

AYA KA

— あ や か —

SIDE STORIES



04

雨のあとに

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原作：GoRA/KINGRECORDS

AYAKA
SIDE
STORIES
04

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TRANSLATION: NARU-KUN / K – PROJECT WORLD

"AYAKA – SIDE STORIES 04": AFTER THE RAIN

Amano Yako moved for the first time in his life in the summer when he was seven years old.

Previously, he and his parents lived in Ichinoshima. However, due to the volcanic eruption that occurred in Shinoshima, the area where the Amano family house was located was especially damaged. As a result, they were forced to move into temporary housing provided by the city.

At that time, or rather, even now, construction work was carried out daily on the island of Ichinoshima in order to achieve early reconstruction. Frequent noise and dust. And it seemed that Yako, who was born with a weak body, would not be able to bear it. The mild fever and cough continued for more than two months.

Concerned about the health of their only child, his parents decided to move to an old house in Ninoshima where Yako's grandparents once lived. They have been there many times and are sure that Yako knows it, it's quiet and the air is clear. His parents thought that perhaps his condition would improve.

And today is moving day. Unfortunately, has been raining since morning.

Despite having trouble walking, his parents carefully moved furniture and other items. Fortunately, the surrounding residents, who had already greeted them previously, lent their support, so the work went smoothly.

Yako also wanted to help, but they wouldn't let him do anything because they didn't want to make him sick. He thought that at least he would have some of his personal belongings, especially the cardboard box that contained his favorite adventure novel, but even that didn't come true. A boy of about the same age who had come to help him quickly took it away.

He couldn't do anything; they wouldn't let him do anything.

Yako felt so pathetic that he hugged his knees alone on the porch. When he looked outside, he can see his parents and neighbors working hard in the rain.

"Ah..."

He doesn't know how many times he sighed. When Yako dropped it...

"Hey..."

A boy was sitting on the terrace. He was the one who went ahead of him carrying cardboard.

"Your name is Yako, right? I'm Chatarou. Fukuwake Chatarou."

"Thank you."

When he suddenly called out to Yako and was nervous, Chatarou immediately extended his hand.

"Let's be friends."

Honestly, Yako was happy to hear Chatarou's words. Because he is physically weak and cannot play actively, he was unable to make friends in Ichinoshima.

However, Yako was unable to take Chatarou's hand. The reason was the four people standing at the front door, beyond Chatarou sitting next to him. Yako's parents and probably Chatarou's parents. They looked at him as if they were waiting for something.

The clever Yako understood that. A boy who was standing in front of him asking for a handshake was approached by adults who asked him to do it.

"If you have any problems, tell me. I'll be a great help."

Chatarou smiled, showing his white teeth.

They probably told him about Yako's situation.

--- He has a weak body.

--- He has no friends.

--- So please be nice to him.

--- Please help him.

No wonder his parents asked Chatarou to do it. They had been watching his only son look lonely for a long time.

However, that wasn't the kind of friend Yako wanted.

"No..."

"Eh?"

"I don't want to!"

Yako glared at him and forcefully pushed Chatarou's hand away.

It can't be helped that he can't make friends because of his physical weakness. However, asking someone to befriend them out of sympathy is different. Yako was still young and his budding self-esteem did not allow it.

"Hey!"

Chatarou's eyes narrowed and he pushed Yako's chest. The strength of the pusher's arms and the lightness of the pushed. As a result of their confrontation, Yako fell backwards and received a severe blow to the back.

He was choking and felt like coughing.

However...

--- Is it okay to give up?

Yako swallowed it and stood up, colliding with Chatarou with his entire body.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

"Speaks!"

The two tangled ones ran off the porch and fell into the Amano family's garden, which was muddy with rain.

"I don't need friends like that!"

"I don't even want people like you!"

In the rain, they hit each other, ripped each other, bit each other and pulled each other's hair. Both parents ran in and intervened, but it took more than five minutes to completely separate them.

The next day.

Yako had a fever and was in bed. That was a reaction to the big fight the day before. The day after he overexerts himself, his body usually asks for rest.

"Cough, cough..."

Coughing, Yako looked out the window. His eyelids were puffy and what he could see in his reduced field of vision was the perfect blue sky. The rain that had continued since yesterday stopped an hour ago.

"...The weather has been pleasant."

Yako felt resentful of his body. He was sure that he... that active boy would already be running around the slightly humid beaches and forests of Ninoshima. It was easy to imagine what he would look like.

"You are very clever..."

When Yako murmured that with envy...

"Are you still sleeping? It's already noon."

The window burst open and a boy looked out from there. It's Chatarou.

Due to yesterday's fierce battle, he has therapeutic gauze stuck all over his face and arms.

"You... cough, cough..."

"I really hope you get better soon."

Looking at Yako who was coughing, Chatarou said that with admiration. Strictly speaking, Yako's symptoms were different from a cold, but Chatarou's parents may have explained it in an easy-to-understand way.

"What do you want...?"

"This. Mom asked me to bring it to you. It's an apology gift."

Chatarou threw a rectangular box into the room. When Yako sat down and opened the lid, the contents were dorayaki. The number is three. The number of pieces is extremely small considering the size of the box.

"Eh?"

"Your family is a family of three, right?"

Chatarou laughed without a trace of guilt. If you look closely, you can see the skin of an azuki bean on his lips.

"Hurry up and get over your cold. Then, let's get back to finishing yesterday."

"Eh...?"

Yako's eyes widened at Chatarou's statement.

He was very surprised that he was still trying to get involved with him after all the mud and wrestling they had been doing.

"Yesterday my father and the others stood in my way, but next time I will win."

Chatarou moved his fists from left to right as he exhaled. It's probably an imitation of boxing. He may be good at working out, but he looks pretty good.

"I'm in a bad mood. Just like you."

"Eh...?"

When Yako asked him, Chatarou began to roll up his sleeves. There is a tooth-shaped scar around the exposed shoulder.

"Of course. You were crying next to me, and even when I hit you, you didn't let go."

"I'm sorry too..."

At that moment, Yako knew it for the first time. The identity of the mysterious energy that gave Chatarou a good fight because of his superior physical strength. That something like that was swirling inside him.

The Ichinoshima children, who were similar in age, treated him as if they were treating with a boil, or did not want to get involved with Yako in the first place because they thought it would be a hindrance to their playtime. As a result, Yako has never had the chance to show his competitiveness.

In a sense, Yako may have become the "real Yako" after having a serious fight with Chatarou.

"Then I'll be off like a frog. See you later."

"Tomorrow everything will be better."

Chatarou waved and started to leave the window, but Yako called him to stop him.

"So it will finally be tomorrow. This time I will win again."

"You didn't win yesterday either! I mean, if they hadn't stopped us, it would have been me!"

The two boys stared at each other through the window.

But soon they began to laugh.

"See you tomorrow, Yako."

"Yes. See you tomorrow, Chatarou."

That's what they promised.

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The rivalry between Amano Yako and Fukuwake Chatarou began after a childhood fight. That continued even after they entered elementary and middle school.

Their daily life is to compete in everything and go through joys and sorrows.

"Damn! I lost to Yako again because of the number "5" on my report card!"

"It doesn't matter, Chatarou."

Yako gave Chatarou a sarcastic smile as he stomped to the ground.

The two were walking home from high school under the scorching summer sun. That day was the closing ceremony and they were playing with the report cards that had just arrived.

By the way, Chatarou's report card had only a "5" in health and physical education, while Yako had five in Japanese, social studies, mathematics, science and foreign language.

"I will pay this debt at the table tennis tournament at the neighborhood association next week! Wash your neck and wait!"

Chatarou stuffed his report card into his bag with one hand and pointed at Yako with the other.

"Huh... table tennis."

Yako groaned with a slightly pale face.

Seeing this, Chatarou smiled and showed his white teeth.

In that short time, his expressions had completely changed.

"Can you stop my slice serve, Yako-kun? Well, do your best not to fall asleep the day after the tournament."

Chatarou patted Yako on the shoulder as if to provoke him.

"Uh, ah. That room for maneuver is the key to survival."

After saying that, Yako pointed back. Chatarou... or rather, the glasses he started wearing last year.

"You don't know if my strong smash breaks your glasses again like it did in the last badminton tournament, right?"

"What's with the "hard hit"? It wasn't the ball that broke the glasses, it was your racket that got away!"

"Is that so? That day Chatarou made me run so much that my consciousness and memory were confused..."

Cough-cough, Yako coughed deliberately.

"Aren't you suddenly sickly and weak? Not only your body but also your head has become weak?!"

"It's loud, idiot. You just know how to exercise."

"Shut up, Yako. All you can do is study."

The two landed light blows on the other's shoulder while uttering childish curses. These skirmishes were also part of their daily life.

The two have been competing against each other since childhood, but now that they are in the second year of high school, it has become clear that the other has strengths and weaknesses.

Yako is good at using his head and bad at exercising.

Chatarou, on the other hand, is good at moving his body and weak with his brain.

Therefore, if you want to win for sure, you only need to compete on your own field. But they didn't do that. Like today, they compete based on qualifications, and that time they competed based on exercise.

If they get the chance, they will compete by solving puzzles and, of course, they will compete by eating lunch boxes too fast. Neither Yako nor Chatarou had the option of "I won't do it because I don't think I'll win".

--- I don't want to lose to this guy.

Compete driven by that feeling. That's the rivalry between two people who hate to lose.

"If you say so."

Chatarou's hand, which had already been about to launch a counterattack blow an unknown number of times, stopped.

"Have you heard the rumors about the ruined cabin? It's said to be haunted."

"Yes. I've heard about that several times."

Yako nodded to Chatarou's question.

A ghost appears in a ruined cabin that stands peacefully deep in the forest.

The current hot topic at the high school Yako and Chatarou attend is a ghost story that has been told a million times before. The cabin had been used as a residence and studio by a painter, but was now intact and in ruins.

"Let's get rid of the ghost."

"Do you believe in such a common ghost story?"

Yako frowned, as if saying it was nonsense. So...

"Hey, Yako. If you're scared, tell me honestly that you're scared, okay?"

Chatarou raised his glasses and the corners of his mouth and smiled provocatively.

"If not, let's go now to the old cabin. It's a test of courage."

Apparently, whether ghosts appear or not is secondary, and Chatarou's intention is to have a match before the next table tennis tournament.

If that is the case, Yako's answer is already decided.

"Let's follow the results and win two games in a row."

Yako said a brave line. However, contrary to his words, his expression was full of joy as he went out with his friend.

The rumored dilapidated cabin was located in the forest at the foot of the mountain on the southwest side of Ninoshima. The thick branches and leaves of the trees block the intense sunlight and a fresh air floats that doesn't feel like summer. However, at the same time, visibility is extremely poor because light no longer reaches the area.

In conclusion, there were no ghosts in the ramshackle cabin. However, he appeared right after Yako and Chatarou left after completing their quest.

A monster made entirely of wood that can only be described as a "giant walking tree".

At the sudden encounter, both Yako and Chatarou couldn't help but let out a stupid voice, "Huh?". What glared at them was a large eye that opened in the center of the monster's body.

And the monster raised high his green arms that looked like trunks...

"Yako!"

Chatarou quickly regained consciousness, grabbed Yako by the neck, and fell into the cabin behind them. Immediately afterwards, a roar and impact hit the two of them.

"The cabin..."

Yako's voice shook as he hovered over his butt. The body that should have escaped into the cabin was now exposed to the outside air. A loud bang crushed it from the ceiling and the entrance itself disappeared.

"If he had hit me, I would have died..."

Chatarou, who had been lying on his back, suddenly sat up.

Then, through the smoke of dirt and dust that had filled the area, he saw the shape of that monster.

Furthermore, he once again waved his arms in the air.

"Run away quickly!"

"Yes!"

Yako and Chatarou immediately got up and ran towards the back of the cabin. They stepped on the easel and drawing table on the floor, kicked down the back door, and ran.

The next moment, a loud noise and wind pressure that was not comparable to before reached the two from behind. They were able to imagine it without looking back. The monster's second attack destroyed the cabin.

"Chatarou, that monster could be..."

"Ah. This is the first time I've seen one so close, but I think it's an Aramitama."

The two looked at each other as they fled through the forest.

Aramitama.

A mysterious creature called Mitama floats around Ayaka Island and is invisible and harmless to ordinary humans. However, the story changes when strong emotions are absorbed and stagnated. It acquires a body by absorbing surrounding matter and goes crazy without orbit. This kind of thing is called Aramitama on this island.

How many people must have visited that cabin after hearing ghost stories before Yako and Chatarou? Although it varies from person to person, they brought a strong emotion of fear to the place.

The two children acted as the final trigger, and the Mitama around the cabin transformed into Aramitama.

"There's nothing we can do about the Aramitama. Is there something about the pulse connector boy?!"

"Chatarou?!"

At this moment, Chatarou, who was running beside him, stopped. When he looked, he saw that a thick vine was wrapped around his neck, and was growing from the Aramitama of the great tree behind him. Apparently, that arm was shaped like a long swirl of vines.

"Let go!"

Yako picked up a fist-sized stone from the ground and smashed it against the vines that trapped Chatarou. However, that did not cause them to drop it, as it only caused small scratches on the surface. As he did so, the vines dug deep into Chatarou's neck.

"Ah... gah... ugh...!"

"Please wait! I'm definitely going to... cough, cough!"

At that moment, Yako's body began to scream, as if he paid the price for the quick exercise. He tried to hit him with another rock, but he couldn't get enough force.

That is not the case now.

The life of his dear friend is at stake.

"I don't care how bad it gets later, just for now...!"

With tears in his eyes, Yako tried to scream, but his body did not listen to him.

However, his most sincere wish had definitely come true.

A pure wind blew from beyond.

"The softest thing in the world, the most solid thing in the world are conquered and nothingness enters nothingness."

The moment a clear voice echoed around them, a tornado was born between the Aramitama and Yako. And he broke the vine that had captured Chatarou into thousands of pieces.

"Kuh... haa... haa...!"

Chatarou was finally allowed to breathe and crawled on all fours, desperately trying to get oxygen. Yako sat next to him and said, "Okay..." as he coughed and his expression fell.

There...

"It's okay now, guys."

He could hear the clear voice from before. This time he was close. Before he knew it, there was a young man in a hunting uniform standing right next to Yako and Chatarou. He must be in his twenties. Not only is he beautiful in profile, but the way he stands there is already beautiful.

"Leave the rest to me."

When he said that to the two children, the young man extended the tip of his unfurled fan ("Heaven") in front of him. At the end of this line was the Aramitama, who has had one of his arms cut off along with the vine.

"Furious Mitama, return to the great flow."

".....!"

As if resisting the young man's words, the giant tree monster trembled silently. Then he pointed his uninjured arm forward.

Frush!

The vines grew again. The thick and flexible whip attacked the youths at high speed while cutting through the air.

"Ugh...!"

Yako instinctively turned his head.

However, no matter how much time passes, Aramitama's vines do not appear.

Instead, a singing voice reached his ears.

"Those who do not lose their place are long gone; those who do not die live a long time."

When Yako cautiously looked up, the wind swirled around him, Chatarou, and the young man. It became a wall that protected them and prevented the vines released by the Aramitama from reaching them.

"It must have been hard. Getting carried away by the emotions caused by humans."

The young man made a sad face as the Aramitama hit the vines against the wind wall again and again. Then, he gently extended his hand.

"...Now, let's rest."

The next moment, the Aramitama flew into the sky with a booming sound. His height was greater than the surrounding trees. It seemed like he had decided that a half-hearted attack wouldn't work and he was planning to crush the young man with his weight.

If he could destroy a hut with a single swing of his arm, what would happen if his entire body crashed into it?

Yako and Chatarou imagined the "end" in a few seconds and were terrified.

However, such a desperate future did not come.

"Nothing is called the beginning of heaven and earth, and being is called the mother of all things."

The young man sang three times.

The soft voice spread across the wind and enveloped the Aramitama in flight. Before long, the once strong tree began to crumble and rot, and all that was left in the air was a large, extravagant eye. However, it turned into pale particles of light and finally turned into a bright rain that fell on the forest.

"Ah, that's very strange..."

"Yes... it's ayakai..."

Yako and Chatarou spoke with their eyes and mouths wide open, speaking only in the exclusive language of Ayaka Island.

A young man approached the two with a smile. It's hard to believe that he has just defeated Aramitama's threat, and his steps are light, as if he had just arrived in the neighborhood to do some shopping.

"Are you hurt? Yako-kun, Chatarou-kun."

"Ah, thank you, Kurama-sensei."

"Thanks to you I saved my life..."

Taking a hand from the young Kurama, Yako and Chatarou staggered to their feet.

His name is Haruaki Kurama. He is the priest of the Kaizumi Shrine in Minoshima and is one of the rare "pulse connectors" who can pacify the Aramitama. He is famous for being a person of character who lends his wisdom not only to cases involving Aramitama, but also to the problems of the island's residents. Therefore, both Yako and Chatarou knew Kurama since they were children. However, it's the first time they've had a face-to-face conversation like that without an adult involved.

"I've been worried about the stagnation around here for some time. I came to see if the Aramitama was about to leave..."

"Does that mean we were in big trouble?"

Chatarou took Kurama's explanation with a wry smile. Despite being almost suffocated by the vines of the Aramitama, the boy with glasses had already recovered his usual vigor.

In comparison, Yako spoke less. Unlike Chatarou, he had not received any direct damage, but the fact that he had forced his body to flee and try to save Chatarou had left a trail behind him. He tried to keep the noise down so as not to disturb Chatarou and Kurama's conversation, but he continued coughing.

"Yako-kun. I guess you're not okay."

Kurama noticed Yako's state and called out to him.

"I heard from your parents that you were born with a weak body. But now that I've seen you up close, I can see it. It seems that's not the only reason for your condition."

"What do you mean?"

Yako asked confused. Meanwhile, Kurama was watching the sickly boy alternately from the front and back.

"There are places where the flow of life energy is stagnant. If we can successfully resolve it..."

As he muttered to himself, Kurama put his hand in front of Yako's chest. When he closed his eyes, Kurama's palm took on a faint white glow.

"It's warm..."

Yako surrendered to the comfort of the light shining in Kurama's hands. The shortness of breath that ate away at his throat and lungs after overexerting his body gradually subsided.

"What about now?"

"Breathing feels so easy... it's like magic..."

Kurama was looking at his face and Yako responded in shock. Hearing that, the young connector nodded in satisfaction and said, "That's good."

"Kurama-sensei is amazing! You did it, Yako!"

Chatarou got excited and jumped while he shouted hurrah. He has seen up close his friend go through difficult times due to a physical illness. As a result, he was filled with joy as if it were his own.

"Ah, that! Thank you very much!"

Looking directly at Kurama, Yako bowed his head so deeply that his forehead almost touched the ground. Not only did he save him from a crisis, but he also broke the chains that had bound him since he was born. The depth of his gratitude was also reflected in the angle of his bow.

"Even if you're no longer short of breath, that doesn't mean your body has gotten stronger, right? Please don't overexert yourself."

Poof-poof. Kurama patted Yako's chest as if he were going to hit him gently. Then, he looked up at the roof of the forest, where a large hole had been left by the flight of the great Aramitama tree, and beyond it the sky was beginning to turn blonde.

"You two, it's time to go home. Regardless of whether there are ghosts or not, the dark forest is dangerous."

After saying that, he turned to the two children and said with a smile, "I'll take you home."

That night, Yako looked out the window, excited.

If his body had been exhausted from spending time in the forest after school, at that moment he would have started to have a fever and cough if everything had continued as usual. However, perhaps because he was able to regain a normal flow of vitality, he only felt a little lazy and not enough to fall asleep.

All that too...

"Thanks to Kurama-sensei...!"

Yako spoke the name of his benefactor with great regret. His gratitude for Kurama grows stronger every time he thinks about it, and now it's starting to turn into admiration.

"I want to be like you. Someone who can save lives and hearts."

Yako spoke forcefully of the dream that had just been born that day. At the same time, the image of Chatarou suffering in agony as the Aramitama nearly suffocated him returned to his mind.

He felt frustrated and helpless because he could only watch his friend approach death. If he could be like Kurama, he's sure he'd never have to feel this way again.

"Tomorrow I will ask Kurama-sensei to make me his apprentice."

One night later, Yako set out to make his dream come true. He was so nervous and excited that he couldn't sleep well that day.

The next day, Yako left home early in the morning. He wanted to become Kurama's disciple as soon as possible, so he planned to board the first sea train bound for Sannoshima.

But...

"Ah..."

In the center of the platform at Ninoshima Station, which was thought to be deserted, Yako saw a boy with familiar glasses. This is Chatarou. He noticed his presence immediately and made a "Hm." sound with the mouth.

When the train arrived, the two boarded without saying a word. Although they sat opposite each other during the trip, they only stared at each other and there was no conversation. As soon as the door of the train that arrived in Minoshima opened, they began walking side by side towards the Kaizumi Shrine on the top of a small mountain.

Yako stepped forward with an indifferent look on his face, and Chatarou quickly passed him as he whistled. Clicking his tongue, Yako took the lead in a short race, and Chatarou, not to be left behind, increased his speed as well.

As they repeated that, they started running as fast as they could while trying to push each other with their shoulders. Immediately after arriving at the area filled with morning fog, they were in such a tie that they had to sit down on the spot.

"Haa... haa... haa..."

"Haa... haa... haa..."

Yako and Chatarou continued to look at each other in silence, both out of breath.

At that moment, Kurama appeared from beyond the mist, holding a bamboo broom. When he saw the children, he narrowed his eyes and said, "Hello.".

"Are you coming to visit so early in the morning?"

At the same time Kurama asked that, Yako and Chatarou, who had been sitting on their butts, quickly moved to sit up straight. Then, they straightened their backs and bowed their heads at the same time, as if they had practiced beforehand.

"Take me as your disciple."

"I guess that's impossible."

Kurama said with a bright laugh.

On the other hand, Yako and Chatarou, who were rejected while expressing their wishes, both made faces that said, "Why?".

"What you want to be is a close disciple, right? I'm sorry, but I have no intention of accepting disciples."

Turning his back on the boys, Kurama began to sweep the floor with his broom. Although it was not a clear rejection, it was as if he had no intention of discussing the matter further.

Still, Yako did not give up. That is a newborn but important dream. There is no way for him to give up easily.

"Do something about it! I really want to become your disciple!"

"Yako..."

Yako tried his best to appeal to Kurama's back. Chatarou smiled when he saw it, because he felt the same way.

"I will not move from here until my master makes me his disciple!"

Pashin. Chatarou patted his thigh and declared that. Immediately, Yako became competitive and said, "I won't move either!"

"No matter what you do, my opinion will not change."

Saying that with a sigh, Kurama entered the office without even looking at the boys. There doesn't seem to be any island to reach at that time.

"If this happens, it's a matter of patience."

"Yes."

Yako nodded at Chatarou's words.

Waiting will be a tough battle, but they are not alone. As long as there is a rival at your side, the feeling of not wanting to lose will continue to increase. It seems like they can last forever with just that. Both Yako and Chatarou felt that way, although they wouldn't say it out loud.

"Is it already noon?"

Kurama looked at the clock on the wall and muttered that. After finishing the morning cleaning, he took refuge in the office at the back of the shrine, where he had been sitting at his desk and writing on the amulets with a brush.

"....."

Suddenly, Kurama looked over his shoulder. There is nothing special in that direction in the room. But...

"Wow, Haru-nii."

The sliding door opened with a languid voice. The person who entered was a young man in his twenties who exuded a calm aura. This is Kurama's youngest disciple, who is actually like a younger brother to him.

"Hey, don't you have some pocket money? I was playing cards with my friends and for some reason I ran out of money."

Jingi said, sitting cross-legged on the tatami.

"Jingi. I can't spend my pocket money if you're going to use it for gambling."

Kurama said with a surprised expression, and Jingi held his head in a theatrical tone and said, "That's very true.". However, he immediately raised his index finger as if to say, "I have an idea!".

"Okay, I'll stop asking for pocket money! So lend me the money! I'm sure I'll pay it back eventually!"

"Isn't that how people say things when they don't return something?"

With a sigh and a wry smile, Kurama put down his pen and said, "You're right.". He then took out the wallet that he was carrying in his fist.

Kurama thinks it's sweet even for him. However, perhaps because he has been taking care of him since he was a child, he can't help but want to help him. He is like a grandfather with a grandson.

"Hehehe, thanks."

Jingi smiled widely as he put the money Kurama had lent him into his pants pocket. Looking to the side, Kurama picked up the brush again and began writing on the amulet.

"By the way, Haru-nii. There were two kids sitting outside, what was that? Are you punishing them for stealing money?"

"....."

When Jingi asked, Kurama's neat writing became slightly messy. It seems that neither Yako nor Chatarou have given up yet.

"It seems that they want to become my apprentices."

"Be a disciple of a priest?"

"...That would have been nice."

Kurama laughed, looking worried. With just that, Jingi understood the situation.

"Hey, are you hoping to hook up with someone? There are strange people out there too."

Although he spoke in a mocking manner, Jingi's expression seemed somehow happy.

"And then? You made them your disciples?"

"That's not my intention. I told you so."

"So they're just sitting around complaining? Ha, they're doing a good job in this damn hot weather."

Jingi laughed and blew a breeze around his neck with a fan.

At that, Kurama made a surprised face.

Looking closely, he could see beads of sweat on Jingi's forehead and neck. He didn't know it because he had been locked in the office the whole time, but maybe the temperature and sunlight outside were not comfortable.

"Jingi."

"Eh?"

When Jingi turned at the call, he saw Kurama rummaging through his desk drawer.

"It would be a disaster if they collapsed from the heat. Could you pass the umbrella to them both?"

Kurama said as he handed Jingi a folding umbrella.

"Why would I do something like that?"

For a moment, Jingi refused, but then he remembered what was in his pants pocket and reluctantly accepted the umbrella.

"Plus, they're probably thirsty, so bring some water and a towel to wipe off the sweat. Plus, it must be hard to sit up straight all the time, so they'd have to sit in a chair and, oh, maybe they're hungry. Could you make them some rice balls?"

"If you're going to get this far, accept them as your apprentices."

Jingi looked at Kurama, who was doing his best to take care of the children, his eyes narrowed in shock.

"Okay, you can make them your disciples. I think Haru-nii is suitable for teaching someone, right?"

It was a sincere and honest feeling. He is sure that his elder brother will teach and guide his disciples with kindness and patience.

But the person in question doesn't seem to believe it. Kurama silently shook his head.

"I couldn't stop my brother and friend from going astray... even though he was the closest to me. There is no way he can guide others in the right direction."

Kurama looked down sadly.

The person he mentioned was Aka Ibuki, who studied and grew up with the "great hermit" Makoto Yanagi. Currently, Ibuki has deviated from Yanagi's teachings and has become an evil follower. Even now, several years later, Kurama still regrets not being able to stop him beforehand.

Of course, Jingi was well aware of the circumstances around him. After all, when Yanagi was alive, he, Kurama, Ibuki, and Yanagi's son Yukito lived under the same roof. In other words, just as Kurama is an older brother, Ibuki is an older brother to Jingi as well. That's why he can painfully understand Kurama's regret towards Ibuki and his hesitation in becoming a mentor because of it.

However, Jingi deliberately ignored him. There are times when a certain kind of callousness is necessary. His deep intuition told him that now was the time.

"No, it's Aka-nii's fault for becoming like this. He's always been reluctant to listen to what others have to say, he's an ultra-stubborn person."

After happily criticizing Ibuki, who was not there, Jingi sat on the corner of the desk. Kurama tried to warn him about his bad manners, but missed the opportune moment when Jingi pointed his finger at the tip of his nose a second earlier.

"Aka-nii doesn't care about that. But doesn't Haru-nii have an obligation?"

"Obligation?"

"Okay. Isn't it the role of Haru-nii, the greatest disciple of the "great hermit" Makoto Yanagi, to pass on the teachings of Yanagi-ryu to the next generation?"

"Passing the teachings of Yanagi-ryu to the next generation..."

Kurama repeated his words carefully.

Then, Jingi brought his face closer to him.

"If Haru-ni doesn't accept disciples, the future of Yanagi-ryu will be completely dark, right? After all, the only ones left are the one who has gone astray, the one who is only interested in living freely, and the one who doesn't even has trained yet."

"You still have a mouth that turns a lot."

Although Kurama had a worried expression on his face, he let out a sigh of admiration. Instead of being persuaded logically, he was overwhelmed by an avalanche of verbal attacks.

"I can't compete with Haru-nii in terms of ability as a connector, but I don't think I lose when it comes to talking."

Jingi proudly rubbed his finger under his nose. He then asked Kurama again.

"And? In the end, will you accept the disciples, yes or no?"

"....."

Kurama didn't respond.

However, his gaze, which he used to look downwards due to regret and hesitation, was now looking straight ahead.

The heat of the sun falling directly from above. As a result, Yako felt like his neck was slowly being burned.

Several hours had passed since the early morning sit-in began and it was almost noon.

His legs, which have been sitting straight for so long, have overcome the numbness and pain and have lost all feeling.

"Haa... haa..."

Very hot, thirsty. They were hungry too.

(Let's just give up.)

He could hear that whisper inside his ear.

To be honest, Yako almost gave in to that voice many times. But every time she did that, he directed his attention to his neighbor. He looked at Chatarou, who was also sweating and continued sitting.

When he noticed Yako's gaze, he laughed.

(What's with that relaxed look on your face?)

At that moment he felt as if his feelings, which had been on the verge of falling apart, had found their core again. He looked like he could give his best again.

So there...

"Oh. You're still sitting there with stupid honesty."

Jingi approached with a flirtatious smile. He then stood behind the children and pushed their feet with his fingers.

"It's not like anyone is watching you, so you should just stand at attention or retreat into the shadows."

"Aaaaaaaaahhh!"

"Ah, the feet! Don't touch my feet!"

The lost sensation of pain was restored and Yako and Chatarou fainted from the pain, as if they were receiving an electric shock. Seeming to find his reactions very amusing, Jingi continued to move their legs rhythmically, as if he were playing a musical instrument.

"P-please take it easy!"

"Go away! Shhh!"

The boys sat up and waved their arms, trying to shoo Jingi behind them.

But...

"Is it okay for you to talk to me like that? I'm your benefactor, benefactor."

A significant statement made by someone who was thought to be a nuisance. As a result, Yako and Chatarou's attacks were temporarily stopped.

"You were in trouble because Haru-nii refused to make you his apprentices, right? You should be grateful, the great Jingi-san sincerely asked him to accept you. "Please accept them as your disciples", that's what I said."

Jingi made a supplication with many parts expressed. The performance is strangely detailed, with slurping and choking on the words in between. He seems to be good not only at speaking but also at acting.

"Then we...!"

"Can we be his disciples?"

Yako and Chatarou twisted their upper bodies to the limit and looked at Jingi behind them. Perhaps in reaction to the difficulties they have had so far, the two were filled with joy.

"I'm glad your wish came true. Well, then, 5,000 yen per person, including the persuasion fee and brokerage fee..."

He extended his left and right palms to the children and prepared to collect money. But soon, a hand came out from the side and grabbed his wrist, squeezing his joints.

The older brother even criticized the younger brother's problematic behavior.

"I thought it was taking you too long to call them both, but you ended up doing unnecessary things, right, Jingi?"

"It's painful! It's a light joke, Haru-nii!"

Although he groaned in pain, Jingi smiled and insisted that he was joking. Kurama let out a sigh at his lack of remorse. He then approached the boys who were sitting, bent his knees and looked them in the eyes.

"They both worked hard for a long time."

Kurama gently touched Yako and Chatarou's heads. And...

"First of all, eat and rest. After that, let's talk about turning you into apprentices."

Kurama then took Yako and Chatarou to a residence next to the main shrine where they ate.

Surprisingly, the one who cooked the food was Jingi, and his skill was at the level of a small restaurant. The boys were about to reconsider Jingi, but witnessed Kurama lecture him in the kitchen after dinner. Apparently, he was secretly trying to charge Yako and Chatarou for the food. Therefore, the evaluation remained negative.

"Well, let's go now."

About an hour after eating, Kurama called Yako and Chatarou. The three moved to a forest a little further away. The trees lined up are peach trees. Right now it's all green, but in the spring, one corner of the sanctuary will be painted bright pink.

"I can sense your desire to be a pulse connector. However, I would like you to try one more thing."

Kurama stopped at the edge of the forest, right where the row of peach trees ended.

"Will you be able to connect to the life line?"

Kurama took a seed out of his pocket and let it fall to the ground. He folded his hands, closed his eyes and sang.

"Everything is created with the blessing of the great way."

The next moment, a small sprout emerged from the ground. It continued to grow and in less than a minute became as splendid as the surrounding trees.

"Wow, that's amazing..."

Yako muttered as he blinked repeatedly at the magical phenomenon that occurred nearby. Chatarou and Yako opened their mouths and ran their palms along the trunks of the newly grown tree, as if to confirm that it was not an illusion.

"What I just showed you is Yanagi-ryu, the basic training at the school where I learned. It cultivates the sense and power to connect with the life line."

When Kurama said that, Yako and Chatarou's faces became even more surprised. Both boys looked nervously at the surrounding trees.

"No way..."

"The peach tree here is..."

Kurama responded with a slight smile at the boys' question, which seemed to be a soliloquy.

"Of course not all of them, right? But at least the trees around you were grown by Yanagiryu members through training."

It is said that miracles like the one Kurama performed previously have been performed as many times as there are peach trees in that area. Both Yako and Chatarou were so amazed by that fact that they both trembled and at the same time their hearts warmed with admiration.

"Someday we will too..."

Yako and Chatarou looked at each other and nodded.

Kurama stared dazzlingly at the two, whose eyes shone like those of little children. But soon his expression tightened.

"I will ask you both to do this training as well. Of course, I will not ask you to grow a tree from the beginning."

Kurama raised three fingers again.

"Grow the seed in three days. If you can do it, I will accept you as my disciples."

"Yes!"

Yako and Chatarou nodded without hesitation at Kurama's conditions. It's not about whether it's possible or not. A strong will to "do it" overflowed from their bodies.

"You seem to be in a good mood."

As he said that, Kurama took out two seeds. Then he placed them in Yako and Chatarou's palms.

"Once you have planted the seed, chant: 'Everything is created with the blessing of the great way'. If you are successful, you will be able to encourage the seed to germinate. But don't forget this."

Kurama leaned his tall body to meet the boys' eyes.

"The most important thing is not the words. It is connecting with the life line that flows deep underground."

"Connect with the life line..."

When Yako repeated his words, Kurama agreed with a satisfied "Yes.". Then, he straightened his back and spoke in a clear voice.

"So, now we will begin the learning exam. The deadline is until sunset the day after tomorrow."

Kurama clapped his hands loudly as a signal to begin.

Immediately afterwards, Yako and Chatarou stood side by side and dropped the seeds on the ground. Then they placed their fingers in the shape of a cross and sang.

"Everything is created with the blessing of the great path!"

The boys' voices overlapped.

Kurama heard that in the background as he left Jingi. Then, he suddenly stopped and opened his mouth, looking ahead where no one was looking.

"Sometimes it's okay. Can you check on them?"

"I don't have enough free time to protect those children."

Diagonally behind Kurama, leaning against a tree, Jingi frowned in annoyance.

"Once a day, I'll give you some pocket money whenever you see how they're doing."

"I'm bored! I'm such a lazy person that I'm going to protect those children!"

Jingi smiled and ran away. The destination is where Yako and Chatarou are training.

Kurama smiled bitterly at the actions of his younger brother, concerned about money. And...

"In my case, if I saw two people in trouble, I would help them."

He muttered with a hint of self-mockery.

"Haa... haa... haa..."

It was Yako who was crawling on all fours and breathing heavily.

Beside him, Chatarou was breathing on his shoulder.

The setting sun illuminated them and the forest where they were.

The two of them had been chanting spells relentlessly since the beginning of the exam. However, the seeds planted in the ground remained silent.

"Danm..."

Muttering in frustration, Yako dug his nails into the dirt floor.

The life line Kurama mentioned runs deep underground. To connect with that, Yako has continued to focus his attention on his feet. However, he still doesn't have an idea what the omen will be.

"That I have to do?"

Chatarou also moaned as he scratched his curly-haired head. The rivals seemed to be equally eager.

"Looks like you're in trouble."

Among the peach trees, among the deep shadows cast by the setting sun, Jingi appeared. Slimy like a monster. He doesn't know how long he had been waiting, but he was definitely waiting for the right moment when he appeared during a lull in the boys' conversation.

"Jingi!"

"Add the "san", brats."

Jingi lightly tapped Yako and Chatarou's foreheads.

"Well, how do you know my name if you haven't told me yours? Are you my fan?"

"I don't know anything about it, but you are a famous person in Ninoshima... no, on Ayaka Island."

Yako said as he pressed his forehead against Jingi who looked at him suspiciously.

"Am I really that famous? Well, recently I started doing connector-like things."

Upon learning that his name is known throughout the island, Jingi ruffled his hair. He is in a very good mood.

But...

"You are famous for being the problem child of Ayaka Island.", Chatarou said, and Yako continued, "All the adults say you are a bad example."

"Who is the problem child and the bad example, idiots!"

Exploding with dissatisfaction, Jingi held Yako and Chatarou's heads in his arms and squeezed them.

"It wasn't us who said that, Jingi!"

"That's right, Jingi! It's a false accusation!"

"I told you to add the "san", right?"

Since the boys didn't change his name, Jingi strengthened his strength even more. However, the guys not only received one-sided treatment.

"Stop!"

"Please let go of me!"

They counterattacked Jingi with their fists and feet.

When that fight lasted about three minutes...

"This is not the time to do this!"

With a particularly loud voice, Yako forcefully slipped out of Jingi's arms. He then turned to him with a penetrating and determined look.

"We are taking the exam to become Kurama-sensei's disciples! Please don't bother us!"

"Exam?"

Jingi looked stunned for a moment.

"That's right, it's an exam! That's why I called you!"

As he laughed out loud, he let go of Chatarou, who was still pinned down.

"Shall I help you with the exam?"

"You?"

Chatarou asked with a frown. The expression on his face was not only caused by the pain in his head, but also by disbelief.

"Okay. I look like this, but I am the third disciple of the "great hermit", right?"

Jingi dropped a seed at his feet, crossed his right and left fingers, and said, "Everything is created with the blessing of the great path!"

Finally, a bud appeared from the ground, and after a while, it turned into a peach tree with splendid branches.

"It's more or less like this."

Jingi put his hands on his hips, puffed out his chest as if he were going to back away, and laughed.

"Oh, I will. There's nothing to be proud of..."

Lifting his glasses, Chatarou honestly spoke words of praise. He was able to easily complete the task he was having trouble with. He couldn't help but admit it.

"If you leave it to me, this test will be over in seconds."

Saying that with confidence, Jingi extended his left and right palms towards Yako and Chatarou, respectively.

"Well, the helper fee is 5,000 yen per person. What do you think? Huh?"

"After all, the purpose is to make money."

Chatarou sighed with an exasperated look on his face.

However, Yako's reaction was different.

"If you can do this difficult task for 5,000 yen, it could be a good deal."

"You..."

Seeing Yako nod in admiration, Chatarou's face turned into a mixture of surprise and anger. Then, Yako noticed the look in his friend's eyes and let out a small laugh.

"If you think it is impossible to pass, let me know at any time. I will lend you 5,000 yen."

"Who's going to borrow it from you? Don't be stupid!"

Even when he raised his voice, the corners of Chatarou's mouth raised.

"It's a shame. If you had asked, I could have told Kurama-sensei that Chatarou cheated."

"You really have a bad personality."

The two began to move slowly while chatting lightly. Then, as before, they lined up side by side. They were still going to do the test.

"Hey, don't you need help? If you don't have much money for out-of-pocket expenses, you can split the fee."

Jingi opened his doors again. But...

"Please stay back!"

"Get out of the way!"

The boys looked over their shoulders and refused in unison. They then began to recite the spell they had repeated many times that day.

In the end, although they persevered until the last train, Yako and Chatarou were unable to advance on the first day of the exam.

Still, the two never looked down.

On the second day they were in high spirits and arrived at Minoshima on the first train.

"Everything is created with the blessing of the great path!"

The boys' voices echoed through the morning fog. They look a little blurry compared to usual. It is definitely the result of yesterday's fight.

However, they don't have the luxury of worrying about whether or not their throat hurts. If the sprouts do not sprout before sunset tomorrow, they will not be able to become Kurama's apprentices.

(Connect! Connect, connect, connect!)

It was Yako who echoed the voice of impatience in his heart.

Kurama said: "The most important thing is to connect with the life line.". And it is said to flow deep underground.

Therefore, Yako has been focused on his feet since the beginning of the exam. However, there was still no tangible response.

He may simply not have the talent to connect the threads and he simply does not realize that the thread of life flows beneath his feet. Such a faint thought crossed his mind.

But...

"Come out noooooooooooooow!"

Yako suddenly came back to his senses when he heard the powerful voice that echoed. When he looked next to him, he saw his rival, who was thinking about the peach seed, without even taking the time to wipe the sweat.

He can't stand losing.

When Yako demonstrated the competitiveness he had known since childhood, he returned his attention to his feet.

"It" happened on the second day of the exam, just as night began to fall.

"What?"

It was Yako who let out his stupid voice. But it was understandable. He felt a sense of crisis, as if he had been swallowed by a torrent, and a sense of security, as if he were being huddled against a large tree. He experienced a strange mix of those sensations in less than a second.

"Right now..."

Blinking, Yako looked at his feet.

Deep, deep, deep.

As a result of sinking his consciousness underground, Yako was able to connect, even if momentarily.

Yes, it was the life line.

"Yako, maybe you..."

Pushing up his glasses, Chatarou looked closely at Yako's face. Then the thin boy suddenly smiled back.

"It's a shame, Chatarou. It looks like I'll be Kurama-sensei's number one disciple."

"Guh...!"

Chatarou gritted his teeth in frustration, sensing from Yako's attitude that something had been accomplished.

"It seems that the connection has not been established yet. Ah, the life line is deeper than I thought."

"Loud, loud! I'll connect right now too!"

Chatarou turned his head and returned to his usual position.

After saying goodbye to that, Yako also headed to the place where his seed would be buried.

(I will try to connect again.)

Taking a long, thin breath, Yako once again regained consciousness...

"Cough, cough."

A cough escaped his mouth. That sound, the impact hitting his lungs, broke Yako's concentration.

And as if that were a sign, all the strength left his entire body.

Yako's body, which had been overworked for two days in a row, seemed to have already reached its limit.

"Just a little more... just a little more..."

As he fell to his knees, Yako grumbled sadly.

"Why am I so fragile...? Why...?"

Yako dropped his fist on his thigh as if questioning his own body. But even that power was already weak.

"Yako..."

Chatarou tried to call Yako, but stopped talking just before doing so. He didn't know what to say at that moment.

So he had no choice but to look at the sky. The moon shone faintly in the night sky. However, thick clouds were slowly approaching.

Third day. The last day of the exam.

Clouds completely covered the entire island of Ayaka, bringing rain to the island since midnight.

And that continued in Minoshima as noon approached.

"Everything is created with the blessing of the great path!"

Chatarou was the one who cast the spell. Along with the surrounding trees and the ground, it was bathed in gently falling raindrops.

Actually, he was wearing a raincoat when he left home, but perhaps because it was cheap, he got so hot that he started sweating while taking the exam. So he decided to take the plunge and get rid of it.

"...It feels spacious."

Chatarou turned to the empty space next to him and let out a sigh.

That morning Yako did not appear on the first sea train. He has contacted him but has not yet received a response. Judging by his appearance yesterday, there is a good chance that he is already in bed at home.

Yako didn't come.

However, somewhere in Chatarou's heart, he was waiting for his rival to arrive, even though he wasn't supposed to.

At that moment, he heard the faint sound of shoes walking on the muddy ground.

Step by step he approached.

".....!"

When Chatarou turned around with a confused look on his face...

"Ugh. How are you?"

What appeared was an umbrella. What he could see underneath were mud-spattered pants and shoes.

He couldn't see his face because his upper body was completely covered by an umbrella, but judging from his tone and voice, there is no doubt that it is Jingi.

"What's wrong, Jingi?"

"Hello, listen."

Jingi let out a voice of dissatisfaction at Chatarou's clearly unwelcoming attitude. But soon after he said in his usual tone: "Here we are!"

Not Chatarou.

Jingi spoke to someone who was under his umbrella.

"Thank you."

Accompanied by a weak voice that seemed drowned out by the sound of rain, someone landed on the ground from Jingi's back.

"Sorry... I'm a little late."

"Yako..."

Chatarou said his name with a smile on his pale face, an expression between crying and laughing.

"Can you pay the transportation fare from the station to here now?"

When Jingi called him, Yako nodded timidly. He began to walk with hesitant steps and arrived at Chatarou's side.

"I will not lose... Chatarou. I will become Kurama-sensei's number one disciple..."

Yako spoke to Chatarou looking forward and he made a seal. And...

"Everything is created... with the blessing... of the great way..."

As he said the spell, Yako's body slowly leaned back. But he didn't fall and was covered in mud.

That's because Chatarou supported him.

"Ah, you just collapsed. I was planning to start working as an assistant from now on."

Jingi let out a sigh, as if he was wrong. But he immediately smiled at Chatarou and said, "It's okay, I still have you."

"Why aren't you doing well on the exam? Hmm? How about a reliable helper...?"

In the middle of speaking at a good pace, Jingi clicked his tongue loudly.

"No, it's already out."

"Eh...?"

For a moment, Chatarou couldn't understand the meaning of Jingi's irritating words. However, he quickly realized that and looked down, still holding Yako.

All he could see was the black, wet ground. However, there was only a small green spot there.

The buds of the peach tree peeked out slightly.

"Why...?"

Questions left Chatarou's mouth in joy. That couldn't be helped either.

After all, Chatarou still hasn't felt as connected to the life line as Yako felt last night.

However, that is something that Chatarou himself did not realize.

From early in the morning until this time today, Chatarou dedicated himself to the exam with even more zeal than the first or second day.

It was partly to forget the loneliness of not having a rival at his side, but the environment sharpened his concentration.

"The path of life is deeper than I expected." He continued to chant the spell innocently and honestly, keeping in mind the words of Yako, who had just connected to the life line.

As expected, Chatarou managed to connect with the life line.

However, it was so thin that he couldn't even notice that he was gaining life force.

That's why he had doubts about the outbreak.

"I don't care why, do you? You passed the test anyway."

Jingi secured the center pole of the umbrella between his neck and shoulders and used his free hands to say "Congratulations." and give a slow applause.

Passing the exam is the result of hard work. However, there was no smile on Chatarou's face. On the contrary, he was looking at Yako in his arms with a confused look in his eyes.

Chatarou soon looked up. Then, with a determined expression on his face, he focused on the mission.

"I have a favor to ask of you."

".....!"

Yako jumped up. The first thing that caught his attention was an unfamiliar Japanese-style room.

"Where I am...?"

His head, still dull and sore, began to think.

If he remembers correctly, he had been feeling unwell since last night and could barely move in the morning. But he couldn't just sleep like that under the futon.

He would make a peach tree sprout and become Kurama's disciple.

With that in mind, Yako crawled out of the house and boarded the sea train, dragging his heavy body.

Then, dazed, he somehow makes it to Minoshima... and doesn't remember anything after that.

"Are you awake?"

Suddenly, he heard a voice nearby. When he turned his attention away from him, Chatarou was sitting cross-legged.

"What? How so?"

Yako frowned. Chatarou was not wearing his usual clothes, but rather a white Shinto priest's robe.

"I got soaked from the rain. I asked Kurama-sensei to lend me a change of clothes. Just like you."

Yako finally realized it after Chatarou told him. He was also wearing a white coat.

"Thank you, okay? I was the one who carried you here after you collapsed, right?"

Chatarou nudged him on the shoulder condescendingly. Accepting that, Yako asked him what was worrying him.

"Collapse... where?"

"Training ground. You looked shaky, chanted a spell, and then collapsed. Well, I wanted to show you. That wonderful fall..."

"That... caused problems."

Yako apologized sincerely, which was rare. A headache different from his physical condition was coming.

"Ugh..."

"Do you still feel bad?"

It must have been because Yako let out a sigh, Chatarou looked at his face with a worried expression on his face.

"It's not like I'm going to collapse anymore. But if I collapsed, I thought I probably didn't do well on the exam."

Smiling weakly, Yako looked at Chatarou.

"How was it, Chatarou? The exam."

"I..."

Just when Chatarou started to open his mouth...

"How is Yako-kun?"

A soft voice came from behind the shoji screen.

"Ah. He just woke up."

When Chatarou responded, the shoji door opened silently. The person who appeared was Kurama. Behind him you can see a black and rainy sky. The deadline for sunset had already passed and night had arrived.

The reason why he could immediately see what was happening outside was because Kurama was standing on the terrace, and the room where Yako and the others were was adjacent to it.

"Your complexion has improved a lot."

"I'm sorry. I borrowed your clothes and bedding."

When Yako lowered his head, Kurama stopped him with his hand.

"I'm the one who should apologize. I purposely avoided visiting the training grounds for the past three days, so as not to disrupt the exam. But as a result, I couldn't do so because I was worried about your health."

Kurama bowed deeply and said, "I'm so sorry."

"I promise that from now on, as your master, I will take careful care of you, my apprentice."

"Master... apprentice...?"

Yako bowed his head.

Seeing that, Kurama asked Chatarou, "Didn't you tell him?".

"I thought Yako would be happier if Kurama-sensei told him."

"I see..."

With a small nod, Kurama cleared his throat. He then bent his knees and looked directly at Yako on the bed.

"I accept you as my disciple. Together, let us protect and defend the Yanagi-ryu."

"Eh, yes?!"

Yako was shocked by Kurama's words and unconsciously kicked the quilt that covered his waist.

"Oh, did I pass? I don't remember anything..."

"Look this."

Chatarou held out his cell phone. The image of a small cocoon appeared on the screen.

"Didn't I just tell you that you collapsed while chanting the spell? That's when the seeds sprouted."

"I also went to the training ground and looked at it. I can be sure that the sprouts have sprouted correctly."

Kurama's testimony was added to Chatarou's photographic evidence. At this moment, Yako finally clenched his fists tightly as if he felt happy.

"I... will be Kurama-sensei's disciple...!"

"Good for you, Yako."

"Yes!"

Chatarou's blessing came to his side and Yako responded with a relieved face. But suddenly a question came to his mind.

"What about Chatarou? What happened to Chatarou's exam?"

"You can tell by this face, right?"

Chatarou laughed and shrugged, looking embarrassed.

"So..."

In a normal match, it is normal for the winner to provoke the loser a lot. However, perhaps because he had seen his rival sweating up close, Yako did not feel that way this time.

"You also worked hard for three days."

"Ah..."

Chatarou scratched his head at Kurama's praise. At that moment, he noticed that Yako was giving him a complicated expression.

"You won't be happy if I'm here. I'll go home first."

Chatarou stood up.

"That's right, I..."

"Say it's okay. Losers just leave."

Chatarou greeted and left the room. "I'll take you to the entrance." Kurama said, following him.

In the end, only Yako was left in the room.

"Kurama-sensei's disciple, huh?"

Yako whispered softly.

It's a dream come true and he's happy, but something is missing.

He knew why. There is no rival.

That doesn't mean his relationship with Chatarou will change. However, as Kurama's disciple, they would not compete. Thinking about it that way made him sad.

While he was immersed in that feeling, he heard the sound of heavy footsteps approaching the room.

"Phew, that was a nice bath."

It was Jingi who appeared with a towel around his neck and covered in steam.

"Oh. Did you wake up?"

When Jingi found Yako, he formed a circle with his thumb and index finger.

"Don't forget, okay? The fare for the "Jingi Taxi" that took you from the station to the training ground."

"What do you mean?"

"Are you trying to take me down?! What a villain!"

"I'm sorry, but my memory of today is very vague. I remember until the moment I arrived in Minoshima, but..."

"After that! After that, I, the great Jingi-san, carried you to the training ground on my back!"

"Hmm..."

"Seriously, this guy! This is the height of ingratitude!"

Jingi shook his head in disbelief.

"Hey, the guy with glasses! He saw me carrying you! So what's going on? Where's the guy with glasses?"

"Chatarou? He just came back, but..."

"What?! I'm sure that guy is trying to lower the price too!"

"Why does Chatarou need to pay you?"

"Well, I gave you a hand, so..."

When Jingi was about to say that, he let out a soft murmur of "Oh, no!".

"What do you mean?! Chatarou paid you to help him?!"

"How noisy! I can't answer that for reasons such as protecting the client's privacy! It's a secret! It's a secret!"

Jingi covered his ears with both hands, blocking Yako's questions.

However, a hand reached out from behind and grabbed his head. In contrast to his kind expression, he asked in a cold voice.

"I would like to hear more details too, Jingi?"

Under pressure from Kurama, Jingi easily revealed the situation.

The truth is that Chatarou was the one who took out the buds. And at his request, he replaced it with Yako's seed.

"Guh...!"

Immediately after learning the truth, Yako ran away.

The destination is the maritime train station. No, he can't just go back to his friend.

"Haa... haa... haa...!"

Under the pouring rain, Yako ran as fast as he could, forgetting about his physical condition.

"Chatarou!"

It was just after running down the stone steps and a long straight line that Yako saw the open umbrella. That's the area where food stalls line up during the festival held four times a year at Kaizumi Shrine.

"Yako...?"

Surprised by his friend suddenly approaching from behind, Chatarou turned around.

"Your body is already..."

"What do you mean, Chatarou?"

The umbrella rolled on the ground.

That was because Yako grabbed Chatarou's chest so hard that it seemed like he was going to push him away.

"Jingi has confessed everything! I heard that you replaced the seeds that sprouted with mine?!"

"....."

Chatarou looked uncomfortable, but he remained silent.

Frustrated by his attitude, Yako asked more questions.

"Why would you do that?"

"Because you wanted to be Kurama-sensei's disciple, right? So..."

"Did you take the exam with such a cheerful mentality that you could easily hand over your position as a disciple?"

"Do you feel light?"

Chatarou, who had been blamed for so long, could see the anger in his eyes.

"I wanted to be Kurama-sensei's disciple! I wanted you to give up!"

Chatarou began the conversation with a regretful expression on his face. Then, he screamed, letting out his pent-up emotions.

"But today, when I saw you trying to continue with the exam despite your habit of getting dizzy, I thought to myself...!"

Regretful and satisfied, Chatarou made a complicated expression that shows the two of them living together.

"I don't mind losing to this guy who's working so hard!"

"I..."

Only a little. A murmur escaped Yako's mouth.

A complete change from his fiery energy from before, he lowered his head helplessly.

"They've always made it easy for me. Even after I moved to Ichinoshima and Ninoshima, they told me that I shouldn't try too hard because I'm weak. Everyone gave me priority. But..."

Yako doesn't look up. Still, he said, "You were different.", and he squeezed Chatarou's neck tightly.

What goes through Yako's mind at that moment is that meeting on that rainy day.

"You were serious from the first time we met. You didn't hold back. You didn't treat me any differently."

The voice that spoke wistfully of his memories slowly became hoarse.

"Please don't say, "I don't care if I lose". Don't take pity on me and give up your victory."

It was raining.

Not only from the sky, but also from Yako's eyes, which were still downcast.

"I want to be the same, only with you...!"

"Yako..."

After hearing Yako's complaint, Chatarou regretted his actions. If he had used a little imagination, he should have figured it out.

If the situation had been reversed, he is sure that Yako would not have wanted to lose the victory in that way. He might have spread his anger even further than the night before.

"I will apologize to Kurama-sensei for exchanging seeds."

As he spoke, Chatarou patted Yako on the shoulder.

Then, Yako seemed to have calmed down and slowly loosened his grip on Chatarou's neck.

"I'll go with you. I'm the reason Chatarou cheated."

Yako laughed as he said that, but Chatarou frowned and asked, "Is this cheating?".

"Well, are you sure? I cheated. However, I passed the test by my own ability, so it's strange to say that I cheated, right?"

"But fraud is fraud, right? It's a fact."

"That's it! You know who I paid to do that dishonest thing!"

It was just a smile, but this time Chatarou grabbed Yako's chest and lifted him up.

Then, Yako seemed to get caught up in Chatarou's condescending comment and reached out to touch Chatarou's neck again, saying, "Even though I didn't ask you to do that?"

"What's that?!"

"What did you say?!"

Will there be a fight in the rain for the first time in several years?

"That's all."

It was Kurama who spoke to stop him. Under an open Japanese umbrella, he seemed as relaxed as ever.

"You two, please follow me."

After saying that, Kurama turned on his heel and started walking.

Yako and Chatarou were stunned for a moment when he stopped them just as they were about to warm up. However, they quickly looked at each other, nodded, and followed the young priest.

Kurama took Yako and Chatarou to a training field lined with peach trees.

That is exactly the place where the children had been sweating in line for three days.

And there, still, a cute little cocoon peeked out of the ground. The number is two.

"Ah, the cocoon!"

"Hey, there are two?!"

Yako and Chatarou's eyes widened and their bodies arched even further in surprise.

"It is possible that Yako-kun put his life force into the soil. Then, he gradually transmitted himself to the seed, causing it to sprout late."

"But I didn't arrive in time for sunset..."

Yako had a depressed expression on his face.

Kurama then scratched his head in embarrassment.

"Part of the reason you collapsed was because I wasn't supervising you properly. With that in mind, I'll give you a lenient score on this exam."

"What's happen?"

Chatarou and Yako held their breath as they looked at Kurama.

Immediately after, he smiled deeply.

"You two passed."

"Yahooooooooooooo!"

The boys hugged each other and rolled happily on the muddy ground. If they get so dirty, it wouldn't be enough to change their clothes. It looks like they'll have to wash off the mud in the hot springs at the back of the main shrine.

Kurama narrowed his eyes as the boys were having fun. Jingi then approached him, holding an umbrella.

"It's not just a lenient score, it's super lenient, right?"

"What do you mean?"

Kurama tilted his head.

Seeing his brother's innocent attitude, Jingi smiled and shrugged.

"Well, when I dug up the seeds, I felt like I was just one step away from germination. He has enough talent."

While saying that to himself, Jingi looked at Kurama with an unusually serious expression on his face.

"Anyway, are you okay? This is your first disciple, and suddenly there are two."

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't worried."

Kurama made a worried smile. But right after that, he said, "But...", and turned his gaze directly towards Yako and Chatarou.

"I thought it would be better for the two of them to be together, although it might be a little difficult for me. The environment where you have your rivals by your side is what helps you grow more than anything."

"Don't speak like someone experienced."

When he said that jokingly, Jingi started to walk away. He got some money and could see that his older brother became more positive. His mission had already been accomplished.

"Don't get too excited and catch a cold, idiots."

On the way home, Jingi called out to Yako and Chatarou, who were throwing their bodies on the ground, exhausted with joy. However, he suddenly noticed something and decided to look over his shoulder and make a slight correction.

"No, from now on, you're my stupid little brothers!"

".....!"

Hearing Jingi's words, Yako and Chatarou jumped up.

That's all.

They have now become disciples of Kurama Haruaki, a pulse connector.

Then, as if he sensed their conscience, Kurama approached the boys.

"From now on, if you want to receive training, please come to the shrine. However, Yanagi-ryu training is not easy, understand?"

The young master made a stern expression and asked.

"Are you ready? Chatarou, Yako."

"Yes, Master!"

The newborn disciples sat upright and responded loudly.

Before he knew it, the rain had stopped and there were only stars in the night sky.

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"I cannot follow you."

"What?"

Yako, who was walking next to Chatarou, asked as he let out a deep sigh.

They are both in Minoshima. Under the gray and rainy sky, they walked along the long path that led to Kaizumi Shrine.

"It's the first day of our memorable training and it's raining, isn't it? Not a good omen, right?"

Waving his umbrella vertically as if to get in the way, Chatarou sighed again.

On the contrary, Yako was not depressed. In fact, he seemed to be in a good mood.

"It is just a thought."

"But you will get wet, the ground will be muddy and it will be difficult to walk, the bottom of your pants will get dirty, the visibility will be bad, it will be wet and your hands will be blocked by the umbrella, right?"

Chatarou listed all the negative points of the rainy days that he could think of.

"That's right." Yako agreed with a wry smile on that point. But he quickly continued: "But..."

"I don't hate it. Wonderful things always come after the rain."

The reason he was able to form a bond with his only rival, was able to become an apprentice to his long-awaited master, was after the rain.

He doesn't know if there will be a third time, but after the rain there may be an encounter or event that will change his life.

There was no way Yako could hate the rain at the point where he was able to make that dream come true.

"Did anything good happen after the rain? The other day we were covered in mud to the point that even if we took a hot spring bath, we couldn't get rid of it."

Chatarou tilted his head in disbelief.

Yako looked at him out of the corner of his eye and smiled.

At that moment, a light shone through his feet.

"Oh. It finally stopped!"

Chatarou took his hand out of the umbrella and checked if the rain had passed. Then, he excitedly began to fold his umbrella.

Following his example, Yako also lowered his umbrella.

Immediately afterwards, his blocked field of vision suddenly opened and a perfect blue sky caught his attention.

And in the background, a young man in a hunting uniform waved in the distance. He is Kurama. The boys were greeted at the bottom of the long stone steps.

"Come on!"

When Yako said that, Chatarou also responded with a strong nod.

Then the disciples began to run up the stairs.

They were aiming for a much higher place where his master was waiting.