

AYA KA

— あ や か —

SIDE STORIES



06

逸脱

著者：あざの耕平

原作：GoRA/KINGRECORDS



TRANSLATION: NARU-KUN / K – PROJECT WORLD

"AYAKA – SIDE STORIES 06": ESCAPE

(1)

Aka Ibuki's parents died when he was eight years old.

It was an accident.

On the night of the typhoon, the car his father was driving fell off the mountain road when he was returning home. Perhaps because of the shock of the accident he had no memory of that moment. Before he knew it, he was lying alone in a hospital bed.

According to the doctors, it was a miracle that he survived.

He heard from his aunt that the truth was different.

"It's my sister's will. Please prioritize prolonging his life."

Apparently that was his mother's will. His father died instantly. His mother was also told that he had died shortly after telling his aunt.

His aunt followed the will of his mother.

That's why Ibuki didn't die.

After being released from the hospital, his aunt took him in, but that didn't last long. After a month of waiting for Ibuki to recover physically and mentally, his aunt took him on a boat and sailed to an island in the south.

The name of the island is Ayaka Island. It was the first time he visited the place.

As soon as he arrived, his aunt headed to a deserted cafe in the old town.

There he met a man wearing a Hawaiian shirt with a really bad print. He is in his early twenties, but despite his youth, he has a strangely old and withered feel to him.

"Hello..."

The man stared at his aunt, smoking the pipe in his mouth and ruffling his strange, finely braided hair with his hands.

"He is neither a dog nor a cat. Don't say that lightly."

"I can't raise this child on my own. Not because of his qualifications. Also because of his environment."

"Then, why me?"

"There is no other suitable option."

"I'm not a random fortune teller either."

"I heard you're already taking care of someone."

"Is he originally from this island? It doesn't matter."

"Not one or two people will change."

"So he's neither a dog nor a cat."

Interactions between the adults went back and forth, like a conversation on the other end of the phone.

For starters, even though she is his aunt, he barely knows her. She is his mother's younger sister and she visited his house once or twice a year. That was the extent of her existence. He has never played with her and has never really talked to her. They only had a strange exchange once. He sensed that not only Ibuki, but also his father and his mother, who was her older sister, were overwhelmed by his aunt's presence.

This was probably due to his aunt's taciturn and gloomy personality, and also due to her unknown occupation.

However, the reason Ibuki is alive is because of his aunt's "business".

That's why... he actually wanted to live with his aunt. He also told his aunt, but she rejected nephew's request.

And she brought him here. She approached a man with a bad attitude sitting across from him at the table.

"I'm not a real "Myakutsugi". If I keep him on my side, things won't turn out well."

When he told her that, her aunt was as grim and expressionless as she always was. However, there was something beautiful about the way she sat in the chair, although she didn't seem worried. It's the same solid place where Ibuki's wishes were rejected.

"First of all, you'll probably be in trouble if you stay like this. From what I saw..."

The man looked down and glared at his aunt.

"You've made a lot of progress, right? Isn't this a good opportunity? Why don't you wash your feet?"

"It's not just me."

"Anyway, I'll give you a hand, okay?"

"It's useless. If you take risks, things will get out of control. This is the path I chose in the first place."

"Did you choose?"

"No. I had a choice. I made the decision."

The man took a deep breath and closed his eyes, groaning softly. His aunt kept her face like a mask and said nothing more.

The shop windows were open and the sunlight streaming in illuminated the tables. The ice cubes melted in the glass on the table in front of him, making a sound. He could hear the bubbling sound of cider. Ibuki listened attentively to the silence of the adults, staring at the small, playful bubbles in the glass.

Then, he suddenly looked up...

He noticed that the man was looking at him.

Their eyes met. There was sympathy in the man's eyes. Since his parents died, other adults... besides his aunt... have looked at him.

However, there seemed to be a depth in that man's eyes that he had never felt before.

He has a harsh but rich depth, just like the ocean that surrounds this island.

"Heh.", the man's mouth curved into a smile. He laughed. That alone was strangely attractive to him.

"I'm Yanagi."

"Eh?"

"Makoto Yanagi. What about you?"

"Ibuki Aka."

"Aka? That's another strange name."

His classmates had told him that many times, but that was the first time he had heard it from an adult he had just met. Furthermore, he was smiling arrogantly. He seemed congested, but for some reason he didn't feel any discomfort.

"You heard what we said, right? Your heartless aunt plans to leave you with me. Are you okay with that?"

It was a mocking tone, but he could understand that it was meant to ease Ibuki's tension. Then he nodded frankly.

His aunt said it was useless and Ibuki said the same. The only relative he knows is his aunt, and if she doesn't want him by her side, there is no other adult he can trust. For Ibuki, it doesn't matter if it's a stranger, a facility somewhere, or an ugly man in front of him.

Just one thing.

The man in front of him, who called himself Yanagi, had a special "meaning" to Ibuki.

"...You're also a "Myakutsugi", right?"

His aunt told him. Yanagi is a "companion" of his aunt.

After confirming that the Yanagi man nodded, he continued.

"Please. Please teach me."

That was Ibuki's only purpose at that moment.

Yanagi stared at him and then let out a sigh.

"Hey, do you know what a pulse connection is?"

"I don't know the details. But I..."

He looked at his aunt sitting next to him. Whether or not she noticed Ibuki's gaze, his aunt was still looking at Yanagi with a mask-like expression on her face.

Ibuki's life was saved by his aunt.

If he could be like his aunt...

At that time, if he were "Myakutsugi"...

It is possible that his father and mother had not died.

"I want to become "Myakutsugi"."

Ibuki shifted his gaze from his aunt to Yanagi and said with deep emotion.

Yanagi's eyes looking at him grew deeper.

That's when it happened.

"...Oh, perfect."

Yanagi suddenly muttered.

Then, a small white shadow gently slid across the table where the three of them were facing each other. He entered the store through an open window. Ibuki couldn't help but feel shocked.

An insect... no, that size he immediately thought it was a small bird, but they were both different. It's origami. For an unusually shaped paper airplane, it's oddly flimsy. It looked more like a cut-out piece of paper than origami. Best of all, it slid on the table and didn't fall. He continued to float above the table.

Ibuki's eyes widened, but Yanagi and his aunt didn't seem surprised either.

"Did you find it? Bring it to me."

He spoke to the floating origami. Ibuki didn't understand and looked at Yanagi and then at his aunt in surprise and doubt, but neither of them offered any explanation.

However, he suddenly understood. It's Yanagi. He is controlling that piece of paper with the power of "Myakutsugi".

"....."

After a while...

Garan.

The bell rang and the cafeteria door opened.

Then a breeze blew through the gap and the same piece of paper he saw slipped into the tent.

Then a boy entered the store following the piece of paper.

The person who entered was a boy about Ibuki's age. Although he was a child like him, he wore the Japanese clothes of a shrine priest.

The piece of paper flew through the air and headed towards Ibuki's table. The boy's gaze followed the movement of the paper and reached Yanagi. He then looked at his aunt, who was sitting with him, and then at Ibuki.

He seemed like an intelligent boy and had the grace of a "good-natured monk". He felt that the gap between the boy in the deserted cafeteria, dressed in Japanese clothing, and a child, highlights something like the boy's "elegance". He reflexively thought it was the exact opposite of him.

Separated by his parents, abandoned by his relatives and surrounded by a heavy atmosphere, he is a gloomy child who does not know what the future holds for him.

He is a pure and wise boy who wears a perfectly wrinkle-free suit and looks at him without the slightest hint of darkness in his eyes.

However, curiously, no feeling of inferiority arose. Maybe it was because the surprise of the piece of paper was still there, and maybe it was because he felt "out of place" at first. Before feeling miserable compared to his opponent, he thought, "What is this?".

A strange, hairy guy who appeared in the middle of a serious topic.

The imbalance of the situation is as if the god enshrined in a small shrine on the island suddenly showed his face in the human world.

"Haruaki. This way."

Yanagi called and the boy approached. After bowing slightly to Ibuki and the others, he asked Yanagi, "Master?", as if he was asking for an explanation.

Yanagi addressed Ibuki first, not the boy.

"Aka. This is Kurama Haruaki. Like you, he is my disciple and seeks to be a connection."

He was relieved. What his aunt had mentioned earlier in the conversation, "taking care of him alone", was probably referring to that child. This boy, who seems to be the exact opposite of him, has the same goal as him.

And...

"So, Haruaki. This is Aka Ibuki. From today, he will be my youngest disciple."

Hearing those simple words, not only Aka, but also the boy in front of him, couldn't help but look at his face.

The expression on the boy's face was one of surprise, confusion and anxiety. And a little hope for the future. A friendly curiosity towards Ibuki, who is the same age.

What about Aka? He wondered how he was looking at him now.

Yanagi smiled, showing his white teeth as the two fell silent due to the suddenness of the situation.

"Let's get along, okay?"

Beside him, he heard his aunt let out a small sigh of relief.

That day, Ibuki Aka met Kurama Haruaki and became Makoto Yanagi's apprentice.

It was the beginning of a new life with a new family.

After...

(2)

Seven years later.

The same smile from back then was in front of Ibuki's eyes. Inside a black frame. Ibuki just stared darkly at that smile that he would never return.

Five days have passed since Yanagi sacrificed himself to quell the fire dragon after the Shinoshima eruption.

Two days had passed since Yanagi's funeral.

(In the end, I...)

It has been seven years since he arrived on the island and seven years have passed since he received Yanagi's teachings. Ibuki worked hard on his training every day and the results of his training were imbued with him. This year he turns fifteen. Ibuki is now on the verge of connection.

But did those seven years really have any meaning?

Ibuki intended to connect like him to protect "his family". But the result is this. Ibuki also lost his "family". This unbearable loss shattered Ibuki's seven years.

His body was heavy. It was as if the flesh and bones had turned to mud. The pitch-black tar adhered to his entire body, eroding it and weighing on his heart. He even felt that his anger at his defeat was being crushed.

In the end, he was unable to protect him.

No, even if he had wanted to protect Yanagi, they couldn't even die together. Even gathering all his strength until the end.

"....."

Ibuki clenched his fists as if to fight the feeling of emptiness. He gritted his back teeth. The force rebelled against itself and his still scarred body groaned in pain. However, it really wasn't enough. He was sure that he deserved more intense pain. The pain was so great that it destroyed him.

However, no pain would be enough to drown out that crippling loss.

"...Aka-kun."

Ibuki turned around slowly when he heard the voice from behind.

Momoko Amamiya was standing there. Her complexion is the worst, but she keeps smiling. This person is always like this. Even when times are difficult or sad, she perseveres and gets through them with a calm smile on her face. She tries to get over it.

"Are you okay? You didn't get much sleep last night either, did you?"

"It's nothing... I'm fine."

"So, what about food? You haven't eaten anything since this morning, right? Shall I make you something simple?"

"No... I have no appetite."

Momoko's smile turned into a wry smile at Ibuki's empty voice.

"But... the wound hasn't healed yet. You need to nourish yourself a little."

"Such thing..."

What Momoko said was correct. She always carefully accumulates the most mundane and everyday things. She doesn't worry about it, but she doesn't hesitate, as she becomes the basis of her life. Only through that rich foundation created, people can advance. She understands it without any logic.

Momoko herself must be enduring a loss as profound as his. Still, she can care about others. Ibuki felt quite inferior to her strength.

Except that...

What is the meaning of nourishing yourself now?

There is no "future" he can move toward now.

Ibuki stayed silent and Momoko didn't force him further. She shifts her gaze from Ibuki to behind him. Ibuki turned to look at the deceased once more, hoping to be drawn in as well.

Makoto Yanagi.

It was exactly like the impression he had when they first met, that he was a careless guy. At the same time, he was also a "great hermit", worthy of admiration by the people of the island.

Strong, generous and bold. However, he was a mysterious man who also had small subtleties.

Ibuki's master. And, maybe... a second father.

He thought of him as some kind of monster that wouldn't move no matter what he did. It was a natural existence, as if it were part of this world, like the wind, water and sun.

He couldn't believe he wasn't there anymore.

"...I'm sure he'll be apologizing in the afterlife. He'll be exaggerating, saying it's hot, but he won't feel bad in the least..."

Momoko said jokingly. There was a slight tremor at the end of the sentence, but Ibuki pretended not to notice.

Makoto Yanagi is dead. He died.

Maybe... normally, it shouldn't have happened that way.

(Damn! It's my fault after all.)

He knew that the fire dragon's power was increasing. Yanagi also took precautions against that problem. It is true that the moment was terrible, but if there had been a little more time, it would have been possible to deal with the situation.

That little bit of time.

They couldn't prepare for even that small period of time.

He couldn't help his master.

What a shame.

"I..."

A series of melting thoughts welled up from the depths of his heart. A dizzying fever and chills shook his entire body.

(I should have stayed. Even if he had died as a result.)

When he thought of the relief he felt at that moment, he couldn't help but cry. At that moment, he would have given everything he had and lived his "life" to the fullest. There may have been some regret, but there must have been some pride.

But it was not suitable.

He left his master and retired.

And he will continue to live without the feeling of being "alive."

(Why? Why is this happening?)

So...

"...Aka."

The moment he heard that voice, it was as if the black tar that was eating him suddenly ignited and burst into flames. The feelings welling up from deep within his chest turned into anger like magma.

He looked back.

His brother was standing there, looking at him with a sad look.

His heart beat violently. The flow of blood seemed to press against his earlobes.

Still, the reason he didn't get angry right away was probably because Momoko was there.

"Haruaki-kun."

Momoko's voice had a slight hint of impatience. Although he didn't talk about the details, she must have guessed something from the way the two of them behaved when they

returned from the island. They had grown up like true brothers, but an unusual rift had developed between them.

"....."

Ibuki took a step forward. As he passed by his brother.

"Come on."

He said quietly and continued without looking back.

After a moment, he realized that his brother was following him. Ibuki continued walking, trying with all his might to contain himself, who looked like he was about to explode.

"Ah, Aka-kun?"

Momoko called out to him from behind, but he ignored her and left. Even his brother didn't criticize Ibuki's attitude. He may have decided it would be better if it was just the two of them too. Without saying anything, Ibuki put on his shoes and walked out the door. His brother followed him in silence.

Without thinking, he walked around the house and out into the garden. Ibuki was in front, followed by his brother.

In fact, he was planning to move to a more remote location. But when Momoko disappeared, he couldn't take it anymore. Ibuki's body trembled and stopped. His brother also stopped, following his movements. Ibuki turned his entire body around him and the two looked at each other.

"....."

Kurama Haruaki, Ibuki's brother.

Kurama calmly accepted Ibuki's silent scolding gaze.

Kurama's complexion was pale and his expression dark. Compared to the face of his brother, Ibuki, he seemed to have aged suddenly. He wondered if it was since Yanagi died that he looked him in the face like that. Even when they recovered the body of his mentor and at his funeral, the two barely exchanged a glance.

And now...

Ibuki felt like he was going to lose himself with the anger bubbling inside of him. He could feel the negative emotions boiling and burning his mind and body.

"Ah..."

Stepping ahead of his brother who was about to call him, Ibuki spat out a sharp question.

"Why did you run away?"

Kurama's face stiffened.

+++++

As Momoko had guessed, there was still a gap between the two of them at that moment that was dripping with blood. A sharp and icy crack where pain, anger and helplessness erupt.

Maybe the brothers were trying to make up for it. Ibuki still thinks there's no way he can do something like that, but maybe that's what he wanted to do at that moment.

Trying to heal the wounds, even a little. Look forward like Momoko.

Of course, he couldn't do that.

In fact, the gap widened.

For Ibuki, the conversation they had only confirmed that it was impossible to repair their relationship. It was clear that the two had separated.

So he left the island. He wouldn't say anything. He wouldn't leave anything behind.

Not that it was a guess. But, he could not stay on the island.

However, as soon as he left the island, he had an idea of where he should go. Or maybe he was remembering it unconsciously. A phrase that his master once told him. He listened to snippets of a conversation he had with a "girlfriend" who was "from the same industry" as if it were someone else's business.

It was like catching a cloud.

Still, Ibuki bet everything on that possibility without hesitation.

(3)

A Mitama floated in the air, emitting a faint light.

For young Ibuki, "it" he rarely saw existed in his daily life, like a butterfly or a spider. It wasn't until he was finally old enough that he realized that "it" was invisible to anyone but him.

When Ibuki found out, his mother told him not to tell anyone. However, Ibuki didn't think that being able to see "it" was anything special. There was nothing good about being able to see "it," and he had never had a bad experience because he could see "it." To young Ibuki, "it" was so obvious that he didn't feel like thinking deeply about it.

So, of course, he had no idea of the dangers such a "specialty" entailed.

"Help me!"

Behind a nearby shrine stretched a half-abandoned grove of trees.

What he saw that day was a little different than usual. It usually gave off a dim light, but that day it seemed cloudy for some reason. Seeing it made him feel disgusted. Then he threw a stone. It was a light feeling, like he was shooing it away. He never thought "it" was going to "fight back".

The murky light condensed and solidified, revealing a pair of creepy eyes. He attacked Ibuki, shaking with laughter.

He ran away desperately.

But "it" haunted him.

As he chased after Ibuki, "it" gradually grew larger, becoming more sinister and "disgusting" as he approached from behind. Ibuki almost stopped breathing from fear.

Still, he resisted with all his might.

"Go over there!"

He waved his arms and raised his voice.

At that moment, "it" suddenly stopped moving, but the situation only got worse. Due to the encouragement given to him, his eyes recognized Ibuki and pointed firmly.

"It" jumped and approached.

That would hit him.

Ibuki instinctively closed his eyes, but the pain and shock he had predicted did not come. On the contrary, he noticed that the "unpleasant feeling" he had felt suddenly vanished.

When he opened his eyes in surprise, he saw the back of an adult standing there, as if he was protecting Ibuki from "it".

It was his aunt. Just as Ibuki was shocked once again by "it", he fell to the ground on the other side of his aunt and melted as if he was boiling. Ibuki looked dumbfounded at the scene in front of him.

His aunt looked over her shoulder.

Then, she told him with the same cold look as always.

"You have talent. It's not good."

+++++

It was raining a lot.

A woman dressed in black mourning stood in a corner of the cemetery, holding a black umbrella. The flowers she had offered lay wet from the rain on the grave in front of her.

Ibuki looked at the woman's back from a distance, compared it with the vague memory of her, and then walked out under the shade of a tree. There was no umbrella. Instead, he pulled the hood over his head.

The woman should have noticed him by now, but there was no noticeable reaction from her. Ibuki walked towards the woman in front of the grave, consciously trampling the gravel under his feet.

Silently, he stopped behind the woman.

The drizzle gently hit the woman's umbrella, wetting Ibuki's hood. The smell of plants melting in the rain tickled his nose.

(What should I say?)

Ibuki pondered as he looked at the woman's back.

"Long time no see, huh."

The woman opened her mouth first. After a few seconds of silence, Ibuki answered briefly: "Yes."

"How old are you now?"

"Fifteen."

"Yes. It's been seven years since then."

The woman said as she slowly turned around.

She looked at Ibuki.

"You have grown."

"...Compared to before."

After all, he hasn't seen her since he became Yanagi's disciple. It is their first reunion since childhood. At the very least, it was natural that the figure had grown larger.

On the other hand, the woman in front of him had not changed at all from what he remembered. At least that's what he thought.

A pale face and lifeless eyes. She has an inorganic touch, with an exhausted expression. It's the same as when she invited Ibuki to Ayaka Island. It was as if time had stopped for her.

However, unlike when he was a child, Ibuki could now see things.

Tense but perfectly controlled vitality. She is sharp and hard, but also flexible. The woman in front of him possessed the "power" of a well-trained Japanese sword. She also has a dark "power" that causes the blade to become soaked in blood.

Ibuki unconsciously gasped at the cold touch. His body was naturally tense.

Yanagi's "companion".

Another person Ibuki knows.

(How should we talk?)

Ibuki was thinking more nervously than before. However, as if to relieve his stress, the woman turned her head and looked at the grave again.

The grave where Ibuki's parents are buried. These are the graves of her sister and her brother-in-law.

Today was the anniversary of their death.

"Do you come here every year?"

He asked before thinking about it. "Yes.", the aunt answered the question indifferently.

"Because it's a relationship."

"Relationship? You mean your immediate family?"

"That's true... but it's a little different. For me, my sister was the thread that connected me to the world she lived in."

"World?"

"Yes."

His aunt nodded slightly.

"A different world than the one I am in, a real world. It is because I am connected to that that I was able to avoid falling."

"Even after her death?"

"Life or death does not matter."

His aunt said flatly. There was no pressure from those words, but Ibuki still couldn't help but tremble.

"I'm definitely connected to that place. For people like me, that fact is important. I visit here once a year to confirm its importance."

He was aware that he probably didn't fully understand the meaning of his aunt's words, that she said that so calmly. Still, he felt that he could grasp the "weight" contained in her words. She dared to tell him that story and that was her intention.

In fact...

"It seems that Yanagi has died."

He assumed that meant the introduction was over. She got straight to the point.

As Ibuki trembled and prepared himself...

"But yes. It seems like that man didn't take any shortcuts. It was the right decision to leave you there."

"What do you mean?"

"Now you can stand on your own."

That was a surprising evaluation and he had to admit that it was an evaluation that went against his expectations. Once again, Ibuki realized that he wanted to be looked down upon as an immature chick instead of treated as a full-fledged person.

Because once they recognize you, you can't trust them anymore.

He pressed his lips tightly. Once again, he was made aware of his own weakness and complacency.

Her words and actions were probably based on reading Ibuki's intentions when he came to meet her. However, he couldn't go back there. He had to hold on to that, even though it was ugly.

"Please."

Ibuki exhaled from all over his body.

As if he wanted to throw himself to the ground, he fell to his knees and prostrated himself.

"Please make me your disciple. I want you to start from scratch!"

The mud soaked his knees and the rain wet his back.

Inadvertently...

"You said a long time ago that I have a talent. Then you will be able to bring out that talent. Any method is fine. It doesn't have to be the right path. Even if I stray from the path!"

A long, heavy silence followed.

Only the rain was pouring down, severely chilling Ibuki's body.

After...

"Why?"

Her aunt asked briefly.

Ibuki rested his forehead on the ground.

"I want revenge on my master's enemy! I don't want to lose anyone else. I want the "power" to do it!"

He appealed with all his heart.

At that moment, it seemed as if the life line flowing beneath the earth trembled slightly.

The silence returned.

After...

"Even if you go off the path..."

His aunt murmured. Even though the few lines she said were in the same voice as before, it sounded like some kind of crazy emotion was coming out of her.

"It seems you've heard from Yanagi."

"...There aren't too many details."

"Still, you know that, right? That I am a user of evil methods."

"Yes."

"And you came to me?"

"That's all."

Ibuki answered clearly.

His aunt took a deep breath.

Her voice was somewhat hoarse, as if she had suddenly aged.

"...Moron."

(There is no doubt. I am stupid. Still, I cannot choose another path.)

He couldn't choose.

That day, Aka Ibuki became a disciple of his second master in his life.

"The important thing is harmony."

Ibuki nodded tentatively in response to his brother's explanation, not really understanding.

It's been half a month since he went to the island, he separated from his aunt and became Yanagi's apprentice. They had already met with the Amamiya family, where they were staying, and Sanji Inou, who was a friend of Yanagi, took care of all the arrangements. Ibuki is already a resident of Ayaka Island. Legally, at least.

However, he did not feel that he fit in on this idyllic island that he visited for the first time. In fact, he makes her realize how foreign he is.

"Ah. Look! The flow of life is very rich on this island, right?"

As his older brother said, "that thing" was common on this island. Additionally, they are all a little larger than those seen on the mainland. This fact was undoubtedly part of the wealth his brother was talking about, but Ibuki's honest impression was that there were a lot of insects in the field and they were huge.

Apparently, on this island, "it" is called "Mitama".

"...I see. Now that I understand things like harmony and abundance, please tell me more about the techniques. If I'm going to be a connection, it won't work unless I can use jutsu."

Ibuki grumbled, feeling self-conscious.

To put it in a childish way, to Ibuki, a pulse connection is a "wizard". And a magician is a magician because he can use "magic". A wizard who can't use magic is like a fish who can't swim. No, first of all, literally speaking, a person who cannot use magic is not a "wizard".

And the brother in front of him, who is only a year older than him, is certainly capable of using magic.

He was later told that the mysterious pieces of paper floating in the air that he saw when he met them were apparently manipulated by his brother. This boy already masters the same connection technique as Yanagi and his aunt.

However, when his brother heard Ibuki's hurried murmurs, he shook his head as if he had his way.

"No, Ibuki-kun. The most important thing for a pulse connector is not to manipulate the technique, but to feel the movement of the vital pulse and vital energy. To become one with nature, or, rather, to observe the life form. I mean, the art of connection is just a secondary aspect of that style."

His brother gave him a pompous lecture with a clear and proud expression on his face. It's been half a month since they met, but he already had a good idea of his brother's personality. He is an intelligent, classy and somehow elegant "good monk", just like the

impression he had when he first met him. At the same time, he was a "weird guy" who was quite out of place.

If the two were classmates, it would probably be for the other's sake to force him to become the troublesome class president. He was sure he would be happy to do it too.

However, when he becomes "brother", he is quite annoying.

"...Haruaki."

Yanagi has also confirmed that there is no need to hold back. Ibuki shouted his brother Kurama's name with a clear hint of displeasure, even though they still called each other by their last name.

"I already completely understand your connection theory. But I came here to learn the technique. Both you and my master can use it, but I am the only one who still can't use it. I don't like that. I can't forgive myself for being the only one who seems to be "different"."

"That's because Ibuki-kun just became an apprentice."

"It's Aka."

"Eh?"

"Come on, Aka, it's okay."

He didn't want to pressure him, but his voice came out naturally. Kurama looked confused. He wanted to get along with him, but it wasn't working. That was his face.

Ibuki continued speaking, realizing that the cause of this was not Kurama but himself.

"I also heard something similar to what you are saying from my master. I understand that this way of thinking is the basis of connection and that it is important. I suppose it is a philosophy of connection or a way of thinking. But with that said, I want to go there as soon as possible."

Now that Ibuki has lost his parents and left where he lived, the only people he turns to are the feelings of being "connected". And even before that thought was even vague, Ibuki felt like he was wasting his time without even having his feet on the ground. That feeling also led to frustration.

He wanted to "feel" it as soon as possible. To feel that he was not wrong, to feel that this is right and to be able to accept the current situation.

"...Please, Haruaki."

Kurama also seemed to sense Ibuki's frustration. His older brother withdrew his usual smile and looked at Ibuki with a serious look. Then, after some hesitation, he made up his mind and nodded.

Face Ibuki head on and slowly close the distance.

"Close your eyes."

"Eh?"

"Alright."

Kurama spoke with a serious tone. Ibuki suppressed the resistance that he had suddenly learned and closed his eyes as he told him.

"Breathe deeply, relax your body and try to relax."

Following Kurama's words, he only opened one eye. Kurama, who was standing right in front of him, had both eyes closed. Likewise, he took a deep breath and relaxed, concentrating slowly and deeply. Ibuki quickly closed his eyes and took a deep breath, sharpening his awareness.

Concentration.

Ibuki's thoughts disappeared.

"Can you feel the movement of the life force flowing through you?"

"Somehow."

"Focus on the flow."

"I'm doing it..."

"More. Like seeing it with your eyes, touching it with your hands, feeling it."

"....."

He thought it was ridiculous.

However, he quickly discarded the ridicule and became serious.

He seriously concentrated from the bottom of his heart to feel the vitality. At a level that he didn't even notice on a daily basis. He chased the sensations that he had somehow always felt, as if he were seeing them with his eyes or touching them with his hands.

The vitality within him.

Kurama's vitality was right next to him.

Besides...

"Oh, the Mitama came. Do you understand?"

".....!"

He understood it.

His eyes remained closed. They haven't even touched his body. However... the Mitamas were at their side.

Two... no, there were even more. Three bodies, four bodies and more. There are many different ones, eleven in total. Floating in the air, as if emerging from the ground, a total of eleven Mitamas approached and gently surrounded the two of them. He could clearly feel their presence without seeing them with his eyes or even touching them with his hands. Not only their existence, but also the curiosity that the Mitamas have towards them.

Recognition.

That fact gave him goosebumps with excitement.

"...Okay. So, while we maintain the current state, let's take our senses "outside". "Down" would be good. Look further down, under your feet. Do you recognize it?"

Recognize. There was something there.

Far below the ground he walked on.

Something vast, like the ocean, shimmered and flowed underground. A mysterious band of light that is both dazzling and vague at the same time. Vast, secret, solemn and beautiful. Countless... swarms of Mitamas, as many as stars, are born like bubbles and are devoured again.

The things that make up the world cannot be seen with the naked eye, but they are definitely there.

The life line.

Just looking at it made him feel like he was being sucked in.

Ibuki was...

(Wah...)

He screamed and stumbled, feeling like he was drowning. He clung desperately to whatever his hand suddenly touched.

Ibuki was about to fall when something gently covered the hand he was holding himself with.

"Touching, pulling and connecting with that thing is what connects us to our pulse."

Before he knew it, Ibuki opened his eyes, which should have been closed. His back was broken and he clung to his brother, grabbing the chest area of his clothing with both hands.

Kurama lightly placed his palm over the hand he was holding on to.

Kurama was silently looking at Ibuki with his usual smile on his face. Ibuki gasped, looked at Kurama, came to his senses, and let go of his hand.

The feeling he had just before disappeared.

However, the "real feeling" remained.

The "real feeling" that he had definitely come into contact with something bigger than he wanted, but far beyond him.

"I'm sure you can do better if you practice..."

Kurama said shyly and looked at Ibuki.

"What do you think, Aka?"

He didn't seem proud and he didn't even seem like he was trying to react. It was a simple, natural question with no other intentions.

Ibuki took a deep breath.

His body was full, but his mind was blank. He had no time to decorate it nor energy to protect himself.

Just openly, but with a serious face...

"I'm hungry."

Kurama smiled widely and nodded.

"I agree."

+++++

A moonlit night in the mountains, in the middle of nowhere.

Ibuki stared at "it" with an icy gaze as it laughed silently. The bulging eyeball in the center of "it" looked at Ibuki with amusement.

Ibuki now knows the familiar name of "it".

Aramitama.

"Uh, "exterminate" the core without damaging it."

Ibuki nodded slightly without turning around as his master ordered him from behind.

There is a power that flows beneath the earth and is the source of life.

Yanagi has that power, which goes by various names around the world... and his aunt also called it "the life line". It is said that all life originates there and returns there after death.

He doesn't know the truth and he doesn't need to know it. What matters is the fact that it is about "power".

Pulse connection is a technique that uses that "power", the vital energy that flows through the veins of life.

Ibuki crossed his arms and fingers to form a seal. Although the movements were Yanagi style, his aunt, who became the new master, did not try to change her disciple's movements to her own style. That's because his "true strength" isn't there.

"Man, earth and sky!"

Ibuki chanted a curse and controlled the life force within himself. Naturally, the essence of life also flows through Ibuki. However, it is not enough to have his own vitality. Therefore, the pulse connector uses his own life force as a priming source, pumping life force from the life line flowing at the bottom of the earth. This is how he makes use of the life force of his life line.

However, when Ibuki used the technique outside the island, he realized once again how blessed Ayaka Island had been with the blessings of life. On the continent, the flow of life is deep and fine. That is why a more severe control of power is necessary.

The Aramitama approached Ibuki relentlessly, regardless of Ibuki's circumstances. He still didn't have enough vitality. Ibuki evaded the Aramitama's charge by rolling.

(Damn!)

It was as if he had returned immediately after becoming Yanagi's apprentice. However, the new master did not give any advice to the undecided disciple. She was just watching him.

No, or maybe she was just watching. Whether Ibuki is injured or not, there is no guarantee that his aunt will help him.

But that was fine.

A trusting heart becomes sweet. Pampering takes away strength.

"Man, earth and sky!"

Ibuki reassembled the technique once more.

The lifeblood that flows underground sometimes rises to the surface and bursts out of the surface. When the life force that has left the life line acquires a certain quantity and density, it takes a form called Mitama. Ibuki has seen the mysterious sea moon swimming in the air since he was a child. Those who have the talent to do so cannot see it with the naked eye and are basically useless and harmless, like insects.

However, the life force that constitutes the Mitama sometimes becomes "stagnant" due to the influence of the outside world. When all their vitality stagnates and becomes clouded, the Mitama strengthen their own existence and begin to attack things that are sources of influence from the outside world: people.

Like that Aramitama right in front of him.

(Next, decide!)

With a strong light in his eyes, Ibuki completed his technique. Life pulsed and moved the atmosphere. A whirlwind occurred that gained momentum in the blink of an eye. Furthermore, the life energy that created the whirlwind condensed and converged, turning into a sharp blade.

Countless swords slashed at the Aramitama. The Aramitama let out a voice that could not be called a scream or laughter as it broke into pieces and crumbled.

Finally, only the center eyeball, the core of the Aramitama, remained in the air. However, the moment Ibuki relaxed his mouth, the last sword grazed their eyeball.

"Ah..."

He couldn't help but exclaim. But it was too late. The wound caused by the blade spread rapidly and the eyeball, like the rest of his body, collapsed and disappeared.

(Damn.)

Ibuki gritted his back teeth. His aunt's instructions were not to damage the core. And the Aramitama that just disappeared before his eyes was the third Aramitama of the night.

He has done it many times with the Aramitama. Even if the individual was much more powerful than the current one, he was confident that he could purify it on his own. That's what it seemed like.

Neither the unfavorable conditions of being outside the island nor the irregular fighting style of leaving behind only core can be used as an excuse. That result is nothing more than proof of Ibuki's immaturity. The feelings of worthlessness that he had been carrying since losing Yanagi were finally weighing heavily on him.

However, even after the disciple's third failure, the aunt's expression did not change.

With the same calm voice as the two previous times...

"One more time."

She said briefly.

Then, his aunt raised her right hand slightly and gently extended her index finger.

Then, she murmured a spell into her mouth.

In the dark forest deep in the mountains, his aunt's fingers were white as if they were glowing faintly in the moonlight.

As if attracted by the whiteness, a new Mitama emerged from somewhere in the forest.

The Mitama floated and approached his aunt without hesitation.

Like a dragonfly, he perched on the tip of her outstretched finger. Then, after shaking his body, he began to stagnate and become cloudy. At the same time, he expanded and became more sinister. Ibuki tensed and paled even though he was already getting used to the sight.

Finally, the Mitama's appearance changed drastically, the center of it opened and an eyeball appeared from within. From Mitama to Aramitama. It's his aunt's technique. Deliberately contaminating one's vitality was an act considered taboo in Yanagi's teachings.

"Exterminate it without damaging the core."

His aunt's voice sounded cold.

His aunt pointed her index finger at Ibuki. The Aramitama was ejected and jumped into the air, expressing distorted joy. Ibuki shook off the fear of his family, not the fear of Aramitama, but the fear of taboos, and focused on the fourth battle.

This time he was successful.

The Aramitama's body disappeared and only the eyeballs and cores that remained fell to the ground.

Leaving Ibuki, who was breathing heavily, his aunt silently approached the core and gently picked it up, as if she were picking a wildflower.

She moved directly in front of Ibuki.

"Hand."

He was salivating. Ibuki didn't want to admit it, but he extended his hand in a shy gesture. His aunt gave Ibuki the core she had collected.

Ibuki's gaze was fixed on his own hands.

He couldn't immediately describe the sensation that arose from his palm. It's raw but fake, slimy but sharp. However, he felt as if he was throbbing slightly. He is dirty, scary and stirs up negative emotions. At the same time, he was brutal, domineering and destructive.

The "power" of the Aramitama was still very present.

"It is diluted to the limit. In my opinion, there is no problem with its constitution. However, it is still not easy."

The rather modest warning sent a shiver down Ibuki's spine.

If it is painful, he will endure it. However, it was difficult to shake the physiological reluctance to do something even more unforgivable than the taboo his aunt had shown him.

If what he was about to do was a legitimate connection, for example, to Yanagi, it must be an unforgivable act. Ibuki himself would have hated him just a few weeks ago.

But now...

In front of Ibuki's eyes, in the palms of his hands, a certain "power" crouched in a terrifying shape.

In search of that "power", Ibuki left the island and the people who lived there.

He deviated.

Even if he deviates from the right path...

"Please prepare for the next thing."

"The next?"

"It looks like a big dining room."

Ibuki forced a smile and raised the core of the Aramitama above his head. He grabbed it with the fingers of both hands and crushed it with all his strength. The core collapsed and the thick contents spilled onto Ibuki's face. Ibuki opened his mouth wide to accept it and swallowed it.

It looked like a suicide attack.

During Ibuki's childhood, he followed in Yanagi's footsteps.

(5)

The season has arrived when it is cold on the island.

While sweeping the shrine grounds, Kurama stopped for a moment to look at the trees. Then, he suddenly thought of the passage of time.

The smell of the air was changing. Also the appearance of the trees. The pulsation of vitality.

Coming soon...

"...It is winter."

The flow of time never stops. He may not notice it right away, but changes occur day by day.

It does not matter what happens.

For example, even if a younger master or disciple disappears.

Kurama was reconsidering that obvious thing.

"He said he was going to the mainland. Maybe he doesn't want to be on this island without Yanagi-sensei right now."

Momoko said it. She also said: "If that's the case, it's okay."

However, Kurama felt differently. He wouldn't say that Momoko didn't feel the same way, but for that reason alone, he couldn't believe that his younger brother was leaving the island.

He never runs away. Even now he felt that he left the island to move forward.

The youngest disciple left the island without saying anything. After that, Momoko received a letter where he told her not to worry, but she hasn't been able to contact him.

"I'll let him do what he wants for now."

Inou said it. Even as he said that, he seems to be working behind the scenes to at least try to discover his whereabouts. Now that Yanagi has passed away, he volunteered to serve as legal guardian for Kurama, Ibuki, and the others. Even Kurama couldn't oppose Inou's meticulous attitude of watching over him.

Just when...

"I wonder if this is okay."

He didn't know it. And there was no one left to tell him the answer.

Kurama stared at the trees as they prepared for winter.

After that, he went back to cleaning the temple grounds.

+++++

"Look. It's burned."

"You, again... you just started a fire without permission and your master scolded you."

"What? You don't need it?"

"I did not say that."

"In that case, look."

"God..."

Kurama stopped sweeping the ground and turned to Ibuki with an angry look on his face. However, his angry face quickly turned into a bitter smile, and by the time he reached Ibuki's side, squatting in front of the remains of the bonfire, he had returned to his usual kind face.

"Yes."

Ibuki said, crouching down as he handed her the baked potato.

The Kurama who received that was...

"Hot!"

"Idiot. It's freshly baked. Don't hold it with your bare hands."

"Because you're... ah, it's floating in the wind, right? You're very skilled."

"This way it cools down faster."

"You use jutsu for stupid things..."

"I put out the fire with jutsu and I also use jutsu to clean up the aftermath. This is what I practice every day."

At the younger disciple's words, Kurama smiled once again and said, "Yes, yes.". Then, after making a hand seal, he recited a short spell, awakened a small kamaitachi, and peeled the skin off a baked potato as if he were using a knife.

Ibuki, who had been proud of his brother's sophisticated techniques, adopted a serious expression. Seeing the slightly regretful expression on his face, Kurama smiled and asked, "What do you think?".

"As always, you're good with that jutsu."

"Because I have the basics. Unlike someone who just wants to do practical things."

"What you are about to eat is a product of that application."

"I see. Thank you, Aka."

Kurama obediently thanked him and sat next to Ibuki. Ibuki, perhaps at the right moment, grabbed a baked potato and broke it in two.

When they both took a bite at the same time, satisfied smiles appeared on both of their faces.

"What do you think of this roast?"

"Raise your arms, Aka. You're a fully-fledged pulse connector now."

"Oh, I got my brother's approval. However, my goal is not to be a "full-fledged" person, but to be in the same league as the "strongest".

"You don't need strength to run a roast potato shop."

"It's not a roast potato shop. I mean, why would I have a roast potato shop?"

Ibuki glanced at his brother, who still seemed a little out of place.

Meanwhile, Kurama was smiling and stuffing his face with baked potato.

"Come to think of it, Aka. Is this something Momoko-san and Jingi will share?"

"They can't miss it."

"What about the master?"

"....."

Ibuki was speechless. Originally, since he had been scolded for starting a fire earlier, he subconsciously intended to keep it a secret from Yanagi.

However, apart from Momoko, he did not believe that young Jingi was capable of keeping a secret.

Kurama seemed to be having fun somehow.

"The previous approval is on hold. If my master finds out that I don't have enough, he will definitely punish me."

"...In other words, we don't have to find out. Change of plan. Let's eat it all ourselves."

"Isn't that what it means to be persistent?"

"So make sure you don't reveal it. I'm telling you, since you ate it, you're an accomplice, Haruaki."

"Let's do this. Give the two remaining roast potatoes to Momoko-san and ask her to serve them for dinner."

"So, are you going to share the two pieces with everyone?"

"I'm going to use it as a cooking ingredient. Momoko-san will be happy, right?"

"Oh, I see..."

"Maybe some baked potatoes would be nice. Or melt butter and sprinkle with salt..."

"You're so brilliant, Haruaki! That's why you're my master's best disciple."

"Hehe. Harmony is important in everything."

"In that case, let's test the potatoes to make sure they are cooked properly."

"That's right. It's difficult if it's half-baked."

They both laughed as they finished the baked potato.

Then, when Yanagi saw the potatoes lined up for dinner, he looked at the two disciples of his in front of Momoko, who was praising the person who provided the ingredients.

Then, without saying a word, he sat down at the table, smiling bitterly at the two strangers.