What It Means To Be Free

Jyoui always wondered what it meant to be free. At home, he never had the chance to go out whenever he wanted to and he never had much of a choice when it came to having fun. His owners had always made him do things exactly the way they taught him to. They chose what he ate, what he slept on, and even where he could do his business. Well, Jyoui didn't mind, since his owners fed him every day and always took him outside the moment they got home. However, Jyoui never knew why they always left when the sun came up and why they always came home right before the sun set.

Jyoui's life used to revolve around three things: eating, sleep' g, playing, a d repeating that all over again. There were lots and lots of toys that he loved to toss around and chase after. There were the small round ones that he nudged around all day, and there were the big rectangular ones that he would chew all day. That was about all he vaguely remembered about the old life he had had, but he liked that lifestyle, even though he had to face the exact same white walls every day. Occasionally, he would be allowed to visit another massive room with grey walls. Here he would play and talk to all his friends that were also visiting this room.

However, he remembered very vividly the day that strangers had come to take him to a new home. He had been given a wonderful meal and had been washed until every speck of dust had been removed from his fur. His nails were clipped to perfection and his orange-white fur was combed `til it shone. A bubbly substance was applied to his teeth, but after the process, they were whiter than the four walls he had been kept in. The woman in white who had cleaned him looked at him one last time, gave him a hug, and patted his head. By then, he should have known that something was wrong, but it was when all his toys and playthings were removed, that he realized someone was going to take him away. There had been rumours about where all the other animals disappeared to, and his friends always told him that it would eventually happen to everyone. Jyoui didn't think it would be that bad, as he had been able to catch glimpses through open doors. Little children would run towards and hug the other animals as they left and everyone seemed happy. Jyoui had hoped that that would happen to him when it was his turn.

After being groomed, he was taken to the room he was occasionally allowed to visit, but none of his friends were there to say goodbye. After all, it had been sleep time, and he wouldn't have wanted to disturb them from their rest anyway. He wondered, though, why it had been so late into the night when it was his turn to be taken. At the same moment, a huge man with dots on his face walked in, he had never seen anything like it before. The man with furry arms held a thick leash; he didn't even have a smile on his face. Jyoui barked at the man and whimpered a little. He was scared and felt completely helpless towards the man towering over him. The woman in white who had cleaned Jyoui leaned over the counter and whispered something in the man's ear as she handed him one of Jyoui's toys. He nodded, reached down to give Jyoui a pat as Jyoui trembled in the very spot he was standing, and placed the leash onto his collar.

"Hey buddy," the man said as he reached down to pat him and as Jyoui shied away from his hand, "who's a good boy?"

And that was that. The man picked Jyoui up and carried him out of his home, up a set of stairs and towards a metal box with four circles that had been waiting nearby. Inside the box was a woman and a young boy with something that was flat and glowing in his hand. When the boy looked up, his eyes widened and tears streamed down his face as the man handed Jyoui to him.

"No way dad!" said the boy, "What's his name?"

"I'm glad you like him. His name's on his collar"

"Jyo...u...i... dad, is that how you read it?" (じょう い/ジョーイ (Joey in Japanese))

The man nodded.

"I'll call you Joey then! It's easier and that's what it sounds like in English! Hi Joey."

He ruffled Joey's ears as Joey curled up in a ball and closed his eyes. Who were these people that he had never seen before? He had never heard of big people with dotted faces and furry arms before. What were they saying? He heard his name being said a few times, but he wasn't used to anything that they were saying. These people were saying things that didn't sound anything like what the woman in white had ever said to him.

Joey spent the next year of his life learning rules the hard way. If he wanted treats, he had to work hard for them. He couldn't relieve himself on anything but the newspaper tray that had been set in the corner for him. What did he get to eat? Joey had to eat the same thing every day and every night, though there was always this one day every few seasons where he would get a steak from his owners. After moving in with his new owners, he didn't have many friends or as many things that he could play with. They would give him bones to chew and balls to play with, but there was no other dog he could play fight with or steal food from. Sometimes, Joey would look longingly at the young boy's mother as she cooked in hopes that she would give him something to eat. Maybe she would drop something onto the floor, but that never happened and they even made sure that he would never reach the food that they ate. He hated living with his new owners. He had no freedom and often felt very lonely.

He had eventually learned the names of his owners as well. The young boy's name was Jake and his father's name was Gordon. The woman, whom Joey guessed was the boy's mother, went by the name of Michelle. Michelle never paid much attention to Joey, though he knew that she was the one who always purchased his treats. Gordon would toy with him and chase after him whenever he passed by, but never for more than a minute or so. Then there was Jake. Jake was the only one, who fed, walked, cleaned, and played with him, but he was also the one who enforced the most rules. Joey wondered why he had to sit before he could eat, why he had to do tricks whenever his owners told him to, and most of all, why he wasn't allowed to run wherever he could when Jake took him outside for walks. Slowly, he had been able to learn commands in his owner's language, but whenever Jake tried to tell him to do things in the language he was used to, Joey hated it. It was as if Jake was slowly taking his old life away. Even though his new owners had done so much just to have him live with them, he didn't like all these new rules they made him follow, so Joey sulked. He laid waste to the newspaper tray and peed all over the carpets in the house, but he didn't get his expected result. All his owners made him do was stay in a cage while they cleaned up everything without complaining. Jake had even given him a hug as Michelle rolled up the carpet and took it outside.

"Don't be upset Joey, we love you and just want to give you as much as we can," said Jake.

Of course, Joey had no idea what Jake had said to him, but he could sense how defeated Jake sounded. It seemed like he had tried so hard to teach him something, but it had, in the end, all gone to waste.

Jyoui trotted across the grass as he heard barking from across the road. He wanted to just run across the road and disobey Jake so badly. His ears perked up as he saw the large black dog Daichi poke its head out from behind a tree. Jyoui sent a friendly growl back across at the other dog as he tugged against the leash that held him. "Woah there boy. Ahhhh stop!" Jake exclaimed.

Jyoui obediently stopped right before the curb ended and waited for Jake to allow him to cross the road. Daichi, whose owner wasn't paying attention, ran straight across the road towards Joey. Joey thought it was unfair. He knew from just that that Daichi was allowed to do anything it wanted to. His owner didn't even bother giving him a leash. Jyoui loved playing with Daichi because he felt as if Daichi's freedom spread to him each time they played together. Jake would stick around when they played, but Daichi's owner, Takashi, would just use his glowing device and wait until Daichi was finished playing to return on his own. This meant that Jyoui had to stay leashed and have his movements restricted whenever he play fought with him. Jyoui always lost to Daichi because of this and Daichi would make fun of him for it, but this time, Daichi dodged his attack and watched as he struggled to untangle himself from his leash. He stared down mockingly at Jyoui and taunted him. As frustrated as Jyoui was, he knew he shouldn't lash out at his friend. Daichi barked at Jyoui to follow him as he finally broke loose of the entanglement.

Meanwhile, Jake's girlfriend Tomomi had come by and said, "Ohayo! Genki desuka?"

Jyoui knew that if he were to feel free, this was the only chance he would get. He recognized this phrase and knew that Tomomi was concerned about something, as the woman in white had often asked him the same question. He took his first step and put his left paw onto the curb. The feeling was great. He had never rebelled against Jake's rules before. Daichi barked and urged him onward to freedom as he trotted into the middle of the road. All sounds seemed to disappear and all Jyoui could hear was his own heartbeat as he put his right paw onto the cement. He could finally feel freedom and it seemed to spread upwards from his paw, but what was that loud sound coming in from his left side?

Jyoui's eyes flew wide in shock as he realized what was coming. He looked up to bark at his friend, but was too late as he heard Daichi howl like he had never before. It wasn't the usual howl he would give off to taunt Jyoui into trying harder at play fighting. This was the howl of his friend in suffering. The giant metal box had come careening into the street like a bear, destroying everything in its path before slamming into a tree. Jyoui couldn't move as he stared at the broken body of his friend on the road. Sounds suddenly seemed to be amplified in Jyoui's ears. There was Jake who was trying to stop him from barking, there was the man in the metal box who was shouting back at Takashi, and even Tomomi was crying as she looked away from the wreck. Before he realized it, Joey's vision had begun to blur and he felt tears streaming from his eyes.

Joey buried his face into Jake's shirt and whimpered.

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