

PROLOGUE

“The fate of the world rests upon your shoulders,” the man levitating ten feet in the air said to the young man in front of him.

“That kind of mind game doesn’t work on me anymore, demon!” Quentin replied in a crisp tone.

“Many others tried over the years to defeat me. What makes you think you are any different?” He crossed his hands over his chest and glared sternly.

“It’s not about what makes me different. It’s all about what makes me who I am,” he quipped.

With iron-clad control, Quentin surrounded himself with a dome-shaped energy shield. He wanted to gauge the threat level first.

“His energy field is remarkable,” the older man thought before he created an energy shield of his own.

Both energy shields collided in a clash of power. The casters didn’t move a muscle. The contact point created sparks that flew in all directions, resembling a bizarre firework display. Though starting off strong, neither shield broke. They appeared to be on even footing with the onset of battle.

The sound tsunami created by the colliding energy shields came across as metal grinding on metal. It was about to perforate their eardrums while a musty, metallic odor flowed in the surroundings.

“We’ll see if the skills you’ve honed and the self-awareness you’ve gained will be enough to defeat me and stop the dark ceremony,” the older man commented. He was the first one to disengage the shield.

A tingling sensation rippled across Quentin’s skin. During the hair-raising moment, he disabled his energy shield. Then, he saw his opponent diving forward at speed invisible to the untrained eye.

“Thought Travel Limbo!” Quentin murmured. He timed his movements with his opponent’s.

Their fists connected with heart-pounding intensity and caused an unexpected explosion. They skidded backward on the rocky surface, leaving dust clouds and broken-out pebbles in their wake. Their fists were not affected by burns.

“This fight is no longer about spirit essence attributes. I’m sure you’re aware of that.”

“The flesh is the one good thing that can be damaged at the scene unless you enhance it with spirit from within!” Quentin uttered with a sideways grin. A strange feeling fueled him.

“If you’re going to use a words binding technique, then I’ll be forced to use one of mine,” the brisk man said, looking somewhat disappointed.

He walked toward the younger man.

“There’s still time to join our side,” he continued, but his murky intentions got no response.

“It’s not going to happen!” Quentin exploded. A nervous twitch of his opponent’s eye urged him to stick to his guns.

“Well, it’s out of my hands,” the mysterious individual said under his breath. He exhaled before he went up in the air.

“Spiritual Lightning Blades!” he uttered with a change in tone.

Quentin saw multiple ethereal blades surrounded by static electricity hovering in the air around his opponent.

The first blade surged toward him, but it zoomed past his head. He had dodged by a hair's breadth. A few strands of his hair danced in the air like feathers.

Then, he spun around, his gaze darting back to the man before him. Other lightning blades had already flanked him, acting like moths drawn to a flame.

Only after he fell flat on his back did it dawn upon him they weren't made of spirit essence or demonic energy.

His heart thundered. Defeat seemed inevitable for a few agonizing seconds. But time was an obnoxious headache to deal with.

Shadowy tentacles emerged from the older man's shoulder blades in an aggressive follow-up move. He attempted to impale the target in a forceful rush.

Quentin darted out of the way with finesse. The shadowy tentacles missed and followed him, like guided missiles, to deal lasting damage early in the fight.

CHAPTER I. INNER CHANGE

A new day came to the city of Philadelphia. The sun rose from behind the towering structures, soaking everything in a sea of light.

The purple eyelet curtains let a single streak of sunlight caress Quentin's face. It seemed to cut his bedroom in half. But he liked it as he cracked a smile. It was an impromptu wake-up alarm without resorting to the nagging chime of his cell phone.

It was 6:15 in the morning. He stretched his body and pulled the curtains aside. Then, after what seemed to be an endless yawn, he sat on the bed. He saw a yellow post-it on his nightstand. The memo was in his handwriting: "Town fair at 10:00 am!"

He didn't feel in a rush, so he lay back. The sun rays lit up the whole room and knocked on his retina to keep him awake.

When his rich dark chocolate eyes met the sun rays, they looked like pools of honey. They matched his dark brown, short and pointy hair. His tall constitution, though slender, displayed developed muscles.

He also had two unusual birthmarks, under each eye, which made his image stand out. He liked to keep his beard clean-shaven, despite the signs of the defined lines he proved to go for sometimes.

It was Saturday. He wasn't used to getting up early, not on

weekends anyway, but he had to attend a college course at 8 o'clock.

He padded into the bathroom. It was clear he was alone in the studio apartment. The decorations were few. He put up one painting and cared for several houseplants that completed the somewhat desolate picture.

He served a protein-heavy breakfast to keep up with his growing appetite since he started doing workouts at home. Dumbbells lay near his bed.

While he searched for his clothes, he remembered the houseplants needed watering. The eucalyptus "Silver Drop" was among his favorite ones. Its piney and mentholated smell had always been able to soothe his aching soul and overclocked mind. Chewed fingernails were another proof of the workings of his inner world.

He came back with some water and poured it slowly. He noticed a pale blue color surrounding them after he looked closely. The image was a sight to behold.

"I'm tired or the sunlight affected my sight," he thought, rubbing his eyes.

He shook his head. He didn't see any pale blue color surrounding them anymore.

The distance between his rented studio and the university he had been attending for the past year was too long for walking. He rushed everything into his side bag and bolted out. Once on the sidewalk, he checked his watch.

"Okay, I'll make it. I just have to catch the bus," Quentin thought while he motioned wordlessly. He knew the bus's timetable by heart.

He picked up the pace. Turning the corner, he saw the bus

approaching the station. He made his way among the other people to get in at the last moment. He caught his breath, but a thumping headache caused him to squint his eyes.

A groan escaped his mouth. “What the heck is going on? Am I catching a cold or something?”

He reached the university twenty minutes later. He darted to the lecture hall without losing time buying a coffee or tea. The students outside the hall were enjoying their hot steaming drinks, but he passed them like they were invisible. Before entering the hall, another student approached him with a hand wave.

“Quentin! Wait for me!”

A friend, Mark Stromberg, greeted him with a faint smile on his tired face. The student was as tall as Quentin, though slenderer. He wore tight black jeans and a black and grey checkered hoodie. His scruffy black hair slightly covered his mysterious green eyes. They were undergraduates taking a degree in business administration.

“Hey, Mark! How are you?” he asked, shaking hands with his friend. He also looked at other students who passed them by. He was rarely late. His stress levels would always increase if he was in a hurry to beat the clock.

“I’m great but kind of sleepy,” he said, rubbing his eyes. “I don’t know why Mr. Morrison wanted us to come today. This is not my jam!” His forehead creased.

“By the way, Tony’s here as well,” he added, looking toward their other mutual friend, Tony Chong.

“Great! We’re all here except Yarra.” A corner of his mouth lifted.

“Yeah, she did say she might skip this cours. The fair is in town.” He spoke with a bit of ridicule in his voice.

They heard swift but heavy footsteps.

“It’s good to see you, guys! Ready for the lecture ahead?” Tony said with kindness, joining them near the entrance.

The Chinese American had short brown hair and a chubby constitution. His weight made others bully him in high school. Despite that, his brown eyes still showed his deep kindness.

“As ready as we can be. You guys are coming to the fair, aren’t you?” Quentin asked, his brows drawing together.

“I’m coming, dude. What about you, Tony?” Mark also asked.

“Count me in. She said she had a surprise in store for us,” he said with excitement in his voice.

They were the last ones to enter the lecture hall. As they walked toward the front, where the vacant seats were, a group of jocks caught sight of them.

“Hey! Check this out! It’s the freak show!” one of them guffawed, causing a chain reaction in their group.

“Yeah! It’s the arrogant geek, the fatso, and the emo kid. You guys need Yarra’s protection again?” Ronny craned his neck. He was the captain of the football team. He choked on a laugh alongside his teammates.

Quentin and his friends wanted to say something in return. Unfortunately, their lips were too slow. Someone had beaten them to the punch.

“Did someone mention my name?” Everyone froze when Yarra entered the class and joined her friends. The scene seemed to happen in slow motion.

The jocks turned their full attention to her when the young woman came down toward them.

The 20-year-old woman was a sight to behold, but not due

to her vapid looks. She was a beautiful African American woman, with wiry dark hair falling to her shoulders, and light-brown eyes that seemed to defy logic. She had full lips that she smeared with ravishing rose lipstick. Her raw and vulnerable demeanor was the little oomph that made her appealing and authentic.

“Are you still hanging out with these freaks?” Vic asked. He was Ronny’s right-hand man. He wasn’t as tall as Ronny, but his pudgy constitution worked in his favor when tackling or blocking opponents. His hair was black and medium in length.

She sized him up. “Better a weirdo than a dummy like you, Vic,” she said, crossing her arms.

Vic felt like a boulder hit his head. A drop of sweat oozed down his temple. He swallowed loudly.

“We’re glad to see you here, Yarra. I thought you weren’t coming to this lecture.” Quentin reacted, not offended by her description. Everyone seemed to treat them like a bunch of oddballs anyway.

Her eyes lit up. “Well, of course, I had to come and save you from public humiliation,” she said, her eyes speaking for her. “So you can all come to the fair as you promised.” She was adamant.

“We’re happy you’re here. I was about to punch Vic.”

Tony chuckled. “I’m sure you would’ve splashed against a stone wall, Mark.”

They all started laughing while the jocks were on fire but didn’t act because they had much respect for Yarra. As she smiled and sighed in relief, Quentin looked at her and spotted a yellow particle in the air around her. Her eyes showed confidence but also deep kindness, not shown every day.

Everyone had to settle down as the professor entered the lecture hall, carrying an ancient-looking, black briefcase.

The students pulled out their writing instruments and papers. Noise ruptured in the lecture hall. The professor seemed irritated.

“Hey, Quentin, are you okay?” Yarra asked as her friend covered his face with his hands. She touched his shoulder gently.

“I guess I’m a bit tired,” he told her. His gaze focused on the big blackboard.

“What’s with all the rumbling around?” the professor said. He slammed his notes on the desk. The echo sent shivers through everyone’s spines.

“I understand now.” The old man had figured it out, as emphasized by a twitch of his thick mustache. “You’re upset because I had you come to class on Saturday morning, right? You know what’s coming, right?” His anger level had risen to new heights ever since teaching this program.

Everyone froze like a chilly breeze had swept across the lecture hall. Mr. Morrison had a reputation for getting worked up and then releasing his anger on the students by giving them challenging assignments or tests. Then, out of the blue, Quentin raised his hand and got up, not much to Yarra’s surprise.

She puffed her cheeks. “Here we go,” she mumbled with no mockery in her voice.

“What is it, Mr. Levine?” Mr. Morrison asked, raising his pudgy head from his papers.

Everyone turned their focus over to Quentin.

“Mr. Morrison, I’d like to be the sacrificial lamb this time. I’d hate to see my fellow students go home with grim smiles

on their faces,” he said, looking across the amphitheater with a plan in mind.

Tony and Mark looked at each other and giggled while the jocks were still angry.

“That arrogant bastard does it again,” Ronny thought, wrinkles appearing on his forehead, his neck veins popping. He was the captain of the football team. He was a sturdy guy, who could’ve passed for a German with his height, short blonde hair, and dreamy blue eyes. He looked jaw-droppingly good. The guy was also renowned for shredding through the opponents’ defense.

Quentin appeared to be calm in the face of adversity, given that he knew what was heading his way.

“Alright, Mr. Levine, come to the blackboard. Please show us the logical succession for a staffing forecast.”

The audience was awestruck.

“He’s going for the one-pointer again,” Yarra thought while Quentin made his way to the front of the class.

He walked up to the blackboard. He knew what he had to explain. As such, he began to draw while the noise in the classroom died down. He finished the schematic in a few minutes, so Mr. Morrison went closer to see.

“Great job as always, Mr. Levine. Now, if you will, please explain,” he said, letting his glasses slide down his nose.

“Yes. We learned how information is power and has been since the dawn of mankind. Concerning human resources, it’s the same. The more information you have, the better prepared you are for the future, as stated by our forecast here. The information comes to the human resources department in the form of internal work offers and internal demand,” he said in one breath.

He brewed tension with every passing second. “Every company has to elaborate a forecast for its necessary work needs, and that’s the next stage as drawn here. Consequently, by making a difference between internal work offers and the internal demand, you get the future necessary work needs,” he concluded, blinking lazily.

“That will suffice. This is where we stopped at our last course. Thank you, Mr. Levine, I will take your contribution into consideration,” the professor added, jotting down a number.

Quentin giggled to himself. “I’ve earned an extra point for my course activity.”

The professor’s head snapped up. “By the way, what would you have said if I hadn’t stopped you?”

He trimmed his voice. “I would’ve said that a company needs to adjust their worker’s shifts and operation time if there are problems with productivity. It could hire new staff and let go of those who don’t bring value to the company anymore,” he said confidently. The professor wasn’t impressed, unlike his fellow students.

The professor showed his yellow teeth after a broad smile. “I’d say more on the lines of substituting manual labor with the working capital through the acquisition of new machinery, replacing the old and counter-productive ones,” he added, imposing his authority.

Quentin took the information in with humility but winked at his friends. They had to cover their mouths not to laugh. He returned to his seat as the old man assumed his rightful place in front of the blackboard.

“I hate him. Why does he have to be such an arrogant

prick?” Ronny commented. He creased his paper. His blue eyes glimmered with hatred.

“Alright, ladies and gentlemen, we’ll discuss the rest of the schematic.”

The course resumed, but no one seemed to notice a shadowy figure when it entered the lecture hall. It crawled across the floor until it reached the area where the jocks were. Ronny, the team captain, was still angry because of Quentin’s arrogant stunt. He broke his pencil in half.

The shadow made its way toward him, as it found an emotional opening. Ronny knew nothing of it. He only felt a surge in his body when the eerie shadow possessed him.

“Ronny, are you alright? I saw you trembling a bit. You already got the shivers for the upcoming game?” Terrence asked. He was another friend of his from the team. The young African American was tall and had a long, bushy beard.

Ronny turned to him, displaying a stern look. He was thirsting for revenge.

Terrence’s voice shrank. “I’m sorry, man! No need to get riled up.”

Ronny turned his attention toward Quentin. His eyes stalked him like a bird of prey. He heard something like a whisper in his mind.

“Negativity...Quentin...hate...attack him...”

He felt compelled to act on impulse. His desire to get back at Quentin was strong, his face showing an evil smile. He looked at the creased paper and broke a ballpoint pen, barely keeping himself together.

“Okay, take it easy. It’s not like we’re going to lose the game. I know you get excited and all, but they don’t have anything

on us.” Vic tried to help him, but his friend’s voice meant nothing to him.

He was trapped in an altered reality. His senses went haywire. Only his brute strength appeared to be under control. Time passed, and break time came. His urge got stronger when the students scurried outside.

“Hey, guys, one more hour, and we’re off to the fair,” Yarra said with total excitement, raising her hands and clenching her fists.

“Yes. We’re all coming. Don’t worry,” Tony assured her of their presence.

“Right! I’m wondering what kind of surprise you have in store for us,” Mark said, still wary of it all. He shoved his hands in his hoodie’s pouch.

“I’ve been wondering about it as well,” Quentin said, crossing his arms and looking at her with piercing eyes.

“No, I won’t divulge this secret now. You’ll have to wait and see.” A flush crept up her face.

As they stood in the hallway, Ronny and his crew approached them.

“What’s up, freaky Quentin?” Vic asked, the others turning to them.

The jocks had bloodlust, and their numbers could have given them the advantage. Quentin didn’t even mind the loud guy. He saw Ronny looking down. Something dark seethed beneath his pretty boy face.

Out of the blue, the football’s team captain threw a punch at him. The others didn’t even have time to react but merely shouted. Quentin didn’t evade it in time. The punch connected with its target, pushing Quentin back against the wall with a loud thud. A twinge blanketed his lower back.

“A direct hit!” the evil entity thought, feeling satisfied.

Ronny riveted. The utter satisfaction on his face portrayed him as a downright sociopath. Quentin was frustrated.

“What’s gotten into you, Ronny!?! It’s not like you.” Yarra intervened in a half-hysterical voice. She tried to calm her ex-boyfriend down. They had broken up several months ago.

He swallowed loudly, and his feral grin vanished. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what came over me,” he replied with a defeated voice. Dread gripped every fiber of his being.

The torrent of emotions felt like an avalanche. Guilt swarmed his mind, and the shadowy creature was forcibly ejected. The jock let go of his burning desire to fight and turned back, much to everyone’s amazement.

“Ronny, I remember your punch to be stronger than this. It was fairly anemic this time,” Quentin said, wanting to have the last word. He gritted his teeth but also felt an unexpected thrill.

“Dude, you went overboard. Let’s get out of here right now!” Terrence looked at his demoralized friend.

“I hope you’ll reconsider my offer to join the team, Quentin,” Ronny stated before he left the scene with his crew.

The others were dumbstruck by his actions. The shadow stuck itself to a wall but departed soon after.

“I am sorry, Master, but I will get another chance.” The evil entity was left to reconsider its strategy.

“Well, that was a surprise,” Tony said to his friends, scratching the back of his head.

Mark subscribed to his opinion with a nod.

“He wants me to join the football team,” Quentin said, wiping some blood off his lips.

Yarra checked on him. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” he said, looking in the distance.

She breathed a sigh of relief.

“They always stick to their reputation,” Tony said.

“They’re brain-damaged jocks!” Mark added. “I’d like to spill their teeth out with my skateboard, man!”

Yarra focused on another matter.

“I can’t wait till we get to the fair. If I could speed up time,” she commented, losing herself in her thoughts.

Her friends spotted her having lost the train of her thoughts. They smiled and tugged her closer as the break was over.