

# AYA KA

— あ や か —

## SIDE STORIES



# 07

### 帰還

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## **TRANSLATION: NARU-KUN / K – PROJECT WORLD**

### **"AYAKA – SIDE STORIES 07": RETURN**

(1)

(Please give me a break.), Taihei Makita lamented.

He must have been a poor bento maker. Although he didn't make much money, he had a decent reputation and his proud bento burger had quite a loyal following.

Although he was skilled in handling part-time jobs, he did not dare to expand the scale of his business because he was picky about the taste he made with his own hands. He was completely satisfied with the feeling that people were happy with his work, as far as he could see.

How was that.

Due to a promise he had made to himself without his knowledge, he was forced to incur debts to people he had never met before and, just as he was making steady payments, he became trapped in a shady scheme to make money.

Although he had many relationships with the yakuza and the mafia, he still managed to move tactfully and before he knew it, he was considered a messenger and a fixer.

The following week, after he decided it wasn't good and gave up, he found himself shaking at the shooting range, where bullets flew and screams mingled.

He really wanted to be given a break.

He slipped away for a moment. However, much to his dismay, the person at the center of that case seemed to be none other than him. Unbeknownst to him (or, to be honest, he had a vague idea) someone related to that type of business was trying to punish Makita for organizing a large amount of weapons smuggling. Of course, he was not a professional lunch box maker, nor was he a police officer or lawyer.

To make it simpler...

He didn't want to say it, but...

They were murderers.

He really wanted to be given a break.

But to be honest, the reality is harsh and cynical. Then Makita ran away. He fought desperately.

Of course, professionals don't care about the efforts of amateurs.

"Ah, damn...!"

He measures more than 1.90 centimeters tall. The constant muscle training he performed while making bento boxes and the protein contained in the prototype gave him a seemingly "soft" physique. No matter how thick his muscles are, they are no match for pistol bullets. No, if he tries hard enough he might be able to get away with a 22 gauge or a 32 gauge, or even a 9mm Parabellum if he tries really hard, but that's not the problem.

He could die.

In a corner of a warehouse district in a deserted port where he doesn't even know the name of the place.

"What kind of B movie is this?"

Panting and sitting against the outside wall of the warehouse, Makita cursed his bad luck.

"Haa haa...", his own turbulent exhalation pressed against his earlobe. And beyond that, he could hear the sound of several shoe soles hitting the asphalt. For some reason, he could hear a voice disturbed by anger. He never dreamed that he would provoke so much hostility from someone.

If he doesn't run, they will kill him.

However, he no longer had the strength or energy to flee.

He never expected his life to end like this. No matter what he says, it sounds like a lie. He doesn't feel it. Well, he figured he might soon realize it, even if he didn't like it.

"Ah~ Damn. If this was the case, I should have eaten something more delicious."

After complaining, a sarcastic smile appeared on his thick lips.

The joy of eating for oneself does not come close to the joy of feeding others.

That's why he uses luxurious ingredients and puts in as much effort as he wants.

He wanted to feed all the hungry people. He wanted to see that face.

"...Ah. Now that I mention it..."

A delicious burger recipe that takes advantage of his signature hamburger steak.

He should have done it at least once. It would be a challenge in terms of cost, but it would have been worth a try. He wanted to give that to someone. He is so gluttonous that anyone would be surprised. As many as he wants to his heart's content. At that time, what kind of food would he show? He wondered how fun that would be to watch.

"Hey!"

"There is he!"

A pursuer with a gun appeared in front of Makita, who smiled deceptively. Apparently that was the end.

One of the men in front raised his hand and pointed his gun at the motionless Makita. Perhaps it was a relief that there was still no sense of reality at that stage. Looking at the death that was soon to come, Makita managed to catch his breath.

But...

"Death" never came.

He can't understand what happened. What he discovered was that a heat wave suddenly hit the area. The pursuers screamed and fainted. Furthermore, for some reason, the scene, which had no true reality, suddenly began to seem real.

The understanding that this was not a dream or a joke, but a shoddy reality.

"What...?"

Just as he was mumbling in shock, a man entered the alley.

An elegant and dynamic silhouette. His steps are calm and firm.

"Taihei Makita?"

The man confirmed with a brusque gesture.

A young man. He is still a young man. He is an attractive young man who seems more like a host than an assassin on that battlefield.

However, he has the power and dynamic beauty of a wild carnivore.

After being fascinated by the young man for a while, Makita exhaled and inhaled.

"That's right."

He answered.

The young man nodded.

And...

"I came to find you as a messenger from "Kinari". I am Ibuki. If you want to get up, come with me."

(2)

"Hmm, I see. It's a shame, but I guess I'll skip it this time... No, there's no rush. There's a chance... Yes. That's right. Thank you for your hard work."

After speaking in a calm tone, Sanji Inou hung up the phone.

He let out a sigh.

The contact he received just before the scheduled time was about the Ayaka Island mascot character, which he had been working on. The project was to create characters called "Yuru-kyara" as part of Ichinoshima's tourism public relations, but the outsourcing company changed its attitude just before the contract was signed and the company ended up going bankrupt. It's not a common occurrence, but it's also not something to make a fuss about. He personally was disappointed, but as he said on the phone, there were no special problems.

However, he was a little worried about the reason for the outsourcing company's sudden change of attitude. The person who commissioned it was a contractor from the mainland, but he had apparently "seen" something when he visited the island.

What the other party "saw" on the island seems to be some kind of strange phenomenon. Inou couldn't laugh. In any case, he had many worries.

"Fortunately, nothing serious seemed to happen..."

Ayaka Island is different from the mainland. In the words of a former friend, it is a place "abundant with the blessings of life" on a level rare anywhere in the world.

However, the blessings of life do not only bring good things. The best example is the existence called Aramitama. The Mitama that emerge from the life line are originally harmless beings that are difficult for ordinary people to see. However, when the life force that constitutes the Mitama becomes cloudy and becomes Aramitama, it causes various damages. Unfortunately, on Ayaka Island, where life is rich and there are many Mitama, there are many opportunities for an Aramitama to appear.

In particular, Ichinoshima, which is in the process of being redeveloped as a tourist destination, has a high flow of people and goods. This is how many "bad things" arrive from outside the island. First, the liveliness of large numbers of people creates biases, both positive and negative. The active mud current produces thick turbidity even in a short period of time. Although most are bubbles that burst and disappear quickly, there are still quite a few that "hit" them.

Since ancient times, on Ayaka Island there have been people called "Myakutsugi" who use the power of life to calm the Aramitama. That hasn't changed, but... the recent number of Aramitama outbreaks has exceeded the amount that can be suppressed by the number of connectors that are decreasing year by year.

"I can't rely solely on Haruaki-kun, but..."

In the past, on Ayaka Island, there was a great master known as the "great hermit" and he was able to single-handedly pacify most of the Aramitama on the island. He was a close friend that Inou will never forget. After his death, his number one disciple, Kurama

Haruaki, took charge of the Kaizumi Shrine and worked hard to harmonize the life cycle of Ayaka Island. He is humbled by his dedication.

However, the increasing appearance of Aramitamas will end up disturbing the harmony of the island. No, it is not a question of "someday", it is an urgent question. There just aren't enough hands. And the rise of Aramitamas is likely to accelerate from now on.

However, the development of Ichinoshima could not be delayed. Finally it is a revival. It hurts, because of the tragedy.

"It's been five years..."

A considerable amount of time has passed since that day when his friend died.

It's still too early to seal it in the past.

However, it is too long to let himself be bound by the regrets of those days. That kind of indulgence cannot be tolerated.

They must face the future. Overcome difficulties.

"I'm worried about the Aramitamas, though. Jingi-kun is a bit more... Oh, no. This is also "bad". What are you telling a fifteen-year-old boy?"

He slapped his forehead.

Think about measures to develop the island while avoiding its bankruptcy. Isn't that what the mayor is there for?

"For the moment, it may have been a good thing that "Yuru-kyara" failed. We need to take action before the island gets a bad reputation. Now, what should we do?"

Leaning his body against the back of the chair, Inou closed his eyes and frowned.

And...

His phone vibrated again. Inou opened one eye and looked at the display on the screen. There is an incoming call. However, it is from a number he does not recognize. He had doubts about it, but he didn't find it suspicious. He is still the mayor. Sometimes, he may suddenly receive a call from someone he doesn't know. Inou answered the call and asked, "Hello..."

"It's been a long time, Inou-san."

At that moment, his breath caught in his throat.

Inou quickly stood up and shouted into his cell phone.

"Aka-kun!"

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His steps were heavy.

Both Ibuki and Kurama were shocked with wounds all over their bodies.

Still, neither of them offered help and they simply continued walking.

Although the eruption had already subsided, the ground near the crater was still hot and slowly burning the atmosphere. One night since then. The surrounding area bears the scars of a fierce battle. A large excavated hill with cracks running through the ground. Even now, the spirit of life is turbulent like a storm.

However, the sense of urgency from the night before was gone. It may seem terrible, but all that has already been done.

The two were walking.

They searched as they walked.

Both of them were already out of breath. Before he could recover, he visited Shinoshima. Holding on to a little bit of hope. He hoped maybe...

And... he understood it.

Ibuki raised his head, which had been somewhat downcast, and smiled reflectively. An awkward smile, something like "no way". Thus, he began to run as if he attracted him.

Kurama noticed the same, and although he was not sure, he still ran with unsteady steps.

Where were the two going...

The sanctuary that had been erected on the edge of the crater was completely destroyed.

But to the side, there was a figure sitting with his back leaning on the sacred spear inserted into the ground.

"Master!"

The relief that seeped involuntarily belonged to Ibuki.

As expected. There was an emotion on his face that convinced him. On second thought, that couldn't be true. There is no way he would have died. After all, it was Yanagi. He was very worried, but all those fears were unfounded. He was fine. He was really good. Ibuki said that to himself from the bottom of his heart.

But...

Kurama noticed it first. The smile that had appeared on his face froze and his gaze fell to the ground, as if he had given up.

"Master?"



Ibuki muttered.

Yanagi laughed.

But he didn't move.

Ibuki's voice should have reached him, but he didn't show the slightest reaction.

His strength was gone. Ibuki knelt down and put his hands on the ground. His toes trembled as he grabbed it, scraping the floor with his toes.

Thoughts and emotions swirled in his head. As he spun, he lost his sense of balance.

"Shit. Damn!"

A thick feeling of passion twisted deep in his stomach. Kurama next to him said nothing and lowered his head.

In front of them, Yanagi died with a smile.

Ibuki raised his head and looked at the sky sadly.

(3)

"I see. It's been five years since then... five years, huh."

As the sun shined softly and the wind blew, Ibuki didn't murmur to anyone else.

His gaze was sharp and clear as he looked at the tombstone in front of him.

His calm voice and demeanor were like nothing he had ever had before. He grew and his body became bigger. It's not that he has grown unnecessarily, but you can tell that he is full of youthful vitality. Furthermore, the thin dark suit that covered his body greatly altered Inou's impression of him.

He became an adult.

Inou's heart warmed at the boy's growth.

The two are in a cemetery on a hill in Ninoshima. In front of the tomb where Makoto Yanagi, Inou's friend and Ibuki's mentor, is buried. His grave, beloved by islanders, still bears flowers even five years after his death. Offerings include sake, which he loved, and fruits grown on the island.

Inou himself used to visit the tomb whenever he had free time.

However, this is the first time he meets Ibuki. Shortly after Yanagi's death, Ibuki left the island.

And today he finally returned.

"...It seems that leaving the island was the right decision."

"Eh?"

"I have changed my mind. You have become more admirable."

Inou said that to Ibuki, still smiling. He thought it was an old-fashioned phrase, but it didn't bother him. It means he's at the right age to have that kind of conversation. Ibuki and him too.

Ibuki, on the other hand, smiled wryly for some reason. Maybe it was just his imagination, but his reaction was like enduring pain. It was a wry smile mixed with self-mockery, as if he had been exposed to some harsh irony.

"...Inou-san. As always, you are a talker."

"Huh? What? I honestly wanted to praise you, you know?"

"So, no, it's fine. At least, I think it was the right answer."

He laughed as he said that. It was a strangely dark smile, different from the bitter smile before. Inou stiffened a little, but the hint of a smile quickly disappeared.

He had a similar reaction before he got there. On the way, he asked him a question about where he had been and what he had been doing for the last five years.

Ibuki's response was: "A family member took care of me." That was also written in the few letters he sent him after leaving the island.

However, in the past, Ibuki was supposed to have become Yanagi's apprentice because he had no relatives to trust. So what does it mean that a family member cares for him? However, when Inou asked Ibuki a question, he refused to give a detailed explanation, even if he didn't say so explicitly. Inou also believes that pursuing the matter now is a bad idea. Although Ibuki has become an adult, he is still a young man of twenty. That's what he should be worried about.

First of all, Inou seemed to be nervous about meeting him again after so long.

And it must be the same for Ibuki. It's been five years since he left the island without telling anyone.

It was natural to feel uncomfortable. There was no need to forcefully deny that feeling of distance.

Inou warned himself that he should not rush.

Ibuki has returned. All he has to do is befriend him again, who is right in front of him. He shouldn't rush, just take it slow.

"So... Aka-kun? This return home is not temporary and you will live on Ayaka Island again, right?"

"...Ah. I came back with that intention."

"Great! Does Momoko-san already know?"

"No."

"In that case, show your face after this. I'm sure she'll be very excited. I can't help but think about it."

Inou himself said that with the desire to have fun.

Then, Ibuki smiled again. The smile has a different nuance than before, an exquisite mix of cynicism and naivety.

"...I'm sorry for worrying you."

"Eh?"

"Thank you for contacting me without telling anyone."

Of course he knew who Ibuki meant by "nobody". Normally, that's the person Ibuki should contact first.

Haruaki Kurama, Ibuki's brother.

"You still can't forgive him?"

Ibuki doesn't answer Inou's question. However, the gloomy expression that suddenly appeared on his face said it all. "I see." Inou murmured briefly.

The reason Ibuki left the island was Yanagi's death. And there, he and his brother Kurama, are closely involved. Of course, it wasn't Kurama's fault, and Ibuki should have understood that, at least in his heart. Still, there seems to be an inevitable dispute between the two.

So...

"Hmm. I know she'll probably get angry later, but I guess I'll just say hello to Momoko-san another time. It's a bit painful to ask her to stay quiet."

Momoko Amamiya, the former owner's granddaughter, is like family to Ibuki. And the same goes for Kurama. If everything is not going to be as before, he will not bother her with secret compulsions.

"Honestly, that would be helpful. I made the right decision by contacting Inou-san first."

"Haha, you're embarrassing me. But I'm going to stop for today, okay? Momoko-san and Jingi-kun will be very happy if they find out you're home."

"...Now that you mention it, what about Jingi? I guess he's gotten a little better."

"He is mischievous and has perfected himself."

"I see."

Ibuki laughed. Yanagi's third disciple, Jingi Sagawa, is currently 15 years old. His unrestrained behavior was one of the headaches Inou had, but at that moment, he was grateful to him.

In fact, there is another family member that he wants to return to the island.

However, he still lived in a facility on the mainland. That is the result of following Yanagi's will.

Will they ever be able to laugh together again in the same place? Wait so. That's why he must do the best he can.

"...Well. From what I see, it seems like you don't intend to cause trouble for Momoko-san like you used to. So where are you going to live?"

"I'm thinking about Ichinoshima."

"Okay, then I'll help you find a good property. The rest is work. I won't skimp on helping you, but now that you're an adult, you can't afford to do nothing. Is there any hope? If you need it, I can prepare you for a job in the government office..."

When Inou spoke, Ibuki's expression suddenly became serious.

"About that... I have a request and a query, Inou-san. It's about business."

"Oh, you came here on business. This is making me nervous."

"Don't make fun of it. It's a serious matter. We are already making preparations and have no intention of going back to the drawing board now. However, if possible, I would like to obtain your permission, Inou-san, and if we can collaborate formally, it would be ideal. I want you to ignore your personal feelings towards me and consider this as a job."

"I don't care about that, but what exactly is your job?"

"It's decided. It's a connector."

After saying that casually, Ibuki looked at Inou with a strong gaze.

"The Aramitas in Ichinoshima. They're increasing quite a bit, right?"

He opened his eyes involuntarily. He remembered when he received the call from Ibuki. At that moment, Inou was worried about that very issue.

"By any chance, are you the one fighting the Aramitas? But you..."



"Although I have been away from the island for five years, I have continued to improve my skills. Especially when it comes to handling the Aramitama. It is different than before. I will show you."

"But..."

"The life cycle of the island is in trouble. It is due to the influence of the fire dragon in Shinoshima. My master has suppressed it, but has not sealed it completely. However, the current Ichinoshima is an area that is especially under renovation. That area has the perfect conditions for Aramitamas to be born. That may not be a problem on the continent, but it is not the case here."

Ibuki stated flatly, but Inou couldn't respond.

In fact, if that is Ninoshima or even Ichinoshima and it is not a tourist area... at least for now, there is no particular problem. For the people of Ayaka Island, the Aramitamas are a threat, but not a source of despair. They have been "accustomed" to its existence since childhood.

Even if an Aramitama appeared, the islanders would not see it as a particular problem as long as it was dealt with correctly.

But...

"It's fine if you are a resident of an island, but if a tourist from another place is attacked by an Aramitama... it would be a big problem if it were widely publicized on the mainland. That situation should be avoided at all costs. Isn't it?"

Ibuki spoke calmly, but there was a strong light in his eyes. His enthusiasm is palpable.

However, he wondered if it was Inou's imagination that he felt a kind of unpleasant attachment to his enthusiasm.

"...You know this too, right? Even people who can't see the Mitama can see the Aramitama, but the memories of the Aramitama fade quickly over time. Especially people outside who haven't been familiar with this kind of thing since ancient times, like the people of this island."

"So they don't have to find out? Even if someone from outside the island gets into an accident, do you think it won't be a problem as long as the cause is unknown?"

"No, that's..."

"If Ichinoshima becomes a tourist destination, interest in Ayaka Island will increase even more. Even if we try to hide information, there is no way things will remain as they are."

That was something Inou was worried about, but had turned a blind eye to.

Ayaka Island is different from the mainland. In other words, it is a mysterious island. Until now, it had not attracted much attention as a secret area known only to those who knew.

But from now on, that won't be the case. And in a sense, it is inevitable.

"We live in a time where the world is so information-based that individuals can communicate to the world what they see and hear. It is of no use if we are the only ones who reject it. I don't think you can hide things about the Aramitama or the line of life. And it's not just us. There are places around the world where the power of life is strong."

Exchange with people outside the island cannot be restricted. That's not limited to the redevelopment of Ichinoshima. It is a much larger trend: the flow of the times.

The mysteries will eventually be analyzed digitally. Rather than secret activities closely linked to everyday life, they are directed towards a systematic rationality that has been scientifically clarified.

Just when...

"Everything else doesn't matter. What I'm talking about is this topic."

After saying that, Ibuki straightened up, as if he was trying to clear things up once again.

"We must understand the "importance" of eliminating the damage caused by the Aramitama in the tourist area of Ichinoshima."

"Of course... that's not something I could expect, but..."

"Then let me do it. I will."

Ibuki declared as he looked directly at Inou. The expression on his face showed his determination not to give an inch.

Inou exhaled and opened his eyes again.

"I understand. In any case, it is true that we do not have enough pulse connectors. If you, Yanagi's disciple, could lend me your strength, I would simply appreciate it. Of course, assuming you can deal with the Aramitama, right?"

"I told you, right? I'll properly "prove" that point to you."

Ibuki smiled fearlessly and extended his right hand. Inou shrugged and shook his hand.

"Does that mean the deal is done?"

"Ah. That's right. Thank you very much."

"Good. So... right now, there are some matters I would like to clarify legally. Can I ask you a favor?"

"Yes?"

+++++

The big, muscular man was shrinking, looking regretful. At the moment, he seems to be aware of the "insane" situation that lies ahead of him. However, what appeared on his face was a careless business smile, as if he had apologized too much and opened up again. Although he is aware of that, he probably doesn't want to take it personally.

Ibuki's business partner, who called himself Makita, said to Inou, who was speechless.

"Bullets are different from real bullets, right? I don't know much about that yet either... Is this a Myakutsugi technique or something? It seems like some kind of hidden manipulation has been done to it... at least its lethality should be pretty low... hahaha!"

Makita smiled, as if he was disappointed. Honestly, Inou also felt like laughing. Seeing the countless firearms lined up in the warehouse made him feel like he couldn't help but laugh. Well, it wasn't funny at all.

Instead...

"I see."

Inou murmured and nodded.

Then he grumbled in his heart, mixing 80% sadness and 20% joy.

In fact, Aka-kun was his disciple.

In the back of his memory, Yanagi was laughing and trying to trick him.

(4)

"...It seems like something is going to go wrong, right?"

Ibuki laughed and snorted at Makita's grim line.

"That's what this business meeting is about. Why do you seem so upset?"

"I went from being a courier to being an arms dealer. I am very dissatisfied."

"Hey, be careful with your words, Makita. This is just a "curse" tool. At least for now."

Saying that, Ibuki looked at the gun in his pocket. He watched with amusement as Makita hurriedly looked around him.

A bar in Ichinoshima. Makita looked bitterly at his new business partner, a younger man who was only twenty years old, who was sitting at a table in the back.

He let out a sigh and sat in the seat across from him.

"Who is that mayor? Although he is a familiar face, he is too flexible."

"Inou-san is used to it. After all, my old master and him were friends since they were young. From what I can see, he is in a lot of trouble. In many ways."

"He seems sincere."

"I guarantee he's honest, okay?"

"Then I think we'll get along well. And I sympathize with you."

After letting out a deep sigh once again, Makita ordered a whiskey from the waiter at the counter. Ibuki narrowed his eyes as he shook the rocks glass and rolled the ice cubes inside.

He's unusually talkative, but he seems a little drunk. However, thanks to that, he seems to be in good spirits. It was unusual for Ibuki to be in such a good mood, since he usually had a gloomy appearance. Although his eyes are as sharp as ever, there is no fear in his eyes.

Furthermore, the relaxed expression on his face corresponds to Ibuki's true age, since he is only twenty years old. Makita couldn't help but think that now he should be able to carry a gun.

The young man in front of him, Aka Ibuki, is Makita's lifeguard. It was easy to understand and saved him from a desperate situation. However, that did not mean that he rescued him from that situation for free. In fact, it seems that Ibuki was more interested in Makita's firearms sales route than in him. It is said that his current master, not his former master, recommended Makita as someone who would meet Ibuki's needs.

That master was a person named "Kinari Rika".

Speaking of "Kinari", it is the name of a "shredder" who is one of the most dangerous people Makita knows, and who he only occasionally whispers about. It's like an urban legend of the underworld, but still, when mentioning that name, the higher up people were, the more they paid attention to their surroundings.

"However, the teacher-student relationship has already dissolved."

These were the words Ibuki said to him, as if he didn't care, when Makita persistently searched for various explanations.

Of course, Makita himself doesn't know Kinari. Apparently, he was nominated based solely on the information that "there is a person who fits Ibuki's wish". In short, he was selected as a business partner because he was a "trustworthy and knowledgeable person in firearms distribution". More of an urban legend. He can't help but think that something is wrong in the world. Makita would like to say many things, but he was aware that it was completely true to say that his main job was to be a lunch box maker.



However, the story did not end with just a firearms transaction.

A lot of things happened after that, but Ibuki seems to have taken a liking to Makita and considered him a business partner instead of just a temporary partner.

However, he was actually a useful "subordinate".

"I just need a little help."

That's the phrase he used when he requested staff, which didn't convey any sense of sincerity or enthusiasm.

However, Makita accepted Ibuki's invitation.

He was grateful because he saved his life and, most importantly, he had no choice. He agreed to that with the intention of jumping off the stage of Shimizu and destiny. However, he never expected to be taken to such a remote island.

To make matters worse, that island has also changed drastically. Ichinoshima, where he is now, looks decent at first glance, but only in some areas that are undergoing redevelopment. When he saw an Aramitama for the first time, he couldn't help but think that it was some kind of photo shoot. He heard that there were people on other islands and that a volcano had erupted five years ago. No, he's sure it's not just the firewood field that makes him think that.

However, the reason Makita teamed up with Ibuki was probably because he was different in the first place. The "Myakutsugi" techniques that that slender, host-looking young man showed him shattered and expanded Makita's common sense. He made him realize, much to his chagrin, that something really is wrong in the world. That's why he managed to adapt to the various things that come with Ayaka Island.

"I wonder if anyone will congratulate me?"

Ibuki responded to the words he blurted out: "Hmm?" Makita shook her head and said it was nothing.

The clerk brought the whiskey. Makita took it, and after the employee walked far enough away, he asked Ibuki, "So?"

"What happened to the "bullet"? Is that convenient?"

"Ah. I was worried when I heard that someone had replaced him, but fortunately the next owner also seems to have solid skills. To be honest, the situation in Ichinoshima is worse than expected. We will need more people soon, but if that is the case, we can take care not only of the bullets, but also of the adjustment of the gun itself."

Ibuki said that as if he had left a coat for him to try on, as if he had sent it to the dry cleaners. Makita frowned as he took a sip of whiskey.

"It's surprising that even on such a rural island there are people who know how to adjust weapons."

"I only adjust it as a "cursing tool"."

"I am regretting the mentality of being trusted with a weapon as if it were a "cursed tool" and I simply accept it without hesitation."

"Well, I've been working with that store since my former master was there."

"You said "former master" again. I feel like that's the culprit behind everything."

"Not everything. At most 80%."

To Ibuki, who was acting calm, Makita said, "That's enough."

Now that he thinks about it, he has come a long way from having a good bento shop. Both in distance and position. Where will his life go from now on?

No, he has decided where he is headed for now.

It's starting a business.

"Are people likely to gather?"

"For now, I'll go while you're here."

"...I'm telling you, I won't be there."

"You learned how to use a gun, right?"

"Does that mean you can fight monsters?"

"I can fight. That's why I took an extra risk and chose a weapon as my magic tool. Even ordinary people who are not related to that can fight against the Aramitamas and exterminate them on their own."

When he answered that, Ibuki returned to his usual self, showing a dark and cold presence. His true nature is unmistakable even when he is drunk. He could see the hatred towards the Aramitama.

It seems that Ibuki's previous master lost his life fighting a dragon.

That past remains the driving force that drives Ibuki. The new business he's about to start is probably part of Ibuki's revenge. Makita gets caught up in Ibuki's revenge.

However, even so, the one who decided to get involved was Makita himself.

Either a demon or a snake will appear... the annoying thing about this island is that there is a real chance of both appearing. Rather, it is a flow in which a dragon appears at the

end. "Oh, my God." Makita said with a Whiskey. He couldn't do it without drinking alcohol.

"...By the way, have you decided on a name?"

"Yes, "Ayaka Security"."

"You came here to work as a security officer. I think your job will probably be as an exorcist or peacekeeper."

"I will take charge of the security of Ayaka Island. Isn't that appropriate?"

Seeing Ibuki's lips curve into a smile, Makita tilted his head.

It is clear that Ibuki's interest is not in the safety of the island, but in eliminating the Aramitama.

However, if his "work" ends up benefiting the people of this island and the people who visit it, then...

There had to be a meaning in that.

Makita raised the glass from him.

"For the future of our business."

Ibuki raised his glass in response.

He gently pressed the rim of the glass.

"For the success of "Ayaka Security"."

+++++

Ichinoshima is the most populated of the Ayaka Islands. Although the influx of people increased due to the redevelopment, the number of residents was large because the island was large and had the most active interaction with the mainland. Currently, the main area is an area that is undergoing redevelopment, but many islanders also live in the surrounding area.

In a corner of that ancient cityscape that reminded him of Ninoshima, there was an old antique shop that seemed to have existed for a hundred years.

The name of the building was "Kumogaido".

Local residents recognize it more as a second-hand tool shop than an antique dealer, and its skills in repairing and restoring broken tools are most valued.

On the other hand, it is an unusual store and many customers come from the mainland just to see it.

A man dressed in Japanese clothing was standing in front of the store.

"Hello, Kumoi-kun. I'm sorry to bother you."

"Huh? Kurama-sensei!"

"I already told you to stop, right?"

Kurama Haruaki smiled calmly as he spoke to the shopkeeper at the back of the store. The merchant stood up from his desk in a panic and then quickly covered the desk with a cloth. Kurama felt a little uncomfortable with that gesture, but he pretended not to notice.

The shop owner, who had a deceptively friendly smile on his face, said that his name was Kyouji Kumoi. He is a lanky young man in his 20s, wearing glasses and a jumpsuit that doesn't match the atmosphere of the store.

There's something about him that makes him seem unreliable, but there are actually quite a few parts of him that are unreliable, but... his abilities are reliable. After all, "Kumogaido" is a long-established shop that only those in the know know it as a magic tool. Kurama's master, Yanagi, was also a close friend of the previous owner and often entrusted him with his own magical tools.

His successor, Kumoi, was the one who decided to take over the store at just 20 years old.

"How is the store? Have you gotten used to it?"

"Well, yes... I usually have free time and my daily routine is to deal with the old men and women who come to make fun of me. I just play with magic tools every day."

"So training every day."

"That's not the case... I have no other abilities... I don't have any talent for manipulating magic tools, but I have nothing else to do anyway..."

He humiliated himself as he looked away.

The magical tools Kumoi wields are clearly on a different level in Kurama's eyes, and his skill is unmistakable. However, for some reason, he is the only one who stubbornly refuses to acknowledge his own abilities. "I have no talent." was his favorite phrase.

However, the previous owner was Kumoi's mentor.

"When you get drunk on that, your mind gets bigger, and you still think you're a genius, right? It's a fact, so if the quality is bad, you won't remember the slightest thing when you wake up. It's already interesting, so I'll let you do whatever you want."

That's what they told him. Kurama hid a bitter smile towards the young magic tool craftsman who had a strangely low self-esteem.



"Well, I had some business to do today, so I stopped by to stretch my legs. What about the token I asked for now?"

"I have everything ready. Do you want to check it now?"

"Everything already? As expected, you work quickly."

"Well, it's a simple task that anyone can do."

It must be a meaningless line, but for some reason it seems outdated, which is Kumoi's fault. Kurama continued with a smile on his face, "No way."

"If anyone could do Kumoi-kun's job, magic tool craftsmen across the country would go bankrupt."

"Even if you compare me to the little ones out there... oh, no? I don't know what someone like me would say about the rest!"

"I know. Anyway, I appreciate your help."

"Ah, but the barrier is still... Sorry. I had an unexpected job to do."

"Of course it doesn't matter. Originally that was something I was forced to ask for."

Kurama responded to the invitation, but his expression darkened slightly as he continued to say, "It's just..."

"Please continue with the preparations. It seems I will need it sooner than I thought."

"Is it Ichinoshima?"

"Yes."

Ayaka Island is a place blessed with rich life. As a side effect of that, Aramitamas often occur. That's why pulse connectors like Kurama exist.

However, recently, Aramitama's appearance has been steadily increasing. The cause is not well understood. The Shinoshima fire dragon that Yanagi suppressed is slowly regaining its power and freedom. As a result of that, the life cycle was interrupted and the redevelopment of Ichinoshima combined with that, creating the soil in which Aramitama could easily be born.

On the other hand, the number of connectors decreases year after year. During Yanagi's lifetime, he had subdued most of the Aramitama, so there was no particular problem, but in a sense, Yanagi's presence was a sign of the lineage of connectors on Ayaka Island, which was already in place decline and had become even more depleted. Today, there are only a few people left on the island who can pacify the Aramitama.

As Yanagi's disciple, Kurama has the duty to protect the island. However, Kurama basically can't leave Sannoshima, where Kaizumi Shrine is located, and he can't stop

monitoring and sealing the fire dragon in Shinnoshima, which is the root cause. There were limits to how well they could deal with the growing number of Aramitamas.

"I have to try harder... but it's not worth it."

"Kurama-sensei, you're doing your best, right? It's thanks to Kurama-sensei that the island is at peace even after Yanagi-sensei is gone."

"That's so..."

When he was about to deny it, Kurama remembered Kumoi's attitude in front of him, laughed and shook his head.

He can't say anything about Kumoi if he is too condescending. Perhaps his predecessor is the standard for a magic tool craftsman. If that's the case, his low self-esteem is somewhat understandable.

When you meet great predecessors, you can't help but compare them with your immature self. However, complaining doesn't help. They have no choice but to act where they can.

"A magical barrier tool. Thank you for your help, Kumoi-kun."

"I understand, sir."

Kurama finds Kumoi trustworthy and nods firmly.

He's only twenty years old.

Now that he thought about it, he must be twenty now. If only he were there right now... next to him...

He wondered how reliable it would be.

"Anyway, I'll bring you the spell you asked for."

"Hmm? Oh, yes."

Kumoi seems to have misunderstood something when Kurama answered him and let out a low laugh.

"Well, it won't be that bad, Sensei. Your worries about Ichinoshima might disappear sooner than you think."

"Oh, why?"

"Huh? Oh, ah... well, I guess you could say it's just a hunch... I wonder if something like that will happen."

By suddenly turning his face away from him and letting his gaze wander around him, Kumoi clearly tricked him. Seeing the shop owner's drawn mouth, Kurama once again remembered the discomfort he felt before.

Kurama's eyes fell on the work desk that Kumoi had covered with a cloth. He hid it in a hurry when he visited, which means there must be something he doesn't want him to see. It is against etiquette to inquire about the work of an artisan. However, at that moment, something similar to intuition passed through Kurama.

Unconsciously, his hand reached out to the desk and lifted the cloth. "Hey!" Kumoi exclaimed in surprise, but the moment he saw "it" hidden under the cloth, the craftsman's protest went unnoticed by Kurama.

On the work table there were several disassembled pieces of iron. However, even in his disassembled state, he was able to understand what it was about.

It's a weapon.

A black, opaque and shiny pistol in maintenance. However, it was not the weapon itself that stole Kurama's consciousness, but rather the remains of the pulse grafting technique he had placed on it.

It belongs to Yanagi.

No, not exactly. Although it belongs to Yanagi, it was not created by the master himself. Someone else had introduced a technique based on the same principle into a weapon. A person from the same school.

Of course, it's not Kurama. Furthermore, it cannot be the work of his youngest disciple, Jingi Sagawa, who is still in high school.

In other words...

"Aka...?"

Facing Kurama, who was muttering in shock, Kumoi crouched down silently without responding.

(5)

"Why did you run away?"

Kurama's face stiffened at Ibuki's question.

Five days after his master sacrificed himself, the two faced each other head on. Facing Ibuki, who was showing his anger, the brother stiffened, but did not collapse.

Kurama answered slowly without taking his eyes off Ibuki.

"It was my master's instructions."

"Don't say that!"

If he loosened the reins even a little, it seemed like he would attack him. Ibuki breathed deeply as passion radiated throughout his body.

"You should have known that the master was going to die, right? And yet! You!"

His entire body felt hot and his vision became blurry.

He couldn't forgive him.

Shouldn't the brothers have been encouraged to take the initiative and fight together? If so, how happy would he have been? Was it something he would be proud of? Together with Kurama, whom he adored as his older brother, he would do everything possible for his master. If he could have done that then, he would not have regretted it even if he had lost his life as a result. In fact, he would have proudly told his deceased parents that he survived to that very moment.

But that didn't happen.

And now he feels miserable.

He can't forgive him.

Ibuki's entire body was pleading as he cried. Although he survived by sacrificing Yanagi alone, he could no longer accept that situation. He couldn't help but face his irrationality.

But...

"Aka..."

Kurama didn't move. There was an expression of determination on his face, like that of a monk in training, carrying a heavy load on his back as he embarked on a faraway journey.

"The fire dragon is alive and well. There is someone who must protect the island. That's why the master taught us..."

"Shut up! If we had stayed, the master might not have died?!"

Ibuki yelled at him as if he wanted to knock him down, but Kurama said:

"No."

He responded calmly.

Kurama's face distorted slightly.

At the same time, a bandage peeked out from under his disheveled neck. It is a bandage that covers Kurama's back. The same scar is also etched on his shoulder.

Wounds received from the fire dragon. That is the injury Kurama received while he was protecting Ibuki. If it was true, it was proof of his own failure.



If Kurama hadn't protected Ibuki back then, he might have died.

And if Kurama hadn't been injured at that moment...

Did the brother just follow the master's instructions?

Would the master have given the same instructions as him back then?

".....!"

Heat and anger swirled and sparked in the back of his mind. Ibuki let go of the hand he was holding and looked away, gritting his teeth.

The focus of his simmering anger shifted from Kurama to himself.

The master's judgment. That's definitely true. In the end, what Ibuki cannot forgive must be his own weakness in allowing his master to make such a decision.

A little time for the master. He was immature and couldn't even prepare for it.

In the end, that burning shame was the result of Ibuki Aka's ineptitude.

"Aka...?"

Kurama spoke softly to his younger brother, who remained silent, exposing his face and shaking his shoulders.

His typical, loving voice. That consideration passed through Ibuki's entire body.

"I..."

Ibuki seemed to be cutting back.

He killed the heart and carved the words.

"I... will get stronger."

"Aka..."

Kurama's voice softened. It was as if he had finally convinced himself that his younger brother had the same determination as him.

"Ah. It's not just you. Me too. Master bought us some time, but the fire dragon has not harmonized yet. The same thing will happen again in a few years. By then, we must acquire the ability to quell the dragon of fire. That's why we..."

Kurama appealed sincerely, with a somewhat painful tone, but firm and focused on the future. Even now that he has lost his master, he still needs to move on. To put everything in harmony.

But...

"Calm him down?"

Ibuki's voice in response was extremely cold.

Ibuki looked at Kurama. Kurama couldn't help but gasp at the dark look in his eyes.

"Then... you should do that. I... I'm sorry."

Ibuki's response contained more disconnection than words. Instead of pushing him away, Ibuki turned his back on Kurama, as if he cut everything off.

Ibuki turned his back on Kurama and started walking. Kurama extended his hand towards his back, but...

His right hand, which he had raised slightly, hung weakly.

Ibuki began to walk with Kurama on his back.

He no longer looked back.

+++++

The finished weapon was satisfactory.

"Just because you like it, are you going to order them all? It's a ridiculous amount, right?"

"It is an expense."

"Don't you think that's a magic word? Expense doesn't mean free, right?"

"Is different?"

"You...?!"

The old town of Ichinoshima. In front of the rows of firearms lined up in an old warehouse, Ibuki and Makita communicated about their progress.

Leaving Makita in agony, Ibuki stared at the gun and bullets that had returned from "Kumogaido".

He was a little worried because his attitude at the time of the delivery was suspicious, but it seems that his fears were unfounded. To be honest, it's more than he expected. The piece of iron that fit in his hand clearly had "power". That's what Ibuki seeks as top priority. No matter what Makita says, he had no intention of letting him go. He returned to Ayaka Island for "power".

"It's essential equipment for business. Of course, it will cost money."

"It's just a matter of degree. Although there is no one to use it... I mean, if the number increases, labor costs will increase..."

"It's true that getting staff is an urgent matter. However, as long as you have this, it becomes a "job" even if you are not a connector. It is not difficult."

"I'm talking about what happens after you hire them."

After complaining, Makita let out a heavy sigh. Ibuki's mouth went slack.

It's a real inconvenience that he nags a lot, but Makita was an encouragement. They believed they would eventually need someone to support the organization's operations at the administrative level, but expected it would be difficult to hire immediately due to the skills and personality required. It was a happy miscalculation that was decided very easily.

He especially liked the fact that he has a scar on his arm. Although their personalities and character were completely different, Ibuki felt a strange sympathy for Makita, whom he could call "a dog from the same hole". He was very grateful to have met him and intended to make the most of it.

Also, if you think about it, it would have been convenient for Ibuki to replace "Kumogaido". Yanagi's previous partner, who had a long relationship with him, would not have been able to cooperate with what Ibuki was trying to do now. At that point, Kumoi, the new owner of the shop, basically has no interest in anything but the magic tool itself. It's not that he doesn't have a good work ethic, but when you compare it to his interest in magical tools, he's the type that easily leans towards the latter. Even in response to Ibuki's request, which was considered a gray area for a traditional connector, he displayed his abilities with almost no resistance.

Of course, Inou's efforts as well. He had been counting on that to some extent from the beginning, but the fact that the conversation was progressing at a rapid pace was proof that he was worried about the deteriorating situation in Ichinoshima. And... for Ibuki personally, the increase in the number of Aramitama cases, which are not good on the island of Ichinoshima, was a desirable thing.

The flow was coming.

Although the progress was faster than expected, there was no way they could ignore that trend.

"We also need to arrange a location. It doesn't look good that the base of the organization responsible for the city's security is a warehouse in the middle of nowhere."

"I think the problem is that the organization in charge of the city's security has a large number of firearms."

"It's a damn tool."

"Yes, yes."

He assumed that he had gotten used to it and Makita didn't touch the matter further. Alright. Everything was going well.

"Ayaka Security" will become a mechanism that will bring even more "power" to Ibuki. Not even his aunt, who opposed the plan when he found out, could have imagined it.

And... after gaining enough "power", he will start over. This time he will achieve victory. He will take revenge on that dragon that he stole from his master.

Until then he has no intention of stopping.

"Eh?"

He received a call.

Ibuki took out his cell phone and checked the person on the other end of the line. It's Inou. He clicked immediately.

As soon as he started the call...

"Oh, Aka-kun? Now."

"Is it out yet?"

"Ah! That's right. It's an Aramitama. I contacted other connectors just to be sure, but I haven't contacted Haruaki-kun yet. However, it seems to be a big problem for me."

"There's no need."

Ibuki stated that clearly and stood up, smiling as if he showed his fangs.

"I'll go. Find a place. Okay. I'll finish it right away."

+++++

Upon seeing it, just as Inou feared, the Aramitama was "a pretty big fish".

Ichinoshima Redevelopment Area. At the corner of the alley, he was kneeling.

As if he noticed Ibuki approaching from behind, he straightened up and turned around. His eyes widened and he looked at Ibuki with an unpleasant expression on his face.

A beast-like figure with fur-covered limbs. That is the effect of the object that was used as a substitute. Probably a dead stray dog or cat. Under his feet were several crumpled plastic buckets. Apparently they were rummaging through the trash for scraps of food. The figure that glided and turned towards him was taller than Ibuki.

The fact that his stagnant life is leaking out is proof that he has recently become an Aramitama. However, the amount that was leaked was considerable. If someone from outside the island couldn't tolerate it, simply being exposed to it could cause them to faint.

A monster that would have been a big problem if he had appeared on dry land, and even earned his own nickname.

But today, in Ichinoshima, you can relax and scavenge in the back alleys. It was exactly the vibe Ibuki was looking for.

"It's perfect for a test shot."

Yes, the moment Ibuki smiled, the Aramitama kicked the asphalt and jumped without making any preliminary moves.

A giant body flew through the air and attacked Ibuki. Ibuki took a step back. At the same time, he took out the pistol that he had just received from "Kumogaido" with his right hand.

Shooting.

At that distance and with that size, it is more difficult to remove. The fired bullet fell on the Aramitama. At the same time, the technique contained in the bullet opened and tore the Aramitama's body.

The Aramitama let out a silent scream. A happy smile appeared on Ibuki's lips.

"It's good. Very good."

Second shot. Third shot. Ibuki pulled the trigger in quick succession. A gunshot was heard and a gunshot flashed. The Aramitama twitched after being shot. Fourth shot. Fifth shot. His forearm was shattered and his life force scattered.

It was a great job.

The bullets he is currently using are not bullets that he has prepared to use with anything other than Ibuki's special pulse gun, but rather they are specially made bullets that he himself has applied his own techniques to depending on the situation. Furthermore, Ibuki relentlessly amasses life force and fires it.

However, the gun in his hand was strictly controlled by the "power" Ibuki had put into it. As expected, Kumoi's ability seemed to be reliable. It is strong enough and has enough lethal power to be used as Ibuki's main weapon in normal times.

"This guy needs additional compensation. Kumoi is suitable for the "Kumogaido" sign."

Ibuki continued shooting in a good mood. It was one-sided.

Eventually, the Aramitama lost most of his body and was unable to move, crawling across the street and convulsing.

He now appears to be on the verge of death. However, even if it is in that state, if he leave it alone, it will recover and cause damage again. The threat of the Aramitama will continue to exist unless it is dispelled through the pulse graft technique.

However, Ibuki took his finger off the trigger.

"...Without damaging the core."

He followed his master's words and murmured them softly.

Laughing, Ibuki slowly approached the motionless Aramitama.

His legs stopped.

All expressions disappeared from Ibuki's face. With an icy look on his face, Ibuki slowly turned his body and looked back.

When Ibuki turned, the air shook and spun into a small vortex. In the blink of an eye, the vortex grew larger and turned into a whirlwind, as a figure floated from above.

He land in the back alley. Then the hem of his robe fluttered.

A familiar face appeared. He is Ibuki's fateful partner, someone he can never forget, no matter how hard he tries.

"Aka..."

Ibuki looked at Kurama, who was muttering in shock, with a cold gaze.

(6)

It was his first meeting in five years. Although his impression had changed drastically, he still recognized him at first glance.

Ibuki Aka. A younger disciple who grew up with Yanagi. And the boy who left Kurama with the death of his master. In front of him, he turned and looked at him silently.

Nostalgia for the past welled up in his chest. Days spent in the same place. The conversations they had countless times. Warm memories of happy times.

However, before his thoughts could be expressed, they were interrupted by another thought.

Caution.

"Haruaki..."

Ibuki blurted out Kurama's name.

It was the first time he heard his brother's voice in five years. However, he still felt more cautious than joyful.

Ibuki's voice was harsh and emotionless. But that didn't mean he didn't have emotions.

The rough and harsh response in his voice was like magma that had cooled and solidified. It is simply the old passion changing form.



Eventually...

A sharp grimace, like a razor cutting through skin, passed Ibuki's lips.

"I didn't expect to find you at a time like this. I should have guessed when Kumoi's behavior was strange."

"No, Aka. Admittedly, Kumoi-kun hasn't spoken."

"Then why are you here... ah?"

Ibuki lifted his chin and looked up.

"Huh? Looks like you were too excited. I can't believe you overlooked it."

His somewhat self-deprecating words were proof that he had seen through Kurama's "jutsu". He tried to use a hidden way, even if it was simple, but it didn't seem to work on Ibuki.

Kurama wordlessly raised his right hand, palm facing up. Then, across the night sky between the buildings, a small white shadow flew through the air like a bird and descended. It looks like origami or a paper airplane, but it is a magical tool called a doll made of cut-out pieces of paper. Kurama was flying that and exploring the surrounding area.

"...It's a technique my master often used."

The sound of Ibuki's voice as he murmured those words seemed to have a hint of thick emotion melting away. Kurama's caution grew minute by minute.

In fact, ever since he saw the weapon in "Kumogaido", he felt that wariness like an invisible thorn. Why is Ibuki's technique on Ayaka Island? Also, does that apply to "weapons"? He questioned Kumoi on the spot, but, although he felt humbled, he did not answer Kurama's questions. Needless to say, the owner of "Kumogaido" would never reveal information about the client. Not even Kurama could make him do it.

First of all, the fact that there is evidence of Ibuki but no information about him has reached him is proof that he is acting secretly, at least without him realizing it. It was the same as when he disappeared without telling him five years ago.

Then Kurama changed his policy and used the pulse graft technique to release multiple dolls in Ichinoshima.

To find Ibuki.

He didn't even know if he wanted to find it or not.

But he found him.

So what should he tell him?

"...Aka. Since when have you been on the island?"

"...I think it was about ten days ago."

"Where have you been so far?"

"On the continent, with a relative."

"Then why didn't you contact me?"

It was different. Even before he asked that question, there was something he wanted to say.

He was glad to see him.

He was worried and waiting for a long time.

The breakup five years ago was painful. That's why he wants to do it again. Once again, as a disciple of Yanagi. Like a family living under one roof. Kurama's true feelings, without lies.

But...

Suspicion that sprouts like thorns and continues to swell does not allow for an easy attitude. The sight that was still visible was setting off Kurama's alarm.

Ibuki laughed.

"You're still as indirect as ever."

Saying that, Ibuki ostentatiously displayed the weapon he was holding in his right hand.

"Quickly, ask me. What happened to that weapon? What about the Aramitama behind you? Why did you leave it there unfinished?"

A dark smile appeared on Ibuki's face. A smile full of venom. And yet, the way he looked at Kurama was like cold steel.

Kurama's expression distorted.

Of course, there was no way he could turn a blind eye. However, Kurama straightened up as he faced the truth.

As a result of being hesitant and condescending to the other person's circumstances, they failed to communicate, misunderstood each other, rebelled against each other, and lost five years of time. He does not intend to repeat the same mistake.

"...Then let me ask you. Aka. What are you doing here?"

"You know that, right? I'm defeating the Aramitama."

"It's a job for the connectors who live on this island."

"It will be different from now on. As far as Ichinoshima is concerned, I will be in charge."

After coldly telling him that, Ibuki shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm telling you, I have permission from the mayor."

"Inou-san? I see. I guess you ran into Inou-san."

"Don't hold a grudge against him, okay? I asked him to keep quiet."

"I guess so."

The rise of Aramitama and the lack of connectors in Ichinoshima have long been a headache for Inou. If Yanagi's disciples were willing to help, it wouldn't be surprising if he welcomed them with open arms.

On the other hand, Inou knew Yanagi's "family" very well. The reason he accepted Ibuki's silence was probably because he considered it "still too early".

It was still too early for him to meet Kurama.

However, it seems that that concern was in vain.

"Aka. Now I know that you have the power to defeat the Aramitama. That in itself makes me happy. I'm sure our master would be proud too."

"I hope so..."

"But what is the method? Why do you make the Aramitama suffer unnecessarily while using the master's technique? If it is a technique to pacify the Aramitama, then you must be familiar with the master's method."

The alley in which the two meet is filled with the life force that escapes from the Aramitama. There were no signs that he had been purified. Only traces of devastation remain. If that continues, it will not be possible to return the life force to the life line. It is poor quality work that disrupts the harmony of life.

Furthermore, the core of the Aramitama, the eyeball, is still there. If that happens, the Aramitama will eventually come back to life and deal even more damage than before. As a connector job, it was a complete failure.

However... Ibuki "overwhelmed" the Aramitama.

In other words, it should not be a result of immaturity. Ibuki "dared" to choose that method.

"Why?"

Kurama and Ibuki... Ibuki, in particular, always paid attention to his master's purification ritual. He must have seen in detail the method of doing it, Yanagi's style. He perhaps had learned the etiquette of ignoring the Aramitama even better than Kurama.

But why? He cannot understand Ibuki's intentions. He can't imagine what is thinking his younger brother. That was not the case in the past. But now...

"Because that's how I do it."

Ibuki replied arrogantly. When the brother answered that, he seemed even more distant than the actual distance between the two.

"I will exterminate the Aramitama. Quicker, more definitively. So that they never come out again."

"Exterminate? The Aramitamas do not cause a plague. If you look at it from a different perspective, it is also part of the life cycle. What is needed is proper treatment..."

"It is a difference of opinion. It is precisely because of such naive ideas that Ayaka Island is causing the rise of Aramitamas."

"Even if you eliminate the Aramitama, you won't be able to prevent new Aramitamas from forming."

It is significant to suppress the appearance of an Aramitama.

However, once an Aramitama occurs, it must be suppressed and returned to the life line. Simply removing it will only make the resulting bias even greater. As a result, the harmony of the entire life cycle will be disturbed.

Of course Ibuki should know that.

"Aka. You're wrong."

Kurama flatly denied it. It is not in his best interest to overlook Ibuki's mistakes. Based on that belief, Kurama appealed to Ibuki.

But...

"No. At least, this is fine with me."

Ibuki responded unperturbed. He reflexively rebelled against his irreverent words.

"Do you disobey our master's teachings?"

"Makoto Yanagi is dead."

Ibuki's response made Kurama's chest go cold. Then, before distrusting Ibuki, he was filled with fierce anger.

No matter who else had said it, Kurama would have accepted those words as mere fact. The five years had given Kurama the strength to do so.

However, the words that came out of Ibuki's mouth broke Kurama's composure like it was paper.

"Aka! Are you trying to say that he lost his life because the master was wrong?"

"I won't say that. However, the master was also "naive". Isn't that true?"

Saying that, Ibuki looked at Kurama provocatively. A dangerous light began to flicker deep in his eyes. It is a faint flame that has not changed for five years.

"For example, if the master had annihilated all the Aramitamas, the fire dragon's power might have been weakened as a result. If he had tried seriously without worrying about harmony, he might have reduced the fire dragon's power. And... If he had simply "exhausted" us properly, perhaps the master would not have died."

The moment he spoke the last word, the pressure seeping out of Ibuki jumped.

After all, he is there.

Kurama was able to get over Yanagi's death in five years, but apparently Ibuki couldn't. No, he rejected it himself. Make Yanagi's death a thing of the past and let him sleep in your memories.

"Stop it, Aka. Master would never want you to be trapped in the past."

"You are as smart as ever, Haruaki. But I am different from you. I will not let go of the anger and misery I felt back then. This is my core."

The atmosphere between the two became tense.

A tingling sensation ran over his skin, as if the atmosphere was electrically charged.

However... Kurama was the first to retreat.

Kurama took a deep breath and slowly relaxed his entire body.

It's not like he's been waiting for something like that for five years. He doesn't think he's wrong, and he doesn't think Ibuki is right, but at least the current situation is "different".

Well, he should start over. Be persistent, again and again.

Kurama took care of his own life.

Ibuki mocked his brother.

"I guess you're going to take a step back after all. You're the same as before."

"...Aka. What about Momoko-san? And also Jingi."

"There's no reason to hide it anymore. I'll go see them tomorrow."

"I see. Then let's talk again."

"I'm sorry, but I don't have time for that. I seem to be busy."

When Ibuki said that, he turned his back on him as if the conversation was over.

And...

"For starters, it's not over yet."

Why? The moment Ibuki murmured that, his skin felt cold. Ignoring Kurama's shiver, Ibuki returned her weapon to his holster and approached the remains of the Aramitama's core, which was convulsing on the road.

Facing Kurama's gaze, he casually picked it up.

"Aka?"

For some reason, the voice that called him was a little hoarse. He didn't even know why.

For a moment, Ibuki's back felt unsteady.

However, Ibuki overcame his hesitation and raised the Aramitama's eyeball.

It crushed.

The core was crushed and the roiling life force poured out. And Ibuki, as expected, opened his mouth wide and grabbed the vitality of him. As if he were devouring a fruit, he sucked, chewed and swallowed the core of the Aramitama. Each time, Ibuki's back shook violently, but he didn't stop.

Kurama's mind was completely blank.

He had glassy eyes, tight lips, and stiff limbs.

He couldn't believe the sight in front of him.

"Aka... Aka! What are you doing?!"

Ibuki didn't respond. He continued to eat silently and, after absorbing the core completely, he wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

He looked back. The moment he saw his face, his hair stood out. He had a devilish expression on his face, different from before.

"What? It's training. It's to gain power."

"Don't be silly! You... what are you doing? What were you thinking when you put the Aramitama core into your body?!"



He was so angry and upset that he couldn't speak.

"Spit it out right now! No, no, I'll just clean it up from the inside!"

"Hey, calm down. It doesn't seem like it, right?"

"Freeze!"

Kurama shouted and made a hand seal.

Ibuki laughed again. It was a smile of joy that seemed to split his lips.

"Ah. You finally looked at me properly. You've always been running away from me, running away towards "harmony". In that case, I'll be with you a little longer."

After saying that, Ibuki brought his right hand together and raised his fist in front of his face.

He breathed and sang.

"Shimeisho Zan!"

He opened his closed fist and placed his palm on the ground. With a bang, cracks appeared in a radial pattern on the asphalt beneath Ibuki's feet.

"A warrior is a warrior. War is anger. Victory is given and people behave arrogantly. The height of evil!"

A wave of life ran through Ibuki's entire body. It is not an unusual amount. It is not of real quality either. His entire body was trembling, especially his right hand, which he held on the ground, was trembling violently. Ibuki grabbed his right wrist with his left hand to restrain it.

A violent right hand. Five fingers extended like claws.

There was a cut on the instep. His skin was torn and something slimy white appeared inside the flesh and his pupils twisted into black circles.

An eyeball.

It is the core of the Aramitama.

In front of a horrified Kurama, Ibuki's right arm enlarged and the sleeves of his jacket and shirt were torn. Red-black streaks, like cracks, appeared and crawled all over his body like snakes.

"Aka... you...?"

In front of him was his younger brother who had completely changed.

The skin on his right arm had swollen abnormally, turning an earthy color, and red-black veins were twisting on it. His hands were thick and enlarged, and his fingers had thick and sharp nails. On the back of his hands, there were eyes that looked around him unsteadily, as if he had a different will.

Red-black veins ran down his face, giving the appearance of blood. And his eyes had changed shape. He has blade-shaped pupils that extend sharply vertically, resembling the core of an Aramitama.

"Are you absorbing the power of the Aramitama? What...?!"

Ibuki's vitality mixed with the Aramitama's vitality. A figure that should not exist as a connector. It's a taboo.

"Have you tried any evil tricks? You... idiot!"

However, the voice that insulted his younger brother sounded like a scream. Ibuki was arrogant, but somehow smiled back.

"Well, I admit I'm stupid, but that's okay. It's always the stupid ones who open the door."

In response, Ibuki slowly waved his right arm at him. The resulting impact turned into a gust of wind that blew towards Kurama. "Shit!" His entire body was pushed forward, giving in to the pressure and being pushed away.

"What do you think? This is the "power" I obtained. With this "power", I will avenge my master. I will exterminate that fire dragon!"

"Idiot!"

Kurama denied it. However, Ibuki realized that he was serious. It's just a connection from the past. After all, Ibuki is still living the "continuation" of that night five years ago. The result of the mistake five years ago is bearing fruit there. Kurama was very aware of that.

At that moment, just before Ibuki left the island, when the two clashed, Kurama must have stopped him by force. Without making him say yes or no. Or maybe he should have followed Ibuki right after he left the island. Not waiting for him to come back.

A feeling of bitterness overwhelmed Kurama.

But now is not the time to repent. Evil laws undermine the user. If that continues, the Aramitama will swallow Ibuki. If that happens, there is no turning back.

"Man, earth and sky!"

Kurama exclaimed, tying the seal.

"Nothing is called the beginning of heaven and earth, and existence is the name of all things."

"It's warm!"

A technique to purify Aramitama. However, before Kurama could use his technique, Ibuki kicked the asphalt and approached him. He raised his now giant right arm. Kurama immediately changed his technique. He created a wind, ride the wind and escape into the air.

But...

"That's why it's warm!"

Ibuki jumped and raised his right fist. He quickly wrapped himself in the wind and blocked it, but the impact sent Kurama flying backwards and crashing into the wall of the building.

He couldn't breathe because the pain ran through his entire body. Still, Kurama didn't let go of the technique from him.

"Existence is named the mother of all things!"

Manipulating the life force that the wind created, he created a technique to purify the Aramitama again and threw it at the transformed Ibuki. Ibuki immediately received the technique on his right arm. However, when a dust of light wrapped around his arm, he stepped back and shook it, saying, "Damn it!".

It was working. So that was fine. As Kurama fell from the wall of the building to the street, he continued to weave techniques in rapid succession, with the intention of dispelling Ibuki's Aramitama.

Of course, Ibuki wouldn't allow it either.

"Don't fuck with me!"

He ran forward and raised his fist. However, this time, Kurama prioritized purification more than defense, keeping his eyes on the blow that could be fatal.

Ibuki also felt his determination to die.

Instantly, Ibuki's movements slowed down.

And...

"Man, earth and sky! Nothingness is called the beginning of heaven and earth, and existence is called the mother of all things!"

He used the technique again.

Immediately after, Ibuki attacked with a right hand that knocked Kurama sideways.

He flew away. His vision became hazy and shock rebounded through his body. Kurama was thrown helplessly onto the asphalt.

On the other hand, Ibuki received the technique correctly and was still chasing him.

The movement stopped.

Ibuki's gaze focused on the scar on Kurama's back that peeked out slightly behind his neck.

"Guh!"

Did he feel relaxed? Ibuki's face distorted due to the effect of Kurama's technique that had been applied to his entire body just before, and he staggered back. "Damn it.", he cursed as his eyes, which had popped onto the back of his right hand, slowly closed their eyelids.

"Haaa! Haaa!"

Ibuki's change was revealed. He was losing blood and had sweat all over his body.

"Aka..."

Kurama, who was lying on the road, forced his body to stand up. He immediately felt a sharp pain, but he gritted his teeth and sat up. Ibuki, on the other hand, staggered and leaned against the wall of the building, still breathing heavily.

Kurama has done a lot of damage, but Ibuki seems to have reached his limit. However, the vitality within his body, although still disturbed, had regained a minimum level of stability. The moment he thought that was a good thing, the strength that was barely holding him up gave up. Kurama sat on the road, unable to move anymore.

After a brief but intense encounter, only Ibuki's breath resonated in the alley. The two clashed seriously and remained silent for a while, saying nothing.

And...

"Aka... are you planning to repeat that action?"

Ibuki did not immediately respond to Kurama's bitter question. After repeatedly gasping for breath, he forced himself to catch his breath and climbed out of the wall of the building he was leaning on.

"I'm going to follow my own path... Don't get in my way, Haruaki."

Ibuki responded without looking at Kurama and slowly took a step forward. He turned his back on Kurama and walked away with unsteady steps. Just like five years ago, he never looked back.

At that moment, Kurama tried to approach Ibuki as he was leaving, but in the end he couldn't do anything.

Even now, he didn't have the strength to stop Ibuki from leaving.

Just when...

"I refuse, Aka. I will definitely stop you."

He told him clearly.

Ibuki stopped for a moment and immediately started walking again, without turning around. Kurama continued to stare at Ibuki until the end as he disappeared into the alley.

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"Hey, did you get robbed or something? How did that happen to you?"

When Ibuki returned to the warehouse, Makita's wide-eyed reaction finally reminded him that he was wearing a torn suit. He clicked his tongue. But right now, he didn't even have the energy to get irritated. He walked over to an empty chair and sat down.

Immediately, his entire body felt like molten lead fatigue. It was no joke, the entire chair looked like it was going to explode into pieces. Ibuki moaned as he corrected himself once more.

His thinking became a little clearer.

However, the only thing that came to mind was the mistake he had just made.

"Shit."

He couldn't win.

Although he used evil methods, he still could not subdue his brother.

He doesn't believe he lacked strength. Probably what was missing was determination. On the other hand, it is because of the sweetness that still remains within him.

Without realizing it, a hand approached his shoulder.

He grabbed his shoulder and dug his nails into it. Anger and remorse roared deep in his stomach like a hungry wolf.

"...Give me some alcohol."

"Hey. You drank it all."

"Then it will be food."

"You ate all that too."

"Then go buy it. Immediately."

"Huh? Just... wait a minute."

Makita raised his eyebrows at his domineering partner, but when he saw Ibuki's expression, he let out a sigh and stood up. Then, as if he remembered something, he rummaged through the plastic bag that rested on the lid of the wooden box next to him.

"Look. I found this. For now, eat something sweet and calm down."

After saying that, he handed it to Ibuki.

Ibuki reflexively took it and confirmed it.

His face looked like he was crying and laughing.

Complex and extremely bitter. His expression was mixed with anger.

"What? It's quite delicious. It's a potato."

Ibuki stared at the potato he received while Makita looked suspicious.

Throw it away, he whispered to himself. But he could not. A memory that felt like a surprise attack entangled the exhausted Ibuki.

Makita finally started to worry and asked, "Hey, are you okay?" Ibuki didn't respond.

It was something incontestable.

Biting his back teeth with a broken expression, Ibuki continued to look at the past in his hands.