

## **Chapter 2: The Invader, Part 2**

*No man is an island,  
entire of itself;  
every man is a piece of the  
continent,  
a part of the main.*

*If a clod be washed away  
by the sea,  
the world is the less,  
as well as if a promontory  
were,  
as well as if a manor of thy  
friend's  
or of thine own were.*

*Any man's death  
diminishes me,  
because I am involved in  
mankind;  
and therefore never send  
to know for whom the bell  
tolls,  
it tolls for thee.*

These words, adapted from a 17th century essay by John Donne, were emblazoned on small signs that hung from either side of the gate to Yamaku Academy. Below the written inscription on the signs, it was transcribed a second time in braille. Should a given student still be unable to understand the sign, they only need to ask a single one of the faculty members at the school, as each and every one of them had been required to fully memorize and understand the meaning of these words before they were able to begin work. It had long been school tradition for new students to, as they entered the gates for the first time, read the inscription if they could and run their hands across the braille. The tradition was one that provided a sense of unity to its students. Ask any Yamaku student or alumni, and they would be able to recall at least some part of the inscription with absolute certainty. However, there were three individuals who had not taken part in this tradition.

Hisao Nakai never read this inscription. In his cynicism towards the changes his life had made after his heart attack, he had neglected to learn about the school or its students, and as such, he had never even heard of such a tradition. He saw his new life at Yamaku as one of isolation from “normal” able-bodied society. Even if he had known of the tradition, he would likely not have participated in it when he entered the Yamaku gates for the first time. At first, he had no desire to feel unity with the students of Yamaku. However, in his ignorance of the text of the inscription, he developed an entirely new kind of unity; a unity with the two others who did not read the inscription. Some may call it coincidence. Others may call it fate.

Hisao Nakai was a man who had lived his life ignoring the fate that lay before him.

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Coming into school the next day was an uncomfortable experience for Hisao. Ever since the day of the festival, he had been horribly sick. He was so sick that not only did he have to stay alone in his room during the festival, but he had to miss class for the past three or so days because of it. He knew that people were going to notice; maybe they wouldn't say anything, but they'd still know. Hisao would be able to see the curious stares, averted gazes, and impulsive glances that would be sent his way. Those that knew him better might ask him about it. They'd try to be polite, but he'd still rather just try to forget it. Between the splitting headache and high

fever, he'd rather have just taken another sick day. However, the Nurse had told him that he wasn't contagious, and he was already well behind in class from having just transferred in. The bell rang to start the first class of the day.

The teacher, Mutou, wasn't in yet. This was to be expected; more often than not, Mutou would arrive late, and have to improvise the lesson for the day. Normally, Hisao saw this as a benefit to being in his class. It was a way for him to have just a few minutes less of actual work to do, or to have just a few minutes more of socializing with friends. Granted, in his class, that was limited to Shizune and Misha, who were infrequently there and may or may not have been in a socializing mood, but regardless, he was usually thankful. Today, he saw it as a curse. Just more time for people to notice he's there and start asking questions.

And, sure enough, two people got out of their seats and started moving towards him. Hisao wished he could have made a bet with someone on whether or not they'd decide to talk to him. He could have earned a bit of spare change on it.

"Hey there, Hicchan!" Hisao looked for a way to describe Misha's voice. Constantly chipper? No, it had less of a positive tone to it.

"Hey there, guys. How have you been?"

As if waiting for Hisao to speak was only a courtesy, Shizune was already signing her reply to Misha. He wondered if she had even been paying attention to what he said. Shizune had been looking at him while he was speaking, and she would have barely been able to see her hands from where she was standing, so... maybe?

"~We've been fine. We're *super* swamped with Student Council work right now!~"

Oh no. Hisao knew where this was going. Even if Shizune had been trying to use a bit more tact, Misha's complete unawareness of subtlety told Hisao everything. He knew they were going to try to get him involved in Student Council work, or chastise him for being absent and try to get him to make up the work he was exempted from. The two of them were a bit predictable in that way.

"But I bet you already know why we're so swamped with work, don'tcha?"

*Here it comes*, Hisao thought.

"Let's see... does it have something to do with me being absent?"

"You're right, Hicchan! It's 'cause we have that- wait," Misha seemed confused, more so than she normally is. The difference between what she expected to hear and what she actually heard stopped her dead in her tracks for a moment. Even Shizune wasn't immune from it. Her usual poker-face broke just a second after Misha finished signing Hisao's response.

"Actually, no... It's not that..." She worriedly looked around for a moment, as if she didn't know how to deal with this unexpected situation. Once Misha's gaze landed on her, Shizune gave her what Hisao assumed was a quick pep talk in sign language. After a second's rest to collect her thoughts, she shook her head and tried to get back into things.

"~No, silly, it's about something else entirely~!" Hisao had to admit, Misha was impressively quick with her mental recovery.

"~You wouldn't know, since you were out the last few days, but our class is getting a new student! He just transferred in from overseas, and Shicchan and I are trying to help get it sorted~!"

*Wait, a new student*, Hisao thought. *When did this happen?*

As Hisao finished his thought, Mutou strolled in, uncharacteristically calm and collected. It was almost as if he actually had a plan for the day.

"Alright, class, everyone get back in your seats."

Mutou stood upright and addressed the class. Usually, Mutou was the sort of teacher who would wander in and assign work for the first part of the class as he got a plan together. The aware confidence he currently spoke with was out of the ordinary for him.

"I'm sure many of you have heard rumors going around about our new classmate. Well, let's get those dismissed right away."

Mutou turned to the classroom door, which he had left open. "Come on in, now's as good a time as any." The student entered from the doorway, and all attention was on him. He moved to the center of the room and stopped, and he surveyed the students just as much as they surveyed him.

"Please introduce yourselves to our new student, Joel Kenjo."

And that was the last thing Hisao heard before he fell asleep.

Hisao awoke as the bell rang to let the class out for lunch. Mutou finished whatever mental tangent he had been on, assigned a few pages of reading as homework, and started sorting some papers on his desk. The class started packing up their things to leave. The first out of their desks were Shizune and Misha, who began looking around the room as if they were just as tired as everyone else.

*Oh no. They're acting natural.*

It was never good when Shizune and Misha tried to act natural. For one, neither of them was very good at it. Try as she might, Shizune had little ability to conceal what she was thinking, and what ability she had flew out the window if she were intentionally plotting something. Misha was arguably much better at it, but that was more due to her really only having one disposition; overly energetic and boisterous. For two, it meant that they were going to try roping someone into helping with the Student Council work.

However, a quick nervous glance from Shizune revealed the target of her plot. Hisao followed where the gaze had been to a spot just slightly beyond him, where a dark-skinned student he didn't recognize sat as he calmly dumped a few books into a bag hanging off of his wheelchair.

*It's got to be him.*

In the handful of seconds or so before Shizune realized that Hisao had caught on, he attempted to give the new student a warning.

"Hey, I'm Hisao Nakai. I'm sorry, but I'm pretty new here and I don't believe I caught your name."

"The name's Joel Kenjo. I'm the student who transferred here today. How's it going, Nakai?"

*Wait, what, Hisao thought. If he's that new student Misha was talking about earlier, then shouldn't Mutou have introduced him to the class? I don't remember him saying anything.*

Hisao was about to continue wondering about this before he remembered why spoke to Joel in the first place.

"I'm good. Anyway, I was the previous new student before you, so I wanted to give you a quick warning about those two over there." Hisao gestured to Shizune and Misha, who had now noticed the two of them. "They're the president and vice-president of the Student Council, and they're probably about to try to rope you into the club."

Joel gave him a smile and an easygoing laugh. "What's so bad about that? They're just going to talk and give me a flyer or something, right?"

Hisao shook his head. "No, actually-"

Before he even finished his sentence, he could feel Misha's presence behind him. *Damn it, Misha*, he thought. Shizune peered around her shoulder.

"Hello there, Mr. Kenjo! Making new friends already, I see!"

Joel gave Misha a curious glance, then turned to Shizune. He moved from the former quickly, but lingered a touch on the latter. A frown crossed his face as he did so. He turned back to Hisao.

"I think I see what you mean. Thanks for trying," he said.

Hisao looked on in desperation at his failed attempt to stop the Student Council.

"Let me introduce myself! ~I'm Misha, and this is Shizune! Shicchan here is the president of the Student Council, and I'm her interpreter, so it's our job to get to know all the students in the class~."

"You two are quick," Joel said. A grin crept across Shizune's face as Misha finished signing the translation. Joel raised an eyebrow in response, apparently catching on to their plot.

"Since you're new here, and probably don't know too many people, we thought we'd invite you to eat lunch with us!"

"Is that so," Joel said.

Shizune gave Joel a suspicious look, then cautiously signed her answer to Misha.

"Why, of course, silly! It's only natural that we would be friendly towards a new student; it's our job as the Student Council!"

"Right," Joel said. "Well, I hate to disappoint, but I've already made lunch plans with Nakai here. In fact, we'd better hurry to make them before we're late. I'll see you next class."

And with that, Joel wheeled straight out the door before anyone else could stop him. For a man in a wheelchair, he was remarkably nimble. Seeing the exit Joel had so kindly opened for him, Hisao jumped on the opportunity.

"Y-Yeah, right, lunch plans. Shizune, Misha, I'll see you around," he said, as he quickly strode out the door, leaving a very confused pair behind him. In a few moments, he caught up with Joel, who was moving with purpose down the hall.

"Hey, Joel," Hisao called. "Wait up!"

Joel stopped and turned around to look at Hisao.

"Hey, Nakai. How's it going?"

"I wanted to say thanks for finding a way out of there," Hisao said.

"No problem. Thanks for the warning. They do that often?"

"Yeah, they did the same thing to me on my first few days. But I have a feeling they won't ask you about Student Council again."

"Good," Joel said. "Serves them right. I think I've seen that Shizune girl's type before; she seems like the sort of person who's never had her authority challenged, right?"

Hisao thought back to every interaction he's had with Shizune. As much as she loves a challenge, she hasn't really had to defend her authority from the Student Council before. At worst, a few students have been passive-aggressive with her, but she's certainly never been directly blown off before.

"More or less," Hisao confirmed. "By the way, you know the cafeteria is in the other direction, right?"

"I would have known eventually," he said, attempting to cover his mistake. Hisao wasn't buying it, though.

"Right. Would you like me to show you where it actually is?"

"If you could, that'd be great." Joel gestured towards Hisao with his hand. "Lead on."

As the two neared the cafeteria, Joel tapped Hisao on the arm to get his attention. Evidently, something that Hisao had not seen had caught his attention.

"Hey, Nakai, isn't that girl in our class? Her name was 'Hana' or something, right?"

Hisao looked up, and sure enough, he saw Hanako guiding Lilly a few meters in front of them. They were carrying a few small bags of food, probably their lunches for the day.

"Yeah, that's Hanako. The girl next to her is Lilly, from Class 3-2."

"Any chance you could introduce us," Joel asked.

"Sure."

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Joel Kenjo was the second individual who did not read the inscription at the gates of Yamaku Academy. While Hisao had not done so out of reservation to accept the fate before him, Joel had not done so out of excitement to accept the fate before him.

Joel was a man who was always looking for something. Although Joel considered himself to be a through-and-through American, and introduced himself as such, he had actually only resided there for a handful of years. He spent most of his infancy in an area of northern Iraq, called Kurdistan. The village where he lived had always been very poor, being a small group of subsistence farmers that could only rarely grow enough to survive, let alone sell. As a result, he had always been looking for some way out of his poverty. When he was a young child, he found his home caught in the midst of war, after a group of rebels attempted to free themselves from the control of the government. During the conflict, Joel was injured and lost the use of his legs. As a result, he had always been looking for a way to walk again. And when he was a teenager, a Japanese-American family had taken him in and adopted him. But as fate would have it, he had come home one day from school to find his adoptive father dead and his adoptive brother missing entirely. As a result, he had always been looking for his brother, the only family he then had left in the world. It was this final search that had lead him to Yamaku Academy.

Joel Kenjo was a man who had lived his life pursuing the fate that lay before him.

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The next thing Hisao knew, he, Joel, Lilly, and Hanako were in the tea room eating lunch, and Hisao had a splitting headache.

*Must have fallen asleep again*, Hisao thought. It was the second time today when he had done that. *What happened? Joel had asked me to introduce him to the girls, and then... I guess they must have invited us here. Maybe I'm more sick than I thought.*

He looked around while clutching his head in pain. Lilly and Hanako were playing chess while they talked with Joel. Meanwhile, Joel idly drew strange marks on a piece of paper with a pencil. Hisao figured it must be some nervous habit of his or something.

*Seems normal enough. Did I really just forget everything between introducing Joel and getting here? That's... strange.*

"Would you all care for some tea," Lilly asked.

"Y-Yes please," Hanako said.

"Sure, if you're making some anyways," Hisao added.

"Yes, and thank you," Joel said.

Lilly got up and went to prepare the tea as she usually does. She filled a teapot with water, using her finger as a way to measure how full of water the pot was getting.

"Tell me, Hisao, how has your day been," Lilly asked.

"Good," Hisao said. He didn't actually remember much of it, but he figured he would leave that detail out for Lilly's sake.

"That's good to hear," she said. "What did you do in class today?"

*Darn*, Hisao thought. He had almost gotten away with his little white lie.

"I... don't really remember much of it. I kinda slept through the whole class," he admitted.

A playful grin crept across Lilly's face.

"My, my, what a lousy student you are," she said. "Whatever shall we do with you? You will set such a bad example for Joel if you keep this up."

Hisao put his head down in embarrassment.

"How was your first day, Joel?"

"Not bad," Joel responded.

"Some kids tried to pull me into a club or something less than an hour after meeting me, so I think I'm getting along well."

Hanako shuddered a bit as he said that, likely having already guessed what 'club' Joel was referring to. Lilly took a little longer to piece it together, but her wavering smile revealed what she knew.

"It wouldn't happen to have been the Student Council, would it," she asked.

"Yeah, it was. A dark-haired girl who can't talk and a pink-haired girl who talks way too much."

Lilly sighed. "Yes, Shizune and Misha. They can certainly be... rather *aggressive*... in their work."

Joel looked up at Lilly. "You sound like you have a history with them."

Hisao looked over to Hanako, who was clearly just as unenthusiastic about this conversation as he was. Lilly and Shizune had an impossibly strong animosity for each other, to

the point where they couldn't be in the same room without starting a massive fight. At least Lilly didn't immediately start ranting like Shizune did when the subject was brought up.

"I do. The Student Council president and I have never gotten along with each other. She is simply too aggressive and impatient for me to get any work done, and even the slightest inconvenience causes her to act like a child."

"You two are in different classes, right? Then what work do you even do together?"

"As it so happens, I'm the class representative. I report to Shizune with whatever my class may need. As Class 3-2 consists of students with severe visual impairments, we have to ensure that the class president is taking our needs into account."

Joel frowned as she spoke. "If your organization is full of infighting, then you aren't going to get a damn thing done. A house divided cannot stand and all that."

By Joel's expression, it was clear that he was picking up on Lilly not being terribly patient with Shizune. His tone may have been fairly neutral, but it was obvious to Hisao that he wasn't really buying that Shizune was completely to blame for the issues the two had. Hisao wondered if he should tell Joel that Shizune likes to self-proclaim herself as a tyrant. Joel continued to scribble on his paper.

"Anyways," Joel continued. "You said you were Class 3-2, right?"

Lilly perked up at the change in topic. Although she tried to hide it, Hisao caught Hanako breathing a sigh of relief as well.

"Yes. I am the representative for the class of the blind. Why do you ask?"

"Well, there was someone I wanted to ask you about," Joel said.

*Is it just me, or did he sound really serious when he said that,* Hisao thought. He began to suspect that Joel wasn't just making small talk about Lilly's duties. Meanwhile, Lilly's tone was one of polite confusion and curiosity.

"I know all of my students well. Is something wrong with one of them?"

Joel frowned.

"Yes. What can you tell me of Yuna Yamada?"

*Yuna Yamada? Who is that,* Hisao thought.

Hanako, who had previously been nervously bouncing her gaze between the other three, immediately shot her eyes straight towards the ground. Apparently she knew something that Lilly and Hisao didn't. Lilly took a moment to think.

"I'm sorry, you said Yuna Yamada, correct? I don't think I know her."

Joel raised an eyebrow at her response.

"Are you sure? Before I came here, I distinctly remember hearing something about a Yuna Yamada in Class 3-2. She's our year, slightly above average height, has hair dyed silver, and is completely blind. Are you sure you don't know her?"

As Joel described her, he kept on writing on his paper. The marks were something that Hisao could not make out, a series of fine curves and dots. But with his description of this Yuna girl, Lilly's resolve hardened and she turned around to face where she remember Joel to have been sitting.

"Yes. In fact, I'm certain," she snapped.

**"There is no Yuna Yamada in Class 3-2!"**

All of a sudden, a panicked expression flashed across Joel's face. It appeared and disappeared in an instant, and it happened so quickly that Hisao wondered if he'd really even seen it. But he knew that it did happen. He could see that beads of sweat had formed on Joel's face. Not only that, but Hisao was certain that Joel's sitting position had changed. He was crouched over the side of his wheelchair, as if he had been moving to grab something from his bag. Hisao was feeling a bit unnerved, too.

Suddenly, the tea kettle was hissing like a train whistle.

"Oh, dear!" Lilly said. Hisao was the first to respond, and he got up to where Lilly was standing at the desk.

"The water seems to be done," she said.

"Do you need a hand," Hisao responded.

"Yes, thank you." Lilly smiled sweetly at Hisao as he helped her pour the water into the four cups. As Lilly held the teapot, Hisao helped to guide it so that it didn't spill. Although it could have been done a bit faster, Hisao discreetly took a moment to savor how soft Lilly's hands were as he made sure she didn't move them (and the pot) too far away from the cups.

"It is a bit funny, though," Lilly said. "I don't quite remember putting the pot up to boil."

"Yeah," Joel added. "Even after you put the pot on the burner, it should have taken a bit to actually start boiling, shouldn't it?"

"Yes. If my memory is correct, it should take about five minutes at least." Lilly said.

"Anyone else remember the pot going up to boil," Joel asked.

"No, I don't think so," Hisao said.

"U-um, Lilly," Hanako stuttered. "I- I think the clock is broken." She fidgeted in her seat as she said so, and gestured over to the analog clock hanging on the wall above the window.

"I-It just skipped a minute," she said.

Hisao and Joel looked up at it to confirm.

"Hanako, are you sure? I don't think it did anything," Hisao said.

Hanako looked away from them for a moment, as if trying to decide whether or not she was confident in her own observation. Now that the attention was on her, she seemed as if she regretted changing the topic of conversation.

"Y-Yes, I'm certain," she said. "I-It said 12:23 for a bit, but when the second hand got to the 12, the minute hand jumped farther than it normally does. It- It went right from 12:23 to 12:25."

Hisao gave Joel a curious look.

"Are you sure, Hanako," Hisao asked.

"It might need its battery changed," Joel suggested. "Lilly, is there a janitor or someone we could ask about that?"

"Yes, I can call someone once we're done here." Lilly wore a mystified expression. "We shouldn't really need to, though. Someone just came to change it yesterday."

Joel quickly turned to his paper to write something down, then looked back up.

"Anyways, we were just talking about something else a moment ago, weren't we?" Joel looked up from his notes to shoot Hisao a snarky glance. "Yeah, we were discussing something else just before you two started flirting."



Lilly set the teapot down and Hisao jolted back from her.

*I was not flirting with her!*

The room was quiet for a moment as the four tried to remember their previous conversation.

"You know what," Joel said, as he looked down at the paper he had been scribbling on. "I think I wrote it down here in my-"

Joel took a large, deep breath. When he looked back up, his eyes were closed, but his expression was one of someone who had just seen a ghost.

"Right. Yuna," Joel said somberly. "Do any of you remember who Yuna Yamada was?"

"No, I don't," Hisao said. "And I think Lilly was pretty clear in that she didn't either. We don't know what you're talking about, Joel."

As Hisao said this, he saw Hanako fidget in her seat again. It was clear she had something to say.

"What is it, Hanako," Hisao asked.

Hanako looked around the room in a mix of fear and frustration. After finding nothing, she turned to Joel with a very intimidated look on her face.

"I-I think I thought I had something, but with the others, I'm not so sure now..."

Joel turned to face Hanako. When he addressed her, Hisao noticed that Joel's voice almost instantly lost the rough, piercing tone it previously had.

"If there's something you want to say, it's okay," he said. "It's very important that I find every bit of information I can. Anything you can add would be helpful."

Hanako seemed to relax the slightest bit. The tension began to fade away from her posture. She looked down at the table for a moment, as if she were mentally preparing herself to speak. Hisao was imagining her giving herself a sort of pep-talk in her own mind. It was a silly mental image, but he just couldn't help himself.

Hanako looked up at Joel with a smile of faint determination.

"I... I re-" she began. She closed her eyes and her body tensed, like a bomb about to go off.

*"I remember Yuna Yamada!"*

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The third individual that had not read the inscription at the gates of Yamaku is one who has not been named yet. While Hisao had not read it out of cynicism, and Joel had not read it out of optimism, this individual was never close enough to the gates to read it. In fact, he had not even known that the inscription was there to begin with. This individual entered Yamaku by passing through the stone wall that surrounded the school. On the day of the festival, he had moved in and out through the large crowds unseen. Anyone in the courtyard would not have been able to recall his presence after the fact any more than they could recall the presence of a fly on a wall. Those that could recall would be hesitant to claim that they had done so. And when this individual had continued to be present at the school for the days since then, they would fail to notice his presence there, even if they were locked in a room with him.

This individual had a special “**ability**”. One which allowed him to make the impossible possible. He never had to confront the world as it was; he could flee it with impunity or prevent it from even happening. With this “**ability**”, there was nothing that could not be made to bow to his spirit. This individual had no need for tradition, unity, or laws, as they had all the power and influence they could ever want. As such, this individual did as his will demanded, regardless of what was morally straight, logically sound, or physically possible. It was this “**ability**” that demanded he take the life of Yuna Yamada, that persuaded him to stay at Yamaku, that hungered to watch their fate fail to bind them. It was the reason that this individual placed himself in a room with the others who had not read the inscription at the gates.

This individual was a man who lived his life escaping the fate that lay before him.

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The next thing Hisao knew, he was lying on the ground. The first things his mind was able to register were sharp pains in both his head and chest, followed by feelings of extreme fatigue and nausea. For a moment, he began to think of the first time he had awakened after his heart attack. He wasn’t really certain as to where he was. He felt sicker than he ever had in his life. He wanted nothing more than to be able to breathe steadily for just a second. Every individual thing that his mind was able to process seemed as if they were competing for the spot of “most important thing going on right now.” Nevertheless, he began an attempt to make sense of his surroundings. This attempt was almost immediately interrupted by the invasion of Joel’s very infuriated voice.

“So, you can make yourself invisible and silence gunshots. Any other bullshit you can do that I should know about?”

*What? Gunshots? I didn’t hear any gunshots,* Hisao thought.

Hisao soon realized that he was lying on his back, with his former seat at the table about a meter away from him. He tried to sit back up, only to be thrown to the ground again by Joel’s forceful hand.

“Hey! Joel, what the hell was that for?”

He looked over at his new companion, hoping for some sort of explana-

*Joel has a gun.*

When the sight of Joel coldly aiming a large handgun at a point outside his field of view reached Hisao’s brain, any other thoughts that had been in his mind immediately ceased to exist. He stayed on the ground for some time, just staring at the scene in front of him and trying to make some sense of it.

*Did somebody get shot,* Hisao thought. This question had just barely formed in his mind before being replaced by a follow-up: *Where are the girls?*

Hisao worriedly looked around the room for Lilly and Hanako. They were on the other side of the table, lying on the ground. Although his view was obstructed, Hisao could guess that Lilly was taking this sudden turn of events a lot better than Hanako was.

Several long moments passed before Hisao could muster up the will to speak.

"J-Joel," Hisao asked. "What's going on?"

Joel quickly turned his head to Hisao, keeping the gun aimed on its target.

"Hey, you're back with us. You planning on remembering things from now on," he asked.

*You're awfully casual for someone who just pulled a gun out in school!*

"I- I think- yes?"

"Good! We won't have to do introductions again," Joel said. He gestured to the corner of the room. "I would like to direct your attention to the man bleeding out on the floor over there."

Hisao looked in the direction Joel indicated, and quickly wished he hadn't. A few meters away from him, a thin and sickly looking man lay in a steadily growing pool of blood. Pale, discolored skin was stretched over a bony hand, which peeked out from a clean and neatly-pressed white suit. The man's hand was slowly and gently touching his face, as if he were surprised by the gaping bullet holes that were in his face. Once he saw Hisao, the man began to reach his arm out towards him.

Before the man's hand got anywhere near Hisao, three bullets pierced his hand and landed in his jaw.

"*Joel what the fuck!*" Hisao screamed in terror. He could now feel an all-too-familiar pain rising in his chest.

"There will be none of that," Joel said sternly.

The man had fallen back down without a sound, and merely kept touching the bullets that had lodged themselves in his head. Nobody spoke for some time.

Eventually, Hisao attempted to break the silence.

"H-hey," he said. "Are you okay?"

The man sat back up, still clutching at his jaw. It seemed to be hanging low on one side, as if half of it had fallen out of place after Joel shot it.

"I am injured," the man said. "These wounds are lethal."

In horror at these words, Hisao turned to Joel.

"*Joel,*" Hisao shouted. "*What did you do?!*"

He responded with silence.

What felt like hours, but was more likely a few minutes, passed. The only sound in the room was of Joel's heavy breathing, and small noises made by the man moving around. Once the pounding sensations in Hisao's head and chest had died down a bit, he tried to break the silence a second time. But he couldn't think of anything to break it with. Eventually, Joel found a few words to say.

"It's been some time, Brother."

*Brother? What's that supposed to mean,* Hisao thought.

"Joel, what do you mean by '*brother*'? Do you know who this is," Hisao asked.

Joel took a deep breath. "I believe some explanations are in order, aren't they," he said.

"**It** agrees," the man said, hand still on his jaw.

Joel and the man looked at each other for a moment.

"Hisao, Lilly, Hanako," Joel began. "This is Keito Kenjo, my brother. I came to Yamaku looking for him."

*What*, Hisao thought.

"Y-Your brother, Joel," Lilly asked. Evidently, not knowing how to react to the situation, she attempted to regain her composure. She returned to a standing position and introduced herself. "It is nice to meet you. My name is Lilly Satou," she said. "My friend here is Hanako Ikezawa," Lilly added, gesturing to the still cowering Hanako.

"I know," the man said.

Lilly was caught off-guard by this. "You know me?"

"I know," the man repeated. "You were in Yuna's class."

*Yuna again!*

"Please!" Lilly pleaded. There was a noticeable fearfulness in her voice, an emotion which Hisao had for some reason never associated with her before. "I do not know this Yuna Yamada!"

"You forgot," Keito said. "You and Hisao forgot her. Forgot meeting me. Forgot the festival night."

"How," Lilly said. "How could I have forgotten someone I knew!" Although Lilly was physically under control, Hisao could hear in her voice that she was practically on the verge of tears.

"My **ability**," Keito said. "It made you forget. Forget that you knew her. Forget that she died. But I remember. I did it."

"What are you talking about," Hisao asked.

Surprisingly enough, Joel was able to respond.

"Hisao," Joel said. "Keito used his **ability** to kill Yuna. He then made everyone in the school forget that she even existed." Joel paused for a moment, then turned to face Keito. "And then you made it so that nobody could see you, and stuck around Hisao here for a while, right? You made him and everyone else forget things to stay hidden."

"Yes," said Keito.

"That's *impossible*," Hisao said. "There's no way you could do that. How does an entire school full of people not just *forget* about a student being murdered on school grounds, but forget that she even existed too?" Hisao stopped to collect his thoughts for a moment, then continued. "And for that matter, how did I just forget a bunch of what happened today?"

"She died on grounds," Keito said. "I didn't say that before. **It** is letting you remember."

*What the hell?*

"Keito, this one's a bit slow. You should probably just show him what's going on," Joel said.

Keito brushed himself off, then pushed himself to a standing position. He was slouching heavily, holding some of the worst posture Hisao had ever seen. It was as if his body wasn't supporting his own weight, and he was being held upright by some invisible entity. It looked sort of like a zombie that Hisao had seen in the old horror movies he used to watch with his friends.

"Let me guess; you're not that hurt, right? Just shake it out and you'll be fine," Joel said.

"You predicted what **it** would say," Keito said, staring directly at Joel. "Used your **ability**."

"What are these *abilities* you two keep going on about," Hisao said.

Before he got his response, Keito started thrashing about violently. He moved his upper body from side to side, like a dog shaking water off its coat. As he did so, Hisao could hear a faint squishing noise.

A popping noise preceded the sound of several bits of metal clinking against the tile floor. Keito stopped moving, and touched at his face again.

"They're out."

Hisao looked to the floor, and saw several slightly distorted bullets laying at Keito's feet. Hisao barely had time to process this before Joel drew his attention away again.

"You're not bleeding anymore either," he said. On this count, Joel was technically correct. But it was quite the technicality.

Blood was no longer flowing away from Keito's wounds, which were now slowly but surely decreasing in size. Instead, it was flowing *towards* his wounds. The puddle below Keito was running up his shoes and his suit, and presumably moving back into the blood vessels in his head. If Hisao looked hard enough, he swore he could see fibers of skin and muscle moving around in the holes in Keito's head. They made a slight squishing noise as Keito's face rearranged itself back into order. Once Hisao was certain of what he saw, he looked away. He could feel a warm, thick liquid rising in his throat.

"Th-that's impossible," Hisao said.

"Hisao, please tell me what is happening," Lilly said.

"I have healed," Keito answered.

"It's his **ability**," Joel said. "I have one just like he does. Mine won't make people forget stuff, or heal my wounds, but it does other stuff. You should get familiar with them now, since that might be what keeps us alive in the next few minutes." Joel took a tired breath, and Hisao got the feeling that Joel had given this explanation before.

"These are the abilities known as Stands."

"Stands," Hisao asked. "So, they're some sort of talent you guys have?"

"More like special powers."

"Willpower," Keito added. Joel turned back to him and refocused the gun on Keito.

"Which reminds me," Joel said. "I'm guessing it wasn't *you* that chose to stick around after killing Yuna?"

"Yes. **It** did. Wanted to see 'fruits of its labors.'"

*What exactly does that mean*, Hisao thought.

"Your Stand is a goddamn psychopath," Joel said. "It's completely out of control. Do you really think you should be letting it make your decisions for you?"

"Why," Keito responded. "Not involved in mankind. Why force it?"

"Keito," Joel said. Hisao saw Joel's arms starting to shake as he tightened his grip on the gun. He was barely containing himself.

"You are involved. Your Stand doesn't just murder people and desecrate their corpses, *it gets off on it*. It killed Yuna and painted the room with her, it's tried to kill me, and it strung your own father up by his innards. *You have to control it!*"

Keito merely gave Joel a dead-eyed stare. Hisao noticed a bizarre, pitch-black aura beginning to form around Keito.

"Can you control **it**," Keito asked.

"Of course," Joel said.

**Then control me. Try to control me before I kill again.**

Hisao wasn't certain where the voice came from. He was sure it came from Keito's direction, but Keito hadn't even moved his lips. It didn't sound like him either, or like any human for that matter; it seemed to echo through the tearoom, moving from its origin outwards and landing back inside Hisao's mind. Had it not been somewhat quiet and calming, it would have almost drowned out the sound of the teapot beginning to boil and hiss steam from its spot on the table. Slowly, so that Joel wouldn't notice, Hisao started to sit back up in his chair. Lilly and Hanako had already done the same, and Hanako's attention was focused firmly on the teapot that was now boiling without being on a burner.

**You might want to act quickly, Joel Kenjo. But you also might want to wait a moment. I believe your friends are about to start enjoying the tea we prepared.**

A wave of realization swept over Joel's face, one which did not hit Hisao.

*"Get away from the damn teapot,"* Joel shouted.

Then the teapot exploded.

**==== To Be Continued ====>**