

Jeden panted, wiping sweat off his brow as he stretched, he could feel his legs scream at the strain and his arms felt heavy and like wet noodles. All he could hear was his blood roar in his ears and his body felt like it was being shaken apart by his heart's heavy hammering. The sensation of his back popping made him feel like he was cracking open a glow stick. "You doing okay rookie?" The middle-aged man next to him put down a bag of flour as he went to check up on his new employee.

"Yea. Yea of course..." Jeden tried to put on a confident smile but it didn't look as convincing with his wet blue hair plastered against his forehead. The white buttoned shirt he was wearing was practically see through, showing off the tribal tattoos he had on his arms. His torso however was hidden by a black vest. He stretched his legs in the starchy black dress pants. "I'm just not used to wearing this type of clothes."

The man chuckled as he pet his moustache, stroking the wispy salt-and-pepper hair. "Color me surprised, I would expect living with Mr. Alphonse, wearing dress clothes would be mandatory." The two shared a laugh before Eugene bent down to pick up the heavy bag of flour, hoisting it onto his shoulder. Eugene was an impressive figure, despite his age and quite humble look of a balding head and wispy moustache. He usually wore a suit jacket alongside the typical café's uniform but for the restocking process, he had taken it off. Jeden was helping him unload boxes of tea and coffee beans, alongside other baking ingredients from a large truck. Abra had gotten the young man a job at InifinTea, which paid better and was more lenient in its work hours. However under the condition that he couldn't use his powers, so Jeden had to carry the ingredients off the truck instead of just replicating them.

It was morning so the sun was hidden by the tall buildings and a chill wind was gently blowing through the alleyways, picking up and tossing about plastic shopping bags and newspapers. However, despite the coolness of the setting, Jeden still felt hot as hell. He felt bad getting the uniform sweaty and wondered if it was machine washable, as he marched back into the truck to pull out another box of coffee beans. They were wooden crates and Jeden couldn't help but worry he'd get splinters as he grabbed hold of them from the bottom to lift them up.

"Pick it up with your knees rookie." Eugene put his hands on the young man's shoulders and pushed him into a squatting position. "You'll stretch out your back and mess it up if you keep picking it up wrong." Jeden only responded with a puff as he slowly straightened himself, focusing on simply carrying the heavy box. Eugene chuckled as red began to color the boy's cheeks and Jeden started to shake as he walked. The older man helped Jeden move the box out, supporting it from the other end. As they placed the crate down with the others, the manager picked up a nearby crowbar and cracked open one of the crates, pulling out a bag of artisan coffee beans and handing it over to Jeden. "Go take a break lad. Brew yourself a cup and relax, I'll finish up here."

"I can keep going sir." Jeden took the bag and placed it down onto an unopened crate. "I don't need a break yet."

Eugene laughed and clapped the young man on the back, nearly knocking him off his feet. "I'm sure you don't lad, but take one anyways. I need the exercise anyways. Been putting on some macaron pounds I need to lose." The young man nodded and picked up the bag of beans again, walking back into the cafe, Eugene's hearty laughter following him.

It was early in the morning so the cafe was quiet, music softly playing but besides that the silence was only broken by the occasional rustle of a newspaper or sniff from a customer. Jeden walked through the kitchen, the two cooks there simply lounging about, talking to each other and relaxing, the ovens were cold and the ranges clear. They traded some pleasantries, the boy offering them some coffee which they accepted happily. He then walked into the cafe itself, appearing behind the bar to see that there was only one person on the floor. "Hello, the manager had me bring over a fresh pack." He handed over the bag of beans and the lady took it from him.

She looked over the package and cut it open, taking a deep inhale of the scent and nodded approvingly. "Eugene has always had good taste." She was older than Jeden, but younger than Eugene, being around her thirties. Her blond hair was tucked up and tied in a bun to keep it out of her face, showing off her sharp facial features, which were contrasted by her soft blue, motherly eyes. She wore her dress shirt rolled up to her elbows and a black skirt that went down to her knees. She didn't wear a vest but instead had a pine green apron on, and clipped to the upper left breast pocket was a pin that said her name, written in the same golden font everyone's name was written in, "Eunice."

She began pouring the beans into a grinder, and Jeden stood there, finally plucking up the courage to ask. "How can I help?"

Eunice jerked her thumb behind her at the stools on the other side of the bar. "Sit down, relax." Not turning to look at him as she slowly began measuring out spoonfuls to place on the coffee

filter. Jeden made his way around and sat down at the bar, watching her snap the filter into place and put a kettle under it, pressing a few buttons to get the process started. "You want any cream or sugar in your coffee?"

"Some sugar would be nice. The guys in the back just want black though." She nodded and pulled out four cups. The two simply sat there, waiting for the coffee to finish brewing, passing the time by listening to the smooth jazz that was playing softly. Once finished she poured two cups and took them to the back before returning and pouring a glass for herself and Jeden. The barista placed the mug in front of him and Jeden reached for the sugar. Eunice simply sipped her coffee, her elbows resting on the bar counter as she simply looked out the window at the passing pedestrians. "So..." Jeden fumbled for words, "How-"

She interrupted him. "How are you doing Jeden? Just starting off, you alright?" She sipped her coffee as her eyes shifted from the window to him.

Jeden met her gaze and nodded, looking down at his coffee to see himself reflected in the near-black liquid. "It's fun, better than my old job that's for sure. I... I really like it here."

Eunice smiled softly and patted the boy's shoulder. "Good to hear, no need to be so shy about it. Eugene is a good man and if you ever have any troubles, always feel free to ask anyone." She placed her cup of coffee down and picking up the pitcher, began making her way around to refill the customers' coffee.

Jeden sat there and drank his own coffee, happy to feel such a warm acceptance. He heard the bell tinkle behind him, signalling the arrival of another customer. He heard Eunice greet the customer and turning around, did the same. The young man was wearing a grey suit, his tie bring a splash of maroon to the otherwise neutral color scheme. He looked to be as old as Jeden if not a bit older. Eunice led him to a small table by a window and took his order before coming back with her pitcher of coffee, now nearly empty.

Jeden watched the man settle down then stare out the window. He looked like a younger version of Abra, with his blond hair and the way the suit fit around his frame. Eunice snapped him out of his observations by putting a platter with a scone and a cup of hot coffee in front of him. "This is to the young man you're staring so intently at. He your type?" She smiled mischievously.

Jeden's face turned red, "No, I was just curious who he is."

"Then go and ask him." Eunice stated and turned around, going back to tending to her own business.

Jeden took the platter and walking over briskly, gently put down the two saucers in front of the man. "Would you like any cream or sugar with your coffee or perhaps some honey, jelly, or butter for your scone?" The young man was staring out the window and turned around slowly, not jumping at Jeden's voice.

Kaiban looked up and smiled politely, "No, I'm fine thank you." He picked up the scone with a napkin to avoid getting any of the glaze or flakes on his fingers as he bit into it. Walden had told him the server was coming so there was no need to be alarmed, it was like having eyes on the back of his head. Jeden left with a nod and the two were by themselves again. Kaiban liked starting his day off with a nice cup of coffee and had happened upon the place in his early morning run.

Walden however, wasn't a big fan of the aspect of sitting down for a leisurely cup of coffee. *[i]We have work to do Kaiban.[/i]* He was more used to the routine of picking up a cup to go from a coffee cart, so this more slower paced morning rubbed him the wrong way.

"You need to learn to relax Walden." Kaiban muttered, sipping his coffee. "We currently have no leads and the RHG building doesn't open for another hour so what's the rush?"

*[i]Oh I'm sorry,[/i]* Walden spat sarcastically. *[i]One tends to forget how nice living is once they're dead.[/i]* Kaiban flinched at the venom in his late master's voice.

"I want to find who killed you as much as you do, but that doesn't allow me to speed up the clock or conjure up leads from thin air. So you'll have to be content with waiting." Kaiban answered and took another bite of his scone. Walden scoffed at his disciple's answer but fell silent and so the two simply listened to the soft jazz play.

The first thing to interrupt the peace was a whimper. Kaiban's head snapped to the sound but his vision was cut off by the wall. The whimpers grew louder and soon was joined by soft

sobbing, they were getting closer. A low growl rumbled from Walden and Kaiban's hand covered his mouth as the two watched the spirits of the dead phase through the wall. They were grotesque, none were whole, they were all broken. Some looked to have been ripped apart by monsters while others were playthings for some massive creature, their limbs snapped like twigs. A quick glance told Kaiban that there were more littering the sidewalks and streets, just a sea of ragged corpses, blood painted across their ruined bodies. Kaiban gulped, his stomach now trying to relieve him of the coffee and scone he had just eaten.

Jeden made his way over to the young man, alarmed by the sudden change in the man's demeanor, the sudden paleness in his pallor as well as the hand over his mouth. "Excuse me sir, are you going to be sick?"

Kaiban looked up to answer and watched as a woman walked through the man, a sensation Jeden was completely oblivious of. She covered the waiter like a veil, hiding him behind her gore. She was missing one arm and was disemboweled, her entrails dragging across the floor like the cut strings of a puppet. Her jaw was hanging from her face by a few ligaments and when she turned to look at him, her eyes were full of despair. *[i]Can you see me?[/i]* The voice was quiet, almost like a small gust of wind, and he could barely hear it over the moaning and crying, but it sent a chill through his body. Kaiban could only focus on not vomiting so he nodded and Jeden helped him up, dragging him through the crowd of dead who began following behind him until ward off by Walden's snarl.

Jeden helped Kaiban into the bathroom before shutting the door behind him, giving the young man some privacy. Kaiban quickly made his way to the toilet where he keeled over it, vomiting into the porcelain bowl. [i]What the hell was that?[/i] Walden asked.

“How am I supposed to know?” Kaiban looked down into the water, staring at the lumpy dark green mess, a mixture of chewed scones, coffee, and the digested remains of his dinner.

“Where did they all come from?”

[i]How am I supposed to know?[/i] Walden shot back. [i]Restless souls are bound to where they died. The only time they would wander like this is if they're wandering alongside whoever killed them. But what type of monster...[/i] He left the rest unsaid but it was an obvious statement, only a monster could have such a massive body count, and a grotesque collection at that. [i]So what do you want to do? Are you going to hide in the bathroom forever?[/i]

“No... I'll be out soon... I just need a bit more time.” Kaiban cradled the porcelain bowl. Walden sighed but he couldn't blame the young man, he simply hasn't lived long enough to be ready for such a thing, not many people would ever live enough to be ready for such a thing. He himself has seen worse, done worse even, but this was to a complete different scale. Soon, the young soul medium cleaned himself up, flushing the toilet then washing his face and hands at the sink.

He opened the door and it took everything within him not to shut it again. It seemed like what they saw was just the beginning, heralds for what was to come. Souls were everywhere, as mutilated and ragged as the next one. Jeden was originally hovering by the door waiting for Kaiban to exit but was drawn away by the arrival of a regular and he looked back to see the pale



man just shiver there. "Oh sir, I was beginning to worry... but you still don't look very okay to me." Jeden walked through the sea of spirits like they weren't even there, and to him, it was because they weren't but Kaiban couldn't help but flinch and cringe as he watched the waiter step through people and step on entrails and other body parts. He looked at the man the waiter was socializing with and wondered how the two knew each other.

The man looked almost regal standing there in his white suit, his platinum blonde hair slicked back and it shined in the light like a halo. The spirits milled around them but none came close to the two and he found it strange. But he was jerked away from his observations as Jeden placed his hand on Kaiban's shoulder. He directed the soul medium back to his table where he helped him into his seat which Kaiban was more resisting because of the person who was already sitting in it. "Sir I suggest you sit down, I'll go brew you some tea, it should help with your stomach." As he walked back he chatted a bit more with the man and pointed to an empty table. Kaiban looked from the two chatting back to the solid wooden table in front of him, simply trying to focus on not creating a scene.

Abra waved the boy off with a smile and made his way over to Kaiban's table, where he indicated to the seat across from the sick soul medium. "May I?" Kaiban looked up and saw no reason to be rude so gestured with his hand to offer the seat. The man had a warm and welcoming aura around him, like a sweet spring breeze. It may explain why the spirits gave him such a wide berth. Abra sat down, resting one leg on top of the other and placing his hands on his lap, finger knitted together, and looked at the young man who went back to staring at the table before finally asking. "You can hear them can't you? Is it as beautiful as I remember?" A small grin played on his lips.

Kaiban looked up and blinked, the man said it so nonchalantly, he couldn't be talking about what he thought he was talking about. "W-what?"

Abra unfolded his legs and leaned in, resting his elbows on the table and propping his head up with his knuckles, one hand curled into a fist with the other hand covering it. "You can hear them can't you? Actually hear them. I want to believe I do, and on occasion I think, in a fleeting belief, in a figment of my imagination, in a moment of clarity," He reached out with his fist, opening his hand so that his fingers could grab at empty space but Kaiban could see the spirits flinch away from his touch. "I can. I can once again hear the little ones cry for their mother's embrace, listen to men beg for their family's lives, and then listen to it all drown in their blood. And..." His voice shook, causing him to pause as tears welled in his eyes. His hand quivered as it hung in the air and he tightened it into a fist. Abra wet his lips with the tip of his tongue and continued. "and it fills me with... ecstasy." The smile never left his face as he wiped the tears away. Kaiban watched as the spirits veered away and realized that they stayed away from him because they were afraid of him. Afraid was too mild of a word, they were terrified of him. "So tell me young man, can you hear them?"

[i]He's insane.[/i] Walden growled. [i]We need to leave now.[/i]

The young spirit medium parroted what his master said. "Yo-you're insane."

Abra smiled broadened, "And you say that like it's a bad thing. Come on little one," he reached over the table and grabbed Kaiban's tie and pulled him in. "Tell me what they're telling you."

Kaiban struggled and tried to pull back but he could only feel the tie get tighter. He stared at Abra and looked at how the man's blue eyes sparkled, seeming to be electrified, crackling with madness and anticipation. The spirits around him began crowding around him and he could only hear their wailing. [i]The clowns! No the shadow! Beware the beasts! The tiger is too fast to hit with a gun! The lion just won't die! The bear! The elephant! You can't run, you can't hide![/i] The young man's breath quickened and his heartbeat hammered in his ears, only adding more chaos to the cacophony of noise.

"Walden!" In his desperation, the only thing he could think of was to squawk out his master's name and the soul manifested out of the boy's chest as the head of a wolf and snapped at Abra's wrist, ripping the entire forearm off. The sudden release sent Kaiban reeling backwards and as he collapsed on the floor he pulled the revolver from its holster and fired at the seated man, getting two shots off. Not looking to see if he hit, the young man scrambled to his feet and ran.

Abra sighed, picking his glove from off the table where he tipped out the cards that had made up his hand. Two cards fluttered onto the wooden surface, bullets smashed against them. He watched the retreating figure and shook his head. "And here I was hoping to stay civil."

Jeden ran over, "Abra are you alright?" There was a splash of tea on his clothing.

The magician looked around to see the customers cowering in their seats, Eunice peeking from over the counter top, and patted Jeden on the shoulder. "I'm fine, just seems like our guest had

an itchy trigger finger. I'll be back soon, and I expect a fresh cup of tea waiting for me. Go clean up now, I'll be fine." Abra quickly swept over to the front door, his coat flapping in the wind as he opened the door and walked out. As he followed Kaiban, the magician folded his sleeve back to reveal his stump of an arm and pulled out a deck of cards. They fluttered over to begin wrapping themselves around the elbow, building down to create the forearm and his hand. Abra rolled the sleeve back down and put his glove back on, never breaking stride. Storm clouds began to brew overhead, the blackness blossoming across the sky like ink injected into a pool of clear water.

Kaiban panted as he ran. "Is he coming? Is he close?" Walden kept watch behind Kaiban and watched the spirits that were chasing them slow down, they were hitting their boundary, straying too far away from their anchor to the physical world.

*[i]We seem to be getting away, but doesn't mean you should stop. We need to get back to your room, we need to get your gun.[/i]* Walden grunted. Then suddenly the spirits continued their chase and he growled. *[i]Run! He seems to have caught our trail.[/i]* He looked around to try to see the man but couldn't see him. Kaiban huffed as he ran, where would they run to? The man was closing in on them, the spirits were sure signs of that.

Kaiban tried to shut their voices out of his head but he could hear them wail after their retreating figures. *[i]Save me! Save us! He's coming![/i]*

He didn't think he'd make it to his apartment. And that was when the rain began, first a few drops but it immediately turned into a torrent that forced the boy to seek cover. However the lack of such and the constant danger kept driving the boy onward until he found himself in the

warehouse district. *[i]Fuck![/i]* Walden realized too late what had happened. *[i]We were guided here like rats![/i]*

“How? What?” Kaiban stood there stunned as he stared through the rusty fence and climbed over and landed with a splash on the other side, mud splattering his pants but he didn’t care. He sludged through the muck, losing his shoes as he ran into a warehouse. As he went to close the doors he looked to the fence to see Abra on the other side, surrounded by his sea of kills. The man looked back and waved before with a puff of smoke landed on the other side of the fence and the souls ran towards the warehouse. Kaiban hurried to slam the door shut and backed away, his breath coming out in short pants. Walden manifested out of the soul medium’s body in the form of a large lupine. “How did he know where we would go?”

“He corralled us in using the fact that you can see the spirits. He directed us to where he wanted us to go.” The wolf spat. “We have to find a way out of here. Or make a stand here.” With the ultimatum made the wolf padded to one side of the door and Kaiban hurried to take his side at the other. Spirits began walking through the warehouse walls and milled about aimlessly, they moaned and cried.

The two waited with bated breath as they waited for the man. The rain masking any noise as it crashed against the roof. Kaiban’s hands felt sweaty as he trembled to keep a hold on his revolver. He had reloaded during the run but he didn’t have many bullets left, he wasn’t ready for a fight. “Relax,” Walden growled. “We can beat him. Just breathe, I’ll make an opening and you take him down.”

“But what about the clowns and beasts the spirits talked about?” Kaiban asked, his raspy whisper getting dulled by the rain as it scratched through the warehouse. “We’ll be outnumbered!”

“Oh them...” A voice echoed through the empty building. “I haven’t had them for long while. I miss Funkfreed though, I really do. So you can hear them, how amazing.” Lights blinked to life and casted a dull yellow gleam along the interior. Large light bulbs swung from the rooftops, shaken from the storm that was pummeling the rooftop. Abra appeared from the other side of the warehouse, not a drop of water on him. Walden howled, rushing at Abra and the magician pulled a hilt from his pocket, cards folding together to form the blade. He lunged at the charging figure, but the spirit morphed back into his human form and parried the sword away. Walden slashed across the magician’s chest but Abra blocked the blade with his arm, the sword stopping against the prosthetic limb. Abra caught the man’s arm but Walden dissolved into mist that reformed back into a wolf which dashed back.

Abra shot cards at the wolf, but the lupine easily dodged them with a side-dash before jumping back in, jaws agape. Abra exchanged the favor by teleporting away and went in for another lunge but was once again parried by the spirit as he morphed back into a human. The two continued to exchange strikes, dueling as their swords clashed like thunder, sparks flashing like lightning.

Soon Abra had his back to Kaiban and Walden smiled as he watched the boy take aim from over the magician’s. However, so did Abra to Walden’s confusion and as the shots rang out, the

one who gasped wasn't Abra, but Kaiban. Cards dropped to the ground, weighed down by the bullets smashed into them.

Kaiban scrambled to reload but Abra didn't give him the chance, turning on his heels and rushing at the young soul medium, teleporting to give increase his advantage. "Kaiban look out!" Walden morphed into a wolf and gave chase but Abra reached the boy first and took the gun, snatching it out of the petrified boy's hand.

Abra pointed the revolver at Walden and looked at Kaiban. "Sit down boy." He ordered. Kaiban's knees crumbled and the boy dropped onto the floor. The spirits swirled around him, kneeling next to him as they whispered frightfully. *[i]Look away.[/i]* And Kaiban tilted his head down. The man's presence was bone-chilling, he was his own blizzard, filling the air with a harrowing fear that seeped into Kaiban's body and made him numb and speechless. "Now tell me boy, what's your name?"

"K-Kaiban..." The young soul medium found himself answering.

"And who's he?" Abra gestured to the wolf.

"That's none of your fucking business scum." Walden growled.

Abra clicked his tongue, "Now that's no way to talk to a man pointing a gun at you. I was never a fan of guns though, such messy tools don't you agree? But the fact that you stopped advancing when I pointed it at you means that there's something special about it." He pulled the hammer

back, "Shall we see what it is?"

"Walden's my master, we're looking for the man who killed him." Kaiban spouted.

"Kaiban, shut your mouth you fool." Walden barked.

"Oh? And how did this come about?"

"It's-"

"Not another word Kaiban!"

"Complicated..." The boy finished weakly.

The rain took over, beating on the roof like a drum roll, building up the suspense before everything seemed to fall silent as Abra took control of the stage. Abra pointed the revolver at Walden then at Kaiban. "Let's play a game. Choose young one, you? Or your master? Are you so loyal to a dead man that you will sacrifice your life for him? Or will you break free from his hold and make your own choices? Choose Kaiban."

"Don't listen to him! He's fucking with your head!"

"And what? You're not? At least I'm giving him a choice. A chance to make a decision. Did you give him that?"



“No...no he didn’t...” Kaiban murmured but piped up. “But he’s my master!”

Abra bent down and patted the young man on the shoulder, smiling sympathetically. “I know... I understand, that’s why I’m shouldering this burden for you.” He pulled a coin from his pocket. It was a golden coin and on one side was a crown and underneath it a family seal, and the other side had the family’s coat-of-arms. He flipped it into the air, caught it before flipping it again. “I will flip this coin, and you decide heads or tails.” He showed the crown for heads and the coat-of-arms for tails. “Whichever side you call, if it lands on that side, I will kill you. If it lands on the other side, I will kill him. Fair isn’t it?” He flipped the coin and catching it, slapped it onto the back of his hand and covered it. “Now choose Kaiban.”

“Don’t say anything Kaiban, he’s just trying to burrow into your head like the fucking maggot that he is!”

“Shhh, don’t listen to him.” Abra smiled. “Just listen to my voice and choose, heads or tails?”

“Not. A. Word! Kaiban!” Walden roared and he charged at Abra.

Abra didn’t turn to look at Walden and placed his hand on Kaiban’s shoulder. “Kaiban, look at me. Everything will be okay.” His voice was soft and kind, it seemed to shed away Kaiban’s worries and made him forget about the spirits around him. “Just say one, heads or tails?”

“H-heads...” Kaiban whispered and flinched as a gunshot rang out, shutting his eyes. He slowly opened them to look up at Abra smiling at him. He looked down to see Walden’s spirit dissolve into tendrils of smoke that dissipated. “W...what have I done?”

“This wasn’t your fault Kaiban, none of this was your fault. After all, how could someone as weak as you do anything about any of this?” Abra handed him the revolver and the coin, a suit-of-arms glittered at Kaiban. “Now there’s one more bullet left, and I think you know what to do with it.” As he fell silent the drum roll filled the warehouse once again.

Abra stepped out and watched a bolt of lightning cut through the sky like a slash from a massive sword. Everything was silent for a beat before a clap of thunder shook the air. Abra couldn’t help but laugh at how simple it was. How much faith someone would put into a coin, how much trust. He wondered how much power the boy actually thought he had in determining who was to live and die, if the boy even knew that in the end, all he did was play the role Abra wrote out for him. With a snap of his fingers, cards swirled out of his pockets to form an umbrella over his head. “I think I’m going to be late for breakfast... what a bother.” He sighed as he walked through the storm, the umbrella shedding wet cards like leaves, letting them crumple on the ground while new ones took their place. He was also walking above the puddles, cards floating down to form a bridge for him to walk across.