

## Chapter 8

The fire burned in front of the town center with rage, yet the crowd was angrier than its heat. Only a week passed. One week. The bodies of three men lied next to the fire, killed brutally. The first's eyes were gone, gouged from his head just like the seconds, and the third's head was gone, still unlocated. People stood shoulder to shoulder, some shouting, some crying, as the Chief Minister Iningdale made his way forward.

Ryuu watched closely, standing at the back of the crowd, ready to make a dash for it when he had to. He didn't mean it, of course. But sometimes things just happened.

"This," shouted Iningdale, "is the doing of an enemy we long thought dead."

He backed away from the crowd, needing nothing else to warn him, feet dragging like rocks in the snow.

"This," the leader pointed at the bodies, "was done by an Elemental."

The crowd screamed at the word, searing with hate. An Elemental? The word hasn't been spoken in so long. Those who tormented their people- Elementals. Even just one living was too much.

Ryuu turned his back on the crowd, taking a breath before walking slowly, keeping to the shadows. The speech continued but he didn't listen, instead his mind was foggy, barely able to keep his path straight. They taunted him. Like all the others. But now he could defend himself, and he couldn't stand to listen to it anymore- their teasing. They thought him weak, so he showed them. But he didn't mean it- no, he didn't mean to do it. He found himself in the lobby of the inn, nervous feet leading him onward.

"What's all the ruckus out there," said the Rowan.

He ignored the inn keeper, tromping past him, his feet continuing. Sure, he managed to get himself into another bind. It wasn't really his fault, not really. Not intentionally at least. He reasoned with himself. He would never. *Never*. But there was still blood on edges of his coat. He knocked on Garion's door, two quick taps. He didn't even remember the entire event, only pieces of it. It was like he was someone else, like an entirely different person took him over. The door swung open, interrupting his thoughts.

"What is it," Garion said in a croaky voice.

He couldn't bring himself to look at the old man, thoughts spinning madly in his head. He couldn't even remember all of it. Did he really kill them? His shoulders tensed before whispering, "they know."

He looked at him, his brows furrowing in confusion before flattening into shock. "Collect your things," he said calmly, "now."

The door slammed before he could respond, kicking him into go-mode. He hurried to his room and gathered what little he had, not having time to consider everything now. Right now, he needed to focus on surviving the next few hours.

“Let’s go,” Garion’s voice hurried him from his room. He was already halfway down the stairs, leaving him to catch up.

“We’re off,” he said to Rowan, grappling some credits from his purse.

“Right now? At this time of night?” He didn’t hide the confusion from his voice. It was odd, definitely. And a bit suspicious.

“Yes, we’ve had an urgent family matter,” Garion waved as he made his way out, leaving no time for a response. “This way,” he whispered.

They walked through the village for what felt like hours. Snow laden the town like a wintery blanket, rickety homes looking as if they would collapse under its weight. It was ostensibly peaceful, tranquil almost, and for a second, he forgot they were running for their lives.

He followed Garion on his heels, the night growing darker and even colder as they made their way out of the village and past the clan’s boundary. Garion’s pace was brisk once out the village, and after a while he had trouble keeping up with him, especially as his toes grew numb.

“Garion,” he called, his breath white as it fell from his lips. “Can we take a break?”

No response, rather he moved faster. He didn’t understand the gravity of the situation. He didn’t know what they would do if they caught them. The gruesome humiliation, the torture. His childish mind could even fathom it.

“Garion, we’ve walked for hours.”

Still, he ignored him.

“Garion,” he snapped.

He flipped around, rage boiling over him. He didn’t need to speak for him to know how angry he was. “No,” he said in a quiet voice. “We will *not* stop,” he picked up the pace again.

There was silence for a few minutes. He knew he’d be upset. He messed up, really messed up. But he didn’t mean to kill them. He just wanted to beat them around a little. You know, teach them a lesson. Garion didn’t know why he had to do it, but Ryuu didn’t either.

“You’re not even going to ask what happened?”

He didn’t respond, silence falling between them again. “I know what happened.” he finally said.

“How?”

“You stole the crystal from me, and you got mad at someone.”

Well, he got half of it right. Silence again. He still didn't know he didn't need the crystal, or that he was even stronger without the crystal weighing his powers down. They continued on their journey. His feet were numb, and he couldn't feel them walking. After a few more hours, he didn't even realize he was still walking, only that he was trudging onward and onward. A few more hours and it wasn't long until the trees looked more familiar.

"The safe house," Ryuu groaned in relief at a funny shadow hanging near the trees.

He could recognize that shadow a mile away, no matter how hidden and camouflaged it was. He trudged faster, his numb toes begging him not to as he clambered up the stairs. He couldn't be happier to see the couch, but plopping into felt even better. He closed his eyes for a moment, finally sheltered from the cold and snow. They made it, safe. For now, at least.

The shuffling of wood and paper caught his attention. He sat up, watching Garion start the fire with the snap of his fingers, flames lapping gently. Finally, something to warm their achy bodies. He shuffled onto the floor in front of the fireplace, rubbing his hands together while Garion took a seat on the couch.

"Give me the crystal," he spoke sternly.

He stared at the flames, not quite ready for this conversation. "I don't have it."

"I'm not *that* old, Ryuu." He scoffed, "give me the stone."

"I don't have it," he snapped at him. Of course, he didn't have it. He didn't need that dumb, old thing. He was stronger than that.

Yet, he shook his head. How could he act so dumb, now? Angry mobs wanted to kill them, and he wouldn't give up the crystal? After all he managed to do? He grabbed Ryuu's bag from the floor and dumping the contents on the ground. Some clothes, a few books, and a trinket or two. It wasn't there. Then, where *was* it? He pulled Ryuu from the ground by his collar, shaking him around, waiting for the crystal to fall off him. He wrestled with him for a second while the shake down got more violent.

"Get off," he managed to huff out.

But he still thrust him back and forth. Where was it? Where was the crystal? Where the hell was it? He finally let go, pushing him back to the floor with a groan.

"Where the hell is it?"

He sucked in a shaky breath, his skin red and achy. "I don't have it," he said quietly.

He begged him to listen, otherwise what would he do? He didn't have it, so what would he do, next? Cut him open and check his insides. He stood slowly, glaring at him before dumping out his bag. The contents rolled on the floor with a quite clatter, with it the crystal necklace. He held the necklace in front of his face before throwing it at him, watching it bounce off his chest and onto the ground.

"I didn't have the damn thing."

He shook his head, now frozen in place. “How,” he whispered to himself. “You snuck it back into my bag,” he reasoned.

“I don’t need it!” He shouted at him. “I don’t need the crystal to use my powers.”

Yet again silence grew, but with it this time was a dreadful tension. He stared at him in disbelief. But, how? It couldn’t be what he thought it was. Maybe he was lying?

He snapped his fingers, a flame floating over them. “No necklace, see.”

His breath stopped in his chest, staring at Ryuu’s hand, then at him. “No,” his voice trailed off. There was only one way he could do that, and that was through the dark powers.

He sighed, sitting in front of the fire again. There couldn’t have been a worse way to tell him, but he was glad to have it off his chest.

“What did you do,” he spoke in a whisper, not making eye contact.

His mind flashed back. Blades of air slicing flesh to the bone, ripping eyes from their sockets in a relentless storm. Maybe he did remember, some, at least. He remembered exactly how each of them screamed- how each man begged him to stop. But he didn’t, he couldn’t stop. Even if he wanted to, he couldn’t. That same dark feeling welled up inside of him, imploring him to slay them, and he couldn’t stop himself. That same dark, empty feeling. It grew, sometimes like mold, other times the way smoke rose. It grew, and he couldn’t control it.

“What did you do,” he shouted at him this time.

He shivered as tears made their way to his eyes, stinging when he tried blinking them away. Why couldn’t he stop himself? “I-” he stuttered, still trying to keep the tears at bay. “I killed them.” His lips quivered as he spoke. “I killed them.”

The memory suddenly flooded back to him, and he saw it clear as day while the tears finally fell, making his cheeks warm. He wished he could push it away again, wherever it was before. It was so horrible. Thinking about it was unbearable. He killed them, more brutally than he could ever fathom. He sucked in a breath, trying to collect himself while it played in his head. Even if he closed his eyes, he saw it. But he saw it if they were open too. It was imprinted into his mind, the way their mouths gaped open while blood gushed from their eye sockets. Who knew that much blood could flow out of a person?

“What do I do,” he choked the words out. “What do I do?”

He hoped he had an answer, begged him to. If he didn’t where else would he turn? He felt like the guilt would consume him if the terrifying memory didn’t first.

“You have to leave.”

His eyes snapped onto him, shaking his head quickly.

But he saw what he saw in his wife and son years ago. The darkness- it claimed them, and he couldn't save them. He wouldn't be able to save Ryou either. There was nothing he could do for him. He was already gone.

"The darkness is," his voice trailed off, "you should've never chosen that path."

He kept shaking his head crawling up to him on hands and knees, "I didn't, Garion. I swear, I didn't. I didn't do anything," he spoke quickly, tripping over his words.

Just like his wife and daughter, he can't save him. "I can't help you."

He sat on his knees, holding his hands together as he sniveled sloppily. "Please. That wasn't me." There was truth in his words. It wasn't him, rather the darkness.

Still, he said nothing, only looking at him, and all Ryou could see was fear in his eyes. Fear of him and what he might do, or maybe what Garion couldn't do.

"Go, Ryou," he spoke softly, turning his back on him. He couldn't bare it- to watch him leave. But he couldn't bare to watch his slow demise either, not like the others.

"No," he said quietly, standing. "You can't do this to me."

He still wouldn't look at him.

"Garion," he said in a shaky voice, "please."

He tried his best to keep it together, but he knew he wasn't even close. He thought he'd be fine on his own, completely alone. After his family, maybe. But after Meryllin and Garion too? He never thought it'd be like this. And he never thought that Garion would be the hardest. Where would he go? What would he do?

"Go," he whispered before roaring, "Go!" It rumbled through the house like thunder. He threw his hand at him, a blaze of lighting striking Ryou across the shoulder.

He stumbled down, the lighting dazing him while his shoulder blistered red.

"Leave now," his voice still roared, lighting gathering around him as emotions powered him up. He would force him away if he had to, like a wild animal.

He dragged himself from the floor, falling through the door and tripping down the stairs. For a minute, he only lied there, slightly dazed as he gathered himself before running wherever his legs would take him. He felt like a child again, fear and misery washing over just like before. He ran- just like before and didn't know to where. He had nowhere to go, and all he could do was run, branches and bushes whipping his face as he passed. He could do nothing but run. That familiar aching darkness rose in chest, not a thing in the world to stop it now, not a person, not even a hint of light in the night.

He shook his head, running even faster. No, he can't be that. Anything but that. No matter how fast he went- it felt closer, and closer. Suddenly he wasn't running from Garion, or

his brothers. No, he was running from himself, and that dreadfully hollow feeling that pitted in his chest. But how could he escape himself?

That's when his thoughts were interrupted by a skid then a slide, tumbling down a ravine after tripping on a dugout root. He managed to catch a mouthful of dirt as he rolled onto a muddy riverbank, and by the time he stopped, his stomach was already retching, heaving up mud.

He tried catching his breath when the tears finally resurfaced, not noticing when it had stopped. He sobbed into the mud, every emotion overwhelming him at once. Fear. Sadness. Loneliness. He couldn't take it- not another second of this despair. He would do anything to be gone. Just gone. Not dead, not alive- gone. He'd just lay here and die. The wolves would eat him, then vultures would get the rest, and mice would chew on his bones. A fitting death for someone who was completely worthless and alone. He rolled over on his back, staring at the sky while the chill of the mud calmed him down. It wouldn't take much effort. With the chill of the night, he should be dead by sunrise. So, he sucked in a shaky breath, closing his eyes for the last time as he waited for the sweet release of death.

## Chapter 9

*Rise!*

The screech of someone's voice snapped Ryu from his deep sleep. His body shuddered awake, shooting up from the mud. He recognized the voice. It was so familiar, but he couldn't put a name to it. He shook his head, wiping the mud from his frostbitten cheek, the voice already forgotten. His olive skin was pale from the cold, but he wasted no time finding a dry area to collect himself- an overhanging rock. He set a few branches a blaze before piling them into a fire, shivering as it popped.

Thoughts started moving again as his body warmed up, and he immediately wished them gone. His life seemed to repeat, first his family, then his clan, then Meryllin, and now Garion. He truly had no one.

The cold morning air stung his nostrils, realizing he was still shivering, which in turn made him realize something worse: he was still alive. Alive and miserable. The dampness in the air seeped into his skin, moist hair clinging to his face, making the already chilly morning worse, and his whole body hurt from rolling down the ravine. Suddenly, something drove him forward. The small fire did little to heat him up, and after sitting for a few minutes, he put out the fire with a burst of water and made his way to the main road. A bit of a hike. He ran farther than he thought, a thin layer of snow painted the ravine, a plot of trees towering above him. He didn't even notice the trees last night.

He wasn't sure what he would do. Nor did he know why he got up, rather, something seemed to drive him forward. It wasn't the will to live, nor the hope of getting better. It was more like the instinct of survival. His body moved, knowing he at least had to walk around to warm himself up again, but his mind paid it no attention. He plodded slowly down the road, the sun rising daintily over his shoulder. Though his pace was achingly slow, he was making his way somewhere, and that meant something, right? Yeah. Yeah, it had to mean something.

The wide dirt road was tainted with snow, creating a murky mixture, and keeping his feet icy cold. Trees and bushes lined the road, hiding everything amongst the woods. For miles, his legs carried him forward, but his mind was still nowhere to be found. He felt lost. His thoughts were cloudy, and he felt so, so tired.

Minutes turned into hours as he continued. He went on for miles until feeling suddenly returned to his body. He felt his bones ache and feet tingle with numbness. That was another good sign, right? His body was still trying, which meant he needed to try. He plopped down next to the nearest tree with a sigh, figuring he owes himself a little break.

His eyes ambled around while his brain looked for something to grasp onto, even the numbness of his mind becoming too much. The snow, or maybe the sun. Instead- his eyes landed on the tree he sat under- an oak tree towering over him, at least 20 feet. He closed his eye and took a breath. Only one thought sticking to his mind now: what's the point? What's the point of anything; to constantly suffer? He had nowhere to go and no one to go to. So, what was the point of continuing on? He sighed and dropped his head into his hands. If only he controlled himself-

**Commented [KC1]:** Maybe change the type of tree? Oak trees don't have vines do they?

or whatever came over him. If only he was better, just a bit better, then he might've been good enough for someone to stay. He would still be with Garion right now- or even Meryllin. Instead, he was alone. Completely alone.

Standing up weakly, he pulled a few vines from the tree, the thought still hanging in his mind. If he can't die in his sleep, he has to be more proactive. He had no place in this world, and if he died, no one would even notice. He fashioned the vines into a noose before throwing it over a sturdy tree branch., tying it tightly, ensuring it wouldn't break from his weight. He could at least do this right, though it took every last bit of strength he had.

But he was tired and ready for it all to be over. So he would put in the work. Besides, he hardly noticed his hands fashioning the noose, nor tightening it around the tree. His mind was still numb and empty. He stood on a rock under the noose, closing his eyes. He thought he would fight back the tears, but none came. Part of him begged himself not to but the other beseeched him to, but he couldn't help but feel a bit of relief when he tightened the noose around his neck. It was better this way. Even though he was scared, he knew it'd be better. So, with a deep breath, he stepped off the rock.

His body floundered in shock. He couldn't breathe, the vines squeezing his neck like snake, tighter and tighter. His once cold body felt like it was on fire as the pressure crushed his neck. For a split second, he felt everything around, the chill against his skin, and the terror inside. And once the terror grew into a hideous, uncontrollable monster, everything dimmed, black sprinkling his vision.

This was it. A life of woe would finally be over.

Finally.

*Finally.*

Finally-

Until he tumbled down with a crash, the branch snapping, throwing him to the ground. He coughed, the noose suddenly loosened, air forced into his lungs as his body heaved. He couldn't kill himself. He couldn't even do that correctly. He thought the tears would definitely break through now, but they didn't. Instead- they sat at the surface, itching to get through, but he couldn't seem to let them out. Instead, he dry sobbed into the ground, probably looking so pathetic, like a pile of loser. Why couldn't it all be over? Life continued to taunt him. But he wouldn't give up so easily. He wouldn't. He breathed fast, making himself feel lightheaded. But before panic ensued, the adrenaline induced energy vanished, sapped away by the cold, and he only lied there with vines still around his neck.

A gentle breeze tugged at him, longing for him to move onward. But he couldn't. Even with a new plan to kill himself, he was too exhausted to get up. The breeze rolled past him and through the trees, etching a path for him in the grass. But he still couldn't move. There was nothing left for him. Nothing but the kind release death could bring. Yet, the breeze pushed even harder.



As the sun finally started to set, he blinked at the newest realization: he made it through another day. And as the panic wore off, he felt sleepiness drift over him. Maybe tonight he would actually die in his sleep. If he were so lucky.

“Why do you cry?” A sudden voice pierced through his thoughts.

His eyes shot open, glancing around quietly. There was nothing, and no one.

“Who’s there,” he called.

He definitely heard someone, or something, and he couldn’t help but get a terrible feeling. He glanced around, ears straining as he listened to the silence. With no response, he assumed it was nothing. Maybe it was just the breeze rustling through the woods. As he was about to lie his head back down, through the foliage emerged a man cloaked in black. Though he could hardly be seen under his garb, flashes of skin were smooth and glittered like that of a snake.

*Kuba.* Ryuu immediately recognized him. But how? And where did he come from?

He ticked his tongue. “You look a shame, truly.”

He stood slowly and took a few steps back from him. “How did you find me?”

He recognized him, yes, because he could never forget. Not even in his dreams, rather, in his nightmares. Worry tickled his chest, unable to shake the feeling something bad was going to happen.

“I hear everything that happens near my village.” He ambled to him, brushing a boney finger across his cheek. “There, there.”

He felt the same darkness he felt that night many years ago. In an instant, it welled back up, completely and fully, as if it never left. He couldn’t fight it. There was nothing to anchor him to. Instead, all he felt was cold, emptiness growing inside him, worse than earlier. ~~He couldn’t let that become him.~~

“Let it in,” Kuba said, cupping his face with hands. “It’s better this way.”

His breath was shallow. He didn’t want to, but then again, maybe he did?

“It takes your pain, your hurt.”

He couldn’t fight it anymore, not that he tried anymore. Maybe he didn’t want to. If there was no reason, or purpose, maybe this could be it. But more than that, it did numb the pain. Not in an apathetic way, but in way where it didn’t even exist, like he didn’t exist.

“Come with me.”

It would take time for him to accept it fully, though he recognized the darkness in the cloudiness of his eyes. He was awful at it, but he needed to be patient with him right now. darkness travels slow and steady.

Yet, he hesitated, looking over his shoulder, the path etched by the wind still stamped into his mind. He could still escape it. But what else was there for him? There could be something incredible and beautiful, or there could be something monstrous. How did he know which to choose?

“I won’t abandon you like the others did.” he said in a gentle voice. “I’ll be there each step of the way.”

His eyes burned into Kuba seriously. Did he mean that? He was hidden under his hood, an enigma, and he knew this couldn’t be the answer to his problems, but he provided comfort he couldn’t find anywhere else. At least he wouldn’t be alone. He reasoned with himself, though it didn’t take much for the dark to lure him in along with all his fears. But the next thing he wondered: if it really could be better, then was the darkness actually so bad?

Kuba plodded off, and he followed at a distance, heading deeper into the woods. They hadn’t gone far until they were passing abandoned homes of a devastated village. Old stone houses dwindled into nothingness, any previous wooden buildings reduced to ash long ago. The grass was dead, and plants failed to grow, creating an even more eerie feeling.

Kuba sat in what used to be the town center, on an old log next to toppled stone ruins.

Ryuu couldn’t even tell what the buildings were supposed to be anymore, sitting across from Kuba, still at a distance. It felt cold there- a different cold than the wintery weather. It was dark, though the sun was still setting, and it felt dreary- like all his bones froze inside him and could no longer move. His insides felt cold and empty, like there was nothing there anymore, even his heart and stomach felt hollowed out. And he felt a weight in his chest, choking on the dark, empty feelings rising in him. He felt worse than ever before, but all he could do was push the feelings away into numbness. The same thing he did regardless.

“We are not the only ones, Ryuu,” he spoke, staring at the ground, only his voice visible.

He didn’t respond. Not only because he didn’t understand anything that was going on, but had no energy to.

“We are not the only ones known to the darkness. There are others.” He lowered his hood, revealing a dwindling man underneath. He looked only a few years older than Ryuu, and his skin seemed to radiate. Not in a bright, pretty way, but the way a snake’s scales reflected in the sun. His skin clung to his face, showing off strong features. Yet, it seemed like he’s been alone for a while, and it looked like it left a dangerous impression on him.

“I freed others.”

Freed? His attention snapped onto him, ignoring his frightening prowess, and after a long pause he finally spoke, “what did you do to me?”

“I freed you.”

He frowned at him, shuddering at how he said it with such ease.

“The darkness is so much more than what anyone tells you.” He stared up at the now dark sky. “The spell I spoke over you, you need not the help of anything.”

The crystal. He ran his fingers through his hair shakily. That’s why he didn’t need it to use his powers. But what exactly did invoke into his life?

“The dark is far more powerful than the light. We live on the wrong side. But I strive to change that.”

He felt his words seep into his mind. Maybe it’s true. He’s read many books on it, and if the light couldn’t save him, nor the people who lived by it, maybe the darkness will.

“This world needs to see, Ryuu,” he looked at him, as if looking into his soul. “The splendor of the darkness.” He paused, “you will become more powerful, learn things even the high council doesn’t know.” He stood in front of him, placing a hand on his head.

This time he didn’t flinch. The more he spoke, the less afraid he felt. Besides- at this point, he had nothing to lose.

“Let it in.” He whispered, “let it save you.”

Ryuu closed his eyes, the dark feeling rising in him. He kept pushing it down for so long but now, he willed it. So, he released himself, letting the dark power overwhelm him, no longer fighting it. He didn’t need to. He opened his eyes with a sigh, thinking it’d be a grand process with a hurricane of emotion. But there was nothing. Instead of fear or sadness, there was nothing. Nothing. Even the wintry weather felt mild to him, the cold inside was far more powerful.

“Good job, Ryuu,” he said, his hand still on his head.

Good job? Was he really doing a good job? He couldn’t lie, that made him feel kind of nice. He stood so they were level. He couldn’t believe. He wasn’t alone anymore. The darkness, it was cold and unforgiving, but it outweighed his own dark thoughts, and he understood now. He knew why Kuba lived in it for so long, it was dreadfully glorious. He was free.

Kuba said smiled faintly at him, walking deeper into the woods. “Together, the world will know the darkness.”

## Chapter 10

The stone felt cold against his achy muscles, making him suddenly miss the comfort of a bed. But he had nowhere else to sleep, and the chilly stone beat the mud floor. Not that he slept at all. Instead- it was mostly tossing, turning, and racing thoughts.

Kuba told him there was somewhere he wanted to take him. He didn't think much of it, and he had nothing better to do- so, of course, he agreed. He would just have to hold off on his original plan. A loud yawn escaped his lips as he dragged himself out the hut, the sun beams still melting the snow. Kuba sat patiently on the same tree stump, hidden under his hood, not getting even a speckle of sun. That couldn't be good for him, but then again, it was none of Ryuu's business, right? Sure- everyone needed a little bit of sun. But he already decided to be cautious. He would watch every single thing he said and did. He couldn't give Kuba a reason to abandon him, so he had to be scrupulous.

"Shall we be off?"

He nodded, his worrisome thoughts interrupted. But that's when he noticed something, so suddenly. He wasn't scared of him, not at all actually. When he first found him lying at the foot of the tree, he was terrified. But in the daylight, he seemed like an ordinary person, except for the dark hood. Just a regular guy. It could've been apathy, or maybe it was something else, but maybe he wasn't such a bad guy.

The pair walked through the forest, staying far from the main road and hidden in the shadow of the monstrous trees. Kuba walked as if he glided across the ground, and always stayed hidden under his cloak. He was truly an enigma, and though Ryuu was still weary of him, he couldn't help but be curious.

His eyes glanced at him every few steps, trying to grapple for a new piece of information. Where was he from? What was his goal? Sure, he could ask, but he hardly spoke lately. There was really nothing for him to say, and no point in saying anything. Still, for the first time in a few days, he was actually interested in something.

"What are your plans?" Kuba's question came suddenly.

Plans? He could ask the same thing. But since he mentioned it, he did have plans. Very serious plans he intended on sticking to, and they were simple. "I'm going to kill myself."

His tongue tsked softly, "what a waste."

He doesn't even know anything about him. And if he did- he'd know that things were better off if he were dead. Far from a waste, rather, it was heroic. They walked for a few more minutes until Kuba stopped abruptly, motioning for him to do the same. He stopped just behind him, peeking over his shoulder.

"Over this hill is a rouge village, no more than five inhabitants," he spoke calmly, "you must destroy them."

Eyes widened at the words, his cheeks suddenly feeling hot. “No,” he shook his head. He knew what it was like to kill someone, and never wanted to feel that again.

He cocked his head at him. “This is an exercise of trust.”

“I trust you,” he nodded quickly.

A soft chuckle escaped his lips, “not your trust in me, but mine in you.”

He sucked in a breath. There was no way he could hurt innocent people. He couldn’t do it even if he wanted to.

“I know it’s hard.” He took a step towards him. “It was hard for me at first, too. But- I can give you the strength you need.”

He placed a bony hand on his forehead, and he didn’t flinch. If this would help him, in turn meaning he wouldn’t have to be alone, he had to do it. Kuba lowered his head and mumbled some words, but he couldn’t make it out. He wasn’t too concerned though.

At first nothing happened. He just stood there while he whispered over him, and he couldn’t help but feel stupid. At least there was no one around to see them. Another minute passed, and he felt a sudden ghastly feeling strike him, right in his chest. Cold, just like the others, but much stronger. Any empathy he had left slowly dwindled as the feeling grew, crawling up his neck like fuzzy spiders.

“Call upon the darkness,” he said. “Shavrun,” he whispered, lifting his hand to the sky.

A vile black mist dripped from his hand, like vines hanging from a tree. He moved his hand slowly, from the mist into whatever he wanted. “You are powerful, Ryuu. This world needs to see you,” he whispered, “the power of darkness in you.”

He held out his hands in front of him, whispering, “Shavrun.”

The same black mist boiled in his palm. He *was* powerful.

“They need to see,” he echoed, still staring the mist.

They needed to know its power. Everyone did. There was nothing in him, not even an ounce of sadness or worry. Nothing. Everyone should know how that feels, and the freedom that comes with it.

“Now go.”

His eyes shot forward to the small hill, moving swiftly towards it. For the first time in days, he finally felt meaning. And for the first time in his life, he finally felt he was worth something. Everyone needed to know this power. They deserved to know. He scaled the hill gracefully, seeing three small wooden homes at the top. A fire burned in the middle of the village, and he could hear gentle voices carrying in the wind. He held his hand toward the village and with ease he casted flames upon them. They were instantly ablaze, screams of terror tickling his ears as he made his way into the tiny village.

He stepped over a woman's burnt corpse. *One.*

"Help me," shouted a frantic man, tossing the mud onto the burning homes.

Ryuu threw his hand at him, a thin blade of air drilling a hole through his forehead. He fell down with a loud thud, dead. *Two.* With a loud groan, another man tackled Ryuu to the ground, wrestling him down.

"Who are you," he screamed. "Who are you," he said over and over.

He wrestled with him. All he wanted was to show them the darkness, and what it could do. He was freeing them from their despondent life. But he couldn't show them like this, not if they resisted like this. He called a branch to him. The limb growing, wrapping around the man's neck and pulling him off Ryuu. Slowly, it dragged him up, lifting him off his feet. The man choked quietly, any futile attempt to breathe evading him while Ryuu watched his eyes pop from his skull and his face turn purple. After another moment, he fell limp. *Three.*

He glanced around slowly. Where were the last two? He strode around the smoldering village until he heard a tiny gasp, a petit woman standing in front of a small boy, both trembling in fear. Cold eyes looked them over, almost feeling pity for them. Almost. Leaning into her face, he saw blonde strands of hair quivering the longer he stared.

"Don't be scared," he whispered. "Let me free you."

He believed. He truly believed he could- that he needed to.

Black mist seeped from him, first swirling around the women's head before flowing into her nose. She shook, choking on the mist as it flowed, blood now leaching from her nose and eyes. She fell to her knees, gasping for air, grabbing Ryuu's shoe in a feeble attempt to save her life. Her throat gurgled with a disgusting whine before falling over, her chest heaving a few more times before growing still. *Four.*

Ryuu shook the women off his foot before looking at the boy. Hesitation found its way over him when they locked eyes. The confusion scribbled over his face and tears running down his cheek reminded him of how he felt all those years ago, and for some reason it stopped him. Didn't he want to be free? But he looked so scared.

Kuba ambled over, black mist drifting off him. The mist floated around the boy, and in just a few seconds his eyes rolled to the back of his skull, falling limp on the floor. *Five.*

Yet, Ryuu didn't feel the satisfaction he thought he would. Instead, an empty feeling floated around in him, covering something that felt even worse.

"Very good," Kuba said, not giving him anymore time to consider his doubts.

He ambled to the center of the tiny village, running his fingers along the earth before picking a spot, closing his eyes and mumbling something.

He didn't pay much attention though. Rather, he felt pride swell in his chest that he finally made someone happy. Did he mean that? Did he really do a good job? If Kuba was proud

of his skill, that *really* meant something. He took in a small breath, giving himself a nod, finally something he was good at.

Kuba groaned quietly, capturing his attention. It seemed he missed something important. Black mist dissipated into an odd shape in the dirt- three triangles adjacent to three spheres with a set a parallel line running through them. It burned itself into the ground, marking its dominion in the tiny village.

“You’ve proven much to me.” He waved a skinny finger along, beckoning him to follow.

Walking next to him quietly, he couldn’t help but wonder what that was all about, but tried not to think much of it. All he knew was he finally made someone proud of him, and he couldn’t express how nice it felt.

“This power I’ve brought from you,” he continued, “it is not of our understanding. You will need to act in order to appease it.” He continued through the woods. “It speaks to me, and tells me what I need to do.”

He didn’t respond. Spoke to him? He wasn’t quite there yet, and wasn’t sure if he wanted to be. Silence fell between the two as they continued. He didn’t really understand what he was talking about. Powers, black mist. It was all mumbo-jumbo to him. Maybe he could just go along with it for now.

After a while of walking, they were back at that familiar spot. The trees looked dead and shriveled, and the grass was dry and brown regardless of the season. The decimated village stood firmly in its spot, stone crumbling while roofs caved in. It wasn’t much at all, but at least it was familiar.

Ryuu sat on a tree stump, glad to finally be back. It didn’t seem like much, and the darkness was enough to take away anything he was feeling, but he still got tired.

“Not yet,” Kuba waved him on. “We have one more place to visit.”

He held in groan but wouldn’t complain, instead he followed him in silence. It didn’t take long until they arrived at a cliffside, and if he wasn’t tired of walking earlier, he definitely was now.

“This is what you wanted to show me?” he asked as they approached the cliffs edge, obviously unimpressed.

He nodded.

“And this is what, exactly?”

“The place of the dead- mostly. Beautiful isn’t it,” Kuba said.

The grass was dry and brown, just as dead as the trees that bore no leaves. The cliff’s edge was sheer, dropping into a dark crevasse that went on for miles and sky was stricken a dark grey, an uninviting view.

“Yeah,” he mumbled, “real nice.”

He sat at the edge of the cliff. At least it was peaceful, and another divergence from his plan. His plan- that’s right. He nearly forgot, still planning to kill himself, though he hadn’t thought much about how. Obviously, hanging didn’t work so he could check that off the list.

“Do you trust me?” Kuba interrupted his thoughts.

Silence. No- not at all. He didn’t trust him in the slightest, but he didn’t have a choice right now. At the moment he had nothing, no one. Who else would there be to trust? Not himself, that’s for sure.

He leaned over his shoulder, whispering, “I wouldn’t.”

Before Ryu had a chance to react, he kicked him off the edge with a dirty boot. He grappled at the cliff’s edge, meeting only crumbling rock and dirt as he rolled off. His arms scrapped the rock, cutting his skin when he went into a free fall. At first, he didn’t scream- only stared.

This can’t be it. This can’t be how he dies. Sure, he was just talking killing himself, and he would’ve, but not like this. It had to be on his own terms, not anyone else’s. Or maybe- a branch grazed his skin as his life flashed before his eyes, finally screaming as he got closer to the ground, deeper into the gaping crevasse. Maybe he’s not ready. There’s so much he needed to do. Garion- he needed to talk to him again. And Meryllin- she needed to know he cared about her. This wasn’t right. Not yet. No- he wasn’t ready. Not yet. Not yet. It wasn’t the right time.

But the ground approached faster and faster, the sharp, black rocks getting bigger and bigger until he struck it with a loud thud.



## Chapter 11

Ghouls and goblins danced around Ryuu as his eyes fluttered open. Hopping, flipping, spinning- scattering bones from previous meals. He grabbed the back of his neck and groaned, an ache wrenching its way through. Whiplash? He stared up, looking for the ceiling but there was only gaping darkness, a long drop. A musty odor rose around him, finally snapping him to reality. Where was he? He finally noticed the spooky figures around him, sizing him up.

“Can we eat it,” one croaked.

“I suppose we can try,” another said.

The tiny goblins were only one or two feet tall, with short legs and rotund torsos. Each one had a varying number of eyes, but they averaged around eight each. Their skin was grey and powdery- almost like they were made of stone. If anything was sure, they hadn't seen sunlight in hundreds of years- maybe thousands. Small grey hands grappled at Ryuu, ready to pull his soft flesh from the bone. He waved his arms around, trying his best shoo them away but only seemed to make them more frenzied.

“No way,” said a new voice, “not in front of me.” A young woman spoke.

“Pft,” one of the ghouls threw their hand at her, “pesky human.”

“Is this Hell?” Ryuu asked, mostly to himself.

He still felt dazed from his fall, or death, he wasn't sure now. But the terrifying goblins and dank caverns seemed to hint at that. He didn't think Hell would be so by the book. Man-eating goblins, dark caves? Kind of tacky if you asked him.

A goblin grabbed a thin piece of his flesh, making Ryuu wince before being yanked up in the woman's grip.

“I said, *not* in front of me.”

“Okay, okay,” he flailed his arms around, begging to be put down. Despite their adorable size, they hated being picked up. They were goblins for goodness' sake!

She released her grip, the goblin dropping with a loud thud, rolling a few feet before scrambling to his feet.

“We'll just drag it down the corridor,” another said.

After a few mumbles of agreement, tiny hands began dragging him away. They were strong despite their small size and seemed to tow him easily.

“Wait,” Ryuu's voice was frantic as he fought the gaggle of goblins.

It took only two of them to drag him a few feet, and that's when he realized he was in a fight for his life, or maybe his soul. He couldn't fight them all off- not without a weapon or something. So, his hands scrapped along the ground, hoping for a large rock or stick, but his

fingers only ran through dirt, tiny cuts chipping into his skin. Nothing. They dragged him further, the torch light fading.

“Wait,” he shouted again, “I’m not tasty,” still grappling at the ground, “I’m poisonous!”

They paused at his words, Ryuu freezing with them.

“Poisonous?”

He nodded briskly, “yeah,” he paused “really poisonous.”

“How would you know?”

He stuttered, “the last guys who tried eat me- well, let’s just say it didn’t go over too well.”

“He’s lying,” one of them pointed a shriveled finger.

“Try ‘em then.”

The goblin shuffled uneasily, taking a tiny step towards him. He was probably lying, but he didn’t want to be one to find out either.

“Come on, just a bite.” His friend egged him on.

“Fine,” he said, “just a little nibble of the ear, then.”

He struggled as he got closer, pinned down by the others. “You’ll die from even a nibble, I swear.”

Gripping his head with cold hands, the goblin bared his teeth for a quick taste. His teeth shallowly pierced his ear before being interrupted, stopping mid-bite.

“He is not for eating.”

He sighed at the familiar voice, never thinking he’d be happy to see Kuba standing over him. The horde, on the other hand, groaned in frustration when they saw him, begrudgingly dropping him and scuttling away.

“Not you again,” one whined, folding their arms.

“Dear, dear,” he said pretentiously before helping him up. “That’ll be the second time I saved you.” He glanced at his ear, “just a small wound. You’ll be fine.”

He pinched his ear, trying to stop the bleeding. “What the hell was the first?”

His head cocked, a smirk crossing his face before heading down the corridor. They both knew what the first time was but didn’t have time to get into that right now. They had more important business to tend to.

“Where are we,” he traveled on his heels, eyes darting around. “Are we in Hell,” he lowered his voice to a whisper.

He chuckled, "Hell? Of sorts..."

That hardly answered his question. Of sorts? Kind of? They were kind of in Hell? Like half-Hell? He bucked at the tiny goblins as he passed, too uneasy to think any further on his predicament.

"Bunch of little bastards," he cursed them.

This wasn't what he expected Hell to be like, not at all, and he *wasn't* a fan. After following him through winding tunnels, they seeped deeper and deeper into the ground, and as they did so he promised to be a better person in his next life. That is if he was given another chance.

He thought about Garion, then Meryllin. If he was really in Hell- there was so much he wanted to say to them that he couldn't. He kicked himself for ending up there. What an idiot he was to end up in the pits of Hell. Sure, he was going to kill himself anyway, and he would've ended up in the same place. If Kuba hadn't- wait... *Kuba!*

He froze, his thoughts suddenly flashing back to his death. He pushed him over the cliff. He *murdered* him, in cold blood, after all he did to prove himself. He sprang forward, tackling Kuba to the ground, pinning him down by his neck.

"You pushed me," he shouted, "I'm in Hell because of you."

Laughter escaped his lips, hardly being able to hold it in, so hard he couldn't even speak. He only laughed, and Ryuu couldn't help but feel freaked out. He never saw him smile, let alone laugh. It was even creepier since he murdered him too.

"Quit laughing," he shook him by the collar. "This is serious."

"You're not dead." He finally said after catching his breath, "you're just visiting."

Visiting? Ryuu rolled off him and pressed his hands into his face with a loud groan. How can someone visit Hell? The more he learned, the less sense it made. So, he wasn't dead, then?

"I thought you could take a joke." He brushed himself off before continuing on the path.

Take a joke? Was that what this was, a joke? His hands balled into fists as anger bubbled over.

"It will all make sense soon."

So, he decided to follow along, and not only because he didn't know the way out. Instead of beating Kuba senseless, he took a deep breath, trailing behind quietly. It wasn't long until they arrived at a dark stone door. He wanted to take a few guesses as to what was behind it but gave up on trying to understand this world.

Each stone was neatly fixated, not even a pebble out of place. Kuba knocked twice, pausing before pushing the door open, entering a large chamber. Only a few torches lit the empty space, while a figure ambled around the room, wearing an all-white robe.

“Kuba,” the figure greeted him with a nod.

Their androgenous face was cut like pure stone into their dark skin, looking at Ryuu with light brown eyes. “Ryuu, you are here.”

Their eyes seemed to look through him, like they could see his entire history in a brief glance, and he couldn't help but shuffle uncomfortably.

“The castaway?” they swept across the floor, making a circle around him.

“Yes,” Kuba answered.

“Mhm,” they mumbled in thought. “I can feel my power within you.”

“Uh,” that's all Ryuu could get out.

Many questions rummaged around his brain. Castaway? Power? But nothing felt right to ask. Rather, he felt too small speak in their presence. Maybe it was their mystical prowess, or inexplicable beauty. Or maybe because none of this was real. That's it. He *did* die when Kuba pushed him over the cliff. Maybe this was some kind of purgatory, a gateway to Hell.

“I've watched you with great interest,” they said, brushing a cold finger along his cheek before freezing, “you doubt?”

Though he tried to keep a straight face, he felt his eyebrows lift. How could they know? They read his thoughts. But how? He held his breath, looking away from the being quickly. If all it took was eye contact, then they would know too much.

“It's okay,” they spoke softly, “you can tell me.”

Sweat beaded on his forehead, trying to think before opening his mouth. “This darkness stuff,” he paused. “I killed-” he choked on the words.

Was that what he wanted to say? He killed people. Innocent people. No, but it was suddenly brought to the forefront of his mind. A scary thought telling him something even more important, “this isn't right.”

“It is the way, but the way is not always right. You of all people should see that.”

“Me?” he echoed.

They smiled at him, “you're special. That's why I choose you.”

None of it makes sense, still. The more he learned, the more he found out, the more he talked, the worse it got. He should've stuck with his original plan.

“When you were a child and your family abandoned you, that night, you think that was coincidence?”

The memory struck his mind like a tsunami hit an unsuspecting city. It was only fragments now but, when he thought about it, it was a strange accident, finding Kuba in the woods that night.

“And when Garion abandoned you?”

“I was there because the Omniscient sent me,” Kuba spoke.

Omniscient? Ryuu stared at the being. Is that who they were?

“You’ve been abandoned by many,” they said, “but I never left you, from the moment Doppia birthed you.”

Fear and awe washed over him at the same time, like an unstoppable wave. Doppia? He’s only ever heard the name of his mother a handful of times. Was it really true? It didn’t sound like truth, but it felt like it. It felt like their words rang true, and their presence felt more real than anything he ever experienced.

But he couldn’t help but feel creeped out. They watched him? He thought about his family, his cheeks turning red as anger bubbled in him. Then, Garion, who chased him away like an animal. Why did so many people abandon him? Even Meryllin, the one he was prepared to give himself to entirely. The thoughts moved too fast for him to chew on just one. Instead, they all spun around his head like a whirlpool, and he felt as though he would drown.

“And now you’ve come home.”

Home? He couldn’t help but feel comfort at the words, though this didn’t feel like it. But he craved it, more than anything else- he craved comfort, home. He needed it, feeling like he would die without it.

“Serve me, Ryuu, and you’ll never be alone.”

He sucked in a shaky breath, hesitating before giving a small nod. Being there, hearing those words- it felt like he had purpose- like he was worth something. And that feeling was better than gold. It was all he asked for. But now he was apart of something even bigger than himself. A mission he’d stop at nothing to complete.

The Omniscient placed their hand on his cheek. It was cold and empty, nothing there, just like Kuba. He shook the feeling away, knowing it wasn’t right. But what did it matter? Right or wrong- he wanted to feel something. And just like they said, the way isn’t always right.

“Speak it,” they said.

“Yes,” his voice quivered.

“Yes?”

“Yes, I will serve you.”

They smiled, leaning close to his face, noses brushing. Their breath fell on his face gently, wrapping his head in a soft cloud before letting him go.

“There is much work to be done,” they whispered before crossing the room to Kuba. “Much work indeed.”

Kuba scooped their hand graciously, pressing it to his forehead. “We will not fail you.”

“I know.”

Kuba backed out of the room, Ryu following suit, sure to not make any mistakes. He couldn't afford a single one. The stone door eased shut behind them and they were quickly on their way through the tunnels. Snaking through the caves, he followed closely behind, being sure to get out of there alive. The damp stone walls all looked exactly the same at each turn, leaving no way to get out on his own. He was happy Kuba was there to lead the way.

Finally, after a silent march, light peaked through the cracks and the stale air grew fresh. He pushed past Kuba and out of the dark cave, collapsing into the dried grass with a sigh. He'd never been so happy to see a bleak, cloudy sky, sucking in the air like a sip of cold water. That place... was heavy. It weighed on him- being in there. That's the only way he could describe. Heavy, like weight pressing into his chest, and he'd like to never go back.

“You are an extraordinarily lucky person.” He watched him appreciate the land.

Pulling himself from the dust, he grabbed him by the collar of his shirt, shaking him with a tight grip. “Don't ever do that again.”

His hands lifted in surrender. “I see someone is not a fan of being pushed off cliffs.”

“Yeah- most people aren't.” He threw his collar from his hands.

“Well, it seems that's exactly what you needed.” He brushed his shoulder gruffly as he passed, “you seem to be going back to your normal self.”

He paused. Actually- he was right. It did feel like he was going back to himself, like the fall shook something up in his brain. In fact, what was he doing here? Playing with the dark side? Visiting Hell? He shivered- he killed people. Oh God- he ran his finger through his hair, suddenly feeling his stomach flip over like he could throw up. He actually killed people. How could he ever live with himself.

“Ryu,” he tried grabbing his attention.

His face ran cold. What has he done? He shrugged his shoulders uncomfortably, his coat suddenly feeling suffocating. Yes, he did feel more like himself, but the realization at the monster he became was almost too much. The grief was stronger than the anger, and both those were almost as strong as the guilt. He didn't even realize Kuba was saying his name- rather it took a few tries until he finally got his attention.

“Ryu,” he said calmly, “focus.”

His eyes snapped onto him, and despite his allegiance with Hell, he felt a bit of comfort to see a familiar face next to him. He almost forgot what that was like. And he didn't know why, but his brute words actually brought ease. Maybe it was because they went to Hell and back, but he felt like he knew Kuba all his life, much longer than a few days.

"We will begin immediately." He waved him along. "The Sawassi Stone- it acts more like a key."

"Sawassi Stone," he echoed.

Right, Sawassi Stone, focus. He pushed the thoughts aside, unable to deal with it now. Rather, he let the inklings of darkness fill him, numbness replacing the obsessive worry. That's what the darkness was for, right? He had to focus on getting through the next day.

"It will allow us to open the portal."

"Right." he nodded, brushing off the heavy feeling he got in his chest at the words- *portal*. What did he mean by that? "Portal, right." He said it again, hoping it would bring clarity.

"Why don't you just ask," he said with an annoyed glance over his shoulder.

His cheeks grew rosy. Why didn't he just ask? They both knew he had no idea what he was talking about, saying portal. But- then again, "why do you have to speak so mysteriously?"

"I'm not speaking mysteriously," he retorted.

"Pushing people off cliffs and randomly saying portals is a bit mysterious." He tried to hold in a chuckle when he said it, sounding more ridiculous when he said out loud.

He held in a sigh, now he was giggly. Kuba was starting to miss the quiet, un-snarky Ryuu. But- he held his gaze for a moment, feeling the fieriness of his personality come through, maybe this version of him wasn't so bad.

"I'll explain everything in due time. For now, you have to find," he paused, thinking of how to describe them, "someone."

"That sounds oddly mysterious."

"This person" he put a thoughtful hand on his chin, "some don't believe he exists."

"So, we're looking for a ghost."

"Not dead-" he wagged a finger, "non-existent."

"Sounds like a fantastic idea." He couldn't hide the sarcasm from his voice.

Searching for someone that doesn't even exist? He'd rather search for a dead person. It'd be easier.

"Oh, you of little faith."

He scoffed at him. Part of him hated Kuba and how devoted his life was to that of darkness, but another part enjoyed his company. He wasn't needy or high maintenance- a little weird, but nonetheless he enjoyed being around a living person- or mostly living at least.

"Tell me about this imaginary character."

"Anasi- sometimes a spider, sometimes a man, sometimes something else entirely."

Eyebrows scrunched in confusion. He really only spoke in riddles. How would he understand anything he was saying? He opened his mouth to speak but he tossed up a finger, silencing him.

"Just listen," he said, "he's illusive. And if we're to find him, we need to be one step ahead of his mischief."

A heavy sigh dropped from his lips. The more Kuba spoke, the more confused he got. Spider? Or a man? You can't be both, but a mischievous one at that? It seemed like he was the one talking in riddles.

"It's best to start in the southern mountain region. He's spotted there the most."

"What does he look like?"

"That, I'm unsure."

"How do we find someone if we don't know what they look like? Let alone a man-spider?"

He smirked, "when you see him, you will know."

He shook his head at the ambiguity before pausing, "what do you mean 'you?' You meant us, right?"

"There's business for me to take care of elsewhere. I trust you can get this done." He shuffled through his pocket, pulling out a coin pouch, fingering through it. He counted a precise number of coins and dropped them in Ryuu's hand, clearly finished relaying the instructions.

But he only stared at the coins, not realizing he was headed off. That's it? Just some credits and ambiguous directions? He chased after him, panic setting in. The air was damp as if it were about to storm, holding thick particles of water, making him sweat more.

"That's it? I just go find him?" He finally caught up.

He glanced over his shoulder. "Yes, it's quite simple when you say it like that," he said before sauntering off again.

He huffed, watching him leave. "But what about the rock? And what do I do when I find him," he called.

"Stone," he firmly corrected him. "Once you find it, convene outside Bear Clan on the North Mountain Pass."



“But what do I do when I find him?”

His voice echoed to him, bouncing off the trees as he disappeared into their embrace,  
“you play his game.”

## *Chapter 12*

Ryuu breathed hard, the thin mountain air making him feel dizzy. It was a further trek than he wanted it to be and once he arrived in the region, there was no one to be found. Already three days passed since he and Kuba parted, and at times, he found himself missing his company, especially when his thoughts wandered. It was hard to keep them at bay when there was nothing around.

The region was small in comparison to the rest of the land but it would take time to walk the entire path- maybe a week. It was underdeveloped, and the closest village was a two-day walk. It didn't really seem like the place to find a man-spider ghost, or anyone to be honest. He's passed a handful of travelers in the last few days, but lately he hasn't seen anyone. Not to mention, it was freezing cold, and he was hungry. He could think of a million other things to do than this. But it was much worse when his thoughts would wander.

He thought about Garion- some days all the time, and some days never. But right now, he was pressed into his mind. What would he think of him now? Disappointment is one word. Maybe disgust? He sighed- definitely that. Sometimes he wished he could go back. He would change everything. Every single thing. He would shave himself down to be the exact person everyone wanted, or maybe even stop himself from being born-

"Spare some change," someone interrupted his thoughts.

He jumped, flipping around to see where the voice came from. No one was around. Not a soul. So, where the hell did it come from?

"Down here."

His head dropped, only a few feet away was a man sitting on the ground. His dark, chutney colored skin glistened in the sun light, bearing not a single blemish nor scar, even at his age he had not a single wrinkle or line.

He stared at him with a tiny smile on his face, a pipe hanging from his lip, smoke lazily floating around him. "Spare some change?"

Though happy to finally see someone, he couldn't shake the strangeness of the situation. There was no one- nothing out here. Where did he come from? And why beg out here, in the middle of nowhere while it was so cold? He stalked toward him cautiously, pausing before he spoke. Could it be?

"I'm looking for someone."

"Spare some change?"

"Do you know if anyone lives out here?"

"Spare some change?" He had the same tiny smile on his face, staring at him with bright eyes.

He took in a sharp breath, stifling his annoyance before snatching the coin pouch from his hip. He fingered through it- seven credits. He dropped into a squat in front of the man, shaking four credits into the palm of his hand and holding it out to him.

The man cocked his head at him before nicking one coin. Putting it on his thumb, he flicked it high in the air, watching it fall perfectly back in place, as if that particular coin was designed to fit perfectly on his thumb.

He shook his head at strangeness, but he didn't have time to consider it. Instead, he ignored it, focusing on his task at hand. "So, who do you know that lives out here?"

He continued flicking the coin, quietly humming an unfamiliar tune, not interested in chatter.

"Hey," he waved a hand in front of him, "can you at least answer my question?"

The humming abruptly stopped, along with coin. He didn't appreciate the interruption, but supposed he'd obliged- just for the fun of it.

"So, maybe you know where I can find them."

"You'll not find me inside, nor outside, but I am in every house. Who am I?"

"Seriously?" He groaned, "riddles?" He couldn't escape the mysterious talk it seemed.

The man simply blinked at him, waiting eagerly for his answer.

He plopped in the dirt next to the man, sighing as he dropped his face into his hands. He supposed he no choice. "Fine," he mumbled before looking up- and that's when he froze.

The mountains disappeared. In fact, the entire mountain pass was gone, hidden by weary wooden walls, the dirt ground now concrete. He stood, slowly spinning around the room, trying to take it all in. An old wooden couch with woven tapestry sat in the middle of the room, a woodstove, narrow table with chairs, and a bright green door. It was a room. But where did it come from? It wasn't here before, so how would it appear from thin air. Unless- he glanced at the man who looked at him, still awaiting an answer. It had to be him.

"Neither inside nor outside," he mumbled, thumbing the shrouded couch before pacing around the room. "Not inside, not outside," he repeated it, over and over until it finally clicked. Air escaped his nose while he sucked in his laugh. Too easy. "A door."

The man grinned from ear to ear, flicking the coin upward- the fabricated room disappearing instantaneously. The couch dissipated from under Ryuu's finger, and that's when he knew for sure. He found him. Now back to the chilly mountain pass, the man spoke, his eyes on the coin spinning up and down.

"That one was for you to see, but the next will not come so easy. I sizzle like bacon but come from an egg. There's plenty of backbone but no good leg. I peel in layers yet always remain whole. I can be long as a pole yet fit in the smallest of holes. What am I?"

Everything went dark. He couldn't tell if it was his own eyes or if the entire mountain passage was overcome with darkness. Coldness crept over him, a sudden slinking movement at his ankles. He waved his arms around, feeling for anything. Relax, he told himself, feeling panic rise in his chest. It's not real. None of it is real. He took a breath, stifling the dread. Play the game and find the stone, he reminded himself, finding peace in the commands.

"Comes from an egg, legs and no backbone- no," he shook his head, "backbone but no leg."

He had to get this right. He shut his eyes, forcing the riddle back to his mind. A stick can fit in a hole, he supposed. But a lot of things fit in small holes, and a stick definitely didn't come from an egg. A twig? No- that's the same as a stick. Another moment went by when a shiver went through his body, cold, thin slinking at his ankle. He snapped a finger at the eureka moment, the hint he needed.

"Snake," he groaned in relief, "Snake!"

In an instant light swelled over the mountain, his blood running warm through his body again.

"You are good at this," the man sucked on his pipe, impressed, and maybe slightly displeased with his ability to easily unravel his riddles.

"Is this another riddle," he asked, half-jokingly. Dare he say, he was starting to enjoy himself a bit.

"What is it that you seek?"

He scrambled to him, no more deciphering his word. That question seemed pretty straight forward "A rock- no, a stone" he said, "the Sawasii Stone."

"Across the land you'll find; small, big, thin, wide, I come in every size. Red, orange, blue, yellow, green, no color is lost to me. Deep inside, you'll surely find, the power comes from thee."

He groaned, dropping his head into his hands. Another riddle? Seriously, he thought he was done with that. He lifted his head, ready to work through the riddle when he felt something in his hand. Rocks- four of them. When did they get there? No, how did they get there?

"The power comes from thee," the man said again, poking Ryuu's chest.

The power? Did he mean the stones? His brain churned. This proved more mindboggling than any riddle. But at least he got the crystals. That's all that mattered. Kuba would be pleased with him. All five of them- wait, not five- he counted carefully, then counted again. Four. There was only four. He needed five. The man said it himself, red, orange, blue, yellow, and green.

"What the hell, old man," he said through gritted teeth.

He counted again, still four. They were all there, except for the red. So where was it?

“Where’s the last stone?” He said impatiently.

If he wanted Kuba to be proud of him, he had to do this right. Otherwise, he’ll just be that dumb kid who can’t do anything.

“Where,” he shouted suddenly, even surprising himself.

He noticed his hands gripping the collar of the man’s shirt, angry fists shaking him.

“No touch,” he brushed him. “No touching of Anasi.”

“S-sorry,” he stuttered, fixing his collar before putting his hands at his side.

What was that? That outburst. Where did it come from? Just chill, he told himself. Relax.

He took a breath, “how do I get the last stone?”

“Of the bear where the people hide, you may find what’s truly inside. But where the knot of your heart comes undone, is where you’ll truly find the last one.”

He smacked a hand to his forehead. Another riddle. He should’ve seen that coming. He closed his eyes waiting for the scene to change, but there was nothing. Where’s the moving room, the light and dark? He opened one eye, seeing the man was gone, just him standing at the side of the road.

“How-” his voice trailed off as he jumped up, scrambling around the mountain stop for him.

Not in the outhouse. Not by the road. Even his pipe was gone. He ambled back to the area he first found him, plopping to the ground. What would he do? If he came back with only four stones, Kuba would hate him. Worthless, he thought before smacking himself in the head. Idiot, he cursed himself again. Just get it right.

“Where the knot of your heart comes undone, you’ll truly find the one,” he echoed.

He crossed his legs, rubbing his temples carefully, putting his entire focus on this riddle. The knot of heart. What could that mean? Was it literal or figurative? The knot comes undone. There were many ways to undo a knot, but a knot of the heart...

His shoulders sagged in defeat, his sigh echoing around the valley. He was getting nowhere, and definitely wouldn’t figure anything out just sitting on the side of the road. He’d make his way back and figure it out on the way and pray that Kuba will accept what he has. If he’s lucky enough.

