

## Hyakkai-Zukan

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Have you heard of Leon? Leon from the public school a few blocks from here. He was one of my classmates. He was quite famous (or should I say infamous) amongst our grade and amongst the teachers for his peculiar behavior.

Who would believe it when told that a dog monster was hanging around the classroom or when told that they saw an old man with an impossibly-shaped head drinking tea at the cafeteria? Everyone just laughed it off at first. Some even pretended to see it too. He was just a kid. We were all just kids.

Eventually, the teachers and the other students have all gotten sick of Leon's lies that they just ignored him when he said anything strange. Perhaps because no one believed him that he insisted even more on seeing these unseen monsters and in turn, everyone hated him for it.

That's why...

"Liar!"

"S-stop it..."

"Go over there, liar!"

"Stop it..."

"Ew! Get away!"

We pushed him down the stairs.

It was an accident! We didn't mean to, we didn't know that would happen! We didn't want to hurt him! The blood--we didn't know what to do. What were we supposed to do?!

When Leon fell, I swear a gust of wind passed through the hallway despite the closed windows and low grumbling sounds vibrated throughout the whole school. A chill

ran down my spine and when I looked at my friends' faces, I knew they felt it too; there was something there with us. Without wasting another second, the three of us bolted down the stairs, ran out of the school, and left Leon for someone else to find.

I skipped school for the next five days so I didn't know how much things have changed until I came back. The atmosphere that surrounded the school turned eerie; the students who once greeted each other energetically, whispered amongst themselves as if afraid that someone might hear them.

My classmates said that strange things have been happening at school for the past week. Voices and footsteps were heard from empty classrooms, and sightings of ghosts in various parts of the school were also reported, but none of these stories frightened me more than what happened when I arrived at our classroom.

“Aaaahhhh!”

“What happened?!”

“At the classroom--!”

“Someone call a teacher!”

The classroom was turned upside down. The chairs, the desks, the shelves, the curtains and everything else in the room was turned upside down. Books were strewn across the floor and looked as if they were trampled upon by an army of men. However, what got my attention the most was what was written on the board. It wasn't written with a chalk or a marker but was slashed through by a knife or something similar.

“2/3”

I paled. Two over three, two out of three--I was the only one left.

That night I dreamt of Leon. He smiled and laughed, but it wasn't the hateful or mocking smile that I was expecting, but rather a friendly and genuine one. He ran along the corridor and hopped around at the schoolyard. I thought it was funny how the leaves danced around him as he moved.

“Look, he’s at it again.”

“Would he ever stop with his lies?”

“What’s he going to say now?”

“How stupid.”

Amongst the crowd that sneered at him were my friends and I. We laughed and pointed at him as we continued attacking him with crude words.

“Stop it...”

“Stop what?”

“STOP IT!”

Leon falls down the stairs. I was about to run but before I could, something grabbed me by the arm. I couldn't move. The crowd that surrounded me earlier was gone and my friends were lying lifeless on the ground.

“I found you!”

I didn't go to school for the rest of the week.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning. Did you need something?”

The man introduced himself as Will Spencer. He was a writer for a supernatural magazine and he heard about the recent occurrences at our school so he came to investigate.

I thought it was strange that he came to me, someone who hasn't been to school recently, for an interview but he mentioned something about my friends and about them not coming to school either so he thought it might be connected. I was scared but also worried about what happened to them so I thought I could at least listen to what he has to say.

According to Will, both of my friends were hospitalized for unknown reasons and that both of them were found at the foot of the stairs at our school on different days. It was suspected that they fell from the stairs, but it only resulted to minor injuries and nothing that could point as to why they would not wake up.

“Could you think of any reason why your friends were attacked?”

“Please leave.”

“Were you involved with anything that might have angered someone?”

“Leave!”

“Will... His arm...”

The girl who was with Will spoke up for the first time. Her name was Rianne and she was the daughter of Will's boss. He couldn't say no when his boss asked him to bring her along since she seemed interested in this case. She wasn't much younger than I was but she gave off a different feeling from every other kid that I've ever met. It was as if her green eyes could see through me.

Ever since I went to school last time, there has been a stinging pain on my forearm. The pain was similar to a light burn left untreated and it didn't feel so bad at first but as the days passed, the area affected by it has spread to almost throughout my forearm.

For the little girl to point out my arm at that moment creeped me out but it dispelled any form of reluctance I had from talking to them about the incident. I gingerly showed them my arm and told them about Leon, about the school, about the writing, about my dream, and about my arm.

"We didn't mean to do it! I swear! It happened so fast--when he fell, we didn't know what we were supposed to do, we didn't have the time to think of what we were supposed to do. Something was there and we were just so scared--we didn't mean to leave him behind!"

"Then you didn't mean to feign innocence until today? Were you so scared of punishment that you told no one about it? Did you even apologize to Leon?"

"What?"

That was true. There were plenty of chances for me to confess. I didn't even tell my parents about it no matter how much they nagged me.

“Anyway, from what you said, it’s been five days since you went to school. If that’s the case, it’d be best if you stay here tonight. Tell your parents to never let you leave the house, okay?”

Will handed me a piece of paper and as soon as the tip of my finger touched the paper, a wave of relief passed throughout my arm. The paper had scribbles on it and said that it was a charm that would protect me from the spirits and reminded me that I must have it on my person at all times.

“The pain on your arm would be unbearable tonight, but if you have the paper I gave you, you should be fine.”

I dreamt of Leon again. This time, he was smiling directly at me as we stood face to face in an empty classroom. There was no crowd, no friends, no monsters, it was just the two of us. The me in the dream exploded into tears and repeatedly apologized to Leon for everything I did.

Leon raised his hand and I closed my eyes. I was expecting him to hit me in rage for what I have done, but nothing came. All I felt was a soothing warmth against my cheek as Leon wiped the stream of tears I didn’t know I had.

I woke up in my room. It was still dark and the clock next to my bed read 3:00 A.M. I got up from bed to get a glass of water and accidentally dropped the paper on the carpet. The pain in my arm instantly resurfaced like a torrent and spread all throughout my body.

Will said I'd be fine if I had the paper so as much as I was hurting all over, I reached down for the fallen item, but before I could take it, the pain was gone. I no longer felt any pain in any part of my body, but at the same time, I couldn't feel anything at all.

My body stood up straight and walked towards the door. It was strange, it was as if I was floating. My body proceeded with its walk. Yes, I was going to get a glass of water. However, my body didn't turn to the kitchen for some water, instead it went for the front door, unlocked the door, and outside the house. It was only then did I realize that something was wrong. I no longer had any control of my body and it was moving by itself towards the school.

“Wait! Leon, I'm sorry! I admit we were wrong! We didn't mean to push you down the stairs, it was an accident! We didn't mean to hurt you!”

I screamed in my mind in hopes that whoever was controlling my body would hear it. Whether it could hear me or it was ignoring me, I didn't know but my body only accelerated its pace.

The school was emitting an ungodly aura. Flying around it were ghosts, spirits, monsters, or whatever they may be. Some of them were looking expectantly at me as if they were waiting for me to arrive.

“Look, he's here!”

“Looks delicious.”

“Would there be enough for all of us?”

Was this how they got my friends too? Taking them from their beds, controlling their bodies, and dragging them to the school? Would I be pushed down the stairs too? Would I my soul be eaten by these monsters and never wake up again?

Suddenly, I could feel myself again. I thought I could still run for it but I collapsed on the ground. The inhuman speed in which I arrived with must have taken a toll on my human body.

“Nurarihyon, the boy’s here. What should we do with him?”

“Do with him what we did to the others!”

“No! Break his arms and legs and feed it to the ghouls!”

“Gouge out his eyes!”

“Rip out his guts!”

“Cut out his tongue!”

Roars erupted from all around but as soon as the small figure from the middle of the pack raised its hand, the group fell into a deafening silence. The figure was that of a shrunken old man with a deformed head. His petite body was robed with silken garments held together by a thin cloth at his waist. Despite his old age and short stature, it was clear that this man was the leader of the monsters.

“Please--!”

I mustered all of my remaining strength and threw myself at his feet.

“Please listen! About Leon, I--!”

“Don’t you dare speak his name!”

An invisible force, pushed me further into the ground. My back felt so heavy that it was as if my spine would break if I so much as tilt my head. The monsters surrounding me only laughed and jeered at my misfortune. It was as if my suffering was some sort of show.

“Take him.”

With that command, I felt their presence slowly inching over me and one after the other passed through me. Each spirit that passed through felt like a gunshot shooting through my body. Although there wasn’t a visible wound, my whole body felt like it was riddled with holes.

“It hurts, right?”

“There’s no wound, but it hurts.”

“You shouldn’t be surprised, right?”

“This is what you did to Leon.”

“Your words are harmless but they cut deep.”

Leon was hurting that much. Leon was hurting all this time because of what we did, but he never complained. We laughed and bullied him but he wasn’t even wrong. There really were monsters.

Each spirit that passed through my body left a piece of their memory behind. In every one of them was Leon. They were thinking so much about him all this time.

They're monsters but they're looking out for him this much.

“Leon never wanted your attention.”

“He just wanted to show off.”

“He was the kind of kid that boasts about his friends.”

“He wanted to introduce his friends to everyone.”

“That brat! I told him you people would never understand!”

“Even this, we know he'd scold us for this!”

“That's why nothing good comes from associating with humans...”

I see. I see now. All those times Leon, talked to us about the monsters, he never once told us they were scary. He never said they were doing anything bad. He didn't even call them monsters! To him they were his precious friends.

“Rin Pyo To Sho Kai Jin Rietsu Zai Zen!”

A blinding flash lighted the area and the monsters that were pushed back away from me.

“What happened to the ward I gave you?”

“Will?”

Will retrieved human-shaped cutouts from his pocket and held his fingers together. The monsters near us flinched back at the sight of them. Whatever it was, it was posing as a threat to the monsters.

“Will, wait! They are--!”

“I know! This is just for precaution! Anne!”

In that moment, Rianne stepped out from the shadows and between the us and the monsters. I couldn't believe that Will brought a child with him at such a dangerous place. Any sane adult would leave kids at home no matter how much they wanted to have ghostly encounters.

“Nurarihyon, everyone, it's enough.”

The voice coming from Rianne didn't sound like her. I only heard her speak once, but I was sure it wasn't hers. It sounded more familiar--like Leon's.

“Leon?”

“Is it Leon?”

“Is it really him?”

Rianne nodded.

“I'm sorry for worrying everyone, but I'm fine. I'm not hurting anymore.”

“Leon...”

Rianne turned to me and smiled.

“I’m sorry that you have to go through all this.”

“No. No! I’m the one who should say sorry! Leon, I--about the incident, we didn’t mean to! We didn’t want that to happen either! I’m sorry... I know that it wouldn’t bring you back to life but please forgive me! I’m so sorry! Leon, please forgive me! Please forgive us...”

Leon kneeled down in front of me and raised his hand. Like in my dream, I closed my eyes and braced for impact, but like in my dream, Leon wiped away my tears. I was ashamed of myself. I thought I would be able to comfort Leon with my apology, but I was the one comforted instead.

“Everyone, shall we go?”

Leon left Rianne’s body and ran back to his friends.

Nurarihyon and the monsters didn’t even glance back at us as they floated into the air and flew through the night. The event was sighted by quite a number of people and was talked about by the townspeople and the mass media for a long time but they never knew what really happened that night. Since then the school was no longer haunted by ghosts and my friends were discharged from the hospital.

They called it the Hyakkai-Zukan or the parade of a hundred demons. They were a generally a friendly group led by a monster named Nurarihyon.

I never saw Will and Anne again; I wanted to formally thank them for all their help but I couldn’t reach them. The magazine they said they belonged to never even existed. Sometimes I want to believe that Leon brought them. I want to believe that Leon didn’t

want his friends to do bad things so he brought Will and Rianne to stop them from hurting people.