

Songs of a Little Tree:

Brave Blue Boy Scout

Aidan Gray

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Chapter 1: Birdsong

Birdsong woke him from a gentle sleep. While the melody crescendoed, so too did the sun, pouring warmth on Josh's face. Any other morning would see him basking in this serenity, but today he sprang out of bed like a child on their birthday. He faced himself in front of a full-length mirror, while the bedhead monster stirred in her sleep just behind him, on the bunk above his own.

The reflection of a boy stared at Josh. In response, he protruded his chin and pondered. He puffed his chest and pontificated. These were his routine morning contemplations, in the place of affirmations.

The next time I see you, you'll be a man...

Josh began to wake the top-bunk bruiser as his artificial alarm finally sounded off.

"Iris, time to start moving," he said with a gentle rub on her arm.

While he began rifling through a pile of shirts, his little sister sat up like an 8-year-old Dracula. "Happy birthday, Josh!" She said with a sudden burst of life.

She jumped down from her bunk with a heavy clatter and a poorly folded sheet of paper clutched in her hand. Josh leaned in to scoop her off the ground.

"Whoa, jumper, be careful!" he said. In hoisting her off the ground, he quickly noticed crayon markings on her paper. "I think everyone is still sleeping."

That's a birthday card, alright.

Sure enough, after a mighty hug, Iris handed it over. There was no challenge to be the first to wish Josh a happy birthday, but his little sister was still waiting for the chance. He felt the love of someone fighting for him in his first moments of the day.

"Happy birthday," she said, more professionally this time, as Josh observed her fine work. "I'm giving you your actual present later."

Within the card, Josh saw the illustration of a superhero– or more accurately–himself, christened with a bold cape. Identified by his dark ponytail, which split into two braids, it didn't take an art scholar to deduce that secret identity.

"And who is this handsome guy?" Josh said with a smile that he couldn't fight, even with super hero strength.

"It's YOU!" Iris exploded. "I made your cape blue because it's your favorite color!"

Nobody else in the big, old house had the gumption Iris did, wishing Josh a happy birthday. Some of the other residents at the family home even delivered wishes with an ounce of sympathy. Josh was not affronted. He was thinking what everyone else probably was:

In two hours... I officially age out of the foster system.

Josh was prepared, and he didn't have serious worries. His best friend's dad manages an apartment building, and they are clearing their family office for him to stay until he leaves for college. No fear to halt him, especially not from celebrating upon the roof of said apartment after jiu-jitsu training this evening.

—

Despite the calendar, today was the first day it *felt* like Spring in the valley. The Arizona sun was a warm hug, while the breeze was cool flattery. That breeze was easy like the coast of getting through school on your big day. Everyone seemed to share a direct message or a smile with Josh to show kindness.

The effect a few classmates posting about your birthday can have... That needs to be studied.

He could feel his brain firing those happy signals all day, so time flew by. Before he knew it, Josh had flown his way into the foyer of Bryan's apartment building after training.

Immediately, Josh noticed how his friend was seated, waiting for him. Every other time Josh had come to visit, he was waiting at least two minutes before Bryan came down to bring him into the elevators.

Well, special occasion?

“Hey Josh, how was practice?” Bryan greeted, “I already brought the pizzas upstairs, by the way.” Josh engaged in the over-elaborate yet routine handshake with his best friend. It was second nature, judging by how the multi-slap process was always overlapping their conversation.

“It was good, thanks again, man,” Josh replied. The two began walking into the elevator when Josh picked up an anomalous smell.

Are you wearing cologne right now?

Thus, Josh retreated to his mental war room. Bryan smelling notably well, was a phenomenon to remark on. Especially if it truly were one of the ordinary repeated outings the two of them had to the same roof.

Was something out of place, he wondered. Now, a sudden absence of eye contact from his friend became present. Did Bryan have nothing else to say on their ride to the top? Then it clicked just before the third floor. Josh knew what was out of place— rather *missing*: Little Iris, blissfully unaware she had given the cat a way out of the bag in the morning. Josh was missing that birthday gift he was promised. With nothing more, *that* was enough to prompt Josh’s trademarked “shifty eyes” in the direction of his elevator companion, alongside a comically conspicuous sniff to demand his attention.

Bryan caught eye contact, instinctively pretended he didn’t, then knew Josh was on to him. The ones that know him best recognize when Joshua Little Tree gets that focused glint in his eye, he’s thinking.

“There’s no way my cologne gave it away,” Bryan said in amused disbelief.

“I thought it was weird so many people wished me a happy birthday today,” Josh said with a suppressed grin. The two laughed as the muggy elevator squeaked to the roof. Bryan delivered an endearing hand on Josh’s shoulder and lost the awkward tightness in his posture.

"Hey, almost had you, though," Bryan said devilishly. Josh determined that remark to be confirmation of his suspicions. "You know the drill, act surprised." A now-quiet Bryan said as he raked his fingers through his hair, stepping through the barely opening elevator doors.

Bryan took his exit. Josh faced a dark rooftop. He could hear nothing; see even less. A hint of cheap pizza and a simmering energy were the only things he could detect. If only his birthday were on a full moon, he quickly imagined. How hilarious it would be, all the people who must be hiding, exposed by the cold light. But the moon was hidden too, waiting perhaps for Josh to cross the threshold.

Complete silence. Bryan stopped his march, and the hairs on Josh's arms stood equally as still.

Any sec-...

"SURPRISE!!!" Indistinct voices collapsed in on Josh.

Before him lay one thought: Party on.

"Josh! Happy birthday, man," said an almost-familiar but definitely friendly voice. This voice, silhouetted by a two-headed garage light, advanced towards him. "I had the idea to surprise you."

A hand shot out into view, with a semicolon stick-and-poke on the very bottom of the thumb.

Dylan!

Additional lighting switched on, illuminating what the rest of Josh's senses were trying to fill in. Warm pizza, baked goods, and a jolt of whimsy in the dusk spring wind. Many familiar faces seemed to be enjoying the good vibrations of the evening.

"Dylan! This is wild," Josh said as he took the handshake and made a hug out of it. "Thank you."

Dylan pulled Josh towards the crowd and promptly hopped up onto a nearby chair. A crowd of smiles and cell phones with flashes on, centered around them both.

“Hey, Everyone!” Dylan, arms held wide, began proudly. “We are, of course, here to celebrate Josh Little Tree!”

Brief “Woo’s” and applause filled the air. Josh felt a moment of quiet in this jubilation. He never considered himself the life of the party, but he felt pride in accepting the attention of everyone celebrating him tonight. Just one thing was still missing, keeping it from being a perfect experience.

“Let me be the first to say!” Dylan continued with a slice of floppy pizza raised like a rallying sword.

The harsh garage lights powered off, and the remaining area lights filled the rooftop with a warm glow. Josh saw a delighted wave of friendly faces focusing on this moment. He shot a quick glance back to Bryan, receiving a nod only a bro could give, and returned his attention to Dylan.

“Josh, you are the greatest guy I know, truly, and I don’t know where I’d be if not for you. You deserve the best man. Have fun being an adult!” Dylan roared into the night.

Dylan stepped down into the crowd while Josh made sure to brandish some knuckles for every group photo and a peace sign for every selfie.

It felt like a holiday miracle when Josh found her. His oldest friend and most trusted companion, Iris Little Tree. She gave him a burning hot hug and wished him a happy birthday, for about the 10th time today. How quickly he flamed from stoic to ecstatic.

“Started early on the pizza, did you?” Josh teased, handing her a square napkin.

Iris wiped the grease off her perpetually fruit punch-stained lips and remarked, “Bryan let me have some when he picked me up! Did we scare you?”

Josh chuckled off the question and grabbed a cake pop, designed to look like a boxing glove, baked proudly by Iris and Bryan's family.

Before he too could indulge, he felt fingers tapping him on the shoulders.

A mysterious woman stood before Josh, one he certainly had not met yet.

Wow, did Dylan invite the whole neighborhood?

The woman introduced herself with an almighty gaze upon him.

"Pretty rare to hear Dylan talk so highly of someone– I'm Sara by the way," she said boldly. "Happy birthday!"

"Sara, nice to meet you, and thanks," Josh gracefully managed her intensity. "Yeah, we've known each other a long time. I go way back with most of these people. I've lived here my whole life."

Iris gave her big brother a hyper-exaggerated look of betrayal for attending Sara's introduction with such effort. She shrugged it off, deciding she would take retribution by scuttling away with two liters of root beer in her arms like a goblin.

"Looks like I'm behind," Sara said, enticing a reply with her final syllable.

No reply came from Josh immediately; he took a beat to think. His attention rested upon the weaponized gaze she was sending him and the heavy timbre of the song in her voice.

A whisper of a chill encircled around Josh. The choice of familiar company or an adventure with chance lay before him. Spontaneous dilemmas never induced anxiety within Josh. This moment felt heavy, charged. The instincts of a newly 18-year-old boy took the wheel.

If the little voice in Josh's head could shrug, it would shrug slyly.

Party on.

—

A spark can be many things: An opportunity, a passion, an idea. People see sparks flying as fortune, and a twin flame as a prize, yet a Spring breeze can carry embers or snuff a candle all

the same. The winds of change were picking up in the waning hours of the party. The night grew cold and quiet. The only flame that kept crackling was at the center of Josh and Sara's connection.

"So, do you get scared when you have to fight someone bigger than you?" Sara asked.

"Not really," Josh said earnestly. "Boxing has an inherent side effect of helping me manage my fear in a lot of ways. The worst thing that can happen is you get punched in the face..."

"... *repeatedly*," he corrected himself mentally.

"You say that like it's a walk in the park," began Sara with a smile. "You aren't afraid of getting clobbered, I mean?"

Josh took a pause. Getting 'clobbered' while one is training or competing is certainly no walk in the park, but it's crucial for someone who wants to improve. Josh happened to be receiving fear exposure therapy when it came to "getting clobbered" since his first sparring matches.

"I suppose it's about the mindset," Josh corrected. "If any situation gets too hot, the worst thing that can happen is someone loses their cool and tries to hurt me— and I fail to prepare for it," Josh said, motioning around as if to say it could happen at any second.

"If I maintain composure and protect my center, then I don't really *get* clobbered. Physically or emotionally," he said with a quiet confidence.

Sara seemed bemused. "Boxing taught you that?"

"Honestly, the eastern martial arts are where I got most of the discipline and philosophy stuff, Wing Chun, Karate..."

"What else do you know?" she asked.

"I started experimenting with martial arts after I joined the foster system," Josh began. "I started boxing pretty young, but when I tried Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu and Wing Chun, I loved it all too much to stop."

"Wow, so you could really beat someone up then?" Sara asked with enthusiasm, yet Josh didn't appreciate how she thought of hurting someone as a reason to perk up. Nonetheless, conversation flowed.

"Nah," Josh said coolly. "No point."

"Well, what if someone does something really bad? Or hurts someone you care about?" Sara asked the question as though it were the most important one of the night. Her eyebrows waited at their high perch until he responded.

Josh admired that she was a questioner. A questioner bored of the favorite colors and dream vacations, just as he was. These spontaneous and curated questions opened the shortcut for Sara to introduce herself to the real Josh beneath the surface.

"I don't like violence," he said flatly. "I don't think it has a place in society, a lot of my coaches try to teach us that," Josh said, twirling a cake pop stick in his fingers. "Animals fight and kill each other, and I like to think we can do better."

"Wise words from the middleweight Machiavelli!" Sara retorted with a smirk.

Josh was stunned— speechless. His instinct was to defend himself from the Machiavelli allegations, but the reference cut deep straight to his tight-leashed sense of humor. She knew exactly what to say to pull Josh back to the moment, the party.

With his mouth still ajar, Josh responded, his obvious bewilderment unfading, and his smile growing back, "First of all, I fight at lightweight..."

Sara's burst of laughter was enough to elicit an ear-to-ear smile out of Josh.

"No way!" Sara suddenly jumped. "You going to be a lumberjack too?"

How did-... OH! My bracelet!

Josh slapped the Northern Arizona University band upon his wrist with an affirmative nod. Turning 18 is a big deal, but in five months, when Josh leaves, that's when the real change starts.

“Too?” Josh asked, just as Sara peeled her phone from her pocket and flashed a phone case with the same logo, like she knew the question was coming.

In the same movement, she grabbed Josh’s hand and placed her phone inside it. For the last time tonight, they sat facing each other, in a moment of silence, communicating loud and clear. Putting his number in that phone was the easiest decision he made all night.

With that, Sara was ready to make her departure. Another handshake and “let’s do this again sometime,” later, he watched her disappear from view into the elevator.

Until the party was nothing but red solo cups, pizza crust, and smashed chips, Josh was happy.

As straggling friends began parting ways and the energy dimmed, Iris was only livening up. Josh knew they would be the last ones up there; he only hoped he could channel her sugar rush into pushing a broom.

When Bryan was the final partier remaining, Iris ran at him and screamed.

“Can we do it now!?” She said, holding her 8-year-old hands like a Victorian peasant begging for a morsel.

Josh saw both Bryan and Iris staring at him and took a breath to prepare himself.

I am way too tired for any more surprises.

“Josh, Iris has a final surprise for you,” Bryan said, somewhat reluctant to indulge the request from Iris. “Since we are on—”

Iris spoke over Bryan, overflowing with enthusiasm.

“We are going to play superheroes since we are on a skyscraper!”

Bryan does not want to play. Josh can read it in his face. Imagining how exciting this must be for Iris, Josh considered it. Bryan quickly laughed to himself, surely noticing gears turning behind Josh’s eyes.

Not for very long did the consideration last, because he knows how much Iris loves playing superheroes, especially with multiple people.

Josh is no reluctant hero; he places his fists on his hips.

“Superheroes, you say?”

He protrudes his chin in courage and puffs his chest in righteousness. Iris runs to Josh.

“I’ll be your sidekick, and you have to kill him!” Iris shouted fiendishly, pointing at Bryan.

Fortunately for the expired bedtimes of all, Bryan’s supervillain reign was short-lived. A few well-placed glowsticks whipping him on the arms were enough to vanquish him after about 12 minutes of blockbuster-worthy action.

Thinking of all the victories that had been won in a single birthday, Josh painted a scene in his eyelids before sleep. He felt himself flying above the clouds, more free than a falcon. He dreamt of strong wings to carry him from an unlikely nest into a blue sky full of opportunity.

For the first time, Josh fell asleep, no longer a child. Tomorrow; his first day on the job.

Chapter 2: Messages from the Deep

Sara had a quirk that Josh was intrigued by, but never questioned. She talked about the future so often and emphasized the importance of making a difference by doing something good. It was refreshing to be surrounded by such consistent, positive energy.

He had never been a “relationship” guy before. Never did he draw hearts upon his calendars, but time had changed him. He remained in tune with the flow of life, nonetheless. He loves the freedom of independence and the weightlessness of being untethered. But this girl instilled within him a new desire: a desire to build. Slowly, as his time in high school drew narrower, Josh warmed up to this new mindset. It seemed particularly convenient timing, too, for as soon as dorm applications opened up at Northern Arizona University, Josh filed. He was going to make the most of his remaining senior year while waiting to join the latest and greatest Health Science majors coming from NAU.

The real world was out there, hiding behind a diploma. While much of his graduating class was longing for the end of a memorable four years, Josh was biding his time until the start of all things new.

Perhaps it was the lack of enthusiasm, or a scheduling conflict, but Josh’s foster parents were not in attendance for the commencement. Another of his foster siblings surely had something going on, he thought.

May is a busy month, after all.

Sitting in rows, wearing matching gowns, and looking on at loved ones in attendance was a feeling no one prepared this graduating class for. Josh felt a union like he never did before. The idiots and the egomaniacs didn’t show up to graduation. In their stead were friends and

companions. Some of them, Josh would never see again, and hearing their names called might be the last time he ever thought of them.

Despite it all, gratitude flowed through Josh's veins. The fun and the ferocity were no longer separate. That thing called the 'high school experience' is a package deal, and he was sharing it with an enormous graduating class. Suddenly, as the school's elected teacher of the year began her speech, Josh felt the word "commencement" perhaps didn't have *enough* bravado.

"...You did this together, all of you," said the strong voice from the stage, closing the speech.

One tassel turn, and about 40 hugs later, Josh recognized an updated highlight of the night.

Bryan's mom had picked up Iris to watch her big brother walk across the small stage and throw his cap in the air. Suddenly, the absence of foster parents was abysmal compared to Iris's admiration.

He never expected little Iris to have a verbose congratulatory declaration at her age. But the way Iris squeezed him and looked at him, offered more than any words he could come up with himself. When someone so innocent looks at you with pride and awe, maybe you aren't half bad, he thought.

Maybe I'll be a good man after all... Wait, I just graduated from high school!!

Lightning could have struck his nervous system, and it would feel no different. But the sky was open tonight, and nary did a crack of thunder roll across it.

As Josh's honeymoon phase with Sara continued to heat up alongside the Arizona summer, he still enjoyed feeling free as a bird. He was beginning to recognize the transitive state he was in. Being out of high school for just 60 days and he was pondering; this was his time to blossom. Bloom into the world as the man he would become, and remain for the rest of his time on this earth.

It seemed he was picking up a thing or two from Sara. Now he wanted more than to build. Josh wanted to forge his future. Unfortunately for him, he won't be making the magnificent and staggering impact on the world like he wants to right away. With a prerequisite of spending a few years on a journey for a piece of paper that says "Health Sciences," Josh was eager to take the saddle.

He skipped a going-away party on that first week of August before his departure up north. One reason was that he was going to come back once a month, and Iris would hate the idea of celebrating his departure. Rather than get his favorite people in the same place at the same time, Josh would prefer to make one last memory with the friends he couldn't pack in a suitcase. Bryan, Dylan, and of course, Iris.

It made no difference if Sara was moving on the same day, to the same school, to a dorm room three floors up. Josh and Sara were both making a transition. The love birds were leaving their nests, and as an infant to the romantics, Josh treated every day with her like it could be his last.

The final weekend before move-out, Josh and Sara would paint together. The sky, the stars, and the desert skyline from the roof on which they met.

Josh arrived at Bryan's apartment intentionally early before dusk. The rooftop of this building he doesn't even know the name of, after all this time, was one of the most special places in his life. Josh and Bryan sat up here and had some of the deepest, most life-changing conversations in this spot.

Pollution... chemicals. As much as I hurt to see the deep skies like that, nothing can compare to that Arizona sunset.

Today, things had seemed extra grimy, however. At least that's what the whisper crawling in from behind his ears kept saying. Something was off all day, and whatever it was, could not get

back on. A chill walked behind him everywhere. It was just one of those days, and he made his efforts to prevent it from being just one of those nights.

The infamous screeching of the elevator making it to the roof didn't have a whiff of nostalgia. It was disappointingly just as sharp and angry as it always had been. This time, it carried something that would make him completely forget.

Sara?

Out she walked in a summer dress. Josh met her eyes and walked towards her.

"I figured you'd show early, Bryan buzzed me in," Sara said with a grin. A deep note of sincerity came out of her voice, followed by the most subtle gloss in her eye.

Josh stuck his hand out for her to hold, and while Josh was finding the words to remind her they were both going to the same place, something caught him.

Sara's fingertip fell upon Josh's hand like snow, but the frosty feeling lay upon his nape. The sensation was strong, like hands reached through his long braids and grabbed him, sending a flood of goosebumps, from neck to knuckles.

Instinctively, Josh's eyes widened as he did a quick shake to snap himself out of the strange wave.

"Whoa, you alright? Seen a gh-..." Sara paused; sound and expression.

"Tsk," Josh, wanting to ignore the awkwardness, pulled Sara in for a hug. "Sorry, I've been getting the chills randomly all day."

"Yeah, I can feel the lizard skin on your arms," Sara said, now inspecting Josh's forearms as if he were contagious.

That's my slang!

There was no need for words; the hug brought the warmth of August back.

The rest of the night had gone exactly as he wanted. He was seeing through his heart instead of his eyes, for he professed Sara was a natural talent with a paintbrush.

"Anyone can paint a sunset," she said humbly. "Your little sister could do it too."

"She prefers markers," Josh said with a smile. "But, seriously, I love yours."

They set their materials aside and moved to more comfortable seating while the paint dried.

"Did you ever think about being an artist?" Josh asked. Yet Sara took a dramatically long pause. She seemed affected emotionally by the question.

Oh no, please tell me I didn't bring up something dark.

"I think every kid wants to do something creative at some point when they get older," Sara said plainly. While Josh couldn't relate exactly, he too had dreams he outgrew.

Maybe Josh did hit a sensitive subject... and he remembered the only thing he fears: trying to console sadness. A man of few words becomes a man of less. Before he could scramble a half-decent response, Sara began again.

"What did you want to be when you were a kid?"

"... strong," he decided.

She looked up at him, and Josh saw the gloss in her eyes was less magic and more tearful now. Words would not leave his mouth, because his brain couldn't find any.

"Are you okay?" was all he could say.

But she looked away, into the night.

"I'll be alright," she said with a fight.

She was fighting a cry, and Josh didn't understand why.

"I really like you... a lot," she said.

Is the relationship dead? Josh thought in his head.

In an instant, it all made sense, why the day felt so cold and tense.

"What are you saying?" Josh said, returning to the moment.

Sara sniffled and rested her head upon his shoulder. Despite his ever-present stoicism, she might have felt the vibrating heart in his chest.

"I don't want to leave," Sara began. "I want us to stay here forever."

Am I dumped...?

"Life is going to change in ways we can never expect. I am happy with you, Josh. I really, truly am," she said.

No..?

"Sara," Josh said, preceding a deep exhale. "We aren't going far. It won't be so different."

She rubbed her eyes and straightened up. She blinked hard and took both of Josh's hands.

"I'm sorry, it's been a rough day," Sara said. "I shouldn't have said anything."

If Josh weren't so confused, he might have actually been helpful. He's got a strong shoulder, just not the best one to cry on.

"No, I'm sorry," he said, pulling her into his arms. "Do you want to go get a nasty burger and talk some more?"

She laughed at the suggestion. The good kind of laugh just after a cry, where the snot in your nose forces that open-mouthed guffaw. The rainbow after the hurricane.

"I should turn in," she said, staring at her shoes. "Could use the extra Z's."

Josh accepted her wishes. He walked her down to her car, kissed her cold lips, and stood in the parking lot for a few more moments, staring at the sky. Perched upon a nearby lamp, Josh noticed the silhouette of an ominous owl. Whether it was staring right at him, through him, or in the complete opposite direction was unknown. Its presence motivated a quick retreat from Josh, up to Bryan's unit.

Josh buzzed himself back up the elevator. His night turned out pretty good, but he felt something was wrong about the way it concluded. At least that is what he told Bryan, as Josh rejoined him in his room to watch him play video games and debrief.

"I dunno. I've had this weird feeling all day, then something was telling me that was the last time we were going to kiss," Josh said, yet still without any visible indication of worry. "Oh, and then I saw an owl!" With a rare jump in his voice.

"And the truth shall set you free!" Bryan said sarcastically, still looking at his TV screen. *He can never just say "I don't get it," can he?*

"Bro, don't you remember my thing with birds?" Josh said.

Bryan paused the game and faced his friend with a sudden demeanor suggesting he was taking Josh seriously now.

"Okay, I forgot about that, but you don't have to be superstitious about every bird you see," Bryan said directly. "A few coincidences don't have to haunt you every time this happens."

Josh looked at Bryan with a reaffirmed smile, "You are probably right. Maybe I'm overthinking."

"How unlike you," Bryan said as a jest while he sat back down and resumed playing.

The two remained seated; Bryan, controlling a horse-riding samurai, and Josh, controlling his confused and agitated emotions.

There was certainly a lot of thinking going on inside Josh's head. Deep talks betwixt online matches, and sitting side-by-side on a couch always seemed to be enough to clear the gloom throughout their friendship. "Time will tell," Josh said.

After the silence that was barely long enough to be awkward, Josh looked out the window. Bryan closed his single-player game and got up to hand Josh the designated "player two" controller. Josh took it with some reluctance.

"Should we DoorDash some nasty burgers?" Bryan asked with a tempting grin.

"You son of a bitch," Josh said through a breaching smile.

Alongside Bryan's victorious "Ha HAA!" Josh loosened his posture on the couch.

Chapter 3: One... Two... Three...

Josh had finally arrived at his new home. A dorm room the size of the average suburban kitchen. Staring at the door marked 616, he heard the sounds of a rhythmic slamming upon what must be a desk. As he emerged into the room, he first met his new roommate.

'Jeremy' would be his name, according to Josh's information. Jeremy spun in his chair to face Josh as he hoisted his luggage through the doorway. Social anxiety feared the man; Jeremy had a big, red circular bump on his forehead. He was smashing his head on the desk without a doubt, and without a care to address it or hide it.

"You must be Jeremy?" said Josh, using a gentle voice.

"Uhh ... yeah," he said, fading into an awkward quiet.

Jeremy spun back in his chair to face his computer, the only thing he seemed to have unpacked at this time. Josh would have slid his hand over his head, befuddled, if he weren't still carrying a duffel bag in each hand. He stood staring at the back of his new roommate's head, wondering if he should check in on him.

But he didn't address it, and he surely knows I could hear him before I walked in...

The kid is not adjusting well, based on subjective standards. Josh finally set his things down with an escape plan. It could be something they can laugh about later, perhaps, but maybe more alone time is what he needs. Concurrently, Josh hoped, Sara might still be settling in further up the building.

Not knowing what to say, Josh decided promptly to escape this weirdness. He made sure to produce a bit of noise on his way out so he wouldn't seem sneaky; something told Josh that Jeremy wouldn't care.

On his way up to room 920, Josh reflected on his first impression of Jeremy. He asked himself what he must think of Josh for not saying anything. He considered whether he should

bring some kind of peace offering back to the dorm once he was finished helping Sara. If Josh is stuck with this guy, he wants him to know Josh won't be any trouble.

A surprisingly simple route to Sara's dorm brought him some relief, a small win. He knocked on the door of a silent room to hear a stir, then a stranger shuffling to the door.

"Hello?" said the stranger.

"Hey, I was looking for Sara, just seeing if she needed some help unpacking," Josh told her.

"Sorry, I think you have the wrong room," she replied quickly.

Josh turned his gaze to confirm the room number, and it was correct. He needn't check his messages to confirm that this was the room she told him to go to; they only talked about it 500 times in the last few weeks.

"Is your name Cat? She told me this was the room." Josh said, hiding his confusion.

"Uh... no. Sorry, dude," the resident said dismissively.

A voice came from deeper in the room, another unrecognized voice.

"Is that him?" said the voice.

"Oh, wait, are you Josh Little Tree?" the first resident asked.

What the hell is going on?

"Yeah...?" he replied slowly, with sharp eyes.

"Well, some weird teeth guy left this for you," said the woman at the door, her friend laughing at the description. She then extended a letter sealed with a bull stamped on the front, addressed to Joshua Little Tree. "I don't know why he left it here, but he told us to give it to you."

The door closed on his face. As the cold wind cascaded over him, it brought a chill. The letter sat in his hand. The hallway was barren, but with a flicker in the lights, life had breathed it back. More students were bustling through the halls.

Josh could only wonder if Sara had anything to do with the letter, but he was certain no one would mistake her for a "weird teeth guy."

He pierced his finger through the stamp, breaking the seal of the bull to open a handwritten letter. "S.C.A.B.B.," boldly marked at the top. He began to read in the chaos of the hallway.

—

"To one Joshua Little Tree,

"You have been hand-selected to represent our agency as a courier of peace. Thousands of candidates are screened for their prowess in academics, fortitude of character, and graceful adaptation to misfortune."

"I am all sweetened up, get to the point," Josh thought as he read on.

"Candidates are then chosen based on spiritual intuition," read the next line.

Josh lowered his hands; nothing to take seriously. He was warned of the pyramid schemes that would seek out unsuspecting freshmen. There was some humor in it, though; it might even be a good way to break the ice with Jeremy when he gets back.

A sudden weight dragged him down from his chest. He remembered what he was doing on this floor. Where is Sara? He quickly folded up the paper and put it in his back pocket so he could give her a call.

Dial tone.

Josh held on to the first excuse he could for why his call wouldn't ring: A swarm of people in this building, yet to connect to the internet, might be messing with his service. Josh would send a "Call me when you can" text on his wait for the elevator.

Undeliverable.

The anxious weight in his chest now felt light. The feeling came from his stomach now, like a void growing. Josh can figure it out with some fresh air and less cellular traffic.

"The number you have dialed is no longer in service, please hang up, or pre-..."

Josh clicked the instant response off after another failed attempt.

"Call Dylan," Josh said to his phone. The moments were stretched, elongated to a miserable margin. The call was initiated. Josh waited. Would he feel better or worse if the call rang out? The first ring sounded, the fake ring, followed by an extraordinarily long anticipation.

"Yo, Josh!" Dylan's friendly greeting ruined everything.

"Fuck," Josh deflated.

"Hey, is everything alright?" Dylan's worried voice coming through. "What's going on?"

"No, it's good," Josh said with a defeated droop in his shoulders. "I can't get a hold of Sara right now. Can you try and text her for me?"

"Yeah, I got you. Just text me her number," Dylan said.

Josh made no movements, no sound.

"Can you hear me?" Dylan asked.

"You don't have it?" Josh replied, now with an even bigger pit in his stomach.

"No? Just send it to me, and I'll text her," said Dylan. Their apparent agitation was masking confusion.

"How did you invite her to my birthday a few months back?" Josh demanded.

"Whoa, I didn't, I only know her because of you. I don't even know her Insta," Dylan defended. "Now *I'm* confused."

"I think she blocked my number. The dorm she told me to go to isn't even hers," Josh said it for Dylan to hear, but he just needed to think out loud. "The girls in there gave me a letter like they knew I'd show up. And you never knew her?"

Dylan, nor many others, would have recognized Josh by the inflection in his voice. The exaggerated tone of confusion that lifted the last syllables from his mouth was not a casual thing to Dylan.

"Is she trying to ghost you or something?" Dylan asked.

"It wasn't that kind of letter— it was something else. I guess I can't ask you if she would ever do that sort of thing." Josh stated in his normal flat intonation.

"No, sorry," Dylan said. "Will you call me back when you figure it out, though? My dad is yelling for me."

"Sorry I freaked out on you like that, I'll hit you later," Josh told Dylan politely before closing the call.

Josh had thought for a moment that he should take a cue from his new roommate and find the nearest hard surface. He expected *some* answers when he called Dylan, but only found more burning questions. Pacing across the entrance of the dorm building on move-in day was a clatter when Josh needed clarity. He watched on as the struggling students and paranoid parents filed in and out of the doorways. Josh began the full ponder as he sat on the hot concrete steps out of range of the commotion.

The sound of a light crumple reminded him of the S.C.A.B.B. letter in his back pocket.

Blah-blah, I'm so awesome, Josh reread the letter. *I'm spiritually awake, blah-blah.*

"The random chills and shadows within your earthly perceptions have never been random and rarely been earthly," Josh read on. "If this letter has found the right man. You will not be in doubt. You will not hesitate."

"The S.C.A.B.B. Agency is dedicated to understanding all that succeeds life and death, and the mysteries in between. Many spirits inhabit this realm, as we believe you have felt, but where there was once a soul, what remains is a search.

"Within yourself, we ask that you search too. Find the invisible strings that have pulled you, the cold hands that have touched you, and the whispers trying to reach you. We are the shield to defend the spiritually vulnerable and the sword to fend off the vile. To

heal a wounded world, to be a hero, in the name of departed loved ones and ancestors forgotten, we ask for Joshua Little Tree.

“Bring nothing but courage, and one item of high personal significance. What can fit in your hand will be your anchor and guide through the veil.”

The letter closed with an address. It was within the same ZIP code as the university, and a date, just a few days away. Josh began a forward march with no destination. Pure motor skills, with no critical thinking. Anything was better than thinking right now.

I need a burger.

As he walked in the vague direction of the dining hall, a bench called out to him. Summoning him to sit and remain until all the events of the last 20 minutes were fully digested. That was a call Josh could answer, and he sank into the bench. With eyes locked onto a crack in the pavement, and elbows rested firmly on his knees, Josh strained his eyes and massaged his knuckles.

What is happening today?

The tiny voice in Josh’s head begged. It begged for something to feel, to feel *certain*. All his thoughts were buzzing and bouncing inside his brain. Where his brain was once a 1,000-piece jigsaw puzzle, circumstances have divided it into a 10,000-piece colorless mess.

Picking fights is never a good move, but when the fight picks you, there are limited options, Josh knows. He also knows that a two-to-one battle against your own panic and confusion would be a losing battle. Never the boy to go down without a fight, he initiated a deep inhale.

One. Two. Three.

Josh began to exhale and sat up. He recognized he was thinking himself into a dark corner.

One... Two... Three.

Josh closed his eyes. Digesting everything at once is impossible; digesting anything at all in this moment seemed impossible. But there he was.

Could he ask for a better place to meditate and calm his mind? Absolutely. A park bench on a university campus during move-in week might actually be the worst place he thought, but another inhale:

One... two... three...

Josh held his breath as long as it took to curse the bench on which he sat. As if he moved the clouds with his breath, the sun was revealed. Through closed eyes, the strengthened sensation of the sizzling Arizona sun bathed Josh. As the heat dawned on him, so too did hope. The sun had shed some light on his melancholy.

one... two... three...

The winds began to sing. The song of life, a distant cacophony, became the focus of Josh's thoughts now. Conversations of passersby, leaves rustling in the trees or dancing along the sidewalk, even the screeching of a bus brake, added to the serenity of the wind's melody.

one...

two...

three...

His mind was quiet. Not a single pan was still simmering on the back burner of his mind. Not one idea was cooking.

Twas a powerful park bench indeed. Josh felt a smile coming on. But it faded slowly as he refocused on the jigsaw pieces still waiting to be sorted. The first step is always dumping out every last piece and spreading them out across the table.

Josh did so within his mind, conducting his train of thought to stay on track and take a mental inventory of everything, each buzzing puzzle piece.

Outstretching his arms on the back of the bench and resting one leg up on his knee, Josh got to work.

This puzzle gets solved from the inside out, and at the center is Iris. She is more important than anything. Back in the mental kitchen, his emotions started to rise like dough. Despite having a calm mind, the mere image of his sweet little sister made him feel weak. Had his eyes been open, they would almost certainly be wet. He hasn't cried since before he turned 18, breaking that streak on this stupid-awesome bench was not his destiny. He kept his chin high, letting the warmth of the sun shower him.

Remembering how much he loved his sister made him question whether he had achieved love with Sara. They spent so much time together in the last four and a half months. Is that enough time for him to truly love someone? He continued to ponder.

Josh now realized that having a quiet mind is good, but having a mind at peace was crucial if he wanted to fit any more pieces together. Statue-esque and stoic, Josh rose.

His postbellum brain clicked. All the pieces fell into place at once. Josh chose public health education as his path to help others; that was his purpose. Josh was a man now; he could forge a new path in new directions to help people. Maybe sending ghosts to the other side and hunting evil can be his new path. Iris always thought of Josh as her hero, but if he could make that a reality...?

That's a badass big brother, am I right!?

Despite his returned calm, Josh knew he was still emotionally active. Thankfully, he has time to sleep on it a few times before setting out on a hero's journey. He is hurt today, wounded, but there is a comfort in knowing a S.C.A.B.B. might be his path to healing.

By the time Josh got out of bed the next morning, he felt confident he had come to the right decision. He spent 40 minutes staring at the ceiling when he first woke, but definitely felt alright by the time he got up, especially and surprisingly as he reached 24 hours of Sara being completely lost in the wind.

Josh's calm and desire for a plan were interlinked. The plan was to follow the call to action and walk into his destiny. A fate filled with demons and lost spirits is fearsome, no doubt, but where there is great fear, one can find bravery tenfold... As long as he keeps his guard up and eyes sharp.

And I am so fucking scared...

While Josh was brushing his teeth, facing a scared and confused boy in the mirror, he snapped back to the mortal realm with the sound of Jeremy scrolling through videos at maximum volume.

I already miss sharing a room with my 8-year-old sister.

What prompted Josh out of the door on his first full day at university was not the volume from Jeremy's dual monitor set-up, but the unfortunate smell of a roommate who had not ventured to the shower room yet.

Chapter 4: The Bus, the Bear, and the Bronze Pot

Am I an idiot?

Josh sat at the bus stop, but he stood at the precipice. The heat of Flagstaff, Arizona, was nothing compared to the stir-fry sidewalks of Mesa. Yet the thought of heat exhaustion infecting his ability to make sound judgments burned bright.

He was about to leave the university track completely behind. If the bus arrived exactly on time, he had 15 minutes to bail and go back to an ordinary life. He held on tight to the requested small personal possession to give him confidence.

When Josh was far younger, his mother gave him a blooming blue iris, petrified within resin, preserved for all time. It was to celebrate their growing family, as they had recently learned Iris would be a girl. Since his mother passed, it naturally became a token to stay close to her. As he waited for Charon's ferry to whisk him away, it took on new symbology once again.

Josh wiped the sweat from his forehead, under his eyes, and let out a deep, tired breath. If Iris and his mother could speak to him through his petrified flower, what would they say?

If his mom could voice her wisdom in this moment, she might tell Josh he is falling for a kidnapper's scheme. He liked the idea of being special so much that he bet his life away on it.

If my dead mom could communicate with me somehow, it would only mean I'm going to the right place... right?

His mind returned to the letter, the invitation. They told him that what he was feeling his whole life was real. Spirits and energies that have been denied or debunked were often truly there.

Maybe they are here right now?

He looked again at his petrified flower. If there was ever a time to be given a sign, it was right now. But a screech alarmed him. A bus was distant, but now in sight, on approach.

Is that it?

Goosebumps took him by the arms, with a nervous fluttering in the stomach. The bus was pristine, probably air-conditioned at every seat. If you asked him to describe the chariot, the one to ferry him away by an agency called "S.C.A.B.B.," it would look nothing like this.

The bus kept driving past. Was it relief that Josh was feeling? Whatever it was had been immediately overwritten by a piercingly loud ringing in his ears. His impulse to follow the noise whence it came spun his neck lefty-loosey.

A double-take he shot in the same direction. In the moment his gaze took in the area, he noticed a beat-up yellow school bus. It was on the side of the road with the engine off, but the driver was leaning up against the front. He was enormous, certainly carrying strong muscles under his grizzly bear stature. Josh could identify it by the way his upper trapezius muscles were nearing his jawline.

Being proficient in a few martial arts forms has made Josh feel physically safe in *most* environments. He reminded himself of that now. If not safe, then confident enough to protect himself. This was not most environments, he felt like he was in the woods, when he belonged in the desert. He was now being watched by an apex predator with a driver's license. Working Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu techniques on a man of his size would be like setting a daddy long-legs loose on a bear.

"Hey, kid, you Josh?" grizzled the bearish man from the woods.

"I am," Josh said calmly as he stood up. "What's your name?"

Don't try to kidnap me, bro.

Josh watched the man walk towards him. He walked with a menacing pace, swinging his legs wide like a bodybuilder. Josh put the petrified flower in his pocket and faced the approaching bear at a 45-degree angle.

Next, the bear spoke, "My name is Umar. I work for S.C.A.B.B."

"You're my ride, Mr. Umar?" Josh said, poised. "I wasn't informed where the facility actually is."

The bear didn't speak. Instead, he scooted Josh's duffel bag along the pavement and towered over him. If Josh was sizing Umar up, the bear was sizing him down. He looked official enough to dismiss Josh's concern of being kidnapped. He was dressed in what looked like a Boy Scout uniform. Different charms took the place of badges. All the pockets on his long cargo pants and the utility belt holding them up all seemed full of stuff.

The bear sat down on the bench and kicked Josh's duffel bag in front of him. "Kid, sit down for a second." He had a sonder in his voice like he was about to tell Josh his dog ran away.

The note of empathy in Umar's voice rang out in Josh's ears as he took a seat. He did not take his eyes off the driver. He did not say a word to him. He did not sit. He was so eager for what Umar would say, he didn't bother spending his breath trying to hasten it.

"Put these on for a second," Umar said as he pulled a pair of techno-safety glasses from one of his many pockets. "You might still be wondering if all this is bullshit?"

PLEASE TELL ME I CAN SEE GHOSTS WITH THOSE!?

It's uncommon to feel extreme anxiety and allure at the same time. Perhaps for the crazed thrill seekers, but not Josh. The body tends to amplify the shared responses. Josh had his heart racing, on one beat, yet stomping for another. Josh's fingers had finally landed on the pair of sunglasses, and he inspected them on his lap.

Surprisingly heavy, more like night vision goggles than safety glasses. Dark lenses, really dark... How do I even see?

"What's the purpose?" Josh said as he slid them up his nose to fit his eyes, trying not to shake. His hand was chilled with goosebumps, but shone a summertime shine.

"It's completely black."

Josh's panicked emotions faded, but his heart needed time to slow. While he held the glasses tight to his face, he took a deep breath. Wondering why he got so worked up, he took them off and looked at Umar.

"They will let you see certain kinds of spirits. I am going to prove it to you," declared Umar delicately with his brash voice.

Josh just convinced himself to stay cool, so he will. The revelation, and his use of the word 'kinds,' brought an uninvited rush, though. Josh forced his emotions out to focus on the understanding he would soon acquire. He held them still in his lap to listen to his driver.

"Then there's one chance," Umar continued. "You will decide if this is the life you want to enter or if you want to turn around and go back to school."

I already disenrolled, and all my classes will be full if I turn back.

"We can get going," Josh said in his recently disused stoic. "I showed up here because I already decided."

"Alright, Mr. Little Tree," Umar said with a jolt of shock in his expression.

"Go meet your team on the bus, then. I got your bag."

"I can manage it," Josh told Umar, patting him high on the shoulder with a half smile. "It's nice of you to ask."

Umar seemed to have gotten the picture of the kid. He saw that Josh had held eye contact after saying something complimentary. That is not something a person does to someone they fear, but it is something the driver took notice of. They both dropped their shoulders a little more and got moving.

Up Umar walked to the front bus and spoke, "Just wanted to give you kids the chance. At least I got three of you to think about it this time." The bear smiled to himself as he stomped into the bus, quaking it slightly as he did.

Josh felt for his petrified blue iris before he followed behind. Walking up to the bus, he said thanks again to Umar as he heard the doors close him in. Being in the shade made him feel instantly better. Despite being at a higher altitude, the angry Arizona heat still finds a way.

And that was the least awesome bench ever. I felt like I was possessed—

And he felt worse again at the thought.

If spirits exist, then bad spirits exist.

He knew he wasn't *literally* possessed, and he only cursed himself with mean words for thinking about it too much. That was all too common for Josh. The brief anxious feeling washed away again as he walked down the lane. Something less common these days happened too: The sound of a friendly voice shot from the back of the bus.

"Seen a ghost?!" Called a man about Josh's age. Umar was the first to laugh, followed by a few ladies chuckling and then seeming embarrassed about it.

"Nah! He didn't even let me turn 'em on!" barked Umar at the jokester through his rear view.

Josh cut through the chatter and murmurous reaction in the bus to assess his new team.

Three ladies and one gentleman, it seems? I can escape college, but not group work. That's hilarious.

"I'm Josh Little Tree," he introduced himself as the engine ignited.

"Whoa, cool," said one of the ladies as she stood in her seat. She seemed Josh's age, too; they all did.

"Little Tree... I'm Diotima."

Simultaneously, they met for a handshake that popped in the air on contact.

"Whoa! Nice indeed," Josh said, endeared by a powerful and unawkward first handshake.

The rest of them stood up while the gentleman in the back spoke first.

"My name is Yoshitsune, but you guys can call me Yoshi!" said the man. He smiled, which was endearing too. He seemed very friendly, but Josh noted he introduced himself to the group and not the guy who had just gotten on.

"Like the samurai?" Diotima, matching his energy.

"I think he's just a dinosaur," said Yoshi with a quizzical look. But he broke into a laugh. "I'm just kidding. Yeah named after the samurai, nicked after the dino." He said it perfectly, like he had either introduced himself that way countless times or had just practiced it countless times.

"I'm Rosemary," another lady said, carrying a smile gifted by Yoshi.

"My name is Peyton," said the final team member.

The bus switched gears, and everyone sat as they began to move. Josh was positioned very near the front, but the rest of the team was concentrated towards the back.

There's a good chance they're cool if they sat in the back of the bus, right?

Perhaps he will feel motivated to join them later, but he felt curiosity nagging him to discuss a few things with Umar. Before opening a conversation, he noticed there was a badge on his vest. Josh maneuvered closer before he could identify that a hand-threaded badge had the same iconography as the letter addressed to him. Suddenly, for the first time, Josh began to postulate the acronym S.C.A.B.B. and figured a good place to start with Umar.

"Scab?" Josh called to Umar. "What does it stand for?"

"Supernatural creature... arrested?-" Umar started.

He doesn't know.

"Supernatural creature apprehension-something," he corrected. "I always forget."

Josh could hear the casual conversation beginning among the team in the back. His answers were not long; he didn't want to bother Umar, so he waited to see if the driver would follow up on the conversation. Moments passed, and the driver noted they would arrive around 9 p.m., but the only other conversation in the bus came from Yoshi, Diotima, Rosemary, and Peyton.

Josh began to tire as the sun set. He blamed it on remaining stationary, and the high anxiety from earlier. Sitting straight up, head leaned back onto the leather seat, Josh began to fall asleep. he began to dream.

He blinked his eyes open to a sky with one million stars. He stared at the grand night, soaking in the awe, experiencing colors so rare. The Milky Way shone beautifully.

What is that?

Josh focused his vision on a distant blue dot. Small, and getting smaller. Josh thought of the only other blue dot he'd heard of in space. He looked down and beside him: Space. He is in space. He continued to dream.

He was flying away from Earth, into the unknown. He spun to see himself flying into Jupiter, into its stormy atmosphere. From flying into Jupiter, to falling towards it, he was unable to change course. Josh could not control his dream.

While he could breathe, he began to choke as he fell into the dense clouds of the great planet. He was soon engulfed in darkness. Being pulled around and spun as if he was being bullied by the rageful winds. Lightning crossed his eyeline in brief cracks from the chaotic storm of the atmosphere. Nothing could he do, he was too far in the darkness. Lighting illuminated nothing, and as he tried to cry in pain–

His head bumped on the bus window.

“Shit!” Umar called from the front. “I curbed it big time. Almost flawless,” as he slowed.

Josh stirred himself to alert. They were pulling into a parking area. They made it. The others in the back were quick to their feet, too. They grabbed everything to be out of the bus moments after it rocked in place for the final time.

Jupiter? What could that mean?

It was an unfamiliar sight, stepping out. No major cities or manmade landmarks, except for the elementary school they just arrived at. They were still in Arizona no doubt.

I'll always recognize the Sonoran Desert.

“Are we in reservation territory?” asked the girl named Diotima as she faced Umar.

“Yes, and no.” He replied matter-of-factly.

There was light coming from the office right around the corner; everywhere else, it was the blackest night. It held the look of a school plucked out of a suburb and thrown into an uninhabited desert, from what was visible. All but the vague driver was asking obvious questions based on

immediate observations. No connection to the internet, grid power, or running water, and so on. The nighttime arrival made them unfairly skeptical. With nearly zero light pollution, the night sky was their only guiding light. There was an area for what could have been a playground, but replaced with cattle stables.

"Big Sugar will be around to greet you and tell you about the place." Umar lost his benevolent energy as he stepped outside.

"The Big Sugar?" Yoshi asked with an are-you-serious eyebrow.

"Means he owns the ranch, he makes me call him that," Umar said with more grouch in his voice.

"We can't meet him inside?" Asked Peyton to bearish Umar.

"There he is, he has to introduce the shaman first," He replied, signaling to the silhouettes approaching.

One was tall and rather boxy, while the other had a sagging and flowing wardrobe. A spark illuminated the shorter one. The man lit a sage as he approached and began speaking softly. *That's obviously the shaman...*

The taller man addressed the waiting crowd without any vocal tone to analyze.

"My name is Abraham Valentine. Welcome to S.C.A.B.B., we call this facility the Bronze Pot," he said with manners.

In the ambient moonlight, he was even more of a stranger. He had deep and tired eyes. An old man, white hair and a loose face. He was also very lined, with a strikingly asymmetrical nose. *A boxer? He's got the big shoulders for it, too.*

"I will answer your other questions while Kettle, here, cleanses your energies before you enter," Abraham Valentine said. All of the new arrivals' eyes were locked upon him, ignoring the chanting and embers slowly encircling them.

"Is he really a shaman?" Diotima demanded clarification.

“He chose to be called ‘shaman’ if that’s what you are getting at,” Valentine replied calmly. “This is one of our precautions, we consider ourselves a superstitious crowd.”

The sage burned out, and darkness poured in again. Distant wind and animals could not penetrate the fatally mute dome that surrounded this Bronze Pot. Peyton continued to nervously move her wind-blown blond hair, snapping at her. A heavy chime started calling from Kettle’s shadow. It gonged at a giant’s walking pace.

The shaman continued his quiet mumbles and rang his mystical instrument. Josh noticed two of the others, Yoshi and Rosemary, subtly inspecting goosebumps upon their arms. As if powered by suggestion, Josh felt it rising too. Chills on his arms and neck. As the arriving winds bit colder in the dark night, he spoke again.

“While we are on the subject of safety,” Valentine prompted. “You all were asked to bring spiritually significant items. You may not go forth without them.”

Josh and some others instinctively patted their pockets. It was only now that Josh was getting a close look at the others. His eyes, adjusting to the moonlight, tried to get the picture of the team.

What kind of life did these people just throw away?

His attention funnelled completely to Diotima as she spoke to Valentine once again.

“Fits in the hand, right?” She asked with a hand up. Her features were sharp, similar was the way she spoke in her urgency. “I have a quill. Just under a foot long.”

A quill?

“That is acceptable,” Valentine spoke. His composure would be disarming if not for the circumstances of their arrival to this place. “We will be helping you to elevate them into an amulet, to further defend you from entities-spiritual.”

The voice beneath the cloak spoke up, “Abraham.”

“What do you mean by entities-spiritual?” Peyton asked.

"I mean you will be safe here, with us," he said with reassurance. "If you choose the field work down the road, you will encounter entities that wish you harm, some physical, like animals, and others spiritual, like ghosts. We've learned enough to develop safety measures, but we intend to keep learning."

"Kettle will take them from you now and return them in the morning," Valentine said, motioning towards the shaman.

"What's he going to do with them?" Rosemary asked.

Josh, stirring on the acronym S.C.A.B.B. and its meaning, listened while handing over his petrified iris. He began to hope the conversation would make its way inside, yet they remained under the heavy blanket of night.

The sour old shaman spoke again after a second, "I will be enchanting, then reconfiguring your possessions to fit onto your vests."

"Enchantment?" Blurted Yoshi. "Are you telling me everyone is wearing a magic vest?"

"Do I look like I do card tricks?" He snapped. "You can ask the bulls or find a book on how the enchantment works," the shaman said slowly.

"The bulls can talk?!" Yoshi blurted snarkily.

"The officers!" hissed Shaman Kettle. "They are called bulls! What swine have you brought us this time, Umar?!"

Everyone looked at Valentine as he finally led the silent group towards the building entrance. Yellow lights poured from just around the corner.

Josh recognized the S.C.A.B.B. logo of a bull stained onto glass, marking the front.

Valentine guided everyone to stand in a circle once more. The tungsten warm glow in the foyer made the quiet space feel completely disconnected from the dark void just outside. Pitch black was only a few feet outside the glass rectangle.

"Don't mind the shaman, he's less grumpy when the sun is up," Valentine said. He hadn't a look of amusement, but cooled tensions nonetheless. "A good time for all to rest. Lots of information coming tomorrow, so let me show you to your quarters."

Before heading down the staircase to the left, Valentine returned to the steel and glass door to lock it.

"What does S.C.A.B.B. stand for, Abraham?" Diotima asked.

Finally! Thank you!

He stared into the dark nothing for a moment, or perhaps his reflection. Josh only knew he was thinking in that moment before he finally responded. During that moment, all eyes watched his chest expand and deflate deeply. He faced the onlookers.

"Supernatural Creature Apprehension and Brazen Bull." Valentine declared.

Ah I see...

Shit.

Chapter 5: Strangers in the Night

"The name is old," Valentine reported. "When we first started the work, we didn't even have typewriters."

Typewriters?

"Pay it little mind," he said without pause. "You all need some sleep now."

Damn... I don't imagine the living quarters in an abandoned elementary school to be any better than my dorm room.

They exited the foyer by descending a staircase to the inside right of the entrance. The sausage was made on the other side of the heavy steel doors, straight across from the exterior door, Josh thought. Everyone emerged from the stairwell into a hallway that made them feel small, and passed sealed classroom doors and sparsely populated bulletin boards.

The lights hummed and briefly flickered at a junction connecting to another hallway. It pressed on the feeling of looking upon a barren environment that ought to be bustling with commotion. The question naturally arose: Why does this place feel empty?

"Discuss amongst yourselves what name to designate your posse," said the mysterious big sugar as he came to a halt. He stood outside a classroom. If he were one head taller, he would have to bend to get inside.

"This is where you will be staying for a while. You all will be working hand and glove for the first year or so, meaning you gotta get along. Gentlemen, your bunks are on the other side of the far divider."

Co-ed dorms?

No one in Josh's "posse" moved. Not out of confusion, but protest. This was no vacation, but even so, Dad had just put them to bed as soon as they got to the hotel. Valentine politely made his instructions crystal:

"Bathrooms are in the center hallway, as you saw. I wish you all can sleep well tonight."

That's it?

Abraham Valentine turned at the center hallway junction, crossing the bathrooms before anyone moved.

"How are we expected to unpack and go to bed right now?" Yoshi asked in a high-pitched whisper.

"Did he say Brazen Bull?" Rosemary asked in a whisper, too.

They're also nervous... this is sketchy.

Josh looked at Rosemary with a smile, halfway affirming her question, halfway giving her sympathy.

Diotima spoke next. She said what everyone had to be thinking.

"Did we just join an agency named after a torture chamber?" she asked as she first entered the repurposed classroom.

The lights were already on. The same warm hue that paired with the aggressively blank walls, made the building seem abandoned. It was un-lived in, but unforgotten. It was not dirty, nor decrepit. A liminal space between a human building, and a ghost town.

"I'll say it," Diotima said as she threw her duffel bag and sat on a loveseat in the center. "This is fucked up."

"There's definitely a strong energy in this place," Peyton admitted, peering around.

Is that spiritual intuition?

Josh remembered these individuals were picked on the same criteria as he was. How would they clash? Blend? Time would tell. The other four still standing, slowly paced the room like it was an antique shop. For five people living here, a lot of the space was dedicated to working. Josh began crossing the divider with a bunk bed far more crude than his foster home would provide.

"So what will we *'designate our posse?'*" Yoshi asked, mimicking Valentine's mysterious composure with a superfluous cowboy accent. "I think we should get to know each other a little more first?"

"Yeah, I think so too," Rosemary spoke up. "Does everyone have a favorite color?"
"Red team," wouldn't that be boring, all things considered?

"Wait!" jumped Peyton. "You guys must have experienced supernatural things in your lives? Why don't we all tell one of the stories?"

Yes! Good way to paint a picture of these people, through their stories.

"I like it, let's do it," said Rosemary earnestly. "Do you want to go first?"

Peyton began without pause. Attention in the room fell upon her. They sat around the room facing into the center, and listened with eerie caution. It was an ancient human experience, like sitting around a campfire telling ghost stories, looking over your shoulder into the unsilent darkness behind you. Only this time, they sat in yard sale furniture in the middle of an empty classroom, in a school that shouldn't exist.

"I went hunting with my dad when I was young," Peyton began gravely.
When you were young? I bet this was a defining moment for you...

Peyton looked the group in the eyes while she continued. "I was around seven. We lived in Tucson at the time, and he would drive out into the empty desert and turn on his highbeams to watch animals cross into the light."

She gave a forced smile that acknowledged shame in her father's "hunting" antics.

"The last time we went," Peyton folded her arms. "We watched a coyote or something crawling across the light from maybe 100 feet away. I was the one who saw it. I told my dad where to look."

She looked at her shoes. "He shot it, but it didn't die right away. It limped forward, and my dad shot it again. I knew he didn't want to hurt it— just end it quickly. He shot it two more times. I

remember seeing the blood and fur spraying out behind the thing as it fell to the ground. He shot it one more time, and it made me so mad. I whispered under my breath to the coyote that I was sorry.”

Peyton sniffed sharply before continuing. She looked at each of the four sets of eyes in the room as a mark of sincerity. “I swear to God, but I heard my father’s voice speak to me and say, ‘There’s nothing to be sorry for, babygirl.’ I don’t know how, but I knew it was coming from the coyote. The voice sounded far away. I looked into the desert and screamed. The coyote started standing up on its back legs. My dad was yelling, ‘What! What!’ before he saw it. I was frozen, staring right at it. It was walking across the beam the way it started. My dad picked me up and threw me in the car. He sped off, and he kept looking in his mirrors for a mile before he said anything to me. I will never forget the sound of his voice, the way he said, ‘I just shot a skinwalker.’”

She paused. She read that the others were invested in her story. After what little they have learned so far, they can understand the true fear she must have had. The five of them took a breath while the severity sank in.

Before she could continue, something went bump in the twitching shadows behind the closed door. Yoshi stood up instinctively, drawing attention to himself as he backed up a step. He avoided the embarrassment of his jumpy reaction by staying locked in place, facing the door.

What is that?

A deep voice groveled ever so quietly, somewhere deep. Everyone stood at attention. Peyton’s eyes darted back and forth, but froze again after a gasp. The door handle made a faint “tik...” as a hand landed upon the other side.

Everyone held a puffed chest in anxiety until Yoshi was brave enough to speak a whisper.

“What was-” He silenced himself instantly as two powerful knocks came from the door.

“It’s the shaman!” roared a dark voice behind the door

Josh was the first to shake the fear. He placed his hand on his heart as he crossed to the door. He looked at the team, widening his eyes for an instant. He communicated it was alright, for as he opened the door, four exhales sounded off behind him.

“Are you trying to get us killed?” The angry shaman tried to hit a cane upon Josh’s chest. Josh calmly guided the slow momentum of the cane to his left as he replied.

“What’s the problem?” Josh asked, concerned. He watched a handful of taller men and women shuffling down the hall over Kettle’s fuzzy hair.

“The problem is you stirring evil in the Pot!” he roared as he marched in. He looked around the room and stomped a foot. “Telling scary stories, are we? How have you lived this long without knowing you cannot invoke the names of certain evil without attaching it to yourself?”

Rosemary shot a glance at Peyton, and the shaman figured it out quickly.

“Young lady,” Kettle began, with a vicious severity. “You will be safe tonight, but not forever if you treat the evil of this world like they are stories for children. This goes for all: DO NOT SPEAK OF THEM.”

With a wave of his cane, he stormed out and tried to slam the door. The mechanism designed to prevent such a thing ruined his dramatic exit, for all but Peyton. She turned back into the group slowly, face pale like a ghoul.

“I’m sorry, guys. I forgot,” Peyton said as she defeatedly went to the only bed not bunked in the room.

“Is that bad luck? Or...” Rosemary asked innocently, but nervously, for her new teammate.

“I guess we’ll see...” Peyton said, staring at the ceiling.

Diotima addressed the group with a lighter tone. “Maybe we can share some stories in the morning, because I’m guessing these bastards won’t be bringing us dinner.”

Yoshi glared at Josh to confirm if he, in fact, just got a load of that.

"Let's break bread in the morning and talk about what our 'posse' can be called," Diotima said with big air quotes.

"Sounds good to me, bottom bunk by the way!" Yoshi called to the group, then directly at Josh.

Everyone said their goodnights. As Josh flicked off the lights and got into bed, he stared at the paneled squares for hours after his eyes adjusted. For about 30 minutes, the room glowed from the phones of his new companions going on and off inside. With no service, no working outlets to charge, there was little use. The only sound bathing the room was a faint acoustic guitar from Yoshi's phone below Josh.

I should have downloaded some music too. It's weird that he called dibs on the bottom bunk, though, right?

I wonder what Iris would think of this place. I don't think I can form an opinion of it yet until I understand it better. I hope this "Mr. Abraham Valentine" answers all my questions tomorrow.

Josh stared more. He stared at the darkness inside his eyelids. He stared into the future, and wondered what it had in store for him.

—

"Are you awake?" called a whisper from below. "Josh— was it?"

I guess we're both having trouble sleeping.

"Yeah, Josh," he whispered to the sky.

"What kind of music do you listen to?" Yoshi asked.

Josh furrowed his eyebrows, befuddled.

That's important right now?

Josh posted on the bars of his bunk and leaned over to look at him. His heavy braids draped first. Yoshi filled the awkward silence with a justification.

"I'm not going to lie to you, I judge everyone based on their music taste," Yoshi said breaking eye contact, choosing the blackness of the dark room. Still, not a creature was stirring. "I find out what kind of person you are by your favorite artists or albums. I asked the girls on the bus, but I never got to ask you."

Josh spoke after a beat of silence, "What did you learn?"

"It's hard to explain," Yoshi said as he rolled out the bunk, moving silently to the couch. "Tell me what you listen to, and we can see if I can figure you out."

Josh sat up. He instinctively reached for his phone before remembering there was no reason to.

Dumb phone, anyway.

"What if I listen to everything?" said Josh, silently leaping from the top bunk.

"Well, what are your favorites? Last one that made you cry, last one you would listen to before you die?" Yoshi continued.

Those are fascinating questions. It's funny he couldn't wait to ask them.

"I don't really have a favorite, I guess," Josh said as he leaned against the bunk beds. "I can't remember the last time I cried, actually."

Movement came from the opposite side of the room, and Diotima came around the divider. By the look of her hair, she had gotten more sleep than the gentlemen. By the sound of the voice, she was still wide awake.

"That's a shame," she said, plopping into a chair beside Josh.

"Did we wake you?" Yoshi asked. Diotima shook her head, prompting him to follow up: "What are you doing awake?"

"Same as you guys," she confidently answered.

Fair enough, Josh thought to himself.

"What do you mean?" Yoshi asked with a confused look. Josh shot a look directly to his right to see Diotima addressing Yoshi directly.

"Thinking," she said. "Like about how the shaman knew what Peyton was saying last night?"

You're right!

"Could he be clairvoyant?" Yoshi asked. "He looks like the kind of guy to have weird powers."

"Hey, watch it," Diotima replied playfully. "I think we were all brought here because we have weird powers."

Yoshi chuckled at first. He lay his head back on the chair, staring straight toward the ceiling. Diotima was sitting 90 degrees sideways in the only single-person chair in the room. She began to brush her hair as she broke the silence in the room.

"What's the special object you guys brought?" She said, still quiet enough not to wake Rosemary and Peyton.

Josh sat for Yoshi to speak first. "I brought a guitar pick; my dad gave it to me after his first stroke," he said without emotion. "First thing I thought of."

"I brought a petrified iris," Josh said. "My little sister's name is Iris, but my mom gave it to me before she was born. She told me to protect it and stuff."

And now I've left Iris... Who knows when I'll get to check in with her again?

"Damn," Yoshi said with sonder in his voice. "You have a sister?"

Is that weird? Josh thought as he nodded in affirmation.

"We were talking on the bus about how we are each the only child," Diotima clarified for Josh. "Seems like most of us have no family except for you."

"Just a sister." Josh's words hung in the air as someone began to turn in their bunk.

Diotima looked to Josh's eyes; maybe she was thinking of apologizing. Perhaps she was jealous or sympathetic, but the gloom in the room was too thick for any words to cut through it. A gentle voice called from the top bunk on the girls' side.

"Hey, roomies," Rosemary said as she sat up. "First day in hell, ey?"

"Girl, I've lived in Arizona my whole life!" Yoshi called back, bringing some light back into the dark room.

While Josh had the same experience, he would not have had the same response. He took Rosemary's question for what it was. Under the surface of his suspicious expectations, he waited for day one to come to an end before deciding if the sarcasm was appropriate.

Chapter 6: Good Mourning Sunshine

Two knocks landed on the door before it swung open. Abraham Valentine entered their room with a scan, and without permission.

"Rise and shine, cowboys," he said with a low volume and even lower energy. "Please wake the young lady still sleeping. After meeting with the shaman this morning, it's clear to me the dos and don'ts need to be the first priority today."

A pained rumble came from Josh's stomach, which he had to ignore. Diotima walked to the single bunk on which Peyton slept deeply. She caressed the arm of the sleeping beauty to wake her.

"Rosemary," she called over the sleeping lady.

"Right here," said the real Rosemary, descending from the bunk above Diotima's. "Also, you guys can call me Rose if you want."

"Sorry, Rose," Diotima said kindly. "You hear that, *Peyton*?"

That first, deep breath of someone just waking up from a slumber; Sometimes it is followed by a stretch, sometimes a groan. Peyton breathed deeply and gasped when she saw Diotima leaning over her.

"It's alright," said Diotima, lifting her empty hands. "Abraham is here to chat with us."

The girls silently acknowledged the awkwardness with phony smiles. Peyton was awake, but certainly not alert. There would be no rest for the weary.

Without another moment to waste, Valentine began. "I understand there was an incident last night. I have made a last-minute adjustment to your schedules, because I need to tell you about the relevant cognitohazards immediately."

"I am the only one who should ever discuss these subjects with you. If you repeat me, or hear another person do the same..." Valentine paused. The muscles in his jaw were visibly clenching over his snow-dusted beard. "There will be consequences to befall each of us."

The hunger that gnawed at Josh's stomach began to turn. It twisted into an uneasy feeling as he silently listened on.

"That's why it's called a cognitohazard. Cursed information that you are at risk for even knowing," he said. "There is a place separate from this one, like the ones we used to visit in our dreams. For simplicity, we call it the spirit world. It does not have the same laws you think this world does. Our earthly limitations mean nothing to them, limitations like locked doors or bullet holes in their chest." Valentine spat the last phrase into the room with subtle indignation that controlled, yet did not hide his displeasure with Peyton.

"Consider my analogy," Valentine postured his hands as his blank-slate-intonation returned. "I am the big, scary spider. This place is my web, my safety net. From here, we can prepare to trap and hunt certain prey. Following so far?"

Valentine continued speaking to the crew like a disappointed father. "This nest, this Bronze Pot, it's safer than your average building, but not perfectly. Our predators are unlike scorpions or birds, but flamethrowers. We can't lock doors against cognitohazards."

The gravity of Peyton's slip-up weighed heavily on every chest in the room. A cold sweat perspired down Josh's forehead as he saw his posse still as stones.

"Our predators don't just drift along the path. Speaking their names is inviting them into your home. Looking upon their face is inviting them into your soul. They think our fear is cute, they think our suffering is their entitlement," Valentine spoke to the posse with a faux-familiarity. He didn't try to brace anyone for the terrible truth he would be giving them.

"You may already be aware that some dark spirits manifest themselves for no reason other than to torment holy ground. You probably think the most tragic fate for a Christian is to

shepherd a bitter demon into their home. Some of these dark spirits do a lot more than flip crucifixes and decapitate idols. None of you are here to play ghost hunter patty cake.”

“I know better, because I’ve seen worse,” He declaimed. “If you call to any gods, you can’t do it here. You paint a target on your back by aligning with their most potent and righteous adversaries. There are no private phone lines in this Suguaro hell.”

The vein in his forehead faded along with the color of a seething vermilion. He was so serious, so grave, that it’s a wonder how high blood pressure hasn’t taken him from this hell to the next.

“I hope you have faith that the pot will keep you safe. I certainly feel safe here. But if the little spiders decide to play with fire, we will be remembered as the most faithful pile of ashes in the desert.”

Shame darkened the room. A familiar shiver crawled up Josh’s spine through the silence. *How many times have I encountered a spirit like that without knowing?*

“You can learn more specifics after you all get breakfast and uniforms,” Valentine said, turning to leave, but paused at the door. “Have you agreed on a designation?”

“Still workshopping,” Yoshi spoke up as everyone else shot quick glances at each other.

“Workshop it by lunch,” Valentine delivered. “Or I will start calling you ‘Los Arañitas.’ Please join me in the foyer once again in an hour or so.”

“Little spiders,” Diotima translated as Valentine finally left earshot behind the slow hissing door.

“Flamethrowers,” Rose repeated, deeply worried.

Slow and scared, the posse shuffled around to grab a change of clothes, make their way to the bathrooms, and collect their peace before rejoining Valentine. Rosemary and Peyton took to the buddy system rather fast, chatting casually while they got ready. It was bringing a pleasant and friendly energy to the room that everyone else needed. Diotima stayed silent. She chose to

get herself ready quickly, silently excusing herself to the foyer before anyone else. Yoshi went out to find a shower, and Josh stayed behind to write a short journal entry:

—

Day one

I expected my world to blow up. I would use the pieces to build a new understanding with all the bombshell education on ghosts and the afterlife I would get. So far, the ratio of things I have learned to the questions I have... It's fucked up. I haven't even eaten since yesterday afternoon.

Part of me thinks I made a mistake by leaving college. That's why I'm being punished. I still have to do group work, and I still have to live in a dorm with strangers. This "posse" might grow on me, though. By that, I mean the first impressions left room to grow. Everyone has that attitude, like they are the main character in their own movie. I can tell each of them is judging the others by every little action. I haven't been saying much to them, just trying to observe, I suppose.

The guy in charge, Abraham Valentine, I can't get a clear idea of him. He's grumpy, that's for sure. Next time I write, I hope to know his vibe better. Maybe I will communicate with the other side by the next time I write?

—

He was off to the restroom before meeting in the foyer. Josh brought a case of personal hygiene items to the bathroom sinks in the middle hallway when he saw Yoshi styling his wet hair in the mirror.

"Dude, I gotta tell you something," Yoshi said with a serious, quiet voice.

Josh furrowed an eyebrow and approached the sink next to him. He stared at Yoshi in the mirror. He looked back and forth from his hair to the bathroom entrance through the corner of his eye. Not once did he look at Josh, until the silence of the bathroom caused their ears to ring.

"What is it?" Josh asked while he started to floss his teeth.

"I was pretending to be lost while I was looking for the bathroom so I could poke around a bit," Yoshi rambled, continuously raking his fingers through his hair. "I just wanted to explore, and I heard something."

Josh continued to wire the floss between his teeth, but actively listened to Yoshi. All he could think was, "*what is he trusting me with?*"

"Downstairs is mostly other dorm rooms, and there was one room that said 'Tiger Crew' on it. It sounds like one of them just fucking *died*," Yoshi said, looking at Josh with a serious grimace.

Josh's eyes widened, his eyebrows saying '*seriously?*' back to Yoshi.

"Yeah, some guy named Wally in their posse. A girl was crying because she missed him. I think they were together, but she was trying to come up with a way to communicate with his spirit, but the other Tigers were talking her out of it."

Josh's hands fell slowly to his sides, he felt a sinking feeling that had become too common too fast at The Bronze Pot. "Whoa... did you hear how he died?"

Yoshi flicked his hands of water and began aggressively raking his hair in the same direction. "No, they seemed like they didn't want to address it directly," said a sympathetic Yoshi. "Could it have been a cognitohazard?" he said with a start.

"Wouldn't it be too dangerous to communicate with him if it were?" Josh thought out loud.

"It has to be dangerous. Juliet probably doesn't care about that," Yoshi joked. "Would you wait for me before you go upstairs?"

Josh nodded. His ever-present creep factor made the buddy system seem like the best choice.

"I thought we would just be hunting ghosts," Yoshi said through visible frustration with his hair. "I didn't know this would be a witchy warzone."

This guy definitely got less sleep than I did; he's confused, hungry, and paranoid. Even if he was having a good hair day, I can see why he would be upset right now. But what part about the "sword" and the "shield" in the letter made you think this would be easy?

"We just have to get an understanding of the danger," Josh said honestly. "We will be alright as long as we keep our guard up, I'm sure."

"Yeah, me too," Yoshi said. Finally giving up on his hair. The battle was lost, but he held himself triumphantly to Josh's surprise. "I wasn't scared, I just worry what happened to Wally, you know?"

"I hear you, pal," Josh said. "We are in deep dark right now."

Yoshi looked across the hallway as if it was a busy road before exiting.

"Livin' it up in the hotel *arizona!*" Yoshi, in a singsong voice to Josh's neutral expression. "You think the rest of the gang is in the foyer?"

"I'm betting," Josh replied. The two of them walked through the wide hallways up the stairs. Whether it was the subconscious memory of staying quiet in elementary school hallways, or the cautious traversal of their new environment, the gentlemen moved swiftly and silently until they arrived side by side in the foyer.

The ladies were indeed already there. Diotima, making her way from areas unexplored, while Peyton and Rose inspected wall postings.

"Hey," Rose chimed. "Have you guys given more thought to our team name?"

Rose's warmth was welcoming, and like a moth, Yoshi flocked to it.

"Actually, yes. Here me out, guys," he said to the perked ears of all. "What if we actually called ourselves the Arañitas?"

Everyone scanned each other, looking for the reactions in the room to dictate their own. Yoshi could hear no alternatives or arguments.

"Is that going to send a message?" Peyton asked, seeming opposed to the idea.

“What kind of message?” questioned Rose. “I don’t want us to offend anyone.”

“Valentine will give us the name anyway,” said Diotima, arms crossed. “I don’t know if he intended to offend us with that, but we could take it for ourselves.”

I suppose that’s true, but I would hate to cause friction when we can avoid it easily.

“That’s what I’m saying!” Yoshi called. “And it tells him that we aren’t afraid.”

“I kinda like it,” Rose agreed, and so did Peyton after inspiring rhetoric.

“Your thoughts?” Diotima’s voice rang out.

I don’t know Spanish, but I’m willing to trust—

“Earth to Josh? What are you thinking?” Diotima was speaking directly to Josh, and he hadn’t noticed. Or he had been too focused on his thoughts to notice her.

“Sorry,” said Josh. “I am thinking about how Valentine would react. I think he already is looking at us like petty, dumb teenagers... I do like the sound of it, though.”

“Well then, the joke is on him,” said a proud Diotima. “Because I’m 21, and definitely not dumb.” A smirk grew from the base of her commanding voice.

“What if we tell Valentine we couldn’t come up with anything, then we get the name we want, the pride that comes with it, and he gets whatever satisfaction his ego needs?” She suggested to the group.

Well-devised, but a lot of effort and dishonesty.

“I knew I was going to like you guys,” Yoshi said. “Are we in agreement, my fellow Arañitas?” he dropped to a low voice. The posse seemed content with the plan.

Josh grinned. He appreciated hearing everyone cast their voice on the matter. As much as he loathed group work, these “Arañitas” didn’t seem like any of them were ever a last pick for dodgeball or the debate team. Diotima had the intrinsic mistrust of the agency and its structure that garnered some kudos from Josh. Her interpersonal communication skills captured the respect of the others.

"Why do we like the idea of well-placed mischief so much?" Josh stirred.

Yoshi continued small-talking with Rose and Peyton, but small hints at larger mysteries were visible all over the small foyer. Outside the glass front doors, the day was breaking. Standing centered to the middle one, Josh noticed the sun rising above the cool horizon straight on from where he stood.

Facing directly East, not that it meant anything in the middle of nowhere.

There was nothing alive about this place. The lone pop of color in the off-white-nightmare was faded orange curtains. Draped down from the high ceilings, they covered the steel doors that hid the rest of the building. A glass case full of Native American artifacts and vintage radio equipment was the immediate conversation starter. When the conversation died out, they started to notice the painting above the stairwell leading to the lower level.

Was that there last night?

A figure standing on a dirt facing a mountain. The northern lights were the focal point of the painting. It was hard to tell anything about the person in the center, with a heavy cloth draped from round shoulders, supporting muscular, sleeveless arms.

The metal doors behind the curtains crashed open at the latch, and Valentine emerged. For the first time, Josh had gotten a full view of that hallway, the belly of this beastly building. Obscuring his vision was the shaman and three other uniform-wearing adults behind him.

Kettle, the shaman, was still wearing the grumpy, old wizard look he was introduced in. A much different energy was carried by the trio. Valentine took Josh's attention from the strangers as he greeted his team.

"Okay, kids, introductions, then breakfast," Valentine said, turning to his company. "These girls are S.C.A.B.B. Wranglers, basically they are animal control, and the gentleman is just a bull—think of bulls as agents. On the left with the big biceps is Missy Roberts. She is also our archivist, so you will be dealing with her frequently to check out learning materials for your assignments."

Aw man... Homework?

Despite the awkwardness of his comment about her arms, they were no exaggeration. She was ripped like an action figure, sporting a dark bob with bangs sweeping across her forehead that gave her the fight-ready look. Yet, when she spoke, it was light and soft with a smile brighter than the early desert sky.

“Yes, I am pretty much a librarian,” Missy said to the new crew. “Most of the books we’ve written ourselves, maybe some of you will be writing the next ones?”

“Yep,” barged Valentine. “Next is Jallen, the equipment master.”

Jallen gave a lukewarm smile to the group and a robotic wave of his hand.

“Actually, you can go back to just ‘Jordan’ now that the other one is gone,” Valentine added a quiet aside before redirecting to the group. “We used to have two Jordans– got confusing.”

Stillness carried a moment too long.

Another death?

“Finally, Piper Jackson, the desert coach,” Valentine continued. “She will be assisting you on how to camp safely and take care of yourselves on extended field trips.”

“Hello,” was all she said. There was little to read outside her shy exterior. It was perhaps more anxiety than shyness. All Josh could know for certain was that she had not taken a deep breath in far too long.

Chapter 7: Cognitohazards

They began a slow tour through the Bronze Pot. The main building layout was almost perfectly mirrored on the top and bottom levels. Two enormous letter 'H' shaped hallways connected each room. The pot was undoubtedly the remains of an elementary school, but shrouded in mysterious history.

Valentine explained that the pot is on reservation territory on a map, but the land was cursed and drove out all human inhabitants. They set the facility here to serve as a lighthouse in spiritually dangerous waters. A poor analogy for dry Arizona, but the picture was clear. Valentine spoke on Native legends, giving rich context to the land, some reminiscent of the works of internet horror. It was unclear whether he was overselling the danger, or underselling. Time would tell.

A few more Wranglers passed by during their tour. Josh could only tell due to the pockets all over their vests and pants. This was all on top of the obvious similarity that all of them looked like Olympians.

Missy was eager to give the crew a tour of the library. If her glasses didn't scream "I love books," her pride in book organization sure did.

"The books lining the walls are ones we have sourced from the real world," Missy spoke as their guide for this section of the tour.

The "real world," ... Funny.

Most of the outsourced books were on the geography and history of the Sonoran Desert. All of the books about "entities," as the bulls referred to them as were written by S.C.A.B.B., imprinted with a stamp of ink or wax to adorn it. Three lanes of bookshelves took up most of the interior space. Only in reading range of the first bookshelf, Josh noted sections indicating "Entities Spiritual" on the first shelf, "Entities Physical" on the second and third.

Spirits are different from entities, which are different from creatures?...

Information overload would consume Josh if he tried to digest the information at the same speed Missy was feeding it. The rest of the group was silent during the tour, occasionally gazing behind their shoulders or in the shadowed corners of the ceilings.

"I feel like I got stuck in the backrooms," Yoshi spoke quietly to his group. "The least they could do is put paintings back up on the walls."

He was right. Every eye in the room could see high above the shelves were spaces where posters of children's books ought to be. Instead, warm lighting flickered shadows of cobwebs and better times on the peeling paint. Even the outline of dust, where a frame once lay, held on to the memory of imagination and escape. This was not a library; Valentine was right not to denote it as such. This was a tomb, and a miracle;

How could a workspace like this not kill Missy's joy?

The team moved on to a room doubling as an auditorium and common area. The kitchen that was attached to the side had been repurposed into a dining bar, similar to a western saloon. Valentine guided them in, underneath the shoddy neon sign that read, "The Grog."

Breakfast from within was a slab of beef cooked medium rare, with eggs. It was nothing he could complain about while his cramping stomach finally settled. The hunger that was cultivating all night, and the questions he was afraid to ask, made it easy to chew through the awkward silence. Valentine and the S.C.A.B.B. team sat apart from the newbies. The food was nothing fantastical, but it held the room's silence for the entire breakfast.

The S.C.A.B.B. team left for a moment after breakfast, leaving Valentine to continue stewarding Josh and his team. The next destination on their tour demanded they backtrack outside the cafeteria to the end of the main hallway. There was a door Josh had not seen on his way up. It led to fresh air, outside, where the sun had become far more hostile as it rose further into the sky.

“We don’t have standard exercise equipment that you may be used to, but out here, you train with archery, we have ropes,” Valentine said as he signaled to a slab of concrete. “You can make do with body weights with that pile of heavy stuff, but we put an emphasis on body combat here. Follow me this way.”

Body combat? Let’s go!

Josh felt the first prod of enthusiasm in days. Even without a coach or sparring partners, getting to preserve his hobby of training martial arts was wonderful news. They entered an annex elevated a few feet off the ground. As they filed into the small doors one by one, Josh smelled a familiar and welcoming scent.

Josh filled his nose with the aroma while the others naturally cringed at it. Inside appeared to be another crew at S.C.A.B.B. working out with an officer guiding them in boxing drills. Sweat made the air heavy. The evidence of hard work was olfactory. No air conditioning meant these guys must be struggling through the workout. Cranky expressions were worn by all. They all looked strong in their thirties. Strikingly, they were exercising with vests on. Charms of different varieties jingled or slapped around through the workout.

I can’t wait to train with these guys. That dude looks about my size, too!

Something as simple as room for a hobby made this place tolerable. For Josh, at least, the feeling that something was watching him no longer pressed him throughout the tour. They left the makeshift MMA studio with few words from its occupants. The team’s penultimate destination was the shaman’s office, where he would finally return their special possessions.

“They are fixed in place for the time being,” the shaman said. “Put them on now.” He was holding out the desert tan vests to each of the crew, with one striking difference among them. A shadow of fear passed over Josh like a small cloud. He had forgotten about his petrified Iris until this point.

Josh offered his sentimental stone of resin to the shaman before entering the building, but superstition had just touched him. For that moment, Josh almost believed it was his sacrifice of the protective iris that opened the door to his unrestful feelings and uncanny observations in the morning.

There's mine, he thought as he grabbed the one on top. A black circular patch replaced the left side breast pocket. On top of the patch, his petrified iris was brandished in a clear casing, secured by small buckle straps.

He quickly slipped it on. The straps seamlessly secured around his shoulder and across his upper body. To Josh, it was comfortable, feeling how it was made for him. The iris emblazoned on his chest like a medal of honor made him stand taller in his shoes as he wore it. Whether it was feeling close to his sister, Iris, again, or the supposed enchantment the shaman performed on the stone, Josh felt a strong energy within himself as wrinkled hands passed each vest to its new owner, identified by their most important possessions.

Rose has jewelry, Yoshi's guitar pick...

The rest of the group began robing themselves in their new vestments. Diotima had her quill upright in the center instead of the left breast. Her vest had the same zipper, only the sealed and protected quill velcroed over her chest.

She looks like a superhero, Josh thought. He imagined the name of her alter ego, and her backstory tied to the feather. Rosemary had a ring, secured in place by braided thread, forming the shape of a star in the place where Josh had his petrified iris. The same place, too, over their hearts, Yoshi had a guitar pick. A vibrant orange pick, standing boldly against a circular black patch.

It made for quite the uniforms, Yoshi and Rose high-fived as they thought so too. Yoshi made the vest appear short due to his impressive height, but Josh would not be the one to tell him.

It was hard to notice what Peyton's amulet was at first. She held a golf ball-sized object chained to the zipper on her right side pocket. As she zipped it up and down, Josh could notice it was a pink object, like a charm within a resin ball.

"Now you look like a true posse," Valentine startled them from the hallway. "All you need is a name. What's it going to be?"

Let's see how this plays out.

The posse turned, only to stand still. Like a stand-off, they said nothing too. Valentine raised an eyebrow about to speak, but was too slow for her.

"We never took the chance to nail it down," Diotima shot in. "You can pick something for us."

Valentine's eyebrow stayed raised, and he looked blank. "Very well, step into my parlor," he said as he stepped past them. Into a smaller, more poorly lit room than the shaman's already abysmal office, Valentine began placing needles and thread on a large work table. He pointed his finger at a small filing system with letters, numbers and symbols.

"Take these letters, sew the word 'Arañita,' to the space left for names," Valentine said as he wrote it on a dirty whiteboard.

Josh looked to Diotima while Valentine was facing the board. She caught his eye and quickly bumped an eyebrow back at him. Even faster, she dropped the smirk hiding beneath her blank stare as Valentine finished writing and faced the group again.

"If you can't sew, I'll teach you the basics," Valentine declared.

He chose to offer help, and it saved him the headache later. Peyton and Diotima were the only ones who knew how to sew, so Rose, Josh, and Yoshi each had a hand to teach them.

Josh occupied his hands with sewing and his mind with observations. There was a darkroom for photography development connecting to the workroom that had a heavy metal deadbolt. Plagued by curiosity, he looked for a key until he finished sewing.

Connected to the shaman's office on the opposite side was Jallen and his equipment room.

This had become the only non-threatening location they had seen so far. Jallen admirably tried to make this room his own. He was "just a bull," like Valentine said, so he didn't have to deal with a lot of dangerous tasks, it seemed. His equipment rental blended into a geek dungeon in a way that was unbecoming of the grouchy exterior he presented at the beginning of the tour.

"Well, Jallen?," Valentine said as he handed the reins over.

"It's equipment rental," He stood from his swivel chair. "We write all this shit down... so you can't be coming and going as you please. Spirit boxes and other communicators need Mr. Valentine and my signed consent, but recording devices just write down the unit number, sign it, and don't break it."

He opened a shelf above his desk and pulled out five small cases. "These are your spok-specs," he said. Jallen cut himself off and looked at Valentine with a fearful look.

"We don't call them that, right Jordan?" Valentine said coldly, through closed teeth.

Hold on. What's that about?

"Forgive me," Jallen said, looking away. He passed the cases out to each Arañita. As he began explaining, they each peeked into the case to see the spy-tech safety glasses that the bus driver, Umar, had shown them before they got on the bus. The equipment master wiped his hand across his forehead, smearing the sweat across his vest.

"They are compact infrared and ultraviolet supervision glasses. I don't know where your education level is on this stuff yet, so here's the gist."

His voice cracked before he began again. "Entities spiritual exist in a different realm, but manifest in this one as apparitions, measured by electromagnetic radiative energy fields."

"Yeah, of course," Yoshi said, subtly sardonic.

"Those entities emit energy at certain frequencies, faster or slower than visible light, which obviously depends on the specific entity," Jordan said to the confused faces of the crew. It was clearly not obvious to the newest S.C.A.B.B. recruits.

"I can see you don't know all the science yet," Jordan continued unimpeded, to a patient audience.

"Basically, the glasses detect spirit energy and tune it to the specific required parameters to be compatible with a micro-CRT display." Jordan felt insulted that the new crew was unable to grasp the academic explanation, so he returned fire in his dumbed-down tone. "It translates non-visible energies into a low-definition display."

Valentine once again spoke over one of his subordinates with haste in his voice.

"Okay, thank you for that thorough explanation. Time to get back to the dormitory. Just keep the glasses with you for field trips."

Something to think about...

Now officially done with the tour, Valentine showed them the easiest route back to their dormitory from the shaman's interconnected offices on the left side of the upper floor. Upon their return, he stayed outside their door with them for a moment.

"Alright. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner schedules are in the folders on the desk in the corner, as well as some other postings you'll need," he said, clapping his hands together. "Do you have any questions you need answered at this time?"

"What's next?" Yoshi asked.

"You get to work," he declared with the most enthusiasm he could fake. "If the master office is locked, I'm not in there. Find the shaman if it's something serious."

Valentine walked off. He had a faster pace than usual, quickly fading out of the moment. *Get to work? Is that a joke?!* Josh thought.

“What the hell does that mean?” Yoshi said to the group. His hands were wide in bewilderment. “Did he even tell us what we do?”

The room was tense. They fiddled with their amulets and tried to find the most comfortable pockets for their hands to rest awkwardly.

“I think he’s been doing this too long,” Peyton said, with perplexity.

“I have just as many questions as I did yesterday,” Josh said to the group. “Are we supposed to create our own assignments?”

He didn’t know why he asked, knowing none of them could know either. Their silence was not indicative that they were searching for a solution, but rather stuck on other questions... or the unsettling tidbits from the tour.

“But where would we even start?” Rose demanded in frustration.

“He said we would need to read some learning materials before doing assignments,” Diotima recalled. “Even if we aren’t ready for that, the least we could be doing right now is reading up.”

With a full chest, Josh said, “Yeah, I agree. The archivist seems like she wants to support us, too.”

Support was what they craved, so the Arañitas finally rallied to attention. The vote of confidence from Josh’s infrequent voice carried not volume, but depth.

They had returned to the dorm for only moments. Eager and antsy, they left together on their first assignment. The little spiders were going to find their place in this strange, tangled web.

Chapter 8: And Something Blue

Day one, part 2

What is my life? After a long conversation with Missy in the library, I think I got an idea of what we're doing in this place day-to-day. S.C.A.B.B. is not as organized as it seems. We are going to be conducting our own investigations on supernatural (or is it paranormal?) events and locations. Mostly finding hotspots, or "portals," determining what kind of entities have been there, and cleansing them or marking them for "wrangler dispatch."

Missy heavily implied that they capture and kill anything that can't be banished from the physical realm. I can't believe these words are becoming so common to say. A lot of small questions came up today that I chose not to ask. The threat of danger seems more distant than I initially worried, though. I don't want to jinx it, but I'm optimistic. I might even have some potential sparring partners here.

The people here are extremes; either champions over their inner darkness or hopeless victims of it. I can't tell yet which category my team falls into; "The Arañitas," we're called. I think the name is kind of badass considering the context, but I don't think I've seen the real version of any of them yet.

We went on solo side-quests after we met with Missy. By the time Rose and Peyton made it back to the dorm, they had eaten lunch. I think I'll wait until dinner to eat. I want to see how the "gym" makes me feel. I'm thankful I still have a place I can go to clear my head.

Josh laid his pen on the desk. He sat in the corner desk of his new office, bedroom, shared space, and everything in between. Before putting up his journal, he inspected the contents of the dusty and dented steel desk. As promised, a food schedule and menu rotation were listed.

Everything was handwritten, including the calendar grid lines. Josh reminded himself that there was no internet here, so no printouts. He was proud that he hadn't thought about social media once since he got here. He was living in the real world, too distracted to care about a distant, digital one. The real world without grocery stores, where everything you eat is either killed or farmed by your coworkers.

"Secrecy Compliance Statement?" he read.

Josh found another sheet, addressing the occupants of this room. A terms and services section underneath the S.C.A.B.B. mission statement, but in fine print.

"S.C.A.B.B. agents in all positions are forbidden to discuss facility secrets or operations to all living and nonliving ears."

Josh felt his nervous system telling him he had found something he shouldn't have. He rocked back in his chair in disbelief. With nobody in the room but him, there was not a soul to tell. Josh grabbed a blue athletic shirt with long sleeves from his bag. It was always his "lucky rashguard" when he was competing in jiu-jitsu tournaments. On his way to the bathroom to change, he saw Umar roaming the halls. He was too far to speak to, but Josh would love to ask *him* some more questions, now that he has a few more to ask.

Umar was perhaps the only person he'd met in this place who didn't look small compared to the hallways. His wide, lumbering steps could land wherever he pleased. For him, he was enjoying a stroll, or stalling his attendance somewhere. Back on track, Josh walked into the bathroom.

He changed into his exercise clothes in the shower stalls, listening to the rhythmic echoed drips and pulsing buzz of light bulbs. The sound of a distant murmur barely hit Josh's ears.

"Or I'm imagining things..." he told himself as he froze to listen.

It was talking, no doubt about it. It was quiet and obscure enough for him to notice it came from a different room, just barely out of range to be understandable. The lights twitched for a moment, and Josh felt cold billow into the stall.

The air is freezing cold!

He didn't know much about ghost hunting yet, but he did know that a pocket of cold air was an indicator of *something*. As quickly as he arrived at the understanding, he was waving his hands through temperate air.

Josh's heart rate ran away from him for a moment. Disembodied voice, lights flicker, cold air. In that order. Josh sat on the thought before another barged into his brain and took the mic.

My amulet! Spok-Specs!

In a flash, Josh scrambled to put his vest back on over his rashguard. His heart beat had raced back, pounding on his chest to be let back inside. He held his right hand over the petrified iris and drew the glasses from the side pocket.

With a flick of the small switch on the bridge of the nose, the glasses activated. They hummed softly as he threw them to his face. He looked around, and around. He darted his head around like he was wearing a virtual reality headset for the first time.

He breathed a controlled breath as he saw nothing in his glasses. He held them an inch from his eyes as he thought it would reveal something. The lenses were white as snow when turned on, if not whiter. It was hard to look at, like a hostile illusion. He placed his index finger on the front, waiting for his finger to plunge through, into the white void through the lenses, but it did not.

"So weird..." He thought as he slid them back on. There was still nothing but blackness on the inside of the lenses. He held them tight to his face to reduce the light coming from the flickering bathroom.

With all his energy diverted to his focused eyes, he jerked hard when it was a sound that alarmed his senses. The same disembodied speech from moments ago. He held the glasses tight to his face once more.

What is that?!

In the sea of black, a current of blue mist slowly floated from left to right. He moved in place within the stall to get a three-dimensional understanding of the strange anomaly. His heart thrashed as he grasped the short distance. Goosebumps rose on his arms. Whether it was a reaction to the excitement or a reaction to a spiritual encounter, Josh wasn't worried about it now. A more concentrated flow of blue particles took shape.

He took the glasses down as he escaped the confinement of the stall. In more open space, he raised his glasses again. He calmed his nerves with deep breaths while holding the glasses to his face with both hands. As he steadied the heartbeat drumming in his ear, he heard the voice again. Instinctively, his gaze followed the noise. The mist had the same idea, it traveled through where the side wall of the bathroom would be. He followed the anomaly out of the bathroom into the hallway and located the faint blue mist once again.

It was dizzying navigating with the glasses on. It was like trying to see in pitch black, not even able to follow the point of one's own finger. Josh stared into the pitch black void; it was deep enough for anyone to be scared. He was nauseated without being able to see where he placed his own feet, but couldn't peel his eyes from the alluring mist. As he followed, dozens of possibilities flashed into his head with each blind step.

"What's at the end of the trail?" Repeated in his thoughts over and over. *Why is this happening inside the building?"*

He held a single hand in front of him, unsure where he was in real space, careful not to collide with another wall. The mist had curved left, and so too did Josh. The mumbling was clear;

the disembodied voice belonged to a woman. The goosebumps rising to his neck could mean only one thing: He's just met a ghost.

"Push. Step. Push. Step." He repeated to himself, now. He forced himself into a rhythm of forward momentum, facing his fear as any boxer would.

He made one final curve in the trail of the cold blue to see the cloud condensing upon a single mass. His breath grew short like an anxious dog.

The mass had the shape no biological creature could have. Despite this, he knew the cloud before him was alive. In a matter of moments, Josh saw an uncanny face staring back at him in the cloud. The picture was blue, in infinite blackness. He could the dark pupils were too big, and the face on the whole was asymmetrical and bizarre. It had no fixed shape; every time he thought he understood a detail of the face, it was in a new location.

Josh swallowed with a dry mouth...

"Hello?" he called.

So much happened at once. A horrible scream pierced his ears as he tore the glasses from his face. Blood on the tile flooring caught his eye first. It stood out against the pale uniform colors inside the women's restroom. The scream had finished. It hadn't been the ghost either, but a girl seated in the center with candles populating the room.

"What's happening!?" Josh's panic slipping out. He noticed symbols drawn onto the walls in white marker as the girl screamed at him, blood dripping from her wrists.

"GET OUT, GET OUT, GET OUT," She wailed, as Josh had just noticed the same pair of glasses in her hand, with earbuds in her ears.

He stayed. He stood at a 45-degree angle to her and scanned the bathroom as fast as he could.

Why the blood? Where's the knife?

The blood on the floor was all around the center drain; it formed a circle, with carefully mirrored shapes on either side. Knife defense drills sprayed the inside of his brain like sparks. He knew they were not safe until he had his eyes on whatever she used to cut herself.

She's lost too much!

Josh quickly snapped a quick look behind him and confirmed that there was nobody else. He locked eyes back to the scared young woman in the bathroom. Her eyes began to swell with a reddish hue against her pale, sickly skin.

The sobbing was loud; she may have screamed out of panic initially, but there was no denying she had given up being quiet. She held her left hand to her chest, as her other hand threw her own pair of S.C.A.B.B. glasses aside.

What is the right move? Josh couldn't tell at this moment. His face puckered out of panic and confusion as he watched her tip a gallon of water onto the floor. Gushing out came lugs of water that washed away the symbols and markings of blood formed upon the floor.

"You're losing too much blood," said Josh out loud as he focused. "I gotta– I have to help you out of here!"

He said it before realising what that would take. He shook his head at himself with wide eyes as he placed his glasses into their pocket. Fight or flight.

"Push, step," he whispered. The wobbly girl barely acknowledged him as she scrubbed the floor with her bare hand. A single of her earbuds fell into the pool of blood and water. Her earbuds and the device connected to them had been nabbed by Josh in a single swoop.

There was zero emergency response training under Josh's belt. He knew basic CPR required of high school athletes, but the instinct to look for a wound guided his hands. A bloody masterpiece took up the canvas of her left arm as he peeled it from her chest.

In the deep red incisions, read crude letters spelling, "W A L L A C E."

He wasn't prepared to wrap the wound or to try stopping the blood loss. He was only compelled to look upon it, and the cat thus gazed upon a familiar curiosity.

"Oh no," fell out of Josh's mouth as he read it. "Let's get out of here."

Under her knees, and behind her back, he reached to hoist her from the wet floor. He found a plastic razor and shook his sad head. Three steps he traveled with her before the light had been eclipsed by an enormous shadow.

The bear-shaped man, Umar, stood at the entrance of the room, but behind him, an even more monstrous hulk of a man stood.

"Good lord," Josh exclaimed under the strain of carrying a limp body.

The enormous man behind Umar spoke, and fangs the size of Josh's pinkies were sticking through his mouth.

"He can't help us right now," he groveled at Josh. "Grab her."

"What happened here, man?" Umar said as he frantically took the girl into his arms. The weeping angel was swept out of the bathroom before Josh could react to the question. Then he was left in the bloodied, flickering bathroom alone with the mysterious giant.

"What happened?" He said through his fangs. Unblinking eyes going both ways, Josh saw his fangs were implanted over his actual teeth, which weren't much prettier.

"I was uh..." Josh coughed and tried to remain present for the conversation his mouth just started. "I was in the men's room, and I heard talking coming from in here, so I walked in—" he said.

The beastly man had a burning confusion on his face that turned wrathful.

"No, no!" sputtered Josh. "I put on the glasses and followed the sound! I didn't know it was the women's room, but she saw me and screamed! She had already lost a lot of blood."

Valentine had walked in the door in a rush. Ordinarily, a familiar face in a situation like this is comfortable. Valentine, who Josh had placed around 6'4", stood at least a foot and a half

shorter than the giant standing before Josh. Everything was boiling into a sensation that made Josh fuse to the powerlessness inside himself.

“Sarg, I see you’ve met Mr. Little Tree,” Valentine quickly called up to the man.

Sarg turned to look at his boss slowly. He then unclenched his meaty fists and walked outside the bathroom, not a word more.

“He’s nicer than he looks—he just heard screaming and went into fight mode,” Valentine claimed.

They walked out of the bathroom together. A trail of small drops of blood led out the way Josh had come from. Outside of the bathroom, he met a distraught man in his 30s, waiting impatiently.

“Josh Little Tree?” the stranger asked Valentine. A moment of silence passed nonetheless as the four men stood in a circle. Umar returned to the scene of the crime around the corner at a trotting pace, as eager as any for answers.

“Josh, would you please tell us exactly what just happened?” Valentine spoke to Josh. He placed a hand on his shoulder, which made his voice seem gentler than it likely was. Like a bitter grandfather, the warmth in his voice only rose on rare occasions.

His panic had weakened enough for Josh to fully regain his strength in composure. Though still flustered, he recounted the specific details in the order they happened, starting with him testing his glasses.

“And it looked like a face was—” Josh told. A quick outburst from the distraught man cut him short.

“A face?” the distraught man said, breathing heavily. “While you had the spok-specs on?”

Valentine’s face twitched. Josh thought of it like it glitched, as it also seemed to have wiped the stranger’s face to a blank slate.

Josh began to derealize. Then he became hyper-aware of his surroundings, like he was never conscious before this weird, abrupt, unrecountable moment.

What is going on?

"You saw a face through the glasses?" the man said calmly.

"Yeah?" Josh said, confusedly. He thought of the amulet upon his chest. "Kind of uncanny valley face, but—"

"It was him," The man said. His bottom lip began to lose its stability as his eyes quickly glossed.

"Charlie," Valentine said. "Have your crew meet me in your dorm, let's talk together shortly."

Josh held sharp eyes on Valentine, even as Charlie stepped away.

A few pieces began to click into place for Josh. He waited.

"That was Charles Sutherland of the Tiger Crew," Valentine said to Josh. "A bunch of weak links."

"Will that girl be okay?" Josh asked.

"Tori Newman," Valentine corrected. "She'll live if that's what you mean. Just like the rest of us!" He called to himself. The ogre-sized man he referred to as Sarg chuffed his underbitten lip in amusement.

Valentine patted Josh on the back. "It was good of you to try to help," he said. "Let's get you to your dorm for now. That's too much action for your first week."

Josh was being spun and steered by Valentine as he took him by the shoulders.

"Sarg, wait for Bear to get back, and then you can rock-paper-scissors for guard duty and cleanup duty," Valentine called out behind him.

Josh was shocked. "You call him Bear?"

"Umar? Yeah, look at him," Valentine smirked at the question. "The son of a bitch is just a big teddy bear."

"No, I see it," Josh said. He had hoped his tone did not appear to Valentine as offended. As he took his hands off Josh's shoulders, they neared the dormitory door.

"You can tell your posse about this," he said. "Tell them what happens when someone tries to contact the dead around here."

"Do you think she actually reached him?" Josh turned to ask. "Her boyfriend?" A blank expression inhabited Valentine's face. Devoid of care for the question. He said, "No, probably not."

They stood at the door. They both expected the other to say parting words, but none came. Josh nodded to him as the door began to hiss closed between. Valentine returned a nod, the silent acknowledgement.

He spun around and exhaled deeply. He noticed Diotima poring over a book while he entered and slunk to the back of the room.

"Dude, are you bleeding!?" She jumped quickly and approached him. Josh put his hands up so she knew he was innocent. "It's not mine, and I didn't hurt anybody," he said, and spun to wash his hands in the sink on the counter.

"Tell me what happened?" Diotima said. Her voice quickly closed the distance on Josh. He began the story while scrubbing all the blood away at the back sink. Only this time, he could tell it all the way through, until the moment he arrived at the door.

"That's everything?" She said. They were sitting directly across from each other in a circle of chairs in the room. She had an expression that Josh thought must be excitement, but he was mistaken.

"Yeah, then I sighed, and you saw me," he finished.

"This is huge," Diotima said as she stood up and began pacing.

"Huge?" What is her huge takeaway?

"Show me what she was listening to," she said as she turned to face Josh again. "If it's what I think it is..."

Holy shit! I forgot!

Josh snapped up from his seat and pulled from his vest pockets the earbuds and connected device.

"P-SB11," Diotima slowly read upside down. "Holy shit!" She curled her fingers and mimicked a muted roar out of awesome excitement. She glanced quickly at the door before taking it from Josh's hands.

"Do you know what this means?" Diotima whispered, still burning with joy. "She was the one who checked it out. They don't know we have this."

Josh whispered too: "Don't they have more of those in the equipment rental?"

"Josh, come on!" she boomed in her quiet voice. "You've had the shifty eyes all day! I know you know this place is hiding secrets. Why else would they lock up all the *communicators*? This is how we get answers!"

How WE get answers? I was going to try by asking people questions first.

"Well, you have to be better at hiding that thing than Tori," Josh said. "Maybe they aren't telling us everything because we haven't asked yet?"

"I was lurking around before the tour this morning," she admitted. "Trust me, you have been suspicious for a good reason." She still had a bit of a twinkle in her eye. Josh's concerned gaze could not do a thing against her wisecracker smile.

How can I trust you? Someone could have died, and this is what you're thinking about?

"Why are you here?" Diotima asked sharply, still standing at arm's length. "What motivated you to come?"

Josh was puzzled by the question. But he had nowhere else to be. "Same as all of us, I bet," he said. "I want to honor those who have passed on, and help those still here."

"Aw, a little hero," Diotima said.

I'm not little, everyone here is just—

"Josh, none of our letters said the same thing; they all pandered to what we wanted to hear," she said. "They told me I would push the epistemological understanding of life and death. I was brought here under the impression I would answer the questions that generations of philosophers before me have thought unknowable."

Josh stared at her with awe, concealed under his expression. She stared back louder.

"So what are we really doing here?" Josh asked Diotima. He asked her like she knew the answer, exactly as she steered him. Before she could finish a word, vague chatter could be heard outside.

"We can't tell the others about this part," She said as she stuffed the P-SB11 spirit box back into his vest pockets. "I don't know if we can trust them yet."

But we can trust each other?

There was no time for Josh to carefully evaluate. Diotima made the choice for him. For the time being, his first instinct was to trust and obey. They stood less than a foot apart as the room's population was about to double.

"*What am I going to do?*" he wondered as the voices met the door handle.

Chapter 9: Investigation #1

Yoshi opened the door wide-smiled with Rose following behind jovially.

"What are you two doing?" Yoshi said sarcastically, sly-eyeing the two of them. Diotima came to a realization at the same time as Josh and took a step back from him.

Uh oh, we were just standing so close—bad look.

Rather than attempt to say "It's not what it looks like," and get laughed at, Josh stepped back silently, too.

Diotima encouraged Josh to share the story of what he had seen in the bathrooms. Recalling the same story three times, nearly back to back to back, completely drained him of the anxiety that had originally taken so much out of him.

Maybe the anxiety faded because last time, he got to *finish* telling the story. As he spoke about watching the deformed face in the mist, his audience was focusing so hard that it was visible on their own faces. The perplexed look on Yoshi and Rose was enough for him to pause the story.

"Did the ghost look like that to you guys?" Yoshi took the chance to speak.

That's right! The bus driver already showed them how to use the glasses!

"It was clearly a person to me," Rose said with a concerned eyebrow. "She had a body. It was so clear."

"Josh," Diotima said. "When Umar picked each of us up, and told us what the glasses could do... He proved it. He told us his grandmother was with him all the time."

I should have let him tell me that.

"It didn't look like what you were describing," she continued. "We could see a ghost with its hand on his shoulder."

Turning his head to face Diotima directly, Josh asked, "Why didn't you tell me that?" emphasizing its importance.

What was that thing in the bathroom?

She flattened her lips and dipped her head to one side as she scowled back at him.

"That wasn't the most important revelation," Diotima answered.

Josh withdrew. They likely would have gotten to that point if they had continued their dialogue. Now he felt some regret in questioning her. She looked at him like it was a miracle he didn't blow the "secret" of the spirit box to the others, but they seemed none the wiser.

"They call him Bear, by the way," Josh annotated. "I'm serious."

Rose laughed at it, giving permission for Yoshi to follow. For a man not trying to be funny, he seemed to be hitting the right beats for his posse. Diotima smirked at his note, but her gaze stayed sharp.

"It wasn't blue either," she said. "She was—like white? It looked like how an 8-year-old would draw a ghost."

The verbal illustration kicked in. Phrased like that, he could easily see the picture in his mind. Yoshi and Rose seemed to agree. If the image was poor, that is one issue. But Josh remembered the clarity in the mist he saw. It was such a peaceful flow of fine particles that it was filed into his memory between sunsets and starry nights.

But there was something wrong; it was blue. This specter wielded horror for a face, and no body. A shimmer flew down Josh's spine.

Could that have been a bad spirit?

"I should talk to Valentine about what I saw, right?" Josh said to the group. "That was either a normal supernatural event, or something bad..."

Nobody was laughing now.

"Yeah, dude, you probably should," Yoshi claimed.

"Yeah, it probably is bad, blood definitely means bad," Rose chimed.

They all then looked to Diotima, who was clearly going to say something contrarian.

"First of all, you basically just said it was 'normal paranormal or abnormal paranormal,'" Diotima said with a light heart. "But guys, I think this is the exact kind of thing we are supposed to be investigating? Take a look at this."

Diotima led the group to the book she had been working on before a bloody Josh entered the room. It was a book bound in plain leather, with words handwritten.

"I asked Missy for whatever their equivalent of S.C.A.B.B. 101 is. This was the second book she gave me. It was transcribed from the dude that founded this place, by a dude that basically worshipped him for him, so beware the credibility," Diotima said as she flashed the cover.

She is so distrustful, I hope she's wrong.

"Ghosts are consistently described in the same way we all saw them," Diotima said.

"Except you."

"So it wasn't a ghost?" Yoshi said, lightbulbing with eureka.

"What else could it be?" Rose asked the group. "I haven't heard of anything like that before, not even on TikTok."

"Were you on cryptid TikTok too?" Yoshi turned to her to ask.

"Yes! Totally!" Rose called to him. She had a beaming smile, and she rolled into a tangent with Yoshi. Meanwhile, Diotima and Josh shot the swiftest side-eyes to each other. Locking only for a moment, they both had both seen the cupid arrows in their backs.

"My whole feed is literally—" she tried to say.

"was," Diotima flatly.

Woof...

"Oh true," Rose said unscathed. "It was, I've been so occupied that I forgot we can't really use our phones. Mine was full of videos talking about different kinds of scary creatures from folklore and different types of spirits."

Social media feeds were the easy vote for the least important conversation topic at this time. But after being cut off once, Rose was still gleefully pedaling, and nobody spoke up this time.

"But as I was saying," she said. "I don't know what that could be. Normal people without— what are they called, Spok-specs? – They can try to detect spirits through other means, but I've never heard of them leaving a trail or being a wonky face in a cloud."

Very interesting... I'm still going to ask Valentine.

"Okay, are we about to assemble?" Yoshi called. "We are going to investigate this right? Go get some nightvision cameras and voice recorders from the tech nerd?"

"Wait, Josh, it wasn't that long ago?" Rose said. She began slipping her S.C.A.B.B. glasses out of their pocket.

"Oh shit, let's go now!" Yoshi said, sliding his glasses on and breaking for the door. Immediately, he took them off, knowing he wouldn't even see the door if he kept them on.

"Couldn't hurt," Josh thought.

Josh followed Yoshi and rose to the door, but fell behind as his personal space was breached. Diotima lunged forward and swiped the spirit box from Josh's pocket with the form of a fencer. He instantly reacted and turned to face her. It was unclear to him whether she had tried to do it without his notice.

She flicked a silent finger to her lips as she silently lay it beside Josh's own duffel bag, and kicked it to conceal the device and earbuds.

Sheisty weirdo...

Diotima entered a light jog to catch up and not be last to the scene of the crime. Josh maintained his cool walk at the end and watched everyone quickly pace towards the women's bathroom. He was not afraid of what he'd see; he'd seen it already. He wasn't afraid it would be gone, or on the loose somewhere. He wasn't stalling, just thinking as he walked.

Just before Yoshi rounded the corner to the hallway, he broke down to a halt. He peeked around the corner like a child spying on their parents in the kitchen. He held out his hand to stop, and the little spiders slowed to a crawling pace.

"Its Valentine and Bear," he said in a low whisper. An incredibly sharp and intense whisper followed it up, "HOLY SHIT THAT GUY IS HUGE."

"Forgot to mention—" Josh whispered now behind him against the wall. "That's Sarg."

Slowly, Yoshi started to peek his head again, but then spontaneously started walking down the hall. Hastily waving to follow, he then dropped the spy act.

Josh began to follow Yoshi, and he saw Valentine, Bear, and the enormous Sarg walking their way down the hall. It was uncommon to see multiple men of this size in the same room. It was enticing at a basketball game, but here, the same could not be said.

"Mr. Valentine, we wanted to inform you of observations we've made about this encounter," Yoshi said, sounding professional enough that Josh couldn't tell if it was meant to be funny.

"Just Valentine," he said. "Why don't I hear it from Fred and not Shaggy?" as he made eye contact with Josh.

Damn... and What?

"I wanted to tell you what I saw in there and hear your thoughts," Josh spoke up. Valentine jumped in.

"I thought that was all to the story?" he said as he craned his head in.

"I didn't take the chance to fully describe the spirit standing above Tori." Josh continued calmly, with a more courageous voice than he had when last telling the story. "It was blue, and its face was like a Picasso... As he got older..."

"Aw shit," Bear said behind Valentine. "You gotta get it, Sarg."

Bear is afraid of that thing?!

"Forget that, your the one who—" Sarg boomed.

"Nope! Gentlemen, this is nothing to panic over," Valentine spoke loudly to cut them short. "He said it had no body, right?" as he nodded to Josh.

"They had to learn eventually, we can kill many birds with this stone," Valentine talked like the Arañitas weren't there to hear. Which reminded Josh...

Where's Peyton? She should be with us right now!

"Bear, go run up to Jallen and get gloves, don't worry about burning sage right now," commanded Valentine. "Time to play with fire, little spiders." He shut his eyes hard for a moment. That made him seem guilty. A sigh of discomfort got through his broken nose, flaring his nostrils. Exhaustion.

—

"You really got my goat, Josh," he said, with his eyes looking more shallow than usual. "Blue through the glasses means only one thing... a *spok*. We know next to nothing about them, besides their wrath against us... You see, spoks destroy everything they can find connected to S.C.A.B.B.. They aren't intelligent entities, but they know how to tell us apart from your average Joe."

"These are called 'spok-specs,' aren't they? Why was that hush-hush?" Diotima, holding her glasses to Valentine.

"We don't need you knowing everything at once. Some information is dangerous 'member?" He said with drama in his voice. "They usually have arms and legs, but they haven't been seen inside the perimeter before today..."

"Why do they hate us?" Rose said.

"Us," huh?

"That's the real cognitohazard," he said, looking to his rear as Bear returned with equipment in hand.

"Bear, bring it out here so I can teach them how to do it," Valentine called to him, but focused his tone with the group. "Consider my example, a ghostly miner from the gold rush always haunts the same town: What does that tell us about entities spiritual?"

"Some ghosts can't move on?" Diotima asked.

"His soul is trapped?" Yoshi guessed.

"He didn't belong in Hell, but couldn't go up?" Rose even tried.

"Damn, the fuck?" Bear said, staring in shock at Rose's question. "Dark..."

"Actually, that's not a bad guess," Valentine added with a nod. "Okay, *Mr. Little Tree*, do you see it?"

Josh flipped a mental coin of his two theories, choosing the one easier to articulate.

"Time is strange to them," he postulated. He knew it was a vague categorization, but a simple place to start.

"Huh," Valentine said with a subtle intrigue. "Good intuition."

Bear walked out of the bathroom again, wearing a unique mechanical glove with a shiny copper band thick around his knuckles and wrist.

"The real world is made of time and space, right?" Valentine proposed. "Take out time, and put something else in. Entities spiritual all operate that way. Some of them were born in the past, like the gold rush..."

“And others?” All present Arañaitas asked at once.

“It dawns on me you can wrestle amongst yourselves where else,” He said, turning to Bear.

“Come closer, right here.”

All the eyes of the little spiders darted frantically around, searching.

Bear still held up his hand within the glove and walked narrow steps for the first time. He approached slowly, with enough time for Josh to see where this was going.

“Why is this a cognitohazard?” Diotima asked, while introducing an anxious side of herself?

He watched Yoshi slowly raise and activate his spok-specs just before the others followed.

He exclaimed in terror. He startled the Rose and Diotima who were both just about to achieve visual at the same time. Josh threw his on and activated them to see the source of their fear.

If they had headphones too, they would have heard the spok screaming. Its “face” was mostly mouth now, crying out in pain. There were short limbs, or tentacles flaring out from the center mass, which had a stronger, more solid form to it by now.

The Arañitas were lifting and lowering their glasses, too wildly afraid to continue a prolonged look. Josh felt a terror so deep, it curdled the blood of his forebears. The blue monster shook and vibrated frantically while Bear’s buzzing hand held it high in the real world.

The air filled with the Arañitas’ labored panting. The wildfire they couldn’t peel their eyes from took their focus away from Valentine, who was suddenly brandishing a blade.

“What-What is that?” Rose said through her shallow breaths. “What are you going to do?”

“Stop bumping your *fucking* gums, and maybe I’ll tell you!” Valentine barked.

Whoa! The hell was that for?

The room was still electric in fear, but hearing Valentine roaring at Rose was just as combusive as seeing seeing the spok. He revealed how afraid he was, the way he pretended it was anger.

“Don’t speak to her like that!” Diotima yelled in the gaping hallway. Her eyes were wide in disbelief and disdain.

Valentine turned slowly, wielding the machete-like weapon. He glared at Diotima as his thumb flipped a button on the weapon’s handle. In his grip, the blade glowed faintly iridescent, and he raised it to Sarg without looking at him.

Diotima did not back down, and in fact doubled down. “Just because you are scared doesn’t mean—”

“IT DOES MEAN!” Valentine busted. “This is a bad situation, and I need to express to you how—”

In came Diotima with equal volume and resolve. “No!” she adjudicated. “You never talk to someone like that!”

Valentine appeared to stop himself from saying whatever what was about to fly out of his old mouth. Josh had certainly just lost some respect for him. Diotima had encouraged him, though; she clearly got scared but went into a different kind of defense mode. Josh had admired her for speaking up, and felt like it was something he should have done too.

“Just let me finish *teaching* you guys something,” Valentine said as he raised the blade to Sarg. “Entities spiritual can be born in the future, as we’ve established.”

Its true? Don't gloss over that!

Sarg tapped his fingers upon the blade, and spun it in his hand like a butcher with his best knife. Valentine and Sarg both had hatred in their eyes as they nodded to each other—a silent agreement to seal their foul intentions.

"Spoks are different, because they got it figured out, they come back to us *on purpose*," he rallied. "They are bent on destruction."

The crew frantically looked at each other, at Valentine, and the huge wranglers, all in a desperate attempt to telepathically transmit a question.

WHY?

"So this is what we have to do," Valentine declared firmly.

Sarg plunged the blade forth, in the direction of Bear, just below where he was holding his hands up. Each of the crew, feeling a wave of sickness, drew their spok-specs once again.

The spok floated, terrified in the darkness as seen through their glasses. A gash burns wide and deep within its center mass. Most appalling was the screaming mouth, and how it had turned into war-torn eyes staring down at its wound. It was unmistakable; it was afraid to die.

Blue energy sprayed out of the wound like a firework trail, then it was gone. The image was pure black again. Could the former spok be experiencing a pure black void now, too? What does it mean for a spirit to die? Where does it go? What Valentine had just done was kneading the little spiders' brains like dough. The implications of his actions weighed heavily, so too did concerns of his ruthlessness.

"We believe they are demonic, following the will of their master, who has not risen to power," Valentine continued relentlessly. "A legend that hasn't been told yet. We are swinging blind against a force that can usurp souls from either side of the grave."

"Further information is limited to officers, and you kids haven't even been here a week," Valentine said. Not even Diotima would break the silence. "You guys have seen too much too soon. Go on to your dormitory and relax or something. I'll spend the day with you all after lunch tomorrow."

His nice guy act was a much harder sell now that he had exposed himself in cold light. Nonetheless, the crew was happy they'd get to work with him tomorrow so they could have

guidance and direction. Ideally, he answers a lot more questions, but if the pattern goes unchanging, the anxiety of a cognitohazard will kill them before anything else.

The crew had developed their first habit, too. Inside their dorm, they stood in a circle letting their questions spill out like whiskey from a barrel.

"Thanks for sticking up for me, by the way," Rose said to Diotima. "I hate when adults raise their voice." she looked at her shoes, and back at Diotima.

She took her in for a hug. "Oh Rosemary," she said. She didn't have the tone in her voice that she did with any of them before. She was not fencing anymore; she was nurturing. "The last thing this world should do is let angry old guys *keep* yelling."

"The physical world? Did you mean it like that?" Josh nodded to her in solidarity.

"Yeah..." Yoshi said. "I should have spoken up too. I didn't think it was right the way he—" He struggled with the word, Josh struggled with the concept, and everyone let the silence hold.

"I feel like I just witnessed a murder," Yoshi confessed to the group as he nervously slicked his hair with his fingers.

Peyton walked in the door. She finally showed up with a single book from archives and broke her stride as she entered.

"Woah, did I miss something?" she said, a pale concern on her face.

Diotima snorted while stifling her amusement which got a big laugh out of Yoshi.

"Actually, yes, this is insane," he said. Yoshi failed to notice, but he had just made Peyton jealous. The microexpressions on her face flared up while she held the book tight to her chest. The fact that there had been laughter, adventure, and fear with everyone else, her gave her a natural reason to feel like she was tangled in a web completely on her own.

As Yoshi regaled the story, with his incomplete pieces of Josh's perspective, he filled Peyton in on what she had missed, the crucial parts at least. Dropping the pep in his step every

beat closer to the end of his song, he told the events to Peyton in vibrant detail. The picture of the wild spok he painted made it seem more real to Josh, as it was being confirmed aloud.

It didn't seem like a big monster when I saw it.

Peyton had adjusted well to the breaking news. A strong energy had suddenly called her back to the dormitory from the library, she said. Once again, the questions revealed were more significant than the ones answered. Her acceptance of the local truth that she could sense something happening downstairs brought calm to her. "Knowing" she was right, Josh found it odd, if not something of a cope.

Deliberations had ceased. Peyton's book was actually a catalog of hotspots within a few miles of the Bronze Pot. After the day's events, nobody had the energy to pitch plans. The morning would offer plenty of time to make the outline of a plan, one that included a conversation with Valentine about spoks. Tonight was not the night for it, Josh thought.

He dismissed himself in a quiet moment. Further down their hallway, and up the stairs, he ascended to the ground floor. Making his way to the gym, he ran through his conversations with Valentine. Everything he said flagged Josh as peculiar; everything sounded like double-speak. Truths hidden behind a smoke screen may not be lies, but it remains dishonest. Josh wants to trust S.C.A.B.B.; his life may be in their hands, after all.

He thought about it a lot. Eventually, he made it into the ratty fitness studio. Many of his frustrations took the shape of a few knuckles, imprinted onto the side of a heavy leather bag. Many of his anxieties shed off his skin in beads of sweat. Finally, his peace came to him.

And after drilling enough to tire his body and overwhelm his anxiety, he readied himself to sleep. On this night, no dreams. A few waking moments spliced his slumber; the face of the spok, of Tori Newman. He thought of what Diotima would plan with his spirit box, and he thought of Sara.

He imagined the sarcastic comments and observations she would be making about his crew. For some time, he had forgotten what she had done to him. How she turned into nothing just before he entered this place, he remembered. She ghosted him. It brought a feeling of shame to his belly as he turned in his top bunk.

On this night, like many others, it was thoughts that haunted him before his rest. The ghosts of his past were the only ones with dominion over him. No monsters, no spirits, no enemies.

He did whatever he could, but failed to see a single dream that night. No subliminal messages or unconscious ideas. There would be no comforts or horrors accompanying him to a new birdsong.

Chapter 10: Smelling the Flowers

Day 4

Where do I begin? Peyton has been upset. At first, I thought it was just her personality, then I thought it was this crazy situation we're in. I don't think she likes us. I washed my hair today, it was very overdue. For the first time since she learned how, Iris wasn't there to braid my hair afterwards. I thought about tying it up in a bun because it didn't feel right. I was getting worked up during breakfast.

I asked Peyton if she would braid my hair, and she accepted. It was an impulse decision, honestly, but there were two motivations. I felt the need to braid my hair so I wouldn't feel like I was abandoning Iris. It's weird, but I can't seem to separate them. It's been hard to remember that she is the reason I came here. I don't feel like I'm doing any good here. The second motivation was so I could have a normal time to ask how she was without prying or implying she's not processing well. She didn't say much, but I think we are cool with each other after that?

Valentine is not a man I would call a 'good' one. He goes through the motions of everything, and it's cold. He definitely has been doing this too long; he talks like the things he says don't shatter my brain every time. He is also dodgy when we ask about spoks and the folklore. I am calling it 'folklore,' I don't care. It's fascinating to me that the people haven't lived yet; thus, the stories told about them haven't compounded into myth. Its function is the same as folklore; the fact that ghosts are the key to learning information from the future is so provoking. What could the scientists of the world do with that knowledge? The implications make me shudder. I know we will learn more after we become officers, but I can't help but feel like I'm being lied to so far; maybe that's Diotima's voice in my head talking.

We don't use normal calendars here, so I have to remember: On the next new moon, there is a competition day. Imanuel Dixon is the bull who also does the combat instructing. Missy told me he holds a boxing competition, and I would really enjoy participating.

Now it's off to lunch, and if any of the Anañitas are in there, I think I'll sit with them.

Josh slapped the book closed. He felt fresh. Not because of his clean and recently braided hair, but it was the journaling. It was the kind of daily chore that would get out of control if Josh didn't regularly maintain it. He jumped up in his chair, put his journal into the desk drawer, and strode towards the door. His mornings have become routine already. No birdsong, but Josh was still rising early for the worm. After another mindless slab of protein for breakfast, he used the crude "equipment" for some exercise. It was just heavy stuff after all, but it did the trick. A shower, then work starting when the sun is at the top of the sky.

He trotted up the staircase down the hall from his dorm. As he rounded the corner after the top step, he was halted by a shout.

"Josh!" Diotima said in a rush. She advanced on pace towards him. "Come with me." In her hand was a wooden case, clasped shut, rattling as she walked.

Despite on clear trajectory to the Grog, he turned the direction she was heading. "What's in the box?" He asked with a suspicious nod.

"A plan," she replied with a smirk, lifting the mystery object. "No, it's just chess."

She rattled the case in her hand before she continued her stride. They exited a door just left of the large multi-purpose space— the only way to the Grog. Diotima always seemed on the move, and Josh always thought it was sneaky. He felt the urge to look down the hallway whence she came, half suspecting to see Bear or Valentine chasing behind. He could only see blazing daylight. Deep down the long, shallow hallway, and through the triplet of glass doors, Josh saw mirages shimmering along desert sand.

The burning sun was soon radiating on his skin as Diotima led him outside. There were a few benches and open spaces before the livestock pens began.

"I do want to *make* a plan, though," She said.

"Chess helps you think?" Josh asked her, squinting through the blaze.

"Not exactly," She said as she opened the chessboard, taking a seat.

"Well, I'm not a champion or anything," Josh admitted, helping separate the pieces.

"Oh, good," She said, spinning the board to take the white pieces. "Because I love winning."

Josh continued setting up pieces, abraded by Diotima's high-energy personality.

"Dude, I'm kidding. You are allowed to smile, you know," Diotima said with some whimsy.

He now struggled with his choice of conspiring to hide a spirit box with her; her antics were perpendicular to Josh's order. On one hand, he is glad to have more one-on-one planning with her. On the other hand, he would not want to be playing chess with her otherwise.

"I know this place is a nightmare, but if you keep taking things so deadly seriously, you might die too," Diotima said earnestly to him.

"I just need to understand this place a little better before I can get out of fight-or-flight," Josh replied truthfully.

"Well, don't forget to smell the flowers," She said as she played a standard opening move.

Certainly no champion as he professed, but he recognizes Diotima knows a thing or two herself. Her smile had faded as her volume dropped a notch.

"You're right," Josh agreed, wanting to move on. "So, a plan, do you have a new opinion on the hotspot we picked yesterday?"

"No, it's perfect," she said, indicating for him to play. "I think we should go soon, like next week."

Josh moved his piece to mirror her play, but slower. He was shocked by her suggestion, but didn't show it. "What makes you say that?" was his most neutral-toned way to express the

obvious concern; They haven't even camped in a safe zone yet, let alone acquired the knowledge to spend a few days near a ghost sighting.

"We can only sneak so many secrets at this level; we need to complete an assignment to learn more," she said, moving her next piece, still looking at Josh. "All we need to do is identify and cleanse, and I already have a lead."

"Well, it's also a five-day trip, and we've only been learning from Piper and Jallen for four days. You think we're up to it?" Josh asked her. He looked her in the eyes, hoping she understood his use of the word 'think' meant he assumed she thought it through. It appears she did, as she moved her next piece.

"Yeah, for sure," she said. "One person trying to do everything would make it happen, but everyone trying to do something would make it work."

Josh was surprised. His defenses were down as he was playing a game, so the words impacted him hard.

"Such is life, I guess," Josh said. "I'm with you, though," as he picked up a piece again, looking for a weakness in her previous move.

But why tell me this privately?

"No wait—" She snapped. "Checkmate."

What the— Fuck!

Checkmate indeed. Unbeknownst to Josh, he had been so focused on what Diotima was hiding, he forgot what he was supposed to be protecting.

"Oh my god, I didn't even think that was possible," he said to her.

"Well, number one: don't say that," she said. She looked back down at the board and began fixing up the pieces for another round. As she did it, Josh realized his next mistake. The one she just corrected.

“Oh, right... Not supposed to reference religious sentiment,” Josh said. “That’s an easy rule to forget.”

Diotima slowly cracked a smile, but subtly shook it off like she was choosing not to speak. Josh considered she was trying not to be smug about her swift victory, and he appreciated her sportsmanship in slight shock. He followed her first move again, even though he misunderstood it.

“Number two: now that you remind me, we need to talk about the cognitohazards if we rush into an investigation,” She said, starting a new round. “Not the little ghost hunting investigation at the hotspot, but underneath the S.C.A.B.B.,” she emphasized with wide eyes.

A feeling began to twirl in his stomach, in no relation to his lunch delay.

“You think trying to learn more about this place will be dangerous?” Josh asked in a low voice as he matched her move again, a little faster this time.

She made a big move.

“I don’t trust Valentine, and I don’t trust this place,” she said. “I trust you, because I can see you are questioning the same things I am.”

Josh went for a safe play.

“How do you mean?” he said.

She made another move, just as confidently as her previous, but she would take something this time.

“Your body language,” she said, pointing a hand at him, holding his recently deceased knight piece. “The way you self-soothe when we learn something with a dark truth behind it. And I thought it was good of you to try and help Tori when you found her in the bathroom the other day.”

He didn’t move for a moment, a short one. He didn’t want her to overanalyze his pause, too. She might be overstepping, but she’s right. He remembered all the times in the last four days

he caught himself with crossed arms. He would rub his knuckles behind his back like an angry bouncer when he was anxious.

He felt embarrassed but appreciative at the same time. There was an emotional impression left behind from his ghost encounter, but hearing a voice outside his own, recognize him for trying to be brave, made him reflect in that brief pause.

Maybe you aren't a complete ass. Game on.

Josh measured his next move carefully before he took it. "Which dark truth comes to mind?" he replied.

She was quick to continue the game.

"When we saw the spok and were first talking to Valentine about it, he said they aren't intelligent, but they know what belongs to S.C.A.B.B. and what doesn't," She continued. "What's the bull's name who teaches us about different spirits?"

"...Something Walsh," Josh interjected quietly.

"George Walsh!" she remembered. "Tell me how he defined intelligence to entities, physical and spiritual."

"It was the ability to communicate with a consistency of reason?" Josh paraphrased. He cautiously went on the attack. "Do you think he's wrong—or that he lied?"

Diotima attacked with no relent.

"Lies. From Abraham," she said. "Communication doesn't have to be words, but obviously spoks are consistent, and I am willing to bet the reasons are there, too. I am more likely to trust the time-travelling ghosts are the ones on the right side of whatever this is. What could they be fighting for? What do they have to gain?"

Josh couldn't tell how this round would end; many roads diverged in front of him. He chose a safe play.

"I can only guess what they are fighting for," He said. "But I'm pretty sure we know what they have to lose."

Diotima's face fell, and color drained a degree. "How can you kill a ghost?" she said in a defeated voice. She moved her next piece with a devastated look behind the emptiness.

"And why?" he asked. "We know they can build perimeters and cleanse areas."

"Check, by the way," Diotima said after she moved her queen across the board. "But you see? This is why I am trusting you, that's a good question."

It wasn't a cheap shot victory, but a mistake Josh should have caught. He already knew she was good, so there was a higher degree of enjoyment without the heat. A one-on-one will get someone fired up when they are experiencing a new competitor for the first time. He remembered the first time he sparred with his boxing coach, and how nervous he was. Every time after that, it was a little more familiar and a little more insightful.

"I know you know the difference between right and wrong," Diotima pleaded. "When undead ghosts are dying, it means this is more serious than life or death. If you can turn all the thinking you do into action, you really *can* be a hero."

Setting up a third round, Josh squinted at the table and contemplated her words. The familiar authority she spoke to him with, and the attention to his details, added up to a mental speed bump he needed to slow down for.

"See! You're doing it right now!" She pointed at his face with an amused look. "I told you I trust you, that means you just say whatever you're thinking, and I'll hear it!"

Damn! Can a guy at least have his thoughts to himself?

"Well, you know you are using the same hero's journey rhetoric S.C.A.B.B. used when they got me into this?" Josh interrogated. "I told you that, and now you are saying the same thing."

"Well? I mean it," she said with a calm attitude, lifting a single eyebrow at him as she spun the board around.

His turn to go first.

"I don't understand why you trust me and no one else?" Josh said, with a comfortable opening move.

"Hey, I'm working on it, Peyton's being a bitch though," said Diotima, as she moved a pawn.

"You shouldn't say that," Josh said politely, initiating a bold attack.

"What?" Diotima replied sarcastically. "It's true!"

"Even if it were, you don't need to make truth into a weapon like that, do you?" Josh said.

"*Such is life,*" Imitated Diotima, "Look around you, dude," as she played a predictable defense.

"Hey, I mean you could have said something nice and true," Josh said. "But, you said something mean and true."

"Ha HA!" Diotima shouted as she stood from the bench, turning a finger to his face. "You admit it's true!"

This is why I think before I speak...

"That's fucked up," Josh said, trying not to smile and focusing on the game.

"Yeah?" Diotima said, about to burst at the seams. She surfed her rook across the board, entrapping Josh's king. "Getting beaten by a girl three times in a row is fucked up!"

Josh shook his head at the humor. He closed his eyes and smiled, feeling a hot summer breeze cooling his sweating skin.

"No, it's not," Josh said as he stood up smugly. "I gotta eat before we get back to work though, do you want to join me so we can keep talking shop?"

"Depends," she remained seated, collecting the pieces. "Are you willing to back me up when I tell the team we should leave the perimeter soon?"

"I'm with it," Josh said, helping shag a few remaining chess pieces.

"I win!" she said happily. "And no, I got some stuff to do before the sun's peak too. Are we with George or the camping lady today?"

Josh thought.

"Combat training is two days in a row, so we go to Dixon again," he reminded her.

"Tomorrow is George."

"Ughh. It's so hot in there, and it smells like ass," she said as she snapped the wooden case closed, holding every black and white piece. "See you there, I guess," Diotima said as she charted off.

On Josh's walk back to the Grog for a quick meal, he thought of how strange an individual Diotima was, and how, despite being a few years older than he, there was a part of her that reminded him of Iris. What would she think of Josh's co-worker, he wondered.

As he ate his lunch, he thought of how this place would change him. Physically, it was clear. He was getting far more sun than usual here, enough for his skin to darken a shade in under a week of his initial arrival. His palette was starting to adjust to the diet. Vegetables like corn, squash, and peppers were the supplement or alternative to every slab of meat and eggs for meals, as a result of having to cultivate their own food at S.C.A.B.B.

How would Josh change on the inside? Would this place stretch, crunch, or break him into a new person? Or can Josh protect his values in order to *grow* in this place? These are the questions he asked himself, alone, in the Grog as he ate.

There was no television to occupy the silence. No radio, sports match, or friends to fill the void. Every meal for Josh was carrying out a sentence. He would do life, with his own thoughts. It could have been a death sentence for a philosopher. Habits of routine helped him turn this time into something valuable, instead.

Chapter 11: Forgetting the Flowers

After his meditation and meal, Josh reunited with the Arañitas in the makeshift combat zone behind the main building. Imanuel was working with the ladies on a very basic striking technique, while Josh had gotten permission to train Yoshi independently.

The day before, Josh had taught Yoshi basic boxing combinations while he wore mitts. Imanuel had done a rigorous warm-up with the whole team before taking the ladies through more drills.

"Do you want the black mouthguard or the red one?" Josh said to Yoshi.

"Mouthguard?" Yoshi said, lying on his back and catching his breath.

"You need to spar if you want to get better," Josh told him, holding two mouthguards sealed in packaging.

"No way, bro," Yoshi said, waving his hand at the options. "I'm not fighting you."

Josh grabbed his hand and started pulling him up to his feet.

"I'm not going to open fire on you, Yoshi," Josh said, "You are looking good, you just have to remember the footwork."

"Okay, okay," Yoshi agreed as he snagged the red mouthguard.

While the gentlemen were wrapping their hands before the spar, they watched the work the rest of their group was doing. Yoshi quipped at how they all looked pissed off, but Josh analyzed Imanuel's style. He was a very technical instructor and a southpaw. It has been rare for Josh in his boxing history to see a left-handed fighter, and he was teaching each of the other Arañitas in the same way.

"Wait, what are you two doing?" Imanuel shouted at Josh and Yoshi.

"I'm gonna...beat this dude azz!" Yoshi slurred through his mouthguard as he slapped his gloves together.

"We don't really do sparring outside competition," Imanuel called, looking perplexed.
Why would you not spar? Simulating a fight is how you test yourself...

"We aren't slugging, I'm just going to run him around and remind him to keep his hands up," Josh said, but before he could continue, Imanuel chirped with an idea.

"Actually, why don't you wait a second until I can supervise?" he said.

"That's not necessary," Josh said as kindly as he could.

This was Josh's wheelhouse, and if there was any place his confidence stood tall, it was inside a boxing ring. Imanuel, standing on lower ground, felt rejected by Josh. With a slight furrow in his eyebrow, he rolled his eyes before returning his attention to the ladies.

Josh bit on his mouthguard halfway in his mouth as he wrapped his hands. As he finished, and put on a beat-up pair of ocean blue boxing gloves, he watched Yoshi staring at Rosemary across the gym. He leaned against the heavy black rope of the elevated boxing ring, bumping his head as if there were a distant melody.

This dude is smitten.

"Yoshi, you with me?" Josh called, grabbing his mouthguard with an empty hand.

Quickly, he spun around. "Yeah, sorry," he slobbered through his mouthguard.

"Be mindful," Josh told him. "I would hate to see someone get hurt."

"Whoa, you said we weren't slugging?" Yoshi said, holding his black gloves defensively.

"I'm not talking about this," Josh told him, putting on his other glove. He nodded in the direction of Rose. "This place doesn't seem to nurture healthy relationships. You ready?"

Josh held his left hand forward, so the boxers could touch gloves before starting. Yoshi met his gloves, but not his eyes.

The two began squaring off in their stances, moving around in a circle together before throwing any strikes.

"You can tell me to stop singing, but you can't get the song out of my head," Yoshi said very seriously, throwing a wild haymaker.

Josh easily slipped under the wide strike and pivoted around him.

"I don't mean to tell you what to do," Josh said. He was beginning to throw soft, slow jabs whenever Yoshi dropped his guard below his face. "It's just risking a lot of pain."

Yoshi got out of his boxing stance. "Look what we're doing, bro, no pain no gain, right?" he said.

Josh dropped a level and threw a quick strike at Yoshi's midsection. He coughed and bent over, wind knocked right out of him.

"Stand up straight," Josh said as he held up Yoshi, returning to regular breathing. "Is that a distraction you can afford?"

Yoshi prepared a mean brawler stance, but with his feet side by side. Josh admired his spirit while recognizing his footwork would take more time to correct.

"I'm glad you care," Yoshi said, peeking over the gloves he held tightly to his face. "But I can sense things with her," he said, swinging wild again.

This time, Josh deflected the strike by swatting it, allowing him to barely slip it and poke him in the stomach again.

"Drop your elbows a bit to cover your body," Josh said, pointing at the spot he just tagged. "What do you mean, though? Sense?"

Yoshi stood normally again, but a foot further back this time, "I feel like we have something special."

That's the hormones talking.

Josh still stood with his left foot in front, elongated from his fighting stance, and lowered his guard. It was a silent move that he knew Yoshi would follow with a loud response.

"We were watching the stars last night, just talking about paranormal things we've seen," Yoshi said, lowering his hands. "I was telling her about a spirit that used to follow me when I was a kid... Bro, she said she could see it behind me, and started describing exactly what I knew he looked like."

Josh looked over at Rosemary, working combinations with Imanuel, happy as a clown despite the dastardly heat. He squinted his eyes and pondered the likelihood of it being true. He turned to Yoshi once more.

"She's like a melody, like a rhythm," Yoshi said. "I can sense her, and she can't dance without a partner."

"Can you explain it in plain terms?" Josh asked.

"That's it," he replied. "I've always known there was more to life than what we could see; Ghosts and secret governments. Now I've gotten proof of the soul, and a mate at the same time." *Yikes, Yoshitsune. Too early for that.*

Despite all his thoughts, Josh couldn't find anything to say. After four days, he felt like he was finally being introduced to the true Yoshi, and he wanted to get to know him better.

"You really think so?" Josh wondered innocently.

"This place has taught me that I can't know anything for certain," Yoshi said. "But all that I feel is real. So I'll go with what feels right."

"Huh," Josh said out loud. "That's a pretty good mindset, actually."

"It rhymes, so that means it's true," Yoshi said with a nonchalant shrug. "Now maybe you and Big D?"

"What did you say?" Josh asked, twitching forward with a bemused eyebrow.

"Diotima," he clarified, "That's what I've been—"

Josh punched him in the face. A quick *pak* on his cheekbone, more of a jest than a ruthless attack.

"HEY!" Yoshi said, quickly getting back into stance.

The men squared off again, shuffling across the ring.

"I'm not hearing the same music you are," Josh said, throwing a feint at his wide-open stomach.

"Well, don't call me crazy for dancing without you," said Yoshi.

"If your dancing footwork is anything like your boxing footwork, I don't think I could tell," Josh grinned through his mouthguard.

"Oh, so you got jokes now?" Yoshi said, shuffling like Muhammad Ali. Josh scoffed.

"Like this," Josh demonstrated. "Put your lead leg in front, your steps should follow your strikes like you are a puppet. Think of your back leg pushing, and your front leg stepping."

Josh began to throw jab-cross combos in the air while marching forward steadily. "Push, step, push, step, push, step," He said. "That's how you need to think, always forward, always controlled."

Yoshi followed his footsteps, literally as he voiced "push, step" out loud to himself. Once again, Josh held a 16-ounce fistbump for Yoshi to initiate more sparring. This time, no words were waiting in the wind.

Josh engaged first by throwing a feint with his lead hand, dropping again to land a right cross upon Yoshi's unprotected stomach. A click sounded as Yoshi's elbows slammed together, defending the punch, but Josh was quick to adjust to an uppercut with his lead hand.

Uppercuts are very powerful when you are within range, with an open shot, much like Josh was in that moment. He pulled his punch out of care, but not all the way. In Josh's mind, there is no better deterrent for poor choices than getting immediately punched in the head.

Yoshi had wide eyes for a moment after the uppercut landed. He did not wobble or flail, but Josh could see he sparked his opponent. Yoshi retaliated with wild hooks, alternating and repeating.

I forgot this is how people fight when they don't focus.

Trained fighters like Josh know that swinging and hitting nothing makes you far more exhausted than beating someone like a drum. Yoshi's forward march had lost all technique, but kept Josh on a steady retreat. He bobbed and weaved so expertly around the haymakers that it demanded explanation.

"Come on, dude!" Yoshi said, panting like a dog. "You just went ultra instinct or something."

"You got wild after I rang your bell," Josh said, with far calmer breathing. "You stopped calculating."

Yoshi took his hands off his knees and back into a ready position.

"Calculate this!" Yoshi said as he threw a feint of his own.

Unfortunately for Yoshi, he expelled most of his air, giving away his next move like an amateur supervillain. When he faked the jab, it was especially easy to detect since he could not exhale the way he would during a normal strike.

As if in slow motion, Josh watched the pretend jab coming at his face, but his gaze pierced the leather glove. He remained still and waited for Yoshi to pull his fist back to guard his face. As it did so, sure enough, a hook came barreling in toward his kidney.

With so much time to prepare, relative to a normal sparring match, Josh thought of a unique counter. The downward block practiced in karate, *gedan barai*.

In a flash, Josh deployed his arm to redirect the strike away from his organs. Muscle memory kicked in, for as he blasted the hook out of his way, he shifted his opposite hip forward, thrusting a forward punch, *choko-tzuki*, into Yoshi's nose.

Yoshi didn't yell. He was the kind of guy to say, "ouchie" in a time like this, but his silence certainly told Josh enough. Yoshi sat down and ripped his gloves off to hold his nose.

"Oh shit!" Josh exclaimed. "I'm so sorry, I lost control."

Yoshi's eyes were already watering; getting punched in the nose tends to elicit such a response.

"Thought I had you that time," Yoshi said. He choked through the remaining words as he spat his mouthguard onto the ground.

Josh degloved and rested his mouthguard on his gloves as he sat beside a recovering Yoshi. Sniffing harder and harder, Yoshi started to weep lightly.

"Fuck, why am I crying?" Yoshi tried to say quietly. "I'm not even sad."

Probably because I just squished the nerves in your face like a sandwich that's too tall.

Josh patted him on the shoulder, "It's just the nerves and tear ducts behind your nose, it happens all the time, Yosh."

As Yoshi coughed, trying to mask his crying, the attention of the other little spiders and Imanuel centered on the ring. The boxers were facing the opposite direction, but Josh took note of the silence growing in the room. He began telling Yoshi a story, in hopes it would prevent everyone from embarrassing the biggest guy in the room, who sat crying on the floor.

"One time— the *first* time I sparred against my coach," Josh recalled. "I was so nervous. I ate right before practice, which was a terrible idea. At the end of the first round, he struck me right in the stomach before the bell. I tried to shake the nerves for round two, but my stomach was churning. Round two started, and he punched me right in the nose."

Yoshi started to focus more on the story than on his misery.

"I didn't even get the chance to start crying, because I threw up in the middle of the ring," Josh said. "I ran to the bathroom with my gloves on, and my mouthguard still in, while my coach was standing there pissed off."

Yoshi laughed a boisterous guffaw. It was so explosive that the evidence of his cry was completely blown away. Perhaps only so explosive because he was crying, Josh assumed. Despite having a pale sense of humor, not even Josh could prevent himself from laughing alongside Yoshi.

Josh remembered the words his coach said to him later that day. After Josh had cleaned the mats of his gym, he sat in the gym alone with his coach. The doors and windows were all open, fans blasting at full power to combat the smell.

He hadn't had the chance to tell Yoshi, but Josh had come back from the bathroom crying as well. Due to embarrassment and getting punched in the face. "When I see you crying, it tells me how hard you're trying," his coach said.

It was the first time he had cried since his Mom died. He was 13, and he was angry. He was much older in the Bronze Pot, much wiser. But what good is wisdom, if it cannot help others, Josh frequently wondered. His coach recognized how hard the young man was trying to fight, and it changed his life.

The ever-present question, "What now?" was Josh's to answer. He chose to respond as a friend.

"My coach said, 'When I see you crying, it tells me how hard you're trying,'" Josh told Yoshi after a moment of silence. "... and you notice how it rhymes?"

"You know what that means!" Yoshi said, wiping his eyes. "You're still an asshole."

Josh stood up and grabbed Yoshi's hand to hoist him to his feet. He applied way less effort to hoist his own large frame, so it took both of Josh's hands to peel him off the sweaty mat.

"And you fight with honor, samurai," Josh said with a sarcastic grin. "Let's do some jiu-jitsu for the rest of our session. You have crazy long arms."

"What! You want to do origami on my arms now?" Yoshi exclaimed with exhaustion.

"This will be better for you, I promise," Josh told him. "Jiu-jitsu is way more practical, less about hurting someone and more about stopping them."

"How is that different in a real fight?" Yoshi asked.

"Yoshi, we aren't training to fight," Josh said seriously. "Martial arts is just that, an art; a sport."

"A discipline," Yoshi reminded himself. "I've heard that before. Maybe you are the real samurai warrior, huh?"

Josh exhaled out of his nose in a light amusement. *Still doesn't get it*, he thought.

Chapter 12: Balding and Bonding

Five little spiders crawled outside and into the sun. Five hands raised to shield ten eyes from the afternoon blaze reigning in the sky. As they walked along the dirty pavement, the path elongated for Josh.

Soon, if all goes well for Josh and Diotima, the five of them would be adventuring out into a more familiar unknown. There was something comforting about going camping on their first assignment, knowing their home was haunted. The only thing left was to convince the remaining three Arañitas to come along.

"Hey, guys," Diotima said, fighting her exhaustion. "I have something for you all. After we get changed, can we meet in the archives?"

"Diotima must be thinking the same thing," Josh thought.

"Got nowhere else to be," Peyton chimed in.

"Yeah, unless I have a heat stroke by then," Yoshi claimed.

Josh tried to catch Diotima's eye in hopes they could non-verbally address the elephant. He failed to get the confirmation from her, but chimed in with Rose that they would both be joining everyone.

"Here," Josh said as he poured the remaining volume of his ice-cold water over Yoshi's neck. "You can ask Ms. Jackson to use her cooler in the Grog if you want to chill your bottle."

Yoshi let out a heavy and relieved sigh, quenching a stress that had been simmering for hours.

"What?" Peyton halted in place. "Why didn't she tell us that before? After we've been drinking body temperature water all week!"

"I don't know why," Josh said calmly. "I heard ice in her bottle, and I asked her about it, then she said I can use it."

"Can we all use it?" Rose asked.

"I can't see why she'd pick and choose," Josh replied. "We can ask her together if you guys want to eat together after the library?"

Diotima finally looked at Josh; she was shiny with sweat, but her demeanor shone dry. No subtle language or communication came across, but she was the first to use words.

"I like that," she said. "We should be breaking bread if we want to work together."

Silent nods or quiet agreements brought back the energy stolen by that greedy desert heat.

"Well, I'm going to hit the shower then head back up to the archives," said Yoshi, beginning to shuffle off.

"Yeah, same with us probably," Peyton said.

"I think I dropped one of my handwraps inside the gym," Josh said. "I'll be right behind you, Yoshi."

The steel doors slammed behind him as he walked off.

"I hope 'breaking bread' gives us the chance to connect better," Josh thought to himself as he marched back up the steps inside the gym. *"I can only go as far as I am willing to support my allies."*

As Josh emerged back into the combat studio, Imanuel was training with someone else. This man was nowhere to be seen moments ago, when the rest of the Arañitas were present. He looked about half Immanuel's age, but carried the same reserved fury behind his eyes.

Have I seen you before?

Josh realized he had stopped in his tracks. The feeling creeping up from the floor ensnared him in cold, intangible vines. The other two men in the room stood in the ring, wearing heavy gloves, chewing on mouthguards like they were about to spar. Suddenly, Josh broke free as he shook off the stare from the Medusa men in the ring.

"Looking for one of my handwraps," Josh said, making his way to the bench outside the ring.

Neither of the men spoke, suspiciously.

Where did he come from? I thought he didn't spar?

"I don't mean to interrupt," he said, grabbing the rolled-up, bright red handwrap that fell on the floor. It wasn't out of line for Josh to question if he was talking to ghosts, because by now the silence in the room was beyond awkward, but ominous.

HELLO?

Josh zipped his wraps back into his duffel bag and looked at the men standing there once more. They held their arms at their sides like a nervous public speaker. Slight movements under the boxing gloves were perceptible but not understandable.

As he turned, the familiar voice reached him.

"Just showing my son some tips," said Imanuel. "He's won the boxing competition for the last 10 seasons."

Your son?...

"I heard you might compete," said the mystery man as he took out his mouthguard to address Josh.

"I would love to," Josh said, "I never got the chance to ask Imanuel about it, though. Sounds like a lot of fun."

How do you know that? Why am I uncomfortable?

The son scoffed at Josh's response and popped his mouthguard back in. Whether he was acting out of disrespect on purpose was one of the many questions on Josh's mind. He stared back at the man, perhaps hoping a longer look would bring answers. For one reason or another, Josh became the ghost in the room.

Immanuel and his son continued a conversation started before Josh had entered the room. They were talking about sparring rules. Rules that they were immediately putting in place, as they touched gloves, backpedaled a step, and faced each other in identical southpaw stances. Like father, like son.

Miscommunication happens, people change their minds, but what was happening in there felt different. Josh stayed and watched the two for a few seconds, partially in disbelief, partially in preparation.

In those few seconds, Josh thought of the most embarrassing ways he could humble the two of them, but shook it off. If a kinder version of these two finds their way to the surface, or one with less ego, Josh could ignore the intrusive thoughts.

Unfortunately, Josh would have nothing quite as pressing to think about as he made his way down to the shower. His sense of belonging was hurting, and secretly dreaming of a sweet, cold revenge.

In the shower, Josh visualized a southpaw standing in front of him. Running through the motions of the ways he needed to angle off the straight punches coming from a right-handed fighter, he heard Yoshi turning off his shower a few stalls down.

The briefest twitch in water pressure reminded Josh where his true focus should be. Visions of beating up someone who didn't show him respect should not be such a priority to a desert ghost hunter... or a yet-to-be hunter.

He finished his shower with a relaxed pace, trying to maximize the serenity he could still gain from it. Beyond the dripping faucet and squeaking shower sandals, an unfamiliar buzzing vibrated his eardrums.

WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

"Yoshi!?" Josh called as he waddled to him at a quickened pace. The young man stood over the sink counter, shaving his hair off onto a towel.

"My hair was just pissing me off, bro," he replied. There was a disquiet mind behind his flat voice, and as Josh stood side by side with him, a wounded soul was visible through glossy-eyed windows.

"You doing okay, man?" Josh asked him through the mirror.

The simple question relieved Yoshi of the air pressure he had been holding in his lungs for too long. He sank his head low and placed the buzzing razor onto the sink. His hand, glittered with black hair, rose to cover his eyes.

"I miss my mom," Yoshi said quietly.

Awh man... what the hell do I say?

As Josh hoped for something to pop into his head, he placed his hand on Yoshi's tall shoulder.

"Me too," Josh said to himself in the mirror. What buttons does his new friend have, and which ones must he be careful not to press?

"Tell me about her," Josh requested.

"She died when I was 14, but this place makes me think about her a lot," Yoshi said, with a slight tremble and a substantial snuffle.

The second time I've seen you cry in a few hours.

"She loved me a lot, but pushed me really hard," he said. "I hated the advice she gave me when I was a kid— always a lecture, but those words have been looping in my head like a broken record. Now I just want her to tell me what I should do in this fucking freak show."

Josh took it all in. He felt his own eyes beginning to betray him. He fought the nerve-tingling howl rising in his throat and choked it to silence before he spoke again.

"Yoshitsune, I'm sorry," Josh said with a natural empathy. "Do you believe she stays with you?"

"I don't know," he said with the feelings of loss made audible. "I don't know anything anymore."

Yoshi blinked a tear onto his towel and began shaving his head again. Saying not a word to Josh, it felt like Yoshi was inviting him to leave. But Josh knows this pain. He found his own way of fighting it, too.

"That's how this place makes me feel, too," he began. "I have so many questions, and my favorite one is 'what if?' What if she could see you now? You are still listening to what she told you, still remembering her love. What if you kept going?"

Yoshi paused shaving himself once again, but kept his chin up. He stared at himself in the mirror, so did Josh.

"If I know anything," Josh continued. "I know she'll be proud to see it. Always forward, push, step."

The sparse-haired samurai curled his lower lip. He was not pouting, no. He looked at himself in defiance; he mastered his breathing with a determined grimace. Inspiration came to Josh, and he felt pride in his new friend overpowering his first demon at S.C.A.B.B.

"What if you stopped trying to erase your pain?" Josh asked. "What if there was some beauty to it when you go all 12 rounds?"

Yoshi handed Josh the buzzer with a forced smile.

"What if you helped me fix this stupid buzz cut?" Yoshi asked. Josh took it and went over the remaining patchy puffs of hair on the back of Yoshi's head.

"Happy to help," Josh reported with honesty.

"Bro," Yoshi said with his chin tucked. "If you obsessed over team sports as a kid instead of combat sports, you'd probably be a better motivational speaker."

"Alright, man," Yoshi said, unamused. "Probably true."

"Hey Im-... I'm just *joshing* you!" Yoshi exclaimed to his own applause.

Never heard that one before...

"Seriously, though, I appreciate you," Yoshi said. "I think it's just been a rough couple of days."

"Big time, not for the faint of heart," Josh said to him, shutting off the buzzer.

"What if it is?" Yoshi asked with an endearing shrug with his hands. "That reminds me, I figured out what kind of music you are..."

"What kind of music I am?" Josh wondered.

"You are heavy metal," he said with a matter-of-factness. "Like some *wohhhh wohh woh wohhhh*." Yoshi air-guitared a sludgy guitar solo as he shook his hair all over the bathroom.

What a weirdo...

"You should probably rinse off again before we head to the archives," Josh said with a forced smile. "I'll meet you up there."

"Yeah, good thinking," Yoshi told him. "You're a real one, Josh."

Josh lifted a hand and humbly swiped away the compliment headed his way. He walked out of the bathroom and sighed to himself. That's twice now Josh has found a surprising and panic-inducing encounter in the bathrooms of the Bronze Pot.

This time, he felt like he had actually handled it the right way. He was left with pride, thickly coating an emotionally fragile shell. Thoughts of his fellow Arañitas' reactions to an abruptly buzzed Yoshi flashed in his head. Especially considering he was always trying to precisely maintain a weathered flow. What would his nervous habit be when he cannot rake his hair for a feeling of control?

Despite being the last one back in the main building, Josh had been the first to rendezvous at the archives room. His adrenaline was above average, anticipating what Diotima and he would say to get their crew on board.

Missy gave him a cheesy smile and a wave that was uncharacteristic of a woman in her early 30s by Josh's uneducated guess. Her whimsy had been contagious to everyone who looked younger than her, excluding Josh. Missy was an important person here, he thought.

Take out the domino with the brightest smile, and things will crash down eventually. He approached her for light conversation and to busy his stirring thoughts.

"Hey Missy, busy day in the office?" he asked sarcastically, but playfully.

"Actually, I am staying busy!" she said. "Do you want to see what I've been working on?"

"Yeah!" Josh said, without realizing he had contracted her energy. "You writing another book?"

"Check this thing out," She said as she closed the book, showcasing the cover.

Boring dark leather, but upon inspection through a squint, Josh could read the cover. Burned into the face was "*El Chupacabra*" with a profile view of a creature, embossed just below.

"About a year ago, Sarg became the first officer to ever kill one, and we've unlocked so much information about them," Missy said it like she would have told the story of their little brother losing his first tooth. "Did you notice the fangs?"

She held up her index fingers like pincers in front of her face, curling them as she waited for Josh's response.

"Don't tell me those are...?" he wondered.

"Pretty spooky, right?" She said, leaning forward in her swivel chair. "We already knew they were bloodsuckers, but usually, people just die when they come into contact with one. It turns out they also have glands that inject nightmare and panic-inducing toxins!"

Josh shivered slightly.

"Did you learn that the easy way or the hard way?" he asked.

"There is no easy way here," she said, taking on Josh's usual demeanor. "I don't know why he wanted to do that, he was already scary enough."

Once again, her dreamlike gaze courted Josh to a better frame of mind.

"Does he use them?" asked Josh, staying on darker questions.

"Just once, I think they are mostly for show," Missy answered

"Freak show..." Josh said. "Oh, sorry! I didn't mean to say that!"

Josh failed to think it through as he was focused on the three ladies in his crew arriving.

Missy, unsurprisingly, found it hilarious.

"Can you believe there's a guy nicknamed 'bear' and it isn't the 500-pound, fanged up freakazoid?" Missy joked back.

"What I believe has been changing about every 30 minutes since I got here," Josh said.

Diotima, Peyton, and Rosemary had joined them.

Chapter 13: Vecinos

“Hey girlies, want to see something cool?” Missy said with a friendly wave. “Peyton, I bet you’d like this one once I finish it.”

“Those are the goat-sucker things with three fangs?” Peyton said after reading the cover.

“Yeah! ¡Las chupacabras!” Missy said.

The conversation faded away from Josh’s ears.

Three fangs?

Usually, Josh forced himself *not* to picture Sarg’s beastly appearance and especially the fangs implanted in his gums. *He clearly sought to create a dynamic duo poking out of his lips, but what would he have done with the third fang? And how the HELL did they learn about the nightmares?*

The idea of someone using a chupacabra fang as a weapon was dreadful. The notion of the entity itself was enough to cause nightmares, but to turn that fear into something with a handle made him more confused or angry than afraid.

While Missy told the ladies about Sarg, Josh had fully tuned out.

Is that the culture of this place? Predators and prey? Here we are, scared little spiders in a bronze web of monsters. Competing to punch the hardest and eat the most protein?

“We have to tell Yoshi, he’s going to lose his mind!” Rose said to Missy and the others.

If he hasn’t completely lost it already...

“Where is he anyway?” Diotima asked. “How did you beat him here?”

“Yeah, he...” Josh contemplated how much he ought to share. “He’ll be right up, I’m sure.”

“Well, invoke his name, and he doth appear,” said Missy as she took a retuned book from Peyton.

In walked Yoshitsune, proudly boasting a shaved head and a smile. It was clear he would enjoy the upcoming reactions. Josh certainly knew he would, too.

Rose gasped so sharply as she saw him that it scared everyone. Despite bouncing so frequently between comfortable and fearful conversation, tensions were high-strung at most times.

Interlocked were Yoshi and Rosemary's eyes; she lifted up her hand to rub the head that was a foot above her own. She started to discuss a likeness between the feeling of his head and a tennis ball, but she cut herself off. After a stroke and a half the both of them froze and stared each other in the eyes.

Josh had been used to googly eyes, but the confusion they presented to each other was different. An acknowledgement they refused to share with the rest. Even Missy had noticed their romantic escape.

"Are they...?" she asked quietly, trying to form a question as it was coming out.

"The answer is yes, whatever you're thinking," Diotima said quietly back to her, as if not to interrupt their moment. "Either yes, or not yet."

Missy stared at them, almost yearning. A disheartening sag in her face washed away the sunny exterior as she let a deep breath off her leash.

Josh watched Missy, who was watching Yoshi and Rosemary. He noted her long face and how it shielded many thoughts. What could she be thinking of, Josh wondered.

Tori's face flashed into his mind. The scarlet letters enscribed the name of her departed lover deep into her skin. Josh felt his own facial features melting out of composure, too.

Does love ever die in peace and quiet?

A thought for later. A question for journaling. His mind lingered upon the hauntings from his own heart, how little he had thought of Sara the last few days, and how, despite everything, he would still miss the feeling of her hands cupped within his own.

A quiet toast commenced in Josh's mind. He invited Yoshitsune and Rosemary, and raised a glass to their bond. Death had already done apart two hearts within the Bronze Pot, and Yoshi and Rose may survive the desert sun by the shadows of their tombstones.

Ow! Hey?

Diotima's sturdy left boot gave Josh a quick kick back to reality. The gazer-beam from her eyes made Josh feel like he accidentally transmitted all of his internal thoughts to her.

"You still with me?" she asked.

"Yeah," Josh told her. "Yes... Sorry, I was—"

"Ruminating?" said Diotima, amidst Josh's pause.

"Ruminating," he repeated.

I was ruminating...

"Keep your eye on the ball," She said quietly to Josh, directing him to look at Missy. "It's time to get to work."

"... Okay?" Josh wondered what she meant, but pushed forward.

"We'd like to make a suggestion, but I have to ask that you guys hear me all the way out first," Josh said to his crew, with Missy still present.

"Hang on," Diotima jumped in. "Let's at least sit down first."

Diotima led the group, and she walked past enough seating for Josh to consider that she did not want Missy to overhear their conversations before they sat in a circle.

"Call the play coach," Yoshi said, as he tried to rake his fingers through hair that was nothing but memory.

"No, I just want to suggest a plan, talk about one," Josh said.

It just occurred to Josh in this moment that he ought not to be the one making this proposal. He was eager to get into the field and hunt ghosts, yes. He was burning to learn more

about S.C.A.B.B., yes. He was not, however, enthusiastic about taking four strangers out into the uninhabited desert for a few days with the possibility of encountering lost spirits.

Josh looked at Diotima to back him up, to take the microphone away. She nodded an encouraging nod. "*She might be a mind reader,*" he thought, "*but she can't communicate as well as she thinks she can.*" Diotima had no plans to communicate telepathically or verbally, it seemed. He was on his own. Everyone wanted to listen, for the first time, it seemed. It was only talking, and Josh had faced mightier challenges than choosing the right words.

"We've been here a few days," Josh spoke calmly. "Piper has been showing us how to survive in the desert a couple of days at a time, and George has been teaching us the encyclopedia of spirits. If we take another week or so to get comfortable with Jallen, or is it Jordan? If we can each specialize in different detection or recording instruments and communication techniques, there's nothing that can stop us from doing some of the lower-level assignments soon. What do you guys think about that?"

Subconsciously, Josh's eyes followed Yoshi. By now, he expected to hear his voice chiming if not Diotima. Rose looked at him first, too, then Diotima.

"I think we are more than capable," Diotima finally said confidently, but softly. "If we can work together."

"I'll be ready to rock in another week," Yoshi said. "I came here to hunt ghosts. I know we have to learn how first, but I'm ready."

"I'm ready too!" Rose agreed. "Low-level assignments are only entities spiritual right?"

"Yes, they are," Peyton finally voiced herself. "I'm surprised we haven't done anything yet anyway. I think a week sounds good. Are we travelling to the hotspot I found for us yesterday?"

Josh saw them looking to each other, agreeing, and discussing early-phase logistics. Maybe he was wrong to think the rest of his crew was afraid to begin the hunt. Perhaps they were more like him than he thought, which reinvoked the 'why' of the plan.

"After we complete our first mission, we can learn more about this place," Josh reminded them. "I haven't been able to stop thinking about that spok. I have too many questions preventing me from sleeping soundly."

"Yeah," Yoshi called. "I've been trying to ask how a legend can be passed *up* a family tree, and nobody wants to tell us."

"That's because of the cognitohazard, I bet," Peyton said.

The air filled with a nauseous energy. A moment passed where none of them looked at each other, but they could be certain of the pale faces at their table.

Yoshi coughed and began fidgeting while he spoke.

"Wait, what do you mean?" he said.

Peyton finally unfroze while a shadow began eclipsing her. Missy had just walked up on the group.

"I'm sorry to eavesdrop," She said.

Shit.

"I don't think anyone will say no to an early investigation, but I want to at least warn you guys to be careful," Missy said.

Diotima sat up in her chair.

"We will," Yoshi said. "But careful of what, exactly?"

Jallen entered the room, distant from where the Arañitas were seated, but visible from the opposite corner. He was wearing a headlamp and followed by another crew. Josh recognized the young man who led his crew. It was Immanuel Dixon's son. His crew had five people too, and if S.C.A.B.B. had a starting lineup, there was no question they just walked in.

While Josh recognized their alliance by the matching vests, a few shades more green than the Arañitas', they all did their best not to acknowledge the other people in the archives.

Missy turned her head to face the crew again. Nearly silent and motionless, she whispered to the group, "What happens when you peel a scab to see what's underneath?"

She walked off. Her short hair flowed with her friendly aura that she maintained for Jallen and the others behind him.

"Was that a metaphor?" Yoshi whispered to the team. "What the fuck, bro?"

In a sharp, irritated whisper, Peyton unleashed upon Yoshi.

"It's about the cognitohazards!" She said, glancing at the opposite corner of the room. "Valentine said the spoks serve a demon; she's trying to warn us off that path."

"Should we talk about this in our dorm?" Rose said, identifying Peyton's agitated nerves.

The word *demon* is never a fun word, but at the Bronze Pot, it's a trigger word. A cannonball in Josh's stomach weighed him down. More ruminations.

"Yes," Diotima said. "Let's grab some whiteboard markers from Missy on our way out."

She stared into the crowd of officers in the corner of the room while talking. Diotima went into overdrive as she began marching off to Missy right away. Naturally, the posse followed, including Josh.

Missy had been directing questions from Jallen when Diotima marched up on them, apathetic to their concurrent conversation.

"Hey, Missy!" she called over their voices. "Can we get some whiteboard markers for the road?"

"Yeah, absolutely," Missy answered. She slid across her long desk and pulled three black and one blue marker from a supply drawer. "Just bring them back in one piece."

Missy stared deep into Diotima's face as she made her request. Her wide gaze indicated to the spiders that she was not talking about just the markers. Diotima, the expert in social espionage, did not blow the secret of a subliminal message to the other crew.

Immanuel's son glared at Josh.

Really? What is your problem? Ended sparring early, did you?

"Maybe Missy can get some coloring pages for you, too?" said one of the men in the crew.

Josh's eyes could not have found Diotima faster. He steadied his footing for the aftershocks of how she would clap back. His eyes processed correctly, but his brain did not.

She stared at the man who spoke to her. No claps or quips at all. She received the handoff of markers from Missy but maintained eye contact with the man. Her look of collected annoyance and amusement made Josh feel embarrassed for the guy.

"Thank you, Missy," Rose said. "What are your names?"

It was a nice try, but the two groups were already in a standoff.

"Chase," said the Dixon prince. He held a joyous glint of mysterious origins behind his eyes. "The wisecracker is Xavier Cox. That's Tank, Violet, and Oxanna. And you are the little spiders everyone's talking about..."

We're new here, of course they are talking about us.

"Let me guess, are you guys Team Slytherin?" Yoshi called.

Josh looked to Yoshi now, breaking the tension of the staredowns. Two wolves raged inside Josh in this moment. One of them, angry at this new crew for being so quick to hostility. The other, angry at Yoshi, for feeding into it.

"Those are some supervillain-ass names," Yoshi said with an unashamed smile.

To Josh at least, it was unclear whether he was trying to make things better or worse, but Xavier sure didn't.

"We're the Ronins," He retorted. "And we're here on business. Why don't you new kids get back to doodling?"

With subtlety, but instinct, Josh pulled on the back of Yoshi's vest. The first impression was abysmal, but it didn't have to be a catastrophe. Unfortunately, he was quickly reminded who had the scariest bark of all the Arañitas.

"Maybe we will," Diotima stepped up. "Not that this wasn't a tasteful introduction."

"Alright, that's enough," Jallen finally stepped in.

Like haunted paintings, the Ronins' eyes each followed the Arañitas out of the archives arena. Diotima and Peyton each held their ground for a beat before stepping along. Josh could feel the heat rising the closer he got to the other side of the archives door.

"Bro!" Yoshi called as soon as the doors closed behind them. "They just dissed us up and down, what the fuck are we going to do?"

"Everyone's fighting their own demons here," Peyton said. "I don't think Chase or Xavier are fighting back at all. That was so toxic."

"Damn," Diotima said. "I wanted to sniff them out, but Yoshi's right. Supervillain-ass names."

Yoshi was walking backwards in front of Josh. "Bro, you gotta keep showing me the moves," he said as he took a shoddy fighting stance. "We can't let that slide next time."

"First of all," Josh began, stopping his walk. "You're going to get dropped in two seconds if you don't fix that footwork. Second... just stay smooth, Yoshi. We can make peace in two seconds if that's what we choose to fight for."

"Yeah!" Diotima said with some sarcasm. "Make love, not war!"

Josh gave a disappointed look at Diotima. No longer does he hold her above the standard, susceptible to petty interpersonal drama. Three years older than Josh and submitting to the control of a bully soured Diotima's wisdom in his eyes.

"That's what I'm talking about!" Yoshi cried. "Big D has my back!"

The crew laughed. If there was anyone with the energy worthy of such a nickname, it was Diotima. Josh smiled and exhaled a little sharper, and decided to let go of the demon he had been fighting, one of frustration and urgency. Calm heads prevail, and strong hearts unite.

“So Big D,” Josh said, with a more comfortable rest among his shoulders. “What are the markers for?”

“Told you,” She said with her smile fading off, but mischief still blazing in her eyes. “Just wanted to go sniff out the Ronin crew.”

Chapter 14: Growing Pains

Day 9

It occurred to me this morning that I have not had any dreams since I've been here. I woke up to the sound of the bunk below me shifting, and for a second, I thought it was Iris. I haven't been away from her this long since I went to that competition in Texas. Even if I stayed at NAU, I wouldn't have gone home just yet. And I don't even know if she started school, too. But she's all alone now, and her big brother left her that way to start third grade. What the fuck is wrong with me? Is my ambition that important? I wanted to be valuable so bad that I abandoned the only thing I valued. This place is messing with my head, and that's probably why I haven't had any dreams. The windows to my subconscious are boarded shut, and now I don't know what to do. I don't know what to think of myself. I can't see who I'm becoming.

I finally feel comfortable with the REM pod, thanks to Rosemary, though. She had a great idea to use her EMF pump to emit electromagnetic radiation so we could detect it with the REM pod without me setting it off every time I try to mess with it. That was actually fun. It reminded me of some old-school scientific method experiments from when I was in elementary school. We went out behind the Bronze Pot, away from interference, to test it last night, and it finally clicked for me. Great timing if we are still planning to leave in a couple of days. I probably could have gotten comfortable with any other piece of equipment faster, but everyone else seemed excited to have a certain piece of gear. Especially Peyton, who was adamant about doing all the full-spectrum photography stuff. For someone who has been witness to too much, I'd expect more of a "see no evil" sentiment from her.

Okay... clocking back in now, thanks for listening.

He stared at the white space on his page for a moment before closing it. He felt his system was not cleaned all the way, but he couldn't scrape anything else out of his mind to write. If his thoughts were not focused on the mission in front of him, they were of the life he'd left behind.

Now he wondered what the last page might read. The journal he had been using was about $\frac{1}{3}$ complete upon his arrival to the Bronze Pot, but was slowly filling. Would he be writing poetry of his triumphs? Lamentations of his misery? Would he be dead before another pen dragged across those sheets? Josh would wonder, but only time would tell.

He's been in this place for nine days and has looked inward for change every evening. In the life he walked away from, there would have been less deceit, paranoia, and danger. In other words, he abandoned a safe and secure life.

This isn't exactly nurturing if I want to become a good man.

"Yo, Josh," Yoshi called from the desk at the front of the room. "Are you going to go work out after you finish writing?"

"Yeah, I'm done, actually," Josh said with a low-hung chin.

"Can I come with you again?" he said on approach. "I'm feeling amped up this morning."

"Yeah, let's do it," Josh said as he stood up.

He had almost forgotten to put away his journal, and worse, close it. He folded the cover over and threw it with a spin into its solemn nest on the top bunk.

"Also, bro," Yoshi said, grabbing his mouthguard and gloves from his duffel bag. "Rose told me she helped you figure out your detector pod with her EMF pump. I have the handheld EMF reader if we want to do some more testing with it tonight?"

"That sounds good," said Josh with honesty. "Do you want to bring the atmospheric sensor too?"

"Oh, I forgot to tell you," Yoshi replied with a distraught set of eyes. "I had to sign it back in because the Tiger crew is using it for an assignment they're about to go on. Jallen's dumbass only has one, so I'm bringing the EMF reader and the thermometers."

The conversation continued as they passed through the hallways. Josh wondered why the Tigers would be going on an assignment with everything they had endured recently. He didn't have the full picture, but peeking at the edges gave him the impression there was more going on. He hoped the distraction would give them a sense of purpose and hope again. If it works for them, maybe it can work for him as well.

"That's odd to me," Josh told him.

"I know!" Yoshi exclaimed in the halls. "George will tell everyone about his book on air pressure and manifestations, except the tech nerd who makes the toys?"

"I mean, it's odd that they get priority over us when we already had an assignment planned," Josh told him. He used a far lower voice in hopes Yoshi would follow his lead, which he did.

"Well, maybe because we haven't confirmed it with Valentine," Yoshi speculated.

"We haven't?" Josh asked, as if he hoped it was a mere joke.

"Well, the Tigers are leaving on the last quarter of the moon," Yoshi remarked. "How far away is that?"

"That's tomorrow night, I think," Josh replied, thinking to look for the moon while he was indoors. "They must be leaving in the morning."

"No!" Yoshi exclaimed again, rubbing his hands over his buzzed black hair. "Weren't we going to leave in like two days? What are we going to do?"

"Well, first we are going to *not* panic," Josh told him. "We have a really low level hotspot, so an atmosphere sensor probably isn't mandatory for identification. We should still tell Valentine or the shaman."

Before they exited the main building, the Ronins entered. The five of them had been returning from their own morning exercise.

"Well, well, well," Yoshi called to them, with an unexpectedly embracing tone. "My favorite duo... Dixon-Cox!"

Chase Dixon had already been red in the face from the heat, but there was no doubt Yoshi's jab added further saturation. Before Josh could see everyone else's reaction, Xavier Cox roared out.

"Good one!" He bellowed. "Why don't you grow the *fuck* up?"

Yoshi did not miss a beat. He was quicker than Josh was in the ring. Yoshi raised his hands like the unarmed man he was, but did not submit to their request.

"Oh no!" He said with piercing eye contact through Xavier. "I'll never make you the butt of another joke, I promise!"

The Ronins said nothing; the lady Oxanna scowled venomously at Yoshi and gave him a soft, but noticeable, shoulder check as she passed. Her dark red pixie cut gave her an imposing demeanor by default. Yoshi spun to follow them, and Josh felt the creature in his chest inflate.

Don't, Yoshi!

"No butts, and definitely no other parts either!" He shouted at them.

Xavier raised his fist with a particular finger extended with maximum fury. To Josh's surprise and frustration, Yoshi guffawed.

"HAHAHA! Grown-ass-man flipping me off with his thumb tucked in!" he said, putting his hands on his knees in aggressive exaggeration. Important to note, his volume was still unconcerned with the other locals in the facility.

"Yoshi, what are you doing?" Josh said while they stood by the door.

"It's cool," He said as his composure returned. "I'm just having some fun; you could have a slice of that pie too."

“At what cost?” Josh said flatly. “You think a bunch of vets are going to appreciate a teenager talking shit all the time?”

“Hey, I’ll be 20 in October,” Yoshi told him. “My god. What day is it even?”

“Can’t say that,” Josh reminded him of the rule again. “But I’m serious, this is a place we need to have allies.”

Damn... I actually don’t know what day it is, though.

Josh thought about how he hadn’t known Yoshi or the rest of his Arañitas for long. While he watched Yoshi ingest his words, he felt he was overstepping by trying to control him after just a few days.

“Josh, you can’t tell me they didn’t start it,” Yoshi pleaded. “They were talking down to us before we even got their names.”

Josh felt like roaring at Yoshi, to sit him down and scold him. A higher road, Josh chose to show him, in hopes he would walk it with him.

“We can end it— peacefully,” he declared. “Then we can start the next chapter, maybe make friends.”

Yoshi curled his lips, choking down a smile. Josh recognized himself as a cornball this time rather than push the point any further.

“Yeah, yeah, power of friendship,” said Josh with some light-hearted self-awareness. “I just don’t want us to have any more grief than necessary.”

“You’re living life,” Yoshi said as he pushed open the door. They crossed a wall of heat as they marched across the yard to the fitness room. “You just have to remember the song and dance, and the grief goes away.”

Well, that explains a lot because I don’t dance.

A sullen silence filled the dry air before Josh found his feelings on the matter solidified.

“What if we could all dance together?” Josh asked him.

“Ooh, well played!” Yoshi smirked as he grabbed the burning hot door handle. “That was actually metal, bro,”

A powerful bird calling from the skies glued Josh to the floor. He spun his head to find it, despite the punishing sun. A dark bird of prey slowly cut across the blue sky. Instantaneously, Josh felt chained in place. He was not afraid; he was safe, surely. An anxious foreboding weighed him down as the bird’s large shadow wiped across.

Yoshi had been in the same prison as he stared at the bird with Josh, the door half open. “That was weird, right?” he said. “You feel weird right now?”

“Anyway, damn...” Yoshi said, heading into the shade of comfort. “Alright– sorry, Joshy, but we ain’t dancing now,” he said as he tossed his gloves above the black ropes surrounding the boxing ring.

Whatever his ruminations encircled were no longer important. Despite a soft, sarcastic threat from Yoshi, he was in a safe place. In the ring, with his hands wrapped and laces tight, he was in control. His focus was sharp, his emotions were quiet, and he could be at peace in the midst of the upcoming fight.

—

After the Arañitas had reunited at sun’s peak, they had a few small and preliminary objectives before focusing on their upcoming field trip. Together, they made their way to the Grog to fill up on brain food for their master planning.

“We actually don’t have to get approval from Valentine, but we obviously have to tell Jallen,” Peyton said, being the first to sit. “The shaman also needs to know so he can cast protective energies on us.”

“I think we should still tell Valentine,” Rose suggested. “Just because it’s our first time, and he might have some advice for us.”

“Don’t overthink it, guys,” Diotima said, sawing at a slab of beef. “Nobody does these low-level spirit chases because they are boring and easy.”

“Can’t hurt us to check in with the Big Sugar,” Yoshi reminded the posse with optimism. “The real problem is going to be tracking *him* down.”

“Yeah, he’s hard to find when you need him,” Peyton noted.

Josh sat with his meal and realized an issue during the conversation he should have thought about long ago. Jallen has made it clear that all entity communication devices, such as the spirit box, are highly secured, highly coveted items. He had taken the one Tori was using when he first arrived, but never heard anything else about it.

His secret to keep it hidden from the others had remained, to his slight discomfort. What churned his stomach more was the potential repercussions Tori had to endure for misplacing it. Did she get punished? What does punishment look like at the agency named after a brazen bull look like?

It was now that he realized what he had done. He stole equipment and is omitting the truth from everyone about it. Everyone besides Diotima. His skin became irritated as shame rippled through it.

“Oh shit, there he is!” Peyton said suddenly, snapping Josh back in.

He turned to see Chase and the shaman entering the Grog. The Arañitas had gone from not seeing the Ronins at all the first few days to suddenly seeing them in passing on repeat. It would not be so notable if the concentrated interactions had been pleasant or even neutral.

Kettle had on his robe in the middle of the day, hood up. Eyes and energies always seem to find him whenever he billows into a room like a dark cloud.

“Should we go talk to him?” Yoshi said. “After he sits down?”

“Why?” Peyton wondered aloud. “Do we— Oh, the Shaman?”

Why would we talk to Chase?

"Yeah, doi," Yoshi mocked her. "We were just talking about him."

Diotima shot a side-eye to Josh, and he caught it. Without enough time to discern her impression, he wondered what she would have to say— something to ask later.

"Wait, Josh," Yoshi said with a full mouth before swallowing. "When are we leaving again? Didn't you sign up for the boxing competition?"

"Oh, you're right," Josh winced. "That's going to interfere with our plan as it stands right now."

Josh looked to his friends to explain the situation. "The competition day is on the new moon, and we would have left for the hotspot by then. Tomorrow is the last quarter, then seven or so days until it's new again."

"Should we wait until after?" Rose asked.

"I'm fine with that, a little more time to prepare?" Peyton chimed with evident relief.

"Now that you mention it, I'd like to do the chess competition too," said Diotima. "What if we just left tomorrow?"

She stunned the seats at the table with the suggestion. Yoshi broke the silence first.

"I mean... we could?" he said, looking around.

Everyone still looked to each other. It seemed there was still a vacancy in the leadership role among the Arañitas.

"Is anyone uncomfortable with that?" Josh asked. "If we leave tomorrow, two days up, quick investigation, two days back?"

He mostly asked for Peyton's input. She seemed the most afflicted by fear out of the others in this place. Josh watched her freeze up whenever the crew speculated about the metaphysics of ghosts and the implications of the afterlife. She released a hissing exhale from her nose while she forked a bite, but communicated a contrary concern.

"Are we allowed to schedule a field trip with under a day's notice?" Peyton asked.

"You kidding?" Yoshi said sardonically. "The Tigers scheduled a field trip tomorrow, and one of them tried doing some kind of voodoo ritual in the bathroom last week!"

"Yeah, I'm thinking if they can, so can we," Diotima said. "Everybody talks down on them for some reason— well, the ritual thing was kind of bad."

"Okay, fine," Peyton said resolutely. "But I'm not talking to the shaman. He gives me creepo-vibes."

"We ought to go together," Josh said. "Someone else can do the talking, but we need you in the conversation."

Their mission was now imminent, and the sense of urgency diluted Josh's guilt. Taking things one push-step at a time is easier when the steps are closer together. A deep shadow was cast by everything he did at the Bronze Pot, and the contrast from the light he lived in before was sharpening.

As he continued his meal in silent contemplation, he reflected on the ease of being honest, kind, and fair when he was younger. He would not call his life a normal adult life, after all. Nonetheless, the relationship between his freedom and moral agency had been developing rapidly since he graduated.

Within these walls, and under this Sonoran sun, Josh found himself tirelessly reflecting on his own virtue, in the Grog, haunted by his spiraling mind.

Is this the nature of S.C.A.B.B. or the nature of myself?

Chapter 15: Shot in the Dark

Before he knew it, he was marching up to the bar where the shaman had been in deep thought as well. Beside him marched Yoshi, Diotima, Peyton, and Rosemary. Josh watched Chase on the other side of the bar, talking to Charles, of the Tiger Crew, in the kitchen. Chase certainly carried himself like the leader of his Ronin posse, fueling displeasure within Josh.

Among the Arañitas, Josh saw each member doing the talking, and the walking. A true team of little spiders, without the need for hierarchy.

"Excuse me, Kettle," Diotima greeted the shaman from behind.

The old man turned around, taking a good look at Diotima, then scanning the crew. He spoke nothing at first.

"We are going on a field trip tomorrow," Diotima said. "We wanted to confirm with you before our next steps."

The Shaman stood unyielding against the gaze of all the little spiders' eyes. His lip twitched subtly, as though he was boiling underneath the surface.

"I will not cast protection upon you if you seek the jaws of death with such vigor," said the shaman. "After all the work I went through to find you all, and educate you on our ways."

His robe flowed as he spun back to his forward position, careless to avoid a disheartening dismissal. Some of the posse looked at each other, hoping for their 'what nows' to be answered. Diotima stared at the back of his head for only a second before walking behind the bar to face him again.

"We are going for a spirit observation in the entity spiritual zone only," She said to him. "You haven't given us any guidance since we've arrived, only evaluation. We've learned enough from the other bulls and wranglers to know these aren't dangerous."

He chewed his food like a cow with grass.

"As I said," Diotima began again. "We are confirming with you, not asking for your blessing."

Josh was surprised she was not breathing fire in his face, and she had kept a controlled composure despite being incited to act by disrespect. She waited for him a moment for final words after he finished chewing.

"Very well, little spiders." He said shrunken. "Next steps should include a sit-down with George and Valentine."

With that, she walked from the inside of the bar back to her teammates. Chase had still been within the bar, and Josh finally noticed his eavesdropping, his disapproving looks. Diotima then signaled back to the table, and they sat after a short, silent walk back.

"Big D for the WIN!" Yoshi cheered quietly. "You ate that little man up!"

That was pretty cool. Respect, Big D.

"That felt good to watch," Peyton said. A new energy surrounded her. Josh could only imagine it as a safe and comforting energy, like she had just seen her monster evicted from the closet.

"You know what," Diotima said. "Let's go find George and Abraham right now. I'm still pissed off."

"Yep, she's on a roll," Yoshi said as Rose shook her head in agreement beside him.

"Maybe we can take a beat before storming in?" Josh suggested. He had his eyes set on Diotima, but held them softly as he could. "Just to keep things steady."

She stood up, "Oh, I'm steady," she said. "We've done enough think-tanking, Josh. I think it's the perfect night for a storm."

Diotima had successfully roused the rest of her team. Maybe it was her chronological advantage, being a couple of years older, that gave her ethos among the crew. Perhaps it was her fighter spirit that they clung to. Josh wondered why they were so willing to follow her, despite his internally proclaimed 'rational hesitation.'

By the time they were walking up to George's office, Josh ceased his mental moping at the sound of someone's **nervous habit**.

Peyton had been holding her amulet, the small object sealed in resin, tied onto her vest pocket zipper. Up and down, and up and down she zipped.

"Hey Peyton," Josh asked. "I never noticed what your amulet is?"

"Oh, it's silly," She said, laying it in her hand to display. "It's a little mirror for one of my dolls— When I was a little girl, I mean."

"Silly? It means a lot to you, right?" He asked, knowing the answer.

"Yeah, you could say that," she said, somewhat embarrassed. "When I was scared, I would freeze up sometimes and just fixate on whatever was in my hand. As I got older, it became less of a plaything, obviously, more of a good luck charm."

Why were you getting scared so often?

"I can't think of anything silly about that," Josh said to her. He gave her a half smile, completely ignorant of whether his attempt at kindness landed.

Yoshi had taken the honor of knocking on George's door, the local scholar on spirits. The door had cracked open slightly, and the white haired occupant inside peeked through.

"Uhh..." Yoshi said after a brief eye contact.

"Sorry, come in. Come in," he said, opening the door wide.

Not who you were expecting?...

"Everything okay?" Yoshi asked as he walked into George's office.

"Yes, of course," George said. "Just feeling a little disquieted in my studies."

"It happens," Josh told him disarmingly. "Is this a good time?"

"Perhaps perfect," George said as he bookmarked a leatherbound book he was writing in. "The best brain break serves the soul as well, they say. Is there something I can do for the infamous Arañitas?"

Maybe work on your Spanish pronunciation...

"Tomorrow we are leaving for a spirit identification field trip," Diotima said.

"Oh, okay," George said. "Well, you can definitely handle a minor investigation. I would confirm with the Tigers too, so they don't take all the rations with them on their punishment. They are heading to the Casa Grande Domes to cleanse the space for losing a spirit box and attempting a ritual."

What?!

The handle of George's door slammed into a downward position, and Valentine breached. Yoshi was startled slightly. "Wow, that's convenient," he said.

Josh would have to wait to unpack the revelation. The rippling consequences of his choices have travelled far, farther than he was comfortable with.

"What's this?" Valentine asked all.

"The Arañitas are going on a field trip tomorrow," George spoke up. "I was about to donate my wisdom, perhaps we can pool our knowledge for the first timers?"

"That's not happening," Valentine said calmly. "I admire the ambition, but you haven't been here for a full moon yet."

"They are only pursuing entities spiritual, sir," George said. He turned his gaze quickly to Josh and asked in a subtle panic, "How long would the trip be? Only a few days, right?"

Why are you asking me?

Before Josh could respond, Valentine jumped in.

"I see. I forgot we still do the little ghost chases," he said. "The Tigers used to forget batteries for their equipment when they first started. If y'all got a brain between the ears, you'll be fine."

That's it?

Josh went over it in his head as they prepared for a last-minute venture into the dark. He went over it a few times as there was so little to work with, and the eerie quiet in the room dragged.

"Little spiders," George began again. "Malevolent entities you may encounter will try to harm your spirits and bodies as we have discussed in our sessions. You must also be mindful that they will recognize strength in unity and devise ways to poison it."

"Mind your weakest link, he means," Valentine said, scanning the Arañitas. "The fear, the insecurity, the doubt will make you an easy host for supernatural infestation."

That's helpful... but I hate it.

"The hotspots on the maps are pretty big," Peyton asked Valentine. "Is there any tricks to narrowing our search when we make it?"

Valentine reached into his pocket. He held a pair of modified spok-specs in his hands, like he was expecting oohs and ahhs.

"When you get there, someone should be wearing their supervision specter sensors," he began.

"You mean the spok-specs?" Diotima asked.

Valentine had not missed the question, but let it bounce off him and splat onto the floor unanswered.

"Through the spok-specs," He iterated. "Areas with recent activity will look like a distant cloud. A 'spectral nebula,' if George has been teaching you the vocabulary."

"Well, you told me not to talk about the spok-specs until they were ready for the you-know-what," George said. "We've only had time to classify spirits and talk about—"

"Yeah, yeah, George," Valentine interrupted. "The real education is in store for you kids if you can identify and document correctly. I'll be damn happy to give you the work the smooth-brained Tigers have had to do."

With the prospect of *'real education'* on the horizon, Josh's eyes widened. They widened a little further after he heard the old man dumping on the Tigers so harshly. Now he was especially eager to get this ball rolling.

Josh sat in a moment of intensity within his mind. Once again, he felt the wave of his reality crash over him. In a day, he would march out into the desert in search of a ghost. In that brief moment, he felt enthusiasm once again. He could hear the light tapping of chains, as the keys to understanding life were being jingled just out of reach.

"In the meantime," Valentine cleared his throat. "George and I are still trying to understand how a spok found itself inside the Bronze Pot. I'd recommend you all recharge your batteries before you enter the belly of the beast tomorrow."

No further objections, no further questions. Josh felt his crew riding the exhilarating anxiety he was surfing upon as well, and they shuffled out of George's drab office.

"What's your take on that, Yoshi?" Rosemary poked. "Metaphorical batteries?" He laughed harder than he needed to. Whether his affections for the sweet Rose held him in bliss, or a well-timed joke in the stead of suspense, his giddy was up with the rest of the Arañitas on their way back to the dorm.

A strange sight met them on their return. The empty bulletin board outside their room that decorated the barren, ghostly walls now had a handwritten sign posted in the direct center. The Arañitas stood around the message inscribed upon a sheet of parchment:

–Arañitas–

Out: Last quarter moon

Expected duration: 4 days

"Posting news on a literal bulletin?" Josh thought. "That's old school."

Rather than begin to charge his batteries, both physical and metaphorical, Josh couldn't help but feel creeped out at the speed at which this information was posted. Kettle was the only suspect, and it seemed up his alley to lurk around, under the radar, and unconfirmed.

Did we even tell him how long we'd be? I don't remember...

Chapter 16: Desert Storm

Day 10

Holy balls. Today was so hot. We left a little after dawn and have been travelling all day. We got the evening campfire started after what felt like 30 minutes. D became super frustrated and stormed off for a bit just after we got it going. By now, we are just waiting to fall asleep. All of our feet hurt, and it's probably because none of us has walked this many steps in a single day. I hope tomorrow's soreness doesn't create any more hostility in our little crew. It bothers me when pain comes out in the form of rage for people. D was probably hungry too, but I don't know why she had to wander off. Maybe we have been spending too much time together recently, getting too comfortable. I hope that's it, and not anything like what Valentine said. "Mind your weakest link." I don't like how he talks.

Josh had more to say, more thoughts to sift onto his journal, but the sound of Yoshi and Rose giggling over the cracking and popping of a small campfire stole his attention. His focus zoned out while the warbling heat waves distorted his view of them.

He lay on the cool dirt, with his S.C.A.B.B. pack as his pillow. His journal lay on his lap, with his pen held in captivity by his restless, twirling grip.

He speculated whether the love birds would be in such high spirits if they were the ones carrying the tents all day, but tried to redirect those thoughts before they turned rotten. He should feel lucky there was an undeniably wholesome bond within his posse.

If he were a jealous man, he wouldn't be able to see the strength that came with proximity to love. It's easy to be afraid when you are alone, Josh knows. Being surrounded by loved ones makes you feel brave, and being surrounded by bravery has a cascading effect.

I wonder what Valentine would say about our strongest link...

You would not hear him say it when he was looking at the big picture, but Josh felt joy in the moment.

"Sorry, I got angry," said Diotima, approaching from behind.

Josh slapped his journal closed and sat up as he turned to her. She plopped down on a rock beside him, looking into the fire she had struggled over so fiercely to create.

"It happens," Josh replied. "Today was no walk in the park."

She stared at him for a moment. He didn't intend for the pun, and certainly didn't intend to call attention to it, so they didn't laugh. Josh held his tongue in hopes she'd delve into a deeper apology.

"I've started 1,000 fires," she exaggerated. "I don't know why that was suddenly so difficult."

"Well..." Josh began.

"Yeah, I heard you asking to help." Diotima barged. "I just felt like I couldn't do anything if a stupid campfire bested me."

Oh boy, another control freak...

"I should have accepted your help," she said earnestly. "I'm sorry."

"Damn," Josh thought. There was a tone of defeat in her voice, but the sincerity stood tall.

"A wise old lady once told me that one person doing everything would make it happen, but everyone doing something would make it work," Josh said.

Diotima's signature sheisty smirk finally began to grow back. She heaved a deep breath, looking into the fire.

"I take it back," She said. "Doing everything sucks."

They laughed together, and for a second, the four young adults forgot the horrors that surrounded their campsite glow. They forgot the context of their camping trip, and enjoyed the spirit of adventure by complete accident.

"I'm just glad you got pissed *after* you figured it out," Josh said, siphoning her snark. "I hate writing in the dark."

"Yeah, and Yoshi's campfire stories wouldn't hit the same with just a flashlight," Diotima cut herself short.

"No way!" she said to Josh quietly. "He's singing to her!"

Josh sat up a bit taller and cracked his head in the direction of Yoshi and Rose. Indeed, he was singing. Not the eyes-locked, soft and romantic kind of singing, but the songs of a grown, albeit young, man feeling whimsical. They rest their heads together on the same S.C.A.B.B. pack and watch the radiant stars above.

Cringe? Or...?

As he turned to Diotima to get her read on it, her voice rang loud.

"Turn it up, Yoshi!" She called through the snapping fire. "I know this one!"

If she was trying to embarrass him, she failed. He did as he was bidden and bellowed his voice into the darkness. Joining the audience against his will, Josh recognized the lyrics and melody from a popular song he had heard growing up. A "banger," he would say.

Rose joined in right away, playfully taunting Diotima as well. Diotima then shot Josh an expression of disbelief and amusement. It seemed by the laugh in her eye, she was holding back a cringe, but the songbirds paid no mind.

Actually, I respect it.

Josh joined in, and now three non-singers gave the night a show it wouldn't soon forget.

"Oh no," Diotima called sarcastically, "You're crazy, too."

He gave his performance a rest to banter. "We have a campfire, new friends, and we have a lot to be afraid of," Josh said. "I think singing together is the least crazy thing about today."

Diotima rolled her eyes and walked to the girls' tent. As the duet quieted behind louder ruminations, Josh thought harder about what he had just said.

His words he had uttered mere seconds ago, had already taken a new effect.

Can spirits be afraid? I wonder how their experience would change if they could hold hands around a campfire and sing... or something equivalent.

How many generations of humans have done what we are doing now? It's become a forgotten ritual, encircling a fire, to stave off the dangers lurking in the dark, and celebrating with a song. It's pretty nice being alive...

A sharp ringing slowly began to oppress him as he pondered by the light. He just admitted how great it is to be alive! That train of thought passively arriving in his mind halted him in his tracks. Hearing the sentiments of his internal monologue gave him pause, gave him goosebumps. *Did I really mean that?*

Seconds later, the zipper of the ladies' tent buzzed, and two sets of footsteps approached. Diotima and Peyton had emerged with warmer smiles than any fire could forge. Diotima began singing and clapping the same song, encouraging Peyton to join.

With peer pressure from Diotima, it was only a matter of moments before Peyton had caved and begun singing herself. Yoshi and Rosemary were elated that the show might go on, and they joined the song once again.

Wow... being alive is the fucking best.

S.C.A.B.B. suddenly tasted sour as he began to think more. He felt a mission to control or dominate the entities. He wondered what a little bit of empathy, and a little bit of song could do.

Spirits must be jealous of us, right?

In between a phrase, Yoshi broke off from the choir to invite Josh back in.

"C'mon, Josh!" he yelled across the glowing campsite. "We already know you know it!"

Peer pressure succeeds again. Being surrounded by brave people has a cascading effect, Josh remembered again. Tonight, he learned that being surrounded by people who choose to

sing, has a similar effect: Fear is loud, insecurity screeches while rage explodes. All the while, a song of praise can mute it all.

The music eventually came to an end. The fire was put out. The Arañitas crawled into their tents, but the song had only strummed its first chord. Valentine would be happy to know their batteries were fully charged when they woke up on the second day of their journey.

—

The little spiders were happy as well. To Josh's amazement, the sun was going down the next day before any complaints about sweat, foot pain, or hunger were voiced. They had high spirits, motivation, and a stronger union than ever before.

After a lunch break from the monotonous march, the crew had been traveling for about an hour.

"Wait, I think it's time," Peyton called from the front as she slowed to a stop. "The mountain is as big as my thumb now. We're in range of the hotspot."

Josh, as the caboose in their line, felt a chill coming on.

"So who wants to wear the spok-specs?" he said.

I sure don't.

Josh's enthusiasm had been cooked away slowly in the desert afternoon. Foreboding thoughts loomed like distant clouds with every step, yet he had nothing to blame those worries on. He could only imagine forgotten nightmares plagued him in the night before. The faded memory of being watched in his dreams remained through his walk through the wide Sonoran valley.

"I'll do it," Yoshi said, pulling a pair from his vest pocket. He patted his chest twice, just over his guitar-pic amulet, before switching on the specs. A calming breath followed.

You feeling weird too?

"So..." Yoshi said aloud. "I feel like I'm looking into outer space right now."

"No clouds? No trails?" Rose asked eagerly.

"I mean, there's a big cloud around the sun, but it's..." he stuttered. "It's just a red cloud, I dunno."

"Well, let's keep on the trail for a while. It looks like a good spot to pitch tents right down by that stream," Peyton suggested.

"Wait, no, it doesn't," Diotima interjected. "There's probably a lot of predators around there when it's dark."

"Good point," Peyton said, retreating into her shoulders somewhat.

"Should we just end it here early? Track any anomalies to the center of the hotspot in the morning so we can start heading back before it's too hot?" Rose asked the group.

On cue, they each scanned the group to vote silently before speaking aloud.

Why else would we wait until morning? Are they scared?

"I like it," Yoshi spoke first. "I'm dying right now."

It was miserably hot, even though they had about two more hours of sunlight to bear. Peyton hissed a sigh as she swung her S.C.A.B.B. pack off her shoulder onto the floor.

Josh watched her as she began unpacking for the camp. He recognized the obvious frustration, but puzzled himself at the source.

"She must have wanted the investigation tonight," he thought. *"Why can't you talk to us, Peyton?"* he wondered. His failure to understand her frustration stayed with him until the sun began to fall behind the mountains.

Perhaps, by now, he was truly an Arañita. He could deduce no other reason why his skin felt like it was crawling so often. Soon, the waning moon would take center stage, and new feelings with it.

After the tents came the campfire, but nary a word was spoken in that time. A silence that went on, amplifying into a dead quiet all around them. No electricity whirring, no distant voices or

commotion. The campfire sounds became so familiar, as they too faded into obscurity. The tall saguaro cacti that populated the desert created silhouettes reaching for the silent night.

"Man, aren't we a fun bunch?" Yoshi mocked at the campfire.

"I'm starting to feel weird energies," Peyton said as soon as the silent tension was broken.

"Anyone else?"

"What do you mean?" Rose asked worriedly. "What kind?"

That's not what I'm feeling, right? Just anxiety.

Rosemary had shuffled to grab a notebook and pen from her backpack.

"Ugh, I don't know," Peyton said, zipping her S.C.A.B.B. vest pocket back and forth. "I had weird dreams last night, and I have had the feeling all day that—"

"That we're being watched?!" Rose jumped in with a spark.

A shade of color had washed out of Peyton's face, and likely Josh's too. His stomach lurched twice over. Peyton sat like a statue. The light in the sky started to fade.

"Why did you say that?" Josh asked Rose. "I mean, what made you say that?"

"I've been feeling the same thing," She replied.

Her pen had touched down on the paper, but she looked grim towards Josh. He had never seen such an authoritative gaze from a delicate flower. He saw Diotima shifting out of the corner of her eyes, and turned to her as she looked down into her palms. Her mouth had fallen open at some point.

She shot her head up, "The specs!"

Instantly, the five of them had whipped their hands into their vest pockets and equipped their spec-spocs. The sound of the low crackling fire masked the light humming of the device, but Josh suspected they had all been up and running fast.

"WOAH WOAH WOAH!" Yoshi began frantically repeating.

Josh saw only darkness. In a moment, he dropped his specs to see which direction Yoshi was facing. He cracked like lightning, throwing the glasses back on and looking into the desert behind him.

A blue fog billowed like a haboob just a few miles behind. It rolled slowly in their direction.

"What the hell is that?!" Diotima roared from the blackness through his glasses.

A terrible warning screeched to a halt at the front of Josh's mind.

"Why is it blue?" he said to no answer.

When he dropped his glasses again to look at his posse, they were each in a loop of scanning the environment with and without their spok-specs. It was disorienting, like trying to perfectly align film strips to see the full picture.

"What do we—"

"There's a face!" Yoshi screamed. "I can see a fucking face in the middle! Look!"

Rose was holding tight onto Yoshi's arm as her shaking hand lifted the glasses once more.

"Where is it?" Diotima called? "I don't see it!"

I don't see it, I don't see it, I don't see it...

"Right in the middle! It's got big eyes and a mouth!" he panted. He started walking further back, losing Rose's grip. "It's— I lost it."

What's going on? What do we do?

"I swear," Yoshi started scrambling. "It was a face inside the cloud! It had horns and crazy eyes! How could you not see it?"

"Hey!" Josh snapped. "We believe you. Take a breath, man."

Yoshi again did as he was bidden, the crew looked to Josh like he was about to rally them.

"It looks far away, we have time before it gets near us, let's talk," Josh said.

"I say we get the fuck out of here, dude!" Yoshi yelled.

"Think about it," Josh said sternly. "We are stuck between the hotspot and the spectral nebula. Where do we go?"

"We can't run, Yoshi," Diotima said. "That's what prey do."

"You think it's a predator?" Rose asked, panning between Diotima and Yoshi.

"Wait—" Josh said. "Just take a breath, everyone. I believe you saw something, Yoshi. I didn't see it, but I believe you. Let's try to see if our other equipment can catch something, too."

And maybe then we can panic...

Everyone was moving with caffeine jitters despite being dehydrated in reality. Josh set up his REM pod about 100 feet from the new camp in the direction of the cloud, while Peyton followed him out with her full-spectrum camera. If a spirit of any kind was approaching the camp, they would be the first to prove it.

"Did you want to take some shots?" Josh asked.

Peyton still had been missing a human flesh color to her skin; she nervously held the heavy camera in front of her chest without raising it once. She followed Josh like a brave puppy. *She was so eager to be the photographer a few days ago.*

"At first," she broke. "At first, I was upset I wouldn't be using this for our investigation."

Josh was still on one knee, activating his REM pod while she looked for the words.

"There's not supposed to be demons out here," Peyton said with a sunken face.

"Peyton, we don't know anything for sure right now," he said in a reassuring tone.

"You said you believe him!" She cried.

"That doesn't mean he's right," he said calmly. "That's what we're trying to figure out, that's why S.C.A.B.B. picked us. And remember, we can always mark the location for wranglers and let them handle it when we get back. We have options, we don't have to be af—"

A mechanical beeping alarmed him enough to cut his words. Josh and Peyton were both attentive to Yoshi at the source of the noise. Muffled by the distance, they could still make out a four-letter word he said to himself.

"Come on," Josh said to Peyton as they approached the camp again. "Yoshi! What are you reading?"

"The temperature dropped two degrees, but I can't tell if it's because the sun is going down," Yoshi said. "I need the book to see what these atmosphere readings mean."

It occurred to Josh, perhaps spending more time preparing for encounters and familiarizing themselves with equipment would have been of huge value.

If we went on this assignment in two weeks, would this still have happened? Damn! We were so starving for information that we bit off more than we could chew.

"Rose, what are you drawing?" Yoshi asked worriedly.

She had markings on a notebook that were undecipherable from Josh's angle.

"I thought I was feeling a connection," She answered. "I tried to draw or scribble whatever was popping into my head, but I lost it."

"A connection to what?" Diotima asked. "What did you draw?"

"I don't exactly know, but there was some kind of pattern or repetition. A person in the middle, then these four shapes just started happening. I feel like they are trying to communicate."

"They!?" Diotima repeated as if offended. "Rose, what are you saying?"

She gasped sharply. "Shh! Listen!"

Josh paused all moving and thinking.

From her vest pocket, Diotima drew a voice recorder and beeped it on over the silence.

"Should we ask something?" Peyton asked in a whisper.

Nobody spoke. They listened with focus like they were identifying what caused a fleeting shadow.

"Yoshi," Josh whispered, indicating for him to check his equipment.

"The only thing that's different is the humidity," Yoshi whispered. "That shouldn't be changing, should it?"

Over the sound of Peyton ziggling and zagging her amulet on her vest, Diotima whispered sharply to Yoshi.

"We're in the middle of the desert in the fucking summer! Why else would it change?" she said to him.

"D, it's still monsoon season," Josh reminded her. "We can't be certain those readings mean supernatural."

"I'm not from here," Diotima shared. "I don't even know what that means. But Rose literally just felt a presence! That's two pieces of evidence that point in the same direction."

Are we calling that evidence?

"My REM pod has been quiet," he reminded her.

"Probably because it's too far away," she said. "Bring it over here!"

Volumes had gone back to normal, and Peyton still held her camera like she was posing for a photo herself. Josh walked off, disgruntled, but said nothing. He was even careful not to say anything with his body language, knowing Diotima is a vulture for that kind of thing.

The others remained quiet, hoisting their dominant ears towards the speaker on the recorder as they instantly replayed their recording. Josh kicked a rock beside him until he had reached the exact position where he departed from his REM pod.

It was gone.

Chapter 17: Contact

Josh spun around once or twice. He was absolutely certain his REM pod was left there, but could see no sign of it.

Maybe an animal? We would have heard it beeping from here if anything came near it, right?

Deeply, he stared into the former location of his REM pod. He soon noticed the impression it left in the sand, surrounded by smooth, undisturbed ground.

Upon looking back towards his posse, they were once again in discussion; indistinct syllables traveled to him, but none of their eyes did.

'Beeeeep!'

The unmistakable sound of his REM pod. The same sound he had heard a dozen times, trying to figure it out back at the Bronze Pot. It was far closer to where the ominous blue cloud had been coming from. It was deeper than he had been willing to travel.

How the...?

Josh put his spok-specs on before tracking any further. He took a slow breath before turning them on.

I'm not going into the cloud by myself if it's in there... One... two... three.

Josh held his eyes shut tight as he flicked the switch on the bridge of the glasses. He opened his eyes to find himself enveloped deep within the blue fog already. He looked back to his posse. The spectral nebula had overtaken them too.

Beeeeep! Deeper into the fog, his REM pod called for him. Something was nearby, activating it.

The blue clouds that had billowed through were interacting with the physical world, and the use of the glasses finally made sense to Josh. He could see the fog leaving negative space

where a cactus might be, or where rocks carved its flow. Finally, he could investigate without taking the specs off to repeatedly orient himself.

Beeeeep!

If he can see, he can walk. If he can walk, there is a path. Josh began a push-step march, slow, towards the beeping sound. He kept his spok-specs on, walking through the desert with only an impression of the physical world.

Beeeeep! He was close.

He halted. He faced the beeping REM pod that was within 10 yards, but no visual anomalies. An armless cactus stood before him, blocking the flow of fog.

Is it brave to keep the specs on or take them off?

The cactus shape spoke. A man's voice, calm, yet alarming as could be.

"Take them off," he said.

Josh heard the wind as he swiped his glasses off, startled by the man.

He beheld the monstrous face which Yoshi had seen in the fog, and it was no demon. It was a man. The stranger wore a red mask with the face of an Oni upon it. His eyes had a hypnotic effect, like looking into the soul of someone shell-shocked. Sure enough, fangs protruded from his fierce mouth.

Instinctively, Josh had taken a fighting stance. At a comfortable 45-degree angle, he stood with his arms held waist high and ready for anything. In the time he had been wearing his spok-specs, the sky had caught on fire. The warming blue had now transformed into a blazing sunset. It would be beautiful to look at, if only Josh could peel his gaze off those yellow eyes.

"Who are you?" Josh demanded.

The trance was broken, and Josh could finally give him the ocular patdown. He had draping cloth hanging from his body, but a large brace over his right wrist and hand. From a quick glance, it looked like it was constructed with bones.

"You can see exactly what I am," The calm gravel voice responded.

They stood in locked positions. Josh had taken a crescent step forward with his left foot. He observed the demon man facing Josh with his feet, hips, and shoulders squared to him.

He isn't getting into a fighting stance... What are you doing?

Josh was not concerned with conversation; he was still deciding between fight or flight. Josh replied nothing to the Oni-Man's vague and mysterious claim. A weak wind picked up as he pocketed the spok-specs slowly.

Josh's left hand extended in front of him, showing his palm as a sign of peace. Simultaneously, his right hand was held just above his waist, as though expecting a war.

Josh was showing his cards. He had entered a jiu-jitsu stance at a snail's pace to watch Oni's reaction.

There was no reaction. He couldn't read the man's eyes underneath the demon mask, but Josh watched him stand too casually for comfort.

"Are they your friends?" he said.

MY TEAM!

Adrenaline began running, but already being in a fighting stance triggered Josh to breathe and stay sharp. How far had Josh been from his team right now? And would they hear him if he made enough noise?

Can't take my eyes off him.

"ANSWER ME!" barked the masked villain.

Josh only squinted his eyes at the demon, utterly perplexed. The only fact Josh could grasp was that the Arañitas would have been wondering where he was by now, and they would have heard the demon screaming in the barren wasteland they inhabited.

Oni marched on Josh for a pace or two. In response, he shrank into his Jiu-Jitsu stance with better form, ready for what came next.

But the Oni pointed at Josh and roared once more.

"It's just us out here, now!" Oni said. "And it's time to talk!"

"What have you done?" Josh said, still focused on his stance.

It wasn't an arm brace that Oni pointed at Josh; it was a weapon. Bones tied together on his wrist secured a small animal skull over his knuckles. A singular fang protruded from the base of the jaw, positioned on top of his knuckles.

Knife defense drills... I got this, I got this, I got this.

"Don't worry about what I've done," he said with a tempered fury. "Worry about what you have to do."

The sun was getting lower, and the sunset was falling apart. Golden hour was over. Deep vermilion cascaded upwards from the western horizon

"You shall be my harbinger," Oni said. "You will help me on my quest if you want to hear their voices again."

I got this, I got this, I got this.

"You are going to run back to whatever S.C.A.B.B. facility you came from and deliver some terms for me," the demon continued. "Every book, every drawing, every EVP that has any connection to spoks, and DEU MOR will be mine. When you return, I will release the others."

"What did you do to them?" Josh demanded again, unconcerned with the strange demands.

Oni seemed to have different expectations for his grand introduction; Every passing second, he filled with anger, soon to overflow. Every siren in Josh's head told him to remain calm.

"Nothing they'll remember," Oni said. "All I need to do is touch their skin, and they will wake, but only when my demands have been met."

Can I save them without you?

"S.C.A.B.B. is not what you think it is," said the Oni, shifting his tone and strategy. "They see supernatural entities and kill them, cage them. The wranglers found a way to kill spoks! They found it because they were *looking* for it. Do you really think the good guys are the ones killing the very entities that can't pass on?"

"You want me to be on team demon?" Josh scoffed.

The self-proclaimed Oni did not possess half the aura he was hoping for. Frustrated, he opened his arms wide.

"I am the Oni," he said. "To ward off evil, to—"

NOW!

Josh lunged at Oni, grabbing the crown of the skull on his hand as he held it away from his body. His other arm shot under his armpit so he could prepare to throw him upon the ground. It was a throw he had drilled hundreds of times.

Yellow eyes flashed at him with a headbutt, and one of the fangs upon the red mask cut his cheek deep. Followed by a stiff two-arm shove, the demon and his harbinger had a few feet between them.

Josh wiped his cheek with the back of his hand; the sweaty glaze from before had made the blood from his wound spread like hot butter. A split second passed before they engaged again. It was unclear who truly had the stare of a demon in their sunset standoff.

He doesn't know how to fight!

Oni used his opening move to approach Josh, winding a heavy overhand strike with his left hand.

Not at all...

Josh knew if anyone swung big and missed big, they would almost certainly throw another wild fist to compensate. Oni's hand with the fang poking out must be avoided.

Josh easily slipped to the outside of his initial strike. On cue, the demon's right hand tried to pierce Josh in the stomach, but he caught the fist with both hands.

Being one step ahead may have saved him from a puncture, but he failed to be two steps ahead. With both hands tight around the strange, fanged fist, Josh couldn't avoid the heavy left hand smashing into his left eye.

What am I doing?

This was no sparring match; this was a street fight in the deep desert. Huffing and grunting filled the air in their struggle until Josh pinned the weapon to his right hip and slid his other hand onto the back of Oni's neck. No more brutish brawling.

Josh's left arm on the inside of Oni's grip prevented him from being shoved off again. At this point, muscle memory took the wheel from Josh.

He heaved his weight behind him, falling to his back while bringing Oni down with him. On the descent, Josh lifted his legs to wrap them around Oni's hips. Crashing onto dirt and rocks was far less forgiving than three-inch thick wrestling mats, but Josh had to control the demon.

Just like he'd practiced with his jiu-jitsu coach, Josh placed his right knee upon Oni's chest, and his left leg parallel to Oni's knees on the ground.

PULL!

Josh stayed on the floor, with Oni secured on top of him. Josh ripped Oni's right hand across to his opposite shoulder. Being hoisted by his right knee, Josh had successfully flipped him over his left leg onto his back.

MOUNT!

Like a wolf spider, Josh climbed on top of Oni. Struggle all he may, the demon could not free himself from Josh's control. He ripped the mask off instinctively. It came from a place of ego, of gloating. Josh dominated the demon predator like prey, but he must always look his opponent in the face.

He was ordinary in his eyes; gone was the haunting, deep yellow gaze. Unkempt and sparse facial hair decorated his scarred and angry face. He was just a man again, pretending to be something more.

Josh transitioned to his right arm. He held on to it like he was sliding down a flagpole, only if the pole had an elbow, and was a few pounds of force away from snapping. Oni began to roar in pain.

With the sweetspot found, Josh maintained pressure on the armbar.

What do I do now?

At the price of releasing some of the pressure, Josh peeled the animal skull apparatus off his hand.

"Wait!" Oni yelled. "Don't kill me! I only want to free them! The spoks!"

Contortion took Josh's face at the claim.

Oni, with his free left hand, drew a tuning fork from under his robes and hit it on the ground three times.

"What are you doing?" Josh yelled.

"I'm going to prove it!" he strained.

Four floating apparitions faded into view, standing around the men struggling on the floor. Mesmerized by materializing spoks, Josh could no longer hold the armbar.

"Fuck!" Exclaimed Oni as he massaged his elbow.

Josh stood up and blinked repeatedly and heavily. Each time his eyes opened, the spoks remained, without the need for his specialized glasses.

In his mind's eye, he focused upon the amulet on his chest, the iris over his heart.

Protect me...

With a glance, Josh eyed the weapon and mask Oni had been disarmed of as he approached one of the Spoks.

"I bet they didn't teach you this," Oni said.

He faced one of the spoks. Their fully formed bodies were less blue than they were in his glasses, but he did not doubt the reality he faced.

Emotionless, they stood like they had no control after they summoned. There was no indication they were aware of their surroundings. They were different from the spok he had seen in the Bronze Pot. The abstractness in the face was familiar, but it was like these four had grown.

Stillness held their bodies as sentinels of a dark secret.

Oni held his arms wide and opened his palms to the statue-esque spok.

"When they manifest in the real world, they look like this," He told Josh with his back turned. "Not your average ghost, huh?"

"Why do they obey you?" Josh asked.

"I gave this life to them," Oni said.

Life?

"Which means I alone," he continued. "Can provide their passage."

Oni had placed his hands under the arms of the spok before him. At first, the spectre remained incorporeal, untouchable. The hands of a demon slowly found resistance as the iridescent spok began to radiate.

Soft mumbles from Oni were indistinct to Josh, but the spok certainly heard it. Even more miraculous than watching a spok form in front of his very eyes, Josh was entranced as the brightening spirit turned its head slowly towards Oni.

While facial features seemed unable to remain consistent, Josh was noticing a reaction he could not understand.

At once, Oni pulled his arms into himself, like he was absorbing the spok. A wave of heat took Josh by surprise. Cold temperatures would be normal around a spirit, but this shockwave of heat was unfamiliar, even to a long-time desert dweller.

The spok was gone. Only three remained.

"Passage," Oni said, turning to Josh again.

"To where?" Josh continued to inquire.

"Guess..." Oni said with a devilish smirk.

A chill returned to Josh like he had never felt warmth before. Every hair on his arms, neck, and even back stood from their seat. Seeing such a man smile made him feel dirtier than he already was.

Where did it go?

"I don't understand," said an honest Josh.

"Why should you?" groveled Oni. "S.C.A.B.B. will protect themselves with the cognitohazard shield until they've possessed you with their ideologies. Before you know it, you will be fighting in their army."

Josh's head sank with the weight of information overload. A depression in his shoulders sagged lower with every phrase Oni uttered.

"Look at me," Oni said. "There's no human resources for a supernatural creature bureau. They sit on the throne built upon rotten values. When diplomacy has failed, the demon uses fear."

"No," Josh said, inflating his chest. "I deny you of my fear. S.C.A.B.B. is flawed, but I will never help you buy change with blood."

Oni collected his mask from the dirt and raised it to his face. Josh could only read Oni's reactions through subtle body language. Nothing was concrete, and Josh could have been talking to a brick wall for all he knew.

"You don't have the scope to argue morals with me," Oni hissed with a returned fury. "This is your first investigation, isn't it? Out here chasing little anomalies and cold pockets, right? You probably haven't been told anything about spoks or DEU MOR."

Josh swallowed hard but tried to maintain his poker face.

"There's a war going on, kid," Oni said as he stepped in closer, shifting his tone once again. "I'm trying to learn everything I can to prevent it from claiming more life."

"You threatened my friends, tried to stab me..." Josh recalled, gesturing to Oni's discarded weapon on the floor. "...only so you can recruit me to be a peacekeeper with you?"

If Josh knew better, he would say he broke through to Oni. His words gave the demon pause as he, too, lowered his gaze to the ground.

"I'm sorry. You were right," Oni said flatly.

"What?" said an utterly dumbfounded Josh. The inflection and emotion of his voice had been changing too jarringly to keep track of.

"I have been using the master's tools," Oni said.

Wow! Is he getting it?

"Yes, exactly," Josh said nervously.

Oh man, what now?

"What's your name, kid?" Oni asked, with a relaxed posture and transfixed demon eyes.

"Josh Little Tree," he said. "What about you?"

"I'm nobody. Just an Oni for the last couple of years," he said. "And I have caused so much terror."

"Everyone has done bad things," Josh said earnestly. He broke through, now it was a rare opportunity to plant a core of beauty and remove the one of wrath. "Think about what you can do tomorrow."

"You think I can make up for what I've done?" Oni asked.

Josh looked into the darkening desert towards his camp. At the very bottom of all the layers, he was angry. His friends were still out of sight and unsafe. Part of him wanted to lunge at Oni again and break his arm for real this time. If he hadn't just established the opposite sentiment

to Oni, perhaps he would have. Josh continued his best to rebuke the evil from Oni's heart with nervous rambles.

"I don't know what you've done. I don't know if anyone can make up for anything, if I really think about it..." Josh said with a grave stare. "But you can do better things tomorrow, and you should."

"Thank you, Josh Little Tree," said Oni, even more mysterious as the darkness continued to deepen. "Never underestimate what a brave blue boy scout can inspire."

Oni turned and began to walk into the desert alone. Josh thrust his left hand towards him and grabbed him by the elbow.

"Hey! My friends!" he shouted.

"As I told you: touch," Oni said. Backing away mysteriously.

"What will you do now?" Josh asked, believing in Oni's fix for his friends.

"I will move forward," he said as he started to walk. "I'll try to be different, better."

His standard volume became quiet, even for a still desert. Josh was still rather surprised by how efficiently he was able to talk the demonic assailant down, but his heart raced with uncertainty for his friends.

Josh let Oni walk a few paces into the desert, beckoning the spoks he had summoned, yet leaving his fang-fist behind. Finally running to his friends' previous locations, Josh leaped over small bushes, burrows, and boulders to return. As he entered the warm glow of their campsite, he found each of them on the floor as if sleeping.

Not sleeping, but stolen. Josh stared at them scattered across the site, hoping he could steal them back. He knelt on the ground beside Diotima, who had been the furthest outside the center of camp.

Please wake up.

He reached for her wrist, but never made contact, as a static shock closed the distance. The spark retracted Josh's hand and defibrilated Diotima from her stolen slumber as she gasped her consciousness back.

A deep groan escaped Josh. It escaped from underneath the crippling fear of losing his friends and surviving a demon ambush.

Chapter 18: Postpartum Possession

Diotima yelped as the shock woke her. She swung a fist instinctively at Josh, but his reflexes were still warm enough to catch the clubbed hand.

"Whoa, D, it's okay," Josh said. "It's Josh, you're alright."

She hyperventilated as her eyes darted around the dark desert. Josh held her wrists for a moment until she finally locked eyes with him.

"Oh no!" she said with a sudden alertness. "What happened? Why are you bleeding?"

In the moment, Josh had forgotten the gash still dripping onto his face. He wiped a dirty finger across his face to see the deep red blood, oozing slowly.

Nerves finally kicked in. Adrenaline finally faded. Suddenly, Josh felt a weightless chest and a cold face, even breathing heavy as Diotima was now.

"JOSH!" she yelled. "Tell me what happened right now!"

To the best of his ability, Josh began recounting the sequence to himself. Navigating the fog seemed a distant memory now, as if it had happened hours ago. The dry blood and dirty sweat restricted his movements. He was crusty as he stared at the dirt, reliving his terrible memory.

His terrorized brain was recording so many details during his heightened state. His failure to take a deep breath since it occurred made him tell each of those details to Diotima like he was convincing himself it truly happened.

"Then I heard a voice tell me to take them off, and it was exactly what Yoshi saw in the clouds," Josh repeated. "He tried to force me to collect something for him in order to save you guys."

"Wait!" Diotima screamed with a fearful look. "What did you do for him?"

"No, I didn't do anything," Josh affirmed. "We scuffled a bit, but we talked it out, and he told me how to wake you up."

"What do you mean, talked it out!?" she yelled, as she stood up with indignation. "You can't gloss over that!"

"We need to wake everyone up, and I can tell you all," Josh asked. He held his palms to her, tired and unwilling to fight any more.

"How did you wake me up?" Diotima said as she knelt beside Peyton. "You didn't have to do any weird ritual, did you?"

She reached down to grab Peyton on the sides of her arms to speak to her, but was stopped by a sharp static shock.

"Ah!" Diotima shrieked as Peyton's eyes flashed open. She had crossed her arms over her chest as if she were tazed, and did not shake the lock-up after Diotima called her names a few times.

"Peyton, Peyton! It's okay, I have you," Diotima said. Her frustration was invisible as she cradled Peyton back to reality.

"That's basically it," Josh said.

"Go wake up those two then," Diotima called back.

Down on one knee again beside Yoshi, pain set in all over Josh. His eye from the punch, the cut, and his back from slamming onto the desert all ached.

Come on, Yoshi.

An arc of electricity bowed from Josh's hand to Yoshi's wrist as he reached for it.

Yoshi's eyes opened slowly at first, but clicked open the rest of the way, and he began crawling backwards and whimpering like a dog.

"Yoshi! Calm down, it's us!" Josh said, flashing his palms.

"That wasn't real! That didn't happen!" Yoshi said, panicked.

"It's over, I promise," Josh called to him. "What happened?"

"Where's Rose?" He cried.

"Yoshi, it's okay," responded Josh. "She's right there."

Without standing all the way to his feet, Yoshi rolled to his knees and crawled the remaining few yards to Rose's location. Instinctively, he reached for her hand and endured the shock.

"Rose, are you okay?!" he asked frantically as she came to. "Rose, it's me, can you hear me?"

By the crumpling of his vest, Josh could tell she was squeezing him hard. She nodded at him with swelling eyes, and they hugged tight.

"Dude," Diotima said, standing behind Josh. "What. The fuck. Happened?" she demanded.

Knowing everyone was safe, Josh finally caught up to his breath. He pitched the story just the same again, sharing every detail and observation his mind wrote down in the panic.

—

"You let him *leave!*?" Yoshi roared.

"What if he was lying?" Diotima said.

"Guys!" Josh said, increasingly impatient. "I convinced him he was wrong, and he told me how to save you, so I came to save you."

"Ugh," Diotima said, rolling her eyes. "You did the right thing, but I don't like it."

"He wanted to know about spoks, and what did he call it?" Peyton asked, detached from her anxiety.

"DEU MOR?" Josh said, trying to recollect. "If he kept going on about the spok-human war, I'm guessing it has something to do with that."

"Oh shit!" Yoshi exclaimed with eureka. "DEU MOR must be the dude that's telling spoks to come for us, that's what Valentine was saying when Josh found the spok inside, right? A demon from the future?"

"No, this is bad," Diotima said calmly, but seriously. "What do we do? Could we seriously be on the wrong side of something huge?"

"Let's take it one step at a time," Josh told the group. "Let's try to get some sleep tonight, and we'll talk about it in the morning, okay?"

"Sleep?" said Rose, rubbing her forehead.

Out of fear, the Aranitas kept their radios on while they tried to wind down. Yoshi slept with his head by the zipper entrance. Every 15 minutes or so, he was poking outside to get a reading from his barometer, yet consistently boring measurements recurred.

Josh, on the other hand, stared at the stars that shone through the tightly stretched nylon tent. He replayed the conversation with Oni over and over, reviewed his takedowns and defense over and over.

His body was exhausted, with all the excitement, he realized it was at the end of one of the most grueling, physically intensive days of his life. Walking through the desert for hours at a time, then fighting off a demon, was a normal day for him now.

Eventually, it seemed Yoshi had drifted to sleep. A restless kind, fraught with twitching and huffing.

Is that from sleeping in a tent, or is he having nightmares?

A quiet voice on the men's radio came through.

"Either of you awake?" asked the radio.

While still staring at the ceiling of his tent, Josh reached for the radio to respond.

"Josh here," he said.

"Come outside," the radio replied.

Josh heard the nearby zipper from the ladies' tent before he got up, and as he stepped carefully over Yoshi and his equipment just outside, he saw Diotima, facing into the black, barren desert.

"Trouble sleeping?" Josh spoke softly.

"Takes one to know one," she said.

Before he reached a sitting position beside her, she turned back to the darkness and spoke again.

"I'm sorry for getting mad at you again, I'm glad you made the decisions you did," she said to Josh's curious side eye. "I still don't know what happened when we got knocked out, but I was devastated to be helpless like that. I'm just frustrated, and I didn't see it at the time."

"Thanks for saying that, D," Josh said with a bit of understanding. A silence grew between them.

Please have a plan...

"We should talk," Diotima told him.

Josh nodded silently, and an accidentally sarcastic delivery slipped out.

"What the fuck are we going to do?" she asked the still sands beyond the camp. "We already had a bad feeling about S.C.A.B.B., and I think we were right. I don't think I can live like this."

With no idea what to say or what to do, Josh became frustrated as well. He rubbed his knuckles like he was getting them to shine, but they were callused and dry as usual.

"Remember when we played chess?" Diotima asked him. "We were making this plan, and I told you I trust you."

Silently, Josh nodded again.

"Do you trust me?" She asked, looking straight through his eyes.

Her gaze pierced with such a genuine honesty that there was no defending from it. Diotima had been present with his spirit, and he felt no urge to hide the truth from her.

"Are you trustworthy?" he asked, resisting his naive impulse.

"Yes," she said, staring true.

"Then tell me what you're thinking," he said.

"It's not what I'm thinking," she said. "It's what that demon has been thinking. Oni knows S.C.A.B.B. but not the Bronze Pot. He knew there were secrets and that we could get them. I say we get them."

"Then what? Missy warned us about what happens when we peel a scab. It's not that I am against it, but I think there would be more cognitohazards if we try to stir the pot at this stage."

"What are you afraid of?" she asked.

"I'm not afraid, just cautious," he said. "I know how that sounds. I just want to have realistic goals and not die on this hill right away."

"Josh," Diotima said. "I'm going to stir. Are you the kind of man to be motivated by odds or motivated by goals?"

What kind of man? I don't know...

"If we do this together, we can do this," she said with finality.

"I think we need the rest of them, too. I think they are with us," Josh said, indicating to the tents behind them.

"Yeah, I don't see Ed and Lorraine fighting against us on this," Diotima said with a smirk.

"What do you mean?" Josh asked earnestly.

"I'll explain when you're older— we have bigger fish to fry," she said. "Let's debrief with the others on the walk back to the Bronze Pot tomorrow."

"What about the hotspot?" Josh asked.

"Are you kidding me?" she said. "We got jumped by an Oni and his cronies, and you want to stick around?"

"Well, what are we going to tell Valentine and George when we come back with nothing documented?"

"We lie," she said without missing a beat. "Tell them the sight was cold, update the map."
I dunno... That sounds wrong.

"I think we will do well to discuss it with the others in the morning, keep them involved," Josh suggested.

"Yeah, I should probably try sleeping again," she said. "Safe to say this was the craziest day of my life."

"I have a feeling we'll be saying that a lot," Josh said, standing up.

"Goodnight, Josh," Diotima said, walking to her tent. "Sweet dreams," she said sarcastically.

That's wishful thinking...

So Josh returned to his tent, making sure not to wake the soft-snoring Yoshi. He thought about what kind of dreams he would have if he could settle down and fall asleep. The decompression his brain needed was supernatural itself. Despite the mound of mental homework he had to do in processing the events of the whole day, his body was exhausted enough to fall asleep quickly after the short chat, even if it was with an Olympic troublemaker.

His subconscious, ever the enemy, struck again. His spiraling thoughts of what kind of nightmares his demon boss fight would produce sent him sliding into the nightmare factory stage of sleep.

He woke up on an alien planet, in the middle of nothing but flat, unfamiliar landscape. Scanning the horizons for any visual noise was useless, for heavy white fog encircled him. The sound of a lone bird screeching, yet impossible to locate.

Walking forward, Josh began to feel a gust of wind as though something was approaching behind him. Finally, he beheld a bird made of shadow swooping past him. As he made visual contact, the bird of darkness became angry. It began cawing like a raven as Josh backed away.

In the bird's rage, it called a swarm of friends upon Josh. All of them, pecking at his head and pulling his hair. He swatted and ran as hard as he could. In metronome-consistent mobs, the shadows pulled clumps of Josh's hair out until he had none on his head.

Amidst the panicked state, he woke himself up. Breathing rapidly, he took in the senses of his tent, his reality. The feeling of having his hair removed, and the weightless sensation was still fresh and raw. After a few tries, he domesticated his hyperventilating chest monster.

The tent was empty. Josh wiped the tension from the muscles in his face with a final deep breath before emerging into the morning.

"There he is," Yoshi said, loudly but without excitement. "As soon as you are ready to rock, we should get out of here."

Josh was respectful of everyone's eagerness to be on the move again as soon as possible. The Arañitas had met a consensus to go back to the pot before Josh woke up. He ate preserved beef jerky and did a light stretching routine before everyone began packing the campsite back up.

While they continued, they theorized. Connecting blurry dots with vague lines from their experiences thus far. They recounted each detail, ensuring they were all on the same page; laying out all the puzzle pieces, as Josh thought.

Yoshi reminded everyone that S.C.A.B.B. has the understanding that spoks are demonic, and following the will of their master, and the mysterious Oni was a person of high interest.

Peyton's input centered around Oni having knowledge like he is from a different S.C.A.B.B. facility. Diotima questioned what information he could have been looking for if he knew so much about spoks already.

Setting a trap at a point of interest on a map produced by S.C.A.B.B. was enough evidence for them all to agree upon a connection. Refusal to be connected by internet communication would explain why potential sister S.C.A.B.B. locations do not have the same data in the archives.

Their brain power had combined. The Arañitas were cutting through the fog of mystery with Occam's razor, yet one question was still shrouded in obscurity.

"But what is DEU MOR?" Diotima pondered. "Okay, let me keep this straight. Starting from the bottom, he wanted to kidnap S.C.A.B.B. recruits to ransom educational material on spoks and *DEU MOR*? I was thinking Oni was the demon leader at first."

"Yeah, I was thinking that too," Peyton chimed in.

"Then why would he think the Bronze Pot has more information for what he's looking for?" Diotima speculated. "Is DEU MOR the real one?"

"A legend that hasn't been told yet," Yoshi repeated. "That's what Valentine said, Oni must be trying to fill the role."

"Wait, is he still a threat or not?" Peyton asked.

"There's no way he changed his mind completely, sorry, Josh," Diotima said. "He may still try to free spoks, but his crusade against The Bronze Pot is probably over."

"Unless he lied so we could lead him back to the Bronze Pot," Rose said. "It would explain why he was camping near a hotspot."

A moment of awed silence among them as they tread back through the desert. The inner urge to look over their shoulders took more focus than watching for snakes for the rest of the trip. *That can't be...*

"What are we gonna do?" Rose asked.

Josh had been kicking a rock in the back of the line while they walked on their desert talk show. He appreciated hearing Rose's question. He instantly noted that her instinct was to do something about it. Like Diotima once said, it's bigger than life and death. He hoped Diotima had the same thought, because it was enough to earn *his* trust.

"We can't tell Valentine or anyone yet," Diotima said. "Let's make a plan amongst ourselves before we say anything."

"Why?" Peyton asked. "You think they would get us in trouble for being attacked?"

"No, nothing like that," Diotima said. "I don't trust them, but I'm deciding to trust you guys. I think S.C.A.B.B. is oppressive and patriarchal of entities. Oni was treating spokas as a means to his ends of power. That leaves us in the middle."

"I think D's right, guys," Josh said from the back. They had all stopped and turned so they could hear him better. "This situation is too serious for us to fall into a dichotomy. Going forward, we can use S.C.A.B.B.'s resources to learn more on our own."

"What are we going to do?" Peyton asked Josh. "Stop Oni from coming to power?"
No! I helped him. He doesn't want to do that.

"Josh, what do we do?" Yoshi echoed.

A frustrated Josh wanted to shrug off the responsibility of being asked for answers. Not one of them had more insight than the others. It then occurred to Josh that two of them had more knowledge.

"I found a spirit box," Josh said. Yoshi's eyes widened like a cartoon. While they should have been marching, they were standing at attention. "When we get back and rank up to bulls, we get permission to visit spok territories for investigation. We can try to communicate. That's step one."

"How are we going to rank up when we never even made an identification at the hotspot?" Peyton prodded again. "We have to complete a field trip to go up, right?"

"Damn it, you're right," Diotima answered. "If we tell them we couldn't find anything, we can't climb the cognitohazard wall. Stupid! Wait-wait!"

Her speed was remarkable. She stared into the clouds floating across the sky like they were carrying her ideas away.

"We don't need to rank up necessarily. Our maps show where known spok activity is," Diotima remembered. "The blue X's! The wranglers can keep going for the entities-physical, and we can go into spok territory under the guise it's another low-level investigation!"

"Wait, what if Oni is at those spots?" Yoshi asked.

Now that I think about it, how did he even end up at the exact same hotspot we did?

"I really think we got somewhere when we talked," Josh said. "I don't believe he would try to hit us with the same trick twice, especially with one less spok."

"I still don't even know what happened," Yoshi said in a depressed volume. "I had a dream or something; I was getting whipped around like a cat toy, but the last thing I remember I was reading my barometer."

"I dreamt something was playing with me like a puppet," Diotima said. "Was it a psychological thing?"

"I have heard some spirits can cause visions," Rose added. "I'm certain Oni and his spoks were affecting us longer than we realized."

Josh felt a chill down his spine that caused his torso to tremor. He ignored the embarrassment as it seemed a small reaction to him with all that was going on.

"Oh my god," Rose moaned. "Guys, we could have... died."

She held her hand over her mouth while the rest of the group watched her wrestle with her feelings. The four of them, mouths hung open, could muster nothing to say. No remedies. No one even made it as far as to remind her not to use religious language.

We ALL could have died...

Pushing from his back leg, Josh stepped in towards the group. He walked on and put his hand on the back of Yoshi's shoulder as he passed.

"We keep moving, always forward," Josh said gently.

Following suit, Yoshi hugged Rose from the side and held her hand as they joined the rest of the group to keep walking.

A few more hours of travel and they had reached sun's peak. On their break for food and rest, it was clear everyone had stirring thoughts and feelings. Knowing how much he thinks to himself, Josh was wondering what the thoughts of his friends sounded like.

"You know I'm thinking about right now?" Diotima asked into the seated circle.

Just say it, D...

Yoshi held two fingers up to his temple. Chewing a protein bar, he responded. "Yes, I am reading you..."

She rolled her eyes and overcame his sarcasm.

"Number one: Is the 'prophecy,' or information S.C.A.B.B. put together, really true?" Diotima wondered. "Number two: Is the future set in stone?"

Josh squinted at Diotima, "*Where is this going?*" He wondered.

Maybe there won't be a spok leader if we do enough. Can we end a war? A bunch of youngins?

"I feel like this is going to hurt my brain," Peyton said dismissively. "I thought prophecies were meant to be propaganda or something."

"Well, if more ghosts from the future end up following the orders of Oni and destroying S.C.A.B.B., it'll obviously be a real-deal prophecy," Yoshi contradicted.

"Yeah, and he's basically halfway there," Rose chimed in.

"Could someone else learn what he knows? Maybe it wasn't *meant* to be a prophecy, and Oni is just exploiting spok's?" Diotima rambled on. "Maybe spok's hate S.C.A.B.B. because they are shitty, not because some psychic medium wanted a reason to wage war."

"D," Josh said. She stopped to look at him. "Don't think too hard about it, maybe the cognitohazard hits when we drive ourselves mad."

"Dude, it's fine," Diotima replied. "I'm just postulating."

"You're right. I'm sorry," Josh said, putting his hand over his heart. "I know what it's like to have spiraling thoughts, I'm just—"

"I'm not spiraling, Josh," Diotima jumped in. "There's a lot to think about. I'm thinking about it."

"You're right. I understand," Josh said.

Why is everyone so cranky?

"Okay, let's just keep going," Diotima said as she stood up, sighing in frustration.

I can't wait to go back to a shared dorm room with these chipper folks.

Throughout the rest of the trip, running from a gila monster and struggling through another sleepless night were the only significant highlights. Conversation remained on spoks, Oni, theories about DEU MOR, and what happens when we die.

Eventually, the desert became familiar again as the sun set. By the time darkness had reached full power, the distant glow of the Bronze Pot guided them back into their haunted home. As dreadful as the flickering lights and stale air were, the protection of walls and the promise of spiritual defense became a beacon.

At last, they wait in the foyer for the shaman to cleanse them. The anxious cold accompanied them as they spoke nothing of their trip, nor their secrets to the shaman. Mumbles and quiet chants were the last words spoken before the little spiders burned out their sage. Grumpily, Kettle waved them off to bed.

Diotima, walking in front, stopped at the bulletin board outside their room before returning. The handwritten note marking their absence was no longer alone. Competition times were listed on another sheet of paper. Being that it was the last thing any of the posse wanted to think about,

they walked into the room without so much as a scan. There were far more serious challenges on the horizon. Diotima plucked the Arañitas note from the board as she dragged her feet inside.

Unshakable was the weight of a secret. Shame, like a heavy blanket, was the burden they each carried to bed. Devastating exhaustion saw them flop into their bunks with a minimal nighttime routine. With final goodnights out of the way, they sank into dreamless sleep.

Chapter 19: I Will Survive

Josh stared at the competition day information in the morning. Thoroughly, he inspected the presentation and thought more about what was *missing* from the posting.

"Hey, Josh," Yoshi said lethargically, entering the hallway. "I'm gonna get some breakfast."

"*Dude is stressed.*" Josh thought as he nodded an acknowledgment to him. His eyes returned to the bulletin.

New Moon

Competition Times:

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*Josh - Boxing - Quarter sun height - Studio*

*Diotima - Chess - Quarter sun height - Auditorium*

*Peyton - Archery - Sun's peak - Yard*

On his return journey to the pot, Josh saw the sliver of moon big enough to know he had one more night before the moon was new again. He felt like he had come back from the trenches, and a sports competition failed to excite him now that he had endured so much.

He reflected on change and how he anticipated it would strike him. He would not run to his journal and profess he has undergone the dramatic metamorphosis into the man he'd always become.

*But it's starting to happen for sure...*

With his morning contemplations out of the way, he decided to abandon his usual routine and make for the archives. No breakfast; he wasn't hungry. No workout; he wasn't motivated.

"Hey, Josh!" called Missy from her desk. "I heard you guys got back late. How was your first investigation? Oh my gosh! What happened to your face?"

*Don't tell her!*

"Oh, right, this?" Josh said, randomizing a stammered excuse. "I just, uh, wasn't being careful and .."

"Do you need to go to the infirmary?" She asked.

"No, it's fine," He said. "I actually forgot about it until you said something."

"That's probably the most action anyone has ever seen during a low-level investigation," she said in an encouraging tone.

*I definitely believe that.*

"If you want pages to start logging, they are in the drawers on the desk by my helmet," Missy said, spinning in her swivel chair to point.

Although logging his investigation was not the reason he came to the archives, he was curious why Missy needed a helmet, and if it looked the way he was imagining. He stepped around her desk to inspect.

*Nope!*

Missy's helmet was perhaps as far away from her personal aesthetic as he could have imagined. At first glance, it looked like a cow mask, and then he wondered if that was intentional.

Sensors in the shape of slightly elliptical dishes were at the sides, where the ears of a mammal might be, and two bison-like horns covered in tight chain mail protruded from the silver base of the temples.

*Just like those spok handling gloves...*

"That's yours?" Josh asked, surprised.

"I know it's freaky looking, huh?" Missy said mildly. "You should have seen the old ones that covered our mouths."

"Why did you need it?" Josh asked.

"Well, I still do some wrangling here and there," said Missy, just before dropping her energy for a moment. "We had a situation while you guys were gone, some readings in the desert. I just wanted to have it nearby, just in case?"

"Like spok readings?" asked Josh.

Eyes shooting open, Missy cracked her eyes from corner to corner.

"Josh!" she said in a sharp whisper. "How do you know about that? I told you to be careful trying to poke around."

Josh remained poised.

"Valentine told us about them," Josh whispered in his defense. "Didn't they tell you I found a spok downstairs last week?"

"That was YOU!?" she said with a deeper concern. "Nobody tells me anything, I feel like a little pet up here sometimes."

Josh gave her the space to speak more, which she took.

"But yes, it was readings confirming movement of multiple spoks moving in the desert,"

*Uh oh.*

"So the helmet was just in case?" Josh asked, instantly regretting not having changed the subject.

"Those beams that look like horns carry a charge that deters them; they can't get into your mind that way," said Missy, as she stared into the black eyes of her helmet.

"Well, I'm just going to look at some books," Josh said, backing up.

"If you don't check anything out," Missy turned to him. "Don't forget to pick up some paper for your team's investigation report.

*What do I tell her? What do I say?*

He spent too long thinking to himself, and he had broken eye contact without saying a word. He closed the conversation by slowly backing away and then awkwardly turning to walk forward, just as slow.

*Stay cool.*

He meandered towards the shelving in the center of the room and peeked to see what Missy was doing, where she was looking. Not at him.

Swiftly, he moved with silent steps into the section of books on the entites spiritual. Something was trying to signal him. He felt a disturbance, but whether it was anatomical or spiritual, he was ignorant.

*Any spok books?*

As he scanned the leather-bound books, a thought occurred to him. Missy was a person who showed care for the Arañitas, with an implicit understanding of the dangers they faced. The Arañitas were hardly concerned with entity threats, but they were scared of *the man*.

Josh went through the roster of all the bulls and wranglers he had met and who might be willing to take their side. As a young man entering the world, he was insecure.

*How could I fix an organization with hundreds of years of history? What if the big and powerful people want things to stay the same as much as I want them to change? Time moves forward, and so do we. They can't expect to have the same playbook forever, right?*

Entering a longstanding structure with values he viewed as corrupt, Josh had little hope of stewarding change. He was the invasive species and felt foreign from the start.

*How are these people even vetted? I barely have anything in common with my team, much less the officers.*

His stomach gave a friendly reminder he hadn't eaten since the sun was up the day before. With no relevant results in his impromptu archives dive, he started towards the Grog for breakfast.

Josh took a few pages to force the illusion on Missy that he would be documenting his recent investigation, yet she stopped him again on the way out.

"Before you go," she said. "If you see Bear and Sarg, can you tell them to come up here? Need some final notes before I bind the Chupacabra book."

"Sure thing, Missy," Josh said as he waved himself out the door.

Turning his head back to the direction of his movement, he saw a small crowd outside the archives, waiting like gators. Kettle, the shiesty shaman, was sandwiched between Piper and another wrangler he had never met before.

A short standoff ensued. Josh used inductive reasoning to determine that this woman was a wrangler by the charms on her vest. Being so startled, he barely noticed the abnormal muscle mass, consistent with every wrangler.

Had he been wielding a clean conscience, Josh would have casually excused himself and retreated to the Grog. This was a different situation.

"Piper, Kettle," Josh said, hiding his nerves. "Morning. You are?"

"Norberta," said the wrangler, extending a handshake and a grouchy demeanor.

"Josh..." revved the shaman. "Why is Piper informing me that your investigation was North-North East of here?"

*I'm done for.*

"Because it... was?" Josh said. Confused and worried, fessing up was all he could do.

A grinch-like grimace twisted into the Shaman's face, and he turned away from Josh with contempt.

"So you must have seen the spectral nebulae across the desert?" asked Norberta suspiciously.

"Seen it?" Josh scoffed to himself mentally. Despite the interrogation, he felt calm, deducing they didn't have all the facts.

"Yes," Josh replied simply.

The curt response enflamed Kettle incrementally, but noticeably.

"So you waltz in here," he snarled with a bony finger pointed at him. "Find the first spok to ever enter the pot, then encounter a spok surge in the desert, *all* within your first moon here. Am I assessing this correctly, little spider?"

*How dare you!?*

The fire spread to Josh. Now he realized Kettle hoped to intimidate him with the 3-1. He singled out Josh to make accusations and make enemies. Josh stood heavy and solid like a statue, facing the trio at his southpaw off-angle.

"As a matter of fact, no," Josh said. He was careful to remain angry only on the inside, but indignant in his tone.

The shaman folded his arms into his robes, utterly brazened by the syllables Josh let off.

He had learned something. Kettle wasn't curious; he was looking to explain something. Josh remained poised and spoke as little as possible in hopes to learn more.

"You may not be blameworthy for the spok in our house," the shaman admitted. "Yet you cannot explain the spok clouds that loomed in the desert sithence your departure!"

"You're right, I can't explain it," Josh said honestly.

*Maybe if you guys taught us about the things that want to kill us, I could explain!*

The shaman remained in a locked stare with Josh, yet he waved off his colleagues like he was casting a spell.

"Madam Piper, Norberta, dismiss yourselves," he said lowly. "Josh Little Tree. I find it hard to trust you. Tell me immediately what spirits met you in the sands."

*"Think! Think!"* Josh thought.

The smell of decaying gums punched Josh in the nose as the shaman crept in, but the objective was to stay cool.

"We made it within range of the hotspot," Josh started. His brain was thinking so far ahead that he was telling the first section of the story completely on autopilot.

"Yoshi decided to put on the specs to guide us the rest of the way," he continued into an incomplete telling of the story. "We saw the spectral nebula, and we got scared."

"You don't seem like a coward," the shaman said, staring at the amulet on his vest.

"Valentine told us blue means bad," said Josh, ignoring the insult. "We left without pursuing the activity within the hotspot."

"Then what happened to your face?" the shaman said, expecting a checkmate.

"Cut," Josh replied. "Anyway, my team and I ought to get back to the drawing board, it seems."

"Be off then," he said finally as he flashed his teeth.

*I'll smell you later, I guess...*

Josh walked off, leaving the final word to the boiling Kettle. He turned behind to see the flowing robes of the Shaman slinking into the archives. With a quickened pace, Josh made for the Grog. Stomping off, he felt tension in his jaw. The repression of anger and truth tried to escape by mouth, but was being clamped shut. He did his best to loosen the muscles and relax himself as he pushed forward.

By the time Josh had blasted into the Grog, he found Yoshi eating steak and eggs alone.

"Yoshi, we need to talk," Josh said as he sat in a booth with his friend.

"Bro, Sarg just told me his nickname used to be Dragon," Yoshi said.

He flinched and sharpened his gaze. "Bear and Dragon," he pondered at the table. "That's... actually not that weird. But listen, this is serious."

From a depressed slouch to a scholarly posture, Yoshi locked in to Josh like a sleeper agent. He scanned the room, although he had been in there a while, and lowered his voice.

*By all means, please act suspicious...*

"Not here, all of us," Josh said.

"Do you want to grab a bite first?" Yoshi said. "Or is it like, *right now* important?"

Josh flashed silent eyes. Yoshi took the hint. He cursed to himself and scarfed the rest of his food like a hungry dog. Setting his plate back on the bar where Charles had served it to him, he gave him parting words with a full mouth.

"Thanks, Tiger," Yoshi waved.

The young men were gone too fast to continue a dialogue. Skipping steps back down the stairs, and speedwalking through the halls, they nearly reached their dormitory.

While on the path, Josh had finally recognized what was making him feel different. The lighting felt like it held a hue closer to green than the usual orange. The walls reflected the sickly complexion onto him and amplified the toxicity of his guilt.

"Hold on, what the hell is this?" Yoshi stopped at the door.

He plucked off a posting from the bulletin that Josh had completely missed. It read the same as their initial post, marking their departure on the last quarter moon. This time, red, bold handwriting claimed, "INCOMPLETE,"

"How do they know?" Yoshi asked worriedly.

"Just come with me, and I'll explain," Josh said impatiently.

Peyton and Diotima were facing each other standing up in the center of the room, but turned silently to Josh and Yoshi as they entered. Instantly, Josh had a singular theory that they were arguing, and he did not care why right now.

"Guys, listen," he began. "S.C.A.B.B. saw the spok cloud too. The shaman just confronted me, accusing me of causing trouble or something since I caught that spok when we first got here."

"Wait, but wasn't that Tiger Crew girl the one who... summoned it or something?" Rose said, still sitting in her bunk.

"That was my guess," Josh said, with a chest at constant inhale. "But he cornered me into telling him about our investigation. I told him we saw the cloud and got scared, so we came back."

"Hold on," Diotima said. "This is fine, nothing has really changed, right?"

"He said he doesn't trust me," Josh told her.

"What?" Diotima exclaimed in disbelief. "All they've told us since we got here is that they have secret information we can't learn yet. All they've done is mislead us, and they don't trust *us*!"

"Well, we aren't being completely honest with them either," Peyton added in.

Diotima slowly turned her head back to Peyton.

"Girl, whose side are you on?" Diotima asked with an attitude confirming Josh's guess that they had been fighting.

"D, stop," Josh intruded. "This isn't about sides anymore. Remember, life or death isn't as serious as it gets anymore."

"Okay, captain," She said snarkily. "So what do we do?"

Josh completed a full exhale. It had been too long. He shut his eyes for a frustrated moment before making a claim.

"We get on the same page," he said. "Right now, I just want you all to know we are facing serious prejudice,"

"Yeah, sorry you got bitched out, Josh, but that's what I've been trying to say since we got here," Diotima said with a raised voice.

"Okay, guys, seriously," Yoshi said, finally entering the conversation. "Let's get some food in our system, and then we can make a plan or something."

With maximum angst, Diotima rolled her eyes and started out the door. The rest of the crew stood in a moment of awkward silence.

"Where's she going?" Peyton asked.

In that moment, the slowly hissing door opened again, and she peeked her head inside.

"Hello?... are we going or not?" Diotima asked.

Taking the lead, Josh begrudgingly followed her path. Wiping his hand down his face and heavy on his eyelids failed to cleanse him of the misery filling every room in the Bronze Pot. He held open the door, implanting the idea for them to follow him through.

If looks could kill, Peyton would have them all dead on the dirt. Despite the hostility, she too followed the termagant Diotima to the Grog.

They marched through the halls, approximating the order they traveled through the desert over the last few days. Josh listened to Yoshi and Rose as they held hands again.

"What was going on in there before we walked in?" Yoshi asked Rose quietly, yet audible to Josh.

"D and Peyton were arguing," Rose said quietly. "Peyton was saying D keeps crapping on her ideas and making her feel stupid."

"I feel like we may have brought that demon back with us," Yoshi said. "Not literally, I feel like I can literally see dark hands on all their shoulders right now."

*Is he including me in that?*

"Wait— let go," Rose said without any show of force.

Yoshi did as he was bidden. A moment after he let go, he grabbed her hand again. They stopped walking down the hall and blocked Josh, too. He stood there, knowing his presence and impatience were not hidden.

Yoshi looked from Peyton, who was up ahead, and to Josh, just behind. All the while, he placed his hand in Rose's and removed it like he was testing her temperature. Yoshi and Rose stared into each other's eyes again.

*Can we not do this right now, please?*

Josh sidestepped the strange lovebirds and began skipping steps up the stairs. Out of earshot, he caught up to Peyton.

They had all made it to the grog. The Ronins were eating breakfast together too now, making it the busiest any of the Arañitas had ever seen the place. Unsurprisingly, Valentine was nowhere to be seen.

While Josh waited for Charles to throw a helping of steak and eggs on his plate, he wondered about the conversation or confrontation his crew might expect from the Big Sugar himself.

The team, minus Yoshi, had gotten to work on their breakfast without a word. Since he had already eaten, he chose the opportunity to start the chat.

"Guys, I've been thinking," he began. "This place seemed like it had all the answers the first few days, but now I think it's all a show."

Diotima scoffed as she raised a cup of room-temperature water to her mouth.

"What I mean to say," Yoshi continued. "Is that our insights are way more valuable than we are willing to give ourselves credit for. We can sense when things feel wrong, and I say we can sense when things feel right too."

"When has anything felt right since we've been here?" Diotima asked, with piqued curiosity.

"When we sang together!" Yoshi claimed, "I feel like we created a really special energy, but then it faded out after the whole— you know."

Rosemary nodded in agreement. Diotima and Peyton stayed silent and continued eating, but Josh was noticing Yoshi's strategy. He brought them to the Grog to break bread and build the bond once again. It was charming, but Josh was still annoyed.

*Perhaps all the more reason I need to listen.*

"I was looking forward to joining a team here and doing some simple ghost hunting," Yoshi said honestly. "The reality of demons and spoks and prophecy mumbo jumbo makes me feel like I'm going to lose it. I want to do something to practice gratitude or have some mental-spiritual defenses."

"I agree," Josh said. "It was definitely a special moment singing out there with you guys."

While the words were coming from his mouth, he reminisced on prior conversations with Yoshi. Conversations in which they were vulnerable with each other. It occurred to him there was no need to use the word embarrassment anymore. They had been through too much together.

Shifting his thoughts to the weight of his iris amulet on his chest, he thought of bravery. For the first time in Josh's life, he chose to abandon the concept of shame and spoke his innermost thoughts.

"Actually, Yoshi," Josh said, straightening his posture. "I really do agree."

Yoshi perked up and glanced at Rose. It seemed he was preparing for a negative reception.

"Life really sucks sometimes, especially lately. I don't even know the lives you guys gave up to come here, but out there in the darkness, I had a crazy thought. I told myself I was glad to be alive, sharing the moment with you all, because I knew I would die one day. If or when I become a ghost, I don't want to partake in some war against the living."

Diotima set down her fork and pursed her lips while deep in thought.

"I was thinking too," she said. "So many coincidences have to happen for us to be born, to have made it this far— I don't just mean family trees lining up. The chances of coming to life being so small, and despite the certainty of death, there is somehow a way to keep going. To me, it makes life even more special, like we are lucky to get the chance, you know?"

"Yes, exactly," Rose said. "Being alive is a gift, and it doesn't belong to the living."

"That's what I'm talking about," Yoshi called, slamming his fist on the table with encouragement. "We gotta share it, and appreciate it, especially when our demons try to sour it on us."

Peyton sighed deeply. She was either unconvinced or unwilling to give the mindset a try. Brewing something to say, Josh wanted to encourage the positive mental attitude Yoshi was working on. Fortunately, Diotima stepped up.

"Peyton," Diotima said, putting her hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry I've made you feel like your ideas were bad. It's something I tell myself all the time. I need to do a better job keeping my demons locked up so they don't come for you guys."

Yoshi grabbed Rose's hand as it was still beside her plate, and they both smiled a bright smile.

"Thanks, D," Peyton said shyly. "I was the dumb crystal girl my whole life, and I just felt like this was the only place where my quirks would be welcomed."

"They are welcome, Peyton," Rose said. "As we said, these are crazy circumstances. It's going to take a combination and a sacrifice of our best ideas put together."

"Yeah, Peyton," Diotima said. "We're a team, and our ideas are like a unique brush stroke. I'm going to go over some of your best strokes, and you'll go over mine. It isn't easy, but we're doing fine."

"Oh! That rhymes, means it's true," Yoshi said.

The team took the comedic beat in stride. Yoshi had given them the needed push to start coming back together again.

"It'll be hard to feel that way next time a demon is trying to kill us," Peyton said, somewhat sarcastically.

"Oh no, it's simple," he said.

The eyes of the Arañitas lay upon Yoshi.

*How are you going to justify that?*

"At first I was afraid," he said. "I was petrified."

He slid out from the booth and twirled a thinking finger. With his next declaration, he projected his voice for the entire Grog to hear.

"But did you think I would lay down and DIE?!" Yoshi called dramatically.

Josh, sitting next to Diotima, leaned over while Yoshi was bellowing another phrase in a singsong voice.

"He's not doing this right now, is he?" Josh whispered.

Diotima and Peyton stare at him like a child misbehaving in the grocery store, impossible to look away, and hard not to laugh.

Yoshi began clapping a few beats and extended a hand to Rose. He was officially entering a musical number in the most inappropriate location imaginable.

"Now you all gotta jump in on this," Yoshi demanded. "And I ain't stopping until you do."

"Shut it down, High School Musical!" barked Violet from the Ronin crew at the bar.

"After the chorus!" Yoshi called back, without even looking her in the eyes. "Isn't this song from your generation anyway?"

Rose watched Yoshi take a few steps on tempo and spin 90 degrees. Yelling about how he will survive, all eyes and ears belonged to him.

"Fuck it," Diotima said, pushing Peyton out of the booth so they could join. "Not like we weren't in trouble already."

*"But this is good trouble,"* Josh thought. He slowly scooted out from the booth to join the circus in the Grog. *"Especially if I don't believe in embarrassment anymore."*

"Suddenly, you got footwork?" Josh asked humurously.

Answering the question with a particular finger, Yoshi continued to sing a phrase that every member of the Bronze Pot would be subject to hearing. Josh, on the other hand, was really listening to his lyrics.

*I don't know how someone becomes a ghost, S.C.A.B.B. doesn't know either, but Yoshi does. I believe him. If I remember to love, I know my spirit will stay alive.*

He didn't know the words, but memorized the simple choreography of a few steps and a spin. He couldn't help appreciating the moment. Josh had experienced the simple magic of a sing-along once, but now that he trusted its power, he felt unstoppable.

Bursting through the door came Missy, Kettle, and his allies from earlier. All of which but the ever-grumpy shaman, wielding curious grins.

"Missy!" Peyton called. "You gotta know this one!"

It seems she did, as she encouraged Piper with her into the center of the Grog with the Arañitas to dance and sing.

The chorus had ended, but the show must go on. A zenith of joy within the Bronze Pot's history could not be limited to a single verse. Yoshi, after repeating a few times, could not carry the vocals forever and wound everyone down.

The feeling became a reprise throughout the day. Last time, Josh was focused on whether or not he felt awkward singing out loud. Today, he heard the music. His demons had faded away, and the Arañitas began to spin the day into one with fresh spirits.

## Chapter 20: New Moon

*New entry:*

*I have officially forgotten what day it is. Turns out I was the last one with an up-to-date list as well. Ask around, they'll tell you it's the third new moon of the summer. Anyway, it's competition day. I was excited for this up until I came face-to-face with Oni and the spoks. It was all I could think about while I was trying to sleep last night. I am in a good mood, though. I'm content. Proud maybe? Yoshi reminded us yesterday that pain is inevitable, but suffering is optional. We have to put the same kind*

*of practice into having a strong spirit as we would into having a strong body. I sense he was a theater kid in high school, but I'm glad we have him.*

*I would have believed a fistfight with a demon would be in my future, sure. Singing and dancing in public? AND enjoying it? Maybe I really am changing.*

*Now I wonder if I could have gotten through to Oni without having to fight him at all. As I mentioned, I am still proud of how things went down. He chose to stop walking an evil path and do what's right. Now that I'm an adult, I'm experiencing things big enough to give me a life-changing amount of hope. I feel like I'm going to be a good man if I continue down this road, if I keep singing along. That has to be the way to live without demons. Without enemies?*

*I still haven't adjusted to not seeing Iris, though. I guess it really became a habit to hear her ramble about her day after we got to the house. I also have been thinking about Bryan. I never told him I was leaving the university to come to S.C.A.B.B.. Now look at how much I've been through since I last heard from him. I wonder if he'd believe anything I've been through since then.*

Josh lightly slapped the journal and tossed it into his duffel bag from his desk in the corner. For a moment, he leaned back in the chair, staring at the muggy paneled ceiling with gratitude. In the morning, his crew had met with George to have an educational session about how spirit energies are detected and where.

Internally, Josh reviewed the content they had gone over and the questions they had. Throughout the lesson, he envisioned how he could apply the knowledge to the secret investigation his team was working on.

George told them that the infrared and ultraviolet wavelengths are captured by the sensor, allowing them to see the energy a spirit is emitting. Hearing the science characterized with such familiarity helped them finally understand the process behind the "evidence" he never grasped. Diotima raised a question that had Josh stirring for the rest of the day.

“What kind of sensor is in the spok-specs?” She had asked. Josh replayed it over and over in his head until he finally noticed an idea hiding under the surface.

Josh leaned forward in his chair. Alone in his dormitory, he sharpened his eyes and rested his chin upon the knuckles of his right hand. The thinking man spun himself in the creaky chair when it hit him:

*The spok specs are tuning the energy that comes into the glasses, right? That's why they are blacked out, because the visible light energy is dialed way down. But if ghosts look normal, and spoks are blue, what does that mean? Blue has the shortest wavelength of all the colors, so they must exist in a specific nanometer range? Holy shit, I'm such a nerd.*

*Radio waves have the longest wavelength. I know a spirit box rapidly scans different radio signals, so a spirit can talk with that energy. Could I tune my spirit box to the electromagnetic frequency of a spok? Is that even a thing? Do I even know what I'm thinking?*

Josh went over the science he hoped he understood again and again. Trying to tell himself he had a scientific question he could only solve with experimentation was a challenge. The ecosystem of knowledge at S.C.A.B.B. was very unfamiliar to him, contributing to a lack of confidence.

He then wondered if he could trust George with this question next session, or if he should ask Missy first. The next thing he knew, Yoshi flew in the door with Rose just behind.

“Dude, there you are!” Yoshi sighed. “What are you doing in here?”

“Guys,” Josh said excitedly. “I just had a crazy idea,”

“Josh, you are supposed to be fighting soon,” Rose reminded him.

To a screeching halt, his train of thought came. He knew he could not check the time with his phone, nor with the sun, since he was inside.

“Yikes,” Josh said, grabbing his lucky blue rash guard from his collection of gear. “How soon?”

"We were waiting in there to watch, that soon," Yoshi said.

Josh put on the navy blue polyester shirt and immediately zipped his vest back on over it.

"Did you know you are doing up against Chase for the first round?" Rose asked.

*The coach's son? No way...*

"Is he?" Yoshi asked, shocked.

"Yeah," Rose replied. "Why do you think so many people are there to watch?"

"Ohhh," Yoshi said with a lightbulb. "I thought they just didn't want to watch chess."

With all his items in hand or on person, Josh jogged with his friends all the way up and out to the yard. As he ascended the rusted steps into the annex doubling as a gym, there were a lot of attendants indeed.

While it was hard to tell at first glance, nobody was wearing athletic wear underneath their vests. Nobody was chewing on a mouthguard or wrapping their hands. It was only Chase, standing by the ring, looking ready to fight.

*Don't tell me we are the only ones...*

"So you still want to do this?" Imanuel said, approaching from his son's side.

"I'm sorry I'm late," Josh told him sincerely.

"Ronin's thought you quit, knowing you'd be facing chase," said Imanuel, inspecting the left side of Josh's face closely.

"I was preparing for an investigation," Josh said as they walked to the ring.

A quick slap on his back from Yoshi. Josh spun to see him and Rose, wielding four thumbs up, mouthing something along the lines of, "kick his ass."

*Gotta talk to them about tuning the spirit box after this...*

Josh summoned Yoshi to remain in his corner so he could help him get water and handle his mouthguard.

"Yoshi," Josh said, overhearing Chase warm up with Xavier in his corner. "Do you think there's a book in the archives with exact wavelength measure?"

"Bro," Yoshi interrupted. "I'm going to stop you right there. I don't really think about books at all, so no. But you should get your head in the game."

Without giving a chance to reply, Yoshi held Josh's mouthguard just in front of his mouth. *Fair enough, I'm probably about to get punched in the— wait, my cut!*

Josh lifted his glove to his face, feeling the bumpy consistency of a scab.

Without further ado, Imanuel stepped over the ropes into the center of the ring, calling forth each fighter.

"*Vah-seline?*" Josh mumbled through his mouth guard, pointing at his face under the glove.

"You'll be fine," Imanuel said. "Short rounds. Now, gentlemen, defend yourselves at all times and listen to my instructions."

*Wow, we are just getting right into this?*

"Touch gloves and return to your corners," Imanuel said. "Bear, can you count 90 seconds on my call?"

Josh lifted his knuckles and looked out at the assembly of onlookers.

"I'll try my best!" Bear said, to the amusement of many.

Josh held his hands still and looked to his opponent, finally.

Upon eye contact, Josh realized his opponent had been waiting for him to participate in a furious stare-down. He met Chase's gaze with a craned eyebrow in confusion. Finally, he touched Josh's gloves, and they retreated to their corners.

"Dude thinks he's the main character," Yoshi said as Josh got a final shoulder rub of good luck.

Josh chuckled through his mouthguard and hung his head to hide the smile. He was thinking so deeply and so seriously that the joke caught him completely off his guard.

"Okay, okay," Josh mumbled to himself.

"Time in, BOX!" Imanuel yelled.

Instantly, Chase began closing the distance in a southpaw push-step motion. Very standard, very technical.

*I'll mirror him.*

Josh, in the orthodox manner, began pushing and stepping to the center of the ring as well, but was slowly creating a circle.

In a clockwise motion, Josh started moving around the ring, staying on the outside of Chase's lead leg. Soon, he would determine what kind of fighter he was facing.

As the distance closed, nobody had thrown a strike. Significant to Josh, as he estimated that he had a slight reach disadvantage.

*Not the first aggressor...*

Josh threw a quick jab to measure an awareness of the distance. Chase slipped away from the strike and continued turning to face Josh as he made circles.

*Not a counter-striker, either...*

Chase then made his first engagement with a heavy straight right, followed up with a cross from his left. Josh deflected the jab upwards and slipped beneath the cross.

*Testing me with a one-two combination...*

Josh threw a double jab, causing Chase to step backwards. After getting out of reach, he drove back in with an overhand straight to the left of Josh's face. He felt the knuckles land directly on his cut. He chewed on his mouthguard through the pain.

*Gotta watch that...*

Josh threw a straight punch up to his face, then changed levels to deliver two more strikes to his abdomen. Chase winced at the impact.

Josh engaged again with a basic one-two, knowing they would hit his defense, in order to distract him from the upcoming hook from his lead hand, landing flush.

*Clean! Alright, stay sharp.*

With a huff and a puff, Chase threw a similar up then down combination, but he rose again with another overhand to the left side of Josh's face, again.

"Careful, man," Josh said through his mouthguard. "I got a cut on my face."

Josh turned his head to flash the gash at his opponent. Chase took the opportunity to throw a heavy hook directly at Josh's presented cheek.

Sirens alarmed in Josh's brain, and he bit down hard through the pain of his cut opening up. It had to be bleeding; Josh could feel it flowing onto his cheek. He stepped back and raised his guard high.

*Is he serious?*

Josh took his eyes off Chase's shoulders to look at Imanuel. It was invisible to nobody, what had just occurred, but unspoken by all. Imanuel didn't even look Josh in the eye.

*If I get too bloody, they will disqualify me...*

*One, two, three,* Josh breathed. He entered the Philly shell stance. His lead hand now lowered to cover his body, and his rear hand held up, right in front of his wounded face.

Josh remembered the first time he sparred against someone standing in the Philly shell. His opponent was standing the way Josh is now. He remembered the black eye and the swollen features he woke up with the next day.

A final chuff, and Josh began push-stepping once again. Encircling his opponent, Josh heaved a sharp but empty exhale. He shot air out loud and twitched forward, but did not throw a strike. His successful deception caused Chase to flinch. Josh punished the reaction with a one-two into Chase's guard, then a powerful uppercut with his lead hand.

It was another squeaky-clean sequence from Josh. Despite the reactions from the audience, and most notably Yoshi, Josh stayed poised and predator-focused. His rear hand, still posted in front of his face like a guard dog.

Chase threw a jab with all of his weight and pursued it with a flurry of quick strikes. Josh braced the first one and backed away as he swatted or swept under the wild fists.

Instead of a controlled sharp breath, Chase grunted as he ended his combination with a wild hook. Josh "picked up the phone," and covered the right side of his head with his glove to cushion the blow.

*Now I see... You're an angry fighter...*

By knowing the category of combatant he was faced with, Josh no longer felt the spirit of competition. Despite the decade and a half of experience Chase seemed to have over Josh, it was clear now that he had little to no experience with competition, only fighting.

*Maybe he didn't even notice he opened my cut; he's just swinging without thinking.*

For the remainder of the round, Josh focused on footwork and evasion, throwing only a few strikes to keep Chase at a manageable distance.

"Time!" Yelled Bear.

"Time!" Repeated Imanuel. "Return to your corners."

"Bro! Bro!" Yoshi yelled, waving him over.

With a towel draped over his hand, Yoshi plucked Josh's mouthguard from his mouth and began pouring a cup of water into his mouth.

"Josh, that was crazy! He's trying to go for your cut, isn't he!" Yoshi panted, wiping his friend's bloody face. "You gotta give him the smack down!"

"I don't think he meant to," Josh said through labored breathing. "Yeah, he's got an attitude, but it seems like he doesn't have that much experience."

"Nah, bro," he said, giving another drink of water. "He's a *dick-son!*" He said, harping on his last name again.

"I could genuinely teach him a huge lesson right now," Josh said, watching him in the other corner.

"Now you're talking!" Yoshi replied, replacing his mouth guard. Yoshi began pretending to beat up someone in front of him.

"Boxers in!" Imanuel yelled. "Fight!"

"*I'm sseriouss,*" Josh said through his mouthguard.

He walked in towards Chase, same Philly shell, new idea.

*If I could help Oni to stop fighting angry, maybe I can stop you...*

Josh stayed light, slipping strikes and keeping Chase at bay. They were still trading a few strikes through the round, until Xavier yelled a callout.

"He's trying to tire you out!" he called from the corner.

*No?*

Chase lowered his hands from protecting his chin to gloating behind his back.

*Is this serious?*

Josh stopped hopping in place and looked from Chase to Imanuel, confused.

"That's enough, just fight!" He instructed.

*How should I put this so he doesn't lose his cool?*

"Relaxss," Josh said. "Don't losze control."

"Shut up," mumbled Chase, angry in the eyes.

"Don't let him get in your head!" Xavier yelled at once.

"Sounds like you're in his head!" Yoshi yelled, with a smile on his face by the sound of it.

"Hey!" Josh yelled, directed at Yoshi.

Imanuel stepped in between the fighters. Hands on both gloves, but eyes only on Josh.

"I said that's enough taunting! Just fight!" He yelled.

*ME?*

Josh held his tongue and refocused his stare onto Chase's shoulders.

*Okay, fine, let's get to work.*

No more bouncing like a kung fu artist, Josh was overcomplicating something simple.

Josh had hopes Chase would join the song and dance one day, but he put those hopes aside for now. Knowing he was out of control, swinging wildly and angrily to prove himself, should have told Josh it wasn't the time to teach a serious lesson. There was one thing different about Josh versus Oni, and Josh versus Chase. One reason why Josh couldn't break through the defenses.

*You aren't afraid of me.*

Josh entered Chase's close quarters, slipping and blocking a fury of strikes.

Upon seeing an opening, Josh launched a fist into Chase's jaw, wobbling him as he stepped back, protecting himself.

The tingling itch of blood leaking down his cheek diluted Josh's focus, and he failed to leap at Chase in the moment of vulnerability.

"Time, time!" Imanuel yelled again. "Corners!"

*That was not 90 seconds... I see what's happening here.*

"You got him good at the end there," Yoshi said, wiping Josh's face and getting him water.

The sight of the blood was a reminder. What he said to Oni, in a desperate plea, was coming back to encourage himself to stay humble.

*I will not buy change in blood... I can't pay for peace by becoming a dominator. Stay cool.*

He said nothing to Yoshi by the time they were called back in. He had too many other objectives to keep track of. The entire room seemed to assume this was an ego match, so Josh had to watch his words. They were willing to allow foul play, so Josh took the responsibility to be a better example.

He circled Chase again, who tried to back him into a corner.

*He's still confident he's better than me if he's trying to walk me down.*

Josh performed a crescent step to close the distance and switch his stance at the same time. His willingness to protect his cut was diminished; Josh was competing for his own, different goals now, and he had a minute to win it.

Entering with the straight punch tied to his crescent step, he followed with two heavy blows to his sides, and another stealth bomb of an uppercut.

Chase was throwing his lead hand instinctively as if he were searching for a light switch in the dark. That was Josh's indicator that he rocked him with the uppercut.

*Jab, cross, jab, cross, jab, cross—*

The fastest strikes Josh could produce fell upon Chase's tight guard like heavy rain. He raised his hands and tucked his chin deep to stay dry. But as above, so below; Josh blasted forward with a *choku-zuki* straight punch directly to his opponent's solar plexus.

A groan emerged from Chase but died just as quickly, for the wind was completely stolen from his lungs. Josh stepped back, with hands all the way lowered, and waited for Chase to resume breathing.

Josh remained in the middle of the ring. The sidebar conversations and commentary had ceased when Josh stood still. Chase looked to Imanuel with an expression of pain on his face. Josh followed the gaze, utterly blank, and stared into him too. A father and son, feeling the same pain, searching for comfort.

"Time," Imanuel said softly, as he approached his son.

Yoshi's mouth hung open in shocked awe.

"Dude, you are like the Native American Batman," Yoshi said, almost forgetting to grab his mouthguard.

"Unlace me," Josh said, holding his gloves to Yoshi.

"It says five rounds on the—" he started.

"Okay, that's it," Imanuel shouted from the corner. "Josh wins by technicality."

The room erupted once again in chatter and murmurs.

"No way! What does that mean?" Yoshi said, unsure if excitement was acceptable.

"I won," Josh said. "Technical knock out."

"Josh, that was incredible!" Rose said, running up to the ring.

Chase had exited the ring and retreated with Xavier to the office in the gym. Once degloved, Josh held a towel to his blood and sweat.

"Was there anyone else?" Josh asked to Imanuel.

The question stunned him, and after a second, a fierce eyebrow scolded him.

"No, Josh," Imanuel said. "You were the only two competitors this summer."

*I'll ask about that later...*

Josh turned back to Rose and Yoshi.

"Guys, we gotta go find D and Peyton. I have an idea," he said, still in the ring.

The lovebirds looked at each other, then back at Josh. He began taking off his handwraps as Bear approached.

"That was something, Little Tree," He said. "Been a while since someone surprised us like that."

"Thanks, Umar," Josh replied with a half smile. "Just gotta stay calm enough to make the right moves. Such is life, you know."

"The right moves," Bear repeated. "I like it. Come chat with me about some stuff in my office tomorrow."

"Where's your office?" Yoshi jumped in.

"My room," he responded. "I call it my office, just on the opposite side of the building from you downstairs."

“Great, sure thing. Thanks again,” Josh replied, throwing his hand wraps in his vest pockets. “Okay, back to work.”

## Chapter 21: Oni Incoming

"She lost?" Josh repeated in disbelief.

"Fool's mate," said Kettle. "She scampered in and out within moments."

Josh was starstruck; he stood in the auditorium and common as another chess match was ongoing. The Ronin, Oxanna, had advanced over Diotima to the second round according to the crudely scribbled bracket on a mobile whiteboard. She stared at Josh, Yoshi, and Rose smugly as they talked with the Shaman, facilitating the competition.

"I don't understand," Josh said, furrowing his eyebrows.

"I sensed that," said the shaman with a weakly suppressed gloat. "It's a wholly rare and titanic sequence of failures that produces a checkmate in two moves."

"Where did she go?" Rose asked with concern.

"I had thought," the shaman replied. "She would spectate the remainder of your competition with all the time she saved herself."

*No, we would have seen her? This doesn't make sense.*

"Well, as much as we'd love to stay," Yoshi said. "We won't."

The shaman replied nothing and floated off to return to the tableside of the competition. The smell of rotten breath decreased with every yard of distance he placed between them.

Josh, too, silently turned and marched to a new destination.

*Check the dorm first.*

"Slow down, Josh!" Yoshi called as he and Rose quickly caught up to him.

As the three of them sped down the hallways, which seemed wider by the day, Josh felt a unique chill. He knew it was not a pocket of cold air he had gone through, nor a pit of existential dread. The goosebumps that took residence on his arms felt like the touch of familiar hands. Who or what sought his attention? It would have to wait.

"There you are," Josh declared as he entered the room.

Diotima sat on her bunk with books and pages spread in front of her. She was startled by Josh breaching, but unsurprised by his heightened energy. She got up slowly, not to disturb the pages that lay out beside her, and she raised a silent finger to her lips as the door slowly hissed closed behind Yoshi and Rose.

"What's going on?" Rose whispered. She was half confused, half frustrated. "What happened?"

"You guys need to see something, but you have to promise not to overreact," Diotima replied. "Do you have your spok-specs?"

*Always...?*

"Yeah?" Rosemary said with wide eyes, smoothing her hand over her vest pocket. "Why?"

"As I said," She replied simply with low volume, zero emotion.

Together, they walked back up the hall once again, and Josh could bear the silence no longer as they took the corner to the stairs.

"Did you get beaten in two moves?" Josh asked.

"Yeah," she said shamelessly. "I had somewhere to be," she said with indignant emphasis.

"Maybe you'll get your head in the game too when you see."

Josh turned behind to look at Yoshi, who had recently demanded Josh "get his head in the game," as well, but with the wrong game in mind. He returned an expression of flat, stretched lips, only interpretable as "yikes, I'm sorry." At least, that's what Josh would have liked to hear.

"Speaking of, why does your cut look so gross?" She said. "Did you lose too?"

"No, he won!" Rose said, enthused for him. "There were no other participants except Chase, and Josh won by technical knockout!"

"You should have seen him fight," Yoshi said. "He was so locked in."

*That wasn't even a real fight... they should be glad they didn't see what happened with Oni...*

"Damn," Diotima remarked, punching the steel doors open to the blazing heat of the yard outside. "Really? How did he take the loss?"

"Let's discuss it later," Josh said. "Where did you go after your chess match?"

"Let me show you what I saw first," Diotima told them, with a realigned tone of business-only.

The four of them stopped far enough behind the practicing archers to talk quietly without being heard. Piper had been leading this competition, but it would not start until the sun was at its peak.

"I was chatting with Peyton while she started warming up. I don't even remember why I felt the urge, but I put on my spok-specs and turned them on. Don't make it obvious, but one of you needs to look towards that mountain right now."

"I'll do it," Yoshi said without hesitation. He waited a moment, and slyly unsheathed his spok specs from his vest pocket and slid them over his nose. With a quick flick of his thumb and a hum from his glasses, he slowly craned his head up. Under direct sunlight, the glowing white on the outside of the active lenses drew no attention from afar.

"Fuck," he whispered. "A spok cloud."

Yoshi kept his head facing the same direction, still. The underlying smile he had as a resting expression faded.

"Yeah," Diotima said. "It's far enough that I don't think anyone has noticed yet."

"Yoshi," Rose said to him. She grabbed his shoulder, not with affection, but with intention. "Is it him?"

With his eyes covered, Josh watched Yoshi's lips for the tell. As she asked the question, the answer seemed to come to him. His cheek muscles sagged deeper, and the hues underneath his skin followed the departure of his content expression.

"He's coming here," Yoshi said calmly. He took off his glasses, Rose took her hand back, and they looked at each other. Diotima had not the expression of concern or fear, but subdued rage.

*We have to do something right now...*

Josh looked over to Peyton, preparing for her competition. He knew without a second thought, the guilt would infect him if he asked her to withdraw. He also knew that not keeping her in the loop and the plan would isolate her more than she already felt.

"After I saw it, I decided to throw my competition," Diotima said.

"Why...?" Yoshi interjected, as though scared of the answer.

Diotima stepped in closer to her friends and spoke even quieter.

"Do you guys remember the glove Bear was using to touch the spok?" She said. "To hold it back?"

"What did you do?" Josh asked in fear of the response.

"I took a bunch of pairs from the equipment room," She whispered. "Everyone was watching you and Chase, so I went for a quick heist."

"Girl..." Rose said, pushing out a sigh. "You are going to be in so much trouble."

"Everyone here might be in trouble if we don't do anything," Diotima said. "If it really is Oni, it can't be good."

"What if he's coming to turn himself in?" Josh asked aloud.

A loud silence filled the gap between talking points. By the expressions facing Josh, nobody seemed to think his suggestion was all that likely.

"I know you guys are on a wholesome spiritual journey or whatever," Diotima responded. "But that shit is not happening."

"Hey, don't rope me in on that. I don't think that's going to happen either," Yoshi replied defensively. "Josh, did you forget everything we've learned about spoks?"

*You mean everything we've been told?*

"We need to get to him before he gets here," Diotima said firmly.

"Why?" Josh said, so confused reactions again.

"Josh..." Diotima said. She closed her eyes and clapped her hands together, bottling her frustration. "The dude has so much hatred in his soul that he literally became a demon."

*Not "literally," but I see what you mean.*

"I am grateful you talked him down that day," continued Diotima, with more composure now. "But you can't *change* someone with a conversation, you can't exorcise prejudice."

"You can try," Josh said fast and flat. "I don't mean to imply your plan is bad. I just want to understand it the way you do."

"How about I explain on the way?" Diotima said. "Josh and I can go raid the Grog for some food and water for the trip. Yoshi, you brought a pair of headphones, right?"

"Yeah, but my phone died after like—" Yoshi started.

"It's not for tunes, just grab them," Diotima cut in. "We'll meet you guys in the dorm, then we'll leave out the front."

"We need Peyton," Josh said.

"Fine, Rose, can you explain everything to her?" Diotima requested.

"Of course," she replied.

"Man, this is gonna suck," Yoshi sighed.

"Okay," Diotima said, hyping herself up. "Let's move before someone else does first."

Thus, the little spiders had spun a plan and sprang into action. Diotima launched forward towards the interior of the Bronze Pot again as Josh followed her head start.

So many jigsaw pieces to so many different puzzles lay in Josh's head as he mindlessly pursued Diotima's pace. The only big picture he could see was in the morality of his actions. He trudged through deceit, anxiety, and unknowable consequences for the last few days.

His team, at large, seemed willing to make the means justify their ends. And if he remembered correctly, that was the same thought process S.C.A.B.B. and even Oni had used. He told himself it was not inherently bad, perhaps as a coping mechanism, but struggled mostly with the idea that he could have been honest at any point.

*Is it too late?*

Letting the genie out of the bottle now would also vent the mistrust the Arañitas held for the agency. It would vent the reality that Josh came face to face with Oni, and let him walk away, days before he billowed in towards the Bronze Pot with allegiant spoks at his side.

An eerie quiet collapsed on Josh's ears with a ring as they entered the Grog together. At this time, there was no one present, not even Charles, who manned the grill.

"Just stuff as much food as you can fit in your pockets," Diotima said. "I'll throw the canteens in my S.C.A.B.B. pack."

"What are we going to do when we find him?" Josh asked, obeying the command.

She let out a sigh, then picked up her pace.

"We bring him in," Diotima replied. "Make him set the spoks free, then arrest him."

"Arrest him?" Josh asked. "Don't you think they'll kill him?"

Josh scanned the room and nearby entrances every few seconds, feeling the discomfoting absence of ambient noise.

"Don't you think he'll try the same?" Diotima asked. She halted as if a light bulb went off. "I know what you must be thinking, Josh, but this is the best move. It might not be perfect, but it's the best, most realistic choice we have."

"Well, what happens when we get back?" he asked. "Will everyone forgive us for stealing equipment and not telling them we knew about a spok siege?"

They stood at a standstill. Stolen equipment in their dorm, and stolen food in their pockets. In the middle of the great Grog heist, they faced each other, locked in dialogue.

"I don't know, Josh," She said with evident honesty. "But we'll figure it out, okay? Don't worry about the next ten steps. Right now, we only have a single choice. We know what's coming, and I'm asking you to make the choice where you help me stop this guy."

Josh held sharp yet safe eye contact. There was a sizeable distance between them, but bridged by her empathy.

"A bad guy, by the way," Diotima shrugged, with a whiff of levity. "Almost like we need a hero or something,"

"If you start singing, I'm telling on you," Josh said, cracking his stoic gaze.

Diotima threw her head back with a blasting laugh and speedwalked towards him, heavy with stolen items.

"We gotta go through the other exit so the chess people don't see us," She said, slowly pushing the side door open. "We'll have to cut through the shamans offices, though."

With speedy and silent success, they emerged from the Grog and slunked through the room they had been inside only once. The room where they officially christened themselves as Arañitas.

They made it through the darkroom with little issue, but lots of anticipation. With every inch closer to the door, they sped faster. Soon enough, they breached their dormitory without any eyes falling upon them.

"Oh, thank God—" Rose exclaimed. "I mean, thank goodness you guys are back. I was worried you were seen."

"No, we're good," Diotima said with deep relief. "Does everyone have the bare essentials? Josh has the spirit box, we have food, water... Yoshi you have the headphones?"

"In my pack," Yoshi replied at attention.

“Okay, I’ll leave my stuff here for a second,” Diotima began, dumping packs of jerky and S.C.A.B.B. rations onto her paper-infested bed. “I’ll go make sure there’s nobody in our path, then we can get moving.”

Without another word, she flew from the coop. Josh felt a small sense of relief as he noticed his stress levels had left with her. Her intensity was laborious for the nonchalant Josh.

He walked over to Peyton and sat beside her on a dusty chair.

“Sorry, we had to pull you from the competition,” Josh said with a forced smile and guilt in his eyes.

“It’s alright,” Peyton said. “I was probably going to lose anyway, basically all the Ronins were competing and a bunch of the wranglers too.”

“Archery is the popular competition, it seems,” Yoshi, stating the obvious. “But Chase wasn’t there.”

“No, he wasn’t,” Peyton said, shifting her gaze to her shoes.

Josh shot a glance at Yoshi and Rose, wondering why that observation was necessary.

“Do you guys think—” Peyton began. Movement and sound cut instantly as the door handle slammed down and began swinging open.

It was Diotima, returned. “Okay, small window, let’s go.”

Yoshi scrambled to her bed to scoop the food she had brought into his S.C.A.B.B. pack, accidentally bringing some of her loose paper with it.

The anticipation of what awaited them in the desert loomed in their minds so densely, the walk through the halls seemed short. Before they could catch a breath, they were facing the scorching sun once again. Muffled voices from the yard’s archery competition faded into obscurity before any of them were brave enough to break the silence.

## Chapter 22: Spirit Box Session

*"Why did you lie to me?"* Josh asked Oni in his imagination.

Five Arañitas traveled into the desert that became immediately unrecognizable after 15 minutes of travel. The anxiety of being caught still held a dome of silence around them. Along the path, Josh wondered what each of his friends saw as the most important part of their current mission.

He tried to count the minutes until someone was going to ask what came next. Yoshi and Rose were leading the expedition, getting closer to the destination with each step. The burden of walking in front and wearing the spok-specs to pursue their fate weighed heavily. From the back of the line, Josh listened to nothing.

Unspeakable were the thoughts of even the chattiest little spider, and his silence at the head of the line set the tone for the continuum of their march.

*Are they trying to listen for something?*

A few hundred paces further, Josh felt foolish for a moment. Despite no warmup and no subsequent matches, he was walking through the daytime desert immediately after a boxing competition. Dehydration was already a high probability; if he had an upcoming rematch against Oni, he might not be as successful. None of them even knew what the spoks were capable of. He went for his canteen to occupy his worrying mind.

Diotima's actions gave Josh reason to be curious, too. Her head hung low, oblivious of whatever surroundings she may be passing through. In a desert like this, the hills, mesas, and cacti blend over time. The patches of dried bushes and intermittent flora engaged Peyton on the walk; she touched every flower within arm's reach. Even the flowers resting upon prickly and defensive plants got to meet Peyton, but not one of them caught her name.

Despite the blistering heat, cooking hair on the tops of their heads, not one complaint was raised. The beauty of the desert, however, was at full mast. Yoshi's imperative for the team to have more gratitude helped Josh focus on the good.

Josh reflected now on Diotima's philosophical provision, the rarity of becoming alive. Alongside Josh, it paired well with his understanding of the great gift it is. *Why won't you look at the flowers? You told me how important it is. What do you ponder that is so heavy, you can't lift your gaze off the ground?*

Yoshi slowed to a halt. He took off his spok-specs and looked at his crew. He flattened his lips for a moment, scanning the desert before him.

"I think we're getting there," he said. "If we get over this hill, we'll be in the cloud. And we'll probably see him..."

He trailed off at the end. The idea made it across to them, but utterly unconfidently. It had been long overdue for a brave soul to ask the burning question.

"What's the plan here?" Josh said.

"First step," Diotima said. "Let's get up there."

It was needless to say they should stay quiet now, and each of them seemed to know. They slowly ascended an incline that flattened off at the top. With a few dozen yards of extra elevation, more of the expansive desert was visible. The view gave Josh that familiar feeling of being small, lost in a sea of sand.

"How are we supposed to find him now that we're here?" Rose whispered.

"I might have something," Josh said as they finished wiping the dust and rocks from their pants.

Josh retrieved the spirit box from his pack and gave it to Diotima. For some reason, she seemed like the best one to carry it.

They each sat down, forming a small circle while they prepared the game plan.

"I might know a way we can tune the spirit box to receive spoks instead of normal spirits," Josh said quietly to the small circle. "I need help practicing the theory, but it's a little something like this."

*One, two, three...*

"Spoks operate at a different energy level than other spirits, right?" Josh started.

"Right," Peyton replied.

The initial comparisons Josh made between what he was doing at S.C.A.B.B. to ghostly science-fair experiments had long since faded. The hatred of groupwork kicked in again as his nerves about sharing a new idea with a group of people surged within him. While his crew affirmed the given knowledge they learned together, Josh tried to siphon the confidence he had in the ring. He pushed and stepped towards that goal while he verbalized the speculative part of his idea.

"When we use spok-specs, we can see the difference. Ghosts are whitish iridescent— Well, I never saw one, but you guys did," Josh said, and swallowed hard. "This spirit box sweeps radio signals to detect spirit voices. The radio waves are on the same energy spectrum that visible light is on."

"The electromagnetic radiation spectrum..." Rose said. Her eyebrows furrowed as she listened, likely picking up what Josh was starting to put down.

"If we can tune the spirit box to receive the same signal as our spok-specs, we might be able to pick something up," Josh said.

"Wait a minute," Rose said. "Don't radio waves have the super long wavelengths? Is a spirit box even capable of reading that many hertz?"

"They do!" Diotima said a little too loudly before correcting herself.

"Sorry... I was just reading about it before we left," She stood up before continuing. "Even infrared is way too high, but if we could see, and compare the rate of difference from a normal spirit to a spok through the glasses, we could apply that to the spirit box, maybe?"

"No, that couldn't work," Rosemary said. "An antenna can receive radio signals, but you need a sensor to pick up light readings."

*Worth a shot I guess...*

"Like a camera sensor?" Peyton asked, standing up too. "What kind of sensor do spok-specs use?"

Rose gasped. She quickly stood up and took the pair from her pocket to inspect the technology of her spok-specs. Removing small panels covering wiring and motherboards.

"You guys are geniuses," Rose said excitedly. "D, take the back panel off the spirit box. There's gotta be a way these devices can communicate."

Josh sent a look to Yoshi. With nothing else to contribute, the two of them sat hopefully awaiting a eureka moment to give them a secret investigative weapon. They stood in solidarity.

"You used to love all those ghost hunting shows as a kid, right?" Peyton asked.

"Oh, I was obsessed," Rose said. "Good thing too, huh? I don't think I'd have understood a thing from George if I didn't have that background."

"Damn it, I wish I had brought those sheets," Diotima said, visibly frustrated. "I was literally just reading about this stuff, but I don't remember anything useful."

"These sheets?" Yoshi said as he grabbed lightly crumpled papers from his bag.

Diotima and Rose both gasped this time.

"Yes, Yoshi!" Diotima said in a sharp whisper. "I can't believe it!"

"Yeah, I rock," He said. Josh knew it was an accident scooping those papers into his bag, but a great accident. "You girls just keep doing science over there while Josh and I look around."

Thus, the gentlemen stood up and scanned the vast desert before them. Quickly equipping their own spok-specs revealed they were within the foreboding fog of nearby spoks. Like standing on the sea floor, they could see the impression of landscape, but mostly blue darkness rolling through. No sign of Oni, nor his mysterious allies.

"Yoshi," Rose said as she quietly approached him from behind. "Did you bring those headphones? I think we need them."

Without a moment wasted, he handed them over to Rose, and she reached up to place them high on his head.

"You should be the one to test it," She said.

Rosemary carefully handed him a mismatched combo of ghost hunting gear: Rose's personal spok-specs and a cellphone-sized spirit box radio strapped around the right arm of the glasses. Yoshi traded his own pair back to her before adjusting the weight of all three accessories.

"We gotta name this thing," Yoshi said to himself, nervously peeling the headphones away from his ears.

"We can wait a second if you're scared," she said to him. "It's okay, Yosh."

For a moment, and only a moment, Yoshi looked to Josh. Josh was watching eagerly; thinking had made a suggestion that his team ran with and got their hopes up on. He was worried the longer they spent on this task, the greater their disappointment in him would be.

Yet those thoughts ceased the moment Josh caught Yoshi's brief eye. After he looked, he turned his gaze back to Rose. With a sudden sense of resolve, he told her, "I got this."

*You got this. Please work.*

He raised the spok-specs over his eyes, carefully adjusting the weight distribution again, and he scanned around the environment. Headphones, high-tech glasses, and a radio strapped to his face— The look of an elite ghost hunter.

"Nothing," he said. "I got nothing."

"Nothing is turned on, Yoshi," Diotima said.

"Oh," he replied. "Damn. Hyped myself up for nothing."

"Not so fast," Rose said. She flicked the switch on the spok-specs, then plugged the headphones into the spirit box. "Don't start talking too loud when I turn the radio on, okay?"

The light humming of the spok-specs blended in with the sound of sweeping radio signals coming from the headphones. In just under ten seconds, a smile started rising on Yoshi's face to the confusion and discomfort of all.

"No way," he said. His volume was above average, despite the forewarning. "I can hear voices..."

Yoshi continued scanning. He took off the headphones, keeping the specs on.

"Guys, it's actually working!" He said, quiet once more. "It's muffled, and sounds low-pitched, but I can hear talking if I point the glasses that way. Rose put these on."

She took the headphones and slowly lowered them onto her head. The sweeping static sound slowly muffled as the cups covered her small ears. For a few seconds, they stood facing each other, connected by the cable of Yoshi's headphones.

Diotima, Peyton, and Josh stood around them in perfect patience. Rose had her head tucked and eyes closed, focusing in until she ripped them off sharply.

"Are you okay?" Peyton said, walking up to comfort her.

"Yeah, they definitely work," she said, wearing fear all over her face.

"Well, what's the bad news?" Diotima asked.

"It just scared me, it sounds like a bad recording of someone who just inhaled reverse helium," Rosemary claimed.

*Like sulfur hexafluoride?*

"What do you mean?" Diotima said. "Can I try?"

"Yeah, bring me those pages again," She responded. "I think we can tune it a little better."

Yoshi maintained his observation of the desert horizons while the girls made the switch.

"Okay, I can hear it," Diotima said. "It does sound like reverse helium," She said with a slight smile.

The amusement died in an instant as Rose made adjustments to the radio device on the side of Yoshi's head.

"What is it?" Rose said, grabbing Diotima's arm. "Is it better?"

Diotima had removed one of the earphones to listen and talk easier, she looked everyone in the eyes with a pale expression.

'Better.' She mouthed the words without a sound, lifting a shushing finger to her lips.

"It said 'more,'" Diotima said in her quietest voice. "I swear it said 'something something do more,'"

*That doesn't even make sense...*

Josh walked up to her, signaling with his hands that he wanted a try. Diotima didn't hesitate to pass the headphones to Josh as he replaced her position.

He heard the radio sweeping, and closed his eyes to better focus.

"SHE'S LOO-KING," said a low voice over three radio sweeps.

*They really can talk!*

It was not fear Josh felt, but perhaps the last thing a deer feels after it sees headlights. He instantly looped the sound over and over in his memory, obsessing over the evidence. There was vocal intonation in the voice, like it was angry, or arguing. The voice was deep, like he expected, but so far beyond the human range that identifying a gender was impossible.

He closed his eyes tighter, like it would amplify his understanding, and listened for more. Someone had grabbed his arm, seeking his attention, but he held out a finger to stave them off. The spirit box continued to burst with the sound of static.

"A-NO-THER," rolled the voice from the headphones into his ears. Images flashed into his head now, different concepts of what a creature with a voice like this must look like. The chills produced by his own imagination saw him slowly raising his shoulders, clenching his fists. Yet he felt entranced by the voice, minimized to ears and understanding alone.

The headphones lifted from his head, freeing him from the ghostly grasp the gear held in. With the low sound of desert wind returning to him, he opened his eyes.

His eyes adjusted, and Yoshi grabbed him by the shoulders.

"I SEE HIM," Yoshi mouthed silently.

Spok-specs risen to rest upon his head, he stared at Josh with a panicked grip. Josh sharpened his eyes and stared back. He watched Yoshi put the specs back over his eyes, grab Rose by the hand, and walk close to the edge of the hill they stood on, crouched low.

He pointed to a tree, perhaps 300 feet away, in the direction he was facing with the spirit box and spok-specs. It was on lower ground, shielding a small area of desert. The tree grew between a large rock and a tall hill, a perfect spot to set up camp, Josh thought. Yoshi released him.

*What are you doing down there, Oni?*

"What do we do now?" Josh whispered.

Diotima slid off her backpack onto the floor and took a knee as she breached inside. She withdrew the chainmail gloves with the silver wrist bands that Bear had once worn when holding a spok.

"This time, we are no prey," She said as she handed a glove to everyone. "We have to capture him so he can't call spok on us. If he does, now we can push them off."

"We aren't going to talk to him?" Josh asked.

"Of course, we're going to question him," Diotima said. "You didn't experience what he did to us, though."

"I think about it a lot, honestly," Yoshi said with his eyes on the ground.

*Alright then, let's get his ass.*

"Call it, coach," Josh said to Diotima, locked in once again.

"There are three spoks with him, so that's five-on-four," Diotima said to the huddle.

"I don't mean to offend you, Rose, but I don't think you are big enough to handle one on your own. I say you can pair up with Peyton or me, and Josh goes for Oni again.

*Shit... the rematch.*

Josh took another swig of his canteen while the rest of the posse nervously agreed to the plan.

*Are we sure Oni is even under the tree?*

"Yoshi," Josh said, continuing to stare towards that quiet little tree. "Are you confident he's down there?"

"He is," Rosemary interjected. She had never sounded so authoritative, and she looked to Yoshi. "Should I tell them?"

*We already know! It's not the time!*

"We discovered mediumship together," Rose said.

...

"Have you heard of a psychic medium, Josh?" Yoshi whispered.

...

"I," Josh began. "Don't understand."

"It's okay," Rose spoke again. "Our own spirits tune in to each other, and our intuitions extend. When he touches me, I feel like I can hear music. I can feel it, and it helps me know things. Like where to look, or what questions to ask."

*Oh... I understand now...*

Josh paused for a moment and looked at the two of them deeply. Despite the nonstop action rollercoaster his life was recently, he found a moment of peace on that mesa. His heartbeat even slowed to a gentle gallop. The Arañitas felt more love and more fear in that moment than ever before.

"I believe you," Josh said.

The crew disassembled the gizmo, comprised of headphones, a pair of spok-specs, and a spirit box radio, and secured it before setting the plan in motion.

*We got this, we got this.*

## Chapter 23: Monster

They walked down the mesa on approach to Oni's location. Josh finally felt the worries outside this task shed from him like the skin of a snake. Motivated by Yoshitsune and Rosemary, he could finally say he had his head in the game.

*Why did I let him go in the first place?*

They arrived upon a perch, overlooking Oni's lonely desert tree. It may have once been a revelation to see a sleeping bag, a few storage crates, and an electric campfire, but not with Yoshi and Rose's intuition.

*What were your last thoughts before you ambushed our camp?*

Josh almost found humor in how perfectly the tables had turned, and he eagerly looked at his nervous crew. He gave them a nod, one final break before they engage.

To his left and his right, Josh confirmed the Arañitas were ready to pounce.

"I'll go straight for him," Josh said ever so quietly. "Follow me down, then throw your specs on when you have stable ground."

Josh leapt over the small edge to slide down into a sprint for Oni's camp. The second his body descended a few feet, he could clearly see the camp under the great palo verde's leaves. Oni was seated on a box, eating from a can.

Josh, in full sprint, saw Oni's first reaction: Put the mask on. Behind Josh, he heard the others slide down.

*He's facing the other way— go for the rear-naked choke!*

Oni, with a fierce and familiar yellow stare, turned to Josh and instinctively threw a can of beans. Expecting the defensive reaction, Josh swatted the can and changed his plan to shoot in with a double leg takedown on the unbalanced Oni.

Affirming Josh's presumption that Oni was an untrained fighter, Oni's last-ditch defensive maneuver was to front kick the rapidly approaching assailant. Josh braced most of the incoming impact by slowing down, but was unable to take him to the ground.

Oni began throwing wild punches at Josh's head as he pushed the demon's foot out of the way. Josh had felt the punches of heavy fabric gloves on his forehead and cheekbones before he dropped levels and punched Oni in the abdomen.

The body strike was only to give Josh a second to back out of range and readjust. The ambush takedown was unsuccessful, but plan B stands for brawl.

Behind him, he heard the struggle of his allies, wrestling and kicking in dirt.

Josh lunged forward at Oni and landed his fist directly on the face of his demon mask, right on the jagged teeth.

*Ow! Stupid.*

He threw a secondary body shot and began forcing a circling motion so he could see his friends as well. As he made it around Oni, a terrible flush of nerves washed over him. Oni faced him just a few feet away, but a dozen feet behind, Josh's friends struggled against invisible forces in the dirt.

*Come on, guys!*

Peyton was yelling and screaming as though she was trapped under a heavy blanket. Diotima and Rose, teaming up against a spok invisible to Josh without his specs. He watched them being dragged and slammed by nothing at all in his peripheral vision. Closer to the tree, he saw Yoshi. He used all his weight to hold the spok in a bear hug, swaying heavily from gusts that burdened him alone.

Josh lunged at Oni with four straightened fingers to his throat. The piercing hand strike stunned him long enough to throw an open palm strike in quick sequence. Josh backed out again. Oni returned with a wild counter-strike from his left hand.

*A Left? Wait!*

An idea popped into his head, and he tested it immediately. Josh feinted a jab and threw two more body strikes at his opponent, exposing himself to a right hook that never came.

Even an inexperienced fighter would have taken the opportunity to knock the slobber off their opponent in that case, but Oni used the hand to push Josh away and strike with his left hand again.

*I hyperextended your elbow last time!*

Josh threw a sidekick into Oni, sending him rolling over the crate he initially sat on.

"Don't fight," he called at the fumbling Oni.

Oni caught his breath as the Arañitas began to gain control over the spoks.

As Josh walked slowly towards him, he listened as his friends' grunts faded to calmer breathing. Rose was still being thrown slightly by the strength of the spok resisting her grip.

"I came to turn myself in," he said, still kneeling behind the wooden crate.

"That's bullshit!" Diotima's labored voice called from behind. "First thing you did was throw a can at him."

"She's right. You're one who lies," Josh said as he kicked the box to the side, preparing to grab him. "We're taking you in ourselves,"

As Josh moved the box aside, he was horrified to see Oni clicking the safety off a handgun hidden he took crate.

"Not this time, boy scout!" Oni shouted.

Josh's eyes widened; they both knew he wasn't fast enough to disarm.

Oni had instantly targeted Josh with the firearm and finally stood to his feet.

"Yep, I am a liar," Oni said. "And I don't want my limbs folded backwards this time."

"What's happening?" Rosemary called. "Josh? We can't see!"

Josh held his hands up; he lost. "He's got a gun," he said flatly.

*I got us killed... and I really thought you had changed?*

"What I got," Oni snarled, brandishing the gun like a magic wand. "...is a grand idea. I was going to your facility, that part is true, but things just keep getting better for me!"

Josh was terrorized by his enthusiasm. Oni's composure was pained, yet victorious.

"I planned to march on your base with three spoks," Oni said to all, waving Josh to stand by his team as they held on. "By the time I get there, looks like I'll have five more."

*He's a gloater; I can distract him.*

"Don't let go, guys!" Josh said in a raised but stern voice. "How do you figure that, Oni?"

"Obviously, I'm going to kill you," Oni said callously. "So who first? Do you guys really want to die wrestling in the dirt with those stupid glasses on?"

"We'll never help you," Josh said. "We're not like you."

"Ooh, how inspiring of you! Says the one not lying in the dirt," Oni mocked. "You just don't get it, I can sacrifice your last breath to OWN your soul, father your birth into the spirit world. I really have the ritual down by now. And to think I could have shown you how..."

Muffled exclamations of agony came from his crew. Rose's worried cry stood out among the rest.

"Whiney goes first," Oni said.

He turned the gun on Rosemary; he meant to shoot.

Josh's animal-like instincts kicked in. Screaming, he threw himself towards Oni. It was so fast, he could not tell if the gun went off before or after the collision. What was unmistakable was that the gun popped.

A Scream, a lunge, and a *bang*. The flash was far brighter than he ever imagined a gun would be. His ears cut away all sound. First to return was a piercing ring in his inner ear. He felt something deep damaged by the sound, yet he remained determined to control the weapon Oni unleashed. Being unable to hear even the sounds of his body flailing against Oni's, he became disoriented, almost nauseated.

Josh lay on the dirt, struggling with Oni again, grasping the barrel of his handgun. He searched for the sound of four familiar voices.

Yoshi released the Spok from his grip and removed his specs frantically.

"ROSEMARY!" he roared, muffled to Josh.

Diotima and Peyton ceased their struggle as well. They remained mute as they looked upon their terrible reality.

The sound of rocks stomping up scared Josh for a moment, until he realized it was Diotima. She stomped on Oni's mask, shattering it after two heavy heels fell upon it.

Josh scrambled out of the position they were in, keeping control of the gun until he could free it from Oni's grip. As he did, Oni deflected Diotima's feet away, throwing her off balance. He stood up as she gained her footing. Josh threw the gun behind him and watched Diotima throw a punch, with the exact technique she had been taught by Imanuel.

Diotima connected with Oni's face, just before he returned by punching her back. From the corner of Josh's eye, he caught a frame of Yoshi leaning over Rose, and Peyton was still frozen in horror, looking on at them.

Josh threw a fully wound right hook at Oni, hoping it would knock him out. He wobbled but stayed on his feet. The demon pretender carried his momentum to Diotima again, but trapped her in a bear hug while he took her to the ground. Furious knees and claws from Diotima flew at Oni until he found a way to hold her arms in tight.

During Oni's attempted control of Diotima, Josh was trying to pry him off. His focus was unbent on holding her down. They thrashed to the floor while Josh tried to get between them. In a twist of anticipation, Josh caught Oni gnashing his teeth and bit down on Diotima's shoulder like a vampire.

Josh slammed hammer fists on the side of Oni's head with all his might. The spirit he had to endure the strikes was fearful. His facial muscles scrunched with vicious tenacity as he locked his jaw. Diotima cried out in pain as he peeled his bloodied face off of her, leaving behind a crimson chomp.

Oni's eyes raised to Josh. Even without the mask, there was a disturbing hint of yellow in the gaze upon that electrified Josh. Amid the eye contact, Oni swallowed hard.

Thunder cracked in the desert, yet time seemed to stop. Diotima even paused at the absurd gulp. Josh stood up and forced his heel deep into Oni's liver.

Diotima easily struggled free while the demon recovered from the liver shot. Now that she stood next to him, Josh noticed clear as day: Oni had taken a bite of her, and kept it. She covered the wound in a mixture of pain and confusion, and the echo of thunder rumbled back from the mountains.

As Oni lay for a moment, Diotima and Josh stared at the sudden dark clouds casting shade in the desert. There was a silence of wind, yet a wave of cold cascaded over them in their pause. Lizard skin on Josh's whole body, as his nervous system went cold, too. A single frosty breath escaped from Diotima.

*What's happening?*

"What the fuck?!" Diotima roared.

Oni crawled backwards painfully and slowly away as they all looked around. Yoshi stood up to observe the strange phenomena as well. From the trench-warfare stare, to a gaping expression of searing terror, Peyton pointed to the high mesa they had descended from.

“WENDIGO!” she screamed.

Josh's eyes locked into its position before she finished the word. The shred of hope that he misheard her faded away. He could hear well enough to understand the scream.

Shadows cast through the sudden fog, painting the silhouette of a colossal beast into the air. From under the bed of his deepest fears, the creature emerged forward towards the edge of the mesa.

It was colossal, but with a twiglike frame. More disturbing than its oversized hands and spider-like fingers was its enormous stomach. The creature looked as if it had been starving for centuries, but had overconsumed on a recent meal. The obscene and uncanny belly looked bow-dragging, yet it descended the mesa with the calculated swiftness of a racing toad.

Nobody moved. It was not a survival strategy; this was nothing like a mountain lion or grizzly bear encounter. Josh felt a new sensation as he experienced buckling knees for the first time in his life. His brain even activated his voice, and a trembling moan accidentally escaped him.

Unobscured by the fog above, the wendigo stared towards them as it descended to their level. It chuffed heavy breaths through lips that were half chewed off. Above the self-cannibalizing mouth, and behind the frantically darting eyes, was the face of a traumatized human. With no hair anywhere, there was still an impression of an inwardly curling unibrow of vengeful sorrow.

Josh finally surrendered to his chattering kneecaps and fell to the floor. Diotima looked left and right, up and down, and all around for a sign of hope while locked in the monster's sights.

Yoshi had been crawling away— backwards, closer to Josh and Diotima, but began hyperventilating too loudly, and drew the creature's attention. It cracked its head directly pointing at Yoshi below, and he collapsed into unconsciousness.

The wendigo's vermilion eyes found Oni on the floor, and whipped air into its flaring nostrils. It crept, with slow steps forward, devoid of noise. The single pace spanned a dozen feet at least, and it crawled low on the floor. The long fingers curled around the arm of a saguaro

cactus like tentacles, unbothered as it pulled itself closer. Its eyes were transfixed on Oni, and widened like the aperture of a camera.

Spared from arm's reach, the monster's attention was stolen by something nearby hitting the floor. Josh was brave, but turning his neck to look at anything else was out of the question.

Once again, something out of view hit the floor and slid in the dirt.

*Spoks?! Help us!*

The next thing Josh noticed was the eyes of the haunting wendigo turning to the noise. More whips of air filled the silence as it sniffed around. A final something flew down from the mesa, and it looked like a dead rabbit.

Shadows cut across the fog from above. Two figures had jumped down from the mesa, sliding towards them. The creature turned around and whined an angry wail.

*CHASE! NORBERTA!*

It was S.C.A.B.B. who came to the rescue. Chase and the wrangler, whom Josh had only met once, now ran at the wendigo, roaring in deep voices.

Unexpectedly, from the deep left of the action, another dead rabbit flew at the wendigo, hitting it in the shoulder. It was Umar, running in at a slow but steady pace. As Josh prepared to watch them all die, Sarg blasted past him towards the cursed juggernaut. Coming from behind Josh, Sarg ran as quietly as he could and tackled the wendigo in the knees.

As he crashed into the skinny legs, Chase and Norberta jumped for the creature's hands. The wendigo couldn't catch itself and fell to the floor, putting most of its weight into Chase and Norberta. With Umar finally on the scene, he ran to the back of the creature and began wrapping his arms around its neck, heaving it backward.

They had taken it down and held it in place. Their success gave Josh a much-needed feeling of comfort, but not nearly enough to settle his drumming heart. He noticed Peyton lay flat

on her back, breathing rapidly as she stared into the dark clouds. Diotima ran for Yoshi and Rose, still holding a hand to her wound.

Oni took the chance to scabble to his feet and attempt to flee.

From Sarg's entry point, followed Missy and George. Missy launched her muscular legs into Oni's side and placed a boot upon his chest, holding him in place. George charged at the wendigo with an open book.

While Chase and the wranglers held the creature immobile, George's muffled voice spoke to the creature. Josh's hearing had not returned, but context clues told him S.C.A.B.B. knew what they were doing.

Josh tried to motivate himself to stand, but became dizzy. He leaned forward, planting his hands on the dirt. He expected to vomit, but let the fuzzy sounds of his environment distract him.

Gentle hands found their way to Josh's underarms and tried to lift his upper body. He flinched at first, but realizing it was Missy assisting him to his feet, he held her tight as he got on his feet again.

"Let's go," her lips moved.

With his legs hardly cooperating, he continued with his rescuer. She had escorted him to the rally point of his other Arañitas. Yoshi and Diotima knelt over Rose's body as it lay flat. Josh fell to his knees again and placed a hand on Rosemary's shoulder.

Slowly, the picture of sound came into focus. He heard the weeping of his allies, of all but one. Yoshi held Rose's limp hand, stained from her wound.

With the sounds of a beast roaring behind him, his inner voice could be heard again.

*What have I done?*

"It's over," George called with heavy breaths. "It's done."

Josh looked at the aftermath behind him. The wendigo was gone. The wranglers wiped dirt off their clothes and approached Rosemary, too. Oni had been tied up with ropes, left alone as everyone stood by to mourn.

Missy had tears coming down one side of her face and knelt to place a hand on Diotima and Peyton's shoulders, too.

"Say the words, George," Missy said.

"Rosemary," said the glum George. "You were stolen by cowardly force, but now you must seek peace. You are surrounded by friends, all encouraging you not to detach from your heart as you detach from your body. Remember your name. Remember your life, and remember all that you have loved. We remember Rosemary."

A moment of silence lingered. Yoshi choked on his pain as Sarg leaned over him and hoisted his limp body off his knees.

"C'mon, kid, let's take a walk," Sarg said. The softness in his voice was unfamiliar, yet the two of them exited the scene like close friends. The towering Sarg's voice faded as they walked into the desert from where Sarg had entered the fray.

"We shouldn't be here much longer," called a voice suddenly.

Josh lifted his head to see Chase standing among them and felt a strange mixture of emotion. Before he could characterize those feelings or peel his eyes off Chase, Umar spoke up.

"He's right," he said with sunken shoulders. "This desert is flooding with negative energy now."

Josh didn't care. He couldn't bring himself to stand and walk away, even if his legs would allow it. Chase assisted Peyton to her feet, as did Missy with Diotima. Norberta attempted to grab Josh, but he shooed her hands away.

"What about Rosemary?" Josh said. Repeating her name made his insides feel heavy; he sank further into the dirt while a screaming feeling rose from his throat.

Peyton wept aloud, as though she finally thawed from her frozen trauma.

"I'm going to carry her to the bus, then we'll say goodbye back home," Umar said.

*The bus? Is that how they got here?*

"Home!?" Diotima roared with puffy, red eyes.

"Wait!" Josh looked around. "The spoks!"

The wranglers had thrown their spok-specs on in such sync. They spun in 360 degrees quickly, then scanned with caution for a moment. When Umar and Norberta took them back off, Josh assumed the obvious; they had fled.

"Where did they go? How could they leave him?" Josh asked rapidly.

"Hey," Chase spoke to him. "Forget about it for now."

Josh made no attempt to forget about it, but as a few more moments passed, the group of wranglers and little spiders had begun a moping crawl to the big yellow bus. Sarg's heavy silhouette was visible from outside. He had taken Yoshi for a talk, and sat beside him in the bus, trapping him at the window seat.

The swelling guilt on Josh's conscience formed a blind spot in his eye. As he walked down the middle lane on the bus, he couldn't look at Yoshi. He pressed his head to the window as everyone else settled into seats on the bus. Identifying his crew by their stifled wimpers, he tried to divert his focus.

Through the dirty window, he looked at the sky and the clearing storm clouds. He looked at the ground, and a horned lizard scurried across.

*Why can't I cry right now?*

A heavy stomp shook his head on the window. He looked to the front of the bus, where Umar carried the lifeless Rosemary in his arms. He sat with her body in the front as he handed the keys to Norberta.

*Why can't I cry?*

At last, Missy had entered the bus. Josh overheard her indicate to the wranglers in the front that she tossed Oni in the storage space at the bottom of the bus. The man being beaten, bloodied, tied up, and in the dark was the only picture in his head for the short and bumpy ride back to the Brone Pot.

Night had fallen as the engine shut off. The night was dark, not simply due to the absence of light. The moon was new, missing from the sky. No beacon to shower a glow across the cooling desert.

The next day would see the sliver of the moon grow. The next night would see just a bit further into the darkness, but Rosemary would not.

She had seen her final moon, as together they waned into a new phase, unseen.

## Chapter 24: Tomorrow's Garden

The 24 hours that followed their return to the Bronze Pot were sour. Kettle and Valentine stationed themselves at the entrance to perform another cleanse with sage and sentiments. Those mumbled chants of the cloaked curmudgeon were the only words spoken to Josh during that day's cycle.

The Arañitas avoided each other. For some, it was their way of denying the reality for a few extra moments. For others, it was a way to avoid the shame, the guilt. Every other wrangler or bull gave the little spiders their space.

Space is only an ingredient in the healing process, however. Time and energy are also needed to fulfill the recovery, but only when applied correctly.

Josh had experienced loss before, much like many others within S.C.A.B.B., he noticed. He had a way to escape the constant reminders before, but not this time. Every time he walked

through a doorway, he'd look for Rosemary for a moment, imagining her short curls bobbing along. The sound of a gun popped the illusion that rang in his heart.

Oni's unknown fate poked at Josh, too. As the subsequent day drew on, he thought more of the false demon's face.

*Where are they holding him? What will they do to him?*

Surely they would at least question him, Josh thought. Perhaps he could seek the chance to get in front of him again.

*What would I do to him?*

Prompted by the thought that probed him the longest, he sat with himself outside the Bronze Pot. Josh watched the colors of the sunset, the wispy and sparse desert clouds catching the colors of the skyline.

As the sky hit its warmest hues, Josh felt cold. The sun was falling to the horizon, slowly descending upon the other side of the mountain. Red began to flow across the landscape, gushing through the atmosphere and staining the sky. Darkness would soon reign. Those were his last moments facing the light, and he spent them fearing the dark. He didn't worry about what lurked under the curtains of moonlight, only that the beauty before him would be snuffed.

Toxic feelings plagued Josh, and pure thoughts could not cure him. His next plan: feed the depression. Eating in the Grog was a mixed bag. He could recall memories that brought a smile or a sinking feeling, depending on the day.

This night was no different. Where the beginning of his dinner was a sulking session, everything changed the moment Valentine walked in. Josh's eyes locked on him as he approached Sarg at the bar.

*When are we going to talk about this?*

His internal wishes were granted. Valentine brought his meal to Josh's booth and sat with him. A moment passed where looks had been exchanged and inspected before words came.

"I've asked the others to give you all some space," Valentine said. "But it's time we talked."

Valentine blinked hard and leaned forward slowly, beginning to stare at the slab of meat below him. The lamp hanging above cast a sharp light on his face. The light contoured every wrinkle and scar, creating stark and fearsome shadows over his grim expression.

"Soon as we learned you went into the spectral nebula, we dispatched our best," he said, eyes in his meal. "We couldn't locate the center, but we could definitely hear the gun from the outskirts. You can imagine their surprise when they arrived upon one of the most infamous and deadly entities physical that we've ever heard of. None of us has ever seen one before!"

*The wendigo...*

The vision of its ghastly silhouette casting that terrible shadow through the fog painted the back of his mind.

"Tomorrow you spiders are going to document everything about it, everything you heard and saw about it," Valentine told him, still staring at the rare steak below him. "Once Missy can consolidate all your accounts, we can produce the first Bronze Pot book on the Wendigo. This is historic for us, truly."

*That's your concern ...?*

"Right," Valentine said. "That's tomorrow. But today, I need to reiterate a key point."

Josh had still not said a word, but didn't feel the need yet.

"After you learned about spooks, you kids just kept digging. You knew enough for what you had seen, but couldn't wait like everyone else to learn more," Valentine said, returning to his apathetic tone. "Had you operated under our rules, we would have given you educationals on the sort of dangers out there."

“Cognitohazards. Ring a bell? Your ambition to pursue knowledge independent of our warnings has cost your team a devastating price. I’m sorry for your loss, but you should be sorry too.”

“Then the young man with the demon mask,” Valentine said before taking a massive forkful.

“Oni,” Josh said.

“Oni, huh?” Valentine repeated. “He’s a victim too—Comes from the S.C.A.B.B. facility in Appalachia.”

*I knew it!*

“Wait,” Josh said. “How is *he* a victim?”

“He listened to the lure of the prophet,” Valentine said, leaning back in the booth.

Josh returned a puzzled look to Valentine, who relaxed in his seat.

“I’ve corresponded with the Appalachian facility. The starry-eyed investigators in the mountains aren’t getting enough oxygen if you ask me,” he continued.

*Why are you telling me all this?*

Josh’s curious brain was salivating, but cautiously. He was internally fuming at the old man while he spilled the beans completely apathetically. His empathy for their loss was a ghost.

Initially, Josh felt like he was in trouble. His team was getting the “talk,” after their sneaking around had caught up with them.

*It was you who gave us the cognitohazard in the first place!*

“They knew we had more spok activity here in the Sonoran Desert facility. This young man in the basement got ideas of being important and tried to come steal the keys from us,” Valentine said. “Yoshitsune was right about that, pook kid.”

“He told you all that?” Josh asked.

“Yoshitsune’s theory,” Valentine clarified. “I know he’s right. I know lots of things.”

"Like what?" Josh wondered aloud.

"Here's the deal: I want your crew to advance. I want you on my team, but I can't trust you," he said nonchalantly. "I'm waving your prerequisites and giving you access to training materials for bulls. When you pass the course, I'll consider letting you in on more relevant information."

"What?" Josh blurted. "Why aren't I in trouble?"

"You were in trouble the moment you started asking questions, kid," Valentine said. "If you want to be punished, just think about what you're capable of when you try to call the shots."

*Getting my friends killed...*

Unsure how to feel, Josh's eyes fell to the table. He wanted to scream at Valentine, but knew it would only be a deflection of his real self-hatred.

*I don't even know if I want to do this anymore...*

"You aren't getting started anytime soon," Valentine said, beginning to eat again. "You guys are going on probation until the next new moon—you understand."

Josh became consumed by the image of quitting as soon as it breached into his head.

"May I be excused?" Josh asked.

"Not until I say this," Valentine said, folding his hands together over the table.

He leaned forward again, accentuating the deep shadows in his sallow eyes.

"Our Oni isn't talking unless it's with you," he said. "I'd like to know why?"

"He probably thinks he can manipulate me," Josh said. "I don't know either."

"What would you do if I asked you to get some information from him?" Valentine said with a curious tension in his rising eyebrow.

Josh clenched his jaw. He imagined himself walking into a room where Oni was handcuffed as if in police custody. His fists were tight under the table. Dark thoughts inhabited his imagination.

“Just think about it,” Valentine said. “We have means of getting answers. It’s in our name sake after all.”

A short silence held the air. A new image took the place of the old one. No longer was Josh holding Oni in imaginary police custody. Instead, he was at the Bronze Pot, in the basement. He descended a hidden staircase into the basement, where a brazen bull inhabits a dark room.

A chill coiled down his spine, and he instinctively launched to his feet outside the booth.

“Yeah, you can go now,” Valentine said. “Get some sleep, and do some thinking.”

“We’ll see what happens,” Josh said. He walked off.

He didn’t intend to depart with an attitude, but felt like he was being ejected from the booth somehow against his will. His half-eaten food remained with Valentine in the ominous lighting. His legs carried him to bed, and his intention was not to stop them.

He descended the stairs, rounded the corner to the massive hallway, and was intercepted by Chase, posted outside his posse’s door.

“Hey, Josh,” Chase said as he approached.

*Anything but this...*

“I just wanted to tell you I’m sorry about what happened,” he said sincerely. “Valentine is making me train you as a bull on the new moon.”

*Anything but that!*

“Hm,” Josh said as he stood still. “Thanks.”

“Anyway,” he said, attempting his best to be casual. “Tell the others I’m sorry too. I still don’t really know all that happened, or what I would have done in that situation.”

Josh tamed the beastly side of him that wanted to howl out in pain, leap at him, and claw at his face. Instead, he did what he does best: Think heavily and act lightly. He thought hard as he silently walked off into the Arañitas dorm.

Whom would he find to interrupt his train of thought, but Yoshi and Diotima, sitting together in the center of the room. His entrance was a cannonball compared to the stillness of the drab dormitory.

Josh took a seat near them to commiserate. He briefly pictured how it would go, telling them he is quitting to spend more time with his sister. Seeing Iris would help take his mind out of this place, certainly.

This wasn't the time for that. Josh felt the pressure of the elephant in the room. He could tell they were equally as scared to address it. While looking for the courage to speak, his eyes found the wound dressing taped to Diotima's shoulder. The urge to shiver at the spine tingled within Josh as the thought of her perspective on things forced its way into his head.

Now he wanted to speak even less, draw zero attention to himself. Nonetheless, the urgency overcame him, and he puffed his chest before breaking the silence:

"How are you guys feeling?"

Diotima looked at the two of them, staying on Yoshi's unreacting face for a moment.

"I don't know," she said miserably. It was unclear how recently it had been since she cried, but it was recent all the same. Her eyes lay upon the floor as she spoke.

"Valentine told me he spoke to you guys," Josh said with a softer voice. "He gave you his sympathies?"

Yoshi's eyelid lifted to Josh. There was a swollen fury in the stare that made Josh regret speaking for a moment before hearing him.

"He tried," Yoshi said. "I could tell he doesn't feel a thing about it. I don't think he can feel anything at all."

"In the same breath, he started talking to us about the job again," Diotima said, energy quickly rising. "Like we inconvenienced their workflow with what happened."

"By what we *did*," Josh said. As it was released from his mouth, he realized he should have kept it within.

"You can't blame yourself," Yoshi said.

It was immediately lighter in the room when Josh heard him say it. The freedom he felt made him see how heavy the shackles of guilt choked him.

*But I have to blame myself?*

"He was right," Yoshi said, tearfully angry. "I hate to admit it, but he was right. We ignored the rules, and look what happened."

"That's not fair!" Diotima said. "He knowingly keeps things secret that could have made things different. It's everyone's fault! This place is horrible!"

*She blames herself, too. Yet, she's right.*

"I don't think I belong here, guys," Josh told the ground between them. "I don't like what I've done at this place, how my actions have defined me."

"What are you saying, you quit?" Yoshi said. "You can't!"

He threw his arms out in confused protest. Diotima took offense to the idea, too.

"You can't quit," she said. "Josh, we need you. Especially now."

"My sister needs me," he said. "And I miss her."

Saying it aloud crushed him a little further, yet he was still unable to produce tears.

Diotima and Yoshi exchanged looks while he swallowed back his emotions.

"I forgot you have a family out there," she said, shrinking into her seat. "You know, I bet that's why they picked the rest of us, because they knew we didn't have anything outside of this. No one to cry to."

Josh watched Yoshi take the theory in stride, like it didn't conflict with him at all.

"Josh, you can't leave," Diotima repeated gravely. "This place is corrupt, it's detached!"

He waited for her to make it make sense. She gave him reasons he should fly far away, yet all he could think about was why he would want to stay if not in solidarity with the Arañitas, or the remainder of them.

"You are responsible for helping make it better!" she scolded.

"Why?" he retorted.

"Because you helped make it worse!" she concluded.

Facing the music, Josh released some of the tension rising in his shoulders and tightening in his face. Yoshi looked at him too; it was a look of disappointment that shattered the self-esteem Josh had longed for. Everything she said was being validated by Yoshi's gaze.

"As I said, we all helped make this place what it is," she said. Diotima approached a step towards Josh and spoke to him in a warmer tone.

"Some of us more than others, and I do mean Valentine," she nodded outside. "Now more than ever, we need to be together, and see that this place changes, be the change if necessary."

"It's necessary," Yoshi said. "Rosemary knew this place needed to change, and I think she knew it started with us. Josh, now we know... she might be watching over us right now."

"You need to hear this, Josh," Diotima said. "On our walk to the mesa, before everything, I was thinking about the flowers on our path."

*Were you?*

"Did you know most species of dinosaurs went extinct before flowers evolved?" She asked.

Josh stared in confusion, he nodded 'no.'

"It's true," she continued. "I'd say look it up, but you'll just have to trust me. Millions of generations of dinosaurs, and how many never got to see something as beautiful as a rose? I was walking along the desert, wondering if the spirits of a dinosaur could still be roaming around."

"At this point, I believe they do," Diotima said, having mastered her emotions. "I also believe they can appreciate how miraculous and inspiring it must be to see so many flowers. It got me thinking of what kind of beauty all of us walking around today won't get to be alive for. Today, it makes me want to fight. It makes me want to fight with everything I can to make tomorrow look a little more pretty, or a little more fair."

"I say we owe it to Rosemary. We owe her a garden like the world has never seen," she told them. "When we see her again, she'll tell us how well we did, how well we treated this gift of being alive, and shared it with the future."

Josh wanted to melt into a puddle on the floor. He wanted Diotima and Yoshitsune to give him a tight hug.

"You're a fighter, you don't turn your back to your enemy," Yoshi said.

*I've never said that.*

"No, he's no fighter," Diotima claimed. "He's a lover all the way. That's why he doesn't get to quit. Fights are won or lost, but love has no ending."

Josh sat in shame. Selfishness almost claimed him and had him packing his bags. That's not the song he's been learning these last few weeks. That's not what his coaches taught him; he must always move forward.

"I..." Josh choked. "I love you guys."

"I love you all," Diotima said.

"I love you all, too," Yoshi said.

Without saying it aloud, it was known their love was not limited to the three individuals in the room. Josh soon attempted to sleep. Per habit, he began reflecting upon his entry to this place. He started at the very beginning, the wound that he thought would heal with S.C.A.B.B.

Unable to sleep, he poured the heavy bucket of thoughts onto paper.

—

*New entry, new moon.*

*I wanted to feel valuable, so I accepted that letter. But wasn't I happy? I had friends and hobbies, but where did my need for value come from? Was it because Sara had just ghosted me? Abandoned me without courtesy? I barely even think about her now. Our relationship can't haunt me from here? Right? What could have prevented me from making such a poor choice with my freedom?*

*That decision changed me. Every day I live with it is another day I become the man I am going to be. I have seen impossible things and discovered perspectives and philosophies outside my dreamscapes. Through all this change, I have kept one thing safe. I love my sister, and I must do right by her.*

*Iris always wanted to play superheroes. She's making me think about how this place could benefit from a real superhero. If my actions will define me, then I'll do something I know would make her proud. I'll play the role of the brave blue boy scout who dared to dream.*

*I'll dream of my beautiful planet, free of war, and full of flowers. The only demons we know are in memories of their defeat. I'll dream of a world where we don't fear the ghosts of the past. Then, when I wake up, my friends and I use our gifts to make it happen.*