**Prologue: The Delinquent Prodigy**

**1 – Delinquent Prodigy**

"Aah~ I finally got the latest Magical Girl Kawaii-chan keychain!"

The mass of people stared awkwardly at the high school student that shouted passionately at the sky. They looked at him like he was a nuisance while some didn’t give him the time of day and minded their own business. The student didn’t seem to care for any of the attention he caught and went his own way.

"Yes! Finally, after a long time of collecting Magical Girl Kawaii-chan collectibles, I can say that I completed it yet again!"

The name of the student who was bragging to himself about his collection was Konjou Ryosei. A 2nd-year high school student with black hair and eyes with the left side of his hair tied in a red string. He grinned elatedly as he safely stored the keychain he just bought in his bag.

As you can tell, he is an otaku. He is a 17-year-old that lives alone and he spends most of his time with his hobbies watching anime, reading manga, collecting figurines, and other things. At first, one would think he was just a nerdy loser with nothing better to do in his life. However, he kept a mind-boggling secret hidden away from the world.

“Oh, h-hi there, Konjou-san. We haven’t really talked at school but I wanted to thank you for yesterday. Also, to apologize since because of me… your leg was…”

Another student with the same uniform as Konjou approached him. He had brown hair and eyes. He seemed to have the same passion in his eyes as Ryosei had earlier but with a hint of guilt as he mentioned the state of his right leg. Noticing that, Ryosei’s elated grin twisted into an awkward smile as he knew exactly what this was about.

“Yesterday? Oh, don’t worry about that one it wasn’t anything major. Look, see? My leg is perfectly fine. I know a thing or two about how to heal these kinds of things quickly, you see…”

Ryosei hopped around on his right leg to show its healthy shape and reassure the student.

“Just don’t talk about it with others.”

“It really does look healed… I got it, I won’t tell anyone but… Konjou-san, I know this is rude for me to ask, but why are you always alone? I-I don’t mean that in a bad way or anything, I just thought that anyone would love to have someone like you around as a friend. You have a great personality and you even helped me with those kidnappers and that… thing from yesterday. I know this is presumptuous of me but… why don’t we become friends and I can—”

“Ah, about that… can we talk about that another time? I actually have something to do. Well then, see you at school.”

“Ah, w-wait a second! Konjou-san!”

The student was silenced as Ryosei cut him off mid-sentence and ran off. He tried to reach out to Ryosei but he was too quick for him and got left behind.

After reaching a good distance between them, Ryosei slowed down and sat down on a nearby bench.

“Wow, my body really took a huge decline. Usually running that much would be nothing for me but here I am sweating…”

Ryosei wasn’t out of breath. Other than the small beads of sweat running down his face there weren’t any signs showing that he was tired.

“Friends, huh… I don’t think someone like me deserves one of those… not someone who ran away from them.”

Ryosei recalled a few years ago when his parents died due to illness. He remembered the sorrow he felt for his parents' death, along with the regret of the emotion-driven decision he chose right after that. He shut himself in his home, never to be seen by anyone after a few weeks, and in that time, he finally came out of the house and set himself a new goal.

*\*Alright!! Time to collect all the Magical Girl Kawaii-chan collectibles!\**

In his time of isolation, he came about a new hobby and became an otaku. He spent his time watching anime and reading manga. He really came falling down after his parent's death. It was something he did to move on from the tragic event, but that came with the cost of the friends he already had.

The moment his relatives got wind of his transformation; they were thrown into a panic. They were thinking "THAT KONJOU RYOSEI... turned into an OTAKU?!" and "I know his parents' death must have been hard for him but for him to turn into this!?" It was chaos. his relatives tried their best to convince him to go back to normal, but that proved to be useless. He was too far in. There was no saving him now.

The reason that his relatives were so worked up about him becoming an otaku is that the Konjou clan is a clan of hunters specialized in the supernatural, and Konjou Ryosei was their prodigy. Before his parents died, they taught him the techniques of their family to pass it down to the next generation.

The first week he started learning their techniques, he had already excelled. He learned and mastered everything at an unbelievable rate, faster than anyone ever before. He even improved the Konjou Style and created new techniques.

Most of the new techniques he made were almost inimitable. Made with such precision that a single mistake in timing could endanger the user. It was something that only the strongest of the hunters dared to learn. But that was not the only thing that made him special. Ryosei had an abnormal ability to completely read people. He could tell what people are actually feeling and tell if they were lying or not. Not a single lie got through his impenetrable defense.

Everyone was in shock. To think someone so young had already mastered techniques and even started creating new ones that surpassed their greatest skills. He was called the "Young Prodigy" and praised by everyone.

But now, after his parents' death, he became an otaku and stopped improving the Konjou Style and started collecting Magical Girl Kawaii-chan collectibles instead. His relatives couldn't do anything about it. Not even the strongest could force him out of his cage. They could only watch as the "Young Prodigy" wasted his time and money on collectibles and anime.

It didn't take long for his title to turn from "Young Prodigy" to "Delinquent Prodigy." Though Ryosei didn't care, most of the family's elders looked down at him in disappointment. And now the "Delinquent Prodigy" is reminiscing his past with an aching feeling of regret.

“‘Delinquent Prodigy,’ huh? Sounds like a perfect fit, to be honest.”

**2 – Little Girl**

As Ryosei ridiculed himself, he saw a little girl walking by with a bag of groceries. From the looks of it, she was no more than 10 years old. It’d make perfect sense for this to be per first-ever grocery run alone, but instead of a face of excitement or anxiety, she possessed a lonely expression. Her mind was taken by something else besides her solo excursion out in town.

*\*I wonder if she had a fight or something with her parents\**

Just as the thought crossed his mind, he let out a pained chuckle as he formed his thoughts into words.

“I’m sure she’d be really pissed if she saw me now.”

Ryosei was close with his parents, even while training they'd sometimes fool around and chase each other. His parents would play along with his stupid antics but they'd be strict when they need to. Ryosei was very fond of them.

“Damn, that guy earlier really threw me off… I think his name was… something-something Ryuuji. Was his last name that confusing? I don’t remember.”

He stopped reminiscing the past and came back to reality. He stood up from the bench and opted to go back home. Suddenly, the little girl he was looking at earlier froze in the middle of the street. But why?

\**HONK! HONK!\**

It seemed like the little girl froze under the loud honks that were quickly approaching her. It was a speeding truck, but why didn’t she just run? The truck may have been speeding but if she picked up the pace and hurried to the other side there wouldn’t be any problem. It looked like she was in total shock.

Then, a better question crossed his mind. Why didn’t the driver just pump the breaks? Ryosei could tell that the truck wouldn’t be able to stop in time to avoid the girl, but he could still give her time by using the breaks.

“CRAP! RUN! GET OUT OF THERE!!”

Ryosei shouted at the girl but it fell on deaf ears as she was too shocked to hear his voice. The girl could have saved herself if she ran or jumped out of the way. Unfortunately, any normal human could freeze under death’s glare and she was just a kid who wouldn’t know what to do if her mind was in a panic.

*\*She's not going to make it!\**

Ryosei thought to himself. He wondered what kind of parents would let a child go out on their own without even knowing what to do in these situations, but the situation had worsened. There was no one else that could save her. Not herself, nor the driver.

“I SAID GET OUT OF THE WAY!!!”

Ryosei shouted as he ran to the girl and pushed her away with incredible speed. Human limits would say such speed was unreachable for the strongest of humans, but he broke those limits as if it were nothing. It was almost as if he teleported to the girl. To top it off, a strong gust of wind blew against the girl as she flew towards the sidewalk, negating the force Ryosei transferred to her and safely placing her away from harm.

\*Good! Now, to just—!?\*

As Ryosei planted his right foot on the ground, a strong pain surged throughout his whole leg, failing him, and sending him to his knees in the middle of the street. He acted with the intention to leave as soon as possible but that didn’t seem to be an option anymore. Although it looked bleak, he outstretched his hand with a serious expression but no trace of worry. The truck approached closer, closer, and closer, until it made contact with his hand, and right at that moment…

“Huh…?”

A small utterance of confusion.

\**CRAAAAAAAASH!!!\**

As such, he didn't get away.

His eyes were slowly losing their light. He looked around to see that the girl he pushed away is safe and was on the other side of the street and with the bystanders panicking to call an ambulance.

*\*H-Huh…? Now… that’s strange. M-My spirit power… didn’t work? Is it because… I haven’t used it in a while? Wait… h-huh? Am I… dying? I… can’t move.\**

Slowly, his vision was turning dark. He can feel the cold coating his body and slowly losing control over his senses. At that moment, death was staring at him and was ready to collect his soul.

*\*Huh... to think it'd turn out like this... I guess my decline hit me harder than I thought. All of that running away and lazing around got me here. How pathetic. There's… no way I'll make it out now, huh? W-Well, at least I saved that girl. Compared to me, she’d probably live a better life worth more than mine.\**

He berated himself for dying so easily. In his mind, the only reason he was dying right now was that he chose to run away. He chose not to direct the blame to anyone else. Then, the girl he saved ran to his side with teary eyes. She held his hand and was shouting something at him but this became inaudible to Ryosei's ears.

Ryosei saw as her purple eyes began to moisten. Then a thought came to mind. He moved the hand the girl was holding and put his hand on her head.

*\*Such... sad eyes... these eyes don't look like they are only sad because the stranger who saved them is dying. The sadness in those eyes... run even deeper... It's like it's been there since long ago. It’s almost like her eyes describe herself.\**

But that didn't make sense. The girl didn't even look like she was in her teens. How can someone so young have such eyes, Ryosei thought.

He scrutinized the girl's face. He looked at the girl as if peering into her soul. He mustered with all the strength he had and smiled at her. His face was beaming. Despite being on the brink of death he smiled at her and gave off a warm feeling that seemed like it was trying to reassure her. If it weren't for all the blood and dirt, it would look like a scene from a manga.

"Looks like… you’re no different from me…"

“Eh…?”

“I think… purple hyacinth… would look good with those eyes…”

Those were his last words before losing all his strength. Once Ryosei's hand let go of her and fell to the ground, the girl started panicking but it was useless and soon all he could see was darkness.

\**I guess this is it for me. I wonder if this means I’ll be able to meet my parents again? If it does… what do I even say? Or… should I even show myself to them. After what I did… Just maybe… I could get a chance. A single chance… to fix everything. To get rid of my regret. Just one, single change to change my decision… I would… \**

After a while, the ambulance would arrive, but only to see that, The Delinquent Prodigy, Konjou Ryosei, had already passed away.

**Chapter 1: 'Accidental' Meeting**

**3 – Morning Battles**

**「**7 Years Later」

It was Monday, a school day, and students are preparing themselves for another week of learning and socializing. The students of Honshou Academy are living their normal everyday lives chatting with each other and fooling around with friends on their way to school. The students continue funneling into the school gates for a while like normal.

The chime was about to ring and there was no one else entering the school, except for one student who was making a mad dash for the school gates. That student was Yukou Senkyo, a 2nd-year high school student. He had brown hair and eyes and has no noticeable features.

He is an otaku, one that has a wide range of hobbies like anime, manga, light novels, visual novels, and various games. Right now, he is using all of his strength to make it to his classroom before the chime rings. The reason he got himself into this situation was that he was up all night reading light novels.

He was not a part of any clubs and goes straight home after school unless something comes up like a newly released game, figurine, or anything at all that involves his hobbies or needs. Though despite being an otaku and having occasional all-nighters, he kept his grades average to make up for it.

"I made it!"

Senkyo shouted as he arrived in the classroom as the chime rang. Despite making his desperate sprint, he didn’t look too tired.

"Yo, Senkyo. you made it on the dot again, huh?"

The person who greeted him in class was his best friend and classmate, Honjou Kinro. They met in middle school where they talked to each other in class and later on became friends when they started talking about light novels. They had surprisingly similar interests despite being completely different.

He had blonde hair with dark blue eyes. He is good-looking and likes to play soccer. He is a member and the ace player of the football club. He would attend club activities and practice on the field while groups of girls cheer for him on the sidelines.

“Yeah... haah... haah… I don't want to get scolded after all.”

“This is basically your exercise though, isn't it? Every time you sleep in you run like your life depends on it. I’ve never seen you be late ever since we met. It’s actually amazing!”

“I never really intended for this to become my exercise...”

“Hahaha! Doing stuff that's good for you when you don't even want to? That's quite the skill!”

Kinro laughed at the irony of Senkyo’s unintentional exercise. He did things that benefited him whether he liked it or not. Senkyo ignored Kinro’s strange comment and headed straight for his seat.

"Good morning, Yukou-san!"

"Ah... Good morning Yutei-san."

The girl that greeted him was Yutei Yukai, she sat on the seat next to Senkyo. She had long light brown hair and eyes with a deep mid-tone of purple. Her hair was fixed in a ponytail that reaches her waist that was tied with a purple hair tie. She is the shortest in her class but that compliments her looks and gives a cute little sister vibe. She has the highest grades in class and she helps other classmates when they ask her to help them out with something. She has a lot of friends, good grades, and is nice to everyone.

Some saw her as a competent little sister of sorts, though a little shy. It wasn’t her beauty that attracted her crowd, but rather the cuteness that made even girls want to watch her from afar. Of course, all of this was unbeknownst to her.

"Sorry for being late! Alright, let's begin class!"

The homeroom teacher arrived and silenced the chattering students and began the class. Senkyo sits by the window where the relaxing breeze was cooling him off and making him sleepy. He hurriedly took countermeasures and bit his lip to focus on the lesson.

*\*Crap... I better not fall asleep. It's a pain to keep up with lessons without someone else explaining them to me, so it's better to just listen... don't fall asleep! Don't fall asleep!!\**

Senkyo's internal battle had begun. Nature was making it hard for him to pay attention to the lesson my making his senses scum to the relaxing sensation of sleep.

Senkyo is a listening type of person, he understood things better when it came to other people talking to him about them. He is insanely good at listening to the point where he only needs a quick skim of Kinro’s notes before a test to refresh his knowledge and ends up with an average result despite almost never studying. He thinks that studying by himself is a pain because he is not used to it, and he would rather battle his desires than study to keep his grades up.

*\* Focus... FOCUS...!\**

He fought his desires throughout the class periods but unfortunately loses the urge to sleep every single time class ends. It was like his brain was playing tricks with him and intentionally trying to make him sleep in class. After multiple mental battles, he finally made it through all the classes and it was time for lunch break.

"Unhhnnn... Why do I always feel like sleeping ONLY when we’re in class? Isn’t that weird? Seriously."

"Don’t go blaming your brain. It’s that irregular sleep schedule of yours that keeps doing it. What? Was last night another all-nighter?"

"Yeah... I got too deep in the light novel I was reading, and the next thing I knew it was three in the morning."

Kinro knew Senkyo was not always this sleepy. He has a proper sleep schedule to avoid sleeping in class and causing painful study sessions. But he has nights where he would get really into something and lose his sense of time and break his sleep schedule. Kinro was already used to this as he had already witnessed this scene multiple times since middle school.

"Okay, time to get up... let’s go eat before lunch break ends. You can talk to me about the light novel you were so into on the way there.”

"AHH! YEAH, IT WAS GREAT! They didn't waste a single word writing and—"

Kinro and Senkyo left the classroom and headed for the cafeteria. They did not have anyone to make lunches for them and they couldn't be bothered to make one for themselves so they always eat in the cafeteria.

**4 – Others’ Perception**

"Waaa~ Honjou-sama is soo~ cool!"

"I know right! I went to see him practice and all his moves were so cool it felt like I was gonna melt just by watching him!"

"And he's so nice too! I saw him help a cat down a tree when I was walking home!"

A talk about Honjou Kinro sparked when they left the classroom. The people talking were Suzuki Himari, Ito Sara, and Sato Aoi, respectively, and all of them are in the same class as Kinro and Senkyo.

"You did?! Nn~ No fair! I would want to see that too...!"

The one who replied is Suzuki Himari. She had flowy light blonde hair that went straight down decorated by a small bunny hairpin and matching eyes. She had a slender figure with a jacket tied around her waist. She's the type that likes to talk about other people. She's not the nicest but also not a bad person.

"Hehehe... Maybe we should walk home together later and hope that we see Honjou-san helping another cat on the way."

The one he made a suggestion of walking home together is Sato Aoi. She had black eyes and short hair at shoulder height. She wore glasses with a red frame. She is the type to join in a conversation but not start one. She's shy but when she gets used to you, she seems almost like Himari.

"Hey! Count me in on that too!"

The one who enthusiastically joined in the fun was Ito Sara. She had brown eyes with matching long hair that was tied into a ponytail that reaches her waist. She had a noticeable antenna-like strand of hair poking up her head. She's the type to make things fun and always fool around. She is very energetic and can feel like a ride when you're with her.

"Hmm... I wonder what Honjou-san's daily routine is..."

"Yeah... I'm a little curious about that too...!"

Aoi and Sara wondered by themselves, completely unaware that they sounded just like stalkers just now.

"Well, what about that otaku? Isn't he always with Honjou-sama?"

Himari asked. She was curious about how such a contradictory pair would be friends with each other.

"Ahh... You mean Yukou-san...?"

"I heard they were friends since middle school."

After hearing Sara’s statement, Himari couldn’t hide her genuine shock.

"Waa~ Since middle school?! They've been friends for that long... I never would've guessed. I guess opposites can be friends, after all. But still, I don't really like him getting too close to Honjou-san. It makes me feel annoyed... I mean, he's such a loser! Way out of Honjou-sama’s league."

"Now, now, Himari-san, calm down."

"Yeah, Aocchi is right! You don't have to be so mean."

"Hmmn... It ticks me off is all."

Aoi and Sara calmed her down. The trio continued to talk about Kinro and Senkyo as they eat their lunch together. Their conversation reached a nearby group of two male students.

"Man! Honjou-kun sure is popular, huh, Touma-kun? It'd be great if I was as popular as he is!"

"I don't care..."

"As cold as always, huh? Even to your childhood friend."

"Just how long are you going to cling to that excuse?"

"Jeez... That's so like you Touma-kun. As shy as always."

"....."

The pair of male classmates heard the talk about Kinro earlier. One of them was envious of him while the other couldn’t care less and turned a cold shoulder towards the envious one.

The envious one was Yamamoto Sora. He had brown hair with a short ponytail and brown eyes. Right now, he is being ignored. Sora is a bit pushy and his friend didn't appreciate that.

The one ignoring him was Saito Touma. He is Sora’s childhood friend but now he seemed to hate that title as Sora always used it as an excuse to annoy him. He had short white hair and sharp, silver eyes to match it. He is as cold as ice to everybody around him but for some reason, Sora chooses to hang out with him despite his snappy attitude.

"Hey, so what do you think about Yukou-kun, Touma-kun?"

"....."

Touma continued to ignore him.

"Oh, come on! Do you hate him? Like him? Think he's interesting? Or maybe..."

Sora kept rambling on about Senkyo and he clearly won't stop until he got an answer

"...shut up..."

Touma looked at him with cold blizzard eyes and responded in his normal uninterested tone.

"Hoho... I made him mad..."

"If I answer, will you shut up...? I want to eat peacefully..."

"Yeah!"

"I don't know much about Yukou and I don't care about him but I think he has it hard with Watanabe."

"Ahh... you're right! It's scary if you're on Watanabe-kun's radar."

"....."

Touma ignored him and continued eating.

**5 – Chaotic Lunch**

Meanwhile, at the cafeteria, Senkyo and Kinro were enjoying their meal and talking to each other. They were talking about the light novel that caused Senkyo to have another all-nighter.

"Hmm... That does sound interesting"

"I know right! I'm planning on buying the other volumes later after school!"

"Well then, once I've finished reading 'The Blade of a Hero' can I borrow that one?"

"Sure! I swear it'll be great! Ah... Whatever you do, don't let your guard down. If you do, you might end up like me."

"Hahaha, sure I'll be careful."

"Would you look at that, it's Shittaku."

"With pretty boy too! Don't get too close or you'll get his germs... oh wait, you probably already have them! HAHAHA!"

Kinro and Senkyo were enjoying their lunch and talking, but unfortunately, a storm came upon them to ruin their peace. A pair of students approached the two of them. They knew that it was going to be trouble.

"What do you guys want, Tanaka-san, Watanabe-san?"

Kinro asked. The pair who approached them were Watanabe Itsuki and Tanaka Riku, The class troublemakers. They are sadly in the same class as Senkyo and Kinro. They pick on other people when they feel like it and they would target the people they especially don't like. And as luck would have it, one of them was Senkyo.

Watanabe Itsuki had a blonde flat top, so he had no bangs to cover his golden eyes. He had a strong build and just from appearances he already looked intimidating.

Tanaka Riku had black hair that was always covered by a blue beany. Unlike Itsuki, he didn't have a spectacular build but possessed sharp black eyes that peered at anyone with his scary face. He would follow Itsuki and cause trouble wherever they go.

"Nothing. Just came by to say hi to our best friend, Shittaku."

"Are you going to leave soon? If not, then we will go on ahead."

Kinro took a passive-aggressive tone as he asked Itsuki and Riku to leave, but they didn't swallow it too well.

"HUH?! WANNA FIGHT PRINCE CHARMING?!"

"YEAH! WE'LL BEAT THE CRAP OUTTA YA!"

"Hey! Let go of him!"

Itsuki and Riku came up to Kinro, and Itsuki grabbed the hem of his blazer. Senkyo tried to help Kinro but was simply pushed away.

"OUTTA THE WAY SHITTAKU! I'M GONNA BEAT THE CRAP OUTTA PRINCE CHARMING HERE BEFORE I GO FOR YOU!"

Itsuki shouted so loud that the whole cafeteria had its eyes on them. But then, someone came running in and pushed Itsuki and Kinro away from each other.

"Stop it, Onii-chan! That's enough!"

"…O-Onii-chan?"

Riku, Kinro, and Senkyo repeated in unison as they heard something they never thought they would ever hear. The one who pushed them away from each other was Itsuki's little sister, Watanabe Ichika, a 1st-year high school student. A year below her brother.

She had blonde hair that was arranged into twin tails with black hair ties. Her eyes were golden like her brother's. It was believable that the two of them were relatives but unlike her brother, she was nice and had a cute face.

“Wha...? Ichika? What are you doing here?”

“What do you mean 'what am I doing here?' This is the cafeteria, you know? What are you doing making another mess?”

Itsuki was weak when it came to his little sister. Before, he didn't have to worry about her and kept causing trouble. But now with his little sister enrolled at the same high school he was, he had to be careful as things like this could happen. He was still not used to having his sister in the same school as he was. He has never slipped up until now. And the consequence of that was a public execution from his sister.

"Stop picking on others already and go back to your class!"

"What?! And gives you the right to—"

"....."

Itsuki tried to bark back but when he saw Ichika scowling at him, he swallowed his words. Her face was saying to do as she says or else. Itsuki was weak when it came to his little sister, that was clear to everyone in the cafeteria that day.

"Tch..."

"Woah...! Itsuki! Wait for me!"

He caught his words and reluctantly went out of the cafeteria with the click of his tongue. He left in a hurry and Riku followed. Kinro and Senkyo were left dumbfounded by what they just witnessed. The biggest and scariest bully in school just stepped down and walked away.

"Are you two okay? Did you two get hurt?"

"Ah...! N-No... we're fine, thank you."

"Y-Yeah, we're not hurt."

Senkyo and Kinro snapped out of it and responded to Ichika.

"I am Watanabe Ichika, Watanabe Itsuki's little sister but you can call me Ichika. I'm sorry about my brother, he can be like that to other people but he's really nice deep inside!"

"Erm... No, it's no problem at all."

Senkyo responded.

"Please tell me when my brother gets into trouble again, I don't want him to hurt himself... Well then, sorry for the trouble but I need to go back to class now, goodbye!"

"Goodbye..."

“See you…”

Senkyo and Kinro were still dumbfounded as they said their farewells. A thought then went through both of their minds and said it aloud.

"Is Watanabe-san… a siscon?."

"Maybe… But let’s not jump the gun here."

Both of them left the cafeteria and headed for the classroom. During their time walking, neither of them talked. When they reached the classroom, they saw Itsuki looking at them intently, almost as if his gaze was saying “*I'll get you for that”*even though he was the one who attacked them. They ignored Itsuki's gaze and headed for their seats and the next period started.

Senkyo lost his sleepiness from the shock and was able to focus on class properly. But in both Senkyo and Kinro's minds, they thought “*Wow... a real siscon... I never thought I'd actually meet one.”*

Afternoon classes passed without a hitch and school ended.

**6 – Remnants of the Past**

"Okay then, I'll head to club practice. See you tomorrow, Senkyo!"

"Yeah, see you tomorrow."

Senkyo left school and headed to a store. This was one of the few times he doesn't go straight home. He went to the store to buy new volumes of 'My Battle Against Demons and the Supernatural', the light novel that made Senkyo break his sleep schedule, and the one that he talked to Kinro about over lunch. Re-On was the author of the book that Senkyo currently had his interests on.

He bought five new volumes and excitedly exited the shop. He began his walk back home with his books in his hand. Everything that the sun touched was painted with a pale tint of orange as the sun disappeared behind the buildings around the town. There were barely any people around. It was about to get dark.

"I didn't really want to take this long, but the line was so long for some reason. I guess that's fine. I can start reading the next volume as soon as I get home!"

Just as he was hyping himself up for his upcoming reading session, a little girl ran past him. It looked like she was out shopping. She had a bag of groceries in her hand.

"Wow... Now kids this little are buying groceries? I'd be home playing games or something if I were them. Then again… if they had someone bad at cooking like my dad, I guess that would make sense."

Senkyo was thinking to himself out loud. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the child drop her money, so she tried to pick them up. But that would soon prove to be fatal as a loud honking sound could be heard immediately after she tried to pick them up. A truck was headed her way and it didn't look like it was going to stop in time.

"KID, GET OUT OF THE WAY!"

Senkyo shouted as he saw the truck heading for the child. The kid didn't move an inch and looked straight at the truck in front of her.

"Damn it...!"

Senkyo dropped his bag and ran to push the child out of the way. But there was no way he was going to make it. He was too far away. The child's demise looked so certain that bystanders shouted for him to stop. Senkyo himself wasn't sure if he was going to make it, but he continued to run for the child regardless.

The winds suddenly blew hard and leaves went flying in the air. The temperature in the area dropped at an alarming rate to the point where it felt like it was winter. Bystanders covered their eyes to avoid getting any dirt in them, but for Senkyo everything was completely different.

The sun disappeared and the sky turned to nighttime. There was no moon in the sky, but everything around him reflected a crystal-like light. It was like the brightest part of a full moon night, or maybe even brighter. It may even be more appropriate to compare it to a crystal cave you would see on the internet. Senkyo looked around and nothing was there. The truck, the girl, the bystanders, all there was left was himself and the buildings around him. Senkyo looked at himself and saw a bright light glowing in the center of his chest.

"WHOA, WHOA, WHOA, WHA... WHAT IS THIS PLACE?! AND WHAT'S WITH THIS LIGHT?!"

Senkyo was completely confused. One second he was running to save a kid, and the next it was night and almost everything around him disappeared. He looked under his shirt to see what was causing the glowing light and to add to his shock, it was coming from directly inside him.

"S-SERIOUSLY, WHAT IT THIS?!!"

Small particles of light began to appear around the space he was in. It was like the snowflakes in winter. The particles sparkled beautifully as they danced through the air. It was a surreal sight. The night was emitting a crystal-like light, accompanied by the fantastical sight of beautiful, shining stars floating around him.

"W-Wha...?! Woah..."

More and more incomprehensible things just kept happening to him and he was left speechless. He was being assailed by a mix of confusion and awe. He didn’t know what to do and stood still. Then he began to feel lightweight as if he was standing on clouds. The particles of light started to collect themselves in Senkyo's chest. His amazement was cut short and started to panic. He then heard a voice he'd never heard before, but he didn't hear it through his ears, it was coming from inside his head.

*"\*Save her...\*"*

"What?!"

"\**and live... without regret.\*"*

The light particles began to pick up their speed and his vision was soon covered in a blinding light as particles collected in his chest. Senkyo closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he saw an unbelievable sight.

The winds ceased their blowing and the temperature returned to its normal state. Leaves were still slowly falling down from the air. The bystander's eyes opened to see the truck had stopped and Senkyo was holding the little girl safely in his arms on the other side of the street from where he previously was.

"H-Huh?!"

Senkyo let his voice out of surprise. He saw as the little girl who was about to get run over was in his arms looking at him with a dumbfounded face. The girl then started crying and reflexively hugged Senkyo, seeking safety. He then patted her back to calm her down.

"T-There, there, you're safe now, see?"

The bystanders then reached for their phones and hurriedly called emergency services. Senkyo continued to comfort the girl to confirm her safety. After some time, emergency services arrived. Senkyo handed over the girl to them to check for injuries and contact her family. At first, the girl was reluctant as she continued to hug Senkyo. It seems she took a liking to him but eventually she let go and was sent back home.

**7 – Lucid Dream**

“Haaaaaaaaaahhh…... That was a tiresome day.”

Senkyo let out a big sigh as he entered his house. He lived alone so he didn’t need to announce himself. His father died a few years ago and he never met his mother.

His father was the one who raised him. He got along and his father and he would teach him things like cooking, cleaning, and the sort. His father was mostly away for work and Senkyo would take care of the house. For some reason, he felt slightly strange as he tried to recollect his past, but that must have been nothing important.

Senkyo headed straight for his room and jumped on his bed. He was still carrying his bag and the books he bought. He stayed like that for a while before he slowly rolled over. He stared blankly at his ceiling, lost in thought.

“Back then…”

He was recalling the incident earlier.

“Yeah… That was incredibly weird.”

He thought back to the time when he was in that night-time space. He remembered that he had a glowing light in the center of his chest. He looked under his uniform where the light in his chest once was. There was nothing there.

“Maybe I was imagining things…”

“…..”

“Then again, there’s also no way I could imagine a place like that.”

He was referring to the breathtaking sight that was the night-time space. He recalled the light particles that were beautifully dancing around him like the far-away stars. It was a place beyond anything he could imagine. Senkyo stood back up and headed for the kitchen.

“Whatever, if anything does happen, it’s not like I can do anything about it. I guess I’ll make a quick dinner and get ready for bed.”

He dismissed his thoughts and started making himself dinner. After a while, Senkyo went to sleep to take his mind off of the earlier events. In the middle of Senkyo’s sleep, something woke him up.

“Hmn….. H-hnnn….. Hmm…. Hm?”

Senkyo opened his eyes. His vision was fuzzy from waking up. When his vision cleared, he wasn’t in his room. He was in a forest. It was night. He couldn’t see much through the darkness. He felt his body moving even though he wasn’t trying to. His body was walking on its own. When he tried to speak, his mouth didn’t move.

*\*What is this…? Is this a dream? A lucid dream? I kind of remember having lucid dreams in the past but it’s never felt this real before. And why can’t I control myself? Well, it’s not like dreams make any sense anyway.\**

Senkyo thought of this as a lucid dream. A dream where you would be conscious and can tell what you were doing. He should have been able to control himself, but that didn’t seem to be the case. Senkyo continued to watch himself walk through the dark forest, out of curiosity about where his body was going.

*\*How the hell is my body not tripping? If this was me walking, I probably would have tripped a hundred times by now. Yep, this is definitely a dream.\**

He continued watching himself. Nothing happened for the next half hour. It was just the darkness and wilderness. But not long after, he finally saw something in front of him that was different from the earlier sights.

*\* An abandoned house?\**

In front of him was a wrecked house that looked like it would come crashing down any minute. It looked like it was an old Japanese-style house. The area around the house was spacious, there weren’t any trees a good distance from the house. Senkyo’s body entered the house and walked around like it knew where it was going.

*\* Even if this is a dream, it’s a bit scary to be here. Where am I going anyway?\**

Senkyo watched as his body maneuvered through the wrecked house. He reached a room with a large space. The holes in the walls let the moonlight illuminate the room. A katana sheathed in a black scabbard with red lines and roses decorating its length was enshrined in the center.

The katana’s red lines and roses began to glow. The closer Senkyo got to the katana, the brighter it glowed. It was like it was reacting to his presence. Senkyo saw the katana in its true beauty. Under the moonlight, the red streaks looked elegant as they covered the scabbard. The subtle glow that shimmered within the darkness, and the roses that looked alive the more Senkyo looked at it.

The katana was a prime example of a legendary item in an RPG game. The fact that it was enshrined and had the moonlight shining on it made it look all the more dramatic. Senkyo’s arms stretched out and grabbed it from its shrine. Right as Senkyo took hold of it, the red streaks stopped glowing and lost their light.

*\*Wait, wait, wait, why am I looking for a katana?! I mean… it looks cool, like really cool! But why am I dreaming about going through a forest to find some kind of legendary katana? Is this my body telling me to get good at my games already?\**

Senkyo didn’t understand why he was having such a dream. He hasn’t been playing too many games lately. Maybe it was his imagination taking over his mind or maybe it was nothing at all, but something kept bothering him. He couldn’t tell what it was.

*\*Agh… whatever, this is just a dream. I shouldn’t worry about it too much.\**

He stopped thinking about the dream and decided it was better to not pay much attention to it. His body started to walk back down the way they came. Back down the dark forest with a legendary katana in hand.

*\*I guess that’s the end of it. My body is walking back down the way it came. Maybe I should try to wake up. I don’t want to watch my body walk in the darkness anymore. Nothing interesting would probably happen.\**

Senkyo tried to wake himself up by furiously trying to move his body and thinking hard to wake up.

*\*Wake up! Wake up! WAKE UP!\**

His body then began to wobble and lose its balance.

*\*Is it working?!\**

His feet were trying their hardest to keep him up but then got caught in a stub on the ground.

*\*Wait! No! No! NOOO—\**

“—OOOOOO!!!”

His body fell to the ground with nothing to stop his fall. Then, audible screaming could be heard. Senkyo was back in his room. He fell from his bed while letting out an ear-piercing scream.

“I-I’m back…”

He checked his surroundings for anything strange. He moved to test if he could move his own body and opened the curtains to check outside. Aside from his legs slightly aching, everything was normal. He was in his bedroom in the same house in the same neighborhood.

“Haahh… I’m back. That was one weird dream. I walked into a forest to find a legendary sword. If I put it like that it really sounds like a game. I’ve never dreamt about something like that before. Maybe that’s what’s bothering me?”

Senkyo fixed himself up and headed for the door. Right as he was about to close it, in the corner of his eye, he saw something that wasn’t supposed to be there. It was a katana sheathed in a black scabbard with red roses decorating its length placed by the door. It was the same one he saw in his dream.

“Wh… WHAAAAATT?!”

He let out yet another ear-piercing scream.

“W-why is this here?! Wasn’t all that just a dream?! Are you telling me I actually walked around in the dark forest and grabbed a legendary katana?!!”

He couldn’t hide his surprise as he examined the katana in front of him.

“What do I do?! Should I just leave a dangerous weapon in my house?”

He was panicking. He was walking around his room and thinking of what to do with the dangerous weapon.

“Ah! Maybe it’s not actually a katana. It’s probably just a toy. Yeah!”

He picked up the katana. It felt heavy to him.

“M-maybe it’s a well-made toy…”

He unsheathed the katana and revealed its sharp and beautiful blade. Much like the scabbard, the katana had the same design with a red streak down the center of its blade. The sunlight from the window bounced on the blade. He touched the blade to feel whether it was real or not and felt the cold sensation of steel on his finger. After a moment of silence, he screamed again.

“ITS REAAAAAAAAAAAAALLLLLL!!!!!”

After some time thinking, he decided to hide the katana in his closet and got ready for school.

**8 – Childhood Friends**

Senkyo was walking on his way to school. He woke up early, so he wasn't going to be late for school. It was only a few minutes away from his house so he usually walked there. His body felt oddly tired and his legs felt like they were killing him.

"Why do I feel like I ran a marathon? My legs hurt so much that they feel like they're gonna fall off…"

Despite his legs hurting, he had to walk. He didn't have a bike or any other means of transportation. The school was so close that he didn't mind that, not until now.

"Yo! Senkyo, good morning!"

"Ah... Good morning, Kinro."

Kinro spotted Senkyo and greeted him. Kinro lived nearby so they both walked together to school more often than not. Having this chance to bring it up, Senkyo struck up a conversation.

"Kinro, have you ever had lucid dreams before?"

"Hm... Yeah, I had some of those before. Why?"

"Well, I had one last night, and it was the strangest dream I've had so far."

"What was it about?"

Senkyo told Kinro about his dream in detail. Kinro listened carefully to Senkyo as he told him about his dream.

"So, you were walking alone in a forest and you see an abandoned house. You went inside it, saw a katana, grabbed it, and then left. The whole time you were dreaming, you couldn't talk or control your body. Is that it?"

"Yeah."

"If you couldn’t control yourself would that even count as a lucid dream? I don't really know what to tell you, but aren't most dreams weird though?"

"Yeah, but this one felt so real!"

"Maybe it's just your imagination."

"Maybe so, but..."

Senkyo wasn't satisfied with leaving it off as “imagination”. He thought if that was the case, then why was the katana he saw in his dream now in his room. But of course, he couldn't say that. He thought it would be trouble if he told him that he had the katana they were talking about was in his room. Senkyo thought Kinro might misunderstand and think the dream was some kind of mental strategy to cover up for Senkyo joining the yakuza or something. Of course, he was overthinking it.

"Maybe you're right. Sorry to trouble you about it."

"Don't worry about it. You never know, the dream might be some kind of prophecy and later you'll find yourself in a forest at night looking for a katana."

"Are you sure you haven’t been reading too many novels, Kinro?"

“Look who’s talking.”

Senkyo and Kinro continued to chat as they headed toward their classroom. Once they reached their destination, Senkyo reached to open the door but before he could, the door opened for him. On the other side of the door, stood Yamamoto Sora and Saito Touma.

"Oh! Yukou-kun, Honjou-kun, good morning!"

Sora greeted them while Touma just stood there beside him.

"Good morning, Yamamoto-san, Saito-san."

"Yeah, good morning."

Kinro and Senkyo returned the greeting.

"Ah! I heard! Yesterday, you two got into some trouble with Watanabe-kun. Then, his little sister came and stopped him. Is that true?!"

Sora questioned them about the incident yesterday. Senkyo thought to himself if it was okay to spread it around.

*\*It looks like the news already got around. Well, it can't be helped, something like that would definitely spread like wildfire.\**

"Yeah, what about it?"

"I mean it's shocking news, isn't it?! *That* Watanabe Itsuki-kun backed down to his sister!"

\**Yeah, that part was a real surprise\**

Senkyo and Kinro internally thought.

In the middle of their conversation, Touma walked past Senkyo and Kinro. As he was walking by, he turned his head and spoke.

"If you're going to fool around, I'm going ahead."

"Ah! Wait for me!"

Sora replied in a bit of a hurry.

"Where are you two going? Class is about to start."

"Ah... something urgent came up so we have to go!"

After answering Senkyo's question, Sora hurried to catch up with Touma. After seeing them in a hurry, Kinro's curiosity was piqued.

"I wonder what was so urgent that they'd skip class."

"Maybe it's a family matter or something?"

"Are Yamamoto-san and Saito-san related?"

"All I know is that they are childhood friends."

Kinro and Senkyo put it in the back of their minds and entered the classroom. But before Senkyo entered, in the corner of his eye, he saw someone peeking from around the corner.

"Hm?"

"Is there something wrong?"

"Ah... No, it was probably nothing."

**9 – Shy Princess**

Senkyo entered the classroom, dismissing what he saw earlier as his imagination. And after a short while, class started.

It was lunch break. Senkyo took the morning classes without problems since he got a good night's sleep. But he felt tired and not at the same time. It was a strange feeling. Kinro then approached Senkyo like usual but not for the same reason of inviting him to lunch.

"Senkyo you can eat without me. I have something to do in my club."

"Oh, sure. Later then."

"See ya!"

Kinro left the classroom and soon, only a few people were left. Just as Senkyo was about to leave the classroom, someone called out to him.

"U-Um! Yukou-san! C-can I bother you for a moment...?"

The person who called out to him was Yutei Yukai. One of the most popular people in his class. Unlike Kinro, she wasn’t renowned for her gorgeous looks, but instead for her personality. She’s shy and clumsy but along with her small figure, she makes everyone around her fawn over her like she was their cute little sister. However, despite being a bit of an awkward person, she earns high grades and helps anyone who comes to her for help. Her kindness and generosity did wonders for her image and everyone began treating her better than anyone else in the class. Some even began to refer to her as the Shy Princess.

It was a bit unexpected. All the times they've ever interacted with each other was with morning greetings and class work as far as he can remember.

"Y-Yeah, what is it?"

"S-Sorry to ask this of you, but could you help me carry the class notebooks? I-I'll buy you something for lunch in exchange!"

"Um... Sure, I'll help you out, but there's no need to treat me to lunch."

"Really? Thank you!"

“…No problem.”

Senkyo and Yukai headed for the faculty. They were walking side by side and carrying the same number of notebooks. It was silent between them until Yukai called out to Senkyo

"Um, Yukou-san, are you tired? Maybe I shouldn't have bothered you after all."

*\*The popular, Yutei Yukai, is talking to me. Why is a popular person talking to me anyways! I'm not good with popular people!\**

Senkyo was nervous, but he wasn't nervous because he was talking to a girl. He was nervous because he was talking to someone popular. He has always been much more distrustful of popular people than normal people. He felt like they might be hiding their true personalities only to get more attention and become more popular. In short, he didn't trust popular people because of fake personalities.

Kinro was an exception to him because they'd been together since middle school. At first, he didn't trust him one bit, even after they talked about light novels. But as time passed by, Kinro and Senkyo kept talking and interacting with one other and came to a point where he determined Kinro isn't a bad person.

He didn't like popular people because he thought they tend to hide their true personalities which would have a bad effect on their reputation if known by the public. But once he determined that they were good people, he'd slowly begin to trust them. Senkyo was like that. As such, this was an awkward situation for him.

"H-Huh? N-No, I'm not tired at all. Why did you ask?"

"You're not? It's just that you just look like you have a hard time walking."

"Well, when I woke up, my legs were hurting for some reason."

"O-Oh no, I shouldn't have bothered you! I-I'm so sorry...!"

Yukai bowed and apologized to Senkyo. She was all flustered and she was shaking. She looked like she was somewhat scared. But that only made Senkyo confused.

"H-Huh... No, no it's fine! You don’t need to apologize. Come on, let’s get to the faculty."

Senkyo tried to move on, but Yukai didn’t let him go.

"No! I shouldn't have bothered you! H-Here! Let me carry the rest of the notebooks! I'll treat you to lunch once I get back!"

*\*Wh-What is this girl saying?! Is she trying to pretend to be nice and finish me off with food? B-but then again, no matter how you look at it, this is overboard! Why is she so insistent?!\**

"No, no! *I'll* carry the notebooks!"

"No, no! I insist! *I'll* carry the notebooks!"

Senkyo was dodging Yukai as she tried to take away the papers from Senkyo's arms. There was no one around to see this. If anyone were, they would look at them like they were watching children fighting over something.

"Hahh.... Hahhh..."

"Gah... Hahhh..."

"I-I insist...Hahh... I'll... Hahh... carry... Hahh... the papers..."

"STOP IT, WILL YOU!!"

Both Senkyo and Yukai were tired from trying to take away notebooks and dodging hands. But even though she was tired, Yukai still insisted on carrying the notebooks. Senkyo finally snapped.

"Kyaa?!"

Yukai let out a surprised squeal as Senkyo shouted at her.

"Why are you insisting so much?! Does it matter who carries it?! And what do you even get from getting me to like you?!"

Senkyo lost it and let out his inner thoughts. Yukai then backed up to the wall. She couldn't stay standing and her legs gave out. She answered Senkyo in a small and trembling voice.

"N...No... Y-you've got it wrong... I... I wasn't... trying to... make you like me...!"

Senkyo calmed down a bit after hearing her trembling voice. Looking at her again, she was cowering in fear. Her voice as well as her body was trembling and shaking. Senkyo was sharp despite his looks, when he looked at Yukai like this, it didn't look fake.

"I... I just! ...I just didn't want to trouble you... i-is all..."

Senkyo felt incredibly bad. It looked like she was forcing her to do his bidding. It was like prey and predator. Senkyo was the predator and Yukai was the prey. If anyone saw this, they'd surely get in the way and protect Yukai.

While trying to speak, under Yukai's hair, you could see a drop of liquid falling off her face. Not long after, a few more came falling down, dampening the floor. She was crying.

"N-No..! I-I'm sorry! I didn't mean to scare you! Please don't cry! I'm sorry! I'm really sorry!!"

Senkyo was convinced. She wasn't pretending. Senkyo apologized as hard as he could. He was repeating "I'm sorry!" and "Please, don't cry!" over and over while prostrating himself. He thought he was the worst person in the world.

*\*WHAT THE HELL, ME?! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?? WHY WOULD YOU MAKE A GIRL CRY?! I'M SUCH AN IDIOT!!!\**

Senkyo internally berated himself. He thought, that if he made an innocent girl cry, he would be the worst scum in the world, and here he is. He was forced to accept that the popular girl, Yutei Yukai, was a truly nice person and a scaredy-cat. He learned that the hard way.

While Senkyo was prostrating himself, Yukai spoke.

"N-no... hic... There's no need... hic... to do that... hic..."

"What do— ...What do you mean? I scared you and made you cry, didn't I? There's no way I don't need to prostrate myself...!"

Senkyo was about to raise his voice again, but he learned from his mistakes and immediately lowered his voice to calm the crying Yukai down.

"I-I'm sorry...hic... I've caused you... hic... a lot of trouble... haven't I?"

"N-no...! It was me who was causing you a lot of trouble. You were just being considerate and I took it the wrong way... *I'm* really sorry!"

"Hic... S-sorry! I need to go...!"

Yukai ran away. She left Senkyo and the notebooks. She must have been really frightened. Senkyo was left alone, with notebooks on the ground. No one was around to witness what happened.

"I-I reaaaalllyy messed up now haven't I...?"

Senkyo sat there and worried about what was going to happen to him now. After a while, he picked up the notebooks and brought them to the faculty. Once he was about to grab lunch, the chime rang and he wasn't able to eat anything.

"I guess this is punishment."

Senkyo had a few crackers in his bag but he didn't eat any of them. He thought this is the least he should get after what happened.

**10 – Spirit**

Before afternoon classes began, Yukai left for home early, saying that she wasn't feeling good. After Senkyo heard that, it felt like a truck ran over him and the pain was gripping his heart like a vice.

After classes ended, Senkyo went straight home. While he was walking, he couldn't feel the pain in his legs. The pain gripping his heart hurt a million times more. Once he got back home, the first thing he did was to head to his room and shout into a pillow as he let out his anguish.

"I'm the worst... seriously..."

"I need to make it up for her... but what do I do...? I don't know what she likes..."

Senkyo thought of various ideas to make up for what he did. Time passed by, and he finally thought of something.

"Ah! I'll make her some cookies! I'm good at making them after all."

Senkyo lived alone, so he had to be able to cook for himself to live. When he was young, his father taught him how to cook. It didn’t take long for him to be better at it than his father. And after a lot of learning, making cookies was one of the things he was good at.

"I better make these the best cookies I’ve ever made. This is definitely not enough to make up for what I did, but right now, this is the best I can do!"

After working hard making cookies, he made himself dinner and passed the time by watching anime and reading manga. Just in case he breaks his sleep schedule again he slept earlier than usual and ended the day.

*\*Hmm... Hopefully, Yutei-san likes cookies. It'll be a tragedy if she hated them or something like that.\**

While trying to sleep he thought of the cookies he made and hoped that Yukai would like them. In the middle of his sleep, something woke him up yet again. He heard wood striking wood from a distance. He opened his eyes to see that he was in a forest. It looked like it was midday. The birds could be heard chirping and the shadows of the trees made shade.

"What is this...? Is this another dream...? Oh, I can talk! What is that sound? It's coming from over there..."

"Haah! \**Krt...!\** Haah! \**Krt...!\**"

Senkyo was in another dream. It felt similar to his last dream but in this one, he could talk and move his body freely. Senkyo cautiously approached the sound of the cracking in the air. When he got closer, he could hear a voice of a little boy shouting rhythmically with every strike.

Before Senkyo’s eyes was a large open space with an old Japanese-style house in its center. It was a good distance between the house and the trees enough that even a large group could fit inside.

"This house... Isn't this the same house from my last dream?"

Yes, it was the same Japanese house from his last dream, but unlike his last dream, it was in good condition. It wasn't wrecked, the windows were fine, the walls didn't have any holes in them, and there were other people in this one too.

In the middle of the open space, a man and a boy were sparring together with wooden swords. On the porch of the house, sat a woman looking over the two people training with a happy smile. It looked to Senkyo like they were a family.

Senkyo stood in the shade of a tree watching from afar. He looked at the family with a confused look saying 'who are these people?' in his mind. He had never met these people before, but then why would they be inside his dream. As the father and son sparred, the boy took notice of Senkyo standing by a tree. They stopped sparring and the boy approached him.

"So, you came."

"Huh...? M-Me...?"

"Of course, you. Do you see anyone else standing in front of me?"

Senkyo was confused. Why is he dreaming about a family that lived in the abandoned house in his last dream? Ignoring his confusion, the boy spoke again.

"It looks like we're going to be together for a while, I hope you don't mind me intruding on you. I didn’t expect this either."

"Together for a while...? Intruding? What do you mean?"

"Oh yeah, I haven't introduced myself yet. I am Konjou Ryosei, and I seem to be some kind of spirit. I was once human but then I died in a traffic accident."

"A-A spirit, you say? What... Why is a spirit in my dreams?"

"Calm down, I'll explain what I know from the beginning."

Senkyo felt agitated, as someone in his dreams was claiming they were a spirit. It made no sense to him. Why was he having another lucid dream in a row? And why was he speaking to a boy that claims to be a spirit that died in an accident? Senkyo couldn't comprehend what was happening.

Ryosei led Senkyo to the living room of the house and told him who he was. He told Senkyo all about the fact that his family is a family of hunters of the supernatural, he told him about how he trained at a young age, but he generalized everything and didn't go too much into detail. After that, he told him about how he died, and his theory as to why he is here.

“When I died, I remember having a heavy regret that stuck in my mind to my very last second. I wished to somehow take care of that regret if I was given a chance. That is the reason why I think I became a spirit.”

"So, are you saying the regret you felt caused you to become a spirit?"

"Yes, at least that's what I think."

“Why are you so unsure?”

“That… It’s a bit complicated. But we’ll touch on that matter later. For now, how about you ask something else.”

"Then, why are you in my dream?"

"Well to clarify that, I don’t think that I'm JUST in your dream."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I'm in your body. And right now, my spirit is talking to you through your dreams."

"W-What?! You're in my body?! A-Are you trying to take my body over or something?!"

"No, why would I do that? I don’t even know how I got here. I was always trapped in *that space* and this is the first time anything like that ever happened."

"That space?"

"The place I met you. In the streets, remember? You tried to save the girl knowing you weren't going to make it, didn't you?"

"That place?! You mean you brought me to that sparkly night-time space?"

"Sparkly? Oh, there wasn’t much to see from my perspective. I had no eyes as a spirit after all"

"Then how did you see me?"

"Well when I was a spirit without a body, I could just sense things around me. Imagine seeing a black space with outlines of everything around me. That's what it felt like."

"Is that so... earlier, you said you wanted to get out of *that space*... Then if you really are some spirit that died in that area, I'm assuming you couldn't escape a certain distance?"

"You catch on quick; I like that! Yes, you're correct there was a certain distance from the place I died that I couldn't get out of. It was about a hundred meters from where I died. It was like an invisible barrier."

"Did you help save that girl?"

"I did, but I don't really know what I did though. When I saw you running for the girl, I couldn't help but try to push you to her. But when I touched you, I suddenly got sucked into your body. The next thing I knew, I could control your body so I used a bit of something to catch up to that girl. I might have strained your legs a bit in the process. Sorry about that."

“No, I don’t mind it that much. But my body pulled you in, is what you said? Is that what happens when you touch humans?"

"No, that was the first time that happened. I've touched a lot of humans of all ages and I've never got sucked into their bodies before. If I had to say, then something about you is special."

"Something about me is special? Hah, don't give me that. I'd rather stay at home watching anime or something rather than become some protagonist."

"Oh? Are you an otaku?"

"Yeah, what about it? Are you going to laugh?"

"Ku... kukuku..."

**11 – Memories and Emotions**

Ryosei started chuckling and reached for his pocket.

"HERE!"

He took two books out of thin air and slammed them down on the table. They were both manga.

"W-what?! I-impossible. T-this is 'Love and Equations!' and this other one is 'Demon King becomes a Hero!' Where did you get these?! Only a handful of people bought this, by the time they became popular they were discontinued! These were discontinued for unknown reasons, but the few who read them said they were godlike!"

"Kukuku... you see, I am an otaku myself!"

"Wh-what?! A kid like you got this?!"

"A kid...? Who are you calling a kid?"

Ryosei snapped his fingers and smoke covered his body. When the smoke disappeared, a young man replaced where he was sitting. He looked like he was the same age as Senkyo. He had black hair and eyes with the left side of his hair wrapped in a red string.

"You see, I can transform my body. This is my real form. I only looked like a child to get the full feeling when I was sparring with my father earlier."

"Y-You... How?!"

"This is a dream remember? I can make anything I want as long as I have a solid vision of it, my parents earlier were the same thing, just a manifestation of my mind."

"T-Then, these manga aren't real either?!"

"Of course not. But the fact that I can manifest these right now proves that I read them before. If you flip open the pages you can see the full content of the manga. Right now, if I wanted to look like an adult, it wouldn't work because I don't have a solid vision of myself as an adult. Meaning, as far as looks go, I can only transform myself up to this age."

"O-Ohh... Wait aren't we getting off-topic here?!"

"Oh, you're right. Excuse me. Do you have something you want to know?"

"If there is anything, I would want to know whether or not something bad will happen if you stay here."

"Hm? I already told you earlier, haven't I? As long as I stay here, I won't do anything bad. Wait no, I won't even do anything bad if I was in your body or not! I'm not an evil spirit after all. In fact, you should be even safer now that I’m here.”

"I-Is that so..."

"If you still don't believe me, then… This might work. Come here for a second."

"What... Hey!"

Ryosei came up to Senkyo and touched his forehead with his own. Senkyo was about to push Ryosei away but he didn’t budge.

“Hold still. I don’t know if this will work, but if our souls connect… just maybe.”

Senkyo was in an awkward position. He felt panicked and didn’t know what to do. But then, he felt something flowing inside him. He saw visions that he had never seen before and felt his chest being assailed by a massive flow of emotions.

"What is this... are these your memories… and emotions?"

"Exactly. I don’t think anything like this happened to anyone else before. But I guess that’s what makes you special."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"When I got sucked into your body, a flow of memories and emotions flowed into me. After experimenting a bit, I learned that we can access each other’s memories and emotions by simply expressing them. From what I gather, our souls are connected. This is why I gave you access to all my memories and emotions. So that you could trust me."

“…..”

Senkyo couldn’t believe what he was hearing. But he had no choice but to accept it. What was happening in front of him was indeed reality.

After a while, Ryosei explained to Senkyo his memories. It wasn’t like any normal high school life. No, it was a life filled with fantasy and the supernatural. From his time in his dream, Senkyo learned that bodies cannot usually house multiple souls. For reasons beyond Ryosei’s knowledge, Senkyo was an exception to the rule. From what it looked like, souls inside a single body can share their memories and emotions if they permit it and that last night’s dream of Senkyo walking around the forest was Ryosei controlling his body. Which meant that if one soul is unconscious, the other can take over. But since Senkyo could struggle against it, the owner of the body still had complete power.

With talks concerning Senkyo’s body over, Ryosei moved on to his experiences. The world was not as peaceful as Senkyo once thought. Evil spirits, ghosts, demons, yokai, and other imaginative beings truly existed. Ryosei’s family, the Konjou Clan, was a clan of hunters. They hunted the supernatural to keep the peace in the world and hide their existence from everyone uninvolved.

They used spirit power to fight against them. Spirit power is the life force of a person’s soul. Normal people cannot use their spirit power due to their lack of knowledge but hunters like the Konjou Clan used it as their tools and combat style. There are consequences if used unwisely. If a person runs out of spirit power, their soul will perish and cease to exist. In short, it meant death.

One of the uses of spirit power is for recovery. Using spirit power on the body can accelerate and enhance the body's healing properties for a short amount of time. It can even cure someone's exhaustion. Ryosei used his own spirit power to recover Senkyo from walking up and down a mountain.

Ryosei continued to teach Senkyo about the various things he knew and explained certain parts of his memories to Senkyo. After hours of talking, Ryosei said they didn't have any more time and that Senkyo was about to wake up. He told him he could talk to him even if he was awake. Senkyo could talk to him if he thought about what he wanted to say in his mind, but talking aloud was also fine.

**12 – Beginning**

"Hrm... Hmmm..."

And finally, after a long, eventful night, Senkyo had woken up.

"That was another weird dream... No... wait, that definitely happened. A spirit now lives inside my body, and I share memories and emotions with him, and now my life is like a plot for an anime... Hey, Ryosei! Are you there?"

*"\*Of course.\*"*

The voice that echoed in Senkyo's head confirmed his suspicion.

"Just to confirm; your family fights these demons and evil spirits, right?"

*"\*Yes, they do. You should know that by now; we shared memories remember?\*"*

As they talked about in the dream, Senkyo and Ryosei shared each other's memories and emotions. That meant that Senkyo also saw how Ryosei lived, trained, and fought. That includes his personal encounters with demons and evil spirits and the emotions that filled those very moments.

"Still, even though they're just shared memories, these demons look nasty."

Something important then crossed Senkyo’s mind.

"Is there a chance I might get attacked by a demon because you're inside me? It wasn't in your memories, so I don't know."

*"\*Well, that's because I also don't know. This is the first time anything like this happened as far as I know. But don't worry, just bring Kuro Yaiba with you at all times. If something does show up to attack, I’ll take over and protect you.\*"*

"How reassuring..."

Senkyo replied in a sarcastic tone. He didn’t doubt Ryosei’s fighting power or anything like that. It was just that he didn’t like the idea of fighting in general.

Kuro Yaiba, the name of Ryosei's katana, was a legendary weapon that was handed down to him. For generations, the Konjou Clan kept Kuro Yaiba hidden from the world, awaiting the day it chooses its wielder. There was a prophecy where it said the blade will choose its wielder by dropping from its pedestal, in front of the chosen one.

Ryosei's family had a tradition to bring newborn children to its resting place. His father gave it to him when he was twelve and said he was chosen by the blade when he was a baby. But this was already known to Senkyo through Ryosei's memories.

"Wait, wait, wait, that's cool and all, but I have to bring this katana around with me wherever I go?!"

*"\*Yes, it’s necessary. It would be bad if we encounter trouble with nothing to defend ourselves.\*"*

"....."

Ryosei was right. Senkyo couldn't deny the fact that he wouldn't encounter demons or spirits, even if the chances were low. He couldn't say anything back to him. The reason he couldn't deny he was right was because of Ryosei's explanation of demons and evil spirits.

Evil spirits are souls that desire vengeance and destruction. Right before they die, they release an excessive amount of negative emotions that are swallowed by them and become spirits that cause trouble wherever they were.

Demons are living beings from another world called Zerid. Unlike fantasy stories, they don't eat humans for their flesh. Demons eat souls. The demons Ryosei's family encountered were always aiming for the souls. After experimenting, this was proven when demons attacked evil spirits, and in cases where humans and animals that got attacked by demons only had bites where their souls were.

They appear in the world by going through rifts, portals that appear at random. The reason for rifts appearing is written in the history of Ryosei's family. It is said that rifts appear because Earth has a direct connection to Zerid. This means that portals to Zerid occasionally appear at random, and demons cross through them and eat souls.

"…So, you're telling me I've been living my life with a chance to get attacked by soul-eating demons from another world?"

"Yes, you and anything else that has a soul in this world. But our family and other hunters around the world usually take care of them before they make contact with other humans."

"Haahhh.... So, this is what they meant by saying there are things better left unsaid. At any rate, I better be careful with this katana; it'll be a huge mess if I get seen with this in public."

Senkyo gave in and pulled out the katana from his closet and a case from another room that was conveniently long enough to contain the katana. He got ready for school and just as he was about to leave, he ran back to the kitchen to grab the cookies he made for Yukai to apologize for yesterday's incident. He almost forgot about it because of a certain spirit and his big debut in his dream.

"What the hell is going to happen to my life now…."

Senkyo thought out loud as he recalled the recent events. The last few days his life turned into a huge mess. But he thought stressing about it too much would on l make it worse.

"Well, there's nothing I can do anymore. I just need to be careful to not get into any trouble."

*"\*Just so you know, in here you really sound like an anime protagonist. What, ending the episode already?\*"*

"I DON'T NEED YOUR OPINION!"

After shouting at Ryosei, Senkyo hurried to school with much more worries on his back than ever before.

**Chapter 2: A Cute Vampire**

**13 – Just Like Any Other Day**

It was a school day. Wednesday to be precise. It was just another normal day for these normal students of Honshou Academy. But one particular student walked on their way to school with a troubled expression. That student was Yukou Senkyo. The most noticeable thing about him today compared to other days was the fact that he was carrying a shinai bag on his shoulder together with his school bag.

*"\*I know I need to bring this to protect me from demons and stuff, but don't I stand out? I'm not even a part of the kendo club.\*"*

*"\*It'll be fine. Just make up an excuse.\*"*

*"\*Easy for you to say, you're not the one making the excuse!\*"*

Senkyo talked to Ryosei in his mind. He was worried about his current appearance. It felt like he stood out like black paint on a white canvas. As he was internally worrying, his best friend, Honjou Kinro, came to greet him.

"Yo, Senkyo! Good morning."

"Good morning, Kinro."

"Hm? What's that on your back?"

"Oh, this? I-It's... uh... It's for my friend's kendo practice! Yeah, a friend lost his shinai so he asked me if he could borrow mine."

"I see, wait, you do kendo?"

"A-Ahh... yeah, when I was little my dad taught me a bit. I stopped pretty early though."

Senkyo panicked to make up an excuse. He said the first thing that came to his mind, and that caused it to have a lot of holes as a cover-up for his actual purpose. Ryosei pointed it out to him in his mind.

*"\*That excuse won't hold well when we bring this every day.\*"*

*"\*You told me to make an excuse and this is the best I've got! I'll just say that I can't tell him the reason if I can't think of anything else!\*"*

*"\*If you say so.\*"*

Ryosei responded in a doubting tone.

"No way... I can't believe *THAT* Yukou Senkyo did kendo when he was a kid."

*\*No, I really didn't. This is my dad's bag, he always had it with him. He asked me if I wanted to train but I refused. It would be a disaster if Kinro said he wanted to see some moves! I'll get found out immediately!\**

"Y-Yeah, hahaha... surprising, isn't it?"

Senkyo and Kinro proceeded to walk to their classroom. Senkyo had a gruesome time as he tried his hardest to avoid questions about his shinai bag. Thankfully, by the end, he was able to survive his first trial.

When they arrived, Senkyo’s eyes immediately wandered to a particular seat. The person who sat in that seat was Yutei Yukai. Luckily for Senkyo, today Yukai was present. He made a beeline for her and caught her attention.

"Good morning, Yutei-san."

"Ah! G-Good morning, Yukou-san..."

Yukai was nervous. Her voice was stuttering and her eyes kept avoiding Senkyo’s gaze, but soon enough, she furiously shook her head and forced herself to lock eyes with Senkyo. She seemed to be really troubled by his presence.

"U-Um! Yutei-san... I'm sorry for yesterday!"

"E-Eh...?"

Yukai looked at Senkyo with a confused look, but Senkyo ignored that.

"I'm sorry for yesterday. I did something very rude. I know this won't be much, but I hope you can accept this as my apology!"

Senkyo handed Yukai a bag of cookies. Yukai looked at the bag, but she didn't accept them yet. Then, she panicked as she tried to get the words out of her mouth.

"N-no! This is all wrong! *I’M* sorry for yesterday! I made you carry those notebooks even though you were tired, and I even ran away and left you with them in the end! I should be apologizing!"

Yukai didn't accept Senkyo's cookies. She then hurriedly opened her bag and took something out of it. The item she took out was another bag of cookies.

"Huh?"

"I-I made cookies for you as an apology. So, please accept them!"

*\*We made the same thing?!\**

It was a coincidence. Both Senkyo and Yukai made cookies to say sorry but Senkyo knew that this wasn't the time to be amazed by coincidences and insisted Yukai to accept his cookies.

"But I was rude to you! *I’M* the one that needs to apologize! So, please accept *MY* cookies!"

"No, I caused you trouble so *I’M* the one that needs to apologize! So, please accept *MY* cookies!"

Both of them wanted the other to take their cookies. The other students looked at them, some confused, some annoyed, and some who just wanted to watch them. Then, someone came up to the two to resolve the problem. It was Kinro.

"Now, now, calm down. I don't know what happened between the two of you, but how about both of you just accept the other's cookies to get this over with?"

"But!"

Senkyo and Yukai were both opposed to the idea. They wanted to apologize to the other but they were also conflicted about accepting the other’s apology. In their mind, they thought that accepting the other’s apology would reduce the value of their apology. Kinro was slightly annoyed by how difficult they were being. After a long talk, Kinro finally convinced the two. Senkyo and Yukai returned to their seats with the other’s bag of cookies in their hands. No doubt, rumors were made by the students who witnessed the situation.

Morning classes started. Senkyo was listening to the teacher in front. Despite breaking his sleep schedule, he was able to properly listen to class since he asked Ryosei to recover his energy. His right hand was flipping his pen as he listened. Senkyo then heard a voice in his head. It was Ryosei.

*"\*Hey, Senkyo, that girl earlier, her name is Yutei Yukai, right?\*"*

*"\*Yeah. What about her?\*"*

*"\*...Nothing, it might be my imagination.\*"*

Senkyo didn't understand why Ryosei asked about her, but he felt his emotions. He felt a gush of curiosity with a hint of sadness and guilt. That was when he was reminded, that there really was another soul living inside him. After the quick thought, Senkyo returned to listening in class.

**14 – Overprotective Brother**

Classes finally ended; it was lunch break. Senkyo and Kinro headed for the cafeteria like they usually do. They sat together, but they weren’t eating. Kinro was staring at Senkyo with a prying look.

"Well Senkyo, what was earlier all about?"

"Ah... t-that's... Haahhh... I guess it's only fair that you know."

Senkyo thought about making up an excuse, but it would've been unfair to Kinro who resolved the earlier conflict. Having no other choice, Senkyo told Kinro about everything that happened to them yesterday. And as a result…

"S-Senkyo... I never thought you'd be so mean!"

"I told you, didn't I?! I really felt bad afterward! It's not like I wanted to make her cry!"

“But you made her cry nonetheless. You even made her feel like she was in the wrong! How horrible!”

Kinro said in an exaggerated tone. Senkyo knew he was just teasing him, but it didn’t take out the fact that it was the truth. As he was receiving a one-sided attack from Kinro, a familiar voice called out to them.

"Ah! Senpai! Nice seeing you here!"

"Ah, umm… Ichika-san. Great timing! Here, want to sit with us?"

Watanabe Ichika came by with her food in her hands, seizing the opportunity, Senkyo offered her to sit with them and changed the topic completely. Kinro didn’t further pursue the topic and let Senkyo go, but not before he giggled gloatingly. It annoyed Senkyo slightly.

There was another person with Ichika, she didn't speak, but Senkyo and Kinro thought she was a shy type so they waited for her to introduce themselves instead of putting her on the spot. Ichika gladly accepted Senkyo’s offer and sat with them.

"Ah... Thank you! Excuse us."

Ichika sat with them, and her friend followed. Then, something crossed Senkyo's mind.

"Oh yeah! Come to think of it, we haven't properly introduced ourselves yet. I'm Yukou Senkyo, 2nd-year high school. I'm classmates with your brother but I'm sure you already know. I hope we can be good friends."

"And I am Honjou Kinro, 2nd-year high school. I'm in the same class as Senkyo and Watanabe-san. Nice to meet you."

"Ah... then let me reintroduce myself. I'm Watanabe Ichika, 1st-year high school. You can call me whatever you want, no need to hesitate.”

“Oh, ok. Got it.”

It seemed like she caught onto Senkyo’s hesitation on what to call her. Since she had the same last name as Itsuki, it would be confusing to refer to them by the same name.

“It’s nice meeting both of you. This is my friend..."

"I am Hisho Yuu, 1st-year high school. Ichika-chan's classmate. Nice to meet you too."

Ichika's friend, Hisho Yuu, had light crimson hair that reaches past her waist. Her eyes were the same color as her hair. She had a slender figure and was wearing a blue jacket over her uniform.

After the introductions, they chatted as they ate their lunch. One of the things Ichika talked about was his brother, Watanabe Itsuki. To Senkyo and Kinro, it looked like Ichika was as overprotective of her brother. Yuu didn't speak much, but Senkyo did notice that she was staring at him a lot. It made him worry if he said anything rude. They finished eating, said goodbyes, and headed to their respective classrooms.

Upon reaching the classroom, someone confronted both of them. It was Itsuki.

"WHAT DID YOU DO WITH MY SISTER?!"

He gripped the hem of Senkyo's blazer and readied his other fist to punch him. Senkyo was confused about what was happening. Itsuki’s shout was loud enough to catch the attention of all the students in the classroom and the others outside the hallway.

"Wh-What do you mean?!"

"YOU SAT WITH MY SISTER AT LUNCH! I SAW EVERY SECOND BUT I COULDN'T HEAR YOU! I SWEAR IF YOU SAID ANYTHING TO CREEP HER OUT, I'LL BEAT YOU INTO A PULP!!"

It was clear to Senkyo now. Ichika wasn’t the only one overprotective about her sibling, it went both ways. However, Itsuki’s overprotectiveness meant violence. That wasn’t good for Senkyo.

Apparently, when Itsuki went to the cafeteria to eat lunch, he saw Ichika sitting with Senkyo and Kinro. He hid reflexively and spied on them. When they were about to return to class, Itsuki ran to the classroom and waited for Senkyo and Kinro to return and ambush them.

*\*Aren’t you just a plain stalker?!\**

"I-I didn't say anything weird! I swear!"

"LIKE HELL I'D BELIEVE YOU!"

"THEN WHY DID YOU BOTHER ASKING ME ABOUT IT?!"

"SO THAT I CAN BEAT YOU INTO A PULP RIGHT NOW IF YOU CONFESS!!"

*\*WHAT IS WRONG WITH THIS GUY?!\**

Senkyo couldn’t help but retort. Itsuki continued to grip Senkyo’s shirt. He wouldn't let it go without being satisfied. Kinro tried to defuse the situation. It wasn’t going to be easy, but he did it without a single thought.

"Stop it, Watanabe-san. Let go of Senkyo!"

"WHY THE HELL SHOULD I?!"

"Because if you don't, your sister would know about it! If you beat him up now, and learn that Senkyo did nothing wrong, your sister wouldn’t be so happy with you. You don't want, would you?"

"WHY YOU... TCH...! You got lucky punk."

Itsuki finally let go of Senkyo, but he still wasn't satisfied. He took a stand in front of the classroom and stared at the whole class. He slammed the desk and said the following words with conviction.

"LISTEN HERE, YOU FOOLS! IF I EVER SEE OR GET WORD THAT YOU HURT OR DID ANYTHING WEIRD TO MY SISTER, I SWEAR, I WILL COME AFTER YOU AND BEAT YOU TO A PULP OR EVEN WORSE!"

With that, Itsuki went back to his seat and pretended as if nothing happened. The whole class was completely frightened and avoided eye contact with Itsuki. Friends chatted with each other right after the Itsuki’s huge threat.

"W-Wow... What the hell was that about."

"I think Yukou-san did something again and got Itsuki angry."

"That thing about his little sister, right? I heard something like that happen in the cafeteria the other day!"

"Yukou-san was there too, wasn't he?!"

"Whoa! So, this is Yukou-san's fault after all!"

“I guess he’s just a filthy womanizer going for anyone.”

“Yeah, earlier before class, he had some kind of fight with Yutei-san.”

“Seriously? That’s so messed up!”

Rumors started to spread like wildfire. And almost immediately, Senkyo's social status plummet to the depths. No one wanted to be on Itsuki's hit list. Because of that, the other students wanted to pin the earlier threat on someone, and unfortunately for Senkyo, he was the perfect candidate. But there were a select few who interpreted the message better than others did.

One of them was a small group of three girls. It was the group of Suzuki Himari, Ito Sara, and Sato Aoi.

"Uwaa~ I knew that otaku was just trouble! He’s a womanizer and a creep!"

“I don’t know about that, Himacchi. It sounded like an overprotective brother to me.”

"What? But it was clear earlier wasn't it? And what makes you say that otaku didn't do anything wrong?"

Sara was the first one to voice her doubts about how most people interpreted it. But she didn't prove to be enough, so Aoi followed up with Sara.

"I think Sara-san is right, Himari-san. I saw Yukou-san and Honjou-san talking to two girls. The one with the blonde hair must've been her sister. I heard a bit of their conversation, but it was normal to me. And do you really think Honjou-san would go along hitting anyone out there?"

"U-Unnnn~... So, that otaku isn't doing anything wrong?"

"I think so..."

"Yeah!"

“And that gorilla was mad about nothing because he’s overprotective? This is confusing…”

With Aoi and Sara giving their own opinions, they were able to convince Himari. They straightened out her misunderstanding. Seeing as Himari was easily convinced, she must've really trusted Aoi and Sara.

But they weren't the only ones to properly interpret the message. A group of two male students heard the earlier group's discussion and praised them for not following the other assumptions.

"Oh? So, not everyone in this class is close-minded after all. You heard that didn't you Touma-kun?"

The two students were Yamamoto Sora and Saito Touma. They watched as Itsuki and Senkyo’s conflict unfolded before them.

"I don't care."

"The same as usual, huh? Still, it looks like Yukou-kun is going to have it hard from now on."

A large number of rumors were already made and spread before the afternoon classes finally started. While in class, Senkyo noticed a few glares from other classmates while he was listening, but he ignored those and focused on the lesson.

**15 – Crimson Bat**

After class, Kinro made a beeline to Senkyo and talked to him.

"Senkyo, rumors about you are spreading like wildfire!"

"Yeah, I noticed. The glares and constant chattering made it obvious."

"But it’s strange. I’ve heard a bunch of rumors about you, but nothing about me."

Senkyo was well aware of the rumors about him. But when he heard that Kinro didn't have any rumors about him, he immediately knew the reason.

*"\*That’s unfair! He has a popularity barrier!\*"*

"Yeah… Well, it's probably better to keep it that way. I'll be heading home now so nothing big will probably happen until tomorrow."

"I suppose you're right, but still, be careful."

"Sure, sure."

Senkyo took his bag and headed for home. But before he could get out of school, he saw someone waving at him in front of the school gate. The person waving was Watanabe Ichika, and the person standing next to her was her friend that was with them at lunch, Hisho Yuu.

"Oh, Ichika-san, do you want something from me?"

"Yukou-senpai, I'm so sorry about my brother! I’ll be sure to do something about this! If there is any way I can apologize, I’ll do it!"

Ichika suddenly apologized and repeatedly bowed at Senkyo. But it was so sudden. He didn't expect to have someone apologizing to him on his way home.

"What are you apologizing for?"

"Earlier, I heard that my brother did something suuupper embarrassing, and it's causing you a lot of trouble! I'm really, really sorry about him!"

"It's already spread that far?!"

*\*Didn’t school JUST end!?\**

"I heard it from Yuu-chan. She said that my brother caused a ruckus about me. Because of it, bad rumors about you spread. I'm really sorry!"

The rumors already spread to other year levels. Almost everyone knew about what happened earlier, including Ichika. When she first heard of it from Yuu, she went mad. Her brother made another mess.

She immediately decided to wait in front of the school gate once classes ended. She didn't know if Senkyo was a part of a club or if he went straight home after class. She thought to be safe, she would wait at the front gate right after class. And so that she wouldn't wait alone, Yuu came with her to wait.

"There's no need to apologize, you didn't do anything wrong."

"No, I'm supposed to take care of my brother! If he does something stupid, I have to fix it so nothing bad happens! I know he can be troublesome and a loose cannon, but he’s a really nice person when it matters!"

*\*I'm starting to think she's more like a mother than a little sister...\**

"Please, if there's anything I can do for you to make up for it, tell me!"

"No need to go that far. Nothing bad happened to me, alright? If anything happens, I'll call you for help."

"But I don't think you'll do that!"

"Huh? What makes you say so?"

"You just seem so nice! You aren't getting angry at me even though I was somewhat involved in what happened. It's easy to see you not calling for my help if you're in trouble!"

"W-Well..."

"See! You stuttered!"

*\*She's sharp! Of course, I won't! My pride will be broken into pieces if I asked my underclassman to protect me from bad rumors!\**

"Well, I guess I can't really make you. But, please remember that you can ask me for anything. I'll try to have this problem solved as fast as I can."

Ichika ran off into the distance. It seems she was hurrying home to talk to her brother. But in front of Senkyo, there was still someone staring at him. It was Yuu. She was staring at Senkyo as if observing him. She bowed to Senkyo and quietly walked away. Senkyo still stood there, staring at her slowly walking away.

"Hmm... I never really talked to Hisho-chan that much. I guess she's just a quiet person."

After another long day, Senkyo finally headed home. Later that day, Itsuki would be sitting in a seiza, while being thoroughly lectured by his little sister. Utterly powerless to do anything.

**…………**

"Whoa! I knew this was an interesting light novel!"

Senkyo was in his room reading a light novel. It was 'My Battle Against Demons and the Supernatural.' He was relaxing in his room after a long day.

"Hahh... nothing beats relaxing."

Ryosei talked to Senkyo as he had nothing to do. In his life, he had only watched anime and read manga. He heard about light novels, but he didn't check them out. So, he was somewhat curious.

*"\*Light novels huh? I'm more of a manga person myself.\*"*

"You said you were an otaku when you were alive right? What kind of otaku were you?"

*"\*Your typical. I watch anime and read manga, but I never tried reading novels.\*"*

"Is that so... Would you like to read some?"

*"\*No, not today anyway. Ahh! That reminds me! Is Magical Girl Kawaii-chan still running?!\*"*

"Magical Girl Kawaii-chan...? That one finished three years ago..."

*"\*T-THREE YEARS AGO?! NNNOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!\*"*

"JEEZ, CALM DOWN! You're hurting my head!"

*"\*I promised her I'll stay with her until the end but I died too early!!\*"*

The topic of anime reminded Ryosei of what he left behind when he died. But when he heard the unfortunate news that his favorite anime already finished without him seeing it through to the end, he despaired.

His voice was echoing through Senkyo's brain. So much that he almost got knocked out by it. It looked like his soul was leaving through his mouth. A few minutes later, Ryosei's cries came to a stop and his voice turned serious.

*"\*Senkyo, did you hear that?\*"*

"All I heard were cries of pain... and my soul being broken by it…"

*"\*Be serious now. I heard something from the closet.\*"*

"From the closet...? The only things in there are my clothes and stuff."

*"\*Just grab Kuro Yaiba and check it!\*"*

"Fine, fine, I'll go and check."

Ryosei sounded incredibly serious. He sent Senkyo to investigate his closet. As a result, Senkyo also turned serious. He knew what demons and evil spirits looked like from Ryosei's memories, creatures with hell-red skin for demons and creatures that come in all shapes in sizes but are generally dark in color for evil spirits. He took out Kuro Yaiba from its bag beside him and slowly approached the closet. Senkyo opened the closet with the tip of its blade but before Senkyo could even react, something came flying out of it.

"AAH!!"

Senkyo let out a scream as what came flying out freaked him out. He took a few steps back and tried to catch whatever came out of his closet with his eyes and saw the most unexpected thing he could've imagined. It was a bat.

A small bat was flying inside Senkyo's room. It had strange light crimson fur and black wings. It was wildly flying around the room. It was trying to escape. This bat looked like it knew what it was doing.

The bat went near the windows and tried to get past the blinds. Ryosei immediately took notice of this and ordered Senkyo.

*"\*Senkyo! Don't let that bat escape capture it!\*"*

"C-Capture it?! Why?! I don't want to go near it! It might bite me!"

*"\*Stop complaining and do it!\*"*

"But...!"

*"\*Fine! I'll do it myself!\*"*

Senkyo lost control of his body and it started moving on its own. Ryosei took over his body. He immediately blocked the windows and kept the bat away from it. He then chased the bat around and tried to catch it with his bare hands, but the bat kept dodging Ryosei's hands and flew around the room.

After a long game of cat and mouse, or more appropriately human and bat, Ryosei finally caught the bat. Once he got his hands on it, he ran straight to the kitchen to look for something to trap the bat in, but all he could find was a big jar.

**16 – Talismans**

"Okay, what's so special about this bat that you wanted it trapped?"

Senkyo regained control of his body. He was currently sitting in the living room. He was sitting on the sofa with a bat sealed in a jar on top of the coffee table. Ryosei put small breathing holes in the cap so that the bat could breathe. The holes were big enough to sustain oxygen for the bat but small enough to keep it from escaping.

*"\*You should've seen it in one of my memories, this bat right here is a vampire.\*"*

"What?! Th-This bat right here? It's true I saw it in one of your memories, but weren’t those only a myth?"

*“\*That’s what my father told me, but this bat fits a vampire’s description perfectly. Besides, do you really think any bat from earth would have this kind of fur? This is all just a hunch, but if I’m correct, then we can interrogate it for some answers.\*”*

"Ah... you're right, my bad."

Vampires were said to be beings that live in Zerid, where demons come from. However, they are not considered demons. They live off the blood of other beings, meaning they don't have to drink human blood to survive. They were beings that were in stories that were told to kids while they were young. They had incredible skill and the ability to mask their presence. It was said that they could hide in a crowd of humans without getting detected by the best hunters in the clan.

"But what is a vampire doing in my closet? Was it going to suck my blood in my sleep?!"

*"\*That would be the likely assumption... Let me borrow your body for a bit.\*"*

Ryosei scrutinized the bat. The bat was just staring at Ryosei. It had its wings covering its body, and it didn't move an inch.

"You, why were you in the closet?"

The bat didn't speak or move.

"We know you're a vampire. There's no need to hide it now."

The bat's ears twitched at Ryosei's words, but it still refused to speak.

"Are you trying to hide your presence again? I told you it's useless! You let your presence leek out for too long."

Of course, it was a bluff. Like other hunters, Ryosei didn’t have the skill to sense the presences of beings he wasn’t familiar with. Maybe knowing that not a word or movement came from the bat. It was set on staying silent.

"Senkyo, we're going to have to keep this bat here until we know what it wants."

*"\*What?! But why?! I don't want a vampire in my house! What if it somehow gets out of that jar and attacks us in our sleep?!\*"*

"Don't worry, I'll put up a barrier around it so it won't escape."

*"\*Oh yeah, you can make those.\*"*

Barriers Talismans are tools made by Ryosei's family. A common tool that is widely used for defense and confinement. The one who cast the barrier can freely choose who can and cannot enter the barrier.

Talismans are vessels with an applied property. Vessels are objects that have spirit power applied to them. Symbols are then written onto the vessel as a basic order to the object. There are nine basic symbols used that pronounce connection, discord, direction, interaction, domination, inferiority, equality, repetition, and spirit.

As such, a simple barrier talisman can be made by writing the symbol for connection and spirit on any vessel. If someone wanted it to be stronger, the caster can pour more spirit power into the talisman. Some talismans can be strengthened if connected with other talismans. Barrier talismans are one of those. However, if even a single talisman is severed from the connection, the entire barrier dissipates.

*"\*If that's the case, then can I make barriers too?\*"*

"Normal humans cannot channel their spirit power. Our family has a special type of training to control spirit power. But since you have my memories, there's no harm in trying. There's a faster and easier way to do it but that needs practice so for now, we'll do it by hand."

Ryosei went off to get a pen and four pieces of paper. He returned to his seat and gave Senkyo's body to him and instructed him.

"Should I just look back to one of your memories to do this?"

*"\*No, it would be better if I instructed you as you do it. You might get confused trying to look through my memories and creating them for the first time. For now, just use it for reference.\*"*

Senkyo knew how to do it from Ryosei's memories. But Ryosei thought it would be better to instruct him to avoid confusion.

*"\*First, we start off by creating a vessel. Pick up a piece of paper and hold it firmly.\*"*

Senkyo did as he was instructed.

*"\*Now, close your eyes and focus your senses on the piece of paper.\*"*

It was a weird sensation. He felt like he was some kind of chuunibyou but he ignored that.

*"\*Good, relax your heart and imagine the paper as an extension of your body. Imagine your spirit power flowing into the paper.\*"*

He felt as if needles poked his fingers. It didn’t hurt, but it was enough for Senkyo to notice it. At the same time, Ryosei spoke to inform him that it was finished.

*"\*Okay, it's done now.\*"*

Senkyo slowly opened his eyes and looked at the paper, but nothing changed.

"I guess it wouldn’t be that easy, huh..."

Senkyo said in a slightly depressed tone. Senkyo failed… or at least that's what he thought.

*"\*No, look closer.\*"*

Senkyo peered at the paper. It was then that he saw small light blue ripples flowing through the paper. It was so thin that it could barely be detected by the naked eye. Since blue ripples didn’t usually appear on paper, it only meant one thing.

"I-I did it...!"

Senkyo succeeded. His eyes widened as he stared at the piece of paper with overwhelming joy. But then he was cut off by Ryosei.

*“\*Not yet, you’ve only made a vessel. Now, move on to writing the symbol for a barrier on the vessel.\*”*

“Oh yeah, you’re right.”

Senkyo took the pen and drew a symbol. The symbol for connection: a circle, and the symbol for spirit: a half-moon arc with a diamond in the center, was placed in the middle of the circle. It was only then that he successfully made a barrier talisman. As an advance lesson, Ryosei told Senkyo to strengthen the talisman. He picked up the talisman and poured his spirit power into it, and surprisingly, the talisman was reinforced with ease. It was much easier than creating a talisman and he was able to do it in no time at all.

He was then able to create a barrier talisman with enhanced strength. Senkyo was elated, but something was a bit strange to him, so voiced it out.

"Wait, didn't you say you need special training to do that?"

*"\*Usually you do, but since you knew how to do it from my memories, I just needed to connect your spirit power to your mind. Since I’m another spirit inside of you, I was able to do that. Normally something like this is impossible.\*"*

"Oh, so you helped me..."

Senkyo was a little disappointed when he heard that. He thought he was able to do something amazing by himself on the first try. Ryosei noticed this and cheered him up.

*"\*Don't worry if we practice on this, I'm sure you'll be able to do it by yourself in no time. You'll have me instructing you so you'll be fine!\*"*

With the help of Ryosei, Senkyo successfully created four barrier talismans. Senkyo wasn’t as happy as he would have been if he did it alone, but he was happy that he made the talismans nonetheless.

"With this, the bat can't get out of this area even if it gets out of the jar, right?"

*"\*That's right.\*"*

**17 – Visitor**

Senkyo placed the four barrier talismans around the jar where the bat was. Looking at it from a normal person's perspective, it looks like a kid just captured a bat and played with it by pretending it was some kind of sealed beast. Senkyo sat back on the sofa as if just finishing a hard day of work.

"Man, I'm probably going to have crazier experiences than sealing a vampire, huh? Thinking about that makes my brain hurt. I mean, I think sealing a vampire is crazy enough."

Senkyo voiced his thoughts and Ryosei asked him a question.

*\*"Well... do you hate this?\*"*

Senkyo stopped and thought about it for a bit. And after some silence he replied.

"I... can't really say I hate this. While it has been trouble since I met you, even if I tell myself that I'll probably die sooner if I stay with you, I still can't say I hate it."

Senkyo voiced his own perspective of their situation. Ryosei was a bit surprised at his response. He thought normal people wouldn't want to come close to danger, but he knew Senkyo was telling the truth. Their souls were connected so they couldn't lie to each other. After a time of silence, Ryosei let out a hearty laugh.

*"\*Hahahahaha! What are you? Some anime protagonist? Hahahaha!\*"*

Senkyo thought about what he said and cringed a bit. He quickly tried to deny Ryosei.

"N-no! It's not like that! I just answered your question! You were the one who was being all emotional and asking 'Do you hate this?'"

*"\*No! I'm not the one being emotional! In the first place, you were the one who was complaining about crazy experiences!\*"*

For a while, their fight would continue. The other trying to win against the other. But as they were fighting, the bat suddenly went crazy and was trying to get out of the jar. Ryosei and Senkyo noticed this and they immediately stopped their fight. Senkyo was the first to speak.

"Why is it suddenly going crazy?"

*"\*I don't know either...\*"*

"Maybe it realized it couldn't get out or something?"

*"\*I don't think that's it.\*"*

The bat looked incredibly panicked. It moved all around the jar flapping its wings and scratching the jar. Realizing it was futile, the bat spoke.

"Get me out of here right now!"

"A girl's voice?!"

*"\*A girl's voice?!\*"*

It was a female voice. It had a panicked tone when it said that. Both Senkyo and Ryosei were surprised about it because some outside factor affected their judgment and passed the bat off as a guy.

"What about it?! Just hurry up and get me out of here already! *One of them*is coming straight for us!"

The bat's words caused them to put their surprise in the back of their head and Senkyo questioned the bat.

"Who's *them?*"

"That's not important right now! I need to get away from here! And you should too!"

The bat was referring to someone who even Ryosei didn't know. Senkyo immediately analyzed what the bat said and came to a conclusion.

"Is something dangerous coming for you? Are you being hunted?"

"Yes! Now just let me out of here before it catches both of us!"

Senkyo didn't know what to do. He turned to ask Ryosei but before they could even prepare themselves, everything around them emitted crystal-like lights. The windows showed that the blue, sunny sky turned into a cold night. Small particles of light were floating in the air. The only ones that had the same appearance as before were Senkyo and the bat.

"Th-This is... that night-time space!"

"It's already here..."

A recent memory that had the same environment as this flashed itself in Senkyo's mind. It was the space where Ryosei got sucked into Senkyo's body. As Senkyo was being reminded of that time, the bat prepared itself as whatever was coming for it was already here.

The door to Senkyo's house exploded inwards. Pieces of wood could be seen from inside the living room and the sound of the door getting destroyed was as audible as if it were right in front of them.

Everyone in the living room stayed silent. Senkyo had already switched with Ryosei since they knew it was going to be trouble for Ryosei if they tried to switch at the last second. He unsheathed Kuro Yaiba and assumed a battle stance.

Loud footsteps resounded throughout the quiet room and only got louder as the source of the footsteps got closer. And finally, from the living room could be seen a wolf-like humanoid. It was standing on two feet, had tattered clothes, brown and black fur, and a beastly face.

"A-A werewolf?!!"

*"\*Wh-What?! Those things exist?!\*"*

"N-No... This is the first time I've ever seen one. I also never heard of a werewolf appearing from my family's stories."

Ryosei and Senkyo were confused, especially Ryosei. He had never heard of other beasts or supernatural beings besides demons and evil spirits in his whole life. Senkyo was at the point where he can somewhat accept things like this now. But no matter how much he could accept that fact, it did not stop both of them from feeling the fear run down their spine.

The werewolf came closer to where Ryosei and the bat were. The werewolf noticed him and spoke like a hungry beast.

"You...rrragh! What are you doing here...ggrrraawh...!?"

It pointed its razor-sharp claws at Ryosei. He cautiously observed the beast and returned its question with another one.

"I can say the same thing. What are you?"

"Grrr... I don't need to answer a question of a foolish human! Raagh!"

The werewolf's eyes wandered away from Ryosei and saw the trapped bat on the table.

"Awoooo!! I finally found you!"

The werewolf howled as if celebrating. It quickly leaped to grab the bat in the jar but was interrupted. A blade swung towards it and was forced to back off. When the werewolf turned to see what it was, it saw Ryosei standing firm with his blade out.

"GRRRAGH!! Don't get in my way human! I'm not interested in you!"

"I won't let you. My instincts are telling me to keep that bat away from you."

"GRAHAHAHAHAHAHA!! FINE! IF YOU WANT TO DIE THAT BADLY THEN I'LL KILL YOU FIRST!"

**18 – First Battle**

The werewolf took another leap, but this time it was aiming for Ryosei. Despite his fear and confusion, he killed those emotions, calmly dodged its attack, and slashed its back. However, the wound Ryosei inflicted on it disappeared like it never got the wound in the first place.

"What the?!"

Ryosei shouted in surprise, but the werewolf had already leaped for him again. The werewolf stopped in front of Ryosei and swung at him with a series of claw attacks. Ryosei was on the defensive. All he could do was block the werewolf's attacks. Ryosei backed up and collected himself.

"GRAHAHAHA! You can keep up with my attacks? Good, it wouldn't be fun if you died so easily! GRRRAAAHH!"

The living room was turned into a mess. The sofas and other furniture were all over the place. Ryosei kicked the nearby sofa away from him to create some space.

Ryosei didn't move from his spot. He sheathed his blade and fixed his form. The werewolf leaped at him again. Before the werewolf got within reach of his blade, Ryosei already swung it. The werewolf thought it was all over for Ryosei, but a sharp gust of wind cut off one of the werewolf's arms.

The werewolf was thrown into a panic and lost its balance. Ryosei took advantage of this and slashed its other arm off. The werewolf used its remaining two legs to get away from Ryosei.

"RRAAAGGH!! THAT MOVE...! A HUNTER OF THE KONJOU CLAN!!"

The werewolf's eyes turned even more beastly as it stared at Ryosei. It was filled with bloodlust. Ryosei didn't want to lose this chance, so he moved to strike the werewolf while it was still weakened.

"HAAA!!"

But when he swung, it was gone. His blade struck the air. He hurried to turn around, but it was too late. The werewolf was behind him. It jumped so fast that Ryosei's eyes couldn't follow it.

The werewolf used its remaining limbs and kicked Ryosei to the wall. He bounced off it and the werewolf followed it up with another kick. It kept kicking Ryosei off the walls and into other walls or furniture until its arms regenerated. It kicked Ryosei to the middle of the room, to the table the bat was placed on. The table got destroyed and so did the barrier.

The jar fell to the ground and broke, releasing the caged bat. Ryosei was lying on the ground trying to get back to stance. He was beaten up really badly from the combo attack the werewolf did. His clothes were a mess and he had blood and bruises throughout his whole body. Senkyo's voice resounded in his head and got his attention.

*"\*Ryosei...! Look over there! The bat!\*"*

Ryosei got back up and looked over in the direction where the bat was. When he looked over, he saw the werewolf gripping the bat tightly and the bat was struggling to get out.

"AWOOOO!! FINALLY, I CAN RETURN YOU TO THE BOSS, AND HE'LL PRAISE ME SO MUCH... THAT I'LL BECOME HIS RIGHT-HAND MAN WHEN HE TAKES OVER THE THREE WORLDS! GRAHAHAHAHA!!"

"N-No...! Let me go...! Get... away from me...!"

"GRRR... YOU'RE A SO ANNOYING! STAY STILL!"

"I said let me go...!"

"GRRAAH! I'LL JUST SUCK OUT YOUR MANA THEN!"

The werewolf opened its jaw wide, and blue waves of light were coming out of the bat and into the werewolf's mouth. Once it was done, it threw the bat to the corner of the room and looked over to Ryosei.

"THAT SHOULD KEEP HER STILL FOR A WHILE... NOW...! LET'S CONTINUE WHERE WE LEFT OFF! GRAWW!!"

"Tch...!"

The werewolf resumed its attacks. Its sharp claws were clashing with Ryosei's blade. The werewolf's attacks were grazing Ryosei and leaving shallow wounds. Ryosei would counter-attack when the werewolf left openings, but it would just regenerate its wounds like they were never inflicted on it.

It was an intense battle. The werewolf fought with brute force, with no care for the small wounds it was receiving, knowing that it would regenerate the next second. Its bloodlust eyes would stare at Ryosei as they fought, increasing its pressure and raising alarms to Ryosei's danger senses.

But Ryosei wouldn't fall short. He blocked and dodge its strikes until he had gotten used to them with Senkyo’s body. And taking advantage of the beastly attacks of the werewolf, counter-attacking every opening he saw, while keeping his own defenses tight.

"GAHAHAHA!! THIS IS EXCITING BOY! YOU'RE ACTUALLY KEEPING UP WITH ME! COME ON SHOW ME MORE OF YOUR SKILLS!!"

"This is so annoying...!"

*"\*Ryosei! Something was shining on the back of its neck! I think it might be its weak point!\*"*

Senkyo pointed out that he saw a weak spot while Ryosei was focusing on fighting. He covered for Ryosei who didn't notice it. Senkyo wasn't fighting, so he helped by paying attention and looking for ways to beat it. But Ryosei wanted to make sure it wasn't Senkyo's imagination that led him to see a false weak spot.

*"\*Are you sure there was something there?\*"*

*"\*Yeah! I'm sure of it!\*"*

*"I guess it's better than going off nothing! I'm trusting you!"*

Ryosei never noticed a weak spot when they were fighting, but he passed it on as his own incompetence from being rusty and trusted Senkyo.

Ryosei assumed a different stance than he was taking in the last other clashes. The werewolf prepared to leap again, but this time Ryosei had a target; the back of his neck. Ryosei quickly turned away from the werewolf and ran.

"YOU'RE RUNNING AWAY?! GRAHAHAHAHA! COWER IN FEAR!! I'LL BE SURE TO RIP YOUR BODY TO PIECES ONCE I'M DONE WITH YOU!"

The werewolf leaped at Ryosei for the finishing move. Ryosei reached a wall, but he didn't stop. He jumped on the wall, twisted his body, and jumped over the leaping werewolf.

"WHAT?!!"

It let its guard down. It thought Ryosei had given up and ran to save his own life. When it saw him run away, it clicked its predatory senses and went for an all-out attack, leaping at Ryosei. This course of action would lead to its defeat. The werewolf was in midair, and it didn’t matter how fast it actually was, it couldn't move while it was airborne. It relied on good footing to do anything.

The werewolf was a sitting duck. It knew that it messed up, and there was no going back. It was going to die.

It was there. Ryosei saw a green gem embedded in its nape. He took a stance that allowed him to attack in midair. He saw his target and slashed it with his blade. He slid through the floor as he landed.

When he returned his gaze to the werewolf, it had its head cut off from the rest of its body, and the green gem that shined on its nape was broken to bits. The werewolf didn't show any signs of recovering.

Ryosei slowly approached the werewolf. He had his blade ready to attack just in case the werewolf regenerated or if its body moved without its head. Right now, Ryosei didn't want to take any chances and closed in with a defensive stance.

The werewolf's body and its head slowly disintegrated into ash and disappeared into the air. With that, Ryosei sheathed back Kuro Yaiba, and slumped to the ground, all burned-out. He had wounds, scratches, blood, and bruises throughout his whole body. His indoor clothes were all torn apart and ragged. There were small drops of blood on the floor.

**19 – Body Compatibility**

"HAAAAAHHHH...! I'm... hahh... done... hahh... for the day... hahh..."

Ryosei was breathing heavily. In the whole fight, he was terribly rusty. He hadn't fought for seven years, and now he was in a different body that wasn't in shape for his fighting style. He did his best to adapt to the current build of Senkyo's body. But doing so limited his attacks and reaction speed.

"S-Senkyo... hahh... sorry to ask you of this... but, could you... train your body a bit..."

*"\*I can see what you mean. My body isn't really suited for battle...\*"*

"H-hey, can we switch now...? I think you can recover faster if you're not the one controlling the body."

Ryosei thought of this from the previous times he switched with Senkyo. When Ryosei wasn't controlling his body, he felt less tired and recovered spirit power faster.

*"\*Sure.\*"*

Senkyo regained control of his body, and as he did...

"AAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHH!!!!"

The damage taken by his body kicked in all at once, and he felt the pain Ryosei was feeling when he was in control of the body. It was excruciating pain.

"AGHH! AHH...! IT HURTS! IT REAAAALLYY HURTS...! AHH!! MY ARM...!"

Cries of pain echoed throughout the nighttime living room. Ryosei used as much spirit power as he could to heal Senkyo’s body. Although his body wasn’t fully restored, all the wounds were closed and stopped any further bleeding. After a few cries later, Senkyo finally calmed down enough that he could bear the pain.

"Ouch... even standing up hurts..."

Senkyo grimaced at the tingling pain going through his body. But he put that at the back of his mind and asked Ryosei about the environment that had yet to change.

"Do you know anything about this night-time space, Ryosei?"

*"\*No, I don't know anything about this either.\*"*

"I see..."

*"\*Well, maybe that werewolf put this up using some kind of vessel. Let's go check outside.\*"*

"Okay."

Senkyo walked through the broken front door leading outside. Senkyo scanned the outside with an awestruck face. Everything around him, just like the time he met Ryosei, was covered with the veil of night. Small particles of light floated throughout the whole outside.

In their surroundings, there was one thing that stood out the most. It was a lantern with a floating ball of flame inside it. It produced an unusually dark flame that wasn’t like any other. It set off a dark aura.

*"\*Is that... an evil spirit...?\*"*

Ryosei's memories reminded him of the evil spirits that he fought with. Dark and seeping with negative emotions. It knew nothing but to destroy without a sane conscious.

"I think so."

Senkyo scrutinized the lantern and noticed the openable cover.

"Hmm... if I let this spirit out maybe something will happen..."

*“\*Maybe, but be careful. If it attacks you step back and I’ll take care of it.\*”*

Senkyo wildly guessed and opened the cover that was on top of the lantern. He immediately took a step back. The evil spirit floated upwards and disintegrated into small light particles, like the ones that were already floating around them.

Not long after, the night-time space then began to slowly dissipate. The night's sky was turning back to the orange tint of sunset. The surrounding buildings, plants, and objects returned to their normal color. After a short while, it was sunset. They were back to their normal world.

"Huh... was that some kind of magical barrier or something...?"

*"\*I don't even care that I don't understand what happened anymore...\*"*

Both Senkyo and Ryosei couldn't get much of what happened. Senkyo recalled today's events and something occurred to him.

"Oh yeah! The bat!"

Senkyo remembered where this all started from, it was the bat. Since it knew the werewolf was coming for her, the only thing that can answer their questions is the bat.

Senkyo immediately turned around to dash toward where the bat was but came to a sudden stop. Something was blocking his way. It was something that was made to block other uninvited guests in a household. It was the door to his house, and it was fully intact.

"Huh...?"

*"\*What the...?\*"*

Senkyo and Ryosei saw what became of the door on their way outside. It was destroyed to bits and the wood from it was scattered everywhere. Yet it was still right in front of them, fully intact, with no broken pieces, no damage, and not even a scratch.

Senkyo hurriedly opened the door and dashed towards the living room. He knew even if it was unexplainable right now, it will all be explained if they asked the bat.

When he saw the living room, it was as he expected. Not a single sign that a life-or-death fight happened in there. The broken furniture, the table, the sofa, and the jar, were all in their rightful place in one piece.

The only thing that was different from before the night-time space appeared what that the bat was no longer in the jar and the barrier that was surrounding it was gone. Senkyo let his voice leak as the one thing that could answer their questions was gone.

"Th-The bat... it's gone..."

*"\*Wait, no! Senkyo! In the corner!\*"*

Senkyo turned his attention to one of the corners of the room, as Ryosei pointed out. Senkyo came closer to the corner. The sight in front of him left both Senkyo and Ryosei bewildered. They were completely speechless.

That was because, in front of them, lay a familiar-looking girl. She had light crimson hair. She looked young, not far from Senkyo’s age. And the most noticeable feature of her at this moment was that she was completely naked. Her slender body lay boldly on the cold floor. The light from the living room reflected on her smooth, pale skin, revealing everything to them. Of course, that included her modest chest that was in full view.

Senkyo and Ryosei were completely and utterly flushed. Ryosei might not have his own body, but it was clear in his voice that was also flushed. They couldn't say a thing. They had never seen anything like it in person after all. But once they realized who the girl was, they shouted her name in surprise.

"Hisho-chan?!"

*"\*Hisho-chan?!\*"*

She was the 1st year student in their school who they met earlier that day, Hisho Yuu.

**Chapter 3: Abrupt Reunion**

**20 – Vampire… Caretaking?**

The houses and the streets were covered in darkness, with only the street lights and the bright moon illuminating the road. The night sky was decorated with the infinite number of stars that lay beyond it. You could not see a single person in the neighborhood streets. Though it looked like it was night, it was technically morning, very, very early in the morning. It was roughly about 3:00 am. The Yukou residence, specifically in the room of the only resident that lives there, had something unusual in it... or more specifically someone.

Senkyo was sitting on a chair facing his bed. He had already broken his sleep schedule, and from the looks of it, something was preventing him to sleep. That was because on his bed, lay a cute young girl covered by the same sheets he used every night. It was only the two of them in the room. The girl sleeping on Senkyo's bed was none other than Hisho Yuu, a 1st-year high school student of Honshou Academy, Senkyo's underclassman, a year below him. Other than Ryosei, another soul living inside Senkyo’s body, Senkyo and Yuu were the only ones present in the room.

Senkyo was sitting on a chair with a stern face and cold sweat was pouring down his face. His feet were tapping perpetually. He looked similar to a fanboy that was about to shake the hand of his biggest idol. He stared at Yuu nervously for two main reasons.

First, he had recently just known that Yuu was a vampire. A creature that was said to be fantasy to both normal people and the supernatural hunters of the Konjou Clan. They had no idea what she would do if she woke up hungry. The second, was because he was alone with a defenseless girl in a single room. Although a vampire, she was very much still a girl. Senkyo’s recent memories were proof of that.

Senkyo is an otaku, so he has seen scenes like this in anime, manga, or anywhere else that his hobby covers. But he never would've thought that one day something like this would actually happen to him.

Like our nervous protagonist here, Ryosei was in the same situation as Senkyo. He may be a soul borrowing a room in Senkyo's body, but he was a male spirit nonetheless. He too was an otaku with no experience with women whatsoever. He shared the same feelings as Senkyo.

These mutual feelings that both of them were feeling were enhanced by the fact that they share emotions. Both of their nervousness were multiplied by two. But they were not nervous because they thought of doing something immoral to her in her sleep, they were nervous because they were not used to being inside the same room alone together with a really cute girl. Ryosei knew Yuu was a vampire, and that he shouldn't let his guard down around her. Kuro Yaiba was even beside him, but that didn't stop Yuu from looking cute in her sleep and that didn't stop Ryosei from feeling flustered about the situation, but he didn't let that show.

As Senkyo was forcing himself to not be nervous and cause a misunderstanding, the sheets rustled. Yuu was waking up. Her eyes opened and blinked a few times to fix her sleepy, fuzzy vision. She slowly sat up on the bed, let out a long yawn, instinctively placed her hand in front of her mouth to cover her yawn, and used the other to rub her eye.

It looked like she was just waking up from a good night's rest. She looked around her surroundings to confirm where she was. She saw a completely unfamiliar room and saw her upperclassman sitting on a chair beside the bed.

"S-Senpai...?"

She muttered in a low voice, still half asleep but finally stopped to think and recollect what she last did before losing consciousness, and it finally struck her. She froze and looked at her body. She had an unfamiliar set of pajamas. The pajamas she wore were bigger than her usual size. Under her clothes, she felt quite breezy, almost as if she had no undergarments. That was because she didn't. From the baggy clothes, she could easily see and feel that she had no undergarments. She looked at Senkyo and saw his face was a bit flushed as he looked at her. He had to say something very, VERY important to say.

"I'M SORRY!"

"KYAAAAAAAAAAA!!!!"

A loud ear-piercing scream could be heard early in the morning. Senkyo thought he chose the correct words to say. He thought about interrogating her at first but realized he should apologize for doing something to Yuu without her permission.

Let's rewind the clock and take a look at the earlier events. The battle with the werewolf was over and Senkyo was back in the real world. Yuu was lying naked on the floor and Senkyo’s face was bright red.

"R-R-R-RYOSEI! WHAT DO WE DO?!"

*"\*WH-WH-WHAT DO YOU MEAN ‘WHAT DO WE DO?!’ P-PUT SOME CLOTHES ON HER AND LAY HER ON A BED!\*"*

It was like both of them forgot the fact that the reason they hurried to her was to find out more information. They first had to sort out the completely defenseless Yuu. They thought to get some of Senkyo's clothes and lay her on a bed first. It was the right course of action, but there was a problem.

"W-W-Wait! *YOU* are going to put the clothes on her right?"

*"\*No way! YOU'RE doing it! I feel too uncomfortable to do that!\*"*

"But we're in this together, aren't we? Come on, help me out over here!"

*"\*Yeah, you're right! We're in this* together*! SO DO YOUR PART AND PUT SOME CLOTHES ON HER ALREADY! I'M ALREADY TIRED FROM THE BATTLE!\*"*

"Kuu..."

Ryosei turned Senkyo's words against him. Senkyo could've thought of ways to childishly counter Ryosei, but he knew he was right. He also didn't want to prolong the fact that Yuu didn't have any clothes on. So, he killed his emotions and carried Yuu to his room.

*\*She’s asleep and this is necessary so there’s nothing to worry about! She’s asleep and this is necessary so there’s nothing to worry about! She’s asleep and this is necessary so there’s nothing to worry about!\**

Senkyo kept repeating to himself as he kept a poker face while carrying Yuu. He thought to pick clothes that were the least revealing and what he ended up with are his pajamas. He thought of what to use in exchange for her undergarments but then realized that was too creepy and threw the idea out the window, Ryosei agreed with him. But then that's when they both realized they were going to have to put her pajamas on.

"Th-This is going to be harder than I thought..."

*"\*Don't you dare turn to me; I had my fair share of troubles!\*"*

"I wasn't thinking about it!"

And so, after a few more minutes of Yuu being covered by the bed's blankets. Senkyo thought of a great way to put on the pajamas for her. He immediately regretted it.

Senkyo sat behind the naked Yuu and had the pair of pajamas ready. He took the shirt and dressed her from behind, and slowly buttoned the shirt up. Next was the pants, he did the same strategy and dressed her from behind, but this one was harder since it needed to be worn from the bottom. He rolled up the pajamas beforehand, placed both Yuu's feet into the openings of the pajamas, and slowly rolled the pajamas up.

It was perfect… almost perfect. Senkyo didn’t see anything Yuu didn’t want him to see. Now it would be easier to face her later on, but there was only one problem.

"That… was dangerous..."

Senkyo said with an even brighter shade of red than before.

*"\*Wow! You actually did it!\*"*

"Shut up! You probably wouldn't have been able to do that!"

*"\*But why were you so nervous? You carried her all the way over here with your bare hands. What's the point of trying to act like you didn't already see her body and doing weird positions just to dress her up?\*"*

"That and this are two different things! Don't act like you could've done this without being nervous!"

The whole time Senkyo was dressing Yuu up, he was focused just like Ryosei was when he was fighting earlier, but that served to be counterproductive. While he was dressing her up from behind, he was forced to breathe in the scent of her hair. He did his best to ignore the alluring scent and focused on the task at hand. In the end, all went well and Yuu was dressed up and slept on Senkyo's bed. Although that didn’t change that the same scent lingered in Senkyo’s nostrils. He was worried he had a weird scent fetish or something like that but he shook his head furiously before he got too much into the subject.

After Senkyo's lust-provoking battle, Ryosei and Senkyo decided to look after Yuu as she slept. It was dangerous to leave a vampire loose in your own house, even though she looks cute. So, Ryosei decided to restore Senkyo's energy and body with spirit power in the morning to avoid being tired and sleeping in classes.

**21 – Probing**

And here we are in the present. Senkyo was sitting on the floor in a seiza, in front of Yuu. While Yuu was sitting on Senkyo's bed with the same shade of red Senkyo had earlier.

"And that's what happened..."

Senkyo just finished explaining to Yuu what happened when she was knocked out. After an awkward silence, Yuu spoke a single word that hit Senkyo like a truck.

"Pervert-senpai..."

"I told you I'm sorry!"

"You saw everything didn't you?!"

"W-Well..."

Senkyo couldn't argue as he did see her naked when he first saw her. He even had to carry her while she was naked. Senkyo was guilty.

"So, you *DID* see everything...!"

"But I couldn't just leave you there! You could've caught a cold or something! Not to mention… you know?"

Senkyo hinted at the fact that she was completely naked on the ground.

"W-Well... thanks for that... B-But you still saw...!"

"I'm really sorry about that!"

Senkyo continued to apologize until Yuu calmed down. They finally got back on topic. Yuu's face turned serious and so did Senkyo.

"I-I guess there’s nothing I can do about this now… Yukou-senpai, what are you?"

"What am I? What do you mean?"

"I'm asking if you're human or not."

"Then, of course, I'm human! What else would I be?"

"I don't believe you!"

"Why do I feel like I had this conversation before?"

Senkyo felt a chill of déjà vu run down his spine. As if everyone around him was compelled to ask him a question only to immediately reject his answer… Well, he set aside the fact that he felt like no one trusted him and continued.

"Why won't you believe that I'm human, then?"

"Well... You don't feel like a human to me."

"I don't feel like a human? You mean your senses are telling you I'm not human?"

"Yes."

*"\*Vampires have enhanced senses, right Ryosei?\*"*

*"\*They do, all of their five senses are superior to humans. We assume that means their senses to feel other species or presences are enhanced as well.\*"*

*"\*But still, do I not feel like a human?\*"*

*"\*I wouldn't be able to tell. After all, this is the first time I've been sucked into someone else's body. That might affect my senses, but as far as I can tell, you're human.\*"*

"Senpai?"

Senkyo stayed silent as he was conversating with Ryosei. Yuu was confused by the sudden silence and called out to Senkyo.

“O-Oh! It's nothing, don't mind it.”

“Hmm… Now that I think about it, you were talking to yourself quite a lot when you had me trapped in that jar, weren’t you?”

“Ah!”

Senkyo didn’t realize it as he was talking to Ryosei in his mind, but the whole time the Yuu was in her bat form, he was making conversation with seemingly no one. Thinking on his feet, he tried to make the best excuse he could come up with.

“Wait, no, that’s… I…”

Absolutely nothing.

“…”

*“\*Senkyo?\*”*

*“\*Just trust me.\*”*

“……”

*“\*Hey, I reaaally think we should make an excuse now!\*”*

“………”

*“\*HEEEEY!!!\*”*

“…Ah! I got it! You’re THAT kind of person. I heard when humans are lonely they make conversation with themselves. Sorry, I didn’t mean to pry.”

“…N-No, it’s… it’s alright…”

Yuu ended her probing with a satisfied nod. Ryosei sighed in relief as she created a convenient misunderstanding for them. However, he wasn’t pleased with Senkyo’s actions, as the enemy could have found out about the connection between him and Ryosei.

*“\*Why didn’t you say anything back there!?\*”*

*“\*What are you talking about? That was the best choice to make, wasn’t it?\*”*

*“\*And what part led you to believe that!?\*”*

*“\*Well, think about it. Ryosei, did Hisho-chan truly believe it was only me talking to myself?\*”*

*“\*She did, what about it?\*”*

*“\*Well, now I can confirm a lot of things. Going by what you said about two souls housing a single body being a nonoccurrence before, Hisho-chan shouldn’t know about it, and being something considered impossible, she shouldn’t have any reason to suspect that. On the other hand, if she suspects us, then there should be a reason for suspicion, that being knowledge that our situation isn’t as impossible as you first thought. If she suspected us, then we could lead an interrogation in that direction, if not, then there’s no need to risk exposing our connection with strange questions. It works, don’t you think?\*”*

*“\*I… huh? Y-You thought THAT far ahead?\*”*

Ryosei couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He didn’t know much about psychology, but it did make sense. By throwing false confusion upon being suspected and staying silent, he made Yuu fill in the blanks to explain his voicelessness using her own knowledge. Normally, if she suspected his feigning ignorance, then she would just do the same. However, with Ryosei’s ability to see through lies, he would be able to catch onto that. He knew Senkyo was only a normal human who lead a perfectly normal life before through his memories, but he didn’t expect him to be so quick-witted and cunning. As he was thinking that, he arrived at a realization. He could not read Senkyo’s thoughts. Although his memories and emotions were connected to him, at the moment when he was crafting his cleaver answer, he couldn’t get a single read on him.

“U-Um… Senpai, did I offend you, after all?”

Pressured by the long silence, Yuu spoke out to Senkyo.

“O-Oh, no, sorry. I was just thinking about a lot of things.”

“Well, if you say so. Then, do you have any questions for me? That’s why you kept watching on me, right?”

“Ah, yes. Could you tell me when you felt that I wasn't human?”

"When I first saw you, on the first day of school. Everyone else had the same atmosphere. But when I saw you, I felt like you were a different being than the other students… somehow."

"The first day of school... that was way before the accident..."

"I thought that you might be who I'm looking for, so I decided to follow you everywhere you went. But if you defeated a werewolf, then that might explain it…"

Yuu looked disheartened as she said so.

"You're looking for someone? And you thought it was me because I had a different atmosphere?"

"Yes… I had no other leads, and you were the only one that stuck out to me."

“Then, why are you looking for this person?”

“..…”

Yuu stayed silent and averted her eyes.

"Hisho-chan?"

"S-Sorry, I'm not supposed to tell anybody the reason."

"Is that so? That should be fine, for now."

Senkyo had no use for information about some random person he didn't know. Although it could be him she was looking for, she still wasn’t certain. Right now, what he wanted to know is about what happened yesterday.

**22 – Her Backstory**

"What want to know is what happened back there. What was that werewolf, why was it chasing you, and what was that night-time space all about?"

"W-Well..."

Yuu took her time to collect her thoughts. She needed to be sure that it was fine to tell Senkyo everything about what happened. She thought about what she could tell and what she couldn't. And finally, she arranged everything in her head.

"A werewolf is one of the races in our world, Zerid. They feed on meat and hunt in packs, like normal wolves. Like the werewolf you fought yesterday, most of the werewolves have joined a group that calls themselves END, a group of Zerians that joined together to rule the three worlds."

"An evil organization, huh? What the hell...?"

"Their organization first appeared seventeen years ago. They are a well-structured group that even has researchers of their own. The cause of the one you call 'the night-time zone' is one of their inventions, a spirit lantern. It is a lantern with a spirit inside it. When the lantern is activated, it releases a sealing glass surrounding the soul and makes it so the spirit zone it makes is spread and covers a certain area."

"Wait a second, are evil spirits and spirits any different? And what’s a spirit zone?"

*"\*You've never heard of this before, right, Ryosei?\*"*

*"\*No, I've heard of evil spirits. As far as we were told, spirits that have no regrets are reincarnated.\*"*

Senkyo and Ryosei were both in the dark about what Yuu was saying. It was strange to them that even the Konjou Clan, a group that fends off the supernatural, would not know more about the subject. Something felt odd.

"Yukou-senpai, I thought humans like you already knew about the three worlds? Weren’t you the one who defeated the werewolf earlier, or was I mistaken?"

"As far as I know, only evil spirits and demons disrupt this world. And I don’t know any other worlds besides Zerid and Earth. I would like to ask you to fill me in on anything I’m missing."

"I see, then I'll explain. But first of all, do you know how this Earth was created?"

“Well there are a lot of theories out there but the most famous one is the Big Bang Theory, right?”

“No, that is wrong.”

Senkyo somewhat expected that to be Yuu’s response. If mysteries like this were hidden from the world, then there was no surefire way for a theory to be true. He and Ryosei stayed silent and listened carefully to Yuu.

“At this moment, three worlds exist Earth, Zerid, and the Spirit Realm. Home to humans, zerians, and spirits. But before, these worlds were once a part of a single planet called, Primo. It was a chaotic world ruled by the gods named Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades. All their creations for their desired worlds were created on a single planet and turned into a mosh pit of destruction. Their creations fought and killed each other for survival and made it so that most of the creatures died before they could ever evolve. That was when they finally decided to separate Primo into three different worlds that each one of them could rule over. With the use of their combined godly powers, they forcefully separated Primo into three, smaller interconnected worlds. Zeus ruled over Zerid, Poseidon ruled over Earth, and Hades ruled over the Spirit Realm. Each god ruled as they wished and created peace for the three worlds that were once known as Primo.”

Senkyo and Ryosei were speechless. Three interconnected worlds are ruled by three gods. A world that was born in destruction was separated to make peace. They couldn’t believe it, but they were forced to. Living proof of a species of one of those worlds was right in front of them. No one could oppose her claim. Senkyo could use his known knowledge and logic to fight her claim, but that would be useless because it was factual that demons, vampires, werewolves, and spirits existed, meanwhile his logic and arguments lay where those species were a myth. His experiences up to this point and his aching body were enough proof that his accumulated knowledge about the world was shallow at best.

“As for your questions earlier, I don’t know the details myself, but evil spirits and spirits are different. A spirit zone is a small replication of the spirit realm that is produced whenever a spirit in a world other than the Spirit Realm appears… I believe. In a spirit zone, only other spirits can enter and they can only do so after the zone completed its creation. However, with END’s spirit lanterns, spirits and mana wielders within the vicinity of the zone are forcefully sucked inside it. The only way out is to release the spirit from the lantern.”

“Is it just me or did you seem kind of uncertain there?”

“That’s because I’ve never actually been to the spirit realm before. I’m only telling you second-hand information given to me. Although I cannot guarantee the legitimacy of my information about the spirit realm, as someone who lives in Zerid, I can guarantee everything else.”

“I-I see…”

It was a huge amount of information to process all at once, but Senkyo was barely able to understand everything that she told him. There was no possible way Yuu was able to come with all of that on the spot. Even if there was, Ryosei could tell whether someone was lying or not. Senkyo put faith in that ability and it turned out she was speaking the truth.

“If there’s anything else you would like to ask, as long as it is within my power, I will answer it.”

“N-No, I think that’s enough for one day. Thank you for your cooperation.”

END traps spirits inside lanterns to use them as tools. When Senkyo heard that, he couldn't help but think about the spirit that was trapped inside it. Meanwhile, something else stuck out to Ryosei.

*"\*Only spirits and mana wielders are forcefully sucked in...? Wait, didn't you enter the spirit zone, Senkyo?\*"*

*"\*I did... Maybe it’s because you were inside me?\*"*

*“\*That could be possible. But with two options, the only way to be certain is if one option is eliminated.\*”*

*“\*Then are you telling me that I could have mana inside me…?\*”*

*“\*It’s only a hunch, but yes.\*”*

*“\*Okay then.\*”*

"Hisho-chan, do you think it’s possible that I have mana inside me?"

Senkyo called out to Yuu once again.

“O-Oh, yes. Recently, I have seen humans that were able to use mana as well but they were artificial.”

“Artificial?”

“I don’t know much about them myself. Wait, shouldn’t you know about them, Yukou-senpai? You’re one of them, right? The hunters of this town.”

“O-Oh, that one is a bit complicated… A-Anyway, Hisho-chan, can you check me if I have mana?”

Upon hearing Senkyo's words, Yuu froze in place and her face suddenly went pale. Something seemed to be troubling her. She then spoke with an agitated voice and stuttered her words.

“M-Me? Check you for mana? Right now?! W-Wait, wait, wait, right now is a bit…”

“Why? Is there a problem?”

“U-Uhm… Y-Y-You see, ah… umm… S-SENPAIII!!!!”

"Whoa!"

Yuu grabbed Senkyo on his shoulders and started shouting agitatedly at his face. She kept shaking him as she spoke. Her face was like a ghost’s and her eyes looked like spirals. Something about what Senkyo said must've really worked her up.

"W-W-W-What are you saying Yukou-senpai?! Ch-Ch-Check if you have mana?! N-N-N-NO! I can't do that! I-I mean, it's not that I don't like you or anything, b-b-b-b-but isn't that a bit too fast?! I never really talked to you or anything and..."

Yuu kept rambling on about something, but Senkyo didn't understand what she was going on about. Her face looked like it was about to overheat.

"Whoa, calm down, calm down, Hisho-chan! I can’t understand what you're talking about!"

**23 – Judge of Character**

Yuu snapped out of it and stopped shaking Senkyo. She didn't realize when was so flustered, but her face was right in front of Senkyo. She hurriedly took her hands off his shoulders and retreated to the bed. But this time, she sat facing the wall.

"Uh-umm... Hisho-chan... did I say something to upset you...?"

"I-It's not that you did something to upset me... It's just that..."

Yuu didn't change the direction she was facing, but she cutely turned her face around and met Senkyo's eyes. Her face was different from its earlier pale. It was now bright red.

"I-It's just that... in our culture... we vampires... if two vampires love each other... they suck their partner's blood as a sign of their love... In this world... it's like a kiss... B-but... to check one's mana... we vampires have to suck their blood....... That’s why..."

When Senkyo heard her explanation, his face turned bright red just like Yuu’s face. He realized what he just said to Yuu. “Can you check me if I have mana?” From Yuu’s perspective, he basically asked Yuu to kiss him. Senkyo then responded to Yuu in the same manner she had earlier.

"I-I-I-I'M SORRY...! I should've been more careful about my words! You're a vampire and all, but I was careless and I probably offended you...!"

"N-No! It's not your fault. Other vampires don't really get this flustered over something like this, it's just me so... I'm sorry if I made you feel bad!"

Yuu turned back to the wall and looked like she had something on her mind. Senkyo noticed that she said the last part with a sad tone and thought that there was a problem. He couldn't stop himself from trying to cheer her up.

"I... I'd hate it if someone I don't know suddenly asked to kiss me. I don’t think you’re in the wrong…"

"Eh...?"

But Senkyo was an awkward person in this type of situation. After saying that one line, he turned to the side to avoid Yuu's eyes. His face was still as flushed as it was earlier, maybe even a little brighter.

Yuu turned to Senkyo in surprise as she heard that. Senkyo is trying to cheer her up, in his own awkward way and it didn't seem like Yuu minded that awkwardness. She stopped facing the wall and faced Senkyo properly.

"Yukou-senpai..."

Senkyo turned to Yuu with the same flushed face. They met eye to eye. Both of them had bright red faces. The atmosphere turned into something that came straight out of a shoujo manga panel. Yuu gave Senkyo a smile and said…

"Thank you!"

The way she thanked him wasn't that grand. It was the same ‘thank you’ you would hear every day. It was supposed to be your normal, nice thank you. But something about Yuu turned it into something else in Senkyo's eyes.

Yuu's eyes met with his and gave him a smile. Nothing too special, but the way she smiled at him and kept their gazes connected made it special. After a moment of thought, Senkyo finally found the word that made that moment special to him.

"C-Cute..."

Senkyo muttered in a small voice that no human from that distance should've ever heard. But Yuu was a vampire. Her enhanced hearing caught Senkyo's mutter as if he was saying it normally to her. Yuu's face became redder than it was, and she turned back to the wall and put her face in the palms of her hands.

After that, they couldn't continue any further questioning and decided to get ready for school. But when they looked at the time, it was only 5:36am. Only two hours and a half had passed since Yuu first woke up. But they didn't feel sleepy anymore. Something about earlier prevented their sleepiness from kicking back in.

So, they decided to pass the time with the only pass time present in Senkyo's room. They played some two-player games and read and talked about manga. It seems like Yuu had a small interest in manga.

After they passed the time, Senkyo had enough time to make breakfast for two and made lunches for both himself and Yuu. It seemed like she flew home to fetch her uniform while Senkyo was cooking because she came back in her uniform. Then, they made their way together to school.

"Yukou-senpai, thank you for cooking me breakfast and making me a lunch box. But you didn't need to do all of that."

"No, it's my way of saying sorry for yesterday."

"Ah... ahaha..."

As Senkyo and Yuu were walking their way to school, he brought up yesterday's incident. Yuu awkwardly laughed as she remembered what happened when she got knocked out.

"Ah... sorry, I didn't mean to bring that up again!"

"No, no, it's fine... Yukou-senpai... why are you so nice to me? I'm a vampire... Aren't you afraid that I'll attack you?"

Yuu asked Senkyo a serious question. Her face was devoid of jokes. Something was on her mind. Was she concerned about Senkyo being too trusting? Or maybe something else entirely. Either way, Senkyo gave out a vague answer as he faced Yuu.

"To be honest, at first, I was afraid. Vampires are known for attacking humans and sucking out their blood. When I heard that the bat was a vampire, I was a bit scared. But when I saw the vampire was someone I know. I stopped to think a bit, then I found myself carrying you to my bed and dressing you up. Weird, isn't it?"

"...I don't get you at all, Yukou-senpai... and that doesn't even answer my question properly!"

"Then I'll tell you clearly this time, why I'm nice to you."

"....."

Yuu silently waited for Senkyo's answer.

"Because you're not a bad person. So, you would have just about the same levels of danger as a normal human. I told myself to be on guard when you woke up, but when I talked to you, you didn't seem like a bad person at all. Then we played games together and talked about manga, wasn't that fun? That's how I knew you weren't bad. That's why I'm nice. That's why I'm not afraid. Does that answer your question?"

"You judged me through a few hours of playing games and talking...? Isn't that a bit too ridiculous?"

"Don't underestimate a man and his hobbies, Hisho-chan."

Senkyo's life has been revolving around his hobbies for as far as he could remember. His father supported him with his hobbies ever since he first got them. His father was probably the type to spoil his child with everything he could, but that didn't look that way. After all, Senkyo turned out to be reasonable, sharp, and open-minded. If he was spoiled all the time, this personality would be a pipe dream.

Yuu sighed, unsatisfied with the answer her senior gave her but she gave up on trying to get a satisfactory answer.

"Here I thought you were actually going to give me a serious answer... Aren't you just laid back, Yukou-senpai?"

"Hahaha, maybe."

"I knew it. You know, Senpai, you shouldn't be so trusting. I'm a vampire you know, I can attack you anytime I want!"

"Then why aren't you?"

"Why would I do that? I'm not some out-of-control vampire!"

"I know, that's why I'm not afraid. You're just like another human that's stronger than me."

"But if I get hungry, I might suck your blood, you know?"

"That's just a little increase in danger. 'If they can be reasoned with, they aren't that dangerous!' That's what my stupid laid-back father used to tell me. I never thought I'd actually be using that saying."

"Your father seems to be happy-go-lucky, huh...?"

"Incredibly. He'd be in a dangerous situation and then laugh about it afterward. Making stupid quotes that don't even make sense when you first say them. I'd sometimes wonder how he even got through his life."

Senkyo reminisced about the past. On the outside, he looked like he was completely dissing his father. But on the inside, he really respected his father. It also seems like he enjoyed his father's presence.

"Then why did you use his quote just now?"

"...Well, that stupid father of mine proved it to be right so far. I must've been infected with his danger germs."

"The apple never goes far from the tree, huh?"

"Don't say that! I'm at least smarter than him!"

"You and your father seemed to be really close..."

Yuu looked back to the road, a little down when she said that last line. Her hair was covering her face, making it difficult to see her expression. She stayed silent as she seemed to have her mind on something else.

"Hisho-chan? Is something wrong?"

"Ah...! It's nothing, Yukou-senpai!"

"If you say so..."

Senkyo knew something was bothering her. He didn't say anything about it because he thought it was a personal matter. He didn't want to be rude and pry into someone else's life. So, he stayed quiet about it, and finally, they reached the school gate.

"Well then, Yukou-senpai, see you later. Oh, thanks for the lunch too!"

"No problem. See you later."

**24 – Kinro’s Interrogation**

Senkyo said his goodbyes as Yuu ran off to her classroom. He was about to head to his classroom as well when he felt a heavy force suddenly weighing on his back. It was accompanied by a loud shout as the force spread through his body. The shout had a familiar voice and recognized the owner of the voice immediately.

"K-Kinro?! What's this all of the sudden?!"

"That's my line! Who would've thought YOU would be walking to school side by side with Hisho-chan! WHAT HAPPENED BETWEEN YOU TWO?!"

"You’ve got it wrong! It's not like that!"

"What part did I get wrong? 'Well then, Yukou-senpai, see you later. Oh, thanks for the lunch too!', 'No problem. See you later,' you said as you saw her off with a smile. Tell me, Senkyo, what did I misunderstand? You made her lunch, didn’t you!?"

"You were eavesdropping?!"

"N-No! I was going to say hi, but then I saw you happily talking with Hisho-chan. When I saw that, I thought I shouldn't interrupt and walked a few meters away. I couldn't help but hear some parts of your conversation. Like, 'The apple never goes far from the tree, huh?' 'Don't say that! I'm at least smarter than him!' 'You and your father seemed to be really close...’'"

"THEN YOU *WERE* EAVESDROPPING!!"

Kinro witnessed all of Senkyo and Yuu's interactions on their way to school. From different angles, Kinro could be seen hiding behind poles, trees, bushes, and every other hiding spot as he followed the two. He was incredibly interested. If curiosity levels can be physically seen, Kinro's would be a pole reaching up to the moon.

He jumped Senkyo the moment Yuu headed for her classroom. He was like a little kid who saw a magic trick for the first time. His face was beaming with curiosity. He quoted the lines he heard from eavesdropping while trying to imitate them with low- and high-pitched voices.

Senkyo couldn’t keep up and calmed Kinro down first, Senkyo thought of excuses he could use. He obviously couldn't tell Kinro that he met her when she suddenly appeared out of his closet, nor could he say Yuu is a vampire and he had a fight to the death with a werewolf yesterday. Kinro asked Senkyo with his usual calm demeanor while Senkyo hid most of the truth to avoid trouble.

"So? What's happened between you two?"

"We just happened to meet on the way to school—"

"Lies."

"What?! How could you deny that so readily?!"

"You MADE HER lunch and ‘just happened’ to MEET HER on the way to school?"

"Grk..."

Senkyo already made a mistake. If he had time to think about it, he could usually make barely passable excuses and get away with it. The sudden appearance of Kinro made him make floppy excuses with a lot of contradictions. He couldn't think of good excuses and messed up.

*“\*Senkyo, I can’t tell if you’re really smart or really dumb, please make up your mind. What happened to the one that could do psychological calculations in less than a second!\*”*

*“\*Shut up I’m just really bad when it comes to Kinro!\*”*

"So, why did you make her lunch?"

"W-Well, h-her parents were away for a bit so—"

"That's another lie."

"What?! You've never even met her parents!"

"*YOU* have?"

"U-Uhmm..."

"Thought so."

Kinro cut Senkyo off every excuse he's thought of before letting him finish. He could somehow tell if he was lying or not. They have been friends since middle school, and that made it easy for Kinro to detect lies from Senkyo when he is caught off guard.

Kinro sighed and thought of asking Senkyo directly.

"Do you plan on telling me the truth?"

"If something happens that requires me to tell the truth... then maybe..."

Senkyo was already found out. He didn't try to struggle when he already knew he had no way out of Kinro's interrogation.

"Kuuu...! Fine, then just answer this one honestly!"

Kinro held back his overflowing curiosity. He was curious, but he didn't lose control of himself. He didn't want to be rude to his friend so he held back, but at the very least he wanted to know one thing that he could not hold back.

"Is Hisho-chan your girlfriend—"

"No."

Senkyo calmly denied Kinro the moment the words left his mouth. It looks like he was at least prepared for this one. Senkyo said it so suddenly that Kinro knew he wasn't lying this time. Kinro not so quietly accepted that Senkyo didn't want to tell him what was between Yuu and him.

"Well, I guess I can just hope that something happens that makes you tell me the truth then."

"...I hope that doesn't happen..."

Something that happens that makes Senkyo tell Kinro the truth; that something is when Kinro gets mixed up in the trouble with evil spirits and demons. Senkyo didn't want Kinro to get into the dangerous mess he was already in. But since Kinro doesn't know anything about it, Senkyo can't blame him for wanting something like that to happen to him.

As Senkyo was thinking of the possibility that Kinro gets involved with him. Kinro noticed something that Senkyo didn't normally bring. He saw it yesterday, but Senkyo said someone else needed it, so he assumed that he meant that he was giving it away. And that thing is...

"Senkyo, I thought you were going to give your shinai to your friend."

"Ah... yeah."

Kinro noticed the shinai bag that Senkyo brought yesterday but what he said to Kinro was that he was going to let a friend borrow it. His words and actions were contradictory. However, this time, Senkyo had an excuse ready to counter any possible counter. He wasn't going to mess up this time.

"That's because my friend has special circumstances with his family, so I just have it around with me and bring it to my friend when he has practices."

A vague answer that prevents a considerate person to pry any further. Senkyo's excuse had a lot of possibilities, and he said it in a way that didn't require him to explain it in detail. Kinro wouldn’t pry into a stranger’s personal life. It was perfect.

"Oh, I see..."

*\*Yes! He bought it!\**

Senkyo internally cheered as he managed to hide at least one thing correctly. Kinro thought of various circumstances in his mind since all he could think of were personal troubles, he didn't say anything else. And so, they arrived at the classroom with some time to spare before the first period.

**25 – Troublesome Rumors**

When they entered the classroom, everyone's attention was on Senkyo. They looked at him like trash. Groups of students openly talked to each other. Loud enough that Senkyo could hear it.

"U~wa~ there he is. I heard he's a womanizer that picks up every girl he sees."

"Gross. He tried to pick up Watanabe-san's little sister and got us all in trouble!"

"I know right! He even tried to go for Yutei-san! That otaku probably thinks it'll turn out as it does in his anime. Disgusting."

The students verbally attacked Senkyo. His rumors finally spread and the students used them to attack him. The majority of the students talked and scowled at Senkyo with disgusted eyes. It looks like his social status is at rock bottom.

While Senkyo was walking to his seat, a student took out his leg and made Senkyo trip. Senkyo caught himself with his other leg and stood back up. It looks like his reaction time and speed got better, most likely from the long mountain climb and yesterday's fight. The reason for Senkyo’s inhuman physical improvement was because of Ryosei’s spirit power which regenerated his body and strengthened his muscles much faster than any normal human. The student didn't like that he caught himself and clicked his tongue.

Kinro saw what happened and wasn’t about to let that slide.

"Hey, what do you think you're doing?"

"Ha? What the hell does it matter to you?"

"That's my friend right there. You think I'll just stand around as you do that?"

There was friction between Kinro and the student. It looked like a fight might break out any second. Senkyo wanted to avoid that, so he came in between them to stop them before things got out of hand.

"No, Kinro. It's fine, you don't need to make a big fuss about it."

"Senkyo…!"

"It's fine."

Senkyo said as Kinro made an annoyed look. He didn't want any bullying happening to his friend, but he couldn't do anything. If he made a big fuss about it, it might have the opposite effect. Kinro was well aware of this fact, so he backed off with an annoyed face.

The student that made Senkyo trip grinned with a smug look on his face. Kinro saw this, he got incredibly annoyed but he had to keep it in, so he bit his lip, balled his hands into a fist, and walked back to his seat. Senkyo returned to his seat with a troubled face and tiredly buried his face in his arms on the table and thought about its cause.

*"\*Oh yeah... I forgot this happened. Watanabe-san made a big threat yesterday about his sister. I completely forgot... Well, I did have a fight to the death with a werewolf and had a fun time with Hisho-chan, it couldn't be helped that I forgot.\*"*

*"\*You know Senkyo, the way you pronounced that the last line sounded a bit inappropriate.\*"*

*"\*What...?\*"*

*"\*'Had a fun time with Hisho-chan.' That's what you said.\*"*

*"\*D-Don't point weird things out when I'm being bullied in school!\*"*

Senkyo's face flushed a bit when Ryosei pointed that out, but no one could see it since he had it buried in his arms.

*"\*But why not? It'll lighten the mood a bit!\*"*

*"\*Don't give me that! Couldn't you try to cheer me up or something instead?\*"*

*"\*Well, to be perfectly honest. For a different reason, I kind of want to smack you myself.\*"*

*"\*Wh-What?! Whose side are you on?!\*"*

*"\*I can't help myself! Seeing you flirt openly with a cute girl makes me a bit frustrated! I mean, you carried her naked, dressed her up, had a 'fun time' with her, and cooked her breakfast and lunch. OF COURSE, I'D BE SOMEWHAT ANNOYED WHEN I SEE THAT. I'M A GUY TOO! I WANT SOMETHING LIKE THAT TOO!!\*"*

*"\*Traitor!\*"*

Ryosei voiced his opinions about Senkyo's activities with Yuu. Even though they're friends, Ryosei couldn't help but feel jealous after all that happened. He wanted something like that too. Ryosei didn't like that Senkyo is being bullied, but he also wanted Senkyo to have a quick smack on the head for all that happened.

The tense atmosphere from his classmates was no more. Even though his classmates are still staring daggers at him, in his mind, it was something else entirely. Whether this was something that Ryosei wanted to cheer Senkyo up or if he just wanted to voice his opinions or maybe both at the same time, no one could tell.

Even though he only met Ryosei for a grand total of two days, it felt like he was one of his closest friends from long ago. Senkyo chalked it up to their memories and emotions being connected to each other. Not to mention fighting alongside him in a life-or-death battle. It seemed like suffering together through hard and painful experiences truly did nurture camaraderie.

Away from the joking atmosphere of Senkyo's mind, other classmates can be seen staring at him, most of them were stares of death, but the others were a different story.

Yukai was staring at Senkyo as he sat with a buried face. She had a face of concern from what happened to him earlier. She knew the class didn't like Senkyo because of Itsuki's threat. Her eyes were filled with worry for a fellow classmate, unaware of the conversation going on inside his head.

First period finally began and Senkyo listened to the lessons like normal. Thanks to the spirit power Ryosei used to help Senkyo recover from a fight to the death and an all-nighter, Senkyo could study normally. There were no visible wounds and no hint of being tired.

It was finally lunch break. Surprisingly no one bothered to bully Senkyo while they were having class but that didn't apply when he was eating lunch. Since Senkyo had time to make himself a bento, he decided to eat separately from Kinro. When he first informed Kinro of it, he had a small bit of teasing come his way.

"Oh? Hisho-chan made that for you, didn't she?"

"No! I made it myself!"

After that, Senkyo wandered the school trying to find a secluded spot to eat lunch. Fortunately for Senkyo, he remembered a good spot: on the school's rooftop. Students weren't allowed there, but they always keep it unlocked for other reasons. If he were to be found there, he would be in trouble, but students and even teachers don't go up there, so it was the perfect spot to have a secret lunch.

Senkyo sat beside the rooftop entrance where there was shade. There was only him on the big, spacious rooftop. The vast blue sky stretched outwards into the distance. He could see the other buildings that looked like small squares on the horizon. It was peaceful, no one was bothering him.

"Hahh... I wonder if I'm going to have to eat lunch here every day now. That would be a pain, I'll have to wake up extra early to make my lunch..."

Senkyo thought of his upcoming school days. He knew he'd get bullied if he ate somewhere in public, whether it was the classroom or the cafeteria, he'd definitely get bullied. He wanted to avoid as much trouble as possible, so he thought of waking up early and making himself a bento, but in his mind, it was still a pain.

"I guess the view here isn't so bad, it's relaxing too... Maybe eating with Kinro, Hisho-chan and Ichika-san wouldn't be so bad."

He daydreamed of eating together with friends on a peaceful rooftop. It might be worth the trouble, is what Senkyo thought. He ate the bento he made as he admired the view.

*\*Creak! Thud!\**

"Huh?"

Senkyo heard the door to the rooftop entrance open and close.

**26 – Others’ Concern**

*"\*Ah, shit. Is it a teacher?\*"*

He immediately thought of the worst. He stopped eating and stared at the corner of the wall, in hopes that whoever entered the rooftop wouldn't turn that corner and find him. Footsteps could be heard getting louder and louder. Whoever it was, they were getting closer. Senkyo kept staring at the corner as the sound got louder. He then saw someone turn the corner.

*"\*I'm done for…\*"*

Senkyo accepted his fate and closed his eyes. He was hoping to avoid trouble but it didn't look like he was going to be given that wish. The person got more visible until finally.

"There you are, gross otaku."

Senkyo immediately reopened his eyes and turned to the source of the voice. He was expecting an old man's voice, but instead, he got a young girl's voice. When Senkyo got a proper look at the person, it was someone he recognized.

"Suzuki-san...?"

It was Suzuki Himari. He never talked to her, but she was always in Kinro's football practices. Senkyo would see Himari at the side cheering for Kinro at times he stayed back in school. The only contact he had with her was when he'd catch her staring at him from time to time.

She approached Senkyo and entered the shade. She pointed at Senkyo with her right hand and said the following words:

"Stay away from Honjou-sama!"

"Ha?"

Senkyo's face was painted with confusion. Himari made a rude order out of the blue. His peaceful lunch had been ruined in less than a minute. He analyzed what Himari meant by what she said to make sure he didn't misunderstand anything and ended up with a reason for her to say something like that.

"Is this because Kinro's getting into trouble because of me?"

"Oh? You're not as dumb as you look. Then that makes things easier for me, if you're his friend, then stay away from Honjou-sama!"

Senkyo got it right. The commotion earlier in the classroom caused Himari to approach him like that. Senkyo understood why she did this. Himari was just concerned for Kinro. If Himari wasn't rude to him earlier, Senkyo might've thought of her as a good girl.

Himari turned her back to Senkyo as if to end the conversation and headed to the exit. Before Himari could get out of Senkyo's sight, he responded to her.

"I refuse."

"Ha?"

Himari immediately turned back to face Senkyo. Her face was painted with the same confusion Senkyo had earlier. It seems the tables have turned. Himari walked back to Senkyo and shouted at him.

"What do you mean 'I refuse?!' I thought you were his friend!"

"Exactly, that's why I refuse."

"What the hell... That doesn't make any sense at all! Aren't you just being selfish?!"

"No, I'm not. I think you are the one who's being selfish."

"Why would *I*be the selfish one, huh?! Explain, gross otaku!"

Himari was fuming. She was shouting at Senkyo at the top of her lungs. Himari's voice covered the silent, peaceful air, replacing it with her loud voice. Senkyo calmly put his chopsticks and lunch down and stood up. He properly faced Himari. He stared at her with a serious expression and answered her question.

"What do you want to happen?"

"Huh? I just said so didn’t I—"

"Just answer the question!"

Senkyo raised a question to Himari in exchange for an answer. She was about to retort, but she was cut off by Senkyo's loud voice. He looked at her with a serious gaze. She was taken aback by Senkyo's sudden change in attitude. She took a step back and answered his question.

"I want you to stay away from Honjou-sama so that he doesn't get mixed up in your trouble!"

"And how do you think Kinro would feel about that?"

"Eh...? I-I think... he'd feel relaxed that you—"

"Wrong!"

"Wha?!"

"Kinro won't feel relaxed! Why would you even think that? He'd feel worried and get pissed off! He couldn't just stand there when his friend is in trouble! That's the kind of personality that anime protagonist-like idiot has!"

Senkyo made his stand as Kinro's friend. They knew each other since they were in middle school, and after their time hanging out together, Senkyo got a good idea of how Kinro would act. That's why he could say these things with confidence. He knew Kinro would get pissed at him if he decided to act like the tragic anime protagonist and shove Kinro away.

He cut off Himari again before she could even finish her last line. She let out a surprised shriek when Senkyo suddenly shouted in the middle of her speech. She was getting overwhelmed by Senkyo that she slowly backed away, but he didn't let her go.

"That's why you're the selfish one! Your first thought about what would be good for Kinro, but you didn't consider how he would feel! You don't have the right to decide who can and can't stay close to Kinro, so don't go out telling other people to stay away from someone without that person's permission!"

Senkyo went off on lecturing Himari while he was at it. Even though Himari backed up, Senkyo approached her as he was talking, not letting her get away from him. Himari took a wrong step and fell on her bottom. She was backed up to the rooftop fence. She couldn't go anywhere.

She looked like prey cornered by a predator. The situation completely changed compared to earlier. Himari was ordering Senkyo to stay away, but now, Himari was backed up and Senkyo was fiercely lecturing her. Himari's earlier anger could no longer be seen, it was replaced by fear and shock. She never knew Senkyo could be so overpowering, she thought he was just some lame otaku.

Everything came to a pause. Himari was backed up to the rooftop fence, while Senkyo was standing in front of her, observing her movements, but that's when he realized.

*"\*Wait... am I going too far?\*"*

*"\*Cornering a girl alone on an empty rooftop? Obviously!\*"*

Ryosei answered the question that no one else could answer. Senkyo rid of his overwhelming presence and loosened his face, but it was too late. Himari had an annoyed face with a few drops of liquid coming out of her eyes and sliding down her face. He was crying, but she was trying hard to keep it in. She had a twisted face and teary eyes.

"Uh-Uhm... I-I didn't mean to—"

"Don't get so cocky!"

Himari ran for it. Senkyo tried to apologize to Himari, but she cut him off before he could finish. She shouted *"Don't get so cocky!"*in a shaken voice. The Himari that first approached Senkyo with a rude tone was no more. She ran away and left Senkyo alone on the school rooftop.

Senkyo was left there, all by himself. He stood there for a while in a frozen state, then suddenly dropped to the ground and leaned to the rooftop fence. He looked at the peaceful blue sky and said in a regretful tone.

"I... did it again..."

*"\*Damn right you did! Why don't you know how to be more careful with girls?!\*"*

This was the second time Senkyo made a girl cry for getting too worked up. Knowing that made him feel worse. Ryosei even told him to be more careful. The saying he was always keeping with him 'The person that makes an innocent girl cry is the worst scum in the world,' was backfiring at him. Himari wasn't a bad person, she just thought what was best for Kinro, but Senkyo got too into it and went all the way to lecturing her.

"I... really have to learn to control myself better..."

*"\*You got that right, even you're making me feel like you're a bad person.\*"*

He messed up again.

**27 – A Friend**

After that, Senkyo finished his lunch and went back to the classroom. Nothing happened in the classroom, because when he got back the chime already rang and so one could bully him but that didn't stop him from feeling bad about Himari. Yet again, Yukou Senkyo made a girl cry.

Afternoon classes were the same as usual and no one tried to bully him in class. As usual, Senkyo parted with Kinro, left the school, and headed home.

"Man... I guess I have to apologize again... another batch of cookies, huh? I can't keep doing this!!"

Senkyo shouted at the sky on his way home. His somewhat pained voice flowed through the air and into nothing. As Senkyo was walking, he heard a familiar voice call him out.

"Um...! Yukou-san...!"

Senkyo turned to the source of the voice. It was a small and nervous voice. It was Yutei Yukai.

"Yutei-san...?"

Yet another unexpected person approached Senkyo. He stared at Yukai who was a little way away from him. Yukai carefully approached Senkyo while he stood there to wait for her. When they were within the proper speaking distance, Yukai spoke.

"Um... Y-Yukou-san..."

"Hm...?"

"Uh... um..."

"Let's go to a better place to talk."

Yukai was fidgeting and couldn't speak out what she wanted to say. Senkyo noticed it, so he suggested moving to a more suitable place to talk.

Senkyo and Yukai were now sitting on the swings. They were in a public playground, right now, and no one else was around. It was only Senkyo and Yukai in the playground. They had a place to sit which made talking better.

"So? Do you want to ask me something?"

"O-Oh, yes... Yukou-san, are you alright?"

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"It's just that... at school, everyone was picking on you... but, I don't think you deserve to be picked on! Y-You did nothing wrong!"

"Yutei-san... thank you."

Senkyo faced Yukai sitting on the other swing beside him. His eyes widened as he heard what he called him out for. Yukai was worried about Senkyo. So he tried to reassure her as soon as he realized he made her worry.

"No, I'm fine! I only get sharp gazes but nothing too bad!"

"But they were making you trip and spreading bad rumors about you!"

"That's fine. I don't even get hurt—"

"No, it's not!"

"....."

Yukai cut off Senkyo before he finished. She rejected his loose attitude. Her voice was as loud as they were fighting over notebooks the other day. The sudden rise in her voice made Senkyo shut up. He stared at her as she spoke her mind.

"It's not fine! You were getting bullied and bad rumors are spreading about you! At this rate, the whole school might pick on you as well! I... don't want that..."

"....."

Senkyo was still stunned by her. Still unable to speak, Senkyo just stared at her with a surprised look. Yukai realized she raised her voice and apologized for it.

"S-Sorry! I didn't mean to raise my voice..."

"I-It's fine, I was just a bit surprised. But... Yutei-san, why are you so worried about me?"

"Ah... you're right. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to poke my nose into your life..."

"No, that's not what I meant! It's just... the only other person that would worry about me is Kinro, so this is the first time a girl was worried about me."

"O-Oh... That's what you meant... Then it's fine if I worry about you?"

"Haha... That's an odd question, but I'd be happy if someone else was worrying about me... Ah...! Not that I'd want to purposefully make them worry!"

"Haha, I know."

Senkyo and Yukai shared a short laugh. Senkyo doesn't have any more parents, didn't have any relatives, and his only friend was Kinro. Although he did have his father’s friend provide him a monthly allowance. Senkyo was happy when he heard that someone else other than Kinro was worrying about him. Since Senkyo could trust Yukai, he knew her worry was genuine, and that's why he was happy. He wouldn't be happy just by having a random person worry about him.

"Then, the reason I'm worried is that... Well... we gave each other cookies."

"...Cookies...?"

"That's all?"

"Yes!"

*\*So, it was all obligation?!\**

Senkyo's face did a whole 180. Senkyo thought she was worried about him because she cared about him. Senkyo was in despair at the thought, until Yukai followed it up.

"It's because when we shared cookies, and when I ate them, I thought 'Don't friends do this?' For a moment I felt like I finally made a friend! I was so happy... so when you were being bullied, before I even realized it, I was following you after school."

"Don't you have a lot of friends, Yutei-san?"

"No... I never really had anyone I could call a friend."

"Th-Then what about our other classmates that they ask you for help?"

"Oh, they were just asking me for help, they don't really talk much to me other than when they want something... I know this might be rude... but, I don't really feel like they were talking to me like friends, so I never got anyone to call a friend..."

"So, you were alone all that time..."

Senkyo always thought Yukai had a lot of friends. His other classmates would always approach her and talk to her, both girls and boys alike. He always assumed she thought of them as friends. But he was wrong, she kept her distance from them even when talking because she didn't feel like they were friends. She valued the quality of her friends more than the quantity.

It was the same when Senkyo first met Kinro. He kept his distance and didn't treat him like a friend and at that time, Senkyo was also alone. He knew what it felt like to be alone with no one to talk to. He empathized with Yukai. But unlike him, Yukai hasn't thought of anyone else as a friend.

"Ah... it was probably rude of me to call you a friend all of the sudden. The cookies were an apology, after all. We never really talked much, I shouldn't call you a friend out of the blue—"

"It's fine."

"Eh...?"

Senkyo interrupted Yukai. He responded with a bright smile on his face. The despair from earlier was gone, that was because he knew the reason Yukai was worried about him. It was because she thought of him as a friend.

Senkyo smiled at Yukai with a warm, welcoming one. Yukai stared at his face when she heard him say 'It's fine.' Her eyes widened bigger than he'd ever seen them. She had a surprised face and eyes that looked like she'd seen the light out of a long, dark tunnel.

"I'm saying let's be friends! If you don't see me as a friend yet, then let's be friends now! It's better to have friends, right?"

"....."

She still didn't speak. She didn't move. When you look at her, she looks like she was still stunned by Senkyo's words… but that wasn't the case. Yukai's eyes slowly closed and her body lost its strength. She looked limp and was going to fall from the swing she was sitting on.

"Yutei-san!"

Senkyo immediately stood up and caught Yutei from falling to the ground. He was holding Yutei in a princess carry. Her small, weak-looking figure spread throughout Senkyo's arms. He worriedly scrutinized her because of her sudden loss of strength.

"Yutei-san! Are you okay?! Yutei-san!"

**28 – Friend or Foe**

This was incredibly unusual. Yukai didn't show any signs of sleep deprivation or exhaustion the whole time they were talking. Then, Senkyo understood the cause when his surroundings turned to nighttime.

*"\*Ryosei!\*"*

*"\*Yeah!\*"*

Senkyo switched with Ryosei as soon as their surroundings changed. It was a spirit zone, and everything around them was painted in shining crystals and light particles floated around them.

Ryosei gently placed Yukai's unconscious body in the nearby shelter and picked up Kuro Yaiba. He was on full alert and scanned the area. In the corner of his eye, he saw the bushes rustling.

"Whoever is in the bushes, come out right now! I know you're there!"

"...!"

The bushes rustled again. Whoever was in the bushes heard Ryosei's call. After a few seconds, a figure slowly came out of the bushes with their hands up. He got into a stance and was ready to strike. When the figure completely got out of the bushes, his stance loosened and his face showed surprise.

The figure that got out of the bushes was Hisho Yuu. She had her school uniform on and up along with her hands. Ryosei was confused for a second.

"Was this you're doing?!"

"Ah...! No! You've got it wrong!"

"Then why are you here?!"

"Well... Ah!!"

Yuu looked reluctant as she was speaking. Before she could begin explaining herself, something caught her attention, she suddenly thrust her hand forward, and a ball of fire cut through the air. The direction the fireball was going to was where Ryosei placed Yukai.

"Yukai-chan! Ah!"

When Ryosei took a look at where Yukai was, he saw a dark shadow that was about to grab her. The fireball hit the shadow and burnt it to a crisp. Ryosei immediately ran to Yukai and checked her for any external wounds, thankfully there weren't any.

"Yukou-senpai!"

Yuu called out for Senkyo, but Ryosei, who was in Senkyo's body, responds instead. She did not know that Senkyo had another soul in his body, and neither did anyone else. So Ryosei had gotten used to being called Senkyo from living inside his body.

Ryosei turned around and saw Yuu running toward him, but Ryosei was still skeptical. He wasn't convinced that Yuu wasn't an enemy. The last time they talked they never got to why Yuu was in Senkyo's house in the first place, that's why Ryosei was still a little doubtful.

"Stop right there, Hisho-chan!"

"...!"

"Are you the one who did this?"

"N-No! I wouldn't do something like this!"

Ryosei stared into Yuu's eyes. He scrutinized her every movement. He was trying to determine whether she was telling the truth or not. Yuu stood there with firm eyes as if they were saying 'I'm not lying!' From birth, Ryosei had the ability to tell whether or not someone was lying, and Ryosei always trusted his senses. He wasted no time and asked if Yuu was an enemy or not. From this, he was able to determine.

"Fine."

Ryosei determined Yuu was not lying. He loosened his stance and looked around the area but one was around. It was just him, Yukai, and Yuu. Since he couldn't see anyone else, he asked the only person that would be knowledgeable about these things.

"Hisho-chan, do you know what that shadow from earlier was?"

"That shadow from earlier was a Rgler. When they touch someone, they show that person's worst fear. They're beings that are created by an Ieroask. In Japanese, it would be best to describe the shadow as a Nightmare and the summoner as a Sleep Demon."

*"\*Yet another demon I don't know...\*"*

"So, there should be a sleep demon somewhere in the zone, right?"

"Yes."

"Do you know where it might be hiding?"

"...Unfortunately, it is most likely in that girl's body. As long as it's there, if it wants to, it can make the girl sleep forever."

"What?!"

Yuu pointed at Yukai's body. Ryosei looked worriedly at Yukai. They got an innocent girl caught up in their troubles.

*"\*Damn it! I got Yutei-san into trouble...\*"*

Senkyo cursed.

*"\*It was my fault. If I had known what sleep demons were, I might've been able to sense them...\*"*

*"\*...Damn! Snap out of it! Regretting the past isn't going to bring her back! Ryosei, let's get her out of this mess!\*"*

*"\*That’s what I’m planning on doing!\*"*

Ryosei and Senkyo resolved themselves to save their new friend. She was still lying on the shelter's table. Ryosei snapped out of it and asked Yuu for any clues on how to save Yukai.

"Hisho-chan, how can we get the demon out of there?"

Yuu stayed silent and looked despaired. She clenched her fists and slowly shook her head.

"...I'm sorry to say, but right now that's impossible."

"Why?!"

"That's because the only way to get a sleep demon out of a body. Is either for the soul in that body to fight off the demon by themselves, or exorcise it out of her body."

"Are you... serious?"

Yuu slowly nodded her head. Ryosei looked like he'd seen a ghost. His pale face said everything. If there was no way to save her, then she was doomed.

"Sleep demons are beings with the power to take the form of their soul and possess their victims by forcibly breaking into their dreams. A body cannot house two souls at once for a long time, so in 24 hours, one of those souls... will perish."

"DAMN IT!"

Ryosei cursed at his inability to do anything. If they didn't get the demon out of there within a day, it is likely that Yukai will die. But instead of despairing, Senkyo thoroughly analyzed Yuu's words, and something in her words stuck out in Senkyo's mind.

*"\*Ryosei! We might be able to save Yutei-san!\*"*

"What?! How?!"

*"\*Hisho-chan said that the demon broke inside her body, right?! Then what if...*YOU *break into Yutei-san's body and defeat the demon inside?\*"*

"Is that even possible?!"

*"\*I think it's worth the try.\*"*

"...?"

Senkyo thought of a brilliant idea but when he shared it with Ryosei, out of panic, Ryosei didn't use his inside voice and spoke out loud. Yuu could only see Senkyo talking to himself as if he was delusional.

“Senpai, you don’t have to talk to yourself. I’m here, you know?”

Although reluctant, Ryosei had prepared to take on the possibility. It was no time to keep secrets as Yukai’s life was on the line. Ryosei stood beside Yukai and closed his eyes. He returned Senkyo's body to him and focused on getting out of Senkyo's body. After a few quiet seconds, a small ball of flame appeared out of Senkyo's body.

"What?! Is that... a spirit?!"

Yuu let out a surprised yell. She hadn't seen anything like this before. A spirit came out of Senkyo and disappeared into Yukai's body. She looked at the scene with a dumbfounded face as it went on.

The spirit disappeared and Senkyo opened his eyes. Senkyo stared at Yukai's body with cheering eyes.

"You can do it, Ryosei. Bring Yutei-san back."

He smiled and let out words of encouragement for his bodiless friend. He entrusted Ryosei to bring back Yukai but there was one person in the area who wanted answers.

"Y-Yukou-senpai!! What was that?!"

Yuu was hungry for an explanation. She had her mouth open wide like she had never seen anything like it before, which in fact she hasn't.

"Hahaha... What should I do...?"

Senkyo let out an awkward laugh as he realized Yuu saw all that happened. Yuu was basically right in front of Senkyo's face as she pressed for answers and that would begin Hisho Yuu's interrogation of Yukou Senkyo.

**29 – Dream World**

Ryosei regained his senses and opened his eyes. In front of him, he saw the sight that he had been used to ever since regaining his consciousness in Senkyo’s mind. The place he was at was like the border between the clear blue sky and the endless sheet of space, it was like what people would call the Karman Line. He had the same appearance as he did when he was a high schooler.

He saw shards of crystals that floated around the place as he walked forward. The crystals had images playing on their surface like videos. He walked over the glass-like floor and observed what was around him. As he was walking, there was one shard that was covered in gold. The image playing on the shard showed someone dying in front of Yukai.

“I knew it… seeing that it's gold, it means she kept that as an unforgettable memory of her.”

Ryosei moved on and proceeded to walk forward. Everything looked fairly normal to him until he got to a certain point. The glass was tainted in red, and the black sky above him turned to blood red. The crystal shards from earlier were painted with the same blood red and the memories inside them blurred.

He hurried and ran straight forward. Black liquid began to cover the floor the further he ran and eerie laughs could be heard from the distance. Suddenly, Ryosei leaped back because of his senses, and from where he once stood, dark arms that resembled shadows sprouted out from the ground.

Ryosei scanned his surroundings and dark shadows were sprouting everywhere around him. It was one of the beings that sleep demons could create: nightmares. Nightmares surrounded Ryosei and closed in on him. Ryosei had nothing to defend himself with and clicked his tongue as the nightmares came closer.

In another location, Yukai was ensnared in dark shadows. She was suspended in the air with arms locking all four of her limbs. Her eyes shuttered, and after a few blinks, opened to see the blood-red surroundings and someone with a purple cloak standing in the middle of large crystals.

The crystals displayed images of the outside where Senkyo and Yuu stood, and two others that displayed an area with a huge amount of dark shadows that covered the screen. Yukai looked at the back of the purple cloak and before she could call out for it, it spoke in a distorted voice.

"This is a first. Is that a spirit? Hahaha! It's not like it matters anymore that boy won't survive my nightmares!"

"N-Nightmares?"

"Oh?"

Yukai spoke instinctively. The purple cloak noticed her and slowly approached her.

"Well, well, you're finally awake! Hahaha! Too bad you won't stay for long!"

"Wh-What? Wh-Who are you?! And... Where... Where am I?!"

Yukai's voice trembled in fear. Her voice was stuttering again. One second, she was talking with Senkyo, and the next she saw she was there. She was incredibly confused.

"Ohohoho! Your voice is trembling! I like it! Let me introduce myself! I am Vara, the Ieroask! I'm here to take over your body! Fear not, it won't hurt, your soul will simply shatter into a thousand pieces."

"Sh-Shatter?! B-But...!"

"WHAT?! DO YOU HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY?!"

"...!"

Yukai was struck with fear. Vara's voice raised so loud that it echoed around the whole room. His voice turned more distorted than earlier. Yukai shut her eyes as hard as she could to try and wake up from what she thought was a nightmare. Small drops of liquid spilled through the gaps in her eyes and poured down her face.

"...H-Hic..! N-no...! Hic... I-I don't want... hic... that..."

"HAHAHA! Bawling in tears won't stop me! HAHAHA!! I'll enjoy my time ripping you to shreds! After all, I have a day before I have to completely destroy you. There's no need to rush! This will teach that boy for messing with us!"

"N-NO...!"

Vara came closer to Yukai. She struggled while suspended in the air, but the shadows locking her were too strong. She couldn't get out. Long dark shadows that took shape of claws appeared behind Vara's purple cloak. It came closer to Yukai as every step resounded through the whole room.

*\*N-no...! Please! Stay away! Stop!\**

Yukai looked at Vara in despair. She closed her eyes tight and clenched her fists. She was getting ready for the claws that were going to slice her.

*\*No...! Hic... someone... hic... help...!\**

The footsteps stopped. Vara was readying its claws to slice through Yukai. No one was there to help her. Her life flashed before her eyes and let out her trembling voice.

"Mom...!"

*\*Slash! Slash! Slash!\**

"E-Eh...?"

Yukai heard the sharp slashing sounds she thought that was her end, the slashing sounds that would end her life, but she didn't feel anything. Her body and insides still felt intact. She didn't feel any kind of pain. She slowly opened her eyes to see what the slashing sounds that didn't spell her death were. When she opened them, she saw the blood-red sky and a man in a jet-black coat with blue lines. She raised her head slightly upwards to see his face. A man about her age, wearing the common black hair but with a red string to decorate it.

"It looks like I made it just in time again."

It was Ryosei, and he was holding Kuro Yaiba. Yukai stared at him from a low angle. That was because she was currently being princess carried by him. She looked to her side to see that the dark shadows that once bound her were cut to little pieces and were disappearing in midair. Vara had a long, deep cut in the middle of his chest area.

Vara held his wound and slumped on his knees. Dark liquid could be seen pouring out of his body and onto the ground. It resembled the dark liquid that once surrounded Ryosei on his way here. Vara was screaming in pain and his voice started stuttering.

"B-Bastard, ho-how a-a-a-are you alive-ve-ve-ve?!"

Vara took over Yukai's body through her dreams. That meant that Ryosei was in the dream world. In the dream world, as long as Ryosei has a good image of something, he can make it appear out of nowhere. Ryosei summoned a dream version of Kuro Yaiba and slashed his way through the army of shadows.

The cloak that clad Vara's body dropped to the ground. It was like Vara's body never existed. The only thing that was left was a pool of dark liquid and the purple cloth. And soon, the room was filled with silence.

"Y-You're...!"

Yukai yelped as she took a look at Ryosei's face, but before she could continue, the space they were in began shaking. It was like an earthquake was happening, but that was impossible since they were inside Yukai's body.

**30 – Reunion**

Soon, the space they were in was broken like glass shards and their surroundings turned to night. The moon and stars covered the night sky. The puddle of dark liquid where Vara once was had a large number of arms sticking out of it. The arms were stacked and stacked until it was at least thirty feet tall.

The dark arms merged together and made a horrid figure, one straight out of a nightmare. It had numerous arms sticking out of its body with four long ones acting as its main arms. It had no eyes but had a massive mouth. It looked like it was covered with tar as fluids were dripping from it. The monster swiped at Ryosei with its four long arms. Ryosei jumped in the air to dodge the first arm, but since he was in midair, he couldn't move to dodge again. He was about to get hit.

"Ah...!"

Yukai held on tighter to Ryosei out of fear, but Ryosei didn't show signs of annoyance or worry, he kept a cool face and focused on dodging the arms. Before Ryosei got hit, a transparent platform appeared under Ryosei's feet and allowed him to dodge the second arm. He did the same with the following arms and safely landed on the ground.

"I-IMpOSsIBLE!! ThERE's nO WaY AnYONe CAn MANIpuLAte DREAmS LiKe THat!!!"

"What? Bending the dream world to your liking isn't possible? Don't make me laugh! You call yourself a sleep demon and can't even make things like that happen in a dream?"

The monster's voice was broken as it spoke. It sounded like what it looked like. Hideous and ghastly. It let out a screeching scream that could destroy ears if heard directly. But Ryosei and Yukai didn't need to move. An intangible barrier appeared in front of them and stopped the sound before it could reach them. The monster went mad as he saw what he couldn't believe. It screeched even louder and the tar-like liquid oozing out from its body shot out like cannonballs.

"IMpOSSibLE! IMpOSSibLE! IMpOSSibLE! IMpOSSibLE! IMpOSSibLE!!"

All of the sudden, trees began sprouting from the ground and covered the flat, moonlit area. Their surroundings turned from a blank plane to a thick forest. The tar that the monster shot out hit the surrounding trees, but the thickness of the leaves prevented them from spreading to the ground.

Ryosei was nowhere to be seen. The forest hid them like a needle in a haystack. The monster couldn't do anything but shoot out tar balls and destroy trees within reach of its arms.

"Pathetic."

Ryosei jumped out of the trees and attacked the monster's blind spot. He was still carrying Yukai, but she didn't seem to hinder Ryosei's movements. She now had a black hoodie covering her. Ryosei held Yukai with his left arm and used his right arm to slash his blade. Yukai was held tight and stuck to Ryosei's chest so she wouldn't fall off.

Ryosei ran just above the monster's tarry body. He had transparent platforms appear at his every step and slashed its body as he ran. The tar shooting out the monster was blocked by the platforms he was stepping on, avoiding getting hit.

Kuro Yaiba was suddenly covered in flames. In a single second, the monster's body had a huge portion in its middle section slashed off. The fire spread throughout the monster’s whole center part, but it severed its own body with its arms to prevent it from spreading all around.

The upper portion of its body came falling down on its lower portion and splashed its tar-like goo on the surrounding trees on impact. Ryosei was once again nowhere to be seen. The monster merged together again but it was noticeably smaller than it once was.

"I'vE HaD ENOUGH! DiE! DiE! DiE! DiE! DiE! DiE!!!"

The monster shot out spikes from its body instead of cannonballs. But even though it was smaller, it was still somewhere around 14 feet tall. It shot out spikes that pierced and destroyed the surrounding trees. Roughly around 50 meters of the trees were all gone and Ryosei couldn't hide from the monster anymore.

Ryosei was now face to face with the monster. He still had Yukai in his arm and her hoodie was tainted with a few drops of tar. But this time, he put Yukai down a good distance away from the monster, but enough that he'd be able to get back if he needed to.

"Stay here and don't move, okay?"

"O-Okay..."

Yukai watched Ryosei as he slowly approached the monster. Ryosei got into a stance and prepared to strike. The monster retracted the tar that was on the trees and ground. Black tar flew through the air and collected in the monster's body. The monster then changed into a humanoid form, its edges were smooth and had a dark aura flowing around it.

In a blink of an eye, Ryosei reignited Kuro Yaiba in flames and slashed the monster but this time, it wouldn't get down as easily. The slashed part regenerated like liquid filling up an empty part of a bottle. It changed its arms to spikes and attacked Ryosei.

Ryosei made contact with the spikes like they were solid spikes but parried them and slashed the monster's body a few times before backing up. Ryosei had a different fighting style compared to when he was fighting using Senkyo's body. That was because Senkyo's body couldn't handle Ryosei's fighting style. But since he was in a dream, he wasn’t limited have the same power as his original body, he could strengthen it and make it much stronger.

The monster continued to receive strikes that slashed through its whole body but it cut off its own body parts faster than the fire could spread. Its tar was all over the vicinity where they were fighting. The monster had its arms and legs cut off but it only reattached themselves, so Ryosei backed and the monster took that chance to gather the tar on the ground to its body again.

Ryosei took a different form and readied to strike. The monster glared at Ryosei with killing intent. It laughed at Ryosei as it was still alive and regenerating.

"HAHAHAHA!! YOu CaN'T DEFeaT ME!! I'LL JUsT KeEp REGenErATING!!"

Yukai looked over at Ryosei with a worried look. He seemed to have stopped completely. Did Ryosei give up? No.

"WHA-WHAT IS THIS??!"

The monster took a look around him and he saw not one Ryosei, but a dozen. They surrounded the monster in a circle with the same stance. The blades they were holding were all clad in fire.

"IMpOSSibLE! IMpOSSibLE! IMpOSSibLE! JuST WhO Are YOu??!!!"

Ryosei didn't bother to respond and began to strike. One Ryosei dashed up to the monster and slashed it with a blade of fire.

"Time to burn!"

"GAHAHGAGHAGAAGAGAAAAAA!!!!!!!!"

The monster screamed in pain. The fire was effective on him. The attacks continued and a slash of fire came in every half a second and almost all the tar from the monster was fully burnt to a crisp. On the 11th strike, only one Ryosei remained, and it looked like his blade had more fire covering it than the previous blades. Ryosei dashed and struck the monster, but not once, he followed it up with eight more strikes and completely obliterated the monster.

Ryosei checked his surroundings for any remaining tars, but there were none. The fire that covered the blade was snuffed out and she sheathed Kuro Yaiba. He walked back to Yukai and kneeled down with one leg to level their faces.

"I'm sorry! I got you dragged into this mess. I hope you can accept my apology!"

"....."

Yukai stayed silent. Ryosei bowed his head, so he couldn't see the look on Yukai's face. Time slowly passed as Yukai stood in front of Ryosei who was kneeling and bowing down to her.

Ryosei then felt a smooth, warm hand touch his face. Yukai stared at Ryosei and slowly raised his face to face hers. When Ryosei faced her, he saw teary eyes and drops of tears dripping down her face. Ryosei was about to say 'sorry' again until Yukai spoke out in a trembling voice.

"Hic... is that you... Ryosei... onii-san?"

Ryosei smiled brightly, expecting her to recognize him.

"That's you, isn't it?! Konjou Ryosei-onii-san!"

Yukai wanted an answer.

"Yeah... it's me. Nice to meet you again, Yutei Yukai-chan."

Yukai's eyes were filled with tears and embraced Ryosei as she cried her heart out. Ryosei gave out a warm smile and patted her back. Her tears glistened from the moonlight. Yukai embraced Ryosei in the middle of a destroyed forest, under the shining light of the moon. They stayed there for a few minutes which felt like a lifetime.

Meanwhile, outside of Yukai's body, a short distance away from Yuu giving Senkyo a mental shakedown. A black blob that looked similar to tar lay on a leaf, in the bushes. It slowly crawled away from where Yuu, Senkyo, and Yukai were and retreated to where it came from.

**............**

Far, far away from Senkyo and the others, the blob reached an abandoned building and entered it. The atmosphere was like what any abandoned buildings in horror movies would be. The blob slowly slid its way to a certain room with a broken-down door and slid through it.

"Ah! Then it's really her?! Yes! If I capture her Nii-sama will be ecstatic!"

A humanoid figure sat on a soft cushion. It had four small balls floating around him. He stared at the black blob that was in front of him.

"You did well, Slime-kun! But... I don't need any broken toys!"

One of the balls that floated around him came close to the blob and electrocuted it. The blob was turned to nothing but a crisp and the ball returned to its original position.

"This will be fun! I'll be sure to play with them a lot!"

**Chapter 4: The Calm Before The Storm**

**31 – Revelations**

That moment I saw her in Senkyo's memories, I recognized her right away. There was no way I could forget who she was. It was impossible, after all, she was the last thing I saw... before I died.

She had the same purple eyes and light brown hair as before. Parts of her may have grown, but I couldn't mistake her. Her teary face that I saw the day I died. Her sheepish and trembling voice always made her seem nervous. Her sad, apologetic eyes that were filled with melancholy looked like they only worsened since I last saw her.

**............**

There's no mistake! That's him! The moment I saw him that time, he looked like he didn't age a single bit. He had the same jet-black hair decorated by a single strand of red string. Those sharp yet gentle eyes that stared at death for me... There was no way I could forget him. It's impossible. After all, he saved my life... and used his own in exchange.

His name was Konjou Ryosei. He saved me from a traffic accident at the cost of his life. Back then, I was just about 11 years old something kept me from moving but he was there and pushed me away from the speeding truck. He was so fast that it felt like the wind pushed me out of the way. When I looked back, he was bleeding on the ground all beaten up.

I went beside him to help him in any way I could, but it felt like I was helped instead. Even though he was dying, even though he was all beaten up and couldn't get up, he smiled at me like he was comforting me. The warm smile that felt like it knew all of my life's worries. I couldn't help but tear up, but most of all, he was the first person that noticed my true feelings. The very ones I kept hidden behind a mask.

*"\*Looks like you’re no different from me… I think… Purple hyacinth would look good with those eyes…\*”*

Those very words reverberated in my mind. He noticed the regret I deeply felt. He mentioned to me a specific flower. The purple hyacinth that translates to the language of flowers as—I am sorry, please forgive me.

After he died, I wanted to know more about him, but all I could find out was his name. Strangely enough, the person who told me that single bit of information was my mother. Despite her condition, she was still able to recognize him from the way I described him. She seemed to know him personally but I couldn’t ask her anything other than that. She was troubled every time I brought it up. In the end, I gave up.

**............**

The sun had begun to set. Senkyo and the others headed to his house to rest from the earlier encounter with a dream demon. Senkyo, Yuu, Yukai, and Ryosei, who was back inside Senkyo’s body, were all present around the dining table but their real reason wasn't just to rest. Yuu stared intently at Senkyo as if saying “You have some explaining to do!” while Yukai was nervously looking around the room.

The earlier encounter reminded Yuu, Senkyo, and Ryosei that there was still a lot they needed to know. While Yukai was unintentionally dragged into their problems, she didn't seem to mind. Senkyo served Yuu and Yukai tea and sat with them. Yuu drank a sip of her tea before beginning the conversation.

"So, Yukou-senpai has another soul living inside of his body and that soul can interact with Yukou-senpai such as sharing memories and emotions, and controlling the same body, is that correct?"

"Yeah..."

Yuu slammed the table with both her hands which got the attention of everyone in the room. She then pointed her finger accusingly at Senkyo and shouted as loud as she could.

"NOW THAT'S JUST IMPOSSIBLE!!"

"Now, now, Hisho-chan, calm down..."

"How can I calm down if what you're saying doesn't make sense?! Humans cannot have more than one soul living inside their bodies! No, even if you weren’t human it’d be impossible! If two souls are inside a single body for more than a day, one of the souls would be forcefully shattered!"

"W-Well... we don't understand why either... It just kinda happened..."

"Yukou-senpai, there goes your laid-back attitude again!"

"But we really don't know! Even Ryosei doesn't know what or why it happened."

"Hahh..."

Yuu let out a heavy sigh and sat back down in her seat. She was clearly worked up. She wanted to know how and why an exception had appeared to the rule that she always knew was true: Only one soul can live inside one body. As far as she knew, that had been true on both beings on Earth and Zerid. So, she was taken aback when Senkyo told her another soul was living inside his body without leaving for more than a day.

"It really is hard to believe, but I can't really deny what's right in front of me..."

"U-umm... I'm sorry, but... I don't get what you guys are talking about..."

Yukai wasn't explained what had happened. When she woke back up, she looked tired, so they headed to Senkyo's house. They didn't explain anything to her on their way, so she was still completely clueless.

"I... I want to know what's happening! About demons and spirits... and about Ryosei-onii-san!"

She spoke out with a determined tone. She wanted to know more about Ryosei. After seven years of wanting to know more, finally, she had the person she wanted to know about right in front of him. But before anyone else could speak, Ryosei took over Senkyo's body and responded to Yukai.

"No."

"B-But why, Yukou-san?!"

Ryosei was now in control of Senkyo’s body. However, there was no distinct difference when they switch. There was no way to tell if Senkyo was speaking or Ryosei.

"Right now, it's Ryosei talking. I can't allow an innocent girl to get caught in our mess. Even Senkyo agrees, you almost died earlier. I can't just keep saving you all the time."

"But...!"

"I agree with Konjou-san, Yutei-senpai. What we're caught up in is no place for a normal human. It's too dangerous."

"....."

Yukai went silent. Everyone else was against letting her get mixed up with demons and spirits. They didn't want another incident like earlier. Yukai couldn't do anything. She couldn't force them to tell her, even if she persisted, nothing would change, she knew that.

She sat there in silence thinking about what she should do. Then, with seeping annoyance, she got up and picked up her bag.

"I see... Then I'll be going. Thank you for the tea."

**32 – …Fairness?**

Yukai left Senkyo's house. Leaving only Senkyo, Ryosei, and Yuu. They stared silently at the door as she left.

*"\*You always joke around but you can be strict when you have to, huh?\*"*

*"\*Naturally. Living a life of fighting demons and evil spirits wasn't a walk in the park. I have to put my foot down when it comes to these things to avoid hurting anyone else. But I don't think I need to tell you that, do I?\*"*

*"\*No, you don't. I was just surprised by this side of you. I mean, you're worried about her like your actual little sister.\*"*

*"\*And where did that come from?\*"*

*"\*A hunch you could say.\*"*

Ryosei brushed Senkyo's comments away and looked back at Yuu.

"Well then, Hisho-chan, I have a question for you too."

"What is it?"

"Why were you in the playground? And I won't take anything like 'I was just passing by' as an answer."

"Ah...! That... umm... well..."

Yuu moved around agitatedly. She scratched her cheek, looked around the room, and scratched her head. All the while Ryosei was observing her like a hawk. She seemed to be thinking of an excuse, but that wouldn't work. Yuu looked straight into Ryosei's eyes and that was all she needed to let her know that there was no getting out of this one.

She stopped moving around and fixed herself. She let out a sigh as a sign of defeat, looked at the ground to avoid Ryosei's eyes, and spoke in a low voice.

"I... ing... you..."

"Excuse me?"

"I... st... king... you..."

"Come again?"

"....."

She went silent and took a deep breath. It looks like whatever the reason was, she really didn't want to tell but forced herself to.

"I WAS STAL—OBSERVING YOU!"

"YOU WERE DEFINITELY GOING TO SAY STALKING!"

With the change of attitude, Senkyo took control of his body and made a quick quip. It looks like he was putting together the puzzle pieces in his mind while Yuu was mumbling incomplete words.

"WHY WERE YOU STALKING ME?!"

"We-well... I told you last time, right? Something about you interested me so I observed you!"

"SINCE WHEN?!"

"From... the first time I saw you... no, a few days after actually!"

"FOR HOW LONG?"

"Tw-twenty-four hours, seven days a week... with exceptions like classes, eating, and sleeping..."

"TW-TWENTY-FOUR SEVEN?! DO YOU EVEN GO HOME?!"

“O-Of course I do! When I change for school or take a bath.”

Senkyo was mentally shocked when he heard her say she had been stalking him 24/7. It looked like his soul was going out of his body.

"I-I was being stalked for that long... and I didn't even notice..."

*"\*Senkyo... seriously, how can you be so sharp yet ignorant at the same time?\*"*

*"\*It's not my fault! How could I expect that my junior is stalking me?!\*"*

Ryosei's voice sounded that of a disappointed father. After that retort, Senkyo realized something.

"Wait... when you say 24/7 then that time in the closet..."

"Yes..."

Senkyo was referring to the time when a bat came flying out of the closet. The day that Senkyo fought a werewolf and carried a naked girl to his room. Yuu would turn herself into a bat and hide in his closet every night and observe him until he slept.

"Then the shadows I've been seeing near my classroom..."

"Most likely..."

He thought back to the multiple times he would see a shadow in the corner of his eye every time he was entering the classroom. Yuu was hiding behind corners, observing his movements and listening in to conversations every time Senkyo was going to school.

"The reason Ichika got the incident with Itsuki so quick..."

"I informed her when I saw..."

When Itsuki made that big threat in front of everyone in the class, at that time Senkyo's social status hit rock bottom, Yuu was watching it happen on the sidelines.

Senkyo then stopped and took a deep breath. He mentally steeled himself. His whole body was trembling and his face went beet red.

"Th-then... every time... I had to *get off*... were you... were you watching...?"

"....."

Yuu didn't respond. Her face blushed at the realization of what Senkyo meant. Senkyo reluctantly thought back to the times he had to relieve himself of all the pent-up urges. Yes, he was thinking back to the inevitable times he had to masturbate. Yuu slowly nodded her head, but still did not make eye contact with Senkyo.

Senkyo's eyes filled with despair. It was like he'd seen hell itself. He was broken by Yuu's gesture of confirming his suspicion.

"N-NOOOOOOOO!!!"

Senkyo let out a pained scream, one that showed how much he broke. It was a scream like no other. It was like his whole world was falling apart.

One would think that someone could only make that scream when they were on the brink of death. But inside, Senkyo had already died from the simple fact of knowing his junior saw him get off. After a few minutes of pained cries, Senkyo had calmed down enough that he wasn't screaming at the top of his lungs, but he still hasn't gotten over the fact he'd been seen. He had tears in his eyes and bit his lip while letting a 'kuuu...' sound out his mouth.

"I'm really sorry!!"

Yuu prostrated herself in front of Senkyo.

"Degenerate-chan..."

Senkyo gave a nickname that he thought would be fitting for his peeking junior. He stared at her with a cold look as he said her new nickname.

"But I really am sorry! I didn't mean to peek!"

"But you peeked, didn't you!?"

"Yes..."

"See!"

*"\*Now, now, calm down Senkyo. I know you've been through a lot, but I can't have this end like last time.\*"*

"Tsk... Fine. I’m letting Ryosei take over."

Yuu responded to him with a nod and returned to her seat to properly face Senkyo. Senkyo switched with Ryosei and picked up where they left off.

"Now then, Hisho-chan, there's something I want to know."

"What is it?"

"Why are you being chased down?"

"...You don't need to know that."

"Seeing that a werewolf and a sleep demon already attacked us, there's probably going to be more. We've already butted in quite a few times so it's likely that whoever is chasing you is already planning on getting rid of us. That's why we want to know what we're up against."

"....."

The room stayed silent as Yuu thought hard about what she should do. You couldn't see her face, but you could tell that she was thinking hard.

"...Fine. However! I need you to agree to three conditions. If you don't agree to them, I won't tell you why I'm being chased."

"What are the conditions?"

"First, you will keep everything I tell you secret no exceptions. Second, if anything happens to me, save yourselves. And third...”

Yuu took a quick pause with a barely noticeable blush on her face.

"I... I want to check if you have mana."

"If I have mana? Didn't you refuse Senkyo when he asked you to?"

"We-well... That was because it was Yukou-senpai's fault! He suddenly brought it up like that and I wasn't mentally prepared yet!"

*"\*Don't give me that!\*"*

Senkyo couldn't help but retort, even if he knew she wouldn't hear it.

"Could you tell us why you want to check Senkyo for mana?"

"That's because... He might be who I'm looking for."

Ryosei stared at Yuu with a questioning face. He didn't bother speaking and just used gestures. Yuu picked up on that and answered him. She declined to answer that question the last time, but it was clear to her that she wasn’t going to get what she wanted if she didn’t answer Ryosei.

"... A true human mana wielder."

“True? Do you mean a human with a natural mana pool?”

"I believe so. It is a prophecy in our world, but in short, to save all three worlds from destruction, a human mana wielder will appear and save us. That's why I need to check Yukou-senpai if he has mana."

"And if he does...?"

"Well... I don't know... At first, I planned to take that person to Zerid immediately but if Yukou-senpai is the mana wielder... I... I'm not sure..."

"I see... Senkyo, do you agree to her conditions?"

*"\*Yeah. I’m fine with that.\*"*

"Then it's settled. Yuu, Senkyo and I agree to your conditions."

"Very well..."

**33 – Agreement**

Her divine soul. That was what Yuu told them the demons were after. A divine soul is a soul that has incredible power that matches the gods. Unlike Senkyo and Ryosei’s two spirits, one body situation, divine souls are a part of one soul.

Beings with a divine soul are called Angels, and they receive the divine soul from birth. They have a crest-like birthmark on them that shows that they have a divine soul and it usually specifies what kind. Every mark is unique, there are no two souls with the same kind of divine soul. They can draw the power of their divine soul and use it to do anything within the soul's limit.

But an Angel can't just draw power from their soul. Their soul must first recognize them as a wielder worthy of their power. Imagine a guarded gate, unless the keeper of the gate recognizes you and lets you through the gate, you won't be able to use the power within the divine soul. Because every divine soul is unique, there is no definite way of being recognized.

However, even given their incredible power, the souls have limits. Those are dependent on what kind of divine soul you have. Yuu has the 'Divine Soul of Flame,' her fire magic is enhanced, and if she gets recognized by the gatekeeper, she will be able to draw out incredible power that can scorch the world in a sea of burning flame.

Yuu had no intention of hurting anybody with her soul, that's why she didn't bother to get recognized by her soul. But the people who are chasing Yuu down want their hands on her soul and use it for whatever evil schemes they had in mind.

The reason Yuu didn't want to tell this to anybody else is that she was worried that the number of people that want her soul would increase. If the words “incredible power that matches even the gods” got into their heads, they might join up with groups that are already after her and her enemies would only increase. It seemed like Yuu trusted Senkyo and Ryosei enough that she would be willing to tell them.

"Divine Souls, huh? If anyone with bad intentions got their hands on such power, it would cause a lot of trouble."

"Yes, that's why I won't let them catch me."

After Yuu's explanation, Ryosei gave his thoughts about it. They stayed quiet for a bit, thinking about what other troublesome mess people will get into if they knew such power exists.

"Hisho-chan, I'm assuming beings with divine souls only come from your world and no one in this world knows about them. Is that correct?"

"Not quite, there have been cases where humans associate with Zerians to get hold of the souls, but as far as I know, only a handful of people know about it. So, as much as I can, I want to prevent that information to spread to any more humans."

"Well, don't worry. You can trust us to keep your secret."

"I see, that's good."

"Then, let's go."

"Konjou-san? Go where?"

Ryosei stood up and headed to Senkyo's room. Yuu followed behind albeit confused. When Ryosei entered the room, he sat on the bed and unbuttoned his uniform.

"Uwawawa!! K-Konjou-san?! Wha-What are you doing?!"

*"\*R-Ryosei?! What are you doing to my body?!\*"*

Yuu got a beet-red face as soon as she saw Senkyo unbuttoning his uniform, but inside, Ryosei was still the one in control. He had his front bare to Yuu as she was lousily covering her face with her hands. There were holes through her hand that her eyes could still see everything.

"This is in one of your conditions, right? You know, 'check for mana.' If I remember correctly, Senkyo agreed to that as well. Kukuku..."

*"\*I REMEMBER AGREEING TO IT, BUT NOT TAKING OFF CLOTHES!!\*"*

"But I'm just unbuttoning your shirt. It would be easier if Hisho-chan sucked you without clothing in the way, right?"

*"\*Don't phrase it in a way people will misunderstand!!\*"*

As Senkyo and Ryosei were having a conversation, Yuu had her eyes going around in circles from Ryosei's last line. After all, that line could easily be misunderstood if no one knew the context.

"Uwawawawawa~~"

Yuu was making weird noises that indicated she was panicking. After Ryosei got everything ready, he gave Senkyo a 'good luck!' before switching places with him and abandoning Senkyo.

"D-Damn you, Ryosei!! "

"I have to do this! I'm the one who requested it so I need to go through with it!"

Yuu's self-encouraging could be heard where Senkyo was sitting. She slowly approached Senkyo trembling step by trembling step. She climbed up Senkyo's lap to properly reach his neck. Soon, their faces were beet red like never before and were inches apart.

*"\*C-C-Calm down, Senkyo! She's just here to check if you have mana, nothing else...!\*"*

*"\*Y-Yukou-senpai is so close... I have to check if he has mana... which means... Uwawawa~!\*"*

Each person had their fair share of mental battles. Yuu finally closed on Senkyo's bare neck and prepared to suck his blood. She bared her fangs at him.

Senkyo then felt fangs as cold as steel make contact with his skin. The cold sensation made Senkyo let out a sharp yelp and jolted slightly in surprise. Yuu went through with it and pierced his bare neck with her cold fangs and proceeded to suck Senkyo's blood.

The whole time Yuu was sucking Senkyo's blood, he would squirm a few times over the unique sensation of having his blood sucked, but for some reason, Yuu also had a few twitches from time to time. The way she sucked on his neck made it look somewhat erotic with her cute face and sucking. Though Senkyo couldn't see it, that didn't stop his imagination from thinking of such things.

After a few seconds, Yuu still wasn't finished. She was taking a while so Senkyo called her out.

"H-Hisho-chan...?"

Hearing Senkyo call out, Yuu took her fangs off Senkyo's neck. But when she faced Senkyo, Senkyo saw a face that looked like she was in the heat.

"Hisho-chan?! What happened?!"

Senkyo was showing his worry for his junior. Suddenly, Yuu pushed Senkyo down the bed with both her hands and stared at him with wanting eyes.

Yuu was panting heavily and there was a small amount of drool showing in her mouth. Her eyes looked like they were overflowing with desire. She looked every bit erotic with her cuteness amplifying it tenfold.

"Hisho… chan...?"

All Senkyo could do was call her name out to try and knock her out of her sudden fit, albeit meekly. He tried to push her off but her strengthened vampire hold was too heavy.

"S-Senkyo-senpai... I... hahh...! can't control myself...!"

"...!"

*"\*S-She used my given name?! Why does that sound so hot?! And what did she mean she can't control herself? Did I do something wrong?! Is this that one thing that happens in anime!? THAT THING!?\*"*

Yuu slowly closed her face into Senkyo's face. Senkyo reflexively closed his eyes and awaited what was going to happen next. Then, he felt a warm, soft sensation on his lips. When he opened his eyes, Yuu's soft, rosy lips were making contact with his.

After a few seconds of trying to confirm his situation, Senkyo realized Yuu was kissing him. His eyes widened and reflexively pushed her away and sat back up. This time, Senkyo didn't feel any weight in Yuu's arms and successfully pushed her away. He was inches away from her and she was still sitting on his lap. He looked at her and saw she was sleeping. Her face was still a bit red and she had a bit rise in temperature.

"O-Oh, ok. That wasn’t a kiss, right? If she’s asleep then we were just touching lips, that’s it… hahh... What was that...?"

Senkyo laid Yuu on his bed and tucked her into the sheets. He grabbed a cold towel and placed it on Yuu's forehead to lower her slightly high temperature. When he placed it, he realized that her temperature spiked up quite a bit. He wasn’t sure what to do since he was treating a vampire instead of a human, so he thought this might have been a normal occurrence for them. For now, he decided to watch over her as if she was a normal human with a high fever. He grabbed a chair and watched over her, just like the last time.

"Seriously… what was… that...?"

As Senkyo looked over Yuu, he felt a bit tired but tried to fight off his sleepiness to watch over his patient, but for some reason, he felt unusually drowsy and nodded off himself.

**34 – Trust**

When Senkyo woke up, he didn't see Yuu lying in the bed anymore. He looked around the room to look for her, but she wasn't anywhere in the room. He stood up and a familiar blanket fell off his body. It was his blanket, but the last time he saw it, it was covering Yuu on the bed.

The blinds were down, but he could see sun rays coming out from the gaps in the blinds. His room looked tidier than when he last saw it.

*"\*She's downstairs.\*"*

*"\*Ryosei? What happened?\*"*

*"\*You fell asleep and Hisho-chan woke up. She covered you with a blanket and went downstairs. I don't think she left because I can hear noises in the kitchen. I can only guess what that was all about, Mr. dating sim protagonist.\*"*

*"\*What?\*"*

*"\*.....\*"*

*"\*Well, whatever I better go check on her. She didn't look pretty good when she fell asleep.\*"*

Ryosei didn't respond back to Senkyo, so he headed for the kitchen. As he got closer, he could smell a nice aroma of bacon and eggs. He heard movement and rhythmic humming with a nice melody coming from the kitchen. Once he entered, he saw a calming sight of a high school girl in an apron cooking breakfast.

She was humming while she was frying eggs and bacon. She was wearing a blue apron over her school uniform, matching her blue jacket. The aroma of fried food filled the room as Senkyo entered. From where Senkyo was standing, she looked like a newlywed wife cooking up the morning breakfast.

"Hisho-chan?"

"Ah! Yukou-senpai, you're up. I hope you don't mind; I'm cooking us breakfast and lunch for school."

"S-Sure, I don't mind. But, are you alright?"

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Well, it's just that last night you had a really high fever. Is that normal for you vampires?”

Yuu stared at Senkyo with a confused look on her face.

“…No, I don’t think so, but I seem to be fine now. See, when I woke up it was already morning, so I thought that I'd make us breakfast and lunch as an apology for last night... I hope you don’t mind."

"O-Oh..."

The scene from last night crossed Senkyo's mind. He could still remember Yuu’s erotic face, it was a sight he'd never forget. That wasn't all, he remembered the moment Yuu fell unconscious, he received his first kiss. He was a little embarrassed about it and a slight blush appeared on his face but that didn't stop him from asking what that was all about. His face showed a mixture of worry and curiosity. Because it was so sudden that he thought he might've done something wrong.

"I don’t mind, but, um... Hisho-chan, about last night... are you okay? You suddenly got too heated up..."

"O-Oh... I'm sorry about that. I went out of control."

"Went out of control?"

"Y-You see, we vampires, don't need to suck human blood to survive. Other food humans eat can also work. It’s just that blood is the most effective, as long as it's the red kind of blood, that is. Although human blood is still the best tasting for us. So..."

"I-I see..."

"B-But don't think that I couldn't control myself just because I drank human blood! My parents gave me a taste of human blood when I was little to avoid having a frenzy of sucking human blood when we grow up. But your blood... tasted much, much better than any I'd tasted before..."

"Thank you...? Is that what I should be saying?"

"Ah! Don't worry I won't be out for your blood just because it tastes good! I-I was just saying that you had different blood from all the others that I tasted so far... It even got me worked up. Sorry, I’ll stop talking now. Please take a seat, breakfast is almost done."

*"\*So, I don't need to worry about anything?\*"*

Despite having a vampire tell him his blood was delicious, Senkyo didn't falter and took a seat by the dining table. He seemed to still trust Yuu with all his heart. Even Ryosei didn't seem worried. Something must have happened last night when Senkyo was asleep that lead Ryosei to trust Yuu.

A few hours earlier, her surroundings were familiar to her, she felt something on her forehead and grabbed it to see what it was. It was a slightly wet cloth that served to lower her body heat. She looked around the room and saw her senior sleeping on a chair by the bedside.

"Yukou-senpai..."

Yuu tried to recall what happened before she fell asleep and remembered the embarrassing things she did to Senkyo. Her face went a little red.

"Seriously, senpai... You can't be this trusting..."

She remembered the conversation they had the other day. Senkyo showed Yuu his full trust. He had a laid-back attitude around her and even told her that she wasn't bad. She got off the bed and put the blanket around Senkyo. She looked at him while he was sleeping and let her thoughts spill out of her head.

"You... really are something else, hehe..."

Yuu gave a bright smile and a light giggle as she looked at Senkyo. It was as if there was more than just happiness behind that smile. If Senkyo was awake, he'd probably give a compliment about Yuu's smile.

She then tidied up the room with a smile on her face and went downstairs to make breakfast and lunch. But little did she know, someone was watching her the whole time.

*"\*Senkyo, you sure did a number on that girl... I may not trust her as much as you do, but that smile wasn't fake.\*"*

Ryosei saw everything. Yuu had no way of knowing. After all, even if Senkyo's eyes were closed, as long as he wasn't controlling Senkyo's body, as a spirit in standby mode, he could see the outlines of his surroundings without the need to open his eyes.

Ryosei had the ability to completely read people, so no one could lie to him and get away with it, may it be human or any other species. He had full trust in his ability, and when he saw Yuu just now, he knew she wasn't a bad person.

**35 – Future Plans**

Now, Senkyo is having breakfast with Yuu. Like the last time they ate together, they didn't speak much because both of them weren't used to this kind of thing. They just ate without a word, but that didn't stop their thoughts.

*"\*This is the second time I'll be eating with Hisho-chan... How do these things keep happening? Yesterday was a fight with a werewolf that caused Yuu to stay the night…. and now it's vampire hormones? It's not like I don't like it, no, I definitely like it! This is the only time I'm alone with a cute girl, after all. This never happens normally. But every time she's stayed, it's only because something bad happened to her. I don't want her to think this house is like a death trap or something...\*"*

*"\*I'm eating with Yukou-senpai again! But maybe I'm being rude now... I stayed here for two nights already, maybe I'm being a nuisance... I don't want that... Later, I better not get into something that'll trouble senpai.\*"*

Both of them had their own thoughts on the situation. If only the other person knew what the other was thinking, they'd probably laugh about it. Just as Senkyo finished eating, he was reminded of something.

"Ah, Hisho-chan, I forgot to ask."

"Hm? What is it?"

"From what happened yesterday, did you find out if I have mana or not?"

"Oh, sorry I forgot to tell you... Yukou-senpai, you..."

"....."

"...don't have any mana in you."

"I see... thanks for checking."

Senkyo didn't look disappointed, after all the only reason he wanted to know if he had mana or not was because he wanted to know why he is able to enter spirit zones. He didn't look disappointed, but confused.

"Then, why can I enter spirit zones?"

"...Hm... Now that I think about it..."

Yuu put her finger to her chin and thought of the reason.

"Do you have a *spectral*?"

"Spectral? What's that?"

"Ah, I haven't mentioned that yet. A spectral is an object that can store mana in it. It can be anything at all, as long as it's physical and can be touched by humans. People who know of Zerid found a way to use mana. I'm not sure of how they do it, but they make it so that an object can store mana, and humans without mana can use it like how we do."

"So, you're saying if I have a spectral then I'll be able to throw fireballs like you did?"

"Basically, yes."

"Oh... That sounds cool, but I don’t think… Ah, wait, I do have one. Kuro Yaiba is a spectral. He can use it to use magic and stuff. But from what I know, wasn’t it the only weapon that could do that? Does that mean it got mass-produced…?"

*“\*…A lot of things seemed to have really changed these past seven years. Looks like we’ll have to visit the Konjou Clan sometime.\*”*

*“\*Uuu… Seriously…?\*”*

From Ryosei’s memories, Kuro Yaiba was the only weapon that allowed access to mana and magic, but now, it seems like there were more weapons with that ability.

"I don’t know much about those, but that explains how you can enter spirit zones."

"It does?"

"Yes. You see, there is another exception in entering the spirit zone I forgot to tell you. When the spectral or the person with mana enters a spirit zone everything touching them will go with them."

"Oh, good to know."

As they were finishing up the conversation, Yuu just finished washing the dishes. She took off the apron she was wearing and faced Senkyo.

"Yukou-senpai, you should get ready for school. I'm going home to change clothes, there's still some time before school starts so I'll make it."

Yuu's uniform was a bit dirty, most likely from the time she hid in the bushes. So she said goodbye to Senkyo and headed home.

"Well, I guess I should get ready too."

Senkyo prepared his bag and headed for school. On the way, Ryosei brought something up.

*"\*Senkyo, tomorrow is the weekend, right?\*"*

*"\*Yeah, do you want to do something?\*"*

*"\*Well, something like that. I want you to train your body for battle.\*"*

*"\*Huh...? Oh...\*"*

Senkyo was a bit confused at first, but then realized what he meant. He had to train his body so that Ryosei could fight better. They had already gone through two battles and one of them was a close call because Senkyo's body couldn't let out Ryosei's true strength. He realized this, so he knew he couldn't object. Because he didn't want to die, and because he didn't want anyone else to get mixed up with them.

*"\*How long are we training for?\*"*

*"Depends on how much your body can take. I'm planning on training in the mountains where I trained. I'll make good training just going up and down the mountain so it'll be perfect."*

*"\*U-Up and down... a mountain...?\*"*

Senkyo trembled at the thought of going up and down a mountain. Senkyo exercises because of his father, but he only did normal exercise, he couldn't imagine going up a mountain to exercise and going down again.

*"\*R-Ryosei... are you serious?\*"*

*"\*Yes. We'll start training tomorrow so I won't let you slack off.\*"*

*"\*B-But... my weekend! I need to catch up with my anime and stuff!\*"*

*"\*It'll be fine! If you're really worried about them, just watch anime and read when you're dreaming or when I'm controlling your body. That's what I do.\*"*

*"\*You do those things?!\*"*

*"\*Obviously, I told you before I'm an otaku too.\*"*

*"\*S-So when I was studying my ass out, you were enjoying your life inside me?!\*"*

*"\*Who can say?\*"*

Senkyo didn't stare at any place in particular, but his eyes were painted with envy. Ryosei could do anything he wanted inside Senkyo, while he still had studies and other things to deal with.

*"\*I guess that's just a perk of being dead, hahaha!\*"*

"You wouldn't have that perk if it wasn't for my body!"

Senkyo let out his voice from the pure annoyance he was feeling. If anyone were around, they'd definitely hear it even if they were a bit far away. And there was one person who did and came up to Senkyo.

**36 – Missing Students**

"Yo! Senkyo, good morning. Are you feeling good? You're talking to yourself."

It was his best friend Kinro.

"A-Ahaha... You heard that... It was nothing important, really."

"If you say so..."

"Ah, Kinro, have you finished the light novel I was..."

Senkyo and Kinro walked to school talking about light novels. This was one of the moments where Senkyo can talk about his hobbies again. Since he's been busy, the time he could use on his hobbies was reduced, so he enjoyed something like this every now and again. When they arrived at the school gates, there were noticeably fewer students going through. They walked the hallways and into their classroom.

They looked around and almost half of the class wasn't present. It was like the class during lunch break, but the only difference is that even the students' desks were empty. There were no signs that their other classmates arrived. They didn't have their bags by their desks. It was only a few minutes before the chime rang, so this was incredibly unusual.

Senkyo and Kinro walked to their desks. As they were, they could hear the other students chatting, but unlike yesterday, they were talking about something else.

"This is scary, isn't it?"

"Yeah, I don't want to be the next one gone!"

"Ah! Why is this happening anyway!"

The students had fear on their faces first thing in the morning. They were talking about something, but Senkyo couldn't make up what it was all about. He ignored them and sat on his seat. He looked around the room where there were empty seats and recalled the ones that stuck out to him the most.

"Watanabe-san, Suzuki-san, Yamamoto-san, and even Saito-san aren't here..."

As his eyes were wandering around looking at empty seats, he didn't notice someone beside him until they called out.

"Um... Yukou-san?"

"Hm? Oh, Yutei-san, sorry I didn't notice you."

"Ah, it's fine, but... Yukou-san, did you hear about the missing students?"

"Missing students?"

"Earlier this morning, I heard that families of the students of Honshou Academy found their children missing when they came to check for them. I heard rumors that it was some kind of big kidnapping against the school, but do you think it might be another demon?"

Yukai said, excitedly. She still had her bag on her. When Senkyo came into the classroom, Yukai wasn't there yet. That meant that Yukai went to talk to Senkyo the moment she arrived. She must've wanted to convey this to them as quickly as possible.

"Hm... What do you think, Ryosei?"

*"\*It is possible. But even if it were, why would it kidnap students?\*"*

"Hm..."

The chime rang as they were having their conversation. The homeroom teacher came in, but he didn't come to start class.

"Ahem. Attention everybody, due to the missing students of Honshou Academy, for the safety of the students, all classes, club activities, and anything else are canceled. All of you are to go straight home and no loitering! That is all. I hope you return safely."

After the teacher's announcement, he left the classroom, and the students went straight into conversation.

Senkyo looked like he was still thinking of something. He had his hand grabbing his chin and looking seriously at nothing in particular. Yukai was about to call out to him, until...

"AH! Could it be...?!"

Senkyo jumped out of his seat at the realization of something. He grabbed both his bags and ran for the exit of the classroom. He dashed outside the classroom but came to a stop as he bumped into someone as he turned the corner.

"Aw..."

"Ouch..."

"I'm sorry! I—Ah!"

"N-No, It's my—Ah!"

"Hisho-chan!"

"Yukou-senpai!"

*"\*Hahh... Thank god, she's alright...\*"*

"Hm?"

Senkyo and Yuu fell to the ground upon their impact. He stood up and gave her a hand. He was in a hurry earlier, but now he is calm again. The reason for Senkyo's sudden jump was that he thought that Yuu was missing like the other students. If this were the work of demons, then their target is most likely Yuu. Senkyo was worried about her. From the classroom, Yukai and Kinro came running out.

"Senkyo, what was that all about?"

"Is there a problem, Yukou-san?"

"Nothing, I just wanted to check on something, that's all."

Kinro noticed Yuu was with Senkyo, and out of curiosity...

"Hm? Oh, Hisho-chan, what are you doing here?"

"H-Honjou-senpai..."

Yuu didn't answer Kinro. For some reason, she avoided eye contact with him.

"...!"

"Wha—Hisho-chan?!"

Yuu grabbed Senkyo's hand and dragged him away. Kinro saw them off with a huge grin on his face. *“Ohoho… good luck, my friend.”* On the other hand, Yukai didn’t follow them since she thought it was something about the demons. After arriving at an isolated location, Yuu let go of Senkyo's hand. She took a deep breath before confronting Senkyo.

**37 – Frantic Search**

"Hisho-chan, what was that all about?"

"Sorry Yukou-senpai, I couldn't talk there."

"You couldn't...? Is this about demons, after all?"

"Yes, I can sense traces of mana being used around the area. On my way home and to school, I sensed traces of mana inside houses around the area. I suspect END is the cause for the missing students."

"Then, do you know where they could be?"

"Unfortunately, I don't."

"Is there a way for us to locate it?"

"I believe there is, but we don't have the tools to help us."

"I see... Then there's no use waiting in here! Let's go outside and look for anything that could lead us to them!"

"Yes, let's go."

Yuu and Senkyo already had their belongings with them, so they didn't need to go back to their classrooms. They headed straight for the school gate.

On their way there, there were barely any students left. It seems while they were talking, the other students were already headed home. But that was only to be expected, after all, no one wanted to be the next one on the missing students list.

As they ran through the barren halls and arrived outside, something peculiar caught their eye. But seeing as who it was and what he was doing, it didn't look like they could avoid him even if they didn't notice him. They saw Watanabe Itsuki in front of the school gates. He was grabbing, shouting, and letting go of students that exited the school.

When Senkyo and Yuu inevitably got close enough, Itsuki turned his attention to Senkyo and grabbed his shirt. Immediately giving off his menacing aura and shouting at full volume.

"SHITTAKU! DID YOU SEE WHAT THOSE DAMN BASTARDS LOOKED LIKE?!"

"Wh-What are you talking about all of the sudden?!"

"YOU KNOW WHO I'M TALKING ABOUT! THE DAMN BASTARDS THAT KIDNAPPED ICHIKA!!"

"Even Ichika-chan...?!"

Yuu shouted reflexively. Watanabe Ichika, Yuu's friend and Senkyo's junior was supposedly kidnapped earlier that morning. The reason why Itsuki wasn't in class earlier and why he's at the school gates asking about kidnappers, is that he was looking for his sister.

"THAT'S WHY I'M LOOKING FOR INFORMATION! NOW TELL ME WHAT YOU KNOW!"

"I... don't know anything."

"Yukou-senpai..."

Senkyo looked regretful that he couldn't tell Itsuki that his sister is most likely kidnapped by a demon. Yuu could only stare at Senkyo with mutual feelings, because she knew they couldn't tell normal people about demons, or else they might get into trouble with them.

"Tch! As useless as always! Get out here already before you get kidnapped yourself! Same goes for the girl with you. You’re… Ichika’s friend, right? Get out of here before something happens to you too."

"Huh...?"

Senkyo stared at Itsuki in surprise.

"Don't 'huh?' me! Go home already!"

Senkyo and Yuu continued to walk and exited the school. Something about the earlier conversation rang through Senkyo's head.

*\*Get out here already before you get kidnapped yourself! Same goes for the girl with you.\**

*"\*Could it be... he's concerned?! ...No, maybe it's just the way he phrased it?\*"*

Senkyo shook his head and dismissed the thought.

"Is there something wrong, Yukou-senpai?"

"Ah, no, it's nothing."

They continued to walk and thought of places to look that might lead to the demon that did this. But before they could get far from the school gate, they heard a loud scream from behind them.

"WHAT THE—GET THE FUCK OFF ME!! WHAT ARE THESE THINGS?!"

Senkyo and Yuu immediately turned around and saw Itsuki flailing against dark arms trying to drag him down. They were pitch black with ripples of purple all around them. They were coming from a similar-looking dark circle directly beneath Itsuki.

"Watanabe-san!"

"Sh-Shittaku?!"

Senkyo switched with Ryosei and dashed towards Itsuki. Yuu followed suit. Ryosei didn't have time to get Kuro Yaiba out of its bag, so he punched and kicked the arms instead. Each punch and kick hit an arm and made it disappear, but with every one disappearing, only more came to replace them.

"This is annoying...!"

"Yukou-senpai!"

Yuu reached both of them and helped Itsuki by firing fireballs and hitting the roots of the dark arms beneath them. The fireballs burned a good amount, but they still regenerated. There was no stop to them and there wasn't anything around them that would indicate the arms' weakness.

"What is happening?!"

"Tch...!"

"Ah?!"

Suddenly, the dark circle's radius got bigger and covered even Ryosei and Yuu. More arms came from the ground and pulled Ryosei and Yuu with Itsuki. They couldn't get out of the sheer number of arms, there were too many. Before they knew it, they were engulfed in the dark abyss. No one in the barren front gates was left.

**Chapter 5: The Other Side**

**38 – Spirit Realm**

*\*Krrt! Krrt! Krrt!\**

Itsuki was lying on the ground. It looks like he fell unconscious from something. He slowly opened his eyes; he could see the ground covering up half his vision. From where he was, he could see small dots of light floating around the area and he could hear faint sounds of metal clashing on metal.

"H-Huh...? What is this...? The school?"

Itsuki slowly got up and sat on his bottom. The first thing he did was scan his surroundings. He recognized where he is, he was just outside the school gate, but there was a small difference, it was night and everything looked similar to a crystal cave. The clashes he heard got louder and the sounds of a wild dog could now be heard, it was coming from just beyond the gate.

*\*GRRR! KRRRT!! SHAAK! SHAAK!\**

Itsuki slowly and cautiously approached the gates. Step by step, wary of the unknown sounds of what seemed to be fighting, he took a peek through the gate.

"Wh-wh-what?!"

He saw two people surrounded by what looked to be a pack of wolves, but looking at them more carefully, those weren't wolves. They could stand on two feet and their arms and legs looked similar to a human's, not an animal's.

"Werewolves?!"

Itsuki's shout was so loud that it attracted the attention of the werewolves. Their beastly eyes glared at Itsuki and charged at him. Despite this, Itsuki didn't run, he came out of the corner and faced the werewolves.

"F-FUCK! WANNA GO?! COME AT ME YOU STUPID MUTTS!!"

Itsuki didn't run in fear, he stood firm and took out his fists, ready to brawl. His readied fists were slightly trembling. He didn't run in fear but that didn't mean that he wasn't afraid. The werewolves were closing the distance in a matter of seconds. Itsuki steeled himself, he bit his lip and pulled back his right fist, and charged at them.

But before they could make contact, the three werewolves in front of him were suddenly beheaded. Blood spilled from their necks and small pieces of stone came falling from each of the werewolves.

"WHAT?!"

Itsuki came to a sudden stop and stared in shock at the monsters’ sudden execution. He pulled up his arms to his side at the realization that there were more enemies. However, before they got to him, the werewolves were engulfed in balls of flames. The werewolves growled and flailed around in pain. In a few seconds, the bodies dropped to the ground and stopped growling, later disintegrating into ashes indicating their death.

"Wha...."

Itsuki was in complete awe. The wild beasts that were coming for him were killed in a blink of an eye. He looked in front of him and saw two familiar people approach him.

"Shittaku... and that girl...?"

He saw Senkyo holding a katana and sheathing it in a black scabbard. Beside him, was a light crimson-haired girl that he saw not long before he lost consciousness.

"Are you alright, Watanabe-san?"

"Sh-shittaku! What the hell was that all about?!"

"Okay, okay! I'll explain, just let me go!"

Itsuki grabbed Senkyo in his rush for answers. He wanted to know why beings from a fantasy were in front of his eyes. His panic was understandable. Senkyo calmed him down and carefully explained the situation.

"You're telling me… We've been sent into some kind of ghost world…? DON’T GIVE ME THAT BULLSHIT!!"

"Calm down, Watanabe-san just hear us out—"

“I DON’T HAVE TIME FOR YOUR GAMES! I HAVE TO FIND MY SISTER!”

Itsuki grabbed Senkyo’s blazer and pushed him against the nearby wall.

“C-Calm down, Watanabe-senpai!”

Yuu’s scream was unheard. Itsuki wasn’t stopping to listen.

“I SWEAR, SHITTAKU… IF YOU DON’T GET ME OUT OF HERE THIS INSTANT, I’LL—”

“WE MIGHT KNOW WHERE ICHIKA-SAN IS!!”

“What…?”

Senkyo cut Itsuki off. The second Itsuki heard about his beloved sister, he came back to his senses. He let go of Senkyo and took a step back.

“You better start talking.”

After fixing himself up, Senkyo left the explanation to Yuu.

"Mana and spirit power interact in strange ways. Because of the chemistry between the two, being close to each other makes mana much more apparent and allows us to detect it clearly in a larger area than normal. I can sense mana being used in town. A spirit zone shouldn't be able to be large enough to reach all the way there. The only explanation for this is that we are in the Spirit Realm. Another world where spirits and other ghostly beings live. If we go to the origin of this mana, it should lead us to where everyone who got kidnapped is. Assuming that the person using mana is the one who kidnapped the students, that is."

Itsuki stared at Yuu as if she spoke in a different language. He didn't understand much. But despite being utterly confused, Itsuki still understood some parts.

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about... But basically, you know where the scums that kidnapped Ichika are."

"Generally speaking, yes."

"OKAY!! Tell me where they are, Shorty!"

"I'm not that short! And I can't even tell you even if I wanted to!"

"Then I'll just follow you."

"No!"

Itsuki came closer and threateningly looked at Yuu.

"Huh?! Got a problem with that?!"

"Eek...!"

Yuu shrieked and backed up from Itsuki's gaze. Senkyo immediately got between them and stopped Itsuki.

"Stop it, Watanabe-san."

"Huh?! You wanna fight?!"

"N-No, I don't want to fight."

"Then what is it?!"

"I-I was already thinking of taking you with us."

"Yukou-senpai?!"

"Hmph, good. Then, I'll be around that corner, come to me when you two are ready."

"Sure."

Itsuki left the two and went behind a corner. Yuu then tugged Senkyo's shirt to catch his attention.

"Why are you letting him go with us, Yukou-senpai? It’ll be very dangerous."

"It's because we’re in the Spirit Realm, right? We don’t even know how to get out of here. The werewolves might come for him when we’re gone. I already talked it out with Ryosei and he said that he agrees with me, it's safer if Watanabe-san is with us than not."

"That’s… you’re right."

Senkyo's argument made sense, they never know when and where enemies will come. If they leave Itsuki, the other enemies will just attack him that's why the safest place for Itsuki is with Senkyo and Yuu.

"Oh yeah, I've been meaning to ask. How can you sense mana traces in the air without doing anything but you can't sense mana inside people unless you suck their blood?"

"That's because nothing is obstructing my senses. Unlike sensing whether someone has mana or not, sensing flows or traces of mana in the air is like seeing ripples in the air. But when mana is inside something like a person or an object, we need to do something else to sense them because their body is obstructing the mana flow. Like I said before, only some species in our world can even sense mana, and because mana mixes with the blood, we can sense mana flows in them."

"Ah, okay, I get it."

While Yuu was explaining how she senses mana traces. From around the corner, Itsuki took a deep breath before he bit his lip and balled his hands into fists.

"…Ichika. I hope you’re alright.”

The trouble-making bully was nowhere to be seen. All that was there was a worried older brother. Hidden from the sight of Senkyo and Yuu, Itsuki gazed at the two.

"I don’t know what’s up with those two and what this place is, but as long as I find Ichika, I don’t care... I promised her."

**39 – Rough Training**

Senkyo, Yuu, and Itsuki walked through the town of crystal-like buildings clad in a veil of night and floating lights. Yuu was in the lead and the other two followed. Itsuki and Senkyo talked in the back informing Itsuki more about what was happening, he was told about demons, spirits, and magic but nothing unnecessary.

"Demons, spirits, and another world... those things exist?"

"Yeah."

"And this shorty is some magic person?"

"Yeah."

"That's... A LOAD OF BULLCRAP! LIKE HELL I'D BELIEVE YOU!"

"Seriously?! You're still not convinced?! But everything is right in front of you!"

"Yeah, but I don't care. If I haven't fought those magic demon bastards then they still don't exist!"

"Fight them? Didn't you just see werewolves coming for your life?"

"Yeah, but I didn't fight them."

Senkyo was left in surprise. Itsuki was the first person he knew that actually thought with his fists rather than his brain. Senkyo couldn't help but be stunned by him.

*"\*This guy is insane!\*"*

Meanwhile, Itsuki was thinking to himself, relating Senkyo’s words to his experiences in the past.

*\*Fantasy monsters, huh? Bullshit… then again, I guess that* THING *would count as one. How many years has it been since then? Bah, it doesn’t matter now.\**

A certain memory made it easier for him to digest the nonsensical information Senkyo was feeding him, but still, he remained stubborn and refused to openly acknowledge it due to his pride. He thought of reluctantly agreeing with them to move on, but Senkyo’s next words ticked him off.

"You can't fight them, Watanabe-san. They're not human, you'll just get killed if you try!"

"Oh? You two can fight them, but I can't? Shittaku, are you underestimating me?"

"That's not what I—"

"Then fight me right here! Come on! Draw your sword!"

"Watanabe-san, stop it!"

"You really are underestimating me! I'll show you...!"

Itsuki sent a punch headed straight for Senkyo's face. He dodged it but Itsuki sent more coming at him. Senkyo dodged every single one and leaped backward to gain some distance between them, but Itsuki didn't let that happen. Itsuki charged at Senkyo with his whole body.

*"\*Ryosei, can you help me out here?!\*"*

*“\*……\*”*

*“\*Ryosei!?\*”*

*"\*I don't want to. He's your friend, deal with him yourself.\*"*

*"\*But we're not even friends!\*"*

*"\*I don't care. Deal with this one yourself.\*"*

Ryosei ignored Senkyo's call for help. If Ryosei was to fight Itsuki, he could just use his skills to knock him out. After all, Senkyo himself wasn't that powerful. Ryosei would do all the fighting while he stayed back. Senkyo never fought by himself.

They only shared bodies, but for some reason, they don’t know what the other was currently thinking, making it impossible for Senkyo to match Ryosei’s skill with the blade. Because of that, Senkyo had an idea of what he was trying to do. He was trying to make him gain experience in fighting. Senkyo knew how to properly execute Ryosei’s techniques from his memories.

*“\*Damn you, Ryosei!!\*”*

"HAAAAA!!"

"Gah...!"

"Yukou-senpai!"

Senkyo got hit by Itsuki and he got knocked to the ground, but he didn't stop there. Itsuki lifted his leg to stomp on Senkyo, but he rolled over and got back up before he got hit.

"S-Stop it!"

"What? Where did the guy that slashed three werewolves in a second go? Are you scared?"

"Are you actually this egotistical? Do you really think beating me will prove you can fight demons?!"

"Yeah, I do! Raw strength is all I need!"

"What an idiot..."

"Watanabe-senpai, stop it already!"

"No, Hisho-chan, this guy can't be reasoned with."

"But...!"

"It's fine!"

"You two done talking?"

Senkyo turned his head and Itsuki was already in front of him and he was about to punch him. Senkyo managed to put his arms up and blocked his punch and took a step back.

"Are you just gonna run?"

"....."

Senkyo knew he was going to lose at this rate. He thought of everything he could to resolve this, but all that came to mind was if he knocked him out somehow. Talking was no good.

"Raaaahhhh!"

Itsuki charged at Senkyo again but he managed to dodge at the last second. Itsuki had more stamina than Senkyo, so tiring him out was out of the question. All Senkyo could do was dodge and buy time until he thought of something.

Senkyo scrutinized Itsuki's every movement as he dodged his attacks, and he noticed a small opening. When Itsuki charges at him, he leaves his neck open, but Senkyo wasn't fast enough to hit him in the neck while he was charging. If he tried, Itsuki will just grab his arm and punch him. Senkyo wanted to avoid as much damage as possible. However, that was the best chance he had. All the other openings were too small and Senkyo didn't have that kind of strength and precision, so he continued to dodge and think of a way to beat Itsuki. He needed to hurry, he wasn’t going to last too long.

*\*Why is Yukou-senpai losing? Is Konjou-san not helping him out? If that's the case, why?! At this rate, Yukou-senpai will just get badly hurt!\**

Yuu couldn't help but worry. If Itsuki didn't stop now, Senkyo will just get unnecessary injuries. She mainly focused on offensive magic, but using a barrier spell would be enough to stop both of them. As she was about to cast the spell, for a second, she saw a small grin on Senkyo's face and hesitated.

*"\*Fine, I don't need your help for this one, I'll do this on my own!\*"*

Senkyo kept avoiding Itsuki's attacks. But this time, when Itsuki charged at him, he charged back. Before they made contact, Senkyo dodged to the side and avoided getting hit.

"What the hell was that?! Are you mocking me?!"

Senkyo repeated the same thing a few times after that, Senkyo was reaching his limit.

"Haha! Tired already? Time to finish this!"

Itsuki charged one last time, this one had all his power in it.

*"\*Hahh… calm down! Control my breathing... focus on my target... concentrate my power...\*"*

This time, Senkyo stood still for a second and took the same form he did every other time he dashed, and finally...

"Ha...!"

"Wha—"

Senkyo disappeared from Itsuki’s vision. He became muddled. Senkyo, who was right in front of him, disappeared without a trace. Not a second less after Senkyo's disappearance, Itsuki felt a powerful strike hit the side of his neck and fell unconscious to the ground.

"Haaahh...! Haaahh...! Haaahh...!"

Senkyo was panting heavily as he stood victorious. Senkyo used one of Ryosei's techniques, the Flash Strike. A strike that allowed the user to dash in a blink of an eye and release a powerful strike stronger than the user's usual strength.

"Y-Yukou-senpai! Are you alright?!"

Yuu shouted as she hurriedly ran towards Senkyo.

"Hahh...! I-I'm fine... hahh...!"

"How did you do that?! Did Konjou-san help you in the end?"

"Surprisingly... hahh... I did it by myself... hahh..."

"That’s amazing!"

At the time of the battle, Senkyo thought, *"\*I can win this if I can just be faster and stronger for just a second... This is going to be one hell of a push, but I'll have to use Ryosei's Flash Strike!\*"*

In the middle of the battle, Senkyo practiced Flash Strike as they fought by doing test runs and dashing at Itsuki every time he charged at him. He thought about the time Ryosei was training Flash Strike and copied him. He used one of his memories that contained a lecture to learn how to properly use the move. By simply having a reference and a lecture to go with it, Senkyo was able to use Flash Strike in the middle of the battle.

*\*Yukou-senpai... just who are you...?\**

Yuu couldn't help but be amazed. Meanwhile, Ryosei was congratulating Senkyo in his mind.

*"\*You did good.\*"*

*"\*Don't 'you did good' me! You abandoned me!\*"*

*"\*At least you know what a fight feels like now. You even managed to use Flash Strike!\*"*

*"\*Yeah, but was that really necessary?!\*"*

*"\*Well, let's say its precautionary.\*"*

*"\*Geez...\*"*

Ryosei used his spirit power to recover Senkyo's scratches and slightly healed his fatigue. After a short while, Itsuki regained consciousness.

**40 – Welcoming Party**

"Hrm... Hm...?"

"Are you alright, Watanabe-san?"

Itsuki looked in front of him and saw Senkyo offering his hand to him. He was then reminded of what happened before he got knocked out.

"...Damn it, I lost...!"

Although Itsuki didn't see how Senkyo knock him out, he had a good guess because of the time he slashed three werewolves. If Senkyo was able to reach the werewolves before they reached Itsuki, then it meant that he was faster than them. He might use brawn over brain but that didn't mean that he couldn't figure that much out.

"Get away from me, Shittaku!"

Itsuki slapped Senkyo's hand away and stood up by himself. He quietly walked away from Senkyo, but before he did, Senkyo called out to him.

"Watanabe-san, I just want you to know that raw power isn't the peak of anyone's strength. Everyone has their own, and if you polish it, you'll grow stronger. And if you fight for someone else, you'll get even stronger. At least, that's what I believe in."

"...Where the hell did the lecture come from, Shittaku?"

Itsuki stopped at Senkyo's words but continued to walk away after giving his response. After a short break, the three continued to follow the traces of mana in the air that led to what could be the enemy’s base. At the end of the mana traces, was an old abandoned building that was a few stories high.

"This is it."

"How many enemies do you think are in there, Hisho-chan?"

"Unfortunately, I can’t tell."

"That’s alright. There's no other way around it, let's go."

With Senkyo in the lead, the trio slowly opened the decrepit door. Senkyo switched with Ryosei and drew his sword. Yuu had her hands out, ready to cast a spell at the first sign of danger. Itsuki was as wary as they were and was ready to pull his fists out any time.

When the door fully opened, their eyes were in surprise because, unlike the old decrepit building, the inside looked like a fancy rich people's party. The inside was bright and was covered in fancy tiles and decorative walls. Their surroundings didn’t look like crystals, there were no floating lights in the room, and the big windows showed the bright sun shining down on a beautiful outside garden, completely contradictory to the sight Senkyo saw before they entered. It was almost as if they were in the real world.

The room was filled with people in fancy clothing and they were chatting like they would be at a party. There were tables with silky white sheets covering them, chandeliers that decorated the ceiling and lit up the room, and a buffet with different variants of food. There was a stage in the front of the room covered with a red curtain.

"What... is this?"

"Looks like some rich bastard's party to me."

"It's an illusion... but to think someone can cast something this big..."

"Hey, those people... don't they look familiar?"

Itsuki pointed out to the people in fancy clothes.

"Yukou-senpai, isn't that a classmate of yours over there?"

"Hm? What?! Isn't that Suzuki-san?!"

Yuu pointed at Senkyo's classmate, Suzuki Himari. She had fancy clothing like all the others, a light purple dress with the same bunny hair pin on her hair. The question that was in Senkyo's mind was, 'why is she here?' Normal people shouldn't be able to enter a spirit zone, much less the Spirit Realm. She wasn’t in class earlier, so her being a victim of the demon’s kidnapping was also a possibility. Even so, would a kidnapped person simply enjoy a high-class party in a completely different world from their own? Himari wasn't the only one Senkyo noticed.

"Hey guys, aren't the other people in this party students of Honshou Academy...?"

"You're right, Yukou-senpai. Those girls over there are a part of my class!"

"Hisho-chan, are these people an illusion too?"

"I'm not too sure... If they were, they shouldn't have a presence but I'm sensing a presence in every single person here. It is also possible that they used magic to mimic their presence, if so then they have a powerful mage in their team..."

"...I'll try talking to one of them."

"Be careful, Yukou-senpai don't let your guard down."

"Yeah, I won't."

Senkyo separated from the two and approached Himari. On the other hand, something caught the attention of Itsuki's wandering eyes. A girl with blonde hair fixed into twin tails, wearing a blue dress wandered in the corner of his eye.

"I-Ichika!!"

Itsuki recognized her immediately, the person he'd been looking for, his little sister, Watanabe Ichika. He ran over to her immediately and pushed away people blocking his path as he ran.

"Wait, Watanabe-senpai, no!"

Yuu called out for Itsuki but fell on deaf ears as Itsuki continued running and ignoring Yuu's call. The three of them were now separated. Yuu thought of staying where she was to keep an eye on both Senkyo and Itsuki. From where she was, she had a good vision of both their locations. If trouble occurred with either of them, she would be able to do something.

"Suzuki-san, is that you...?"

"Oh? If it isn't that lame otaku. What are you doing here? And why are you in our school uniform?"

"Don't mind my school uniform! Why are you guys in the Spirit Realm?"

"Spirit Realm? What are you talking about? Is your geekiness leaking out now? Hahaha!"

*"\*So, she doesn't know...?\*"*

"Then, what's this party all about?"

"You came here not knowing what this is all about? How ignorant."

*"\*I could say the same to you!\*"*

"Fine, I'll tell you. This party is our welcoming party!"

"Welcoming... party?"

"Yes, One of the ten leaders of END, Fulgur-sama's welcoming party!!"

"A-A leader of END?!"

Himari pointed to the stage in front of them signaling to Senkyo to look at the stage. Meanwhile, over at another conversation, Itsuki made it to where his little sister was. He was shouting her name over and over as he pushed through the crowd.

"Ichika! Ichika!!"

"Ah! Onii-chan, you're here!"

Once Itsuki reached Ichika he immediately wrapped her in his embrace. Ichika was surprised but she hugged her back. At that moment, Itsuki was silent but it didn't seem like he was happy. After a few seconds, Itsuki pushed Ichika back in anger.

"Who the fuck are you, bitch?!"

"O-Onii-chan?!"

Itsuki had a face contradictory to the one earlier. He looked at Ichika like he was about to beat her up. Ichika was teary-eyed and weeping on the floor. Other people tried to help her out but Itsuki didn't make that possible.

"DON'T TOUCH HER!"

The other guests stepped away from her and just surrounded Ichika and Itsuki. Yuu, who saw this ran over to them.

"Watanabe-senpai, what’s happening?!"

Yuu pushed away the crowd and headed for Itsuki.

"Watanabe-senpai, what—"

"Don't get close to her, Shorty."

"Huh..."

**41 – Fulgur’s Welcome**

Itsuki had a face she had never seen before. One that was serious and terrifying and looked like he was out to kill. Yuu reflexively backed off, she wanted to know what this was all about but Itsuki explained before she had the time to ask.

"That isn't my little sister."

"How did you know?"

"When I hugged her, she didn't feel like the usual Ichika, her presence was off. Her usual warmth and the expression in her eyes in completely different. But all of that could just be passed on as some kind of side effect for entering this world so that would just be half the reason... What tipped me off was... ICHIKA WOULD NEVER HUG ME BACK!! SHE'D BE TOO EMBARRASSED TO DO THAT!!"

*"\*What? H-He figured out she was a fake because he hugged her?! And this guy can sense presences?! I know some humans can do that but Watanabe-senpai is an idiot who talks with his fists! He's an idiot but he can sense presences?! No, maybe he is just being a pervert…\*"*

Yuu was in utter shock. Itsuki was a literal brute that was just a normal human and sensing presences was more of an abnormal ability, yet he still sensed her. He figured it out with minor details such as expressions, body heat, and actions it was completely unlike him. But with all that said, she still couldn’t throw out the possibility that this was just him being a creep.

"Answer me! Who are you and where is my little sister?!"

"....."

"IF YOU DON'T ANSWER, I'LL BEAT YOU TO A PULP FOR COPYING ICHIKA'S FACE!!"

"....."

The person that looked like Ichika didn't respond but she pointed her finger up to the stage without making any eye contact with Itsuki or Yuu. In a meek voice, she muttered.

"Fulgur-sama..."

"HA?! WHAT WAS THAT?! I CAN'T HEAR YOU!"

"Watanabe-senpai, look!"

Yuu directed Itsuki's attention to the stage. The curtains that covered the stage were pulled up and showed their contents. There was a man with a tattered cloak that stood on the stage. His face was covered with worn-out bandages but still wore a white mask with an eye hole in the middle of the mask.

"I'm sorry, but I will be welcoming you in place of Fulgur-sama."

"What?! We were promised to meet Fulgur-sama!!"

Himari shouted in anger. She, Ichika, and the other guests looked like they were betrayed. All of the people in the room looked at the masked man in front and listened to him.

"All of you are mere puppets. Fulgur-sama had decided that he does not need to show himself. So, instead, he will graciously reward the one who can capture the crimson-haired girl with an audience with him personally!!"

"Seriously?!"

"Hell yeah!"

"Where is that girl?!"

"Over there!"

The people in the room made an immediate fuss and looked for a crimson-haired girl. Unfortunately, there was only one crimson-haired girl in the room and that was Yuu.

Senkyo realized this and immediately looked around for Yuu, and that proved to be easy. He saw a huge crowd circling something and a furious amount of shouting and screaming. There was no mistake, Yuu was in the middle of all of those people.

"Damn, there's too many of them!"

In the middle of the crowd, Yuu was casting a barrier on both herself and Itsuki. The transparent magical wall kept the crowd at bay. Their punches and kicks weren't strong enough to break the barrier, so as long as Yuu can hold up, they were fine.

"Shittaku wasn't lying when he said you were a magic person..."

"Of course not! What would be the point of lying?!"

"Guess so... But what are we going to do with these idiots? I need to pay back that monster for copying Ichika's face!"

"Of course you are..."

Yuu and Itsuki were in a pinch. They were trapped by a mountain of people. Senkyo was outside trying to think of a way to bust through the crowd. In the middle of the commotion, the masked man got everyone's attention.

"Hahahahaha! This should do for the welcoming party! Now, Hisho Yuu-sama and company, Master Fulgur will be waiting for your arrival. We will meet again but before that, I do hope that you will become a good entertainment for Master Fulgur."

A pitch-black portal appeared behind the masked man and he entered it without looking back. The masked man went past it and the portal disappeared with him. The guests that were present in the room began twitching uncontrollably. Black foam was coming out of their mouth and eyes.

"Wha...?!"

"Eek!"

"The hell?!"

The guests' bodies turned into black liquid and morphed into different-looking demons. All of them had small pieces of armor to protect their body made out of bones, skulls, and some rags. They had hell-red skin and shining yellow eyes and different weapons like spears, bows, short swords, and shields.

They covered not only the ground but even the sky. There were three different kinds of demons. Those with wings and tails were armed with bows, those with small horns and buffed arms were armed with short swords and shields, and those with goat legs were armed with spears.

"Lesser demons!!"

**42 – Swarm**

Yuu shouted as she recognized their form. Senkyo switched with Ryosei and started slashing the demons. While Yuu readied an area of effect spell to temporarily get rid of the lesser demons just outside the barrier.

"Watanabe-senpai, you stay here!"

"What?! No, I'll whack these bastards too!"

"No! Listen to us! Yukou-senpai beat you right?! Then in your own words, you won't be able to beat these demons! Just stay put or you might get yourself killed!"

"Tch...!"

Itsuki clenched his hand and ground his teeth. He was infuriated at the fact that he felt useless, that he felt weak and he couldn't do anything about it. Yuu was right, and Itsuki knew that which is why all he could do was get mad at himself for not being strong enough.

*"\*Damn it!\*"*

Yuu took one last look at Itsuki and determined that he'll stay put and listen to her. Yuu placed her hands on the ground and prepared to cast a spell.

"O Earth, heed my call, bend to my will, let the power that runs through my veins crystallize my desire, trample the earth beneath me, and create thorns of protection. Crown Spikes!"

The ground turned itself into sharp piercing spikes and skewered the surrounding lesser demons. The barrier was dead center inside the circle of spikes. Yuu walked outside the barrier leaving Itsuki inside. She cast fireballs at the flying lesser demons with bows, covering Ryosei and assuring him that no arrows come flying his way.

Ryosei weaved through the enemy numbers and slashed each lesser demon he came across. He reached Yuu and protected her from any incoming ground units. Yuu, who was standing on top of one of the spikes, supported Ryosei with attacks coming from his blind spot and any remaining bow demons.

Those who tried to climb the spikes of earth were beheaded before they knew it. The few that made it up the spikes were met with a fireball, making them fall off and burn to a crisp. Ryosei and Yuu's teamwork kept all the lesser demons at bay and thinned out their numbers just by defending.

*\*I'll really just be in the way, won't I? And why is that Shittaku fighting way better than earlier?! He held back on me again! Damn it! …I gotta get stronger or else...!\**

Itsuki watched Ryosei and Yuu's amazing teamwork. He felt powerless as he watched, but for some reason, he looked determined. Something about watching them fight made him worked up.

As Senkyo and Yuu's fight continued, over half of the lesser demons were already gone but they needed to finish this quick because Senkyo's body didn't have enough stamina to last another half and Ryosei wanted to save his spirit power to recover Senkyo for a more important situation.

"Hisho-chan, I need some time! Cover me for a bit!"

"Got it!"

Ryosei sheathed Kuro Yaiba, closed his eyes, and focused. Yuu covered Ryosei with a barrage of fireballs while simultaneously defending herself. Looking closely, Ryosei's hair began to flutter ever so slightly and the dust on the ground circled around Ryosei as if being caught in a weak tornado with Ryosei at the center.

"Sheath my blade with the wind. Your power is the face of elegance. Flow as I show you the path, the line to a dashing ending. Konjou Style, Gale Fan!"

Ryosei opened his eyes and slashed Kuro Yaiba horizontally. A strong and sharp gust of wind traced Ryosei's slash, and all of the sudden, in a fan shape, all the lesser demons in front of Ryosei were slashed, beheaded, and killed. Even the back wall in range of Ryosei’s slash was cut through.

Konjou Style, Gale Fan. A technique that uses the user's focus and mana, of course, since it used mana it could only be used if the user wielded a spectral or had mana. Everyone in the room was stunned, in under a second, the number of demons was cut down to ten percent.

"Whoa!"

"W-What... the..."

Everyone was in complete shock. Yuu and Itsuki witnessed the carnage Ryosei's slash laid. Yuu realized she was just standing around and snapped out of it, with her remaining magic, she cast fireballs on all of the remaining lesser demons.

Yuu cast her last fireball and burned the last lesser demon. Ryosei was exhausted, especially since Senkyo's body didn't have the usual stamina of his old body. He laid his back against the ground looking like he had just run a marathon without rest.

"Hahh... hahh... That... hahh... was new..."

Ryosei returned control to Senkyo.

"Good work, Yukou-senpai!"

"Well... hahh... it wasn’t me who fought so..."

"Then both of you did great!"

"I didn’t really do anything though..."

"Still, that was amazing! You took out so many lesser demons in one hit!"

"You heard that?"

*"\*Yes, tell her thanks\*"*

"He says 'Thank you.'"

While they were chatting, Itsuki approached them.

"Shittaku..."

*"\*Oh god... what is it this time?\*"*

Senkyo looked at Itsuki with worried eyes. He thought he might do something crazy again like another fight, but that was not the case.

"...That wasn't so bad."

"!?"

Senkyo, this time was the one who was shocked. It was basically Itsuki's way of saying 'you did great!' but he had never seen Itsuki praise anyone or even say thanks ever in his whole life. All he could do was stare back at Itsuki until he finally got the words out of his mouth.

"...T-Thanks?"

"Why are you saying it like a question?!"

"No, I'm thankful, I'm thankful!"

\**Creeeeeek!\**

As Senkyo and Itsuki were talking, in front of the stage, a set of huge double doors appeared out of nowhere.

"I guess it's telling us to go forward... Yukou-senpai?"

"We go through after we rest, you're tired too, aren't you Hisho-chan? You used a lot of mana back there, didn't you?"

"I did, but I’ll be fine. Thanks for worrying about me."

Itsuki left the two alone and rested by one of the walls.

"Call me when we're going."

"Okay!"

After a bit of rest, Senkyo got enough energy to last another fight, and the trio headed for the double doors on the stage. When they opened it, they saw greenery as far as the eye can see. There were plants and trees everywhere. It looked like it was midday. They could hear the sounds of bugs and flowing water from outside the door.

Cautiously, they went past the door and entered that forest. When all of them got through, the door closed by itself and disappeared like it was never there.

"No going back huh? Well, it's not like we intend to anyways."

**43 – Hunting Pack**

Senkyo and the others continued walking. For about ten minutes they didn't find anything interesting.

"Are these bastards afraid to show up or something?"

"Calm down, Watanabe-san. They might be planning a surprise attack."

"Surprise attack? Just come at me like a man!"

"Shh! Quiet! I hear something!"

At Yuu's call, Senkyo and Itsuki shut up and listened for sounds. With Yuu's enhanced senses she could faintly hear, a familiar monstrous growl coming from behind them.

"Werewolves are coming from behind!"

"Hurry! Let's find an open area! We'll be at a disadvantage if we fight here!"

Senkyo and others started running. The forest was thick, the trees were tall with vines growing off them, logs on the ground, and bushes that were five feet tall. Senkyo and the others raced through the natural obstacle course jumping and dashing through.

They knew they had to get to a suitable place to fight before the werewolves caught them. Itsuki could only imagine the danger but Senkyo knew of it. When Senkyo and Ryosei battled a werewolf in Senkyo's living room, he was combo-ed by the werewolf in midair with its insane speed.

If multiple werewolves were to use the same move as him, there would be attacks coming out of nowhere. They would use the trees and bounce off them to do surprise attacks and not just to their sides but also from above. The close proximity of the trees would affect Ryosei's slashes, not to mention their vision. They have a low to no chance of winning if that happened.

"Guys, over there! An opening!"

Itsuki pointed at the wide glade slightly to the left of them. They quickly changed their direction towards the glade. They safely reached it and headed for the center of it. Senkyo assessed the situation and barked out orders.

"Hisho-chan, create a barrier and prepare to cast area magic when the werewolves show up, and don't use fire magic you might burn the forest down."

"Sure!"

"Watanabe-san, if the barrier breaks I want you to take Hisho-chan away from the enemies while she uses magic to cover your escape. Once you get away, have Hisho-chan set up another barrier and support me with magic."

"Sure, sure, at least I can finally get some action."

"I'll be ready to counter any werewolves that leap at us. If we get separated, focus on defending yourselves, and don't worry about us*.*"

*\*Us?\**

Itsuki noticed something odd in Senkyo's last sentence. He said to 'not worry about *us*' but as far as Itsuki knows, it was only him, Yuu, and Senkyo.

*\*Whatever, I'll mind the minor details later!\**

He put it on the back of his head and prepared for the enemy. A few seconds later, a werewolf came jumping from behind them. *Slash! Slash!*Senkyo, who was now being controlled by Ryosei, countered the werewolf by dashing under it and slicing it at its center, destroying the weak spot that it had behind its neck.

After that, they were at a stand-still, there was no movement whatsoever. They were watching Senkyo and the others. They felt their beastly eyes glaring at them from within the thick forest and their movement rustling the leaves. After a moment of silence, they struck.

From all sides of the forest, the werewolves came in all at once, some leaped at them and some ran at them but either way they were met by Yuu's wind slashes similar to Ryosei's earlier technique but with significantly less power and range.

Yuu was able to intercept werewolves coming from her side by Senkyo's orders. Ryosei fought on the frontlines battling all the werewolves on his side, compared to his first fight with a werewolf, he got used to fighting in Senkyo's body and since he knew the werewolves' weakness, it was way easier.

The werewolves that were attacking the barrier were either met with Yuu's wind slashes or Ryosei's blade. Cracks in the barrier were simply repaired by Yuu. Itsuki, as always watched on the sidelines as the two fought but he already accepted the fact that he'd just be in the way instead, a different resolve burned within him.

*"\*After this ends, I'll be sure to get stronger! I can't let that otaku be stronger than me!\*"*

Ryosei and Yuu fought without anything wrong happening until a beastly howl came from within the forest. The werewolves that were fighting immediately retreated into the forest. Ryosei retreated back inside the barrier and readied his blade.

*"\*Ryosei, tell Hisho-chan to switch to a single target spell. That howl was probably their boss.\*"*

*"Yeah, I agree."*

"Hisho-chan, switch your attacks to a single target one that'll pack a punch!"

"Okay!"

Senkyo, Yuu, and Itsuki watched as the birds of the forest flew away in fear. Whatever was coming for them, it was going to be a strong opponent. A strong growling noise could be heard just inside the grove of trees and suddenly...

*\*...Crack!\**

The barrier that Yuu created was destroyed.

"Ah?!"

"The hell?!"

In front of Yuu and Itsuki, Ryosei was clashing his blade with a werewolf's claws. The werewolf was unlike any other they'd seen. It had a part of its left ear bitten out and ear piercings on its right. Its face was filled with scars and its eyes glowed blood red. Its body and strength were bigger and more powerful than any of the other werewolves. Ryosei managed to keep the werewolf at bay and fended it off. It stood with an intimidating aura that of a beast.

"Watanabe-san!"

"Doing it!"

Itsuki carried Yuu with his right arm and ran away from the beast. She was simply hanging on his arm.

*\*I know this is in case they attack us from behind but I definitely feel like luggage right now!\**

Yuu didn't let her thoughts leak out and guarded their rear. She set up another barrier away from Senkyo and the beast but not far enough that they could get ambushed from within the forest. Over where Senkyo was, the beast spoke.

"I! AM ONE OF THE GREAT LEADERS OF FULGUR-SAMA'S SUBORDINATES! I AM HERE TO EVALUATE YOUR SKILL!"

"Evaluate my skill? Just what are you talking about?"

*“\*Senkyo, get ready to cast it!\*”*

*“\*Gotcha!\*”*

"HUMAN! SINCE YOU SURVIVED THE EARLIER ATTACK, IT IS TIME FOR ME TO PERSONALLY TEST YOU!"

"Test me for what?!"

"IF A FILTHY HUMAN LIKE YOU IS WORTHY OF SEEING THE GREATNESS THAT IS FULGUR-SAMA!"

"Who is this Fulgur-sama?"

"ENOUGH TALKING!! PREPARE YOURSELF, HUMAN!!"

*"\*Damn, I thought I could get more information...\*"*

The werewolf crouched on all four of its legs and readied to pounce. Ryosei noticed this and prepared himself. A second later, it was on the other side of Ryosei and left a shockwave in the air that went straight past where Ryosei was.

When the werewolf turned back around, it saw Ryosei looking at it in the same stance as he was before the werewolf pounced.

"YOU DODGED IT?!"

Ryosei showed no sign of responding he was completely focused.

"IS THAT SO?! THEN TAKE THIS!!"

The werewolf pounced again and left another shockwave. This time, it clearly pounced straight through where Ryosei was. The werewolf had a grin on its mouth, but a second later, its head came falling down its body.

"No way!"

Itsuki shouted as he saw what happened. Ryosei stood still and the werewolf pounced through him, but in that same second, Ryosei disappeared from where he stood and was already beside the werewolf and slashed its head off. Yuu, however, had an amazed face but was not surprised.

But it wasn't over yet. The head that was separated from the werewolf's body reattached itself to the body. Ryosei hurriedly took a step back and readied his sword.

"Didn't I cut off its head?!"

Ryosei cut the werewolf's head clean off but it was still alive. The weak spot that usually killed a werewolf in one hit didn't work. Ryosei didn’t notice it, but Senkyo did. This werewolf had one huge difference from the other werewolves—There wasn’t anything engraved on its nape.

"Damn it!"

The werewolf fully regenerated and faced Ryosei.

"Hahaha... HAHAHAHAHAHA!!!"

The werewolf faced the sky and laughed uncontrollably.

"AMAZING, SIMPLY AMAZING!! HUMAN, YOU HAVE PROVEN YOURSELF WORTHY OF A PROPER BATTLE! I'LL BE WAITING FOR YOU IN THE FINAL STAGE I'M LOOKING FORWARD TO OUR FATEFUL REMATCH! HAHAHA!!"

A pitch-black portal appeared under the werewolf and it sunk into it. Like the masked man from earlier, it just left them.

"What was that all about...?"

**44 – Beyond the Doors**

Yuu dispelled her barrier when she determined there were no further threats. Itsuki stared at Senkyo with the usual wonder in his eyes. Yuu came up from behind him and gave Itsuki an explanation of what happened.

"He used Illusion Magic, Void Magic, and Scent Magic. But in such a short amount of time… is this also the effect of having two souls? Chantless casting… There’s one possibility but that’s…"

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

Just as Yuu was about to go off on a tangent, Itsuki brought him back to reality and snapped her out of it. Realizing that, she fixed herself and continued her explanation.

"Magic created from light, dark, and control elements. Light for Illusion Magic, Dark for Void Magic, and Control for Scent Magic. He used them to trick the werewolf before it attacked."

“Huh? Aren’t two of those supposed to be dark types? That’s what they do in games and stuff…”

“Not quite. Illusion magic distorts the light of something, making them appear like something else to others. Contrary to that, dark magic’s void magic is what erases illusions because it can erase false light in a certain area. Well, it’s mostly used to make you invisible, which is what he used to sneak up on the werewolf. Then he erased his scent and put it on his illusion using scent magic to prevent its nose from picking them up, quite the skilled magic user.”

As Yuu explained, before the werewolf pounced on him, he cast a copy of himself where he stood using illusion magic, turned himself invisible using void magic, and moved out of the way. While doing that, he disguised his scent and replaced it with the illusion to seal the deal. When the werewolf pounced, it went through thin air and the copy vanished.

He was able to execute the last strike by making a copy of himself and predicting where the werewolf would end up after its attack.

"...Magic just sounds like cheats."

"For normal humans, it is."

Senkyo, Yuu, and Itsuki gathered and another big pair of double doors appeared in front of them.

"Should we go in now, Yukou-senpai?"

"Yeah, my stamina already recovered."

"Is it me or is your stamina increasing a bit too quick?"

"Maybe it's a side effect of having your energy forcefully recovered every single time..."

"...?"

Itsuki overheard their conversation. Something was making Senkyo forcefully recover his strength. Though it popped in Itsuki's head, at this point he didn't care much about that anymore. He'd already seen a whole army of lesser demons get cleaned off in one slash. He put it in the back of his mind and passed it off as magic.

Senkyo pushed open the double doors. The doors connected to a long castle-like hallway lit by purple torches on the walls. They entered the hallway and just like last time the doors behind them disappeared. Senkyo and the others were on high alert as they walked.

After a few minutes of walking through the hallway, they reached another set of double doors but this one was bigger and fancier. Senkyo and the others knew danger was the only thing that would lie behind those doors. It was like the door for the boss room in an MMORPG. Senkyo switched with Ryosei and readied his sword, Yuu was prepared to cast barriers or attack magic depending on the situation, Itsuki knew he wouldn't do much but he still readied his fists. Slowly, Senkyo pushed open the double doors.

The room in front of the three was a familiar setting in fantasy adventures with relation to royalty. The room had a seat in the middle of it where the person with the most power sat and gave out orders. It was a throne room.

Everything around them was made out of shiny marble with gold decorations all around. The middle of the room had a red carpet that reached all the way in front of the throne.

On the throne sat a kid with pure white skin with yellow lightning shapes on the side of his cheek. He had hair as white as his skin with occasional strands of yellow hair and blue eyes that shined as bright as lightning. He wore a Gi and had four white balls floating around him.

On each side of the throne stood a cloaked man with a mask and a werewolf. The two enemies that showed themselves to Senkyo and the others before reaching this room.

"Yay! You're finally here!"

The kid on the throne spoke like his friends that came to play finally arrived.

"Let me introduce myself, I am Fulgur, one of the ten leaders of END. I only needed to retrieve the crimson-haired girl, but I thought it'd be fun if I sent all of you here and we'll all play together first!"

"Shut up! I don't care about you! Where is Ichika?!"

"Watanabe-san, no! Calm down for a second!"

Itsuki shouted in rage. The cautious Ryosei forcefully held Itsuki back to stop him from doing anything else that might provoke the kid.

If the fact that the kid was a leader of END was true, then he had to have been dangerous. Ryosei considered what Itsuki hadn't and acted on it, but Itsuki struggled to get out. He didn't calm down, so Ryosei whispered to Itsuki something that proved effective in the past.

"Watanabe-san, if you don't calm down, you might never be able to see Ichika-san ever again."

"…?!"

Itsuki slowly stopped struggling. He put his arms down and went silent. The thought of not being able to see his sister must've knocked him out of it.

"Tsk! Damn it..."

Itsuki could only curse as he stepped down and stayed silent.

"Good, if you didn't calm him down, I would've had to get rid of him. I don't want crybabies in my games after all."

"Please don't misunderstand him. He just wanted to know what amazing magic the great Fulgur-sama used to send us to different places and brought us here!"

"Ooh, is that so?! You recognize my greatness! You have a good eye! Very well, since I'm feeling a bit generous, I'll tell you!"

*"\*Wow! Talk about easy!\*"*

Ryosei easily manipulated Fulgur by simply praising him. He thought tricking him was worth a try, and he was right. Fulgur looked like a kid, acted like a kid, and was a kid. Conceited with a loose mouth every time someone sings their praises. Which led Ryosei to squeeze out a bit more information about how powerful the enemy they were facing was.

"You'll be surprised to know that the magic used to bring you here wasn't because of me. It was because of my loyal toy, Magic Man, that did all of this! Unfortunately, he can't be here since he's holding this space together and gathering more batteries."

"What does the great Fulgur-sama mean by batteries?"

"Show them, Magic Man!"

"As you wish..."

Fulgur stood up from his throne and cast his arms to the air above him, and a mysterious voice echoed around the room. A rectangular screen suddenly appeared in the air with an image of a dark room with a pit of glowing purple. A closer look into the pit, it was a horrendous sight.

"That's...!"

"\**Gasp!\**"

"Aren't they...?!"

People were wrapped in cocoons of purple slime. It was a huge pit at that. As far as the eye could see, it was only humans. Noticeably most of them were students that wore the same uniforms as Senkyo did.

"Honshou Academy students?!"

The screen kept changing view. Itsuki saw a familiar face, it was the face of the one he was looking for.

"Ichika! Damn it, I swear I'll fucking kill you, bastard!"

"Get a grip, Watanabe-san!"

"Like hell I'll get a grip! I just saw Ichika in one of those things!"

"We'll save her, Watanabe-san! But we can't do that if you keep letting your emotions lose!"

"S-Shit...!"

Itsuki ground his teeth and clenched his fists, trying his hardest to keep his emotions from running wild. Surprisingly, Itsuki had a lot more control over his emotions than Senkyo thought.

*"\*Ryosei, that Fulgur kid said that they were batteries, weren't they? Then does that mean all the energy they used for those areas was from all those people?\*"*

*"\*I think so. If we don't stop this quick, those people will have all their spirit power sapped from them. Worst case scenario, they might die.\*"*

*"\*Damn it...\*"*

The situation was dire. Senkyo and the others had a time limit they couldn't see. They needed to finish this as fast as they could or people might die.

"Okay! Enough looking at my greatness, let's start the game! Magic Man!"

"Yes, my lord."

The mysterious voice echoed again. A flash of light covered everyone's vision and swallowed the whole room in it. When they opened their eyes...

"Where are we?!"

**45 – Duel**

Ryosei looked around. The throne room that they previously were in was now gone. It was a completely different location. He was in the middle of an open field with seats surrounding it. He was in a kind of battle arena. While looking around, he realized that Yuu and Itsuki were gone. He was separated from them after that light blinded him.

"Hisho-chan! Watanabe-san! Where are you?!"

"IT'S USELESS, HUMAN!!"

A beastly voice caught his attention and faced the source of it. In front of him stood a familiar furry beast that emitted the very definition of terror. The same one that he faced earlier in the forest.

"MASTER FULGUR-SAMA'S GAME IS THAT WE FIGHT TO THE DEATH!! A PERFECT REMATCH FOR MY EARLIER LOSS! I MAY HAVE UNDERESTIMATED YOU EARLIER, BUT THIS TIME I’M NOT HOLDING BACK! HAHAHA!!"

"Damn... This is going to be annoying..."

Ryosei recalled the last time they fought caught them in surprise. This particular werewolf didn't have a stone embedded in its nape, which usually indicated its weak spot. Without it having a weak spot, it'll be impossible for Ryosei to defeat something that doesn't die.

*"\*Well, I think this is better than having Hisho-chan or Watanabe-san fight this thing.\*"*

*"\*Oh? You're ready to pick the short end of the stick for your companions?\*"*

*"\*Why are you so surprised?!\*"*

*"\*Well I thought any normal person, especially an otaku like you would be screaming by now, saying things like 'Why am I in this situation?!' or 'I don't want to die!!\*'"*

*"\*Do I look that pathetic?\*"*

*"\*No, I just thought it was the normal reaction.\*"*

*"\*So, you're saying I'm not normal?\*"*

*"\*Hahaha, you’re incredibly strange. I mean, no one can just accept these things so quickly. From the start, I thought it was weird that you weren't more confused and you were more accepting.\*"*

*"\*Are you insulting me?\*"*

*"\*No, at least I don't think so. I think it's great that the person I possessed is a good person.\*"*

*"\*The hell...?\*"*

"HUMAN! STOP SPACING OUT AND FIGHT ME!!"

Ryosei was distracted by the internal conversation he had with Senkyo, but the werewolf caught back his attention. He then readied his sword.

"That was rather kind. You waited for me to get into form."

"OF COURSE! I WOULD NOT THINK OF SULLYING THE NAME THAT MASTER FULGUR GAVE ME BY SNEAKING ATTACKS IN A PROPER DUEL!!"

*"\*Why the hell does a beast have a knight’s honor? Also wasn’t it just trying to assassinate us earlier in the forest…?\*"*

"I, DOG MAN, WILL DEFEAT YOU IN THIS DUEL!!"

*\*D-Dog man…? Ahh, whatever.\**

Senkyo dismissed the beast’s strange name. The werewolf stood still. Ryosei was wary of it doing something unexpected so kept his distance and was ready to act at any time.

*"\*Ryosei, look! Under the werewolf!\*"*

Dark lines began forming below where the werewolf stood. They stretched out from it and were forming more lines as it expanded. But it didn't end there, even the werewolf itself began emitting a field of darkness. The werewolf growled as the darkness formed around him. Senkyo and Ryosei were on high alert. This was the first time they've seen anything like it.

Suddenly, the werewolf released a howl, unlike anything they'd ever heard. It felt distorted and it struck fear into the hearts that heard this. Ryosei was no exception, for a second, his form faltered and left a huge opening.

The darkness that wrapped the werewolf exploded and covered everything. The ground, the arena, the sky, and everything else was nowhere to be seen. All that remained were Senkyo, Ryosei, the werewolf, and the eternal darkness that covered their surroundings.

"Wh-What is this?!"

The howl and the sudden change in surroundings left Ryosei unguarded. The werewolf wasted no time and leaped at Ryosei. He was about to dodge out of the way but...

"What?!"

The werewolf's claws turned blood red and covered Ryosei's entire vision. He reflexively went from dodging to blocking but by then it was too late.

"Gaahh...!"

The werewolf managed to leave a deep wound on Ryosei's left shoulder. Blood spilled from the wound, he fell to the ground, and dropped Kuro Yaiba.

*"\*Ryosei! What happened?!\*"*

Senkyo asked in a shaken tone.

*"\*I don't know... I'm pretty sure I still had time to dodge that, but its claws suddenly got bigger and it struck me from there.\*"*

*"\*What are you talking about?\*"*

*"\*Didn't you see it, Senkyo?!\*"*

Before they could figure out what was going on, the werewolf rushed at Ryosei. he tried to dodge but it was like something was keeping him in place. He looked at how far the werewolf was from him and he knew he had enough time to dodge this one. The werewolf's bloodlust glare kept Ryosei in place. It was as if Ryosei was seeing something Senkyo couldn’t. The werewolf leaped, and just like earlier, Ryosei chose to block instead of dodging. Before the werewolf was about to reach Ryosei, Senkyo shouted at Ryosei as loud as he could.

*"\*RYOSEI! ROLL TO YOUR RIGHT AS FAR AS YOU CAN! ROLL! RIGHT NOW!!\*"*

Ryosei reflexively rolled to his right as Senkyo told him to. The werewolf that was about to bite Ryosei's head off hit nothing but air. Ryosei successfully got away from the werewolf's attack.

"WHAT?!"

**46 – Impatience**

The werewolf shouted in surprise.

*"\*Senkyo?! What was that?!\*"*

*"\*Ryosei, I think this place is messing with your senses.\*"*

*"\*My... senses?\*"*

*"\*What did you see when the werewolf was coming at you?\*"*

*"\*It looked like it was closer than it should've and it looked more intimidating...\*"*

*"\*This space must be enhancing your sense of fear.\*"*

*"\*Fear? Not my vision or anything else?\*"*

*"\*No, if that was the case, then I would've been seeing the things you've been seeing. From my perspective, the werewolf was just leaping and dashing at us like it normally did.\*"*

*"\*So that's why...\*"*

The reason Ryosei got hit by the werewolf's first attack wasn't that its claws became bigger, it was because Ryosei didn't dodge. The space affecting Ryosei's senses made it look like it was closer and bigger than it should have been. If Ryosei continued to dodge, he would not have gotten hit.

The reason Senkyo wasn't being affected by this, was because right now, is a spirit. He was only using his body's five senses but he wasn't using his brain because Ryosei was the one occupying it. As a spirit on standby in Senkyo's body, things like memories and feelings are shared, which includes fear, but the one taking the brunt of the fear was the one who was currently controlling the body, Ryosei. That means Senkyo was not having delusions like the werewolf's claws being closer than they should be.

"HAHAHA! I DON'T KNOW HOW YOU GOT OUT OF THAT ONE BUT I'LL BE SURE NOT TO MISS THIS TIME!!"

The werewolf dashed at Ryosei again. It had its claws out and was ready to slice Ryosei. From Ryosei's perspective, its claws were bigger and glowed red. Since he knew it was fear affecting him, he bit his lip as hard as he could to snap out of it. He mentally steeled himself and imagined the werewolf a bit farther than it should've been.

Ryosei knew he wasn't going to win like this, but it helped him dodge attacks like this one. He successfully dodged and ran to pick Kuro Yaiba back up. He took his form and readied his blade.

*"\*Senkyo, I'm going to close my eyes. You tell me what you see and I'll move according to what you say.\*"*

*"\*Heh heh... indeed this is the correct move to avoid its effects. But it's not going to be that easy.\*"*

*"\*I know that but I trust you, so trust in me to slice this mutt up the moment it comes close!\*"*

*"\*You got it!\*"*

Ryosei closed his eyes, and Senkyo watched an outline of the werewolf. The reason for this was that Senkyo wasn't controlling his body. He was a spirit on standby mode. And just like Ryosei, when his spirit is on standby mode, he doesn't need to have Senkyo's eyes open. He could see the outlines of his surroundings just like when before Ryosei met Senkyo. Ryosei had vision even without having his eyes open.

"WHY YOU...! I DON'T KNOW HOW YOU'RE GETTING AWAY, BUT I DON'T HAVE TIME FOR GAMES! IT'S TIME TO FINISH THIS!"

The werewolf got on all fours and made a rush for Ryosei. He readied his blade for the moment he gets instructions from Senkyo. The werewolf ran at Ryosei as fast as it could, and Senkyo saw the outline of the werewolf coming directly at them.

*"\*It's going to pounce right in front of you! Right now, it's about 10 meters away!\*"*

"...!"

Ryosei gripped his sword and focused. His hair began to flutter and traces of wind could be seen circling around Ryosei. Senkyo didn't have to ask what Ryosei was going to do. So, he waited until his timing was perfect. Finally, the werewolf pounced on Ryosei.

*"\*It's 35 degrees above you!!\*"*

"HA!!"

Ryosei slashed his sword at the indicated location and a sharp gust of wind traced the blade angling 35 degrees upwards.

"WHAT?!"

The werewolf couldn't dodge in midair and got cut clean in half. The dark space Senkyo and Ryosei were in began to disappear and the arena that they were once in reappeared in front of them. Ryosei reopened his eyes and the effects of the space were gone.

*"\*Good work, Senkyo! I knew I could count on you!\*"*

*"\*I could say the same to you.\*"*

Ryosei looked at the pieces of the werewolf in front of them. Ryosei readied his blade and expected the werewolf to revive. The two pieces of the werewolf began to move.

"Tch... it's not over yet!"

*"\*I don't know about that one.\*"*

"Huh?"

Ryosei questioned Senkyo's last statement. But he knew he had to focus on the enemy in front of him. The werewolf's pieces were slowly merging together until they came to a sudden stop.

"What...?"

The werewolf's body stopped merging mid-revival and a few seconds later, the werewolf's body turned to ashes.

*"\*Just as I thought.\*"*

"Senkyo, what happened?!"

*"\*Mana.\*"*

"Huh?"

*"\*The werewolf used mana to keep regenerating. But since it ran out of mana, it couldn't fully revive and died right there.\*"*

"I see… you really are amazing. But how did you find out?"

*"\*Well, I wasn't sure at all, but after seeing what happened, now I'm definitely sure! Impatience!\*"*

*“\*It was Impatient?\*”*

Senkyo explained. Part of how Senkyo discovered the werewolf's secret was because the werewolf showed its trump card right off the bat. It didn't bother wearing them down or trying to cripple them before it used it. If it wanted to get a definite victory it would've tried doing that to Ryosei before using its ace. So, there must've been a reason for that.

It was because it couldn't afford a battle of attrition; it had limited resources. And the only resource he had was mana. Knowing it wouldn't win a prolonged battle, it tried to finish it right off the bat, and from the werewolf's words:

*\*I DON'T KNOW HOW YOU'RE GETTING AWAY, BUT I DON'T HAVE TIME FOR GAMES! IT'S TIME TO FINISH THIS!\**

It didn't expect to have the battle last that long. The space must've been using up its mana as time passed. Before the werewolf could even regenerate itself, it ran out of mana and died.

"Wow, you really have a knack for this sort of thing!"

*"\*I don't know if I should be proud of that or not...\*"*

As Senkyo and Ryosei were in the middle of their conversation, a blinding light covered their vision.

"Whoa?!"

*"\*This is...!\*"*

With that, the arena was left empty with Senkyo and Ryosei nowhere to be seen.

**47 – Yuu’s Support**

Meanwhile, Yuu and Itsuki were together in a similar location. They were in an arena that looked identical to the arena Senkyo and Ryosei were battling.

"Where are we...? Where's Yukou-senpai?"

"Don't know, but more importantly, look over there."

Itsuki pointed in front of him. There stood the man covered in bandages and wearing a tattered cloak with a mask on. The one they met at the party when they first entered the building.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, I am Puppet Man, a puppeteer of Fulgur-sama. The game Fulgur-sama has chosen is a fight to the death, and I, Puppet Man, humbly requested I go against two of you."

"Don't give me your formal talk! Give me back Ichika!"

"My, my we have a rather impolite guest here... perfect!"

The puppeteer cast its arm towards Itsuki. A black hole suddenly appeared above Itsuki. Multiple strings descended from the hole and clung to him.

"GAH! GET THESE THINGS OFF ME!!"

"No! Watanabe-senpai!"

Yuu cast a fireball to the strings but it suddenly went off course and turned left. The strings wrapped Itsuki in a dark aura and turned Itsuki completely silent. Yuu worriedly called out to Itsuki.

"Watanabe-senpai...?"

Itsuki slowly approached Yuu. He was walking weirdly and he wasn't saying anything.

"A-Are you alright?"

Itsuki finally reached Yuu, but he still didn't say anything. He slowly pulled his fist and launched it toward Yuu. She avoided his punch and created distance between them.

"Just as I thought... Watanabe-senpai is being controlled!"

Yuu was wary of Itsuki from the moment he was wrapped in a dark aura. She backed off and kept her distance from him. She summoned multiple fireballs around her and shot all of them at once, aiming for the strings above Itsuki. But not a single one of the shots hit. All the fireballs curved away from their target as if voluntarily avoiding them.

"What happened?!"

"Child, I believe I already introduced myself. I am a PUPPETEER! Do not think my skill is so low that I can only control living beings!"

Yuu analyzed everything he said. Her face had a serious look on it.

"Don't tell me... you can control my magic?!"

The puppeteer responded with a mocking laugh. Itsuki began running towards Yuu at full speed. He had his fist ready to punch her when she was within his reach. Yuu stepped to the side, dodging Itsuki's punch. Itsuki was set off balance as Yuu swept his legs making him fall to the ground.

"Aw... I guess in the end he was just human after all... a weakling."

The puppeteer said. It flung its arm across the air while looking at Itsuki. Then, he went flying from where he lay to the farthest wall where the puppeteer's arm ended his fling.

"Watanabe-senpai!"

"Oh, don't worry about him. I made sure he was still alive. After all, that boy will make a good toy for Fulgur-sama."

"You monster..."

"How delightful… Don't worry, I won't kill you. Fulgur-sama still has uses for your soul."

The puppeteer chucked. If he didn't have anything obstructing his face, he would probably be smirking. He raised his arm up to the sky and multiple black holes opened from the ground.

"Come, my puppets!"

Lesser demons began popping out of every black hole. They were the same demons that Ryosei and Yuu fought at the party. They came out of the holes like rats. And covered both the land and the sky.

"If only Yukou-senpai and Konjou-san were here, this would be a lot easier."

Yuu thought back to the time Ryosei killed almost half the enemies' numbers in a single strike. But that made her realize something.

*"\*Wait, Isn't Yukou-senpai pushing himself?\*"*

Yuu thought back to the whole time they were sent to the Spirit Realm. The whole time, Senkyo and Ryosei have done nothing but fight.

Before they even got to the party, Senkyo had a fight with Itsuki and Ryosei didn't help him that time. Senkyo fought for himself, and in the end, he won but was also exhausted. That time at the party too, Senkyo and Ryosei killed the most enemies. That time in the forest, Senkyo and Ryosei defeated the werewolf boss. And now, somewhere away from her, he was fighting again.

Yuu felt bad about Senkyo and Ryosei always doing most of the work, even though it was her problem. All the force recovery Senkyo's body has been receiving must've been taking a toll on it one way or another.

*"\*I have to lighten Yukou-senpai and Konjou-san's burden! I'll defeat this puppet and bring Watanabe-senpai back!\*"*

Yuu was now determined to help Senkyo and Ryosei. Her way of doing that was by defeating the puppeteer for them. She placed her hand on the ground and cast a barrier around her. The lesser demons were striking the barrier with their sharp blades and arrows. But the barrier was strong enough to withstand it… for the time being.

"This should be good enough."

Yuu stood back up and stretched her arms out in front of her, hands facing the ground. She entered a state of focus and began a series of chants.

"O Fire, become my sword, become my shield. Let me wield your burning flame to cut down my adversaries. Knight Spell: Fire Magic!"

Yuu was suddenly covered in fire. The flame that wrapped around her didn't seem to hurt and she didn't scream in pain. The fire slowly dissipated but left a blade of fire that wrapped around Yuu's right arm.

"O Wind, coat my legs, aid my every step. Bless me with your flight that will create my path. Enhanced Speed!"

Yuu's legs were covered with a burst of wind. Like the fire, it slowly dissipated but this time, it left no trace.

"O Fire, protect me with your flare, become my mantle. Cloak me like the heavenly sun. Sun's Protection!"

Another burst of fire surrounded Yuu and quickly dissipated.

While Yuu was chanting, her barrier was slowly opening up cracks and they became larger and larger as time passed. After she finished her last chant, the barrier around Yuu broke into pieces and a horde of lesser demons entered the barrier.

"My, my I hope she isn't—"

The puppeteer was interrupted by a burst of flame from where Yuu stood. Lesser demons in that area were knocked back and were slowly burning. Another burst of fire appeared in the middle of the army of lesser demons and had the same effect as the first burst of fire. Then, more and more bursts of fire appeared in the middle of the army. Noticeably, the bursts of fire were coming toward where the puppeteer was. And from within the army of lesser demons, Yuu came dashing out of it. She was going at high speeds towards the puppeteer.

"What?!"

"Burn!"

Yuu dashed next to the puppeteer and slashed him with her right arm which was covered in a blade of fire. The puppeteer barely dodged the slash but still burnt his tattered cloak slightly.

"Why you—"

Before the puppeteer could finish, a burst of fire came from around Yuu and knocked the puppeteer back.

But the puppeteer wasn't the only enemy, lesser demons came to strike Yuu from all directions right after the burst of fire. Unfortunately for them, fire appeared in midair and blocked all the attacks that would have hit Yuu.

"Good thing I got to cast all my spells!"

**48 – Glimpse of Hell**

Yuu puffed her chest out boastingly. The magics that Yuu cast helped her tremendously.

Knight Spell is a magic that creates a temporary blade to cover one of the user's limbs and a temporary invisible shield that blocked any attack that it could. In Yuu's situation, she used fire magic so the blade that covered her right arm and the temporary shield used fire.

Enhanced Speed, as self-explanatory as the name, enhances the target's speed depending on the power the user put into it.

Sun's Protection is continuous magic that lets out a burst of flame in a five-second interval for as long as the user wants to, as long as the user has mana to sustain it. It busted flame around the user like the flaming sun and protected it from any nearby enemies.

If Yuu hadn't cast these she wouldn't have been able to quickly reach the puppeteer and attack him as she did. The puppeteer slowly got back up from the ground. He was groaning as he stood. He obviously didn't take Yuu's attack too well.

"Brat... You actually got a hit off me... haha... HAHAHA!!"

The puppeteer started laughing maniacally and he stood. His mask slowly started to break. Cracks covered the mask.

"I pray that this brat won't die after I'm done teaching you a lesson... Forgive me, Fulgur-sama if I do!"

The puppeteer's mask broke to pieces and took off the bandage that covered his face. From behind the bandages, was a black hole. The hole expanded and floated into the sky. A rumbling came from the hole and all the lesser demons were sucked up. Then, a wooden mannequin doll that stretched over 300 feet dropped from the hole. It took up almost half the arena.

"You have to be kidding me..."

Yuu sounded a bit disheartened. It was only natural. A gigantic enemy just appeared from out of nowhere. But she didn't keep herself like that for long. She renewed her resolve and started running to the mannequin's leg.

"Take this!"

She summoned multiple fireballs around her as she ran to the mannequin. She shot all of them at once in a single area and followed it up with a slash from her fire blade. The spot that she hit looked burned from her attacks. But it was only a small portion of it. At the rate she was going, she'll never be able to finish the battle.

"Hahaha! How cute!"

The mannequin spoke, but it didn't have a mouth. The sound of its voice resounded throughout the whole arena.

"I won't forgive you for earlier!!"

Strings came out from the mannequin's fingertips and went straight for Yuu. She immediately moved to dodge the incoming strings. She ran as fast as she could to avoid being caught by the strings that were whipping the ground behind her.

Yuu could only run. She didn't have a way to defeat the colossal wooden mannequin. She racked her brain as she ran with her enhanced speed. She already dropped Sun's Protection to preserve her mana and the blade covering her right arm started to fade.

She didn't stop making up possibilities and crossing them out in her head. She thought of ideas like her life depended on it, which it did. Her face looked serious focusing on thinking while running to dodge the strings. And finally, her face lit up and a grin showed up on her mouth.

"This might just work!"

"Stay still, you little brat!!"

Yuu began running faster now that she could fully focus on running and dodging. She was running in circles around the mannequin. The strings that kept whipping at her couldn't land a hit. Yuu clasped her hands in front of her as she ran and began chanting a spell.

"O Fire, lend me your power, from the pits of hell come to mine aid..."

The mannequin belittled Yuu as it saw her chanting.

"No measly fire magic can take me down!! Can't you see I'm over 300 feet tall?! You'll never be able to take me down, IT'S USELESS!! HAHAHA!!"

"...Set the first point of my retribution!"

Yuu chanted as she ran. After her first chant, nothing happened.

"HAHAHA!! DID YOU CHANT YOUR SPELL WRONG? POOR GIRL, HAHAHA!!"

She continued running and dodging. The land was covered in ruptures from the attacks of the mannequin. Yuu maneuvered through the fragmented arena and started chanting again.

"O Fire, lend me your power, from the pits of hell come to mine aid..."

She chanted the same chant she did earlier but slightly changed in the end.

"...Set the second point of my retribution!"

She didn't stop running because she knew she'll die if she did. She was completely defenseless. She didn't have any protection magic and the strings were so strong that they left fissures on the ground.

She continued as she ran in a circle. Neither stopping to catch her breath nor rest in any kind of way. Finally, she ran a whole lap around the mannequin.

"O Fire, lend me your power, from the pits of hell come to mine aid..."

"I TOLD YOU THIS IS USELESS!!"

"...Set the fifth point of my retribution!"

"YOU'RE WASTING YOUR TIME!"

"With the five keys set, open the gates of hell and begin my reckoning! Hell's Pillar!"

At Yuu's words, a crimson light shined beneath the mannequin.

"WHAT?! THIS IS—"

A magic circle appeared beneath the mannequin and shaped a star in the middle. It shined in bright crimson as ashes and cinders floated in the air inside it.

"A HIGH-TIER SPELL?!"

The mannequin stopped its attack in confusion as it looked beneath it. If the mannequin had a face, it surely would be one of utter despair. Yuu backed up all the way to the wall, far from the mannequin. She was panting uncontrollably, trying to catch her breath. Sweat covered her whole body. But she still managed to grin as the mannequin looked at its demise. Not even a second later, a pillar of blazing inferno appeared inside the area of the magic circle that reached all the way up the sky. It was like hell itself appeared through the ground.

"GAAAAAAAAA!!!"

The colossal wooden mannequin was completely engulfed in flames. The hell inside the magic circle burnt its wooden body to a crisp. Slowly, the silhouette inside the burning inferno became smaller, and in time, disappeared.

A few seconds after the shadow inside the pillar of flame disappeared, Yuu dispelled her magic. The pillar of flame and the magic circle beneath it was nowhere to be seen. All that was left on the battlefield were Yuu and Itsuki. Even the mannequin's ashes didn't remain. It was completely obliterated.

"H...Huh? What..."

Itsuki was released from the puppeteer's spell. He just regained consciousness. He looked around and saw Yuu in the distance.

"Shorty!"

He ran as over to Yuu as fast as he could. When he reached her, Yuu was about to fall over but Itsuki caught her before she did.

"Hey, Shorty! What happened?!"

Yuu couldn't answer properly. She was too tired to. Itsuki noticed that and stopped the questioning. She exhausted herself quite a bit. Her mana was almost all gone and all that running made her tired. She was in no shape to walk, much less another battle. All of the sudden, without even letting Yuu take a break, another flash of light covered their vision.

**Chapter 6: The Child Leader**

**49 – Anomaly**

A blinding light covered their vision.

"We're back?!"

"H-Huh? I'm not tired anymore...?"

Itsuki and Yuu were back in the throne room they left in. The same kid sat on the same throne atop the stairs. The only difference was, that the two that were beside the kid, the puppeteer and the werewolf, were gone.

Yuu wondered why she didn't feel tired anymore. Just a second ago, she was sweating and panting heavily trying to catch her breath. Even her mana pool was replenished.

"I recovered you, that's why!"

Fulgur who was sitting leisurely on the throne answered Yuu's question. Fulgur, a leader of END, the enemy, recovered Yuu's mana and energy. That boggled Yuu and Itsuki's minds. Why did he do that?

"B-But why?"

"Ah, wait, they're coming!"

A ball of light appeared beside Yuu and Itsuki, and from it appeared Senkyo.

"Yukou-senpai!"

"Shittaku!"

Yuu and Itsuki shouted when they saw Senkyo suddenly appear before them. They were happy to see that the one who separated from them was okay.

"Hisho-chan! Watanabe-san! What happened to you guys?!"

"We were sent to an arena and fought the guy with the tattered cloak with a mask. We’re fine. How about you, Senpai?"

“Good thing you guys are okay. I think I fought in a different arena. My enemy was the werewolf."

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I have a few... wait, my arm is healed?"

"I told them already, it's because I healed you all!"

"*Y-YOU*did? But why?"

Senkyo wore the same confused expression. Fulgur showed a grin before answering their question.

"Well, to fight you of course! I don't want to fight broken toys!"

*"\*What the hell is wrong with this kid...?\*"* Senkyo thought.

Fulgur disappeared from his throne. In a blink of a second, he was right in front of Senkyo and was staring at him.

"What?!"

Senkyo reflexively backed up. Fulgur looked like a kid, but just because he did, that did not mean Senkyo could let his guard down. Yuu and Itsuki did the same. They were wary of the major threat right in front of them.

"Hey, you!"

Fulgur pointed his finger at Senkyo.

"M-Me?"

Senkyo quizzically pointed to himself, confirming he was who Fulgur was talking to.

"Yeah. Who are you right now? Yukou or Konjou?”

"What?!"

Senkyo took another step back. He was taken by surprise when Fulgur not only mentioned Senkyo's name but Ryosei's as well. Yuu looked as surprised as Senkyo did while Itsuki was confused about the question Fulgur asked. He didn't know who Konjou was, so he naturally didn't catch up to what was happening.

"H-How do you know about Ry—no, Konjou?"

Senkyo was about to say Ryosei's given name but immediately cut himself. Fulgur already knew about Ryosei, so to be safe, Senkyo didn't want more information about them to get out. So Senkyo used Ryosei's last name instead.

"Because you were all mentioning each other’s names. How else would I know?"

Fulgur looked at them as if it was common sense. He listened to them the whole time they were there but that wasn't what Senkyo was asking. He wanted to know how Fulgur knew about Ryosei's existence.

"No, not the names! How did you know about Konjou? Calling out another name isn't immediately going to point to having another spirit!"

Senkyo pressed Fulgur for answers. Fulgur turned his back on Senkyo and slowly walked up the stairs to his throne. When he reached its apex, he turned back around and faced him again, but this time something was different about him.

His left eye was covered in a dark purple flame. His whole aura from earlier changed as well. Now, you could feel a dark aura of anger and regret seeping out of him. Everyone's skin crawled as he faced them. They could all feel it, his animosity. Senkyo, Yuu, and Itsuki reflexively took a fighting stance. Fulgur's new presence put them all on high alert. The whole room was filled with tension as Fulgur stared at the three below him.

"Hahaha! Can you guess what I am?"

Fulgur emitted a frightening aura but his childish attitude didn't seem to change. He asked as he looked at Senkyo and the others. His eyes encouraged them to try and guess, but to Senkyo, it looked like he was forcing them to.

"Could you be... an evil spirit?"

Senkyo answered in a cautious voice.

"Correct!"

Fulgur threw his hands in the air as he said that.

"I am an evil spirit! Did I surprise you?"

"I-Impossible! Isn’t that a physical body?! What are you?!"

This wasn't supposed to be possible. Although they only recently discovered that the Spirit Realm even existed. They were certain that spirits didn’t have physical bodies. Their confusion was understandable. Evil spirits are supposed to be the souls of the people that emitted a large amount of negative emotion before they died. They cause terror in the world of the living with instinct and without consciousness, but this particular one had enough intelligence to play around with his enemies.

"Hmm... fine! Since you are one of the first people to interest me, I'll make an exception for you! Let your great Fulgur-nii-sama open your eyes!"

Fulgur grinned and stuck his chest out. It looked like he was boasting to Senkyo, but something seemed strange from his words. Fulgur addressed himself as an elder brother to Senkyo.

"You and I are one of the same."

Fulgur teleported upside down floating in front of Senkyo with his face directly in front of his.

“Huh?”

After a light giggle, he disappeared once more and his voice echoed throughout the room. Everyone in the room looked around for him but with no luck. His voice simply reverberated without a physical body to call its origin.

“Yukou Senkyo, you don’t know who you are. As an older brother, I feel bad. An anomaly like you shouldn’t exist, and neither should I. Given great power but with an even greater consequence. Honestly, the god of death should just have our heads and end our suffering. That’ll be easier for us.”

"What are you talking about?!"

“Oh? I was just answering your question.”

Fulgur suddenly appeared in front of Senkyo. Standing still and staring him straight in the eye. He quoted Senkyo

“‘What are you?’ you asked me. Then my answer is… something like you, an anomaly! You see, Otou-sama, the one who saved me, made me like this!"

Senkyo was confused, but he tried his hardest to comprehend what he was saying. He didn’t say a word and listened quietly.

"Let me tell you a story! —

**50 – The Lightning Leader, Fulgur**

Long, long ago there was a sickly child who just wanted to play. But his body was too weak to go outside the house. He was always in his bed, doing absolutely nothing. Waiting for something to happen.

A few years later, he overheard his mother and father talking about their financial situation. They said they couldn't keep living like this. They needed more money, so what did they do? They leave their sickly child who was sucking up all their money in the streets to die!

They didn't even bother to send their child to an orphanage. They left him on the streets like trash. They left him and fled the town. The child spent his time in the dark alleys. People simply walked by like he never existed. He was thinking things like 'Why did they do this?', 'Why is everybody ignoring me?', 'Someone... please help...' After his time in the dark alleys, his mind broke and all that was left in him was hatred, and eventually, the child met his death.

Next thing he knew he was wreaking havoc in the village he died in as an evil spirit. Suddenly, a man approached him like it was a normal thing to do. Despite being an intangible spirit, the man saw him and approached him. Naturally, the evil spirit attacked him, but for some reason, it didn't work for him. He put his hand on the spirit and somehow managed to touch it. The spirit was confused as to what the man was doing.

The man asked the evil spirit 'Do you want to play?' The evil spirit immediately answered 'Yes! I want to!' Then, the man took the spirit away and completely transformed him. The man blessed the spirit with incredible power and a physical body.

From a frail little boy to a powerful evil spirit. The spirit soon became one of the leaders of the man's group and gave him a title and a new name. He became one of the ten leaders of END, The Lightning Leader, Fulgur.

—end of story!"

The room stayed silent after hearing about Fulgur's past. He experienced pain as a small child and was given the chance to redo life. That would usually be a satisfying result if only his new life didn't involve destroying three worlds and ruling over them.

"That's why I'm an anomaly! An evil spirit with a mana source! How amazing is that? And you, something about you is different. Otou-sama told me about you! You have two souls inside your body, don't you? That isn't normal, you know..."

Senkyo stood still. Fulgur was basically saying that Senkyo wasn't human and he caught on to that. He looked confused he didn't know how to take Fulgur's words, whether he should believe him, or ignore him. Fulgur smirked as if aiming for this reaction from him. It looked like he planned this all along. He extended his hand to Senkyo, and Senkyo looked at him quizzically.

"Senkyo-chan, do you want to join me and find out the truth?"

"Yukou-senpai, no!"

"What are you doing, you idiot!"

"BOTH OF YOU SHUT UP!"

Fulgur knocked Yuu and Itsuki back to the wall behind them. He faced back to Senkyo and urged him to take his hand. Senkyo slowly raised his hand. It was going towards Fulgur's hand, slowly but surely. Until suddenly...

*\*Smack!\**

Senkyo smacked Fulgur's hand away with his. He looked at Fulgur with a smile and said...

"Don't think I'll take the hand of someone who wants to destroy the world and all its treasures with it!!"

"What?"

"If I join you, and destroy the world, who do you think will continue to make great entertainment? Anime, manga, visual novels, light novels, everything, they'll all disappear! I am a man of my hobbies and I am not letting a selfish kid like you destroy them!"

Yuu and Itsuki smiled as they heard Senkyo's speech. Their looks said that they should've expected that coming.

"Yukou-senpai... you really are straightforward."

"That loser needs to get better at his speeches."

Senkyo may have been thrown into confusion, but that didn't mean he lost his sense of reasoning. He knew that was what Fulgur was after all along. Unfortunately for Fulgur, Senkyo wasn't so easy to control.

Fulgur dropped his head and went silent. It didn't look like he was too happy about being rejected. The aura around Fulgur became heavier. The temperature in the room suddenly dropped. Fulgur mumbled quietly.

"...vable... gi... ble..."

He kept mumbling over and over. He was repeating the same words but no one could make it out. Gradually, his voice started to get louder and more comprehensible. Until he finally shouted it out loud.

"UNFORGIVABLE! UNFORGIVABLE! UNFORGIVABLE!!"

The aura around Fulgur burst with animosity. Everyone in the room got back on their feet and prepared themselves for an incoming storm.

"YOU CAN'T SAY 'NO' TO ME! I’M YOUR OLDER BROTHER! ONE OF THE LEADERS OF END! YOU SHOULD FOLLOW EVERYTHING I SAY WITHOUT QUESTION! THAT'S WHAT TOYS LIKE YOU SHOULD DO!"

Fulgur wailed. He was a child throwing a tantrum. It looked like he was spoiled a lot after meeting his 'Otou-sama.' He was referring to people as his toys and he only cared about his own entertainment. The rejection he took earlier was probably his first in a long time.

The four balls floating around Fulgur began quivering and lightning slowly coiled them. Shortly after, the whole throne room started shaking like an earthquake was happening.

"Kya?!"

"An earthquake?!"

"What's happening?!"

"IF YOU DON'T WANT TO JOIN ME, I'LL JUST FORCE YOU! I'LL BRING YOU TO OTOU-SAMA ALONG WITH THAT VAMPIRE!! SURELY, HE WOULD HAVE SOMETHING TO CONTROL YOU! MAGIC MAN, TO THE PLAYGROUND!"

"Yes, my lord."

A mysterious voice resounded in the room, then another blinding light covered their vision.

"Not this again...!"

*\*Crash! Crash! Crash! Crash! Crash!\**

Loud deafening crashes could be heard from beyond the light. It was a familiar crash that could be heard in bad weather. The light slowly dissipated from everyone's vision.

"This place..."

"Senpai is this..."

"Isn’t this a fucking lightning field?!"

**51 – Immense Power**

Numerous metal poles stretched throughout the whole landscape. The sky was covered with dark gloomy clouds. Claps of thunder could be heard coming from both far away and right next to them but that wasn't the most eye-catching of the whole sight.

Lightning struck the poles left and right but not just any lightning. Red, blue, green, purple, yellow, white, and other various colors of lightning struck the metal poles around them. A surreal sight that could never be possible in the real world. Sparks of lighting ranging in all sorts of colors spread throughout the field. Truly a sight that could only be seen in a fantasy, but Senkyo was seeing them with his own two eyes.

"I've never seen anything like this..."

Yuu and Itsuki ran over to where Senkyo was. Back in the throne room, they were thrown to a wall so they had to return to Senkyo’s side.

"Yukou-senpai, are you alright?"

"Yeah, nothing happened yet."

"Oi, Shittaku, do you know where we are?"

"It's probably another field Fulgur made."

"HAHAHAHA!! WELCOME TO MY PLAYGROUND!"

Fulgur floated in the sky in front of Senkyo and the others. His hands were coiled with white lightning while the four floating balls around him were coiled with red, blue, purple, and yellow lightning. He looked like a true god of lighting as he floated in the air.

"SINCE YOU WERE RUDE ENOUGH TO DECLINE MY INVITATION, I'LL HAVE TO PUNISH YOU BEFORE I HAND YOU TO OTOU-SAMA! AND WHILE I'M AT IT, I'LL TEST YOUR POWER MYSELF!"

The lightning around the field began striking more frequently. Every strike shook the ground and pierced the ears. Senkyo switched with Ryosei and readied for battle. Yuu and Itsuki did the same. Ryosei began to command them but...

"Hisho-chan, create a bar—?!"

"BLITZ!"

A white ray of light bounced off the metal poles and hit Ryosei, Yuu, and Itsuki. It kept bouncing all over the place and hit them left and right. Without letting them have time to catch their breath, the ray of light relentlessly beat them up. That light was none other than Fulgur himself.

"GAH?!"

"AHH...!"

"UGH!"

Ryosei and the others didn't have enough time to react. The light was too fast. They couldn't dodge it. They took every single hit it threw at them. The ray of light stopped and Fulgur reappeared on the ground beside them.

Ryosei, Yuu, and Itsuki all fell to the ground. They had bruises, scratches, and even burns all over their body. Ryosei, the fastest person out of the three of them, couldn't even react. That inhuman speed beat them up hard.

"Hahaha!! That was just a warm-up! Don't tell me you guys can't handle it anymore. Stand up! I haven't even had my fun yet!"

Ryosei was the first to act. He used Flash Strike and got behind Fulgur.

"Too slow!"

One of the balls floating around Fulgur blocked Ryosei's blade. The ball discharged red lightning, crawled through Kuro Yaiba, and electrocuted Ryosei.

"GAAAH!!!"

Ryosei couldn't get away. The beat-down he received earlier slightly crippled him so he couldn't get away in time. The electricity that ran through Ryosei stunned him and brought him to his knees.

"I'm powerful, aren't I? Otou-sama made me like this. If you join me, you could be like this too. Come on, leave behind everything and join me already! You’ve done nothing but waste your whole life! Your talent! THIS IS THE TIME TO MAKE USE OF IT! TO FINALLY MAKE USE OF YOUR PATHETIC LIFE!!"

Fulgur still acted like a kid and persisted to convert Senkyo. Ryosei slowly got back up and created distance between them. But Ryosei knew that distance was meaningless, because of Fulgur's speed, he could close that gap in under half a second.

"Still struggling? I know you know this is useless."

Ryosei grit his teeth in frustration. He got back up and readied his sword. He used Flash Strike again and attacked Fulgur. Fulgur looked at Ryosei like an annoying bug. He used the balls floating around him to block his strike, but this time he didn't discharge any lightning.

Ryosei continued to attack Fulgur, but his attacks were always blocked by the balls protecting him. A barrage of fireballs then came flying at Fulgur from all directions. Yuu cast the fireballs to support Senkyo as he attacked.

"It's useless..."

Fulgur himself discharged a field of lightning and dispelled every single fireball and knocked Ryosei back in the process. Kuro Yaiba got knocked off his hand. Itsuki caught Ryosei before he hit the ground and Yuu caught Kuro Yaiba.

"Thanks..."

"Don't need it."

"Yukou-senpai, here."

Yuu handed back Kuro Yaiba to Ryosei. However, when he tried to retrieve his sword, his arm didn't move. Ryosei's right arm, the one he used to wield Kuro Yaiba, felt numb and it didn't follow his orders. It was paralyzed.

"You have to be kidding me..."

"Yukou-senpai, are you alright?"

"I... I can't move my arm..."

"What...?!"

"What do you mean, Shittaku?!"

Yuu and Itsuki looked at Ryosei in disbelief. Their companion just took a major hit. Their swordsman's arm, the one he used to wield his sword, was paralyzed. He was basically useless now.

"Hahaha!! Did you get paralyzed? I didn't even mean to!"

Fulgur walked towards Senkyo. Yuu created a barrier and began shooting fireballs from inside it. She shot, and shot, and shot but every single one of her fireballs was blocked before they reached Fulgur. Despite this, Yuu still continued shooting.

*"\*Senkyo, I don't think we can beat this guy.\*"*

*"\*I don't think so too...\*"*

Senkyo and Ryosei were losing hope. They looked at the situation strategically and nothing they thought of led to victory. Ryosei was already accepting the fact that he lost. Everything looked for the worse, but...

*"\*But I'm still not giving up.\*"*

*"\*What? Didn't you just say you agreed with me?\*"*

*"\*I did. I don't think there's a single way we can win.\*"*

*"\*Then you want to fight meaninglessly?\*"*

*"\*Of course not!\*"*

*"\*Then what do you mean?!\*"*

Ryosei was already panicked. Fulgur easily beat him like it was nothing. His attacks didn't hit him once. His right arm was paralyzed. He couldn't do anything anymore. He despaired in the face of this frightening enemy. Despite him looking like a kid, he was still a leader of a terrifying organization that planned to rule three worlds. His panic was understandable.

But Senkyo, despite knowing the enemy's power, despite sharing the despair that Ryosei felt, despite the odds clearly being absolutely against them, still said with conviction, 'I'm still not giving up.' And the reason for that is...

*"\*Hey, Ryosei you're an otaku, right?\*"*

*"\*Yeah, but what does that matter now?!\*"*

*"\*Then you must've seen at least a few anime that tortured the protagonist's friends and even killed some of them off...\*"*

*"\*What...?\*"*

*"\*Ryosei, what do you think will happen to Hisho-chan and Watanabe-san when we lose?\*"*

*"\*That's...\*"*

*"\*Hisho-chan will be sent to the enemy's hands and have her divine soul be used for their evil schemes. If her divine soul is her actual soul, then it's most likely that they'll kill her.\*"*

*"\*.....\*"*

Ryosei couldn't talk back. Senkyo spoke what he had in mind. He wasn't wrong. The enemy's target is Yuu's divine soul, which is part of her soul. That means, killing her and collecting her soul is the only way to get her soul.

*"\*And what about Watanabe-san? The enemy has no use for him. They might use him as a lab rat and experiment on him. If they don't, Fulgur will just kill him. And what about the people that they're using as power for this space? No one will save them, you know?\*"*

Senkyo was thinking about all the possibilities this whole time. He has been thinking about his companions and the people who were trapped. He thought of the worst possible scenarios.

*"\*But why... why are you thinking about the worst things that could happen?\*"*

Senkyo took a quick pause.

*"\*That's because this is real life. This isn't any anime or anything. It isn't certain that someone will just come to save us before we die. Thinking about the worst possible scenarios early makes it easier to prepare when it comes. I've seen enough anime where a lot of characters die... I am not about to let that happen in real life!\*"*

**52 – He Who Challenges Impossibility**

*"....."*

Ryosei was in awe. He never thought that Senkyo would be like this.

*"\*As long as I'm around, I'll do everything to keep that from happening! I'll think of every possible scenario, I'll simulate every possible scenario, and I'll choose the one that has the best ending! Like a player with a copy of all the visual novel's endings!\*"*

Ryosei couldn't say another word. This was completely unexpected of him. Ryosei and Senkyo shared emotions, memories, and bodies, but they didn't share thoughts or personalities. Senkyo's mindset was completely different.

Senkyo didn't sound the least bit despaired. In fact, it sounded like he was determined. Who knew there was a person like him out in the world? He had an incredible talent and he used it for the better of the people around him, his companions. If he weren't an otaku, if he hadn't witnessed the despair and happiness that happened in fiction, if he didn't feel the fictional character's emotions, would he have ended up as he had? Most certainly not.

Ryosei looked back at himself. He despaired at the enemy's power. He already thought of giving up because he thought there was no use. He didn't consider what would happen to his other companions when they lost like Senkyo did.

But considering all the possibilities and simulating them wasn't as easy as it sounded. You had to have a strong enough heart to swallow the despair that the bad endings would bring and Senkyo had just that. A strong heart that would lead them to victory.

He felt ashamed. He was a hunter of the Konjou clan. He fought other kinds of demons and spirits before. He was used to battle. He knew the dangers. Yet why is the person who suddenly got dragged into the world of demons and spirits the one holding his head up instead of him? That's what he thought.

*"\*Damn it! I’m such an idiot... Senkyo, I'm sorry!\*"*

He rebuked himself.

*"\*It's fine, at the end of the day, we're different people. You can't expect the other person to do all the things the other person can. I'm the one who thinks of these things, while you're the one who battles in my place. So, I'll ask you, would you lend me your power for my plan?\*"*

*"\*Yeah, I'm with you all the way!\*"*

Ryosei found himself a new resolve. Senkyo opened up a new way of thinking for him, and he wanted to support that.

*"\*Then, let me handle it for now.\*"*

*"\*Sure.\*"*

Senkyo took back control of his body. Fulgur already broke through Yuu's barrier. She was casting ice magic to slow Fulgur down. She froze his feet to the ground, but that was useless. Fulgur easily broke Yuu's magic. One of Fulgur's balls came close to Yuu. It looked like Fulgur was about to electrocute Yuu and knock her out. Itsuki was about to tackle Fulgur, but two other balls awaited him. Everything was falling down, until...

"Hey, Fulgur-nii-sama!"

Senkyo called out to Fulgur while addressing him as an older brother. This immediately grabbed the attention of Fulgur. But not only him, Itsuki and Yuu were surprised at what that was all about. Everyone stopped where they were and faced Senkyo. He stood up and approached Fulgur.

"Whoa! Whoa! Did you finally decide to join me?!"

"Well, I came to give you a chance."

"A chance? What are you talking about?"

Senkyo gave Fulgur a bright smile.

"Let's play a game!"

Everyone looked at Senkyo in surprise. To think that Senkyo would propose a game at a time like this.

"Yukou-senpai, what are you—"

"Hahaha! You finally get me! Let's do it! What do you want to play?!"

Senkyo grabbed his chin in a thinking manner and looked at the sky.

"Let's see... how about an endurance game!"

"An endurance game?"

"Yeah! The rules are, you attack me as much as you want in three seconds. If I don't fall down and am still conscious within three seconds, I win and you have to do as I say. But if I fall or get knocked out, you win and I have to do what you say. How does that sound?"

"Oh! That sounds great! Let's play!"

Fulgur looked happy and jumped around in joy, but Yuu and Itsuki weren't so happy. They knew what that game entailed.

"Then, let's talk about what happens when one of us wins."

"Huh...? Can't we just think about that after someone wins?"

"No, that's not allowed. It's a part of the rules. You have to decide on what happens before the game starts."

"Eehhh...?"

"It's more fun this way!"

"Is it...?"

"It is, it is!"

"Hrm... fine. Older brothers spoil their little brothers so I’ll give you this one."

Senkyo was able to set Fulgur up, but now comes the hard part. The one he needed to pull off the most.

"Okay! Then how about... If I win, you let go of all the people you're using as batteries and all three of us here, but if you win, you'll let go of all the people you're using as batteries along with Hisho-chan and Watanabe-san and I'll join you in END and play games with you all the time!"

Everyone was in surprise yet again. The outcome was basically all the same either way. Senkyo and the others had the benefit of whether they lost or not. It was completely unfair.

"No! That doesn't sound fair at all!"

Fulgur shouted.

*"\*...here goes everything!\*"*

"Huh? But it's more fun this way!"

Senkyo took the personality of a spoiled little brother.

"What do you mean?! If I don't bring that vampire back, Otou-sama will scold me!"

"But think about it this way, If I win, you get to look for me again, and we'll be able to have more fun! And since you're looking for me, it'll be a game of hide-and-seek! Isn't that fun?"

"Hmm... yeah but what if I lose! How is that going to be fun?"

"Oh? Then I'll help you find Hisho-chan again! I'll be 'it' with you! And the two of us will find Hisho-chan together!"

"Ooh!! That does sound fun! Wait... but Otou-sama will still scold me..."

"No, he won't, because I'll talk to him about our little game! I won't let him scold you! I'm sure he'll forgive us he's a nice person, after all, right?"

"Really?!"

"Yeah, really!"

"Then let's do it! Let's play the game!!"

Senkyo and Fulgur were smiling at each other. Fulgur was like an excited kid who just entered a theme park. Both of them were set to play the game, but...

“I’ll play the game. But only if you increase the time to five seconds!”

Senkyo bit his lip as he heard that.

“W-Wait, come on. I think three seconds is long enough, right? Five is a bit…”

“NO!”

Fulgur shouted

“I’m spoiling you as much as I can, you know? I think the game should at least be ten seconds long, but I’m willing to compensate for five. Any lower wouldn’t be any fun!”

“F… Fine. I’ll try and last five seconds.”

“Yay! Then let’s hurry up and start!”

Fulgur prepared himself and waited for Senkyo to come to him. Senkyo tried to control Fulgur as much as he could and hit the limit. He was afraid that if he tried to force his rules, he’ll back out. So he reluctantly accepted the five seconds and began walking to him until something else got in his way.

"I won't let you, Yukou-senpai! It's too dangerous! You might die!"

Yuu shouted at Senkyo, she wanted to stop him. She fully understood what Senkyo wanted to happen. Senkyo created a situation where in the end, Yuu and the others will be saved. He tricked Fulgur into thinking that those conditions were the best for him by adding in the element of fun and using himself as a prize for Fulgur. Although logic didn’t see it as fair, his personality did and that was all that mattered.

Yuu and the others will be saved, but what about Senkyo? Senkyo was the one in the most danger. Not only did he have to take a large number of attacks from Fulgur, but he also had to win to get temporary freedom from Fulgur and if he lost, he'll be forced to join END. Senkyo was sacrificing himself. Yuu didn't want that.

"Come on, Yukou-senpai, you don't need to do this! We'll just have to beat him now or escape! You don't have to sacrifice yourself!"

Senkyo slowly approached Yuu and pet her head.

"Hisho-chan, thank you... But I have to do this, sorry."

**53 – Gamble for Power**

Senkyo took off his hand and left Yuu. But just before he left, he looked at Itsuki, who didn't say anything to him. He was grinding his teeth and clenching his hand into a fist. He was trembling as he stood. Itsuki noticed Senkyo's gaze and looked at him back. Senkyo's eyes pointed to Yuu and looked back to Itsuki.

Itsuki got the message. Senkyo wanted him to take care of Yuu and keep her out of what was about to happen. Itsuki ground his teeth even harder but eventually responded with a nod.

Yuu screamed for Senkyo to stop. Then, Itsuki put his arm in front of her, getting in the way between her and Senkyo. Itsuki was telling her to let him do it. Yuu began to tremble, she ground her teeth and clenched her hands as hard as she could. Tears started falling. Senkyo saw this but he continued to walk toward Fulgur.

*"\*That's the third one, Senkyo.\*"*

*"\*sigh... so it is...\*"*

Ryosei was referring to the fact that Yuu was the third girl that he made cry. Finally, Senkyo and Fulgur were ready.

"Are we starting now?!"

"Yeah, let's start the game."

Senkyo looked serious. He braced himself for the wave of attacks he was going to receive. He had to last five seconds if he could.

*"\*Senkyo, I'll be using my recovery on you. Though it'll be like throwing a glass of water at a building covered in fire. Try your best to hang in there.\*"*

*"\*Yeah, I will. After all, I have no intention of losing this game. I have to apologize to another girl now, so I have to come back and take responsibility.\*"*

*"\*Sounding cocky, are we?\*"*

*"\*It's a sort of encouragement.\*"*

The four balls that floated around Fulgur moved to surround Senkyo. Fulgur showed both his palms to Senkyo and began to count down.

"3... 2... 1... 0!"

A field of lighting surrounded Senkyo. White bolts of lightning went through Senkyo's body and electrocuted him.

"GAAAAAAAAAAAHHHH!!!"

White lightning bolts are the most dangerous of all the different colors of lightning. Senkyo had to be surrounded for an excruciating five seconds in this. This was about to be Senkyo's longest five seconds but definitely not his last. That was because… Senkyo’s plan involved a gamble with the god of chance.

Time slowed down for Senkyo immensely. Every second felt like a lifetime. Bolts of lightning were running up and down his body. His skin was turning black from the incredible heat that ran over it. His clothes were tattered and his shirt started to catch fire.

Yuu and Itsuki watched in horror. They couldn't do anything about what was happening. Senkyo didn't let them interfere. They stood there and watched as Senkyo suffered from a thousand bolts of lightning.

Fulgur didn't look satisfied that Senkyo was still standing and screaming. He clasped his hands and white bolts of lightning came down on Senkyo from the dark clouds. Balls of lightning appeared around Senkyo and closed in on him.

A barrage of lightning strikes of all kinds stuck Senkyo. If any normal person was to get hit with this, they would've died by now, but something was different about Senkyo and that was what he was gambling on.

Senkyo screamed out in pain as he bared through the devastating attacks. Even if Senkyo survives this, there was no way he would be able to live normally anymore, but he ignored the future side effects.

*"\*Bear with it...! Bear with it...! Bear with it...!\*"*

Senkyo not only had to physically bear the pain but also mentally. His mind began to get fuzzy. The lightning must've been getting to him.

*"\*What's... this...?\*"*

A vision appeared in Senkyo's mind.

"Senkyo... snap out of it... Senkyo!"

*"\*What?!\*"*

A man appeared before Senkyo. He was shaking his shoulder, hard.

*"\*Dad...? Dad?! What the...?! Where am I?!\*"*

Fulgur, Yuu, Itsuki, and the lightning that was frying Senkyo alive were gone. He couldn't feel the pain anymore. It was almost as if he was completely sent away from the battlefield.

*"\*Ah... am I dead?\*"*

Senkyo's deceased father was right in front of him as if he were alive. Senkyo thought he died from the massive amounts of lightning bolts and he was now on his way to the afterlife with his father.

"Get a grip! I know there are a lot of enemies but Leo and I will take care of it!"

*"\*What...?\*"*

Senkyo looked over his father's shoulder and saw a whole army of monsters. There were running, flying, and dashing toward them. They looked like they ranged from half Senkyo's height to ones as tall as buildings.

*"\*Wh-wh-what the hell?! I thought I was dead! Why are there still demons coming after us all the way in the afterlife?!\*"*

Senkyo freaked out at the sudden appearance of more demons. Right when he thought he was on his way to somewhere peaceful; he saw more demons.

"Senkyo!"

His father shouted at him. The loud voice made him snap out of it. Senkyo took a better look at his father and the surroundings, but something was clearly off. Aside from the hordes of demons coming after them, the sky was painted in a peculiar color.

The sky was colored blood red. There wasn't any kind of weather or phenomenon that happened on earth that made the sky color this shade of red. The land they were at looked nothing like any place on earth that he knew. Grasslands stretched out into the horizon. The grass was colored blue like it was frozen in thin ice. Yet it still flowed smoothly as the strong winds went by.

His father looked different too. He looked younger and he had a tattered cloak wrapped around his back. Over to the far left was a person holding a spear. It was his father’s colleague and the person who was currently giving him his monthly allowance to financially support his life alone. His father was holding a katana in his hand. Something about the katana looked awfully familiar. The blade was sheathed in a white scabbard with a blue design on its tip.

*"\*Isn't that... Kuro Yaiba's scabbard? It has a different color scheme but it's definitely it!\*"*

"Listen to me."

Senkyo faced his father. His father had a stern face on.

"Somewhere in the future, you'll probably have to face the same scary monsters over there or maybe even worse. I promise you; you'll be able to face them head-on; I know it! But before that future comes, I want you to live a normal life. One that you’ll love with all your heart that you’d want to live for it."

His father smiled at him. It was a warm smile that was somewhat reassuring. He put his hand on Senkyo's head.

"So, after this incident, you'll forget everything about the other worlds like that. You'll be able to live normally. Don't worry I'll still be with you after this. You won’t be seeing Shiro for a while, but she says she can handle it."

*"\*Eh...? Forget...? About other worlds?\*"*

"But I won't be able to stay by your side your whole life. Something will probably happen to me and you'll have to fend for yourself. If... if you're seeing this memory now, that means something really bad is happening to you. But don't worry you'll be fine soon enough, just chant with these words..."

Senkyo listened intently to his father's words. Every word was carved into his head. It was like a mysterious force was forcing him to remember.

"Alright, I gotta go! Leo, let's clean up here and go home!"

Senkyo's vision became fuzzy, and the sound that reached his ears slowly hushed. When Senkyo came to, he was back in the lightning field and he was being fried to death by the lightning around him.

**54 – Divine Soul**

*"\*I'm back—gaaaahhh!!!\*"*

The pain that temporarily nulled came back as Senkyo returned from the mysterious vision.

*"\*Senko! Hang in there!!\*"*

Ryosei was shouting in his head. The pain and Ryosei's voice woke him up from his dream. Senkyo didn't know what anything was happening anymore. More incomprehensible things just kept happening. But for some reason, Senkyo still remembered what happened in that dream he had.

*"\*Well, I have nothing to lose!\*"*

*"\*Senkyo? What do you mean?\*"*

Senkyo gritted his teeth and used his strength to move his mouth properly under the pain of lightning bolts running through his body. He used the adrenaline to his advantage and forcefully screamed the words...

"RELEASE...! 8TH LEVEL SEAL...!!"

"Hm...?"

The air around Senkyo changed. Fulgur looked puzzled as to what Senkyo just shouted. Senkyo's scream also got the attention of Yuu and Itsuki.

"SUMMON FAMILIAR: ... SHIRO!!"

Ripples of blue light surrounded Senkyo. His wounds began to heal, his skin changed back to its normal color, and the small fire that started in Senkyo's clothes went out. It was as if something was protecting him.

"Eh...?"

Senkyo stopped feeling the pain of the lightning that was still surrounding him. Fulgur noticed something was wrong. His face turned serious and barraged Senkyo with more lightning bolts. His face started to look panicked. It was already long past five seconds.

"Stop! It's past five seconds! Stop hurting Yukou-senpai!!"

"Shorty! Look! That otaku's body!!"

Itsuki pointed at Senkyo. He noticed that his wounds slowly disappeared and his face didn't seem in pain anymore, he stopped screaming too.

"Eh...?"

Yuu and Itsuki silently watched Senkyo.

*"\*Senkyo?! What's happening?!\*"*

Ryosei was as surprised as Yuu and Itsuki. The pain suddenly stopped and Fulgur began to panic.

*"\*I don't know either, but you can leave it to me!\*"*

*"\*What's with that...?\*"*

Senkyo said it in a cheerful voice that Ryosei felt a little bit reassured. Senkyo always surprised Ryosei every single time. For some reason, something inside Ryosei just felt like he could leave it to him.

"I am a master worthy of my soul. Unleash my power to the world of the living and show them the wrath of the dead and the non-existent. Open the gates and heed my call, soul that resides within me, Divine Soul of Spirits!"

*"\*What?!\*"*

"What?!"

Senkyo chanted a sort of magic spell. Yuu and Ryosei were both taken aback. Senkyo, a human with no mana, chanted a spell. Senkyo couldn't stop surprising them, but that didn't stop there. A light-gray crest lit up on the back of Senkyo's right hand.

"An angel's crest?!"

A crest-like birthmark that indicated an Angel, one who bears a divine soul, suddenly appeared. Senkyo didn't have any crests or birthmarks like that his whole life. No one would think that Senkyo was an Angel. But this crest suddenly appeared, and Yuu was utterly confused at what was happening.

"Impossible...! I changed my mind! I’m ending this game!"

Fulgur turned into a bolt of lightning and charged Senkyo. He tried to grab Senkyo’s head but his hand was blocked by his right hand.

"Wh-What?! I thought your arm was paralyzed!"

Fulgur took a look at Senkyo's face, he was surprised to see that Senkyo's eyes were closed.

"Are you underestimating me?!"

Fulgur felt insulted that Senkyo didn't have his eyes open. He thought that Senkyo didn't think he would break through his defenses. Fulgur let out a flurry of punches. His punches were so fast that Yuu and Itsuki could only see afterimages as if short lightning bolts were hitting Senkyo from close range. But to Fulgur's surprise, his punches weren't even reaching Senkyo. They were blocked by the ripples of blue light that surrounded Senkyo. Fulgur made some distance between them.

"YOU’RE NOTHING LIKE OTOU-SAMA DESCRIBED!!"

Fulgur shouted and raised his arms to the sky. The dark clouds circled above Fulgur and the thunder started to get louder. The balls that surrounded Senkyo returned to Fulgur. The lightning field around Senkyo stopped. The balls created a line that connected Fulgur's palm to the circling dark clouds. Lightning of all sorts of colors came down from the clouds straight to Fulgur's palm and collected itself there.

"TASTE MY POWERFUL LIGHTNING!! LIGHTNING GOD'S RE—"

"Spirit bind."

"—AH?!"

Fulgur suddenly stopped moving. The lightning that collected in his palms stopped striking and dissipated. The balls that connected Fulgur and the clouds fell to the ground as if they lost their batteries. Fulgur looked like he was struggling. Something was keeping him from moving.

"IMPOSSIBLE!! WHY CAN'T I MOVE?! WHAT DID YOU DO?!"

Everyone stared at Senkyo. Their eyes all hungered for answers.

"My lord, we must go!"

A mysterious voice resounded in the air. It was the one that Fulgur called 'Magic Man.' A dark portal opened up behind Fulgur and it moved forward, slowly sucking Fulgur in.

"HAHAHA! As expected of Magic Man. I'll be going now; this little game was fun but I have to leave. Mark my words, I'll come back for you! Haha—Eh...?"

"Like I'll let you. Spirit bind."

Just before the portal fully swallowed Fulgur, it stopped at Senkyo's words. But for some reason, Senkyo didn't sound like himself. His voice didn’t change but his tone and speech pattern did.

"What? M-Magic Man... what's happening?! Get me out of here!"

"M-My lord... I cannot move...!"

"What?!"

Fulgur looked incredibly paled. He and his subordinate, who wasn't even in the same place, couldn't move just because of Senkyo.

"You, from the other side of the portal, get in here."

The portal shifted to the left and someone wearing a cloak appeared out of the portal. When the cloaked man was in line with Fulgur, the portal disappeared.

"What?! Impossible! Something's controlling me and my magic!"

Senkyo, who stayed still all this time, faced Fulgur and everyone else. Everyone was shocked to see that Senkyo was making a face he never made before. His eyes looked cold; they were as cold as the darkest side of the moon. Everyone was intimidated by his look.

"Yukou... senpai?"

"What the..."

Senkyo looked at Yuu and Itsuki who were right behind him, but then looked back at Fulgur and the cloaked man.

"I am the Divine Soul of Spirits. The owner of this body is my master. I am currently controlling my master's body because he is not yet ready to receive my power. So, for threatening the life of my master, you will pay with your life."

"D-Divine Soul of Spirits...?!"

Yuu let out in a surprised voice.

"What?! Impossible! Absolutely impossible! The Divine Soul of the Spirits was obliterated long ago! There shouldn't be another one popping out of nowhere!"

"Hmph... You said it yourself, didn’t you? That my master is an anomaly."

Senkyo, or rather, the Divine Soul of Spirits raised his arm and directed his palm to Fulgur.

"Summon Soul: Grim Reaper.”

**55 – First Step Into The Mystery**

An area of the ground in front of Fulgur and the cloaked man began gathering waves of dark mana. It made a circle in the ground and something slowly came out of it.

"What?! No! Stop!"

"My lord! I will try to use my magic to get you out...!"

"It's useless. You won't be able to move, use magic, or anything else if you're in my binds."

The cloaked man struggled but to no avail. He couldn't move one bit. The dark figure that came out of the ground came into full vision. It had curly hair that reached its shoulders. It wore a skull mask over its face. It had a black jacket, boots decorated with skulls, chains that hung on his waistband, and a large scythe that he carried on his back.

"NO!! IMPOSSIBLE! IT'S ACTUALLY YOU!"

"You're getting really annoying. Grim reaper, purify the two in front of you."

"Ah~ The nostalgic feeling of being summoned. So you're back, soul of spirits!"

"Shut up and do your work you damn god."

"Aw! How mean! Fine... I'll make this quick. First is..."

The Grim Reaper and the soul talked like they were longtime friends. It was incredibly weird to Yuu and Itsuki to see the so-called 'Grim Reaper' talk in a laid-back manner. Then again, none of this made sense to them from the start.

The Grim Reaper walked in front of the cloaked man who struggled and struggled but to no avail.

"You have a bad sense of fashion. No one wears such a worn-out cloak anymore! I'll put you out of your misery first!"

"Hah! I am an Ieroask! You can't kill me just because you behead me! My body is made out of tar!"

"Oh~? Is that so? Want to test it out?"

"Fool! The Grim Reaper's scythe is absolute! It'll kill anything as long as he cuts off their head!"

"What?!"

Fulgur shouted at the dream demon despite it being a useless effort. The Grim Reaper raised his scythe and beheaded the cloaked man. His head dropped to the ground and splattered black tar. The body lost its bind and dropped with its head. The dream demon didn't regenerate and didn't move. Just like Fulgur said, the dream demon died.

"Make it clean, kids are watching!"

The soul looked over to Yuu and Itsuki as he said that to the Grim Reaper.

"Fine, fine."

The Grim Reaper stretched his hand out to the dream demon's remains. Its body turned into particles and floated into the sky. The Grim Reaper then faced Fulgur. He was met with eyes that were filled with despair and terror.

"No! Stop! I'll give you anything! Please! I'm a spirit too so—"

"So, what? You'll become my subordinate? You'll swear allegiance to me? I don't need a kid like you."

The Grim Reaper raised his scythe again.

"Goodbye ~!"

"NOOO—!!"

Fulgur's head was cut off. The Grim Reaper did the same thing to Fulgur's body as he did to the cloaked man's. His body turned to particles and dissipated. Fulgur, one of the leaders of END, The Lightning Leader, died.

"No way... They defeated that Fulgur guy... so easily..."

"So, this is the power... of the Grim Reaper..."

Itsuki and Yuu watched as the Grim Reaper mercilessly and one-sidedly defeated Fulgur. When they fought Fulgur, they couldn't do a single thing. They were beaten up and got backed up in a corner but the Grim Reaper did that exact thing to Fulgur. In fact, much worse. The Grim Reaper put down his scythe and faced Senkyo while slowly sinking into a dark hole.

"How cold~! You're already returning me?"

"I don't need you anymore. Get lost."

"Ugh... Fine, see you soon, I guess."

The Grim Reaper got fully sucked into the hole and disappeared. The soul that's controlling Senkyo faced Yuu and Itsuki. The two noticed and were wary of it. Then, Senkyo sighed.

"Take care of my master for me. Seriously, what a reckless plan. And to think it worked… he really is like his father."

Senkyo’s plan was to rely on the power that Fulgur incorporated him with. It was clear to Senkyo that Yuu wasn’t Fulgur’s only goal. He was also a part of it. In the way Fulgur was talking, Senkyo was not human and he was somehow an “anomaly.” He bet his life on that mysterious power and took a reckless gamble with no guaranteed chance of success. With the threats gone. Senkyo’s eyes slowly closed and his body limped and dropped to the ground.

"Yukou-senpai!"

Yuu and Itsuki hurriedly ran to where Senkyo was. Senkyo's eyes were closed. It looked like he was unconscious.

"Yukou-senpai! Yukou-senpai!"

Yuu repeatedly called out to Senkyo. Her eyes were a bit teary and she wore a worried look. Itsuki watched from behind as Yuu called out to Senkyo. For some reason, he felt like he shouldn't be there. Slowly, Senkyo's eyes opened and blinked a few times to clear his vision. He fully opened his eyes and saw a teary-eyed Yuu in front of him.

"E-Eh...?"

"Yukou senpai...!"

Yuu hugged Senkyo like it was the end of the world and started crying. Senkyo was confused as to what was happening. Senkyo looked over Yuu’s shoulder and saw Itsuki standing silently. He asked him what happened but Itsuki responded with a sigh and said...

"Figure that out later!"

Itsuki now understood why he felt out of place. Yuu was hugging Senkyo affectionately. That was all Itsuki needed to know what was happening. Though he was a bit dumb, apparently sometimes he could be sharp.

Itsuki was a bit disappointed when Senkyo asked what happened first. A cute girl is weeping on his chest and he first asked about the situation! At that moment Itsuki thought of Senkyo as a disappointment to all males in the world. A little bit later, their surroundings slowly began to disappear, and a new room came into view.

"Wh-Where are we...?"

Itsuki asked out loud. They were in a room that shined beautifully. Small particles of light floated around them. It was like the whole room was lit up by shiny crystals. Despite the room illuminating beautifully, the other things around them didn't complement that. The walls looked a bit old with cracks and worn-out paint. There were a few holes in the room and wooden planks blocked the broken windows.

"Did the magic get dispelled?"

"I think so..."

Yuu, who still didn't release Senkyo from her grip, agreed with him.

"I think this is the abandoned building we entered earlier,"

Itsuki commented.

"...I see, that would make sense. We did enter one in the first place,"

Senkyo replied. Senkyo looked back at Yuu, but something seemed to be bothering her.

"Is there something wrong, Hi—"

"Shh! I hear footsteps, two of them, coming this way."

Senkyo and Itsuki both went silent. Sweat dripped through their tense faces. As far as they knew, they were in no shape for another fight. Senkyo was tired, but maybe Yuu could fire some magic as cover for an escape.

Senkyo was tired, but he still got up and picked his sword up. Yuu prepared to cast fireballs at the entrance. Itsuki readied his fist, he thought if it was something he could fight, he'll gladly punch its lights out.

The three of them kept an eye on the entrance of the room. The footsteps became loud enough for Senkyo and Itsuki to hear, but with that was the sound of someone talking.

"Maaan! There were a lot of people back there. Good thing no one looked like they got too drained."

"Shut up. You're too loud. The enemy might hear you."

*"\*Wait... aren't those voices familiar...?\*"*

Senkyo listened carefully to the voices that came down the hall.

"It's fine! They probably already know we're here. I mean, it's unusual that we haven't seen a single enemy running around. It was just the people in that massive pit. They stopped casting their field illusion too—"

The person talking was suddenly cut off. The sound of the footsteps and the conversation stopped just outside the entrance of the room. The room was filled with tense silence, and suddenly...

"Don't move!"

Two people came out of the edge of the entrance. The one that shouted held kunai in both of his hands while the other readied to draw a sword from its scabbard. They wore the same strange clothing. Both of them looked awfully familiar.

"...Yamamoto-san and Saito-san...?"

Senkyo recognized them.

"H-Huh...? Yukou-kun... Watanabe-kun... and a girl...? What are you guys doing here...?"

"That's what we were about to ask you..."

The five of them had a silent staring contest at each other as the time passed by, surprised at the unexpected appearance of the other party.

**Epilogue: Connections**

**55.5 – Hero’s Business Trip**

"Hell yeah! I finished another volume's manuscript!"

A man that looked like he was around his thirties jumped out of his seat and pumped his fist in the air. He was in a dark room with only the monitor from his screen lighting up the room. He was wearing plain normal indoor clothes that you would see in a normal household.

He had blonde short hair and two long intersecting scars on his right cheek. He had crimson eyes with a vibrant look to them.

*\*Knock! Knock! Knock!\**

The knock on the door caught his attention.

"Oh, Come in!"

"Excuse me."

The door opened and the person who opened it was a butler. He was an old man with white slicked-back hair and a respectable aura around him. He had the proper butler suit on and white gloves to go with it.

"Akira-sama, it's time for dinner."

"Okay, I'll be there in a minute! Ah! Could you turn on the lights for me, I didn't notice it got so dark. Guess I was too into it this time..."

"Yes, sir."

The butler reached for the light switch and flipped it open. The lights illuminated the dark room and revealed what hid in the darkness. It was a large room with a huge, expensive-looking bed, a big flat-screen TV that was hung on the wall in front of the bed, a huge fancy-looking bookshelf that was filled with light novels and manga, and all the other essentials of a room needed. The room was as luxurious as it could be.

The room was so luxurious that the man who the butler referred to as Akira, looked incredibly out of place. He was only wearing plain clothes. He was like a black dot on a white canvas.

"Well then, if you'll excuse me."

The butler bowed and left the room, closing the door behind him as he did.

"Hmm... I wonder if Ren is home."

Akira left the room with his PC still on. The monitor showed the manuscript that Akira just finished working on. The title of the manuscript was displayed at the top of the screen. It showed “My Battle Against Demons and the Supernatural Volume 7.”

Akira went down a huge and fancy flight of stairs that lead to a lobby and headed straight for the dining room. When he got there, the dining room looked as luxurious as the other rooms. It was spacious and there were even chandeliers hanging on the ceiling. The dining table was huge with a lot of chairs surrounding it. In one of the chairs, someone was already eating there.

“He” had short black hair and black colored eyes to match it. “He” wearing a male high school uniform.

"Ah... Ren, you're back. How was school?"

"It was normal, nothing interesting happened."

"I see you're still wearing a boy's uniform... I swear you look so cute in a girl's uniform! Really, really cute!"

"Shut up, old man."

Akira let out a long sigh after being told to shut up by Ren, who was his daughter. Ren wore a boy's uniform but was in fact a girl. She has a complex about wearing male clothes for some reason. She sat down on the chair at the end of the table and had her dinner served. As they were eating, Akira struck up a conversation.

"Oh yeah, I finished my 7th volume's manuscript. Now I can take a break again and spend some more time with you!"

"You mean the one written based on your time as a Hero? And don’t you have something better to do?"

"That's the only one I write. And don't call me a 'Hero' it sounds too cringy."

"Fine, fine."

Akira took a sip from his cup before continuing.

“And unfortunately, I do have something to do. Why is it that my free time got taken away? Oh, how saddening!”

He pretended to cry in an exaggerated manner, but Ren didn’t seem to bat an eye at his behavior.

“How unusual. What are you planning on doing?”

“A hunter group from America wants my help. Apparently the Zerians over there were acting up. They didn’t have enough manpower so they asked me to come.”

“Are you in any shape to even fight? You’ve done nothing but writing for a long time now.”

“Don’t underestimate your old man, Ren. This is nothing a bit of warming up won’t fix.”

“Hah… if you say so. Then good luck out there.”

“I’ll take care of them and come back in no time! …Oh yeah, that reminds me. Ren, if something does happen just call Ryuuji. He can take care of the house while you’re gone.”

“Yeah, I know. No need to worry.”

“Well, that’s good.”

Akira finished eating and slumped to his chair as he let out a tired sigh. He looked out at the large window to his right where he could see the moon shine beautifully in the night sky. His eyes looked at the moon like he was reminiscing a distant past and let out another sigh.

“‘You’ll know when the time comes,’ huh? Leave it to you to make these vague prophecies, Yukou Yuuto.”

**Prologue: Not So Normal Classmates**

**56 – Hunters**

Hunters. People who know of the supernatural, the other hidden secrets of the world, and fight to protect the world as we know it. Most people live in a society where these things only exist in fiction. Unaware of the groups that run in the shadows that protect their normal, peaceful lives.

The Konjou Clan is a hunter group that exists in the shadows of the world and affiliates itself with its mysteries. They fight demons, spirits, and anything else supernatural that threatens the lives of humans and this world. Sneakily in the shadows, they work and use hidden abilities that no normal human knows of.

They shroud themselves with their techniques so that no one discovers their existence. They work with similar groups, not only inside Japan but all around the world. And the hunters of the Konjou clan are dispatched to deal with the problems caused by anything other-worldly or supernatural.

Earlier this morning, there were massive amounts of reports of missing people from all around town. The hunters of the Konjou clan gathered to deal with the problem immediately. And after collecting intel and tracing mana tracks, they arrived at a certain abandoned building inside a mysterious place called the Spirit Realm. And there...

"What are you guys doing here!?"

"We could say the same to you! And what's with those outfits!?"

Yamamoto Sora and Saito Touma appeared in front of Senkyo's group. Sora was wearing black clothing and a cloak with blue lines that spread all over his clothes. While Touma was wearing the same black clothing with blue lines, instead of a cloak, he wore a long black coat.

Sora and Senkyo shouted in surprise at their unexpected encounter. They met their normal, everyday classmates in a world where no such normality existed. Both parties were shocked to see each other. They tried to get answers from the other, and in no time, things became messy and the room was in chaos, mostly because of Itsuki.

After the situation calmed down, both parties decided that Senkyo's group explain themselves first. Senkyo briefly explained what happened, only including the major parts. Of course, this did not include Senkyo's fight with Itsuki because it was irrelevant as well as specifics on how he defeated Fulgur because Senkyo himself did not know what happened. But Senkyo still managed to explain that they took down The Lightning Leader, Fulgur.

After hearing Senkyo's explanation both Sora and even the cold, expressionless, Touma had their eyes open in surprise. Sora was the first to speak out.

"Wait, wait, wait! Did I hear you right!? You said you defeated *The*Lightning Leader of END!?"

"Well... I don't really remember how, but I think so... We defeated him, right guys?"

Senkyo looked over to Itsuki and Yuu for confirmation.

"The Lightning Leader was defeated, but we didn't do anything Yukou-senpai. I know you don't remember, but you defeated him by yourself."

"Wh-what!? By myself!? That's impossible right, Watanabe-san?"

"Shut up and accept it. Shorty is right. You did it by yourself. But don't ask me what happened. I don’t have a clue what did."

"S-Seriously!?"

Senkyo took a step back as both his companions agreed that he defeated Fulgur by himself. He immediately turned to Ryosei about it, but only to get the same response.

Ryosei was conscious the whole time Senkyo's body was possessed by the Divine Soul of Spirits. He saw the power that defeated The Lightning Leader like it was child's play. He had already crafted his own theories as to what happened but he didn't bother explaining now. He thought it would be best if a discussion about that was done later.

Having no one to explain what happened to him, Senkyo was only thrown into confusion. How did he, Yukou Senkyo, defeat Fulgur without any help from Ryosei? Although it didn’t make sense to him, it was what Senkyo was aiming for, to begin with: the mysterious power that Fulgur branded on him.

*"\*Fine, it’s probably best if I don’t know.\*"*

Seeing as he was getting nowhere by troubling himself with it, he tried to put that subject aside and hoped that Ryosei or someone would later explain the events of his fight with Fulgur. Meanwhile, Sora and Touma were having a private discussion of their own. They whispered to each other trying to not let their conversation leak out to the other party.

"Do you think he's telling the truth, Touma-kun?"

"I don't know. He could be a hunter of a different group and came all the way here to spread false rumors about himself."

"He came all the way to a different group's area just to spread false rumors of defeating a leader? Even if he is the strongest hunter in their group, wouldn't that be too far of a stretch for anyone to actually believe that?"

"Then, let's take him to Freda-sama."

"Ah, good idea! With Freda-sama we'll be able to tell if he's lying or not."

"Hey, you two over there, what are you talking about? Where are you planning on taking Yukou-senpai?"

Yuu stepped up angrily. Sora and Touma observed her with caution. They were whispering enough that Senkyo and Itsuki couldn't hear them, but she heard them as if they were talking normally.

"A-Ahaha... It's nothing I swear!"

"I heard you, 'Let's take him to Freda-sama,' 'With Freda-sama we'll be able to tell if he's lying or not.' You don't believe senpai so you'll take him to some sketchy person? Stop troubling him! He's worked himself out too much already, he doesn't need anyone forcing him to go anywhere!"

Sora and Touma didn’t expect them to be heard. They were sure that they whispered low enough that no one would've heard their mumbling unless they there right behind them, but she heard the whole conversation from that distance. Now, they even doubted themselves if they really did lower their voice.

Senkyo walked up to Yuu and placed his hand on her shoulder. He caught her attention and looked at him.

"It's fine, Hisho-chan. I may not look like it but I can still go through a few more crazy rides."

"But..."

**57 – One’s Worth**

Senkyo tried to reassure Yuu, but it didn't look like she took it too well. Yuu was still doubtful that involving themselves any further with Sora and Touma was a good idea. Senkyo went through a lot, and she had a front-seat view of seeing how hard he worked. She was worried about how much he was pushing himself.

Senkyo noticed. He noticed how she wasn't thinking about herself and thinking about him instead. Sora and Touma were talking about taking him somewhere unknown and possibly dangerous. Yuu got mad at them because of that. Senkyo was happy that she was worried for his sake. He appreciated what she was doing and was thankful. So instead of reassuring her, he decided to tell the truth.

"Well... honestly, everything kind of hurts. I don't think I can even last another fight. Even going home and sleeping for a whole day sounds like a good idea. But... if they know something about END or its leaders, it might be worth checking them out. Plus, it's highly likely that they are a part of the Konjou Clan."

"Senpai, you need to rest! If you want to check them out then at least go when you're all rested up!"

Senkyo and Yuu argued for a bit longer but none of them were backing off. Sora, Touma, and Itsuki were just watching awkwardly as they argued. But everything came to a close when Ryosei finally stepped in and suggested that they ask more about who they were before coming to a decision on whether they would leave or not.

It was the most obvious thing to do, but Senkyo and Yuu were too stressed to think how they normally would. Having calmed down, they asked about who Sora and Touma were but at some point, it seemed like they wanted to win the argument more than actually gathering information.

Sora revealed that they were hunters of the Konjou Clan, just as Senkyo thought. Because of the mountain of reports of missing people and students, they were sent with a team to deal with the problem immediately.

When they arrived at the abandoned building, they searched and found a whole pit of people trapped inside purple slime. The rest of their team rescued the victims and sent them to their clan's hospital where the victims will be checked and cleansed for any sort of curse, illness, lingering effects, and anything else. In short, they'll be healed and will return to normal.

Sora and Touma went to explore further in the building because of the lack of enemies in the whole building. It didn't make sense that there were captured humans but with no signs of the abductors. He heard from Senkyo that the leader was defeated and his subordinates could have simply fled, but he was still skeptical of that, not to mention that a thorough inspection should be done on whether or not the enemies fled. Before Sora could continue explaining, Itsuki grabbed both of Sora's shoulders and took all his attention.

"WHERE IS MY LITTLE SISTER!?"

"U-Uhm..."

Sora was startled by Itsuki's sudden appearance. He couldn't answer Itsuki's question immediately because of it.

"DON'T KEEP ME WAITING! I KNOW I SAW MY LITTLE SISTER THERE! WHERE IS SHE!?"

Itsuki began shaking Sora for answers. The whole reason Itsuki even got mixed into this situation was that he was looking for his little sister, Ichika.

"O-Oh yeah! Yeah, I saw your little sister. She should be—"

As Sora was about to tell Itsuki more about where his sister was, Itsuki grabbed Sora and carried him over his shoulder, and ran out of the hallway.

"POINT ME TO WHERE SHE IS!!"

"W-Wait, Watanabe-kun! Stop! Let me goooo!!!"

Sora's scream could be heard getting farther and farther from the room they were in.

"W-Wait, Watanabe-san, we weren't finished talking!"

Senkyo sighed as his companion carried away Sora and ended their talk. Only Senkyo, Yuu, and Touma were left in the room.

"Well... they don't seem to be bad guys."

*"\*Did Yamamoto-san tell any lies, Ryosei?\*"*

*"\*No, he was telling the truth. We should go with them. We’ll be safe.\*"*

Senkyo consulted Ryosei and they were both in agreement on what to do. Seeing that they were actually a part of the Konjou Clan, then it didn't have many dangers at all.

"Well then, I guess we're going, Hisho-cha—"

When Senkyo faced Yuu, she was pouting.

"W-Wait, Hisho-chan, come on, you don't need to be mad about it! I'll be able to take care of myself somehow!"

"That's not it!"

Yuu shouted.

"It's just that... I feel... kind of useless now. Back in the Spirit Realm, it felt like you were the only one doing all the work. I'm supposed to be able to fight, I was supposed to handle half of our enemies, but every time we fought, you and Konjou-san were the ones who were doing all the work. At first, I took it for granted, but when you were fighting Fulgur... I realized how useless I was. I didn't want that... I didn't want to be useless. I just wanted to help you, even just by a little bit... to make up for not being strong enough."

Senkyo didn't know this was in her mind. Her expression was pained. It must've been gnawing at her since the battle with Fulgur. Senkyo knew Yuu was worried about him, he planned on thanking her later, but he didn't know it was weighing on her this much.

Senkyo wasn't going to let her worry over this any longer. He stood in front of Yuu and called her, catching her attention.

"You aren't useless, Hisho-chan!"

Senkyo shouted.

"Eh...?"

"You're not useless! You had my back since the first battle, didn't you? You always had my back when we fought! You covered my blind spots while protecting Watanabe-san. You used your sharp senses to warn us of danger. You even created many chances for me to easily cut down enemies. I wouldn't have even been able to move the way I did if it weren't for you. Because the only reason I was able to fight like that was because I knew you had my back. If you weren't there, there's no way I could've protected Watanabe-san and defeated all the enemies at the same time. You weren't useless one bit! You were essential! We needed you! If anything, *I*was the one that was useless. I wasn't even the one fighting, Ryosei was. So stop beating yourself up about it. But if you still insist on doing so, I'll show you how useful you are... Wait, that came out wrong. I mean how beneficial you were. Wait, that's not quite right either... Ah! You were indispensable! Absolutely necessary! You're a vital part of the group! I'll show you... how amazing you really are!"

Yuu stared at Senkyo, completely stunned. She thought she was just a bother to him. That she was dead weight relying on him but she never thought that Senkyo looked at her that way. That he thought she was amazing. Senkyo praised her like she was the one taking on all the work. To Yuu, she didn't even do much, but to Senkyo, he noticed stuff that even Yuu herself never even noticed. To Yuu, this was the first time she's ever been praised like this.

*"\*I'm... not useless? Senkyo-senpai, you...\*"*

Recalling what Senkyo said, Yuu was incredibly embarrassed. She wasn't used to praising, and Senkyo just praised her like it was the end of the world. Yuu covered her face with both her hands trying to hide her embarrassment. If Senkyo saw her face now, it would've been bright red.

"Sh-shut up, Senpai! D-Don't just say these things casually, idiot!"

"W-Wait, Hisho-chan! Did I say something wrong! Hisho-chaaaan!!"

Yuu ran out of the room. She quickly retreated to hide her embarrassment.

**Chapter 1: The Hidden Village**

**58 – Back to Earth**

"We’re here."

Sora raised his hand and stopped everyone on their trek. Right now, Senkyo, Yuu, Itsuki, Sora, and Touma were within the thick greenery of the mountains. Their surroundings were filled with trees as far as the eye could see.

Earlier, when Senkyo and Yuu got left the abandoned building, they were met by a large group of people in black cloaks and coats surrounding Itsuki and Sora while Touma leisurely stood around. The other people in black were the other hunters of the party the Konjou Clan sent.

Itsuki came bursting out of the building while carrying Sora like luggage. The other hunters immediately pulled out their weapons thinking that it was an enemy attack. Sora tried to explain the situation to them as quickly as he could before something bad happened. Fortunately, the other hunters understood and put down their weapons.

After having settled things down, Itsuki looked around and couldn't see Ichika anywhere. When Sora asked the person who was in charge of taking care of the victims, they said that they were already sent to their facilities to get checked and treated if anything was wrong with them. Frustrated at having missed her sister by a few minutes, Itsuki took it out on Sora and shook him furiously until Sora couldn't even stand anymore.

Coincidentally, Touma and Sora found Senkyo, Yuu, and Itsuki's belongings. Before their party entered the spirit realm, they found three handbags lying around the front gate and a shinai bag in the area, but in a completely different world, the Spirit Realm. Naturally, Sora thought that Senkyo and the others were victims of the serial kidnappings, but to his surprise, they were actually the ones who eliminated the threat. Sora brought them with him so he could return them on Monday but now that the owners are right in front of him, he returned them.

The rest of the hunters left while Sora and Touma accompanied Senkyo and the others to the clan's settlement. Senkyo, Yuu, and Itsuki followed Sora and Touma through the Spirit Realm. While they were walking, they noticed movement in the corner of their eyes every so often. Senkyo asked Sora what those were and they said those were the spirits that lived in the realm. Most of them don't show themselves around humans, they just watch them from afar.

Seeing as a member of the Konjou Clan knew about this world, it was certain that there have been many changes in the past seven years. Namely, how the clan operated. When Ryosei was alive, he didn’t know anything about the Spirit Realm. They only took care of threats that appeared on Earth. These other-worldly activities didn’t exist.

Their group continued walking and climbed the nearby mountain that was about 20 minutes away from the edge of town. There were no roads or paths leading to where they were currently standing. The last sight of anything man-made was when they separated from the mountain path at the bottom of the mountain. If it weren't for the fact that everything was illuminated by the glowing crystals of the Spirit Realm, it would be pitch black.

"Okay, we return to the real world here."

“Whoa… is this another Spirit Realm thing…?”

Sora stopped the party in front of a gigantic white wall glowing clearly as if it were solidified light. Itsuki was the first to question Sora about this unusual sight. The others stared at him, supporting Itsuki’s query with their curious gazes. A troubled look was plastered on Sora’s face as to how he would go about answering his question without them being too dissatisfied.

“W-Well, we can’t really disclose that information to the public, but you can think of it as a lock of sorts. We can only enter through Earth if we want to proceed.”

Itsuki was clearly dissatisfied with his answer, but he opted to keep that to himself so they could proceed.

Sora breathed a sigh of relief as no unnecessary delays and furious shaking took place. He crouched and began to trace a circle on the ground. Taking a closer look, Sora's finger wasn't touching the ground at all, it was hovering over it. His finger moved through the air leaving nothing behind that could be considered a mark.

Sora stood back up, ending his tracing. Seconds later, the ground where he traced began to glow white and blue and it revealed a patch of green grass covered in the dark shade of the night. Touma didn't waste any time and stood on it. A horizontal streak of light stretched out below, swallowing Touma whole and disappearing when the light subdued.

"That guy... always in a hurry. Come on, just stand on the grass and I’ll take care of sending you through."

Sora gestured for them to go. Itsuki followed, then Yuu, then Senkyo. After regaining their vision, Senkyo saw in front of him a dark forest with tall trees and thick bushes. Touma and Itsuki stood close by while Yuu was providing their light source with the fireball floating above her hands.

“Step out of that thing.”

“R-Right.”

Touma ordered Senkyo to step out of the circle he came from. Unlike earlier, the circle was showing a patch of crystal-like grass. It appears the circle shows the ground of the other world at that exact location. Not long after, Sora appeared from a horizontal streak of light that came down towards the circle and disappeared immediately after his arrival, leaving no trace of the strange crystal-like grass.

"Hey! What happened to the lights?"

Itsuki voiced his thoughts when his environment suddenly changed. The only source of light was Touma and Yuu’s fireball

"The Spirit Realm is always illuminated with shining particles and terrain, after all. This is only what everything looks like without those lights. In other words, we’re back on Earth."

Sora provided an explanation for the sudden darkness. They spent so long in the Spirit Realm that it already became nighttime on Earth. None of them had anything they could use to track time with, not to mention barely any chances to since they were mostly in combat.

"U-Um... What was that magic circle earlier? I've never seen anything like it."

Yuu asked Sora about the magic circle that transported them back to the real world. Yuu is from another world where magic is the norm. If she was surprised by a magic circle, then it must be something she never knew existed in her world or something that originated in this world.

Sora gave Yuu a smirk and said "No~ way."

Yuu looked a bit disappointed, leaving her curiosity unsated. On the other hand, even though Senkyo and Ryosei didn’t know what it was at first, simply observing Sora gave them the answer.

He used the skill that every member of the Konjou Clan needed to learn before becoming an official hunter, Espy. The ability to be able to detect spirit power. Some evil spirits have the ability to hide from the naked eye. Hunters used espy to detect their spirit power.

This was a similar case. When Sora traced a circle on the ground, blue particles dropped from his finger and created the circle. People without espy couldn’t see the particles, making it simple magic for Yuu and Itsuki. Ryosei could more or less guess how he activated the transportation since he also used spirit power in the past.

"Enough chit-chat and let's get on with it already. The three of you, hold on to Sora."

Yuu and Itsuki stared quizzically at Touma. They didn’t understand why that was necessary.

"Hold on to him? Why do I need to do that?"

Itsuki asked. Touma didn't answer back, so Sora did instead.

"It's something we can't talk about since you guys are outsiders, but none of you can enter the town without holding on to either me or Touma-kun."

Saying that only made the two more curious, but they understood that they won't get anything by pestering them any further. Itsuki also wanted to see his sister as fast as he could so he didn't say anything to prolong their stop.

"Okay then, if you three understand I'll be going ahead."

Touma walked ahead and disappeared into the darkness of the forest. Senkyo and the others watched as the darkness subtly swallowed Touma. It looked so natural that normal people like Itsuki wouldn't question it, but Senkyo and Yuu sensed something unnatural about it. They put it aside and held onto Sora. Senkyo and Itsuki held on to Sora's shoulders, while Yuu held on to his cloak.

"Hold on tight and don't let go, okay?"

**59 – Konjou Clan**

Senkyo and the others nodded and Sora walked forward. Suddenly, a fog began surrounding them. All but Sora and Senkyo were surprised at its sudden appearance. The further they walked, the thicker the fog got, and eventually, they couldn't see anything in front of them. Their whole vision was covered by fog.

They slightly tightened their grip on Sora because they knew if they let go, they'd end up getting lost. After a few more seconds of walking through the thick fog, the fog slowly subsided and eventually disappeared and in front of them, appeared a traditional-style Japanese town.

The streets were paved in stone brick and illuminated by the warm light of lanterns. Houses and various shops are scattered throughout the street, all of which are in a traditional style. Not only that, most of the people were in traditional clothing but there were also some in normal, modern clothes.

"Whoa... I've never seen a traditional Japanese town before!"

"I've seen some in anime but this is my first time seeing one in person."

"Who cares about that? Where's my sister?"

Yuu and Senkyo admired the town but Itsuki was solely focused on his sister and didn't care about anything else. Seeing Itsuki worry, Sora tried to reassure him.

"Don't worry, Watanabe-kun, your sister is in safe hands. You'll see her later."

"I better, or else you're in for some trouble!"

Sora scratched his head with a troubled face. For some reason, trying to help put him in danger. Their group continued to walk with Sora in the lead. They were headed for the town's hospital especially made to cure curses, illnesses, and anything else otherworldly or supernatural. But they can also treat normal wounds or injuries like other hospitals. After walking through the streets, they finally made it to their destination. When they saw what it looked like, they were somewhat disappointed.

"This isn't traditional."

"Not at all."

"Nowhere near it."

All three visitors arrived at similar conclusions. It was a modern hospital that you would normally see in the world. They were so disappointed that even Itsuki had to say something about it.

"Do you guys even know what a traditional-style hospital looks like!?"

Sora immediately retorted.

"I think we're even more disappointed because we don't know what it looks like."

Yuu and Itsuki silently nodded in agreement with Senkyo.

"I guess you have a point. Wait, that's not why we're here!"

The four of them entered the hospital and were greeted by the receptionist's desk. Sora walked over to it while Senkyo, Yuu, and Itsuki took their time to observe their surroundings. The inside looked like a normal hospital. Senkyo and the others expected something to be a bit different. It was a hospital of an organization with ties to the unknown. It was a hospital that existed in a part of the world where magic, demons, other worlds, ghosts, and other bizarre things were commonplace, only to end up like any other hospital in the world.

"Isn't what you expected? Sadly, I can't tell you how awesome this place is but this should blow your mind. Come on, follow me!"

Sora took them in front of the receptionist's desk. On closer inspection, there was a circle with some sort of pattern carved into the ground they were standing on.

"Is this... a magic circle?"

It was something Senkyo was familiar with because of Ryosei's memories. Upon entering the hospital, the floor looked flat and smooth, nothing looked odd or out of place. That was only until they entered the circle that managed to escape their vision earlier. Sora grinned when he heard Senkyo's surprised voice and said to the receptionist

"To Watanabe Ichika's room, please!"

The receptionist nodded. She placed her right hand on a crystal ball beside her and chanted something so fast that not even Yuu understood what she said. Not a second later, the floor began to light up in blue light and swallowed their group whole.

After a few seconds after the light faded, in front of Senkyo wasn't the receptionist's desk anymore, it was a door that had a number on the side and a name under it. It said: 403, Watanabe Ichika.

"We're here!"

Sora shouted. Itsuki seemed unfazed. After all that happened to him, suddenly getting teleported somewhere wasn’t enough to amuse him. However, Senkyo and Yuu were having a small bit of trouble processing. They looked around them and saw that they weren't in the lobby anymore. They were in a corridor with a window behind them with a good view of the town they were in earlier. Out of the three of them, Senkyo was the first to break out of their surprise.

"Teleportation magic..."

"Correct! You get 100 points!"

Sora said excitedly like a game show host.

"But how!? Never mind the mana cost, how were you able to cast it so quickly!?"

"Ha-ha! That's the difference between us and other groups! It's top secret so I won't tell! Hahaha!"

Sora acted like a kid who was bragging to his friends about what he had. Senkyo and Ryosei couldn’t even imagine what events happened that lead the Konjou Clan to advance so quickly.

In Ryosei's memories, magic in general was something only he could use. Kuro Yaiba is a spectral that contains mana that the user could consume to use magic. Teleportation magic was a spell that used up moderate to enormous amounts of mana depending on the distance. On top of that, it is a mid to high-tier spell that consists of three verses that may need to be repeated depending on the distance. Although the distance was short, there was still no explanation for why it was cast so fast. The receptionist didn't even seem like she chanted at all since the teleport was done in one second.

Yuu was just as amazed as Senkyo was for the same reason. She had sparkles in her eyes and was bombarding Sora with questions, while Sora looked full of himself and kept bragging but at the same time not letting any information leak.

"Enough of that! Ichika... is behind this door, right?"

"Yep, don't worry our doctors here are top-notch."

Itsuki shouted and interrupted their awe. Senkyo was forced to put his questions aside for now. Sora reassured Itsuki. Before coming here, Itsuki always rushed to the next place where he thought his sister was. But now that he was actually there, seeing her in the ball of slime must've made him hesitate. Something was weighing on his mind.

*\*If anything happened to her, I would be there to protect her. If something was troubling her, I would be there to listen. And if she needed help, I would be there for her. That's what I promised myself that day. I lived up to that promise time and time again... but this time... I failed. And all I did was hold back the people who actually did everything... I was powerless. I was... useless… I’m afraid of the expression she’ll have once I enter this room but worrying about that won’t do me any good. I’ll just have to face her and look her directly in the eye. My resolve… can never be broken.\**

Itsuki took a deep breath and opened the door. And beyond it... Ichika was quietly sleeping on a medical bed.

"Ichika!"

Itsuki ran over to her side to check for anything wrong. There were no cuts, bruises, or anything at all. She looked completely fine but he wasn't satisfied with that.

"Nothing's wrong with her, right!?"

Sora picked up a piece of paper on the table and read it.

"It says she's fine. She only had energy deprivation but she'll be fine after she wakes up."

"Can I take your word for it?"

"Yeah, like I said our doctors here are top-notch."

Itsuki let out a sigh of relief

"Then that's fine... Thanks for saving Ichika for me. Seriously, thanks."

"I didn't do anything. If you want to thank someone, thank the doctors and the ones who brought her here."

"Then, can you tell them thanks for me?"

"Sure thing."

Senkyo, Yuu, and Sora looked happy for Itsuki. They stood silently by the side and watched Itsuki take his time by his sister's side. Looking incredibly thankful for his sister's safety. After a while, Itsuki decided to stay with Ichika. As Senkyo, Yuu, and Sora were exiting the hospital, they found Touma who told them to follow him.

**60 – Clan Chief**

After walking deeper into town, they entered a huge cave going into the mountain. The cave had lanterns to light up the path. It was a straight line forward with no twists or turns and beyond it was an incredibly wide-open area.

In front of them, was a bridge that prevented you from falling into the strange but beautiful lake at the bottom. The water shined like a beautiful clear crystal. It illuminated the whole area that would've been pitch black without it. Its serene sight served as the area's light and beauty.

Over at the other side of the bridge, was an island that sat in the middle of the beautiful lake. And on the island, was a huge Japanese castle. It brimmed with strength and at the same time, looked mystifying. It was a castle that was located in a cave inside a mountain where its waters give out their own light.

Senkyo and Yuu were dumbfounded as they admired the scene that they could only see in the movies in front of their own two eyes. They couldn't say a word. They were completely and utterly stunned. Senkyo already saw this in Ryosei’s memories, but actually seeing it in person was a completely different feeling.

They continued to follow Touma. While walking over the bridge, they felt oddly relaxed as they looked over at the serene water. It was like the water was affecting them to be that way. The castle grounds were incredibly wide. There were other buildings that likely served their own purpose and on the other open areas groups of people were training with hand-to-hand combat, weapons, and magic.

Inside the castle, everything was mostly made out of wood, including the floor. Lanterns were hanging from the ceiling and on the walls. It had beautiful decorations like paintings and statues. You could see a huge staircase in the middle of the room that lead to the other floors. Senkyo and Yuu followed behind Sora and Touma. It seemed like Sora already knew where they were going. After climbing up a few flights of stairs, they stopped in front of a sliding door with a sign beside it saying "Clan Chief's Office"

*"\*The clan chief!? What would they want from us!?\*"*

Senkyo immediately got stiff. He could only wonder what someone so high in status would want from them, who just arrived. In reality, he knew the reason as apparently, he made the great feat of defeating a leader, but he couldn’t help but be surprised to keep his composure. Touma then spoke loud enough for anyone inside to hear.

"Excuse me, Yukou Senkyo and his companion has arrived!"

From inside the room, a deep voice responded

"Come in."

Touma, then slowly opened the door for them, and inside was a young man that looked like he was in his twenties. He sat behind a desk table with his arms folded. He had short black hair, wore traditional clothing, and emitted an aura of respect.

"Wait, you're—"

Senkyo recognized who the man was but he cut himself off before he could finish.

"Oh, do you know who I am, young man?"

"Ah, n-no, I mistook you for someone else, sorry."

"Is that so?"

Senkyo, Yuu, Sora, and Touma entered the room and stood in front of the man. He began introducing himself.

"Nice to meet you, I am the current chief of the Konjou Clan, Konjou Yousuke."

Yuu noticed that he was related to the spirit living inside Senkyo, Konjou Ryosei but she didn't mention it and stayed silent.

"I'm Yukou Senkyo, 2nd-year high school student of Honshou Academy. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"And I'm Hisho Yuu, 1st-year high school student of Honshou Academy. It's a pleasure to meet you too."

Yousuke observed Senkyo and Yuu, but noticed something off and brought it up with Touma.

"Touma-kun, you said in your report that there were three of them, right? Where is the other one?"

"Yes, the other person, Watanabe Itsuki, is currently in our local hospital watching his little sister, who was a victim of the earlier incident. Yamamoto-san thought it would be wise to leave him with his sister. Do you want us to retrieve him?"

"No, that would be fine. As long as he stays inside the town, you can bring him here anytime we need him. For now, I'm more interested in you, Yukou Senkyo-kun. Your companions claimed that you defeated one of the leaders of the infamous group, END. Is that true?"

"To be truly honest, I don't know. It is true that we fought a leader of END, but I don't have any memory of defeating him."

"No memory of defeating someone? Are you affected by some kind of magic?"

"I don't think so. The last thing I remember was passing out after getting attacked. The next thing I know, the enemy was gone and my companions said that I defeated him."

Yousuke went silent. He was staring into Senkyo's eyes trying to figure out whether what he said was a lie or not. He carefully analyzed every word Senkyo said while staring at his very soul and then...

"Unfortunately for me, I don't have the same special abilities like some people. Your story is too hard to swallow, but at the same time, in a world where the line of impossibility cannot be determined, I can't afford to let ridiculous stories like this pass if it involves information about this world's greatest enemy."

Yousuke stood up from his chair and exited the room.

"I'll take up Touma-kun's suggestion. All of you, come with me."

**61 – Freda**

Senkyo, Yuu, Touma, and Sora followed Yousuke to another room. The room they entered had a curtain covering the end of the room and they could see a silhouette of a woman behind it. The room seemed to serve as some kind of audience room.

"Oh? Clan chief, what brings you to my quarters today?"

"Freda-sama, I would like to test these kids' honesty."

Yousuke said as he showed Senkyo and Yuu. Senkyo thought to himself why the clan chief used the "sama" honorific when he is supposed to be the highest in status but he kept his thoughts to himself.

"Very well, you may ask them your questions."

Yousuke faced Senkyo

"Yukou-kun, did you defeat a leader of END?"

"I don't know. I don't remember doing it."

Yousuke faced the woman's silhouette.

"Truth."

"Did you get hit by any kind of magic before losing conscious?"

"I was being hit by lightning. It was too much for me to bare and lost consciousness. "

"Truth."

Yousuke asked two questions to test his honesty earlier. So far, it didn't seem like Senkyo was the type to lie. Yousuke cleared his throat and prepared to ask the real question.

"...Then, Yukou Senkyo-kun, did you really fight a leader of END?"

"Yes, I did."

"Truth."

The whole room went silent. Sora, Touma, and even Yousuke wore surprised faces. Yousuke then prepared to ask his next question, but instead of Senkyo, he faced Yuu.

"Hisho-kun, is it true that Yukou-kun defeated a leader of the group END?"

"Yes, he did."

Yousuke awaited Freda's response, but it looks like something was stopping her from doing so.

"Freda-sama?"

Yousuke called out to Freda. Soon after, in a low, somewhat shaken voice.

"...Truth. The girl... is saying the truth."

"I see…"

"Impossible!"

"Whoa!"

Yousuke managed to maintain his composure. However, Touma and Sora were completely baffled. The farfetched story they heard earlier was real. A single person took down an enemy beyond the Konjou Clan's comprehension.

"If that's real, then how!?"

It was so unbelievable that even the normally composed Touma shot a question towards Yuu.

"I can’t tell you."

"Why is that!?"

"....."

Yuu stayed silent. She didn't want to reveal any more information about Senkyo. Touma didn't like that and was about to walk over to her until Yousuke stopped him.

"Calm down Touma-kun, I understand how you feel but you need to get a grip."

"...! Y-Yes sir."

Touma was forced to back down but ground his teeth in frustration. For some reason, Touma was being unusually aggressive. He usually didn't say much but it seems like he was more emotionally sensitive.

"Yukou-kun, I have one last question for you... are you a part of any group or have connections with any organizations?"

"No, I don't"

"...Truth."

"Very well, we'll end it there. Since it's getting really late, how about you two stay here for the night? I'll prepare rooms for you two to stay in."

"Really? Then I'll take you up on that offer. Is it okay with you, Hisho-chan?"

"Yes, I'm fine with it."

"Then, I'll have them prepared in a few minutes, Sora-kun, take them to the lobby and wait for their rooms to be prepared."

"Okay!"

With that, Sora did what he was tasked and Yousuke returned to his office.

"Yukou Senkyo... how interesting. Ever since END and its leaders appeared, no one has been able to defeat any of them. And now I hear that not only that was one was defeated and was done by a single boy…"

Yousuke said to himself as he looked out the room's windows. The door opened behind him, and the person who opened that door was Touma.

"Excuse me sir, but shouldn't we be asking more about the leaders of END and how to defeat them? Why did you let them go like that!?"

Touma sounded impatient. Normally he was silent and didn't talk much, but something about this subject is causing him to lose his composure.

"As I said before, Touma-kun, be patient. We don't know much about these two, other than they going to the same school as you and that they were involved in the defeat of a leader of END. We must be quick but careful. We don't want to lose our one and only lead in freeing this world from END's clutches, for all we know, a single mistake might cost us this lead. We have to gain their trust while confirming they won't be a possible threat themselves. Do you understand what I'm saying, Touma-kun?"

Yousuke was a cautious man. He wanted the information as much as anyone else did, but he didn't want to be reckless in doing so. The last thing he wanted was a fight with someone who defeated a leader of END single-handedly. They didn't know the power that Senkyo possessed and that made him much more dangerous. Touma realized this and hurriedly apologize.

"Y-Yes sir, I apologize. It was wrong for me to question your actions without thinking."

Touma stepped back and hung his head while trying to calm himself down. Yousuke sighed at the sight of Touma agonizing about this.

"Well, no one can blame you after what you've been through. Don't worry, we'll get the information we need. For now, standby for further orders."

"Yes, sir."

Touma left the room, leaving Yousuke alone once again. Yousuke walked back to his desk, filling the silent room with the sound of his footsteps. He turned his eyes to the picture frame displayed on his desk.

"...You should've been the one to take over this role you know? Then again, even if you were still here, you probably would've shoved it to me anyway, wouldn't you, Ryosei?"

The picture frame showed what looked like a younger version of Yousuke and the Delinquent Prodigy, Konjou Ryosei.

**62 – Ties with the Konjou Clan**

Meanwhile, in another room inside the castle, Senkyo flopped on a king-sized bed while wearing a yukata. He was in the room Yousuke provided them with.

The room had a flat-screen TV, a king-sized bed, and a beautiful outdoor view. It had wooden flooring covered with clean tatami mats. And the closet contained futon beds that could be laid down on the floor because of the room's huge space. It seemed like they had the option of sleeping on the bed or on the floor depending on the people's preference.

The reason why Senkyo was in a yukata was that he just finished taking a bath in the castle's indoor hot springs. A hot and relaxing bath after a long day of the battle took the strain off Senkyo's muscles. It was so relaxing that Senkyo fell asleep inside the hot spring and Ryosei had to take over his body to get him out.

"Thanks for saving me back there, I would've been a goner."

*"\*There are limits to how much you can relax inside a bath! Be careful next time!\*"*

"Sure, got it. But I got to say, this place has everything. I never expected there to be a hot spring in here. The electricity too. We're inside a mountain and we still have electricity. Now it feels like I'm in a hot spring hotel or something."

*"\*Well, aside from those two, a lot has changed.\*"*

"Yeah, we share memories but I was still surprised about everything. If I had to count how many times you shouted out of surprise earlier, it probably would've been on the three digits."

*"\*Now you're just exaggerating! But still... this was a big surprise. Now I don't even know my own hometown anymore. It's only been seven years and I don't recognize half of the town. Our technology skyrocketed, our buildings upgraded, You-chan became the clan chief, and that Freda person is new.\*"*

"Oh yeah, your cousin called this Freda person with a 'sama' honorific, didn't he?"

*"\*Yes, there aren't any positions higher than clan chief, I don't think he has to call anyone by that. This Freda person is probably the one we want to know about the most. They even seem to be able to tell when someone's lying or not.\*"*

"So, she's similar to you?"

*"\*Maybe, but we can’t be too sure. I got this ability naturally, but there’s possible that there’s some kind of magic out there to tell.\*"*

"In the end, we don’t know anything, huh? This person really is mysterious. What do we do now?"

Ryosei went deep into thought about their situation. After a few seconds, he came to the conclusion that their next move will be...

*"\*We have to make ties and train with the Konjou Clan!\*"*

"Can't you just show yourself to them? If Freda's powers are real, when you introduce yourself to them in my body she'll end up with 'truth' wouldn't she?"

*"\*No, I don't think it'll be that easy.\*"*

Senkyo was confused as to why Ryosei said that. As Senkyo said, proving Ryosei's existence can be as easy as that if Freda's powers are real. Seeing as Yousuke came to Freda for this sort of thing as if it were natural, and the fact that Freda, who had never seen Senkyo, knew they were saying the truth, there's a high chance that her powers are real.

"Why is that?"

*"\*The clan's rules and my image. If we prove to them that I exist in your body, that might just make things worse. Our enemies are too strong. If we don't get stronger as fast as we can, we might not be able to survive the next time we come across a leader. Being trained by the Konjou Clan is a good shortcut for this, but would The Elders really let a friend of someone who disgraced the clan train under them?\*"*

"Oh, I see your point..."

The Elders, a group of the clan's retired hunters that have been of great service to the clan and achieved outstanding feats in their time. Their position is second to the clan chief and helps him govern the clan by maintaining order, managing attacks, and many more. They, individually, are of lower status than the clan chief, but through voting, they can either force the chief to a decision or completely overthrow them.

In the clan's history, The Elders and the people have overthrown corrupt chiefs and have either exiled or executed them depending on the weight of their crimes, but even that was a rare occurrence. The members of The Elders are people who have gained the clan's trust and are selected by receiving the title from the clan chief.

The problem Senkyo and Ryosei were facing here is that before Ryosei's death, The Elders already had a bad impression of him. They say that Ryosei was completely useless and a disgrace to the clan. They didn't quite like Ryosei's transformation from the clan's prodigy to a shut-in otaku. Ryosei even heard from one of his friends in the clan that the elders decided that he was forbidden to return to the clan until he realized the error of his ways, but at the time Ryosei couldn't have cared less.

Both Ryosei and Senkyo realized that they were in a tight spot. There was a good chance that everything Ryosei-related like anime, manga, and games was banned in the clan. When the elders discover that Senkyo is related to Ryosei, it was more than likely that the clan wouldn't reach out a single hand to him.

Unfortunately, hiding Senkyo's connection with Ryosei is going to be a hard task. After all, Senkyo now wields Kuro Yaiba, the legendary katana that the clan once was in possession of. He got off lucky in their meeting with Touma and Sora. Seeing as none of them recognized the katana Senkyo held, they must not know of it or at the very least what it looked like but it wouldn't go so smoothly when other older clan members see it.

Senkyo and Ryosei were stuck in a tight pinch. They need the Konjou Clan's help to train Senkyo, but the Konjou Clan won't help him if they discovered Kuro Yaiba or Ryosei. One mistake and it will be all over, Senkyo had to convince the Konjou Clan to let him train with them while hiding Ryosei and Kuro Yaiba.

"AHH!! This is frustrating!"

*"\*We have no choice. If we get caught, that'll be the end of your quick power-up training and that might spell our deaths.\*"*

"I know, but still!"

*"\*Stop complaining. Save that energy for tomorrow. You're going to have a long day ahead of you.\*"*

"\**Sigh\*...*Fine, got it."

Later that night, Senkyo fell asleep immediately the moment he shut his eyes. He was just that tired from a whole day of battle and putting his body over its limits.

**63 – Envisaged**

*\*Master...\**

A voice echoed through Senkyo's mind. A small voice that sounded like it could be dragged away by the wind was accompanied by the sound of cat bells. But it didn't come anywhere outside, the source of the voice was in his mind.

*\*Over here... Master...\**

Senkyo opened his eyes and found himself inside a cave lit by blue light running through the walls like cracks. But that was weird, the last time Senkyo remembered was falling asleep on a luxurious bed but right now, he was nowhere near that bed.

"Ryosei? Are you there?"

"….."

There was no response. Ryosei usually responded to Senkyo immediately. He didn't need anything like sleeping. As long as he was inside Senkyo, he was like an ongoing phone call. Eliminating other possibilities, Senkyo narrowed things down, and what most likely happened was...

"I think... I got 'envisaged.'"

Being "envisaged" was what Senkyo decided to call this phenomenon. It is the ability to separate from the body and enter one’s own mind. It is something Ryosei uses to call Senkyo into his dreams, or something Senkyo himself initiates and enters his own head. When Ryosei and Senkyo switch controls, the other is sent here as “standby mode.”

However, no one was there. Senkyo was called, but he didn’t initiate it, and it didn’t seem like Ryosei called for him either. Senkyo didn’t recognize this cave. It was in neither of their memories. The surroundings of this place can only be influenced by memories. Piecing his clues together, he could only come up with one possible outcome.

“Someone else is inside me. I have to be careful. I don't know what will happen if I die here. I have to assume the worst just to be safe."

Senkyo warily walked deeper into the cave of blue light. He didn't know what called him here, but he couldn't just stand around. After a bit of walking, he reached a fork. He couldn't see the end of either path and was unsure of which path to take.

"Huh?"

Senkyo heard the sound of cat bells jingling coming from the left path. It was the same jingling he heard when the voice called out to him. He took the left path and followed the jingling sound. He encountered many other forks but continued to follow the sound of the bells. As the sounds became louder, Senkyo began to hear water flowing. It was like the sound of a waterfall.

Senkyo finally exited the labyrinth-like cave and saw a huge lake that reflected the two moons in the night sky. There were trees, grass, and other different types of greenery around the area, some he could recognize and some that he couldn't. There was a cliff on one side of the lake where there was water falling from its peak and on the walls.

The lake where all the water fell glowed in a blue light similar to the light in the cave Senkyo was in. Thinking about it, even more, Senkyo realized that this lake and the water of the lake surrounding the Konjou Clan's castle were the same. They glowed the same light and had the same beauty, the confusing part was... why? Why were these waters similar?

Senkyo wondered about it, but the jingling bells caught his attention. Senkyo looked over in the direction of the sound and saw a white cat sitting on top of a rock in the lake. The cat noticed Senkyo and made a massive leap toward him.

"Master!"

"Wha!?"

Senkyo was pushed down to the ground by the cat. He felt something wrap around him and weigh down his chest. He opened his eyes to see what it was and saw two white pointy things right in front of his face. On closer inspection, they looked like white cat ears. All of the sudden, the ears twitched and Senkyo got back up in surprise.

"Nya!?"

In front of Senkyo, was a girl sitting on the ground on both her legs. She had skin as white as snow, blue eyes similar to the lake's beautiful glow, and white long hair with the most noticeable trait, white cat ears and tail. She was what Senkyo knew as, a catgirl. She wore white knee-high socks, brown shorts, a white robe with a hood with cat ear pockets, and a red choker with a cat bell attached to it.

*\*Wh-what's happening here? Why is there a catgirl in front of me? Wait, is she just a catgirl because she's in my dream? Is she an assassin trying to get comfortable with me because she knows I always wanted to see a catgirl? If that's so then I should be careful. But wait, there's a catgirl in front of me! A CATGIRL! I might not get another chance to see this when I wake up. I should take my time to take in this sight! Wait, if I do that I might get killed if she really is an assassin! But this is a once-in-a-lifetime chance! AAAAH, WHAT SHOULD I DO!?\**

Senkyo was at a complete loss for what to do. He's been thinking so hard that he didn't even notice that he's been staring at a catgirl for almost a minute now. If the catgirl really was an assassin Senkyo would've probably died already but he didn't realize that.

For some reason, despite being incredibly smart, Senkyo can be easily distracted. He was ready to defend himself at any moment when he walked through the caves. But for some reason, when he saw the catgirl, he let his guard down, is it because she was a catgirl... or maybe something else?

The catgirl stood up and walked up to Senkyo. He backed up a bit but not enough to keep their distance, deep inside Senkyo wanted a closer look at the catgirl. Suddenly, the catgirl extended her arms toward Senkyo.

*\*Ah... So this is the end. I'm sorry Ryosei. I let my guard down. Who knew I would die for the thing I wanted to see the most? In the end, catgirls are just too damn cute that they make you unable to move the first time you see them. Truly the best assassins! But I won't end this without a fight! If I'm going to die to a catgirl, I might as well find out how fluffy their ears are!\**

Senkyo made a break for the catgirl's ears and pet the white fluffs like his life depended on it. It was incredibly soft and had a soothing sensation. It felt like Senkyo's hands were going to sink into her soft silky hair. *"\*It feels like heaven...!\*"* was Senkyo's evaluation. He kept petting and petting until he realized he was still alive.

*\*Eh...? Wait... she didn't kill me? But then what is she...\**

Senkyo looked down at the catgirl and saw her rubbing her head against Senkyo's chest and hugging him tightly.

"I missed you, Master! You're finally back after a long time!"

"EEEHHHHH!!?"

Senkyo was completely confused and couldn't understand what was happening. After a few minutes of collecting his thoughts and some more head pats, Senkyo finally got his cool together and was face to face with the catgirl.

"Shiro is Shiro! Your familiar!"

**64 – Shiro**

"My familiar...?"

"That's correct! You summoned Shiro through a spell you cast."

"What spell...?"

Senkyo went through his memories of when he tried to cast anything. He recalled back when he was being fried from Fulgur’s attacks, Senkyo chanted what seemed to be a summoning spell*, \*SUMMON FAMILIAR: ... SHIRO!!\**

"The time Fulgur was about to kill me!? But I didn't even have Kuro Yaiba or any other spectral on me. How would I be able to summon anything without mana!?"

“Well, that’s because you have mana, of course! It was released the moment you took off the seal!”

“Wh-What? Me? Have mana? I’m just a…”

Senkyo trailed off as he was reminded of the title the lightning leader gave him: an anomaly. He could never forget. He put his life on the line and bet on that title to be able to save his friends and himself. If his burnt, half-dead body returned to normal when he regained consciousness, then there was no way magic wasn’t involved. If it was true that Senkyo was the one who defeated Fulgur alone, then there was no doubt about it, this girl was telling the truth.

“If you’re saying I have mana, then why didn’t I have it before? Who are you? Why did I only gain mana when I summoned you?”

"Hmm... Shiro thinks it would be best to explain things from the beginning. Master, this isn't the first time we met."

"What?"

Shiro began to tell Senkyo her story. It all started way back in time. Shiro lived in Zerid and she a race that they called Nemi. Nemi are peaceful beastmen that commonly live near lakes. They have ears and tails that of a cat with fast speed and sharp senses. They build their village around a lake because of how they live. They survive by drinking the energy and nutrients only Nemi find in natural liquid, but of all the natural liquids, water is the best for them.

But in their world, Nemi have another name, Miracle Beasts. That is because of the natural ability of Nemi: to be able to create a special type of water, Mythical Water. Because of the natural magical barrier that Nemi always emit, every time their barrier makes contact with a water source like a lake, little by little, the water transforms. The water emits a glowing light the same as their barrier and completely transforms it into the liquid they call Mythical Water. Because of its unbelievable power, most regarded it as a myth.

Because of this, Nemi procure their water through simple tools or mechanisms and makes repositories of water for easier access. Doing so reduced the chances of any attacks their village might take. They reduced the chances, but they couldn't eliminate them.

When Shiro was still a kid, she lived a peaceful and happy life in the village of Nils with her parents. But one day, a corrupt noble wasn't satisfied with only hearing stories of the Mythical Water. So he sent out numerous scouting parties and sent them out to search the land. When settlements were found, an invading party was sent out and plundered every Nemian village they found and captured the Nemi, just to have his own personal supply of the Mythical Water.

One of those villages was the village of Nils. In the middle of the invasion, Shiro's father fended off the invaders to buy time for Shiro's mother to hide Shiro. She was hidden under the floorboards and was told by her mother to stay there and not come out. Her mother went back for her husband and left Shiro hidden, but unfortunately, neither of them came back.

A day after the invasion, Shiro came out of hiding and went out to check the village, but all she could see were burnt-down buildings and destroyed houses, she didn't see anyone else, she was the only one who escaped.

Weeks passed and Shiro was about to break. She couldn't survive on her own. The lake the village used to use was contaminated with poison the invaders brought with them. It seemed that they didn't want anyone else getting the mythic water. They went so far as to poison an entire lake that wasn't even turned into mythic water just because Nemi used it.

Shiro had no other way to drink water aside from collecting rainwater. Shiro tried to search for other water sources but failed and only got herself hurt. She had no way to defend herself and her only shelter was the half-destroyed house she used to live in. Nights were cold and sleeping was a pain. She had limited water and sometimes had bad luck where it didn't even rain for three days straight.

Her body was about to give out on her. Her supply of water was scarce. She had numerous wounds and bruises from trying to hunt for other water sources. She was a complete mess. But one day, she met Yukou Yuuto, Senkyo's father.

Yuuto was traveling and found the former village of Nils. He was tired and took a break in a half-destroyed house that at least had its roof somewhat intact. There he noticed something under the floorboards. He heard footsteps and saw movement from below. He looked under and made eye contact with something but what was under there quickly ran away deeper into the floorboards.

Yuuto wondered what it was and thought about checking it out, but before he did, he realized that he might just scare what was under there even more. So he decided to leave.

After a few minutes, after determining the strange man was gone, Shiro went back out of hiding. Upon her exit, she saw a strange half-opened container with two sticks on top and it was letting out steam with a strange aroma. It had text on it that Shiro could not understand, it had the text RAMEN on it and beside it was a bottle of water. Out of thirst, Shiro didn't even check to see if it was poisoned or not, she drank the bottle immediately. Later, Shiro completely opened the strange container but she didn't do anything else with it and left it.

In the following days, the man kept coming back to the same house and always left a water bottle with some different kind of food with it, but only the water bottle was ever touched. Days went by with the same routine and Shiro became a bit healthier, but a bottle of water a day wasn't nearly enough to put her back to full strength, finally gathering enough courage, she decided to approach the strange man leaving her food and water.

Yuuto's curiosity and caring personality made him leave food for the thing he saw under the floorboards. He wasn't sure if it was an animal or a person, but whatever they were kept drinking the bottle he always left but not the food. Yuuto found it a bit strange but kept changing the food until he found one that his little friend would eat.

One day, as he was having his lunch, a part of the wall of the house slowly opened and saw blue eyes and white ears pop out. Slowly, the creature from under the floorboards he wanted to meet came out of hiding and showed itself in front of him but he was surprised to see a little girl with white ears and a tail show up instead.

But what popped out of his mind first was not that she was a Nemi, it was that she was a catgirl. The catgirl cautiously approached him moving out of the shadows and into the light but stopped midway. Yuuto sensed her hesitation and he held out a water bottle to her. Then, the catgirl meekly reached out to grab the bottle, once she did, she immediately took a step back but instead of going back into hiding, she sat over at the other side of the room, opposite to Yuuto.

At first, Yuuto was incredibly surprised but smiled as Shiro showed that small gesture of trust. As days went on, Shiro and Yuuto became closer and closer, and eventually, Shiro was able to talk to Yuuto and even act how she normally did.

Yuuto took care of her and Shiro became healthy again. Yuuto even gave Shiro sleeping bags and magical heaters. Shiro became really attached to Yuuto and she would always await his return every day.

But the day came when Yuuto said that he had to go back home and might not be able to come back. At first, Shiro broke into tears and clung to Yuuto as tight as she could and she kept saying "No, don't go please...!" That was until Yuuto asked her, "Then, do you want to come with me?" Shiro transformed from incredibly sad to beaming with happiness and hugged Yuuto even tighter.

When Yuuto returned home with Shiro, there, she met the person she came to call her big brother, Yukou Senkyo. They were about the same age. Shiro was a bit shy at first but Senkyo always played with her and they got along.

Yuuto even ordered a custom-made hoodie with cat ear pockets from a friend to give to Shiro to wear in public. They spent their days together playing and doing many other things. Senkyo always acted like the big brother and took care of Shiro and protected her. Their days were spent like that until...

**65 – Little Sister**

"....."

Shiro suddenly stopped. Senkyo was listening as she told him about his "past" that he didn't know about.

"Then, what happened?"

Senkyo urged her to continue. Curious about why he never knew of this. In an apologetic voice, Shiro said to Senkyo...

"Your memories were sealed by Yuuto-san and he made Shiro its guardian."

"What!? But why!?"

Senkyo was surprised, even though he expected this. He still remembered the time he was getting fried by Fulgur. A memory of his father played in his mind and carved a spell into his brain. His father said that he wanted Senkyo to live a normal life. It didn't seem like he was lying, but why did he wait for that specific time to seal away Senkyo's memories? He even brought Shiro into his life. If they got along so well, why did Yuuto think that "living a normal life" is what Senkyo wanted? Something felt off. That was probably why Senkyo felt the need to ask Shiro.

"Shiro is afraid she cannot answer that. But please know that Yuuto-san did this for your sake, so... Please don't get mad at him!"

Shiro was asking Senkyo to not hate his father. She must've really liked his father the way he did, but from the start, Senkyo had no intention of putting it against his father.

"Don't worry, I wasn't planning on getting mad at that old man for this."

"Shiro is sorry... Shiro promised Yuuto-san... that Shiro won't release all of your memories until the time came. But Yuuto-san let Shiro release your memories of her when we meet again, so if you want to... would you like to remember Shiro again?"

As Shiro said that, Senkyo felt like she was pleading for him to say yes. Having someone close to you completely forget you must've been really hard on her. From her stories alone, she felt like she really appreciated everything Yuuto and Senkyo did for her. As time passed, their bonds grew to the point where they treated each other like an actual family. It felt to Senkyo that from the bottom of her heart, she was saying "Please, remember me!"

With no hesitation at all, Senkyo said "yes" to her. Shiro looked incredibly happy. Her face was beaming and she was jumping around celebrating. Senkyo was happy seeing her happy. He didn't have any logical explanation for it, but it felt like he was connected with her.

"Then without further ado!"

Shiro grabbed Senkyo's face and touched their foreheads. A bright white light shined at the connection and Senkyo felt a flood of memories and emotions coming back to him. A little bit after, the white light dissipated and Shiro let go of Senkyo. But after that Senkyo stayed still so Shiro called his name out but then, Senkyo suddenly hugged Shiro.

"...Shiro! It really is you!"

"Nya!? M-Master... don't surprise Shiro like that!"

Senkyo tilted his head in confusion when he heard Shiro call him "Master."

"Wait a second, Shiro, why are you calling me 'Master' all of the sudden?"

"Oh... that's because of the familiar pact."

"Familiar pact? What's that?"

"Sorry, Shiro forgot to explain that part. To stay with you longer and be the one protecting you instead, Yuuto-san suggested that Shiro became your familiar."

A familiar, a living creature that entered a 'Familiar Pact' with someone else. A Familiar Pact was a kind of ritual where one person will sacrifice their freedom to the other person in exchange for gaining power.

The familiar will become half-spirit and live inside the one they made a pact with. They will be forced to call the other party "Master" and they will not be able to disobey them. But if the familiar is summoned, as long as they are not told by orders, familiars can do whatever they please.

"Wait, my dad told you to become my familiar? Why!?"

Senkyo wasn't so happy. To him, Senkyo took away Shiro's freedom and trapped her inside him for years. The worst part was that he didn't even know about it but seeing this reaction was something Shiro already expected.

"You never change do you, Master. Don't worry Shiro wanted this. Shiro wanted to repay both you and Yuuto-san for being so kind to me. So she decided to be the one to protect you the next time you needed it and it looks like it already paid off!"

"Huh? W-Wait, were you the one who put that shield around me that time with Fulgur!?"

"Ehehehe... Yes, it was!"

The ripples of blue light that healed and surrounded to protect Senkyo that time against Fulgur. It was done by none other than Shiro herself.

"Y-You didn't hurt yourself anywhere because of that, did you? You're fine, right?"

In the end, Senkyo was still a worrywart.

"Yes, Shiro is fine! You worry too much, Master."

"W-Well, I'd feel bad if you got hurt because of me so..."

Senkyo looked away slightly and avoided Shiro's eyes. Seeing that made Shiro really happy and showed a bright smile.

"Well, thank you for worrying about Shiro, Master!"

That bright smile Shiro showed made Senkyo a little bit nervous. He didn't notice before, but Shiro is cute.

"I-It's nothing! Another thing, stop calling me 'Master' I'm not used to it, I'd rather you call me like how you usually did."

"Well then, you have to order me to do that~."

"Fine... Shiro, I order you to act like how you normally do and not let your freedom be restricted by dumb orders or magic, decide everything with your own will, you got that!?"

"...! Yes, Onii-chan!"

**Chapter 2: Nighttime Trouble**

**66 – Cat Girl**

*“\*—nkyo... Senkyo... Senkyo!\*”*

In the middle of Senkyo's sleep, another voice called out to him, but this time it was the voice of his spirit friend, Ryosei.

*\*This again...? What is it now? I just want to sleep!\**

Senkyo shouted internally. He stayed up late, had his reunion with Shiro, and now Ryosei was calling out to him. It was like the world didn't want him to take any breaks.

Senkyo slowly opened his eyes feeling sluggish. His vision was blurry from waking up. He was feeling the want to close his eyes again and bury himself in the pillows.

*\*Ah... so he's trying to wake me up?\**

At first, Senkyo thought he was being envisaged again, but it was actually Ryosei trying to wake him up. Realizing Ryosei's internal shouting was actually a wake-up call, Senkyo tried to get up. However, something kept his left arm from moving, so he ended up rolling to the left instead. As Senkyo rolled to the side, something blocked his way. He caught a sweet scent that was oddly nostalgic, but he ignored it. He was still half asleep and his eyes were closed as he moved around. Clearly, Senkyo still wanted to sleep, but he still tried his hardest to wake up.

Senkyo tried to identify the obstacle that was immobilizing his left arm and blocking the way, so he used his right hand to feel out what it was instead of opening his eyes. He felt something soft and fluffy, so he determined it was a pillow.

*\*Oh, it was just a pillow...? When did these things get so heavy?\**

Senkyo brushed the obstacle's surface with his hand, it felt incredibly soft, it was like his hand was going to sink in its fluffiness.

*\*Maybe I'll sleep for five more minutes...\**

As Senkyo thought that, he wrapped his arm around the "pillow" and hugged it tightly.

"Nya~!"

*\*...Nya?\**

A cute squeal came out as he hugged the "pillow." Last time Senkyo checked, pillows don't let out cute high-pitched squeals when you hug them. He decided to slowly open his eyes to see what it was. And after his vision cleared up, Senkyo saw white hair and cat ears in his arms. At that moment, Senkyo was completely stunned.

The girl in Senkyo's arms was the catgirl he just reunited with, Shiro. Her scent, her smooth body, and the white fluffy cat ears gave it away. It was then that he realized the smooth sensation he was feeling was not from a pillow, but from a girl's bare skin. Senkyo hugged Shiro tightly without knowing, and because of that, his lips were touching her forehead, his nose was taking in her hair's fragrance, and his body directly touching her body with his leg slightly in between hers.

"WH-WH-WH-WH-WH-WH-WH-WH-WHAAAAT!!?!??"

Shiro was using his arm as a pillow. Senkyo panicked and tried to get out. He successfully slipped his left arm from her head but he ended up falling off the bed. He got up only to see Shiro's fully naked body. A sleepy expression floated on her face as she rubbed her eye and greeted Senkyo, making for an alluring sight.

"Nya... Onii-chan... good morning..."

"A-Ahh... wha...?"

Senkyo was at a loss for words. His mouth was left wide open. He tried to say something but the words got stuck in his throat. He didn't avert his eyes; they were completely glued to the eye candy in front of him. Whether it was because he wanted to imprint the image before him deep inside his brain, or maybe because his brain wasn't functional enough to make him realize he should avert his eyes, either way, he didn't move them. That was until a loud voice echoed in Senkyo's mind.

*"\*Senkyo!!\*"*

"WAH!?"

Ryosei finally caught Senkyo's attention. Senkyo jumped in surprise and looked around the room for the source of the voice but soon realized it was Ryosei.

*"\*W-What?\*"*

*"\*It's about time you noticed me! What the hell is going on!? Who's this catgirl and where did she come from!?\*"*

*"\*I-I didn't know she could do this! Wait... you don't know who she is?\*"*

*"\*What? Of course not, this is the first time I've seen her!\*"*

*"....."*

Senkyo was surprised to hear that Ryosei didn't know about Shiro. From the very beginning, when Ryosei got sucked into Senkyo's body, they shared all their emotions and memories. But when Shiro released parts of Senkyo's memories, Ryosei didn't even have a clue about it.

He discovered another thing about their unusual situation. Senkyo thought that he'd have to look more into this and get all the details. The more they knew about their situation, the better.

He would think about it, but right now was not the time. Senkyo was still in the middle of a bizarre situation. He calmed down enough to be able to diffuse the whole thing. He could explain everything to Ryosei later, but first, he had to sort out Shiro.

Luckily for him, no one else was in the room or so Senkyo thought... until he looked over to the door where he saw Yuu staring at him like human trash. The scene presented to her was: Senkyo alone with a naked catgirl on a pretty messy bed. It was bound to cause misunderstandings. Yuu glared at him with disgusted eyes.

The menacing aura Yuu was emitting was enough to make the whole room tremble. Senkyo felt a chill run down his spine and broke out in a cold sweat. At that moment, Senkyo knew he was done for.

"Ah..."

"Yukou-senpai... WHAT. ARE. YOU. DOING!?"

"W-W-W-WAIT I CAN EXPLAIN!"

"I DON'T NEED YOUR CRAPPY EXCUSES!!"

"GAAAAA!!!"

Senkyo tried to explain himself but it was a futile attempt. Later that day, the room's cleaners would have to deal with burn marks on walls and replace burnt furniture.

**67 – New Memories**

After changing back to his normal clothes and treating his burn marks, the bandaged Senkyo went to Yuu's room where they gathered to talk about Shiro and what they were going to do next. The people in the room were Senkyo, Yuu, Shiro, and Itsuki, who was called by Senkyo via smartphone. Apparently, Sora had the numbers of all of their classmates so Senkyo asked him for Itsuki's number.

"So, do you mind introducing her to us, Yukou-senpai?"

Yuu's sharp glare at Senkyo was a sign that she was still angry at him. Senkyo could only smile ruefully as one more misunderstanding would render him into ashes.

"Y-Yeah... this girl here is Shiro. She is a Nemi, one of the races from Zerid. Due to circumstances, my dad brought her to this world when I was a kid. The three of us lived together ever since."

"That's right! Shiro and Onii-chan have an unbreakable bond!"

"Wait a second, if this is true, then why are you only telling us now? And wouldn't that mean that you were only pretending to not know of Zerid?"

Yuu raised a very sound argument. The first time they met, Senkyo acted like a total outsider, like he didn't know anything. That was because he wasn't acting. Senkyo's memories were sealed and he didn't even know anything about it. Ryosei not knowing about it at first was proof of that.

When Senkyo woke up, Ryosei didn't even know Shiro. It was only after Senkyo explained to him who she was that he came to understand. In the middle of explaining who Shiro was, Ryosei slowly began to receive the same memories that Senkyo recently acquired.

After wracking his brain, Senkyo theorized that he "refreshed" the copy of his memories inside Ryosei. Senkyo and Ryosei couldn’t read what the other was currently thinking. By explaining to Ryosei his newly acquired memories, it was like talking to an old friend about your past experiences and remembering these things that would've otherwise been forgotten.

"Well, I know this is going to sound farfetched, but bear with me. My memories of that… were sealed."

"What!?"

Yuu and Itsuki shouted in surprise. "My memories were sealed," they probably never expected to hear that seriously in a conversation before. Itsuki has already been through a lot with them and experienced a fantasy firsthand, so he knew better than to take that as a joke.

After their initial shock, they quickly regained their composure and urged Senkyo to continue. Senkyo told them all about what happened in his dream and everything he understood from it. In short, Senkyo's father sealed parts of his memories and entrusted them to Shiro, who was like a little sister that Senkyo recently remembered through releasing parts of his sealed memories.

They discovered more mysteries about Senkyo but with no answers. They asked Shiro about Senkyo, but as expected, she refused to say anything. But she did reassure them about one thing, Senkyo's personality was never changed. He was the same as he was before, only with a part of his memories gone.

"Gaah! This is so annoying! You, Furball, just tell us about his memories or I'll beat it out of you!"

*\*Hiss!\**

Itsuki threatened Shiro, and she responded by hiding behind Senkyo and hissing at her aggressor. The new information they received made both Itsuki and Yuu a bit frustrated, seeing as no answers were given in turn. Yuu wasn't as blunt as Itsuki, it was clear by the look on her face that she was bothered by it. She entered deep thought without even noticing.

"\**Yukou-senpai... someone with the ability to house multiple souls in his body. His father sealed his memories for an unknown reason, had connections to Zerid in the past, and most importantly, has a divine soul that he can hide itself and has its own will...* *The more I know about Yukou-senpai, the more mysterious he gets, to the point where he, himself, doesn't even know everything about him. Hmm... this is very strange. Yukou-senpai has a divine soul. It's not unheard of for something that has no mana to have a divine soul. But to use the powers of a divine soul, they need to have a supply of mana. A spectral would be fine, but Yukou-senpai wasn't holding a spectral that time... but, that could only mean...\**"

"—sho-chan... Hisho-chan?"

"Uwa!?"

Yuu fell over her seat when she was snapped out of her trance, only to see the person she was thinking about waving his hand in front of her.

"Whoa! Hisho-chan are you okay? Sorry, did I get too close?"

"N-No, I'm fine! Hahaha... It's nothing to be sorry about. Wait, what are you doing Yukou-senpai? Why did you suddenly appear in front of me like that?"

"Appear in front of you? I was calling out for you a long time ago. You weren't responding so I came to get your attention..."

"O-Oh... Is that so...? Then, sorry for ignoring you, I spaced out for a moment there. A-Anyway, what were you asking?"

"We were asking what you were going to do from here on. We already asked Watanabe-san and he said he's going to stay and train with the Konjou clan as well."

"O-Oh..."

Yuu has been lost in thought for so long that she hadn't even noticed that they already changed topics. They asked what she was going to do. Luckily, Yuu already knew the answer to that.

"If you don't mind, I think I'll stay with everyone. We've been through a lot, we're basically a team now, right?"

"Yeah, no one seems to mind, it's great that you'll still stick around. But, didn't you say before that you had someone you have to find?"

"About that... I think that if I stay with you, then I'll eventually find who I'm looking for."

“I-Is that so?”

*“\*Yukou-senpai, I'll find out whether or not you are the one I'm looking for and the mysteries surrounding you along with it!\*”*

*“\*This is a bit of a weird situation…\*”*

The hunter and the hunted are in the same group. It was only recently that Senkyo discovered that he had mana running in his veins. It was more than likely that he was the one Yuu was looking for. But Senkyo didn’t know why Yuu was looking for him, so he kept it a secret. To Yuu, Senkyo is a human with no mana since the first time she checked him she confirmed it. But now that his mana was released, the only way to keep his relationship with Yuu as it is, he has to keep her from ever checking his mana.

**68 – Training Grounds**

Soon after their meeting concluded, it was decided that Senkyo and Itsuki would ask the clan chief, Yousuke, to let them train with them while Yuu would watch over Kuro Yaiba to make sure it isn't discovered.

They all had breakfast and headed straight to the clan chief's office to ask Yousuke for permission to train with them. To their surprise, Yousuke agreed immediately and had Touma and Sora accompany them with their training.

Senkyo and Itsuki followed behind Sora and Touma as they walked into the forest towards their training grounds where their mentor and other students were waiting for them. Senkyo walked nervously as he thought about training with other people who would be levels ahead of him. Actual fighters who've been training since they were children. Meanwhile, he was just a high school otaku who did running to school to not be late as his only exercise. And to add to the pressure, Yousuke sent them to train with the current most powerful hunter of the Konjou Clan.

*"\*Ahh... The most powerful of the Konjou Clan, he said! Why did he send us to train with someone like him!? I'm not even as powerful as he thinks I am!\*"*

*"\*This is good! What's faster progress than training with the strongest? If we're lucky, he'll whip you up to shape in no time!\*"*

*"\*I don't think you get it, Ryosei. They might be the strongest, but what if they're one of those brutal trainers who would suplex you if you made a single mistake!?\*"*

*"\*Senkyo... you've been watching too many anime. This is a group of hunters, not wrestlers\*"*

*"\*Don't worry Onii-chan! Shiro will be here for you~!\*"*

Shiro encouraged Senkyo, and it felt somewhat reassuring. Now that Shiro is summoned, she will be living inside Senkyo in her spirit mode. It was a familiar's skill to always be with their masters. Basically, she had the same ability as Ryosei, excluding the ability to take over his body.

*"\*They'll be strict but they wouldn't seriously injure anyone. You'll be fine as long as you don't do anything stupid.\*"*

*"\*~~~! I hope that's the case...\*"*

"We're here."

Sora notified Senkyo and Itsuki. They reached an opening in the forest where there stood lines of people in various attire. In front of all of them was the mentor that was assigned to the group, Konjou Clan's strongest hunter, Yamazaki Dai.

He had short black hair and eyes. He held a wooden sword in front of him as he stood. At first sight, Senkyo could tell that he was incredibly powerful. He had a well-built body with a few small scars on his arms. Dai spotted Sora and the others and called them out.

"Ah, you're here! Alright, listen everyone, these people are going to be joining us temporarily. Most of you might recognize these two..."

Dai pointed at Sora and Touma.

"The person with the brown hair and short ponytail is Yamamoto Sora, and the person with the white hair and sharp eyes that looks like he'll bite at any second is Saito Touma."

The well-ordered crowd talked amongst themselves. It seems like those two were well-known.

"You mean those are *the* Yamamoto Sora and Saito Touma!?"

"The Konjou Clan's Yin and Yang...?"

"This is the first time I've seen them in person..."

The crowd's murmuring seemed to annoy Touma but brushed it away with a click in his tongue. Senkyo and Itsuki followed behind Sora. After Sora and Touma's introduction, everyone's attention was directed to Senkyo and Itsuki.

"These two are guests of the Konjou Clan. The clan chief assigned them here because they are apparently the ones who defeated one of the leaders of END. The one—"

"WHAT!?"

"Impossible! A leader was actually defeated!?"

“No way, that has to be a joke!”

"Who are these people!?"

The once-murmuring crowd became rowdy and started getting out of control. It was a huge shock for them. No one had ever defeated a single leader in history. Being the first one to defeat one was obviously a huge deal. So much that the well-disciplined crowd began to riot but...

"..."

"!!"

It suddenly became quiet. It was like the noisy gossiping never even happened. Everyone stopped talking and lined up properly again, just like how Senkyo first saw them. The odd part was that it only took a sharp glare from Dai to quiet them down. He didn't raise his voice or make any gestures to indicate an order. In the first place, most of the hunters were distracted and didn't even have Dai in their vision.

"W-Wow..."

Senkyo knew what Dai did, but he was amazed nonetheless. Almost like a programmed system, the other hunters responded the moment Dai glared. It was a basic skill that hunters learn at a young age, called "Connect."

A skill that connects people's thoughts. It uses a person's spirit power to connect with other people. This has been their method of communication before mana and spectrals were even discovered.

It was an easy and convenient means of communication without hindering movement or requiring speaking. It only uses spirit power when you send your thoughts, and it only costs a small amount so you didn't have to worry much about overusing spirit power. And once you got used to it, sending your thoughts to multiple people will be like breathing air.

"Surprised?"

"Y-Yeah, it was amazing how fast everyone responded to you."

"Of course, discipline is a must. The battlefield does not show mercy to those who overstep their bounds."

"Is that so..."

"Well, how about you two? The clan chief didn't inform me with much, would you mind introducing yourselves?"

"O-Oh yeah, I am Yukou Senkyo. A high school student of Honshou Academy from class 2-B... I-I hope I can learn a lot from this."

"I'm Watanabe Itsuki. I'm from the same class as him. Just don't get in my way."

"....."

The hunters wore puzzled expressions in response to Senkyo and Itsuki's introduction. After all, it was natural to assume that they'd be in another hunter group that fights in the shadows if they were able to defeat a leader, but that wasn't the case.

Senkyo and Itsuki introduced themselves as high schoolers. That lead the hunters to doubt the information they were given, but since they trust the clan, they assumed that Senkyo and Itsuki simply didn't want to reveal who they truly were.

**69 – Clan Classes**

After their introduction, they turned to Dai for what to do next. But Dai was staring at them carefully as if examining them. After arranging his thoughts, Dai turned back to the crowd and gave them instructions.

"Hmm... Okay, since I'll be focusing my attention on our new companions, you're all going to self-train. You can train with someone in the same class if you want. If anything happens or if you want a duel, just call for me. Am I clear?"

"Understood!"

Classes. These are the fighting styles that hunters use. A hunter’s class determines their position and role in a battle. Seeing as the past seven years had massive changes, Senkyo asked Dai about the current classes.

Enchanters. Hunters that fight mainly by using talismans, enchanting their weapons or items with spirit power, and supporting other hunters. They are adaptive depending on their opponent or the situation. Enchanters only use normal weapons, and not spectrals, because the mana from a spectral affects the amount or spirit power a person can use.

If someone holds a spectral, the spirit power they can use will be reduced to only enough to enchant one item an hour or a trip to and back from the Spirit Realm. This is in effect for about 12 hours from the last time one held a spectral.

Fighters. Hunters that fight by using spectrals. Unlike enchanters, they use spectrals to fight their enemies. By using the mana within their spectrals, they can use defensive or offensive magic depending on the situation.

They learn new skills by asking someone who knows a different skill to teach them, or experimenting with magic and creating their own skill. But fighters have to be careful with the amount of mana they use. If they accidentally lose track of their spectral's mana and suddenly run out in the middle of battle, it could mean death. The only way to replenish mana is to transfer it into the spectral.

To avoid such a situation, people created Magic Arts. Compared to shaping fire into a blade or a shield, covering an already-made blade and shield with fire is incredibly simple that doesn't use up much mana at all and doesn't require a chant.

Magic arts were made to preserve mana by using the simplest of magics. They use something as simple as covering their weapon with magic and using their creativity to use that simple magic to something comparable to powerful magic that requires more mana and a chant.

Brutes. Hunters who use their spirit power to use skills and enhance their bodies. Brutes are generally resolute people. With their purpose in their mind, they draw power from their soul and shape it. Unlike the other classes, this is the most dangerous class. If you aren't careful, you might overuse your spirit power and destroy your soul in the process. But on the other hand, you can be the toughest piece on the field and can lead everyone to victory.

And lastly, Casters. These are hunters that specialize in casting spells from afar and defeating their enemies with magic. But casters don't use spectrals, they use staffs. Unlike spectrals, staffs have a large mana supply and can replenish mana on their own. Depending on the user and the staff, mana can replenish at an incredibly fast rate. Having a large supply of mana and being self-replenishing allows casters to use high-tier magic that fighters are unable to use due to the lack of mana.

But casters have a special condition. A hunter cannot be a caster unless they have an affinity for mana and they've taken a "Bond Ritual." The one who created class, and the same person that conducts the bond rituals, is Freda. Hunters that have a special affinity to mana can become casters if they take a bond ritual.

A Bond Ritual is a ritual where Freda makes a bond with the caster and the staff. Making this bond is the same as making the staff's mana supply the caster's own. Meaning that the caster themselves will have their own mana pool and be able to regenerate it. Once bonded with a staff, you cannot change the staff unless you take another Bond Ritual with another staff. Freda is the only person who can carry out these rituals.

Moreover, since the hunter is directly connected to mana, the effect that prevents the use of both mana and spirit power is permanent. Therefore, casters are permanently limited to a trip and back from the Spirit Realm an hour. Within that hour, casters cannot use spirit power.

Compared to seven years ago, two classes have been added and one was removed. In the past, the only classes were Enchanters, Brutes, and Purifiers. Purifiers were like priests that exorcise evil spirits with their spirit power. But now, it seems like purifiers were no longer needed and introduced Fighters and Casters to the Konjou Clan.

*"\*Hearing this just makes me want to know who this Freda person is. All I know is that she appeared at some point in the seven years I was dead.\*"*

*"\*I'm a bit interested in that too. If we're lucky, maybe the clan chief will let us meet her.\*"*

*"\*You'll have to gain You-chan's trust if you want to do that.\*"*

*"\*I know, I just haven't figured out a way to go about gaining his trust.\*"*

*"\*Well, do your best. Oh look, Dai is calling you over.\*"*

Senkyo was busy discussing their newfound information with Ryosei. After Dai's explanation, he left to tend to his other students before he focused on them, leaving Senkyo thinking about Freda and her involvement in the past seven years.

Senkyo approached Dai who was waving to call him over. Itsuki was already there. Senkyo was the only one they were waiting for. The other hunters have already dispersed and gone about their self-training.

"Took you long enough. Could you stop daydreaming and move so we can get this over with?"

"Sorry, my bad."

"Alright, how about we start with testing your stamina..."

And so, Senkyo and Itsuki's training began. The first test was to maneuver through the forest and get down and back up the mountain. They made it so that Senkyo and Itsuki could temporarily cross the mysterious barrier around the Konjou Clan after giving them a sample of their blood. Senkyo, Itsuki, Sora, and Touma all raced to the bottom while dodging the obstacles in the way.

Sora and Touma were used to this, but since they were ordered to look after both of them, they did the test with them. They reached the bottom without a hitch and waited for Senkyo and Itsuki. Itsuki dodged trees and jumped over logs and small streams. Although he had a few trips and stops here and there, he made it to the bottom of the mountain. Immediately after getting down the mountain, Itsuki turned and sprinted back up the mountain.

"Hmm... He has lots of room to grow doesn't he, Touma-kun?"

"So far, he hasn't stopped to take a rest. At the very least, he has the strength and tenacity to endure this. But this isn't enough to defeat a leader."

"Don't be mean! This is his first time doing it, and even you had to take stops every now and again! ...Although, aside from that, I agree that this is nowhere near enough power to defeat a leader."

*"\*Well, they did say that Yukou-kun was the one that defeated a leader single-handedly... But he's not here. He must've already reached the bottom on a different side of the mountain, I guess we should follow Watanabe-kun\*—*Come on, Touma-kun, let's go!”

"I don't need you to tell me."

Right as Sora was about to go. A distant voice reached his ears.

"...?"

"Hey, Touma-kun, did you hear something just now?"

"I don't know what you're talking about just hurry up and go."

*"\*Hm... Maybe I was just imagining things...\*"*

Sora and Touma followed Itsuki as he went back up the mountain. Itsuki almost never stopped running. He would shout every time he was slowing down and it somehow always got him a bit further without resting. The whole way back up, they never saw Senkyo.

"Oh? You're back already? I have to say for the first run you did great. Normally people would've taken another thirty minutes or so."

"Heh... heh... hehh... O-Of course... haah... I'm... hah... incredibly... s-strong... hah... you know...? Hahh..."

From how Itsuki talked, anyone could tell he was beat. He was trying to catch air as he talked just to brag. But from the looks of it, Itsuki was barely able to take on the difficulty he put himself through. While Itsuki tried to walk off his exhaustion, Sora noticed that Senkyo wasn't there yet.

*"\*Huh? This is weird... Did he get lost or something?\*"*

"Yamazaki-sensei, I'm going to look for Yukou-kun, is that fine?"

"Yeah. It would be a problem if he got lost and didn't get back."

Sora jumped on the nearest tree and then to the next. He went to look for Senkyo, who might've gotten lost somewhere. As Sora's search got closer to the bottom of the mountain, he spotted a few broken shrubs that lead to a slope. When Sora looked over to investigate, he saw Senkyo lying face down on the ground with cuts, and bruises, covered with dirt and leaves.

"Yukou-kun!?"

**70 – Taste of Training**

Let's turn back time to the start of the test...

*"\*Okay! Since my stamina and speed went up because of Ryosei breaking my body's limits every time, I should be able to do this now!\*"*

*"\*Well... I don't know about that one...\*"*

*"\*Eh?\*"*

*"\*I think it's better if you didn't know.\*"*

Confused at what Ryosei said, Senkyo didn't notice they already started. Running to catch up with them, Senkyo began to sprint. He dodged the trees, jumped over obstacles, and ran down the mountain. It was almost as if his muscles already adapted to this. Senkyo was about a few hundred meters away from Itsuki when Ryosei suddenly called Senkyo out.

*"\*Senkyo... Sorry, but I can't hold on any longer...\*"*

*"\*H-Huh!? What do you mean by that!? What's happening!?\*"*

Ryosei’s voice sounded a bit strained. It made Senkyo worry about what he just said to him. The worse part was that it didn't sound like he was joking.

*"\*I promise I'll explain later...! I'm about to let go, Shiro, are you ready...?\*"*

*"\*This better be for the best, or else, Shiro will get you for this!\*"*

*"\*Wh-What!? Shiro, too!? Seriously, what's gonna happen!?\*"*

No one answered Senkyo. Senkyo slowed down and began walking to try and prepare for what was going to happen next. Senkyo tried to prepare for anything. Since no one was telling him what was happening, it probably wasn't a big deal but it worried him nonetheless.

*"\*Okay... 3... 2... 1... DO IT!\*"*

Right after Ryosei signaled Shiro, Senkyo felt a sudden pain run through his whole body. In his legs, in his arms, in his shoulders, in his stomach, everything hurt.

"G-GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHH!!!!"

Senkyo let out an ear-piercing scream that echoed through the mountain. Senkyo began to stumble and writhe on the ground. Losing control over his body, he rolled into some shrubs, down a slope, and stopped at the bottom, where he would soon be discovered by Sora sometime later.

*"\*Nature's Time!\*"*

All Senkyo could hear was Shiro shouting and casting a spell, making Senkyo feel just that bit better. That was the last thing Senkyo could hear before slowly passing out on the ground and later getting found by Sora. It wasn't until night came that Senkyo regained consciousness.

**............**

"Mm... Hm... Haa—AAWW!!"

Pain was the first one to greet Senkyo from his sleep. He could still feel his body aching, but not as bad as it was earlier. He was rudely disturbed by his yawn when he tried to move his arms around. Every part of his body had a lingering feeling of pain. He knew if he moved, it would only hurt.

The pain Senkyo felt didn't actually hurt that much. He could even walk around and flail his arms a bit. It was just that he didn't expect to feel pain the moment he woke up. Senkyo toughed out the pain and sat up straight.

When he looked around, Senkyo noticed he was in the room he slept in the other night. But, the more he thought about it, he realized that couldn't be the case. Because earlier this morning, his room was destroyed by Yuu's fireballs.

"Well, this is a large castle. This is probably a different room that looks exactly like the room I last slept in last night."

*"\*Oh? You're awake. Good to see you can move around.\*"*

Ryosei noticed Senkyo was awake and called out to him. Senkyo wanted answers to what happened. He was kept in the dark by Ryosei and Shiro, saying that there was no time to explain. Since everything turned out how it did, naturally, Senkyo wanted answers.

"What happened back there? Was it some kind of magic someone put on me or something?"

*"\*No, it was inevitably going to happen.\*"*

"What do you mean by that?"

*"\*You see, if you remember that time we fought a whole horde of lesser demons, while we were fighting, your body's muscles were getting damaged from all the fighting.\*"*

"What!? Damaged!? What does that mean!?"

*"\*Wait, calm down! Let me finish.\*"*

Senkyo stayed quiet and waited in suspense for what Ryosei was going to say next.

*"\*Right now, your muscles are regenerating.\*"*

"What...?"

*"\*When your muscles get damaged, your body repairs that damage and makes your muscles bigger and stronger than they were before, right? Think about it like that.\*"*

*"*I-I think I heard that before, but are you sure I didn't take any serious damage?"

*"\*Oh, you did.\*"*

"What!? Then—!"

*"\*But that was*before *Shiro saved you, you see...\*"*

Ryosei explained to Senkyo everything that lead to what happened earlier. When they were fighting the horde of lesser demons, Senkyo's muscles were getting too damaged to the point where it was going to be a serious injury.

Right before Ryosei gave Senkyo's body back to him, he used his spirit power to temporarily replace the damaged parts of Senkyo's muscles. Ryosei's spirit power acted as Senkyo's muscles, and it was like his muscles were never damaged at all.

It was part of the spirit power's restoration power. From that point onwards, Ryosei continuously used his spirit power to prevent Senkyo's muscles to be any more damaged than they already were. But unfortunately, during the time they fought Fulgur, Ryosei let go of his focus and Senkyo's muscles were seriously damaged to the point where it would take months or maybe years to naturally heal.

But when Senkyo suddenly got covered in blue light, his muscles were slowly getting repaired. Shiro cast various spells to save Senkyo at that time. One of those spells is one called "Nature's Time." A spell that accelerates the natural restoration of something, depending on the amount of mana expended. It healed Senkyo's bruises, wounds, and muscles. That spell helped Senkyo avoid getting serious damage.

The rest other spells were Nemian Grace, Barrier Transfer, and Unwavering Resolve. Nemian Grace is a spell that imitates part of what Mythical Water does and cures all disabilities. Barrier Transfer transfers and temporarily increase the natural magic barrier Nemi have to the target. And finally, Unwavering Resolve, a spell that uses mana to be cast, but uses resolve as its power. It channels the caster's resolve and shapes it by reinforcing the target's defensive power and tenacity. By casting all these spells, Shiro managed to save Senkyo.

After the whole ordeal, Senkyo's muscles were back in a state where they could naturally heal. But because they were still in the Spirit Realm, Ryosei replaced Senkyo's muscles again. Then, after encountering the Konjou Clan and accepting their offer to sleep, Ryosei didn't want to stop using his spirit power since it would only disturb Senkyo's sleep, so Ryosei left it on until this morning today. In the middle of the race, Ryosei was planning on releasing his replacements and letting Senkyo's muscles naturally heal, but not after Shiro intervened.

*"\*What are you doing to Onii-chan!?\*"*

Shiro noticed the fake muscles acting as replacements and confronted Ryosei. At first, Shiro was ready to attack Ryosei and kick him out of Senkyo's body. Luckily, Ryosei managed to get Shiro to listen to his explanation and convinced her to help him, although she sounded reluctant.

As Ryosei let go of the replacement muscles, Senkyo suddenly felt intense pain. Shiro cast the same magic she cast previously, Nature's Time, that accelerates the natural restoration of something, in this case, it was Senkyo's muscles.

*"\*Right now, Onii-chan will still be in pain, but since Shiro used 'Nature's Time,' Onii-chan's muscles should be fully healed after a good night's sleep.\*"*

Nature's Time took longer this time because Shiro used a lower amount of mana compared to the last time. Seeing the number of spells she used, it was obvious that her mana pool would be running low, for now, this was the best Shiro could do.

"...Is that so...? Thanks, Shiro."

*"\*Anything for Onii-chan!\*"*

“Thanks, but… Ryosei… Why didn’t you just tell me to stop before you did that!?”

*“\*Wait, calm down. For the record, I did consider it. But in the end, someone else would have to pick you up and bring you back to the clan, with that in mind, I thought having someone see you knocked out due to an actual accident would be much better than someone seeing you knocked out out of nowhere. I thought that would sell the ‘this guy must be really tired’ image rather than ‘a mysterious force just took this guy down’ image. It’s better this way so that no one thinks of questioning us too much about it later.\*”*

“I-I guess I can see where you’re coming from. Making it look like I was just tired from the start prevents too much questioning… but still… but still! That isn’t the point I thought I was gonna die there!”

*“\*I’m sure someone who survived being fired to a crisp by a sea of lightning can handle a bit of a tumble down a hill.\*”*

“You’re heartless!”

*"\*Well, you have to get used to this, because your body will be feeling like this for a while.\*"*

"Wait... what do you mean by that?"

Senkyo was caught off guard by what Ryosei said.

*"\*Even if your muscles rebuild tomorrow, that won't be enough. So, we'll be training and pushing your body to the limit again!\*"*

"So... you're telling me, I'll have to live with my body aching like this?"

*"\*It'll get easier as time passes, don't worry!\*"*

Ryosei said enthusiastically, but Senkyo stuttered for a bit.

"So... every day... like this...?"

*"\*Yeah!\*"*

"....."

"Why meeee!?"

With that, marked the beginning of Senkyo's days of training.

**71 – His Haunt**

"Alright, getting to the toilet shouldn't be that much of a problem... Wait, where's the toilet on this floor again?"

*"\*It's right beside the stairs at the end of the corridor.\*"*

"Thanks."

Waking from his sleep, Senkyo felt the need to relieve himself so he slowly walked to the toilet. Although his muscles hurt, it wasn’t enough to immobilize him. He made it to the toilet and successfully finished his business. Senkyo was about to head back to his room, but little did he know that getting back to his room was going to have to wait.

*"\*...! Senkyo... do you hear that!?\*"*

"Huh? No, what is it?"

*"\*My ears cannot be mistaken... this is the opening theme song for Magical Girl Kawaii-chan!!\*"*

"Just so we're clear it's *my* ears—Wh-Whoa!?"

"Come on, Senkyo, we need to get to the source of the sound right away!"

*"\*H-Hey! That's no reason to hijack my body!\*"*

"Don't sweat the small stuff!"

*"\*Be careful! My muscles aren't even healed yet!\*"*

Ryosei took off to the sound of the opening song he seems to love so much. He climbed up the flights of stairs going two floors up.

*"\*You heard it two floors above us!? You don't even have your own body!\*"*

*"\*Tsk tsk tsk... It's precisely because I don't have a body that I can find the things etched into my soul easily.\*"*

*"\*What does that even mean!?\*"*

Ryosei quietly approached the room where he could hear his beloved anime.

*"\*I can't be mistaken, this is it! Behind this door, Magical Girl Kawaii-chan!\*"*

Ryosei opened the door and immediately went inside.

"Kawaii-chaaaann!!!"

"!?"

As Ryosei opened the door, a hurried shuffling was heard coming from inside the room. After carefully examining the room, there was a girl in pajamas frozen in place right in front of them. It looked like she was hurriedly heading to the open window.

"Wait... Kaede!?"

"Wh-Who..."

Ryosei recognized the girl in front of him. Her name was Konjou Kaede, Konjou Yousuke's little sister. She had black hair with braided twin tails decorated by a cherry blossom hair pin. She wore a pair of glasses that shielded her black-colored eyes. She was staring at Ryosei with a surprised face. It was almost like her face was saying *"\*Who is this person!?\*"*

"U-Umm... who might you be...?"

"Ah...!"

That's when Ryosei remembered that he was using Senkyo's body. To Kaede, a random stranger just busted inside the room and called her out like they were close friends. *"\*This is bad!\*"* is what Ryosei thought.

"O-Oh yeah...umm... I-I am Yukou Senkyo, n-nice to meet you. I'm staying in the castle until tomorrow. I hope you don't mind my stay."

"I-I see... I hope you don't mind me asking but, what are you doing here?"

"Ah! I-I was just passing by and I heard the opening theme song to an anime I liked and I couldn't help but check..."

Kaede looked over to the television, the only thing around that was showing anime. Even though it was obvious, she still wanted to confirm, so she asked Ryosei.

"You like Magical Girl Kawaii-chan?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

"Then... could you tell me, what's so good about the show!?"

"Whoa!?"

From being cautious and keeping her distance, to up close and personal. Kaede dropped all defenses and went for the offensive the moment she heard Ryosei's answer. Ryosei was perplexed by Kaede's sudden change and took a few steps back.

"Wh-What's so good about the show? Shouldn't you know that, I mean, you're watching it aren't you?"

"...Then let me change the question... is this show worth dying for?"

"D-Dying for… huh."

"...A-Ah. No, n-never mind, it's nothing."

Kaede backed out of asking "Senkyo," but that was only natural. Ryosei knew Kaede would never confide to anyone she didn't trust with her problems, much less a stranger. However, immediately after hearing her question, Ryosei knew what Kaede meant behind it. It was about him.

When he was still alive, around the time when he got into anime, every time he talked to Kaede, Yousuke, or anyone else for that matter, he would always bring up his newfound hobby. Ryosei was so happy when he talked about it, that it probably made his close friends think *"\*Maybe this is for the best.\*"*

After giving the television one last look, he shifted his eyes to Kaede along with his objective. Ryosei wanted to help Kaede with whatever was troubling her. Although he already had an idea, he also wanted to know more about what happened because of him. Normally, she would never tell a stranger about her personal matters, but if he used her weakness against her, the results could be different. So he decided to use her weakness—her inability to keep her composure when flustered. Ryosei slowly approached Kaede, but Kaede stepped back, even more cautious than she was before.

*"\*Tsk... at this rate, she'll get away. This is going to hurt a bit but it'll be worth it... hopefully.\*"*

Suddenly, Ryosei used Flash Strike, but instead of striking, he slammed the wall behind Kaede with a resounding BANG and pinned Kaede against the wall. It hurt as Ryosei did it but he toughed it out.

"Wha-What!?—\**A Flash Strike!?\*"*

Pinned against the wall and only a few inches away from each other, Ryosei began to break her defenses. Although it looked like Kaede was about to push him away, he said something that caught her attention.

"...You know, if it brings you bad memories, you don't have to force yourself to like it just because someone else did."

“……D-Did you know Ryosei-nii-chan?”

“We happened to meet at a convention.”

“I-Is that so… Then why did you bother saying that to me? Do you really believe that thinking about Ryosei-nii-chan brings me bad memories?”

“Oh? I never said that, though?”

“………”

Kaede kept silent. Ryosei decided to push even further.

“Are you telling me that it won’t bother you if we talk about him?”

“H-Huh? Of course not… not at all.”

“Then, what happened here when he died.”

“You don’t need to know that, do you? You’re an outsider, so why should I tell you?”

“……”

Ryosei was getting a bit irritated. It was true that Kaede wouldn’t leak information about the clan to an outsider, but he wanted answers. He wanted to know the damage he did.

“Is that so? Then if I told you he’s still alive, what would you do?”

“W-What? Why are you saying that?”

Kaede’s voice was getting louder. Ryosei could tell he hit a nerve, but he didn’t stop.

“I’m saying that if he was still alive, then he wouldn’t want you to burden yourself with him!. I mean, it’s obvious you’re bothered. He went ahead and died by himself. Why should you even care about someone who abandoned you—”

*\*SLAP!!\**

Kaede’s hand went across Ryosei’s face and a resounding slap echoed throughout the room.

"Don’t talk about Ryosei-nii-chan like that! H-He died because of me! Because I didn't do anything! I decided to let him stay like that! If only I had convinced him to come back... If I had convinced him, then he wouldn't have died! He could've still been alive and doing what he liked!”

“W-What..?”

Ryosei was dumbfounded. He wasn’t expecting that response. She says that she was responsible. He couldn’t think of a more stupid thing to say. *“\*Why are you saying that? What the hell did I even do to make you feel that way?\*”* Ryosei thought.

Kaede's emotions began to get out of control. She began shouting her heart out, leaving her feelings out in plain view. Tears began appearing in the corner of her eyes as she let every single thought she kept to herself out for everyone to see.

"I can't forgive myself. I could've saved him, but I turned a blind eye.”

*“\*What…\*”*

“I... didn't care enough for him!”

*“\*…nonsense…\*”*

“If I did, then maybe I could've stood my ground and gotten him out of his shell.”

*“\*…are you…\*”*

“That's why I will never forgive myself!”

*“\*…talking about!?\*”*

“For not caring!”

*“\*Stop it.\*”*

“For not acting!”

*“\*Stop it!\*”*

“And for letting him die—”

“STOP IT!”

**72 – Past Mistakes**

Ryosei shouted, silencing Kaede.

“What are you saying? What do you mean it’s your fault!? First of all, you did everything for him already. You kept him company the day his parents died, didn't you!? You supported his decisions! Despite being against the elders, despite being against the whole clan, you still sided with him, didn't you!? When you saw him smiling and laughing again, it must've been a relief, right? After seeing him in such a sad state for so long, you must've been really happy! Because you could see his smiling face, his energetic, normal self! Every step of the way, not just when his parents died! Ever since you were little, ever since you first met, you've always been there for him. At every point of his life, down to the very end, every time he needed someone, you've been by his side, you were there for him, all of you were! You all cared for him and did everything you could to let him live a happy life! Don't take it out on yourself! If Ryosei knew you were suffering and beating yourself up because of this, he would be devastated! To see someone he cared about beat themselves up because of him... it's the worst...

“H-Huh? Wha… Why do you even know all of this!? Why are you speaking like Ryosei-nii-chan!? Just exactly who do you think you are!?”

“Me…? Then… Then why don’t you find out for yourself? You can do that can’t you?”

“F-Fine!”

Kaede reached her hand out to Ryosei’s forehead. Kaede’s special skill, the skill used on innocent victims from the supernatural to send them back to their normal lives. Hypnotic Suggestion. It allows her to prompt a suggestion to a target and persuades them to choose it. Normally used to make others forget about their memories of the supernatural. But of course, to choose the specific memories, the ability allows her to read a target’s memories. Which is why…

“…!? H-Huh? Impossible… How!? If that happened, then…!”

She saw it. Senkyo and Ryosei’s memories. Senkyo’s encounter with Ryosei, their battles, and how they ended up here. There was no doubt. The person who wielded Kuro Yaiba, the person who wiped out the enemies with swift skill, and the person who was controlling the body right in front of her, was his cousin, Konjou Ryosei.

“I bet you’re complaining about why I didn’t come to you earlier, huh? Do you really think that I would have the audacity to come here without a plan? Not after what happened last time—Whoa!?”

A powerful force pushed Ryosei to the ground. Kaede tackled him, and since his body was already weak, Ryosei fell without resist. She was bumping her forehead on Ryosei’s chest, all the while murmuring “idiot” over and over again. He could see the tears pouring down her eyes. He felt the strength behind that tackle and the grip of her arms around his waist. Ryosei returned the gesture and wrapped his hands around her and gently brushed her hair, reassuring her his warmth was real.

“I’m sorry. For leaving you alone, and causing you to feel that way.”

“That’s not what I want to hear from you. I already know that. If my trust in you wasn’t enough, your memories were solid proof that you’re sorry.”

“Then… I’m sorry for shouting at you and opening your wounds earlier.”

“Wrong. If I was still mad about that, then I wouldn’t be hugging you right now.”

“I give up. What is it?”

“Couldn’t you have thought about it more?”

“If I did then we’ll be here all night.”

“Fine… I’ll give you a hint. What do you say when you return home?”

Kaede wiped her tears on Ryosei’s clothes and stared at him straight in the eye, awaiting his words. Realizing what she wanted, Ryosei gave her a bright smile.

“I’m home, Kaede. I promise I won’t repeat my mistakes, so will you welcome me back?”

“Sure! Welcome back, Ryosei-nii-chan!”

After that, Ryosei and Kaede spent their time talking to each other. The whole time, Kaede seemed to be clingier than before, but Ryosei let that pass After some time, they heard footsteps and voices coming from the corridor.

"H-Hello? Is anybody in there?"

Suddenly, Kaede quickly turned off the lights and the television. She was so fast and swift; she knew where to go and what to do like she's already done this a million times.

"Come on! We got to get out of here! Follow me!"

Kaede took Ryosei's hand and headed for the open window.

"Whoa, whoa, what are you doing!?"

"Just trust me!"

"W-Wait—AAAHH!!"

The door opened and two people inspected the room. They saw a dark, and empty room. The television was off, the lights were off, and the windows were closed shut.

"I-I swear I heard a scream come from this room! You heard that too, didn't you!?"

"I-Impossible...! Are the rumors of a ghost living in this room actually true!?"

"Sh-Shut up! There's no way ghosts can be real!"

“What do you mean!? We literally know a world filled with ghosts!”

"Well, I'm not going to stay in this room any longer!"

"H-Hey! Wait for me!"

The two people left the room and quickly walked away as fast as they could. Just outside the room above that room, Kaede and Ryosei could be seen entering the window.

"T-To think we were going to escape through the window and climb upstairs through the roof... What the hell have you gotten yourself into when I was gone?"

"It's only natural, anime is forbidden in the clan after all. You were the cause of that you know? The elders were really mad at you."

"I figured as much. But this is 'natural,' huh? Wait... why were you watching anime in the first place? Didn't you hate it?"

"Well, at first I did. I actually started watching anime just to insult it, but as time went by, I actually enjoyed it... I-I know what you're going to say, and don't bother! I know it's pathetic that I enjoyed something I tried to hate! I was disappointed at the start too, you know!"

"I never said anything! But I think it's good that you didn't keep pretending not to like it. It's like that thing you know, accepting yourself kind of thing."

“I just imitated what you did, excluding the stupid stuff like leaving us of course.”

"I’m sorry, okay!"

“Hahaha, I was just teasing you!”

Her expression was genuine happiness. Ryosei was happy to be able to see this face again. Kaede turned around and headed for the coffee table in the room. It had a tea set placed on top of it, and she poured the tea into a cup and handed it over to Ryosei.

"Here, some tea. It's still hot so be careful."

"Thank you."

Ryosei took a sip of the tea, and for the first time, took a good look at his surroundings. The room was unlike most of the other rooms. Instead of the standard room for guests, this room looked a bit more personalized. It had a bed, a desk with a pc and a bunch of paper and pens, a coffee table, a bookshelf with various titled books, and many other various things.

"You have an organized room, but didn't you like it cutesier?"

“Leave it alone! It looks more mature!”

“‘Mature,’ huh? You know some adults have cutesier rooms than this, right?”

“Eh? Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

Kaede seemed to try and hide her embarrassment but her bright red cheeks were a dead give-away.

“A-Anyway, it’s getting a bit late now. Shouldn’t you go back to sleep?”

“Hmm, I guess you’re right. Well, it's been fun. Thanks for the tea, Kaede."

"Yeah, see you later."

“Oh yeah, don’t go telling anyone about me okay? Not even to You-chan.”

“Of course. You were talking about it earlier this morning, right?”

“…Just how much of our memories did you check?”

“Pretty much everything. We can talk about anything you want to know some other time, okay?”

“That’ll be great. Thanks. Goodnight, Kaede.”

“Goodnight, Ryosei-nii-chan.”

Ryosei closed the door behind him as he left. The sound of his footsteps got farther and farther until it was nowhere to be heard. Kaede stood in place, not moving an inch from where she saw Ryosei off.

“Goodnight, and welcome back.”

**Chapter 3: Senkyo's Class**

**73 – Return Home**

"Y-Yukou-senpai!? What are you doing here!?"

Yuu shouted in surprise when she saw Senkyo in front of her doorstep. It was still a bit early in the morning so Yuu was still in her yukata. She must have just woken up. Her yukata was a bit loose and Senkyo could see a bit more of her shoulder's skin. He went slightly red and pointed it out to her.

"E-Enough joking around! You should be resting!"

"Don't worry. Look, I'm as good as new!"

Senkyo stretched his body around to prove to Yuu that he was actually in good shape. Usually, she would have a hard time believing that. But the events that took place yesterday enabled her to guess what had happened to Senkyo.

**…………**

"All of his muscles are damaged, but from the looks of it, he'll be fine in a few days."

A man in a white coat was inspecting Senkyo's unconscious body. They were inside the room where Senkyo would wake up later that night. Sora brought Senkyo to the castle and called in a doctor to treat him. After thoroughly checking, all the doctor could find was normal muscle damage from training. But Yuu didn't quite understand that.

"Wh-What!? Didn't you say his muscles are damaged!? Shouldn't we do something about that!?"

"Calm down, miss. This is only normal muscle damage someone would get from training. It's nothing to be worried about."

"B-But he was just running earlier, wasn't he? Why is his whole body damaged in such a short time?"

"Although I did find that strange, I couldn't find any trace of a curse or some kind of magic that could do this. But I did find traces of mana, likely to have come from healing magic."

"I-Is that so... sorry for getting worked up."

"Don't worry, Hisho-kun, Yukou-kun will be all fine, don't worry."

Yuu silently nodded her head in response to Yousuke’s attempt to reassure her.

"Well then, I'm afraid I have some business to attend to. If Yukou-kun wakes up, tell him that Sora-kun and the others are continuing Watanabe-kun's evaluation. He can take his evaluation when he feels better."

“Yes, sir.”

The doctor and Yousuke left the room. Yuu sat down on the chair beside Senkyo's bed. She was worried about him, but what the doctor said earlier caught her attention as well.

"Traces of mana... He’s not wrong. I noticed it when I first saw him."

Yuu stared at Senkyo with a mix of worry and curiosity. Although her worry was genuine, at that moment, she couldn't help but think of trying to uncover some of Senkyo's mysteries. She thought of sucking a little bit of Senkyo's blood again, just to make sure he really had no mana.

"G-Gulp..."

Yuu's face slowly came closer to Senkyo's neck. She was entirely focused on it. She thought about what the doctor said, "I did find traces of mana, likely to have come from a healing magic." For the whole day, she guarded Kuro Yaiba. Senkyo couldn't have used it to use healing magic. Unless... he didn't need it.

"\**If Yukou-senpai does have mana... then that means bringing him Zerid. B-But that's...\*"*

Yuu stopped just before she was about to bite Senkyo. Her mouth was open, fangs showing, ready to pierce Senkyo's skin, but she stopped in place just before she did. For a few seconds, she stood still, and she backed out.

"Hahaha... There's no way, right? Why would Yukou-senpai suddenly have mana? The last time I checked, he didn't have any. How would that even change? It must've been Shiro-san. Nemi are known to specialize in healing magic."

She backed off and sat back in her seat. She laughed awkwardly as she tried to shake away her suspicion.

"I-I need to go now! Excuse me!"

Yuu ran out of the door in a hurry, leaving Senkyo alone in the room.

**…………**

"You know, you shouldn't hurt yourself just because Shiro-san can heal you back up."

"Wh-Wha!? How did you know?"

"Oh? That was just a guess."

"R-Really? Then—"

Senkyo felt the dark aura coming out of Yuu. She was staring daggers at him. He reflexively backed off in fear.

"So just because you have a healer, you think getting hurt is fine now? I see, it's not like we were really worried about you or anything."

"Ah! W-Wait, Hisho-chan, there's a misunderstanding here! I didn't actually intentionally hurt myself! I was just surprised about knowing Shiro healed me back up, I swear! S-So—"

*\*Snap!\**

Yuu snapped her fingers and a ball of fire appeared above her hand. Senkyo's face paled.

"If getting hurt is alright, then you wouldn't mind having a few burns on you, would you!?"

"WAIT, WAIT, WAIT!! AAAAHHHHH!!! I'M SORRY! I'M SORRYYYY!!!"

**............**

Later that day, Senkyo, Yuu, Itsuki, Sora, and Touma were all gathered in the Clan Chief's Office where they stood before Yousuke. Senkyo's group had their belongings with them and were ready to leave. They were called into the office by Yousuke to get some final words out before they left.

"First of all, as a token of our gratitude, we would like to reward you three for defeating a leader of END. Here, take these charms with you. It's a charm of protection. Of course, this isn't like any charm. This one can be used in battle and protect you with a barrier. It activates by itself but it can only be up for a limited amount of time. When the barrier disappears, just keep it with you to recharge. It can only be used once every 10 minutes. Most of our hunters have one. It has saved many lives from dangerous situations."

Yousuke presented three white charms to the group. He stood up to give all three of them the items. The trio examined the charms and kept them in their pockets. Yousuke sat back down on his chair and directed his gaze to Itsuki.

"Watanabe-kun, I heard from Dai that you did an amazing job on yesterday's evaluation. I believe you got a brute class, right? It's impressive to get evaluated for a brute. That means there's something you're fighting for."

"Stop with the flattery. It doesn't work on me."

Itsuki said it like he meant it. Even though he was being complemented, he brushed it aside and didn't care at all. Yousuke smiled understandingly and proceeded with his final words.

"After this, you'll be going back to the peaceful world most people live in, away from the shadows. I do hope you already knew this, but you have to keep this place a secret—this hidden world a secret. No matter how much time you spend in that world, it will never be the same now that you’ve affiliated yourselves with this world."

His tone emphasized this was the most important part he wanted to say. His eyes stared at all three of them back with nerve-wracking glares. The three of them tensed up a bit, but they were expecting this. After all, how can they let three outsiders, who potentially never knew of this world until now, roam free with the knowledge they just gained. Senkyo stepped up and spoke for the three of them.

"Of course. Before we even came here, we knew we had to keep this a secret. We do not and will never plan on revealing a secret that would destroy the world's current peace. Although these are only words with no concrete way of reassuring you: we will not reveal this to anyone and we will keep it a secret."

Senkyo didn't stutter. He stared Yousuke back as he said his whole speech. Yousuke responded in satisfaction.

"That's good. Although I will have Sora and Touma keep an eye on you four, including your sister, Watanabe-kun. She did leave this place thinking it was some kind of secret resort in the mountains. Usually, we would hand over patients to public hospitals we're connected with, but we made an exception for your request. So just to be sure, we'll keep an eye on her. That much would be fine, wouldn't it?"

"Tsk... For now, as long as you don't peek into her private life or go anywhere near her that'd be fine. But if any of you freaks do anything to her, you'll have me to answer for it!"

Itsuki didn't seem to like the idea but agreed to it anyway.

"That's fine, I assure you your little sister's safety. I'm sure we'll meet again. Take care on your way home. Sora-kun and Touma-kun will escort you down the mountain. If you ever do plan on coming back, just get in touch with those two."

"Got it, thank you for everything."

With that Senkyo, Yuu, and Itsuki left the clan's settlement. After a long walk, they finally reached the town where they parted ways with Sora and Touma.

"Well, my home is this way. See you at school Yukou-senpai, Watanabe-senpai."

"Yeah, see you tomorrow."

"Heh. Don't get lost now."

Itsuki whispered but Yuu turned his head back and glared at him. Her vampire senses helped her hear it. He stepped back in surprise since he didn't expect her to hear that. As Yuu went off the distance Senkyo was left with Itsuki.

"Well, my route is this way. So, see you at school, Watanabe-san."

"Not so fast, Shittaku. I'll be coming with you, 'cause this is also my route."

"E-Eh...?"

Senkyo's route only led to the neighborhood. If they have the same route, that would mean that they live in the same neighborhood. He was a bit shocked to hear that since he's never seen Itsuki anywhere before. But then, he realized that he didn't even go outside enough to get a chance for that to happen.

"Come with me for a bit. We have something to talk about."

"Huh?"

**74 – Itsuki’s Request**

Itsuki brought Senkyo to a wide-open lot. It had pipes of concrete and planks of wood laying around the area, but other than those, it was completely empty. Itsuki stopped in the middle of the lot and turned around to face Senkyo.

It didn't seem like he brought him here to play around. Itsuki looked serious, though a bit menacing, it wasn't like his usual "I'll beat the crap out of you" face.

"'Who are you right now? Yukou or Konjou?'"

"…!"

"I don’t get it much, but Lightning Boy said something like that, right? That there’s another spirit inside you."

Itsuki referred to Senkyo's conversation with Fulgur.

"Hey, Shittaku, just what the hell are you? I didn’t know what the hell happened at that place, but I know that wasn’t anything a human can do."

Senkyo stayed silent for a moment. He didn't know exactly how to respond to that question. He must have been talking about what Senkyo did after he passed out from Fulgur’s attacks. He thought about what to answer, or if he should even answer that question honestly.

"I'm not gonna let you go unless you answer me. So hurry up or we'll be here all day."

Itsuki didn't do his usual threats, but he pressured Senkyo nonetheless. It's become quite apparent to Senkyo that Itsuki changed how he usually treated him. Instead of threatening to beat him up and shouting in front of his face, Itsuki kept his distance and pressured him out of it.

Senkyo snapped out of his surprise. Thinking about it, he didn't need to answer him. He could just bolt out of the place and leave Itsuki behind. He had no reason to tell him the truth. He had nothing to gain from it. But even so, he decided to tell the truth.

"You see..."

Senkyo told Itsuki about Ryosei and how he could control his body to fight in his place. He told everything about Kuro Yaiba and its relation with Ryosei and the Konjou Clan, the reason why he wanted to train with the Konjou Clan, and the dangers they would inevitably encounter in the future.

If Itsuki leaked this information to the Konjou Clan, the worst-case scenario was that no one would believe Senkyo, refuse to train him, and would take Kuro Yaiba, leaving Senkyo with nothing but his head to defend himself. Senkyo and Ryosei didn't want that to happen. But Senkyo took this chance, hoping that this would be beneficial to them in some way. He decided to trust Itsuki.

"..."

Senkyo finished explaining everything to him. He waited in silence as Itsuki processed everything Senkyo said. Unlike the last time, Senkyo explained something to him, Itsuki took this seriously. Itsuki slowly opened his eyes and made contact with Senkyo's.

"I get it. Don't worry, I'm not that much of a bastard to screw you over. In fact… I can use you."

"Use me?"

Senkyo's face softened when he heard that Itsuki didn’t plan on telling anyone, but it suddenly changed to confusion when he heard the last part.

"Shittaku, I want you to do something for me. You said this ghost friend of yours was a powerful big shot, right? The one who cut all those demons in half. I want him to make me even more powerful. And in exchange, I'll help you with smashing those demons into pieces. How does that sound? I'm sure you're listening inside there, aren't ya ghostie!"

"Two days in from finding out about the supernatural and you’re already making deals with them…. You really are reckless and bold aren’t you, Itsuki-san? Isn't this interesting."

“Huh? What did you just say?”

“Oh come on. You could at least realize that the one you’re making a deal with is talking.”

Ryosei took over Senkyo's body, but it didn’t seem to hit Itsuki that they changed.

“What the hell… That’s creepy. You don’t change voices or anything.”

“Of course not. I can control Senkyo’s body but I can’t change his vocal cords.”

"I couldn’t care less. So, what do you say?"

"Before anything else progresses, I want to know why you want power. If your answer pleases me then I'll accept, and if you lie to me you can forget about getting my help."

No lie could ever get past Ryosei. His all-seeing eyes pressured Itsuki and made him tense up a bit. A bead of sweat dripped down Itsuki's face. But despite all this, he didn’t hesitate.

"I want to repay someone. That's all."

Itsuki's answer was vague. He didn't specify who he was repaying or how he was going to repay them. He could be doing something that might become trouble for Senkyo and Ryosei in the future, or maybe that was his way of saying that he wanted to beat someone up. But none of those thoughts crossed Ryosei's mind. That was because he already knew who it was for. She was the only person that Itsuki went so far as to go to another world. His own sister.

"Fine, I'll teach you. I warn you; it isn't going to be easy. But I'm sure you already knew that."

"Thanks."

Itsuki bowed his head slightly. He retracted back all the while keeping his serious face. Ryosei slightly grinned as he finally figured out what kind of person Watanabe Itsuki really is.

"Just to clarify, I said I'd teach you, but I didn't say when."

"What? Then when are you going to!?"

"Calm down, I'll teach you eventually. But first, you have to actually know the basics of the brute class. Maybe after a few weeks of training from Dai, you'll be ready to take on my teachings. You can't refuse this since you're the one who asked, either get trained by Dai and then by me or I won't teach you at all."

"Tch, Fine! All I have to do is spend a week or two training with that loud mouth, right? That'll be nothin’! I'll make you regret not teaching me earlier!"

With that, Itsuki officially became a part of Senkyo's group.

**75 – Hectic Week’s Reflection**

After that, Itsuki and Senkyo went their separate ways and returned home. Senkyo immediately headed to his room and flopped on his bed followed by a long groan.

"Ughhhh... What a week... So far, the most hectic week in my life and it's just going to get even worse from here on, huh?"

*"\*You say that like you don't want to, but you still end up doing it in the end.\*"*

"Stop reading my emotions, why don't you?"

Senkyo sat back up and looked around his room. It was filled with manga, light novels, video games, had a TV to watch anime, and a PC for various uses. His room became the embodiment of his hobbies. Although he lived alone and was a full-blown otaku, his room was still quite tidy.

"I probably won't be able to watch as much anime or juggle my hobbies anymore, huh?"

Now that Senkyo's decided to train and get stronger, there would be little to no time left for his precious hobbies.

*"\*Do you regret it?\*"*

"No, it's fine. Strangely… strangely enough, I feel like I wasn’t as attached to my hobbies as I thought.”

*“\*What’s that supposed to mean?\*”*

“Dunno. But I think I’ll be able to move on from this lifestyle easier than I thought.”

*“\*That certainly is strange. No human can simply change a lifestyle they’ve been living for years overnight, but that’s exactly what you’re doing. Your emotions say so.\*”*

“I guess you can say I’m an anomaly, huh?”

*“\*I see Fulgur’s words stuck with you.\*”*

“I mean, he claimed I wasn’t even human. How can I just forget that?”

*“\*So you say but it doesn’t seem to be bothering you as much.\*”*

“I guess not. Though I do wish I could still continue things like I used to, fighting demons and monsters from another world sounds cool, right?"

*"\*Did you really have to say it like that? If I didn't know how you think, I would've thought you were doing this for fun.\*"*

"I didn't think I would have to say my intentions out loud to someone who's literally inside me and can read my emotions and scan my memories."

*"\*Touché.\*"*

This whole week, Senkyo encountered and passed many hurdles. He met a spirit that made his body it's new home, fought werewolves and monsters, met a vampire from another world, got dragged into another world, almost died, defeated someone who was supposed to be a big deal, discovered a hidden world behind the shadows of society, and finally ended the week in his home. If someone heard this, they'd think they were making a terrible summary of a light novel.

Even with all of these happening, Senkyo still decided to continue walking on this path and risk his life. Of course, he didn't decide to do this without a goal in mind. After all that has happened, Senkyo realized one thing, he didn't know who he really was.

Sealed memories and his father who sealed them. Senkyo wanted to know all about them. What actually happened in the past, what his father is keeping from him, and the things he could do that no one else could. The shroud of mystery that surrounds him and his father, he wanted to know what was behind it. That is why Senkyo decided to stay on this path.

From the middle of his spacing out, Senkyo got knocked down to the bed as a white-haired cat girl appeared out of nowhere and tackled him into a hug.

“Whoa!? Shiro, where did you come from!?”

“What do you mean, Onii-chan? Shiro is always with you remember? You are Shiro’s master, and Shiro is your familiar! But at the same time, you are Shiro’s big brother, and Shiro is your sister! Isn’t that great!”

“U-Uhh… If you say it like that some people might take it in a weird way… Well, I guess no one’s here.”

“You’re tired aren’t you, Onii-chan? We can sleep together if you want to, just like in the past!”

“S-Sleep together… I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

“Oh come on, O~ni~chaaaan~!!”

Shiro tightened her hug around Senkyo’s chest.

“Whoa, wha!? Shiro!? Stop! That’s a bit too strong!”

“Ehehee… It’s been so long since the last time we were like this!”

“…Yeah, I guess it is.”

Senkyo tried to resist Shiro, but he couldn’t make himself forcibly pry her off him. Not after knowing that she waited so long just to protect him. In the end, Senkyo gave in to Shiro and spoiled her.

**76 – Brute’s Beginning**

*\*Ding ding ding ding~\**

The afternoon chime rang which signaled the end of classes and the start of Senkyo and Itsuki's training. Senkyo entrusted Kuro Yaiba to Yuu again because it was dangerous to bring it along with them, and it was risky when left alone in the house in case of an enemy attack like that time a werewolf suddenly barged through their door.

Thankfully, no one in the Konjou Clan would suspect her strangely for holding it as they introduced Yuu to them as a fighter class that prefers to use magic that came from a different organization that had now cut ties with them. Although they still suspected her as a spy, it was much better compared to introducing her with no origins.

Earlier that morning, Senkyo talked to Sora about going back to the Konjou clan to train with Dai. Sora smirked and handed him two pendants with the Konjou clan's symbol on them.

"This is something that'll help you get through the barrier and use our teleport points. We finally got an okay from both the clan chief and the village elders to let you use the teleportation network so you don't have to spend hours climbing the mountain."

"I see, thanks."

"Hehe, good luck man, now even the village elders have their eyes on you."

"A-Ahahaha..."

Senkyo could only awkwardly laugh as he attracted yet more unwanted attention.

"Oh yeah, since you'll be using our network now, you can go to a few places..."

Sora told Senkyo the locations of some of their teleportation points. Apparently, teleportation points are scattered everywhere in town. They made these points to travel faster and to be able to quickly respond to any attacks.

One of those teleportation points was inside a family restaurant called "Joe n' Nathan's," the family restaurant Senkyo and Itsuki were currently in. Naturally, if a hidden organization wants to keep itself hidden, it'd cover and disguise everything that would lead to them. In this situation, a family restaurant was a cover. But despite being just a cover-up, business sure was bustling

"Hey, this is the place, right?"

"I think so. Yamamoto-san told me to just show this pendant to the staff and they'll know."

Everything looked so natural that even Senkyo began to doubt what he heard from Sora. While standing there and second-guessing himself, a waitress came to serve them.

"Welcome to Joe n’ Nathan’s! A table for two?"

"Ah! N-No, we're—"

"Someone told us to show you this. Now what?"

Itsuki pushed Senkyo aside and showed off the pendant to the waitress. Itsuki didn't have the time to deal with Senkyo's indecisiveness and took it to himself to take care of the situation. The waitress leaned in to examine the pendant more carefully. When she was satisfied, she straightened back up.

"This way, please."

Senkyo and Itsuki followed the waitress to the back, entered the staff room, and reached another door that had a "Do not enter" sign on it. The waitress placed her hand on the doorknob followed by a glowing light coming from her hand.

The waitress opened the door and gestured for them to come in. The inside was a small empty room with nothing but a carpet covering the floor.

"Stand on the carpet, please"

They did as they were told and stood on the carpet. The waitress didn't enter the room with them, instead, she bowed and closed the door.

"Eh?"

A second later, the carpet began glowing and illuminated every corner of the room with blue light. Their vision began to clear up and saw themselves in an unfamiliar room with a huge magic circle below them.

Looking around, the room was almost empty. It was an incredibly spacious room with tall pillars to support the ceiling. From the looks of it, this room was made just to have this magic circle below them. The circle was about as wide as half a standard track-and-field field.

"You're here!"

Senkyo and Itsuki heard a familiar voice and looked over to see Dai waving while walking toward them.

"Glad to see both of you are in good shape... you are right? Last time Yukou-kun suddenly collapsed so now I'm not too confident with judging from perspective."

Dai jokingly brought up what happened last time. Senkyo cringed as he thought about how that would've looked from Dai's perspective. He was supposedly the one who took out one of END's leaders and got done in by a run down the mountain.

"Sorry about that, my muscles suddenly gave up on me for some reason. But don't worry, today I won't be going down like last time!"

*"\*All my muscles are fully healed this time so I’ll be fine.\*"*

"Good to hear. Watanabe-kun, how about we take a quick one-on-one to refresh your memory?"

"Don't underestimate me or I'll crush you to bits."

"Sure, I'll be careful. Yukou-kun, you observe our match and take what you can get from it."

"Okay."

In the middle of an open field, Itsuki and Dai faced each other. Itsuki had his bare hands for weapons but Dai had a wooden sword. Dai is a fighter class and his main weapon is a sword. It may look like Itsuki had a disadvantage but his only real disadvantage was that he was a beginner.

Brutes are trained to take heavy hits, the one who takes most of the damage in battle. They have high resistance, regeneration, and overall, very tenacious. If this were a battle between people of equal experience, Dai might be the one at a disadvantage.

"Alright, are you ready, Watanabe-kun?"

"Shut up and let's go!"

"Begin!"

Itsuki was the first to move. He ran towards Dai who stood still with his sword in front of him, at the ready. Suddenly, in a blink of an eye, Itsuki disappeared.

"What!?"

Senkyo was caught off guard when Itsuki appeared behind Dai. It was the move Senkyo was most familiar with, the Flash Strike. Itsuki trained for a single day and he was already capable of a flash strike. Senkyo learned it in the middle of a battle, but that was because of Ryosei’s memories. A flash strike requires the caster to send a burst of spirit power to their legs and a basic protective coating on their body to protect them from the wind pressure. Which meant that Itsuki was already capable of basic spirit power control.

"I got you!"

*\*Bam!\**

"Not quite."

Itsuki planted his foot on the ground and hurled his fist at Dai's back. But instead of his back, Itsuki hit his sword. Itsuki who flashed behind Dai's back to punch him at his blind spot got blocked and was now facing Dai, staring right into his eyes.

"Tch!"

Itsuki retracted his arm and created some distance between them.

"A surprise attack like that won't work when your opponent expects you to do it, Watanabe-kun."

"It was a lucky swing, loud mouth!"

Itsuki charged in again, but he didn't use Flash Strike, or maybe he didn't have the time to. Dai, who was a distance away from Itsuki, suddenly appeared in front of him.

"What!?"

*\*Bang!\**

A small explosion appeared between Itsuki and Dai. Itsuki got knocked back but he didn't get any wounds or injuries from it. On the other hand, Dai was standing just fine from where the explosion happened.

"You should be more careful! This is what happens if you use your abilities haphazardly."

*"\*That was one of the brute class's abilities, 'Burst.' An offensive ability that ignites concentrated energy with your spirit power, causing an explosion. In this case, Itsuki was preparing to use burst the moment Dai tried to block his next attack. But he wasn't ready for Dai to suddenly flash at him. He panicked, used Burst when he didn't have proper footing, and got blown away.\*"*

*"\*Wow... I wonder if Yamazaki-sensei did that on purpose.\*"*

Itsuki got back on his feet, clearly frustrated.

"Damn it!"

"Don't let your guard down now. The battle isn't over yet."

Dai flashed at Itsuki and struck him from the back. But before the sword could reach him, it was stopped inches away from Itsuki's body.

"Who said I was!?"

Itsuki tried to grab Dai but he jumped away before he could.

"Don't get cocky just because you have a barrier. If I wanted to, I could've destroyed that flimsy barrier and you would've lost then and there."

Itsuki's annoyance was written all over his face. The fact that he couldn't do anything against Dai was frustrating. Even though he knew Dai was the Konjou clan's best, he still aimed to defeat him.

"I'll get a hit off you if it's the last thing I'll do!"

"Then I'll be waiting. That day won't be today though."

"Wha!?"

Dai disappeared from Itsuki's vision. At that moment, he knew he was in trouble. Itsuki immediately tried to turn around but was met by the sound of shattering glass that was his barrier and a painful wooden sword to the stomach.

"G-Gaah...!"

Itsuki was knocked to the ground writhing in pain with his hand on his stomach trying to somehow lessen the pain by covering it. He rolled around in frustration from his defeat.

"D-Damn it!"

"Good to know you still remember what you learned last time. But that's just a tiny part of everything, you still have a lot to learn. Don't be cocky and keep training. Come find me when you're ready to continue your training."

**77 – Strength and Weakness**

Dai left Itsuki on the ground and went to Senkyo.

"U-Um... Was that really necessary? Wasn't that a bit too much?"

From Senkyo's perspective, Dai just completely crushed Itsuki, a beginner, and didn't bother to help him at all right after. He used an underhanded tactic like using Itsuki's power against him. He didn't show much mercy to a beginner. Senkyo was getting a bit nervous after he saw all that.

"Oh. Don't worry, my way of training you will be different. You see, what Watanabe-kun needs to learn is to not underestimate an enemy. It will be good if he learns how to judge and act based on the difference between his and other people's power. If he stops underestimating people, then he'll avoid reckless decisions like opening himself to his enemy or charging straight in. Just because his class is someone that takes damage doesn't mean that he should. That's all I wanted to teach him."

Dai opted to fix the most troublesome problem first before anything else. He knew Itsuki was a bit too overconfident and took care of it before it became a problem. From the looks of it, Dai noticed these problems from the first day they met.

Today, Dai suggested having a battle before anything else to keep Itsuki's confidence from turning to recklessness. On the first day they trained, Itsuki already learned most of the basics. It was amazing for a completely normal person to learn that much in such a short amount of time.

But, after gaining more power, so did Itsuki's ego. If he kept gaining power, without showing him his limits, he might have gone into battle without ever getting a chance to get out of one.

"Don't worry. He isn't the kind of person that will hold a grudge. He'll turn this frustration into fuel to get him working even harder. He'll aim for the day he finally beats me, and I'll just watch over his genuine bright smile that shows all his effort was worth it. Something like that."

"..."

Senkyo was too surprised to speak. Dai said that with genuine hope. It was a bit odd to Senkyo that he hoped for something like that from Itsuki when it was only his second day training him. That line was a bit cheesy but that made Senkyo lighten up a bit around him.

"A-Ahaha... That was a bit weird, wasn't it? Well, let's ignore that. Let's begin your evaluation first."

"Alright!"

"Ah, on second thought, I need to see if you're fit for the evaluation first."

"O-Ouch... You really like to rub salt in the wound don't you, Yamazaki-sensei?"

Senkyo enthusiastically responded but was shot down by Dai's second comment.

"Hahaha! Sorry about that."

And so, Senkyo began his training. Itsuki came back right after they left him and joined in. Dai trained both Senkyo and Itsuki at the same time without losing focus despite having completely different training methods.

The afternoon passed and it was already nighttime. It was about half past eight and Senkyo and Itsuki just finished their training. Senkyo and Itsuki were both completely worn out, barely catching their breaths. Dai who worked them out to the bone nodded satisfyingly.

"Hah... r-ruthless..."

"...I-Is that all you got?"

"Good work. That'll be it for today."

Senkyo fell to his knees so he could finally relax his body. Dai who wasn't quite finished grabbed Senkyo's attention.

"Yukou-kun, about your evaluation, right now, you aren't fit to be in the fighter class."

"O-Oh..."

Just before Senkyo began his evaluation, Dai asked him what class he was aiming for. Senkyo answered without hesitation: the fighter class. Since Ryosei was also in a fighter class, he wanted to get in the same class so that his body could be trained like Ryosei's which will allow him to use more of his power.

"Isn't there a way to get in right now? Nothing at all?"

"No, excluding the caster class, the evaluation tests are made so that only the ones who can take the class pass. Your evaluation on the fighter class was a fail. Your current stamina won't be able to catch up with the fighter class's training."

"Ah, If that's the case—"

Senkyo cut himself off, to be more specific, Ryosei took control of his body and stopped Senkyo from saying any more.

"I-In that case, is there any class I'm suited for?"

"There is. It's the enchanter class."

"Then I suppose I'll begin my training in the enchanter class tomorrow. I'll be in your care."

"Sure, it's nice to have you."

"HEY! Stop talking and let's go already!"

Itsuki shouted in the distance while he was walking back toward the castle. Dai and Senkyo followed suit. Senkyo and Itsuki were served dinner and offered to take a quick dip in the hot spring. Although they both took the dinner, they declined the hot spring. Itsuki wanted to go back home saying it was late, and Senkyo declined for the same reason.

The two went back to the Teleportation Tower, the building that they were teleported to earlier that afternoon. It was the teleportation network's hub where hunters come and go from and to battles. They were teleported to the closest point to their homes which was the same point they teleported from, at Joe n’ Nathan’s. Senkyo parted ways with Itsuki shortly after they were teleported. On his way home, Senkyo finally brought up Ryosei's sudden body jacking earlier.

"Ryosei, about earlier, why did you stop me from getting in the fighter class. Surely if I say something like 'I have an item passed down to me that lets me restore my stamina' wouldn't sound too farfetched considering everything else."

*"\*You don't get it. That's exactly why I stopped you.\*"*

Senkyo pondered what Ryosei meant by what he said. If everybody knew he had some kind of item that restores stamina, it would be extremely useful in battle. So Senkyo's conclusion was that someone would want to target him, aiming for an item that doesn't even exist and only leading to Senkyo getting into more trouble.

"Is that it?"

*"\*Well, that's also a possibility, but that wasn't my reason.\*"*

Puzzled, Senkyo asked Ryosei what his true motive was.

"Then, what is it?"

*"\*Senkyo, right now, what is our greatest weakness?\*"*

"Our weakness? You mean my body?"

*"\*No, it's me.\*"*

"You? Why? You're the one who does the fighting! I only strategize in my head. You're the one who's using his skills to defeat the enemies. If anything, I should be our greatest weakness because I can't do anything else to help with the fighting."

Ryosei stayed silent. It seemed like Ryosei wanted Senkyo to figure this out himself. Senkyo didn't expect Ryosei to say that. He thought, their greatest power was their greatest weakness. But how could that be? In every single battle, Ryosei fought in Senkyo's place. Every. Single. Time.

"Ah...!"

*"\*Now do you understand?\*"*

"Yeah... I get it."

Senkyo figured it out. What makes Senkyo and Ryosei strong is Ryosei. But if the enemies find a way to take Ryosei out of the equation, then all there'll be left is Senkyo, who has barely any experience in fighting. Senkyo will be a sitting duck ready to be ravaged by predators.

What Ryosei wanted was for Senkyo to be able to fight for himself, in the case that Ryosei was taken out of the picture. At the very least, Senkyo will find a way to get away from the enemies until Ryosei can fight again.

Ryosei stopped Senkyo from entering the fighter class, a class he was deemed unfit for, and got him to enter a different one, a class that Senkyo can take by himself. If Senkyo can find his skill in the enchanter class, then it would be all the much better for them. That way, even without Ryosei, Senkyo will have a fighting chance, and their skill set could even broaden depending on what Senkyo learns.

"I see… You’re right. That would be great. I got too absorbed in trying to get a fighter class that I didn’t consider that."

“As long as you understand. Do your best on training.”

“Of course, I will.”

**78 – Guard Duty**

Senkyo reached his house and opened the door. As he comes in, he couldn't help but catch the smell of curry coming from the kitchen. Senkyo lived alone so there shouldn't be anyone around, but Senkyo also doubted a burglar would be making curry in the middle of their robbery. Senkyo cautiously approached the entrance to the kitchen when someone intercepted them.

"Yukou-senpai! You're finally back!"

"What!? Hisho-chan!? W-Why are you here?"

It was Senkyo's underclassman and vampire friend, Yuu. She was still wearing her school uniform and she was wearing an apron over it. She greeted Senkyo with a bright welcoming smile that a wife would usually show their husband who just got back tired from work.

"Well, when you had me take care of Kuro Yaiba, I forgot to ask how I was supposed to give it back to you. Without Kuro Yaiba you wouldn't have anything to defend yourself. Since I didn't know what to do, I decided to stop by and wait for you. I hope you don't mind but I cooked us dinner while I was waiting."

"O-Oh, I don't mind at all, in fact, I'm glad you did, but how did you get inside? I'm pretty sure I locked the doors..."

"W-Well..."

Yuu turned a bit red when Senkyo asked about how she got in.

"You leave the window to your room unlocked... So, I... kinda flew over there."

"Oh yeah, you are a vampire after all. Even when we first met you were… Ah..."

Senkyo imagined as she explained, but he remembered that her clothes don't get transformed when Yuu turns into a vampire. That could only mean that she came into his room naked and had to grab her clothes outside.

"I-I’m sorry. It must've been hard."

"Don't remind me!!"

After facing Yuu's thousand small punches in an attempt to hide her embarrassment, Senkyo ate dinner again. Although he wasn't too hungry, he couldn't bring himself to tell her that he already had dinner. Yuu worked hard for it after all. He didn't want the food to be wasted or ruin her mood by telling her he already had dinner. After a second serving of dinner, Senkyo washed the dishes and saw Yuu off.

"Well, I see you at school, Yukou-senpai."

"Ah, wait! I'm going to be training every day. It would be troublesome for you if you had to do this all day. So how about you keep it for now and I'll just message you when I need it?"

"You mean we exchange emails?"

"Yeah."

"But what if you really need it? If you encounter an enemy, you would have to get a chance to call me and then wait for me to get there! Isn’t this a bad idea?"

Senkyo didn't have any other means of defense besides Kuro Yaiba. Yuu was worried that it'll be too late before Yuu could even get to Senkyo.

"I'll think of something."

"That's not reassuring at all!"

"It's better this way. I can't have my eye on Kuro Yaiba when we're training, and leaving it alone at home is a bit risky too!"

"What do you mean!? Is this a baby!? Aren't you just being paranoid, Yukou-senpai?"

"No, I'm just taking the risks into account!"

"The risk of you getting targeted is higher than this sword getting stolen!"

"Urk..."

Senkyo couldn't talk back to that because it made sense. Their enemies might not even know about Kuro Yaiba. If they find out that Senkyo was the one who defeated Fulgur, they'd go for him, not the blade.

"See, you know I'm right, but why do you still want to go without it!?"

"W-Well I don't have much of a choice! If I brought it to the Konjou clan, Kuro Yaiba will get found out. If I leave it alone at home, I'd be running the risk of Kuro Yaiba getting stolen."

Yuu's eye twitched. She was getting irritated at how stubborn Senkyo was about leaving himself vulnerable. Then, Yuu pouted and looked away from Senkyo.

"Hmph! For someone who thinks of every possibility, you sure don't like taking the best option."

"W-What!? C-Come on, I said that in the heat of the moment! Another thing, if I thought of every possibility every single time something happens my brain will explode! At least credit me when I actually do it!"

"You still don't get it, do you?"

“Get what?”

“Hmph!”

“…”

Senkyo saw Yuu's eyes peeking while she was looking away, eyes still as annoyed as ever. He couldn't take any more of her cryptic word and broke.

"No, I don't! So please just tell me!"

Yuu kept looking away. It looked like she was having trouble getting out what she had to say. But after a deep breath and using the heat of the moment to push her words, she finally got it out.

"From now on, I'll be on Yukou-senpai guard duty! I'll follow you around anywhere you go outside of school and make sure you get home safely! And you don't have a say in the matter!"

"W-What!? Isn’t that a bit unreasonable?"

“What’s unreasonable here is you leaving yourself defenseless!”

Yuu grabbed Senkyo’s collar and brought his face down to the same level as her face. She came closer to Senkyo and whispered in his ear.

“If you still refuse, then I’ll suck your blood out. I may be your underclassman, but I’m still a vampire after all. *Foo!*”

“Wh-Wha…”

Yuu playfully blew into Senkyo’s ear and as a result, he forcibly jerked out of Yuu’s grip and lightly rubbed his ear with a slightly red face. His reaction seemed to entertain Yuu and she let out a cute giggle.

“Well, Senpai? Do you still want to resist or do you like the thought of your underclassman biting into your neck?”

“S-Stop saying nonsense! Fine! I give up, okay! Have it your way!”

“Hehehe. then that settles it. Now, give me your email.”

“Here.”

Senkyo handed over his phone to Yuu. When Yuu finished putting in their contacts, she handed the phone back.

“Now I can call you if you try to leave me behind.”

“I didn’t even think of doing that! At least give me a bit of trust!”

“Hehe, I know. I was just kidding.”

“This girl…”

“Well then, Senpai. See you at school tomorrow. Goodnight!”

“Goodnight.”

Yuu gave Senkyo a smile before taking her leave. Senkyo was a bit taken aback by how aggressive she was being and stood shaken as he watched Yuu leave his vision. And so, Yuu's plan, Yukou-senpai Guard Duty was initiated.

**Chapter 4: The Dual User**

**79 – A New Lifestyle**

It was Friday morning. The sun shined its comfortable morning rays over the groups of students that walked their way to school. The birds chirped, and the cozy wind blew. It was the perfect weather to start a morning. The sun wasn't too hot, and it wasn't too cold. If anyone stared their day with weather like this they'd be compelled to stop and take in the rare perfect weather.

However, there would always be people that wouldn't notice such nice weather. Those would be the people who were too preoccupied with their problems and such. One of those people was Yukou Senkyo. He walked sluggishly and looked extremely worn out. The cause of this was a combination of both the previous four days of gruesome training from Konjou Clan's most powerful, Dai Yamazaki, and the previous three days of rumors going around about him.

Let's do a bit of catching up. Earlier this Monday, Senkyo went to school with the rumors of him doing immoral things to Ichika still flying around. He entered the classroom with the same disgusted eyes staring him down like filth, the same as last week's but...

"Ah, look, it's that perverted otaku!"

"Eww... get him away from me! Hahaha—"

*\*Slam!\**

As Senkyo was getting the same verbal abuse from last week, a loud slam came from the back of the class, catching everyone's attention. Everyone immediately looked over and saw Itsuki with his fist slammed on his desk.

"Agh! It's so damn noisy in here! Could you shut the fuck up, eh!?"

Itsuki glared at the girls who were attacking Senkyo with eyes that could kill. The girls immediately exited the class and ran away in fear. All the other students were silenced by what just happened but Itsuki wasn't satisfied with that.

"Does anyone else wanna make some noise? I'll welcome it with a fist to your face!"

Itsuki glared at the other students that had their eyes on Senkyo. After getting the message that their life was in danger, everyone looked away and pretended like they were minding their own business. Seeing there were no other competitors, Itsuki took a quick glance at Senkyo.

"\**Don't misunderstand, this is only because Ichika forced me to!\**" is what his annoyed look seemed to say. Senkyo responded with a smile and a quick bow as thanks. After that, no one else messed with Senkyo. But that didn't stop them from making other rumors about how Itsuki had a complete switch in attitude towards Senkyo.

Senkyo was finally free from annoying rumors that dirtied his name. And now with protection from the most feared person in school, no one dares to cross him. But in turn, another rumor about him and Itsuki popped up. Since it didn't bother him like the previous rumor did, Senkyo didn't care. He would return to the usual school days where Kinro was normally the only one who would talk with him. Although it sounds bad, it was better than getting picked on.

That was until the next day came.

"U-Um... is Yukou-senpai here?"

There was a familiar voice coming from the classroom's entrance. It was the voice of the person who declared she'd be on Yukou-senpai Guard Duty yesterday night. Senkyo turned to see a girl in a blue jacket that was acting a bit more docile than he usually saw her. When they made eye contact, she signaled Senkyo to come over.

"What is it, Hisho-chan?"

"What do you mean, 'What is it?' I'm waiting for you! I'll be guarding you so you don't kill yourself with your reckless decisions!"

Yuu was talking in a whispering voice and seemed a bit uneasy. The usual Yuu would just shout at him and recite a hundred reasons why she was doing this, but that wasn't the case.

"Hey, Hisho-chan, could it be that you're actually a shy type?"

"This only hit you now?"

"I mean you don't actually act any bit shy around me."

"It's too late to be shy to the person who already saw me naked...! Nnn~~ What are you making me say!?"

"Ah..."

*"\*Nobody heard that, right? No, there's no way. No. Definitely not. Absolutely. No way. Although the last part was a bit louder than her voice earlier there's no way that's enough to be heard, right? Humans don't have enhanced vampire hearing so I should be fine! Yeah, I'm fine, I'm fine, I'm...\*"*

Right as Senkyo heard what Yuu said, he questioned himself, praying, praying, and praying that Yuu's voice was unheard. But when he slowly looked over behind him, the other students that were nearby looked at Senkyo with shocked faces.

Senkyo and Yuu didn't go to any place private. They were talking in the middle of the hallway, right in front of their classroom. He didn't expect this talk to go in that direction so moving to someplace private didn't cross his mind.

How wrong he was. The students' minds who heard Yuu's last line sent their imaginations into overdrive. When they noticed Senkyo was looking at them, they turned in the other direction and quickly walked away.

"N-No... I'm done for!"

"Eh!? Y-Yukou-senpai? What's wrong? What happened? Hello?"

Senkyo was brought down to his knees, despair in his voice. From what it sounded, Yuu didn't catch on to what happened. Senkyo thought Yuu would eventually catch the approaching rumors, but for now, it was best that she didn't know.

From that day forward, Yuu always comes and waits for Senkyo to leave the classroom and follows him around everywhere he went. That only fanned the flames of the rumors but since Itsuki was always with them the rumors didn't go too wild.

Senkyo, Yuu, and Itsuki always leave school together and head to the usual teleportation point at Joe n' Nathan's. Yuu would watch over Kuro Yaiba as she watched Senkyo and Itsuki train. They always had dinner at the Konjou castle and would be teleported to the closest point to their homes, and since Yuu lived in the town, they said their goodbyes before they get teleported. This was the daily routine these three followed every day.

Going back to the present, it was Friday morning and Senkyo was tired from training. His body was still adjusting to his everyday training. Senkyo's muscles ached, but not too bad that Senkyo couldn't move. Ryosei assured Senkyo that when he got used to this his aching muscles will go away. On his way to school, his best friend, Honjou Kinro, came from behind him and greeted him with a good morning and a pat on the shoulder.

"Good morning!"

*\*Pat!\**

"Ouch!"

Kinro didn't expect to hurt Senkyo. From what he knew, he didn't pat hard enough that it would hurt. But seeing he was wrong, he backed off and quickly apologized.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to hit you so hard."

"No, it's fine. My muscles were just aching from some exercise, that's all."

"Exercise!? You!?"

Kinro's surprise was justified. The only exercise Kinro saw Senkyo do was running to not be late for school. But if a pat on the shoulder hurt, then that meant he was doing more than just normal running.

"What's gotten into you, Senkyo? Are you sick? Is it a fever?"

"Get off my back! Isn’t that a bit rude? I'm actually training here!"

"Wow... I never thought I'd see the day."

"Neither did I."

They were having their normal everyday exchange. But there was something different about how Kinro was acting. This kind of interaction was no different from all the others, but it was like Kinro wanted to say something to Senkyo. Sure enough, he was right on the mark.

"Hey, Senkyo, is everything really okay?"

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, for starters, you nod off in class more often. I can tell you've been more tired recently. You don't go straight home anymore. And whenever we talk you rarely bring up anime or anything anymore. You know, if you need help, I'm here. You don't have to carry everything yourself."

Kinro didn't bring it up before, but he was watching. He noticed Senkyo's change in character. The subtle nodding off to the obvious not talking much about anime anymore. From Kinro's perspective, Senkyo stopped doing what he loved the most in exchange for something that only made him all beat up.

Although Kinro didn't want to assume what Senkyo was doing was bad for him, he also couldn't help but be worried. He talked to Senkyo with the intent to stretch out a helping hand to him. Despite not knowing his troubles, he still wanted to help.

"Don't worry, Kinro. I'm doing this because I want to. Though it was a bit hard to drop my usual routine, I didn't give up on anime. If I did, now that would be worrying. I just don't have that much time for it right now."

"Is that so? I don't really have much of a choice but to take your word for it, do I? Well, just so you know, if you do need help, you can count on me."

"When the time comes, I won't hesitate."

Senkyo gave Kinro a reassuring smile. He was glad that Kinro was genuinely worried for him. He could remember the not-so-distant past. The day that he met Kinro.

*\*He really is a charming idiot.\**

**80 – Lunchbreak with Kaede**

The sound of a can dropping from a vending machine reverberated through Senkyo's ears. It was currently lunch time and he was grabbing some refreshments to wash down the food he ate with Kinro. There was still a bit of time before he had to return to class, so he decided to stay and hang around outside for a bit before going back.

Senkyo turned to the left of him and saw a familiar face sitting on a bench under the shade of a tree while eating lunch. It was Kaede. But it took Senkyo a second to realize that because she looked slightly different from the last time he saw her. Right now, she wasn't wearing any glasses and her hair which used to be tied into twin tails went straight down her back. But the same cherry blossom hair pin never left its spot.

*"\*I didn't know she went to this school.\*"*

*"\*Well, knowing how overprotective Kou-chan can be, he probably got her in here with someone to look after her. I doubt Kaede knows about it though.\*"*

*"\*It must be hard, huh?\*"*

Senkyo walked over to Kaede, who didn’t seem to notice him coming. It looks like she was enjoying her lunch just a bit too much. She was stuffing her mouth with rice and chicken so fast that some bits of rice got stuck to her face.

"There's rice stuck on your face."

Without looking up at Senkyo, Kaede searched her cheek with her hand and picked up two rice grains that escaped her rice-devouring mouth and put them back in. She looked over to see the owner of the voice who ratted out the rice grains and saw it was Senkyo.

“Nice to see you, Kaede-san.”

"Yukou-san!? What are you doing here?"

"I'm a student here, that's why."

Kaede looked like she just remembered something important.

"O-Oh yeah... You're Yamamoto-san and Saito-san's classmate. It slipped my mind."

"Ouch. Does that mean I'm not worth remembering?"

"N-No! That's not what I meant!"

Kaede started to become a bit flustered. Senkyo was used to joking around but Kaede didn't seem to catch on.

"Haha, I'm joking."

"O-Oh..."

"Do you mind if I sit here?"

"No, not at all."

Senkyo sat beside Kaede, opened his drink, and took a sip. Kaede calmed herself down and struck up a conversation after finishing the last bits of her lunch.

“Actually, I haven’t properly introduced myself to you, Yukou-san. I am Konjou Kaede, a 1st year student at Honshou Academy. As well as Konjou Ryosei’s cousin and The Konjou Clan Chief’s sister. Nice to finally meet you.”

“Then, I’m Yukou Senkyo, 2nd year student of Honshou Academy and Ryosei’s partner. Nice to meet you too.”

The last time and the first time Senkyo and Kaede met, Ryosei was the one who was controlling his body. They didn’t properly introduce themselves as themselves.

"How has your training been going? I heard good things from Yamazaki-san."

"Well, I haven't broken down just yet so that's a good sign. Yamazaki-sensei just finished teaching me all the basics in yesterday's training. Man, the enchanter class is so hard. Yamazaki-sensei doesn't even tell me if I did well learning something or not. I'm afraid my learning ability is lower than average."

"Yeah, Yamazaki-san likes to do that. He does that to not affect someone's learning ability. Apparently, he does that to some people that he thinks perform better under those kinds of thoughts."

"Seriously? Personally, I'd rather not have those thoughts."

"He knows what he's doing. I'm sure this is for the best."

"Hopefully."

Senkyo scratched his head as he thought back to the past few days when Dai pummeled everything into Senkyo's head. He felt like sharing his experiences with someone to let out some steam, thankfully someone was right beside him to listen.

"After my evaluation, he had me master making a vessel. Everybody else made it look like it was so easy but it took me about 30 seconds to make one. I had to spend one and a half days trying to improve it. Well, now I can make one in five seconds so I guess that was good progress."

"Eh?"

Kaede let out a surprised voice as she heard that. Senkyo turned to Kaede whose face was in disbelief.

"What's wrong?"

"You reduced your enchanting time that much in one and a half days?"

"Y-Yeah, what about it?"

"That's way too fast! It took me almost a week to finish an enchant in 10 seconds, and my first enchant took 23 seconds! No matter how you look at it, that's way too fast!"

"I-Is that so? Well, I also do some practice and experiments at home. Maybe that had something to do with it?"

Kaede shook her head furiously denying his reasoning. With no idea what else to say, he stayed quiet until she spoke again. Then, Kaede realized something.

"Wait... If that is so, then that means you also finished learning the basics in another one and a half days. Am I correct?"

Senkyo silently nodded, confirming Kaede's deduction. She massaged her temple because of the sudden headache she got from hearing his insanely fast learning. Unable to comprehend how exactly he did all of that in such a short amount of time, Kaede decided that later she would confirm what she just heard with Dai in the small chance that Senkyo was for some reason lying.

Noticing her silence and for some reason exhausted look, Senkyo wanted to continue the conversation so he added the last thing he got from Dai's training.

"Oh, and Yamazaki-sensei told me to start bringing weapons with me."

"You have some on you!?"

"Of course not! I declined the moment he suggested it."

Senkyo's class didn't require the hunter to have a weapon they were specialized in like in the fighter class, but that was because enchanters usually have more than one weapon on them. They would enchant their weapon however they wanted and most of the time they wouldn't be able to retrieve it. Dai wanted Senkyo to get used to that but he didn't take much thought about the places he would be bringing the weapons to if he did that.

"Honestly, I think Yamazaki-sensei forgot that I'll only be training temporarily. I'm not actually going to join the clan."

"Why not? I think you'd do great!"

*\*Seriously. I've never met anyone who learns that fast. Especially in an enchanter class.\**

Kaede thought to herself.

"How can you say that? You haven't even seen me fight by myself."

"You did when you fought Watanabe-senpai, didn’t you? You learned the flash strike in the middle of battle!"

Kaede read Senkyo’s memories, so she knows about everything prior to their first encounter.

“That was because of Ryosei. I just used his memories on how to use it is all.”

"We'll see how things go. But I don't think you should put yourself down like that."

"That wasn't really my intention though. Besides, I'm fine with just being allies with the clan. If I join then I wouldn't be able to go wherever I want to."

"Why is that?"

"There's something I'm... we're searching for."

The chime signaling the end of lunch rang in the distance. Senkyo stood up and threw his can into the trash bin beside him.

"Well, it was fun talking. I'll see you next time."

“Mhm, say goodbye to Ryosei-nii-chan for me.”

“Don’t worry about that. He can hear you too—Well, it’s just as Senkyo said. See you later, Kaede.”

Ryosei took over Senkyo’s body and said his farewells to Kaede

“Yep, see you later.”

**81 – After School Detour**

Afternoon classes were over. Yuu waited for Senkyo in front of the classroom like usual. He went up to Yuu along with probing stares coming from inside the classroom. He learned to just ignore them. As long as they don't cause trouble for him or anyone else, he couldn't care much about them.

"Hey, let's go."

Senkyo didn't notice, but the one they were waiting for, Itsuki, already got out of the classroom and was waiting for Senkyo to move. But unlike the past days, Senkyo had another plan in mind. He just wanted to inform Itsuki and Yuu before he went anywhere.

"Actually, I have to stop by somewhere first so you guys can go ahead without me."

"What do you mean, Yukou-senpai? Did you forget why I'm even here? You aren't going anywhere without me."

Yuu was on Yukou-senpai Guard Duty after all. She wasn't going to leave Senkyo by himself. The past three days of dedication to her word were proof of that.

"You sounded like an overprotective mother."

"No, more like a possessive girlfriend."

"Wha!?"

"~~!"

This is how this trio interacted. Senkyo and Yuu were mostly the ones who talk while Itsuki joins in only to make fun of them. But Itsuki didn’t have any malice in his words. And Senkyo found that somewhat comforting, except for this time.

"N-No I'm not! It's Yukou-senpai's fault for not looking after himself!"

"Wait, Hisho-chan, don't—"

"Did you hear that!?"

"She said she wasn't looking after himself!"

"You mean he gets spoiled by a cute girl every day!?"

Senkyo's peanut gallery hasn't taken its eyes off Senkyo. They've been eavesdropping the whole time without any care about personal business. After Yuu's last line, the crowd went wild and fanned the flames of their uneventful lives so they took pleasure in fantasizing and making false stories about others who do. At that moment, Senkyo knew he had to get out before anything gets any worse. Senkyo took Yuu's hand and ran for it.

"Wha? S-Senpai!?"

Senkyo may have prevented things from getting worse, but the rumors were already going out of control. It was a lost cause.

After Senkyo got far away from the classroom, he was brought down to his knees once again, this time, he already accepted the fact that he was never going to take down those rumors.

"Seriously, what's gotten into you Yukou-senpai?"

"Nothing. It's better you don't know. Anyway, let's go before something else happens..."

With that, Senkyo and Yuu headed to their destination.

Senkyo's destination was none other than the place where people's deepest thoughts and fantasies manifest and are shared with the whole world. The place where Senkyo and other people spend their time scouring for treasure, some buried in the sands of unpopularity, and some placed on the pedestal of fame… the bookstore.

"U-Um... Senpai, is this what we came here for?"

"Of course! Although I barely have any time for my hobbies, doesn't mean I gave up on them."

What Senkyo held in his hand was the latest volume of "My Battle Against Demons and the Supernatural." The series Senkyo began to take a liking due to the similarities between his and the story protagonist's situations.

"You should read it too! The protagonist, Seig, a master spear fighter, gets into an accident with a demon that appeared out of nowhere. After getting severely wounded, Seig managed to fend off the demon, but he got thrown into a rift that appeared out of nowhere by another demon. When he woke up, he was in another world with only himself to rely on. Now, he has to survive the unknown world and find a way back home. Don't you think that's cool!"

Senkyo went on about the novel. He got too passionate and lost himself in his words. It took an awkward look from Yuu and the stares of a few nearby customers to get him back to his senses.

"W-Whoa, Senpai calm down. We're in public remember?"

"O-Oh, sorry about that."

Realizing he was being loud, Senkyo quickly apologized and hung his head in embarrassment.

"Don't worry Senpai, at worst they'll only remember your voice."

"That doesn't help...!"

Senkyo retorted in a whispering voice to avoid bothering anyone. He let out all the troubles piling inside him with a deep sigh and brushed them off with a "Whatever..." Senkyo took the book he came for and was about to head to the counter when an idea came to mind.

"Oh yeah, now that we're here, why don't you get a book as well?"

"Me?"

“Of course. You said you like manga didn’t you?”

“You remembered that?”

“Yep.”

The day Senkyo encountered Yuu in his house, they passed time by playing games and manga. That day, Yuu talked about how she heard about manga but never actually read one. She lives on her own so she had to prioritize herself first. But when Yuu finally secured a stable source of income, she spent hours looking at all the manga, troubled about which one she should buy as her first one.

She thought, "This is the first manga I'm going to buy; I better make it count!" But that only lead her to be hesitant and indecisive about what she was going to buy. Unable to make a decision, she gave up, and in the end, bought nothing.

Senkyo thought it was a weird thing to be worried about but since Yuu is from another world, he didn't know how they thought there and their social norms, so he kept that thought to himself. After all, he didn't want another cultural miscommunication like the first time Yuu said she was going to suck Senkyo's blood.

Of course, Senkyo was kind enough to let her read the manga that he had stored on the bookshelves. Yuu's face, when she was reading, was pure bliss. She flipped through the pages with sparkling eyes and emotion as she got into the story of what she was reading. This is why Senkyo decided it would be the perfect chance.

Senkyo walked over to another shelf and picked up a manga with the title "The Lazy Vampire's Messy Life" and handed it to Yuu.

"Here, it's a good manga to start off with. Plus, you're also a vampire so maybe you'll like it."

"O-Oh..."

Senkyo was thrown off because instead of the sparkling eyes he was expecting, Yuu looked disappointed. Confused about her uncharacteristic reaction, and worried that he may have said something wrong again, Senkyo continued with caution and a bit of hesitance.

"U-Um... Did I say something weird?"

Realizing that she made Senkyo feel at fault for her sudden gloom, Yuu flailed her arms around and kept repeating "Wait, wait, wait!" in an attempt to tell Senkyo that it was all a misunderstanding.

"Y-You see, I'm actually very happy that you picked out a series for me, but I didn't bring enough money with me so I won't be able to buy it today..."

"...Oh? That's it?"

Senkyo sighed in relief that he didn't do anything wrong this time around. On the other hand, this time, Yuu was thrown off because of Senkyo's casual "That's it?" statement. As far as Yuu knows, she had no means to buy manga.

"What do you mean?"

"You see, I was actually planning on buying this for you."

"....."

"......."

"EEEEH!?"

"Whoa!? D-Don't shout all of a sudden!"

After a long silent gap, Yuu finally processed what Senkyo said at the pace of an old computer. But when she eventually arranged her thoughts, she couldn't believe what she heard and spontaneously shouted. Of course, without question, that got the attention of a lot more people this time around, but neither Yuu nor Senkyo seemed to notice that fact.

"N-No, wait, why would you do that? Are you trying to get me in debt to you!?"

"Where did that come from!? I just wanted to give you a gift, that's all!"

"W-What for!? I don't remember doing anything that deserves receiving a gift."

"It's a gift! If I think you deserve one, then it's my decision to give you one."

"That doesn't make sense!!"

"It makes perfect sense!!"

Senkyo and Yuu began to fight for something extremely trivial as a gift. They shouted their hearts out. Flustered and red in the face because of this sudden treatment, Yuu tried to deny Senkyo's gift. This was the first time anyone's ever given her a gift. And this "gift" is something she wasn't all too familiar with.

In her world, the act of giving things to others existed, but it didn't have the concept of a gift. When Yuu researched this world's traditions, she came upon the concept of gifting—To give someone without the expectation of anything in return, which can also be a sign of affection. In other words, Senkyo was showing affection toward Yuu. Which is why she was incredibly flustered.

Immersed in their little quarrel, they neglected to notice the stares of everyone in the store was on them. And that there was an employee beside them trying to get their attention. But when they finally did, they were frozen in place because of two main reasons. One is that they caused a lot of commotion and bothered everyone around them, and two is the fact that they knew what was going to happen next.

**82 – Kaede’s Hobby**

"Hah..."

"Hah..."

Both Senkyo and Yuu let out a deep sigh in hopes that the wind will take away the humiliation they just put themselves through. Right now, Senkyo and Yuu were just outside the bookstore they were just in. They were kicked out because of all the ruckus they made inside the store, which was to be expected.

"...I wonder if I can still show my face around that store."

"I-I'm sorry, Senpai. It's because I made a huge fuss about it..."

"No, don't be. It'll only make me feel worse if you start apologizing to me now, so how about we just put this aside."

"...Okay."

As Senkyo and Yuu were about to walk away from the bookstore and try to forget about the mortifying events that just occurred, Senkyo spotted a familiar girl wearing sunglasses and a mask.

*"\*That's... Kaede, isn't it? What is she doing all the way out here?\*"*

Kaede was still in her school uniform and she has, yet again, changed her look. Or more specifically, just simply wore shades and a mask. As Kaede was walking closer, she noticed Senkyo and looked straight into his eyes. She immediately backed up and tried to get away but he wasn't about to let that happen.

"Wait right there."

"Y-Yes?"

Senkyo, but more accurately, Ryosei went up to her and stopped her from getting away. Ryosei suddenly took control of Senkyo's body again and stopped Kaede. It seems like he wanted to know what she was doing all the way over here when the nearest teleportation point was in the way she came from.

"Wh-Who might you be?"

Even when caught she still tried to play it off. However, this time, Ryosei wasn't going to hold back on her and pulled an ace off his sleeve.

"If you don't tell me why you're here, I'll tell Kou-chan that you used to wet the blankets but I took care of them before anyone else noticed."

"Wha—What!?"

Ryosei showed Kaede a playful face but kept the seriousness in his voice.

"I'll do it, I swear."

"~~~!! FINE, FINE! JUST STOP TALKING, YOU PERVERT!!"

By blackmailing the poor Kaede, she reluctantly followed Ryosei and Yuu to a nearby park to talk. Having done his purpose, Ryosei gave the controls to Senkyo's body back to him.

With her "disguise" taken off, Kaede sat on the nearest bench they could find with Yuu and Senkyo standing in front of her. Although Senkyo wasn't up for prying into Kaede's business, Ryosei wanted to know about it. A memory crossed Senkyo’s mind as he thought that. It was when Ryosei said that Yousuke, Kaede's brother, was overprotective.

*"\*I don't think you're much different.\*"*

*"\*Huh?\*"*

*"\*No, it's nothing.\*"*

Keeping his thoughts to himself, Senkyo turned his eyes to Kaede. But somehow, he couldn't help but feel like he was forgetting something. That something was reminded to him when Yuu whispered in his ears.

"Um... Yukou-senpai, who is this...?"

"Oh yeah! Sorry, I forgot."

Senkyo lead the introductions himself and served as the medium to introduce a friend to another friend. He started off with Kaede's introduction and faced Yuu as he pointed toward Kaede.

"This person here is Ryosei’s cousin and Yousuke-san’s little sister, Konjou Kaede. She's a 1st year in our school."

Just as Senkyo was about to introduce Yuu to Kaede, he felt a tug on his shirt. It was Yuu. She was signaling him to come closer.

“Senpai, is it really okay to talk about Ryosei-san around her?”

She whispered into Senkyo’s ear, not letting her words leak over to Kaede.

“Don’t worry, she already knows about him.”

“What!?”

“We can trust her, I promise. Get along with her okay?”

“If you say so…”

After reassuring Yuu’s doubts, Senkyo faced Kaede and proceeded with Yuu’s introduction by placing his hand on her head.

"And Kaede-chan, this here is Hisho Yuu, also a 1st year in our school and one of my companions."

"Hey! Who told you to touch my head?"

Yuu buzzed off Senkyo's hand.

"I couldn't outstretch my arm so I thought this would be fine."

"And what made you think that?"

"Various reasons. Anyway, Ryosei was wondering why you are here, Kaede-chan."

Senkyo dropped the subject and immediately began the next topic to seek refuge from Yuu's questioning. Thankfully, Yuu decided to let Senkyo off with only a bit of pouting.

“Is this what all of this was about?”

“Pretty much.”

Kaede asked in a bitter tone and breathed a long sigh after confirming her suspicions. She was clearly annoyed. It was understandable. After all, she was blackmailed by Ryosei and dragged over here out of her will. She muttered under her breath “I guess you and nii-chan are still the same after all this time…” before answering his question.

"I was going to buy a new volume for a manga series that I follow."

"Oh? I didn't think you'd be into that."

"Am I not allowed to?"

"Ah, no that’s not what I meant. It's just surprising that's all. Well? Are you satisfied with that, Ryosei?"

Senkyo called out to Ryosei looking to end this uncalled detainment as soon as possible.

“For now, it’s fine. But why did you even bother wearing that weird disguise?”

“Well, if it weren’t for a certain *someone*, maybe I wouldn’t need to buy and read manga in secret.”

Kaede’s intense look at Ryosei was implying that he was the cause of it. And Ryosei couldn’t deny it.

“…Y-Yeah, that might be on me. Fine, sorry about that.”

“About what exactly?”

“About stopping you earlier…… and possibly a small amount of blackmailing.”

“Ryosei-nii-chan.”

“…Sorry for blackmailing.”

“Good.”

It was supposed to be Ryosei that was scolding Kaede, but for some reason, it became the other way around. Yuu was utterly speechless. Even she didn’t understand what just happened for everything to turn as it did. Senkyo, who was looking over Kaede and Ryosei’s exchange from inside his body was somewhat expecting this to happen. That was because of the numerous times Kaede turned the tables on Ryosei in the past. He saw these exchanges in Ryosei’s memories, but nevertheless, he still couldn’t help but be in awe. As tough as Ryosei is, Kaede was one of the few people he had trouble dealing with.

Seeing that he was mercilessly silenced by Kaede, Senkyo took back control of his body and tried to lighten up the mood.

"You really are something, Kaede-san."

“Oh, hello Yukou-san. Sorry if Ryosei-nii-chan was bothering you with his overprotectiveness. It can be very annoying; I know it personally.”

“You must have it hard. W-Well, enough of that, what manga are you reading?”

"Oh, I’m glad you asked. It's called 'The Lazy Vampire's Messy Life.' I started reading it a few days ago and I liked it very much."

"Oh, really? Perfect timing! Sorry to bother you, but could you buy another copy of that? Oh, and the 7th volume of 'My Battle Against Demons and the Supernatural.'"

"Eh? What for?"

"Yukou-senpai! You're still on about that!?"

"Of course, I am. I decided it earlier so I'm going to see it through!"

"...?"

**83 – Charming Idiot**

Kaede, who was not informed of what happened in the bookstore, couldn't follow the flow of the conversation. But that didn't matter, because she was going to know one way or another. She needs context from Senkyo before she does what she was asked to either way. And when Senkyo told her their situation...

"So... you're telling me you were kicked out because of your small lovers' quarrel...? Pfft...! Hahaha! That’s hilarious, hahaha!!"

Kaede laughed her heart out as she heard the ridiculous things that happened in her absence. On the other hand, Senkyo slightly regretted his decision to tell her about it, and Yuu just silently hung her head down in embarrassment.

"A-Anyway, you'll do it, right?"

"Pfft... O-Of course, anything to lighten the weight off your shoulders... I'll be going now."

Kaede left Senkyo and Yuu behind while still lightly giggling as she walked away.

"Why do I feel like I want to give her a smack."

Clearly tired from all that's happened, Senkyo sat down on the bench and Yuu followed. Now that they were alone, with no one else in sight, Senkyo saw this as a perfect time to ask Yuu why she keeps refusing his gift.

"Hisho-chan, why don't you just accept it? You deserve something for everything you've done. I told you before that you're a vital part of this group, and that if needed, I'll show you how amazing you really are."

"Yukou-senpai..."

Yuu thought back to the time when they were about to leave the abandoned building. Senkyo made a whole dramatic scene where he relieved Yuu of her agonizing. Then, after changing his perspective slightly, he took a shot in the dark and gave another possible cause.

"...Or maybe you just don't like the gift."

"N-No! You're wrong!"

Yuu immediately denied it when she heard that. She didn't want Senkyo to misunderstand any more than he already has. So she decided to just come out with it.

"It's just... I lived in this world for 3 years now. I had to learn this world's language and how it worked. Thankfully, with the help of someone I met, I managed to learn its language in a short amount of time. But then I realized that learning that wasn’t going to be enough. So I asked for their help again, and I managed to get into Honshou Academy. I thought I was prepared to interact with other people but… I was just too different. Everyone was in their own groups and when I talked to some of them, they just seemed so aggressive, and in the end, we didn't understand each other and I stayed alone."

Senkyo listened to Yuu's story carefully. Every one of her words served as fragments that recreated her story in Senkyo's head. The image of her being alone kept popping up in his head and finally understood how Yuu felt.

"Um... well... what I'm trying to say is..."

Yuu is from another world and came here, to a world that she knew nothing about. She had to survive in this unknown world where everyone but herself was an enemy. She struggled alone as much as she could until she finally found someone else she could rely on. But who knew the true struggle she’s been through? Definitely not Senkyo. As far as he knew, she did everything she could, but he could never truly understand.

Alone in this world, without anyone to rely on, she became used to the feeling of being alone and doing everything herself. Since she didn't know anyone and didn't interact with that many people. Loneliness was a part of her everyday life. In some ways, just like Senkyo, and in most ways not.

"Hisho-chan, since you told me your story, I'll let you listen to mine."

"Huh?"

"There was once a boy whose father died from getting trapped in a burning building. He was devastated and decided to take it out on society and turned to his hobbies to console him. He decided to be alone and lived his life alone. To him, his hobbies were all that mattered and everyone else was nothing."

Although Yuu and Senkyo were both once loners, Senkyo knew they were different but similar at the same time. Senkyo, who chose to be alone after his father died, put his hobbies first and came to be a loner. And Yuu who sought interaction but was rejected by her peers because she was different.

One that cares nothing about the people around him and saw the world and other people as nothing but background characters. Senkyo was happy and enjoyed his hobbies, but that never shook off the feeling of loneliness and the worthlessness he saw in himself.

"But, in his middle school life, a charming idiot thought it was a great idea to befriend that one loner in the corner of the class. His attitude irritated the hell out of that boy and wondered what stupid worthless things he wanted from him. But apparently, he just wanted to be friends since they had the same hobbies. It sounded like the stupidest thing to that boy's ears. He chased that charming idiot away, but he just kept coming back the next day. Eventually, the boy got tired of chasing him away and ignored him instead. The idiot talked and talked with only grunts as his replies. But one day, when the idiot said something that opposed the boy's opinion about a light novel, he responded sharply and defended it. Little did that boy know, that he was going to have a hard time ignoring him from there on out."

Yuu listened to Senkyo as he told him about his past. But she had doubts as to whether that really was actually Senkyo's past. After all, how could someone that sounds so anti-social and hard to approach become the Senkyo today?

"...How did that boy change?"

"He didn't change. He returned back to his past self."

"Huh?"

"You see, that boy was never a true loner. He was only running away from everything. He just couldn't let go of the past and dragged his original personality down with him. If he really wanted to be alone, he wouldn't have been that easy to budge. That charming idiot helped him let go of the past and turned him back to what he once was."

Senkyo was like that from the beginning and only with the help of Kinro did he change back to his actual self. Hearing that, Yuu thought to herself, "Yukou-senpai really is lucky to have had Honjou-senpai with him." She thought back as to why everything ended up like this. But she had no clue why it did.

"Why did you tell me this, Yukou-senpai?"

Senkyo silently got up from the bench and faced Yuu who was looking up at him from the bench. A sudden gust of wind brushed Senkyo's hair, setting his clothes aflutter. Yuu was blinded by the bright light that was Senkyo's smile. He reached out his hand to Yuu like a saint offering his help. In a cheerful and reassuring tone, Senkyo said the following:

"Hisho-chan, I'll be that charming idiot for you."

"Eh?"

Yuu became incredibly perplexed. Her face was at a total loss as to what was unfolding in front of her very eyes.

"You won't be alone anymore. We're friends, and I'll always be here when you need me. Apparently, a true friend is a working cure for being a fake loner. How about it? Do you want this otaku to be your charming idiot? Then maybe, you’ll be able to act like your true self, the person you were before coming to this world."

With a long pause, Yuu took a big gulp and flushed down her worries. She took a deep breath and looked straight into Senkyo's glistening eyes. The imaginary heat around the area made Yuu's face completely red. She gathered the courage to raise her voice and let out an answer.

"I—"

*\*Wshhh...!\**

"What!?"

"This is...!"

Before Yuu could answer, she was cut off by the sudden change in their surroundings. The temperature became cold and the calm and peaceful day became a menacing night. Particles floated everywhere and the birds that flew around the park disappeared. It was the place they'd been seeing quite a bit the last week. Where werewolves, demons, and otherworldly creatures tend to show themselves. The Spirit Realm.

"Why are we in the spirit realm!?"

"No, this is more likely to be a spirit zone. No other spirits are around. Yukou-senpai, we have to check on Kaede-san if she's alright."

"Yeah, let's go."

Being forced to hold off on the earlier talk, Senkyo and Yuu quickly headed to the bookstore where Kaede went to.

**84 – Hollow Knight**

Turning back the time a few minutes earlier, where the sky still shined the calm afternoon sun with people going around doing their own business. A certain high school student was eying a certain bookstore. He set his back against the building from across the bookstore as he kept his eyes on the entrance, waiting for someone to come out.

"I didn't expect Yukou-kun to be here. What's more, he knows Kaede-san. That was surprising."

The owner of the voice was none other than Yamamoto Sora. He wore a jacket over his uniform, covering it completely from other people’s view. There was only one reason he was there stalking the bookstore. It was because he was tasked by Yousuke to guard his little sister, Kaede, in the shadows.

He did this task every day and he hadn't been found out to this day. This started at the beginning of the school year when Kaede first entered high school. This was due to the overprotectiveness of the clan chief. Sora had to do this without slack. At first, this was supposed to be Sora and Touma's task but at some point, Sora suggested that he do this by himself and had Touma switch with him only when he had something else to do.

He was used to this kind of routine and didn't mind the trouble the work brought. The only thing he had problems with was the guilty feeling he got from stalking and learning more about someone's personal life without their knowing.

What's worse, Kaede was a friend of Sora. If she found out that he was stalking her everywhere around town, that friendship could very well take a huge hit. That was why he took extra care not to get found out.

"I swear, you're too careless. If I weren't the one doing this job, you'd be in a lot of trouble."

He said that as if the person he was talking to was right in front of him. He was referring to Kaede going in and out of the bookstore to purchase manga. Such items were forbidden in the Konjou Clan, but he made an exception for her friend and kept it secret. He wore a troubled face as he said that, but there weren't any negative feelings from his acting.

*\*Wshhh...!\**

"What!?"

Suddenly, without warning, the sound of engines running and footsteps tapping the concrete disappeared, along with everyone around him. The sky became covered with a veil of night and floating particles appeared out of nowhere.

Sora took off his jacket and switched it with a black cloak he grabbed from inside his bag. Along with the cloak, he took out a belt loaded with six kunai and a strange circular compartment attached to its back. Equipping the two items, Sora left his bag and hurriedly entered the bookstore where Kaede was.

"Kaede-san!! Are you alright!?"

"Y-Yamamoto-san...!?"

A scream that was undoubtedly Kaede's came from deeper inside the store. Since Sora couldn't see her, she must've been covered by the tall bookshelves that spread around the store.

"I'm coming! Give me a sign where you are!"

Sora jumped on top of one of the bookshelves and began hopping off one onto another. Alternating from left and right, he scanned the isles in search of Kaede. With eyes and ears on full alert, he heard a low muffled voice and metal clanging from just below the bookshelf in front of him. Sora had a bad feeling about it and stopped jumping on that bookshelf.

Just as he stopped to check his surroundings, a giant piece of metal swung right in front of Sora's face, barely missing him. With danger senses screaming at him at full force, he instinctively jumped over to the bookshelf to his left and looked over to see what that piece of metal was.

Sora's eyes widened as he saw a giant metallic armor set with fiery grey flame leaking through the gaps of the armor. It had Kaede trapped inside its metallic arms. Kaede flailed and struggled but to no avail. The dark ominous light coming from the eye holes of the armor gazed at Sora as it stood up from its crouching position.

"Kaede-san!"

"Mff...Mfff...!!"

Sora made some distance between him and the giant armor, hurriedly thinking of a way to save Kaede from the moving armor. The set of armor slowly stood up. As it was doing so, Sora noticed that it was too tall for the store's height, but instead of bumping its head on the ceiling, its head went straight through the ceiling, destroying it as it stood.

The armor picked up the broad sword lying on the ground with its open hand and held it in a swinging position. Sensing the incoming danger, Sora dived off the bookshelf, and not a second later, a huge broadsword sliced through where he once was cutting through several bookshelves and even the ceiling.

The armor slowly turned its head to Sora and went after him with a broadsword getting ready for another swing. Knowing he was the current target of the sinister set of armor, he went for the exit and lead it outside to a more open field. Although a tighter space was best suited for Sora, the armor’s movements were not restricted by the building, and instead, every time it moved became trouble for him since he would have to watch out for the falling debris.

By both jumping and crouching, Sora dodged the giant swings coming from behind him as he ran. The ceiling and the bookshelves that were obstructing both the giant armor and the sword's swings didn't even do anything to slow it down. Sora was in a panic as some of the swings were just a hair away from slicing him. Finally, after what seemed like forever, Sora busted out of the store and so did the set of armor.

*\*CRASHH!!\**

"What is that!?"

"Yukou-senpai, look!"

Yuu pointed to the armor's arm which held Kaede captive.

"Kaede-chan!?"

Senkyo and Yuu just arrived to find Sora and the giant armor busting through the bookstore, destroying the front entrance. Soon after, the bookstore collapsed, debris reaching all the way to the middle of the road.

"YUKOU-KUN! GET OUT OF HERE! IT'S TOO DANGEROUS!"

In a panicked voice, Sora warned Senkyo the moment he saw him. Whatever that giant armor was, Ryosei didn't know anything about it, but at the very least, he knew it was dangerous enough to break Sora's usual playfulness.

The giant armor was in full view and Senkyo got a good look at it. It was huge in size and over twice his height. Its armor plating had sharp tips ranging from fingers to shoulder plating. Its helmet had horns extending out of it and the eyeholes were filled with two menacing grey flames. Dark flame seeped through the spaces in the armor. Anyone that sees this would freeze in fear.

The armor turned its head to Senkyo who Sora called out to. When it saw him, it gave up on Sora and faced Senkyo. It pointed its sword at Senkyo with a slow and ominous voice that sounded like it came from the deepest part of hell came from the giant armor.

"You... are you the one who ended Lord Fulgur?"

Senkyo took a big gulp. Slightly intimidated by the enemy in front of him.

"W-What if I am?"

"Then... you shall pay the price. Death. A direct order from his greatness."

**85 – Ryosei’s Play**

"Hisho-chan, take these and get back. Leave Kuro Yaiba to me."

Yuu took Senkyo's bag and handed him Kuro Yaiba. She headed to Sora to get an explanation for how this happened.

"Yamamoto-senpai, what happened over here?"

"There's no time for that! You have to get Yukou-kun out of there! You can't take that thing on! It's too powerful!"

Sora shouted his warnings. It seems like Sora already knew what the enemy was.

"Why? What is that thing?"

"That thing is a revenant! They are evil spirits that END turned into servants. They fed those spirits negative energy making them incredibly powerful. They trained them into their personal slaves taking every order given to them. There are many types of revenants, and this one is a Hollowed Knight. The only way anyone can defeat a revenant is if they slice through their core. I've seen Yukou-kun train. He's only a beginner. There's no way he can defeat that thing!"

"Hm... Is that so?"

Yuu said nonchalantly, completely devoid of worry. Hearing that, Sora got slightly irritated and raised his voice.

"Didn't you understand what I just said!?"

"I did. It's just that if it's Yukou-senpai, I can trust his word. He won't go down easily. Don’t you remember? He defeated the lightning leader of END."

“I remember that, but after seeing his training, I’m starting to doubt it.”

"Just look and see."

Senkyo switched with Ryosei and took out Kuro Yaiba as they got into stance. The hollowed knight readied its sword and rushed them. Ryosei didn't move and held his stance. He didn't panic and analyzed the situation. Kaede was trapped in its left arm and it held the broadsword with its right hand. Ryosei's target was clear to him.

The sound of metal clanging reverberated as the possessed armor took step after step and kept getting closer to him. Ryosei refused to move and let the possessed armor get close to him until it got to the point where he was in range of the possessed armor's sword.

"So... you have accepted your fate."

"GET OUT OF THERE!!" Sora screamed.

With a large horizontal swing, the possessed armor sliced through Ryosei... or so it thought. The two halves of Senkyo's body that were supposed to be in front of it weren't there. Then, the sound of metal dropping on the ground rang in everyone's ears.

At a closer look, Ryosei was to the right of the possessed armor, and he sliced its left arm off the hollowed knight's main body. Kaede who was held captive in its left arm was set free and Ryosei quickly grabbed her and brought her to safety.

"What!?"

"..."

Sora who thought Senkyo's death was certain was proven wrong when Ryosei suddenly appeared beside him with Kaede safely in his arms. The possessed armor remained silent as it processed what just happened.

"Are you alright, Kaede-chan?"

"Huh? Oh! Y-Yeah, I'm alright. Thank you, Ryo—Yukou-san."

Kaede was also baffled by what happened. One second, she was trapped by a frightening body of armor, and the next she was in the safety of Ryosei's arms. Everything happened so fast that she didn't even notice she was saved.

At that moment, Ryosei waited until the possessed armor's sword was in the middle of being swung and took that window to Flash Strike just below its arm and positioned himself to the right of the hollowed knight where its left arm was wide open due to the motion of its swing. Its right arm was fully extended while the base of its left arm was completely open from behind. Ryosei took that chance and sliced its arm off to save Kaede.

The hollowed knight's cut-off parts slowly retracted themselves back into the armor. Ryosei who knew things were just about to get started put Kaede down and faced the hollowed knight.

"You... are strong."

"No, you simply underestimated me. With positioning as sloppy as that, anyone could tell you were going for a full power swing. Maybe you should go back to your owners and tell them to train you better?"

Ryosei gave the hollowed knight no room to breathe. He used Flash Strike as his opening attack on it. The hollowed knight was incredibly slow that it couldn't hit Ryosei who was running around it and slicing it up. Its swings kept hitting nothing but air.

*\*Strike! Strike! Strike!\**

Ryosei's strikes began to weaken the armor. Some cuts even managed to pierce right through the armor, causing more grey flames to leak out of it. It was a one-sided battle. The possessed armor was no match for Ryosei who was landing hit after hit without any sort of consequence.

*"\*Let's finish this!\*"*

Ryosei created distance between them to prepare for his final strike. Kuro Yaiba emitted a white light as he went into stance. Confirming his target, Ryosei dashed at the speed of light as a trail of white was left behind from his Flash Strike.

The hollowed knight that didn't manage to keep track of Ryosei had its back turned and completely open to Ryosei. It didn't make any effort to move but instead muttered something under its breath.

"Hate... Hate. Hate. Hate! Hate!!"

The grey flames leaking out of its armor began flickering uncontrollably and the dark aura around it became even darker. Ryosei swung Kuro Yaiba and was about to deliver the finishing blow when—

"I HATE THIS WORLD!!"

*\*BAMM!!\**

The possessed armor's voice suddenly changed. Instead of a slow empty voice,it sounded like a man's voice. It sounded like they'd gone mad and put all their hatred in one loud shout.

Its berserk shout echoed through the whole space and the dark aura around the possessed armor blew up, covering the battlefield. The contrasting streak of white light pierced through the sphere of dark energy.

With the two contrasting lights dissipating, everyone witnessing the battle before them watched in suspense, hoping to see "Senkyo" come out victorious. Their vision cleared, and everyone could clearly see that Kuro Yaiba had pierced right through the possessed armor's chest.

"...No way. What was that...?"

"Y-Yukou-san..."

Sora and Kaede uttered in disbelief. This was the first time they'd ever seen "Senkyo" fight. Although Kaede was Ryosei’s cousin, she never had the chance to actually see him fight except for the memories he collected from Senkyo. But of course, seeing the real thing in person was completely different. Even though they confirmed that Senkyo defeated a leader of END, when Sora saw how Senkyo was in training he began to think otherwise. But seeing as Senkyo was possessing this much power, another question popped up in Sora’s mind: Why is he even training in the first place.

However, Yuu wasn't cheering like how she usually would. She scrutinized the battlefield and noticed something Sora and Kaede did not.

"Wait, it's not over! Look, Yukou-senpai's blade!"

Sora and Kaede examined the place Yuu pointed out.

"That's...!"

"Ah!?"

At a closer look, Ryosei's blade cut through what seemed like layers of tentacles. Multiple dark tentacle-shaped things were severed and lay on the ground. The inside which was supposed to be the revenant's core was no longer translucent but was filled with a solid color of black.

The tentacles that appeared out of nowhere stopped Ryosei's final blow. With an annoyed look, Ryosei clicked his tongue. The tentacles that were still intact wrapped around Ryosei's blade and threw it away. Ryosei didn't let go of Kuro Yaiba and landed gracefully as he was thrown away.

"What just happened?"

**86 – Hollow Army**

Ryosei threw a question to everyone. Sora who was right behind him answered Ryosei's question.

"The revenant manifested itself. By using negative energy as spirit essence, it became strong enough to be able to create a physical form. It must've used the frustration it was getting and amplified the hatred it already had. Now that it has a physical form it'll be even harder to defeat it."

"I see..."

The appearance of the possessed armor before them changed. The flames that leaked from its body turned into a tentacle-like lifeform that wiggled around in the air, and the flame that was supposed to be its core became a solid color, making it hard to tell where its core really is. The possessed armor directed its gaze to the one who forced it to enter this form. It then spoke in a human's voice, filled with pure hatred as it cried out.

"YOU... YOU!! HOW DARE YOU! YOU, LIKE THE OTHER ACCURSED HUMANS IN THIS DAMNED WORLD, WILL FACE THE WRATH OF *END*!! WITH THE HELP OF HIS GREATNESS, WE WILL SHOW THE WORLD HOW FOOLISH THEY ARE! AND OUR FIRST STEP TOWARD THAT GOAL, IS ELIMINATING YOU!"

It raised its sword to the sky.

"MY SUBORDINATES! SHOW THEM THE FRIGHTENING POWER OF END!"

All of a sudden, their surroundings were covered with spine-chilling smoke. Multiple clangs of metal could be heard coming from within the smoke. Ryosei and the others regrouped and awaited what was to come.

From the smoke, came a giant metallic set of armor with grey flames coming out from the gaps of its armor. Then came another, and another, and another, and just kept going. An army of hollowed knights appeared from within the smoke and surrounded Ryosei's group. They were dead center of an army of hollowed knights with numbers going up to at least a hundred.

"This doesn't look good..."

"Yamamoto-san, what else do I have to know about these things?"

"Other than what you already know, attacks with a blessing enchantment or light magic are most effective against them."

"Can you take them on?"

"Don't underestimate me. I can take on ghosts in metal shells! Ah, I don't know about that one though. If your attack didn't cut it down, I'm not too sure about mine."

Sora pointed at the manifested revenant standing across the sea of flaming sets of armor.

"Don't worry, I'll take it on. The only reason it didn't get cut down in the first place was because of its tentacles. Since they aren't regenerating, its lifeline is gone. I only need to get close enough to defeat it."

"Then, I'll leave it to you."

Ryosei turned his head to Kaede, worried about her safety. Seeing as they were surrounded from all angles, an enemy could get under their nose and attack Kaede. Noticing this, Yuu reassured Ryosei.

"Don't worry, I'll protect Kaede-san."

"Sorry for the trouble."

Ryosei readied his sword with his pathing getting planned out in his head. Sora took out six kunai from his belt with three of them in each hand with his arms crossed. Yuu stretched out her arms, aiming where a throng of the hollowed knights were grouped up.

"KILL THEM ALL!!!"

The beastly roar the manifested revenant made signaled the start of the battle. Their metallic footsteps rumbled the ground. The army of hollowed knights charged at them with broadswords ready to slice them in half.

Ryosei was first to act as he dashed in between the enemy's frontline and confused the enemy by running around and slicing their ranks with a white-glowing blade, one covered in light magic. Like a mouse in the middle of a crowd of people, Ryosei weaved through everything, dodging the huge blades that would spell his death and returning the favor with a bright shining blade through their chest.

While Ryosei was confusing the enemies, Sora didn't fall short. He threw all his kunai at the sea of enemies, hitting absolutely nothing. The hollowed knights in front of him raised their blades without a worry in the world seeing as their enemy was completely unarmed. But instead of panicking or cowering in fear, Sora gave them a big smirk.

The sound of metal piercing metal could be heard from behind the possessed armor, but before the enemy could recognize what the sound was, their cores were drilled into and their spirits perished.

Sora took out his hands and caught all six of the kunai he threw away as if the kunai came directly to his hands. As hollowed knight’s spirit perished, the armor in front of Sora that served only as a shell came falling down to the ground, revealing to Sora the cluster of armor on the ground with their chest plates having a clean hole in the middle.

Sora had the power to take on the hollowed knight back inside the bookstore. The only problem was the fact that it had Kaede as a hostage. Even if Sora aimed for its back and stopped his kunai right before it pierced its front plating, the hollowed knight could have used her as a shield or tried to kill her as it died. Sora didn’t want to take those chances. But now without a hostage, Sora could use his weapons as much as he liked.

"Easy."

Sora quickly celebrated his victory and moved on to the next group of enemies. Yuu who was watching what happened was struck by surprise.

"Wow... That was amazing."

"That's Yamamoto-san's original technique, Complete Spirit Power Flow."

"What's that?"

"It's a technique he made himself. It allows him to make his spirit power flow through anything he is in contact with and anything that is in contact with that extends the connection. If you look closely, the kunai Yamamoto-san is using are connected with a strong and thin string. He can transfer his spirit power through the string and can make his kunai go anywhere he wants and do whatever he wants."

"Wow... that really is amazing. From here, it looks like the kunai are missiles flying through the air."

While the two girls were in the middle of admiring Sora's technique, a hollowed knight managed to sneak behind them. With its sword overhead, the hollowed knight was winding up to slash Yuu.

"Hisho-san, look out!"

Kaede notices the sneaky hollowed knight and warned Yuu about it. But it seems like that wasn't needed as Yuu pointed a ball of light in the palm of her hand and at the possessed armor's core without even looking at it.

"Heaven's Pierce."

After Yuu uttered those words, a ray of light extended from the ball in her palm and pierced straight through the hollowed knight before her. Yuu angled her hand to the left and the ray of light pierced through more hollowed knight before the spell was done.

When Yuu finally decided to stop observing Sora and she was met with piles of armor cut cleanly in half with the next wave of possessed armor a few feet away from her had a bit of a burn on their armor. Yuu's vampire senses picked up on the enemies before they reached them and was able to ready a spell.

Kaede who was left nonplussed, stared at Yuu internally praising her magical power and the fact that she did that with such precision despite not even looking.

"I see you don't fall behind, Hisho-san."

"Thanks."

With a quick response, Yuu focused on the army before them and pierced the rest of the waves of possessed armor that came.

**87 – Manifested Revenant**

*\*Slash! Slaaash!!\**

Ryosei picked off another two hollowed knights as he ran through the middle of the army. Numerous blades hit the ground behind him as a result of the slow suits of armor trying to hit his nimble body.

*"\*You know, this wouldn't have happened if you just finished off the first possessed armor in the first place.\*"*

*"\*I'm sorry, okay? I just wanted to test how powerful the thing really was. It's a necessary process. Now, the next time I face the same enemy, I'll have better knowledge about it.\*"*

*"\*Read the clan records instead!\*"*

*"\*Experiencing it firsthand is better!\*"*

Senkyo and Ryosei had an internal argument as they weaved through the dangerous situation like it was a walk in the park. Earlier, the reason why Ryosei didn't finish off the first possessed armor was because he wanted to test the armor's limits. He got his wish, but in exchange, they had to fight a whole army of possessed armor. As Senkyo was finishing up lecturing Ryosei, their main target came into view.

"Time to finish up what I started."

From the cluster of possessed armor, Ryosei dashed out and set his eyes on the manifested revenant. The revenant used its tentacles to intercept Ryosei, but they were simply dodged and jumped over.

"Let's cut off all its tentacles just to be safe."

*\*Slash! Slash! Slash! Slash! Strike!\**

"YOU BASTARD!!"

Ryosei cut off the four remaining tentacles that came after him and disarmed it of its sword. Now, his target had nothing else up its sleeve. Completely defenseless, the manifested revenant came after Ryosei with its fists.

"How pathetic. I'll be sure to end your suffering."

"RAAAAGHH!!!"

With its final battle cry, the manifested revenant launched its fists at Ryosei. Its efforts went for naught as Ryosei nimbly dodged the two fists. With its back completely open to Ryosei, he was about to release the last strike when a huge sword came hurling down at him.

Ryosei backpedaled, dodging the guillotine swing that was coming after his head. Resuming movement, he kept running around and saw that the revenant's reinforcements had arrived. Multiple hollowed knights surrounded the revenant protecting it from Ryosei.

"I wonder if you're all defending it because of companionship or just because you can't defy its orders. But unfortunately, your life extension ends here."

Ryosei gave distance between himself and the group of possessed armor. He gathered power to his legs and held Kuro Yaiba pointing behind him. The suits of possessed armor that weren't protecting the revenant approached behind Ryosei. But before the swarm of possessed armor could reach Ryosei, lightning coursed through Kuro Yaiba's blade and the spark at its tip signaled the battle's final move.

*“\*Magic arts: Crackling Thunder\*”*

*\*BAAANGGGG!!!\**

A huge burst of lightning came from behind Ryosei propelling him toward and above the revenant. The suits of possessed armor that were coming from behind him were charred with the spirits possessing them incinerated from the world.

"Kya!!"

"Whoa!"

"Is that...?"

Kaede covered her ears in fear but Sora and Yuu turned to the huge burst of lightning that came from the distance. The explosion was so incredibly loud and powerful that even the clutter of possessed armor were distracted by it. Everyone's attention was directed at the boy who was in midair directly on top of the manifested revenant.

"May you find happiness in the afterlife."

"CURSE YOUUU!!!!"

Ryosei raised his blade overhead with a spark of lightning coming out behind it and slashed down as his target was within reach.

*“\*Magic arts: Heaven’s Blade\*”*

*\*BAAANGGGG!!!\**

With another resounding burst of lightning, Senkyo crushed the cluster of armor along with the ground supporting them. With a huge shock wave, everyone's vision was temporarily blinded as dust clouds reaching all the way to where they stood were assaulting their eyes. The huge explosion of lightning subsided and the dust lifted up, enabling everyone to lay their eyes on the aftermath of Ryosei's attack.

Sora, Yuu, and Kaede ran over to where they saw "Senkyo" deliver the last strike and saw a huge crater with "Senkyo" standing over pieces of charred and crushed armor. He ended his display with a satisfying click as he sheathed Kuro Yaiba back in its scabbard.

"I-Incredible..."

"Wh-Whoa..."

Kaede and Sora stared blankly at Ryosei with their nonplussed faces. They had a bit of trouble processing the sight before them, but Yuu was used to seeing this and congratulated Ryosei.

"You did great *Yukou-senpai*!"

With a slight emphasis on Senkyo's name, Ryosei took it as thanks directed to both him and Senkyo and responded accordingly.

"Thanks."

The attack that Ryosei did was a magic art. He used Kuro Yaiba as the guide for the lightning to coat. He released a burst of mana to propel himself toward the revenant and proceeded to guide the lighting with a focused strike on the revenant’s core.

Ryosei walked out of the crater that his last strike created with a tired look on his face. Although he wasn't catching his breath, that was only because Senkyo kept restoring Ryosei's stamina with his own spirit power. When Ryosei and Yuu got out of the crater, their faces weren't ones with relief but ones with unease.

"U-Um... I don't like the looks of this."

"Same here..."

Sora and Kaede snapped out of their trances and turned to where Ryosei was looking at. They were met with the rest of the hollowed knights, but they weren't doing anything. They were standing still like statues with their swords dropped on the ground.

"This is bad! They're losing their morale. If they gain too much negative energy, they'll turn out like the first one we fought! We have to stop them somehow!"

Sora exclaimed in a panic.

"Damn it! There aren't many left but there is still too much for us to handle in a short amount of time."

"We have to weaken them or finish them all in one go. If we don't, defeating their comrades will only accelerate their manifestation."

They were in a tough spot. They had to defeat every enemy in one go or they'll have to face more of those manifested revenants. But this time, they'll have full power, unlike the first manifested revenant, Ryosei couldn't damage them the moment they manifest.

"What...? I see... that might work!"

**88 – Dual User**

Sora and Kaede looked over to "Senkyo" with confused looks. To them, "Senkyo" suddenly began talking to himself, but in reality, Ryosei was listening to Senkyo in his mind.

"Um... Yukou-kun?"

"Yukou-san?"

"I have a plan!"

With an enthusiastic tone, Ryosei handed the controls to Senkyo and turned to everyone.

"Hisho-chan, do you still have my bag?"

"Oh, it's right here."

"Thanks."

Senkyo took his bag from Yuu, went through it, and took out a few items: a pen, and a bunch of paper. Everyone looked at Senkyo questionably as no one had a clue what he was doing.

Senkyo laid down the pieces of paper, one in the middle and surrounded it with more paper. He grabbed his pen and started scribbling on the paper he laid down. Not long after Senkyo began scribbling, Sora caught on to Senkyo's plan.

"Wait, is that... a Field Circle!?"

"I think that's what it's called, so yeah!"

"But a Field Circle requires spirit power! And you definitely used a spectral back then! You can't use both! When you use a spectral, the mana affects the amount of spirit power you can use. At most, you can enchant a single item or transfer between the Spirit Realm and back! Everyone knows that!"

"Don't worry and trust me on this one!"

Completely ignoring Sora's words, Senkyo continued scribbling until he drew the circle. It had a half-moon arc and a diamond in the center—the symbol for spirit, and inside its diamond were two interlacing circles—the symbols for connection, which made it look like a Venn Diagram. The outer edge of the spirit symbol was then connected to many other circles on the outer papers with a single line connecting the outer circles to the center. Senkyo placed his palm on top of the middle circle, and soon after, the circle he drew glowed white.

"What!?"

Sora was baffled as his knowledge betrayed him. What he thought was impossible was being done right in front of his eyes. A Field Circle is a technique that requires a moderate amount of spirit power, meaning someone who just used a spectral cannot cast it, but it was being cast by a spectral user right in front of his eyes.

Sora was struck with an incredible headache because he was having a lot of trouble comprehending what and who Senkyo really is, but right now, he knew what he had to do first. With a resounding sigh, Sora gave in to Senkyo and took half of the outer papers, and headed away from them. Getting the message, Senkyo turned to Yuu to help him out.

"Hisho-chan, I need you to take these papers and surround all the possessed armor inside a huge circle with these. It doesn't in what order you place these, you just have to make a circle. Yamamoto-san is already making the other half, you just need to complete it. Can you do that?"

Senkyo handed to Yuu the rest of the outer papers.

"Roger!"

Yuu took off and cast Enhanced Speed to help her go faster. Sora and Yuu placed the papers one by one running around all the possessed armor that were in the middle of manifesting. With haste, Sora and Yuu placed all the papers. Sora shouted as loud as he could at Senkyo to inform him that the circle was done.

"YUKOU-KUN! DO IT NOW!!"

"Alright!"

Senkyo placed his palm on the middle circle again and transferred his spirit power. Soon after, white outlines glowed from the ground, creating a magic circle. The glow from the ground made it look like a holy power was being given to everyone.

Senkyo, Sora, Yuu, and Kaede felt nothing different. But the same could not be said for all the hollowed knights. They began shaking and agonizing as the holy light touched them. It was like their spirits were being cleansed of all evil. That was because a Field Circle is a technique that constantly casts an enhancement the caster chooses. The caster can choose which are affected by the circle and those that are not.

In this situation, Senkyo cast a blessing enhancement on the circle and its power is cleansing all the possessed armor, slowly until their spirits will be cleansed and peacefully pass on.

All the possessed armor were screaming in agony, refusing to get blessed by the circle, but all of them, in the end, passed on. Seeing as there were no more enemies standing, Senkyo took his hand off the circle and sighed in relief and he sat on the ground.

"It's finally done..."

Sora and Yuu walked over to Senkyo. Sora was the first to speak in a completely awed tone.

"Yukou-kun... just who are you?"

"Me?"

Senkyo pointed to himself quizzically and Sora responded with a nod.

"I'm just an otaku who's looking for something."

Sora didn’t know how to return Senkyo's response. Instead of answering Sora's question as he hoped, Senkyo gave a completely useless answer instead and glossed over it. Kaede who witnessed everything from the sidelines came up to Senkyo and took his hand.

"That was amazing, *Yukou-san*! You should really join the Konjou clan, you're incredibly powerful!"

"What? Ah... N-No thanks, we talked about this at lunch, didn't we?"

"Hm… I guess we did. Well? Have you changed your mind?"

“Like hell I would!”

As Senkyo was busy dealing with Kaede, he failed to notice Yuu behind Kaede who looked a bit annoyed.

"Yukou-senpai... are you already planning on leaving me!?"

"Wha...!? No! Wait, Hisho-chan, calm down!"

"How can I calm down if you're going away!?"

"This is a misunderstanding! I'm not going anywhere!"

"Really?"

"Of course. Kaede-chan was just joking around."

Just as Senkyo was calming Yuu down, Kaede decided to stir everything up by bringing a bit of mischief.

“Yeah, obviously. Did you really think I was going to take Yukou-san from you, Hisho-san? Now that I think about it, you two are really close, huh? Are you two lovers?”

“Wha—!?”

“L-Love—!?”

Senkyo and Yuu had a hard time speaking their minds after Kaede’s statement. After barely collecting themselves, the two tried to deny Kaede’s accusations while she just enjoyed the two’s flustered reactions.c

This farce continued for a bit longer. Sora couldn't take whatever was happening with them anymore and took off to find the spirit lantern that was causing the spirit zone. When they got back to the real world, it was already turning night.

Since Senkyo wouldn't have enough time to practice when he reaches the Konjou clan, he and Yuu decided to head home for the day and rest. Moreover, Senkyo managed to give Yuu his gift. With a quick blush, Yuu took the gift and took off in a hurried manner.

**Chapter 5: The True Wielder**

**89 – Weekend Training**

"Agh... Why do we have to do this? I'll be worn out before we even reach the foot of the mountain!"

*"\*What's a little test? I'm sure you can make it somehow.\*"*

"Are you crazy? Somehow is an understatement! It would be a miracle if I pull this off! Just listen to yourself. You're telling me to jog from the neighborhood all the way through town and up a mountain, just what makes you think I'll actually survive this!?"

Saturday. The day when students are finally given time off school and are able to spend their time however they want. This would be the perfect time to spend time with friends or family, or maybe just lay around taking your mind off the stressful school days. Every person has their own way of spending their free time.

In this case, Senkyo was spending his Saturday training at the Konjou clan again. However, instead of going to the Konjou clan like how they usually would through teleportation points, Ryosei had the bright idea to wake Senkyo up early and make him jog all the way over there.

After being forced into his tracksuit and out of the house, Senkyo had no choice but to comply with Ryosei's demands and began jogging. In his grey tracksuit, Senkyo began the jog that would lead to his legs falling off. He did not only have to jog across town but up a mountain while avoiding its obstacles.

"I'm gonna die..."

Senkyo muttered seemingly with no life inside him. He thought back to what led him to this situation but was then reminded that the reason he was going to jog himself to death was because he didn't want to die from all the otherworldly creatures that came after him. The irony of the situation hit Senkyo like a huge wrecking ball to the stomach. Seeing as both options lead to death, Senkyo resigned to Ryosei and jogged.

Yesterday, Senkyo's encounter with the army of hollowed knights caused him to reveal Ryosei's power to Sora. Senkyo and Ryosei feared that everyone in the Konjou clan already knew about how powerful "Senkyo" is.

From their perspective, Senkyo was someone who was thought to have defeated a leader of END. Although it seemed like they trusted Freda's word, doubts about him clearly sprouted from people around him, seeing as he was someone that couldn't even run down a mountain without getting knocked out.

The only reason Dai was training Senkyo from the very beginning was that Senkyo asked him to. Senkyo wasn't cut out to be in the fighter class, so he turned to the enchanter class where it was discovered that he was quite a fast learner, but nothing more than that. If Dai discovered Senkyo's feat that day, Senkyo wasn't too sure if Dai would continue training him without giving him a proper reason.

As Senkyo was heading home yesterday, his mind was filled with these worries. But just before he got home, Sora intercepted him. He came to talk about his power. As expected, it was about Senkyo’s reasons for training with the clan. Of course, he didn’t disclose any information to him. After telling Sora to be quiet about his power, he was unexpectedly compliant and backed off.

"HAHH...! Nouhh...! Aih... caunt... any... moreee...!"

*\*Thud!\**

*"\*Ha-ha! See! I knew you could do it!\*"*

A thud on the ground resounded through the forest as Senkyo fell to the ground right on the Konjou town's outskirts. That thud marked the end of his death jog. After about three excruciating hours, he finally made it.

However, it was decided that they would begin training at 8:30am. Senkyo left the house at 6am, so after about three hours it would be 9am. Senkyo did the math in his head, albeit slowly because of the jog, and it finally came to him that he was late.

Even though he knew he was late, Senkyo couldn't even manage to walk, so he laid there while panting trying to catch his breath like a person who almost drowned. At the moment, he couldn't care less about being late.

Senkyo heard what Ryosei said earlier, but couldn't even muster the power to retort against Ryosei in his mind. That was just how tired he was, exhausted was an understatement. For a few minutes, Senkyo didn't move and focused on getting stable breathing again.

"Uuu... I guess I have to get up at some point..."

Albeit reluctant to leave the grass he was laying on, Senkyo lazily got back up and faced in front of him where there was nothing but trees in sight. He reached to his chest where he took out a pendant with the Konjou clan's symbol on it. He continued to head forward where he was greeted by an immense fog. However, Senkyo continued to walk forward like the fog was non-existent. Not worried about tumbling or hitting an obstacle, he trenched into the fog until it slowly cleared up and revealed a path leading to a traditional Japanese-style town.

"I... I did it... I actually did it!"

After seeing his goal in front of him, Senkyo broke out in a fit of happiness. The joy of overcoming all the pain he went through and reaching his goal filled his mind. Senkyo jumped around while laughing like an idiot. Needless to say, people directed weird stares at him. In the middle of his fit, he remembered the whole reason why he went there in the first place.

"Ah! Oh no, I'm late! I got to hurry!"

Cutting his celebration short, Senkyo ran through town toward their usual training grounds. Unfortunately, Senkyo's legs still couldn't take it and slowed him down into a slow brisk walk. As he was passing by the residents of the town, a voice called out to him. Senkyo turned to the owner of the voice and his eyes were met with someone unexpected.

**90 – Traces of Exile**

In front of him came an old man with long grey hair and beard. He looked like he was still in good shape despite his old age, he didn't need any support and walked with a straight back. He stood tall in front of Senkyo like he was cornering his prey. Senkyo instinctively took a step back as he got closer.

"Pardon, but are you perhaps Yukou Senkyo-dono?"

"Y-Yes I am."

There was a bit of nervousness in Senkyo's voice. That was because, although the old man in front of him didn't know Senkyo, he knew exactly who the old man was. He was Sakurai Kosuke, a former brute class hunter, and a current Elder of the Konjou clan. Going back through Ryosei's memories, Kosuke was one of the people who strongly agreed with exiling him. Although Ryosei knew he was doing everything with the clan in mind, he still couldn't forget the times when he aggressively went after him in meetings.

Seeing how aggressive this old man could be, Senkyo put his guard up. With nervousness in his voice, Senkyo began to talk with Kosuke.

“I am Sakurai Kosuke, and Elder of this town. Seeing as you have been the talk of the town recently, I am glad to have finally met you.”

“A-Ah, it’s nice to meet you too.”

Kosuke stayed silent as he scrutinized Senkyo.

"I see... For what the rumors say, you seem quite dull."

"W-Well, I only started training recently. So, I..."

"Then are you implying that you managed to defeat a fearsome leader of END with no training whatsoever?"

"Ah, That's..."

Senkyo trailed off, unsure of how to answer that question. He thought of pretending of having experience in battle and that he uses a different style in battle, but when it came to it, he had nothing to show. If Senkyo was asked to prove that he would only be put in an even tougher spot.

"Yes. But I don't actually know how I defeated Fulgur."

"You do not know? That is very strange."

"Yes, it really is."

As Senkyo averted his eyes to the side, certain that Kosuke wouldn't easily take an explanation like that. On the contrary, Kosuke did not pry Senkyo any further.

"Although I do not believe that you have defeated a leader, I do believe that you encountered him and the fact that he has been defeated."

"Huh?"

Seeing Senkyo's bluntly surprised face, Kosuke explained the reasoning behind his conclusion.

"In the past, when I was still in action, I encountered the very same leader."

Kosuke’s words caught Senkyo's attention.

"But, 'encountered' may not be the correct term. Watched... might be more appropriate. An incredibly powerful foe with unimaginable strength. In that battle, I managed to mark him. Ever since, I always sensed his overflowing spirit power. But just last week, that power was snuffed out, and up to this day, it never came back. Just like that day…"

Kosuke's words trail away as he said his last line. Like reminiscing a distant past, he looked up to the sky melancholically. Setting his attention back to Senkyo, he extended his hand to him. He was signaling Senkyo to grab his hand for a handshake. He slowly grabbed his hand.

"...!"

Kosuke's eyes suddenly widened in surprise. Senkyo looked around him and there was nothing that stuck out that could be the cause for his reaction. After a few seconds, Senkyo, still as puzzled as he was from the start, gingerly called out to him.

"U-Umm... c-can I let go now...?"

Like a video resuming its play, Kosuke let go of Senkyo's hand and retracted his arm. He cleared his voice, seemingly in an alarmed manner. He then stared Senkyo straight in the eyes and asked him a question. Strangely to Senkyo, something about his expression was off.

"Have you perhaps taken an evaluation test to know which class you would fit in?"

"Yes, I did. I got in the enchanter class."

As Kosuke's face suddenly showed a slight shock as he heard that. His voice faintly began to lose its composure.

"The enchanter class... you say? Why did you not take the brute class?"

"Yamazaki-sensei said that the enchanter class was the only one I was capable of getting into."

"Wh-What..."

Senkyo watched Kosuke place his hand on his chin. Something was troubling him, that much was clear. He called out to him again, but this one didn't seem to register in Kosuke's head. After standing around waiting for him to respond, he said his farewell.

"Yukou Senkyo-dono, I'll be remembering you. For now, there is somewhere I need to be. Until the next time we meet."

Kosuke then left Senkyo alone and went his own way. Senkyo's stare followed his back as he went. The conversation took a direction where Senkyo didn't even know what was happening. As his puzzled look followed his back, he remembered that he was late for training,

"Ah, now I've done it...!"

Senkyo began running to the training grounds, worried about the faces he'll be met with once he arrives almost an hour late. Senkyo was in too much of a hurry to notice, but his legs finally began listening to him again, enabling his ability to run.

"Sorry, I'm late!"

Senkyo announced himself as he approached Dai and Yuu who were watching the other hunters practicing their techniques. There were groups that were in pairs practicing techniques that required more than one person, and there were groups that were by themselves as they enhanced their own skill. From the looks of it, Dai already guided his students on what they should do.

"Oh, you're finally here, what took you so long?"

"Yukou-senpai, you can't start slacking off just because it's the weekend. Have some more discipline."

Yuu greeted Senkyo with an immediate lecture. Though it was natural seeing as Senkyo was an hour late, Senkyo couldn't help but feel his pride take a bit of damage since his underclassman was the first to scold him about this.

"Sorry! I actually woke up early so I decided to jog all the way here. It took me longer than I thought, my bad."

"Really now?"

Dai pressed Senkyo looking to see if he was telling the truth. He looked at Senkyo with a straight face. Even though Dai was nice, he was still a teacher at the end of the day, so it was only natural that he wouldn't let Senkyo off easy. With a bit of nervousness in Senkyo's voice, he answered Dai.

"Y-Yes, I'm sorry, it won't happen again."

Senkyo was expecting some kind of punishment for being late. But instead, he got a long sigh coming from Dai.

"It was my bad on my part too. You didn't have any way to contact me. Connect can only work at a certain distance and you didn't have my cellphone number. It doesn't feel right to punish a student for wanting to grow... So I'll look over this time, but make sure it doesn't happen again, okay?"

"Y-Yes!"

Senkyo was a bit perplexed. Everything that Dai said was correct but he was still expecting some kind of punishment, even if just a little.

"If you understand then let's pick up where we left off last time. I'll give you my contact later, so focus on training for now."

"Roger!"

Putting those thoughts aside, Senkyo headed to a nearby tree and put his hand on it. Dai followed suit and their training began.

Yuu, who was holding the shinai bag that Senkyo handed over to her, watched over Senkyo as he trained. She thought back to the time before they entered the spirit zone and fought the army of hollowed knights.

"'I'll be that charming idiot for you'...huh?"

A slight red blush floated on her face as she recited his words. The fact that she didn't understand what Senkyo was thinking irked her and began tightening her hold on the shinai bag.

"Nnn~!! I can't tell if you're doing it on purpose or not...! For better or for worse, you really are way too nice. Really... unlike me..."

Yuu cast her gaze down to the ground. Something was bothering her, but she kept it to herself and decided to not voice it. Then, from behind her, she heard a familiar voice.

**91 – Spark of Chaos**

"Yamazaki-san sure is soft, huh?"

Yuu turned around to face the owner of the voice.

"Yamamoto-senpai?"

"Hi, you're Hisho-chan, right?"

Yuu responded with a silent nod. Sora then stood beside her and watched over Senkyo who was training diligently with Dai, seemingly observing his every movement.

"You know, I haven't known Yukou-kun for that long. We were classmates last school year but he mostly didn't talk to anyone but Honjou-kun."

Yuu was confused as to why Sora suddenly started talking about this, but she decided to let Sora speak and listen.

"I've always wondered, how can he have such average grades even though he almost never takes any notes in class? How could he bare Watanabe-kun's continuous bullying before? It was nothing but pure curiosity, nothing else. But then yesterday, when I finally saw how Yukou-kun fought, you would think at least one of my questions would be answered. But on the contrary, only more questions came to my head. How is he so powerful? How can he cast a lot of spirit power despite using a spectral? Things like that. I haven't the slightest clue who that person is. Now, I want to know what makes that person so interesting. But before anything else, I want to be sure of one thing... is he or will he be an enemy of humanity?"

"No, he isn't. Yukou-senpai is without a doubt very mysterious. But is not an enemy of this world, that I am sure of."

Yuu answered Sora in a serious tone. Her voice didn't falter as she said that. However, even if it didn't sound like she was lying, Sora couldn't just simply take her word for it. Sora isn't careless, he wanted more concrete proof that they could be trusted.

"Unfortunately, words won't be enough to convince me."

"Then why bring this up to me in the first place?"

"Why indeed... Maybe I just wanted to see your reaction, maybe I wanted to inform you that I don't trust you, or maybe something else entirely."

Sora walked away from Yuu, ending their conversation there. As if remembering something he forgot, Sora faced Yuu to ask one last question.

"By the way... what's with that sword? At first, it would seem like you just don't want it to get stolen, but from where stand, it looks to me that you're hiding the sword."

"….."

Yuu didn't respond.

"Well, it wasn't like I was expecting you to answer in the first place."

Sora turned his back to Yuu and disappeared into the forest. For the rest of the day, Yuu became wary of Sora.

In the space where noise is forbidden and silence is law, the residents of the Konjou clan ranging from normal people to hunters immerse themselves in the books that were displayed on the thousands of shelves in the building. The Great Library.

In the Konjou clan, everything that was ever recorded was always stored at the library. They didn't keep anything hidden from their fellow clan members and displayed the information publicly. If there was anything that anyone wanted to keep something secret, they wouldn't write it on paper, but instead remember it in their heads.

Sora entered the Konjou clan's library where vast amounts of books from normal textbooks to books with techniques you could learn were located. This included a book that Sora came here for, a book regarding the clan's history.

"I'd like to find the books about the clan's history."

"Understood. Please wait a moment."

Sora requested the librarian in front of him. The librarian searched the requested books on the computer in front of her. Soon enough, she got the location and directed Sora to it.

"The books about the clan's history are over there at the very last aisle."

"Thank you."

Sora walked over to where the librarian pointed him. Sora traced his fingers on the books reading the titles of the books out loud as his finger pointed at one. After a bit of searching, Sora found the one he was looking for.

"There it is! History of the Konjou Clan."

Instead of a book, Sora took out a brown file from the bookshelf and took it to the nearest seat. Sora opened the file and searched its contents. From afar, a person who Sora was childhood friends with spotted him searching through a file.

*\*Sora? What's he doing here? That guy hates reading.\**

Touma silently thought in his head. He was currently reading a book while sitting across the room where he could spot Sora.

"Let's see, let's see... swords, swords, swords... Ah, there it is!"

Sora flipped to a page that had a photo of Kuro Yaiba with its description on the bottom. Sora brought the book closer to his face and scrutinized the image of the sword on the book. After being satisfied, he brought the book back down to the table and muttered to himself.

"This is definitely it! The sword Yukou-kun used! *\*I remembered Dai telling me a story. A legend who dropped from grace. A swordsman that cut his enemies down at the speed of light. He wielded a jet-black blade with a steak of red that was said to be the mark of death. An everlasting spectral with a limitless mana pool, unique from the other spectrals. I didn’t notice it before. I almost forgot that story. But yesterday… Senkyo reminded me of that story. His lightning-fast movements made it look like he was teleporting to the naked eye. A black blade with a red steak that cut down those hollowed knights like butter.\**"

Sora finished playing his memories in his mind and read through Kuro Yaiba’s description.

"Kuro Yaiba. The Konjou Clan's legendary blade. It was kept hidden under the castle where newborns were brought to test whether or not the blade would choose them. In the year 20XX, the blade had finally chosen its master and dropped in front of a newborn. Its wielder was Konjou Ryosei, an outstanding prodigy that mastered the clan's techniques faster than anyone else and even made techniques not only within his class but to all the other classes in his time..."

Sora continued reading the blade's history and its wielder. At a certain point, Sora yelled out in shock, catching everyone's attention. After apologizing, Sora finished up his research and put the file back where he got it. Satisfied with his findings, Sora left the library.

After confirming that Sora left the library, Touma came out of hiding and went to where Sora put back the file. He took the same file out of the bookshelf and searched its contents.

“Huh, really now?”

Touma’s eyes glowed purple as he finished reading through the file.

**92 – Lunchtime Daydream**

It was lunchtime. Dai dismissed the hunters to eat lunch and scheduled them to return an hour later. Senkyo and Itsuki were offered lunch at the castle again. Itsuki accepted and headed to the castle, but Senkyo and Yuu had other plans.

Yesterday, Yuu asked Senkyo if he wanted her to make lunch for him. Needless to say, Senkyo accepted her offer.

Under the shade of the trees, accompanied by the calming sound of the stream going down the mountain and the refreshing breeze of the wind. Senkyo and Yuu sat on the grass with their lunches in their hands.

"Mm~ Hisho-chan, your cooking really is delicious!"

Senkyo's delighted voice cut off the calming sound of nature as he complimented Yuu's cooking. His face reflected his joy as he happily ate his food. But he couldn't properly distinguish whether he was happy because the food was delicious or because a girl made it for him, since he was so happy, he concluded it was both.

"Haha... Save the flattery, it won't work on me."

"So you're still bad at taking compliments?"

"Grk..."

Yuu let out a surprised voice, letting Senkyo know that he hit a bullseye. Then resulting in her scowling at Senkyo.

"Could you please not read my mind."

"Sorry, it was just so obvious I had to."

"And stop teasing me while you're at it!"

Senkyo and Yuu enjoyed the calming atmosphere around them as they chat and ate their food. Senkyo couldn't even believe this was real. Just a few weeks ago, the only person that'd eat lunch with him was Kinro. The thought of having lunch with a girl, let alone having them make a handmade lunch for him, never crossed his mind. But now here he is, eating lunch alone together with his cute underclassman.

*"\*Eating handmade lunch together with a girl... It sounds so surreal but it's actually happening!\*"*

Senkyo thought to himself as he quietly took another bite from his lunch. His gaze wandered to Yuu who was also eating her lunch.

"\**Heh, without a doubt her cooking is delicious, but there's only one problem... She's 3D! In this situation, it's textbook for the girl to feed the protagonist a bite or two as she says 'Say ahh,' all the while looking cute and opening her mouth. Unfortunately, the reality is cruel...\*"*

Another weird thought just crossed Senkyo's head. Although he didn't voice it, if someone heard that, they'd probably look at him with a disgusted face saying something like "Uwa... she already made you lunch and you're still thinking of weird things like that? You're the worst!" Senkyo didn't like the fact that he could easily imagine someone saying something like that as it only served to make him feel bad.

Senkyo heaved a short sigh as he tried to push away the thoughts. However, while Senkyo was daydreaming, Yuu called out to him in a weird voice, grabbing Senkyo's attention.

"Yu~kou~sen~pai~!"

"Mm? What is it, Hisho-chan?"

Yuu picked up the food from her own bento with her chopsticks and held it out to Senkyo's mouth. She opened her mouth and said the following, "Yukou-senpai~! Say aaah..."

"Eh... Eh? EHHHH!!?"

Senkyo, who was completely and utterly shocked, shouted as loud as he could and immediately began to panic.

"Wait!? Wha? How? Why? H-Hisho-chan, w-what are you doing?"

"Can't you tell? I'm feeding you!"

"N-N-N-NO! I—WHAT'S GOTTEN INTO YOU ALL OF THE SUDDEN!?"

*"\*Wh-Wh-What the hell!? Did I accidentally say my thoughts out loud or something!? I was only joking!\*"*

With a mischievous smile, Yuu's face came closing into Senkyo's face. He reflexively backed up, but his whole body was unable to move from the shock which resulted in only his head moving back. Yuu went past Senkyo's head placing her mouth right beside Senkyo's ear, and whispering seductively into his ear,

"That's because... I love you, Yukou-senpai~"

"Wha... WHAA—"

"—AAATTT!!"

"Kya!?"

Senkyo let out the loudest howl he could possibly voice. Suddenly, he jerked off of the ground, getting up in a sitting position as he continued to howl. Noticing that his view changed, Senkyo looked around. He was only seeing a stream of water in front of him and the rest of nature beyond it. Now even more confused, Senkyo heard Yuu's voice coming from behind him.

"Jeez, senpai. What are you suddenly shouting for? Did you have a bad dream or something?"

"Eh?"

*"\*A bad... dream?\*"*

Senkyo quizzically turned his head around to face Yuu, confusion written all over his face. She heaved an exasperated sigh as she explained to him what happened.

"Yukou-senpai, you fell asleep while laying down on the grass. I don't know what dream you had but it's time to wake up."

"……"

Senkyo went into thinking, trying to recover the memories that matched Yuu's statement. After a few seconds of exercising his brain, Senkyo let out a quick "Ah..." as he finally remembered everything that happened.

Right after Senkyo finished lunch, he rolled around on the ground and laid on the grass while looking blankly at the blue sky. After a while, the refreshing breeze of the wind and the comforting grass got the better of him and fell asleep.

"Then... That means it was all a dream?"

Yuu quietly nodded, affirming Senkyo's conclusion.

"Hah... hahah... To think it was all just a dream..."

Senkyo played the image in his mind of Yuu confessing to Senkyo. It was an incredibly aggressive approach, unlike the usual Yuu, who would be too shy to pull off something like that.

"I should've known..."

With disbelief mixed into his voice, Senkyo heaved another big sigh, one mixed with disappointment, a lot of it. Taking all the strength away from his body, Senkyo closed his eyes and limply fell down from his sitting position and onto the ground, or so he thought.

"Ah, wait, senpai...!"

Instead of hitting the grass like he initially expected, Senkyo's head hit something soft instead. Curious about what the soft unknown object his head laid on was, he opened his eyes and was puzzled when he saw Yuu's blushing face staring at him from directly above him.

"Hm? Hisho...chan?"

Yuu stayed silent while suddenly averting her eyes in a different direction. Senkyo just woke up and regained his memories before he fell asleep. In those memories, he was certain that he fell asleep on the grass, but how does that explain the sight he was seeing right in front of him?

After having Senkyo's brain finally wake up from sleep, he finally realized his situation. When Senkyo jerked off the ground, neither he nor Yuu moved from their spot. If Senkyo simply lied back down then that would mean that Senkyo's head was placed there the entire time. And judging from Senkyo's perspective where he could see the underside of Yuu's chest, it could only mean one thing...

"A... lap pillow?"

Yes. A lap pillow. Senkyo could feel the sensation of Yuu's thighs wrapping around the back of his head. The view that Senkyo currently had was nothing short of exquisite. The body heat from Yuu that Senkyo was feeling only served to make his flushed face even hotter. Senkyo thought to take his head off immediately, but his young adolescent mind refused to listen and wanted to savor the sensation for even longer.

"Umm... H-Hisho-chan, why am I..."

"Er, umm... I..."

Feeling just as embarrassed as Senkyo was, Yuu kept stumbling on her words. After regaining some composure, Yuu was finally able to speak part of her mind, at least enough to explain the situation.

"This is... I read somewhere that you would get sick if you lay on the ground for too long... That wouldn't be good, so I thought of doing this 'lap pillow' thing I also read somewhere. Should I not have...?"

Yuu was misunderstanding one thing, that laying on a cold surface only increased the chances of getting a cold. Moreover, what she said only applied to cold surfaces like a tiled floor or hard cement. She didn't know that warm surfaces like the grass that bathed in the sun's light at some point in the day didn't quite count.

Although, she thought of what was best for Senkyo, making him incredibly happy. Spoiling the mood now by saying that she misunderstood had a bad ring in Senkyo's ears. So instead, he gave Yuu a bright smile, reached his arm out, and pet her head, along with saying the words...

"Thank you. I really appreciate it."

Yuu returned Senkyo's gesture with her own. She gave Senkyo a bright smile and looked at him with comforting eyes accompanied by a cute little giggle. Although the gesture seemed the same, to Senkyo, it was like the first time he saw the cherry blossoms in full bloom. Senkyo could feel his heart bursting out of his chest. He was afraid that his heartbeats were so loud that Yuu might hear them. Allured, he unconsciously leaked his thoughts into a low mumble.

"Cute..."

"Hm?"

Just before Yuu could process what Senkyo just said, a voice coming from above them caught their attention as Yuu and Senkyo were called out.

"I see, so you two really are a couple."

From atop the tree, Sora dropped down in front of Senkyo and Yuu. With his sudden appearance, Senkyo immediately got up in a panic.

**93 – Sora’s Suspicion**

"We-We're not a couple!"

"Really? Then what was that just now?"

"Th-That was..."

Senkyo couldn't think of a response and looked over to Yuu for help but unfortunately, she was burying herself in her jacket out of embarrassment. Seeing as Senkyo was unable to think of a response back, Sora set aside his teasing and went straight to the point.

"Well, I don't really care about that. What I do care about... is that."

Sora pointed to the shinai bag that was on the ground beside Yuu. Sensing the topic turned serious, Yuu peeked out of her jacket and held on to the shinai bag after pushing it behind her, hiding it from Sora's sight. Senkyo had a hunch about what Sora meant, but instead, he feigned ignorance as if he didn't get what Sora questioned him about it.

"What do you mean, Yamamoto-san...?"

"I think you know what I mean. If you didn't, you wouldn't be making an effort in hiding the Konjou clan's legendary sword from them, would you?"

Unfortunately, there was no bluffing himself out of there. Sora hit all the right spots, making it impossible to get out of. There was no point in dragging it out. Senkyo's only choice was to confront Sora.

"How did you know?"

"I did a bit of studying. Konjou Ryosei, the son of the former clan chief and the wielder of the legendary sword, Kuro Yaiba, died seven years ago in a car accident. He didn't have Kuro Yaiba on him, so the whole clan searched high and low to retrieve the sword but to no avail. To this day, the legendary blade was never found. Its scabbard had a red rose pattern with the blade had a strike of red down its blade, much like yours... or should I say it is the clan’s blade?"

Sora glared at Senkyo menacingly, an expression he never saw Sora make. Sensing the danger coming from Sora, Senkyo went on full alert. Planning ahead, Senkyo observed Sora's person, from what he could see, Sora was wearing the kunai belt he fought with the other day but he wasn't wearing his usual battle cloak. Other than the kunai belt, there was nothing else on him. However, Senkyo was still wary of hidden weapons within his clothes.

"So? What are you going to do?"

"I'm a reasonable guy, Yukou-kun. If you explain to me how and why you have Kuro Yaiba, I might think twice about cutting you down right now."

After hearing that, Senkyo knew Sora was after answers. He wasn't sure, but he theorized that Sora didn't tell everyone about this because he wanted to catch Senkyo in this particular situation. He gave Senkyo a chance to avoid more trouble if he just told the truth.

Although Sora can get the whole clan to keep quiet until Senkyo was deep within the clan's territory, he wouldn't be able to make every person hide the change in their attitude. At the very least, if he told anyone it would be only a handful amount of people that can keep their mouths shut. Seeing as Sora came here alone, he must've given this information to someone.

Senkyo and Ryosei's plan was to get stronger first. After that, then they would think about telling the truth to the Konjou clan, but that plan was completely derailed. Now that their secret had been revealed, Senkyo had to gain the Konjou clan's trust.

"Alright, I'll tell you..."

Time passed by, and it was already time to resume training with Dai, but even so, Senkyo continued to explain everything to Sora. He told Sora everything that happened thus far, about Ryosei, how they met, what Yuu really was, their time in the Spirit Realm—everything.

"Hmm..."

Sora was sitting down in front of Senkyo and Yuu, Senkyo just finished explaining their situation to Sora. Yuu held on to the shinai bag while Senkyo explained everything. With a puzzled face, Sora was trying to process everything that he just heard from Senkyo.

"So... you're telling me, the soul of Konjou Ryosei is living inside your body, and let you retrieve the blade from where it was hidden. After that, you met Hisho-chan, a vampire, after having an encounter with a werewolf, and now, she's following you around as your girlfriend?"

"That's about it... wait, I didn't say anything about that last part."

Sora scratched his head, troubled by the amount of information Senkyo just dumped on him in one go. He knew he was the one who asked for an explanation but to think there was this much stuff that Senkyo wanted to say. Sora told Senkyo a summary of what he understood and added a bit of his personal opinion there, looking for confirmation if he understood correctly.

"Nnn~~... Yeah, it won't do."

"What?"

Senkyo was surprised to hear that. A lot of things ran through Senkyo's mind like: did I not explain it properly? What won't do? Is there something else he wanted?

"No, no, you see, from the beginning, I wasn't really the best at listening. I'm more like someone who learns from doing it instead of reading kind of guy. I want you to show me concrete proof that everything you said was true. How about showing Konjou Ryosei? Surely if something as impossible as another soul inhabiting your body, you should be able to make something happen that can prove that.

“……”

Senkyo could only think of one possible way to be able to show Ryosei to him. After confirming that Ryosei could do it, Senkyo faced Sora.

“Alright, don’t move.”

“What!?”

All of the sudden, a small ball of flame appeared from Senkyo’s chest and flew through the air at speeds so fast that Sora didn’t even have the time to react. The ball of flame was absorbed in Sora’s head, and as a result of his panic, he fell backward onto his bottom. Not too long after, he fell asleep and got knocked out on the ground.

“Yukou-senpai!? What happened!?”

“I just sent Ryosei to invade his mind. Right now, he got forcefully envisaged by him. His conscious should be in the dream world with him.”

“Is that so…? Did you have to be so aggressive with him?”

“Well, as sorry as I am, there was no other choice. If Sora thought Ryosei’s spirit form was some sort of attack, there was no way he would let it touch him.”

“That makes sense. How long do we have to wait?”

“Not too long. As soon as Ryosei is finished, he should wake him up.”

**94 – The Words He Lives By**

*“\*Can you hear me?\*”*

“Who’s there?! Where am I?!”

Sora was in the middle of an open field. Green grass stretched out to the horizon and trees at the far distance. A voice he didn’t recognize echoed throughout the field. Sora was in his fighting stance, ready to attack with his kunai in hand.

*“\*You wanted proof I was really Konjou Ryosei, right? What else do you think I’m here for?\*”*

“Then show yourself!”

“I’m right here.”

Sora heard the voice coming from directly behind him. He threw all his kunai as he turned around to the source of the voice. He saw a humanoid figure and aimed all of his kunai at it.

*\*Snap!\**

But before the kunai could even reach the figure, the strings attached to them were severed.

“What!?”

“I’m trying to introduce myself. There is no need for weapons.”

Ryosei began to appear from thin air right in front of Sora. He looked at the figure he aimed at earlier and saw that it was slowly disappearing. It was an illusion set up beforehand. The sword that the real Ryosei in front of him was holding slowly disappeared as well. It was his way of showing he wasn’t here to fight.

“I’m Konjou Ryosei. Former… no, one of the wielders of Kuro Yaiba. And you are?”

“…Yamamoto Sora, a hunter of the enchanter class. It’s true that you look exactly like Konjou Ryosei, but how do I know that you’re not just disguising as him?”

“You’re a bit hard to please, I see. But that doesn’t matter. If you allow me, I can easily prove myself to you.”

“Then how would you do that?”

“By showing you a part of my memories. You just have to hold still without doing anything. If you can handle that, you will get the proof you’re looking for.”

“What? Do you think I’ll let my guard down?”

“That’s your decision. But I’m warning you, your body isn’t like Senkyo’s. If I don’t get out of here within a day, your soul will be destroyed.”

“You’re holding me hostage!? Why the hell would a legend of the Konjou clan do something so traitorous!? You’re planning on killing another hunter!”

“What? I never said anything about killing you. Before your time limit ends, I’ll just get out of your body. The problem lies with you. If you don’t trust me now, then can you really trust my word that I would leave your body by its time limit? Can you really afford to take such a chance?”

“Wh-What the… What’s with these underhanded tactics!? I heard you fell from grace and were exiled from the clan, but I never heard something like this!”

“Then let this be a lesson. On the battlefield, justice doesn’t always prevail. And in your life as a hunter of the Konjou clan, your goal isn’t to win battles with equality, it’s ‘to save as many lives as you can along with your own. As long as you live, you will save. And as long as you’re alive, you will continue to use your power to protect.’ Those are the words I followed as a hunter. Although it sounds hypocritical of me, would you not say you follow these words as well?”

“……”

Sora was left speechless, deciding what his next move was. He continued to stare at Ryosei looking for a hint to make the right move.

“…Fine. Do as you wish.”

Sora stood still as Ryosei approached him. Just as his head was about to make contact with Sora’s forehead, Ryosei muttered “There really isn’t any need for that kunai you’re hiding.”

Before Sora could draw the kunai from behind him, Ryosei made contact with Sora’s forehead and passed on some of his memories. Sora stood still as fragments of Ryosei’s mind were forcefully ingrained into him. Memories of his time as a hunter, the day of his death, his time as a bodyless spirit, his encounter with Senkyo, and his battles on the first time he entered the Spirit Realm. Parts of those events were shown to Sora.

“Well? Are you satisfied now?”

“…Alright. I believe you.”

“Perfect. See you in the real world.”

“Wait! What the hell is with that!? The new words you live by! What do you mean by ‘Repay debts, extinguish regrets, and protect everything at the cost of my life!?’”

His past motto and the current one were completely different. In the past, he talked about living as the best choice to be able to save lives, but his current one talked about risking his own life to achieve his goals.

“Oops, maybe I shared too much. Don’t bother trying to find out.”

“Wait!!”

Everything was covered in a blinding light. Sora’s head became fuzzy and tried to open his eyes. But in front of him, was no longer the open field, it was Senkyo and Yuu.

“Oh, you’re awake.”

“H-Huh? What happened?”

Sora slowly got up to a sitting position.

“I made Ryosei invade your mind. Sorry about that. But you believe us now, right?”

“Y-Yeah, but wait, Ryosei-san—”

Before Sora could continue his sentence, Senkyo cut him off and silenced him.

“I know. But that isn’t your business nor is it mine. Leave it for now, okay?”

Senkyo was talking like he saw everything that happened in his mind. But he could make a good guess on how that happened. If Ryosei could share his memories with him, then he would be able to do the same with Senkyo. Following Senkyo’s words, he stopped pursuing the subject.

“Fine.”

“Thanks.”

After determining that Senkyo wasn’t a threat, Sora swore to keep it a secret that he possessed the Kuro Yaiba. Now that Sora was satisfied, the three headed back to the training grounds where Dai would be waiting to train Senkyo. However, before they could leave the forest, someone clad in a black coat appeared in front of them. The first one to recognize that person was Sora.

"Is that... Touma-kun? Hey, Touma-kun!"

**95 – Rampage**

Sora called out to his childhood friend, but he didn't respond. Touma began to approach them. However, something about Touma didn't seem right. Sensing a bit of unease, Senkyo took the shinai bag from Yuu and put his guard up.

Looking at Touma closely, he was wearing the black coat that Senkyo first saw him wear when they encountered them in the Spirit Realm. Moreover, Touma had his katana mounted on his waist. In other words, he was in his battle gear.

"T-Touma-kun?"

"How disappointing, Sora."

"Eh?"

Sora was struck by surprise after hearing Touma's sudden remark.

"You really are too soft. You know that bastard stole the Konjou clan's legendary sword! Why are you walking leisurely beside them!? Why aren't you taking it back!?"

"Touma-kun, calm down!"

"Shut up! Are you going to lie to me, just like they did!? I knew it, I shouldn't have made friends with anyone at all! Every single one of you is just a backstabbing liar!"

Touma shouted in anger. He sounded furious, his voice dripping with rage. Touma wouldn't listen to anything that Sora said. Touma drew his katana. He dashed passed Sora, heading directly to Senkyo.

Senkyo, who was prepared for a sudden fight, switched with Ryosei and quickly drew Kuro Yaiba and tried to block Touma. But the sound of blades clashing never reached Ryosei's ears. Just before their swords made contact, Touma's image split into two, one going to his left side and one going to his right side.

"What!?"

To both of Ryosei's sides, Touma appeared with his sword ready to strike. Ryosei was about to dodge but he wasn't going to make it. Just as the blades were about to reach Ryosei, they were stopped in midair.

Touma passed Ryosei, finishing his strike, with a face puzzled at what blocked his blades. He clicked his tongue and took a stance in front of Ryosei. Little did Touma know that the reason for his strike being blocked was because of Shiro, who cast a barrier around Ryosei before he got hit.

"Yukou-senpai, are you alright!?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I was just a bit distracted. Saito-san—\**No use, huh?\*"*

Ryosei and Yuu stood off against Touma. With a proper face-off, Ryosei took stance while Yuu took position behind him, readying her attacks. Just as Ryosei was about to try and negotiate with Touma, he dashed towards them.

Ryosei intercepted Touma, dashing towards him and clashing blades. Staring each other down, he could see Touma's bloodlust eyes, staring at him with unusual anger.

Neither Senkyo nor Ryosei knew why Touma was so worked up. They would understand if he wanted to take them down because of fear of being an enemy, but that didn't seem to be the reason behind his actions.

Not a second longer, Ryosei jumped to the sky, leaving Touma on the ground. Touma immediately understood why Ryosei jumped when he saw a barrage of fireballs coming at him.

Touma slashed and dodged the incoming fireballs. When the coast was clear, Touma's focus was directed to Yuu, who was providing support from the rear.

Touma tried to change targets but was unable to when Ryosei appeared from his side. Touma went for a diagonal slash. But that was a fatal mistake. He didn't expect Ryosei to be so fast. He miscalculated the distance and gave Ryosei a huge opening.

Before Touma could even strike, Ryosei dashed below him and weaved his fist in between Touma's raised arms, and punched his chin, making him drop his sword and knocking him back, onto the ground.

Ryosei made the illusion that he was holding an exposed blade, but in reality, he was holding the sword while it was in its sheath. Ryosei went for a bare-handed attack and disabled Touma. That was Ryosei's aim in the first place. Killing Touma never crossed his mind.

Ryosei approached Touma incapacitated on the ground. He drew Kuro Yaiba and pointed it at Touma's neck, signaling the end of the battle.

"Why are you doing this? If you would just listen to Yamamoto-san, you would understand that I'm not a threat to the clan!"

Ryosei shouted at Touma. He was recovering from Ryosei's last blow and made contact with his eyes.

"Why... you say...? A threat to the clan, you say...? Heheheheh... Hahahaha!"

Touma began to laugh maniacally while placing his open hand to his face.

"Just so you know, I couldn't care less about the clan! I'm doing this to get stronger! Think about it! If I get the legendary sword, I'll get stronger! After all, all people do is betray others! In this evil and twisted world, the only way to survive in this world is by yourself! And I'll prove that I don't need anyone else right here!"

"Yukou-kun, watch out!"

Sora noticed that Touma was opening the gaps in his fingers, slowly revealing his right eye. Seeing that, Sora throws out a warning to Ryosei, but it was too late.

The gap in Touma's hand revealed not his eye, but a glowing white light. Realizing what it was, Ryosei hurriedly dodged but caused him to lose balance and ended up falling to the ground instead, releasing Touma from his sword. And then, a white ray of light came out from Touma's right eye, grazing Ryosei's shoulder as he dodged.

Having released from his lock, Touma picked up the sword that he dropped and went to attack Ryosei.

"I'll be taking your sword!!"

With Ryosei's sword misplaced from the fall, he was wide open, and couldn't block this strike. As Touma's blade was reaching Ryosei, another blade intercepted Touma.

"What!?"

Touma scanned Ryosei, but he could clearly see that his blade was still on the ground. He investigated the source of the new blade and saw Dai standing beside him.

"What are you doing, Touma-kun?"

"Tch...!"

Touma clicked his tongue and backed up. He was good with the sword but he wasn't better than Dai, he was aware of this fact and decided to retreat.

"'I couldn't care less about the clan, I'm doing this to get stronger,' is what you said, right? Those are some conceited words you said back there. If the other clan members knew of this, you would definitely be punished."

Touma began to panic. Dai heard everything he said from the start. That meant that he knew that Touma had no plans to return Kuro Yaiba back to the clan. Dai was one of the most respected people in the clan, no one would believe Touma if he tried to lie out of it. He was backed up to a corner, after a quick glance at Sora, who was looking at him worriedly, Touma ran into the forest, away from everyone else.

Dai stood still and didn't pursue Touma. Instead, he looked over to Ryosei who was holding the Konjou clan's long-lost legendary sword in his hand.

"Kuro Yaiba, huh? I haven't seen that blade in ages."

After examining Kuro Yaiba, Dai turned his gaze to Ryosei and pointed his sword at Ryosei's neck.

"I'll either have to cut your throat or you'll hand over that sword and come with me. Which one will it be?"

With a reluctant sigh, Ryosei sheathed Kuro Yaiba and handed it over to Dai.

"Good. I didn't want to have to kill one of my students. But... you have a lot of explaining to do."

Dai took out a cloth with ripples flowing through its surface and wrapped it around Ryosei's wrists. Strangely, the cloth seemed to be hard to take off, enough that handcuffs would be ashamed.

"Wait! Let go of Yukou-senpai!"

Yuu pushed away Dai and defended Ryosei. Noticing the unusual strength from her push, Dai couldn't help but comment about it.

"Oh? You might not look like it but you're powerful."

"It's okay, Hisho-chan. We'll be fine, trust me."

"But...!"

Ryosei gave Yuu a reassuring look to calm her down. Although a bit reluctantly, Yuu stepped away from Dai, instead she stayed by Ryosei's side. Seeing as there were no more obstacles, Dai escorted Ryosei to the castle.

Having not moved in place, Sora was still staring into the forest where Touma left them. His face was filled with worry for his friend that ran away. Dai called out to Sora.

"Hey, Sora-kun! You're also coming with us, you know!"

"Ah, sorry, I'm coming!"

**96 – Trial**

All of them were escorted to the castle. After a few hours of waiting in a cell, Senkyo, Yuu, and Sora were brought into a huge room with desks connected into a huge circle. The two were brought to the center of the interconnected desks like some kind of hearing.

The desks were all filled with aged men, also known as the Elders, and on the desk in front of them, was Konjou Yousuke, who had Kuro Yaiba placed in front of him. Dai Yamazaki sat to the left of Yousuke, while Konjou Kaede, who looked worried about the situation, sat to the right side of her brother.

Yousuke was the first to speak.

"I'm sure word was already spread, but to those who do not know, the boy before us, Yukou Senkyo, has been found in possession of the Konjou clan's legendary sword, Kuro Yaiba."

Everyone around the table had serious looks, but the moment Yousuke mentioned Kuro Yaiba most of the elders were in shock. None of them spoke to interrupt the clan chief and held their tongues.

"Furthermore, he claims that he possesses the soul of the former holder of the Kuro Yaiba, Konjou Ryosei, living inside his body. I could not take this any other way but a great insolence to the dead."

Seemingly holding back his anger, Yousuke continued to speak.

"Yukou Senkyo, explain yourself right this moment!"

Yousuke was a patient man. But it looks like hearing Ryosei get disgraced was what set him off. Everyone's gaze was directed to Senkyo. After an audible gulp, Senkyo steeled himself and began speaking.

"I am not lying. Everything you have mentioned is the truth. The reason why I—"

*\*Bang!\**

A loud noise caught everyone's attention. As they turned to see what the cause of it was and saw Yousuke who dropped his fist on the table.

"WHY DO YOU PERSIST WITH THIS FARCE!? DO YOU HONESTLY BELIEVE THAT ANYONE WOULD ACCEPT THIS STORY OF YOURS!?"

Yousuke let all his anger out. His words echoed loud and clear in everyone's ears. His voice filled with anger with a hint of sadness. Kaede, who was sitting beside him, shouted to oppose Yousuke.

"Clan chief! I can vouch for him! Yukou-san is not lying about anything!"

"Kaede... what?"

Yousuke calmed down slightly after hearing Kaede’s words.

“I read Yukou-san’s memories and everything that he said was the truth. About Ryosei-nii-chan, and the fact that he lives in his body.”

Everyone couldn’t believe what they were hearing. The soul of the former wielder of the Kuro Yaiba was in their presence and was living inside another person.

"I-I would like to vouch for Yukou-kun as well. Just earlier, I met the real Konjou Ryosei when he invaded my mind."

“Invaded? What do you mean by that?”

A person from the elders sought an explanation for Sora’s statement.

“When I discovered about the Kuro Yaiba, I threatened Yukou-kun to explain himself by using his secret as a bargaining chip.”

“On your own actions!? Why did you not report this to your superiors?”

“Sir! I reported my findings to Yamazaki Dai-sensei, but I declined Yamazaki-sensei’s order to report it any further due to Yukou-kun being an unknown threat at the time. I determined it was the best course of action to be taken care of as soon as possible. I apologize for neglecting to follow proper procedures! I am prepared to take the consequences of my actions!”

The elders along with Yousuke and Kaede turned to Dai and he nodded in response, confirming Sora’s claim. Just as Yousuke was about to speak, the door to the room slammed open. As it did, revealed Itsuki who was trying to be held back by two guards.

"What the fuck is going on in here!?"

"Watanabe-san!?"

"Watanabe-kun!?"

"Watanabe-senpai!?"

Itsuki stomped furiously into the room. The two guards that were trying to hold him back only served to slow him down, but not enough to completely stop him. Senkyo, Sora, and Yuu let out surprised voices as they stared dumbfoundedly at his dramatic courtroom break-in.

"Oi! Over there, you bastard! What do you mean you're locking that Shittaku up!? He said the truth, didn't he!? What the hell is there to talk about in here!?"

While still trying to be held back by two guards, and their attempt being embarrassingly useless, Itsuki shouted at Yousuke. Everyone including Yousuke was perplexed by the sudden commotion. After a bit of mental processing, Yousuke signaled the two guards to step back and gave permission to let Itsuki in.

"Watanabe-kun, you said that Yukou-kun told the truth, am I right? Then that means that you saw something that proves him to have Konjou Ryosei's soul inside his body, or are you simply claiming that without any proof whatsoever?"

"Of course, I've seen it! He suddenly changed personalities in front of me! Do you really think this guy is capable of doing something like that!?"

Even though Itsuki was defending Senkyo, Senkyo felt a bit attacked when Itsuki basically said that he wasn't capable of tricking him.

"Oh? Is that so? But even if we assume that he really has Konjou Ryosei's soul inside him, that isn't the only thing keeping him in here, you know?"

"I know, I heard it too. It's that this shorty is a vampire, isn't it?"

Another commotion came from the people sitting at the desks around them. A vampire—a race from Zerid that very rarely appears on Earth. Even in the Konjou clan's history, there have only been about 3 to 5 vampires that appeared in their areas.

Yuu shrunk back behind Senkyo, trying to hide from the furious stares of the Elders. Senkyo placed his arm around Yuu, giving her the comfort of his protection.

"Yeah, I had to beat up a few people before getting all the information, but I got it. And all I have to say to that is... what the fuck is wrong about that!?"

Everyone's attention turned to Itsuki.

"She's just a girl, isn't she? Are you old bastards telling me that you'll kill her just because she's a vampire? Isn't that just racism!? Have any of you even tried talking to the vampires you met? I bet not."

"Watanabe-senpai..."

Yuu peeked out of her hiding for a bit. She gave Itsuki a surprised look and so did Senkyo. They never told Itsuki anything about Yuu being a vampire. At first, they'd thought Itsuki would be too conflicted so they tried to hide that from him, but clearly, that wasn't the case.

"Are you an idiot? If you tried to talk to a vampire, you would get your blood sucked in an instant!"

A person from the Elders cried out.

"It's because of that thinking that they attack in the first place! How about I take a fist to your face and try to knock some sense into you!"

"Why you...!"

"QUIET! ALL OF YOU!"

**97 – Judgement**

Just before everything got any more out of control, Yousuke slammed his fist into the desk. Now that he had everyone’s attention, he proceeded to speak.

“Of the Konjou clan, two people are vouching for Konjou Ryosei’s existence within Yukou Senkyo. If these statements are true, then you would have a way to prove his existence to us. If you fail to do so, then all that side with Yukou Senkyo will receive punishment. No exceptions will be accepted.”

Yousuke faced Kaede as he announced his last line. He was warning her that if she continued down this path and failed, then she would also be punished. However, Kaede did not falter.

Senkyo had to prove Ryosei’s existence but it wasn’t possible to prove him the same way he proved him to Kaede and Sora. He had to give proof of Ryosei to a whole audience at the same time. Fortunately, Senkyo and Ryosei already thought about what to do beforehand. Before they even made contact with the Konjou clan, they thought about this exact moment. It was an inevitable event for him since he required the Konjou clan’s power.

“Alright. Then I’ll leave this to Ryosei.”

Senkyo switched with Ryosei.

"Yo, You-chan. Long time no see. Too bad our first reunion was in this place, huh?"

Ryosei addressed Yousuke in a casual manner like he always did. But he was unimpressed. Yousuke kept quiet without a reaction waiting for that concrete evidence that proved Ryosei’s existence. Such greetings weren’t enough. That was to be expected.

Proceeding further, a plain cloth dropped from Ryosei's back. It was the same cloth that Dai used to constrict him earlier. But this time, the ripples on its surface were nowhere to be seen.

"He disenchanted it!?"

Dai voiced out in a surprised tone. That was because disenchanting was a technique that removes all or specific enchantments on a vessel. It was a mid-level skill that required precision. Disenchanting wasn't as easy as enchanting, depending on the complexity of the enchantment it could either be as easy as untying a shoelace or as hard as trying to untie the Gordian Knot.

Ignoring Dai, Ryosei directed his hand towards Kuro Yaiba. The desk in front of Yousuke began to shake. He turned in front of him and saw the red design on Kuro Yaiba began to glow. Looking at it carefully, Kuro Yaiba was the one making the desk shake. And not a second later, Kuro Yaiba quickly flew through the air and landed directly in Ryosei's hand.

"Then... that means..."

"Yeah... Kuro Yaiba recognizes him as its wielder."

"……"

Everyone in the room was silenced. Everybody in the room knew exactly what that meant.

"Let me reintroduce myself I am Konjou Ryosei. Nice to see you again!"

Everybody was in the middle of processing what was happening in front of them. If they recognize that the boy in front of them was in fact Konjou Ryosei, then they would also be forced to accept that more than one soul was somehow able to be housed in a single body. Before anyone could even finish processing, Yousuke raised his voice.

"Wait! I will recognize that you are chosen by Kuro Yaiba, but there is one more thing that I want to see..."

"Clan chief! Don't you think that's enough? Kuro Yaiba itself recognizes him as its wielder! The only person ever recognized by it was Ryosei-nii-chan!"

Kaede interrupted Yousuke, giving him a share of her thoughts. Yousuke looked understandingly at Kaede.

"I understand what you mean. But I am the clan chief of the Konjou clan. I must take wise action in every decision, especially something major like this one. The fact that the blade, Kuro Yaiba recognizes Yukou Senkyo as its wielder is unmistakable. However, we do not even know whether the blade can choose another wielder or not after the former wielder’s death. As the Konjou clan’s current chief, as well as Konjou Ryosei’s close cousin, I will test you one last time."

Yousuke made a sound argument, but he also revealed that even the Konjou clan didn’t know the true capabilities of the Kuro Yaiba. He determined that it was currently impossible to confirm Ryosei’s existence through Kuro Yaiba’s functions, so he decided to take matters into his own hands.

"You, who claim to be my cousin, Konjou Ryosei, will participate in the upcoming 'Hunter Battle Royale' and take the winning spot. But with an extra hurdle. You and your team will be the main targets of all the other teams. If you fail to do so, I will not recognize you as Konjou Ryosei and punish you for claiming so."

Everyone from the Konjou clan turned in shock. It was something that was never done in the Konjou clan’s history before. Ryosei knew exactly what it meant and understood the difficulty, but he didn’t flinch.

"Is that alright? You know, this body is still Senkyo's. It still can't handle most of my techniques. A test to see my fighting style is useless."

Ryosei said so in a nonchalant tone. He wasn't worried one bit.

"That is fine. After all, this isn't a test of skill, this will be a test of Konjou Ryosei. Surely, if you are truly him, you know what that means, right?"

"You got it!"

Soon after that, the hearing was dismissed with Senkyo and his companions tasked to take on the Hunter Battle Royale.

**Chapter 6: Days of Preparation**

**98 – Hunter Battle Royale**

*\*Ding, dong!\**

"Oh, you're early, Watanabe-san. That's a bit surprising, come in."

Senkyo responded to the doorbell's ring and opened the front door. The person who notified him of their arrival was Itsuki. He had his hands in the front pockets of the orange jacket that he wore yesterday. Itsuki entered the house and was directed by Senkyo to head to the living room as he closed the door behind him. Upon entering the room, Itsuki found Yuu sitting on the sofa with a leisurely expression.

"Ah, you're finally here, Watanabe-senpai."

"Yeah, Ichika wouldn't get off my back so I came early. But..."

Itsuki sat on the seat opposite to Yuu and scrutinized her before continuing what he was about to say.

"Never mind me. If I'm early, then what time did you get here? It's still an hour before we were supposed to meet y’know? Do you live here or somethin’? You don't look nervous at all."

"W-Well, this isn't the first time I came here and Yukou-senpai didn’t mind so I thought I'd come in early."

"That so...?"

Senkyo entered the living room and offered Itsuki some tea but he quickly denied it. He wanted to get straight to the point.

"Never mind that. More importantly, where is that ghost friend of yours?"

"Yeah, he's coming—always impatient, aren't you, Itsuki-san."

Senkyo switched with Ryosei immediately. To everyone else around them, it just looked like he continued talking after a short pause. But it was actually what separated Senkyo and Ryosei from speaking. If it weren’t for how they talk and call other people, no one would be able to tell if it was Senkyo or Ryosei actually speaking.

"No one asked for your opinion."

"Guess so. Well, now that everyone's here, let's begin the meeting. I'd like to explain what the Hunter Battle Royale is..."

The Hunter Battle Royale. It is an annual tradition that the Konjou Clan holds to test their hunters' skills and teamwork. Teams are spread around the mountain and fight each other until only one team remains standing. A team can consist of two to five hunters—a standard party. The last team standingwins.

Participants are given battle gear and spirit weapons as their equipment for the event. Spirit weapons are special weapons crafted by the clan’s blacksmiths. They do not come in contact with physical objects like bodies or swords, but instead, they hit intangible objects like the soul. Hunters can apply the same effect to their weapons by using their spirit power which allows them to fight evil spirits.

The Konjou Clan uses spirit weapons in these kinds of events to avoid injury or accidents. Although one might think that, instead of a physical injury, they'll take some kind of injury to their spirit. But those worries were unfound, as the spirit weapons they provide can only knock someone out at full power. Even if someone were to hack and slash someone a million times with those weapons, they would only end up knocked out and would wake up in a few moments. Once a participant is knocked out, they are eliminated from the battle.

With the arrival of Fighters and Casters, classes that use mana instead of spirit power, special battle gear was given to participants. The battle gear protects the wearer from mana-infused attacks. Battle gear used in the battle royale is much flimsier than official battle gear. Once a participant’s battle gear is destroyed, they are eliminated from the battle.

Aside from surrendering, those two are the only ways to eliminate participants. Judges prepared for the event to watch for any violations. The moment a person violates the rules, they are taken away and disqualified.

A person is chosen as a leader of a party. That person serves as the main hub for the whole team’s communication line. The connect skill is what allows mental communication by connecting one person to another. To relieve strain on inexperienced hunters, party members only connect themselves to the party leader. Every party member can communicate with each other as long as they are connected to the party leader. Of course, it creates more strain on the party leader. When the person everyone is connected to is knocked out or loses focus, the connection line is severed.

There are experienced parties that can connect themselves to each and every member. It creates the same amount of strain on each member, but it allows them to maintain the communication line even if the leader is incapacitated. However, in the battle royale, every party is forced to only connect to the leader. This balances the competition by allowing a way for a party to become disorganized. If a leader is incapacitated, the members are not allowed to reconstruct their communication line.

In this particular battle royale, Yousuke said that Senkyo and the others will be the main targets of every party member. Whichever party eliminates Senkyo and the others first, they will win. If multiple parties contribute to Senkyo’s defeat, they are sent to fight each other in one last death match. Parties have the option of attacking other parties besides Senkyo’s but they do will not win unless they defeat or contributes to Senkyo’s demise.

"So it’s safe to say that everyone will be after us... then Yukou-senpai is going to be the leader, right?"

Yuu seemed to care more about who was going to be the leader than the horde of hunters going after them. But before he could respond, Itsuki cut him off.

"Of course not! I'll be the leader! I'm way stronger than Shittaku."

Yuu's eyebrow twitched a bit, showing the irritation she felt when Itsuki said that about Senkyo. Soon after, a fight began.

"How can you be so arrogant! Yukou-senpai is much smarter and stronger than you think! Actually, you saw how Yukou-senpai fought in the abandoned building, right? How can you say that when you saw him yourself?"

"Shut up, Shorty! That was probably his ghost friend controlling his body. What? Can you tell the difference between the two?"

"Th-There was a difference... you know, when Yukou-senpai..."

As Yuu and Itsuki continued arguing, Senkyo talked with Ryosei.

*"\*Ah... they're at it again. Aren't you going to stop them?\*"*

*"\*Maybe a bit longer. It doesn't seem like they're really fighting anyway.\*"*

*"\*Stop acting cool. You noticed it too, didn't you?\*"*

*"\*How could I not? I can see what you see. Although I can't hear what you're thinking right now, I can still figure this one out myself. Not to mention that I can read your emotions. Hisho-chan and Itsuki-san are finally opening themselves to each other. It looks like your job as a medium isn't going to be needed anymore.\*"*

*"\*Who would've thought things would turn out like this? The person who used to be my bully turned out to be a pretty nice guy with a superiority and sister complex, and the first-ever underclassman I ever talked to is actually a vampire from another world. What's more, is that they've become our teammates who'll fight by our side.\*"*

*"\*You did this, you know? You made a choice that brought this unlikely band of people together.\*"*

*"\*Don't be silly. I'm no protagonist. There's no way my single choice would make this much of a change. I don't control people's lives; they have their own. The reason things ended up like this is because of everyone's choices; not a single person's.\*"*

*"\*It really is like you to say that...\*"*

Ryosei put an end to their conversation along with Yuu and Itsuki’s arguing.

"Alright, alright, it's time to stop. We don't have any more time to waste. Come on, follow me."

"Hm? Where to?"

Yuu questioned Ryosei, speaking for both herself and Itsuki. Ryosei quickly turned around to answer Yuu.

"To a secret base."

**99 – Fragments of Home**

Yuu and Itsuki followed Ryosei, who was taking them to his "secret base." After hearing the word, Itsuki was already trying to guess it, an abandoned building, an abandoned train, an abandoned ship, and even guessed the sewers. Ryosei and Yuu were a bit puzzled about Itsuki's love for abandoned stuff but before long, they decided to ignore him.

Ryosei lead them through town and through a familiar route that they took to get to the Konjou clan. Itsuki, who noticed the familiarity, raised his voice.

"Hey, isn't this the path to the Konjou clan? You remember we aren't allowed there, right?"

Yesterday, it was decided that Senkyo and his whole party are not allowed to enter the Konjou clan until the day of the event. They were told that the Konjou clan wouldn't help Senkyo in training anymore. So right now, they were all on their own. Thankfully, Ryosei already had a backup plan.

"I know that."

"Then why are we here?"

"Just follow me."

"Grr..."

Ryosei refused to explain to Itsuki, which got him a bit annoyed. After reaching the foot of the mountain, instead of their usual route, they immediately went off-road. The three of them weaved through trees and shrubs, taking a route that would be confusing and hard to remember. After reaching a certain point, Ryosei stopped.

"We're here."

Yuu and Ryosei looked around, but there was nothing in sight but trees. Although Itsuki looked a bit confused, Yuu remembered a recent memory that was similar to the situation at hand.

"Could it be that it's hidden by fog again?"

"Correct. There's a strong illusion barrier in front of us. This one is actually stronger than the Konjou clan's barrier."

"It's stronger? Is there something more important through here?"

"...Well, to us, it was."

"...?"

Ryosei walked in front of Yuu and Itsuki and told them to hold onto him. They did as they were told, placed both of their hands on either of Ryosei's shoulders, and walked forward. A thick fog suddenly appeared. A strange feeling welled up inside Yuu and Itsuki to let go and turn around. It was like a sweet voice was urging them to leave the whole mountain entirely.

Ryosei stepped back and supported both Yuu and Itsuki with his arms and forced them to walk forward. After a while, the fog slowly cleared up. Yuu and Itsuki felt a bit drained. They weren't physically tired, but it took a lot of their mental fortitude to get through the fog.

"Th-That didn't feel anything like last time..."

"What the hell...? Are you tryin' to kill us?"

Yuu and Itsuki voiced their thoughts as they tried to catch their breath. It seems like it really did a number on them.

"Far from my intention. I told you, didn't I? This barrier is stronger than the Konjou Clan's."

"No doubt..."

Yuu turned her focus from Ryosei to the space behind him. There, she saw a smashed-up house that looked like it could come crashing down at any moment. It was the same house Senkyo first entered to retrieve Kuro Yaiba. That time in the forest, Ryosei took control of Senkyo's body and came here.

"Whoa, I was right! It's an abandoned house!"

Itsuki shouted in excitement. Ryosei walked in front of Yuu and Itsuki. As if introducing a tourist site, Ryosei raised his arms and presented them to the house.

"Welcome, to my house... or at least what's left of it, hahaha..."

Ryosei laughed awkwardly and scratched the back of his head. He walked towards it while signaling Yuu and Itsuki to follow him. He walked up to the front door and pried the door open.

"Whoa, it's harder to open than last time."

"Um... Ryosei-san, are we really going in there? It seems very unstable."

"Yeah, I don't want to get buried in wood."

Yuu and Itsuki were doubtful about entering. It was only reasonable that they did. The house didn't look like it would last another day. Fortunately, Ryosei reassured them.

"Don't worry, we aren't going inside. I was just testing its condition from last time."

"Last time? You've been here with Yukou-senpai before?"

"Yeah, when I came to get Kuro Yaiba. It's been stored here the whole time so no one else could find it. After all, the barrier around this space was created by my mother, Konjou Reiko, also known as, God's Enchantress."

"God's Enwhatsit? What's that?"

Answering Itsuki's question, Ryosei explained.

"My mother, The God's Enchantress, is the one who created the Konjou clan's illusion barrier. She was a prodigy of enchanting. She could make incredibly complex and intricate enchantments that baffled the whole clan. At first, we hid in the mountains without the illusion barrier. But when my mom saw that as a problem, she holed up in her research room for almost a month and created the barrier. She was an incredibly talented hunter and a loving mother..."

For a few seconds, Yuu and Itsuki remained silent as Ryosei reminisced about the past. Ryosei explained how after planning this out with her husband, Reiko created an illusion barrier much more powerful than the original one that surrounded the clan. The barrier was so potent that even an experienced hunter wouldn’t even notice. No one but Ryosei and his parents knew about this place.

They used it as a kind of home away from home. Here, they trained and spent time with each other as a family, out of reach from the responsibilities of the clan. Ryosei valued this place deeply. Putting his feelings aside, he explained the reason why he brought them there.

**100 – Gruesome Week**

"In here, all five of us will train for the upcoming event."

"Five? There's only three of us here."

Itsuki says so as he counts everyone present. But, he neglected to count the ones that weren't in a physical form.

"Have you already forgotten that Ryosei-san and Shiro-san live inside of Yukou-senpai, Watanabe-senpai?

"...Oh yeah, now that you mention it, I forgot that was a thing. Well, it's their fault for being ghosts."

"Shiro isn't a ghost!"

A voice coming from Senkyo's body reached everyone's ears. Senkyo’s voice doesn’t change despite who was in control of the body. But this one was completely different. That was because it wasn't Senkyo's, it was his familiar, Shiro.

A bright light came out of Senkyo's chest and formed the shape of a girl with cat ears and a tail in front of everyone. The light slowly dissipated and revealed Shiro. She was in the outfit she usually wore, a white robe with cat ear pockets, brown shorts, knee-high socks, and a choker. She wore a pouting face as she stared at Itsuki.

"Shiro isn't a ghost, she's a familiar. So stop calling her that!"

"Whoa, what!?"

Itsuki took a step back when he saw Shiro's sudden appearance. Yuu, however, didn't seem fazed. In fact, Yuu stared at Shiro with a bit of an intrigued look. Yuu took a step closer to Shiro and scrutinized her.

"Wow... this is the first time I've actually seen a familiar manifest from their owner, what's more, is that she can manifest by herself, why is that? I heard that familiars can only be summoned if they're told by their masters but she just came out of her own."

"Fufufu! amazing, isn't it? This is because of Onii-chan's order!"

"Yukou-senpai's order...?"

Wondering just what kind of order that was, Yuu stared at Senkyo with a querying look. Senkyo, who didn't see a reason to hide the fact, told her what it was. Ryosei switched with Senkyo to answer her properly.

"It was when we first met in my dream. Shiro kept calling me 'Master,' and I became a bit uncomfortable, so I told her to have her own free will and not be restricted by the pact or any kind of magic."

"Whoa... I never knew you could order your familiar like that."

"Yeah, well, because of that, the moment I got back home from the first time we returned from the Konjou clan, she suddenly showed up and jumped me. It happens a few times too but I don't really mind, so I guess it's fine."

"I see..."

Yuu gazed at Shiro with even more curiosity than before. Meanwhile, on Shiro's side, although she boasted about Senkyo earlier, she slowly became a bit uncomfortable and slowly backed up. Getting the conversation back on track, Ryosei took back control and got everyone's attention.

"Okay, back to what we were talking about. The five of us are going to train here for the Hunter Battle Royale. Although, each of us have our own power, but as a team... no, I take it back. Even as a team, we don't have enough knowledge and skill to confidently fend everyone off."

Ryosei began to point out everyone's strengths and weaknesses. He pointed at each person as he called out their name.

"Hisho-chan, although you're powerful with magic, have you ever thought about close combat?"

"No... that didn't really cross my mind. I tried melee combat before, but I can't say I'm good at it."

"Itsuki-san, you've been doing well on Dai's training, but as of right now, you're still a beginner. You still lack experience."

"You don't have to tell me."

"Shiro, you're a great healer and supported us the whole time, not to be mean or anything, but that's as far as you can do. In terms of combat, you're useless."

"Nnn~ Shiro knows that, but she doesn't like it when you say that in Onii-chan's body..."

"And as for me and Senkyo, we lack coordination. We will probably be able to use both Senkyo's enchanter abilities and my fighter abilities at the same time, but we are nowhere near used to that. In fact, we haven't even tried it."

"Don't you think you're forgetting something?"

Shiro peered questionably at Ryosei as she asked that.

"Hm? What do you mean?"

"Figures you don't remember. That time when that grumpy guy with the sword shot a light beam at you. You didn't have to dodge that, you know? Shiro could have just protected you with a barrier."

Ryosei searched his recent memories, looking for someone with the definition of a "grumpy guy with a sword," and came out with Touma. That time, Ryosei dodged his light beam in a panic, causing him to give Touma a huge opening.

"Oh... I see."

When Ryosei thought about it carefully, Shiro's barrier managed to fend off even Fulgur, The Lightning Leader's attacks. Compared to that, the light beam would've been absolutely nothing.

"That's my bad. Then, coordination training between the three of us would also be needed."

"You bet! Onii-chan and Shiro will always be together—U-Uwaah!!"

As Shiro was puffing her chest out with confidence, she was pushed away to the side by Itsuki.

"W-What was that for, you brute!?"

"Shut up, Furball."

"Why you..."

Itsuki ignored Shiro's menacing gaze and faced Ryosei.

"Well, how do you plan on training us and filling up these gaps?"

"Senkyo will be the one explaining to you that."

Ryosei gave the control back to Senkyo. Although it looked like nothing changed for everyone else.

"Is everybody listening?"

Senkyo surveyed the three people in front of him and received silent nods from everyone, affirming their correspondence.

“The objective given to is the test of Konjou Ryosei, which means—to surpass expectations. And to do that, I need all of you to do the same. Here's my plan. First, Yuu will..."

After a lengthy talking, Senkyo gave everyone their training plan. Since they only had a week to use, they had to fit as much practice as possible in that one week. After that meeting, began the gruesome week of training that Senkyo and the others had to face.

For the first three days, each day they invested their time in training individuals. On times when someone had nothing they could do to help train another person, they would train on their own, or have someone else that was available to help them.

For that Sunday, it was settled that they would train Yuu and Shiro for their melee combat. Ryosei, Senkyo, and Itsuki taught them all about the basics of what they knew. Itsuki taught them about hand-to-hand combat, while Ryosei taught them how to fight with weapons, specifically a sword. Surprisingly, Itsuki had a history with karate which made it a valuable lesson for both girls and even for Senkyo who was watching from the side.

This was done all the while training Itsuki's combat skills. Ryosei trained Itsuki’s combat skills in times when Yuu and Shiro fought one-on-one. Meanwhile, Senkyo and Ryosei would try and practice switching and reacting to each other’s actions.

On the next day, they focused to train Itsuki. Ryosei had tested Itsuki's limits from the other day and decided on how to teach him the secret art that he never wrote in text when he was alive.

Ryosei only shared this technique with one other person, but they swore that they would never teach their technique to anyone unless they had his permission. So they had no problems having someone else use it on the day of the battle.

While that was happening, Yuu and Shiro taught each other and shared each other's knowledge about magic and how they used it. Yuu taught Shiro about how and when to cast combat magic and how to fight with it. On the other hand, Shiro taught Yuu about how to create stronger, wider, barriers and healing as well as other support magic. This included the distance at which the barrier could be cast.

On the day after that, it was Senkyo and Ryosei's time to train. They tested just how fast they could react the moment they switched with the other. They aimed to better their coordination and unlock amazing combos.

They later had Shiro train with them and try to see to what extent they could combine all their skills. While that was happening, Yuu was helping Itsuki out on the missions Ryosei sent him out to do.

And finally, the last four days would be used to train how they fight together as a team and their strategy on how to win the Hunter Battle Royale. One of the practices they did was allowing everyone to suddenly attack anyone in the team and enter battle.

Breaks and being in public were an exception, but other than that, any time of the day someone was allowed to sneak attack someone else.

On one of the times, Itsuki would suddenly use his secret arts and attack Senkyo. This would enhance their combat instincts and others' presence. They would make themselves used to sneak attacks, helping them reduce the chances that they would get snuck on themselves on the day of the battle. Senkyo particularly struggled with this one since Itsuki would always have his eye on him. And worse yet, Ryosei wasn’t willing to help him, so he received more than just a few beatdowns.

After having various experiences and situations handed to them, they finally reached the fourth day of their training week. Wednesday. Senkyo, Ryosei, Shiro, Yuu, and Itsuki finally finished yesterday's individual training. During the school days, there was training they could do while in class, so they used that to their advantage. And after class, they headed straight for Ryosei's hidden house on the mountain.

Unlike when they trained in the Konjou clan, they didn't have any teleportation points set up, so they had to walk every day there. Fortunately, Ryosei's home wasn't too high up the mountain, and took them only sometime over 30 minutes to get from school to Ryosei's house.

**101 – In-Class Training**

And now, the rise of a new day finally came. The end of their three-day individual/pairs training, and the start of their team training. Senkyo was heading out of his house with the usual shinai bag on his shoulder. As he was walking, he saw Kinro walking ahead of him, on his way to school. To pay him back for what he usually does, Senkyo snuck behind Kinro's back and gave him a light tap.

"Yo! Good morning."

"Whoa!? O-Oh, Senkyo, good morning. You surprised me there..."

Kinro didn't know, but Senkyo was over 20 meters away from him. To get to him, Senkyo went to a run, but he didn't make the slightest sound. Like a predator hunting down its prey, or an assassin committing their deed, Senkyo tapped Kinro's back with no trace of his presence, making it all the more surprising.

In the small cervices of free time the five of them had, Ryosei was able to give them some extracurricular activities and taught them a simple trick to move fast but silently. They had a hard time at first, but it was obvious they trained in their free time. Because yesterday, everyone was able to use that skill properly.

Silent Blows. It uses a small amount of spirit power to create a sound barrier around a point of contact. It traps the sound inside the barrier, preventing it from reaching anyone’s ears.

"That's payback for last time."

"Is that so? Then I'll pay you back tenfold next time."

"We'll see if you can try."

Kinro gave Senkyo a rueful smile. He thought about how he was about to get a heart attack from that. Senkyo and Kinro headed to school together, having their usual exchange and catching up with each other.

The two of them reached the classroom and put down their bags. Senkyo looked beside him over to Yukai, who he greeted when he first arrived. Over the past few days, up until today, Senkyo noticed that she was a bit troubled. It was written all over her face but Senkyo never brought it up. She kept her head down on the desk and kept moving around restlessly.

Yukai looked over to Senkyo and immediately averted her eyes. Seeing as he most likely had something to do with her current behavior, Senkyo prompted to talk to Yukai.

"Um, Yutei-san? Is there something you want to talk about? You've been acting weird these past few days."

"Wh-What do you mean? I don't have anything to talk about..."

Yukai said so all the while having the back of her head turned to Senkyo.

*"\*I definitely did something...\*"*

*"\*Way to go, Shittaku.\*"*

Senkyo looked over to Itsuki who was staring at him from his seat. His mouth didn't open and he didn't speak, but Senkyo heard his voice loud and clear.

Even after how many times Senkyo pestered Yukai about what was wrong with her, she refused to answer. Resigned to the fact, Senkyo stepped back and left her alone. But not without saying a few parting words.

"If you want to talk about it, just call me. I'll listen to what you have to say."

As Senkyo backed up, without him seeing, Yukai took a sneaky glance at Senkyo. After that, nothing else happened and the teacher entered the classroom and began class.

"Okay, as you can see here. You can apply the formula and finally..."

In the middle of class, Senkyo was listening to the lesson the teacher was teaching. He had a notebook in front of him, but he showed no signs of writing on it. Just as he was immersing himself in the teacher's lesson, he heard Itsuki's voice come out of nowhere.

*"\*Hey, Shittaku! What the hell is this guy saying?\*"*

*"\*He's teaching the lesson, what about it?\*"*

*"\*That's not what I meant! Answer me seriously before I come over there and beat you into a pulp!\*"*

*"\*I got it, I got it. Just stop shouting in my mind.\*"*

This mysterious exchange inside Senkyo's head was a part of their training. Right now, Senkyo and Itsuki were communicating through the Connect skill. To have better communication in battle, they began using the Connect skill since the start of the week. They used it for trivial and mostly useless things, but the fact that they kept using it and were getting accustomed to it was great. Even though right now, Senkyo was being threatened through mind-talk, he still considered this to be progress.

As Senkyo finished explaining the lesson to Itsuki though Connect, another person joined the line. Yuu, who wasn't even present in the room, was able to Connect and talk with Senkyo, despite being one floor below them.

*"\*U-Um... Sorry to bother you, Yukou-senpai, but what does...\*"*

At first, Yuu and Shiro had trouble using Connect since they had mana inside them. Although their spirit power wasn't non-existent, they had a hard time drawing it out. But eventually, both of them learned how to use it. Senkyo and Itsuki were connected to everyone else in the party to get used to Connect but Yuu and Shiro were only connected to Senkyo since they had very low spirit power.

One question came after another, and Senkyo answered all of them, free of annoyance. In fact, it seemed that he was enjoying it a bit. Just as the three were talking through Connect, the teacher called Senkyo out to answer the question he just asked.

*"\*Ah... Heh, now you've done it.\*"*

Itsuki said so in the despair that surrounded the situation. Senkyo was in the middle of explaining lessons to both Itsuki and Yuu, he was the only one talking while the other two were only listening. Unfortunately, even Itsuki, who was just listening, didn't even hear the question asked. Compare to Senkyo, who was explaining everything, there was no way he would be able to answer.

However, contradictory to that, Senkyo stood up calmly and answered the question. It was then followed by a "correct" from the teacher and allowed him to sit back down. Itsuki, who watched the whole thing happen, was in shock. He was convinced that Senkyo wouldn't have heard that.

Although it wasn't his intention to sabotage Senkyo, Itsuki was surprised by the attentiveness Senkyo had. After a few seconds, Itsuki's name was called out by the teacher. But, unlike Senkyo, he didn't have the same inhuman communication skills Senkyo possessed. Luckily for Itsuki, there was a certain person who could communicate with him through his mind and was an incredibly good listener.

*"\*The question was...\*"*

Senkyo retold the question to Itsuki and saved his ass.

*\*I swear, that Shittaku sure is weird.\**

Itsuki didn't send that message through Connect but was in his own thoughts. His thoughts contained no negative meaning, instead, it was something more along the lines of amazement.

After school, different from all the other days so far, Senkyo, Yuu, and Itsuki didn't go straight to Ryosei's house. Instead, all three of them were inside an empty classroom. Senkyo and Itsuki were sitting in their usual seats, while Yuu was behind the teacher's desk in front of the classroom.

"Uhm, Yukou-senpai, are you sure no one is going to come in here? It's still pretty early out, and some students might come back."

"Don't worry, Hisho-chan. Ryosei put up a spirit barrier that repels everyone we don’t want to come here. We’ll be fine."

Senkyo said that so confidently that Yuu got the impression that he knew what he was doing. Although she felt nothing was different, She didn't know much about spirit power to even be able to tell.

"Okay, Shiro-chan, come out."

"Here!"

Yuu called out to Shiro, and she responded with a bright light coming out of Senkyo's chest and manifested right beside Yuu.

"Hm... 'Shiro-chan,' huh? It looks like you two got close."

Senkyo said so in response to hearing how Yuu familiarly addressed Shiro.

"Yeah, Yuu-chan and Shiro got along perfectly!"

"W-Well, things happened and..."

Yuu averted her eyes as Shiro addressed her. Her face was tinged with the slight color of red and she began to fidget slightly. It looks like Yuu wasn't used to being addressed in such a familiar way. But despite that, she didn't look like she hated it. Having that extra topic pass, Yuu regained her composure and began the lesson.

"Now, let's begin the magic lesson!"

Right now, Yuu and Shiro were explaining the basic knowledge about magic to Senkyo and Itsuki. Today was the day that they would finally broaden their knowledge of magic. To have a good idea of what their teammates and enemies could bring out, Senkyo and Itsuki needed to learn, at the very least the basics of magic.

Although Ryosei was a fighter class when he was alive, no one was there to properly teach magic. He only survived by using abilities his grandfather taught him and creating his own techniques with them. But if they finally get a good look at it, they might be able to become even stronger.

Yuu may have explained to Senkyo magic briefly in the past, but this time they were going in depth. Senkyo, Ryosei, and Itsuki listened carefully to what the two girls in front of them were saying.

**102 – Magic Lesson**

Magic doesn't just happen. By using the mana stored in your body or in a spectral, you are actually releasing it to the space near you. The range someone can cast mana to is dependent on the caster’s skill. Some can have short ranges while some have long. By having mana around you, it creates the phenomenon called Element Ingression. It is what allows the person who released the mana to be able to use the power of the 11 elements. In addition, the caster of the magic cannot be hurt by the magic created from their own mana.

Magic and elements are two different things. The elements are the base of all magic. They are not magic itself, but magic cannot be made without the elements. Magic is a phenomenon derived from the element ingression. There are many types of magic, some of them are fire magic, wind magic, and teleportation magic.

There are 11 basic elements of magic. All these elements branch out and create more magic. The basic elements that magic comes from are fire, water, nature, earth, lightning, frost, light, dark, blood, control, and null.

Magic enables the ability to control, create, and shape elements or, in other words, absolute control over the element. By using mana, you will receive temporary control over the chosen element/s. Proportional to the amount of mana you use, you will receive access to any of the 11 elements.

The fire element. It is the one that controls fire and hot temperatures. It is mostly an offensive element, but can still be used for other subjects outside of offensive combat.

The water element. It is the one that controls water and its properties. It has the unique ability to change the type of water. For example, one can use the water element to turn freshwater into seawater, or vice versa.

The nature element. It is the one that controls the plants and the wind. It can be used to better crops or enhance the movement speed. However, it is rumored that, in the past, the nature element had the power to control more than just plants and wind.

The earth element. It is the one that controls the solid surface of the earth like rocks and dirt. With a higher skill, the earth element can not only lift the earth from the ground but it can also be used to appraise unknown ores and other secret arts hidden within its magic.

The lightning element. It is the one that controls lightning and its origin. Unlike how lightning usually occurs, this element allows you to create lighting in the palm of your hand. But in a deeper sense, the user is allowed to tamper with what causes lightning to occur.

The frost element. It is the one that controls freezing temperatures, ice, and snow. This magic allows the user to create snow and ice. Additionally, they can set the temperature in a certain area down.

The light element. It is the one that controls holy blessings, sight, and light waves. It can make dangerous lasers but also serve as a blessing from god. It can also be used as simple illumination, like a ball of light that follows you around as well as deceit by manipulating the light others see.

The dark element. It is the one that controls the shadows, dark powers, and emptiness. This magic can erase existences and control natural forces. Usually used for nullifying light illusions or controlling gravity. It has various applications that are similar to the light element but can differ greatly depending on the situation.

The blood element. Unlike all the other elements, this element is an exclusive power. It means, that only a specific group of people can use this element, namely, vampires.

This is because the element not only uses mana but blood along with it. The amount of blood it uses is beyond what a normal being can handle, which is why, vampires, the beings that have a huge amount of blood in their bodies compared to other beings, are the only ones that can use it. Of course, anyone else is free to try but if they don't have enough blood, it could cost them their life.

This element allows control over the user's own blood. It does not create blood but utilizes the user’s own blood instead. Vampires can summon their blood from their bodies and shape it in any way they want.

The control element. It is the one that controls one's health. This element can cast curses, poison, and many more kinds of afflictions, but it can also cure, heal, give boosts, and many more affects that can positively affect one's health.

And finally, the last element, the null element. It is magic that can be modified by other elements. A few examples are barriers and teleportation magic. They don't have a specific element, but magic like barriers can be mixed with other elements to enhance protection against certain elements, but can also reduce protection against other elements. An example of that is a fire barrier which increases protection against the nature element but is vulnerable to water and earth elements.

Spells are what shape the mana into magic. They are separated into two phases: the chant phase and the cast phase. The chant phase is the part where the caster uses words from a chant to arrange the mana in a way that releases the desired elements. While the cast phase is the part at the end of a chant. It mentions the magic spell's name and makes mana undergo element ingression, creating magic. Only when these two phases are successfully executed, a magic spell is cast, albeit with a few exceptions.

Magic spells are categorized into three groups based on the amount of mana needed and how hard they are to cast.

The first category is called the low-tier spells. Spells that can be cast without the chant phase and are usually easily overpowered. Although they are low-tier, it does not mean they are useless. A simple fireball spell is still capable of burning someone alive.

The next category is called the mid-tier spells. Most of these spells require a chant. These spells are what people tend to use in battle because of the reasonable mana cost and powerful outputs.

The last category is called the high-tier spells. Some of these spells not only require a chant, but are also required to be cast multiple times, changing positions, and other tedious requirements. These spells are mostly used as a to assault from afar or as a last resort, as some of these spells can drain someone's entire mana pool.

With that, ended Yuu and Shiro's lesson about magic. Almost two hours had passed since the start of their lesson. Just before she left it there, Yuu asked her students for any clarifications that were needed.

"That would be all. Are there any questions?"

Yuu presents the question to Senkyo and Itsuki. Senkyo raised his voice.

"Does magic get canceled when it comes in contact with someone else's magic?"

"Magic could be canceled, but that depends on which one has more mana in it. Generally, when magic collides, the one with more mana wins. If they have even power, then the magic would just clash and disappear. Some exceptions happen when the magic with lower mana has the elemental advantage. For example, if fire was put against water, even if it has slightly more mana than the other, the water would win out in the end."

"I see, thanks."

"Then, if that's all..."

That was the only question that was brought up for the entire lesson. Although Senkyo understood, he had his doubts about Itsuki as his face was twisted with a plethora of emotions. He thought about talking to him about it later. As Senkyo and Itsuki got up and were about to leave, they heard a bump on the door, and a high-pitched "Ouch!" come with it.

"Who's there!?"

Itsuki shouted to the person on the other side of the door. Senkyo hurried to the door and opened it, but there was no one there. Senkyo searched the hallway and saw nothing but emptiness.

“U-Uhmm… Yukou-senpai?”

Yuu called Senkyo from behind him. He slowly turned his head behind him and showed his grim face. Yuu, who looked like she just saw a ghost, knew exactly what was on Senkyo's mind.

*"\*R-Ryosei!? N-No one should’ve been able to enter, right!?\*"*

*“\*W-Wha… Huh? Ah, it must be someone from the Konjou clan. Maybe Sora! The barrier can repel normal people but people like hunters can break in.\*”*

Ryosei was speechless. For a second, he couldn’t believe what just happened. But he quickly regained his composure after thinking of a reasonable explanation.

"R-Ryosei says that it was probably Sora. They can get through be barrier by destroying it."

"Is that so…? Then there shouldn’t be anything to worry about, right? We didn’t talk about strategy or anything."

“Yeah, you’re right. We should go now. We still have things to do.”

“Okay.”

Senkyo and the others continued to Ryosei's house and proceeded with training. They were alert and constantly checking their surroundings but they didn’t find anyone.

**103 – Aging Curse**

On Friday, when Senkyo and the others were about to head to their usual training spot, they were intercepted by Sora.

"Hey, Yukou-kun, could we talk? Ah, it's fine if you two want to listen as well. This won't take long."

An unexpected occurrence. The last time Senkyo had a talk with Sora was at the Konjou clan, the day when they found out about Kuro Yaiba. When Senkyo was in class, Sora purposely avoided him, but now he suddenly decided to talk. It was only natural that Senkyo, along with Yuu and Itsuki were surprised.

After securing a quiet place to talk, Senkyo, Yuu, and Itsuki listened to what Sora wanted to say.

"Actually, what I wanted to talk about was Touma-kun,"

Senkyo recalled as the last time he saw Touma was the time he tried to kill him. They weren't pleasant memories, but he remembers them nonetheless.

"Yeah, he went on a bit of a rampage. What was that about?"

"There's a reason why he acted like that. You see..."

Sora told them about his past with Touma. They were childhood friends that lived just next to each other's homes. Unlike how Touma was now, he was a cheerful and energetic kid, always having fun with Sora. They played together, fooling around, and went to the same school.

Because of their closeness, both their parents were contaminated by their friendship. One day, when both of their families were having a party together, a rampaging demon burst through their front door and sent everyone into a panic.

Later on, a group of hunters finally came by and killed the demon. Unfortunately, both Sora and Touma's parents met a gruesome fate. When the hunters were about to take their leave, two kids came running down the stairs and saw what had happened to their parents.

The hunters, who couldn't just abandon the kids, took them to the Konjou clan. After a few years, Sora had put the past behind him and moved on. Touma, however, still harbored a few feelings about it.

"His parents were always quick to make promises to him. Things like what they would buy for him, where they would travel, and how they would spend their time in the future. But at the time of the party, I promised him that I’d always be his ally and stayed with him when we heard the commotion happen downstairs. After we found out that our parents died, he knew that none of those promises would ever come true. I kept my promise until just recently, but when he found me siding with you the other day, it must’ve come through to him as a betrayal. Although that usually wouldn’t be enough to rattle a normal person, Touma-kun is emotionally unstable… severely.”

"Was he always like that or was it just a sort of trauma?"

Sora responded in return by shaking his head from side to side.

"No, that was just the seed that caused him to become like that. After we became official hunters, on a certain mission we were teamed up with another person, his name was Higuchi Daiki."

**............**

"Higuchi-san, are you alright!?"

"Y-Yeah, just a slight wound."

Touma worriedly assisted Daiki. Sora, who was covering the wound on his left shoulder, sighed in relief as he saw that his two team members were okay.

All three of them were inside the Spirit Realm. They were in their black combat gear, wounded, but still breathing. There were no other enemies around them, as Touma defeated the last one.

"D-Damn, I've never fought a Dehin like that before. That guy was strong."

"Yeah, even his minions were freaky."

"Yeah... incredibly."

Daiki voiced his complaints as Touma helped him up off the ground. Using the force Higuchi was assisted with as he stood, a sharp object pierced through Touma's stomach.

"...Huh?"

Touma looked below him where he saw Daiki's hand had turned into a purple spike and was going through his stomach.

"Touma-kun!?"

Sora screamed and hurriedly ran towards them.

"HIGUCHI-KUN!? WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING!?"

"Ha? Stay out of this."

Daiki raised his arm and a wave of sound pushed Sora away, smashing him into the wall behind him. Daiki brought his focus back to Touma.

"Wh-Why... are you doing this?"

"HAHAHA!! Why? Why wouldn't I? That Dehin promised me paradise at their castle! Why would I want to stick in this shitty world if there's a better one right through a portal?"

"Y-You... bastard!"

"Shut up. I would kill you right now, but that Dehin was really interested in you for some stupid reason. If I do this, I'll get my pass to paradise. No hard feelings, okay? HAHAHA!!"

Daiki placed his free hand which was glowing purple on Touma's face. Veins of black coursed through Daiki's hand, and onto Touma's face. The dark veins spread. A scream of pain and agony came out of Touma's mouth. The veins accumulated around Touma's right eye until it became completely black. Then...

"AAAHHHHHHH!!!!"

Touma's right eye exploded, blood running down Daiki's hand. All the while, Daiki looked like he was enjoying everything. The tips of his lips almost reached the edge of his ears as he laughed maniacally.

"What did they call you two? 'The Yin and Yang of the Konjou clan?' HAHAHA! Let's see how tenacious the Yin actually is, shall we?"

"G-GAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!!"

**104 – Sora’s Request**

"When I regained my consciousness, it was already too late. Higuchi had left and Touma-kun was severely injured..."

Sora clenched his fists, holding back the emotions he felt when he recalled the memory.

"After that, the Konjou clan's doctors were able to save him somehow. It was a one-time operation that could never be done again. They replaced Touma-kun's right eye with a spectral that could be used as a means of vision. But there was one thing that the doctors couldn't cure, the curse that Higuchi put Touma-kun in."

"A curse?"

Ryosei had no memory of what the being he called a Dehin. Which meant that it only showed up within the past seven years.

"Yeah, a Dehin is one of the beings from Zerid. They are mind-controlling demons that can turn you into his minion or put a curse on you. Since that day, Touma-kun completely changed. That curse... it fed the hatred in Touma-kun's heart and soon enough, turned Touma-kun into what you saw last week. The most frustrating part was… I couldn’t do anything to help him! It was only a matter of time until the curse completely consumed him… I tried to act how I usually did around him saying it would be what he wanted, but in reality, it was just my pathetic attempt to run away from the truth!"

The three of them, who were listening to Sora's story, all showed unpleasant looks. Even though he knew it was a useless question, Senkyo asked anyway.

"Even after all this time they still haven’t found a cure?"

Sora shook his head from side to side.

"No, unfortunately, we don't know that much about magic. Our researchers have yet to find one."

“I see…”

Senkyo went silent. After a deep breath, Sora raised his voice.

“T-That’s why… Yukou-kun, I have a request!”

After saying all that, Sora took his leave but made a request to Senkyo just before he left. The day continued, and the three of them went off to do their training. When night came, and everyone went back to their houses, Senkyo was laying on the bed and thinking about what Sora said that afternoon.

"*'\*If you can do anything about it… Please save Touma-kun!\*'* huh? Geez, you really care about him, don't you?"

Senkyo pondered in his room in silence. He closed his eyes, trying to get a clear image of what he should do. It wasn't his business to butt in, but at the same time, he felt like leaving them like that was a bad idea.

The only reason Sora asked for Senkyo’s help was most likely because of the impossible feats he’s achieved. He was hoping that the person who took down a Leader alone, and the person who was able to revive a legend by housing two souls in his body would be able to perform another miracle to save his friend. All of a sudden, a voice came from Senkyo's head. It was Shiro.

*"\*Um, Onii-chan, are you still thinking about what that ponytail boy said?\*"*

"Yeah, something like that."

*"\*If you want to, Shiro knows of a way to cure a Dehin's curse.\*"*

Senkyo jumped out of his bed in surprise at what Shiro said.

"Really!?"

*"\*Yeah! If it's helpful to Onii-chan, Shiro will tell you!\*"*

**…………**

Deep within the forest of the mountain, unbeknown to the people of the Konjou clan, a lone boy walked through the forest under the heavy rain of the night. He didn't take cover or showed any signs of doing so. Cold and alone, he walked aimlessly.

*\*Why... Why. Why. Why. Why. Why!! Everyone is a traitor... No one can be trusted. No one! No one! No one! No one!!\**

The boy fell to his knees and clenched his head with both of his hands. He was shaking. It may have been because of the rain that he was mercilessly bombarded with, or perhaps something else.

Drops of water dripped from the tip of his white hair. His eyes were devoid of life. His mouth was twisted, showing the suffering he was currently in. He was lost, in every sense of the word. He knew not what to do and what he should do. In the middle of his internal suffering, an ominous voice echoed in his mind.

*"\*Do you want to take revenge?\*"*

*"\*Revenge...? On who?\*"*

*"\*Revenge on all of the people that betrayed you, and the people who caused them to betray you. Take revenge for all the suffering they made you go through!\*"*

*"\*That's... but, I am too weak. There's no way...\*"*

*"\*Do not fret, little one. I will share with you my power, and you shalt take your revenge! Channel your anger, your fear, your hatred, your jealousy, your everything! My power will let it take shape! Now, channel it, manifest it!\*"*

*"\*My... hatred... yes, my hatred!\*"*

The boy's body began to emit a purple aura. It got thicker and thicker, his body, shaking even more so than before. He screamed through the empty forest, letting out all his negative emotions.

All of the sudden, the purple aura surrounding him burst. The raindrops that bombarded him, disappeared before they could make contact. The area around the boy became a safe haven from the raindrops' volley.

The boy slowly stood up. But now, he was different. Black veins covered his body, but it was much worse around his right eye. His body was no longer shaking, but instead, it seethed with hatred.

The boy approached a nearby tree. He took out his arm and swung it right through the tree. With a loud crash as the tree fell down, revealed that the boy's arm was no longer an arm, and was now a purple axe.

"Power... Revenge... Power…! Revenge…!! I WILL TAKE MY REVENGE ON THIS PITIFUL WORLD!!!"

A small purple light illuminated the dark forest, but unlike light in the dark, an even darker force lay within. He became unable to properly express his words. The ominous dark clouds that covered the sky and the rain that became even more powerful than before brewed a bad omen for the upcoming days.

**Chapter 7: The Hunter Battle Royale**

**105 – Day of the Battle Royale**

Sunday. The day of the Hunter Battle Royale. The weather was clear, and the sun shined upon everyone. The Konjou clan's town square was filled to the brim with spectators. They were gathering around the stage with a tall tower in the middle that had four huge screens attached to it. Some watched from far away even as far as their houses. They cheered, showing their anticipation for the upcoming event.

A man in a hunter's combat suit with a mask came up to the stage and took the mic. It was the announcer and commentator of the event. He riled up the crowd even more before he began his speech.

"People of the Konjou clan, are you ready to witness exciting and thrilling battles?"

"Yeah!!"

"Do you want to see the clan's hunters show their skill on the fiery battlefield!?"

"Yeah!!"

"Then look no further, for the 47th annual Hunter Battle Royale is going to be even more amazing than all the others! For in this battle royale, one of the participating teams has been said to have defeated a leader of our lifetime enemy, the infamous, EEEEEEEEEND!"

"Wh-What!?"

"What did he say...?"

"Someone defeated a leader!?"

From deafening cheers to puzzled stares, everyone in the crowd was in disbelief at what the announcer had said. The crowd began to gossip amongst themselves trying to make of the situation. But before they could even process anything, the announcer topped it off with another unbelievable statement.

"Not only that, this team's leader has not only one person inside him but two! It has been said that the soul of the Konjou Clan's Delinquent Prodigy, Konjou Ryosei, lives inside the leader's body! Because if that, this battle will only end once they fall!"

"Seriously...?"

"Now that's just absurd!"

"How are we supposed to believe that!?"

Just before the crowd was about to be thrown into chaos, the announcer skillfully takes their attention and controlled the situation. The announcer took the mic closer to his mouth and shouted at it as loud as he could.

"THAT'S RIGHT!! Even I don't know if I should believe this! That's why, how about we decide that for ourselves! Don't be fooled, they may look like a team of three, but including the Delinquent Prodigy, they are actually a team of five! Try and see through their secrets as they fight in battle, I present to you, the unfathomable team, Team Senkyo!!"

All four screens showed Senkyo, Yuu, and Itsuki, standing by and waiting for the start of the event. The crowd's gossip became louder and louder, everyone, scrutinizing the three people that were shown on the screen.

“Is everyone ready?”

Senkyo asked as he looked over at Yuu and Itsuki.

“Yep!”

“Ready to beat their asses!”

Yuu and Itsuki responded enthusiastically to Senkyo.

“You all know the plan, right? Everyone just follow the plan and we can win this. Tell me if anything goes wrong through Connect. We all trained for this so just show them what we can do! Good luck.”

A loud gong resounded over the distance. It was the signal that the battle has begun.

Inside the mountain, the place where instead of the sun, the crystal waters illuminated the area, the judges of the event sat inside the room where Senkyo had his hearing. There were five screens presented in front of them, but instead of being around a tower, all of them were attached to a wall, four of them forming a bigger square, and one screen separate from the others.

One of the screens in the group of four showed the same screens that were being broadcasted at the town square. It was a live feed, but oddly enough, it was a glass pane with no electrical connections to it. The same applied to the screens at the town square.

"It looks like everything is going as expected. Sorry for having you do this every year, Kaede."

"Don't worry about it, Nii—Clan chief. I'm used to it already."

“There shouldn’t be a problem calling me like you usually do with the people here.”

“Thanks, Nii-chan…”

In the middle of the room, Kaede was standing on top of a glowing magic circle. Her hands were clasped together and her eyes closed shut. There were a few particles that were constantly floating from the circle. She stayed like that, unmoving.

There were five judges for the event, but only four people were present in the room, Kaede included. The first judge, Konjou Yousuke, the clan chief, was looking a bit perturbed as he gazed at his sister in the middle of the room.

"You don't have to worry, Clan chief, your sister is more capable than you think."

The second judge, Yamazaki Dai, reassured Yousuke of his simple plight. Then, the lone screen separate from the others turned on and showed a figure of a woman sitting in front of them. The room was a bit dark, making it hard to make out her face.

"Oh, Freda-sama, you're finally here."

"Yes, I'm sorry I can't make it there. There were a few things I had to take care of over here."

"It's completely fine, Freda-sama. We all know how hard your work is."

"Thank you for understanding."

The third judge, Freda, a mysterious woman that appeared in the clan within the past seven years that Ryosei was gone. After Yousuke had his exchange with her, the door flew open, and came in a young woman hurling toward Yousuke. Part of her hair was braided into a crown and the tail of that crown fluttered in the wind as she presented herself before everyone. She had long dark purple hair and matching eyes. She looked a bit peeved as she scowled at him.

"If you’re joking with me, I hope you know that I'll beat you into a pulp. Clan chief or not..."

"Calm down, Yoshiko. I know you well enough to know that you'll actually do that. Besides, I wouldn't joke about this even if it cost my life."

The young woman who just barged in and threatened the clan chief was the fourth judge, Shimizu Yoshiko. In the past, she was one of Konjou Reiko's apprentices and Konjou Ryosei's childhood friend. She acted like a big sister to him and cared just as much about him and his parents as an actual family.

"Fair enough... Then, where is he?"

Yousuke pointed at one particular person that was being shown on one of the screens that were attached to the wall behind her. There, showed the same live feed that was being broadcasted at the town square, the feed that showed Senkyo's team.

"It's that boy right there."

"That's... Ryosei?"

"No, that boy's name is Yukou Senkyo. To be specific, Ryosei is only inside his body, but he isn't the body's owner."

"That's basically the same thing! I hate it when you overcomplicate things!"

"Is it not because of your negligence that you cannot understand it properly, Shimizu-dono? Seriously, in the position that you are in, you still have the audacity to show up late."

"A-Ahaha... hello to you too, Sakurai-ojii-san. As sharp-tongued and merciless as usual, I see."

The fifth judge, and the person who rebuked Yoshiko, Sakurai Kosuke. He was also the one who Senkyo encountered on the streets last week. He sat behind the desk with his arms crossed, staring at her with a sharp gaze. Yoshiko slowly slid away and sat beside Yousuke.

"I told you this would happen."

"What can I do? I overslept!"

Having everything that happened passed, the judges turned their focus to the screens before them. The four grouped screens constantly changed views, showing different sides of the battlefield and the fights that were going on within it. While the separate screen was constantly showing Freda's screen.

"Hm?"

The event had already started. A few minutes in, Kosuke let out a questioning tone as he noticed something that happened in one feed just before it got changed to another.

"Kaede-dono, could you please change the feed on the upper right back to the last one?"

"Yes, please wait a moment."

Kaede responded while still having her eyes closed. Not a second later, the upper right screen changed back to the previous feed. And there, all of them saw the absurd situation that was happening in that certain area.

**106 – Strategy for Victory**

"Wh-What's this?"

"Is he... alone?"

"No doubt about it. On top of that, he's being chased by so many people!"

Respectively, Yousuke, Yoshiko, and Freda raised their voice in response to what they were seeing. The screen showed Senkyo jumping from tree to tree by himself in the mountain as he was being chased down by other hunters.

"There's more! It looks each member of their team is all alone!"

With that, two more of the screens changed and showed Yuu and Itsuki in the same situation as Senkyo. They were all being chased down and hunted like prey.

"Utter foolishness. Just what do they think they are doing?"

Kosuke said so in an angered manner, along with a tinge of disappointment. Kosuke let out a small sigh and brought his eyes down to the ground.

*\*I suppose people's hopes easily do get crushed..\*.*

Kosuke thought internally. The judges disappointedly dismissed Team Senkyo's live feed and moved on to the other feeds. After another few minutes, Kaede called out to everyone.

"Everyone, look at this!"

Three of the screens suddenly changed feeds and showed Team Senkyo, but this time...

"This many should be enough. Ryosei, Shiro, are you two ready?"

*"\*Of course.\*"*

*"\*As always!\*"*

"Then let's go!"

Senkyo went into a far dash and hid behind a tree, avoiding the vision of the people chasing him. But having known their current location, the hunters launched ranged attacks on the tree. Before the magic could make any contact. Two Senkyos came out of the tree, one ran to the left and one to the right. The casters launched low-tier spells to hit one of the Senkyos, but both of them dodged the magic and proceeded to run.

"One of them is just an illusion! We split up and chase both of them. To the group who's chasing a clone, it won't last if it gets too far away from its caster. Just join us later and intercept his path."

Despite being in different teams, the other hunters complied and split up, of course, after getting approval from the leader of their team. Having their pursuer's numbers cut in half, and assuring that he was far away enough from the other group of hunters, the Senkyo who went to the left began to make his move.

Senkyo turned around and faced the groups of people that were chasing him. It was obvious from their numbers that there was more than just one team. But that works just fine for the Senkyo Team.

Senkyo drew the handle of the katana attached to his waist. It was a spirit weapon instead of Kuro Yaiba. At first, it looked like it was only the handle and the hilt, and no blade could be seen. But as Senkyo continued to draw the handle, a flame appeared at the base of the hilt and quickly shaped a sword. In mid-air, Senkyo turned around and swung his sword at the hunters chasing him.

"Sheath my blade with the wind. Your power is the face of elegance. Flow as I show you the path, the line to a dashing ending. Konjou Style, Gale Fan!"

A razor-sharp gust of wind traced Senkyo's sword and expanded in a fan shape. The hunters chasing him all got out of the way, resulting in Senkyo's Gale Fan hitting nothing. Since it was a spirit weapon that cannot come in contact with physical objects, neither the leaves nor the trees were cut down.

"Man, everyone's reaction time is fast."

*"\*They were trained for this.\*"*

Senkyo landed on the ground, stopping the chase there. Enemy hunters came from all directions and had Senkyo cornered. Some were seen standing from afar and some were ready to close in on him at any time. As their front liners came in to attack...

"Your turn!—Magic Arts: Whirlwind Burst!"

Senkyo quickly switched with Ryosei. Wind exploded from Ryosei as he used flash strike, knocking everyone near him back. Before they even hit the ground, a powerful updraft sent them all flying up the sky. After being treated as ragdolls for the second, Ryosei went from person to person, slashing, eliminating, and even knocking some of them out.

Everyone around Ryosei was dumbfounded that he pulled a high-precision skill off. That was because Whirlwind Burst’s area of effect worked incredibly close to the caster. Had Ryosei not timed it right, he would've missed everyone and left himself open or he would've gotten slashed before he could do anything.

"Casters, open fire!"

An enemy leader shouted his order. All the other teams followed suit after they got the same directives from their own team leaders. Most of the hunters perched on the trees while some stayed on the ground. The casters began chanting, and by the looks of it, they were all casting mid-tier spells. All the non-caster class hunters were on guard protecting their casters until they finished their casting.

Ryosei stood in the middle of all of them, and there were no more than just a few more seconds before everyone finishes their spells. With this in mind, Ryosei began to chant.

Various magical spells were thrown toward Ryosei, who was standing still and chanting. Fire, water, wind, lighting, and many other magics were approaching Ryosei at high speed. But just before they made contact...

"Link one to the other and bind me in your connection. Heed my every call, even if it means bending time and space itself. Terminate the impasse of space. Teleport!"

*\*BOOM!!\**

**107 – Extermination**

The hunters watched the magics explode and shroud the area with a cloud of dust. They watched in suspense as the cloud of dust began to disappear. And when it all cleared up...

"Gone..."

A single hunter spoke up as Ryosei's figure was nowhere to be seen. Suddenly, they heard a scream come from behind them. The hunters that heard the scream looked over to see a caster of their team go down.

"He's here!"

Ryosei jumped off branch after branch assassinating every enemy caster. While in mid-air, two hunters wielding a sword and a spear intercepted him while another threw kunai at him. The swordsman jumped to intercept him while the spearman stayed on the branch and waited for him to reach his attack range.

*“\*Magic Arts: Swallow Strike!\*”*

Ryosei brought up his sword overhead and stuck it downwards toward the swordsman all the while dodging the kunai coming at him. The swordsman noticed his intention and stepped on empty air to dodge sideways. He tried to hit Ryosei as he fell but he was too fast. Ryosei missed the swordsman but not a second later he also stepped on empty air and launched himself at the spearman above him at lightning-fast speeds. The spearman couldn’t react in time and was knocked out as Ryosei’s sword mercilessly passed through his chest.

As the spearman was getting knocked out, the person who threw the kunai threw more at Ryosei and charged at him with a short sword. Ryosei who just finished slashing the spearman sensed the kunai as well as the swordsman coming from behind him.

Ryosei didn’t move from his position and the hunters were already milliseconds away from making contact with Ryosei. But before they even hit him, a spirit blade came from below the swordsman and sliced through his chest. Before the kunai hunter even realized what happened, Ryosei was about to eliminate him with a spirit blade from above. The Ryosei who was standing in front of him stayed motionless, making his mistake clear to him. It was an illusion. Ryosei set up an illusion of himself and turned invisible before moving to strike the swordsman. They were completely fooled.

“GUAAH—!!”

But even after eliminating a whole party, the battle wasn’t over. The other teams have already set themselves up to attack Ryosei. A firing squad of four archers was positioned four trees behind him. Their arrows were enhanced by some kind of magic. Then, a brute class hunter landed on the branch Ryosei was on while three other swordsmen were approaching from each direction. The brute charged at Ryosei and delivered a punch going straight to his chest. Ryosei jumped over his arm and tried to slash through his head but was blocked by a barrier.

The brute immediately retracted his arm while his other was launched to punch Ryosei. The three swordsmen arrived one coming from below Ryosei and two coming from above on both his sides. In addition, four magic arrows were coming straight for him.

*“\*Magic arts: Crackling Thunder\*”*

Ryosei pointed his sword opposite from the swordsman behind his left side which was conveniently pointing at the brute’s head. He charged his sword with lighting and launched himself backward with a huge burst just like what he did when he fought the hollowed knights. The brute was hit by the burst of lightning but he did not get knocked back. He stubbornly stood his ground and ducked out of it as he was being hit in exchange for his barrier.

At that moment, the arrows missed Ryosei and he was now right beside one of the swordsmen and used wind magic to stop himself from getting launched any further back and took a slash at the swordsman beside him. The swordsman successfully made an air foothold with magic and tried to dodge out of range but he was hit by the tip of Ryosei’s blade and electrocuted, stunning him for a brief moment as he tried to take on the pain. Ryosei didn’t let this moment pass and slashed him.

The brute jumped at him and created air footholds to try and punch Ryosei. He did the same and dodged his punches and kicks. Ryosei charged his sword with lightning and prepared to slash at the brute. He noticed this and used flash strike to dodge backward, but as he regained vision, Ryosei was still right in front of him. Like he didn’t move at all.

“What!?”

*“\*Flash Strike: Thunderclap!\*”*

Ryosei predicted the brute’s movements and used flash strike at the very same time the brute did. He continued his strike and slashed through the brute’s chest making him fall out of the sky. A second after he defeated the brute, Ryosei removed his own footholds and fell to the ground.

His actions allowed him to avoid the four magical arrows coming from behind him. Ryosei didn’t even turn around but he knew there were arrows behind him nonetheless. With arrows dodged, now two swordsmen below him were his next obstacle. They both jumped towards Ryosei to prevent him from escaping with footholds. One of them covered their blade with fire while the other covered their blade with lightning. They swung at him but were interrupted when a shout came from the distance.

“THAT’S AN ILLUSION! WE NEED ASSISTANCE! HE’S COMING AFTER US!”

The two swordsmen saw the one who shouted was one of the archers in the distance. They didn’t hesitate and left the falling Ryosei alone and used footholds to quickly come to the archer’s aid. The Ryosei they left simply fell and stood still like a statue and it disappeared as it hit the ground.

Earlier as the four arrows were about to hit Ryosei, he quickly made an illusion of himself and created a foothold to the side which he used to launch himself toward the archers. The archers took notice of this when one of them cast magic that revealed the invisible. She was seeing through a small glass-like pane that was floating right in front of her eyes. A dark silhouette of Ryosei fell downwards while a pure white silhouette of Ryosei could be seen running straight at them.

“Everyone, Defensive Formation 7!”

The archers responded to the order accordingly. Three archers prepared their bows and shot arrows in unison. The three arrows hit the ground in front of Ryosei and created a wall of fire. Ryosei stopped in time before hitting it and ran around the wall. Right as he peeked through the wall, he saw three more arrows heading straight at him. He wasted no time and used flash strike to get past the magic arrows before getting trapped on the other side.

While the three were intercepting Ryosei with fire walls, one of them took out an arrow and stabbed the tree branch they were on right after chanting a spell. The four archers were affected by magic which made the firing rate of the three shooting archers even faster. She then cast a barrier around them just before joining the three archers in shooting.

Ryosei kept running at them and dodging their walls of fire. The two swordsmen were just a short distance behind him. One of the archers noticed that he seemed to be running at the base of the tree.

*\*Is he planning on running up the trunk of the tree and using it as a shield? Or maybe he’s planning on cutting the tree down…. No, that wouldn’t be possible. Spirit weapons faze through physical objects. It’s a different story if we enhanced the tree’s durability like how we always do. The blade will cut through it since it’ll be considered someone else’s spirit power. But no one does that in a hunter battle royale, it's common sense!\**

Ryosei kept using flash strike to dodge the walls. The two swordsmen were falling behind since they weren’t used to using flash strike so many times.

*“\*This is my chance!\*”*

“Sheath my blade with the wind. Your power is the face of elegance. Flow as I show you the path, the line to a dashing ending. Konjou Style, Gale Fan!”

Ryosei ran as he chanted. Right as he was about to cast it, the stopped to take a firm footing on the ground and slashed his sword toward the line of archers. The archers changed their target from Ryosei to the gale of wind coming straight at them. Volley after volley, they hit Ryosei’s attack, but it didn’t show any signs of stopping.

“What the hell is happening!? Why aren’t our attacks doing anything to it!?”

“Impossible! It has so much magical power that our attacks combined can’t cancel it!”

“At the very least, the barrier should protect us!”

The archers hoped that the barrier surrounding them would be enough to protect them from Ryosei’s attack. But alas, their hope was in vain as the sound of shattered glass reached their ears. Their armor along with the barrier shattered from the force of the attack.

Seconds earlier, Ryosei cast Gale Fan and immediately turned around to face his next enemies. His attack hadn’t even reached the archers yet, but he trusted in his own power that his attack would break through and eliminate his targets.

Without a second waste, Ryosei surprised his two pursuers by turning around and immediately using flash strike. He cut down the swordsman to his left and quickly pivoted on his foot to cut down the second swordsman to the right.

Ryosei finally found a chance to catch his breath and scan his surroundings. He eliminated a lot of hunters but there were still a few more remaining.

*“\*Can you still keep up?\*”*

Senkyo threw Ryosei a question as he was catching his breath.

*“\*That was nothing. I just needed a little breather. Thanks to you training your body I can fight decently now.\*”*

*“\*Good to know. Oh, two enemies behind you! A swordsman and a spearman!\*”*

*“\*No worries, I got enough rest. Good to know you have my back.\*”*

Ryoseicontinued to engage team after team. He handled the fighting while Senkyo notified him of new enemies and covered his blind spots. One of the main reasons he could fight with this much awareness was because of Senkyo.

**108 – Scorchless Conflagration**

Meanwhile, on another side of the mountain, Yuu was running through the forest and jumping over obstacles. She was also being chased by a large group of hunters.

Right now, she was wearing the caster's battle gear. But unlike the usual caster battle gear which consisted of a black robe with long and baggy sleeves and some form of black hat, all consisting of the same blue lines that covered the gear, she was wearing a robe with cut-down sleeves and replaced them with long sleeve gloves and changed the witch hat for a beret. Incidentally, all brutes, including Itsuki, wear a black Gi.

"Senpai said that I need to cull them at least once... This many should be enough. Hm... Still, this ring and bracelet sure are strange… with these, I can use fire magic without having to worry about setting the whole mountain on fire, but I don't think I should use too much this early, so maybe I'll pass."

Before the event started, Yuu was given a ring and a bracelet as her spirit weapons. She may have her own mana pool, but they didn't want to risk any injuries.

"I better make use of everything around here."

Yuu began chanting.

"O Nature, bless me with your power, empower your children. Aid me in my plight and suppress my enemies. Overgrowth!"

"Be on your guard! The vampire is chanting a spell!"

As the hunter said that, a yelp was heard from behind them. They looked over to check and saw their teammate was suspended in the air with a vine wrapped around his left leg. Followed by even more vines chaining him up, his libs were all wrapped, and even his body.

The hunter screamed in a panic, "H-HEELL—"

The hunter's cry for help was cut short after another vine wrapped around his mouth.

Everyone readied their weapons and became wary of the trees. When vines came hurling in, the hunters would cut them down before they reached them, but unfortunately for them, there were too many.

"What!?"

A vine wrapped around a hunter's foot and saw that it did not come from a tree, but from a bush. He was then suspended in midair as the vine raised him up in the air. Before long, almost everyone was trapped in vines.

"My body is a mantle of obsidian. A core as fiery as the blistering sun. Empower me and smear my body with your flaming magma. Konjou Style, Volcanic Skin!"

The hunters that acted fast enough as well as the hunters that could still speak while suppressed cast Volcanic Skin. Their bodies were protected with a veil as hot as a fiery inferno. Nothing changed about their appearance but every time the vines made contact with them; it was burnt to a crisp preventing them to suppress them. But before all of them could escape, Yuu out-chanted them and took out most of the suppressed hunters.

“O Nature, Amass your power at my word. Create my weapons and impale my adversaries. Needle Storm!”

The air around Yuu began to compress into long, sharp spikes and launched at the hunters. The hunters were pierced through the chest and destroyed their armor in the process. Air continued to compress around Yuu and so did the volley of spikes. Most of the suppressed hunters as well as those unfortunate enough to not react in time were eliminated.

"Huh?"

A volley of arrows came from the backline. Yuu dodged by swiftly rolling to the side and disappearing into the bushes. She continued running without anyone’s vision of her. However, with her enhanced hearing, she barely heard someone chanting.

"Conjoin my arrows, pierce my enemies. Show them the fearsome storm that you can bring. Konjou Style, Arrow Squall!"

She chanted a quick spell and fired another volley. As she fired a single arrow, numerous arrow-shaped green lights appeared and positioned themselves parallel to the arrow loaded in her bow. She fired the volley blindly into the general direction Yuu disappeared into.

Yuu heard the sound of the arrows flying at her. She used her hearing to avoid the arrows without needing to look behind her.

“Hmm… That’s going to be a problem. I better take care of the backline before continuing. I wanted to save this just in case but it can’t be helped.”

Yuu turned back around to where she lost her pursuers but remained hidden from their sight. She began to set up a trap for her pursuers. She stopped right in front of a bush and set up her plan from there.

“O Light, I am as I desire to be. Standing tall and still, created through falsehoods. Call upon the fire and embed within the power of the blazing sun, follow my word. Ephemeral Clone!”

A copy of Yuu appeared behind her. It stood still and imitated Yuu’s position right before it was summoned. She was in the motion of standing up. It stood still and didn’t move even as Yuu walked around.

Normally, creating a still clone of yourself was a low-tier spell that only required the cast. It was usually executed in a very low voice to avoid having others hear the cast, but Yuu needed to chant for this clone.

That was because she applied an additional property to her clone. As long as it was within 10 seconds of summoning if she desires it, Yuu’s clone will explode and burn everything close to it. It was a mid-tier version of Ephemeral Clone. It lasted longer and could follow an order.

She knew the enemy was using magic to detect illusion since she barely saw the person who shot at her just before she fled. They could indeed detect illusion magic, but that only worked if they were not obstructed by something. She placed her illusion right in front of a huge bush to prevent it from being detected.

"O Wind, coat my legs, aid my every step. Bless me with your flight that will create my path. Enhanced Speed!"

Yuu prepared herself and cast enhanced speed. She stayed quiet and listened for the footsteps of the hunters. When she determined they were on the other side of the wall of leaves, she chanted in a quiet mumble.

“O Fire, break free from your cage, exhibit your power. Scorch my path and bring upon a conflagration. Eruption.”

Yuu punched the ground and was followed by two lines on either side appearing and extending in front of her. The ground exploded and created a thick wall of fire in between the lines. She then ran straight into the flame.

A small bit earlier, the group of hunters tried to find Yuu. They were already back in formation with their vanguard consisting of fighters and enchanters leading the search and their rear guard which consisted of casters and fighters armed with bows lined up in a straight line.

A fighter at the front lines led the search with a glass-like pane in front of his eye. It was light magic that saw through illusions. It was used to detect traps or any sneak attacks. Perhaps because he was too wary of what appeared in his illusion detector or maybe because he wasn’t taking a good look at where he was standing, but the last thing he heard was someone shouting “Look out, below us!” before being engulfed in a fiery flame.

From an outside perspective, two lines on the ground appeared coming from the bushes. Someone shouted a warning because of it, but the ground inside it began to crack and spewed out a huge wall of fire, destroying the frontlines. The backline reacted to it in time and no one got hurt.

Enchanters on the frontlines threw their kunai toward the source of the magic while fast-reacting fighters used flash strike to get past through the bush and pushed toward the attacker. They expected someone to be behind the bush. There was. But through their illusion detectors, they saw a dark silhouette of a girl. It was an illusion.

Not a second later, an explosion could be heard coming from their rear. Their backline was engulfed in fire. But before they could even return to assist, the illusion exploded and burned most of the hunters caught in it while it knocked back the others farther away.

Yuu had used the wall of fire to hide herself and reach the backlines. Since magic created from the caster’s mana cannot hurt them, she was able to run through the flames without getting hurt.

Although she couldn’t see, she used her senses to navigate through the flame, dodging obstacles and hunters that were too shocked to walk outside the flames. She chanted quietly as she ran through.

“O Fire, let my hands guide you. Recreate an image of a burning hell, beginning with this small flare…”

When she finally heard arrows being loaded and spells being chanted right beside her, she extended both her arms directly at either side and cast her spell.

“…Paired Hellfire!”

She continued running forward to maximize the enemies she hit by spreading her fire. Scorching flames came from within the already-standing wall of fire and took out lines of hunters. Yuu emerged from the flames and saw the result of her actions. She created hell on earth. Those she eliminated walked out of her fire furiously dripping sweat and shaking. They didn’t get hurt because Yuu used spirit weapons, only their armor was completely burnt. But nonetheless, they were engulfed in flames without even being prepared for it.

“Oops… Maybe I went a little too far? Well, at least I didn’t need to use hand-to-hand combat. Better play it safe than sorry. I don’t want to ruin Senpai’s plan.”

Yuu scratched her cheek awkwardly. Seconds later, a voice shouted in the distance and caught her attention.

"The vampire is over there! Ready your weapons!"

"Ah, reinforcements are here. I should stop here. I already dealt with most of them. I need to follow Senpai's plan."

With that in mind, Yuu quickly took her leave and ran away from the next wave of hunters chasing her, being wary of intercepting groups in front of her.

**109 – Beast’s Tenacity**

Over on Itsuki's side, he was already engaging with the hunters. He got tired of running away and challenged everyone chasing him. He was surrounded by hunters, in the trees, and on land. Ranged hunters shot their projectiles at him while the melee hunters kept him from escaping the area. It was a good plan but...

"Aight, time to use the thing!"

Itsuki briefly remembers what Ryosei said to him during their training.

*"\*Listen, I only taught one other person about this, so you don't have to worry about enemies with the same skillset. Because of that, take them by surprise. No one will expect your skillset. Hold onto this until the very last second, and then...\*"*

"I'LL MAKE THEM MY PREY!!"

The casters finished their chant and launched various magic spells onto Itsuki. Just before they hit him, Itsuki quickly made various strange hand gestures. And finally, every single spell hit him.

“Bond Manifest: Turtle!”

*\*BOOM!!\**

"Okay, we got him!"

"So much for the team that defeated a leader, am I right?"

The hunters cheered for their victory just a bit too early. From within the cloud of smoke, a thunderous roar as fearsome as a lion reverberated in everyone's ears. Everyone's joyous cheers were cut short and turned into silence as they waited in suspense for what could've made such a roar.

Stunned and unmoving, they watch the smoke. Suddenly, Itsuki came bolting out of the cloud of smoke and charging at the first person he saw. The hunters were expecting his spirit armor to be destroyed, but he didn't look the least bit damaged from the attacks. With that many spells, one would expect him to be very damaged at the least, but that wasn't the case. In fact, Itsuki was more fired up than before.

“Bond Manifest: Elephant!”

After performing hand gestures, Itsuki charged even faster at the closest person to him. That person was also a brute and took his stance. However, he became more and more confused as time passed, seeing as Itsuki wasn't taking any stance whatsoever. He simply continued to charge at him head first.

When Itsuki got close enough, the brute aimed to punch Itsuki's head. But completely contradictory to his expectations, Itsuki didn't slow down one bit and continued charging.

"What!?"

The brute's arm got pushed back and ultimately getting smashed into the tree behind him. Itsuki headbutt the brute so hard that the tree behind him fell backward. After confirming he was knocked out, Itsuki faced the other hunters with another fearsome yell. A moment's hesitation reached the hunters, but quickly recomposed themselves and prepared their attacks.

The casters began to chant their spells while the rest attacked Itsuki. He charged at the next person; this time it was a fighter armed with a sword. He charged the same as he did last time, but unlike last time, when he got close, the hunter disappeared.

Itsuki's target disappeared into thin air. It was illusion magic. Thanks to the lesson he learned from Yuu and Shiro, he didn't panic. He knew his enemy was only invisible, but not intangible. Itsuki crouched down, ready to pounce.

“Bond Manifest: Snake!”

Itsuki performed more hand gestures, closed his eyes, and made use of his senses. His vision turned infrared, allowing him to see the hunter who was about to swing down on Itsuki's chest. But before that could happen, he jumped toward the hunter and wrapped around him. He constricted an invisible figure, like a snake who trapped his prey. Before long, the hunter who went invisible dropped to the ground unconscious.

His next opponent was a group of three, two swordsmen and a brute. He made the same hand gestures and shouted.

“Bond Manifest: Gorilla!”

Before charging in, Itsuki pounded the ground with both of his hands and actually managed to leave a mark. He charged again. The brute confronted Itsuki while the two swordsmen waited behind him.

Itsuki opened up with a punch, which was then blocked by the brute. Having Itsuki's arm temporarily disabled, the other two swordsmen sent piercing attacks in Itsuki's way.

"LIKE HELL I'LL LET THAT HAPPEN!!"

Itsuki grabbed the brute's arm with his available hand and flailed him toward the two swordsmen behind him. One of the swordsmen got knocked to the side and hit the tree, while the other was crushed by the brute's body.

"COME AT ME!!"

Itsuki roared. Seeing what happened to the others who tried to fight Itsuki in hand-to-hand combat, the other hunters learned their lesson and kept a safe distance away. Now, without having to worry about hitting their allies, the ranged hunters, who had their bows and spells ready opened fire.

“Bond Manifest: Turtle!”

Itsuki shouted after he performed the same gestures. Unfortunately for the hunters, he walked away slowly with no signs of his armor getting destroyed or signs of getting knocked out. He managed to take every single attack by raising his arms up in a cross and creating a green barrier around him that looked similar to a turtle's shell.

Seeing as none of their attacks affected him, a seed of fear began to sprout within the hunters. No one approached him or began to cast any spells. They were at a loss for what to do.

"GET THE FUCK DOWN!! BOND MANIFEST: GORILLA!"

Since no one came for him, Itsuki went to the nearest tree where hunters were perched and punched right through it after performing his usual gestures.

Screams came out of the mouths of the hunters on the tree top. He repeatedly punched through the tree until it couldn't support itself and fell down. The hunters were at the point where they couldn't even think straight and let their instincts take over. Proof of that was when they didn't bother to jump to the closest tree but instead braced themselves for the fall. Hunters laid on the ground, unconscious from the fall.

The hunters coordinated one massive attack while Itsuki was distracted. Three brutes rushed at him, two spearmen and two swordsmen followed behind them, while three casters chanted spells from afar.

Itsuki didn’t hesitate and charged at one of the brutes. Since they knew that Itsuki wouldn’t stop for nothing, the brutes charged at him as well. It was a fight to see who was strongest. Three brutes or Itsuki.

One of the brutes decided that it wasn’t a good idea, used flash strike, and tried to punch Itsuki’s side, but when he did, there was no one there. That was because Itsuki happened to use flash strike at the same time.

He then appeared above the brute in front of him. He was upside down with his arms extended to each side of the brute. He used the power he got from flash strike to grab him and lifted him up the brute off the ground as he spun around the air. When he was right side up, he smashed the brute he had in his hands into the ground where a spearman and a swordsman were.

The two hunters underneath the brute were completely knocked out. But since the brute Itsuki used as a weapon was still conscious, he made sure to finish the job by punching him in his temple and knocking him out.

While Itsuki was standing still, the three casters made their move. Two chains of lightning and a snowball were launched at him. The lightning shocked him for a second but he bared it and tried performing his usual gestures and mumbled something.

“Bond… Manifest…”

But when the snowball hit him, he slowed down considerably until he froze.

The spearman beside him didn’t waste a second and shoved the spear through his chest, but it was stopped by Itsuki’s barrier. While trying to pierce through it, he examined Itsuki. Looking at him closely, he saw that his hands were positioned in a particular way. It was the last gesture he always made before shouting “bond manifest” followed by some kind of animal.

*“\*Wait, now that I think about it… wasn’t that Yosuke-ojii-san’s technique!?\*”*

After the spearman’s sudden realization, Itsuki broke the ice and grabbed the nearest person which just happened to be the spearman.

“BEAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAR!!!!!!”

“What the!?”

Itsuki took a tight hold of his head and searched the trees. After seeing one of the casters, he threw the spearman at him, but not before confiscating his spear. Itsuki aimed the spear at the spearman’s chest and threw it at him. The spearman hit the caster and the spear that Itsuki threw pierced them both, eliminating them from the battle.

After Itsuki threw the spear, he heard footsteps coming from behind and beside him. Without hesitation, he turned around and readied a punch. The swordsman was already about to hit him, but his blade was blocked by the Itsuki’s barrier.

He managed to crack his barrier but was delivered a powerful punch to the temple, knocking him out. Itsuki’s troubles didn’t stop. He received the same punch when he wasn’t looking. It was from the earlier brute.

He grabbed Itsuki’s head and struck it with his knee followed by a powerful blow to the solar plexus, knocking him back. The sound of glass shattering reached everyone’s ears as Itsuki’s natural barrier was broken. Having raised everyone’s morale, the other hunters stepped up to take on Itsuki.

*\*What… That sound… was my barrier? No… no, no ,no, no!! Impossible! I’m going to lose… This can’t be happening. Where!? Where did I go wrong!?\**

Itsuki’s mind was a mess. He was on the brink of defeat. He tried to think of what he did wrong, but couldn’t find it. Just as he was about to hit the tree behind him, voices echoed in his head.

*“\*This is Ryosei, dealt with everyone on my side. Setting up the final stage.\*”*

*“\*This is Yuu, I culled my pursuers and bringing the rest. Should I head there now?\*”*

*“\*No, not yet. Hold off for thirty more minutes.\*”*

*“\*Got it!\*”*

*“\*Itsuki-san, any problems on your end?\*”*

**110 – Unrelenting Berserker**

It was Ryosei and Yuu communicating through connect. They were updating their status to everyone. That was when Itsuki remembered something Ryosei told him while they were training in the past week.

*\*Hey, Itsuki-san. I know why you chose to become a hunter. It’s to become strong enough to protect your sister, isn’t it? I don’t know why you’re going this far for her, but there’s nothing wrong with that. You are a brute. You’re most powerful when you have a straight head and true to your goal. Use that drive to power yourself through. For now, stop thinking about useless things like mistakes and remember your training. Let your instincts run wild. I know you can overcome this challenge.\**

*\*That cocky ghost… I’ll never hear the last of it if I fail now!\**

Itsuki responded to Ryosei before anything else.

*“\*I HEAR YOU! THIRTY MINUTES IS NOTHING!\*”*

Just as Itsuki was about to hit the tree behind him, he pointed his arms behind him and bent his legs like he was lunging. Suddenly, explosions erupted at the end of all his limbs and stopped himself. He landed on his feet and performed his gestures.

“BOND MANIFEST: MONKEY!!!”

He shouted his heart out as he used flash strike to return in front of the brute that knocked him back and threw a punch to his temple. The brute anticipated that and blocked it with his arm. Itsuki threw his next punch and exchanged blows with the brute.

Punches and kicks, blocks and barriers. Itsuki began to penetrate the brute’s defenses but was blocked by the barrier. Meanwhile, all the brute’s attacks were getting blocked one after another.

*“\*What!? Why is he faster than before!?\*”*

The other hunters prepared their attacks and were about to take Itsuki down from behind. Finally, after a long series of attacks, Itsuki broke the brute’s barrier. But in exchange, the brute finally got a hit off Itsuki. He didn’t have a barrier; it was only his bare skin. However, contradicting his expectations, Itsuki stood his ground. The brute saw his eyes and the burning passion. It was the last thing he saw before getting knocked out by a punch in the temple.

“COME AT MEEE!!!”

With the brute’s fall, the other hunters’ weapons finally made contact with Itsuki… or so they thought. Their weapons were stopped just before they hit Itsuki’s skin. It was a barrier. Itsuki was able to regenerate it. The barrier was hit with spells and weapons, so much so that black smoke clouded the area. But for some reason, his barrier stayed strong.

Itsuki gripped the head of the brute he took down, just before he fell, and used him to knock back the hunters behind him. They all reacted in time and jumped away. But Itsuki didn’t stop his swing and aimed it at the casters on the trees.

He closed the gap to his closest enemy with flash strike and punched his solar plexus. The other hunters engaged. Swordsmen, spearmen, and ranged hunters. The swordsmen coordinated an attack and used flash strike to slice through Itsuki’s barrier by hitting him from three sides, creating a triangle. Meanwhile, the spearmen tried to stab him from a distance.

But Itsuki didn’t let that happen. His barrier withstood the swordsmen’s triangle strike. He elbowed the person to his left, knocking him out. Then, used that left hand to grip the person to his right by spinning to his left using the momentum of his last attack. Meanwhile, using his right hand to punch the person in front of him, knocking him back, and making him land unconscious on the ground. Then, grabbing the neck of the first person he knocked out.

He lifted the two like ragdolls and used them as shields to protect him from the spears coming from both sides. The spearmen hesitated but Itsuki pushed them forward and ended up skewered by their own allies’ spears.

Itsuki didn’t let this chance go by and knocked out the two spearmen close to him. Magic launched at him but he dodged them all. He locked his eyes on the first caster he saw and rushed at him.

He was intercepted by a brute so he changed priorities. Itsuki engaged with an uppercut. The brute blocked it with his hand and launched his free fist at him. However, Itsuki forcefully broke his fist free and rotated his arm to block the attack. Meanwhile, he took another step forward and used his free fist to punch the brute on the solar plexus. The brute was baffled when he heard glass shatter and shards of his barrier dissipating. With his defenses broken, Itsuki used his elbow that was pointing at the brute’s neck from blocking the attack earlier and struck it. He followed it up with another punch to the solar plexus and one to the temple.

Itsuki heard footsteps approaching from behind him. With no time to waste, he grabbed the knocked-out brute and used flash strike to backflip. Just as Itsuki thought, right below him was a big group of hunters, and now he was going to destroy all of them with a huge crash.

The hunters who had no clue where Itsuki disappeared to was suddenly demolished by an attack from above. Those unfortunate enough to be in the middle of the impact were crushed and knocked out, while those close lost their balance and fell. Itsuki got back up and made swift work with the downed opponents and knocked them out by throwing them at the casters that were about to launch their spell.

Most of the casters hesitated and were knocked out by their allies’ bodies while some were forced to launch their spells at their own allies to save themselves. Itsuki leaped at the first caster he saw and grabbed him. He was inevitably thrown at another caster and knocked them off the tree. The casters were miraculously conscious but were finished off by a powerful stomp to the chest from Itsuki.

The rest of the fighters and brutes charged at Itsuki, eager to finish him off. He waited for them to come and took the defensive. A swordsman was first to reach him with flash strike. He swung his sword but was denied when Itsuki used Burst to create a small explosion before the blade made contact. With the swordsman’s footing destroyed, he finished him off with a powerful punch.

He did the same to the following hunters. With incredible agility, he countered attack after attack and knocked them out when they were open. When the brutes arrived, he took the initiative and used flash strike to power his punch and attacked the brute.

To the brute’s surprise, even though he expected his attack and had his arms up to defend himself, Itsuki’s punch destroyed his barrier in an instant, making him completely open, and was finished off by his next punch.

Itsuki went on an unstoppable rampage. He denied every attack with blocks, bursts, and even parries, followed by a devastating strike from fists, kicks, elbows, and even headbutts, taking every enemy out on one strike.

After defeating all the fighters and brutes, Itsuki looked around to find survivors. After scanning the whole area, he found three casters in the distance. He slowly approached them. The casters seemed to be utterly shaken since they were stuttering and messed up their chant every time they tried it. One of the casters finally chanted correctly and launched a lightning strike. It was blocked by Itsuki’s barrier. One of the casters tried to back up but tripped on a rock. The next attack was from a different caster who launched a snowball at him. The same one that froze Itsuki earlier. But now, it was ineffective to Itsuki’s barrier.

Itsuki was closing in and the two standing casters tried to run for it but were stopped by a flash strike from Itsuki and grabbed both of their necks and threw them to the caster that was already on the ground. He crouched right in front of the three and glared at them with a terrifying face.

“Oi, oi, oi, where do you think you three are going?”

“W-W-We surren—”

One of the casters tried to surrender but was denied when Itsuki forcefully shut him up with his hand.

“LISTEN TO WHAT I HAVE TO SAY, WILL YA!?”

The three frighted casters did as Itsuki said.

“You can surrender once you inform your friends that I’m here, aight? If you do that, I’ll promise you that I won’t go after you goons when this battle ends, got that?!”

The three casters nodded furiously in agreement with Itsuki’s threat. He let the three casters leave and flee for help. With that taken care of, he walked up to one of the fallen branches he destroyed by throwing humans like ragdolls and sat to catch his breath.

*“\*It’s me. I might have done too much to the enemy. How much time do we have left?\*”*

*“\*There are still 15 more minutes before completion. Is it a huge problem on your side, Itsuki-san?\*”*

*“\*No, not really.\*”*

*“\*Okay then, I’ll inform you when we’re ready to go.\*”*

Itsuki finished his update to Ryosei and breathed out a huge sigh as he stared at the sky.

“Looks like there really is no coming back from this path. Ugh… that was hard.”

**111 – Team Senkyo’s Performance**

Over at the castle, the judges just finished witnessing the chaos Senkyo Team dealt. Their faces were the very definition of dumbfounded.

"Wh-What the hell was that...?"

"Ryosei was to be expected, but even his other teammates..."

"They went on a massacre... the remaining participants are down to 44% and it's only been an hour in. This is the fastest a Hunter Battle Royale has ever gone..."

Yoshiko, Yousuke, and Dai expressed their bewilderment. Each individual member overcame the odds and fought against—wiped out a huge number of hunters all by themselves using their own unique way of fighting.

Everyone was baffled by their performance. Over at the side, Kosuke voiced out his thoughts, getting the rest of the judges' attention.

"That boy... the one with the barbaric fighting style. He used Transcendence. A technique that requires you to make a bond with an animal and be able to use their power."

"Isn't that your fighting style, Kosuke-san? How does that boy know about it? Did you teach him?"

Dai curiously questioned Kosuke. Everyone else didn't seem to know anything about what Dai said. They turned their attention to him, intently listening for his response.

"No, I taught him nothing. In the first place, I did not create that fighting style."

"Then, who did?"

With a bit of hesitation, Kosuke told them the truth.

"It was that brat who created it. Konjou Ryosei."

"What!?"

Everyone yelled in surprise.

"It is true. That boy created that skill when he was 11. He came up to me and told me he would teach me a fighting style as a birthday present. Hahaha... amusing, isn't it? To think a child would teach a veteran hunter and actually make use of it. That brat really had it in him... Hm? What is it?"

Kosuke looked to his around and saw the four judges staring at him with shocked faces.

"Oh, sorry. It's just that I've never seen you laugh before, Sakurai-ojii-san."

"I agree with Yoshiko, in the time I've known you, you've always had a face of steel."

Yoshiko and Yousuke inputted their thoughts.

"Then, it is also a bit shocking to me that you had no reaction to me being taught by a child."

"Well, I've seen him do shocking things way back then, so I kind of got used to them."

Yousuke said so as he remembered his past with Ryosei. After realizing what Kosuke entailed, Dai voiced it out.

"Are you saying that the real Ryosei-san really is inside Yukou-kun?"

"Yes, after all, no one but him and I know about how this technique is done."

"I see..."

Having Dai's thoughts heard, Yoshiko was the next one to speak.

"Wait, a bond? That means getting up close and personal, right? Then doesn't that mean that boy got up close to all those animals he mentioned? How..."

Yoshiko gazed questionably at Kosuke. In response, he closed his eyes and shook his head from side to side, signaling that he has no idea on how Itsuki got those bonds. On the other hand, Kaede spoke up and added her piece.

"U-Um... I did hear in the news that there has been a burglar breaking in and out of zoos at night... could it be that...?"

Silently, everyone nodded in agreement to the connection between the two. Although Kaede couldn't see, she thought the same and figured that silence meant they agreed.

"Still, splitting up and eliminating as many people as possible, is that their strategy? It seems to be working now, but do they really have enough resources to keep fighting like this?”

Yoshiko pointed out the flaw in their strategy. However, Dai would say differently.

"No. I think that this is only a part of their strategy."

"What do you mean, Dai?"

Yousuke asked.

"No one would figure this out without this knowledge, but Yukou-kun and Ryosei-san can use both spirit power and mana without a problem."

"Seriously!?"

Yoshiko voiced out in shock. She wasn't the only one, although they didn't yell out, every other person in the room, except for Freda and Yousuke, was in shock.

"Yes. Remember, when I trained Yukou-kun, he had an incredibly fast learning pace and could cast techniques that required a lot of spirit power with ease. And the other day, Sora-kun reported to me that Senkyo was actually the one who defeated most of the enemies when they encountered the revenants last week. And he did that by using a field circle right after using a spectral."

"I received the same report from Sora-kun. He told me that Yukou-kun was a dual user."

"A-A dual user!? You mean the one from that children’s story? How is that possible!?"

Yoshiko yelled out.

"I do not know, but the fact that he can use high amounts of spirit power and mana at the same time is real."

The room fell silent. Everyone knew how absurd that sounded, but Dai and Yousuke would have no reason to lie. Everyone was forced to believe so. Having that fact settled in, Kosuke spoke up.

"Yamazaki-dono, I have heard that that boy failed every class but the enchanter class. But last week, I used Intimidate to test his mettle, but found myself the one intimidated instead."

"I-Impossible! If he topped even your spirit power, then that would mean that he was able to hide at least 97% of his spirit power from the evaluation test!"

"That much!? That's ridiculous..." Yoshiko added.

"I suppose we will have a mountain of questions to ask Yukou-kun about..."

After Dai said that, Yoshiko put him back on track to where he left off earlier.

"Then, Dai, about the Senkyo Team's plan..."

"Oh, yes. It would be easier to show you... Kaede-san, could you please show on the screen all the members of Team Senkyo."

"Right away."

Three screens changed and showed Senkyo, Yuu, and Itsuki being chased by hunters. Having done so, Dai asked a strange request.

"Then, Kaede-san, could you please find another Yukou Senkyo on the battlefield, different from the one on the screen."

From Dai's request, the other judges figured out what Dai meant.

"I see! At the start of the match, that Yukou Senkyo split off into two!"

Yoshiko reminded them of Senkyo's past actions.

"That's right, and in the register, including Ryosei, there were still five members that were registered. The person that magically showed up before the Chief and me when we were confirming the members, was Team Senkyo's fifth member, Shiro."

**112 – Spider’s Web**

"Nya!? Nya!? Nya!? Nya!? Nyaa!!! How many spells are you planning on throwing at Shiro!?"

Shiro, disguised as Senkyo, evaded spell after spell as she was running away from the hunters in her pursuit. At this point, the hunters were convinced that they were running after the real Senkyo.

"Captain, should we really keep chasing this guy? The other half of our group hasn’t come back yet. Should we not be worried this is a trap?"

"You don't get it, do you? If we take out the so-called 'Konjou Ryosei' and the person who defeated a leader, we'll prove that we're powerful enough to take on a leader ourselves and send us to the frontlines!"

"But captain—"

"Just shut up and follow my orders! We'll take the glory and leave that bastard in the dust!"

The male hunter stepped down and kept quiet. Although he had his doubts, he still decided to follow orders. They continued chasing Shiro, who they mistook for Senkyo.

*"\*Everyone, are you there? It's ready. Move on to phase two of our plan.\*"*

"It's Onii-chan!"

Senkyo's voice echoed in Shiro's head. From his wording, it was safe to say that the message was meant for everybody in Team Senkyo. Shiro gave a cheerful response, along with the response of Yuu and Itsuki.

*"\*Got it, Onii-chan!\*"*

*"\*Roger!\*."*

*"\*‘Bout time!\*"*

"Yes! Shiro can finally see Onii-chan again—waah!!”

“Huh!?”

The hunter who cast the fireball that was making a beeline directly toward Shiro was in shock when he saw his fireball disintegrate before it made contact with Shiro. In a slight panic, Shiro turned back and saw that all of her pursuers were still after her.

“Whew, good, they’re all still after Shiro. It doesn’t look like they figured it out yet. Shiro has to hurry up before that happens again.”

Shiro changed course and headed for the location of phase two.

"...So, does that mean that this Shiro is actually a cover-up?"

Yoshiko asked, continuing the conversation from before. Dai answered in response to the question.

"That's right. By having Shiro disguise herself with illusion magic, her pursuers will think she is the real Senkyo because of how long they've been chasing her. While she's doing that, Senkyo and Ryosei, who completely annihilated all of their pursuers, will prepare the second part of their plan."

"And, that is...?"

Yoshiko questioned.

"We’ll just have to see for ourselves."

"Look over there! It's the rest of Team Senkyo!"

A hunter shouted as they saw Yuu and Itsuki heading their way with pursuers of their own. The leader of the group, voiced his orders.

"So this was their plan... They wanted us to fight each other and slip away in the chaos. These dirty bastards... Don't let them get away! Keep chasing that bastard until we have him dead!"

"Alright!"

The hunters responded to the captain's orders. They set their sights on Senkyo, who was actually Shiro, and began to pick up the pace. A certain male hunter, however, had doubts of his own. It was the same hunter that offered to stop chasing Shiro.

*"\*This is strange... There’s a huge opening where that guy is going. But if their plan really was to escape in the commotion, wouldn't it be better to meet up in a place where the trees are thick? But if that isn't their plan then what...?\*"*

The hunter remembered the time when he separated from their original hunter group. Their deal was to come back when they confirm that they were chasing the wrong one, but they never came back. There would've been enough time for them to backtrack their group, so why did they not come back?

*\*Don't be fooled, they may look like a team of three, but including the Delinquent Prodigy, they are actually a team of five!\**

The hunter remembered the announcer's words, just before all communications to the clan were closed off and the event had started.

*"\*A team of... five!?\*"*

He carefully counted everyone present. Senkyo, Ryosei, Yuu, Itsuki... but he failed to account for one more person.

*"\*C-Could it be!?\*"*

Shiro, Yuu, and Itsuki came out of the forest and onto the middle of an open field where there was a single rock standing in the middle of it. Their pursuers came flooding in. They weren't fast enough to properly count them all, but at least fifty hunters were coming in from all directions.

"GET THEM ALL—"

"EVERYONE GET OFF THE GROUND!!"

The male hunter cut his leader off before he could finish speaking, overwriting his order. The hunter stayed perched on the tree that stood at the edge of the forest. The leader and most of the hunters failed to heed his warning and jumped into the glade. Not a second later...

"What is this!?"

The area of ground that covered not only the whole glade but reached all the way into the forest became covered in black outlines that shaped a magic circle. The hunters that touched the circle became unable to move their bodies. Their bodies refused to listen to their orders, but all of them were perfectly conscious.

The hunters struggled and struggled but to no avail. Some hunters managed to avoid the trap, but their numbers were so scarce that they could be counted with both hands.

In the middle of the glade, where a rock once stood, appeared Senkyo who had his hand placed on a piece of paper. Now that there was no rock to be seen, it was obvious that he was concealing himself as a rock with illusion magic.

The ranged hunters that were on the tree tops fired their projectiles at Senkyo, but another Senkyo stepped up in front of Senkyo and created a barrier to protect him. Slowly, the Senkyo who put up the barrier began to reveal her true form, and there appeared Shiro's catgirl figure.

"It worked Onii-chan!"

"Yeah, good work. Thanks for hanging in there. I'll make it up for you with whatever you want."

"Ehehehe~... Well, if you insist..."

A small drop of saliva slipped out of Shiro's mouth as she imagined the various things that she could do with the power she obtained.

**113 – Approaching Storm**

"We'll take care of this."

"Leave it to us, Yukou-senpai!"

Itsuki and Yuu, who were still moving despite being on top of the field circle approached the closest person to each of them. Itsuki pulled up his fist while Yuu summoned a fireball to her palm. The petrified hunters could only watch as their death comes closer and closer to them as Itsuki and Yuu eliminated the hunters in their path.

Not long after, all the hunters that got stuck in Senkyo's fly trap were eliminated. Yuu took care of the surviving hunters who tried to run away, while some of them surrendered themselves, saving the experience of getting knocked out.

Over at the Konjou town, everyone was silent as they watched the screen where they saw almost every single hunter get eliminated with no way to fight back. The announcer was first to break the silence.

"I-It's a massacre!! Team Senkyo lead everyone into their fly trap and took them out one by one! Team Senkyo's earlier performance, where they overcame the odds and took out groups of hunters all by themselves, followed by a merciless tactic to draw every single hunter in and almost end the whole event right there and then in under an hour and a half!! Such an amazing performance! With frightening wits and strength, they received the title of almost every record in the whole Konjou clan! Now, do you think they are worthy of all the feats they have been given up to this point?"

With the announcer's question, every citizen cheered in approval. The whole town rumbled as it was showered in thunderous cheers. It was a sign of the town approving of every jaw-dropping claim that Senkyo and the others had said.

"H-He really is capable of using both spirit power and mana..."

Inside the castle, where the event's judges were located, Yoshiko said so in a meek voice. She has been astonished too many times to have enough power to shout out in surprise. As if the energy was sapped out of her, she rested on the desk as her mind malfunctioned from everything that happened.

"Amazing. To think Yukou-kun thought of such a plan..."

"It was devious but ingenious. He used every member’s strengths and built up a plan around them. His tactics in battle are magnificent."

"So it's not only Ryosei-san but all these other people are strong too... Just what happened that got him into this, I wonder..."

Dai, Kosuke, and Yousuke said their piece about what they thought. But there was one person who hadn't spoken much in the entire time they were watching.

"Freda-sama? Is something the matter?"

Yousuke asked.

"The real challenge is about to show itself."

"Hm?"

One of the screens changed feeds, and everyone immediately realized what Freda meant. Their faces suddenly became serious as they watched him approach the battlefield.

Back where Senkyo and the others stood, Senkyo disabled the field circle after having taken care of everything. He approached a certain hunter, who decided to surrender after witnessing everything that happened.

"Yo, nice fight out there."

It was the hunter who yelled out the warning to everyone else before the trap was activated and managed to save a few hunters. He looked a bit crestfallen as Senkyo said that.

"Well, you say that but I hadn't done anything but chase around a dummy. Not only that, we all got caught in your petrify trap."

"What do you mean? You figured out our plan, didn't you?"

"Not quite, I was a bit off. I thought the fifth member set up the trap. But to think the fifth member was a dummy and the other one was someone who could use both spirit power and mana... Did I stop listening at lessons at some point or something?"

"Sorry, I'm just an anomaly."

"Huh? What's that?"

"Nothing important. Now, you should get away from here as far as possible."

*“\*Did you notice it too, Senkyo?\*”*

*“\*Yep. That frightening dark aura… It has to be him.\*”*

Senkyo turned his back and went to his teammates.

"W-Wait! What do you mean by that?"

The hunter called for Senkyo, but he didn't turn around. Ignoring the hunter's call, Senkyo reached Yuu and Itsuki.

"Are you sure you'll be alright, Yukou-senpai? I can still stay if you want."

"Yeah, I can show off my secret art again!"

Senkyo shook his head in denial.

"Sorry, but let us three take care of this one. Besides, I need someone to take these unconscious people away from the area. If they get caught in, it might be trouble for me."

"I see..."

Yuu said so disappointedly.

"Tsk. Fine, but I'll have a fight with your ghost friend once you're done! I need to show him how weak he is compared to me now."

"Yeah, sure. We'll come back."

Itsuki turned his back and carried the closest unconscious person on his shoulder and took off to get another. Meanwhile, Yuu was still standing in front of Senkyo. Taking notice of her internal plight, Senkyo said some words of reassurance.

"Hey, I told you before. I'm not going anywhere. We'll come back as soon as we're done, I promise."

"F-Fine. Have it your way."

**114 – Senkyo and Touma**

Yuu took off and left Senkyo alone. After a few seconds, a dark aura coming from the trees was slowly coming closer and closer to where Senkyo stood. From within the forest, came Touma. He was still wearing the same battle gear from last week's incident. His clothes were all torn up and worn down. Mud and scratches covered his clothes. His body was covered in black veins and both of his arms were covered with a tinge of purple.

"Wow... He's in worse shape than I thought."

Senkyo placed his spirit weapon back in the sheath attached to his waist. In exchange, he reached out to the back of his cloak and pulled out a wooden sword, and held it with his dominant right hand. On his left, he took out two kunai from within his cloak and prepared for battle.

Unlike all the other times, it wasn't Ryosei who was readying himself for battle, but Senkyo. This was the first time that he was actually fighting with his own body. Being completely aware of that fact, Senkyo did his best to keep his cool, because the only sure way he wasn't getting out of this one alive, is if he chickens out and half-ass everything.

Touma began to growl like a wild animal as he glared at Senkyo with killing intent. Senkyo took a deep breath to calm his nerves. Awaiting Touma's move, he stood still with his guard up.

Finally, Touma charged in head first with his arms placed to his sides like he was about to tackle Senkyo. As he got closer, both his arms turned into purple blades. Senkyo, on the other hand, was enchanting his weapons. His wooden sword rippled in blue light as did the kunai he hid beneath his cloak. With another deep breath to cool his nerves, Senkyo charged to intercept Touma.

"YOU... REVENGE...! YOU… DIIIE..!!"

Touma leaped toward Senkyo with his arm blades forming an X. Just before Touma made contact, Senkyo disappeared in thin air. Touma slashed his blades and ended his strike with his arm blades pointed downwards. He turned his head from left then right, searching for Senkyo's body.

"RAAAA!!"

Touma felt both of his arm blades fall from their place and dropped to the ground. Senkyo was behind him with his wooden sword covered in some kind of purple liquid. The pain ran through Touma's body, but instead of dropping to the ground in pain, he turned around to face Senkyo and charged him.

Purple slime oozed from the part where Touma's arms were cut off and began to form new blades, but before they finished forming, Senkyo threw two kunai into his regenerating arms. They glowed with similar symbols of spirit: a half-moon arc with a diamond in the center. Inside the arc, just above the tip of the diamond was intersected by the symbol of domination: two parallel lines with the upper line stretching twice as long as the lower line, similar to the upside-down of the Japanese kanji for two. And finally, in the center of the diamond was the symbol of interaction: two parallel lines stretching out to opposite sides with one perpendicular line connecting them, which could be compared to a line drawing of a lightning bolt or a deformed version of the Japanese katakana for “sa.”

Senkyo made some distance and took out more kunai from his cloak. When Touma's arms fully submerged the kunai, his arms exploded and severed his newly regenerated arms. Touma screamed in pain but still charged at Senkyo.

*"\*H-How many times am I supposed to do this again, Shiro?\*"*

*"\*Only until his magic barrier subdues, then Onii-chan can finally cure him.\*"*

*"\*Haah...\*"*

Senkyo heaved a deep sigh as he recalled the instructions Shiro gave to him the other night. It was a tedious process but Senkyo had to do it. He recalled his conversation with Shiro.

*"\*A Dehin's curse can be cured by high-tier control magic in our world. But it requires a part of the Dehin’s body that cursed him. Since it’s impossible for us to obtain that, Onii-chan will have to do it manually.\*"*

*"\*Manually? How do I do that?\*"*

*"\*First, we have to tire him out. The curse is powerful enough that its excess power turns into a barrier that protects anything from curing it. So, drain that excess power out. Onii-chan has to cut off the infected parts as much as possible. But don't cut off his head, or he will die for real."*

Senkyo let Touma charge in and entered melee combat. Senkyo used his wooden sword to block the first arm blade while he used his kunai to block the second. With Senkyo's arms all taken, Touma lifted up his foot and kicked Senkyo in the stomach.

Senkyo held onto both his weapons as he was sent hurling backward. Touma immediately followed up and transformed his arms into huge hammers. As he was charging at Senkyo, he jumped up in the air in an attempt to crush him.

Senkyo rolled to the side as fast as he could and got back up. While at his previous location, Touma crushed the ground with his twin hammers and even made a small cloud of dust.

Senkyo placed a kunai on the ground, then ran to a different location and placed another kunai on the ground. He repeatedly did so while dodging Touma's bone-crushing attacks. After having done his work, Senkyo finally faced Touma with his wooden sword in hand.

Touma went for another crushing attack and leaped at Senkyo. He swiftly tumbled to the side where he wasn't going to be affected by the attack.

*\*CRUSH!!\**

"DAMN... YOU... FIGHT... FIGHT!!"

Touma growled monstrously, clearly annoyed by Senkyo's lack of will to fight.

"I'd rather set my advantages first before fighting."

Before Touma could lift his hammer arms from the ground, he felt a sharp pain accompanied by purple liquid gushing out of his arms. With his cries of pain, he got back up and charged at Senkyo.

With Touma's arms yet to regenerate, Senkyo intercepted Touma's charge. Touma raised his regenerating arms and reached out to Senkyo. Purple slime climbed from his arms' base and began to form a long spike as it regenerated.

Touma's aim was to spike Senkyo the moment his arms regenerated. But despite having a spike extending toward Senkyo's face and his stomach, he didn't dodge and proceeded with his attack.

That was because he wasn't going to let that happen. Just before the spikes could fully form, something shot through Touma's arms, dismembering his arms once again. The fast-moving objects that cut Touma's arms twice were the kunai that Senkyo placed around the battlefield. They glowed with the symbol of direction: an equilateral triangle, and inside it, the symbol of spirit.

Senkyo strategically placed the kunai. Unlike Sora's Complete Spirit Power Flow, Senkyo can't control the kunai however he wants. However, he can enchant a kunai to launch in a certain direction beforehand. Senkyo placed numerous kunai on the ground and enchanted them to launch at a straight line angling slightly upward on his word. He lured Touma to the middle of the battlefield where the kunai were all pointing.

Senkyo, who didn't have anything in his way, struck Touma's stomach with the blade of his wooden sword, but oddly enough, it didn't cut through unlike when he cut Touma's arms.

That was because Senkyo disenchanted his wooden sword to avoid cutting Touma down. However, even if Senkyo's sword didn't cut through, Touma still felt the strike and threw up purple liquid.

**115 – Helplessness**

Touma dropped to the ground with his dismembered arms trying to cover up his stomach. Touma was pretty beaten up. Senkyo cut off his arms numerous times already. Touma writhed in pain, but he was nowhere close to kicking the bucket.

"REVENGE...! I... KILL... YOU...! I...! I...! RAAAAGGGHHHHH!!!!!"

Four tentacles came out of Touma's back, sending Touma into even more suffering than before. Each tentacle wrapped each one of his limbs. His arms and legs were completely covered in purple tentacles. Senkyo backed up, knowing it was dangerous to stand too close to Touma.

*"\*Onii-chan, his barrier is gone now!\*"*

"Yeah, but this is going to be troubling. Ryosei, are you ready?"

*"\*Of course.\*"*

Shiro’s final instruction flashed through his head.

*\*Onii-chan has to cut down that guy's weak points. If all the points where the curse rooted itself in him are cut, then the curse will lose its control over him, weakening the curse. At that point, we only have to cast a normal purification spell and he will be cured!\**

Imagining what they would have to do if things got out of hand, Ryosei said to Senkyo.

*"\*This is the first time we'll be doing this in battle, isn't it?\*"*

"Yeah, let's wipe this curse out and go home!"

Senkyo dropped the remaining kunai in his cloak. He switched positions and held the wooden sword in his left hand while he took out the spirit blade and held it with his right hand.

Touma let out another monstrous roar and charged at Senkyo. In a blink of an eye, he reached Senkyo. Touma raised his left arm and launched it at Senkyo. However, in that short period where Touma dashed, at the same time, Senkyo switched with Ryosei.

Ryosei dodged Touma's arm with the slightest of movements, as simple as moving his shoulder away. Using that momentum, Ryosei swung his spirit blade upwards, severing Touma's arm from his body once again. He brought down the spirit sword from the sky and slashed through his head, but it wasn’t sliced off. The slash only resulted in popping Touma’s right eye.

With the spirit sword, Ryosei’s first slash cut through Touma's arm. His neck was in the path of its slash but it didn’t sever it. That was because spirit weapons can only come in contact with spiritual objects like the soul, which included curses. The swords can only temporarily subdue living spirits, but it works just fine on curses.

Since Touma's whole arm was taken over by the curse, it was severed. His neck wasn’t severed which meant that there was still a chance to save him. On Ryosei’s second strike, he didn’t cut through his head, but his right eye popped, indicating that the curse had taken over it.

In a panic, Touma backpedaled, making distance between himself and Ryosei. After a few seconds, Touma's right arm refused to regenerate its purple slime, the same went for his eye. Touma roared in frustration and stared Ryosei down with a bloodshot eye.

"Hey, are you sure this is fine? Even if we cure him, he won't be able to regenerate his arms and eye, won't he?"

Ryosei asked.

*"\*Unfortunately, that is the cost of curing a Dehin's curse this late on.\*"*

*"\*Damn...\*"*

*"\*Sorry. Shiro can't be of any more help, Onii-chan.\*"*

*"\*No, it's not your fault.\*"*

Ryosei has already cut two of the four weak points. Its original weak points were its left arm, right arm, right eye, and heart. Since the spirit weapon only knocks out a living soul, it will only remove the curse. Ryosei already cut off Touma's right arm and right eye. Only two more left before they can fully cure Touma. Determined to release Touma from his suffering as fast as possible, Ryosei dashed toward Touma.

Ryosei was about to cut down Touma's left arm, but a tentacle from behind Touma came and intercepted him. By using both the wooden and the spirit sword, Ryosei blocked and slashed the tentacles that went his way.

Touma didn’t even have the power to control himself. He was just a beast on a rampage. He wasn’t even a challenge to Ryosei and Senkyo to the point where they didn’t even need to use the kunai Senkyo prepared around the battlefield or the plan they had in case the situation went awry. While the battle was occurring, Senkyo thought to himself.

*\*I wonder why... even if we are doing this for Saito-san's sake, it feels like I'm taking everything from him at the same time. If Saito-san gets cured, he'll end up disabled with no arms and one eye... Even if the Konjou clan can make another eye for him, that won't change the fact that Saito-san won't have any arms. In the first place, Yamamoto-san mentioned that it was a one-time operation that couldn’t be done again. Although I don’t know the details, if such a limit was on a spectral-prosthetic eye, then arms are most likely out of the question.\**

Pondering and pondering, even as the chaos outside went on, Senkyo kept thinking about the inevitable outcome of this battle.

*\*Even if it weren’t a spectral, no one can just make artificial arms with a snap of a finger. Saito-san is a swordsman who relies highly on his arms if he loses those, even if he wasn't a swordsman, his life would be ruined. Is it really still saving... if it would only bring him more grief...?\**

Ryosei successfully severed Touma's left arm. Now, only the tentacles stand in Ryosei's way. It was an easy run from there on out. Ryosei only had to get a clear stab through the heart.

When one of the tentacles hurled at Ryosei, he cut it down without difficulty. As it backed off, Ryosei noticed that it stopped regenerating. Touma's back wasn't a weak spot, and he used the wooden sword to cut that tentacle, not the spirit blade. That could've only meant that the curse was losing its power. Seeing an easier solution, he went to cut off all the tentacles.

On the other side of the mountain, in the middle of the Konjou clan's town, the people cheered for Senkyo and Ryosei's victory. However, the announcer looked up to the screens, not with excitement, thrill, or suspense, but with sadness.

He took off the mask concealing his face to get a better look at the screen, and there, revealed Sora. Sadness and frustration floated around him.

"...Damn it! Touma-kun, I'm sorry... I couldn’t do a single thing...!"

Earlier, Senkyo told Sora about his plans to relieve Touma of his curse. He told him everything, how he was going to do it, what was going to happen, and the result. Sora was fully aware of what was to become of Touma after the curse was cured.

In frustration with his inability to help his childhood friend, Sora berated himself. He agreed to Senkyo's plan. In response, he wanted to do everything he can to help Senkyo. That was why he became the event's announcer, to help Senkyo be accepted by the rest of the Konjou clan.

But the fact that he was there, in a safe location without any danger while his classmate he barely even knew took care of his personal problems for him. Having awareness of this, ate Sora from the inside.

With the last tentacle cut, Ryosei walked up to Touma and pointed the spirit blade at his chest, ready to pierce his heart. Hesitation wrapped Ryosei's arms, preventing him from pushing through. Having these imaginary shackles chaining him, he shouted as loud as he could, summoning the courage to break the chains and end Touma's misery, but before he could make contact...

"WAIIITT!!!"

**116 – What It Means to Save**

Senkyo suddenly took over his body and threw the spirit blade to the ground. Touma was completely defenseless. The tentacles that wrapped around his limbs and came out of his back were all gone. In this defenseless form, Senkyo took Touma at the collar and raised him up from the ground.

Senkyo opened his mouth, wanting to say something to Touma, but he swallowed those words down his throat. He was unsure of what to say. Senkyo knew, that saying anything to Touma at this point was already too late.

Simply saying words won't do anything. He won't hear them, it won't change the outcome, and it definitely won't magically cure Touma and give him back his arms without reason. Words are indeed powerful, but they certainly aren't powerful enough to help Senkyo’s plight.

Troubled about what exactly Senkyo wanted to do, he kept standing there with Touma raised from the ground. Everyone who was watching Senkyo stayed in silence, from the townsfolk to the judges. Finally, Senkyo opened his mouth.

"Y... You might be fine with this... You'll get cured and thank everyone for saving you... You'll tell me that it's not my fault that you ended up disabled... But I'm not fine with that at all! It's not that I don't want to take responsibility, but how can anyone be satisfied with this at all? I came here to save you! If curing you means that you'll still be in pain in the long run, then did I really do what I said I would do? WHAT EXACTLY DO I HAVE TO DO!? WHAT DO I NEED TO DO TO SAVE YOU!?"

Senkyo shouted at Touma, who was still out of control and trying to escape. Touma looked pathetic, completely beaten up and out of control. Senkyo cursed at the fact that curing him and making him live like that was his only option.

With his right arm still suspending Touma in midair, Senkyo reluctantly picked up the spirit weapon by his feet. Be pointed it at Touma's heart, but nothing further than that. Senkyo couldn't move his shaking hand.

*"\*…Damn it! Damn it! Damn it!!\*"*

Senkyo dropped the spirit weapon. As he did...

"Good grief, you're as idealistic as your father."

No one else but Senkyo was in the vicinity. The one who spoke was none other than Senkyo, but at the same time, somebody completely different from him. It was the same person who took over Senkyo's body to defeat Fulgur, The Divine Soul of Spirits.

He threw Touma into the air. In the middle of his ascent, Touma froze, suspended in midair without anything supporting him.

After scratching the back of his head, he held out his right hand to Touma. A light-grey light revealed the crest that suddenly appeared on the back of Senkyo's right hand. His cold eyes stared down Touma's pathetic figure.

"Come to me, power sealed by the heavens itself. At this moment, I am God. Heed my bidding and shape my desires, power that exceeds the 12 elements. Shape the very soul in front of me as I desire. Soul Synthesis."

Touma's chest, where his heart was located, began to glow in a light-grey light. A magic circle appeared on the ground below Touma and blasted him with a light-grey light that reached the skies. Soon after, the light came back down and emitted a deafening yet bearable blast.

From the mysterious light appeared Touma, who was completely uninjured. No wounds, cuts, scratches, or severed arms. Touma was completely back to normal now. His arms are attached to his body and the color of his body was as normal as could be.

"Hey, boy."

He called out to someone, but no one else was around. His voice was too low to be able to be heard by anyone else if someone were there, so naturally, he was referring to Ryosei.

*"\*Are you talking to me...?\*"*

"Of course, I am. Now, once this guy wakes up, tell him this..."

With no one else around to hear it, the divine soul told Ryosei to relay a certain message.

*"\*What!? You're not joking?\*"*

"Who could come up with such an elaborate joke like that?"

*"\*Well...\*"*

It wasn't that Ryosei didn't believe what he said, it was just that it was so unbelievable that he was shocked it was real.

"Anyways, I'll be going now—"

*"\*Wait!\*"*

"Huh?"

Ryosei stopped the divine soul before it completely disappeared again.

*"\*Why do you keep helping us? And why do you hide yourself from Senkyo?\*"*

"Hmm... Then let's put it like this. Why do you eat? Why do you sleep? And why did you hesitate to stab his heart?"

The divine soul turned the question back on Ryosei. He picked up on what the divine soul meant, and that was "I'm a divine *soul.*If you couldn't tell, I have my own way of thinking and doing things."

Silenced by the soul, Ryosei stepped down. But just as he thought the conversation was over, the divine soul raised his voice.

"Well, as for your second question, don't tell Master that I exist. I knock him out every time I come out to not have him discover me. The last thing I want is for him to be dependent on my power. Master has potential. I don't think I have to specify what I mean, right?"

He meant that if Senkyo discovered he had such power; he would ruin his own growth by becoming dependent on him. He is not ready to receive his power. But seeing as he can openly interact with Senkyo, and the fact that he used his power on Touma, that could only mean one thing...

*"\*Then... does this mean that Senkyo was already recognized before?\*"*

The divine soul didn't respond. He returned to Senkyo's body and hid himself. Proof of that was crest behind Senkyo's right hand was gone. When Senkyo regained consciousness, he was absolutely confused as to how Touma was back to normal.

Ryosei pondered about his talk with the divine soul. The odd part was that his conversation with the divine soul and his memory of the Soul’s battle with Fulgur were never shared with Senkyo. He could only imagine that it was the soul's doing.

Normally, Ryosei and Senkyo shared every memory, so far, the only exception was if their memories are sealed. But now, that included the Divine Soul’s tampering. Ryosei put those complicated thoughts at the back of his head, but he couldn't help that they kept popping up every now and again.

**Epilogue: A Knock on the Rift**

**117 – A Knock on the Rift**

It was Monday. A week had passed since the day that the Hunter Battle Royale was held. In the end, Touma was sent to maximum-level detainment in the dungeons where he also received medication since he had yet to wake up.

Senkyo’s team won the battle royale and was accepted as official members of the Konjou Clan. But to be more accurate, they became the allies of the Konjou Clan. Since Senkyo did not want to be bound by the clan's rules, he wanted to be allies instead of members. Furthermore, Senkyo was recognized as another wielder of Kuro Yaiba. The clan elders were skeptical about the wielder of the clan’s legendary blade not being a member of their clan but somehow Yousuke was able to convince them.

After that, Senkyo asked to be trained by someone in the clan to become even stronger. As per Senkyo's request, he was assigned a personal mentor. He was assigned to someone else besides Dai, so Senkyo was, yet again, nervous about meeting his new mentor. He did not know if they would be someone he could deal with or not. But to be stronger, Senkyo accepted.

After school, Senkyo was called in by the clan. However, he was not called in by Yousuke or any of the elders. He was called in, by the mysterious woman, Freda.

"U-Umm, it's Yukou Senkyo. Excuse me, I'm coming in!"

Senkyo announced himself as he opened the door to Freda's quarters. He was told by Yousuke to head straight over there and that he was free to let himself in.

Senkyo entered the room with caution. Similar to last time, the room was empty, and only consisted of the curtain that hid the other side of the room.

"Freda-sama? Hello? Is anyone here?"

Senkyo called out to the other side of the curtain. Thankfully, it looks like his calls were heard as the sound of hurried footsteps became louder and louder followed by a distant voice saying "I'll be right there!"

He waited, and finally, a silhouette of a woman appeared through the curtains. The curtains began retracting upwards, revealing to Senkyo the other side of the room. But betraying his expectations, there was nothing but emptiness on the other side as well.

When the curtain was fully opened, Freda came out of the corner and showed herself to Senkyo. His jaw dropped at her unexpected appearance.

She had white porcelain skin. Her golden curly hair went down her back and her front. Eyes as green as emerald reflected the light of the room. She wore a green dress with touches of white, and chest assets that were on the bigger side. From what Senkyo could tell, she was about the same height as him and she had a young beautiful face. But the most eye-catching of her whole appearance was her pointy ears. Senkyo only knew one race with the same characteristics as those...

"An elf!?"

"Yes, I'm Freda, and I am an elf from Zerid. Nice to meet you, Yukou Senkyo-san and Konjou Ryosei-san!"

Senkyo thought Freda was most likely a level-headed and serious person. But from her cheery introduction and gestures, he now knew that he was completely and utterly wrong. To add to that, Freda immediately approached Senkyo and took his hand.

"It really is you! Nnn~~ Amazing!"

Her emerald eyes sparkled as she scrutinized Senkyo. He reflexively took a few steps back, but that proved to be useless as she closed the distance in a quick second.

"U-Umm... So, you're an elf? That was surprising..."

"Aw, that isn't that important. Right now, what's important is you! Here, come with me!"

Freda took Senkyo's hand and dragged him through the other side of the room.

**............**

Over at a distant land, one so distant from Earth that it was separated as a different world. In the world they call Zerid, at a particular ominous castle where the clouds were as dark as the aura around it, and lands as barren as the most lifeless of lands.

A certain man sat on top of a throne. Three people kneeled before that man. However, these three people were far from being considered "people." For these three people, who were covered with different kinds of armor, were skeletons.

From left to right, the first skeleton wore a huge set of full-body armor. It was as huge as a bus. Its skull bathed in a red flame, lighting up the area around it. If it weren't for the fact that it wasn't wearing its helmet, there was no way to tell what was actually inside that glowing red helmet.

The second skeleton was a bit smaller than the first one. Instead of full-body armor, it wore a coat that covered its body that was bathed in a blue flame.

The third skeleton wasn't much different from the second one's height. However, it had scars ingrained in its skull. It wore a light set of armor, but that didn't hide the black flame that bathed its body. The man on the throne raised his voice.

"The infamous 'Brothers in Death.' I heard great things about you three. You said you can hunt anyone and anything, am I right?"

The third skeleton responded to the man.

"That is correct, my lord. We have yet to fail a single hunt. Anyone and anything can be hunted. Nothing is safe when they enter our sights."

"Great... But this job won’t be a hunt. It’s a package retrieval."

"Could you explain in detail, my lord?"

"Here."

With a snap of a finger, a flame appeared before each skeleton, like a burning paper played in reverse, two pieces of paper appeared in front of each skeleton.

"Those two are your packages. They’ll be quite the handful. They even successfully took out one of my precious leaders. Quite the feat, isn't it?’

“Th-They defeated a leader!? I-Is this really a job we can take on, my lord? With all due respect, but not even we would have the power to go against a leader, much less someone who defeated one!”

“Oh? Are you going back on your word?”

The man shot the skeleton with a blood-curdling glare. The skeletons stiffened in fear. The one that was negotiating with the man tried his best to de-escalate the situation. At this moment, their lives were on the line.

“N-No! Of course not, my lord. It was a lapse of judgment. If my lord asked for us, I’m sure you knew we could accomplish the mission. I would like to receive the details of the mission!”

“Good.”

The man’s face lightened and the skeletons sighed in relief. He continued to relay his orders.

“They both live on Earth. The female is a vampire that goes by the name Hisho Yuu. And the other is a high-school boy called Yukou Senkyo. I want these two packages delivered to me alive. If you can't get them alive, then find a way. I trust this retrieval won't be a problem for you all, will it?"

"There would be no such problem, my lord. Rest assured; we will have these two before your greatness in no time."

"I'll hold you up to that..."

With a frightening laugh, the skeletons stared at the papers in front of them. Like some sort of practice, they pierced the two pieces of paper from the back with a blade. One would be able to see that the blade pierced right through the images of Senkyo and Yuu.

Just outside that room, someone overheard the conversation. They hurriedly left and kept walking through the huge corridor like they hadn't stopped to eavesdrop.

"Hm... So the rumors of that lighting kid dying were true. Heheheh, even though that kid was weaker than me, if someone defeated him, then that means they are sure to be able to entertain me. Hahahaha!"

He was the very definition of a demon. He had long horns on his head and his large body looked like it was nothing but muscle. A huge sword was attached to his back, one with cracks and red veins. His demonic eyes glowed red in the darkness as he thought of the havoc he'd reek. His ominous deep voice echoed through the corridor as his large figure glowed red within the darkness.

**Prologue: Little Endeavor**

**118 – A Completely Different Encounter**

“Haa… They didn’t come out again…”

The owner of the disheartened voice was Yutei Yukai. She slumped onto the table in front of her, burying her head in her arms to hide her tired face. She was currently inside the popular family restaurant Joe n’ Nathan’s. She had an empty cup and plate spread in front of her.

Her cup of was refilled multiple times in the time that she did her homework. But simply completing homework or eating food was not the real reason she was spending her time there.

“Where are you… Yukou-san… Ryosei-nii-saaan~…”

Unfortunately for her, she was waiting for Senkyo and Itsuki, who teleported to the Konjou Clan to train and answer a summon. But she didn’t know that, which meant that it wasn’t going to be until nighttime until she found the people she was looking for.

“I’ve been following Yukou-san and the others for over two weeks now but I always lose them before I could try to find a way to help…”

After Yukai was rejected by Ryosei, she took her anger on her pillow by giving it a hundred small punches. She was frustrated that she was tossed aside. She wanted to prove to Ryosei that she was useful even if she couldn’t fight, and her first move happened a little over two weeks ago.

She wanted to make sure that she was going to give them something they needed. Since Yukai knew Senkyo and Ryosei would be fighting, she wanted to give them food and drinks to replenish their energy, but she wanted to make sure they needed it. Yukai thought if they already had that covered, it would only weigh on their stomachs if they ate too much.

For her first few days, she followed them to Joe n’ Nathan’s. Yukai took a seat that could see the last corner that Senkyo and the others disappeared into. However, every single time, it always took them until nighttime to come back out again. What was even weirder was that only Senkyo and Itsuki come out back out. Yukai had never seen Yuu leave with them. After that, Senkyo and Itsuki just went back to their homes looking tired. Having no idea what could’ve caused them to be that tired at the back of a restaurant left Yukai incredibly confused.

After that week ended, Yukai got her hopes up since they changed from going to Joe n’ Nathan’s to the mountains for some strange reason. This is where Yukai thought she was finally going to see them train and hoped that she could help them by bringing them food and drinks. But unfortunately, every time she tried to follow them, she would just lose them almost immediately. It was like something was preventing her from following them.

Another week passed. This time, Senkyo and the others began alternating to both the mountains and the restaurant, but her efforts saw no progress. However, the fact that she was still trying to follow them even after that much time and failure proved her incredible determination and tenacity. But that also spelled out that she was a brilliant stalker.

“They seemed so busy too… that time back in the classroom.”

Yukai was referring to the afternoon when Yuu and Shiro taught Senkyo and Itsuki about magic. She was simply walking through the halls when she heard Yuu’s voice come from what should have been an empty classroom. Upon investigating she heard all about magic.

“If only I didn’t slip and bump my head on the door, I could have heard something that they needed… Ahh, I’m such an idiooot!”

It was but an unfortunate accident. One that pulled her away from her goal.

“I guess this is another day with no progress… this isn’t working. If this keeps up, I’ll have my money to worry about. I’ve been skipping my part-time too much, and the manager is getting mad at me. I have to go back to my old schedule…”

With her depressed look, she stood up, took her bag, and headed to the toilet before she went home. She exited the cubicle and was headed to wash her hands after doing her business. But then, she suddenly stopped when she saw someone in a male high school uniform nonchalantly washing his hands in the women’s restroom.

He had short black hair and a long gym bag strapped on her back. Yukai looked around in a panic for someone to call for help but there was no one to be seen. It was just her and the intruder alone inside the restroom.

The intruder finished washing his hands and looked at the mirror in front of him where he spotted Yukai’s shocked reflection standing behind him. He turned around to face her. It was all clear to him that if he does anything at all she would scream.

Silently, with calm movements, the intruder reached inside his pocket where he took out his student identification card and slowly handed it over to her. He did so slowly so Yukai wouldn’t get frightened. Understanding the intruder’s gesture, Yukai meekly took the card away from him and examined it. And to her surprise, the card said…

“Name: Akira Ren, age: 17, sex… female?!”

Yukai quickly did a double-take and scrutinized the intruder’s person thoroughly. Specifically, the chest area. There she saw a small bump that no male would possess.

“It’s true…”

Yukai mumbled in surprise. She angled her head slightly higher and saw HER smiling at her awkwardly. Realizing how rude she was to Ren, she quickly bowed and apologized.

“I’M SO SORRY!”

“No, it’s alright. I get it all the time. It’s my fault for wearing a male uniform to begin with. I didn’t know someone was here.”

“N-No, I was also at fault for jumping to conclusions! Here, I’ll return your card. I’ll buy you something to apologize.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary.”

“I insist!”

“Thank you, but I’ll have to decline. It’s also getting dark out I need to get back home.”

“Ah, then let me accompany you. It’s dangerous to walk by yourself.”

“E-Ehh…”

Ren was utterly confused. It was just a simple misunderstanding but this girl she just met was offering to buy her something or accompany her home just to apologize. Normally, both sides would just apologize and everything would be over. But that wasn’t the case tonight.

“W-Well, for now, how about we talk outside? We’re still in the restroom after all.”

**119 – The Night’s Furious Gale**

Ren left Joe n’ Nathan’s with Yukai on her tail. After that, she tried her best to brush Yukai off but she was unsuccessful. Yukai was insistent and didn’t let her go no matter how many times she gave hints that she didn’t want to get repaid. Left with no other choices, Ren reluctantly agreed to let Yukai accompany her home.

\**I’ve never seen anyone like this before. Could it be some kind of spirit influencing her? But I don’t sense any near her.\**

“This is probably rude to ask, but why are you wearing a male’s uniform, Akira-san?”

Ren’s train of thought was cut off by Yukai’s voice.

“There’s no particular reason. I just like wearing this over a girl’s uniform. I can move around perfectly plus I don’t have to worry about my skirt lifting up.”

“Ooh… That was a more girl-like reason than I thought.”

Ren replied to Yukai’s comment with a fierce gaze. There was no doubt about it, Yukai stepped on a landmine.

“I’M SORRY! I DIDN’T MEAN IT LIKE THAT! I-I just thought that you’re cuter than I expected or something like that…”

Ren heaved a sigh and spared Yukai from her deadly glare.

“You don’t need to make something up like that. Even my dad says that I’ll look cuter in a girl’s uniform. I would wear a girl’s uniform but there are a few circumstances that keep me from doing that.”

“For me, I do admit that you would look cuter in a girl’s uniform. But I think your boy’s uniform gives its own charms! At first glance, you look like a handsome high school student, but when people discover that you’re actually a girl, it gives you a unique cuteness… or something like that. In fact, some people would prefer it this way, probably!”

“O-Oh… is that so? I’ll keep that in mind. Thanks…”

Seeing Ren a bit happier, Yukai gave her a smile in return. The two continued to walk side by side while talking and getting to know more about one another. Coincidentally, their homes were in the same area which made things very convenient for them.

On their route, they had to cross over a bridge. When they got closer to the bridge, Ren stopped talking and her face turned serious. Confused about her sudden change of attitude, Yukai called her out.

“What’s wrong, Akira-san?”

“Something’s wrong. Yutei-san, stay behind me and don’t stray away from me.”

Although confused, the serious tone in her voice convinced Yukai it was something serious. She didn’t want to cause Ren any more trouble, so she decided to save the questions for later and do as she says.

They finally reached the bridge and Ren looked around frantically as they walked. Her eyes kept going from left to right cautiously looking at the guardrails of the bridge. That was when suddenly, human-like figures jumped from the river and climbed up the bridge. They had wet, green skin, slimy webbed hands and feet, and a turtle’s carapace on their back. they were well-known creatures from folklore… kappas.

“Eek! I-Is that… an actual kappa?!”

Yukai screamed in a panicked voice. Kappas blocked both ends of the bridge as well as the guardrails. They were completely surrounded. Running away wasn’t an option. Ren quickly unstrapped her bag and opened it. Without prolonging things any longer, a kappa leaped at the two, beginning the attack. Yukai was struck with fear and reflexively defended herself with her arms, but contrary to her expectations, she never felt any pain.

That was because the kappa that leaped at them was beheaded, and its lifeless body slumped to the ground. Nothing bled out from it, and the way its severed head stared at her was beyond creepy. Its head and body soon dissipated into ashes. Yukai jolted back in terror from the disgusting sight in front of her, which caused another kappa to leap at her from behind. But much like the other kappa, it was beheaded before it ever reached Yukai. The reason for that was the person beside her who was wielding a long spear. Ren.

“H-Huh…? Akira-san?”

“Stay close to me and stay down.”

Yukai responded with a light nod and crouched down behind Ren. With their comrades sliced in front of them, the kappas all began to attack. Some of them rushed at them while some leaped. They planned to overwhelm Ren with numbers. Despite the multitude of enemies attacking her from all sides, fear did not show on Ren’s face. She stayed calm and readied her weapon. With her spear resting on her right arm, the first kappa reached her attack range, and the massacre began.

A green broken piece of a gem that was attached where the blade of the spear and the pole intersected glowed as Ren made a circular slash. The slash cut down the kappas that were within the spear’s range and left a flurry of wind that cut down everything that made contact with it, making minced kappa out of the ones that dared touch it. With Ren and Yukai wrapped within the veil of razor-sharp wind, they were protected from the mob of kappas, but only for a short while.

Just before the veil of wind disappeared, Ren readied her spear and began thrusting and slashing enemies that came within her range. Her first attack dealt a huge blow to the enemy’s numbers as well as their morale. Horrified to meet the same fate as their fallen allies, the kappas began to be cautious and observed Ren from a distance, looking for an opening.

Ren wanted to finish the fight and get out of their situation as quickly as possible. Although she could wait things out while slowly cutting down their numbers, she was worried about Yukai. As far as she knew, she was but an innocent bystander that knew nothing of the supernatural. Seeing kappas ambush them would surely take a toll on her mental state. Ren wanted to bring Yukai to a safe place, so she acted as fast as she could.

Ren placed her spear close to her hip. Intending to attack, the green gem glowed once more. She took a large step forward and thrust her spear in front of her. The closest kappa to Ren was about 4 meters away from her. It was beyond the length of her spear, which meant she could not reach it to attack… in any normal circumstance. This was, however, no normal circumstance.

The tip of her spear reached its peak and was nowhere near the closest kappa. But the screams of pain and holes that indicated something pierced through the kappas begged to differ. As she thrust her spear forward, the wind traced the tip of the spear and extended her reach with a piercing wind, putting holes in the kappas that were in the line of her thrust. The kappas were in shock, but Ren was not going to let them off easy.

Taking advantage of the enemy’s confusion, Ren continued to use her long-ranged thrusts that reached even the farthest enemy away from them. While some kappas fled to get away from her, some pushed the attack and got close to her but were met by long-ranged slashes. With trained movements, Ren stayed close to Yukai while thrusting and slashing her spear at her enemies. Her quick execution and successive combination of attacks made it seem like she was dancing with the spear. Yukai was completely protected as long as she was beside her.

With the help of her wind magic, the range on Ren’s spear extended to the end of the bridge, making it impossible for the kappas to get close enough to attack. And not long after Ren’s first thrust, the kappas retreated and the bridge was clear of enemies. It was like how it was when Ren and Yukai first got there. Empty, devoid of evil spirits.

**120 – Belated Encounter**

Spirits like yokai do not leave corpses behind, rather, they disappear when they die. All the kappa that died disappeared and no one will ever see them again. Having done her job of protecting Yukai, Ren placed her spear down and called out to her.

“Yutei-san, it’s okay now. The enemies are all gone.”

“A-Akira-san…?”

Ren crouched down and reassured Yukai with a warm smile. However, Yukai was still in shock from everything. Her eyes were tearing up while she was sitting on the ground with her hands over her head.

*\*I guess this is where we part, huh? Once she recovers, Yutei-san will leave in a hurry and we’ll never meet again. What a waste… I thought we could have been friends too. This always happens when I’m friends with a normal person. Once they find out I fight things like that, they always stay away from me. Well, that’s probably the normal reaction to something like this.\**

With Yukai still in shock, Ren decided to get up and put her spear back in her gym bag. Ren turned her back to Yukai and reached out to pick up her bag. As she was putting her spear back, Yukai said something that caught Ren’s attention.

“Akira-san… was that wind magic?”

“Huh?!”

Now, it was Ren’s turn to be in shock. *\*How does someone like her know about wind magic?!\*,* she thought.

“Wh-What? How do you know about wind magic?”

“Well… there were a few circumstances. But right now… I have a lot I have to ask you!”

Yukai’s eyes lit up at Ren’s response. *\*If Akira-san didn’t deny it, then it must be true,\** she thought. This might be what she was looking for. She wants to be useful to Ryosei and the others, but since she can’t get a hold of any of them, she couldn’t do anything.

But now, with Ren, there might be a chance of her being related to Ryosei in some way. And even if she wasn’t, she could try to ask her to help get to Ryosei. It was Yukai’s first lead to getting in contact with him.

While Yukai was already celebrating her newfound friend, Ren was still left confused as to why she was smiling strangely at her. It was safe to say that Yukai was the first person who responded to her like this. The fear and shock from earlier were completely gone. However…

“…!”

“Yutei-san, you can ask your questions later. But right now, stay behind me.”

Ren took out the spear from her bag again and took a stance while facing the guardrails. She seemed to have sensed something coming for them. With her spear at the ready, she awaited the threat that was coming from the direction she was facing.

In no time at all, a humongous deformed kappa jumped from the river and hurled itself at Ren and Yukai with its mouth fully open. It intended to eat them both in one bite. The gem on Ren’s spear glowed as was about to thrust right into the center of the kappa’s mouth.

But before she could thrust her spear, a dark figure zoomed from the kappa’s side and out the other. Not even a second from when it emerged, the huge kappa was cut in half with no fighting chance.

Ren switched from a thrust to a long-ranged swipe to prevent the kappa’s dead body from hitting them. The kappa was blown away to the side. Ren looked at the kappa for confirmation, and sure enough, it was cut cleanly down the center. The question was, who or what caused that?

Ren faced the dark figure which was responsible and pointed her spear toward it. The figure stayed still without moving. But even so, Ren wasn’t about to let her guard down just because it killed the kappa for them. With a strong tension between the two sides, they failed to notice what was happening behind them.

While Ren was focused solely on the dark figure, Yukai noticed something happen to the huge kappa that didn’t happen to the other kappas. While it disappeared, a blue ball of fire appeared from it and zoomed toward the dark figure, which was then engulfed in a blue flame.

“It’s evolving!? Yutei-san, get back!”

Ren warned Yukai as she watched the dark figure bathe in a blue flame. The flame slowly began to dissipate and a figure of a human appeared from the flame.

“…Eh?”

And this particular human caught the attention of the girl hiding behind Ren.

“What the hell was that? I was inside the fire but it didn’t hurt one bit. Ah, maybe this is what happens when I get a higher status? Maybe… hey, you, can you see me now?”

The owner of the carefree voice came from the man that emerged from the flame. He had black eyes and hair that had an extended part to his left tied in a red cloth. He was wearing a black coat with blue lines to decorate it. His face showed that he was very troubled and seemed to think that no one could see him. And this person who just appeared in front of them was immediately recognized by Yukai.

“Ryosei-onii-san?!”

“Oh… You can see me!”

**Chapter 1: Out of Body**

**121 – Eternal Paradise**

A few hours earlier, inside the Konjou Clan’s castle, Senkyo was being dragged by Freda somewhere. He was inside her living quarters to respond to her summons. He was expecting to be in for a long talk with a silhouette but now he was being dragged someplace else with the real Freda dragging him in.

She took Senkyo through a door leading to a stairwell that went further down. Freda’s room was located on the ground floor of the castle which meant that Senkyo was being brought to an underground room. The stairwell was decorated with green lights inside cubbyholes in the walls. But the sources of the lights were by no means powered by electricity. They were beautiful glowing green flowers that were placed in glass vases.

“Are these bioluminescent flowers?”

*“\*They seem to be, but I don’t know why the clan would have something like this just for aesthetics.\*”*

“Those flowers are from Zerid. They are called Frodem. They grow in the forest of elves. They are my favorite flower so I thought to decorate the place with them. Do they look good?”

“Yeah, they are really beautiful. I never thought that flowers like this naturally existed. Then again, it is from another world. Is there anything else like this in Zerid?”

“Oh? Do you have an interest in flowers?”

Freda excitedly said as she brought her face closer to Senkyo.

“W-Well, not in particular. But I am curious about what other things exist in Zerid.”

Senkyo said as he took a few steps back.

“Is that so? Then that’s great! Come on, let’s go. I will show you all the beautiful plants there are in Zerid!”

Without another word, Freda hurried him down the stairs towards the exit. As they were reaching the end of the stairwell, Senkyo began to see light until finally…

“Whoaa…”

*“\*This is…\*”*

Senkyo and Ryosei were in awe as they looked around them. From every direction, they could see plants, trees, flowers, and all sorts of greenery. The entire ground was dirt and grass. At the far end of his vision, he could see a tall cliff face with a waterfall pouring down into a river that snaked to a lake. There was no such indication that they were underground, if they didn’t know any better, they would’ve thought they were on the surface.

From where Senkyo stood, he could recognize some of the plants, but there was a lot he couldn’t. Anyone could tell right away that most of the plants were very unusual because of their shape and strange patterns. They were completely unknown to him, but their beauty was undeniable.

Be that as it may, those were not the most surprising subject around them. It was the sky. Freda brought Senkyo and Ryosei underground, but despite that, there was no ceiling above their heads. Instead, there was the blue sky along with the sun and clouds. There was also no possible way for the area to be an opening on another side of the mountain since they went down a stairwell that stretched directly beneath them. The only possible explanation for this is that it was made by magic.

“Yukou-san, Konjou-san, welcome to my underground forest!”

“It’s like we’re above ground…”

“That is because of my magic, Eternal Paradise. It is a high-tier spell that uses the nature element to create a space where any plant can survive in. Of course, when I say any plant that includes plants in this world and Zerid. I made this place so I could admire the plants of both worlds!”

“So this is what high-tier magic is capable of. I expected it to be powerful but to think it could replicate even the sun… It’s mind-boggling.”

“I know right? Magic is such a wonderful thing. But just to let you know, the magic doesn’t just replicate the sun, it replicates the whole day and night cycle.”

“Seriously?!”

“Yes. Come, let me show you some of the plants we have in Zerid.”

Freda skipped excitedly as she hurried Senkyo to the nearest plant. The first one they came up to was a shrub with strange crescent-shaped leaves its smaller side covered in a blue stroke. They could hear a humming sound coming from inside the shrub. Senkyo figured they were the only ones down there. Seeing as he seems to be wrong, he asked Freda who else was present.

“Are there other people down here besides us?”

“No, there aren’t.”

“Then, is it an intruder?”

*“\*Be careful, Senkyo. If they managed to get past the clan’s defenses, there would be no doubt they are powerful.\*”*

Senkyo immediately became wary and took hold of Kuro Yaiba, ready to draw at any time. Ryosei gave Senkyo his warning and prepared to switch with him if anything went wrong. However, a short giggle came from Freda and broke the tension around Senkyo.

“There is no need to be frightened. I should have said so earlier, but that sound is coming from the shrub itself. There are no intruders in the area.”

“Eh?”

*“\*Eh?\*”*

Senkyo’s stance fell and Ryosei let his guard down at Freda’s words. After that small misunderstanding was cleared up, she continued to talk about the shrub.

“This shrub is called a Fruna. Its leaves are able to mimic any sound that it hears. The humming you are hearing now is the leaves mimicking my humming from before you arrived.”

“Is that so… that was embarrassing. We got worked up all for nothing.”

*“\*If you listen closely, it sounds exactly like Freda. So these are what plants from other worlds are capable of…\*”*

“Do not mind it. I was at fault for not explaining sooner.”

Freda stretched out her hand and plucked a leaf from the shrub and handed it over to Senkyo.

“Here, would you like to try it?”

“Of course! How does it work?”

“Hold the leaf with the blue side facing you. Say anything into it and the leaf will repeat it over and over again. From any sound you make, the blue side catches it while the green side repeats it. That is how the leaf functions.”

Senkyo brought the leaf close to his lips and said “Hello!” The leaf then began to repeat “Hello!” over and over again with Senkyo’s voice and with the same tone and volume.

“Whoa, it's working!”

“I’m glad you like it.”

**122 – Zeldian Flora**

Freda continued to show Senkyo and Ryosei few more plants. They were shown trees called Arkage. They looked like any normal tree on earth and had medium-sized leaves. It could have been mistaken as such until you stretch its branch or take a leaf or a branch off and plant its base on the ground.

An Arkage’s branch is flexible. Enough that a normal person’s strength can bend it into a circle. Additionally, when planted to a surface, an Arkage’s leaves disguise themselves as that surface and hide anything behind it. When a whole branch is planted, the branch and the leaves on it become disguised.

“Amazing. This would be perfect for hiding.”

“It is. My people often use it to hide ourselves and our traps.”

The next plant was vines called Vino. They grow anywhere and are extremely dangerous. The vines slowly tangle themselves on anything that touches them. As a demonstration, Freda threw a rock at one of the vines. The rock touched a vine and continued falling down, but was caught by the tip of the vine and was soon suspended in the air with the vine wrapped around it.

Senkyo questioned why Freda kept something like this there, and her reason was because of its beauty at night. Although it looks like a normal vine in the daylight, when it is under the moon, the vines begin to constantly change colors from blue and purple. It also becomes resistant to fire.

“I wish I could show you what they look like at night. You could come back any time if you want.”

“Thank you. I’ll come by when I get the chance.”

As Freda and Senkyo approach a patch of flowers that look similar to white dandelions, Shiro suddenly appeared out of nowhere and began rolling on the flowers. It took Senkyo completely by surprise since Shiro normally wouldn’t do something like this.

“Shiro?! What are you doing?! Hey, stop that!”

Strangely enough, even with Senkyo telling Shiro to stop, she completely ignored him like she hadn’t heard him at all. While Senkyo was busy panicking and telling Shiro to stop, he did not notice that Freda was quite amused until she let out a small giggle.

“It is fine, Yukou-san. These flowers happen to be Nemi’s favorite flowers. I expected this to happen which is one of the main reasons why I decided to show you these flowers.”

“Oh, is that so? Th-Then, thank you for showing us these flowers.”

Senkyo walked up to one of the flowers and touched its white ball. To his surprise, it was incredibly soft and relaxing. The flower brushed along the palm of his hand with each of its bristles tickling his skin. When Senkyo took his hand off, it left a lingering feeling on his palm.

“These are Moltis flowers. They are very soft and durable flowers that can be used as a brush. But that is not what most of us in Zerid use it for. Moltis flowers have a healing property that heals whatever it brushes over something. Right now, you should be feeling like the flower is still brushing along the palm of your hand.”

“That’s right. It feels very relaxing.”

“That is the effect of the flower’s healing property. But since you do not have a wound, instead you are feeling the excess mana dancing around your palm, like what it is doing right now to Shiro-san.”

“I guess I can’t blame her. If you rolled around a patch of these flowers, it might become a habit.”

“That is true. But that is not the only effect that it has on Shiro-san or Nemi in general.”

“What do you mean?”

“As you may or may not know, Nemi have a protective barrier that protects them from magical attacks. That barrier is powered by Shiro-san’s mana. As long as she has mana, her barrier will stay active.”

“Oh, I never knew the last part. But what does that have to do with Shiro and the Moltis flowers?”

“If you aren’t injured, any healing magic cast on you will not immediately disappear but will instead linger around at the location where it was cast on. Exactly what you experienced earlier. But since Nemi have a magical barrier that uses mana, what do you think would happen if excess mana were to play around her body?”

“…Would she absorb it?”

“Correct. Her barrier absorbs the excess mana from the Moltis flowers and converts it into her own. But her barrier’s mana absorption is not only limited to excess mana. All Nemi’s protective barriers can absorb exposed mana and turn them into their own.”

“Exposed mana? Is that…”

When Senkyo heard the term, he began to think about it carefully and remembered Yuu’s words from the other day she taught them about magic.

\**By having mana around you, it creates the phenomenon called Element Ingression. Element Ingression is what allows the person who released the mana to be able to use the power of the 11 elements.\**

That gave him an inkling of what that meant, and so, to confirm his suspicions, Senkyo asked Freda about it

“Freda-san, by ‘exposed mana’ does that mean magical spells like fireballs or thunderbolts?”

“Exactly! Wow, you catch on fast!”

Since magic is, to put it simply, just mana that was shaped by spells. If you were to take away the mana from any magic, it would become nothing. This means that Shiro’s barrier extracts the mana in the air, disabling magic with unprotected mana such as fireballs.

Thinking about it logically, Shiro was able to protect Senkyo from Fulgur’s powerful attack that would have left him dead, despite being newly released from her seal. Shiro expanded her magical barrier to Senkyo and deflected all of Fulgur’s attacks, that was what he thought at first. But now, with what he heard from Freda, he knew that instead of *deflecting* all of Fulgur’s attacks, Shiro *absorbed* it all and used the mana she gained from it to cast other spells to heal him. As Senkyo was thinking this, Freda added something.

“But do not think that Nemi are invincible to magic. Absorbing magic from exposed spells is a conscious act. If someone were to attack her with magic while she is asleep, it will damage her directly without getting absorbed by the barrier. Also, they can only absorb exposed magic. Magic similar to field circles, barriers, or curses cannot get absorbed.”

“I see… that was very informative, thank you very much.”

“Oh, no, it was nothing.”

As Freda and Senkyo were talking, Shiro came up to Senkyo, seemingly satisfied with her time rolling around as she was wearing a huge smile on her face.

“Onii-chan, Onii-chan, do you want to play on the flowers with Shiro?”

“…Ahaha, I think I’ll pass. Rolling around in flowers isn’t really my thing.”

“Do you not like it?”

“Well, I think it’s a matter of dignity rather than hating it.”

“Hehe, I see she’s still quite energetic.”

With Freda’s comment, Shiro hid behind Senkyo and suddenly glared at her with distrust.

“Shiro doesn’t know what you plan to do with Onii-chan, but Shiro will make sure to keep an eye on you.”

Shiro then entered a short jump and suddenly disappeared into thin air.

“Ah, there she goes. Sorry about that, Freda-san. Shiro seems to only trust me and Hisho-chan, so she’s a bit aggressive to others.”

“That is fine. No one would trust a stranger, after all. There is no need to apologize since she is merely being careful. Besides you might have a hard time believing me later.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s something I want to talk to you about. But this isn’t a place for that. I’ll lead you to my home.”

Senkyo followed Freda as they walked through the forest. She lived in the trees, specifically, the largest tree in the area that was located between the river and the lake. There were stairs that wrapped around the tree that led to the top where her home was located. The tree they were on was connected to the rooms on top of the other nearby trees by wooden bridges. They were different facilities like an archery range, a library, and vacant bedrooms.

Freda chose to talk with them at a place with a great view of the whole area, and that was her main tree’s balcony. It had a great view of the nature around them along with the lake and the streaming waterfall. Freda served Senkyo a cup of tea while sitting around a wooden table and began talking.

“One of the reasons why I called you here was to know you better. However, the main reason is different. I called you here because I wanted to talk to you about an important issue that involves all three worlds. But first, Yousuke-san has informed you about the truth about the Konjou Clan, right?”

“Yes. We talked together in private yesterday after the battle.”

**123 – Spirit Statuses**

At the end of the Hunter Battle Royale, Yousuke called Senkyo alone to his office. When he entered, he was met by Konjou Yousuke, Yamazaki Dai, and Sakurai Kosuke. Having proven his legitimacy, they filled in Senkyo and Ryosei about the events in the Konjou Clan in the past seven years, as well as the secrets that were now common knowledge before that.

When Ryosei was still alive, there was a secret group within the Konjou Clan. Instead of being tasked with protecting the people from invading demons and evil spirits, they were tasked to go on expeditions to the Spirit Realm, a world that only a handful of people knew existed at the time.

They explored the Spirit Realm in hopes of understanding it better. After a lot of hardship, they eventually figured out how that world functioned and the true reason why evil spirits were appearing on earth.

The spirit realm has 3 sections. The Zerid-Spirit World, Earth-Spirit World, and Spirit World. The Zerid-Spirit World and Earth-Spirit World are the middle ground between the two worlds and the true spirit world. These sections are where the spirited souls of their respective worlds are sent to.

Senkyo and Ryosei have only gone to the earth-spirit world, but they never reached the true spirit world. Only true spirits have the power to travel to the true spirit world. Unless invited by a true spirit, spirited souls and other beings will never be able to reach the spirit world.

All spirits have a few things in common. They have cores, the symbol of their existence. Cores are like the hearts of humans. If all cores of a spirit are broken, it will die. They are unable to use mana and rely on spirit power to maintain their existence.

In the Spirit Realm, there are two kinds of spirits: True Spirits and Spirited Souls. True spirits are the spirits that are born in that world. They can maneuver their cores around their body and wield multiple weapons. Meanwhile, spirited souls are the souls of beings that died on Earth or Zerid. Souls of the dead are usually reincarnated immediately, but there are also times when their soul unconsciously refuses to reincarnate due to strong emotion or unfulfilled desire. This puts them in a deciding period causing them to create a spirit zone.

This period is the fork to reincarnating or becoming a spirited soul. If the soul’s complications disappear, they are reincarnated. But if that period runs out, the soul is reborn in the spirit realm without its memories and becomes a spirited soul. They are reborn with a weapon as a manifestation of their resolve and desire. Their cores are directly connected to their weapons. Usually, spirited souls have their cores where their hearts would normally be, and they are not able to move them like true spirits. However, when they summon their weapons, their cores are immediately transferred to the weapon They will also gain the ability to move around their souls, but they can only move it inside their weapons.

If a spirited soul’s desire is fulfilled or if they achieve inner peace, they can choose to reincarnate. But despite the danger, there are also times when spirited souls refuse to reincarnate and choose to live in this world. There are various reasons out there. But the most common one is: to reach a higher level of being. Becoming a god.

There are statuses in the spirit realm that determine their power and capabilities. They are reached depending on the amount of spirit power a spirit possesses. From the lowest to the highest status, there exists ghost, eidolon, revenant, spirit, seer, visitant, guardian, sentinel, demigod, and god. As spirits achieve higher statuses, they are granted a new ability

Ghost. Is the lowest status and only have the base abilities to manifest their weapon, glimpsing and visiting the world they came from. Visiting is the power to create a distorted spiritual body that you can use to be seen in the world you died in. It is incomplete and is limited to an hour of manifestation. It is normally only used to gain spirit power. While manifesting, ghosts can only move around materials with their spirit power but are unable to make contact with physical objects. Meanwhile, glimpsing is the ability to see the exact location you are in from one world to another. This rank is the starting rank of all spirited souls and is only available to them.

Eidolon. A status in which the spirited soul can reinforce their weapon and regenerate them if damaged. Otherwise, a ghost’s weapon will never regenerate its damage making it dangerous for them to enter battle.

Revenant. It gives the spirited soul the ability to manifest its form in one of the living worlds. Unlike visiting, it fully manifests an identical copy of what they looked like when they were alive and has a great increase in its limitations ranging from 12 to 24 hours of manifestation. Aside from those, the spirited souls are still only able to manifest in the world they previously died in and are unable to make contact with physical objects.

Spirit. The lowest status for true spirits and the status every single one is born with. To spirited souls, when they reach this status, their spirit power greatly increases along with their resolve and durability of their weapon. Additionally, they are able to use a skill true spirits use, spirit expansion. The ability to stretch their spiritual body using spirit power. Spirits can become bigger but they cannot shrink smaller than their original body size.

Seer. Evolves the glimpse ability spirits have and enables the spirit to have the power to glimpse into all worlds. Whether they are in one world or the other, they will have the ability to see the surrounding area of the other two worlds in that specific location.

Visitant. Grants the spirit the ability to manifest itself in all three worlds. Spirits of seer status or lower are only able to manifest their spiritual body in two worlds including the spirit realm.

Guardian. The spirit receives the ability to guard a living being. This status is defined by humans as a guardian angel. By becoming a living being’s guardian angel, the spirit will be forced to follow them around and guard them in exchange for spirit power. The spirit is free to stop being a guardian angel and release itself at any time.

Sentinel. It blesses the spirit with the same effects as the previous Spirit status but on a greater scale. Furthermore, it is comprised of 4 stages. In each stage, the spirit is granted an additional core, much like receiving multiple lives, and is also granted more power. Resulting in the spirit obtaining 5 cores and incredible power after completely evolving from this status.

Demigod. It grants the spirit the power to control a force of their specialty. Depending on the spirit’s previous achievements, its cores transform and enable the spirit to specialize in that force. An example of this is a to-be God of the sea can control water in some way.

God. So far there are no known spirits that have successfully become a god. Resulting in a lack of information.

**124 – Unknown Power**

Aside from the status of guardian and above, spirit power is acquired if a spirit accepts offerings given to them, grants someone’s prayers to them, acquires emotions directed to them, if someone becomes aware of them or recognizes their existence, and lastly, collecting other spirit’s spirit power by breaking their core.

In a battle between spirits, there is a different system. Spirit power is everything. It is their lifeforce and their source of power. They can only take damage through mana and other spirits’ spirit power; physical attacks do not work. In making contact with another spirit, they will not take damage unless the spirit has the intent to kill the other. Weapons are not necessary to kill amongst spirits. Even their bodies are enough.

When spirits become desperate in battle, they can enter a rampaging state. This state of a spirit is when they lose control over themselves due to negative emotions. To humans, they are called evil spirits. In this state, spirits can make contact with physical objects. It was found in the expeditions that rampaging spirits can be reverted to their normal selves if they are calmed down. However, if left alone, they will remain in that state and can become permanent.

“That was everything. Did you get all that?”

Yousuke gazed at Senkyo questioningly as he finished his long lecture.

“Yeah, we pretty much got all that. But if that’s the case, when we were fighting hollowed knights, even before one of them manifested they were able to make contact with us, why is that?”

“That is because you were in the spirit realm. Anything in the spirit realm, living being or not, can be touched by spirits. It’s the reason why END uses spirit lanterns. They take advantage of this fact to isolate their enemies and to allow spirits like the hollowed knights to provide backup. Do you have any more questions?”

“Then, about Ryosei. You said that when a soul turns into a spirited soul, then their memories are wiped out and they are sent to the spirit realm. Then why is it that after seven years, Ryosei was still inside his spirit zone with his memories still intact? Does that mean spirit zones differ from soul to soul?”

“…We do not know. Spirits zones of a soul can range from a day to a whole week, but we have never encountered a spirit zone that lasted seven years. In fact, there should be no possible way for a hunter or a demon to miss a spirit zone lasting that long. But for his memories, we theorize that it’s because he was never properly turned into a spirited soul, to begin with. When you found him, he just merged with your body and became a spirited soul that way along with his memories.”

“I see, that does sound probable… Then, this will be the last question. Who is Freda and what did she do here?”

“…About that, she requested for her to be the one to tell you about herself. Which is why she was asking for you two to meet her tomorrow after school. If you want to know about her, then answer her summons tomorrow.”

“Okay, I’ll be sure to be there.”

“Good. But now that we’re officially allies, we’d like to know exactly what you are, Yukou-kun. An example of that is that pillar of light that restored Touma-kun.”

“Huh?”

Senkyo paused for a moment and tried to recall his memories, but he couldn’t remember anything that Yousuke said. Just as he was about to ask him, Ryosei took control of his body.

“Yo, You-chan. Its Ryosei. About that, Senkyo doesn’t know anything about it. And I think it would be better not to. It’s a bit of a selfish thing to say, but could you not ask about that?”

Yousuke sharpened his gaze on Ryosei. He returned the gesture with a serious face and kept their intense glare on each other in complete silence.

“We may be cousins, Ryosei. But do you really think that I’ll overlook something this large of a scale? We cut the live broadcasting from the whole clan but all five judges still saw exactly what happened.”

“Doesn’t that mean that you made that decision in concern for us? How thoughtful of you.”

“For now, it’s private. But if you share your powers with us, we will be able to think of ways to utilize it! This could save many hunters in battles and could give us a chance to finally take down END! Why would you stay quiet about it!?”

“Although that may certainly be true, there’s something you don’t understand, You-chan. I have no idea what Senkyo is truly capable of. Not me, nor himself. I have seen his power firsthand, and from what I gather, it is not something that can be forcibly obtained. We lack information. If we are too hasty, it could backfire on us horrendously. Knowing this, do you still want us to give you completely theorized information?”

Yousuke seemed to be out of words. He was troubled by what Ryosei said.

“Theorized information, huh…”

If what Ryosei was saying was true, then it would indeed be reckless to experiment on unknown power. On the other hand, that power was what they needed to get an upper hand on END. It was undeniable that Senkyo’s power was in its infancy, they needed to cultivate that, but the problem was that no one knew how to do that. After racking his brain, Yousuke came to a decision.

“…Fine, for now, you can keep that to yourselves. But if you ever find something out, I shouldn’t have to remind you to share it with us.”

Ryosei directed a smile at him, almost as if he had been expecting this outcome.

“I already know that. Well then, we should end this here. It’s getting late.”

**…………**

*“\*I assume you’re not going to tell me anything about that conversation, huh?\*”*

*“\*No, but you don’t mind that, do you?\*”*

*“\*…\*”*

They were reminded of the events that happened yesterday. Ever since then, Ryosei never told Senkyo about what he meant, but even so, he didn’t try to pursue it. Seeing as Senkyo didn’t want to continue the conversation, they resumed their focus on Freda.

“So, what is this issue exactly?”

Freda kept her gaze fixated on Senkyo. She closed her eyes looking quite troubled. When she reopened them, she made a strange request.

“I apologize if I am being rude, but may I ask that Shiro-san and Konjou-san leave your body?”

“Hm? Is there a problem with them being here?”

“This issue isn’t exactly easy to convey. If possible, I would like nothing to influence your decision. I’m very sorry.”

“Oh, no, it’s nothing to be sorry about.”

Senkyo asked Shiro and Ryosei to temporarily leave them alone. Shiro appeared and slowly walked away while wearing a doubtful face. It was obvious she didn’t want to leave Senkyo alone, but she forced herself to leave.

As for Ryosei, Freda suggested him to visit the spirit realm. Since he was technically a spirit, he should be able to create a spiritual body in the spirit realm. Ryosei couldn’t deny that he also wanted to check the spirit realm.

After a short while, it was decided that Ryosei would return to Freda and get her attention by visiting her if his rank was below a revenant so that she can bring him back. She sent him to the spirit realm by drawing a circle on the ground, exactly like how Sora sent them back to Earth. At this moment, Senkyo and Freda were all alone.

“Well then, can we proceed?”

“That choice is yours to decide.”

“What do you mean?”

Freda sharpened her gaze on Senkyo. It was obvious from the atmosphere that this was no laughing matter. Senkyo inadvertently gulped and tensed up.

“Yukou-san, what I am about to tell you may change your life forever. I have not told anyone about this ever since I arrived here except for the chief, Yamazaki-san, and Kosuke-san. This is something that is only meant for you, and you alone. Once you choose to hear what I am about to say, there will be no turning back. You will never be able to return to a peaceful life. Now, I will ask you, do you want me to proceed?”

Having heard Freda’s warning, he pondered.

*\*She has mistaken something. What she’s telling me is something that already happened. My life changed the moment I made contact with Ryosei, but I don’t regret that. I was long past the point of no return. The only path for me is straight forward.\**

“I…”

\**To survive, I need power. To be able to solve the mysteries around me, I need information. The correct decision was all too obvious.\**

“…”

*\*But still.\**

“…”

*\*I hesitated.\**

“…Choose to proceed.”

*\*I made my decision. I forced myself to. I tried to kill my own emotions to make the right choice, but I ignored something important. Little did I know that ignoring something that was right in front of me, that turning a blind eye to my weakness, would lead me to make the worst decision possible.\**

**125 – Winged Assailant**

Ryosei was sent to the spirit realm. Senkyo and Freda were gone and his whole environment changed. The time of day turned to night and small particles floated around him. He was on his lonesome, which is why he took a while to notice that he was in his normal body instead of a floating flame.

“I’m here… Senkyo should be fine on his own. Freda wasn’t lying so there’s no need to worry. For now…”

Ryosei jumped off Freda’s tree house and walked up to the river beside it.

“So, this is what I look like.”

He saw his reflection on the water’s surface. He was wearing his old school uniform, the very ones he wore on his death. But unlike a normal human being, Ryosei’s body was producing small flames. His hair flowed like a burning flame as well as some parts of his body and clothes.

He stared at the palm of his hand and closed his eyes. Seconds later, a small circular pearl appeared.

“Hm? What is this? Did I do something wrong?”

Ryosei was trying to summon his weapon. He was told that spirits summoned weapons the same as a hunter using spirit power. But for some reason, no matter how many times he released and re-summoned his weapon. The only thing that appeared was the small pearl in front of him.

“Now that I think about it… using magic and spirit power is pretty similar.”

Magic is the result of chanting to shape mana and casting to materialize magic. Meanwhile, using spirit power is the result of using resolve to be able to use it and the desire to produce a certain outcome.

“I’ve only been trying to summon my weapon, but maybe I still need to use spirit power to shape it?”

With the pearl in the palm of his hand, Ryosei used his spirit power on it. The pearl then expanded and transformed into a familiar shape. A black blade with a red streak down its center. The legendary blade of the Konjou clan, Kuro Yaiba.

“Nice, it worked!”

Now that Ryosei was able to summon his weapon, he was safe to wander around the spirit realm. Ryosei headed for the exit and headed to leave the castle. In his way, he did not see any other people or spirits. There would always be some spirits lurking around in the shadows hiding from them, but the fact that he didn’t sense any other presence was proof that there were none. Despite this strange circumstance, Ryosei didn’t find it strange.

He surfaced and walked through the town, but it was all the same. The houses and buildings were the same, but it was deprived of any presence until he finally reached the town’s barrier.

“Looks like it’s still working fine. The town’s barrier not only keeps people away, but spirits along with it. Mom sure worked hard on this.”

Ryosei lifted his foot off the ground and crossed the barrier. There, he was finally able to sense other presences.

“Hmm… but what’s with this? I can only sense three spirits in the area. I was expecting a lot more.”

Ryosei thought it was strange but he put it to the back of his mind and continued to walk down the mountain. An eerie silence accompanied Ryosei’s footsteps. All he could see around him were trees and leaves that shined like crystal stones. It was always nighttime in the spirit realm but Ryosei could see his surroundings as clear as day.

Is the source of the light the particles around him or does everything in this world have its own source of light? It was a question that troubled every spirit realm researcher and goes unanswered to this day. It naturally popped up in Ryosei’s head while he observed in silence. The reason for that was most likely his latest encounter with Senkyo’s divine soul.

Similar to how Ryosei thought it was pointless to think hard about whether an object of the spirit realm radiated light or not, he thought it was pointless to know how Senkyo obtained a divine soul. Divine souls are received from someone’s birth, so it was natural to not think too much about their origin. But if that were truly the case, then why was it that Fulgur seemed to know about the soul? Why is it that the soul cares enough about its master to save someone else’s life? And why was it that the soul continues to hide its existence from its master?

Ryosei’s mind was bombarded by many other questions like this but not a single answer to accompany them. Despite having all of Senkyo’s memories from birth, he was still a mystery to him. That just goes to show how much he was being kept in the dark, by his father, Shiro, the divine soul, and perhaps other beings he has yet to encounter.

“Haah…How troublesome can this one person be?”

As Ryosei was thinking to himself, he noticed something odd.

“Hm? The two other presences are gone. There’s only one left… and it’s—”

Before Ryosei could even finish processing his thought, black feathers came flying towards him from within the trees. Ryosei swiftly dodged them and ran behind a tree for cover. The feathers were strong enough to stick to the ground where he previously was.

Just before he hid, he took a glance at the source of the feathers only to see a shadow fly off and disappear into the trees, but that did not imply it was gone. The leaves rustled and gusts of wind came from all directions. Ryosei summoned his pearl, but he didn’t transform it into Kuro Yaiba.

The movements stopped, which meant that whatever was after Ryosei either left or found an opening. Ryosei immediately figured out it was the latter as he sensed a presence behind him. Even though he was behind a tree, whoever was attacking intentionally positioned themselves behind it. Relying on his senses, he quickly crouched low to the ground. Not a second later, a blade cut through the tree and knocked the severed trunk away with the force of its swing.

Ryosei turned around to swing his hand containing the pearl and transformed it into Kuro Yaiba as he completed his swing, but the shadow was too fast and disappeared back into the trees. It secured its escape by launching sharp feathers at Ryosei, forcing him to defend himself. Unfortunately for the shadow, Ryosei wasn’t about to let it escape from him this time. Now that he knew the enemy was directly in front of him, Ryosei used flash strike to catch up to it.

“Ka!?”

The shadow cried out in surprise when it saw Ryosei appear right beside him. Black wings expanded on its back and flapped them downwards sending it upward at high speed. Ryosei followed by using flash strikes repeatedly between the trees to repel him upwards.

*\*Clash!\**

In the clear sky above the trees, Ryosei was able to see exactly who the attacker was. It was a crow with a man’s body with black wings on its back. It donned traditional Japanese clothing and was holding a katana in its right hand. He recognized it was a yokai from Japanese mythology that was said to resemble a mix between old men and birds, a Tengu. However, the tengu in front of him had a head of a raven instead of an old man. That meant that it was one of the Karasu Tengu (Crow Tengu).

It glared viciously at Ryosei as they clashed blades in the night sky. It expanded its wings and propelled itself backward while shooting out feather blades. Ryosei wasn’t able to deflect them fast enough due to the close distance and got hit. Having nothing to support his body, he plummeted to the ground, but he was still void of fear. While falling out of the sky, he pointed his blade in the exact opposite direction of the tengu.

“Magic arts: Crackling Thunder!”

“KA!?”

The tengu, who thought Ryosei was about to meet a cruel end to the ground, was severed in half when a burst of lightning appeared behind Ryosei and sliced through him with it. It was severed from its lower body, so it tried to calm down and keep afloat, but to its surprise, its wings refused to listen to it. It was paralyzed, resulting in its unceremonious fall to the hard ground.

**126 – Tengu Interrogation**

Ryosei slowly walked up to the tengu. Seeing as it was still moving meant its core was still intact. It dropped its katana when it fell, leaving only its wings as its weapons. It stared at Ryosei in shock.

“Ka… What in the world are you?”

“Me? No one important.”

Ryosei grabbed the tengu and threw it next to a tree. With the pearl in his hand, he transformed them into ropes and bound the tengu to the tree.

“Ka!? What was that!?”

“Nothing important. Setting that aside, I have some questions I want to ask you. I’m warning you, if you don’t answer…”

“KA!!”

The tengu felt a sharp pain running through its body. He immediately realized it was the rope.

“Wasn’t this a katana before!? Why is it a rope now!?”

“You don’t have time to worry about that. Right now, if you don’t answer me, I’ll make my ropes hurt you until you die out. If you try to fight back by damaging my ropes with your body, I’ll tighten the rope and end you immediately. Do you understand?”

The tengu gulped in fear and slowly nodded its head. Ryosei was using how spirit power works to his advantage. If he doesn’t intend to kill it, then the tengu won’t get hurt or lose spirit power. But if he does, then that pain will immediately run through its whole body.

Usually, 90% of a spirit’s spirit power is compressed in the core and it uses the remaining 10% to create a spiritual body. A spirit will automatically regenerate its body, but even that would take a while to complete. This was why Ryosei had an ample amount of time to finish his interrogation before the tengu can regenerate its lower body.

“Ka… Fine, what do you want?”

Seeing his disadvantageous position, the tengu decided to comply.

“First of all, why did you try to assassinate me?”

“Ka, Assassinate? What a vulgar word. ‘Subdue’ fits better in this situation. A spirited soul like you wouldn’t die from having their heads severed from their bodies. As long as your weapon is intact, you’ll be fine.”

“…”

As much as Ryosei would like to deny it, the tengu was saying the truth. On top of that, he didn’t sense any lies. Although cutting his head off wouldn’t kill him, it would temporarily take his vision, hearing, and smell.

“K-K-K-KAA!!”

“Answer the question.”

Ryosei tightened the rope to hurt him for a few seconds as punishment for trying to dodge his question.

“Ka… Fine, fine. It’s because you appeared from that dome of light. A dome of mysterious light that no one has been able to cross over. If someone walks out of there, then they must be something special!”

“A dome of light…”

The tengu was talking about the Konjou clan’s barrier. Its power was strong enough to deny entry to those unwelcome and durable to defend against any attacks on it. Such was the power of Ryosei’s mother.

“If that’s the case, then severing my head would only give you a second at most. This is a spiritual body, not a human’s. I can still see without my eyes, you know?”

“Ka? What are you saying? I’ve never heard of a spirited soul seeing without its eyes before.”

“…Is that so?”

As a test, Ryosei closed his eyes and focused his mind. Just as he was expecting, he was able to see outlines of his surroundings. He saw the tengu tilt its head in confusion at his actions. To the tengu, Ryosei simply closed his eyes, eliminating his vision. It thought about escaping but gave up the moment it realized the rope was too tight to stretch its wings.

Ryosei then reopened his eyes.

“Hm, you’re right. I wonder why I thought that.”

He decided to feign ignorance, hiding a skill that seemed to be uncommon amongst spirited souls.

“Ka… Are you sure you’re not insane? Ah, you must be a newborn! Kukuku, of course you’d be confused, huh?”

Although he didn’t understand the tengu’s logic, he decided to play along.

“Sure, let’s go with that. Anyway, I need someone who lives in this world to help me out here. So tell me how to check my status as a spirit is.”

“Kukuku… such a thing doesn’t exist. The only way for you to make sure is to test if you can perform the new skills in every status. You seem to be versed in statuses, but I should remind you that newborns begin with ghosts—”

“Yeah, sure. More importantly, why are you the only spirit around here? Shouldn’t there be others?”

“Kuu… such a rude youngin. If you’re looking for refined true spirits like me, most of them are in the spirit world. And spirits like you are most likely away from here.”

“And why is that?”

“Ka! The land dragon will arrive today! A true spirit that originated from three towns away searching for spirit cores to eat. From the last time I heard, its status is close to a seer. It takes cores or weapons with its lightning-fast tongue. The only other obstacle that prevents other spirits from killing it is its thick armored scales. Since nothing so far has penetrated its scales, I assume that its core is staying steady in its center.

“Why exactly are you explaining this in detail? I didn’t ask for that much.”

“Ka… How sharp. I want you to kill it for me. Seeing as what you’ve done to me, I won’t be able to fly fast enough to escape its tongue.”

“Do you understand the situation you’re in? Why would I do that?”

“Ka! You need a guide to this world, don’t you? If you manage to make it out, I will become your ally. I can even send you to the spirit world if you want. And you don’t even have to look for me since I live on this mountain. Just call and I’ll be here. This is the greatest offer yet, don’t you think?”

“Really now? Then how do I know you aren’t lying and planning to send me to a trap for revenge? In the first place, how am I sure you’ll actually come back to me?”

“Ka. You’ll just have to decide for yourself. A high risk for a high reward is fair after all.”

He was telling the truth, but Ryosei pondered for a bit. Although the tengu only offered uncertain benefits, having those services would serve him useful in the future. He was sure the tengu is trying to gain something from this offer besides safety, perhaps his power, but other than that he was unsure. From the tengu’s description of the enemy, it seemed like something he could take on. If ever he’s wrong, then he could just retreat for safety. There would be no need to complete a shady request if it would put his life on the line.

“…Fine, I’ll take you up on that offer.”

Ryosei grabbed the rope and reverted it back to a small pearl.

“So, when is this thing supposed to appear—”

\**BOOOM!!!\**

The ground shook intensely, shaking the leaves off the trees around them. The source of the shaking was coming from the town. Ryosei quickly climbed the nearest tree to investigate and saw a giant lizard dig itself out of the ground and began walking around town.

“Ka! There it is! Now, be on your way!”

The tengu hovered beside him, with its wings unparalyzed keeping it afloat. It was certainly a strange sight to see a flying upper body without a bottom.

“What an annoying crow. At least tell me your name.”

“Ka… I thought I was about to get away. My name is Shin.”

“Ok, then. I’m warning you, if you don’t keep your end of the deal, the next time we meet, you’ll be in for more than just a missing lower body.”

Having said his parting words, Ryosei jumped off the tree and maneuvered down the mountain toward the town.

“KA! Where are you going!? You haven’t even told me your name yet!”

“I’ll think about it the next time we meet.”

Without another word, Ryosei took off down the mountain.

*\*That crow is more scheming than it appears. It’s trying to become allies with me because of my power. In that fight, I instinctively used mana to cut him down. But in this world, casting mana is impossible. Not even I knew until I used it. It must be because of Senkyo again. I have no idea what effect he had on me, but right now, I’m not a spirited soul nor a true spirit. I’ll have to find out what caused me to meet him in the first place. To do that, I need to reach the spirit world for information. And since I know everything that tengu said was true, once I take this lizard on, I’ll have access to it whenever I want to!\**

**127 – Land Dragon**

When Ryosei arrived in town, he perched himself on a four-story building to observe his target. At a closer look, the giant lizard had a grotesque figure. It possessed a long human mouth with huge eyeballs gouging out and squinted vertically. Its body was covered in scales with sharp spikes sticking out its back all the way to the tip of its tail.

He summoned his pearl and poured spirit power into it. The pearl shined brighter and looked much smoother. He reinforced his weapon to confirm his status. At this moment he determined he was at least on an eidolon status.

Moving to the next step, he tried to manifest himself on earth. He saw the blue-colored sky and the people walking on the streets below. When he looked at his arm, it was a distorted black shadow. After seeing enough, he brought himself back to the spirit realm.

“Well, that confirms it. I’m an eidolon. If I was a revenant, I should’ve seen my own hand. Let’s see… I’m an eidolon while that thing is a spirit that’s about to rank up to a seer. It has more spirit power than me but that doesn’t mean I won’t be able to beat it. I beat that tengu, earlier using magic, but I shouldn’t do that with this one. He’s probably observing me so I should refrain from showing him what I’m capable of, just in case he stabs me in the back after he keeps his word.”

Ryosei planned out his plan of attack, but he didn’t know what his limits were. The only time he’s fought as a spirit was back when he saved Yukai from the dream demon. He was unsure whether he could fight like that in the spirit realm since he fought that demon in the mind.

“I guess this will be the perfect time to test my limits.”

Ryosei reshaped the pearl to Kuro Yaiba and turned around, only to find the lizard he was observing had climbed up the building and had its mouth open, ready to feast on his core.

“Shit!”

The lizard’s tongue shot out of its mouth and launched directly at Ryosei but was met with the empty air behind him. Ryosei used flash strike to escape and slashed the lizard’s side with Kiro Yaiba, but its scales deflected the attack.

Ryosei landed safely on the ground and made some distance between them. He took a quick look at his body and realized that his uniform was gone and had turned to his usual battle gear. A black coat imbued with spirit power, blue lines spreading throughout the cloth to maximize the efficiency of using spirit power. A typical feature of any hunter’s battle gear, but these coats were made specifically to combat the limit forced upon his spirit power as a side effect of using mana.

In the past, only he wore this kind of gear. But now with the help of Freda mass-producing spectrals, it became a widespread class. He didn’t know why he suddenly took this form, but perhaps it was a natural instinct that he would take this form every time he fights. Thinking about it, when he saved Yukai from the dream demon, he took the same form.

While he was thinking this, the lizard faced him and shot out its tongue once more. Ready for its attack, he dodged the tongue and disappeared into the nearest building.

“Its tongue is incredibly long and attacking the scales on his back is out of the question. Then, let’s try this…”

The lizard approached the building Ryosei entered and peeked through the windows. All of the sudden, a shadow appeared above it. Using its instincts, the spikes on the lizard’s back extended upwards and pierced the shadow. The sound of wood getting destroyed was heard upon contact. The lizard turned sideways to see what it hit was a table and what was left of it was scattered on the ground.

\**Whoosh!!\**

The moment the lizard took its eyes off the building, it felt something sharp slash its skin. Ryosei sneaked up to the lizard while it was distracted and attacked it. He hit the lighter-colored part of its skin which appeared on its bottom half. Unlike when he tried to pierce its dark green scales earlier, his current slash left a mark on it, releasing small particles as Kuro Kaiba slid through its body. But it wasn’t enough to completely penetrate it.

The lizard let out an intimidating scream and trampled on the ground below it. Its impact made small craters but Ryosei was already gone.

“As I suspected, its bottom half is weaker than the rest. I should aim there but I still can’t pierce it.”

Ryosei analyzed the lizard from further down the street behind it. He pondered on what to do next. Unlike using the physical form of Kuro Yaiba, its spirit form’s sharpness was dependent on its status and spirit power. He was still in the 2nd to lowest rank which meant Kuro Yaiba didn’t have its usual sharpness.

“If that’s the case, then I’ll have to bring down the lizard’s spirit power.”

**128 – Spirit and Mana**

Ryosei ran further down the road before calling out to the lizard.

“Heeey! I’m over here you creepy reptile!”

The lizard heard Ryosei’s scream and quickly turned his way. Upon seeing him, without hesitation, it shot out its long, slimy tongue. Ryosei dodged it but the tongue made a sudden curve and followed Ryosei.

Dodge after dodge, the lizard’s tongue followed Ryosei around. When the tongue was long enough, he ran towards the lizard as he was being chased down by its tongue from behind. He then used flash strike to reach the base of its tongue and cut it off, releasing a spark of particles.

Ryosei jumped away before he was trampled but the lizard wasn’t going to let him catch a break. All the spikes above its back stretched out and pursued Ryosei like missiles. He dodged one of them and tried to cut them but Kuro Yaiba didn’t pierce it. He released his weapon instead of pulling it out to not get caught by the other spikes heading his way. The spikes were as hard as its dark green scales so his only choice was to run away.

Left and right, up and down, the spikes scattered everywhere to the point where its tips began hitting their own spikes and destroying each other. Hiding behind its other spikes and using its power against it was an effective move. His elegant dance of death caused the lizard to destroy itself.

With most of the lizard’s defenses out of commission, Ryosei went for the offensive. He ran up to the lizard and stabbed both of its eyes, taking away its ability to see. The lizard began to lose its control and attacked with its tail at random. Its tail extended and flayed wildly, destroying building after building but was unable to hit Ryosei.

The lizard finally regenerated its body’s lost portions and spotted Ryosei standing in front of it, taunting him. Enraged, the lizard began screeching. Slowly, the lizard’s size became larger and larger. At the end of its screech, it was about three times the size it was earlier.

All at once, the lizard shot out its tongue and all its spikes. Dodging became a harder task, but that meant that it was going to be quicker for the lizard’s attacks to hit each other. Ryosei dodged, jumped, ran, climbed, slid, rolled, and weaved through all of its attacks. Without rest and losing pace, Ryosei avoided death by the millimeter.

What came with its rage was its loss of reason, it cared not how much the lizard hit itself as long as it could reach the annoying nuisance that was Ryosei. Every time it missed Ryosei by a few millimeters only served to enrage it even further and continued to launch its attacks without care. It was only when it saw Ryosei standing still did it realize that its spikes were all destroyed, its tongue pierced with holes, and its size back to normal. The lizard was an open target.

“Heh, this is checkmate.”

Sensing it’s inevitable peril, the lizard made a last-ditch effort and tried to run away.

\**Whoosh!!\**

Unfortunately for the lizard, there was no escape in the face of Konjou Ryosei. The lizard was cut cleanly in half after Ryosei used flash strike followed by a slide and a vertical slash below the lizard. It lost so much spirit power that even its hardened, dark-green scales were cut like butter.

Despite the killing blow, Ryosei wasn’t finished. He turned around and jumped in between the remains of the lizard while it was still standing and sliced it in another half.

Ryosei finally stopped and examined his hunt. There he saw two clean cuts; one sliced the lizard completely in half while the other was a smaller horizontal slash that cut a translucent orb.

In those last few moments, right before Ryosei slid under the lizard, he summoned Kuro Yaiba and reinforced it. When he was below the lizard, he extended the length of Kuro Yaiba’s blade and reverted it back to normal as he reappeared out the other side. Even if Shin was observing somewhere around town, he wouldn’t see Kuro Yaiba transforming into a longer blade when Ryosei was under the lizard. He took advantage of that small window and cut the lizard cleanly in two.

However, even if the blow looked devastating, Ryosei couldn’t afford to be careless. Shin told him that the core was most likely in the center, but that didn’t mean the lizard still couldn’t move it around. That was why he turned around and landed another blow. The lizard didn’t have any meat inside of it since it was a spirit. This was why it was easy for Ryosei to spot a solid orb in the middle of a translucent body.

Ryosei fulfilled Shin’s task. Seeing as there were no other spirits around, he released his weapon.

“Haahh… That was harder than I thought. Memorizing where its spikes are the whole time really takes it out of you. Well, never mind that. I should have gotten spirit power from that; how do I collect it?”

Almost as if the gods were answering his question, the lizard’s body disappeared and the orb he cut in half turned into small particles and entered Ryosei’s body.

“Hm, so this is what it feels like to gain spirit power… Wait, wasn’t that lizard almost a seer?! Why isn’t my status going up? Wait second, how do I know if my status goes up in the first place?!”

Thinking back to Ryosei’s earlier interrogation with Shin, the closest question Ryosei asked about the current situation, was how to figure out his status. It wasn’t the same as figuring out if he raised his status or not, but it was the best he had.

“I guess I’ll try to manifest on Earth… no, that’s a bad idea. I’m in the middle of a public area someone will definitely freak out if they see me.”

Ryosei figured he should take a rest somewhere. Conveniently enough, he was close to a café by the river and headed over without another word. Although there wasn’t going to be anyone serving, there were seats placed outside for him to rest on.

From atop the trees of the mountainside, Shin was watching Ryosei and his whole battle. He clearly saw the skill Ryosei portrayed. Even with the difference in spirit power, he beat the land dragon. Incredible speed and agility along with clean and decisive strikes. Engaging in battle while using the least amount of spirit power. Shin saw all of it.

“Ka… As expected of my sharp eyes, that spirit’s power is incredible.”

Shin perched himself on one of the trees with his lower half fully regenerated.

“Kekeke, I bet he actually thinks that I have no idea what he is! It is impossible for a newborn to be that knowledgeable! He didn’t even flinch when I talked about statuses. Ah… such power, but such little knowledge. Not to mention… that spirit used mana.”

Shin flew upwards and stared at the disaster before him. The trees and the ground were covered in darkness and scorched in black flame. There were signs of regeneration but were so small that they could barely be noticed.

“Ka! The environment of the Earth-Spirit world is completely dependent on the environment on earth. If anything is different or destroyed, it would regenerate until it is completely identical to earth, otherwise, it would remain the same. Normally, destruction like this will be regenerated in a few hours. But looking at this, it may take months to heal… So, this is the fabled Calamitous Energy. The amalgamation of mana and spirit power… the mark of ruination. Even someone as glorious as I am does not know how it works. It seems to have affected the landscape but not my body.”

Shin placed his hand over his stomach. He remembered the fear he had the moment he realized he was struck with magic. It severed part of his upper body that made contact with magic but it didn’t burn as the landscape did.

“Ka… I guess he is what the old geezers were talking about. To think he truly existed… I thought they were just going crazy from age, kakaka!”

Shin burst out laughing and slowly mellowed down into silence.

“Ka. ‘The one who the light reveals will release this world of its darkness’ …huh? A boy who cannot only use spirit power but as well as magic from the other worlds. He does sound like someone in a prophecy… But despite that, can someone with such destructive power truly save this world? I’ll be the judge of that.”

Shin then flew away, disappearing into the trees.

**129 – Revenant**

Meanwhile, at a nearby café, Ryosei pulled a seat out and sat limply, surrendering his whole body to his exhaustion. Although he didn’t feel physical exhaustion, mental exhaustion was plaguing him the same as ever.

“Uuu… It’s been a long day.”

Ryosei learned a few more things about the spirit realm and even experienced a battle with a spirit. The Konjou clan learned general knowledge about the spirit realm, but it doesn’t seem like they know anything about battles between spirits.

“It was a productive day, but I’m still new to this world. I might be able to fend for myself but everything else is still a mystery. Information the clan has on the spirit realm is useful for hunters, but it’s different when it comes to spirits. Why can’t there just be a HUD like in Senkyo’s MMOs to make things easier? Haaa…”

Ryosei slumped further into the chair, stretched his back, and closed his eyes in an attempt to release all the stress he’s been accumulating. When he reopened his eyes, he was greeted with a circle in front of him that had the numbers 12984/13000 in its center.

“Huh? Numbers?”

Ryosei held out his hand to touch it but it completely fazed through. He tried waving his hand on it but nothing worked, when he blinked, the circle disappeared. It left Ryosei confused and wanted to see it again. With the next blink, the circle reappeared, and the next caused it to disappear again.

Seeming to get how the circle worked, Ryosei did some tests. Blinking causes the circle of numbers to appear and disappear. He can control its appearance by simply willing for it, but there was still the matter of what the numbers meant.

“Could it be? Is this how much spirit power I have?”

Wanting to test his theory, Ryosei stood up and held his hand out. From his hand appeared a small pearl. Ryosei was alone, but he didn’t want to take any chances. Upon summoning the circle, he saw that the numbers turned from 12984/13000 to 12974/13000.

“Whoa! It really is my spirit power. Thank the gods! HUD acquired!”

Ryosei jumped joyously in the air with his fist raised high in the sky. It seems that not seeing his current spirit power frustrated him a lot.

“Still though, I only need to obtain 26 more spirit power to rank up. I’m so close! Ah, but I still need extra spirit power to be able to use my abilities and actually maintain revenant status. I’ll just go back to being an eidolon if I use too much. Alright, time to find something to hunt!”

Ryosei didn’t bother releasing Kuro Yaiba and went on to find some spirits. But before he could even move, Ryosei noticed something moving in the river.

“Huh, is that…?”

Something was moving under the water, heading towards the nearby bridge. When it got close, it jumped out of the water and onto the bridge. It was a kappa.

“Yes! One appeared right in front of me. That was easy.”

Ryosei ran over to the kappa but before he could reach it, the kappa turned dark as it walked forward and disappeared. Confused, Ryosei was stopped in his tracks.

“Eh? What did it…?”

The kappa disappeared in a strange way. Its body turned dark from right to left before disappearing, almost as if it was going through a door of some kind.

“Oh, maybe it manifested on earth.”

Ryosei stopped to glimpse. His eyes glowed and turned everything in his vision from the spirit realm to the normal earth he was used to seeing. But what he saw was nowhere near normal. There was a mob of kappas being massacred on the bridge. Ryosei immediately ran to one of the ends of the bridge to see what was happening and saw Yukai hiding behind a man holding a spear.

“What?!”

Ryosei watched as kappa after kappa was pierced and slashed by the person who was skillfully handling his spear.

“That’s… wind magic, isn’t it?”

Ryosei didn’t know what to be more surprised of, the mysterious spear user who he never heard of or Yukai getting herself in another mess. Seeing as the kappas were already retreating, there was no need for Ryosei to come out and ended his glimpse.

“Who was he? Maybe I’ll ask You-chan when I get back. He should know a thing or two.”

Ryosei was about to leave but was brought to a stop as soon as he saw what was coming from down the river. It was a huge deformed kappa and it was coming right toward where Yukai and the spear user were standing at high speed.

He immediately used glimpse in an attempt to warn the two. However, glimpse is an ability that only functioned to see the other world, meaning that Ryosei’s words did not reach them.

“Damn it!”

Ryosei thought about taking out the kappa before it even manifested on earth, but there was still a chance Shin was observing him from afar. He was left with one last option. And it was to manifest on earth as a deformed spirit in front of other people.

He activated visit and took his stance, but realized he couldn’t physically see Kuro Yaiba as it was distorted along with his body, but that didn’t matter. He didn’t need to see his blade in order to fight, after all, he’d been accustomed to his blade since he was a child. He closed his eyes and focused on the kappa heading for Yukai and her friend.

Ryosei sensed the kappa coming closer and closer. With that in mind and the speed it was going, he calculated its arrival to the very second. Right as the huge kappa manifested, without mercy, Ryosei intercepted it with his blade.

He quickly turned around to see that he cut the kappa’s core right in its center, just before it was blown away by the spear user. Ryosei looked around their surroundings to be sure that there were no more threats. Once he was sure, he released his weapon and blinked his eyes to summon the circle for his spirit power, and saw the numbers still appeared 12974/13000. Last time, he simply had to wait until he absorbed the core, but maybe it was different now that he was going to reach a higher status.

“Maybe I have to absorb it forcibly.”

Ryosei pulled up his arm and pointed it at the core over the distance. To his surprise, the core didn’t disperse into particles. But instead, it became a flame and zoomed straight toward him.

“Wait, what?!”

Upon contact, Ryosei was covered in flame and he could see the numbers on the circle rising. From 12974/13000 it became 13674/25000. Ryosei felt the heat of the flame enveloping him and transferring its heat to him. It was warm, and it didn’t hurt him. He watched his arms turn from a dark figure to his normal human arms.

“What the hell was that? I was inside the fire but it didn’t hurt one bit. Ah, maybe this is what happens when I get a higher status? Maybe… hey, you, can you see me now?”

Ryosei called out to the spear user in front of him. But before he could even respond, the person behind him answers his question for him.

**130 – The Other Side of Sincerity**

“Ryosei-onii-san?!”

“Oh… You can see me!”

“Wait, Yutei-san! It’s dangerous!”

Yukai bolted out of Ren’s protection and headed straight for Ryosei. Ren tried to stop her but she was too quick.

“Hey, Yukai-chan.”

“It is you, Ryosei-onii—Eh?”

Yukai tried to touch Ryosei but her hands fazed right through his body. Confused, Yukai tried touching Ryosei everywhere but with no luck. Ryosei stepped back to get some distance between them.

“U-Umm, Yukai-chan, what are you doing?”

“R-Ryosei-onii-san! What’s happening to you?! Why can’t I touch you?!”

“What do you mean? I’m a spirit, remember? There’s no way you can touch me.”

“A-Ah, oh yeah. Sorry, I must’ve bothered you.”

“Not at all. This is the first time you’ve seen me in this form so it’s only natural. The last time you saw me like this was in the dream world where both of us had a spiritual body, but it’s a bit different here in the real world.”

Ryosei and Yukai were having their idle chat but the situation still didn’t sit right with Ren. She wedged herself in between Yukai and Ryosei with her spear still at the ready.

“Sorry for disturbing you two, but I’m not backing down until I understand what’s going on.”

“There’s no need to worry, Akira-san. This is Konjou Ryosei-onii-san. He saved my life multiple times.”

“Konjou…? So you’re a spirit of the local hunters. No wonder that gear looked familiar. Why are you here?”

“I saw you two so I came to help.”

“Really now? How exactly did you meet Yutei-san?”

“I met her before I died. Is there something wrong with that?”

“Yes, there is.”

Ren pointed her spear at Ryosei, her eyes seething with distrust.

“That can’t be possible. All spirited souls lose their memories, no exceptions. What do you have to say about that?”

“…”

Ryosei made a mistake. The person he was talking to was not affiliated with the clan. He was a stranger that also knew about the supernatural. It was possible he was a member of another group. It would be bad if he discovered that Ryosei was some kind of unique spirit.

“W-Well that’s because…”

Ryosei racked his brain while trying to look as normal as possible. His eyes strayed away from Ren and landed on Yukai.

“…of her. Yukai-chan told me about my past and how we met.”

Yukai looked a bit confused but quickly picked up on Ryosei’s intentions when she saw the desperate look in his eyes.

“Ah, y-yeah! It’s true! Ryosei-onii-san saved me from a car accident. But because of that…”

Yukai trailed off, looking a bit uneasy. It was obvious to Ryosei that the accident still bothered her.

“It’s a sensitive topic, so can I ask you to refrain from asking her? I’m not a threat so there’s no need to worry.”

Ren still didn’t seem convinced. But she didn’t look as aggressive as before. She seemed to be concerned about Yukai as well.

“I’ll just take my leave. I’ll see you some other time—”

Just as Ryosei was about to leave, Yukai called out to him.

“W-Wait, Ryosei-onii-san!”

Both Ryosei and Ren turned to Yukai.

“I-I want to talk about something, so… Could you come with us? It’s okay, Akira-san. We can trust him, I assure you.”

Yukai stared at Ren with pleading eyes. Although it seemed to trouble her, she reluctantly lowered her spear and stored it back in her bag.

“Alright, fine. But if I see you do something suspicious, I won’t hesitate to cut you down.”

“Y-Yeah, I’ll keep that in mind.”

On their way home, Ren was the first to separate from them. Yukai insisted that she accompanied her all the way home, but Ren quickly denied it and ran before Yukai could say anything else.

“Aw, I couldn’t fully make it up to Akira-san.”

Yukai stared at the ground depressingly. It was a huge difference from her earlier cheerfulness. It was like night and day. One second she was cheerful and sad the next. Ryosei could not stand it.

“Why are you so obsessed about repaying her? You just mistook her for a guy, right? I did too, you know. If you hadn’t talked about it earlier, I definitely wouldn’t have noticed.”

Yukai stayed quiet and lowered her head. That was not how she usually acted. She would have answered Ryosei the second he asked. He tried to peek under her face and look her in the eyes but she averted them.

“If you don’t want to talk about it, then that’s fine too. Everyone has their own circumstances, after all. That’s what I would normally say. But… this is my fault, isn’t it?”

“You’re—”

Yukai turned her face to Ryosei inadvertently and tried to deny his claim but seeing Ryosei’s serious look, she swallowed her words.

“Hahh… Looks like saving people has its own consequences.”

Ryosei saved Yukai when she was little and died for it. He made an act of kindness to Yukai and denied her every way of repaying him. For a child, seeing someone die in front of them must have been traumatizing. That was what likely lead her to what she is now. Unable to go on without repaying her debts.

“When you learned that I lived in Senkyo’s body, you immediately offered to help us without even knowing the dangers. You wanted to repay me without any thought of your own health. That’s what you thought, am I wrong? Isn’t that also part of the reason you were so happy to see me earlier?”

“I-I… don’t…”

Yukai struggled to speak her mind against Ryosei’s claims.

“Seriously…”

Yukai was like an open book. She didn’t even try to deny the truth. She couldn’t get herself to lie to defend herself, not to the person she wants to repay. Ryosei felt like he was bullying a defenseless little critter.

“I-I’m sorry. I’m just a bother to have around, aren’t I?”

“…If you keep throwing yourself into danger… Then, yes.”

Yukai stopped moving the moment she heard his response.

“…!! Yeah… E… Exactly what I thought… I… I’m just…”

Her voice was shaking and her eyes began to moisten. She tried to keep herself from crying but tears penetrated her defenses the moment she blinked.

“E-Excuse me!”

“Ah, wait!”

Yukai ran off as fast as she could and left Ryosei behind. She disappeared from Ryosei’s sight, swallowed by the darkness of the streets. She was now alone with no one around and made a beeline for her apartment.

**131 – One of the Same**

*“\*Idiot! Idiot! Idiot! Idiot! I’m such an idiot! I only wanted to help but all I ended up doing is causing trouble for everyone. I didn’t even think of Ryosei-nii-san’s feelings. All I did was think for my satisfaction! I’m such a terrible person.\*”*

Yukai berated herself as she ran away. She hated herself. Even though deep in her heart she knew exactly what she was doing and what it was causing, she still continued to try and butt in.

The tears came pouring down her eyes, cries filling the dark, empty streets. She arrived at a quiet, two-story apartment. She climbed the stairs and stopped in front of room 203. Hurriedly, she took out a key from her bag and unlocked the door. The inside was dark and noiseless which meant no other person was home.

Yukai quickly entered the room, turned on the lights, and closed the door behind her with her back as she threw all her body weight at it. Losing strength in her legs, she slowly slid down against the door onto her behind. She covered her face with her shoulders and cried as loud as she could. All the while repeating “I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

She stayed there crying, bawling her eyes out. She was alone in her small apartment room with no one to comfort her.

“Don’t be sorry. I should be the one to say that.”

A lone voice called out to Yukai. But that shouldn’t have been possible. She was alone when she arrived. She gingerly looked up revealing her disheveled face and saw Ryosei kneeling down in front of her. He tried to touch her face and give her warmth, but he was unable to do so and his hand just fazed through.

“I’m sorry. I should have been clearer. I just want to keep you safe but I ended up making you cry, I’m sorry—”

“Don’t apologize!”

Ryosei apologized wholeheartedly but Yukai cut him off before he could finish and reburied her face in her arms. He was taken aback. The usual Yukai wouldn’t cut anyone off and shout like that.

“\**H-Hic\**… Don’t… I’m a terrible person… \**hic\**. A really, really terrible person. \**hic*\* A-About what I wanted to talk about…\**hic*\* Before I even met you with Yukou-san, I was already under a lot of stress… \**hic, sniffle*.\*”

Yukai sucked her tears up and tried her best to explain to Ryosei her situation.

“My mother is in a coma. She has been for a while now. The doctors said that nothing was wrong with her. They couldn’t figure out the cause of her coma. All they could do was put her in the ICU and stabilize her health. Right now, she’s still in the hospital suffering on her own. The only thing I could do was sit and watch her. I didn’t want that. It hurt every time I entered the room with her unconscious. I began to think of the worst. Eventually, I stopped visiting her. I came up with excuses for myself. That I needed to focus on school. That I needed a part-time job. But in reality, that was all a front. I… I was scared. I don’t want her to die. I wanted to be there for her. But when I tried to go to visit her, my legs would plant themselves on the ground, and my mind would come up with excuses not to go… That’s when I met you again. You saved my life again. I told myself that I should repay you. That maybe if I used my time on repaying you, I could keep my mind from my mother… I’m horrible, aren’t I? Some daughter I turned out to be. I ran away from her and left her alone, just to keep myself from hurting. I even troubled you, just to keep myself from hurting. And now… I’m troubling you again with my own problems… \**hic\*.* I’m the worst! \**Hic\*…*”

Yukai continued to cry. Ryosei listened carefully to her. She hated herself for being self-centered to protect herself. She didn’t want to get hurt, and she hated herself for that. She thought she was the worst human being alive because she troubled everyone for her own sake. After collecting his thoughts, he responded to her.

“Yeah, what you did was absolutely terrible.”

“…!!”

It only served to worsen the situation. But then…

“But… I think that’s normal. We humans don’t want to be hurt. None of us do. We act selfishly to get rid of that pain. That’s why you did what you did. Everyone has those times. The only difference is that there are some who keep running away, and others who face their pain. Even I acted selfishly and troubled everyone. I ran away as you did.”

“\**Sniffle\**… You did?”

Yukai calmed herself down a little. She wanted to hear what Ryosei had to say.

“Yeah, I did. It was after my parents’ death. They died at the same time from illness. I couldn’t take it. The reality was too hard to swallow. I left my clan and worried my close friends. Then, when I died, my cousins grieved my death so much that they blamed themselves. I was pathetic too, you know. I didn’t know how badly I messed up until I met my cousin in Senkyo’s body… If only I faced that pain, then I wouldn’t have made everyone suffer so much. I hated myself too. Even before I died, I already knew what I was doing was wrong. I just didn’t have the courage to face it.”

Ryosei understood. He understood all too well. The pain, the denial, and the regret that came with it. It was the worst choice he could have possibly done. He knew that but chose to do it either way. It wasn’t something that logical reasoning and self-control could stop.

“Liar.”

Yukai bluntly said.

“Eh?”

“Liar.”

She repeated.

“W-Wait, which part of my story do you think I’m lying about?”

Ryosei panicked. Clearly, he didn’t expect such a response from her.

“Everything. You’re lying about everything! If you aren’t, then how, how did you manage to forgive yourself?!”

Yukai jumped up and kneeled with her face right up to Ryosei’s face. She wanted to hear his answer. A bit perplexed, he tried to distance himself from her, but she didn’t let him and closed the distance. Seeing as his effort was useless, he proceeded to tell her.

“I didn’t forgive myself.”

“Th-Then…!”

Yukai tried to interrupt, but Ryosei silenced her and continued talking.

“But everyone else has forgiven me. Listen to me, Yukai-chan. I won’t be able to forgive myself. I plan to carry this burden until the very end. That way, there’s no way that I’d forget exactly how painful my experience was. That way, the next time it happens, I’ll be sure to make the right choice. How about you? What do you want to do? Do you want to keep running away, or do you want to face the pain and carry your burden?”

“I-I…”

Yukai still seemed to be indecisive. Ryosei knew exactly what was holding her back. It was the same thing that kept him from facing the pain in the past. The arduous chains of fear.

“Don’t be afraid. The path ahead is thorny, but you won’t be alone. As someone who went through it by themselves, I wouldn’t want you to have the same experience. That’s why I’ll accompany you. I’ll walk with you in the dark streets, just like earlier. So don’t be afraid. I’ll be by your side. I promise.”

Ryosei stretched his hand out to Yukai.

“But in exchange, you have to make an effort to change. If you ever get tired, I’ll be here for you, alright?”

Her gaze was locked onto his hand like it was her salvation. However, she removed her eyes from it and stared at Ryosei’s warm, compassionate look. It reminded her of how her mother used to stare at her like that. Accepting and forgiving. Overflowing with emotion, Yukai jumped into Ryosei and embraced him.

“Owowow… W-Wait, Yukai-chan. I-It hurts…”

She seized Ryosei with her ironclad grasp. So much so that Ryosei began hurting. He was too focused to realize, but once he did, he was flabbergasted.

*\*It hurts?! Wait a second, I’m a* spirit, *aren’t I? How is she able to touch me?\**

Ryosei looked down on the weeping Yukai. She cried on his chest, dampening his clothes in the process. When he saw this sight, he put away everything else in the back of his head and decided to comfort her. He gently pet her head with one hand and wrapped her back with the other. He enveloped her in his soothing warmth and stayed like that for a while longer.

**Chapter 2: Mutuality**

**132 – Strange Connection**

*“\*I see… Well, just like what I said before, just take your time. You’re forcing yourself too much.\*”*

Senkyo let out a long sigh before responding to Ryosei. It was the next day. They each had their respective adventures and Ryosei’s return to his body caused these to merge, making the other known of their activities, almost as if making a report. Ryosei had ventured into the spirit realm, while Senkyo finished his talk with Freda and was introduced to his new mentor. However, Senkyo’s talk seemed to be plaguing him which resulted in this conversation with Ryosei.

“It’s just pathetic. After all I’ve been through, I never thought something like this would actually trouble me.”

*“\*Doesn’t that just prove that you are human?\*”*

“Haha… I wonder…”

Senkyo grabbed a cup of tea and sat tiredly on the sofa. He was trying to collect his mind after a stressful day. The main source of his stress was his talk with Freda. Whatever they talked about, it was troubling him greatly, but it seemed like Ryosei saw this coming. Tired of being suffocated by the atmosphere, Senkyo wanted to change it so he switched topics.

“Well, enough about me. You seemed to have quite the eventful day yourself. Especially with Yutei-san.”

*“\*Something like that couldn’t be avoided. I just wanted to help her out.\*”*

“I’m not trying to make fun of you. If anything, I think you did great. But still, we can’t ignore the fact you were able to make contact with each other. We tested it earlier, no one else can touch you, not even me.”

Senkyo and Ryosei performed a test earlier. Ryosei manifested on earth and tried to touch other people passing by, and even tried it with Senkyo, but in the end, he was not able to make contact with a single one.

“I can help you out by theorizing, but testing will completely rely on you.”

*“\*I know. I’ll try to figure out how this is happening tomorrow.\*”*

**…………**

*“\*Even though I said that, I don’t really know how to start…\*”*

Ryosei looked over to Yukai using his spirit vision. Outlines of the students and the classroom filled his vision.

*“\*Huh?\*”*

But for some reason. Within the backdrop of traced outlines, the girl who sat beside him was the only one filled with color and depth. He saw Yukai as how a normal person would perceive her. This was the first time he saw anyone like this. It took him a few seconds to return to his senses. When he did, he knew he had no time to waste. Since going out of Senkyo’s body would mean showing the whole class a floating flame, Ryosei had to go to the spirit realm to be able to do anything.

*“\*Hey, Senkyo. Open up the spirit world.\*”*

Without removing his eyes from the lecture, Senkyo reached under his desk and drew a circle. Upon completion, it then reflected the spirit world, showing a radiant turquoise hue on the desk. He hovered his hand over the circle and a blue flame appeared from his palm and placed itself on the colored part of the desk.

*“\*Are you still here?\*”*

Senkyo thought to himself, but there was no response. It meant that Ryosei was already out of his body. After confirming that, he took his hand out of the circle. A second later, a light enveloped the blue flame that was Ryosei and disappeared.

*“\*Good luck out there.\*”*

Although he knew Ryosei wasn’t able to hear him, he bid goodbye as his spirit friend was transported to the spirit realm.

“Alright! It worked!”

Ryosei was in the spirit realm. He tried to move, but he was stuck in something. When he looked below him, his body was inside Senko’s desk. Nothing was hurting, but there was no doubt that his stomach was going through the desk.

“What the hell?”

He pulled up his fist and strengthened it with spirit power before destroying the desk below him. His whole body got stuck in the desk, causing him to destroy all of it to get out.

“W-Wow, transporting to the spirit realm is more dangerous than I thought. I better be careful where I transfer the next time I come here. Anyway…”

Ryosei moved on and shifted his focus to Yukai’s seat. There was something unusual hovering above it. It was a red flame that looked similar to Ryosei’s blue flame whenever he left Senkyo’s body. He looked around for something that could help him understand what it was, but there was nothing there. The classroom was empty except for the flame in front of him.

“Is this supposed to be… Yukai-chan?”

Ryosei observed it for a bit. However, there was nothing else around it. It was just a flame. Seeing as he was getting nowhere, he decided to touch it. But when he did, his hand fazed straight through it. It didn’t hurt. It was like nothing was there at all.

Ryosei closed his eyes and used his spirit vision. An outline of the deserted classroom appeared, but in place of the red flame was Yukai’s figure. It was like she was physically in front of him, coloring his empty vision.

He tried to touch her while using his spirit vision but ended unsuccessfully. His hand did not make contact with her at all and fazed through her body. Ryosei pondered what to do for a while. There was only so much he could do in the spirit realm. He needed to meet with Yukai on Earth, but that meant manifesting. Right now, she was in the middle of class. It was not something that he could do at the current moment.

Having nothing else to do, Ryosei exited the classroom to look for clues on how this was happening. It was possible that something in the spirit realm was causing her to always appear in his vision.

The whole time he was roaming the halls of the school, the red flame was always in his vision. Even when he was all the way out on the fields, he saw Yukai’s flame through the walls and other objects that obstructed his vision of it. The only thing that constantly changed was the flame’s size. He was able to tell the depth of the flame, allowing him to calculate his distance with it. Ryosei explored the whole school and even the locations around it, but he could not find a single thing that would explain the situation.

“Hahh… I’m stumped.”

After a long time walking around, Ryosei took a break on top of the rooftop. He was sitting on the floor with his back resting against the fence.

“I guess this means that nothing is externally influencing her, but I can’t be too sure, not yet. Hahh… If only I could talk with her right now then, maybe I could finally get somewhere.”

Ryosei’s eyes naturally gravitated towards the red flame below him, trying to stare it down for answers. But unlike before, the flame was moving around.

“Hm? I guess this means it’s lunch break. Wow, I spent a long time searching and I didn’t even notice the time go by.”

Ryosei’s eyes were still following Yukai’s flame.

“Hm?”

But for some reason, the flame was gradually getting larger.

“Is she…”

The flame was getting closer and closer until it was right behind the rooftop’s door in front of him.

“…coming to me?”

The door to the rooftop opened. Just to be sure, Ryosei used glimpse to make sure who it was. And as he thought, it was Yukai. When she closed the door, she stared at Ryosei, looking at him straight in the eye, almost as if she, a human on Earth, saw him, a spirit in the spirit realm.

“…”

It could’ve been a coincidence. Ryosei didn’t want to jump to conclusions so he moved to the corner over his left. But through his glimpse, he could see Yukai’s eyes following him around.

“…”

When Ryosei reached the corner, he used flash strike to immediately move to the farthest corner. It was the corner behind Yukai’s left side, her blind spot. The flame stopped for a few seconds, but then, it moved closer to Ryosei. In his glimpse, Yukai was peeking around the entrance’s bulkhead corner while looking straight at him. There was no possible way such a thing was a coincidence. Having nothing else to do, Ryosei manifested himself on Earth. Various colors entered his eyes, he saw the clear blue sky above him, the town over in the distance, and Yukai who was elated to see him.

“Ryosei-nii-san!”

**133 – Flames**

Yukai made a beeline for Ryosei and greeted him with a quick hug. To his surprise, she was able to touch him.

“Y-Yukai-chan? What are you doing here? No, how did you even find me?”

“What are you saying? Weren’t you the one who called me here?”

“Huh? I’m pretty sure I didn’t do anything.”

“Well, you see…”

Yukai explained why she ended up there. She went on to eat lunch when class ended, just like how she usually does, entertaining herself by making plans for later in the day. Apparently, she had trouble deciding about what to do after school, but when she finally did, she felt the urge to look above her, and there she found a small blue flame coming out of the ceiling.

She panicked and pointed out the flame to the cafeteria staff, but they saw nothing. They thought she was crazy and sent her away. She was a bit worried and kept eying the flame, but when she noticed it was following her throughout the building like the moon in a clear night sky, she knew something was wrong. No one else could see it except her. She began thinking, and the only idea that came to mind was Ryosei. Because of that, she followed the flame and got closer to it until it led her to the rooftop.

“A blue flame, huh?”

Now that Ryosei was manifested on earth, he could no longer see the red flame.

“Can you still see it now?”

Yukai took a step back and examined Ryosei. She also looked around her surroundings.

“No, it’s gone now. I think it disappeared when you appeared. Does that mean it was you?”

“Perhaps, but I’m still not sure…”

“I see. Then… no, never mind.”

Her eyes strayed away from Ryosei as she was processing her thought, but she stopped herself. He had a good guess why. She must have thought of offering her help, but recalling their talk yesterday night, she was making good of her word and restrained herself, thinking that she would only trouble him. A smile appeared on his face, seeing that Yukai was trying to change. However, he could not dissolve the phenomenon around him and Yukai, he thought doing this was counterproductive, but he had to obtain whatever information existed for him to act on it properly.

“Your class is about to begin, right?”

“Yes, in just a few more minutes.”

“Then, can you help me out later? I want to know what that flame was all about.”

Yukai’s face lit up the moment Ryosei asked for her help. But then, it gradually faded. That gesture struck Ryosei as strange.

“Yeah, I’d like to help you. I really do! But… I have a part-time job. I don’t want to make you wait.”

“Is that so? Well, I don’t mind if it gets late as long as you don’t.”

“Really!?”

Ryosei nodded his head in response. Yukai gave Ryosei another tight hug.

“Thank you!!”

A few seconds later, Ryosei felt her hug getting tighter, strangely, not with excitement, but instead with slight distress. He didn’t ask what was wrong and waited for her to open up by herself. After gathering the courage to do so, Yukai opened her mouth.

“Actually, about what I decided to do earlier, before seeing that blue flame… I wanted to ask you to come with me… so I can take the first step to make everything right. Is that too much?”

“I already told you yesterday, right? I’m not one to break my promises, well, not anymore.”

Yukai showed her appreciation by hugging Ryosei even tighter, constricting him to the level that it slightly hurt him, but he toughed it out to not break the mood.

“Thank you so much. I mean it.”

Ryosei didn’t respond. Instead, he comforted her by hugging her back. After being satisfied, Yukai finally let go.

“Then, I’ll see you later, Ryosei-nii-san. I have to get to class.”

“Sure, do your best. I’ll be waiting here for you later, okay?”

Yukai nodded happily and exited the rooftop, her light footsteps dampening as time passed by the second. After confirming that she left, Ryosei returned to the spirit realm.

“Hm… She can still touch me.”

Ryosei watched as a red flame moved around below him. He used his spirit vision and saw Yukai’s figure through the outlines walking down the stairs.

“So, we can see each other through these flames? She said she saw a blue flame after making her decision… Either that means she didn’t notice my flame before that or she only saw my flame when she began thinking about me. All of this began yesterday. I must’ve done something… No, we must’ve done something. But what could it be?”

Ryosei slumped on the ground.

“Whatever it is, there’s clearly some kind of connection between us. Well, I can’t figure anything out without her. For now, I’ll just stay here. I don’t want trouble with other spirits.”

**134 – To Move Forward**

Later that afternoon, Yukai returned to meet up with Ryosei. He was about to manifest, but he realized that he would have to walk through the school of students if he did that. They quickly relocated to a secluded area outside the school. When they met up, she immediately took a grip on Ryosei’s hand. Her grip was tight. It was obvious she was looking for someone to comfort her. In return, he gripped her hand back while they headed to their destination. The hospital.

“Are you sure you’re ready?”

Ryosei and Yukai stood at the entrance of the hospital. He was rather concerned for Yukai. She spent over five minutes standing in silence, trying to gather her courage to enter. She did not respond, but not because she intentionally ignored him, it seemed like she didn’t even notice him speak.

Instead of calling out for her, Ryosei tightened her grip on Yukai’s hand. Actions speak louder than words, he tested this phrase and it was only then that he caught her attention. She was a bit startled and stared at him in surprise. He comforted her with a bright smile and said to her “It’s okay. I’m here.”

Yukai took a deep breath. She did not speak, but she walked forward. After dealing with the receptionist, they finally reached the door to a certain room. The patient in the room was Yutei Yuriko.

She reached to open the door by placing her hand on the handle. And finally, after one last push, she opened the door to the room. Ryosei let out a light gasp but silenced himself before Yukai noticed. There, she saw her mother unconscious on the bed. She had light brown hair, her bright pupils concealed by her eyelids. Her body had thinned out due to the tolls of time without proper nutrition. It was an indication of how long she’s been here.

Yukai paused for a second but walked into the room after another deep breath. They stood by the bedside and took a moment to take everything in.

“H-Hello, mom. It’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

Yukai stopped speaking. She was hoping to get a response, but deep inside, she knew that was impossible.

“It’s been about half a year now since my last visit… How have you been doing?”

Ryosei stood beside her quietly gripping her hand. He felt the constant pressure from her grasp. Her arm was shaking, but she didn’t let it show on her face.

“I’ve been doing well in my studies. I even got a part-time job. I didn’t want to rely on Dad’s money any longer. I know you don’t want me to do that, but I needed something to take my mind off everything. Nothing much changed in half a year. I’m sorry I’m not much of a conversation. You’d think I would have a lot of stories to tell if I was gone for that long… I’m sorry about that.”

A tear dropped from her eye. More came coming down right after. She kept a straight face saying that she was fine and was holding her own, but her teary eyes and trembling voice betrayed her.

“You must’ve been lonely by yourself. I… I’m sorry about that. I was too much of a coward. I ran away… I’m sorry about that. I left you alone just to save myself… I’m sorry about that. I know you went through a lot of trouble…*\*hic\** Y-You must be furious. I left you after all. I’m sorry about that.”

It was then that she finally reached her limit. She could not contain her emotions and her face was disheveled. Her composure broke like a dam, the heavy waves of emotions overpowering her and sending her hands and forehead to the floor, the rest of her body curled up, lowering herself for forgiveness.

“*\*hic\** I’m sorry for everything! *\*hic\** I-I’m the worst daughter, aren’t I!? *\*hic\** I couldn’t be there when you needed me! *\*hic\** I just ran away *\*hic\** even though I knew what I was doing was wrong. *\*hic\** I let myself stay that way *\*hic\** because it hurt me seeing you like this! *\*hic\** I *\*hic\** I’m sorry!! *\*hic\** I’m really sorry!! *\*hic\** I swear *\*hic\**  I’ll make it up to you *\*hic\** I’ll be better *\*hic\** so please *\*hic\** please forgive me…!!”

Yukai began to bawl her eyes out and repeatedly apologized. Even Ryosei didn’t know what to do. He was taken aback the moment she groveled on the floor. At first, he thought of getting her off the ground, but when he tried to carry her up, she struggled out of his grip and ended up burying her face by the side of her mother’s bed. Ryosei thought this was better than having her face on the ground so he decided to let her be. After a while, Yukai finally calmed down. She stayed in the room, introducing Ryosei to her mother and telling stories until it was about time for her part-time job. Just before they left, Ryosei gave one last message to Yukai’s mother.

“Nice to meet you, Mrs. Yutei. As Yukai-chan said so earlier, I am Konjou Ryosei. Before we go, I’d like to ask you to forgive her. She’s been struggling by herself just like you were. Today, she finally found the courage to come here and face her troubles. She never forgot about you in the past six months. She came in earnest and overcame herself. I would like you to find it in your heart to forgive her if her actions ever troubled you. Thank you very much. I will be sure to take care of your daughter in your absence.”

Ryosei bowed to Yukai’s mother before proceeding to leave the room.

“Ryosei-nii-san…”

Yukai heard everything he said while she was waiting by the door. She stared at him in surprise. As a response, he showed her another comforting smile before urging her to move forward.

“Come on. You’re going to be late for your part-time.”

“O-Oh, yeah.”

Yukai closed the door and walked beside Ryosei. She was about to grab his hand, but she stopped midway. She hesitated and rethought her actions. She put her hand down and walked beside him normally.

**135 – Savor Soul**

“Then, I’ll be seeing you later, Ryosei-nii-san.”

“Yeah, I’ll be waiting around the area. Do your best in there.”

“Sure!”

Ryosei saw Yukai off as she entered the back entrance of a building. He walked to the front and examined the place. It was a café called “Savor Soul.” Apparently, she got a part-time job here six months ago.

He walked up to the store and peeked through the glass window. Most of the seats were occupied. It had a relaxing atmosphere with the customers enjoying themselves talking with their friends, family, and colleagues while eating their food.

Ryosei spotted Yukai come out of the back wearing the café’s uniform. She wore a white long sleeve with a grey waist apron and black pants. He was a bit surprised at how good she looked in that outfit. She went up to the person brewing coffee and bowed to her a few times before standing in front of the counter.

“So, she’s a cashier here.”

He stayed still observing her interactions with customers. She seemed to be used to talking to the customers and took their orders smoothly without stuttering or messing up. Ryosei remembered the time she asked for Senkyo’s help in bringing the class notebooks to the faculty. She was a nervous wreck and stuttering at almost every word, but now she was completely composed, devoid of her usual clumsy self.

After a while, Ryosei decided to walk inside as a customer. Why not watch her closer, he thought. As he was about to push the door open, he was suddenly pulled from behind.

“Whoa!?”

He saw the doors of the café become smaller until it was perfectly framed inside a thin circle floating in the sky. Everything outside of the circle shifted from earth to the spirit realm, colored in its usual turquoise hue. When he realized what was happening, Ryosei summoned his weapon, but before he could move, a transparent barrier surrounded him. It was the work of a spirit. Ryosei could not move to swing his blade. He had to protect his core at all costs. He was about to turn to a drastic move but he stopped when a man’s voice called out to him.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Ryosei turned to the voice behind him and saw a huge man in a military uniform. He had his arm bent away from him with his elbow pointing at him. Instead of a weapon, he was using his arm to threaten him.

“What do you mean?”

“Did you think no one would notice a spirit loitering in front of the café? If you don’t state your intentions right now, I’ll cut your head off and destroy your core.”

“Huh?”

Ryosei was a bit confused. At first, he thought that a spirit pulled him back into the spirit world to take his core, but that did not seem to be the case. He did not know exactly how the spirit was able to forcefully pull him into the spirit realm, but there was no other explanation. But the most mind-boggling part of this situation was that he wasn’t being attacked. Sure, he was being threatened. But the soldier spirit in front of him seemed to care more about why he was standing around the café.

“I don’t have time for games. You have 10 seconds! 10. 9—”

“I was just going to enter like a customer.”

“Really now? Do you even know how to act like a human? If you didn’t, you would’ve just walked right through those doors and freaked out the customers.”

“Ah…”

The realization just hit him. Ryosei was so used to making contact with Yukai that he forgot he couldn’t make contact with objects.

“By the looks of it, you forgot about that fact. I don’t care how much you like it there on the living world, but if you can’t even keep the basics like that, you’re better off staying here.”

“Y-Yeah… wait. Why are you even so concerned about this café?”

“Hm?”

The soldier was surprised to hear that question. He was looking at Ryosei with a disappointed face.

“You have at least a revenant status, but you don’t know about this café? Just how did you manage to survive out there without hearing about this place?”

He was talking like it was common knowledge in the spirit realm.

“You don’t seem to be lying about not knowing. Normally, I would let you go. But I can’t take any chances. You’re clearly a fighter.”

Ryosei traced the soldier’s glare and saw it was being directed at his sword. Getting his message, he released it to reassure him of their safety. The soldier nodded his head.

“Okay. Cinnamon.”

The barrier around Ryosei began to distort. It shrunk around him in a way that he could not escape even as the barrier was transforming, but also transform into a tight collar around his neck.

“If you try anything, your head will be cut off and you’ll disappear where you stand.”

Ryosei was about to touch his collar, but he was struck by a sharp pain throughout his body.

“Ow!”

“Keep your hands to yourself. Now, Kris!”

The doors behind Ryosei flew open and appeared another spirited soul. He was a young boy in his teens with orange hair and blue eyes. He wore the same café uniform Yukai was wearing.

“Yes, General—OW!!”

The soldier smacked the boy as he arrived.

“I told you to call me ‘Manager!’”

“E-Ehhh?? You really want to stick with something that lame? General is waaay cooler! Besides, the boss told me it was fine!”

The soldier breathed a heavy sigh before resigning himself to his fate.

“Fine, I don’t care anymore. Here, I’ve got an intruder for you. Send him to the interrogation room and watch him until we get there.”

“You got it!”

Following the soldier’s command, the boy took Ryosei and escorted him with a bat pointed to his core. He led him to the building nearby where many spirited souls were guarding the vicinity. The boy escorting him greeted the other spirits as they walked by, and so did they. They stopped at a room with only a table and two chairs. The boy placed him on the farthest chair from the door and kept the bat on his core.

**136 – Spirit Realm Business**

“…”

“…So, what are you doing here?”

It’s been a few hours since he was brought to the room. Ryosei and the boy waited there in silence the whole time. But now, it seems that not even the boy who was guarding him was able to bear the boredom.

“…”

But Ryosei didn’t respond.

“Come on, you can tell me!”

“…”

“Aren’t you being a little cold? At least say something!”

“…”

He breathed a heavy sigh and was about to give up. But right as he did, Ryosei finally spoke.

“What’s with that café?”

“!? Ha-ha! I’m glad you asked!”

The boy’s face brightened when he finally acquired a conversation. Ryosei waited for him to become desperate before saying anything.

“Savor Soul is the best café on earth and the spirit realm! We serve all kinds of customers with respect and have a big menu to choose from! The café that will soothe your soul and make you feel alive again, that’s Savor Soul!”

“U-Uhuh…”

Ryosei wanted to get information but he mostly got a huge sales pitch. The boy did say something of interest. “The best café on earth and the spirit realm.”

“So, are you telling me that this café serves spirits too?”

“Of course! There’s nothing else like it! It serves true spirits and spirited souls alike with food from earth as offerings to increase spirit power along with that delicious taste! Most of its customers are nice but when something happens, we always have the general. He’s the strongest spirit I know! He’s the coolest!”

“A business in the spirit realm? I understand that customers will get spirit power, but what do you get in exchange?”

“Oh, you didn’t even know that? Wow, you must be really new. It’s this world’s currency. Dark Cores.”

“And where do you get those?”

“Dark cores are cores of fully rampaging spirits and predators. Here, as your senior, I’ll be nice and give you a whole lecture on the spirit realm—”

“No, please don’t do that. Just tell me what predators are.”

Ryosei shut the boy down. He didn’t want another long talk about information he already knew. The boy showed a discontented face.

“Ugh, fine. If you already knew what rampaging spirits are, then predators are spirits that are born in that state. They don’t have emotions and are only born to kill. They are true spirits, but not even the other true spirits like them. They’re basically enemies of every normal spirit in the realm. No one likes them which is why we use their cores as currency. It helps clean this part of the spirit realm. We call them currency, but in the end, they’re still cores. You can absorb them to gain spirit power if you want.”

“Wait, how do you even take cores away without them regenerating?”

“Oh, that? You have to have a Spirit status to do that. You can use your own spirit power to contain the core like a bag so that it doesn’t regenerate. Fortunately for us, these things operate completely by instinct. If it thinks that it can’t get out, it will give up and stop resisting.”

“I see. So you need to fight it until it calms down. Isn’t that a bit too much work just to contain something though?”

“Probably, if you do it by yourself. But if you have another person with you, then it’s really easy. We just have one of them become bait and gather a large group of those things, then the other will cage those things in a huge barrier.”

“Then that means you have to be stronger than them, right?”

“Yeah, you’re not wrong. But with what the spirit realm turned into now, I don’t think newcomers like you will have a hard time surviving. Our café even offers to help new spirits if they work for it.”

The boy seemed like he was thinking back to a past memory. His face turned from an energetic to a gentle one. It was only for a second. He then returned to his usual energetic self and continued the conversation.

“Yep, this world changed and it was all the boss’s doing! She’s like the mafia boss of the earth spirit world! Don Kait—OWW!!”

A small ball suddenly hit the boy’s head and screamed in pain. Ryosei turned to the source of the ball and saw a familiar face. It was a girl with reddish-brown hair and brown eyes. She wore the same uniform as the boy behind Ryosei. It was the same person that Yukai first talked to when he was looking through the window.

“I told you not to call me that!”

The girl entered the room with the soldier from earlier following her from behind. She scowled at him as she took her seat in front of Ryosei.

“I-I’m sorry, Boss!”

“I told you Miss Kaitlyn is fine… whatever. So, this is the suspicious spirit you were talking about?”

The person that seemed to be named Kaitlyn turned to the soldier behind her.

“Yes. He was about to enter the café without knowing how to act like a human. Luckily, there was no one around to see him so I took him into custody.”

“I see. Thanks for that. Now…”

Kaitlyn returned her gaze to Ryosei. She threw suspecting looks at him and examined his person.

“My friend here filled me in about you. Normally we wouldn’t keep you like this if you are only new here, but the fact that you’re at least a revenant status without knowing how this world functions is highly suspicious. Spirits can survive by themselves but never this quick. Not to mention, they’d have grasped this world’s common sense before revenant status. This isn’t the first time we’ve had spirits pretend to be newcomers here after all.”

“I’m not looking for trouble. It is true that I know almost nothing about this world, but that’s because I mostly spent my time haunting the same building and fighting spirits that attacked me. This is actually the first time I decided to walk around since I felt like I was at least strong enough to defend myself.”

Ryosei was prepared for this. Ever since his encounter with Ren, he thought up stories to explain himself to other people. He didn’t expect to need to make a story for other spirits, but he managed to think of one in the time he was waiting inside the room. Kaitlyn seemed to be thinking of something. Ryosei suspected she was looking for holes in Ryosei’s story. She sat there for a few seconds before reaching a decision.

“Hmm… That so? Okay, we’ll let you go.”

“Huh!? Is that really okay, Boss?”

The orange-haired boy shouted in surprise.

“Yeah. We don’t really have anything to disprove his story. I wouldn’t want to keep him any longer if he’s as innocent as he says he is. So, we’ll let him go. However!”

Kaitlyn shifted her gaze from the boy to Ryosei and stared at him with a serious look.

“If we ever see you do anything suspicious around here again, you’ll be stuck in here for a lot longer. Got that?”

“Sure.”

“Good. Well then, I’ll have this guy take care of your release. Orange hair, come with me. You’ve gone on break long enough.”

“Yes ma’am!”

Kaitlyn and the boy left the room, leaving Ryosei and the soldier as the only ones left. The soldier quietly walked behind Ryosei.

“Come on, get up.”

Ryosei did as he said and was escorted outside. But while he was walking out of the building, he asked the soldier behind him.

“Hey, I still don’t know much about this world. Other than the basics, I know nothing. Can you tell me more about it?”

“No. I have a job to do, and it doesn’t involve teaching newborns.”

“But you’re a soldier, aren’t you? Don’t you feel like you have to rescue innocent spirits or something like that?”

“And where did you get that from? A drama movie? Look kid, I’m sure you’ve had your share of tough times in this world. That feeling isn’t a stranger to any of the spirited souls I’ve met. We became ghosts with only our emotions and basic knowledge of earth to work with. No memories of ourselves, or the people we knew. Everyone around you is an enemy, but what’s even worse, is that you, yourself, are your greatest enemy.”

“You mean… people become more conflicted here?”

“Oh? Lucky you. It seems you’re a straightforward person. Must be nice. You can focus on one goal while the rest of us are here have no idea what to do with ourselves. I’ve met a lot of spirits in my time here, and most of them… broke.”

“Is that something I should be asking you to explain? If it's personal, I don’t mind you not telling me.”

“What’s this? Are you actually concerned about me?”

“I may not have had any emotional trouble when I first came here. But I think the past me knows much about emotional trouble firsthand.”

“So much that it’s engraved in your soul, is what you’re saying?”

Ryosei nodded.

“I see. Then maybe that’s why you didn’t have trouble fitting in here. Well, whatever the case may be, I don’t have any interest in it, nor do you even have the ability to tell me about it.”

The soldier stopped Ryosei in the middle of the street in front of the building they left from.

“We’re here. Cinnamon.”

The collar around Ryosei’s neck slowly dissolved into nothingness. He used his hands to discern the collar and confirmed it was gone.

“Thanks. Anyway, I should be going now.”

“Sure, good luck out there.”

Ryosei was about to take off, but before he got too far away, the soldier called out to him.

“Hey!”

Ryosei turned around and directed his eyes to the soldier in the distance.

“I’ll give you a tip! Don’t lose sight of yourself!”

As he finished conveying his message, he turned around and headed back to the café. Keeping the soldier’s words in mind, Ryosei headed to a nearby park.

**137 – Desire**

“Man, I didn’t really get much off of that other than realizing that there’s a lot more I don’t know about this world.”

Ryosei sat on the swing with his thoughts filled with today’s encounters. He tried to make theories but none of them made any sense to him. His mind was in disarray.

“I think I’ll just let Senkyo handle this one… Oh yeah, I almost forgot. I was supposed to wait for Yukai-chan.”

Ryosei looked around but something wasn’t right.

“Wait. What!?”

The red flame that usually marked Yukai’s location was nowhere to be seen. For the longest time, it didn’t disappear from Ryosei’s sight, but for some reason, after his encounter with other spirits, it suddenly disappeared.

He didn’t like the sound of that. It was either a coincidence or maybe the spirits somehow realized that Ryosei was related to Yukai and did something to her. Riddled with worry, Ryosei used glimpse to scan the area in front of him. Confirming it was empty, he immediately manifested himself on earth and set himself to head to the café. But before he could even move a step from where he stood, a familiar voice called out to him.

“Oh, you’re finally here, Ryosei-nii-san!”

“Wha!?”

Ryosei jumped in surprise and flicked his head at frightening speeds to the source of the voice. He was speechless and utterly confused. He couldn’t believe the person in front of him. It was Yukai, sitting on the swing beside Ryosei.

“What took you so long? I saw you were in some kind of building then I followed you here. I was calling out to you, could you not hear me?”

Ryosei heard her, but he didn’t respond. After a few seconds, he realized something. Instead of talking to her, his next action was to return to the spirit realm. His surroundings changed as well as Yukai. From her normal physical form, she turned into a red flame. He knew he wasn’t imagining things. Just recently, he saw that Yukai’s flame was nowhere to be seen. And now, for some reason, it was back like it never disappeared to begin with.

“Hm… This might just prove my theory.”

He was satisfied with what he saw and manifested back on earth. He didn’t want to leave Yukai alone for too long after he rudely disappeared on her.

“Sorry about that. I had to check on something.”

“Is that so? Then, do you want to go?”

“Yeah, sure…”

Ryosei and Yukai proceeded to head to Yukai’s apartment. While walking, Ryosei was completely lost in thought. Resulting in a silent walk to their destination. Yukai took notice of his strenuous face and decided to keep quiet until he talked. Upon entering her apartment, Ryosei used his glimpse to scan the room for any spirits present. The moment he confirmed there were none, he finally called out to Yukai.

“Hey, Yukai-chan, could you stay there for a moment?”

“Mhm, sure.”

Yukai stood directly in front of Ryosei.

“Alright.”

Ryosei disappeared and returned to the spirit realm. There, directly in front of him, was a floating red flame. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He cleared his mind of any thoughts and distractions. And the moment he reopened his eyes, the red flame before him was gone, but he didn’t panic like earlier. Instead, he calmly used glimpse and saw Yukai standing in the same place she was before. He stopped using glimpse but the flame was still gone. It wasn’t until a few seconds after he stopped using glimpse did the fire return to his vision.

“So that’s how this works. Interesting.”

Ryosei manifested back on earth. He didn’t talk to Yukai about anything, instead, he asked her to do something unusual.

“Yukai-chan, what did you see when I disappeared?”

“Hm? I saw a blue flame. That tells me where you are, right? When you’re invisible to other people that flame tells me where you are.”

*“\*It seems she thinks spirits like me go invisible. Well, I can’t tell her about the spirit realm so this misunderstanding is as good as it gets.\*”*

“Yep. Now, could you do me a favor and stop thinking about me?”

“Huh!? W-What do you mean? Are you going to leave!?”

“Ah, no, sorry, I phrased that wrong. I’m just trying to test how these flames work. From what I can tell, these things tell us where each other is when I’m invisible, but it only appears when we’re thinking of the other person. If you stop thinking about me and the blue flame disappears, that will prove my theory.”

Yukai paled when she mistook Ryosei’s intentions at first but calmed down and prepared to help him when she understood what he meant.

“O-Oh, got it. Sorry for the misunderstanding. I’ll do my best.”

“Thanks.”

Ryosei returned to the spirit realm and manifested back 10 minutes later. And the results…

“Uuu~… I-I’m sorry. I couldn’t do it. Whenever I try to force myself not to think about you it only makes the opposite effect. In the end, I couldn’t do it. Sorry…”

“No, that’s fine. There’s no need to be beaten up about it.”

Yukai was a bit unhappy about failing Ryosei, but having him console her from behind made her feel better. The two moved from talking in the entrance to the living room. They were sitting in front of a coffee table with tea ready for each of them.

“There’s the tea too… I forgot that you were a spirit and couldn’t actually drink anything. I feel like I’ve been a bit out of it lately. I’m really useless, aren’t I?”

“No.”

“Ow!”

Ryosei flicked Yukai’s forehead and forcibly grabbed her attention.

“I don’t want to hear any more whining and self-deprecating. You’re one of the few people I can talk like this with. It’s happy seeing that someone still thinks of me as human… Thank you.”

“O-Oh…”

Yukai seemed to be lost for a moment and stared blankly at Ryosei. She didn’t seem to be able to respond, but she stopped being hard on herself. They spent another hour talking to each other after Ryosei decided to leave.

“It’s about time for me to go. You did well today, Yukai-chan.”

He drew near her and extended his hand to pet her head. Both of them knew it was Ryosei’s way of congratulating her. It was how it has always been, but just before he made contact, Yukai let out a weak yet overpowering yell.

“No…!”

She didn’t dodge his hand but closed her eyes like she was bracing herself for something to hit her. It was all unexpected to Ryosei, as a result, he was unable to respond to Yukai’s words in time and placed his hand on her head.

“Eh…?”

Or so he thought. Contrary to his expectations, his hand fazed through her head. He immediately pulled his hand back the moment he realized what happened. He stared at the palm of his hand like he had seen a ghost. It wasn’t until Yukai spoke up did he regain his senses.

“I-I… don’t like that! Stop treating me like a child! I get that you were trying to cheer me on, but petting my head is banned!”

She glared at Ryosei. She was upset, a rare sight. He was a bit taken aback by her sudden outburst, but it was clear in her eyes that she was serious. Her eyes were piercing through his very soul sending him her earnest message. After returning to his senses, he pulled up his arm in front of her and shaped his hand into a fist.

“…Got it. Then, how about this?”

Yukai simply stared at his fist, lost of what to do. She cocked her head while trying to comprehend Ryosei’s gesture.

“It’s a fist bump. Haven’t you heard of it?”

Her mouth broadened and her eyes glistened when he heard what he said. She shaped her hand into a fist just like Ryosei and placed it in front of his fist. She turned to him trying to confirm she was doing it correctly and he responded with a slight nod. She gingerly drew her fist closer to Ryosei’s fist and applied a bit more force to her hand as they made contact.

A quiet tap barely reached their ears as their fists collided with each other. A huge smile appeared on both of their faces as a result. With both parties satisfied, Yukai saw Ryosei out the door as they said their final goodbyes before parting.

**138 – Solemn Promise**

It was already dark outside before he reached his destination. The only light source nearby was the light coming from the entrance of the hospital before him. Ryosei returned to the spirit realm before entering the hospital. He navigated through the floors until he reached the room Yukai’s mother was admitted. He opened the door and there he saw…

“There’s no doubt about it…”

A dark aura radiated from her. It was pitch black, the epitome of death. It conjured a foul presence, any spirit would cower at the sight of the repulsive abomination. The more Ryosei got closer to her, the more the aura became apparent to him. He had his senses screaming at him to run away at that instant. If he didn’t have the composure to face it, he might have just done so. That was just terrifying it was.

“This is a curse, I’m sure of it. If I wasn’t a spirit, I probably would have no idea. But my senses are screaming at me, telling me all about it. This must be what the instincts of spirits are capable of. Now that I think about it…”

Back when Senkyo and Ryosei were fighting Touma when he was taken over by a curse, his senses reacted like this, or so he thought. If his senses truly reacted, then why were Senkyo and every other hunter able to see it.

*\*No… I’m wrong. What we were seeing at that time was the manifestation of the curse. There was only one person that was able to truly see the curse. It was Shiro. She was able to detect the four sources of the curse… I see. Curses from Zerid can only be seen by Zeldians, while curses from the Spirit Realm can only be seen by spirits. I think this is a safe assumption. I don’t have time to experiment with this, after all.\**

Ryosei tried to extend his hand but he stopped himself from getting any closer and pulled back.

*“\*I can’t. Whatever that curse is, I feel like a spirit like me would get infected by it the moment I touch it. Yukai and the other doctors are able to touch her, but that’s probably because they're human. I can’t risk myself here.\*”*

He used glimpse and scanned around the room and the hallway outside the room. There was no one around. He then turned back to Yukai’s mother and manifested on earth, immediately taking a deep bow.

“I swear to you, I will save you from this curse! That’s why, I ask you, as someone who died without getting rid of their regrets, to forgive your daughter, cherish her, and save her from herself! Please!”

Ryosei shouted with his heart, pouring all of his feelings into the words he was conveying to the bedridden woman in front of him. Although she had her eyes closed and her body not responding to her mind’s orders, he was hoping, at the very least, that she could hear his plea. There are cases where people in comas are still able to hear their surroundings. He was betting on the possibility to be able to send his personal message to her.

“Hello? Is somebody there?”

The door opened behind him and a nurse scanned the room for any intruders. It was well past visiting hours. But she only saw Yukai’s mother laying on the bed like how she always has. She performed a quick check and cleared the possible hiding spots a person would be able to fit in, but no one else was present.

Later that night, Ryosei returned to Senkyo and entered his body. Their memories transferred to each other, informing them of the other’s activities while they were gone. Senkyo showed visible surprise but then nodded understandingly.

“May I ask why you didn’t pursue Yutei-san with any more questions? You wanted answers just as much as I do.”

*“\*You should stop beating around the bush like that. It doesn’t work too well if you don’t sound the least bit upset. If you want me to show you my resolve, then fine. I care about Yukai-chan, is that wrong?\*”*

“Hehehe, are you sure you should use ‘care’ in this situation? Are you sure the right term isn’t ‘love?’”

*“\*Keep your creepy shipping and imagination limited to fiction, Senkyo. It’ll get really bad if you do that to the wrong person.\*”*

“I know. I guess I’m wrong, for now, that is.”

Senkyo kept teasing Ryosei, but it didn’t take long for him to get back to business.

“Well, at least we know what you and your connection to Yutei-san is. Desire. That much is clear.”

*“\*Yeah. Whenever I’m in the spirit world, we can see each other just by thinking about each other. If we stop thinking about each other, the flame disappears. Since it works even when I’m unconsciously thinking, I almost never notice it disappear.\*”*

“And the only reason you’re able to touch each other is if both of you allow the other to do so. Mutual desire. The only times you haven’t been able to touch each other is if you don’t want to or if Yutei-san doesn’t want to.”

*“\*You’re right. But still, even though we know how this works, we still don’t know why it works.\*”*

“Yep. In the first place, what caused your connection with Yutei-san? Why is it that out of all the spirits and humans, you two are the only two that can make contact with each other?”

*“\*We still have more to learn. But, I’ve decided. There is no way I’m getting Yukai-chan involved with any more of this. I’m sure I don’t need to explain this to you,\*”*

“Definitely.”

Senkyo’s expression had a hint of sadness in it as he answered Ryosei.

*\*Good to see you doing well. It’s making me jealous… He decided to prioritize his feelings over his duty. The moment he first lost sight of Yukai’s flame he must’ve been in a huge shock. So much that it’s like I can feel his emotions just by looking through his memories. If only I had the same resolve as him. Then maybe, this wouldn’t be plaguing my mind so much.\**

“Well, since all of us did a great job today, I’m sure watching a few anime wouldn’t hurt!”

*“\*Go get some rest!\*”*

**Chapter 3: Guardian**

**139 – The Old Man**

The usual greenery and natural beauty of the forest were warped at night, coating the atmosphere with an eerie sensation. The only sounds that could be heard were the cold, chilling breeze blowing through the air, the diverse songs of the nocturnal creatures, footsteps rustling and crushing the grass and fallen leaves accompanied by the loud grumbling of a single person.

“Ahh, this is so shit! Why the hell did that old man send me here in the first place?!”

It was Watanabe Itsuki walking through the woods by his lonesome in the dead of night, his sanity slowly deteriorating but never failing to curse the man who brought him to this situation. He was wearing a black Gi, the battle uniform of brutes of the Konjou Clan, along with several bandages all over his body.

“It’s so fucking cold! Who the hell was the shithead that designed these things!?”

It was quite evident that he was unhappy, miserable in fact. It all started earlier that day, but thinking about it carefully, this was inevitable the moment he was assigned to train under his new mentor some time over a week ago.

Monday of last week, the day after the battle royale was concluded. The school was over, and Itsuki was off to meet his new mentor assigned to him by the Konjou clan. He wasn’t told who it was, but he was instructed to enter the basement of a building separated from the castle, but still within the protected grounds.

Upon arriving downstairs, he was met with a long corridor with doors extending to different rooms to the sides and noticeable huge iron double doors at the very end. Despite not receiving other orders, Itsuki didn’t hesitate and walked forward to the very end of the hallway and tried to open the door. He was going to train to fight in life-threatening battles, and what other room felt appropriate than the ominous iron giants, he thought. However, it didn’t budge so he called out to the other side.

“Heyy!! I’m here, open the door!”

There was no answer. Itsuki kept beating the door and shouting, getting irritated the longer he was left unanswered. While he was trying to break down the door, a kunai was hurled toward his back.

“…Ha?”

Despite the sudden attack on his blind spot, Itsuki was able to catch the kunai in midair before it even reached him. Normally, he would immediately enter combat and charge the person behind him, but the kunai was aimed directly beside his head, it wasn’t going to hit anything but the door. He didn’t immediately counterattack, but he was still enraged. The assailant threw a deadly object in his direction, intentional or not, it still put his life on the line.

He turned around with bloodshot eyes. Peering over his shoulder, he saw an old man standing at the other end of the hallway.

“Who’re you? Do ya really think I’ll let you slide just because you weren’t going to hit me? What the fuck do you want?”

He turned around and faced the old man while slowly approaching him with heavy steps, anger in his eyes all the while radiating a threatening aura. The old man spoke.

“Oho? Already worked up, I see. Well? What are you going to do?”

“I’ll tell you… WITH MY FISTS!”

Itsuki dropped his bag and used flash strike to quickly close the distance between them. Since the distance was too far for a normal flash strike to cover, he used the walls as footholds and repelled off them, gaining speed and power all the while.

“Too slow.”

He jumped to reach the old man and used his empowered punch, aiming for his head as he dove toward him. The old man moved slightly, leaning to the side without even moving his legs. The air pressure from his punch grazed the old man, indicated by the noticeable sparks on his barrier. He was a brute class.

With his fist dodged, Itsuki kicked with his knee and thrust his elbow downwards, trying to pincer the old man’s head as he passed by. The old man shifted to a backflip and dodged Itsuki’s follow-up attack. He crashed behind the old man and destroyed some of the stairs. His improper form and haphazard movements should have granted him no time to prepare for the impact, but contrary to the old man’s expectations, Itsuki landed safely, crouching on the rubble beneath him to regain his balance. Just before he landed, he used the stronger force from thrusting his elbow to spin his body around and point his legs behind him.

“Bond Manifest: Monkey!”

Itsuki made various hand gestures before using another flash strike and charging at the old man. He stopped in front of him and threw another punch at him. The old man threw his arm up and swept Itsuki’s arm away to parry his attack, so he followed up with another punch from his other fist, but it was too slow. The old man grabbed hold of his parried arm and pulled him, making Itsuki lose his balance, and threw a fist into his solar plexus. His barrier instantly shattered but reduced the power of the old man’s strike for Itsuki to take the damage and launch his counterattack.

Itsuki threw a tiger claw at the old man’s chin, however, that power wasn’t enough to destroy his barrier. He saw it was just a desperate attack from Itsuki, in a time of panic, he disregarded the enemy’s abilities and used an attack that would have been effective it if weren’t for his barrier. The old man simply stared at the tiger claw strike with disappointment, letting Itsuki realize his foolishness once he gets denied by the barrier. Suddenly, his eyes opened wide in surprise as two explosions struck him from the front and behind, specifically, from Itsuki’s palms. It was the brute class offensive ability: Burst. An explosion ignited his concentrated spirit power. Both blasts erupted at point-blank range on the old man’s barrier. They were not enough to destroy it, but weakened his barrier enough for Itsuki’s tiger claw to penetrate, shattering the barrier and reaching the old man’s chin.

“Enough.”

The old man uttered before Itsuki’s attack could make contact. But what of it? Itsuki did not have the skill to stop a full-power attack at a moment’s notice, nor did he plan on doing so, but strangely, he did just that. It was uncharacteristic of him to listen to someone so readily, especially since that very someone was a person who threatened his life.

“Hm. I must say, you exceeded my expectations. You are an untamed beast that solves everything through brute force, so I didn’t have high expectations to begin with, but it seems like your combat senses make up for that. Rejoice, you have potential, child.”

“Enough talking! What did you do to me!?”

The old man stepped back and circled Itsuki who was standing still like a statue. He was frozen in place, still stuck in the same position as he was earlier. The old man looked him in the eye.

“I am your new mentor, Kosuke Sakurai. Do not think that just because I am old, I would go easy on you. I have yet to go senile. Come quick.”

Kosuke let go of his arm and turned to the iron door behind him. Suddenly, Itsuki regained control of his body. He didn’t understand what happened except for the fact that Kosuke was able to freeze him somehow.

“Raaaahh!!!”

“I said enough!”

Itsuki pounced behind his back with his fist ready but Kosuke responded with a roundhouse kick.

“GAAH—!!”

*\*Bang! …Thud!\**

“K-Ku…!”

His kick was so powerful that it instantly broke Itsuki’s regenerated barrier and sent him flying to the wall beside them. He fell to the ground with his hands on his stomach trying to bear the pain he took from Kosuke’s kick.

“Come on, get moving. You won’t be able to last out there if that’s enough to do you in.”

Kosuke proceeded to walk towards the iron door without looking back at Itsuki.

“This old man…!”

**140 – Kosuke’s Test**

He forced himself to stand back up and followed behind him, albeit reluctantly. Kosuke placed his hand on the iron door, then a blue light traced the gap between the double doors. When the light disappeared, he pushed the doors and revealed the other side with ease. Itsuki peered through the other side only to be confused.

“What’s this? Did you forget to pay the electricity bill or somethin’?”

“No, this is a test.”

“Ha?”

The other side was pitch black. There wasn’t a single light source apart from the light coming from the hallway, but even so, nothing but the wooden floor was lit up.

“Go on.”

“What the!?”

Kosuke pushed him inside the room and closed the door behind him.

“Oi! What the fuck do you mean!? You haven’t even said anything! The hell am I supposed to do here!?”

Itsuki ran to the door and banged against it while shouting his complaints as loud as he could, but he received no response. After getting tired of standing around the entrance, he decided to navigate himself through the dark room on his own.

After walking blind for a few seconds, he arrived at what he thought was the middle of the room. It was then that something hit him. Hard.

“GUOO—!!”

Whatever it was that hit him, it resembled what anyone would think getting hit by a truck would be like. He was flung to the wall after getting hit. His barrier took the brunt of the damage, but that didn’t save him from the shockwave. The impact was so powerful that he was sure if he didn’t spend so much time shouting his complaints and giving time for his barrier to regenerate, he would’ve died right then and there. He tried to recover, but that wasn’t going to be as simple as he thought.

Before he got back up, something hit him from the side, pushing him back to the general direction he came from. He couldn’t see. He was just being flung around in the darkness like a helpless ragdoll. This infuriated Itsuki. He didn’t come just to be toyed around with. He came to become powerful.

But despite that, he still got hit by the same thing as earlier. The only difference was, he dug his limbs into that object. He didn’t get knocked back and had the chance to identify the object. It was most likely a huge stone ball. Once it reached its peak, the stone ball dropped and swung to the other side. Finally, Itsuki took this chance to cross the room.

He jumped off the ball and made a beeline to where he thought the end of the room was. It was then that he was hit by another stone ball. Itsuki did the same and clung to the ball and waited for it to return to the middle of the room where he continued his sprint. Since he was expecting to get hit, he prepared for this by focusing his spirit power on strengthening his barrier to lessen the damage as much as possible.

After clearing a few meters, he came to a sudden stop and waited a few seconds before continuing. He used his instincts to calculate the gaps between the stone balls. He repeated that as many times as he could and breezed through without getting hit.

“Ha-ha! Take that old man! This is won’t be enough to stop me!”

Five minutes later. Kosuke opened the door and was met with the same dark room. But now, he reached out to the wall by the double doors. Placing his hand on the wall caused it to emit blue light and drew a square around his hand. Lights from above lit up the room to reveal the contents of the chamber. Multiple stone balls were swinging like pendulums all the way to the end of the long hall. In addition, there were logs placed on both sides of the room that moved like pistons. Anyone that stood there would probably get knocked back to the middle of the room.

And over a distance in front of him, was Itsuki who was lying on the floor clearly beaten up by the stone balls. He wasn’t even halfway across the room. Kosuke placed his hand on the same stone panel that he used to turn on the lights and the same blue light drew another square of the same form, but this time, it stopped the stone balls and log pistons from swinging and thrusting. He approached the half-dead Itsuki and touched his forehead. It was then that the light returned to Itsuki’s eyes and their blurry state slowly cleared as they focused on him.

“Good, you are alive. Follow me when you feel like it. You have five minutes to rest. Any more and you will regret it.”

Itsuki tilted his head to the side to see Kosuke’s back heading towards the exit.

“That arrogant geezer… Tsk!”

Itsuki immediately, but slowly picked himself up and slowly walked towards Kosuke. They returned to the first floor of the building they were in and entered another room. The inside was highly peculiar. It was just an empty room with a lone chair in the middle almost like some kind of interrogation room. Kosuke signaled Itsuki to sit on the chair. He threw himself on it with a huge sigh, trying to relax his body from the exhaustion. Kosuke didn’t like that too much.

“Hey! What do you think you are doing? Sit up straight. Just because you’re tired doesn’t mean you can laze around! You are in the middle of training!”

“What’s your problem, old man!? You call that shit training? That was abuse! You didn’t even begin to tell me anything! You attacked me and locked me in a torture room!”

“Oh? What? You could not handle it? I did not know I was dealing with a wimp. Maybe we should call this off after all.”

“OI! WHAT THE HELL DID YOU CALL ME!?”

Itsuki stood up into an aggressive stance, seemingly ready to pounce on Kosuke at any time. Kosuke glared back at him as he taunted him.

“I said you are a wimp. So? What are you going to do?”

Itsuki growled as he ground his teeth. For a second, it looked like he was about to let loose. But unexpectedly, he held back and sat on the chair in a proper position. He was still annoyed, but kept it in and swallowed his pride.

**141 – Lecture**

“Good.”

Kosuke made a satisfied nod and walked around the room.

“So, do you know why I did all of that?”

“Ha?”

“Why I attacked you, and why I trapped you in that room. Do you know the answer?”

“Like I’d know what some old man is thinking. You’re insane!”

“Is that how you talk to the person training you? Answer the question!”

“Tsk…”

He clicked his tongue and scratched his head before sighing into submission.

“It’s like that isn’t it? You’re trying to test me. You said it yourself earlier.”

“Good to know that you actually use your head at times.”

“Hey, I’m trying to cooperate here!”

Kosuke ignored him.

“I don’t suppose you know what kind of test it is, do you?”

“It’s to find out my capabilities or something like that. That loudmouth did the same to me before.”

“That ‘loud mouth’ you are talking about is Yamazaki Dai. Address him properly.”

“Like I care.”

*\*Slam!!\**

Kosuke swatted the back of Itsuki’s chair with a wooden sword.

“It looks like I’m going to have to teach you proper discipline first.”

“Wh-Wha!?”

After about an hour of trying to discipline Itsuki, they got to the point where Kosuke was willing to continue their lesson.

“Ok, ok. Just continue the lesson, old gee… teacher.”

Obviously, it didn’t go too well. But Kosuke let him slide to continue the lesson.

“Let us review your fighting yesterday at the battle royale.”

“Ha-ha, I know I did great on that one!”

“It was utterly stupid.”

“Huh?”

“What you did yesterday, was absolutely stupid.”

Itsuki was baffled by what he had heard. In his solo fight with the other hunters, he almost lost but he managed to pick himself back up and continue fighting until he won. There were even more experienced hunters among his opponents but he still managed to pull off a win. The storm of questions in Itsuki’s mind was about to be answered by Kosuke.

“When you were fighting, you kept using flash strike whenever you wished. That was stupid.”

“What’s so stupid about that? It’s an easy skill.”

“You idiot!”

“OW!”

Kosuke smacked his head with his wooden sword.

“What’s your problem!?”

“You do not think of the consequences. Do you even know what you’re doing to your body when you use flash strike too much?”

“What? Of course not. You just power up your legs then you go whoosh! What so bad about that?”

Kosuke sighed as he facepalmed.

“‘Whoosh,’ huh? I’ll have to have a talk with Yamazaki-dono later.”

He tapped Itsuki’s chair to get his attention.

“Listen up, the flash strike is not an all-powerful move that makes you go ‘whoosh’ magically. That move shapes the spirit power in your body as temporary muscles. Whenever you use that move, it uses those fake muscles to propel your body at high speeds. In the process, it destroys those fake muscles the moment you launch because of its destructive power. You then create another set of fake muscles and make them heavier to slow yourself down, or another set to absorb all the force if you want to land. If you make a single mistake, you can end up saying goodbye to your legs. That’s why not too many hunters use it. Let alone using it back-to-back.”

“Then why can that Shittaku use it like that? Is there something he’s doing that I’m not?”

“No. There is nothing like that. He’s using consecutive flash strikes with the same consequences. The only difference between you and him is that he has Ryosei with him. With him in control, it does not matter if Yukou-dono’s body is not fit. As long as his mind can keep up with his actions, he can use it as many times as he wants.”

“So you’re telling me I can do the same things he’s doing as long as I can keep up? That’s easy—”

“No.”

“Ha?”

“I will not allow you. What happened yesterday was beginner’s luck. If I do not deem you fit, you are not to use flash strike consecutively.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me! I’ll show you!”

Itsuki got up from his seat and used flash strike to close the distance between him and Kosuke, He was planning on punching him and using flash strike again, repeating the action to prove his point, but before he even landed the first punch…

*\*Slap!\**

“GAA—!!”

He slapped him mid-travel and sent him flying across the room. Writhing on the floor yet again, Kosuke approached him.

“Listen up! You are nowhere near being a strong hunter! You are weak! You realize that which is why you came here, is it not!? If you keep riding your high horse, you have no place here in the Konjou Clan! If you do not shape up, you will stay weak with only your pride to protect you! Now, this is your last chance! Stand up and apologize or leave this room immediately!”

Itsuki stayed silent. He stopped moving the moment Kosuke began his spiel. He listened carefully like every word hit something inside him. He then slowly stood up as straight as a stick, stared at Kosuke’s eyes, showing his determination, and bowed as low as he could while shouting the words with all his heart.

“I’m sorry for my rudeness! …It will never happen again. That’s why… I want you to make me strong by teaching me your ways!”

“Good. Now, let’s continue the lesson.”

**142 – Hard Work**

From that day on, Itsuki continued his grisly training with Kosuke. He was taught how to properly use his power as a brute. Day in and day out, he faced many lessons and painful tests without complaint, bearing his hardship by clenching his fists and using those very ones to take on his obstacles. He took everything head-on and proved his growth through results. It was then that Tuesday night of the next week arrived.

“Focus. The moment you enter this room, the test will begin. Remember what I taught you and you will be fine.”

“I know.”

Itsuki took deep breaths and prepared himself before a set of iron double doors. Kosuke opened the doors and revealed nothing but darkness. It was the same as before.

“Getting cold feet?”

“Not a chance. I’ll clear this thing one minute tops.”

“That’s what I like to hear. Now go!”

Kosuke signaled the beginning of the test. Itsuki ran straight into the dark room. The door closed behind him, closing off his only light source. His vision should’ve been pitch black, but for some reason, multiple lines of blue light appeared on both his sides, on the floor, and on the walls, outlining the room and showing the distance of his run.

It was one of the basic skills of a hunter. Espy. The ability to see spirit power inside objects or in their raw form. In this situation, espy was showing him the shape of the room and the places it was connected to.

*\*Clang!!\**

“Kgh!”

There was no warning, not even a sound. But multiple huge blades connected to metal chains shot at him from both sides. But he didn’t stop, nor did he slow down. The blades hit his barrier, making a loud metallic noise that reverberated around the room as it deflected every blade.

*“\*You are a brute. Whether your goal is to protect or to press the attack, do not let anything stop you. Getting hit is not the end of you. Make a decision and follow through. You have no time to hesitate.\*”*

Itsuki remembered Kosuke’s words from his training. It echoed in his mind like a spirit haunting him.

“Even when he’s not here he doesn’t know when to shut up! Hh…!”

*\*Booooom!!\**

He sensed the danger and jumped just before the floor and the ceiling exploded out of nowhere.

*\*Smash…!\**

The sound of glass shattering reached his ears as the explosion destroyed the last of his barrier’s durability. He was too slow, but despite that, he didn’t stop running.

*“\*Your barrier is just another layer of your thick defense; do not depend on it. Do not falter just because it is gone!\*”*

All of the sudden, the walls from the side propelled at him at insane speeds. He had no barrier and only had his skin to protect him. But regardless, he thrust both of his hands into the walls. With the reaction time even faster than the speed of the walls, he touched both of them and the walls were immediately propelled back to their original location. It was by no means that his brute strength was the one that pushed the thick, solid walls away.

*“\*Spirits are beings that are completely made out of spirit power. As humans, we can never use the true potential of spirit power as they do. But that does not mean that we cannot completely imitate them. Poltergeist. The ability to control or produce sound and to control or fine-tune objects.\*”*

Itsuki used poltergeist to repel the walls. Much like all the contraptions inside the room, all of them are powered by the poltergeist ability. This is also the reason why he couldn’t hear the sounds of moving chains on the first set of traps since it didn’t use machinery to launch the blades.

As Itsuki continued running, the floor below him sank downwards and revealed a wall of spikes around him. The spikes were as thin as needles and spread close enough so that no one could fit their feet between the gaps. But that didn’t stop him. He kept running towards the wall of spikes, and just before he reached it, he jumped in mid-air and propelled himself upwards like he was jumping between the side of buildings. He didn’t use the wall of spikes as walls, but the very air itself. It was wind magic that Ryosei used in the battle royale. Although brutes fight with spirit power, they can still use a small amount of magic embedded in their Gi.

The moment he reached the peak, he was met with a huge log that swung at him the moment he got back up top. Itsuki used the momentum from his jumps to keep jumping upward and propelled himself straight past the log using air footholds. The end was near. It wasn’t but a few more meters before he reached it. And at that moment…

*\*Rumble rumble rumble\**

The floor in front of him, the very block that stood between him and the finish rose from the ground and blocked his path. The block was roughly 3 meters of a thick, solid wall. It wasn’t a hard obstacle; he could just use poltergeist to bring it back down. That’s what a normal person would think. But not Itsuki.

“Like hell I’ll stop for this!”

From the very start, he never stopped moving. No matter what the obstacle he kept running with nothing to stop him. If he used poltergeist, he would’ve had to wait for it to go down. Even though it was a mere half-second of waiting, it would’ve stopped him. And the only other solution in his head was.

“Outta my way!!”

He rammed straight through the wall and busted right through it. And beyond that huge wall, was a panel with blue light surrounding it. He placed his hand on it and used his spirit power to activate it. The lights opened, the traps stopped functioning, and the iron door at the other side of the room opened, revealing Kosuke who was already staring inside the room.

“58.43 seconds. It looks like you can keep your word. Congratulations.”

His voice echoed through the room and reached Itsuki’s ears. The moment he heard those words brought an overjoyed expression to his face and cheered as loud as he could while pumping his fist in the air.

“UUOOAAAAA!!! I TOLD YOU I COULD DO IT! I FUCKING TOLD YOU!!”

While he was cheering from the other end of the room, Kosuke examined the events that transpired while he was waiting on the other side. There was nothing broken in the room except for the mad-sized hole at the very end of the course.

*“This kid… He rammed through the wall with his body. The other brutes either stopped to punch it and destroy it as a whole or stopped to try and use poltergeist to bring it back down. The people that tried to use poltergeist either gave up or had to destroy it by punching. After all, that last obstacle is a test of courage. When that block rose, another block moved below it to lock it in place, preventing everyone except Sora to use poltergeist to take the easy way out. While the ones who punched it had to channel all their power into their punches, protecting their fists while destroying the wall. But this kid rammed straight through it. This was no simple trick like strengthening his body. Judging from the small cracks on the floor right before the block, he used flash strike, body strengthening, and kindle.”*

Kindle. The ability to summon and shape raw spirit power outside one’s body. Usage of spirit power was limited to the body and the objects it is in contact with. Two prime examples of this are a brute making a barrier around one’s body, and whenever a hunter enters the spirit realm. To enter, they make a circle of their own spirit power to summon a gate to the other world. Although a person can summon it outside their body, spirit power can only last 10 seconds before disintegrating.

*“He molded the barrier on his arms and used that as the horns that took the brunt of the blow and destroyed the wall. The main power comes from the spirit power while he supported it with his own body… I am certain I heard his barrier breaking earlier, but he was able to put up another barrier powerful enough to penetrate the wall. I was right. He has potential.”*

Itsuki walked up to Kosuke.

“See that? That was me. Come on, let's advance to the next level!”

“Enough. This was only level 3 of this training facility. You have time to grow, do not rush it.”

“Ugh, fine. Well, is that all or do you have another lesson?”

“We will end it here. Get some rest, you have a busy day ahead of you tomorrow.”

“Alright!”

Itsuki cheered and headed for the stairs leading to the first floor of the building. But it didn’t take him long to realize a strange implication behind Kosuke’s words.

“…Wait, what do you mean, ‘a busy day?’ Tomorrow’s just another Wednesday. Are we doing something?”

“I’m glad you noticed. If you did not, you would have had even less time to prepare. You do not have to go to school tomorrow.”

“Huh? Why’s that?”

Itsuki was confused. He was sure tomorrow was just a normal school day like any other. No holidays or any events that might postpone school.

“We have connections to Honshou Academy. I excused you for 2 days since you will be going on a mission.”

“What!? Isn’t this too sudden? Why are you only telling me this now!?”

“Because I was waiting if you could pass this test, of course. And now that you did, I am assigning you to your first mission as a hunter of the Konjou clan.”

“…I see. So you need my power so bad that you had to ask me the moment I proved myself worthy, hm, hm. Very well, I’ll take on this measly mission of yours.”

“As I said before, being conceited will only lead to defeat.”

“Can’t you take a joke?”

“Good. Then, come back here at 7 in the morning. You will have to prepare. Because you are going to Hokkaido.”

“…Huh?”

**143 – Fragment of the Beginning**

Wednesday afternoon, somewhere in the wilderness of Hokkaido. The forest was thick and lively with chirping birds and wandering critters. The sun was shining brightly with almost no clouds. The wind blew through the air cooling down the hot temperature. Itsuki arrived seemingly tired from his long journey.

“I know this is a mission and all, but does it have to be this far? I had to get on a plane, take a taxi, and walk all the way over here! Where the hell is this anyway? That taxi driver gave me a map with a mark just beside this lake. He must have been one of the old man’s subordinates. Just how many connections does this clan have?”

Itsuki stared at the lake and examined his surroundings. There was nothing out of place or anything to be skeptical about. It was just a normal forest. He found himself a convenient rock to sit on. As he was sitting doing nothing, he was reminded of the conversation he had with Kosuke just before he left.

**…………**

“Remember, your mission is to find the rumored half-moon wolf. We have confirmed sightings that the wolf is a creature from Zerid. Do try to not be a bother.”\*

“…”

The both of them stared at each other in silence. No one seemed to have anything else to add.

“What are you waiting for? Go on.”

“What?? That’s all? When I find it, then what? Are you sending me on a sightseeing trip or something?”

Itsuki was right to be confused. His only orders were to find the wolf, nothing else followed that. But if that was really all of it, then this wouldn’t have been a mission in the first place. There must have been something Kosuke forgot to mention, but he didn’t add a single thing.

“No. That’s all. Now go or you will miss your flight!”

“EHHH!???”

**…………**

“Jeez, would it kill that guy to be a bit more specific? For all I know this might be some kind of fake mission to get rid of me or something. Gah, whatever! I need to set up camp before it gets dark.”

Itsuki got up and dropped a long bag on the ground which contained his tent. He was planning on camping out since his mission involved going out at night and searching for the half-moon wolf. A mystical wolf that was infamous to the locals.

Stories mention people catching sight of its silver fur glistening under the moonlight, reflecting its celestial light to their very eyes, but suddenly disappearing into the shadows as if being swallowed by the darkness itself, returning to nonexistence. As bright as the moon atop the highlands and pitch-black upon entering the shadows. That was the reason it was called the half-moon wolf. There have been many claims of sightings and people hearing its howls at night since a year ago. No one has concrete proof of its existence, leaving it as a myth told by the locals.

Kosuke never told Itsuki anything else about the half-moon wolf except for the fact that it exists and that it came from Zerid. There wasn’t much information, but he was already used to that. He probably didn’t need any more information to complete the mission which is why Kosuke never said anything else, that’s what Itsuki thought. He trusted him so much that he was fine with this kind of treatment.

“Alright, this should be fine.”

Itsuki finished setting up the tent and stored the rest of his belongings inside it. Since he had nothing else to do, he returned to the rock he sat on earlier. He breathed a long sigh releasing the strain on his body before sitting down. There wasn’t anything else to look at besides trees and water, a boring sight to others, but it was quite the opposite to Itsuki.

“This lake looks nice… Reminds me of that time we went camping when we were kids.”

Itsuki turned to the forest, looking through the thick trees with no clear subject. He was lost in thought, reminiscing an old memory.

“So that’s what happened that day…”

He stood up and headed into the forest. He traveled for a while in silence while taking in the nature around him. He scouted the area and found hills that provided a good view of the area and a few interesting areas that may have led to caves. Of course, he didn’t pay them any more than a glace. He had no time for cave exploring.

Having finished his scout, he sat down by a tree, ate a snack, and drank a bottle of water. It was about 5 in the afternoon, just around an hour before sunset. There was nothing but trees around him. When he finished eating, he tried to get up but his hand landed on something as he was getting up.

“Hm, a rock.”

He got up and stared at the tree he was sitting on. His eyes kept shifting from the rock on his palm, the tree in front of him, and the area around him.

*“\*It didn’t happen here, I’m sure, but it's someplace similar. Inside a forest like this, standing against a tree like this, with frightening growling like this, and finding a convenient rock on the ground like this… is where it all started.\*”*

He recalled a distant memory, one so far back that it wouldn’t have been strange if it completely deteriorated, but it was something so significant that he could recall all the details just like it was yesterday. He was experiencing nostalgia, like pictures flying through his mind. He narrowed his eyes at a specific spot in front of the tree. His eyes gleamed with renewed resolve from the memories that transpired in a similar location.

“Hm? Growling?”

When he snapped out of his reverie, he realized something. This very location was indeed similar to his past memories, but for some reason, even the growling that was supposedly only his memory was still resounding through his ears even now. It was then that he realized it wasn’t coming from his memory.

Itsuki turned to the source of the threatening growl. There, he saw a wolf that was a distance away, cautiously observing him. It looked like any other wolf with grey fur, nothing about it had any signs that it came from another world except for the fact that it was standing right in front of him. Wolves are extinct in Japan, leaving no other questions in Itsuki’s mind.

“Oh? Isn’t that nice! You saved me the trouble of finding you! Looks like I’ll be sleeping on a bed later if I finish this quickly!”

The wolf quickly turned around and ran away.

“HEY!”

**144 – Chasing**

Itsuki gave chase. The wolf was weaving through the obstacles of the forest and so was Itsuki. He wasn’t getting slowed by anything but the distance just kept widening. It wasn’t that the wolf was better at clearing the forest, it was just that Itsuki wasn’t fast enough. At this rate, he’ll lose the wolf.

“Don’t think you’ll get away! W-What was it again? That magic that makes me faster…”

He tried to think of the spell from the top of his head.

“Wind, make my legs faster. Uh, B-Bless me with your fight to create my path. Flash Speed!”

Itsuki chanted, but nothing happened. He was still falling behind the wolf. He didn’t feel any change or anything like that.

“Goddammit! Why the hell did they have to make this chant so complicated?! It doesn’t even make sense!”

He realized he didn’t chant the spell correctly, which is why the magic didn’t activate. But the realization didn’t change the fact that he won’t be able to activate it. If a spell isn’t chanted correctly word for word, it will not activate. That’s what they’ve been taught by Freda on the week they became allied with the clan.

“Then I’ll just have to do this the old-fashioned way—”

*“\*You are allowed to use flash strike, but never consecutively. I have not allowed you that yet. Remember, flash strike is not an all-powerful skill. It has its flaws. Do not depend on it.\*”*

Just before Itsuki was about to use flash strike, he remembered Kosuke’s warning about the skill. He gritted his teeth in frustration. He couldn’t think of anything else he could use to catch up. He searched his surroundings for anything to help, but nothing came to mind.

“Ah, fuck it! Whatever happens, happens!”

Itsuki empowered his legs, preparing to launch himself at the wolf using flash strike. In an instant, Itsuki was able to close the distance by half. He was still behind, but he didn’t enter another flash strike. He used flash strike upwards to avoid the obstacles, and as he was falling down, he stretched his arms up in the air to grab hold of a branch and used it as a swing to close even more distance.

The wolf peeked back as it was running away. Seeing the distance Itsuki cleared in an instant made it pick up the pace. The gap between them was enough to be cleared in a single flash strike, but he refused to do so. Instead, he empowered his hands and arms to continuously swing from branch to branch like a monkey.

“I got you now! Prepare yourself!”

He sped through the air swinging in perfect pendulums until he made his final swing, launching himself into the air and falling directly on top of the fleeing wolf. If the wolf continued to run, he would land directly on it. Noticing that, the wolf stopped and let out a booming howl at him.

“AROOOOOO!!!!!”

“What!?”

It wasn’t any normal howl. As the wolf stopped, Itsuki overshot and before he could even look behind him, everything around him turned dark. It was like it instantly became night. Normally, he would think that this was the spirit world, but this was different. On the few meters that he could barely see, everything around him was still colored like earth and none of it was similar to glowing crystals. His vision was impaired. He could only see a few meters away from him. He couldn’t the sky or even the trees over those few meters.

Upon landing, he could hear growling wolves from all around him. They surrounded him like cornered prey. He scanned around him and saw the same wolves lurking on the edge of his vision. Their heads became visible but the other half of their bodies were still hidden within the darkness.

“I remember this! It’s called dark magic. It can make illusions and stuff. Fine, I’ll take you on!”

Itsuki stood still and readied himself for his opponents.

*“\*Perception Field!\*”*

Nothing changed. The wolves began their attack coming from all sides of Itsuki, but he didn’t falter. He twisted his trunk to the side and launched a punch with his right hand at the nearest wolf, knocking it back. Meanwhile, he used his other arm to reach below the neck of an oncoming wolf pouncing to his side and smashed it on another wolf as he returned to his normal position. He then launched a roundhouse kick followed by a straight punch. That took out a total of four wolves, sending the wolf hit by the roundhouse kick flying into two other wolves while he grounded another wolf from below him.

A total of six wolves came in to attack, four aiming for his legs while the other two pounced above him. There was no way he could protect himself with just his limbs, but that didn’t matter. He reached both of his arms up to the two wolves above him. He grabbed hold of their heads with a vice grip and bashed them into each other. Meanwhile, before the other wolves reached his legs, he stomped the ground, creating a shockwave that temporarily confused the wolves. It slowed them down, but in the end, they reached Itsuki.

“Damn. That didn’t take them out. Looks like I’m gonna need some more training!”

He didn’t scream in pain. That was only natural. After all, the wolves didn’t even reach his skin. They were blocked by his barrier, stuck with their fangs floating just above his skin. He launched them away by kicking other incoming wolves with both his feet as hard as he can. He continued fighting the wolves, keeping his ground while he was at it.

Itsuki’s fighting wasn’t perfect. He left openings for the enemies to ponce onto whenever he was attacking. In fact, there were more openings than the number of wolves that attacked each time, but then why was it that he was barely hit by any of the wolves?

That was because of his skill, Perception Field. It’s a skill that uses spirit power to sense anything around him within a 5-meter radius. The moment they enter, the speed they move in, their exact location, and whether they were in the air or on the ground, he was able to sense them all. It was a skill that allowed him to attack without worrying about what was around him. That was because he already knew where they were. Although it was important to keep a tight defense, a beginner like him wouldn’t be able to hold that, so he used this skill to close his openings only when he needed to.

After defending himself against the wolves, his vision returned to normal. He immediately searched his surroundings but the wolves were already gone. There was an orange tint to his surroundings, it was already sunset.

“You coward!! Come back here and fight me like a man!”

Itsuki wasn’t too happy about it. He shouted his anger to the air but only received silence in return. There was nothing else he could do about it. Being forced to accept the results, he clicked his tongue before walking away from the scene.

“Hm… I wondered what the ruckus was all about. I see an annoying human fighting my prey. I think he will be a nuisance. I must dispose of… no. I can use him. I see it now, the end of my hunt!”

An unknown voice was coming from within the trees. A spectator that seemed to be plotting an evil scheme. There wasn’t a shadow that suggested another person was there, but for some reason, they were able to witness the fight that occurred.

**145 – Smoke in the Night Sky**

“Mm~ Ichika’s cooking really is incredible!”

The sun had set and the moon was high up in the sky. The forest was covered in darkness and the only light sources around were coming from the radiant moon above and a lone tent by the lake. Inside it, Itsuki was enjoying the bento box Ichika prepared for him earlier that day.

She woke up early and prepared his lunch and dinner. He never intended for her to make his food. Even he was speechless the moment she handed him the two boxes. Yesterday night, when he got back home, he told his family about his little excursion. Of course, he disguised his true intentions with a story Kosuke made… with a few changes.

“What the hell even is a Waddler club? For a secret organization, that name is sooo fucking lame.”

Itsuki finished all of his food and neatly stored it back in his bag. Having finished his dinner, he got out of his normal clothes and switched into the Konjou clan’s Gi. It was then that he realized that he wouldn’t have been able to use magic earlier when he was chasing the wolf, even if he chanted correctly. Not only that but what he was trying to cast was mid-tier magic. He couldn’t remember what it was, but there was some kind of limits for brutes on magic. A brute’s Gi also functions as a spectral. He didn’t bother to ask why that was because he was uninterested, but now that he had experienced the lack of tools at his disposal, he thought that learning a few magic tricks wasn’t too bad.

He was now ready for battle. He planned on searching the whole night until he found the wolf again. It was going to be harder to search at night, but he had something prepared for this. He took out a hunting flashlight from his bag.

“Hehe! This will be the greatest weapon! Look at this range! Whua! Foo! Hiya!!”

Itsuki flashed his light all around the tent with exaggerated movements. It seemed like it was his first time seeing a powerful flashlight. Having equipped all of his gear, he got out of his tent to begin his hunt.

“Now, where should I start… huh?”

He looked around him to decide where to go, but even before rotating in a full circle, it was quite obvious where his first destination was. Smoke was floating up the sky in the direction he was facing. It was not the same amount of smoke a normal campfire would make. He hurried his way over to the source of the smoke.

He ran through the forest with his light on to warn him of the oncoming obstacles to prevent him from slowing down. As he was getting closer, he could see tinges of yellow and orange reflecting from the smoke and through the trees. He reached the glade, giving him a good look at what was happening.

Although it was obvious from the smoke, it was a forest fire. The trees were engulfed in a large burning flame. Smoke and embers polluted the air, making it hard for him to breathe. Normally, anyone faced with this dangerous situation would run the other way and take their belongings out of the forest, but not Itsuki.

“There are only a few trees burning. Whatever caused it was recent. I have to prevent this from spreading!”

He ran over to the closest unaffected tree to the fire and placed his hands on it. He used his spirit energy to increase its toughness. With enough spirit energy, the tree will be strong enough so that it wouldn’t catch fire.

“Alright!”

Itsuki moved from tree to tree, transferring his spirit power and strengthening every single one. He had to withstand the polluted air and burning heat that was coming in front of him. Although he had a barrier, if he stood near fire long enough, the heat would transfer from his barrier all the way to his skin. He had to be quick.

His plan was working. The trees he strengthened weren’t catching any fire. If he successfully caged off the forest fire with the strengthened trees, the fire inside will take itself out and disappear. But just as he was about to finish…

“Cough, cough… just a few more—GUH!!”

A dark ball hit him in the chest and knocked him back. When he turned to its source, he saw a wolf. But it wasn’t the same one he saw earlier. Its fur was black with tinges of white. It came out of the shadows with a vicious look, glaring at Itsuki with bloodshot eyes, and growled threateningly as it approached him.

“What!? You’re…”

Itsuki was surprised when the flames from the forest fire revealed the shape of the wolf. It had a normal wolf’s body but it had two tails instead of one. Whether or not the wolf he saw earlier was another illusion or not, this wolf was clearly the one he was looking for. He stood up and faced the wolf, and that was when he was hit with another surprise.

“Grrryou… You did this…! You burned the forest, now it’s my turn to return the favor…!”

“It talked!? In Japanese!?”

The wolf talked in perfect sentences. It only opened its mouth, but it was able to produce the same words humans can.

“GRR… AROOOOOOO!!!”

**146 – Half-Moon Wolf’s Attack**

The wolf gave Itsuki no time to recover from his surprise. It let out a thunderous howl and suddenly multiple wolves appeared behind the half-moon wolf. They appeared out of thin air. Fortunately, the wolf clones looked like grey wolves, completely different from the half-moon wolf’s appearance, making it easy to tell which was real and which weren’t.

“I see now… Calling for some fake friends, huh? No matter how many you summon, I’ll destroy them to smithereens!”

Then, the wolf howled again, but this time, dark circular ripples traveled through the air and passed through Itsuki. The very moment that the first ripple passed him; his vision darkened. It was just like what happened to him earlier. He could only see a certain distance.

“This won’t work on me!”

He immediately activated his perception field and waited for any movement. There was only silence. He could only think that the wolves were positioning themselves in a way that would be hard for him to counter even if they were detected 5 meters away, but he was wrong.

“What the—!?”

The ground below him turned to white and he was lifted off the ground. He could feel the intense wind coming from the ground, keeping him afloat at the exact center of the white circle below him. He tried to move out of the center by flapping his limbs around like he was swimming but the wind was keeping him from moving away from that very location.

“Grrr… I would usually let my prey loose and hunt them down. But you aren’t prey, you’re rotten scum that deserves to be wiped out! AROOOOO!!!”

He heard the voice of the wolf from beyond the shadows. Angry and seething with rage. Not a moment later, wolves shot out from the shadows at lightning speed and attacked him. They bared their fangs, bit him all over, and dug their sharp claws into his barrier. Some of them attacked and fell off but most of them got a grip on his body and mauled him. Itsuki struggled to shake them off. He spun around in the air and beat up the ones he could reach.

Then, from the shadows came a blur of white and black. He couldn’t make up what it was, but it was probably the half-moon wolf. He felt the wolf try to bite into his neck but was unsuccessful. It then used air footholds to get above him and kicked him down to the ground and so did the other wolves.

It was all a blur. The constant spinning and the relentless attacks from the wolves made it so that Itsuki could barely comprehend what was happening around him. His surroundings were complete darkness which made it hard to tell left from right, but when he was falling toward the ground. He saw a steady body of white. He regained his sight and sense of direction again, but that only added to the fear that was about to strike him.

From within the white circle came a gigantic head of a wolf, pale white with pitch-black eyes. It appeared out of the ground and swallowed him in its open mouth, revealing its razor-sharp fangs. The wolf devoured him whole and closed its mouth with a thunderous crack as the magic collapsed on him.

“K-Kgh…! Haahhh… Haahhh…”

He was left floating in mid-air, still alive from the wolves’ brutal assault. His skin wasn’t damaged one bit. That was because of the sturdy barrier that he had around him, but he was panting, his breath out of control. Although his barrier managed to take on all of the damage, it took him all of his strength to bear the horror he faced. He was mentally exhausted since a hunter’s mental state is an important factor that allows them to use their spirit power.

Itsuki could only catch his breath and try to regenerate his energy and barrier. He couldn’t move and knew it was wise not to despite the dangers around him. Growling came from the shadows. Multiple wolves showed their faces and circled around him at the edge of the darkness. The head of the half-moon wolf appeared, but it was different. Earlier, it was mostly covered in black fur, but now only one side was black fur while the other was white. Something seemed to be running through its fur since it was standing up and flowing like a strong wind was blowing through it. It glared at him with its sharp eyes.

“How irksome. You’re still alive. Clinging to life with all you have… Grr… AROOO!!!!”

The half-moon wolf howled another time and the others followed. Dark circles rippled through the air coming from all the wolves and wrapped him in them. Itsuki could feel it. His ears were being broken, reducing all of the sounds he could perceive to only blank ringing. He could feel his body weakening and his eyes spinning around in confusion. He could barely function.

“Now, I’ll rid you from this world like the vermin you are!! AROOO!!!!”

The wolves began their attack. Numerous wolves launched at him with their claws and fangs. They used all of their strength to break through his barrier. Although he could barely see anything, he still spun around in mid-air and tried to dodge and shake off the wolves. It was apparent that he was dodging in the correct direction to avoid some of the wolves, but he still got hit, and eventually, all of the wolves successfully clung to him. He was too slow. Whether it was the wolves’ speed, his body weakening, or a mix of both, he got mauled no matter what.

He got hit, but he was dodging the right way despite his weakened state. That was because of his perception field. It was able to sense anything from 5 meters away, but that didn’t mean it enhanced all his senses. Itsuki’s perception field only uses a spirit power like a radar, even with his hearing dulled, and eyes ablur, he could still use his perception field to sense his enemies, but that didn’t make up for the fact that his senses were severely impaired.

*\*Crack… Shatter!\**

**147 – Kindled Spirit**

The sound of shattering glass heralded the moment Itsuki feared. The wolves successfully broke his barrier and exposed his bare skin. They pressed their attack, biting and scratching him all over. He kept rolling around the air in an attempt to shake the wolves off. He didn’t bother to use his arms to punch or legs to kick, instead, he spun around while breathing deeply to regain energy. Despite his skin getting pierced and torn in half, he gritted his teeth and took the damage. He kept calm. He wouldn’t have been able to do this if it weren’t for his harsh training.

*“\*D-Damn it! Wait till I get my energy back! With Transcendence I’ll—\*”*

*“\*From now on, you are forbidden from using Transcendence. Make use of your own power. Use your head. You can’t keep relying on brute force and overwhelming power forever. I won’t say anything if you need it to survive, but if you really want to become strong… Then stop cowering behind overwhelming power!\*”*

Just before Itsuki used transcendence, Kosuke’s voice echoed through his head yet again. It was another one of his sermons that struck something deep inside him. Like he was reading a manual about how Itsuki functioned, he said the right words for it to be engraved in his very soul.

“Haahh…”

He took another deep breath and calmed himself. The wolves kicked him toward the ground and fled. He knew exactly what was going to happen next. The ground below him covered in white began to distort, and a wolf’s head began to rise. Itsuki pulled back his fist and stared directly at the fearsome beast below him. He used the gathered air from his breath to release a loud roar of his own.

“…FUCK YOUUUUUUU!!!!!!!!”

He launched his fist toward the giant wolf. The moment he outstretched his arm came an explosion and a large figure of a blue fist shooting into the wolf’s mouth, prying it open as it penetrated its throat. Another explosion followed the moment they made contact. The fist took the wolf head-on and stopped its approach, ultimately canceling out the magic that the wolf used.

“GRR… AROOO!!!!!”

Immediately after seeing its magic countered, the half-moon wolf let out another bloodcurdling howl. More dark ripples traveled through the air, Itsuki felt his body getting weaker, it was adding to the current effects he was already under and crippled him even more, but that didn’t end there.

From within the shadows appeared two fearsome white eyes and stretched out two paws with razor-sharp claws hurling straight toward Itsuki. With the help of his perception field, he managed to put his hands up to defend himself in the right places.

“GAHH…!”

Blue arms manifested and covered his own to strengthen his defense. It was kindled spirit power, similar to what he used to launch a fist into the wolf’s mouth. He managed to block one of the claws, but the other broke through and left a large scratch on his arms.

Itsuki was already getting tired, but he sensed multiple wolves launching at him once more. Their attack was relentless. The half-moon wolf wasn’t letting him have any time to rest. He felt this, but instead of trying to save his breath, he used it to let out a hair-raising roar.

“WRRAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!!!!”

Something within Itsuki clicked as he let out his shout. It was like a heavy weight was lifted off his chest. The sickening cripple he had was lifted, in fact, he felt even better. It felt like the energy was back inside of him. That very moment, he spun around, not to shake off the incoming wolves, but to intercept them.

He grabbed hold of the snouts of two wolves and crushed them with his vice grip, reducing them to nothing as the illusions disappeared. While the other wolves were able to latch onto him with their fangs and claws, he pincered the wolf on his stomach with his knee and elbow, entered a backflip, crouched in mid-air to reach the wolf hanging on his heel, and crushed its head, followed by slamming both of his fists behind his back to rid of the wolf clinging with its claws.

“AROOOO!!!!”

Not a moment later, another pair of paws appeared from the shadows, but this time Itsuki was prepared and blocked both paws with a barrier.

“AROOOO!!!!”

Itsuki sensed it. This was the final attack. Another pack of wolves came from the sides, but that wasn’t all, the white circle below him began to distort and white eyes appeared in the darkness, a forewarning of the approach of the gigantic wolf head and the large claws. It was an all-out attack.

But he didn’t panic. A grin appeared on his face, a deep contrast to his perilous situation. While he was floating parallel to the ground with his face towards it, he suddenly spun himself upright, summoned air footholds directly below his feet, and used flash strike directly above him. He turned his grin to grit as he performed all of that in less than half a second. He pulled back his arm and shouted his heart out as he launched upwards and released a deadly punch directly inside the half-moon wolf’s mouth, opening it so wide that one would have thought it would break its snout. The wolf made a sharp cry as the force of Itsuki’s fist crawled throughout its body. The wolves stubbornly clinging to him, the giant head, claws, the white ground, and the darkness all disappeared the moment his fist made contact.

This was a part of his plan. He purposely focused his attention on the ground and his sides, purposefully avoiding looking above him. He made it look like he was too focused on everything else, creating a fake opening above him so that if the half-moon wolf ever attacked, it would most likely be from above.

Itsuki and the half-moon wolf fell to the ground. The forest came into view and the sea of flames that were burning the trees to ashes was still beside them. He laid on the ground with ragged breath, profuse sweating, multiple scratches, bite marks, and blood flowing out of those very wounds. He was a mess. If anyone saw him, they would no doubt expect him to die from blood loss, but that didn’t concern Itsuki. It took him about three minutes before forcing himself to stand up with his wounds sealed. He didn’t use medical equipment but instead forced his blood to coagulate and seal his wounds using spirit power in exchange for platelets. He looked around and saw the half-moon wolf unconscious on the ground right by a tree. He slowly made his way towards it, bearing the pain he was experiencing.

“Time to finish this…”

**148 – Defeat in Victory**

Just before he reached it, however, came another wolf. It was one of its clones. It was growling to try and intimidate him. But that didn’t work, Itsuki just walked closer like the wolf wasn’t there. But then…

“GRR!! GRARRR…!”

“…Huh?”

The wolf pounced at him. He retaliated by throwing a punch at it, but he pulled back at the last second, neutralizing the force and letting the wolf bite into his fist, but it didn’t hurt. In the time he was lying on the ground, he regained enough energy to produce a strong barrier and a single wolf definitely wasn’t enough to destroy it. Itsuki stopped moving upon realizing something.

“… It's breathing. It’s… real!”

The wolf was breathing. Unlike the clones he fought earlier, they didn’t breathe. They were just illusions that served to fight on behalf of the half-moon wolf’s will. The wolf that was biting on his fist, however, was breathing. It could only mean one thing, that this wolf wasn’t produced by the half-moon wolf, nor was it from another world. It was just a normal, living, breathing, grey wolf with no special skills whatsoever.

“No way…”

Noticing that it was useless, the wolf unlatched its mouth on Itsuki’s fist and returned to intimidating him with the knocked-out half-moon wolf behind it. This very moment reminded him of a similar time. The weak protecting the strong, standing up to a fearsome opponent that was beyond their power to handle, just to protect what was important to them. He could never forget that moment in his life.

He stood there facing the wolf, staring at its eyes silently for a few seconds. He racked his head, trying to understand the situation before him. Then, a loud crash in the distance caught his attention. It was a tree branch that gave out and fell from the forest fire. He then realized what chain of events led to this very situation.

He walked away from the wolf and headed towards the forest fire. Despite the long pause since the last time he was strengthening trees, the forest fire hadn’t gotten too out of control. It spread more which meant that he had to strengthen a few more trees but it was still within his ability to encase the fire. He was exhausted, but he still had spirit power and energy left in him.

He strengthened all the trees and successfully trapped the fire. If he had to make a rough assumption, his spirit power was around 40%. Although his fight with the half-moon wolf was intense, he didn’t use as much spirit power as he first imagined. He was just incredibly tired.

Itsuki picked up the flashlight he dropped on the ground and walked away, he stopped and thought of looking back at the wolves, but he shook his head and continued walking back to his tent.

“That wolf… It attacked me because it thought I caused the forest fire. That little shit… if it stopped and thought for a moment then it wouldn’t have to be like this…”

*“\*Your mission is to find the rumored half-moon wolf.\*”*

*“\*Do try to not be a bother.\*”*

He remembered the very words Kosuke used to give him his mission. This was followed by the time earlier that day when he chased after the grey wolf. Back then, he didn’t see any dark ripples come out of its mouth, along this is the fact that he sensed it breathing.

“…You meant to not be a bother to the wolves, not the hunters that sent me here, huh?”

If he thought about his mission first, he would have realized that the mission was to judge whether or not he should even get rid of the half-moon wolf in the first place. If he hadn’t tried to chase down the wolf earlier that afternoon, then he would not have been such a bad figure to the wolves. Since the half-moon wolf could actually conversate, then maybe it would’ve tried to talk instead.

“…The rumors go back to a year ago. That old man… they would’ve gotten rid of that thing much earlier if it was actually a threat! He set me up!”

The only information Itsuki was given were rumors of howling and sightings. If they ignored the fact that it came from Zerid, there were no reports of attacks or anything that would have gotten the attention of the clan. He sent Itsuki on a mission to use his head more, not to get rid of a wolf, if he failed to realize that, then this fight was his punishment.

Itsuki clicked his tongue as he quietly continued walking with an annoyed expression on his face, but that expression quickly changed the moment he arrived by the lake.

“What the…”

His tent was burnt down. He could see the tent’s poles remain standing while the rest was burned to ashes. His face paled as he was thrown into a panic, so much so that he used flash strike to quickly get to the tent. He dug through the ashes trying to find something.

“There it is!”

He felt something solid through the remnants and pulled it out. It was his bag that contained all of his belongings. It had soot all over it, much like Itsuki, but there were no holes or anything that might expose its contents. He opened the bag.

“It’s safe! My lunch box is safe! Phew, Ichika would’ve killed me if I went home with this thing damaged. I already went through it once, never again.”

Instead of worrying about who could have burnt his tent down, he first worried about the safety of his lunch box. In the past, he received a scolding from his sister when he accidentally broke his lunch box by using it as a weapon. It ended terribly for him. With his primary concerns out of the way, he returned to reality.

“Now, who the hell did this!? Is there another monster I don’t know about!? Whatever it is, it's strong enough to burn the special equipment the old man gave me.”

The tent, as well as his bag, were made out of special equipment from the Konjou clan. It’s made to resist simple fires and magic. Of course, there was a limit to what it could resist, but seeing as the whole tent was burnt down, there was no chance any normal human could do this. He figured whoever did this to his tent was the same creature that started the forest fire.

“I better find that thing. I can’t leave if something like that is on the loose—O-Ow…”

Just as he was about to head out into the woods again, he felt a sharp pain all over his body. Although he was able to stop his bleeding using spirit power, wounds and bruises still existed all over his body. It couldn’t heal wounds and injuries the same way magic can. He walked over to the rock he sat on before, opened his bag, and took out the medical kit to treat his wounds.

“Didn’t think I’ll actually be using this… Tch, I feel like I lost somehow.”

**149 – Budding Seed**

Earlier that day, around the afternoon, when Itsuki was still scouting the area of his camp. Kosuke was sitting on a bench in the residential area. He was sipping on a hot cup of green tea while watching the people of the Konjou clan go about their everyday lives.

“Hm? Good afternoon, Sakurai-ojii-san. I didn’t think I’d see you here.”

“Oh, good afternoon. I should be the one saying that to you, Shimizu-dono.”

The person who greeted Kosuke was none other than Shimizu Yoshiko, the person who served as the fourth judge at the battle royale.

“It seems like you’re slacking on work a bit, aren’t you, Sakurai-ojii-san?”

“I have finished all of my work, which is why I’m resting. I do not want to hear that from the same person that was late for her first training session with her very first student.”

“Grk… So you knew…”

“I have eyes everywhere.”

“Transcendence is that useful, huh? Well, how is your training with that Watanabe kid? I didn’t think he’d last a day when I heard you were his mentor. I even heard that you made him go through your brutal personality test. Someone had to go fix the stairs the day after. It took quite the work to get that done quickly.”

“Hm…”

Kosuke took a sip of green tea before responding to her.

“He has potential. It would not be strange if he manages to become the strongest brute of the clan someday.”

“Oh? That’s reassuring, especially since it's coming from you. I barely hear you praising anyone. I guess you’ve made a lot of progress in your training.”

“Hm? As a brute, he’s barely made any. He’s still at the third level of the hundred-level training dungeon.”

“What!? You’re kidding me. That kid that wiped out a horde of our trained hunters all by himself?”

“That was not skill. That was a beast using everything he had to survive.”

“What do you mean?”

“In his fight, he already lost as a brute. He tried to use raw power to scare off his enemies. My student was not anything more than a school bully with immense raw strength. He tried to scare off actual fighters with a mysterious skill they have never fought against. It worked until our hunters caught up to what he was doing. In all honesty, a single hunter could have taken him down if it were not for the transcendence Ryosei taught him.”

“Aren’t you just being cold again? Then, how did he win that fight?”

“…Halfway into the fight, he changed. He was driven into a corner leaving him with only one choice—to fight. Before, he was only cowering behind his power, but at that moment, I saw he had something none of the other hunters possessed. Incredible combat and primal instinct as well as overwhelming resolve and desire.”

“What do you mean? All of our hunters have that.”

“Would all of our hunters be able to teach themselves Plunder, Perception Field, Unbreakable, and consistent flash strike attacks in the middle of battle?”

“H-Huh? Are you telling me he didn’t know those skills beforehand!? What was Dai doing this whole time?”

“I talked with Yamazaki-dono after the battle. He said he was never taught those skills because he had even bigger problems. At the time, he had a bad habit of fighting without using his head. As a hunter yourself, you must know the dangers.”

Yoshiko nodded in agreement.

“Even Ryosei said the same. He had a difficult time with him in group practices, but apparently, he never noticed him use those skills. Except for flash strike tactics, those skills are part of the most valuable skills that make brutes what they are, and that person unconsciously taught themselves those skills in order to survive. Not only that, but he also incorporated them into his barbaric fighting style. His unorthodox style is what brought him victory.”

“I see. Then, with you sending him out to his very first mission, I guess it’s safe to say you managed to fix that.”

“For the most part. This mission of his will be the true test. Whether or not he has learned his lesson will completely depend on this. He is up against two otherworldly creatures. It’s up to him to figure out the real enemy.”

“What? Are you sure he’ll be alright?”

“I taught him how to think, how to treat wounds, how to fight, and all the basic skills of a brute aside from Unbreakable. Although he won’t be able to use plunder, if he is as talented as I think he is, he will be able to teach himself unbreakable again to survive. If not, then he will simply use transcendence and fail.”

Yoshiko recalled the function of the skill Unbreakable. It makes spirit power run across your body and increases their tenacity and resistance. It is used to reduce or remove negative effects on the body. It is directly connected to the soul. This means unbreakable’s effectiveness is highly dependent on the person’s willpower.

A smirk showed on Kosuke’s face just before he took another sip of his tea.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, I just realized how unlikely it is for him to fail.”

“Why is that?”

“He was the first person to ever finish the first level in the dark without using Espy. Instead, he used it to learn perception field.”

“H-He’s quite the character, isn’t he?”

“He is ill-mannered and complained a lot, but it wasn’t too hard to fix those, to a satisfactory level at least. In the end, he is a straightforward and earnest kid who was blinded by the definition of power, and I know he is the kind of kid that can overcome a test like this.”

**150 – Unclouded Eyes**

“It’s so fucking cold! Who the hell was the shithead that designed these things!?”

Itsuki shouted into the night while he was walking alone in the forest. He had his bag holstered on one of his shoulders and several bandages all over his body. Right now, he was in the dead of night at Hokkaido, the northmost of Japan, with only a Gi on his person, but he only had himself to blame.

“I can’t believe I didn’t put my clothes in the bag!”

Back when he changed into his Gi, he left the clothes on the floor which resulted in them getting burnt to a crisp along with the tent.

“Geez…”

Itsuki made it to one of the highest places in the area. He could see the forest fire had already died down. There was only a small amount of smoke in the distance but no fire. He continued to scout the area, looking for something that might be a sign of the other creature that caused tonight’s fires. There didn’t seem to be anything around until…

“AROOOO!!!”

“Huh?”

He heard a distant howl. It was the same howl he kept hearing in his battle earlier.

“AROOOO!!!”

“…”

It was the half-moon wolf. It kept howling from over the distance. He noticed the wolf always howled before an attack, perhaps that was how they cast their magic. If that was the case, then it could only mean it was fighting something at this very moment.

Itsuki didn’t waste any more time and sprinted towards the howling. It kept getting louder and louder as he cleared the forest. The howls lasted for about three minutes before abruptly stopping. He picked up the pace. He finally caught up to the enemy’s plans. He was being used. The forest fire, the fight with the half-moon wolf, the burning down of his tent, and the repeated howls from over the distance. It was all a plan to catch the half-moon wolf weakened and off guard. It used Itsuki as its pawn and burnt his tent in an attempt to chase him out of the forest the moment his usefulness was all gone. Realizing this made his blood boil.

He stopped by a river. Now with the howls gone, he wasn’t sure what other clues he can use to find the wolf. He searched the area, looking for signs of struggle. His eyes widened when he found a sure-fire clue.

“Hey! Over there!”

Itsuki shouted and ran over to someone, specifically, a wolf, the same one that stood between him and the half-moon wolf earlier. The wolf entered an aggressive stance, baring its fangs and growling intimidatingly. He made sure to keep his distance to not provoke it.

“Calm down, I’m here to save your friend! You were with him, right? You should know!”

He couldn’t believe what he was doing. He was trying to talk to a normal wolf using real words to communicate with it. From an outsider’s perspective, he must’ve looked crazy, but that wasn’t the time for him to think of those things.

“I-I… Here… Save… You’re… Friend!”

He tried his hardest by breaking his sentences and acting words out but to no response. The situation looked bleak and Itsuki was ready to go off to find more clues, but just before he did so, the wolf barked at him a few times. It might have been trying to say something, but there was no way Itsuki would understand. Then, the wolf left.

“Wh—!? Hey!”

The wolf stopped to look back at him. It stared at him and barked twice, followed by moving forward a few steps and looking back at him. It then struck him that the wolf was trying to make him follow it.

“Hell yeah, I got through!”

He celebrated by himself and followed the wolf. They traveled by the river and followed it upstream. After a few minutes, they arrived at a cave where the source of the river came from. The wolf barked into the cave, telling him that the half-moon wolf and its abductor were inside there.

Itsuki walked in but the wolf didn’t seem to want to follow. It was understandable. Its instincts were probably screaming at it, telling it would die if it dared to step any further in. That was no wonder as whatever took the half-moon wolf had enough power to take a simple wolf down. Even if it were injured, the half-moon wolf would still be quite difficult to take on. After all, it didn’t need to move to attack or defend. So he left the wolf behind and set his focus directly in front of him.

He arrived at a spacious opening. It had huge rocks and boulders around the area and a large lake in the middle which was the source of the river. It was more open than he thought a cave would be. He scanned the cave and saw the half-moon wolf knocked out next to a wall, and something else right beside it.

“Is that… an eye?”

A purple eye was hovering just beside the wolf. It was staring straight at him like it was expecting him to come. A voice echoed through the cave welcoming Itsuki of his arrival.

“I see you have come. I cannot fathom why you willingly walked into your death.”

“You think you can kill me? Why don’t I show you which one of us will actually die?”

Itsuki dropped his bag and rushed the eye. He could feel his wounds hurting every time he moved abruptly, but luckily, he didn’t need to worry about his bleeding since he stopped it using spirit power. He used flash strike to close the final distance as a surprise attack and was about to drive his fist into the eye. But suddenly, he stopped and used the rest of his momentum to jump backward. A purple laser shot through the location he was going toward.

Itsuki turned to its source and saw another eye floating in the air. Then, another laser came from behind him. He dodged it with flash strike but got hit by another laser from the side. The force knocked him back but he managed to land on his feet.

“I have you all figured out. I watched you, watched you, and watched you. I know, spirit power, omnidirectional sensory, supersonic dashes, empowered defenses, and incredible resistances; a chantless close-range skillset. I see that you are strong and swift, but you have no chance of winning if you cannot destroy all of me at once!”

Multiple eyes appeared from behind rocks and small crevices. They surrounded him, riddling the cave with purple squinting monsters. There were too many to keep track of, all that Itsuki knows is that he was trapped. The eyes began to glow, alerting him of their lasers.

He waited for them to shoot and use flash strike to dodge it, but something felt off. Out of all of the eyes around him, only one was pointing at him. Right when the laser was about to hit him, rolled sideways instead. A laser hit the ground he was standing on and multiple others shot in a circle around him.

“Tch! What a pain in the ass!”

The eyes shot 10 meters around where he was previously standing. It was the max range of his flash strike. Although other hunters can cover a longer distance, right now, 10 meters was his limit. The enemy tried to intercept him.

Itsuki decided to save flash strike for later and ran towards the nearest eye around him. He ran strangely, turning left and right. Without the use of flash strike, he only had less than a second to react and get out of the way if they shot another laser. Instead of escaping, he hoped to mess up their aim by making faints.

“I see you.”

“Kgh!”

But even that didn’t work. His barrier successfully blocked the laser, but he couldn’t afford to take unnecessary hits. Since his barrier was still weak from the earlier battle, it would only take two more hits before it broke.

He picked himself up and continued running straight toward the eye, tossing away his zigzag tactic. It glowed, signaling it was about to shoot. The very second it shot the laser, he used flash strike to drive under it and reached it with his punch. It stopped spewing the laser when he destroyed it, but it didn’t end there. An eye appeared behind him, glowing as it did, it was about to shoot a laser at point-blank range into his back.

“Pesky eyes!”

Itsuki thrust his elbow at it. He noticed it with perception field the moment it appeared and immediately pulled back his extended arm. Another one appeared at the edge of his field 5 meters above him, readying its laser, but instead of chasing after it, he jumped backward to dodge it. The eye missed its laser, and along with that came multiple lasers surrounding that blast, leaving no room for anything to be near it. If Itsuki chased after it, he would’ve been bombarded with those lasers, piercing not only his barrier but his body as well. He was safe, but now he was at a loss for what to do. He continued running to escape the next barrage of lasers and racked his brain as he ran.

**151 – Open Mind**

*“\*Think, think! They told me something about this! I know it! I need to remember!\*”*

He searched the area as he ran, searching for anything that might help him remember the information he needed.

*“\*Rocks… water… moss… lasers… eyes… eyes… eyes, eyes, eyes, eyes, eyes! Why are there so many eyes!? How does this thing even work if it only has eyes?! …Ah!\*”*

Itsuki remembered. That day he and Senkyo were taught about the creatures that lived in Zerid. Their bodies adapted to their environment of mana and magic. They can not only use spells, but also use their body to enhance them, reduce casting time, and do many other things depending on their species.

*“\*Bodies! It's trying to trick me! I don’t need to destroy all these eyes; I just need to find its body somewhere! Kgh—!\*”*

He rolled to the side to dodge the incoming laser he sensed and changed his course to the closest obstacle he could find. It was a huge boulder, without a second thought, he wrapped his hand in spirit power and drove his fist into it. The rock cracked, but it didn’t break so he followed it up with another punch.

“Not here.”

He demolished the huge rock in two punches but his target wasn’t there. He picked up two medium-sized rocks that could fit his palm and ran to the next boulder. He threw the rocks at the lasers but only to be penetrated, creating a clean circle where the laser pierced it and resumed their pursuit of him. He dodged to the side and avoided it.

“It works.”

After reaching the boulder, he scanned the area and saw a few glowing eyes, so he hid behind the boulder. There were still eyes around him, so there was no real point in hiding but that wasn’t his goal. He readied his legs, looking like he was about to use flash strike. Multiple lasers pierced through the rock, all intersecting to one spot, on his very location. Meanwhile, more lasers were shot 10 meters around him. Completely relying on perception field, he closed his eyes and waited for the very moment the lasers closed in and entered a backflip in place, dodging the lasers and returning to his original position.

“TAKE THIS!”

Itsuki took a deep breath, wrapped his arms in spirit power, and punched into the one hole where all the lasers intersected to. Suddenly, a beam of blue light blasted through all of the holes created by the enemy’s lasers, much like a disco light, and shot down all the eyes that shot through the boulder. Along with the eyes, the boulder crumbled after the attack, revealing nothing but the other side of the cave. Seeing that his target wasn’t there, he ran to the next boulder.

“I see you are very interesting. I calculated that you would be gone in a minute. I was wrong. I underestimated you, human, however… I know your resistance is futile.”

“Oh, shut it!”

Itsuki continued to destroy boulder after boulder, clearing any possible hiding spot, but the moment he demolished the last one, he ended up with nothing. The eyes that he destroyed only revived, and the cave was clear of any hiding spots.

“I told you. I noticed you saw through my lie. I never thought a lower species like you would possess such knowledge, however… I am far superior! I am not even inside the cave you are in! I consider this unfortunate that I cannot observe you any longer, but I must now return to my master—”

“SHUT IIIIT!!”

Itsuki roared and made his way to the half-moon wolf. Multiple eyes gathered in front of it and made a purple barrier. He wrapped his arm with spirit power and used flash strike to bust his way in, but it was too strong. He was knocked back by the force of his strike but caught himself with his feet and threw a volley of punches into the barrier. It began to crack.

“GET OUT OF MY WAAAAY!!!”

He was standing still as he threw his punches. Of course, the enemy wasn’t about to let this chance slip past. Multiple eyes charged up and fired lasers at him. He sensed he was surrounded. With no escape from the sides, he used flash strike to go upwards. He sensed more coming for him so he created air footholds to launch himself backward. Having sure he was safe, a grin showed on his face…

“Hehe! I got you—”

…but only to be wiped the moment he saw the state of the barrier.

“What!?”

He planned on using the lasers against his enemy by making him shoot their own lasers directly at the barrier, but contrary to his expectations, the barrier was never better. The cracks that he managed to inflict on it were completely sealed. He was sure he dodged the lasers at the last possible second, so they had to have hit the barrier. But why was it fixed instead of destroyed? That was the question that plagued his mind, and his enemy took the liberty of relieving him of that.

“I told you before. I see what you’re doing. I noticed that you are missing critical information. I cast magic with my own mana, it cannot damage me or my own magic. I detect you are in pain after seeing my attack reinforce the barrier that you were trying to destroy… I told you before; it is futile.”

Itsuki grit his teeth in frustration. Repeating the same actions won’t break the barrier, it will only drain the little amount of spirit power he had left. He felt that he had about 22% left. Destroying all of the obstacles and taking out the eyes cost him a lot. He had to finish this quick. Something that doesn’t require spirit power. It was then that it hit him. The sudden realization of his key to victory. He turned around and headed for the cave exit.

“I see you have realized your weakness. However, I will not allow you to escape.”

Multiple eyes appeared in front of the exit and lit up, ready to intercept him. But before they could launch their barrage, he repeatedly used flash strike to grab his bag off the floor and quickly avoided the lasers by using flash strike to the side.

He took it with him and ran as fast as he could to the enemy’s barrier. Since most of the eyes were grouped up at the exit, there weren’t as many eyes to defend the barrier. He swerved around to dodge the lasers using perception field to detect them and made it back in front of the barrier.

He could see the eyes from beyond the barrier. They were the ones that kept the barrier standing. If only he had a way to take the eyes out, he would have no need to destroy the barrier, so he took out from his bag his greatest weapon. The hunting flashlight.

“HAVE A TASTE OF MY GREATEST WEAPON YOU DISGUSTING EYEBALL!!”

He turned the flashlight on at its most concentrated setting and pointed it at one of the eyeballs. It felt the burning pain of the light in less than a second. The reason the light was able to pass through the barrier was that it wasn’t magical or physical. If light wasn’t allowed to cross through the barrier, then Itsuki wouldn’t have been able to see what was inside of it. It was the first-ever time in his life he was overjoyed he listened in science class.

“GAAAAAAAHH!!!!”

**152 – Eye of the Storm**

His enemy screamed in pain and all of the eyeballs around him disappeared. The barrier was down and there were no other shooters. He could pick up the half-moon wolf and escape that very moment, but now wasn’t the time.

Instead, he ran past it and used flash strike into the wall. A pair of razor-sharp serrated blades appeared from the wall and tried to pincer his neck like a pair of scissors, but it was too slow. Before the blades even appeared through the wall, Itsuki had already steered clear of it and dashed through the wall. He was long gone. What the blades were about to hit was only an afterimage from his quick transition to a flash strike.

From behind the wall was a small cubbyhole, but it was actually just an extension of the cave that was covered by an illusion. Inside that tight space was Itsuki with his arm charged all the way back and hurled it towards the head of the purple abomination in front of him. The force of his punch was so powerful that it sent it flying across the cave.

“Heh, you were too close to the wall, blockhead!”

Back when he first tried to destroy the barrier to release the half-moon wolf, his perception field picked up on mumbling from across the wall just before lasers were shot at him. The enemy’s chanting exposed his position. After looking for so long, it just hid behind the hostage this whole time.

It rolled on the ground until it was brought to a stop by the rough ground scraping its body, but its suffering was yet to end. Itsuki used the force from his flash strike to smash it underfoot further into the ground. Just as he was about to pummel it with his fists, he sensed a laser coming at him from the side and stepped back to evade it. In turn, the enemy picked itself back up.

“I-I miscalculated… I neglected to consider my positioning…!”

Itsuki watched his enemy from afar, deciding on his next move. His enemy was clad in purple skin. Its head looked like an insect’s pincers with an opening inside it seemed to be its mouth. It had four arms, two smaller ones and two larger ones with sawblades, three crab-like legs, and a huge purple eye embedded at the center of its body. Just before it managed to fully recover, he used flash strike and kicked it back.

“Well too bad!”

The enemy slid back but managed to stay standing. It saw Itsuki following up his attack with his fist so it used its razor-sharp sawblades to intercept it. Suddenly, he stopped his punch in mid-air, but in exchange, a large fist came hurling at it. The enemy intercepted it with one of its razor-sharp blades and saved the other for when Itsuki decided to use it as an opening.

“!?”

It was a smart move. Unfortunately for it, Itsuki’s kindled fist was much more powerful than it expected. It tried to disable it by directly attacking the kindled fist with its other serrated arm, but it was too slow. The moment it tried that, Itsuki was already under his own kindled fist and threw a punch directly at its exposed eye. It stepped back to dodge but only to be overwhelmed by his kindled fist and knocked back.

Taking advantage of this opening, Itsuki followed it up by intercepting the trajectory of its landing with his fist and launched it back yet another time. Just before it left the air, Itsuki continued his relentless attacks by axe-kicking his enemy into the ground followed by another series of punches.

No blood came out of it, but instead, its skin cracked, showing it was reaching its limit. Taking a few more attacks meant its end. Multiple lasers shot at him, but it was easily evaded by his flash strike. The lasers didn’t shoot as accurately as before. They spread all over the general area Itsuki was standing instead of intersecting at one point. It was clear his enemy was in a panic.

“I’ll finish you—”

*\*Thud…!\**

Both Itsuki and the enemy’s attention was caught by the sudden thud on the ground. It was the flashlight that he strapped to the belt of his Gi. He squeezed it in there tightly, but all the moving around loosened it up, and his last flash strike was its limit. He tried to retrieve it back with flash strike, but the enemy’s laser was faster and reduced it to ashes.

“I-I… I…!”

A large mass of purple eyes appeared in mid-air and piled up like a barrier around his enemy. The massive accumulation of eyes then exploded and spread all across the room. They left behind a large barrier where his enemy stood in the middle. He could hear it struggling to speak but the echo throughout the cave delivered his messages to him.

“…I-I-I-I made t-too many miscalculations! I w-will grant you the honor of showing my true power! I will bring upon you a fitting end!”

Before, it mumbled its spells, but now it didn’t even bother to hide that it was about to cast something.

“O darkness, let this be the prelude to the catastrophe, shape me as your herald, and lend me the power to bring upon judgment. Darkness in the sky is His forewarning…”

An eye appeared in a corner of the cave. Itsuki didn’t know what was happening but he didn’t like it.

“Roaring thunder signals its arrival…”

Another eye appeared at another corner. He reached the bottom of the first eye and shot a kindled fist at it, but it was intercepted by a barrage of lasers from the eyes around the cave.

“The fleeing is but a futile attempt to escape the inevitable…”

A third eye appeared. He used consecutive flash strikes to reach it but he was intercepted by the same lasers. He managed to dodge them, but he never reached the eyes. Whatever they were, they are clearly important.

“And the hapless bunch that receives its judgment are the fools who dared awaken the Devil! Eye of the Storm!”

Another eye appeared. At that moment, the entirety of the cave was filled with a dark fog. They sparked with purple lighting hitting anything inside the fog much like a thunderstorm in the clouds. Itsuki was no exception. He couldn’t move a muscle and he could feel the electricity coursing through his body and the fog assailing his breathing.

“Th-This…“

“I commend you for driving me to this point. I really do, but… I will now bring you death!”

The fog became thicker and lightning struck even stronger. The loud crackling of thunder could be heard as lightning struck the cave. Then, all the eyes that spread through the cave glowed in purple light. Similar to a light show, constant beams of purple lasers shot through the cave, all of them moving around in a coordinated motion so that every inch of the cave was shot by the lasers, flattening the surface all the while. As if that wasn’t enough, the eye at the center of the creature glowed in the same light. It seemed to be charging its attack. One so intense that purple lightning began dancing over its surface. Having reached its peak power, the eye released a gigantic purple laser, deadlier than any laser it ever shot. All the other eyes shot their small lasers and all of them concentrated on one location, the area where Itsuki was standing. The power was so immense that instead of digging the wall out, the laser pierced through the whole cave and lit up the sky.

The fog slowly cleared up and all of the purple eyes scattered around the cave disappeared, only its barrier remained. It stayed inside its protection, panting heavily for air. The eye in its center produced smoke from its intense all-out attack. Normally, magic isn’t produced directly from the body, but this creature from Zerid could clearly use its body to empower its attacks.

“I-I… hahh… must be careful for now on… I gather that… hahh… beings of this world… are incredibly powerful—”

“Gee, thanks.”

*\*CRUSH!!\**

From behind the creature, Itsuki stood soaking wet with his arm gruesomely piercing its chest with his hands grasping its eye with a vice grip. With another crushing sound, he squeezed his hand and crushed the eye, leaving it no chance to respond to his surprise attack.

**153 – Guardian**

About a minute earlier, Itsuki was stunned by the incessant purple lightning striking his body and was being suffocated by the dark fog, continuous attacks both internal and external. However, that wasn’t enough to restrain him. He was able to break through using a brute skill that Kosuke never taught him. Unbreakable. The very same skill that released him from the effects of the half-moon wolf’s magic earlier.

His unbreakable will, stubbornness, and unwavering resolve caused him to move forward. However, every time he broke past, it didn’t take long for him to be stunned again, but that didn’t matter to him, he would only break free again and again. He gritted his teeth and let out his battle cry as he repeated the process of getting stunned and breaking free over and over again until it seemed like the magic became ineffective against him and made his way to the river close by.

Inside the water, he was completely free from the fog and lightning. When he opened his eyes, he saw there was a hole in the barrier that his enemy failed to notice. Its barrier was created and strengthened by connecting multiple of its floating eyeballs, but there weren’t any eyes placed under the water. He swam through the river and surfaced inside the barrier where the creature was blasting its enormous laser through the cave. He slowly approached it using barriers to silence the noise he was making and executed his assassination.

The creature was now an empty husk. It fell lifelessly to the ground with a thud. The creature began to disintegrate, slowly disappearing from this world, leaving its ashes for the wind to take away. It was just how creatures from Zerid died.

He turned to the palm that rushed it mercilessly. His eyes widened in surprise. His palm was glowing purple and it was quickly spreading up his arm as if entering his veins.

“Wh-What the fuck!? H-Hey! Get the fuck off me!!”

He tried to brush off the foreign hue, but as expected, since it was inside his body he couldn’t actually touch it. Thinking for a while, his eyes brightened as he came up with an idea. He focused his mind and controlled the spirit power inside him, making them run through his veins to flush out the light. It didn’t take too long until he saw the purple light getting pushed back. He continued to pour his spirit power into his arm and cleanse the light, but then, before it could be fully pushed back, the light simply disappeared.

“U-Uhh…”

He couldn’t help but let out his anxiety through his mouth. He continued pouring his arm with spirit power just in case but nothing happened.

“W-Well, I’ll just ask that old man about it later, I’m sure it's nothing. Yep. Next time I’ll keep in mind not to do that again…”

Itsuki left the body alone with nervous thoughts and made his way to the half-moon wolf. He was surprised. The wolf that had half-black and half-white fur when it was knocked out, currently had most of its fur white with small tinges of black and staring directly at him. It must have been how its body functioned with magic. It had wounds on its body and on one of its legs from its battle with the eye creature. It called out to him.

“You. Why did you come here?”

He responded to the wolf while making his way to his bag that was close by.

“A mission. I was sent to a useless sightseeing mission, that’s it.”

He opened his bag, took out bandages, and approached the wolf. It was wary of him and stepped back with a growl.

“What? You don’t want me to stop your bleeding?”

“What kind of sightseer can fight two consecutive battles with otherworldly creatures?!”

“How about you stop complaining and let me treat you. It’s getting annoying.”

“Stop it. I don’t need your help now that I’m conscious. I can heal these myself with my own magic.”

The wolf walked away from Itsuki and headed towards the exit. He got a bit irritated by its actions and yelled out at it.

“What? That’s it? I saved your life, you know?”

The wolf stopped in its tracks and stared back at him.

“I know. For that, you have my thanks. But that is no reason for me to suddenly be friendly with the same person that punched my guts out.”

The wolf kept walking away. With a click of his tongue, Itsuki picked up his bag and stored his bandages back. He was irritated by the wolf’s attitude, but it made a great point. In the first place, if he hadn’t acted rashly, he might have been able to avoid their whole fight.

He made it outside the cave and saw that it was dawn. It lit up the forest, making the trees create long shadows, peering its sunlight through its narrow openings. He was about to head out of the forest to look for somewhere to eat and pass his time before his flight back home but a familiar howl behind him took his attention. It was the half-moon wolf, as well as two grey wolves and a small cub around it.

“Don’t disregard my thanks. You can come back any time. I safeguard these forests, so you won’t have any trouble with its inhabitants. The name’s Enrel, don’t forget it.”

The pack of wolves left him alone and disappeared into the trees. Itsuki watched as they left and faced back to the path out of the forest and walked away. In his mind replayed the words the wolf left him with.

“So you’re some kind of guardian, huh? Heh. Give me some time and I’ll be the same.”

He stared at the rising sun, imagining the future ahead of him.

“Wait…”

However, it was then that he realized the near future had much more in store for him.

“I used consecutive flash strikes! Fuuuuck!”

In the heat of the battle, Itsuki forgot about the order to not use consecutive flash strikes. It was true that he needed to use them to live, so he didn’t regret using them. But he experienced first-hand how his mentor punished him for a mistake necessary or not. This situation was indeed different, but that only served to worsen the situation as he would have no idea what to expect once he returned. He could only look blankly at the sky and prepare for a storm much more frightening than the earlier monster.

**Chapter 4: Shadows of the Past & The Undiscovered Future**

**154 – The End & New Beginning**

“Who are you?”

A dark figure appeared in front of me. A round blob of black and purple with ominous red eyes, dark cinders emerging from its fiery head as if its own evil was burning it, standing at just the same level as my waist. It was similar to slimes you would find in games or any other fantasy entertainment media the 21st century produced. It responded to me in a shilling voice, making me even more uncomfortable.

“Me…? I am you, and you are me. You have gone far into the darkness. There’s no escaping it. It won’t be long now… your absolute end.”

“Huh…?”

I had no idea what it was saying at the time. I had just regained consciousness from that nightmare, after all. From those excruciating days of rampaging emotions that I tried to keep inside me. From those cursed days when I could barely keep a hold of myself. But to think… after waking up from that abhorrent nightmare… was only the beginning of an even worse reality. How cruel this world is.

“…”

I slowly opened my eyes only to see the same dark and gloomy surroundings come into view. A place where I was all alone with nothing but my mind to entertain me for most of the time. Then again, the word “entertain” was my way of sugar-coating reality with a utopian dream that would never come. A more appropriate word would be “torture.”

Here in the dark depths of the Konjou clan’s dungeons, behind the cold iron bars enhanced with spirit power to make them stronger than diamonds and resistant to any magical attacks. I sat up on top of cold, hard cement that was a sorry excuse for a bed with lifeless eyes as I’m tortured by my very own mind.

My name is Saito Touma, a traitor of the clan I once served, and a monster cursed for a lifetime. This all began two weeks and two days ago. The very day I was placed in this cell, I saw a dark slime in my dream, one that I had never seen before. I asked it what it was and gave me an obscure answer along with a prelude to my doom. I didn’t understand it at the time, but now, it was probably describing this very day.

**…………**

I woke up that day to find that I was all alone in this dark cell. My memories were a blur. The last thing I could recall clearly was reading a file that Sora was reading. My memories after that were in fragments. It seems like I attacked Sora and Senkyo because I was angry about something, and after that, I tried to kill Senkyo another time but failed.

I shouted to get someone’s attention. A hunter I didn’t know responded to my call, but they immediately left the moment they saw it was me. I repeatedly called out as they left but they never turned to look back. A few minutes later, Sakurai-sama and Yukou-san appeared.

“Sa—”

*\*Sakurai-sama? Yukou-san? Since when did I start calling them that?\**

My words were stuck in my throat and I couldn’t do anything but stare at them intensely. They came up to the cell and greeted me.

“Good to see you’re awake, Touma-kun.”

“Sakurai-sama, what’s the meaning of this? Why am I here!?”

“I see, so you have no recollection of what happened. Well, I’ll let Ryosei here explain your situation. It would be best if he did it.”

“…Ryosei?”

*\*As I recall, Ryosei was the name I read from the file back at the library. He was the person that wielded Kuro Yaiba… that weapon…\**

“Nice to finally meet you, Touma. I may look like Senkyo right now, but I am Konjou Ryosei, the true wielder of the blade you tried to steal.”

“S-Steal!? I wouldn’t do something like that!”

“Is that so? I guess you weren’t conscious at that time. What was the last thing you remember?”

“I was at the library reading a file about Kuro Yaiba! After that, I can’t remember anything clearly. But I wouldn’t betray the clan to steal the legendary sword!”

“…I wouldn’t recommend lying to me, Touma.”

“W-What do you mean!? I’m not lying! I just woke up just now! I don’t even know why I’m here!”

“If you say so…”

I don’t know why, but the person in front of me was reading me like a book. It was true that everything was like a blur, but when he mentioned that I tried to steal, everything came flooding back in. My confrontation with Yukou-san and Hisho-san, the moment my body was taken over by my curse, and… that bright light that brought me back to normal.

I remembered, but I still tried to deny it. If I had to guess what could have hinted at my lie, it would be that my eyes were checking both my arms if they were still intact. Even so, is that really enough for him to be so confident that I was lying?

He was looking at me with doubtful eyes. He saw through my lie and threw a passive-aggressive attitude at me…. Tch, how annoying. Why can’t he just believe me? It was a believable excuse.

“Well, let me make this quick for you. Your life was saved by Sakurai-ojii-san. In the middle of the hunter battle royale, your curse took over your body and went on a rampage. You were about to be taken out by the participating hunters until he personally entered the battlefield and saved you from certain death.”

*\*Lies. He’s lying. I remember clearly. The fight at the battle royale was only between me and Yukou-san, and he was the one that summoned that light that saved me! But why… why are they lying to hide the truth? And why is Sakurai-sama playing along with his lies? Why are they trying to keep me in the dark? T-This is so annoying…!\**

“But to save your life meant something else in exchange. The technique that he used had merged your soul with the curse.”

**155 – Cursed Body**

“What!? M-Merged!? You mean that light didn’t save me!?”

“Oh? What light could you mean? Did I say that Sakurai-ojii-san’s technique caused a light?”

“Kh… N-No, I just remembered seeing a bright light is all…”

“Really? But then why aren’t you asking anything about being in the battle royale? If the last thing you could remember was being in the library, then suddenly participating in the battle royale sure is a large gap in your memory. Are you sure you don’t know anything at all?”

“G-Grrr…”

*\*This bastard! He knew all about my lie, but he decided to catch me instead of pursuing the fact that I was lying! Just how arrogant can this guy get!?\**

“Well, seeing that you’re actually well informed, I’ll continue explaining what happened to your body…”

Listening to this guy’s voice was annoying, and hearing the horror that became of me from him was just pure agony. My soul had been merged with my curse. That meant that its abilities also merged with my body, which was probably why my arms regenerated. Apparently, since the technique that was used to save me needed two souls, they created a soul out of the curse, and that very soul was merged with mine. That meant its emotions, memories, and personality mixed with mine. At that very moment, I learned that I had no way of differentiating myself from the curse. It was like trying to differentiate two tissues of the same brand.

*“\*I am you, and you are me. You have gone far into the darkness. There’s no escaping it. It won’t be long now, your absolute end.\*”*

I remember that dark blob from my dream. It was then that I discovered what it meant by that. The curse that plagued me for years… became part of me as a permanent blight for as long as I live… This is the worst!

“DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT YOU’RE SAYING RIGHT NOW!?”

I couldn’t handle it. Hearing that I had to deal with that thing for the rest of my life broke me.

“YEAH, I WAS LYING EARLIER! SO WHAT!? I KNOW THE TRUTH! THAT YUKOU SENKYO WAS THE ONE THAT PUT THIS CURSE OF A LIFETIME ON ME! WHY DID YOU DO IT!? WHY DID YOU ENGRAVE THIS THING IN MY SOUL!? ANSWER ME!!!”

“…”

He didn’t say anything.

“I SAID ANSWER ME!!!”

“You don’t understand anything.”

He didn’t answer me.

“I WANT YOU TO ANSWER ME!!!”

So I kept screaming at him until he gave me a proper answer, but he didn’t listen. I could barely hear his voice with my screaming, but I heard it clearly enough to understand. The line that would torture my mind in the following days.

“We had two choices, to kill you, a person that never got to truly experience anything in his life because of a curse, or sever both of your arms and take one of your eyes, crippling you, making you a normal person with no chances for a normal life… Both choices were bad, so we made our own and decided to save you. Well, I say that but in reality, it’s your choice if you want to be saved or not. We’ve set your path. If you truly want to be released from your suffering, you’ll make the right choice.”

After he said his piece, that wretch walked away without looking back at me.

“HEY!! COME BACK HERE!! I’M NOT DONE TALKING!!! GET BACK HERE YOU BASTARD!!!”

He left me with… this old man so I tried to get answers out of him instead.

“WHAT THE HELL WAS HE ON ABOUT!? TELL ME!! YOU KNEW ABOUT THIS DIDN’T YOU?! IF YOU KNEW I’D ONLY SUFFER EVEN MORE, WHY DIDN’T YOU STOP THEM?! YOU KNEW EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENED TO ME OLD GEEZER! DEATH WOULD HAVE BEEN A BETTER OUTCOME THAN THIS!!”

The geezer let out a sigh and kept his usual calm attitude.

“…This. This is why you’re in here. Right now, you are a danger to everyone around you. You cannot control your temper, and you do not even know what you are capable of. If we let you lose in this state, you would be more than likely to kill someone. I know you’ve had this curse for most of your time as a hunter, but right now, this is the best for you.”

“NO SHIT I CAN’T CONTROL MY TEMPER! SOME BASTARD JUST PUT ME ON THE TORTURE RIDE OF A LIFETIME! AND NOW I’M IN PRISON EVEN THOUGH I’M CLEARLY THE VICTIM! HOW CAN I STAY CALM!?”

“…”

I thrust my fist into the bars, strong enough to make a ringing noise around the dungeon, but not enough to break me out of my cage. I can feel my knuckles numbing from that. The old man just stared at me from across the bars, looking at me with pity and disappointment.

“DON’T LOOK AT ME LIKE THAT!”

I thrust my fist yet again, this time with my other fist, but it didn’t change anything. The bars didn’t bend. He was still staring at me with those same eyes, and now both of my fists feel like hell. Then, finally, the geezer opened his mouth, but I was by no means happy about it.

“Despite his attitude, he can say some useful things from time to time. Find yourself, then find what you want in life. What you really want. You are a veteran hunter of the Konjou clan, it will be difficult, but do not lose focus. Despite your state, there are still people that are willing to stand by your side. Do not lose them.”

“I DON’T WANT YOUR PHILOSOPHICAL BULLSHIT! GET ME OUT OF HERE!!”

“I said what I had to. Whatever happens, do not lose yourself.”

“HEY! GET BACK HERE!”

He left the same way the other bastard did. He disappeared from the corner of the wall and never looked back. I screamed and screamed and even banged the bars as hard as I can, but even then, he didn’t look back.

**156 – One With Darkness**

“Yo! How are you doing? Looks like you’ve calmed down a bit.”

“…”

A familiar voice reached my ears. It was him again. The only person that kept visiting me ever since I was first down here, my childhood friend, Yamamoto Sora. It’s not like I enjoyed his presence, in fact, most of the time I get annoyed by him, but having something to distract me from my mind wasn’t too bad.

“You’ve calmed down but you’re still as cold as ever, huh? Haha…”

I’ve been living this nightmare for more than two weeks now. He said I calmed down but that was only because I accepted that I had no escape from my fate. Going day in and day out with nothing else to do kept me from running away from it. If I didn’t compromise, I wouldn’t have been able to survive this long.

“Oh, get this! This hilarious thing happened at school earlier…”

Every night he comes here to tell me about his day. His cheerful attitude never changed despite our situation, but I know he’s only putting up a brave front. Inside, he was in pain seeing me in here, he is scared that the person he once knew would be gone forever. He’s been like this all these years. I thought with this curse inside of me, I would lose myself and take my anger out on him because he didn’t do anything else to prevent this. But my compassion overwhelmed that anger, leaving me silent as I listen to his stories. Ultimately, both of us wore a façade ever since that day.

“…Oh yeah, that reminds me—”

“Enough, go home. It’s already been two hours. I don’t want to hear anymore.”

“Whoa, it’s been that long? Man, time sure flies when I’m down here, huh?”

“…”

“…Heh. Well, I guess I’ll come back tomorrow. If you get bored you can always call me!”

That guy never fails to spend at least an hour down here. He has no sense of time and always speaks without thinking about what he’s saying. These are the dungeons. It has a barrier so that I can’t use connect to contact people outside. What do you mean by “call you?”

With nothing else to do I head to sleep. A sweet relaxing time where I can regain my energy and rest my mind… is what most people would think.

“Hey, hey! Come with me, let’s play a game!”

“Sure! Sounds fun!”

I found myself standing in a peaceful neighborhood with two cheery kids playing with each other in front of me. Those kids were me and Sora, the past versions of ourselves.

“…You. Feel like breaking yet?”

And an ominous voice called out from behind me. I didn’t need to turn around to know who, no, what it was. A dark, mucky slime with despair in the form of embers burning all over its body, the very image of the curse that haunts me.

“Breaking, huh? If I wanted that then I wouldn’t be here in the first place.”

“I can feel it. Your soul is already wrapped in darkness. If only it weren’t for your savior, you would’ve already been gone.”

“…I would’ve wanted it that way.”

Senkyo made our soul so that we couldn’t just take over the other personality. Our soul is the result of our conjoined memories, emotions, and personalities. We share memories and emotions, but our personalities are half and half. It was hard to identify it at first, but since I had nothing else to do, I dedicated my time to figuring out what type of personality my curse took after merging with me.

It was much simpler than I first imagined. It must be because it was just a curse with a fixed goal and nothing else. It simply wanted power and destruction, and to do that, it had to get rid of me, but doing that wasn’t as easy as putting me into depression. It needed to make me submit, to give up my personality. If I did that, I would lose complete control of my mind and body, ultimately disappearing entirely.

“Then why don’t you do just that and rid yourself of your suffering?”

“…How annoying.”

The curse and I can hear each other’s train of thought. Now that we were one soul, it was impossible to have any form of secrecy from the other.

“Making me say it isn’t going to change anything.”

That also meant that it already knew the answer to his question. It was only trying to provoke me by making me say something I wouldn’t want to say out loud.

“Is that so?”

**157 – The Past & The Future**

The scene before me suddenly changed. From the day, it became night, and more people entered the scene.

“Hahaha, calm down, Touma. There’s enough cake for everyone.”

“But Dad! I need to eat faster or Sora will take my toys!”

“Hehe, I’m a really fast eater!”

“Don’t worry, I’ll let both of you go at the same time. So just eat and enjoy the food with us.”

“Okay, Mom…”

It was the night when both our parents died. We were inside the living room enjoying a large amount of food laid out on the table. It was a Christmas party with both of our families. We enjoyed our time together, talking, playing, eating, and laughing our hardest. After we finished eating dinner, my father was nice enough to let us go and play upstairs while our parents took their time talking to each other. It separated us for only a short while, is what I thought at the time. But I was soon to be proven wrong.

*\*Crash!!\**

When Sora and I were playing by ourselves, a loud crash accompanied by violent shaking brought our joy to an abrupt stop and was immediately taken over by confusion and panic. Then, we heard ear-piercing screams from below us. Normally, we would run downstairs and check on what was happening, in fact, Sora was already heading his way out the door, but fear struck me. The continuous unknown rumbling from below and loud panicked screaming aroused my sense of fear.

Whatever was happening down there was dangerous! That was what my mind screamed at me. Giving in to my primal senses, I called out to Sora to stop him from leaving the room.

“Stop! D-Don’t leave me!”

“W-What? But something’s going on downstairs! We need to check—”

“No!”

I denied him of leaving my side with all my heart. Going downstairs was scary, but being alone without knowing what was happening was even worse. I didn’t want that.

“I-I’m scared… hic, I, hic, I don’t want to be alone!”

Taken over by fear, I bawled my eyes out and tears began to dampen the carpet below me. Sora, who was more than ready to run out of the room came back for me and granted my selfish wish. We stayed there for a while until we heard other voices from downstairs.

“It’s trapped! Finish it off now before it kills any more innocent people!”

“The barrier is up! No bystanders will arrive! Don’t let it escape!”

The rumbling became even more intense but soon died out as well as the screaming voices of the strangers. A minute passed. 5 minutes passed. 10 minutes passed. And nothing changed.

“H-Hey, Touma-kun. I think it’s safe now. We should go downstairs now…”

I nodded lightly as I wiped the remaining tears off my face. We slowly made our way to the stairs without making any noise and heard the strangers’ voices again.

“This is terrible. If only I blocked it instead of dodging it… This wouldn’t have happened! This could’ve been all avoided!”

“Do not blame yourself, Yamazaki. It was a life-or-death situation. Between taking the hit or moving away from it, anyone would choose to not get hit. Take this experience into your heart. This is what happens if we make a simple mistake. All you can do now is train to avoid this from ever happening again. You wouldn’t tell me you’ve forgotten… would you?”

“Training is what we do to reduce the possibilities of this kind of outcome… despite our powerlessness in some situations, all we can do is use that to move forward. There’s absolutely no way I can forget those words, Sensei. I believe you know what I mean.”

“Good. Now, pick up the bodies. We need to begin covering this up as much as we can before leaving. I’ll contact the clan for—”

“Is there something wrong, Sensei?”

“There are others. Over there at the stairs, show yourselves!”

That was the day I met Sakurai Kosuke. He shouted at us and bound our will with only his voice. I wanted to run back into my room, but my body didn’t let me. Sora and I slowly walked down the stairs and showed ourselves, but before they could bark any more orders, we saw what had happened to our parents.

It was the first time we experienced what death was. It wasn’t just simply losing our life, but seeing the life of the ones we love disappear right in front of us. I could feel the tears flowing back out of my reddened eyes, my heart being squeezed like a vice grip, and my mind going blank, failing to process the current situation.

My whole body was stunned. I was unable to move. But Sora was different, he ran straight to his parents’ lifeless bodies and wrapped them in his arms as hard as he can. Meanwhile, I was still stuck on the stairs. That told me everything, the difference in our personalities. How different we were as human beings. However, there was one thing we had in common, and that was our endless stream of tears as we mourned our parents’ death. Later on, the man who took us in after our great loss, Sakurai Kosuke, brought us to the Konjou clan hidden in the nearby mountains.

“…How many times do you plan on showing me this?”

When the scene before me ended, I gave a stoic response to the curse. This wasn’t the first time I saw this, nor was it the second. Because if it was, then I would’ve gone mad, just like on my first night in this dark cell. The multiple times of reliving this scene, my trauma, resulted in my response today.

“Stop pretending to be strong. You are already within my grasp.”

“You don’t get it. I’m just tired. Tired of you, and this world. But I’m sure you already know that.”

“Well then, it’s time for you to wake up. The road to darkness is before you.”

“Road to darkness… I traveled that path for 5 years now. There’s no going back. It’s time to take my revenge.”

I opened my eyes. There isn’t a clock in sight, but if I woke up now then my body clock was all the proof I need to believe it was 3 in the morning. Most of the hunters are now asleep. There are obviously still a handful guarding the dungeon, but with my power, I can escape without raising any alarms.

I walked up to the enhanced iron bars and poked my arm and leg out. Normally, my limbs wouldn’t fit through the spaces of the bars, but as I draw closer to them, I transform my arm and leg into thin purple sheets and effortlessly reach through the bars and turned them back to normal to balance my body. With my left leg out of the jail cell, I pushed the rest of my body out of the cell by turning myself into a thin purple sheet and transforming myself back to normal as I cross the bars.

They underestimated me. They only tighten the security at the exit of the dungeon. I know this because I scouted the area before using basic magic called Detect, a null magic that uses mana to detect entities. The reason I can use mana without a spectral is because of the mana embedded in my body. I can still use spirit power, but not as well as before. I don’t use it in battle either way so that shouldn’t be a problem.

I reach a turn and sense two guards coming my way. When they turned the corner, I was gone. I slipped inside one of the empty cells and avoided getting caught. But this wasn’t good, they were heading straight to my cell. Why now of all times to check for me?

“Tch, how annoying. I guess I’ll have to use a little force after all. These two will be nice practice dummies to warm up with…”

That night, Saito Touma escaped the dungeon.

**158 – Clouded Sky**

15 found unconscious, 21 injured, and 14 hospitalized. All 50 hunters guarding the dungeon were defeated. Those numbers repeat themselves in my mind making me more anxious than ever before. Earlier today, Touma-kun escaped the Konjou clan’s dungeon without raising any alarms. He somehow took out all of the guards without letting any of them escape to call for reinforcements.

15 unconscious. Those were the people that got injected with paralysis magic, shown by a puncture wounds on the bodies of the victims. 21 injured. They were the people who were able to detect Touma-kun and fought back before they were assassinated. But despite detecting him beforehand, they were all taken out by magic spells and light wounds. 14 hospitalized. They were the people who were able to keep up with his sudden and peculiar attacks but were ultimately still defeated. And all 50 hunters were found wrapped in a purple substance, preventing them from moving.

My face paled when I first heard of the news, but it only got worse when I saw the actual scene. It was a brutal battle if you could even call it that, with blood all over the place. The guards that were posted to guard the dungeon were by no means weak. They were all strong and experienced in various fights against spirits and demons, some of them even won in the battle royale in the past. Yet every single one of them was taken out.

We investigated Touma-kun’s house in the residential area and found traces of him being inside. We don’t know what he took with him but it was most likely essentials like money, food, and clothing.

Later that Wednesday morning, school was ongoing. Watanabe-san was excused by the school under the pretense of a club activity of the Waddler Club. Unable to clear my head, I used Connect to communicate with Yukou-kun. I informed him of the situation and asked for help. It ended with me being a bit rude. Despite being the one asking for help, I couldn’t help but scream in my mind when I heard the only two possibilities.

*“\*Are you sure there aren’t any other possibilities!?\*”*

*“\*I’m sure. Saito-san either broke out with his own will, or his body was taken over by the curse.\*”*

*“\*There’s no way Touma-kun would think of betraying us! Didn’t you say before that the only way for him to be possessed was if he decided to give in to the curse and erase his personality!? T-There must be some other reason!\*”*

*“\*Look, Yamamoto-san, I’m sorry but I don’t know anything about his relationship with the curse any more than you do. I wasn’t the one that merged their souls, it was Ryosei. But for some reason, I don’t have his memories of what he did. If there’s another possibility then I’m missing information. But I don’t think he would keep important information from us. You should try to accept one of the possibilities.\*”*

*“\*Kgh…\*”*

In all honesty, I didn’t need to ask Yukou-kun about the possibilities of what happened. All it takes is simple logic. But I refused to accept those possibilities, so I asked him only to get the same answer.

I don’t have any definite proof, but I think that he escaped of his own will. Touma-kun is the strongest person I know in the world. Endowed with a sharp intuition, incredible tenacity, and mind-boggling patience, he fought his curse head-on for 5 years now.

It suddenly got terrifyingly worse a week before the battle royale. Thanks to Yukou-kun he got better, but that didn’t mean Touma-kun wasn’t suffering anymore. He was highly unstable the first time I visited him in the dungeons, I knew everything became harder for Touma-kun, but I believed he could take it on.

On the night before his escape, I had a feeling he regained control of himself. Unlike other nights, he didn’t shoo me away and listened silently as I talked about my day. But what genuinely got my hopes up was when he told me to go home. He told me to go home because it was already late at night. I had school in the morning so he ended our conversation the moment it hit 11pm. I have no idea how he can be so accurate with the time despite not having a clock, but he was looking out for me. Other people might think it was because he had his plan to escape so he got rid of me, but I know that’s not true. Because when he’s concerned about other people, he always looks them in the eye.

Thoughts about Touma’s situation circle around my head. I was filled with hope that he finally overcame his curse, but I was also anxious, anxious because I couldn’t think of a reason why he would escape. He knows he wasn’t being kept inside to be punished. If he showed that he controlled the curse, he would’ve been let out. What is he thinking?

“Saito-kun? Why are you here? Weren’t you hospitalized?”

I turn my head to the teacher who mentioned Touma-kun, following his gaze I find the very person I’m worried about standing at the entrance of the classroom with absolutely no wounds.

“Hm? …Ah, yeah. I was released yesterday. Sorry, I forgot to inform the school.”

“I see. Well if that’s the case, go ahead and take your seat.”

I watch him carefully as he walked toward me, heading to his seat beside me. I scrutinize his whole body and there aren’t any signs of the purple substance the curse produces. Next, I stare at his eyes examining his expression. I know he can see me in the corner of his vision, but he ignored me and kept a stone face as he sat down.

*“\*T-TOUMA-KUN?! Why are you here!? Wait, no, why did you escape the dungeons!? Hey! Listen to me!\*”*

I use Connect to send my thoughts to him but he continued to ignore me. I kept my stare at the board in front of the class to avoid catching the teacher’s notice, but I didn’t stop trying to get Touma-kun’s attention.

“What a pain…”

He muttered under his breath instead of using Connect. It was his usual cold response that I was accustomed to. I didn’t sense any malice in his voice or any signs of the curse taking over, I was right. Then… was his escape just a rash decision? I-I can’t tell. But if it is, surely \**he\** could help!

I kept silent until lunch break came. He left the classroom and I followed behind him, but I can tell we weren’t walking to the cafeteria for some nice lunch. I didn’t try to hide the fact that I was following him, I was directly behind him, letting my presence be known. Finally, he stopped. He led me to the back of the school building, deep within the thick trees where no one would find us.

**159 – Internal Turmoil**

“This is the last time I’ll let you follow me.”

“Huh?”

“From now on, I’ll be on my own. After what I did, I’m probably considered a threat to the clan. A level B threat at the very least.”

“W-What!? You’re wrong! You can still come back! You won’t be considered a threat, I know it! Sakurai-san won’t let that happen!”

“That’s just optimistic thinking. It will happen, I’m sure. More importantly, you aren’t asking me about my curse. How can you put so much trust in me?”

“Because I know you! There’s no way you’ll be taken over by some curse! You’re the strongest person I know! You should just come back to the clan! People will look at you wrongly after what you’ve done… but we can just say that your curse rampaged and you were able to win against it afterward! You’ll be fine!”

Touma-kun pointed a slight grin at me.

“Heh, good to see your true colors again. It must’ve been suffocating inside that mask.”

A mask, huh? He’s not wrong. I didn’t care if I need to lie or do a few wrongs to get what I want, but this isn’t what I want to hear. Not right now.

“This isn’t the time for jokes! Come on, just come back!”

“That wasn’t a joke, and neither was my escape. You know full well that no one would believe that story. A hunter rampaged because of a curse and conveniently escaped without any casualties? No one is going to swallow that story. Not to mention going to my house and picking up essentials as well as this one uniform. I’m sure everyone back in the clan has figured it out by now.”

“Kgh… N-No, you’re wrong! I’m certain…”

I was trying to think of an excuse, but I know how sharp the higher-ups of the clan are. I’m lying, but that’s what I need to do to keep Touma-kun from leaving.

“I know you better than anyone, Sora. I knew you would be the first to figure out the truth, as well as the last person to figure out why I decided to escape.”

“W-What do you mean by that!?”

“Go figure it out yourself. I came to school today to warn you. The clan will probably send units to hunt me down. Even if you’re one of those people, I won’t show you any mercy. I held back in the dungeons, but not anymore. If any hunters attack me, I won’t hesitate to kill. You can relay this message to the clan, though… you’ll have no chance of defeating me.”

“Wh-What…?”

He’s glaring straight into my eyes. This is a threat. A genuine threat. This is wrong. This is all wrong! Why is Touma-kun threatening to kill us!? W-Was I wrong about the curse? No, I can’t be. Then is this the curse’s influence? It has to be! Its personality merged with him that’s why he’s acting like this!

My emotions run rampant, and my anger takes over. The curse isn’t completely gone. Touma-kun is doing his best to fight against it, but the curse was about to make him do something he didn’t want. The worst part is he doesn’t even realize that! They have a single soul, so it must be hard to tell them apart from each other. I have to stop him!

“After school, don’t try to find me.”

“…”

He turned his back to me, leaving me behind. I grit my teeth as I watch his back disappear into the trees. I swear on my very life, that before this day ends, I will bring Touma-kun back to his senses! I return to the classroom, not to take classes, but to enchant.

Later that afternoon, school was out and I made sure to follow behind Touma-kun, not letting him escape my sight. There’s no need to hide anything. I’m sure he already knows about my intentions. But before either of us could leave, we were intercepted by the only person I informed of Touma’s location. Sakurai-san.

Touma-kun stops abruptly and the two glare at each other with such intensity that the air around us plummet and was taken over by a spine-chilling atmosphere. I called Sakurai-san earlier through Connect and told him about the situation as well as his threat. The tension between the two is even affecting the other students around us, making them steer clear of us. Although to begin with, Sakurai-san wearing grandiose traditional clothing like this will make anyone want to avoid him.

Touma-kun turned his head over his shoulder and directed his gaze to me, knowing I was the one who contacted Sakurai-san. I responded with a serious gaze of my own, verbally telling him to stop what he was doing. He ignored me and faced Sakurai-san.

“So, what do you want?”

“Hm… Taking responsibility. I can see you took our advice. You did well.”

“Get to the point.”

“…This is the path you have chosen, and I am here to tell you about its consequences. It has been decided earlier that there will be a target on your head, a Threat Level A. After seeing what you have done and what you are capable of, I am sure you already expected this.”

“WHAT!?”

I couldn’t help but let out a loud scream. Was I hearing right!? Threat level A? On Touma-kun!? Threat Levels are what we measure our enemies’ power with. Depending on the kind of enemy, may it be a spirit or demon, these threat levels tell us which hunters and how many to commission in battle.

From the lowest to highest threat level comes threat level D, followed by C, B, A, then the highest, S. Level Ds consists of ghosts and eidolons, level Cs consists of revenants, level Bs consists of spirits and seers, level As consists of visitants and guardians, and level Ss consists of sentinels, demigods, and gods.

Due to our lack of knowledge and experience with Zerid, we could only rank the species that we’ve encountered in the past. One of those ranked species is called Dehin, the species that cursed Touma-kun. They are considered as a Threat Level A, handled by multiple parties of skilled hunters. But why? Why did they officially mark Touma-kun as an enemy!? He’s just another victim too! I’m sure they know that but they still did this! I wanted to take all my anger on Sakurai-san, but Touma-kun’s hardened tone cut me off. Did he know I was going to react like this too?

“WHAT DO YOU—”

“Going out of your way to come here just to tell me that? You must be bored!”

“This is my way of taking responsibility. I was the one that told you to choose a path, if this is the one you chose then I am partly at fault.”

“As stiff as ever huh, old man? If that’s all then I’ll be on my way. Surely, you don’t think of making a scene in public, are you?”

“Take your leave. In the first place, my real objective here isn’t you.”

“That so?”

Touma-kun proceeded to walk past Sakurai-san and out the school gate.

**160 – The Other Side of the Mirror**

“Wait!”

I try to chase after him, but I was stopped in my tracks by Sakurai-san. My shoulder suffered a tight clasp from his hand, making me unable to move any further. Something in me broke. The bottle that I kept all my anger tightly locked in had burst.

This bastard… He let Touma-kun get a level A target. He didn’t even try to stop him from leaving, but instead, he’s trying to stop me!? What is his problem!? Doesn’t he think anything of him?

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING!? LET GO OF ME, YOU USELESS OLD COOT!”

“Get your head together. What are you planning on doing?”

“I’M GOING TO HELP TOUMA-KUN! HOW ABOUT YOU!? WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS!? DON’T YOU CARE ABOUT HIM!?”

“Surely you are not thinking of fighting him, are you?”

“WHAT ABOUT IT!? IT’S BETTER THAN WHAT YOU’RE DOING! I’M SURE IF I BEAT THE CRAP OUT OF HIM, HE’LL REALIZE THAT HE’S JUST BEING INFLUENCED BY THE CURSE!”

“You are insane! That plan will never work. In the first place, you would have no chance against a Level A.”

“WHY DID YOU EVEN COME HERE!? I CALLED YOU HERE BECAUSE I THOUGHT YOU WOULD DO SOMETHING ABOUT TOUMA-KUN! WHY ARE YOU DOING THE OPPOSITE!? I SHOULD’VE NEVER CALLED YOU OVER!”

Why can’t he understand!? Why does he only think about rules and regulations!? Why isn’t he doing anything about Touma-kun? Yukou-kun saved Touma-kun so he could live his life the way he wants to! If he’s being influenced by the curse to do something, then this chance will be wasted!

“…Is that so? Even though you called me to help, you continue to whine and refuse to communicate. So be it, do as you wish. Just make sure to report to my office later tonight. Be sure to prepare for a long self-reflection session.”

He loosened his grip on my shoulder, so I forcefully shove it back with that shoulder and ran out the school gate. I don’t care what scolding that guy has for me, but one thing’s for sure, I’ve lost all my respect for him.

I ran a good distance away from the school. Needless to say, Touma-kun was nowhere to be found, and looking around town aimlessly won’t do me any good. At this point, I’m better off going back home and volunteering to work on night patrol. But maybe, just maybe, he went back to the place where it all started.

I arrive in a familiar neighborhood. I could still recognize the buildings around me as I walked through them. A feeling of nostalgia hits me as I look around but I focus myself on my goal. I face forward and spot Touma-kun staring at a huge house. It was a newly built house with a built-in garage. It’s the youngest building on the street. How do I know that? Well, that’s because this is where both our houses once stood.

The incident was covered as a fire accident. The clan used a barrier similar to the Konjou clan’s illusion barrier to keep people from approaching the scene. They then used their tools to make a convincing accident that no one would question. Of course, that meant burning both our houses to the ground. Touma-kun and I were reported found in the woods playing that night without our parents’ permission.

Our whole incident was summarized: Amidst the panic of their runaway children, the parents left the stove open and caused a grease fire. It abruptly spread when the residents attempted to use water to extinguish the flames. We were blamed for our own tragedy. Although it sounds cruel, this is something we chose to do.

While we were being sheltered at the Konjou clan that dreadful night, Touma-kun and I overheard one of the hunters talking to Sakurai-san about the incident’s cover. They told him that the cover will be a fire accident and that we would be the reason for our parents’ “carelessness” in the incident. I was outraged that they even considered that, but Sakurai-san outright refused the proposal before I could even say anything about it and immediately quelled my anger. But unexpectedly, Touma-kun came up to the two of them and insisted that he was blamed for the incident. That he was the one that dragged me outside and was the sole cause of the incident. I didn’t know why he said such a thing. But I thought that if he was going to be blamed, I was going down that road with him. Which is how everything played out as it did.

The Konjou Clan took us in and we lived in their residential area for two years. It was in our third year that we decided to become hunters to prevent any tragedies like what happened to us. After three months of training, we were assigned to our first mission and were officially hunters. At the end of that year, was the mission that cursed Touma-kun, and five years later, we arrived here. Touma-kun fought the curse alone for those five years. He was able to win against it even after getting completely possessed, but that didn’t mean it didn’t affect him. After five years of doing nothing but putting on a smile, it was my time to finally do something about it.

“I said not to find me, didn’t I?”

I lost my focus for a minute. I didn’t notice that I was fixed on the same house Touma-kun was staring at. His sudden utterance brought my senses back.

“I couldn’t help myself. I want to save you.”

“Not this again. If you plan on bringing me back, as I said before, I won’t show any mercy.”

“Can you really defeat me though?”

“That’s my line.”

He turned his back to me and walked away, so I followed him. He wasn’t trying to get away, he already accepted the fact that I wasn’t letting him go. He was following one of the rules of the clan. No hunter shall engage enemies in public unless necessary. Touma-kun was leading me to a secluded area for me to attack him. His consideration fueled me with the hope that I could still help him. Dusk had arrived by the time we stopped deep in a forest at the edge of town.

**161 – Sora and Touma**

“I was hoping this was another one of your terrible jokes.”

“I thought the same when you escaped the dungeons. I’m here to return the favor.”

I took the equipment I always kept in my bag. My uniform’s cloak, fingerless gloves, kunai, intertwine gear, and various enchanter tools. I learned from my mistakes. The time that hollowed knight took Kaede-san hostage, I only brought my cloak, intertwine gear, and the six kunai that were already attached to it. I was unable to fight against it due to my lack of tools. So I began to bring my other tools as well, in turn, my bag became heavy and bulkier, but now I know it was the right decision. Equipped with the weapons hidden inside my cloak, I leave my bag behind and face him.

“I appreciate waiting for me to get ready! You really are nice, Touma-kun! Keep this up and you’ll be branded as a tsundere!”

“Putting on that act won’t do you any good. You know very well, Sora. That enchanters are the weakest when they’re alone, especially you.”

“I can take care of myself. I’m not afraid of you because I know you won’t kill me! I know the real Touma-kun would never kill anyone!”

“Really now?”

Looks like my words weren’t enough to reach him. Just as I ready the two kunai in my hand, a purple tentacle appeared from behind him and stretched towards me at an incredible speed. Since I was expecting attacks similar to a Dehin, I was prepared for this. It was just like when he was possessed at the battle royale. I threw one of my kunai at a tree in the distance as I jumped upwards to dodge his attack.

The tentacle below me began to distort, but I had nothing to worry about. The kunai I threw finally made contact with the tree. Multiple sharp spikes rose from the tentacle below me but I was able to pull away from it by retracting the thread attached to the embedded kunai.

I feel the breeze brushing against my body, the cloak fluttering behind me, and the leaves leaving a trail of my path as I close into the tree where my kunai was embedded at breakneck speed. I throw two more kunai, one to a different tree and one toward Touma-kun. I then change course as I reel myself towards the new tree my kunai hit. As for the first kunai embedded in a tree, I released it and directed it to head toward him as well.

I throw two more kunai toward the trees to help me maneuver through obstacles and circle around Touma-kun. I use the three trees my kunai were attached to clear my path of obstruction. Then, I release two kunai, one retracting toward me while I directed the other toward him as fast as I can.

I launch one more toward a tree closer to him, released the previous kunai I was using, and threw it to a tree past Touma to better position myself. The moment that kunai hit, I reel towards it, release the other kunai, and threw it at his shoulder as I passed above him. With this, I have four kunai heading towards him in all directions, one I’m currently using to travel, and one more available.

I trained for this. I threw all four kunai with barely any interval before their arrival. I can’t do quick calculations, but the kindled spirit power on my kunai is enough to tell me I’m right. I was a complete blur to him. If it weren’t for the barrier protecting my eyes, I would have been blinded. The speed I could execute this technique showed how much I honed it. This is my fighting style, Complete Spirit Power Flow!

This is an original technique I came up with. Before I became an enchanter, both Touma-kun and I were brutes. We only learned as far as its basics, but that was enough for me to create this technique. Complete Spirit Power Flow uses the spirit power from a brute’s barrier to be able to wrap everything I’m in contact with, then I use poltergeist to move anything how I want.

My contraption, the intertwine gear, was a perfect match for this technique. The intertwine gear is as simple as it can get. It’s made with a metal cylinder with six rolls of strong thread attached to my combat belt. It is completely powered by my spirit power. It allows me to constantly flow my spirit power to all my kunai, giving me the ability to latch them onto any surface even if its smooth metal, pulling myself wherever I want, making my kunai move in different directions in the air, sharpen them, harden them, enchant them, as well as annoying tricks like this…

From here, I can clearly see the threads of three of the four kunai I threw at Touma-kun will get caught by trees, making my attack useless. But before the threads get caught by the trees, they untied themselves, circled around the trees, and re-tied themselves to the kunai in mid-air.

I exploited a rule of kindled spirit power. Even with my kunai detached from my threads, I still have 10 seconds before the spirit power disappears and lose control. Kindled spirit power only begins to disappear when it loses its constant flow of spirit power, so as long as I reconnect my threads within 10 seconds, I can keep constant control of my kunai.

All four of my kunai were heading for Touma-kun at full power. My kunai are sharpened blades enhanced with a blessing to penetrate through his curse’s ability. Surely, even if he uses his curse, I should…!

Just as I thought I used enough power to enhance my kunai, another three tentacles sprouted from his back and blocked all four of my kunai.

“Damn it…!”

I quickly redirect all four of those kunai to the nearby trees to be able to move in the air however I want. I throw a kunai directly at his face. He tried to intercept it with a tentacle, but it explodes and spreads a thick smoke over his vision.

As the smoke slowly subsided, he heard numerous clicking noises all around him. The source of those clicking sounds were the many of the items I’d been enhancing back in class. Tricky Marbles!

Countless marbles surround Touma-kun, many on the ground and even more falling from the sky. The marbles glowed with the same symbols. The symbol of spirit: a half-moon arc with a diamond in the center was intersected by the symbol of inferiority: a V with a circle in the middle. The V passed through the ends of the arc and the circle encased the diamond in the middle. Meanwhile, the symbol of connection: a circle, was intersecting with the tip of the V, and finally, the symbol of interaction: two parallel lines and a perpendicular line connecting the two was inside the diamond. They each hand the same symbol, but their effects varied. Not a second later, every single marble exploded assaulting his ears with deafening explosions. Once I landed on the ground, I release all four of my kunai and directed them inside the smoke intersecting at the spot Touma-kun stood.

“…!”

I can feel it! All four of them hit! The tricky marbles weakened him! Every single one of those marbles were vessels that I made and enhanced them with different effects: weakness, slowness, blindness, and deafness. Everything caught by those explosions was inflicted with those effects. My goal wasn’t to kill Touma-kun, it was only to weaken him. Meanwhile, I used all four of my kunai that were strengthened with amplified blessing enhancement to penetrate his defenses.

“Wha!?”

Before the smoke dispersed, I could feel all four of my kunai severed from my threads. I quickly retract them but he took hold of the threads before I got them outside the smoke. I forcefully snap my threads using spirit power to prevent him from using them against me.

I take five kunai out of my cloak and tie my available threads on each one. With my intertwine gear replenished with kunai, I hide three of them in my cloak while I hold two of them in hand and take the defensive.

All of the sudden, Touma-kun appeared in front of me. Both his arms turned to purple spikes and thrust them at me. I panicked slightly from his sudden surprise attack, but I was able to parry them. I was about to close in to cut his shoulders off but I notice his stomach distorting.

“Kgh!”

I forcefully pull myself away from him by using my intertwine gear. Before he came out of the smoke, I preemptively latched one of my kunai to the trees behind me in case I needed a quick escape, and that time is now!

A kunai launched from my cloak to prevent him from immediately chasing me down. I enhanced it with weakness and slowness to buy me some time and detonated them in front of him.

I reach into my belt and take out several pieces of paper and throw them around me. They were talismans I made to function as traps. They possessed the symbol of spirit: a half-moon arc with a diamond in the center, the symbol of domination: two parallel lines with the upper line twice as long as the lower was intersecting the symbol of spirit above the diamond and the insides of the arc, and finally, the symbol of repetition: two backslashes side-by-side was hanging on the lower right end of the domination symbol. Unlike kindled spirit power, enchanted vessels like this can only have one function at a time, but they aren’t limited to any time limit. This means I can activate them at any time I want.

Using the 10 seconds of control I have over them, I placed them strategically throughout the forest. On the trees, branches, rocks, and the ground. Touma-kun left the cloud of smoke caused by my kunai without any signs of exhaustion or infirmity. I can only imagine his curse can also block out my enchantments.

He looks around and spots the few decorations I’ve made for the area. However, he still seems unfazed. Instead of coming in for the attack, he stares straight into my eyes and utters one word.

“One.”

**162 – Chain Assault**

I wasn’t sure how to respond, but I have no time to be confused. Knowing Touma-kun, this can be an attempt to regenerate his energy. I need to strike now!

I take out a kunai to replace the one I lost and threw five of them at him. I directed all five of them to close in from all sides. One of his back tentacles tried to intercept one of my kunai, but before they made contact, I detonated that kunai and severed it from his body.

Even Touma-kun seemed to be surprised. Instead of using crippling enchantments on him, I decided to take a bit more risk and enchanted them with blessing. By using this, I have a higher chance of killing Touma-kun, so I have to be careful and avoid his heart, but I can manage that much!

When he realized I changed tactics, he jumped up in the air to avoid the rest of my kunai. But it was a futile attempt at the face of my technique. All four remaining kunai took a sharp turn upwards, chasing him like homing missiles. He transformed his leg into a shield to take on the impact, but that also meant losing sight of them. I quickly amplify their power and speed and sent them to go around the shield.

Two tentacles were able to intercept two of my kunai, but the rest were able to break through and reach their target. All four of my kunai detonate, making a stupendous mini-fireworks show, destroying two of his tentacles and both his legs. This was my chance!

I dash towards his falling body and intercept the course of his fall. With his back completely open to me, I take hold of my kunai and aim for his shoulder. But before I could get close enough to attack, his last tentacle expanded into a shield and protected his backside. I was about to take more kunai from my belt, but I notice the center of his shield distorting again. I quickly stop myself and leap backward. Not even a second later, three spikes came from his shield and punctured the air where I previously was.

What the hell!? He can still use his curse like that!? I replenish my intertwine gear’s kunai and take a mental note that I have two backup kunai left to work with. I won’t have enough to replenish another set. I have to make this work!

I watch him from the distance, observing his every move. He was supporting himself with his last back tentacle. Taking him on like this won’t be too hard, I’m almost there! That was what I thought until I watched the ends of his hacked-off feet distort and regenerate both his legs back.

“Two.”

I still don’t know what he’s counting up to, but no doubt I was beginning to feel frustrated. I already used up quite a lot of resources, but that only took out three of his back tentacles. Despite how bad the situation seemed, I controlled my emotions and retreat into the forest.

There was no doubt his surprise attack earlier was a flash strike. I don’t know how much spirit power he can still use. I should be careful and assume he can it again. With that in mind, I send out all six of my threaded kunai to secure the area around me and take out two of my extra kunai to defend against those sudden attacks. I just need to wait.

I stand completely still, watching the movement in the forest, waiting for him to come. I don’t expect him to suddenly emerge from the trees. He is one of the few people that know how my techniques work after all. With all six of my kunai afloat, they are now acting as a kind of alarm. Even with the speed of flash strike, I’ll still be able to react in time. With that option eliminated, there was only one place he can use to attack me. From above!

*\*BOOOOM!!\**

An explosion lit up above me, and coming down from the sky was Touma-kun. He lost form from my trap, It’s now or never! I threw one of the kunai I was holding toward him. Even without his form, he was still able to create a shield, but that didn’t matter!

The smoke the explosion created masked my true intentions. From within the smoke, I appeared and delivered an axe kick to Touma-kun, sending him directly toward the ground. He turned his body and pointed the shield at me while he used his other tentacle to break his fall. But that wasn’t going to save him, the reason being that an explosive talisman was below him.

*\*BOOOOM!!\**

“Kgh!”

The explosion destroyed his last tentacle and sent him airborne long enough for me to position myself and punch him toward the closest tree. A tree that wasn’t only tall and sturdy, but also one that had another one of my talismans on it. The explosion sent him hurling back towards me which was enough time for me to throw the rest of my tricky marbles at him. These marbles weren’t like the first batch. I enhanced them just now to stick to their target and detonate a powerful explosion tinged with a small blessing enhancement.

All the marbles that I hurled toward him stuck to him like magnets. I feel incredibly reluctant to do this, but I’m sure Touma-kun won’t die. I made sure to not stick anything near his heart. I mentally prepare myself as I was about to do something incredibly cruel to my friend. I need to make him realize that he’s being influenced by the curse! Come back to your senses, Touma-kun!

*\*BOOOOM!!\**

I detonated two marbles below him and to his side, sending him flying towards another tree with a talisman, following that with two more explosions to the side, sending him to a talisman placed on the ground. Once he was airborne again followed another explosion that sent him to another tree with a talisman. I repeated this, making him unable to move, weakening him enough to the point where he can’t regenerate. Since my crippling attacks won’t work on him, I’ll just have to do it manually.

The marbles made huge explosions, but only deal a small amount of damage since I only enchanted a tiny mass of blessing into them. My goal is to send him to every talisman—the traps that will damage and weaken him. There was no doubt he was getting sick from all this spinning around.

Every explosion I detonate inflicted the same pain inside me, every single one slowly made me lose my resolve to continue, but this was the only way. I need to do this, or else his freedom will be taken again!

With all of the talismans used up, I use the remaining marbles to position him directly in front of a tree. I launched all six of my kunai to embed him into the tree. They traced his clothes and suspended him to the tree. I then use that outline to make a small barrier so that he wouldn’t be able to escape.

“Haah… Haah… Haah…”

Using all that focus drained the energy out of me, but I still make my way to Touma-kun. Unlike me, he wasn’t trying to catch his breath, but there was no doubt my attacks were effective. Too much, in fact. His body was wounded all over. He was covered with bruises and abrasions spilled some of his blood from his body.

I felt my heart break the moment I saw him like that, though I have no one else to blame but myself. I need to swallow this pain and wake up Touma-kun.

**163 – Counting**

“…”

Huh? W-Wait, what am I supposed to say? “Are you still the Touma-kun I know?”, no, that’s wrong. I know he’s still in control of his body, he’s just being influenced! T-Then what do I say now? “Have you come to?”, “Do you realize what you’re doing?”, “You’re being influenced by the curse, snap out of it!”, no, that feels wrong! Wrong! Wrong! Wrong! Wrong! WRONG!

My mind was a mess. Before I could even say anything, Touma-kun spoke.

“Using complete spirit power flow to trap me and hiding small mana-triggered talismans behind leaves to keep me from noticing. I’ll give it to you; I didn’t think you’d be able to go all out against me.”

My complete spirit power flow. Since I was a brute before, I also know how to create a perception field. Because I neglected to train that ability when I changed classes, I could only create small 5-meter fields. To make up for that, I used perception field on all six of my kunai to make a larger field. Since Touma-kun knew that, I forced him to attack from above where I stuck a talisman that activates when it detects mana in a certain radius. That was the secret to my attack. But why is he bringing it up now? Not knowing how to respond, I stay silent.

“But that begs the question, why did you try so hard, Sora?”

“W-What do you mean? To save you, of course! Don’t you realize that you’re being influenced by the curse!? You threatened us saying that you’d kill anyone that came for you, and you were serious! The Touma-kun I know would never say something like that!”

“…Is that so? I’m being influenced, you say? Then, why the hell am I not killing you now, huh!?”

“What are you on about? You can’t even kill me inside that barr—!?”

Tiny spikes sprouted from his body, piercing through all six of the kunai that were holding the barrier. The barrier began to disappear and the wounds I inflicted on his body along with it. I tried to reach for the last two kunai that I had on my belt, but I took an awful roundhouse kick to the face, knocking me down to the ground and dropping the last of my weapons. With my mind thrown into confusion and my face to the ground, his claim shut me down completely.

“Three. This is the third time in our battle that I could’ve killed you.”

“H-Huh?”

“From the start, I didn’t plan on going all out. But despite that, despite not even taking you seriously, I still could’ve killed you three times. This is the difference between our power… and this is the control I can have over my body. Now, do you still think I’m being influenced?”

“Wh… I…”

I’m speechless. Those times he had been counting were the times I could’ve died…? And after that, he’s going to say that his decision to kill people was all within his own volition? No… no, I don’t want that! I don’t want to accept that!

“Y-You’re lying! If that’s the case, then how can you say that with a serious face!? Why would the Touma-kun I know say that he would be ready to kill at any time!?”

“…Before this fight started, you said, ‘I’m not afraid of you because I know you won’t kill me. I know the real Touma-kun would never kill anyone.’ You were half-right and half-wrong. Even with this curse’s personality inside me, killing you didn’t feel right to me. Simply thinking about it made me sick. Despite all this, I still think of you as a friend.”

“….”

A-A friend…? Touma-kun is… calling me his friend again…? What kind of dream…

“But on the other hand, I’ve changed. Anyone else that tries to stop me, even if it's Senkyo, the person who gave me this chance to live, I won’t show any mercy. I will kill without remorse. Though, I doubt he would lay a hand on me. He’s the key to my liberation, after all.”

What I heard from Touma-kun was especially bothering. I would normally blow up and deny him this very second. But why do I feel like I’m in the wrong?

“Why…? If this was really your own decision… then why…!?”

“This is my revenge on this world that cursed me.”

**164 – Passage of Our Time**

“…What do you mean?”

“When I woke up in the dungeons for the very first time, the old man and Ryosei visited me. They told me that only I could save myself at this point, that I had to choose a path, one that I would walk for the rest of my life. I didn’t listen to them at first. They caged me, after all. But since the curse made me face my horrors, my trauma, and my weakness, I had to overcome them to keep myself sane. It took me a while… a long while, 5 years to be exact, but I finally got there. I don’t want to be taken by this curse. The path I chose is separation from the clan. I want to find something that will cure this curse, or at least bury it with something, even if it takes me my whole life. Being a part of the clan won’t do me any good. Waiting a month to become trusted again only to leave will just be a waste of a month. I want to be free and find what I want as fast as I can! Sitting in a cell, caged like a dangerous animal is only a death sentence! Do you understand what I’m saying, Sora!?”

“…!”

“……”

…Touma-kun kept his gaze locked on my eyes. Unwavering resolve… fierce determination… and burning desire… Those feelings were reflected in his eyes. And in deep contrast to his… my eyes were filled with tears. I barely managed to silence my cries, but I let the embodiment of my sorrow, regret, guilt, shame, and dismay flow down my face, dirtying the ground with its filth.

This!? I fought Touma-kun to do this!? I took out everything I had, mercilessly attacked him, and wounded him all over for some delusion I stuck in my head all this time!? I convinced myself that he was being influenced to do something he didn’t want, but if I think about it logically, why would anyone want to stay caged, doing nothing just to suffer? I got angry for all the wrong reasons because I kept clinging to the image I saw Touma-kun in.

Endowed with incredible tenacity? Mind-boggling patience? Just because of that, I left Touma-kun alone for 5 years, just to act against him at the very end! What the hell am I doing!? In the end, Touma-kun is still human! Not some all-powerful being!

I failed to understand the person I was calling my childhood friend was changing as the years go by. Just because he had a curse on him, I always thought that if that disappeared, then he would return to his old cheerful self, the Touma-kun that I saw before the tragedy. What kind of fairytale dream am I trying to live!?

My condition only worsens, to the point where I can’t even keep my cries in check. I wailed pathetically in front of the person I always looked up to. The look in his eyes only brings me pain. They empathize with just how much I messed up with my life. I can’t bear to look at them, so I continue to bawl my eyes out staring at the ground.

“…I-I’m sorry! Hic, hic, I’m sorry, hic, Touma-kun…!”

I continue to apologize to him in the most mortifying way possible. I couldn’t even manage to look in the eye of the person I was trying to apologize to. I wish I could just crawl into a hole and die. Just as I was thinking of such things, Touma-kun spoke.

“…You care too much.”

I can hear him, but I can’t stop crying.

“On that night, the night where everything began, it showed me clearly how differently we are as people. You’re a person that cares too much about their loved ones to the point where you’d rush into danger without a second thought. Meanwhile, I’m a person that focuses on myself and survival more than anything else. It’s probably because we’re completely different people that everything ended up like this.”

“Kgh…!”

“But maybe because we’re polar opposites that I was able to survive this long.”

“…”

“You were always there to remind me of the kind of person I wanted to be.”

“…?”

“Kind, caring, friendly, cheerful, optimistic, but at the same time, strong, mindful, and self-aware. That was the kind of person I wanted to be. I got annoyed every time you got close to me. It reminds me how much I hate myself and that I’ll never become the same person as you. But at the same time, it was the one thing that got me to accept my harsh reality faster than anything that curse threw at me. Thanks.”

“Wha… What do you mean!? That doesn’t sound anything like me at all! If I was like that, then this would’ve never happened!”

“That’s only because you were facing me, Sora. You got caught up with the stress of my curse. Because you knew I was in pain, because you cared too much about me, because you are who you are, you masked your true self to try and help me, and you failed to notice the truth.”

“You’re wrong!”

“No, I’m right. I know it for a fact. I’ve been watching you, after all. We’re childhood friends.”

“W-Wha…”

“This is as much time I’m going to give you. Go fix yourself up and go home. You’ve got a sermon with the old man, don’t you? Oh, and take off that mask. It doesn’t suit you.”

I sat there silent. My cries are long gone, and only a few remnants of tears stay on my face. I watch my childhood friend’s back shrink into the distance and disappear from my sight as he got swallowed by the darkness. A childhood friend, you say? Why now of all times? Why the hell are you this strong? What do you mean you envied me? You have it the other way around…! Hey! Come back! Don’t go! Touma-kun! Touma-kuuuun!!

“TOUMA-KUUUUUUUUUN!!!”

I sat there on my lonesome for a while longer. Wiping my newly shed tears. It wasn’t regret, guilt, shame, dismay, or any of the sort. I shed my tears once more in bittersweetness as I realize it was our time to separate ways. After being with each other for almost our whole lives through thick and thin, it’s time for us to grow and spread our wings, taking our own separate paths.

“It isn’t even our third-year graduation yet… why does everything come and go so quickly?”

That night, I returned to the clan and gave my deepest apologies to Sakurai-sensei. I didn’t bother to figure out if he truly cared about Touma-kun or not, I just brushed him away with anger along with the advice he was about to give me.

I spent my whole night getting lectured by him. But by the end of that night, I got him to accept my one request—to make it so that the clan will cease their hunt for Touma-kun until he hurts a civilian with his curse. The next day, it became a controversial topic within the clan. But on Friday of that week, the clan chief officially accepted this request and ceased all hunts on Touma-kun until it was confirmed that he hurt a civilian. That meant having hunters monitoring him, but this was the best I can do to help him. He decided to spread his wings, so it’s about time I did the same.

**Chapter 5: What The Heart Seeks**

**165 – Nightmare**

*\*You are not human.\**

I heard a voice. It belonged to the woman that lived below the Konjou Clan’s settlement. She was the elf known as Freda.

*\*You are not human.\**

She repeated the sentence again. For some reason, now slightly distorted.

*\*You are not human.\**

She repeated again. Now in a high pitch voice. The voice she then took sounded slightly familiar. I’ve only heard it for a brief moment in my whole life, but the weight that this voice carried was enough to embed its words in my head.

*\*You are not human.\**

That’s right. I remember now. It was from a strange spirit that took the form of a little boy. The very one that made an attempt on my life, treating me like nothing but another toy for him to break. The Lightning Leader, Fulgur.

*\*You are not human! You are not human! You are not human! You are not human!\**

The moment I realized this, he repeated it faster and louder. As if it were a chant to crystalize his words.

*\*You are an anomaly! Anomaly! ANOMALY!!\**

He appeared in front of me. Circling me like a shark, shoving his face in front of mine, locking his maddened eyes with mine filled with fear.

*\*An existence that will never be accepted in this world! You’ll die a cruel death just like I did!\**

A sharp blade appeared from the shadows behind him. It was so quick that I wouldn’t have even noticed if I blinked. It slid across his neck, parting his head with his body. Normally, that would mean he died, but his headless body caught his head and turned the bloody head toward me.

*\*See you in hell… Little Brother…!\**

“WHA!? Hahh…! Hahh…! Hahh…!”

I woke up in the middle of the night and catch myself profusely sweating along with my heartbeat hammering against my chest. I try to control my ragged breathing and lower my heart rate.

*“\*Are you okay, Senkyo?\*”*

*“\*…Y-Yeah, It’s nothing.\*”*

Ryosei called out to me in my head. He’s concerned for me but I quickly reassure him. I woke up from a nightmare. It’s been a while since I had these. I can still remember clearly that my very first one was about my dad passing away. A fiery inferno was all around me and the building I was in was about to collapse. It was hard to breathe from all the smoke; I was losing oxygen by the second. Despite that, I stayed looking for him. I eventually find him, and at that point, anything could happen. The building would collapse, we would get buried in rubble, engulfed in flames, or maybe even lose our breath, but there was always one outcome. His death.

However, compared to my first nightmare, the one I just had was nothing like it. A pitch-black space with nothing but emptiness. My body was the only thing that reflected light in my eyes. I walked forward with no clear goal, and in that silence, a single sentence echoed.

*“\*You are not human.\*”*

That single sentence repeated again, and again, and again, and again, and again without pause, continuously, perpetually, incessantly, ceaselessly, endlessly. I could do nothing to stop it. I tried to run away as fast as I could, but the sound didn’t diminish. It stayed in a static state, like a broken record I was forced to listen to. I was already suffering, pressing my hands against my ears as hard as I could to dampen the sound as much as I can. It was a futile effort, and to make things worse, the root cause of this nightmare showed up. Fulgur, showing me his gory state, impaling me with a terrifying sense of foreboding.

I got this fear three weeks ago when Freda-san and I talked by ourselves. I was given the choice to hear what she had to say, and in my pursuit of strength, I carelessly chose to continue. Our conversation was still clear in my head.

**166 – The Prophesied One**

“Very well, if that is your choice. Do you know about the Konjou Clan’s stories about The Dual Wielder?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“The Dual Wielder is a folk tale that originated in the clan about 22 years ago. It is a story about a young boy that possesses the power to simultaneously use mana and spirit power. It grated him immense strength that brought harmony to all three worlds. But at the end of his journey, he was unable to control his power, which lead to inevitable death.”

My eyes widen when I heard this story. Since the only person I knew that could use both mana and spirit power simultaneously… was me. I didn’t tell the clan, but I used to do some self-training at home to explore my limits and what I could do. One of those discoveries is that I can use mana and spirit power simultaneously. Additionally, I don’t need a spectral like Kuro Yaiba to be able to use mana. It surprised both me and Ryosei, but there was no denying the truth.

“The true face of this story is a prophecy made by one of the last heroes.”

“Heroes? What are those?”

“After the gods divided Primo, their power was not enough to sustain a complete severance, and dimensional rifts began to appear. Many were taken by these rifts and forcefully sent to one of the other worlds. As a result, many died and were treated as monsters. In Earth’s case, otherworlders were labeled demons, witches, beasts, the list goes on. So the gods decided to connect the three worlds by sending ambassadors to each world. They would choose a group of five and bless them with godly weapons to defend themselves. Ambassadors of Earth were called Heroes, those of Zerid were called Hfixesi, and those of the Spirit Realm were called Di Manes. Returning to our topic, one of the last heroes used their godly power to tell a prophecy.”

“And that prophecy is ‘The Dual Wielder?’”

“…That is my suspicion.”

“Huh? A suspicion? Wasn’t that what you were going to tell me?”

“I was indeed going to relay you a prophecy, but the one I know of is told differently.”

“Told differently? Does that mean ‘The Dual Wielder’ is the same as your prophecy?”

“That is what I am led to believe. After comparing the two texts, they are almost no different from each other. I suspect the prophecy was told differently as it was passed down, resulting in The Dual Wielder.”

“Then, can I please hear your version?”

“Very well. The prophecy goes like this, ‘Born from the thirst for power, he holds the gift of the three masteries. His wish heralds the flag of harmony. The commander of tranquility he is, but devoid of corruption he is not. Attaining such strength marks the beginning, and reaching its heights is the prelude to his fall.’”

I try to compare The Dual Wielder and Freda-san’s prophecy as she tells it. The ideas were indeed the same, but a line that caught me was, “the ability to use mana and spirit power” from The Dual Wielder and “the three masteries” from Freda’s prophecy didn’t fit. I was about to bring it up with her immediately, but she beat me to it like she knew what I was thinking.

“At first, I disregarded this as ‘the three masteries’ depicts three powers and ‘the power to use mana and spirit power’ only shows two. However, I recently discovered concrete proof that the Konjou clan and Zerid were once connected, making The Dual Wielder and the prophecy more than likely to be true. If we assume that is the case, then I theorize that you, the dual wielder, have untapped power that we have yet to discover—the third mastery.”

I start to feel anxious trying to continue this topic. If both of these stories are the same one, and if the hero of these stories really is me… then that means my life was set to go down this direction 22 years ago. And… if I continue to go down this path, then I will die.

I always thought that dying is just a part of life. If I walk this path then I’m just dying earlier than normal. It is an inevitable end for all of us, which is probably why I was so accepting of this dangerous path. I’m not scared of dying, as long as I live my life to the fullest, may it be from a battle or a natural death, I can imagine myself accepting it without any regrets because it was the path I chose…

But why is my heart aching? Why am I going against my own beliefs? Was I only trying to fool myself? If I’m worried about my death now, then back in our fight with Fulgur, the words I said, the emotions I felt, the courage I gathered, and the resolve I showed, were all of it caused by the heat of the moment. Was it was all fake?

I was already going down a rocky path. I couldn’t even trust myself anymore. I thought I knew everything about myself from both inside and out. I think it was my true emotions when I said I wanted to know more about myself. I said I was prepared to go down this dangerous road for it, but Freda-san’s next words made me realize.

“Now, Yukou-san, I have been waiting for you. I will recite encrypted messages for you. If you are truly The Dual Wielder, then this will allow you to unlock your true potential. Obtaining these powers will not be a simple task, which is why I need you to accept a single fact. You are not human.”

My mind stopped functioning. “You are not human,” she says. After watching countless anime about protagonists being revealed as non-human, I always thought that I would react differently. If someone told me I wasn’t human, then that doesn’t change that I’m still a living being. Someone that expresses emotions and moves forward to live. Then why is this haunting me? What is holding me back from accepting the truth?

“You are a superior being that will save the three worlds, so there is no need to—”

“STOP!”

My mind was a mess. I couldn’t hold myself back. I felt like if I kept listening to what she was about to say, my heart would be broken to pieces, so I inadvertently let out a frustrated yell. I didn’t even notice that I jumped out of my seat and slammed the table. Freda-san stared at me blankly, clearly nonplussed. It took me a while to realize what I did. I regained my senses but I didn’t say a word, and neither did she. I bow to her to apologize and quickly take my leave. I left in silence, but my actions speak volumes about my panic.

**…………**

*“\*Senkyo…\*”*

Ryosei called out to me. I didn’t say a word, but he can sense that I’m not feeling the least bit okay. I didn’t want to continue feeling like this. I look over at my alarm clock and see that it was still 3 in the morning. I need to go back to sleep for school later, I know that, yet I stay awake. I didn’t want to see that dream again.

“Can you cover for me?”

*“\*Hahh… Sure. But I won’t be doing this tomorrow.\*”*

“Got it. Thanks.”

I asked Ryosei to use his spirit power to restore my energy so that I don’t have to sleep. We agreed that he would only do this in emergencies since sleeping is always healthier, but I guess he sees this as one. I’m really lucky to have him.

**167 – Unease in Change**

It was Tuesday morning. The weather was calm, but it was noticeably getting hotter by the day. While Senkyo was on his way to school, he saw Kinro walking in front of him. He entered a quick jog to catch up to him, and as he was about to tap his shoulder…

“Yo, Kinro—Whoa!?”

“S-Senkyo! Help me!”

He turned around the second he heard Senkyo’s voice and grabbed hold of both of his shoulders. He seemed incredibly desperate as he stared intensely at him.

“…You need help studying? Look man, you really scared me. I thought it was something serious.”

“This is serious! I’m struggling to keep up with math and science to the point where I don’t even understand what language our teacher is speaking!”

“Calm down. He was still speaking Japanese, I assure you.”

“How can I calm down? I’ve been studying all night but I can’t even remember half of what I read! Not to mention it’s the end-of-term exams next week! Come on, man, help me out here!”

Senkyo and Kinro were a week away from the end-of-term exams of their first term. In other words, the last hurdle before summer vacation was right around the corner. At this time, there were two types of people: ones that are confident in their academic ability, and ones that are on edge about the incoming storm. Senkyo and Kinro were perfect examples of those two.

“Oh yeah, I guess I should worry a bit.”

“That! That attitude right there! It annoys me so much but I need someone like you to teach me now, SO PLEASE TEACH ME!!!”

“W-WHOA, WHOA, WHOA, C-CALM DOWN!!”

Kinro began shaking Senkyo back and forth, so much so that he felt like he was going to hurl. If it wasn’t for his recent training he might have just done so. Fearing for his life, he reluctantly accepted his request.

“Then it's settled! The library after school. Got it! See ya then!”

After their little interaction on their way to school, the two talked about their schedules on their way to the classroom. Both of them were available in the afternoon, so they decided to hold their tutor session as soon as possible.

Kinro left cheerily, humming a happy tune all the while. His attitude was completely different from earlier. It showed just how much he trusted Senkyo’s ability to teach. Moving on from his sudden job request, Senkyo headed for his seat.

“Good morning, Yukou-san!”

“Oh, good morning, Yutei-san.”

He was immediately greeted by Yukai the moment he got there. Senkyo saw that she was in high spirits again. Lately, she was livelier than usual. When it comes to interacting with other classmates, helping them with schoolwork, and even when she gets invited for lunch, acted happier and even a little more selfish. However, her amount of change was still at the level where most people wouldn’t notice anything different about her. She was still meek and doesn’t initiate interactions. She was only beginning to change, and Senkyo noticed that. He also knew the cause for this, and that was his friend, Ryosei.

“It’s good to know you and Ryosei are getting along.”

“O-Oh… Um, y-yes! I… really appreciate his company. I’d like you to tell him that!”

“He can hear you loud and clear.”

“R-Really!? T-Then, thank you!”

Yukai quickly bowed to Senkyo and turned away in embarrassment. Although this is how she usually acted in school, Senkyo wasn’t used to it anymore. He could remember it clearly…

Ever since Freda taught Ryosei how to enter the spirit world, he had been exploring it, trying to figure out how the world functioned as well as what was causing his connection with Yukai. So far, he only discovered one organization-like body in the spirit world, and that was Savor Soul. It was the perfect place to begin his investigation, but he didn’t go there. In fact, Ryosei did his best to avoid the place as much as possible.

This was what he wanted. Even though he already had a lead, Ryosei decided to throw it away. That was because he wanted to protect Yukai. He could tell the café wasn’t doing anything wrong to their human staff since he always checked Yukai’s health every time she returned from her part-time job. But to be on the safe side, he didn’t want the café to learn that one of their human staff has a unique connection with a spirit.

He thought a relationship between humans and spirits wasn’t looked down upon, at the very least, it wasn’t abhorred at that café. It was a café that served humans after all. His reason was simpler. Overprotectiveness. He was worried to death when he first lost Yukai’s flame. At first, he thought it was because other spirits did something to her because they discovered she was connected to him. If Ryosei angers a spirit, they might attack Yukai instead to get his attention. This is why he decided to leave her alone… when searching the spirit realm at least.

*“\*No! I refuse! Wasn’t it you who said you’ll stay by my side? No breaking promises!\*”*

When Ryosei told Yukai about the situation, she flatly declined, quite aggressively at that. It was the side of Yukai that she would never show anyone else. When she’s around Ryosei, she would be more selfish and expressive of her emotions.

*“\*Change… huh.\*”*

Senkyo looked around the whole classroom. He first spots Itsuki who was strangely reviewing his notes for the next class. Usually, he would just sit there with a bored expression. Ever since he finished his first mission, he began studying more diligently. He wasn’t putting as much time into studying as other students, but it was a surprise nonetheless. The whole class was in awe when they saw him reviewing, even until now.

A few seats over he saw Sora, who was reading his notes with a stern expression. Before, he always got frustrated with studying and gave up halfway. He probably did most of his studying at home since he has over-average grades. The reason for this was quite clear in Senkyo’s head. He wanted to ace next week’s tests… or so people would think. In reality, the source of his determination came from the empty seat right beside Sora. It was the seat that Touma was previously assigned to. Sora told Senkyo everything about what happened on the night they fought and requested him to leave Touma alone. Naturally, he agreed. After suffering that defeat and accepting it all, Senkyo suspected he wanted to make use of most of his free time outside of school to train and improve his technique.

There was a great deal of change around him within the past week. Putting aside the technical sides, all of this change began because got caught in the supernatural.

*\*Is this the effect of entering a different environment, or is it the result of gaining experiences?\**

Senkyo thought to himself. He wasn’t sure about the answer either, but there was one thing he was certain about.

*\*I’m changing…\**

Senkyo’s train of thought was broken when the homeroom teacher showed up and announced themselves. He tried his best to focus on class and put his worries at the back of his head.

**168 – Lunch Together**

Lunchbreak arrived. Kinro invited Senkyo to eat at the cafeteria like always, but today was different. Since Senkyo woke up early due to his nightmare, he prepared a lunch box for himself. After parting ways with Kinro, he headed to the rooftop with his lunch in hand. He arrived at his destination and made his way to the place he sat last time. When he turned the corner, he was surprised to find someone else had taken his secret spot.

“Y-Yukou-senpai…?”

“Hisho-chan?”

It was Yuu. Senkyo stopped and saw her frozen in time with a piece of chicken before her open mouth. After a few seconds pass, she took a bite of her chicken before explaining herself.

“Oh, it was just you. I got scared for a second! I thought it was a teacher coming to check!”

“…Well, it was just me. Wait, no, why did you prioritize your food over me!?”

“The food was getting cold! It was telling me to eat before it did!”

She then took another bite.

“Wow, I never knew you loved food to this extent. I feel like I’m being brushed away here!”

“That wasn’t what I meant to do! Y-You’re here to eat your lunch, right? Come on, sit down.”

Yuu patted the space beside her, urging him to take his break. He walked over and opened his lunch box, revealing a well-balanced meal with meat, fruits, and vegetables.

“Whoa! Your lunch is so colorful!”

Senkyo could see the sparkle in her eyes as she examined his lunch box.

“I think this is normal. I just added more than usual and arranged them a bit. I woke up early so I was a bit bored. After that, this happened.”

“You make it sound so easy! S-So this is what’s normal in this world… how frightening. My lunch box is nowhere near as good as yours.”

Yuu’s lunch box only had chicken and rice beside each other. It was a plain lunch box without any design like Senkyo’s.

“There’s no need to think like that! This is just something I tried out because I didn’t have anything else to do anyway. As long as you have enough food in your lunch, I’d say it’s great! Decorating it like this is just a bit extra.”

“But you said yours was normal.”

“Normal as in no shaped cut-outs or character decorations! I’m sure most people would think your lunch is normal when they don’t have those! Like I said, decoration is just extra. I bet everyone’s lunch would be the same as yours if they’re short on time, mine included.”

“Is that so… Then you don’t think my lunch is weird?”

“No, not at all! You’re like any other student here.”

Senkyo was worried about Yuu. She told him a little about her past before. She was shunned by her classmates because she was different. She may have developed a slight trauma from that, which is why he was trying his best to reassure her.

“Thank you, Senpai. By the way, do you come here often?”

“Not really. This is my second time eating here. I don’t usually make my own lunch, so you wouldn’t really find me anywhere else but in the cafeteria. How about you? Didn’t you eat with Ichika-san?”

“That was the plan, but Watanabe-senpai forgot his lunch box so Ichika-san went to give it to him. She said she would eat with him for today. She invited me to join them but I’m not good with Watanabe-senpai.”

“Do you hate him?”

“No, it’s not like that! It’s just… he can be a bit aggressive and the only time I talked alone with him was when we were training for the battle royale. I think it’ll just be awkward if I go.”

“Is that so? That’s understandable.”

“It is?”

“Well, I don’t really hang out with other people but Kinro and you. I trained with Watanabe-san and sometimes Yamamoto-san, but I wouldn’t say we’ve hung out. I think we see each other as friends, companions at the very least. But if you put me in the same situation, I’d do the same as you.”

“…Really? Hehe, it looks like we’re alike, Senpai. I haven’t hung out with anyone besides Ichika-chan and you.”

“Haha, seems like it. But the only reason we started hanging out was because of you, remember? Your ‘Yukou-senpai Guard Duty?’”’

“Nnn~! That’s your fault, Senpai! If only you took care of yourself more!”

“I told you I’d be fine, right? Nothing attacked us, see?”

“Yeah, something did! Did you forget about the hollowed knights already?”

“Nah, that one doesn’t count. We WENT to it, so that means we still haven’t been attacked yet.”

“Stop trying to make excuses! If we were attacked, then it counts!”

Senkyo and Yuu continued their bickering as they ate their lunches. It took them a while, but they eventually calmed down. The bright blue sky overlooked their small talk as they spoke in between bites. The sun was blasting its blazing heat but the rooftop bulkhead protected them with its tiny shadow. It was noon so there was barely a shadow to coat them, which meant that the two had to sit closer than normal. Despite their close proximity, neither of them seemed to mind. They simply talked merrily as time passed and their lunch boxes went empty.

**169 – Tutoring Session**

The afternoon came and classes were over. Senkyo waited for Kinro outside the classroom while he was giving one of his other friends a quick tutor about the last class. Senkyo was amazed at how good Kinro is at every subject besides math and science.

*“\*Well, everybody has their weakness. I guess Kinro’s is just calculations.\*”*

While he was watching Kinro through the window, Yukai announced her departure as she passed by him.

“I’ll be going now. See you tomorrow, Yukou-san!”

“Yeah, see you then!”

*\*I could’ve teased Ryosei if he were here.\**

Whenever Senkyo was at school, Ryosei would be out in the spirit world. However, every time, before he returns to Senkyo’s house, he stops by to check on Yukai. Senkyo knew he does it out of the kindness of his heart since he can sense his emotions. He doesn’t think of Yukai as a love interest, but that’s what makes him teasable for Senkyo.

“Yukou-senpai, are you ready to go?”

Yuu arrived and called out to Senkyo. She came to accompany him at training like always. However, today was different.

“Huh? Oh, sorry. I forgot to tell you; my training for the next two weeks is canceled. They said I need to focus on the upcoming tests.”

After hearing that, Yuu showed a dissatisfied face.

“You should reaaally work on relaying things like that next time.”

“Yeaaah… sorry about that. I even had a chance to tell you that earlier. It completely slipped my mind.”

She heaved a light sigh as she heard his response.

“Well then, are you going home?”

“Oh, not yet. Kinro is asking me to tutor him for the tests next week.”

“Tutoring? I know you’re smart, Senpai, but does that include academics?”

“Well, I’m average on everything.”

Senkyo’s answer left Yuu in a bit of a bind. Her confused face says it all, “Should you be teaching if your grades are only average?” was written on her expression. And the one to save her from her confused state wasn’t Senkyo. It was Kinro.

“Don’t be fooled by his grades!”

“Oh, good afternoon, Honjou-senpai.”

“Nice to see you, Hisho-chan.”

After a brief exchange of greetings, Yuu picked up the conversation. Evidently, he piqued her curiosity.

“What was it about Yukou-senpai’s grades?”

“Ah, yes. This guy is faking his grades! I wouldn’t say he’s purposely getting the answers wrong, he just doesn’t try! He only listens in class and doesn’t study at home, even for tests like next week! He’ll just sit back watching his anime and still end up with average grades! All he needs is a quick read and he’ll be able to understand it! It’s insane!”

Yuu immediately turns to Senkyo, looking to confirm if what he was saying was true. As a response, he stays silent for a while with his eyes wandering around the place. He was obviously trying to think of an excuse, but Yuu’s piercing gaze was too much for him. So he let out a sigh that signaled his defeat and sated the itch coming from his head.

“Fine, I might have done that in the past…”

Senkyo immediately switches his sights from Yuu to Kinro.

“I thought I told you to keep quiet about that!?”

“O-Oh, you did? Teehee~!”

“Don’t ‘teehee’ me! Hey!”

“Fine, fine, I’m sorry! But I thought it would be fine if Hisho-chan heard it, right? Look, no one’s even around us. They already left.”

Senkyo turned back to Yuu, worried she took it the wrong way as a sign of distrust. He was surprised to see that instead of distrust, he saw Yuu silently staring at the ground. It seems like she was thinking of something.

“Uhm, Hisho-chan? Is something wrong?”

“O-Oh, no it’s nothing!”

“Really?”

The tables have turned completely. Earlier, it was Senkyo who was trying to hide something and Yuu who was peering for answers, but now it was the other way around.

“Y-Yukou-senpai? What are you…?”

“No, it just seems like you wanted something from me. But, if you insist there’s nothing wrong, then I guess I’ll just have to leave it at that…”

Senkyo was trying to pressure Yuu by feigning ignorance. Yuu noticed that, but she couldn’t help but twist her face when Senkyo began slowly walking away. She was about to break. All she needed was one more push.

“…Then, I guess I’ll see you after the exams. You don’t need to come here—”

“W-WAIT!”

Yuu let out a loud yell, stopping Senkyo in his tracks. He slowly turned around pretending to be surprised, but he was immediately compromised when both Yuu and Kinro saw a grin on his face. Yuu’s face was bright red with her hands clutching the hem of her uniform. She couldn’t help but feel ashamed for playing right into his hands, but there was no going back now.

“…C-Can you… also teach me?”

“Sure, I don’t mind.”

He immediately answered her like he was expecting this. From the start, he had a feeling she wanted to ask but still played around with her.

“Uuugh! Yukou-senpai, you meanie!”

And so, Yuu joined Senkyo and Kinro in their study session. Everything should’ve been fine, however…

“Ugh, There are so many people…”

Senkyo scanned the library from its entrance and saw the crowd of students scattered throughout the library. They were all studying for the upcoming tests this coming week. There were students from various classes and year levels, that included some of Senkyo’s classmates.

He grimaced just thinking about what would happen when people see an average-scoring student like him teaching an above-average student like Kinro. Both Kinro and Yuu took notice of Senkyo’s distress. It was clear earlier that he didn’t want anyone to know he was actually quite capable in academics. So, Kinro took the initiative.

“It looks a bit too crowded in here. I probably won’t be able to focus. Say, do you two want to come to my place?”

The other two turned to him before sharing their thoughts.

“Your place huh… I haven’t been there in a while. I’m fine with it as long as Hisho-chan is.”

“I’m okay with it. I’m a bit nervous, though. Hopefully I don’t do something wrong.”

“You’ll be fine, don’t worry. My parents are nice people. I’m sure you’ll feel comfortable in no time!”

**170 – A Great Relationship**

The three left the school and made their way to Kinro’s house. It only took a few minutes of walking before they reached it, and unlike Kinro’s princely looks, his house was just like any other.

“I’m home!”

Kinro unlocked the door to his house and announced his arrival.

“Come on in.”

He waited by the door to welcome the two in and closed the door behind them. Senkyo casually entered and set foot inside while Yuu timidly followed behind.

“Excuse me!”

“…E-Excuse me.”

As everyone was taking their shoes off, a woman appears from the other room.

“Oh! Is that Senkyo I hear? Welcome, welcome. It’s been a while since you last visited. How have you been?”

“Hello there, Mrs. Honjou. I’ve been a bit busy recently, but I’m doing fine. We just came to study since the school library was packed. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Oh no, not at all! I should be thanking you for taking care of Kinro for me. His grades have gone up since the last time you came to tutor him… Oh, and this is?”

Kinro’s mother spots Yuu who was standing behind Senkyo the whole time. Yuu jumped nervously when she realized she was called out. She came out of hiding to introduce herself.

“I-I am Hisho Yuu, a 1st year of Honshou Academy. N-Nice to meet you…”

It was clear to Kinro’s mother that Yuu was the shy type. She didn’t mind that. She even showed a smile to support that fact, but that smile implied more than just support. To her, there were more important topics to get into.

“Ooh! I didn’t know you got yourself a cute girlfriend! Way to go!”

“WHAT!?”

“…!?!?!”

Out of the three friends, Senkyo was the only one that shouted in surprise. His mouth was agape from her shocking statement. Meanwhile, Yuu was too dumbstruck to even function properly. She just stood there with rosy cheeks and stared intensely at the ground, avoiding all eye contact. On the other hand, Kinro simply stood on the sidelines with a huge grin on his face. It was the perfect time for him to tease them.

“Hahaha! See? I told you, you were being too obvious! Even my mom could tell at first sight!”

“What do you mean!? We aren’t even like that! What even gave you that crazy idea, Ms. Honjou!? Was it Kinro!? No, it has to be! You…!”

Senkyo turned to Kinro who was wearing a smug face as he watched the scene unfold before him. However, before Senkyo could even do anything, Kinro’s mother cleared everything up.

“No, it was nothing like that. It was just a woman’s intuition~!”

“W-Well if that’s the case, then you’re wrong! Hisho-chan and I aren’t dating! And another thing, isn’t that something you say to your own son!?”

“It’s a woman’s intuition. I mean, if a shy girl wanted to hide behind someone, it would be someone they’re most comfortable with, no? And with how close you two were, I thought just maybe… something is afoot!”

“H-Huh? I… no! T-That may be so, but it doesn’t mean we’re in a relationship!”

“Hmm, maybe not. Honestly, I just wanted to tease you a bit. But with those reactions… Oh, how rude of me! I’m keeping you here for too long. Here, Senkyo, you two can go on ahead to Kinro’s room. He’ll bring up the snacks before you kids start studying.”

“N-No, that’s…”

Senkyo tried to stop advancing any further. Unfortunately for him, everyone in the household was against him.

“Gladly! You two can wait in my room. I just need to help my mom a bit!”

“Kinroooo!!”

“Take care, you two!”

After the coordinated double team from the Honjou family, Senkyo and Yuu were left with no choice but to go to Kinro’s room by themselves. Yuu was dead silent the whole time she was following Senkyo to Kinro’s room. She didn’t dislike the situation; she just couldn’t produce words after breaking down from all the teasing she received.

Senkyo opened the door annoyedly and dropped himself in front of the coffee table in the middle of the room. Yuu stood by the door, amazed at how carefree he was being in another person’s room. She gently closed the door behind her and sat on the other side of the table opposite to Senkyo. While she was collecting her thoughts, he spoke to her in an apologetic tone.

“Sorry about that Hisho-chan. Their teasing can get out of hand.”

“Oh, I-Its fine.”

“Yeah right. I guess shutting down in the middle of a conversation is normal for you?”

“…W-Well, I was a bit troubled. More importantly, Senpai, you really are close to Honjou-senpai and even his family. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him act like that in school.”

“Yeah, they’re good people. It’s been about 4 years since I met Kinro. The first time I visited his house was in our last year of middle school. I still had a bit of my edge at the time so I was a little rude to his parents. Hahh… thinking about it again is making me cringe. But thankfully, everyone here was kind enough to look over that. After that a lot of things happened and, well, now we’re like this.”

“Wow, I never would’ve thought. So you’re the type to have fewer friends but closer relationships.”

“I think so. How about you?”

“I’m… not so sure. I think it’s a bit early to tell. I don’t have someone that I’ve been friends with for too long. Ichika-chan was my first one, but I only met her at the start of the year.”

“Hm? Is that so? You know, I would think about the quality of the relationship rather than how long it is.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, when you meet a person for the first time and get along with them, you share some laughs, have fun together, get comfortable being around each other, they don’t have any bad influences on you, and you don’t have any bad influences on them, I think that’s enough to say it’s a good relationship. Then, let’s say that relationship deteriorates. Maybe you had a fallout, you two discover something about each other neither of you likes or maybe they’re pushing you away and the good times end there, it doesn’t change the past. You had a good time with them. You enjoyed each other’s company. You can just leave that good-quality relationship in the past as good memories. But what I think forges the greatest relationship is when you two can repair it no matter what happens. Through thick and thin, the good or the bad, if your relationship stays strong, then I don’t think it's necessary to consider how long it’s been, right? Well, at least that’s what I think.”

After Senkyo finally finishes saying his piece, he noticed the silence looming around the both of them. Yuu was staring at Senkyo, her eyes glistening in awe and her mouth slightly agape. It was then realized just how sappy and embarrassing his lines were. In an attempt to escape her silent judgment, he directs his gaze to the door, hoping Kinro finally enters to break the atmosphere and save him, but then, Yuu spoke in a soft and reserved tone.

“Then… what do you think of relationships made out of lies?”

Senkyo turned back to Yuu, a spark of light illuminating his mortified eyes. It seems that she was interested in the conversation after all. Thinking this, he responds to her adamantly.

“That doesn’t matter.”

“…”

Sensing she was looking for more answers, he expounded.

“If it's made with lies, then the truth will surely break it. What happens next depends on both parties. Whether they can accept those lies and if both of them desire to repair what they’ve lost, or maybe even if only one side repairs it to make it up to the other person, then surely, it would be a great relationship. Though it probably won’t be the same as normal, maybe in some circumstances it will. Hey, what do I know? Human relationships are hard, and I definitely don’t have a degree in this. I’m just spouting a bunch of nonsense hahaha…”

“I don’t think so.”

“Huh?”

Just as Senkyo was trying to hide his embarrassment with a self-deprecating comment, Yuu silences him.

“I think that’s a beautiful ideology. I love it!”

“…”

The silence around them turned into allure. Yuu’s smile was bright and radiant, reflecting the very happiness in her soul with this one expression. It was like a mirror, letting him peer through the other side, giving shape to raw emotions. He couldn’t help but be drawn in by her honest personality. People always have walls around them, not letting anyone see their raw emotions, and keeping some form of distance between each other. The same goes for Yuu. But at that very moment, that wall disappeared, giving Senkyo a glimpse of her true self. Seeing as she did it so naturally, with not a hint of forcefulness, hiding no ulterior motives, and doing it just to clearly express herself to him. It was no wonder that Senkyo was captivated by it.

Two knocks came from the door, making Yuu turn to it, breaking her expression, and in turn, cutting off Senkyo’s trance. It was followed by Kinro’s voice with a flippant tone.

“Hey, it’s okay for me to open the door, right?”

Senkyo directed him a sharp glare. If those were enough to cut somebody up, Kinro would already be minced into small, tiny pieces. That was just how furious he was that his deep revere was cut short due to him. It was so powerful that Kinro backed up a bit, realizing he made a mistake, he turned his volume down into a meek tone.

“I-I am very sorry for the intrusion… H-Here, some snacks for you…”

Kinro slowly entered the room, trying his best to stand strong against Senkyo’s glare, and placed a tray of snacks and tea on the table. Realizing there was nothing that could be done, Senkyo let out a sigh, took out his notes, and quickly read through them. He needed a bit of time to review everything before tutoring anyone. Kinro and Yuu studied by themselves until Senkyo was ready. After a little bit over 30 minutes, the three’s study session finally began.

**171 – Best Friend**

Kinro and Yuu had their brows furrowed the whole time they were studying by themselves but it slowly dissipated when Senkyo started teaching them. They spent the rest of the afternoon immersed in their studies. They wouldn’t have noticed it was getting late if it weren’t for the darkness dimming their surroundings and hindering their vision to keep studying.

The three cut their studies short and packed their bags before it got too late. Senkyo and Yuu said their farewells while Kinro saw them off. Dusk had arrived and the streets were under the twilight sky by the time the two left the Honjou household.

“Th-That was hard. I can’t anymore, I’m tired. Why do you look like you’re fine after all that, Senpai?”

“I don’t know. This isn’t the first time I tutored someone so maybe I got used to it?”

“Uuu… I wish I was like that.”

“Well, whatever the case, we’re still going back tomorrow to finish the rest of the study material. Go get some rest but don’t slack off, okay?”

“Yes, Teacher.”

Kinro and Yuu have yet to understand the rest of the lessons on their worst subjects, so they decided to continue the remaining lessons tomorrow. Senkyo was the teacher of this group so he had to act like one. But the more he did, the more he cringed after hearing each line he spoke echoing in his head. They did quite a bit of mental damage to him since he knew he was being a hypocrite. He never studied for tests unless it was for teaching someone. Telling someone to spend time studying for themselves to get high grades without himself even doing so was biting on his conscience.

“You know, you can stick to calling me ‘Senpai.’ I don’t like the sound of being called a teacher.”

“If that’s what you want, then I don’t mind, Senpai.”

“Thanks. By the way, your apartment is in town, right? Maybe I can walk you there this time.”

“You don’t need to go out of your way. I can take care of myself you know.”

Yuu scowled at Senkyo, making him shrink back a little. She obviously took his intentions the wrong way, so he quickly explained himself.

“N-No, you’ve got it wrong. I was just planning to buy some stuff at the grocery store so I thought I might as well offer you… but if you don’t want to, that’s completely fine too!”

Yuu’s mood quickly shifted and her eyes brightened. She faced Senkyo energetically almost as if the study session earlier didn’t faze her at all.

“Then how about going together instead? I was planning to do the same thing!”

“O-Oh, what a coincidence. Sure, I don’t mind.”

“Hooray! Hey, Senpai, how about showing me which vegetables you used in your lunch box earlier? I want to make something like that too!”

“Hahaha, you sure are fired up. Okay but picking them isn’t good enough, you know? You actually have to cook them.”

“That’s rude! I know how to cook! I just don’t remember the name of the vegetables is all.”

“Seriously? How did you even last this long here?”

“Well, I mostly only eat meat but… You know what, that doesn’t matter now! I’m a vampire so I can live without vegetables.”

“…”

“H-Hey! What are you looking at me with sympathetic eyes for!? I’m telling the truth here!”

Senkyo placed his hand on her shoulder, his eyes glinted, and one side of his mouth curved into a half-smile. Then, he followed with a mocking remark.

“Look, Hisho-chan. Being picky isn’t good for you. Even I eat almost anything.”

“STOP IIIIIIIT!!!”

The two continued bickering and entertaining themselves as they shopped together for the night. The hours flew by and the two parted for the night and headed to their homes.

The next day. Senkyo was on his way to school when Kinro walked up to him. Unlike yesterday, his face was just like the morning sun, bright, cheery, and exorcised of all his worries. He went with a spring in his step followed by a pat on Senkyo’s back.

“Yo! Good morning Senkyo!”

“You seem really happy today.”

“Of course, I am! All thanks to you. At this rate, I’ll have nothing to worry about. I’m counting on you later as well.”

“Yeah, yeah, I got it. I don’t mind tutoring you but you won’t have me forever, you know?”

“I’m working on it. You’ll see! I won’t even need your help on the next tests.”

Senkyo shifts his eyes in the other direction as he replies in a snarky tone.

“Sure… Good luck on that one.”

“Hey! You don’t look like you believe me at all! You even looked away!”

“No, it must be your imagination. I was just looking at the birds.”

Senkyo turned back to Kinro. Unexpectedly, instead of a slightly annoyed expression, he was peering at him. It was only for a second, but he was undoubtedly scrutinizing his face. Senkyo was sure of this.

“…Then I guess that’s fine. So? Have you read any books lately?”

*\*This guy…\**

“Only a few. I don’t have much time anymore.”

“Oh? Why is that?”

Senkyo paused for a bit before responding.

“…I’m training, remember? I told you before.”

“Ah, yeah, I think you said that. So what’s this all about? Surely you aren’t training for no reason, right?”

He stared at the ground, avoiding contact with Kinro’s eyes.

“It’s… kendo training. Nothing much.”

“Really? Is that why you always have that thing around you?”

Kinro pointed at the shinai bag hanging on the same shoulder Senkyo was carrying his bag. Kinro added.

“But didn’t you say that was for your friend?”

“Oh, that… That was a lie. I was just a bit shy to admit it at first, but I took a bit of a liking to it.”

Senkyo answered casually. The story he made up was to explain why he always had a shinai bag on him. But now he was exposing that lie to make it seem like the truth.

“You were shy, huh? Come on, you know you didn’t have to worry about me.”

“Are you being serious right now? I can already imagine you teasing me about this.”

“Hmm, you’re not wrong.”

“See!?”

“Hahaha, well is that so, then why are you telling me this now?”

“You’re worried, aren’t you? I bet you saw my face when you were coming up to me.”

“As sharp as ever.”

Earlier that day, Senkyo had another untimely wake due to the same nightmare from yesterday. He was more than aware of his mood but he didn’t expect Kinro to catch on immediately.

Kinro is great at reading the mood. It was probably something he picked up from getting popular. He knew how to read the people swarming around him, which is probably why he was even better at reading his best friend.

Senkyo didn’t need to reveal his lie, but it was his precaution. Now that Kinro was getting slightly concerned, there was a chance that he would stick his nose out where it’s not supposed to be. He might try to find a way to help but end up caught in his supernatural business. Endangering Kinro was something he wanted to avoid, and so he sacrificed his lie for another one closer to the truth, but also one that would relieve his worries, even for just a little bit.

“You don’t need to worry. I was just told by my mentor how terrible I was doing. Nothing to concern yourself over.”

“So that’s what happened. Well taking to account what you’ve been doing in the past, I’m sure you’re doing great. Chin up, you’ll get there at some point.”

“Sure, thanks. But you don’t need to worry about me too much. I’m more than capable of solving my problems by myself.”

“Heh, really now? Is that your way of telling me not to intrude in your personal life?”

“No, that’s not—”

Just as Senkyo was trying to explain himself, Kinro tapped the front of his shoulders with his knuckles and directed a smirk at him.

“Not happening. It’s not fair if you’re the only one that does it.”

Senkyo had his mouth agape from Kinro’s remark. He was a bit startled, but it wasn’t long until he snapped out of it with a tired sigh.

“Fine, I got it, do what you want. But still, I did *\*that\** for myself. You don’t need to keep worrying about it.”

“Then I guess I’m doing this for myself too. So you have no choice but to indulge me.”

Senkyo wore a troubled face as he scratched his head. It looks like his efforts were useless. Kinro declared that he would poke his nose into his troubles if he got the chance. Senkyo had no way of stopping him since he did the same thing in the past. Now his only choice was to make it so that he doesn’t find a need to bother him. Giving in to Kinro’s selfishness, he ended the subject with a single retort.

“I guess what I did just turned you into a selfish brat, huh?”

They ended their conversation about their unknown past and continued walking to school. Senkyo spent the rest of his morning listening carefully to the lessons like he always did. The time ticked away and the bell finally rang, signaling the start of lunch break.

**172 – Awaited Confrontation**

Since Senkyo woke up early again, he was able to make himself lunch. He separated from Kinro and headed to the same spot he usually ate at—the rooftop. And on his way there, he had a thought that just couldn’t leave his mind.

*\*I wonder if Hisho-chan is there again.\**

He was reminded of the charming smile Yuu showed him yesterday. He couldn’t get his mind off it, he wanted to see it again, and so he opened the door to the rooftop and looked around in search of his underclassman. Seeing that nobody was around in front of the entrance, he closed the door and turn the corner of the bulkhead, and saw…

“…She’s not here. Well, she did say that she ate here just because Ichika-san ate with Watanabe-san. He probably wouldn’t forget his lunch twice in a row.”

Just as he was thinking these thoughts, the door to the rooftop opened, and saw…

“Hey, what are you doing here?”

“A-A teacher!?”

“Hm? Why d’you sound so surprised? ‘Course, I’m a teacher. Didja think I was your girlfriend or somethin’?”

“Uhh…”

Senkyo buried his face in the palm of his hand to cover the disappointment and embarrassment that was leaking through it. This was his third time eating on the roof, no teachers came for him the first two times, why would he expect one on the third? Thoughts like that echoed in his head to excuse himself for getting into this strange situation. Unfortunately for him, the teacher that caught him wasn’t going to let him finish.

“Well, whatever the case, get out of here before I report you.”

“H-Huh? You’re just going to let me go?”

*\*This guy is pretty lax… Is this really okay?\**

Senkyo’s confusion was understandable. Normally, teachers would punish students that break rules, but for some reason, the person standing in front of him wasn’t like that. Thinking about it carefully, the teacher didn’t even sound furious when he first saw him here. In fact, he was talking casually the whole time in a relaxed tone.

“Look, escapin’ reality is normal for students nowadays. You were soo lonely that you came to eat here by yourself so that no one would see how pathetic your life is, I understand that. If I punished ya here, I’d be rubbin’ salt into the wound. Just accept my kindness and leave.”

“W-WHAT ARE YOU SAYING!? WHAT KIND OF TEACHER ARE YOU!?”

“What d’you mean?”

The teacher left Senkyo absolutely muddled. He threw all sorts of insults at him without holding anything back, in such a casual tone no less. If someone like this actually taught a class, it would be chaos. He could only stare at the teacher dumbfoundedly as he tried to collect himself. But unfortunately…

“Hm? Wait, aren’t you the guy that became the new wielder of Kuro Yaiba? Ahh, now that I said it that’s totally you.”

“HUH!?”

One surprise came after another. Senkyo let out a startled yell at the initial surprise, but he soon connected the dots and got a grip on the situation. The teacher just talked about Kuro Yaiba, something that no one would know except for the Konjou clan’s members. Which can only mean that the teacher in front of him was one of its members.

It all made sense now. There was no possible way someone like him would pass as a teacher. Not only was his attitude overgrown, but his black hair also grew so long that it was covering his left eye and he had to tie the back of his hair into a small ponytail. The white shirt under his black vest was unkempt and wrinkled with a few holes unbuttoned. His gaze sharpened on Senkyo and took a small piece of paper out of his black tie.

“Lucky me.”

He dropped the paper on the ground, releasing a blue light that shaped some kind of magic circle with what seemed to be Japanese kanji and various other shapes and patterns written on it.

“It’s a warding talisman. It prevents bystanders from coming here. It’s not as powerful as Reiko-sama’s barrier but it does its job as long as the rest stay oblivious to the talisman’s effect. You know what this means, right?”

Senkyo watched the man carefully and spotted blue ripples coming out of his hands using espy. A marking of a brute channeling kindled spirit power. Sensing his malicious intent, he immediately enhanced the lunch box in his hands and pulled it up to shield him from his incoming attack, but just before it all happened, Senkyo suddenly changed forms and used flash strike backward into the fence.

Senkyo and the man used flash strike at the exact same time. He managed to sustain the distance between them and watched the teacher punch through the air he previously stood on.

“Looks like you have the reaction time to cut it. But that won’t—”

The man’s speech was interrupted when a black circle unexpectedly appeared below him and shot out multiple chains that bound him on the ground.

“What the!?”

The man shouted in surprise, on the other hand, Senkyo curved his lips into a smile. Following the man’s binding, a creak resounded throughout the rooftop, indicating the door to the place opened. Once the door reached a reasonable angle, Senkyo turned in that direction, and saw…

“Are you alright, Senpai?”

“Yeah, thanks to you.”

His vampire underclassman, Hisho Yuu.

**173 – School Rooftop**

“So, who is this guy, Senpai?”

“Dunno. I think he’s a member of the Konjou clan that works in the school. But one thing’s for sure, he isn’t a teacher.”

Senkyo and Yuu look at the man inquisitively, encouraging him to explain himself. He furrowed his brows showing his annoyed expression and clicked his tongue before answering their question.

“Is this how you treat your elders? I’m Hashimoto Haruto. As you handsomely deduced, I’m not a teacher here and I’m also a part of the clan. I manage the rooftop here and keep and maintain its functionality.”

“Hm? There’s nothing on this roof though…”

Yuu looked around to check as she pointed out the discrepancy in his words, and just as she remembered, the rooftop was certainly empty. Nothing that needs managing or anything that has functionality. Senkyo glared at him with his pupils flared.

“Hey, hey, calm down! Don’t jump to conclusions, I’m telling the truth here! You just don’t see it that’s why. Use poltergeist to lift up that tile at the corner over there and you’ll see I’m telling the truth.”

“Hisho-chan, can you watch him for me?”

“Got it.”

Senkyo walked up to the corner a few meters away from him. He used espy to check if there was any spirit power embedded in the tile but nothing showed up. Carefully, he placed his hands on the tile and noticed it was loose. He wanted to avoid following Haruto’s instructions as much as possible in case of a trap, but if it was a sensor-activated trap then it was better to execute it as fast as possible.

He used poltergeist to lift the tile to the sky, and at the same time, he used flash strike to get back as far as possible. Five seconds passed and nothing happened.

“J-Just what in the hell are you doing?”

Haruto lightly shook his head accompanied by rapid blinking as he stared at Senkyo in confusion. A genuine reaction that gave away whether there was actually a trap placed or not. Sensing it was safe to approach it, Senkyo walked up and saw a circle with various shapes and texts around it.

“This is… a teleportation circle!”

Underneath the floating tile laid a teleportation circle engraved in the cement.

“…”

But something looked wrong. The circle was too small for anyone to teleport on it. Senkyo took a closer look and before he was certain, but now there was no doubt about it. There were fewer symbols on the teleportation circle for it to function properly.

“You were saying you’re doing maintenance here, right? Then why are there fewer symbols on this circle than the others I’ve seen?”

“You’re really meticulous and it’s getting reaaaaally annoying.”

“Then how about starting by explaining everything before I ask the questions to make you?”

“We sure have a cocky new wielder on our hands… Look, this school is used as a second teleportation hub for the Konjou clan. In case of an attack on the clan or other emergency situations, hunters on the field will use this school to quickly get themselves there. Since we mostly operate within the town and places around it, this school, which is closest to the center of the town, is the best place our units can funnel in. The circle you’re looking at is just one part of a huge teleportation area, that being, this whole rooftop. Why do you think this roof has tiles despite banning students from entering it? In the first place, why did this school even ban students from coming here? There hasn’t been a single record of anyone dropping themselves from here since this was first built. To hide our secrets obviously! …And another thing, you didn’t really think school rooftops always looked clean, did you!? Leaves, trash, puddles, moss, this place was a mess before I got here! Every single goddamn day I clean this place just to make it look pretty for some stupid neat freak named Sakurai Kosuke! I did this y’know!? I did!”

Haruto told Senkyo and Yuu all about the real purpose of the school’s rooftop, and it was clear in their astonished faces that they weren’t expecting this, but then, partway through Haruto’s explanation abruptly turned to a tangent of him complaining about his job, as a result, the other two’s faces also turned from amazement to disappointment.

Senkyo and Yuu stared at the man silently as they processed his story. They didn’t know much about the school’s history, but it was certainly strange to install tiles on the roof that will never be used by students.

Senkyo walked up to the other corner close to them and examined it. It was loose just like the other tile and using poltergeist, it revealed another circle. It was the same size as the other one, but it had different symbols engraved in it. Thinking about it carefully, he remembered Freda mentioning that teleportation circles were a new technology that she developed only after meeting with the clan.

*\*There’s probably a lot to talk about if I ask about this, and I don’t trust this guy to be capable of actually teaching me anything. I’ll just ask Freda-san directly once the tests are over with. Everything he’s saying seems to be true, but still…\**

He placed the two tiles back in place and faced Haruto who was chained to the ground.

“Then why exactly did you attack me?”

As a response to Senkyo’s question, Haruto glared at him.

“You have some nerve asking me that question. Don’t tell me you already forgot who I am!?”

“What is this time? You’re Hashimoto Haruto, right? I can’t forget you if I haven’t met you before.”

“But you’ve obviously heard of me. Then w—”

“Nope, not at all.”

Haruto’s ill temper immediately subsided the moment he heard Senkyo’s curt response and began to stutter.

“N-No, that can’t be. Surely… Surely, your beautiful mentor talked about me, right?”

“Y-You’re talking about Shimizu-sensei, right…? Why did you say it like that are you some kind of creep? And no, she didn’t tell me anything about you.”

The new mentor that was assigned to Senkyo, Shimizu Yoshiko, one of Konjou Reiko’s apprentices and one of the judges of the previous battle royale that witnessed Senkyo’s true power. He has trained under her for 2 weeks now, and in those 2 weeks, he has never heard her speak of anyone.

Having the reality of the situation shown to Haruto was like someone slapping him with a fish across the face, so his soul attempted to ascend to the heavens to escape the mortifying situation he got himself into. Senkyo and Yuu simply eyeballed at him in pity as whatever he was going through was clearly something no human should experience. Seeing as he was mentally broken, Yuu released the chains and freed his restrictions, yet he kept kneeling like some kind of religious statue but instead of praying he made a perfect image of what a man would look like without a soul.

They waited a few minutes for Haruto’s soul to make a full recovery and snap himself out of his disoriented state. After collecting the power to move his mouth Haruto finally spoke.

“No… no, this can’t be…”

If Senkyo wasn’t wrong, this was the first stage of grief—denial. Unfortunately, he didn’t have the time to let him stay like this. So, he returned the favor of attacking him by hitting him on the head.

“Hey! Answer me if you don’t want me to report to the clan about this!”

“Hmph, do it. I don’t care.”

“Fine. I guess I’ll report this to Shizumu-sensei first.”

“Wh-What!? Hey! Don’t you dare do that!”

“Alright, then do you feel like explaining yourself yet?”

“Grr… Tsk.”

**174 – Difficult Relationships**

Haruto sucked in his anger and stood up to properly face Senkyo.

“As you should have known, I am Yoshiko-san’s destined partner. We are meant to be guided by the red strings of fate! But then, the past few days she’s only been talking about her teaching a shrimp like you. And now that I caught you myself, it was the perfect time for me to test if you are truly worthy of training under my goddess.”

He was strangely passionate about what he was talking about to the point where he had to explain it in a grandiose way to Senkyo. Although Yuu didn’t seem to catch on to what he was saying, Senkyo was kind enough to translate.

“So basically, your one-sided love with Yoshiko-sensei is still going unreceived. And now you’re jealous that she’s been talking about our training rather than noticing you. Got it.”

“H-Hey! Don’t—”

“Ah, I see now. I probably wouldn’t have understood if you didn’t explain it, Senpai. He was being a bit weird.”

“…!”

“Don’t worry, Hisho-chan. It’s hard to understand him in the first place which is probably why he’s still being ignored by Shizumu-sensei.”

“…!!”

“Oh, no wonder. The poor thing.”

“…!!!”

While Senkyo and Yuu were talking amongst themselves, Haruto was being shot down mercilessly by their conversation. Before they even noticed what was happening, he was already reduced to a lifeless corpse.

“Hm… Looks like he knew the truth deep down. He has it rough. Maybe we should leave him alone, Hisho-chan.”

“Y-Yeah, I agree.”

“L-Look, we won’t tell anyone about what happened here, so cheer up, kay?”

Senkyo delivered his last words of pity before closing the door to the rooftop. The two walk down the stairs with a bit of lingering regret in their hearts. They needed to question Haruto as much as possible to determine he was safe, but in turn, they completely demolished his mental state. Looking to change the air around them, Senkyo spoke.

“Hey, thanks for saving me back there.”

“No, that was nothing really.”

Earlier, before Haruto used flash strike, and as Senkyo was enhancing his lunch box, Yuu’s voice echoed in his head, telling him to step back the moment the enemy moves up towards him. Senkyo did exactly that and Yuu was able to cast binding magic from over the wall to cage Haruto. But now that he thought about it carefully…

“Hmm… You were able to determine our locations with your enhanced senses, right?”

“Yes, why?”

“Well, since your classroom is on the bottom floor. I was wondering if you heard our conversation all the way on the rooftop, and over all the other conversations going on throughout the school no less.”

“U-Uhm…”

Yuu seemed to be troubled when Senkyo pointed that out. She gave him a reply in a nervous tone.

“A-Are you doubting the power of a vampire, Senpai?”

“I mean, I would imagine having hearing like that would jumble every conversation in the background, so I just thought that maybe…”

He gazed into her eyes, pressuring her to tell the truth. Her face only became even more uneasy until she finally broke into a sigh.

“Nothing gets past you huh… I just wanted to show you the lunch I prepared from the ingredients we bought together. So I thought maybe you were at the rooftop again and went there. But then I heard you talking to that guy earlier and understood what was happening.”

“O-Oh, I see… then what happened to Ichika-san?”

“I separated from her today. If you weren’t there, then I guess I would be eating by myself.”

Senkyo reflexively looked away with a bit of a red tinge on his face.

“Then… I guess it would be really bad if we don’t eat together now, huh?”

“Y-Yeah, it would… B-But after what happened I guess—”

“Alright then! Wanna go to the cafeteria then?”

“Y-Yes, that’d be great!”

The two headed to the cafeteria and used the time they had left to eat their lunch and enjoy their time with each other. However, their little excursion would not go unnoticed.

After school, in the middle of a break from their study session, Yuu had to go to the washroom so Kinro kindly directed her to its location verbally. In her absence was the perfect opportunity for Kinro to make his move. He peered at Senkyo inquisitively and slid to the middle of the table directly in front of him.

“So?”

Senkyo cocked his head to the side while he was taking a swig of his juice, indicating he needed him to be clearer about his purpose.

“Don’t play dumb. You know what I’m talking about. You and Hisho-chan ate together at lunch, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, what about it?”

“Oh, come on! Can’t you tell me more?”

“Never mind that. I have no idea what you’re on about.”

Kinro heaved a sigh and decided to stop beating around the bush.

“You and Hisho-chan are going out, aren’t you?”

“Oh, it was just another one of your ridiculous jokes.”

Senkyo left it like that and turned his attention to his textbook while taking another swig of juice.

“Don’t brush me off here! I’m serious!”

“Even if you are, you’re wrong. I just happened to come across her and ate together. There’s nothing wrong with eating with a female friend is there? Unless… wait! You swing that way!?”

“Shut it! You’re the one trying to throw terrible jokes here not me!”

“That so? Then are we done with this? I’m trying to pull your grades up over here.”

“I truly appreciate that which is why I’m going this. I’m not poking my nose out of curiosity. This is your first partner, right? I can give you some good advice. Although I never had a girlfriend myself, I heard a lot of stories from the ones around me. I’m popular after all.”

“Wow, this guy really just said that.”

Although Senkyo winced at Kinro, he could tell he was being earnest. He wasn’t some kind of love guru but he could definitely pitch in some advice when it came to the opposite sex. He appreciated his offer, but he didn’t need it.

“Thanks, but no thanks. We aren’t an item. What even gave you the idea in the first place? If it’s because we leave school together, I already told you yesterday that she’s just another student from the same dojo, the same as Watanabe-san.”

Yesterday, Senkyo told him that he was learning kendo. After seeing the opportunity, he used that as another cover-up for why he often left together with Yuu and Itsuki. He asked about it before but all Senkyo did was dodge the topic. Senkyo pointed that out again, but from the look on Kinro’s face, that didn’t seem to be the case.

“I saw you earlier this morning when you were on your way to school. And you had the same, depressed face you had yesterday. You tried to cover it up when you were in the classroom, but it was still there. All the way up until lunch break, that is. When lunch break came, you bolted out of the classroom with a huge grin on your face. Completely different from your attitude all morning. And later I spot you eating together with Hisho-chan like the happiest couple in the world. Does that ring any bells?”

Senkyo looked far off to the side, reminding himself of the events earlier that day. Kinro wasn’t wrong. He was being plagued by his dream that morning and he was undeniably happier when he was talking with Yuu.

*\*Happiest couple in the world huh… if only.\**

Senkyo turned towards Kinro with a troubled look on his face.

“I-I mean, that did happen. But there’s no way I looked THAT different.”

“Hahh… If only you had a mirror.”

The door behind Kinro opened and entered Yuu, cutting their conversation there.

“Sorry for taking so long. I got a bit confused.”

“No problem. Do you want to continue or rest a bit more?”

“I’d like to study now if you don’t mind.”

“Well then, let’s get back on track.”

**175 – Aching Heart**

The three continued their study session together and finished it without any further trouble. Dusk had arrived once more which marked the end of the study session for the three. Kinro gave his thanks and farewells as the two walked away towards the distance.

“Nnn~ It’s finally over with!”

Yuu stretched her arms to release her strain from studying. Senkyo gave her a sidelong glance, watching her as she spread her arms to the sky.

*\*I wonder what she would look like without her jacket…\**

Her blue jacket was obstructing Senkyo’s vision from seeing her body’s curves as she extended her arms upward. It took only a few seconds after the thought crossed his mind until he realized what he was doing. He shook his head furiously in hopes that those impure thoughts get blown away.

*\*D-Damn that Kinro… If only he hadn’t said that.\**

“Hm? Is there something wrong, Senpai?”

“A-Ah, no, nothing at all!”

Senkyo was a bit flustered, indicated clearly by his actions and flushed cheeks. Yuu had no idea why so she decided to ignore it.

“If you say so… Oh yeah, Senpai, do you want to come with me to town? There’s a café I’ve been looking at for a while, but, well… I don’t want to go alone.”

“Sure. I don’t have any other plans.”

“Great! Let’s get going!”

The two made their way to town and arrive in front of the café. The signboard in front of the building had “Savor Soul” written in fancy letters.

*\*So this is that café that Ryosei saw… Well, I’m not here to cause any trouble. I better not try to snoop around. I’d hate to ruin Hisho-chan’s first time here.\**

They entered a café and got themselves a table. A waitress approached them and took their orders. Senkyo looked around in search of Yukai, but he didn’t see her anywhere. Then, he remembered that she was also taking a break to prepare for the exams. Yukai didn’t tell him anything about it. It was just a memory from Ryosei’s side.

*\*That reminds me, Ryosei is also tutoring her. He’s been coming home later because of it. If that guy was alive, I swear they’d be a couple… Tsk, dammit Kinro. Now I can’t think of anything else but couples. I’ll get you back for this!\**

While Senkyo was lost in his mind, Yuu had been staring at him for a while now. Seeing the rapid changes in his expression she decided to call out to him.

“Senpai? Is there something wrong?”

“A-Ah, no, nothing at all!”

“You said the exact same thing earlier! Even your stuttering was the same!”

“Wh—That’s…”

“Senpai.”

She directed Senkyo a fierce glare, driving off any more untruths from his mouth. He let out a sigh, resigning himself to his fate.

“Maybe I’m a bit out of it. Kinro said something weird earlier and it’s been on my mind ever since.”

“I don’t know if it’ll do much, but I can hear you out.”

“I’m fine, really.”

Senkyo insisted he was okay, but she didn’t appreciate that and began to pout.

“Hmph, what a joke. That’s what you said before when I first proposed to guard you. And look what happened earlier this morning. If it weren’t for me, you’d be in a lot of trouble, Senpai.”

“Kgh…”

Senkyo couldn’t talk back. If it weren’t for her, he would’ve been forced to fight Haruto on the rooftop with only a lunch box in hand. It wasn’t a situation he would want to experience again.

*\*To think her Yukou-senpai Guard Duty would actually work… The naming was so lame that took it lightly. Ugh, I feel like I’ve been defeated in more ways than one.\**

“So, Senpai?”

Yuu kept pursuing the subject. If this kept up, she wouldn’t let go of him until she was satisfied. With that in mind, Senkyo responded in a roundabout way.

“Do you have someone you care about?”

Yuu was a bit taken aback, but after the initial surprise subsided, she spoke.

“I… I care about my family back at home.”

“Oh yeah, since they’re in another world, they’re probably on your mind all the time. My situation is something similar. You care about them so much that you’d always want to… want to be with them.”

“…Yeah. I’d like to see them again.”

Both Senkyo and Yuu turned silent. Their minds froze, inadvertently forgetting about the conversation they were having, and being sucked by their own thoughts.

*\*Someone I care about so much that I always want to be with them… I tried to avoid mentioning anything Kinro said, but that sure backfired… When I said that, the only person that came to mind…\**

Senkyo raised his head and saw Yuu, thinking to herself, lost in her thoughts. He couldn’t help but admire her. She had her head down so he couldn’t see her expression clearly. He unconsciously put his arms on the table to take a closer look at her. They were each in their own world, completely unaware of what was happening around them. Which was probably how they managed to ignore the waitress beside them for so long.

“U-Umm… Sir, your order is here…”

“O-Oh, sorry about that!”

Senkyo took his arms off the table which allowed the waitress to lay down their orders. His panicked voice alerted Yuu to raise her head and see her order getting placed in front of her. For Senkyo was a cup of black tea, while Yuu’s order was a strawberry parfait.

“Woaah! This looks delicious! This is going to be my first time eating something like this.”

“Haha, glad to see you enjoying yourself. You can call me anytime you want company. I’m sure I’ll be available.”

“Thank you, Senpai. By the way, are you okay with black tea? Didn’t you have some back in your home?”

“Hmm, I guess you make a fair point. Then how about next time? We’ll come back again and order something new.”

“…Next time, huh.”

Yuu’s face dropped for a second. To Senkyo’s surprise, she directed him with a strained smile, but the tone of her voice sounded like she was saying it from her heart. If he had to relate her current expression to a word, it would be… bittersweet.

“Yeah, let’s come back sometime!”

He didn’t know how to respond to her. It was the first time he saw anyone make that kind of expression. Luckily for him, his worries disappear when Yuu started to act normally. They continued to chat and enjoyed their night together. Senkyo undoubtedly had a great time that night. However…

*\*You are not human.\**

“GAHH!! HAA…! HAA…! HAA…!”

Just like the past two nights, the same nightmare assaulted him in his sleep. However, unlike the other nights, it never hit him this hard before. He was gasping for air, blood pumping through his veins at an increased rate, and anxiety filling up his paled face. But not only that, it was almost like he had a black hole in his heart, compressing it tightly and sucking it in, leaving only negative emotions, the true nature of that black hole. And of course, extreme emotions like that were poured over to his bodymate, Ryosei.

*“\*H-Hey! Senkyo, keep it together!\*”*

Hearing Ryosei’s voice caused him to get a grasp of the situation and immediately tried to level his breathing and calm himself down. A few minutes passed before he was back to normal, sitting on the bed he could feel his clothes sticking to his body because of all the sweat. It was an uncomfortable feeling that he wanted gone. But before that, he had to discuss something with Ryosei.

“You saw that, right?”

*“\*Yeah, I did.\*”*

What Senkyo asked him about was his nightmare. When it first happened two days ago, Ryosei’s consciousness was also asleep since he had nothing better to do. The night after that, he decided to help Senkyo with his nightmare and tried to erase it from the dream world while he was experiencing it. Unfortunately, his worries were too great to the point where not even he could do anything about it. And this night, he didn’t even get the chance to do anything. It was only uttered a single time, but even that was enough to send Senkyo to this state.

It wasn’t the way the sentence was said that was different, but the person who said it. Instead of Fulgur or Freda, the person he dreamt of that uttered that sentence, was Yuu. It brought him great distress, but at the same time, exposed the cause of these incessant nightmares.

“There’s… no other way to explain this huh?”

*“\*I think you should get this over with today, or else it’ll trouble you even more. I’m tired of compensating for your energy you know?\*”*

“Haha… Yeah, thanks for that.”

He let out a dry laugh as he was reminded how much Ryosei helped with his nightmares. He had to face his troubles now and get some closure before they got any worse. And the time to end his nightmares was after school at Yuu’s apartment.

**176 – Yuu’s Apartment**

*“\*Okay…\*”*

Senkyo took a deep breath to release the tension in his lungs, but nothing he did worked in his favor. In the end, he wasn’t able to calm down his nerves before reaching this place. He couldn’t focus in class the whole day. The only thoughts in his mind were how he was going to bring up the subject to Yuu, and the infinite possibilities the situation could go wrong.

Yesterday night when Senkyo and Yuu were about to part ways, she confessed to him about something.

*“\*Actually, I’m still kind of falling behind on English. If you don’t mind, could you help me study tomorrow?\*”*

Of course, Senkyo accepted without a second thought. At first, it was only to help out Yuu with her studies. But after realizing what was truly plaguing him, the opportunity presented itself.

“Come in, Senpai.”

Yuu welcomed Senkyo into her apartment. She closed the door behind him as he entered, and it didn’t take him long to notice the luxury she was living in. He turned to the long hallway and spotted the smooth flooring designed in a wood strip parquet stretching to other areas of the apartment room. Solid wooden doors and pure white walls covered the place. And at the end of the hall, he could see the sunlight illuminating the apartment room through a glass door leading to the balcony outside.

“Th-This is…”

Senkyo was stunned in awe. He lived alone in a single house but nothing inside it produced the same vibe as the entrance to Yuu’s apartment room. His mouth was agape with his eyes wandering throughout the whole place.

“It’s nothing to boast about. I didn’t find this place, after all. The person who took care of me set me up with this place. Honestly, they had to pay the rent until I was finally able to financially support myself. It’s kind of embarrassing to say, hahaha…”

*\*We talked about it before coming here, but Hisho-chan’s apartment room is a 1LDK. I don’t know much about apartments since I didn’t need to. But man, this is a 1LDK?! I’ve never seen such luxury in my life! I think there’s a lot to boast about here!\**

After properly taking off their shoes, Yuu moved forward and Senkyo followed behind. He could already see a small part of the living room through the hallway which made him able to prepare himself for the rest of the room.

He already saw the flat-screen TV stationed by the wall on top of a low storage cabinet. Seeing as she has a flat-screen, it was safe to say there was more imposing furniture present like a couch or a huge bookshelf. It only took him a few steps not only to confirm his suspicion but break his expectations.

There was a large couch placed in front of the TV with a coffee table in between. Both of these were placed above a stylish carpet that served as a comfy seat for those who wanted to sit on the floor. The room served both as a living room and a dining room, indicated by the dining table and sets of chairs placed in front of the glass door that allowed a view of the outside. It was just as he expected the rest of the room to be after seeing the TV.

What caught him off guard was the display of wooden sculptures at the back of the room. They were by no means ordinary works. All of the artworks varied from animals, human figures, buildings, flowers, and more. They all had a similar carving style which hinted they were all made by the same artist. The sculptures were given an intricate design by carving the figures to the very last detail, including the strands of feathers, bricks of buildings, and other meticulous subtleties. Having these many high-quality artworks must’ve cost a fortune, probably much more than the whole apartment room. While Senkyo was racking his brain trying to process the information, Yuu dropped another bombshell revelation.

“Ah, those are the sculptures that I made. Do they look good?”

Something incredible just left Yuu’s mouth and entered Senkyo’s ears. He immediately turned around to face her, awestruck by her last remark.

“You’re asking me if they look GOOD!? These are breathtaking! I never knew you had a talent like this!”

“Hehehe, it’s a bit embarrassing to hear you say that… thank you.”

He turned back around and marveled at the wood sculptures again. They were truly a work of a professional.

“Whoa… So you support yourself by making wood sculptures huh… No wonder your apartment room looks so fancy. Selling these would fetch a high price in the market.”

“W-Well, I did get compensated generously for my work. But don’t misunderstand, I wasn’t the one who furnished the place. It was the one who helped me before. Even with all that money, I don’t think I would choose something this grand.”

“The person who helped you before… well, whoever they are they have quite the large wad of cash in their pocket to give you an apartment like this. Did you do anything to make them in debt to you?”

“No, not that I know of. Although this might be rude to them since they helped me a lot and all, I think it’s more appropriate to say that they forced this on me…”

“Huh, is that so…”

*\*I know there are generous people out there. But is someone really going to help a stranger this much just because they’re in need? Or maybe…\**

Senkyo was trying to piece together a theory for gaining this mystery man’s assistance, but his train of thought was interrupted when he heard Yuu call out to him.

“Senpai, come here. I want you to look at this.”

She presented him with another wood sculpture, but this one was different from all the others. The artwork was a figure of a man with long hair and with bat wings sprouting behind his back. His left hand had some sort of ball floating above it while his right arm was wrapped around a long spear.

What set apart this artwork from the others was everything about it. From afar, someone would assume that the sculpture was masterfully colored. But upon closer inspection, instead of being carved, it was more like the artwork was naturally created by nature.

His hair was composed of ice wool, a type of ice that looks like lustrous white hair that forms on dead wood. Similar to the wings, its clothes were black charcoal with outlines of the fine wood it once was. In contrast to this, his skin was made of white wood paler than birch. Anyone would assume a different kind of wood was added, but seeing as it was connected to the whole figure, Senkyo had his doubts. The ball on his left hand wasn’t an illusion. It was floating in the air with nothing connected to it. And lastly, the spear the man was holding was made out of black wood, twisting in a direction and holding a red stone on its tip.

This artwork was simply impossible for humans to create. There was no set of tools out there to be able to create it. But Senkyo faced Yuu and realized, it wasn’t something a measly human could create, it was something Yuu, a being from another world created.

“I-Is there even a word out there to describe this…?”

“Hey, Senpai, what’s that supposed to mean?”

Yuu gave him a fierce glare after misunderstanding his message.

“N-No, it’s not like that. What I meant was it's so incredible that I literally have no words for it.”

“Well, if you say so… This is something I made from Zerid. I used various magic to make it just like those ones over there. I carved them with wind magic since that’s what I’m used to doing.”

“You did woodcarving when you were in Zerid? I guess art exists even in other worlds.”

“Yes. I started doing it when I was a kid. Before, I could only use wind magic to make similar sculptures to those. When I worked hard to improve, I could do ones like these.”

Senkyo scrutinized the sculpture again. It was amazing, but it definitely wasn’t something she could sell. People would question how she was able to make something like this if they saw it. None of us would want that trouble. Magic isn’t public knowledge, after all.

Whatever magic she used, it was able to even preserve the ice beard for its hair. It may be some kind of magic related to time, but then again, he wasn’t sure. He could ask her, but that wasn’t what he was there for. Just as Senkyo was about to bring up the study session, he swallowed his words after hearing something interesting.

“You know, this is the only piece I made with all my heart.”

“Hm?”

“I made it after arriving on Earth. It’s the symbolic statue of my homeland. We call it ‘Mssioadr Bkkrn’ in your language, it means Vampire King. It’s made after, Hczarel Mszekrnlr, one of the past vampire kings. He took the throne by force and overthrew the corrupt king. The orb on his left hand is a pure ball of blood, representing the honor and pride of vampires. And on his right arm is the ‘Ycziiagdr,’ the spear he used to kill the king. The spear is a weapon that represents fear and death since it was a weapon widely used against vampires. But what Hczarel was trying to convey is to embrace your fear. He was the person that started the revolution since everyone else was too afraid to go against the corrupt king’s hand. He took up the spear that represents the people’s fears and slew the corrupt king with it. ‘Turn your fears into weapons and stand up,’ he said. He was a symbol of righteousness and heroicness… someone I won’t be able to imitate…”

The room grew quiet. Senkyo was listening attentively to her every word. A few seconds passed before Yuu realized the mood around her.

“Ah, I-I’m sorry, Senpai! I was prattling a lot there, wasn’t I? A-Anyway, I’m going to get my notes. Take a seat wherever you like!”

“Ah, wait—and she left…”

Yuu hurried into her room before Senkyo could even stop her. He turned to the side where she placed the sculpture she was holding.

“Turn your fears into weapons and stand up, huh? That’s easier said than done. But honestly, I would’ve loved to hear more.”

**177 – Bottled Thoughts**

Yuu returned with her materials and sat next to Senkyo who was waiting for her by the coffee table. The clock ticked as the two immersed themselves in their study. A few hours passed and the time was around 6pm. Yuu offered Senkyo to eat dinner with her, and he accepted which allowed them to continue their study. And now, after hours of processing the lessons, they finally reached a good place to take a rest.

“U-Uuuugh… English is so complicated…!”

Yuu whined as she limply rested her body on the table.

“You’ll learn eventually if you study hard enough… probably.”

“Hey! What’s with the insecurity!?”

“W-Well, I just thought I wasn’t one to talk since I don’t experience the same troubles you have.”

“Nnnn~~! What’s wrong with this world!? Why is it so unfair!?”

“That’s just life, I guess.”

“You’re not helpiiing!!”

She sprang upwards in anger to face Senkyo and used the remaining force to fall back to the couch behind her.

“It’s break time, right? I’ll take a quick nap, just wake me up later.”

“Quit being lazy! I know you’re tired but once you finish the test I’m going to make for you, everything will be over with.”

She stared at Senkyo with a dissatisfied face, but soon it turned into a huge grin.

“‘Quit being lazy,’ he said. Who was it that spent all their free time lazing around in their room again?”

“K-Kgh…”

Feeling the guilt in his heart, Senkyo looked away and grimaced, leaving Yuu to be the victor of their mental warfare.

“Ha-ha thought so! I’ll be on the couch so just wake me up once you’re done!”

She crawled her way onto the couch behind her and placed her head on the pillow resting on the couch.

“Wow, you’re seriously doing this, huh? You know I’m still a guy, right? I might do something weird if you leave yourself defenseless like that.”

“Pfft…!”

“Hey! What’s with the snicker!?”

“N-No, it’s nothing, Senpai. I just thought it was funny that you resorted to empty threats like that.”

“H-Huh!? What makes you say that?”

“You aren’t the type of person to do that. That’s how much trust I have in you. Do you really plan on breaking that now?”

“W-Well… Gah, fine. Do whatever you want.”

“Hehe, thanks!”

In the end, Senkyo was mentally overpowered and was forced to let Yuu do as she pleased. Having the sour taste of defeat inside his mouth, he distracted himself by working on the test for Yuu to answer.

The room turned quiet with only the sound of Senkyo’s pen scratching on paper. A few minutes passed and he was about to finish the test… until.

“Wha!?”

Senkyo’s body jolted up after feeling a light breeze blow against the back of his neck. He turned around to see Yuu’s face. Unlike her state a few minutes ago, she was sleeping peacefully without a single strain on her expression. She was angelic, but after scanning the rest of her body, Senkyo found another way to describe her. Erotic.

He furiously shook his head the moment he realized what was going on in his mind. He thought it would take a while to rid himself of those ideas, but they came right off after coming to a realization.

“T-This is a bit cowardly… This can’t give me any closure. No, practice! That’s it, this is practice! I’ll think of what to say now so I can say it later after studying, yeah!”

Senkyo turned back to his paper and resumed writing while he arranged his thoughts.

“Let’s see… H-Hey, Hisho-chan…”

He kept his head down, looking at the paper he was writing as he absentmindedly voiced his thoughts out loud.

“This is going to be a weird question, but how do you feel about me lying to you? You see, a few weeks ago, I found out something strange about myself. Do you remember when Fulgur called me an anomaly? That I’m not human? Apparently, that’s true. It bothered me ever since for some reason. I kept getting nightmares about it, even… I didn’t think I’d have so much trouble with this. Before, I probably presented myself as some kind of amazing genius. Saying stuff like taking to account all of the possibilities and choosing the best path… or something like that. Haha… I can’t help but cringe now that I’m thinking about it. Honestly, those were just some things I said out of the heat of the moment. I’m nothing like that. And… I’d be lying if I didn’t say I wasn’t trying to act cool. I lied. I’m not cool or anything like that. I’m just human, no, something like a human. I don’t really know how to take this but… what do you think about me now?”

The room returned to silence as Senkyo’s hand stopped from writing. After a few seconds passed, his question remained unanswered.

“Hmm… No, I think I can do without too many details. I need to think of something else—Ow!!”

Or so he thought. A sharp pain assaulted the back of his head, his senses signaling to shout in pain, but that pain suddenly turned into anxiety the moment he heard a voice behind him. The black hole that assailed him last night returned with a vengeance.

“What a stupid thing to say.”

**178 – Future’s Wish**

He turned around to see Yuu’s annoyed expression, her eyebrows furrowed and her face pouting. After seeing that, the black hole in his heart slowly began to be replaced by hope, the hope of acceptance. He focused on her voice, and the message she was conveying.

“I wouldn’t think any less of you just because of that. I’ve seen who you really are, Senpai. I don’t need you to tell me that you were trying to act cool. I could tell from the start anyway.”

“Wh-What!?”

“Yep. Really though, who wouldn’t notice that you were spouting something you saw on anime? It was pretty lame at first. The heat of the moment really helped you out there.”

“H-Hey!”

He shouted in embarrassment, trying to hide it from her with anger, but the rosy cheeks on his face didn’t help his case.

“Hmph, that’s what you get for trying to ask me that question. Senpai, I think you’re a great person, human or not. You’ve been a huge help ever since I met you. I saw what you can do and the extent you’d go to achieve your goal. I wouldn’t look at you differently just because you’re not human. I’m a vampire, remember? Not human. If that’s the case then we’re more alike than we initially thought! Hmm… now that I think about it, I accused you of not being human when we first met remember?”

Senkyo stopped to think and searched his memories. What she was saying was true. She told him she wasn’t human. At the time, he didn’t think anything of it, not just because he thought it was nonsense, but also because he didn’t care if he wasn’t.

“…T-That’s… That’s right. Hahahahaha, I’ve changed, haven’t I?”

Senkyo let out a hearty laugh. Meanwhile, Yuu just stared at him, clueless about what was going on in his mind.

“Hm? You have? I didn’t notice anything.”

“Maybe I changed the moment I met you? It sounds very possible to me.”

Yuu averted her eyes in embarrassment but brought them back to him before responding.

“Is that a bad thing?”

“Haha, no, in fact, it’s the exact opposite. Thank you for meeting me.”

“I-I don’t think you need to thank me for that! …Really. Maybe you’ll even regret saying that down the line.”

Yuu’s mood made an abrupt change. It was Senkyo’s last line that triggered it, but he had no clue why it did.

“What do you mean?”

“You were worried about lying to me, right? Well, actually… Even I… Even I’m keeping something from you. Something that you definitely wouldn’t forgive me for.”

“Huh? There’s no way I’d bare a grudge on you—”

Yuu placed her finger on Senkyo’s mouth, preventing it from opening any further. She stared at him with glossy eyes, trying to hold back the tears inside them.

“Then, I’ll believe you when we get there. It’s not a secret I can keep for long anyway. So, I’m going to say this to you in advance. I’m sorry.”

She tried to say it in a cheerful tone, but her voice turned shaky at the end of her sentence. Whatever was troubling her, it wasn’t any normal problem.

“Well then, I rested long enough. Are you done with your test, Senpai?”

Yuu tried to change the subject and end the conversation, but Senkyo didn’t feel like doing so. At the very least, not if he hadn’t said his piece.

“May our relationship turn into a great one.”

He froze time around them. Neither he nor Yuu moved a muscle. The only sign around them that proved this wasn’t the cause of magic was the clock on the wall, ticking incessantly to fill the silence. Senkyo let go of a short phrase, but both of them knew what it signified. It was Senkyo’s ideology of relationships that he shared with Yuu when they were studying at Kinro’s place. He defined a great relationship as one that could be repaired no matter what hardship threatened to break it, even if it is subjected to trials of lies and deceit, he was hoping their relationship would be repaired and forged into something stronger.

“…!”

Senkyo jolted in surprise. He was suddenly being enveloped by warmth, the feeling of clothes brushing against his neck. A weight pressed down on his head, locks of light crimson hair entering his peripheral vision, causing the scent he’d been catching ever since the moment he arrived there to become stronger than ever. Yuu was hugging him gently. Realizing this, Senkyo’s brain malfunctioned, leaving him in a daze.

A minute of silence passed, enough for Senkyo to regain his senses. He noticed that Yuu’s embrace became tighter as time passed, but it didn’t bother him. Whatever troubles Yuu was going through, it was no trivial matter. He placed his hand on her arm, hoping to comfort her even if just a little. He wanted that moment to last forever, being this close to her, becoming a pillar to support her, this was one of the things he’d never done in his life, and never thought of doing it until now. He wanted to be there for her.

Unfortunately, all good things had to come to an end. Yuu’s arms loosened, signaling the end of this beautiful moment, bringing a bittersweet cloud to loom over Senkyo’s face. But just before it all ended, Yuu slid down to his shoulder, her cheeks rubbing against Senkyo’s as she did so, and brought her mouth close to his ear. She whispered softly into it.

“…Seriously, Senpai… you always have the last word. Thank you…”

A wave of allure brushed Senkyo once again. It was the same charm he found when Yuu wholeheartedly expressed herself back in Kinro’s room. But this time, not with a smile, but with the sweet tone of her voice. He couldn’t see her face, but he could vividly imagine it as her voice gently funneled down his ear. Even without being seen, he could sense Yuu’s raw emotion with just her voice. It fascinated him. How can someone express themselves so clearly and honestly? It was a mystery to him.

As Yuu pulled herself away, Senkyo was assaulted with melancholy, leaving him with a sense of longing.

“I think I’m ready to take the test, Senpai.”

“O-Oh yeah, it’s over here…”

Senkyo turned to the notebook he wrote the test in and saw the last question was very peculiar. He didn’t even have any memory that he wrote it. In English, it asked, “Do you love me?”

“W-W-W-WHOAWAWAWAWAITWAITWAITWAIT!!”

He grabbed his pen in a panic and mercilessly scratched over the last question, leaving only a large unsightly mass of lead. There was no possible way for anyone to recover the message that was written behind it now.

“A-Are you okay, Senpai?”

“Y-Yeah, I’m fine. Yep, totally fine. Here’s your test. Oh, the last question is a bonus point. I’ll give it to you for hearing me out.”

“O-Okay.”

Senkyo placed his back against the edge of the couch and released the tension inside his body with a long sigh.

“Are you sure you’re fine, Senpai?”

Yuu asked while looking at him worriedly.

“I am. I’m just a bit tired.”

“Then how about you sleep and I’ll wake you up after I finish?”

“Heh, no way. I have to watch my student to the very end, you know? There’s a chance they might cheat too.”

“You know I wouldn’t do that, right? Hahaha…”

“I’ll believe it when I see it. Come on now, get to writing.”

“Nnn~! Aren’t you being unreasonably spiteful!?”

“I can say the same thing to you earlier.”

“Fine, fine, I’m doing it.”

Yuu returned her attention to her paper and began answering. Later, she finished and got a passing score from Senkyo. Having completed tonight’s goal, Yuu made dinner with the help of Senkyo and the two ate together while chatting the whole while. After cleaning up, it was time for Senkyo to take his leave.

“Thank you again, Senpai. For coming all the way here just to help me out.”

“No problem…”

Senkyo hushed, seemingly being taken away by his thoughts.

“I guess this is—”

Just before Yuu could say goodbye, he interrupted her.

“Hisho-chan, do you mind coming with me for a bit?”

**179 – The Place Where They Reach The Moon**

Senkyo dragged Yuu off somewhere. They took a taxi somewhere to the edge of town and dropped off on a seemingly empty street. They then entered the woods and navigated through the darkness. Yuu was holding up her phone’s flashlight as she traveled, but it seems like Senkyo, who was in front of her, didn’t need it. It wasn’t long until they finally reached an open area where Senkyo welcomed Yuu with a bright smile on his face.

“This is it!”

Yuu walked up to where Senkyo stood and widened her eyes as she saw the scenery before her.

“It’s… the town!”

Numerous lights shined from inside the huddle of buildings that spread throughout the area. There were various types of buildings down there, stores, restaurants, houses, and more, but from where they were currently looking at, they were all the same. Small blocks of varying shapes embellished the night with their colorful, illuminating lights. They were like the stars that decorated the night sky, but instead of the open plane above, it was on the ground and spaced closer to each other and more patterned than those on the opposite side of the horizon, but even then, they had their own kind of beauty.

Yuu’s eyes seemed to be glued to the man-made attraction before her. Seeing how fixated she was along with the huge smile on her face brought a similar one to Senkyo.

“This is the place my dad always brought me when I was down. It was to cheer me up, saying stuff like, ‘Hah, look at you now! You’re the king of this place and the ones below you are your peasants to control!’”

“U-Umm, is this the part where I’m supposed to laugh?”

“Haha, don’t worry, I had the same reaction. But then, he said this, ‘Since you’re the king now, it’s your responsibility to maintain this beauty. Life has its ups and downs, but somehow, we humans still managed to make things like these even when we don’t mean to. Don’t lose sight of what’s important. Keep your mind calm and collected. If you do that, I’m sure you’ll make the right decisions.’”

“…”

She was out of words and simply stared at Senkyo in bewilderment. Noticing, her gaze on him, Senkyo began to stutter.

“Y-Yeah, those were some pretty embarrassing lines huh? Hahaha…”

“Hmm, that may be so. But to me, I think they’re lines to live by.”

“O-Oh come on, those weren’t that great.”

“Then if they weren’t, why did you bring me here with those exact lines in mind?”

“H-Hmm…? I wonder why…”

Senkyo averted his eyes from Yuu’s probing gaze and directed them to the sky above. He knew his face was reddening from the heat, so he had to in order to cover it up without looking suspicious. All he could do was look up and hope the darkness would swallow up the tinge of red on his face. It was then that he was reminded of another word from his father.

*“\*Do you see that moon up there? I always thought of that as something marvelous. Anyone can make their own interpretations about it and they can never be wrong. It’s their personal opinion of it, after all. When I was a kid, I would always shout out my frustrations at that thing. It would always put me right back in my groove. How about you? What do you think the moon is there for?\*”*

Coincidentally, it was a full moon tonight. It shined down upon the earth with all of its beauty.

“The moon, huh…”

Senkyo muttered under his breath. Even though it was in a low voice, Yuu still picked it up and shifted her gaze toward it. From beside her, she hears him say…

“I think a full moon shows how often you’re likely to get an opportunity. It happens once a month, so a one-in-thirty chance a day. If you take away the lunar calendar, you’ll never know when it’ll happen, but you just need to look out for it and keep looking at the sky. If you stop looking for a day, you might miss it, if you look too much, you’ll just tire yourself before you find it, but what you need to know is that it’s there. It’s somewhere out there, an opportunity to get something you want, one you need to work hard for to get, but also something you need to balance to keep looking for it. That’s what the moon is for me.”

“Hm?”

But even so, she didn’t understand a single word he mentioned. She directed him with a look of confusion. Taking notice of this, he simply smiled. He met her gaze with his own and said…

“Just like the full moon, another opportunity appeared. The moon is beautiful, isn’t it?”

It was something a being from another world wouldn’t pick up on, that’s what was on Senkyo’s mind. A poetic way of delivering someone their feelings. It was embarrassing to say, but it just seemed fitting. A roundabout way of telling someone you love them.

“Yes, it really is.”

Seeing how she shifted her gaze to the moon right after, it was safe to say she didn’t pick up on his message.

*\*I love Hisho-chan. Others might think it’s too quick to say after only spending over a month with her but, I’m sure. What plagued me this whole week wasn’t because I was afraid of dying or scared of not being human. The only thing I was afraid of was how she was going to treat me if she found out I was something different. What I felt wasn’t fear of dying, it was fear of losing Hisho-chan. By all means, I want to lay my feelings bare right here and now… but now’s not the time. Something is plaguing her mind. A subject similar to this brought me to the state I was in this morning. I don’t want to burden her with unnecessary confessions. Once she finds closure to her worries, then I’ll tell her. I’ll confess how I feel and make her mine. Right now, that’s the goal I want to work towards. It may take weeks, maybe months, years even, but I’ll keep looking for the chance, the chance to tell her how I really feel.\**

*\*That’s what I said to myself that night. But who would’ve thought that my resolve would be crushed only after a day that thought crossed my mind?\**

“Senpai, I love you.”

**Chapter 6: Profess, In This Clouded Night**

**180 – Confession**

Only a few minutes before five o’clock in the afternoon. The sun is beginning to set on the horizon. The sky was painted with a vivid orange, tinting the clouds with its color. Students were shouting in the distance, some were cheering, others were barking out orders, and the rest were involuntary grunts they let out every time they kick the soccer ball on the field.

Senkyo could be seen sitting on a bench watching the school’s soccer club playing their final practice game of the day. The score was 3 to 10, nowhere near close to each other. One team was winning the game by a huge landslide. It was the last quarter of the game, but despite the inevitable defeat the other team was going to take, they were still giving it their all. They didn’t seem to have any plans of backing down.

“I guess this is that fighting spirit you get from facing a formidable foe. They do this every day, so if they’re this worked up then maybe this is the highest they’ve scored on him so far? Or maybe this is the lowest he’s scored. Either way, he really is something.”

He focuses his gaze on the monster that caused the scores to be how they are. It was his best friend Honjou Kinro, the ace of the soccer team. He is a striker that easily weaves through the enemy lines using his insane footwork like flowing water. Not only that, he can steal the ball from the enemy so quick that he was basically both the toughest offense and defense.

The opposing team needed to keep their distance from him or lure him away in order to break through him, but after that, they had the rest of his team to worry about. Those three points on the board showed how many times they were able to make a miracle happen.

“Well, it’s about time. I better get going.”

Senkyo stands up from the bench and heads back into the school building. Normally, he wouldn’t be here this late, but a conversation earlier that day bound him to the school’s premises.

*\*I wonder what Hisho-chan wants…\**

*“\*…Uhmm. Senpai… can I, ask you a favor?\*”*

*“\*Sure, what is it?\*”*

“\*Later in the afternoon, could you come to the rooftop at 5 o’clock? There’s… something I need to say.\*”

Earlier, the two spent their lunch break together at the cafeteria. However, unlike the previous times he spent lunch with Yuu, the reason wasn’t that he was awoken by nightmares anymore. He woke up early in the morning feeling better than ever and made haste to prepare a lunch to eat together with her. It was something they arranged before parting yesterday night. Since it was the last day of the week, Senkyo thought it would be nice to end it like this. Senkyo reached the stairs after recalling how he ended up in this situation, but then he remembered something.

“Wait, is the roof going to be unlocked? I haven’t gone there ever since that weird guy found us… Hashimoto-san, was it? Guess there’s only one way to find out.”

After reaching the top of the stairs, he stood in front of the door to the rooftop and turned the doorknob. Seeing as it was unlocked, he opened the door and saw Yuu leaning against the fence behind her. He stopped for a moment to take in the sight before him. The orange rays of the sunset colored the edge of her figure, almost as if he just opened the door to the world’s most valued treasure.

“Oh, Senpai… you came.”

She raised her head and curved the edge of her lips into a melancholic smile.

“Yeah, of course I did. More importantly, is something wrong?”

“…Wrong, huh? I’d say everything about me is wrong.”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

She stared at the ground as she approached Senkyo. After reaching a reasonable distance, she took two deep breaths without showing her face and spoke.

“Um, Senpai… do you remember what happened when we first met?”

Senkyo’s expression brightened as he reminisced their fateful meeting, seeming to be entertained as he recalled the events.

“Yeah, it was kinda weird huh? You suddenly came out of the closet as a bat and few around the room. Later when we trapped you in a jar a werewolf suddenly busted in the door. It was definitely a surprise, but what was even more shocking was seeing you lying on the floor instead of the bat, hahaha…”

His face turned red as he summarized their first encounter. He omitted the small details like seeing her naked but it didn’t take out the fact that it crossed his mind. He did that to be considerate, but his efforts were for naught.

“Mhm. Looking back at it, you saw me naked, didn’t you? You even dressed me up in your clothes hahaha… Sorry about that.”

“Y-Yeah… that did happen, yes.”

Yuu’s remark made his face take a deeper tint of red. Luckily for him, she wasn’t looking at his face right now.

“Sorry for suddenly bringing this up on you. I just thought that it’s been a lot of fun ever since I met you. Thank you, for everything.”

His expression took a sudden change from embarrassment to worry. He didn’t know why, but the tone of her voice was a sad one.

“That’s good an all but, what happened?”

She didn’t respond. Instead, she took a step closer, followed by another, and another, all the way until her head was against his chest. Senkyo was a bit surprised but immediately composed himself. It wasn’t something he should keep interpreting as affection. That’s what he said to himself, but then…

“I don’t have any right to say this, but I’m just too selfish to hold myself back…”

“…Hisho-chan?”

“Senpai, I love you.”

In less than a second, after registering her words in his head, all his senses went haywire. His heartbeat was pounding in his chest at an immense rate. It felt like it would bust out and take his life. It wasn’t even a question that his face was beet red. His body temperature rose and his mind went blank, unable to register anything besides what his eyes were presenting him.

“…I love you. That is what I thought.”

As if his mind wasn’t already malfunctioning from her sudden confession, her words completely shut him down. His delight transformed into anxiety and caused his beating heart to ache.

**181 – Dusk Falls**

“…W-What do you mean?”

Senkyo shot her a question. She didn’t answer. However, instead of repeating the question, after peeking around her head, he noticed the floor directly under her was dampening in small circles. She was crying.

After keeping her head facing down, she finally raises it and faces Senkyo, showing him her distraught figure. Her eyebrows furrowed, eyes were drenched and sullied with tears, lips twitching from the intensity she was grinding her teeth. Seeing her like that shocked him, but more importantly, it brought him back to his senses and told him what to do.

Silently, he pulled her closer and wrapped her around his arms. Instead of words, he used actions and coated her with his warmth, reassuring her that he was there for her. Just as she was about to accept his protection, she suddenly shoved him away.

“N-No! No more! Please! Don’t be kind to me! I’m begging you!”

He took a step forward, calling out for her as he did.

“Hisho-ch—”

“NO! Don’t come any closer! It’s for your own good! Just stay where you are!”

Despite Yuu’s warning, Senkyo placed another foot forward and kept doing so, warranting more warnings from Yuu. One after another he placed forward and continued to ignore her words until he was directly in front of her with almost no distance between them.

“It’s alright.”

He wrapped her again in a hug, and just like before, she tried to escape, but Senkyo wasn’t going to allow her that and ensnared her with his arms. He hugged her tight.

“NO! No, no, no, no, no! Y-You don’t understand, Senpai! Please… don’t be…”

She continued to struggle, but Senkyo pinned her against the fence behind her to secure his bind on her. After realizing she wasn’t going to escape, she slowly calmed down and reluctantly accepted his kindness. In a trembling voice, she said…

“…Yukou-senpai… you’re too kind… so much that it’ll hurt me even more the moment you hate me… Please… let go…!”

“That’s impossible. Letting you go now, as well as hating you. It’s impossible. That’s why you should just give in and rely on me. Okay?”

Yuu stayed still and kept silent after hearing that. It was only after a few moments later did she move. She raised her hand, crawling on the surface of his chest to do so, and placed it on his cheek.

Looking downwards, he saw her face covered in tears, but instead of distress, she showed him a strained, bittersweet smile.

“I can’t.”

She clasped his cheek and pulled down his head and placed her mouth directly in front of his ear and whispered to him.

“I can’t keep relying on you. I’ll handle this, I promise. Because maybe… just maybe, I really do love you after all.”

Her melancholic voice echoed in his ear and sent his heartrate went back up, but she then calmed it down after she sunk her fangs into his neck. Under the twilight sky, high up on the school rooftop, Senkyo’s consciousness faded as Yuu’s fangs set him to sleep.

His body limped towards Yuu. Strangely enough, even when he was unconscious, he was still keeping the same power in his embrace. She quietly returned his hug and revered in it for a few seconds before gently sitting him against the fence. A ray of light sped out of his body and zipped past Yuu. Behind her appeared a familiar face. The person who she became close with after training desperately for the battle royale. Shiro.

“Y-Yuu-chan… why did you…?”

Her eyes shifted in confusion from Yuu and her unconscious master, her eyes demanding an explanation for her actions. Yuu faced the ground before gathering the courage to look her in the eye.

“This is… as you can see.”

Shiro grit her teeth in frustration and entered a fighting position.

“Shiro doesn’t know why you’re doing this, but Shiro is not going to let you take her big brother away!”

“…”

Shiro summoned fireballs in the air and shot them toward Yuu. However, as if she expected that, summoned the same number of fireballs and intercepted all of them.

“What!?”

Yuu quickly closed in. Shiro panicked and threw her fist out to punch her, but was mercilessly thwarted by Yuu as she swept Shiro’s arm away with a flat hand and swiftly drove the edge of her hand into her neck, assaulting her carotid and knocking her out. Yuu caught her body before she fell to the ground and placed her beside the rooftop bulkhead.

“They taught me hand-to-hand combat just for me to use it against them… I’m despicable.”

She took a paper taped to a translucent gem from her pockets and placed it inside Senkyo’s bag. She then arranged his bookbag neatly along with his shinai bag in front of the entrance to the rooftop.

She returned to Senkyo and stared at him for a moment, taking in the actions she had done before shaking her head to return to reality. On her back appeared huge bat wings that ripped through her uniform and jacket as they sprouted. She spread them wide to stretch them before picking up Senkyo and placing him behind her. Having fixed his position, she flapped her wings and entered the sky with Senkyo on her back, leaving the school behind them.

**182 – Undead Ambush**

Dusk had passed and the sky was coated with a dark but starry mantle. The bright moon above gleamed its radiant light down on earth, but not enough to illuminate its surface. In a dark, quiet forest where the chirping of nocturnal insects delivered a relaxing ambiance that bettered that of the honking horns and roaring engines of the city, a lone light brightened the area, slowly moving through the dark woodland.

There traveled Yuu with Senkyo unconsciously laying against her back. An orb of light floated in front of them and lit up the path they trekked. At some point, she stopped to look around her surroundings. She took a deep breath before calling out into the darkness.

“I’m here!”

For a moment, there didn’t seem to be anyone present, but then, a voice came from the tree in front of her.

“Oh, good job.”

“W-What? Who are you!?”

An unfamiliar voice reached Yuu’s ears. She scrutinized the tree and spotted a dark figure come out. She commanded her orb to irradiate him and revealed the shadow’s true form. A figure pale from top to bottom, or rather, completely white. They possessed no skin, muscles, or any sort of trace that they should be alive, and yet they were standing before her, moving around and conversating when the only thing their body composed of were bare bones. A skeleton.

An empty husk that moved like it was alive. Its skull had a scar ingrained in it, and its skeletal body was covered in light armor and a tattered shawl. One of its hands was behind the tree, obstructing Yuu’s vision.

“Hm? I guess you didn’t get the message. In this situation, you can call me a courier. I’m here to pick up two packages. Namely, you and that boy.”

It raised its scraggy finger and pointed at both of them.

“I suggest you don’t make this harder than it has be and cooperate with us.”

Despite the skeleton’s warning, Yuu opened one of her hands and prepared herself for battle.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk, I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

Suddenly, a bony spear impaled the ground in front of her and froze a small area of the ground. Her close proximity to the spear allowed her no time to react and got caught by the ice that swallowed her feet and rooted her to the ground.

She turned to the source of the spear and saw a blue flame floating in the air. With her enhanced eyesight, she discerned the flame was another skeleton. Its skull was submerged in the blue flame and exposed its position. From the looks of it, it was still able to wear a hood over its skull, and just like the other skeleton, it was wearing a light set of armor.

Then, from behind her, she heard the grass rustling along with heavy footsteps. It was a gigantic figure wearing a set of full-plated armor with the inside of its helmet glowing an ominous shade of red. She couldn’t see inside its helmet, but the red inside it was enough to tell her it was another skeleton. It stood there menacingly within the darkness, awaiting its time to strike.

Silence befell them. The tension in the air indicated there was no true option for peace. Then, Yuu clasped the ground and erected a barrier to protect them. She needed more time to assess the situation and cast her spells, unfortunately, she wasn’t granted that.

The huge armored skeleton behind her stepped up with speed faster than its body suggested. It held an enormous warhammer and slammed it on her barrier. The sound of glass shattering reached her ears, alerting her that the barrier had already been broken the moment it was erected.

Along with its devastating strike, she noticed a spear was hurling toward her. She tried to react but she was too slow. All she could do was shove Senkyo off her back before it penetrated her right shoulder. She felt her body weakening from the spear, not just because she was injured, but the spear was spiked with weakening control magic.

The armored skeleton behind her picked the two of them up with each hand and placed one finger on their mouths, restricting their movements and their ability to cast magic.

“See? What did I tell you? Wow, I thought we would have a bit of trouble but I thought wrong. I knew my Lord made the right choice.”

The skeleton spoke in a mocking tone. Convinced it was all over, it turned its back and began heading back into the darkness, but then, the armored hand that was restraining Yuu began to melt. Suddenly, she busted out of the enemy’s clutches, making two spirals of fire, one from her feet and one from her hands as she forced her way out. She then hovered in the sky, revealing her wings and sustaining her current altitude. She took out the spear that was stuck in her shoulder and cast magic to close up her wound. The skeleton was dumbfounded after seeing her performance.

“W-What was that!? A castless spell?! No, that can’t be… Impossible… an Angel!? These underhanded tricks can only be done by them! But why did my Lord not inform us about this!?”

The skeleton’s head suddenly burst and bathed in a black flame. It finally revealed his other hand holding a bone-like kusarigama. The jagged blade of its kama was connected to a skull as its weight with a spine chain. He turns to the other skeletons and addressed them in a strange language.

“Lrbk fia iiapq enlr en havvrel! Ja siuioakrn oa lr enoag fia xeoadr!”

(Take her down but be careful! Our mission is to bring her alive!)

**183 – Deadlock**

The three skeletons made their move. The armored one placed its warhammer on the ground and launched into the sky with insane speed and began mumbling a spell. The skeleton perched on the trees barraged spears at her. Meanwhile, the skeleton who ordered the other two equipped its kama. The blade of the kama began to turn and straightened itself, turning from a sickle to a short harpoon and throwing it at Yuu.

She evaded the spears they threw at her with swift movements, but it was only when she heard the sound of grating metal behind her did she realize she was being herded toward the armored skeleton. She immediately propelled herself upwards. When she reached a good distance away, she looked down and brought back vision on her enemies.

Just as she expected, the armored skeleton tried to catch her. Now that it reached the peak of its jump, it stopped in mid-air and fell back down, but not before completing the chant of its spell. By the time it reached its apex, it only needed to cast it.

“—Adruilraxe Uilra!”

Sparks of lightning coiled between its hands and shot out a streak of lightning that rendered her immobile. She couldn’t move her arms, legs, wings, or mouth which made her head straight for the ground. Luckily for her, she was still able to cast spells without the need for chanting.

*“\*O Graceful Healer, cleanse us of the ailments that curse our bodies. Gather your power for those that impede our path. Purify!\*”*

Her senses slowly came back to her. However, another spear impaled her from behind and her body began to weaken. She tried to take it out, but another blade impaled her leg. It was the short harpoon the skeleton threw at her, along with it was a paralyzing spell that ran through the bones and immobilized her again.

“I caught a big one!”

The skeleton pulled on the spine-rope and brought her down to the ground even faster. Yuu was about to cast a spell to break out of her binds and regain altitude, but she saw more spears coming for her despite already being caught. The enemy was cautious. Even if she broke out, she would only be bound again.

“I guess there’s no other way.”

After she analyzed her situation, she chanted.

*“\*O Graceful Healer, cleanse us of the ailments that curse our bodies. Gather your power for those that impede our path. Purify!\*”*

Regaining her ability to speak, she chanted again.

“O Nature, bless me with your power, empower your children—"

“It’s useless! We’ll just silence you—what!?”

Indeed, there was no time for her to finish her chant. She was only a few meters away and with weakening spears only inches away from her body. Yuu was chanting a nature spell. Everyone present knew she wasn’t going to make it. However, what followed after wasn’t the continuation of the chant for Overgrowth, but a cast for a completely different spell.

“Acid Blood!”

Three new spears pierced her skin, all of them releasing blood from her body, but then she took them by surprise as they saw the blood coming out of her wounds spreading to the weapons around her and crawling down the spine-rope at an alarming rate. The skeleton quickly severed the connection by only wishing for it and backed off. The spears and the harpoon that were skewered in her body were completely covered in her blood and began to disintegrate. With the weapons out of her body, she uttered another spell—the continuation of her last.

“Aid me in my plight and suppress my enemies. Overgrowth!”

The greenery around them began to grow vines and shackled her enemies. They tried their hardest to break free, but the vines around them only multiplied the longer they struggled. Knowing it was useless, they stopped and took a different approach. The three skeletons cast the same spell and the flames on their skulls burst, covering their whole bodies and burning the vines around them. Meanwhile, Yuu immediately went airborne and returned to the sky. This time, at a higher altitude where none of them can reach her easily. It was the perfect opportunity for her to finish them off from afar.

“O Fire, I bring rise to you as the master of flame—”

But then, her chant was interrupted when the armored skeleton raised Senkyo towards Yuu. Their leader skeleton shouted to her.

“If you don’t come down here now, we’ll just take this guy and leave! Our mission was to get both of you but we won’t die for it! Come down here and save your friend before we get too impatient!”

The armored skeleton handed Senkyo to the black-flamed one, tied him up to a tree, and activated a barrier around him.

“I’m warning you! If you break this barrier, we’ll just take him and leave! The same goes if you try those long-range attacks again! If you want to save him, you’ll have to face us on our terms!”

Having delivered its threat, it faced the armored skeleton.

“Gxeiia lroa ent xe xerel huiui. Osi goag lr glr lrdr aui j ja pqxejui.”

(Guard this boy at all costs. I’m going to get the rest of our weapons.)

The armored skeleton nodded its head in confirmation. Then, the black-flamed skeleton took out a white gem from under its shawl and motioned it downwards in mid-air. In doing so, it ripped through the space before it and made a rift, almost as if it was ripping a box open with a box cutter. It entered through it and disappeared, and a few seconds later, so did the rift that swallowed it.

Meanwhile, in the air, Yuu was gritting her teeth after hearing the skeleton’s threat.

“Damn it!”

She then hurled downwards toward the enemy in an attempt to defeat the remaining two.

**184 – Entrusted Gem**

Earlier that afternoon, around the time Yuu left with Senkyo, the door to the rooftop opened along with a voice of a man dissatisfied with the world. It was Haruto, the person that attacked Senkyo on that very rooftop. Right now, the subject he was complaining about was the reason Senkyo and Yuu were able to enter the rooftop on that every afternoon.

“Agh, I left it unlocked again. Seriously, it’s such a pain to remember somethin’ as little as turnin’ a lock after a hard, long session of cleanin’ a whole goddamn rooftop! Haahh… I wish they’d just put some kind of automatic lock system or somethin’. They have the money for it too! …Hm? What’s this?”

Haruto spots two bags in front of the door, a bookbag and a shinai bag.

“Did someone leave it here? I better find out who this belongs to huh…?”

He approaches it, seemingly with good intentions. Then, the moment he was within reach of the bag, his mouth twisted into a fiendish smile, and his eyes filled with malicious intent.

“Hahahaha! Yeah, right! Like I’ll waste my time tryin’ to find some nobody! This is your punishment for enterin’ the rooftop without permission, dumbass! Hahahahaha!!”

He opened the book bag and began rummaging through its contents.

“Hmm… Let’s see, nothin’, nothin’, nothin’, nothin’… Jeez, what’s with this guy? It’s all books and study material in here. Where’s the treasure? Manga, porn mags, anything? Ugh, booooring!!”

Despite plundering the person’s bag, he still had the guts to insult the person’s belongings despite them being the norm. If someone were present, they would surely point out how the actual strange person was him.

“…Ah, wait. Oooooh, I might’ve found somethin’!”

Haruto takes out a translucent gem with a piece of paper taped onto it.

“What’s this? Some kinda weird confession item? Man, times are changin’.”

Despite him identifying it as an important personal item, he still continued his prying and casually opened the piece of paper. Contradictory to his expectations, the piece of paper was actually a map of the town, and a particular spot had a red circle, bringing his attention to it. It was in the middle of the forest just outside of the town.

“Oh, it’s just some kinda treasure map. Seriously? Aren’t ya bit too old to be playin’ these games?”

He tossed them aside just like the rest of the bag’s contents. As the bag gets emptier, he noticed a familiar lunch box within the bag.

“Hmm… Isn’t this that Senkyo guy’s lunch box? Wait a second…”

After realizing who the owner was, Haruto’s eyes immediately shifted from the bookbag to the shinai bag and opened it. And of course, there he saw the one and only, Kuro Yaiba.

“Holy shiiiit!! What’s this thin’ doin’ layin’ around here!? Did he come in here and forget about it or somethin’? …Damn, I better report this to the chief! Kukuku… this will be the perfect revenge! This is what he gets for killin’ my heart over and over again! …Huh?”

As he was laughing maniacally about cooking up his spiteful plan, he heard a low groan coming from behind the entrance bulkhead. Curious, he stood up, inspected the source of the voice, and saw Shiro sitting against the wall.

“What the hell!? Th-This is a catgirl, isn’t it!? Wh-Wh-What in… Oh! Are my fantasies finally coming true!? …Wait, no, I’m not into little girls. Then again cat ears…”

While Haruto was spouting nonsense to himself, Shiro’s eyes finally opened and the flood of memories hit her like a truck, and her brain was sent into panic mode.

“Wh-Where is she!? Wait, no, where’s Onii-chan!?”

Shiro searched around agitatedly, the dread apparent on her face. She saw Haruto and even made eye contact with him, but she paid him no mind until she cleared the whole rooftop and confirmed that Senkyo and Yuu were gone.

“Hey, you! Where are Onii-chan and Yuu-chan!?”

Haruto was taken aback at what was happening. He had no idea who this person was, and what she was doing here, but there was at least one thing he caught on to.

“What… Y-Yuu-chan? Are you talkin’ about that vampire that’s always around that Senkyo kid?”

“That’s right! Where are they!?”

“I-I have no idea. When I got here only his bag and sword were left.”

He points behind him where Senkyo’s belongings lie, but when Shiro peeked from his side, she saw all of Senkyo’s stuff scattered on the ground. On top of her uneasiness added shock and anger as her mind processed what happened while she was knocked out.

“Y-Y-You monster! Shiro remembers you! You’re that impudent bastard that got rejected by his crush!”

“HEY! Where did ya get that from!?”

Although she was fuming, Shiro didn’t have time to argue around with him. She ran over to Senkyo’s bags and returned everything in the bags neatly. In her arranging, she saw an item that didn’t belong to Senkyo, a translucent gem and a map of the town. She took a few moments of silence to rack her mind at what it could be. When realization struck her, she became even more agitated than before.

“Hey, you over there! Take Shiro to the Konjou clan! This rooftop is a teleportation circle right!? Come on then, we don’t have much time!”

“I don’t know how ya know that, but even if ya say so, I have no clue who ya are. There’s no way I’m goin’ to let a stranger enter the castle.”

Infuriated, Shiro poured down all her stress on the person who refused to cooperate with her.

“LISTEN HERE, YOU GOOD-FOR-NOTHING SCOUNDREL! SHIRO NEEDS YOU TO TAKE HER TO THE CASTLE SO SHE CAN REPORT THIS TO YOUR CHIEF AND GET REINFORCEMENTS TO SAVE ONII-C—S-SENKYO! IF YOU DON’T HURRY UP, SHIRO WILL MAKE SURE THAT YOU WILL NEVER GET HOOKED UP WITH YOSHIKO-SAN!”

“W-Wha…!?”

Haruto was perplexed by Shiro’s fury which rendered him silent for a moment. That gave him enough time for his mind to pick up that whatever she was saying was serious and that she was likely not an enemy. Having been forced to take the situation a bit more seriously, he finally gave in and agreed to send them to the castle.

“Fine, fine, I got it. Hahh… I won’t be able to lock the door from this side. Does this mean I’ll need to come back? Whatever… damn doors.”

The two arrived at the castle and hurried their way to the chief’s quarters. Shiro quickly went over the situation and requested backup. The clan chief, Yousuke, nodded understandingly and made a quick summary of her report.

“I see. So basically, Hisho-kun betrayed Yukou-kun and is taking him to this place on the map where she’s going to take him to Zerid.”

“Yes! This gem right here is a Traveler’s Gem! It can send you between Earth and Zerid! Even if we don’t stop them from leaving, we can still chase after them! So please, send your units to help Onii-chan!”

Yousuke remained silent. He was racking his brain so hard that the tense aura around him prevented anyone from disturbing his train of thought. After a short while, he came to a decision.

“Right now, most of our hunters are out on missions. The only ones left that can help you are the ones on patrol. But since they’re too far away, we can’t contact them. I want you two to seek Sakurai-dono’s assistance. Tell him to contact Ryosei and all the patrol near the area. Now go, make haste!”

“Thank you!”

Shiro and Haruto bowed their heads and quickly headed to Kosuke’s quarters where they quickly explained the situation.

**185 – Urgent Call**

The sky was turning dark and the night was upon them. In the less populated area of town, Ryosei was standing in front of Yukai’s apartment door and was just about to leave.

“Thank you for today, Ryosei-nii-san. You really helped me with my studies. With this, I feel like I can actually get perfect scores now.”

“Haha, can’t wait to see it. Good luck out there.”

Ryosei raised his fist and pointed it to Yukai. She responded accordingly and bumped her fist with his and made a happy giggle as she did. Seeing her like that brought a smile to Ryosei’s face and bid her farewell.

“Looks like she’s finally brightening up. She’s become much less reserved around me. That’s great and all… but still…”

The image of Yukai’s bedridden mother flashed in his mind. Remembering the curse that was contaminating her body sent chills down his spine. He couldn’t help but become worried.

“I need to find something to cure her. I don’t know how much time I have left. But even so… Shiro won’t be able to help since this isn’t related to magic. It’s a curse from a spirit. I’ve been searching the spirit realm for so long but nothing showed up… Agh, maybe I have no other choice but to confront the spirits at that café after all…”

While his mind was occupied by the worry of the curse inflicted on Yukai’s mother, a voice echoed in his head.

*“\*Ryosei, can you hear me?\*”*

It was Kosuke. Although he was the same person that spearheaded exiling him from the clan when he was alive, it didn’t seem like Kosuke held the same resentment in the past. In fact, it seems like he was a bit nicer to him ever since the battle royale.

*“\*I’m here, Sakurai-ojii-san. What is it?\*”*

*“\*It’s urgent. Yukou Senkyo has been abducted by Hisho Yuu. I need you to go to the Joe n’ Nathan’s a few blocks down. We have a teleport point there. I already informed them where to send you, just come quickly. She’ll explain the situation to you.\*”*

A sudden contact from the Connect network arrived with shocking news and made Ryosei rush to Joe n’ Nathan’s. Despite the contents of the news, Ryosei didn’t express shock, but anger. This was because the situation was not outside of *\*their\** prediction. After arriving home yesterday, Senkyo shared his memories with Ryosei, and that is when he picked up on Yuu’s hints of betrayal.

**…………**

“\*Senkyo, you know what this means, right?\*”

“Yep, I do. She was already giving a few hints, but after today, it might as well be certain. Hisho-chan will probably betray us.”

Yuu had been acting strange lately. Something was bothering her, but she didn’t want anyone to take notice of that, but her honest nature leaked her intentions. One of the most notable actions that brought to this conclusion was her recent interest in Senkyo’s view on lies and her apologetic attitude earlier that night.

“\*Then we have to—\*”

“Stop.”

Senkyo cut Ryosei off with a heavy, curt tone. The message’s contents included an impenetrable iron wall that didn’t have a single intention of moving aside for others, Ryosei included, and of course, this shocked him.

“\*W-What!? Why not!?\*”

Even though they are in the same body, they couldn’t hear each other’s thoughts. At the end of the day, Senkyo and Ryosei were two different souls.

“You saw it, right? She was genuinely sad. She, herself, doesn’t want to do this, but something is forcing her to. I’ll find out what it is and do something about it.”

“\*Are you insane!? For all we know she’s an assassin plotting to kill you! Let’s not take any chances and—\*”

“I will not let you or anybody else lay a finger on her.”

A tone as cold as the lowest climate of the north, emanating a heavy portent of calamity, seething with so much emotion that it was overflowing to Ryosei, instilling fear deeper than any other source. If it weren’t for the fact that Ryosei was an experienced fighter that lived through many life-and-death situations, as well as death itself, he would not have been able to utter a word. It was also because of those senses that he knew Senkyo was being serious. If he continued to argue with him, it would end on anything but a happy note. So instead, he decided to respond with a witty retort.

“\*W-Wow… so this is what they call blind love… I guess not even you are protected from its madness, huh?\*”

Although it sounded offensive at face value, it was Ryosei’s way of warning him of the stupidity he was doing, an act of concern for Senkyo, which Senkyo perceived through emotions as Ryosei said so, quelling his anger. After sensing Ryosei was letting him go as he wished, Senkyo tried to reassure him and off the conversation in a positive light.

“Don’t worry. I haven’t lost my senses. If I determine that she is a lost cause, I’ll end what I started with my own two hands. I will guarantee you that.”

He vowed resolutely, leaving Ryosei with no choice but to accept his decision. If Senkyo dies traveling that road, then would deserve it as it was his own volition that sent him there. However, unbeknownst to Senkyo, Ryosei made a vow of his own.

\*As a hunter of the Konjou clan, as the dead person you brought back to life, and as your friend, I will keep you away from taking the path I determine to lead to your certain doom, may it be from a prophecy or your love for the enemy. I will use the life you revived to bring you toward a happy life of your own!\*

**186 – Reaping From Risks Taken**

He reached the family restaurant in less than a minute with his rushed sprint and successfully arrived at his destination. From bland white but properly maintained walls, he became surrounded by solid wooden walls. The space he was in was only big enough to fit the teleporting circle. There was a single lamp outside that lit up the area. He left the small room in his battle gear and was greeted by Kosuke, and surprisingly, Shiro.

“Good you’re here.”

“With that intense message, anyone would come running in. Anyway, what’s the situation?”

“She will be filling you in as you go. We’re trying our best to hurry here, so we don’t have much time to waste. One of the hunters is already out calling everyone they can. I need to help out. It’s going to take at least ten minutes for the reinforcements to arrive. Hold out until then.”

“Got it.”

Kosuke nods in satisfaction.

“Perfect. Now, take this with you. You know how to use it better than anyone.”

Sakurai hands Ryosei a katana with a black scabbard designed with red roses, easily recognizable from the time it’s been around him. Kuro Yaiba. He was a bit confused as to why he had it at first, but it didn’t take him long to piece together what happened after seeing Shiro in front of him instead of being inside Senkyo’s body. He shifts his gaze from the sword to Kosuke and bows before taking off.

“Understood. Shiro, let’s go!”

“Yes!”

Ryosei summons a ball of light to guide their way into the dark forest. Shiro filled Ryosei in on everything that happened that day that led to her betrayal. Their talk at lunch, her expressions, and the lines she remembered. Hearing her story made him bring a finger to his chin.

“Really now… I highly doubt this was something she planned a long time ago.”

“What makes you say that?”

“It’s because I didn’t sense any lies before. When we first met Hisho-chan, I even asked her directly…”

“I even asked her directly if she was an enemy or not” is what Ryosei was about to say, but then it hit him. When they first met Yuu, they never got to ask her that question. At another time, when they were faced with the dream demon, he only asked her if she was at fault for Yukai’s condition at the time. He never actually asked her if she was an enemy, which meant it wouldn’t have triggered his senses. It was then that another thought came to mind.

*“\*I thought that you might be who I'm looking for, so I decided to follow you everywhere you went. But if you defeated a werewolf, then that might explain it*…*\*”*

*“\*S-Sorry, I'm not supposed to tell anybody the reason.\*”*

Yuu’s true goal for coming to Earth.

*“\**…*Fine. However! I need you to agree to three conditions. If you don't agree with them, I won't tell you why I'm being chased.\*”*

*“\*I*… *I want to check if you have mana.\*”*

*“\*That's because*… *He might be who I'm looking for.\*”*

To find a true human mana wielder. And her plans for that person were…

*“\***Well*… *I don't know*… *At first, I planned to take that person to Zerid immediately but if Yukou-senpai is the mana wielder*… *I*… *I'm not sure*…*\*”*

To take them to Zerid. And the result of that inspection…

*“\*Oh, sorry I forgot to tell you… Yukou-senpai, you**… don't have any mana in you.\*”*

At that time, Ryosei didn’t sense any lies which only confused him even more. Even back in the Konjou clan, when Senkyo was knocked out by the pain of breaking his muscles, Ryosei was conscious. Yuu was about to bite his neck, but she didn’t commit to it.

There was either something he was missing that led to her finding out, or the even more inconceivable, Ryosei’s ability doesn’t work on Yuu. These thoughts filled his head, sending him into confusion.

It was true that Senkyo was the person Yuu was looking for. Senkyo and Ryosei were aware of that fact the moment they learned he could use mana without a spectral in one of his private practice sessions in his own home. Yet they still chose to let her stay close by.

Why they decided to take such a risk was simple, Senkyo took an interest in Yuu. It wasn’t until yesterday that he realized that fact, but to Ryosei who was only a visitor to Senkyo’s body, he knew about it long ago. It was also yesterday that Ryosei decided to respect his decision and let a known risk pass by. In turn, he made a vow to himself to lead Senkyo to a happy life. But then, why was he away when Senkyo’s abduction happened? What reasons were there? Was it because he didn’t expect her to as so early? Maybe because Senkyo would suspect his actions? No, the reason was quite clear in his head. The vision of a dainty high school girl that he shared his pain with flashed in his mind, causing a black hole to temporarily squeeze his heart in.

“D-Damn it! I was too careless!”

“H-Hey! What are you shouting all of the sudden for!?”

Shiro was startled by Ryosei’s abrupt shout. After being consumed in his thoughts, he completely forgot that Shiro was right beside him.

“Sorry about that. But I just realized that we brought this situation on ourselves. Relationships are a tough thing to deal with, huh?”

“What are you even talking about?”

“You know what, never mind that. We were too lax and neglected the danger right beside us. Before you arrived here, Hisho-chan asked us to check Senkyo if he had mana. We carelessly agreed in exchange for information, but now it’s coming to bite us back.”

Ryosei shared his thoughts. However, she didn’t react poorly like he first expected her to, on the contrary, she even denied that thought.

“That’s impossible.”

“What?”

“If it happened when Shiro wasn’t released yet, then what you’re saying is impossible. That’s because Onii-chan’s mana was locked along with Shiro.”

Ryosei’s eyes widened. He was reminded of just how mysterious the person he was living with was. The person beside her was also a subject of questioning. Senkyo, who doesn’t know what he is capable of, the catgirl from another world that knew his secrets but keeps them hidden, and the enigmatic man known as his father who brought all of this together. He shook his head in an attempt to remove his curiosity and returned to the subject at hand.

“Then how do you think she found out about Senkyo’s mana?”

“Most likely, it was from witnessing the power of the Divine Soul of Spirits. To use the power of a divine soul, a source of mana is needed. When Shiro first woke up, Shiro witnessed Onii-chan chant the call for his divine soul. Throughout his call, and the times he used his magic, Onii-chan wasn’t holding a spectral. A fellow Angel like Yuu-chan would notice.”

“I-I see…”

The Divine Soul of Spirits. It was the one Ryosei talked to at the end of the battle royale. They could control the memories that get transferred between him and Senkyo. Another questionable entity. Ryosei let out an exasperated sigh after hearing all of that. Right now wasn’t the time to worry about that, so he let it all out with a huge sigh and concentrated on the path in front of him.

In the distance, they could finally see flashing lights and hear a large rumbling. There seemed to be a fight going on so they laid low and observed from afar. They could see Yuu flying in the air, a skeleton jumping from tree to tree while carrying a bag of spears behind its back, and a fully armored guard that was preventing Yuu from getting close to Senkyo, who was tied inside a barrier behind it.

“W-What’s happening here? Who are these people?”

Shiro voiced her thoughts as she watched the two parties battling. Ryosei kept quiet and analyzed the situation. They were clearly fighting over Senkyo, but just because the other party was going against Yuu didn’t mean they were allies. With that in mind, he made a decision.

“We’re going to sneak around behind them and release Senkyo. This is the perfect time since they’re preoccupied with each other. Follow me, but be quiet.”

“Okay.”

Ryosei and Shiro lurked in the shadows, slowly making their way to Senkyo. The other three were too engrossed with each other to notice them. At this rate, they would release Senkyo without having any trouble. That was until Shiro noticed a small area on the tree next to Ryosei began to distort.

“Look out!”

Shiro called out to him in a panic. Just before the magic took shape, Ryosei took notice of it and swiftly dodged it. Not a second later, a twisted branch sprouted out of the tree and pierced the area Ryosei was previously standing on. The sudden occurrence caused a whole commotion and caught the attention of the other three.

“Ryosei-san… Shiro-chan…”

**187 – Objective or Subjective**

Yuu inadvertently breathed out their names. Meanwhile, the two skeletons talked among themselves in the same strange language.

“Aoavvadrdrlr… Pqxe pq iia Xel?”

(Reinforcements… Xel, what do we do?)

“Iiasi! Regrn, lrbk ha j lrdr krnpq jdr. Oarel bkdr lrdr mssioadr eui.”

(Damn it! Regrn, take care of the new ones. I’ll keep the vampire busy.)

“Cziiaalrj.”

(Understood.)

The armored skeleton shifted its attention to Ryosei and Shiro and charged at them with its warhammer. In response, Ryosei simply stood there and observed his opponent with his hand firmly gripped on his weapon. The skeleton reached the attacking distance and lunged as it brought its warhammer down on Ryosei. However, it only reached the flat ground.

Before it could even notice, Ryosei passed by him. He was like a light feather dancing with the wind. It was so quick that the skeleton thought he just did that for the sake of dodging his attack, but when it tried to turn around to face him, its lower body didn’t respond, instead, it lost its balance and fell to the ground, splitting its armor into two and snuffing out the red flame inside its helmet in the process.

“K-Krnpqt… Yui pqxe uiwodr!?”

(I-Impossible… What was that speed!?)

The hooded skeleton stood in shock, but it soon realized it didn’t have the time to indulge in that luxury the moment Ryosei turned to it. Having seen his tremendous power, it became flustered, but still managed to create a barrier for itself and began to chant.

“J Pqhdr Pqlrfi, Oa enuidrfi tcz relsilrui wopqa vva si drdr fims jdrdr. Hadr lrdr jdr pqjxedr pqjgiia cz xeiia iiaoadr sireluikrn lraczfi lrdra fixelr. Hoawooag Iiahoadr!”

(O Wicked Witch, I beseech your limitless power for my eyes have opened. Curse the ones who’ve wronged us and drive malison through their hearts. Crippling Decline!)

Although it chanted something, nothing seemed to happen at all. It then grabbed a spear one after another and threw them at Ryosei, making an impassible wall of spears. Ryosei charged at lightning speed and jumped in the small spaces between the spears, weaving through each one like needle and thread. Those that were in his way were cut down in a blink of an eye. He maintained his momentum and accelerated towards the skeleton.

*“\*Flash Strike: Breath of the Wind.\*”*

He swung his blade and passed the skeleton, destroying its barrier in the process. But that wasn’t all, a powerful gust of wind accompanied his strike, pushing the skeleton backward and pulling him up a few inches into the air. It couldn’t do anything the moment it was airborne, and from behind it emerged a black blade.

*“\*Magic Arts: Chained Blade!\*”*

Ryosei slashed the skeleton but the moment it made contact with the enemy’s bones, the blade did not penetrate. It was as if the blade lost all its power upon contact, but it seemed like that was Ryosei’s intention. It was a simple touch and it didn’t hurt the skeleton whatsoever, but that contact implanted the skeleton with a binding effect that prevented its bones to move.

With the skeletons taken care of, Ryosei turned to the other barrier that was encasing Senkyo. He shattered it whole with a single, focused strike from Kuro Yaiba and released his binds. Being unconscious, he fell to the ground but was caught in time by Shiro.

“Thank god… Onii-chan is safe. Shiro is going to take off the sleeping magic cast on him.”

“Good.”

“O Graceful Healer, cleanse us of the ailments that curse our bodies. Gather your power for those that impede our path. Purify!”

Shiro brought her hand above Senkyo’s chest and cast her spell. A few seconds later, his eyes sloppily opened like it was his first wake in the early morning.

“Ryosei…? Shiro…?”

Those very eyes then flung open in surprise when Shiro threw herself at Senkyo and locked him in a tight embrace. He was thrown into confusion the very moment he woke up.

“H-Hey, Shiro? What’s happening here? Shiro?”

No matter how many times he called out, he was ignored. By the looks of it, she was too focused on her hugging to notice. Which was why he turned to the other person next to him for answers.

“R-Ryosei?”

He called out to him and responded with a slight nod.

“She finally acted. What do you plan to do now?”

Ryosei said curtly but Senkyo didn’t seem the least bit surprised. He anticipated this, after all. The only reason he asked was out of desperation. Senkyo wanted to find out Yuu’s circumstances before this happened, but she acted too early for him to even begin doing so. Now being in a precarious position, he answered honestly.

“I have no idea.”

Such blunt honesty stifled Ryosei and even Shiro who was busy rubbing her head against his chest.

“But just like I promised yesterday, I’ll be the one to handle her.”

He finally stood up and locked his eyes with Yuu. Just as he was about to walk forward, Ryosei stepped in his way.

“Don’t you get it, Senkyo? She’s been playing us this whole time. She knew about you before she even suggested to ‘guard’ you. Her confession earlier on the rooftop was just a farce to let your guard down! She played with your feelings!”

Senkyo’s eyes turned cold and eyed Ryosei with those threatening eyes. His aura was so heavy that it even made Shiro flinch. However, after a deep breath of fresh air, Senkyo forced himself to return to normal, forcing a stop to his anger that was about to be poured on the wrong person. Ryosei was only concerned about him which is why he was doing this, and Senkyo realized that.

“Then, I guess we’ll find out if that’s true at the interrogation table.”

He passed Ryosei, heading to Yuu who was hovering in the night sky.

“Senkyo!”

“Trust me, Ryosei. While I handle this, how about you get information from that other skeleton. I don’t know who that is, but seeing as your mana is wrapped around its body, I’m sure he’s not the friendliest one in the neighborhood.”

The strain in Ryosei’s face showed that he was quite vexed. He hurried here with anger in hand, ready to cut down the traitor that abducted him, but for some reason, he couldn’t easily go against his word. Was it because he had been in his body for too long? No, that would be nonsense, but it was true that he let Senkyo go. If he pointed out the most probable cause, it would probably be because of the possibility that Yuu truly didn’t plan to hurt him, but just needed him. He had no idea, and in their current situation, there were only a few sources of information to go by.

With that in mind, he reluctantly disregarded his dissatisfaction and returned his focus to the skeleton that he disabled earlier. He came up behind it and placed his blade on its neck bone, speaking in a threatening tone all the while.

“I’m going to start with you. Tell me why you’re here, if not, I’ll kill you.”

The skeleton stayed silent.

“Hey! I’m talking to you!”

“Why don’t you calm down?”

Shiro called out to him from behind, disrupting his questioning attempt. He breathed a sigh as he turned his head slightly behind him.

“Hahh… Why are you here? Shouldn’t you stick with Senkyo? He might do something crazy, you know?”

“Onii-chan said he wanted to go alone. Besides, Shiro believes in Onii-chan. Shiro isn’t too sure about Yuu-chan anymore, but if she is really being forced to do this, and she still wants to stay friends… then Shiro wouldn’t mind that.”

“Haahh… Seriously, every single one of the Yukou family is stubborn to no end. Well, not that I’m any different. Ugh, I’ve gone soft.”

Ryosei let out a defeated sigh. Even though he wanted to finish this quickly through the language of combat, he was outnumbered by the two most affected by the situation. If this is their decision, then it made it even harder for him to act. He decided to indulge the two, but only until he saw danger in the situation.

“Then if you have something that can make this guy talk that would be great.”

“The problem isn’t that they don’t want to talk. They don’t understand you to begin with. Let Shiro handle this.”

Shiro cleared her throat and then…

“Uidrdrj. Pqt tcz xedr fia? Pqxe tcz uidr lroa wodra vva? Oavv xeuidr krnj lrfi, tcz pqrel en bkreldr.”

(Skeleton. Why did you come here? What do you want from the person you tied up? If you don’t answer, we will kill you.)

It was the same language that Ryosei heard from the skeletons earlier. Since both of them were from the same world, it wasn’t strange that they spoke the same language, but he was still a bit surprised hearing Shiro speak it. Although they were from another world, the existence of another language slipped his mind since Yuu, Shiro, and Freda, the only people he knew from Zerid, always spoke in Japanese.

The skeleton finally responded, but not in the way Shiro expected. It scoffed at her; fear was absent in his actions.

“Bkrel? tcz pqrel? Oa uixelrdr, lrdr pqaiia Nemiyoak uixe pqfi. Enlr relj reloa oa xevva oakrnj krndrdr! Kekekeke!”

(You, kill me? I was startled when I saw a Nemian in this world. But looks like I have nothing to worry about! Hahahaha!)

“What did he say?”

Ryosei asked Shiro when the skeleton stopped speaking. Although looking at her slightly annoyed face, he wasn’t expecting much.

“Looks like they don’t plan on telling us anything. Shiro will keep communicating. Could you help by threatening him more or something?”

“A hard head, huh? I’ll take care of this—”

Ryosei cut himself short and immediately took hold of Kuro Yaiba. The source of his panic was in the air, rushing at him at breakneck speed. It was a magic attack created by Yuu.

**188 – Beyond Betrayal**

A few minutes earlier, on Yuu and Senkyo’s confrontation.

“Yo, Hisho-chan”

“Senpai… Are you mad?”

Yuu made an awkward smile as she said so, clearly perplexed about the situation. In contrast, Senkyo answered bluntly, showing no mixed feelings about the situation.

“No. How could I be? I expected this to happen. I just didn’t think it would happen so early.”

“What?! How!?”

“Wait, did you seriously think you were hiding anything? With all your actions you might as well have been shouting your intentions.”

“I-I was that readable? N-No way…”

Seeing the genuine surprise on her face made Senkyo worry for her. She was honest to a fault, making her terrible for espionage missions. If all of this wraps up cleanly and everything returns to normal, Senkyo was thinking of giving Yuu some lessons on this subject.

“Well, there you have it. Hisho-chan, I won’t go easy on you. Now that the situation has come to this, you either stop this and tell us the truth or I’ll force you to. I know you don’t want to do this, so how about coming clean so we can help you? Even if the clan refuses to, I’ll be—”

“That’s the problem! If I do that, I’ll be relying on you again! I can’t do that! The only thing I want the least is to keep shoving my problems onto you! I have pride too, you know!? Even if you don’t mind, I do! Now, just let me handle this so everything can go back to normal! You don’t even need to do anything! I just need you to come to Zerid for just a little bit!”

“There’s going to be a bit of a problem with that. You see, my worries are a bit different from everyone else’s. You brought me here to go to Zerid, but along the way you encountered that skeleton over there that prevented that. That means someone knew you were going to bring me here and they intercepted you to go after me, if not, then they’re after the both of us. If we have targets on our backs, then it’ll be dangerous for you to do this alone!”

Senkyo’s statement made Yuu raise her ears. She was sure he was unconscious the whole time here and she never saw Ryosei enter his body, which meant that Senkyo was able to deduce the events that led them here and the danger that was ahead of Yuu.

“If you know that much then why are you even stopping me!? It’s dangerous so I’ll handle this myself!”

“You don’t get it! That’s all the more reason to help you! Just wait for at least another day until we convince the clan to give us some reinforcements!”

“I really don’t get it! Why are you trying to do this!?”

“That’s because I love you so fucking much that I can’t bear the idea of you dying while I sit idly by! So please, just stop being stubborn and let me help you!”

“Like I said—H-Huh!?”

Senkyo made her choke on her words, baffling her as her mind replayed his last message on repeat. Her lips twitched into a smile and her heartbeat began picking up pace, making her face redden, but before anything took complete form, she forcefully molded her lips to point downwards and stifled her heartbeats by clenching her chest.

“Y-You’re wrong! You’re mistaking that for some other emotion! L-Look carefully at a mirror you dumbass! If anyone here is stubborn that’s—!?”

As Yuu was about to return his words, something in her peripheral vision caught her attention and flicked her head toward it, bringing it to focus. Noticing this, Senkyo followed her eyes and both of them saw the skeleton Ryosei took down earlier was reconstructing itself. The spine of the skeleton extended at high speeds towards the other half and connected like two puzzle pieces, sealing the gap between them as if they were never cut in the first place. It turned its head to Ryosei who was busy trying to interrogate the other skeleton.

“O Nature, Amass your power at my word. Create my weapons and impale my adversaries. Needle Storm!”

Yuu quickly chanted and launched the hail of magic behind Ryosei, where the armored skeleton was heading. The air around her gathered and shaped themselves into long, sharp spikes that were inconspicuous within the darkness. Noticing a slight change in the breeze, Ryosei turned to see Yuu launching her magic at him. He instinctively reached for his sword, but before he could even draw his sword, a metallic clang came from behind him. He could feel his blade become restricted. Turning to his backside, there was a sinister skull with dark flames coming out of its eyeholes, clamming down on his blade. It was connected by a long vertebrate to a bone-like sickle on the other end. The said sickle and long vertebrate were being held by a skeleton with a scarred skull bathing inside a black flame, which strangely enough, lit up the area around him indicating his presence.

“Krnoa ycz hxeh! Fisi krnpq bkrel!”

(Now’s your chance! Kill him now!)

In response to that skeleton’s shout, the sound of rattling bones entered Ryosei’s ears. He tried to move his muscles, but contrary to his expectations, they didn’t respond. His body remained stationary no matter how many times his brain ordered it to move, almost as if he was in the middle of sleep paralysis. It was the same kind of magic he used in Chained Blade.

*“\*W-What is this!? Control magic!?\*”*

As he was stuck staring at the skeleton binding him, a giant set of armor eclipsed his figure, and his eyes filled with fear as he saw a gigantic armored skeleton with its similar-sized warhammer brooding over his head, spelling his doom with the terrifying skull embedded flatly on the head of the hammer.

Yuu’s Needle Storm was going to pass Ryosei and riddle the skeleton with holes. It was perfect timing. Her calculations were perfect, but then, several bony spears intercepted them and exploded, taking out all of Yuu’s magic.

Yuu and Senkyo turned over to the source and saw the skeleton that was bound earlier was moving freely and making new spears out of its own bones. They looked over to where it should have been and saw Shiro’s shoulder skewered to the ground by one of its spears. It looks like she tried to warn them, but magic was preventing her voice box from producing any sound, leaving them with the image of a screaming girl with her arm outstretched to them.

With nothing left to save him, the menacing red light from under its helmet was the last thing Ryosei saw before the hammer consumed him whole and crushed him under its weight. A dreadful slam reached the ears of everyone in the area and attracted their eyes, greeting them with a foul cloud of dust along with a hammer slightly sinking into the ground.

**189 – Elusive Spirit**

Everyone was left speechless, their eyes glued to the hammer, watching the dust around it slowly disperse. Metallic clunking accompanied the armored skeleton’s movements as it slowly pulled its hammer out of the ground. Grass, dirt, and rubble fell off from the face of the hammer, releasing yet another small cloud of dust. From under its hammer, it saw a rectangular depression roughly outlining its hammer, as well as a sword and a scabbard inside a depression of its own. However, there was no trace of the person he pulverized which made it think he somehow escaped. But before it could act on its thoughts, a flurry of strokes came from behind it, causing the illusion of a black streak of light snaking down its whole body.

Behind the towering armor’s body was Ryosei, his coat fluttering from the speed of his movement, brandishing a black blade, a spitting image of the one embedded in the dirt. Cold piercing eyes accompanied only by the fervor of battle. His wispy, black hair and the red string that decorated it fluttered in the air as he swung his last stroke.

His sword didn’t put a single scratch on its armor, suggesting that he missed all of his strokes, but the clanging of bones against metal that resounded right after begged to differ. Its armor was dismantled into their separate pieces and exposed the disaster within. The bones of the skeleton were hacked off into small pieces and sprawled on the floor. After confirming his target was down, Ryosei disappeared into thin air almost as if he was never there in the first place.

“F-Fioa uioaoa!? I-Iiasi! Tcz sikrn hlrvv!”

(H-He’s a spirit!? D-Damn it! Cut off your mana!)

The scarred skeleton shouted in a panic. Immediately after that, the flames of the two other skeletons dissipated cutting off the light source that was marking them. In the shroud of darkness, the skeletons had their weapons at the ready, constantly searching their surroundings for a sneak attack from Ryosei.

The skeletons knew exactly what their enemy was. The experience they accumulated in their years of hunting gave them the ability to read the enemy, targets from other worlds were no exception. A spirit with the status of revenant or higher. Their target returned to the spirit realm to evade the skeleton’s warhammer. Doing so didn’t require a chant which allowed him to escape even while cursed with magic. Since spirits have stronger spirit power in the spirit realm compared to being in a different world, he cured his curse the moment he entered the spirit realm. At this very moment, the spirit would be watching them through their glimpse ability. The moment he finds an opening…

The scarred skeleton then began chanting.

“J Pqhdr Pqlrfi, Oa enuidrfi tcz relsilrui wopqa vva si drdr fims jdrdr. Hadr lrdr jdr pqjxedr pqjgiia cz xeiia iiaoadr sireluikrn lraczfi lrdra fixelr…”

(O Wicked Witch, I beseech your limitless power for my eyes have opened. Curse the ones who’ve wronged us and drive malison through their hearts…)

It decided to stay stationary after finishing its chant, staring in a single direction into the darkness. Constantly spinning its skull-whip in one hand while carrying its bony sickle in the other. After a few seconds, a blade swung down at the center of the skeleton’s body, from its skull going down its spine all the way below its ribcage. However, upon closer inspection, Ryosei realized that his blade never pierced the skeleton in the first place. Its body was fully intact without any scratches, and its blade simply passed through its bones.

“–Hoawooag Iiahoadr!”

(–Crippling Decline!)

But before Ryosei could do anything in response, the skeleton’s skull lit up in the same black flame and cast his spell. It threw its skull-whip behind, spiraling around its body and biting Ryosei’s neck. The force of the blow caused him to fall to his side. The same effect happened earlier and rendered him motionless with its magic. The skeleton followed up its movements by pivoting on the ball of its foot to the opposite direction it threw its skull-whip, intercepting Ryosei’s fall with the blade of its bony sickle heading straight towards his neck.

Just like earlier, Ryosei disappeared and the skull that was biting on his neck fell to the ground with a dull thud, and its sickle reached nothing but thin air. However, the skeleton anticipated this. With the open hand it used to throw its spine-whip, it reached into its shawl and took out an opaque gem. Its sickle turned into a harpoon hook as the skeleton slashed the air below it using the gem, flickering like a broken lightbulb as it stroked the gem, leaving a rift to another world, namely, the spirit realm where Ryosei would be. It then thrust its blade downwards into the rift, piercing anything in its way. A surprised expression appeared on the skeleton’s face as it felt nothing but dirt, it immediately turned around but with no one in sight.

“Damn it! What the hell is that thing!? That recovery was way too fast!”

The skeleton extinguished its flames and scanned the area around it. Its skeleton ally was keeping Yuu busy with the spears it keep producing from its body. Over at the side, the armored skeleton was regenerating its body. They were reduced to a million pieces so it was no wonder their revival was taking so long. Then, the sound of swift footsteps caught its attention. Over at the distance, the person they kept bound in ropes was freed from their restrictions and was making a mad dash towards the rectangular depression the armored skeleton left. It soon realized what they were after, but it was too late.

“Ryosei!”

Senkyo picked up Kuro Yaiba from the ground and called out to Ryosei. His shout was unneeded as the person he called out to already began manifesting himself and entering Senkyo’s body.

“He possessed him!?”

The scarred skeleton yelled out in shock at what he saw, stopping him from throwing his harpoon hook. A spear was hurling toward Senkyo in a feeble attempt to stop him, but with Ryosei’s spirit in control, he simply swung his blade and cut it cleanly in half.

In a blink of an eye, Ryosei, who had now returned to Senkyo’s body, dashed at breakneck speed towards Shiro and took out the spear pinning her to the ground. Immediately after freeing her, the wind took her away from the spot that was soon pierced with more bony spears.

“Shiro, return to Senkyo’s body!”

“G-Got it!”

Shiro was clearly confused by the fast pace of the battle, so she obediently followed Ryosei’s orders and was sucked into Senkyo’s chest to avoid becoming a hindrance. After confirming no one else was in trouble, Ryosei took a stop and analyzed the enemy.

*“\*So, are these guys like the werewolf we fought before? Do I need to drain their mana or find some kind of weak spot?\*”*

*“\*I’m still not sure. Give me some time. Shiro, take care of Ryosei for me.\*”*

*“\*Got it, Onii-chan!\*”*

**190 – Ryosei’s Counterattack**

Having Ryosei left to his devices, he focused his gaze on the spear-thrower who launched a barrage of bony spears. Just like last time, he sped up and used flash strike to weave through the gaps of the spear. Unfortunately, the skeleton anticipated this.

“Draoaa tcz si uiaauiiia jrel. Lrbk lroa! –Oakrnlrj!”

(You only surprised me earlier. Take this! –Ignition!)

The cold, nighttime air around Ryosei suddenly ramped up to skin-peeling temperatures followed by a huge blast that would tear the skin like paper if they were directly hit. A cloud of black smoke clouded the area, obstructing the view of everyone trying to peer into it.

*“\*O-Oh…\*”*

Within the shroud, Ryosei looked around in a mix of surprise and embarrassment. His sword was angled to defend his front, but that wasn’t the reason why he was unharmed. In front of him was a glass-like wall with a tinge of blue, the magical barrier Shiro possessed.

*“\*Hey, what are you doing!? This is Onii-chan’s body you know!? That sword won’t do you any good if the attacks are coming from everywhere around you!\*”*

*“\*S-Sorry about that… Fighting in Senkyo’s body so suddenly got me a bit confused.\*”*

Ryosei bowed instinctively even though the person he was apologizing to was in his head. It had been a long time since Ryosei fought with Senkyo’s body. It was his first battle with him in a while and his fighting style abruptly shifted from his unrestricted spirit form to Senkyo’s undertrained body. He wouldn’t be able to fight properly without readjusting himself.

*“\*From what Shiro can tell, these skeletons can apply magic to their bones. They’re like an enchanter hunter. Don’t get too close to them.\*”*

*“\*Thanks for that.\*”*

Although Shiro doesn’t fight, she was still more knowledgeable about magic and Zerid creatures than Ryosei was. After doing a few stretches in the smoke to get a feel for Senkyo’s body again, Ryosei took a deep breath and entered his stance. As the smoke began to clear, he jumped out of it with flash strike, rushing into the spear thrower once more.

“Czdrdrui!”

(It’s no use!)

The spear-thrower hurled another barrage at Ryosei, yet he didn’t show any signs of moving, in fact, his speed only increased.

*“\*What are you doing!? You can’t force your way through with speed! Shiro told you before, didn’t she!? They can apply magic in their bones! There’s no telling what magic that thing put in those!\*”*

Shiro shouted at Ryosei, trying to stop him from going through with his suicidal plan. However, he ignored her and only responded with a grin.

“Sheath my blade with the wind. Your power is the face of elegance. Flow as I show you the path, the path to an elegant ending. Konjou Style, Gale Fan!”

A strong, piercing wind extended horizontally into the spears, cutting every single one in its path. However, this wasn’t enough to take every single one out. The rest of the spears were still hurling at… nothing. The skeleton looked around in confusion, but Ryosei was nowhere to be found.

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to the skeleton, Ryosei raised his sword overhead after he sneakily went under the skeleton’s radar, or more appropriately, above it. From within the forest of darkness, he used flash strike to send himself high into the sky, towering over the barrage of spears and even more so. The black, starry sky served as his backdrop with the bright moon illuminating him from behind, outlining his figure and making a perfect silhouette of him.

*“\*Magic Arts: Heaven’s Blade!\*”*

Small sparks of lightning coiled his blade which then abruptly burst into a living thunderstorm, sending out bolts of lightning from the blade. The skeleton was directly below him, clueless of the impending lightning strike from above.

“Derg! Tcz xejdr!”

(Derg! Above you!)

The scarred skeleton roared, his scream overpowering all of the sounds in the dark forest. Ryosei didn’t need to know their language to figure out it was warning their ally about him. In response, the spear-thrower strained his neck bones upwards, Ryosei’s figure filling its empty eye sockets.

It quickly leaped backward with its spear in hand, ready to stab at Ryosei the moment he landed. Then, a sharp pain assailed its vertebrate, cutting it in half along with its spear. It was so focused on Ryosei that it forgot the lethal gust of wind approaching him from the front. Before it could even regenerate its bones, Ryosei demolished the ground in front of it, leaving a gaping crater in the middle of the forest, sending powerful shockwaves and a powerful electrical discharge, rendering it in a state of paralysis for a few seconds.

With its body split into two, and the electricity blocking the orders its brain was sending to its bones, or whatever kind of force was making it move, Ryosei took the chance to brandish his sword, ready to cut the skeleton down into finer pieces like a fish on a cutting board. But then, an ominous red light appeared from behind him along with a murderous gaze that made his hairs stand up. It was the armored skeleton. He immediately created an air foothold directly under his feet to jump upwards and distance himself from the danger.

Although he was able to save most of his body, he didn’t leave unscathed. Even upon using flash strike, its warhammer was able to hit his legs. An ear-piercing blast roared below him upon impact and tipped his form, causing him to spin out of control to the nearest tree. Right before impact, a strong gust of wind emerged from Ryosei’s back, negating the force and plopping him lightly on the ground below.

In that whole sequence, Ryosei never felt any pain. That was because of Shiro. While Ryosei was immersed in battle, she was vigilant of her surroundings, searching for any danger that would inflict pain on Senkyo’s body. One of these dangers was the armored skeleton. Since Ryosei and the skeleton were moving so quick, she wasn’t sure a warning would make it in time. Instead, she expanded her magical barrier and erected a normal one to negate both the magical and physical damage. Although that didn’t stop the force of the warhammer from transferring to Ryosei, she negated that as well with quick wind magic.

*“\*W-Wow, that was amazing. I didn’t feel a thing.\*”*

*“\*That’s only natural. When it comes to protecting Onii-chan, Shiro is number one!\*”*

After expressing his gratitude, Ryosei refocused his thoughts on his battle. He eyed the two skeletons in front of him, the towering armored one, and the paralyzed one showing signs of regeneration. Suddenly, a long spine stretched from his side, coiling around him and restraining him, but before that happened, he cut down the spine from below and raced towards the scarred skeleton that launched its spine-whip, cutting the spine above him as he went.

The armored skeleton interrupted him by swinging its warhammer in the air, releasing a powerful gust of wind. Ryosei then stepped back to avoid it. The scarred skeleton approached the paralyzed one and uttered something under its breath, releasing the paralysis Ryosei inflicted on it and regenerating its body. The three skeletons were all back in action, their weapons at the ready, slowly shuffling to better position themselves.

In all honesty, the gust of wind he dodged earlier wouldn’t have caught him if he used flash strike, but he didn’t want to tire himself too much before Senkyo was able to figure out how to defeat the enemy. He didn’t need to cut down his enemies, he just needed to buy time. He retreated to the trees and kept his ground, using the trees as a shield for their attacks.

**191 – Skeleton’s Weakness**

Meanwhile, within the confinements of skin and bones, the psychological realm in which memories and emotions reside, Senkyo was racking his head, collecting information and making connections.

Of course, before he began, he asked Shiro about everything she knew about the skeletons. But due to her confined lifestyle in her village as a child and her sudden adaptation from Zerid to Earth, she didn’t know any other species besides the major ones like vampires. Skeletons were unknown to her. All she could do was speculate just like Senkyo and conclude that they can use magic through their bones just like enhancer hunters.

*“\*Let’s see… Ryosei’s first attack was on the armored skeleton. He was a spirit form at the time, so normally, any and all physical objects should be untouchable for him. But then why was he able to carry around Kuro Yaiba? Does it have anything to do with him being its wielder? No, never mind that, I need to focus here.\*”*

Senkyo recalled Ryosei’s first engagement with the enemy. Although he never saw it, Ryosei’s memories transferred to him the moment he returned to his body. He scrutinized the armored skeleton using his spirit vision. Since he was unable to use his eyes, he was given the sight that Ryosei used to navigate when he still hadn’t met Senkyo. The world around him was pitch-black, a canvas of darkness. But when he focused hard enough to use his spirit vision, the canvas was decorated with white lines of all kinds of curves and strokes, creating a very detailed outline of their surroundings, like a manga that was drawn with white ink on black paper. Fortunately for him, there was no concept of light in this vision, making it so that the trees at far distances were still clear to him despite them being devoid of light. This allowed him to clearly see important details in the skeleton’s armor. There was only a single cut in it. It was the one Ryosei inflicted using Kuro Yaiba in its physical form.

Senkyo could recall multiple times of Ryosei drove his sword through the skeleton’s armor, yet his blade only pierced the skeleton’s bones and left its armor unscathed. At that time, he was using his spirit blade, meaning it also wouldn’t make contact with physical objects, but that didn’t signify its bones weren’t physical, since it was penetrated by a physical sword as well.

There was only one possibility. Shiro was correct. The skeletons can send mana through their bones, which meant that spirits can make contact with anything that contained mana. For a split second, an image of Yukai appeared in his head, but then he banished the idea before his train of thought went off course. Right now, he needed to find the skeleton’s weakness.

Senkyo’s focus shifted from the armored skeleton to the scarred one. Its skull was bathed in a burning black flame, looking all the more terrifying as he waved his bony harpoon hook.

*“\*This one seems to be their leader. It can speak both Japanese and Zeldian. Those flames… it ordered its allies to cut off their mana the moment they found out Ryosei is a spirit. These goons aren’t your normal bounty hunters. They know how to fight beings from other worlds.\*”*

Senkyo inwardly expressed a slight fear and respect. Their enemies were clearly not newcomers.

*“\*Hm?\*”*

Senkyo’s attention was caught by the scar that crossed over its left eye socket. It had been present there the very first time he laid his eyes on him. Although these skeletons could regenerate at an insane speed, for some reason, the scar on its skull didn’t make a single attempt to do so. There was a possibility the skeleton left it there as some kind of fashion design, but he highly doubted that was the case.

*“\*Ryosei! Go for their skulls! They can’t regenerate them!\*”*

*“\*Oh, that was quick! Got it!\*”*

Although the intensity of their fight jumbled up their sense of time, it was barely even 3 minutes from the moment Ryosei entered Senkyo’s body. In response to Senkyo’s order, Ryosei turned his head to the closest enemy, the spear thrower. His sharp glare delivered his full intent to the skeleton. Preparing for his attack, the skeleton mumbled numerous times and drove five spears into the ground with him in the center, followed by another murmur, creating a barrier around it. Having witnessed this, Shiro gave Ryosei a warning.

*“\*Be careful! Those spears can activate on their own. The moment you get close to them, whatever magic it applied in them will activate.\*”*

*“\*Is that so…? Then, I’m going to need Enhance Speed and one physical barrier.\*”*

*“\*W-What!? You’re not planning on going straight in, are you!?\*”*

*“\*Heh, that’s exactly what’s going to happen. If you really are number one, then I better be in one piece after this is over.\*”*

*“\*T-This is insane… Onii-chan…\*”*

Her voice echoed in disbelief. Even after seeing the number of defenses, Ryosei had to go through, he was eager to charge straight in. Senkyo could picture an image of Shiro looking at him with upturned eyes, seeking permission to go through with the plan. He agreed, causing Shiro to cast her spells reluctantly.

The moment she uttered her last spell he charged straight into the three skeletons. The time she spent casting gave the enemy enough time to make a defensive formation around the spear thrower. Seeing as there were other targets closer to him, it would’ve been smarter to switch targets and take care of the spear-thrower later. But there was one factor different from earlier: he didn’t need to hold back. With the goal of a swift takedown, in order to show off, he began chanting.

“Remnants of the past, become my incarnate and bring upon the shadow of war. I call out the penumbra of the lurking devils. Konjou Style, Phantom Blade!”

A dark cloud burst from where Ryosei stood, concealing an ample area of the forest, and with the help of the darkness, it simply looked like he was swallowed by it. Suddenly, three shadows emerged from the cloud, rushing straight into the skeletons without showing any signs of stopping.

For a moment, the skeletons were struck with confusion. Three Ryoseis completely identical to each other were approaching them from different directions. When they snapped out of their daze, the scarred skeleton threw out its spine-whip at the one approaching from the far left.

Whether that Ryosei was the real one or not, he was still able to react and cut the spine-whip down before it completely encircled him. The skeleton’s weapon was already badly damaged from Ryosei’s earlier attack. The skull end of the weapon was already lost and its range was shortened substantially. The skeleton knew what would happen if it used its body to block him. Since it didn’t want that outcome, it simply stood on the sidelines, letting the Ryosei pass.

While the scarred skeleton let the Ryosei pass, the armored skeleton dealt with two. It charged its hammer and blocked the path of the Ryosei closing in the center, swinging its hammer as it arrived. The Ryosei attempted to block using its sword but was overpowered by the force and crushed into the ground.

Lifting up its hammer, there was no trace of Ryosei. Since it was using Senkyo’s body it wouldn’t be able to do the same trick from earlier, meaning it was a fake. With incredible speed, it mumbled a chant and closed the gap between it and the Ryosei at the far right. It managed to evade the initial swing, but it was immediately followed up by a bone-crushing gust of wind, reducing the Ryosei to a cloud of smoke. It was another fake.

The armored skeleton turned to its ally, tracing its gaze, it saw Ryosei about to reach the edge of the spear thrower’s barrier. There was no way to reach him now, even with the help of its superhuman speed. Sliced-up bone spears sprawled behind Ryosei, showing the spear thrower’s multiple attempts to keep him at bay. Alas, it was unsuccessful.

At the edge of the barrier, Ryosei took form, standing still as he did so. The spear-thrower hurled one last spear at his head the moment he stood still. Just when it thought it landed a hit, the booming sound of shattering glass reverberated in the skeleton’s ear, a sharp blade covered its vision, and a powerful eruption of electricity ran through every bone in its body, charging every bone-piece with electricity as it’s skull shattered into a million pieces.

*“\*Flash Strike: Thunderclap.\*”*

Ryosei crashed straight through the barrier with a flash strike. He didn’t get blocked by the barrier. He used a physical barrier of his own to take the impact for him. With the help of greater force and a stronger barrier, his barrier broke through the skeleton’s and enabled him to strike it down.

If the other skeletons possessed eyes, they would widen in shock at the performance before them. Suddenly, an unknown force was binding his muscles, preventing them from moving any further. A crown of ice that stretched higher than the trees surrounded him, followed by a massive explosion, and a large, rock spike emerged from the ground within the ice cage, towering over the initial crown.

At the tip of that spike laid Ryosei pierced through the chest, displaying him for everyone in the area to see. Not long after, the ground below the massive death structure distorted and began melting. From solid, brown dirt and rock, the ground around it turned to a viscous liquid, a mixture of yellow, orange, and red dyeing the liquid and emitting a scorching heat that melted the structure in its center. Molten lava.

The other two skeletons stared blankly at the sight, stupefied by the string of magic spells their ally prepared. Their mission was to bring Senkyo alive, in other words, they failed. But that realization was overcome by sadness as they took a moment of silence to mourn the loss of their ally.

**192 – Cursed Gift**

Then, that sadness immediately reverted back into shock with a mixture of fear and anger the moment they took another look at the tip of the structure. Ryosei was now gone from the tip of the rock spike that once held him through the chest. A familiar voice called out from behind them, their fear hidden behind a tall wall of intense anger.

“Do you get it now? We’re the hunters of this world, not you.”

They turned their heads, their skulls sending Ryosei a death glare with their eyeless, skull cavity complimented by their flame, raging in response to their emotional state.

“Y-YOU BASTARD! WHAT KIND OF MONSTER ARE YOU!?”

The skeleton shot his words at Ryosei who was standing by a tree, completely unharmed. He replied curtly, sending only hints of his trick.

“What? Did you just assume that I was charging along with my illusions?”

It was then that they realized. The moment the three Ryoseis appeared, the dark cloud was still standing, concealing everything within. They were too focused on stopping his attack to realize that all three Ryoseis were an illusion, and the real one was right behind them, controlling the illusions he sent out.

“YOU ROTTEN DEMON! HOW DO YOU EVEN HAVE ENOUGH POWER TO CREATE AND MOVE THOSE ILLUSIONS! THAT CHANT WAS TOO SHORT TO HAVE THE POWER OF A HIGH-TIER SPELL!”

. He returned the skeleton’s glare with his own, creating a face of the cold tundra with eyes burning with rage greater than the skeletons’, arousing the fear behind their anger.

“Do you really think you’re in the situation to be speaking to me like that? How about you take a look around your surroundings and know your place.”

The scarred skeleton inadvertently took a step back, reluctantly straining its neck upwards looking at the trees above. Its mouth opened agape and its anger slowly turned into fear. The trees were scattered with people wearing black clothing and various weapons in their hands. The hunters that Shiro requested had arrived. They surrounded the enemy, some perched on the trees while others were spread on the ground.

A sole hunter donning the brute uniform consisting of a black Gi took Ryosei’s side.

“This is Hashimoto Haruto, commander of Rescue Battalion A. We have Battalion B scattered in the forest, sealing any way of escape and preventing any further enemies from entering. Meanwhile, Battalion C is erecting a barrier around the perimeter to prevent any bystanders from approaching or seeing inside. As a direct order from Elder Sakurai Kosuke, the command will be transferred to you. What shall we do?”

For a moment, Ryosei was nonplussed at Haruto’s speech pattern and attitude. He didn’t meet with him directly, but he knew about him from Senkyo’s memories and what he did one time on the rooftop. The attitude he was taking now was a far cry from Senkyo’s past encounter with him. It seems like he has different personalities for work and leisure time. But after hearing his prim and proper report as he kneeled on one leg in front of him, he couldn’t help but doubt his memories. He shook his head lightly, snapping himself out of his daze and focused on the situation.

“I need one of those skeletons restrained for interrogation. It would be best if we catch both of them, but if needed, I permit you to kill one of them. Their skull is their weak spot; break that and they’ll die. Target their bodies from optimal suppression. After that…”

Ryosei shifted his gaze from Haruto towards the sky, where Yuu was still watching them, and quickly turned back to Haruto.

“Keep that vampire from escaping. We’ll be restraining her next.”

“Understood.”

Haruto closed his eyes, focusing deeply on his thoughts. Ryosei could tell he was relaying his order to the rest of the hunters using Connect. After a few seconds, the hunters moved to position themselves and readied their weapons, awaiting the commander’s attack order.

Meanwhile, when the scarred skeleton first noticed the horde of enemies hidden within the trees, it began to panic, looking around restlessly for a way to escape. Then, it remembered that it didn’t need to break through the sea of enemies. Its skull turned to its shawl, staring at a pocket inside the cloth where two Traveler’s Gems lay. An opaque gem and a white gem that seemed to be flickering like a broken lightbulb at irregular intervals.

It could escape right then and there. But the image of a terrifying figure sitting leisurely atop a glamorous throne flashed in his head, the client of the mission they were in. The skeleton ground his teeth, ruing the day it decided to accept his mission.

From its side came the armored skeleton, its one last ally. It extended its metal hand towards him, his curled-up fist slowly opening up and revealing a dark orb of some sort.

“Enaj, oa fims lroa.”

(Enaj, I have this.)

“Lrxe pqxe?”

(What is that?)

“Rela vvj gvv. Fi lroa si, lr enlrrel, czdr lroa.”

(A gift from the Lord. He told me I should use this in battle.)

The scarred skeleton stared at it, trying to weigh out his options to make a decision. But Ryosei didn’t allow him the time and ordered the other hunters to take position. The rustling of leaves and swift movements from shadowy figures caused the skeleton to rush his decision.

“Xeaglr! Lrt gms czdr!”

(Alright! Give it a try!)

Upon hearing that, the armored skeleton took off its helmet, revealing its flaming red skull, and brought up the dark orb to his mouth and swallowed it. A few of the hunters saw the act and reported it immediately to Haruto, causing him to order everyone to hold their positions and observed them.

     A few seconds of silence passed, the tension in the air weighing down on everyone present, awaiting the results of the skeleton’s actions. Then, a vile wave of energy passed through everyone. The hunters were quite familiar with this feeling. It was something that evil spirits would usually secrete in an attempt to terrify the weak, but most of all, it was used to release the limits on their body.

     Sounds of metal clunking could be heard from the armored skeleton, which then sharpened to a loud clang as the armor on its body bent all over and broke into multiple metal fragments. It then became apparent that the skeleton was increasing its size at a fast pace until it towered over the trees, becoming just over three times their size. The hunters managed to fall back before the skeleton’s feet flattened them in its growth.

**193 – Rampaging Colossus**

     Its skull was ablaze in a ginormous red flame, lighting up the sky above. If it weren’t for the barrier the other hunters activated, the skeleton would’ve become a colossal beacon for all to see and fear. It turned its skull around, looking for something. Its empty eye pockets aligned with Yuu, who was hovering in the sky watching the skeleton’s transformation. Yuu sensed the danger upon her and evaded as a skeletal hand came to swat her from the sky.

     “O Nature, Amass your power at my word. Create my weapons and impale my adversaries. Needle Storm!”

     The air around her gathered into multiple sharp spikes comprising of deadly hurricanes and launched them toward its skull. Along with the storm, she accompanied it with a fireballs and chunky rocks firing at breakneck speed, most of them traveled on their own, but others merged with her initial needle storm and produced a flaming hurricane of heavy stone. The intense heat of the flame hurricane then melted the rocks inside, turning them into lava. The skeleton defended itself with its arms which took the blow of the lava storm. Its bones began to melt, but its regeneration was far superior, making it look like nothing happened.

     While the skeleton was busying itself with Yuu, the hunters below took that chance to rearrange themselves into a new formation.

     “FORMATION TITAN E! REQUEST ASSISTANCE FROM BATALLION B!”

     Haruto barked orders, causing the rest of the hunters to move accordingly. Units wearing cloaks, coats, and robes placed themselves within the trees. These hunter classes were enhancers, ranged fighters, and casters, respectively. Casters and ranged fighters raised their weapons, casting spells to empower their weapons and magic to throw at the giant before them. Meanwhile, enhancers sealed the attackers inside a barrier, protecting them from attacks and creating a small mountain range of protective barricades within the shroud of trees. Following that, they used their spirit power to enhance their allies’ attacks with blessings to further increase their effectiveness, later taking up their own weapons to help attack the enemy.

     A flurry of magic and ranged attacks bombarded the skeleton from all sides, making it impossible to defend against all of them, but even with all the successful hits, it was barely taking any scratches. Annoyed with the hunters, it shifted its attention to the ants below it and attempted to move its leg to stomp over them. However, contradictory to its expectations, its leg refused to move. Craning its neck even further down below, it saw a cluster of hunters under multiple barriers tightly gripping its feet, weighing it down heavily. It was surprised to see such tiny vermin able to weigh heavier than its colossal body.

     All of the hunters restraining the skeleton were brutes. Their inhuman strength along with the power of numbers and spirit power allowed such a thing to be possible, but even if they were able to restrain the skeleton, that feat taxed their bodies. If the skeleton were to swat them away with its hands, their flimsy restraints would crumble.

     Having sensed this, the skeleton reached downwards, but it was then intercepted by multiple coated men wielding swords of light. They were melee fighters. They waited on the ground below and sprung into action only to parry the skeleton’s attacks whenever it came to destroy its restraints. Both brutes and fighters were accompanied by enhancers, protecting the brutes with barriers, sustaining their energy to continue their push, and also enhancing the weapons of the fighters, occasionally joining to parry attacks.

     The skeleton attempted to break through their defenses using brute force and brought down its fists into the ground. But waves of hunters intercepted them, spears, swords, axes, repeatedly attacked a single location on each arm until they were cut down and fell towards the ground. The cut-off skeletal hands were then shoved away by hunters with maces, staffs, and warhammers, successfully protecting the brutes.

     Only when its arms were cut that it realized it couldn’t last long. The attacks from the rear were now taking a toll on its skull. Since it ignored the rear’s attacks only to make a failed attempt of taking out the brutes below, its skull was fairly damaged, consisting of small cracks and occasional holes.

     It regenerated its arms, again and again, to try and break the restraints below it, only to fail in every attempt. Its skull was now heavily damaged with large holes and cracks spread on its surface. It wouldn’t take long before it finally broke. The image of the death of its ally flashed through its empty skull, a singular strike, shattering its skull into mere fragments. Fueled with despair, anger, and desire for revenge against the small vermin below, it roared a blood-curdling scream into the sky above it, causing the air around them to reverberate. Along with its scream arrived another wave of vile energy, raising the hairs of the hunters around them.

     The hunters quickly examined its body, searching for something different. Then, they spotted something appear in the middle of its ribcage. An orb emitting dark energy, ominous green and black air spiraled around it and extended through its body. It twisted around its arms, legs, ribcage, and even in and around the holes of its skull, creating a perfect anatomy of what would happen if a tentacle monster grew inside your body and decided to take it over. The ominous air hardened, turning into solid, tentacles that wiggled around uncontrollably in its eye sockets and jaw as the skeleton screamed in pain. The gory scene before them caused some of the rear hunters to stop attacking and grimaced as they stared at it.

*“\*Ryosei, isn’t this…?\*”*

*“\*Yeah, it’s a rampaging spirit.\*”*

The sight boggled their minds. Although they already knew about a rampaging spirit, they’d never seen or heard of a living being turning into a rampaging spirit while they were still alive. Despite its skinless body, the skeleton was still technically alive as a species of a different world, but despite that, it still turned into a rampaging spirit, something that is only available to spirits. One thing is for a fact, the skeleton wasn’t a spirit before. A contradiction in their knowledge led them to conclude that the orb the skeleton took earlier was the cause of this transformation.

     The skeleton let out another loud roar and kicked up its feet, sending the brutes and everyone in the way of its swinging leg launching high up into the sky. With its increase in power and loss of restraints, it swung its arms and stopped its feet onto the rear, who were already trying to flee.

     “TEMPORARY RETREAT! REGROUP AT THE EAST BARRIER POINT AND REQUEST FOR SUPPORT ON A THREAT LEVEL A!”

     The order echoed throughout the forest as well as in Connect networks. The hunters responded accordingly and made their way east of the forest. This was a safe card to play. Seeing as their enemy was unlike anything they’d ever seen before; they needed to measure its strength and gather data on what it was capable of before sending out units to take it down. However, the plan didn’t ring well in Senkyo’s ears. Although it was safe, it was clear that the enemy was only going to get stronger from here on. If the core in its ribcage formed fully and the tentacles covered its whole body like armor, it would be even harder to take down. They needed to strike now while the core was still visible. His raging emotions were clear to Ryosei, making him place his hand on Haruto’s shoulder and told him,

     “There’s no need for that. We’ll take care of this.”

     Haruto’s eyes widened in surprise before he shouted at him for suggesting to fight the monster on his own.

     “What!? Look, kid, I don’t care if you’re the new wielder of the legendary blade. But takin’ that thin’ on when we don’t know what it's capable of, by yourself no less, is just suicide!”

     Haruto dropped his polite attitude as a result of hearing Ryosei’s words. Despite his protest, Ryosei simply shot him a grin before turning his back to him.

     “Orders say I’m on command now, remember? Although you handled your troops beautifully, I’ll be enough to take it on.”

     He left Haruto with those words before leaping down the tree branch and heading for the skeleton. Haruto clicked his tongue in frustration and reluctantly ordered the hunters to return on stand-by.

*“\*So, what’s the plan?\*”*

Ryosei asked Senkyo as he charged in.

*“\*We’re going to try something we couldn’t do in the battle royale.\*”*

*“\*You mean… Interchange?\*”*

*“\*You know it. But first, we’re going to need a few kunai.\*”*

*“\*What!? I just left Haruto though!\*”*

*“\*It’s not my fault you tried to act cool there! Go get some from a nearby hunter or something!\*”*

     Ryosei swallowed his pride and turned his head to the nearest hunter that seemed like they’d be carrying kunai. He changed his course and called out to the hunter atop a tree, who was wearing a black cloak, indicating they were an enhancer.

     “I’m going to need your kunai. Hand over some.”

     Perhaps because he was trying to hide his embarrassment, he ordered the hunter rather curtly. A surprised look appeared on the hunter’s face and stared blankly at him, trying to process the situation. When they took a once-over on Ryosei his eyes spotted Kuro Yaiba in their hands, helping him realize who the person in front of him was.

     “Come on, hurry up!”

     Ryosei’s restless voice brought them out of their daze and hurriedly took five kunai from his combat belt and handed them over to him. Having received the kunai, he stored them in his pockets and left them for the skeleton.

*“\*Now, circle around the skeleton while chanting a spell. We’re going to cast Hell’s Pillar.\*”*

*“\*Isn’t that…\*”*

*“\*Yep, it’s the spell Hisho-chan taught Shiro. I don’t see a problem using something she gave us. It’s not like the spell will be unusable if she’s an enemy or ally.\*”*

*“\*Guess so. Alright.\*”*

**194 – Senkyo’s Magic**

     Ryosei closed into the skeleton and began chanting. To activate the magic, he needed to plant five points of Hell’s Pillar in a circle. If the circle is distorted or if all the points weren’t planted, then the magic won’t activate. He didn’t need to make a perfect circle but at the very least something similar to one. He needed to make sure not to lose his bearings in order to succeed.

     “O Fire, lend me your power, from the pits of hell come to mine aid. Set the first point of my retribution!”

     The skeleton spotted Ryosei beneath him and swung its hands downward, trying to grab him. It seemed like it was still trying to stick to its mission by catching Ryosei. But it was unknowingly making it easier for Ryosei to cast high-level magic to kill it.

     “O Fire, lend me your power, from the pits of hell come to mine aid. Set the second point of my retribution!”

     While he was traversing the deformed land, broken trees and small crevices scattered around the skeleton served as additional obstacles along with the skeleton itself.

     “O Fire, lend me your power, from the pits of hell come to mine aid. Set the third point of my retribution!”

     While his mind was processing everything around him almost instantly, a thought crossed his mind. If they cast Hell’s Pillar, would that really be enough to defeat the skeleton? Although the core was a different story, the skeleton was initially alive, so it may not need the core in order to live. If it became even more powerful, then it wouldn’t be strange if its bones did the same, allowing it to withstand the blast. He shot his question to Senkyo, casting and dodging all the while.

*“\*It’s as you say, there’s no certainty that Hell’s Pillar would be enough to destroy its skull. But that’s where we come in to finish the job. We’ll use Interchange to climb up its body all the way up to the skull where you’ll destroy it manually.\*”*

     Interchange. It was the official name Senkyo and Ryosei came up with to address their rapid control switching skill. While Ryosei was a master swordsman, he couldn’t enhance items and control their trajectory as Senkyo can. Combining the skills of two souls with one body at a single time, was Interchange.

*“\*The spear-thrower from earlier was creating spears using its body, and this one was able to hold up the lower half of its armor that you cut off using some of its bones, I assume. None of us could see how they did it since it was so dark. Even when you took control of my body, it always hid behind a tree so I couldn’t see it. We can’t be too careful. I’ll shoot out any bones coming our way when we climb this thing. We only have five kunai so you better get there quick.\*”*

*“\*Okay, I got it. Then that means we’ll be climbing while Hell’s Pillar is activated, right?\*”*

*“\*You got that right. Although it won’t destroy the bones, it will weaken them at the very least. I know Hisho-chan betrayed us, but you didn’t sense her lying when she said magic doesn’t hurt its user, did you?\*”*

Ryosei let out an inward sigh as everything Senkyo said made sense to him. Senkyo knew Ryosei had a tremendous amount of distrust against Yuu, which made him opposed to anything that originally came from her, but hearing Senkyo’s explanation made him cave in.

     “O Fire, lend me your power, from the pits of hell come to mine aid. Set the fifth point of my retribution!”

     Having set the last point of Hell’s Pillar, Ryosei headed inside the circle, stopped directly under the skeleton, and began chanting its last lines. The moment he uttered the last word, everything around them will be set ablaze, so he needed to memorize as much of the skeleton in front of him as he could. Although he knew Senkyo can simply guide him with spirit vision, it would help if he remembered the general layout and his pathing.

     “With the five keys set, open the gates of hell and begin my reckoning! Hell's Pillar!”

     After the name of the spell left his mouth, the ground below him rumbled as strings of fire surged upwards starting from the center. The flame consumed Ryosei, the core, and ended at the jaw of the skeleton’s skull. Yuu and every one of the hunters watched the scene in front of them, their minds asking no one in particular whether or not Ryosei could accomplish this feat. But then, the string of fire that blasted out of the center gradually disappeared. It only lasted for a second. Everyone was questioned what happened, seeing as Hell’s Pillar didn’t even expand from the middle of the circle.

     Craning their necks downwards from the skeleton’s skull, their eyes widened, and gasps heaved as they saw Ryosei standing still in the center, motionless. His clothes were tattered as it was seared with intense flame, ashes of the burnt areas of his clothes scattered over the ground, and remnants of the great flame remained of his clothes, continuously burning the rest of his clothes. Yuu who was watching from above stared in utter confusion. His clothes shouldn’t have burnt since she remembered teaching him to wrap his clothes in mana whenever he planned on entering his own magic. But a closer look and a change of angle made everything clear—no, it simply made everything even stranger. However, worry overpowered the confusion in her head.

     Ryosei couldn’t support his own weight and dropped to his knees and fell on his bottom, remaining in a kneeling position. Under his singed clothes, was his skin charred, covered with severe burns. His normal, supple skin turned dry and leathery with large burn spots consisting of black, white, brown, and yellow. His hair was seared in the flame, leaving nothing but a large bald spot on his head.

     Everyone froze in shock, but then the first person quickly came to, realizing the opportunity they’d been given. The scarred skeleton, who was watching from the sidelines, sprung up to action. It transformed its bone sickle into a harpoon and threw it toward Ryosei. Its weapon was severed many times, but there was still enough range for it to reach Ryosei. The hunters quickly acted the moment they realized what was happening.

     Hands shuffling, weapons brandishing, voices chanting, footfalls dropping, every hunter moved to save Ryosei, and the next second, everyone was silenced. The noise dispersed and the natural ambiance of the forest returned. The panicked scrambling was reduced to simple stares. The blade of the jagged harpoon ended right in front of Ryosei’s shoulder. The blade was stopped, and Ryosei was saved, not by a spell nor a weapon, but with a body.

     Ryosei’s eyes widened. The sound of broken glass resounded in his ear. Locks of crimson hair fell to the ground as they separated from their owner. The ends of a skirt fluttered downwards from the quick speed they arrived at. Blue fabric covered most of his vision as he looked up, a blue jacket that was ripped in three places. Two of which sprouted bat wings that spread in a wide arc, covering more of his vision. The third cut was drenched with blood, from behind, it would be the area where the heart is, piercing through the area was a bony harpoon with several jagged blades to hold onto whatever it hit. He could hear the sounds of struggle coming from the person in front of him. A dam burst after hearing her muffled grunts.

     “G-Gah! Hi—kgh! …sho, ch-chan…!”

     The owner of the voice was no longer Ryosei. Senkyo forcefully took back control of his body in order to call out to the girl in front of him. Taking back control meant that the pain Ryosei was feeling would transfer to him. But surprisingly, there was much less pain than he initially thought, but he knew that meant his condition was worse.

**195 – Rayless Wrath**

     “D-Damn it! Gah, whatever! You saved me the trouble of going after you.”

     The scarred skeleton pulled on his spine-whip and brought Yuu towards it.

          With the last of her strength, Yuu turned her head behind her, making eye contact with Senkyo. She then managed to shoot him a tiny smile, blood exiting the crack of her lips. In a low voice, she left him a message before being pulled in by the skeleton, causing Senkyo to produce tears from his eyes. From the fire, it seemed like his face was the least damaged. Perhaps it was because he was looking upwards, but that didn’t matter.

     The skeleton pulled out a white gem from its shawl, flickering like a broken lightbulb. It passed it through the air, creating a dimensional rift that led to the unknown. Then, it threw Yuu’s body like luggage into the rift, disappearing from the world. The rift then slowly closed, the white gem abruptly broke as it did, and the skeleton’s attention shifted to Senkyo.

     The hunters knew it was time to move, so they charged in again to save Senkyo, but they were stopped in their tracks by the giant skeleton above them. It swung its arms and kicked its legs, keeping the hunters away and blocking the attacks coming for its ally.

     “N-No…”

     Senkyo spoke inadvertently. Although, not for the reasons most people were expecting.

*“\*S-Senkyo!? Hey! Can you hear me!?\*”*

     Ryosei called out to Senkyo, trying to get a hold of his attention. In this situation, anyone should be feeling fear, terror, panic, despair, or anything of the like as they are about to be taken in by a skeleton from another world, but not Senkyo. Instead of fear, Senkyo’s emotions burned with rage, so much so that even Ryosei was being affected by it. He didn’t know what Senkyo could do in his state, deep inside, he hoped it was all just malice with nothing to back it up, but for some reason, it didn’t feel like that was the case. The fact that Ryosei didn’t know what was happening in Senkyo’s mind brought him fear.

     Senkyo forcefully moved his arms, both hands gripping Kuro Yaiba; one on the hilt, and one at the base of the blade, creating a hand-scabbard. After seeing this, it was all too obvious to Ryosei what he was planning.

*“\*STOP! SENKYO! DON’T DO THIS! YOU DON’T NEED TO! SHIRO AND I WILL PROTECT YOU! SHE ALREADY HAS A STRONG BARRIER UP! JUST CALM DOWN!\*”*

     Ryosei screamed at Senkyo. A memory flashed through his mind. The memory that held the reason why their secret family house in the mountains was reduced to that state. The day after his parents died, he went to the house, only for a monster to find its way inside. Filled with rage and nothing to pour onto, he uttered a single sentence that brought the house to its current state and completely obliterated the monster. What was most shocking was the time that took him to do so, a grand total of one second.

     With no signs of stopping, Ryosei tried to forcibly take control, but Senkyo wasn’t letting him. Since he was the owner of the body, it was only natural he had superior control. Then, Ryosei attempted to leave his body and manifest to stop him directly, but to his surprise, he wasn’t able to do so. When he thought of Senkyo having superior control, he didn’t expect him to be able to trap him inside his body. With no other cards to play, Ryosei contacted Haruto through Connect.

*“\*HARUTO! ORDER EVERYONE TO RETREAT! GET OUT OF HERE BEFORE YOU DIE!\*”*

     Ryosei sounded absurd to him. The person who said they would be able to handle the situation by themselves was unmoving in the middle of the fray, only seconds away from being kidnapped.

*“\*STOP JOKING—\*”*

*“\*SHUT UUUP! YOU DON’T UNDERSTAND! I NEED YOU TO LEAVE BEFORE—\*”*

     “Unbind the manacles of my zenith.”

     While Ryosei was in the middle of ordering the other hunters to retreat, Senkyo uttered a single sentence, seething with pure rage. He was too late.

     Senkyo drew Kuro Yaiba from his hand-scabbard, grasping it tightly in order to make a shallow cut through his fingers. The backside of his hand dripped blood while the other released a thick miasma as he drew his sword, concealing the blade as he drew it.

*“\*GET OUT OF HEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEERE!!!\*”*

     Ryosei roared at Haruto through Connect, making a last attempt to save his allies. The panic in his voice rang alarm bells in Haruto, causing him to call a retreat. He didn’t quite understand what was happening, so he decided to watch from afar. The miasma spread through the area, shrouding Senkyo in its cloud.

     “No, you don’t!”

     The scarred skeleton threw its harpoon into the cloud where Senkyo once kneeled, aiming for his shoulder. As the blade disappeared in the miasma, it felt a tug in its spine-whip. Thinking it caught him, it pulled it back, only to find out that his spine-rope had been severed.

     From within the smoke, a thunderous blast assaulted the ears of those that remained and the miasma spread across the land, consuming the two skeletons and Haruto. When Haruto felt it was safe to open his eyes, he was greeted by a furious rumbling, the ground beneath the trees cracking.

     He took a quick glance at the location Senkyo last stood and was dumbfounded by what he’d seen. The person who he assumed to be Senkyo donned caliginous armor, dark, shadowy plates garnished with brilliant gold that twinkled in the night. His back was covered by a nebulous cape as if the mist was constantly shaping it. His visor glowed deep blue, tracing the pupils of his eyes like a flame.

     His grand, imposing armor wasn’t the only thing to behold. His armored gauntlets clasped the hilt to a beclouded blade resting on his shoulder plates. The dark rayless blade stretched half a meter with the guard swiveling around the blade, but that was only the blade. In addition to the blade, a dark, misty cloud wrapped the blade’s edges, expanding over three times its length.

     Haruto couldn’t get rid of the terror he was giving off. He was the epitome of death. Grand and deadly. Now he understood why Ryosei wanted everyone away from this, realizing that, it was his time to go as well, but as fate would have it, it wasn’t going to be easy.

     The crevices on the ground below expanded into fissures. The gaping hole of darkness inside it was the last place he wanted to be. He jumped from tree to tree to avoid the ground, but then the life drained from them, turning their healthy bark to grey twigs. He quickly hopped off to the solid ground. He had no choice but to hop over the pitfalls of doom, but when he raised his head there was barely any land left, in fact, the land he was standing on was floating over the pits of hell.

     His face chilled as a horrifying sight was brought to his face. The whole world was falling apart around him. He closed his eyes in fear, bracing for his impending doom, but that never came. When he reopened his eyes, he was brought back to the dark forest. Everything around him seemed fine. He looked around in confusion for a while before he was reminded of the person who brought his nightmares to life.

     He rushed back to the battlefield, but when he got there, there was no trace of Senkyo or the skeletons. There were no fissures but crevices from the giant skeleton’s attacks were still present. After experiencing the roller coaster of life and death, he was brought to his knees, his brain overheating from all the confusion he accumulated. He stared at the sky as if asking it a question, a lifeless voice echoing out of his throat.

     “How the hell am I supposed to report this…?”

**195.5 – Vengeance**

     A few minutes earlier, Senkyo was faced with the two skeletons. Sensing the terrifying aura he released, the giant skeleton decided to kill him instead of catching him. It brought its foot down to stomp on him but it was quickly sliced off with his gigantic sword. The skeleton tried to regenerate its leg back, but it didn’t work, making it lose balance and fall to the ground.

     Senkyo turned to the skeleton, malice in his eyes. With swift movements he cut every limb off its body separating its upper and lower arms, upper and lower legs, leaving only the skull and the ribcage attached. The giant skeleton screamed in pain while the other simply watched in horror. The giant skeleton attempted to regenerate, but an unknown force was preventing him.

     “Serves you right.”

     If Senkyo’s eyes could be seen, they would be looking down on the giant skeleton as if it was worthless trash. With the snap of his finger, the ground broke apart and created fissures, consuming the broken limbs of the skeleton into its shadowy darkness.

     He turned to the scarred skeleton, the one who killed Yuu with a pierce through the heart. The flames in his visor went ablaze as the memory crossed his mind. He put his hand to the rest of the giant skeleton’s body as he stared at the scarred skeleton.

     “Rot.”

     The trees around them were sucked out of their lives, turning into nothing but tall grey twigs. To his side, not only were the trees withering but so were the bones of the skeleton. Its thick, heavy bones turned to nothing but ashes and were taken by the wind.

     Anger welled up in the scarred skeleton, but above that was fear. It knew it needed to escape. It turned around in an attempt to run away, but the dreadful sound of a finger snapping behind it brought trepidation, a chill running down its spine. Not a moment later, the skeleton’s fears came true and the land around them broke to pieces and fell into the dark abyss below, leaving nothing but a straight path from Senkyo to the skeleton.

     The skeleton’s bones shivered, the embodiment of death nearing him one terrifying footstep at a time. Then, its face lightened up as it remembered something. It searched its shawl in a panic, looking through its pockets. It then found an opaque gem and ripped apart the air in front of it, creating a rift through worlds. It jumped in without hesitation, disappearing from the world.

     However, Senkyo wasn’t about to let its prey escape him. With a blinding speed, he rushed into the rift, leaving a shadowy trail and chasing after the skeleton. He preemptively swung his sword horizontally, cutting everything in its path. The next thing he knew, the swing had cut the skeleton’s skull into two, putting the fire out of its life. Its remnants quickly turned to ash.

     Then, Senkyo’s armor and sword began dissipating into the air, revealing his scorched body and charred uniform. He took a few deep breaths, not because he was tired, but to try and calm himself down. He silently walked up to the skeleton to inspect its belongings, but then, the stone wall beside him distorted and several spikes of stone pierced through his body, sending it to the opposite wall and suspending him in the air, blood running down each spike.

     He could hear the distant voices of his friends, Ryosei and Shiro, calling out his name. Unfortunately, the call of darkness was much stronger, his eyes closing allowing less and less light through his vision, the darkness consuming him. It didn’t take long for the voices of his friends to die down into silence and lose consciousness.

     Yet, beyond the wall of darkness, there was a single voice that resonated in Senkyo’s ears more than anything. It was the voice of the vampire girl one year below him who usually wore a bright smile that did wonders for his mood, the person who betrayed him and planned to bring him to Zerid, the first person to ever ensnare his heart, and the person who died using their body to save his life, Hisho Yuu. Her last words echoed in Senkyo’s unconscious mind.

     “I’m sorry.”

     With the image of her dying face in his mind, Senkyo fell into a deep sleep.

**Chapter 1:**

**196 – Dark Abyss**

*“\*I’m sorry.\*”*

A voice resonated in the dark, empty abyss. Those words weighed on him, bringing him even further down, sinking into the deep ocean of the void, the depths wrapping around his body in a frigid casket. For once, he tried to open his eyes and saw sunlight peering through the dark water and shining down on him. Was he given hope? No. All it did was remind him of the shape of the gash that tore through his light. A pale, crude blade drew deep crimson liquid that stained the sky-blue cloth of his sun. Light crimson rain fell on him, as if imitating the thin, silky hair of his beloved who was suffering.

“Kgh…”

He closed his eyes and averted his gaze. Seeing such a sight was too much for him to bear. It hurt to see her suffer. It didn’t matter what little detail entered his eyes. All of it would inadvertently remind him of her. He couldn’t take his mind off it.

“Choose.”

A deep voice came from the dark depths behind him. What could it have been? What voice could be so loud that it would echo through the thick water and reach his ears? Nothing. He must have been hallucinating.

“Let go of everything and sink into nothingness. Become one with nature and cleanse your mind through death. Or perhaps, struggle once more to find a possibility that can mend even the sun’s wounds. Transcend the weight of fate and swim through the vast ocean you call life. Make a choice. There is no room for hesitation.”

“A… choice?”

What was it? What was it that made the words of the dark abyss so persuasive? Was this the same voice maniacs and psychopaths hear and bring them further from normality? Or maybe it was just his mind tricking himself in order to cope with the situation. After all, it seemed like the voice was playing along with his madness, personifying everything around him to his recent tragedy. But he would never know. However, there was one fact he was sure about. It was the fact that this voice was arousing the flame that had died in his body.

There was a time when he would not have cared about any of this. If he was stabbed in a corner or run over by a speeding vehicle, he would have simply refrained from meaningless struggle and accepted it as a part of life. If he was saved by cutting-edge technology then he would consider that a lucky coincidence.

However, he had changed. He found something to struggle for, someone he would lay down his life for. Dying for that person was certainly an option, but that is not fit for this situation at the very least. His current deathly state was the reason she was pierced in the heart, to begin with. If he died now, then his only legacy would be how he was a loser who brought ruin to others.

Last he saw, she was clearly stabbed in the heart. If she was human, she’d have died. But she wasn’t. She was a vampire. In the first place, do vampires who require an abundant supply of blood even have something as fragile as a heart? Maybe something similar, but most likely not the same. It could all be his desperation talking, but what if she was still alive?

If so, then she would be suffering somewhere on the brink of death. Even if he chose to move now, he would be too late, but that wasn’t the problem. It was the fact that he was accepting such a fate. If he was truly willing to die for her sake, then he would also be willing to live for her sake. His situation mattered not. Even if he was in a worse state than she was, that mattered not. The only thing of importance was getting to her side and saving her life, but looking around, this was not a place he could do that.

“To save as many lives as you can along with your own. As long as you live, you will save. And as long as you’re alive, you will continue to use your power to protect.”

Those were the words that Ryosei lived by when he was a hunter, Senkyo felt like it was a shame that he had to throw away those words, but right now, he could feel them resonating inside him more than ever.

“I… will save you.”

His voice was muffled by the water, bringing only bubbles of air to the surface.

“I won’t let you apologize here.”

His voice began to clear.

“I won’t let it end here! I will LIVE!”

He shouted it the dark water, his voice as clear as his determination. Such a feat was impossible, but fitting for someone who chose to challenge the line between what is possible and what is not.

“Very well.”

The abyss responded. Along with that came a mysterious force that pushed his sinking body behind him, bringing him closer and closer to the sunlight piercing through the water's surface. Challenging the impossible, he pushed through the heavy water and reached out to it as it filled his vision.

**197 – Third Mastery**

“I will… live!”

He exclaimed once more, but now significantly softer than his earlier shouts. As his blurry vision cleared, he noticed that his outstretched hand was reaching for a lantern hanging on the ceiling. His senses returned to him, but he wasn’t feeling the same as usual. There was a strange tingle coming from all over his body, and what was even more peculiar was the fact that they were not coming from above his skin, but instead inside his body. One particular spot was the palm of his outstretched hand. He inspected it, but there was nothing that seemed wrong with it. Then, the sound of splashing water accompanied by a loud metallic clang pierced his eardrums, making him flinch and turn his head towards the source. There, he saw a familiar face.

“O…Onii-chan?”

She muttered under her breath, but enough for Senkyo to hear it.

“Y-Yeah… Hey there, Shiro-chan.”

“Onii-chan!”

Tears climbed down her cheeks as she heard his response. The overflowing emotions took over and caused her to pounce on him with one arm open.

“W-Wha!?”

But after hearing his voice spike in surprise, she was brought back to her senses and quickly kicked the wall beside her, sending herself away from Senkyo, hurling towards the floor beside him, ending the event with an awful tumble face-first to the ground. It seemed like she realized jumping on top of a bedridden person right after they woke up was a bad idea.

“S-Shiro!? Are you okay!?”

“M-Mrf… Shyrho ish… ofkeii!”

Hearing her speak in broken words made Senkyo doubt her claim. Despite that, she bounced right back up and properly faced him as if nothing happened.

“More importantly, are you okay, Onii-chan!? Does it hurt anywhere!?”

Shiro brings up one of her arms to him but doesn’t touch him. Senkyo could tell she was being overly careful with him, treating him like a precious vase that would shatter to high-pitch noise. But in truth, he was feeling perfectly fine. There was a strange tingle in his body but he did not feel weakened.

On the contrary, the same could not be said for Shiro. Looking at her carefully, she had green vines wrapping around her left arm, strapping it tightly to her body. From his memories with Freda, it was a vine called Vino that wrapped around anything that touched it. It was interesting how she used it, but he didn’t let his slight amazement disregard the fact that she kept it from moving and let her right arm make her worried gestures. Recalling the past events, that arm was held by her left shoulder which the spear-thrower skeleton pierced.

“I should be the one asking you that! Is your shoulder alright!?”

Senkyo jumped out of the bed to face her properly, examining the shoulder wrapped in vines. Seeing this made her widen her eyes, and soon after widened her smile as she hugged him tightly with one arm.

“S-Shiro?”

“Thank goodness you’re alive… thank goodness…”

She tightened her embrace and buried her head in his chest, rubbing him with her cheeks as she relished in his warmth. This reminded him that he wasn’t the only one hurting from recent events. He could vividly remember Yuu’s figure when she saved him from being taken which made him want to jump right into action. But seeing Shiro’s relived figure made him calm down. The very least he could do for her was to wait for her to recover.

Looking around, it seemed they were inside some kind of cave hideout. The room mostly contained bones that caught dust from being left alone for so long, but the makeshift bed and end table next to him showed clearly that this space was no bedroom and was only used to house him temporarily. This was all Shiro’s doing. The end table was covered with cloth, hiding its raw, rocky texture to make it more appealing. Additionally, it was filled with a wooden bowl of water and food that was similar to boiled spinach on top of clean leaves. Meanwhile, the bed that held his body was only an elevated floor with cloth covering it, but his body was laying in a soft material. If he had to guess, it had to be wool or at least something similar. If he was reading the situation correctly, Shiro built these to take care of him while he was out cold. If Senkyo decided to shove her off after all her hard work, saving Yuu will be the least of her worries. His conscience wouldn’t let him hear the end of it.

A few minutes passed and Shiro finally decided to detach herself from Senkyo. She decided to inform him of their current situation, but first, there was something she had to get out of the way first.

“S-Shiro is so sorry, Onii-chan! Sorry! Sorry! Sorry!”

“W-Whoa, whoa, whoa! What’s this all of the sudden!? Whatever it is, it’s fine!”

She groveled and brought her forehead to the ground to apologize to him, but all that ended up doing was making Senkyo feel uncomfortable in the situation. He wanted her to get up and tried to pull her up but she vehemently insisted that her head stayed on the ground.

“S-Shiro made a huge mistake, and she let Onii-chan get hurt badly because of it! S-Shiro is so sorry! S-Shiro is…”

Just as Senkyo thought, he was not as lucky as his healthy body suggested. He could remember the spikes suddenly sprouting out of the wall, as well as the sensation of cold stone piercing his skin and shattering bones. Shiro was most likely apologizing for that. Realizing this, he kneeled down to her and placed a hand on her shoulder to comfort her.

“Shiro, I know you. You aren’t the type to let your guard down just because I seemed invincible. There must have been something else to prevent your barrier from erecting. We may not know what it is, but I know you aren’t to blame. I genuinely believe that.”

“Onii-chan…”

Senkyo remembered everything. Not a single memory broke off from his mind. In his blazing rage, he activated one of the main functions of Kuro Yaiba, the Release Factor. Even Ryosei wasn’t too sure of how it worked, but by sacrificing the owner’s own blood and emotion, the blade will transform and empower the owner, releasing a zone where they are in full control of. This explained how he was able to summon chasms and wither trees only for them to return to normal the moment he stopped his skill. Those obstacles were not real, but they were also not fake. It was the extension of Kuro Yaiba’s power.

“S-Shiro thinks… when Onii-chan released the armor he was wearing, the substance that created it stayed on Onii-chan’s body which blocked Shiro’s magic. As a familiar, Shiro’s magic will never intercept Onii-chan’s magic, but…”

Shiro trailed off, thinking hard about how to deliver the remainder of her message. It seemed that she was trying to doubt herself, but Senkyo’s trusting look made her come to a decision.

“What it was made of was not magic… but spirit power.”

“H-Huh!? Are you sure!?”

“Yes. Although Shiro has no power to see traces of spirit power, she has the power to see traces of mana. Since Shiro did not see any mana, the power had to have been spirit power.”

Senkyo was shocked to hear Shiro’s claim, not because he didn’t know spirit power could be used that way, but because of an entirely different reason. One that stemmed from the memory of Konjou Ryosei.

“Wait, that can’t be.”

“Why is that, Onii-chan?”

“It’s just that… In Ryosei’s memories, he didn’t find any traces of spirit power, so we always assumed it was mana. It made sense since it’s a spectral, but if that isn’t the case, then what…?”

Senkyo gazed at Shiro inquisitively, but her widened eyes showed no signs that she had the ability to answer his question. She was just as shocked as he was. It was then that Senkyo recalled the prophecy that Freda told him: Born from the thirst for power, he holds the gift of the three masteries.

“Is this… the third mastery?”

The source of the Release Factor’s power was neither mana nor spirit power, so the only logical conclusion was that it was the third mastery. However, Senkyo didn’t want to accept that yet. Not because he was afraid of not being human, but because of the fact that it was so mysterious that not even Shiro, the person he thought would know his secrets, was informed of this power. For now, he decided to lock that power away and use it only for the direst of times. There was no point in pursuing unknown powers, for now, he needed to assess the situation and focus on working with what they knew they had.

“Then, Shiro. Could you please tell me what happened after I passed out, and if possible, everything you know about me?”

“Okay, Onii-chan.”

Shiro replied immediately. She anticipated the question and prepared for it. Senkyo sat back down on the bed and listened carefully.

**198 – Eight Seals**

After chasing down the skeleton through the rift, they arrived in Zerid. It was because of the Traveler’s Gem the skeleton used. After cutting down the skeleton, a trap that it had set activated and skewered Senkyo. Due to an unknown force, Shiro’s barrier did not activate and brought him to a fatal condition. Two spikes penetrated his left arm, four penetrated his right arm, two on his left lung, one on his right lung, two on the stomach, three on the left leg, and one on the right leg. The spikes were already drenched with his blood and the glut was already making pools of blood below him. There was no recovering from those damages, even if Shiro used all her healing knowledge, the damages were too severe for her to do anything. He should have lost his life then and there.

Despite that, instead of hesitating, Ryosei cut down the spikes holding Senkyo and laid him down on the ground, all the while using poltergeist and Kuro Yaiba’s physical form to make contact with him. Since he was a spirit, he couldn’t touch physical objects, but one of those exceptions included Kuro Yaiba, which he used to handle the situation.

“Shiro, do something!”

He shouted at Shiro to snap out of it and begin healing him. Thanks to that, she began chanting the most powerful healing magic she knew. It wasn’t going to be enough, but she at least had to try. Then, as she was chanting, the rocks that were left inside Senkyo to reduce the bleeding suddenly broke into multiple pieces.

“W-Wha!?”

The sudden clatter caught both of their attention. They didn’t know why that happened, but Ryosei discarded that thought and immediately ran to him to stop his bleeding. Contrary to his expectations, not a single drop of blood dripped from any of the fifteen cavities on his body. To add to his surprise, a liquid-like pop entered his ears. He turned to see that Senkyo’s right arm had severed from his body. Much like the other holes, his arms refused to draw blood. Fear and panic began to sink into Ryosei so he turned to Shiro to shoot his questions, but before he could even ask anything…

“The wounds are… healing?”

Shiro slumped to the ground in relief. From Ryosei’s memory, she never finished chanting her spell. Then what was stopping Senkyo from bleeding to death? He didn’t know the answer, but seeing Shiro’s face, it was obvious she knew something.

“Shiro! What is this!? What’s happening to Senkyo!?”

He shouted at her, hurrying her for answers. She stayed silent for a moment, staring at the ground to ponder the question and whether or not this should be something she should be telling Ryosei, but eventually, she came to a decision.

“This is… one of Onii-chan’s abilities.”

“Abilities…? What do you…”

Although Ryosei was confused, he was not surprised. Senkyo and Shiro’s existences were clouded with mystery. If Shiro spoke of “abilities” then that meant Senkyo was no human, or at the very least not a normal one. It was then he recalled the prophecy Freda told them: Born from the thirst for power, he holds the gift of the three masteries. His wish heralds the flag of harmony. The commander of tranquility he is, but devoid of corruption he is not. Attaining such strength marks the beginning, and reaching its heights is the prelude to his fall.

“Then is this… the beginning?”

Ryosei uttered to himself as he connected Freda’s prophecy with their current situation. His train of thought was broken by Shiro as she continued to explain what was happening.

“No, the beginning happened the moment Shiro was released. She has been told by Onii-chan’s father that there are eight seals inside him. Each of these seals Onii-chan’s natural abilities. He did that so that Onii-chan could live a happy life as a normal human, but also told me that his normal life will end the moment Shiro is released, the first and foremost seal inside Onii-chan. After that seal is undone, the rest will unlock themselves if Onii-chan fulfills their conditions.”

Ryosei’s face curled uncomfortably as he listened to Shiro. She was basically saying that she would never have been set free if Senkyo’s life had never taken the road down the supernatural. She noticed this, but only replied with a melancholic smile and continued.

“Except for being able to control both spirit power and mana, Shiro was never told of the rest of Onii-chan’s power. This was probably because Yuuto-san wanted it this way. He told Shiro that the only way to unlock Senkyo’s true potential was to keep living and nothing else. Shiro isn’t smart like the both of you, but Shiro is certain that Yuuto-san said that because he wanted Onii-chan to live his life the way he wanted to, not because of conditions to unlock his power.”

“I see…”

As the two were talking, they heard strange squelching sounds coming from behind Ryosei. When they checked to see what it was, they saw that Senkyo’s cavities were being mended by strands of flesh and bone stretching and intertwining with each other, almost as if the hole was being sewn by his own body. The same was true for the base of Senkyo’s right shoulder, but instead of strands from opposite sides joining together, it was intertwining with itself. It seemed like it was trying to regrow its arm, similar to how a lizard regenerates their tail. This amazed the two, at the same time struck them with awe, but ultimately thankful Senkyo was going to return to normal.

**199 – Seventh Seal**

“…Which brings us here. Onii-chan has been asleep for four days since then.”

“So that’s what happened…”

Senkyo uttered as Shiro finished telling him the past events. He inadvertently shifted his gaze to his right arm which was once skewered by stone spikes and severed off his body, but now it was all back to normal, and the tingling feeling he was sensing throughout his body was the process of his body healing. This was not something humans were capable of, which drove home the fact that he wasn’t one, but that didn’t matter anymore. As long as Yuu didn’t mind that fact, then there was no reason for him to fret the subject.

He scanned the rest of his body and confirmed that all of it was in normal shape. He was reminded of its charred state before he even arrived in Zerid. His skin turned dry and leathery, riddled with black, white, brown, and yellow burn marks. He brushed over his skin with his hands to feel for those burn spots, just in case his vision was deceiving him, but when he reached his head, he confirmed that the event was no dream, as well as the fact that the rest of his burn marks were healed. His hair had been coated with fire and burnt most of them, reaching the scalp. In normal circumstances, his hair would never regrow due to the severity of the burn, but he could feel that his scalp had regenerated along with the rest of his body. Well, his current hair was a different story, though. It seems like whatever regeneration he had didn’t include growing hair back to its usual hairstyle, but that was fine.

“Then, does this mean I released the seventh seal?”

Senkyo asked Shiro. Seeing as he never had a regeneration skill before, there was no other explanation but he still asked just in case.

“Yes. Although Shiro cannot open Onii-chan’s seals, she can tell whether or not they’ve been opened. Shiro can confirm that one of the seals has been released.”

“One of the seals? Not the seventh?”

“Yes. The order to release seals is quite flexible, so other seals are unnamed. Shiro heard from Yuuto-san that most of the seals are achievable without the power of other seals, but the ones that do usually have a strong indication. An example would be when Onii-chan first released Shiro. That would strictly be the eighth seal, a named seal, which has more power than normal ones.”

Senkyo nodded lightly as he processed Shiro’s information. Basically, the construction of the eight seals within him is like a multi-layered circle. The outermost layer consists of only one, but powerful seal that hides everything inside him. The layer after that seems to consist of multiple seals which can be unlocked without order. Then the inner layer will need the power of the preceding layer in order to be unlocked.

So as of this moment, he is currently on the second layer of seals. He can unlock the rest of the powers on this layer, but if chance allows it, he will be able to unlock a seal on the third layer if he completes its prerequisites by chance. Senkyo and Shiro didn’t quite understand the strength sealed in each layer, but they assumed that the deeper the layer, the greater the power.

“I see… But I wonder what caused it? Was it activating the release factor? Or maybe it was because I was on the brink of death?”

“Shiro doesn’t know, but she is certain it wasn’t because Onii-chan was about to die.”

“Hm? Why’s that?”

“That is because that was the seal condition of Onii-chan’s memories.”

“My memories…? Oh, yeah, now that you mention it, you’re right.”

Senkyo recalled the time when he was being fried alive by Fulgur’s lightning attacks. Just when he was about to lose consciousness, a memory of his father’s last message to him before he allegedly sealed his memories. After that, he chanted a spell to release the eighth seal, returning Shiro and his mana supply.

When the thought of mana crossed his mind, he remembered something important.

“Wait, why was I burnt by my own magic?”

Senkyo shot Shiro the question, but he saw the apologetic gaze in her eyes, giving him a good guess at what her answer would be.

“S-Shiro… does not know. It is true that users cannot be hurt by their own magic, but if it’s Onii-chan we’re talking about, then…”

“There are endless possibilities,” is what Senkyo felt she was going to say. He didn’t mind that. She did mention that his father never mentioned much to her, he believed that. There was no reason to lie about that, after all. However, he did recall Shiro saying something to him on their first meeting.

“What about my other memories? You said before that the old man sealed them away until ‘the time came,’ right? Isn’t that time now?”

Shiro seemed to be averting Senkyo’s gaze but she was trying her hardest not to. This was not a sign of her lying, but instead, it stemmed from the fact that she was going to give him an unfavorable answer. It was not something she wanted to give him, especially this time when he had just recovered from something horrible. But eventually, Shiro gathered her courage and told him directly.

“Shiro is sorry… this is, not yet that time…”

Senkyo thought he was ready for it, but he could still feel a tinge of annoyance tickle his heart, but if he had to fault anyone, it would be his father for giving Shiro the orders to keep quiet at all times until “that time” comes. Disregarding that, Senkyo placed his hand on Shiro’s head and pet her gently.

“You did well, Shiro.”

“Y-Yeah, thank you, Onii-chan…”

The two stayed like that for a moment, rewarding Shiro for doing a great job in this crisis.

**200 – Skeleton’s Hideout**

After that, Shiro urged Senkyo to follow her and walked the dark halls of the shelter. There were no torches on the walls or any kind of aesthetics. Whoever used this place used it for the bare minimum of what they needed to set out to do. You could call them minimalist, but Senkyo was sure that wasn’t the case. This cave was used by the skeletons as a temporary hideout, so to them, this was nothing but a good place to sit down after they had done their duties. To further prove Senkyo’s assumption, soft light on the walls finally reached his eyes, and when he entered the room with that light, he saw a campfire with three medium-sized rocks for people to sit around it, a large rectangular cavity on the cave wall that acted as some kind of work area, and the exit to the cave.

Senkyo took a peek outside out of curiosity and saw the starry sky above, with not one, but two moons decorating its cosmic blanket. Both of which could only be seen through a large geographic split above him, stone walls so high and steep that climbing them was a death wish. But maybe, if one fell from that height, their fall might be cushioned by the river flowing below them, or perhaps just drown as the raging rapids overpower their bodies. It was then that Senkyo realized that they were inside a ravine and the cave that he just left was elevated only a few meters above the rapids below him.

Having been satisfied with his search outside, he returned inside and took a good look around the area. It was a dreary place with nothing but a single campfire and a small lantern on top of the work area-like cavity. He saw no other paths that led to other areas, meaning this was everything here. The campfire held a pot that seemed to be boiling something. If he had to guess, it was the food that was on the bedside table earlier. Seeing as there was no greenery inside the cave meant that Shiro had to climb up the ravine to acquire their food. He made a mental note to reward her later.

He then approached the work area and found a few pieces of lightweight armor and cloth lying on the side, bony daggers and sickles as well as a fairly long spine-whip the skeleton used in their battle. And finally, two leaves of brown paper akin to wanted posters were laid in the middle of the work area, showing fairly recent images of both Senkyo and Yuu with a bone dagger stabbed into Yuu’s poster. That dagger was most likely used to carve the number fourteen on both papers.

“Hey, Shiro, do you have any idea what this means?”

Shiro walked up beside him and saw Senkyo pointing at the posters. Immediately, she responded.

“This is most likely the number of days the skeletons had to catch and bring Onii-chan and Yuu-chan to their clients. If that’s the case, then there are only three days left before they notice something wrong. If Ryosei-san doesn’t come back by then, Shiro and Onii-chan will leave before the enemy finds us.”

“Oh? What makes you say that?”

Shiro shifted her gaze in front of her and summoned a ball of light to rid of the darkness and reveal the map with a continent of unknown shape. It was one he had never seen before, but that would be natural as this was no longer Earth.

It was a map made from the same brown paper but with no landmarks or anything that would serve to be helpful for navigation. However, there was a series of red circles and crosses sprawled all over the map each pair connected with a line. Some pairs were scribbled out while some bared checkmarks, and the only pair unaccompanied with scribbles or checkmarks was a cross on the lower-center area connecting to a circle in the lower part of a nearby island.

“This is Yuwokrn. A continent of Zerid directly on top of Japan. The large body of land with the cross mark is the nation of Uikakrn and the thin but long detached island on the top right is the Zelaoage Empire. Shiro does not know the distance between the two since she’s never learned about it, but from what Ryosei-san theorized, since the skeletons were already expecting Yuu-chan to bring Onii-chan on that very day to intercept her, then he said it was likely that their client did not give they any leeway on schedule since the situation was similar to a pick-up job. Although he did add that this was all speculation and it could all be wrong.”

Senkyo nodded in understanding. She was basically saying there was no certainty of safety in their stay in that cave and that the enemy could visit them at any moment. The only thing keeping them in the area was a faulty theory and the fact that Senkyo was unconscious until just a few hours ago. But now that he was awake, it was high time they travel far away from the area as fast as possible. He was immersed in his thoughts of plans to leave, but then he realized something was off.

“Shiro, where’s Ryosei? He doesn’t seem to be inside me.”

“O-Oh, that… Um, Ryosei-san left to find a way back to Earth.”

“A way back? But didn’t we have those Traveler’s Gems? You brought one with you before you came here right?”

Senkyo wasn’t there personally, but he remembered her informing Ryosei about it when they were rushing toward their location back in the forest. From that memory, Shiro should have it in her right pocket, but Shiro’s unnerved attitude made him doubt that.

“A-Actually, when Onii-chan and Ryosei-san saved Shiro from the spears back then, Shiro returned to Onii-chan’s body in a panic, and she forgot that physical objects don’t stick to her when she does that…”

“Wait, so that means…”

Senkyo pieced together the information and his voice became tinted with a tone of excitement, the ends of his lips curving into a slight grin.

**201 – The Worst Poison**

“Yes, it was left back in the forest… Shiro is so—”

“OKAY! Well, that’s just unfortunate, isn’t it!?”

Senkyo suddenly patted Shiro on her left shoulder in a hearty tone which prevented her from apologizing any further. Although his words were suggesting he was worried about the situation, the jovial tone in his voice was telling a different story. This only struck Shiro with confusion.

“Oh wait, the last skeleton used a Traveler’s Gem too, right? What happened to that?”

He was talking about the opaque gem his enemy used to try and escape. It was a useless effort that ended with it losing its life, but it was impossible for them to forget the gem since it was the one that brought them here in the first place.

“That one got destroyed when Onii-chan killed the skeleton. Since it was still holding the gem that time, it flew out of the skeleton’s hands and smashed on the wall.”

“Ooh, I see… Man, we’re so unlucky, huh?”

His words may be saying one thing. But his tone betrayed his true intentions, as well as the smile forming on his face.

“O-Onii-chan? What are you planning?”

Senkyo quickly took a deep breath and calmed his mind before responding.

“I will find Hisho-chan and save her.”

He quickly turned his smug grin to a face with burning determination, reducing his earlier image to a mere afterthought. Shiro fell silent as she listened to him.

“I know for a fact that Hisho-chan was pierced through the heart. This may be a futile venture, but I won’t stop until I find her. I have a feeling that she is still out there, alive. So I will continue to resist fate and all logic until I find her or carry her dead body in my arms.”

After he finished vehemently declaring his oath, he turned to Shiro and awaited her response. She was staring intensely at the ground, dwelling on the right decisions to make. If she let Senkyo go, then he might get badly hurt just like last time or even worse, lose his life. On the other hand, she could not deny that she wanted to see Yuu again. Not only was she her first friend, but she also used herself to defend Senkyo. Taking notice of this, Senkyo left him with a few words of advice.

“Shiro, whether you approve of my actions or not doesn’t matter. I learned something while I was knocked out: do not hesitate. If I had only refused Freda-san’s offer to hear her prophecy, then I would not have realized my feelings and acted on Hisho-chan’s lies, restraining her before all of this happened. On the other hand, if I had continued to listen to her and her secrets of how to unlock my ‘true potential,’ then reaching my current goal would be much easier, but I did none of that and ran halfway into my decision. Even if your choice contradicts mine, I want you to follow through and walk down that path, as long as it’s the one you see right and with the least regrets no matter what happens.”

“Onii-chan… that isn’t fair…”

“…”

No matter how many times his words were repeated in her mind, all she could find were words laced with cruel bias and devious schemes spoken by a cunning fox that inputted calculations at every step. His words were giving her freedom, but that was only if it was taken at face value. In reality, Senkyo was using Shiro’s emotions against her. She had been sealed inside Senkyo for a long time and the magic that was able to do that had bound her will to Senkyo’s words. When Shiro was released for the first time, she was elated to hear that Senkyo wanted their relationship to return to what it once was as she was given the order of freedom. But now, he was trying to give her that freedom again, not so that she could be free to choose, but instead to remind her of the freedom he once gave her and the emotions that came with that.

In short, he was trying to bring her to his side by using guilt against her. He showed weakness, showed resolve, and gave her freedom, or rather, reminded her of the fact. Would she really have the power to go against his honest will? The will of the person she saw as an older brother and the person that gave her freedom from the seal within his body? After showing his resolve to fight and reminding her of his previous kindness, it became a herculean task to go against him without a pang of guilt assaulting her chest.

However, Shiro did not feel hurt, sad, or any of the sort. That was because there was more to his words. Why would Senkyo turn to an underhanded tactic to prevent her from going against his actions? It was simple. He needed her more than ever, so much so that he would use her own emotions against her. He could easily just order her to his side if he was that desperate, but although his words were carefully crafted to manipulate Shiro, he made them from the bottom of his heart and stained them with no lies.

As much as he wanted her aid, he wanted her to be free. Perhaps knowing that fact was what was making her lose strength in her arms and made her lips curve into a smile. This was probably all part of his calculations, but she couldn’t help but give in. Not if she knew that she was needed.

Manipulation using the hearts of both culprit and victim. The worst poison.

“Onii-chan…”

She softly muttered his name before gripping her cloak and flicking her head to face Senkyo, making the bell around her neck echo through the room.

“Shiro will do it! Shiro will support Onii-chan and save Yuu-chan!”

Senkyo gave her a smile after seeing the same determination in her eyes and prepared to walk on land different from Earth. He knew this was not going to be like the games he played and the stories he read. He considered death at every turn. Perhaps when they attempt to climb out of the ravine using magic, a large serpent would appear from the waters and attack them, or maybe a highly dangerous creature would be waiting for them the moment they leave. But just like how the various possibilities in his mind could be the next event in reality, the idea of saving Yuu was a future he never saw to be unreachable.

**202 – Departure**

“Alright! Then let’s take anything useful and get out of here. Shiro, where’s Kuro Yaiba?”

“It’s under the pile of bones in the backroom. Shiro put it there so it would be close to you.”

“Oh, I see. Although it’s a little messy, we should take this map with us too. Oh, and maybe these sickles could be useful too…”

As Senkyo was browsing through the cave for items to take with them, Shiro came to a realization that he was forgetting to consider someone else. The person that went out to explore this mysterious world for a way back home. Ryosei.

“W-Wait, Onii-chan! What about Ryosei-san? If we leave without him, it will be really hard to find him again.”

“That’s fine.”

“H-Huh!?”

For a second, Shiro thought Senkyo was just that desperate to find Yuu that he would leave Ryosei behind all by himself, the person against him meeting with her the most. But then she was reminded that he wasn’t that kind of person. Senkyo was desperate, but he would never put his friend in harm’s way. There must have been a deeper meaning she wasn’t getting. She trusted him that much. Noticing her confused gaze, Senkyo proceeded to explain.

“You said it yourself, right? We have 3 days at most before the enemy notices something’s off and comes here to check. If Ryosei hasn’t returned yet, then there’s a good chance he hasn’t found anything yet. There’s also a possibility that something is holding him back, but one thing’s for sure, there won’t be enough time for him to come back. Whether I am conscious or not, he probably assumed that we would leave this place before the last day. So going by that, the best move for us to do is to find safety away from this place.”

“Is that so…? Then did he not expect you to wake up? Ryosei-san is against Onii-chan meeting with Yuu-chan, right? Oh wait, maybe he didn’t think we would be doing this after he saw her…”

Shiro spoke gradually quieter as she realized what she was about to say in front of Senkyo. It was a bad move to remind him of that memory no matter what the case, but looking at him, he didn’t seem to be as affected as she initially thought and simply breathed a sigh.

“Perhaps. Perhaps that was the case, but maybe, just maybe, he learned to trust her after her stunt, even if just a little bit.”

The image of a hook piercing Yuu’s heart crossed Senkyo’s mind. At the time, Senkyo wasn’t able to sense it, but now that he tried to remember, he sensed worry and sadness come not from him, but from Ryosei. It’s possible he didn’t return to prioritize something even more important because he trusted whatever Senkyo’s decision would be, and most importantly, he trusted Yuu again even if only slightly.

“Okay, Shiro grab Kuro Yaiba and everything useful in the backroom. I’ll take care of the stuff in here.”

“Got it!”

Shiro responded and left to head deeper into the cave, but just before she did, Senkyo called out to her again.

“Oh wait, before you go, can you do me a favor?”

About 30 minutes later.

With Shiro in his arms, Senkyo hopped off the comfort of land and placed his foot in midair where it was caught by magic. Continuing his momentum, he jumped upwards repeatedly creating new air footholds to climb out of the land’s mouth. He took his last jump and lightly placed his foot on the soft dirt and grass. The wind blew against his slightly tattered shawl, revealing the lightweight armor strapped on his chest and shoulders, as well as the kunai and bony daggers that were hidden within the shawl’s cloth.

Fortunately or unfortunately, he also had the charm of protection that he always carried after receiving it from the Konjou Clan. He was thankful that he had it in the situation, but also realizing it was there made it heavy for his heart because it meant that he would have been fine even without Yuu’s intervention. But there was nothing that could be done about the past and he quickly put that thought aside with mixed feelings.

Another similar cloth was wrapped around his waist in order to suspend Kuro Yaiba to his person and the two bony sickles hidden behind his back. The night breeze was cold, but mostly because his head had lost the rest of his brown locks of protection.

“Brr! Being bald feels a bit weird, but it’s definitely better than having random patches of hair on my head. Oh, and now my hair will grow evenly! Maybe I should get a new hairstyle when it grows again. What do you think, Shiro?”

“Shiro thinks you look good in that, but it’s definitely still a bit new to her… More importantly, where do we go? We’re looking to find Yuu-chan, but Shiro does not know anything specific about Yuwokrn. Shiro was only ever in the village when she was a child and she was never curious about the outside world… sorry about that, Onii-chan…”

Shiro made a light bow with both of her hands firmly placed on each side, as well as her right arm. The vines suspending it were now absent and she was now back to its natural state.

“No need to apologize. Look, there’s a forest there in the distance. We’ll look for some food and water to take with us and look for a place with other people so we can stock up on resources and information.”

Senkyo took the map out of his shawl and pointed at the cross that they speculated they were.

“We have that map to start with, so we can check the other locations with crosses and see if Hisho-chan was sent to any of those. But going in blind will be suicide. There might be other enemies there, so first let's find a village and gather information about them. Those skeletons were pretty strong so maybe they’re well known.”

“As expected of Onii-chan! You always know what to do. Then, let’s go!”

Shiro cheerily walked to the forest alongside Senkyo. It was decided that she would only go back inside Senkyo’s body whenever their lives were in danger. Otherwise, Shiro will be helping Senkyo by telling him what she knew of the world and making his food with whatever she forages in the wild.

**203 – Yuwokrn Forest**

The two passed the night by trekking down the forest to get as far away as possible from the enemy’s hideout. They summoned a ball of light to aid their travels and exposed the mysterious beauty of a night in Zerid. They found familiar plants such as frunas and vino they discovered through Freda’s Eternal Paradise. But what they found in abundance, was the mystical undergrowth of plants that danced under the moonlight while others shrunk and hid underground when they were exposed to bright light, all under trees where their trunks twisted and turned to make their branches connect with other similar trees. There were also ones riddled with holes that released relaxing fumes that calmed the senses of those who passed it.

The wildlife was no different with tree-like birds with wings that attracted leaves and propelled their flight using them. One other notable animal they found was a one-eyed deer that carried mole-like creatures on its back. By the end of the night, Senkyo was thankful they didn’t encounter any hostile creatures and relished the sights he saw that no one could ever see on earth. It was about noon when they decided to take a break and tackle one of their major problems. Food.

“Hey, Shiro, what are we going to do about food?”

“Hm? Won’t these woxefi leaves do?”

Senkyo couldn’t hide his disgust as he twisted his face in a grimace when he heard the name of the leaves. Those were the leaves Shiro boiled back in the cave and fed to him. It left a sour taste in his mouth with a much less desirable aftertaste. Remembering that experience was enough to make his composure falter. Seeing this reaction slightly offended Shiro.

“That’s rude, Onii-chan! Woxefi leaves might have a strong taste but they’re tasty when you get used to them! We used to eat these all the time in our village.”

“So you’re saying it’s an acquired taste? What different is that from saying it actually tastes terrible?”

“Onii-chan! Fine, then Shiro will just have to feed you these until you like them.”

“W-Wait, no, please! I-I’m sorry, okay? It’s delicious if you get used to them but let's eat something else, okay? Please!?”

“Hrmm… Fine, Shiro forgives you.”

“Hahh… Thank god…”

Senkyo breathed a sigh of relief as he dodged Shiro’s wrath. He took a mental note to not make fun of her food palette when he still has no idea how to make food in Zerid by himself. While he was thinking that, he realized that he wasn’t as hungry as someone who was unconscious for four days. He shouldn’t have been able to swallow and there definitely wasn’t any medical equipment to feed him. With that in mind, he asked Shiro.

“While we’re at it, how did you feed me while I was unconscious? I didn’t feel hungry until now so you must’ve fed me right?”

“Oh, yes, Shiro did. She used magic to control your body to make you swallow food and water.”

“Wow, you can do that, huh? I guess that would go under… control magic, right?”

“Yes. But Shiro would not have been able to do that if Onii-chan didn’t order her to do as she pleased. Normally, familiars’ magic doesn’t work on their masters because they could easily turn on them.”

“I see. Then, good thing you’re Shiro. I trust you wholeheartedly.”

“O-Oh, well, Shiro thinks the same… B-But more importantly, Onii-chan, look!”

Trying to hide her embarrassment from Senkyo’s sudden compliment, Shiro changed the topic and pointed to a tree in the distance. It was a tree with soggy leaves that resembled kelp. Its long strings of leaves reached down to their waists and suspended only a few inches from the ground.

“This is an Atdrel tree. They grow near bodies of water and their leaves can be eaten raw. This should be enough to fill us up.”

Shiro turned to Senkyo but it didn’t seem like he was too interested and simply looked at it silently. In truth, he was just stifling his reactions to avoid offending her again. He was making the best poker face he could shape while bottling his true thoughts such as…

*\*This is actual food!? They just look like soggy kelp!\**

*\*Wait, could kelp be eaten raw again?\**

*\*Agh, either way, it doesn’t look appetizing at all!\**

*\*N-No, I have to force myself to eat it! If I reject this, who knows what she’ll do to me!\**

Calmly, or so it seems, Senkyo took a leaf from the tree and slowly placed it in his mouth. Shiro was concerned about why he was being oddly quiet the whole time, but she immediately brightened up when she saw his reaction.

“O-Oh! This is actually delicious!”

“Really!? That’s a relief… Shiro thought you didn’t like it.”

“Well, at first I didn’t. It just looks like soggy kelp after all. But it actually tastes sweet with a smooth texture. It’s kind of like candy.”

“Yep, that’s why Shiro likes it too! …Hm?”

While she was looking around, something caught her attention. It was a mushroom with a white stem and gills wearing a purple cap with white scales. She quickly made her way towards it and picked one to give to Senkyo.

“Onii-chan, here!”

She handed him the mushroom that was about the size of his palm.

“It’s called Sifij Mushrooms. They’re delicious too!”

“Huh!?”

He had an inkling of what it was going to be about. He just simply didn’t want to consider the possibility. In video games and RPGs this purple mushroom would be a poisonous one that constantly releases skull-shaped fumes indicating its lethal effects on the person. However, he had to remember that this is real life, just a completely different world. If Shiro, a local of this world, is telling him that this poison-looking mushroom is actually a delicious treat, then he at least had to entertain the idea. The atdrel leaves were also unexpectedly delicious despite their looks so he was hoping this to be the same case.

“S-So, do I just eat this raw?”

“No, you have to heat it up with fire magic. Make a ball of fire and place it inside its stem. Shiro has never tried heating it with normal fire, but depending on how powerful the fire is, you can make it taste like baked potatoes or drink it like potato cream soup! Weak fire makes baked ones and strong fire makes soup. Oh, be careful not to use anything too powerful or you’ll just end up burning it.”

“That so…? What are in these things anyway potatoes?”

“Shiro has no idea. All she knows is that they taste like potatoes and they’re delicious!”

Senkyo was slightly worried when she said she didn’t know what its contents were but then again, science might not exist in this world so she wouldn’t be at fault for not knowing. For now, he decided to follow Shiro’s instructions and tried to summon a ball of fire.

“…”

However, before he did, a memory flashed in his mind. A searing inferno filled his vision with red and orange, wrapping all over his body and singeing his skin to black leather. The next thing he knew, he was sweating profusely with the palm of his hand hovering under the mushroom’s stem.

“Y-You know what? Why don’t you show me how to do it, Shiro? I don’t quite understand how to do it.”

“Sure, that’s fine. Here, look closely, Onii-chan.”

Thankfully for Senkyo, she didn’t seem to suspect anything. It would’ve been bad to worry her in this situation. But one thing was clear to him, he caught a slight trauma from using magic. That was something he was going to have to get rid of if he wanted to survive in this world. He had Kuro Yaiba with him, but his skill was nowhere near Ryosei’s. While he was spacing out, a loud pop broke his train of thought and brought back his attention to reality.

“Here, it's done!”

Shiro handed the mushroom back to him. The mushroom looked the same but the only difference was its cap was slightly detached and it was producing smoke from under it. He took it off and found a white clump akin to mashed potatoes. Unlike what it initially looked like, the steam coming off of the mushroom along with the familiar potato-like scent made it look mouth-watering instead of ominously poisonous.

“Whoa! This looks great!”

“Right!? Come on, eat!”

Senkyo took a scoop using his finger and placed it in his mouth. A savory flavor assaulted his tastebuds and brought him the familiar taste of potatoes. The delectable aftertaste made him hum in delight.

“Wow, it actually tastes like baked potatoes…”

“Heh, Shiro told you so! Now here, it’s the soup variant.”

While Senkyo was busy eating the sifij mushroom Shiro first handed him, she grabbed another one and prepared him the potato cream soup version of the sifij mushroom. Without another word, he accepted the newly prepared sifij mushroom and drank it. It had a thick texture with a satisfyingly hot temperature to warm his stomach. In a matter of a few seconds, the mushroom was empty with no soup left inside it. At that moment, he made his decision.

“Shiro!”

“E-Eh?”

Senkyo suddenly grabbed her shoulders and made her release a sharp yell.

“Let’s pack a load of these things!”

“You sure are into this, huh, Onii-chan?”

“That’s right! I’ll take these soggy kelps and ominous purple mushrooms any time of the day over those boiled leaves!”

“Hrmm…”

Evidently, Shiro was quite unsatisfied with what he said.

“N-No, wait. I mean, these are really useful food that are small, delicious, and easy to carry. Let’s take these instead!”

“You know woxefi leaves are easier to carry, right? They’re just leaves after all.”

“M-My beloved little sister, Shiro. Surely you don’t plan on making food out of those when we still need a pot to boil them meanwhile these convenient items can be cooked as we walk, right?”

“Onii-chan.”

“Y-Yes!?”

“We’re taking all of them.”

“Affirmative!”

Realizing there was no saving his future self from the taste of “healthy” woxefi leaves, he cut his losses and followed Shiro’s command before the situation got any worse for him. They then foraged the area for as many atdrel leaves and sifij mushrooms they could carry inside the leftover sheets they took from the hideout.

**204 – Xeqrel**

Sometime later, Senkyo was entertaining himself by pondering various thoughts while he was picking sifij mushrooms. One of those thoughts included the atdrel trees. Shiro told him earlier that they grew near bodies of water, but no matter how far he looked, he didn’t see one in sight. Noticing this, he voiced his question to Shiro.

“Shiro, I thought these atdrel trees only grew near bodies of water but I don’t see anything.”

“Oh, that? Shiro thinks it must be a water pool underneath the area. Shiro’s kind can sense whenever water is nearby, but we cannot locate them exactly.”

“I see, that’s interesting.”

After foraging a complete patch of sifij mushrooms, he walked over to the next patch, but before he could even get close to it, he sunk into the ground and his whole body was submerged in water. He saw the thick greenery before him suddenly turn into a subaquatic environment. He panicked for a second, but upon realizing that his air was limited, he immediately calmed himself and assessed the situation.

As he craned his head upwards, he raised a brow in puzzlement as he saw that instead of the sky, a field of grass filled the space above him. He was sure he had sunk downwards into the water but was confused as to why he was still seeing grass and not dirt. The only place where the sky was true was directly above him from where he fell. The ground below him suddenly broke as if it were a thin sheet of ice atop a lake in winter.

As he searched for more clues, he felt something brush against his right arm. At first, it seemed like a patch of grass, but he was certain that was not the case when he saw it was shaped like a leaf. He grabbed it and bent it slightly, but instead of flexing softly, it made an arc much like how rubber would. He noticed that its stem was hollow and upon inspecting its base, he saw dirt stuck inside it. He poked the inside with his finger but before he could discover any more, he heard something heading towards him at high speeds.

He turned around to see a large underwater beast rushing at him with its mouth wide open ready to swallow him whole. Instinctively, he reached for Kuro Yaiba but he couldn’t pull it out due to the water around him. He tried to use magic instead but a distinct memory shut him down before he could even do so. His trauma prevented him from using magic. However, this was a life-and-death situation and Senkyo understood that. He needed to get over that experience right this second or else it would cost him his life.

Unfortunately for him, before he could even rebuild his mental state, he was already directly under the beast’s fangs. Before it completely closed, a blue veil wrapped around him, halting the approach of his impending doom. A barrier had been cast on him. It wasn’t his magic, so the only other possibility was Shiro. Confirming his simple deduction, he heard her savior chant a spell from above.

“O Water, I call for your headspring, the origin of life. Flow with my word to bring upon judgment to those who defile thee. Aqua Surge!”

A resounding burst entered his ears and the weight of the water around him disappeared. The next thing he knew, he was high up in the sky propelled by a large geyser. The beast lost its grip on the barrier due to the impact and gave distance between them. Now that Senkyo’s eyes were free from water, he caught a good look at the beast that made an attempt at his life.

It was a large salamander covered in a blue and green pattern with a length as long as the average lamppost. It had eight external gills circling its neck like a mane wriggling around as it tried to recover from Shiro’s magic. It was similar to the critically endangered axolotls that posed no threat to humans. They possessed the ability to regenerate almost every part of their body including hearts, brains, and lungs. If the creature in front of him had similar regenerative abilities, it would be very difficult to take it down.

The best possible move to make was to reduce it to ashes and annihilate it completely but such a thing was not possible with only Kuro Yaiba. He needed to use magic. He wouldn’t be able to end this battle without it. Despite thinking this, he could not discard the possibility that the beast didn’t possess that ability. He knew it was much easier to use magic, but he couldn't bring himself to use it.

Senkyo reached for Kuro Yaiba once more and positioned his legs to execute the enemy with continuous attacks using air footholds and flash strikes. Alas, due to his internal plague, he neglected to properly perceive his surroundings and failed to notice the axolotl beast’s external gills had all pointed themselves at him. Not a second later, water gushed out of their tips and released a powerful torrent of water. Meanwhile, unlike Senkyo, Shiro had noticed the axolotl beast’s intent and chanted a spell.

“O Wind, usher your gentle breeze and bring forth a draft, power of the gale. Herald your mystic breath once for conflict and twice for liberty. Zephyr!”

As the axolotl beast’s attack launched through the air, a ball of wind gathered beside Senkyo and exploded, sending him flying through the air and ultimately dodging the beast’s attack. Shiro’s gaze followed him through the air to summon wind magic to cushion his fall.

The sudden impact was strong but not enough to injure Senkyo. As he flew through the air, he desperately tried to lock his eyes back on the enemy and once he did, his face paled. The beast had lost interest in him and brought its focus on Shiro instead.

“Shiroo! Look out!!”

“…!”

**205 – Choice**

Shiro refused to take off his eyes on Senkyo but she didn’t ignore his warning and immediately cast a barrier on herself. The moment it was erected, a powerful force caused it to shake. Directly behind Shiro, the axolotl beast had its jaw wide open with its fangs driving into the barrier. A light updraft caught Senkyo and safely landed him on the ground. Now that was over, Shiro turned to the beast behind her, but not before its fangs finally pierced her only protection. The sound of shattering glass reverberated in her ear like an alarm and instinctively summoned multiple barriers to guard her. The beast’s fangs were able to pierce some of them, but not everything.

Just as she was about to start casting offensive magic, the beast roared and its fangs were coated in a dark flame. It took control of its external gills and wriggled them around in every direction. The next second, every filament on its external gills shot out high-pressure water that was enough to trim trees and some of the barriers guarding Shiro. Along with trying to penetrate her defenses, it created a wide dome of skin-peeling water sprays that protected the beast from any outside interference.

Meanwhile, Senkyo was behind a tree using it as cover from the high-pressure water dome. There was no time to waste. He had to make a move. Shiro was busy trying to maintain her defenses by restoring broken barriers, she had no time to chant for any sort of offensive magic. For the entire time, Senkyo had been leaving everything to Shiro. He was only a burden to her, doing absolutely nothing but being saved.

It was the same as before.

Yuu’s image flashed before his eyes. At that very moment, Shiro reminded him of her and the fact that he was completely useless. And the cause of his lack of action was his hesitation due to recent trauma.

Without even realizing it, he was about to repeat the same mistake he made. Uncertainty. Hesitation. Doubt. Indecisiveness. Such thoughts were filling his mind, preventing him to take action. It was all under a single effect. Trauma. But if he let his emotions take over, the only future waiting for him was more suffering from that same trauma. He had to decide. To make a choice and dedicate all his power to that choice.

Currently, he had Kuro Yaiba, two bone sickles, six bony daggers, and five kunai, all of which he could use to eliminate the beast using spirit power. He wouldn’t be able to kill it if the beast had a regeneration ability, but enough time to save Shiro and escape. Additionally, he wasn’t even sure it had those regenerative functions.

On the other hand, he could use magic with the spells Aqua Surge, Crown Spikes, Eruption, Knight Spell, Sun’s Protection, Hell’s Pillar, Needle Storm, Overgrowth, Purify, and Zephyr at his disposal. All of these were spells Yuu taught to Shiro, and in turn, taught to him by Shiro. Finally, after analyzing his skillset, he came to a decision.

*\*I’ll use magic. The only trauma I should be afraid of is when I watch my loved ones die while I stay a useless buffoon! Not again. Never again! I am not human! Bathing in a fiery hell or chopping my limbs a thousand times is much better than seeing them die!\**

“O Nature, bless me with your power, empower your children. Aid me in my plight and suppress my enemies. Overgrowth!”

Facing the axolotl beast, he stood true to his decision and recited the chant. The surrounding vines hurled at the beast with such speed that they managed to penetrate the high-pressure streams and tangled themselves around the beast. A normal cast of overgrowth usually wouldn’t have enough power to overpower them, but that just went to show how much mana Senkyo applied to them.

Stimulated by the growth effect of the spell more vines sprouted throughout the area and bound the beast even more. Not even a few seconds later, its external gills were completely covered in vines while its jaw was kept wide open as the vines continued to wrap around it.

“O Nature, Amass your power at my word. Create my weapons and impale my adversaries. Needle Storm!”

The air around Senkyo compressed and gathered to shape multiple needles, creating a wall of high-pressure air that could pierce through skin and bones. He dropped his arm and launched his attack, raining a volley of high-pressured air upon the beast’s suspended body. Each needle pierced and drilled into its skin, tossing bits of vines, skin, blood, and bones in its wake. Senkyo quickly used the opportunity to grab Shiro and took her away from the beast as well as his line of fire.

“O Fire, break free from your cage, exhibit your power. Scorch my path and bring upon a conflagration. Eruption!”

He stomped the ground with his right foot and caused two lines to appear on the ground, stretching forward with the axolotl beast’s remains inside the lines. The area between the lines then cracked and glowed an ominous red and orange. A second later, a wall of flame erupted from the ground and swallowed the remains of the beast with a scorching inferno so hot that not even ash would remain.

Senkyo stared into his creation. It was a similar sight from a few nights ago where he injured himself with his own magic. But unlike then, he was outside of the burning hell, using what once harmed him to save Shiro’s life. It was strange for him to see it like that. However, could he truly claim that he conquered his trauma without placing himself in the same situation as before? Most would say that this was more than enough, but Senkyo wasn’t satisfied. He was able to cast magic, but he was unsure that he could use its true potential without being able to walk through it.

Slowly, Senkyo raised his hand, gingerly placing it in front of the wall of flame, preparing to prove to himself that he was not afraid of pain if it meant saving his loved ones and surviving in this strange world. But before he could even do so, he felt something soft brush his back and wrap around him. Looking down to see what it was, he saw Shiro hugging him tightly from behind.

“Shiro is so glad Onii-chan is safe…! S-She was so worried… that Onii-chan would get hurt again…”

Senkyo was happy that Shiro felt that way, but at the same time, it was strange. That was because he felt this should be the other way around.

“No… that’s my line. I wasn’t in any danger. You were protecting me, after all. I’m sorry.”

“Huh? For what?”

Shiro met Senkyo’s gaze with upturned eyes.

“It took me way too long to make a move. If only I used magic earlier, you wouldn’t have been in that situation in the first place. I even shouted a warning at you instead of just shielding you with a barrier earlier. I’m sorry about that, really. I’ll do better next time.”

“You don’t really need to, though…”

“Nope, I do. If I have to fight through every battle with you almost dying, then I’ll actually seal you inside me until we’re back on earth.”

“W-What!? That’s unfair!”

“Exactly. That’s why I’ll do better next time, okay?”

“Ooh, okay! Then Shiro will do my best too!”

Shiro shot Senkyo with a bright smile as she responded, showing him just how happy she was that he cared for her so much. After that, he finally realized that the magic he cast was beginning to burn the forest. He made an awkward face as he noticed this and took out the fire with water magic before it all spread.

Then, a little bit after calming down the situation, a shout called out to them in the distance.

“Fit! Pqxui fiwodroag fia!?”

(Hey! What’s happening here!?)

**206 – Commander Iaksin**

Upon hearing the shout, Shiro immediately returned to Senkyo’s body before she was spotted. Senkyo turned to the voice and saw a man clad in leather equipment under a red robe appear over the hill beside them.

“Huh…? A… human?”

*“\*No, Onii-chan. They may look human, but they are locals of Zerid. Their kind are called Sorun. Much like Shiro, they have special abilities they gained from evolution. Unfortunately, there seem to be different kinds of Sorun, so Shiro does not know what abilities they possess.\*”*

*“\*I see… got it.\*”*

While Shiro was giving Senkyo the description of the person before him, the man slammed the ground as he crouched, summoning a multi-layered barrier. Not long after, more humans appeared on the hilltop. Two people wearing the same garments joined the side of the first man and began mumbling something with their hands pointed at Senkyo. Five more people appeared and lined up in front of them, three of which donned light armor equipped with a spear, a bow, and a katana, while the other two were clad in heavy armor readying a large warhammer and a shield. Finally, one last person revealed themselves, but instead of staying behind the protection of the barrier, he lead the group outside it and slowly approached Senkyo.

His weapon of choice was a greatsword which was resting on his shoulder plates. He was also clad in heavy armor but unlike the others, he rode on a strange dark horse with scales all over its body, a gleaming ultramarine tail and crest, as well as a rhinoceros horn glowing in the same ultramarine hue on its forehead. Most would define this creature as a unicorn, but its daunting aura made the description seem incorrect.

The small army followed behind the leader, their multi-layered barrier moving along with them. As the leader reached speaking distance with him, he took off his helmet and revealed his rugged face decorated by his short, brown hair and full beard.

“Lrxedrdr, pqxe oa tcz woajdr?”

(Traveler, what is your purpose?)

“U-Uhm…”

Senkyo didn’t know what to say to that, he was speaking in a different language, after all. Mixed with his intimidating presence, Senkyo’s brain failed to function properly. Fortunately for him, the voice of a goddess echoed in his head and saved him from his precarious situation.

*“\*Onii-chan, he asked why we’re here.\*”*

*“\*Oh, okay!\*”*

He opened his mouth and raised his finger.

“…”

And immediately closed it along with his finger.

*“\*Wait, what do I even say!? I don’t know how to speak that language!\*”*

*“\*U-Uhm, then, what do you want to say to him? Shiro will tell how what to say, Onii-chan just has to repeat it.\*”*

*“\*Ah, good idea! Then tell him that we were just passing by when that beast attacked us.\*”*

*“\*Okay! Then, repeat after me… Pqa yui wouioagt pqdr xe enxelr uiiiadrrel xelrhdr cz.\*”*

*“\*…P-Puwa yui uyoekuto pudurekuse… huh? What was it again?\*”*

*“\*O-Onii-chan you… N-No, never mind. It’s a new language so this is only natural. Shiro should be glad you pronounced one word correctly.\*”*

*“\*I-I did that bad!?\*”*

The disappointment was painfully clear in her voice. Although it was true that none of it was his fault seeing as the language and word pronunciation was completely different from Japanese but Senkyo couldn’t shake that disheartened feeling.

*“\*Okay, Shiro has another idea. What if Shiro controls Onii-chan’s body and speaks for him instead?\*”*

*“\*Ooh, that’s a great idea! …But how are you going to do that? You can’t control it like Ryosei, can you?\*”*

*“\*No, however, Shiro will use control magic instead! Usually, the spell requires a chant, but if the target consents and allows Shiro’s mana to take over, then she can do so at a moment’s notice!\*”*

*“\*Awesome! Then hurry and try it. This guy seems to be losing his patience.\*”*

*“\*On it!\*”*

The knight in front of him found it suspicious how long it was taking Senkyo to respond, so he was thinking of repeating himself with a bit more force, but before he could do so, Senkyo finally said something.

“Pqa yui wouioagt pqdr xe enxelr uiiiadrrel xelrhdr cz…”

(We were just passing by when a beast suddenly attacked us…)

The knight raised a brow at Senkyo.

“‘Pqa?’ Iiaiia tcz fims xe hsixeoakrn pqlr tcz?”

(“We?” Did you have a companion with you?)

“O-Oh, tui. Oa fiiia si vvsirelxe firel si iiavvxe lr.”

(O-Oh, yes. I had my familiar help me take it down.)

“Uidr…”

(I see…)

The knight seemed to be satisfied with the answer and put aside his suspicions.

“Lrdr, lroa enxelr pqxe iiaiia lr relbk?”

(Then, what did this beast look like?)

“Lr pqui reladr sikrnlra lrxe fiiia drlraxe grelui uisirela lr lrkrnxerelui xeiia vvdroarel siczfi lrxe hkrn xesiui uixerelpq pqjdr enaoaa.”

(It was a large monster that had external gills that looked like tentacles and a flexible mouth that can almost swallow barriers whole.)

“Hrmm…”

The knight took his eyes off Senkyo and shifted toward the location where the beast died. Following his gaze, Senkyo turned around and saw two other people in black cloaks inspecting the few chunks of the beast that flew around the area due to his needle storm. Both individuals responded to the knight’s gaze with a silent nod and disappeared into the trees.

“Tcz lrczfi uidr lrreloag, enlr pqt uih iiauiahoadr sigh czdr? Ja lrjwo hadr j vva uijlriia xeiia oasiiiaxedrt auijiiaiia pqoafi pqui firelvvrel, enlr pqcziialr jdr j lrj siiia-oaa uidrrel en drjg vva xe xeqrel?”

(You seem to be telling the truth, but why use such destructive magic? Our troop spotted a carpet of fire and responded immediately which was helpful, but wouldn’t one or two mid-tier spells be enough for a xeqrel?)

“Oa lrxe pqxe enxelr hreldr? Xejjoaui, oa lraxekrn j uisi iiauiatiia vvj si xelrjui. Enlr enxelr awoiia agkrnalrj fidr, oa lr aiiah lr xefiui j iiahiiaiia oa ui.”

(Is that what the beast is called? Apologies, I destroyed some of the terrain from my actions. But in case the beast had rapid regeneration, I decided to reduce it to ashes before it did so.)

“Ja? Ficzi, lrdr xet jv uia fims iiarnl?Iia tcz xeqrel oa krn oadr? Lrxedrdr, hcziia oa en…”

(Huh? They don’t have any of the sort, though? Do you have no idea what a xeqrel is? Traveler, could it be that…)

Senkyo’s heart dropped, fearing the knight thought of him as some kind of foreigner. He had no idea how these people treated people outside their country, much less someone from a completely different world. Just as he was formulating a plan to make a quick escape, the knight’s words halted him.

“…tfims sisiadr tcz relui xe pqrel?”

(…you’ve lost your memories as well?)

“Eh?”

**207 – Language Barrier**

It was completely different from what he was thinking, but he didn’t fail to take advantage of that misunderstanding.

“T-Tui!”

(Y-Yes!)

“Xejfia mshoa, ja? Lrxe drwoxekrn drdrtfikrn. Lrxedrdr, oa tcz pqui hreldrlr tcz lrjglr j uilrxeoakrn, Naen j lrpq vvrelj cz tcz hkrn. Tcz lraiia siui.”

(Another victim, huh? That explains everything. Traveler, if you wish to collect your thoughts on the situation, you can follow us back to the town of Naen. You must be tired.)

“Oa sih lrjendr krnlr, oa pqcziia en gxe.”

(If it isn’t much trouble, I would be glad to.)

“Msa pqrel.”

(Very well.)

The knight peeked over his shoulder and gave his troop a nod. Following that, the multi-layered barrier disappeared and they stepped aside for their leader to take the front. As he passed, the troop eyed Senkyo, signaling him with their gazes to follow behind their leader while they take the rear. Whether it was to guard him from possible danger or to keep a close eye on him in case he was hostile, Senkyo simply followed and began to ponder his future actions.

This was perfect for Senkyo. One of his major problems besides surviving in Zerid was interacting and socializing peacefully with its people. His main goal was to find and save Yuu, but as the otherworlder that he is, he had no means of tracking her by himself aside from a vague map. To that end, he needed to build relationships with the locals to gain trust and information to gather clues that will lead to her. By seeing one of the world’s settlements and how its people usually interact with each other, he would gain a good understanding of how to act toward others and how to use those relationships for his goals.

He planned to gain more information from the knight in front of him by feigning the victim of some sort of memory loss incident that seemed to be occurring. Since he already talked with him, the knight was the best person for the job. He also seemed to be a kind person seeing as he offered him an escort to the nearby town after coming to the assumption that he lost his memory. Although it didn’t sit right with him that he was taking advantage of his kindness, he would repeat this as many times as he needed if it meant saving Yuu.

Then, in the middle of their travel, he found even more reason to interrogate him as soon as possible. The heavily armored knight wielding a hammer called out to the leader.

“So, in the end, this extermination mission was a total dud, huh, Commander Iaksin?”

“No need to get worked up Ajdrha. I agree with the Duke that this was the safest decision. Let’s be thankful that there was only one xeqrel. A whole pack of those could have given us casualties.”

“You have a point but I really wanted to get some real action going!”

“You’ll have your chance, I’m sure. And before that time comes I hope you’ll keep yourself in top condition.”

“No problems here! I’m always ready to swing and squish!”

“Haha, you’re always so spirited.”

“!!!”

Hearing that conversation made Senkyo freeze, bringing his legs to a stop and fixing his shocked expression for everyone to see.

“Hm? Oa wojrelsi akrn oalr, Lrxedrdr”

(Hm? Is there something wrong, Traveler?)

“Y-You… spoke Japanese…”

The commander of the group that seemed to be named Iaksin stared at him in surprise. The rest of the troops stopped in their tracks to do the same. Perhaps because of shock, Senkyo spoke his mind before thinking of future repercussions. However, it was too late to change what he had done. All he could do now was see how the situation played out and act accordingly.

“Oh, so you can speak Japanese too? You’re a lucky one. I heard other victims forgot how to speak it which is quite unfortunate. Mostly because it has become more prevalent in the last few years.”

Thankfully for Senkyo, they were only shocked because he was supposedly a victim of memory loss that retained the ability to speak Japanese. It seemed the language didn’t mean anything more than simply being able to speak another language. The situation could have been worse like the language only being available to high-ranking individuals and a system that punished commoners that knew of it. Knowing this world was absent of such insane systems, Senkyo breathed a sigh of relief.

“U-Um! I’m sorry to impose this on you so suddenly, but could I please have a bit of your time later? Because of my memory loss, I’m still quite confused about this world, but I still remember someone important that I’m looking for. It would be a huge help if I could ask you some questions.”

“Oh, if that’s the case then I’d be happy to.”

“Really!? Thank you very much!”

Senkyo bowed to the knight as he showed his appreciation, and doing so seemed to have brought more questions to Iaksin’s mind.

“Are you from Nairn? Look, just like Fawxa over there.”

Senkyo’s gaze traced his finger and landed on the person behind him. She was a female warrior with short black hair wearing light armor keeping a katana to her waist. Her sharp glare met his gaze and released a not-so-friendly aura toward him.

“Ah, sorry about her. She may seem cold but she’s a caring one. But in case you don’t remember, Nairn is at the southwest of here on the other side of Uikakrn, so I was just wondering if you traveled all the way here just for the person you’re looking for.”

“S-Sorry, but I don’t quite remember that either. But what made you think I’m from Nairn?”

“It’s just that your mannerisms are the same as Fawxa. You also have a katana with you which is quite common in that region. But it seems your memories are certainly in a chaotic state since even your early years were affected, so I will save my own questions for later.”

“A-Ah, yes. I’ll do the same.”

“Alright then, let’s get back on track. It isn’t too far now.”

Senkyo and the troop picked up their slack and continued to fill the road with their rhythmic footsteps. He knew for a fact that he was in a different world, and with that being the case, it is only natural the species inhabiting it are also different. The people he was with were not humans, but instead a species called Sorun. But as far as he could tell, they were basically the same. Any human could live with Sorun and no one would be able to tell the difference. In addition to that, it seemed like the Japanese language was also commonly used. If that were the case, then there could also be a possibility of a Japanese person living among them, which means they could know of a way back to Earth. It wasn’t Senkyo’s main goal, but rather the next goal after finding Yuu. If he finds a way home, then he could plan his future actions around that since Yuu was likely in enemy territory. But before Senkyo could think any deeper, Shiro called out to him.

*“\*Onii-chan, you’re wrong there.\*”*

*“\*Hm? Where?\*”*

*“\*About a human being able to live within Soruns without sticking out. You see, we Zeldians have the power to detect mana in some way. Shiro can detect mana inside people through smell, meanwhile, Yuu-chan can detect exposed mana with sight but can only detect obstructed mana through her fangs. As for Soruns, they can sense any kind of mana, obstructed or not, using only their sight.\*”*

*“\*I see… then you’re saying that they’d be able to tell the difference between a Sorun and a human just by looking at them if they possess mana or not?\*”*

*“\*Yes, and the reason they are not questioning Onii-chan about that is because he possesses mana.\*”*

*“\*…Wait, but wouldn’t that mean that I’m actually just a Sorun?\*”*

Shiro paused for a second before continuing, giving serious thought to Senkyo’s question.

*“\*Shiro… is not sure. But if she had to guess, then no. Unlike Onii-chan, Sorun cannot use spirit power as he can. In truth, she does not know about what species Onii-chan is either, but what Shiro knows for certain is that Onii-chan is Shiro’s Onii-chan, and that fact will never change no matter what species he is!\*”*

*“\*Haha, thanks Shiro.\*”*

**208 – Town of Naen**

Time of what felt like 30 minutes passed and just as Senkyo finished building his questions for Iaksin, the horizon revealed a large town overflowing with medieval aesthetics with high watchtowers scattered across and overlooking the bustling town of wood and stone, houses built on timber frames, streets paved with solid cobblestone, all crawling up a hill that perched a large manor constructed with much more precision and size, its vicinity decorated with pleasant trees and artistic hedges.

The marvelous townscape was built across a large river with a long stone bridge connecting the two edges of land, and unlike scenes in fantasy stories, a stone wall was absent from the area, most likely because it was only a single town of a whole nation. Senkyo surmised that using manpower and resources on a single town was simply a waste, but the one reason that drove that fact was the existence of magic. Even if they had built walls against attackers, people of this world would simply use magic to overcome that obstacle. It is true that walls were not completely useless in this world as they would still fend off grounded troops, but it was certainly not effective to use limited resources on every settlement. Not to mention the existence of barriers. He did not know the limits of how large and powerful a barrier could be created, but if it had the power to cover and protect the whole town from multiple attacks, then that would be all the more reason to discard walls.

Senkyo and the troop crossed the bridge and entered the town. He spotted multiple knights guarding the bridge as well as the town with iron-clad individuals roaming the streets to complete their patrols. The side of the streets sprawled with its residents and vendors using cloths to shield their stores from undesirable weather or as a mat to place and present their precious goods. Meanwhile, those with more capital and much more specific merchandise marked their own stores with signboards presenting carved images of their wares such as swords and shields, hammers and nails, bows and arrows, pillows and moons, and finally, a signboard showing an image of some kind of food and beer was where Iaksin came to a stop.

“Alright, you all go on ahead. Ajdrha, take care of Oftir for me.”

Iaksin said so as he got off his horse and handed over its leash to the knight named Ajdrha.

“But Commander, what about the payment?”

“I’ll just pick it up after I’m done. I’d like to keep Oftir with me but you know what happens if I leave him alone in town.”

“I see, got it. Then we’ll be seeing you back at the manor.”

“Mm, take care of yourselves.”

The rest of the troops continued their march to the center of town where the large manor towered over everything. After seeing them off, Iaksin turned to face Senkyo.

“This is where we’ll be talking.”

“This is… a tavern, right?”

Senkyo followed his gaze and his fears came true. He was referring to the store making the most noise around the area with loud, hearty cheers and constant clanking of crockery signaling just how busy the business was. Iaksin noticed Senkyo’s face twist in perplexion, so he reassured him of one thing.

“Don’t worry. We won’t be talking in the dining area. The place will be much quieter and actually suited for talking.”

“O-Oh, I see. That’s good.”

Iaksin nodded in satisfaction and took the lead while Senkyo followed him from behind. Upon entering the tavern, he was immediately greeted by the customers, but unlike what Senkyo was expecting, they were not clad in any kind of armor nor were they donning tools of war. They were simple locals and laborers that you would see in the streets.

“Hey! It’s the commander!”

“How’ve ya been doin’ sir!”

“You’ve been busy all day how bout ya finally share a drink with us!”

“Haha, maybe next time, Risod. I’m still in the middle of something but keep that zest for when I do.”

“Aye, aye!”

Senkyo and Iaksin entered the door past the counter and traveled down the hall where they reached a door without the blaring noise of the tavern. When Iaksin opened the door, he revealed a large luxurious room with red patterned wallpaper, curtains of the same color with gold embroidery, multiple wall lamps, a chandelier, a large rug decorating the floor under a small round table of four chairs, a polished workbench and chair serving as a workplace with its numerous stacks of paper.

“Come, take a seat.”

Senkyo managed to contain his surprise and sat on the chair on the opposite side of the round table from Iaksin.

“I only have a single question so I’ll wait for you to finish. But first, let me introduce myself, I am Iaksin Krelag, one of the commanders of the Duke of Naen. Oh, and just to clarify, my given name is Iaksin while my family name is Krelag. Our way of introduction when it comes to names is the opposite of Nairn.”

“I see… then I am Senkyo Yukou. In respect to your customs, I introduced myself the same way as you did.”

“Haha, there’s no need to do that but I appreciate it. So, do you have your questions yet or are you still having a difficult time with your memories?”

Senkyo shook his head from side to side in denial as he answered Iaksin’s concern.

“No, I’m fine now. So first of all, do you know anything about three skeleton bounty hunters?”

“Skeletons, huh? If you’re looking for someone kidnapped by a bounty hunter, then here in Uikakrn, in most cases they will have a prison where they keep everyone they take. But unfortunately, I have no idea what it’s like when it comes to Sikrn bounty hunting since I’ve never left the country.”

“Sikrn?”

“Ah, they are the ones that live in the east. There are some anywhere in the continent but most of them live in Ridsikrn and Zelaoage. They’re called Sikrn because it means Mana Fairies. They have immense compatibility with mana, making not only their magic output much more powerful, but most of them can even use their own bodies to enhance with mana in some way.”

“So they’re the most powerful with mana, huh… Are vampires Sikrns too?”

“Yes. If you’re looking for vampires then they have a city of their own over at Ridsilkrn. Although, I don’t know exactly where… oh yeah, you can go to the library of the Border City Iqanlr. You should be able to find a detailed map there.”

“What’s a border city and where do I head to find it?”

“Let’s see… border cities are the cities we built across national borders as a sign of peace and unity with our neighboring countries. Half of the city is built on Uikakrn territory while the other is on the other country’s land. Luckily for you, Border City Iquanlr is the closest city that connects with Ridsikrn. All you need to do is leave the east exit and continue heading that way. Haha, funnily enough, that’s the way we came from.”

“W-What? You’re saying we walked in the complete opposite direction…? U-Ugh…”

“Cheer up. At the very least you met us so now you know exactly where to go.”

“Y-Yeah, you’re right. Sorry about that. But while we’re at it, how can you tell which direction is which?”

“You forgot that too, huh? No wonder you’re lost. We have these things called Ailak stones. They look like this.”

**209 – Gathering Information**

Iaksin dug around his neck area, grabbed a string that was hanging around it, and took out a strange stone it was connected to. The stone seemed to have a rough texture, but upon inspecting it closer, the dark shades on the stone were actually natural tints and its true texture was incredibly polished and smooth as proven by the light reflecting on it through the window.

“This stone can tell you where the south is and navigate upon that. By applying some mana to it, it will begin to glow and vibrate.”

Just as Iaksin explained, the dark tint of the stone glowed in a mix of pink and purple light and shook erratically in between his fingers.

“Ailak stones are all connected to each other and they will try their best to maintain the connection with the largest throng of Ailak stones in the world. They got their name from this behavior meaning Resonate Link. The intensity of its vibration will depend on its distance to the south. When you place it farther to the south, it will increase its power. Meanwhile placing it closer to the south will decrease its power. The reason for this is because it’s using up the mana you applied to maintain its connection with Frxal Island, the southmost island of all of Zerid where the whole island is a giant rock of Ailak stone.”

“That’s interesting… where do you think I can buy one?”

“They only have these at high-end alchemist shops. If you have the money for it I can show you to one.”

“O-Oh, money, huh? W-Well, the thing is, I don’t have any money…”

“H-Huh?”

Iaksin’s face quickly turned pale, one filled with worry that he might have brought back a terrible memory or perhaps lost the memory of where he kept it along with the concern of his future, fundless plans.

“I-I see… sorry about that.”

“Don’t worry, I don’t mind at all. For now, can I ask where you learned Japanese?”

“Yeah, this language has been taught in some schools ever since a thousand years ago. It's become common now but there are still some who don’t speak it so it's always best to use Zeldish when talking to new people.”

“Then are huma—”

Senkyo was about to ask if humans were the ones that appeared a thousand years ago that taught them the language, but he decided against it. The only questions that would answer were unrelated to his goals. He wanted to focus on Yuu, and learning unnecessary information may affect his actions. In fear of that, he cut himself off.

“Hm? Is there something wrong?”

“Ah, no, sorry. Then how about the beast that attacked us earlier? There seemed to be a trap made from… Arkage leaves I think it was?”

“Hm, that was quite unfortunate for you to encounter that creature in your state. You see, those beasts are called Xeqrel. The area you were in earlier was a common foraging spot for our locals which might’ve attracted it. Normally, anyone could’ve just taken out the xeqrel before we were even mobilized, but the problem lay in the existence of Arkage trees around the area. They can’t speak but have high intelligence. They used their external gills to pick some of the Arkage leaves to hide in the river where it often lives in. It can also dig its own pools and connect them through underground tunnels. If the xeqrel was in a pack, then I’m sure it wouldn’t have been such an easy battle.”

“Could you not have sent more fighters?”

“Unfortunately that wasn’t an option. Most of the Duke’s troops are away under the order of the main capital. Due to that, only my troop was available for commission.”

“Don’t you have an adventurer’s guild to recruit fighters or something like that?”

“Adventurer’s Guild? Haha.”

Iaksin lightly chuckled upon hearing the word.

“It seems those foreign books got to you before reality did, Sir Senkyo. It’s true that we have merchant and craftsman guilds, but an adventurer’s guild is long gone.”

“Why not? They would be good to have against those beasts right?”

“Indeed, if we had an adventurer’s guild now then our extermination mission wouldn’t have been so dangerous. However, hostile beasts rarely ever show themselves out in the open, especially near settlements because of The Great Unity March that happened a few hundred years ago. And even if they did, any ordinary citizen could defeat them with the right magic. There just won’t be enough demand for an adventurer’s guild, not to mention that killing any more than we already have would damage the ecosystem.”

“What’s the Great Unity March?”

“All factions of Yuwokrn gathered all their armies and divided them into five great armies led by the five Heroes of the time. The armies marched all over Yuwokrn to exterminate any beast that decided to become a threat to them.”

“H-Hmm? Isn’t that a bit too far? You know, extermination and everything.”

“Is that so? Well, it wasn’t like the armies killed on sight. You see, most of the beasts here are intelligent as much as they are dangerous. Most beasts agreed to stay away from large groups of people, especially when it came to settlements. Meanwhile, the beasts that ignored our warnings were killed and those who managed to escape retreated to Sunken Nests. Ah, if you don’t know what those are, they are the dens of typically hostile beasts that plague our caves and caverns. Since underground caves were too extensive and were no place to march an army into, the beasts were left alive, but instead, the entrance to those caves became guarded.”

“I see. Having something like that happen would certainly reduce any need for an adventurer’s guild. Not to mention if civilians are as capable as you say, then gathering jobs would certainly be on the low side.”

**210 – Iaksin’s Concern**

“That’s right. If you’re looking for something similar, then you should check out settlements with Sunken Nests. They usually have a place called Haeqras. It’s a recent organization made by one of the Heroes 27 years ago. But despite their fresh formation, they’re already keeping up with long-established businesses, placing branches in every settlement with Sunken Nests. Perhaps that’s the influence of a Hero for you.”

“Oh, really? What do they do?”

“They take in anyone interested and train them to dive into Sunken Nests. Before Haequras, merchants and nobles usually commission knights to collect materials in Sunken Nests. But those requests were rarely accepted due to the intricacy of a Sunken Nest. No nest is ever the same, some of them require troops specialized in fighting in tight spaces or ones that are able to navigate through steep terrain. In short, it was no place for knights with strict formations and low adaptability to enter. There are some exceptions, but getting commissioned became excessive which was too much to ask their lord and the interest in Sunken Nest soon died down.”

“I see… then I take it Haeqras trains their people differently depending on the Sunken Nest?”

“Ooh, you’re really perceptive, Sir Senkyo. Yes, the people Haeqras trains are called Crawlers. They have a rule where Crawlers must first pass an aptitude test before being able to be commissioned by employers. They make sure the Crawler has the ability to handle themselves in the Sunken Nest. This rule is especially strict when it comes to escort jobs since it isn’t only their lives at stake but also the people they are escorting.”

“Crawlers, huh?”

Hearing the term, he couldn’t help but think that it was named after the term dungeon crawling. Whatever Sunken Nests were, they sounded similar to dungeons you’d find in fantasy games back on Earth. And he was right.

“Funnily enough, it seemed like the Hero who started Haequras was discontent with the lack of an adventurer’s guild and tried to erect one, but as we thought, it was a dud. So, he compromised and created Haeqras instead. I remember a rumor that said its name was derived from another language in their world that meant ‘high class’ and that it was a perfect fit that in our language it meant ‘crawler’ which reminded him about a term in their world called dungeon crawlers. It is certainly an excellent form of symbolism that connects our world with his! I’m sure the effort he dedicated to making something as simple as a name delivered his passion to the people and made it succeed even more! I was so moved!”

“A-Ahaha…”

Senkyo couldn’t help but internally cringe at that explanation. He couldn’t bring himself to tell Iaksin, who gave heated praise to the name, that the Hero simply took an already existing game term and translated it, which conveniently sounded like a fancy foreign word. Whoever that hero was, Senkyo already had a good grasp of his personality. Wanting to move the conversation, he commented on something else.

“But still, these must’ve been some smart monsters if they knew to back down against the Great Unity March.”

“That’s true. Actually, most of the monsters that backed down have gained the ability to talk and created their own settlements all over Yuwokrn. Some of them have entered political agreements with some leaders.”

“That really is amazing!”

“I know, right? I even met one myself. Oh, before we lose track, is that all you wanted to ask?”

“Ah, only one last question. What’s causing all of these memory loss incidents?”

Iaksin paused for a second and stroked his beard in thought, most likely thinking about their whole conversation as he said the following words.

“You truly are a peculiar one, Sir Senkyo. You’d think that would be your first question.”

“A-Ah, yeah, I guess I am. Well, that’s just how important the person I’m looking for is.”

“I am glad to be of service to your cause. And as to answer your question, a monster we’ve never seen before broke out of the main capital’s sunken nest. One that possessed incredible speed, wings that tear the sky, and the power to devour the memories of its victims. I haven’t actually been able to see it with my own eyes, but that’s what I’ve heard. Seeing as it assaulted you before you arrived here, it must be close by. I will report this to the Duke to prepare the appropriate defenses later. You should be careful too, Sir Senkyo. There’s a good chance you will encounter it again if you head back east.”

“Thank you for your concern.”

Senkyo felt a sense of guilt brewing inside him seeing as he’s instilled false fear in Iaksin. In reality, Senkyo was only pretending to be a victim of that to be able to ask him these questions without arousing suspicion. Unfortunately, he was going to have to live with this guilt, at the very least, until he finds Yuu.

“Mm, if that is all, then may I ask my question?”

“Ah, sure. If it’s something I remember that is.”

“Then, do you remember the father of your glassmetal blade? If not, then maybe the place you acquired it from?”

“Glassmetal blade…?”

Senkyo followed Iaksin’s finger and found that he was referring to Kuro Yaiba.

“O-Oh, this? Actually, it isn’t even mine. It’s my friend’s sword. We lost each other when traveling here so I was just keeping it until I found him again. I apologize but I do not know this blade’s smith.”

“Is that so? That’s unfortunate. The moment I saw it I immediately knew it was crafted by a most talented blacksmith. I was hoping to have a sword birthed by them but it looks like I’ll have to hold that thought.”

“You must really have an eye for swords then if you knew that from just seeing the scabbard, Iaksin-san.”

“‘Iaksin-san?’ Ah, see, you are from Nairn. They’re the only ones with that custom.”

“Oh, that’s… interesting.”

“Well, going back to the topic, it doesn’t take someone with a keen eye to know its value. You see, glassmetal is hailed for its beauty but it is also the most fragile metal in existence, so much so that its strength is commonly compared to glass. But despite that, the genius who crafted that blade not only managed to create a sword but as well as a scabbard for it, all out of glassmetal.”

“H-Hm? R-Really…?”

Senkyo couldn’t help but be dumbfounded. Iaksin is calling Kuro Yaiba, the sword that aided both him and Ryosei through multiple battles of life and death, cutting both flesh and armor with lethal strokes that sliced through them like butter, the most fragile metal in this world.

He didn’t want to believe it, but he couldn’t help but be unnerved. He never truly thought of who exactly made Kuro Yaiba and where it came from. He had no idea how the blade worked and so did Ryosei, but if what Iaksin was saying is true, then it was dangerous to expose the blade to any sort of danger. It made Senkyo anxious that someone from Zerid immediately recognized the blade while no one on Earth could.

“What are your plans now, Sir Senkyo?”

“Hmm… I think I’ll continue my travel.”

“But it will be nighttime by you leave town wouldn’t it?”

“That may be so, but I have no money. Besides, even if I did, I have no time to waste. We got ourselves some food from the forest earlier so we’ll just find shelter on the way.”

“I truly admire that determination. Sir Senkyo, before you leave, could you wait for me at the east exit? I want to give you the payment I’ll be receiving from my commission.”

“W-What!? Are you sure!?”

“Hm? Won’t you take it?”

“W-Well, it would help me greatly so I’d be happy to, but it’s your reward right?”

“Nonsense. I did nothing. It was you who took out the beast, not us. I cannot speak for my subordinates, but if anyone should be receiving the reward, it would be you.”

“T-That’s… Thank you very much for your kindness.”

“This is nothing. With that settled, we should go now before it gets dark.”

“Yeah, I agree.”

**211 – Jester of Naen**

Iaksin and Senkyo left the tavern and agreed to meet at the east exit. Since it would take him a while to even get to the manor on foot, Senkyo decided to walk around town for a bit. He saw the townspeople hustling and bustling, working their everyday lives using their own skills to make them stand out over everyone else. It was an unusual sight for him to see unlike when he was simply living his life and going to school back on Earth. Just as he was thinking that, some of those people that were using their skills were certainly standing out more than any other person on the street. A large crowd had gathered in a circle, curious about what it was, Senkyo went to check.

As Senkyo weaved through the throng of people, he found a jester juggling six rings making them flow like waves in the air with such speed and precision that he was able to sustain that for a long time. He then threw the rings high into the air and spun around exaggeratedly as he managed to weave his arm through every ring that fell down and caught them.

He handed the rings to one of his two assistants while the other handed him five balls and began juggling again. As he formed a perfect circle with the five balls, he passed one to his foot, tossed that ball through the ring of balls he was juggling, and caught it with his face. He then followed it up by passing another ball to his foot, but instead of repeating the same move, he jerked his forehead, bouncing the ball on top of it, tossed the ball on his foot to the other foot, and continued his performance. The crowd cheered in amazement as they watched the jester juggle a ball with his head, three with his hands, and one with his feet as he alternated the ball from one foot to another, keeping his balance all the while.

He carefully caught all the balls and froze their motion without letting any of them touch the ground and tossed the balls to his assistant. He then raised both of his hands up in the air and entered a one-hand front walkover, carrying all his body weight with one hand as he flipped his whole body, similar to a backflip without becoming airborne, but instead of landing the flip, he stopped his legs’ advancement in the air and purposefully fell on his bottom. The spectators laughed as they gullibly believed he failed his trick. The jester looked around in confusion as he did so but quickly rebounded by shifting to a back walkover where he stretched his whole body backward and smoothly flipped it to land gracefully on his feet. The crowd cheered once more as the jester bowed signaling the end of that performance.

“Thank you, all! Now, for my next act, I will perform a magic trick for you all to see, but this kind of magic will be manaless! Do we have any volunteers!?”

The crowd searched amongst themselves in an attempt to find the person who was not their own that would continue the performance, however, not a single hand was raised. Noticing the lack of participation of his spectators, the jester took it upon himself to continue the act.

“Very well! As you all have seen, I have not moved from this spot, nor have any of you seen any mana exit or enter my body! Now, can the owner of this item please step forward!”

The jester then took off his hat, revealing his silver hair, and obstructed the crowd’s view of his mouth. With his head craned backward to align his mouth with his esophagus, he took off the hat to reveal a sword with a black hilt, a blade that possessed a familiar red stroke was sticking out of his mouth. The crowd cheered in awe while Senkyo panicked as he saw Kuro Yaiba was missing from its scabbard.

“Hahaha, thank you, thank you!”

“Hey! Give that back!”

As the jester entertained his audience, Senkyo stepped up to intervene and take back his sword, but before he could do so, the jester hurriedly made distance between them.

“Oh, yes, but please wait a moment.”

The jester cleaned Kuro Yaiba with a cloth he had in his pockets and presented it to everyone.

“Do any of you know what this is? It is a marvelous sword crafted only by the most capable of blacksmiths made from the most beautiful metal of all, Grudr, also known as glassmetal!”

“Glassmetal?? Then that thing’s useless! It’ll break the moment it touches anything! Haha!”

“Keep that thing for display before someone robs it for money!”

“Txe! Krn glr hlr tcz pqkrndr iiaiialr!”

(Yeah! No wonder you didn’t get cut!)

The crowd denounced Kuro Yaiba, making Senkyo closer to snapping. But before he did, the jester spoke up.

“Yes, yes! But wait! Do any of you know of the great heroes of 27 years ago!?”

“Huh? What about them?”

“Ah! Weren’t there two heroes that had glassmetal katanas?”

“Txe, oa fiui aglr lroabk!”

(Yeah, I think he’s right!)

Hearing the subject of heroes froze Senkyo. If what the audience was saying was true, then he had already laid eyes on the glassmetal swords they were speaking of. One in his memories, painted in white and blue, while the other was right in front of him being handled by the jester.

“Correct! Iordr!”

The crowd stared at the jester in confusion about what he said. It was quite evident that whatever that was, they had no knowledge of it.

“In the realm of the manaless, this metal has a different name, Iordr, meaning spirit metal! Besides its overwhelming beauty, this metal possesses the power to house spirits!”

“Actually??”

“No way!”

“Axeoat lr glr enh!”

(Get back to reality!)

It was clear his audience didn’t believe him, but the jester continued regardless.

“Reality or fantasy, which one would you be compelled to believe in this world? In the ambiguous line between the two, depending on the power of the spirit housing it, the blade can turn from its dull, fragile self into a completely different blade that cuts through anything possessing such might that it would be deemed unbreakable! Quite an interesting story is it not? Would you let yourself be chained by the cruel reality or believe in the thought of attainable fantasy!? As for me…”

The joker quickly spun around exaggeratedly and revealed himself to the crowd.

“…I believe in the art of clown!”

His face was covered behind glasses with giant blue eyebrows, a blue mustache, and a large red nose. The audience was pleased with his performance as they laughed at his appearance.

“That marks the end of our performance! Thank you all for coming!”

Most of the crowd whined rebelliously, but deep inside, they were quite satisfied and left the area. After he closed his performance, the jester walked up to Senkyo.

“I, too, hope that your sword will find that fantasy. But I do suggest that you refrain from using it. The moment the sword breaks, there’s no bringing it back no matter how powerful the fantasy. I bid thee farewell!”

The jester hurried back to his assistants and escaped through a dark alleyway.

“Wait a second! Give me back my sword!”

Senkyo chased after them, but as he turned the corner, he saw that the alleyway was a dead end but the jester and his assistants were nowhere to be seen. He quickly turned his head up and saw one of the assistants’ capes disappear over the roof. He thought of chasing them down, but just as he was about to jump upwards, he felt something shake by his hip. When he checked what it was, he saw it was Kuro Yaiba’s hilt. Much like how the jester took his sword, he placed it back without him even noticing.

As he stopped to ponder the jester’s actions, he realized it was almost time for his meeting with Iaksin. Not wanting to inconvenience the person kind enough to fund his ventures, he let the jester go and headed for the east exit.

When he arrived, he looked around but saw no sign of him. Just as he feared he miscalculated the time, a voice called out to him from behind.

“Ah, Sir Senkyo! Sorry for taking so long.”

“O-Oh, no not at all. To be honest, I thought I was late.”

“Hahaha! Good to know you were enjoying the town so much. Here, three bags of gold and silver hjor.”

Iaksin handed Senkyo three heavy bags that chimed as he moved around.

“T-Three bags!? Wait, hjor is the currency, right?”

“That is correct. It was only supposed to be one bag, but some of my subordinates thought you could use them better, so here.”

“This is… Thank you all so much! Please, could you relay the message to your subordinates?”

Senkyo bowed his head in appreciation for Iaksin’s kindness.

“Of course, any time.”

“Seriously! Thank you so much! Oh, could this be enough to buy one of the ailak stones you showed me?”

“Hmm, no. You’ll need two more of those bags if you want at least one.”

“H-Huh!? Wait, why is it so expensive!? Didn’t you say there’s a whole island of those things? Shouldn’t that mean it’s a common resource?”

“Well, that would be the case if the island wasn’t always active. See, unlike any other place in Zerid, the southern areas have the largest amount of natural mana in the environment. Due to that abundance, the island’s ailak stones are always active. I didn’t tell you this earlier, but when you penetrate an active ailak stone, it will explode. So, in short, that resource is unobtainable, leaving us with the ailak stones we find underground.”

“I-I see… that’s unfortunate, but asking for more is simply out of the question. Oh…”

Senkyo’s eyes laid on Kuro Yaiba. From this day alone, Iaksin, the jester, and even the crowd from earlier told him that his blade was actually a fragile piece. He recalled one of the jester’s parting words basically telling him Kuro Yaiba had lost its strength. If that was the case, then there was only one reason that could have happened, and that was the absence of Ryosei.

In the first place, Senkyo isn’t the wielder of Kuro Yaiba. He had experiences of using it himself, but Ryosei was always inside his body. Then, he remembered that Ryosei had the power to call Kuro Yaiba whenever he was in the spirit realm. If everything the jester said was true, then the spirit residing inside Kuro Yaiba was gone, and instead, it was by Ryosei’s side at that very moment.

“Iaksin-san, I’m sorry to trouble you any further, but could you please show me to a weapon shop?”

“Mm, sure. I don’t mind.”

“Thank you so much!”

**Chapter 2:**

**212 – A Search for Earth**

*\*Slash! Slash!\**

“Graaaaaah!!”

A powerful roar echoed through an inky world scintillated by the crystal-like grass and trees of the forest. There stood a lone figure clad in a black coat with what seemed to be a large mutated bear slowly disintegrating into ashes behind it. The loud scream was the mutated bear’s last call for help before being taken away by the wind in the form of little particles along with its life.

“19626/25000…”

The figure that slew the mutated bear spoke with a defeated air to its voice as it read out the numbers it saw only through its eyes.

“Right now, I’m a revenant. A whole three levels away from visitant… We can’t get back to Earth this way; it’ll take way too long.”

It was Ryosei, looking displeased as he returned Kuro Yaiba to its sheath. He was contemplating the path he chose after being trapped in a completely different world. About three days ago when they first arrived in Zerid, he immediately set out to search for a way to return home after confirming Senkyo’s stable condition.

His first course of action was to travel in a single direction to find civilization and ask around who might know a way to travel through worlds, however, that plan completely fell apart the moment he found himself in the middle of the forest at dusk of his third day. By placing landmarks on his trail to prevent him from getting lost, he traveled in this direction without stopping, and being the sleepless and untiring spirit that he is, he did exactly just that.

Despite this, his efforts were fruitless as it was his time to return to the hideout before they reached their first week in Zerid. According to his theory, the people that arranged Senkyo’s kidnapping will be expecting him by then. If they have some sort of transportation method or allies in the nearby area, then it was most likely for hostiles to appear in the hideout by the end of the week. Before that time, Ryosei had to return to the hideout and get as far away as possible, hoping that Senkyo would have regained consciousness by then.

As it was the third day, he had four days remaining. He realized he was cutting it close as unexpected interference may appear and slow him down on his way back, especially since every second he was late was another second lost for their escape.

“To think that even my backup plan would turn out badly… this situation really isn’t great.”

Ryosei decided to travel in the spirit world instead of in the real world as it consumed less energy and allowed him to fight the local spirits and take their spirit power. In the event that he found nothing by the end of the third day, he was hoping that it was enough time for him to get closer to the spirit level of visitant and send them back to earth by himself by using its powers to cross worlds. Unfortunately, it seemed like killing hostile spirits didn’t give him as much spirit power to level up, bringing two of his plans down on the very same day.

“This is bad. Not only did I find nothing, but knowing Senkyo, if he wakes up without anyone to stop him… after that happened, there's a good chance he’ll leave to look for Hisho-chan.”

Ryosei thought back to the moment Yuu blocked the skeleton’s hook from reaching Senkyo. Even before she saved him, Senkyo was blinded by love to the point where he tried to persuade her to stop despite him being the target of her kidnapping. But now that Yuu showed that she valued Senkyo by sacrificing her own life, these two actions didn’t connect. Why would anyone kidnap a person who they valued enough to use their life to save them? Was it just because they had an incredibly valuable role in some kind of scheme, or is it something else entirely? Right now, no one knew the answer to that, and Ryosei feared that the moment Senkyo realized this, he would go out and search for her.

However, what bothered Ryosei here was his decision. Before he left the hideout to find a way back to earth, he felt like deep inside, he knew this was what Senkyo would do. Then why did he even leave in the first place for a plan that had no guarantee of success? Would it not have been wiser to stay back and guard Senkyo rather than separate from him? In the first place, his actions were based on a completely unreliable theory with endless loopholes patched up by baseless assumptions. If that theory was wrong, then it wouldn’t be strange for an enemy to return to that hideout. And in Ryosei’s absence, Senkyo’s life would be in the most danger.

*\*Why did I even leave?\**

It was the leading question that was running through Ryosei’s head at the moment.

“I should’ve planned this out better… Hm?”

As he seemed to be bothered by his inability to create well-thought plans, he heard a tune in the distance.

“Is that… a flute?”

Ryosei’s eyes lit up in expectation. If there was a flute being played, then someone had to be operating it. This was his final chance to find a clue on how to escape Zerid. He hurriedly but quietly made his way to the origin of the string of harmony. Through the thick of the forest revealed a young girl blowing on the flute by the river. Her emerald hair was fixed in a bob cut with a white dress over her body. The melody she played had managed to relax his mental state, which allowed him to notice an important detail. She was a spirit. Specifically, one of the four spirits he noticed nearby.

He shifted his gaze from the young girl towards a rustling bush. Two individuals exited the bush on opposite sides and returned to the forest’s cloak as they hid behind different bushes and trees. It seemed like they were trying to surround the area around this young girl. He didn’t quite understand what their relationship with her was, but after catching a glimpse of their rugged faces plastered with wide smiles of greed, it didn’t seem like they were bearing any good intentions.

As of this moment, Ryosei didn’t have enough knowledge about their abilities. If he wanted to protect the young girl from their attack, then being right beside her was the best move. However, just before Ryosei stepped out of the bush, a thought came to mind.

*\*Is this really the right decision?\**

Just a few moments ago, Ryosei came to the realization of just how dangerous it was to leave Senkyo alone. It was a spur-of-the-moment decision without concern for other possible outcomes. Just like this one, what would happen if Ryosei decided to protect this girl? His current goal was to find a way back to earth. To that end, would it be more effective if he gained the trust of a little child by saving them or the trust of the assailants by helping them catch the child?

“…”

A cold chill ran down his spine upon noticing the terrible thought that crossed his mind. Why would he consider assisting people in committing an evil deed? Was this what it meant to think objectively? Ryosei never encountered such a problem in his time alive. It was a world that was always black and white. Hunters kill spirits attacking humans and spare spirits that mind their own business. Evil spirits were impossible to reason with, making it a meaningless action to do so. But now that he was facing a conflict between normal spirits—the beings that he thought of as either enemies or neutral bystanders—would that justify the sacrifice of this one spirit? A terrifying thought indeed.

*\*Whoosh!\**

Before Ryosei could even arrange his thoughts, the three spirits jumped out of their hiding places and charged at the young girl. In the hands of the individuals were a knife, gun, and mace. At that moment, there was no time to think. Ryosei disregarded all his thoughts and let his body take control. Rather than choosing the correct choice, he opted for the action he felt was best. With that in mind, he quickly swooped in and drew three clean strokes with Kuro Yaiba. The path of his blade traced the weapons of each of the three assailants. If they were spirited souls, those locations would house their cores. The staggered expressions that were spread between the three were cleanly wiped out as they disappeared into nothing but ashes, confirming that they were spirited souls and clearing the area of any other spirits.

**213 – Spirit Girl**

“…”

Ryosei turned to the young girl suspiciously. Although it had been a quick scuffle, it still created a loud enough noise to take someone else’s notice. At the very least, the final gasps of the three should have been loud enough to reach the girl’s ears and warn her of the danger. Despite this, she continued her tune, uncaring of the events that took place directly behind her. Although he saved her life, it didn’t seem like he would be appreciated for it.

Ryosei couldn’t care less about gratitude but at the very least he wanted information on how to return back to earth, and maybe if possible, the reason for the target behind her back that those three spirits were after. He thought of making loud footsteps toward her and grabbing her shoulder to take her notice, but before he could do that, the girl stopped playing, slowly turned around, and bowed her head to Ryosei.

“Tha-Thank you for saving me from those three strange men!”

The young girl directed her appreciation towards Ryosei with moist eyes that were more than ready to cry. Taken aback by this sudden development, Ryosei took a step back to assess the situation. Contrary to his first impression of her being oblivious, it seemed like the truth was the complete opposite. This girl was so perspective of her surroundings that she knew that he was the one that took down the people that were after her life.

Indeed, there was noise to indicate people present, but not enough to tell the number of assailants and most definitely not something that would suggest that Ryosei, who was holding a sharp murder weapon of his own, was the one that warded them off.

“I-I thought I was going to die! Thank you, um… Mister Cool Guy!”

*\*This kid is too carefree for her own good,\** were the thoughts that filled Ryosei’s head. Even though she knew she was in a precarious situation, she just stood by and waited for him to save her and rewarded him with unnerving cheeriness. But just as he was about to be thrown into confusion again, he got a grip on himself and reminded himself of his objectives.

“Uhh, sure. But enough of that, do you know a way to get to a place called Earth? It’s a completely different worl—”

“Yes, I do!”

“Ah, good. Then… wait, you do!?”

Another surprise. He didn’t expect a child to know about something that seemed very complicated such as traveling through worlds. But what bothered him the most was although he was able to successfully ask the core message, the young girl didn’t even begin to think about why he was asking such a thing. She answered him instantaneously as if she was expecting it. Was this just the level of perception this girl had? Ryosei found that very hard to believe, but for some reason, he couldn’t throw away the possibility. After all…

“Hehehe! I bet you’re confused, aren’t you, Mister Cool Guy. You’re wary of me, but also curious. You’re even thanking yourself that you didn’t sell me off to those three strangers. You see… I am also a Cool Lady!~”

Cringe. It was the first word that passed through Ryosei’s mind. Not only did she wear a smug face, but also puffed out her chest and pointed to herself in a grandiose manner, exemplifying her self-importance. For a girl who was about to burst into tears a few seconds ago, she must have quite the heavy mood swings.

Leaving aside her cocky attitude, she was right about everything she just claimed. While an excuse of high perception might explain how she could read his current emotions, there was no possible way for her to know that Ryosei was weighing down his options of either saving the girl or giving her to the assailants.

“Ah, now you’re really, REALLY curious now, aren’t you!? How did I know all of that, you ask? Well, my services aren’t for cheap. You want me to tell you what I can do and how to get to Earth, right? I’ll do it, but first, I need you to promise me something.”

“…and that is?”

Her words reminded Ryosei of your typical scam artist. But strangely enough, he found her words a little convincing. He wondered if it was only because he had no choice in the matter.

“Do you know ‘The Garden?’ I want you to take me there!”

“‘The Garden…?’ Sorry, but if you couldn’t tell, I’m a spirited soul. I don’t know what’s common knowledge in this world.”

“You’re… not lying. U-Umm… well, you don’t have to worry about that. I’m a capable cool lady. You just have to be my bodyguard until we get there. Although I’m a cool lady, those people are too much for me to handle. I promise that if you get me to The Garden, I can get you back to Earth. So, how about it? Please?”

She was, in fact, capable of what she was saying and was willing to keep her end of the bargain if Ryosei did what she asked. What told him this was his ability to detect lies. The ability that let him see through any fabric of untruth, no matter how little information or how cleverly crafted those lies were. Now that he was using such an ability, it gave him a hunch.

“Sure. But how long is this going to take? I don’t have that much time on my hands…”

“U-Umm… M-Maybe a few hours…?”

It was already the third day since Ryosei left Senkyo. He only had half a day to spare to get back to him in time. Going any further would be crossing the line. He’d be relying on Shiro to leave the hideout or hoping that the enemy didn’t have a way to immediately send units to check the area for Senkyo to be safe. On top of all of this, was the inevitable effort Ryosei would have to make to find the other two. Even if Senkyo and Shiro either escape or get caught, Ryosei would have to search for them in order to bring them back to Earth.

Normally, he would just go back and get Senkyo first, but that meant convincing the girl and hoping that they haven’t already left, but above all, he couldn’t guarantee the safety of this method. The girl may not be lying about telling him how to get back to Earth, but the problem was the girl herself. For some reason, she had a bounty on her head that guarantees many enemies of unknown skill along the way. Bringing an unconscious person on a journey filled with blood-hungry assassins was a questionable choice at best.

Ultimately, Ryosei was left with two choices. To abandon Senkyo and leave his well-being to fate, or to drop his only lead on how to get back to Earth. At first glance, it was obvious that he should just go back for Senkyo. Since the whole reason he went out to find a way back to Earth was to safely get Senkyo there, abandoning him would make this action completely meaningless. He’d be putting the cart before the horse. However, he wasn’t just dropping a lead. He would also be sacrificing the girl in front of him. It is clear to him that if he leaves, then this girl will have no way to defend herself and die to her pursuers. The frightened look on her face right this moment was proof of that. It seems he was right.

“…”

Just as he was about to open his mouth to deliver his merciless decision, he stopped himself. For some reason, he couldn’t be satisfied with this. So much so that his mind was a complete mess. But in hindsight, wasn’t his mind already a mess before he left the cave? For some reason, he chose the option that left Senkyo the most vulnerable. He wouldn’t have normally done that. Unable to go any further, he decided to take a step back and arrange his thoughts.

**214 – Chaotic Mind**

This girl could read his mind, or at least something similar to that effect. Her last words to him were a lie. She was trying to cover up the true length of the journey, or at the very least, was uncertain of it when she realized the possibility of her getting left behind if the journey was over Ryosei’s time constraints. She purposefully made that whole show to look reliable earlier and prevent him from realizing the offer’s cons, convincing him that escorting her would be in his best interests. It seemed like this girl was actually somewhat capable. It was simply unfortunate for her that Ryosei wasn’t the kind of person to lose sight of his objectives.

The thought of bringing her with him back to the hideout crossed his mind, but that would defeat his purpose of protecting Senkyo if he brought back a huge target behind his back. This girl and Senkyo cannot meet, and choosing one over the other would put the other in great danger. This was a difficult choice, as the person he would neglect would most likely die.

There was only one aspect that broke this stalemate. Looking at the situation objectively, Ryosei had no reason to be saving a random spirit girl he just met. The logical choice was to return to Senkyo. He wanted to make the right decision this time. Then logically, Senkyo was the right decision. It had to be. After all, that was how Ryosei operated all this time when he was alive.

Whenever in battles and life-or-death situations, he would always opt for the most logical decision. What was so different about before and now? Ryosei wasn’t sure, but there were probably many factors that changed, but if he had to point a finger to fault something for his current mental anguish would be…

*“\*You are not human.\*”*

Ryosei’s thoughts lead to Senkyo’s anxiety about being a non-human. It seemed like Senkyo’s troubles had so much effect on him that it even haunted him after the person himself was relieved of this anxiety. For Senkyo, it turned out that he was only worried about what Yuu thought of him, but then why did it stick to Ryosei. The question floated around his head.

For starters, Ryosei was most definitely no longer human. He is a spirited soul that revived his consciousness after encountering Senkyo. Why would he care if he was still defined as human or not? He didn’t have a special person like Senkyo did that he would care about appearances at this point in time. After introducing himself as a spirited soul to his loved ones, they treated him no less than usual. In fact, they might have even gotten closer.

Being human or not is meaningless to him. Having come to that conclusion, Ryosei chose to change perspectives. He figured if it wasn’t the classification of being human, then perhaps it was something more… internal. The concept of being human. What differentiates humans and animals would be their intellect, in a deeper meaning, it would be something connected to their emotions—morals. The idea of what is right or wrong. A complex subject that varies from person to person.

If it were this, it would make sense that leaving a little girl to die to assassins when you could have done something would wound one’s morals. That would also explain why he hated himself after even considering the idea of handing a little girl to dangerous men in exchange for information. It all made sense. But that meant that he had been deviating from his previous system of thought. Whether this change was a good one or not was yet to be determined. What he did know, though, was that it was similar to Senkyo’s, which he first looked down on as naïve and idiotic.

After all, who in their right mind would chase after a girl that betrayed them and tried to kidnap them to another world? It was incomprehensible. Beyond logic. However, it was that same system of thought that proved Ryosei wrong time and time again. In times when Ryosei would just stop and say it was meaningless, Senkyo forged himself a path to take on those situations. For a second, Ryosei felt good about this change. But that begs the question, when and how did this change happen? As Ryosei was deep in thought, a voice called out to him and brought him back to reality.

“U-Uhm… so… are you coming with me?”

The girl in front of him asked meekly, a drastic change from the pompous act before. She was being careful not to get on Ryosei’s bad side, most likely because she wanted to have Ryosei on board in protecting her, but after his internal struggle, she was no longer confident. She had a hard time maintaining eye contact, her voice was soft, the light in her eyes slowly darkened, frowned lips being bitten from the inside to maintain composure and handle anxiety. She didn’t want to disturb the long silence so as to not anger him, but got pressured by trepidation. Her fear was apparent.

“That’s… a good question.”

Would it truly sit right with Ryosei to leave this defenseless girl to fend for herself against her pursuers? No, it would not. Then would he be fine if he abandoned Senkyo? It was a question he couldn’t immediately answer. If he left Senkyo, it would definitely make it hard for him, however, he is not incapable. If he wakes up with Ryosei absent, he felt there was a good chance he would leave immediately to look for Yuu. Even if he was still unconscious, he knew Shiro would do everything to protect Senkyo and perhaps even leave early. If it's those two, they might just be able to handle themselves, and it would simply be Ryosei being overprotective of Senkyo.

“Haaah……”

Ryosei let out a deep sigh, making the girl stiffen as straight as a stick as she realized he had come to a decision. Her face was pale from anxiety but wasn’t sweating one bit. Probably because she was a spirit, not human. Ryosei had a defeated look along with his response.

“Fine, I’ll go.”

Those three words resonated inside the girl and brightened her up, making her mental state turn a complete 180, bringing cheer and life back into her eyes.

“Really!? Really, really, REALLY!? You’ll go right!? You said you’d go! I heard it no doubt about it am I wrong!?”

Her cheery side might be back but the anxiety seemed to linger as she asked for confirmation.

“Yes, I decided to go with you. Now that that’s been established let's get a move on before I change my mind.”

“Uhuh! Okay, okay, sure, let’s go, Mr. Cool Bro! Over here, follow me! I’ll explain everything you need to know here on the way, so rest assured you’re in safe hands!”

“M-Mr. Cool Bro…? No, no, no, just call me Ryosei. Please.”

“Do you not like it?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Okay! Then I’ll call you Ryocchei!”

“R-Ryo—huh?? No, please. Dial it down with the cutesy names already. I’m begging you.”

Dissatisfied, she bubbled her cheeks and stared sharply at Ryosei. But even so, she managed to convince herself that it was best to back down and compromised.

“…Then, Ryo-chan. Is that fine?”

“Hahh, you know what, fine. Let’s just go.”

“Yeeey! Then let’s go!”

The girl excitedly tugged on Ryosei’s hand, trying to drag him along with her to who knows where.

**215 - Chouka**

The girl’s name is Chouka. She is the daughter of the head of The Garden. Apparently, her mother tends to be on the overprotective side. She always has a barrier around their home to keep outsiders away and to make sure no deviants like Chouka wander off on her own and get into trouble.

Hearing that she had a mother piqued Ryosei’s interest. Apparently, true spirits have the ability to construct altars which creates true spirits of the same species. By supplying the altar with the spirit power of their kind, it will eventually give birth to another spirit. Mixing in the spirit power of a different species disrupts the process and resets the progress for that spirit.

While that was the case, Chouka’s mother was not a true spirit, but a spirited soul. Unlike true spirit who are born in the Spirit Realm, spirited souls were simply lost souls of other worlds that were sent to this world because of certain circumstances. They were not given any ability to reproduce or create spirits of their kind. However, Chouka’s mother was different.

She claimed that in the beginning, Chouka was not yet a spirit. She was a wisp. They were the spirit equivalent of a familiar. Summoned from the caster’s own spirit power, wisps have no consciousness or individuality. They are simply there to serve and follow their caster’s will. They are mostly used for reconnaissance, confusing enemies with multiple signatures of spirit power, and generally being an extension of the caster’s being.

She had memories of those times, although they were vague. But Chouka’s mother would always treat them like her actual children. She would talk to them despite their unresponsiveness and praise them whenever they succeeded in completing a mission she sent them to.

Time passed with their lives like that and came the moment everything changed. Chouka’s mother was chosen to be a Di Manes. The Hero equivalent of the spirits. Being bestowed with great power, not only her mother but as well as the wisps she controlled, Chouka and her siblings, were strengthened. It was then that Chouka and the others gained a conscious. They could listen to others and respond to them with their own thoughts.

Although that was the case, they were still too limited and weak to be called spirits, but it was a step in the right direction. Their lives became even more livelier after that. Her mother was elated by her children’s evolution and had them interact with other beings to build up their own individuality. As they were given that mission, Chouka became close with another Di Manes named Yuuki. She talked about how her interactions with Yuuki were one of the best things that happened in her life and how much fun she had. But then, her eyes dropped slightly and her face took a solemn look for half a second. Ryosei didn’t miss that. Something must have happened with Yuuki, but he didn’t pursue the subject.

From there, Chouka’s detailed stories became vague, clearly trying to avoid certain memories. It seemed like there was a certain incident that triggered everything, but she didn’t clarify it. However, she did mention that Yuuki entrusted a portion of his spirit power to Chouka and another sibling. Doing so empowered them greatly. The next thing they knew, soul fragments of the Di Manes became one with Chouka and her brother’s souls, completely turning them into spirits.

That power was the one she used to break out of her mother’s barrier and got herself stuck in such a precarious situation. She didn’t know why she was being targeted, but if it had to be anything, then it would be the soul fragment that merged with her. It was a tremendous power source that birthed spirits. Seeing as she had nothing else on her it was the most likely target. Incidentally, that was also the power she used to read Ryosei’s mind.

Apparently, it had to do with her flute, but she didn’t specify. Well, that was fine since Ryosei was still a kind of stranger to her who was only hired to be a bodyguard. Spreading word about one’s own powers to strangers was a stupid act. It seemed like Chouka knew this. Ryosei’s evaluation of her would have gone up a significant amount if it weren’t for the strain she was putting on her face as she declined to tell him everything. She clearly wanted to boast about it. Well, the way she talked about herself already sounded like she was boasting so at this point it was natural.

*\*A Di Manes, huh?\**

Ryosei felt this was a perfect opportunity to ask about the questions he had in mind. If it’s a Di Manes, then they might know something about the reason for Senkyo’s strange powers and maybe even something about himself since he was something like a spirited soul, but also not. And if it’s them, then they might know something about his other concern…

*\*If it’s a person with that much power, I wonder if they’ll be able to cure Yukai-chan’s mother…\**

**216 – Enny**

“We’re here! Enny, are you here?”

Chouka stopped in front of a cliffside. At first, it seems like there was nothing here, but a trained eye for different kinds of presences dictates that they have entered a completely different territory from before. He noticed this a few minutes ago, almost as if the land they were stepping on was all a part of a single spirit. He was a bit worried, but Chouka walked right in without worry. Noticing my concern, she told him that this was simply the entrance to the True Spirit World, and it is maintained by someone she calls Enny. He didn’t let that cutesy name deceive his senses. Seeing as how carefree she was despite being ambushed by others that were after her life, he was sure she could slap a cute name on a pool of ominous slime at the drop of a hat.

He was right.

“Oh? Chouka, what brings you back so early? I was sure you’d be out for another day or two.”

“Hey…”

“Shh! Enny, Shhh!!”

While Chouka was busy silencing any more information that would suggest that she brought this trouble upon herself, Ryosei observed the one she called “Enny.” It wasn’t just a non-person, it was a single mouth that appeared out of the cliffside, lips with a rough texture that could be mistaken for rocks, teeth as large as your average person, a tongue shaped like a snake’s, slithering as it spoke, and its whole figure outlined with dark shadows. He was reminded again that this was the spirit world, a world where sights like this were most likely the norm. But still, he didn’t understand his employer’s sense for cutesy names.

“…A-Anyway, Enny, could you send us back home? I need to talk with Mommy about something. There were these strange guys following me around, you see. So… s-so, I’m going to warn her about them and guard the others!”

It was clear to anyone that she was only acting tough, but the small amount of time Ryosei had spent with her told him clearly that she was filled with pride. Although he didn’t know if it was good for her or not, it was certainly the cause of her outgoing attitude. At least she meant no malice with it.

“Haha, okay, Chouka. Do your best guarding those siblings of yours. As their reliable big sister, you have to be there for them.”

“Y-Yes! I’ll be the best reliable big sister in the world!”

Chouka’s eyes lit up at the phrase “reliable big sister.” Her eyes filled with fire as she heavily gestured her excitement. It seemed like Ryosei was going to finish his duty earlier than he thought. There was even a slight chance he could get back to Senkyo. But then, Enny’s tone turned heavy.

“But you see… There seems to be a problem with the Spirit Realm today. I’m not sure I can accurately send you to The Garden. We’re still investigating the problem, so maybe if you waited a few days it’ll turn back to normal and I can send you back safely.”

“What!? D-Days!? But that’s…”

Chouka was conflicted. Normally, she wouldn’t mind waiting days to return, but it seemed like she wanted to report the danger she discovered to her family as soon as possible. It must’ve been her fixation on being a reliable big sister. Then, she turned to Ryosei.

“Hey, Ryo-chan. I think we should still go. What do you think?”

Surprisingly, she wasn’t forceful about her decision and was looking for his insights. He thought he’d just be dragged along this whole trip but she knew the importance of others’ opinions. She had been giving herself her own restraints every now and then, being careful not to overdo it. Wherever she was getting her pride from, it wasn’t all for show.

“I think we’ll be fine if we go now. If something happens I’ll just do my job. That’s what I’m here for, right?”

“R-Really!? Hooray!”

Ryosei decided to indulge Chouka. Although he wasn’t sure if this was the right decision, it was one he was fine with. Besides, if all went right, he’d be able to get back to Senkyo. Maybe.

“Well then, if you don’t mind, I’ll be sending you two now.”

“Okay!”

“Please.”

The two gave their last responses as a pitch-black circle with ripples of purple appeared below them. Arms then began to rise from the circle, gripped the two tightly, and dragged them into the darkness.

“W-What the—This is…!”

A memory flashed in Ryosei’s head. It was the time when Senkyo, Yuu, and Itsuki were first dragged into the spirit realm. In front of the school gates, these exact arms attacked Itsuki along with Senkyo and Yuu as collateral after trying to save him.

Sensing Ryosei’s panic, Chouka reassured him.

“You don’t need to be afraid, Ryo-chan. These are Enny’s powers. It’ll send us straight back home in no time!”

“I-Is that so…?”

Ryosei checked for lies and none showed up. It seemed like she truly trusted Enny with this. He turned his head to the large mouth to make sure of it himself.

“Will this be dangerous for us?”

“Of course! You’re safe in my hands. Literally, hahaha! I’ll try my best to send you to The Garden, so rest assured.”

Ryosei still couldn’t get used to seeing this mouth talking to him like that, much less if it began telling terrible jokes like that. But other than that, he felt no malice and seemed to be telling the truth. He had a difficult expression on his face but decided to go along with them. From here on, whatever happens, happens.

**217 – The Entity and the Looming Spider**

The shadow expanded and consumed Ryosei and Chouka whole. The pool of darkness then shrunk to nothingness as if it never existed. Silence returned to the empty cliffside. Then, a single voice disturbed that silence.

“Did you actually send them to Hiroto’s place?”

It sounded like it belonged to a woman. There was no one to one there, but they were clearly talking to Enny.

“Why should I be the one to report to you? You have units on the scene, why not ask them?”

“Fufu, you got me there.”

The voice was playful. Almost like it never expected Enny to answer in the first place. It was just trying to mess with her.

“Why don’t you just show yourself, Control Leader of END?”

“My, my! How delightful it is to be summoned by a Divine Beast!”

Thin lines of distorted space appeared from above. A haze that was shaped like a spider web slowly stretched downwards. A thin line protruded from the formation and came the owner of the voice.

A being that could fit the description of woman-spider better than spider-woman descended from above. The lower portion of her body was that of a spider. A large frame with multiple legs to support its weight. Meanwhile, her upper portion was a woman with spider-like features. Long and sharp fangs with fingers of similar lethality. Six red eyes plastered on her face with deadly gazes that looked like they were hunting for prey. And fine, long filaments that covered her body, exchanging human clothes for animal hair. It was half woman and half spider.

“A pleasure to meet you.”

The spider licked her lips as she said that, staring at Enny. The whole time she was here, she had been looking at Enny like she was prey.

“How imprudent. Do you think you can get away without consequence?”

“Of course, I can! Divine Beast that you are, you cannot take action other than maintaining the Spirit Realm. You are incapable of violence. That fact was true even in the face of your master’s murder!”

“Enough of this!”

Enny’s voice boomed so loud that the surrounding trees trembled and even the ground began to rumble.

“If you’ve come only to provoke me, then I’ll just send you away myself!”

A large pool of darkness appeared beneath the spider, the arms that rose from it grabbed her and tried to consume her. But before they could, the thread connecting her to the spider web above tensed and stopped her from completely going away.

“Oops. My apologies. I may have gone a bit too far with that one. More importantly, I do have actual business with you. I’m sure you would have the heart to listen to me after helping you bring the boy here. It took me quite a while to make him leave the other boy behind and go with that girl.”

“Unfortunately for you, I know all about your plans. The moment you take control of Yukou Senkyo, you’re hoping to take Konjou Ryosei as collateral using their unusual connection. So now, you’re trying to strengthen the two to ensure that they become chosen to be the next ambassadors. There is nothing for me to repay.”

“My, my. As expected of the Divine Beast. Having eyes and ears in all three worlds sure is convenient. Oh, how lucky we were to have found you early. Then again, things would have gone for the worst if you hadn’t sent those kids to the Spirit Realm when you did. For the both of us.”

“Utterly disgusting. To that end, you sacrificed one of your leaders and sent innocent hunters to their deaths. It is hard to understand such methods.”

“Well, for me, it is you who is hard to understand. Despite being a transcendent being, you still possess needless emotion. If only you had thrown those away, then perhaps we would actually be troubled by this development.”

“My master was a benevolent ruler. Discarding the gifts given to a being is a foolish act.”

“I knew I wouldn’t be able to understand you. It is simply frustrating that someone like you achieved transcendence. My magic doesn’t work on you and you even bypassed the truth detection of those kids. Such wasted potential.”

“I, too, knew this was a waste of time.”

The arms that wrapped the spider pulled harder. The heavy aura they released thickened.

“Ah, you wouldn’t want to do that. I’m sure you know, but the reason Konjou Ryosei died was because of me. Having to do that another time is a simple task. He is not essential to us, just a large bonus. But to you, he is different. An essential unit that can be added to the Spirit Realm’s powers. If you cross us here, well… I’m sure I don’t need to clarify what happens next.”

The arms loosened slightly. Having seen the successful results of her threat, her lips twisted into a cruel smile.

“That’s what I thought. Well, I’m sure you already have an inkling about my request with you. Seeing the positive results of our little scheme today, we would like you to cooperate with us to strengthen Yukou Senkyo and Konjou Ryosei until the day of judgment comes. From thereon… the early bird gets the worm, I guess. Hahaha!”

“Such arrogance. What makes you think you’ll be able to take control of those two?”

“‘The commander of tranquility he is, devoid of corruption he is not,’ as the prophecy says. Our master is a bit obsessed with that passage. I’m sure the both of us know what that line pertains to.”

“Yukou Senkyo’s leash, huh? And knowing you have that option, you brazenly waltz up to me and request an alliance?”

“Oh, my. Is it perhaps that the one they call ‘The Entity’ has no power to counteract such methods?”

“You misunderstand, I was questioning whether you actually have a chance of taking hold of them.”

“My, such confidence. Then please, accept our proposal and prove me wrong. It will make for a cute struggle.”

“Very well. Although incapable of violence, I will make you regret challenging me to a battle of wits.”

In a blink of an eye, sharp threads swung down and the dark arms rooting the spider were severed. She ascended to her spider web and hung on one of its threads upside down as it replied to Enny.

“Then I, Vilane The Control Leader, will happily dance with you.”

**218 – Destination**

A place devoid of light. Moments after being swallowed by the pool of darkness, Ryosei’s vision was taken from him, allowing him to see nothing but darkness. He can speak, he can smell, he can hear, he can feel, but he cannot see. Just as he was about to call out to the person that should be beside him, a small light appeared below their confines of darkness. It quickly took up most of his vision until he was forced to close his eyes and protect them from the bright light.

“Th-This is…”

A voice reached his ears as he tried to recover from his blindness. It was Chouka. It seemed like she was reacting to something. If that was the case, then it should be okay to open his eyes again and see what was happening, too. Ryosei thought and slowly opened his eyes. His vision was blurry, his head was dizzy, and a sharp pang of pain assaulted his body, making him stagger. Realizing he wasn’t going to get anywhere if he forced himself, he stood still and focused on recovery.

A few seconds passed and everything slowly subsided until his senses were all back to normal. His blurry vision slowly focused on the structure in front of him. It was a strange sight. A large ball was floating inside a tube of spirit power. It seemed like the flow of energy was coming from both the floor and the ceiling, intersecting with the ball between them.

Looking at it closely, it wasn’t just intersecting with the ball. It was being absorbed in it. The ball was a bit hazy but more opaque than the flow of spirit power entering it. If Ryosei wasn’t mistaken, then this ball was also made up of spirit power and the purpose of the tube was to strengthen it.

He walked up closer to it and scrutinized it carefully. He walked around it a few times to discern the structure and then caught a small figure from within the ball. Within the ball was what seemed to be some kind of nucleus. It had thicker spirit power than any place in the whole structure, almost like the core of a spirit. Within that core was an outline of some kind. The thick accumulation of spirit power was making it hard to see, but it wasn’t impossible. It wasn’t symmetrical and the edges he could recognize had a rough texture. If he had to describe it, then he would compare it to a fragment of broken glass.

He tried to think of what the structure was supposed to be, but then a voice called out to him.

“U-Uhmm… Ryo-chan?”

It was Chouka. He was so focused on the structure that he forgot to talk with her first.

“Oh, sorry I got distracted. What is it?”

Chouka looked down at the floor with clouded eyes, but then she suddenly shook her head vigorously and faced Ryosei. Turning the anxiety in her eyes into determination.

“This isn’t home.”

“It’s not, huh…”

After hearing Enny’s warnings he figured they wouldn’t be sent to the right place. But if Enny meant to send them to The Garden, then maybe the margin of error was small and The Garden was close by. Well, that’s just positive thinking at work. Worst case scenario, they were at the farthest place from The Garden possible. But since they chose to take this route then there was no use griping to the past. Ryosei explained that to Chouka, but despite being in a possibly desperate situation, the determination in her eyes didn’t falter.

“Then, we should get out of here as soon as possible! This large, glowy thing isn’t something anyone would have. We better not get involved to get back home faster.”

“That makes sense, but where do we go?”

“To Enny! When we arrive, we’ll just have to wait until she’s feeling better again. Then, we go home!”

“Enny? Didn’t we just leave her? Do you know a way to get back there?”

“No, we’ll ask the closest Enny!”

“The closest…? What?”

Noticing Ryosei’s confusion, Chouka explains.

“You see, Enny is in charge of managing the Spirit Realm. There are many of her all over the Spirit Realm. She can send anyone to any place in this world. If she tries hard, she can even send us to different worlds. She’s an amazing person! We can just trace her power to find her.”

Ryosei nodded understandingly. It seemed like this Enny is not just one person, she is an existence that has enough power to be tasked with the Spirit Realm’s maintenance. If she can manage a whole world, then it isn’t any surprise that there is more than one of her. A thought crossed Ryosei’s mind.

“Then I can just ask her to send me back to Earth?”

“Ah!? Th-That’s—!”

Chouka’s expression filled with panic. When she was boasting all about Enny’s existence, she leaked that Enny was the key for Ryosei to get back home. As long as he gets to her, there would be no need for Chouka. Realizing her mistake, she gestures frantically trying to give him reasons not to leave her. They were all weak excuses, but she threw them at him nonetheless.

She might be a child but she’s quite capable. Though capable, she’s still a child. No one would think that a child like her would be able to think properly in this situation and construct a feasible plan to get out of their predicament. She has the skills and traits of a capable leader.

On the contrary, she has no experience in using any of those. She can make simple mistakes just as easily as he can solve problems. Just like now, she leaked the only information that Ryosei was after. With no binding force left on him, he can just leave Chouka behind and focus on fixing his own problems. That route would be easier and much more efficient for him.

Ryosei could see why she always escaped from home. If she doesn’t get experience, then the skills and traits she cultivated will rot. He only voiced her mistake to make her aware of it, Ryosei could easily apologize and end this conversation as a simple prank, but how will that serve her experience? Harsh as it is, if Chouka’s mistakes aren’t punished, she won’t grow. To that end, he opened his mouth.

“Sorry, but none of those excuses really worry me. I’ll just take my leave here and go. Too bad, huh?”

“N-No! W-Wait!”

“What? Do you have more to say?”

“I… I…”

Just as Ryosei turned his back to her, Chouka quickly restrained his arm. Panicking, she spoke in wordless stutters. Before, she always looked Ryosei straight in the eyes while talking, but now her eyes were all over the place, from the ground, to the walls, to the strange structure. She was thinking of ways to bind Ryosei to her again. Beyond this room, she knew not of the dangers that lay ahead. She needed Ryosei’s power to escape. If she loses him now, there was a good chance she won’t make it back home.

The long silence continued. Ryosei placed one foot further from Chouka. The message was clear. Take any longer, and she will lose him. Agitated, distressed, frenzied, crazed, fraught, it wasn’t the mental state someone wanted to be in to be able to solve a problem as fast as possible. Seeing this, Ryosei decided to give her a little push.

“This is getting annoying. If all you’re going to do is squirm in place then I’m out. Reliable big sister? Don’t make me laugh. Like anyone that can’t do anything but panic will be reliable.”

Ryosei’s words struck a nerve in Chouka. At first, she looked furious, but then she looked downwards to the ground. Unlike before, she was still. He couldn’t see her face. Was she crying? He was criticizing Senkyo for making a lot of girls cry but it looks like he wasn’t any better.

As he had that thought, Chouka suddenly headbutted his chest with her full weight, knocking both of them down to the ground. She quickly straddled his chest to keep him from escaping. Then, she began.

“I have a proposal!”

**219 – Creating A Bond**

“Ha? You’ve already lost my interest because of your little mistake. What do you think you can do to take that back, huh?”

“I can do something! Something only I can do! So there’s no way you’ll refuse!”

“Then, instead of shouting at me in the face, how about you tell me what it is already?”

Chouka’s expression stiffened at Ryosei’s words, but it was only for a second. Fueled with determination, she claimed.

“If you cooperate with me now, then I’ll tell mommy to grant one request from you!”

“Mommy…? Then that’s—”

Before he could finish speaking, Chouka voiced his thoughts and added power to her words.

“A God of Life! A previous Di Manes! Only if you cooperate with me, then I’ll make someone with that much power will grant you a single wish!”

It was certainly an attractive offer. In the first place, he wanted to have an audience with her mother and ask her about many things. She will not be obligated to answer him, but with Chouka’s proposal, he wouldn’t have to worry about that. But still, her reward wasn’t quite firmly built.

“How do you guarantee that she’ll grant that? It’s you who’s talking, not her. If I face someone with that much power, then she can just kill me before I even notice.”

“A contract! Right now, let’s make a contract!”

“A contract?”

“Yes! We are completely made up of spirit power. Compared to other contracts such as a Familiar Pact from Zerid and a Psyche Contract from Earth, which connect living beings to spirits. A Spirit Bond, a contract that connects two spirits is much more powerful! By connecting both of our cores and reciting an oath, a Spirit Bond will be formed. If you break this bond, then not only will you die, but your soul will be shattered and become incapable of reincarnation. Form that bond with me, and you will have one wish granted by Mommy!”

“I see… That is an enticing offer.”

“Then!”

Chouka’s eyes lit up with excitement as it sounded like Ryosei was about to accept the offer, but her guard was still up. She didn’t take that as a confirmation and was ready to move once more in the event that he refused. He was quite curious about the next actions she would take, but prolonging their stay in that room wasn’t a good idea. Stifling his wants, he spoke.

“Okay. I’ll take it.”

“R-Really…?”

There was still doubt clouding her face. It seemed like threatening to leave her finally made her alert of others. This was good.

“Really. Now, get off and let’s make that contract before I change my mind.”

“Y-Yes!”

Realizing she was still straddling him, Chouka quickly got off of Ryosei, stuck her arm out, and summoned her flute. The spirit power in her body flowed into her hand and shaped the instrument. Along with it was a heavy presence. A large bundle of power that sheathed her flute and made it seem impenetrable. It was her core.

“Now, take out your weapon. A spirited soul like Ryo-chan has no choice but to give it your core, so I don’t need to teach you how to apply it as I did. Once we make contact with our weapons, we recite at the same time…”

Chouka taught the chant they need to speak and Ryosei quickly learned it. He questioned why this ritual was so vulnerable, seeing as they were basically placing their hearts out in the open. But it seemed like it didn’t matter. A spirit’s body is strong only because it contains the soul. But after placing it in their weapons, their durability transfers. The weapon may be small, but it's as strong as having it inside their body, meanwhile, their body will be the vulnerable part that’s vulnerable.

He asked why they needed to go through the trouble of summoning their weapons instead of just holding hands, but it was a problem of distance. Their cores will be too far from each other. They might be able to solve that problem by hugging, but that was even more dangerous since one person could just shape their body into a spear and pierce the other person. Not to mention the hindrance to their vision. Ultimately, this was for the best.

“…then, we speak our pledges and confirm the connection. If you follow my lead, you’ll be fine.”

“Got it. So, are you ready?”

Ryosei summoned Kuro Yaiba and outstretched it to Chouka. Nodding, she did the same with her flute and placed her core next to Ryosei’s, the sides of their weapons touching.

“In the count of three, we chant.”

“Okay.”

“One… two… three…”

As Chouka counted down, their eyes stared at each other, confirming the other’s resolve. The moment she reached the end of her countdown, they both began.

“I am you. You are me. Our souls are one being in the form of two. I am He who Holds, grasp that carries your departure, grasp that releases your arrival. Ruler of Tophet, witness our pledge.”

Upon uttering the passage, lights of purple and gray emit from their weapons. They swirled around the two, encasing them in a sphere of strange illumination, most of them accumulating on the ground beneath them, creating a pool of light. Chouka continued.

“I am Chouka. Hear my oath. In exchange for Konjou Ryosei’s cooperation, I will see to it that The God of Life, Mei will grant his one wish. Betrayal be bane, loyalty be boon.”

Ryosei was slightly dissatisfied with Chouka’s words. Although she wasn’t wrong, the word cooperation was too vague. He wasn’t quite sure how this bond worked. If it was based on the user’s perspective then that would be fine, but if it was built upon the words used, there would be trouble. He couldn’t quite point it out in this situation though. Chouka was waiting for him to say his pledge. It wasn’t quite perfect, but he did great work getting this far. For that, he decided to cut her some slack. He didn’t know why but he took quite a liking to her.

“I am Konjou Ryosei. Hear my oath. I swear that I will protect Chouka and bring her to The Garden safely. Betrayal be bane, loyalty be boon.”

Chouka’s eyes widened at his words. He placed definite restrictions in his oath, chaining him as her guardian until they reached their goal. As she was about to voice out her concern, she stifled her mouth and continued.

“Voice be heard, words be honored, soul be fettered. I am Chouka, and I place my soul with this pledge.”

“Voice be heard, words be honored, soul be fettered. I am Konjou Ryosei, and I place my soul with this pledge.”

With Ryosei uttering the last word, the spiraling lights flowed into Chouka and Ryosei’s cores, the pool beneath them turning white and wrapping their bodies. The illumination slowly subsided as they merged with their bodies. The room turned silent and the contract was finished.

Then a hearty laugh broke the silence.

“Hahaha! Ryo-chan, you’ve made a huge mistake! You were too specific on your oath. Now, you actually have no choice but to become my bodyguard, hahaha!”

It seemed like the contract was based on words instead of perception.

“O-Oh, no! I messed up!”

Ryosei said so with a higher pitch voice than usual. It was supposed to indicate his sarcasm but it didn’t seem like Chouka quite picked up on that.

“Hahaha! Now, bow before me!”

It seemed like her victory was getting to her head. He needed to do something about it before her ego swallows her experience here to oblivion.

“Wait a second… If that oath was based on words, then wasn’t it you who messed up?”

“Huh?”

Her face twisted with visible question marks appearing above her head, clearly not understanding what he was trying to say.

“You said in exchange for my ‘cooperation.’ Then, if I responded the same, wouldn’t I be able to do whatever I want as long as you get to The Garden?”

“Th-That’s…”

Ryosei closed the distance between them and intimidated her with his large figure towering above her.

“Hey… Chouka, what happened just now, was it a fluke?”

“A-A fluke!? No way!”

“How can you become a reliable big sister if this keeps happening, huh? Your mistake was even worse than mine. You should be thanking me I made that mistake in the first place.”

“N-No! M-Mistakes are a part of growing! This was my first time making a contract with anyone! You’ll see, the next time I make a contract I won’t let that mistake happen again!”

“…If only it comes true, huh?”

“Yes, it will!”

“I guess we’ll just have to see then.”

While the two were bickering, a door to the room opened and two individuals appeared.

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing here!?”

**220 – Black Rose**

A kappa and a tengu appeared before them. They had their weapons out and pointed at Ryosei and Chouka. Not waiting for any further unwanted development, Ryosei immediately used flash strike and swung Kuro Yaiba. Before the two could even think of defending themselves with their naginata and katana, Ryosei already severed their arms. In response to their shock of losing their limbs, he continued and took their legs. The support below them suddenly disappeared and their bodies began to fall to the ground. They opened their mouths to scream but all that came out was a sharp shriek as Ryosei sealed both of their mouths by transforming Kuro Yaiba into a cloth. Before anyone even realized it, the kappa and tengu that came to investigate the room were restrained by a rope and silenced by a cloth, their bodies placed back-to-back.

“…”

Just as Ryosei finished doing his job, he faced Chouka to find her surprised face filled with shock, amazement, and even a hint of fear. She then blinked hard and shook her head lightly to bring herself back to reality and faced the two spirits, the faint smile on her face showing her relief that she managed to secure Ryosei’s power.

“You two. If you don’t want to die, then answer my questions.”

Chouka said coldly to the two spirits.

“Did you call for help before entering this room?”

However, despite her intimidating tone, the spirits’ response was only a sharp glare of anger. Seeing this, Ryosei quickly tightened the rope and cloth that bound them, sending pain through their body. Their screams were silenced by the cloth to muffled voices.

Seeing that, Chouka took out her flute and called out to Ryosei.

“Ryo-chan, can you do that again whenever they look angry?”

“Hm? Yeah, that’s what I was planning.”

Chouka nodded as she brought the flute to her mouth. A calm melody filled the room, but soon it changed to an intense one. Moreover, the two spirits were reacting to her music. Their faces would contort into anger, then change to fear as Ryosei tightened their bindings, following that were faces of despair, then determination, then fear, and finally, their expressions softened as Chouka brought an end to her performance. She told him to tighten their binds every time they showed an angry expression, but in the end, he only needed to do it once.

“There, now they’ll answer every question we ask them.”

“Wow, amazing. Is this that your power?”

“Yes, it’s one that can affect mental states.”

Ryosei turned to the two spirits and saw their tired expressions. Whatever it was it really did seem to work.

“It really is amazing… Hey, you didn’t use that to read my mind again, did you?”

Since he was in the room, the music that came out of Chouka’s flute also reached his ears. He was reminded of the surprise he caught when he first met her. As his worries surfaced, Chouka reassured him.

“Don’t worry. It isn’t as effective against someone who already knows about it. I could still try to use it on you, but I would need to focus more to break through your mental defenses. Not to mention, you’d probably feel my spirit power entering your body if I did.”

“Hm… got it.”

She wasn’t lying, so he believed her. But in response to that, it was Chouka that showed confusion. It seemed like she didn’t know why he believed her so easily. She read his mind, but memories seemed to be a different story. After that, they began interrogating the two spirits.

There were no reinforcements called. It seemed like the reason the two came to check this room was because they felt a strong presence of spirit power as they passed by. It seemed to be the time when Ryosei and Chouka made a Spirit Bond. They didn’t bother to call for others.

As for their location, it seemed like they were in a secluded area in the Spirit World. A hideout of sorts. The building was a large structure hidden underground that spanned around 4 hectares, almost the size of Tokyo Dome with 5 floors deep. The person who owned this place was a spirited soul named Hiroto. He is a powerful person who brought together this organization called “Black Rose.” And most surprising of all, a previous Di Manes. Ryosei and Chouka fell into shock as they heard this. They were supposed to be the ones that were chosen to forge strong connections with other worlds and forge peace with the three worlds. But then, what were they doing here?

Chouka quickly asked the question and their response was… “I don’t know.” It seemed like the only reason these two were even a part of the organization was that they wanted to meet a former Di Manes and become a power to them. Their heads dropped disappointedly at their response. These would be perfect examples of small fry. They were fillers that only became a part of something because everyone else was doing it and because of the fame their leader held. If the whole world was turned on its head, these two wouldn’t hesitate to go against the leader.

After that, they asked about the structure of the building. It seemed like they were on the 3rd floor underground. Every floor had stairs at their corners. On the top floor, exits could be found in the middle of every side which leads to hidden entrances on the surface. To get out, they will need to reach the stairs, climb two floors up, cross a long hallway, reach an exit, and escape. Considering that the span of every floor was about 4 hectares, their faces paled at the amount of lurking and hiding they needed to do.

After being satisfied with the information, Chouka played the flute once more. Upon finishing, she told Ryosei to release their binds. He looked at her curiously but did as he was told. Then, the two spirits silently stood up and headed for the door without minding Chouka and Ryosei’s presence.

“What did you do?”

Ryosei shot a question to Chouka.

“It’s a bit of mind control. I told them to forget ever seeing us and patrol the route to the nearest exit. If they find someone, then they’ll scream in surprise and snap out of their mind control. It’s to alert us of others. Snapping them out of my mind control is just a precaution so that others don’t get too suspicious of their actions. But don’t worry, even if I release them, they won’t remember us a single bit.”

“Wow. That’s great!”

Ryosei praised her as he was genuinely surprised by her powers. Chouka then wore a smug face in response.

“Heheheh! It’s only natural! I’m a reliable big sister, after all!”

“Now, if only we could do something about you getting carried away.”

“I don’t get carried away!”

**221 – Escape**

Ryosei and Chouka walked the halls of Black Rose’s underground base. With the kappa and tengu in front of them to alert them of incoming patrol, the two discussed a plan of action in the event that they encounter an enemy or get caught. Fortunately, they crafted a plan they were satisfied with before they were found and reached the flights of stairs in the corner of the floor. They then began their ascent.

Ryosei didn’t have the time to look at his surroundings carefully, but this place was completely different from the Spirit Realm he was used to. Instead of everything glowing like crystals of one color, this place had its walls colored blue and tinted purple and green. They had various textures like rough stone floors and smooth wooden walls, but that part was the same as what he was used to since the Spirit Realm’s structure was based on Earth.

They passed the 2nd floor safely, but just as they were about to reach the 1st floor, loud screams resounded and bounced through the walls of the building. There, they saw what seemed to be a ghost stupefied by the tengu and kappa’s sudden outburst. They had a body of a human, but their lower half gradually faded into nothingness as they floated in the air.

Without mind for her appearance, Ryosei quickly took action and used flash strike to close the distance between them. Since the stairs spiraled upwards and downwards through floors, he used the stair’s railings as a foothold to jump onto the 1st floor without the ghost catching his figure. He quickly snuck behind her, severed her limbs, and sealed her mouth before she could speak, draining her spirit power all the while.

As that was happening, Chouka took the flute out and played a tune. Slowly, but surely. The ghost’s expression cycled through a myriad of emotions until it finally succumbed to Chouka’s powers. Unlike the kappa and tengu, Ryosei had to tighten his hold three times as the number of times the ghost showed rage. He didn’t quite know the relationship between anger and being able to successfully take control of them, but it seemed that difficulty is indicated by the number of times they become angry.

The ghost’s resistance finally faded as Chouka stopped playing and delivered a light nod to Ryosei. Seeing that, he released his bindings and stepped back. There, the ghost stood still, unmoving with a sloppy expression on their face. Chouka successfully took control of her. Ryosei looked around for other enemies, but there was nothing there except empty halls.

He turned to face Chouka.

“Good job.”

“A-Ah, yeah…”

Unexpectedly, instead of boasting about her abilities, Chouka had a gloomy expression plastered on her face. Finding that strange, Ryosei asked.

“What’s wrong? Did something happen?”

“Well, yes… Sorry, I didn’t expect those two to scream so loudly. We might have caught attention. We should probably go.”

Without waiting for Ryosei’s response, she quickly controlled the three spirits under her control and began scouting their route to the exit. Ryosei followed without replying to her, but not without silent praise. He figured she would need more experience to grow, but it seemed like she was a fast learner. She only ordered the spirits to scream at the sight of an enemy, but she didn’t control the output, leading to them screaming at full volume. Realizing this, she opted to apologize rather than ignore it after a successful takedown. On the outside, she was refusing to accept her mistakes, but it was only a front to hide her embarrassment and protect her pride, but on the inside, she was deeply reflecting on them.

Now, all that was left was the 200-meter stretch toward the exit. Here, they had the help of three spirits. At first, Chouka’s control over the tengu and kappa was set to be released the moment they encountered an enemy, but Ryosei suggested they revise that.

When they encounter a weak enemy, he proposed that they keep Chouka’s control on them and take over the other enemy. If it was a strong enemy, then they would opt to release their control and find a place to hide. Since her power to take over others’ minds depends on their mental resistance. If they tried this on a formidable foe, then all that would happen is a fight to the death. Or at the very least, Ryosei would have to weaken and distract the enemy enough for Chouka’s powers to work. They wanted to avoid that since the ruckus they would cause will only attract more enemies, defeating the purpose of controlling the enemy.

The first 50 meters were uneventful, but a few seconds after that a loud scream reached their ears. It wasn’t as loud as before, but enough to alert the two. It was the path the kappa went to. Ryosei took a quick peek and found that he encountered a spirited soul. A human that had a katana on his waist. Seeing him, Ryosei quickly returned to Chouka.

“We need to go. He’s strong.”

“Okay…!”

Chouka gave a stifled, but determined response and headed to where she sent the ghost to patrol. Before they encountered the spirited soul, there were three paths before them. First, was the hall stretching directly toward the exit, the path the kappa took where he found the spirited soul. Second, was a hallway stretching to the left where the tengu patroled. There weren’t enemies there, but since it was in close proximity to where the kappa was found, it was a risky move to take that path. With that, they decided to take the path the ghost took.

Chouka released her control on the kappa and the tengu. Since they were a lost cause, she used them to slow down the spirited soul’s advance by confusing them with terrible explanations. Meanwhile, she ordered the ghost to stop in front of a room that was safe to hide it. Since the phrase “safe to hide in” depended on the ghost’s perception of the structure, it wasn’t a foolproof order that ensured them a safe hiding place, but it was good enough. If it turns out that it wasn’t safe, then they’ll just have to deal with the trouble inside that room. It was better fighting inside an enclosed room rather than an open hallway, so this was fine.

There, they found the ghost standing in front of a metal door, staring at it blankly. Ryosei was first to open the door and took a peek inside. There were workbenches and tools in the room. It looked like a workshop. He widened the gap and took a quick scan of the room. It was empty. Confirming it was safe, he urged Chouka in. When the two of them were inside the room, Chouka sent the ghost away from them, taking random turns all the while before she released her.

With this, they secured a place to settle for a while and make a new plan of action. They took three turns to get to this room. It wasn’t far from where they initially left, but they couldn’t say it was close either. If possible, they wanted to hide in the rooms closer to where they left, but since the ghost passed them, it was too risky to hide in them. After that is the remaining 150 meters to the exit.

They thought about taking control of passing spirits, but before they could form anything concrete, the sound of stone grinding on stone reached their ears. When they turned to the noise, one of the walls suddenly opened. Ryosei quickly summoned Kuro Yaiba and hid in a blind spot near the newly discovered opening. When the figure left the shadows and entered the room, Ryosei went for their limbs to disable them. But before he did, something unexpected happened.

“Stop.”

A deep voice reached his ears and suddenly, before his blade could reach the burly figure’s skin, it stopped, just as the figure ordered.

**222 – Spirit Smith**

Surprise coated Ryosei’s expression for a second, but he quickly followed it up with three more strikes. But they were all stopped by a mysterious force before they reached his target. Seeing this, the figure spoke.

“Sheath your weapon.”

Just as he ordered, Kuro Yaiba disappeared against his will. He didn’t know what kind of powers this enemy possessed, but he knew he needed to make distance between them. He was currently unarmed in the face of an enemy of unknown power. He couldn’t afford to be too close to them.

A man of rough structure, toned muscles, and a large beard, but despite that, he had a short figure. He was a stubby man that could easily be defined in fantasy stories. A dwarf. However, this was not the usual kind. There were parts of his body flowing like a burning flame becoming translucent as they reached the tip. Much like the ones Ryosei possessed. He was a spirited soul.

Silence filled the room as Ryosei and the dwarf stared each other down. Chouka couldn’t understand what was happening, but she could feel the thick tension in the air and stayed silent. Finally, the one that broke the tension was the dwarf.

“What are you doing in this room?”

He shot a question at the two with a stoic expression. Ryosei couldn’t sense any bloodlust, but that didn’t mean he was safe. There was a possibility of the enemy being skilled enough to hide such intentions. And with the opponent maintaining a blank expression the moment he entered the room, despite being greeted with a surprise attack, such a possibility was high.

Ryosei didn’t respond. But despite his silence, the dwarf gave a light nod of understanding. He then walked to a nearby desk and pulled something out. Ryosei wanted to prevent him from acquiring anything to add to his power, but when he tried to summon Kuro Yaiba, it didn’t appear. Whatever the dwarf did, it was still working.

He showed them a small purple orb. It seemed to be some kind of gemstone. Then, the dwarf began.

“This is a resonance stone. It can be crafted into various things, but this particular raw piece of mineral is used as an alarm. When broken, it will send a reaction to other resonance stones it is connected to. I have more than one of these. I’ll have you rethink your actions carefully if you plan on staying in my dwelling.”

With that, the dwarf placed the stone in his pocket and moved to one of the workbenches and sat on the chair, turning his back completely towards them. The two didn’t understand his actions. If you think back to his last message, it was like he didn’t mind them staying in the room. But was that really what was happening? If what he was saying was true, then it was possible for him to have broken a stone hidden from their sight, and was only feigning ignorance to stall them so that reinforcements will catch them.

While Ryosei was thinking of leaving, Chouka pulled out her flute and played a simple tune. It wasn’t anything complicated and soon ended within a minute. Finally, she decided to speak up.

“U-Um! Are you okay with us being in this room?”

“I don’t care.”

“I-Is that so? Then, did you break a stone or call any reinforcements here?”

“No.”

“Hmm, I-I see…”

Chouka nodded at his responses to her questions, but instead of clearing up queries in her head, confusion took hold of her expression. The same was true for Ryosei. The dwarf uttered no lies. His responses weren’t roundabout either. They were straightforward responses that will be caught by his lie detection without fail. With that ability of his, he should have been certain, but that only brought up the question… Why?

As if thinking along the same lines as Ryosei, Chouka spoke up for him.

“Why are you letting us go? If you belong to this organization, then shouldn’t you be reporting us?”

The dwarf then turned his head to face them. It seemed like this question caught his interest enough to drop whatever he was doing on the workbench.

“Then, let me ask you this, what are you doing here?”

“We’re currently looking to get out of this building. There was a mistake in the destination Enny was supposed to send us to. We’re not looking for any trouble, we just want to get out of here.”

“Enny…? Do you mean The Entity?”

“Yes, that’s her!”

“I’ve never heard of the Divine Beast making a mistake with that before, but who am I to say? I don’t understand that thing’s abilities nor do I care. If you’re looking for a way out, then as long as you don’t disturb our business here, I don’t care.”

“Thank you very much!”

Chouka bowed to the dwarf in gratitude and a cheerful smile appeared on her face. From that whole exchange, Ryosei was concerned about how trusting Chouka was. She didn’t doubt any response the dwarf gave her. But then again, she had the ability to control people’s minds, she even played her flute before asking him questions. There was a possibility that she just had the same lie-detecting powers as him.

“This is great isn’t it, Ryo-chan?”

Chouka turned to Ryosei with a relaxed smile. Not wanting to beat around the bush, he asked her.

“Do you have lie-detecting abilities?”

“O-Oh, so you’ve finally caught on? Yes, lie-detecting is a part of my wide range of abilities!”

It seemed like she gained more confidence after her successful exchange with the dwarf as she puffed out her chest. Hearing that, Ryosei wondered if the lie-detecting abilities he had were the same as the one Chouka was using. He wanted to ask, but right now wasn’t the time.

He turned to the dwarf who resumed his work after being thanked by Chouka. On the workbench, he was handling a rod with a glowing orb on the tip, weaving it around in circles around something. Ryosei couldn’t quite see what he was doing, but it seemed like Chouka didn’t question it. She either knew what he was doing and saw no danger in it or was just completely oblivious to it. He decided to ask her, hoping that it was the former. Thankfully, his prayers were answered.

“Yes. He is what we call in this world a Spirit Smith. They create spirit weapons for other spirits to use, and sometimes, they even contract with living beings.”

“Spirit weapons, huh? I didn’t know about that.”

Ryosei was reminded of the weapons they used back in the Battle Royale. If that was true, then a Spirit Smith crafted all of those weapons. It seemed like the Konjou Clan was more involved with spirits than he thought. Since they didn’t tell him about this, then they were still withholding information. He planned to ask his cousin about this when he gets back home.

Suddenly, a loud boom resounded in the room. It came from the dwarf. It seemed like he stood up as he banged the table with the tool he was using. The two of them felt the anger seething from his body like a fiery aura. Ryosei instinctively tried to summon Kuro Yaiba, but it still didn’t work. Then, he turned to them and roared, much unlike his previous cold responses.

“YOU’RE TELLING ME THE KONJOU CLAN NEVER TAUGHT YOU HOW TO USE YOUR SPIRIT WEAPON!?”

**223 – Raqeav**

The dwarf stared at Ryosei in particular with enraged eyes. He didn’t know why, but it seemed that his last statement angered the dwarf. Was he just some needlessly passionate dwarf that got triggered by seeing someone be ignorant of spirit weapons? He hoped that wasn’t the case. But it didn’t seem like it, seeing as the dwarf also mentioned the Konjou Clan. Did he have a connection with them? Before Ryosei could ponder the question further, the dwarf exclaimed.

“I WAS WONDERING WHY THE CURRENT USER WAS INCOMPETENT, AND I DISCOVER THAT NO ONE TAUGHT HIM!? WHAT THE HELL, MASAO!?”

The current user? Masao? The dwarf began spouting nonsense that should have been incomprehensible, but Ryosei tried to think deeper. Ever since his words, he disregarded Chouka completely and kept his furious gaze on him. He must be related somehow. Then how? He called “the current user” incompetent, was that supposed to be him? It was the only subject he hurled an insult at. Then, who’s Masao? The only person he knew with that name was his grandfather. If so, then the dwarf was calling out Masao after seeing him, an incompetent user. There was only one thing that connected the word “user” with Ryosei and his grandfather.

“Do you know Kuro Yaiba?”

“YEAH, I KNOW IT! GOT A PROBLEM WITH THAT!?”

The dwarf was needlessly aggressive with him, but he was still able to respond to him at least. Thinking about it, he could turn this situation to his advantage. The dwarf was angry that he didn’t know or that no one taught him how to use Kuro Yaiba, which right now, could pass as a spirit weapon. Then that must mean that he knew how to use it properly.

“Shamefully, it is true that I don’t know how to properly use Kuro Yaiba. So, having someone who knows how it’s used to teach me will help greatly.”

At Ryosei’s words, the dwarf began to calm down. When he cooled down and the anger slowly dissipated, he clicked his tongue and responded.

“No way. Do it yourself.”

An unfavorable answer, but not unexpected. In all honesty, he was hoping the dwarf would be as prideful as Chouka and say some cliché words like “I can’t let an incompetent user like you hold on to the legendary blade. Fine, I’ll teach you.” Unfortunately, that wasn’t the case. But even so, he tried to pursue him.

“Please! There are many things I don’t know about this blade. If I knew how to use it properly then—”

But he was interrupted by the dwarf before he could finish his plea.

“Let me stop you right there, kid. Haahhh… this is troublesome…”

He let out a heavy sigh as his eyes landed on Chouka.

“You, there. Tell him, what does a Spirit Smith want in exchange for handing out his weapons.”

Chouka had a confused expression on her face. She couldn’t keep up with what was happening, but he followed the dwarf’s orders immediately. Perhaps it was because she was in a panic that she just answered to relieve some of the pressure.

“S-Spirit Smiths, unlike the trending human businesses like Savor Soul, don’t ask for currency in exchange for their services. Instead, they make a contract with their buyers to use their weapons with heart and never discard it in exchange for another. A spirit smith’s main source of power and experience. By having the weapons they crafted continuously used, spirit smiths gain more power, increasing their ability to craft better weapons. These factors include the user’s knowledge of the weapon, the user’s growth in using the weapon, the battles won and lost using the weapon, the user’s refinement in skill using the weapon, the amount of unity the user has with the weapon, a-and, umm, v-various other things!”

“Hm. Good.”

Chouka seemed to have left out other factors, but the dwarf didn’t mind. If so, then her explanation was satisfactory and was enough to deliver the message the dwarf wanted to say. Thinking this, he scrutinized her explanation with the dwarf’s best interest.

“You want me to learn how to use Kuro Yaiba by myself… So that the father of Kuro Yaiba becomes more powerful… Are you…?”

Staring at the dwarf with a dumbfounded gaze, the words that trailed to silence were finished by him.

“I am Raqeav, one of the creators of your current Kuro Yaiba.”

He couldn’t believe it. Kuro Yaiba was a weapon that was passed down for generations, kept secret from the world so that no one would abuse its powers. Its father should be long gone, but if they were a spirit, then it wouldn’t be impossible to meet them. But just before Ryosei thought of how unbelievable this coincidence was, he caught on to his phrasing.

“What do you mean ‘one’ of the creators?”

“I mean it as it is. I am only one of the many creators of your ‘current’ Kuro Yaiba.”

Raqeav emphasized the word ‘current’ as he spoke Kuro Yaiba’s name. It seemed he wanted Ryosei to catch onto that part.

“Then, how about the Kuro Yaiba before? Are you the creator of that one?”

He shook his head slowly.

“No. The original Kuro Yaiba was made solely by God. After all, it was originally a Divine Weapon.”

“What? Divine Weapon?”

“Boy, are you familiar with the three ambassadors?”

“Ambassadors? Do you mean the Heroes, Hfixesi, and Di Manes?”

“Hm. Divine Weapons for Heroes, Gjia Eaixih for Hfixesi, and Empyrean Catalyst for Di Manes. These are the names of the weapons bestowed by the gods upon the ambassadors to help in their goal of uniting the three worlds. Kuro Yaiba was one particular Divine Weapon used by Konjou Masao. Long story short, that weapon was broken in an intense battle. Needing a weapon to help aid his allies, Masao sought help. With me as one of those blessed enough to work with a Divine Weapon, we crafted your current Kuro Yaiba. One I like to call, The Tampered Blade.”

“H-Huh? Wait, that’s not what I know. Wasn’t this a legendary weapon passed down through generations? Then why does it sound like…”

“It was made recently? Well, that’s because it was. It was the weapon given to Hero Konjou Masao 27 years ago. Exactly 27 years of age. If you’re wondering why they made it sound like some kind of relic made by your ancient ancestors is because of Masao. ‘Instead of a lame story of being a hand-me-down from his old grandfather, I want him to have a more exciting background like an ancient weapon or something,’ so he said.”

“…”

Ryosei hated it. He hated how easily imaginable that was. Konjou Masao, an eccentric but with great talent to make up for it. Or perhaps it was because he had great talent that he was an eccentric. Either way, he was told that his grandfather was the one that made his parents train him with the blade as a young 3-year-old. Others thought him strangely for it and even stranger for his parents to accept such an order. At first, all he could do was swing a stick, but he didn’t care and continued training him until the training was taken over by his grandfather at the age of 6.

Then began his harsh days of reality. Training with his grandfather was completely different from what he was used to, but he managed to adapt and keep up with his trials until he was given Kuro Yaiba on his 12th birthday. After that, he never saw his grandfather again after saying he had a “business trip” to attend to. He only follows his whims but shows great results that no one was able to reprimand him for it. He could see his grandfather utter the very words Raqeav just said in vivid accuracy. But then, Raqeav added.

“Well, that’s what he said on the surface. On the inside it was different.”

“What do you mean?”

“Eccentric as he is, Masao was well aware of that. He knew he needed to leave Kuro Yaiba to someone, but he didn’t want them to associate it with him. Seeing as the blade’s next successor was still a child, he hid the fact that he was a Hero and that Kuro Yaiba was his. He thought it would be bad if you started trying to be like him. His unorthodox fighting style, mindset, and incomprehensible actions. Those were all strictly his. He was afraid you’d start comparing yourself to him and instead of trying to nurture your own strengths, you’d nurture the strengths he had. Ultimately, it was decided it would be best to leave you in the dark for that one.”

“I see…”

Ryosei couldn’t deny that it was very possible for him to do what his grandfather feared. His grandfather had a positive reputation for great skill despite his strangeness. Everyone respected him. If the title of being God’s Chosen Ambassador was added to that mix, and the sword he was using was a Divine Blade crafted by God, the pressure might have gotten to him and it might have birthed a bad habit of comparing himself to his grandfather. Realizing that, Ryosei couldn’t thank him enough for this action.

**224 – Ambassadors**

“To think that gramps was a Hero…”

Ryosei never thought that grandfather of his would hold such an amazing title. He was an ambassador of Earth chosen by God. The fact that he was related to such a person was surreal. But then, he realized something.

“Wait… Raqeav-san, do you know the names of the other ambassadors?”

“All 15 of them?”

“As many as you can. Please.”

Raqeav didn’t understand why he wanted to know, but the determination he felt in his voice told him it was important. He stayed silent for a while, staring at the ceiling and making troubled faces.

“Hmm… Okay, I got it.”

“Really!? Thank you so much!”

“Don’t sweat it. It isn’t like these names were supposed to be kept secret or anything. First, with the Hfixesi, we had Firel, Nwen, Draui, Msena, and Kroiat.”

Ryosei didn’t recognize any of them, but that was only natural. He wasn’t expecting to know anyone from Zerid. His aim was somewhere else.

“For Di Manes, we had Yuuki, Hana, Shigo, Mei, and Hiroto.”

Chouka showed a slight reaction when she heard him mention Yuuki’s name. He was one of the few people she was close to, and the one that entrusted her with his power. He felt a sad story behind the two, one that she didn’t want to touch too often, so Ryosei pretended not to notice and continued listening.

“Lastly, for Heroes, he had Konjou Masao, Akira Leo, Honshou Mirai, Yutei Katashi, and Yukou Yuuto.”

“…!”

Ryosei’s eyes widen in surprise. He was expecting to hear familiar names, but he didn’t expect to recognize so many of them. First was Yukou Yuuto. From the scarce memories they had of him, they knew Yuuto had some kind of connection with Zerid. When they were reminded of the sword he was holding that looked exactly like Kuro Yaiba with a different color scheme, they suspected him to be a Hero, which is the reason Ryosei asked this question to begin with.

But then, there was an interesting name in the mix—Yutei Katashi. This person had the same surname as Yutei Yukai. It could just be a coincidence, but what if it isn’t? Then, Ryosei was reminded of her unique ability to be able to perceive and make contact with him. There was some kind of connection between them. So far, they’ve deduced that the connection has something to do with “desire,” but what if that connection had something to do with the three ambassadors? Ryosei didn’t like it. After all, it could easily mean that if the next generation of ambassadors were picked, Yukai, an innocent high school girl that has no knowledge of the life-or-death battles happening behind the scenes, might be chosen to be an ambassador. Imagining her getting sucked into this chaos, he didn’t like it.

“What’s wrong?”

Raqeav called out to Ryosei, noticing his pained expression. When he realized the face he was making, Ryosei scratched his neck awkwardly as he tried to explain to him.

“A-Ahaha… Sorry about that, I just recognized a few familiar surnames there. Like one strange girl I met the other day had the name Akira. It seemed like she even knew how to use a spear.”

He tried to divert to his true thoughts using the other name he recognized—Akira Leo. He possessed the same surname as Akira Ren. Like Yukai, it could all be a coincidence, but that didn’t mean the possibility was gone. In response to this, Raqeav said something concerning.

“There’s no way to be certain. But if you’re that curious, then you probably won’t have to wait for too long.”

“What do you mean?”

“Judgement Day, the day when all of the ambassadors are chosen and are given their blessings, is close by.”

“What!? How do you know this!? When is it!?”

Ryosei raised his voice at Raqeav. Imagining Yukai as an ambassador sent him into a panic. If it was close by, he felt that there was no time for him to stop that future. No, in the first place, he didn’t know if it was a future that can be stopped, or if it is something that will even happen. It was just that his imagination momentarily became the truth in his mind when he heard Raqeav’s words. It was an emotional reaction.

“Sorry, I chose my words wrong. Judgement Day has long passed. The only thing that’s keeping the ambassadors to be chosen and their blessings to be given are the Lost Maiden.”

“The Lost Maiden?”

“Hm. Due to Lord Hades’ death, there was no possible way for all three gods to choose worthy ambassadors the same as before. Lord Hades also knew this, which is why, right before his death, he ended the term of the ambassadors of the time and immediately picked the next generation. However, there would be trouble if the new generation of ambassadors were revealed before it was time for them to take on those titles. To prevent that from happening, Poseidon and Zeus chose a special being to become the Lost Maiden. A being that is used as a catalyst to contain the gods’ powers. She has the power to bestow upon the title of ambassador and their blessings as she sees fit, but she cannot change the ambassadors.”

“Then, who are these ambassadors?”

Raqeav shook his head slowly at the question.

“I don’t know. The only one that knows that for certain is the Lost Maiden. But, seeing as you’re here. I highly doubt the Maiden will keep holding onto that power for too long.”

“Why is that?”

Just before he answered the question, he sharpened his gaze and filled his words with conviction.

“Because a potential ambassador that dies is as good as nothing.”

“!?”

Ryosei was taken aback by his unexpected response.

“Little Ryosei, you’ve been using you’re blade haphazardly. Recently, you’ve used its release factor in a rampaging state didn’t you? I could feel it. You were about to die.”

“That’s…”

It was technically Senkyo who used it, but the fact that Ryosei let that happen was a part of the problem. If only he didn’t underestimate Senkyo’s control and left his body before he decided on using Kuro Yaiba’s release factor, he could’ve prevented them from getting trapped in Zerid. But Ryosei knew that wasn’t the only thing he was talking about.

“You’ve only been wielding Kuro Yaiba as a weapon. As an object. Your spirit couldn’t be any more detached from it than it already is. I won’t tell you how to handle your blade, but I’ll give you this. Do you know why spirited souls have their cores forcibly sent to their weapons?”

Ryosei didn’t speak. He simply shook his head from side to side. For some reason, Raqeav was emitting an intimidating aura. One that only the true masters of a single craft could possess. In the face of him, Ryosei, who was held for being a prodigy, was a mere flea.

“‘Fight with your life on the line.’ Those were the words Lord Hades responded with to the same question. You already died, and this is your second chance at life. With your soul as your only weapon, Lord Hades seeks to know if your spirit is as strong as your ambition to live. In this world where spirits reside, the skill and finesse you learned when you were alive are only second to the most important aspect of a spirit—Will. If you want to survive this place, become one with the blade and place your heart in it like every swing challenges your purpose in this second life.”

“…”

Raqeav ended his spiel and silence returned to the room. An expression filled with shame and regret filled Ryosei’s face. It should have been obvious to him. In his life, he trained the blade with all his heart. A refreshing feeling filled him every time his parents or his grandfather praised him. But when he became a hunter, that mindset was replaced by one of calculation and precision, and even worse when he became a spirit. He even thought of sacrificing Chouka when he first met her. He was reflecting on his actions, but unfortunately, no one would let him have the time to do so.

“You should go now.”

“Huh…?”

Ryosei raised his head as Raqeav said that.

“I sense it. People are coming this way, they must’ve tracked you down.”

“Wh-What!?”

Despite having this talk, Ryosei was keeping a close eye on Raqeav’s actions, but he didn’t make any move to call for help, he also didn’t feel he had the intention to do so. Just before he pondered needlessly, he shook his head with renewed conviction as he turned to Chouka.

“Chouka, we’re going now. I’m going to carry you.”

“Huh—Wait, what is—!?”

Ryosei took up Chouka in his arms as he faced the door. He was carrying him like a princess as he readied to make a mad dash out of the room. But just before he did, he turned to Raqeav.

“Raqaev-san, thank you so much for everything.”

“No worries. Ah, I forgot to mention this, but you should go to the Lost Maiden and ask for her plans for your powers. I have a feeling it’s going to be a rough road ahead for you.”

“What? But I don’t even know her.”

“Yes, you do. The Lost Maiden Freda. She’s at your clan’s settlement, right?”

“…”

Another shocker just before he left. Ryosei didn’t expect it, but there was no time for surprise now. He needed to focus on the trial in front of him. So, instead of asking for clarification, he returned Raqeav’s suggestion with one, determined response.

“Got it!”

**225 – Breakthrough**

Steeling himself, he faces the door. He could sense multiple presences gathering outside the door. There were still few of them, but given more time, they’d eventually build an uncrossable sea of people. Knowing this, he tightened his grip on Chouka and used Poltergeist to open the door wide open within a blink of an eye. The people outside had their weapons pointed toward him, but they didn’t expect him to suddenly bust out the door and run straight at them. They thought it was a desperate attempt to escape, but the moment Ryosei landed, a powerful gust of wind blew them away from him.

“Grhk…! Magic!?”

One of the guards exclaimed as they saw Ryosei’s shadow running down the hallway at an unbelievable speed. Other spirits tried to stop him, swinging their weapons and using Poltergeist to keep him from moving, but nothing worked. He would weave through the tight spaces between their weapons or use the walls or slide under the floor to dodge them. When they tried to use their Poltergeist on him, it didn’t work. He was too strong for them to be affected by their Poltergeist. They were hoping to at least slow him down, but nothing appeared to affect him. Almost like some mysterious force was keeping him from harm’s way.

In reality, he was using wind magic the whole time. It wasn’t a powerful spell, he was only manipulating air and increasing his speed. Every time he attempted to squeeze between their weapons, he would use both Poltergeist and wind magic to open a wider gap for him to enter. Every time he slid through the ground or jumped high in the air, he would use wind magic to maintain and even increase his momentum. It made enemies that were relying on physics confused as they missed every time they tried to anticipate the decline in his speed.

While all that running was happening, Chouka stopped struggling out of the embarrassing hold Ryosei was carrying her in. Instead, she tightened her grip around his neck and closed her eyes as she braced for impact in fear as the wind brushed over her skin as they ran through the accumulating numbers of enemies in the hallways.

Right, left, straight, right, straight, left, straight, right, left, right, right, left, straight. Ryosei maneuvered through the throng of enemies, moving through the halls, avoiding large numbers of enemies, but also sometimes going straight through those numbers in case they were being herded towards a trap. It wasn’t long until he reached the edge of the floor, but instead of running in the outermost hallway, he ran down the hallway parallel to it. In case the enemy anticipates their pathing and blocks them, he opted for the hallway next door to allow him space to maneuver.

They reached the place they left off last time, then passed 50 meters, and then another 50 meters. It wasn’t long until the exit was in their sights. As he was running through the outermost hallway after avoiding an attempt to block him, he saw an opening on the left wall, one that never existed in the past 200 meters. However, just as they were reaching their goal, Ryosei’s vision darkened. He still had his eyes open, but a sudden shadow appeared out of nowhere and swallowed his vision. The exit he just saw, the long hallways, the enemies, his own body, he had lost vision of them all.

“Magic… No, spirit power!”

As Ryosei analyzed the cause of his sudden blindness, he sensed spirit power wrapping his whole body. It wasn’t that his surroundings were suddenly swallowed by a shadow, but he was only made to think so. It was the same mental attack that Chouka used on their enemies. He recognized the feeling of having been mentally invaded as he thought back to the first time he met Chouka. He quickly empowered his body, focusing on wrapping and swallowing the foreign presence inside his head.

It wasn’t long until the shadow slowly dissipated, but just as it disappeared a shadow appeared below him. At first, he thought they somehow invaded his head again but soon realized that it wasn’t the case. He then picked up the pace, jumped in the air, placed an air foothold, and accelerated forward. Soon, long shadow-like spikes sprouted from the ground and reached all the way to the ceiling of the place Ryosei was previously in.

After seeing the damage behind them, he faced the path in front of him, but instead of seeing the exit, he saw two familiar sharp objects the Konjou Clan often used—kunai. Just as the two dug into his eyes, he used Poltergeist to knock both of them away before they reached any deeper into his head. His vision was impaired with no eyes to identify his surroundings with. He berated himself for letting his guard down. If only he kept his eyes on his pathing, the enemy wouldn’t have had the chance to take his sight away from him.

Suddenly, a large figure appeared from the side and grabbed hold of him. With Ryosei’s vision taken, it was the perfect time to launch an attack. However, what they didn’t expect was for Ryosei to still be able to move even without his eyes. Unbeknownst to them, he had the ability to perceive his surroundings by focusing his mind. The figure that knocked Ryosei to the wall and tried to pin him down was a large man with reddish skin and a pair of horns sprouting on his head. It was an Oni.

Just as he felt the solid wall squishing him in between the large Oni, he quickly dropped Chouka and slipped under the other fist that was going straight for his body. Grabbing that outstretched arm, he hurled him to the ground and followed up with a heavy dropkick to the neck as he caught Chouka before she reached the ground. While the Oni was momentarily stunned as he was pinned to the ground, Ryosei took this chance to rush toward the exit and leave the structure.

**226 – Fox Spirit**

About ten minutes have passed. An opening finally showed itself beyond the thick forest. Upon reaching the exit, Ryosei and Chouka were transported to a mysterious forest. Unlike the forests of Earth or the Spirit Realm he was used to, these trees had their trunks clad in purple lightly transitioning to the blue opaque leaves growing on them. The leaves grew and decayed at the same rate. Every five minutes that passed a leaf would have grown and disintegrated into small particles, mixing them with the abundant particles flying in the air.

Ryosei wanted to know more about them at first, but he had to move. He wasn’t out of the forest just yet, literally. Picking up his pace, maneuvering through the trees to throw off pursuers, he finally found an opening. It seemed to be a grassland. Just as they set their foot out of the forest, Ryosei quickly used flash strike to hide behind a tree.

Immediately after, a flash of light covered their surroundings. The tree shielded them from whatever that white light was. A few seconds after, it slowly subsided and a voice belonging to a female pierced through the air.

“I can’t believe how far you’ve gone. I swear, those monkeys never do their job properly.”

Ryosei peeked behind the tree and saw the owner of the voice, and most probably the one who caused that white light. It was a fox spirit. A woman with ears and tail of a fox, golden silky fur covering her fox-like attributes. She responded to his probing gaze with a sharp one of her own, sending a cold chill down his spine.

“You are?”

Ryosei decided to engage with the fox spirit in a conversation. He wanted to get out of the area as soon as possible, but desperately running past the person in front of them who has unknown power was a foolish venture. First, he needed to gauge her power, or at the very least find an escape route with many outs in consideration to the fox spirit’s possible powers.

“I don’t see the need for me to indulge in a talk. How about surrendering now? Five seconds without a response and I’ll happily take you on.”

She wasn’t having it. She knew his intentions and opted to push him into a corner. Ryosei might have been fine on his own, but with Chouka to protect, he couldn’t move carelessly. Unfortunately, five minutes passed and the fox spirit made her move.

Multiple balls of light flooded out of her hand and surrounded the tree they were hiding behind. They had faint presences of a spirit inside them with an appearance similar to a small flame. Based on Chouka’s talk about her past, it seemed like these were wisps. They follow their master’s orders as an extension of their being. She said they were mainly used for reconnaissance, but they were also an extension of their master’s body. Meaning, they could be used as a conduit to release spirit power.

Upon realizing this, Ryosei tried to escape the encirclement by running up the tree and jumping out using flash strike. However, he stopped himself just before he reached the edge of the ring of wisps. He was too late. It was faint, but he could sense spirit power surrounding them. He thought about breaking through it, but these weren’t the kind that would easily yield to panicked attacks. The sphere of spirit power surrounding them was so thin that it could barely be perceived. So thin and skillfully focused that a large amount of spirit power was concentrated into these lines and made it difficult to cut down.

The fox spirit sneered. Immediately after, multiple orbs shot out of the wisps in rapid succession, flying at Ryosei and Chouka so quick that they would be swallowed by the torrent of orbs in a matter of seconds. In response to this, Ryosei faced directly below them and swung Kuro Yaiba with his right hand while he was carrying Chouka on his other. A gust of wind shot out of his swing and overwhelmed the orbs flying in its path. It was similar to his Gale Fan technique, but due to the fast-paced conditions of the situation, he only wrapped his blade with magic and used an inferior version of the technique. It was weaker and had less range, but it was short and provided Ryosei with the opening he needed.

As he firmly planted his feet on the ground, he made a barrier out of his own spirit power to prevent the onslaught of orbs from reaching them. The orbs pelted his barrier, small particles of light dispersing at every point of contact. The rate he was getting hit was so fast that the outside seemed like a snowscape of small light particles. He could feel his spirit power draining like a vacuum was sucking him dry. He needed to break the barrier, but he couldn’t do it while simultaneously holding his barrier.

As if to respond to his silent calls for help, an intense melody filled their surroundings. He could feel the attacks weakening. Before he knew it, Chouka pulled out her flute and did something to the enemy. Then, after a sharp and extended tone, the particles floating around them quickly accumulated and formed a barrier beneath Ryosei’s.

“What!? This little brat…!”

When it was fully erected, Ryosei could feel the sturdiness of the barrier. It was the same for the fox spirit as she cursed at Chouka’s power. A single look from Chouka was all he needed to receive her message. With that, he slowly placed her down and readied to draw Kuro Yaiba, facing the powerful but barely perceptible barrier in front of them.

Ryosei planned to use magic to boost his attack and break the barrier, but then he remembered what Raqeav told him.

“Fight with your life on the line!”

Ryosei shouted with conviction as if to steel himself with those very words. He disregarded all of his basic combat knowledge and opted for a single, focused swing with nothing but his will to power it. Normally, he needed to empower his blade to break a clearly solid defense like the one in front of him, but he threw away that logic. Right now, he wanted to be one with his blade. He is a spirited soul, a mere remnant of the old Konjou Ryosei that was once alive. He was given this chance to live once more as a bodiless being. In exchange for this, there was only one, single thing the god that created this world wanted from him—to show him the strength of his will.

With his core placed firmly inside Kuro Yaiba, he poured as much spirit power into the blade as much as he could, filling it with his determination. To become one with the blade—he was not swinging Kuro Yaiba, he was not using a tool to empower his fighting capabilities, he was using an extended part of his being to cut through the trials that seek to erase his existence. His Will was being challenged by the obstacle before him. With that, he let out every ounce of his being into one swing.

Despite the raging torrent of orbs trying to break through Chouka’s barrier and swallow the two, Ryosei was calm and silent. There was no extravagant show out of his attack. It was a single, undaunted stroke. Immediately after, the thin lines that trapped the two were cut like butter. Taking that chance, Ryosei quickly picked up Chouka and ran through the opening he made. He rushed out, using flash strike as much as he could to escape the fox spirit.

He did so with such speed that he didn’t even notice the ground beneath him disappear. Ryosei took a quick peek behind him to see what had happened. From the looks of it, what he thought was a flat plain was apparently the edge of a cliff, and below him was the empty air. There was a town below them if that was any compensation. Though it wasn’t until a few hundred meters of falling. He survived an onslaught of deadly orbs and broke the barrier trapping them, but ended up falling off a cliff. This must be what they call “out of the pan into the fire,” Ryosei thought. He couldn’t believe the stupidity of the situation. He made a tired face as he sighed in exasperation, falling down the air as they succumbed to gravity.

“AAAAAAAAHHHHHH!!!!”

There was only Chouka’s scream as she finally realized the situation they were in.

“W-What power…”

The fox spirit exclaimed in awe as she stared at Ryosei’s figure as he fell down the cliff.

“Hehe… hahaha!! It looks like I’m going to have lots of fun with that spirit! Now, those monkeys better do this job right this time. Ah, such strong will with deep desire… I can’t wait!”

**227 – Plotting**

“AAAAAAAAHHHHHH!!!!”

About 5 seconds have passed since Ryosei and Chouka began their freefall. Chouka still hasn’t calmed down and was still screaming in Ryosei’s ear. On the other hand, Ryosei was as calm as ever. Though, his face looked slightly pale perhaps due to the spirit power he used earlier. Since he never swung Kuro Yaiba like that before, it was a strange feeling for him. He barely took any damage from breaking the fox spirit’s cage, but it was a different story for his mind. He could hear a faint ringing in his ears as if he had tinnitus. But for now, he focused on the problem at hand. They needed to escape.

Ryosei turned his attention to the ground below them and used wind magic to negate the impact of their fall. He didn’t know if there was a method to negate impact using spirit power, but seeing as Chouka was hopelessly screaming for dear life in his arms, it sounded like there was no such method. Or perhaps she also didn’t know but this wasn’t the time for needless hypotheticals.

“Okay, we landed.”

“H-Huh…?”

Chouka gingerly opened her eyes and looked around. They were in the middle of a town where the buildings took shape of traditional Japanese structures painted mostly in a common shade of red, illuminated by the various colors of red, blue, and yellow lanterns. Although, none of these buildings actually had a solid color. Most of them faded into different colors such as purple, green, and orange, much like a color gradient. Otherwise, they would simply be transparent.

There was an abundant about of people walking around. Some of them stopped to stare at the two since they suddenly fell from the sky, but most of them just ignored them. Everyone around them took completely different appearances. There were what seemed to be humans, animals, living objects, ghosts, yokai, and other various creatures.

Ryosei took a few seconds to take in the new scenery which reminded him once again that this wasn’t the Spirit Realm he was used to. It was a completely independent world that took no similarities with Earth and Zerid. It had its own structures, residents, and geography. He wanted to look around some more, but the pressure of his chasers was still on them. They needed to escape.

Putting down Chouka, Ryosei began walking forward. A few seconds passed and sensing something was wrong, he turned around to see that Chouka never moved from the spot he placed her down, Was she still stunned from the freefall? He went back to check with her.

“Chouka, what’s wrong?”

“I-I don’t know, but I don’t like this fog…”

“Fog? What fog?”

Ryosei looked around his surroundings and only saw the hustle and bustle of any other town regardless of the world. None of them seemed to sense any kind of fog either. However, Ryosei’s response only served to worsen Chouka’s facial expression as it turned grim.

“…You don’t… see the fog…?”

“No.”

Sensing the alarm in Chouka’s voice, he turned serious. In turn, she took a deep breath and walked forward, urging Ryosei to walk as close to her as possible. Then, she began snapping her fingers in a rhythm.

“I think this is the work of another Mental Arts user.”

“What…? You mean the same power you use?”

The two conversated in a low voice as they walked forward, not looking at each other and constantly wearing stoic, stone faces to prevent their emotions from leaking.

“Yes. No one around us… no, only I seem to notice the fog which shows the enemy’s strength with it. We need to be careful.”

“Mental Arts, I see… then is it better for me to fight off their mental attacks? I was able to do it before when we were escaping.”

“No. I think… they would probably want that. Since fighting off a mental attack means focusing your spirit power to flow inside your body, it will be difficult to manifest your weapon and fend off incoming attackers. The moment you try to do so, they will probably strike.”

“Got it. Then that means they’re likely near us right this moment. Close enough to launch an attack with only a second of distraction.”

Ryosei turned his eyes to the corners of buildings, alleyways, windows, roofs, and other possible hiding spots near them. Nothing was there, but he wasn’t a reliable source of information at the moment since he was being affected by a mental attack. If they could hide the fog around them, as Chouka said, then it wasn’t strange to be able to hide or at least disguise others. Enemies could be walking beside them but he wouldn’t be able to notice them.

“What do you think we should do? We can’t just keep walking like this. They’ll attack us eventually.”

“You’re right…”

Chouka cast her eyes downward for a second. It seemed like she knew they had to do something but was clinging to the faint hope that simply walking forward was a viable option. With the question in her mind, she delved into silence as they walked for a few seconds.

“A frontal breakthrough like what you did earlier won’t work this time. Especially since their mental arts user can dig into your head… Ryo-chan, I think we should face them.”

“Face them? Are you sure? It sounds like they’re pretty powerful. You’re not just hoping this one mental arts user is the strongest among them are you?”

Ryosei probed Chouka as she proposed her idea to him. However, she didn’t falter.

“Yes. I can do something about the fog. Once we lure our enemies out or at least when we find an opening, I can get rid of the fog and bring the public into this. With that much commotion, we might be able to get away.”

“Hmm… that does sound good for us but are you sure involving the public is a good idea?”

“Don’t worry. People of this world can handle themselves pretty well. Besides, I don’t think they’ll bother deceiving everyone with mental arts if they just wanted to get us.”

“Then, lastly, are you sure you should be talking about this to me? If someone is using mental arts on me, then wouldn’t they be able to overhear our conversation?”

Chouka shook her head almost immediately as if expecting that question.

“No. After I realized this was mental arts, I began snapping my fingers to use my power. Although weak, it’s enough to block out the perception the enemy will receive from mental arts. Hehe… I’m a cool girl, after all!”

After minutes of maintaining a solid expression, he showed his amazement by nodding lightly to the idea. She reminded him of a certain schemer that always thought ahead of him despite leading a completely normal life until they met him. A light smirk then showed on his face as he responded to her with proud eyes like a father congratulating his daughter.

“Alright, let’s do it.”

**228 – Pursuit**

After finalizing their plan, Ryosei was the first to move. He picked up Chouka in his arms just like when they escaped earlier, but this time she didn’t seem to be too bothered by it. They sprinted through the crowd and charged forward. They caused a bit of a panic, but then it all settled down as if everyone around them forgot he even existed. It was the work of mental arts. Chouka was right. Whoever was chasing them didn’t want any of the public to get needlessly involved.

A few seconds after that, the ground in front of them turned pitch black. He saw this before where spikes sprouted from the ground. He considered using flash strike to break through before it even activated, but there was the possibility that it triggered was by movement, so he decided to rush down an empty alleyway. He knew that they were being herded, but accepted the invitation.

In the alleyway stood a figure with reddish skin and horns on his head clad in traditional samurai armor, donning a large metal club.

“FOUND YOU!!”

He roared and shook the air as he charged in swinging his club overhead with a slight angle to cover the whole space of the alleyway. There was no way to get past him. Knowing that, Ryosei kicked off the walls to his side and climbed upwards. However, that wouldn’t work either.

A man was towering over them on top of the building and threw down kunai to stop Ryosei’s ascent. It was the spirited soul they tried to avoid when they first attempted to escape. His wavy, black hair fluttered in the air making it unable to tell if that was just the way his hair was shaped or the usual spiritual flames that sprouted out of Ryosei’s body. He wore a gakuran in navy blue with a matching cap, staring him down with a katana resting on his shoulder while his other hand was throwing obstacles to stop Ryosei.

With two enemies blocking his escape routes, he saw no need to push through and retreated. In the first place, he only wanted to draw out enemies. For their plan to work, they needed to be in a public space.

Turning back, a beam of light grazed his cheek. Blocking the exit to the alleyway was the fox spirit that they escaped from earlier. With wisps floating around her person, her tail waved back and forth as she stood before Ryosei.

“We meet again, Darling~!”

“…?”

She winked playfully at Ryosei which confused him and the other spirited soul above them. However, the Oni didn’t seem to care and swung his metal club at Ryosei’s back. He responded by kicking off the wall and dropkicking him from above. With his arms occupied he shouldn’t have been able to defend against Ryosei, but then he roared once more.

“Like hell I’ll lose to this shit again!”

The temperature began to rise and a red aura wrapped the Oni. As Ryosei was about to land the dropkick, the horns of the Oni grew tremendously and pointed at his feet. He tried to abandon the attack, but kunai dropped from above, piercing his shoulders and suddenly exploding. He shielded Chouka but was pierced from below in exchange.

The Oni tried to pin him to the ground, but Ryosei already escaped from the horns and raced towards the exit where the fox spirit was standing. If he were a human, things may have gone differently, but as a spirit, as long as he had spirit power, he could regenerate his body as much as he wanted, so he endured the pain and immediately moved the moment he stepped on the Oni’s face.

Meanwhile, the fox spirit had the entrance blocked by the same barrier from earlier. The only difference was the amount. There were five layers of barriers blocking the exit. It took him all his focus to break through the barrier earlier, but he knew it was only a problem of concentration. In reality, the spirit power that cost him to break the barrier wasn’t much compared to the power of the barrier. He needed to believe in himself and become one with the blade once more. There was no room for doubt that only dulls his blade.

Sharpening his senses, he shot a quick apology to Chouka to which she responded with a high-pitched yelp as he unceremoniously threw her over his shoulder, allowing his one hand to manifest Kuro Yaiba. Focusing on his power, he moved.

*“\*Become one with the blade… Spirit Style: Flowing Thoughts!\*”*

As Ryosei used flash strike to accelerate him forward, he launched five swift strokes, weaving from barrier to barrier without stopping and breaking through every single one before he even reached the destination of his flash strike.

A skill birthed from the trials of life and death. Made only possible by Ryosei’s determination as he visualized the outcome and manifested it through his thoughts, strengthening his soul. The Oni and the spirited soul widened their mouths in surprise while the fox spirit only widened her grin as she whispered to herself.

“Such power…!”

Ryosei broke through the barrier and returned to the main street. With the three enemies left behind in the alleyway and no one else in sight, Ryosei called out Chouka’s name and began playing her flute. A calming melody filled the streets, spreading through every corner, wrapping the area with her spirit power, and finally…

“…”

“…”

Nothing happened.

“I-Impossible! What!?”

Panic began spreading over Chouka’s face as her surroundings refused to change. Her spirit power should have worked, but why couldn’t they see the bystanders? Thinking about it carefully, she was even more confused.

“Where is everyone else!? No one’s here!”

Chouka screamed out loud. Her spirit power should have worked, but even if that were the case, why were the other spirits gone? Their whole plan revolved around escaping through the commotion made by the sudden appearance of a crowd to block the enemies from chasing them down freely. Although Ryosei can be affected by mental arts, the same shouldn’t apply to Chouka, or at the very least, it never happened to her before. Was there truly an enemy out there that was powerful enough to overwhelm her mental arts, or was it something else entirely? Then, it dawned upon her.

“A spirit field user!”

“Kikikiii… How correct you are…”

An eerie voice called out to them from above. Turning to the owner, they saw a corpse. No… more specifically, a monster that is said to feed on flesh and corpses. With its wrinkly body that seemed to be almost devoid of muscles, it breathed out a nasty cloud of black murkiness as it stared at the two from the top of a building on all fours. A Ghoul. Chouka’s eyes widened.

“That fog… was that ghoul’s breath… The fog wasn’t imbedded with mental arts but with a spirit field… Then, what used mental arts on all those people!?”

Ryosei didn’t quite understand, but he could tell from the context. Apparently, that ghoul had the power to make everyone in the area disappear, completely countering the escape route they planned out. And to add to that, the person that used mental arts on everyone including him purposefully mislead Chouka into believing the ghoul’s breath was responsible for the mental arts. What cunning.

By the time they could recover from the surprise, the three spirits that we left in the alleyway caught up and surrounded the two. They were only taking positions, but they weren’t attacking. Seeing as how they were acting like the hunters he used to command when he was alive, he knew all too well what was happening.

“Are you going to show yourself, Commander?”

Ryosei said to no one in particular. Then, a figure slowly appeared behind the ghoul. It was a woman with long silky hair that reached down to her waist, but unlike any normal one, she was floating in the air with her lower body disappearing into nothingness. A smirk appeared on her face.

“We meet again.”

“…!”

Ryosei and Chouka were surprised to see the identity of the enemy commander. It was the ghost that they encountered on the stairs when they were making their first escape. How was that possible, Ryosei asked himself. When he first laid eyes on the ghost, he determined that they weren’t a threat. They didn’t have much spirit power, not to mention being easily controlled by Chouka’s mental arts. Was she somehow able to hide her abilities? Chouka seemed to be thinking the same thing. Gauging the two’s reactions, the ghost spoke.

“I guess you’ll just have to find out the hard way!”

The ghost shouted as murderous intent flowed out of her body. There were five powerful enemies surrounding Ryosei and Chouka. Although Chouka made a mistake, Ryosei didn’t blame her for this situation. After all, he didn’t even get most of what was happening. He didn’t have enough knowledge, and without Chouka, he would be lost beyond his mind.

Ryosei took another look at his opponents. Then, he blinked, allowing a set of numbers to appear in his vision.

*“\*16351/25000… About 3,000 left before I’ll revert to an Eidolon.\*”*

Ryosei took a second to think about it, but he saw a possibility to get out of this situation. However, it would likely send his spirit power under 13,000 which was the requirement to evolve into the Revenant that he is now. It was regretful, it seemed like the only way. The more he thought about it, the more realistic his plan seemed to be. The tension slowly released from his body and was replaced by exasperation as he breathed a sigh of annoyance.

He was only one step closer to getting back to Earth but then these five decided to get in the way. The fact that they stopped them when they were so close to reaching their goal probably annoyed him the most. Then, a single thought echoed through his head.

“\**I just wanna go home…*\*”

Suddenly, a flash of blue light consumed Ryosei and Chouka. The spirits surrounding them refused to remove their eyes from the light. Since they didn’t have physical eyes, they could withstand staring at strong light as long as they keep a sharp eye on the outside perimeter of the light, Ryosei and Chouka wouldn’t be able to escape. That should have been the case, but when the light subsided, the two they were watching like a hawk had disappeared. They couldn’t see them, they couldn’t sense them, and they couldn’t even imagine what they did. Upon seeing this, the ghost perched on one of the buildings said one thing…

“Whaaaaaat!?”

**229 – Anxiety**

Tuesday. Just like any other day the sun rose and pierced the windows with its bright rays. The sound of flowing water and constant squeaking filled a certain living room. It was supposed to be a room big enough to fit two people, but only one of them has been living there for the past few years. The sound of flowing water was cut off, signaled by a resounding clang as the only person present finished cleaning the dishes. They left the dishes to dry but a certain cup caught her gaze.

“I wonder what happened with Yukou-san and Ryosei-nii-san…”

Yukai looked solemnly as she turned away from the cup and grabbed her bag to leave the room. It had been four days since she last saw the two. She remembered like it was yesterday when Ryosei said his goodbyes and left her apartment room. There were no signs of any worrying development, yet they were gone.

She first felt something was wrong when she went to visit Senkyo’s house on Saturday. She wanted to thank Ryosei for tutoring her in her worst subjects. So, she made some sweets. She knew Ryosei couldn’t make contact with anything besides her. But a thought came to mind. What would happen if she fed him? Would he be able to eat or will it just faze like it normally would? She wanted to know. This was the perfect chance.

With a skip to her step, she made her sweets and headed to Senkyo’s house… only to find it was empty. She rang the doorbell a few times, feeling anxious that maybe she was disturbing them at a bad time, but it eventually turned into worry as the two people she was looking for weren’t even there. She thought that maybe they were training in the mountains again, so she decided to come back later that night. When she did, she was faced with the same situation. No matter how long she waited at the door, no one came.

Monday finally came and she waited at her seat with anxiety gleaming in her eyes as she stared at the seat next to her. As she feared, Senkyo didn’t arrive for class. She turned to Itsuki. She knew he always went with them whenever they practiced, but she couldn’t muster the courage to talk to him. His aura was too intimidating. She did, however, manage to walk over to Yuu’s classroom and asked for her, but her classmates only reported to Yukai about her absence. After class, she went to Senkyo’s house again, but to no avail.

“Haahhh… Not here.”

Clad in her school uniform with her bag in her hands, she made a detour from school and went to check his house again. Unfortunately, it was in the same state. She was worried they had gotten into something dangerous. Of course, that was a given seeing as they hunt otherworldly beings for a living. She knew that, but that didn’t help her from worrying.

Heading to the school with dejected steps, something unexpected happened.

“Oh! Yutei-san, is that you?”

“Whaa!?”

The sudden mention of her name made her jump. She didn’t expect anyone to call out to her. As she turned around to see the owner of the voice, she saw Honjou Kinro, Senkyo’s best friend.

“What are you doing here? I don’t think I’ve seen you down this route before.”

Apparently, he called out to her because she was an oddity on his usual route to school. Well, that was only natural since her house was on the other side of town. Gathering her strength, she faced him and responded.

“O-Oh, it’s nothing. I just went to see if Yukou-san was home.”

“Ooh! That’s nice! I never knew you two were such good friends!”

“Y-Yes, he’s always been taking care of me.”

“Ah, it’s good to know that I’m not his only friend in our class!”

Kinro seemed to be genuinely happy. He was like a father that heard his son was finally socializing for once. Yukai didn’t really know how to respond, so she kept quiet and gave him a wry smile.

“But, you’re right! I wonder where that guy is. Doesn’t he know that tomorrow’s the exams? What a time to disappear.”

It seemed like he didn’t know anything about his absence either. She was hoping it wouldn’t be the case, but that only strengthened further the possibility that they were in a dangerous situation. If Senkyo’s closest friend didn’t know about anything, then there was no hope of asking anyone else that lived normal lives. Her disheartened expression didn’t get past Kinro’s gaze.

“Hm… You don’t need to worry too much, Yutei-san.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s Senkyo we’re talking about here. Though he’s an idiot, he can be surprisingly reliable at times. If there’s anyone that can take care of themselves, it's him.”

“…”

Her eyes widened, then followed her mouth as she let out a light giggle.

“Hehe, you’re right. If it’s Yukou-san, he’ll be alright.”

The two then continued to walk to school. They were mostly silent with the occasional short topic here and there, but none of them minded that. Talking with Kinro made her feel better, albeit meager, but it was still a positive change.

The classes come and go with not much difference. It was the same daily routine that Yukai always went through. Sitting still in her seat only served to make her uncomfortable, but she knew she didn’t have anything else better to do.

“Ryosei-nii-san…”

She muttered his name as she looked out the window. She was just staring off into space to pass the time, not listening to anything the teacher was saying in front of the class. But then, she saw something. A blue dot… no, a blue flame. It suddenly appeared in her vision as fast as she reacted to it.

“Ryosei-nii-san!”

She slammed her desk as she stood up in a hurry. Without a doubt, that sudden fit caught the whole class’ attention. Realizing this, she smiled awkwardly at the class. But then, just before she folded and sat back in her seat, she shook her head and faced the teacher.

“I’m sorry, something important came up! Excuse me!”

She picked up her bag and rushed outside the door. The teacher’s voice calling for her reached her ears, but she chose to ignore it and ran out of the school.

**230 – Blue Flame**

Turning corner after corner, Yukai follows the blue flame plastered on her vision, floating above any kind of physical obstruction. Through the walls of the buildings, the small blue flame becomes larger and larger, urging her to go faster as she closes the distance. Although in a hurry, she retains enough sanity to stop and check for vehicles before crossing the street. She didn’t like standing still, but it was infinitely better than getting run over by a car. She was already in that situation once and she wasn’t careless enough to let it happen again.

Before she knew it, she was nearing the outskirts of town. There were barely any people around, but the flame was so large compared to when she first saw it that she doubted it would take her more than a minute to get to it.

But as she turned the corner, she bumped into someone and fell on her bottom. Although it hurt, she quickly picked herself back up and furiously apologized to the man.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry! I was in a hurry and I wasn’t looking! Please forgive me!”

She did so while bowing a few times in record speed that you would doubt she was actually apologizing since it looked like she was doing some kind of strange ritual. But Yukai didn’t realize that. To her actions, the man responded.

“…You’re more energetic today than ever, Yutei-san. What’s gotten you all worked up?”

“Eh…?”

Yukai froze as the energy running throughout her body suddenly dispersed the moment she heard her name. Did she know this man? As memory serves, she never met any other males beyond school and part-time work. But would she really run into them at this time of day all the way out in the furthest part of town? As she finally raised her head to look the person straight in the eye, she realized who they were.

“A-Akira-san?! What are you doing here!?”

It was Akira Ren. The mysterious high school girl in male clothing who knows about otherworldly subjects. The way she met her was a bit strange, but they still ended up being friends. Seeing the nervousness dissipate from Yukai’s eyes as she realized her identity, Ren responded to her.

“It’s nothing. I was just doing the usual.”

She said so as she glanced at the long gym bag on her back. It was what held her spear, her weapon of choice in fighting against otherworldly beings. She doesn’t say it out loud, but it seems that she just finished fighting another one today. She doesn’t mind telling Yukai, seeing as she hinted at it.

“I see… Uhh, umm… Good work out there today!”

“Haha, thanks! But anyway, what are you doing all the way out here?”

“O-Oh, that… I was just looking for Ryosei-nii-san.”

Yukai hesitated for a second, but then decided it was okay to tell Ren. She is her friend and the only person who knew about the world’s mysteries that she could talk to.

“Looking for him? Did he disappear?”

“Yes, about four days ago. But now, I think he’s finally back!”

“You think?”

“U-Umm… It’s a bit hard to explain., but do you want to come with me?”

“Sure, I don’t have anything else to do. Besides, if it’s something involving spirits, there’s no way I’ll let you go by yourself.”

“Thank you so much!”

Yukai beamed at Ren’s response. With her around, she became more confident with her steps and lead the way. Since she told her he was close by, Ren took off the gym bag and held it in her hands. It was unzipped, but not unpacked. She had her hand inside the bag, ready to take it out at a moment’s notice. She didn’t want to have it laid out in the open for all to see. If a bystander ever passes by with her weapon out, it would be a lot of trouble to explain it. The last thing she wanted was someone calling the police for a suspicious person with a spear.

After a few turns, Yukai finally stopped in a barren street, albeit suddenly. She was staring at empty space. Ren found that strange and called out to her.

“Yutei-san?”

“…He’s here.”

“What?”

“Ryosei-nii-san… is here.”

“…?”

She responded to Ren’s questions, but her answers were as cryptic as her actions. She didn’t understand what was happening. She tried to sense spirits but there wasn’t a single sign of one in the area. Unsure of what to do, she simply stood there and watched Yukai.

Unbeknownst to Ren, Yukai was seeing a blue flame floating in the middle of the street. Just before they turned the corner, the flame was in the middle of the block, inside someone’s house. She didn’t know what to do at first, but then the flame suddenly dashed into the middle of the street, surprising Yukai and making her stop abruptly. Ren was talking to her. She didn’t mean to ignore her, but she didn’t want to take her eyes off the blue flame.

After staring at it in silence for a few seconds, she finally took a step toward it. The sound of her light footsteps filled the silent street. One step at a time she approached the middle of the street. She stretched out her arm to the flame but stopped before making contact with it. What did she think would happen?

Yukai has no knowledge of spirits of any kind. The fact that she can see Ryosei in the form of a blue flame while he was in another world was something he never heard of. She knew all that, but then what did she wish to accomplish by making contact with the flame? Those doubts circled around her mind. At the end of the day, she was only human. What can she do that others can’t? Usually, she would be the one lacking, how can she expect to be different from others this time?

It was then that the blue flame brightened. A compelling, warm flame reflected in her pupils. The flame should be something completely intangible, unable to produce any sort of heat. Well, she didn’t know that, but that was what it seemed when she first approached it. But now, it was completely different. She could feel it Almost like the flame was manifesting into reality right in front of her eyes.

It was then that she remembered. She may not be able to socialize normally like other people, she may not know much about otherworldly beings, and she can’t fight them like Ren can, but if there was one thing she should be confident about, it was the fact that she was the only one that can truly interact with Ryosei.

Although Senkyo could talk to him in his mind and lend his body to him, Yukai was the only one that can make physical contact with him. It was something that she could do. To make him feel like an actual human again. If she can do that, then why would she not be able to make contact with him now?

Desire—the main factor that allows contact between her and Ryosei, that was what he told him while they were studying in her room. She only asked out of curiosity, but Ryosei gladly told her his findings, and now, it was the time to make the most use of them. She concentrated on her thoughts, trying to connect them with her heart, building up the desire to see him once again.

Worry, anxiety, anticipation, trepidation, excitement, happiness. Her emotions swirled as she thought about what would happen if she failed and if she succeeded, closing in on one, singular thought.

“I want to see you, Ryosei-nii-san!”

Ren looked over curiously, wondering why she entered a standstill. When she finally acted, she took one step forward and fully extended her arm, and gripped her hand as if grabbing something. Then, as she shouted, a pale blue light assaulted her eyes for a second. Her arms switched to cover it, but noticing it was too late, they stayed still as she shut her eyelids instead. Upon opening them again, she saw a man holding a sword in one hand while his other was holding the shoulder of a girl standing in front of him. His joints were loose with his muscles tense, seemingly in a battle stance. They suddenly appeared in front of her out of nowhere. While she was still too stunned to move, a loud, joyous voice filled the air.

“Ryosei-nii-san!”

“W-What!?”

Yukai suddenly latched behind Ryosei’s back, hugging him from behind. Naturally, he motioned his sword to his back at the sudden surprise, but he managed to stop himself before he did anything careless. It seemed like his guard was down when he suddenly appeared in front of them. That was good. Ren paled at the thought of Yukai getting cut in half if Ryosei had the reflexes to turn behind him and swing his sword. But then again, Ryosei couldn’t touch her since he was a spirit, so Ren’s face relaxed at least a little. That’s what she told herself, little did she know how real her worries truly were.

“Yukai-chan!?”

Finally recognizing the person clinging tightly to his back, he shouted in surprise. He then looked around at his surroundings. It was a street of familiar construction with solid colors filled with familiar sights. Much unlike the strange spirit-filled world he was just in.

“W-What the… This is… Earth?”

Ryosei didn’t quite understand it, but when his eyes laid on Ren, and seeing as Yukai was right behind him, he figured that they were the cause for this to happen. He searched the roofs of the buildings around them and the exits of the street, but he didn’t find any spirits blocking them. His mind caught up to his surprise and quickly acted.

“We have to get out of here! Come on, to the Konjou Clan!”

“Eh—Wha!?”

“Huh!?”

After releasing his weapon, he used both of his arms to carry Chouka and Yukai and ran in the direction of the mountains. He took a quick peek back and saw Akira was still a bit confused about what to do.

“Akira-san, you too! Hurry!”

“G-Got it!”

**231 – Assessment**

After a few minutes of running at full speed toward the mountains, Ryosei checked behind them and confirmed that no one was chasing them. He couldn’t feel their presences. He then peered into the spirit realm using Glimpse and saw nothing. Thinking that they were safe from pursuers, Ryosei slowed down and placed the two girls he was carrying down. Ren, who was following behind them slowed down as well and questioned Ryosei.

“What was that!? Why did you tell us to run earlier? And why here?”

She was clearly dissatisfied with the situation. That was understandable. Ryosei just appeared out of nowhere and started barking orders and forced everyone to go with him. Ren could sense it was a critical situation so she simply followed him, but now that they calmed down, she demanded an explanation.

“Yeah, what happened to you, Ryosei-nii-san!?”

“U-Uhmm, yeah… What happened…?”

Yukai and even Chouka turned to him for answers. Unlike how Ren’s concern was the lack of information in a potentially dangerous situation, Yukai’s concern was more about what happened to Ryosei after all this time, meanwhile, Chouka was just at a loss since everything was so sudden that even her brain couldn’t keep up with the development.

“Yeah, I’ll explain while we walk. We need to get to the Konjou Clan.”

“…”

Ren frowned as she heard that. She wanted to ask the reason why he was taking them to the Konjou Clan in the first place, but sensing that piling her questions on Ryosei wouldn’t do her any good, she decided to hold back and listen.

Ryosei surveyed the members: Yukai, Ren, and Chouka. If it’s these three, then there weren’t too many problems in telling them his story. He told them about how they got stuck in another world, Zerid. He was vague about how they got there and the danger of the situation by telling them this happened because of a fight with an enemy. When they got there, they didn’t have any way to get back home, so Ryosei set out to find a way to return to Earth. He then got to the point where he met Chouka and took the chance to introduce her to the other two and did the same the other way around. He then explained how they were trapped inside a building of some kind of organization and had to escape. But as they did, they were chased down by enemies until they got to Yukai, where she suddenly transported Ryosei and Chouka to Earth. Since he wasn’t sure if the enemies would catch up to what happened, he forced everyone to get out of the area as soon as possible.

Ren’s brow raised when he mentioned how Yukai transported him to Earth. It was one thing to be watching from Ren’s perspective, but from Ryosei’s, he shouldn’t have been able to deduce something so extraordinary unless he knew about what Yukai could do. Her eyes showed that she wanted to cut in and ask, but didn’t want to rudely interrupt him.

Ryosei saw this and offered an explanation, but not before confirming with Yukai that it was okay to share with them. Upon having her consent, he told them about a strange connection between Yukai and him. They didn’t know exactly how it worked, but they deduced that they are able to make contact with each other as long as they let the other do so and how “desire” seemed to be the main factor of this condition. Upon finishing his explanation, Ren raised another question.

“If that is so, then why are you telling us this?”

Indeed, Ryosei had no strong reason to reveal his connection with Yukai. Sure, Ren wanted him to do so, but he could have simply refused by telling her it was confidential. Ryosei nodded at Ren’s concern and explained.

“It’s because I want you all to trust me.”

He faced not just Ren, but also Chouka. He forged a contract with her to ensure that his actions lead to Ryosei escorting her back home. The fact that he wasn’t being stopped from leading her to the Konjou Clan meant that he still had that goal in mind and wanted to go to the Clan to achieve it. However, she was still a bit anxious about the situation. She was being led to an unknown destination where who knows what was happening. Ryosei wanted to reassure her that everything was going to be alright by seeking her trust. She sensed his intentions in his gaze and responded with a deep nod.

“Okay, I trust you, Ryo-chan!”

Satisfied with Chouka’s response, he faced Ren. She still had a difficult expression on her face. She wasn’t sure how to proceed, but she didn’t sense any malice in his words, that much she was certain. She closed her eyes and pondered for a bit. A few seconds passed, and finally, she shared her thoughts.

“I’m not going to say I trust you, but your words are genuine. I’ll come with you as long as I can stay with Yutei-san.”

“That’s fine.”

Ryosei’s lips curled into a smile as he heard that. She wanted to protect Yukai if something happened. In the Konjou Clan, there would be nothing that would threaten their lives, but the fact that Ren was set on protecting her friend despite that made him happy.

A few minutes passed, and finally, Ryosei came to a stop.

“This is it. Yukai-chan, Chouka, I need you two to hold onto me and never let go no matter what. Meanwhile, Akira-san, I need you to hold onto Yukai-chan and don’t get separated from her.”

“Okay!”

“Got it.”

“Sure.”

The three followed Ryosei’s orders without question. Yukai and Chouka trusted him, so they didn’t even bat an eye at his orders, but he was a bit surprised to see that Ren immediately agree. Did she know about the Konjou Clan’s barrier? That thought crossed his mind, but there were more important things to take care of. He didn’t want to get side-tracked and continued.

One step at a time, the empty woodland was slowly wrapped in a thick fog. Surprised voices came out of Yukai and Chouka and tightened their grip on Ryosei. Yukai slowed down a bit as her focus turned to the ground in front of her.

“There’s no need to worry about tripping. As long as you hold on to me, you’ll be fine.”

“Y-Yeah…!”

She forced a confident face and raised her head as they advanced through the blindness. Then, after a few more seconds, the fog finally began to subside and light appeared from the other side. There, they were able to see a traditional Japanese town and its residents filling the streets.

“We’re here.”

Ryosei announced as they crossed the barrier and the fog finally disappeared.

“W-Whoaaa…! A traditional Japanese town!”

“So this is what a settlement on Earth looks like!”

Yukai and Chouka both exclaimed in excited voices. As Ryosei and Ren were watching over them, Ren posed another question to Ryosei.

“Why did you bring us here again? I can understand forcing us to leave the area, but there was no reason to go all the way to the Konjou Clan, was there? In the first place, are you even allowed to bring strangers into this place? I can tell everyone about this place, you know?”

Ren seemed to be testing Ryosei, but he already had the answers to those questions in mind.

“Akira Leo.”

Ren’s eyes widened in surprise as he mentioned that name.

“Based on your reaction, you’re related to him somehow. He was one of the heroes of the previous generations. It wouldn’t be strange for you to learn all about otherworldy things from him, seeing as you use a spear—”

Ryosei thought back to the vision Senkyo saw in their battle with Fulgur. A man who his father referred to as “Leo,” holding a spear as he stood in front of them.

“—the same weapon he uses, it's highly likely that’s the case. What I’m about to do is something related to the succeeding heroes, we might even discover who they will be. There’s a possibility that you will be one of those heroes, and even if you’re not then at least you can forward the information to Leo-san. That’s why I want you here. Seeing who you are, I doubt I need to worry about information about this place getting leaked, not to mention that it seemed like you already know about it.”

“…is that so?”

Ren replied curtly, but it was clear from his shaken expression that he took her by surprise. Ryosei then urged everyone to follow him and headed for the castle.

**232 – Meeting**

On the way to the castle, the residents looked over to Ryosei’s group but never gave them too much mind. To them, they were just a bunch of students walking down the street. The fact that they had school uniforms didn’t bother them since it wasn’t like the village forbade modern society. Those who had permission were allowed to leave and return to the village any time they wanted and the conditions for permission weren’t strict either. They simply needed to inform an official to escort them while outside. Ryosei and the others were nothing new.

Their walk went smoothly for the most part, but when they were about to reach the cave that housed the Konjou Castle, someone called out to them.

“…R-Ryosei-san! Yutei-san!”

“That’s him!?”

“Yamamoto-kun… and Watanabe-kun…?”

Yukai was the first to react to the call. The group turned to the source of the voice and found Sora and Itsuki running toward them. Ryosei was surprised that Sora recognized him but remembered that he invaded his mind at some point to convince him that Senkyo was innocent of stealing Kuro Yaiba. Meanwhile, behind him was Itsuki wearing a confused face. He interacted with him before, but he never actually saw what he looked like.

“Hey, is this actually him?”

“It is, I’m telling you!”

“Oh, Sora-san, Itsuki-san. What is it?”

“What do you mean ‘what is it!?’ You and Yukou-kun have been lost for four days now! We were panicking about finding a way to bring you back! What happened to you guys!?”

“Y-Yeah, that’s been a whole ride… I’ll explain that later when everyone’s gathered. Once we get to the castle, could you call You-cha—I mean, the chief to Freda’s place? There’s something important I need to talk about.”

Sora made a difficult face but still managed to come to a decision.

“Well… Normally, there are procedures you need to go through to have an audience with Freda-sama, but it should be fine if it's you… probably.”

“Thanks. Oh, and can you take care of them while I’m gone?”

Ryosei points to the three people behind him: Yukai, Chouka, and Ren. Sora scanned them and his look couldn’t look any more confused, but before he could respond, a voice boomed.

“What are you doing getting little girls involved with this, huh!?”

He pointed at Yukai and Chouka as Itsuki shouted at Ryosei.

“Little…”

“I-I’m not little! I’m a Cool Lady!”

Yukai depressingly looked down to the floor while Chouka tried to protest, but Itsuki ignored them and kept his gaze on Ryosei.

“Do you think just because you’re a strong bastard means it’s okay to bring innocent people here!? Do you really think that, huh!?”

“I-Itsuki-san, could you calm down for a second?”

“Ha!?”

Ryosei had mixed feelings about this situation. He was happy to see that Itsuki is actually trying to be responsible for once and trying to reprimand him for bringing what he thinks are “innocent” people to the Konjou Clan. On the other hand, he was completely misunderstanding the situation and was being a needless obstacle for them. Sora sensed his distress and offered his help.

“Watanabe-kun, could you quiet down a bit? What do you think will happen if Sakurai-san hears you?”

“…!”

Itsuki’s head twitched and he looked around him in search of someone. It looked like Kosuke really did break through his stubbornness. His eyes were that of fear and wary, like prey that sensed the presence of a predator. After confirming that the person in question was absent, he turned to Ryosei again, but now with a much calmer demeanor.

“A-Anyway, you need to explain yourself. Fast.”

“I know. I swear, I’ll explain everything after I meet with Freda-san. After that, I can ask every question you have. So could you please wait?”

“…”

Itsuki’s eyes were uncertain, but he reluctantly accepted and lead the way to the castle.

“Then let’s go! The faster we get there the better!”

Ryosei sighed in relief as the storm finally passed. He turned to his three companions who also had curious eyes, asking him to explain what was happening now that two strangers entered the scene. Out of the three, Yukai was particularly curious. It wasn’t because two people suddenly came and made a scene with Ryosei, but because those two particular people were ones she was familiar with. She didn’t expect to find anyone she knew in the Konjou Clan, but the first person to actually interact with them were two of her classmates from school. She only thought of them as normal classmates, so it was no wonder. To their curious gazes, he responded.

“I’ll explain everything later.”

They were disappointed by the answer, but they also understood that it would be better to explain everything once they calmed down. They haven’t even reached the so-called “castle” and they already had a load of questions to barrage Ryosei. There was no doubt that more questions would eventually come. Thinking that, they all quietly followed Itsuki and reached the castle.

Unsurprisingly, the three visitors were in awe as they entered the cave. At first, it was nothing impressive, but the moment they entered the large cavity inside the mountain where the Konjou Castle lay, their expressions widened as they scanned their surroundings. A large lake of glowing water that illuminated the inside of the cave and a large castle towering over all of it in the middle of the lake. A mystical sight that they never expected to catch upon their visit here. Ryosei grinned as he saw their faces, but not as much as Itsuki who probably felt superior as he lead them over the bridge to the castle. The same scene happened as they first entered the castle and scanned the interior.

“Well then, I’ll be leaving them to you. Don’t forget to call the chief.”

“Got it.”

Ryosei said to Sora as he separated from the group. Yukai and Chouka turned to him as he left. Sensing their light anxiety, he responded with a light nod and a reassuring smile. The two nodded back and adjusted their gazes to the path Sora was leading them.

Seeing as everything seemed to be fine, he headed toward Freda’s quarters. For convenience, he turned his clothes to match a fighter’s battle uniform with their signature black coat in order to prevent people from questioning his presence. He passed by many people but they didn’t pay him any mind and arrived at his destination without trouble. He tried to open the door, but then realized it was locked. Normally, it would be difficult to get past this since locks in the Konjou Clan were set to trigger an alarm if they were forcefully opened by Poltergeist, but since he was a spirit, he was able to simply pass through the door. It may seem vulnerable, but ever since his mother created the barrier around them, there was no need to make buildings resistant to spirit attacks anymore since they wouldn’t be able to pass through his mother’s barrier.

He entered the empty audience room and headed straight for the door at the back. It was the one with a stairwell that lead down to Freda’s home which she created using Eternal Paradise. When he arrived at the bottom of the stairs, he was greeted with an abundant amount of nature where the plants not only varied from different species all over the world but also through Zerid’s biosphere. He used his spirit power to search for mana, which was all over the place, but there was one source that was thicker than any of the other sources. He calmly walked through the area as the sound of nature filled his ears.

After a few minutes of walking, a light humming entered his ears. It was familiar. He was reminded of the time when he and Senkyo mistakenly thought there was an intruder when they heard humming coming from the shrubs. Apparently, it was only a plant called Fruna shrubs that mimicked the sounds that it picks up. Seeing as there were no such shrubs nearby, it had to be the only resident of this area. However, unlike the previous cheery humming, this one had a sad tone as the melody swayed with small intervals of pauses. The person he was searching for finally came to view and he called out to her.

“Hello, Freda-san.”

“K-Kyaa!?”

She suddenly jumped backward and raised her arms up when he heard Ryosei’s voice. Well, he intended to surprise her a bit, but he didn’t expect this animated reaction. She peered through Ryosei’s face as she slowly processed the situation. Then, when she realized what was happening, she voiced out his name.

“K-Konjou-san…”

Her eyes first lit up with happiness and relief, but then they half closed as what seemed to be fear and guilt filled her mind. Her eyes strayed away from his gaze for a second but quickly recovered after a moment passed.

“Where is Yukou-san?”

“He’s still trapped in Zerid. I went off to find a way back but got caught in something. I have something to talk to you about.”

“I see… Then, shall we change locations?”

“That’s fine.”

She was surprisingly calm… No, that’s only what it looked like on the outside. Ryosei noticed that she didn’t have her usual composure when talking about serious topics nor did she have the energetic side that she showed when she gave them a tour of her Eternal Paradise. She was managing to keep as composed as she could, but Ryosei quickly caught onto her shoddy act. She was probably the most stressed about the situation out of everybody. Now that Ryosei knew that she had the power to release an ambassador’s power, it must have been worrying that one of those ambassadors was stuck in a dangerous world.

The two were silent, uttering not a single word with only their footsteps to fill the silence between them as they reached her treehouse and sat around a table on the balcony, showing them a beautiful view of nature outside.

**233 – Freda’s Thoughts**

“Before you start, I have something to say. Is that fine?”

“I don’t mind.”

Freda looked Ryosei straight in the eyes as she asked for permission. She took a deep breath before she began.

“From the bottom of my heart, I apologize for letting this tragedy happen!”

She said as she bowed deeply to Ryosei. The abrupt apology caught him off guard. From how Freda acted the whole time, he figured that she felt guilty for the situation, but still couldn’t help but be surprised by the force she put into her bow. He wanted to say something, but Freda continued before he could get a word in.

“This tragedy… it could have been all avoided if I simply acted properly from the start. I am very sorry for that! If only I had been better…”

“Wait, what do you mean by ‘tragedy?’”

“This situation. If only I had been better, I wouldn’t have placed unnecessary weight on Yukou-san’s shoulders. I’m sure you already know, but when I asked to have a private talk with Yukou-san, I did horrible things to him…”

Her voice began to weaken as she thought back to the past. Ryosei knew about what happened to them. To him, it wasn’t much. Freda was only telling Senkyo the truth about what was to come. Even Senkyo understood that. The reason she told him what she did was so that Senkyo could prepare himself. But apparently, it was different for Freda.

“When we talked, I forced a decision upon him. I thought I was being considerate but in reality, I only made it hard for him to refuse me. I carelessly told him about how he was most likely the person that would save everyone from doom in exchange for his life, I force upon him the weight of that title and tried to make him accept that by telling him… ‘You are not human.’ What a heartless thing to say. I did that thinking it was for the best, but that was simply me being naïve. It was…”

Her eyes faltered as they removed contact with Ryosei’s eyes for just a second. She held her arms as if to steel herself and returned her gaze to Ryosei.

“…It was simply me being shameful. I wasn’t giving Yukou-san an option, I was forcing him to become the person of my ideal. I wanted him to accept my words with struggle, but still take everything in and continue for the better of the world. I wanted him to listen to all the harsh words I was saying with a pained face, but still listen and understand my words. I wanted him to take every unreasonable thing I mentioned and act to make the best possible decision and walk down that path without question. I was… I was simply projecting the person I wanted to be, but could never become… It was a shameful display of power. That’s why… I’m sorry!”

Freda ended with another deep bow. For the first time, Ryosei was hearing her true thoughts. Ever since he met her, he had an image of her being a great person who assisted the Konjou Clan while he was gone. She did have some childish behaviors, but she would always be reliable at times when it mattered the most. That was what he thought of her. But the Freda in front of him was completely different.

She wasn’t some omnipotent being that could make everything better with the touch of her hand. She was just someone that made mistakes of all magnitudes like any other person. She was someone that could show a variety of emotions just like any other person. And right now, she was reflecting with swirling emotions of guilt and regret as she confessed to Ryosei her mistakes.

It was probably best if she said this to Senkyo instead of Ryosei, but he could feel that she was bottling up her emotions all this time, and it all exploded like a dam on him, who was the closest person to Senkyo at the time. Choosing the correct words to say, he replied to her.

“If Senkyo hears this, I’m sure he will appreciate it. He’ll probably be a bit troubled by it, but I’m sure he’ll be glad that you decided to be honest with him. I don’t have the right to judge you in Senkyo’s place, but at the very least, I think that you aren’t the only one at fault for the situation. This is all happening because of a cumulative chain of mistakes and mishaps. Blaming you for everything is unreasonable and unfair.”

“…I see, thank you.”

He felt the hesitation in her words. She probably wanted to refute him and take in all the blame, but she decided not to after catching the spirit inside of his eyes. His gaze was certain, returning her gaze not with an objective perspective, but with his true feelings reflecting in his pupils. He wanted to let her know that this wasn’t just an attempt to cheer her up, but simply his innermost thoughts. Catching the message, he continued.

“As of now, nothing too bad has happened. If we all manage to make it through, I’m sure it will be for the best, but right now, I don’t have enough power to make that happen. Freda-san, I want you to lend me power—the power of the Lost Maiden.”

“…!”

Her head jumped as Ryosei’s words entered her ears. With widened eyes, she stared at him as she asked an incomplete question.

“H-How did you…?”

“I met a person called Raqeav. He told me about the ambassadors of the past and the situation of the current ambassadors. The passing of judgment day and the existence of the Lost Maiden—you, Freda-san.”

“I see… Raqeav-san, huh…”

Freda said to no one in particular as her eyes dropped to the floor for a second then returned to Ryosei.

“So that’s what you want to talk about. Then, go on. I’ll answer any question you ask to the best of my power.”

“Thank you.”

Ryosei returned with a light bow of appreciation.

“First, who are the current ambassadors?”

“Not only the ambassadors of Earth but as well as other worlds?”

“That’s right.”

“…I can reveal their names to you. But, do you truly think that knowing them will do you any good?”

“What?”

Ryosei tilted his head slightly, not understanding Freda’s question.

“As I have experienced with Yukou-san, there are times that it is better for others not to know who they are yet. If I tell you the names of the ambassadors, what do you plan on doing with that information? It can indeed be helpful for discerning who will be allies and their importance in a situation. However, can you be certain that you will not make the same mistake I have with Yukou-san? If you do not give me a definite answer, I will have to refuse you.”

**234 – Future Plans**

“Hmm…”

Ryosei stopped to think. Freda brought up a good argument. At first, Ryosei simply wanted to know the names of the ambassadors for convenience. The more he knows, the better the decisions he will make in situations. But it was as she said, these benefits do not come without consequence. If he used that information poorly, it could only make things worse. Time passed quietly on the treehouse balcony. Neither of them said a word as Ryosei silently deliberated Freda’s question. It was only after a few minutes did he speak again.

“Then, I will change the question. Of the people closest to me, who are ambassadors?”

“…”

Freda stayed silent, analyzing the validity of Ryosei’s question. He didn’t want to be refused here, so he explained his train of thought.

“I’m not sure I will be able to make the right decisions with other ambassadors, but if it's with the people I already know, I’m sure I will be able to make full use of that information. Not to mention that I may need them to help me retrieve Senkyo. I cannot do this alone, so, please.”

Freda closed her eyes as she thought, and finally, nodded lightly.

“I understand. I also think that it would be difficult to imagine bringing back Yukou-san without the power of the ambassadors. If it’s the people close to you, it should be no problem for me to reveal them.”

“Thank you!”

Ryosei bowed to her in gratitude. Freda watched his actions and let out a light giggle. Ryosei returned to sitting straight and threw a curious glance at her. Noticing it, she explained.

“Oh sorry. It’s just that I was the one bowing to you a while ago and now you’re the one doing it, I couldn’t help but laugh, haha…”

“Is that so?”

He tilted his head, seemingly not picking up Freda’s sense of humor. After her laughter subsided, she said to Ryosei.

“Okay. Now, for the ambassadors close to you they would be—”

“Ryosei!”

As Freda was talking, a loud voice boomed and cut her off. Turning to the source, they saw a young man in a kimono who was strangely disheveled compared to his usual image.

“Oh, You-chan, you’re here.”

He was the current chief of the Konjou Clan. Unlike his usual prim image, he was a bit sweaty and was panting as he arrived at the door. He quickly controlled his breathing before walking up to the two as he wiped off the sweat on his forehead.

“Did you just run all the way over here?”

Ryosei shot a question at him as he observed his current state.

“Well, maybe just a bit. I was held back by some paperwork so I rushed over here after I finished them. You were calling for me, weren’t you? Also, what do you think you’re doing!? Do you know how worried everyone was while you were gone!? You’ve been gone for four days after a report saying that all hell went loose so everyone had to retreat. Then when they got back you were nowhere to be found. How do you think that makes us feel, huh!? You could have at least dropped by my office first!”

“W-Wait a second, calm down…”

*\*“All hell went loose!?” Is that what Haruto wrote down in the report!? Well, he wasn’t far off, but he could have a least toned it down a bit!\**

The image of the unkempt man-child crossed his mind. He was hoping that his report would be as proper as the side of him he showed in the battle with the skeletons, but that was simply wishful thinking. Wanting to control the situation, Ryosei gave an apology to make progress.

“I’m really, really, really sorry, okay!? I went to Freda-san first because it was something incredibly important! That’s why I called you here. Come on, You-chan, you can lecture me all you want later, but let’s have this conversation first, okay?”

Yousuke turned his gaze to Freda who was sitting right across from Ryosei. Seeing the difficult face she was making, he decided it was better to stop for now and took a seat on an empty chair.

“I understand. But just so you know, this isn’t over.”

“G-Got it…”

Although Ryosei was a bit bothered, he was actually slightly relieved to see how he was acting. Recently he had been able to act properly as the chief of the clan, but it was refreshing to know that his personality from the past wasn’t gone.

“Then, what are we talking about?”

Yousuke asked as he faced the two.

“Okay, I’ll explain.”

Giving Yousuke a rundown on what happened so far, he finally proceeded to discuss their future plans and how to get back Senkyo.

**235 – Conversation**

“Here’s a cup of tea, Yutei-san.”

“O-Oh, thank you.”

“Here’s yours, Akira-san.”

“Thank you.”

“And Chouka-chan… can’t drink, right?”

“Yep, don’t worry about me.”

“…”

Yukai, Ren, and Chouka were sitting around a table being served tea by Sora while enduring Itsuki’s silent gaze. It was no question that Yukai couldn’t handle it and kept her head toward the floor but Ren and Chouka didn’t mind. Ren even stared back. She didn’t like how he was making Yukai uncomfortable and decided to call him out.

“Watanebe-san, could you please stop staring? You’re bothering us.”

“Ha? What the hell?”

“What? I’m just asking you to stop being rude. What gave you the right to be angry?”

“The fuck is your problem, huh?”

“N-Now, now! Let’s all calm down. Watanabe-kun, stop staring! They’re guests, we can’t be bothering them!”

“I didn’t even do anything! I’m just looking!”

“That’s the problem! Why are you even staring at them in the first place?”

“I mean, doesn’t it bother you? Those guys were gone for days and one of them suddenly comes back with two little girls and some random guy! This is suspicious as hell! He said he was going to explain but then he went off somewhere when we got here!”

“A-A guy!? Watanabe-kun, Akira-san is clearly a woman! You can tell from her face, no one in their right mind would mistake her for anything else!”

“…!”

Yukai suddenly shrunk back after hearing Sora’s statement. Ren noticed this and couldn’t help but let out a wry smile.

“H-Huh? A woman? You’re joking.”

“He’s right.”

Ren cut in and confirmed Sora’s words before the two began arguing about her gender. Sora let out a sigh as he lightly bowed to Ren as thanks for stopping the impending argument that he saw behind Itsuki’s words.

“See, you were just being rude. And another thing, it’s not that I’m not curious but Ryosei-san isn’t here to answer our questions. He’s the one that knows everything that happened, what if they don’t even know and just got caught in some trouble with Ryosei-san? You’ll just end up bothering them like you are now, so could you just wait for him to come back?”

“…”

Itsuki went quiet when Sora told him off. Sora’s eyes widened in surprise at his obedience and let out a sigh of relief—if only.

“NO, I’M NOT CONVINCED!”

“Whyy??”

Ignoring Sora’s attempts to stop him, he faced the three.

“What happened with you guys and Ryosei? Tell me everything or else!”

“Like we would talk to someone with that attitude. Are you sure this person is a hunter and not just some stray delinquent? I thought the hunters of the Konjou Clan were more disciplined than this.”

Ren answered as she stared at Sora as if shooting him a complaint. He couldn’t help but smile wryly when he found it a bit hard to deny.

“The fuck did you just say!?”

“STOP IT, BOTH OF YOU!!”

Ren was about to give Itsuki another piece of her mind but was cut off by Sora. The room finally dove into silence as everyone stared at Sora.

“Okay, that’s good… I think we just got off the wrong foot. Basically, Watanabe-kun just wants to know more about you guys.”

“Ha? What are you—”

“Stop. Watanabe-kun.”

“…K-Krh… tch!”

Sora stared at him blankly with deadpan eyes and responded in a monotone voice. Making it look like the person filled with expressions that was trying to communicate with them earlier was nothing but a myth. Even the other three that were overlooking the situation were a bit surprised. In the face of those eyes and that static voice, even he knew that the only thing that lay beyond that was nothing but trouble and decided to concede.

With a satisfied nod, he turned back to the three.

“Okay, basically, we want to know more about you guys. But it’d be rude if we didn’t introduce ourselves first. I’m Yamamoto Sora, a 2nd year at Honshou Academy and Yutei-san’s classmate. As for why I’m a hunter, I was taken in by the clan after an incident with a rampaging demon when I was a child. And now, I became a hunter to fight those sorts of things. I wouldn’t say that I did that to fight for the public, but more like to survive. Anyway, feel free to ask me any question you have and I’ll answer them to the best of my ability.”

“…”

The three seemed to be satisfied with Sora’s introduction as their strained faces softened. To continue to flow, Sora nudged Itsuki to do the same but he wasn’t quite as courteous as him.

“What?”

“Introduce yourself. Now.”

“U-Ugh…”

Itsuki first resisted, but Sora urged him with the same expressionless face and monotone voice as before. With a tired groan, he reluctantly turned his face to look the three in the eyes and spoke.

“Watanabe Itsuki. I’m in the same class as these two and I’m a hunter because I want to. That’s all.”

No one was clearly satisfied with his introduction, but Sora didn’t hound him for it and decided to extend his introduction.

“He’s a new hunter that started a little over a month ago. Despite what he says, I’m sure he has his own reasons he wanted to become a hunter. After all, he’s quite a powerful brute class that can match even veterans in a head-to-head fight. Ah, if you’re wondering what a brute class is, it’s a category of hunters that fight using their fighting spirit, so if he’s that powerful, then whatever he’s fighting for is definitely nothing to scoff at. He may be a bit wild but he’s not all that bad, at the very least, he’s trying his best.”

“I see.”

Ren nodded after hearing Sora’s opinion of him. Yukai looked a bit surprised, her eyes widened as she listened to Sora’s words carefully. Meanwhile, Chouka was continuously nodding as she took notes in a notepad that appeared out of nowhere. Yukai and Itsuki didn’t seem to understand where she got it but Sora and Ren both knew that she made it from her spirit power. But still, they wondered if the notes she was taking would still be intact once she absorbs them back into her body. Ren, who seemed to appreciate Sora acting as a mediator then began.

“Then, I am Akira Ren. I’m a 2nd year at Mizuchi Academy. I don’t belong to any organizations, but I do fight the same creatures as you do. As for why I decided to go to Mizuchi, it’s the same as every person who gets accepted there. Simply to be able to fight against these otherworldly beings. This was probably my father’s influence, but the last thing I want is to be the one useless in times of need.”

“Huh? What’s with that? That doesn’t make sense at all.”

Itsuki commented after hearing Ren’s introduction. He didn’t understand how Mizuchi Academy suddenly became connected to fighting otherworldly beings. Those two things shouldn’t have any relation, but Sora explained otherwise.

“Mizuchi Academy is a school that specializes in training future hunters. Well, ‘hunters’ is a term unique to the Konjou Clan, so they’ll be called different things depending on the organization they get in, but basically, the school trains people to fight otherworldly beings.”

“Huuuh!? That’s a thing!?”

“Yes, but from what I remember Mizuchi was built recently. It’s only been running for two years so it hasn’t built much of a reputation yet… uuh, I think?”

“What are you hesitating for all of the sudden?”

“No, it’s just that I realized that there are a lot of students going to Mizuchi despite being a recent school… It shouldn’t have that much of a reputation yet but isn’t it too famous especially since they only accept people like us?”

“How should I know? You’re the one telling the story!”

“Yeah, thought so…”

**236 – Everyone’s Mysteries**

As Sora trailed off, for the first time, Yukai got the chance to speak her thoughts.

“T-Then, if such a school existed, why aren’t Yamamoto-san and the other young hunters studying there? Wouldn’t that be a better option than going to a normal school like Honshou?”

Sora stared in surprise at her sudden question. She must have been so interested in the topic that she gathered the courage to speak, but most importantly, he didn’t quite know how to answer the question.

“U-Uhh… I-I’m not sure. Maybe it’s because it's not yet reliable since it’s a new school? We do regular training here in the Konjou Clan so maybe they thought it wasn’t needed…”

“Hm? You don’t know?”

The one to ask him to expound on his answer was Ren. Perhaps because she thought it was strange that a member of the clan didn’t know something that should have been obvious? The question floated around Sora’s head for a bit as he deliberated on how to answer Ren. After a few seconds, he finally thought of a good response.

“Yes, sorry about that. I was never really interested so I never thought to ask. I just thought that going to school and training here in the clan was better than going out of our way to attend Mizuchi but now that I thought about it Mizuchi would be better since we would be able to engage with other people like us.”

“I see… you don’t know. Well, I think that’s fine. It might just mean that the higher-ups had a different plan in mind.”

“Perhaps…”

Sora wasn’t quite satisfied with that generalized answer and made a mental note to ask Kosuke about it later.

“U-Um! I’d like to introduce myself too!”

Yukai announced as she broke Sora’s train of thought and caught the eye of everyone present. She must have been waiting for a good time to cut in since they deviated from the main topic of introduction into a tangent about Mizuchi Academy. Bringing back the conversation to the original subject, she spoke.

“I’m Yutei Yukai! A 2nd year at Honshou Academy! …And, u-uhmm, I don’t know much about these otherworldly topics, so I don’t get much of what’s happening, but for some reason, I have a special connection with Ryosei-nii-san that lets me interact with him!”

“A special connection? The hell are you talking about?”

Itsuki latched onto Yukai’s words albeit aggressively. Ren didn’t like that and sent a glare of intimidation down his way while Sora’s face twisted into a troubled expression.

“Y-Yes! I’ll explain! For some reason, I can touch Ryosei-nii-san even though he’s a spirit, and just earlier today, I was able to… uhhmm, c-call? I think… I was able to call Ryosei-nii-san from somewhere and appeared in front of us!”

“???”

Itsuki and Sora were quite confused with Yukai’s explanation. Her words didn’t quite deliver what she wanted to tell them, since she didn’t know how to explain it either, it made sense, but that didn’t help the fact that they didn’t understand her. Sensing that disconnection, Yukai began stammering as she tried to think about how to resolve the problem. Ren didn’t want to make it any more difficult for her and decided to throw her a lifeline.

“She was able to summon Konjou-san even though he was in another world. I’m not sure how it happened, but there was no doubt about what I witnessed. Konjou-san said that ‘desire’ is a large factor in their connection, but none of us, not even Konjou-san himself understands how their connection works.”

“W-What…?”

“That’s insane!”

Sora’s voice trailed off in awe while Itsuki shouted in refusal to accept Ren’s words, but both of them stared at Yukai, trying to scrutinize her and perhaps pick something up that might explain what Ren just said. Then, Sora asked her the question that was bothering him even before he arrived in the Konjou Clan.

“Then, Yutei-san, was your connection with Ryosei-san related to you shouting his name earlier in the classroom?”

“A-Ah!”

Yukai replayed the memory in her head that lead her to find Ryosei in the first place. To her, it felt so long ago that she had even forgotten she did that despite it being only a few hours ago.

“Yes…”

“Wow… Actually, that’s what made us rush over to the Konjou Clan today. We found it strange that you said Ryosei-san’s name and wanted to report it to the clan chief but we found you guys before we could.”

“Y-You were going to report me!?”

“A-Ah… No, it’s not like that! You see, the chief is actually Ryosei-san’s cousin, so we wanted to ask him if he ever met you when he was alive… or something like that.”

“O-Oh… is that so? That’s a relief…”

“Haha…”

Sora let out an awkward laugh as he somehow prevented Yukai from getting intimidated again. He was surprised to find out Yukai’s connection with Ryosei, but now that he was talking to her again, he was sure that the Yukai he saw in class was no different from the one in front of them.

“Oh, then it’s my turn!”

Chouka said as the notes she was writing the whole time were absorbed back into her body. She stood up with a confident pose as she faced everyone around the table.

“I’m Chouka, a Cool Lady! When I first met Ryo-chan in the Spirit Realm, I wittingly recruited him to help me achieve my goals, and later on, with my quick thinking and cunning, made a Spirit Bond with him to keep him on a leash! ….Well, he might have helped me out a little, but that’s not the point! We were accidentally transported to Black Rose’s secret base but managed to escape with extremely valuable information and ended up here because of Yuka-chan! Oh, and I’m the daughter of a God!”

“…Huh?”

“What in the…”

“U-Uhm…”

“Eh? Eeeh!?”

Sora, Itsuki, Ren, and Yukai reacted respectively. Chouka’s introduction was as chaotic as it could get. Ryosei explained his situation with Chouka to Ren and Yukai before, but that wasn’t nearly as destructive as her current explanation. They could sense that she romanticized her story to some degree with her pride overflowing to every single one of them. But she was basically saying that she made a contract with Ryosei in order to cooperate with him, got transported to the base of some organization, retrieved information from them, then ended her introduction by adding that she was the daughter of a god… Even after being silent for a little over a minute to try and comprehend everything she said, they still couldn’t help but shut down due to the flood of questions drowning their minds at the moment.

“Say something already!!”

Unable to bear the dead silence after her introduction, Chouka shouted in frustration. After that, the group spent the whole time asking questions about Chouka’s explanation until they were all caught up with everything that happened to them. That included Chouka’s true identity, her contract with Ryosei, Black Rose, and as well as the Spirit Smith Raqeav. She tried to explain what Raqeav told them, but after everything that happened, failed to recall much of Ryosei’s conversation with him aside from terms such as Judgement Day, Ambassadors, and Lost Maiden.

She tried to recall the names he mentioned but only ended up saying names that no one could comprehend. The confident face she showed when said them almost fooled them into actually believing those names to be true.

After everything was over, Ren was about to expound on the subject of ambassadors, but just before she could start, Ryosei finally came back and told them…

“Sorry for taking so long! For now, follow me, it’s something important.”

“What!? Wait, where’s your explanation!?”

It seemed like Itsuki was never able to move on about the explanation Ryosei promised him. Well, everyone present agreed with him and only stared at Ryosei with anticipation. Even after everyone’s talk with each other, there were clearly missing factors that no one could explain, namely the details that Chouka failed to remember. So, they wanted Ryosei to provide them.

“Don’t worry, I’m going to do exactly just that… Well, ac But first, we need to get to a certain place.”

**237 – Herald to a New Generation**

The group then followed Ryosei through the castle halls, weaving through the corners, they arrived at a familiar location to Sora and Itsuki.

“This is…”

“It’s that Freda person’s room isn’t it?”

Itsuki finished Sora’s words. Ryosei opened the door and welcomed everyone to what seemed to be an audience room. It was mostly empty except for the curtain that was supposed to cover whoever is supposed to sit on the other side.

“Come on, through here.”

Ryosei led them past the curtain and headed for a door that led to a stairwell going deep underground. Ryosei continued downward while the other five followed him from behind. Yukai and Chouka anxiously looked around the place, seemingly intimidated by the construction along with how deep the stairwell went. But after long, they finally arrived at the exit where abundant nature awaited them.

All five of them looked around in awe. Even Sora and Itsuki didn’t know about this place. There were familiar plants, ones they didn’t recognize, and others that were clearly not from this world. They raised their heads where there should have been some kind of ceiling, but instead of a solid wall, they found the endless blue sky where the white clouds calmly floated above them with the sun peering through them.

“Over here.”

As they were trying to comprehend what they were seeing, Ryosei mercilessly interrupted their train of thought and urged them to follow him through the forest. The others obediently trailed behind him until they reached the face of the cliff where there was a flight of stairs led upwards by the waterfall. Staring blankly at the absurd number of stairs, Itsuki let out a complaint.

“We’re not actually climbing all of this right!?”

They climbed it, ignoring Itsuki’s incessant complaints all the while. It seemed like one of the cruel training drills Kosuke always threw at Itsuki, but the others didn’t mind the travel much since they were enjoying talking to each other and passed the time it took them to arrive at the top. The only ones that truly suffered were Itsuki who ended up yapping the whole time and Sora who had to listen to his every complaint.

But then, when they got to the top, every single one of them had the same reaction—silenced as they took in the sight before them. Unlike on the ground where the most dominant feature was nature, here, the most dominant feature was water as patches of water flowed down the ceiling into a large lake that fell even further downwards, which then served as the waterfall that they saw when they first got there.

It was a waterscape where pillars of flowing water of all sizes filled a large lake. In the center of that lake was a body of land where a large platform lay. On that small island were the Konjou Clan’s chief and Freda who stood silently on the platform as they awaited Ryosei and the others’ arrival.

Ryosei walked to the island using the rectangular patches of stone that protruded above the water. The others followed silently, being careful not to slip. Ryosei stood beside Freda and faced the others where they all lined up in front of them. After scanning the people that arrived, Ryosei finally broke the silence.

“As you may or may not know, four days ago, me—Konjou Ryosei and Yukou Senkyo faced an enemy that trapped us in Zerid.”

“Yukou… Senkyo!?”

The one that disrupted the silence from the audience was Ren, clinging to Senkyo’s name. Everyone turned to her, but Ryosei didn’t let that disturb his speech and decided to continue.

“Yes. I left him alone while he was recovering from the fight to find a way to get back to Earth. But now, after my talk with Freda, I now realize that it was the enemy’s mental attack that made me think it was best to leave him. We currently do not know Senkyo’s situation, but at the very least, we still know he is alive using Freda’s powers. After traveling through the Spirit World with Chouka, I met a Spirit Smith named Raqeav who told me about the ambassadors of the past—the people who are tasked by the gods to make peace with the other worlds they are connected to…”

Ryosei explained to everyone the information he got from Yuu in the past. How the world was originally one large planet called Primo which was filled with chaos due to the ideal worlds of three gods: Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades, mingled and overwrote each other, creating pandemonium and ceasing any sort of life. Because of this, they used their powers to divide Primo into three different worlds: Zerid, Earth, and the Spirit Realm. He continued about how it was there was the problem of rifts appearing randomly and sending beings to other worlds, creating a panic. And their solution to that was the Ambassadors, people who are chosen from each world and are sent to others in order to make peace. If everyone understands that otherworlders aren’t a threat, then at the very least, it would lessen the danger of being sent to another world.

However, what stood before that ambition was another god that appeared out of nowhere and killed Hades, the God of the Spirit Realm. Because of this, he took that chance to erase the efforts of the previous ambassadors by erasing the memories of residents of Earth and the Spirit Realm. Making them forget about otherworlders from ever coming to make peace. The only people that were spared from this curse are the people who were in Zerid at the time, who were protected by the efforts of the ambassadors and the remaining two gods.

The others listened to Ryosei’s story, their faces twisting into different expressions as they were filled with different emotions as they listened to him. They frequently showed surprise, anger, sadness, amazement, and confusion. All except for Ren who showed a stern expression the whole time, and Chouka who looked like she was only trying her best to stay still.

“…Then, as to why I’m telling you all this, is because I think that the powers of the ambassadors are needed to save Senkyo.”

Ryosei announced as he finished filling in everybody about the lore of the world and the actions of the gods. Sora, Itsuki, and Yukai looked at him in confusion, while Ren and Chouka nodded lightly in understanding. Seeing this, Itsuki frowned and furrowed his brows in frustration. As if to catch up to the others, he quickly thought of something.

“T-Then what? How are you going to find these ambassadors of the past, huh?”

Itsuki shot the question at Ryosei and ended with a satisfied expression without even waiting for his reply. Unfortunately, his light celebration was quickly shot down by Ryosei’s next words.

“No, that’s not it.”

“H-Huh? Then what!?”

The others stayed silent as they watched Itsuki and Ryosei’s exchange. Although Itsuki was wrong and two of the five people in the audience seemed to understand where the situation was going, none of them insulted his efforts to figure out the situation. After all, Itsuki was actually asking important questions and progressing the conversation.

“I’ll tell you. But first, I would like to mention the names of the previous ambassadors to you all. Do with this information what you will, but this will be a good point of reference for you all to know for the future.”

“What?”

Ignoring Itsuki’s confused response, Ryosei continued.

“Ambassadors of Zerid, the Hfixesi: Firel, Nwen, Draui, Msena, and Kroiat.”

As expected, there was no reaction as no one recognized any names. Although, Chouka had an excited face the whole time as if anticipating something.

“Ambassadors of the Spirit Realm, the Di manes: Yuuki, Hana, Shigo, Mei, and Hiroto.”

“Woo!! Yuuki and Mei! I know them, I know them!”

Chouka shouted cheerfully in complete contrast to the tense atmosphere that surrounded them. She was acting like a mother whose child won first place in some big event. Even Ryosei couldn’t help but let out an exasperated sigh at her actions, but still continued.

“And finally, Ambassadors of Earth, the Heroes: Konjou Masao, Yukou Yuuto, Akira Leo, Honshou Mirai, and… Yutei Katashi.”

Sora, Itsuki, Chouka, and Yukai let out surprised expressions while Ren stayed the same as always. For Sora, Itsuki, and Chouka, they were probably most surprised about how there were so many names that they recognized, but for Yukai, she was staring blankly at Ryosei as she heard the name of her father get mentioned.

“N-No way…”

Yukai whispered under her breath. Catching her confusion, Ryosei dropped the formal appearance and told her.

“Yukai-chan, we’ll talk about it later. I’ll be there.”

A light smile appeared on her face and nodded slightly in response. She appreciated his concern for her, but still couldn’t help but look down at the ground in deep thought. Ren also saw this and made a difficult expression. But still, they both knew that this had to continue.

“As for how we plan on saving Senkyo, she will be explaining everything from here.”

Ryosei pointed to the woman beside him, to Freda. Everyone besides Yukai turned to her and prepared to listen.

**238 – The Maiden’s Call**

“I am Freda, The Lost Maiden.”

Sora and Itsuki threw her a confused look while Ren and Chouka nodded in satisfaction. Sora and Itsuki only heard of the title “Lost Maiden” earlier that day, so they didn’t quite understand the weight it brought but the other two were clearly the opposite. They wanted to ask Freda to explain further, but before they could, she shot them another question.

“Before I start with anything, I have a question for you all.”

Freda said as she scanned the audience before continuing.

“What kind of future do you want to have?”

“Future?”

Sora parroted Freda’s words, asking her to explain further.

“Yes. Your ideal. A vision of the future where you have achieved your goals, obtained happiness, or maybe simply one where you are satisfied with being alive. Anything at all.”

They understood what she wanted from them, but no one knew how to answer it. She was asking for the future, a time uncertain where any plans could easily crumble due to the simplest mistakes. Should they be answering her while considering its feasibility? Or maybe they should be answering using the first thing that popped into their heads? The silence continued as they deliberated on how to answer her question. But among them, there was a single person who didn’t look as troubled as everyone else with the question. They simply stayed quiet and closed their eyes as if confirming her thoughts. Then, she spoke.

“A future where I’ve righted the wrongs of the past.”

Ren spoke confidently as she faced Freda, staring her straight in the eyes as she answered. The others stared at her surprised at her assertive reply. It was short and concise, completely different from what they were crafting in their heads. In response to Ren’s answer, Freda nodded in satisfaction.

“I see.”

After seeing how easily she accepted her answer, the others felt like their worries were complexly meaningless. There was no need to go into too much detail, she just wanted an answer that was true to their hearts. Realizing that, Sora was next to speak.

“To me, I think that I’d just want to have a future where everyone important to me is alive and well. If everyone else is happy then I’m happy, but still, I’d like it if we all got along too…”

Sora trailed off as if recalling a recent memory. Freda nodded, hearing his true thoughts. Meanwhile, Itsuki’s face twisted in frustration after everyone was getting ahead of him. Turning to face Freda, he asked.

“D-Do we seriously have to answer this bullshit?”

“Watanabe-kun, it would do you good to share your thoughts even once and a while. Also, stop being rude to everyone. I’ll have to talk with Sakurai-san about this.”

Yousuke caught his question instead, making Itsuki click his tongue. His eyes wandered away from the people in front of him and spoke reluctantly.

“I-I just want to protect someone, that’s all!”

He said as we scratched the back of his neck awkwardly, thinking of the person in question in his mind. Freda nodded, satisfied with his rough answer.

“Oh, oh! I want a future where everyone is happy!”

Chouka answered excitedly as she raised her arm to let everyone know that she wanted to be next to answer. Well, she answered immediately after she raised her arm without waiting for anyone to respond so it was meaningless. Freda nodded, hearing her earnest wish for joy.

“…I, u-umm…”

After everyone answered her, all that was left was Yukai. Being the last one to answer and the only reason why the conversation wasn’t progressing, she felt the pressure and began panicking. It wasn’t like she was doing it on purpose, she just couldn’t think of an answer she was satisfied with. After a few more seconds, she answered.

“I-I… would want a future where everyone is safe and alive!”

She shouted, forcing the words out of her throat. But then, unlike how she responded to the others, Freda asked her another question.

“Are you certain about this?”

“U-Umm… Yes!”

“I understand.”

Freda nodded, hearing Yukai’s response. Then, she faced the audience as a whole.

“Now that I have heard your thoughts, I will now move on to the main topic. Due to the incident of the last generation, Judgement Day, the day when all ambassadors are chosen and are blessed with the powers to venture into other worlds, was commenced immediately after ending the last generation. Normally, that would mean that every ambassador chosen is immediately given their blessings and is tasked by the gods. However, that would mean that ambassadors will be unprepared and are nowhere near capable of handling their blessings. That is the reason why I was created. The Lost Maiden, it is my duty to serve as a catalyst and hold the powers of the ambassadors until it is time for them to receive their blessings. I have a unique connection with every single ambassador and can give them their blessings no matter the time. So, I think that there is no better time than now to bless some of the current ambassadors.”

Freda announced, emphasizing her will to share the blessings of the gods. Sora, Yukai, and even Itsuki finally caught on to what she wanted to do, and the reason they were sent to hear all of this. Itsuki was particularly proud to have finally realized her intentions as he crossed his arms and nodded approvingly with a smile on his face. Then, Freda continued.

“Of the people present, I will now be announcing the ambassadors chosen by the gods!”

Itsuki’s smile widened after Freda’s words matched his prediction, his excitement comparable to Chouka’s energy as she lightly swayed her body in anticipation. Ryosei and Ren kept their cool expressions as they awaited Freda to continue. Meanwhile, Sora and Yukai had confused expressions, perhaps not keeping up with the conversation or simply having a hard time believing the major event that was happening before them. With varied reactions, Freda announced.

“The Di Manes: Konjou Ryosei and Chouka!”

“…”

“Yes!! I did it! I’m an ambassador!!!”

Ryosei simply nodded, expecting his name to be announced. He went to talk to Freda before they were called here, so no one questioned his reaction. Although, Chouka’s reaction was the exact opposite, as she jumped for joy, cheering that her name was called. But unlike the other times she happily collected attention, no one minded her this time. They were too focused on Freda to react to her actions.

“The Heroes: Yamamoto Sora, Watanabe Itsuki, and Akira Ren!”

“E-Ehhh???”

“Hell yeah!”

“Huh…?”

Sora couldn’t do anything but let out a confused howl while Itsuki cheered the same as Chouka. In contrast to their reactions, Ren, who kept a cool expression this whole time, tilted her head as her face twisted in confusion. She shifted her attention from Freda to the girl beside her, Yukai.

Her mouth was agape as she heard Freda’s announcement. Her name was not mentioned. No one ever told her that everyone present was an ambassador, so she shouldn’t have expected to be one. But after hearing that her father was actually an ambassador and the fact that she was present at this major event, the implications told her that the possibility of her name being called was high. But after everything that happened, her name was not mentioned.

Confused by this, Ren asked Freda in Yukai’s place.

“Freda-san, are you certain that there are no other ambassadors present?”

Freda takes a quick pause, thinking of the answer to give her.

“There is one more ambassador I have yet to mention.”

“Really? Who is it?”

“The Hero, Saito Touma.”

**239 – The Weight of the Title**

“WHAT!? TOUMA-KUN!?”

Ren was the one to ask her the question, but Sora shouted in surprise before she could even process the name Freda mentioned.

“Yes, Saito Touma is one of the current ambassadors. You may have conflicting feelings about this after the recent incident with Saito-san, but that does not change that he is one of the ambassadors.”

“W-Wha…?”

As Freda responded to Sora’s surprise, Ren couldn’t help but become even more confused. She turned to Yukai. Appreciating Ren’s efforts to speak for her, she simply smiled at her and gave a word of thanks.

“It’s all right. Thank you.”

“…”

Ren fell into silence as she was forced to drop the subject. If Yukai didn’t want her to press the subject, then she had to right to. Thinking that, she forced her expression back to its usual calm appearance, but couldn’t help leaking some degree of disappointment.

“To you ambassadors present, I must make sure that you all understand the responsibilities of this title. As Konjou-san explained earlier, the task of ambassadors is to make peace with other worlds, but due to the last generation’s incident, this has been changed. Currently, the task imposed on you by the gods is… nothing.”

Confused murmurs begin popping around the group everyone but Ren and Yukai tried to make sense of Freda’s words.

“Usually, ambassadors are unable to refuse the tasks the gods imposed on them. However, as this generation’s Judgement Day was made in irregular circumstances, the gods were not able to impose anything to your will. In other words, the power you will hold when I bless you will follow your will and yours alone. You will be able to use those powers as you please without limit. You can use them to bring misfortune to others or help them thrive. You may even forget this ever happened and refuse to use these powers to return to a normal life. The choice is yours.”

The room suddenly fell silent. After realizing the true weight of the title of “ambassador” everyone stopped to think. As they did so, Freda continued.

“Whatever you do with your blessings is yours to control. But at the very least, there is one request I have you all to do. Go to Zerid and bring back Yukou Senkyo and Hisho Yuu.”

The ambassadors looked at each other, gauging their will to accept her request. As it seemed like everyone present was familiar with Senkyo, no one had any qualms about taking on the challenge. But Sora and Itsuki had conflicted faces when they heard Yuu’s name in the list of people to bring back. In the silence, Itsuki threw a question at Freda.

“Why? What happens if we don’t save them?”

“Hey, Watanabe-kun!”

Sora snapped at his question.

“Chill out! I’m just asking! I don’t mind saving Shittaku, but why do we have to get that shorty vampire? She betrayed us, right!?”

“Oh, that’s what it was… You need to be more careful with your words!”

“Like I care!”

Before the two began bickering again, Freda kindly told them the reason.

“That is because, if the enemy gets their hands on Yukou-san, Zeus, the God of Zerid, will perish.”

“What!?”

Everyone except for Ryosei and Ren let out surprised gasps at the sudden declaration. Finding their surprise understandable, she explained.

“That is because the enemy has the power to kill gods just like how they did Hades. But to do that, they need someone who is directly connected to the god. And The Hfixesi: Yukou Senkyo and Hisho Yuu, are examples of those people. Having even one of them will be the key to Zeus’ death.”

“No way… that traitor is an ambassador!?”

“Whether you like it or not, the fact that Hisho Yuu is chosen as an ambassador remains true.”

Freda declared. Ren and Chouka didn’t know Yuu, but it was obvious from their exchange that she was once an ally that betrayed them in some way. Sora and Itsuki kept silent, trying to accept that the person who endangered Senkyo in the first place was someone they needed to save and work with in the future. Meanwhile, Yukai could only be confused as he suddenly heard that one of the people she knows was a traitor.

“Please, I request your aid. No one will know how detrimental the loss of another god will be.”

Everyone began to calm down after hearing Freda’s heartfelt request as she bowed to them. A few seconds of silence passed, and finally, Yousuke spoke out.

“Ambassadors! Have you forgotten your ideals!? To right the wrongs of the past, to see that your loved ones are alive and well, to protect those important to you, to reach a future where everyone is happy, do you think any of these ideals of yours will come true when the world is steadily crumbling!? Some of you may think that you don’t need to hear me say this and that you were already planning to accept Freda-sama’s request, but do you truly think that naïve mindset will be enough to carry the title of ambassador!? You all have different ideals, and different futures that you want to live in, but we can only have one. What do you think will happen if these overlap each other!? What you all need the most is not power, but unity and understanding! You must all understand that currently, there is one single objective to reach your ideals: Bring back Yukou Senkyo and Hisho Yuu. To the ambassadors under the Konjou Clan, you are all ordered to return to this location to go to Zerid by the end of this week! You don’t have to worry about your upcoming tests, we will cover them. What we need the most from all of you is the skill and confidence to take on the challenge before you! As for those unrelated to the clan, you are welcome to come here on the said day to join the group. That is all!”

The ambassadors tensed their expressions as they listened to Yousuke’s speech. As they realize the weight of the title bestowed upon them, they all stopped to think of their future actions as they leave the area. And Yukai, who could only watch everything that happened, walked away with a depressed face.

**240 – Commitment**

“Hey, how are you holding up?”

“O-Oh, Ryosei-nii-san.”

After returning from Freda’s Eternal Paradise and leaving her room, everyone separated ways to ponder about what they just learned. All that was left were Chouka, Ryosei, and Yukai, who was frozen still in front of Freda’s room as if in a daze. Ryosei had a clue as to what was bothering her and called out to her.

“It’s nothing.”

“That won’t do. I invited you to that meeting even though I knew you might react like this. It’s about your father, isn’t it?”

“…Yes. Can’t hide anything from you, can I?”

Yukai conceded in hiding her façade after Ryosei hit the bull’s eye. She gave up rather easily and she didn’t even sound reluctant to be honest with him. In fact, it felt like she was relieved that he guessed correctly. Ryosei didn’t miss that.

“I told you before, didn’t I? I’ll be there for you. You don’t need to keep everything to yourself anymore.”

“I see… Hehe, you’re right.”

Her lips curled up to a smile as she heard Ryosei’s words. She didn’t have to carry her burden by herself anymore. She wasn’t alone, not anymore. When she realized that, she couldn’t help but let out a light giggle.

“My father was a good man. He’s hard-working, is kind to others, always finds a way to make others laugh, and change their mood completely when they’re sad… at least, that’s what my mom always told me.”

Sensing the heavy change in the tone of her voice, Ryosei prepared himself. Even Chouka, who looked like she wanted to say something the entire time, froze and stayed silent as Yukai continued.

“I’ve never met my father. He wasn’t there for any of my birthdays, not even on the day I was born. It has always been mom and me, and no one else. But even so… mom talked about him every chance she could, praising him and telling me stories of the many things he’s done. When I heard that, then I thought, maybe, just maybe, he’ll come back to us, and the only reason he was gone was that something important was keeping him from us. But as we waited, and waited, and waited, until mom was bedridden in the hospital, he never came back. I gave up on the idea of him coming back into our lives years ago. Honestly, I hate him. Leaving us to fend for ourselves, without supporting us as a father should. Even if he came back now, I would never forgive him. If he was as great as the man mom made him out to be, then why did he leave in the first place? But… But even so, even when I complained to mom about him, she would only make a sad face. She didn’t deny what I said, but she also didn’t agree with them. Even after everything, she still had some trust left for that man… I couldn’t believe it. I thought mom was just desperate… but now… now that I heard that he was a Hero… an ambassador sent to another world to make peace… I… I…!”

Yukai told her story normally at the start, making her thoughts form into words to tell Ryosei, completely unlike how she was when she faced her mother again for the first time in six months. But as she neared the end, her composure faltered. It was as if her mind and mouth forgot how to communicate with each other, and the words she wanted to say got stuck in her throat. She tried to force them out until all she could do was shout a single word. But before she pushed herself too hard, Ryosei placed his hand on her head and began petting her.

“Since you hated yourself too, your father was the only other person that you recognized to be worse that you. But now, that might not be the case. I’m not going to say that I’ve experienced the same as you did, but if you could trust me, I want you to know that I understand. Even imagining it now, it’s scary how real that situation could have been for me if I found someone to despise.”

She nodded silently, her pained roars were reduced to meek noises. She felt hurt but didn’t cry.

“In that situation, I wouldn’t say that he wasn’t at fault. I think your feelings are justified, and I’m not saying this just to make you feel better. Even if he was chosen to be an ambassador, it still doesn’t take out the fact that he left you two. Even if the purpose is good or bad, he wasn’t responsible. But you aren’t satisfied with that, are you?”

She nodded again.

“Then how about this? I’ll find your father for you.”

“H-Huh…?”

Yukai removed her eyes from the floor and turned them to Ryosei. She let out a confused noise, but couldn’t think of anything to say.

“You just need to see him, right? These ‘what ifs’ and superficial words won’t be enough. If I find him and bring him to you, then you’ll finally be able to calm down. And if it turns out that you won’t be able to meet him again, then we can grieve. I’ll be there for you, and so will your mother.”

“Wh-What…? Mom will…? What do you mean, Ryosei-nii-san?”

Her eyes widened. How was he able to say that? That she would be able to grieve along with her mother. She was currently at the hospital, unconscious. She couldn’t wake up, let alone grieve. She felt like those words should have angered her. They should have felt like insults that were underestimating her mother’s condition. But they didn’t. Contrary to that, she felt relief. She didn’t know why, but she could feel the truth in his words. That in time, she would be able to be with her mother again.

“…”

“A-Ah, It’s a bit too early for that, isn’t it? Those tears should be saved for her, not me.”

With a blank face, a single tear crawled down her face, and then came others that followed. Not wanting Ryosei to see her face, she buried it in his clothes and talked to him in a muffled voice, spaced with uneven pauses to hold back her voice from truly crying.

“Y… You mean… it…? Mom… Mom is…? She’s… She’s… waking up…?”

As she asked for confirmation, Ryosei turned to Chouka. She didn’t quite know what to do in that situation and just stood around. She had multiple urges to leave, but every time she tried to, Ryosei would glare, rooting her in place. When she received the sudden signal from him, she didn’t quite understand what to do, but after summoning Kuro Yaiba behind Yukai, where she couldn’t see, Chouka finally understood and acted accordingly.

“Yes, it’s possible! With my mom’s help, there’s nothing she won’t be able to cure!”

Chouka claimed excitedly. She wasn’t actually sure what Yukai’s mother’s situation is, but since she heard that she was in the hospital, she figured it was related to life and death. It was nothing that her mother, a god of life, couldn’t be able to fix.

“I see… thank you… thank you…!”

As Yukai thanked them wholeheartedly, Ryosei felt a little bad. He purposefully directed the conversation from her father to his mother. He didn’t want to leave her with a heavy load in her heart, so she told him about how he could save her mother. He couldn’t allow her to carry the stress of worrying about both her mother and father. So for now, he relived her worries about her mother.

However, in truth, he wasn’t sure if a god of life will be able to cure her mother. After seeing her mother’s state, it wasn’t an exaggeration to describe it as a manifestation of death trying to maul her soul, but the fact that she was able to survive was nothing short of a miracle. But, there must have been something at work. Something that was making that… thing attack her. And something that was keeping it from killing her. He wasn’t sure if Chouka’s mother could cure her, but he knew there was a way. He could feel it. He didn’t know why, but it felt as if he could cut down the curse with his blade. This was his way of committing to this. Some day, Yukai and her mother will be able to talk again.

**241 – Diverging Paths**

“So that’s what you’re planning on using our contract for!”

Chouka said conclusively as she pointed her finger at Ryosei. A few minutes earlier, they separated with Yukai after Ryosei said everything he wanted to say. They had to go back to the Spirit Realm and get to The Garden, Chouka’s home, as per the contract. Visiting the Konjou Clan was nothing more than a detour after being forcefully summoned to Earth by Yukai. Chouka didn’t mind that. To her, this was a benefit as she found out that she was actually one of the Di Manes for the current generation of ambassadors. But right now, there was only one thing that was most important of all—asserting dominance.

“I see now! So you entered that contract with her in mind! I’m not saying that it's wrong, but you shouldn’t let your emotions get the best of you. If I was a bad kid, I could have trapped you with that contract. Either phrase my words to make you do something different or assassinate you when you were vulnerable. The possibilities were endless! Are you sure you can continue without straightening those emotions of yours?”

“Ok then, I just won’t interact with you anymore after this.”

“H-Huuuuh? I-Is that so…? Well, I-I’m a Cool Lady, so I won’t need your help in the future anymore!”

“That so? Then I guess I’ll leave you out in our missions as ambassadors.”

“W-What!? You can’t do that!”

“Why not?”

“Because we’re ambassadors! We’re supposed to be a team remember?”

“Oh? I thought you said you didn’t need my help? Are you saying you were wrong?”

“R-Ryo-chan…! Why are you being so spiteful!?”

“I wouldn’t say that. I’m just giving you a taste of your own medicine.”

“K-Krgh…!”

Unable to keep up her composure, Chouka lost.

“K-Kya!”

“…!”

While the two were busy fooling around, a black figure suddenly appeared before them, making Chouka scream in surprise and Ryosei summon Kuro Yaiba. It appeared in mid-air and expanded by the second. As the two warily watched it, they noticed that it was taking the shape of a humanoid. This was familiar, and Ryosei was first to notice. This was what it would look like to others every time he manifested on Earth. Seeing the similarities, he concluded that someone was manifesting in front of them.

With their guard up, they watched as the figure slowly took shape. And surprisingly, he knew this person. He had curly hair that reached his shoulders, a jet-black jacket with matching boots decorated with skulls, chains that hung on his waistband, and a large scythe hanging on his back. The only difference was that he wasn’t wearing the skull mask he was wearing before, exposing his excellent facial features. As he finally appeared, he announced.

“I’m here to pick you two up, young lady, young prince.”

“The god of death!?”

Ryosei shouted.

**…………**

The days passed and arrived at the end of the week. Itsuki was alone walking through Freda’s Eternal Paradise, heading to where Ryosei took them a few days ago. He had his black Gi on, the battle gear of the Konjou Clan’s brutes. In the past few days, he didn’t make contact with any other hunter or ambassador. Instead, he simply spent his time lazing around his house. Since he wasn’t required to take the tests, his parents couldn’t force him to go to school. His sister, Ichika, would spout complaints about his inactivity but he always said that he was doing something. Of course, no one believed him.

The sound of water smashing into water greeted him as he arrived at the location. Avoiding the puddles of water sprawled across the place, he headed to the small island in the middle of everything. Sora, who was wearing a black cloak, the battle gear of enchanters, and Ren, who was wearing her usual school uniform, were already there standing in front of Freda and Yousuke just like the other day, but with additions. Beside the two stood Yamazaki Dai, the Konjou Clan’s strongest hunter, Sakurai Yosuke, one of the strongest elders and Itsuki’s current teacher, and Shimizu Yoshiko, disciple of the strongest enchanter in the clan’s history and Senkyo’s current teacher, all of them wearing their respective class’ battle gear.

Itsuki greeted them with a confused face, wondering why they were there. And as to confuse him more, Yousuke announced.

“Now that everyone is here, we will now explain the details of this operation.”

“Wait, wait! What do you mean? Ryosei and that kid aren’t here yet!”

Itsuki complained, to which Yousuke provided an explanation.

“The Di Manes Konjou Ryosei and Chouka will no be joining us. Currently, they are on a different operation from this one, due to unexpected factors, they will be tackling a different problem that only they can take on as spirits.”

“What the hell…?”

He understood but wasn’t satisfied by that. Yousuke ignored Itsuki and proceeded to the main subject.

“For this operation, our main goal is to find and bring back Yukou Senkyo and Hisho Yuu to prevent our enemies from killing Zeus, the god of Zerid. We will be using this summoning circle to send you all to Zerid.”

Yousuke tapped his feet and pointed to the platform they were standing on. They couldn’t see it properly from the front, but looking at it from the sky, the platform had a large circle engraved in it, but that was all it was. A large circle. Even if they had a bird’s eye view of the platform, most people would doubt it was even a magic circle.

“Yamazaki Dai, Sakurai Yosuke, and Shimizu Yoshiko will be accompanying you all. We wanted to send more reinforcements, but we didn’t want to overload Freda-san with too much burden, so we will just send you our most powerful forces.”

“I’m supposed to be retired though…”

“A-Ahaha… I’m glad you were kind enough to accept our request, Sakurai-dono.”

Yousuke could only laugh awkwardly at Yosuke’s sudden statement. As an elder, he was exempt from any further missions from the clan, but because of his power, Yousuke sent a request for him to join. Since it was a request instead of an order, he was allowed to seek his help, and it all depended on the receiver on whether or not they would accept. Thankfully, Kosuke accepted, but it seemed like he was intent on reminding the clan chief of the favor he was doing for him.

“Will now begin activating the summoning circle. To all of those participating in the mission, please stand inside the circle.”

**242 – Fear**

Itsuki, Sora, and Ren stepped onto the platform and into the circle at Freda’s announcement. Dai, Kosuke, and Yoshiko stayed on the platform while Freda and Yousuke stepped off. Seeing that everyone was in position, Freda clasped her hands and began mumbling something in a strange language. As she was doing that, Yousuke spoke out.

“Freda-sama is our trump card. With her, we have the upper hand over the enemy. As they are unaware of the existence of the Lost Maiden, they will misunderstand the appearance of ambassadors as the day Judgement Day commenced. This will allow us to hide other ambassadors from them. Namely, Yukou-kun and Hisho-kun. Use this information as a weapon and spread the news that ambassadors have arrived. Along with that, never say or do anything that will lead to exposing the existence of the Lost Maiden and her identity.”

As if to signal the end of Yousuke’s speech, a pillar of opaque blue light shot out from the circle and confined the people inside it.

“Please do not leave the circle. After a few minutes, the circle will automatically transport every one of you to the summoning circle in the middle of Yuwokrn, the continent of Zerid where Yukou-san will be on. You must gather information on their possible whereabouts and find them. Konjou-san told me that their last known location was near the Border City Iqanlr. That is our only clue.”

Everyone nodded at Freda’s words.

“Before getting summoned to Zerid, I will bless you with the power of ambassadors. However, you will not be able to make full use of them until you obtain your respective Divine Weapons. Usually, the gods will give them to you without trouble, but due to Hades’ death only a few new weapons are forged, and the rest of you will have to find the Divine Weapons of the previous generation.”

“What!? What’s up with that!? How are we supposed to find these things in a different world!? We don’t even know what they look like, who knows where they’re at!”

Itsuki boomed as he complained to Freda, but she was already expecting this.

“Worry not. By becoming ambassadors, you will all gain god’s blessing called Fated Winds. This will guide you all to your respective Divine Weapons. They can come in many forms of coincidences, noises, images, and other signs, but all you have to do is trust your instincts, and you will be guided by god.”

“That sounds convenient. If its using instincts then wouldn’t you find the first one, Watanabe-kun?”

“Well, guess you’re right.”

Sora added, convincing Itsuki that this was in his favor, putting an end to any other possible complaints. Seeing as no one else had questions, Freda continued.

“After giving all of you your powers, I will lose my physical body. But this will be beneficial for us, as I will be able to watch over all of you and give you all your powers in the best possible moments. Please relay this to Yukou-san.”

“Affirmative.”

Everyone responded in understanding. Silence then filled the atmosphere, leaving only the background noises of water smashing and flowing in their surroundings and the ruffling of clothes as everyone scanned themselves, making sure that they have the items they needed for the mission. Then, Freda announced, breaking the silence and sending everyone to attention.

“Ten seconds before the transport. Everyone, may luck be with you.”

Everyone nodded in response, but then something happened. All of the sudden, Itsuki ran toward the edge of the circle.

“H-Huh!? Wait, what!? My body…! I can’t control it!”

“What!?”

Everyone exclaimed in surprised voices, but the first to act was Ren, who used the pole of her spear to knock Itsuki back to the center of the circle. He took the hit, but he stood his ground and didn’t move from his spot.

“Everyone, stop him!”

Seeing that her attempt was ineffective, she shouted for help. At that time, Itsuki gripped her spear and launched a punch to her gut, but just before she was hit, Ren let go of her spear and jumped backward. Itsuki threw away the spear and resumed his dash out of the circle.

“Anyone! Anyone at all, stop me!!”

Itsuki shouted in a panic.

“What a handful student you are.”

Sakurai was next to block his path. With him, there would be no problems since all he had to do was stall him for three more seconds. But then, he missed.

“…!”

No… even Kosuke didn’t expect this. As he was about to secure Itsuki’s arm, his hand passed through his body. Right when he thought he somehow missed, Itsuki rushed forward sending his whole body through Kosuke crossing through him as if he was a ghost. With no one else to stop him, all that was left for him was to leave the circle. But then, just as he was about to reach it a scream resonated in his ears.

“Stoooop!!!”

“Kgh…!”

Sora came from the side and tackled him, pushing Itsuki to the ground and locking him in place. Itsuki struggled, but with only half a second left, there was no possible way for him to escape. But as a last struggle, he raised his fist and threw it to the ground, making contact with the edge of the magic circle and creating a crack. Everyone saw that and paled, but before they could do anything about it, the opaque blue light swirled and solidified, consuming everyone inside it.

A few seconds passed, and all that was left was Yousuke, staring blankly at the platform where something alarming just happened right before his eyes. The six people he sent to Zerid were gone, and Freda, who was the only person he could ask about it was gone, just as she said would happen.

The magic circle cracked, but he didn’t know what dangers that caused for them. Agonizing in his lack of knowledge to comprehend the situation, he could only say one thing…

“So this is how Hashimoto felt, huh?”

**243 – Deep Wish**

It's cold, but at the same time, I’m burning up.

The normal temperature my body frequented to indicate there was nothing wrong with me was in complete disarray. It felt like my chest had a bottomless chasm gaping through it, sucking up all the heat in my body. But then, there was my hand, thigh, stomach, and neck. All of those places were producing so much heat that it felt like I was bathing in lava. But that was only natural. I lost one of my irajas, after all.

I see red. Red dyeing the hard, brown soil. A dreary place with numerous cages and chains. There was no sunlight, only the small, flickering flame coming from a single candle inside the lamp that was hanging by a decrepit door was allowing color to enter my eyes. That was everything I could barely recognize before everything began to darken.

My vision flickered. I think I passed out.

Red. The next thing I knew the soil was all but red. Unlike before, I could twitch my body, allowing me to recognize the liquid pooling around my body. There was also sound, but all I could pick up was that there was noise around me. I couldn’t recognize anything other than that.

My vision flickered yet again. Haha… Despite my critical condition, I was still barely conscious. Was this some kind of harassment? Are the gods mocking me? Why couldn’t I just stay unconscious? I can feel it. It was all too clear to ignore but much too dull to do anything about. The pain in my body, the heavy breathing to keep myself alive, the cruel sight of my sorry condition, and the state of unmoving which forced me to do nothing but think about everything that happened that led to this moment.

Hisho Yuu. That was the name that person gave to me three years ago when I arrived to fulfill my single mission. Find and bring the true mana wielder back to Zerid. It was all too sudden, but given the situation, there was nothing I could do but follow. I didn’t want to stay still anymore, I didn’t want to burden anyone anymore, and I didn’t want to be useless anymore, but in the end, that was all I did.

Because I didn’t care enough to learn Japanese at home while everyone did, I wasted half a year learning it and another half to become fluent. Others would consider this a fast learning pace, but considering how common that language is back home, it was all too slow. Time was of the essence and I wasted so much of it. I tried to search for my target, but all I did was draw attention to myself and got marked by END’s hunters. Even though I knew I was an Angel, I was too careless. Then, when I finally felt the presence of my target, I turned a blind eye to it using weak excuses like “I can’t be sure yet,” “maybe I was mistaken,” or “there’s no way it’s them,” but I knew that deep inside me my true thoughts were saying: “I don’t want to do it.”

Yukou Senkyo. My target, and the person I fell in love with. The first time I met him, I thought he was just some pervert. But the more I spent time with him I realized he was earnest. He was an honest person that wasn’t afraid of sharing his thoughts and his true self with others. He only did what he wanted, but he was serious with his every step. And surprisingly, behind that straightforward attitude was a mind that tied into so many elements around it that it made him a complicated person to get a hold of. With every step, he thinks, but at the same time, he knows when to step down. Smart at times but often does stupid things. A person that is true to himself and open to others. Simple but complicated. In his every action, I can only describe him as an earnest person that supports that with solid results. What an interesting person.

The person I wanted to be. That was him.

When I saw his angel crest light up when he fought with his life for us, I knew immediately. Ah, this person is the one I’m looking for. But before I realized that, I quickly buried that idea deep in my mind. I wanted to know more about him and how he became like that. By the end, I used the excuse “he was manaless when I checked him” as a shield to continue observing him. What made this person like he is? I wanted to know more about that, but he was shrouded by mystery. Hidden memories kept secret from him by his father and the person that claimed to be his sister. I couldn’t know anything he doesn’t, but I thought it was fine since all I wanted was the person he was at the time, the one that was built on the memories he had.

That was the plan. But then, he began saying strange things to me. “You’re not useless,” “You won’t be alone anymore,” “Then maybe, you’ll be able to act like your true self.” His words always break through my defenses. I wanted to be him, a person that was reliable. But then I began to doubt myself. I didn’t know what I was doing anymore. I just continued living my life like that. I was running away from my problems, and in all honesty, I probably would have continued doing so if he hadn’t said that single sentence.

“May our relationship turn into a great one.”

It was that person’s ideology that a strong bond can only be forged through hardship. The trials and tribulations of life between two people. It was a like a wake-up call that made me realize my stupidity. I had been relying on that person for so long that I neglected the whole reason I came to Earth in the first place. But in order to fulfill my purpose, I needed to betray him. I didn’t know what was waiting for him after I bring him to Zerid and to that person, but knowing the context, it probably wasn’t anything good.

I was really selfish. I wanted to protect what was important to me in Zerid, but I also didn’t want anything to happen to him. I knew if I acted on this, it would probably destroy everything I had built up with that person, but at the same time, if I didn’t do anything I would end up running away for the rest of my life. There was truly only one choice. Had I stayed under his protection and chosen to ignore my purpose, I would have become useless. Had I relied on him for all of my problems, I would have become useless without him. But if I managed to solve the problem myself, then I would have a broken relationship, but with proof that I wasn’t useless. I didn’t want to keep being protected. I’ve had enough of that my whole life. It was my time to step up and prove that I was someone worthy of standing beside that person. With that in mind, I solidified my will and chose to tear the relationship with that person down with it.

I changed. I didn’t want to be anyone else anymore. I wanted to be myself and prove that I was someone worthy of claiming that I wasn’t anyone else but myself. Solving this problem and fixing my relationship with the person dear to me would be my proof.

I love him. But as I thought, I couldn’t claim it so boldly after thinking about what I was about to do. His words almost dissolved my confidence, but I stood strong and took the next step forward.

But as I thought, I was useless.

All I had to do was make it back home, but I ended up getting stopped by an ambush. I let him get kidnapped under my care. And I had to wait for someone else to come and solve the problem for me yet again. It was only when everything turned into chaos that I was finally able to claim that I became useful.

My heart dropped when I saw that person drop to the ground after being consumed by his own magic. Magic created through a person’s mana cannot harm them. That is common sense for all who lived in Zerid, but for some reason, it didn’t apply to him. When his defenseless self was faced with danger, I put myself between them. It pierced one of my irajas, what could be considered a heart of a vampire.

Hahaha… Truly pitiful. I don’t regret saving him, but to think that I needed to pay this much to finally be useful… truly…. Truly pitiful. …and worst of all, only now that I’m here bleeding out the blood from my body do I finally realize that I probably didn’t even need to do any of that.

The charm of protection. The small reward the Konjou Clan first gave us after beating Fulgur. Since it was the same as a barrier, I simply kept it at home and never used it, but it may have been different from Senpai. He’s a cautious person that thinks of possible dangers before they happen. For a person like that, carrying around that small charm is only normal. If it was like that… then I truly am useless. Even after offering myself it still wasn’t enough to be useful.

It hurts. Ah… it hurts so much…!

Why? Why am I even here? I should have just died back then! If I knew I was only going to be a burden from there on, I should have just stayed back with my mother and father! Even if it meant death, at least I didn’t run away…! Just… let me die…

*“\*I… will save you.\*”*

Ahhh… even when I’m dying, I can still hear his voice… Senpai… I’m sorry, for everything.

*“\*I won’t let you apologize here.\*”*

Stop it. Just stop. I’m not worth it. I’ll never be worth it. So, please… just let me go.

*“\*I won’t let it end here! I will LIVE!\*”*

It was at that moment that I felt a change in my body. Everything became hot. It was as if my blood was rampaging inside of me. I’ve… felt this before. It was the same heat that I felt after drinking Senpai’s blood. It was like his emotions were pouring into me.

Hahaha… It was around the day after I came face to face with Senpai. It seemed like I did something embarrassing because of that. I can’t remember much, but I remember Senpai’s troubled face when he talked about it.

…I wonder. What would happen if I could start again? It would never happen. It’s impossible, after all. But if there was one single thing that I want to change. Then, please, become useful. I can’t be like Senpai. I can’t see what he sees in me. But what I can be is “useful.” I want to be “myself.”

**244 – The Boy and The Wolf**

“Hey. Hey! Wake up!”

“Grr… woof!”

“Ah, fine, fine! I’ll let YOU handle it.”

“Woof!”

In a dark, gloomy room filled with numerous cages, a boy and a large wolf gathered around a person on the ground. The large wolf towering over the boy with its jet-black fur lurked in the shadows as it circled the girl. The boy’s white hair and short structure reflected an innocent boy around the age of 11, but his stoic expression as he examined the area could only be compared to that of a seasoned war veteran. It was a gory sight, but it didn’t faze him. There was blood all over the floor that spread a few meters away from the body. Most of it already dried up and got sucked into the soil.

Normally, any normal person would have died from blood loss. But this was no normal person. It was a vampire. That was the only reason they were able to live through this scene. It was because vampires don’t have hearts. What they had was something similar to one.

Irajas. Small spherical balls inside vampires that produce blood. Unlike hearts, irajas have the power to store excess blood and make a connection with other irajas. Being connected to others increase blood production and blood storage. This allows vampires to use as much blood magic as they want. These creatures normally have five irajas. They appear in random parts of the body, and their location is determined at birth. Having all five irajas active is important for any vampire.

But here, before the two was a vampire that seemed to have one of their irajas broken. Although vampires can use blood to regenerate, irajas can never regenerate. Upon losing one, it is normal for these vampires to be unable to move from a few hours to a few weeks. However, there were also examples of some who can withstand the shock of losing an iraja and keep moving. The most recent example of that is the recent Ycziiagdr Revolution where the king was overthrown for corruption. The leader of the revolution took fatal blows to four irajas but managed to keep moving and pushed the uprising to victory. But from the looks of it, this vampire didn’t possess that kind of strength.

The boy stepped back as the wolf walked up to the body. It used its snout to roll the person over and got a good look at the person in question. It was a girl. Her appearance was horrendous. There were holes and scratches all over her clothes that were dyed red from her own blood. Her face and body possessed the same blood stains but no wounds.

“Hey, I thought this person lost their iraja. What gives?”

The boy complained as he stared at the gaping hole in the chest area of her clothes. The clothes were damaged, but her skin was clearly fine. Drenched in blood, but otherwise intact. The wolf turned to the boy with a dissatisfied look.

“Woof, woof! Arooo!”

“I guess that makes sense. It’s probably just the skin that regenerated.”

The wolf nodded as if satisfied and turned its focus on the girl. It began licking her hands which were covered in dried blood and cleaned them up. The boy watched the scene with an impatient look on his face.

“Come on, let’s just leave!”

“Grrr!!”

He shouted at the wolf, but it responded with a growl of refusal as it stared at him threateningly.

“K-Kuu… pride of the pack… You always like using that excuse as a shield!”

“Arf!”

The wolf barked at him dismissively as it proceeded to clean up the girl’s face after it was done with her hands.

“M… Muu…”

“Arf? Woof, woof!”

“Ah, you’re finally awake?”

The wolf called out to the boy after hearing the girl let out a weak groan. Catching his attention, the boy walked up to the girl. It didn’t look like she was going to wake up immediately, so he tried to force her awake by shaking her body.

“Hey! Wake up!”

“Grr…”

“Don’t worry, I’m being careful. Oh, see! She’s opening her eyes!”

The girl’s eyelids fluttered as she tried to regain her vision. She even began to move her body around as her consciousness surfaced.

“Took you long enough.”

“H…Huh…?”

She let out a confused voice as she saw the boy.

“Woof!”

“Hyah…!?”

Then jumped back in surprise when the wolf suddenly barked beside her.

“And you tell ME to be careful.”

“Arf…”

After the boy quickly reprimanded the wolf, he shifted his eyes back to the girl in front of them.

“You, do you know where you are?”

“W-What…?”

She reflexively asked him back, but he didn’t answer. When her brain finally caught up with the conversation, she looked around and saw she was in an unfamiliar place, but despite this, it was clear where she was, and breathed out the answer.

“Zerid…”

“Well, obviously! Are you sure you don’t have anything wrong with your head? You lost an iraja, didn’t you?”

“Iraja… M-My iraja!”

Upon realizing the situation, the girl hurriedly clasped her chest. Then, her face twisted in confusion. She moved her hand from her chest to her thigh, then to her stomach, to her left hand, to her neck, and back to her chest. The boy and the wolf watched the girl fumble about in confusion. Silence filled the room. The usually impatient boy wanted to say something, but even he could read the atmosphere that made it hard for him to speak. And finally, the girl spoke.

“It’s… there.”

“Huh? What is?”

“My iraja! It’s still there! What did you do!?”

The once pale and bloody girl suddenly approached the boy in vigor, trying to extract questions out of him. The wolf stayed by the side watching the scene play out in confusion. The boy glared at the wolf to help but then it shrugged its neck in refusal. He wanted to smack it right that moment, but he had other problems to take care of.

“Hey! Answer me!”

“I don’t know! I don’t know anything, so lay off!”

The boy tried to push the girl away, but she quickly backed up and avoided his palms.

“W-What’s wrong with this girl!?”

“Woof.”

The boy shouted in confusion while the wolf let out a sympathetic bark. It wasn’t even a minute ago when she just woke up from an unconscious state, not to mention being knocked out from a clearly fatal incident. She acted frightened and confused in the beginning, it was what the boy saw as a natural reaction, but then she suddenly livened up and pressed him for answers he didn’t have.

“It wasn’t him… Then why? I was obviously stabbed. I could vaguely remember the feeling of my iraja getting destroyed, but I can still feel its heat… Wait, what happened after I got stabbed again…? I can’t remember. Then, could it be Senpai…? But how…”

The girl began mumbling at the corner all by herself. She was pacing around in restlessness as she let out incomprehensible words. Then, it seemed like she finally returned to reality as she stopped getting absorbed in her thoughts, but then she shifted her gaze to the boy.

“Wait, a nemi…?”

Specifically, her gaze was directed to the white wolf ears and tail that the boy possessed. But then, he protested.

“A werewolf! I’m a werewolf!!”

**245 – First Connections Back**

“I’m Hisho Yuu. I just came back from Earth. Nice to meet you.”

“Gotcha. I’m Garin, a member of the Ujlufi Werewolf Clan. This here is my brother, Renig.”

“Woof!”

After everyone calmed down, they decided to move to the other room and properly discuss the situation. It was a desolate room with only the bare necessities such as a campfire, rocks that served as chairs around it, and a workbench embedded in one of the walls. They decided to talk over the campfire where the chairs were placed. Well, it wasn’t like they had a choice seeing as there was nothing else in the room.

At first, Garin was opposed to it and wanted to leave as soon as possible. He was worried about being caught by hostiles since that location was apparently a bounty hunter hideout. However, Renig seemed to have convinced him to stay. Yuu could only make up what he was saying through Garin’s responses, but it seemed like he reassured him that there was no possibility of that since it had been a week since there was any movement in the area.

A week. That was how long Yuu had been knocked out. That was strange since she didn’t feel hungry at all. She asked the two if they somehow fed her anything, but through Garin, Renig said that there was no way he could do that since he was trapped in a cage of Urang Metal, the strongest metal in Zerid that has both physical and magical resistant properties. And today was the day when Garin arrived at the hideout, broke out Renig, and found Yuu.

“We’re in a bit of a hurry. Since there was apparently a huge problem happening in our hometown, we decided to go back home from traveling, but then we got into trouble with the ‘Brothers in Death.’ I got away but Renig got caught.”

“I see… the Brothers in Death, huh? Were they a trio of three skeletons who had red, blue, and black flames?”

“Yeah, that’s them. Seeing as you got thrown in their dungeon, I’m guessing you had a bad run-in with them too?”

“Unfortunately. I… uhh, was planning on coming back to Zerid but then they caught me…?”

Yuu tilted her head in confusion as she said that. Garin caught that and demanded an explanation.

“What was that? Are you asking us a question or something?”

“Ah, no, that’s not it. My thoughts just trailed off for a bit. But yeah, they caught me and I ended up here.”

“That so? Then, do you know what happened to them? Renig said that they stopped showing up after you got shoved into the dungeon through their Traveler’s Gem.”

“I do… it was a bit of a chaotic time. But, there were other people there when they showed up. We fought them, and I can confirm that one of them died. I don’t know about the other two since I got caught. The next thing I knew you two were here and woke me up. I don’t remember anything else.”

Yuu made a complicated face. But strangely enough, it wasn’t because she was recalling painful memories. It was because she was able to share such painful memories so easily. And before she could even ponder about that, Garin raised his voice energetically.

“Really!? One of them died!? Who was it, the black one?”

“O-Oh, no. It was the blue one, the one who threw spears.”

“Ah, that guy. Well, it’s better than none. With at least one of them out of the picture, I think we’ll be safe for a while.”

“Haha… It sounds like you really didn’t like them, huh?”

“Obviously! Despite being low in numbers those guys are the most well-known bounty hunters in Ridsikrn. They’re at the top of their game with the most successful hunts. With even one of them gone, we’ll finally be able to take a breather. Well, enough about us, what are you going to do?”

“Oh, uh…”

“In the first place, the only reason I stopped to talk was that Renig was worried about you. Frankly, I would have just ignored you.”

“…I-Is that so? Then, thank you for worrying about me, Renig.”

“Woof!”

Yuu let out a wry smile as Garin boldly declared his open neglection to her and properly delivered her appreciation to her savior. The thought of getting dragged into Zerid without knowing where you are was not an experience she wanted to have. This place wasn’t as convenient as Earth where following roads will guarantee you civilization. At times you’ll end up in abandoned villages or even encounter dangerous monsters. It was much worse in the sky since it has much more predators than on Earth, so she would have to refrain from flying and stick to the ground. Now that she was thinking about it, having Garin and Renig here to ask her questions was truly a blessing.

**246 – Yuu’s Intentions**

“Actually, I’m thinking of going back to Nrjia.”

“The Kingdom of Vampires…? Uhh, you said that you came from Earth, so I don’t know if you know this but…”

“Mhm. Don’t worry, I know. It’s been taken over by END.”

Yuu said so with melancholic eyes as she cut into Garin’s words. It was three years ago when news that the Kingdom of Nrjia fell to a massive attack from END. The organization had already taken over Zelaoage, and everyone knew it was only a matter of time until they moved their forces to the mainland.

Unfortunately for the vampires, their territory was chosen as their first conquest. The Kingdom quickly fell and pressured the surrounding regions. The border city between the Frukaui Country and Ridsikrn Empire was dissolved in the process. The people sought refuge in the neighboring country. Since some had homes on the other side of Ridsikrn, they attempted to go back to their homes by either circling the Fixedul Inland Sea located in the center of Yuwokrn or taking ships to circle around Yuwokrn entirely. Meanwhile, most of the ones that had homes in the border city or the Nrjia Kingdom aided in strengthening the military forces between Frukaui and the newly conquered Nrjia.

After recalling all of this, it only served to confuse Garin even more about why Yuu insisted on returning to Nrjia. Sensing his doubt, Yuu provided a bit more information.

“My family is still there. They let me escape by sacrificing themselves. At first, I went to Earth to find a way to save my family, but that plan fell through. And now, I’m here. Honestly, I don’t know if they’re still alive or not, but I’m done running away. I want to know what happened to them, for better or for worse.”

A heavy silence filled the air. After Yuu finished her declaration, Garin lowered his head in deep thought. Renig stared at him, perhaps waiting for his response, the same as Yuu. It was about a minute when he finally broke the silence and shared his thoughts.

“That is utterly stupid.”

The atmosphere became heavier as Renig drooped his ears at his response, but Yuu remained stoic as she listened to his response.

“You’re charging into hostile territory, you know? Unlike properly structured states where they’d prioritize detaining, this place will kill you outright. Not to mention the fact that your family is likely dead by now. You might not know since you ran away, but the casualty count ever since END’s attack up until the present is about half of Nrjia Kingdom’s last recorded population. There were even sightings of pits filled with corpses. It won’t be strange for you to end up in one of those pits after going in by yourself. It’s a completely idiotic plan.”

Yuu simply stared at him with a straight face as Garin spat acid at her resolve, but at the same time, she understood what he was saying. Behind his cold, thorny words were feelings of concern. Her impression of the boy was just an impulsive person that only looked forward, but seeing how he presented her with facts and probabilities to convince her proved that theory wrong. It reminded her of a certain person which made her reflexively smile.

“What? Are you mocking me?”

Garin saw that as an insult and pointed that out, but before anything got worse, Yuu quickly explained herself.

“Ah, no, sorry. I just thought that the way you responded was very similar to a person I knew. They were a great person that was always someone you could rely on. I admired them.”

“H-Huh…? That so? T-Then, that’s all the more reason to stop what you’re about to do!”

Garin’s cheeks reddened for a bit as he slightly averted his eyes. It seemed like he wasn’t too good with compliments. But still, Yuu had to respond.

“No, because they are such a person that I need to do this.”

Garin’s quickly regained composure and furrowed his brows at Yuu’s response.

“What do you mean?”

“Because I was with such a person, I kept losing sight of who I was. I just kept following them, being able to move just because I knew they were there. The whole reason I came back to Zerid was to put an end to that. I am my own person, and I will solve my own problems. Even I know I won’t be powerful enough to take on END, but that isn’t what I’m after, not anymore… I just want to find out what happened to my family. If they’re alive, then I’ll escape with them, but I have no plans of taking on END directly. In and out, that was my plan from the beginning.”

Garin let out a heavy sigh and scratched his head as he stared at the ground with a difficult expression. It seemed like he had trouble trying to refute that reason. And before he could even say anything in response, Renig called for his attention.

“Woof! Woof, woof, woof!”

“I know, But we can’t just—”

“Woof, woof.”

“Is she even going to go with this?”

“Arf! Woof! Woof, woof!”

“Haaaaah… just like me, huh…”

“U-Uhm?”

Sensing that their conversation was ending, Yuu cut in as if to bring the conversation back to the main topic.

“Ah, nothing. Just a bit of a personal thing. Anyway…”

After quickly dismissing his previous statement, Garin fixed himself and stared Yuu straight in the eyes as he responded to her.

“If that’s the case, then we know a person on the inside. They can get you in and out of Nrjia.”

“W-What?”

Yuu stared at Garin with a dumbfounded expression. It wasn’t long ago when he was severely reprimanding her for her suicidal idea, but now he was trying to give the information that would help her accomplish that idea.

“Huh? What’s the matter? You wanted to get inside, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I did. But… why are you telling me this?”

“That… doesn’t matter. Anyway, what matters is whether or not you want to get this person to help you. If you don’t that’s fine. But if you do, then we can help you. Of course, with a condition attached.”

Garin declared and examined Yuu’s reaction, gauging what she thought of his offer. Then, after a bit of a pause, she replied.

“Hmm… Could this condition have anything to do with your hometown?”

“That’s right. You’re sharp, it makes things easier for me. Now, I’m in a bit of a similar situation. My hometown got taken over by some people from END, but not as bad as Nrjia. If we act quickly, we can still recover our town back. If you help us out with this, I can take you to my connections at Nrjia and get you inside. There is no compromise.”

“I understand.”

Yuu nodded, and immediately gave her response.

“Then, I’ll take you on your offer. This can also be a good chance for me to get a good grasp of the enemy’s power. I don’t see a reason for me to refuse.”

“Is that so? Then that’s great.”

“Woof, woof!”

Renig barked in excitement as he circled the two of them. It seemed like he was nervous the whole time they were talking, but now it looks like he was satisfied with the result.

“Okay then, let’s get moving.”

**247 – In The Wild**

Dust clouds formed as dirt and grass were thrown into the air by the paws that dug into them to gather the force to drive through the empty field. The black spot in the green canvas of nature was Renig, who carried both Garin and Yuu on his back. It had been a day since Yuu, Garin, and Renig met, and right now, they were on their way to their first destination, the Town of Qasen.

Qasen wasn’t the closest town to where they were, instead it was closest to the Ujlufi Village and the border of the Fallen Nrjia Kingdom. It was the perfect place to stock up on supplies and serve as a midpoint for the two locations. They planned to finish their work in Ujlufi Village, restock back in Qasen, and finally head to the Nrjia border where Garin and Renig would introduce Yuu to their connections.

At the pace they were going, they estimated arriving at Qasen tomorrow morning. They came from the edge of the Inland Fixedul Sea, where the skeletons’ hideout was hidden in a cliffside facing the ocean. It was fixed with an illusionary wall that hid the entrance from the outside. The only reason Garin caught on to that was because he could smell Renig’s scent, since the illusion only distorted sight, not smell.

Normally, it would take a few more days to get to Qasen from that location, but thanks to Renig, it was shortened to a three-day trip. But that wasn’t without problems. Since it was Yuu’s first time riding a giant wolf, she wasn’t quite sure what to do. It was a bit awkward at first. There weren’t any reigns to hold onto like the horses on Earth, so they had to grab onto Renig’s fur. Yuu was unsure how much power to use to latch onto his fur, but after having hands-on experience with what would happen to her if she gripped lightly, she learned to grip like her life depends on it. She didn’t want to get blown away anymore.

Additionally, it was difficult to keep still when she was just sitting on a wolf’s bare back. It wasn’t like saddles weren’t developed in Zerid. In fact, there are saddles for most mountable species in this world, wolves like Renig included. But when Yuu asked them why they weren’t using saddles, Garin answered as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

“Saddles? We don’t need them. Just ride on Renig’s back.”

“Woof!”

It left her dumbfounded. It seemed like people like Garin were accustomed to riding on wolves’ bare backs that it didn’t even register as uncomfortable to them. In the same way, Renig was used to having people on his back and latch onto his fur that he doesn’t even flinch. In the end, Yuu had to bear with the uncomfortable ride.

“Okay, I think this is a good place to stop.”

Garin said as they arrived near the edge of a forest they entered. Yuu quickly got off, clutching her stomach and with a face that looked like she was about to hurl. This was the result of their trek through the twisting forest where there were obstacles scattered all over the place. Since going around the forest would take up too much of their time, they opted to go pierce through the mass of nature.

Fortunately or unfortunately, Renig was the perfect mount for the job. His species is well versed with the forest and going around the obstacles that filled it. He could keep a constant speed and tackle nature’s challenges with ease. But that also involved many twisting, turning, jumping, crouching, and sudden changes in speed that Yuu wasn’t used to. Garin was completely fine with it and didn’t even bat an eye at the more than bumpy ride, but it was quite different from Yuu. At some point, they had to stop for a while as Yuu threw up her innards and waited for her to recover.

“That was… hell…”

“Get used to it already. We’ll gather food, you set up camp by those trees. We saw some sifij mushrooms and a river that might have fish on the way, so get a fire ready.”

Without even waiting for her reply, Garin quickly remounted Renig and disappeared into the trees. Yuu could only face the ground and stay still until she finally stabilized. She could still feel the vulnerability of her stomach, but she could at least manage to walk and set up camp like Garin asked her to.

She slowly crouched down and placed her palm on the ground.

“Stone Wall.”

Yuu uttered and a circular patch of ground rose from under her palm until it was at a good level to use as a chair. It ended up looking like a dirt pillar with a patch of grass above it. She repeated that another time. She then collected the nearby sticks and placed the in the middle of the two makeshift seats, but set aside three that would serve as good rods. She placed her palm on the ground again and cast the same spell, but this time, a circular barrier of dirt rose to surround the sticks, making a pit. Finally, she shot a fireball into the pit and ignited the sticks. After making sure that everything was in good condition, she sat down on one of the seats.

“You’re really good at this, aren’t you.”

Looking at the source of the voice, Yuu saw Garin and Renig coming from the trees with sifij mushrooms and fish stored in different fiber nets.

“I trained myself to specialize in magic.”

“I’ve never seen anyone make intricate seats and firepits before.”

Apparently, they usually had Renig make a firepit by digging out a hole and collecting nearby sticks. Garin would find food and then start a fire since Renig couldn’t do that. But when Yuu offered to help yesterday, they both wore surprised faces as she prepared a camp better than anything they ever made.

This was probably because of the fact that no magic exists that make these specific shapes. Magic is formed from mana that is shaped by spells. Whenever someone uses magic, they chant a spell that shapes mana to create a fixed outcome. However, this is different in low-teir magic. What shapes the mana isn’t your words but your mind, and instead of using the mana in the air, it uses the mana in your body. By thinking of the outcome of the original spell, you have your base, and by applying your thoughts, you can alter that outcome. This wasn’t something that someone taught Yuu, she learned this by herself after engaging in the art of sculpting.

“Well, I can say the same for you. You crafted those nets on the go.”

“We werewolves specialize in using our hands.”

It was only yesterday when Garin collected fiber as they traveled and crafted them into nets while riding Renig. Despite being an incredibly bumpy ride, he still managed to craft them with precision.

He explained that it was only normal for werewolves like him to do that. The species are good with their hands along with the flexibility and information processing superior to humans. Garin and Renig’s clan usually had werewolves do dexterity work and pure wolves like Renig do the power and guard work.

Incidentally, yesterday, Yuu asked him about the werewolves that END have. The werewolves Yuu encountered so far were closer to wolves than what Garin looked like. They had more hair and were more aggressive. Compared to that, the only wolf-like attributes Garin had was wolf ears and a tail. Yuu even mistook him for a nemi because of that. But in response to that question, Garin shot her a fierce glare, and after a few seconds, he responded in a low growl.

“Those things aren’t werewolves.”

In the end, Yuu chose to let the subject go and moved on.

**248 – Message at Daybreak**

The night passed and came the break of dawn. The sky was filled with a deep blue as the sun was about to rise on the horizon and replace the two moons of Zerid. On the edge of a certain forest, Yuu, Garin, and Renig prepared to set off to the town of Qasen. But before they took off, Garin took out a white gem from his pocket. It was a little clouded, but otherwise reflected the small amount of light around it. It was a traveler’s gem, and Garin quickly used it to tear a hole in mid-air, causing a rift to appear.

“Renig, a paper and quill.”

“Woof!”

Reacting to that, Renig jumps into the rift and disappears as the rift slowly dispersed into nothing a few seconds later.

“It’s really useful, isn’t it? The traveler’s gem.”

Yuu said as she saw the scene unfold before her.

“Yep. A widespread tool used for instantaneous transport. Anyone wants their hands on this thing, but at the same time, that’s the reason why almost no one has it. Haha, how ironic.”

Garin said so as he made a bitter face. The traveler’s gem is one of the most prevalent inventions of Apocrology, a branch of science exclusive to Zerid which focuses on magic. It was first used as a tool to cross worlds and was originally named “Rift Gem,” but with the incident 17 years ago travels to other worlds quickly dropped. They had to find other ways to use the rift gem to make it useful again.

Their solution to this was to apply different functions to the gem. Now, you could use it to travel a certain distance in a given direction, commonly used by transporters since using this function of the gem allowed the rift to stay up for a prolonged amount of time. Another function is to use it as a core for a fixed portal that allows one to travel from one fixed location to another. The portal only activates when mana is applied to it, and it can be deactivated by cutting off the mana source, allowing people to use it as a dimensional door that can send you to two rooms in one doorway. And finally, the function Garin gem was set to. The gem can mark a location and every time the gem is used, it creates a rift in that specific location no matter how far away, however, the rift can only hold for a few seconds before disappearing.

With these three new functions added, the item was renamed from “Rift Gem” to “Traveler’s Gem” since all three of its uses were useful to travelers as it could be used for general movement, portable homes, and storage areas. The gem’s durability highly depends on the distance between rifts and the time a rift is kept active. Because of this, there were many attempts to make its usage consistent, but perhaps since it was new technology, there haven’t been any breakthroughs to make this possible.

“Honestly, it’s really convenient but not at the same time. It’s way too expensive, has limited uses, and you can’t even use all of the functions in one gem; you still have to go to the nearest apocrophist to change its functions! The only reason we have this was that it was given as a reward. It’s useful, sure! But the maintenance that you have to keep up and usage conservation makes this an annoyance for traveling! You’ll get used to it, then you’ll want more when it breaks, but you won’t have enough money to buy one! Aghh, those damned rich aristocrats!!”

“A-Ahaha… Oh, isn’t it time to bring Renig back?”

“…Ah, yeah, you’re right.”

Yuu’s lips twisted into a wry smile as she successfully aborted that conversation. It seemed like she made Garin resurface some unpleasant memories and was about to go into a ranting spree. Thankfully, she had an excuse ready.

Garin ran the traveler’s gem across the air once more and summoned a rift. Through it, you could see Renig sitting in front of the rift with a piece of paper, a quill, and a bottle of ink. Garin quickly took out the paper, opened the ink bottle, applied the ink to the quill, closed the ink bottle, and took out the quill. In that time, Renig quietly walked around him. And after everything was done, the rift disappeared.

“Wow, that was quick.”

“Anything to save durability on this damned gem.”

He spat words of wrath which made Yuu unsure how to react. Ignoring her troubled face, Garin took the quill and wrote something on the paper. After he finished writing his letter, he discarded the quill and cleared his throat. Then, he whistled. It was quick with a rhythmic tone as if signaling something. In reality, that’s what it was.

The same tune was repeated in the distance. They were currently on the edge of the plains, not a place where sounds would echo. Looking up in the sky where Yuu heard the sound come from, the source approached them close enough to spot its figure.

It soared through the skies with its ultramarine wings. Its sharp, golden eyes pierced the space between it and Garin. Arriving at speeds that shook the tranquil air, it opened its wings to land softly on Garin’s arm with its sharp talons and repeated the tune once more through its pointed elongated beak.

“Hey there, Rifa. I’ve got a message for you.”

“Is that a Uebat bird?”

“Yep. A majestic bird hailed for being the ‘Sky Bird’ due to its feathers that change depending on the color of the sky. Since its feathers act as camouflage from predators along with its insanely fast flight speed, it’s been ranked as one of the best messenger birds. It’s incredibly difficult to tame due to its aggressive nature, but when you do, it shows strong loyalty as long as you treat it properly. It’ll always follow you from a distance and you can call it whenever you want. Heheheh… how’s that? Amazing isn’t it?”

“Y-Yeah, it really is.”

*“\*It would have been better if you weren’t so smug about it!\*”*

Yuu retorted in her mind but didn’t let it out her mouth. Taming a uebat bird truly is an amazing feat, but most of that amazement leaked out when she realized the only reason he bothered explaining was that he wanted to boast.

“Rika is its name, huh? It's cute, is it a girl?”

“Yeah, it’s a girl, but it’s not supposed to be cute, it’s strong! Rika means ‘Luminous Raptor,’ so it’s strong!”

“Doesn’t luminous means it’s shining? Aren’t uebat birds supposed to be hidden?”

“There it is! The usual ‘your naming sense doesn’t match what they’re made for’ attitude! Just so you know, I named her Rika because the sky is always bright, okay!? Got a problem with that!?”

“H-Hmm… Well, if you put it that way it makes sense.”

“Thought so!”

After having made his point to Yuu, he folded the paper to make it shaped like a long rectangle and wrapped it around Rika’s leg.

“Get this to Vems and later I’ll treat you to some juicy meat.”

“Eeeeeee!!”

Rika screeched as if agreeing and flew off into the sky. Yuu looked curiously at the direction it was flying and thought for a second.

“Wait, isn’t that the way to Qasen?”

“Yep, that’s it. If you’re wondering why… well, you’ll find out later. Come on let’s move now.”

“Okay.”

“Woof!”

**249 – Frontline Town Qasen**

“We’re here.”

Garin said as Renig slowly decelerated at the top of a hill. Yuu gingerly peeked from behind the strands of her hair that got disheveled at some point in the ride. Clutching her stomach, trying to hold in the food she ate from climbing her throat, she straightened her back and directed her gaze to the direction Garin and Renig were facing.

There, she saw a large town stretching from below the hill. A townscape made of wood, stone, but sometimes with the occasional concrete building that stood out from the others. In the middle of everything was a large wooden manor that was spaced out from the town by a beautiful garden.

However, that wasn’t all that was there. The town was encased in a circle of solid purple light stretching into the sky, enough to tower the tallest building in the town. Inside that was another circle of purple light that separated the town from the manor in the center. Along with that was the clear activity of armored people outside the town. They seemed to be patrolling the area as they moved mechanically. Above the town were multiple birds that circled the area as if patrolling just like the people that seemed to be guards. And finally, there was a line of people stretching from the entrance of the town down the road.

“Let's go.”

Garin said, and unlike before, Renig respond by walking up to the town instead of running. Since the ride was more stable than before, Yuu got the chance to ask Garin some questions.

“Hey, what’s going on with this town?”

“Ah, you’ve never seen this before, huh? I guess that makes sense. Qasen wasn’t like this three years ago.”

He nodded as if convinced.

“Well, the light around the town is a fortress barrier. An artificially manufactured arcane structure in the town keeps it up to serve as walls in times of invasion. Unlike the usual barrier you can cast with magic, this one is much stronger with resistance to all kinds of attacks. What you see here is its ‘half-state.’ It only has walls up instead of surrounding the whole town to save power. They’ll only set it to a ‘full-state’ when a threat arrives. This along with the heavy security is because of Nrjia’s fall. After END took over the kingdom, Qasen became one of Ridsikrn’s frontline towns. The Laxid Kingdom, the nation Qasen is under, requested aid from the empire and sent their forces to frontline towns like this one.”

“Oh, I see… Now that I’m actually here, it really feels like we're at war now…”

“War, huh… I don’t know if that’s the right term for it. Ever since three years ago, it's been a stalemate. END wasn’t making any big moves and the Emperor insists on focusing on defense instead of attacking. I heard people didn’t like that too much, but eh, those aristocrats can deal with their own problems.”

“I wonder why…’

“Beats me.”

Yuu tried to think of the Emperor’s reasoning for his actions. Perhaps he was afraid of END’s power since they were able to conquer Nrjia in a single night. Was it a problem of resources? She didn’t think that should’ve been the case. END is clearly a hostile existence in Yuwokrn. Their ruler doesn’t engage in politics and only attacks territories around it. It was like a stain that was corrupting Yuwokrn, slowly spreading into different lands. Forging alliances with other countries in the land wouldn’t be hard since END is already seen as a common enemy by all. When she finished that thought, she realized something.

“Wait, why isn’t anyone attacking END?”

It would be one thing if a kingdom was afraid of going against END’s power, but it’s a different matter altogether if everyone was the same. She was certain that there should’ve been at least one nation that attempted to retaliate, but it didn’t seem like that was the case.

“Dunno. But if you want to know more about politics so much then you’re in luck.”

Garin directed a mischievous smile at Yuu as he said that. Then, as they closed into the line that seemed to be for people who want to enter the town, Renig went straight past them and headed straight for the entrance. The people in the line were all looking at them in confusion while some were openly angry and started shouting at them for ignoring the line completely. Garin and Renig ignored them too, but the same wasn’t the same with Yuu.

“Hey, is this okay?”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s fine, just leave it to us.”

Garin exclaimed with confidence as he tapped his own chest with his fist. She was still a bit unsure, but if they said it was fine, she couldn’t really say anything back since they were the ones who said to come here in the first place.

They finally arrived at the entrance. The fortress barrier that was only a wall of solid light opened up an entrance to the town and even had an intricate design that made Yuu wonder how it was made. In front of the entrance were guards checking card-like items from the people in the line. They would take it and place it in front of a crystal ball. She was a bit curious as to what was happening, but before they could get any closer, something happened.

Garin started whistling a tune that caught the eyes of the people in line and, of course, the guards that were posted at the entrance. Two of the guards walked up to them and blocked their path.

“Halt! What are you doing here!? Get back in line!”

The guard with two horns protruding from their helmet shouted at them and pointed his spear at them. The other guard that accompanied him said nothing, but did the same and pointed his spear. However, Garin only stood there and stared at them and continued to whistle. Seeing that he wasn’t following his orders, the guard became more irritated and put more power in his voice.

“Didn’t you hear me!? Get back or else we’ll be forced to take you down!”

“It’s fine. Stand down.”

A mellow voice came from behind the guard. Everyone’s attention shifted to the source of the voice. There, stood a man donning a large tailcoat over a black vest and red pants with their edges tucked into black boots that were shaped like a horse’s legs instead of a human’s. He wore white gloves that covered his large hands. His face was pale white but had what seemed like a black beard growing from the edges of his face into his vest. His eye sockets seemed to be empty, but two red pupils were floating over its dark cavities. They had no nose and a mouth that twisted irregularly as it reached the ends of the white parts of his face.

“C-Count Vems!”

“They are my guests. Please, let them through.”

“Y-Yes sir!”

**250 – Count Vems**

“I am Count Vems Uakras of the Ilagxi, the lord of Qasen. It is a pleasure to meet you.”

Vems introduced himself looking at Yuu specifically. After being allowed through Qasen’s walls, Yuu and the others were escorted to the heart of the town where they entered Vems’ manor and were brought to one of their private rooms to talk. The room was spacious and was designed heavily to fit a person of high standing. There, Vems sat on a sofa chair while Yuu and the others sat on a sofa across from him, all the people served with tea in front of them, Renig included.

“I’m Hisho Yuu of the Vampires. I escaped Nrjia Kingdom’s fall by seeking refuge on Earth. And now, after three years, I’ve decided to come back and find out what happened to my hometown and my family.”

The red pupils in Vems’ eye sockets widened at Yuu’s introduction. But his composure didn’t falter. His eyes returned to their normal size and responded appropriately.

“My, this is a surprise. To think I would be meeting a vampire today. I find it noble of you to come back to find out what happened to your kin. However… I cannot deny that the path you will be taking to manifest your will be a treacherous one.”

His head lowered slightly as he thought about the state of the Nrjia Kingdom. The difficulty of the task was clear in Vems’ expression.

“I understand. But still, I will continue.”

“I see… what a marvelous resolve you possess. I wish you good luck. ”

“Thank you.”

“Hey, can I talk now?”

As if to break the heavy atmosphere, Garin called out unceremoniously. To that, Yuu stiffened at Garin’s rudeness. But contrary to her expectations, Vems let out a light chuckle.

“Haha, you are as impatient as ever, Sir Garin.”

“Shut it. Now, I want to talk about my hometown.”

“Has something happened to the Ujlufi Village?”

“Yeah, END invaded and took over the village. They’re taking my people captive.”

After hearing Garin’s quick overview of the situation, Vems’ face was colored in a different shade of surprise from learning Yuu’s story. It was a grave expression that shook his unwavering demeanor.

“This… is not good. So, END has finally begun to move…”

“That’s right. That’s why I’m here. Vems, can you lend me forces to take back my village?”

At Garin’s words, Vems let out a depressed sigh before matching his serious gaze.

“I apologize. I cannot lend any manpower to your cause. Now that END is becoming active again, it is all the more important for me to prioritize the strength of the Frontline Town Qasen. Breaking from my responsibilities only to benefit my own needs is a disgrace. Sir Garin, I am certain you knew my response would be like this.”

“Well, it was worth a try.”

Garin said it as lightly as if brushing the dust off his shoulder. It seemed like he never expected his request to go through in the first place. To this, Vems shook his head lightly in slight exasperation. Then, to progress the conversation, Garin continued.

“Then, can you grant me access to Hevel’s workshop again? I need to stock up on resources.”

“Of course, that is fine. Lending you manpower is one thing, but there are no problems with you entering business with him.”

“Awesome! I’ll go there now! Come on, Renig!”

“*\*Slrrp\**—Woof!”

Licking off the last drop of tea from his cup, Renig got up and let Garin get on his back, and headed for the door.

“Sir Garin, your access card.”

Vems was unfazed by Garin’s sudden takeoff and calmly said in a loud voice for him to hear. After realizing something, Renig walked back to Vems.

“Seriously, I am fine with your attitude if we are in private, but please behave yourself in the workshop. There are other people there who will have a sour face with your brazenness. If you keep that up, even my position as the count will not be able to stop your inevitable ban from accessing Sir Hevel’s services.”

“Those aristocrats… fine I got it.”

“Then, please walk properly.”

“Tch!”

Garin begrudgingly got off Renig’s back and got on his feet. Satisfied, Vems then turned to Renig.

“You too, Sir Renig. You are supposed to be Sir Garin’s guardian, what will the Ujlufi Clan think when they get word Sir Garin insulted another aristocrat? The last blunder is still fresh in my mind.”

“Woo…”

“As long as you understand.”

Renig nodded his head with shame. It seemed like he was actually being repentant. Yuu simply looked at them in surprise. It was about three days since she met Garin and Renig, but she was already well aware of how wild they were. When Vems quickly reprimanded them and quieted them down, it was almost like seeing a miracle.

“Here is the access card. Please, proceed with caution.”

“Got it…”

“Arf…”

Vems handed them a silver card from under his coat. When Garin took it, the two walked through the door quietly and left. After a few seconds, Vems turned to Yuu.

“I’m sorry you had to see that.”

“A-Ah, no it’s fine. I’m already used to how lively they are.”

“In my humble opinion, I think that might be a problem in and of itself. Well, I guess that makes me the same, haha…”

Vems laughed with a wry smile. Yuu had a question in her mind for a while now. Seeing as everything seems to be calming down, she decided it was time to bring it up.

“Um, Count Vems, what is your relationship with Garin and Renig? It seems like he really dislikes aristocrats, but he’s very friendly with you despite being one, and you don’t seem to mind. I’m just a bit curious.”

“Ah, that one. Well, surprisingly, we have had a long relationship. It had been nine years since we met. At that time, I was but a traveling merchant. On one of our trips, we were unfortunate enough to get caught in a Sunken Nest Exodus.”

A sunken nest exodus is treated as a natural disaster where the creatures that live in a sunken nest are forced to leave their nest due to various reasons such as habitat deficiency, mass culling, and overpopulation. Vems continues and specifies that habitat deficiency was the reason for the exodus they encountered.

“We thought we were dead, but then they came. Despite being at the young age of 10, Sir Garin and Sir Renig came to protect us. He was young, but that only served to mask his true power. He fought wild, but not senseless. It was after the incident that I got acquainted with him as an arms dealer and an information broker—”

“W-Wait, I’m sorry to interrupt, but… How old is Garin again?”

“Ah, yes, he may look like a child, but that would be the werewolf’s blood keeping him like that. In reality, he’s 19 years old. Although he’s old by other people’s standards, he is undoubtedly childish. So it would be best to treat him how he looks.”

“A-Ah… yes…”

Yuu’s voice trailed off to silence as she dropped her head to the ground. Something inside her was breaking, and the resounding scream in her thoughts shaped it perfectly.

“\*He’s OLDER than me!?\*”

Vems watched Yuu’s reaction with a knowing look, seemingly used to this kind of reaction. Perhaps his previous clients had the same reaction when they found out Garin’s true age. And to deal with that, he simply continued.

“It seemed like he had reasons of his own for leaving his village at such a young age, but we never talked about that.”

An expression of sadness flashed on Vems’ face for a second, but he swiftly buried it and continued.

“They often use my services for almost anything. Since he is also a bit of a busybody, he would bring people to my doorstep looking for consultation, information, and armaments among others. Well, because of that I managed to create a wide net of connections that earned me the honor of the title of count. The trigger for that was probably the time he brought the Prince of Laxid Kingdom to me due to a problem with attempted usurpation. Hahaha, I could still remember the pain my head was in after having royalty brought to my disorderly office. Perhaps because of that, I was assigned to govern Qasen three years ago as a frontline town.”

Vems told the story behind him and the two with a warm look on his face. The pain and headaches were probably true, not to mention being incredibly annoyed, but it didn’t seem like he hated being dragged around by Garin and Renig’s whims.

“I was surprised to find his tamed uebat, Rika, on my windowsill. I hurried my way down to the entrance as soon as possible. I instructed him to simply name himself to the guard before, but that didn’t go too well because of a problem on both sides. So the best solution was to just welcome him in person.”

Yuu nodded in understanding. Garin used Rika to contact him. But what she found strange was the need for him to go in person.

“Could you not have simply assigned a specific servant that always goes to welcome him instead of yourself?”

“Ah, that one.”

Vems let out a light chuckle before answering her.

“We do have one. However, this time he specifically instructed me to meet him in person. If I had to say, he wrote it in consideration to you, Miss Yuu. He probably wanted the least amount of people to take notice of you. Considering your situation and what you want to accomplish.”

When Yuu heard what Vems said, she was in genuine shock. She never thought Garin would be so considerate. Since she was a vampire, her presence in the Town of Qasen would spread like wildfire the moment her identity was discovered. And that leak in information wouldn’t be favorable for someone who wanted to get into the Nrjia Kingdom.

“I see… I should thank him when he gets back.”

“I am sure he would appreciate it.”

Yuu’s lips curled into a smile as she began to see Garin in a new light. But suddenly, when she was about to bring up another topic, her chest turned hot and that heat spread through her whole body until it began to hurt.

“Miss Yuu, what’s wrong!?”

Her contorted expression delivered the presence of a problem to Vems. He raised his voice in a panic, louder than any she had heard from him before. She clutched her chest as if to ease the pain and tried to stand up, but her muscles gave out and she fell back to the sofa. Unable to do anything, she breathed heavily in an attempt to bring her temperature down.

“Miss Yuu! Servants! Fetch the doctor!”

Vems’ alarmed voice slowly quieted down as Yuu’s vision faded.

**251 – A Warm Connection**

\*Clank\* \*Clank\*

The sound of rattling chains resounded in my ears. It was dark. An empty void with no shape. The only light that reflected in my eyes was my own body, the blade protruding in my chest, and the chains binding me in place. I try to move, but there were no signs that I could break out.

“Senpai…”

While I was figuring out my situation, that person appeared before me. He was staring at me with a blank expression. He did nothing. He didn’t move, he didn’t speak, but still, tears fell from my eyes. The chains suspending my arms rattled loudly when my hands inadvertently tried to hold the pain of sinking in my chest. My face quickly distorted in despair.

How? How did this happen? Was I ever so shameless that I would forget the biggest mistake in my life? My biggest betrayal to the person I loved? The one that sent me in front of the gates of hell?

The memories of me spending my life leisurely after I was thrown back into Zerid appeared in my mind. My emotions churned with anger and disgust. Finding out what happened to my family? What are you saying? You’re the one who abandoned them in the first place! It’s too late for that now! Why are you even still trying!? You’re useless!! You can’t do anything but make things worse! Just stop! Stop, stop, stop, stop, stop!!!

I try to shout all of my emotions out, but none of them come out of my mouth. It felt like I can hear them, but my throat didn’t move to voice them. But there was one thing I was able to say. I looked Senpai in the eyes and told him my deep-rooted feelings.

“…Senpai… I hate to rely on you all the time… but this one, I really want you to do… Please… kill me.”

**…………**

“Woof, woof!”

A familiar voice echoed in the room. Opening her eyes, Yuu saw Renig beside her barking happily.

“Renig…”

“Oh, you’re awake.”

“Garin…”

Hearing Garin’s voice, she pressed on the soft mattress, took off the sheets over her body, and rose from a large bed to face him. She found him by the window feeding Rika with a large portion of cooked meat. The orange rays wrapping their bodies signaled the coming of dusk. Along with that, Rika’s feathers were dyed like flames as if to prove it was sunset.

“I heard you suddenly got sick. What’s with that? Everyone was worried, Renig especially. He wouldn’t even leave your side.”

“Woo…”

Renig whined in concern as if to supplement Garin’s words.

“Ah… Sorry, I worried you all. Thank you, Renig, it seems like you were watching me the whole time.”

“Arf!”

Yuu pet Renig’s head as a show of her appreciation and he responded with a happy bark. Renig is supposed to be Garin’s guardian, but it seemed like he likes taking care of others in general.

“Anyway, what happened to you?”

He asked it before, but Garin mentioned it again with urgency. Despite how wild he is and what he says, it seemed like Garin shares at least a portion of Renig’s feelings. It reminded Yuu of how Vems said that he specifically requested him to meet them in person in consideration for her. Garin wanted answers now, but she didn’t feel it was right to continue the conversation without saying anything first.

“Thank you too, Garin. I worried you.”

“It… It doesn’t matter now! Come on, what happened!?”

Garin responded in a panic, desperately trying to change the subject. To that reaction, Yuu let out a light chuckle which Garin responded to with an embarrassed glare. Not wanting to tease Garin too much, Yuu progressed the conversation.

“I… don’t know what happened. I was just talking to Count Vems until I suddenly got attacked with a fever. My body was all hot and it felt like my blood was running laps around my body.”

“A sudden fever? There’s no way that’s the case. What else did you feel?”

Garin pressed Yuu to explain her experience in more detail. It seemed like he wanted to help in finding out what happened to her.

“Let’s see… well, I don’t know if it counts, but I had a dream… I think…?”

“A dream?”

“Yes. It was dark, I couldn’t move, and I couldn’t see anything, but other than that I don’t think anything else happened.”

“A dream, huh… Could it be a Rgler? No, but your experience was too vague. You could have just been half-conscious with that… Argh, I don’t know!”

Garin grumbles in frustration when none of his thoughts seemed to match the situation. After letting out a sigh of resignation, a screech took him by surprise, making Garin jump backward. Turning to the window where the screech came from, the figure of his tame uebat, Rika was flying away in the distance, disappearing in the golden hue of the sky. It seemed like she was finished eating and took her leave. Garin walked up to the window, took the plate, closed the window and the curtain, and returned to talking with Yuu.

“It seems like your condition is better than before, but don’t push yourself too hard. If we don’t know what happened, that’s a bigger reason to take care of yourself.”

“I understand. I’ll be careful.”

“Good. I finished ordering mine and Renig’s equipment. They said it’ll be ready tomorrow, but we never got to buy you some gear. If you can, we should check out the workshop tomorrow.”

“Got it. I think I’ll be able to go.”

“Then I’ll we’ll go tomorrow after breakfast. Oh, you’ll be staying in this room, by the way.”

“Huh!? Wait, when did I get a room!?”

Yuu screamed in surprise at Garin’s sudden claim.

“You got one the moment I sent Vems the message Rika brought him. In this place, we’re his guests. You can just sit back and relax while you’re here.”

“Are you sure you should be the one saying that to me!?”

Garin was just a guest himself. If anyone should be asking her to take it easy, it would be the owner of the manor. But Garin didn’t seem to care about that and ignored her.

“Later, Vems will be visiting you. He said he had something he wanted to talk about in private. He didn’t tell me what it was about, but if there’s one thing I can say, then it's that Vems is someone I trust.”

He delivered those words to Yuu with conviction. It seemed like he sensed what Vems wanted to talk about wouldn’t be a light story, but even though he didn’t tell him what it was about, he still trusts his decision and let him go. This was both his way of reassuring her of Vems as a person, and a way to help Vems deliver what he wants to convey. Yuu sensed the warm connection between them and his genuine care for others. To this, Yuu could only respond with one thing.

“Thank you, Garin.”

**252 – Vems of the Ilagxi**

*\*Knock\* \*Knock\**

“Come in.”

“Pardon the intrusion.”

A knock came from the door, asking for permission to enter. Allowing the visitor entry, Vems appeared, just as Garin said about an hour ago. He reassured her of Vems’ trustworthiness, but that didn’t mean she should just shut up and listen. She wanted to have a productive talk from this exchange, and having her own thoughts throughout the talk was essential. But she probably wouldn’t need to worry about that, because if Vems would bother shooing Garin and Renig away just to have a private talk with her, then the subject wouldn’t be anything that she could just shut up about.

“How are you, Miss Yuu?”

Vems greeted Yuu while checking her condition as he walked to her bedside.

“I’m better now thanks to everyone. You too, Count Vems. I appreciate lending me a room in your manor even though we just met.”

“I do not mind. Sir Garin and Sir Renig often brought me surprise guests out of nowhere in the past. I feel a bit complicated about it, but I think I got used to it. If he brought you in as a guest, then we will treat you as such. You can call it one of his strong points, but he has great intuition… Yes, that’s why I thought I needed to talk to you about this subject.”

The heavy atmosphere that came with Vems’ serious face made Yuu straighten her back. This made her pause for a second, but she managed to nod and allowed him to proceed with the subject.

“Please, go on.”

“I understand. Miss Yuu, do you mind if I placed my hand on your head?”

“Huh?”

It was such a strange request that Yuu couldn’t say anything except a squeak of confusion. Sensing this, Vems asked her a question.

“Yes. Miss Yuu, do you know what the Ilagxi are known for?”

“…Like Count Vems, they are a race that is hailed for having the ‘Arcane Arm.’ Your race evolved in a way that allowed your arms to make contact with mana and manipulate it directly, enabling you to cast magic by only moving your arms and using those arms in tandem with different magic to produce unique feats.”

“That is correct.”

Vems nodded in satisfaction at Yuu’s explanation. He then proceeded by taking off his white gloves, revealing his large, red hands.

“My concern starts with this. Using my power as an Ilagxi, I want to confirm something. Please, could you allow me to use them on you?”

“…”

Yuu was doubtful. She knew exactly how powerful Vems’ race was. Specifically, how powerful his Arcane Arm is. There were stories of his people who were considered one of the strongest military forces in Ridsikrn’s army. The ability to manipulate mana directly was not something that could be scoffed at. If she let him use his powers on her, he could easily disable her use of magic and leave her defenseless. In this situation, she knew it would be best if she simply refused for her own protection.

But then, he remembered Garin’s words, his genuine trust for the person in front of her was clearly delivered. He wanted Yuu to trust Vems, just like he did. The person in front of Yuu at the moment was nothing but a stranger she met earlier this day. But what about Garin? He might be wild and whimsical but despite spending a short amount of time with him, she could clearly sense his sincerity. Right now, Yuu trusted Garin, and if Garin wanted her to trust Vems, then there wasn’t anything wrong with doing so. In reality, there were many possibilities this could go wrong, but she wanted to believe that the person she knew to be “Garin” wasn’t someone who would let her down. With that in mind, she spoke.

“Okay, that’s fine.”

Vems’ expression seemed to be surprised with his red pupils enlarged. But then, it went back to normal the moment he recomposed himself to respond.

“I see… Thank you.”

Vems placed his large, red hand on Yuu’s head. There, time passed. A second, ten, thirty. It was after a whole minute had passed when Vems broke the silence in the air.

“I will explain everything now. But will you allow my hand to stay on your head?”

Vems asked for confirmation, but unlike before, Yuu already had an answer.

“I don’t mind.”

He didn’t say anything, but he nodded in appreciation. Then, after catching his breath, he began.

“Miss Yuu, are you aware of the fact that the mana flowing inside your body is abnormal?”

“A-Abnormal…?”

It was all so sudden. Surprised, Yuu could do nothing but parrot his words. Seeing her look confused, Vems continued.

“The power of this arm allows us to do exactly as you explained, but that is not all. Since our arms allow us direct contact with mana, we can feel the flow of mana inside a person. This allows us to find abnormalities and fix that flow of mana. Although a bit brute, it also allows us to disable a person from using magic by cutting off a person’s mana flow…”

Vems took a short pause, looked Yuu in the eyes, and continued after taking a heavy breath.

“And the fact that I cannot do any of these to you is enough to tell anyone that your mana is abnormal.”

“What…?”

Still not understanding Vems’ point, he nodded and took a different approach.

“Let’s see… Miss Yuu, how does a vampire like you check the mana flow of others?”

“…We suck their blood and process the mana inside our bodies. It allows us to temporarily ‘mark’ that target and our eyes gain the ability to see that person’s mana flow, almost as if seeing flowing red water going up and down that person’s body. If there are any issues or irregularities, we will be able to sense it through our eyes or the taste of their blood.”

“Indeed. Now, for us Ilagxi it is the same, but instead of relying on sight and taste, we rely on touch. The flow of a person’s mana to us is soft and bendable, almost like string for a puppet, we can directly touch that string and manipulate it as we desire. In the face of our Arcane Arm, mana flow is a submissive existence… However, in Miss Yuu’s case, it is different.”

Yuu inadvertently swallowed her saliva when she began to understand what Vems was saying.

“The flow of your mana is unlike any I have seen before. When I touch it, I feel resistance. Unlike how mana normally allows us to do as we please, your mana defies our will. Mana, especially one coming from the body is not like that because it is considered an extension of your body. It should be flexible and submits to the owner’s will. But in your case, I feel as if it has a mind of its own. It does not follow my will, and I am afraid that it will not follow your will either. No… perhaps it is correct to say that it is already influencing you.”

“…How so?”

Yuu asked with a heavy heart. Vems was basically telling her that her mana was defying her. Instead of being an extension of her body that is waiting to be moved, that part of her body is the one that’s moving her. She felt fear brewing inside her, but she knew this wasn’t the place to break down, so she pressed forward.

“I cannot say for certain, but I think it is possible that the mana is manipulating your mind.”

“…And what made you think this?”

“The flow of your mana. Although resistant, I could still feel its shape. It wraps all over your body, but it all converges on a single point as if that part of your body is using mana at the very moment. And that part is—your mind.”

“…”

Yuu fell silent. It was a shock to be told something like that. Her mana, the existence that was always like another hand to her, was controlling her mind. She couldn’t remember what happened, but if what Vems was saying is correct, then its only natural, because the mana is making her mind unaware of this change. It could be possible that she forgot certain parts of her memories and replaced them with new ones. And the most frightening factor about this is the fact that she wouldn’t be able to tell which is which despite knowing this fact. If they were talking about the limitless possibilities, there might even be a world where Yuu would forget about this talk with Vems and become unaware of her current state again. The thought made her sunder.

She didn’t notice it, but Yuu was gritting her teeth in frustration. She was shaking. What was preventing her from being a fake? If her memories were being manipulated, what was stopping her from creating a fabricated personality? Was the life she was living so far a lie? The emotions that came from those experiences, were those also a lie? She would be able to have an idea which part of her life was a lie or not if she could just pinpoint the time this change appeared, but the fact is that this change is preventing her from knowing that. The fact that she couldn’t answer these questions was driving her insane.

“Miss Yuu, please c-calm down.”

Vems uttered in a loud, but calm voice, making her return to reality. She didn’t realize it, but looking at his expression, he seemed to be in pain, but he was enduring that pain.

“I u-understand why you are confused… but I want you to know this single fact: You are not a fabrication.”

“…W-What…?”

Yuu asked in a shaking voice. She was a fragile thing that would break the moment you put a little force onto her, but Vems decided to handle her with care and mentioned this one fact that he knew would strengthen her.

“R-Right now… I am sensing your mana flow… and I… I think I can tell whenever the mana is influencing your body…!”

Vems began stuttering with beads of sweat dripping from his head. Looking at him closely, it seemed like his face was contorting in pain even more than before, but still, he refused to let go of her head.

“Whenever you try to revive those memories… t-the mana flow becomes heavier. Just like now, at this very moment… the mana is collecting in your mind. However…!”

Vems finally let go of her head and started breathing heavily to catch his breath. Looking at the arm he held to her head, his red skin was tinged with a shade of purple. He took a pause to catch his breath and recompose himself before facing Yuu and continuing.

“However, before we began this talk I placed my arm on your head for a minute. At that time, I can confirm with certainty that your mana was nothing like it is right now. I could still manipulate it to an extent, much unlike it is right now. It was certainly influencing you, perhaps to manipulate some of your memories, but that amount of power is not enough to create a fake personality. The way you handled yourself this morning, and how you’ve been acting up until this point, none of it was fake.”

Yuu widened her eyes at Vems’ claim. Although she knew that this was probably just all a hunch, she wanted to believe his words. Thinking that, her expression softened. She wasn’t relieved of her troubles, but it definitely lifted a weight off her chest.

“I… I see. I’m… not fake…”

“That is correct. However, going forward, it may be best if we let Sir Garin know about your situation. With him beside you, he will be able to tell if you change for the worse. Of course, this is only a proposal. It all depends on your will, Miss Yuu.”

“Mhm… yes, that might be for the best. I don’t mind.”

Yuu said after only a quick pause. She still felt shaken, but not as bad as it was before. Trusting Vems’ words, she wasn’t fake. Her memories were real, the people she met were real, the feelings she felt toward those people were real, and the emotions she felt after doing what she did to those people were also real. Although her relationships with those people didn’t turn out for the best, the fact that they were all real calmed her down. With that, she let out a heavy sigh before turning to Vems.

“Count Vems… Thank you, for telling me this.”

“No, this is much is normal. Haha, I guess even though my rank was raised to count, I could never shake off my past experiences as a consultant.”

Vems said while quickly reminiscing the past.

“Ah, but rest assured, only I was able to see through your current state. I called for a doctor, but after discovering your abnormal mana flow, I sent them away and thought it was best to handle this problem myself.”

“I see… Thank you for your consideration. It is much appreciated. But…”

Yuu delivered her sincere gratitude. However, a certain thought came to mind.

“How did Count Vems discover my mana flow in the first place? Didn’t you have your gloves on when we last spoke?”

Yuu asked while thinking back to the time she was talking to Vems earlier that day. From what she remembered Ilagxi could only manipulate mana from direct contact. Clothing from either party would disrupt that connection. Proof of that was when he took off his gloves earlier before explaining to her the situation.

“Ah, that one. I think it has a lot to do with the sudden fever attack that Miss Yuu experienced this morning.”

“How so?”

“Well, when you first fainted in front of me, I thought it would be best to carry you myself to the infirmary. But when I made contact with you, I felt the power of your mana. I touched you on top of your clothes with my gloves on, but still, I could feel the immense pressure of it. After that, instead of the infirmary, I decided to bring you to your private room where no one would make a fuss about your situation. Then, when you cooled down, so did the strength of your mana, and I could not sense your mana through clothes anymore.”

Yuu nodded in understanding. She took a long pause before continuing to process the information, but in the end, she was fine and responded appropriately.

“I see… I’m glad that it was Count Vems that discovered it. You were very helpful.”

“And I am glad I could be of service.”

**253 – Workshop of Zerid’s Science**

That night, Vems left Yuu with a warning to be careful. Since none of them knew the cause of her sudden fever, caution was a must. That being said, no one knew how to actually prevent that from happening, for now, it was decided that Yuu would always have an escort with her whenever she was out of her room.

The night passed and a new day arrived. Yuu, Garin, and Renig had breakfast on the large dining table with Vems. Everyone was delighted with the high quality of food. Then, a few hours later, it was time for the three to head to the workshop Garin said they would visit.

“It’s through here.”

Garin said as they arrived in front of a door with a sign that wrote “Apocrologist Workshop.” He took out a silver card from his pocket and placed it on a rectangular engraving on the side of the door. The engraving shined green. Reacting to that, Garin took the card back into his pockets and opened the door.

“Hevel! We’re here!”

The room was spacious with many things Yuu had never seen before. There were workbenches and stations of various kinds with items sprawled on them. Items varied from deadly-looking swords, axes, and bows to normal-looking clothes like shirts and pants. There were also accessories like necklaces, bracelets, and rings along with many colored stones that were embedded in the ornaments. Shouting into the large room, a rough voice boomed in response.

“I’LL BE RIGHT THERE!!”

Turning the corner, a large man with short, curly, grey hair appeared. He had a rough figure with a body toned by hard labor. His eyes settled on Garin and came to greet him with his arms open.

“Oho! Young Gar, you’re here!”

“Yeah. Do you have your gear ready?”

“‘Course, I do! They’re in tip-top shape, ready to take a beating! Oh… Ah, is this young lady the one you were talking about yesterday?”

While talking to Garin, the man took notice of Yuu standing next to him.

“Yep. She’ll be coming with us so she needs some gear too.”

“Oh, gotcha.”

The man left Garin and turned to Yuu.

“Nice to meet ya, young lady. The name’s Hevel, the head apocrosmith of this place. In other words, the most reliable person to make gear made from apocrology! It’ll be nice working with ya!”

“I’m Hisho Yuu. It’ll be nice working with you too.”

Yuu gave Hevel a short introduction, but to that, Hevel raised an eyebrow. She noticed this change and thought back to her actions if she did anything wrong, but nothing came to mind. Then, as to answer her voiceless question, Hevel spoke.

“Young lady, are you a person with honor?”

“O-Oh, my last name.”

In Zerid, most people are only given one name. Before people from Earth came to Zerid, that was all there was. They didn’t mind having people of the same name, so no one even thought it was a problem. But when the first ambassadors from Earth came, they highlighted this as a problem. At some point, family names were given to everyone, but because of the nature of Zeldians, most of them threw it away saying that it was an inconvenience. In the end, the only people that adopted this culture were royalty and people they honor for their achievements.

Earlier, Hevel was just surprised to meet someone related to a person with honor. Realizing this, she explained.

“No, I’m not. It’s just that I lived on Earth for the past three years. This is just the name I used.”

“OOOHH!!! Now that you mention it, your clothes are from Earth, aren’t they!?”

Hevel’s excitement immediately skyrocketed the moment he realized she was from Earth. He came up to her and took a closer look at her clothes.

“This is definitely from Earth! Nothin’ on Zerid can make clothes like this! Young Hisho… ah, wait, since you’re from Earth then you introduce yourselves backward, right? Then it's Yuu, isn’t it? Young Yuu, no… Lady Yuu how was it on Earth!? Is it as good as everyone’s makin’ it out to be!? Ah, what about—KUGAAAHH!!”

As Hevel was cornering Yuu with his newly found excitement, a well-placed dropkick sent Hevel’s face to the ground, making him writhe in pain. The instigator, Garin, got up and looked down at Hevel.

“We’re here for gear, remember! What happened to your pride as a craftsman to keeping out of your client’s private life!?”

Slowly getting up from the ground, Hevel returned.

“Argh, fine, fine, I was wrong! But you didn’t have to go that far! The hell are you trying to do injuring your top craftsman!?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Didn’t you just trip?”

“Why you little… You know this is the reason why some of the other smiths don’t like havin’ ya here!”

“They’re just aristocrats that’s why we don’t mix well.”

“There it is! That indiscriminate hate for aristocrats! Ya know, most of them will actually treat you well if you just respected them.”

“I don’t care!”

The two glared at each other in a standoff. Meanwhile, Yuu was watching them with an awkward face since she didn’t know what to do. Out of nowhere Hevel and Garin just started fighting, of course she didn’t know how to react. For now, she thought of trying to calm them down.

“U-Umm, Garin, Hevel-san, aren’t we supposed to be looking at gear today?”

The two stared at Yuu as if realizing something obvious. Then, they backed off each other and composed themselves.

“She’s right, old man. Get to the gears already.”

“That’s what I wanted to do in the first place… Still, Hevel-san, huh? That’s the first time anyone’s called me with an Earth honorific.”

“A-Ah, sorry about that. Would chief do fine?”

To Yuu’s suggestion, Hevel raised his hand gesturing for her to stop.

“Nah, that’s fine. This is a good change of pace. It’s like I’m dealing with someone from Earth… wait, I guess that’s technically what it is. Ah, feels good.”

“Can you never stop saying stupid things?”

“Haa!? The hell’d you say!?”

“U-Uhmm…”

Just like that, the two entered another argument. Yuu was at a loss. They calmed down for a second but they got back into it the next. She tried to walk up and diffuse the situation again, but Renig blocked her path and shook his head slowly with his eyes closed. Sensing the deep regret coming from that expression, Yuu took his advice and simply stood by the sidelines. After that, the two argued for another five minutes or so.

“Okay, this is it.”

After letting the storm pass, the two finally calmed down and Hevel led them to a workbench with various items arranged in front of them.

“The culmination of apocrology and my pride and joy as a Sourn. Some of these items are mass-produced, but I tweaked them a bit to match how you two fight.”

Garin and Renig stared at the table in clear excitement. They were inspecting each item as if playing with newly bought toys. By the side, despite their fighting earlier, Hevel was watching the two go through his items with a warm look in his eyes. To this, Yuu came up to him and asked.

“Hevel-san, you said you were Sorun earlier?”

Earlier, Yuu inadvertently addressed Hevel with an honorific, most likely from his old age and his professional atmosphere, well, the one he had before his brawl with Garin. He took quite a liking to it and insisted her to keep calling him that. Yuu felt like he was one of the people that would make a fuss about every single detail related to foreigners, but she kept that to herself.

“Yeah, I’m a Sorun. I bet ya think it's strange to be out of my home country aren’t ya?”

The Sorun are local to the Kingdom of Uikakrn. It wasn’t like Uikakrn and Ridsikrn were at odds with each other, but it surprised Yuu to find someone from another nation with a high position of head apocrosmith since Zeldians tend to be lineal.

“Yep, a surprise isn’t it? Well, that’d be the case three years ago, but now it’s a well-known fact that Soruns are the most compatible race when it comes to fiddling with apocrology. Although our bodies aren’t as evolved with magic as Sikrns, it allows us to be more sensitive to tools and magic stones, and along with that, we can understand an arcane structure better than anyone else.”

“I see… That’s amazing, but… did the discovery of that have anything to do with Nrjia’s fall?”

“Ahh, yep that was the case. The night of the invasion, when people were trying to evacuate to Fruakui’s borders, a single Sorun that happened to be there stood up to help everyone escape. Coincidentally, I happened to be there too and saw everything.”

“What happened?”

At Yuu’s question, Hevel held his chin and paused to think of a good response. A few seconds later, he managed to form his words.

“It was a massacre. Standing in front of the Frukaui and Ridsikrn’s Border City, he killed every threat with efficiency and precision with his ranged magic tools. He armed capable warriors with small, but deadly weapons that shot faster than any bow, a large barrel that shot huge explosive rocks that took out swarms in a blink of an eye, and a long cylindrical mass of metal that spewed magic that chased the vitals of his enemies… After everything calmed down, we found out two things: first, that he was a Sorun and second, that he went by the name ‘Tatari.’”

Yuu fell silent at Hevel’s words. She never would have known such a story since she escaped to Earth that night. The story he told had a heavy weight to it. Instead of being amazed by his heroic act of saving people from Nrjia, his name which meant “curse” made it feel like he was out for blood. It felt as if the people being saved were only a result of the person’s bloodlust.

Sensing the heavy atmosphere, Hevel cleared his throat and quickly shifted the topic.

“Welp! That’s how everyone found out that we’re actually good at apocrology. It didn’t take long for Soruns to be called into Ridsikirn as apocrologists. Some didn’t like it at first. I mean, I can’t blame them after what happened to Nrjia, but still, most of them decided to come. I guess being a part of ‘The Nation of Arcane Innovation’ was a bit too big of an opportunity for them to pass up.”

Ridsikrn, The Nation of Arcane Innovation, was currently the most technologically advanced sovereignty in Zerid in terms of magic. A land filled with Sikrns, mana fairies that can manipulate mana and create magic in different ways, and a land where apocrology was first born and prospered. This made Yuwokrn one of the most powerful continents of Zerid.

**254 – The Mind-Numbing Power of Arcane Innovation**

“Alright! Now that you have your gear on, it’s time to show you how these babies actually work.”

Hevel announced. He decided to explain Garin’s items first and walked up to him. Then, he took a small cylinder out of his pockets. Applying his mana to it, the cylinder shout out a beam of light and extended the length of the cylinder. He then pointed it at Garin’s boots. It seemed to serve as a pointing stick.

His boots were made of leather that extended just below his knees. They were dyed in a dark shade of green that was kept together by a similar-colored string.

“Let’s start with Young Gar’s gear. At the bottom, he’s wearing a mass-produced item called Boots of Gravity but I modified it a bit to suit his style. By flowing mana into these things, it’ll use a dark gem, a gem that can use dark magic, to control the weight of the wearer. What’s more, is that it can control your center of gravity, allowing you to balance on anything as long as you actually place your center of gravity on the center of the thing you’re trying to stand on. He bought a standard pair of these last time so he knows how to use them. Young Gar, why don’t you show Lady Yuu how it works?”

“Sure, I don’t mind.”

Hevel took two small circular objects from his pockets and threw one at the wall and another at the wall opposite to it. The two objects stuck to the wall’s surfaces and created a thin string between them. There, Garin jumped onto the string and ran from one side to the other, then back again with ease. Despite having a large body, he swiftly crossed the string as if it were flat land.

“As you can see, the boots let him control his center of gravity precisely so that he doesn’t fall. Well, that’s the standard function. Young Gar, stand on the middle of the string.”

Garin followed Hevel’s words without question and got back on the string.

“I’ll throw this at you. I want you to kick it, but apply more mana to your boots before making contact.”

Hevel took out a throwing knife from his pocket and presented it to Garin. He responded with a nod, giving Hevel his consent.

“Alright, take this!”

Hevel threw the knife at him and when it got close enough, Garin hopped, applied more mana to his boots, and kicked the knife away. He then landed on the string again to keep balance. Although it was a string, it doesn’t show any sign of collapsing on him. When Garin first fixed his vision, he saw Yuu and Renig looking at him in awe. He tilted his head in confusion since he didn’t do anything that great.

“What are you—”

When he was about to ask them about it, he was immediately silenced when he saw the knife he kicked floating in front of him. Seeing that everyone was speechless, Hevel explained.

“I installed Ifar Stones into those boots. It lets you apply your mana signature to anything it touches. In other words, when your boots touch anything, it applies your mana to it. And since it’s using the boots as a medium, it copies the functions of the boots along with it. Then, I made it so that anything with the same mana signature and arcane structure would integrate and adjust itself to the main body. In simple terms, it makes that item orbit you and control it with your mana. Since Garin’s fighting style focuses on disarming weapons from the enemy and using their weapons against them, this is the best item to use to support that.”

“Whooaaa!!”

Garin shouted in excitement as he stared at the knife slowly floating around him. His eyes were sparkling brighter than ever before. But when he tried reaching out for the knife, his brows furrowed and the bright sparkle in his eyes quickly faded.

“Hey, I can’t reach it though?”

When Garin takes a step forward to grab the knife, it moves away at the same distance. To that, Hevel explained.

“I told you before, right? It might be separated from your body, but it has your mana inside it now. It also has the same gravitational functions that the boots use. The boots only make it so that you can take items and have them around for you to use. If you don’t actually use them, it’ll be meaningless.”

“Ooh, so I just have to use my mana!”

Garin stretched his hand out to the knife. Then the knife changed its course and placed itself on Garin’s hand.

“Oohoho! It actually worked!”

“See. But be careful not to waste its mana. It only applied the same amount of mana you used when you made contact with it. Which means it's limited. Whenever you’re going to use the mana inside the items you touch, just keep in mind that you’ll lose control of it when it runs out of mana. Oh, and you can’t use this on anything too big or on too many items. The dark gem installed into this thing isn’t strong enough to handle heavy loads. If you have too many things in control or try to use it on a large item, it won’t work, and at worse, it’ll overload and break… just like every item you bought from me last time…”

Hevel shot a fierce glare at Garin that made him instinctively back up. Before Yuu met Garin, apparently all the items he had broke from careless use.

“A-Anyway! What’s the next item!?”

Hevel blew his nose at his obvious attempt to change the subject but moved on anyway. This time, he pointed at the rectangular bag attached to Garin’s belt. Opening it, a plethora of white needles were shown to everyone.

“These are a set of Physically Structured Magic Needles. A special item I made for people like Garin who’re good with their hands and aim. They’re made with Srija Metal, a metal that can extract and store magic power—a type of processed mana that’s made by thinking of the arcane structure of a spell. It’s been processed so that it can be used by anyone, so you just need to send your thoughts into these needles. The best comparison to this would be using low-tier magic by forming the structure in your mind. With this metal, you can store the magic power of a spell and cast it without having to chant. It’s the best form of apocrology that allows chantless casting. The problem is that it can’t store enough magic power to cast mid-tier magic. Some tried using a larger piece of srija metal to fit in enough magic power, but before it could even reach the middle of the chant, the arcane structure became jumbled and mixed together to the point where an Arcane Optimizer couldn’t fix it. In the end, to cast mid-tier spells a heavy block of srjia metal was needed. It was inefficient to the point where it was useless so everyone discarded that technology. But with this…”

Hevel took eight needles from the box and handed them to Garin and took out another small circular object.

“I’ll throw this out the window and want you to hit this with a needle, then hit that needle until all eight connect, all while trying to cast a mid-tier spell in your head.”

Garin tilted his head in confusion, but the serious look in Hevel’s eyes prevented him from asking any questions. They walked up to the open window and prepared themselves.

“Ready… Go!”

After Hevel threw the target out the window, Garin immediately locked onto the object and threw all eight of the needles in a smooth, continuous flow that didn’t even last three seconds. The first needle hit, the second connected to the needled, and other succeeding needles connected to the preceding one until it made a snake of needles. Then, after all eight needles connected, they disintegrated, and the wind around where they were suddenly gathered and shaped into many high-pressured needles that flew into the distance. It was the mid-tier magic called “Needle Storm.”

“I-It worked!”

While everyone was looking outside the window, Hevel explained.

“The reason why everyone had problems with srija metal was that it has an annoying function where if the magic power inside it goes over a certain threshold, it absorbs the magic power into the metal. To get around this, I made it so that the arcane structure of these needles doesn’t take in any more magic power past its threshold. Now, it stores magic power properly. But the key part here is the fact that it uses numbers to make up for the quality. You see, the threshold in a large block of srija metal is too low compared to multiple smaller pieces of srija metal. That’s why I made them in the most efficient mass that can store magic power and handle their shape easily. If you connect eight of these needles while trying to cast a single magic spell in your head, it successfully stores the magic power needed to cast that spell. After that, it uses the Arcane Optimizer coated in its body to arrange the magic structure properly so that it casts correctly. And finally, the magic activates.”

The three were listening to him. Yuu got lost about halfway into his explanation, but Garin still seems to be keeping up and asked a question.

“Then, can this cast high-tier magic too!?”

“Theoretically, it can. To cast low-tier magic, you can do that with a single needle. For mid-tier, eight needles. And for high-tier, you’ll need twenty-four. But there’s a problem. Unlike casting low- and mid-tier, most high-tier magic has conditions you have to meet. These needles can’t cast magic that needs anything other than magic power. That limits your magic to spells that need to be cast in a shape. High-tier magic, ‘Hell’s Pillar,’ is an example of this. It needs to place five points in a shape of a circle. To cast that using this item, you need to connect twenty-four needles and shape them in a circle. It’s highly conditional and you’ll need enough mana to supply all of these. It’s not something you can just use willy-nilly.”

To Hevel’s words, Garin nodded in excitement. It seemed like his warning didn’t faze him and was still enthusiastic about the thought of using high-tier magic using the needles.

“Oh, and be careful whenever you put mana into these things. When you do, the coating makes it so that they stick to other needles. That’s how they maintain the connection. If you put mana into these while they’re grouped in a pile, they’ll just stick to each other and they won’t come off until they run out of mana.”

While Hevel was explaining all of this, Yuu was just looking at them with a blank face. She didn’t understand what they were talking about. She turned to Renig who was sitting beside her and saw that he was listening intently as well. Something inside her broke when she realized that a wolf was beating her in terms of intelligence.

Hevel, who didn’t notice Yuu’s plight, continued. He pointed at the light plate armor on Garin’s chest. It was a plate of grey metal with red engravings placed on his chest.

“This is the Plate of the Bloodcrazed Beast. Unlike everything else, I made this exclusively for Young Gar. It can’t block attacks from anywhere except the chest, but I didn’t design this to protect you in the first place. When you wear this, whenever you get hurt and draw blood, or if you hurt someone and draw their blood, it uses the melted blood gem inside of it to suck that blood and empower you. Its arcane structure is connected to the wearer’s heart and infuses it and the body with physical strengthening and enhanced regeneration. In other words, the more you get hurt or hurt an enemy over a prolonged period of time, the stronger you get. It’s the perfect item for the combat-crazed beast that you are.”

“Hahaha!! You know exactly what I like, Hevel!”

With an energetic voice, he took a dagger from his back that was supposed to be his new weapon and cut himself with it. The wound naturally drew blood, but then his plating glowed red, and the blood disappeared. A few seconds later, Garin frowned.

“What the hell? I thought it was supposed to make me more powerful?”

“I told you didn’t I? The more you get hurt over a prolonged period of time. That little cut won’t be enough to make a big difference. In the first place, you know how costly blood magic is. Those vampires are the only ones that can normally use them.”

Yuu let out a wry smile when Hevel spoke roughly about vampires. But he didn’t know she was one so it wasn’t like he could be blamed for being disrespectful to a client. She just let it pass and continued to listen.

“But now that you have this, you’ll be able to use the same blood magic the harder you fight. Besides, look, your wound is already closing.”

Everyone turned their gaze to the place Garin cut his skin and saw that it was slowly closing.

“Oh! You’re right!”

Garin traced his closing wound with his fingers. Then, he let out a light giggle.

“As creepy as ever, I see.”

Hevel said to jab at his behavior and continued to the next item.

“Okay, next is this one…”

At this point, Yuu looked at every item Garin was wearing. Aside from the Boots of Gravity, the set of Physically Structured Magic Needles, and the Plate of the Bloodcrazed Beast, there were twin daggers placed in scabbards attached to his belt behind him, a pair of fingerless gloves that reached his forearm, a green mantle on his back, and two blue bands, one wrapping one of his ears and the other on the base of his tail.

Then, there was Renig who was wearing armored claws, armor on his shoulders and thighs that also seemed to serve as storage, armored ear-pieces, and two bands wrapping his neck and the base of his tail.

Looking at Hevel, who was explaining everything in complicated words and jargon, along with Garin and Renig, who seemed to be listening to him intently, it felt like at some point she was left out and couldn’t understand anything anymore.

It took them until the end of the day to finish everything and pick out new gear for Yuu. By the time Hevel tried to explain to her the items displayed in the workshop, her brain was completely fried and shut down. In the end, they decided to bring the items she thought were interesting to the training grounds the next morning to actually have a feel for how they work.

**255 – The Price of Arcane Power**

“Aight, then! I’ll see ya both early morning and I’ll have your items ready before you leave!”

“Th-Thank you, Hevel-san.”

“Thanks, Hevel.”

“Woof!”

Yuu, Garin, and Renig gave their thanks as they left Hevel’s workshop. It was the day after they first visited his workshop. The three finished testing their gear on the practice grounds and sealed the transaction by paying for the items.

Walking down the hallway, Yuu’s expression looked like she was in a daze. Despite only being morning, it looked like she had all the energy drained from her face. It wasn’t much physical exhaustion as it was mental exhaustion.

This morning, she tried to understand the inner workings of her gear and all the other options that were available to her. It was true that she was a local of Zerid and already knew of apocrology, but knowing its existence wasn’t the same as knowing how it works. Since Hevel talked in all jargon as he tried to explain her gear, she had a bit of a hard time trying to grasp how her items worked. But thankfully, she managed to overcome that challenge and picked out a decent set of items… If it were only that, then perhaps she wouldn’t have looked so worn down.

“15,188… How…”

15,188 Hjor. That was the spine-chilling amount that all their items totaled to. Hjor is the local currency of the Yuwokrn continent. And as it happens, Hjor is the strongest currency in Zerid. This is because of the rise of the Nation of Arcane Innovation, Ridsikrn. As the birthplace, and currently most advanced nation of magic tools, the demand for their coinage became the highest in the whole world. Of course, there were other factors such as using those revenues efficiently, but it was undeniable that magic tools were the root cause of this.

Reminding herself of this, Yuu paled as she did the calculations for converting Yuwokrnian Hjor to Japanese Yen. Before the incident 17 years ago that cut them off their connection with Earth, the last recorded conversion rate for 1 hjor was equal to 342.11 yen. Taking this into consideration, Yuu inadvertently uttered the total price of their items in form of Japanese Yen.

“5,195,966.68… Where did you… that kind of money…”

She spoke in broken sentences as she recalled the prices for each item.

For Garin:

2,099 Hjor for the Plate of the Bloodcrazed Beast

1,599 Hjor for a pair of Kindred Beast Daggers

1,000 Hjor for two Bands of Magic Power

949 Hjor for a pair of Modified Gloves of Magic Threads (Garin Based)

749 Hjor for a pair of Modified Boots of Gravity (Garin Based)

699 Hjor for a set of Physically Structured Magic Needles

599 Hjor for a Magic Nullifying Mantle

For Renig:

1,499 Hjor for the Claws of the Feral Beast

1,099 Hjor for a set of Pure Wolf Armor with Gravitational Storage

1,000 Hjor for two Bands of Magic Power

849 Hjor for a pair of Modified Armored Pure Wolf Ears (Renig Based)

For Yuu:

849 Hjor for the Vest of Guiding Winds

749 Hjor for a pair of Modified Boots of Gravity (Garin Based)

599 Hjor for a Magic Nullifying Mantle

450 Hjor for a Collar Barrier

400 Hjor for a Bracelet of Peaceful Nature

“What’s wrong?”

Unaware of Yuu’s internal plight, Garin asked. Unable to take his casual attitude, Yuu finally snapped.

“What’s wrong!? You asked me what’s wrong!? What’s with all of those expensive items?? And how did you even afford these!? It’s 15,188 Hjor, you know!! In Japan, that’s 5 million!!! How are you able to buy all of that with a casual expression!? Are you secretly an aristocrat!? Royalty!?”

Yuu grabbed Garin’s shoulders and was on the verge of shaking down the answers out of him along with his breakfast.

“Y-Yuu, seriously! I just took the money out of our storage using the Traveler’s Gem! Me and Renig collected most of those from achievements and requests in Haequras! Sometimes we get large rewards from outside sources too! We just don’t use our money much that’s why they piled up so much! Come on, just calm down!”

“How can I calm down!? You basically gave me about 3,000 Hjor for free! You’re lucky mostly picked out mass-produced items! How do you think that’s going to make me feel if I bought high-end items!?”

Garin didn’t expect this, but Yuu was the type that didn’t like being beholden to someone. But now that he thought about it, when he first met Yuu, she said that the whole reason she came back to Zerid was to separate from someone she kept relying on too much and be independent. It was then that he realized that this might not have been the best move. With an awkward face, he tried to reason with Yuu, beads of sweat trickling down his head all the while. Even Renig was watching in concern.

“L-Look, I’m sorry I didn’t consult with you! But think about it! Are you really about to come with me, knowing that we’re going to be facing someone from END, with nothing but your magic? You’re right, it costs a bit of money but that’s better than coming underprepared!”

To Garin’s words, Yuu looked away for a second and faltered. Seeing the change, he quickly took that opportunity to free himself from mortal danger.

“Listen, this an investment! I didn’t buy you gear just to give them to you; it’s so that you can be more useful when we actually get there! Get it!?”

“Me… useful…?”

Yuu’s eyes widened and her grip on Garin immediately loosened.

“Yeah! Useful! That’s why I’m buying you these things! I’ll take those items back after we’re done, but if you do good, I don’t mind just giving them to you as a bonus. Okay? Understand?”

“Yeah, I got it!”

Yuu said in a cheery voice as she finally backed up and gave Garin his personal space back. With a sigh of relief, Garin fixed himself up. He dodged a bullet. He was reminded of the incident earlier that day when he carelessly tried to use his daggers at Yuu back on the practice grounds. The daggers he bought were something he specifically ordered to suit his combat style. An aggressive fighter that focuses on melee combat and pressuring enemies. But when he tried to use it on Yuu, she quickly parried his attacks and disabled him with only brute force.

Sure, he wasn’t serious, but that didn’t mean he was slow either. He pounced on her, but the next thing he knew, he was being thrown onto the ground like a lifeless ragdoll. Everyone watched in awe. When they got back to the workshop, Hevel even suggested buying a hand-to-hand combat magic weapon, but Yuu strongly refused after hearing the item costs. With his memories resurfacing, the tingling pain in his back suddenly felt stronger.

“Still, to think that apocrology was this advanced… I didn’t care much about it in the past, but I never expected it to have an identification function.”

Yuu shared her amazement when she thought about what Hevel was doing with their items at the moment.

“Yep, cool isn’t it? They can make the items so that they don’t work unless they’re being used by the same person. It prevents a lot of stealing, but it can still be broken. Especially in battle… hehe…”

Garin chuckled. Yuu could only shape a wry smile at his strange habits when it comes to thinking about fighting. They were currently talking about the Owner Ascription function that can be implemented into magic tools. It is a function that uses a blood gem security system to assign one or more owners to a magic item so that only they will be able to use it. It requires blood and some apocrologic tools to register and remove an owner from an item. And when using it, the item collects a small blood sample from the holder. If the blood signature doesn’t match, it will not work. Since blood gems also take in the owner’s mana along with the blood, this prevents any security breaches from blood relatives.

Yuu was reminded of the sight of Qasen’s entrance when she first got here. They had identification cards that were implemented with an Owner Ascription function that confirmed the holder’s identity. This was the same as the access card that Vems handed to Garin so that he could access Hevel’s workshop.

The three reached the lobby. Then, Garin and Renig changed their course to head to the exit.

“We’ll be going to buy some supplies. We usually just forage from the wilderness, but we don’t know if we can do that in the village, so we’re stocking up just in case. With Renig’s new armor, we’ll be able to carry it.”

“Okay. Then, I’ll be…”

Just as Yuu was about to keep Garin informed of her plans, she suddenly lost her voice. She was familiar with this feeling. Rising temperature, boiling blood, flickering consciousness. She was being attacked with a sudden fever again. Her muscles lost their power and limped.

“Yuu!”

Noticing the sudden change in Yuu’s complexion, Garin ran over to her before her body fell to the ground.

**256 – Hollow Tears**

“Mnn… Mmm…”

“Ah, Miss Yuu, you are awake.”

Opening her eyelids, Yuu heard Vems’ voice call out from beside her. She took a few moments to collect herself and grasp what was happening around her. Vems stood by her patiently, waiting for her to catch up with the situation.

“C-Count Vems… was I… attacked by another fever?”

“Yes. Sir Garin and Sir Renig brought you here and took care of you for a while. Since they had to buy supplies, they are currently away at the moment. I took over watching you the moment my schedule opened up.”

“Oh, really? I’m sorry to bother you like this.”

“I do not mind. I should remind you that you are a guest. If I fail to take care of your well-being despite being under my care, that would wound me more than anything else.”

“I see… Thank you.”

“You are welcome.”

Vems’ expression brightened when he received her gratitude. It seemed like she understood that everyone was looking out for her. That was one of the reasons that Vems was the one personally taking care of her instead of a servant. It was bad for a stranger to find Yuu in this state. Not to mention the fact that no one clearly knew what was happening to her.

“Then, Miss Yuu, do you have any idea what is happening to you? You said that you did not want to get checked by a doctor before, but I wonder if this is truly the correct course of action…”

The day after Yuu first collapsed, she told Vems to keep her away from anyone else that might find out that she was a vampire. Unfortunately, she included doctors in that list, so Vems was quite troubled by how to treat her since she was sick but still refuses treatment. It would be one thing if he knew that she could be cured if she met a doctor, but that uncertainty of his caused him to get bound by Yuu’s desperate request. Seeing Vems’ searching expression, she thought back to her experience and told him.

“I… had the same dream… I think. It was the same as last time. Pitch black with nothing there. Well, there should be nothing there… but for some reason, I feel like I’m missing something important.”

“I see… Then, does that mean we still have no idea how to stop these sudden fits from happening?”

Yuu silently nodded at Vems’ question. Seeing that, his face dropped to the ground as if it was being weighed down by the thoughts that shaped his depressed expression.

“…”

He stayed silent. It was clear that he wanted to say something, but he was still sorting his thoughts to build the words that would best deliver his intentions. Yuu read the atmosphere and waited patiently for his coming words. It was around a minute later when the silent tension was finally broken.

“Miss Yuu, I am aware of your circumstances, and I understand that this is something important to you, but if I may be rude… I think it would be best if you stayed here instead of going with Sir Garin and Sir Renig.”

“Huh?”

Yuu’s mouth was left agape at Vems’ words. The surprise was clear in her wide-eyed expression.

“I do not mean to make a mockery of your resolve, but… I must remind you that you will be facing END. We have no idea how powerful the forces they sent out were. Normally, I would let actions like this slide since Sir Garin has always been like this, and I have no intention of stopping him since he knows the dangers. Whatever happens to his life will be his own responsibility. However, Miss Yuu’s case is different. You indeed have the resolve and you know all too well about END’s power after Nrjia’s fall, but do you truly think that you can be of help when you have that volatile condition?”

“…!”

At his question, Yuu froze. “Do you truly think that you can be of help?” The question resounded in her mind.

“Let me be clear. I have no intention of forcibly stopping you. In the end, what you want to do will be your own responsibility. But I think that it would only serve to worsen the situation when you suddenly fell ill in a terrible situation. This might influence how Sir Garin and Sir Renig fight and, to be blunt, hold them back.”

“…”

“Here, in the manor, I don’t mind having Miss Yuu stay for a while. And if it’s your deal with Sir Garin then—”

An abrupt stop. In his attempt to try and convince Yuu, something took his voice from him and forced him to stop. He could only stare in silence at Yuu.

“…”

“…”

A few seconds passed without anything breaking the quiet atmosphere. Then, Vems let out a deep sigh and reached for the pocket under his vest. He took out a handkerchief and handed it over to Yuu.

“It seems I have done something out of line. I apologize.”

Vems said that and headed for the door. He placed his hand on the handle, but just before turning it to leave, he turned back to Yuu and told her.

“Please, choose your future actions with care.”

Then, without anything to add, Vems left the room. The door lightly closed without much sound as he handled it with care. Yuu only stared at the door. She wasn’t sure what happened. Vems’ words were etched deep into her mind. She understood that he was just trying to look out for her. She didn’t think he was doing anything wrong, but that didn’t mean she would think nothing of it. Still, she wanted to face his words head-on, but something stopped him.

“Ah…”

It was then that she felt something moist spread over the back of her hand.

“I’m…”

She took that hand and felt her cheeks where she was met with a running stream of liquid.

“…crying?”

Her confused face had a stream of tears coming down her eyes. She wiped her eyes and examined the liquid. There was no doubt that they were tears. The embodiment of sorrow. Did she feel sad about something? Yuu didn’t quite understand.

“Why?”

It was strange. There was no doubt that she was crying. She was supposed to be sad about something. But she didn’t feel any of it. She remembered the times in the past when she felt sadness. Her chest usually tightened, her throat would tremble at her weeping, and her eyes would cloud with her tears. She felt the same as always, but there were clearly tears running down her cheeks. She was crying, but at the same time, she was not. As she was thinking that, a light jingle resounded in the room.

“Do you want to know why?”

“…!”

**257 – Jingling Bells**

It was then that an unfamiliar voice entered Yuu’s ears. She hurriedly flicked her head to face the source of the voice. There, she saw someone standing by the open window. Leaning on the windowsill with the curtains lightly fluttering from the wind, his strange figure was highlighted by the orange rays of dusk.

He wore extraordinary clothing. Brown shoes with their tips pointed to the sky, accentuated by the contrasting red design on his left foot and blue design on his right. Baggy pants with a black and blue checkered pattern on his left leg, and a black and red pattern on his right leg. A jacket with a black base that alternated red and blue. His long sleeves alternate in design with his left arm with a white base and red star pattern, while his right arm had a black base with a blue diamond pattern. His neck was covered with a red and blue scarf. A white mask decorated with golden lips hid his face. And an eye-catching fool’s cap decorated his head with a white and black base and gold outlined tips, each one adorned by a small bell. A jester.

In his hands, covered in white gloves, was a deck of cards. The sound of rapid flicking entered her ears as the jester played with the deck, shuffling it at a fast pace.

“Who are you!?”

Yuu wiped her ears away and readied herself the moment she realized he was there. She didn’t look around when she first woke up, but she had a feeling Vems didn’t invite him inside the room. Seeing her reaction to him, the jester walked up in front of her bed as if taking a casual walk, playing with his cards all the while.

“Me? I am an illusion, but at the same time am not. A figment of your imagination come real. Ah, or was it my imagination? I forget. Many people call me by many names. The Clown, The Wildcard, The Wandering Entertainer, but what would fit me the most would certainly be… The Stray Fool.”

“W-What are you doing here!?”

The jester spoke in a matter-of-fact tone, much unlike the joker that his appearance suggested. Yuu’s agitated voice filled the room with her shout.

“Worry not. I am simply here to be of service. You could say that it’s your fault I’m here, Miss Hisho Yuu.”

“W-What…?”

She didn’t understand what the jester was saying. How did he even know her name? Was he stalking her for a while now? How much does he know? The questions come to her and pass without being answered.

“I see that I’m being quite a bother. Then, I promise to finish my business and leave. Miss Yuu, do you know what these are?”

The jester showed her the cards in his hand. There, familiar images illustrated them.

“Tarot cards?”

A deck of cards once used for card games in the mid-15th century in Europe. In the present, it was most often used as a form of cartomancy used for divination. Fortune telling. It was the first idea that came to Yuu’s mind as she saw the cards.

“Correct. This fool of yours can do much more than just perform tricks on the side of the road. In those sets of skills, divination is one of them.”

“What? Are you saying that you’re going to tell me my fortune? I don’t see any reason for you to break in just to do that, nor do I have a reason to accept that. Get out of here!”

The jester raised his finger and waved it in denial.

“Not quite, Miss Yuu. As I’ve explained before, the only reason I’m here is because of you. My reason for being here is to simply be of service. And as for the reason you will accept this is… well, Miss Yuu, aren’t you in quite a predicament?”

“W-What are you even…”

Yuu tried to deny it, but deep inside she knew. She was missing memories, kept away from her by the mysterious mana flow inside her body. There was no doubt that something about her past memories was altered. And to add to that, were the tears she shed unconsciously at Vems’ words. The hollow tears fell. It was as if they were telling her that she should have been sad. She knew something was wrong.

“You understand, don’t you, Miss Yuu.”

“Even so! What is your divination going to do for me!?”

“You can be useful…”

“…!”

“…or so I would say if I wanted to manipulate you.”

“…”

“I’m sure you’ve noticed, but the word ‘useful’ seems to be a trigger word for you. Not using it maliciously and pointing this fact out to you is my offering for trust. If you doubt my power, then that is fine. I may not be able to satisfy your deepest desires, but I can assist you. Even if you aren’t quite yourself, I can give you something that will open more paths for you to take. Of course, whatever I may give, the path you trek will be only for you to decide.”

Yuu’s fists tightened. She was uncertain. She wasn’t sure how to go forward. At first, She thought that it would be best to help Garin so that she can enter Nrjia. But after Vems’ suggestion, she realized something. She was doing the same exact thing with Senkyo to Garin. She was only following someone again.

Just because it was an easy decision, she chose to help Garin. But she never considered how to help him. If she had, then Vems’ question wouldn’t have shaken her so much. Being an available fighting force helps Garin, but in the end, she wouldn’t be able to move without him. She was planning on facing END and taking back a captured territory. What else could she do besides fighting? Yuu’s face darkened in disappointment at the fact that she never considered the question and the fact that she never changed what she was doing in the past. But just before she began wallowing in despair, she asked the jester.

“You’re… going to assist me, is that right?”

“With pinpoint accuracy. I am only here to be of service. If my services are unneeded, then I shall see myself out. Miss Yuu, your decision?”

Yuu took a deep breath before continuing.

“Fine, assist me.”

**258 – The Stray Fool’s Divination**

“Very well. Then, what question do you want to be answered?”

“What question…?”

Yuu paused for a second, thinking of the best question to ask. But it didn’t take her long. With eyes of determination, she straightened her back and asked the jester with confidence.

“How do I become ‘myself?’”

The jester nodded as he received Yuu’s question. Then, he motioned his arm across the air and a solid blue block appeared in front of her. Its length was enough so that it would reach the edge of the bed where the jester was standing.

“W-What the!? Spirit Power!?”

At Yuu’s shout, the first color of emotion appeared from the jester as he let out a light chuckle, but he didn’t bother explaining his reaction. He threw the cards on the table, making them sprawl unevenly. Then, the cards began moving on their own. The cards mixed with each other as they moved around the table in random directions. When the jester snapped his fingers, the cards all gathered in front of him and stacked themselves in a deck. With cards in hand, he expertly shuffled the cards, and the satisfying sound of fast and precise cards flipping filled the room. Finally, he placed the cards in an arc. With his finished work, he threw his arm to the side as if to signal his conclusion, and the cards slid across the table and placed themselves in front of Yuu, still arranged in a uniform arc.

Yuu’s mouth was still agape. She didn’t know what to say about the jester’s performance of handling spirit power. Was he actually just a spirit? Or was he someone that can use spirit power? She couldn’t answer those questions.

“Miss Yuu, please pick out three cards. As you do, focus on the single question you asked me in your mind.”

But when the jester called out to her, she knew that this wasn’t the time for such thoughts. Quickly shifting her focus, she thought about her question.

Why did she ask such a question? What did she want out of that question? How did she want that question to be answered? Focusing on her inner thoughts, she extended her hand and pointed at a card in the arc. Then, that card immediately moved on its own and placed itself behind the arc of cards. After focusing for a while, as if trying to deliver the heart of her question to the cards, she picked out another, and finally the last one.

With three cards placed side by side behind the arc of cards, the jester spoke.

“This is a three-card spread. It may be a beginner’s technique, but my past customers would assert their quality. Miss Yuu, if you are ready to face the voice of the cards, please just say so.”

To the jester’s question, she nodded decisively.

“I’m ready.”

“I am sure they appreciate your spirit.”

With the jester’s words, the first card placed on the far left flipped sideways and revealed the card. The card was upside down, so Yuu turned her head a bit to recognize what it was. But when she finally did, she let out a light gasp. There, was an illustration of a man pierced to the ground with ten swords. Merciless wasn’t a word that would do the sight justice. The ten long swords extended up to the sky covered in nothing but darkness as if to show sympathize with the situation.

“The Reversed Ten of Swords. The symbol of the end. Whatever you have lost, there is no reviving it. It depicts a large amount of power a person has built up, but because of many mistakes, runs away from that power. The dark sky, a representation of fear and the betrayal that happened. It could be a betrayal from another person, or perhaps a self-sabotage.”

The jester’s words resonated in her heart. It was exactly what she was feeling. It was so accurate that she couldn’t help but bite into her lips and lower her head in shame.

“The perfect card to show that you have hit rock bottom. But turning it around, that also means that you can lose nothing more. Just between the dead man and the dark sky is the bright horizon beginning to part the clouds. The chance to build your life once more.”

At that bright perspective of the card, Yuu raised her head a bit.

“However, with its position reversed, it shows that you are working against that chance. It can mean that you’re physically doing something wrong or your mentality is ill-suited for that chance. Perhaps you’ve been exaggerating your emotions to seek attention or cope. Whatever the case may be, it would be best for you to do nothing until that drama has passed but…”

The jester scrutinized Yuu once more before continuing.

“It seems like something else is making it so that drama never happened.”

“H-Huh…? What do you mean?”

“That would be something for you to find out. In the end, I am only interpreting what the cards are saying. I am here to assist, not to give answers, Miss Yuu.”

“…”

She couldn’t say anything against the jester’s reprimanding. Then, the jester moved on to the next card placed in the middle of the three. The card flipped over from the side and showed an illustration of someone handing one of six large cups with a white flower to someone else in what seemed to be a castle town. Unlike the last card, it was upright. Not knowing how to interpret it, Yuu waited for the jester to speak.

“The Six of Cups. The representation of refreshing openness and innocence. Symbolizing the joy of nostalgia and childhood innocence shown by the two children passing a flower-filled cup. Traditionally titled ‘The Past,’ it reflects that aspects of your past self have vanished, and may make you think that remembering these joyous visages is the only way to be happy. However, it indicates that you must avoid living in that past. Instead, you must use the past to help you in the present and build the future. It is the card for moving forward.”

“The past… for the future…”

Looking back at the past, she did a lot that she regretted, but there were certainly times when she was happy. Before and after she went to Earth, happiness was always present. But what did that have to do with building the future? She didn’t quite understand that one, but what she did grasp was to move forward.

And finally, the jester flipped the last card. This one was upright, just like the previous card. On it, was an illustration of what seemed to be an angel with blonde hair and red wings blowing a trumpet with a white flag bearing a red cross from the clouds, while everyone below him welcomed his tune with open arms. But unlike the other cards, there was text indicating the card’s name at the bottom.

“Judgement…”

Before the jester could explain, Yuu uttered the name of the card. She felt anxiety slowly crawling up her skin as she tried to think of the various possibilities the card meant. Seeing this, the jester opted to explain before trepidation allowed any unsavory thoughts to take over her mind.

“That’s right. A card that signals that a significant point in your life is coming. One that focuses on reflecting and evaluating yourself and your actions. And then, through that, is a period of awakening. A state of having a clear idea of what you need to change and to be your true self. A card that affects not only you but as well as the people around you. The card of Reincarnation, Renewal, or better yet, Redemption.”

“Redemption…”

Yuu couldn’t resist the urge to repeat the word that caught her interest. It was the word that meant regaining one’s honor. A chance to get back what she had before. Senkyo’s face appeared in her head. Maybe, just maybe, there was a chance to get back the relationship they had before. She thought that but realized a discrepancy.

How was there a chance of regaining what they had if the cards themselves told her that there was no reviving the past? The first and the last card seemed to conflict with each other. When she was thinking about asking the jester about it, he spoke before her.

“With these three together, the cards are telling you to learn from the past, value what you had, remember what you lived for, and use all of that to build your future. However, you have to accept that you will never regain what you had before. Focus on the coming future by evaluating yourself and considering your past actions, across all of that is your awakening. There, you will know how to truly become ‘yourself.’”

“…”

Yuu stayed silent, pondering the meaning of the jester’s words. Leave behind the past? But then what happened to the redemption she was promised? What was she supposed to get from the past? As the questions fired through Yuu’s head, the cards in front of her collected themselves into one pile and returned to the jester’s hand, along with that, the solid block of spirit power in front of her disappeared.

“Well then. With this, I’ll be on my way.”

“W-Wait! You can’t go just like that! I have questions!”

She shouted to the jester as he turned his back to her.

“Miss Yuu, I am only an assistant. I have given my services by telling you what it is you need to consider in order to reach your goal. In the end, you will be the one to carve that path. Or perhaps, would you prefer following in someone else’s path?”

His words immediately silenced Yuu. He was right. This time, it was her time to think for herself. Whatever choice she would make, it would be one that came from her thoughts and only hers. With a satisfied nod, the jester continued to the open window. The light outside turned dark. As he climbed up the windowsill, he paused just before going and turned back to Yuu.

“…With my services done, I have no more responsibilities here. However, I would like to share a bit of personal advice. Miss Yuu, I believe that my current divination would work best if you left Qasen two days later.”

“W-What? Why—”

Just as she was about to ask the jester again, she stopped herself when she uttered the word “why.” It was like something inside her clicked. She had a feeling that if she continued to ask that question, she would be faced with the same situation as before. Taking from past actions, she responded.

“I’ll take it into consideration.”

With her response, the jester nodded and let himself out the window. Yuu sat silently in the room, thinking about what to do.

**259 – Converging Plans**

“So, what did you want to talk about?”

Garin asked, facing Yuu who was sitting on the sofa across from him. Beside him were Renig and Vems. They were suddenly called by Yuu in the middle of the night. She told them she wanted to discuss something important, so they decided to gather in Vems’ office where they could properly sit down to talk.

However, when they all finally gathered and took their seats, Yuu simply sat there in silence with her head facing the ground. Garin couldn’t help but call out to her to try and progress the conversation. Then, Yuu took a deep breath before finally raising her head and facing everyone.

Fire. In her eyes, there was a burning flame that made everyone who saw her expression hold their breath. They have never seen her make such a face. It was like she was forcing her message through them with her piercing gaze before she even began talking.

“I called you all here to let you know what I plan to do. At first, I simply planned on going with Garin and helping with END, but after hearing Count Vems’ take on the situation, I realized that I was naive.”

No one spoke. They simply sat there and listened to Yuu as she delivered her speech. No one dared to disrupt the flow of her thoughts.

“First, I will announce that I will still go to Ujlufi Village to help Garin and Renig. But just like Count Vems said, it would be a problem if I fainted suddenly. If that happened every single time, I would be a burden.”

Garin threw a glare at Vems as Yuu said that, and he received that with a light nod as if both confirming her story and saying that he didn’t regret saying it.

“I could die in the middle of battle. However, that will not happen. Even if I get attacked by a sudden fever while fighting, I will not die. My body won’t allow me to die.”

As Yuu said that, she stood up, turned her back to the others, and pulled down her clothes. Various gazes gathered on her. Garin looked a bit flustered. Renig’s eyes widened in surprise, and Vems kept his composure, but all of them showed the same reaction when they saw the marking on her back.

In the center of her bare back between the shoulder blades was a red marking of what seemed to be a flame.

“I am an Angel, and this crest of mine proves it.”

No one could hide their surprise as they stared dumbfoundedly at the crest. How could they not? It was a marking that appeared on beings with a divine soul, a symbol of immense power.

“With this, even when my body is unconscious, the divine soul inside of me can take over and protect me. Of course, normally, you can’t do that just because you are an Angel, but for me who was recognized by my soul… it is possible.”

“…”

The rustling of Yuu’s clothes filled the silence in the room as she fixed her clothes. Everyone didn’t say a thing. but it would be most accurate to say that they couldn’t say anything against her claim. After all, the records of Angels and what they were capable of were scarce. They were beings of unknown power, not to mention the fact that their power varies from person to person.

“Of course, I will only use this power when the situation calls for it… but it would be best if this power was never used at all.”

She said as the tone of her voice slightly dropped at the end, but no one noticed that.

“And finally, although it interferes with our original schedule, I will be heading to the village two days later than planned.”

“!?”

“!?”

Her words caused Garin and Renig’s heads to jerk in surprise and stared at her in confusion. It was understandable. After all, the whole reason they were going to his village was that it was being taken over by END. They wanted to get back as soon as possible. Delays were detrimental since more casualties could rise with each passing day. The “Brothers in Death” already held them back once, and now she was declaring that she would stall them for another two days. She knew that she had to be careful with her words and deliver her intentions properly to them.

“Earlier tonight, a person came to my room. They broke in through the window just after Count Vems left. He wore bright vibrant colors and dressed up like a jester. And in contrast to what he looked like, he talked with almost no emotion, like he only wanted to do what he was set out to do… And that person gave me some advice. He told me to leave two days later. In all honesty, it’s kind of dumb, isn’t it? Trusting someone you don’t even know, not to mention being highly strange and suspicious… But, I decided that I want to take that advice. I don’t know why… but I just have a feeling that he’s right. That for some reason, I should hold back my leave for two more days.”

She looked over to Garin and the others. They had an indescribable emotion on their face. Was it anger, confusion, or sadness? She couldn’t quite find the perfect word for it, but it would be best to describe it as a mixture of many emotions. Not just Garin and Renig, but also Vems.

“Well, I don’t plan on holding you back. You two can head to the village tomorrow as you planned. I just need some directions and then I’ll get there in two days. You should keep the equipment you bought for me and I’ll just use them once I meet up with you two. I know this is selfish of me, but this is what I chose to do, so please, let me stay for two more days.”

She kept her gaze fixed on Garin’s eyes, sending her determination through her fiery eyes. Seeing this, he let out a tired sigh before replying.

“Fine! Two days, right? I’ll tell Hevel to keep the equipment in his workshop for now. We can just take it when we want to practice with it or when we leave.”

Yuu’s face brightened when they told her they were fine with letting her stay for two more days, but it quickly distorted to confusion when she realized they were planning on staying as well.

“W-Wait, you’re staying, too? Are you sure about this?”

She was worried that they were putting off their plans just to accommodate her, and those concerns were clearly delivered through her expression. To that Garin asked.

“Yuu, what did that jester call himself?”

She didn’t expect the sudden question but answered him just as he asked.

“He said he had many names, but the one he liked the most was ‘The Stray Fool.’”

After hearing her answer, Garin nodded lightly.

“Yeah, now I’m even more sure. It’s fine.”

Still clueless about what he was talking about, she furrowed her brows in confusion as she tried to figure it out with the information he had in hand. However, it wasn’t needed when Vems took it upon himself to supply her with information.

“Miss Yuu, that jester you talk about is something of a myth in Yuwokrn. Not everyone knows he exists, and most only know of him from stories of others, an elusive fellow that appears in the strangest of times. He calls himself ‘The Stray Fool,’ but the majority of those who know him call him ‘The Wildcard.’ This is due to his deeds.”

This time, it was Yuu’s turn to be surprised. She never expected the person who broke into her room to be a well-known person.

“What deeds?”

She asked.

“The Wildcard is known to give one of two things. One, being a blessing, and two, being a curse. He appears suddenly in front of people claiming to offer his ‘services,’ and if you follow them, you may either be gifted a wonderful outcome or damned to the devil’s call. Of those who curse his existence, there is not a person that has seen him with their own eyes. This is because of the fact that everyone unfortunate enough to draw his curse was never seen again. The only people who knew those unlucky people ever existed were commonly the loved ones of that person. Since they were quick enough to share their encounter with Wildcard with them, they figured he was the cause of that person’s disappearance. A flower in one hand, and a knife in the other. No one knew which one he would pull out.”

“I-I see…”

Yuu dropped her eyes to the ground for a second. She didn’t know how to take this information in since it was clear that not being involved with the jester he met was the best logical course of action. But then, as if to clear her doubts, Garin spoke.

“It’s fine. I trust him.”

She stared at him with widened eyes as he declared, seeking an explanation.

“That’s because he saved my life once. That’s all there is to it.”

Garin said dismissively, trying to cut off any other follow-up questions.

“But, there is one more thing. He was also the one that told me that the village would be invaded.”

“What!?”

“I see…”

Yuu yelped in surprise while Vems nodded understandingly at his sudden revelation. Wanting to confirm his thinking was correct, Vems shared his thoughts.

“There was no possible way that the normal flow of information would pass the frontline town of Qasen and its nearby settlements without causing an uproar. After all, the subject was an invasion from END. But somehow, it reached Garin and Renig who was out traveling all over Yuwokrn. It would only reach them through a direct informant, and one that would know of their current location at the time, which in this case, was The Wildcard. And since you referred to the invasion in future tense in this sentence despite reporting to us the invasion in present tense means Wildcard knew of it before it even happened, but was certain it would have occurred by the time you got there…”

“That’s right. So if he was the one that told Yuu to hold back two more days, then it makes sense for me to follow.”

“But how is that even possible?”

While Vems and Garin were discussing, Yuu brought up a good question. It seemed like they knew something that made all of this talk actually valid. Here, Vems took the initiative to explain.

“It is the reason the Wildcard is hailed as a myth. It is said that he could be in more than one place at once. That to him, the concept of distance was non-existent. And not to mention that everyone had different impressions of him. One group said he was a cheery person, a different group said he was a gloomy person, and others said differently. In the end, no one truly knew. He was once characterized by his unique outfit, but his image had been burned into the eyes of others so they managed to replicate it and began wearing his outfit for various purposes. The only way to truly know his identity is to feel for his atmosphere that others failed to imitate.”

“So… no one knows how they’re actually defying distance or changing personalities?”

“Unfortunately, no. Others theorized it was an advanced teleportation magic tool, but Sir Hevel already disapproved of that, saying that it was impossible to be in two places at once even with the most fantasized magic tools. It only allows you to teleport, but in the end, there could only be one of the same person. As for his personalities, the majority simply passed it on as expert acting.”

“Yep, no one knows. But me and Renig are sure of one thing, he’s trying to help us. Just like Yuu, we don’t know why, but we can feel that he’s a good person.”

When Garin said that, Vems let out a heavy sigh.

“This is exactly why I am worried. I have no clue why you insist to take his side despite his records. He could be lying about END’s invasion for all we know!”

“Shut up! I just trust him, that’s it!”

Yuu let out a light chuckle as she twisted her lips into a wry smile when she saw the two being at odds with each other, but that raised a question in her head.

“Uhm, this might be a bit off-topic but… why did no one attack END despite their inactivity? I can understand others being afraid of going against their power, but I didn’t think that there was absolutely no one that wanted to challenge them.”

“Ah, that one. Hmm… Well, if it’s Miss Yuu, then you should know since it concerns your homeland.”

Vems said before clearing his throat to speak.

“It was the Emperor of Ridsikrn that proposed the idea to other sovereign powers. He wanted absolutely no action against END, and the other countries of Yuwokrn accepted his proposal. As for the contents of his proposal and why other countries would want to accept it, no one truly knew. There was turmoil amongst the public when they heard about it, but at some point, they were able to calm down. This is my simple theory, but it could be because of the Emperor’s power.”

“The Emperor’s power…? Do you mean his connection with the Hero of Prophecy?”

“…”

Yuu caught Garin’s attention.

“Yes, the connection with the only person in history to ever be able to see into the future. Perhaps because of that, the others submitted to the Emperor’s proposal.”

The connection with the Hero of Prophecy. No one but the Emperor himself knew what its capabilities were, but its existence was known even before the incident 17 years ago. It gave the Emperor more political power over other countries which made it possible for him to persuade others to his ideas. Yuu knew this. However, Garin couldn’t care less.

“Whatever! No one cares! Let’s get one thing straight, we’ll be leaving in the morning two days from now. And before that day comes, we’ll be training with our gear so that we can know how to use them properly at any time when we get to the village, okay!? We’re already late, so I won’t accept any other delays, understand!?”

“Yes!”

“Woof!”

Vems watched the three energetically talk about their future plans. From here on, whatever they would come across will be their own responsibilities. When the thought crossed his mind, he let out another sigh.

“I have to say, my childhood was never this stressful. What made them like this, I wonder…”

**260 – Praqrev Forest**

“This is it. The Praqrev Forest.”

Garin said as they arrived in front of the edge of the Praqrev Forest, the home of the Ujlufi Werewolf Clan.

It was three days after they decided to prolong their stay in Qasen for two more days. It took them only one whole day of traveling to get to their destination. The Praquev Forest wasn’t far away from Qasen, but Yuu was still surprised that they were able to arrive so quickly despite Renig having two people on his back and items in his armor storage. Apparently, it was the power of his Pure Wolf Armor with Gravitational Storage. He could release a coating from the armor and wrap anything it touched with gravity magic. The weight of the armor and storage was negated by wrapping itself with gravity magic.

All three of them had the gear they purchased from Hevel equipped. Before they left Qasen, Yuu decided to leave her old clothes and switched them to different clothes and some leather armor that would be best for actual combat. Now, she wore the same dark green boots of gravity over her new black pants, a leather vest traced with green outlines over her new white long-sleeve, the same green mantle as Garin, a golden bracelet with a streak of green across it, and a golden collar around her neck.

“Okay, let’s enter. But let’s be careful, we don’t want to catch unneeded attention.”

“Woof.”

Renig moved forth, walking swiftly, but being careful not to reveal their presence.

“Ah, Yuu, if you’re helping us, then you should know this. You know that the werewolf race is a Labeled Race, right?”

“Yes, just like us vampires. A race that was given a different name by the ambassadors. At first, only the ambassadors called us by our labeled names because we were in some way similar to a species in their world. But then, everyone else began copying the ambassadors until our labeled names prevailed over our traditional names.”

“Yep, that’s it. Most races became labeled races naturally, but for us werewolves, we used that label to our advantage.”

“From what I remember, the werewolves’ traditional name was… Qeajrv.”

“That’s right. You see, the Qeajrv race includes werewolf species like me and pure wolf species like Renig. But we made it so that only a few remembered this fact.”

Yuu let out a breath of amazement. She was one of the people that didn’t know that werewolves and pure wolves were actually once a single race. The ambassadors defined them as different races, and the only thing similar to them were their wolf ears and tails. Perhaps because of their lack of similarity, they were able to hide this fact from the majority that didn’t know beforehand.

“The reason for that is to hide the true nature of our power. From the outside, it would look like two different races coexisting in the Praqrev Forest, with different capabilities and different strengths and weaknesses. But in truth, our power is much more different.”

“And that is…?”

Yuu asked as anticipation formed her curiosity.

“Hmm… Well, it might just be better to let you see it first.”

“What? Just explain it, and I’ll understand!”

Yuu urged him, only to get a doubtful look in return.

“Are you sure? You know, no matter how much we try to hide it now, there’s no stopping people who already knew about us from writing their knowledge in books. They’re a few hundred years old, but it doesn’t stop the fact that you could just visit a library and know about us. And now that I just explained this to you, can you really understand everything with just words?”

“K-Kuu…”

She clenched her fists in frustration. It was just like how Garin and the others didn’t know much about Angels. The information about them was available, but they just haven’t read any of them. It would be difficult to explain to others who have no prior knowledge about a subject that requires it. Just like how Yuu couldn’t properly explain how the power of an Angel works, Garin couldn’t explain how his race’s true power worked without a solid base. In this case, Garin wanted to use visual knowledge as a base before explaining to Yuu their power. The fact that she understood this made her unable to speak.

“Well, there is one thing that can make things easier.”

Yuu cocked her head at Garin’s sudden claim.

“Do you know what Evolutionary Races are?”

“Yes. They’re races that have the ability to evolve to a different form. Their evolution is different from natural evolution since it can happen in an instant, but I’m not sure why that is.”

“Yep, and that’s the true power of us Qeajrv. Only a few know, but we’re actually an evolutionary race.”

“H-Huh!?”

Seeing her reaction, Garin’s lips stretched into a smug grin.

“Haha, see! There’s no way you’ll understand without seeing it for yourself.”

She wasn’t expecting that revelation. But now that she thought about it, it made sense. Werewolves, or rather, Qeajrvs are a race that originated in Ridsikrn, the land of the Sikrns, or Mana Fairies. It was common knowledge that Sikrns are beings that evolved while deeply involved with mana, making their bodies adapt to their power. This is due to the denser amount of mana in the area, perhaps because the southeast of Yuwokrn, where Ridsikirn stands, is the closest area to Frxal Island, the island of ailak stones, which is maintained by a high concentration of mana.

Sikrn, who have been influenced by that high concentration of mana, have evolved differently from others and are able to handle mana in ways that others cannot. The Qeajrv, which are also Sikrns, that Yuu has met so far were Garin and Renig. But looking at their current appearance, they looked nothing else than a boy with wolf attributes and a wolf with high intelligence. The question was: what was making this normal-looking pair sikrns? And now, she knew the answer: the fact that they were an evolutionary race.

“…”

“…?”

While Yuu was busy trying to arrange the newly-found information in her head, she felt something on her knee. She took a peek to see that Garin was lightly poking her. In his hand was a piece of paper. She took it, then Garin immediately retrieved his hand and returned to talking.

“This is what I’m talking about. Well, not that you understand, that’s good…”

Something didn’t feel right to her. The paper she was holding was one of the supplies that Garin bought before leaving Qasen. It should have been in the pocket on Renig’s shoulder, which was in front of Garin along with a matching pen. Unfolding the piece of paper, Yuu read it and immediately understood. It wrote…

“\*There are enemies. All directions. Still gathering.\*”

Looking from behind him, it seemed like Garin was writing inside Renig’s gravitational storage to hide from the enemies that they were communicating. Garin and Renig must have sensed the enemies with their ears. Since it was well known that werewolves and pure wolves could detect mana with their noses. But once she saw how he was communicating, she felt a bit conflicted. Although it works, there’s a good chance that the enemy would notice his strange position, especially if he wanted to write more messages. Here, Yuu thought of a better alternative.

*“\*There’s no need to do that, Garin.\*”*

“…!?”

“…!!”

Garin’s head flicked upwards in surprise and stopped talking while Renig went to a complete stop, confused at the voice they heard in their heads.

“\*I-It’s me, Yuu! Keep going or else they’ll get suspicious!\*”

Yuu gave a flustered order after seeing the two’s reaction. Garin and Renig’s startled faces were still there, but they managed to follow Yuu’s words. Renig resumed walking while Garin began making small talk with Yuu to feign ignorance to the enemies gathering around them.

“\*I’m using a trick I got from Earth called ‘connect.’ It lets us talk in our minds.\*”

“\*W-What the hell!? If you had something convenient like this, why didn’t you tell us before!?\*”

“\*He is right!\*”

The two said, reprimanding her late actions.

“\*W-Wait, Renig, is that you!?\*”

However, it seemed like Renig’s subconscious voice caught her attention first.

“\*Yes, it is. It is nice to finally talk to you, Yuu.\*”

“\*A-Ah, same here.\*”

“\*This isn’t the time for this is it!?\*”

Hearing Yuu and Renig casually exchanging greetings made Garin snap.

“\*Y-You’re right. I’m sorry.\*”

“\*We’ll be having a looong talk about this later, got it!?\*”

“\*That’s fine, but let’s end this quick! I don’t have enough energy for a long conversation!\*”

Yuu could use Connect, but not as well as everyone from Earth. She could only communicate from a short distance away and she couldn’t keep it up for long. They took a moment of silence to reset their minds and recompose themselves before continuing.

“\*Okay, first, it looks like the enemies coming from the front are demons. I’ll let Renig keep them busy. The enemies on our sides and the back are augmented werewolves. I don’t know if you know them, Yuu, but save your questions for later. But just know that you have to aim for the crystals on their nape. If there’s none, then either drain their mana or incinerate them to dust!\*”

The way Garin described the enemy reminded Yuu of the werewolves that she was first familiar with.

“\*Yuu, can you cast magic that blocks off the ones behind us?\*”

“\*I can.\*”

“\*Okay! Then, Yuu blocks the ones behind us, Renig takes the front, I’ll take the ones on the right, and Yuu takes the ones on the left. Got it!?\*”

“\*Yes!\*”

“\*Understood!\*”

Hearing their voices of approval, Garin nodded.

“\*Alright, we don’t need to keep quiet, it’s already too late. The moment they jump out, let’s raise some hell!\*”

**261 – Counter Attack**

It wasn’t long until the enemies made their move. The first to charge in were the demons at their front. They were a pack of canine-like creatures with large, razor claws attached to long arms and legs, a body of blood-red and pitch black, crimson fur running down its vertebrate, leading to its long tail, a skinless head with only its bare skull, and two horns that would stab through its prey.

The moment they charged, Yuu and Garin immediately jumped off Renig’s back.

“\*O Earth, built from sticks and stones, soar the regal sky. Display your majesty and tower over those who oppose your indestructible command…\*”

“—Great Wall!”

As Renig charged in to intercept the demons coming from their front, Yuu cast the spell she prepared in her head. The ground shook, trees were uprooted, and a large wall of solid earth towered, stretching through the forest, and cutting off the enemies behind them. Seeing that the backline threat was dealt with, Yuu and Garin split to opposite sides and took on the enemies on their end.

Renig was the first to engage in battle. As he was charging, the armor plating on his ears glowed blue, and a thin sheet of the same color wrapped around his body. Followed by that, the armor attached to his thighs and shoulders glowed purple, wrapping over the blue sheet with its dark color. As the colors meshed and subsided, Renig accelerated into the strongest demon that was leading the pack.

The demon lowered its head, pointing its deadly horns at Renig, but he didn’t falter. And as they collided, the sound of bones crushing could be heard in the vicinity as the demon’s horns broke as it made contact with the thin sheet of dark light around Renig. Following that was an explosion of blood and guts as Renig’s impact with the demon quite literally crushed it to bits.

This was because of the combined powers of his armored wolf ears and gravitational storage. Renig’s armored wolf ears were designed to coat the user with a modified barrier that was designed to ram into objects. Meanwhile, the gravitational storage weighed that coating with a stronger gravitational force, making it heavier, sturdier, and deadlier as it made impact on others. Since his barrier coating only wrapped around Renig, it didn’t affect his weight at all. He could run at the same speed as always, but ram into others with the combined weight of a 10-story building. After the impact, all he had to do was reduce his gravity to lighten the impact on the ground so that his legs don’t dig into the dirt and get stuck.

The nearby demons were startled, but continued the charge and headed for Yuu and Garin. Renig was behind, but he wasn’t worried.

“Awrooo!”

He let out a loud howl that suddenly made his armored claws shine a green light. He began running and accelerated as he weaved through the forest’s obstacles, faster than ever. It was the effect of the Enhanced Speed magic built into his armored claws. As his paws made contact with the ground, they left behind footprints of light. Then, he finally caught up to the pack of demons and rammed into them from the side, causing another gory scene of bloodshed and carnage. However, it wasn’t enough to kill everyone. Three of them got away by hiding behind mother nature for cover against Renig’s destructive power.

“AWROOOOO!!!”

But they were nothing more than prey. That was what they looked like in Renig’s eyes as he howled once more. Then, his fur began to spark, and shadows appeared behind the three demons. Three long wooden stakes pierced through their skulls with pinpoint accuracy. Over the distance, Renig stood still with his jet-black fur stained with patches of white hair, watching over the dead demons with two of his tails lightly wriggling in the wind, one tail more than usual, glowing in a solid blue color. From his open mouth, a deep voice chimed the ears of the dead.

“Grrr… pathetic beings…”

As he turned his back on the dead demons, another wave was charging in. However, Renig’s sharp eyes only eyed them until they arrived at a certain point.

“AAWROOOOOOO!!!”

Another howl resounded through the forest. Then, the footprints of light that he left on his path earlier changed to a brown light and shined brightly. Suddenly, spikes of earth burst from the ground and pierced the oncoming demons. Their frontline was destroyed, and as the demons poured through the spikes, Renig intercepted them once more.

Meanwhile, his brother, Garin was in a fierce battle with several augmented werewolves. He beheaded one of the werewolves using his dagger in a backward position, which allowed him to have more power, destroying the crystal on their napes. He stepped back, waited for the headless body in front of him to begin to fall, and jumped forward as it fell with his arm outstretched with the other dagger in a forward position, which allowed him more reach and finesse. The augmented werewolf behind the falling body didn’t even realize that it had been stabbed in the neck.

He was using his Kindred Beast Daggers. Twin daggers with grey gems in the center of their cross-guards and blue gems in their pommels.

Another augmented werewolf jumped at him from the side, but he threw his available dagger at it and pierced its neck. Then, Garin’s ears twitched. He quickly pulled out the dagger from the augmented werewolf in front of him, the gems in the pommels of both the daggers glowed blue, and a blue line appeared and connected the daggers at the pommel, then he jumped up high. Not a second later, an augmented werewolf swung at the area below him with its claws. He used the force of his jump to pull with the dagger in his hand, making the dagger that was stuck in the other werewolf’s neck fly toward him. The moment he caught the dagger, the line immediately disappeared, he landed on the shoulders of the augmented werewolf behind him, sent a flurry of stabs down its neck, and jumped down while cutting open the back of the werewolf. It was overkill, but he needed to be prepared for the enemies that just entered the field.

Garin’s armor glowed red as it absorbed the blood coming out of the werewolf. Then, he jumped to the side. An augmented werewolf larger than the others appeared. He didn’t get to see its nape, but he knew this was one of the werewolves that didn’t have a gem. That wasn’t all, two more were charging him from different sides. However, that didn’t phase him. With a wide grin, the red glow on his armor subsided and the iris in his eyes was dyed blood red.

Charing in, he held both his daggers in the forward position. The augmented werewolf responded in kind with its claws ready to tear him apart. Garin caught one of its claws with his dagger, weaved under the other arm, and pincered it with his other dagger, severing it from the owner. Using that force, he pivoted on the ball of his foot and quickly rotated both of his daggers into the backward position by pincering them with his fingers. There, he stood under the body of the augmented werewolf whose arm he dismembered, and between two more of the same kind of gemless werewolf. With both his arms stretched forward holding daggers in the backward position, he put strength into his legs as he pulled the daggers back, cutting both the augmented werewolves at his sides.

He jumped back lightly before re-engaging with the three augmented werewolves. Unlike the other werewolves, these gemless ones will regenerate their bodies until either they run out of mana or burn every cell in their body. With that in mind, he requested that Hevel made him the Kindred Beast Daggers. Twin daggers embedded with a null gem, a gem that can be used as a medium for any element of magic and modified to siphon the magic of others. The gems on his daggers glowed a gloomy grey as Garin went to absorb all the augmented werewolves’ mana.

In no time at all, the augmented werewolves regenerated all the damage from his first attack and attempted to counter his second attack. As Garin charged between two enemies with daggers in the forward position, he received deep cuts on his shoulders, but the damage was almost immediately negated as his armor glowed red to regenerate it. With shallow wounds, he thrust his dagger at the neck of the last enemy, piercing through it, and fixing the position of his dagger.

Using the werewolf’s neck as a fulcrum, he jumped and spun his body until he arrived at an upside-down position. With his head pointed to the ground, his eyes caught the two other werewolves chasing after him. As the werewolf beside him scratched the back of his head, he shifted his hold on the daggers from forward to backward position, calmly aligned his other dagger to the necks of the incoming werewolves, placed his full power on his upper body, making his lower body limp slightly, and spun his body, beheading all three of the werewolves at once, leaving a trail of grey light as the daggers activated their mana siphon.

He placed back power into his lower body, making his legs bend as he landed gracefully on the ground. However, it wasn’t over. He only beheaded the augmented werewolves. The kindred daggers needed more attacks to completely drain them. Reinforcements were coming for Garin, but that wasn’t a problem.

The moment he sensed their presence, he threw one of the daggers at the closest augmented werewolf and pierced his neck. With his open hand, he quickly reached out for the rectangular bag on his belt and took out eight needles. He applied his mana to them as he chanted the spell of the magic he wanted to cast in his head, and threw it on the ground below him. After the needles disappeared, the ground below him rumbled, and multiple spikes surrounded him and the three werewolves in a circle, penetrating the augmented werewolves above them, and blocking off the other incoming werewolves. He cast the spell for Crown Spikes.

There were some that were only stuck on the spikes and weren’t actually killed. Others were even gemless. But they weren’t his focus. The pommel of the daggers glowed once more, allowing him to retrieve the dagger he threw earlier in the same fashion, and began cutting down the three headless werewolves until their mana supply was reduced to nothing, powering Garin up again for the next wave of enemies.

As the two fought wildly, Yuu sparked with a more destructive style.

“O Nature, I am your medium, your voice, your soul. Resonate and express yourself through me to punish those who oppose you. Gale Howl!”

The augmented werewolves running at Yuu were suddenly knocked back by a powerful gust of wind, making some of them hit the trees, shattering the gems in their napes. And those unfortunate enough to get caught at the center of her magic were immediately killed by the pressure that shattered their gems. With the distance between her and her enemies, Yuu summoned multiple fireballs and shot them at the wolves. Every time one was hit in the neck, it would explode their heads off and shatter the gem in the process. It may have been low-tier magic, but she made sure to pack them with a lot of power. Some of the fireballs hit trees and leaves, but instead of burning, the bracelet she was wearing would glow green, and as if scoffing at the concept of chemical reaction, the fire simply disappeared into the wind.

It was the power of the Bracelet of Peaceful Nature. The item had a nature gem embedded into it. Its function was to copy the mana signature of that gem and apply it to every magic she cast, making it so that it wouldn’t harm anything that resonated with the nature gem. This used the phenomenon of how magic cannot harm the caster of the magic. Research proved that it was somehow related to a person’s mana signature, the unique arcane structure of a person’s mana, and how they shape mana. The bracelet made it so that every magic she cast would also have the mana signature of a nature gem, which was roughly the same signature as plants and trees. This made her magic treat trees and nature the same as the caster of the magic, and in this case, prevented Yuu from causing a massive forest fire with her magic. The item was useful, but she had to be careful when to use it. If she was faced against tree treants or forest elves who have similar mana signatures to the nature gem, they would not take damage. Thankfully, this wasn’t the case with augmented werewolves.

“\*O Fire, let my hands guide you. Recreate an image of a burning hell, beginning with this small flare…\*”

Yuu began chanting a spell in her mind the moment she saw augmented werewolves adapting to her fireballs and dodging them. There was also another group coming from behind her.

“O Nature, bless me with your power, empower your children. Aid me in my plight and suppress my enemies…”

While she chanted in her mind, she also chanted out loud. The proper way to chant in battle was to mumble the words under one’s breath so that enemies wouldn’t be able to intercept your magic with a counter. But here, she chanted aloud, making most of the augmented werewolves stand back while others hurried their approach. It seemed like the ones that fell back were waiting to outrun Overgrowth’s bindings while the others charged to interrupt her. However, unbeknownst to them, this is what she wanted.

The green outlines in Yuu’s vest glowed green, and her mantle began blowing slowly. As the werewolves reached melee range, she extended her arms out to both sides and shouted.

“—Paired Hellfire!”

The augmented werewolves couldn’t react fast enough to the unexpected magic she cast. As the augmented werewolves launched their claws, flames gathered in her hands, and a sudden burst of wind exploded behind her, launching her forward away from danger, and knocking back the werewolves that were once behind her. This was partnered by the thick columns of scorching inferno, making the embodiment of hell spread over a large area at a moment’s notice, reducing the enemies that decided to wait in the trees to cinders.

What propelled her forward was her Vest of Guiding Winds. It has the ability to release a strong gust of wind that can propel the wearer towards any direction they choose and knock back anyone that gets hit with it. It was built for ranged backline units like Yuu so that they can always keep their distance from enemies.

However, there were also some who could save themselves by running out of the dancing flames. But Yuu was merciless.

“—Overgrowth!”

The trees and bushes grew vines and suspended every single augmented werewolf in the area. Making those who were in the scene of hell burn to their deaths while suspended like common poultry. Those who were safe from her hellfire were then struck by fireballs, ending their lives all the same.

The Praqrev Forest screamed in bloody death as the three dealt with the enemies without an ounce of mercy.

**262 – Eksert of the Vjzasu**

“Grrah! Was that all of them?”

Garin shot the question at Yuu and Renig who were nearby as he beheaded the last augmented werewolf that challenged him. His armor glowed red and regenerated his wounds. The area finally calmed down as the enemy numbers dwindled to zero.

“Grrwoof! I don’t sense any more enemies.”

“W-Whoa!? D-Did Renig just talk!?”

Yuu’s body jerked backward in surprise with her foot taking one step behind her the moment she heard a deep voice come from Renig’s mouth. She didn’t notice what was happening on his end since they were fighting, but now that everything calmed down, it was clear that he even had an additional tail. One look at it was all it took for her to realize that it was made from mana. Garin was the one that responded to her surprise.

“Yep. We can talk about that later, but for now, let’s get out of here. Though it’s strange… I thought there would be even more enemies.”

Garin held his chin, pondering that single thought.

“Hmm, now that you say it, you’re right. It took them some time to gather before they attacked. The word should have reached their base, but I feel like the numbers we fought were too few to be considered all the fighting force END has to offer…”

“Whatever it is, we should leave first—ah, an enemy!”

The spike in his voice put Yuu back on alert, and Renig seemed to have noticed at the same time as Garin. Turning her head to where the two were staring, an augmented werewolf could be seen rushing at them. There was just one, and no one else. It struck them strange since from what they’ve seen so far, they only come in packs. Setting the question aside for a second, Yuu summoned a flame and aimed at its neck.

“…!”

“!?”

“!?”

However, she didn’t get to launch it. Before the werewolf could even get close, an explosion from behind swallowed it whole. The unexpected attack confused the three and made them more alert.

As their eyes narrowed to see through the forest, they saw a figure coming from behind the scorched augmented werewolf. He slowly walked up to them with his green boots crushing the werewolf’s embers underfoot. Wearing what seemed to be normal cloth pants and a shirt under a leather vest with pale blue adornments and a tattered shawl with stains of black and purple over his body. A helmet unlike any other covered his face with its black rim and what seemed to be blue stained glass covering his face. If Yuu didn’t know any better, she would have thought it came from some kind of sci-fi movie.

But what attracted everyone’s attention wasn’t his strange helmet, but his upper body. Under the tattered shawl were clearly four arms, each covered in leather gloves and possessing a familiar Band of Magic Power. He also had two blades attached to the left side of his hips. One long and one short, similar to the Daisho, a set of katana and wakizashi of the Japanese Edo period. And on his back was a long object covered in a white cloth, perhaps it was a sword, but there was a bulk in the shape which made them uncertain.

The three were still on high alert at the appearance of the unknown man. Seeing their caution, the moment the man reached a reasonable distance, he raised one of his hands to his front. The three slowly separated from each other, after exchanging wordless glances. The man didn’t mind their movement and moved his fingers in the air. There, blue light traced his fingers and wrote the words…

<Hello, I’m Eksert of the Vjzasu. I was wondering if you’ve seen someone I’m looking for.>

At a good distance away from each other, the three saw the words the man called Eksert wrote in the air. They were in Japanese, but both of them were able to read them just fine. Yuu was the first to respond.

“What is a Vjzasu like you doing all the way out here?”

The Vjzasu. A race that is characterized by their four arms and six eyes. One of the races that are said to be the strongest force of military power, just like Vems’ race, the Ilagxi. Their race once served as elites in Ridsikrn’s military as if it was natural. But as time passed, abuse of their power sprouted and it only became worse as time passed. Because of this, the race withdrew most of their people from the military and secluded themselves in their homeland in the far southeast of Yuwokrn, along with the Emperor’s approval of their decision. Ever since then, the Vjzasu that were seen outside their territory were scarce.

The power that people feared from them was their ability to cast multiple spells at once. The Vjzasu was a race of mouthless people, which meant they couldn’t cast spells like most people. But in exchange for this, they had the ability to write spells using their fingers to cast them. Aprocology explained that their power to do that stems from the function of their bodies to arrange a mana structure, replacing the need for words. They were known to be able to cast four spells at once of any tier. This included multicasting high-tier spells, given that the conditions for those spells could be fulfilled at the same time and that the caster had enough mana to cast it.

Not only that, but they could also fight in close combat. They could use two of their arms to wield weapons while the other two cast magic. A fearsome all-arounder race that could do many tasks simultaneously.

Knowing all of this, it was strange to see one near the edge of the Ridsikrn border, the furthest place from their homeland. And to Yuu’s question, Eksert responded.

<I’m just an exile. My love for the outside world sent me out to the land of the Vjzasu. You could consider me a Haeqras Crawler. I was traveling with a friend to a Haeqras branch in Ridsikrn when she was captured by people who I suspect to be END. They brought them to this forest, and I returned here today after fetching the magic tools that were being fixed by my apocrosmith in the town of Siwk. I plan on finding her today, and I was wondering if any of you have seen her.>

Eksert gave them an overview of his background to drop suspicion levels. Of course, they couldn’t just take his words at face value. After he finished explaining, Garin tried to poke holes into his story.

“You said you suspect these people to be END, why is that?”

<It was the last scream my friend let out before getting decapitated by her abductors. I don’t have any proof, but those were her words, so I believe her.>

“You said that you returned today, then how many times have you actually been here and what do you know?”

<This is my second time here. The first time was two days ago when I chased her abductors. I didn’t get much information, but I know that demons and augmented werewolves roam the forest.>

“Two days? But you said that you came from the town of Siwk. It might be the second closest town to the Praqrev Forest, but it still takes three days on foot. Are you telling me you went to Siwk and back within two days?”

<I used a Traveler’s Gem to get there. It was its last use before breaking. Since my gear was almost ready by the time I got there, I just borrowed a Veural from an acquaintance so that I could get back as fast as possible.>

“…That so?”

The Veural is the fastest land monster that could be tamed. Since the path from Siwk and the forest was nothing but plains, it would make sense that they would arrive around this time. Everything Eksert was saying made sense, so Garin was having a hard time countering him.

“Then, what does your friend look like?”

Yuu was the one who continued the interrogation.

<Her name is Serka. She has black hair and is as tall as you, Young Lady. She’s a Qeajrv just like that boy. To prove that, she was the one that told me about the truth of the Qeajrv race. This includes the fact that werewolves and pure wolves are part of a single race.>

“…!”

Eksert pointed at Renig. Right now, he was in a form that Yuu had never seen him in before. As if to specify the extent of his knowledge, he pointed at his blue tail of mana. He even referred to them by their race’s traditional name.

“A Qeajrv… Does that have anything to do with the invasion in our village?”

Garin asked.

<Invasion? I’m sorry, I don’t know that much. I’m only here to get back a friend.>

“Is that so…”

His ears drooped a little in disappointment. Taking advantage of his dead air, Eksert asked.

<Are you all here to stop an invasion?>

“Not quite. END invaded this place before we got here. We’re here to take the place back.”

<I see… then, I have a proposal.>

Everyone’s brow raised at Eksert’s words.

“…What is it?”

Garin asked in a cautious voice, allowing him to proceed with his next words.

<How about we join forces? I have a feeling I won’t be seeing Serka unless I take END’s influence off the table. Since you three want to take back your hometown, then our objectives align.>

“…”

They fell silent, pondering what the best course of action should be. Then, Yuu opened back the Connect network to Garin and Renig.

*“\*What do you guys think? I feel like we should be more cautious about this.\*”*

*“\*You’re right. His story seems good, but I don’t think we should take him, not to the place we’re going.\*”*

*“\*Wait. I agree that we shouldn’t take him with us, but I think we should keep our connection with him. Neither Garin nor I sensed his presence. He’s powerful and an expert in stealth, we should use him.\*”*

Yuu and Garin seemed to understand Renig’s point of view and took a second to consider it. Garin was first to respond back.

*“\*What if he’s a spy END sent to find out where the hideout is? Or maybe he’ll backstab us the moment it matters the most?\*”*

*“\*That is unlikely. Garin, have you any idea why there aren’t any reinforcements coming?\*”*

*“\*Huh?\*”*

Now that Renig mentioned it, they have been standing in the same spot for a while now, and not a single sign of enemy reinforcements was to be seen. He then shot a questioning look at Renig.

*“\*It was his doing. I could not sense his presence, but while we were fighting, there were many enemies that suddenly disappeared. I thought they chose to fall back, but if this man is here, then it makes even more sense.\*”*

*“\*…Is he that strong?\*”*

*“\*Yes. My Senlr caught his mana signature the moment he pointed at me… he has an absurd amount of power. If he was truly a man of END, then he would have no problem taking all of us down, and any resistance our people would ever dream to muster. This is only my conjecture, but while all three of us were fighting, he was probably taking out the units at the back and killed off the messengers.\*”*

*“\*…\*”*

Garin fell silent. But this time, it was Yuu’s turn to voice her opinion.

*“\*If that’s the case, then I think we should team up. From your conversation, it seems like we’re going to a hideout. But if neither of you could sense his presence, then it’s useless to even try and hide it. None of us can move without the possibility of him being in the shadows. Instead, I think we should show him to the entrance, but we don’t let him in. We’ll only make contact with him when we’re about to move against END. Besides, maybe he can do something to keep the enemy away from us.\*”*

*“\*…\*”*

*“\*…\*”*

This time, both of them fell silent, pondering Yuu’s suggestion. A minute of silence passed. No one moved and no one spoke, keeping Eksert’s proposal hanging in the air, but he didn’t seem to mind and waited for their response patiently.

Garin was the one that broke the standoff by nodding his head at the other two, and they returned the gesture.

“Fine, we’ll take you up on that offer, but we have conditions. You will only go as far as the entrance of our destination; you can’t enter. Frankly, we don’t trust you yet, so you can prove that by preventing the enemy from finding out about us. We’ll only contact you once we’ve decided to move, until then, just stand by the entrance. What do you say?”

<That’s fine. I understand your decision. If you can help me find Serka as fast as possible, it doesn’t matter.>

After saying that, Eksert took out his hand, gesturing to seal their deal. Garin took a step forward, but Yuu went to block his way.

“I’ll do it. He might have something up his sleeves.”

“What? Then you’ll be in danger.”

“It’s fine! I’ll do it.”

Yuu turned her back to Garin and jogged up to Eksert, ignoring Garin’s call and the worried look on his face. She arrived at a short distance in front of him and matched the eyes that were behind his helmet.

“I’m Hisho Yuu, the Qeajrv boy over there is Garin, and the other one is Renig. I hope this alliance becomes a fruitful one.”

<Likewise.>

She took his hand and shook it, finalizing their agreement.

“…?”

Nothing happened, but it felt like Eksert’s grip on her hand was a bit tight. She couldn’t see his expression, so she couldn’t read him. In the end, the three left with Eksert in tow. But then, Yuu noticed that she had a shallow wound on her arm. She must have gotten it from battle. The blood stained the rip in her clothes with their crimson color, and a thought came to mind.

*“\*Good thing I didn’t faint…\*”*

Yuu couldn’t help but feel a slight sting in her chest. She may not have a heart like others, but there was always her iraja that acted like one. The cause for her pain was not unbeknownst to her. A few days ago, when she consulted Garin, Renig, and Vems about her plans, she told the truth about most things, but her speech was not without deceit.

Taking advantage of their lack of knowledge, no one could disprove that divine souls can take over their owner’s bodies. In reality, it was possible. She saw it happen, after all. The divine soul taking over Senkyo’s body in his fight with Fulgur. But there was one thing she decided to hide in the shadows—her divine soul cannot take over her body. It wasn’t the difference in the powers of their divine souls. It was just the underlying fact that Hisho Yuu is not recognized by her divine soul.

**263 – Evolutionary Power**

“We’re almost there. But first, Eksert, you said that this friend of yours told you about us. Then prove it by telling us what you know.”

“Woof!”

As the four of them were walking through the forest, Garin jumped at the opportunity to pressure Eksert. Renig seemed to encourage this, but he reverted back to his normal form, making his fur return to jet black, reducing his tails back to one, and making him lose the ability to speak.

Eksert responded by jumping in front of the group and writing in the air while walking backward.

<Is this to test my knowledge or to explain your powers to someone?>

He wrote while directing his glance to Yuu. He hasn’t been with them for long, but he already somehow deduced that she didn’t know much about the Qeajrv race. Garin had a bitter look on his face, but he still managed to respond.

“It’s both.”

<Okay. Where do you want me to start?>

“Then, tell us what makes the Qeajrv race powerful. Yuu, use Renig’s transformation earlier as a reference.”

“Ah, got it.”

<…>

Yuu’s ears perked up once she realized this was the continuation of the earlier. She directed her attention to Eksert, who was still walking backward without even tripping or slowing down. It was almost like he had eyes behind his back. But for some reason, he was just silently staring at Garin. Did something about him catch his attention?

“Eksert?”

Yuu called out to him, making him shift his gaze to her.

<Sorry, I was just thinking about something.>

He didn’t bother explaining himself and began his explanation.

<The Qeajrv race is an evolutionary race. Strangely enough, the people of this race have two different appearances that made others think they were of different races. One is the werewolf, and the other is the pure wolf. This is also because of their evolutionary power, the most powerful asset the race has. They have five different evolution stages. From lowest to highest they have the Black and White Stage, the Green Stage, the Blue Stage, the Blank Stage, and the Golden Stage.>

Garin nodded, silently approving of Eksert’s explanation so far.

<They have the power to evolve at will, and the evolutionary stage they’re at is indicated by the number of tails they have, or better yet, the number of senlr. Their tails or senlr serve as antennae to gather more mana and convert it to magic. They have temporary and permanent evolutions depending on the form of their senlr. A senlr made of pure mana, the tail that Renig had earlier, is a temporary evolution that allowed him to use his power in the Green Stage. However, if that tail was made with flesh and blood, it is a permanent evolution, meaning that they fulfilled the requirements to evolve to the Green Stage.>

Using Garin and Renig as references, that would mean that both of them were still at the Black and White stage, given that they only had one tail, but that struck Yuu as strange. If they were still at the beginning stage, then how were they so powerful?

“If that’s the case, them why are Garin and Renig still at the black and white stage? They’re strong, so wouldn’t it be natural for them to evolve permanently by now?”

Eksert shook his head at Yuu’s idea.

<No. You see, the Qeajrv race doesn’t evolve from gaining power. But instead, they evolve from refining their power.>

She tilted her head at his words.

<For Qeajrvs to even be capable of evolving temporarily, they need to have a supply of moon essence in their bodies.>

“What? The moon?”

<Yes. Originally, Qeajrvs would bathe their tails in the moonlight and gather moon essence to evolve. They built structures called moon trees to help speed up this process. but there is a different way to go about evolution and it is much faster and more efficient than the former.>

Garin eyed Eksert, watching him closely as he explained.

<That would be with the help of a Senlr Maiden. They are people in the Qeajrv race that devote themselves to gathering moon essence and sharing it with others. Using themselves as a medium, their job is to perform a ritual every night to transfer moon essence from moon trees and the moon itself to others near them.>

It seemed like the Senlr Maiden acted as aa support to other Qeajrvs.

<However, this can only be done when the Senlr Maiden’s current evolutionary stage is higher than the people they’re transferring their moon essence to. This is because the higher the evolutionary stage of a Qeajrv, the higher quality of the moon essence their bodies extract. These maidens use their bodies to share a higher quality of moon essence with others that can only extract a lower quality and allow them to evolve faster. In other words, if a Senlr Maiden’s evolutionary stage is only at the Blue Stage, they can only quicken the evolution of Qeajrvs in the Green Stage and below.>

Yuu turned her gaze to Garin, looking for confirmation, and he responded with a silent nod.

“So… the reason why Garin and Renig haven’t evolved yet is that they don’t go to see a Senlr Maiden?”

<That is only one of many possible reasons since they can evolve even without the help of a maiden. As to what that reason is…>

“…”

Yuu and Eksert’s eyes shifted to Garin who was staring at Eksert with an annoyed expression on his face.

“We just use too much moon essence in our travels to evolve. That’s all.”

<So he says.>

“Wait a sec, this isn’t what I told you to do! I said to explain what makes us powerful! Why are you suddenly questioning me!?”

<I did as you said, but the conversation just happened to lead to you.>

“What do you mean ‘just happened!?’ You planned this didn’t you!?”

<I have not the faintest idea.>

Eksert wrote in a more formal tone, clearly mocking him without a single intention of hiding his schemes.

“Grr…!”

“Woof!”

Just as Garin began to growl in frustration, Renig called out to everyone with his bark. To that, Eksert finally stopped walking backward and turned around. Garin let out a sigh to vent the hot air gathering inside him announced.

“We’re here.”

**264 – The Mana Stone**

The group stopped in front of a large rock with patches of blue all over. This seemed to be their destination, but there was nothing around them except the large rock.

“Okay, last question. Do you know what this is and what we’re about to do with it?”

Garin said as he kept his gaze on Eksert, and to that, he just nodded.

<A mana stone. To be precise, a conveniently large-sized mana stone that was modified to hide everything under it. If this is our destination, then you’ll be entering your temporary Green Stage to manipulate the mana structure and reveal what’s under this.>

“What? Manipulate the mana structure?”

Yuu asked when she saw Eksert’s message.

<It’s the hidden power that comes with evolving as a Qeajrv. If Soruns are the best race to build apocrologic tools, then the Qeajrvs are the best race to use those tools. Only a handful number of people know, but the Qeajrv have the ability to manipulate mana structures. A powerful asset combined with apocrology.>

“I’ve been hearing these terms before but what exactly are they? How is that any different from… uhh, an arcane structure?”

<An arcane structure is the overall construction of apocrological or magical elements. Meanwhile, a mana structure is the arrangement of mana to make certain phenomena happen. The best analogy here is that an arcane structure is like a ready-to-assemble table. Its parts are already made, which are the apocrological and magical elements, and all that’s left to do is piece them together. Meanwhile, a mana structure is the wood and items used to create every piece, which is the base of every magic.>

“Huh? Wait, if that’s the case, then shouldn’t Qeajrvs be better at creating apocrological items? I mean, you said that they could manipulate the very base of every magic so wouldn’t it be natural to be them?”

<No. Apocrology is the craft of using various elements to create new technology. Although the Qeajrv race is the best mana manipulator, they also need to know about other practices in order to apply mana manipulating to their craft. They may be able to create individual items to use in apocrology, but they would only specialize in that one item instead of the apocrological tool as a whole. In the end, apocrology is done best by the Sorun that can understand most about how various elements interact with each other. Meanwhile, the Qeajrv are the ones that understand most of how an apocrological tool functions. They can manipulate the mana structure of a tool to make it surpass its limits.>

“I see…”

Yuu nodded in understanding. It was basically the case of different professions having different abilities. The Sorun would be akin to engineers that use a variety of items to make other tools while the Qeajrv were the craftsmen that can manipulate mana that can make certain parts for the engineers to use. But in the end, it was best for them to simply use a fully constructed apocrological tool since they specialize in manipulating the mana structure of the tool as a whole.

“I’ve been listening, but what are you two even talking about? What’s a ‘redi-tu-asembul’ table? I feel like you’ve been saying things right but I don’t understand what that had to do with anything.”

“Ah…”

<|>

Yuu let out a voice in realization while Eksert’s hand limply fell down, creating a streak of light, when he realized the same thing.

“It’s a ‘ready-to-assemble’ table. It’s something that we had on Earth.”

“On EARTH!? Wait, then how did Eksert know what that was all about?”

“Ah, now that you mention it…”

Everyone’s eyes gathered at Eksert, waiting for what his response was going to be. He was a local of Zerid, but for some reason, he knew something that only existed in a different world. Their silent questions pierced through him and made him reluctantly raise his hand and write his message.

<I traveled to Earth one time. I wanted to know what the world looked like after the incident 17 years ago.>

“…”

“…”

Seeing Eksert’s reason, it wasn’t a difficult story to believe, and they couldn’t disprove him either since there have been many other Zeldians that did the same thing after the incident 17 years ago.

“Woof!”

A familiar bark came from outside the three’s conversation. Renig was there scratching a blue part of the mana stone. It seemed like he didn’t want to wait any longer. Unable to make any progress with Eksert’s story, they were forced to let it slide.

“Okay…”

Standing in front of the largest patch of blue the mana stone had, Garin closed his eyes and focused. Then, a blue tail of mana appeared behind him. Opening his eyes, he placed his hand on the blue patch. The area where his hand made contact opened up a hole and its edge turned green, then suddenly, the hole expanded, leaving a large opening for Garin and the others to enter through. Inside the opening was a staircase that led underground.

“Welp, it’s just as you said would happen.”

Garin told Eksert with his back still turned to them, but there was a clear annoyance in his voice.

<And just as you said, I will be staying here to stand guard.>

Since Eksert couldn’t actually speak, he jumped beside him and wrote his message. Seeing him write something in his peripheral vision, Garin turned his head to him.

“Let’s just hope you’ll actually do what you say you will…”

Garin, Renig, and Yuu entered the entrance, leaving Eksert outside. Garin placed his hand on the edge of the entrance, making the edges of the mana stone glow green, and closed the opening. Continuing down the staircase, Garin looked around the walls curiously.

“Hmm… They changed things up around here.”

The hallway was mostly covered in blue. But considering how their race could manipulate mana like how Garin did earlier, then these were probably refined mana stones. If it ended with that, it wouldn’t have been strange, but the walls and floor weren’t just blue, they were smooth walls and tiles. Additionally, the ceiling above them had rectangular electric lights that lit up the staircase. The place was closer to a structure from Earth than any they’d seen in Zerid. It wasn’t like lights were exclusive to Earth. The people in Zerid were taught how to build them, but the problem was that their prices were quite high after their connections to Earth were cut off. They could use resources found in Zerid, but they were much more taxing than their original versions. Garin must have found it strange that the people he knew would use up resources for this.

“Hey, what do you think of him?”

Garin said while looking at Yuu.

“Eksert?”

“Yeah.”

Yuu took a moment of silence to ponder his question. It hadn’t been that long since they’d met, but talks with him gave them a hint of his personality.

“Hmm… If I had to say, he’s sly. He’s definitely hiding something, but whether or not it’s malicious… I’m not sure. But if there’s anything I’m most certain of, is that he’s strong.”

“Right. He has the knowledge and his skill shows in his movements. I asked him to answer my questions and he did exactly just that while walking backward without even so much as slowing down. All while moving his fingers to talk with us. He’s either our most powerful asset or our worst enemy.”

**265 – 10 Year Reunion**

As the two talked, Garin would sometimes stop their movement, placing his hand on the wall, and making the blue wall that seemed to also be made with mana stones turn green. Apparently, he was disabling traps set for intruders. He was familiar with the place, so Yuu simply followed what he said.

Eventually, they reached a blue glass pane at the end of the staircase. The moment Garin placed his hand on it and opened it, someone from the other side tackled and pinned him down to the ground.

“GUUH…!!”

“Gaaaaarin~!”

“Woof, woof!”

Yuu took a step back in surprise at the sudden assault. The person on the ground pinning down Garin was a girl with looked around the same age as Garin, but since his age was apparently higher than his looks suggested, it would be best to say that they looked like a 10-year-old.

“Huh…?”

Yuu couldn’t help but let out a confused voice. The girl had wolf ears and three tails, and the color of her hair and tails were half black and half white, parting the two contrasting colors down the center of her body. However, that wasn’t what caught her attention, but instead what she was wearing. She had a white lab coat over a white long-sleeve shirt with a matching red tie, leather shorts, and black tights. Those were clothes from Earth.

“W-Wait a second, what are you even wearing!?”

“Hihihi, do you like it? Look, see!”

The girl lifted the edge of her coat, revealing her sensational legs. Garin couldn’t take the eye candy and tried to push her off.

“G-Get off me, Hiz!”

“Heeeh? You leave us and stay silent for 10 years and this is what I get? Come on, you can do better than that… Gaaaariin~!”

She tightened her arms around his waist and rubbed her cheeks against his chest. Despite having a wolf’s attributes she acted more like a cat than anything.

“Hiz! We’re here about END so could you calm down!?”

Hiz’s ears perked up when his words registered in her brain. It made her loosen her grip a bit and Garin wasted no time taking that opportunity and pushed her off him.

“Kya!”

She screamed playfully. But after that, she picked herself up and wore a slightly more serious face, completely different from her earlier expression.

“Did you go to the village?”

“No, I got it from an informant.”

“He’s a quick one, huh? I mean, they invaded us only five days ago and now you’re here with gear and… reinforcements.”

Hiz said as her gaze shifted from Garin to Yuu and raised her brow.

“I’m Hisho Yuu. Nice to meet you.”

“Same here. I’m Hizli.”

Hizli walked up to Yuu and shook her hand. But just as they were about to end their greeting, Hizli noticed a wound on Yuu’s arm. She quickly wiped it with her thumb and stared at it for a bit. Then, she matched Yuu’s gaze.

“Yuu, are you a vampire?”

“!?”

She didn’t expect her identity to be caught so easily. Her widened eyes were all the confirmation Hizli needed. With a teasing smile, she began to explain herself.

“Did Garin not tell you? We Qeajrvs can manipulate mana. And to manipulate it, we need to have senses to know where they are. In other words, the mana in your blood was all I needed. The vampire race is the only race that has mana in their blood, after all.”

“I see…”

Yuu didn’t mind too much if others know that she was a vampire as long as it doesn’t disrupt her way to Nrjia, but she was a bit disappointed in herself for that mistake. She knew that her kind was the only one with mana in their blood, but she carelessly let someone else check that blood. She couldn’t do anything but sigh.

“Don’t worry, Yuu. She might be a handful, but she isn’t a bad person.”

“Huh!? I’m not a handful either! I’m a nice girl!”

“Says the same person that tackled her brother and checked someone else’s mana without permission!”

“…!”

“…!”

The two then began staring each other down with heated glares. Yuu had a flashback to Garin’s argument with Hevel when they first met. Her face paled when she realized that the same lengthy, absolutely meaningless fight could happen here again. So she tried to defuse this as quick as she could.

“W-Wait, I have a question! A-Are you two siblings?”

Her panic made her stutter a bit, but she got the message through. The one that broke their staredown and responded to her was Hizli.

“Well, in our clan, yes. But we’re not actually blood-related. We just treat each other like brothers and sisters in the clan. I’m an only child, just like Garin.”

“Hm, that makes sense.”

Yuu didn’t question it before, but she noticed the inconsistency when Garin first introduced Renig as his brother and when Vems said that Renig was supposed to be his guardian. It could have been a situation where the eldest brother became the legal guardian, so she didn’t want to carelessly ask questions. She also had other things going on at the time, so she never had the chance to ask, but after Hizli’s explanation, it all came together.

“Oh, Hizli, I was wondering, where did you get those clothes? Aren’t they from Earth?”

“Now that you mention it, it has to be! I’ve been traveling the place and I haven’t seen anything like those. The base is different from last time too!”

It seemed like both Yuu and Garin were curious. Meanwhile, Renig at the back apparently couldn’t care less and laid down on the floor.

“Hmm…”

Hizli folded her arms and closed her eyes in deliberation. She seemed to be considering the best move, so Yuu chose to stay silent to give her time, but Garin couldn’t care less.

“Just tell us already!”

“…”

“Oi, Hiz, come on! Why are you shutting up when we FINALLY want you to talk!?”

“..”

“Hiiiizz!!”

“ARGH! Could you shut up! What the hell gives you the right to order me around to spill our secrets after leaving us for ten years and coming back with another girl!? Is this the milk you were buying from the convenience store!?”

Hizli screamed at Garin with a slightly red face.

“Huh?”

Unfortunately, he didn’t get a single one of her messages.

“Wow, she knows an American joke… Wait, wasn’t it the grocery store…?”

“You, too! That isn’t the issue here, is it!?”

It seemed like the situation was all but devolving into chaos. Yuu had a feeling that if she weren’t present then it wouldn’t have come to this, but alas, the hardships of human relationships. It took them a few minutes before everything calmed down.

“Fine! I’ll just call someone else, okay!? Both of you, stay here! Renig, make sure they don’t leave this room!”

“Woof!”

“Hey, why are you following her all of the sudden? I thought you were MY partner?”

Ignoring Garin, Hizli left the room behind a metallic door that automatically opened sideways. After everything that happened, Yuu was certain of one thing.

“They definitely have connections to someone on Earth.”

“What? But how? Almost everyone there forgot that Zerid even exists, how did they…”

Garin was about to point out the absurdity of Yuu’s words, but he trailed off at the end, leaving his words hanging in the air.

“Garin? Do you know something?”

“No… It’s… it’s nothing.”

Seeing his fists tightening and shaking sure didn’t seem like nothing to Yuu, but she kept quiet about it and waited for Hizli instead. If there was one thing she wouldn’t do, it’d be to force secrets out of people. After all, she wasn’t one to talk.

“Alright. They said it was fine. But ALL of you have to come to tomorrow’s meeting. We need to talk about how to deal with END, and ALL of you are helping.”

“You’ve been real loud every time you said ‘all,’ but you mean us three right?”

“No, that person standing outside the base too.”

“H-Huh!? Why him!? No, wait, how did you even find him!?”

It wasn’t just Garin, but Yuu and even Renig, who didn’t seem to care about their talks, stared at Hizli, dumbfounded. The man they were talking about was Eksert, the mysterious Vjzasu that they encountered in the forest. His presence was that of air, obscure, and even invisible. Garin and Renig couldn’t get a single trace of his presence the moment he left their vision. How were they, who didn’t even leave the base, able to discover his existence?

“It wasn’t me. It was Erezil.”

“Ah, no wonder…”

“Woof.”

Garin and Renig seemed to be satisfied by just hearing the person’s name, but obviously, the same couldn’t be said with Yuu.

“Why? Who is this Erezil person?”

“Hmm, well she was the one who said it was fine to let all of you in, so I guess it’s okay to explain.”

Hizli muttered to herself out loud while looking upwards.

“Do you know what these are?”

She asked as the three tails behind her back stretched out and pointed at her.

“They’re… senlr, right? And with three made from flesh, that makes you… A Qeajrv at their Blue Stage, am I right?”

“Wow, so Garin did tell you about us! …tch!”

“U-Um, I swear it’s nothing like that…”

Yuu received the full message behind her jealousy-filled tongue clicking. She hoped to clear up the misunderstanding, but it didn’t look like she was interested in listening. Meanwhile, Garin was still as clueless as ever.

“Anyway, Erezil is the most powerful person in our clan. Her value is beyond anything else. The Five-Tail Golden Senlr Maiden.”

“A five-tail!?”

It wasn’t Yuu, but Garin who shouted in surprise. He reacted so fast that she couldn’t even get her word in.

“Wait, why are you shouting?”

Hizli looked at him with a confused face.

“I mean, she was a four-tail before, right!?”

“Ugh, that was ten years ago. Obviously, with someone of her talent, she was bound to get there at some point.”

She spoke with the color of disappointment clear in her voice.

“Meanwhile…”

She scrutinized Garin and Renig and saw that both of them only had one tail. Garin still had another tail made of mana, but she was concerned about their current level. Her eyes fell to the ground and let out a sigh.

“Well, we should talk about that later, too…”

This time, none of them caught the message in her cryptic words.

**266 – The Five-Tail Senlr Maiden**

The three of them followed Hizli. They silently twisted through the halls with the occasional nostalgic gasp from Garin. Then, they arrived at a room with a large circle with various markings in the middle.

“Huh?”

“What… Hey, what’s this, some new art thing?”

Both Yuu and Garin let out confused voices. Garin, who saw no use in the almost empty room pointed at the circle with raised brows and asked in a mocking tone. However, Yuu’s was a bit different. She recognized these complicated patterns.

“…A Teleportation Circle.”

“Huh?”

“Arf?”

“Eh…? You know what this is?”

While Garin and Renig were stuck trying to figure out what Yuu said, Hizli was already continuing the conversation.

“Ah, yes. I lived on Earth for the last few years and I encountered the same thing. But I never thought I’d see one here.”

“Oh? From Earth…? I see…”

Hizli muttered to herself as she pinched her chin to ponder Yuu’s words.

“Is there something wrong?”

“…No, never mind me.”

She said dismissively and bounced off to a different topic.

“As Yuu said, this is a teleportation circle. Technology from Earth that lets us teleport to a certain place almost immediately. The one that puts Traveler’s Gems to shame. It doesn’t break, and we can use it as many times as we want so long as we have enough mana and a new power source be obtained. Before, we had a Traveler’s Gem connected to an evacuation settlement, but when we got our hands on this, we immediately switched and saved the Traveler’s Gems for different occasions.”

“What? Is that even possible?”

Despite the explanation, Garin still had his doubts.

“Well then, you’ll just have to try it out for yourself. Come on, all of you get on the circle.”

Everyone followed her orders and gathered at the center of the circle. Then, with two taps of her foot, the circle lit up with a blue light and covered everyone’s vision. The next thing they knew, their surroundings changed. Garin and Renig were dumbfounded with their mouths wide open as they looked around.

Steep walls of earth extended to the crimson sky as dusk was upon them. Trees with holes in their trunks of varying sizes surrounded them. The inside of those trunks and what seemed to be gems attached to their surface glowed bright grey. And in front of them, was a woman that looked like they were in their twenties. Her black silky hair extended to around her knees, the color of that hair turning white as it reached its tips. She wore a black dress decorated with blue flowers around her waist and the hem with ornate leaves of the same color. She looked at them with her white eyes matching her porcelain skin. Her wolf ears and six tails flowed freely as the wind picked up, shaking the blue flower that decorated her hair. Then, she spoke.

“Welcome. I am Erezil, it’s nice to meet you.”

She directed a light bow at Yuu, making her stiffen up, and bowed a bit too strong in return.

“N-Nice to meet you too!”

“Fufu. And you too, Garin. Welcome back.”

“Y-Yeah, thanks. Looks like a lot happened while I was gone, Ere.”

“Mnn, you’re not wrong there.”

She twisted her lips into a wry smile, with tired eyes that looked away from them for just a moment.

“Hm? Wait, I thought you could only have five tails, but why are there six?”

Yuu asked as she stared at the sixth tail that stuck out from the rest because of its shorter length.

“Ah, this. Fufu, come on now, no need to be shy. Introduce yourself.”

Erezil said as she looked behind her. Then, two wolf ears popped out from behind her back. A few seconds later, someone’s face could be seen with panicked eyes that shifted from the ground, to their group, to Erezil, and then to a different place in their surroundings. The person’s eyes darted around as they gingerly revealed themselves from Erezil’s back.

A small child that reached up as tall as Erezil’s waist was there. One of her ears was colored in white, and the other along with the rest of her short hair was black. Her white tail squirmed about, showing her nervousness. Her hands tightly gripped her dress, which was similar to Erezil’s, as she squeezed the words out of her throat.

“H-Hi… I’m… Yi…… rae. Ah, Y-Yirae! …Nn!”

At first, she said her name with a pause in between, but when she noticed it, she quickly redid her introduction with a louder voice than she expected. The moment she realized that, she returned to hide behind the safety of Erezil’s back. But this time, she managed to keep one eye out as she stared at Yuu and the others.

“Fufufu. Yes, this is Yirae. She’s a bit shy, but she’s a sweet girl. We had the other clan members retreat to the secret village via teleportation circle, but this precious one wanted to stay by my side no matter what. Hehe, her dream is to become a senlr maiden just like me, so I hope you all could support her!”

“…! …!”

Yirae then nodded vigorously in agreement from behind Erezil’s back.

“Woof, woof!”

“Sure, do your best!”

“Hihi, she’s a big dreamer, that Yirae.”

“I support you too!”

Renig was first to give his cheers, followed by everyone else. Then, it looked like she saw jumping for joy at their kind words.

“Yirae, I’m going to have to talk with them for a while, so you can continue your practice over there, is that fine?”

“…!”

She silently nodded and trotted to one of the glowing trees, a bit out of sight as she hid half of her body behind another tree, but they could still spot her. She placed her hands on the tree, her tail then glowed grey, and a grey ball came out from one of the holes in its bark and circled around her.

“If you’re wondering, she’s making the moon essence flow from the tree to her tail and returning it. It’s a practice to get her body used to intaking moon essence for a prolonged amount of time.”

She directed the explanation so Yuu, filling her in on what was happening.

“Is that so? It’s good to see that she’s working hard.”

“Indeed.”

With a nod, Erezil took a short pause to change gears before she continued. Darkness slowly crept up their surroundings as the final light of day disappeared as the sun sunk back down into the earth, leaving only the light of the moon trees around them to illuminate the area.

**267 – Underlying Motives**

“First, I would like to thank you for agreeing to come here. We call this place the Lunar Stage, a Sunken Nest that we conquered to obtain resources and built this makeshift temple… Fufu, though it’s supposed to be an alternative, I personally like it here better.”

Erezil said as she spun around with her arms open.

“Now then…”

She locked eyes with Yuu before continuing, targeting her as the main recipient of her next words.

“You’re all probably wondering why we have technology from Earth, namely, the Teleportation Circle.”

“H-Hey, Sister Ere, that’s…”

Hizli tried to voice her opinion, doubting that continuing her thought would be a good idea. But Erezil refused her as she raised her hand as if to block any more words coming from her. Unable to do anything, she stayed silent with an anxious face and carefully watched Yuu.

“This is because we have connections with humans from Earth. Does the name ‘Konjou Clan’ seem familiar to any of you?”

Garin and Renig both immediately turned to Yuu. Since both of them had no clue, if anyone had even the slightest chance of knowing, it was the person that came from Earth. And the way she held her breath and stood there stupefied confirmed their hunches. She clearly had many questions waiting to be thrown at Erezil, but before she could sort her thoughts and utter a single question, she continued.

“They were the ones, the inventors of the Teleportation Circle, that shared their technology with us. But at the root of all of this, we only knew a single person who introduced us to the Konjou Clan. This was more of a gift from *\*them.\**”

She shifted her gaze to Garin as she emphasized suggestively. Catching on to that, he muttered out loud.

“No way…”

But just like with Yuu, she didn’t allow him the luxury to organize his thoughts.

“It was around six years when they returned to the village and gave us this technology. That was one of the major turning points of the Ujlufi Werewolf Clan’s evolution. Because of this, we discovered the secret to our race’s requirements for evolution.”

“W-What!?”

“!!”

Garin and Renig reacted strongly to her words. Yuu didn’t know the full context, but she could make a guess that this was probably because of her hunch that the Qeajrv’s evolution requirements weren’t clearly known. In the first place, evolutionary races rarely ever discover the needs for their evolution, so it wasn’t an uncommon story. In fact, this was the natural reaction.

“H-How!? It wasn’t just gathering more moon essence!?”

Garin asked fervently. However, Erezil laid her hand flat in the air and slowly lowered it downward, signaling him to calm himself. Garin ground his teeth in frustration, but after a reluctant click of his tongue, he silenced himself. With a satisfied nod, Erezil continued.

“It is undoubtfully needed for a Qeajrv to have moon essence in order to evolve. However, that is not all. The key to evolution is a mix of three different sources. Moon essence, mana, and finally, spirit power, one of the most scarce resources a single Zeldian can ever have.”

Yuu was reminded of how spirit power had a contradicting effect when mixed with mana. Just like how hunters of the Konjou Clan couldn’t use spirit power as much the moment they use mana. But for Zeldians, it was something that came along with their existence. In exchange for having mana in their bodies, they had a low supply of spirit power. But although low, it was not non-existent.

“It is similar to metal casting. First, we need moon essence. This empowers our bodies, allowing them to gather potential for our next evolution, like a metal cast. Second, we need mana. It fuses with the moon essence, making it react in a way that solidifies our potential, like molten metal being poured into a cast. This happens whenever we attempt to generate a senlr. And finally, we need spirit power to maintain that form, like a substance used to cool down the metal. The reason we don’t maintain our next evolution is that our bodies are filled with two strong raw powers. If we force it to stay in our bodies for a long time, it will begin to destroy us from the inside. However, the spirit power weakens that power enough so that it can stabilize, allowing our bodies to adapt to it and evolve.”

“…”

The room fell into silence. This was finally the long-sought moment for everyone to arrange their thoughts. Erezil stood there, waiting for their reactions. And to that, Garin gave a response that suited him the most.

“Sorry, what?”

Hizli let out a long, heavy sigh after those words entered her ears. She looked at him in disappointment.

“H-Hey! This ain’t my fault! In the first place, I don’t even know what this spirit power thing is!”

“Ugh, well I guess you have a point…”

“See!”

The two argued, but separate from them, Yuu had only finished sorting her mind asked Erezil.

“U-Um, I don’t understand it completely either… I think I get it theoretically, but seeing it in person would probably be best…”

“I see. You’re right, that should provide to everyone’s current understanding.”

Then, a dim light touched Erezil’s feet. It was a familiar light that had become embedded in her daily life. She looked upward and saw two moons peeking from the edge of the earth.

“Ah, what perfect timing…”

Erezil said as the light in their surroundings became a bit brighter. The trees glowing silvery grey were accompanied by small blue dots on the ground and the glowing blue flowers on Erezil’s dress. As the moon above shined upon them, all five tails on Erezil’s back spread like a fan and shined in a golden light. As if to react to that, the small dots of blue sprawled on the ground all sprouted into gorgeous blue flowers, similar to the ones on Erezil’s dress, warding off the darkness with their blue light.

Erezil opened her arms wide as she raised her head to the sky with her eyes closed.

“O Light, bestow upon us the power of yore. Let the origin of black and white rise as You did to the golden sun. Hear my words, my chant, my prayer—”

A loud smack resounded in the area as she brought her hands together and opened her eyelids to reveal her golden eyes.

“—Qeajrv’s Illumination!”

Blue particles of light burst from all of the blue flowers on the ground, filling the air with its mystical sight. Then, the grey trees all shined in the same color as Erezil’s golden aura. Balls of light were produced from each tree and danced in the air filled with blue particles. In the distance, Yirae was jumping around, playing with the floating lights. Then, all of them began moving to two main points, Garin and Renig’s tails.

The two observed their bodies as all the light poured in. Then, their eyes changed to show an illuminating golden color. And along with that, an additional tail appeared on their behind, but unlike the temporary tails that they donned earlier, it was made out of flesh and bones, the same color as their other tail.

“W-Whoa!?”

“Grris is… such power!”

It wasn’t just Garin, but even Renig let out a voice of astonishment as the power that allowed him to speak flowed into them. Everyone watched as the lights were eventually all exhausted and the area returned to a tranquil-looking garden with trees illuminating the surroundings with grey light and small dots of blue spread across the ground. Erezil’s golden aura also disappeared, letting her eyes revert to their white color. The same happened to Garin and Renig’s eyes as they returned to their natural color.

“Well then, how does that serve as a first-hand experience?”

Erezil asked the two who were slightly busy observing their newly acquired tails.

“Fufu, enjoy them as much as you want. Both of you have permanently reached the Green Stage after all.”

It was Garin who first snapped out of his reverie and finally asked his questions.

“Wait, how!? I know that was a ritual just now, but that only gives us moon essence, right? Then what about the other requirements?”

“Hihihi, I’ll be taking it from here.”

Hizli walked up to the spotlight.

“The requirement for moon essence was fulfilled the moment Sister Ere transferred the ones stored in the moon trees to the both of you. For mana, if any of you were even lacking in the first place, it was fulfilled when Sister Ere made these Ixke Flowers bloom. Flowers that react and bloom only with mana. The moment she filled them with her mana, it sprayed clumps of neutral mana that both of you could absorb. And as for the requirement for spirit power… both of you have already reached it a long time ago.”

Hizli’s melancholic expression didn’t go past Garin and Renig’s eyes. They both understood what she meant and fell silent because of it. Yuu, who didn’t know what it was all about kept her silence. But unexpectedly, Erezil suggested something completely absurd.

“As for that situation… I would like to talk more about it here, but I would need a certain someone’s permission first.”

“W-What!? Sister Ere, this is too much!”

Hizli shouted in protest.

“I don’t know what you have in mind, but please stop making choices that could weigh heavily on Garin’s shoulders! Right now, even if she’s an ally, it doesn’t mean that we should just reveal everything to her needlessly! Knowing Garin, if he answers that, he might just agree! Stop forcing him to make choices that he doesn’t want! Please!”

“…”

Once more, the room fell silent. Erezil observed the situation. Hizli was standing between her and Garin, trying to hide him behind her. Garin had his head down and couldn’t see his expression, but it was no doubt a strained one. Renig was by Garin’s side, silently listening to the conversation. And Yuu was on the sidelines, nervous at the sudden turn of events. Having considered everyone’s reaction to the situation, she made a choice.

“I understand, I will refrain from this behavior. I apologize.”

The tension released from Hizli with a sigh as a satisfying answer came from Erezil. Then, she turned her back to Erezil to face Garin.

“Hey, how about you rest up for the day? I have something to tell you, but we still have tomorrow. We can talk then so just take a break, it’s been 10 years, you deserve it. Okay?”

“Mnn.”

He nodded in response to her suggestion.

“Then, let me accompany you.”

“Hihi, yep, you too Renig.”

Hizli dragged Garin by the hand and led him to the Teleportation Circle that they came through earlier. Renig followed right behind them. Hizli turned back around and gave Erezil a light bow.

“Well then, we’ll be going now.”

With a quick farewell, she tapped the ground twice with her foot and disappeared into a pillar of blue light. Yuu was left alone with Erezil and Yirae who was nervously hiding behind a tree as she watched the exchange happen.

“U-Umm…”

Wanting to say something, but unable to think of anything good, Yuu filled the air with her awkward filler voice as she turned to Erezil. Since she couldn’t take the lead, Erezil opted to take it instead.

“That didn’t go well… Hm, I’ll have to rethink my plans. For now, Miss Yuu, you can stand on the teleportation circle and I’ll send you to a room you can use to rest. I will have someone deliver food to you. We can meet again tomorrow for the meeting.”

“I-Is this really okay…? Me being here and all.”

Yuu looked around, and this was clearly not a place where normal tourists were brought to sightsee. She was a stranger and an outsider. There should have been no need for her to be here. But from what she could tell, the person in front of her was the reason she was brought here in the first place.

“Fufu, no need to worry about that. These actions are my decisions. Whatever becomes of them is my responsibility. For now, you should go rest, Miss Yuu. I’m sure you’ve had your fair share of troubles before you got here.”

“If you say so…”

She wasn’t satisfied with that answer, but she could do nothing about it and reluctantly walked over to the teleportation circle.

“Well then, Miss Yuu, I hope to see the both of you some time.”

“The both of us…?”

“Ah, by that, I mean you and your other friend on the surface. I’m looking to have an exchange with the both of you.”

“What…?”

She couldn’t comprehend what she was saying. She got that she wanted to talk, but in the first place, what was compelling her to have a talk with two strangers? The question couldn’t leave her thoughts.

“Why? We’re both strangers to you, right? Aren’t you doubtful that we might be a threat to this place? Especially now that END decided to invade your village?”

If there was anyone suspicious in their hideout at the moment, that person would be Yuu. An outsider, and strangely, a vampire of the recently conquered Kingdom of Nrjia that came as reinforcements to fight against END, who invaded no longer than five days ago. But despite these suspiciously overlapping facts, she was unperturbed by them.

“Ah, fufu… Let’s just say that although we’ve never met each other, it doesn’t mean that you two don’t strike me as familiar.”

Before Yuu could get another question in, a pillar of light swallowed her and cut off the conversation short. The next thing she knew, she was in a decently-sized room with walls and flooring covered in blue, a high probability that they were made in mana stones for Qeajrvs to use. But unlike the walls and floors, the furniture was built with common materials like wood, stone, and metal. Although she would have been a bit curious as to why that was in normal circumstances, she couldn’t get her mind off Erezil’s last words.

“Just what do you know…?”

**268 – Meeting with the Ujlufi Clan**

The next morning, everyone was called to a single room. With the staple blue walls and tiles, everyone gathered around a rectangular table made from a material similar to quartz, sitting on wooden chairs as they observed the other members that were attending the meeting.

The focus of those eyes was pointed at the four members that arrived yesterday. Sitting next to each other, Garin had an annoyed look on his face, likely from the stares he had been getting for a while now, Renig simply sat calmly and ignored those looks, Yuu was clearly nervous as she fidgeted every now and again with her eyes mostly looking down the table, and Eksert was as undiscernible as ever, sitting there silently.

“Alright, I’d like to begin this meeting by introducing the reinforcements that arrived yesterday. I’ve been briefed by Lady Erezil about them yesterday, so I’ll be the one to introduce them to the team.”

The one who spoke was a large burly man with short black hair and three black tails who sat at the end of the table. It seemed like he was taking the lead for this meeting, so Yuu and the others sat silently as he introduced every one of them.

“First, we have Garin. I’m sure everyone here knows him already, but he is a well-known traveler and has made many names for himself, particularly the incident with the Laxid Kingdom being the most troublesome event that the Ujlufi Clan had to deal with… But now, he made his way back to us when he heard of END’s invasion. Second, we have Renig. Garin’s assigned guardian that valiantly followed through with their role as he accompanied Garin in his ventures. Despite being single-tailed, they acquired titles and gathered more honor than most of the past members of the clan.”

The table’s reaction to the two’s introduction was small, but they clearly had more negative impressions of the two than positive ones.

“Third, we have Miss Yuu. She is a vampire that Garin brought with him as reinforcements against our invaders. She apparently lived on Earth before coming here, supported by her knowledge of technology from that world shown in her ability to identify Earth’s clothing and our newly acquired Teleportation Circle. She is also said to know about the Konjou Clan, which strengthens her story.”

This time, the table looked at her curiously, but they still stood by the negative attitude that they showed Garin and Renig earlier.

“And finally, for the fourth one, we have Sir Eksert. We have no prior knowledge about him, but he gladly introduced himself earlier this morning when he came to get him. He is an exiled Vjzasu that works in Haeqras as a high-ranking Crawler. His identification card proved to be legitimate, saying that he is assigned to the role of Voyager, a difficult role that was only given to the extremely talented with the straining responsibilities of traveling from branch to branch to balance the difficulties of Sunken Nests. He has received multiple names, one of them being the Roaming Ace, due to his success as a Voyager. He claims to have come here to take back a companion that was abducted by END and was brought to our village. His ally is a Qeajrv named Serka, whose natural hair color is pure black.”

Eksert bowed his head lightly as he was introduced. The table’s impression of him was undiscernible, much like his character. There were signs that some looked at him in a favorable light, albeit small, but most who had a negative impression of him were fiercer on him than the other three.

“Now, I will be introducing our roster. The first would be me. My name is Xeoi, and I hold the title of Alpha, the strongest warrior of the clan, with power second only to Lady Erezil. I specialize as a fighter and stayed here to take back our homeland.”

He then presented the man sitting next to him. He had white hair just like Garin’s and had three white tails on his back. However, he was one of the people that had a negative impression of the other group this whole time, looking at them with a frustrated look.

“This is Mrel. He possesses the title of Beta, the second strongest warrior of the clan, and my right-hand man. He specializes in ranged attacks, but he’s no pushover in close combat. Just like me, he is here to uphold his title and fight off our invaders.”

Moving his arm slightly upward, he presented the old man sitting next to Mrel. His hair was striped black and white like a tiger's with a similar pattern on his three tails. The only thing that matched his intimidating aura was his unfavorable look at the group of newcomers.

“This is Chief Elrei, the current leader of the Ujlufi Clan. He is renowned for his quick-wittedness and severe strength on the battlefield. He led the clan to where it is now for thirty years and rightfully obtained the respect of every one of its members.”

He then presented someone the reinforcement group, except for Eksert, was familiar with.

“This is Sister Hizli. She is the clan’s most powerful and even more skilled Manamancer. She took the lead in constructing the new layout of this underground base and integrated many of its functions. She expertly modifies apocrologic tools to make them more powerful in the hands of Qeajrvs. And finally, is the leading researcher in the new field of spirit power.”

She happily nodded to Xeoi’s introduction of her. However, despite that show of joy, she looked over the reinforcement group with mixed feelings, specifically, she had negative impressions of Yuu and Eksert, but showed curiosity about both of their backgrounds.

“And finally, we have Sister Erezil. The clan’s top senlr maiden with power second to none, being the only person to have ever reached the Golden Stage. She has approved of all four of our reinforcements to join us in our endeavor of taking down END’s forces and retrieving what is rightfully ours.”

Erezil bowed as she was introduced. And now, after looking over the members of the meeting once more, cleared his throat and changed gears.

“Now, I will be discussing the purpose of this meeting. We will be taking back our village fighting against END, but before that, we must know what these people are after. Why is it that after three years of no movement, END has decided to attack our secluded village rather than a major cornerstone to the Ridsikrn Empire? We’ve discussed this before, and this answer is none other than our latest technology, the Mana-Infused Spirit Core.”

The reinforcement group stared at Xeoi with question marks on their heads, looking for an explanation.

“It is the most powerful energy source that Sister Hizli developed a year ago. After discovering the need for spirit power in our race’s evolution, she quickly began research intending to develop spirit power within individual Qeajrvs. The result was the Mana-Infused Spirit Core. A mechanism that modifies the structure of natural mana into one that strictly avoids contact with spirit power. Since the loss of spirit power happens when it makes contact with mana, her solution to that was to make it so that mana would avoid contact with spirit power. However, there are still problems with that such as the disruption of mana flow whenever mana is used. The core produces results but is still a work in progress. At the moment, it’s just a decorative structure that does absolutely nothing… or at least that’s what we thought.”

Everyone from the Ujlufi clan showed a bitter expression, especially Hizli as she clutched her chest to calm down her raging heart.

“Our scouts laid their eyes on a new form of augmented werewolves. Originally, augmented werewolves were created from people of the Qeajrv race. The foolish who sold themselves to END were modified. We suspect it was an attempt to make the most powerful type of wolf. In modern terms, the combined powers of a werewolf and a pure wolf. The agility and dexterity of a werewolf, and the power and toughness of a pure wolf. The being called an augmented werewolf was made to have the combined strengths of both. They succeeded, but that destroyed the mental state of the Qeajrvs that were subjected to this process. At the moment, every augmented werewolf so far was either blood-crazed or a puppet for END’s schemes. However, fragments of the original person’s personality seem to show from time to time, well, not that it stops them from following the orders they were given.”

Yuu was reminded of the time when Senkyo faced off against the werewolf under Fulgur’s command. She wasn’t there, but Senkyo told her his side of the story, and how the werewolf had an inconsistent personality. One moment, he wanted to assassinate him mercilessly from the shadows, and the next he wanted to face him off in a proper duel. It was strange, to say the least, and Xeoi’s explanation provided to that.

“But now, there is another type. These augmented werewolves ever only have one tail, but now, there were sightings of ones with two tails. If there was anything in our village that could make those senseless beasts evolve, the only explanation would be the Mana-Infused Spirit Core. Even though it was a work in progress, END has somehow used it to their advantage. That’s why, in our next operation, our goal will be to destroy the core before it produces any more powerful enemies.”

Hearing that, the atmosphere of the table seemed to drop. Wordlessly, everyone’s eyes gathered on Hizli, the creator of the declared target. Noticing the attention gathered on her, she took a deep breath and stood up.

“I approve of the operation’s objective. We must cut off their power source before END becomes any more powerful. No matter what.”

The Ujlufi clan nodded at her show of resolve. Meanwhile, Garin was staring at Hizli with an uncertain expression.

“Then, I will be moving on to how the operation will be executed. Our target is the Ujlufi temple, the Mana-Infused Spirit Core lies in its basement. To get there, we will be taking the teleportation circle to get to the underground entrance. Our scouts have risked their lives in planting this circle where it needs to be, and we will make their efforts worth it. Beyond that is an everchanging labyrinth that tosses everyone who enters off their trail, another expert work of Sister Hizli. Unfortunately, it seems like END was able to cross it, but we don’t know if they made it through destruction or pure luck. So, if the labyrinth is still working, we will have Sister Hizli tamper with the structure and let us through. After that is a straight path to the Mana-Infused Spirit Core. We will destroy it posthaste and leave before we’re surrounded by enemies.”

Xeoi looked into the eyes of each person around the table before continuing.

“Everyone around this table, save for Sister Erezil will participate in the operation. I prefer this operation to be done with as few people as possible, but we aim to return, at the very least with Sister Hizli. Our extra manpower will ensure that she is protected at all costs. The operation will commence three days from now, just enough time for Sister Hizli and her team to modify our equipment and have us ready for battle. That will be all for the operation’s contents, now, may I have your opinions on the subject?”

The first to raise their hand was Mrel, Xeoi’s right-hand man.

“Very well, Mrel, what do you have to say?”

“I think I’m speaking for everyone when I ask this, but should we really have these people join in on our operation? We have someone who abandoned the village, a person that followed that foolishness, a vampire, and a vjzasu that could very well be people of END. How are we sure that these people aren’t a threat to us?”

In response to Mrel, Erezil raised her hand, and Xeoi allowed her to speak.

“I believe Brother Xeoi has already explained that I can confirm the two’s legitimacy. They are not a threat to us, I assure you.”

“Not a threat? How? Sister Erezil, isn’t this just one of your usual whims? You only say that they’re safe, but you never say out loud how you determined them to be safe! Even if you’re the most powerful person in the clan, how am I supposed to trust you if you’re keeping secrets from us!?”

“…”

The atmosphere turned heavy as Erezil chose to pause in silence before replying to Mrel’s words.

“There are things better left unsaid. But please understand that this is for the sake of the clan. To that end, would you still say that you don’t trust me?”

“Kgh… You would ask me that question… just how important are these people?”

“More than you would ever imagine, Mrel. Please, stand down.”

“Tch…!”

With a click of his tongue, he begrudgingly sat back down in his seat. Then, the next person to raise his hand was Elrei.

“Oa, Mreltczg fims uisi sixeh. Ocza j aoavvadrlr vv oa iia xewojdr krnlr. Fipqmsa, lrdra j firel avvui lr, Ereziltczg krn lrdra hjdrxeoaj j oauiui j sih pqcziia en j xerel hjhui siui vvjoafi. Fia, oa wooadr krn uixerelpq pqrel xeiia lrdra xehwo.”

(I have the same stance as Young Mrel. I do not approve of any of our reinforcements. However, refusing their help when Young Erezil insists so much of their cooperation would be the most foolish of all choices. Here, I will swallow my pride and accept them.)

“Thank you, Chief Elrei.”

Erezil bowed to Elrei in appreciation, but that proved to be premature.

“Fipqmsa, oa jrel pqrel lroa jdr nwdrlrj ui pqdr tcz xeuidr. Oa tcz krn avvui si j, pqrel krnlr rellr.”

(However, I will only do so when you answer this one question. I will not let you refuse me.)

He delivered a fierce glare at Erezil, his fearsome aura seeping into the skin of everyone in the area. To his threatening declaration, she nodded reluctantly.

“…Very well.”

“Lrdr…”

(Then…)

Elrei shifted his spine-chilling glare from Erezil to Eksert. He raised his arm and pointed at him, directing everyone’s gazes to the man at the end of his finger.

“Tcz, lroa jdr hkrn enxe?”

(Can you beat this one?)

Everyone from the Ujlufi clan, including Garin and Renig widened their eyes at Elrei’s question. It was a well-known fact that Erezil is the most powerful person in the clan. The five tails on her back were proof of that. But his question suggested that Eksert’s power was on par against Erezil, or at the very least, Elrei was uncertain of Eksert’s strength.

To Elrei’s question, Erezil answered almost immediately.

“At the moment, yes. If we were to engage in battle now, I will undoubtedly come out as the victor. However, he possesses potential more than anything I would hope to achieve. I believe allying ourselves with him will be a wise choice.”

“Ouidr. Vva xeuidroag lrxebk.”

(I see. Thank you for answering.)

With the end of Elrei’s talk, Xeoi quickly tried to recompose himself and continued.

“W-Well, then. Does anyone else have anything to say?”

Xeoi delivered his gaze specifically to the reinforcement side. No one seemed to want to say anything, but then Eksert raised his hand. And after Elrei’s question, everyone watched him with more alertness than usual.

<Could someone please teach me about how Qeajrvs manipulate mana? And how mana works in their evolution?>

It was a question none of them expected. Most of the people present didn’t know what to say, but Erezil was the one who took the liberty of answering for everyone.

“Yes, that’s completely fine. Since Hizli is busy with her work, I’ll be the one teaching you. Do you mind?”

<No, not at all.>

Mrel and even Garin looked like they wanted to say something, but their senses were not so dull that they would miss the sharp atmosphere around Erezil that would cut anyone that tried to refute her. Not long after, the meeting disbanded without any more incidents.

**269 – Dancing Lights**

It was late at night. Yuu had finished eating dinner in the underground base’s cafeteria. She thought of spending the rest of her time in her room, but she couldn’t help but feel restless. So now, she was walking around the halls, pondering how to feel about the meeting earlier that day.

“Eksert and Erezil…”

The names of the two people who filled her head leaked out in her voice. These were the most mysterious people out of everyone she met after returning to Zerid. It felt like they always knew something everyone else didn’t. The way Erezil was pushing her and Eksert’s participation in their operation to take back their home was all too unnatural. She mentioned in the meeting that she knew something but just didn’t want to tell them. She suggested the same thing when they first met but unceremoniously cut off the conversation before she could ask any more.

And then there was Eksert. People around her seemed to feel his immense power. The first was Renig when they first encountered him in the forest. The next seemed to be Erezil, who noticed their presence when they first arrived at their base. And finally, there was Chief Elrei, who suggested that his power would be able to challenge Erezil. She never felt it, but she could tell he was unusual. In the first place, was their encounter with him truly a coincidence?

Before they arrived at the Praqrev Forest, a jester entered Yuu’s room and convinced her to hold off their departure for two more days. Had they not followed him, they would not have met Eksert or at the very least, they wouldn’t have met until some time later. Was Eksert a person the jester wanted them to meet? Taking it at face value, then the jester made them meet each other as soon as possible so that he could become a powerful military asset. But was that all?

If the reason the jester made them meet was only so that they could have someone strong by their side, then why would Erezil act so favorably of him? No, it wasn’t just him, she treated her favorably as well. It wasn’t power. She couldn’t directly compare her power with his, but there was a clear difference in how others treated the two in terms of power.

Was it something they had in common or were they somehow singled out of everyone in this world? Unfortunately, no matter how many questions she asks in her mind, none of them come answered. Then, suddenly, she was forcibly pulled out of her train of thought by a loud bang that came from a nearby room.

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN SHE WENT WITH HIM!?”

“—Aah!?”

She flicked her head upward in surprise and saw a familiar child running out of the room in front of them in a panic.

“A-Ah, wait, Yirae, where are you going!?”

Then, she saw Hizli come out the same door trying to chase after Yirae, but stopping herself at the door. She stared at the corner she disappeared to with a worried look on her face, but she still didn’t move to get her. As she reluctantly turned her face back to the inside of the room, Yuu entered her line of sight and made her jump back in surprise.

“D-Did you see that?”

“M-Mn. Sorry, I was just walking by. I didn’t mean to.”

“No, you’re fine… Ah! Well…”

It seemed like she was considering something after her voice spiked up and dropped down in almost the same second. But after a quick deliberation, she locked eyes with Yuu, an uncertain expression clouding her face.

“Could you look for Yirae? I don’t know where she’ll run to, but I’m worried about what she might get herself into.”

“Yes, that’s fine.”

“Okay then. Thanks.”

She turned back to the room and closed the door behind her. Yuu wasn’t sure, but it seemed like Garin was the person inside the room with her since the voice that snapped her out of spacing out sounded like him. Not wanting to eavesdrop, she hurried her way to the corner Yirae turned.

“Yirae! Where are you? Yiraee!”

After a while, she remained unfound and left Yuu screaming down the halls with no one to respond to her.

“Yirae! Uiajuit, ycz xedr pqdrdr!?”

(Yirae! Seriously, where are you!?)

She even tried speaking in Zeldian in case she liked that better.

“…”

But there was no response.

“Haah…”

With a deep sigh, she was forced to accept two things. One, is that Yirae was nowhere to be found. And second…

“I’m lost aren’t I…?”

She continued wandering the halls, mostly with the purpose of finding Yirae, and slightly of the want to find a familiar location to fix her bearings. A few minutes later, her prayers were miraculously answered. Her eyes brightened as she walked up to a familiar glass pane to observe that it was the very same one.

“There’s no doubt! This is the entrance! …huh?”

She didn’t notice at first due to her desperation, but the door was slightly ajar. Did someone come by and didn’t close the door all the way? But of anything, only a small child could fit in that space…

“…!”

As a terrible thought crossed her mind, Yuu pushed the door open and headed up the stairs to the exit. She was jumping from step to step, covering multiple levels as she did so. But then she was stopped when the step she placed her foot on glowed in a brighter blue. With her quick reactions, she was able to open her wings and pushed herself backward with a strong flap. Not a second later, blue spikes sprouted from the walls and stabbed the whole area in front of her.

At the edge of the plethora of spikes, Yuu landed lightly on the ground and retracted her bat wings.

“Haah… That was a close one. Good thing I got Hevel-san to make cuts in the armor so I could sprout my wings… More importantly, the traps are still active. Did Yirae not go outside after all?”

She first suspected that the slightly open door meant that Yirae used that space to exit the base, but was it something else? There was no way for her to leave this place without disabling the traps. Maybe she did but just reactivated them…? No, Garin needed to be on his Green Stage to do that, she didn’t even know if she was capable of doing the same. Not to mention the simple fact that if she bothered to do all of that then she wouldn’t have made such a mistake with the door downstairs.

The spikes slowly retracted and Yuu searched the area. Maybe there was just something she wasn’t seeing. Then, she noticed a discrepancy on the walls. The walls were all blue, but one particular spot on it looked darker than the others. Observing it closer, that was because it was a small handle protruding out of the walls. Curious, she placed her hand on it and slowly turned it. The knob reached its limit and a small push was all it took to reveal a hidden space behind it.

“W-Whoa…”

She fully opened the door and revealed a small teleportation circle inside the enclosed space. She hesitated for a bit but ended up standing on it and pouring the spirit power it needed. She decided that if she felt tired because of her dwindling spirit power before the circle activated, then she would just turn back. But unexpectedly, it didn’t take long for a blue light to swallow her.

“This is… the entrance.”

In front of her was the large mana stone that marked the entrance to the Ujlufu clan’s secret base. No wonder she was able to activate it, the distance wasn’t that far off. And around her was the thick forest that was covered by nothing but darkness… or at least, it should have been.

“Whoohoho!! Waaa!!! It’s beautiful!”

The jolly laughs of a child could be heard coming from the back of the mana stone. Along with that were many sparkling lights that changed in color every now and again. She sneaked up silently to the commotion and saw something unbelievable.

Orange, blue, green, and yellow. Those were the colors that lit up the darkness as orbs of fire floating in the air turned to streams of glowing water. Then, the drops of that water gradually turned into glowing green leaves that caused a soft zephyr in the area, making the hair and clothes of the two people standing in it flow lightly to the wind’s dance. The leaves then gathered and turned into lightning and crawled up one of the people’s skin.

“Hehehe! It tickles!”

<Really?>

Those two people were Yirae and Eksert, a pair she didn’t expect to see together. Yirae’s tail waved happily in the air as the looked up at the dancing magic lights. The lightning gathered and turned to multiple balls of white light and circled the two with one or two balls changing in color. Yirae ran around as she tried to chase the colors before they turned back to white.

“Hahaha! It’s just like Sister Ere’s shinies!”

Yuu was absolutely stupefied as she watched the heartwarming sight. Not because she thought the pair was so unlikely, but because of how Eksert used his magic. She didn’t even know where to begin to theorize how he was doing what he did. How was he able to change the magical elements despite them already being cast? The basis of magic was that it was the result of a carefully arranged mana structure shaped and placed by the caster’s thoughts and words. If they cast magic, there was no way to rearrange that mana structure, but the person in front of her was doing exactly just that. No, that wasn’t all he was also able to change the power output of his magic.

This all began with fireballs that floated around the air, but as the elements changed, they turned to lightning that could only be powerful enough to tickle a person. Even if the flames were light, the mana inside it would be equivalent to much more power than a simple tickle. This was beyond any magic she knew ever existed.

Eksert’s magic changed from element to element, making them glow in their respective colors. White, purple, brown, rose, orange. The color path that made the white orbs of light turn into a blindfold of darkness that playfully took Yirae’s sight for a second. Then, turning into rocks as she forced the blindfold off her face. She threw the rocks at the trees and got absorbed, turning the patch in made contact with to bright rose. And finally, gathering up in the sky once more as floating flames.

Amazement, sadness, fear, envy. Yuu stared at Eksert with a mix of emotions.

*“\*Is this… his power?\*”*

She thought to herself.

But then, instead of turning into a different element, the flames in the sky multiplied and spread over a wider area. Before she even realized it, the flames were spreading closer to her and surrounded her.

“A-Ah!”

She accidentally let out a panicked voice which triggered the flames to burst into a shower of pale blue light. They touched her skin and cooled it down for a few seconds, almost like snow. Then, when she turned her head back to Yirae and Eksert, it was a bit different than before. Instead of playing around innocently, Eksert was standing in front of her while Yirae was hiding behind his back, one eye peeking out to look at her. In front of her, the words in the air glowing in blue wrote…

<What do we have here?>

“Ah… Ahaha, uhmm… what indeed?”

**270 – Yuu and Eksert**

<So you’re telling me you got lost, somehow ended up in the entrance, followed Yirae’s trail, ended up finding us, and instead of calling out to us you chose to sneak up and spy on us?>

“…I have no excuses.”

Currently, Yuu was sitting in a seiza position in front of Eksert, who had both pairs of arms crossed, and Yirae, whose tail was wagging with eyes wide in curiosity as she was watching otherworldly discipline.

<You know we could’ve mistaken you for an enemy, right? Are you trying to scare Yirae?>

“N-No! I was just looking for her since she suddenly ran off somewhere! Wait, in the first place, what are you two doing here!? If you don’t want enemies sneaking up on you, then you shouldn’t be here in the first place!”

Yuu tried to throw the blame back at Eksert.

<I knew it. With that loud voice, you’re definitely trying to scare Yirae.>

But he expertly dodged it by bringing up the child behind him. Although she knew what he was trying to do, looking at Yirae, there was no doubt that she was more frightened than before she shouted. Her tail even stopped wagging.

“K-Kgh…! Nnn~!!!”

She wanted to say something, but she felt like any word that left her mouth would have ended up as a shout. Infuriating as it is, she didn’t want to scare Yirae anymore. So she silenced every energy that wanted to throw itself at the cunning man by holding her mouth shut, making her cheeks puff slightly as she pouted helplessly.

Seeing this, Eksert stepped back and crouched, putting himself behind Yirae with his height around her level.

<Haha, Yirae, look, her cheeks are growing! It’s a vampire’s tell to know they’re embarrassed.>

“R-Really?”

She raised her head and finally looked Yuu in the eyes. Seeing her distorted face, she let out a light giggle, and her tail resumed wriggling in the air. Yuu wanted to get mad at him for his teasing, but it was clearly working to better Yirae’s mood, so she could only self-destruct with a deep sigh to let all the steam out.

As she did, small embers appeared in front of her mouth and spread around them to illuminate the area with their warm, orange light. It was Eksert’s magic again.

<Whooa! Look, she’s letting all the scary stuff out of her system. Now she won’t be scary anymore.>

“She won’t?”

<Mn. I’m sure of it. Tell her to hold your hand. It’s cold here outside, she’ll make it warm for you.>

Yirae shifted her gaze from Eksert to Yuu. Her arm raised slightly, but she pulled back from uncertainty.

“B-But…”

<Here, I’ll help you.>

Eksert placed his hand below the back of Yirae’s hand to support it. Raising it to her chest level, he wrote another message with his free hand.

<Okay, now all you need to do is tell her with your eyes.>

“M-My eyes?”

<Yes. You don’t have to force yourself to speak. She’ll understand you.>

“Nn…”

Trusting in Eksert’s words, Yirae locked eyes with Yuu and stared at her with strained eyes as if shooting a laser beam at her. Reading the flow of the conversation, this was Yuu’s turn to walk up slowly to her and place her hand on Yirae’s. Eksert gave her a chance to get closer to the usually meek and easily frightened child.

Letting herself get dragged by the flow, she slowly approached Yirae, careful not to scare her with any sudden movements, crouched down, lightly placed her hand on hers, and sent a small amount of magic to warm up her hand.

“I-It’s warm…”

<See? She’s not scary anymore.>

“…! …!”

She nodded excitedly in agreement. Seeing this, Yuu couldn’t help but shape a smile on her face.

“You’re really good with kids, huh?”

<Yes, I have a little sister so I’m used to it.>

“No wonder… But on a serious note, why are you two here?”

Yuu calmed down, so she chose to ask the question once more. With the change in her tune, he was happy to respond.

<I’m keeping a promise, well, half of a promise. I went inside, but you told me to guard the outside, am I right? I’m just doing that.>

“H-Huh? That doesn’t matter anymore, does it? Erezil already approved your entry and you already have a room, I’m sure you don’t need to do this.”

<Then think of this as my selfishness. I’m not doing this because you told me to, but because I want to. We can never let our guard down. Especially because I haven’t seen a single enemy come this way ever since we got here.>

“What do you mean? Isn’t that good?”

<I wonder…>

Eksert drew a circle and placed the text “Forest” inside it. Then, he drew a small diamond at the center and labeled it as “Enemy,” and a small square away from the diamond and labeled it as “Base.” And finally, he drew arrows coming from the “Enemy” and bouncing on the edge of the circle, avoiding the “Base.” With his free hand, he resumed talking to Yuu while visualizing his thoughts with his other hand.

<If this immovable location was in the perfect blind spot in END’s patrols, then maybe. But the fact is that they probably know we’re still in the forest. It wouldn’t be strange for them to change patrol routes so that we won’t be able to read them and have more changes in finding us. Even if it hasn’t been long, I would’ve expected one or two enemies to roam the area by now.>

“Hmm… I guess you’re right.”

<Mn. That’s why I’m here.>

“I see… Then why is Yirae here?”

The two looked at Yirae who was playing with Yuu’s hand the whole time.

“Allow me to answer that.”

Yuu and Eksert quickly flicked their heads to the source of the voice. There, they saw Erezil, standing on the edge of the floating flames’ lights and the dark forest. Reacting to her voice, Yirae jumped out between Eksert and Yuu and jumped to hug Erezil.

“Sister Ere!”

“Yes, yes, did you have fun?”

“Mnn! Hehehe…”

She nodded happily as Erezil pet her head.

<I see… No wonder.>

“Hm? Do you know something?”

Yuu asked as she saw the words he wrote.

<After dinner I asked Lady Erezil to let me outside since I couldn’t operate the walls to re-enter.>

“Oh, that makes sense.”

While the two were talking, Erezil faced Yirae.

“Yirae, you’ve done well. But it's time to go back inside, okay?”

“Hmm!”

“Do you know how to get back to the base?”

“…! …!”

She nodded vigorously.

“Sister Ere taught me after all… I won’t fail!”

Yirae closed her eyes and strained her face as she focused. Then, a tail made out of mana appeared behind her.

“Hehehe… I did it!”

“Well done! You have talent, Yirae. But for now, go back downstairs.”

“Mn!”

Yirae trotted back to the entrance. Green light shined from the front of the mana stone as she got inside and once more as she closed the entrance. Confirming that Yirae had left, Erezil turned back to Yuu and Eksert, and what first met her was the text from Eksert’s finger.

<Lady Erezil, am I right to assume that you ordered Yirae to meet me?>

“Yes, how sharp of you. But I wouldn’t say order, it was a request. I happened to spot Miss Yuu looking for Yirae, so I thought it was the perfect chance to get you two together.”

“So… you made her lead me here? Wait, but why?”

To Yuu’s question, Erezil let out a light giggle.

“I told you before, didn’t I, Miss Yuu?”

She was reminded of yesterday when they parted, saying that she wanted to talk to both her and Eksert.

“…A talk?”

“That’s right. But more specifically, a request. Miss Yuu, Sir Eksert…”

Her smile faded and looked the two in the eyes with a serious expression.

“Please, whatever happens three days from now, do not let Garin die.”

The request only served to confuse them, making them tilt their heads slightly in confusion.

“Ideally, I wanted Garin’s consent to tell the both of you, but that was naïve thinking. I will tell you about him, his past, and who he really is.”

“W-Wait, what’s this all of the sudden?”

Yuu cut off Erezil before she could continue speaking. This was all too sudden, but most importantly, it left a bitter taste in her mouth hearing about someone else’s past when they didn’t want to reveal it.

“No, this decision isn’t sudden at all. But first, I would like to make it clear that you both need to know Garin, and Garin needs to know about both of you. You are free to doubt me, so you can tell Garin all about yourselves in your leisure, but please let me start by telling you all about Garin.”

The two stared silently at Erezil, pondering in their heads what they should do. And the first one to make a decision was Eksert.

<Alright, but one question: why us?>

It was the question that plagued Yuu’s mind for a while now. Erezil read the text and twisted her mouth to a wry smile.

“Who else would I ask besides this generation’s ambassadors?”

“A-Ambassador…?”

<…>

Yuu’s eyes widened at Erezil’s words. Meanwhile, Eksert could only stare at her silently.

“Yes. You see, I’m not just a simple five-tailed Qeajrv. I am one of the people that helped the previous generation of ambassadors. And their auras… their unique mana structure… the very hymn of their souls… I can feel it in both of you as well. It’s strangely small, but it’s there all the same. No one else but fellow ambassadors would have this presence.”

“I’m… an ambassador? But… why—AGH!!”

“Miss Yuu!?”

Rising temperature, boiling blood, flickering consciousness, and along with those was a severe headache. It was happening again. She was being attacked by a sudden fever. But this time, it was worse. Her head ached, pulsing like it was threatening to burst out of her head at any moment. Erezil moved to support her when her body began to limp, but Eksert was quicker to catch her and carried her in his arms.

**271 – Me and This Strange Space**

“Wield your great power for others. You can be useful in many ways, and in turn, they will be useful to you.”

Ahh… When was the last time I heard these words? It felt like it had been so long. A nostalgic feeling surged inside me as the memory of twelve years ago played in front of me.

“That is all you need to know to live with that crest. Live with those words in heart.”

This was the day my father told me about the power of my crest, what it meant to me, and what it meant to others. Since birth, I’ve always had a flame-like crest on my back. Apparently, it was a sign that I was an Angel, a special person that was born at an uncertain rate. There had been records that the shortest interval between the birth of two angels was four days, while the longest interval was three hundred years. That was me. I was the person that was marked as the first angel to be born in three hundred years, and all that brought me was unwanted attention.

“Pqedr tcz j hczlrkrn!”

(We’re counting on you!)

“I can’t wait to see what you’ll do, Angel!”

“Oa tczel krn krdr uiakrndrlr woaj j krn pqaiia enlr zdr!”

(I bet you’ll become the strongest person in the world!)

Whenever I interact with others, all they have to say about me is my power. That slowly led me to a life of solitude. I didn’t want to go to town and interact with others anymore. Just because I was born with this crest, with this power, I wasn’t allowed to be like other kids my age. And all of that, all of the cheering, the celebrating, the praise… it all went to nothing. It was a mistake to ever expect anything from me.

Power? That’s hilarious. I have no power. The only people that should’ve received all the praise and expectations I got were people like Eksert… Yes, Eksert. The moment I saw him use his magic, I knew instantly how amazing he was. He was beyond anything I could ever imagine, and he was able to use that talent of his for anything, even for something as simple as entertaining a child. I wasn’t like that. If people knew who he was, then maybe they could’ve expected less from me? Well, it’s not like I could change the past.

How did I even get here again? This is… a dream. It has to be. The memories playing in front of me, and the fact that I could remember everything was proof of that. But… one thing was different from the others. I could move. I wasn’t chained anymore… but the skeleton’s blade was still stuck to my chest. I tried pulling it out but I wouldn’t budge. Well, I guess it doesn’t really matter.

The last memory I had was… ah. The scene changed before me, the bright sun turned dark, trees grew from the ground, and people appeared in front of me. There stood Erezil, Eksert, and me.

“Who else would I ask besides this generation’s ambassadors?”

That’s right, Lady Erezil said that. It had to have been a joke. I mean, me? An ambassador? That was the biggest lie that I’ve heard in my life. Compared to the man standing beside me in my memory, a man with true power, talent, and skill, to the personification of an ambassador, I was nothing. It had to have been a mistake. There was just no way someone like me was chosen. Even if I was, then it was useless on me. All of that power… an angel and an ambassador… I didn’t deserve it.

The scenery in front of me changed again. The forest brightened and the terrain changed, but the trees remained. Erezil and Eksert disappeared, and all that was left was me sitting with my face buried in my knees as I sat hugging them on a rock. Then, a person came.

“What’s wrong?”

It was my mother. She had quite the personality. A raging war goddess in battle, but a gentle, loving mother when it came to us kids. I refused her help multiple times, but eventually, her persistence broke me, and I told her all about my worries. And then, she suggested something.

“Here, why don’t you do this?”

She gave me a small wooden log. I didn’t know what I was supposed to do with it, so I glared at her thinking it was one of her jokes. But then, a flurry of razor-sharp wind cut it and made it look like me. Perched on top of a rock, hugging my legs and wallowing in despair. It was so crooked that you could barely tell what it was. Rough edges, large cuts, and absolutely no fine details. I didn’t even have a face. It was understandable since she used basic structured magic. Apparently, she only did this to pass time when she was a child. But still, for the first time in forever, it made my eyes sparkle. After that, my mother made other sculptures and she taught me how to do them. That was the spark I needed to light up my passion for sculpting.

Days turned to weeks, weeks turned to months, and months turned to years. Ever since that day, I never stopped sculpting. I was best when the material was wood, but I could sculpt on other materials too. Others’ impressions of me plummeted since all I cared about was my sculptures, but I welcomed that. No one praised me anymore, no one expected anything from me anymore, and I could do everything I wanted just by making sculptures. My mother supported me and so did my father. He was a bit reluctant to do so, but he was kind enough to let me do what I want. My siblings even asked me to make sculptures of them. This was one of the best times in my childhood.

But it was just as they say… All good things must come to an end. Five years after I started sculpting, my parents became ill. Every doctor did everything they could to cure them, but nothing worked. Eventually, my grandfather had to come and manage everything for us. But as the eldest child, I had to do something to help, so my grandfather put me to work.

There was barely any time in the day for sculpting. I just worked, worked, and worked. And when my pace began to drop, my grandfather would make me work faster to compensate. Then, that day came…

One year after my grandfather moved in to help our family, the sunken nests in the Nrjia Kingdom began to act strangely, and monsters would sometimes leave their nests in groups and wreak havoc. The local Haeqras were able to do something about it, but there wasn’t enough manpower to keep them under control. And so, my grandfather saw this as a chance to give me more work. My next job: to help the effort in controlling the sunken nests. I didn’t want to. I never even fought before that. Why? Just why? Why was I suddenly being thrust into this unreasonable situation!?

“Why am I suddenly being thrust into this unreasonable situation!?”

…That was a mistake. I said it out loud. I never should have done that. It was the one opening my grandfather needed.

“‘Wield your great power for others. You can be useful in many ways, and in turn, they will be useful to you.’ Do you know these words? You should, because I taught your father this. You have a crest, you are an angel, and with that power, you can put the sunken nests under control. Use it. Stop your childish daydreaming and do it. Become useful.”

Become useful… he said. I couldn’t believe that my father’s words came from this man. I and my father weren’t that close, but I didn’t hate him, in fact, I respected him for how he worked hard for those around him. But to think that they came from this man, someone completely unlike my father… was that the true meaning of his words?

Disillusioned, I could only nod.

My days of hard work in the sunken nests began. I fought hard day after day, traveling nest after nest, using all my free time I had to read books in magic to use them in battle. Eventually, we managed to control all the nests, but I still needed to make my rounds to maintain them. Everything seemed to calm down… until a year passed.

With only a year of subjugating monsters, my powers disappeared. My powers as an angel, the whole reason I was sent to the frontlines, disappeared. Things couldn’t have gotten worse. Thankfully, Haeqras had already sent capable units to each sunken nest and maintained them while I was inactive, but in the end, my powers never returned. And of course, this caused a stir among the people I worked with. They insulted and threw harsh words at me before, and this only made that worse.

“Fit, pqxe a tcz goagj iia krnpq, Xegrel!?”

(Hey, what are you gonna do about this now, Angel!?)

“What do you mean ‘Angel?’ The only thing that went to the heavens is that thing’s worth!”

“Maybe the miracle they bestowed upon her was her severe uselessness!”

I ignored them, or at least I tried to. But no matter how much I tried to deceive myself, I couldn’t get their words out of my head. So I just did better. I just needed to become stronger to become useful. I read books, practiced my magic, and dominated in battle. And it worked, it finally worked! They would still spit at me behind my back, but they couldn’t deny that I was strong. I was useful… I was useful, but that didn’t make me feel any better.

Three more years passed just like that until the night of the kingdom’s fall. That night, I was sent to Earth by my grandfather to find the person mentioned in the prophecy. He told me to bring him so that we could take back the kingdom from END’s clutches.

I hated him, and I’m sure he knew that. But in the end, he was a man that wanted only what was best for the kingdom. He proved that from the tasks he sent me out to do. Helping the people and helping defend the kingdom. My personal hatred of him aside, I didn’t want the kingdom to be under END’s thumb forever. I wanted to be useful. So, I accepted.

Little did I know… that I would prove to myself once more that… I was absolutely useless.

**272 – The Two Who Always Support Me**

Just end me. Why are you taking my memories and emotions from me!? Why are you making me docile!? What is this power that’s keeping me from meeting my end!? Why!? Why, why, why, why, why… WHY!?

*“\*You’re a curious one… Tell me, does this really make you happy?\*”*

H-Huh…?

“Yes! My mother taught me this, and it’s really fun!”

This is…

The scene changed before I even knew it. It was me, sitting on the same rock in the same forest where my mother taught me all about sculpting. There, a voice echoed in my head… Yes, this is the first time I met her… Veoia, The Divine Soul of Flame, the one that resided inside me.

*“\*I expected to see something else when I woke up, you know? Like this wild, battle-crazed maniac that was drowned in my power.\*”*

“I don’t care about that.”

*“\*You don’t? I guess, for a child like you fighting doesn’t really mean much.\*”*

“Hm. I don’t care. I just want to sculpt!”

*“\*I see… Then, you are free to use my powers for that.\*”*

This was the day Veoia recognized me as her master, a worthy user of her powers. Back to my talk with Garin, Renig, and Vems, I tricked them, but I never told a single lie. I told them I was recognized by my soul, and this was that time. I simply deceived them into thinking that I was still recognized. No… it was more accurate to say that they didn’t even know that Angels could lose the rights to their powers after they were already accepted. I didn’t know either.

But because of her that I was able to do so many more things with magic, not just fire, the element that she dominated. Because of how easily I could control fire, I was able to discover that there was more to low-teir spells than just weak, quick-fire shots. I could bend them to my will. I could do so much more things with low-teir spells than other structured magic. With that, I applied it to every element and improved my magic sculpting tremendously.

She would always be there to guide me in how to use my power when I wanted to shape something I didn’t know how. She was like a teacher and a friend. The times were fun when I talked with her. I was isolated from others to focus on my hobby, but that didn’t mean I didn’t want to talk. In those times, Veoia was there for me. Maybe that was why I was able to keep up with Yukou-senpai?

*“\*Master, I’m afraid I will have to go now.\*”*

“H-Huh?”

Ah, this was it… The day that she left me.

*“\*I will be blunt. You are no longer worthy of handling my power.\*”*

She really was blunt. It was just like her to be that way.

“W-What!? No! This is too sudden!? Why!? Why am I not worthy anymore!? What did I do wrong!? What is it, just tell me and I’ll fix it immediately!”

To that, she shook her head in denial.

*“\*I cannot do that. We divine souls cannot tell others the secrets to handling our power. It is for our owners, our masters, to figure out the answer to that.\*”*

“Th-This can’t be! Don’t leave me!”

*“\*Haha… It’s laughable, to think that I would grow so attached that my heart would ache. I don’t even have a heart, isn’t that strange?\*”*

“This isn’t the time for jokes! Veoia, please!”

Once again, she shook her head.

*“\*No. I’m afraid I cannot do anything about this. The only person that can solve this is you, Master.\*”*

“B-But… No… I….”

Tears began running down my cheeks, pleading for the person inside me to stay by my side. No, it wasn’t just the person in my memory. Even I was tearing up. Why wouldn’t I? She was both a mother and a best friend to me. She was the one who helped me through the harsh times my grandfather put me through. Even when people insulted me in the sunken nests, I was still able to keep my head up and walk forward.

This… This is the one memory I buried deep in my mind so that I would never have to think about it ever again. The one memory that I destroyed in order to adapt to my surroundings. To think that I would see it here… In this space that kept my memories and emotions sealed. No, maybe it was because of it that I was able to see it again.

*“\*Please, don’t cry. I know it’s a difficult ask, but stay strong. If there was one thing I ever loved about you, it was how passionate you were when sculpting various figurines. You made ones for your family, what you wanted to look like when you were older, and even what I would look like if I ever had a body. Those times… I cherish those times no matter where I am.\*”*

“I-I cherished those times too! I… did… I *\*did.\** Ah… hahaha… ah, AHHHH!!”

The me in my memory stayed silent from shock. The one that answered Veoia and screamed out all the air in their lungs was me, the one overseeing this memory play in front of me.

I just realized… I’m such an idiot. Why did I even throw this memory away in the first place!? I even forgot all about it. She even told me to stay strong… but I needed to throw this last memory of us away to do that… I’M SUCH AN IDIOT!!

I threw her away… and tried to replace Veoia with Yukou-senpai… didn’t I?

The realization finally hit me.

All of my memories together with Senpai… it was probably my pathetic attempt in finding someone to replace Veoia. Were any of them even real? I don’t know anymore…

*“\*But, honestly, I think this is for the better. I’ve… been in pain watching you. The bright fervor that burned in your heart was lost in your frantic rush to become ‘useful.’ It was my power that forced you to forget that, which is why I think it’s better for us to separate for a while.\*”*

My… fervor… was lost?

*“\*I hope to see the day when we will get to talk again. At that time, I’m sure you will burn brighter than ever. I guarantee it. When that happens, I’m sure we will never again separate. May I see the smile that put one to my soul again.\*”*

Her voice faded, making this the last time I ever talked to her… but, her words… was there any meaning to those words? The fervor that was lost in my search to become “useful…?” My sculptures? Did I need to make sculptures every day? No, that’s too specific. Maybe it was, but it doesn’t sound right.

Somewhere in the past… the me from the past… “myself…!” The tarot cards! I didn’t understand at first, but that was because I was focusing on the wrong thing! I didn’t ask how to bring back what I had with Yukou-senpai, I asked how to become “myself!” The card for that was the six of cups… The past me that vanished… I need to remember the past for the future… Return to the past. That’s…

A memory flowed through my head, and the scenery changed. The room where my past self kneeled lifelessly on the floor began to change. Zerid’s noticeable structures disappeared and changed into ones I recently adapted to. Earth. And there… Senpai and I were sitting on a bench.

“This is…”

“Hisho-chan, since you told me your story, I’ll let you listen to mine.”

That’s right. This was the time Senpai talked about his past. Devastated by his father’s death, he turned gloomy and became a lone wolf, hating society to cope with his recent tragedy. But then, Honjou-senpai came and forced himself on him until he eventually broke through.

“…How did that boy change?”

I asked the question, which made me hold my breath as Senpai’s answer refreshed itself in my head.

“You see, that boy was never a true loner. He was only running away from everything. He just couldn't let go of the past and dragged his original personality down with him. If he really wanted to be alone, he wouldn't have been that easy to budge. That charming idiot helped him let go of the past and turned him back to what he once was.”

Ah, I see… Even now… even after all I’ve done… even after I betrayed you… you’re still here by my side… Senpai…

“I’m… such an idiot… hic, such, hic… as stupid, stupid, idiot…”

The tears flowed even more, sobbing clear in my voice.

“Hisho-chan, I'll be that charming idiot for you.”

Ah… you are, Senpai… You’ve always been that idiot for me. I mean… only an idiot would even chase after someone like me… Thank you… for being that person.

The tears kept flowing and my sobbing was the only thing that filled this mysterious space. It was strange… I’ve always, always hated this place. This was what kept me from ending everything. It was the one that kept me from being myself… but now I knew… this was what truly preserved “myself.”

I wonder how things will turn out now… I… I want to live. I can’t die now. Not when two of the most important people in my life kept me going this far! I need to live, and show them that I was worth their time and effort! I need to remember! Every single time I left this place, my memories of it never reached my conscious mind. If nothing else, I need to remember this! I need to live! I need to bring back what I had in the past and use it for the future! I’m this close! Please, please! Let me remember!

Time passed in this mysterious space. I don’t know how long it had been, but what I do know for certain, is that I never gave up trying to burn my memories here into my mind.

**273 – The Son of A Hero**

Light pierced through the darkness and covered her vision with a blank sheet of white. That was what Yuu saw as her eyes first opened and attempted to adjust to the light in her surroundings.

“Nn…”

Her wet eyes blinked rapidly to clear her vision. And beyond that, what first greeted her was floating text that wrote…

<Are you awake?>

It was Eksert, standing beside her as he asked, still as silent as ever. Yuu pushed from below her to help in her attempt to sit upright. Eksert backed off the moment he realized this and gave her space. Her cheeks tingled, which instinctively made her bring her hand up to it. The wet sensation was familiar. Tears were falling from her cheeks again.

“Was I… crying?”

She asked Eksert.

<Yes. Just before you woke up.>

“I see…”

She stared at the hand she used to wipe her tears. Her skin was moist as it absorbed the wetness. A few seconds of silence passed before Yuu muttered under her breath.

“These… aren’t hollow… are they?”

<What was that?>

It seemed like Eksert didn’t catch that. But instead of repeating, she shook her head from side to side, dismissing him.

“No, it’s nothing.”

Silence clouded the air once more. It seemed like Yuu was thinking about something, so it was Eksert’s turn to break the dead air… or at least resume the conversation.

<What’s wrong? You’ve been acting strange.>

“Ah… No, I just… I had a dream.”

<A dream? Was it sad?>

“Mn. Very. But I tried my hardest to make sure I didn’t forget. Haha, well, I don’t think I remember everything from the dream. But at the very least, I remember what mattered the most.”

<Then that’s great.>

“Yes… yes, it is.”

Yuu nodded to him and gave him a sincere smile. Then, she turned her head and looked around the room. She was searching for something, but when she confirmed that it wasn’t there, she brought her gaze back to Eksert and asked him.

“Hey, where’s Lady Erezil?”

<She said she was going to the Lunar Stage to tend to the moon trees.>

“The moon trees? Is it still night?”

The moment he heard Yuu’s words, he tilted his head in three different directions in deliberation of how to answer her. When he finally decided to meet her eyes again, he wrote…

<Well, it *\*is\** night… but specifically, it’s the night before we begin our raid.>

“Eh… EEEEEEEEHHHH!?”

…………

“Miss Yuu! How are you doing!?”

After Eksert’s unbelievable revelation, Yuu immediately sent him to get Erezil and got back to her room in no longer than five minutes. She practically rushed in and broke the door down with how quick she was. Yuu has never seen her act like this, so she didn’t even know how to react besides having her mouth hanging open. No one could read Eksert’s facial expression, but the way his arms were hanging in the air in what seemed to be an attempt to calm Erezil down made them able to hazard a guess.

“I-I’m well, Lady Erezil.”

Erezil breathed out a sigh of relief as she saw her body was in good condition, supported by her response.

“Thank goodness… I was worried. Your mana levels suddenly shot up and gathered in your head; I didn’t know what was happening. I’m ashamed I wasn’t able to do anything about it.”

“No, it’s nothing to beat yourself over! I’ve been having these sudden fever attacks before even coming here, it’s not your fault.”

“Miss Yuu, I think you’re not understanding what I’m worried about. Us five-tailed Qeajrvs have the power to see, feel, and control mana, even those of others as long as conditions are met. But then when you got knocked out from that mana rampage and I tried to cure it, it didn’t work. I’m not certain of the cause, but the fact is that I cannot control your mana.”

“…I see. But you shouldn’t worry too much about it. It’s not like whatever’s happening inside me is hurting me. It’s fine.”

“Well, if you insist…”

Erezil pinched her chin in thought, not entirely convinced. Seeing that, Yuu tried to move the conversation before she got stuck getting interrogated.

“More importantly, Lady Erezil, you wanted to tell us something before I got attacked by my fever, didn’t you?”

“Ah, yes… I do have something to say, but are you sure you want to hear it? I noticed how your face contorted when I announced that you were an ambassador… I was afraid that it triggered something that caused that mana rampage.”

“Ah… that one… well, in some ways you probably aren’t wrong…”

“Th-Then it was my fault…”

Her voice weakened as her eyes dropped to the floor in depression.

“W-Wait, please calm down! I’m thankful you did that! I really am! It made me remember something incredibly important, so there’s nothing you have to worry about!”

Erezil’s wolf ears twitched as she raised her head slightly.

“Truly?”

“Yes, I am! In fact, I called you here so that I could hear the rest of your story! If it’s something really important, then I don’t want to turn my head away from it!”

“I see… Then, please allow me to begin.”

She finally recomposed herself and cleared her throat before looking at both Yuu and Eksert in the eyes.

“As I was saying before, I request that the two of you make it so that Garin does not die in tomorrow night’s operation. I would prefer it if we don’t have any casualties to begin with, but Garin is especially important.”

The two stayed silent, letting her speak without cutting her off at any point.

“And the reason for that stems from 27 years ago—the day the new generation of ambassadors was chosen. At that time, all Heroes were summoned to the heart of Yuwokrn, Xevinge, or what is now known as Sky Island Xevinge. However, at that time, no one knew that one of the True Heroes was transported here, to the Ujlufi Village.”

Eksert didn’t say anything, and neither did Yuu, but they clearly didn’t expect this.

“We let him stay in our village, unknowing that he was actually one of the heroes. The one that took care of him was my mentor and Garin’s mother, Lady Lraca, the only four-tail senlr maiden at the time. She knew the most Japanese out of the whole clan, so she would spend her days with him by her side, talking to him and getting him to understand how the village worked. In truth, Elder Elrei didn’t approve of his stay, but he couldn’t force him out when Lady Lraca protected him. A year passed just like that, but then, Lady Lraca got caught saving children from slave traders that were around the forest. When the man heard of this, he swiftly went off to save her and I went with him. Elder Elrei wanted us to gather our forces first, but the two of us didn’t want to waste a single second. We went to raid the slave traders’ base camp, and it clearly wasn’t your usual traders. Their numbers were like an army. In truth, it made me freeze. But that man didn’t even bat an eye. He stepped up, and that was when both Lady Lraca and I felt it… The immense mana that radiated from his body. A strange sensation of mana that neither of us felt before. The one that we would later know as the mana of a Hero, an Ambassador. We saved Lady Lraca, but not even a single second after she was in safe hands, she suggested that they go to Xevinge while I was left in charge as the head senlr maiden. Of course, none of us were having any of her wild ideas. But when it came to her… she would always find a way to bend everything to her whims.”

A wry smile appeared on Erezil’s face as she reminisced about the past.

“She ran away with the man after they snuck out through the village’s defenses… specifically, the defenses that kept her from running out of the village since we expected this to happen. But the power of a four-tail was just too much for us at the time.”

<Wow, they had defenses for her. Just how crazy was this woman?>

“Eksert, read the mood. This isn’t the time for your quip!”

Yuu nudged him and scolded him under her breath.

<Sorry.>

“Haha, well, he isn’t wrong.”

But it seemed like Yuu’s whisper was no match for Erezil’s sharp ears.

“But moving on, the years passed and the two would contact us from time to time by messages from uebat birds. They ventured throughout the continent trying to get into contact with that generation’s heroes. That was a different story, but what was important was when the two of them came back 8 years later. Lady Lraca had already become a five-tail, but what was more shocking was the fact that she was pregnant with the man’s child and they came back to settle down. Of course, Elder Elrei was furious, Hero that man may have been, he was nothing in the face of the Elder. He wasn’t related to Lady Lraca, but she was like a guardian to her. Things got chaotic, but they somehow worked everything out. It was in that year that Garin was born… but no one knew how difficult the life in front of him was going to be.”

**274 – Request for Another**

“After two years of life in the village, they were forced to go back to Xevinge when a message arrived saying that the 6th Hero, the imposter that sent the man to our village and took his title as a hero began to move. In that struggle, the 6th Hero won and forced the Heroes to lose their power and return to Earth. At that time, there was no way to contact the man since every connection they once had disappeared along with the influence the other worlds had on Earth, changing the functions, laws, culture, and even the geography of the world. It was difficult for us to find him, and since Lady Lraca knew that he went back without a Traveler’s Gem with him, there was no way for him to contact us. In the end, Garin had to live without a father. She lived with her mother peacefully for 5 years, but again, tragedy struck that family. Lady Lraca was abducted by unknown individuals. We didn’t know who they were, but we’re certain they had to have been END. There was no one else out there who would seek out her power if not for the enemies that she used that power on. And so… Garin was left by himself in the village.”

“That’s…”

Yuu inadvertently let out her voice as the sorrow Garin must have felt crossed her mind. To that, Erezil smiled in appreciation at her sympathy.

“The moment Garin heard of this, he immediately tried to leave the village to find her, but of course, no one let him. He was only a child with no experience in battle. Our inside defenses didn’t even have a hard time when he tried to leave the village. That was why he decided to train himself with Renig so that he could become more powerful. We all thought that it was useless, but contrary to that, his growth progressed by leaps and bounds. We didn’t know what it was, but perhaps it was truly just simple talent that ran through the family. The son of a Hero and the most powerful Senlr Maiden in our clan’s history. In two years, no one could match him in a fight. His self-trained technique made him wild and unpredictable, and it wasn’t long until he soon broke out of the village’s walls. For 10 years, he had been gone to find his mother. He knew END had them, but even he wasn’t foolish enough to just march in their territory, so he went Yuwokrn training himself and finding reliable allies instead until he was ready.”

Feeling that it was the end of the story, Eksert nodded and wrote his words in the air. The other two’s eyes focused on him as his words formed.

<The son of a Hero. I never would have expected I was working with such a person, but… in the end, what is your request? If you wanted us to keep him from dying because he needs to see his family, then there was no need to bring up his whole past, right? And considering that you never mentioned him ever having the same presence as an Ambassador, I doubt your reasoning would be to protect a possible ally.>

Erezil giggled as she saw what he wrote.

“You are as sharp as ever, Sir Eksert, but a little bit too impatient. There is more to my story. In actuality, three years after Garin left, Lady Lraca came back to the village.”

“Huh!?”

Yuu couldn’t hide her shock and shouted out loud. Meanwhile, Eksert didn’t say anything but the surprise was clear in the swift tilt in his head.

“Hehe, amazing, isn’t it? It was like life was making fun of that family, but I digress. It was Lady Lraca’s husband that saved her. He finally found a way back and searched for Lady Lraca. Apparently, their ailak stones resonated so he knew exactly where to go. When they came back, everyone thought the forest would burn from the Elder’s rage, but Lady Lraca stopped him before that happened. Unfortunately, we had no way to contact Garin and Renig, so we never got to tell them until two days ago.”

“Wait, but if she returned, then where is she now?”

Once the information finally settled down in her mind, Yuu asked what everyone had in mind.

“Of course, being a captive of END for 5 years didn’t have its repercussions. At the time, Lady Lraca only had one tail and all her mana and moon essence were all gone. She was experimented on by END, and perhaps because of the positive results of that, our village was being subject to their eyes once more. We didn’t know if she was capable of a full recovery, but that was why she needed to go with the Hero back to Earth where their technology from before the incident 17 years ago was recovered. With their help, there was a chance for her recovery, so no one, not even the Elder refuted their decision. And thankfully, one year later, it was confirmed that it was possible for her to recover, not fully, but her life was in no danger as long as she kept up their treatment. And finally, to my request…”

Erezil paused and took a moment to breathe, mostly to prepare herself and partly because of the lengthy time she had been talking.

“Miss Yuu, Sir Eksert, after all of your purposes have been fulfilled, please bring Garin with you to Earth.”

“Huh?”

Yuu didn’t catch on to Erezil’s intentions, but it couldn’t have been more clear to the man standing beside her with his arms crossed.

<So you want us to bring Garin back with his family?>

“That’s right.”

<But why are you asking us? Although we’re ambassadors, we don’t know the person you’re talking about. Asking this of us is no different from asking someone with a Traveler’s Gem.>

“…Huh?”

This time, it was Erezil’s turn to let out a confused voice, making Yuu raise her brow, and Eksert tilt his head. But then, his attitude immediately changed from Erezil’s next words.

“But… don’t you know him? Akira Leo, The Lost Hero of the Tempest Spear.”

Eksert’s expression froze as his head pointed straight into Erezil’s eyes. Seeing that he was clearly shaken by her words, Yuu turned to him and asked.

“Oh, do you know him?”

<…>

“Hello? Eksert?”

<…!>

Only when Yuu waved her hand in front of him did he finally return to reality.

<The Tempest Spear… Yes, I know that man. I simply never knew his past.>

“Ah, is that so?”

Erezil breathed a sigh of relief. Eksert’s claim that he didn’t know the person she was talking about probably shook her as well. Considering that if she were wrong, then that would have meant that she just revealed everything about Garin needlessly.

“I was worried for a second… Thankfully, I wasn’t wrong.”

Just as she was relaxing her tense muscles, Eksert raised his finger to get her attention.

<I do know him, but how did you know that?>

“Ah, that’s because when the Hero came back a year later to report Lady Lraca’s condition, he was the one that shared with us the Konjou Clan’s technology, that, along with a vial of your mana.”

<My mana?>

“Yes. Apparently, he had it for reasons he never mentioned. But he did say that if I ever found someone with the same mana signature, then I could trust them and that they would know about his whereabouts. Although, I didn’t expect you to arrive with Garin and Renig when they came back. That was a pleasant surprise.”

<…I see.>

He then turned silent, pondering something in his mind. But still, Erezil knew that she had to set the record straight, so she asked them once more.

“Now that I explained the situation, would you please accept my request?”

Erezil bowed to the two, making Yuu open her mouth in surprise, raising her hands slightly, and getting Eksert’s attention, away from what was troubling him in his mind. Seconds passed, and it seemed like she didn’t have any intention of raising her head without having an answer. Yuu and Eksert looked at each other, communicating through their looks. Yuu nodded, insisting that they accept her request. Eksert took a second, but eventually followed her and nodded as well.

“Okay, Lady Erezil. We accept your request. So, please raise your head.”

“…”

“Lady Erezil?”

“…”

Erezil never raised her head. Yuu and Eksert were confused as to why that was, but then, they both noticed the moist areas of the floor below her and the small droplets that came from her face.

“Thank you… so much.”

Yuu smiled as Erezil’s heartfelt words sunk deep into her heart.

**275 – First Conflict**

“Is everyone ready?”

Xeoi asked as he overlooked the people standing before him. In front were the people that would accompany him on the frontlines, Eksert, Garin, and Renig. Behind them were Hizli, who would guide them through the underground temple, and Elrei, who was to solely protect her. And finally, their backline consisted of Yuu and Mrel. He nodded in satisfaction, then turned around and took one step forward to the teleportation circle in front of him.

“I will be heading first to secure the surroundings. If I don’t get back in five minutes, move to plan B. Am I clear?”

“Understood!”

Everyone’s reply echoed throughout the room, allowing Xeoi to tap the ground twice and disappear as he activated the circle. It was one of the items Hizli created in their three days of preparation. Similar to the boots she had on at the moment, the boots Xeoi used to activate the circle were special items that could store spirit power and activate depending on certain gestures. She called it Spirit Boots, which compensated for a Zeldian’s lack of spirit power, allowing them to use the long-range capabilities of the teleportation circle.

Four minutes passed, and everyone was waiting silently for Xeoi’s return. They didn’t know what was happening on the other side, so in the worst-case scenario, they would move to their backup plan. But thankfully, before it came to that, a blue pillar rose from the circle once more and appeared Xeoi.

“All clear. It took me a while to set up the Mana-Nullifying Stakes Sister Hizli gave me, but now we won’t be detected once we get through the other side.”

Another one of Hizli’s inventions that kept the mana flow of everyone within an encirclement of stakes from flowing to their surroundings, keeping their presence hidden.

“Step onto the circle in reverse formation. The moment we arrive, the entrance to the underground temple will be behind us. Leave an opening in the middle for Sister Hizli to walk through so she can get started in opening the door. Watch out for enemies and guard her at all costs!”

“Understood!”

Doing as Xeoi said, everyone entered the teleportation circle. After confirming that everyone was ready, an additional blue tail appeared on his behind. Mrel, Elrei, Hizli, Garin, and Renig did the same, resulting in four of them having four tails, while Garin and Renig had three. They prepared themselves for battle the very moment they crossed through the teleportation circle. Even if it was confirmed that the area was clear, their mission demanded that they were quick before enemy reinforcements arrived. And so, the two taps from Xeoi’s foot signaled the beginning of the operation.

Arriving in the dark tunnel, Xeoi launched orbs of light, illuminating their surroundings and revealing the brick wall standing behind them. Without hesitation, Hizli rushed to the wall and poured her mana into it. They discussed this before and explained that the underground entrance was an emergency exit locked from the inside. To break through, they needed Hizli to manipulate the mana structure inside the bricks and open it from the outside. Hizli was the one that made this emergency exit, and she considered the possibility of someone trying to open this from the outside. Normally, it wouldn’t be possible, but all of the mechanisms she created allowed her and only her mana signature to manipulate them.

The others watched their surroundings. There was only one other opening, and that was in front of them, but they weren’t naive enough to take their attention away from the walls where possible traps could have been set or perhaps even an ambush depending on the abilities of their enemy. They all stood behind the purple glowing stakes embedded in the ground, the mana-nullifying stakes that Xeoi set up beforehand.

They all worked in tense silence. But then, something unexpected happened. Eksert drew the wakizashi from its sheathe and slashed the ground below him, specifically, the teleportation circle all of them came through.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING!?”

Xeoi’s booming shout resounded through the tunnel as he saw every second of what Eksert did.

“T-That was our way out! Why did you destroy it!? Now how are we supposed to get back!?”

He stuttered realizing the strength he used in his voice just now and immediately tried to stifle it. For a second, everyone’s eyes gathered on the two of them, but Hizli shook her head and continued working on her job. Yuu did the same and returned her focus to the other end of the tunnel and kept guard. Mrel was going to step up, but Elrei stopped him and signaled him to keep quiet.

“But, Elder! That bastard…!”

He wanted to speak up, but Elrei sent a menacing glare his way, making his senses stiffen up and silencing him. And so, everyone else could only watch the two.

“What were you thinking!?”

<I wanted to cut off our connection to the base in case the enemy finds this and uses it to invade us from the inside. This may be our only way out, but risking it being used by the enemy is much worse.>

“That’s why he had Sister Erezil to take care of the base! Even if they did invade, she would be there to stop them!”

<Are you certain you can say that when they decide to invade us from the entrance at the same time?>

“W-What!? How would they do that!? They don’t even know where we are!”

<Only a fool would let themselves revel in those naïve illusions. No matter how powerful Lady Erezil is, once they successfully get through the defenses and flood the halls, all they would need to do is find the teleportation to the clan’s secret village and we would lose. Please understand that this was the best decision.>

“Y-You…!”

Xeoi looked like he was on the verge of snapping, but he stopped to take a deep breath and forced himself to calm down.

“Fine, there’s nothing else that can be done. The circle’s power has already been cut off; it's useless now. We just have to focus on the mission objective. I trust that you will take responsibility for opening a path to our escape?”

<That is fine.>

He breathed a deep sigh and turned his back on Eskert, clearly dissatisfied. Then, the person who took his place was Garin. He had a displeased expression on his face, but he still had control of his emotions. He whispered to him with a tense tone.

“What was that all about…!? Ere told me to trust you… but how do I do that after all of that…!? I knew she was crazy for making decisions all by herself…!”

After Erezil’s talk with Eksert and Yuu, she said that she would tell Garin what she did, and what exactly she wanted to happen. Unsurprisingly, he didn’t like a single second of it.

<I won’t tell you not to worry or just to trust me blindly. All I ask is for you to hold your judgment of me until after we’ve arrived at our destination. Watch me closely, I don’t mind. Just keep in mind that I intend to honor my promise to her.>

He wrote that in small characters in front of Garin’s face, his back turned to Hizli. That was because earlier that day, he explicitly told both him and Yuu to keep this a secret from Hizli. It seemed like he didn’t want to worry her, especially since she was the key to this operation. Earlier when Xeoi and Eksert clashed words, Garin doubted that Hizli would have been able to get back to work as quick as she did if she knew of Erezil’s actions.

Garin ground his teeth, not knowing how to respond to him. Eksert was showing consideration for his earlier order, and he did explain that he destroyed the teleportation circle with the clan’s safety in mind. He didn’t know how genuine those voiceless, floating words were, but Erezil told him to trust Eksert. In the end, he decided to back off and watch how things progress.

Earth scraped on earth. The rumbling walls gathered everyone’s attention as they saw the thick walls of bricks opening a smaller tunnel for them to pass through.

“It’s open! Come on, let’s go!”

Hizli announced as soon as she finished her work. To that, everyone moved forward, turning their focus to the trials in front of them.

**276 – Crossing the Labyrinth of Flowers**

A blue light was on the other side of the tunnel. The moment they got close enough for everyone to see what was beyond the dark hallway, almost all of them gasped in awe. The scene before them was like a mystic garden. A single hallway with walls of leaves and vines, all of them commonly decorated by blue flowers, specifically, ixke flowers that they saw at the Lunar Stage. The space was just large enough to fit their formation and a few meters of distance from the walls.

Apparently, the original purpose of this labyrinth was to be a mana source for rituals that happened in the temple. Just like what Erezil did with Garin in the Lunar Stage, they needed a massive amount of mana to ensure evolution. The temple’s purpose was to hold these rituals but on a larger scale than the Lunar Stage, and the massive amounts of ixke flowers were the result of that.

However, since they only used this when someone needed to evolve, it would become untouched most of the time. Not wanting to waste that, Hizli decided to build the Mana-Infused Spirit Core below this place so that it could power her mechanism. And to protect that dangerous machine, she modified this section of the temple so that it would work as a labyrinth that only selected people would be able to navigate their way through.

“Take a left here.”

Hizli ordered as she walked with her hand on the walls. The path in front of them was only a straight line with no places to turn. The only thing to the left was a wall of ixke flowers, but despite this, Xeoi took his hand out as if to shove the plants away. Then, a path slowly opened for the group to walk through.

“…!”

But what awaited them there were the hounds of END. A number of them were walking through the halls with their razor-sharp claws scraping the floor as they did so, their blood-colored fur contrasting with the gentle blue lights of the flowers on the wall.

“Demons!”

Xeoi announced as he took out his sword and swung it down on the closest demon that charged at them. Eksert, Garin, and Renig followed him up by taking out the incoming demons. Eksert held his katana with both hands and sent an overhead slash on the first demon, following it up with a swift dash almost instantly, cutting two more down as he swept his side, then thrust at the demon that tried to pounce on him, piercing its neck, and finally twisting his blade to slash the demon coming from his side.

Garin matched him by catching the claws of the demon that tried to attack him, allowing him to break those claws, safely position himself to the demon’s side, and send a flurry of stabs down its body. A demon tried to attack him from behind, but before it could, five razor-sharp claws pierced it from below, killing it in mid-air. It was the five claws that Garin destroyed from the first demon. Much like his boots, his fingerless gloves had the same gravitational effect, allowing him to send mana down anything he touches with his hands or weapon. But that was only one of its effects.

Sensing the three oncoming demons trying to corner him from three different sides, the blue gems on his gloves’ wrist glowed, creating a solid line of blue that connected his two wrists. He then thrust both arms to the side while backflipping, expanding the string of mana to wrap the demon that he killed with another demon’s claws, used its dead body to knock all three demons away, and finished them off with a single needle to the neck that exploded on impact.

While the two went for the aggressive, Renig and Xeoi stayed behind the two and killed every demon that snuck past them, protecting their backline. Just like before, Renig wrapped himself in a barrier and applied his gravitational storage to strengthen it, allowing him protection and lethal damage. Xeoi slashed with his broadsword, taking out one demon at a time. It was clear that he was no match compared to Eksert’s swordsmanship, but he compensated for that with magic, allowing him to leave a trail of deadly wind floating in the air with every slash, creating a pseudo-barrier that cuts down every demon that tries to pass it.

Meanwhile, Yuu and Mrel were in the back making sure that no enemies pincer them from behind and supporting their frontline by throwing magic and chakrams. Yuu decided to avoid using any flashy spells since their space was limited and stuck to barraging the enemies with fireballs. While she did that, Mrel kept jumping in the air to get the best positioning to throw his chakram, wrapping it with wind magic, throwing two of them underhand while two more overhand, sending a total of four chakrams that beheaded four demons from different angles, and finally returning to him as he guided his weapons with magic.

They continued down the path like that, keeping their defense strong and unfaltering, but still, there was no end to them. Hizli noticed this and turned behind her. There were no enemies there, but she felt that it would only be a matter of time before that became history. They already engaged with enemy units, so it would be wise to continue with the assumption that reinforcements were already coming. Analyzing the situation, she ordered.

“Change of plans! It seems like all these demons are placed on the most optimal path to the core. This must be how they keep getting through the labyrinth. We’ll take a left here, and start running! We can’t afford to be slow!”

“Understood!”

Everyone responded and did as she said. The frontline lead the charge, rushing down the enemies at a faster pace the moment they turned the corner. There were visibly fewer demons on this path, so rushing them down wasn’t difficult. As they ran down the path, Hizli kept her hand on the walls, analyzing the structure of the maze as she did so. However, she knew that analyzing the most optimal path wasn’t enough. Enemies were after them, but there was undoubtedly more in front of them. She couldn’t afford to have their pursuers support the enemies and pincer them. Considering that, she needed to activate one other function of this labyrinth.

“Wha—!?”

But before she could, Elrei grabbed her and thrust his staff into the leaves, following that with an explosion from the other side that blew off the leaves and flowers in their direction. He then jumped back into position before letting Hizli go.

“Uixedrlr. Iiavvdrlr wolrui vvj drdroaui xedr hxeoag.”

(Stay alert. Enemies are chasing us from different paths.)

She didn’t notice their presence because she was too distracted, or rather, too focused on manipulating the labyrinth’s mana structure.

“Y-Yes, sorry… But, I need to activate the labyrinth’s functions! I might get absorbed again, so could you defend me for a while longer, Elder?”

Elrei looked into her eyes and saw the determination. She knew she could do it. She knew she could do something about the enemies. It wasn’t just desperation. That was why he nodded to her and kept guard.

“Thank you! Ah, we make another right over there!”

She continued to announce directions as she manipulated the mana structure. Sometimes she would get dragged from place to place, but she never once lost focus. Connecting one structure to the other, making their form one, separating another, and repeating the process. Her tails glowed blue as they took in all the mana she was processing at once. Beads of sweat slid down her skin as she was taxed both physically and mentally. But not once did she stop. She needed to make this succeed. So she pushed herself to the limit, and even further beyond until…

“This is it! Labyrinth of Blooming Flowers: Activate!!!!”

The curved path in front of the group revealed a straight path where other walls were stretching to the side, making a single path forward for the group. Then, the flowers on the walls glowed, while the smaller ones bloomed, and finally, all of them burst, spreading a thick cloud of pure mana all over the labyrinth.

“The mana will mask our presence! It’s just a straight path forward! Keep running before the labyrinth starts reshaping itself!!!”

Hizli shouted for everyone to hear, making them change their priorities from cutting down enemies to rushing down the path in front of them. With her last ounce of energy poured into that order, she limped and fell down, but before she hit the ground, Elrei caught her body and carried her as he ran forward.

“Pqreljdr.”

(Well done.)

“Hi…hihi…”

Hizli’s consciousness faded as she heard Elrei’s word of praise. The blue tail behind her slowly disintegrated along with it.

The group sped down the path Hizli opened, ignoring the demons in the path that stayed unmoving due to the massive amount of mana in the air that confused their senses. They ran, ran, and ran until they saw the exit. Xeoi was first to cross, but then his figure disappeared somewhere. The rest of the group followed, and the very moment the last one of them crossed, the path behind them closed. This was the labyrinth reshaping itself, making it so that there will be no permanent path to their location. Continuously changing.

**277 – Pressure**

The moment the last ones in their group crossed the labyrinth, they breathed a sigh of relief. Unfortunately, that was short-lived the moment they saw the sight before them. Xeoi was by the wall with a spear protruding out of his left leg, making blood pool below it. He lost his extra senlr and was left with three tails. Garin and Eksert were by his side while Renig was growling at one of the exits of the labyrinth that soon disappeared as it changed shape.

“Brother Xeoi!”

Mrel was first to react and ran to Xeoi’s side.

“What happened!?”

“There was an enemy waiting for us. The moment Brother Xeoi crossed the labyrinth, they threw a spear at him and disappeared back into the labyrinth before we could chase him.”

Garin gave him a run-down of what happened while Eksert took the spear out and used control magic to heal his wounds. He would be able to walk again in just a while. But everyone felt something was wrong. Even if all the enemy wanted to do was hinder them, they should have known that this kind of shallow damage wouldn’t affect them much since control magic was available to them. Why would they risk one of their subordinates’ life to do something so trivial? Xeoi answered the unasked question.

“It looks like my mana is slowly dropping… Whatever was in that spear, it’s directly affecting my mana pool.”

“What!? Your mana pool!? Is that even possible!?”

Mrel shouted in disbelief. No one has ever heard of a mana-siphoning spear. But they couldn’t deny what was happening in front of their very eyes. They could certainly sense the flow of mana inside Xeoi gradually decreasing.

“Hiz, what do you—!?”

Garin, who was too absorbed in Xeoi’s condition, finally raised his head to find her. If anyone would be able to explain what was happening to Xeoi, it would be their own prodigy. However, what awaited him was the sight of his childhood friend unconscious in Elrei’s arms. Worry and concern quickly colored his eyes as his thoughts ran wild at what could have happened behind his back. He simply followed the orders Hizli was barking out and never turned around. Since she ordered them all the way through the labyrinth, he assumed that nothing went wrong, but this sight of her quickly made him doubt himself. Thankfully, before his imagination conjured unwanted thoughts, Elrei set him straight.

“Pqat iiakrnlr.Uidri yui lrdr pqjdr relenakrnfii krn sikrn uiahczdr lraiia vvj fikrnrelkrn. Fipqmsa, Uidri pqkrnr en pqbkkrn vva xe pqoadr.”

(Don’t worry. She’s just tired from handling the whole labyrinth’s mana structure. However, she won’t be waking up for a while.)

“Ah… I-Is that so…?”

Garin let out a sigh of relief the moment he understood that she wasn’t harmed.

<Still, we have one that’s slowly losing mana and one down… This isn’t a great start.>

Eksert wrote with his open hand, still healing Xeoi’s wound.

“With no mana, I won’t be of much use… huh? This is terrible…”

Eksert stared at Xeoi as he dropped his head in disappointment. Then, he placed his hand on Xeoi’s arm.

“H-Hey, what are you doing?”

<I’m analyzing the flow of your mana. For us vjzasu, we can sense it with our fingertips.>

“O-Oh, is that so?”

Seeing as he didn’t stop him, Eksert continued to brush his fingertips on his person. It seemed like Xeoi was uncomfortable about it, but swallowed that feeling.

“What do we do now? We don’t know how dangerous it is ahead of us. Is it okay to bring them along?”

Mrel asked as he shared his thoughts with the group.

“You’re right… I think it would be best if I stay with Sister Hizli here. This place should be safe now with the labyrinth constantly shifting. Moreover, I think we would just hinder you all by being easy targets for the enemy.”

“What!? No way! I’m not leaving Hiz here! She has to come with us! You’re saying this place is safe, but how can you be so sure!? You literally just got hit by a spear! I don’t care if it was by surprise or whatever; even if it was temporary, you had the power of a four-tail! How did you let that hit you!?”

“Hey! I don’t want to hear that from someone who wasn’t even a two-tail a few days ago! Brother Xeoi was the one leading the charge for us! If anyone was going to get hit, it was him! He took the hit so none of us had to! What are you insulting him for!? In the first place, no one even knew this kind of weapon existed, what do you want us to do about that!?”

Mrel snapped at Garin, who burst out of anger with Xeoi’s suggestion. Everyone knew that this team wouldn’t be as united as desired, considering its members clearly expressed their negative opinions of the other at their first meeting in the secret base. But if this internal strife got any worse, it wouldn’t be strange if the party collapsed. Considering that, Eksert finally stood up and got in between the two.

<We are a team here. Stop fighting.>

“What the hell are you doing acting like the team player!? No one cares about what you say!”

“Like I’d let this guy get away with planning to abandon Hiz! Whatever happens, we’re taking her with us!”

“Are you trying to get us killed!? Don’t you understand that she’ll be in more danger that way!? Just like Brother Xeoi said, this is the safest place for them! Sister Hizli poured all her power into making this possible! Are you trying to spit at her efforts!?”

“You… YOU BASTARD!!! WHAT GIVES YOU THE RIGHT TO SPEAK FOR HIZ!?”

Even with Eksert’s intervention, the two continued fighting. There wasn’t anything within the realm of reason that could stop these two now. The party would collapse here and now. But… Eksert wouldn’t let it all end here. If nothing reasonable could stop them… then he just had to be a little bit unreasonable.

*\*Snap!\**

A resounding snap echoed in the room and the temperature dropped so quickly that the cold quickly had everyone’s bodies shivering. Their hair stood on end, not because of the freezing temperature, but the heavy pressure radiating from Eksert. None of them have ever felt this sensation before. It was like something was squeezing their heart and choking them at the same time, making their bodies unable to move. It didn’t take long for everyone to start sweating under his pressure. The only person safe from his mental assault was Hizli, who wasn’t even conscious to react to it.

<I repeat. We are a team here. Stop fighting. If none of you can reach a decision, then I will. I have done my research and asked Miss Hizli about the layout of the upcoming floor. We are taking Sir Xeoi and Miss Hizli with us. However, to prevent them from becoming easy targets, they will go with Sir Mrel, who will separate with us to secure the high ground in the room with the Mana-Infused Spirit Core. The only entrance there is a vent, so it will be a simple task to secure the location. Am I clear?>

The blood-curdling silence that was maintained throughout the room as Eksert wrote his speech in the air made Garin and Mrel nod their heads. There were no objections from anyone else. Xeoi seemed to be sweating buckets, but no one paid him any mind. And so, Eksert released the unknown pressure on everyone, allowing Garin and Mrel to catch their breath as if they just finished running a marathon. Yuu, Elrei, Renig, and Xeoi watched silently as he took the spear that pierced Xeoi and headed to the door that led to the stairwell downstairs.

<Come now. We have no time to waste. I’ll take the lead.>

Eksert announced, making everyone nod their heads, each person having a different emotion being directed to him. Garin went to Hizli and picked her up, glaring at Xeoi, making a silent statement that he had no plans of following him any time soon. Xeoi clumsily stood up and followed Eksert. His leg was already healed, so he should’ve been able to walk properly, but perhaps because his mana was being drained, Mrel decided to support him. Elrei and Renig were by each other the whole time and seemed to have some kind of agreement. And finally, Yuu was the only one bold enough to walk beside Eksert after his extravagant show of power. They didn’t talk, but there was no need to.

**278 – In The Battlefield… They Happen**

<Okay, this is it.>

Eksert pointed at the vent near the ceiling. It looked a bit tight, but Xeoi, the person with the largest body frame, could somehow fit in, but not without earth magic that expanded the vent in the first place. Xeoi was first to go through the vent, expanding its size and allowing Mrel to have an easier time crossing with Hizli, who was carried with the help of wind magic to make her hover through.

While the three were working their way through the vent, Eksert, Yuu, Garin, Renig, and Elrei went down the final flight of stairs that led them to the final door to the Spirit Core. At the end of the stairs was a large rectangular glass pane that seemed to be used to observe the mechanism from outside the room. They peeked through it and saw an azure oval-shaped structure. Its base was wrapped in a green substance. It seemed to be some kind of plant since it had roots planted firmly to the ground. Taking that into consideration, the azure oval looked closer to some kind of flower with its petals shut. If anything, it was similar to what ixke flowers looked like.

Eksert was the first to open the door and crossed it, entering a room with metallic walls and floor with a blue accent, likely made from mana stones as most structures they’ve seen so far. The only place with a patch of dirt was the ground under the Mana-Infused Spirit Core that stood at the center of the room. The group angled their heads upward and spotted Xeoi and Mrel. Hizli wasn’t there, but she was likely placed safely by the walls where no one could see her. Eksert raised his hand in the air and closed it, signaling for Xeoi and Mrel to get into position.

It was decided on their way here that only Mrel would show himself to fight when Eksert signaled him to. Meanwhile, Xeoi would stay by the vent and warn them of incoming enemies. If enemies somehow got their way to them, it was his job to protect the two. Although he had no mana, he could still swing his sword. They both didn’t take Eksert’s orders well, but thankfully, Elrei was there to support him. It felt strange for Eksert to see him support his leadership. It could have been his earlier assertion of power, but if he thought back properly, Elrei also stopped Mrel from getting in with his first fight with Xeoi at the entrance. He didn’t know why, but the elder seemed to support him.

Mrel lay on the ground with his stomach on the floor, entering a prone position and disappearing from the sight of everyone on the ground.

They all got ready. Yuu stood alert with her spells. Garin took out both of his daggers. Renig coated himself with his barrier and gravitational sheet. Elrei got into a stance with his staff. And finally… Eksert remained the same and walked forward.

“Um… Eksert?”

Yuu called out to him, but he didn’t respond. Just like the others, she couldn’t fathom what was going on in his mind. They all expected him to draw his sword before stepping forward, but he continued barehanded. No one knew if he was underestimating the enemy, foolishly charging forward, or something else entirely. But at the very least no one did anything except follow his lead. Then, when they finally reached about one-fourth of the distance to the Spirit Core, a rhythmic clapping resounded throughout the room. From behind the Spirit Core, a figure appeared.

He was a large werewolf with white fur donning a tuxedo, excluding a noble air around him. He was clearly in some kind of high position in their chain of command. He was about twice the size of Xeoi, who was the largest person in their group. And most alarmingly, there were three tails on his back. Two of them with the same color as his fur, while the one at the center was colored black and clearly larger than the other two.

“I welcome you—”

The moment he spoke, Eksert didn’t waste a single second and threw his arm across the air.

“H-Hey, what are you doing!?”

“Pqxe ui sixeoag j lroa!?”

(What is the meaning of this!?)

“Sir Eksert, calm yourself!”

“What the hell are you suddenly snapping for!?”

Yuu, Elreri, Renig, and Garin all couldn’t keep their words in their throat any longer and shouted at Eksert’s actions.

The air around him gathered and compressed into multiple needles. Everyone was shocked by this. Even the werewolf that just showed himself held the words in his throat. In no less than half a second, the magic fully charged itself and shot upward to the side slightly behind him.

“GAAAAHH!!”

A pained scream echoed through the room. Just as everyone thought Eksert was shooting magic at the enemy, perhaps out of spite of taking his comrade, everyone called out to him. But his magic went nowhere near the werewolf. They traced the direction of his magic with their eyes and were dumbfounded by what they saw.

It was Xeoi standing over Mrel with his sword clearly aimed at his neck.

<Finally, you’ve taken the bait.>

Those words flew at Xeoi along with the meat-shredding gale that dug into all his limbs and destroyed the blade that was pointed at his ally.

“EKSEEEEEEEERRTT!!”

He screamed his lungs out as if to output all the pain that was crawling all over his body, cursing the name of the person he called out.

“Brother… Xeoi…?”

Mrel stared at his pained face from below, watching as the remnants of the blade he held dropped beside him, cutting a shallow wound on his arm. Strangely enough, even after getting pierced, Xeoi remained in the same position. Then, multiple balls of light appeared and circled around him.

“What… WHAT IS THIIIS!?”

He screamed once more as he finally realized his helplessness. The light closed in his body and picked him up, lifting from the ground, flew across the air, and disappeared as if to throw his ravaged body in front of Eksert and the others.

<Just so you know… Your biggest mistake was refusing to see me as a threat, Sir Xeoi.>

“YOU BASTARD!!”

He cursed him once more. Then, Eksert stepped aside and presented his pitiful state to the four standing behind him. All of them with shocked expressions as they saw their supposed ally beaten up on the ground. He was clearly trying his hardest to get out of this situation, but Xeoi’s body refused to listen and stayed frozen.

<I would like all of you to see the true face of our ally. As you’ve all seen just now, he had a clear intent to kill Sir Mrel. You may or may not have a close relationship with this person, but please accept that this man tried to kill one of our own. In other words, a traitor.>

He wrote those words twice. One to show Yuu and the others, and one to communicate with Mrel who was still on the high ground by making his floating words fly through the air.

“Sir Eksert… what is the meaning of this?”

Renig spoke for everyone in the group. His voice was clearer now, unlike in the past. It was the result of evolving to the Green Stage. And to his words, Eksert nodded.

<I have long suspected this man of treachery—>

As he was writing his words, he sensed a mass of mana coming from behind him. He stopped his fingers and turned to block the magic with a barrier. The large flame that was shot at him exploded on the other side of the barrier. When it finally subsided, he saw the werewolf standing with his arm out.

“My, oh my. What kind of performance was that? To think I thought you had talent in you… and you show me this? I am disappointed, Xeoi.”

At that blast, everyone snapped out of their surprise and returned to reality where the enemy stood in front of them, bearing his fangs. They all returned to their senses and readied their weapons.

“I had this whole plan to torture one of your precious allies in front of you, but unfortunately, I cannot do that anymore. How sad. I guess I’ll just have to take care of all of you as quickly as possible.”

Suddenly, a loud growling came from behind them. Garin and Yuu took their eyes off the enemy to inspect what it was and saw a whole pack of demons crowding the other side of the door through the glass.

“Demons!”

Garin shouted to alarm everyone. However, before any of them could take a look, The werewolf howled.

“AWROOOO!!!”

As a response to that, the demons on the other side exploded, sending pieces of metal flying as the heat from the explosion seared the air and brought down the ceiling, blocking their path to the stairwell.

“There’s no escape… huh?”

<Well, I wouldn’t say that.>

Eksert wrote to Yuu with his eyes fixed on the werewolf. Then, from behind the werewolf, a large pillar of light rose from the ground. Everyone present was familiar with it… The activation of a teleportation circle.

“What!? Why do they have a teleportation circle!?”

Garin exclaimed in surprise.

<If it is true that people of the Ujlufi clan are the only ones with access to this technology in Zerid, then the only explanation would be a leak in information. Specifically, information that person gave to the enemy.>

He wrote as he pointed to Xeoi. Having calmed down, the fact that Xeoi was a traitor finally set for Garin, making him look at the man on the ground with disgust. Thinking about it, it all made sense since he tried to separate Hizli, who was the genius who led the Ujlufi clan’s technology and built the Spirit Core they were currently fighting for. Had they left Hizli with him, it would be all too likely that she would be in their hands.

The pillar of light revealed a platoon of demons. They stood in front of the Spirit Core, placing themselves in their leader’s order. Then, another pillar rose, covering the room in its blue light. This time, a platoon of augmented werewolves appeared. But unlike the ones they fought in the forest, these ones had two tails and were armed with bows. They placed themselves behind the teleportation circle, and once again, the pillar of light rose. What came out was a platoon of unarmed two-tailed werewolves, all around two strange purple towers with a large, purple gem pointing at the Eksert and the others. They placed each one behind both sides of the Spirit Core.

“Let us finish this.”

Those bloodlust eyes of the commanding werewolf showed no intent of negotiations. He wanted to kill every single one of them without mercy. To that, Eksert wrote with all four hands and placed the words in front of the group and one more to contact Mrel, who made no movement ever since Xeoi’s betrayal.

<I know you’re all confused, but this is not the time for that! Our enemy has unknown technology and a literal army! Kill all of your personal attachments for now, and focus on fighting! We are on the battlefield! Pick up your weapons and fight because your life depends on it! You can get all the answers later! Now…>

*“\*…FOLLOW MY ORDERS!!\*”*

**279 – The Twin Towers**

A deep voice resounded in everyone’s mind, taking all of them by surprise. It was a voice none of them had ever heard before, but it was a sensation most of them were familiar with. It was the skill “Connect.” A skill that uses spirit power to communicate with allies. Yuu used it before with Garin and Renig, but right now, it was clear that Eksert was the one that used it. Out of the seven that Eksert connected with, Hizli, Mrel, and Elrei were the only ones that have never experienced this sensation. Hizli was still unconscious and there was no response from Mrel, but Elrei clearly didn’t expect a voice to echo in his head, making his eyes widen. However, compared to his earlier surprise, he was able to quickly recover from this one.

*“\*This is Eksert. I will be taking the lead, and I need your full cooperation!\*”*

The enemy began their attack with the demons leading the charge, not giving any of them the chance to prepare themselves.

*“\*Yuu, take the backline and support us with magic! Elder Elrei, hold your ground as our center and protect Yuu! Garin and Renig, both of you come with me to the front lines! As much as possible, use wide-ranged attacks!\*”*

*“\*Okay!\*”*

*“\*Oa pqxe iia j pqrel siui.\*”*

*(\*I will do what I must.\*)*

*“\*Graah, whatever!\*”*

*“\*Understood!\*”*

Everyone moved as he ordered, preparing to clash as a five-man party against a whole army. Each had their doubts, but everyone was connected by one sole thought: *“\*Like hell we’d die here!\*”*

The first clash sparked. Eksert’s blade flew through the air and beheaded a single demon, but then, the slash released a wave of violent wind that took out other demons, and finally, beheaded some of the werewolves at the back. Although it was indirect through magic, he felt from that slash that no gems were broken. That could only mean that the enemies were gemless werewolves, beasts that will refuse to die so long as they have mana inside their bodies or if they still have bodies to store that mana. They were an annoying bunch to deal with, and if one of them was a gemless variant, it wouldn’t be strange if every single one of their enemies were the same. In war, it was best to assume the worst.

“\*They’re gemless! Incinerate them or suck their mana dry!\*”

Garin and Renig finally caught up to Eksert’s charge and aimed to take out the demons to his sides. Garin’s blades glowed a gloomy grey and the sheet coating Renig with dark light merged, completing his frightening offense and defense. But just as they clashed, the twin purple towers beside the Spirit Core lit up, their large, shiny surfaces releasing an ominous lavender color. Then, Garin, Renig, and Elrei’s extra senlr disappeared.

“GRAAA!!”

Suddenly, Renig let out a loud cry as he was thrown down to the ground by a massive force. The demons in front of him took that chance and swiped at the helpless wolf. But before they could make contact, Eksert got in between them and shoved his arm forward. As if following the will of his motion, all the demons in front of them were knocked back.

With just three of them on the front lines, it was unavoidable that most of them would pass by them and go for Yuu and Elrei. But Eksert anticipated this. With Renig safe, he fought off the demons around him with his two upper arms while his two lower arms danced in the air as his fingers moved to write two passages in the air.

<O Frost, let the chilling wind blow upon us once more. Form your soles with my words and firmly grip them with all your might. Frozen Land!>

<O Earth, speak once more and deliver your will. Heaven or hell; pass upon your judgment on the mortals before you—>

He finished writing the first spell, lowering the temperature around them and releasing thick, white clouds as ice froze the land around him. Ice crawled on the ground and climbed up every single one of the demons’ legs, rooting them in place.

<—Rise: Rumbling Land!>

Then, he finished his second spell, breaking the land around the unmoving demons the very moment they froze. The surface they stood on severed itself from the primary body of land and pumped upward in the air, angling itself slightly sideways toward the wave of demons and werewolves and away from Yuu and Elrei. Every single demon that passed them was thrown back and collided with other enemies, momentarily stopping their advance.

*“\*Yuu, can you stall them with any magic!?\*”*

*“\*I can! Please set up Great Wall after I cast!\*”*

*“\*Got it! Garin, we’re backing off!\*”*

The battle had barely started, but everyone knew to be cautious, especially with their clear disadvantage in numbers. Eksert picked up Renig who was able to move better than before and retreated. Garin soon followed and got behind Eksert, wary of incoming enemies.

“O Fire, let your pure flames incinerate scum…

<O Earth, built from sticks and stones, soar the regal sky. Display your majesty and tower over those who oppose your indestructible command…">

Eksert began writing the spell in the air and stopped just before it cast, waiting for Yuu’s magic.

“…your arrant light warding off the darkness. I call upon your celestial body. Solar Flare!”

<…Great Wall!>

In front of the army, a swirling orb of orange and red appeared, almost as if the sun itself descended upon them. But before Eksert and the others could see its effects, a thick chunk of the ground rose and completely separated them from the werewolves.

Meanwhile, on the other side, the orb sparked and brightened, the flames shooting out from it burning the werewolves that got close to it. Then, it beamed even brighter than ever before, blinding everyone foolish enough to keep their eyes on it. Those who were slightly away from the ball were even affected, their fur catching flames and scorching their skin. They immediately backed off the moment they saw how their allies were burnt to a crisp.

“Solar Flare… a weak spell in a normal battle but perfect in war. To think they knew this much magic… Just who are those people?”

The commanding werewolf muttered to himself as he fearlessly stared the pseudo-sun down where his underlings screamed in agony as they tried to escape the fiery inferno.

“What happened!?”

Yuu asked as Eksert, Garin, and Renig got close to them.

“I have no clue… I believe my barrier somehow cracked open, making my gravitational coating affect my body. But… how?”

Renig said as he limped to them, miraculously still able to walk despite the heavy force that crushed him to the ground. It was one of the biggest weaknesses of his fighting style. The moment his barrier cracked, the gravitational coating would seep in and affect him. They likely knew this and planned to release his gravitational coating the moment he felt his barrier crack, but it was so sudden that he didn’t even expect it. But who could blame him? He never even made contact before the barrier cracked.

“It’s weird. My equipment is acting strange too. Here, my daggers aren’t functioning the way they’re supposed to.”

Garin showed his twin daggers and pointed at the gems in its cross-guards where the grey gem fluctuated from bright to dim.

“Not to mention everyone’s senlr disappeared too.”

Yuu added, piling up their list of abnormalities. Then, Elrei walked up, catching everyone’s attention.

“Oa lr uipq. Si senlr yui envva relui, lrxe woarel relglr siiia sikrn xea iiauidrui vvj cz xexe. A woaxeui lr sia xehalr uit woarel relglr vvj ui xexe.”

(I saw it. Just before I lost my senlr, that purple light made the mana in the air disperse away from us. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it ran away from whatever that purple light is.)

Elrei was the only active person in their party that had four tails with his mana-structured senlr. Since Garin and Renig were still at three tails, he saw things that they could not.

*“\*I see… So those twin towers must have similar properties to the spear that pierced Xeoi. It repels mana away from us… if that’s the case, then we’re in trouble. The light caused a jam in Garin and Renig’s magic tools since they were absorbing mana from the environment. Perhaps you could still use it by supplying it with the mana inside your body, but this is nothing more than a conjecture. The light isn’t affecting us because of the wall, but if you want to try it out, don’t do it in a dangerous position.\*”*

“Okay.”

Garin nodded as he answered. Eksert talked in his mind, but he made sure to keep his eye on him to know who he was directing that thought toward.

*“\*It seems like it doesn’t affect the mana inside our bodies since we could still cast it, but that means our resources are limited. We can’t afford an extended battle.\*”*

“Oa xeadr.”

(I agree.)

“Then do we take care of the towers first? There are two of them, so maybe it would be best to aim that firepower at the Spirit Core since destroying it is our main objective?”

Yuu shared her thoughts. Everyone looked at each other, waiting for a response from her. The one that spoke up after a few seconds of silence was Eksert.

*“\*No, we still need mana to escape. The answer is neither.\*”*

“Neither?”

Garin parroted his words out loud with visible doubt forming on his face. To that, Eksert explained himself.

*“\*Yes. In the first place, the thing that brought those towers and that army was the teleportation circle. Even if we destroy both towers, whose to say that they won’t have other towers ready to send in? These people had a clear intent of targeting this village and anticipated our raid. It wouldn’t be strange for them to prepare multiple contingencies to counter your clan like those towers. Not to mention that mana isn’t the only one it’s dispersing. Your extra senlr is made out of mana, but it’s a part of your body, no different from your arms and legs. What likely got rid of it was something that affected your moon essence. Am I wrong?\*”*

Garin stared at Eksert in surprise. How did he, who wasn’t even a qeajrv, know that? That kind of knowledge wasn’t even common sense among their race. Only to those who had experience working with their senlr and researching more about them. Seeing his reaction, he provided.

*“\*I told you, I was researching. I wasn’t doing nothing these past three days.\*”*

He said with a smug tone in his voice.

*\*BAAANNGG!\**

As they were talking, a thundering explosion shook the air and made everyone jump. The source was the wall. It wasn’t that clear from far away, but there were certainly cracks on their block of earth.

*“\*What!? They’re breaking it down so quickly! Is this… Mass Casting!?\*”*

“Indeed, it is.”

Renig said with a grim tone to his voice.

Mass casting is a unique technique that only qeajrvs can perform. By casting the same magic as a group, it would amplify the output of the magic. Normally, this would only result in having multiple people cast magic at the same time with the same output. It would be like each of them shooting one at a time. However, for qeajrvs who can manipulate mana, they can connect the magic each of them are forming as they chant, allowing for the output to multiply. A technique only available to qeajrvs on the Green Stage and above. Frustratingly, it was the same stage as every single one of their enemies.

“My magic must have dissipated! We don’t have much longer!”

Yuu said to everyone. Catching on her implication to hurry up, Eksert turned to Renig.

*“\*Renig, can you do anything to fight off the werewolves?\*”*

“Although I will not be able to move much, I am still capable of casting magic to support all of you. However, I would like to save this for once I regain my temporary Blue Stage. I will be more useful at that level.”

*“\*Okay, got it.\*”*

*\*BAAANNGG!!\**

Another round collided with the wall. On the other side, the platoon of bow-wielding augmented werewolves stretched their strings, arrows loaded in the bows, and fired them on the commander’s signal. A wide volley of arrows flew through the air, flames sparking from each one, then slowly, it all merged and formed a large spear of flame, targeting a single spot on the wall, effectively taking it down.

“Once more! Load your weapons!”

The commander shouted as he ordered the werewolves to continue the assault.

*“\*Alright, change of plans. Yuu and Renig stay in the backline. Elder Elrei will be in charge of guarding both of you. Garin and I will take the front. Our goal is to destroy the teleportation circle, followed by the twin towers, and finally the Spirit Core! To do this, we need to buy some time! We will be facing an army, but we need to maintain our ground. We must NOT get overwhelmed! Put your trust in me and we will survive, am I clear!?\*”*

“Understood!”

**280 – Holding the Charge**

“Fire!”

The commander werewolf shouted once more, releasing another volley of roaring flame. It scorched the air as it traveled the same path, focusing on piercing a singular point on the earthen wall. Until finally, the raging flames withered the soil and left a gaping hole for the demons to pass.

“Reload your arrows! Switch to a wider volley with more power; we’re tearing this wall down!”

The flames exploded as they made contact with the wall, releasing a geyser of flame as it leaked through the hole in the wall. The wall that stood tall against the enemy’s repeated attacks finally crumbled and flames burst through the wall, demolishing the separation between the two sides. A thick cloud of dust covered the area as the bits of earth fell to the ground, creating a mountain of rubble.

“Attack!!”

The demons and werewolves charged into the cloud of dust at the commander’s orders, eager to take down the mere five people that were trapped on the other side. They climbed over the mountain of rubble, using other senses aside from sight to navigate their way through the dust. But then, as they reached the edge of the scatter of powder, a flash of light appeared above them and what seemed like blue-stained glass blocked their path.

Not even a second later, a booming roar ushered the gates of hell as a fiery inferno engulfed the demons and werewolves in the dust and quickly spread to the rest of the army. The commander werewolf’s eyes widened in surprise and hurriedly threw his arms up to erect a barrier with a water attribute to contain the explosion. However, it soon cracked, making him panic to make another barrier behind it. The initial barrier broke down but the second one he summoned was strong enough to hold back hell’s breath.

“W-What was that!? High-tier magic!?”

He screamed as the flames of hell danced behind the barrier.

Meanwhile, on the other side, Garin, Renig, and Elrei were watching in awe as the flames took out all the troops that charged in, still burning bright from the other side of their water-attributed barrier.

“Whoaa… It worked just like you said…”

Garin muttered directing his words to the man beside him.

*“\*It was just a dust explosion. Luckily, there’s only a handful of people in Zerid that knows of it. The enemy commander was simply not one of them.\*”*

Just before the flame arrows broke through their wall, Eksert ordered Yuu to ready a water-attribute barrier and erect it the moment she launched a large fireball into the dust. Since it was from her own magic, a single barrier was able to withstand it, but the chemical reaction that caused the explosion still threatened to break her defenses.

*“\*I built that wall with metal, coal, and other materials that would create combustible dust. With the size of that wall and this enclosed space, it was the perfect opportunity to surprise them with a bit of science. We can only hope they couldn’t react fast enough to stop it, but for some reason, I highly doubt they’re that incompetent.\*”*

The roaring flames finally died down as the oxygen on the other side of the wall was all but gone. The field cleared and allowed them to see the commander werewolf behind his own barrier. In between the two were the ashen bodies of the demons and werewolves that got caught in the dust explosion, their bodies disintegrating into the air.

“Accursed vermin! You are more trouble than you are worth! Name yourselves! Who are you!?”

The commander werewolf shouted as he pointed in Eksert and Yuu’s direction, the two non-qeajrvs in the group, the outsiders. They were called out by the enemy, but no one made any moves to respond to him.

“Gah! So be it! I will have all the time in the world to extract answers from you later! Front line, enough games! Charge in with all you’ve got! Archers, provide supporting fire! Freeze them all!”

The demons and werewolves charged once again, undaunted by the two times their charges resulted in mass casualties. The demons were still at the front, but it wasn’t long until the werewolves overtook them and jumped over the mountain of rubble. Their legs carried them quicker than usual as they were enhanced with the wind element. Meanwhile, the archers pulled their strings, wrapping their arrows with pale blue light. They released the pressure and soared their arrows through the air.

<O Water, the body of my temper, bridle the violent waves. Embody my pneuma and douse the blaze of wrath. Sodden Flux!>

A thin wave of water shot through the air and made contact with every enemy in the area. It didn’t cut them, but the water sunk into their skin and slowed down their charge.

*“\*Everyone, flame barriers!\*”*

Eksert ordered the others in his head, prompting them to cover their bodies with fire-attributed barriers. The volley of arrows landed and froze the land just like Eksert did earlier. The ice crawled through the ground and attempted to encase Eksert and the others, but their barriers stood in the way and melted the ice. Meanwhile, although the werewolves were slowed, their charge was not stopped. Their tails glowed as they used their mana to power their attack.

“GRAAWWRL!!”

The werewolves swung their claws in unison as they hit Eksert and Garin’s barriers. The claws released three spikes of earth on contact that broke through the barriers. Eksert jumped to dodge the deadly spikes. From above, he could clearly see the mass of werewolves passing by them and charging their backline.

*“\*They’re getting through! Garin, recover the defense and hold back the charge; we can’t let any more pass! Elder Elrei, Yuu, and Renig take care of anyone that passed through; clear our ground!\*”*

He sent orders in his mind as he beheaded the werewolf in front of him while landing, spun as he rose to dodge the attack of the werewolf next to him, slashing it in the process, and all the while making his lower arms dance to his spells’ tune.

<O Wind, usher your gentle breeze and bring forth a draft, power of the gale. Herald your mystic breath once for conflict and twice for liberty. Zephyr!>

<O Wind, usher your gentle breeze and bring forth a draft, power of the gale. Herald your mystic breath once for conflict and twice for liberty. Zephyr!>

The wind around Eksert compressed into two orbs of wind, one placed on both his sides. It then exploded, sending the werewolves who were trying to pincer him to his front. With the enemies lined up, he raised his blade crackling with electricity, and sent it down the group of werewolves. An enormous beam of lightning shot through the werewolves and fried them. Normally, this would be enough to kill them, but being the gemless werewolves that they were, they would soon regenerate. That was why he didn’t hesitate to use more magic.

<O Fire, break free from your cage, exhibit your power. Scorch my path and bring upon a conflagration. Eruption!>

Two lines appeared on the ground, swallowing the stunned werewolves, and soon created a thick wall of flames that burnt their bodies to a crisp. Since they couldn’t move from his earlier lightning attack, the werewolves could do nothing but sit and burn until there was nothing left of them. With this group dealt with, he shifted his focus to the incoming enemies.

Meanwhile, Garin dodged under the spikes they sent at him, rose from the ground, and beheaded one of the werewolves in front of him with his dagger in the backward position. Just as he was stabbing holes into the headless werewolf with both daggers glowing grey in the forward position, draining it of its mana, an order came from Eksert.

*\*Hold them back? This guy is unreasonable! Doesn’t he know I’m a one-on-one fighter!? ARGHH, WHATEVER!!\**

He internally cursed his leader but followed him anyway as he jumped back and took 16 needles from his bag. He separated 8 in a clump and threw them on the ground beside him. Then, he jumped in the air and threw the other clump of 8 on the other side. At contact with the ground, the needles disappeared and caused cracks to appear in the ground. Just like earlier, the earth rose and shoved the werewolves and demons on them backward. But this time, it was taller, making it difficult for them to scale it.

With those set, he took out 16 more and threw 8 on the ground one at a time, each one connecting to the previous needle. The moment all 8 connected, the needles disappeared and a powerful gust of wind was released from the ground up to the height of the needles and blew away the incoming werewolves, including those who attempted to jump over their obstacles. Not only that, the ones in front of the needles took the brunt of the damage and their bodies were cut to pieces. While that was happening, Garin threw another 8 on Eksert’s side and produced the same effect.

He landed with 16 more, threw 8 one at a time in the ground in front of him, freezing the ground and halting the enemies, and threw another 8. He repeated this process until Eksert successfully regained control of the frontline, all the while thinking one thing:

*\*You better pay for these later, Leader!\**

**281 – The Power They Could Not Reach**

While Eksert and Garin were busy doing what they could in the front, Yuu, Renig, and Elrei gathered as they defended against the werewolves and demons that got through.

“O Nature, Amass your power at my word. Create my weapons and impale my adversaries. Needle Storm!”

The air around them compressed and shot out multiple surges of meat-shredding wind, clearing the space around them temporarily, but she knew that not a single one would die from only the wind. That was why she threw in a volley of fireballs that mixed with the furious gust. Since both were her magic, none of them canceled each other out and created a flaming gale that burnt the small pieces of the werewolves to a crisp.

“You are truly skillful in magic, Miss Yuu.”

Renig complimented her as he sat between Elrei and Yuu.

“I apologize for not being of much use. Those towers are quite the trouble.”

“You don’t have to worry about that. You said that you can do something once we take those down, right? Then just save your power until then!”

“Understood.”

As the two talked Elrei calmly handled the incoming enemies with his staff coated in fire, swinging it down on werewolves that got close to them and swinging it sideways whenever they tried to pile on him. A werewolf charged at him with other werewolves and demons following it from behind. To that, Elrei jumped so high that it made his old looks seem like a joke and swung down his staff on its head, then landing in front of the clump of enemies, he brought his staff above him and spun it with so much force that it created a light zephyr, knocking the enemies back while burning their faces with his magic-infused staff. It would burn them, but unfortunately, not enough to engulf their bodies. It was frustrating to admit, but Elrei wasn’t killing a single werewolf.

“Hm?”

Then, he noticed something as he stared down at the enemies in front of him. Garin erected two tall walls of earth. He shifted his attention from the twin towers that were jamming the mana in the air and his moon essence to the wall and saw that they created shadows where the purple light did not reach.

“Sii Yuu, Renig, jdr lrxe woxedr pq siui sims! Rekglr iiadr krnlr axefi, pq mst xerel czdr ja sij druikrndr lrdr!”

(Miss Yuu, Renig, we must move over there! The light does not reach it, we may be able to use our moon essence there!)

Yuu and Renig turn to the area Elrei pointed to and saw shadows that were devoid of purple light. Renig’s ears popped up and shouted.

“Yes! If we reach that place, I will be able to aid you!”

“Then it’s decided, we’re moving! Renig, get ready! I’m going to open up a path!”

He nodded at Yuu’s words, lifting his body with his shaky legs. It was clear he won’t be able to run, so Yuu and Elrei would have to defend him as they traveled. With that in mind, she chanted.

“O Fire, let my hands guide you. Recreate an image of a burning hell, beginning with this small flare—”

Yuu took a short pause before continuing.

“O Fire, return to your roots, the provenance of your bright eminence. Take shape, profound blaze of yore. Brimstone Discus!"”

Two small orbs appeared around Yuu and the others, suddenly, they exploded and knocked back the groups of werewolves and demons, turning into two spinning disks of fire, revolving around Yuu and the others.

“Now!”

Yuu, Renig, and Elrei slowly advanced forward, moving in the safety of the dancing devils Yuu commanded. Renig made sure to move quickly despite his limp. Some werewolves attempted to attack them by jumping over the disks of fire, but Elrei was ready to receive them and knocked them into death’s door with his staff. As the spell began to dissipate, they were still halfway to their destination. But no one panicked as Yuu took the lead, stretched both her arms out to both sides and shouted.

“—Paired Hellfire!”

A thick conflagration released from Yuu’s palms and engulfed the werewolves and demons that thought it was safe to approach in flames. Along with that, she ran forward as the wind gathered behind her, dealing with the werewolves in front of her by opening her wings and kicking them into the flames. And finally, the back of her vest released a high pressure of wind, propelling her forward and spreading the flames long enough to reach the shade. As her magic stopped, she turned back to find Elrei guarding Renig from behind, dealing with the incoming enemies with his staff. Then, Yuu also released a volley of fireballs, blasting the enemies that attempted to enter the flame columns on her side until finally, Renig managed to reach the shade.

Without a second to waste, he tapped into his moon essence and howled, summoning a blue tail made from his mana and moon essence. Then, something appeared from within his senlr and shot at one of the werewolves. It was a wolf made from mana. It had the same looks as Renig, donning the same number of three tails, but simply made out of mana, the same as his senlr. It mauled the werewolf and bit off its head. Then, it sank into the beheaded werewolf’s body as if sinking in quicksand. More mana-structured wolves appeared from Renig’s senlr and did the same as the first one. And after a few seconds, multiple blue orbs rose from their bodies and merged back into his senlr. Seeing Yuu’s surprised face, he explained.

“This is called Shaping and Mana Harvesting. A skill unique to us pure wolf qeajrvs. We can sacrifice our moon essence to make clones of ourselves and order those clones to steal the mana of others. This would be an unorthodox use of our senlr, but incredibly effective against gemless werewolves.”

“I see… No wonder it’s working so well.”

Yuu continued to throw fireballs at enemies as she watched the wolves go on a rampage. But then, she spotted one that tried to pounce on a werewolf outside the shadows and disintegrated before it even reached its target.

“Ah, how unfortunate. The purple light negates my clones. Those towers must be dealt with for me to help against the army.”

“Ui hadrlr. Czlrrel lrj lrpqa xedr gkrn, ycz sims cz siui sij druikrndr. Oa pqrel en xeuiuixeh krn vva.”

(That is correct. You must save up your moon essence until those towers are gone. For now, I will be of assistance.)

Elrei jumped in front of the two, his four tails wriggling in the air as he slammed one end of his staff down the ground. The action produced a shockwave along with multiple white orbs floating around the three one of the werewolves saw them as a threat and jumped over it, but one of the orbs close to it moved to align itself below the werewolf. The ground below the orb rumbled and sprouted a long spike that pierced the werewolf right down the center. Since that wasn’t enough to kill it, the spike itself caught on fire and burned the werewolf as if he was some kind of sacrifice. Of course, Elrei paid this no mind.

Since the orb disappeared after that one kill, the werewolves powered themselves with wind magic and wrapped their claws in the same power, charging all at once. However, that attempt was futile. Elrei lifted his staff from the ground and ignited it with fire, swung it sideways, and instead of hitting the werewolves, it made contact with three of the white orbs. Immediately after, a wave of flame burst from the orbs, submerging the attackers in a breath of hellfire.

As if the concept of fear was nothing but a myth, more werewolves and demons charged into the space devoid of orbs. Elrei gladly clashed with them as he jumped in the air and send an overhead smash from his staff to the demon below him, crushing its body to the ground. But then, three werewolves anticipated his jump and tried to assault him in midair. Yet again, Elrei felt no fear as he kicked one of the werewolves in the chin, rotating and retracting his legs to kick the other two away at the same time.

When he landed, there were already numerous amounts of enemies attempting to flood them in all directions, regardless of whether it had an orb or not. Yuu and Renig were doing what they could to push them back with magic. Elrei raised his staff and applied as much force as he could to hit the one orb with the most number of enemies, the force of the attack digging up the metal below them. Then, a larger shockwave hit the enemies as the ground below them cracked. The ground could not support their weight and let up, sinking the werewolves and demons standing on it into the pit below.

He picked his staff and spun it around, flames releasing from the pressure and making contact with the rest of the orbs, resulting in a complete holocaust as the flames swallowed everything in their surroundings, burning every single hostile to a crisp. When he finally stopped, the planted his staff on the ground once more, releasing a small shockwave and reviving the white orbs that he used.

“Hsi.”

(Come.)

The old man stared with his sharp eyes at the remaining enemies that lingered a distance away from them.

**282 – Turning the Tides**

“Aside from those two, everything is going as expected. Even augmented, two-tails could never match their three- and four-tails. But even so, no matter how powerful they are, they will not last against our sheer number.”

The commander werewolf muttered to himself as he watched the battle unfold. His troops were dropping like flies at the face of a mere five people. Despite this, there wasn’t any trace of panic or urgency in his expression.

“Archers, ready your bows!”

At the frontlines, Garin quickly stepped backward dodging the flaming claw the werewolf in front of him launched at him. With only a few centimeters away from its scorching claws, he stopped himself and jumped in with his daggers in the backward position, beheading the beast. With most of its senses taken, he repeatedly stabbed the werewolf, siphoning the mana from it while dodging and beheading the other werewolves that tried to disturb him.

“Gah, it works just like he said but not as well as I want it to…”

Garin complained as he felt there was significantly less mana flowing into him from the werewolf. After using up around half his needles, he began to feel his mana dwindling to concerning levels so he tried to replenish it by stealing from his enemies but the twin towers’ influence made it impossible to work at its top performance.

Meanwhile, Eksert was busy electrocuting his enemies with his blade and piling them up to burn them all at once. With a swift swing of his katana, the electricity ran through its blade and transferred to a werewolf’s body, crawling not just over its whole body, but as well as the nearby werewolves in the vicinity. But then, as he moved to eliminate the stunned werewolves, he noticed the commander werewolf gesture with his arms, resulting in a volley of arrows sparkling with bright yellow as it was sent through the air.

*“\*A volley! Set up earth barriers!\*”*

No one questioned Eksert and immediately set up barriers around their bodies, their appearance similar to brown-stained glass with a light sandstorm acting as its shell. The werewolves that noticed their sudden defense did the same. The arrows came and consumed the whole battlefield, light yellow lightning crawling through the land like a serpent, sending electricity through all the werewolves that failed to notice the oncoming lightning strike.

*“\*What are they doing!? Don’t they know that they’re hitting their own troops!?\*”*

Garin exclaimed as he saw the werewolves being fried on the other side of his barrier.

*“\*They’re trying to force us to up our mana.\*”*

Eksert answered. Since the tide of battle was slowly moving in their favor, they could take out the enemies around them without having to use their mana. Noticing this, the commander ordered a barrage, making them create barriers to defend themselves.

*“\*Since they don’t care about their casualties, it can only mean one thing…\*”*

As if matching Eksert’s train of thought, an azure pillar rose behind the Spirit Core. The teleportation circle activated again, this time bringing in another platoon of demons. And once more, bringing another platoon of werewolves, completely replenishing their numbers.

“Hey, hey, hey, WHAT THE HELL IS THIS ALL ABOUT!?”

Garin screamed out loud at the sight of the mass amount of enemies flooding through the backlines. It couldn’t be helped since they did all they could to hold their ground against the initial army of demons and werewolves. Since he was in charge of keeping the enemies at bay, he knew that he didn’t have enough mana or tools to fend off another charge.

*“\*Another army… it was just as Sir Eksern said. We must take out the teleportation circle.\*”*

Renig restated their objective, trying to keep everyone from falling into depression by reminding them of what was most important.

*“\*That’s right, but how do we do that!? We can barely hold our ground, how are we supposed to even advance!?\*”*

Garin bewailed, as he looked over their situation. They couldn’t afford to advance since there were only five of them. Defending with their small number was a miracle, but he couldn’t even fathom what sort of godly phenomenon would allow them the option to move their feet even a step forward. Looking at it from a realistic perspective, all was lost. But then, Eksert showed them the light.

*“\*You don’t have to worry about that.\*”*

*“\*Huh?\*”*

*“\*In the first place, we were just stalling until I could get the stage set. We’re turning the tables in an instant and escaping the moment we destroy the Spirit Core! Now, listen to me…\*”*

As the enemy reinforcements were charging in, Elrei picked up Xeoi’s motionless body and brought it with him to further back to the wall where Renig was waiting. Since Elrei and Renig were out in the open, their senlrs disappeared with the twin towers in the way. Yuu was nearby creating bonfires behind them with earth, wind, and fire magic. Eksert was in the frontlines with Garin behind him, waiting for a signal as he coated his whole body with magic. Eksert sheathed his blade, staring down the enemies rushing at them empty-handed.

They stayed like that as the new horde of enemies were running at them at full speed. Their legs were coated with wind magic to accelerate them even further. When they reached the halfway point, Eksert raised all four of his arms in the air and began writing.

<O Water, the wounds have opened once more, let your melancholic tears forge anew. Bring about the spate of vehemence to bless those who call your name. Mystic Cloudburst!>

<O Water, our tower of strength, the stalwart bastion, emerge from the seas and take shape. Allow the lower beings to witness your splendor…>

<O Water, our tower of strength, the stalwart bastion, emerge from the seas and take shape. Allow the lower beings to witness your splendor…>

<O Water, the merciful one that was hailed a savior, she who sheltered the weak from the storm of chaos…>

The first spell finished, summoning white clouds in front of Eksert that covered the ceiling and rained down a storm of crystal-like raindrops that sparkled in the air as they fell from the sky and reached even the commander werewolf at the back. Every wound the werewolves received as they attempted to climb the mountain of rubble closed, healing at every drop of rain.

“Mystic Cloudburst…? Why would they use a support spell on… us… No, could it be!? Archers! Prepare your strongest frost-attribute volley!”

The enchanting picturesque sight disappeared as quickly as it appeared. Along with it were the completion of Eksert’s second and third spells, and the beginning of a fifth spell.

<…and repel those that dare stain your sanctuary. Hydrous Monolith!>

<…and repel those that dare stain your sanctuary. Hydrous Monolith!>

<…Goddess, be warned of man who bites the hand that feeds him. Let not the sorrow but the judgment flow…>

<O Fire, break free from your cage, exhibit your power. Scorch my path and bring upon a conflagration.…>

Two large pools of water appeared by the walls on both of Eksert’s sides. The water swirled upward, rising to the ceiling.

“Fire!!! Do not let that spell take shape!”

The commander werewolf shouted, prompting the archers behind him to fire the volley of frost arrows, threatening to freeze the water pillars. But before they could reach it, a large fire-attributed barrier appeared and caught all the arrows. The frost arrows made a thunderous explosion on contact, splashing ice and snow past the barrier and spreading all over the vicinity. It looked like nothing could stop it now.

<—Eruption!>

But then, a wall of flame rose from the ground, melting the remnants of the frost volley. It was the magic spell, Eruption, but its output was clearly weakened as it covered a thinner area, but with enough power to counter the enemy’s attempt in disrupting him.

<…Turn thy drops of sadness to the divine word, speak in the ubiquitous language…>

“Do not let up! We cannot let him finish his chant! Keep firing!!!”

The commander demanded, making the werewolves at the back strain themselves. Their senlrs were trembling from the consecutive volleys. They pulled their strings, connected their mana with each other, and shot, but to no avail. Eksert kept summoning fire-attribute barriers with minimal surface area to save mana, but large enough to receive the attacks. Small splashes like the initial volley were dealt with by smaller barriers while large splashes were caught by Eruption. All of them with minimized power to conserve mana, releasing the most optimal output of magic. Until finally, the water reached the ceiling, forming two giant pillars of flowing water.

<…I deliver her word…>

“You pesky outsider!!”

The commander cursed Eksert as he threw his hands out, erecting multiple layers of barriers applied with the ice and wind element in front of his troops.

<…Harrowed Deluge!>

The pillars of water beside him exploded toward the army, thousands of pounds of water bearing down at the enemy like a tsunami. And as if that wasn’t enough, the land in front of Eksert cracked open and released a massive flood. The water reached the multilayered barriers the commander werewolf set…

*\*Snap!\**

Only to shatter them like glass as Eksert snapped his fingers.

“W-What!?”

The ranging waves reached the army, crushing and drowning the closest enemies. The commander continued to build barriers to halt the deadly tsunami coming his way. But every time…

*\*Snap, snap, snap!\**

They would shatter along with the rhythmic snaps as if they weren’t even there.

“What is this!? Even if it is a high-tier spell…! To think this would have this much power!”

Over half of the army was caught in the deadly torrent and it wasn’t showing a single sign of slowing down. The werewolves that drowned were left sprawled all over the field, unmoving. Their bodies were still intact which would normally mean they would still be able to move as their gemless nature allowed them. But beneath the naked eye, there wasn’t a single drop of mana left in their bodies, leaving them as lifeless husks.

“Curse you!!!”

**283 – The Man with Six Tails**

“Hey… Do you actually need us for this…?”

Garin whispered to Eksert in awe of his great magic. He witnessed him cast a complicated high-tier spell with such speed and power that the enemy couldn’t do anything to stop him. Successfully casting multiple spells at the same time, both preparing for the offensive and defending all by himself. Seeing the damage he was still doing to the enemy units, it wouldn’t be strange if they got wiped out right here and now.

*“\*It would be great if it finished here, but I’m not arrogant enough to assume that we would win just because I managed to cast a high-tier spell…\*”*

As he conveyed his musings, a purple light reflected in the massive wall of water. Not a second later, the tsunami exploded in the center, parting the thick column of water, and revealing the purple light swirling in front of a blue pillar on the other side.

*“\*…And it looks like I was right to do so. Everyone, prepare yourselves!\*”*

He called out to everyone, breaking them from their admiration for his magic and bringing them back to reality. Multiple explosions occurred from within the body of water, sending splashes through the air, and finally, freezing them over, turning the droplets into snow pellets, and falling to the ground where a sea of flames awaited them.

“Truly, pests. I never thought I would be pushed back enough to use this. I commend you all.”

The commander werewolf stood tall, his voice reverberating through the air with wind magic, making it so that the weight of his words remained despite the distance.

“Allow me to introduce the last name you will ever remember. I am Iaq, the leader of this invasion and…”

He curled his lips, revealing his sharp, vicious teeth. He stood tall and composed as six tails fluttered behind his back. Three of his original senlr, and an additional three more made from mana.

“…The first six-tail qeajrv in this world!”

He spread his arms dramatically with deep haughtiness in his eyes as he looked down upon everyone. From behind him appeared a new army of demons and werewolves, replacing the ones Eksert just wiped out. There was no magic powerful enough to stop their constant flow.

“…What…?”

A shaken mutter entered Eksert’s ear as Iaq spread all six of his tails for everyone to see. Garin couldn’t help but leave his mouth open as he tried to process what exactly was happening before him. He was taught since birth that he and his fellow qeajrvs could only reach the power of a five-tail. But for some reason, there was something in front of him that defied that. Not to mention the fact that he possessed three mana-structured senlr, completely opposed to the long-lived belief that they could only produce one mana-structured senlr.

For that time, he could do nothing but stand completely still, staring blankly at the incomprehensible foe before him. However, Eksert was not the same.

*“\*Everyone, change of plans. I’m going in alone. Yuu, ready your magic!\*”*

*“\*Y-Yes!\*”*

He communicated with everyone before drawing his sword, coating his legs with wind magic, and running into the fray.

“I can’t let him outdo me!”

Yuu cheered herself on, standing in front of the three bonfires and beginning her chant.

“O Fire, kindling wonder, the dancing luster, for why have you taken so? It was I that fueled you, it was I that sustained you, must you engulf even the hand that fed you? The flare of your passion has turned dark, a mere remnant of your past radiance. Take my hand and heed my call. Once more we rise; from the ashes, we emerge. Your rebirth becomes my unbending will. Let this be the time of redemption—”

Just like Eksert, she was unfazed, continuing to resist the unknown. The two may not have been qeajrvs, but they should have known exactly how threatening a six-tailed would be. No, to be precise, they wouldn’t, but the very fact that no one else knew should have been enough to convey the dangers of facing that kind of enemy. Yet they sustained the mettle to keep moving. Were they being brave? Perhaps, foolish? The answer didn’t actually matter. It was just factual that they were contributing more than Garin ever did to their battle.

“…Like hell I’m letting someone else do my job from me!”

Garin coated his legs with wind magic and chased after Eksert. He pressed on, trying to catch up to the man in front of him.

*“\*Garin, what are you doing? I said I’m going alone!\*”*

Before he even got to him, he already detected his presence. His words reverberated within Garin’s mind, but they weren’t enough to stop him.

*“\*Why would I let you do that!? Just because I spaced out for a few seconds doesn’t mean you can cut me off like that! I’m not letting you guys solve this problem for us; I’m going!!\*”*

He picked up the pace until he reached Eksert’s side and stared at him through his helmet.

*“\*I don’t care what promise you made with Ere! I’m not going to sit by a corner and do nothing!\*”*

They maintained eye contact for a while before Eksert shifted his focus back to the army in front of him.

*“\*Do what you will.\*”*

He grinned at Eksert’s response and brandished his twin daggers at the enemies.

“That’s what I like to hear!”

As they approached, the situation took a strange turn as the army of demons and werewolves parted like the Red Sea, letting Garin and Eksert pass. Confused looks clouded their faces, but the reason for that was clear as Iaq announced for all to hear.

“Let them pass and aim for the others! I will let these vermin have the honor of being the first test dummies to taste my power!”

There was not a single hint of worry in his eyes. Only his boastful voice and pompous attitude. He wasn’t even accepting Eksert and Garin’s challenge. For him, they were like toys that came for him to play with. Garin was insulted, but he held his emotions and redirected them to the mana he poured into his blades.

Eksert took the front while Garin circled behind him. With a jump, Eksert raised his blade overhead, imbuing it with the lightning element, and gripping the handle tightly as he brought down a powerful strike… or at least that should have happened if not for the thin strands of wind that stood before him like a net and tore his body to shreds.

“What an interesting trick.”

Ignoring the chunks of flesh and blood that came from above him, he angled his head down where another Eksert appeared from thin air and sent three swift slashes his way. Meanwhile, Garin came from behind him sending a dagger into his back. But to both of their attempts at his life, Iaq simply stood there with his arms crossed. Then, a barrier shaped like an asterisk appeared in front of him, blocking all three of his strikes, and as for the back, a single circle blocked Garin’s stab with pinpoint accuracy.

“Kneel before me.”

As Iaq said those words, the weight around Garin and Eksert increased tremendously. If it weren’t for their instincts and quick reactions, they would have failed to catch themselves with their legs and their bodies would have sunk into the ground.

*“\*Plan B!\*”*

Eksert announced in their network, making Garin shift his legs.

“Oho?”

Immediately after, Eksert and Garin’s weight lightened, allowing both of them to gain distance away from Iaq. Eksert placed his hand near the floor with his palm facing the ground and circled Iaq. Meanwhile, Garin recovered his footing and focused, summoning an extra senlr. Since the twin towers didn’t reach in front of the Spirit Core, Iaq and Garin were free to use their moon essence and utilize the mana in the air.

Garin charged back in with his empowered form, launching himself forward and clashing with Iaq’s claws. Sparks flew in the air as the two deadly weapons ground the other’s surface. But then, something unusual happened to one of Iaq’s senlrs, namely, the unusually large one with black fur. Its hairs stood as if static electricity ran down its strands.

“My, oh my!”

A strong gust of wind knocked Garin back. He used his own power to counter it, but he couldn’t win against him with sheer force.

“This is truly entertaining! A man that can match my power, and the son of the she-beast! There could not have been any better puppets than this!”

Ignoring the insane werewolf’s ramblings, Garin created a string of mana that connected his two daggers and threw one at the werewolf as he attempted to regain control of his body. A small barrier blocked its path and landed on the ground. On impact, the blade sent cracks through the land, crawling to Iaq. Unfortunately, before it could reach him, cracks appeared from Iaq’s feet and intercepted Garin’s attack with his own. The contact of the two cracks gave birth to two twisting spikes that rose from the ground.

But as that was happening, Garin already recovered and went to match Iaq once more. Stone spikes sprouted from the ground, trying to impale Garin, but his swift legs and agile footwork allowed him to either outrun them or dodge them.

“My boy, do you want to hear a story?”

**284 – Coordinated Attack**

“Like I care!”

Garin’s senlr glowed along with his daggers. The bright lights brought forth his latent power, increasing his speed once more and allowing his daggers to embody the fire and frost elements as a searing flame and a shard of ice coated their blades.

“Now, now, no need to rush.”

Iaq motionlessly countered Garin’s charge as a wall of earth blocked his path. Then when he tried to jump over that wall, a large ball of fire intercepted him, forcing him to twist his body and dodge.

“I would like to talk about an interesting story in my workplace. One day, I was introduced to a new colleague. They did not work directly under me, but I was responsible for her to some degree.”

The awkward position sent Garin rolling on the ground, but he quickly regained footing and threw his flaming dagger at Iaq. With his hand free, he took out 8 needles from his bag and threw them behind his dagger.

“They were quite cute, you see? They tried to resist my orders every time I interacted with her. It happened countless times. My, I could not believe how feisty they were.”

The dagger that was coming from him was blown away by a powerful wind, but before it could go fully off course, the 8 needles behind it disappeared, gathering all the wind that tried to misplace the dagger in such a way that carried it back to its original trajectory and created multiple needles of razor-sharp wind that launched at Iaq.

“But one day, they calmed down. Why, you ask? Well, that was because I took something precious from her as a punishment.”

The flurry of wind and the dagger were all blocked by small barriers that anticipated their pathing. Deflecting each attack with efficiency.

“Do you know what that is?”

The ground below Garin rumbled, his instincts telling him to dodge. He swiftly moved away from that location, only to be greeted with a large ball of fire that came from the side. Garin tried to stop himself, but before he even knew it, his legs were frozen in ice up to his knees, freezing his joints. Realizing that dodging wasn’t an option, he raised his remaining dagger, turning the ice into water, and summoned water barriers to take the attack. The ball of flame made contact, breaking through his defenses and clashing with his water dagger. His arm began shaking as the force was too much for him to handle. Then, the fireball exploded, launching his dagger through the air and sending him to the ground.

“Ahh, yes. I remember this sight all too well.”

Iaq slowly approached him, looking down at him with a delighted smile on his face. Garin tried to pick himself back up, but his legs were frozen. His daggers were disarmed from him, so he tried to reach for his needles. However, a small explosion blew it off his waist, leaving him with nothing.

“You have the same look as your mother as I stole one of her senlrs.”

Garin tried to think of ways to get out of his situation, but Iaq’s words stopped his train of thought completely. For the first time, Garin finally brought his attention to Iaq with his blank eyes.

“Yes, this black tail of mine was her’s. Ahh, the look on her face as I showed up to her in this form… it was sublime! Just like you, she slumped to the ground in despair. Hahaha, and to think I would happen upon her son in the same situation! It seems your family was destined to fall in my hands!”

“Y-YOU BAST—!”

Iaq cackled. Garin’s eyes were filled with rage at the sight of this man. But just before he could say anything, a sudden force came from his side, sending his body flying through the air. As he turned to look back at what had hit him, he saw Eksert standing where had just been.

*“\*NOW!!!\*”*

Eksert shouted in their network. The very moment after that, a pillar of blue light rose from the ground. But this time, it wasn’t the teleportation circle’s activation. A large pillar of light appeared under Eksert and Iaq, consuming both of them. A few seconds later, the light subsided and revealed that the two who were caught in the flash were gone.

At that very moment, four bright flames appeared behind the Spirit Core.

“TAKE THIS YOU BASTAAAAAARDS!!!”

The man that bellowed with rage was Mrel. He threw four of his chakrams from the platform near the ceiling. Each of the rings engulfed in flames as it accelerated, spreading ash and cinder in the air the moment all of the chakrams dug into the ground and destroyed the teleportation circle.

“—Fumes of the Inflamed!”

Noticing this, Yuu immediately cast the magic she had prepared this whole time. An orange orb appeared within the smoke of each bonfire, sucking up the black smoke and even the flames that they came from. Once the orbs collected everything, they exploded, sending three bright flaming arrows that pierced through the air, launching at the twin towers and the Spirit Core all at once.

“AWROOO!!!”

The archers at the back didn’t wait for orders. Even they knew they had to do everything within their power to stop that attack. They pulled their strings and readied their arrows, but none of them had the chance to let go.

“LIKE I’D LET YOU!!!”

Mrel sent more chakrams below him, all of them heading straight for the platoon of archers. However, the four chakrams he sent would never be able to stop them. For that reason, the archers ignored him and continued to take aim. But then, all four of his senlrs glowed. Since he was behind the twin towers, their purple light couldn’t take away his power and activated it.

The four chakrams glowed as Mrel willed it. Two orbs appeared around every single chakram and exploded as they got close to the army. From the thunderous roar, eight blazing discs of flame spun around, taking the archers’ lives en masse.

“KEEP IT UP!!!”

Mrel made quick work with the archers and the moment he made sure every single one was dead, he rerouted the four chakrams to the Spirit Core, sending eight flaming discs it's way.

Meanwhile, on the frontlines, some of the werewolves tried to intercept Yuu’s arrows. However, any magic they sent to it would only pass the arrows harmlessly as the bright flames turned to dark clouds every time anyone tried to disrupt it and reignite its burning splendor as it continued to soar through the sky. All of their attacks went undisturbed, and soon enough, two loud explosions echoed through the room as two of Yuu’s arrows successfully took out the twin towers.

The moment that happened, Elrei and Renig regained the ability to summon their extra senlrs.

“AWROOO!!!”

Renig immediately howled, bringing forth his three-tail form, and summoned an army of clones that he sent to intercept the incoming army. Their job was now to defend themselves until they could take out the Spirit Core. Yuu sent an arrow to destroy it, but the moment they checked its status…

“What…?”

She could only mutter in confusion.

**285 – The End of the Mission**

*“\*Stand back and leave this to me! Follow the plan!\*”*

Those were the words Eksert sent Garin as he traveled through the air.

“WAIT, WHAT THE HELL!? I’M NOT FINISHED DEALING WITH THAT SCUM!!”

His enraged screams didn’t reach Eksert as a blue pillar of light erected from the ground and consumed him and Iaq. This was the plan. Garin knew that. If they couldn’t take Iaq on through battle, then Garin would need to buy time while Eksert set something up to take Iaq out of the picture. That was exactly what they did, but it left an unpleasant taste in Garin’s mouth the moment he realized that the werewolf he was fighting was involved with his mother.

“DAMN IT!”

Garin cursed as he twisted his body backward and kicked the approaching wall with his frozen legs, cracking them. He then landed on the ground with those legs, sending the force through the cracks and breaking the cold encasing completely.

“GRA! GRA!! GRAAH!!!”

With his legs free from the ice, he jumped around and kicked the wall. Transferring his pent-up rage to his legs, he released it to the walls with each grunt, warming up his cold legs at the same time.

“Haaah…”

It wasn’t long until he finally calmed himself down and was brought him back to his senses. Although he was pissed, he knew better than to let emotions drive him on the battlefield, and recovered in only a few seconds. With a deep breath, he searched for his weapons, the two daggers, and the bag of magic needles. Conveniently, one of the daggers lay near his bag. He quickly went over to it, but not before noticing Mrel above him throwing chakrams and demolishing the enemy backline.

“Huh? He got him to move? I thought he was sulking in a corner this whole time.”

It wasn’t long, but Garin interacted with Mrel before he left the Ujlufi village. He was always stuck to the hip with Xeoi, so he thought his betrayal would put him render him completely useless. No, thinking about how he adamantly sided with Xeoi the whole way here, he had to have been down. He got back up, but he highly doubted he did that all by himself. Since none of them had any time to interact with him, it had to have been Eksert’s work with his strange telepathy.

“Just how powerful is that guy…?”

He muttered to himself as he remembered their first meeting with him and how the Elder pointed out his unusual strength. Shifting his eyes to the place where Eksert and Iaq once stood, he couldn’t help but be satisfied with the Elder’s evaluation of him. How was he even able to get rid of a six-tailed qeajrv in the first place? Well, it wasn’t like running these questions through his head would do him any good at the moment. With that in mind, he picked back one of his daggers and tied the bag of magic needles to his waist. The belt was broken from the blast, but it wasn’t completely unusable. Meanwhile, he created a string that connected the dagger in his hand and the other dagger in the distance and pulled it over to him.

*\*BOOOOMM!!\**

*\*BOOOOMM!!\**

Two loud explosions erupted to his sides. Those were the magic Yuu prepared to make a quick decisive blow the moment everything that could stop them disappeared. With the teleportation circle destroyed, the platoon of archers dealt with, and Iaq taken out from the scenes, this was the ideal situation Eksert had in mind when he gave them the orders to move earlier. All that was left was to take out the Mana-Infused Spirit Core and their mission would end there.

“H-Huh…?”

Unfortunately, the enemy wasn’t out of surprises. As Yuu’s flame arrow approached the Spirit Core, the large oval structure lit up in bright cyanic light and its surface began to distort. A second later, three figures exited the plant-like structure and took Yuu’s high-tier magic head-on. The two sides collided, shaking the air around them and clouding the area with smoke as they made contact. What stood before Garin as the smoke settled were three augmented werewolves but unlike the others, these three were made of mana. Their skin, fur, arms, legs, everything was made out of mana. This was like Shaping, the skill unique to pure wolf qeajrvs, but instead of pure wolves, augmented werewolves shaped by the mana.

The three mana-structured werewolves stared at Garin. Then, the Spirit Core distorted once more, producing more mana-structured werewolves until a line of seven mana-structured werewolves stood before him. And to make things worse, the number of tails each one possessed was the cruel number of five.

“You… have got to be kidding…”

How many times has he been left speechless from this one battle alone? Garin wouldn’t know the answer to that question. But if there was one thing he was certain about, it would be the fact that there was no possible way for him to take on seven five-tailed werewolves all by himself.

All seven charged at him. If these werewolves had the same power as the number of tails they possess suggested, there was absolutely no escape for him. There, he accepted his fate and took out a small crystal orb Eksert gave him. It had scintillating colors of purple, blue, and red with red at its core and purple and blue spiraling around it. Before the mana-structured werewolves could reach him, he took it to his palm…

“This better work!”

…and crushed it.

The seven werewolves barraged his location with various magic. But as the dust settled, Garin was nowhere to be seen.

In the backlines, Yuu’s enhanced eyesight caught the whole situation.

“Uisilroag pqjg ui lrdr?”

(Is there something wrong?)

Elrei asked her as he noticed the confused look on her face. Yuu turned to him, her eyebrows twitching about as she tried to find the right words to explain what she saw.

“I-It seems like my attack was stopped by five-tail augmented werewolves that appeared from the Spirit Core. They are made completely out of mana, just like Renig’s clones. There are seven of them in total, and Garin who was faced with that number used the orb Eksert gave him.”

“Pqxe!? Fi ui jxe!?”

(What!? Is he okay!?)

“Yes, I believe so. Garin disappeared just before the enemy got to him.”

Elrei breathed a sigh of relief as Yuu confirmed his safety and stared back at the Spirit Core where the seven reported werewolves stood.

“Lrdr pqxe iiaoag? Xelrhoag krn xedr?”

(What are they doing? Are they attacking?)

“No, it seems like they’re standing their ground. If I had to say, they might be tasked with guarding the Spirit Core so they’re not attacking.”

“Should we retreat just like Sir Eksert suggested?”

Renig posed the question to Yuu and Elrei. Eksert said that if anything else unexpected happened and they determined that it was risky to continue pursuing the objective, then they should simply crush the small crystal orbs he handed to everyone and they would be able to escape.

“Garintczg fiui alrdrlriia xeiia Eksert ui krnpqdrdr. Pq fixe sikrnjdr relui lrjsih lr auiuioag. Pq yui fiui krn pqaui uijrel vvrelj xeiia relxedr.”

(Young Garin has already retreated and Eksert is nowhere to be seen. We have lost too much manpower to continue resisting. We should just follow his words and leave as well.)

“I agree with Elder Elrei. It’s too dangerous without everyone here. We retreat.”

“Understood.”

As everyone reached a consensus, they moved to take out the small crystal orbs from their pockets, but then, a rabid growl came from behind them.

“GRAAGR!!!”

“Xeczxe!”

(Look out!)

Elrei pushed Yuu away with his left hand and tried to deflect the assailant’s attack with the staff on his right hand, but they were too fast and inflicted a deep wound on the arm Elrei used to guard and the chest he exposed as he attempted to use his staff. He reflexively opened his mouth to scream his pain, but he turned that scream into a shout as he endured the damage and slammed his staff into the assailant’s body, knocking them back a good distance.

“Elder Elrei!?”

“Elder!?”

Yuu and Renig ran to Elrei’s side. Renig stood between him and the assailant while Yuu applied healing magic to his wounds, starting with the claw mark on his chest. They turned to the assailant and saw Xeoi standing before them.

“S-Sir Xeoi!?”

Renig couldn’t believe his eyes. Eksert guaranteed that there was no way for Xeoi to break through his invisible binds, but somehow, he was moving more than fine as he managed to inflict a concerning amount of damage on Elrei. But not only that, his appearance was completely different from before.

He was once beaten up with holes all over his body. Forced blood coagulation was the only thing that saved him from bleeding to death. But now, his skin was all healed without a single stain of blood on his body. His figure was bulkier than before, and to add to that, half of his face had turned to a wolf’s, much like the faces of the augmented werewolves. And finally, four tails wriggled behind him, all of them made from skin and bones, not a single trace of a mana-structured senlr. One look at him was all Yuu needed to determine what they had to do.

“Hurry! Crush your orbs!”

“Wait! But what about Sir Xeoi!? We need to bring him back and interrogate him!”

Renig argued, but Yuu swiftly rejected him.

“We don’t have the luxury! The Elder is wounded, the army will soon arrive, and we have no idea what Xeoi can do! We can’t pacify him quick enough; we need to leave him before it's too late!”

“K-Kgh…!”

Yuu brought up good points that Renig couldn’t refute. Yuu was only thinking of the best choice in the situation. Renig knew that, which is why he could do nothing but swallow this decision.

“V-Very well…”

Renig took out the orb he hid in his mouth and aligned it with his teeth to crush it. Yuu assisted Elrei in breaking his crystal orb while breaking her own with her open hand. However, Elrei hardened his hand in resistance to Yuu.

“Elder Elrei?”

“Pqadr j drpqt fikrndr krnlr relxeoag!”

(We’re not leaving empty-handed!)

Elrei slammed his hand to the ground, making a pillar angled toward them rise from the ground. A metallic clang resounded, making Elrei raise his hand to catch the object he flung to himself with magic. The mana-siphoning spear.

Xeoi charged them when he saw this, but Yuu slowed him down with a barrage of fireballs. With her efforts, Elrei got a firm grip on the spear and shouted.

“Alrdrlr!”

(Retreat!)

At the very moment the three crushed their orbs, they disappeared from the enemies’ sight.

**…………**

“KEEP IT UP!”

Mrel shouted as he sent his chakrams to the Spirit Core. 8 discs of flame spun around as they were about to make contact with the structure. But then, just before he could graze it, the Spirit Core distorted and four figures appeared from nowhere to block his attack.

“What!?”

Each one went after a chakram, their artificial fur and five tails flowing in the air as each of them hurried to jump in front of every attack. They stretched their arms out and shot out a high-pressured beam of water. The force of the water doused the flames and halted the chakrams’ approach.

He stood dumbfounded at the sudden interference of the mana-structured werewolves. However, the werewolves didn’t let him recover and charged at him. With the click of his tongue, Mrel reached out to his belt and threw our four chakrams as he jumped backward, away from the four mana-structured werewolves. Unfortunately, every single one was caught by water bubbles that appeared in the air.

Suddenly, he felt his weight increase, taking him out of the air and sending him straight to the ground. Rooted deep into the floor, he could only raise his head slightly as he watched one of the mana-structured werewolves lunge at him with its fierce claws. At that moment, there was nothing else he could do.

**286 – Calamity and Madness**

A place where the floor, walls, structures, and magic that affected the terrain lost all their color and followed the uniform appearance of bright turquoise crystal stones. The environment where everything is covered in snow-like particles. There, stood two people facing each other with blades and magic in hand. Eksert and Iaq.

“Hahaha! To think you would have the power to send me to the Spirit Realm… No, the more pressing subject is the fact that you had the spirit power to make a transport circle large enough so that I would not escape. How are you doing this?”

Eksert simply stared at him in silence with his blade on the ready.

“You and I both know that there is no possible way for a single person to be able to use both magic and spirit power at the same time. Even the heroes of the past could only manage to use magic in exchange for their ability to use spirit power. Yet you are here doing exactly what they could not. I asked you before and I will ask again: who are you?”

With his upper hands holding his katana and one of his lower hands holding his wakizashi, he replied to him with his last open hand.

<Instead of worrying about my identity, shouldn’t you be more concerned about the Mana-Infused Spirit Core? With you stuck with me in the Spirit Realm, nothing will be stopping us from destroying the core.>

A wide grin appeared on Iaq’s face as he read those words.

“Oh? Is that what you think? Tell me, do you truly think we would be so moronic as to let the question of whether or not the core is protected dictate our fates? The one who should truly be worrying here is you.”

<I see. So you have countermeasures prepared.>

“Indeed. But it seems to me that you are not too concerned.”

<Of course. I have countermeasures of my own.>

Iaq’s grin widened into a smile, showing him deadly white teeth.

“As expected! I apologize for my earlier attitude. I have misjudged you. You are no vermin, you are a capable person worthy of joining our ranks. With the skill you possess, I am more than certain that you would become a powerful asset that will help us pursue our goals! Please, take this as a formal invitation to join hands with us and fulfill our dreams!”

Iaq theatrically outstretched his hand to Eksert. To that, he simply stared at it in silence.

“My, does this decision trouble you that much? The answer should be obvious.”

He tilted his head at Eksert’s unresponsiveness. But then he finally moved his hands.

<Why would I join with those that disturbed the peace of the life I once lived? And as if that weren’t enough, you’ve even ruined Serka’s life. That person deserved better than this, yet you all have brought her nothing but suffering.>

“Oh, but all of those were necessary for a better world. Nothing great could be built without sacrifices. That is simply reality.”

<I would have to decline. The reality I desire is much different.>

“Is that so? How unfortunate.”

Iaq closed his eyes, but the smile on his face didn’t disappear.

“Then there is no other choice but to take that power for myself!”

The land around Eksert rumbled and a circular wall rose from the ground, encasing him in a tube of earth. Meanwhile, above him came a boulder dropping from the sky threatening to crush him. However, the thick earthen walls were no match for the power of Eksert’s slashes, allowing him to break through with ease.

“What is more running going to do for you!?”

Iaq shouted as Eksert sprinted away from the tower of earth. But there was no escape so long as he was within Iaq’s sights. Balls of flame appeared in the sky and shot at him all at once. He felt his weight increase, indicating the use of gravity magic, and with those relentless attacks came a flurry of razor-sharp wind coming from all sides. He was completely cornered. No amount of running and dodging would be able to evade this barrage. Everything converged at one point, the place where Eksert stood. Even he knew there was no escaping. So he stood still and waited for the magic to converge. And just as the imminent destruction came, he stared at Iaq’s elated figure from a distance and thought to himself.

*“\*Gotcha.\*”*

All of the sudden, Iaq found himself within his own barrage of magic attacks.

“Eh…?”

The confusion filled his eyes, but what truly stood out was Eksert’s figure sheathing both his blades as if declaring the end of the battle, watching him from the distance, standing at the very same place he stood just a moment ago. An ear-piercing explosion made the air around them tremble as the various magic converged. Within the smoke came Iaq as he appeared undamaged.

“Was that teleportation…? Impressive, but so what? Have you become so desperate that you have forgotten the fact that we cannot damage ourselves with our own mana!?”

Iaq roared at the disappointing display he showed… at least that was what would have happened if he had not noticed the small black flames on his clothes.

<It seems you are the one in need of knowledge. Taking you out of the picture wasn’t the only reason I brought you to the spirit realm. To you, who can manipulate magic of all tiers at will, the spirit realm is nothing but a death trap.>

“Wh-What is!?”

The black flames began to spread, crawling up his clothes and scorching his body.

“G-Gah! GRAAAAHH!!!”

At the sight of the mysterious fire burning him alive, Iaq panicked and transferred all of his power to his arms and used it to rip his clothes apart, releasing him from his blazing constraints. However, it was too late. His fur had already caught the flame of death.

<Have you ever heard of Calamitous Energy? It’s the result of having mana and spirit power make contact with each other… or at least, that’s what most of the handful of people who know of it think. To be more specific, it’s a phenomenon that occurs when a large amount of mana is forcibly manipulated when spirit power and mana are in contact with each other. In most cases, the very moment exposed magic makes contact with spirit power, just like how you got hit with your own magic right now. Some low-tier magic like lightly manipulating gravity, the ground, or the wind are exceptions since the mana they manipulate is environmental and requires almost no mana manipulation. However, there are certainly limits to those exceptions…>

Eksert said as he shifted his eyes to the earth tower Iaq used to trap him and saw that it was crumbling to the ground with black flames consuming it whole.

“GRAAA!!! GRAAAAAA!!!!”

He looked at Eksert’s composed self with bloodshot eyes, screaming at him as if cursing. He tried to put out the fire on his fur by rolling on the ground, but all it did was make the ground catch the black flame and spread the fire.

<My, did you not know of this?>

He mimicked Iaq’s speech pattern, mocking him.

<It has been said that Calamitous Energy is the purest form of power as it was the only thing that all three worlds inherited from the original world, Primo. It wreaks complete destruction and refuses to smother until time finally decides to pull its strings. Now, I wonder which will win out, your body, or the painful ticking of time?>

“GWRAAAAA!!!!”

Iaq howled, summoning multiple fireballs in the air and launching all of them at Eksert.

“D-DIIIIIIIIEEEEEEE!!!!!!”

He finally formed a single word, in complete contrast to his past well-mannered speech. There wasn’t a single trace of his regal self. He was reduced to nothing but a beast as the flames consumed his body.

His wild, unrefined attack scattered in the air, making it easily predictable where every shot was going to land. However, Iaq made no attempt to fix himself, but instead, resolved to win with sheer power and numbers.

The six tails Iaq possessed wriggled in the air as he used them to conduct his mana with the environment, setting all of his tails ablaze in inky flames. A ring of fire wrapped their surroundings, leaving Eksert with no place to run to. Pools of water formed on the ground, the air compressed into deadly wind, blocks of earth rose from the floor, spears of ice formed in the sky, a current of lightning traveled through the ground, everything was enveloped in white light, covering the surroundings and making it impossible to discern where every death trap was, and finally, the gravity rose, bringing everything that stood in the area to the ground.

In the middle of it all, Iaq cackled in certain victory as the black flames consumed everything around him. Bloodshot eyes filled with nothing but insanity.

At a faraway location, namely the qeajrv’s secret base, Eksert’s body appeared in the room as he arrived with a deep sigh and thought to himself.

*“\*What a pitiful man.\*”*

He didn’t expect his enemy to try and bring himself down with him. Perhaps it was another factor of calamitous energy that degraded even the mental capabilities of a person. Or maybe it was something more natural like his enemy not having the mental capacity to accept defeat or face immense danger. Well, no one would be able to answer his questions anymore.

He stared at the crystal pieces in his hand, thinking back to the man that sought salvation through the false fantasy.

**287 – The Reason Why**

“Hey, what are you doing?”

I was just sitting by myself, alone in the forest just like usual. Bluntly speaking, I was a loner. I didn’t socialize much since most of the people around me would only talk about nothing but magic. And someone that only used earth magic like me couldn’t keep up with what they were saying. But then, he approached me from out of nowhere.

“You’re… Brother Xeoi…”

He was a talented child that could match older clan members in magic and mana manipulation with ease. He was the complete opposite of me, someone that would never understand me. That was what I thought at that time.

“Yup. And you’re Mrel! Hey, do you want to help me?”

“H-Help you…?”

Absurd. That was what I thought of him at the time. We may be in the same clan and treat each other like brothers and sisters, but there wasn’t a single person out there that I could confidently call my sibling. But this person didn’t care and wedged himself in my life.

He unreasonably dragged me away from my safe haven and used me as a practice partner. He wanted to test his fire magic, so he needed someone to immediately use water magic so that the forest didn’t catch on fire. I did just as he asked, but got mad at me for using weak water magic. How annoying could one person be? How do you expect me to match your magic if you’re a two-tail and I’m stuck at one? But then, things changed.

“You’re useless. You need to get better at using magic! Get over here, I’ll teach you!”

“Huh…? No, but I’m…”

“What? Just because you’re family is in charge of village construction doesn’t mean you can’t learn other magic!”

Wow… That surprised me. He knew what my family’s role in the village is? Since we’re a secluded race, we have different families be in charge of different roles to develop our village. Just as he said, my family was in charge of construction, which called for skill in earth magic and its different variants. I was never taught how to use other elements besides earth. But he was saying that he wanted to teach me other elements?

“Is it… even okay to do that?”

“‘Course it is! We’re qeajrvs! We’re basically the only ones that can do what Angels can when we reach four-tail! We can cast mid-tier magic without chanting and other cool stuff! And after that, we can become even more powerful with five tails! Why limit yourself to earth if you can do even more!?”

For the first time in forever, there was light in my eyes. It wasn’t like I hated my parents for only teaching me earth magic, but I’ve always wanted to know about others. If I know more about other magic, then maybe I can find the courage to talk to more people. If I know more about other magic, I can do more things than a normal construction-oriented clan member could ever do. If I know more about other magic, then maybe, I could be happy… There was only one answer I could give.

“Th-Then, please, teach me more about magic!”

Brother Xeoi. He is the man that helped me the most and brought me to where I am. There was no other person I respected than him… But then…. That day arrived.

“EKSEEEEEEEERRTT!!”

Brother Xeoi cried in pain above me with his sword pointed at no one other than me. My brain couldn’t comprehend the situation. Just what was happening? Why was Brother Xeoi pointing his sword at me? There was one obvious answer, but I turned that away and rejected it as much as I could. But then, the cruel words flew in front of my eyes, dragging me back to reality.

<I would like all of you to see the true face of our ally. As you’ve all seen just now, he had a clear intent to kill Sir Mrel. You may or may not have a close relationship with this person, but please accept that this man tried to kill one of our own. In other words, a traitor.>

My heart sank at the thought of the floating message in front of me. Brother Xeoi? A traitor…? How is this even possible? What reason would he have to turn on us? I’ve been with him for as long as I remember, and I haven’t seen a justifiable reason for him to betray us. Just what…. what was happening…?

For a while, I couldn’t move. I was in a daze with my head in the clouds. I was completely and utterly crestfallen like I was drowning in a deep sea, unable to breathe. But then, he called out to me.

*“\*Mrel, talk to me!\*”*

It was that bastard, Eksert. He wasn’t anywhere near me, but I could hear his voice in my head loud and clear.

*“\*…\*”*

I ignored him. I thought I was losing it. In fact, I was, but he kept calling out, refusing to get passed off as a mere illusion.

*“\*Please, I need you to help us win!\*”*

I ignored him again, and again, and again, but he kept pestering me. What was this guy’s problem? Doesn’t he know that he’s at fault for this!? What even gave you the idea that Brother Xeoi was a traitor!? You just got here! What do you know!? It would have been a hundred times better if you had just kept your mouth shut!!!

*“\*SHUT UUUUUP!!!\*”*

I couldn’t help but scream.

*“\*This is all your fault! If you hadn’t come! If you hadn’t shown up and antagonized Brother Xeoi! If you just hadn’t existed, then Brother Xeoi would never have betrayed us!!!\*”*

Was I being unreasonable? I didn’t care. All I wanted was to pour all of my anger on someone.

*“\*Just shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up!!!\*”*

I didn’t even know what I was saying anymore, but it seemed like it worked. He closed his mouth, but that peaceful solitude didn’t last long.

*“\*I understand that you’re mad at me, but are you sure you just want to sit back and remain in the shadows about Xeoi’s betrayal?\*”*

*“\*….shut up…. please…\*”*

*“\*I can’t. I need you and everyone here to survive. That includes Xeoi. I know I’ve been nothing but a bother to the two of you but think about it. If you and everyone here dies, you will never know what made him become like this.\*”*

*“\*I already know! It’s all your fault!!\*”*

*“\*Is that really the case? Aren’t you just being a child? Mrel, just so you know, you’re at fault here too.\*”*

*“\*What the…!? You mother fucker…!!!\*”*

*“\*It’s true, isn’t it? You’re the closest person to Xeoi, aren’t you? Then why was it that you didn’t notice him acting strange? Even I, who just arrived, already had my suspicions. Why was it that you, who has always been with Xeoi, didn’t notice his plot? Not to mention the fact that you were the first person he tried to kill. Are you sure you’re as close to Xeoi as you think? Or maybe it was all in your head?\*”*

*“\*Are you telling me my relationship with him was nothing but lies!?\*”*

*“\*No, I didn’t say any of that. I don’t know the answer to that. The only person that knows is Xeoi. I have no answers for you, but he does. However, how can you even talk to him if we’re all dead?\*”*

*“\*That… That’s…\*”*

*“\*Come on. Help us. Not for me, not for anyone else, just for you and Xeoi. We aren’t becoming allies this is just the means to an end. We want to destroy the Spirit Core, and you want to talk to Xeoi. To do that, we both need to kill our enemies and live. Why don’t we join hands this once just to reach our goals?\*”*

*“\*…\*”*

Join forces? With the person that ruined everything for me? Why… why am I even considering this? I loathe this man, but I want to know why Brother Xeoi did what he did. If it was my fault… then I need to fix what I can… I need… I need to talk to him.

*“\*B-But, how the hell do you even plan on winning? They have a whole army!\*”*

*“\*This? With your help, we don’t even need to worry about them. I will coat you with my spirit power to completely hide your presence. All you have to do is get above the teleportation circle and destroy it the moment I give my signal.\*”*

*“\*What…? How am I supposed to believe that? How do I know that you aren’t just trying to make me bait?\*”*

*“\*Then, I’ll show you.\*”*

*“\*What?\*”*

*“\*I will show you just how I’ll do it. I need you to get on top of the teleportation circle as fast as possible, but you don’t have to go until you determine that I’m telling you the truth. Until then, just stand back and watch.\*”*

I didn’t reply to him, but he did exactly what he said. He summoned a devastating tsunami that mowed down their army. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing with my eyes, but the power this man possessed was tremendous. I hate him, but his power is nothing to scoff at. So with that, I reluctantly moved forward to position.

*“\*NOW!!!\*”*

He gave the signal, and I did just as he ordered. It went better than I thought it would, but then, those strange mana-structured werewolves appeared. I was sure I was going to die. It was hilarious. I did just as that bastard said but in the end, I was going to die. Why the hell… is this happening to me?

Those were my last thoughts before I found myself in the secret base’s infirmary.

**288 – Battle Review**

“I’M SOOOO SORRY!”

In a confined room, Hizli shouted as she bowed deeply to Eksert. Erezil was beside her giggling at the sight.

<F-For what?>

Even without a face, everyone could tell how perplexed Eksert was with the situation. He was suddenly called in by Erezil but was greeted with an apology from Hizli out of nowhere. Noticing his startled reaction, she began to explain.

“About yesterday night’s raid! I heard everything from Garin. Apparently, I was nothing but luggage for most of the time. To think I was sleeping while everyone else was fighting for our lives… Well, I guess my life wasn’t really in any real danger…”

She said as she brushed her left shoulder with her fingertips.

“Is this where you placed the Circuit to get us back?”

A Circuit is a common term in the Konjou Clan which refers to the arrangement of Symbols, an element that can command spirit power in a certain way. Erezil and Hizli knew of this through Akira when he shared the Konjou Clan’s technology with them, so they could easily keep up with Eksert’s explanation.

<Partly correct. Just before we left for the operation, I placed a device on everyone that would teleport them back to this place when destroyed. I added a circuit that would forcefully activate either when the host recognizes they are about to receive a fatal blow or when I so desire. I used both of those to bring Mrel and Miss Hizli back here, respectively.>

Eksert showed his hand where small crystal balls were kept in between his fingers. Erezil and Hizli observed them with great interest, particularly Hizli as she scrutinized them at point black distance, practically glued to the crystals.

<Here, you can have one of them.>

He placed one of the small crystals on Hizli’s hand, to which her eyes glistered in what was virtually the incarnation of joy.

“A-Are you sure I can have these!?”

She asked to confirm, but with the way she was tightly gripping the crystal, there wasn’t a single morsel of thought that would entertain the idea of letting the crystal go. She might as well be claiming ownership.

<Yes, it’s fine. So long as we can keep a positive relationship after everything has passed, there will be no problems.>

“Of course! I’m sure the clan will appreciate having someone like you as an ally! I’m looking forward to what blessings this partnership will bring us!”

<As with I.>

“U-Uhm… I do not mind becoming allies but could you not make it sound like everything is over and done with? We still have things to do.”

Erezil gave them her piece seeing as the conversation wasn’t anywhere near the subject she wanted to discuss.

“We must decide what our future actions should be after reviewing the battle data. Our current objectives are to recover Brother Xeoi and take back our village from END. Let us not forget this.”

“T-That’s right! Sorry, I got distracted.”

<Well then, since we’re on that topic, Miss Hizli, have you analyzed what that mana-siphoning spear was?>

“Ah, yes. I got started the moment Garin explained to me the situation. I’ve been examining it for a while now and found a strange element integrated into its design. From what we can tell, this element drains not mana, but moon essence. Its structure is incredibly similar to moon essence, but at the same time, the polar opposite of it. Bluntly speaking, the element seems the be the inverse polarity of moon essence. Instead of being energy for us qeajrvs, this element consumes moon essence, then creating a phenomenon where mana is repelled from it. Thus, we decided to call this element: Dark Essence.”

Eksert and Erezil nodded at her explanation. Then, Eksert raised his hand.

<Does this dark essence have anything to do with Xeoi turning into a half-augmented werewolf?>

“Yes, it has a large effect on bodies of qeajrvs. That is because dark essence is the missing link that proves my theory of how augmented werewolves are made.”

<Oh, is that so?>

“As memory serves, Hizli’s theory is that they somehow destroy the limiters in our bodies, am I correct?”

“Exactly. We didn’t know how, but with dark essence, it all makes sense. You see, from a newborn, all qeajrvs have the same form and body. As we age, our bodies develop either into a werewolf or a pure wolf. This is because the moon essence we absorb as babies is responsible for specializing our bodies into strong and sturdy types like pure wolves or quick and dexterous types like werewolves. This is done by blocking the development of the muscles and organs of the other type. However, with dark essence, it consumes all of that moon essence and fundamentally destroys our limiters, making it so that both types in a single body are developed. In Brother Xeoi’s case, the dark essence succeeded in destroying his limiters halfway, but Miss Yuu said that he moved only after she saw the Mana-Infused Spirit Core create its guards. I’ve never seen it, but there is a possibility of the core creating shockwaves in the air with every clone created. For those clones to be created and use senlr, moon essence is needed. If that was the case, then Brother Xeoi’s transformation could have been stopped by the core’s influence. With the shockwaves charged with moon essence, the dark essence inside his body was overwhelmed and got consumed. I’m certain of this last part since I experimented with the dark essence earlier and that was the result.”

“…I see”

Erezil lowered her face. Hizli’s explanation extracted a faint amount of dejection from her.

“Hizli, do you think it would be possible for Brother Xeoi to return to his former self?”

Hizli held her chin and closed her eyes in deliberation. A few seconds of silence passed before she opened them back to bring the unsavory news.

“Unfortunately, that is impossible. If no more dark essence is injected into his body, it will not get worse, but even with the limiters recovered, his body has already developed. There is no possible way to un-develop his body. In other words, half of his body will forever remain as an augmented werewolf.”

“…”

She shifted her eyes to the ground with Hizli’s words.

<With how both of you are acting, I assume there is a severe drawback to forcibly turning your body into augmented werewolves?>

Hizli closed her eyes and nodded with a heavy air.

“It is as you say. With both body types developed, the body will require more moon essence to maintain it. However, the real problem lies in the fact that the body was developed through dark essence. Even when all the dark essence is extracted, the body, which was severely influenced by that essence, will have a hard time controlling moon essence. The flow will become irregular and, at most times, would leak out of the body. This was the reason why augmented werewolves in the past could only have one tail. They could not have the capacity to evolve in the first place because of this. However, with the Mana-Infused Spirit Core, I theorize that they used it as a medium to transfer moon essence, mana, and spirit power all at the same time. Using the core as a kind of control center, they made it possible for augmented werewolves to evolve.”

<Hmm… That makes sense. You sure know how to make convincing theories.>

“Hihihi, I built it, after all. Well… I’m not sure if I should be proud right now since it’s being used against us…”

She scratched her cheek awkwardly as her gaze strayed from Eksert and Erezil’s.

“What a troublesome talent we have, fufu… Oh, but that reminds me, didn’t the report include the enemy commander being able to summon three senlrs? How was that possible?”

“Strangely enough, it’s the same reason as before. Because of the fact that an augmented werewolf’s limiters are broken, they are theoretically allowed to summon more than one senlr. With enough moon essence, mana, and spirit power stored in their body, it is easily achievable to obtain that form. Of course, that augmented werewolf will most likely suffer large drawbacks. Overusing their body will likely result in them being unable to use their senlrs in the future. This is especially true for augmented werewolves since their body is incompatible with moon essence in the first place. Even if they just summon a single senlr, it would have an effect on their body in the future. I am unsure whether or not the enemy acted with that knowledge in mind or because they had a countermeasure. But one thing is for sure, they will become utterly useless in the future if they had no countermeasures set.”

<If that’s true, then it’s no wonder no one else was using extra senlrs. Hmm… I think that does it for my questions, do any of you have anything else to say?>

Here, Hizli was the one who raised her hand. After being the only one able to answer everyone else’s questions, it was her time to question the others, or specifically, the only other person that was on the battlefield.

“I don’t mean for this to come off as offensive but, Sir Eksert, are we certain that the enemy commander died?”

“Yes, this is an important question for our future actions.”

Erezil nodded. She agreed with Hizli’s train of thought. Eksert took a proper look in both of their eyes before responding.

<Unfortunately, I do not know the enemy commander’s current status.>

Erezil’s head dropped to the ground while Hizli made a sour expression. Both only lasted for a second and recovered almost immediately.

“You said that the commander lost his mind and tried to kill you along with his life by engulfing the whole spirit realm with… uhm… calamitous energy, right? Are you telling us there was actually a way for him to escape that?”

Hizli posed the question to him.

<Yes, there was a way. The original plan was to keep an eye on the enemy until he died from the flames. However, with him turning everything into a sea of flames, I was forced to pull back. He should have burned in that hellscape, but without anyone watching, he could have easily made a spirit portal to escape the spirit realm. Of course, heavily damaged, but I cannot deny the possibility that his body somehow survived the flames.>

“I see… What are the chances for him to recover for our next fight?”

Erezil asked.

<If nothing strange happens, then zero.>

“Strange… huh? That’s gonna be a tough ask. Everything up until now was nothing but strange.”

Hizli scoffed at the absurdity of the trials they’ve faced ever since END’s raid. It was clear she wasn’t expecting much from Eksert’s realistic answer.

“Then, if he ever recovers, do you think you will be able to take him on?”

Eksert shook his head from side to side.

<As much as it pains me to say, that would be a difficult task to take on. In the first place, I concocted my initial plan with the premise of taking out my enemy without having to fight since I knew that there was no possible way for me to win in a fair fight. However, that only applies if he somehow found a way to recover fully. Body, power, senlr, and all. If not, then there may be a chance for me to win.>

“Understood. I will take that into consideration. Then, what do all of you think our next actions should be?”

Erezil asked, but both she and Hizli’s gazes both gathered at Eksert at the same time. With what seemed like a sigh as his shoulders raised up and immediately sunk down, he faced the two.

<Well, in my opinion, I think we should attack as soon as tomorrow morning.>

“In the morning? Are we okay with our group being seen? And honestly, this is quite sudden.”

<It doesn’t matter. That is because this time, the strategy is a frontal assault.>

The moment these words entered her ears, Hizli could help but speak up.

“A-Are you out of your mind!? Wasn’t it all of you who said that they fought you with literally multiple armies!?”

<Yes, but do you truly think that those numbers would be able to enter the forest and remain hidden from your scouts? Miss Hizli, what was it that brought those armies to us?>

“O-Oohh! A teleportation circle!”

<Correct. It was a teleportation circle. You might have assumed that those armies were waiting in their camp in the Ujlufi village, but in reality, fast and coordinated entrances like that require a large, open space and organized enemies. You won’t be able to fulfill those requirements in a forest. Their armies must be somewhere far from here, hence the use of a teleportation circle. And that means that the actual number guarding the Ujlufi Village is much smaller than the number we faced in the spirit core room. However, they do have the option of sending all of those forces to us given the time. That’s why I think we should strike while the iron’s hot. With our small number, it’s easier for us to move around and we can recover faster than the enemy. That’s why we must attack as soon as possible. Play by our strengths and finish this battle before they can fully recuperate. I believe this to be our win condition.>

The two, who were listening to Eksert with their undivided attention, faced each other and returned their gazes to him after their silent agreement.

“Understood. Now that you said it, this might our best chance at ending this. Honestly, I wanted to wait a few more days to analyze the spear and turn it into something we can use, but we shouldn’t let this one pass.”

“I agree just like Hizli. We must end this while we still can.”

Eksert nodded in approval of the two after feeling a wave of determination comes from their every word.

<Well said. Then, Let us move on to—>

But alas, their smooth flow was immediately broken.

“We have a problem! Brother Mrel is awake, but he’s rampaging in the infirmary!”

Renig busted through the door, putting an abrupt end to the three’s meeting.

**289 – Unhealed Wounds**

“What do you mean!? Where is he!? Where’s Brother Xeoi!?”

The voice everyone was familiar with echoed through the halls, his screams of misery shaking the air and piercing the walls. Renig led the way while Erezil, Hizli, and Eksert followed behind him. The moment they reached the door to the infirmary, Renig placed his paws on the door and manipulated the mana to open it. There, they saw Garin trying to keep Mrel from leaving his bed as he tried to struggle out. Yuu was on the sidelines staring at the ground with a pained expression on her face.

“Mrel! What is the meaning of this!? Calm down!”

Erezil shouted, capturing everyone’s attention. She wanted to keep the situation under control, and it seemed like her appearance kept Mrel’s emotions in check for a second… but just for a second. The moment he laid his eyes on Eksert, his burning anger burst anew.

“You…! YOU!! YOU BASTARD!!! WHERE THE HELL IS BROTHER XEOI!! YOU TOLD ME THAT I WOULD GET TO TALK TO HIM IF I DID WHAT YOU SAID! THEN, WHERE IS HE!? WHERE!!?”

He pointed accusingly at Eksert, his hand, down the arm, to his shoulders and even his very body trembled in rage. Brows furrowed deep with anger, bloodshot eyes that possessed a glare that could kill. To his aggressive state, Eksert only remained silent.

It was then that Renig, Garin, and Yuu realized something. They all noticed how Mrel stood up and destroyed the teleportation circle instead of wallowing in despair. The three had a feeling that Eksert was somehow involved, but it was only now that they connected the dots. They were confused about his sudden outburst, but now it was clear. Eksert convinced Mrel to help by using Xeoi as a bargaining chip. His overflowing wrath along with his words all pointed to it. There wouldn’t be a problem if they had secured Xeoi, but the very problem was the fact that they had not. Xeoi, the person Mrel wanted to meet the most, the reason he dragged himself out of the swamp of anguish, was not here. And all of his uncontrollable emotions poured onto Eksert, the one who promised him a meeting with Xeoi.

“YOU TALK A BIG GAME BUT YOU HAVE NOTHING TO SHOW! YOU NEVER EVEN THOUGHT OF BRINGING BACK BROTHER XEOI TO BEGIN WITH! YOU TRICKED ME—”

“NO! NO, HE DIDN’T!!”

Mrel’s cries were so loud that it must have been taxing his throat, but there was a louder roar that buried even that. It was Yuu.

“Eksert didn’t do anything wrong! It was me! I ordered everyone to leave Sir Xeoi!”

“You… What…!?”

In just a few words, Mrel shifted his curse cannon from Eksert and directed it at Yuu. However, before he could shoot off any more words of acid, Erezil found a gap in his moment of silence and took advantage of it.

“THAT IS ENOUGH!!!”

A loud pop reverberated through the room. Everyone present fell silent. Along with Erezil’s shout came a hand that slapped Mrel across the face. The impact was enough to make his cheeks turn bright red. The force of her sudden smack knocked away the rampaging man’s furious expression and stifled his fumes. The pupils of his wide eyes slowly moved to the edge of his peripheral vision as he made contact with Erezil’s gaze.

“You have said enough! Mrel, I need you to stop acting like a child! Just because you did not get what you wanted does not mean it warrants you to throw a tantrum! Keep yourself together!”

“But—!”

Another pop echoed. Erezil silenced Mrel with another slap, this time on the other cheek.

“I will hear none of it! Mrel, if you calmed down even for just a second, you would realize why everything turned out this way!”

“W-What…?”

His eyes blinked rapidly in confusion. Erezil kept her gaze firmly locked on Mrel as if delivering a telepathic message through that. Mrel straightened his bent spine and looked around the room.

“…!”

And it didn’t take him long to find what Erezil was referring to. Just a few beds away from him, the elder of their clan was in a deep sleep with bandages on his arm and chest. It seemed like he took quite a beating, but otherwise fine. Still, he couldn’t believe the sight shown before him.

Their elder was a powerful man that carried the weight of the clan for many decades. Other people surpassed his strength through the years but still follow his every word out of respect. That was just the kind of man he was. However, his long years of service came with age. No matter how great he was, he was not beyond time. Mrel first thought it would be best for the elder to join the retreat in the secret village and leave the struggle for their village to them, but he could not stop him from choosing to remain. Inside, he hoped to deal with the enemy before the elder needed to step up, unfortunately, that was nothing but naivete. The sight before him proved that.

“Elder Elrei took critical damage, so it was a wise decision for them to immediately retreat. If you are wondering how this happened, then you should know that the person who wounded him like this was none other than your brother, Xeoi.”

“Brother… did…?”

“Yes. His wounds healed and attacked the Elder’s group from behind. The surprise attack forced their hand to back off, otherwise, the Elder’s life would have been at risk. They had no time to secure Xeoi. They could not afford it. It is as simple as that.”

Mrel fell silent as he stared at the ground. A few seconds later, he shifted his gaze to Elrei.

“Brother Xeoi…”

His melancholic voice called out for his beloved bother, his thoughts entering a world of his own. Seeing how Mrel managed to calm down, Erezil let out a sigh and turned to Eksert.

“I apologize for this, Sir Eksert. If you want, we can continue our talk later. It might be best to take a little breather.”

She said to him, but Eksert turned his head slightly to the side when he noticed Yuu leaving the room silently.

<Then, I’ll take you up on that offer.>

**290 – Glimmering Riverside**

The veil of the night wrapped the world in darkness, the thick trees of the forest made sure of this, blocking the moonlight above and casting their shadows to the ground below. Depending on the kind of person you were, the unlit forest would look like a simple sight of the night or an ominous void hiding threats in the gloom, threatening people that wandered in it with the mysterious blade of the unknown.

Exactly because of this, certain places would stand out like an oasis in the dry scorching desert. Yuu wandered in the dark and found herself by a river. The moonlit night reflected off the water’s surface, making it shimmer like an unstained gem. The forest was dark because of the trees, but in the middle of the river, their umbra could not murk it with darkness. She crouched by the riverside, took out her left hand, and submerged the tips of her fingers in the river. She could feel the water wrap around her them, sending the cold temperature crawling up her hand and making it adjust its temperature.

“Haaahh…”

A deep sigh escaped her mouth as she buried her face in her other arm. Her eyes blankly stared at her submerged fingers as she buried herself in her thoughts.

*“\*Oh? Why the long face?\*”*

“W-Wha!?”

Just before she did, a voice echoed in her head. She remembered this sensation. It wasn’t something she could trace with her ears since it was telepathy, but her body instinctively turned around and found the person in question.

“E-Eksert!? W-Why are you here?”

Eksert walked out from the shadows, his strange glass-like helmet shining as the moonlight bounced off it.

<Nothing. I just saw you head outside with a depressed look on your face, so I came to check.>

His finger danced in the air, changing his communication medium from telepathy to written words. Seeing his response, she let out another sigh, this time in amazement.

“You really shouldn’t have bothered. I’m just reflecting on my actions.”

<Oh? Have you done something that needs reflection?>

“Krgh…”

She was visibly troubled as her face twisted into an awkward expression.

“Y-Yeah, it was about our battle the other day… M-Man, you were really powerful, huh? That reminds me, how were you even able to do any of those?”

<Hm? What do you mean?>

“Don’t play dumb with me!”

Yuu lightly pushed him away, tired of his games.

“You somehow found out about Sir Xeoi’s true plans, somehow made escape routes for all of us, and somehow were able to use both mana and spirit power! I ignored it before since we were in the middle of the battle but it’s about time you give an explanation!”

<Whoa, whoa, fine, I got it!>

He placed two hands up in the air as if to push back her aggressive approach while one of his lower arms wrote his reply. Yuu stood with her arms crossed, waiting for his words.

<Well, why don’t we sit down? This will take a while.>

He said as he gestured to the riverside. Yuu took a bit to consider his plans, but after determining he wasn’t running anywhere he sat by the riverside with Eksert.

He began to explain. Apparently, from the start, Eksert never trusted a single one of their allies. He began with doubt. His reason was quite understandable. Just because he was the one who joined the group didn’t mean that he would bend his will to them. Just like Yuu, some people would immediately consider everyone in the group they join as allies. But with Eksert, he considered them as strangers. People he didn’t know, and people that are easily capable of cutting him off and betraying him. He worked out everyone’s trustworthiness from the bottom up, determining everyone’s worth through actions. However, there was a certain event that made him suspicious of mostly Xeoi and lightened his doubt on everyone else.

On the first day of their arrival, Eksert wasn’t allowed inside because they were still suspicious of his true identity and main objective, making him spend his time outside the base as a lookout. But then, he saw a person leave the base and head into the forest. It was Xeoi. Suspicious, he followed him into the forest, careful of hiding his presence. Garin and Renig said that they couldn’t detect Eksert, and it was the same for Xeoi as well as the person he met with, Iaq, the commander of END’s invasion force.

They talked about their plans and how they would manipulate their raid four days from then. Originally, the plan was to raid the secret base from above to lure her out, then use the teleportation circle that connected directly inside their secret base to send more forces in and overwhelm Erezil, the sole defender of the base, with numbers to reach the teleportation circle to their secret village. While that was happening, they would finish off the raiding force by taking one of them as a hostage and stall for time until the surprise raid operation was confirmed as a success.

None of them knew that Eksert was in the shadows, listening to every word they said. This made it clear what he had to do, but he knew he couldn’t just accuse Xeoi of treachery. So with that, he built up countermeasures and backup plans for the moment he caught Xeoi making a decisive move against them.

While he was doing that, he extracted more information about him from Erezil. Apparently, Xeoi was only appointed as alpha recently. This was because the former alpha had died in battle from the initial raid. Of the forces that were sent to hold the invasion back while the civilians escaped, Xeoi was the only one that returned alive, automatically making him alpha. Mrel, who was one of the people who were tasked to escort the other villagers to the secret village insisted he stayed with Xeoi as beta. With Eksert’s knowledge of Xeoi’s betrayal, the story already reeked of bad faith. Considering the limited power of two-tailed augmented werewolves he saw from battle, Eksert suspected that there were other people besides Xeoi that played a part in the village’s fall. He wanted to find out their motivation, but that was pushing it with only a few days of time and almost no trust from everyone else, so he focused on building solid countermeasures.

As such, he secretly placed circuits on every one of the raid members’ bodies that would bring them back to a simple structure he placed inside the secret base. Xeoi also had one of these. In fact, there were many countermeasures placed on Xeoi’s body through spirit power made possible by the time he got hit by the mana-siphoning spear, but all of them disappeared. Eksert suspected an interaction with his dark essence and the Mana-Infused Spirit Core’s pulsating to have done something. When the Spirit Core summoned guards, the core’s shockwave made it so that every mana it touched would avoid spirit power. This usually wouldn’t mean it would destroy the circuit placed on Xeoi, seeing as everyone else returned just fine. However, from Hizli’s words, it seemed like the dark essence made it so that it had to be overloaded with mana and moon essence, which made it forcefully come into contact with spirit power. Since the mana couldn’t be pushed back, the circuits got destroyed instead.

Then, when they progressed the conversation to Eksert’s use of mana and spirit power at the same time, Yuu’s mouth opened in amazement. She listened quietly until now, nodding and giving the occasional reply to show that she was still listening, but this reaction was completely different from the others.

<It’s because of this. Grudr Metal.>

Eksert took out a pendant underneath his clothes. It had a golden chain with blue embellishments connecting to a crescent moon that reflected a rose gleam under the moonlight. Apparently, he had multiple accessories like this hidden all over his body and this was just one of them.

“Grudr… That’s glassmetal, right?”

<Correct. But another name for this is Iordr Metal. Spirit Metal. It can house spirits and make this fragile metal become indestructible depending on the spirit’s power or potential. However, spirits aren’t the only thing these can contain. It won’t strengthen it, but it can also hold spirit power. Since it doesn’t travel inside my body, it doesn’t get consumed by mana like how Earthlings do. With this, I can use both mana and spirit power at the same time.>

“Wow… where did you even get these?”

<Do you remember Akira Leo? He was the one who handed me most of these items. Their technology is really something else.>

“Oh, one of the heroes? Lady Erezil said it before but it really is a surprise that you know someone that amazing.”

<Hah, tell me about it.>

“Hm?”

<Oh no, nothing. Anyway, it can be very useful for surprise attacks since no one expects a Zeldian to suddenly use spirit power.>

“…Well, I wonder.”

Yuu said as she recalled her past memories. She also knew someone who could use both powers at the same time. It was certainly surprising at first. Seeing how Eksert fought with both those powers reminded her of how great of a person the one she knew actually was. If the person in question became stronger, would he be able to fight like that? The answer was no. After all, she believed that if it was them, then they could do something even better. Such thoughts ran through her mind.

<Now then, enough about me. How about you? You said that you were reflecting on something, right? I let it slide earlier, but I’m bringing it back. No use in trying to change the subject this time.>

“K-Krgh… So it didn’t work…”

She furrowed her brows and ground her teeth at Eksert’s sudden boomerang. She let out a sigh, just like earlier.

<Hm?>

Sitting while hugging her knees, she tilted her body sideways until she went off balance and fell to the grass. She clearly did it on purpose, so Eksert didn’t say anything. Looking at the moonlit river from the ground, she began to speak.

“I’m just down about Mrel and Xeoi.”

*“\*Is it because you couldn’t bring Xeoi back with you? As Lady Erezil said, that’s fine. You made the right choice.\*”*

Eksert switched back from writing to telepathy, seeing as Yuu wasn’t in a position to look at him to read his response.

“No, that’s a bit wrong. I wasn’t that I couldn’t, I just didn’t. If I’m being honest, then there was definitely a way for me to bring Xeoi with us. Even without the circuit, we had the crystal gems. If I just made up my mind and acted, I would have been able to do something to secure him.”

Yuu claimed as she tried to take a grip on the water from the river, but just as liquid works, the water leaks from the gaps between her fingers and flows back down the stream, escaping her grasp.

*“\*From the sound of it, you’re not just talking about a simple fight.\*”*

Yuu fell silent and time passed with only the sound of nature filling the air with bugs and other critters working through the night and the water flowing down the river. Eksert didn’t bother speaking and immersed himself in the silence.

“Eksert, do you know something?”

She finally spoke, making Eksert turn his head from the river back to her body on the ground.

*“\*What?\*”*

“I’m an Angel. I don’t mean figuratively. An actual Angel. The ones that have divine souls inside them.”

He didn’t respond, so Yuu continued.

“They say that we possess incredible power. In my case, apparently, I can drown the world in a sea of flames with my Divine Soul of Flame. If I can do that, then surely securing a single person from escaping shouldn’t be a problem, right?”

*“\*Well, this is certainly a surprise, but if I’m not mistaken, that only applies when your soul recognizes you.\*”*

“Then it should apply. I got recognized twice now. Once in the past, then I lost that power, but recently I got recognized again. I haven’t used it, but I can feel it. The power of the divine soul.”

*“\*I see… Then, if you don’t mind me asking, what was the reason you didn’t use that power?\*”*

“…I was scared. Unlike the last time I used it, it’s different. You might not understand, but there should be someone else that I can talk to with these powers. But I can’t hear their voice. Maybe I will if I finally use it again, but I’m scared that I won’t hear them. But then, it if works, I’m scared of what to say to them. It’s been so long… I wonder if they’re not mad at me? Well, I planned to use it in our raid no matter the answer, but you just took the lead and I let myself use that as an excuse to not bring out my power. It was already too late when Xeoi attacked us from the back, but if I just used it from the start, then we could have had a better outcome.”

She dropped her eyes to the ground, thinking of the worse possible outcome.

*“\*Aren’t you just overthinking things?\*”*

“I am?”

For once, after a while, Yuu turned her head to face Eksert.

*“\*Yes. If you’re worrying this much about it then you must have been close. I can’t imagine someone that important hating you just because you took your time. Better yet, won’t they be happy to finally talk to you again?\*”*

“Well!”

She got up and faced him to drive the point.

“You’re probably right, but it’s not that easy! It’s just… it feels like there’s something inside me that’s telling me not to do it, that I shouldn’t use my powers… Maybe my instincts? Look, I can’t explain it but it’s something like that!”

*“\*…\*”*

“Hey, are you listening!?”

*“\*Yeah, my bad. I don’t quite understand but it must be hard.\*”*

“Do I sense sarcasm in there!?”

*“\*Down, girl. Down. I’m just saying that I think. No malice intended.\*”*

“Hmph, very well.”

She curtly turned to the river, taking her eyes off him.

Silence filled the air once more as the two watched the water follow nature’s path. There wasn’t much of a conversation after that, but the two enjoyed watching the serene spectacle before them.

“Well, I’m going back now. Thanks for accompanying me.”

Yuu said as she got up on her feet and turned to leave. But then, just before she could, Eksert called out to her.

*“\*Hey, I have a request for you.\*”*

“A request?”

She tilted her head at what he would possibly want from her.

*“\*Yeah. We’re going to raid the village again tomorrow, and if possible, could you not use the powers of the divine soul?\*”*

“H-Huh? Why is that?”

She was bewildered by what he said. She couldn’t possibly think of a good reason to do that. If she didn’t know any better, the idea of Eksert trying to drag them down would pop into her mind, but she knew it had to have been something else. She waited and waited for Eksert’s response, but…

*“\*…No, you could say it’s just a personal preference. You can ignore it if you’d like.\*”*

“I-Is that so…?”

She didn’t quite know how to respond to that, but she figured it would be best to just nod along for now.

*“\*But, if there is one thing, then don’t push yourself too hard.\*”*

“…”

Yuu stopped to think before responding to Eksert. But once she made up her mind, she properly turned her body to face him and looked him in the eyes.

“I can’t do that. After all, I have someone I need to repay no matter what. I don’t care what they’ll think of me in the future, but I will get to them and tell them directly: ‘I may never get back what I had in the past, but will do my everything to build a better future. With body and soul.’ If I can’t push myself here, then how can I say that with confidence when I finally face them again?”

*“\*…\*”*

“Anyway, that’s that. It’s been a good night.”

Yuu turned around, this time for good as the darkness of the forest swallowed her figure. Eksert watched her go silently. The moment he confirmed that she was gone, he turned back to the serene river, and the sound of the calming flow of water entered his ears. It helped him settle his mind and arrange his thoughts. Just what he needed.

*“\*Is that so? Then, I guess there’s nothing else I can do.\*”*

**291 – Struggle**

“…a—ah… h…”

A gruff voice let out. The only sound that dared to echo in the silent room. The putrid scent near the man wafted through the room, spreading the nauseating odor that would make anyone that took a whiff of it hold their breath unless they wanted to throw up their insides. A thick, queasy smell that made everyone feel like burning leather was shoved into their throats.

“…a-aa…!”

Stifled screams that tried to express their helplessness. The eyes of such a man rolled upward. Looking, searching, hoping, wanting, that someone, something, some form of miracle would rescue his flickering soul.

At that time, the sound of debris getting crushed underfoot resounded. A steady stride but with contrasting footfalls. The rhythm of the steps fluctuated from heavy to light, almost as if one of the person’s feet lacked footwear. Then at times, those steps would splash as they trudged into liquid, then would crush as they tramped into something solid, and then they would return to normal, gradually coming closer to the pitiful existence lying on the ground.

It stopped.

“Hah! To think our great leader would be reduced to this. ”

And scoffed with a voice filled with scorn and ridicule. With all of his power, the man on the ground used whatever strength was left inside him to turn his face to the side and direct his eyes to the man above him.

There, he saw the eyes of a beast. A strange monster. His face was distorted, half of it having that of a human, but then twisting at his midsection, turning into that of a wolf. The same went not only for his face but also his body, alternating with foot and paw, hand and claw, and finally merging its murderous teeth, dripping with red liquid. The man’s eyes trembled as he recognized the identity of the fiend.

“…xe…oi…”

“My, how wonderful it is to be recognized by our regal leader, Commander Iaq.”

He mocked the man below him by mimicking his way of speech, sneering all the while at Iaq’s ragged body. His fur was almost nonexistent, revealing his skin painted in various sickening colors of the levels of charred meat. He was bloodless, all his blood vessels sealed with flame and prevented any gore, not that it helped in stopping anyone from wanting to puke at the sight of him. Some of the damage in his body was so severe that it showed bone, particularly on all three of his tails.

Raising his human foot, he crashed it into Iaq’s face, crushing it against the hard ground below.

“YOU FUCKING PIECE OF SHIT!!”

He howled, continuing his heavy kicks down his face.

“We helped you take the village down so I can be the ruler! I pretended to be their ally to break them from the inside! And all for me to walk back here and realize that you were plotting to betray us from the beginning!? Trash like you should eat the ground! Just! Like! THIS!”

With every word came a kick, one intensifying more than the other. He was still careful not to send a kick too hard that would kill him. But that didn’t mean they weren’t powerful, proven by the few pieces of teeth that fell from his mouth. With his wolf-like hand, he clutched the side of his face that turned into an augmented werewolf.

“It looks like your little present didn’t come out as you expected, huh? I still have my mind intact. You fucked up, Dear Commander.”

As he looked down at Iaq like human waste, Xeoi’s eyes were set on the three tail bones on his body.

“Hmm… The senlr of the most powerful qeajrv of our village’s history, or perhaps even the most powerful qeajrv of all time. I’ve always wanted to become powerful, to become someone who could weave mana and magic however they wished. That was because of her. The moment I saw how she used that magic when I was a child, I was entranced. I wanted to become just like her, I thought. Oh, but don’t worry, I won’t hold the fact that you kidnapped her against you. What I fell in love with was the potential of magic, not her.”

Xeoi waved his hands in the air, dismissing the thought.

“But you know, because of large my body became, even though I had a talent for magic, and even though I wanted to cultivate that magic, I was assigned to become a guard, you know? A savage brute that engaged in close combat and enhanced physical prowess instead of magical power. Just because of this body… haha, funny, isn’t it?”

The man was laughing, but the sinister glare in his eyes was clearly not.

“Well then, if they judged me because of my body, then maybe I should just show them proof that I was meant to be someone better off with magic…”

He crouched down and reached for the middle of Iaq’s three tails, the longest one out of the three sets of bones, the tail of the most powerful qeajrv. Setting his hand firmly around the tail, he tightened his muscles, raised his leg, slammed it down at the base of the tail, and pulled.

“Gwreeeehh….!!!”

Iaq screamed, fueled by the agonizing sensation of his bone separating from his body. Blood finally spilled, gushing out of the newly made hole in his body. He writhed on the ground… or at least he would have if his nerves and muscles weren’t burnt to a crisp, which only resulted in him shaking and trembling in pain.

Xeoi didn’t even bat an eye at the sight of him and took the newly acquired bone to his eyes.

“Hahaha! The senlr of the most powerful qeajrv of all time… It’s all bones, no skin, but maybe this thing still has some of its mana left in it! Ha, ha… hahahaha!!”

He laughed hysterically, holding the skeleton firmly over his head as he cackled at the ceiling. As time passed and his mind calmed down, his eyes shifted from the bone to the large plant-like structure in front of him. The Mana-Infused Spirit Core.

“I don’t really get how this thing works… but I wonder what will happen if I place this thing there? Will I get its powers? Or will nothing happen at all? Well, I guess it’s up to me to find out!”

He set one foot forward and walked up to the spirit core. The blue surface of the core distorted and a single five-tailed augmented werewolf revealed itself. Despite this, Xeoi continued unfazed and walked past the werewolf, unscathed.

“Haha! Well, at least you didn’t lie about the core only attacking people with the intent to destroy it.”

He said to Iaq without turning to face him. He was completely focused on the spirit core, uncaring of anything else that was happening around him now that he passed the final, and hardest obstacle. Unfortunately for him, that would cause him quite some trouble.

“GRAAA…!!!”

“Wha—!?”

**292 – Treacherous Path**

Iaq flew through the air from behind Xeoi and tackled him away from the spirit core. A confused expression immediately spread across his face. He was certain that there was no possible way for Iaq to move his body. He couldn’t even squirm properly when he took out his tail. But then, a gust of wind ran over his skin. It wasn’t just the force of Iaq’s propelling body, but the force of what propelled his body in the first place.

“Y-You can still use magic!?”

“GRAAAA!!!!”

Unable to form proper words, Iaq simply howled the last remaining air out of his lungs and wailed at the spirit core. That very moment, the spirit core distorted and shaped multiple werewolves. Meanwhile, the one that was standing by earlier pounced on them and sent a crackling swing of his claws on both Iaq and Xeoi.

“Grraa…!!”

Xeoi let out a pained cry as electricity ran through his body. He faced upward at the man who took him down and pinned him to the ground with his body. The look in his eyes told him everything.

Killing intent.

His eyes were filled with such, but it wasn’t only directed to Xeoi. The bloodlust in those eyes wanted everything around them dead. This included the spirit core, which triggered its self-defense mechanism, and unbelievably, bloodlust that also wanted the end to his very own life. A man filled with nothing but desperation. A beast with nothing else to lose.

The beast opened its maw and went for Xeoi’s neck. It couldn’t move any of its limbs, but it could still use its neck and mouth. Xeoi took out his arm and blocked it, preventing his certain death. However, that didn’t stop the shaped werewolves around them from attacking. All sorts of attacks landed on their bodies, fire, water, earth, wind, and they weren’t limited to magic as scratches spread all over their bodies, making them bathe in their own blood. Since the beast couldn’t even feel much of his body anymore, this didn’t affect him at all, but the same couldn’t be said for Xeoi.

“Graah….!! Like… hell…! I’d… let myself… go here!!”

He clearly felt every blow the shaped werewolves sent him and the beast’s teeth clamping down on his arm didn’t help. But still, there was life in his eyes. In complete contrast to the beast wishing for nothing but death, he was here to live. The very reason he got to this point, the value that sent him down this road, and the vision he saw far ahead on this path, everything flashed before him, invigorating his spirit.

“DAAAAMN YOUUUU!!!!!”

Xeoi forced the beast’s mouth back and twisted his arm, scraping his skin against the beast’s teeth. He ground his own teeth, taking the pain head-on, until finally, his hand got a firm grasp on the beast’s head. Then, he shifted his eyes to the side where a shaped werewolf was approaching with a wide swipe, long and sharp spikes of earth wrapping its claws. If those sharp protrusions were anything at all, they would be death. But that didn’t matter.

“WRAAAAAAA!!!!”

An ear-piercing howl trembled the air. Unrelenting to his doom, Xeoi pushed his body off the ground with wind magic just like the beast did and threw himself right into the hands of death, piercing his stomach. Completely contradictory. however, that was the answer he came up with as Xeoi took the hand that held a skeletal tail and shoved it into the shaped werewolf’s body. They might be shaped, but they were still part of the Mana-Infused Spirit Core. And so, he demanded—

“GIVE IT TO ME!! YOUR POWER! THE VERY ESSENCE OF YOUR SOUL! SHOW ME!! THE MAGIC I SAW THAT DAY!!! THE POTENTIAL OF OUR KIN!!!”

Then, he launched his other arm that clutched the beast’s head and shoved it at the shaped werewolf’s head. The act caused the shaped werewolf’s azure body to turn purple. As this was happening, the other shaped werewolves continued their attacks until Xeoi was buried in a mountain of shaped werewolves. Within it… was a spark of purple light.

*\*BOOOOMMM!!!\**

A massive explosion resounded, shaking the very room, making dust spread to the air and the debris from the recent battle move from rest. Smoke covered the heart of the explosion, but the moment it cleared, it revealed two figures.

An augmented werewolf whose body was battered to the point where he shouldn’t have been alive. One of his legs, both of his forearms, the left side of his chest, and half of his face were showing bone while the rest of his body looked like it was bathed in a sea of flame. He had no tails, a critical disadvantage for an augmented werewolf. However, those missing body parts, excluding the tails, were substituted by purple mana, allowing it to kneel on the ground with both legs. Its bones could be seen past the mana, but it was otherwise alive. Breathing.

Meanwhile, the other was a half augmented werewolf who was clutching the other on the head. Unlike the other one, he wasn’t damaged enough to show bone, but he still possessed holes, scratches, burns, and other wounds on his body. Just like the other werewolf, purple mana sealed those wounds, making his body covered in them.

Iaq and Xeoi. The two were completely different from before.

Xeoi looked down and noticed Iaq’s lack of tails. He turned his head behind him to confirm his own. A wide grin appeared on his face.

“Iaq, stand up.”

He ordered, and strangely, he followed. Expressionless, the exact opposite of what he was before. This was because of a single thing.

“Ha… haha… hahahaha!!”

Xeoi cackled at the realization.

“I noticed this before, but it looks like retaining my consciousness from an augmented werewolf transformation made me able to order around other werewolves, just like you.”

He pointed at Iaq with his augmented finger, but he didn’t react. He then shifted his gaze to his surroundings. Bodies of augmented werewolves spread across the floor with blood and meat decorating the otherwise clean, metal floor. Some of them have already begun to reduce to dust as the mana in the air rotted them.

“…If only I realized that earlier, then I wouldn’t have had to kill anyone before getting to you.”

He raised his head, allowing the prim and proper lines of augmented werewolves to enter his vision. They were grouped in squares, just like how an army would. This was all because they were at Xeoi’s behest. The unfortunate ones lying on the ground were the ones he killed before he realized he possessed such power.

“But now, it looks like you’re just like them now, Commander.”

He turned to face Iaq, his expressionless face greeting him no different from when he first saw him in this state.

“I didn’t become END’s little puppet. But for the unfortunate people that were turned into one… I’ll make sure to take care of them. Augmented as they are, they were still once qeajrvs, I’m sure they’ll be of use. Although you planned to betray me, I will take care of what’s left of your body. You’re tailless, but…”

A ball of fire appeared in the air and shot at Iaq. However, before it reached him, the fire disappeared as if it was snuffed out in mid-air. Xeoi’s smile widened. Then, the air trembled once more as a large spear of fire stretching toward the ceiling seared it. The spear shot at Iaq with a larger force than the earlier fireball but… just like the fireball, it never reached him and disappeared before it could.

“The ability to consume mana. If the Hizli was here… she’d probably say something inside Iaq or me reacted with the spirit core. Well, not that I care.”

Xeoi turned his back to Iaq and searched around the room. The entrance to this room at the back was blocked by rubble because of Iaq’s initial plan to deal with the raid. He turned to the vent where he was forced to enter because of Eksert. The sour memory took his smile and made him click his tongue. Unexpectedly, even for him, he quickly recovered and faced the army of augmented werewolves.

“Get away from the back!”

His order echoed through the room, making the werewolves move forward in an orderly manner. Then, once the space at the back was large enough, Xeoi threw his arm forward, making five balls of flame appear around him and sending them to the back. In the empty space, the five balls of flame arranged themselves in a large, perfect circle. The moment they all set themselves on the ground, Xeoi snapped his fingers, creating a pillar of flame that shot out of the encirclement and pierced through the ceiling above. This was it, the high-tier spell, Hell’s Pillar.

Xeoi’s smile returned, showing an ominous expression for all to see. The fur on his tails fluttered from the power of his magic. All five of them wriggled in the air. Four of them are made of skin and fur. Meanwhile, the one at the center was made from purple mana all wrapping around a long, skeletal tail.

“I’m sure they’ll come back. When they do, I’ll be sure to take care of them. They’re my kin, after all. Well, as for the ones that aren’t… I’ll just have to hand them down to the devil.”

**293 – Charging the Frontline**

“Renig, are you ready?”

“As always.”

“That’s what I like to hear!”

Garin and Renig stood facing the forest with no one else around them. Just ahead was the Ujlufi Village and the two were about to charge straight in through their gates. Two against their whole force. Despite the depressing difference in numbers, Garin climbed on top of Renig and unhesitatingly charged forward, piercing through the forest. This was all because of the plan they discussed just about an hour ago.

**…………**

“I will now be explaining how we are going to execute this operation.”

Erezil declared as she looked over the other participants of their second and final raid. Eksert, Yuu, Renig, Garin, and Mrel. Confirming the resolved looks on their faces, she continued.

“First, our main objective is to destroy the Mana-Infused Spirit Core. To do that, we have the Dark Spear, the spear that we collected from the last battle. This spear is embedded with dark essence, the opposing form of moon essence. It has the power to consume moon essence to power itself, yet the situation is not as simple as piercing the spirit core with this item. Because of the massive amount of moon essence in the core, attacking it with this would normally destroy the spear completely, which brings us to the main point. As Hizli tested, the only way to completely destroy the spirit core is to charge this spear with more power, meaning to consume moon essence. Of course, I am not talking about sacrificing our own. The way to do this is to fight the shaped werewolves the Mana-Infused Spirit Core produces. One by one, this spear will consume each shaped werewolf, charging it for every kill. And as per Hizli’s calculations, the dark spear will need around 20 shaped werewolves to become powerful enough to destroy the spirit core. Although the number may be intimidating, we have no other choice but to take on this challenge. Ideally, we would like to have Garin, Eksert, and Yuu work together in achieving this number while Mrel, Renig, and I will be in charge of finding and securing Xeoi.”

No one responded to her with words, but the looks in everyone’s eyes were enough to tell her that they understood. Some tension in her body let out seeing as Mrel, the person she was most concerned about, was cooperating properly. This plan was mostly from Eksert, but of course, with his clear disdain for the outsiders, particularly Eksert and Yuu, they couldn’t let the two stand out, much less lead the group even if it was their idea.

There were other options such as leaving Mrel out of the group, but it didn’t take much for anyone to realize that they will know no silence the moment they choose this path. With him in a mentally unstable state, they wouldn’t be able to prepare for what chaos he would create if left alone. The moment he takes a rash decision, it could easily bring down the whole operation. None of them were willing to take that chance, so they had no choice but to bring Mrel with them.

As for the others, Hizli was left in the base analyzing a piece of the dark spear she took for experimenting since she was never actually fit for battle while Elrei was still resting in the infirmary. The elder woke up earlier in the day but of course, he was in no state to battle. They had a bit of trouble with him since he insisted that he join. But in the end, they convinced him to stay put on the pretext that he takes over Erezil’s role and guards the base. Of course, Erezil secretly told Hizli that in the event of an attack, she would take the elder to the secret village and destroy the teleportation circle.

“Moving on, it would be difficult to get surrounded in the forest where the enemies will have a lot of cover. So, this operation will have Garin and Renig take the frontline while we await their signal before moving in. Being our fastest and most agile, their job is to gather as many enemies as possible and clump them together to the glade near the village then, our role will be to take wipe out the enemies with widespread attacks. Together, we will push through the remaining enemy forces and head for the temple. With our previous entrance compromised, we will be taking the main entrance through the temple. I will be handling the labyrinth in place of Hizli. Our forces will separate depending on the situation in the room, but generally, Mrel and I will be focused on Xeoi.”

**…………**

“Hihi… The frontline, huh?”

“Garin, you are starting to laugh like Sister Hizli.”

“Ah, my bad. But still, you heard what Eksert said earlier, right?”

Separate from the official debriefing, Yuu, Garin, and Renig were called by Eksert and Erezil and were told the finer parts of the subjects they discussed the other day. One of them being…

“That they are certain there are other traitors? What about them?”

“It just felt like fighting these augmented werewolves and five-tailed bastards was getting old. But now… I can finally take on some trash more my style!”

He growled, showing his ferocious teeth, thirsty for battle.

“Just to remind you, we are allowed to take them down a peg, but we cannot kill any qeajrvs.”

“Ugh… I know, I know! Jeez, you need to fix your meddlesome side.”

“I think your wild fighting fits are what needs fixing here…”

Just as the two were talking, their ears perked up, sensing the danger coming from the front. Not even a second after their reaction, Renig jumped to the side, dodging the frost arrow that came from the trees and created a patch of ice as it dug into the ground. Tracing the origin of the arrow, it came from the top of a tree somewhere to the left, deeper inside the forest.

“That has to be a qeajrv.”

Garin said, eyeing one particular tree deep in the forest. It was the one he singled out from the others based on the vibrations in the air. Even before they decided to charge in, Garin made it so that the wind around them would carry noise directly to their ears, and the vibrations from shooting the initial shot completely gave away the archer’s location. This was one of the few things he could do as a two-tail. As Renig passed behind the trees using them as shields from the attacker, Garin caught a glimpse of the archer’s ear. A white ear decorated with a golden earring. If memory served correctly, there was only one person he knew that fit that description.

“Baen.”

“Garin, no! We are focusing on the objective!”

Renig couldn’t read his face, but his voice clearly delivered his intentions.

“Ugh, fine! We just have to get this done, right? Then let’s get going!”

“Haah… I can only hope you keep your word.”

Another arrow pierced through the gaps between the trees and headed for them. Just like the other one, swift and precise, almost as if the arrow was being guided to hit their location. This didn’t surprise any of them and they expertly dodged the shot. As qeajrvs of the Ujlufi Clan, it was only natural for ranged attackers to master guiding projectiles with mana. Depending on the number of tails they possessed, it would affect the extent of how they controlled their shots. Based on the fact that they used arrows and the sharp curves they made, it was coming from a four-tail. Knowing this, hiding behind trees wouldn’t change much of the situation, so Renig prioritized speed, allowing him to get out of the archer’s range faster.

The enemy continued firing frost arrows which made it fatal for Renig if he dodged too slowly. Even if he avoided the shot with a hair’s breadth, the arrow would create an ice field upon contact with the ground and catch them. Garin reached for his pocket and took out a needle. The moment the next arrow shot, he locked his eyes on them, waited for the moment it was only a few meters away from them, and threw it to intercept. The arrow leaned to the side, avoiding the needle, but even before that, the needle disappeared, vanishing from existence. Then, it was followed by a small explosion that consumed the arrow as it tried to pass where it should have been.

The same exchange happened multiple times. Each one was slightly different from the other with the arrow curving, diving downward, or climbing upward, but each time the needle would simply launch a different magic like a sharp gust of wind or a single spike of earth. Then, the arrows finally stopped, a sign of their successful breakthrough. No matter how much they could control the arrow, a four-tail was limited to the initial launch of an arrow. They could control it as much as they want, but they couldn’t extend its range.

It wasn’t long until the stone walls of the Ujlufi Village reached their sights. There were augmented werewolves and demons in front of it and on top of the walls. They charged the two the moment they noticed them, but these numbers weren’t enough. They needed more enemies. And so, without words, Garin laid low and held Renig’s neck tight. The next moment, a dark sheet coated the two, Renig’s gravity sheet. The last time he used this, it broke his leg due to the twin towers penetrating through his barrier. However, they were already destroyed. Other towers would have been spotted being carried through the forest, and it was impossible to carry a tower out of the spirit core room. This only meant one thing; he had nothing to fear.

**294 – Village of the Ujlufi**

Garin took a hexagon-shaped metal device from his pocket and threw it to the ground. It tumbled a few times but the moment it came to a stop, it slowly blended with its surroundings like a chameleon, disappearing from sight. Confirming the device was set, he turned his attention to the wall in front of them.

A large group of demons and augmented werewolves were coming to intercept them, yet in the face of Renig’s gravity sheet that meant nothing. Blood splattered across the ground as they penetrated through the mass of enemy units, and soon followed tiny pieces of debris as they smashed through the wall with ease.

Beyond the barrier was the Ujlufi Village. Houses and structures commonly made from wood and stone, land with only gravel paths to guide them from place to place, and the small number of commercial buildings which all screamed their lack of development. It was a complete contrast to the secret base Garin and Renig lived in for the past few days. Strange as it would be for others, all of this was the norm.

“The same as ever, huh? Well, not that I was expecting much.”

Garin muttered under his breath after a quick observation of the town. He shifted his attention to the enemies that sprawled across his field of vision, all separated into orderly groups of two werewolves and three demons each. The closest ones sent their demons to engage with the two while the other werewolves circled them, waiting for an opening to present itself. Garin thought of clearing this first wave before continuing but delaying their objective any longer would only invite unwanted trouble, so he focused, as did Renig. A mass of blue light solidified on their backs and created a third senlr.

“Let’s wrap this up quick, Renig!”

“Understood!”

They rushed into the largest number of enemies, following the path that would attract the most attention. Renig would usually force his way through the demons that tried to attack him while withstanding the barrage of ranged magic attacks that came from the werewolves. His barrier was strong, even more so when it was enhanced with gravity magic, but that didn’t mean it was completely invincible. The more enemies they attracted meant the more attacks that would come their way, contributing greatly to wearing down Renig’s gravity sheet. It wasn’t long until he felt the barrier was about to break.

“Garin, we are out of time.”

“How far until we get to the phantom house?”

“100 meters.”

“It’s doable. Drop the barrier and stick to the buildings.”

“Understood.”

Renig picked up the pace and forced their way past the last wall of demons. With a bit more breathing room, he retracted the gravity sheet, removing their defenses. This allowed the werewolves’ magic attacks to land on the two, but despite that, every single magic attack was blocked as Garin spread his cloak to receive the attacks. The magic nullifying mantle.

His temporary defenses allowed them to survive the wave of attacks unscathed, but now the werewolves could simply adjust their positioning to avoid the cloak. Thankfully, before that inevitability could arrive, Renig reached the side of the houses and ran by the walls. This would indeed prevent attacks coming from one side, but that wasn’t what they were aiming for.

Just as the werewolves were about to fire the next waves of magic, Garin placed his palm on the surface of the walls as they passed by and activated his senlr. His false tail shimmered as he manipulated the mana embedded within the wall. The new wave of demons that were charging them and the werewolves hovering around them was shoved backward and brought to the ground.

Underdeveloped as the village seemed to be at first look, that was only a mask to hide the clan’s true power through many hidden functions built into the village’s structures. One such function was the gravitational repel built into every structure which knocks back everyone from its base. With the path clear, the two rushed to their destination and made sure to stay by the walls. Demons tried multiple times to reach them but Garin would simply activate the gravitational repel of the building close to them. The werewolves were forced to attack from a farther distance to avoid the gravitational repel, but that space allowed Renig to react to every attack, jumping, crouching, and weaving past their attempts at their life.

“There it is! The phantom house!”

Renig shouted and brought Garin’s attention to the building directly in front of them.

“Alright! You don’t need to stop, just get me close to it!”

“On it!”

Continuing to avoid contact with the enemy, Renig paced himself to the goal. But then, groups of werewolves and demons appeared from the corner of the block and intercepted them. Since the enemy couldn’t reach them from long range, they snuck through the back and blocked their way instead. With them sticking to the walls, they wouldn’t get affected by the repel.

A wise choice, but at the end of the day, they were simply too weak to have a snowball’s chance in hell against the two. Garin threw 8 needles consecutively, hitting the ends of the previous needle with pinpoint accuracy. They disappeared, but not without leaving a land of ice that locked the hostiles to the ground. With the enemies in front of them grounded, Garin proceeded to throw one of his dangers while he kept one in his hand. The moment it reached a certain point, a thread of mana appeared and connected the hilt of the daggers, and made it swing to the side where the werewolves were lined up. Flames ran down from the dagger in his hand, down the mana cord, and into the thrown dagger, bearing down on the necks of the enemy werewolves like a pendulum. The metal dug into their skin and decapitated every single werewolf, leaving them with headless necks ablaze. Since the demons couldn’t perform ranged attacks, they ignored them and simply jumped over their heads.

As Renig arrived at the door of their destination, he held down his paws and made a sharp right. Using that momentum, Garin jumped off Renig’s back and crashed into the door, but not before reaching for the doorknob and turning it open at the right moment. He smoothly entered the house and closed it as fast as he entered. Meanwhile, Renig continued to run around the village, attracting as many enemies as he could while circling back to the wall they first busted through.

In the phantom house, Garin took a quick scan of the room. It was just like any other residential house furnished with tables, chairs, equipment, and other items albeit old. None of these mattered. Those were just the fluff that concealed the primary purpose of the house he entered. His main focus was a certain window. After a quick inspection, he walked up to the only window in the house with a frame adorned with metal corners. He placed his hand on the frame and began to pour mana into it.

A loud bang came from the door. While most of the enemies went after Renig, some separated and went for Garin’s head instead. The repetitive slams resounded through the room louder and louder as time passed, the people on the other side desperate to break the door down. Since the door was just a wooden door blocked by a wooden beam, it didn’t take long for it to get destroyed. However, as the werewolves and demons flooded into the house, Garin was nowhere to be seen.

Turning the clock a few seconds back, Garin manipulated the mana structure and poured mana of his own into the window frame, making it emit a soft glow and turning the window that showed the outside world to reflect another room, one completely different from the one he was currently inside. This was the Phantom House. A building near the center of the Ujlufi village with traveler’s gems installed to a window that could send anyone that used it to one of the four corners of the village, indicated by the four corners of the window frame. Garin activated the corner that was closest to where they broke through and jumped in the window, teleporting from one house to the other. He quickly placed his hand back on the window frame which now possessed a single metal corner indicating its sole connection to the phantom house and closed the rift.

Daggers out at the ready, Garin exited the building and headed to the place where they broke through. There wasn’t a single enemy in sight since they were being distracted by Renig. After confirming the area was clear, he took out multiple small circular devices with an orange gem in their center and placed them across the walls. He set every device except for one, left through the hole in the wall, and headed to the location where he saw the hexagon-shaped device plant itself. The moment he reached a good distance away, he turned to the circular device in his hand and crushed it. At that very moment, the area was dyed a deep orange as a large explosion flared into the sky.

Renig was in the village leading the enemies around, but now without Garin and the fact that he had been running for a long time, he amassed too many enemies for him to handle. He managed to continue avoiding them using the gravitational repel of the buildings, but this prolonged chase allowed the enemies to prepare for his pathing and kept on blocking him. He managed to break through their encirclement by summoning shaped wolves and casting mid-tier earth magic to make paths of his own, but all of that could only slow delay his inevitable capture.

Suddenly, a large shockwave reached both his ears and his fur as a massive explosion from the walls in front of him shot into the sky. The demons and werewolves took their eyes off of him for a second to investigate what was happening, but that was all he needed to take out a crystal from inside his mouth. A crystal that held a variety of colors with a red core. Aligning it to his teeth, he crushed it, blurring his vision and distorting his senses.

“Renig, you’re here!”

Just as he was recovering from the experience, a voice called out to him. It was Garin.

“That should do it. I gathered them in front of the explosion. Even if they lost me, they would have to check what happened to the walls.”

“Yep. Now all we need to do is wait and see what they do.”

The two looked back to the walls where orange sparks of fire dotted the pillar of smoke that stained the blue sky. Their next move would depend on the enemy’s reaction. Unfortunately, simply standing there and doing nothing was slowly, but surely getting on Garin’s nerves.

“Hey, why don’t we just give the signal now? We know they’re all gathered on the other side, it’s just covered in smoke.”

“Garin, that is the backup plan. Sir Eksert strictly ordered us to only use it when we can’t lead them to the glade.”

“In this situation, doesn’t this apply? They’re trapped on the other side by a wall of smoke, that’s why we can’t get them to the glade. Makes sense, no?”

“Garin—”

Ears twitched. Garin and Renig both jumped away from each other. The very next second, a violent whirlwind came from the sky and drove into the ground, scattering wood, leaves, and dirt as it drilled the earth. It wasn’t long until it subsided, and the culprit was seen lying at the center of the whirlwind—an arrow.

“Baen!”

Garin shouted as he traced the vibrations in the air.

**295 – Cause for the Clan**

Appearing from the trees above, a man audaciously stood fast. He wore a green robe characterized by its large sleeves, half-concealing his light armor underneath which consisted of cloth, leather equipment such as boots and gauntlets, and a few metal platings on his knees, chest, and shoulders. He held a bow in his left hand just beside the arrows and quiver strapped to his left hip. His ears twitched, one possessing black fur while the other having white, pierced by a golden ring at its tip. Four tails wriggled beneath his robe, two of which boasting silky white fur, one with black onyx fur, and the other being a glimmering mass of mana. The man they knew as Baen.

“Well, if it ain’t Garin and Renig! We’re happy to see ya back and all, but trashing our village is a bit over the top.”

“We?”

“What? Ya tryin’ to play the word game with me? That’s cute and all, but we have more important things to discuss. Why don’t you just leave those stiff losers and join us?”

Baen gave a condescending smirk as he suggested that.

“You’ve been out n’ about for ten years with no one to keep you down and free to flap yer little wings. Ya know exactly how good it is to be off the clan’s leash. Savin’ people, explorin’ the great wonders, even suckin’ up to fallen princes! We heard exactly how you’ve been livin’ the life out there! Hey, why don’t ya help us get the same thrill?”

The tone in his voice turned serious.

“Here in the clan, there’s nothing but stuck-up geezers who don’t give a shit about what we want! They know nothing else but rules, traditions, and the clan’s safety. A bunch of cowardly wusses! We’re QEAJRVS!! We have the power to evolve and manipulate mana however we want! We’re born with that power! We’re born with magic! We’re born with skills completely unique from others. But what about the right to use ‘em!? We have none! In this clan, there’s nothin’ but rules, rules that force upon roles on every single one of us! When yer born in a crafter’s family yer forced to craft for the rest of yer life. When yer born in a construction family yer forced to build for the rest of yet life. There’re a few exceptions, but don’t ya get the point? We need to change! Throw these shackles away ‘n be free! That’s what you did! We just want the same thing! Come on, join us ‘n make this clan better!”

“…”

A heavy silence filled the forest. Baen looked down at Garin who kept his head down the whole time. Wondering if his words had reached him, he simply stood there and awaited his answer. And finally, he spoke the very first words in a while.

“Five! Far east: sniper! Guards: two pure! I’ll handle three!”

Words completely detached from the subject of Baen’s speech. It took him a few seconds, but Baen eventually realized the meaning of his broken words.

*“\*Five other enemies. One sniper with two pure wolves guarding them in the far east. Take care of them, and I’ll handle the three.\*”*

Baen searched the ground, but there was only Garin. Renig, the one he was with before, was nowhere to be seen.

An arrow pierced across the forest with a speed that broke the sound barrier. However, it was exactly because of that speed that Garin was able to notice it coming and leaned backward, dodging the fatal arrow by mere inches. It penetrated through a few trees before coming to a stop at the fifth one.

“You…! Don’t ya get what yer throwin’ away here!?”

His words wreathed with rage, insulted at the realization that Garin’s silence was actually him figuring out his current situation. The thought of him completely ignoring his heartfelt words brewed a furious storm inside him. Yet Garin’s stance was as firm as his.

“I couldn’t care less for the village’s politics or whatever. You can deal with that yourselves. But what I hate is the fact that you chose violence to send that message. Getting innocent people involved, aspiring kids like Yirae, and honest workers like Hizli… And even working with END to get this done? You can throw your spats all you want later, but one thing’s for sure…”

Garin stretched out his arm, took out his thumb, and dramatically pointed to the ground.

“Here, you fall.”

“You cheeky little brat!!”

He was finished putting up with Garin’s insolence. There was only one thing a person that dared scoff at the courage and dedication they poured into the clan’s future would deserve. Death.

Baen loaded his bow with an arrow and aimed. Garin took out his daggers to stop him, but he was intercepted by two qeajrvs that jumped out of the bushes, both of them possessing four tails, extra senlr included. One of them brandished a katana while the other with dual hand axes. In just a blink of an eye, the katana was found bearing down on Garin’s neck from above while one of the axes was thrown at his back and the other was held firm, ready to swing at Garin’s hip and fell him like a tree after overtaking the very axe he just threw. Unfortunately for the enemy, their biggest blunder was letting Garin gather impetus for this very moment.

Just as fast as the enemies charged in, Garin crouched, dodging the axe that was closing in on his back, going below the axe carrier’s wide swing, and turned to face him with daggers at the ready. The swordsman from above adjusted his swing to off Garin’s head, but his quick descent was suddenly halted, and began to rise from the ground. The swordsman paused in shock but immediately recovered to realize that some kind of bird grabbed him by the collar. Unbeknownst to him, it was an Uebat Bird, that barred its talons at him. Seeing this happen right before his eyes, Baen ignored the azure bird and focused on Garin, stretching the string on his bow and amplifying it with magic to shoot just as fast and powerful as the arrow his ally first shot at him.

Garin rolled in between the axe carrier’s legs and cut his Achilles tendon, sending a sharp pain through the axe man’s body, making him scream in pain. He was about to fall to the ground as he lost his balance, but not before Garin inflicted numerous light cuts on his back, drawing as much blood as he could without killing him, and the moment he finished, the man was kicked to the ground, falling face first into the soil.

Seeing the opening Garin made as he kicked the axe carrier away, Baen shot his arrow with a resounding boom as it broke through the sound barrier once more. There were other ways he could have enhanced his arrows, but the most reliable method was for his shot to reach the target before they could even have the time to dodge. This was a common sense within the clan, which is why Garin easily anticipated this move. He couldn’t dodge the arrow at this range, but he operated knowing that. The blood Garin drew from the axe carrier disappeared and was absorbed into his chest plate, making it glow in a deep red.

The Plate of the Bloodcrazed Beast activated, invigorating his heart and enhancing his physical strength and regenerative abilities, and as a side effect, making his eyes glow in the same color as his chest plate. Garin brought both of his daggers together and placed them right in front of the arrow’s path. However, this wasn’t a simple block. He angled his daggers and poured his mana into it, not to increase its defenses, but to control the gravity around it. The arrow eventually hit the daggers. Of course, the force that broke the sound barrier was too powerful to be bent solely by a sudden change in the gravitational field, so he had to withstand the shot with his strengthened arms. With the daggers angled to a certain point, the point of the arrow scraped against the daggers, and assisted by the change in gravity, made the arrow curve and turn to a different path.

“GRAAAAHH!!!”

A horrid scream of agony echoed through the forest. The source of the awful cry was the axe carrier, who wasn’t just lying on the ground, but also embedded into it as an arrow pierced his hand, forcefully making him let go of his last axe and firmly planting it in place. Baen and the swordsman saw the scene happen right in front of them, freezing their bodies from stupefaction. Baen was the first to snap out of it and loaded his bow with another arrow, at that time, his heart dropped. Garin was nowhere to be found. Fear quickly spread through his body just like the shadow eclipsing him from the back.

“!!!”

The moment he realized the reaper was already upon him, it was all too late. A powerful force pushed him off the tree sending his body to the flat ground. He tried to spin and shoot his bow, but a scorching heat penetrated through his shoulders, which was soon replaced by a burning liquid, making him lose all the power in his arms and drop his bow and arrow. It was the blades of Garin’s daggers heated to the point where Baen’s shoulder plates melted like butter.

“NOT LIKE THIIIISSS!!!!”

**296 – Monsters**

Baen screeched, struggling against the despair. His senlr glowed, creating two cracks that split the earth below. Realizing what this was, Garin quickly jumped off Baen’s body and evaded the attack. A wall of flame shot out from the ground and consumed Baen’s body. Since he couldn’t get burnt from his own magic, Baen was likely to stay in the flame either until the magic ran out or until he recovered. Then, a hail of fireballs came from the sky. He swiftly dodged the attacks and turned to the source.

A few moments ago, the swordsman was trying to escape the uebat bird’s hold by stabbing the space just above his neck. Unfortunately for him, the bird was too fast to get caught by his flimsy stabs, and simply picked him back up the missed, making him bob in the air. Tired of this dizzying farce, the man switched tactics and placed his blade on his neck, ready to swing the moment he got picked up again. This was, yet again, ineffective as the bird simply let him go and grabbed his foot instead. He swung his sword at the bird, but it let him go, dodged, and grabbed him again. Just as it was doing earlier but with his foot. Frustrated, the swordsman removed his focus from the bird and turned to Garin. He knocked off Baen and made him retreat into his own magic.

With the spirit to struggle still burning inside him, he activated his senlr and summoned multiple fireballs at Garin. It wasn’t just that. The greenery around Garin began to shake, resulting in multiple vines shooting out of the plants to bind him. He tried cutting them down before they could reach him, but the large number of them overwhelmed him, and managed to lock down all four of his limbs.

“I got you!”

The swordsman exhaled with zest and summoned another barrage at Garin. He may have thought it was an opening, but he neglected to consider the power of what bent Baen’s sound-penetrating shot. The gems in the cross-guard of his daggers dyed themselves orange, resulting in a burst of flame that burnt the vines around his hands to a crisp. The vines that held his feet let him swing away from being set ablaze.

“What!?”

As he swung back, he used that momentum to bend his knees and cut the vines suspending his legs. Immediately after being freed, he rushed down to where Baen dropped his weapon. He picked up the bow and arrow, creating the sound of shattering glass, and aimed at the swordsman.

“HAH!”

He snorted.

“You idiot! All our weapons have Owner Ascription! You won’t even be able to pull the string!”

Unperturbed by the man’s words, Garin continued to load the bow and pulled the string.

“E-Eh…?”

The swordsman couldn’t process what was happening and let out a dumb cry. He was nonplussed to the point where he didn’t even cast magic to interfere with Garin’s attack. How was he supposed to react? He saw a weapon that should have been unusable to others, including allies, wielded by the enemy and pointed right at him. That was one other function of Garin’s Modified Gloves of Magic Threads. It didn’t only create mana threads, and gravitate weapons around it, but it also allowed him to destroy simple Owner Ascriptions so that he could use weapons he steals from his enemies. Unprovided with this knowledge, the swordsman could only stare blankly at the sharp arrow pointed straight at him.

“Rika, let him go!”

Garin ordered, and uebat bird let go of the man’s foot, making him plummet to the ground headlong.

“AHHHHH!!!!”

The man’s screams echoed through the forest, but Garin ignored that. He simply focused, pulled the string, and applied his mana to it. As the cord strained and his mana poured, the bow released a soft green light and wrapped the arrow. With his aim true, his sharp eyes focused on a single point and let go of the string. The arrow shot, releasing a loud boom that broke the sound barrier and pierced the swordsman’s foot. The force of the arrow carried his whole body to the tree behind him.

“GRAAAA—!!!!”

His screams of terror changed to ones of agony, as his foot was firmly fixed against the tree. The loud wails made an abrupt stop as the force from the shot bumped his head against the tree and knocked him out cold.

Garin let out the air he held in his lungs when he made that shot and dropped the bow. Without arrows it was useless, so he turned back to Baen whose Eruption spell disappeared a few seconds ago. That meant that he saw every second of what happened. The battle was a two-on-three, a three-tail, and a bird against four-tails. The match-up was laughable, yet they still lost with an overwhelming victory for Garin. Completely incomprehensible.

“M…Mo—”

Garin found him against a tree. It seemed like he tried to run away but tripped on the small rocks in the vicinity and scuffed the soil with his face since he couldn’t use his arms to properly hold himself up. In the end, his clumsy attempt at retreat ended up with him being cornered to a tree, voice shaking in pure terror, trepidation seeping in his heart with every step Garin took.

“Mo—Mo… Monster… YER A MONSTER!! GET AWAY FROM ME!! LEAVE ME ALONE!!!”

Unaffected by his verbal insult, Garin continued his easy gait.

“STAY BACK!! STAY THE FUCK BACK!!!”

Indifferent to his mental suffering, he walked right up to Baen. His body shook as he gingerly looked up at the cold gaze Garin was sending him. His ears drooped and made himself tinier by backing up to the ground. Then, a voice rang from behind him.

“Garin, I took care of the others.”

Baen’s gaze immediately turned to the voice. A fatal mistake. His eyes widened just like how his dread deepened at the sight he was presented with. Renig came from the shadows with two other wolves on his back and one of his allies being carried by the collar, his body getting dragged through the ground.

“Oh, good job. Right, we were making sure that everything was going just as planned. Well, that was a fun way to pass the time.”

“Pass… pass the time…?”

Baen couldn’t help but parrot his words. This fight was supposed to be his show of power, determination, and spirit. But to this man in front of him… it was all a game. The insult to injury would usually send his engine roaring for retribution, but the depths of his fear consumed even that.

“Yeah, I was getting bored of just waiting. Look, now we know what our next move should be.”

Garin pointed at the village wall. A large gap was made between the towering stone structures. The smoke from the explosion had mostly gone, revealing a mass of werewolves and demons waiting just across the stone wall, but not leaving.

“We are fortunate that Sir Eksert prepared for this. Garin, send the signal now.”

“Right ahead of you.”

Garin took out a transparent stick from his pocket and poured his mana in, making it take an orange color. When the stick fully turned orange, he broke it in half. A second passed and the hexagon-shaped device that was blown toward the gaping wall from Baen’s initial whirlwind attack shimmered in yellow light, making multiple humanoid figures appear from thin air. The very moment they solidified, the area across the rubble was flooded by a sea of flame, burning every demon and augmented werewolf alive.

“W… Wha…”

Baen was at a loss for words as he saw a holocaust happen right before his eyes, all within a blink of an eye, no less. His eyes naturally gravitated to the most fearsome figure in the group. Black hair that turned white at the tips, almost as if death was preluding to their eventual cleansing. A black dress embellished with blue flowers that embodied her achievement of the impossible. The ornate leaves at the hem that dances between life and death. And finally, the five tails that flowed against the pressure of the living hell this very person made.

“S… Sister Erezil… why… out…”

Baen was broken to the point where he couldn’t even form proper sentences. Erezil’s ears twitched as a familiar voice entered her ears. Turning to the source, a devilish smile appeared on her face.

“Why, if it isn’t Baen! You were a part of this too, huh? Well, you were the one who led me away from the village on the day of the invasion. I guess it was too convenient to just be a coincidence, huh? I should not be surprised.”

“———!!!”

All the color emptied from Baen’s face. His terror reached its limits and all senses in his body were all but gone. He probably didn’t even notice that he wet his own pants.

“Oh, my.”

Erezil exclaimed in surprise at the sudden development. But still, she recovered and continued to face him, knowing that something had to be said.

“Baen, I suggest you just stay there and sleep. After all, once everything here is done and over with… I will make sure of it that you all take responsibility. Okay?”

She was smiling, but her eyes were not. Baen swallowed a chunk of his saliva and began to hyperventilate, inhaling and exhaling rapidly. He tried to quell his fit by holding his breath but couldn’t, so he clutched his heart to try and withstand it, but he was reminded once more… There was no greater fear than seeing that look in Erezil’s eyes, which eventually led to his loss of consciousness.

“Are you sure that was okay?”

This time, even Garin was concerned with what happened and asked Erezil.

“He will be fine. Just a simple, harsh lesson for him to remember once this is over with.”

“Ugh… that side of you I just can’t get along with, Ere.”

“How mean.”

In the end, they tied up all six of the qeajrvs to the trees and pressed forward the moment they were certain every enemy within the vicinity was dead. Miraculously, the flames didn’t even singe the structures of the village. This was all thanks to Erezil’s expert handling of her mana and magic. It was the small act of mercy that she did for the soon-to-be-punished traitors of the clan.

**297 – The Spark of Conflict**

“There it is, the temple!”

Garin exclaimed as he saw a large two-story building separated from the other buildings. It had a traditional Japanese design inspired by Akira Leo when he persuaded the village that they needed to renovate the building. The roofs that curved up in the edges were plated with clay roof tiles called kawara, supported at the base with multiple wooden pillars. There was space between the main building and the pillars which acted as a hallway, lit up by cube-shaped lanterns where they could see the beautiful public garden just outside the building. The shrubs shook as the gentle breeze brushed against them. Leaves that weren’t strong enough to withstand the zephyr flew through the air and into the serene pond nearby.

<We’re here already? There weren’t as many enemies as there should have been.>

Eksert shared his observation.

<Stay alert. The rest must be somewhere.>

“Same to you. Make sure to keep that spear safe.”

Garin said as he pointed to the Dark Spear he carried in his hand.

<You needn’t mention it.>

Walking up the stairs to the wooden door, Erezil took the lead and stretched out her hands to open the entrance. An eerie creak resounded before it revealed a brow-raising scene. The first room that greeted them was what the clan called the Ceremonial Room. It consisted of a wide open area for the clan’s villagers to sit, where directly in front of it was a space filled with tall plants decorated with blue flowers arranged into two orderly blocks, and at the very end of the room was a slightly elevated platform which usually served as the seat a Senlr Maiden like Erezil would take. Long, rectangular paper lanterns that merged at the tip like a spike adorned the ceiling to bring light into the room. But before anything else, there was a large elephant in the room that needed to be addressed—a wide pit in the ground.

It wasn’t just the hole in the floor, but the opening in the ceiling directly above it also raised questions. Sunlight passed through it, brightening the room like a large spotlight. It was roughly the same size as the one on the ground, giving the impression that some kind of pillar shot out of the ground and dug up this cavity. Peering into the abyss, they could see the labyrinth on the level below them which seemed to stop working seeing as the walls refused to move and regenerate the hole. Even deeper beyond that was metal flooring at the bottom which made them snap out of their shock and remembered their objective.

“That’s the spirit core room! This leads directly down to it!”

“…”

<…>

“…? What’s wrong?”

There wasn’t any external factor that caused it, but both Erezil and Eksert simply stared down the hole in silence, pondering something. It seemed like they picked up some kind of bad premonition. When Garin opened his mouth to ask about it, uneven footsteps echoed through the room. The sound came from the side. All six of them turned to the source and eyes widened in shock.

“Ah, I see you’ve made it.”

It was Xeoi. There was no other person it could have been. Even if he only retained half of his human-like appearance, he could still be recognized. However, instead of it being a simple problem of failing to perceive their true identity, it was more of a concern where Xeoi’s whole body was covered in dark purple light. He wasn’t like this in their last encounter, but the six could only speculate what horrors he went through for this to have happened.

“There we go.”

They only watched as Xeoi ignored their existences, walked past them, went down the walls of ornate blue flowers, trampling the petals they shed underfoot, burning them with a stained flame by the touch, and reaching the end where he presumptuously sat on the stage.

“If you still haven’t caught up after that one, I’ll just say it outright.”

He said, staring into Erezil’s eyes, which possessed a disgruntled expression, and matched it with a determined gaze of his own.

“This will be the clan’s fall—as well as its rebirth!”

“B-Brother Xeoi! Please, answer me! Why are you doing this?”

Mrel shouted. He had been silent for a while, taking in his brother’s current abhorrent appearance. But now, with his courage gathered, he found the strength to speak up.

“Mrel… huh?”

He wanted to finally speak with him, that was the whole reason why he came with Erezil and the others. The chance to hear his thoughts. The opportunity to finally find out what it is he kept hidden from him that sparked this needless conflict.

“You know…”

So he strained his ears with every intent to listen to Xeoi’s words and understand him to the best he possibly could. He didn’t want to miss anything important. He didn’t want to remain ignorant anymore. But unfortunately for him…

“I’ve always hated you.”

“…E-Eh?”

His warm, heartfelt emotions were returned with a cold response. Devoid of passion, not a single trace of the spirit he once adored, only a mechanical response that declared his dislike of him. Unable to comprehend what was happening, Mrel could only let out a confused cry.

“You heard me. You’re just so clingy. Sticking to me every chance you get. It gets on my nerves, you know? You’re not doing anything; just repeating everything you’ve done since we were children. You disappointed me. That’s why I hate you.”

“W-What… but… I’m… I’m always on your side! Your ally! I-I… I’m your friend—”

“Shut up.”

Mrel’s mouth was forcibly closed mid-sentence, followed by an invisible force from the front which sent him flying backward until he rolled across the floor to a still.

“What are you doing!?”

Garin gave Xeoi a fierce glare. His ally tried to reason with the enemy, trying their hardest to communicate with them. He wanted to see what would happen even if it sounded like Mrel would backstab them the very moment he found a good reason from Xeoi to do so. Despite that, he quite literally threw him aside as if he were trying to swat away the buzzing of an annoying housefly.

“Why are you so mad? None of you liked him either, right? He was a hassle. Nothing more than a waste of precious space.”

Xeoi responded heartlessly. Replying with a straight tone as if he was talking about something that everyone recognized as a fact. Garin opened his mouth, wanting to say something, but then he was stopped by Erezil as he placed her hand in front of him.

“A hassle, you say? Is that truly how you feel, Xeoi?”

“Undoubtedly.”

“Then, how about sitting down and talking with us and explaining why you think so? We would like nothing more than to understand each other and resolve this conflict with words.”

“Impossible. How do you think I got here in the first place? If I sat down now and did as you said, then all my efforts would have been for nothing. Besides…”

For once, it wasn’t a blank expression on his face that responded to her. A hint of emotion within his long barren heart. A fierce one, shown clearly through his newly sharpened glare and the razor canines he presented as his teeth curved into a mocking grin. The face of a person maddened with power.

“You lost the very moment you entered this room.”

**298 – Peak of Evolution**

Xeoi declared, throwing his arm out to Eksert. The air around him began to sparkle with orange dots. The others swiftly fled the area, and Eksert tried to do the same by jumping away from whatever they were, but the dots simply followed. Since it didn’t look like running was going to work, he took a second to analyze what they were and found that they were the remains of a fire. Cinders. Suddenly, it became hard to breathe, making him twitch for a single second. Unfortunately, that was all Xeoi needed to tell that he was dead.

“Die, you eyesore.”

A circle of flame appeared from the ground below him and encased him. Before he even had any time to react, Eksert’s whole body was consumed in a thick flame. More accurately, flames burst from inside his body, the excess of their blaze leaking out his clothes and as well as the base of his helmet, cooking his body alive in more ways than one.

“Eksert!”

“Sir Eksert!”

His allies screamed his name, but all he could do was arc his body in pain, his head facing the ceiling, letting out his silent screams. Yuu tried to do something but Erezil caught her hand, stopping her. Turning to Erezil, she was greeted with a grim expression on her face as she said in a low voice.

“That is high-tier magic, Devil’s Combustion. The moment you breathe those embers and step into that circle, there will be nothing stopping your body from going up in flames…”

“No…!”

A flat thud entered their ears and another one just as their eyes shifted to the source. There, they found Eksert’s body lying unmoving on the floor, his body and clothes continuing to burn incessantly.

“Haha, what an insect! All that scurrying and buzzing from before, just to kick the bucket with a single strike! Now…”

His predatory glare shifted from Eksert’s body to Yuu. There wasn’t any need to question it. That look in his eyes was all Erezil needed to guess his next intentions. Not wasting a single second, she blocked Xeoi’s sights on Yuu and summoned multiple frozen spikes around her. As the icicles of magic caught his attention, the ground below him froze over, grounding his crossed legs to the ground. And as if that weren’t enough, the earth below Xeoi rumbled and created arcs of earth that bound his body to the ground like shackles. The sudden attack reached Xeoi in less than a second. A quick end for someone Erezil determined a critical threat. She looked over the group. Mrel was still unconscious and it looked like Eksert was a lost cause. It was a shame, but they needed to continue even with just the four of them. Well, that was what she thought.

“MY! How aggressive!”

She flicked her head at the sound of that voice with such speed that you would have thought she was expecting it. Her eyes widened as they watched the cloud of cold air disperse. The others did the same, wracking their heads to figure out the best possible action against the situation this was leading to. From the cold screen appeared Xeoi, his body without a single scratch, all five of his tails wriggling in the air, one of them, in particular, glowing in an ominous purple light. A skeletal tail wrapped in the same purple light.

That shape, that mana… a tail Garin would never forget from his last encounter with Iaq… the power that a disciple like Erezil would never be so bold as to forget. It was…

“Mother’s tail…!!!”

“Lady Lraca’s senlr….!”

Rage smoldered in the son while confusion and shock filled the disciple. That sight, those reactions, their muddled mental states… to Xeoi, they were all…

“Ah~! Music to my ears! Those are the expressions I want! What a delight this will be as I crush every hope you ever had, throwing all of you into the pits of despair! Take this! The power of the greatest qeajrv of our clan!”

He threw his arm through the air once more, this time pointing at Erezil who was in a state of shock. She was immediately pulled out of the clouds the moment she realized her body was being pulled in all directions at once, threatening to rip her apart.

*“\*This is… High-tier Dark Magic: Spatial Fracture!\*”*

Realizing what the magic was, she activated her own to negate the attack. She cast Dimensional Layer, a spell that created an area with freely modifiable dark-attribute mana. Not a single thing happened through the naked eye, but an explosion of dark-attribute mana spread through the air and created an Element Field. The term used for a space filled with a dominant element, which in this case, was dark, making the correct term for this is a Dark Field.

This then allowed her to create an omnidirectional pull of gravity around her body. Finally, she cast Structural Synthesis, a null magic that can do nothing on its own, but everything when grouped with the correct collection of magic. A spell that fuses other magic.

“HA!!!”

Erezil forced her voice out as she concocted a string of spells in a single second, allowing her body to return to its normal state.

“Oooh, as expected of our maiden. Casting her own Spatial Fracture to counter my own.”

Xeoi said in a mocking tone while clapping slowly. His haughty attitude made Erezil click her tongue in frustration. Then, she turned to Garin, who was busy glaring daggers at Xeoi, unaware of the unobtrusive battle of high-tier magic she had with Xeoi.

“GARIN!”

Her unusually loud voice perked his ears and immediately caught his attention. Not waiting for him to respond, she ordered him.

“Take the Dark Spear and destroy the core! I will hold Xeoi here.”

“What!? No—”

“NOW!”

She dismissed the conversation with her order being forced down his throat. Garin was taken aback for a second, making him turn to Xeoi who returned his gaze with a condescending one of his own. It would usually churn his insides, but his instincts and Erezil’s uncharacteristically forced order told him to do as she said. With a bitter expression, he reluctantly took the Dark Spear beside Eksert’s body and jumped in the hole.

“Renig, Miss Yuu, follow Garin.”

“Understood!”

Renig didn’t offer a single bit of resistance and jumped into the hole. However, Yuu didn’t take it as easily.

“W-What!? But—”

“PLEASE! I DO NOT WANT TO SAY IT, BUT RIGHT NOW, YOU CANNOT DO ANYTHING AGAINST HIM!”

Yuu felt like she just swallowed a bug, but she understood Erezil’s reasoning. She was up against another five-tail. Unlike Iaq, who was taken out by unconventional means, this was a head-to-head battle with the qeajrv race’s peak of evolutionary power. This wasn’t a battlefield that she could just enter.

There was one thing she could do. One thing that she failed to do in the previous battle. She talked about it with Eksert, but even with that, her problem was still there. Something was stopping her. It wasn’t just her imagination.

“Oh? You, leave? Like I’d let that one happen!”

Suddenly, Yuu felt a heavy weight bear on her back, bringing her to her knees. Erezil clicked her tongue the moment she realized her escape was gone and faced Xeoi, blocking Yuu with her body.

“Shall we begin our dance to the death, Dear Maiden?”

**299 – Embrace Death**

Two soft thuds let out as Garin and Renig arrived at the bottom of the hole, breaking their fall with wind magic. They did a quick scan of the room, the traces of the last battle remained proven by the line of rubble just over the distance. It was the debris from Eksert’s great wall when they used it to buy time, so it seemed like they were at the back of the room, the farthest place from the spirit core.

“Huh…?”

Garin unconsciously voiced his surprise. The marks of their fight were here but the army of demons and augmented werewolves were not. He was expecting the rest of them to be here since the ones they took out on the surface didn’t come close to matching their estimated numbers. Instead, there was only a sole figure filling the lifeless room. A black shadow. A stain above the artificial flower-like structure known to be the Mana-Infused Spirit Core. The two walked to it slowly, their senses at full alert.

The moment they reached a certain point, Garin started to realize the identity of the black figure.

“Hey, Renig… isn’t that…?”

Taking a look, the wolf also caught up to his train of thought.

“The enemy commander… Iaq.”

They remember hearing from Eksert that he took out Iaq when he forcefully brought him to the spirit realm, but with that also came the unfortunate news that he wasn’t able to finish him off. The two hoped it was all just needless worry from him. Unfortunately, his anxiety was just. And it didn’t end there.

“Hey… what the hell? I was gonna say he was better off staying in his coffin but it looks like this guy went one step further and rose from the dead!”

Said Garin as he pointed at the bare bones covered by a purple light.

“That light… I believe that is the same one Sir Xeoi used against Lady Erezil.”

“What…? Now that you mention it, you’re right. Wait, but what does that mean? Unless he’s hiding it like Xeoi, it doesn’t look like he even has a tail.”

“I do not know…”

Garin and Renig observed Iaq for a moment. He was simply standing there staring blankly into space, not reacting to a thing they did. Calling his name didn’t work neither did throwing insults at him. They had no doubt he would react to an attack. Although still, his guard was by no means down. Bent joints that could move at a moment’s notice, a blank but alert stare, ears perked up to catch any level of noise. It seemed like all they could actually do to make him act on his own was to get closer. However, even if there was a slight chance that they could progress without a fight, they weren’t about to take terrible odds that put their lives on the line. Garin placed his legs firmly on the ground before continuing.

“O Nature, Amass your power at my word. Create my weapons and impale my adversaries. Needle Storm!”

Unlike the fast-paced flow of battles he normally engaged in, he had time to stop and chant. He could have used his needles, but with them running low due to the war he had in this very room, he decided to save them by casting magic manually.

The air around him compressed into multiple spikes and shot themselves to the motionless Iaq. Garin and Renig didn’t waste a single second and immediately entered their battle stances without waiting for the result, placing the dark spear down and taking out his daggers. They watched the scene in front of them play out. The razor-sharp air that could slice even metal apart hurled toward Iaq. They closed in on Iaq, still refusing to move. Just as they made contact with him, Garin and Renig made sure to pay attention to everything that was about to happen. There, they saw the compressed air of mana and wind disperse in front of their very eyes, almost as if it was being deconstructed the moment they reached a certain point.

“What just…?”

“Garin look, his body!”

Garin let his guard down for a second after being confused with Iaq’s performance. Thankfully, Renig immediately brought his attention back to reality, making him focus on the glowing purple light around Iaq.

“It’s the same as Xeoi when he was hit with Ere’s magic!”

“Correct. Does this mean that magic is useless against him?”

“…”

He fell silent, lacking the information to answer his question with a satisfactory response. All he could do was ready himself for everything that could possibly happen with Iaq’s reaction.

“GRAAAA!!!!”

After a long span of silence, Iaq howled as the color in the purple light wrapping his whole body brightened, making it harder to see his bones. With a huff of steam, he quickly charged into Garin. The invisible pressure from that one, single move made his muscles twitch, instinctively telling him to flee instead of guard. He stopped it, holding his ground, opting for logic over senses. That was a mistake he would soon have to pay.

Renig escaped successfully and attempted to assist Garin by summoning snowballs and pelting Iaq’s back with them. The aim was to slow him down enough for Garin to find an opening, but just like with the earlier needle storm, they all disappeared before reaching him. If anything, all that did was activate his purple light, making him noticeably faster. His moment of hesitation consumed his only opportunity to step back, leaving him with the forced choice of taking his attack head-on. Exorcising his mind of doubt and regret, he faced Iaq.

Just before he reached attacking range, Iaq preemptively charged his arm, swiping the air so that it would slice Garin to pieces the very moment he reached him. Garin pressed forward, receiving it with the dagger on his left earlier which would allow him more options. His next move was normally to weave through his next attack and rain a flurry of stabs and slashes down on his body, but there was one thing he overlooked.

*“\*W-What!? Such power!\*”*

His lips twisted in panic as his left arm trembled at the strength flowing through Iaq’s one swing. If he let things continue like this, he had no doubt he would penetrate through his flimsy defense and slice him. So he quickly assisted his guard, but all that did was leave his right side open for the taking. Iaq swung his left arm, hurling at Garin’s defenseless body.

Garin tried activating his magic tools, but not a single one responded to him, proving further that any attempt at magic against him was futile. Worse yet, it was counterproductive as Iaq’s purple light only activated, powering him up even more. It was just like the dark essence Erezil explained in their meeting. A source of energy that consumes moon essence to power itself, except in this case, it wasn’t just moon essence but mana as well.

Alas, that realization would do absolutely nothing if he were to perish here. In spite of that, or perhaps exactly because of that, it left Garin with one clear goal in mind: live.

“WRAAAA!!!!”

He roared, sending a brand new power through his muscles, his battle cry allowing him to do what he could not. This wasn’t a power that was gained through mana or moon essence which made Iaq powerless to stop it. This was a completely physiological reaction commonly known as the fight-or-flight response which Garin consciously activated, allowing him to gain hysterical strength.

To humans, this reaction would normally be uncontrollable. It was something that would happen depending on the situation. The same should have been the same for qeajrvs, but that was simply because no one was desperate enough to make it happen.

In Garin’s 10 years of searching the continent of Yuworkn for power and possible traces of her mother, he used moon essence to search areas for his mother just like how an active sonar system would on Earth. Sending signals through the air and waiting for them to bounce back to report whether or not they encountered another senlr. It would mostly come back with duds and in the times he caught a signal it would simply be another qeajrv. By using moon essence this way ceaselessly, he cut off his chances of evolving. The same went for Renig.

Because of that, he had to fight against his adversaries with tooth and nail, retaliating with pure strength alone. This led to no small number of near-death situations. It almost always ended up triggering his fight-or-flight response, making him accustomed to it. He didn’t know about the term, but he knew that the deeper he went into the jaws of death, this response would trigger, giving him enough power to take down a wall he once thought could not be scaled. Instead of using his power as a qeajrv to manipulate his mana, he used it to manipulate his nervous system. The moment he became accustomed to it, his senses would follow his will, giving him the strength he needed whenever he wanted it. Unfortunately, for Renig, this meant losing Garin to become a blood-crazed battle maniac, but with the achievements they gathered, he eventually was forced to see it as a needed compensation.

And so—into the jaws of death once more!

Garin immediately adjusted his right foot and thrust his elbow at Iaq’s face, not to hit it, but to adjust the hold on his right dagger from the forward position to the backward position. This bearing allowed him to release more power. The benefits didn’t stop there, as this position made his body avoid Iaq’s incoming claws. From here, his palm would hit him instead, but it was only a matter of time before he adjusted his claws or penetrate his back with it. Without wasting a single millisecond, he pulled his dagger through the claws he locked it with, breaking it in half, digging the blade across Iaq’s chest, and finally reaching his arm, cutting it in half while his elbow followed behind Iaq’s swipe, avoiding any damage on his person. He then crouched, leaving the severed arm to hit the empty air, all while keeping his right arm in check with his left dagger.

Iaq’s body was now open for attacks, but his senses screamed at him to back off and observe what happens first. This time, he trusted it, using the opening to make a tactical retreat. With his heart pounding against his chest and sweating profusely, he took a second to level his head with a deep breath before shifting his focus to Iaq.

Completely unlike the last time he saw him, he simply stood there like a lifeless doll, devoid of his once arrogant attitude. The stump on his right arm where Garin severed began to wriggle with purple light. It glowed, activating something which made the purple mass stretch through the air, retrieving the arm. It retracted, placing the arm right where Garin just severed it from but this time with a purple mass between them acting like some kind of adhesive. Iaq didn’t even flinch at what happened and simply moved his right arm again as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

Garin only clicked his tongue before entering his battle stance. Just before he actually engaged, he let out a single curse.

“You goddamn cockroach!”

**300 – Skills Over Tails**

Blade against claw. Garin clashed with Iaq. With his superior swiftness, Garin dodged one claw after another, being careful of cheap kicks he might launch while he evaded his attacks. The ones he couldn’t dodge were met by his dagger. Unlike before, one of them was enough to withstand Iaq’s power, allowing him to hold nothing back. He kept blocking and redirecting his attacks, but the same situation went for Iaq, who maintained his guard and kept Garin at bay.

It was a complete deadlock. Garin had a leg up in speed, but Iaq had an upper hand on power. Garin could avoid his attacks, but the threat that came in with Iaq’s every attack meant that he needed to be careful when launching the attack. A single misstep could easily cause the balance to tilt in Iaq’s favor. One critical mistake would end everything. This was the situation Garin couldn’t be happier to have.

Considering his first tussle with Iaq, the fact that he could keep up with him toe-to-toe showed just how much he weakened since then. He could negate the use of mana, but unlike Xeoi, he couldn’t use magic himself. This was what brought everything to this impasse. One that would break the moment an outside source interfered. The ideal situation for Garin.

Iaq swung his left arm. Garin went under, evaded it, and moved in to attack. Seeing this, Iaq jumped backward while swinging with his right arm, counteracting his movement and placing him right back into his claw’s arc. However, that didn’t happen.

“GRAAA!!!”

“GRRR!!!!”

From behind him, Renig appeared and sunk his teeth into Iaq’s shoulder, clamping his jaw into it, holding it down like a vice, and preventing any further movement. This was the deciding factor: a 2-on-1 battle. When Garin matches the enemy’s strength, Renig would be there to break the balance. Admittedly, Renig wasn’t as powerful as Garin, but he was his guardian, so for 10 years he did all he could to become a pillar for him to fall onto in hard times. He knew exactly what Garin wanted and when he wanted it. And this very moment he chose, it was exactly just that.

With Iaq’s footing gone and both his arms without the power to stop him, he was finally allowed to release his bloodlust. He first thrust his right dagger into his chest and gouged his heart in the forward position while gathering strength in his left dagger in the backward position. His nimble fingers danced around the dagger’s handle and switched to a backward position. He tightened his muscles on both arms and pulled with his right while pushing with his left, Renig releasing his jaw when he saw the blades approaching. He cleaved Iaq’s right arm clean off with his left dagger while he dragged his dagger across Iaq’s chest and ripped his left arm’s shoulder off its socket, leaving him unable to retaliate. His execution on Iaq’s left arm was crass compared to the right arm since Iaq’s left arm was still left hanging on his body by the small bit of skin on the underarm, but Garin couldn’t care less and continued.

The force Garin used when he pounced on him and the fact that Iaq had no bearings when he did so brought them to the ground where Garin pincered his neck with both of his daggers in the backward position. As a finishing touch, he made a light jump backward, cleaved his legs from his body, and kicked every dismembered body part away, his loose left arm included.

“That should keep him down for a while! Renig, Stall his regeneration while I work on the core!”

“Understood!”

He ordered, sheathing his daggers and rushing to pick the dark spear back up. Renig did as Garin said and continued ripping apart Iaq’s body to shreds, hoping that it would hinder his regeneration. With that obstacle gone, he shifted his attention to their main objective—The Mana-Infused Spirit Core.

Directing his intentions to it, the surface of the azure plant-like structure began to distort, producing a group of five shaped augmented werewolves in front of him. Before, the sight of this group of five-tailed augmented werewolves would immediately trigger his danger senses, imploring him to retreat from the peril he was charging into. No, in fact, those very alarms were blaring inside of him right that moment. However, what was different between now and then was the fact that trust was placed in him. Trust from his allies on the surface who believed he could overcome this wall, trust from Renig who continued to lay waste to Iaq’s body to buy him time, and finally, trust from Hizli, the person who talked to him in secret before the day of the final raid.

**…………**

“H-Huh? What do you mean?”

Garin took a step back as something absurd just came out of the mouth of the person in front of him.

“Like I said! I talked with Sister Ere, and I told her that you’re the best shot we have at taking out the spirit core!”

“No—ugh, look, I heard you, but there’s no way I can do that! Wouldn’t Eksert have the best shot at it? That guy’s power is second only to Ere!”

Renig refuted which made Hizli blow her cheeks into a pout, standing tall with pressure on both of her legs and giving him an annoyed look.

“W-What? Got a problem with me?”

“Yeah, a huge problem! What happened to the Garin who left the village 10 years ago, leaving chaos in his tracks just to find and rescue his mother!? The very same Garin that came back 10 years later with the same fierce look in his eyes!? What happened to him!?”

Hizli pounced onto Garin and latched behind his back with a chokehold. He tried to struggle his way out by reaching for her lab coat, but all that did was give her an opening to seize his arm and pin him down to the ground with an arm lock.

“S-See! I don’t see a trace of that Garin anymore!”

“W-What are—a-argh!! …y-you doing!?”

Their faces were beet red, but it wasn’t because of a little wrestling. In actuality, Garin successfully got hold of her lab coat when she went for his arm, but that was only it, resulting in him removing an article of clothing from her in the scuffle. He couldn’t see it, but he could feel her holding his arm down against her chest and her tight-clad legs hugging his body. The strange sensation of otherworldly clothing sent strange thoughts to his head, but he tried to rid of all of them by banging his head on the floor. Hizli felt the same, but there was no act of self-harm. Since she was the one who initiated this, she felt the need to see it through.

“Garin, look at me!”

Now with his forehead looking a bit red, he turned his head to the side where he found her disheveled white long-sleeve locking down his arm and accentuating her chest. The length of her red tie went over her shoulder and onto the floor. A similar sight was just above her body with her porcelain skin decorated with cherry cheeks. The few strands of her half-white and half-black hair stuck to her moist face.

“I believe in you! I don’t care how strong the others are! I think you’re the perfect person for the job because you worked hard for over 10 years! You know how to handle almost any weapon and the stories you told me when you first returned make me certain that you have more than enough skill to use the dark spear against the spirit core! You told me what you often told yourself in your journey, right!? ‘The tails don’t matter; it’s the skill that makes the difference!’ Are you really going to let some mask-wearing, four-arm take that away from you!?”

Garin fell silent to her words, only simply watching the expressions Hizli made as she delivered her passionate message. His ears twitched, realizing that his heart had been pounding against his chest for a while now. It usually didn’t happen outside of battle, but he knew that his heart was racing.

“F-Fine! Fine! Okay, I’ll do it! J-Just get off me!”

“O-Oh, r-right!”

“Jeez, you didn’t have to get all violent.”

“It’s your fault for acting all wimpy and gloomy!”

She brought her head closer, driving her point. It made him lean backward and scratch his head in resignation.

“Seriously, you’re—”

**…………**

“—A real handful!”

Garin howled in the air as a past memory surfaced in his mind, right at the same time he took out the seventh shaped werewolf. The earth around him began to rise, the werewolves trying to lock Garin down the moment they realized that they couldn’t take him out in a head-to-head battle. Unfortunately from them, all it took was a swirl of his spear to break down all of the erecting walls, absorbing the mana that moved them. This led to the werewolf standing on the top to lose his footing and falling to the ground where Garin’s spear was there to catch it. The werewolf’s body was stained purple from where he was pierced and immediately consumed by the weapon in the very next second, disappearing as if they never existed to begin with.

A storm of cinders began filling the air, creating an illusion of a gunpowder-heavy battlefield where enemy structures were burnt down by flames, Garin’s bloodthirsty sneer highlighted within. A large circle of flame appeared beneath him. The very same skill Xeoi used to burn Eksert from the inside. A simple counter for this was to just not breathe, but Garin didn’t need to bend over to the spell’s demands. Before the cinders could even reach his body, they would get consumed by the dark spear and give rise to a dim purple glow. As for the circle of fire below him, all he had to do was poke it with the spear and it would swallow the fire as if it was being sucked by a vacuum cleaner.

Over thirty shaped werewolves have been produced by the spirit core, but none of them would dare approach Garin. They opted for ranged attacks despite knowing how ineffective they were against him. Spells of varying elements of all ranges from high to low attempted to take his life, but so long as he had the spear and the skill to wield the spear, not a single one could reach him.

**301 – A Reliable Ally**

The shaped werewolves attempted attacking all at once from all sides, but Garin was capable of spinning the spear with a smooth flow, alternately covering both sides of his body fast enough that it made the illusion of him having two spears that protected his body like a barrier. They attempted to gather all of their power to make one devastating blow that would overload the spear, although it was unclear whether or not that was a calculated decision. Although an attack that flashy only gave Garin enough time to avoid the attack before they could even launch it. At some point, one of them even attempted to disarm his spear manually, but all that did was consume it the moment it made contact with the spear. If attacks were fired at him, he would intercept them. If the terrain around him began to move, he would impale it and crumble the formation before it could shape itself. Worse yet internal attacks like weakening control magic simply didn’t work since their mana actually had to reach the body before it could activate.

Experience told them that they were powerless against Garin, leaving him at twelve kills before they finally figured it would be best to maintain a distance from him at all times. Although he counted twelve kills, with the amount of magic they pelted him with, it would be safe to say that all of that accounted for two or three kills. But now, Garin could neither catch up to them fast enough to hit them with his spear nor could he throw his spear at them since it would leave him completely defenseless. They deliberated that it was best to keep him in a stalemate by not getting close to him.

Unfortunately for them, Garin possessed a kind of hostage. The Mana-Infused Spirit Core. It didn’t matter if there were thirty or a thousand shaped werewolves around him. If none of them wanted to get close, he would simply attack the core directly. Unlike how the shaped werewolves seemed to have some kind of sense for battle, the spirit core was mechanical as could be and produced these shaped werewolves as long as it felt threatened. It produced three to block his approach and Garin skewered them the moment they separated from the core. More produced from other sides while he dealt with the initial three, but they would immediately make distance either deeper into the room or to the air above, floating overhead like vultures with wind magic, looking for an opportunity to present itself.

Then, he heard Renig’s voice from the distance.

“Garin! I cannot hold him back for much longer! He is about to revive!”

Iaq. The name of his incoming enemy popped into his head. Fortunately for Garin, no matter how many shaped werewolves were in the area, they didn’t lay their hands on Renig since the core didn’t recognize him as a threat. Conversely, that also meant he couldn’t just leave Iaq to be killed by the shaped werewolves. Well, since magic didn’t work on him either, it wouldn’t really do anything… except…

Garin’s face paled at his realization. Proven by their earlier battle, Iaq would become stronger every time someone tried to use magic on him. If he deliberately aggravated the spirit core, then that would make them attack him with magic. If that terrible combination ever brewed itself into existence… there was no chance for Garin and Renig to escape that room alive.

“WRAAA!!!!!”

A feral scream came from within the clump of shaped werewolves. He took a quick glance at its general direction before returning his bloodlust to the core in front of him. From the quick flash of the situation, he saw Iaq pouncing and mauling the shaped werewolves, ingesting them with every strike. Garin currently had about seventeen or eighteen kills, the mana absorbed from the attacks included. He just needed two more, three at most.

The surface of the spirit core distorted, signaling the birth and death of a newly shaped werewolf for him to assimilate with the dark spear. Unfortunately, alarm bells rang to his side, making his ears perk up. It was the situation he feared the most.

“DIIEEEE!!!!”

In contrast to his usual snarling, this one was the one that sounded most like words—the curse for Garin’s death. Garin was forced to back up but Iaq’s speed was on a completely different level from the earlier battle. His foot paws ground against the metal flooring with one hand extending its claws out, screeching as it dug into the floor to slow down enough to pounce at its prey.

With only about two left before reaching his goal, he was faced with death’s stare. The situation couldn’t have frustrated him enough. He left the spear in one hand while he reached for his dagger with the other. But before he could even do so, Iaq already launched himself, hurling his whole body at a speed Garin could barely follow. Then—he slipped.

“Gahh!!”

“WRAAWRLL!!!”

Garin’s bottom met with the floor and made him suffer a shallow scratch on the chest plate but that was all there was. Meanwhile, the power of Iaq’s leap sent him hurling all the way to the wall. If there was ever one thing that could allow him to dodge the attack despite Iaq being overwhelmingly faster than him and watching his every move, it would be an accident where none of his muscles suggested he would make a sudden movement, or at the very least, a staged accident that couldn’t be seen by the attacker.

At the time he was staring death in the face, Garin knew for a fact that any attempt at dodging would result in him getting torn to shreds since Iaq’s eyes followed every movement he made like a hawk. Being perfect and precise in that situation made for the most predictable prey. Realizing this, he dropped his form and opted to become random. But how could he do that without making a single movement and also convincing Iaq that he wasn’t just going to drop motionlessly onto the ground? He needed another element. An unforeseen formula into the mix.

Knowing that, he left his life in their hands… or perhaps, paws. The very moment Garin was about to take a step back, a small patch of ice formed on the one spot he stepped on, making him lose balance at the sudden drop of friction. The aim was so precise and well-timed that Iaq couldn’t even react to it, making him miss his target.

Garin immediately sheathed his dagger, picked himself back up, and headed for the spirit core, but not before thrusting his fist into the air in appreciation and sticking his tongue out. Renig caught the message and disappeared back into the crowd of shaped werewolves, hiding from Iaq’s preying eyes.

This was Garin’s one final opportunity. Before getting back to him, Iaq would undoubtedly be stronger, faster, and deadlier than ever before because of the shaped werewolves he would cull. He used his one chance to dodge and he doubted that it would happen again. He needed to finish this now. It was all or nothing.

He took his hand out of his pocket and readied the spear in hand, intercepting the attacks of the shaped werewolves. As he got close, the spirit core distorted once more, producing more shaped werewolves to protect itself. Along with that was the impending sound of death, heavy and quick footfalls that thundered across the room.

One, two. Garin’s spear pierced the last remaining shaped werewolves he needed. The dark spear glowed in power. All that was left was a final, deep thrust into the mechanism. That said, he was out of time. An ominous purple glow emitted from behind him, identical to the spear he had in hand. The visage of the undead loomed over him, the look of a bloodthirsty beast on one side while the other was shaped similarly with a purple flame but allowing its bare skull for all to see. Its deadly claws charged and swiped, bearing closer and closer to Garin’s neck.

However, Garin, who was keeping track of his movement through the vibrations in the air allowed him to determine from the very start that he had no chance of making it. So instead, he settled for compensation. He stuck his tongue out, revealing a small crystal orb that was adorned with multiple colors all around a red core. Aligning it with his teeth, he crushed it, distorting his vision. The azure surface of the plant-like structure suddenly turned into a metal wall. Taking a quick look around, he was back under the hole they came through at the very back of the room. There was a familiar hexagon-shaped device on the floor which dimmed from its bright yellow color. He still had the same stance with the dark spear thrust forward. He was afraid of what would happen if he used the orb while he held the dark spear in his hands. It wasn’t like he had time to throw away the spear, but seeing as he was safe and sound, he couldn’t care less.

“Good work.”

A familiar voice rang through the air. A calm, level-headed congratulations in complete contrast to the blood-pumping action he faced. It was Renig, the one that saved him multiple times through this endeavor of his. He caught the signal Garin sent that he was planning on using the orb when he thanked him, so he discretely escaped the action and retreated to their exit.

After heaving a deep sigh of relief, he returned Renig’s greetings.

“You too.”

Meanwhile, Iaq, who had suddenly lost his target, attempted to stop his approach. However, the moment he turned to the ground below him, he found eight needles that were bundled up together. They disappeared as quickly as they entered his field of vision, but what was more concerning than that was the fact that the surface he was landing on suddenly froze over, leaving him no space to properly stop himself. He bent his body, making it land on all fours, his claws trying their best to sink into the ice but the force that propelled him through the sky was too great and clawed the surface, leaving only scratch marks on the ground that led straight to the Mana-Infused Spirit Core.

“GRAAAAA—!!!!”

Iaq snarled one last time before getting cut off bluntly as his body was consumed by the Mana-Infused Spirit core. Garin may not have used the dark spear to destroy it, but he used Iaq’s entire body as a substitute. One more potent than the spear that consumed about 20 or so shaped werewolves. It wasn’t long until purple dyed the inside of the flower-like structure, turning its closed petals from azure to heliotrope. The soft blue glow converted to purple until the light darkened and fluctuated from light and dark. Cracks began to appear on the core. Just as the erratic reaction from the core suggested, it wasn’t long until the structure exploded, shaking the room with its huge shockwave.

**302 – The Two at the Apex**

“Come on, come on, come on! Is that all you’ve got!?”

Xeoi goaded Erezil after exiting the cloud of smoke that her last attack produced. Searching for her figure, Xeoi found her shooting through the sky at a trajectory to circle around him. She had been fighting him for a while now but it was quite clear to her that attacking him directly with magic simply doesn’t work no matter the level of magic spells she used. In spite of that, she never once thought of giving up. It wasn’t even an option in her book. If direct attacks don’t work, then she just had to find another way to deal with him.

Thinking that, she launched her hand to the sky, erecting a cylindrical pillar that consumed Xeoi. Large thick masses of frozen icicles appeared in the air surrounding the pillar. Knowing a simple attack like this wouldn’t do anything, cracks began to form on every surface in the vicinity. Chunks of dirt, rocks, wood, and metal sprawled across the air. She shot the icicles into the pillar in an attempt to impale Xeoi inside.

This was the combination of Dimensional Layer which allowed her more control of the gravity in the area and Territory Collapse which arbitrarily destroyed her surroundings except for where Yuu and Eksert were located. Then, using Structural Synthesis on the area, it gave birth to the possibility of another magic. The high-tier earth magic, Seismic Implosion.

The gravity of all the floating debris made an immediate shift, an invisible force making them shoot through the air and collapse into a single location. Numerous deafening slams reverberated through the room as everything pounded into the base of the pillar, creating a dome of wreckage. Every single one of the magic she cast was a direct attack, which made it clear what the result of this attempt would be if she stopped here… but she didn’t.

Finally completing a full circle around Xeoi, the ground began to glow orange in the shape of a circle. Specifically, the circle she finished creating. The gates of hell opened as the floor began to erupt a pillar of fire. The high-tier fire magic, Hell’s Pillar. Although Erezil could almost instantly cast high-tier spells, those with physical requirements like moving in a circle and setting waypoints were needed to be fulfilled manually.

This was yet another direct attack. That was what it looked like from the outside. However, what happened inside the inferno was completely different. The mass of earth she piled onto Xeoi quickly melted from the extreme heat around it, turning the earth into lava. Since her magic didn’t work because of mana, then she just needed to make something that didn’t possess mana that could harm him. Using magic to create a non-mana attack.

When the pillar of flame finally began to fade, a sour expression filled her face.

“Hahahaha! Using mana to create artificial lava… what a roundabout way of attacking me! Just to remind you, I can use magic too!”

Xeoi stood tall behind a translucent dome of blue with lava trickling to the ground, slowly hardening back into rocks. A water-attributed barrier separated him from the lava.

“Well, maybe it might have worked if only it weren’t so slow. I guess we’ll never know.”

With a foul sneer, he dropped his barrier, making the newly turned rocks above him fall to his head.

“Let me return the favor.”

Through Erezil’s eyes, a burst of mana exploded from his body, scattering the air with it. Seeing as nothing was caught through the naked eye, she deduced that he cast Dimensional Layer. Then, just before the falling rocks could make contact with Xeoi’s body, they disintegrated into dust, or more specifically, sand. The same effect happened in the area around them, deteriorating the earthen surfaces to sand and dust. This was the mid-tier earth magic, Terra Decay. Paired with Dimensional Layer, he created a storm of powder. Combining the two powers with Structural Synthesis, he cast the high-tier earth magic, Dry Blizzard.

A violent sandstorm filled Erezil’s vision, reducing the colors she could see to umber. She felt the sand and dust wrapping all around her body, crawling up her skin like insects. It was clear from the vicious squall that it wanted to suffocate her in the sand but as most battles with magic went, so long as you had the knowledge to counter the enemy’s attacks, you could keep going.

A strong gravitational wave poured out of Erezil, scattering the dust and sand that wrapped her body. Then, multiple orbs swirling with a powerful glow of orange and red scattered in the area. They sparked and brightened, shooting out flames before they peaked with a blinding light that scorched everything that touched it, turning the specks of sand to glass. This time, it was just a mid-tier spell cast multiple times to avoid getting interrupted. So long as one of them survived, Solar Flare was sure to turn the whole sandstorm into a shower of reflecting lights. Although Dry Blizzard could infinitely create sand and dust, the two conditions that had to be maintained were the caster’s mana and the presence of at least one grain of sand or dust. Since Erezil couldn’t rely on the former to happen, she executed the latter.

Light from both the pseudo suns and the natural sunlight from above reflected off the tiny glasses, decorating the air with a magnificent glitter. Floating within the stunning sight, Erezil cast Dimensional Layer. She threw both of her arms forward, making two bodies of ice appear from the ground and crawl around Xeoi. Multiple chunks of hail then pelted the ground from the sky, freezing everything that came into contact with them. Two Impinging Glaciers and a Hailstorm.

With everything set in place, she activated Structural Synthesis, clouding the ceiling with the frozen breath of the north. Mighty walls of ice towered the space around Xeoi. This was the land beneath the snow. High-tier frost magic, Icescape Prison. A type of magic called Field Magic. This magic seals the caster and their targets in a completely different environment as if they were in a different world. To the outside, they commonly looked like a mass of solid color that was difficult to break into just as it was to break out of… or at least, that was what it was supposed to be.

The surface below Xeoi’s feet was completely different from the land of snow and ice. It was the wooden floor he stood on before—the land outside of the prison. It wasn’t just that. The heavy hail that was supposed to freeze everything it touched disintegrated to nothing when approaching him. She thought trapping him inside field magic might work, it was, however, futile.

A violent rain of crystal-like drops then poured from the sky—

“…Harrowed Deluge? Are you thinking of drowning me or something?”

Erezil’s eyes widened, her face contorting in frustration at his pinpoint deliberation. This made the two pillars of water beside her rise slower.

“Dear Maiden, let me tell you a simple fact. To you, and to our whole race of mana-manipulating, magic-wielding species… I am your natural enemy. Your worst nightmare.”

A dark purple light gathered around Xeoi and encased him in a sphere. As the light thickened, entering complete darkness, it exploded. The pressure from the blast made Erezil fall from the sky, or perhaps, part of the reason. Once Erezil removed her face to the floor and examined the area, her face paled and she ground her in aggravation. The world of snow and ice she made was gone without a trace. The same went for the high-tier water magic she was about to cast. All that remained was the ravaged building of what once was the temple for the whole Ujlufi village. The blast Xeoi made wasn’t just a trick with wind and dark magic. It was the power he gained from the depths of hell. The power to consume mana and moon essence, completely erasing her Icescape Prison and the wind magic that allowed her to become airborne. The problem would be solved with non-mana attacks, but the fact was that the monster himself also possessed the ability to cast magic. Making it difficult for simple physical attacks to get through. A paradoxical being.

Uneven footsteps closed into Erezil. She could only stare helplessly as a large frame overshadowed her defenseless body.

“I will declare this once more. You, the most powerful being in our clan, have lost the moment you even thought of challenging me. I will finish this once and for all.”

A glitter of green light appeared in the air. The moment they landed on the soil, it brought about life as multiple plants began to grow in the vicinity. Squeezing themselves through the small holes in the floorboards, the patches of dirt that were exposed from the destroyed parts of the temple, and vines that began to crawl from the trees and onto the building. This was the mid-tier nature magic, Esse Sprout.

Then, a cloud dyed in blood red spread through the plants, making them twist and turn until small mouths appeared on them, their stem and leaves wriggling around violently. Another cloud of red smoke appeared. This time, the plants grew, expanding their size along with their mouths and the reach of their herb bodies. Two casts of the mid-tier nature magic, Violent Animation.

Finally, with Structural Synthesis to finish the formula off, the vines hanging from the ceiling extended, binding all four of Erezil’s limbs and even her body and neck, suspending her in the air. Then, the meat-hungry flowers below her grew tremendously in size, taking up the space of the average car as its large mouth repeatedly chomped its teeth, begging to consume Erezil whole.

“G-Gaahhh!”

She struggled, trying to use fire magic to break out of her binds. But strangely enough, it didn’t work. Much unlike how she cast a string of multiple magic spells before, not a single one worked as she desired.

“Try not to struggle too much and kill yourself, okay? It’s useless. My power is still wrapping your body. Not even chantless casting can activate now.”

“C-Curse you! Xeoi!!”

“Oho? I think that’s the loudest voice I’ve ever heard our Maiden make. Having power really does make everything possible, huh?”

He turned her back to her, leaving her hanging helplessly above the plethora of carnivorous plants.

“W-Wait! Where do you think you’re going!?”

“Haha, do you want to die that badly? Don’t worry, I’ll take care of you once I make quick work of the outsiders. This is our clan’s problem!”

He left Erezil, this time for good, and leisurely walked up to Eksert and Yuu. One was already dead while the other was at the mercy of his gravity magic. An ominous orb of darkness emerged above the palm of his hand.

“These two pests have been a thorn in my side, poking their noses where they’re not supposed to be! For that, both of you; DIE!!”

As he threw the orb—a haze of tango and vermillion filled everyone’s vision.

**303 – The Shadow**

“Kgh… Grk…!”

Rattling chains were the only noise that filled the area. I was here again.

“Gaahhh!!! Hrgh…!! Ragh!!!”

Incessant clinking and clanking caused by every sharp jolt I make. I never thought I’d see this place again, but here I am, back where I started. In an empty void with no other colors aside from my body and these heavy shackles binding me in place. I couldn’t even tell if I was standing on solid ground or just floating in the air. All I knew was I was stuck in place by these chains that were connected to nothingness.

“Let! Me! Out!!!”

I shouted with every push, perhaps hoping that my desperate cries would bring about a miracle and unbind me. Unfortunately, that wasn’t the case.

“GRAAHHH!!!!”

I gave it one last push with all of my might, digging my feet into the formless ground and pushing against it with all the power I could muster.

“Krgh—!!”

Tension spread through the chains, but that was all that happened. The shackles that bound me by the wrists, ankles, and neck dug into my skin, leaving marks and making me gag as the cold metal choked my throat. My reckless charge brought me to the ground, slumping to the ground helplessly.

“Why…? I just… I don’t understand…”

Why am I here? A question that filled my head. Though, having said that, I had an inkling of the reason. I wanted to break from whatever was holding me back. The unknown force that prevented me from using the power of the divine soul on the first raid. All I could recall was being brought to the ground by Xeoi’s gravity magic. My body became heavy, fell to my knees, and the next thing I knew I was here in the same position. But instead of gravity magic, these chains bound me.

I take a deep breath and assess the situation once more. I look at my shackles. I believe this space is a fragment of my mind. It had to be since it showed me all my past memories the last time I was here. If that’s the case, then what are these chains? A manifestation of some kind of regret? Doubts? I don’t want to sound too confident… but I don’t feel a single one. I felt relieved more than I could ever be the last time I was here. But then what were these chains? And not to mention…

“This dagger…”

I brought my hand to my chest where it was met with a bone-like blade. I could never forget this dagger. It was the one I purposefully took to defend Senpai. I know I did something unneeded, but how else should I have reacted? …The person I loved was about to get stabbed right in front of me. There was nothing rational about my actions. Simply one that was shaped by my true feelings. That might have caused unnecessary trouble, but… I don’t regret it.

“But it’s still there.”

“!?”

Just as I was thinking to myself, a black shadow appeared out of thin air. Its figure was vague, like a black mist that would go wherever the wind would take it. Two red dots glowed within the cloud, looking similar to Vems’ eyes that only floated in the darkness.

“How can you say that? When you have these on your body.”

The cloud of darkness extended, joining with the cold shackles and the protrusion of the bone dagger in my chest. Its question made me inadvertently click my tongue.

“What do you know!? What even are you and what are you doing here!?”

I snapped at it, voicing my anger and doubts. I didn’t have time to leisurely talk here! Lady Erezil is out there fighting for our lives! I can’t just stay here and wait for everything to pass! I’m not like what I was before. I NEED to do something!

“What do I know, you ask? For one, I know exactly what those chains and that dagger are. The chains are manifestations of fear. Fear that holds back your true potential. The dagger is the manifestation of regret. One that will stick to your body forever so long as it doesn’t get resolved. These are facts. Knowing that, what are you going to do about them now?”

It stared at me with its beady red eyes, waiting for an answer to come out of my mouth.

Fear? Regret? Of what? I’ve dug through my memories multiple times now. Sure, there were times when I experienced those emotions, but that goes for everyone else too! I’m not perfect, so I make mistakes. What I needed to do was carry on with those feelings, dealing with them the best I can, but not getting consumed by them. I’ve done that already.

Compared to my recent plight, all of these past experiences were trivial at best. None of these could create shackles like these. Even within the realm of my mind… No, exactly because we were in my mind that I knew it was impossible. My conclusion: there weren’t any unresolved fears or regret that could hold me back like this.

Then, was this shadow lying? What can I do to confirm that? This was my mind… so can I order it to tell me? Can I probe it and find out if it’s lying or not? I don’t know, but nothing will happen if I just keep doubting myself.

“Are you lying?”

“What?”

“I’m asking if you’re lying or not about what you said earlier. Are these chains and daggers truly a manifestation of fear and regret?”

The shadow fell silent for a moment, thinking. Finally, it spoke.

“Yes, it’s true. Fear and regret; those are what binds you.”

I could feel vibrations running through my body from his answer. This was it, the message that my mind confirmed. It worked! But what do they mean? These vibrations… they felt like the same vibrations that would run down my body when I manually worked on wooden sculptures. This was the feeling whenever I made the perfect carve… it rang true.

True…? No, it had to have been false, right?

Something began to squeeze my chest. It was the feeling of doubt seeping through my body.

No, I can’t let this faze me! I need to stand my ground! I’ve been following what everyone around me has been telling me to do for the longest time now! Whether it was from someone’s harsh and cruel orders, or from a tactician’s calculated commands, or even from someone trying to comfort me. There wasn’t a single one that I could confidently claim as a decision I made for myself. If I bend to the shadow’s words now, nothing will change! I will carve my own path!

“True… huh? Then, let me rephrase that. Are these chains and daggers… are they a manifestation of MY fears and regrets?”

Once more, it hushed, holding the words at its imaginary throat.

“What are you talking about? You already assumed that was the case.”

It rang true… True, but it dodged the question.

“I don’t want any of that. I want you to answer my question directly. Yes or no. Those are your only options.”

“Why? I don’t see a reason for me to answer that.”

Vibrations crawled over my skin once more. However, there was a difference. A huge difference. Unlike the satisfying vibrations that crawled up my arm and the pleasant sound of a precise carve, this one was duller. An annoying pitch that came from an unsuccessful carve. Its words rang false.

“False… you’re lying. You know I have a good reason to hear your answer!”

“…”

It fell silent.

This… This is it! I’m breaking through it! Whatever this shadow was, it’s trying to hide something. I could guess what it was, but that’s not what I’m looking for. I want a clear answer. One without any loopholes for this shadow to escape through. To do that… I need to craft it. A path made with my own powers, with my own decisions. I can do it, just like I can with sculpting!

**304 – Together**

“What are you hiding?”

“I hide a lot of things.”

True… but wrong. I need to be more specific. Go with questions that can only be answered with true or false.

“Are you my enemy?”

“What else could I be?”

No, he keeps answering me with questions. Nothing will progress like this… If I can make this place tell me if this shadow is lying or not, then I should be able to do other things. This is the dream world. Something that Senpai and Ryosei-san used to interact with each other. If they can make anything they want to happen as they will it… then!

“You only answer me truthfully!”

The red eyes of the shadow seemed to twitch. It seemed to work. If I continue my last train of thought, then…

“Do these chains belong to me?”

“…”

It didn’t speak.

“You must answer every question I ask you!”

“…”

“Do these chains belong to me?”

“Figure that one out yourself.”

“Huh?”

What? It didn’t work? My dream world couldn’t control it? Why? I can tell whether it’s lying or not, but I can’t control its answers directly? No… I’m looking at this wrong. I affected my OWN senses, not the shadow. I can’t influence it directly… Looking back on my conversations with Senpai, this is an answer in and of itself!

“I can’t control you. This means that you’re not a creation of my mind. Who are you!?”

“You did well figuring that one out, but what of it?”

It rang true. It admitted it since it had no escape.

“These chains, this dagger, are these your fears and regrets!?”

“A bold accusation. What benefit would I have for doing that?”

Nothing rings. It’s playing around my lie detection. True and false questions won’t do anything here. I need to make it slip just like last time.

“…You played along with me when I thought I could control you. I was going to get to it eventually, but you hid it for as long as you could… but why? Why do you keep answering me? If I can’t control you, then wouldn’t it just be best to stay silent?”

“What if I said I’m just playing with you?”

“I would have my doubts.”

“And those are?”

“That you want me to break through you.”

“Hahaha, that’s a funny one.”

False.

“…But it’s true… isn’t it?”

“Why do you think so?”

“Because you’re an honest person.”

“Huh?”

“No, excuse me. Not honest, but earnest.”

“You’re spouting nonsense.”

False… huh… could this be…?

A thin smile appeared on my face.

“Then, can I assume I know you?”

“Do you know anyone else who’s a floating cloud of darkness?”

“No, but appearances can easily be changed in the dream world. Well, that aside…”

I stood up, rattling my chains on the shapeless ground, and walked up close to the shadow.

“Aren’t you scared of me?”

“Why would I be?”

“I guess not, but…”

I held my hand out placing it beside the two floating red eyes in the shadow as if caressing someone’s cheeks.

“Hehe, you sure don’t have any qualms about me getting close to you like this.”

“What of it?”

“It just reminded me of someone I know.”

“Someone who looks like a shadow?”

“No, someone who's just being stubborn about this situation. He’s charming, diligent, and sometimes a bit passionate. A sly fox that enjoys wordplay and controlling everything in the palm of his hand.”

“…”

Ah… hahaha!! He fell silent. How cute! If those silent words would be translated by vibrations, they would only ring one thing.

“True. Senpai, I’m glad to see you again!”

“…”

That’s right. There was no other person this could be. A person who’s earnest, passionate, and a bit roundabout with his feelings. Someone with the ability or has gained the ability to communicate with me like this… Normally that would be impossible, but if it’s him, then it would make a lot of sense. The person I love the most. I was angry at first, but the moment it came to me, it all suddenly became fun. Haha, thinking back to what gave him away and made everything click was so sweet. He responded with a witty reply but it came out as a statement. He didn’t think there was anything funny about me doing my best.

The cloud of darkness began to compress, shaping the figure of a human. They then molded into familiar features. Yukou Senkyo finally appeared in front of me. The colorless void changed just as he did, filling up our surroundings in pure white, just like an empty canvas.

“These chains… this dagger… are they yours, Senpai?”

“Mn…”

He nodded.

“Why?”

“…”

I felt relieved when I first realized who he was, but his expression was a bit dark. Just as I was about to ask what it was all about, he spoke.

“Yeah… you don’t need these anymore, huh?”

He snapped his fingers, making the cold shackles disappear from sight. The chains were gone, but there was still something left. The bone dagger.

Senpai closed the distance between us, reducing it to none. He wrapped his arms around me, hugging me tightly.

“W-Wait—No, Senpai, that’s…!”

Of course, with the blade of the dagger still sticking through my chest, it penetrated his. He did this on purpose. I can tell since I could feel his hands thrusting the dagger deeper through our bodies. I felt no pain, and neither did he. We were in the dream world, after all. This wasn’t our actual bodies. Despite that fact, he still bled in the chest… Why?

“Yuu, this is my regret. My fears aside, this will forever be etched into my very soul. I just selfishly dragged you into it. With this, there won’t be any going back. We’ve lost what we had in the past and it’s not coming back.”

“…Mn, I know.”

“This is… a new start. With this new relationship, would you bear my regrets with me?”

He whispered into my ears. But… I already had an answer for that.

“No. I refuse.”

“I-Is that so…?”

My response left him tongue-tied. It looks like he didn’t walk into this situation thinking he’d be rejected. Hehe, despite how smart he is, he’s quite the dummy. Just what I like about him.

“Why are you the only one that can share their regrets?? Isn’t that a bit selfish? Just so you know, I worked hard to get here!”

“…Ahh! …Haha, that you did.”

He let a relieved sigh the moment he realized what I meant.

“Then, for the start of our new relationship, do you agree to us sharing our regrets?”

“If that’s the case… yes.”

“Alright. It’s settled.”

A spear suddenly appeared behind Senpai, the most potent weapon against us vampires, possessing the representation for our fears and death. An invisible force launched it through the air, penetrating through both of our bodies and residing in our chests just beside where the dagger was. Light trickles of blood escaped our mouths, as we kept staring at each other’s faces. The same happened on the shaft of the spear, letting our blood flow down the slightly inclined rod of wood. The moment drops of our blood fell from the spear and onto the white canvas, Senpai spoke.

“Yuu.”

“What is it, Senpai?”

“The next time we meet face to face, I will be your enemy.”

“W-What…?”

He gave me a playful smile before his body became translucent.

“W-Wait! Senpai, what do you mean!? Hey! Senpaaiii!!”

Just like that, he disappeared from sight.

“G-Grrr!! Why!? Why does he always get the last word!?”

Seriously! What does he mean!? These cryptic messages are so annoying!

I stopped for a second, taking my time to level my head. Then, I notice it. My chest lacked both the spear and the dagger that impaled it. I begin to panic, patting my chest and my back in search of the items we shared. I never thought I’d see the day when I worried about not having life-threatening objects sticking out of my body.

*\*Clink!\**

A sharp metallic sound entered my ears. With my enhanced hearing, I traced the source to the bottom of my feet. I stepped on something. Removing my foot, I found two small key chains. One of a bony dagger, and the other a spear.

“…Hehe, I guess these are cuter, huh? I think I like it…”

I placed the accessories on my palms and clutched them tightly to my chest, taking in everything that happened. Suddenly, a thought came to mind.

“W-Wait! I need to help out Lady Erezil and the others!”

Panic began to well up within me, but then, the keychains in the palm of my hand suddenly shook. Surprised, I let out a sharp cry. I reopened my hand to see the small dagger moving on its own, writing words down on my palm.

“O-Oh, this is… Senpai… and these are…”

I read the words and widened my eyes. I forgot I had this option. Thinking about it now, this all began because I wanted to get this back. A thought completely unrelated to the situation popped into my head without notice.

“I wonder if this counts as having matching accessories?”

Since the dagger and spear were basically keychains it should count, right? Well, they’re only present when within my mind so I can’t really show them off…

“Ah!?”

The small spear then picked itself up, thwacking me in the head.

“A-Alright, okay, sorry!”

Shaking the unnecessary thoughts out of my head, I shifted my gaze to my palm and read out loud the next engraved in it.

“I am a master worthy of my soul. Rekindle the ardent flames of creation and destruction, manifest your guiding light. Heed my call, overlord of the dreaded hell and the exalted star, soul that resides within me, Divine Soul of Flame!”

A light of tango and vermillion glowed beneath my clothes, right in the space between my shoulder blades. For a long time in forever, the crest that brandished the red mark of passion radiated once more.

**305 – Ignite**

“What!?”

An enormous burst of flame exploded right in front of Xeoi, consuming his entire field of vision. The heavy waves of fire made him take a step back and brace for impact. He raised both of his arms to shield his face instinctively the moment he saw the sudden blast. Not because he was surprised, but instead was the fault of the intense heat that suddenly released before he even saw the flames. It felt as if he was being cooked alive.

“What!? What the hell!?”

Heat. Agony. Searing skin. Trembling purple light. For the first time after taking this form, his body felt pain. Xeoi forced his eyes open despite the intense thermal radiation wrapping his body. He could barely make out the flames touching his body. His face twisted into a muddled expression, lost as to why the fire was able to reach him. Ideally, he wanted time to pick himself back up, but his body screaming in pain told him all about how he didn’t have the luxury to do that. Instead, he trusted his instincts, focusing not on the outside disturbance, but on the corrupt power within him.

“WRAAAAA!!!!”

A sheet of black collected on the surface of his skin, solidifying and exploding. He opened his eyes, half of his vision blurred, reddened eyes excreting light yellow liquid from the prolonged exposure to heat. With his other eye, he could still see clearly. Unlike his mortal optic, the other one shaped with purple light to match an augmented werewolf’s appearance had no damage, allowing him to see that his effort paid off as a dome empty of fire entered his vision. It seemed like his mana-devouring powers were still in effect. It was simply less effective than how it usually was. Except, there was another problem. This move unearthed something terrible for him.

“—!!?”

A chill ran down his spine. His hair stood on end, ears and tails trembling, body shivering. It was as if death was breathing down his neck. Filled with the idea of his impending doom, his fight-and-flight response triggered, allowing him to gain enough speed to create pillars of stone on both of his sides and flee from the area. Jumping to his front and twisting his body in the middle of the air, his eyes caught sight of an impossibility. It was Eksert with his arm extended outward holding a katana, one that cut through two thick solid pillars of earth. His clothes were scorched, but otherwise alive. If it weren’t for his senses, he wouldn’t have been able to slow down his stroke and dodge. Chills spread through his body at the thought. But then, his body flew further up the air.

“KRGAAAA!!!!”

Again. His vision was taken from him, the colors that only filled it being amber and scarlet. As he fled backward, a thick pillar of lava erupted from the ground like a geyser, consuming his body whole. He could feel the viscous liquid melting his body to the bone. By the time the lava returned to the Earth, all that was left of his outer skin were a few patches countable by a person’s fingers with the rest being his insides, some actually revealing bones.

Just as he thought it wouldn’t get any worse, a shadow eclipsed his body from above. His ruined eye trembled at the sight of Eksert somersaulting in the air with his wakizashi cutting his stomach open. The sensation immediately spread through his body and, as if scorching his muscles wasn’t enough, paralyzed it completely like a fast-acting poison. All he could do was wrench his mouth in pain.

Just as he felt it was about time he made contact with the ground again, he caught Eksert on the edge of his vision in a stance. Two of his hands held firmly on the handle of his katana and by the scabbard mouth. One of his lower hands was writing something in the air but he couldn’t make it out because of the blurry vision of his natural eye. Time passed slowly with him turning his head slightly to the side until his eye made from purple light caught the words.

<May your soul find peace.>

The world spun violently, his face rolling through the blistering ground. Numerous thuds entered his ear. As his vision came to a stop, his face paled. In front of him laid his body… no, pieces of it, completely detached from his head. His lower body from the hip-down was cleaved from his torso, which was also cut cleanly in half, separating his chest from his stomach. He tried to say something but with his mouth separated from his throat, nothing came out. It was left agape as his vision flicked like an expiring light bulb. Slowly, the intervals for light shortened and darkness conquered.

**…………**

What… happened…? Oh… right. I died. Mercilessly butchered. That didn’t take long at all. It was just a moment. A single moment with my guard down, and that was all it took to mow down the omnipotent power it thought I had. That’s right… in battle, every second can mean life or death. Taking me by surprise and utilizing that was the best thing they could do.

Why? Why is everything turning out like this? I just wanted to make the clan a better place. I just wanted to destroy the rules and restrictions they force upon us. I just… wanted freedom. Freedom to use magic however I want. Freedom to become what I want to be. Freedom to travel around the continent and experience many things… Freedom to live… Was that so much to ask for?

…No, this is stupid. Regretting everything now when it’s already too late is stupid. If this path I chose was a mistake, then so are they for letting things come to this. I chose this path because I thought it was right. Just because I’m dying doesn’t change that. I sold myself to the devil the moment I joined hands with END. And even now… I don’t regret it. How could I? This was the only path that I could take to reach my dream. They denied me of it, so I fought back for my right to dream. If I fought for what I thought was right, then I have nothing to regret. I just lost, and now I died because of it… I die, huh?

< May your soul find peace.>

That’s… ha… hahaha… really funny.

Peace? For me???

Hahaha!

There is none! I destroyed it along with the clan’s! You really think I’ll just sink into peace just because I died and couldn’t do anything anymore!? Those naïve words you’re giving to me are nothing but needless meddling! No one understood me, much less an outsider like you! I’m far gone! There’s nothing left for me anymore!

Ha… hahaha… HAHAHAHAHAHA!!!!!

THAT’S RIGHT!

THERE’S NOTHING! IT’S TOO LATE FOR ME! NO WORDS CAN REACH ME! I DEDICATED MYSELF TO THIS PATH FOR TOO LONG! THERE’S NOTHING LEFT WAITING FOR ME! MY BODY’S REDUCED TO A MONSTER AND I MADE IT LIKE THAT BECAUSE I WANTED FREEDOM!

FORSAKE PEACE, EMBRACE CHAOS! IF ALL THAT’S LEFT FOR ME IS TO DISAPPEAR, THEN I’LL MAKE SURE TO DRAG ALL OF YOU DOWN WITH ME! THE CLAN CAN REBUILD AND BECOME BETTER! I AM THE TRAGEDY THAT WILL MAKE EVERYTHING MOVE IN PLACE! EVEN IN DEATH, I WILL WIN! I WILL MAKE THIS CLAN BETTER! I’LL JUST HOWL! HOWL SO LOUDLY THAT THEY WON’T BE ABLE TO IGNORE ME! I WILL HOWL! HOWL FOR THE SAKE OF MY DREAM!!!!

**…………**

“Eksert, something’s happening to the body!”

Across the hellscape of lava and fire, Yuu warned Eksert, who turned his back on the body as he was walking to her, alerting him of the strange activity coming from the corpse. A purple light shone in the center of his chest. The light ignited a purple flame and consumed Xeoi’s chest. The flame’s origin darkened until it solidified into a purple crystal. Then, large flames exploded around it, extending outward and forming four limbs and a head of a wolf. It had no tails, but that didn’t make it any less frightening. Its chest expanded, planted its legs firmly on the ground, threw its whole body forward, and howled.

“AWWWRROOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!”

It created a powerful shockwave, clearing the hellscape Yuu made as if it never existed, revealing the inside of the unscorched wooden temple. It survived the fire thanks to Yuu’s expert handling and the same went for Erezil who was catching her breath where she was once about to be fed to carnivorous plants that were burnt to a crisp by Yuu’s initial attack. However, this was not the time for thankful cheers.

*“\*Yuu, Lady Erezil!\*”*

*“\*Yes!\*”*

*“\*Understood!\*”*

There was no need for more words. There was only one thing that needed to be done.

**306 – Finishing Blow**

Eksert was first to move, charging at Xeoi at breakneck speed.

*“\*Yuu, take his vision!\*”*

He ordered Yuu with Connect but she was one step ahead of him with her arm outstretched, summoning a dome of flame that rose from the ground, consuming Xeoi whole. It was large enough to cover most of what was left of the temple and Eksert broke into the flames without hesitation. This was the power of a person with a high mastery of a certain element. Just like how the Bracelet of Peaceful Nature that decorated Yuu’s arm worked, she could manually take the mana signature of her surroundings and apply them to her flames in real-time, allowing her to control what objects her magic affected. Of course, this only applied to magic that used the fire element. Common sense in Zerid already considered it difficult for someone to take the mana signature of others, so applying it to every magic they cast was seen as a feat that can only be fulfilled by the most exceptional. But for Yuu and her newly regained crest, this was as simple as just willing the fire to choose its victims.

Eksert pierced through the flames unscathed, closing into the heart of the inferno. But then, he noticed something occurred. Instead of the fire flaring indiscriminately, it felt like it was all flowing toward the center. It didn’t even take a second for the reason to present itself. The fire around him disappeared in the blink of an eye, revealing Xeoi’s body shining in purple as the flames were consumed by his body like a dark hole.

Xeoi found Eksert revealed from the dome of inferno and swiftly prepared to intercept him. His feet pushed against the ground, digging out the wooden floor below them. Eksert saw this, but the next thing he realized was that he was already right in front of him. He wasn’t able to react to his immense speed. Claws flew through the air, about to make a fine arc with Eksert in the center. With the speed he had, there was no way for Eksert to dodge this normally. If it weren’t for the fact that Eksert was prepared for situations like this to happen, he would have died long ago.

Eksert’s figure disappeared from existence, leaving the claws to catch nothing but thin air. However, there was something within that emptiness that also made that claw glow purple. While that happened, three formless strokes crossed Xeoi’s body, severing his two arms and his head from his body. No one was behind him when that happened as if a ghost just decided to enter the chaos, or at least that was what it seemed to the naked eye. Eksert was there, blended into his surroundings with the use of light magic to hide his appearance and make him invisible.

Just before Xeoi could gouge Eksert, his lower arm had prepared the chant for short-distance teleportation and repositioned himself behind Xeoi. As a bonus, Erezil had cast light and control magic on him to hide his presence so that Xeoi would notice where he went to.

The three severed body parts dropped to the ground but Eksert wasn’t finished. He took a stance behind the headless body, aiming for the purple crystal core that formed in its chest. Recalling where the crystal would be, he thrust his blade. As if sensing the impending danger, the body crouched, making the blade pierce the area just above the crystal. Xeoi followed up by using one leg to balance his body and the other leg to attack thin air. Coincidence or not, that one area was where Eksert’s invisible body once stood. Since the attack took some time to set up due to his lack of limbs, Eksert easily dodged it but it seemed like his camouflage wasn’t working. But at the very least, Eksert figured something out.

*“\*It seems like he can absorb mana now just like how dark essence would with moon essence! Never use magic directly against him!\*”*

*“\*What!? Even my fire magic won’t work anymore?\*”*

Yuu exclaimed with a shaken voice. It was quite a shock to hear that even when powered by her divine soul, her magic would get consumed.

*“\*Unfortunately, yes. It must be related to his transformation. This is only my conjecture, but maybe Xeoi wasn’t able to use this power before since he was a half-augmented werewolf. But now it’s different. The form he has is a pure augmented werewolf powered by dark essence.\*”*

*“\*That’s annoying…\*”*

Erezil shared her feelings.

*“\*Indeed. I thought about indirect ways to affect him like filling the room with smoke to make it hard to breathe or distorting the appearance of the room, but that would also affect you, Sir Eksert. It would be a gamble to use these ideas since we are not even certain these would make a difference.\*”*

*“\*I’ll handle it! The worst thing that can happen now is if we let this thing out of this building! We can’t afford to compromise now!\*”*

*“\*Very well.”*

Erezil shifted her gaze to Mrel who was lying on the ground unconscious. A light zephyr picked him up from the ground and carried him outside the temple. Now that he was gone, she turned to Yuu.

*“Miss Yuu, I’ll let you handle the smoke. Burn the temple.\*”*

*“\*I-Is that really okay?\*”*

*“\*Yes.\*”*

Yuu was taken aback by her order which went to show the resolve she steeled herself with to finally bring this situation to an end. Denying her words would stain her determination. With that, Yuu also steeled herself.

The wooden walls of the temple were set ablaze, encasing everyone in a wall of flame. The very next second, light spread from the center of the temple and covered everything in a white sheet. A world of pure white, complete emptiness. The only ones visible were Erezil, Yuu, Eksert, Xeoi, and the wooden floor around him so that he wouldn’t absorb the light magic Erezil was using, making the illusion of a spotlight that brought all of the attention to their enemy.

Xeoi had long since regenerated and Eksert was doing all he could to hold him down. He was struggling since his enemy’s speed and agility were greater than his which brought him into dangerous situations where he needed to use teleportation magic to avoid the attack. The downside of doing so was that Xeoi would consume the mana that teleportation left in his tracks, making him only more powerful and harder to deal with. It was a godsend that this beast couldn’t use magic on top of this, perhaps being the trade-off of turning into a pure augmented werewolf. But now that Erezil and Yuu have finished setting the stage, it was time to finish this.

*\*SCREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!!!\**

A high-pitched noise reverberated in the white world. Making everyone including Xeoi jerk their heads in irritation, a sharp noise made from sound magic, a derivative of the control element. Eksert and the others expected this through Erezil’s warning in the Connect network, but even so, they couldn’t deny how annoying this noise was. However, the surprise gave Eksert an opening to attack Xeoi. He cut through both of Xeoi’s arms, preventing him to guard, and went for the gem in his chest.

“WRAAAA!!!!”

But Xeoi wouldn’t allow it. He crouched, catching the blade with his teeth. He tried to break the blade in two but stopped and opted to retreat when Eksert took a step forward and tried to attack him with the wakizashi in his free hand. The wooden spotlight followed his movements, not giving him a chance to absorb any of the mana around him. As he went, he caught the scent of burning wood as smoke and ashes entered his nose. He felt stuffy, but that also meant that going forward would lead to the exit. Even if the white world indirectly covered his vision, the outside world was still there. What was waiting in front of him was a wall of fire that will empower him and a free exit to the outside world. He quickened his pace, charging at the empty space. Until finally, he was met with a solid wall which he crashed into.

Unbeknownst to Xeoi, despite the emptiness in the white world, Yuu could still feel where her flames were located, allowing her perfect knowledge of where the edges of the white world were. As she saw Xeoi charging at one of them, she erected a thick wall of earth that would block his path. The wall was made with magic, but the moment it finished forming, the mana within the wall disappeared since all the mana was really needed for was to raise the earth. Unlike how magic like Great Wall would create earth from thin air, Yuu only used a portion of that power. She made natural solid earth rise from the ground and held it in place by manipulating the cavity created beneath the wall to hold it in place, preventing Xeoi’s mana absorption.

With Xeoi stunned by the crash, Eksert immediately went for the attack. The perfect opening. He charged as he held his blade at the ready. The moment Xeoi’s body entered his attack range, he slashed, making a stroke that crossed with the purple gem in Xeoi’s chest, leaving a clean cut on the surface of the earth wall along with it. Xeoi’s body parted into two. The crystal was broken; the battle is over… or at least, that was what the three thought.

“GRAA—!! AWROOOOO!!!!!!”

Xeoi howled once more, causing his body to spasm. Then, the purple flames that formed his body spread, the portion that was separated from his head to the chest began to form a lower body while the portion that parted from the chest to the lower body began forming an upper body. By the time any of the three could accept what was happening in front of them, Xeoi’s body separated into two completely different clones of himself.

“AAAAWWRRROOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!”

The two monsters howled into the sky, clearing all of the magic in place, and revealing the temple seared from Yuu’s magic. Everyone stared at the two with horror, thinking about what tragedy they were about to bring.

**307 – Heart’s Wish**

Being right in front of the two monsters, Eksert knew he was in the most danger. He could barely deal with one of them; two were just absurd. One of the clones launched its claws at him, making Eskert dodge backward. Alas, this was what the two clones wanted as the other had already anticipated his movement and attacked from behind. The moment he sensed the danger, Eksert twisted his body and blocked the brunt of the attack to his body with his wakizashi. However, that didn’t stop its claws from scratching the surface of his helmet.

As the shards of glass flew in the air, Eksert finished writing the chant for teleportation in his lower hand and warped away from the area before the other clone could follow up the attack from behind. He returned to Yuu and Erezil who couldn’t believe what was happening. It made sense. Eksert didn’t want to believe it either.

They all simply thought that if they broke the crystal, the one part in its body that screamed like it was a weak spot, then it would end everything. Even Xeoi himself seemed to think the same thing, avoiding their attacks and protecting the crystal and all, but that wasn’t the case. They couldn’t use magic on it and physical attacks wouldn’t work on any part of it. Their enemy was an augmented werewolf, but none of the prevalent knowledge of how to kill one normally helped here. They couldn’t drain it of its mana since it didn’t have any to begin with. And burning it in flames simply didn’t work since it would consume its mana and empower it even more.

As they were thinking, one of the clones left the temple and went to spread its wrath unto the outside world, the one thing everyone wanted to prevent. Meanwhile, the other one faced the group, walking up to them leisurely, perhaps understanding where it stood.

*“\*How… do we defeat this…?\*”*

Erezil asked, crestfallen.

*“\*…\*”*

Eksert clenched his fists in frustration.

*“\*There’s… only one thing I can think of…\*”*

Erezil and Yuu jerked their hanging heads up to look at Eksert in surprise, but their hopeful expressions darkened when they saw how frustrated he was. They didn’t know why, but this wasn’t a reaction that spelled a good ending. But despite how he felt about the plan, Eksert shared it with them.

*“\*The one thing that will end this… is if we overload their dark essence with so much mana at once that it would explode. Just like in the results of Miss Hizli’s experiments.\*”*

*“\*What? But how do we do that?\*”*

*“\*…\*”*

Yuu asked, which only made his words stick to his throat. And yet, despite that, he recovered and decided to push the idea through.

*“\*…By sacrificing someone with a large amount of mana inside them.\*”*

The girls’ eyes widened. They all caught his implication. To end this, the two of the most powerful allies they had would have to lay down their lives—Eksert and Erezil.

*“\*I’m sorry. Maybe spirit power could work, but I can’t utilize spirit power like how Earthlings would. I can only apply them to my weapons which would turn them into physical attacks… if only I knew…!\*”*

He clenched his fist even harder, his head hanging with frustration.

*“\*…No, this is not your fault, Sir Eksert. If anything, it would be ours for letting this situation develop to this point. For that, I deeply apologize.\*”*

Erezil bowed her head to Eksert who kept his back turned to her. He stood there, silently.

“No… NO!!”

A voice reached the two’s ears. In contrast to their sorrowful voices, her’s were filled with determination. The two inadvertently turned to her, but with Eksert covering the scratch mark the clone dug into his helmet.

“Why are you both talking like I’m the most useless one here!? Why are you both talking about sacrificing yourselves while I just sit here and watch everything happen!? Is this really the only thing you can think of!?”

“I know how you feel, Miss Yuu. But, we have no other choice…”

“Fine! If that’s all you can think of, then I’ll just make one! I will open us a new possibility!”

“What do you—”

Eksert and Erezil watched her as she cried out, burying Erezil’s voice with her own.

“VEOIA—”

**…………**

“\*—I know you’re here!\*”

Eksert and Erezil disappeared and so did the scorched temple. The scenery changed completely. Right now, Yuu stood in the middle of a traditional Japanese audience hall. The floor was covered in finely woven tatami mats, elegant trees and animals painted onto the paper doors, and the exposed posts and beams of clear-grained wood were decorated with nail-head covers of flaming flowers. Ignoring the ornate room, she stared at the elevated portion of the room where sliding doors blocked her view of the other room.

“My! It’s been a while since you last visited me here, Master!”

The elated sound of a woman’s voice penetrated the sliding doors in front of her. The doors promptly opened on their own, revealing to Yuu a room with the same design but one with more aesthetic designs such as a raised alcove decorated with a scroll painting on the wall with a tall artistic vase in front of it. There were also staggered shelves that displayed various items such as a red and orange paper fan, a traditional tea set, a bonsai tree, and other ornaments. On the center wall was a large banner displaying the very same crest on Yuu’s back.

In the middle of everything was a beautiful woman sitting in a seiza donning a red kimono with a pink ornate design. A purple Obi with golden embellishments wrapped her waist. Her silky black hair with a red accent stretched to her waist. A small part of it tied in a ponytail with a red string, the left side of her bangs kept tidy by an ornate red hairclip designed with a small golden fan, red fiery flowers, and ribbon-like tassels that went down to her shoulder. Her sharp vermillion eyes glimmered against the light of the lanterns above, enhancing the beauty of her porcelain skin.

“It’s been a while, hasn’t it, Master?”

Yuu barged into this room in a panic, but after seeing the person in front of her, even she was stupefied. Her mouth was left agape as she tried to say something but couldn’t get her words through her throat. Despite that, Veoia seemed to get her message.

“Hahaha, did I surprise you? Mhm~ Of course I did! Every other time you came to this room, it was empty. But now, a beautiful woman is sitting in it.”

“V-Veoia, this is…”

“Yes, it is as you imagine. This is the form of the sculpture you once envisioned me as. I felt I needed to give you some kind of surprise when we next meet, so here it is!”

She stood up from her seiza and did an elegant twirl, displaying her enchanting figure to Yuu.

“How do I look?”

“You’re beautiful… just like how I thought you’d be.”

“Hehe, you’re silly, Master. Of course, I am. You made this form after all.”

“Mn… I did.”

The memories of her sculpting her image of Veoia came to mind. She didn’t spare a single bit of effort. She used everything at her disposal, even going through the trouble of researching traditional kimonos of Earth and various other articles that made them beautiful. She couldn’t help but make a delighted smile.

“Well, my surprise aside. You want something from me, don’t you, Master?”

“Yes. I want the power to burn Xeoi completely. The power to protect my allies.”

Veoia placed her hand to her chin, thinking.

“I see… that purple beast, huh? I am sorry to say, but with the current you, this is the limit you can handle my power.”

“That… can’t be!”

She raised her voice in denial.

“I could control my power better than this before! I—We fought for our lives with that power! I know we have the strength to take these clones down!”

However, Veoia could only shake her head.

“Yes, that is correct. However, that is a case of the past. Right now, in the present, you have only just revived your right to my power. It was the very same level of power you had when you sculpted happily as a child. Just like how you’ve lost my powers, you must rebuild this control once more. Master, allow me to be blunt. There is no orthodox way of giving you the power you need as of this moment.”

“What…”

Her eyes widened in shock, but suddenly, she shook her head and hung it, staring at the ground, deep in thought. Then, she raised her head once more, staring Veoia in the eyes with bright determination, reflecting her inextinguishable resolve and dedication.

“An orthodox way!? Then, is there an unorthodox way of doing it!? Is there!?”

Veoia made a difficult face and let out a light sigh.

“Haah… you usually wouldn’t notice that. That man must be influencing you… But, there is a way, miraculous as it is.”

“Then we’ll use it! No matter how dangerous it is!”

“I would like you to reconsider this, Master. This option may very well erase your soul from this body!”

“W-What? It’s THAT dangerous!?”

“See, even you didn’t expect it! I knew it was best to not have this conversation—”

“Wait! No, I-I…”

Yuu’s eyes darted around the room, looking for an excuse to persuade Veoia with. She couldn’t deny that the prospect of having her soul erased from existence made her freeze. It wasn’t just about dying, but also because she wanted to see her loved ones once more. Particularly, the one she met just a while ago…

“…!”

A thought crossed her mind, making her dig for something in her pockets. She found them and presented them to Veoia. A small bony dagger and a spear accessory.

“These! These are proof of my bond and promise with the person I love! I know that person is somewhere in this world looking for me! He’s out there right now doing his best to find me, risking his life traveling a world he never even knew about just to meet with me! If I can’t pour my all here and now, then how do you expect me to face him!? If I don’t take any risks here, I’ll stay weak forever! I won’t have that! I will prove to him how much I’ve grown by saving my allies right now!”

She shouted her heart out on Veoia, every word filled with a plethora of emotions. Sadness, fear, excitement, anger, frustration, hope, determination, and most of all…

“This is your passion… huh?”

Veoia whispered under her breath, albeit slightly disgruntled. She hid it with her poker face on the outside, but on the inside, it was a completely different story.

*“\*Krghhh~!!!! Are you telling me my cute, precious master got to meet me again only because of the passion of love!? Are you serious!? It was WAAAY better when it was just the passion of making sculptures!! I hate this passion! Argh...! I swear, the moment I get to talk to this homewrecker I’ll give this scum that stole my master away from me a piece of my mind! He’s dead to me! DEAD!!!\*”*

“O-Oohh~ You feel that way, do you, Master…?”

“Yes! Without a doubt in my mind!”

*“\*Doubt it!! I want you to doubt it!!!\*”*

Veoia let out a deeper sigh than earlier, letting the fumes that were gathering in her head out.

“Understood. If my master wishes it, then I will do my best to fulfill your wishes. But first… Master, I want you to answer this one question honestly.”

“What is it?”

“If it had to happen by force, against your will, would you still dedicate your life to the man named Yukou Senkyo?”

“…?”

It seemed like Yuu wasn’t expecting this kind of question, but the serious look on Veoia’s face told her all she had to know, making her straighten her spine before responding with her heart.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

*“\*WHY!?\*”*

“Very well.”

Hiding her vexation from her master, Veoia snapped her fingers, consuming the whole room in flames.

**308 – True Flame**

“VEOIA—MANIFEST MY TRUE POWER!!”

“What!?”

Erezil exclaimed, shocked at the change in her mana.

A bright flame ignited on Yuu’s back, her crimson eyes glinted with an amber hue, and steam began to emit from the surface of her skin. She entered a crouching start, flame wrapping her hands and feet as she did so. Cinders began circling her body. Then, the moment she pushed the ground, sparks flew, and her body was coated with a thick sheet of flame as she launched at Xeoi’s clone like a rocket, leaving a spiral of flame down her path.

“Miss Yuu!”

“…”

Erezil called out to her while Eksert silently watched her go, not failing to cover his broken helmet. As Yuu propelled at the clone, it stood its ground and let out a fearsome howl.

“AWROOO!!”

A dark wave released from its mouth, aiming to hit Yuu and consume her mana. In response to this, she threw her arm across the horizon, making an arc that released fire like a flamethrower, matching the dark wave the clone threw at her. Then, as they made contact, the dark wave was easily consumed by the flames. The clone widened its eyes in surprise, but it didn’t have time to process what was happening as Yuu reached it.

She placed her arms below her shoulders, close to the body, and curved them with her fingers spread apart from each other as if preparing to tackle. The clone tried to claw Yuu in the air, but her body made a sharp turn in the air, weaving below its arm and penetrating its defenses. She turned her hand to a claw and thrust it to the center of its chest, gouging the area around its crystal heart. A thick amount of fire poured into its body from her hand, filling the inside of its translucent light purple skin with inferno, and causing the excess blaze to pour out of its mouth.

Transferring her force and momentum to the clone, its body flew across the room, digging the wooden floorboards as it scraped against the ground. The moment it made a complete stop, leaving wreckage behind its path like a crashed meteor, ash and cinders flew across the sky as a flower of flame bloomed beneath Xeoi’s clone with it in the pistil of the flower. The blossom dyed the scorched walls in a soft reddish-orange. At its full bloom, the flower closed its petals, consuming the clone whole, releasing a steaming shockwave as it sealed.

Yuu determined that the battle was over and went outside to hunt down the remaining clone. A short while later, Erezil and Eksert walked up to the fire flower that was slowly shrinking over time. The moment it fully disappeared, they found that all that remained in the center of the flower was a pile of ashes.

How did Yuu’s fire overcome Xeoi’s mana-consuming body? Erezil realized the answer to that question the moment she recalled the sudden change in her mana.

“She… Miss Yuu’s magic… didn’t have mana.”

She muttered out loud, astounded at the sudden development. At first, she thought that something happened to her that made her mana signature so scarce that it was undetectable, making her worry about her reckless charge, but she was off the mark. The fire that she produced simply lacked mana, to begin with. It wasn’t created by mana, spells, or any of the sort, making it difficult for her to call it magic. If she had to compare it to anything, then it would be that of a natural disaster. Against Xeoi who could only consume mana, this magic-like attack that lacked mana was the bane of his existence. He had neither the power to stop it nor to withstand it. In the face of Yuu’s current power… against her True Flames… he was of no threat.

**…………**

“W…hat…?”

Mrel clasped his head as his consciousness slowly returned. His eyes opened and looked around the area realizing that she was inside one of the Ujlufi village’s residential houses.

“Where am I… Brother! Where’s Brother Xeoi!?”

He cried as the memories before he got knocked out slowly flowed back into his head. He jumped out of the bed, found the belt that held his chakrams in the middle of the floor, equipped it, and was about to barge out of the door to look for his beloved brother figure… but then, he stopped in his tracks.

*“\*You know… I’ve always hated you.\*”*

The cruel words reverberated in his ears like a curse, keeping him from moving anywhere.

*“\*You heard me. You’re just so clingy. Sticking to me every chance you get. It gets on my nerves, you know?\*”*

“No, I… don’t…”

He tried to get the words out of his throat, despite him knowing fully well they were lies.

*“\*You’re not doing anything; just repeating everything you’ve done since we were children.\*”*

“…”

Feeling the guilt spreading through his chest, he fell silent. The points his brother made squeezed his heart like a vice.

*“\*You disappointed me. That’s why I hate you.\*”*

“Where did… I go wrong…?”

That was the question that he wanted to ask his brother the most. However, there would be no doubt that it would only become fuel for the fire if he actually went through with the idea. His brother declared his incompetence. He felt that seeking his guide for the answers despite this would only drive the point. This was something that he needed to find out for himself. It was something he needed to realize by himself.

*\*BOOOM!!\**

“What was that!?”

Mrel promptly opened the door to inspect the noise, almost as if the explosive sound broke down the invisible barrier that separated him from the exit. He ran through the village structures which seemed to be unharmed. Well, the area he was currently in was at the very least. The moment he closed into the heart of the village there was nothing but destruction as far as the eye can see. Houses and stores felled in a barbaric manner, tearing structures down for the sake of pure destruction.

*\*Clink\* \*Clink\* \*Clank\**

He heard the cluttering from a nearby source and quietly approached it. Peeking from behind the corner, he found an augmented werewolf clad in pure purple light rummaging through the rubble until it picked up a translucent white gem. A Traveler’s Gem. Specifically, one of the gems that were secretly used around the town in case of emergencies.

*\*VVSSHHH!!!\**

Without hesitation, Mrel took one of the chakrams attached to his belt and threw it at the werewolf’s chest where a solid purple gem lay. Sensing the strength of his enemy, he manifested a fourth senlr, activating it immediately, and summoning two orbs that exploded into two spinning disks that revolved around his chakram, unaware of the mistake he was making.

The werewolf simply stood there in silence as the two flaming disks approached him and got consumed by his body, making it glow.

“What!?”

Mrel was shocked, but his expression brightened when the werewolf made no movement to evade his chakram and struck the purple gem, separating it into two.

“Hah!”

The werewolf’s body split into two, but those very parts expanded until they formed two purple werewolves.

“…!?”

It made him take a step back in fear and confusion. But as if it weren’t enough, the werewolf picked up his chakram and split the other werewolf’s gem into two. Forming a total of three werewolves. They repeated this loop over and over until it produced a total of twelve werewolves clad in purple flames. The whole time, Mrel helplessly watched the horrifying scene, backing up blindly, which made him trip and fall to his bottom, cornering his back to one of the remains of a wall.

One of the werewolves approached him. His body shook in terror, mouth agape from trepidation, eyes unblinking. Then, the werewolf formed words.

“…JUst… aS… i… ThoUGHt. YoU… DiSAPpoInT Me.”

Although the voice was warped, Mrel could faintly recognize the person behind the voice.

“…Brother?”

Without another word, Xeoi’s clone raised its arm, claws protruding. All Mrel did was stare at it as his death slowly dropped from above. His eyes widened, pupils reflecting the sharp claws, but there was no resistance. But then, just before it could reach him, a blazing object knocked it away, ash and cinders trailing its path. Slowly turning his head, Mrel saw Yuu’s figure wrapped in a thick sheet of fire on top of Xeoi’s clone. She thrust her hand into the clone’s crystal heart, filling its insides with flames until it threw it out its mouth. Then, a fiery flower appeared from the ground as if symbolizing its death, and consumed the body whole.

All of the remaining eleven clones saw this and staggered backward, away from the threat in front of them. Clones as they were, they didn’t share their senses. This was proven since they didn’t decide to flee when Yuu took down the first clone. Now that all of them witnessed what happened, there was no need for that, but also, it was too late.

The werewolves scattered, fleeing from the impossibly powerful opponent they were faced with. The last time they saw her, she was but a backline unit. A weak spellcaster that was nothing against their mana-devouring capabilities. But for some reason, she was able to hurt them, burn them, consume them, incinerate them. As of this moment, she was the unknown that could take their lives, so they fled in all directions, hoping that even if not all of them could escape, some would.

Yuu turned her back to the closed fire flower burning behind her and turned her gaze to Mrel. The young werewolf didn’t know how to react and hung his head and ground his teeth, perhaps in shame or frustration, but she felt no malice. She slowly went after the fleeing clones. She passed Mrel. And as she was about to turn the corner, Mrel finally asked.

“Hey… why did… everything turn out like this…?”

Yuu spared him a glance, but despite her flaming eyes, her stare was as cold as ice. Mrel saw it. Then, without a word, Yuu turned her back and continued her hunt. Meanwhile, Mrel was left in shock.

“I know, right…? What the hell am I even talking about…?”

He pulled his legs to his chin and buried his face in them.

“Ah… AHHH…!! AAAAAAAARRRRRRRGGGGGHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!”

He screamed with all of his might, emptying his lungs and breaking his vocal cords. The cries of the young boy continued beneath the shadow of a broken building, lasting until his throat found its limit.

**309 – Fire Flower**

Numerous footfalls thundered across the Ujlufi Village, all of them aiming to escape the area. Eleven augmented werewolves ran through the structures, over and under obstacles on all fours. They weren’t taking any chances and went for the safest possible option to survive. Eleven purple flames raced to the edge of the village walls. Then, a single, bright orange flame towered over all of them, floating in the sky with a blank expression on her face but fiery eyes that showed her determination. Supported by the flames shooting out of her feet, she stretched her arms out to both sides, ignited them in flames, and crossed her arms.

Just as the eleven purple flames were about to reach the edge, fire rose from the ground in a spiral motion, rising to the sky until it created a dome of hell. All of the eleven clones turned their backs and stared blankly at the sky where Yuu’s bright figure radiated with both beauty and ferocity. Unable to take it, two of the eleven tried to force themselves out of the dome by crossing the fire. They disappeared past the flames, but then, the solid dome morphed into bars, allowing the other wolves inside the dome to witness the results of their allies’ struggle. What was revealed to them was their purple flames overwhelmed with orange ones, a flower of fire blooming below their unmoving bodies on the floor, closing their petals and consuming them whole. An act of callousness. Mercilessly threatening the ones inside by making an example of others. The remaining nine clones scattered around the town, searching for a different way out of this hell.

Nine purple flames sprawled unevenly across the village, some entering the houses looking for exits. In response to this, Yuu raised her hand slightly above her head, ignited it, and dropped it like a hammer of judgment. The wooden structures within the dome all caught on fire, consuming a total of three werewolves that tried to salvage Traveler’s Gems in the buildings. Just like the others, a flower of fire bloomed beneath their corpses.

Six purple flames ran helplessly through the village streets. Seeing this, Yuu brought up her hand to her face and shaped her hand to extend only her index and middle finger. She placed the tips of those fingers in front of her mouth, ignited them, and blew on them. A flood of thick black smoke released from the dome of hell and flooded the streets, suffocating the clones running around it. The only parts left unaffected by the chaos were the temple and one spot in the village where Mrel remained screaming. She was in complete control. In this situation, she was none other than a God.

Of course, she doubted that smoke would actually kill these purple beasts, it just made it easier to take them out. So, God descended from the sky.

Ash, cinder, ember, and smoke filled the air, slowly suffocating the six remaining clones in the vicinity. They each tried to navigate through the black clouds, hoping for a miracle, to find a sign of release. This wish was granted to three of the clones as a blast of flame flooded the street all three of them were on, releasing them from the cages of their miserable li, and planting them a beautiful fiery blossom as a tribute for their departure.

One of them wasn’t so lucky as they ran blindly through the smoldering fumes. On all fours, they tried to escape the will of God, resulting in them going at breakneck speed toward the dome of hell, incinerating him just like the first two victims of the dome. Without fail, a flower of fire bid its condolences.

Two of them remained. They walked leisurely through the singed vapors having accepted their fates. Miraculously, they found each other and blindly trekked through the streets together. Then, a figure tinged with orange appeared before them, making them stop in their tracks and waited for them to appear. The smoke parted away from the area, allowing the embodiment of God to present herself, a blank color in her blazing eyes, she stared at the two. The remaining werewolves turned their gazes to the other, silently exchanging messages through eye contact. Returning their gaze to God, one of them spoke out.

“wE… ReGREt nOtHNG…”

The other followed.

“DEliVer… To THem… Our lAST… mEsSAGe…”

The one that first spoke out turned their head to the nearby building that was set on fire, but never burning, and returned it to God. The two spoke, but their mangled voices refused to talk in unison.

“We… DEsIRe FReEDom…”

“We dESirE… ChANge…”

Then, as if this last message meant the most to them, their distorted voices synchronized.

“…LeT… OUr cLAn… EvOLvE…”

Yuu kept her contrasting gaze on the two, listening to them silently. Then, she calmly walked up to the two and placed her hands on both of their crystal hearts. The two accepted her and gave no resistance. The two were soon wrapped in flames, making their bodies limp as the flame of their lives flickered. Yuu held both of them and lightly placed them on the ground in a seiza position. She faced both of them as two fiery flowers blossomed beneath them. She gave them a light bow before the petals sealed and consumed the two completely.

After a few seconds, Yuu turned her back, and snapped her fingers, sparking a flame. Reacting to this, the dome of hell, the burning structures, and the cloud of smoke all disappeared. The only traces that proved they even existed were the ashes, cinders, and embers that danced through the sky of Ujlifi Village and the enclosed fiery flowers that scattered around it.

**…………**

*“\*‘Course it is! We’re qeajrvs! We’re basically the only ones that can do what Angels can when we reach four-tail! We can cast mid-tier magic without chanting and other cool stuff! And after that, we can become even more powerful with five tails! Why limit yourself to earth if you can do even more!?\*”*

Ah… I remember. Those were the very words that I gave to Mrel when we first met. In those days, I was still a bright child who was optimistic about their future, living with their all to fulfill their dreams. The fun days I spent with my brother began there, learning magic and how to control our mana with our senlr. There were… a lot of mistakes which led to fights, but all of them were trivial and we would immediately make up the very next day. I never thought that I would end up trying to kill my dear brother and take control of the clan by force in the future… When did it all start, I wonder?

*“\*…Brother!\*”*

*“\*MREL!!\*”*

Ah, that’s right. If there was anything that sparked this conflict, then this would be the first of many other sparks down the road eventually lit up a flame. We were doing our daily training in the forest. When we took a break, Mrel insisted that we go to the edge of the forest to see what the outside world looked like. I was interested in it just as he was, so I didn’t even think twice about agreeing. When we got there, we saw the line where the trees of the forest ended, the line where we were forbidden to cross for the safety of our clan. Yet, despite that, the empty plains that opened up the blue sky on the horizon just seemed too enchanting to simply disregard. That was when I found myself with another dream.

*“\*I want to travel outside the forest when I’m older!\*”*

*“\*Yeah! Me too! We can together, Brother Xeoi!\*”*

*“\*Haha! Yeah, we can! It’s going to be so much fun!\*”*

Dreaming. That was the best entertainment the two of us have had, imagining the bright futures we had and the limitless possibilities. How naïve we were…

**310 – Fallen Victory**

*“\*…Brother!\*”*

*“\*MREL!!\*”*

Just when we were going back to our usual training grounds, Mrel fell behind when curiosity got the better of him and made him inspect a noise where two Isers ambushed him. The Iser was forest species with long brown hair that could cover their small bodies and disguise themselves like plants. They had long arms and legs compared to their bodies which were about the size of an average human adult man’s fist. Small as they were, they were vicious when they hunt in packs, brandishing their small weapons to overwhelm weak or crippled opponents. Thankfully for us, they weren’t hunting and only happened upon two strays. However, that didn’t make the situation any better at the time.

I ran back as fast as I could before it was too late. Mrel got pierced a few times with their small blades but he successfully controlled the damage to only be on his arms as he blocked with them. I tried to get to him as fast as I could but I was too scared of what would happen if everything was too late by the time I could physically defend him. So instead, I used magic. The fear and desperation that flowed through me activated my senlr, allowing me to become a three-tail for a short period. Shards of ice flew around me as I chanted and shot them at the Isers. Each one that pelted them pierced their skin and froze them in ice. With the threat gone, I ran to Mrel and comforted his shaking body. We canceled training and headed straight back to the village. Little did we know, our hardship would only begin there.

*“\*Pqxe sixe tcz vvaui j driia lr pqkrn!?\*”*

*(What do you mean you went to the edge of the forest!?)*

Our clan leader, Elder Elrei greeted us with a furious spiel. He went about how we violated the clan’s rules and that we brought the situation upon ourselves. I explained how we didn’t actually leave the forest and simply observed from a distance, but the man insisted on our fault. All I could hear was pure sophistry.

I told them how I manifested a third tail for the situation but none would believe me. Of course, why would they? I only recently received a permanent second tail, even temporary, a third tail that early only sounded like a child’s fantastical ramblings. Then, he said something that frustrated me even more. He entertained the idea of my feat but announced that, if that were the case, he would condemn me for using an extra senlr near the edge of the forest where there was danger of our secret being revealed.

I just used magic to save my brother! Why am I being punished for that!? Why should I hold back on using magic in that situation!? Someone’s life was at risk! I told him what I thought, but there was no use. He said that it would have been best in the first place if we didn’t go near the edge of the forest. They wanted to keep our strength a secret so badly that it sickened me. After many situations like this, vexation became the norm for me.

*“\*Xeoi, you’ve been assigned to the close-quarter guard. You will report to your assigned superior by tomorrow morning.\*”*

The years passed and it was time for me to inherit the roles my parents had. To become a guard that would defend the village. I was quite happy about this since there were other children who had roles that they didn’t like. If I entered the guard, I could become a part of the magic guard that specialized in handling magic and mana… Alas, because of how my body grew strong and muscular, they saw it fit to send me to the close-quarter guard, the people that specialized in melee combat.

I couldn’t accept this and tried many times to have my role changed. But in the Ujlufi Clan, the leader’s word was absolute, that being—Elder Elrei. He denied me over and over, telling me the same excuses.

*“\*Xehwo lroa. Hoaiia tcza krnlr xetjdr. Drdrtfiken iiag tcz pqkrn hkrnlr fims cziiaalrkrn.\*”*

*(You need to accept this. You’re not a child anymore. Understand that you can’t have everything go as you want it.)*

I wanted to practice magic. To excel in my talent. To become just as powerful as the strongest qeajrv in history. I told him what I wanted from the bottom of my heart, but that didn’t do anything to sway his heart. His ramblings went around the line of how the village needed to be as organized as possible. To follow the rules that guide them to the best choices. To protect the village from the threats the outside world would bring them. I understood everything to the point where I felt sick hearing everything over and over like a broken record. I understood clearly, but I just couldn’t agree with him. I made that clear, yet I still ended up in the close-quarter guard.

*“\*Brother Xeoi! You were awesome back there! You hacked and slashed that Xeqrel like it was nothing!\*”*

My dear brother praised me, but I didn’t feel an ounce of delight. Before, I welcomed his praise since I was actually happy about what I was doing. Using magic and getting better at it. But now that we’ve grown, so did the invisible rift that brought us apart… except, that rift apparently only existed in my eyes. He blindly praised me for everything I did no matter what it was. Achievement or mistake he would somehow find a way to turn it into praise. The worse part was that there was no malice in his words, no obligation, just genuine amazement. It made me sick.

*\*How can you be so carefree to not notice I’ve been suffering? Do you really think I’d be happy about using the sword instead of magic!? Oh, I know, it’s because you got what you wanted!\**

Unlike me, Mrel showed his talents to the point where even the Elder recognized him and changed his role from a builder to one of the units of the magic guard. He was so happy. I would have been too, if you asked the me when I was still a kid. Right now, there was nothing but frustration and jealousy.

*\*He had no talent. He just trained his hardest. But why was it that someone like me who had talent, passion, determination, and the one who worked harder than anyone else, ended up lost!? IS IT REALLY JUST BECAUSE OF MY BODY!? IF SO THEN I NEVER WANTED THIS IN THE FIRST PLACE!\**

Brewing inside me was the cauldron of hate and frustration. My future was lost to my body’s natural development. The passion I had for magic was all transferred to my negative emotions. The person I treated for so long as my true little brother left me in the dust and spewed genuine words of praise for every tiny thing I did, making my ears bleed from false sarcasm.

*“\*AAAAARRRRGHHHHH!!!\*”*

Just as I was on the brink of insanity, I held on to my final hope. As the years passed, the Elder changed. He became more understanding and listened to the worries of the clan members. Apparently, this was the influence of the man that Lady Lraca took in, who we recently discovered to be a Hero. I haven’t visited him for a long time, but now, it was time. I wanted change. I wanted freedom. I wanted to make it clear that we couldn’t go on like this. So, once more, I steeled myself and entered his quarters.

I left distraught.

He was a lot calmer than when I last entered his quarters and didn’t end up snapping at every word that opposed him. He was actually being sensitive to my feelings for once. It seemed he remembered our past spats and apologized for them. He even offered me to change my position from the captain of the close-quarters guard to a member of the magic guard. This offer really brought my hopes up. He was willing to sacrifice one of their best close-combat fighters just to let them have their way for once. I felt happy. Genuinely.

But then, as I brought my proposal up, he spoke to me in a calm voice, and explained his reasoning that my plan to reveal our true power to the world and make them recognize our clan’s true value so that we could open up new possibilities, would only bring needless bloodshed to our clan. He denied my proposal and almost made me shout in anger. But then, I saw it in his face. It was strict as could ever be, but not because he found the idea of change displeasing, but instead, because he feared it.

For centuries, our clan hid in the shadows along with what we were truly capable of from the world to prevent them from thirsting for our power. But now, it was different. We had technology, power, and potential that the general populace knew nothing of. We had the power to fend for ourselves. We could finally take the next step and evolve, not as individual qeajrvs, but together as a clan, as a race, even. Yet, fear bound him, preventing him from taking the next step.

Days turned to weeks, and weeks turned to months. I kept on trying to convince the Elder, adjusting my proposal as many times as I could to a level that would be acceptable, but there was nothing. Despite him accepting my incessant visits, the same did not go for my ideas. There was no change.

Then, that fateful day arrived. I was caught off guard in one of my patrols of the forest and got cornered by a pack of demons and augmented werewolves. The man called Iaq presented himself to me and tried to get information about the clan to me. Perhaps, sensing the spite I held for my own homeland, he offered me a position. A spy. A renegade. A rotten traitor. He explained to me how their only objective was to secure the Mana-Infused Spirit Core. Once that happened, he would assist me in taking over the clan and becoming its new ruler. I would be able to realize my dreams, even if by force.

At the time, it dawned on me. I’ve trekked the path of peace for the longest time. This was a new choice presented to me: the path to chaos. No one would even consider a coup d’etat with Lady Erezil keeping everyone in check, but with END, with them, the people who kidnapped the most powerful qeajrv in our clan’s history, it was possible. I remembered how the Elder feared the bloodshed that would come from taking that one step forward.

*\*Then… if you fear it so much… just to maintain this false peace… I will be the one to show you. That the fantastical future where the clan would live in complete lack of bloodshed… your wish for our eternal peace and stagnation… is nothing but a child’s dream, the very one you took away from me.\**

I shook Iaq’s hand, dedicating my efforts to the new path I chose. The very first thing I needed were allies, so I went to the person I trusted the most in the clan. Without needing to be said, it wasn’t Mrel. I already despised him at this time. It was someone who empathized with my plight. Someone who was wronged by the binding chains of tradition the same as me. A person who was ruined by the inability to have the clan evolve a step further. Baen.

At first, he was resistant, but I explained to him my vision. I wanted him to know the depths of my emotions. Of what I wanted to achieve. He knew of my backstory, but I just needed to get into more detail. Why did I choose to talk to him first, why I decided to dedicate myself to this path, why I saw this as something the clan needed, and much, much more.

And so… that was how Baen delivered my will to the people of Ujlufi. Even after death… I won.

**311 – Verdict 1**

Three days have passed after the conclusion of the whole ordeal with END and Xeoi. The Ujlufi Clan used that time to patrol the forest and clear it of any remaining threats as well as rebuild the damages to the village. Although Erezil and Yuu’s magic was careful with the environment, the same could not be said for their enemies, naturally. They continued using their secret village as their temporary home while the reconstruction was still ongoing. As for the prisoners of war, they were locked up in their dungeons. Erezil had planned for them to be used extensively in the reconstruction efforts, but first had to come was the verdict. Everyone knew there were only two ways their trial would go. Either with the prisoners getting punished through manual labor or death.

Today was the day the most significant members that contributed to the clan’s victory gathered. The days preceding days to this had them busy with work like research, patrols, recovery, and others. Just yesterday the members that were assigned to patrols finished clearing the whole forest, assuring their safety and allowing this to happen.

Baen, the representative of the traitors was brought down to a room in the underground base where he was greeted with Eksert, Yuu, Renig, Garin, Hizli, Mrel, Erezil, and Elrei. Sitting in front of an arc table, Baen told his side of the story, of how Xeoi approached him with the idea and he accepted. Assisting with the plan by gathering like-minded individuals and turning them to their side, corrupting the clan from the inside. When he was asked why he agreed to this insane scheme, he spoke confidently, claiming that the reason he turned against the clan is the very same reason that he and his allies shared—to make the clan evolve.

He then proceeded by relaying to the jury what their leader, Xeoi, said to them. What the man they called Xeoi wanted from all of this. What spurred the man called Xeoi to take this course of action. What the man called Xeoi wanted to live for. He told him everything, his story that he shared with him.

**…………**

“…”

The room fell silent. It had been hours since Baen began passionately talking about how all of this began from Xeoi’s perspective. A story that began when he was a child all the way until his life ended a few days ago. Baen finished telling them everything, making large gulps from the glass of water given to him echo clearly through the silent room. He finished chugging down the water, letting out a refreshed breath before speaking up again.

“We jus’ want what’s best for the clan! This’s what we’ve been fightin’ for! Even if ya kill all of us and silence us, we got no doubt that this’ll just happen again! If it didn’t, then that jus’ means the clan didn’t last long enough for someone to try again!”

“Mrel, is that a threat?”

Erezil spoke to him, making Baen stiffen up and shake like a leaf. It seems that the memories of their last encounter haven’t left his mind yet. But surprisingly, despite his internal struggle, he let out his voice, albeit squeaky.

“Y-Y-Y-Yersh…! ‘C-C-Courshe, it ish!!”

(Y-Y-Y-Yes…! Of course, it is!!)

She simply replied with a smile. He sundered. Then, she turned to Garin.

“Garin, what do you think about what he said?”

The person in question was fearlessly and quite comfortably, sleeping on the table. Renig who was next to him lightly kicked his side, which Garin’s body leisurely took. Sensing that the eyes on him told him they didn’t care about appearances anymore, he kicked Garin with all his might, sending him faceplanting across the floor.

“H-HEY! What was that for!?”

He got back up, unjustly angry.

“It’s for sleeping on the job, Garin. Can’t you just act proper for once?”

Hizli chided him.

“What do you mean!? You guys forced me in here! I told you I didn’t want to be but you didn’t care!”

“You still act like a child. Sister Ere, it hurts to say, but why did we bring him here again?”

Everyone’s gazes shifted to Erezil and she answered calmly.

“You all are important individuals that experienced the conflict directly. Even if you do not have as much power and obligation as the head of the clan to make this verdict, I thought it was best to gather everyone’s thoughts about it coming from their own perspective, and perhaps even debunk some lies that may have been said.”

“I never told a lie! I would never disgrace Brother Xeoi’s efforts by doing that!”

Baen fervently objected to her statement, making it seem like his earlier fear of Erezil was all a lie. She calmly listened to his words and nodded.

“I understand, but so should you that this is the proper way of doing things. Normally, it would just be me and the Elder to judge you. But after hearing what Miss Yuu told me, I thought to compromise and make this meeting happen. Baen, would you continue to lash out at every offense and affront directed at Xeoi’s name? Because this will likely happen many times in this meeting. If you have to plans of compromising with us, then this conversation is over. Do you really want that?”

Baen swallowed his words, silencing him. Looking at her eyes, she was dead serious. Thinking about it now, whenever there were important decisions to be made, they would only be directed to the Elder. Occasionally, the Head Senlr Maiden would have a word to say about the situation but never have normal clan members, or worse yet, outsiders, affected a decision before. Realizing this, he could only lower his head in submission.

“…I’m sorry.”

“Very good. Now…”

Erezil turned back to Garin who got back to his seat and asked him again.

“Garin, although you’ve been asleep for the past hour or so, I’m sure you’ve had an idea what Baen was trying to convey. What are your thoughts about it? Also, I’m not accepting ‘I don’t care’ as an answer.”

“Ugh… You always like stuffy things like this, huh?”

“It is my duty.”

With an annoyed expression, Garin reluctantly went into thought.

“Then… I guess when I first found out he betrayed us it made sense since he did a bunch of suspicious things like suggesting to abandon Hiz. I thought there was something wrong in his head for doing that. I mean, not only did he think of opposing Ere but he joined with END to do that. Even if they won, END would probably just make them into augmented werewolves. Well, I guess they tried to do that earlier than I thought, huh?”

He scoffed, being reminded of the time Xeoi got impaled by the Dark Spear the enemy prepared for him, turning him into a half-augmented werewolf. It looked like Baen was about to jump out of his seat but held himself back with all his might, gritting his teeth all the while. He had the fates of his fellow allies on his shoulders, after all. He didn’t want their chance to realize their cause to get shrugged under the rug because of his actions. Garin watched his efforts with one eye open and let out a sigh.

“But… It’s not like I don’t understand a bit of what they felt. My ten years out of the clan was definitely a good change of pace. There are a lot of things the outside world has to offer and things that would do us good if we experienced them first-hand. In that part, I understand him. Though, Xeoi was obsessed with showing off our powers to the world, which I can’t really say I know much of. I used so much of my moon essence on other things that I couldn’t even summon an extra one half of the time. Whenever I did, I used it when no one was looking out of habit. Maybe we could do with more freedom and still keep our secrets but… that’s just me talking. I don’t know where you guys will take this, but if you do plan on revealing our powers then you’d be better off starting with Laxid Kingdom. I can ask the prince to support us or something like that. Anyway, that’s all I have to say.”

Garin scanned the looks of everyone and furrowed his brows. Baen and Mrel were looking at him with widened eyes while Erezil and Hizli were giving him warm smiles. Hizli, who was next to Renig, was particularly annoying.

“What are you looking at!?”

“Ohhh~, nothing! I knew you could be reliable when you try~!”

“You! Get over here!”

Garin jumped out of his seat and tried to get to Hizli.

“Ah~! Renig, hold him back for me!”

And just as she ordered, Renig got up and pushed him back.

“Hey! Whose side are you supposed to be on!?”

Seeing where this situation was going, Erezil stopped them the way she knew best.

“Now, now! Both of you calm down! You can flirt all you want after this is over!”

“We’re not flirting!”

“We’re not flirting!”

They said in unison.

Ignoring the two, Erezil addressed the person sitting next to Garin.

“Renig, what are your thoughts?”

Prepared for his turn to come, he answered immediately.

“After hearing Sir Xeoi’s side of the story, I suppose it cannot be said that I do not empathize with him. Just like Garin, I have learned the value of the outside world. I have experienced the importance of freedom and broadening our horizons. But aside from that, there was one particular part that resonated with me on a personal level. Sir Baen, in our conflict, I have only encountered 2 of the 6 pure werewolves on your side. Compared to the 82 werewolves you recruited, why do you think the reason is for our small number?”

Baen seemed to be surprised at the sudden question he posed to him, but still managed to get an answer out.

“Th-That’s because we didn’t know who we could fully trust. Unlike the werewolves, the pure wolves normally had lil’ to no complaints with how things were. The ones we did get weren’t guardians and were miffed with how much moon essence they spent compared to us werewolves.”

“Exactly. In our current system, we pure wolves are assigned to more laborious tasks than werewolves since most of us help with construction around the village and perform the heavy tasks because of our superior raw strength. This ends up with us using more moon essence in our roles than the average werewolf, making us naturally slower when it comes to evolution, and with the werewolf’s dramatic increase in strength with every senlr, this unintentionally makes us weaker. As shown in our battles, all of the difficult opponents were werewolves which made me slightly dissatisfied with my brethren’s place in the clan.”

Yuu tilted her head while keeping a straight face, silently relaying to the group that if that were the case then there should have been a rise in the number of pure wolves. To clarify this, Renig continued.

“What greatly counteracts our desire for evolution is the Guardian system. It makes troubled young werewolves get paired with older pure wolves that are assigned to become their guardians separate from their parents. Due to the children’s parents having to fulfill their roles, many kids have troubled times and require a caretaker. Since the mental age of us pure werewolves develop significantly faster, it became natural to have a werewolf paired with a pure wolf around their age, taking their role as a playmate, and at the same time, having the role of a guardian. This strengthens our bonds with them, making us feel needed. This is most likely why Sir Baen had a hard time finding trustworthy pure wolves that they could turn into allies. Even without evolution, we are generally satisfied with supporting werewolves, which in turn, support us. Therefore, I believe that the clan will be fine as it is. Although, if we ever decide to reveal ourselves, I am certain that us pure wolves will have your support.”

Renig ended his speech, drawing a silent nod from Erezil’s reaction. Meanwhile, beside him was Hizli smiling with amusement at Garin who had his head buried in his knees while covering his ears, trying to shut off the words that made his face turn red. It seemed like he felt that his words were more than just simple observations.

**312 – Verdict 2**

“Well, then. It’s my turn, right?”

Hizli said, straightening her posture.

“As for me, I don’t really have experiences as Xeoi did, so I can’t really say I can empathize with him. I’ve thought about what it would be like if I went out of the forest, but that was just it—a thought. On the contrary, I did feel the unity from the ones that shared his ideals. It wasn’t like we didn’t expect them to raid our base, but it was still impressive how calculated everything was.”

What Hizli referred to was when Garin and the others set off for the second raid, a portion of the enemy’s forces separated to execute a counter-raid. They wanted to capture everyone inside and get to the teleportation circle for the secret base. Although, they didn’t actually expect to capture anyone nor did they expect to be able to use the teleportation circle since they trusted that Erezil and the others knew better than to leave the teleportation circle active in the event of a raid. Instead, their true aim was to procure samples in the teleportation room and trace the connection of the broken portal.

They would have executed the raid with such haste and efficiency that Hizli let out a voice of surprise. Demons would charge the entrance and blow it open while the augmented werewolves would flood into the base to trigger the traps ahead like sacrifices. Right behind them were werewolves mounted on pure wolves to rush down into the teleportation room as fast as they could. The rest of the werewolves surrounded the base from trees on the lookout for any suspicious activities and would follow down after the people who rushed down the base in groups. Well… If only they knew about the traps laid around the base then maybe it would have happened. Hizli could remember it clearly.

Before they could even get to the entrance of the base, black outlines appeared from the entrance stretching deep into the forest shaped like a strange circle. There was no magic, but everyone that made contact with the ground became unable to move and later lost consciousness. Meanwhile, the ones that remained on the trees felt a sudden loss of friction and slipped off the branches, falling down onto the black circle like flies and meeting the same fate as the ones before them. Hizli had a bird’s eye view of this happening through a scouting device Eksert lent her. The very same person who set up the traps made from spirit power, which made the raiders unable to detect them. The original plan was for Hizli to retreat with the elder, but then Eksert gave her the device and told her to hold off the retreat for when they actually penetrate the defenses.

When Erezil and the others came back from the raid, their brains couldn’t even process the scene presented to them. Bodies of werewolves scattered across the forest sleeping as if they just retired after staying awake for five days straight. There was no question that everyone’s focus went to Eksert, to which he replied…

*“\*I told you I would keep my promise.\*”*

Deftly referring to his promise to Garin, Renig, and Yuu that he would protect the base from enemies. Garin couldn’t stop cackling after he heard that.

“That said, I would like to focus more on the practical aspects of Baen’s story. First of all, I would like to begin with how utterly foolish his actions were. The only thing he did was talk to one person and ended the conversation. Why couldn’t he just try and persuade the majority of the clan to make a change? Out of the 194 members of the clan, he successfully convinced 88. Clearly, from the beginning, he was sure to convince almost half of the entire clan. Surely, some people who agreed with his perspective were missed, and there was a likely chance to convince those that had reservations about the idea. Had he gone for a political route, this situation would have never happened. Even if he couldn’t get his message through with peace, then there was no need to partner with END. If they had asked, Sister Erezil would not interfere. All you had to do was officially challenge the position of ruler which consists of both leaders choosing nine members from the clan and surviving in the forest without any assistance from the clan for nine days and a team battle at the tenth with the whole forest as the battlefield, again with no assistance from the clan. Our clan values the competence of a ruler most along with their wise judgments for critical situations such as this. Based on this very conflict, the current elder, Elrei, showed weakness in the very beginning when he gave control over the situation to Xeoi, a spy. Meanwhile, Xeoi misjudged their ally and allowed for treachery, leading to this result. They equally had faults in their judgments, perhaps due to the stagnation that Xeoi stressed. So, if he had challenged him, there was also a likely chance of winning. He went on about how he didn’t have any choices left, but in reality, he was just too focused on a single option that he disregarded to consider others. I would never hand over this clan’s future to the words of a person like that.”

“…”

Baen tightened the ball of his fist so hard that it drew blood, his body shaking from bottling his rioting emotions, mouth shut so tight that you would know he was doing his best to hold his teeth together and prevent himself from speaking.

“I see. Then would that be all?”

Erezil asked her.

“…No. Unfortunately.”

She said, picking up the sheets of paper that were in front of her.

“His words aside, his actions sure dealt a large damage on us. I’ve gathered the data from the aftermath of the battlefield along with everyone’s perspective of the battles that happened. The Mana-Infused Spirit Core was designed to separate spirit power and mana. That was all it was supposed to do, but reports show that it brought back a half-dead man to life and gave a half-augmented werewolf the power to consume mana while being able to cast magic themselves. These should NOT have happened. The main spirit core is gone, but I managed to find remnants of the core in the wreckage. It seems that both Iaq and Xeoi turned to what they were because of a strange reaction from having dark essence and moon essence mixed in an environment where mana and spirit power are separate. This subject requires further research. However, what truly concerns me is END’s movement. If they truly wanted to take control of the spirit core, there was no need for negotiations in the first place. They could have sent in a whole army instead of sending a small force to deal with us. I’m sure they would have no reservations in boldly attacking a small part of another country. Yet, they didn’t. Perhaps they didn’t have us listed with high importance or didn’t expect our technology to be so powerful, but either way, it's suspicious that they waited so long for this to happen. But if there’s one thing I know for sure, it's that information about this has already been leaked to END. It gives me shivers thinking of what they can do with this technology. With that in mind, the prospect of having a Kingdom or even the Empire recognize our importance and shelter us from possible future threats may not be a bad idea. In this conflict, we had the help of Garin, Renig, and two outsiders. We couldn’t resolve this with the clan’s power alone. So, I think that forging connections with capable forces will bring us the most safety.”

“A very interesting perspective. I am certain this would contribute greatly to our decision.”

“It would be an honor.”

Hizli returned to her seat.

“…”

“…”

Only to have Garin staring at her this time.

“…What?”

She asked, clearly troubled by his gaze.

“No, it’s just that I’ve never seen you talk like that.”

“Hihihi, I’m actually a genius, you see!”

She sneered at him with a smug face, trying to get a rise from him. But then, he replied from outside her expectations.

“You really worked hard, huh?”

“…”

Her face froze, turning red just before she faced away from him.

“Look, I said you two can do that all you want after this…”

Erezil couldn’t help but add.

“What do you mean!?”

“What do you mean!?”

They said in unison.

“Haah… I swear you two are doing this on purpose…”

Shaking off the minor headache and unneeded sweetness Hizli and Garin gave her, she shifted her attention to the person next to Hizli.

“Mrel, as someone who has been with Xeoi since childhood, what do you think of this?”

“I…”

Everyone’s eyes were on him, but Baen’s glare stood out among them. That’s right, of course, they would. In Xeoi’s and his allies’ eyes, Mrel was an uncaring person that clung to the title of Xeoi’s little brother despite him not doing anything to support him in his darkest times. In fact, he was even ignorant that Xeoi was going through such a phase. Even if he claimed to be on Xeoi’s side, no one felt those words to be true. And now, he was about to talk about the brother he failed to care for.

“…”

Silence and a deep breath.

“I… am a disgrace. I never once thought that… Sir Xeoi was troubled by anything. I lived my happy fantasy all by myself and blinded my eyes from the truth. I have no right to call him my brother, nor do I have the right to speak for his sake. But… what I can do is repent and compensate. No matter how this trial ends, I swear that I will dedicate my life to manifesting the vision Sir Xeoi had.”

“So? How do ya plan on doin’ that?”

Baen spoke up, challenging the words he let out his mouth. He was clearly unconvinced of Mrel’s determination. If he truly meant his words, then he should be able to answer at least this question.

“For one… this will be the official announcement of my resignation as a member of the magic guard. I will abandon my goal of becoming a five-tail and dedicate myself to politics. If this trial leads to the clan revealing the true capabilities of a qeajrv, then I will do my utmost to make significant contributions to let our change flow smoothly. Otherwise, I will convince the rest of the clan of our need for a change. This time, I will not turn a blind eye to what is happening in front of me. This is no longer the ramblings of a delusional child, but instead, is the declaration of a person who will take the lead in creating change and make the lives of my fellow brothers and sisters better, a person that Sir Xeoi would become proud of!”

He said, looking at Baen’s eyes for recognition. If there was one person he needed to convince most, it would be the one who took his place as Xeoi’s true ally. He stared at his soul resolutely, conveying the depths of his conviction.

“…”

Time passed in silence until Baen removed his gaze from Mrel’s and turned to the ground.

“…Do what ya want.”

“Understood!”

A smile appeared on Erezil’s face as she watched the exchange happen.

**313 – Verdict 3**

“Next, we will hear from Sir Eksert. As an outsider, how did you feel about getting mixed up in our affairs?”

Eksert nodded and opted to communicate via Connect since it would be difficult for the others to read if he wrote in the air.

*“\*I don’t feel too troubled about it since I came here with my own objectives in mind. However, I did feel like this situation could have been avoided if both sides properly communicated with each other. Although I do agree with what Miss Hizli said about Xeoi not considering all of his options, there is also the fact that no one supported him enough to point him to other paths. It seems to me that he fought all by himself since childhood and the stress from all of that built up, deteriorating his mental state, and leading to his current actions. It may be unreasonable to ask someone completely unrelated to him, but had there been someone by his side to support him, things may have gone differently. If asked about what I think about the clan’s state, then it would be that it focuses too much on practicality and neglected the care for clan members as individuals. Parents are unable to care for their children and having different roles affect social relationships so much that it removes the value of childhood friends and even distorts them in extreme cases like Mrel and Xeoi’s. This may be brazen of me to say seeing as you’ve all lived like this to preserve your clan, but this is just how I think as an outsider.\*”*

“I see. I cannot deny that it hurt to hear some of those, but that is simply the difference between our upbringings. Knowing that you saw us like this is a good perspective to know about. Then, how about Miss Yuu?”

The spotlight was handed to Yuu, who returned everyone’s gazes with a blank stare. Ever since her fight with Xeoi three days ago, she often made this face. Everyone was a bit troubled by how to approach the subject since she was noticeably less energetic and not as expressive as before. It almost felt like the atmosphere she had when she fought with her full potential didn’t leave her. Her eyes were back to their usual crimson color but the same could not be said for her personality. After a minute of silence, the unusual Yuu gave her answer.

“…Xeoi said to deliver a message: ‘We desire freedom, we desire change; let our clan evolve.’

I don’t think he was lying.”

That was it. Yuu ended her message there. But of course, no one was quite satisfied with that. All of those present knew of her sudden shift in attitude three days ago. The same went for Baen since he was explicitly told before coming here to never pressure or question Yuu about her situation. The others tried before but all of them ended up in awkward situations where she would blankly stare at them for an hour before answering them with one word: “I don’t know.”

Wanting to extract more of her personal opinion, Erezil went on to guide her.

“Then, Miss Yuu, do you agree with the words he said about the clan?”

“…Yes.”

Erezil gave her a satisfied nod.

“It seems like every outsider holds the same opinion of our clan. Coincidentally, Hero Leo shared your opinions. He was the first person that brought the most change to our clan. He had to deal with Elder Elrei every time he did so, but with Lady Lraca’s support, he easily got his way. In the end, the Hero’s revisions gave us a boost in technology and made our village prosper. The result of those efforts and perhaps even his common spats with the Elder even had him change his ways… Yes, perhaps this is a good time than ever to share my own opinion about this subject.”

She took a deep breath and had a good look at everyone’s expressions before continuing.

“Personally, I am for the change Xeoi chased after. His methods aside, the message he wanted to impart about how the clan state is a just cause. Hero Leo gave us a taste of what change could be like, perhaps he was even part of the reason that made Xeoi move like this. Indeed, it is frightening to think of at first, but we ended up yielding great results. We are qeajrvs. An evolutionary race that thrives from change. It is as Xeoi said. We have secluded ourselves for long enough. We have become stronger than we were when our ancestors first decided to hide themselves. It is about time we make a move. We are the most technologically advanced clan among our race. Other clans have kept their stagnation for centuries. If we don’t take the first step, no one will.”

She declared, making sure her voice reached everyone present. Finally, after letting the moment sink in, she turned to Elrei.

“Elder Elrei, after having heard everyone’s opinions, what do you have to say? Please, deliver your judgment as the ruler of the clan.”

The elder, who everyone has noticed to be silent throughout the whole trial, closed his eyes to organize his thoughts. Everyone gave him time, knowing full well all the weight that was currently on his shoulders. In Baen’s delivery of Xeoi’s life story, he was depicted as a cruel leader that denied him of reaching his dreams. Simply saying that he contributed to making the recent conflict happen was a huge understatement. Had he been more understanding of Xeoi, then his betrayal would not have happened. There were many times in the story where he could have chosen a different option and it would have changed these developments significantly. Yet, he unknowingly chose the very options that led to this outcome. Knowing all of this, he spoke.

“Oa j lroa hxe lrdr xe Driiaa, Arela xe pqrel krn. Oa xe iialr fims lrdr siui jlrsirel hjhui lr sibk lrxe pqrel hxe relxe wojwoalr xeiia lrdr uisi lrsi sioalroa woxedr… Oa si jkrn xerel j hjhui siiia fims endr hadrlr hkrnj iaakrn, tlr oa hxeui j vvlra krn sikrn oa firel si fixe cz fig. Iiauioadr, sit krn relxedruioa reliia j lrdr krnxeiia uiahoakrn j hxe. Vvj lroa lroarel, xe uikrnrel hkrnreluij fims his—Oa lrdr wouilrj j Arela pqrel arelkrnczui.”

(I am the Elder of this clan, as well as its Ruler. I have a duty to make the most optimal choices that will lead our clan to prosperity and maintain peace at the same time… I cannot deny that not all of the choices I have made have been correct, yet I hold my head up high that I made them with the clan’s future in mind. Despite this, my leadership has led to the near-destruction of our clan. From this trial, I have come to a single conclusion—I will relinquish the position of Ruler.)

Baen and Mrel’s eyes widened at this while the others kept straight faces.

“Czvvaczxedrt, lrdr woaj lrdr wouilrj fiui wouidr lrxe pqui enui. J woaxeui lr uit lroa iiahuij siiia fiui wouioag enhczdr. Lroa jiiaxe siiia si axeoadr lrxe oa enfikrn lrdr lrsiui.Oa vva iiahiiaui endr arela, oa jrel aglr rellr wouilrj g ui krnpq gkrnalrj enoaiia lrdra jkrn vvlra. Fipqmsa, relh j hkrnoaxedr vva wouilrj pqlr lrdr, Oa lroa wouilrj firel jkrn vva kenpq. Jh pq his iiat xe pqafi uihdruia endr vvcziia, Oa lroa arel jvva lr lrdr woajxerel.”

(Unfortunately, the person that was best suited for the position has passed. Or perhaps it is best to say that this decision was made because of his passing. This whole ordeal has made me realize that I am behind the times. I have been the ruler for decades, it is only right to let this position go so that the new generation can build their own future. However, with the lack of candidates for the position, I will hold onto this position for now. Once we come upon the day a worthy successor has been found, I will offer this role to them personally.)

After announcing this to everyone in the room, Elrei turned his gaze to Mrel and then shifted it to Baen.

“Lroa lroarel hkrnreluij xe vva, Baentczg xeiia fiui xereldr pqrel en uiendrlr sikrnxe relena vva xe msrelxedr pqafi awodrdrlrkrn lrdr lrcz wopqa ja ah. Lrxerel!”

(As for the conclusion of this trial, Baen and his allies will be subject to manual labor for a village that is worthy of representing the true power of our race. That is all!)

**314 – Ever-changing World**

The Praqrev Forest was home to many species, one such is the qeajrvs which have themselves under the same clan. The Ujlufi clan were, just like other clans of the same race, conservatives that maintained their peace in complete stillness. They never expanded their territory, never made use of all the resources in the forest, and never developed. However, that changed upon the arrival of a Hero, an ambassador of Earth. They gave the clan knowledge, culture, and technology. They made ripples in the still water they called life.

Then, it happened again. A disturbance. One greater than the light ripples that the Hero made. A large splash that brought chaos to the waters, one that soon marked the beginning of movement. The hands of time began ticking once more for the Ujlufi clan and they would soon drag other clans of their race with them whether they liked it or not. When asked if this choice was right or wrong, no one would answer them a simple yes or no. The minuscule opinion of a single person would have no authority to speak for the whole qeajrv race. The only one that had the right to do so was the flow of time. Their choice will be judged not by words, but by actions. From hereon, the ability and competence of the Ujlufi clan would be tested.

Just like the flow of time, the serene stream of the river continued its uninterrupted movement. The location was close to the underground base that was detached from the main Ujlufi village, a place untouched by the advancement of technology. It was just like the stillness the qeajrv race had, but at the same time, it wasn’t. This beautiful river was in constant change, albeit small, the forest dwellers often used this place to recover their energy, drinking from the stream that constantly wore down the rocks below it, eating from the grass that was dependent on the pollen and seeds that were scattered by the wind, procuring the fruits from the trees that spread their seed in the vicinity. The only aspect of stillness in this place was its constant beauty and the uninterrupted change caused by the hands of nature.

On the banks of such a river, Yuu sat under the shade of a tree. This was the same river she found herself at the night before their second raid on the Ujlufi Village. The only difference was that instead of wanting to bathe under the light of the celestial body in the sky, she hid in the shadows produced by it, escaping from its heat. Yet, what remained from the night was the calmness of the scene in front of her. The rays of the sun reflected off the surface of the water, the breeze blowing lightly, shaking the leaves of the trees where various animals made homes out of. In the middle of all that, a voice called out to her. The scene was so familiar that it gave her chills of déjà vu.

*“\*Hey, what do you think about Elder Elrei’s decision?\*”*

Eksert called out to her from behind, walking up to her and stopping by her side. She turned her head and craned her neck upward, giving Eksert a good look at the blank expression on her face.

“…”

*“\*…\*”*

No words were said, but it didn’t seem like Eksert minded that as he walked up to the shade of the tree across from Yuu and took a seat. He was followed by Yuu’s gaze the whole time, yet he didn’t mind that behavior and turned his eyes to the river in front of him. Time passed in silence.

“…”

*“\*…\*”*

“…I think, it was in the right direction…”

She finally spoke to answer the question Eksert gave her ten minutes ago. A normal person would be troubled by such a delayed response, but this became the norm for Yuu three days ago. It wasn’t like she couldn’t express herself she just had trouble doing so.

*“\*I see. I still have a few problems with it, but those are for them to figure it out. It’s their clan, after all. We can’t really just go around telling them what to do.\*”*

“…Yes, you’re right…”

*“\*…\*”*

“…”

The conversation hushed once more. In normal social situations, this would be considered an awkward pause, usually stemming from the uncertainty of how to continue the conversation, pressuring them to speak. However, there was no such tension between Yuu and Eksert. They just went silent as if it were the most natural thing to do.

*“\*So, what are you going to do now?\*”*

The conversation picked up six minutes later with Eksert’s prompt.

*“\*…\*”*

“…I’ll go, to Nrjia. I need to…”

This time, Yuu answered within half a minute.

*“\*The fallen kingdom, huh?\*”*

He went into thought, removing his gaze from Yuu for a moment.

“…Aren’t you worried?”

*“\*Worried?\*”*

This time, Yuu started a new subject. But unlike the other times, Ekesert didn’t pick up on what she meant.

“…Your goal… it was to rescue your ally, remember?”

*“\*Oh, right. Serka.\*”*

Back when they first met Eksert, he went on about how his ally got kidnapped and disappeared into the depths of the Praqrev forest, where END successfully invaded.

“…We, didn’t find her anywhere… Aren’t you worried?”

In the aftermath of the conflict, everyone searched high and low for a girl that matched Eksert’s description. Unfortunately, o matter how hard they looked, that person was nowhere to be found. It was only natural that the searchers concluded to themselves that she was transported to a different place. It had been 12 days since he last saw her. In between the time they executed the first raid, there was a time gap of 6 days, more than enough time to relocate a single person, not to mention with the availability of teleportation circles. Strangely enough, in spite of that, there was no sense of urgency in Eksert’s expression. His face couldn’t be seen through the glass helmet, but they were expecting some kind of agitation from his actions, yet, nothing. To that, Eksert leisurely said.

*“\*No, I’m not particularly worried.\*”*

“…Is that so? …Why?”

It seems like this subject caught Yuu’s interest. This was the first time she tried to pry information out of someone ever since she became like this. In celebration of this small step back into normalcy, he answered.

*“\*It’s because I know exactly where she is. Right now, she’s headed to the Fallen Kingdom of Vampires, Nrjia.\*”*

“…?”

Yuu couldn’t help but tilt her head at his answer. Was such a coincidence really possible? Then again, now that she thought about it, END only has two territories. The land of Nrjia that they recently conquered and the detached island, Zelaoage. Going from the Praqrev Forest, the closest base they could transport her to was Nrjia. It wasn’t a coincidence, just the natural place they would send a person they abducted.

“…I see. Then… are you coming with us?”

*“\*Hmm, may I?\*”*

“…I don’t see a problem with it. Garin and Renig, too… probably…”

*“\*Haha, even when you’re expressionless you’re still clumsy. Couldn’t you have just kept the last part to yourself? Maybe then you’d still seem like a cool beauty.\*”*

“…”

She turned her face away from him in expressionless pouting. This type of silence was completely different from their earlier atmosphere. Sensing that she had no intention of continuing down this topic any further, he closed it.

*“\*Then, I’ll be joining your departure tomorrow.\*”*

**315 – His Serka**

A day passed and here came a new one. It was bright and early in the morning with daybreak right over the horizon. Garin, Renig, Yuu, and Eksert were at the edge of the Praqrev Forest, getting ready to leave. Yuu had already agreed to it, but Eksert asked Garin and Renig about joining them just in case. As Yuu guessed, they accepted him immediately, in complete contrast to the first time he suggested joining forces.

“So… you’re going, huh?”

Beside the departing party were the ones that woke up to send them off. Hizli, Erezil, and surprisingly, Yirae, the young girl that aspired to become a Senlr Maiden just like Erezil.

“Yep, I don’t know when I’ll be back. I don’t need to search for Mother anymore, so maybe I’ll come to visit more often.”

Garin replied to Hizli as he packed the bags of supplies they got from the clan in the storage on Renig’s armor.

“Really!?”

Hizli’s ears perked up from the response and her tail began waving slightly.

“Yeah, maybe sometime in the next 5 years.”

“Hey!!”

She smacked him.

“Agh—What was that for!?”

“What part of that is OFTEN!?”

“It’s more than the times I visited in the last ten years, isn’t it?”

“Are you TRYING to get me angry!?”

She smacked him again.

“Agh—What is it with you!?”

“It’s what a battle-crazed maniac like you deserves!”

“What are you bringing that up for!?”

The two continued bickering for a while the others watched them from a distance. If someone from Earth saw this, it would look like two kids arguing about a toy they had problems sharing. Because of their characteristics as qeajrvs, their bodies looked somewhere about half of their age, so no one would figure that these two, with bodies of 11-year-old kids, were actually 19-year-old young adults that were much too talented for their age. One of the spectators in particular watched them with a hint of annoyance.

“…I wonder why those two still refuse to be honest with themselves?”

*“\*I think that’s what they call ‘youth’ on Earth, Lady Erezil.\*”*

“What a strange concept.”

Erezil finally removed her attention from Garin and Hizli and turned to Eksert and Yuu.

“I apologize for the small send-off, Elder Elrei and Mrel are too busy working on plans for the clan’s future development. They have been working non-stop without sleep so I could not bring myself to wake them up when I saw them knocked out earlier.”

*“\*It sounds like they’re really eager on getting started.\*”*

“That they are. Fufu, we have been slacking for centuries now. Perhaps this is just how it should be.”

She gave both Eksert and Yuu a serious look before continuing.

“Again, I would like to express my gratitude for your aid in our troubled times. I cannot stress enough that if it were not for the both of you, we would likely be chained under the control of END. Thank you.”

*“\*I was simply trying to accomplish my own goals.\*”*

“Mnm… I just wanted help to get into Nrjia…”

Eksert and Yuu showed their modesty, but Erezil wasn’t that easy to back down.

“Even so, you both have my thanks. You are welcome to return to our clan at any time. If you are in need of assistance, we will be sure to aid you.”

The two exchanged glances, confirming that they picked up on the same signs, sensing that she wasn’t going to let this go. Coordinating their answers, the two waved their white flags and accepted.

*“\*If you insist.\*”*

“…Okay.”

While that exchange was happening, Yirae was peeking from behind Erezil, looking at both Eksert and Yuu. Erezil noticed her dithering and gave her a little push, taking a quick step to the side and bringing her out of her shadow.

“…!? …~!!!”

“Here, Yirae wanted to say goodbye too! She asked me about you two and when she found out of your departure, she looked a bit troubled. That’s why I brought her here.”

Her eyes darted around all over the place, her stiff expression clearly conveying her nervousness. Back when they found each other in the forest at night, she was more energetic and expressive with Eksert and Yuu. But now that she calmed down, it seemed to reset her attitude with them. It wasn’t that she didn’t like them anymore seeing as she came all the way to see them off, she was just shy.

Eksert walked a distance away, making Yirae droop her ears in sadness. But then, he came back with something in his hand which immediately relieved her dejection.

<Here. It’s a gift.>

“…!”

Eksert decided to switch back to writing words in the air, the communication Yirae was used to having with him, and handed her a flower. It was no ordinary flower. It had the shape of a trumpet with its white petals extending its pointed tips outwardly. The center of the flower released a light-blue glow with particles sparkling inside it. Erezil and Yuu turned to where he first picked the flower and saw a patch of white flowers that lacked the blue glow of allure the one handed to Yirae had.

He clearly used spirit power to make that happen. Yuu made a slightly vexed expression and walked up to Yirae.

“…Here… my gift.”

“…?”

Yirae’s tilted in confusion. Yuu held out an open palm with nothing on it, but then, a flicker of flame appeared. It drew Yirae’s attention and watched it as the flame steadily bloomed into a beautiful flaming flower. A rosette-shaped flame that possessed a tango pistil and flared out to the tips of the petals with an amber hue, small embers dancing around it.

Yuu slowly brought it up to Yirae’s head.

“…!”

Yirae backed up slightly, afraid of getting burned by the flames. But then, Yuu reassured her.

“…Don’t worry… It won’t hurt…”

Looking into Yuu’s blank eyes, she felt a strange feeling of comfort. Seeing her expression calm down, her lips curved into a faint smile, and proceeded to place the flower on her hair. Yirae didn’t resist her approach.

“…There, it looks good on you… You’re cute… Yirae…”

Yuu’s soft expression made her cheeks glow a light red. Then, curious, she touched the flaming flower on her head. It felt warm, but that was all there was. It didn’t hurt to touch at all no matter how much or how long she touched it.

“Oh, my! Those flowers look good on you, Yirae! You look precious! Now, what do you have to say to them?”

“…! …!”

Erezil praised her looks and prompted her to say her thanks. The child caught this and nodded her head excitedly. This time, she easily managed to look both of them in the eyes and spoke.

“…Th-Thank you!! F-For the gifts…! And!! For… saving our village!! Thank you!!!”

She pushed out her voice so much that she was shouting her feelings out half of the time, but no one minded that. Eksert and Yuu appreciated her attempt.

“Hey!! Eksert, Yuu! We’re leaving, come on!”

From the distance, Garin shouted as he walked off mounted on Renig. Hizli watched him leave with an annoyed expression. It seemed like their spat calmed down enough for him to leave, or maybe, the other way around and Garin couldn’t last another second before cracking. Just before the two left, they faced Erezil and Yirae one last time.

<We’ll be going now. Thank you for everything.>

“Mnm… Goodbye.”

Erezil gave them a light bow while Yirae waved her hand lively.

“Farewell. Until we meet again.”

“…! …! Good! Bye!”

The two joined with Garin and Renig and walked off into the distance. Their first destination was the Frontline Town Qasen, where they would stock up on supplies and replenish their weapons. In their battle, Garin used quite a bit of Physically Structured Magic Needles, so he needed to purchase a new set or two from Hevel. He planned to have his gear checked while he was at it to make sure there were still in working order. The other two were free to do what they want but the plan was only to stay a single day. They didn’t want to waste too much time, after all.

They arrived two days later. They were twice as slow compared to when they traveled from Qasen to the Praqrev Forest. This was because they didn’t have enough space on Renig’s back to fit Eksert, so they had to make do with a leisurely pace. Though they thought of it as a leisurely pace, Eksert was running most of the time and kept up with Renig’s pace using magic and spirit power. Garin actually saw that as fun entertainment so he would regularly switch with Eksert and race Renig. He wasn’t as fast as Renig when it came to pure muscle power, the advantage of pure wolves over werewolves, which was why he often used his mana to keep up. It was a bizarre sight, but they kept that up all the way until they reached Qasen.

Just like how they entered Quasen before, Garin sent his tamed uebat bird, Rika, to deliver a message to Count Vems and provide them immediate entrance and housing in his manor. A frightening image came to both Eksert and Yuu’s minds where some random guy with a child-like body controlled the operations of Qasen from the shadows, but that was only limited to their imaginations, hopefully. Connections were scary, they were reminded.

After temporarily setting up camp in Vems’ manor, Garin and Renig immediately went to Hevel’s workshop. They invited Yuu and Eksert to come with them, but they both refused. The reason for that was because Eksert had informed Yuu beforehand that he wanted her to meet him in his quarters.

If only she hadn’t lowered her guard so much, then she might not have been caught by the trap that bound her the moment she took a step into the room.

“…What…?”

Her dumbfounded voice echoed through the room flatly.

*\*Thump\*… \*Clunk\**

The wooden door closed behind her followed by its immediate lock. Then, a voice echoed in her mind.

*“\*That took quite some time, didn’t it? Well, we were allies back when we fought against END in the Praqrev Forest… but I wonder if it’s still the same now?\*”*

“…K-Kgh…!”

Yuu tried turning her head around, but her body didn’t listen to her. It wasn’t like she was being held still with ropes or a cage. She was simply standing there as if time had frozen for her. This was…

“…Spirit… power…!”

Since she didn’t have the ability to detect the foreign power, she wasn’t able to avoid the trap she walked right into. Eksert appeared from the edge of her vision and placed himself in front of her, an ominous gaze coming from the other side of the glass helmet. She didn’t understand why this was happening. Eksert should have been an ally. No, he definitely was. He risked his life trying to fight off END back in the Ujlufi village. But what was so different now that led him to do this?

Without any clue how everything came to this, she asked.

“…Why…?”

Eksert placed one of his hands to his chin, pondering.

*“\*‘Why,’ you asked? I feel like you should already know the answer, but… Ah, of course, what am I saying? There’s no way you can recognize me with this mask on.\*”*

Eksert placed his hands on the glass mask and slowly took it off.

“!!!”

The face that greeted her did nothing but shake her to her very core.

*“\*Yuu, do you know where the name Serka comes from?\*”*

“…”

She was frozen in shock and couldn’t speak. Despite this, Eksert mercilessly continued.

*“\*It’s a derivation from the word Vengeance… Specifically, my vengeance to you.\*”*

“…!”

*“\*It’s time to atone for your sins. This is your judgment, Serka… No, should I address you in a more formal tone, Your Royal Highness?\*”*

“…!?”

*“\*Ah, yes. That’s better. Welcome home, Princess of the Fallen Kingdom Nrjia, Rnriai Mszekrnlr.\*”*

**Chapter 1:**

**­­­­316 – Border City Iqanlr**

“We made it!”

Senkyo shouted as he ran through the shadows of the forest and into the light of the open plains. It had been two days since he left the town of Naen and approximately one full week of surviving in the world of Zerid. He had been knocked out for four days after his powers went on a rampage when he fought the three skeletons back on Earth. As for the cause of that rampage, he more or less figured out that it was because he became emotionally unstable when he saw Yuu get kidnapped by the skeletons, for saving his life no less. The incident concluded with Senkyo, Ryosei, and Shiro getting trapped in another world, so Ryosei, Senkyo’s spirit companion, went off to find a way back to Earth while Senkyo was recovering through his unknown powers.

Who would have expected Senkyo to decide on abandoning Ryosei and leave without him? Partly, Ryosei had a small inkling. Senkyo wanted one thing, and it was to find Yuu no matter what it took. He knew that if Ryosei had come back and caught him, he would drag him right back to Earth, so Senkyo decided on making the valiant decision of a tactical retreat and ran for the hills with Shiro on his back.

Their trek through the unknown world led to encountering Iaksin, a Knight Commander of the Town of Naen, the first settlement in Zerid that Senkyo entered. The meeting ended with them learning many things about this foreign world. Shiro is Senkyo’s familiar and foster sister that originated from a small village of Nemi, a species hailed for their supporting prowess. She is a local of Zerid but that didn’t mean she knew much about it. In actuality, she only knew a small amount more than Senkyo did. This was due to the invasion of her village which led to her getting adopted by Yukou Yuuto, Senkyo’s father, and becoming Senkyo’s sister at a young age.

As Senkyo and Shiro were leaving Naen to set off for their next destination, Commander Iaksin gave him three bags of money that were supposedly his and his companion’s reward for taking down a Xeqrel, a beast that preyed on people inside bodies of water. Since Senkyo was the real person behind the subjugation of the beast, they saw it right to hand it over to him despite there being no obligation for them to do so. Senkyo accepted the reward and gave him funds to purchase some supplies for their journey.

Their destination was closer than they thought, seeing as they arrived only two days on foot. But then again, it wasn’t like there were any disruptions in their walk. Unlike how the games and fantasy stories Senkyo consumed back on Earth where the roads and wilderness were filled with lurking beasts like goblins, ogres, or other various creatures, Zerid had none of those threats. Sure, they encountered a hostile beast every now and then, but their power was that of a chihuahua with all bark with no bite compared to Senkyo. From Iaksin’s words, those very beasts were like small puppies for the below-average Zeldian. That just showed how much the Great Unity March, the great purge of hostile beasts on Yuwokrn, affected their environment.

Right now, Senkyo and Shiro stood in front of the Border City Iqanlr, the place where he would find more clues about where to look for Yuu. His black cloak fluttered in the wind, revealing his leather armor, fingerless gauntlets, dark pants, and leather boots. He upgraded from his cloth sheet to a leather backpack that held their supplies and his scorched school uniform. At first, he wanted to see if he could sell his otherworldly clothes for money, but since Iaksin gave him additional funds, he hid their existence so that he wouldn’t get questioned about them. He was considering selling them someplace at Iqanlr, but he didn’t know how people would react to otherworldly clothing so he was still deliberating about it.

Across Senkyo’s chest was the utility strap that was designed to be able to attach a variety of useful items. One kunai scabbard placed parallel to the strap and three smaller bags were attached across it. The small bags held leaves that he turned into vessels, objects applied with spirit power that can be turned into talismans and used for various occasions. On his hip was a combat belt that also had attachments to hold his bone daggers, scabbards for the rest of his four kunai, and two katanas, one of them being Kuro Yaiba, and the other being a blade he purchased at Iaksin’s recommendation. There, he stood, dumbfounded.

“…Huh?”

*“\*What’s wrong, Onii-chan?\*”*

Shiro’s voice echoed through his head. Since she was Senkyo’s familiar, she had the power to place herself inside her master’s body, just like how Ryosei would. This was how he was able to blend in with the locals despite not knowing the language they spoke. She would just take control of Senkyo’s mouth and speak in his place.

“No, what do you mean ‘what’s wrong?’ What IS THAT!?”

Senkyo pointed over the horizon where a ginormous metal structure shaped like a polygonal bunker towered with supporting extensions protruding at its base, sloping up to a flat roof. If anything, this seemed more futuristic than it did fantastical.

*“\*That’s Iqanlr… right?\*”*

She asked innocently, not picking up on the disbelief in his voice. He came to this city expecting a more fantastical scene like how the town of Naen was with its medieval designs but bigger and more wondrous… He couldn’t really say that this sight wasn’t wondrous in its own right but it definitely was far what anything his imagination managed to weave together. He decided to drop his expectations for any more fantasy-like scenes and simply wondered how something like this managed to exist in Zerid.

Based on the town of Naen, this world still had places that were created with a more medieval design but then there was Iqanlr which looked like something that surpassed even the technology on Earth; the difference was surreal. Then again, Senkyo never actually confirmed their technology, it only implied that from the looks of the walls around the border city. Additionally, he only visited Naen so far and was about to see what Iqanlr had to offer. He couldn’t really tell which was more dominant in this world from those two places alone. In the end, there was no use speculating in his head. He came to Iqanlr looking for a library that held a treasure trove of information waiting to be taken by people like him. To know more about this world and what he should do, he needed to go there first.

He followed the trail up to the city’s entrance and found a line of people extending from it. He’s seen this sight before. Not personally, through fantasy anime where towns and cities require some kind of identification to get inside. If this was the same thing, then that didn’t spell anything good for him. There was no way for him to get identification since he was literally from another world.

Thinking about it carefully, he could have probably asked Iaksin how to get identification but that meant going back to Naen and wasting at least four days. It was safe to say he wasn’t too keen about this outcome. When he first arrived in Naen, he was with Iaksin and his troop so no one dared to stop him, but more than that, there just wasn’t anyone stopping others’ entry. Everyone was free to come and leave as they pleased. Perhaps this was the difference between a normal town and a border city, or a medieval settlement and a more futuristic one like this, or maybe both. He wasn’t getting anywhere with these thoughts, but then it struck him. He had the perfect excuse that COULD, POSSIBLY work. Hoping that this final lifeline would save him the time and trouble to get across the city entrance, he placed himself at the back of the line.

Time ticked and it was about 34 minutes when he got deep enough into the line where the solid metal supports that extended out on both sides of the entrance closed him in, blocking the view of the grassy field on his left and right sides, leaving only the sight of the entrance in front and the long line that extended behind him. These supports were strangely extended farther out than the rest, so he surmised that they were probably used for strategic purposes. Since there’s only one entrance, anyone who wanted to siege this place from the ground would have to go through here, making large groups funnel in and clump in this narrow walkway. Senkyo instinctively turned his head upward at the thought as he saw the metal ceiling. He wondered if there was any mechanism that would blow up everyone under it, but he certainly didn’t want to find that one out for himself. With the dark thoughts circling in his mind, he just wanted to hurry up and get out of the suspicious enclosure.

“Next!”

Finally, it was time for Senkyo to get processed through whatever they had going on. He walked upon the guard’s prompt and faced him. The guard was clad in iron… no, some kind of metal armor. His face was covered by his helmet but the tail on his and the two tips protruding above his head told him everything he needed to deliberate that this person wasn’t human… or Sorun, the people who look most similar to humans in this world.

“Identification, please.”

Just as he feared, it was an identity checkpoint. He hoped it was something strange like a foreign custom of some kind that required them to stop but that was not the case. Well, it wasn’t like he lined up without a plan against this, so he shook off his fears and began.

“U-Uhm… My identity…?”

Senkyo said in a befuddled tone, talking meekly.

“Yes, please show us proof of your identity.”

“Uhh… H-How about this…?”

He unveiled his hood, revealing Senkyo’s face and the cloth bandana that he had around his head. The incident in the battle just before he got stuck to Zerid burnt parts of his hair. The unknown power he had regenerated the damages in his body, but that wasn’t quite the same for his hair, so he decided to shave it all off and this bandana replaced the warmth that his locks brought. However, that didn’t do anything to satisfy the guard in front of him. He looked annoyed at Senkyo’s actions.

“Your identification card. If you can’t show any form of identification, you won’t be allowed to enter Iqanlr.”

He said flatly with a hint of irritation. It was getting dangerous but now he gave something for Senkyo to work with.

“H-Huh…? W-What’s… an identification card?”

“What? Are you messing with us?”

Senkyo took a step back with a startled look on his face at the guard’s snark. Then, he helplessly turned to the other guards and the people waiting behind him, looking for some kind of hint in their reactions. The others just stared at him strangely, wondering why he was acting like that. Then, he turned back to the guard and said…

“I… don’t know what you’re… talking about. Can’t I just… walk in?”

“Ja, Rnei. Gaeka Wojdruia iiadrkrnlr fi drsi relbk krn vv lrdr wojrel reljoag vva?”

(Hey, Rnei. Doesn’t he seem like one of the people Professor Gaeka is looking for?)

One of the other guards wedged himself into the conversation before the guard he referred to as Rnei could say anything. Then, he stopped, taking a moment to ponder which seemed to cool down his boiling blood.

“Now that you said it…”

He took one more look and scrutinized Senkyo.

“H-Huh!? W-What did he just say? U-Uh… what… kind of language was that…?”

It was the local language, clearly. It was common sense for anyone in this world, but still, Senkyo claimed ignorance. Rnei turned to the guard that called out to him and gave him a nod.

“I see… Well then, we have a different process for people like you. Come on, follow me.”

“H-Huh?”

“I said follow me!”

“Y-Yes!”

Rnei left with Senkyo on tail and the checkpoint was taken over by the other guard that called out to Rnei.

“Next!”

The guard called for the next person in Japanese, just like how Rnei did earlier.

**317 – Blood Sample**

Senkyo was led to a different room, looking confused and bewildered all the while. At first, he did it to keep up the act, but that lie soon turned into the truth the moment he saw the technology he was working with.

He followed Rnei into a room inside the walls. They got to that location by going through multiple doors that were unlocked by the silver card Rnei had in hand and used it just like how Earthlings would with scanners and identification cards, tapping a designated area with the card and unlocking the doors. Unlike the black metal that coated the outside wall, the interior was mostly clear white. It seemed like the large walls weren’t just walls but also some kind of military building since Senkyo came across other guards and people wearing white lab coats. Senkyo did a double-take at the lab coats since there was no room for doubt that those were Earth’s clothing but he could tell from the texture that it was made to imitate a white lab coat. It looked a bit rough and didn’t possess the trim and tidiness of an actual lab coat. It was technically still a white lab coat, but not an authentic one from Earth.

“Still, I never expected to find one of you all the way over here. I guess the Professor’s crazy ideas aren’t so impossible after all…”

“W-What…?”

“Oh, sorry. I guess you wouldn’t know, huh? It’s about the monster you encountered. It takes its victim’s memories instead of killing them. I’ve heard reports of people being reduced to living husks and completely forgetting how to move. I guess you’re lucky since I could barely tell you were a victim.”

“H-Huh!? I-I encountered a scary monster like that!?”

He feigned ignorance once more. Senkyo couldn’t really say that it was good for this memory-devouring monster to be on the loose, but it’s definitely helping him get across situations like this where he lacked the knowledge of the average Zeldian.

Apparently, an unknown monster broke out of the Uikakrn Capital’s sunken nest, one that had the power to tear through the sky and devour memories. Senkyo first found this out when he first encountered Iaksin and he translated Senkyo’s confused musings as a sign that he lost his memory to this monster. It was terribly convenient, so Senkyo thought to pull out that card at the entrance. He had his doubts in the middle of his act, but things fell into place, and ended up in a room with Rnei, sitting across the table with a knife and glass vials in a vial rack.

“I’m going to need to draw a bit of your blood. Normally, we would have just turned you away at the entrance right then and there, but there’s this prestigious professor that’s always whining about how he wants samples of victims. So, in short, for you to pass through and enter Iqanlr, you’ll have to cooperate with us. If you won’t, then end of story.”

“S… So, I just have to fill a vial with my blood?”

“Yes, that’s all you have to do and the professor will sanction your entry. Annoyingly, he has that kind of power.”

“I see, then…”

*“\*Onii-chan, don’t!\*”*

Just as Senkyo was about to voice his agreement, Yuu shouted in his mind for him to stop. Confused, he turned his attention to her.

*“\*Shiro? Why, what’s wrong?\*”*

*“\*U-Uhm… uhh… That’s…! S-Sharing your blood, is bad!\*”*

*“\*Huh? Why?\*”*

She was troubled but Senkyo had no idea why.

*“\*I…\*”*

She fell silent for a second. Then, he could mentally hear the sound of her gathering her breath and letting it all out in one go as if to give herself a push.

*“\*It’s about Onii-chan’s power! It’s too dangerous for others to have! If you give your blood, you’ll give them a portion of your power! If that happens, then it might cause a lot of trouble!\*”*

*“\*My power…? Shiro… is that…\*”*

*“\*Yes! It is one of the memories that Yuuto-san entrusted to Shiro! And now, Shiro thinks it’s best for Onii-chan to know!\*”*

Shiro wasn’t just a familiar and a little sister, but she was also the only connection he had with the life he had before having his memories sealed by his father. She knew more about his childhood than Senkyo did. This also included the powers he was capable of before having them sealed along with his memories. Shiro hid this information until now because she thought he didn’t need to know yet. But now…

*“\*I see… but, then… Ah, actually I have an idea. Shiro, I promise I’m not going to let them have any of my blood, so trust me. I didn’t train under Shimizu-sensei for nothing.\*”*

*“\*I-If Onii-chan say so…\*”*

Just as Rnei was about to lose patience waiting for Senkyo’s answer in silence, he finally replied.

“Sure, no problem.”

Senkyo picked up the knife and opened a wound on the tip of his index finger, letting red liquid escape from his body. It was a small one that barely dripped any blood. Rnei looked unsatisfied with his cut but he didn’t voice it out. Senkyo hovered the wound on one of the open vials, waited for a drop of blood to drip, and the moment it made contact with the vial…

*\*Boom!\**

“What!?”

“Ah!?”

It exploded the glass vial and everything around it, making the two jump out of their seats and give distance.

“W-W-What…!? W-What was that!?”

“H-Huh?”

Senkyo continued his character as the fool and acted confused. Meanwhile, Rnei looked equally as troubled as Senkyo was playing himself off to be. The two just stared at the top of the table where the explosion happened.

“I-I thought I just had to put my blood in there? W-Why did it explode!?”

He pushed for Rnei to snap out of his surprise and got the conversation started.

“I… don’t know. Ugh, this is why I hate complicated stuff like this…”

Rnei seemed to have rebuilt his composure and got out of his startled stance.

“There are some more vials that weren’t destroyed. Use those and get this over with already.”

He said with an irked tone. Unlike earlier in the entrance, it wasn’t directed to him but more to the whole situation itself. Senkyo gave a meek nod and placed his open wound on one of the open vials. Particularly, the one at the center of the unharmed vials. His blood dripped, made contact with the vial, and exploded.

“Wah!?”

This time, it was only Senkyo who backed off and Rnei stood his ground, observing the scene from afar.

“Wh-What is this!? It keeps exploding when I put my blood in! Are you sure this is supposed to happen!?”

“Look, I don’t know, okay!? I don’t do any of these kinds of things! …Ugh, why the hell is happening when I’M in charge!?”

The clasped his head in frustration, the tail on his back waving erratically. Unbeknownst to him, the reason this was happening was simply that he was unfortunate enough to be dealing with the single spirit power user that existed in Zerid. From Senkyo’s perspective, a blue stream was poured into the vial along with his blood. That was his kindled spirit power, one of the primary weapons of an Enchanter or a Brute class of the Konjou clan. They solidify the spirit power inside them and give them form. However, they could only be seen through an ability called “Espy,” an ability common for Earthlings that engage with the unknown like the hunters of the Konjou clan. That said, it was a completely different story for Zeldians. They don’t usually deal with spirit power, so they have no countermeasures against them.

Kindled spirit power disintegrates 10 seconds after being formed outside the body and its range of effects can only work on the owner’s body or the objects that it touches. In this case, the kindled spirit power was collected in the glass and used “Burst,” an offensive ability that ignites concentrated spirit power and causes an explosion. Senkyo wasn’t so proud of making someone’s job harder for them, but he had to do this to follow Shiro’s wishes. The blood gets caught in the explosion and leaves nothing behind. With that done, there was no possible way for them to retrieve his blood and from the outside, it still seems like he was cooperating with the procedure, bringing Rnei at a loss for what to do. Then again, it seemed he was a bit too lost so Senkyo pushed for some progress.

“T-This isn’t working… S-Sir, are you sure… I can’t just enter?”

“That’s…”

He’s still confused. Thinking about the situation carefully, shouldn’t there have been other procedures if this kind of problem came up? Then again, it wasn’t like they were expecting the vials to explode upon contact with blood, but you’d expect a guard to simply follow the next course of action set for them by their employers, if there were none, then that should prompt them to turn Senkyo away because they couldn’t collect his blood. This should be true for Rnei especially since Senkyo still remembers how he ranted that he wanted everything over with. If they didn’t turn him away immediately, then does the person that wants a blood sample of a victim affect him this much? Senkyo couldn’t help but think.

“U-Umm… If you really want my… blood that much, then… c-couldn’t you just, find me in the city later? I-I… have somewhere I need to be… so….”

“I can’t just let you go! We couldn’t get a sample of your blood; how can we sanction your entry if we don’t have this one requirement!?”

“…No, but… we don’t know why… this is happening… right? But I would still give a sample of my blood… if I need to. Then… why don’t you just send someone who knows what to do? That’s… easier for you too, isn’t it?”

“That’s… hmm…”

He stopped for a bit, deliberating what Senkyo just suggested. It took him around a minute to come to a decision.

“Okay, fine. That sounds like a good idea! Less trouble for me the better… Then, I’ll be letting you loose but I’ll have someone follow you around so you don’t run away, okay? They’ll come up to you once we figure out what to do. Is that good?”

“Y-Yes… Let’s go with that…”

Senkyo couldn’t help but notice the number of problems in that reply. This guard definitely wasn’t suited for any kind of job that needed to use wits. He mentioned that someone would be tailing him but it would’ve been better for Rnei to keep that to himself. Then, there was positively no doubt that he made this decision all by himself and didn’t bother consulting the idea with his superiors. And finally, the one Senkyo was most thankful for him to have missed, is that he could have just had Senkyo detained after they figured out what to do. Rnei was so incompetent it was strange. He questioned the standards their employers gave them before becoming guards. But thanks to that, Senkyo was able to pass the walls and enter the city.

**318 – Behind the Walls of Iqanlr**

Rnei took the lead out of Iqanlr’s walls and let Senkyo past the entrance gate. He mentioned someone being sent to tail him but he couldn’t sense their presence. They were either a professional that went under Senkyo’s radar or they didn’t even exist yet. Either way, he had more important things to worry about.

Crossing the entrance to the Border City Iqanlr, he was met with another strange sight. What sprawled in front of him were buildings constructed with the same medieval designs he saw back in the town of Naen. He found himself scratching his head. After seeing the interior of Iqanlr’s walls and the technology built into them, he expected the inside to be somewhat advanced as well. The town inside the walls was a stark contrast to the walls themselves. It was as if the walls were the only thing that advanced while the town it was protecting was left behind.

The roads were still made from dirt, the buildings with their plain, minimal design of wood and stone, and the only mode of transportation is through mounts or beast-drawn carriages. There wasn’t a single sign of technological advancement here. Senkyo tried to think of a reason for this and ended up with the explanation that this advanced technology was only discovered recently and is in the middle of implementing in the whole city. That explanation would make sense, but that leaves more to be answered like how their technological advancement jumped so much or why they decided to prioritize military power like the walls instead of the city’s agriculture which would hasten their overall advancement in the long run. In the end, the speculation did nothing for him. Again, he was reminded just how important getting information about this world was to him.

*“\*Onii-chan, are we going straight to the library?\*”*

*“\*No, we know they have one here but we don’t know where it is yet. We could ask random people on the street but I have a better idea. Shiro, you’re hungry too, right?\*”*

*“\*!! Yes! Are we going to a restaurant!?\*”*

Shiro’s voice perked up at the sound of food. It was understandable for Senkyo too since they’d been eating nothing but foraged forest food for about a week now. Comparing the forageable food from Earth and Zerid was like stale bread and a nutritious breakfast thanks to the sifij mushrooms they carried that could make either baked mushrooms or mushroom soup depending on the heat it was exposed to. But even so, forest food was still forest food. The two soon grew tired of their food supply and craved a different variety, that being meat. The thought of chicken or steak doused in delicious gravy made Senkyo and Shiro’s minds melt and their mouths salivate. At that moment, their thoughts became one.

*“\*Let’s go get some food!\*”*

*“\*Let’s go get some food!\*”*

Senkyo asked around where they could find the best food in the city and were directed to what seemed to be the food district where there were restaurants along with bars and taverns. At first, Senkyo thought he would have to go to a rowdy tavern, but there were other eateries in the area that were calmer and more sophisticated perhaps because they didn’t serve any alcohol.

First, Senkyo found a quiet area to let Shiro take form. Light came from Senkyo’s chest and molded into a shape of a catgirl. The white light slowly disappeared and revealed Shiro in her usual outfit of a white robe with cat ear pockets, brown shorts, knee-high socks, and a choker with a golden cat bell.

“Onii-chan~!”

“Whoa, there, there…”

She immediately greeted Senkyo with a hug. Thinking about it, Shiro had always been clingy with him even when they were little. In the past few days, she was often inside Senkyo’s head just in case he encountered someone and needed to converse with them without looking suspicious. She would only come out when she wanted to eat, to which she would, without fail, give Senkyo a hug. Senkyo had mixed feelings about this, but seeing as Shiro was sealed inside his body for years now until the day came that her power was needed, he thought it was fine to spoil her like this.

That being said, this was… a bit strange in this situation. Shiro’s clinginess aside, what bothered Senkyo the most was her clothing.

Usually, Senkyo wouldn’t have batted an eye at her normal outfit, but that was because they were on Earth. Right now, they were in Zerid. The types of clothing aside, it was more of a problem with how her clothes were woven. The cloth was clearly high quality compared to what Senkyo was wearing. So much so that it might make them stand out depending on how observant others are. Thinking that, Senkyo had to ask.

“Hey, Shiro, can you make your clothes look a bit rougher? Like the cloth from these robes.”

He stretched out his arm and let Shiro inspect his cloak. She scrutinized it and thought for a second.

“Hmm… Shiro can try but these are the clothes Shiro had before becoming Onii-chan’s familiar. Shiro has never tried changing her clothes before, but Shiro will try until Onii-chan is satisfied!”

Shiro’s body glowed in white light and returned to Senkyo’s body. She came back out a few seconds later. There was no change in her clothes. She tried multiple times after that, but it didn’t work. Senkyo called off the attempt. Shiro looked a bit down but Senkyo quickly cheered her up but petting her head. She quite liked this treatment.

Returning to their original objective, they let their noses decide for them and ended up in an eatery with a calm atmosphere and a savory aroma coming from their kitchen. They ended up in a grill house that served a variety of meat and veggies. Then it dawned upon him. How did restaurants work in medieval times?

He tried to think back to the fantasy anime he watched before, but he was certain that all of them left the ordering part of the restaurant out of the equation and went straight to receiving their food. He could vaguely recall looking up on the internet how restaurants worked in olden times and this made his face twist uncomfortably. There were no menus in medieval times except for perhaps for the higher echelons, but this was a public establishment for the commoners. People could come in and buy food but they can’t choose the food they wanted. There were no choices. Common restaurants in medieval times gave out food but it was always the chief’s choice. Well, there should be no problem here since all they served was grilled food.

“Excuse me, I’ll have the Ufrwo Grilled Mutton!”

“Ah, mine will be the Quioa Barbecue!”

“I’ll just have the Chef’s Special.”

“Yes, would that be all?”

Senkyo couldn’t help but overhear a strangely familiar string of requests that he commonly heard in restaurants on Earth. Turning his head to the side, he saw a group of people looking at a menu while a waitress was jotting down their orders.

“Eh…”

Het let out a dumbfounded voice.

“Hello, welcome to Kehilr’s Grill! Is this for a party of two?”

“Hey, Onii-chan! A cute waitress is talking to us!”

Shiro said as she tugged on his shirt.

“O-Oh, sorry, my bad! Um, yes. Just two.”

“Very well, right this way!”

*\*Eh?\**

The waitress led them to an open table with two chairs and handed both of them a menu. They weren’t just sheets of paper, they were both sealed in plastic.

*\*Ehhhhh???\**

“Well then, please just call for me when you’ve decided on an order!”

The waitress left and went on to serve a different table.

“Onii-chan, look, look! The Quioa Barbeque looks amazing!”

“!?!?”

Senkyo quickly turned to Shiro and saw her pointing at another table with a juicy set of sticks with meat and veggies, a mouth-watering fragrance coming off along with the smoke. He breathed a sigh of relief. If she had pointed to a printed picture of the said dish, he would have lost it. Unable to keep it to himself any longer, he voiced his concerns to Shiro.

“Hey, Shiro, don’t you think this is a BIT TOO SIMILAR to Earth?”

She turned to Senkyo and tilted her head in confusion.

“What do you mean?”

Those eyes of hers. They told Senkyo all too well that she thought he was the one saying strange things. There was obviously something he wasn’t getting here. Something that even Shiro expected him to know.

“U-Uhm… It’s just, this place is way too similar to Earth. Isn’t that weird?”

Modern customs such as having plastic-wrapped menus and even waitresses that haven’t appeared before the 1600s, there should be none of that in any medieval or fantasy setting. It was like cultures from Earth were being shared with this world, and that was exactly what Shiro implied in her reply.

“Onii-chan, don’t you know about what the ambassadors are?”

“Ambassadors…? …Oohh!!”

It had been a long time since he heard that term he forgot all about it. He usually referred to them as Heroes but that was only because he was talking about ambassadors from Earth. He recently talked to Iaksin about heroes but not the ambassadors as a whole. If he were to consider Shiro’s reaction and the fact that she had never been surprised by the technological developments of Zerid despite her not knowing too much more than him, that would show just how influential all the ambassadors actually are. To Shiro, and to everyone else who knew of the ambassadors, it was only natural that their technology was like this.

“Sorry, I don’t know anything too deep about them. All I know is that they were sent to other worlds to make peace with them and that five ambassadors were chosen from Earth, Zerid, and the Spirit Realm. Depending on where they originated from, they would be called Heroes, Hfixesi, and Di Manes, respectively. And that’s… about it. I don’t know much of their history or what they’ve done except for what Iaksin-san mentioned like the Great Unity March and Haeqras.”

Shiro nodded understandingly before responding.

“That’s… not that much to work with… Shiro should have asked how much Onii-chan knew about them, but it never crossed Shiro’s mind since you seemed to be doing fine despite it being Onii-chan’s first time in Zerid. Shiro thought maybe Yuu-chan explained them to Onii-chan before…”

“Ah, she mentioned them before but she didn’t explain anything about them. There was my talk with Freda-san but she only mentioned how their job was to make peace with other worlds but that was only supplementary information she provided before revealing that I was the one being mentioned in the Heroes’ prophecy—”

Shiro suddenly jumped out of her seat and covered Senkyo’s mouth.

“Onii-chan, shhh!!! Not here!”

Senkyo was so absorbed in his train of thought that he forgot the fact that they were in a public environment. Thankfully, no one seemed to give them any mind but he realized that this type of conversation was better to be had in private. Realizing this, Senkyo gently removed Shiro’s hand from his mouth.

“Sorry, Shiro, that was my bad. Let’s talk about this some other time. First, let’s have some lunch.”

“Mn! Shiro agrees!”

She gave Senkyo a lively nod before returning to her seat and choosing what to eat from the menu.

**319 – The Strength of Hjor**

“Nyaa~! That was delicious~!”

“Haha, it’s good that you enjoyed yourself.”

Senkyo said to Shiro who was walking beside him with a skip to her step as they left the restaurant behind them. Just before they took off, Senkyo made sure to ask the waitress for directions to the largest library they had in the city and told him to go to a place called Xhiari. Senkyo made a mental note of what the waitress said and walked through the streets with her words in mind and body. He walked through the streets subconsciously following the directions but what really filled his mind was about their current budget.

*\*I guess it really wasn’t just Iaksin-san’s connections… This place has a strong currency.\**

He thought back to the night before they left Naen. Iaksin handed him three bags of silver and gold Hjor. At the time, he hadn’t thought much of it. Silver and gold, typical fantasy currency, nothing too hard to understand. But then, the problem arose when he went to the shop Iaksin guided him to and saw the prices of his purchased items.

The items he bought were: A Shadow Cloak, Swift Gauntlets, Traction Boots, leather armor, a backpack, a utility strap, a combat belt, three small bags attachments, five kunai scabbard attachments, two dagger scabbard attachments, and two scabbard holders to carry his katanas. Shiro didn’t need anything since she was half-spirit due to the Familiar Pact so physical items would just come off every time she returned to his body.

Apparently, the Shadow Cloak had the power to increase his evasiveness and allows the wearer to blend into the shadows more effectively. The Swift Gauntles could increase the wearer’s dexterity and hasten his hand and arm movements. And the Traction Boots can dig into any surface no matter how slippery. It sounded like a bunch of fantasy fraud but they all worked just as they advertised. Senkyo didn’t know how they worked, but they were undoubtedly useful.

This would cost a fortune. That was what Senkyo’s thoughts were at the time. But then, when it came to adding everything up, their total was 2,218.70 Hjor. It was cheap! That’s what he thought until he asked about the prices.

Apparently, the three that took up most of the sum were the named items he bought, the Shadow Cloak for 749.99, the Swift Gauntlets for 549.99, and the Traction Boots for 499.99. What came after were the katana for 239.99 and the leather armor for 74.99. It seemed reasonable to Senkyo.

But then the other prices came. The backpack for 20, the strap for 10.20, the belt for 12, the kunai scabbards for 5.50 a piece, the small bags for 4.95 a piece, the dagger scabbards for 7.65 a piece, and the holders for 1.95 a piece. At that moment he thought, maybe they lowered the prices on purpose because of Iaksin and they chose to deduct most of them from the small pieces like attachments and belts.

Then came their lunch at Kehilr’s Grill. Their total: 10.16 Hjor. This wasn’t just a simple two-meal order. This was Senkyo ordering two juicy-looking menu items and Shiro hoarding a whole six. There was so much that other customers couldn’t help but give their table a glance. Even the waitresses were in disbelief at how much they saw Shiro eat.

It wasn’t like Shiro was on the brink of starving to death. In fact, all Shiro really needed to survive was natural liquid since that was what all Nemi like her needed. Meat and other food sources were unneeded, all they were was a luxury. And Shiro indulged herself deep in that splendor. Their food cost more than a good number of Senkyo’s equipment, and that was only about 10 Hjor.

As for how the currency worked in Zerid, Iaksin handed him a note of the values of every Hjor coin:

Lesser Bronze Coins valued at 0.01 Hjor, the smallest coin in Hjor with a dotted rim.

Bronze Coins valued at 0.10 Hjor, a plain bronze coin slightly larger than its Lesser variant.

Greater Bronze Coins valued at 1.00 Hjor, the largest of the three variants with a silver rim.

Lesser Silver Coins valued at 10.00 Hjor, a silver coin about the size of a Bronze Coin with a bronze rim.

Silver Coins valued at 50.00 Hjor, a plain silver coin about the size of a Greater Bronze.

Greater Silver Coins valued at 100.00 Hjor, larger than any variant of Bronze with a golden rim.

Lesser Gold Coins valued at 300.00 Hjor, about the size of a Silver Coin with a silver rim.

Gold Coins valued at 500.00 Hjor, a plain gold coin around the size of a Greater Silver.

And lastly, Greater Gold Coins valued at 1,000.00 Hjor, the largest coin in Hjor with a plain gold body but an ornate rim.

Again, thought back to the time he was given THREE BAGS of SILVER and GOLD coins, apparently just from taking down a single monster. No matter what anybody said this was clearly too much. Iaksin said that those three bags were his and a few of his comrades’ reward for subjugating a Xeqrel, which wasn’t even that threatening once you knew what it was capable of. It just didn’t make any sense to him. Iaksin received an exaggerated reward and gave it to Senkyo, who did nothing to be given this much money. Seriously, of the 20,000 Hjor he got from Iaksin, he only spent 2,228.86 Hjor, leaving him with a grand total of 17,771.14 Hjor. There was no possible way for this amount of money to be a reward for taking down a SINGLE monster. What was Iaksin thinking?

Senkyo let out a sigh.

“So this is what they mean about having too much money to know what to do with…”

“Mn? Is there something wrong, Onii-chan?”

“…No, it's nothing. I guess this means we have nothing to worry about when it comes to money.”

“Oh!? Does this mean Shiro and Onii-chan can eat like that whenever we want!?”

Shiro said excitedly, her ears twitching, tail waving to and fro, mouth watering, and eyes sparkling.

“Haha, no.”

He replied flatly.

“Aww…”

Everything that was moving drooped in disappointment. Senkyo wanted to spoil her, but eating extravagant meals like earlier every single day was too much. Not to mention they might be able to use this money on good equipment. Since the named equipment he bought at the highest price were the ones that worked as they advertised, it may be possible for them to find something even better. Maybe some that even Shiro would be able to use. For that, they needed money. They may seem rich now, but they never knew that was coming for them in the long run. In Senkyo and Shiro’s current situation, there was nothing worse than underestimating a possible threat, splurging money included.

“E-Excuse me! C-Can I have a moment of your time!?”

“!?”

“…!”

A man suddenly blocked their way and yelled, surprising the two and making Senkyo take a step back while Shiro hid and took refuge behind him.

**320 – Arachne Tailors**

“I am Leolja, the owner of Arachne Tailors, and if you couldn’t tell, an Iwaiida Riser of Iqanlr’s Sunken Nest.”

The person that stopped Senkyo and Shiro was a gentleman with arachnid features of eight eyes, a spider-like mouth, small filaments across his body, and four pairs of spider legs attached to his back. Aside from his spider legs, he stood on two human-like legs wearing black shoes with his two human-like hands wearing white gloves placed in front of him which stopped Senkyo and Shiro in their tracks. He donned a white three-piece suit with a matching top hat. He made a light bow with his left arm bent at the elbow and placed it behind his back, while his right arm took off his hat and bent the same way in front of his body across the abdomen, and slowly tipped his body forward.

Senkyo and Shiro didn’t know how to react and an awkward silence strained the air. Letting the moment pass, the man straightened his body in a fluid motion with the same elegance as his bow.

“I apologize for stopping you, but there is something I must ask about! Would you please give me a few moments of your time?”

“U-Umm…”

Senkyo turned to Shiro for her opinion and found a face that was just as lost as he was. Trying to assess the situation as best as he could, he summed it up to some businessman coming up to the two of them for something. He mentioned something about “Arachne Tailors,” so he assumed he was some kind of tailor. If that’s the case, then the only thing a tailor would want from the two of them with only their outside appearances to consider, was Shiro’s clothes. He was concerned about it before so it wasn’t that hard to deduce.

The man that called himself Leolja saw Senkyo’s eyes turn from him to Shiro’s clothes. Catching on to his thought process, he responded to his unvoiced conclusion.

“It is as you surmised, but considering the subject matter, it would be best for the two of us to talk in a private environment. Ah, of course, I will repay you for taking your time in however way you want, so long as the request is appropriate. Please, I assure you it won’t take long.”

The man was sharp and pushed for Senkyo’s cooperation instead of both of their consent, perhaps after seeing Shiro’s reaction. He was good with his eyes and knew how to read the subtle signs of the other party. Senkyo considered a connection with the man. It seemed like he truly came up to them only to discuss Shiro’s clothes so there were low chances of him being led to a trap, still, it wasn’t like the chances were none. But then, there was the fact that this person may have something to offer them. Bluntly thinking, he was a spider, and that reminded him of how spider silk on Earth is actually quite strong and even used for body armor. If he took the man’s offer, then there was a chance to get access to unique types of clothing. Weighing the possible merits against the demerits, he decided.

“Mnn… Sure… we’ll go.”

“Excellent! Well then, please, right this way!”

Leolja excitedly said as he took one step to the side and pointed with both arms to the direction they needed to go, leading the way with Senkyo and Shiro in tail. Senkyo made sure to remember which turns they took and how far off course they were from the way to the library. Whether things with Leolja go good or bad, they still needed to get to the library at some point.

Senkyo found that the place Leolja had in mind wasn’t far away at all. It was a formal establishment near the food district with a signboard in front of it saying “Arachne Tailors” in both Japanese and what he assumed to be Zeldian text. They entered the shop which had employees wearing the same three-piece suit Leolja wore except for the top hat, and unlike Leolja, none of them were a spider race. Customers were browsing their wears of different types of clothes, ranging from formal attire to casual clothing, and even…

“Ah, I see this unique otherworldly clothing has caught your eye. This is what the Earthlings refer to as ‘Cosplay Costumes,’ apparel that originated from the character designs of their many sources of entertainment.”

Cosplay. What was displayed in front of them was a mannequin with four pieces of clothing. The clothes in question were composed of a chest piece, a short skirt, and two shoulderless sleeves, all designed with a mix of traditional Japanese clothing. Needless to say, there were many exposed parts such as the shoulders, the belly, and the legs.

“It may seem impractical but the main objective of this type of clothing is to cultivate creativity and is catered to people with a unique sense of fashion. Ah, I would like to be clear that although I called this impractical, we at Arachne Tailors have made even this type of exposed clothing usable in certain combat situations. Take this as an example.”

One of the spider legs on Leolja’s back thrust into the mannequin’s exposed abdomen at an incredibly fast speed. It didn’t seem like he held anything back. Normally, what would end up happening was for the strike to pierce cleanly through the lifeless doll, but before that happened, multiple black threads stretched from the chest piece and the short skirt, all intersecting at the point Leolja tried to pierce.

“This is what Arachne Tailors are capable of. It may seem like an exposed portion but in reality, nothing is without protection. Wearing the complete set activates the connection with clothes, automatically creating invisible threads over the exposed areas and protecting them the same way the clothes would. We have heard of news that some people use our clothes to trick enemies into attacking an open area but end up getting caught by the wearer’s trap and leave unscathed due to our clothes’ tight protection. Let this be a demonstration of how capable we are.”

“I see… this… is really interesting.”

Senkyo said while scrutinizing the outfit in front of him, touching its exposed parts and being met with a wall of black thread. It seemed like he lucked out on his gamble. He wanted connections with Leolja.

“Whoaa…!! O-Onii-chan, can Shiro try it!?”

Shiro said with eyes sparkling even brighter than when she devoured a six-course meal back at the grill house. Thinking about it, Shiro’s usual clothing already looked like a cosplay, so maybe she liked wearing clothes like this. The thought crossed Senkyo’s mind and immediately transitioned to questioning what clothing in this world could be justified as a “cosplay.” If Senkyo wandered around on Earth wearing the clothes he had on right now, everyone would assume he was cosplaying as some character. Well, now that he was in an actual fantasy world anything he wore could be considered cosplay. Then, the thought of Shiro wearing the costume in front of them crossed his mind.

“Huh!? No, we can’t!”

The answer came out immediately to cover his embarrassment.

“W-We’re here to do business, remember?”

That was his flimsy excuse. Unfortunately for him, Leolja was there.

“No, if you would like to try out our clothes, then please do. It may become a good reference for our talk later. By all means.”

“!!!”

His reply made Shiro’s eyes sparkle even more. She had Leolja’s permission, but she still waited for Senkyo to give his. It seemed like no matter how much she wanted to do something, she still wanted his permission, even though she was free to do so. She had the appearance of a cat but it really seemed like she was more akin to a loyal puppy. He couldn’t help but have his heartstrings tugged by her actions, frustrating as it is.

“F-Fine…”

“Yay, yay!! Shiro loves you, Onii-chan!”

“Mnn, sure. Me too.”

Just a bit of sibling affection for the first time in a long time. He kept playing it cool outside, but on the inside, he was melting from happiness.

**321 – A Hobby’s Reason**

A few hours passed with Shiro trying out a good number of different outfits. It wasn’t just the cosplay clothes, she also tried out casual wear, loungewear, and they even had sleepwear! At this point, Senkyo couldn’t see the difference between this clothing store and one on Earth. Shiro got so into it that she dragged Senkyo with her. He was already reluctant to do this, so she chose his clothes for him, picking out the same types of clothes she wore but with cool, stylish formal clothes added as a bonus. Meanwhile, Leolja eagerly complimented most of their looks. He held his breath on some, which Senkyo assumed to be a sign that he didn’t quite agree with the look. Though, he preferred a professional’s honest opinion rather than empty praise just to get more sales, so he saw this as a positive thing.

Half of the afternoon was already gone when Shiro finished her fashion spree. There, Senkyo made a mental note for someone to take Shiro to a mall when they got back home, but preferably without him present. The three went deeper into the building, arriving at the second floor where Leolja’s office was located.

“Have you thoroughly enjoyed yourselves?”

“Yes!”

Shiro made a cheery reply to Leolja’s question. All of that fashion testing must have brought him to her good side seeing as she was actually responding to him instead of just letting Senkyo take charge of the conversation.

“Then, I would like to move on to the main reason I asked for the two of you. You may already know, but are the clothes Miss Shiro is wearing authentic?”

By “authentic,” he meant if it was made from Earth, Senkyo didn’t miss this. At first, he was unsure of how to go about revealing he had connections to Earth but after seeing the influence ambassadors brought to this world to the point where this place was basically a mix of a fantasy world and Earth, perhaps talking about their sources wasn’t such a bad idea. Of course, he would abstain from mentioning that he was actually from Earth, but saying that something they had was from Earth didn’t sound too bad of a move… That was what he planned to do, but now that he thought about it, the true source of Shiro’s clothes was something he wasn’t too sure about either.

“…Well, it originally WAS authentic. You see, Shiro is my sister but circumstances had forced us to bind her with a Familiar Pact with me. These clothes are the clothes she wore when she made the pact.”

“Oh! That certainly is an unusual story. I see… so these clothes are that of a half-spirit’s…”

He pinched his chin, thinking for a second. Senkyo internally breathed a sigh of relief, seeing as Leolja wasn’t too shocked about what he said, implying that it wasn’t too farfetched of a story and the fact that he knew about Spirits in addition to Earthlings.

“Sorry, you probably wanted to know where we got these clothes.”

He was about to make a light bow, but then, Shiro tugged on his clothes, catching his attention.

“Onii-chan! Don’t we still have your clothes?”

“Oh, those ones. I do have physical clothes that originated from Earth but…”

“Ah!? So you do have samples of Earth’s clothes?”

Leolja latched onto his words as quick as he heard them.

“Yes, but unfortunately, they got scorched in one of our conflicts. I don’t think these would be something worth selling.”

The school uniform Senkyo wore was burnt and stale. Not a piece of cloth was spared from the flames of his own magic. Even if they were produced from Earth where they had advanced technology for weaving, the clothes he wore earlier were of much better quality. In fact, they were so good that he could barely tell it was made in a fantasy world. What he assumed to be spider cloth felt different from common clothing on Earth but that didn’t mean they were any less comfortable. Considering this, he simply saw no merit in purchasing his burnt clothes. Nevertheless, Leolja thought differently.

“Oh, that’s completely fine! You see, as silly as it sounds, I’m not actually in dire need of a supply of Earth’s resources. I’ve heard that clothing shops before 17 years ago always had suppliers on Earth but our establishment doesn’t need that. The real reason I called out to both of you was more on the side of satisfying my selfish curiosity. You see, I’ve learned about Earth’s weaving techniques and the like but I have never seen a real sample of their clothes. I may be able to weave my own cloth and have a clothing establishment of my own, but that doesn’t mean I’m not curious about how cloth was weaved before my time.”

He said passionately, bringing Senkyo to a nod.

“I see… Then, the reason you called out to us was that you just wanted to examine what Earth’s cloth was like?”

“Yes. It’s completely unrelated to my business, so you’re free to refuse me if you want to. But preferably, I would like for you to accept. I could take inspiration from the clothes if it strikes me and overall, have my curiosity fulfilled. With that said, would you be willing to sell me a piece of Earth’s clothes, scorched as they may be?”

“Hmm, I don’t see a problem with that. Sure, I’ll sell them.”

“Thank you very much.”

A… smile(?), or at least what Senkyo thought was a smile, formed on Leolja’s face. He couldn’t really tell because of his Arachne mouth but that’s what it felt like.

“Oh, this is embarrassing… My apologies, but don’t think I ever got your name. I deduced Miss Shiro’s name from your exchanges but I never got yours.”

“A-Ah!? So-Sorry, that’s my bad!”

“No, it’s quite fine. I was the one who suddenly called out to you and dragged you here. I didn’t give you any time to properly introduce yourselves, so I feel this is mostly my fault. I was just so absorbed with clothing that it slipped my mind.”

“…Well, in that case, I am Yukou Senkyo, Yukou is my last name while Senkyo is my first name. And as you may already know, this is my sister, Yukou Shiro.”

“Shiro is Shiro!”

She followed up Senkyo’s introduction, raising her arm in the air and doing one for her own.

“Haha, what fun siblings you two are. Well then, Sir Senkyo and Miss Shiro, is there anything you would like in exchange for the trouble I’ve caused you?”

In this situation, Senkyo would usually refuse his offer since he and Shiro already got quite a lot from trying out their clothes, but this situation wasn’t normal. He needed to use anything at his disposal to elevate his perspective of the situation.

“Actually, there is…”

Senkyo went ahead and explained his supposed situation where his memories were taken from him by a monster and ended up in Iqanlr with missing patches of memories. Since Leolja was the only person he explained this to with Shiro out in the open, he applied the same fake setting on her.

“Oh, my… that is quite an unfortunate situation. If there is anything you want to know, I will be sure to provide you with any information I can.”

And thus began Senkyo’s incessant strings of questions.

**322 – Iwaiida Riser, Leolja**

First, Senkyo began with a question addressing a term Leolja mentioned in his first introduction to them. An Iwaiida Riser of Iqanlr’s Sunken Nest, he referred to himself as such. To understand what a Riser was, he first went into detail about what a Sunken Nest is. As Iaksin explained before, they are underground habitats where all hostile monsters retreated to when the Great Unity March happened. Sunken Nests usually have a dominant species that become the most dangerous in a Sunken Nest, the people of Haeqras would mark what type a Sunken Nest is depending on this dominant species. As for Iqanlr, it was an insect type. The most dominant species inside the sunken nest is the Iwaiida race, an evolutionary race that consists of arachne, as well as the same race Leolja belonged to. Apparently, a Riser is a term used for someone that was originally born and raised in a sunken nest, but lost their hostility for people on the surface and left the nest to live above ground. An Iwaiida Riser, one born from the most dangerous race in Iqanlr’s sunken nest, was Leolja’s true identity.

This was a huge shock to both Senkyo and Shiro, and Leolja’s wry face told them how he expected this reaction. Curious, Senkyo pursued how exactly he became a Riser. The contents were a bit cruel, but that was exactly why Leolja revolted the sunken nest. Below the surface, the Iwaiida race would feed on other monsters in the nest, but due to their large numbers, there were never enough, so their race resorted to cannibalism. They ate their brethren, thinning the competitors for food, and becoming food themselves. That was normal for the Iwaiida race, but that didn’t change the fact that Leolja was disgusted by this. When he was a child, he saw mothers lay themselves down as food for their children, as well as situations with the roles reversed where mothers ate their babies for food. It sickened him. He knew all too well how different his mindset was compared to his kin but that didn’t bother him. He just didn’t like seeing what entered his eyes and that was it. There was no special reason.

Fortunately, Leolja was a talented hunter from birth, allowing him to provide food for himself without needing to resort to cannibalism. However, that didn’t make his life simple. The fact that he refused to submit to the race’s cannibalism had him become the perfect target for his Iwaiida brethren. He was a lone wolf, always on the run from his own kin. He then explained how evolutionary races work to Senkyo and that the Iwaiida race evolves from food and combat experience. The more he eats, the more his food varies, the more he turns that food into energy for combat, and the more he pushes his body to the brink for survival, every single second in Leolja’s life had him evolve to the final form of their race. They didn’t have a name for this, but the people in Haeqras referred to his form as a Demonic Spider. The most dangerous enemy in the sunken nest.

In case Senkyo and Shiro had plans of visiting the nest, Leolja showed them his true form. A large body of a spider filled the room, one with the upper half of its body turning into a human’s. Unlike how Leolja’s half-human, half-spider form earlier where the human side was dominant, this had the spider side as the dominant form, one consisting of sharp, lethal fingers the same as his fearful fangs.

Despite his terrifying look, Leolja spoke in the same polite way he did earlier. He went on about how everyone at his level was able to make threads that blend in with the environment. He cited the cosplay costume Senkyo and Shiro first saw earlier, explaining that their threads could become invisible just like the clothes. He warned him that the only way to detect them was to sense the mana running down their threads. Some races in Zerid have a simple time doing this due to their natural abilities, but there were still more that weren’t that lucky.

Leolja returned to his human dominant form, retaining the three-piece suit he donned from the start without a scratch despite his sudden body enlargement. This was also the work of his illusionary threads, he said.

Realizing the tangent their conversation took, he brought it back to how Leolja became a Riser. At first, Senkyo thought that Leolja simply had more intelligence than the others but this wasn’t the case. The Iwaiida have similar levels of intelligence and at the time, Leolja’s was average. He was a talented hunter by instinct, not intelligence. What really had him change was a strange man that did research at the bottom of the sunken nest. He tried to kill him at first but he could never do it. The man had strange contraptions that allowed him to escape his traps as if he had never been caught in the first place. The man didn’t try to strike back and just ignored him.

Time passed and Leolja eventually found out that his kin would never chase him down after a certain point. That being, the area around where the man was researching. He was wary at first, but eventually, curiosity took over and made him approach the man. He asked about it from a safe distance and the man answered that it was a type of barrier that repelled hostiles. The fact that he was able to enter meant that he wasn’t hostile, so the man never cared to pay attention to him until he called out. Leolja reminded him of the fact that he tried to kill him before, to which the man explained that it wasn’t the type of hostility that the barrier repelled. He went on about how there was a difference between hostility to murder and hostility to survive, but Leolja didn’t exactly understand at the time.

After this revelation, Leolja frequented the man’s place. He would watch from afar and observe him making his unusual contraptions. Then, at some point, got involved with his research. That was the moment he realized that he had a fatal weakness—curiosity, something he could never resist for long.

The man taught him many things about what he was doing research on and about other things outside of the sunken nest. Leolja never went into detail about what it was with Senkyo and Shiro, but that eventually led to Leolja finding his passion for making clothes. He utilized the thread he would usually use for hunting and turned them into cloth, giving birth to a new type of combat clothing. Even the man he thought could do anything was amazed.

This made the man suggest he leave the nest and live on the surface, but that was the biggest hurdle out there. The reason why Risers are so rare is that they didn’t know what the surface had to offer and what threats were awaiting them. In the past, some people tried negotiating with the ones living in the sunken nest to peacefully live on the surface, but his kin was too hostile to be reasoned with and attacked. Leolja didn’t know what would happen if he went to the surface after that, but the man reassured him and gave him a push.

After some time, Leolja gathered the courage to make contact with people on the surface. He took on a more human-like appearance and dressed himself in elegant clothing. An image of a man entering a job interview came to Senkyo’s mind but he didn’t voice his thought. Leolja arrived near the surface where he encountered surface dwellers, but in complete contrast to his initial thought, they only gave him a glance and leisurely passed him. He was surprised but eventually continued. On the surface, the ones that first made contact with him were guards which he assumed belonged to Haeqras, the organization that the researcher talked about. He thought he would be met with weapons, but instead, was given the question.

*“\*Are you leaving the Sunken Nest and becoming a Riser?\*”*

Thankfully, there were quite a few people with surprised expressions among the guard, seeing as a Demonic Spider just came out of the nest. This relieved him of the concern that surface dwellers were an emotionless bunch. But the one that he assumed to be the most powerful person in command, the person right in front of him, had a stone-faced expression, unperturbed by his appearance.

Leolja spoke to confirm the man’s assumption and was sent to the local Haeqras where he was given an identification card and sent him out to the city with an escort, whose job was to introduce him to how the surface world functioned. They strolled the town, being introduced to each and every facility he might need to use such as inns, the food district, how the walls functioned, and even some essential lessons that explained how the world worked outside of Iqanlr and some compulsory education which included the history of the three worlds. By the end of the day, Leolja couldn’t help but ask the escort.

*“\*Why does no one seem to mind that I’m a Demonic Spider?\*”*

No one cared he was from the sunken nest. It was just like how the researcher explained that would happen. The escort turned to him and clarified that surface dwellers aren’t weak. Each and everyone from every race, no matter how different they are, has a common ability to discern the hostility of another person. Of course, there were ways to hide from these senses, but the fact that Leolja looked so prim and proper had most of the people they encountered take that instinctive sense as a fact.

The escort went about how discrimination and racism weren’t prevalent concepts in Zerid. However, there was a rise in these ever since the very first ambassadors showed up, but most of them simply took that as an inconvenience in exchange for having a better state of living.

That began Leolja’s half a year of learning all about the surface world. After that half, he went on and established a business called Arachne Tailors, one that quickly shot in popularity due to its high-quality clothing and the otherworldly design they had, specifically, the designs that the researcher prepared for him from time to time. It seemed like he had knowledge of Earth and made rough sketches of the clothes they had. Leolja used them as a base and made clothes out of them with his personal touch.

And so… after a year and a half from becoming a Riser, here he was with Senkyo and Shiro in front of him.

“W-Wow… so this is actually a brand new establishment, huh? I never would have known…”

“Whoa! That’s amazing!”

“You flatter me.”

Leolja said before sipping on the tea that was served to him, Senkyo, and Shiro by an employee at some point in their talk.

“I never thought Zeldians were so accepting…”

Senkyo muttered before going deep into thought. When he considered everything that happened in Zerid where, unlike Earth, had many races that were equal in power and no single dominant species. Perhaps it was only natural for there to have few cases of discrimination and racism in this world. Not to mention the fact that they openly welcomed a race that originated from a completely different world. But then, he couldn’t help but be disappointed in humans when he heard the fact that these toxic concepts rose ever since ambassadors, or more specifically, humans came to Zerid.

“I quite enjoyed that talk. Is that all you want to ask of me?”

Leolja turned to Senkyo for confirmation.

“Ah, yes. It was a very interesting life story you gave us, Sir Leolja. I hope for the best in your future on the surface world.”

“Haha, please, you can address me without formalities if you’d like.”

“Oh, no, we couldn’t—”

“Then, let’s go with Leela!”

Senkyo’s face froze when he heard the absurd utterance from Shiro’s mouth.

“You’re Leela!”

“Leela, you say? I assume this is a type of phonetic spelling. Honestly, it sound’s a bit too womanly… but if that’s how you would prefer it, I don’t mind, Miss Shiro.”

“No! That’s unfair! You need to call Shiro the same way!”

“O-Oh…”

Leolja’s puzzled face turned to Senkyo and received an apologetic bow. He took that as his signal to play along, so he did just that.

“I see… then, how does ‘Shir’ work?”

“Shir!?”

She parroted him excitedly with her eyes sparkling.

“Shir! Onii-chan, did you hear that!? It sounds cool! Shiro has a nickname now! Shiro is Shir!”

“Haha, good for you.”

“Mn~! Mnn~!”

She hummed happily as Senkyo pet her head. Meanwhile, Leolja just overlooked them with warm eyes.

“Well then, I apologize for the trouble, uhmm… Leolja.”

“Haha, it was nothing at all. If anything, I should be thanking you two, Senkyo, Shir.”

“Thank you too, Leela!”

Shiro was incredibly cheerful today. Maybe because she made another friend which brought a smile to Senkyo’s face. But still, their job here wasn’t done. They still needed to sell his uniform.

“Okay. I’ll take out the clothes now—”

“—…Wait! Please, stop! You aren’t allowed to enter here!”

“It’s fine, I tell you! It’s fine!”

Just as he reached out for his bag, a muffled voice came from the hallway outside the room. The three turned their attention to the door. Then, it suddenly flew open, revealing a girl in some kind of uniform. It seemed like the employee tried to stop her but was unsuccessful and simply gave an apologetic bow when he saw Leolja’s face through the door.

“Sir Leolja! I’m taking these two with me!”

**323 – The Chaotic Extrovert**

“Um… This is a bit late now but, who are you again?”

“Mmn~?”

The woman in front of Senkyo and Shiro turned to them. She seemed about the same age as Senkyo with wavy brown hair that reached her waist and amber eyes that reflected the same color as the gem on her uniform. To be precise, a school uniform. One with a short-sleeved white blouse under a purple vest adorned with golden edges and a similar colored aiguillette connecting the vest to the amber gem. Her pleated short skirt bounced lightly as she turned her head around with a spring in her step, along with her black mantle that was adorned with various purple designs, wrapping around her neck with a golden chain that fastened into another amber gem. This was no doubt a clothing design that incorporated Zerid’s local magic and Earth’s, or specifically, Japan’s uniforms. That, or the design was completely based on some fantasy story that someone got from Earth.

At this point, Senkyo was already unfazed by Earth’s influence on Zerid. He literally just got out of a clothing store with clothes that were much too similar to Earth’s clothes and earlier dined in a grill that had Earth-contemporary food service. This uniform was nothing. Yet, he couldn’t help but strain his face as he watched the girl in front of him. It wasn’t because of the uniform, but more of the fact that she was eating some kind of grilled… seafood(?) on a stick. It wasn’t just the simple problem of the food looking absolutely horrendous, but it was moving along with it! It was some kind of mix of a sea slug, a fish, and tentacles on its back that wriggled slightly from time to time. He had a mountain of comments loaded in his mouth, but he stifled it and silenced himself for the last few minutes so as to not lose sight of the first question he needed to ask the most. Her identity.

Back at Arachne Tailors in Leolja’s office, this person quite literally dragged them out of the door.

**…………**

“H-Hey! Miss Hira! What are you doing!?”

Leolja raised his voice as the woman he referred to as Hira made a light jog to Senkyo and Shiro’s backs, grabbing them at the collar of their clothes.

“It’s an emergency! Prof Gaeka wants ‘em, stat!”

“The professor!?”

“Yep, yep! Ok, now that you know, we’ll be off!”

*\*Tug! Tug!\**

“Eh?”

“Nya!?”

At that very moment, she pulled both Senkyo and Shiro out of their seats and rushed out of the store. They could hear Leolja’s call for her to stop fading in the distance but there was no halting this person. Senkyo didn’t know why, but this person was insanely strong seeing as she was able to drag both of them with one hand each. He tried calling out for her to let them go multiple times but she only did so when they arrived at a street stall that sold those… things. He couldn’t help but feel insulted that his safety was of less importance than that seafood thing.

**…………**

“Oh, my bad! I was totally rude earlier, huh? Sorry, I just wanted to get out of Sir Leolja’s hair as fast as possible. I bet I wouldn’t be able to get away if I stayed for too long. My name’s Hira, by the way! Ah, and I heard that you lost some of your memories, so you probably don’t know what this uniform is!”

“M-Mn…”

Shiro hid behind Senkyo’s back, clearly overwhelmed by Hira’s lively energy. To be honest, he was a bit swamped by her too but he had to take control of the conversation before both of them get dragged by her flow.

“Y-Yes, I’m Yukou Senkyo, and this is my sister, Shiro. Earlier, you said that you know we’re missing memories. How did you know that?”

“Oh, that! Fufu, you wouldn’t believe it, but I’m actually the spy that’s been tailing both of you since you left the walls! I betcha didn’t even notice I was there, huh? But I was!! I’m so good, aren’t I!?”

She continued talking while walking forward, alternating her gaze from her front to their faces, and giving animated gestures as she spoke. Senkyo had no idea how this girl was doing this without bumping into something, but that wasn’t what he wanted to focus on. If what Hira just said was true, then it was just as she said. He didn’t pick up a single trace of her presence. This person acted like one hell of a trendy gal that didn’t care much about other things, but in reality, she could actually be capable to some extent. If only she would stop munching on that half-dead street food then maybe his opinion of her would actually go up.

“Oh, yeah! Oh, yeah! Hey, Senkyo-san!”

She cheerfully called for him, slowing down and matching his stride, placing herself right beside him.

*“\*What kind of spy is this bubbly!?\*”*

Senkyo couldn’t help but quip in his mind. It wasn’t only that she was the most extroverted person he had ever met in this world, but she didn’t even hesitate to address him by his first name right off the bat. Right now, he could only compare her to a cat on their zoomies.

“W-What is it, Hira-san?”

“I—ah!?”

She was about to say something but suddenly stopped herself, widening her eyes in surprise and placing her hand to cover the front of her open mouth. After a few seconds of letting her thoughts stabilize, she told him.

“Wait… calling you Senkyo-san is fine, right? Sorry, I’m not used to talking to people from Nairn so I ended up using your first name. Is it ok? I can change it if you’d like.”

“Oh, uh…”

As Iaksin explained before, the Nairn was a place somewhere on the southwest side of the Uikakrn Kingdom. Apparently, they had similar customs to the Japanese such as introducing themselves by their last names first and using honorifics. It was the place Iaksin assumed Senkyo came from since it made the most sense, so he didn’t waste any time adapting that information to his fake background. And now, Hira seemed to be concerned with the same assumption in her head.

She awkwardly scratched the back of her head while her bright smile from earlier turned crooked, making her seem sheepish. Senkyo wasn’t sure how to respond to that since the chaotic waves around her immediately quelled at her mistake. If this wasn’t all an act, then Hira was actually more or less considerate. He almost inadvertently blurted out his consent when he realized this, but this was where he drew the line. Senkyo felt that if he didn’t do anything to put her under control he wouldn’t get anything out of her.

“Yes, please go with my last name.”

“M-Mn, sorry about that again, Yukou-san.”

“No, there’s no need to drag the subject.”

“Y-Yeah, you’re right! Ah! But wait, then what do I call your sister? Isn’t her last name the same as yours?”

“Ah…”

A blunder. He was so focused on dealing with Hira that he forgot about Shiro’s opinion. He turned to his back where Shiro remained separated from Hira via Senkyo body shield and saw her reassuring gaze.

“Don’t worry, Onii-chan. Shiro is used to being called by her first name. Shiro doesn’t mind.”

“Is that so? You’ve grown strong now, huh?”

“Hehe~… Praise me more~!”

He reflexively stretched his hand out and pet her head, making her let out a few delighted hums. That lasted for a few seconds until Senkyo realized that Hira was still around. She stared at them with a perplexed look in her eyes, immediately averted them when she saw Senkyo turn to her, and feigned ignorance by whistling sloppily and clumsily scratching her cheek. She wasn’t fooling anyone. His face reddened slightly from embarrassment, but on the bright side, she calmed down somewhat compared to her earlier behavior so he could actually get some answers from her now. Senkyo cut his actions off with a forced cough and faced Hira.

“Hey, Hira-san, you said I was needed but where exactly are we going and who are we meeting?”

“Oh! What a perfect time to ask that!”

She dropped her sloppy act and made a light jog to the side of the road. There, she thrust her arms out as if making a grand reveal, presenting a familiar-looking structure beyond her hands.

“BEHOLD!!! The world’s most advanced apocrologic institution, and not to mention, the school I currently attend in, Apocrology Academy Xhiari!”

**324 – Xhiari**

“What!?”

Senkyo couldn’t help but raise his voice. It was the very same name he heard the waitress tell him to look for. His memories reconfirmed that he clearly asked the waitress for the location of a library. However, from what Hira was saying, Xhiari is a school, not a library. The thought of the school library came to mind, but would a school library be bigger than a standalone library? This was his first thought. But the more he looked at the school, the more that thought seemed to be plausible. After all, this school seemed to be larger than any school he’d seen on Earth.

Senkyo stopped, took a step back, and took in the sight before him. The school and the streets were separated by ornate metal bars supported by a brick frame. Beyond that was a grassy area designed to look like a park with concrete pathways that led to a large school building constructed in modern Japanese architecture with multiple rows of windows spread evenly on every floor. He could see other students near the entrance and chatting by the trees outside wearing the same uniform as Hira had on.

“So, so, what do ya think of it!? This is the place where most of the ambassadors’ knowledge is poured into! It’s awesome, isn’t it!?”

“This is… beyond my expectations.”

“Woo! I know, right!? That’s what I thought when I first got here too!”

Even just by looking at this place, Senkyo knew this would be the ideal place to supplement his ignorance of this world. If what Hira said was true, then this place is where knowledge from both Earth, Zerid, and even the Spirit Realm was collected. There was no better place he could wish for. Senkyo wanted to ask about the library immediately, but there was such a thing called an order to this situation. Right now, he wasn’t being led to the library, but to some person called Professor Gaeka. He couldn’t get to the books, so who better to extract more knowledge from than the person right beside him?

“Hira-san, you said this is an ‘Apocrology Academy,’ what do you mean by that?”

“Oh! That’s right, you lost your memories! But fear not! I’ll be here to help you out when you’re in trouble! Let's talk while we walk, okay?”

Hira took out a silver card and tapped it into a rectangular cavity on the side of the gate, just like how one would tap a scanner on Earth. This made the gates open automatically for them to enter. Apparently, this was one of the inventions of apocrology, to which she explained was the science of Zerid. She went on about many things and how it uses Zerid’s resources and Earth’s knowledge to create new technology. The key card and scanner were one of many.

On Earth, these things would be powered by electricity but on Zerid, they were powered by magic, or at least what Senkyo assumed to be magic. Wanting to be sure about the subject, he asked Hira how the contraption worked. She told him that it worked mostly on magic but it still had a few electric components, confirming the existence of electricity in this world. The difference was instead of implementing it the same way Earth did, they modified it so that their sources of electricity would be one among many options such as a magic electricity generator, lightning stones, or a person’s own lightning magic. In this world, electricity was basically self-supplied, removing the need for powerlines and electricity companies. In a world where everyone had their own way of creating electricity, such things were useless. In turn, this led to most people in Zerid being quite capable of lightning magic. Everyone generally knew how to use and control its output.

Satisfied, and also quite vexed that the people of this world, which he first thought to be a typical fantasy world without a trace of modern technology, basically ran on free electricity, he shifted the subject to hide his internal pain. The next topic he decided to touch upon was when Hira introduced Xhiari as the “world’s most advanced apocrologic institution.” She explained that the Ridsikrn Empire held the name of “The Nation of Arcane Innovation” due to the fact that it was the most advanced nation in terms of technology and magic. She clarified to him that this was also one of the biggest reasons why Hjor, Yuwokrn’s currency, was one of the strongest currencies in Zerid. Hearing this, a question came to Senkyo’s mind.

“Why is the most advanced apocrologic institution inside a Border City instead of at the heart of the Empire?”

Senkyo could recall Iaksin telling him that border cities were built between nations as a sign of peace and unity. Although, as good as that purpose may be, was it really a smart move to place such an important facility right on another country’s territory? Hira understood his question, to which she wagged her finger in disapproval. Apparently, there was no other way for Xhiari to be the most advanced apocrologic institution if it wasn’t built on Iqanlr. The Ridsikrn Empire may be the most technologically advanced country, but the ones that are most compatible with handling such technology were the Sorun race, a race local to the Kingdom of Uikakrn. By placing Xhiari on both Uikakrn and Ridsikrn’s borders, it was not only a sign of peace but also a partnership. Ridsikrn could send their technology to Xhiari while Uikakrn would provide Sorun to analyze their technology, improve them, and create more. Both countries benefited from this widely which led to Xhiari’s current state.

In addition to having the backing of two whole countries, the past few ambassadors also contributed to Xhiari by putting their knowledge into the project. One of the ambassadors a few centuries ago was an architect and made the academy similar to Japanese schools. Of course, this was modified as the years passed but with that ambassador’s architecture as a base, the academy was made into what it is now.

Now that Senkyo understood more about his current environment, he moved on to another topic he had in mind. The identity of this Professor Gaeka. He caught this name even before he entered the city. There was no doubt that this person is very influential. The problem was the fact that they were specifically asking for Senkyo and Shiro. Perhaps not them directly, since the guards at the wall clarified that they wanted the blood of a victim from the rampaging memory-devouring monster. The issue was that they wanted Senkyo’s blood, which was a huge problem, or so Shiro suggested. Senkyo didn’t actually know how big of a deal his blood was but if Shiro said so then he had no reason to doubt her. To have an idea of how to deal with this professor, he wanted information from Hira.

“Oh, the Prof, huh? Well, he’s one of Xhiari’s leading apocrologists. He’s made many contributions so far and now he’s in charge of figuring out how this elusive memory-eating monster works. For that, he says he needs the blood of a victim. That’s you two!”

“So he’s going to use our blood to fight off this monster? Is that even possible?”

“Who knows? I can’t understand half of the stuff he does, and I study here!”

She emphasized her words by patting her chest with both of her hands, indirectly implying her high intelligence. Doing so as she slurped the last piece of that… seafood-thing on a stick. There was no doubt that Hira was a student in an academy that is hailed to be the world’s most advanced institution, but for SOME REASON, Senkyo found Hira’s genius hard to believe.

“Um, Hira-san, what exactly are the requirements to attend this academy?”

She unhesitatingly answered.

“Not much!”

To which Senkyo slowly nodded his head with deep ruth, lips sealed tight to prevent any unnecessary words to be said…

“Hey!! What’s with that pitying look on your face!?”

…Not that it helped to hide those thoughts.

“Look, don’t misunderstand! The requirements for attending the academy are little to none! You just need to understand how apocrology works and have a passion to cultivate it! That’s me! But, actually enrolling in Xhiari is a different matter! This place has half of its students decided to be Soruns or anyone that Uikakrn decides to send in. Meanwhile, the other half is decided completely by who is the most capable in apocrology than others. For your information, I’m in the latter half! Sure, I’m Sorun, but that doesn’t mean I got picked by the Kingdom. They have their own thing going on there! I’m just some random from the countryside that got in with my own strength just like the others! So I can’t help but feel like you’re being really rude right now!”

She passionately gave out her speech, each and every one of her movements conveying to Senkyo her true feelings. It made him realize that Hira wasn’t joking when she said she had the passion to study here. From what she said, she had her own pride in getting into Xhiari, and Senkyo spat on that pride by refusing to take her seriously and even doubting her abilities. It was no wonder that Hira was hurt by that. Senkyo chose to be a bit hard on her just to keep her under control, but he knew that it didn’t warrant him to actually hurting her feelings.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to go that far.”

“Hmph! As long as you know.”

She turned around with a huff and continued leading their way.

**325 – AW-Unit**

So far, Senkyo, Shiro, and Hira have passed the main school building and a few others which seemed to be some kind of warehouse and large tower of sorts. Right now they were beside an open field with students in the middle of it. Senkyo couldn’t help but stop to stare the moment he saw the outfits of the students.

“Are you interested in our practical sessions?”

Hira noticed Senkyo pause for a bit and came back to him. She was a bit angry earlier but it looked like she already passed it off as water under the bridge.

“Hira-san, what are those outfits they’re wearing?”

He asked, pointing to the students wearing varying types of jumpsuits. Though, he was more familiar with these suits if he referred to them as space battles suits, the same ones he often saw in space science fiction anime where the characters pilot and fight in gigantic robots. Yet another thing he didn’t expect to see in Zerid.

“Oho? Are you interested?”

“If I had to say, then yes. It’s the first time I’ve seen anything like it.”

“Hehe, I know right? You’ve lost your memories but I betcha would’ve had the same reaction even if you did!”

She said, pointing and smirking at him mischievously.

“You’re real confident, huh? And what makes you say that?”

“That’s ‘cuz Xhiari’s the only place that produces those things! In other words, people like me! Oh, and we don’t sell these by the way. It’s all completely school property!”

Hira said something incredible just now and instinctively made Senkyo want to squeeze in a quip, but thought otherwise after being reminded of her passionate speech earlier. Instead, he opted to ask passively.

“Wow, you can make those things?”

“‘Course I can! Every student in their 3rd year and above have to be able to make their own if they want to stay Xhiari or graduate.”

“3rd year and above…? Um, how do school years work in Xhiari again?”

“Oh, I never got to that part, huh? Well, you see…”

She went on to explain that just like how the school architecture was based on Japan’s, their school year system was the same. They have both a middle school and a high school, both requiring three years in order to advance to the next level. However, unlike Earth, graduating in this world isn’t as important nor as valuable as it is on Earth. It can get you to college, but bluntly speaking, if you weren’t a merchant, it’s useless in Zerid.

This was how it usually went for the standard schools in Zerid, but in Xhiari, it was different. Third-years have the option of extending their stay in the school through the research program. This allowed graduated third-years to put their knowledge into use and become research apprentices in the apocrology field. Seeing as everyone that attended this school aimed to be involved in apocrology in the first place, almost everyone took the research program. From this point on, each student is given five years to prove their worth to the school in order to become a full-fledged apocrologist researcher. Otherwise, the student would lose their right to stay in the academy and will be forced to become an apocrologist researcher through other means.

“By the way, I’m in my second year as an apprentice!”

“Whoa… That’s actually amazing. How’s your chance of becoming an official researcher looking?”

He asked innocently, unknowingly penetrating an intangible spike through Hira’s chest. Her bright cheer quickly went into gloom.

“W-Well, y-you know… I-It’s in the process… yep…”

That reaction was all he needed to know not to pursue the subject. Senkyo didn’t know what went into this whole apocrologic research thing, so he didn’t know how to cheer Hira up. An ignorant person like him might actually just worsen the situation, making him opt to change the subject instead.

“A-Anyway, what do those suits have to do with apocrologic research? It seems like its importance is at the point where the school wants everyone to be able to make it. It’s the first requirement to entering the research program, after all.”

“Oh, yeah! That!”

Her mood perked up right away. This person’s mood swings left Senkyo confused about whether or not to actually worry about her, but that wasn’t what he needed to think about now.

“Take a good look at the students over there.”

Hira pointed to the middle of the field. At some point during their talk, a red circle appeared at the center while the group of students stood by the edge of it. Two people walked up from the group to the center of the red circle. One was a woman with white hair and red eyes donning an azure battle suit with what seemed to be a thin exoskeleton attached to her. Based on her human looks, she seemed to be a Sorun. Meanwhile, the other was a large man with black and brown scales all over his body, reptile feet, sharp claws, a tail, two bright red horns on their head, two sharp protrusions on their back, and a face that looked similar to a dragon. Such a man had a carmine battle suit and a large exoskeleton frame that made it look like he was half machine.

“What’s happening there?”

“A mock battle. Its purpose is to test out the capabilities of the suits they made and basically let students know where they need to work on.”

“Then those things are designed for battle, right?”

“Not quite. They can be used for purposes other than battle. It’s just that live combat draws out more of the suit’s problems or unexpected functions. It can be good or bad depending on what happens and statistics shows that mock battles are best for drawing them out.”

“I see.”

The two students made distance from each other and prepared to fight as they got into their fighting stances. They stared at each other in silence, watching the other’s movement as the seconds of stillness passed. The first sign of movement was seen at the very second the person in charge gave a signal.

The large dragon man was the first to move, an explosive blast under his feet propelling him toward the woman.

“Yukou-san, do you know how battles with magic usually go?”

“I’ve seen it happen multiple times before but I never fully understood it.”

The woman managed to dodge by a hair’s breadth, her pale locks grazed by the dragon man’s metal arm. Her lips opened and closed rapidly as she did so, creating a reaction beneath the ground the dragon man floated on as he made the attack. However, immediately after the woman uttered her first word, the dragon man followed with the same rapid lip movements. A spike of earth attempted to rise from the ground and impale the dragon man, but was immediately crushed right back into the ground like a pancake as a heavy force of gravity kept it in check.

“Then, ever notice how everyone always mumbles something?”

“Yes. That’s them casting a spell, right?”

“Correct. Have you ever thought why?”

“Well, spells are generally cast through words. You don’t really have to be clear as long as you get it out of your mouth and make the mana form as you want… So my guess is that they do that for faster cast time and to keep the spell secret from the enemy.”

Senkyo caught either Yuu or their enemies doing so before releasing magic before. This wasn’t an answer that came into mind at Hira’s question, but more of his thoughts of what it could be based on his previous battles.

“Ooh, you’re on fire, Yukou-san! Another correct answer! The first step in fighting with magic is to keep your enemy from knowing what you’re going to cast. Just like how the lizard guy from earlier anticipated the attack and immediately countered the girl’s magic, you won’t win a fight against someone with a wide knowledge of magic if you keep spilling what you’re trying to do beforehand. This is also why races with good earing are feared on the battlefield. As long as you hear and know how to deal with their spells, you’re basically invincible.”

The battle raged on as they had their conversation. It was mostly a one-sided attack from the dragon man while the woman kept dodging every single one. It seemed like her aim was to tire her opponent out, but if that were the case there would be no end to this, seeing as the dragon man seemed to move primarily on his machine and conserving his real stamina. That was what he thought. As the dragon man landed from another charge attack, his face paled.

“That was how it used to be. But, do you know what Angels are?”

Senkyo stared at the scene before him, wide-eyed. Seeing as he couldn’t answer the question, Hira did it for him.

“The blessed children of god. People who can cast magic with only their heads. Monsters that had complete dominance on a single power. There was once a time when they were the most powerful beings in the world. Unable to predict them, unable to know what they’ll do next, and the frustrating feeling of your mouth not being fast enough to out-cast magic they prepared in their minds. They were untouchable existences.”

Senkyo had no idea when, but the woman instantaneously took over control of the field in a blink of an eye. What spread around the dragon man were multiple clones of the woman, all of them rushing at him at the same time. They were nothing but illusions, so the only one that he should actually make contact with was the real one. That’s how it should have been. But for some reason, every single strike from every single clone sent a heavy impact on his body. Not only that, the thin exoskeleton on her body glowed at one particular strike, sending the dragon man’s large frame flying across the arena.

“Angels are a thing of the past. What we have now is the future. The accumulation of knowledge and technology from all three worlds, the pride and joy of apocrology. Angel Wing Units, abbreviated as AW-Unit, the wings that let us soar through the skies.”

**326 – The Dragon Man and the Woman**

It didn’t take long for the dragon man to realize that if he did nothing, he would be sent out of bounds. First, he confirmed that all of the woman’s clones were all on one side of him, taking away the concern of being surrounded from all sides. Then, he somersaulted in the air, pointing the flat of his feet to the sky above. At that moment, a burst of fire sent him straight to the ground, spinning as he shot downward, and digging his exoskeleton’s feet through the dirt to stop himself.

Standing just in front of the red line, he charged his arms and impaled the ground with both of his exoskeleton’s arms. Orange light emitted from the machinery, sending it not only through his gear but also through the ground, making it look like the earth was cracking apart. The woman responded by having her clones dodge the cracks and charge the dragon man all at once, aiming to overwhelm him with numbers before he could finish what he planned to do.

Pressurized steam released from the dragon man’s body as the large exoskeleton removed its grip on his person. A compartment opened from both legs of the machine and revealed two gauntlet swords, a belt, and four bands which he equipped to both wrists and ankles. Since the unequipped exoskeleton was still operating, continuing to spread orange light through the whole field, it was clear to everyone that he planned on protecting it until whatever the machine was trying to do successfully resolved. Realizing this, the woman who maintained a safe distance from the machine until now moved forward and pushed closer to the dragon man’s position.

“BRING IT OOOOONNN!!!”

The dragon man roared so loudly that his voice reached where Senkyo and the others were standing. He whipped his tail on the ground with such strength that it left a cavity where he struck. He mumbled, casting some sort of spell under his breath. The woman did the same in response to this. Then, the dragon man’s red horns began to glow along with his body, making the gaps between his scales more pronounced. The gauntlet swords, the belt, and the bands all glowed in orange as the light reached them. Finally, an explosion.

Black smoke veiled the area despite the lack of proper fuel to produce it. As the clones charged into the smoke, a wave of flame brushed them away. No one could see what the dragon man did since he was hidden by the smoke. But then, a strong gust of wind came from the woman, carrying away the black smoke that hid the dragon man, revealing his annoyed face. The gust unmasked the current state of his gear. Flames wrapped around the gauntlet swords like whips, continuing their fervent veil around the dragon man’s body.

Every time the dragon man attacked with his gauntlet sword, the flames would extend like a whip, taking out multiple clones in a single strike, making it more difficult to get to him with his erratic flames. He continued doing this near the machine, keeping a tight defense around it. Despite the vast difference in numbers, the dragon man successfully fended off every single clone in the area, leaving only him and the woman.

At this point, the machine had covered the majority of the ground with its ominous orange light. Only a little more before it completely filled the area. The situation was looking bleak for the woman. Although Senkyo didn’t know what would happen if the cracks filled the arena, there was nothing more frightening than the unknown. The best thing to do was expect the worst-case scenario—the woman’s defeat. However, despite the underlying danger, the woman didn’t seem to care and just stared at the dragon man with a blank stare. The dragon man returned this with a tense face.

The woman looked up to the sky for a second, taking his vision off of the enemy, and heaved a big sigh. She mumbled something and proceeded to place her hand on her nape. There was something there that seemed to be some kind of scanner. As she finished her mumbling, the colorless pad she placed her fingers on glowed white. In the very next moment, she was gone. Senkyo didn’t know what happened, but the same couldn’t be said for the dragon man.

He finished mumbling a chant as well. The effect erased the flame whip that wrapped his left gauntlet sword, turning the orange light to a dark purple. As soon as the gauntlet sword was completely consumed in dark purple light, the dragon man found the woman right in front of him, about to send a devastating kick to his head. This took him by surprise, but he wasn’t unprepared. The flame whip from his right gauntlet sword managed to block the attack, allowing the dragon man to have a clear shot at her small body. With her leg bound, most would think this was the end for her. However, that wasn’t the case.

Pale blue light ran up to her bound leg, causing ice to blast from her limb and onto the dragon man’s face and shoulder. This loosened his grip on her for a second, allowing her to pull her leg back and drive her fist into the dragon man’s abdomen. With the exoskeleton of the arm she just used glowing yellow, a surge of electricity spread across his body. Not giving the man a chance to recover, she followed up with another punch. This time with the exoskeleton emitting a brown light.

The dragon man knew that everything would end the moment that attack connected, but the electricity from earlier shocked his muscles, and couldn’t immediately respond with his body. Having no other choice, the orange glow on the belt around his hips intensified, turning into a red color. Noticing the strange reaction, the woman backed off. Just as she did, the space around the dragon man was engulfed in flames, the belt reduced to pieces in the process. He stretched his limbs and exercised them a bit as he stood in the fire. Since it was birthed from his own mana, they didn’t affect him, which allowed for a good safe zone to recover his body.

Preferably, he would have wanted the woman to wait for him to recover, but she didn’t feel like having any of that and switched his target to the large machine behind him. There was visible displeasure as the dragon man’s face twisted in annoyance. The woman moved, circling around the dragon man and rushing down the machine. The dragon man blocked the woman’s path and thrust his gauntlet sword at her.

“Huh…?”

As for the woman… she was stabbed, making the dragon man let out a dumbfounded voice. His head went into overdrive, trying to analyze the situation as fast as he could. The AW-Units they wore weren’t just used to cast instantaneous magic and synchronize with various technologies, they were also a formidable piece of armor, especially if the ones who made them created it with such a purpose. All of the AW-Units the students wore were screened through a set of requirements, one of them being the ability to protect the wearer from a fatal blow. If the AW-Unit the woman wore was genuine, his attack would have never penetrated her body. Instead, it would destroy the AW-Unit entirely in exchange for receiving the blow. In that case, the fact that his attack went through meant one thing. The woman in front of him was a fake.

In just under a second of attacking a clone, he quickly realized this fact and turned around to the machine behind him, catching the very moment when the woman kicked empty air. There should be no threats from a missed attack like that, but the main concern was that the exoskeleton of the leg she kicked with glowed in a brown light. The swift motion of her leg caused the earth below to rise and knock the machine off of the ground and out of the ring.

This should not have happened. The dragon man knew that the woman was using the light element to hide herself, so he purposefully charged his left gauntlet sword with the dark element to negate her stealth. As long as he had it set to that, it should have been impossible for the woman to pull off this move. Confused, the dragon man checked his left gauntlet sword and realized the cause of the problem. It was devoid of light, in other words, not functioning. His mind quickly recalled the moment the woman drove a strike of electricity through his body. At that moment, she must have focused most of her magic on his left gauntlet sword, shocking it and disabling a major weapon against her. The dragon man lost his strength and slumped to the ground.

“FUCK!! I WAS SO CLOSE!!!”

He punched the ground out of frustration. Seeing him completely drop his guard, everyone watching saw this as a concede of defeat. It seemed like the dragon man’s whole game plan was based around his heavy machine doing something to get him the win. With it gone and no other alternatives, this was the end of the line. That should have been the end of it. Except…

“Vleid, aren’t these things supposed to disappear now?”

The woman walked up to him and asked in a tired voice that only he could hear. She was referring to the orange cracks on the ground. She assumed that they would disappear the moment the large exoskeleton was pulled off the ground, but that wasn’t the case. The orange cracks kept forming, slowly stretching forward as they filled the whole circle.

“This is bad! Raeri, get out of the circle! NOW!!”

“Got it.”

Senkyo, Shiro, and Hira noticed the small commotion happening in the circle. The woman left the dragon man at breakneck speed, arriving to where the other students and the supervisor were standing. Meanwhile, the dragon man rushed over to the fallen machine, reattached it to his body, and tried fiddling with the controls. Nothing happened. Next, he impaled the same spots with the exoskeleton’s arms before trying the controls again but to no avail. Desperate, he bolted to the other edge of the circle that was about to be consumed by the cracks. He detached the machine outside the border and dug out the ground, trying to prevent the orange cracks from reaching the red circle. However, his attempts were futile as the crack would either circle around or go over every obstacle he put between them.

“Damn it! Damn it! DAMN III—!!!”

His incessant curses reached where Senkyo and the others were standing. The frustrated shouts of the dragon man were the last thing they heard before a large pillar of flame rose from the ground and consumed the skies.

**327 – A Mysterious Spell**

A blazing inferno that Senkyo was all too familiar with emerged from the ground. It was the same magic he attempted to use once against a colossal skeleton. The very same magic that almost burned him half to death and exposed him to great danger. You could say that if it wasn’t for this magic, he would never have ended up in Zerid the way he did. The high-tier fire magic, Hell’s Pillar.

“H-Hey, hey, hey, wait a minute. What’s all this!?”

Hira’s voice was filled with panic as she watched the scene unfold. She boasted about the AW-Units earlier but it seemed like she didn’t expect this to happen. Particularly, she was worried about the red circle that marked the battlefield. It was designed to contain any magic that was fired inside it to make sure anyone fighting within doesn’t involve the spectators or damage anything outside of the field. The problem was that prolonged exposure to a high-tier spell like this might destroy it. There was no telling exactly what would happen. It could end with the field getting destroyed but since this was the result of some kind of error, there was also the change of the magic going wild.

While she was thinking that, Senkyo had concerns of his own. This scene invoked a number of emotions inside of him. It reminded him how powerless he was in the face of overwhelming strength. He could learn how to control spirit power or use magic, but that didn’t change the fact that he was mortal. One mistake is all it takes for everything to fall apart. In the same way, one attack is all that’s needed to end his life. He went face-to-face with death more than once. During his battle with Fulgur and the next when he tried to use the magic that he thought would help him.

Just like what was happening in the red circle at this very moment, the path he chose was filled with many unexpected dangers like this one. In the life he chose, death could be waiting for him behind every corner. It could be from the hands of the enemy, an unfortunate accident, or an end due to his own incompetence. What the dragon man was experiencing right now resonated with Senkyo. This was clearly not something he wanted to happen, but it did, and the majority of the cause for it lay on him. Some people wouldn’t see it as such. This incident could be considered a force of nature. An unavoidable result of many factors that came together at the worst possible times, but in the end, it doesn’t excuse the fact that many things can be lost from these events. No matter what excuse people manage to come up with, the fact still withstanding—a mistake is a mistake. That’s why, the best solution for such a problem…

“I’ll never let it happen again.”

The words flowed out of his mouth as naturally as breathing.

“Thou, who hath taken form. Forged from the planet's wealth, I call upon ye. Reveal thy core and pledge to mine will. Deconstruct.”

A spell. That was clearly what it was but Shiro and Hira couldn’t help but stare at him with dumbfounded expressions. It wasn’t any spell they’d ever heard in their life. Completely unknown to this new chant, they looked around their surroundings to find what could have been the effect of his magic. That didn’t take long for them to detect.

The towering inferno quickly dispersed from top to bottom, large flames being reduced to mere embers. The air and the ground bathed in a crimson hue slowly returned to their natural color, revealing the red circle where the dragon man stood with his mouth agape, stupefied at the unexpected development. Every person was left speechless, trying to figure out what they just witnessed. In such a tense atmosphere, Hira’s energetic voice served like a lighthouse in the night, bringing everyone’s attention to her and her group.

“Wow, wow, wow, wow, WOW!! Yukou-san, that was amazing!! You took out that Hell’s Pillar like it was nothing!! How did you do that!? Hey, how!?”

“Stop pestering Onii-chan! You don’t need to know, do you!?”

Shiro, who had been quiet for a while now, got in between Hira and Senkyo in an attempt to dismiss the subject.

“You’re right, but I’ve never seen anything like it! It was AWESOME!! If possible, I’d like to use it in creating my inventions!”

However, Hira didn’t want to give up that easily. Invisible sparks clashed between Shiro and Hira, their mental battle continuing in silence. Senkyo didn’t really know how to take this, so he just let everything happen. No, it wasn’t just that. He didn’t even know how he ended up doing that.

Senkyo stared at his hand. He didn’t do any particular movements as he chanted the mysterious spell, but it just felt natural to check his palms first. His instincts took action before his mind could process what was happening. It wasn’t like his body was being taken over, but more like his body simply did as he willed. He could recall the vivid sensation of the words entering his mind and leaving his mouth in one smooth stroke. If he had to compare it to anything, it would be similar to the time when memories of his father entered his mind in the middle of his test of endurance against Fulgur.

“Excuse me, are you the one who got rid of that magic for us?”

A middle-aged man walked up to Senkyo and the group. Judging from his complete human features, the man was a Sorun.

“I am the supervisor of the practical session that was being conducted just now. I simply wanted to convey my thanks to the person who resolved the mishap. Many accidents and errors happen in these sessions, but this was the first ever time anyone has ever incorporated high-tier spells into their AW-Units. Having no prior experience in such, it is no exaggeration that you have saved us from grimmer odds. Please, accept my deepest apologies and gratitude.”

The man bowed to him, quelling the tension between Shiro and Hira in the process. Senkyo didn’t expect to be in this situation, or more accurately, he was too preoccupied to even consider it. He almost retreated to his modest attitude instinctively but managed to hold it down to consider a different path of action.

“I’m glad I was able to be here to stop it. My name is Yukou Senkyo and I entered the academy today due to a summons.”

“Ah, I see. We were very lucky to have you watching over us at the perfect time. My name is Adeira, the supervisor of class R2-S. Please, do not hesitate to call for my name when you are in need of assistance.”

“That would be greatly appreciated.”

Taking his eyes off Senkyo, the man directed them to the girl beside him.

“Miss Hira, I assume guiding Sir Yukou was the priority task you’ve been given. See to it that you do so properly and conduct yourself as a proud example of the academy.”

“Yessir!”

Adeira let a light sigh with his eyes darting slowly into empty space as her response entered his ears. It seemed like he didn’t expect her to follow his words in the first place and didn’t attempt to pursue her any further. As compensation, he gave another bow to Senkyo.

“I’m afraid I must be off now. Sir Yukou, once again, you have my thanks.”

Adeira didn’t wait for Senkyo’s response before disappearing in front of him and reappearing multiple times in a line back to the group of students. It seemed like he used some kind of teleportation magic that could travel limited distances.

“He introduced himself earlier, but I’ll tell you more about him. That person is Sir Adeira, one of the genius apocrologic researchers that pioneered teleportation-based tools. One of the biggest bigwigs of the academy! Lucky you, being able to talk to someone so important! Oh, he’s also my supervisor, by the way!”

“Your… supervisor…”

“Yep! That means the people gathered over there are my classmates in R2-S! Hehehe, I don’t mean to brag… but R2-S stands for Research Year 2, Level S! A place only for the most talented people in our year!”

Something gave Senkyo and Shiro the feeling that she was only saying this to brag, but none of them voiced it out loud. At this point, Senkyo had a hunch that she was only doing this to prove a point for disparaging her position earlier.

“You really love throwing these curveballs at me, huh? I’m sorry for what I said, okay?”

“Hehe, serves you right~!”

**328 – Professor Gaeka**

“For someone who's in a hurry, it sure took a while for us to get here.”

“Hey, it’s your fault for sightseeing and asking so many questions! You should be thankful I went out of my way to indulge you!”

“Well, you’re not wrong.”

After making a quick stop to watch class R2-S’ practical session, Senkyo, Shiro, and Hira continued their walk to their destination. Past the training field was a whole section dedicated to apocrology research. In one of the buildings there, the three entered and climbed to one of the top floors through an elevator. The sight of this advanced technology didn’t even phase Senkyo anymore.

The group stopped in front of a room with a nameplate that wrote “Gravitational Research Room” in Japanese kanji.

“We’re here~!”

Hira cheerfully announced as she spun around to face Senkyo and Shiro.

“We’ll be entering Prof Gaeka’s room now, so be on your best behavior!”

She warned them and turned around to open the door without waiting for their reply. She knocked on the door a total of five times with short pauses after her first and third knock. It seemed to be some kind of secret code to indicate that the person knocking was Hira. Senkyo wondered why there was a need for such caution. Before he could come up with anything plausible, the door opened before them and revealed the space beyond.

The room was built with sterile flooring and clean white walls. The majority of the room was colored in pale white and the ceiling was installed with glowing panels and vents. There were revolving chairs that provided seating and a fridge that stored various materials for cold storage. Numerous scientific items were spread across the desks and shelves, and most likely more behind the white cabinets and drawers filling the space in the room.

Many strange items were placed in the room. Most of them resembled items on Earth like a microscope, a Bunsen burner, a centrifuge, an incubator, and other similar items. However, they differed from Earth’s items such that gems and unknown metals modified them. Senkyo noticed from the earlier battle between the woman and the dragon man that some colored gems represent an element of power and most of the ones in this room had a dark purple gem on them, which he assumed to be the dark element. That would make sense since this room specialized in gravity magic, just as the nameplate suggested. Other than those, there were universal scientific tools such as beakers, test tubes, droppers, and other such items.

In that whole room, one person stood in front of a desk, turning around to find Senkyo and the others. He was on the elderly side around his 70s or older with white hair and a beard styled in mutton chops adoring his face. He seemed to be Sorun due to his human features, but something felt strange about him.

“…!!”

The same sensation seemed to strike Shiro at the same time, making her hair stand on end and tightening her grip on his arm. He didn’t seem to be a bad individual, but he couldn’t just disregard Shiro’s reaction.

“Why, hello there. You two must be the victims of the rampaging monster I’ve been told about.”

Donning his below-standard white lab coat, he approached Senkyo and the group.

“Heyy there, Prof! I brought them just like you asked!”

“So you did. A great job you’ve done, Miss Hira.”

“Hehe, naturally~!”

She replied, wiping some nonexistent dirt off her face with her thumb. Then, her smug face quickly turned into dissatisfaction the moment Gaeka’s next words entered her ears.

“I’m thankful for your help. You may leave now and return to your class.”

“Ehh?? Can’t I, like, stay here?”

“No, you must not. I’m afraid I will be operating in delicate work. I would prefer it if only the minimum number of people were around.”

“Aww… fine.”

Her expression conveyed her dissatisfaction, but she also knew the struggles of having unwanted elements in her research, so she begrudgingly turned to the door but not before giving a pouty face. Gaeka bowed to her leaving figure just as the door closed behind her. A still silence filled the air for a moment before Gaeka turned to Senkyo and Shiro.

“I apologize for the late introduction. I am Professor Gaeka, the lead researcher of the rampaging monster situation. Just as the wall guards requested of you, I would like to have samples of your blood to aid me in my research.”

Gaeka said, politely giving them a light bow. Senkyo occupied the silence with a few filler words as he turned to Shiro to gauge her reaction. At these times, even when her knowledge of this world was not that much better than his, her instincts were still a thousand times more reliable than his. Seeing that she had a wary expression on her face, similar to that of a cat being threatened of her territory, he concluded that he operate with the same caution in mind.

“That would be fine, but you must have heard of the trouble we had at the walls, right? Do you have anything that can solve that problem?”

Senkyo had no plans of leaving this person with anything, but he also didn’t want to do anything that could get him kicked out of the academy, worse yet the city. He finally found the perfect place to look for information. He had no intention of losing it in this interaction. His goal was to give the Gaeka a good reason to drop his pursuit of his blood, or at the very least prolong his attempts until he finished his information gathering.

“The case with your blood exploding whenever it makes contact with a vial, am I correct? I haven’t seen the phenomenon in person, so I would like it if you give me a demonstration of how it happens.”

“I don’t see a problem with that. Where should I do it?”

“First, we should test it over here.”

Gaeka showed Senkyo and Shiro to a single test tube suspended in the air by a stand. There was a small knife beside it just like how it was the first time he did this. Senkyo looked around for a second, before asking Gaeka a quick question.

“Don’t you have a syringe here?”

With all of the advanced equipment in this room, it was impossible to not have a simple syringe. One must exist somewhere, but they still prepared a knife instead.

“I would like to recreate the situation similar to the original as much as possible. I originally planned of using vials and a vial rack to collect the blood as well, but then I wouldn’t be able to examine the situation happen as clearly as I would like to. If I find nothing comes out in this test, the next one will involve a vial rack, and finally collection from a syringe. We’ll be going through these tests in that order.”

“I see…”

He nodded, trying to think of ways to end this as fast as possible. There should be no problem in the test with the test tube and vials, but the syringe was a different story. He could blow up his blood using his kindled spirit power, but that was only because he can match drop it at the same time his blood drips. With the syringe, he could blow it up from the outside, but not the inside. It may look suspicious when the blood blows up from the outside instead of the inside.

“Then, let us begin the tests.”

**329 – Blood Hustle**

Senkyo picked up the knife and made a small incision on his finger, only enough to draw tiny drops of blood. Since he planned on blowing up the test tube from the start, he didn’t want to draw too much blood. That’s what he planned to do, but the cut he made was wider than he expected. He didn’t think he was that clumsy but there was nothing he could do now. Instead, he focused on kindling his spirit power to mix with the blood and make it explode… that’s how it should have been.

“Hm, it seems like there was no reaction. It’s great that we collected a blood sample but it would be better if we found out how the phenomenon occurs.”

“H-Huh…?”

Senkyo couldn’t help but let out a confused voice. His blood trickled and so did his kindled spirit power. The blue stream that was invisible to everyone who couldn’t use Espy mixed with his blood and entered the same test tube. The problem happened when it passed through the midsection of the tube. With no warnings whatsoever, his kindled spirit power disappeared, disintegrating into nothingness before it could even reach the bottom of the glass container.

“O-Onii-chan…!”

Shiro’s panicked whisper entered his ear, telling him to do something about the situation before it was too late. The professor went to pick up the test tube. If he laid his hands on it, it may already be too late. It will look a bit unnatural, but he had to stop him.

“Ah, actually—!!”

Senkyo launched his hand so fast that no one could misunderstand what he was doing. There were problems with this option, but he had to secure the blood sample before anything else. He swiped the test tube from the table, preventing Gaeka from picking it up. Or so he thought.

“Is there something wrong, Sir Yukou?”

“W-What?”

Looking at Gaeka, he already had the tube of blood in his hands. Meanwhile, what Senkyo grabbed from the table was the stand the test tube was placed on. He couldn’t believe what was happening. There was no possible way for Gaeka to take the test tube before him. He was closer and faster. But despite these factors, the test tube still somehow ended up in Gaeka’s hands.

“…Professor Gaeka, just what did you do…?”

“What are you talking about, Sir Yukou? I just picked up the blood sample. I should be the one asking that question to you. It surprised me when you suddenly shouted and picked up the test tube stand.”

“…”

What was happening here? The thought immediately came to Senkyo’s mind. Gaeka was suggesting that he picked up the test tube while Senkyo just stood there like a statue until a few moments later when he acted to take the test tube first. It would be like someone froze time for Senkyo while Gaeka went on unhindered. Was such a thing possible? He knew magic existed in this world, but never had he encountered nor even heard of time magic. Lost, Senkyo turned to Shiro for her opinion. It would be too suspicious to whisper to each other in secret, so he opted to use Connect.

*“\*Shiro, what happened?\*”*

*“\*No way! He’s lying! Shiro saw it just like how Onii-chan did! He somehow got the blood before Onii-chan could!\*”*

It was the same as his thoughts. Normally, he would believe Shiro’s words unhesitatingly but if what Gaeka saw was true, then there was a possibility that someone froze time for both Senkyo and Shiro, making them have the exact misunderstanding they wanted them to have. Conversely, if he were to believe in Shiro, then that would mean Gaeka was intentionally hiding the fact that he took the blood before Senkyo could. This implied that he wanted his blood so badly that he was either on alert and reacted quickly to Senkyo’s movements or prepared for Senkyo’s attempt to take the blood sample from the start.

“That was a fruitful test. Okay, how about we try to do it again but this time with the same exact conditions?”

Gaeka placed a lid on the test tube and placed it on the holder he had on his belt as he pointed to the desk with a vial rack. He wanted to proceed but it was clear that Senkyo was reluctant to do so.

“Sir Yukou?”

One of two possible situations was happening at the moment. One, there is an existence of a third party for some reason that involves one of the three people in the room at the moment. Two, Gaeka is lying and is trying to get Senkyo’s blood no matter what. In two, his possible branches out to either wanting to do something about the rampaging monster, or the worse alternative, knowing and wanting the power in his blood. As an extra, there was a third possibility consisting of situations that could lead to the same results but were set aside due to their detachment from reality.

“…Sorry, I had my mind in the clouds for a bit. Let’s continue the tests.”

*“\*Onii-chan!?\*”*

Shiro shouted in his mind in surprise. It was an understandable reaction. She probably wanted to reduce as much damage done as possible. That being, how much blood Gaeka obtained. It wasn’t like he didn’t care about Shiro’s opinion. In fact, this was happening because he trusted her. It was just a matter of priority. It would be great if they reduced how much blood was given, but more than that, he wanted to find out where exactly Gaeka stood with his actions. Was he an innocent man or someone who had knowledge of who he is? That was the question he wanted an answer to the most at the moment.

Explaining this to Shiro in his mind, she reluctantly backed down. She didn’t agree with his actions, but she was dedicated to supporting him no matter what he chose. For such loyalty, Senkyo had to bring out results.

“Professor, here take this.”

“Hm?”

Senkyo took the small knife he had in his hand and gently placed it on Gaeka’s hand.

“Why are you giving me the knife? We still need to use it for this test.”

He asked with a sharp tone, displeased with this action.

“Oh, it’s just that I opened a wider wound than I intended to earlier. I could still get some blood out with this, so it should be fine.”

Gaeka shook his head at this.

“No. We are trying our best to recreate the situation in the walls that prompted the vials to explode. It is ideal for us to open up a new cut to remove as many unwanted factors as possible. Please, take it back and use it.”

Senkyo shifted his gaze a few times from the knife and Gaeka’s expression.

“…If you say so, then there’s no problem with that.”

He walked up to Gaeka again and picked up the knife. Then, he went to the vial rack and examined the vials, brushing his hand on every single one while his face was in close proximity to them.

“What are you doing?”

Gaeka asked in a calm voice, trying to peek over his head to see what Senkyo was fiddling with. Before he could catch a clear view, Senkyo retracted his body as he answered.

“No, it's nothing. I just wanted to see if something about the vials is causing an explosion somehow.”

“I see. How was your inspection?”

“Nothing unusual.”

“Hm. Then, all the more reason to conduct this test.”

Senkyo took the knife and slowly opened a wound on one of his fingers. This time, with such care that there would be no mistake that he cut only a small portion of it. A small incision opened up, just as how he wanted it.

“…”

However, the wound didn’t stop widening, opening up a larger wound than his knife even touched. He took a quick glance over to Gaeka and saw that he was taking notes on his clipboard with a stone face. Putting him aside, for now, Senkyo hovered his open wound on one of the vials, pouring spirit power along with it. The red stream of blood mixed with the blue spirit power, pouring into the open vial. And just like earlier, the spirit power disappeared before it could even reach the bottom. The thought of activating Burst before the spirit power disappeared crossed his mind, but that would ruin his whole plan.

“No reaction. Hm… Sir Senkyo, please continue filling up bottles until we find a reaction—ah!”

It was a bit delayed, but he finally saw Senkyo’s hand closing into the vial filled with blood. There should be no possible way for him to take the vial, yet that was exactly what he did. Before his hand could reach the bottle, it disappeared from that spot and reappeared on Gaeka’s hand. It seemed to be some form of teleportation. It would be difficult to confirm this with 100% certainty if he only used his eyes, but Senkyo had a trump up his sleeve.

Just before he conducted the test, he made contact with Gaeka’s hand twice, allowing him ample time to coat it with kindled spirit power and apply tracking properties to it. In the same way, he coated all of the vials with the same properties. And for good measure, he applied the same on his own hand in case some kind of effect happened to his hand without his knowing. As a result, he confirmed that Gaeka didn’t stop his movements nor did he move at unimaginable speeds to take the vial from him. Staying where he was, the vial disappeared in front of Senkyo and reappeared on Gaeka’s hand.

That eliminates the possibility of a third party. Gaeka wants this blood desperately. All that was left to do was find out why. Senkyo had a hunch what it could be, and his upcoming little trick should provide for good measure.

“A—AHH!? W-What!?”

The very moment the vial was moved, the glass bottle increased in temperature rapidly as the solid glass container turned into molten glass, deforming on the palm of his hand and evaporating the blood inside it. Gaeka instinctively shook the molten glass out of his hand. There was still lingering pain in his palm, but he shot a sharp glare in Senkyo’s direction accusingly. Senkyo caught this in his peripheral vision as he immediately turned his head to the vial rack with a surprised expression on his face. Wondering what his reaction was all about, Gaeka traced Senkyo’s gaze and caused a sharp scream from his mouth.

All the glass vials also melted into molten glass. No, it wasn’t just the vials. Every glass container currently in the room lost its shape, leaving a scatter of molten mass all over the room. And by everything, that included the test tube that was held around Gaeka’s belt, vaporizing the blood inside it and burning his leg in the process. Senkyo let his screams of agony pass with a perplexed expression on his face. Then, when Gaeka finally regained control of his body, he rushed up to Senkyo and grabbed him by the collar of his shirt.

“WHAT!! ARE YOU DOING!?”

Tossing away composure into the air, he glared at him with bloodshot eyes, shaking and sweating profusely from the burns he just received from the molten glass. Anger seethed through every word in his mouth. Shiro was about to push Gaeka away, but she was stopped by Senkyo’s orders through Connect. This ended in a situation where Gaeka was holding up Senkyo, shaking like a leaf from fear and confusion.

“I-I-I-I d-don’t know what’s happening!! I-I-I—”

“STOP PLAYING DUMB WITH ME!! I KNOW THAT—”

In the middle of his sentence, he bit his lip, silencing himself before he can say anything more. He shut his eyes aggressively and took a deep breath, trying to regain his lost composure. He glared at Senkyo one more time before he slowly placed him down. Senkyo slumped to the ground the moment he let go of his clothes, unceremoniously bringing him to his bottom. With a hostile sigh and a few coughs to clear his throat, he spoke.

“I apologize. I lost control of myself for a moment. That was unreasonable of me to blame this incident on you. Please, let us continue this session on another day. I will need some time to prepare for unexpected phenomena like this one. For now, enjoy your stay in Iqanlr.”

Gaeka tapped his unburnt pocket twice, making the door open automatically. Senkyo saw this, and clumsily got up his feet, bowing to Gaeka at a sharp 90-degree angle, and leaving in a fluster with Shiro in hand. As their figures disappeared from the room, Gaeka clicked his tongue, cursing the two behind their backs.

“Damn pests.”

**330 – Their Conclusions**

After Senkyo and Shiro got a good distance away from the room Gaeka was in, Senkyo sighed in relief.

“We got away…”

His tense shoulders slackened, or more accurately, returned to normal. Senkyo’s clumsy gait stabilized, his terrible posture straightening to its proper position. He dropped the little act he put up with Gaeka and turned to Shiro with a grin on his face.

“See, I told you it’d be fine, right?”

“Geez! Onii-chan, you need to stop worrying Shiro like that!”

She complained, raising her voice louder than usual. Senkyo took a joking tone toward her but it seemed she was genuinely upset, wiping his smug face and turning it into something more serious to match her.

“I’m sorry, but that was all I could think of.”

“Even so!”

Shiro got in front of Senkyo and wrapped her arms around his waist, locking him in place. Taken aback by this sudden development, he could do nothing but wait for Shiro’s next move.

“Shiro knows it was all an act, but… even so, it hurts Shiro when she sees Onii-chan get pushed around like that. She hates it. Shiro doesn’t want to be too selfish, so she won’t tell you to stop doing those things. She knows Onii-chan is doing that for the best. But… at the very least, please warn Shiro about it. When she saw Onii-chan’s frightened face, it scared her too. She didn’t know it was an act at the time, so she was confused about what to do. Shiro fully supports Onii-chan, she’ll do anything and everything to help you. So please, don’t hide anything from Shiro. Shiro is always on Onii-chan’s side, so please share your ideas with Shiro. She might not understand them, but she would appreciate it if you told her so she doesn’t have to worry…”

She tightened her embrace around his body, refusing to let go. It was as if she thought she would lose him the second her arms so much as loosened. It was at that moment that I clicked in his head. He had been so preoccupied with surviving in this world and being efficient with every action that he neglected to consider how those around him felt about his actions. Even when he tried to repay Shiro for her worth, it was with results. It was always about which was the best course of action and the most gain they would receive. There was nothing wrong with prioritizing it, but the way Senkyo went about that option caused unwarranted pain to Shiro. Even Hira was affected by this when he thoughtlessly belittled her position in the academy.

Realizing how irresponsible he had been, he let out a disappointed sigh for himself and returned Shiro’s hug with one of his own. It wasn’t constricting like Shiro’s embrace was. It was warm and gentle, like a snuggly blanket in the middle of a cold winter night. There, he relayed his feelings through his actions, and soon through words.

“I’m sorry. I’ll make sure it never happens again. You’re important to me, Shiro. I might make mistakes and fail to realize some things in the future. At those times, I want you to call out to me just like you did today. I don’t want to make mistakes. But most of all, I don’t want to hurt anyone I love. You’re one of those people, Shiro.”

“…Mn. Okay.”

Shiro tightened her hug one last time before reluctantly letting go. Backpedaling a few steps, she locked her sparkling eyes with Senkyo’s, and a bright smile formed on her rosy face.

“Onii-chan, you said that you love Shiro?”

The question got his voice stuck in his throat.

“What? Cat got your tongue?”

She teased him for his silence, to which he regained his composure through a tired sigh.

“Yes, I do. As a brother, that is.”

“Aww, too bad.”

Shiro walked up to Senkyo and seized his hand, intertwining their fingers. To add to that, she cuddled her arm affectionately. Just like how a lover would on a date out in the city.

“Then, let Shiro have this at least. As Onii-chan’s sister.”

“I-I’m pretty sure normal siblings don’t usually do this…”

“It’s punishment. Accept it.”

She was curt with her words, not allowing any opportunity for negotiation. Looking around, there were quite a few people who were eyeing them from afar. In his mind, he could only be thankful that this wasn’t his school. Knowing there was nothing else that could be done, he submitted to Shiro’s will and continued walking with her on his arm.

Senkyo went around asking the people around him for directions to the library, his main goal in coming to Iqanlr. And at some point, he got a good handle on the pathing. All that was left now was to get there. Shiro was still on his arm. She looked like she was enjoying herself. It pained his heart to think of ruining that mood, but he just swore to her that he would share everything he was thinking. There was the option of leaving the subject for later, but the contents of his message were too important to set aside. So, he communicated with her through Connect.

*“\*Shiro, I want to tell you something.\*”*

*“\*What is it, Onii-chan?\*”*

Her voice was serious despite her warm, outside appearance. If he had to hazard a guess, then she probably expected him to talk about this subject sooner or later.

*“\*It’s about Professor Gaeka.\*”*

*“\*…\*”*

She didn’t respond and waited for him to continue.

*“\*He knows what I am. And the power in my blood.\*”*

*“\*…Shiro thinks the same. He was too aggressive in trying to get Onii-chan’s blood. That’s Shiro’s reason but, why does Onii-chan think so?\*”*

She looked at him with upturned eyes, her undivided attention placed on Senkyo.

*“\*When I confirmed that there was no third party, I immediately activated the spirit power I spread across the room…\*”*

At the time, when Senkyo finished pouring his blood into the vial, he used a skill called Diffusion. It is an enchanter skill from the Konjou Clan that spreads the caster's kindled spirit power in a limited area through a kind of explosion from his body. With his ten seconds of free reign of the room, he used the spirit power to set the temperatures on every glass surface several degrees above their melting point, turning every single one to molten glass the moment he willed it. This was so that Gaeka wouldn’t be able to continue collecting his blood sample. Then again, this was only thanks to the fact that he didn’t think to look at the drawers and cabinets. Since they were obstructed by furniture, the kindled spirit power that spread across the room didn’t reach them.

There were other reasons why he did this such as getting rid of the blood samples that were already collected. But the most important part of it was that his trick hurt and infuriated Gaeka. Of course, this could have led to them being kicked out of the city. The only reason they were able to enter the city was that Gaeka would supposedly allow any victim from the rampaging monster to pass so long as they gave their blood sample. That was what the guards told them, yet even now when they still haven’t given a blood sample, they were still allowed to roam the city. In fact, Gaeka encouraged them to do so.

Senkyo saw this as his attempt to keep them in the city where he would be in close reach. Gaeka was desperate enough for his blood that he would overlook the earlier incident to keep him in the city. What remained was to know what fueled such desperation. Whether it was to deal with the rampaging monster or for Senkyo’s blood specifically.

Just like Shiro said, he could conclude it was the latter due to his aggressiveness, but it was more than that; Gaeka was just too prepared to the point it was suspicious. Without meeting Senkyo once prior to the earlier meeting, he was able to do something to the test tube and vials that stopped the flow of kindled spirit power inside it. He was able to confirm this when he brushed his hand over all of the vials. His spirit power successfully coated the outside of every one, but everything that tried to enter it would disappear. It was too catered against Senkyo. As far as he knew, he was the only person in this world who could use spirit power. Even if he weren’t it was no doubt uncommon since Zeldians like Yuu and Shiro had a small reserve of spirit power. But despite this fact, he was able to prepare against it with just words from the guard that reported to him about the incident.

Not only that, throughout the whole process of melting every glass in the room, Gaeka constantly sent death stares at Senkyo, accusing him of being the one responsible for everything that was happening. He knew that Senkyo was able to use spirit power despite only meeting him for the first time.

All of those pretty much confirmed his intentions, but what really put the nail in the coffin was the fact that not once did Gaeka ask for Shiro’s blood sample. In fact, he wasn’t perturbed by Shiro’s presence at all. Senkyo entered the town by himself, so the report the man should have sent was that a single person entered the city. He let Shiro out only when they got inside. There was a possibility that informants besides Hira reported Shiro to Gaeka or perhaps Hira had some kind of way to contact Gaeka while tailing them, so Senkyo didn’t focus much on that part. But the issue lay in the fact that he ignored her existence completely.

Gaeka didn’t clarify whether or not Shiro was affected by the same effects of this rampaging monster. He didn’t care about a blood sample from her. All he was focused on was Senkyo’s blood. If he was truly desperate to do something about the rampaging monster, then he would have asked Shiro for her blood too. But that wasn’t the case, which only left the other reason as his motivation.

*“\*Somehow, Gaeka knows about me and what I’m capable of. I don’t know to what extent, but at the very least he knows about what my blood does just like you do. With that said, could you tell me more about my own capabilities? People are trying to fight over my powers that even I don’t know I can do. It can’t stay like this.\*”*

After realizing what Senkyo was getting at, Shiro tightened her grip on his arm. Perhaps there was something hard to talk about but Shiro still managed to respond with a heavy nod and voiced her thoughts.

“Shiro will tell Onii-chan in the library.”

**331 – Exploring the Books**

The Library of Xhiari. It is said to be the largest collection of books and information in the whole of Yuwokrn. A prestigious study that even the public is allowed to access despite the being property of an academy. It has a whole building dedicated to it located in the park area of Xhiari Academy near the second entrance to the campus. There are guards and patrollers constantly roaming the area around the library. This is to control to flow of outsiders to only the library and ensure that the response will be quick if any trouble were to occur in the area.

When Senkyo and Shiro reached the area, a few of the patrol came up to them and asked for their identity. Apparently, this was because they were wearing outsider clothes, which no one that belonged to the campus should be wearing. This suggested that he was an outsider, but it was strange that they came from the direction of the school building. They were basically being suspected as trespassers.

Senkyo quickly tried to clear the misunderstanding by saying that they were guests. Of course, this claim needed to be confirmed, so they asked for the person who let them inside. Hira and Gaeka’s names came to mind, but it didn’t feel right for him to cite their names. Gaeka was basically an enemy until circumstances change, so he preferred it if he didn’t get word of where they planned on spending most of their time. There was Hira, but he had no doubt that the information that got to her would eventually get to Gaeka as well. It wasn’t that he saw her as an enemy it was just that her mouth was too big to keep anything secret. Not to mention she seemed to be under Gaeka’s direct control. After contemplating for a few seconds, Senkyo gave the name of Class R2-S’ supervisor, Adeira. He didn’t know if he had any connection with Gaeka, but out of all the options he had, he was the was his only choice. If it turns out that he was close with Gaeka, then there was just no avoiding that outcome. He knew it would be good to have more connections, but he never thought he’d be using Adeira’s name so soon.

This response visibly surprised the patrol. After a quick talk amongst themselves, they came to a conclusion to let Senkyo and Shiro enter the library while one of them went to confirm this information with Adeira. They explicitly told him that he won’t be able to leave the campus until they got a response but he was free to enter the library, still. Perhaps this had something to do with the library being a public space, but Senkyo felt that this decision was a bit risky on the patrol’s side. Well, he wasn’t complaining since he benefited from this. It was amazing how Adeira’s name would get them this much leeway.

They entered the library, greeted by the massive expanse of books and desks that spread across the room. The interior was designed in Gothic architecture, filling the inside with segmental arches as the bookshelves lined the walls of the room. The same layout was repeated on the floors above, which was apparent through the center of the room where multiple sets of desks and chairs were placed all under the skylight on the ceiling. A hollow rectangular space was left on each floor to achieve this, making it easy to spot categories of books.

“Ok, Onii-chan. Stay here, Shiro will be right back!”

“H-Huh? Wait, Shiro!?”

She quickly let go of the arm she was clinging to all the way to the library and trotted away from Senkyo. He tried calling out to her, but she ignored his call and disappeared into the books. He wondered what Shiro would be off to do when they just arrived at this place for the first time in their lives. Her reluctance to tell him about his own powers came to mind. He doubted she was trying to avoid the topic, but perhaps it was involved somehow. Wanting to respect her wishes, he dropped the thought of chasing her and went to the bookshelves instead. If she was going to take a while, then he might as well begin tackling his original purpose here.

He picked up some random books from the shelves, went to the nearest desk, and started reading. First and foremost, he breathed a sigh of relief that he could actually read the books. Every book he picked up was written in Japanese, saving him from the requirement for Shiro to translate for him. He thought about it ever since arriving in the city, but everyone he met so far was able to speak in Japanese. The only instance he ever heard anyone speak in Zeldian was when he first arrived at the walls. Back in Naen, he heard a few utterances of the local language every now and then, but it was almost non-existent in Iqanlr.

If Senkyo had to guess, then perhaps it was because Iqanlr is an innovative city that incorporates Earth’s knowledge into their lives. Since that knowledge came to them in the form of Japanese, then they had to the language more than usual. As he read some of the books, his thoughts were confirmed when he encountered a book with some history of Iqanlr.

Apparently, the ambassadors and researchers of Iqanlr constantly exchanged thoughts and ideas through paper rather than words due to ambassadors having to travel so much. This led to the need for the researchers to write in Japanese since the ambassadors didn’t know how to speak their language; the Zeldians had to adjust. If Senkyo had to compare this to something, it would be like how English is for the Japanese. In order to process information from foreign countries, they needed to know the language to comprehend them. Just like how English is the most spoken language on Earth, Japanese was the most spoken language on Yuwokrn due to the ambassadors’ influence.

This resulted in a rise of Japanese-written literature but it was hard to say there was a decline in Zeldian-written literature. It wasn’t that Zeldian literature wasn’t affected, it was just that there wasn’t much Zeldian literature in the past. Before the ambassadors came, there was barely anything written in text. The ambassadors were the ones who introduced the concept of books and libraries to Yuwokrn. This also meant that the only reference Zeldians had from the start was Japanese text. This resulted in the cultivation of Zeldian literature, which also adapted some aspects of Japanese writing such as writing characters vertically from right to left. Japanese-written literature may be the majority of the books in Yuwokrn but Zeldian-written literature wasn’t forgotten. It was the minority but it seemed like this was bound to happen since Zeldians advanced through the consumption of Japanese-written literature.

Looking at the names of the authors of the books he had, he would find their names written in katakana form more often than their Zeldian equivalent. Moreover, some were outright Japanese names. Senkyo couldn’t tell if these were from Japanese authors or Zeldians that were named in Japanese.

As he skimmed from book to book, he found a few interesting topics to take note of and read thoroughly later like the different races in Yuwokrn, forageable items, animals, food recipes, and finally, a detailed map of the whole continent. With multiple books opened on the desk, Senkyo cross-referenced the information and found the place he was hoping to find. His eyes focused on one particular area on the map. About north-east from Iqanlr, at the topmost region of the Ridsikrn Empire, just below the bottom-rightmost part of Frukaui, and over the south-west part of the Zelaoage Island, was a kingdom, one home to a Zeldian race he was very familiar with—Vampires.

The Vampire Kingdom of Nrjia. If he couldn’t find information about the whereabouts of Yuu’s takers, then Senkyo went for the next best thing. The place that was most likely to be Yuu’s hometown. However, there was a problem, one that made Senkyo’s eyes darken as he read the passage.

“Nrjia has fallen…”

3 years ago, the kingdom of vampires was taken over by END in a single night.

“3 years…”

*“\*It's just... I lived in this world for 3 years now. I had to learn this world's language and how it worked.\*”*

A past memory that felt like had aged for decades resurfaced in his mind. A conversation with Yuu right after they got out of school. 3 years; A perfect match between Yuu’s story and the date of the tragic event stated in the book he was reading. There was no way it was a coincidence. Yuu went to Earth to escape END’s invasion. Senkyo searched the books to know more about the incident, but before he could find anything worth noting, Shiro finally returned.

“Sorry, Onii-chan. It took Shiro a while but she finally found it!”

**332 – The Origin**

“O-Oh, Shiro. What’s this?”

Noticing his sister’s arrival, he placed down the book he was reading and turned to her. In her hand was another book. She showed it to him which left his mouth agape from his inability to read its title. At the very least, he quickly deduced what kind of book it was.

“It's… a Zeldian-written book. And an old one at that.”

The book in her hands had a tattered cover and the pages were yellowing from decay. Shiro pulled a chair over and sat next to Senkyo.

“We should keep everything we’re about to talk about in private.”

Realizing what Shiro was hinting at, Senkyo turned away from her and picked up one of the books in front of him, pretending to read. Shiro did the same, but unlike Senkyo, she hadn’t opened the book yet. Senkyo stared blankly at the pages while he gave the majority of his attention to Shiro through Connect.

*“\*This book… Shiro doesn’t know everything about it. But, Yuuto-san told me that everything started with this book.\*”*

Senkyo couldn’t help by widen his eyes and raise his brows at Shiro’s claim. She was saying that the book in her hands was the element that made his life what it is now. He wanted to let Shiro continue, but there was something that bothered him about this.

*“\*Wait, Shiro. Did you know that this library had that book?\*”*

*“\*No. But Shiro thought she might as well check. We’re lucky that they had it in this library.\*”*

Xhiari’s library wasn’t hailed for being the largest one in Yuwokrn for nothing, the thought crossed his mind. Senkyo couldn’t tell how rare this book was since it was his first time seeing it. His mind almost veered off-topic when he pondered how much of a coincidence finding a book like this here actually was, but he immediately shook that train of thought out of his head. This was just a bad habit of his overthinking. He needed to focus on what really mattered and brought his attention back to Shiro.

*“\*Onii-chan, do you remember what Shiro told you about your powers when you first woke up in this world?\*”*

*“\*Yeah. My powers are all separated and locked away behind eight seals. The first one that broke was the seal on Shiro and my mana. Then, the moment we arrived in Zerid, another one of my seals was released. The ability behind that seal was Rapid Regeneration, which saved my life.\*”*

A difficult expression floated above Shiro’s face as the last few words entered her ear. She quickly shook her thoughts away and continued.

*“\*That’s correct. Neither of us knows what triggered the release of the seventh seal because all Shiro knows about the seals is the eighth seal. The one Shiro was sealed in. The only reason Shiro knows about the powers in Onii-chan’s blood is that it’s a side effect of him receiving his mana again.\*”*

*“\*Ever since my mana was released? Then… I could’ve done something with my blood for a while now?\*”*

*“\*Yes. Shiro chose not to tell Onii-chan about it since it would’ve given you information Shiro didn’t want you to know yet. But considering our circumstances, it will be bad if Shiro didn’t say anything to Onii-chan about it.\*”*

Shiro took a glance at the title of the book in her hands before continuing.

*“\*Onii-chan, have you ever thought why other people can’t use mana and spirit power at the same time?\*”*

*“\*The thought came to me a few times, but I’ve never arrived at an answer I was satisfied with.\*”*

*“\*That’s only natural. Normally, anyone who did that would be completely eradicated on the spot.\*”*

His head involuntarily turned to the side and faced Shiro at her words.

*“\*Yuuto-san let Shiro have a look at the contents of this book before. She couldn’t understand most of what was written on it, but at the very least, she knows what it was trying to say.\*”*

She brushed the dust off the title of the book before relaying it in Japanese through Connect.

*“\*Calamitous Energy: The Essence of the First World, Primo. A book that talks about the most destructive power in existence.\*”*

No time for being surprised, Senkyo immediately analyzed her few words, relating them to his past knowledge. Yuu told Senkyo in the past when they first met that Primo was the first world that Earth, Zerid, and the Spirit Realm originated from. She told him how chaotic that world was due to the overlapping of the power of the three gods that ruled it. If he related her words to his knowledge, then it was possible that Calamitous Energy was power birthed from all three gods. When that thought came to mind, Senkyo could suddenly feel the pressure around him and Shiro.

Shiro finally opened the book and began reading.

*“\*Discarded, abandoned, and forgotten, but never lost. This marks the rediscovery of the fabled power of old. I am Voaul Oqr, and this is my record of how I stumbled upon the most fierce power left by the three gods.\*”*

The book was written from the author’s perspective, a telling of his experiences and how he discovered Calamitous Energy. Voaul was once a merchant by profession, a researcher by hobby, and an explorer by heart. He often traveled to many places. Not only in Zerid but in other worlds too. His reach was limitless and was considered one of the most successful merchants in the three worlds. This was because of the many items he would find while exploring in his travels. He had unbelievable luck and a connoisseur’s eye for discerning the worth of the items he found.

In one of his explorations, he was struck with tragedy. He was separated from his companions and ended up stuck at the bottom of a Sunken Nest. The particular nest he was inside was dominated by a species that could siphon the power inside anything. This included people and items.

As Voaul tried to find his way out of the Sunken Nest, he eventually encountered numerous enemies with this terrifying ability. He tried to avoid fighting them at all costs, but fate didn’t let him have that luxury. Eventually, he was forced to take up arms and clash with the beasts. He could use magic, but he was afraid it would simply get absorbed by the enemy’s power. He had lost all of his physical weapons when he first got separated from the group. With no other choice, he wielded an otherworldly weapon crafted from the Spirit Realm. Spirit weapons.

A purple light burst forth as his weapon shaped itself. He took advantage of the enemy’s surprise and immediately launched an attack. He took down quite a few enemies before the moment that changed everything arrived. One of the monsters snuck from his blindside and attacked him, forcing him to block with his sword. This was all the monster needed to siphon the power out of the sword.

The purple light disappeared, leaving Voaul defenseless. He thought he was going to die. All the monster in front of him had to do was slash him before he empowered his spirit weapon with spirit power again. But the unexpected happened. The monster in front of him went wild as if it was struggling against something inside it. Before anyone could understand what was happening, the monster burst into flames, consuming its body and everything around it in black flames. Every monster that was nearby was caught in the explosion, burning their bodies the same way as the first monster. All Voaul could do was put his back against the wall and watch as the monsters around them were burnt to a crisp by the unknown black flame. He was separated from the other monsters that were spared from the explosion by a wall of jet-black flames. Seeing that there was nothing else to be gained, the monsters fled.

Once the flames subsided, Voaul walked up to the remains of the monsters caught by the fire. There was barely anything left of them except ashes. But more importantly, those dreadful flames of gloom reminded him of the old folktale passed down by the elders of the single species that survived the chaos from the first world, Primo. An ever-burning blaze that could not be stopped by anything except the mercy of time. A catastrophe ignited by the spark of forcibly conjoining the two opposing powers. Calamitous Energy.

**333 – Secrets of the Past**

The conjoining of two opposing powers. In other words, mixing spirit power and mana. Senkyo reflexively took a glance at the palm of his hand. He always had spirit power inside of him. That went the same for every human on Earth. It was just never trained to be used like how hunters in the Konjou Clan used them. However, that changed the moment Ryosei came into his life, letting him know the way of life in the Konjou Clan and allowing him the ability to use his spirit power. Then, there was his mana. It was released from the eighth seal along with Shiro, allowing it to flow through his body once more. A massive amount pouring back into a body with spirit power. If they were going solely by what Shiro read so far, then Senkyo should have burst into black flames just like how the monster did when spirit power entered its mana-filled body. But this wasn’t the case for him. In fact, he was able to use both powers freely as if moving a part of his body. He never felt anything dangerous from it. He had no answers, so he opted to listen more to Shiro to find out more.

She skipped over many pages, going by memory to get to the next biggest development in the book. At this part, Voaul had begun research on Calamitous Energy. With his many connections and wealthy fortune, he was able to set the most optimal environments for testing the inner workings of Calamitous Energy. Their primary way of exploring this unknown power was through the monsters that Voaul encountered in the Sunken Nest. They were hunted, captured, and made to go through many tests to understand this power better.

Of course, being the destructive power that it is, many of these species died for the sake of research. With no way to force these species to procreate, they were left with no choice but to use what they had. Voaul expanded his resources to hunt down every one of these species until none of them was left free to roam the world. Every single one of their kind was used in Voaul’s experiments. Every single one of their kind dying day after day en masse. Every single one of their kind gone for the sake of power.

Voaul was afraid of the extinction of this race, not because of pity, but because he would lose his only way of creating Calamitous Energy. This time eventually came as the last test was conducted. Thankfully for Voaul, their sacrifices weren’t in vain as the truth behind Calamitous Energy came to light.

Having spirit power and mana make contact wasn’t enough. It needed to be activated through a massive spark in mana like magic being cast. The level they estimated was a mid-tier spell or multiple low-tier spells activating at the same time. They needed to be in contact with spirit power the whole time for the reaction to trigger. The flame caused by this lasts for approximately 3 minutes regardless of the power inputted. They are easy to spread and will catch onto anything. And finally, the flames don’t only burn physical forms, but spiritual forms as well. In simple terms, anyone caught by these flames is susceptible to having their entire existence wiped out. They consume not just the body but the soul as well. This was supported by the fact that anyone who died from them never became a spirited soul in the Spirit Realm.

With the results of the research passed, Voaul went into his reflection on this power. The contents of it were… gone. Shiro told Senkyo to turn to her and saw the last page she read out to him, the book’s cover, and ripped pages in between them.

*“\*This marks the end of the book. If Onii-chan wondering what the contents of these ripped pages were, Shiro doesn’t know either. She asked Yuuto-san when he first showed this to her, but he never responded. She thinks that Yuuto-san knew something but he didn’t tell her.\*”*

*“\*The old man knew, huh…\*”*

A thought passed through his head. It could have been that his father was just being secretive again, but the reason was likely because he was talking to Shiro. He managed to tell her all about what she knew so far, but Senkyo can see her visible struggle in conveying this information to him. If he had to hazard a guess, his father probably didn’t tell Shiro what it was because he didn’t want to burden her with any more of the truth. A wry smile appeared on Shiro’s face as he thought this. Shiro isn’t stupid. She probably thought the same thing before and chose to accept that reasoning.

With a dull thump, Shiro closed the book in her hands and told Senkyo.

*“\*Yuuto-san didn’t tell Shiro anything about the pages of this book. But he did tell her another result of Voaul’s experiments that didn’t arise until recently.\*”*

Senkyo reflexively held his breath at this sudden claim. His gaze was solely on Shiro.

*“\*That is… the birth of another element. From the original 11 elements: fire, water, nature, earth, lightning, frost, light, dark, blood, control, and null, another element was added. The 12th element—Creation. The ultimate form of magic, the purified form of Calamitous Energy, and the power that runs in Onii-chan’s blood.\*”*

Completely nonplussed, Senkyo could only stare with widened eyes at her as she continued speaking.

*“\*Onii-chan’s truest power is the ability to store this element in his body. The creation element, the tranquil and untainted form of Calamitous Energy. The ability to use both mana and spirit power freely. The ability to weave the power birthed from the three gods to your will. If Onii-chan manages to master control over this power, it would be no exaggeration for someone to call you the ultimate being.\*”*

*“\*…And this element can be found in my blood?\*”*

*“\*Yes…\*”*

There were no reactions. Just silence. Shiro waited for Senkyo’s next move, while all Senkyo could do was send his mind to overdrive to process all of this information. For now, he removed his gaze from Shiro and hung his head, supporting it with both of his hands clasped in front of it, the weight transferring to his elbows placed on both legs.

After about five more minutes of silence, Senkyo collected his thoughts and listed a few things he wanted answers to.

*“\*Shiro, how did I get this power?\*”*

*“\*…She doesn’t know.\*”*

*Unaffected by that response, he continued.*

*“\*Then, have you seen my power in action before?\*”*

*“\*Yes.\*”*

*“\*What happened at that time?\*”*

*“\*Shiro doesn’t want to answer that… But, you’ve seen it being used before, Onii-chan.\*”*

*“\*When?\*”*

*“\*Earlier today, when Onii-chan stopped the rampaging Hell’s Pillar. That was magic from the creation element. That’s why Shiro was so surprised when you suddenly used it.\*”*

*“\*…I see, so that’s the creation element…\*”*

Senkyo recalled how the massive high-tier spell was silenced by a weaker mid-tier spell. The element may be called creation but it was also capable of destruction. The most he could figure out about that spell was that it suddenly came to his head when he willed it. He didn’t know why. It could be connected to his conscious such that convenient spells would just pop up in his head right when he needed them, but he wasn’t sure if this was the case. There was no evidence and he certainly didn’t know where to start to test this. In the end, he couldn’t figure it out and decided to move progress the conversation with Shiro instead.

*“\*Am I the only person with this power?\*”*

*“\*As far as Shiro knows, yes…\*”*

*“\*When was that book created?\*”*

Shiro’s ears perked at the question and she immediately opened the book and searched for the date. Her eyes widened the moment she read it and conveyed it to Senkyo in a gingerly tone.

*“\*1812…\*”*

*“\*…about 200 years ago, huh? If this power was the result of this research, why do you think it took this long to produce results?\*”*

*“\*Shiro wasn’t informed in detail, but Yuuto-san said that it was stopped at some point and was forgotten entirely. It was a famous topic back then but everyone suddenly lost interest in it.\*”*

*“\*Why was that?\*”*

*“\*Yuuto-san didn’t tell Shiro.\*”*

*“\*Then, how does he even know something that dated 200 years ago? Is it written in the book?\*”*

*“\*Shiro hasn’t read the entire book, so she doesn’t know and Yuuto-san never told Shiro how he knew.\*”*

*“\*So, a work from two centuries ago lost traction but was suddenly revived recently, and on top of that, created a completely new element…\*”*

He summarized his thoughts out loud in their Connect network.

*“\*Then, what happened recently that could have been related to my powers?\*”*

*“\*If there was anything at all, then it would be the incident with the last generation of ambassadors.\*”*

*“\*I’ve been hearing about this every now and then. What happened with the ambassadors?\*”*

*“\*All Onii-chan knows about the ambassadors is that they were sent to other worlds to make peace, right?\*”*

*“\*Yes, we talked about it at lunch.\*”*

*“\*Okay, then it all began when…\*”*

Shiro proceeded to tell Senkyo about the events that transpired in the time of the last generation of ambassadors. All about how another god interfered with the peace and killed Hades, how one of the Heroes was discovered to be a fake and betrayed everyone, and how the tragedy ended with the memories, influences, and connections from every other world disappearing from Earth and the Spirit Realm as if their interactions with the other worlds never transpired. Senkyo discovered that this was the doing of the god that killed Hades and that Zerid was the only one spared from this effect due to the efforts of all of the ambassadors and the two gods, in a way, making Zerid the most advanced world out of the three.

Then, Senkyo asked how ambassadors were chosen. Shiro didn’t know the exact details, but what she did know was the existence of a date called Judgement Day, a day when all the chosen ambassadors are given their godly blessings. Then, he followed up that question by asking who the ambassadors of the last generation were. Shiro couldn’t recall all of them, but she clearly stated that his father, Yukou Yuuto, and his father’s colleague and acting guardian, Akira Leo, were a part of the previous generation’s ambassadors. As a side, she could vaguely remember the surnames of the other Heroes being Konjou, Yutei, and Honshou. Three familiar surnames relating to Konjou Ryosei, Yutei Yukai, and the school he was studying at, Honshou Academy. The story sent Senkyo silent for about ten minutes. His conclusion:

“THIS IS TOO MUCH TO TAKE IN!!”

**334 – Cunning Exchange**

After being reprimanded by the people around him for shouting so loudly in the library, Senkyo thought to tidy up and prepare to leave. He had all of the books he was interested in on a stack in front of him, the book about calamitous energy included, sitting on the top of the stack. He wondered if he could borrow the books from the library. He might be able to do so if this were Earth, but this was Zerid, they could have different rules. For now, they decided to ask one of the librarians for help.

“Onii-chan.”

Shiro’s stifled call of him reached his ears. Turning to her, she had another person with her. She had short brunette hair and round glasses adorning her brown eyes. A brown fur cloak with white edges covered the back of her body while a white long-sleeve shirt under her grey vest and brown shorts could be seen from the front.

Her face didn’t look too far from Senkyo’s age but there was a mature atmosphere around her. If he had to say, she was most likely somewhere in her 20s, but what took most of his attention was her unique features. Those being the two wings covered in hazel feathers protruding behind her back, the sharp nails on her fingers, her feathery legs with the same color as her wings, and the deadly talons in place of her human feet. The half-human, half-avian fantasy species—a harpy.

“This is the person that helped me find that book earlier.”

“Hello, how may I help you?”

She asked in a cool tone, her expression blank as she matched Senkyo’s gaze.

“Oh, um, we wanted to know if we could borrow these books over here.”

Senkyo presented the stacks of books to her. There were 10 books in total. She took a glance at the stack and returned her gaze to Senkyo, scanning his body.

“I’m sorry, but you’re not a student of Xhiari, are you?”

“No, we’re outsiders.”

She lightly nodded at his response.

“Hm. There will be a few complications in your request. Namely, books from Xhiari’s library cannot be borrowed by anyone except the students and staff of the institution. The library may be open to the public, but the high rate of cases of lost or damaged books in the past made it so that they are unable to borrow them.”

“Oh, is that so?”

Senkyo was afraid of something like this. He scratched his head at the thought of having to scour for these books every day he wanted to read. Ideally, he would’ve liked to take these to their lodgings and read them there so he could read them whenever he had spare time, but that didn’t seem like it was going to happen. Looking at Senkyo’s face, the librarian opened her mouth to say something…

“However—”

“Ah, you can make exceptions for these people.”

…But before she could get her words out, another voice overlapped her. Their eyes widened in surprise at the sudden interruption, inadvertently drawing them to the source of the voice. The man that stood there was a middle-aged Sorun they were familiar with. One of the most important people in the academy, Adeira.

“How are you doing, Sir Adeira?”

With quick feet, the librarian turned to him, took a step backward, and bowed politely to him, retaining her calm demeanor all the while.

“I’m fine, thank you. But, as I said earlier, it’s fine if these people borrow any books. My authority allows me to do this, correct?”

“Yes. If it’s someone with Sir Adeira’s status, they are allowed to sanction outsiders to borrow books from the library.”

As she says this, the librarian walks up to the stack of books, picks up the calamitous energy book that was laying on top of the whole stack, and placed it beside the stack. She continues to do this to the other books until two evenly stacks were made.

“In exchange, if the borrowed books of those sanctioned individuals are lost or damaged in some way, Sir Adeira will face the consequences that come with it. Despite this, will Sir Adeira continue this sanction?”

“Yes, please do so.”

“Very well. I will begin to process the books.”

The librarian went to fetch a book cart and placed the two stacks on the cart.

“Please proceed to the front desk when you are ready to claim your books.”

She said to Senkyo before leaving them.

“O-Okay, thanks…”

He stuttered, still slightly perplexed by the situation. With the librarian gone, he turned his attention to Adeira, who seemed to have taken quite a risky responsibility for him.

“Sir Adeira, is this really okay? I mean, you didn’t have to do that for me.”

“I don’t mind. You can treat this as my repayment for saving us earlier today. Though, I do wonder why you decided to name me instead of Professor Gaeka.”

“Grk…! A-Ah, that one…”

He was referring to how he dealt with the patrol earlier. He used Adeira’s name hoping everything would resolve at that, but it didn’t. The person himself approached him because of it. He didn’t seem upset, and with those raised brows, perhaps he was just curious. It was the kind of face that was trying to probe for information. Seeing as there was no other choice but to confront Adeira about it, he spoke.

“I met up with Professor Gaeka earlier, and honestly, I don’t trust him. I’m afraid of what would happen if I gave him information about where I was, so I thought maybe Sir Adeira could help me with that…”

He answered truthfully, relaying his dissatisfaction with the professor.

“I understand. Well, you aren’t the first one to have the same impression. I don’t mind filling in as your backer. But with this, it’s a bit difficult to say we’re on equal standing, Sir Yukou.”

He smiled knowingly at Senkyo, suggesting that this was his real aim from the beginning. He wanted Senkyo to be in debt to him. There was no question about it; it was for his power. It was the only thing that could have caught Adeira’s interest, after all. The real question was whether or not he was after his general strength or if he also knew about his ability to use the creation element. He had no clue. After discovering just how big of a deal the power inside him was, it seemed like everyone around him was suspicious. This was probably one of the things that Shiro didn’t want him to experience. Well, there was nothing that could be done now.

“I-I’m in your debt. I’ll do anything to assist you, so long as it stays within reasonable grounds…”

“I’ll be looking forward to working with you.”

Adeira said before bowing to Senkyo and leaving. He felt like he was having a headache from that exchange. First was dealing with Gaeka’s approaches, next was Shiro’s large load of shocking revelations, then it was this. Senkyo had no more energy left in him to think. He just wanted one thing. Rest.

Senkyo and Shiro proceeded to the front desk where Senkyo had to sign on a piece of paper for every book he borrowed, totaling ten signatures. It was a bit tedious, but it was surprisingly simple. Senkyo expected to deal with something about identification again and having to work around it. The fact that it was less of a headache than he originally thought improved his mood a little.

Before leaving, he asked the librarian where they could find a place they could stay. She named a place called “Elqa” which wasn’t too far from Xhiari. She ensured the quality they had there with unexpected enthusiasm. It wasn’t like she raised her voice or anything, she just repeated “It’s the best” over and over with the same blank tone every time he tried to ask something about it. Not wanting to deal with such eccentricity, he gave up communicating and just decided to go there.

**335 – Leolja’s Warning**

“Mmn~… mn…”

From the depths of his slumber, Senkyo’s consciousness slowly arose as a sweet voice entered his ears. There was a familiar sensation beyond his closed eyelids. There was something soft and warm wrapping around his body. A fresh, delightful scent wafted into his nostrils. Opening his eyes, the sense of déjà vu struck him.

“Sh-Shiro!?”

He tried to launch himself out of bed but Shiro’s hold on him tightened, keeping him from escaping.

“Ehehe… Onii-chan…”

She snuggled against his chest as if to claim her prize. This was just like the time Senkyo and Shiro first reunited. Her arms and legs clinging to his body, her bare skin hidden only by the bed sheets, and the severe state of fluster on Senkyo’s face when he realized that he was only one article of clothing away from being in the same state.

“How did this happen…”

The memories of last night slowly flowed back into his mind. They were deep into the night when they arrived at Elqa. They expected a simple cozy inn but what stood in front of their eyes was on a completely different level. Instead of an inn, it was better to compare it to a five-star hotel. The building was built in the same modern architecture on Earth and the reception inside was just as its image implied. Now they understood what the librarian meant by “the best.”

When Senkyo checked the list of available rooms, almost instinctively, he booked the room at the very top of the hotel. The penthouse suite. Even after everything he discovered in this world, he didn’t expect to find such a modern word on the list. He needed to investigate it and find out just how advanced this world was in terms of living standards… or so he told himself. In reality, he succumbed to the sweet allure of luxury. He had money, he was tired, and he wanted some kind of compensation after traveling for so long, why not take it?

The two were guided to the top of the hotel by a bellhop, doing them the service of carrying their luggage. The bellhop unlocked the room for them and operated a rectangular pad. Placing his hand on the pad’s surface, he charged lighting magic through it, lighting up the whole room and revealing heaven.

A whole floor fully furnished with luxury items was before them. The living room had a dining table lit under warm, relaxing lights. Uniquely designed chairs and decorations filled the desolate spaces. A fine carpet lay across the whole room. Paintings and curtains spread across the walls. Two sofas and a couch were set near the windows. And the glass wall that led to the terrace outside could be seen from the entrance. It felt like they were really on Earth instead of another world.

The bellhop explained to them that the power will be regularly maintained by the staff, so he wouldn’t have to bother recharging the room with lightning magic. That was great news for him since he was more than certain he’d just overload the pad the bellhop just operated and would end up paying for damages if he tried to do the same. After saying everything he had to mention to the guests, the bellhop politely bowed and took his leave.

Senkyo and Shiro’s eyes wandered around the room in marvel. The first thing Senkyo inspected was the sofas, couch, and carpet. Unlike the threads and weaving of the below-standard lab coats he saw earlier that day, the furniture here was completely different. They were soft and smooth just like the quality back on Earth. More questions popped up in his head because of this, but he immediately chased them away, wanting to end this tiring day without any more thinking.

A little exploring later was all it took for the two to find a large bathroom fixed with both a shower and a bathtub. Best of all, there was a panel that could regulate the temperature of the water. After traveling for days out in the wild without anything to keep themselves clean, this was nothing but pure bliss. The two settled in and got food delivered from the hotel. There was a variety of choices but Senkyo recognized almost none of them. In fear of ordering something like that… creature Hira was eating earlier that day, they went for a meal they were familiar with.

Naturally, what came after that was a relaxing time in the bath. Senkyo went in first at Shiro’s suggestion. At first, he had a strange feeling that she might try entering the bath while he was there, but that didn’t happen. When he finished his time in the bath, instead of wearing the same dirty clothes, Senkyo opted to wear the soft bathrobe that was prepared for them in the bathroom.

At this point in his memories, he realized his mistake. He was so immersed in luxury that his mind’s self-awareness was numbed. He failed to realize that under that bathrobe of his… was nothing. To add to that, he immediately threw himself on the king-sized bed and drifted off to sleep, allowing Shiro to take advantage of the situation and end up as they did the very next morning.

After forcibly taking control of the situation, Senkyo escaped Shiro’s clutches and donned the same equipment he had yesterday. He felt a bit dirty wearing the same clothes that went unwashed for days, but it wasn’t like he had an extra set of equipment lying around to wear. Even if he did, there was the complication of carrying them in their travels.

Well, buying combat equipment may not be a good option, but buying indoor clothes was completely fine. They could carry them in their bag and if it ever got full, then they can just discard them. The sleepwear and loungewear they tried out in Arachne Tailors yesterday came to Senkyo’s mind.

“Oh yeah, we never gave Leolja my school uniform, did I?”

“Now that Onii-chan says it, Hira dragged us out before we could.”

“We should get back to him today and buy some indoor clothes while we’re at it.”

“E-Ehh… indoor clothes? Onii-chan, you just want to buy sleepwear for Shiro, don’t you?”

“Obviously!”

“Ehhhh~~………”

Senkyo just realized this, but his sister really preferred sleeping in her birthday suit. She didn’t do this when they slept outside, thankfully, but it quickly changed when they got into a private room. He usually wouldn’t touch on personal preferences, but despite this large penthouse suite, there was only one bed on the whole floor. It was a king-sized bed, but that meant that the two will have to share. There was no way Senkyo was going to survive continuous nights with her naked sister. And now that he formed that idea into words in his mind, it just sounded all the more wrong. He was buying sleepwear. There was no budging him on this one.

**…………**

After spending the first half of the day lounging around and reading some of the books Senkyo picked out, he and Shiro headed to Arachne Tailors to meet with Leolja. When they first asked the staff for him, they immediately recognized them and disappeared into the backroom. The staff later came back to escort the two into Leolja’s office.

“Senkyo, Shir, welcome back.”

“It’s good to see you again, Leolja.”

“Leela!!”

The three exchanged their quick greetings as Senkyo and Shiro sat on the two chairs in front of Leolja’s desk.

“I’m sorry we got cut off yesterday. Here, I came to sell the Earth uniform.”

“There’s no need to apologize, but thank you for getting back to me. Oh, if I may ask, what happened to you two yesterday?”

“After Hira-san dragged us out?”

“Yes. I don’t mean to be nosy, but I had a few concerns with what Miss Hira said as she dragged you two out. Particularly, about Professor Gaeka.”

“…Professor Gaeka.”

Senkyo couldn’t help but parrot the name in surprise. The serious look on Leolja’s face didn’t look like he was asking for conversation’s sake. Senkyo and Shiro’s relationship with Gaeka was a sensitive topic, seeing as he is one of the people that know what Senkyo is truly capable of. There was always the possibility of other people probing him in his stead to plan out his next move. Leolja could be one of those people.

He turned to Shiro and she gave him a nod. Leolja could be an enemy, but just like Shiro, Senkyo wanted to trust him.

“Well…”

Senkyo told the story about how Gaeka was desperate about getting his blood. Due to unforeseen incidences, they got away without leaving a blood sample. He emphasized the suspicion they felt from him but never went into detail about how they thought so and why everything turned out how it did, hiding the fact that Senkyo was a special existence in the process.

“Mm… I see…”

Leolja placed his hands on the desk as Senkyo ended his story. He took a deep breath before letting out his grave voice.

“Senkyo, I must warn you about that man.”

“Oh… Why is that?”

“You see, ever since that man entered the city, some strange occurrences have been happening behind the scenes. The people I know within the guard and even the academy began acting strangely. One example you’ve seen firsthand is Miss Hira. As you may have experienced, her personality is very straightforward. She acts before she thinks and goes by her instincts. That woman has a strong sense of self. When I first met her, I was certain that no one would be able to bind her down. Yet, she now does every errand Professor Gaeka gives her. You could say that she calmed down but I feel the transition was much too unnatural. She even neglects the research she loves doing just to complete an order. I haven’t met the man, but the sudden change in Miss Hira’s demeanor is concerning. Not to mention that I’ve been observing the same changes in other people I know. I have no definite proof to back up my suspicions but I don’t need them. I’m different from how I was when I lived in the Sunken Nest, but that doesn’t mean I’ve been defanged. The senses that guided me to survival are telling me that this man is nothing but trouble. So, please be careful.”

“Hm, okay. Understood.”

“Hm!!”

Senkyo and Shiro took Leolja’s warning to heart. Then, Senkyo finally handed over his burnt school uniform. Leolja told him that his payment was prepared at the reception desk. Senkyo then informed him of how he was planning on buying some clothes from the store, to which he said that he could take the total off based on the payment. After that, Senkyo and Shiro prepared to take their leave, but not before asking them one more thing.

“Senkyo, Shir, do you two have any plans later today?”

“Oh, yes. We’re thinking of visiting Haeqras and see if we can investigate the Sunken Nest. Is there a problem with that?”

“No, I just wanted to know. Sorry if I gave any misunderstandings.”

And so, the two left the room and continued the day.

**336 – Local Haeqras**

It didn’t take them too long to be on their way to Haeqras. All they had to do was pick from the sleepwear Shiro tried out yesterday. They were buying this under the assumption it would be discarded in the long run, and more likely than not, be left unwashed. For these reasons, they planned on buying two new clothes for both of them. It wouldn’t matter if one of them gets ragged or unwashed since they had another reserve, but to save space they had to keep everything at the bare minimum, so two for each of them was the conclusion.

Senkyo didn’t care much about fashion and prioritized practicality, because of this, it didn’t even take him a minute to pick out two sets of clothes. Shiro, however, was different and not in the way one would normally expect. She didn’t care about which clothes to choose. In fact, she outright refused to choose. She kept going on about how she disliked wearing sleepwear in private. Convincing Shiro was what prevented them from leaving immediately. There was no way Senkyo was allowing a repeat of last night, so he had to be a bit forceful with this one.

Instead of having Shiro choose, he chose for her. He tried to remember which of the clothes she tried on yesterday and reacted positively to. There were surprisingly many options. It seemed like she didn’t mind wearing sleepwear for fashion. He had a hard time choosing two sets that suited her the best. Not because he was indecisive, but because it was a struggle to keep his mind in check as he went through the options. Well, on the bright side, at least he had some form of measurement so that he didn’t have to go through everything all over again. What form of measurement, you ask? We don’t talk about that here.

All that was left after that was confronting Shiro about his choices for her. He thought it would be another uphill battle but she accepted both of them quite easily. The moment the words “I picked these out for you” were said, her ears immediately perked up and caught her full attention. A frighteningly mischievous smile appeared on Shiro’s face but Senkyo didn’t want to think about it. Though, he had to make peace with the thought that tonight was probably going to be another long night.

After following the directions the staff from Aracne Tailors gave them, they eventually arrived at the local Haeqras. Unlike the modern buildings in the city, this one was built in wood and stone. If Senkyo were to speak honestly, this was a bit of a letdown. After seeing all the other modern structures such as Xhairi and Elqa, it felt like he was sent back in time with their fluctuating technology. Well, that was the perfect descriptor for the whole city of Iqanlr since their technology is so inconsistent, which made this actually natural.

Instead of Haeqras, what truly caught his attention was the structure that stood across it. The streets of the city intersect to a large circular open space at its center. Haeqras stands on the edge of this circle. However, this space isn’t open to the public. The reason for that being is that it was the place where the Sunken Nest of Iqanlr was located.

The large circular area was surrounded by a strong metal fence with a few trees, greenery, and benches placed inside of it. At its core were two concentric hollow towers built in Gothic architecture with three-pointed arches as their base. How Senkyo was able to determine they were both hollow towers was simple. Both of these towers were fragmented as if they were ruined structures.

The outermost tower was more disjointed than the inner tower with there being more frequent disconnections and more open space to reveal the inside of the tower. The inner tower was only disjointed into two halves, separating vertically at its center which held many light poles that surrounded a large cavity on the ground—the entrance to the Sunken Nest. Open sky bridges were used to connect the fragmented structures, showing that the hollowed tower had an interior of some kind. There were also many guards spread inside the metal fence and even some patrolling the sky bridges.

Senkyo stared at it in amazement. This was the closest thing to “fantasy” he had seen ever since coming to this world. It was old, impractical, and only made to look flashy, which overall, made it look cool. That should have been the thought he concluded to if it weren’t for one thing: this was real life. Unlike in games or stories, real people worked blood and sweat to create this kind of unrealistic structure. Was it only made for entertainment purposes? Maybe this stood here before the city was even made? He didn’t know the answer to those questions. That’s why instead of pondering with imagination alone, he put the thought aside and entered Haeqras.

What greeted him inside was a calm atmosphere and rows of counters placed on two sides of the room. There were seats in the form of chairs and couches at the center of the room. Unlike the typical fantasy guild house, Haeqras was more formal and its reception was tailored to clients rather than “adventurers,” or in this world, crawlers. If Senkyo had to compare this to Earth, then it was similar to a bank or similar receptions. The counters were separated into two sections. One under “Clients” and the other under “Crawlers.” The row for crawlers was desolate while most of the people inside lined up as clients, others sitting leisurely on the seats. Senkyo first thought that the clients' row would mostly be filled with merchants or people with some kind of high status but he was wrong. The lines didn’t discriminate with its balanced number of what seemed to be nobles and commoners.

Leaving that aside, that meant Senkyo had two options to explore the Sunken Nest. Going from the signs, he could either hire a crawler to go with him or apply as a crawler and go. Senkyo originally only planned to go by himself, so that should lead him to become a crawler. But then, a thought came to mind. Even if he was a crawler, would he be allowed to explore the Sunken Nest at his leisure? He didn’t know. He had been standing still with Shiro for a while now and none of the staff ever called to him, so without wasting any more time, he and Shiro approached one of the open counters under the crawler’s row.

“Hello, how may I help you?”

“I wanted to ask about what benefits I can get if I became a crawler.”

“Are you planning on applying to be one?”

“Yes.”

“Very well. Then please refer to this guidebook and ask me what questions you may have about it.”

The receptionist handed him a book and he began to skim it.

In summary, becoming a crawler requires taking an aptitude test to determine whether or not a person will be qualified to operate in the Sunken Nest the test was taken for. In other words, pass a test and you’ll be able to become a crawler. It is noted that the crawler will only be able to operate in the Haeqras branches they passed aptitude tests for. To operate in another branch, they must take the specific test for that branch and pass it.

Crawlers gain the right to enter Sunken Nests by themselves. However, they must first report to Haeqras and acquire permission to be eligible to pass the guards. Haeqras will be held accountable for lives lost in operations but this does not apply if a crawler dies outside of the missions given.

Crawlers will be given a specialized identification card to serve as proof of their identity as a crawler. This card may also function as a general identification card. To maintain an active status as a crawler, they must complete at least two missions every month. Otherwise, they would have their active status revoked, and in simple terms, be fired. The only way for them to become a crawler again is to pass tests just like before.

“Okay, I’ll apply to become a crawler.”

After understanding the basics, Senkyo gave an immediate answer. The job was simple enough and his only restriction was to finish two missions in a month. But what really caught his attention was the identification card. With that, he will finally be able to overcome problems that need this.

“Understood. We have one assessor available at the moment. However, please know that Haeqras does not have assessors present for aptitude tests all the time. If you are to fail and take the test again or succeed and take an aptitude test in a different Haeqras branch, please consider making an appointment first.”

It seemed like Senkyo and Shiro came at a lucky time with a single assessor available.

“Oh, okay. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Thank you. Now, please standby until the assessor arrives.”

**337 – Access Level**

Senkyo and Shiro did as the receptionist told them and waited for their assessor on one of the couches. The same thought came to his mind when he found a similar couch in their room that there had to have been a supplier for furniture here. From what he had heard so far, Iqanlr is the most advanced location in all of Yuwokrn. Yet, it didn’t seem like they had the technology to create couches that have the same quality on Earth. If he was correct on this, then that meant that someone other than them has the ability to come and go from Earth to Zerid easily enough to import items. He didn’t know who they were or how they do it, but their imports get to places in Iqanlr. Maybe there was a chance to run into them and ask some questions. Such thoughts passed through his head as time passed.

“Hello there, I will be assessing you for today.”

A voice called out to them from behind, which apparently came from their assessor. Senkyo and Shiro quickly stood up and turned to greet them.

“Oh, thank you for the—eh!?”

“Leela!?”

And to their surprise, the person in front of them was none other than the owner of Arachne Tailors, Leolja. The gentleman spider tippled his hat to greet them.

“Hello again, Senkyo, Shir. Did I surprise you?”

Shiro nodded her head vigorously at his question while Senkyo remained speechless.

“Since I am one of the most difficult enemies you would encounter in the Sunken Nest, I was quickly hired as one of the possible assessors when I became a riser. When I heard you planned on coming here to enter the Sunken Nest I thought to drop by just in case you planned on becoming a crawler.”

“Is it okay for you to be here? What about the shop?”

“It is in safe hands. I trust my employees enough to leave the establishment to them while I tackle other matters.”

“So whimsical!”

“Haha, perhaps. There are a few reasons I can do this but for now how about we focus on the assessment?”

Leolja forcibly changed the subject and showed them to a door. Navigating through Haeqras’ halls, they climbed down a set of stairs into the basement where they arrived in front of a large opening on the wall.

“This is one of our artificial training grounds. Ever since I got hired in Haeqras, they made these artificial caves I can use to emulate the environment down in the Sunken Nest. I can provide the same quality of danger as if you are truly in the Sunken Nest, which boosted the accuracy in assigning access levels.”

“Access level?”

“Yes. This is a system we use to rank our crawlers and assign appropriate tasks to them. Every sunken nest is separated into levels. Depending on the sunken nest, the levels may vary, but for Iqanlr’s sunken nest, there are eight levels. Starting from the most basic level down to the most dangerous, there are levels E, D, C, B, A1, A2, A3, and S. As its name suggests, the access level is what allows access to these areas.”

“Why is level A divided into three sublevels?”

“These levels are mainly separated by the resources they contain. The resources found on all levels of A are generally the same but are divided into three sublevels due to the threats that exist there. You see, the access level of a crawler is determined by whether or not crawlers can complete an escort mission on a certain level. If the crawler’s deepest accomplishment is on level A3, then their access level is A2. Their level is downgraded in consideration of the unpredictability of the sunken nest. There are cases where the enemies on A3 are seen on higher levels like A2, and in one instance, even on level C. It isn’t as if the enemies defined in a single level are strictly only found in that level. They are not machines; they are living beings, which also means they have the erratic nature of one. The one-level downgrade is Haeqras’ consideration of this fact. As someone who once lived in that nest, I would attest that this is the correct decision.”

“That makes sense… Then, how can a crawler get access level S?”

“That topic has been a difficult one to tackle in the past since no one could accurately measure that level without risking the lives of crawlers, but the solution was clear the moment I became a riser. In order to be assigned access level S in Iqanlr’s sunken nest, the crawler must be able to complete an escort mission on this level with me as an enemy. To avoid flukes, they must do this three consecutive times.”

“Does that mean anyone can try to get access level S? Aren’t there any requirements?”

“What Haeqras values the most are skill and the ability to complete a mission. It does not matter if you are applying for the first time as a crawler. So long as you have the skill to deal with the enemies on a certain level while conducting an escort mission, the hardest task a crawler can be given, then you are rewarded for your talent. How about you, Senkyo? What level are you going to test for?”

“My access level, huh?”

He pinched his chin as he pondered the question. Senkyo first thought of going to the sunken nest just so he could see for his own eyes what one would look like. Just a bit of probing in case he ended up in a sunken nest in the future. Although, if there was anything to be gained, there were two things: resources and experience.

As a hunter under the enchanter class in the Konjou clan, there was nothing more important than having many resources to work with. Senkyo learned a lot from his mentor, Shimizu Yoshiko, the person who taught him all about how to become a competent enchanter. One of the golden rules under the enchanter class is to make use of natural resources and everything in the enchanter’s surroundings. Senkyo learned how to apply techniques in the enchanter class on items on Earth, and now, he was in Zerid. He didn’t know what reaction the items in this world would have if he applied his techniques to them. If possible, he would like to examine the resources at the deepest level.

Then, there was experience. He already had experience fighting a xeqrel, but that was only one of many possible enemies in this world. It didn’t take anything over than a few glances at his surroundings to know that the races here are more diverse than on Earth. This implies that the enemies he would face will, more or less, be just as diverse. He needed to learn how to adapt to every enemy. The faster he can, the better. Another major rule to enchanters.

With these two into consideration, there was only one choice they were pointing to. However, this also meant placing his full trust in Leolja. Senkyo wasn’t complacent enough to think he was going to clear this task without using his specialty—the use of spirit power. There was a chance Leolja wouldn’t be able to detect spirit power, but gambling on that possibility was foolish when he still had the option to not use it. It would be best if he gained access to all levels of the sunken nest, but was revealing the fact that he can use spirit power worth it?

He shifted his gaze to Shiro who was trying to read his expression the whole time. If he were to make a mistake here, it will bring him and Shiro unneeded danger. He trusted Leolja once by telling him about what happened with Gaeka but telling him about his capabilities was a different story. So, he made a decision.

“I’ll go for access level A—”

“—S! Onii-chan and Shiro will take access level S!”

Or at least, he was about to. Shiro cut Senkyo off and declared something completely different. Just as he was wondering what she was trying to do, her voice echoed in his head.

*“\*Sh-Shiro thinks that Onii-chan should have more allies! Onii-chan has always valued connections more than raw power in the past! Shiro doesn’t want Onii-chan to isolate himself just because of his powers! Even if there’s a risk… Shiro wants Onii-chan to take it!\*”*

Her voice was just as powerful as her call yesterday. Those were her words. It was her decision. She had always been reluctant of letting him know about his abilities and this was one of the reasons. She knew he would begin to isolate himself the moment the truth came to light. She knew about how he was likely to spread doubt and suspicion to those around him. To counteract this, she acted like so.

As Senkyo stared silently into Shiro’s eyes, Leolja asked to confirm.

“Excuse me, but which access level did you want to take again?”

His gaze wandered to Shiro one more time before he answered.

“We’ll take the challenge for access level S.”

**338 – The Sunken Nest’s Mirror**

Dark, but not completely. The cave that stretches out in front of them glows in a deep purple hue. This was an indicator that the current level they were on was A3. Along with that light was an army of arachnids that crawled all over every surface around them. Beyond everything was an opening that glowed in red. That was the final level Senkyo and to get to. Level S. It was the level he needed to reach to fight Leolja and clear one of the three runs to be eligible to obtain access level S. It was still a long way to go. It almost seemed bleak. Yet, in the middle of all this, he smirked.

About an hour ago, Senkyo’s test to become a crawler began. Leolja was the first to go inside the artificial cave while Senkyo needed to handle a few preparations. Before he could go inside, he had to bring with him a special training dummy Leolja provided him. It could walk by itself and follow simple orders such as “move,” “run,” and “stay.” This was used to emulate the experience of an actual escort mission. Senkyo needed to complete three successful escort missions to level S in a row to be able to get access level S. For that, he needed to make sure the training dummy he was with does not receive any kind of fatal damage. Some smaller forms of damage were forgiven, but anything decisive like a fatal wound or lack of maintenance that led to fatal poisoning or blood loss was a sign of failure.

The fact that escort missions required the crawler to constantly monitor their client was what made it the hardest mission to conduct. Even if the crawler is powerful and incredibly skilled, they needed to babysit another person that had no special abilities and is susceptible to danger. Looking at Haeqras’ records, escort missions were rarely asked for by clients due to the danger it meant not just for the crawler but also for the client. These rare cases were mostly conducted for observation, in other words, for research. It is the crawler’s job to make sure the client’s purpose is fulfilled. Because of this, Senkyo’s mission was to get the training dummy to level S, remain in a designated area for 5 minutes, and collect a particular resource. His mission ends the moment he arrives back at the entrance of the artificial cave, and the mission will only be considered a success if the dummy did not take fatal damage, fulfilled the 5-minute requirement, and brought back the stated resource. After that, he needed to complete the whole process two more times. Now that Senkyo summarized everything, it all sounded like the most troublesome thing he had ever taken on.

With a heavy sigh, he entered the artificial cave with the dummy following him closely behind. Shiro was with them, but not in her physical form. Since they were about to enter enemy territory where anything could happen at any time, it was better for Shiro to get inside Senkyo’s body. Putting it bluntly, she would only be an easy target if she were to walk around in her physical form. Whereas if she were in her spirit form inside Senkyo’s body, she still had the ability to support Senkyo without being a subject of worry. With this, he can place more attention on their environment and the training dummy behind him.

A few seconds from entering was all it took to arrive at level E. Initially, Senkyo thought he would have to have a continuous light source active the whole time they delved into the cave, but such actions were unneeded. The cave was lit up by the glowing stones all around them which indicated the current level. These stones are called Gejikr and were set up by Haeqras to make it easy to recognize the limits of each level.

Senkyo took out a guidebook Leolja gave him just before he left. It had information about the resources, enemies, and natural status on every level. This was something that is given to every crawler and examinee that applies to a particular Haeqras branch. Each branch has its own guidebook due to the many variations of sunken nests, and so long as the person is a crawler that is qualified to enter the sunken nest of that particular branch, then they will have access to their own personal guidebook.

Senkyo skimmed the book while observing his surroundings and nodded lightly as he confirmed the information matches. The area was lit by stones that glowed in white and the enemies found in here weren’t particularly threatening. He expected to find spiders immediately after entering, but that wasn’t the case. In complete contrast to that, there wasn’t anything that was like a spider to be found in this area. It mostly consisted of lizard-, bat-, and centipede-like creatures. They sometimes went in to attack but most of them stayed passively on the walls. The enemies here weren’t particularly aggressive and it was possible for Senkyo to walk calmly deeper into the cave without much trouble.

One level down was level D. In this area, the stones were lit in a green color. Compared to the previous level, this one was more chaotic. The very same creatures from the above level were here, but they were in a stronger form than the ones on the previous level. On this level, there were some Arachne species, and the evolved level E species seemed to be hunting them down for prey. Senkyo observed the bat-like creatures swooping into the webs and picking spiders from them. The lizard-like creatures hid in the shadows with their camouflaging scales and hunted spiders with their tongue. Then, the centipede-like creatures are more direct, charging into the webs and releasing what seemed to be a venomous spray, melting the webs and devouring spiders.

In their hunt, a rampaging centipede charged into Senkyo but was easily fended off using Needle Storm, driving a flurry of fatal wind spears into its segments. Responding to his attack, a camouflaged lizard appeared behind them and targeted the dummy. Thankfully, with Shiro watching their surroundings, she warned Senkyo of the danger, allowing him to push the dummy away in time and using Heaven’s Pierce to combat the lizard's tongue, sending a white laser against it and piercing its body. Witnessing Senkyo’s fast and deadly responses, the other creatures that were watching everything backed off the moment they realized he wasn’t worth the trouble. With the coast clear of hostiles, Senkyo took the time to examine the dead centipede and lizard. He had no idea how their anatomy worked, but at the very least he knew which parts were worth anything because of the guidebook he had in hand.

“Hkrwir’s fangs… seem to be the only thing I can use. How about the lizard? It has… Eozea’s scales and its tongue… camouflage and elasticity. These will be good to have. Ugh, next time I kill one of these I gotta make sure not to blast its insides open…”

He collected some of the monsters’ parts with a disgusted face and placed them inside one of his chest pouches. After that, he tried to see what the bat creatures called Nexlrs had to offer, but they were too troublesome to chase down. For now, he decided to continue his trek to deeper levels.

**339 – Iwaiida’s Evolutions**

Level C. The stones in this area glowed yellow and there was nothing but Arachne on this level. Despite this, there were only a few webs in the area but what it did have were large numbers of spider sacs that glowed green. Going off the guidebook, the enemies on this floor were the Stage 1 evolution of the Iwaiida. Since the Iwaiida don’t care for what their evolutions were called, Haeqras named them Bomb Jockeys, the very same spiders that were being hunted down on the above level. These are small and incredibly fast creatures. This was how they are described in the guidebook but their size is slightly larger than the average human hand. By Earth’s common standards, it was quite big.

They did not hunt by webbing, trapping, and biting but rather by chemical disintegration through the three green orbs on their backs. They can jump around all over their target and explode the orbs on their backs to release a corroding liquid that breaks down the target into something they can consume. The creatures on the upper floor were able to hunt them and keep the corroding liquid in check using their special abilities like how the centipede’s venom could dilute the liquid and make them consumable, the lizards using their tongue to take all three orbs out before going for the kill, and the bats swooping in to pick the spiders on their underside and forcibly popping the orbs before they can get used against them. Although they were capable of hunting them, that didn’t mean they weren’t safe from their corroding liquid either. It was a constant battle of wits against the bomb jockeys and the other creatures.

This was the main reason why it was safer for crawlers on the upper level. With the presence of predators, the bomb jockeys couldn’t afford to attack recklessly. Even if they succeed in attacking a crawler, the other predators would be waiting to kill them right after. Meanwhile, all the crawler had to do was show his strength to the predators and they would leave them alone, just like what happened with Senkyo earlier. However, here on level C, the bomb jockeys had nothing to hold them back.

“Shiro.”

*“\*Yes, Onii-chan!\*”*

Senkyo called for Shiro’s support the moment he sensed the presence of multiple hostiles scuttling their way. Bomb jockeys appeared from the fork of the path in front of them, the small cracks on the walls around them, and even some from the sacs nearby. Just as the guidebook stated, bomb jockeys often work in clusters, overwhelming hunters with numbers. When Senkyo first read this, he wondered why the spiders on level D apply the same tactic, but then he remembered how the other creatures were hunting in a way that kept them from grouping. However, nothing was stopping them on level C. This would overwhelm anyone if they weren’t ready. Thankfully, Senkyo wasn’t one of those people.

He took a few steps back and placed the dummy directly to his back and gave it an order.

“Stick to my back.”

As the dummy was designed to function, it glued itself to his back, but not in a way that disrupted his movements.

*“\*Barrier Transfer!\*”*

Casting her magic, Shiro’s natural magic barrier appeared around Senkyo and the dummy, coating the surface of their bodies in blue light. Senkyo held the scabbard by the mouth and prepared to draw it. The bomb jockeys that appeared near him immediately jumped to his side and exploded their orbs. The green corrosive liquid shot out and hurled at Senkyo and the dummy. They would have melted on the spot if it landed, but as they tried to pass through the blue sheet that covered Senkyo and the dummy, the green liquid disappeared as if they were never there.

This was the effect of Shiro, a Nemi’s natural magic barrier. It absorbed all of the liquid and converted them into her own power. This would not work if the liquid was purely chemical. The only reason her magic barrier worked was that the true identity of the acid is a product of defective magic. Bomb jockeys have an incomplete body part that cannot properly process mana, therefore making them unable to use magic. The result of its trying to use magic was a mixture of various elements that turned into liquid form. As it was made from mana, Shiro’s barrier worked against it just like any other magic.

*“\*Flash Strike: Breath of the Wind!\*”*

Digging through the memories left by Ryosei, Senkyo chose the most optimal move to use in the situation. His legs quickly bent and launched him forward in less than a second, leaving a powerful gust of wind in his wake. Using the pressure from his flash strike, the wind picked up all of the bomb jockeys that were about to land after launching their attack as well as those that were in his path as he used flash strike. Then, as his body came to a halt, he controlled the wind so that it would keep all of the bomb jockeys he caught inside a whirlwind that surrounded him.

With his katana ready to draw, he chanted.

“Sheath my blade with the wind. Your power is the face of elegance. Flow as I show you the path, the line to a dashing ending. Konjou Style, Gale Fan!”

A sharp clink resounded as Senkyo unsheathed the katana and swung it horizontally toward the cluster of bomb jockeys. Gale Fan is a technique that released a lethal blast of wind that traces the path of the katana. An attack that only covered a thin line wouldn’t work against a cluster of small spiders scuttling over multiple surfaces. However, with the swirling whirlwind around Senkyo, he utilized that existing power to strengthen his attack, sending a violent storm down the cave, and killing every bomb jockey that dared block its path. The yellow glowing stones in the area were painted green from the bomb jockeys’ acid, but that wasn’t a threat in the face of Shiro’s natural barrier and allowed Senkyo and the dummy to walk leisurely forward, stopping at the fork in the path.

“Hmm… those jockeys are fast and annoying but the hardest part here is probably navigation…”

He said as he contemplated whether or not to go down the left or right path. He observed the state of each path before continuing, but seeing as there were no differences, he could do nothing but sigh, leave behind an indicator, and go down one of the paths.

Level B. The glowing stones in this level were orange. Thankfully, Senkyo didn’t have to turn back and chose the right path. Once again, he consulted the guidebook to confirm his enemies. This level had both Stage 1 and 2 evolutions of the Iwaiida race. The Stage 2 evolution is called a Phantom Threader, coined for its characteristic to weave threads and use them as a medium to utilize magic. They are infamous for their illusion traps which caution the crawler to watch for their surroundings.

One could call this level more dangerous than the previous. In reality, it should be. But this wasn’t the real sunken nest, it was only a cave made to look like it. Leolja told him this beforehand, but the only levels that actually contained threats were levels E to C. From here on out, the dangers that Senkyo would encounter will be illusions made by Leolja. As they were controlled encounters by the assessor, they were actually the safest part of the test.

Apparently, the artificial cave he brought Senkyo to was designed for crawlers that aim for access level B or deeper. There were separate caves that test for upper access levels, and crawlers that are tested on these deep-level caves were expected to pass level C with ease. It seemed like Leolja never doubted his power seeing as he accepted him to test on this cave without qualms.

Senkyo activated the null magic called Detect, allowing him to supplement his lack of mana senses. This magic gave him the ability to detect entities. Since all of the traps and enemies will be illusions, he specified the detection to mana entities, allowing him to avoid pitfalls, enemy ambushes, fake walls, and even fake paths. He was impressed with every single one of them, especially with the fake paths. They were cobwebs that were disguised as a 3D illusion with moving objects inside them. If he didn’t have Detect magic active, there was a chance for him to walk straight into a cobweb without even knowing it.

In the end, only bomb jockeys attacked Senkyo again and they were dealt with in the same fashion as before. He was a bit disappointed in not being able to even see what the Stage 2 forms looked like in person, but their actions match the characteristics written for them in the guidebook. They are more of a neutral type that doesn’t attack until their prey gets caught in their webs. They hide until the very last second and conceal themselves with their own illusions.

Although, it was noted that Phantom Threaders are at their weakest on Level B because the only other Iwaiida there were bomb jockeys. They are much more threatening with more noise and chaos happening around the target to give them the chance for assassination. He had to keep them in mind for later.

**340 – Sublevels of A**

Level A1. This area had blue glowing stones. It had the same enemies as the previous level but with the addition of the Iwaiida’s Stage 3 evolution, the Cave Trappers. Just like its previous evolution stage, it employs traps to catch its prey. Its recorded traps are trapdoors, collapsing walls, and strategic cave-ins. Its physical traps make it more difficult to detect than simply searching for mana. To make these traps these spiders need enough strength to break down cave walls and dig through them. This evolution stage gives the Iwaiida a frightening spike in power as it can hunt both with traps and with pure strength. If its trap fails, it will almost certainly chase after the target until it finishes the hunt. Its size is massive compared to the other two stages with an average size of just below the average human, and this was recorded while it was crawling.

“We’re in a cave, so it’d be best if I avoid fire magic. That limits my options, though. I have physical attacks but… I wonder if it’ll last…”

Senkyo took a look at his sheathed katana. It was one he bought back in the town of Naen. Iaksin recommended this under his condition of being cheap, durable, and compatible with magic. There were other named items in the shop but they all seemed to work only for a specific purpose. They were too specific that he was afraid that something wrong would happen if he decided to apply both magic and spirit power to it. He didn’t want to risk it and went for a katana better fit for general use. The problem was whether or not it would actually work as advertised. So far, Senkyo fought enemies with flesh and bones, but this time the enemy was a cave-digging, gigantic spider. No doubt its outer shell was going to be hard.

This usually wouldn’t be a worry if he had Ryosei with him. He could just use his other katana, Kuro Yaiba, to cut his enemies down. It was hailed for its indestructible metal but after hearing what the jester said back at Naen, it seemed that this was only true when Ryosei is present. He couldn’t fully confirm this because he didn’t want to break the precious blade in case it was true. The deciding factor that led him to preserve the blade was Iaksin identifying the blade and the scabbard as fragile metals. It was a third-party opinion that supported the jester’s claims. There was also the jester’s crowd affirming the metal’s fragility. Taking all of those opinions together, he decided to settle to fight with a substitute sword.

With Detect active, he could still sense the enemies waiting behind the walls for him to get close. It would be best if he could just pass by without triggering them, but he doubted will be that easy. Hugging the left wall, Senkyo kept his eye open for the cave trapper hiding behind the right side of the wall. Then, as he was about to cross it, the wall beside him crumbled and a gigantic spider constructed in pure blue light jumped at him. This surprise inadvertently made him jump to the other side. The moment he landed, he realized his mistake.

Since every enemy from level B onward were illusions, there was a problem of confusing the illusions that spiders made and the illusions that Leolja made. To differentiate them, Leolja specified that illusions that can kill him are in their natural color, meanwhile, illusions that are only made to trick him are made in pure blue light. Seeing the construction of the spider that came out of the left wall, it was all too clear what its aim was.

*“\*Flash Strike: Breath of the Wind!\*”*

Senkyo immediately moved as the wall behind him crumbled, revealing a gigantic spider with green and black cuticles, legs with such thickness and length that you could feel them pierce through solid rock with ease, and its vile head with eight eyes, two solid horns, and large, skull-crushing jaws lunged at Senkyo. It didn’t even take half a second for it to reach the location of its prey.

Senkyo let his guard down, but he wasn’t going to go down from a single mistake. He immediately recovered by dodging the cave trapper’s lunge by using flash strike, making the spider’s legs and jaws hit empty air by a hair’s breadth. The moment he arrived at a stop, the cave trapper didn’t succumb to surprise and instantly gave chase. Senkyo wasn’t foolish enough to make two mistakes in a row and anticipated this movement. As he stopped, he turned his body around 180 degrees to face the spider and used the second phase of the technique he used.

Earlier, he utilized Breath of the Wind to collect all of the bomb jockeys in a single stroke. He used it to hinder their movements rather than kill them. However, the true face of Breath of the Wind wasn’t a crowd control skill, but an open-ended skill that utilizes the wind pressure depending on the situation. In other words, he could use it to deal lethal damage. Even as the gigantic cave trapper was right in front of Senkyo, the speed and wind pressure he gained from flash strike allowed him to swing his sword instantaneously along with a follow-up of the pressurized wind which made an illusion for a powerful triple slash. His first strike bisected the cave trapper cleanly in half while the follow-up wind slashes hacked off all of its legs.

The spider’s eight legs sprawled all over the cave while Senkyo stood in between the bisected spider’s jaws. There weren’t any blood and guts since it was just an illusion, but that didn’t stop him from hurrying out of that area. He breathed a sigh of relief as he managed to recover from his mistake. The target dummy stayed at a safe distance away from the ruckus. Even without being ordered, the target dummy always prioritizes avoiding anything that can harm it. He didn’t know how it functioned like that but it was smart. That aside, it was time for reflection.

Senkyo was so focused on being careful of the cave trapper that he neglected his surroundings. If he paid more attention to his Detect skill, he would have realized that the mana signature suddenly appeared out of nowhere. This had to be the phantom threader’s trap. He didn’t expect it to be able to weave such a convincing trap in less than a second. It was difficult to admit, but his saving grace was the fact that he could immediately identify the trap as an illusion because it was pure blue. Had this been the real deal and a life-like illusion appeared in front of him, it would be hard to say that Senkyo would have had enough reaction time to recover. He couldn’t afford to make the same mistake again.

Level A2. This level was lit in a light purple hue. After his first encounter with the cave trappers, he found a better way to deal with the spiders. Instead of walking by and dealing with the spiders when they show themselves, Senkyo decided to attack the spiders through the walls before he even got anywhere near them. He did this by casting Crown Spikes under where the enemies’ mana signals were, piercing them from below before they could even have the chance to lunge out of their hiding spot.

Upon arriving on this level, Senkyo took his hand out to grab the guidebook from his pocket, but before he could, shards of ice emerged from the ground into Senkyo. He immediately dodged this with the training dummy safely in his arm. Turning to the source of the attack, he found the Stage 4 evolution of this level, the Magic Arm.

It was a more hideous version of the previous cave trapper. It had a similar build but its mouth split into two with its two deadly jaws and two tentacle-like parts coming out of either side of its mouth. The main difference between this stage and the previous one was that it had two pairs of arms in exchange for two pairs of front legs. Senkyo only caught a glance of the text but it uses its arms to cast and control magic. This type engages in head-on battles instead of trapping the enemy.

Using the Detect skill, he could see more than just the magic arm. There were five cave trappers in the vicinity. Two in the walls in front of him and three in the ceiling. They would jump right out the moment he attempted to close the distance between him and the magic arm. Senkyo couldn’t sense it, but he had no doubt there were phantom threaders too. This was the hardest group he had faced so far. For now, he wanted to focus on eliminating the ones in front of him.

*“\*Shiro, protect the dummy.\*”*

*“\*Got it, Onii-chan!\*”*

With her firm response, Shiro appeared out of Senkyo’s body and placed herself in front of the dummy.

“Don’t leave Shiro’s side!”

She ordered the dummy as she erected a strong barrier around them and strengthened her natural magic barrier to cover them along with it. Knowing that Shiro would be able to handle herself, Senkyo placed his focus on his front. His eyes darted around all over the place, trying to find the best opening move. The magic arm pelted Senkyo with ice attacks but before any of them could even land, his plan had already been drawn his blade.

*“\*Flash Strike: Thunderclap!\*”*

He passed through the flying icicles and rushed into the largest group of enemies. This was by the left wall where both cave trappers were in the walls next to each other while there was another one right above them. Thunderclap is usually utilized in situations where the hit needs to be immediate. That would be this moment. He aimed for the ground where the largest clump of enemies was. Before the three cave trappers could jump out of their hiding places, Senkyo’s blade made contact with the ground as he cast his spell.

“Magic Arts, Field Discharge!”

The moment it touched the ground, a massive burst of electricity discharged from the blade and crawled through the cave walls. His objective was to fry three of the cave trappers before he clashed with the other enemies. Senkyo jumped backward to safety, and at that moment, six surfaces of the walls broke down. Three of them were the cave trappers he fried through the walls before they could even jump out, resulting in them spasming on the ground, but not yet dead. The other two were the cave trappers from the ceiling that jumped down in an attempt to attack Senkyo but missed the moment he retreated. And the last one was placed right behind where Senkyo jumped to. Except, he was unfazed by this. After all, the only thing that jumped out was a pure blue spider, an indication that it was nothing more than a harmless illusion.

This time, he kept track of all of the mana signatures around him with Detect, allowing him to discover the appearance of an illusion trap that appeared at his location. Its large blue body swallowed Senkyo whole and blinded him. Normally, it would be a problem but Detect kept track of the mana signatures even if he couldn’t see them. Rather than a hindrance, this was an opportunity.

“O Nature, Amass your power at my word. Create my weapons and impale my adversaries. Needle Storm!”

The wind around Senkyo compressed and shot out at the three moving mana signatures. The illusion that blinded him slowly disappeared and showed that his attack had no effect. This was because of the magic arm that intercepted his needle storm with icicle spears. The two cave trappers lunged at Senkyo while the magic arm remained at a safe distance. Senkyo had no idea what limits the magic arm possessed. It was ideal to eliminate it right away, but then he might not have a chance fully gauge its abilities before arriving at level A3. The last thing he wanted was to get caught by surprise on level A3 or S. For now, he focused on the two cave trappers.

As the battle between the two giant spiders and Senkyo went on, the magic arm crawled to the cavity in the ceiling. Specifically, the one that was made by the cave trapper that Senkyo paralyzed at the start of the battle. It hammered two of its hands to the ground, summoning an icicle spear that penetrated the inside of the cavity. Then, a moment later, the mana signatures Senkyo detected multiplied. When he turned to look, clusters of bomb jockeys were pouring out from all three cavities made by the cave trappers. This was a bit of a problem.

Before, Senkyo didn’t even have to recognize the existence of bomb jockeys because of Shiro. But now, she was guarding the training dummy and in this situation, retreating to them would expose the dummy to even more danger, only making this battle difficult. Thankfully, two of the three clusters of bomb jockeys were fakes as defined by their pure blue color. Ignoring the fakes, Senkyo focused on the bomb jockeys closing in.

“Magic Arts: Whirlwind Burst!”

Dodging the attacks of both cave trappers, he swung his sword, releasing a powerful hurricane that knocked both of the giant spiders back along with the bomb jockeys that tried to get close. Just before they hit the ground, the wind changed directions, shoving every enemy that was caught in the hurricane away from Senkyo, Shiro, and the dummy. With the position he has, Senkyo could easily wipe out all of the enemies in one strike, but the magic arm has yet to make any movements.

As his gaze pierced through the cluster of enemies, he found the magic arm standing completely still… No, that wasn’t it. The magic arm that his eyes caught just now wasn’t the same one as earlier. It was pure blue. An illusion. But then, where was the real magic arm?

He turned to Shiro and the dummy as he searched the mana signatures with Detect. There were signatures all over the place because of the fake bomb jockeys. He could no longer use it to keep track of the magic arm. That’s when it happened. Through the chaos, Five large figures lunged from behind Shiro and the dummy. All of them were magic arms and surrounded the two. Senkyo immediately entered the stance for a flash strike. However, he was too slow. Three of them launched earth and frost magic to destroy the barrier while the other two lunged at Shiro and the dummy.

“SHIROO!!”

**341 – The Strategist and The Fighter**

Dust and white smoke veiled the scene. Senkyo was in his stance but he was too slow. This marked the end of the test. His loss was brought about by fatal damage taken by the dummy. Had this been real, then there was no telling how he would react. Not only would he have failed a mission, but a client, and worse yet, Shiro would have lost their lives. The fact that Leolja’s illusions were so life-like made that feeling all the more real. Where did he go wrong? The thought floated in his mind. Was it because he ignored the fakes, making it hard to detect the incoming magic arms? Or maybe it was the simple reason of him not finishing the battle before everything got out of hand? No, it was more simple than that. He underestimated the enemy. He miscalculated. Just as the realization was about to ease his muscles, a familiar voice entered his mind.

*“\*Onii-chan! The magic arm is approaching us from behind!\*”*

How? No, this wasn’t the time for questions. A flare lit in Senkyo’s eyes. His pressured legs launched him across the room and into the veil of dust and white smoke. As he neared the large shroud, everything made sense to him. His arm instinctively moved, swinging his katana through the air before he even entered the shroud. Then, the stroke ripped through the space between him and the shroud. The dust and white smoke divided as if curtains parting, revealing a single magic arm attempting to break through Shiro’s defenses. Senkyo’s eyes sharpened like a predator's. The deadly gaze caused the magic arm to back off instinctively, but not before being torn to shreds as Senkyo’s blade sliced through its body. It was a flurry of strikes so fast and precise that they didn’t even disturb the magic arm’s retreat. It only realized it was dead the moment it made contact with the ground and its body parts rolled across the floor.

A flat thud echoed across the room as the magic arm’s last body part arrived at a stop. The magic arm’s death was apparent from the silence. Then, the other spiders around them scattered chaotically like soldiers without their general. It seemed they lost interest in killing Senkyo. Just before everything fully disappeared, he turned around to the path he took to get to Shiro and the dummy. What stood there was a large 3D illusion of what seemed like Senkyo fighting the spiders from earlier. This was what phantom threaders were capable of. Deceit that allowed the fabrication of events and the ability to show false information. To Shiro, it looked like nothing wrong was happening, but to Senkyo it looked like he just lost. The only reason he realized it was a fake was because of Shiro’s call. If they were in the same situation but with Shiro unable to contact him, there would be nothing but certain defeat.

Senkyo turned his head to the dead magic arm disappearing as if it had served its purpose. That attack was too organized compared to other attacks he encountered from the upper levels. He dug through his pocket and took out the guidebook. Just as he figured, it was written that it had the ability to control a group of lower evolution Iwaiidas. It seems to use it to hunt other groups of Iwaiidas or crawlers that it encounters.

From this experience, Senkyo learned just how much of a threat these evolutions were if they get mixed together in a group. The bomb jockeys were troublesome and they are many in numbers, mixed with the elusive phantom threader, it can spread many mana signatures that renders Senkyo’s Detect useless. This makes it difficult to keep track of large threats like cave trappers or magic arms without constant vision of them. With all of these mixed together, the magic arm can create confusing situations just like what it did earlier.

Besides the enemies, there was one more fatal mistake that Senkyo made. He didn’t realize this until now, but he was reminded of the illusion the phantom threaders showed him of Shiro and the dummy getting attacked from behind. At that time, he was thinking too much. It had been a while since he began fighting these fantastical creatures and he did most of this beside Ryosei with him controlling his body and doing the physical work for him. It wasn’t like he didn’t know how to fight, but he never actually knew what it meant to fight with his own body in such critical situations as earlier.

He mainly fought with his mind, thinking of strategies against the enemy and relaying the best course of action to Ryosei. However, that person wasn’t here anymore. The person fighting in his body was now none other than Senkyo himself. He entered this test with the mindset of fighting just as usual but with the added trouble of executing actions with his body. This was wrong and he only realized that. The place a strategist like him belonged in was a safe place where he could carefully analyze situations and make the best course of action. A battlefield like earlier was no place for a strategist.

Senkyo kept on thinking and analyzing that he got confused in the midst of all of the chaos. Then, at the moment when time and speed truly mattered—the moment when Shiro’s barrier was about to be broken—he had to think of the most efficient move to use. It was a fabricated situation, but what if it wasn’t? Those few precious milliseconds he used to comprehend, analyze, and execute would have cost him Shiro’s life. This wasn’t good enough. The battlefield wasn’t so merciful that it would forgive him for wasting time on something like that. He needed to be a fighter, not a strategist. He needed to become just like Ryosei. A man that fought not by thinking, but through instincts. No more analysis. Just comprehension and execution. What he needed was the ability to make the correct choice just with a single glance. The type of talent Ryosei ruled in.

“Talent… huh?”

His gaze naturally shifted to his other katana, Kuro Yaiba. Ryosei’s blade. For a second, he thought about it. Would someone like him who was nothing but a useless otaku not even two months ago really be able to fight like a prodigy like Ryosei? The answer to that was painfully obvious. So much so that he couldn’t help but clench his teeth in frustration. He planned on traveling all over Zerid to find Yuu, but he didn’t even have the talent needed to survive the journey.

He shamelessly thought that level S would be attainable if he took the test seriously, but he was about to lose the test just now. He wasn’t even at level A3. With the sublevels of A separated into 3 because of their substantial increase in difficulty, what did it mean for him who made such a fatal mistake on this level? This was the experience he was looking for. This was it, but now that he had a taste of the experience, doubt seeped into his heart about whether or not he had the skill to complete this test. Shiro once called him the ultimate being, but that was if he masters his true power. Did that also mean that without this power, he was nothing? Such thoughts entered his mind.

“Onii-chan.”

While Senkyo was lost in his own thoughts, he felt something wrap around him. As his consciousness was dragged back to reality, he noticed that Shiro was hugging him from behind. Her worried voice echoed through the cave.

“What’s wrong? You look like you’re in pain…”

“O-Oh… I was?”

“Mhm…”

Pathetic. He didn’t realize that he was standing still for so long that his little sister needed to comfort him. Thinking so, he tried to force out a smile to reassure Shiro.

“It’s…”

He was about to let out a flimsy excuse but stopped himself for a moment. Was there actually anything pathetic about getting help from those around him? The past Senkyo may have thought so, but what about the present? The only reason he valued connections so much was after his best friend, Kinro brightened his life again. He realized that it was better for people to be there for him when he needed them. Shiro was one of those people. The only reason he thought of shoving her away was because of his pride. But was prioritizing pride truly the right choice in this situation?

No… it wasn’t. He could easily envision Shiro getting hurt for not sharing his troubles with her. He knew this because the same would be true if Shiro did this with him. Not to mention, if he did that, then he would be breaking the promise he made with Shiro recently. A strategist wasn’t needed on a battlefield. But right now, this was just a space with Senkyo and Shiro. It wasn’t difficult for a strategist like him to know which is the correct answer in this situation.

“… It’s just that, I don’t think I’m strong enough for this. If I make a mistake, I’d be putting you in danger… I don’t want that.”

Hearing Senkyo’s answer, Shiro giggled. His eyebrows raised at the unexpected reaction.

“Onii-chan, did you forget how you coerced Shiro into making her help you? Isn’t it a bit too late to worry about that now?”

“K-Krgh…”

Her reply felt like a blade that pierced through his chest.

“Well, this just means that Onii-chan actually cares for Shiro, so she forgives you. But Shiro doesn’t agree with him. Onii-chan is strong. The way you responded to Shiro’s call and eliminate the enemy proves it. It was so quick that Shiro didn’t even realize that Onii-chan did anything! It was the first time Shiro ever saw the eyes Onii-chan had! It was a little scary, but also reassuring.”

“Reassuring?”

“Yes! If Onii-chan can do something like that, then Shiro won’t have anything to fear! Because she knows that Onii-chan is strong!”

“I was… strong, huh…?”

“Obviously!”

Senkyo tried to recall the sensation when he acted to save Shiro. There was nothing on his mind. It was just him, Shiro, and the magic arm. He didn’t even know what he did. All he knew was that he needed to kill the magic arm before it could break Shiro’s barrier and hurt her. She wouldn’t have actually gotten hurt since it was an illusion, but Senkyo didn’t have the time to think of things like that at the time. If he moved like that, then perhaps Shiro was right.

It was nothing but verbal reassurance. There was no strategy or any power gained from that conversation. Just a bit of the right words to lighten Senkyo’s chest. Nothing concrete, but he was fine with that.

“Thanks, Shiro.”

“Shiro is always here for Onii-chan!”

For now, it was fine.

**342 – Black Smoke**

Level A3. Unlike with the other levels, Senkyo read the enemies found on this level in advance. All of the previous Iwaiida evolutions are retained with the addition of the Stage 5 evolution, the Arachne Sage. They possess the abilities of all previous evolutions and have higher intelligence than them. They are known to use the magic arm’s control ability to bring multiple magic arms under their command, and with that, they order the magic arms to control lower Iwaiida evolutions, creating a chain of command. In other words, this evolution stage is a General.

Entering level A3 will immediately put the crawler under the general’s radar. The main struggle at this level is getting through the general’s troops and killing them to pass the level. However, it is noted that this is the common situation. There can be times when the crawler will encounter two or, if they have the worst luck in the world, three Arachne Sages, leading to the crawler fighting against three armies. The only bright side in this situation is that more likely than not, this would be the result of a territorial dispute. If played well, the crawler may be able to turn the Sages against each other.

It was all interesting information, but Senkyo wasn’t about to rely on the illusions created by a single person to fight amongst themselves. At this level, his options were to aim for the sage’s head or bust through their whole army into Level S. With a client with him, it seemed like a quick breakthrough would be the solution, but Senkyo was afraid of the sage chasing after them. It wasn’t like his enemies were completely limited on the level they appear on. If they can go up levels, then they could go down them too. After pondering his next move, he finally arrived at the entrance of A3.

Knowing the enemy’s game, Senkyo immediately charged through with the dummy latching onto his back. Shiro returned to Senkyo’s body to provide support there. She used Barrier Transfer again to extend her natural magic barrier to Senkyo and the dummy. Since he couldn’t properly use his katana with the dummy on his back, he opted to have the bone dagger at the ready.

He rushed through the cave and arrived at the first fork. He used Detect to confirm both of them were real and went down the left path. Upon his turn, he found five mana signatures appear behind him. Fake or not, it didn’t seem like the enemy was planning on letting him out of this path. For now, he continued, but not before dropping a few leaves from his small bag.

A mana signature suddenly appeared above him. Was it a fake? Senkyo didn’t take that chance and accelerated to dodge. He took a glance behind him and confirmed that it was a real cave trapper. Cave trappers usually wait just beyond the cave walls, but this one had to have dug from farther above him if its mana signature was only detected just now. It was likely an order from the sage.

The cave trapper chases them down. Two more mana signatures appeared from each of his sides. Senkyo used flash strike to dodge the pincer attack and avoided the two cave trappers that broke through the walls. Eventually, the path separated into three. The path forked into two while a hole was in the middle of them. Multiple cave trappers appeared on the left path while the two other paths were unobstructed. Using Detect, he found that the right path was an illusion made by phantom threaders. By process of elimination, the hole below him was the best option, but the sage should know that. It seemed like it was familiar with how he detected the previous threats seeing as it purposefully placed the cave trappers outside his Detect’s range. There was still a chance the hole below had the worst contents of all.

“Remnants of the past, become my incarnate and bring upon the shadow of war. I call out the penumbra of the lurking devils. Konjou Style, Phantom Blade!”

Just before he reached the intersection, a dark cloud filled the area and blinded the enemy’s sight of him. Then, from within the cloud appeared three Senkyos, all with dummies on their backs. Each of them took a different path. The one that charged into the cluster of cave trappers used Gale Fan to clear the enemies to break through. However, as he reached further, the ground below him opened up, revealing a massive pit. More cave trappers appeared from behind him and pushed him into the abyss. Then, there was the Senkyo that charged into the fake path. He swung his blade, aiming to cut through the illusion. But before he could, several spider legs appeared from the illusion and pierced the approaching Senkyo. Finally, the one that delved into the hole in the ground was met with a nest of bomb jockeys jumping all over the walls. They filled all the surfaces as Senkyo fell deeper into the deathtrap. The sound of exploding bomb jockeys filled the air.

It was a dead end with no other paths forward. The three cave trappers and an additional four came out of the black smoke. Some of them chased after the Senkyo that jumped into the hole, some chased after the one that was pushed into the abyss, and the others delivered more fatal blows to the Senkyo caught by the fake path. But then, after a few seconds, that Senkyo disappeared into thin air. Just like the Iwaiida that were chasing after them, it was an illusion. With their target gone, they were about to move to one of the other Senkyos but stopped in their tracks. At that very moment, the Iwaiidas in the area discovered that the other two that charged in were fakes too. They searched the area for the real Senkyo but could find nothing. Then, as the black cloud cleared behind them, it revealed a beheaded magic arm.

A few moments ago, Senkyo sent out three copies of him to scout the paths before he committed to a path. His presence was concealed because the cloud he summoned possessed a sense disruption effect. It was the same strategy Ryosei used when he fought the three skeletons back on Earth. He stuck by the side of the wall as the three cave trappers passed him, followed by five mana signatures which turned out to be a group of four cave trappers guarding a magic arm. It was likely the one that was controlling every Iwaiida in the area, so Senkyo took the chance to cut it down as it passed by. He couldn’t see it but he could feel it pass through the black cloud as if it was an extension of his skin. The moment he confirmed there were no available paths, he turned back and rushed to switch to the other path.

A small grin appeared on his face as he left the scene. He only used Phantom Blade to clear the paths but he didn’t expect to extract useful information from that move. First of all, the cloud produced by Phantom Blade disrupts all communication from the outside. This included the Magic Arm, Arcahne Sage, and Leolja’s communication abilities. This was proven by the fact that none of the surrounding enemies turned to attack Senkyo when he first took down the magic arm at the back. The magic arm should have been the one controlling the spiders there but they continued to move despite it dying. A doubt appeared on Senkyo’s mind that it may not have been the one in control, but as he ran away, all of the mana signatures behind him disappeared.

He took this as Leolja’s way of saying there was no use for them anymore, or at least, was made useless because of control loss. If that was the case, then he was right about thinking the magic arm was the main controller. The only reason he could think of that would explain the other spiders moving despite it being dead was the fact that all of the spiders here are actually illusions in Leolja’s control. He didn’t know about the cloud’s sense disruptive effects and acted with the idea that nothing would happen if he walked into the black cloud. If this situation were real, then walking into that cloud would make the magic arm lose all control of the spiders it had under its command. Knowing that the arachne sage uses the same ability as the magic arms, this would be an indispensable tool to have. There was no doubt that Leolja would act cautiously around those black clouds from now on.

There was a large cobweb that blocked Senkyo’s path, but no illusions were on it. Perhaps this was because the magic arm died and lost control of the traps that were supposed to be there. He used Detect just in case it was an illusion purposefully made to look like that and confirmed that it was real. Senkyo cut the cobweb down and slipped into the right path.

**343 – Into The Fray**

Cave trappers launched multiple attacks on Senkyo, sprouting out of walls to land a fatal blow. However, Senkyo was too fast and avoided them with his quick maneuvers. Eventually, the cave path opened up into a large cavern. If he reaches it, he would have more room to escape his pursuers or finish them off. Then, that was the moment he realized it. A thick mass of mana signatures stood in his way. While using Detect, it felt and looked like he was running straight into an area of glowing blue mass. Was it another trap? His senses screamed that he had to avoid entering that area at all costs. Except, it wasn’t that simple. Behind him was a deadly cluster of cave trappers that were determined to corner him no matter what. They piled up so much that they were about half the size of the large area in front of him.

If the main paths aren’t available, so he quickly searched the walls of the cave. There was only one time the cave walls open up and that was when cave trappers dug through the walls to attack Senkyo. He searched for mana signatures, but none were coming to jump him anymore. They knew what he wanted to do. Preferably, he wanted to take a safe route, but there were no options left. He mumbled.

The soles of his boots skid across the ground as he brought himself to a stop, pivoting at his foot to face the cluster of cave trappers.

“O Fire, break free from your cage, exhibit your power. Scorch my path and bring upon a conflagration. Eruption!”

He stomped the ground while placing his twin daggers at the ready. Two lines appeared on both his sides and stretched into the cluster of cave trappers. The cave walls were coated with a soft orange hue as flames erupted from the ground. He didn’t want to use the fire element while trapped in a cave, but there were more benefits to using it here than there were drawbacks. Suddenly, as the flames grew in size, the floor below him crumbled. It was a sinkhole that led straight into the center of the mass of mana signatures. As he fell downward, he caught the figure of the magic arm that used earth magic to break the floor below him in the corner of his eye. Not wanting to be taken out without a fight, he kicked off the wall and dragged the magic arm down with him. The moment he was thrown into the center of the deathtrap, multiple cave trappers sprouted from the ground and impaled him with their spider legs. The seconds passed… and the impaled Senkyo exploded and released a cloud of black smoke. An illusion.

A few seconds back, just before Senkyo entered a stop, he mumbled to cast a spell that only he could hear.

“O Light, I am as I desire to be. Fighting with tooth and nail, created through falsehoods. Call upon the power to bring everything to my will, follow my word. Ephermal Clone.—Conceal.”

Senkyo turned invisible and tucked into the walls while another appeared to take his place just as he disappeared. He cast Ephermal Clone, a mid-tier light magic, and Conceal, a low-tier light magic, with such precision that it never seemed like Senkyo did anything at all. His clone turned on the pursuing cave trappers and used Eruption to take them all out. Ephermal Clone was a complicated spell that Yuu introduced to Senkyo as an Open Spell, a type of spell that was constructed in a way that could have different outputs depending on the contents of the chant. Changing certain phrases and passages will bring about different variations of the same spell. Another example of this was Knight Spell, the only other open spell Yuu taught him.

In this instance, Ephermal Clone had two inputs as open spells. The <Action Property> and the <Extra Element> placed on the last two sentences before the cast. “Fighting with tooth and nail” allowed it to become a convincing Senkyo while fighting the spiders and “The power to bring everything to my will” applied the control element to it. Specifically, the same black smoke that possessed sense disruption derived from a skill called Konjou Style, Hunting Shroud.

As the enemy fell for his trick, he walked up to the edge of the hole his clone fell through and saw an unbelievable scene. The walls were littered with round spiders crawling all over with their webs connecting from wall to wall. He never saw them before in person, but these round spiders with thin legs were the true form of phantom threaders. With numbers as large as these, it wouldn’t be strange to fill a whole area with illusions. Connecting this with the information he had, he concluded that the large mass of mana signatures was none other than a house of mirrors made by phantom threaders. An area completely controlled by their illusions. Getting stuck in the middle of that would mean certain defeat… or at least, in normal circumstances.

Even when Senkyo was out in the open for all to see, none of the other spiders took action against him. The reason for this was simple. The magic arm that controlled all of them was stuck inside the black smoke at the center of the mass illusions. He doubted something this large would be controlled by a single magic arm, especially since they knew how fatal the black smoke is to them. It was controlled by multiple magic arms but the portion Senkyo was on right now was disabled due to his clone taking the magic arm down with it.

With the cave trappers behind him burnt to a crisp, he had the option of entering one of their tunnels and going around the mass of illusions, but that would give the spiders time to recover. He weighed his options in less than a second. He dropped a few leaves onto the floor, secured the dummy on his back, and jumped inside the hole that led to the center of the spider nest. He cut down the webs in his way with a single dagger and used wind magic to soften his landing. At the center of the black smoke, he placed the dummy down and ordered it.

“Stay.”

It was dangerous to leave the dummy alone, but so long as it was within his black smoke, none of the spiders will be able to reach it because they would be cut off from the magic arm and arachne sage’s control. There was a chance a lone stray would come upon it. But with Senkyo’s ability to detect everything that moved inside the black smoke, the chances of that happening were virtually impossible with him on guard.

Senkyo planted his feet on the ground, returned his dagger, unsheathed the katana, and disappeared into the shroud. Around him were thirteen hostiles. Twelve were cave trappers and one magic arm. The magic arm was dragged here but it was still alive. If it ever got out of the smoke, it would mean trouble. The way it walked was completely different from the other cave trappers which made it easy to discern from the others. Without even a second passing after he took off, his body appeared above the magic arm and swiftly beheaded it. He thought of leaving immediately, but it could be a problem if the nearby cave trappers found their way out of the black cloud and chased them down. Nine of them were close to each other near the edge of the cloud, so it wasn’t impossible for them to get out.

He made up his mind and cut down the three straggling cave trappers separated from the clutter the same way he did with the magic arm. Then, he positioned himself to jump into the center of the clutter. He planted his feet down firmly and readied his blade.

*“\*Flash Strike: Thunderclap!\*”*

He swung his blade, coated it with lightning magic, and used flash strike. He found himself in the center of the nine cave trappers with his blade about to make contact with the ground. But before he did, he added.

“Magic Arts: Crackling Thunder!”

The blade sparked in bright white as lethal lightning burst from the blade. This was a technique that made use of concentrated lightning magic released at a high-pressured output. However, Senkyo added no holes to release the pressure and kept it all in the blade. This would result in the blade exploding if kept in this state for too long, which is why he didn’t waste any time and cast his final technique before the blade hit the ground.

“Magic Arts: Field Discharge!”

At that very moment, an explosive roar made the cave tremble as a crash of powerful lightning fried every living being around Senkyo. He used the same technique earlier but only garnered a weak output. That was because Field Discharge was reliant on the accumulated lightning used to cast it. With Thunderclap and Crackling Thunder used to supply Field Discharge, all the nine cave trappers and even more spiders beyond the black smoke died in an instant. From the outside, the scene was comparable to a thundercloud sparking numerous times as the chaos occurred from within.

Of course, Senkyo was careful not to have the output leak to the dummy and returned to its side safely. With no enemies around them, switched back to his bone daggers, picked up the dummy again, and rushed to the outside of the mass illusion they were in.

**344 – Past the Mirrors**

The moment Senkyo popped out of the black cloud, what awaited him was an impossible number of bomb jockeys, cave trappers, and magic arms charging at them. They were all constructed in pure blue meaning they were no more than mere illusions and accelerated into the turmoil.

“O Wind, coat my legs, aid my every step. Bless me with your flight that will create my path. Enhanced Speed!”

The moment wind assisted his every step, the path in front of him warped and turned into a dark spider’s nest with webs, cocoons, and spiders of all stages. As he saw before, spiders created from a 3D illusion didn’t take pure blue forms, which made it difficult to discern without only vision alone. He activated Dectect and found himself in the middle of a thick cluster of mana signatures. It allowed him to differentiate active spiders from the ones in 3D illusions, but there was still the problem of not knowing which path was real. Even if he could detect the 3D illusion, all the spiders had to do was make everything around him a 3D illusion and stray him off the path to the exit. For that reason, he activated another skill.

*“\*Perception Field!\*”*

A skill used by non-magic users of the Konjou Clan, typically used by hunters in the Brute and Enchanter class. It uses spirit power to sense everything around the user within a 5-meter radius. This included the movements of the enemies, the precise distance between him and illusions, and of course…

“HAA!!”

Sound.

Senkyo’s shout echoed through the cave, bouncing off the walls and returning to him. An advanced use for the Perception Field: Echolocation. No matter how many illusions the phantom threaders weaved, there was no deceiving the flow of sound as they bounce off the real cave walls, allowing Senkyo to find the path forward.

Block. Fake. Fake. Slash. Fake. Real. Fake. Block. Real. Real. Fake. Slash.

Senkyo pressed forward with his head immersed in complete focus. When ranged magic attacks were shot at him, he let them pass and get consumed by Shiro’s natural magic barrier. When ranged physical attacks were shot, he would block them. When a blue spider would appear, he would ignore them. When a colored spider appeared, he would cut them down before they could even reach the midpoint of his katana. When a sheet of mana appeared in front of him, he would consult his perception field to find the right path and detect any hostiles that were waiting just beyond the 3D illusion. Despite the mass of hallucinations being thrown at Senkyo’s eyes, he could only see what he wanted to see, throwing away every bit of unnecessary information as he pierced through the Iwaiida’s house of mirrors.

The moment he found the exit to the mass of illusions, he searched for possible landing spots that allowed high-speed movement and connected them like dots leading from his location to his finish line. Then, to take the enemy by surprise, he dug his feet firmly onto the ground below him.

*“\*Flash strike! Flash strike! Flash strike! Flash strike! Flash strike! Flash strike!\*”*

He zoomed past every enemy and illusion before they even had the chance to form anything block his path. His arrival at the exit was as he expected, a clutter of spiders waiting to ambush him as he made the turn. It didn’t look like they expected Senkyo to get to them with such speed and allowed him to get the jump on them. With all the wind pressure he accumulated from consecutive undisrupted flash strikes, he weaved all of them with a single skill.

*“\*Flash Strike: Breath of the Wind.\*”*

A heavy slash sent a lethal gust of wind down the path with the spiders and ripped their bodies apart as if being caught in a violent tornado. Their legs separated from their bodies and abdomen and those pieces would get ripped into smaller parts. It was a good thing that all of them were only Leolja’s illusions which didn’t produce any gore. Even if Senkyo was the one who did it, he didn’t want to stomach the sight of blood and guts all over the walls. Throwing those thoughts aside, he quickly delved deeper into the cave before enemy reinforcements got to him.

**…………**

A few minutes later, Senkyo escaped pursuing spiders and slowed down to a walk. He had been pushing both his mind and body the whole time, so he deserved a bit of rest before the next skirmish. For now, he dropped his Perception Field and continued only with the Detect spell active.

On his way, his eyes caught sight of something interesting. Different from the glowing stones in deep purple, there was a stone that possessed a lighter shade of purple. A Charged Dark Stone. Senkyo knew this because he remembered reading it as one of the resources that could be obtained on the sublevels of A. He didn’t expect to actually find any resources here since this was only a test cave and not a cave on the real sunken nest. Yet, the resource was right in front of his own eyes.

There was a possibility it was a trap but that didn’t stop Senkyo from trying to procure it. He couldn’t tell if it was an illusion or not since A Charged Dark Stone also had mana inside it, so it would naturally have a mana signature, making it difficult for him to tell if it was real or not with Detect. He put his guard on full alert as he went to collect the resource. Detect and Perception Field were both active with one hand on the handle of one of his bone daggers. And finally, he successfully picked up the stone and backed off safely. It was real.

A sigh of relief escaped his mouth. Senkyo examined the stone just in case there was some kind of trick attached to it but there was nothing to be concerned about. The reason he wanted this stone was that its description stuck out from the other resources listed in the guidebook. It wasn’t much to people in Zerid, but for an enchanter like him, this was his secret weapon. He took out one of his kunai and strengthened it to break the stone down to pieces so that they could fit in his small bags. The moment every piece of the charged dark stone was in his bag, he continued onward.

It seemed like the enemies found on this level preferred preparing for upcoming fights by setting traps and ambushes rather than weakening the crawler at random. In a way, it was good since it gave Senkyo the chance to rest, but that also meant that his next encounter with enemies would be another troublesome time. As he was thinking this, he climbed up the obstacles in front of him and caught sight of an opening that released a red glow. One completely different from the deep purple hue around him. It was the color for the next level: S.

He confirmed its authenticity through Detect, making sure that it wasn’t an illusion. It would be great if he got to it without further trouble, but the problem with enemies that liked setting up traps and ambushes was the fact that they would get in the way every time their targets get close to their objective. At this time, Senkyo’s situation was no exception.

Iwaiida of all stages appeared from all corners of the massive cavern he was in. All of them colored without a hint of blue bodies to inflate their numbers. Then, rhythmic taps resounded through the whole cavern. As if to show off, a humanoid figure appeared from the entrance to level S. A cloaked man with spider-like features. The gaps in their cloak showed a spider’s body while he stood on human-like legs with human-like arms that held a long staff in one hand. The spider legs that sprouted from its back patted each other as if clapping for Senkyo’s arrival. Finally, the spider head beneath its hood reflected a murderous gaze from its eight eyes as it stared at Senkyo. This was the Arachne Sage.

It was quite bold for it to present itself in front of Senkyo. Instead of watching safely from the sidelines, it decided to enter the battlefield on its own. Was this because an arachne sage could form arrogant personalities or was Leolja using his power to force a situation where he had to fight the sage? In all honesty, the answer was probably both. However, there was a single upside to this situation.

When dealing with enemies that excelled in using traps and ambushes, so long as Senkyo caught a feel for where they would set up their traps, then they were nothing more than announced dangers. A smirk appeared on his face, responding to the sage’s bloodlust.

**345 – An Existence Apart From Others**

The harmonic sound of chirping birds could be heard as they fly through the trees of the forest. The gentle morning sun peered through the gaps between the trees. Passing through shade and sunlight, their shadows come and go. The soft breeze ruffled the leaves accompanied by the calming ring of wind chimes. In the middle of that peaceful scene, Senkyo was alone sitting in an isolated dojo built in the forest of the Konjou Clan’s territory. There, he waited in silence, the once tense atmosphere softening from the anticlimactic wait.

After a few more minutes of enduring stillness, he could sense something send ripples across the forest’s tranquil ambiance. The ripples become bigger and bigger until finally, a heavy breeze blew into the dojo as a person arrived and pressed their arms on the wooden walls for support.

“S-Sorry! I overslept!”

It was Shimizu Yoshiko, the personal mentor assigned to Senkyo.

“N-No, don’t mind me…”

He said in an attempt to be polite to her. This was his first day of training under her; he didn’t want to leave a bad impression. Yoshiko fixed herself before walking into the dojo and placing herself in front of Senkyo.

“You must’ve heard about me from Sakurai-ojii-san. I’m Shimizu Yoshiko, disciple of Konjou Reiko, and from now on, your new mentor. If you think this is going to be a smooth ride, then think again! I’ll be sure to work you to the bone to become the strongest enchanter out there!”

Such was her declaration and the beginning of more harsh days of training.

As a start, she went over the basics of the enchanter class. Unlike fighters and casters who use magic, enchanters are hunters that fight with spirit power, manifesting their strength through talismans, items, and weapons. The most important part of being an enchanter is remembering the basic symbols and arranging them in vessels to produce various effects. There are nine basic symbols to begin with.

Connection. A symbol characterized by a basic circle. As its name suggests, it creates a connection between two properties. It can also be used to strengthen existing connections or make two properties affect each other in some way. It can also react whenever a type of connection occurs.

Discord. A symbol characterized by a basic X. It is the complete opposite of Connection and disrupts the connection between two properties. The two symbols oppose each other, but can still be used together depending on the arrangement of symbols and the property of Discord applied. This is mainly utilized for the various ways it can disrupt the connection between two properties. This can also react when a type of discord occurs.

Direction. A symbol characterized by a basic triangle. This applies movement to the vessel it is applied to or reacts to some type of movement. Often used for traps but can also be used to dictate the direction of an effect.

Interaction. A symbol characterized by a lightning bolt drawn in three lines and right angles or a deformed katakana of “sa.” To be specific, it has two parallel lines that stretch out to opposite sides with a perpendicular line connecting the two just above their bases. This can be used to activate a Circuit or react whenever a certain type of interaction occurs.

Domination. A symbol characterized by two centered parallel lines with the upper line twice as long as the lower line. A symbol that creates power by having one property superior to the other. This can be used to draw power that overwhelms targets, make targets superior at a certain property, react whenever a type of domination occurs, or other effects of the like.

Inferiority. A symbol characterized by a circle floating in between the space of a V. The complete opposite of Domination, a symbol that creates power by having one property inferior to the other. It can draw power that reduces the strength of targets or, in general, make targets inferior to a certain property. This can also be used to react whenever a type of inferiority occurs.

Equality. A symbol characterized by three parallel lines of the same length. This is a symbol that draws power from having a perfect balance or force connected properties to have a perfect balance. It is often used in tandem with Connection to create various effects. Just like with the others, it can also react whenever a type of balance occurs.

Repetition. A symbol characterized by two parallel backslashes. It is a symbol that can make a Circuit repeat itself or make a specific part of a Circuit repeat itself. This is often used when a type of repetitive cast is needed. This can also be used to react whenever a type of repetition occurs.

Spirit. A symbol characterized by a diamond placed at the center of a half-moon arc. It is the most used symbol out of the nine due to the fact that it is used to draw power from the wills of users and places them into the Circuit. This is used to manifest power based on the will of the person who creates it.

A connection of two or more Symbols is called a Circuit. The way circuits are arranged is crucial in creating different effects. This is because circuits activate from the innermost symbol and expand as more symbols are added to it. This means that the first symbol to activate is the inner symbol before the outer symbol. For example, to make a bomb that explodes upon contact requires the symbols for Interaction and Spirit. Interaction will be placed within the diamond of Spirit. If the arrangement is reversed, the circuit will draw power first before it even makes contact, exploding the moment power is placed into it.

Beyond arranging inner and outer symbols, there is also a need to arrange symbols that overlap each other. Overlapping symbols mean will often trigger at the same time. For example, overlapping Spirit and Domination with Interaction at the center allows the user to release heavy attacks based on the user’s will upon enemy contact. If they were separate with Spirit as the outermost symbol, the circuit will activate upon contact, have Domination react for domination effects, then release a normal attack. In this circuit, the Domination symbol is useless as it connects to nothing and the Spirit symbol releases an average attack with no influence from the Domination symbol.

And finally, when three or more symbols overlap, there can be times when one symbol only overlaps with certain symbols instead of every symbol. In such an instance, the effect of that one symbol will only apply to the symbols it is connected to. For example, a circuit with Spirit, Domination, and Repetition with Repetition connected only to Domination. This is a circuit that activates the moment the user applies power to the Spirit symbol. The user has the option to produce overwhelming attacks with the Domination symbol. Then, the moment Domination is used, it activates once more, producing attacks that deal twice as much damage compared to a circuit without Repetition. Had the Repetition symbol been connected to the Spirit symbol, the circuit would require twice as much spirit power. It would produce a more powerful output or a different one entirely, but this could result in needless use of spirit power. Whenever engaging in fights, enchanters are more likely to use more spirit power than brutes who take the frontlines. Enchanters must manage their spirit power consumption properly as they can burn through their supply easily.

It was nearing dusk when Yoshiko finished teaching Senkyo all about the basics and making him go through various exercises to put all of them into practice, or at least reminding him since he already knew of them through Ryosei’s memories. Naturally, Senkyo thought that they would end here for the day. However, something unexpected came from Yoshiko’s mouth.

“Okay! Now it’s time for the practical session!”

“Eh?”

By “practical session,” she meant throwing Senkyo in the middle of the dark woods and hunting him down like a predator chasing down its helpless prey.

“—GAH!!?”

This scream was made when he barely dodged the fist Yoshiko threw at him through a solid tree trunk.

“—HYAAA!!”

This scream was made when he ran for dear life as a flurry of muscle-piercing leaves rained down from above.

“—GRUKK!!”

This groan was made when he miswrote a circuit and resulting in it exploding in his face.

The situation was so one-sided that it was better to define it as torture rather than training. In this session, Yoshiko gave Senkyo one objective—to hit her. Recalling the various stories of fiction he consumed, in situations when the instructor gave simple objectives, it was likely to be one of the hardest hurdles for the protagonist to overcome. This was exactly the same.

It wasn’t that Senkyo wasn’t trying to fight back. There were rules to this training, and that was to only use spirit power and fight through talismans. All he needed to do was pick up any object lying around the forest, apply his spirit power to it and turn it into a vessel, then inscribe a circuit to it and make it a talisman, and use it against Yoshiko. It seemed simple at first, but the problem lay in the fact that he couldn’t even make a single talisman.

Every time he tried to pick up an item, Yoshiko would always have something on her sleeve to disrupt Senkyo. When he crouched to pick up sticks, an object zoomed past him, and the next thing he knew, the sticks he picked up withered to dust. When he tried to pull leaves off of the trees, they would stay connected as if it was impossible to pull them off in the first place. When he tried to go all for nothing and picked up the dirt on the ground, Yoshiko threw seeds into the dirt, making them sprout into a tree right on the top of his hand. Then, in the miraculous times he managed to make a vessel, it would get disenchanted the moment a leaf Yoshiko threw out made contact with it.

A night of training in the woods left Senkyo exhausted. The day right after, from morning until night, it was the same one-sided hunting session. It wasn’t long until he began to fear the sight of purple as he caught mere moments of her hair entering and disappearing from his field of vision. She was simply merciless when it came to training him.

Eventually, the day came when Senkyo got fed up and questioned her about her lessons. From Ryosei’s memories, an enchanter’s training was more focused on enchanting and crafting various circuits to use in battle, determining which circuits would be best against specific enemies. It wasn’t focused on live battles like the ones Yoshiko was subjecting Senkyo to. Nodding as if expecting to be asked this question, Yoshiko said.

“You aren’t like other enchanters. You can use magic on top of spirit power. Not just that, your supply of spirit power is undeterminable, but at the very least, it’s greater than Sakurai-ojii-san’s spirit power, one of the people with the greatest supply of spirit power in the clan. Not to mention you have high adaptability that was able to reduce your enchanting time from 30 seconds to 5 in less than two days. For someone like you, do you think orthodox training methods would work effectively?”

“Th-That’s…”

Senkyo couldn’t say anything back. His biggest disadvantage here was the fact that he didn’t even know what he was capable of. Since he couldn’t determine his own strength, it was left to the people who trained them to determine it and cultivate it. In other words, from his mentor’s eyes, this was what he needed to grow. However, Senkyo still couldn’t see why that is.

“—Then, how is this training method effective if you keep preventing me from creating talismans!?”

To that question, Yoshiko answered unhesitatingly.

“Real battle experience. The pressure of scrambling through your every option to fight, the pressure of helplessness against an overwhelmingly powerful opponent, the pressure of possible death. Whenever you fight me, I will make you realize just how wide the gap between our skills is. I will make you realize the definition between an amateur and a professional hunter. Then, when it all finally sinks in, I want you to overcome me.”

“What? How does that make sense?”

Yoshiko chuckled at Senkyo’s words.

“I heard from Ryosei that you’re a smart kid. Always thinking of ways to overcome the trials you face. Somehow or another, you always find those ways and break through any situation. A genius. A true prodigy. That’s how he described you. For someone as talented as you, this is the only way I will hone your skills.”

Genius. Prodigy.

Senkyo wanted to deny those words, but he knew that this wasn’t the place to be stubborn. If that was how they saw him, so be it. What he wanted to know right this moment was his mentor’s reasoning.

“So basically, you’re telling me to figure everything out for myself?”

“That’s it. Do you think I’m neglectful for this?”

Those sharp eyes she stares at him with. Those are the very eyes she uses whenever she wanted Ryosei to give a satisfactory answer. She only used them whenever she gave him enough information to figure out her inner thoughts, but Ryosei rarely succeeded, resulting in harsh punishment. If Senkyo fails to answer properly, there would be hell to pay.

Unreasonable. That was the only word that popped into his head.

“An enchanter…”

Yet.

“…is someone who innovates.”

He answers all the same.

“They build everything from the nine symbols and weave their thoughts into symbols. How I control these nine symbols are all up to me. How I create these nine symbols are all up to me… If I can’t make one thing work, then try another… If I face a problem that can’t be solved through orthodox means, then try unorthodox means… Because I’m different, I have that option… You…”

A wide smile spreads across Yoshiko’s face as Senkyo arrives at his conclusion. Then, she answers for him.

“I’m still neglectful! Correct!”

She switches from her serious tone to her playful one.

“We’ll end today’s session here! Tomorrow will be a different day. From now on, I’ll stop being neglectful!”

The next day, Senkyo experienced a completely different hell than what he saw so far. But despite this, he was able to land a hit on her five days later. On that day, an indescribable expression floated on Yoshiko’s face. It was the face of someone who couldn’t find the right words to express the chaotic mix of emotions brewing inside of her. But at the very least, she was able to leave him with these few words.

“…A step closer to an enchanter no one has ever seen before.”

**346 – The Unorthodox Enchanter**

Senkyo kicks off the battle by throwing leaves into the air, all of them possessing one circuit and a lone circle on the other side. On his hand was a single leaf with a circuit constructed with Spirit at the center followed by overlapping Direction and Connection, creating a diamond and a half-moon arc contained in a triangle that overlapped with a circle on all three points. Filling the leaf with spirit power, it glows, taking control of all the leaves Senkyo threw in the air and sending the barrage to the entrance of level S where the arachne sage stood.

The mastermind responded with the tap of his staff, summoning numerous fireballs to intercept the incoming leaves. But the moment they were about to make contact, the circuits activated. Among the leaves were three sets of circuits. First were circuits with Spirit and Discord overlapping each other with Repetition attached to Discord. Second were circuits with Discord at the center inside Spirit overlapping with Domination at its base. Third were circuits with Discord at the center inside Spirit overlapping with Inferiority and Direction.

The first circuits activated, breaking down all of the fireballs that attempted to incinerate the leaves. The second and third sets of circuits detected an occurrence of Discord, activating all of the other circuits at once. The second set of circuits exploded, clearing all of the spiders within the vicinity with a devastating explosion. The third set of circuits pierced through the smoke and accelerated toward the arachne sage. The sage tried to dodge but there were too many to handle and received the barrage. The steel-like leaves sunk into its skin, taking all of its energy and making it feel lethargic.

From within the smoke came Senkyo, speeding in the direction of the sage. Sensing the danger, the sage swing its staff with all the energy it had left, creating numerous layers of cobwebs that produced 3D illusions. Senkyo rushed forward, unhindered. Using both Detect and Perception Field, he could tell which were fakes and what were beyond those fakes. Unfortunately, by the time he arrived where the sage previously stood, it was gone. It shouldn’t have been able to move far away, but he realized what happened when he saw the backs of numerous cave trappers disappearing into the illusions. It hitched a ride on them so it could escape.

In front of him was the entrance to level S. Nothing was stopping him from entering now. However, leaving the sage alive while it was this close to him was a chance he would only have now. If he left, he would risk it preparing more traps for him on the way back. The only guarantee for safety was to finish it off right this moment while he had the momentum. Making his decision, Senkyo set down the dummy, ordered it to stay, and had Shiro guard it. The last time he did this, almost ended up terribly, but now he had a perfect guarantor.

“Winding sheet of the dark night, envelope the locus of my blood sport. Spread as if you are I, and I the darkness that blinds thee. Curse those foolish that enter the domain of the predator. Konjou Style, Hunting Shroud!”

Black smoke spread around the vicinity, seeping into every path and crack no matter how small. It expanded into level S and the cavern of level A3, preventing any enemies that entering from both sides. So long as this shroud existed, no enemy would be able to reach Shiro and the dummy without him noticing. Not to mention, the moment an enemy enters the shroud, its connection will be cut off from anything that was controlling it or anything it was controlling. This assured that magic arms, arachne sages, and demonic spiders wouldn’t dare step foot and completely prevent any controlled attacks from masterminds. This shroud lasted for about 10 seconds. It may not be much for others, but for Senkyo, this was just perfect.

He recalled the words his mentor often repeated.

*\*If you’re gonna fight, finish everything in one go!\**

This wasn’t because she was a battle-crazed maniac, but because it was how enchanters would settle fights. Comparing the energy costs of techniques in the brute and the enchanter class, the brute class would consume more spirit power with every technique used, but enchanters, although they have a lower cost, tend to require multiple uses of the same skill to become effective against enemies. Unlike the magic arts of the fighter class, enchanters don’t have a way to preserve their spirit power. Because of this, it is said that it is dangerous for enchanters to fight on their own. However, in the times that they are forced to do so, cannot escape, and don’t expect reinforcements, there is only one option for them. Since they wouldn’t be able to match an opponent in a battle of attrition, they must kill their enemy before it kills them. An all-out attack at the perfect timing was ideal.

Leaving the shroud, he was greeted with several illusions and an army of spiders rushing to kill him. With Detect and Perception Field, he cuts down every 3D illusion, and with the leaves he threw out, he pierces through the obstacles with slashes and explosions. He arrived at the center of the cluster of mana signatures and prepared. Right now, the sage was hiding somewhere close to him behind all of the illusions and spiders. Searching through every single corner would be ineffective. For this reason, he would end the battle with this single move.

*\*You are an enchanter. You are that who innovates with the world. Unlike the fighters and casters that use magic that bend the elements of the world to their wills with spells and chants, we enchanters are those that become one with the world and fight as the environment around us. Our wills do not force the world to our desires, but it is the world’s desire to move at the request of our wills. Whenever we fight, we are not alone; the world you stand on is on your side.\**

The words of his mentor flowed through his mind once more. To become one with the world. That is what it meant to become an enchanter. If that was the case, then everything inside this cavern was his to control. Every enemy inside this place, no matter where the sage was hiding, had no escape from his reach.

The floor of the cavern glowed in bright light, shaping an unusual formation that would normally not be seen in this world. A diamond inside a half-moon arc overlapping three lines of the same length connected into two large circles on its left and right sides. Inside both circles possessed the same diamond and half-moon arc at their center. The difference was that the left side had the diamond inside a circle which was placed in between a large V, while the right side had two parallel lines with the upper line twice the length as the lower one placed below the half-moon arc. This was the power of an enchanter.

The moment Senkyo realized that this was the final room that led to level S, he continuously poured spirit power into the cavern, creating a large-scale vessel. The whole time he fought, the numerous leaves he released weren’t just to keep the enemies at bay, but it was also to carve a large circuit into the cavern floor. An enchant of this scale would usually be enough to completely drain the average enchanter of their spirit power. However, Senkyo wasn’t an average enchanter. Even with the spirit power it cost him to make the cavern a vessel, along with the spirit power it cost him to activate a circuit that affected the whole cavern, it would be enough to bring any enchanter on Earth to their knees. Despite this, Senkyo didn’t feel anything at all.

The wide-ranged circuit that was embedded on the cavern floor glowed showing the symbols of overlapping Spirit and Equality connected to two Connections that contained overlapping Spirit and Inferiority as well as Spirit and Domination. Pouring his spirit power into the circuit, Senkyo was able to sense the inferior entity inside the cavern in terms of numbers—the lone arachne sage.

He immediately rushed to its location on the far side of the cave opposite to the entrance of level S. It tried to move the spiders it controlled to hinder Senkyo and create numerous 3D illusions to throw him off path, but none of them could stop him. Strangely, every spider around him slowed down as if the strength and energy were sapped from their bodies. This was because the spiders that the arachne sage controlled, the dominant numbers, were given the same weaknesses the sage was experiencing from the leaves that first hit him. This was the equality of bodily state. The circuit Senkyo created wasn’t just to search for the sage but to weaken every spider in the vicinity by giving them the same bodily state as the arachne sage.

The 3D illusions kept rising to block Senkyo but that was all it could do. The obstacles could never delay Senkyo nor did they throw him off his path to the arachne sage. Within a few seconds, the sage could only pale its face as Senkyo appeared in front of it, his cold blade running through its bare neck. For safe measure, he cut down all four of its limbs as well as the spider legs protruding out its back. After thoroughly disabling the arachne sage, he waited for everything to settle.

With their leader’s death, all of the spiders in the area scrambled out of the cavern, hiding into the small cracks they could fit in and running into the cave paths away from the area. Some of the cave trappers simply burrowed their way out of the vicinity. Seeing as the hostiles retreated, Senkyo returned to the entrance of level S where the black smoke was just about to disappear. He thought of continuing down the path, but after all of that, it was reasonable to stop for a bit of rest. Beyond this point was the area where he would fight Leolja, the Demon Spider that was able to replicate the entirety of levels B to S with just his illusions. There was no telling what would happen if he fought him in his tired state. For now, even just for a few minutes, he sat down with Hunting Shroud to secure the area.

**347 – Iqanlr’s Deepest Level**

Level S. The deepest and most dangerous level of the Iqanlr Sunken Nest. Every evolution of Iwaiida exists in this area. This includes their highest attainable form, the Demonic Spider. It possesses the powers of all previous evolutions and amplifies them to be utilized in ways the arachne sage could not. This stage gains a body capable of utilizing every power of the Iwaiida to its fullest. Strangely enough, Senkyo knew more about this evolution stage than the previous lower stages.

He walked down the red-lit cave with the training dummy still latched onto his back. Unlike the last two levels, nothing tried to attack him immediately after entering the level. So far it was calm with no enemies in sight. He kept his Detect and Perception Field active just in case something tried to deliver a surprise attack.

*“\*Hey, Shiro.\*”*

*“\*What is it, Onii-chan?\*”*

*“\*Don’t you think there’s something strange with my body?\*”*

Shiro tilted her head at Senkyo’s sudden question.

*“\*What do you mean?\*”*

*“\*I just noticed after fighting the arachne sage, but haven’t I gotten stronger?\*”*

*“\*But Onii-chan has always been strong, right?\*”*

*“\*No, not like that. I mean my physical capabilities. It hasn’t been 2 months ever since my lifestyle drastically changed but it feels like my body is already used to fighting. It's nowhere near Ryosei’s body when he was alive, but it's strong enough to survive high-intensity fights. Even after that, I only needed to rest for about 5 minutes before getting back on track. No matter what my body went through there’s no way it should have adapted this fast. Is this another type of ability I have?\*”*

He recalls the eight seals his father placed on his body. The moment he woke up in Zerid, Shiro told him all about the sealed power inside his body. Of the eight seals, two were released. The first one was released in his fight against Fulgur. It was the seal that locked away Shiro inside his body along with some of his memories, his mana, and the power to manipulate it. The condition to unlock it was to reach a near-death state, as stated by Shiro. The second was released at some point between getting burnt by his own magic when he was fighting the skeletons on Earth and when he arrived at Zerid. It was the ability to rapidly regenerate his body from even fatal injuries. The condition that unlocked it is still unknown. Shiro only had knowledge of the conditions on her own seal but she also had the ability to sense whether or not a seal was released from Senkyo’s body.

*“\*No, Onii-chan has only released two seals so far. The cause of Onii-chan’s growth is unrelated to the locked seals.\*”*

*“\*Hmm… is that so?\*”*

Just as Senkyo was about to immerse himself in his thoughts, Shiro added.

*“\*If Shiro had to guess, perhaps it’s a side effect of Onii-chan’s regenerative ability.\*”*

*“\*A side effect… just like how I gained the ability to store creation magic when I unlocked my mana?\*”*

*“\*Yes. When Onii-chan first arrived in Zerid, he was… not in good shape. At that time, Onii-chan’s regenerative abilities saved his life by replacing his right arm and regenerating other parts of Onii-chan’s body. Maybe something happened when Onii-chan’s body healed.\*”*

*“\*Hmm… if that’s the case, then I’m not just regenerating my muscles; my body is rebuilding them. Instead of just bringing it back to its previous state, it makes them stronger. No wonder it feels like I can handle the katana better.\*”*

Senkyo’s right arm received the most damage when they first got to Zerid. With four spikes piercing through it, his body had no choice but to dismember the whole arm from his shoulder instead of filling in the holes like the rest of his body did. If his theory was correct, then that meant that his right arm was completely revamped.

He turned to his arm and rolled it around a few times.

“Hmm…”

This new discovery brought new ideas into his head.

A few minutes later, arriving at a small opening, Senkyo decided to take a stop there. The area around them was big enough to move around but not too large that it felt intimidating. There was nothing inside the area except Senkyo and rocks. On top of that, the only entrances to this area were the few passageways that were connected to it.

“This is the perfect place to take out one of the requirements.”

In this test, Senkyo was expected to perform two things: find and extract a particular resource and remain in a particular area for five minutes. For the latter, the specific details entailed that the dummy should be released from any restrictions and be allowed to roam freely. In the five minutes that it is, Senkyo’s job was to make sure they remain unharmed, to a certain extent. This was to simulate the actions of a researcher. He thought of using Hunting Shroud to make sure they were safe but then if this were a real situation, the researcher wouldn’t be able to observe anything. Afraid of being disqualified, he refrained from securing the area with black smoke and instead fortified it with talismans with a circuit to detect movement.

He released the dummy from his back by ordering it to stand, followed by another one to officially begin the five minutes.

“Observe.”

Senkyo remained by the dummy’s side as it walked freely, vigilant of any reactions from his talismans or anything his senses pick up. When he first heard of this condition, it only seemed troublesome to him, and now that they were at level S, he found out he was right, but not in the way he expected. The characteristics of areas Senkyo was able to conduct the five-minute test were locations with wide spaces and little to no resources. He thought it wouldn’t take long for them to find places that matched this description but he was wrong.

There were many resources in level S and barely any blank spots. Looking back on the description of level S in his guidebook, it was stated that it had the most resources out of any of the other levels. Inside this treasure trove of a level were occasional empty spaces that wouldn’t have any resources in them. Researchers have attempted to study this phenomenon in the past, but the lack of reliable crawlers with access level S slowed down that research, and have not found any definitive answers to this day.

The time slowly passed by with a few lone spiders coming from the passageways. Senkyo quickly took care of them with his talismans before they became a problem. Eventually, the five minutes passed without anything happening. He expected to have his hands full with spiders pouring in from all sides and holding down the fort with everything he had, but that wasn’t what happened.

Senkyo pinched his chin and pondered. This test was supposed to simulate what would occur in the levels of Iqanlr’s sunken nest. If nothing happened even while they stood still in a location without any resources, would the same happen in the real sunken nest? Was there some kind of important meaning to these empty areas that would ward off enemies? He pondered, but that was the limit of his current capabilities. He had no information he could use to conclude any theories. For now, he set the thought aside and continued his exploration of level S.

**348 – The Final Search**

“Remnants of the past, become my incarnate and bring upon the shadow of war. I call out the penumbra of the lurking devils. Konjou Style, Phantom Blade!”

A cloud of black smoke shrouded the area where four Senkyos ran out and escaped to four different passageways. Ever since Senkyo left the resourceless area, he found a substantial increase in enemy encounters. With their numbers, they often tried to herd him into their traps but he always gave them the slip by using Phantom Blade or Hunting Shroud. It would have been great if they never caught his traces again, but the biggest disadvantage in the lower levels is the fact that enemies are all over the place. It doesn’t take long for them to gather more spiders and try to ambush him again.

It was around ten minutes of exploring after Senkyo left the resourceless area. Even with his prominent searching skills, Detect and Perception Field, he had yet to find the target he was looking for: the Spell Crystal. This was a valuable resource that could be used to cast spells. It can be used for daily life, but most importantly, could be used to craft the energy core of AW-Units called ARC-Mana. It could be recognized by its distinct light blue color and unique mana signature. Except, Senkyo had no way to find it.

According to the information in his guidebook, spell crystals were often found by using a mid-tier level of the spell Detect. Senkyo was only capable of using its low-tier level. This wasn’t a problem of skill, but a problem of knowledge. He didn’t know how to cast the mid-tier spell for Detect. He stopped to list down all of the spells he learned from Yuu in his head.

Aqua Surge. Crown Spikes. Detect (low-tier). Enhanced Speed. Ephermal Clone (low- and mid-tier). Eruption. Gale Howl. Great Wall. Heaven’s Pierce. Hell’s Pillar. Knight Spell. Needle Storm. Overgrowth. Paired Hellfire. Purify. Sun’s Protection. Zephyr.

Aside from the spells he knew from the Konjou Clan, these were his current mana skillset. A common trend here was the dominant number of offensive spells with hardly any utility spells. The same trend applied to the Konjou Clan’s spells, but that was because they were combat-oriented, to begin with. Overall, he knew a decent amount of utility spells from the Konjou Clan since Ryosei had them in his memories but none of them could be used to search for the spell crystal. Because of his lack of ability, he didn’t have any other choice but to search for the spell crystal manually.

His only saving grace was the fact that his low-tier Detect could still perceive a spell crystal’s mana signature. The downside of this was that he needed to get close to inspect every mana signature he detected. In a cave filled with hostile spiders that often gathered in clusters, this meant walking straight into those dangerous clusters. Ironically, the process would have been smoother if he was against real spiders instead of illusions. Since he had perception field, he could have snuck up to nearby mana signatures with Hunting Shroud and detected if there was any breathing in the area. If he detected breathing along with the mana signatures, then he would simply back off and move along, then if he didn’t, he would come up close and inspect if they were spell crystals. Unfortunately, with illusions as his enemies, there wasn’t any breathing to be detected, which forced him to walk up to mana signatures.

One solution he thought of involved ignoring every cluster of mana signatures and only inspecting mana signatures of low numbers. Yet, as if to curse him, the description of spell crystals included this passage:

*\*Spell crystals are often found in clumps. Due to the power they emit, Iwaiida are likely to gather around spell crystals and build their nests around them.\**

This unholy passage forced Senkyo to dive into every clump of mana signatures he found. Because of this, the ten minutes that would usually be nothing long for the average person felt like hours of fighting and running for Senkyo. The few seconds of walking after escaping every horde of spiders were his only solace before getting ambushed by a different group of arachnids. Another ten minutes of the same scenes happened before he finally found something that lit up his tired eyes.

“Spell crystals!”

He exclaimed the moment his eyes laid on a large vein of light blue crystals as he pierced through the middle of a spider nest. Without missing a single beat, he immediately acted.

“O Nature, I am your medium, your voice, your soul. Resonate and express yourself through me to punish those who oppose you. Gale Howl!”

A violent wind blew away the spiders in front of him. Meanwhile, those directly blocking the path from Senkyo’s position to the vein of spell crystals exploded into pieces as the wind made contact with them. With the path cleared, he used consecutive flash strikes to cover the distance and slashed his sword as the spell crystals got in range of his blade.

*“\*Flash strike: Breath of the Wind!\*”*

The smooth horizontal stroke was accompanied by a sharp wind. In a matter of an instant, pieces of the spell crystal broke and sprawled in the air. He collected the airborne minerals, handing some to the dummy and storing the rest in his small bags. Mission complete. All he had to do now was get back to the surface. The moment he shifted his attention from the crystals to his surroundings, he realized. This was going to be the most difficult part of the test.

A cave filled to the brim with spider webs, stretching from the floor to the ceiling, reaching to all sides of the cave. Every single string had a mana signature. This would usually mean that all of them were nothing but illusions, yet his senses screamed danger from all directions. Among every mana signature was one that was unmistakably more powerful than the others. The only demonic spider on this level, Leolja, arrived.

“I had a feeling you’d show up…”

Senkyo whispered to himself as if cursing. The whole time he was searching for the mana crystals he didn’t miss the constant pressure the spiders were giving him. Every time he escaped from raiding a nest, another group would always be there to ambush him the moment he got away. Depending on the situation, he would eliminate them all or run away again. The problem with running away was that another group would always be there to catch him, while the problem with eliminating all of the enemies was the incoming reinforcements that would arrive if he killed them too slowly. Leolja had eyes everywhere, so he knew his game. As long as he pressured Senkyo, he would tire him for the moment he decided to show up. Spell crystals were the perfect bait for him.

Iwaiida of all stages crawled all over the webs, all of them closing into Senkyo’s location. He attempted to slice open a path through the plethora of webs. The moment it was about to make contact, the webs in its path turned to stone and stopped his swing. With his blade stuck in the stone, the spiders closed in for the kill.

**349 – Spirit Power and Magic**

In that instant, he realized that there was no fighting his way out. He was trapped at the center of Leolja’s spider web like a butterfly with its wings stuck, ready to be eaten by the spider at any time. His skill and experience were far below Ryosei’s. He couldn’t perform the same feats he could. The fact that his slash was stopped was proof of that. He was reminded once more, he was not a fighter, but a strategist.

A memory that felt as if it had happened years ago came to mind. It was the time Ryosei stopped him from entering the fighter class and sent him to the enchanter class instead. It was the determinant of his current strengths and weaknesses. The situation Ryosei wanted to avoid was for Senkyo to be left helpless in a position just like his current one. “Stick to your strengths,” was what he wanted to convey. The result of neglecting that advice was when he first thought he lost the test back on level A2. At that time, he wanted to hold back on using spirit power for as long as possible. The difference between that time and the present was the fact that Senkyo no longer needed to hide his cards.

Small pieces of rubble fell from where his blade penetrated the stone. Without a second to waste, he acted. Senkyo let go of his katana, moving both hands, one toward the pieces of rubble and the other to one of the small bags on his chest. What he took out from the bag was a bundle of charged dark stones and leaves. Spirit power coursed through his hands into the items he held, turning the seemingly normal items into vessels. 1 second passed.

The output of spirit power coming out of his hands increased, kindling spirit power onto the vessels, tracing the exact circuit he had in his mind. His hands merged, mixing the rubble, leaves, and charged dark stones into one pile. With the influence of his mind and the spirit power that wrapped the items, the three objects moved and arranged themselves as per Senkyo’s will. At that moment, his preparations were complete. 2 seconds passed.

The Iwaiida all closed into his location. About three more seconds was what separated Senkyo from his loss. In those few three, Senkyo threw every set of charged dark stones into the air where the creation weaved through the webs and obstacles until he arrived at its designated location. The charged dark stones had a circuit built with Spirit at its center, the diamond placed on the rubble while the arc appeared on the charged dark stones, overlapping on the symbol for Direction. A symbol that overlapped over two vessels—a technique called Vessel Convergent where another vessel is used to enhance the function of a circuit.

In this instance, the Spirit symbol was used to solidify Senkyo’s will to avoid the webs and spiders. Along with that will was the rubble, a sample of what Senkyo wanted to be avoided, the circuit became more accurate and precise in how to move and weave through the obstacles. 3 seconds passed.

Of the seven sets of charged dark stones, four successfully reached the walls. The other three were stopped by the Iwaiida. The light of the circuit on each of the sets expanded to show a circle with three diamonds and arcs overlapping in the three directions the triangle inside of it pointed. Connection and three sets of Spirit symbols. The light didn’t stop there. Multiple lines extended from the outer edge of the symbols and connected to each leaf where another symbol of Connection lay and a line that connected to it. All of the leaves shot outward, weaving through the obstacles, and creating a circle of leaves inside the spider webs. Of the four sets of charged dark stones, one was thwarted before it could form. 4 seconds passed.

The other spiders tried to disrupt the other three while the rest continued their rapid scuttle to Senkyo. Less than a second remained. Before the spiders could reach any of their targets, three bright circles illuminated within the spider web. The identity of the three circles was a Konjou Clan technique called a Field Circle, the very same one Senkyo used when he fought against hollowed knights on Earth. A technique that could apply various effects to anyone standing inside it based on the will of the user that created it. It was essentially an applied form of the Spirit symbol. For the field circle to work, it must have another medium to invoke the user’s will. What is commonly used for this is a circuit.

Behind each of the sets of charged dark stones was another circuit. At its center were two overlapping symbols for Connection that shaped a Venn Diagram. Above that was a diamond and a half-arc, the symbol for Spirit. This was the basic circuit placed inside a field circle. However, Senkyo’s circuit was more than that with a single symbol for Discord overlapping with Spirit. Every part of Senkyo’s contraption activated, shrouding the whole area with black smoke. To be specific, the same smoke used in Hunting Shroud and Phantom Blade—the smoke that would disable every control Leolja would have on the Iwaiida.

Senkyo should have used a technique powered by spirit power, yet what his contraption released was a wide cast of magic. This could not be done simply by applying the user’s will to the Spirit symbol. Doing so was similar to an attempt to cast magic using spirit power. This was also a step in the process, but cannot be done entirely by it. What he needed was a vessel that would make his will take shape. A vessel that could cast magic. This was the use for the charged dark stones.

There was an item that existed called a Dark Gem which contained mana that can be used to cast dark magic. A Charged Dark Stone functioned similarly to this, but instead of having mana, it had dark-attributed mana. While dark gems can easily be integrated into apocrologic items, charged dark gems cannot be used for anything other than dark magic which makes it difficult to use in tandem with other elements. Another factor was the fact that the dark stone was useless the moment every mana was drained from it. It cannot regenerate its mana supply as gems can, but the power of magic it creates is far superior. It was deemed inefficient for most items but was still used in some items that functioned purely on the dark element and are intended for one-time use. This was one of the small bits of knowledge Senkyo learned from reading the books back in the penthouse.

The circuit extracted the dark-attributed mana from the charged dark stone and used it to carry out Senkyo’s will. The sudden veil caused all of the charging spiders to freeze up and fall off of the spider web, rolling lifelessly on the ground below Senkyo. Among the countless spiders inside the veil, only one remained moving. Leolja.

Senkyo gently placed the training dummy down.

“Shiro, take care of it.”

*“\*Yes!\*”*

Responding to his call, Shiro left Senkyo’s body and guarded the dummy. Then, he pulled his katana out of the stone. Calmly entering his stance, a deep breath left his mouth to relieve at least a small portion of the exhaustion he built up. In his mind was only one thing: defeat the enemy, before it defeats you.

“Sheath my blade with the wind. Your power is the face of elegance. Flow as I show you the path, the line to a dashing ending. Konjou Style, Gale Fan!”

A powerful arc of deadly wind traveled across the room, cutting through the thick layers of spider webs. Unlike earlier, none of the webs turned to stone or did anything to stop the attack. This was because so long as the field circle was active, everyone inside it aside from Senkyo would be unable to make any form of ranged connection. This was because of Discord cutting off Leolja’s control over the webs.

“Bring it on, Senkyo!”

As if responding to Senkyo’s will, the shout of a familiar voice echoed through the cave as the arc of deadly wind was deftly swept away by numerous strings that danced within the black cloud. It was Leolja in his humanoid form with numerous spider threads connected to his hands and the spider legs attached to his back.

**350 – Conclusion At First Contact**

Senkyo pinpointed Leolja’s location with the use of his shroud. He placed his sword in the opposite direction, sending thunder magic through the blade.

“Magic Arts: Crackling Thunder!”

An explosive roar resounded as a large concentrated mass of lightning propelled Senkyo through the air, arriving at Leolja’s location in a blink of an eye. Leolja stared into Senkyo’s soul with his composed face as the voltaic blade swung at his body. The three spider legs on his back wrapped themselves in webs and blocked the attack. Meanwhile, his two arms were busy launching his spider threads in a completely different direction. As the sparks weakened from the initial impact, the Senkyo disappeared into nothing. An illusion. The fact that Leolja barely paid any attention to it proved that he knew this. Ten deadly spider threads swept through the black smoke where sharp footfalls could be heard trying to avoid them. The real Senkyo was there trying to get behind Leolja’s back. Alas, he could only dodge as the spider threads chased him relentlessly.

Confusion filled Senkyo’s mind. How was Leolja able to find his exact location all the time despite being blinded by the shroud? He jumped into the air to dodge the threads. It was then that he noticed. Whenever he became airborne, the other threads would sweep through every possible location he could be instead of targeting his current location. Was he trying to predict his movements? No, he couldn’t do that which is why he did that. Leolja could not detect him in the air.

He landed while dodging and parrying the magic threads, then, used one of his kunai to slice the ground. One of the biggest disadvantages of moving inside his black smoke was the fact that even he couldn’t use his vision. He can detect movement inside the shroud to make up for it, but he couldn’t do anything about objects that didn’t move. He knew where floors, walls, and obstacles would be by analyzing the shape of his shroud, but stationary objects that crawled over those were a different story, much like the spider webs that stretched on every surface of the cave.

The spider webs he cut flew through the air, exposing Leolja’s detection network. He used this intricate network of spider webs to detect where his feet landed. As a response to his discovery, lightning coursed through the spider webs on the ground and electrocuted him. He tried to jump to remove his contact, but the electricity made his muscles tense, rooting him in place without any other option than to grit his teeth and endure. Leolja could transfer his magic through the spider webs. This was what he used earlier to block his swing by turning the webs to stone. The only difference between now and before was the fact that Leolja had a direct connection to his webs. Because of his field circle, he wasn’t able to use magic on his webs remotely, but maintaining direct contact with the webs was a loophole to his restrictions. However, this also meant that if Leolja becomes airborne for even just a moment, he would lose all control of his webs.

The ground around Senkyo began to rise while he was kept still by the lightning. It was trying to trap him inside. If he allowed this to form, it would lock down any chance he had of passing the test. Realizing this, he raised his katana and pierced the ground with it. Enduring the pain of the electricity and using spirit power to force his muscles to flex, he raised his body from the ground by using his katana as support, shouting to push against the pain. Then, he created a foothold in the air by using his spirit power and letting go of his katana, severing his contact with the electric spider webs.

He took a second to recover his body, but it didn’t seem like Leolja was about to let him have the luxury. Senkyo sensed ten spider strings whipping in his direction. He couldn’t dodge it due to the lingering electricity coursing through his muscles, and using his kunai to block the attack would only reveal his location. To avoid the worst possible outcome, he chanted.

“O Earth, built from sticks and stones, soar the regal sky. Display your majesty and tower over those who oppose your indestructible command. Great Wall!”

The ground rose in front of him, blocking the approaching spider threads completely. This was a temporary stopgap, proven by the fact that all ten threads simply placed themselves above the wall before continuing their attack. A few seconds was all it bought, but that was good enough. His muscles recovered enough to move, making him create a vertical air foothold behind his feet.

*“\*Flash Strike: Breath of the Wind! Flash Strike: Breath of the Wind! Flash Strike: Breath of the Wind!\*”*

He launched himself out of his previous location into the direction of his great wall. The immense speed from a flash strike would usually result in Senkyo smashing into the wall, but by manipulating the wind pressure as he pierced the wind, he used it to cushion his arrival at the wall, countering the force in his flash strike. Finally, by creating another foothold below his feet and using Breath of the Wind to repeat the same feat, he successfully made numerous sharp turns to avoid the approaching spider strings, over his own great wall, and toward Leolja’s location. Since he made no contact with any of his webs, he was completely under his radar. A straight rush to Leolja’s side should have been left. Yet, with no basis at all, the hairs on Senkyo’s skin stood on end, warning him of the impending danger. He came to a full stop in the middle of the air and thought for a second. The most threatening element that separated Senkyo from victory was Leolja’s deadly spider strings. It was the only device that allowed him to trade blows with him inside his field circle.

He focused his attention on the senses he was receiving from the shroud. There were small, almost impossibly unnoticeable, thin strings that barely took any space, but they were there. Eight strings connected from the eight spider legs on Leolja’s back to the walls of the cave. It would have been simple if only eight lines of string separated him and his target, but this wasn’t the case. In addition to the eight main strings were numerous spider strings that connected to each other, creating the shape of a spiderweb. There was no space for Senkyo to squeeze into. While he was analyzing the situation, the other ten spider strings were being whipped all over the cave like troublesome versions of laser detectors one would find in spy movies. He made sure to avoid every single one of them before catching his breath and returning to thought.

Beyond the wall of webs was his target, Leolja, who stood in his best condition. He had yet to strain himself or show Senkyo anything near the power he imagined him having. There was a good possibility he was underestimating him. Meanwhile, he was already breathing through both his nose and mouth to regulate his heartbeats and maintain his remaining energy. There was too much difference in their energy. Leolja forced him into a battle of attrition the moment he entered level S and brought him to this disadvantageous position. He could rest now while Leolja was still searching for him but there was no guarantee when he would decide to change plans. There was only one possible way to win. Before he changes his plan of action, before he gets the time to show his true power to Senkyo; defeat Leolja right where he stands.

His goal never changed. The problem was that it wasn’t possible to make contact with him without taking down the spiderweb. Leolja made sure the holes in the web were small enough to not let any of Senkyo’s leaves pass. He couldn’t attack him from his current position. Though, he noticed something. To create the large spiderweb and have it active, Leolja needed it to be connected to the spider legs in his back. Tracing the spider webs to its source, he found that at the center of all of it was Leolja who was standing just beyond the edge of the funnel-shaped spiderweb. He continued flinging his spider strings all over the place through the wall of spider webs by severing the connection before they could make contact and reconnecting them again. Only for a moment, but the strings were cut. There lay his only chance.

His eyes watched as the spider strings traveled, carefully determining at which point most of the strings severed, all the while dodging the said strings. Placing himself directly above the center of the spiderweb, waited for his moment, the very millisecond the spiderweb was most vulnerable. He dropped. Without his katana, about half of his skillset was unusable, but that didn’t mean he was useless. He took out the twin bone daggers as he fell, foul memories of the weapons in his hands entering his mind. They appeared for just a second and vanished the moment after, his mind void of everything but the goal he needed to accomplish.

The ten spider strings that searched the room intersected as Leolja’s arms crossed, his body dropping as if weaving through the thin strings. Then, he created a solid foothold of spirit power just before he made contact with the ground, using a skill called Silent Blows to silence his landing, he waited for the moment most of the strings were severed, his eyes closed tight as he focused all of his senses on the thin, borderline invisible strings. Finally, he struck.

*“\*Perception Field. Unbreakable. Diffusion.\*”*

He lunged at the center of the spiderweb while activating a string of spirit skills, giving him more accurate information about his surroundings, reinforcing his body, and spreading kindled spirit power in the area. Having everything set, he activated another skill as the first dagger made contact with the spiderweb.

*“\*Mortal Forge, First Strike.\*”*

The area on the ground with his kindled spirit power formed a diamond inside a half-arc, creating the symbol for Spirit. The moment his dagger connected to the spiderweb, the area of kindled spirit power lit up, paralyzing Leolja’s body as he tried to respond to the contact on his web. Along with that, a powerful boom pierced Leolja’s ears as his web helplessly crumbled to whatever force destroyed it. Then, from the black smoke, a sharp blade pierced through his right shoulder. It was a blade made of bone with what seemed to be a spine connecting to the shroud of smoke, the second bone dagger Senkyo held. The dagger’s bolster made a sharp noise as the blade suddenly bent at a 90-degree angle, thrusting the handle of the dagger deeper into his shoulder, and strengthening its grip on Leolja’s body.

A sudden force pulled Leolja from his location toward the source of the hook-like dagger. Senkyo appeared from the black veil and knocked Leolja down to a platform made of spirit power with his other dagger held against his neck. Leolja was held down with his life in Senkyo’s hands. Since his body was off the cave’s floor, he was unable to use the spiderwebs he had in place to break out of his position. Above him was Senkyo letting out light breaths from his mouth as he asked.

“Are you dead, …haah, in this situation?”

To which Leolja let out a light chuckle before responding.

“Yes. If this were a real situation, I would be thoroughly dead. Well played, Senkyo.”

“…Haah, says the one who was holding back!”

“My, whatever could you mean?”

He responded sarcastically before reminding Senkyo.

“Though I am dead, this test is yet to be over until you return to the surface.”

“Heh, you don’t need to worry about that.”

**351 – Hidden Mark**

After taking a few minutes of rest, Shiro returned to Senkyo’s body and Senkyo picked up the training dummy to prepare to leave. His katana was back in its sheathe and one of his daggers out while his other hand supported the dummy’s hold on him. Finally, the black shroud slowly disappeared as the field circles he prepared ran out of mana, exposing Senkyo and the dummy to the dangers of level S once more. Leolja went off ahead of time to reach the surface before he did, so Senkyo was the only one in the area. Before any spiders could catch him, he vacated the area and headed for the exit of level S.

On the way down to level S, Senkyo placed down numerous patches of leaves this was to serve as waypoints to retrace his steps. Simply following those waypoints with spirit power led Senkyo to the shortest possible route to the exit of level S with the fewest amount of enemy encounters. When he made it to level A3, he was welcomed with a grand reception of numerous spiders, but Senkyo was fast enough to outrun them before they could trap him in place. Unlike earlier when he needed to take out his pursuers to avoid future trouble, he didn’t need to concern himself with them anymore since his only goal was to get out of the cave. Even if pursuers gather, so long as he made it to the surface, he was clear.

That being said, he didn’t forget about the enormous house of illusions placed at the center of level A3. He was able to break through it before because one of the magic arms was taken out, leaving a large hole in their defenses, but now that he was traveling back, there was no doubt all of the holes in that area were fixed, leaving Senkyo to fight against the full power of the house of illusions. It would be a better decision to find a different path around the hostile area, but that would only be true if Senkyo didn’t have anything prepared to fight against that.

He fought off the enemies in his path using the bone dagger and made it to the entrance of the house of illusions. Just before he entered, he took out a leaf with a circuit on it. With Spirit at its center, two symbols of Connection intersected at the center of the Spirit symbol with the far left and right sides of the circuit extended with a symbol for Interaction. Each Interaction symbol connected to a symbol for Connection with Spirit inside of it. At the center of the house of illusions were magic arms, cave trappers, bomb jockeys, and a pile of leaves with the same circuit as the one on Senkyo’s hand. The circuit on those leaves glowed up until it arrived at the Interaction symbol. The moment Senkyo placed spirit power into the leaf in his hand, those Interaction symbols lit up and activated the entire circuit.

The leaves rose from the ground creating a circle, each of the leaves connected to each other through spirit power. That circle of spirit power then extended to Senkyo’s location, creating a tunnel of pure barrier. When the tunnel soon came into sight, Senkyo threw the leaf behind him and rushed into the tunnel. The walls of spirit power converged into the leaf on the floor and blocked the entrance. With this, he created a solid tunnel of spirit power that could protect him from any attacks. The same reaction continued to every pile of leaves Senkyo left behind up until the exit of level A3. Since the barriers were created, there was no need for Senkyo to worry about illusions and losing his path. Though, there were hostiles that got trapped inside the tunnel as it formed. Senkyo may be at a disadvantage if he used only his dagger but there was an easier solution that existed.

“O Nature, Amass your power at my word. Create my weapons and impale my adversaries. Needle Storm!”

The air around Senkyo compressed and shot out lethal gusts of wind into the enemies that were blocking his path. Needle storm not only pierced the first enemy it hit but as well as the enemies behind it. The Iwaiida outside of the barrier tried their all to break through, but it was too powerful for them to penetrate. Senkyo arrived at the center of the house of illusions while using the same spell to clear his path. From here, the barrier entered a steep stretch upward, so Senkyo climbed it by creating air footholds with his every jump. He passed through level A3 without much trouble because of his tunnel.

After that, Senkyo dealt with every enemy smoothly. The main troublesome enemies on level A2 were magic arms, but compared to dealing with arachne sages and demonic spiders, as long as you knew what they were capable of, they weren’t much of a threat. Meanwhile, level A1 didn’t even have any spiders that could unite them against Senkyo, and frankly speaking, levels B and above weren’t even a threat to him.

**…………**

“Welcome back, Senkyo. There were a few difficulties but you have successfully returned to the surface with all of the requirements accomplished. Well done.”

Leolja greeted Senkyo as he arrived from the entrance of the artificial cave. After dropping the dummy and regaining his voice with a few sharp breaths, he responded.

“…A-Are you saying that, haah, I need to go through that again… Haah, two more times!?”

He asked with a wearied voice, clearly out of any form of energy he had before beginning his test. Unfortunately, the moment he left the cave and made it safely to the surface, he remembered that the requirement for gaining access level S was to repeat that whole process a total of three times in a row. If he was this drained for the first time, then how did he expect to successfully conquer the artificial cave two more times? Leolja’s next words made his dreary eyes brighten up for a second but made them twist into confusion in the end.

“Oh, of course not, at least for today that is.”

“…H-Huh? Wait, but didn’t you say I have to do this three times in a row?”

“Yes, you are not mistaken. Except, the idea we have in mind for the phrase ‘in a row’ is for the crawler to conquer the same test for three days straight. In the first place, it is impossible for me to replicate levels B to S without running out of mana for the day. Doing this three times in one day is simply unreasonable. Implying it as if the crawler has to accomplish the test three times in the same day is just a little mental test we put our crawlers through.”

“Wait… but how does this make any difference from taking the test for access level A3 three times in a row? Their destination is level S too, right?”

“That is correct. The difficulty you experienced just now was the test for access level A3. Though, I would advise you not to let your guard down. What makes the test for access level A3 and level S different is the fact that the succeeding two tests will have escalating difficulties. Meaning that the test tomorrow and the test after that will be much harder than the previous one. This should serve as an answer for my below-average performance.”

*\*Says the one that was holding back!\**

His previous accusation came to mind. It was clear from the fight that Leolja wasn’t trying desperately to kill Senkyo just like how the other spiders in the cave were. In the end, instead of actively attacking Senkyo, he opted to hold a defensive line where his position could easily be compromised. Apparently, this was the treatment Leolja would give to crawlers aiming to obtain access level A3. The difficulty of achieving access level S could only be truly felt on the second and third time a crawler took the test. Just as Senkyo’s eyes were about to darken, Leolja went for a follow-up to counter this.

“Though, I must say, your fighting style truly was a surprise. Even though I was holding back, I had a hard time keeping up with you. I’ve never even seen over half of the feats you performed. Is this related to your race’s natural power?”

“O-Oh, yeah, something like that…”

Leolja must have been talking about how the bodies of different races can change the output of magic. Senkyo learned this from the Konjou Clan, before even getting sent to Zerid, so he knew it was better to nod along to not arouse suspicion. Then again, showing off how he used spirit power was suspicious enough in his book, so even this attempt may be useless.

“As expected, you truly are fearsome.”

“Hm? Where did that come from?”

Confused at Leolja’s strange choice of words, Senkyo couldn’t help but ask.

“The moment I laid my eyes on you, I knew instinctively just how powerful you are. To be honest, so much so that I couldn’t help but stutter. That power you hold… I wonder just how well you can use it?”

“…”

“Fufu… Well then, I will be on my way. Senkyo, let us meet again at this spot tomorrow at noon. We will resume the test by then.”

Just like that, Leolja turned his back without waiting for Senkyo’s response. There was no change in expression, nor in tone, nor in demeanor. It was the usual Leolja he always knew. Yet, right before he bid his farewells, Senkyo couldn’t help but feel that there was a deeper meaning to those words he let go.

**…………**

In a dark secluded area where the natural light never touches, a single figure tinkered with advanced aporocological tools, bouncing clings and clangs with a few cranks all over the walls as he worked on a certain device. Buried deep under the sounds of his engineering, the faint sound of footfalls could be heard coming from beyond the room. The man noticed this but didn’t bother checking. From the sanguine corridor lit by gejikr stones entered a familiar face to the man.

“Hard at work as always. When do you plan on having the decency to at least turn the lights on?”

The man who just arrive said mockingly to the tinkering man. His figure shadowed by the dark room and his contours illuminated by the blood-red light couldn’t have been anything more than frightening. Not to mention the fact that eight spider legs protruded from the man’s back. A normal human from Earth would lose their mind if they saw this sight presented to them at the end of a dark street at night. Placing his hand on a rectangular panel, he powered it with lightning magic, turning on the electronic lights in the room.

“Ugh, how many times do I have to tell you that I don’t have the time to lose focus. If you want to be my mother and take care of my room then do it. Just don’t bother me.”

“How shameless. A little word of appreciation would have been great. Well, at the very least you took the time to respond to me.”

“That’s because you have something for me, right? What do you have, Leolja?”

The face of the sole riser of Iqanlr’s sunken nest was illuminated under the clear light.

**352 – The Backhanded Gentleman**

“3 items.”

Leolja said as he opened a cloth bag and walked up to the man’s workbench. When he arrived at the man’s side, he finally decided to halt his work and directed his attention to Leolja. His red eyes glanced at Leolja’s face for only a moment before dedicating his gaze to the contents of the bag.

“I think you’ll be overjoyed with today’s haul. A bag of hair samples, a vial full of sweat, and finally—”

He placed the items he named on the workbench one by one. The man watched with a blank face as they entered his vision. Non-changing and unimpressed. Then, the last item was revealed.

“—half a vial of blood.”

“!!!”

The man couldn’t help but shove his face at the item, scrutinizing the liquid inside the vial with his similarly colored iris.

“Heh… hehehe… Hahahaha!! Good work, Leola! Nicely done!!”

Much unlike his cold treatment of Leolja earlier, the man cackled in joy and patted his shoulder as if he was his best friend.

“Ahhh, I was worried I wasn’t going to make it in time, but with this, I’ll have it done before midnight!”

“Was the previous item insufficient?”

“You got that right. Just look at it.”

The man opened a drawer and threw the item he took from it onto the workbench. It was a school uniform that was a bit scorched. Anyone who would see such an item would immediately think of an unfortunate student and relate it in some way to fire. The most common would be a fire accident perhaps on school premises or in the student’s home, but this one in particular wasn’t scorched by such mundane means.

When Leolja first handed over the school uniform after buying it from the owner, he immediately gave it to the man in front of him. It still looked like what any old scorched school uniform would look like, but now, it was completely different. The magic-less uniform now had patches of black all over the cloth. It wasn’t anything as simple as ink or black cloth. It shimmered unstably with a blue sheen much unlike anything the natural world would produce.

“The connection was rejected. The DNA sample was too inorganic to be turned into a medium. I liked your quick thinking and going after the clothes they wore, but the fact that the DNA was stuck on clothes meant that it couldn’t properly be treated as a catalyst. The same went for the other clothes they wore, so being old or new didn’t have anything to do with it. It’s unfortunate, but now that you brought me, not just his DNA, but his blood directly! Then you and I have nothing to fear. Though, how did you get these anyway?”

“From a little test. He wanted to become a crawler with access level S, so it gave me many opportunities to collect these items. But I must say, the blood was a bit troublesome to collect. I had to hide my strings in illusions he rushed past through and position them correctly so that they wouldn’t leave any wounds that were too noticeable. Originally, I only aimed to obtain a drop or two, but when I realized his wounds regenerated almost instantly, I took that as an opportunity to collect as much blood as possible. Right now, he should be walking outside without any marks. He didn’t even have any idea any of his blood was drawn.”

“Wow… he’s insane. Isn’t he a bit too careless? He took on a crawler’s test in this situation and didn’t even realize that his instructor was stealing blood right under his nose. No, before that, doesn’t he know that identification cards are necessary for crawlers to have? It takes the owner’s blood to make those so there would be no way for him to become a crawler without releasing his blood.”

“It’s as you say. It seemed like he was unaware of that fact so I kept quiet about it.”

“That’s very like you. So, what other things did you find out about him? You fought him right? Or maybe he didn’t even make it to level S?”

“Oh, I fought him. Just like my senses feared, he is a force to be reckoned with. Except…”

Leolja’s head slackened and placed it on his knuckles, getting absorbed in his thoughts.

“What? Spit it out.”

“No, it’s just that, he’s strong, but not as powerful as the image I had of him from your stories. A man that can use both mana and spirit power. I still held back on our fight like I was supposed to, but to be honest, I was expecting more from him. Perhaps some kind of power that could overwhelm me completely—”

“Wait, wait, wait!! He FOUGHT you!? As in no holds barred, full-power, magic and spirit power kind of fighting??”

“That’s correct.”

He said flatly, making the man ask rhetorically.

“Doesn’t this guy trust you a bit too much?”

“Perhaps. I do believe he showed me his whole hand casting magic, using spirit power, and applying them to symbols and circuits. Now that I fought him like that, I’m thankful you gave me the time to teach me all about the applications of spirit power. I never thought I would be able to use them, but it undoubtedly helped me follow up on his movements.”

“Well, it's no wonder. If you tested him for access level S, then that also meant fighting through all of your illusions. There’s only a limited amount of applications of spirit power that can affect illusions. So in the end, to make the experience more realistic, it's your job to make your illusions react the way his spirit skills are supposed to affect them. Did you make any misses on that part?”

“Surprisingly, it wasn’t a spirit skill that caught me off guard. It was a spell that summoned a black shroud that disrupted my control and communication over my illusions. What truly confused me was the fact it was a mid-tier spell despite its damaging effects.”

“Ah… then that had to have been a Spirit Spell. It’s a special term we use to address spells that use spirit power to compress chanting time and, if done well, apply other spells to it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Hmm, let’s say that we have a normal mid-tier spell that can make a certain effect happen and describe this effect as ‘explosive.’ Going through the method of creating spells, spirit power can be used, or specifically, symbols, to craft a spell that incorporates other spells into the new spell. This new spell is called a Spirit Spell. It uses the caster’s spirit power along with mana. This certain spirit spell has the power to produce the effects of the earlier spell we talked about in addition to other effects.”

“That’s absurd! If that’s true then…”

Right as Leolja’s words trailed off, perhaps out of the refusal to accept reality, the man mercilessly brought reality to his face.

“—It would be like casting two spells at the same time? That’s right. It creates a symbol out of the words in a chant to address the activation of another spell. Just like what I said earlier, the normal spell could be described as ‘explosive.’ A word or phrase inside of the spirit spell’s chant will be used to embody this spell, activating it along with the activation of the spirit spell. Alternatively, it can also be used in a single spell. Let’s say you have a high-tier spell and its requirements and grammar can be manipulated. You can turn that spell into a spirit spell by shortening phrases into words, making it seem like a mid-tier spell.”

“…”

Leolja could only stare at the man with a nonplussed expression on his face, unable to properly process such an unbelievable effect. Taking responsibility for accidentally sealing Leolja’s mouth, the man changed the subject.

“Enough of that. Overall, what’s your opinion of him?”

Leolja’s head lifted to the ceiling, reviewing his memories and comprehending them. About a minute of undisturbed silence passed before he arrived at a conclusion.

“Jack of all trades, master of none. That is what that man is. His techniques are too few and sloppy to become a real threat to me, or at the very least, compared to your works, his techniques are subpar, especially for someone that can naturally use magic and spirit power. Then again, his skill set is so versatile that I have no idea what that man has planned next. I was holding back on our fight earlier, but right when he defeated me, it was no doubt a complete loss. I wasn’t able to do anything against his sudden attack. If the same event happens while I was serious, the result would be the same. That being said, now that I know what he is capable of, I do not think he has enough power to defeat me on the third day of his crawler test.”

“Hmm… is that so?”

The man swept his hand over the workbench and picked up the vial half-filled with blood. He brought the item right up to his eye, just like how he did earlier.

“As he is, maybe. But I wonder if you would be able to say the same when that third day comes.”

“Surely you jest. Do you think he would be able to improve that much? He has just about two days left. It’s impossible.”

“We have no way of knowing. Even I don’t.”

“Then were you just bluffing with what you said to me?”

“Well… I don’t know if he’ll pass his test or not. But if you think about how the test is supposed to replicate a real life-or-death battle, then what I can say for certain, is that you won’t be able to kill him.”

Leolja raised his brows in doubt, yet he couldn’t help but pry his words open.

“What makes you say so?”

“That’s because that man…”

A change happened inside the blood vial he stared at for so long. A flicker of blue, black, and purple, those very same colors reflecting on his sanguine eyes. Something that would not appear in anyone’s natural bloodstream.

“…has already made contact with the power of a god.”

“…”

Again, he fell silent, trying to figure out the meaning of the man’s words.

“Well, just be cautious is all I’m telling you to do. Don’t get caught now! The more of his blood that we have the better!”

**353 – The Strategist’s Struggle**

The time reached dusk when Senkyo and Shiro finally finished the first part of the crawler’s test and left Haeqras. A long day of fighting exhausted Senkyo in both mind and body, so they made a beeline for the food district and filled their stomachs to the brim. They ate their main dishes in a single shop and proceeded to eat more after that by making rounds and buying food-to-go around the district as if it were a festival.

At the end of their food binge, there should have been nothing better than to go back to their penthouse hotel, immerse their body in a relaxing bath, and stow away into the land of dreams. However, there was one thing that stood in the way of this luxurious vision. No matter what he did, Senkyo couldn’t get the words Leolja said to him out of his head.

*“\*That power you hold… I wonder just how well you can use it?\*”*

He couldn’t help but feel like it meant something. Beneath Leolja’s polite smile and demeanor was a tone that seemed to challenge him. What bugged him the most was how close the fight was despite it being the easiest of the three runs he had to do to obtain access level S. He held back before reaching level A3, but that didn’t mean he would be able to beat Leolja on the second run. He already did all he could to defeat him earlier; fighting him tomorrow as he is was a death wish. There were options for honing his technique and preparing ready-made talismans, but there was only so much those could do in a short period of time. He didn’t even have a day before the next fight. If he wanted a faster way to secure his strength, then there was only one thing he could think of.

“Just as I thought, nothing beats the library.”

Senkyo said as he browsed through the bookshelves of Xhiari’s great library. The books he currently had in hand were spellbooks of the elements of water, nature, earth, frost, lightning, light, dark, and finally, the last book he was about to grab from the shelves, control. From the books of these eight elements, he was set on finding useful spells that he could use in tomorrow’s test. He didn’t pick these specific elements at random. Senkyo chose these spellbooks because of the guidebook he was given earlier in the test. It was confiscated after the test, but he remembered that there was a portion that suggested useful spells that crawlers often used to deal with the enemies in the sunken nest. Most of those spells were under the selected eight elements he had in hand.

In addition to these spellbooks, Shiro made a suggestion to pick up a book about the sunken nest of Iqanlr. Although he already had the spellbooks and knew which spells were suggested by Haeqras, there was still a big difference between technical knowledge and knowledge gained from experience. In general, Haeqras would have detailed information about the sunken nests they were assigned to, which Senkyo didn’t have access to since he wasn’t a crawler yet. But, that didn’t stop other crawlers or clients that entered the sunken nest to write their experiences down in books and share them with the world. By inspecting those books as well, then there was a chance for him to find unpopular strategies or come up with ideas for his future actions based on what was written in the books. He decided to take up Shiro’s idea but picked only one book to use as a reference. His books were already on the verge of hitting the double digits. It would be another problem if he didn’t find the information he needed because he overloaded himself with too many books, so he placed a limit of nine books on himself.

Senkyo and Shiro occupied an open table and began their search for knowledge. He knew only about 20 spells to use in battle. It may seem a lot for the average earthling, but a measly 20 spells wouldn’t be able to survive in the depths of Iqanlr’s sunken nest. Senkyo only compensated for his lack of power by using his versatility of magic and spirit skills. Others may value the strength of a single powerful technique or spell greater than the strength of numerous spells or techniques with average power, just like Ryosei, but Senkyo was different. For him, to become strong is to have many weapons in his arsenal. Unlike other people, learning a single spell doesn’t just give him one more spell to use in battle, but it also gave him the option to apply that new spell to his spirit techniques, just like how he did when he activated the field circles that released a prolonged shroud of black clouds. His strength lay in strategy, not power. The more knowledge he applies to his strategies, the stronger he will be to overcome the power of his enemies.

For the first three hours of reading, Shiro read through the spellbooks of water, nature, and control while Senkyo was reading all of the others. When Shiro finished reading her third book, she then stood up and notified Senkyo that she wanted to find a certain book. There were no dangers inside the library, so he let her roam free just like before.

The hours passed and they spent their time in the library until they reached deep into the night. Senkyo had two stacks of books around him. Six books to his left, two books to his right, one additional book to his side he used for reference, and a stack of papers and a pen the library let him have. In the past few hours, he successfully finished skimming and scanning through six spellbooks and listed down promising articles he found, all the while using the book about Iqanlr’s sunken nest to check which spells could be useful and can be integrated into his strategies. The two that remained on his left were the spellbooks for nature and control and the one he just finished was the spellbook for the water element. He left these three spellbooks for last so that just in case he couldn’t finish everything in one night, Shiro would have already read the three books which could compensate for Senkyo’s lack of knowledge.

He took his arm out to pick up the spellbook for nature. Then, the moment he was about to place his fingers on it, a loud bang came from in front of him as a stack of books was carelessly placed on the table. His head flicked instinctively and his eyes landed on a familiar individual.

“Yo. You’re that person who stopped my Ruerg’s malfunction, aren’t you?”

“Ah, you’re…”

It was the dragon man he watched yesterday on Xhiari’s training grounds. It seemed like he also recognized Senkyo. Well, seeing as he was the one that silenced a high-tier spell with a mid-tier spell that no one has ever heard of, it was only natural his impression on them would be huge. The distance didn’t matter; Senkyo’s image was engraved into the dragon man’s retinas.

“How about introducing yourself first?”

Behind him was the woman the dragon man fought against. Senkyo’s impression of her was a calm and collected type, but now that he got a good look at her face, she may have just been too tired to make any big reactions. His reason for thinking this was the bags under her lethargic red eyes.

“Ah, my bad, my bad. I’m Vleid of the Aagri, and this is Raeri, a Sorun. Now, we just have a few questions to ask you.”

Senkyo’s eye twitched in annoyance, seeing exactly where the flow of this conversation was about to go.

“What did you do back there!?”

An internal groan echoed in his head as those very words left Vleid’s mouth.

**354 – Their Proposal**

“Oww!”

“No shouting in the library.”

Surprisingly, Senkyo’s internal wish for the dragon man called Vleid to shut up was quickly fulfilled by his companion, Raeri. Perhaps because she was wary of their location, but the tired look on her face as she pulled the chair next to Vleid to sit down indirectly told him she just couldn’t be bothered with the dragon man’s excessive energy.

“You two are close, huh?”

“Ha? As if!”

“Mm.”

Vleid denied his claim while Raeri only shrugged her shoulders in apathy. Yesterday, his impression of them was that of two fierce rivals or at the very least a pair that wanted to crush the other opponent with all their might. Contrary to that, seeing and interacting with them in person gave him the impression of long-lived friends.

“Anyway—K-Kgh… Anyway… what kind of magic did you use to stop my Ruerg’s malfunction? Y’know, the AW-Unit Frame I was using.”

With a swift and effective kick from Raeri under the table, Vleid was forced to keep his voice down and interrogate Senkyo with a hushed tone. From the dragon man’s words, it seemed like the exoskeletons attached to their suits were called AW-Unit Frames. The suits themselves are the main AW-Unit while the exoskeletons are like extensions or frames. Senkyo had no intention of revealing the magic he used on Vleid’s machine, but the talk about AW-Units did interest him.

“That… Hmmm, sorry. The magic I know is not for sale.”

“What—Tch…!”

“Be nice.”

“Whatever.”

A click of the tongue in response to another one of Raeri’s silent discipline. If Senkyo didn’t know any better he would have thought he was dealing with a dog and his owner. Vleid returns his focus to Senkyo and continues.

“Okay, at the very least, tell us where you learned that magic.”

“I don’t know.”

“Huh? What do you mean you don’t know?”

“I mean what I said; I don’t know. Look, I’m just trying to learn some spells. If you’re going to continue bothering me, I’ll go to a different table.”

“C-Come on, just wait. Do you even have any idea what you did yesterday? You silenced rampaging high-tier magic with a mid-tier spell! ‘The magic with the superior mana cannot lose to those inferior to it’—It’s something that shakes the very concept of magic down entirely to its roots! It’d be one thing if you used an element to counter fire magic and if the magic didn’t target the high-tier magic but what your mid-tier did was exactly just that! From our perspective, you used a null element against the fire element, went against a high-tier spell head-on with a mid-tier spell, and won—Argh…!”

When Vleid’s voice began to pick up with his passionate speech, Raeri didn’t forget to take the reigns and keep his discipline in check. Though, this time he was quick to recover from her attack.

“A-Anyway, what I’m trying to say is that I want you to help us learn more about what you did. There are countless things that people don’t know yet. Those who believe they know everything are fools. It's our job as researchers to discover exactly what it is we don’t know and understand them. What you did back there—could be the very key to something that can change the lives of countless people for the better. What you did can change the three worlds for the better…! *\*Glance…\**”

Just as he realized his voice was about to pick up again, Vleid immediately subdued his volume to a whisper. His quick thinking saved him another round of one-sided beating from the woman beside him. His routine skit with Raeri aside, what he said was very interesting to him, enough to keep him silent in thought for a bit. He spoke of the concept of magic and how his creation magic seemed to break that.

Contrary to his rough attitude, he was actually earnest about the subject and conscious of his position as a researcher. Looking at the books they brought with them which consisted mostly of apocrology, and taking in the fact that they are Hira’s classmates, students of class R2-S, which was claimed by Hira to be the most talented class in their year, then they were most likely capable people despite what their demeanor might suggest. Not to mention the very two people in front of him were the same two people that engaged in the anime-like mecha battle that instantly cast magic as if they were Angels and applied them to machines they built with their own two hands. Now that he thought more of them than just annoyances to his studies, the fact that he was actually talking to amazing people slowly sank into his mind. Was Hira the same? He didn’t know because he hadn’t seen what she was capable of in action yet.

Reviewing Vleid’s little speech, what he was offering could undoubtedly benefit him. He didn’t know about what he was capable of either, so having people who know what to look for and how to teach him more about what he could do was extremely useful. Except, with pros also come with cons.

“You say that it can make change for the better but conversely, doesn’t it mean it also has the power to make change for the worse? How can you be so eager to learn about what I can do if you know it can also bring suffering?”

“T-That’s…”

Senkyo struck Vleid’s argument at the very heart of its weak points. He tried to convince him by only directing his attention to the positives and ignoring the negatives, but Senkyo didn’t miss that. Vleid was essentially speaking of the advancement of magic. If there was ever a world where the average person would be able to use creation magic, there was indeed a possibility to make a great change. However, the word “advance” carried more weight than what the normal person would think. Scientific advancement gave access to efficient resource production, improved daily lives, and solved numerous health issues, causing the advancement of the human race, or Earth, in terms of the three worlds.

The sad part was that advancement didn’t only mean an increase in positive outcomes but as well as negative ones such as allowing new ways for violence, cruelty, and suffering to occur. Wars are a simple way to summarize the point. The question was, what type of war would occur if Zerid ever advanced more than it already has? Due to the conflict of the past generation of ambassadors, Zerid has become the most advanced world over Earth and the Spirit Realm which both experienced a devolution. If Senkyo’s powers send this world a level higher than what it currently is, it could be very likely to spark a new conflict. While there may be people who would never dare break the peace of the three worlds, there were also those who seek the absolute opposite, the primary example being, END.

“I’m sorry but…”

It was decided. The cons much outweighed the pros. There was no justifiable reason for Senkyo to risk sparking conflict between parallel worlds just because he wanted to become a little bit stronger than he is now. He wanted to know what he was and what he was capable of, but at the end of the day, the reason he chose this path in his life was so that it could give more meaning to it. What person would want a life that was plagued with eternal conflict and unceasing suffering? That wasn’t what Senkyo wanted.

“Umm, can I say something?”

Raeri spoke with a listless tone. Perhaps because the situation was going south, she finally decided to raise her voice, though it didn’t sound like she cared much. Vleid shot his gaze in her direction and pointed it to the ground in dejection. It seemed like he wanted to convince Senkyo all on his own without relying on Raeri. She didn’t give him even a glance but she did pat his back. It took all of Senkyo’s power to hold back a retort about Raeri and Vleid’s strange master-and-dog-like relationship.

“It looks to me like you don’t know much about what you did and actually want to know more about it. The problem is that you distrust those around you too much to be able to rely on them with your power.”

Senkyo didn’t know if it was mind-reading or just her ability to read people, but Raeri hit his main concerns with a bullseye.

“Then, how about we compromise? How does powering up without us doing anything for you sound like?”

**355 – True Motive**

“…And what’s in it for you?”

A way to become stronger without any risks. As much as he wanted to accept those tantalizing words at face value, there was always some kind of string attached to these shady deals. Senkyo just couldn’t find a reason for Raeri and Vleid to help him without anything in it for them. In the first place, the two approached him and immediately tried to extract the information about his magic from him. Throwing away their purpose completely only increased his suspicions of them.

Despite this, Raeri stuck to her words.

“Nothing? I thought it was obvious… Well, you probably doubt us so that’s fine. The best case scenario for us is to have you share with us your magic so that we can use it in our research, or maybe even switch our research topics entirely. That being said, you don’t want to share your magic because you don’t trust anyone else with it. I’ve seen it before with other races, so I don’t care what reason you have. The fact is that you don’t want to share it with anybody. We can’t convince you to share with us. Then here’s an idea: how about we give you what you want and wait for something to happen?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“…”

Vleid didn’t seem to get it much but Senkyo could guess what she was trying to go for. Her lethargic expression unchanging, she finally removed her gaze from the book she was reading and properly faced Senkyo. For a split second, there was a faint hit of emotion in her eyes as she matched Senkyo’s stare.

“In short, the answer is the AW-Units. You clearly don’t have access to them, but like anyone, you can become much more powerful with them. From the looks of it, you’ve been researching a lot about spells.”

Raeri said as she pointed to Senkyo’s books.

“There are a lot of spells in this world. The spells written on those books you have are but a fraction of the collective of existing spells. Do you really have the confidence to embed every single one in your head? Not to mention, use them all effectively in battle without them hindering you? Let’s say that you did manage to remember every spell in those books. How confident are you that you can choose a single spell in those books that is the best for a single situation? Not only do you have to think and recall the effects of all those spells but also recite their specific chants. Frankly, it's inefficient. But, with AW-Units, it can reduce that burden significantly. You only have to think of the spell to activate it. No chants and immediate casting. Every single spell you have can be integrated into these suits and have them activated at your leisure—The same goes for that unique magic that you showed us.”

“Oohhh!”

Vleid shot his head back in understanding, finally realizing what Raeri was trying to convey.

“So basically, you want to give me power and you two will act like vultures, waiting for the moment I slip and reveal something about my magic.”

“Mhm, pretty much.”

“Hey! Don’t tell him that!”

“I don’t want to hear it. The reason you couldn’t convince him was that you couldn’t compromise. If you want to say something show me some results.”

“U-Ugh…”

Every single time. Whenever the frail-looking woman in front of Senkyo does something to keep the large, intimidating dragon man under her thumb, it sends chills down his spine. It was clear from the start that he shouldn’t get involved with these types of people but Senkyo couldn’t help but admit that what they did have was an enticing offer.

To summarize her point, she was willing to offer Senkyo lessons to learn about AW-Units and how to use them. He had the choice of applying his unique spells on it if he liked, but that would run the risk of revealing it. Though it may sound bad, the most important point here was the fact that it was nothing more than a choice. If Senkyo simply chose to never apply creation magic to his AW-Units, then his primary worries would cease to exist. So long as he kept his knowledge about creation magic away from making contact with the world, then theoretically, there was no possible way for him to slip up. So long as her words had no other purposes than that, then there were no risks only rewards.

In other words, a careless challenge. Again, the story was too good to be true. Would someone of her status really offer him something like this? He couldn’t help but doubt her motives. He began thinking. Perhaps their motive wasn’t to get anything out of Senkyo at all, but it was true that they wanted to convince him to do something. What was it? There was just too much Senkyo didn’t know.

“I will keep your offer in mind and get back to you once I make a decision. For now, I will take my leave and retire for the day.”

His danger senses blared louder than ever. It was too incoherent. Their actions and motives didn’t align. In times like this, there was always one safe action to take out of everything currently offered to him. A tactical retreat.

“Then, excuse—”

“Oh my, what a coincidence it is to find you here, Sir Yukou.”

His hair stood on end and chills ran down his spine once more, making him instinctively use flash strike to leave the area he was in. Looking back, he found Professor Gaeka with his hand suspended in the air, perhaps because it was about to pat his shoulder. Naturally, using flash strike in a quiet library caused quite a commotion. It wasn’t only sound but as well as the wind pressure that sent the countless numbers of paper in the area to a flutter. With the whole library’s attention directed to them, Senkyo responded.

“A-Ah, why if it isn’t Professor Gaeka. Y-You surprised me so much it made me jump… Sorry, did you have any business with me today?”

Senkyo continued to put on airs, maintaining his polite words as he conversed with Gaeka, all the while looking for any possible exits in the area. His eyes darted around in a panic. He tried to control them despite this, but it seemed like Gaeka wasn’t letting him off easy.

“You seem to be in a hurry. Are you busy at this time? Actually, I wanted to follow up on our previous agreement. I secured a suitable room to perform the required blood extraction. So, if you could please cooperate with us, we would appreciate nothing more.”

“‘Us?’—Wha, HEY!!”

From out of nowhere, the surrounding individuals got out of their seats and grabbed hold of Senkyo’s body, holding it down and preventing his escape. Were they spies Gaeka planted this whole time? No, he didn’t have time to think of useless things in his situation. What mattered the most now was escape.

*“\*Flash Strike: Breath of the Wind!\*”*

Whatever was happening right now there was no doubt it was all planned. Taking that into account, Senkyo dropped the idea of using magic entirely and solely relied on spirit skills. For everyone in this world, magic was the norm, and spirit power was non-existent. If they prepared anything at all to stop Senkyo, it wouldn’t affect his spirit power… or at least that was what he hoped.

Senkyo activated his spirit skill just like always, but in this instance, it refused to work. There, a twisted smile appeared on Gaeka’s face.

“Didn’t I tell you? I made my own preparations.”

It was right after he said that did the people holding him down locked him to the floor.

“O Fire, protect me with your flare—Gah!!”

This time, he tried to chant a spell, but his head was kicked into the ground and stopped his words from forming magic.

“Haha, hahaha!!”

With his cheek pressed to the floor, he could see Gaeka leisurely walking toward him with an arrogant face. No magic and no spirit power. Just as he feared, when stripped of his fangs, there was nothing left for Senkyo to defend himself. Even if Ryosei was present, he wouldn’t compensate for the sheer difference of strength between Senkyo’s body and everyone that was holding him down. If it was Ryosei’s original body, there were still options available for him, but at the end of the day, Senkyo wasn’t that kind of person. It was unreasonable for someone to expect his body to reach what Ryosei’s living body attained in the past. Just as Senkyo was gritting his teeth, desperate for other options, something strange popped out of the gaps in the floorboards.

It was something like a small brown vegetable-like faceless cartoon character that you would find in television shows. It was about the size of the tip of his finger, waving at him with its little stubby arms as it got out of the floor with its little stubby legs.

“…Eh…?”

At that moment, the small brown creature expanded, knocking everyone away from Senkyo. At first, he thought he was saved, but taking a closer look at how the creature expanded, its brown skin surrounded his whole body. The next thing he knew, he was eaten.

Silence returned to the library as the brown creature ate Senkyo and escaped through the floorboards. There was only one person that reacted to this, his face brightening from pure rage, his body shaking as if having trouble keeping his rampage in check. In the end, he let his frustration out with a single loud scream, cursing the one person that had the ability to disrupt him.

“ADEIRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!!!”

**356 – Movements in the Shadows**

“My, my, what trouble this is…”

A single man muttered to himself as he stared at the person in front of him. Lying on the ground with his face down to the floor was Senkyo. Adeira scratched the back of his neck awkwardly as he was reminded of the event that just occurred.

“This throws me off my plans…”

“U-Ughhh…”

“Ah, you’re awake, Sir Yukou.”

Senkyo’s pained groans echoed through the room, alerting Adeira of his consciousness. Slowly, he pushed the ground and fixed his body up. Looking around the room, he seemed to be in some kind of personal office but it was hard to tell what anything was with his dizzy head and the dim surroundings. The only source of light in the room was the moonlight that pierced the window, outlining the contours of a person he met just yesterday. One of the most valued individuals in the Apocrologic Academy of Xhiari, Adeira.

“S-Sir Adeira?”

Senkyo stuttered as he tried to confirm the identity of the person in front of him. With a quick nod, the man responded.

“That’s right. You were in a difficult situation back there. You have to be careful next time.”

“Be careful…? No, wait, first of all, what’s happening and why are you here?”

“Hmm, I suppose a quick lecture is in order. It would be best if you at least became aware of the situation, for the both of us.”

“What do you mean?”

Senkyo shot Adeira a dubious look, but seeing as he was the one that saved him from being cornered by Gaeka earlier, he at least owed him enough to lend him an ear, suspicious as he may seem.

“Right now, an internal strife is happening within Iqanlr’s walls. Countless disagreements, political conflicts, sudden violent outbursts. They may not be visible to the public eye, but they are indeed happening. These conflicts are similar to what you experienced earlier in the library.”

“Internal conflicts? Why? Is the government in Iqanlr that bad?”

“No, usually they’re united and organized, showing great management in this city. The problem is Professor Gaeka.”

“Oh, him…”

Honestly, Senkyo wasn’t too surprised by that revelation. He saw Gaeka as an enemy in the first place. Him causing trouble was only natural for Senkyo. The problem was how he created these problems, which Adeira explains.

“His arrival to Iqanlr was strange at best. It wasn’t like Xhiari was needing of any specialists and the official statement for his coming to Xhiari was to find solutions about the rampaging monster that appeared in the capital of Uikakrn. But this is the border city of Iqanlr, one of the farthest locations from the capital in the territory. It made no sense to send a researcher this far away from the origin of the incident. Yet, almost no one seemed to question it. As for those who initially did, they eventually stopped questioning this too, almost as if their minds stopped perceiving this as a problem. The only ones that aren’t affected by this in the institution are me and a few of my companions. After our quick reconnaissance, we found that these strange behaviors are centered around the people in Xhiari, Iqanlr’s military, and the current government. We consider it some form of mind control, but we are yet to confirm what exactly this is. As for the cause of these strange behaviors,… well, the fact that almost every single one of those affected by this was treating Professor Gaeka like a king was a dead giveaway that he was involved in this situation. Eventually, after all of us digging around, we found out that Professor Gaeka’s objective was one thing—You.”

Adeira pointed at Senkyo with his sharp gaze piercing through his body. He already knew this, so for now, he decided to stay silent and returned with a serious gaze of his own.

“The actions taken by Professor Gaeka’s pawns were usually focused on making a mess of the government in Iqanlr. At first, we thought he wanted to take Iqanlr down from the inside, but those attempts suddenly stopped yesterday. When we reviewed the positions of his pawns, we found that they were all centered around the entrance of Iqanlr. With the help of our professional trackers, he quickly grasped the situation that Professor Gaeka’s forces pulled back and poured them all on observing the man named Yukou Senkyo. We had no idea why he had such an obsession with you, but after what I saw yesterday, it was clear.”

He was referring to when Senkyo used creation magic to silence the Vleid’s AW-Unit Frame’s malfunction. It was one thing if he made a mistake and let his power slip, but Senkyo didn’t even know anything about his power at the time. In other words, the headache he was experiencing now was because of some work of nature that made him reveal his affinity for creation magic for some reason.

“From what I understand, the professor wants a sample of your blood, correct?”

“Yes. Before you say anything else, I have no intention of revealing why.”

“That’s fine. What’s important is to keep Professor Gaeka from reaching his objectives. Sir Yukou, from now on—”

“Eh!? Is this where Onii-chan is!? This is the room, isn’t it! Heyy, Ranaaat, help meeee~!!”

Adeira’s words were abruptly cut off by a loud series of banging on the door and a familiar voice that Senkyo knew all too well.

“Calm down, Miss Shiro, the door is just locked. Please, wait for Sir Adeira to open the door.”

“Wha, b-but…! Onii-chan is…!”

“Please wait.”

“B—”

“Please wait.”

“Yes…”

Senkyo couldn’t help but overhear a ridiculous conversation from beyond the door behind him. It was no doubt Shiro, which he forgot about in the heat of the moment, as painful as it was to admit. Though, it did sound like she made another friend, well, at the very least someone who can keep her under control.

“What terrible timing…”

Adeira said with an exasperated sigh as he walked up to the door and unlocked it.

*\*BANG!\**

“Ah…! Onii-chan!!”

“Whoa!”

The door immediately flung open, smacking Adeia in the face as Shiro shot through the room and leaped in his arms. He was happy to be reunited with his little sister, but he couldn’t help but feel bad about Adeira. He could only let out a wry smile as he saw Adeira’s vacant eyes.

“Thank you for your hard work.”

“Mnn… Likewise…”

From beyond the door, another person came in and gave Adeira a greeting along with a polite bow. She was a harpy with short brunette hair and glasses wearing a familiar fur cloak and brown shorts. She was the librarian that he engaged with on their first visit to the library.

“Thank you for your hard work.”

“A-Ah, yeah, good work out there…”

She turned to Senkyo and gave him the same formal bow and greeting. He didn’t know what was happening but he did appreciate that she brought Shiro back to him. After fixing himself and rebuilding his composure, Adeira locked the door and returned to the front.

**357 – The Third Party**

“This is Miss Ranat. She is… a third party you could say. I didn’t expect her at all but she was the one who first reported suspicious movements in the library to me. Namely, right around when Professor Gaeka’s pawns were gathering around you. Thanks to her, I was able to summon my familiar and got you out of that hairy situation.”

“Oh, so that little chibi doll was your familiar?”

“…Chibi doll, huh…? Well, I suppose that’s also a way to describe him. Anyway, I only cooperated with her to save you from Professor Gaeka, so I don’t know her motives either. Our partnership ends along with this meeting tonight, so if you want to ask her questions you can do that yourself. I realize that I’m a bit pushy but as of the moment, my hostility toward Professor Gaeka was revealed and now I’m on the run from his pawns. I have my ways for situations like this but there’s no doubt this will become a headache.”

“That reminds me, Hira-san said that you were the one that pioneered teleportation technology. Is it possible for you to let us borrow something that can help us for the time being?”

“You don’t hold back on your words do you, Sir Yukou? I believe you already owe me a good debt but you wish for more… I can’t say I’m impressed.”

Although Adeira’s words caused him to feel a pang of guilt, he was also convinced that this needed to be done.

“Your opinions aside, I think this is beneficial for both of us. You would reduce my chances of getting caught and I would have increased chances of escaping. Of course, if you want me to repay my debts then that’s fine, but I won’t be able to do anything if I’m caught.”

“Haah…”

Adeira let out a tired sigh, his reluctance showing clearly in his expression.

“I will hand over one of my tools. I can understand if you think it is barely anything but I think that this is the right amount to give you the right amount of protection.”

“? Why is that?”

“Because the one I’ll be giving you should ward off any reckless attempts Professor Gaeka would make to capture you. Tonight, there is a chance for them to attack you in your residence. But when he realizes what tool I gave you, he’ll be cautious. Any more than this item may give the impression that you still have other plans to do in Iqanlr. We want to make it look like you will have no hesitation in using this the moment you feel threatened. After all, the moment you use this tool, there would be nothing to stop you from leaving Iqanlr. I’d imagine that would be the worst-case scenario for the professor. Flaunt it confidently but be careful not to lose it. Don’t give any impressions that you plan to escape using anything besides the item I’ll be giving you. The last thing we want is for them to launch a desperate attack because they thought you were leaving the city. Just follow those instructions and you should be able to continue your day tomorrow as normal. I’ll be pulling some strings to ensure this, so please don’t get caught.”

“Yes.”

Senkyo responded with a firm nod. It seemed like Adeira already thought of handing him the magic tool he had in mind from the start, seeing as he prepared this detailed explanation for him.

“Let’s end the night here. Miss Ranat, please escort them to the area I mentioned earlier.”

“Understood.”

Ranat gave Adeira another bow before leaving the room with Senkyo and Shiro in tow. The door of the room closed behind them as the two gave their final words of farewell to Adeira. Looking around the hallway they entered, it seemed like it belonged to that of a large manor. They walked by the rich hallway aesthetics as the moonlight peered through the windows, making vertical shadows of the windows they passed through.

“Hey, hey, Ranat, where are we going?”

Shiro playfully asked, to which she responded in the same formal tone.

“Our destination is one of Sir Adeira’s teleportation rooms. He informed me that he will be sending you two to your current residence using that for the night.”

Senkyo carefully watched Ranat’s movements. He didn’t know what happened in the short amount of time Shiro was gone, but somehow she got to her good side quite easily. As much as he didn’t want to accept the possibility, there was certainly a chance for Shiro to get infected by whatever mind control Adeira mentioned.

“Miss Ranat, what exactly happened between you and Shiro?”

“I simply taught her a few spells and methods I know of. If you are worried about her well-being then there is no need to fret. As the master of Miss Shiro, you should be able to perceive her physical and mental conditions as you please. Using this privilege, the task of determining whether or not she is affected by the mind control Sir Adeira mentioned would be trivial.”

“E-Eh…? Wait, eh, I-I can do that?”

It seemed like Ranat immediately saw through the purpose of Senkyo’s question and preemptively reassured him of Shiro’s safety. It would be good if she was just fast on the pick-up but her answer was so accurate that he couldn’t help but think she had the ability to read minds. Well, it wasn’t like he had any way of telling for certain, so he set that thought aside for now and expanded on a more beneficial topic.

“Yes. There is more to a familiar pact than simply uniting and empowering the familiar. A familiar pact is a complex ritual that involves both mana and magic. It is generally seen as a dangerous practice for failing the ritual may easily result in the deaths of the intended familiar and master involved, as well as other spectators that are in close proximity to the ritual.”

When Ranat said this, what immediately came to mind was the calamitous energy that he read from the book Shiro handed to him. A ritual with mana and spirit power involved sounded like it could cause an outbreak of calamitous energy. The fact that he and Shiro were involved in one in the past gave him chills, but then again, considering that Shiro told him that his body had the ability to purify this energy and turn it into the creation element, there may have been no such dangers at all.

“The master has the role of caring for the familiar and giving them new potential. Because of this, there are many ways available for the master to manage their familiars. The trick to using this management properly is hidden behind the function of ‘orders’ given to the familiar. Meanwhile, it is the familiar’s duty to fulfill their master’s wishes, supporting them however they can. To help in their duty, the familiar has the ability to adjust themselves to the master’s wish. From what I have heard, the true potential of a familiar pact will only show when the spirits of both familiar and master become one.”

Senkyo and Shiro stared at Ranat’s back in confusion. Senkyo could tell she used general terms to shorten her explanation but that increased the vagueness of her message that he couldn’t get a grasp on immediately. On the other hand, Shiro’s blank eyes signaled that she shut down halfway through her explanation. Just as Senkyo was about to ask to clarify Ranat’s points, she turned around and handed him a book.

“Please take this. It is a book about the familiar pacts written by a reliable researcher. The text is all in Japanese so… it is the only downside if you cannot read it.”

“Ehhh…”

“Wow! As expected of Ranat, she’s always ready!”

Ranat handed over a book with the title “Foundations of the Familiar Pact Ritual; The Truth Behind the Binding Circles.” Senkyo could only stare at her in a confused look while Shiro cheered for her. Was she carrying that book the whole time? Did she know they would talk about familiar pacts on the way here? The more Senkyo spent time around her the more he became convinced that she had some kind of mind-reading or prediction ability. Was she really just a librarian? She seemed more like a maid. No, a secretary! These confused thoughts continued to plague Senkyo’s mind.

“U-Uhmm, Miss Ranat, why are you cooperating with us this much again?”

“Hmm… If I had to say, that is because this is also for my sake.”

No matter how many times Senkyo tried to probe, Ranat refused to dive into that topic any further.

**358 – The End of a Hectic Day**

“N-Nnnhh~!!”

A sweet moan left Senkyo’s mouth as his refreshed body sank into the soft quicksand that was his bed. After a long day of hard work, it felt like he was thrown into the clouds, a comfortable softness enveloping his body.

Recalling today’s events, he visited Arachne Tailors, fought against Leolja for the test to become a crawler and obtain access level S, then went to the library to research useful spells, had another encounter with Gaeka, was saved by Adeira, had a mysterious exchange with Ranat, and was sent back to their penthouse suite through Adeira’s teleportation technology. It was quite the day. Thinking back on it, the teleportation room they were sent to was similar to the teleportation points the Konjou Clan had. The main difference was that it was able to teleport them to a location without another teleportation circle placed.

When Adeira activated the teleportation mechanism, the next thing they knew, Senkyo and Shiro were standing right inside their penthouse suite. No matter how hard they looked there were no teleportation circles to be found. In the end, they decided to drop their search and prepared to end their day. Just like yesterday, Senkyo was first to enter the bath and refreshed his mind and body. What made this experience even better was that he was able to use proper sleepwear rather than just a bathrobe. Unlike yesterday, he didn’t feel as much vulnerability now that he had these clothes.

After relishing the sensation of his king-sized bed, Senkyo rolled over, grabbed a certain item around his neck, and placed it in the center of his vision. It was a strange pendant with a small crystal orb with shimmering colors of purple, blue, and red with red at its core and purple and blue spiraling around it. Adeira explained to Senkyo that if the crystal orb or the chain that holds it is broken, he will immediately be teleported far away from Iqanlr. It was simple but effective. Gaeka needed Senkyo to remain in Iqanlr but any attempt at his capture will immediately destroy that objective. When Adeira first handed him the item, he had doubts about how it might be vulnerable to Gaeka’s tools, that being items or techniques similar to the one he used to stop him from using spirit power. It was a valid concern, yet Adeira was adamant that nothing will be able to stop the item from activating. He gave a brief explanation about how it was made to function independently and that it locks out external influences.

Senkyo placed his trust in his words, but just to be safe than sorry, he prepared a few countermeasures of his own. As of this moment, the whole hotel they were staying at as well as the area around it was riddled with leaves with circuits that functioned to alert Senkyo of hostile movement. There were different circuits depending on their location. It cost him a lot of resources but at the very least, even if he was out of the hotel, he would be notified of suspicious activities. Although, the biggest downside to this move was the fact that it exhausted his entire leaf supply. In just one day, his entire three bags of leaves were all used up. Well, it made sense since he used two and a half bags in the crawler test, but this placed him in a rough spot.

Normally, this wouldn’t even register in his mind as a problem seeing as he could just go to a tree and pick its leaves out. But in his current situation, he wasn’t allowed to leave Iqanlr to do that unless he wanted to provoke Gaeka. Just before they parted, Senkyo asked Adeira why they couldn’t just use this to force Gaeka to move and ambush him when he does, but he reasoned with the fact that their preparations were yet to be finished, so he and his group couldn’t take action just yet. He was left with the option to find trees inside of Iqanlr. He could remember two locations where he saw trees in place. It would be great if he could just go to them but their placements proved to be very problematic. One of these locations was Xhiari, where Adeira explicitly warned Senkyo never to enter again. It was basically one of the main bases of Gaeka. Entering there was the same as offering himself to his predator. He did have Adeira’s teleportation item, but the fact that he warned him not to approach Xhiari despite knowing he had it meant that there was something he was afraid of inside the academy. It was best not to test the enemy’s power with his arrogance, so he crossed Xhiari off of his options immediately.

There was only one other place left. It was the small garden around the sunken nest of Iqanlr, the place he saw right across the entrance to the local Haeqras. He had no access to this place due to the fact that he wasn’t a crawler, but there were quite literally no other options. Fighting Leolja without his reserve of leaves and leaf talismans, which he heavily relied on, was nothing short of an insane suicide mission. He hoped that maybe contacting Leolja before the start of their test and asking him to somehow give him permission to collect leaves from the small garden would work. He didn’t know how the internal affairs in Haeqras functioned, but since Leolja was in an influential position, or at least it seems like it, then it was possible. Maybe. Perhaps.

Senkyo wanted to make more preparations for tomorrow’s test, especially since he ran out of talismans, but staying up any more than this would just hurt his energy with lack of sleep. Not to mention, he had no plans of sacrificing his well-deserved rest. Sinking deeper into the bed with his tired body, his brain naturally weakened and his concern for tomorrow’s test slowly disappeared. His eyelids grew heavy as the bell for the train to the land of dreams rang in his head. This was probably the reason he failed to notice another predator.

“Onii-chan~!”

“Eh…”

From the corner of his vision, the predator arrived. Her mischievous smile showed her clean white teeth, eyes narrowing sharply into an impish arc. Then, she struck.

“Gotchaa~!”

“G-Gah, S-Shiro, wait…! Get off…!”

“No~ can~ do~! Shiro has been waiting all day for her alone time with Onii-chan! Whatever happens, she will never yield this moment!”

She jumped on top of his body and wrapped her arms around Senkyo’s neck. Looking down at his body, he found that Shiro was wearing a set of sleep shorts and a camisole along with a bed jacket to cover the exposed arms. This should have lessened the area of exposed skin, making it easier to bare, but for some reason, this coordination of clothing only made her more attractive. Senkyo couldn’t deny that the word “cute” was echoing in his head on repeat like a broken record. His brotherly senses to protect her from everything tainted in the world became more apparent than ever. Yet, as if to conflict that, the worldly desires brewing within him were indicating that he, himself, was tainted. Such a cruel paradox made him want to bury himself in a hole and die.

Just before the feeling of self-hate set in, soft angelic breaths caressed his skin. The sudden sensation made him make a sharp jolt. It was then that he realized that Shiro already took off to dreamland. Senkyo tried to gently pry her arms off but they always tightened every time he tried. This situation was another problematic one… was it?

Senkyo stopped and looked at this situation from another perspective. A normal adolescent male might be stimulated by this situation and feel guilty. But, right now, Shiro was doing this with Senkyo as his sister, so it only made sense to respond to this as her brother. Setting aside the fact that they weren’t blood-related siblings, there was always an unspoken rule that brothers and sisters cannot feel sexual attraction towards each other in normal human society. Taking that into account, that would mean that Senkyo was NOT feeling sexual attraction toward Shiro and that this current act was NOT illicit in any way, shape, or form, and is completely and entirely wholesome. This was only some close sibling bonding. Exactly. Surely. It had to have been.

After repeating this to himself to brainwash—or rather, reconfirm his current position, he eventually joined Shiro in her sleep, drifting off to the same land of dreams accompanied by the fluffiness of a cloud and the presence of a cute angel.

**359 – The Dreamland I Wasn’t Expecting**

Huh?

*“\*Just see—for the world—\*”*

*“\*—DON’T MESS WITH ME!!\*”*

*“\*—This is… for—better—I—\*”*

*“\*Rise…—will not stop—BEHEAD—FALSE GOD!\*”*

*“\*Protect—Here, I rest…\*”*

*“\*————!!!\*”*

What? What are these things I’m seeing? I can hear voices… voices I don’t even recognize. Some of them screaming, weeping, fuming with anger, resigned to their fates, speaking of their beliefs. What is this? No, in the first place, where am I? Around me was a dark space. An empty void with voices of those I don’t know echoing. The only thing around this place is me. I feel like I’ve been in this place before… that’s right, this is the dream world. The place I ended up when Freda-san first revealed that I wasn’t human. This is where it became clear to me what I truly valued in life.

But, why am I seeing this place again? What happened? The last thing I remember was falling asleep with Shiro. I knew I went on about going to dreamland but I didn’t mean I wanted to end up in this place again. What am even supposed to—WAAAAAHHHH!!!!

As I was aimlessly walking through the dark empty space, when I set my foot down on the ground, instead of supporting my body, my foot fell right through the ground, sending me to the void. I flailed my arms and legs, trying to grab onto whatever I can, but in the end…

*“\*—GUUAAHH!! A-Ahh… That hurts…\*”*

I hit the ground. Hard.

*“\*Well, it’s not like I can die here. At the same time, that doesn’t mean I can’t feel pain… How inconvenient…\*”*

Right as I was complaining about how the dreamworld worked, I raised my head to find someone I had never seen before. He was a burly man with a large frame. A thick brown beard hung over his metallic armor as he towered in front of me.

“Are you alright? I held back but I didn’t know if that was enough.”

*“\*Who are you?\*”*

“Yes, I’m fine. I only took a scratch, nothing too concerning.”

*“\*Huh?\*”*

What? Did \*I\* just speak something different? No… my words didn’t leave my mouth at all. It’s moving on its own! I tried to move any part of my body, but it refused to listen and I stay laying on the ground. Anything I say, wherever I try to look, it’s useless. Was this even my body to begin with?

“Here.”

“Ah, thanks.”

It didn’t seem like it. The man in front of me extended his arm to pick me up and the person’s body I was inside of took his hand and rose to his feet. It looks like I can’t do anything else but watch.

“You still have a long way to go but as long as you keep training I’m sure your efforts will bear fruit.”

“I appreciate your kind words, Draui-san.”

Draui…? Did the person I’m inside of just call him Draui?? Isn’t that person… an ambassador? When I asked Shiro about the identities of the previous ambassadors, the name Draui was one of the very few she could recall. I think her reason for that was that he was just so huge that she couldn’t believe someone could grow to his size. If the person in front of me is the same Draui in question, then that would make sense. From what I can tell he was a dwarf, but unlike how fiction described them as big but short, this Draui was big and tall, and even towering over the person I’m inside in despite him standing completely straight.

“Heeey there, you two~!”

A cheery voice came from behind us and just as the person I’m inside in was going to turn around and see who called, a powerful slap hit our shoulder, making my vision blackout.

*“\*W-What is this…?\*”*

The next thing I knew, I found myself standing in the middle of some kind of battlefield. Everything around me was on fire and screams of fear and agony could be heard from everywhere.

“G-Gahh…”

My body moved by itself again, or rather, the person I was inside of decided to move. He was injured, blood running down his arms and dripping from the tips of his fingers. He limped as he walked into a safe place inside a deserted alleyway. This person was… different from the previous one. I can tell by the size of their arms. This person’s arms were bigger than the last one, not to mention his voice was different.

“Damn it! Why… why did everything have to end like this…!?”

He cursed as his eyes pointed toward the rising flames. This voice… it’s familiar… Ah, it was only brief, but I think this person’s voice was the same one that called out to us at the end of the last scene. He was so cheery back then and now that was nothing but a distant memory. All that was remaining was the anger and sadness that seeped through his shaking voice.

“Fuck!!”

With one last kick filled with his frenzied emotions, he hit the wall of the alleyway, sending cracks across my whole field of vision almost as if my sight turned to broken glass.

*“\*…!!\*”*

A new scene was brought to me. With my vision remaining broken, a different perspective appeared for every whole shard of vision, like a broken glass mirror with a different scene for every single glass shard. In some places, my perspective was running, fighting, and carrying people to safety, as well as a few others. It would have been great if there was no one talking because of this shared vision, unfortunately, it was the exact opposite of what I hoped for. The words and thoughts coming from every single perspective resounded in my head, turning it into a chaotic mosh pit of the voices of strangers… no… voices of the same person…? Wha—

*“\*A-AAHH!! Stop it! Be quiet…! Stop talking…!\*”*

The voices suddenly spiked in volume. I sealed my ears with all my might, but it did nothing to hinder the voices speaking directly into my head.

*“\*Stop, stop, stop, stop… STOP IIIIIITT!!!\*”*

I screamed out with all the air in my lungs. I didn’t expect it to work, but finally, my vision blacked out, and silence returned. I breathed a sigh of relief as I was finally freed from the noise. That being said, it might be just as chaotic on the next scene I get thrown into. Well, if I ever do get another scene. Please, just wake me up already. Make it stop.

“For Onii-chan’s sake… For Onii-chan’s sake, Shiro will do anything!!”

*“\*Huh… Shiro…?\*”*

In the next scene, I was given Shiro’s perspective. I don’t see her face, but I can tell she had determined eyes as she conveyed her emotions through her gaze to the person in front of her.

“Alright… I’m sorry about this, Shiro.”

“No, Shiro can tell that Yuuto-san has been troubled by this for a long time. Shiro wants to repay you and Onii-chan for everything!”

Ahh… it’s been a while since I’ve seen this guy’s stupid face. My father was watching Shiro with warm eyes, touched by her words. It feels a bit weird from my perspective since he’s just looking at me creepily, but… it really has been a while, so I couldn’t say anything more and just watched the scene unfold.

“Haha, repay us? What’s that all of a sudden? You’re part of the family too, Shiro. My daughter, and Senkyo’s dear little sister. Don’t talk like some stranger that’s indebted to us. Just be yourself and say that you want to help us. I don’t know about you, but hearing my daughter is willing to help an old man like me is a hundred times better than having her take pity on me!”

Another one of the old man’s lectures. Again, I couldn’t see it, yet I could tell this left Shiro dumbfounded but also brought a smile to her face.

“Hehe, you’re right… Then, please let Shiro help you, Father.”

It was one of the few times that Shiro would refer to the old man as her father. It wasn’t that she didn’t feel close to him, but rather because she preferred to call him “Yuuto-san.” It was one of her few old-habits-die-hard moments where she couldn’t help but feel awkward when referring to dad as her father. Wholesome moments like this one are the only ones that can break that habit of hers.

*“\*It… really has been a while…\*”*

**360 – A Shadow I Need to Watch Out For**

“—Don’t leave me!”

*“\*—!?\**”

All of a sudden, the peaceful atmosphere around me was broken by the pained screams of a single voice. It wasn’t only because it came out of nowhere in full volume like a jumpscare in a horror movie, but it was also because I instantly recognized the owner of this voice.

“This isn’t the time for jokes! Veoia, please!”

The person’s perspective I was seeing now was none other than Hisho Yuu, the person I’ve searching for. She was screaming, pleading, begging for someone, but at the same time, she was the only person in this room. She was talking to empty space, conversating all by herself in solitude. Yet, her emotions felt too real for this to be some kind of hallucination.

If I had to guess, then maybe someone was talking to her in her mind. Since I can use Connect and had daily conversations with Ryosei and Shiro in his mind in the past, it was one of the simplest reasons I could be satisfied with, but then that leaves the question of who Hisho-chan is talking to.

“B-But… No… I….”

My vision began to blur as tears collected in her eyes. It seemed like Hisho-chan entered a state of shock. Then, when everything finally cleared, I was stupefied by the sight in front of me. My face formed no emotions, yet they were rampaging inside of me. The sight I saw sent ripples down my very being. My emotions became a mess. Rampaging, going berserk, running wild, becoming frenzied. The shock kept my body still, but my true feelings leaked as tears fell from my eyes.

“Senpai…”

Chains. The chains rattled as Hisho-chan tried to move, binding all four of her limbs. Her eyes were just like this void. Empty, without light. It was the face of someone who wanted everything to be over with. The face of someone who suffered and reached their limit. Seeing her like this crushed my heart.

It wasn’t just the chains, but also a bone-like dagger protruding through her chest, piercing her clean through the heart. I was reminded of how she blocked the skeleton’s attack to save me back on Earth. Her sacrifice was the trigger that made me chase down the escaping skeleton and search for her, despite not knowing anything about the new world I was thrown into. Right now, she was suffering. Hisho-chan was suffering without anyone to support her.

I felt it. Fiery emotions ignited within me. It was anger. Anger at the fact that I am unable to do anything in her time of need. Anger at the fact that I’m stuck here without knowing where she is. But then, it slowly quells as I think. The rational part of me speaks. Why would I be shown something like this at this time?

Hisho-chan should have no way of contacting me nor is she capable of talking to me directly in my dreams. Not to mention, even if she had the means, would she really contact me of her own volition? As much as it pains me to admit it, I don’t think so. How can I be so sure that the scene I’m being shown isn’t something that was made to shake my composure? Was this some kind of mental attack from Professor Gaeka? Or maybe something else entirely…?

I watch the Hisho-chan in front of me in silence, trying to comprehend what was happening. Then, she speaks once more.

“…Senpai… I hate to rely on you all the time… but this one, I really want you to do… Please… kill me.”

…Why?

Why is it that you say such things that break my heart? …I have to hurry. It doesn’t matter if she’s fake or not, what does is the fact that my original goal hasn’t changed. I need to find Hisho-chan as fast as possible. My only clue is Nrjia which is located northeast of the border city Iqanlr. However, this is only her hometown, which isn’t guaranteed to have her. She was kidnapped after all. Information about bandit camps or human trafficking rings is much more reliable… no.

I remember talking to Shiro when I first woke up that she and Ryosei suspected that END was the client of the skeletons that hunted us. The worst-case scenario will have Hisho-chan at the heart of enemy territory. Although, if I were to be optimistic, then at the very least she is on or near their lands… Recalling Yuwokrn’s map in my head, those places could be somewhere in Zelaoage, the north side of Ridsikrn, or the east side of Frukaui. Since I’m on the border between Uikakrn and Ridsikrn, I can travel to the north side of Ridsikrn and search for more clues. After that, I will be in the most optimal area to extend my search deeper into Ridsikrn, cross the borders to Frukaui, or sail to Zelaoage. Then—

“You seem so serious. What’s wrong? Was that girl someone important to you?”

Just as my thoughts were filled with nothing but my future actions, another voice I didn’t recognize entered my ears. Looking around, Hisho-chan was no longer in front of me. She disappeared and what revealed itself in exchange was a body of black mist with two glowing red eyes. It wasn’t just a voice in my head, nor was it a dialogue of a scene I’d never seen before, it was something that was talking directly to me. I instinctively jumped back and made distance the moment it entered my vision.

What is it this time!? An actual intruder!?

“You’re wary of me. That’s nice to see. But I wonder, do you know what I am?”

Is it trying to extract information from me? It seems like it. I’m not about to fall for any of its schemes. I don’t know what it wants except for information. The best way to avoid leaking this is to simply remain silent.

“Not feeling like answering me? That’s fine. I like that you’re cautious… though, not enough to completely avoid any conflict it looks like. I just got news that the monkey that’s chasing you almost had you caught. Man, it must be a pain for the person who had to clean that mess up.”

It’s… talking about Professor Gaeka and Sir Adeira. From its words, it seems to be acquainted with them at least and has knowledge about the recent events.

“You’re still not talking, huh? Well, I didn’t expect much to begin with. This is more of a forced kick-start to get you going.”

“…?”

Kick-start? What is this thing talking about?

“Oh! Looks like your poker face is slipping.”

“!!”

D-Damn it. I subconsciously raised my brow. Failing to maintain full control of my body, the shadow quickly picks up on my nonverbal signs. It has no face, but I can painfully feel the sneer behind the shadow’s aura.

“In other words, I’m powering you up. I don’t care if you believe me or not, but I’m making it so that you can use your creation element better. You saw those visions right? Those are the visions of the people you can have power over. Simply put, you might be able to control them. It looks like you already have control over one of them. Though, it does seem to be subconscious.”

“…”

I maintained a stoic face, but I can’t help but be curious about what he knows. Powering up? People I can control? I’m getting sick and tired of having random strangers walk up to me knowing more about me than I do. Was I some kind of celebrity in the past? I’m starting to think that the majority of people in Zerid know me as common knowledge. I swear, can someone just stop and tell me everything about myself already!?

“Oh, I’m not telling you how it works though. These things are generally more effective when you learn them yourself.”

And now you’re reading my mind!?

“I am curious about one thing though. Why are you holding back?”

“…”

“I mean, you unlocked one of your seals, right? You made contact with the power of god, so one of those has to be unlocked. It's pretty powerful too, but I wonder why you won’t use it… Meh, no matter. In the end, you won’t be able to keep that thing hidden. I’m going to make good use of you while you’re still here, so be prepared!”

The lack of urgency in this guy’s voice irks me. Why the hell is this guy barging into my mind without permission and running his mouth off? It reminds me of a certain someone… huh? Could it be?

This black mist has been blabbering for the entire time it’s been here, so here I decided to go for a little counterattack.

“Hey, are you Hira-san’s father?”

“HUH!? How di—…HUWH!??”

Oh, bingo. This is what happens when you speak too much. None of what he said pointed to this, but his personality sure made it easy to imagine.

“W-W- W- W- W- W-Well, well well, would you look at the time! I remember I have something important I gotta do!”

The shadow began scrambling around the room in a panic. I didn’t know how it planned on getting out, but just before it gets the chance, I shoot out one last question.

“Answer me, are you my enemy?”

Just before the shadow floated off to the distance, it stopped and turned around, making its red eyes clear within the black void.

“You can think of me however you want, but I don’t consider myself on anyone’s side. I just want to do something and I’m using you to do just that. There’s no point in hiding it, so I may as well tell you this much. Although, it's probably because I have a good feeling you’ll end up doing what I want. I’m using you, so don’t think of anything and let yourself get used. I’m sure you’ll end up with a good result.”

It said in an arrogant tone as its shadow became consumed by the void. I stayed silent for a while, staring at where the shadow disappeared. After a while, my belated response to its words left my mouth.

“‘Let yourself get used,’ huh? I don’t know what you’re after, but I’ll be doing what I want. If you’re not careful, I might just bite back.”

**361 – Problem Upon Wake**

“Mn… mhnnn…”

The rays of morning light entered Senkyo’s vision as his eyelids flickered, clearing his senses as he arose from slumber. A few seconds passed until he finally became fully conscious. Looking around, he confirmed he was still on the king-sized bed in the penthouse suite without any threats in the area. None of his talismans activated while he was asleep nor were any lost, indicating that no one attempted to make any moves against Senkyo throughout the night. It seemed like Adeira kept his word, securing Senkyo’s room as a safe house.

Beside Senkyo was Shiro, sleeping snuggly as she hugged one of his arms. The question of whether or not he should be sleeping with Shiro came to mind. Even if nothing happens there was no doubt people would raise their eyebrows when they hear of this. Thinking about what would happen once Ryosei entered his body again and got a copy of all his memories here made him twist his face in agony. He thought about stopping, but then again, it wasn’t like that would erase the other times he slept with her. A quick deliberation suggested that instead of worrying about the future, he needed to focus on the present. Taking that into consideration, since no one was around to be disturbed by the two, there was no reason to stop what they were doing. Although he would never be caught dead speaking it out loud, he had to admit that he enjoyed the fluffiness of Shiro’s fur. It was a type of stress relief that worked very effectively. Considering the fact that he couldn’t use one of his natural stress-relief methods due to their situation and lack of privacy, he concluded that at the very least, this much should be fine.

Frankly speaking, he loved Yuu and could only see Shiro as a sister. He didn’t have much trouble keeping his urges in check. The fact that he quickly silenced it last night was proof of that. The chaotic mess that he called his daily life in Zerid was too hectic to be concerned with such things, not to mention the fact that the actual person he loved was somewhere out in the world without anything to confirm whether or not she was safe. There are barely any chances to rest easy because of these. Now that his train of thought arrived at this, it was about time he finished his morning musings and began preparing for the day.

“Shiro… Hey, Shiro… it’s time to wake up.”

“Nmnn… nnnhh~…”

He gently shook her body until Shiro’s eyelids slowly opened. Her pupils searched around until they landed on Senkyo’s face.

“…Onii-chan… good morning…”

“Mn, good morning to you too, Shiro. Sorry to wake you up but I have something I have to tell you.”

“Hm…?”

When Shiro fully regained consciousness, Senkyo told her everything he saw in his dream. All about the visions he saw including the scenes with Shiro and Yuu as well as the appearance of Hira’s father that broke in his dreams. After finishing everything, she hugged her knees tighter and leaned backward.

“Umm, Shiro… can I ask why we’re in this position…?”

“Because Shiro likes it. And she’s thinking.”

“…Is that so?”

Right around somewhere in the middle of Senkyo’s story, Shiro placed herself in between his legs and turned him into a reclining chair. With a pillow in her arms, she hugged it tight along with her legs, hiding part of her mouth and making some of her words muffled. Apparently, this was some sort of thinking position, or so her words suggest.

“…Shiro knows about it.”

“Oh, you do?”

She spoke in a soft voice as she searched through the memories of the past, talking about them nostalgically.

“Hmn, when you pulled pranks on Shiro and Yuuto-san in the past. It could be described as mind control but Shiro felt like it was closer to Onii-chan’s soul influencing our souls. At first, you did it often with pranks that had large effects but you slowly calmed down when Yuuto-san scolded you saying that it was dangerous to do that.”

“…I pulled pranks with my powers, huh?”

Imagining himself as a child wielding some kind of all-powerful element was a scary thought. He was glad that his father put a stop to him before his childish self did something irreversible.

“Oh, but Yuuto-san also warned Shiro about your pranks, saying that she shouldn’t become too emotional whenever Onii-chan did something. Apparently, whatever you were doing gave Shiro the ability to do something as well. But, nothing wrong ever happened in the past, so she doesn’t know for sure.”

“Interesting…”

An ability that gives Shiro another ability. Hearing this reminded Senkyo of what Ranat said about the familiar pact. The master is responsible for caring and giving new potential to their familiars. The secret to this lies in the orders they give to them.

“Shiro, when I did these pranks were you already my familiar then?”

“No, Shiro was just Onii-chan’s little sister! Shiro only became a familiar around the time when Yuuto-san mentioned sealing your memories.”

This should have meant that creation magic and the familiar pact were two unrelated things, but since the familiar pact comes from a ritual that uses both spirit power and mana, there could be a possibility that Senkyo was unintentionally using the effects of creation magic similarly to how the familiar pact is forged… or at least he thought so. All of these were only his educated guesses. Since he never actually remembered how to use the creation element, he could only think along the lines of “spirit power + mana = calamitous energy/creation element.” Mix them well and you’ll have the creation element, mix them poorly and you’ll have calamitous energy. He knew he simplified it too much but this was necessary to keep his mind in order.

“Haahh… this is going to take a bit more time to figure out. For now, he should focus on a more guaranteed source of power to use in our test later.”

“Are you talking about the spells?”

“Yep. Shiro, go get ready so we can leave. I’ll figure out what we can use, and you can tell me what you found in the spellbooks for the nature and control elements while we walk. We still need to visit Leolja and get permission to pick leaves for our test.”

“E-Ehh… can’t Shiro and Onii-chan just stay here?”

She complained as she buried herself deeper in between Senkyo’s legs. While staring at him with upturned eyes, he replied to her in a curt tone.

“No.”

“Auuu…”

She let out a dejected noise as she reluctantly picked herself off of the bed and headed for the bathroom. He felt a bit bad but there was no time to waste. Yesterday was actually more productive than he ever could have imagined. He learned more about spells, the familiar pact, and the creation element that he could use. Once he manages to understand even just one of these thoroughly, it could power him up significantly if he pairs it up with spirit power and battle tactics.

Right now, it was a race against time to power himself up. He could not afford to lose this—

“N-NYAAAAA!!!!!”

“Shiro!?”

Shiro’s ear-piercing scream came from the bathroom. In a panic, Senkyo shot out of bed and hurried to the bathroom door. The moment he arrived, the door immediately opened, revealing Shiro in her half-dressed self. He would have usually reacted to this, but he was too concerned about what made Shiro scream in the first place that he couldn’t process this properly. When he met eyes with Shiro, she looked shaken.

“Onii-chan!!”

“What happened!?”

“L-Look! The time!!”

“The… time…?”

Shiro fully opened the door and Senkyo’s gaze traced where her finger pointed to. It was a digital clock that showed the numbers “11:34.” Reading this, his eyes blinked a few times as if to deceive himself from reality, but when the numbers refused to change, his face paled as he fully understood what made Shiro scream.

“Eh…”

He could do nothing but let out a dumbfounded voice.

**362 – Returning to the Caves**

“Can’t we delay it for just a few minutes?”

“No, unfortunately not. The rules and procedures for an access level S test state that every trial must be held on time. Failure to do so will lead to the failure of the test.”

Senkyo was hit with terrible news the moment he arrived at Haeqras. After waking up and learning how close it was to the next test with Leolja, Senkyo and Shiro instantly rushed outside of the hotel and made a beeline for Haeqras, stopping only in front of an open food stall to get at least some form of nutrients in their stomach.

When they arrived, he asked Leolja if he could pick some leaves from the trees around the sunken nest. He answered that it was fine, but the real problem was the fact that the test was already about to start, which gave him no time to acquire the said resources.

“Besides, from the sound of it, you two arrived late because of oversleeping, am I correct? I think it is only right for you to compensate for your own lack of diligence. Fighting without one of your primary tools would be the perfect punishment.”

“But…”

*“\*I only overslept because of someone who invaded my dreams—,\*"* or so he wanted to say but that would just end up with him unnecessarily leaking information.

“Haeqras’ rules are made to be strict so that in times like this, the crawler should be able to do something about the problem even with the disadvantage given to them. A crawler’s value rises when they are able to deal with problems under unreasonable restrictions rather than a crawler who can only fulfill their tasks only when they are at full strength. That is why Haeqras does not compensate with time. Whatever state the crawler is in the moment the time of the test arrives, they will take it in that state no matter what. Even if they are in a severely injured state, they will not be exempted from these ironclad rules. Cases like those often end up with the crawler retaking another three-day test. And now that I’ve said this, you have arrived without the tools you need, making you take this test without them. There will be no compensation on our side. Is that clear?”

“Yes…”

Leolja spoke as an instructor, drilling Haeqras’ values into Senkyo with a stern, authoritarian voice. He could do nothing against him like this. “If you mess up, do something to fix it.” That was basically what they wanted to embed into their crawlers. It didn’t matter what reason the crawlers have that gave them a disadvantage in their test. What mattered was how the crawlers would respond in times like these and if they will be able to overcome it. In this situation, even if it wasn’t Senkyo’s fault that he arrived late, it didn’t matter. What Leolja wanted from him right now was the ability to make up for his loss. Having that fact settled in his head, Senkyo had no choice but to prepare for the upcoming test.

Forced by the rules of Haeqras, he entered a new artificial cave to begin his second test. This cave is different from the last one, making it so that he couldn’t trace the path to level S from his memories. The cave structure is different but the enemies were still the same. In levels E and D, he only walked by the creatures inside the cave without giving them anything more than just a glance and a fatal low-tier spell if they ever turn hostile. There was little to no danger on level E while he simply needed to scare off annoying enemies on level D.

Rather than the enemies, he used his time walking through the cave in collecting rocks and other resources he could use later on in the deeper levels. With his leaf supply reduced to a resounding zero, he needed to make other talismans through other means. Using pebbles and other small rocks could work as a substitute but he knew that the range of uses on weighted talismans like rocks was much less than the capabilities of thin and light talismans like leaves or paper due to the fact that they’re bigger, heavier, and inflexible.

He imagined using rocks to perform his large-scale circuits as he did on the deeper levels where his leaf talismans nimbly dodged and weaved through numerous obstacles to execute his plans. If he were to use rocks in those situations, he could easily imagine them being disrupted, stopping him from using large circuits or field circles just like he did last time. For now, these rocks were a flimsy stopgap so that he wouldn’t be completely unable to use spirit power and enchanter techniques.

Along with the small rocks and pebbles, he also harvested body parts from the enemies that were in the area. Unlike levels B and below, the enemies in the levels above them were real, allowing him to use them for enchanter techniques. Back then, he collected Hkrwir’s fangs, an Eozea’s scales, and its tongue. They were basically centipede fangs, lizard scales, and a lizard tongue. He didn’t have to use them back then since he had leaf talismans, but now with those resources exhausted, he thought these items could have their purpose.

Level C had the usual swarm of bomb jockeys, but they weren’t much of a threat against Senkyo’s wide-ranged offensive magic. Level B should just have phantom threaders which weren’t much of a threat as long as you could detect their traps, but unusually, he found a few cave trappers around the end of the level. He was reminded that the enemies in the sunken nest weren’t restricted to the levels they frequented.

As a test run, he used one of his newly learned spells.

“O Earth, speak once more and deliver your will. Heaven or hell; pass upon your judgment on the mortals before you. Rise: Rumbling Land.”

Mumbling the chant in a volume difficult for others to hear, he targeted the areas behind the walls where Detect could sense a cave trapper hiding inside. It was a spell that could make an area of land suddenly rise or cave in depending on how it is cast. Using this, he can force cave trappers to leave their hiding spot or, if the caster knew how the tunnel of the hiding cave trapper was formed, kill it on the spot.

In this situation, Senkyo couldn’t detect the formation of the tunnel with Detect, so he opted for the land to rise directly upward. More often times than not, this would cause the cave trapper to rise up and either run away or break out of its hiding spot. But in this case, when the rise was forcefully stopped at a lower height than Senkyo intended, it was a sign that the tunnel had no space above it and was likely dug in a horizontal path. Meaning, with no space above the cave trapper, Senkyo’s magic mercilessly squished it while it was inside the tunnel.

“That’s lucky… but I probably shouldn’t use this on single targets.”

Rumbling Land was a mid-tier spell. Although it was effective against cave trappers, it was a waste of mana to use it on a single target since it was designed to affect a large area. Not to mention, the guidebook specifically stated to use Rumbling Land with caution. Since it affected terrain, using this spell haphazardly could lead to massive cave-ins and destroy paths that were previously mapped out. This was also the reason why it was strongly discouraged to use the cave-in chant of Rumbling Land. Making more walls was one thing, but removing them was an entirely different issue. The only time crawlers are allowed to use highly destructive magic was in times when the danger was critical and lives were at stake.

“O Earth, act and hasten the course of nature. Wither the strong and impregnable, take their time and turn them into a strew. Terra Decay.”

Moving forward into level A1, he faced the cave trappers inside this level using a new spell called Terra Decay. It had the power to turn earth and rocks into sand and dust, making them fall onto the spiders waiting right behind them and burying them. It was an easy way to reveal and hold down cave trappers, making it simple to eliminate them with his sword. It cost less mana than Rumbling Land despite both of them being mid-tier spells and also created a wall of heavy sand that could block off any reinforcements inside the tunnels of the cave trappers. No matter how strong the cave trappers may be, their strength can do nothing against the pliability of sand and dust.

“That was easy.”

Clearing the floor, he moved on to the next one.

**363 – Careful Advance**

Level A2 is where Magic Arms often begin to appear. They are the first to gain the ability to control other Iwaiida in their evolutionary ladder. It may be difficult to fight them when someone cannot do anything against their ability to gather and control other Iwaiida, but to someone who can, it was only a matter of how fast they can eliminate them.

Their first encounter with a magic arm had them ambushed by a large number of bomb jockeys and a horde of cave trappers that soon followed. Just as always, Shiro’s natural magic barrier made the bomb jockeys completely useless while Senkyo activated the spell “Enhance Speed” and used flash strike to pierce through the wall of enemies. What mattered on this level wasn’t defeating every enemy in front of them, but simply taking out the one mastermind in the area.

Unlike Arachne Sages and Demonic Spiders, Magic Arms have a significantly smaller range to control other Iwaiida. This meant that whenever the enemies in an area attacked in coordination with each other, it was very likely that a magic arm was present nearby.

Senkyo had both Detect and Perception Field active as he cleared the area, picking up on two mana signatures inside the walls and moving away from them. Based on the small pieces of earth and rocks dropping inside the walls, it was likely a tunnel created by a cave trapper. Meanwhile, there could only be one thing waiting behind it that possessed a greater mana signature than the cave trapper. It was the magic arm.

Recognizing the enemy’s attempt to retreat, he activated Terra Decay to open up a path to their tunnel. A wall of sand and dust appeared. Of course, Senkyo still wasn’t able to reach his targets as it is. Just like how the cave trappers wouldn’t be able to break through the wall of grounded earth with brute strength, the same applied to Senkyo. However, there was an option that made this obstacle more convenient for him.

“O Wind, carry the sound of the howl and continue the chase. Cast around your scent, imprint your shape, and mark the quarry. Gale Hound!”

A sharp blast of wind pierced through the wall of sand and dust, exploding into the tunnel and creating a thick cloud. The tunnel was now accessible in exchange for his clear vision. This would usually be a problem, but not when he could clearly track the presence of his target.

Following the mana signature, Senkyo uttered the chant needed for “Needle Storm.” As he did, numerous mana signatures similar to the magic arm appeared all around him. Their appearance was much too unnatural, not to mention that magic arms would never be this coordinated when nothing was controlling them. With these thoughts being taken into consideration, he quickly deduced that they were illusions made by phantom threaders. It was a last-ditch effort for the magic arm to throw Senkyo off its trail. If he ever aimed for the wrong target, it would give the real one a chance to escape… or so it might think.

Senkyo’s aim never wavered, pointing every single deadly clump of wind at a single magic arm. He launched released the deadly wind around him into his target, making it lose control of every Iwaiida in the area and eliminating the magic arm dummies made by phantom threaders. The reason for Senkyo’s precise aim wasn’t because of luck, but instead was the work of the effects of Gale Hound, or at the very least, what should have been the effects of said spell.

Gale Hound released a strong gust of wind but it also had the ability to mark every living being that it hits. However, the magic arm Senkyo faced was only an illusion. In a real situation, he would be able to tell living beings he hit with the spell apart from those that made no contact with it. In this test, the dummies that spawned around him had a different mana signature from the real magic arm, allowing Senkyo to differentiate the supposed real one from the dummies using Detect. It was clear that Leolja was properly controlling the enemies around him to enact a suitable substitute for what should have been the result if this were a real situation.

Senkyo’s lips curled up in amazement at Leolja’s expert control, yet the very second later, they dropped, showing a bitter expression, contradictory to the earlier one he showed. Brushing his feelings aside, he continued down the path, eliminating magic arms in the same manner until he arrived to level A3.

The next level was significantly more dangerous than the previous one, making Senkyo enter it with caution. He knew that the moment he set foot onto the level meant that he was detected by at least one of the Arachne Sages on the level. Although their abilities are similar to the magic arms, it felt like a completely different ability due to how much powerful it is.

Just like Senkyo’s previous experience, an arachne sage could control entire armies of spiders from the end of a level all the way to the beginning of one. The previous strategy of ignoring everything else and targeting only the mastermind wasn’t as effective. After all, there was no possible way to target someone on the completely opposite side of the level. Crawlers oftentimes don’t hunt down a sage and simply prioritize a task or crossing the level. In fact, Senkyo would have done exactly just that if the sage didn’t appear right in front of him the last time he entered level A3. That was certainly unusual behavior, his suspicions supported by the guidebook mentioning that it was rare for arachne sages to show themselves.

What didn’t change from his previous visit to level A3 was the constant pressure that came from all directions. He quickly got a good number of cave trappers chasing him through the cave after a failed ambush. At some point he felt that he was being herded in one direction, so he turned around and eliminated his current pursuers. Last time, he fully took the bait and got led to a house of illusions, forcing him to use more resources than necessary to clear the level, and exhausting his energy. This ended with him being significantly tired when he was faced with the pressure on level S. For now, he decided to take it slow and avoid unnecessary conflict.

**364 – Shiro’s First Move**

Noticing Senkyo’s passive actions, the sage was the one that fueled the flames of conflict, placing five mana signatures the same as magic arms into his detection range. When he first picked this up, Senkyo did not know if all of the five signatures were real magic arms or illusions made by phantom threaders. For now, it was clear that the sage pushed for the offensive.

He immediately considered the worst-case scenario where all five signals were real, which was equivalent to having five platoons of hostiles coming to corner him. A quick decision was needed but not a hasty one.

“O Wind, change the currents of your gentle breeze, become the draft that alerts me of your presence. Exploration in a swift sweep; turn the expanse inside out and return the lay of the land. Scout’s Breath.”

A blast of light wind released from Senkyo, shooting into the cave path as well as the small cracks and openings in the area. Just like how Detect and Perception Field gave information about the area, Scout’s Breath was one of the most used spells in the sunken nest, being renowned for its useful detection skill and the wide range of it. It was a spell that traced out the area around the caster at a flat range of 20 meters. This value may increase or decrease depending on the flow of wind in the area. Going with the wind may increase this range and searching against the wind may decrease this. As he was in a cave without any strong winds to hinder or assist this spell, the shape of the area spanning an average of 20 meters was revealed to him.

Unfortunately, this spell cannot determine whether or not the entities it hits are illusions, as it only works with the shape of those it makes contact with. However, after confirming the five magic arms, it also scanned the area beyond them, confirming any enemies that may serve as reinforcements for the five magic arms. As it turns out, around ten more magic arms were found outside of Senkyo’s Detect range. One was behind each of the initial five he detected while another group of five closed in from his rear. With this many enemies, it was likely an all-out attack. Had Senkyo blindly attacked the initial five magic arms, he could have fallen for a devastating trap.

At this time, he couldn’t have been more thankful that Shiro read through the spellbook for the nature element before he did. Since an incident last night happened before he could flip through it, he wouldn’t have been able to use this spell without her.

Making a quick analysis of the situation, there was a swarm of bomb jockeys in front of him and above him. Those were followed by cave trappers to act as the main fighting force. Bomb jockeys were not a threat at all, but their exploding chemicals could blind his vision and allow the cave trappers to find an opening. Not only that, there was already a dangerous number of cave trappers gathering below him as well, which would most likely pop up the moment the bomb jockeys charged in. To block off his escape, there were also a large number of cave trappers waiting behind him, extending outside the range of his Scout’s Breath, making their numbers unclear. And above everything, their numbers kept increasing from thin air, indicating the presence of illusions made by phantom threaders. They seemed to be building bodies of spiderwebs around the perimeter. This situation was similar to when he raided the house of illusions last time, but this time, the enemy was building the house with him at the center.

He commentated about the situation to Shiro in his mind as he analyzed it. Preferably, he didn’t want to waste too much energy on this and save as many resources as possible for level S. Although, against an army of this size, that didn’t seem to be possible. That was when Shiro said something that he didn’t expect.

“Onii-chan, do you want Shiro to do something about this? Shiro can help!”

“O-Oh…?”

So far, Senkyo was always the one to make strategies and fight while Shiro assisted with healing and defense. Since this test couldn’t actually harm Senkyo, she focused more on defense, but never had there been a time when Shiro made a suggestion before.

“What do you have in mind?”

“Hehe, you can just do what you always do and trust in Shiro! That’s the plan!”

Senkyo had no words. He was speechless. For some reason, Shiro’s voice was filled with confidence and didn’t falter against the pressure of an army of hostiles. Usually, this was where Senkyo would outright deny the plan because he didn’t know what was going to happen, but the person that suggested this was Shiro. Instead of denouncing her mystery plan, he felt the urge to support this since it showed Shiro’s growth. He felt like a father seeing his daughter resolve a complicated family problem all on her own. His feelings preceded his logical judgment. For now, he prepared a good backup plan in mind in the event that Shiro’s plan falls apart. While he was standing there completely still, the enemy finally made their move.

He could sense the massive swarm of bomb jockeys coming from their front. Meanwhile, there were mana signatures of cave trappers coming from above, most likely there to open up holes for more bomb jockeys to flow into his location. Shiro’s natural magic barrier coated Senkyo to protect him from the incoming danger while Senkyo readied his bone daggers over his katana, prioritizing speed over damage. To compensate for the lack of damage, he turned the daggers into talismans and used spirit power to empower them, sharping their edges and increasing their durability.

The flood of bomb jockeys arrived with cave trappers breaking the ceiling, allowing more jockeys to flow in just like Senkyo expected. He counted four cave trappers before his vision was reduced to a splatter of green corrosive liquid. The liquid that was about to make contact with him was absorbed by the magic barrier, but that didn’t stop the area from getting filled by it and blinding his surroundings. At this moment, Detect became useless as the corrosive liquid that filled the room was also picked up by this skill, shrouding the mana signatures of the four cave trappers that landed.

In this situation, Perception Field was the only thing that could guide him. One of the cave trappers approached him, unaffected by the blinding liquid of the bomb jockeys. Its heavy, earth-crushing legs thrust at him. He nimbly dodged four legs, cutting them with his enchanted bone daggers as they passed over his body. With the front legs gone, he backed up and waited for the cave trapper to lose its balance. The force it used to launch forward made its attacks deadly, but with its four front legs gone, the cave trapper couldn’t maintain its weight and fell to the ground. That was when Senkyo came to behead the spider and finish it off.

He would have killed it, if it weren’t for two other cave trappers to come in to save its life. When Senkyo backed off, he noticed the mana signatures of the cave trappers from the ground rising up while the more mana signatures from above were dropping down. They were about to send the main forces at him. He couldn’t sense it anymore, but he assumed that there were cave trappers coming in from in front of him as well.

With him backed into a corner, Senkyo made a light jump and created an air foothold for him to stand on. Then, he chanted.

“O Earth, act and hasten the course of nature. Wither the strong and impregnable, take their time and turn them into a strew. Terra Decay!”

At the same time, Shiro did as well.

*“\*O Clear Canvas, I call upon thee to grow, build, and expand. Broaden our horizon and spread your influence to the masses. Greater Plain!\*”*

Senkyo meant to affect only the floor, but for some reason, his Terra Decay reached the walls and even the ceiling above. He was surprised, but with him on high alert, he immediately used a consecutive chain of flash strikes to escape his own magic. Taking a quick glance to his back, he saw that the cave trappers that tried to sprout from the ground get stuck in the sand and those that tried to break in from the ceiling lost their footing and fell on their backs. In the end, all were caught and buried under the heavy mass of sand and dust. This wasn’t just Terra Decay but also the effect of the unknown spell he heard Shiro chant in his head.

“Shiro, what did you do?”

“Hehe, impressed? Shiro learned this from Ranat while she was away from Onii-chan!”

“While we were in the library, huh…? But wait, you chanted in my head, right? How did that spell activate without using words?”

It was common sense in Zerid that magic was the product of mana being shaped through words. Without words, a normal person wouldn’t be able to shape the mana to cast a single spell. There were exceptions to this rule such as races with other means to shape mana like a race called Qeajrv that could evolve to a being that can cast without chanting depending on the power they have represented through their tails or senlr. Senkyo read about them in the book about calamitous energy. One of the scenes depicted the author, Voaul Oqr, interacting with them in pursuit of a clear definition of this unknown power.

The point was that Shiro should not have been able to cast magic in his head since her race, the Nemi, do not have a special ability that allows them to do so. To clear his visible confusion, Shiro quickly explained, or at least, to the extent she knew.

“Well, Ranat just said that a familiar like Shiro has the ability to do that! She said something about mana being controlled by her thoughts instead of words, but we didn’t have time to talk about it.”

“I see… Ranat again, huh?”

Every time that librarian popped into Senkyo’s mind, he couldn’t weave any realistic situations that he would be satisfied with that can explain her actions. She randomly showed up out of nowhere to help Shiro and then assist Senkyo by handing him a book about the familiar pact. He didn’t have any answers, so for now, he focused on the test in front of him.

**365 – Trade-Off**

*“\*They’re retreating!\*”*

Senkyo said to Shiro as the five mana signatures of magic arms fell back. Fortunately, with the information he collected from Scout’s Breath earlier, he knew that it was only a trap where five more magic arms were awaiting them further back. Along with their retreat came another swarm of bomb jockeys to blind his vision again as well as the cave trappers that would eventually engage with him. Normally, he would ignore the reinforcements and focus on the magic arms, but with the knowledge of there being five more at the back, he decided to take his time and clear the enemies in front of him.

“O Darkness, what falls are the ignoble vipers, and what rises are only they who stay true. Seek control of the body around you and expel those that threaten your land. Pressure Drive!”

*“\*O Clear Canvas, your strength lies with them who hold the brush. Lend your energy, liven the potency of their stroke, and become the medium for their passion. Power Augmentation!\*”*

Finishing their chants at the same time, the corrosive liquid and the approaching enemies around Senkyo were all pushed back to the cave walls, a strong gravitational force pressing them to the solid rocks. Meanwhile, the same powerful force was placed onto Senkyo but instead of being crushed to the walls, he was shot across the air, piercing through the cave path at an incredible speed. The dark spell Pressure Drive was one that controls the gravitational force in an area and repels enemies while it shoots allies into a direction the caster chooses.

This spell was mainly used in swarms like this since it not only pushes back enemies and gives the caster space, but also stops them from increasing by having the bodies of enemies in the area block the approach of new cave trappers or other enemies in general. Usually, it would last for only a few seconds, but with the help of Shiro’s Power Augmentation, it increased the power of the spell, extending its time and further empowering the gravitational pressure released by the spell. This ended with Senkyo’s explosive increase in speed and caught up to the retreating magic arms.

At this point, even his Detect picked up the mana signatures of the five new magic arms that awaited in the backlines. With a total of ten mana signatures of magic arms, they brought their attention to Senkyo. The never-ending swarm of bomb jockeys and cave trappers refused to cease, and now, even phantom threaders joined the fray by creating 3D illusions to mess with Senkyo’s vision and mana perception.

Before the phantom threaders could act, Senkyo embedded the location of all ten mana signatures in his mind. The very moment after, the area was covered by a sheet of thick mana, concealing the mana signatures and making Detect useless.

“O Wind, change the currents of your gentle breeze, become the draft that alerts me of your presence. Exploration in a swift sweep; turn the expanse inside out and return the lay of the land. Scout’s Breath.”

*“\*Barrier! Barrier! Barrier!\*”*

Senkyo immediately used Scout’s Breath to analyze his current position. Shiro opted to cast barriers around him to stall for time. The best part about being in a cave was that the tight space limited the number of enemies that could attack Shiro’s barriers at the same time. No matter how many more enemies pour in, that didn’t change the speed of them breaking her barriers.

This time, Scout’s Breath showed no more presence of reinforcements, meaning that this would all be over the moment they cleared this last wave. However, he was under time pressure. He kept in mind the magic arms that he detected behind him on his first cast of Scout’s Breath. If he took too long here, those behind him would catch up and make everything harder. He needed to be quick.

The cave paths around him in a 20-meter radius were projected in his mind. Overlapping this image along with the mana signatures of the ten magic arms he took note of earlier, six of those signals were on the cave paths while the other four were inside walls. The four were either illusions or magic arms that were located in a cave path or tunnel that the wind from Senkyo’s Scout’s Breath couldn’t reach. The six were likely to be real but could still be fake.

There was no confirming the legitimacy of each mana signature, and on top of that, it was simply impossible to take out all ten mana signatures before any sort of reinforcements arrive from the enemies. Senkyo didn’t have that much time or power. But, he couldn’t just ignore them and rush for the exit to level S. Doing that would just bring more trouble for him in the future when he eventually has to return to the surface, and right now, he doesn’t even know where the exit is. Taking everything into consideration, he switched objectives from taking out all ten signatures to taking out only the six that were connected to his current location.

Exploring unknown territory to take out the four signatures was dangerous. It also needed Senkyo to break down walls in order to reach them. Trying to take them out would only slow him down, especially if all of them were illusions. The trade-off in targeting the six mana signals was simply better. Relaying the switch of plans to Shiro, they prepared for their breakthrough.

“O Darkness, what falls are the ignoble vipers, and what rises are only they who stay true. Seek control of the body around you and expel those that threaten your land. Pressure Drive!”

*“\*O Clear Canvas, your strength lies with them who hold the brush. Lend your energy, liven the potency of their stroke, and become the medium for their passion. Power Augmentation!\*”*

Without the enemies being able to penetrate Shiro’s solid barriers, they repeated the combo of Pressure Drive and Power Augmentation, sending the spiders back and piercing through the illusions made by the phantom threaders. The time Senkyo spent thinking amassed an insane amount of enemies shown by the spiders that were crushed to death by the gravitational force. The space they were being shot through was narrow with the bodies of crushed spiders serving as their new walls. But, it was no time to be amazed by the carnage or the power that caused it. Setting useless thoughts aside, Senkyo took out six rock talismans and Hkrwir fangs, the fangs from the centipede-like creatures he encountered on level D.

Each rock talisman was merged with a Hkrwir fang through spirit power. All six of them had a circuit with Interaction at the center inside of Connection on the rock talisman while the Hkrwir fang had a circuit of Connection at the center of the symbol for Spirit, extending at the tip of the arc with the symbol of Domination followed by Repetition. Then, he chanted.

“O Light, I am as I desire to be. Hunting my adversaries with tooth and nail, created through falsehoods. Call upon the roar of the heavens and bring those that oppose it to a daze, follow my word. Ephemeral Clone!”

As Senkyo began his chant, Shiro followed.

*“\*O Clear Canvas, the emptiness that fills you is not the void but the mirror that reflects the spirit of the painter. Become the manifestation of their will and bring to life the perfect reproduction. Split Image!\*”*

Senkyo’s magic caused one of the rock talismans in his hand to jump out. Then, a copy of himself appeared with the rock talisman as its core. Following that, Shiro’s cast produced the exact same result. Senkyo widened his eyes in surprise but kept his head together and ordered both copies to split and rush down a different path from them. They repeated this two more times until all six rock talismans were consumed.

Their final two copies were produced and Senkyo sent one of them to a different path. In front of him was an illusion of himself that he and Shiro made. He ordered all six copies to perform one single thing—eliminate one of the magic arm mana signatures he sensed earlier. He sent the other five copies down the paths where he last sensed the magic arm mana signatures. One of them happened to be right in front of them, which is why he left one leading the way. Senkyo could have just taken out the magic arm by himself, but he wanted to see if the clone would execute like he wanted it to.

He and his copy continued down the path until a magic arm entered their sights. It had its natural color, signifying that it wasn’t supposed to be an illusion. Senkyo stood back while his copy charged forward. The magic arm noticed his copy’s approach and launched a flurry of low-tier fire and wind attacks. His copy was swift, dodging every single one. Realizing that its attacks were ineffective, the magic arm slammed its arms on the ground, creating numerous earth spikes below his clone, rising until they reached it. But, the clone used flash strike, zooming past the spikes and placing itself in front of the magic arm where it began to launch its bone daggers into the magic arm. Then, out of nowhere, the ceiling above the clone broke, and a cave trapper shot out from the hole and pinned the clone to the ground where it used its earth-shattering spider legs to kill the clone.

At first glance, it would look like the clone failed its goal. But then, the moment it disappeared, a blast of lightning struck the area around it, stunning the magic arm and the cave trapper. It was then followed by a heavy spray of acid that came from none other than the Hkrwir fang that was attached to the rock talisman. Unable to move, the magic arm and cave trapper could do nothing but stand inside the spray until the acid melted them to death.

This was an interesting technique Senkyo learned about while he was reading the spellbook for the dark element. Along with the clone, it was possible to place a core inside it. This core could act as an integrated source of energy and increase the durability of a clone depending on the physical strength of the core. In this situation, Senkyo’s earlier clone had the <Action Property> to hunt magic arm mana signatures while it had the <Extra Element> of lightning to stun enemies upon disappearing. Above all of this, the clones possessed a core that would activate the moment the clone disappears, activating Interaction and creating a spray of Hkrwir acid from the Spirit symbol. With this contraption, even if the clones failed to eliminate the target, as long as they are within close range of them, they will still die with Senkyo’s backup circuit.

The other clones should have executed similarly to the clone in front of Senkyo but there was still no guarantee how many magic arms he actually eliminated. He didn’t know which of the mana signatures he detected earlier were real or fake. And, there was one simple counter to his clones. If a phantom threader created a fake magic arm in front of the real one, his clones would attack the closest target with a magic arm mana signature, putting all their energy into killing a fake and letting the real target live. This method had no guarantees, but it was the only thing he could do to break down the enemies in the area. The arachne sage that controlled everything simply placed its pawns in the most optimal positions so that Senkyo wouldn’t be able to take them all. Facing the reality of the situation, he cut off all his losses and focused on finding the path to level S. Senkyo could only hope that this last attempt of his took down enough enemy forces.

**366 – Dangers Between Levels**

After searching around level A3, Senkyo eventually found the path to level S. He encountered a few enemies while he was searching, but nothing too troublesome to stop his search. It seemed like the arachne sage chose to leave him for now. It could have been because of his last assault strike on his magic arms but instead of worrying about that, what mattered now was the obstacle in front of him. At the entrance to level S was a floor that radiated a clear mana signature. It was an illusion to hide some kind of trap made by a phantom threader. It covered both the floor and the walls but not the ceiling. He could have dug upward, but he had an easier solution in mind.

“Hup—”

He made a light hop, entering the air and suspending himself in it by creating an air foothold.

“—Eh!?”

Or at least that was what he meant to do until his body suddenly slipped from his own air platform, hurling toward the trap in front.

“I would be more careful if I were you.”

“!?!?”

A familiar voice entered his ears and his face paled when he easily pieced together what had happened. Behind him was none other than Leolja with lines of strings extending from his fingers and over the air foothold Senkyo created. He hadn’t even entered level S, but the boss that was supposed to be inside it was already behind him. These levels serve only as an indicator where the Iwaiida often stay but that didn’t mean they couldn’t leave them. What Leolja did was leave level S and waited to ambush Senkyo once he arrived at the path to level S. He was easy prey since it was obvious he would eventually walk through it.

Leolja’s free hand ignited in flames and threw the deadly inflamed strings at Senkyo. For the first time in a while, he had to be careful about the training dummy’s safety. He forced his body to twist in the air and save the dummy latched onto his back by facing the attack head-on. He would have taken damage if it weren’t for the magic barrier and physical barrier created by Shiro.

“What an annoying ability.”

A line of complaint left Leolja’s mouth as Senkyo fell through the trap in front of him, fazing through the floor, and disappearing from the area. Right as he entered the trap, he experienced a massive attack on his senses, taking the light from his eyes and reducing his vision through blindness, his ears ringing from the deafness imposed upon him, his sense of smell ceasing, his taste dulling, and his skin failing to pick up even the gentle caress of the wind.

“—!!—!!!”

It felt like Shiro was trying to say something to him but even the senses in his head couldn’t properly understand her.

“—Purify”

Senkyo couldn’t keep up with what was happening. What he did know was that whatever Shiro did began to clear his senses. It would have been great if it ended there, but then he realized that he was freefalling into a pit of sand.

“O-O Wind, usher your gentle breeze and bring forth a draft, power of the gale! Herald your mystic breath once for conflict and twice for liberty! Zephyr!!!”

He couldn’t be bothered hiding his chant and screamed it for the world to hear, but as a result, he quickly made the air below him gather into numerous high-pressure orbs. Right as his body was about to splat on the ground, they exploded, throwing Senkyo airborne once more, but this time at a slower speed that allowed him to control himself and make an air foothold. He wanted to analyze the situation but a glance was all he could afford before a cave trapper latched onto his back and pushed him off the platform.

The cave trapper tried to attack the target dummy but Shiro’s barriers were quick to build and blocked it. Senkyo made another air foothold and shook off the cave trapper. Then, he jumped and made another air foothold to dodge another cave trapper that he sensed. It was good that the immediate threat was now gone but this didn’t give Senkyo’s chest any form of relief. After all, the one glance he took along with the mana signatures to back it up told him that this was the most dangerous situation he had ever been in these tests.

Surrounding Senkyo in a circle, a total of six arachne sages were spread with their arms stretched out as they chanted magic. This was a situation that he would never end up in level A3. It wasn’t possible to have six arachne sages work together in tandem just to crush a single crawler. But this was level S, the deepest level where Leolja’s evolution stage, the demonic spider, ruled. By controlling the arachne sages, he forced them out of hiding and pitted them directly against Senkyo. It would have been great if the sages were only strong as the typical backline strategists, but the unfortunate thing was that they were also quite the force to be reckoned with in a fight.

“O Nature, Amass your power at my word. Create my weapons and impale my adversaries. Needle Storm!”

Senkyo tried to charge at one of the sages with the support of Needle Storm by his side. But then, thick strings rose from the ground and blocked Senkyo from the sages. He poured his Needle Storm and slashed the strings with his katana but to no avail. Looking upward, the circle of strings all met with Leolja’s hand, creating a cone-like prison that encaged Senkyo. Instead of trying to break through a single side, he changed his target to Leolja where all of the spider strings gathered. Just like before, he would break through that point and finish off Leolja. Senkyo steadily rose up, using flash strike to move from air foothold to air foothold, avoiding cave trappers that were dropping from above. But before he could even get to it, Leolja’s lips twisted into a smirk as the arachne sages finished chanting their spells.

From below, two trails of ice glaciers snaked through the ground, slowly rising upward with every advance as if trying to reach Senkyo’s height. Meanwhile, from above, a heavy rain of hail pelted everything below it with their solid chunks of ice. Everything the ice touched instantly froze over, solidifying the sand below him. However, this didn’t affect Senkyo with the help of Shiro’s magic barrier. The hail that would hit him would just get absorbed.

This shouldn’t have stopped his advance but then, the environment around him changed. White clouds appeared and covered the ceiling, the ice glaciers on the ground expanded taller and wider in an instant, and the ground below pilled up with snow and hail as they unceasingly dropped from the white clouds. The sight of the cave was nowhere to be seen. The same went for Leolja, the arachne sages, and the cave trappers that attacked him. Even Detect could only find the violent winter storm around him. Confined in some kind of arctic, Senkyo could only remain still as there were no visible escape routes from this place.

**367 – The Spell of Undefined Power**

Right now, Senkyo was trapped in some kind of magic. Shiro’s magic barrier still worked, proven by it absorbing the snow and hail that tried to pelt him. But, that didn’t stop the temperature from dropping. Because the magic affected the environment instead of Senkyo’s body, the magic barrier he had could not stop this magic from forming. With them trapped in a field of frost, Shiro prioritized keeping Senkyo warm by summoning numerous fireballs around him. The pressure of the cold brought their lifespan to a mere two seconds, but she continued summoning them to keep Senkyo warm. It was only a matter of time before the cold would get to him, so he needed to make the most out of the time Shiro was buying for him.

Thinking hard about what to do to escape, he was reminded of a spell he read in the spellbook for the frost element. It was the very spell that was being used on them at the moment. Icescape Prison was the name of that spell and it required the presence of five mid-tier spells to be able to cast it. From the inside, it looked like he was trapped in another dimension, but in reality, he was simply trapped in a type of container. Contrary to the scene inside, it would only look like a mass of pale blue color from an outside perspective. This would most likely allow Leolja to gather more troops. Breaking out was already one thing but thinking that his problems didn’t end there made him have a slight headache.

Back when he was reading in the library, he quickly disregarded Icescape Prison for being hard to cast. The same went for other high-tier spells, but putting those aside, he focused more on the requirements of these spells and found that most of them often required Dimensional Layer and Structural Synthesis. From the looks of it, these were the prominent spells that could make high-tier spells. Out of curiosity, he remembered the spell for Dimensional Layer while reading the spellbook for the dark element, but since Structural Synthesis was a null element and Senkyo didn’t get the time to search it due to Gaeka’s attack, he didn’t know how to cast it.

While narrating his whole thought process in his mind, Shiro spoke up to tell him.

*“\*Shiro knows how to cast Structural Synthesis!\*”*

“…Ahaha… so you do…”

*“\*Yep! Ranat taught Shiro!\*”*

“…I thought that would be the case.”

Since Shiro apparently learned many null magic spells from Ranat, he was hoping she would know this one as well. The only way to break out of Icescape Prison was to overload the space with searing hot flames that can melt the ice faster than it can freeze. The most troublesome part of this magic was the fact that it regenerated more ice the more you damage it. If one were to make a dent, the prison will expand and thicken the ice. Theoretically, breaking down the Icescape is possible with brute strength, but only if they are able to break the entire space in a single blow and get out of the Icescape before it regenerates its walls. This varies by how strong the Icescape Prison is built, but typically, using fire was best.

Taking all of this into consideration, Senkyo was thankful to have Dimensional Layer and Structural Synthesis in his arsenal. After all, if his most powerful fire magic failed to melt the space, he would be stuck with no options.

“O Fire, lend me your power, from the pits of hell come to mine aid. Set the first point of my retribution!”

“O Fire, lend me your power, from the pits of hell come to mine aid. Set the second point of my retribution!”

…

“With the five keys set, open the gates of hell and begin my reckoning! Hell's Pillar!”

And as it turned out, after making a quick lap around the land and casting Hell’s Pillar, his most powerful spell couldn’t overpower the ice. Hell’s Pillar was able to melt the ice in the vicinity to some extent while the ice inside the column of flame was already turning into liquid. But once the spell ran out, all the damage it dealt was replaced by thicker masses of ice. At the very least, the spell warmed him up a lot.

The only way he could think of to escape was to utilize Structural Synthesis, a spell that fuses other spells. The problem was that Senkyo didn’t know how to use it and the same went for Shiro despite her being the one who knows how to cast the spell. How exactly do these spells “fuse?” Senkyo needed to understand that before being able to utilize it properly.

“Shiro, cast Structural Synthesis after my second spell.”

*“\*Understood!\*”*

Eruption, Hell’s Pillar, Knight Spell, Paired Hellfire, and Sun’s Protection. These were the only spells he knew that could utilize the fire element. Technically, he also knew other spells from the Konjou Clan, but those spells usually involve having a weapon. They weren’t fit for the highly destructive spell that he was trying to produce. The same went for Knight Spell and Sun’s Protection, but they were different in the sense that he was okay with flaunting those spells out in public.

Only now that he listed all of them did he realize how few fire spells he knew. Since fire wasn’t used in the caves because of the tight spaces, he didn’t bother reading up on fire spells. Maybe because of this Leolja used Icescape Prison on him. If Shiro didn’t learn about Structural Synthesis, everything could have very likely ended here.

“O Fire, let my hands guide you. Recreate an image of a burning hell, beginning with this small flare. Paired Hellfire!”

“O Fire, break free from your cage, exhibit your power. Scorch my path and bring upon a conflagration. Eruption!”

*“\*Invisible light that ignites the most devastating fires, you who rule the world with your omnipotent presence. I request to you: heed the call for your power, take form the shape that unites the living circuits, and give birth to a greater power. Structural Synthesis!\*”*

With a wall of flame in front of him extending outward and two bodies of fire blasting from both of his palms, Shiro cast Structural Synthesis. As a result, Senkyo tilted his head and Shiro let out a confused noise in his head.

“Nothing… happened?”

*“\*U-Umm… Sh-Shiro should have chanted it correctly! S-Structural Synthesis should have worked!\*”*

She explained in a panicked voice, clearly a bit flustered with the result of her magic.

“Calm down, Shiro. Let’s think about this for a moment.”

*“\*Y-Yes…\*”*

She slowly quieted down, but he could still feel the restlessness inside her.

“For now, let’s try out a few more combinations.”

*“\*M-Mnn…\*”*

Eruption and Knight Spell—nothing.

Knight Spell and Paired Hellfire—nothing.

Paired Hellfire and Sun’s Protection—nothing.

Knight Spell and Sun’s Protection—nothing.

Sun’s Protection and Eruption—nothing.

Every time they tried to use Structural Synthesis, they would end up with the same result. Thinking about it now, Senkyo should have stopped after the third time they failed. Right now, Shiro was down in the dumps due to the magic not working. She was probably being hard on herself for all of these failures. Senkyo would like nothing more than to comfort her but right now he was in the middle of a freezing blizzard of ice and hail. It wasn’t really a place he would want Shiro to manifest herself in. The best thing he could do now was figure out why the magic wasn’t working.

“Shiro, did Ranat say anything about Structural Synthesis?”

*“\*R-Ranat…? Y-Yes… She said to just connect it to other spells and cast it just like how Shiro usually would. Sh-Shiro thinks she’s been doing exactly what she said, but… it won’t work…\*”*

“Connect it to other spells… huh?”

Was it some kind of misinterpretation? The phrase “connect it to other spells” would probably have someone shape the mana by simply overlapping it on existing spells, but maybe that wasn’t it? An enhanced version of spells existed out there like Open Spells. It wouldn’t be weird if Structural Synthesis was another type of special spell that Senkyo didn’t know about. In fact, he already noticed signs that Structural Synthesis wasn’t like other spells he used so far.

For instance, the chant didn’t start with the usual “O <Element>.” The chant opens immediately into a sentence without this. The only other instance Senkyo remembered seeing this was… actually quite often. This pattern would only appear when he was casting a spell that the Konjou Clan taught him. Spells that were made by the clan themselves. In other words, spells that originated from Earth, not Zerid. Gale Fan, Hunting Shroud, and Phantom Blade all had chants that didn’t start with “O <Element>.” Following this trend, that would mean that Structural Synthesis was created by an earthling, not a zeldian.

Thinking about it this way, a certain phrase made him quite interested. Specifically, the part saying “take form the shape that unites the living circuits.” The word “circuit” is a common term in the enchanter class of the Konjou Clan which Senkyo was very familiar with. This thought gave him a hunch. As for whether it was right or not, there was only one way to find out.

“Shiro, I’ll try to cast Structural Synthesis. Can you observe how the mana is formed?”

*“\*…? Y-Yes, Shiro can do that.\*”*

“Thanks.”

Although a bit confused, Shiro quickly agreed. Uttering the correct string of words will control the mana around a caster. A skilled caster will be able to see and feel how the mana is being formed. As for Senkyo and Shiro, they are able to see the mana they were casting as if they were a single person. If Senkyo can figure out how this spell interacts with other magic, he would be able to find his first big lead for using Structural Synthesis.

He cast Eruption and Paired Hellfire once more. A column of flames to his front and two sprays of fire gushing out of his palms. Here, he collected the mana around him and began his chant.

“Invisible light that ignites the most devastating fires…”

Three clumps of mana highlight themselves in front of him… no, five? Six. Seven. No, unlike normal spells, this spell had no fixed number of mana it could control. As long as he willed it, the number of highlighted clumps would increase and decrease. For now, he settled with three.

“…you who rule the world with your omnipotent presence.”

Around this part, Shiro would simply connect the three clumps, placing one in each body of fire. But that doesn’t work. So, Senkyo decided to do something different.

*“\*…!\*”*

Shiro didn’t speak, but he could hear her voice piqued by Senkyo’s formation.

“I request to you:…”

Mana formations are typically made simple with the existence of spells. They would give the caster a simple guide as to how the mana should be arranged. The caster’s main job was to place the mana where they want the output to be released.

“…heed the call for your power…”

However, a spell like Structural Synthesis was completely different. The caster would be given the building blocks, but how the spell would be arranged was the caster’s responsibility.

“…take form the shape that unites the living circuits…”

This magic had no fixed form. It was a spell that was meant to be shaped by the caster to produce the result that they desire. In other words, Shiro, who had no specific image in mind for what the spell should do, could only produce nothing because of this.

“…and give birth to a greater power.”

Unlike how Shiro would support Senkyo’s previous magic by using null spells to empower them, this was not a spell that was made to support or assist. It was a spell that was made to build and create. Now that Senkyo realized this, the only person that casts this spell should be none other than a person that already has an image in mind and knows how to arrange and produce the said image. As an enchanter of the Konjou Clan, it was all too simple to meet these requirements

“—Structural Synthesis!”

A clump of mana was placed inside the product of Eruption, encasing it as if placing it inside a giant circle and two lines, the symbol for Connection and Repetition, where inside, the mana formed into symbols of Spirit and two repeats of Domination on each end of the arc. Meanwhile, the palms of his hands were encased in the same shape of mana signifying Connection, placing the symbol for Spirit in the center of Direction inside the circle. The said three circles were connected by a string of mana.

At the very moment Senkyo cast, he swept his hands through his surroundings, creating numerous cracks on the ground, all of them tracing straight lines where a second later, an enormous body of flame rose to the sky as if a volcanic eruption had occurred, save for the center where Senkyo stood unscathed. It was almost like Hell’s Pillar was cast but with a shorter height. It was just as he wanted it to happen. Instead of spewing flames, everywhere his palms point would instantly cast Eruption. A good name he thought of for this was Volcanic Palm, inspired by its effects similar to a volcanic eruption.

The ice caught by the Volcanic Palm already began to melt, but the size of this fire wasn’t even close to melting the Icescape Prison. If Senkyo waited for his flames to weaken, he would only be faced with a stronger defense. It was now or never. He hesitated for just a second after recalling a terrible memory but thinking of his goals in mind, he forced his legs and shot himself into the sea of flames.

**368 – The Fury of Hell’s Gale**

“O Fire, lend me your power, from the pits of hell come to mine aid. Set the first point of my retribution!”

“O Fire, lend me your power, from the pits of hell come to mine aid. Set the second point of my retribution!”

Running inside the flames, Senkyo began the chant for Hell’s Pillar. At the same time, he took out rock talismans and Eozea tongues from his small bags. He made sure to wrap them in his mana, just like he did with the target dummy stuck to his back, so that the flames don’t consume them and separated them into pairs. He combined the two and engraved a circuit to each one.

Placed on the rock talisman was a center of Spirit connected to a symbol for Connection by overlapping four symbols of Interaction in their ordinal directions, all inside another symbol of Connection. Meanwhile, the Eozea tongue had a center of Connection overlapping the symbol for Direction at its three points midsections, further extending the chain by overlapping another symbol for Direction at those same points, creating an inverse copy. This was placed inside the diamond of the symbol of Spirit accompanied by Domination.

“With the five keys set, open the gates of hell and begin my reckoning! Hell's Pillar!”`

*“\*O Clear Canvas, your strength lies with them who hold the brush. Lend your energy, liven the potency of their stroke, and become the medium for their passion. Power Augmentation!\*”*

*\*FVVWSSHHH!!!\**

The ground opened up, consuming the entire Icescape Prison in a devastating blaze. With the help of Shiro’s Power Augmentation, the ice in the area could not oppose the rising heat and quickly turned to liquid. As long as Senkyo continued this, he would be able to break out of the prison eventually, but that wasn’t enough for him. He didn’t expect Leolja to sit back and relax while he was stuck in the Icescape Prison. He wanted something more before breaking out. While he was inside the Icescape, despite being there to freeze him to death, it also served as a shroud to prevent outsiders from seeing what was happening inside. He wanted something that he could use to make his way to Leolja the moment he broke out, no matter where he was in the cave. For this reason, he continued chanting.

“O Darkness, spread your looming shadow away from the recognition of the naked eye and construct your boundary as you see fit. Unhindered, unfettered, unbridled: release the boundless potential that you hold! Dimensional Layer!”

*“\*O Clear Canvas, I call upon thee to grow, build, and expand. Broaden our horizon and spread your influence to the masses. Greater Plain!\*”*

A blast of dark energy sprawled within the raging flames.

“O Wind, harbinger of nature’s trial, raise a furor as you serve your harsh lessons. Shake the earth, the sea, and the sky; I call upon the power that brings tremors to the very body of nature itself. Raging Tempest!”

*“\*O Clear Canvas, I call upon thee to grow, build, and expand. Broaden our horizon and spread your influence to the masses. Greater Plain!\*”*

The flames began to dance in the sky. A mix of fire, earth, and wind could be seen as flames merged with the crumbling ground, creating molten lava and circulating it in the storm of hell. As the molten lava was not from Senkyo’s magic, Shiro placed a physical barrier on Senkyo and the target dummy to prevent it from making contact. Completely immersed in his own world, Senkyo never even realized that his life was in danger as he continued chanting his final spell.

“Invisible light that ignites the most devastating fires, you who rule the world with your omnipotent presence. I request to you: heed the call for your power, take form the shape that unites the living circuits, and give birth to a greater power—”

Volcanic Palm, Hell’s Pillar, Dimensional Layer, and Raging Tempest, all empowered by Shiro’s null magic. Senkyo summoned numerous clumps of mana and merged all of the existing magics. His mind and heart focused solely on unifying all of the various spells together to create magic on a completely different level from any of what he had cast before. The lines connected and the structure was built. Devastating magic that will turn the tides of war in a single stroke.

“—Structural Synthesis!”

The name of the spell he forged was quickly decided. Nether Firestorm.

**…………**

From beyond the walls of the Icescape Prison, Leolja was near the ceiling of the cave, standing on one of his threads, watching the sight below as a cesspool of bomb jockeys, phantom threaders, cave trappers, magic arms, and arachne sages surrounded the pillar of pale blue ice that served as Senkyo’s prison. Its exterior began to melt a few seconds ago, so he prepared the Iwaiida under his control for Senkyo’s potential breakout. He spread his threads around the vicinity to act as a net and prevent any blitz attacks on his person. He considered himself quite prepared. In fact, he was even worried that maybe he was overdoing it by putting this much pressure on his current challenger.

But then, it happened.

*\*FFFVVVVSSSHHHHH!!!\**

“!?!?!?”

A sudden blast of intense flames. He created more threads to block the pressure and placed his arms to shield his eyes and inspect the source of this attack. From the center of the cave where the thick block of pale blue ice once stood was now some sort of blazing cavity that produced the same results of a white hole. It constantly spat out a furious storm of fire and lava, the pressure making the ground crumble and fall apart, making it hard for him to see anything at all due to the cinders that assaulted his eyes despite his current defenses. He quickly tried to resolve this by creating makeshift goggles with his spider threads, only to find that his life was being threatened the moment he shaped them.

“Kghh…!”

He dodged the deadly blade that crossed this vision, sparing his arm and the spider legs on his back from being severed. Before he ever realized it, he instinctively wrapped himself in threads and launched a clump of webs into Senkyo, pushing them away from each other. Now with a bit of breathing room, he checked up on his army of Iwaiida, only to find massive clumps of his threads melting into liquid, some even dissolving. Those were the remnants of the bodies he made his illusions out of. Instead of being spread across the cave, they were collected into groups, implying that they were gathered before getting taken out. The initial blast of Senkyo’s attack almost completely annihilated the army he built up. For now, he tried to get more spiders to come as reinforcements and escape.

With the heat in the area melting his webs, it was no wonder that the net he created didn’t pick up on Senkyo’s attack. Leolja needed to keep sheeting his body with threads to maintain his armor against the storm coming from the pits of hell. Along with that, he had to create a mask and regulate artificial oxygen through it so that he could breathe. He peered through the blaze in search of an exit from the area but the heavy flames made it impossible to see through them.

He may not be able to see, but his danger senses made his hairs stand on end, warning him of the biggest threat inside the fire field. He quickly launched a clump of webs to the wall to repel him away from danger, but before it could make contact, a small cavity similar to the one in the center of the room appeared on the wall which released an aggressive blast of fire and lava, turning his webs to liquid before they could even make contact.

“G-GRAAH…!!”

Realizing his perilous position, he shaped large claws from his free arm and swiped in the direction he sensed Senkyo coming from. At the same time, the spider legs on his back spewed a blast of spider webs around his surroundings to serve as detectors and an extra line of defense. In the end, he made no contact from his panicked swipe, and neither did Senkyo continue his aggressive approach. For a second, he thought he was safe until the fog of fire and cinders revealed a peculiar rock that had some kind of tongue attached to it. When he realized that there was a circuit attached to it, Leolja could only widen his eyes before it activated.

A large blast emitted from the rock, knocking him and the spider webs he created back. But then a second later, instead of being blasted away, the force reversed and his body got sucked into the source of the blast along with his webs. Turning the explosion into an implosion, it resulted in him getting stuck in his own webs. He realized that this was what took out most of his army while he was distracted by the initial blast of Senkyo’s magic.

His body was taken out of the air with the restriction of his movements and pinned to the ground below. Senkyo stomped his body underfoot and positioned the sharp blade of his katana, threatening to cut his neck. The next thing Leolja knew, the firestorm began to calm down and Senkyo was looking at him from above with his blade placed snuggly by his neck.

“It’s over, right?”

Senkyo asked for confirmation, to which Leolja released all of the compressed air he held in his lungs in relief, limped his body, and said…

“Don’t you think that was a bit much!?”

“A-Ahh… Sorry, my bad…”

**369 – Pieces Falling Together**

After taking out Leolja, the rest of Senkyo’s time in the cave went smoothly. He simply picked a convenient place to stop and waited for five minutes while keeping enemies out to accomplish his first objective. As for the second, he searched for the target mineral at his own pace without having to deal with any extreme attacks. Without the demon spider, the arachne sages took over control to take Senkyo out but their danger was nowhere near what Leolja gave him. In the first place, the arachne sages would never place themselves in the frontline, reducing the danger Senkyo faced by a significant amount.

He often countered enemies using Pressure Drive and a few other mid-tier spells depending on the situation. It also felt like the difficulty of level S went down with the absence of a demon spider which allowed him to get used to the attacks of arachne sages at some point. Seeing as they were the second-most dangerous enemy in the sunken nest, his journey up the levels was devoid of trouble, to say the least.

Although, this wasn’t the time to get used to this, as Leolja’s last warning just before he left him on level S was him saying that there would be other demon spiders to follow in the real sunken nest. Apparently, tomorrow’s test would have Leolja come back in action no matter how many times he defeats him to simulate the situation of having numerous demon spiders on the level.

“Well done.”

Leolja greeted him as Senkyo resurfaced from the cave, the composure in his voice recovered from the last time he heard it.

“You have cleared the second day of your test. I didn’t know how today was going to turn out based on what you told me when you first arrived but it seems like it was my needless concern. You and Shir did a good job.”

“Thanks. I didn’t know what would happen too. For a second, I thought you had us with Icescape Prison but it was a good thing that Shiro knew how to cast Structured Synthesis. We would have been done for without that.”

“Yes… It was an impressive use of Structured Synthesis. I never thought I would witness such incredible magic today. Keep this up and I am certain you will obtain the right to become a splendid crawler.”

Leolja placed his hand on Senkyo’s shoulder and gave him a nod of encouragement. He returned his gaze with a genuine smile but with probing eyes.

“Hmn, thanks.”

“Well then, I must be on my way. I have already approved your entry to the surface perimeter of the sunken nest. Simply state your name to one of Haeqras’ staff and they will escort you. Collect what you must but keep in mind that entering the sunken nest itself is prohibited. Haeqras’ staff and the guards there will make sure of that. We will be meeting tomorrow at the same time, so please be prepared.”

“I’ll make sure… but, just before you go, I actually have a question.”

“Oh? What would that be?”

Leolja remained in place and kept his eyes locked with Senkyo’s, waiting for his response.

“…”

“…”

The silence continued, creating an awkward atmosphere and making Leolja tilt his head in confusion.

“…Is there something wrong, Senkyo?”

“Ah… No, I was just wondering what made you so good at handling your illusions.”

“There’s no special trick to it. I’ve seen all kinds of people both in my time in the Sunken Nest and as a Riser. It’s all about the experience.”

“Is that so? I’ll be sure to keep that in mind for the future.”

“I am glad I was able to be of service. Then, I will be off.”

Saying that, Leolja turned his back and left the artificial caves. As Senkyo saw him disappear from his vision, Shiro couldn’t help but be curious about his actions.

*“\*Onii-chan, why did you ask Leela that?\*”*

To her, it may seem like he just asked a random question out of nowhere, but to Senkyo it meant something else completely.

*“\*Shiro, I think Leolja knows about Spirit Power and Circuits.\*”*

He said to her in his mind, keeping their conversation away from the outside world.

**…………**

Footsteps echoed once more from a certain gloomy hallway. There was only one person who would walk down this red hallway that possessed a stride with this rhythm, and the person working in a dimly lit room knew this.

“Leolja, you’re back. What’s the status?”

“I thought I was going to die.”

“Not that, you idiot! How much DNA did you gather?”

“Would it kill you to be a bit more concerned about me?”

“Not when we’re this close!”

Leolja could only let out a sigh in resignation to the man’s attitude and flicked on the light switch to the room.

“Tsk.”

“Deal with it.”

He brushed off the man’s dissatisfied tone and brought him a cloth bag. He placed the contents of the bag on the workbench where the man analyzed the items.

“A vial of sweat and just shy of half a vial of blood… There’s significantly less than yesterday’s haul, huh?”

“There was nothing I could do. His attack on me burnt the hair I collected and he cleared the sunken nest with much fewer problems compared to last time.”

“That’s… a bit unfortunate. How was he compared to yesterday?”

“Like a completely different person. Honestly, I think that he was just holding back before. He used so much more magic this time than last time. He didn’t even use much spirit power and he still managed to become so troublesome.”

“Sounds like you weren’t kidding that he beat you up hard, huh? On the bright side, this is what we want too, so don’t be down about it.”

“I know that. But, did invading his mind really power him up that much? You cannot blame me for thinking it’s hard to believe.”

“Hm? Did he use creation magic on you?”

“I don’t think so, from what I can tell at least.”

“Then what I did should have done nothing to power him up. Maybe his mana flow became smoother than before but nothing decisive without creation magic.”

“What are you talking about? Then how do you explain his explosive increase in power? Are you actually going to say that he was holding back?”

“I don’t know for sure, but Adeira did say that he was in the library reading a stack of spellbooks. According to a third party, he was researching which spells would be useful for his test today.”

“Researching…? Care to explain what that means?”

“You know, handpicking spells and remembering which ones are useful… or something like that.”

“Are you telling me I lost because he spent an all-nighter cramming spells into his brain…? Do you understand just how absurd that sounds?”

“Of course I do. If you could learn spells just by remembering them and chanting them correctly, there would be no need for magic schools around the world. Understanding the mana structure of the spell, how it is integrated into their chant, knowing how to pour the right amount of mana, and manipulating said mana to produce the desired outcome. Sure, the chants of spells make it easier but that doesn’t change the fact that it’s a practiced skill. All of those are important especially when trying to cast formulation spells like Structured Synthesis. If I didn’t know who this desperate crammer was, I would have thought you’d gone insane.”

“So he is some kind of exception, is what you are trying to say?”

“…That’s the kind of existence he is. An anomaly. That’s why we’re going to use him. Nothing better than to pit monsters against monsters. Besides, this will be beneficial for him too, so don’t feel too bad.”

“Can you be more specific? Do know that it is hard to follow you up if you keep me in the dark with your cryptic words.”

“He’s… someone you’re better off forgetting. That man is destined to fall along with his power. The only thing anyone can do about that now is to lead him so that he falls in a way that’s more convenient for everyone involved. I’ll be the one to do that. Leolja, just remember, do not get too involved with him. Especially after all this trouble blows over. Someone who has never experienced the outside world like you should just stick with working for their own sake. There are better things to do out there, and getting involved with that man isn’t one of them.”

The man took the two vials of liquid, turned his back to Leolja, and resumed his work. From then on, he ignored Leolja’s presence as if he was never there. The Iwaiida gentleman could only look at his working figure with concern.

“…You never listen to me, do you?”

Leolja said bitterly and left the room.

**370 – What Could Be Lost or Gained**

*“\*So… Leela shouldn’t have been able to make his illusions react how they did if he didn’t know how Onii-chan’s spirit power and circuits work?\*”*

*“\*Basically, yes. Thinking about it, it’s pretty amazing how he made them work with the way I set my circuits. Since the output of the Spirit symbol highly depends on my thoughts and will, he was doing the same thing as reading my mind with every circuit.\*”*

Senkyo and Shiro discussed the issue with Leolja as they waited in the elevator to arrive at their floor. The time entered the evening as the nocturnal sky looked over the earth. Before returning to Elqa, their hotel, the two first prioritized securing leaves that Senkyo could use as talismans. Just as Senkyo expected, the Haeqras staff and the guards placed around the sunken nest watched him with suspicious eyes as he picked the leaves from the trees. This was more than likely the first-ever request that someone was given permission to pick leaves from trees around the sunken nest. No one understood what he was after, which led them to think that Senkyo had an ulterior motive, making it all the more awkward for him as he chanted phrases in his mind like: “You’re misunderstanding!” or “I’m just here for the leaves, I swear!” and “I’m not suspicious so please don’t look at me like that!” Of course, saying them aloud would only dig his grave deeper, so he collected the leaves in silence.

After filling the three small bags strapped around his chest with them, they dropped by the food district to eat a quick dinner and headed back home. This led to Shiro bringing up the subject with Leolja again as she summarized what Senkyo told her while they were out picking leaves and eating food. Apparently, Senkyo didn’t think of it as much at first, but after reading a more detailed discussion of how illusions work in the spellbook for the dark element, he realized that most of what his spirit power and circuits were doing should have no effect against them. Yet, Leolja still made his illusions react appropriately to Senkyo’s spirit skills.

*“\*But, that doesn't mean that Leela is an enemy, right!?\*”*

Shiro said in a panicked voice. This reaction was to be expected. She placed her trust in him, after all. The last thing she wanted to hear about him is how he was actually an enemy from the very beginning. Senkyo didn’t see her since she was still inside his body, but he could imagine the anxious face she was making.

*“\*Well, it’s certainly a possibility, but nothing certain. All in all, I’m just saying that Leolja was hiding the fact that he knew about spirit power and circuits from us. Then again, it’s not like I asked him directly about it, but you’d expect a normal person to say a word or two about it. Revealing any more of our cards was risky, so I had to be indirect about extracting information.\*”*

*“\*Then he’s… not our enemy…?\*”*

*“\*…For now, no. But he is in the grey area.\*”*

*“\*…\*”*

Shiro was down about Senkyo’s response, but he didn’t want to sugarcoat the truth and answered her honestly. Despite expecting this reaction he couldn’t help but feel the frustration of not being able to do anything about it. Shiro was the one who suggested to trust Leolja while Senkyo wanted to be more conservative. If everything here ended poorly, it could highly impact Senkyo’s future operations as it might damage Shiro mentally. As she showed earlier today, she could do more than just remain on stand-by and wait to receive attacks. If he lost her motivation or spirit here, it could be detrimental. It was clear that his main objective was to make it so that trusting Leolja was an overall beneficial decision.

Senkyo exited the elevator and entered their penthouse suite as he pondered. Shiro manifested herself from Senkyo and opened the lights for him. Seeing this reminded him of a certain order he gave her.

*“\*Fine... Shiro, I order you to act like how you normally do and not let your freedom be restricted by dumb orders or magic, decide everything with your own will, you got that!?\*”*

It was the first and last order Senkyo ever gave Shiro as her master. Because of this, she was able to manifest herself however she liked and allowed her to address him how she did before she became a familiar. Ever since then, Senkyo refused… or more accurately, forgot about the fact that he had the power to control Shiro’s will. Of course, without negating his first order, every other order he gives her would only sound like requests, but that wasn’t the point. What mattered was what a certain mysterious librarian told him recently.

*“\*As the master of Miss Shiro, you should be able to perceive her physical and mental conditions as you please. Using this privilege, the task of determining whether or not she is affected by the mind control Sir Adeira mentioned would be trivial.\*”*

Ranat went on about the depth of a familiar pact and how its true power would only arise once both spirits of master and familiar became one. She mentioned how the trick to managing familiars lay in the orders that the master gives and how the familiar should have the ability to adjust themselves to the master’s wish. In other words, the pact wasn’t made to have someone subservient to another. The real purpose of the familiar pact was a contract of mutuality which would work best if both parties of the contract were on equal standings.

Thinking about it now, Senkyo and Shiro’s relationship was far from equal. For others, it might sound like Senkyo was taking advantage of Shiro, but as embarrassing as it was to admit, it was closer to the other way around. It wasn’t like Shiro was actively taking advantage of Senkyo. He just placed Shiro in a position of higher importance than his own. The overly complicated speech he was using in his mind would simply translate in layman's terms as: “He spoiled her too much.”

Shiro watched Senkyo from the sofa as he paced through the room. It looked strange from her perspective, but it would become even stranger if she knew that the reason for his agitated behavior was that he was having an internal argument with himself trying to justify his overprotective treatment of her. At some point, he finally calmed down and checked the pile of books that he borrowed from the library on his first day of arriving at Iqanlr.

Beside the pile, there lay a notebook that he bought on his way from the library to Elqa on his first night in Iqanlr. There wasn’t much content in it, but it did have a brief list of races, forageable items, animals, and food recipes. By brief, that meant having about four to seven items on each list. He took the time to write them down before visiting Haeqras for the crawler test. Out of the whole notebook, what Senkyo focused all his efforts on wasn’t the list, but the map of Yuwokrn that he sketched onto the back of the notebook. Flipping to the last page, he took his pen and hovered over the east side of Ridsikrn. Nothing happened. Before his pen could make contact with the paper, he pulled back with a sigh and returned the notebook and pen. For a second, it felt like he was on the cusp of realizing something. It had the same sensation as remembering something important he needed to do but still had his memory fail him.

Instead of that, his eyes naturally landed on the other book that he didn’t expect to have. Its title: “Foundations of the Familiar Pact Ritual; The Truth Behind the Binding Circles,” the book that Ranat gave him. Taking his mind off of the realization his mind failed to provide, he prioritized what he did realize, which was the importance of the relationship between master and familiar.

**371 – Unsolvable Condition**

“Shiro, what does being a familiar feel like?”

“Hm? Being a familiar…?”

Senkyo took the book for the familiar pact and sat beside Shiro on the sofa. Confused at his sudden question, she tilted her head and gave Senkyo a lost gaze. Picking up the need to explain himself better, he continued.

“Yeah. Before you became my familiar, you were a normal person just like everyone else, right? No magical restrictions or strange pacts, just a life with you as my little sister. Compared to those days, is there anything different now that you’re my familiar?”

“A difference… hmm…”

Shiro stopped to think about her answer, pinching her chin between her fingers with her tail waving softly and her ears twitching from time to time. Watching her cute gestures healed a portion of Senkyo’s internal stress. It was times like this when he was reminded of how fortunate he was to have such an adorable little sister, which fueled his determination to protect her even more.

“Shiro thinks that…”

“Oh!”

With the start of her voice, Senkyo snapped back into reality and strained his ears to listen to Shiro.

“…she likes being Onii-chan’s familiar is better. Before, Shiro was just Onii-chan’s little sister. At the time, she was nothing but only an object that everyone needed to protect. Shiro… Shiro didn’t like that… No, Shiro hated that.”

“…”

“Just being protected by Onii-chan, Yuuto-san, and everyone around us. Shiro hated being a useless doll.”

“…!”

*\*Useless\**

Hearing that word made Senkyo sunder. It was like something inside him was forcefully ripping his heart in two. The most confusing part about this feeling was the fact that he didn’t know where it was coming from. Simply, from seemingly nowhere, that word resounded in his heart.

“That’s why… That’s why, right now, Shiro likes that she is able to help Onii-chan in any way possible! J-Just earlier, when Shiro began using null magic to empower Onii-chan’s magic, it made her soooooo~ happy!! For the first time in a while, Shiro actually felt like she was being helpful… That she was actually doing something for a change. So… the biggest difference between now and then is that now… Shiro is happy! Yep~!”

Shiro gave Senkyo a bright smile. Just like her countless others, pure and filled with genuine emotion. Against this, Senkyo was completely unable to fight against. While Shiro was thinking her hardest about what to answer, he was drowning in his own fantasies thinking about how it would be best if Shiro would remain untouched by the cruelty of reality and that he would keep her protected in every way possible. But now, he realized that doing so would be completely against Shiro’s will.

*“\*Shiro is happy,\*”* she said.

A joy derived from finally being free from protection. That was what Shiro’s voice seemed to relay as she said it. Flipping through the book of the familiar pact, he returned to a certain page that caught his eye when he first skimmed the book and showed a bittersweet smile. There, it wrote…

\*The formation of a single, compact soul is an absurdly grueling yet very much possible goal to reach. May it be happiness, anger, sadness, envy, excitement, malice, lust, or any other emotion possible. To a party of two people connected by a familiar pact, sharing such matching wavelengths is the key to unlocking the true potential of the pact. Having one’s own self, having one’s own goal, knowing the other’s own self, knowing the other’s own goal, and at some point, resonating with their soul for a single purpose. The familiar pact was coined such that the two related parties will achieve a partnership that transcends those that mere mortals could only dream of achieving.\*

“They meant Familiar as in ‘intimacy’ instead of a ‘demon’s henchman…’ huh? ”

Taking and giving. Sharing and compensating. The text continues on how the state of being a “compact soul” is all about parting and gaining different qualities, personalities, opinions, and the like so that the two parties involved in the pact reach a level of “equilibrium,” the state where the quality of both parties are the same. And from there, both parties must reach a sort of consensus to unlock the true power of the familiar pact.

Taking Shiro and Senkyo’s will right now, they both oppose each other. Shiro wanted to be free and unsheltered by the people around her while Senkyo wanted to keep her protected from everything that could possibly harm her. If Senkyo wanted to be connected with Shiro through “happiness,” then she, who was already happy, didn’t need to do anything else. “Taking and giving. Sharing and compensating,” reading this passage, Senkyo knew all too well what to do. But it still didn’t stop it from being hard for him to do.

If Senkyo ever wanted the chance to release the true potential of his familiar pact with Shiro, he needed to accept that it be better for Shiro to be constantly exposed to danger than being under his wing. Thinking about it normally, it would make sense since she would never truly grow if all her problems were being solved by someone besides her. But what if the problem involved having her life in danger? Would it be fine to let her fend for herself? What would happiness do if Shiro died? Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

“Onii-chan…? What’s wrong?”

Before Senkyo even knew it, he had his face to the ground with his brows furrowed, making a tense expression.

“A-Ahaha…”

Conflicted, he could do nothing but let out an awkward laugh. His terrible attempt at a poker face revealed his anxiety to Shiro.

“…”

“…”

The heavy atmosphere sealed everyone’s mouths making it seem unbearable. Or at least, to Senkyo. When he tried to look at Shiro, he found her unwavering gaze locked onto his face, making him avert them instinctively. He was ashamed. There was only one optimal solution to this problem, not to mention, it was the choice that Shiro would rather have. Yet, he couldn’t get himself to accept that. It felt like he was being a child, but his primary concern was Shiro’s possible death. Was it wrong to want to have someone precious away from death? No, it was not, but at the same time, it would be better if she were to have experience of being exposed to it. Especially in this world where everything could possibly kill her.

Senkyo wanted to have more power to protect Shiro and everyone important to him, but to empower himself through the familiar pact, he needed to place Shiro in danger. If he chose not to, then not only would it become impossible for him to unlock the true potential of the familiar pact, but he might also endanger Shiro in the long run by taking valuable experience from her. The moment a time came when Senkyo wasn’t there to protect Shiro, then she would have nothing. This was what be defined as a paradox, or better yet, a catch-22. There was no escape from his contradictory conditions. Because of this, he could only stay silent.

“…”

“…!?”

In the same way, Shiro kept quiet but unlike how Senkyo could do nothing, she placed herself in between his legs and sat there. It was the same position he found himself in earlier that day when Shiro turned him into a chair. Back then, it was a bit awkward, but now, he found his arms unthinkingly wrapping around her and his hand moving to pet her head. At this moment, Senkyo didn’t think much about anything else and simply said…

“Sorry.”

“Shiro will always be on Onii-chan’s side no matter what happens.”

“I know.”

He didn’t know what this phenomenon was or why it was working, but he could already feel his chest loosening from her presence.

**…………**

Time passed for the two. Before they even realized it, they fell asleep on the sofa. Senkyo found this out when he woke up in the middle of the night. Slightly confused as his consciousness returned, he rubbed his eyes to clear his vision.

“…!!!”

However, that wasn’t all. The reason for his wake wasn’t just a spontaneous rise, but because of a certain signal running through his head.

“Shiro! It’s time to move!!”

Devoid of the gentleness he had earlier, he quickly forced Shiro to wake up with a sudden shake.

“W-W-What!?”

She was startled, and rightfully so, but there was no time to explain the situation.

“Get inside me! NOW!”

“Hu—”

Without even getting to respond, or more accurately, getting cut off by her reply, Shiro turned to light and got absorbed into Senkyo’s body. Without hesitation, he used flash strike and headed for the balcony. Before him, numerous pillars of smoke and fire rose from various areas in the city. From the penthouse suite’s balcony where it overlooked the normally wonderful city, he could hear screams and sounds of battle from everywhere below. Setting aside his confusion, he searched for a safe place to run to and jumped off the balcony with flash strike.

**Chapter 1:**

**372 – Searching the City**

*“\*W-W-What’s happening, Onii-chan!?\*”*

Shiro asked with her voice shaking from the sudden chaos she was thrown into after waking up. One moment she was in the land of dreams, and the very next she was woken up by Senkyo and falling from the sky into a burning city. Everything was happening so fast that it was overloading her brain.

*“\*We were in danger.\*”*

Senkyo said as he approached the ground at a controlled pace with his flash strike and air footholds. He made sure to land in a quiet area and entered an alleyway to sneak through the streets.

*“\*The sensors I set up detected hostile movement approaching us.\*”*

He referred to the security system he arranged using the last of his leaf talismans yesterday.

*“\*There were a lot of them but I definitely picked up Professor Gaeka’s presence. The last thing I want is a confrontation with him silencing my use of spirit power or magic, so I hurried out. Thankfully, I built the scout talismans so that they could slow down enemies around them, so that bought us more time.\*”*

*“\*Professor Gaeka!? But, didn’t Adeira say that he wouldn’t attack us if we had the thing he gave us?\*”*

*“\*He did… that’s why I’m worried. It’s a fact that the pendant kept him from bothering us the whole day, but he chose this specific time to attack us. With the city suddenly plunged into chaos, it’s hard to say that this is some kind of coincidence. I don’t know what they have planned but I’m afraid of their confidence. I know Sir Adeira said that the pendant is basically unstoppable but it could be predictable. I don’t want to use it yet just in case they have something up their sleeves. First, let’s gather as much information as possible.\*”*

*“\*O-Okay!\*”*

Senkyo remained in hard-to-spot places as he moved from building to building through the city. His first observation was that most of the people had already fled the streets. Compared to how it usually was in the daytime, instead of people being sprawled all over the place, there were only a few groups here and there. If this were Earth, he would have assumed they evacuated somewhere but this was Zerid. As Leolja explained in his backstory, the reason no one batted an eye at the presence of a demon spider on the surface was that the average person knew more than simple self-defense. In an emergency like this, it was possible that the residents were out fighting somewhere, but he still couldn’t be sure.

The second observation he made was that it was hard to tell which could be his possible enemies. In the places with patches of fire, Senkyo got to watch a few sparks of conflict. The fights would usually be civilians against guards. The guards would be first to strike and the civilians would work together to fend them off. Then, there were other times where civilians fought other civilians which made it hard to tell enemy and ally apart. For now, it was factual that civilians were the only ones on the defensive while guards and a few other civilians were on the offensive. It didn’t seem like the guards were doing this as a part of their duty, so a simple way to wrap this up is that guards are always hostile.

Because of the guards usually being the oppressors, Senkyo figured that the situation was some kind of coup. It would be great if he could check where the government’s office was but he didn’t know where it was located. From his experience, it would usually be in the center of the city, so he slowly made his way there.

As he approached his destination, he ended up in a familiar street. This was the path he would usually take to get to Haeqras. He turned to the end of the road where he would find the local Haeqras with a single left turn and saw a pillar of smoke coming from that specific location. Curious as to what happened, he cleared the road for enemies and made a short detour to Haeqras.

To avoid a group of guards that were coming from Haeqras, he ended up climbing the buildings and perching at a high but obstructed location to get a bird’s eye view of the area. There, he found that the local Haeqras was indeed in flames and unmoving bodies sprawled at its front door. There were both guards and civilians unconscious on the street with the number of downed guards doubling the number of civilians. Among the group, one of them looked more familiar than the others. He wanted to take a closer look at the scene but the problem with his position was that he could only see the front of Haeqras. He was hidden from everywhere else but that also meant that he couldn’t see anything except what he was seeing now. He was forced to move from his location.

After a bit of careful navigation, he cleared any possible hostiles in the area and sent his leaf talismans out as sensors to warn him of anyone that entered. Now that he was somewhat safe, he left the shadows and went out to the street to inspect the group of unconscious people. His eyes looked for the person that he recognized earlier. It was a guard with a tail and two horns protruding from his helmet. In Zerid, that simple description could fit just about anyone, but this specific guard was the one that he interacted with the most when he first arrived at Iqanlr’s walls.

*“\*Shiro, this is…uhhm, Rnei, right? The guard that tried to get my blood when we first got here.\*”*

*“\*Mnn… Honestly, Shiro doesn’t know. She didn’t see his face and she couldn’t care less about some guard so she doesn’t know.\*”*

*“\*You make a point but, oof. I wouldn’t want to be the subject of that descriptor. Anyway…\*”*

Senkyo took off the helmet from the person that looked like Rnei and revealed his face. He had purple skin and seemed to be young about in his late teens or a young adult, in terms of Earth standards. But what drew his attention was his half-dead face with soulless eyes and his mouth wide open with saliva dripping out of it. He even doubted he was alive and checked for a pulse. Thankfully, even though he was of a different race, he still had a pulse and had them in the same location a human would. Half-dead but still alive. He stepped away from Rnei and inspected the other bodies and found that the majority of them were in the same state. Specifically, all of the guards and a few of the civilians. This ratio of the half-dead people had the same ratio of hostiles he saw running around the city. He wasn’t foolish enough to pass this as a simple coincidence.

He thought of waking up one of the civilians who didn’t look like they were at death’s door but postponed his plans. No matter how much surveillance he had in the area, Senkyo had no desire to fight any enemies at the moment. Just to be safe, he opted to carry the bodies of the civilians that didn’t look like enemies and placed them in a building with only one entrance. Strategically speaking, it was the building that was easiest to guard and when push came to shove, Senkyo could easily make another escape exit with his magic. After moving everyone into the building, he took Rnei with him as well just so he could keep observing the state of his potential enemies. Of course, he had him tied in a rope he found while he was sneaking from building to building.

To secure their safehouse, he placed leftover rock talismans he had around the building and created a field circle to keep any sound from escaping and hide their presence. Once he finished fortifying the area, he turned to the unconscious group he kept in the corner.

**373 – The Krikrt Group**

“Shiro, can do you something to get them conscious?”

*“\*Mnn… Shiro doesn’t know if it will work, but she has an idea.\*”*

“Okay, then I’ll leave it to you.”

*“\*Got it!\*”*

A bright light formed from Senkyo’s chest and manifested Shiro as it shot out onto the center of the room.

“This should work with Onii-chan’s field circle…”

She stretched her hand out to the center where a rock talisman was placed engraved with a circuit to hide their location. Senkyo watched with interest as this was most likely something she got from Ranat too.

“Nemian Grace! Nature’s Time!”

The two spells she cast sounded familiar to Senkyo. Those were the ones Shiro used in the past to get out of precarious situations. To his memory, Nemian Grace was a spell that manifests the power of Shrio’s race and cures all disabilities. The next was Nature’s Time which accelerates the natural restoration of the target. From what he knew, both were mid-tier spells and Nemian Grace was a unique spell that could only be cast by Shiro’s race. Yet, she used both of them with ease on his field circle, making it seem like they were nothing more than mere low-tier spells.

“Ugg… Kgrhh…”

“Oh, it worked!”

Senkyo exclaimed as the unconscious group arose. The closest one to him was the first to get up. He had a large body and pig-like features. The man clutched his head and shook it from side to side as if to shake off his drowsiness and regain his focus.

“Hello? Are you okay?”

“Knh…!?”

“Whoa!”

When Senkyo first approached the pigman, he responded with a quick draw with a knife hidden in his clothes. Senkyo instinctively responded by using kindled spirit power coating one of the kunai on the utility strap wrapped around his chest to intercept and block the blade. With the knife stopped, Senkyo backed off and retracted the kunai before the kindled spirit power coating it disappeared.

“L-Let’s all calm down now, okay? I’m Yukou Senkyo, and I brought you all here when I saw everyone knocked out in front of Haeqras. I don’t mean any harm; I’m just confused at what’s happening and I want my questions to be answered.”

He appealed to the group with a calm tone and took both of his hands out, wordlessly saying that he was of no threat. Then again, the ones who were able to see how Senkyo blocked the sudden attack on him just now may think otherwise. He didn’t even need to use his body to draw a weapon.

“Yukou… Senkyo… Hey, isn’t that the person Sir Leolja was testing…?”

“Eh?”

Another person suddenly uttered something startling, making everyone’s eyes turn to him and subsequently, to Senkyo. The sudden mention of his name produced a confused voice out of his mouth.

“It’s… the person that’s taking the level S test right?”

“The bois were sayin’ he has a Nemi familiar with ‘em. Ain’t that her?”

“Yeah, I saw him come out of the testing grounds earlier! That’s definitely him!”

“I heard rumors that he passed the 2nd day faster than the first!”

“He’s that strong…? Wait, then doesn’t this mean we’re lucky!?”

The crowd suddenly got rowdier as they talked about Senkyo. He didn’t know what was happening, but the fact that the group in front of him somehow recognized him despite not ever meeting them all but exposed who they were.

“Umm, is everyone here a crawler from Haeqras?”

“Yea!”

“That’s right!”

“You got it!”

Varying responses of confirmation resounded around the room. It was just as expected. The most likely group of people to hear such rumors and get found unconscious in front of Haeqras were none other than crawlers. Though, he had to take a step back from the pressure of their united yell. From the crowd, the pigman that attacked him earlier walked up to him with his knife sheathed. He even made a show of hands to make sure everyone could see he was unarmed.

“Sorry ‘bout that earlier. I get a bit jumpy when strangers try to come up to me. It’s a habit I picked up in the business. I heard about you. Probably every local crawler has. We barely get anyone on access level S, so it was bound to happen. The name’s Krikrt, a level A2 local crawler.”

Krikrt took out his hand and Senkyo followed his example to shake hands.

“Nice to meet you.”

The firm greeting cleared up the initial tension inside the room when everyone first woke up. Since no one else was walking up to talk to him, Senkyo assumed that Krikrt immediately got recognized as the leader of everyone present. He said he was a level A2 crawler, so the man in front of him was no pushover.

“So, as I asked earlier…”

“Wait a sec.”

Krikrt cut off Senkyo with a strong voice and raised his volume, asserting that he should be the first to speak. Not wanting to stir any conflicts, Senkyo quickly yielded.

“First things first, we know more than you do, so we’d appreciate it if you told us what happened to us while we were out cold. I’ll be clear: we’ll all answer whatever questions you have, but we don’t want to hold back any decisions we could make now. The last thing we want is to sit here tellin’ stories everyone already knows while all hell is breakin’ loose outside that door. Do you got that?”

“That… makes sense. Okay, I understand.”

It was more efficient to prioritize getting the larger group up to date since the information would get passed on to more people. Because they already knew what was happening around them, they would have better knowledge of what decision to be made and when. Contrary to that, the only people who were clueless about what was happening were Senkyo and Shiro. It would take longer to explain the situation to them and the only time they can finally make optimal decisions is when that explanation ends. It was quicker to make the best decisions when Krikrt’s group get the information first.

Realizing this, Senkyo told them all about the guards that fled the scene where he first found the whole group lying on the ground outside Haeqras. He followed this up by telling them about the presence of a security system he made and the fact that he brought one of the guards into the room for observational purposes. Senkyo didn’t get into too much detail due to time constraints and because he didn’t want to expose his methods. Krikrt and the others probably caught onto this but let the subject go, perhaps due to some kind of proper manners among crawlers.

“A test subject, huh?”

Krikrt mused to himself as he turned to the unconscious Rnei tied up in a corner. Everyone followed his gaze as he walked up to the guard. He scrutinized his body carefully, pacing around him from left to right. Then, he stopped in front of him, placed his knee on the ground to crouch to Rnei’s eye level, and forcefully opened his eyelids. Finally, he spoke.

“He’s… not infected.”

His words reached everyone’s ears, creating ripples of murmurs and exclamations of disbelief, doubt, and confusion. He retracted his body from Rnei’s personal space and said.

“Y’all can check if you want, but he ain’t infected. If what Senkyo is tellin’ us is true, then we can just stay here for a while. Ah, Urikae! Everyone except for you! Get your ass over to the Lord’s mansion and deliver a message to Sir Leolja!”

“W-What!!!”

“No complainin’ unless ya wanna get slugged!”

He took the man he called Urikae by the shoulder and told whispered something to him in the corner. A few seconds later, he kicked his behind and shoved him to the door where Urikae fearfully covered his body with his black cloak and carefully exited the building as if fleeing. Senkyo didn’t know what happened there but the scene was similar to an exchange between some school bully and his gofer. After finishing his work, Krikrt walked back to Senkyo.

**374 – Behind the Chaos**

“Sorry about that. It’s a bit hard to move that guy after everythin’ that happened, but he’s our most talented scout so he’s the only one I can count on.”

“Uhh, yeah, no worries here…”

Even after half-threatening Urikae to fulfill his orders, it seemed like Krikrt recognized his ability to some extent which made it slightly more wholesome… or so Senkyo would like to think. Either way, there was no doubt that Krikrt was already making his moves just like he said he would and came to Senkyo to fulfill the other half of his promise.

“Anyway, I want to know what happened to the city.”

“That’s fine. Where do ya want me to start?”

“First… how did this chaos start?”

“I don’t know all of the details, but about an hour ago, all of the guards suddenly started attackin’ everythin’ around ‘em. We were at a bar at the time and held back the attack in the area but other places weren’t so lucky. Before we knew it, a spider from Sir Leolja came and explained a bit of the situation. Apparently, somethin’ was brainwashing all of the guards to go insane, so he asked us to take care of ‘em through non-lethal means. He definitely contacted other crawlers in the same way but who knows how many actually followed his orders. For us, well, we owe him a few favors so we did what he said.”

“Leolja, huh…?”

The thought of Leolja knowing about Senkyo’s spirit power came to mind. From what he could piece together from Krikrt’s story, he was contributing largely to controlling the situation. He still didn’t know how to treat him, but for now, he seemed to be trying to solve the problem.

“How did he contact you?”

“You know he’s originally a demonic spider from the sunken nest, right? He can take control of the phantom threaders from the nest and use them as scouts and communication devices. Somethin’ about sharing senses and using the threads and vibrations; I don’t really get it, but the point is that you can basically talk to him whenever his spider is near ya. Last we heard from him was that he was gatherin’ troops to charge the Lord’s mansion. We thought of joinin’ him but we went to check the situation at Haeqras first. Then… well, none of us really understood what went down when we got there.”

He noticed how Krikrt’s voice was tinged with a hint of anxiety and confusion as he ended his response. Senkyo didn’t plan on letting this go, so he pursued the subject.

“…What do you mean?”

“Mmnn… you see, when we got to Haeqras, there was already a group of guards tryin’ to tear the place down, so we got in a bit of a scuffle. But, before any of us even knew what happened, some of our mates began turnin’ on us. Then, just when we thought it couldn’t get any worse than that, some… large, *\*thing\** came from out of nowhere and blasted into the sunken nest. Before I could make out what it was, my vision suddenly faded and the next thin’ I knew, you were right in front of me. All of it was a blur, but whatever that thing was, it ain’t anythin’ good.”

“So, an unidentified large object came in just before everyone lost consciousness at the same time…”

He placed his hand on his chin as he suspected the possibility that the two events were connected.

“What do you think that large thing was?”

“I have no clue. All I know is that it was big.”

“That’s hardly anything to work with… Then, do you know what’s making the guards hostile?”

“I don’t have much on that side either. What we do know is that more people are gettin’ brainwashed, not just the guards. It happens randomly and the only way we can tell is the look in their eyes. The moment they look like they came from the dead, they’re gone. Which reminds me… Senkyo, did anythin’ happen to that guard over there?”

Krikrt turned to his side and pointed at Rnei tied up unconscious by the wall.

“His eyes were normal. All the guards should be infected with some kind of brainwashing, but that guy definitely doesn’t have those eyes. I was wonderin’ if you know of anythin’ happened.”

“Not that anything I know of…”

Senkyo had his eyes on Rnei the whole time and the last time he checked, Rnei’s eyes were half-dead just like the other guards that were unconscious in front of Haeqras. There should have been no chance for anyone to interact with him.

*“\*Onii-chan.\*”*

Shiro came to his side and called him out through Connect. He turned his gaze to her and responded through the same telepathic network.

*“\*What is it, Shiro?\*”*

*“\*Do you think Shiro’s magic did anything?\*”*

*“\*Your… magic, huh?\*”*

Just earlier Shiro applied Nemian Grace and Nature’s Time to his field circle to wake up Krikrt and his group. At the time, he had Rnei tied up in the corner but still within his field circle. Thinking about it, that was the only thing that could have influenced Rnei in such a short timeframe.

“Hm? Did you think of anything?”

Krikrt saw the slight change of expression on Senkyo’s face and questioned it immediately. The thought of sharing his new realization crossed his mind but decided otherwise.

“…No, Shiro just reminded me of something I need to do.”

He felt a little bad about hiding this from Krikrt since he was being so helpful, but he couldn’t afford to risk having to explain his field circle and how Shiro’s magic accidentally affected Rnei along with everyone in the room.

“Oh, were you doin’ somethin’ before you got to us?”

“Well…”

He said the first thing that came to mind just so that Krikrt wouldn’t become suspicious of him, but now he had the problem of maintaining his lie. He internally cursed himself for not thinking of an easier lie to work with.

“Yeah… uh, I’m looking for a friend… Her name’s Hira and I haven’t been able to contact her for a while.”

“Oh! Miss Hira from the academy, right? If it's her, we saw where she went.”

“What!? You did!?”

As expected was a reaction of disbelief from someone who only named someone as an excuse. He didn’t think his reason would connect with Krikrt’s knowledge, but it most certainly did. Not only did he know who Hira was but saw her at some point as well. The fact that he drew the odds of him talking to the one person that had this kind of knowledge left Senkyo’s mouth agape.

“Yeah, we bumped into her when we were in the food district. Then, well, if my eyes ain’t playin’ with me, I think I saw her just before I lost consciousness too. She went after whatever crashed into the sunken nest. Maybe she was chasin’ after it but my thoughts couldn’t hold long enough to see.”

“So, Hira-san went after the large entity…”

His last contact with Hira was some time under 3 days ago when she brought him and Shiro to Professor Gaeka’s office. Her overwhelming outward personality made her stick to his mind but what truly made her name pop up in his head was because of how someone who seemed to be her father broke into his dreams and said some strange things about using him as a tool for his goal.

Ever since she left Professor Gaeka’s office, he never made contact with her again which made him wonder what she had been doing in the past few days. Before, he couldn’t care less since it was none of his business, but now that Iqanlr was thrown into chaos and his father seemed to be scheming something behind the scenes, he couldn’t help but turn her attention to her.

“What is she after…?”

He whispered to himself as he thought about the person in question.

**375 – Senses in Turmoil**

Senkyo left the building Krikrt’s group was staying and made a quick expedition outside. With his security network around the area, he could return at any time he wanted before any guards would make it to Krikrt and the others, so he wasn’t too worried about leaving them. After hearing from Krikrt, he made his way to the front of Haeqras. The unconscious bodies were still on the ground but that wasn’t the reason he returned. Raising his head upward, he saw large chunks of rubble and destruction.

Krikrt mentioned that whatever happened in front of Haeqras ended with a massive crash on the sunken nest. Senkyo figured to investigate and found that the two concentric towers around the entrance were half destroyed. The beautiful green garden he saw in the morning was now turned into a garden of dust and debris.

“Hm? What’s this…?”

Shining through the dim lighting in the area, Senkyo noticed that something was glowing inside the chunks of rubble. Taking an amber hue, cracks that formed on the chunks emitted this light. He picked up one of the chunks and drew a line across the chuck using his palm, all the while releasing kindled spirit power to tamper with it. The chunk crumbled and revealed the core… of nothing. His head inadvertently tilted with confusion. He checked the other side of the chunk where he first saw the glow come from and confirmed that it was gone. The only thing that remained in Senkyo’s hands was a chunk of plain rock… or at least, whatever mineral the concentric hollow towers were supposed to be made of.

Senkyo went for another try and picked up a sizable chunk that had a crack of glowing amber. This time, he decided to use his sword to open up the chuck while having the glowing part remain in his field of vision. Instead of opening it with spirit power, he opted to use more manual means. Although, he couldn’t fully claim that his katana wasn’t affected by spirit power since he needed that to enchant the blade so it could cut through stone.

“…!”

With a swift strike, the chunk was cut in half and cracks quickly spread across the brittle parts, breaking down into smaller pieces on the ground. The result: gone.

Senkyo watched the glowing crack as he slashed with his blade and saw that the glow disappeared the moment his blade pierced the chunk. The glow was gone, but now he could hear the faint sound of trickling liquid. He summoned a ball of light with light magic to inspect his surroundings and found that it was coming from the chunk he just broke. Inside it was transparent liquid pouring onto the ground. It was possibly the source of the amber light. He didn’t know what the light was, but he was too invested to back off now.

It wasn’t hard to find another glowing chunk since it seemed to be inside every part of the concentric towers. This time, instead of spirit power, he tried using magic. He didn’t know if the liquid was flammable or not, so he chose to use earth magic just to be safe and summoned a rock spike to break into the chunk. He shot it across the air and made contact with the target, creating an interesting result.

*\*BOOM!!\**

“It… exploded, huh?”

Despite trying to avoid this result by using non-flammable material, the chunk still exploded. Since the light disappeared when he used spirit power before, the only possibility he could think of was that contact with mana ignited it. Whatever the glowing liquid was, it seemed to be some kind of reactive chemical.

Upon speculating this, he searched through the rubble for another chunk with glowing light. However, this time, he was looking for one that he could break using only pure strength, preferably one with a brittle coating. It took him a while to find using only a single ball of light as a light source, but he eventually obtained one. He didn’t like the thought of breaking it open with his bare hands, so he threw it at a sharp surface instead. The result: gone.

Even when he didn’t use any kind of external power to break the chunk open, the amber glow still disappeared. It didn’t explode like the previous attempt, but the liquid failed to retain its glow. Thinking about it carefully, in Zerid, mana could be found almost everywhere as if it were air. If he interpreted the results as “spirit power/mana + amber liquid = gone,” then it would make sense that merely exposing it to air would cause the glow to disappear. The only thing contradicting this conclusion was the fact that even when the chunks already had cracks where air could enter, the amber glow remained alive. Unless the chunks were somehow blocking mana from entering, his interpretation will fail to hold.

“…hmm? Wait… blocking the mana?”

Senkyo went to another chunk and found a crack of glowing amber. This time, he summoned a fireball and placed it just above the crack. When he moved his hand away and controlled the fire to move into the crack, it spread across the surface of the chunk and disappeared shortly after. The result: alive. The amber glow was still alive.

He set aside his surprise and proceeded with more tests on the chunk. Time passed quickly as he made discovery after discovery. What he learned was that whatever material these chucks were made from, they had the power to repel not only mana but also spirit power. He proved this when he tried to pour kindled spirit power into the crack. Thinking back to his encounter with Gaeka in the library the other day, something stopped his spirit power from functioning. Whatever material the chunk was made of, it had properties that could repel spirit power. If they somehow weaponized this material, then it would make sense why his powers were completely silenced in the library. The question was: how?

The test continued to answer this one question. If he knew how a weaponized material like this functioned, then he could find a hole to exploit the next time Gaeka or anyone else tried to silence him in the same way. First, he learned that a repel field will only work if a barrier of the stone material is present beforehand. The chunks are a good example of a “barrier” as they keep the amber liquid inside them alive simply by being inside the chunks. Second, he discovered what was considered as being “inside” these materials. A repel field required sealing an area completely in the material storing the amber liquid. Space between these materials was allowed as shown by the fact that it still repelled mana and spirit power despite having cracks on the chunks. The maximum distance between two pieces of the materials was roughly about 30 centimeters for it to still be considered “sealed.” For reference, a sphere of rocks of the material with a space of 30 centimeters between each other was still considered a “sealed space.” It was important to note that this needed to seal a 3D space. Simply creating a circle of rocks does not work. He confirmed this by creating a sphere of rocks with this material using Dimensional Layer.

As for the last discovery, he found that any attempt to penetrate the repelling field from the outside would work depending on how strong the material around the field was created. If the area was a conservative build of small rocks with 30-centimeter spaces from each other, then the repelling field would become flimsy, and any type of penetrating attack, whether physical or magical, will break it instantly. Conversely, if the build was stronger like how the chunks were basically large rocks with amber liquid inside them, then the repelling field would become harder to break.

After these tests, Senkyo could no longer think of other ways to use the strange material. As of now, the possibilities to weaponize the repelling material were limited to primitive means, so he couldn’t be certain that surrounding him with this material was the method Gaeka used in the library. This was why he decided to leave the subject at that for now and took a few pieces with him for future investigations.

Other than the chunks that came from the concentric towers, there was nothing much else of note in the area. Once Senkyo finished checking the perimeter of the sunken nest, he finally approached the entrance to the sunken nest itself. It was a large pit; bigger than what it seemed like from afar.

Back in the safe house, Krikrt told him that a large object had come down from the sky and crashed into the sunken nest. Searching around the area, he found a crater by the edge of the sunken nest which fit Krikrt’s story. Inspecting it closely, there seemed to be some kind of liquid on the crater. Unlike how the liquid inside the chunks showed a transparent color, this liquid was green and more viscous. The liquid trailed into the sunken nest, suggesting that whatever landed here entered the nest. Thinking it was a bad idea to jump into the unknown, he took a cautious step back and searched for traces of Hira instead.

Since her entrance wasn’t as grand as whatever made the crater, or at least it didn’t seem like it from Krikrt’s story, there weren’t many clues to work with. Reminding himself of Hira’s image to find some kind of hint, he recalled the amber gems on her uniform. Her other classmates like Vleid and Raeri didn’t have the same flashy gems on their uniforms, but for some reason, Hira did. It had the same color as the amber liquid that he couldn’t extract in the chunks earlier, which had the possibility of some kind of connection. Was it possible that the amber liquid was caused by Hira instead of being inside the material in the first place? That didn’t seem likely. Still, looking around didn’t give him any more clues than that.

It seemed like Senkyo already found everything useful in the area and decided to return to the safe house and share his findings with the Krikrt group. But, at that moment…

“…!!!!!!”

…without a sound, it showed itself seemingly out of nowhere. Senkyo had all of his sensory abilities active. The security network in the area, Detect, and even Perception Field. Everything to make sure that nothing would get the jump on him. Yet, its silent aura hid its presence despite its ginormous body. From the entrance of the sunken nest was a large bug akin to a gigantic fly clinging as if peeking from the ground, staring right into Senkyo’s eyes. The first few seconds of surprise had his senses paralyzed. Just when his rational thought finally returned and wondered what he was looking at, it was already too late.

He felt his mind numb and his vision became blurry. Confusion seeped through his mind, scrambling his thoughts into a messier chaos than it needed to be. He tried to back off but his body wouldn’t listen to him. All he was left to work with was his mind and the memories he had stored… Memories… memories that began to blur right as he tried to think back to the past.

“…A———AAAA-Ah….ghhhh…!!!”

Terrible. It was a terrible, terrible revelation that crossed his mind.

*“\*And* ————*stion, a monster…*——— *broke out of the main capital’s*—*nest. O\*\** ————*essed incredible speed, wings*—*tear the sky \*\*\*\* power*—*devour*—*memories*—\*—\*—*victims.* ——*i\*h \*\* o*— *eyes,* —*\*\*at I’ve heard. ####before you arrived here*——*must b\* cl\*se by.\*”*

*“\*\*h, so\*\*y—\*ou wouldn’t know##? It———m\*nster you encountered. \*\* takes—— memories—t\*\*d \*f killing them——r\*p\*rts—red\*\*\*—to living husks—\*ompletely forgetting———I gue\*\*—lucky——you—a victim——————\*”*

It had been on his mind for a while. Why were so many people acting so much in favor of Gaeka? How was Gaeka able to control so many people at once? How was he able to control even more people despite not being present? It was… an intervention of a third party… no, if Gaeka was able to control a monster that could can memories… a monster that actually had much more power than that… Like a monster that could bend the minds of its victims and brainwash them into its control… A monster that could strike the minds of unsuspecting victims before they even realize it… If he could control just that one monster, then everything that happened so far was possible. If his mind was being affected by the monster’s power before he even realized it… then it was possible to bypass his senses. Theoretically, the monster could have been sitting in the middle of the entrance the whole time and Senkyo wouldn’t have even realized it. For as long as he had met the locals of Zerid, he was using the memory-devouring monster as an excuse for his ignorance. But now that he was being pressured under its power face-to-face, he couldn’t help but tremble in fear.

*“\*Onii-chan! What’s wrong!? Onii-chan!! Shiro is trying to push it back!! What is it doing!?\*”*

“!!!”

A ray of light glimmered in the darkness. Her voice… Shiro’s voice… For a second, he forgot about her existence. Even when she spoke, the only reason he recalled her name was because of her strange way of referring to herself in the third person. She was… his familiar. A tool… no, someone he could rely on as a partner… Someone who cured one of the guards under the control of the monster’s brainwashing. His only hope.

“SHIIIRROOOOOO!!!! I*———Gggraahh…!!*”

With all of his remaining power, he tried to howl his thoughts to existence, but the monster’s control over his body prevented him from doing so. As the milliseconds passed by, every fragment of memory was disappearing like flames spreading through oil.

*“\*I——ORDER YOU————\*”*

In his final struggle, he screamed with all his heart.

**376 – Schemes of the High Beings**

Smoke and fire rose from the ground. Atop a certain balcony known for being one of the highest spots in the city of Iqanlr, namely the penthouse room of Elqa, stood a single man by the edge of the building watching the chaos unfold in the city below him. It was a coordinated attack he decided to commence that night because of his lack of options. Preferably for him, it would have been great if his goal was achieved through a single conversation. Yet, both internal and external factors prevented him from ending his business the way he wanted to.

In the end, he found himself leaning on the guardrails of Elqa’s balcony with his hand clutching his head. Perhaps the old age was finally getting to him. He certainly didn’t like the extra work he had to put into his goals. Although, at the very least, his final trump card seemed to be leading tonight’s event to the end that he wanted. Just to make sure everything was functioning as planned, the man double-checked with the other groups under his control through a small communication device attached to his ear.

“—Yes…. just make sure to lock him down the moment he appears. He will be a bit dizzy so the chance will be perfect…. Yes…. good… Don’t fail me.”

“SoUNds LIke yOU tHoUghT Of EVeRytHIng, sIR GaEKA.”

From behind Gaeka came a distorted voice that not a single person would ever be able to recognize. Perhaps because of this skillful cover-up, he knew exactly who he was talking to even without turning his back.

“Of course I have. Everyone knows that I would be the last person to be unprepared.”

“intErEStING… ThEn, dID YoU nEED to bE flASHy wITh YOur mEtHODs?”

“It was an inevitability. You, of all people, should know that I do not want to stand out like this.”

“ThAT Is a sTRAngE thiNG tO sAy. ArEn’T YOu AlrEady staNdINg oUt BY trYInG to meSs wItH thE BOY? OuR orDERs ARe to waTch hIM And aVoId aS MuCh dIrECt CoNtACT as PoSSiblE. YoU’rE doInG The eXacT OpposITe FrOm wHAt i cAN tEll.”

The person’s sharp words cut through Gaeka’s composure and made him furrow his brows. He turned his head sideways to send daggers with his gaze but rebuilt his formal demeanor a second later.

“Why do you care? What’s strange to me is the fact that you are here in the first place. I don’t suppose you were out on an evening walk, were you?”

“I’Ve bEEn STUck hErE For 3 yEARS. I tHOuGht a lITtlE chaNGe of PAce wOUlDN’t huRt.”

“How whimsical. Well, I suppose it fits your character.”

“…”

The person behind Gaeka returned no reply and poured themselves a cup of tea. The sound of trickling liquid, as it collected inside the cup, filled the silence in the air. The person made themselves at home by throwing themselves on the soft couch and leisurely sipping their cup of warm tea.

“DELiCiouS. I doN’T EXpeCt soMEOne As cRuDe as yOU tO mAKe THIs wHIle YOu wErE hERe So iT’s PRObaBly soMetHInG thE bOy bREweD. TeChNolOGy SUre is SomMEthIng eLse kEEpIng soEMtHing lIKe thIs wARM deSPitE tHe TIme… ThaT reMIndS me, i dIDn’T thInK YOu wERe SO cLOse wITH thE NaTurE LeAder tHaT tHEY’d hAnd yOu ONe of tHeIr baBIEs. ISn’t tHIs THe onE sHe MAde wItH Yhe CONtroL LeaDer’s hElp?”

“You’re still here? I don’t have time to talk.”

“I’m suRE yOu Do. NoTHing HaPPenS In tHe midDLE oF sENDing ouT ORdeRs ANd AcTuALLy hAVInG tHeM ComPleTEd. WHy dOn’T YOu rElaX wHIle yOU’re wAitInG?”

“Just get out.”

*\*VVVVLLSSHHHH!!!\**

A spray of blood appeared from Gaeka and shot at the person at a blinding speed. But in an instant, the blood lost all its momentum at its halfway point and splashed onto the ground.

“AH, lOOk aT tHE mESS YOU mAde; IT's juSt LIke The oNe OUTSIDE. It mAkEs mE wANt to oPEn My mOUth anD SPout soMe RANDOM wORds iN dISguSt. thIs pLACe Is my tERRitoRy, So i thINk You cAN inDULge ME aS a liTTle bIT Of cOMpenSatiON.”

“Tsk…! What do you want?”

Gaeka clutched his head with both hands and massaged his temples as he reluctantly gave in to the person’s threats.

“I tOlD YOu. i jUSt WAnt To tALK. WhY arE yOu HeRe, blOOd LeAdER?”

“Damn you… I’m taking an opportunity, can’t you see? Our orders are to watch over him and avoid as much contact as possible. The Lord said nothing about taking a few samples of blood through indirect means.”

“I rECalL yOU TRyiNg tO coLleCt HiS bLOoD FACe-to-fAcE, thOuGH?”

“Minor exceptions. Those times should have been times I completed my goal. I’ll admit that the first time was my mistake but everything would have gone perfectly the second time if it weren’t for those damn pests.”

“TwIStinG WOrDs aNd ruLeS tO YOUr CoNVenIeNCe aS aLWayS.”

“How do you think I got to my position? Standing out to the enemy is bad but standing out to allies is not. Because the Lord found me and used me, he got to destroy and take over my homeland. As for me, standing out to him was what got me this power. It’s a win for both sides.”

“WeLL? aRe You ABouT tO ReAcH yOuR GoALs aNyTIMe SOon?”

“It’s already guaranteed. My pawns stole his escape route’s destination point and my pet is already brainwashing him as we speak. There’s nothing else I need to worry about.”

“WhAT aBoUT ThE DOOr? ThE NaTURe LeADer waNTeD it bURiED, RiGhT?”

“It is none of my concern. Once I secure the boy’s blood, that’s it. I can let my pet loose to do whatever it wants after the fact.”

“Is ThAt sO?”

The person took a final sip of their cup and rose from their seat.

“i ThiNk I’Ll tAKe My lEAvE HeRE.”

“Please, have a safe trip, and don’t come back.”

“I’LL dO ExACtlY jUsT ThAT. I HaVE A feELIng YoU’Ll Be Even BuSIEr fRoM NoW On, So i’lL gEt oUT of YoUr HAIr.”

“What are you talking about?”

“iF Only YouR SeNSes weRe sHARper, ThEn mAYBE YoU WouLD ReALIZE.”

The person’s footsteps moved toward the distance and disappeared with the sound of the door shutting behind them. Gaeka let out a tired sigh after his little verbal bout. He turned his focus to the direction of the sunken nest. There, his pawn was taking over Senkyo’s mind.

“It should be done by now.”

Gaeka tapped the small communication device in his ear and activated the mechanism.

“Can you hear me? Send him back; that’s an order. The faster you get him here, the quicker we can—”

*\*BOOOOOMMMM!!!!\**

“—What!?”

A pillar of fire rose from the sunken nest. There, three figures danced through the sky. One of them, he immediately recognized. It was the monster Gaeka had under his control, with its large size it was hard to mistake. It was attacking one of the figures with the help of the other one. Its ally was Yukou Senkyo. Knowing that it already brainwashed him, it was only natural. But, what made him sharpen his eyes in confusion was the identity of the figure they were attacking.

“Is that… the boy’s familiar?”

**377 – Master and Familiar**

*“\*Onii-chan! What’s wrong!? Onii-chan!! Shiro is trying to push it back!! What is it doing!?\*”*

From seemingly out of nowhere, the dream world where Shiro usually resided as she stayed inside Senkyo’s body was quickly being infected by a dark green substance. Her barriers could hold them back but only for a few seconds. They weren’t effective against the unknown force. She tried using offensive spells and mixing different kinds of magic, but none of them worked.

Shiro was in a panic. If she had taken a second to realize that casting magic in the dream world was different from the real world, then perhaps she would have thought of a better solution rather than slowing down the dark green substance’s approach.

“SHIIIRROOOOOO!!!! I*———Gggraahh…!!*”

*“\*Onii-chan!?\*”*

Her master was in pain but she didn’t know the first thing she needed to do to help him. She called out for him numerous times yet with no reply. For a second, she even doubted if he could still hear her voice. At the very least, she understood that this was a mental attack, so that idea wasn’t impossible.

*“\*I——ORDER YOU————\*”*

Shiro’s ears and tail perked at the word “order.” It was like all of her senses dedicated themselves to hearing the next words that would come from her master. In that instantaneous moment of weakness, a powerful wave from the dark green substance rose and broke through all of Shiro’s defenses. With her hands stopped and nothing else to disrupt the substance, its complete domination was set in stone.

*“\*————CURE ME!!!\*”*

Just as the wave of ominous green was about to swallow Shiro whole, Senkyo’s final order entered her ears and everything around her changed in an instant.

“Nya!?”

This familiar sensation was her being manifested back into the real world. It was so sudden that she couldn’t help but let out a surprised scream. She manifested in mid-air as if she was forcefully thrown out of Senkyo’s body. She first tried to regain her bearings and know where exactly she was. Somewhere inside the garden around the sunken nest. That was the only thing she could make out before her body began moving on its own.

“N-Nya!?”

She entered a half-somersault, making her feet point to the sky and her head to the ground, bringing Senkyo, who was standing in the distance behind her, back into her vision. With her hand pointed to him, she cast a spell.

“Nemian Grace!”

Again with no chant, she activated the spell that cured Rnei earlier that night. Had the magic activated, Senkyo would have broken free from the memory monster’s control. But, as the mana around him formed, the fly-like monster shielded Senkyo and sprayed green acid from its mouth. Nemian Grace wasn’t a projectile that forms exposed mana that can be blocked by attacks, but the fact is that mana needs to form before magic can take place. If the mana is disrupted before it forms, it is the same as negating the cast. In this predicament, the acid that the memory monster sprayed broke down the mana that was forming to activate Nemian Grace around Senkyo. Such a feat should not be possible unless the acid had similar properties to neutral mana.

With Shiro’s attempt to cure Senkyo taken apart, Senkyo drew his sword and used flash strike to close the distance with Shiro. Soulless eyes stared her down from above as he prepared to bring down his blade overhead. A clear sign that he was already under the memory monster’s control.

“O-Onii-chan, don’t—!!”

Her lips pleaded for mercy but her body fought for life. A physical barrier coated her body as her legs spun in an attempt to disarm Senkyo’s weapon. Her barrier-clad legs clashed with his blade. Senkyo tried to empower his strike with magic but was quickly absorbed by Shiro’s natural magic barrier. With a more powerful impact than he initially expected, he was forced to strengthen his grip on the blade’s handle. This small window of time allowed Shiro to chant a spell.

“O Nature, bless me with your power, empower your children. Aid me in my plight and suppress my enemies. Overgrowth!”

“My body is a mantle of obsidian. A core as fiery as the blistering sun. Empower me and smear my body with your flaming magma. Konjou Style, Volcanic Skin!”

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

*“\*O Water, swamp the uncharted lands and claim your new heart. Solidify your body and usher in the emergence of a mighty sea. Bubble Pool!\*”*

*“\*O Nature, Amass your power at my word. Create my weapons and impale my adversaries. Needle Storm!\*”*

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

Stems of plants began peeking from the inside of Shiro’s clothes and instantly grew into large vines. The ones that grew from her backside supported her body before she hit the ground while the others shot at Senkyo to restrict his body. Not only that, some of the leaves contained in the small bags around Senkyo’s chest grew into more vines and wrapped around his body. Familiar with the chant, Senkyo responded by casting Volcanic Skin, ramping the surface of his skin to blazing temperatures, and burning his restrictions.

But then, the moment after that, a massive bubble of water appeared out of thin air and encased Senkyo in it. The freezing cold temperature of the water doused the fire burning the vines, allowing new ones to replace them and restrict him once more. At the same time, numerous clumps of pressurized air collected around Senkyo and severed all of the vines that extended from Shiro to Senkyo. Due to the sudden appearance of a bubble of water, he was only able to free himself slightly from the vines that wrapped around his body by redirecting some of the shots of his Needle Storm.

Senkyo may have initiated the attack but his first clash of magic with Shiro ended up in her favor. Since she had a natural deterrent against magic, she had the advantage to begin with, which suggested that his sudden attack was only a desperate one to finish Shiro off before she made use of that. Unfortunately for him, for whatever reason, Shiro made quick and efficient decisions despite being under pressure and having no experience in live battles. Someone watching from the outside might have thought of her as a seasoned fighter, but her internal dialogue begged to differ.

*\*Eh. Huh?? WHAT!? Wait… HUUHHH!?!?!??? What’s happening, what’s happening, WHAT. IS. HAPPENING!?\**

Shiro used the vines supporting her back to flip herself right-side-up and planted her feet to the ground, dispersing the force pushing her body back and coming to a stop. With her body poised low and her knees bent ready to leap, she launched herself at Senkyo with flash strike, closing the distance between her and the place where Senkyo was suspended in a body of floating water.

“Nemian Grace—”

*\*KKSSSHHAAAAA!!!!\**

The fly-like monster sprayed its acid from the sky once more, disrupting Shiro’s magic from forming and attacking her from a distance. As this was happening, Senkyo wasn’t staying silent like a damsel in distress. Five stones pushed themselves out of his small bags.

*“\*O Fire, lend me your power, from the pits of hell come to mine aid. Set the first point of my retribution—O Fire, lend me your power, from the pits of hell come to mine aid. Set the second point of my retribution—\*”*

He chanted in his head as each stone passed in front of his gaze, setting the points of his spell directly onto the stones. Once he finished completing his chants, the stones spread themselves outside his aquatic confines. They formed a perfect circle around him with Shiro inside of it. Since her attention was taken by the fly monster in the skies, it took her a while to notice. But the moment she did, she knew she needed to escape and turned around to get out of the circle.

*“\*With the five keys set, open the gates of hell and begin my reckoning! Hell's Pillar!\*”*

Yet, Hell’s Pillar activated instantly, allowing her no time to flee as a massive pillar of flames rose from the ground, keeping true to its namesake. With Shiro’s magical barrier, she wasn’t hurt by this at all, but her fears weren’t about the fire; it was about the threat that was unleashed inside it.

*“\*Flash Strike: Thunderclap!\*”*

Without even lasting a second inside the flames, Senkyo reached Shiro’s location and positioned himself above her, bringing down his katana on her head. Shiro’s physical and magical barriers were able to block the attack, but they did not negate the pressure, making her lose her balance and tumble across the ground. She may not be damaged by the fire, but that didn’t mean she was unaffected.

She would be fine if she could retaliate, but all her eyes could see were flames. Whenever casters entered their own magic, they could usually navigate by assessing the formation of their magic, and as this rule can only apply to the caster, if anyone else were to imitate this, they would be walking in a fog of magic. Not only that, it was almost impossible to cast their own magic since another caster was already dominating the mana field in the area. Trying to do so was the same as attempting to make a flame from a lighter survive inside a waterfall.

*\*Eh…?\**

Shiro knew this. But even so, her body and mind moved. Almost as if anticipating this moment, she quickly regained her footing and chanted.

“O Water, our tower of strength, the stalwart bastion, emerge from the seas and take shape. Allow the lower beings to witness your splendor and repel those that dare stain your sanctuary. Hydrous Monolith!”

*“\**O Frost, let the chilling wind blow upon us once more. Form your soles with my words and firmly grip them with all your might. Frozen Land!*\*”*

A large pool of water replaced the blazing earth, swirling as it rose from the ground and overwhelmed the pillar of hell. Just when Senkyo was about to land from this aerial attack on Shiro, the unexpected change in the environment made Senkyo’s legs slip and sink into the ground. At the exact same time, the water in the ground froze over, rooting him in place. With only the floor frozen, he could still spot Shiro swimming through the water as if she were an international athlete.

Most people would expect him to have no escape. Contrary to their thoughts, Senkyo had access to spirit power which he immediately used to tamper with the construction of materials and melt the ice that bound him.

“Remnants of the past, become my incarnate and bring upon the shadow of war. I call out the penumbra of the lurking devils. Konjou Style, Phantom Blade!”

*“\*Flash Strike: Breath of the Wind!\*”*

A massive cloud of black smoke appeared, hiding Senkyo from sight. He used Breath of the Wind along with the three clones that appeared with Phantom Blade and scattered in an attempt to throw Shiro off his tail. He made it out of the blazing pillar and suspended himself in the air by creating air footholds. Since the magic Shiro cast was a mid-tier spell, it was only natural that it didn’t completely overwhelm the entire Hell’s Pillar. That should have meant that he and his three clones disappeared into the flames again after exiting the body of water inside the Hell’s Pillar, making it harder for Shiro to track him down. In normal circumstances, it was impossible for her to follow Senkyo. But, the fact that she burst out of the pillar of fire and tackled Senkyo out of the sky was solid proof that this was no normal circumstance.

“Nemian Grace—”

*\*KKSSSHHAAAAA!!!!\**

Such was her attempt to cure Senkyo. Disrupted again by the monster that floated in the sky.

**378 – His Order**

*“\*O Wind, return to the origin, summon the fresh breeze. Cleanse that which dirties your sacred ground and banish the scum that tarnishes it. Lustrate Current!\*”*

Shiro activated another spell as she went against Senkyo and the monster. Somehow, dancing through the air and dashing on the ground, fighting toe to toe against the two enemies. In their clashes, Shiro always ended up one step ahead of Senkyo, but the fly monster always prevented her from dealing the final blow to him. Meanwhile, Senkyo did all he could to keep Shiro away from the monster, keeping the battle in a stalemate.

*\*How… How is this happening?\**

Shiro mused to herself as her body acted all on its own accord. It wasn’t just her that was doing something completely unexpected, but also Senkyo. After recovering from the initial surprise of clashing with him, the fact that she was nothing but a spectator to this fight finally settled in her mind. Her body may have been the one moving, but she knew better than anyone that she wasn’t the one in control. This gave her the leeway to analyze the situation just like how Senkyo would.

Was it some kind of brainwashing? Perhaps, but something was different from the image she had of it. She expected that she wouldn’t be able to form thoughts just like what she was doing now. Contrary to that, only her body moving on its own but her mind was completely intact. Was the fly monster the one that was controlling her and making her fight Senkyo? Impossible. She saw no gain in the monster using her to kill itself. But most of all, how was Senkyo and her able to fight like this?

Both Senkyo and Shiro were using chantless double-casting. Shiro’s use of spirit spells despite her body’s low spirit pool. Not to mention the fact that she was somehow always ahead of what Senkyo was trying to do.

Senkyo should have had no idea, but Shiro knew that he was an Angel that could use chantless casting. She always knew of his ability to do so but kept silent because it was clear to her that Senkyo wasn’t dumb enough not to notice the connection between chantless casting and being an Angel. The relationship between these two subjects was stated in the book of Calamitous Energy, so it would only be a matter of time before he realized what he was, if he ever discovered his ability to cast chantless spells. It was a secret she wanted to keep from him a bit longer because it would make him aware of his divine soul. As for the divine soul itself, she knew that it wouldn’t appreciate him knowing of its existence. This was the complicated relationship that she had to maintain, but now it was all getting out of hand because of the fact that the fly monster was able to force Senkyo to use his chantless casting.

As if that wasn’t already enough of a problem for her, her own body was able to imitate the same feats that Senkyo could do. Chantless casting despite her not being an Angel. The constant use of spirit power. All of it was beyond her abilities even if her body and personality were completely different. She needed to be reborn as another being to be able to perform these feats, yet she did them anyway. The only thing that Shiro could think of that would explain this phenomenon was her relationship with Senkyo as his familiar.

*\*It was Onii-chan’s order… our familiar pact.\**

Just like what Ranat explained to them, the power between master and familiar. For the first time in a long time, Shiro was given an absolute order from Senkyo to cure him. Right now, her body was doing everything it could to fulfill that order. As for whether her current power was the result of his order or not, she couldn’t say for certain.

Shiro’s body ran from Senkyo and the monster’s attacks. She evaded Senkyo’s lightning-quick attacks and shielded herself from the acid that the monster constantly sprayed at her. All while doing this, she kept a level head and placed her hands on numerous chunks around the sunken nest. There were a few close calls with Senkyo’s constant pressure on her. Even without magic, his strikes were enough to break normal barriers to pieces. The only reason she was able to hold out against him for so long was because she was pouring three times the needed amount of mana for a single barrier and layering them over other barriers.

*“\*Flash Strike: Thunderclap!!\*”*

*\*KRAAA!!\**

“Kggh…!”

His single attack pierced through three barriers at once and damaged the fourth one severely. Even without releasing the thunder magic that came with his Thunderclap, its pure pressure was still something to be feared. Shiro knew that she wouldn’t hold out any longer. Time gave Senkyo a chance to power his attacks and weaken her barrier by hitting the same location attack after attack. The fact that he could consistently attack her made the damage worse. But still, they weren’t enough to stop Shiro’s plot.

“O Wind, harbinger of nature’s trial, raise a furor as you serve your harsh lessons. Shake the earth, the sea, and the sky; I call upon the power that brings tremors to the very body of nature itself—”

*“\*O Water, the body of my temper, bridle the violent waves. Embody my pneuma and douse the blaze of wrath—\*”*

*“\*Flash Strike: Thunderclap!\*”*

“—Raging Tempest!”

*“\*—Sodden Flux!\*”*

Once Senkyo charged in for another hit, Shiro cast both of the spells she was chanting. A furious gale blew in the area, pushing Senkyo to the ground. It slowed down his attack but it didn’t stop him from taking three more barriers out of Shiro’s defenses. But, because of his close proximity to her, he was unable to avoid the thin wave of water that slowed down his movements.

“Winding sheet of the dark night, envelope the locus of my blood sport. Spread as if you are I, and I the darkness that blinds thee. Curse those foolish that enter the domain of the predator. Konjou Style, Hunting Shroud!”

*“\*O Earth, built from sticks and stones, soar the regal sky—\*”*

Shiro quickly used flash strike to gain distance and Hunting Shroud to disappear from his sight. Senkyo tried to follow her but the Sodden Flux that hit him reduced the distance he could usually cover in half, allowing Shiro to escape. Then, from behind him came the sound of rumbling earth. Even a quick glance was enough to tell what Shiro’s aim was. The large chunks of rocks she touched earlier were turned into talismans and a circuit with Spirit at the center inside the symbol of Direction overlapping another symbol of Spirit glowed brightly on every chunk of solid earth. They rose to the sky and darted at the fly monster. It tried its best to dodge the large chunks, but the Raging Tempest that Shiro cast restricted its movement severely.

Spells that were thought to keep Senkyo down were revealed to be a setup for an attack on the fly monster. Before now, the fly monster was always flying close to Senkyo so it could use him to deter Shiro, but when Senkyo chased her down with consecutive flash strikes, the violent storm kept the monster from moving with him, creating a gap between them. Senkyo tried his best to return to the monster, but the Sodden Flux that weighed his movements slowed his arrival. To make it worse, the land in front of him suddenly rose to the sky, blocking him from the monster. It was clearly a cast of Great Wall that Shiro used to hold him back even more.

“O Earth, act and hasten the course of nature. Wither the strong and impregnable, take their time and turn them into a strew. Terra Decay!”

Just as quickly as it rose, the block of earth turned into sand and dust with Senkyo’s quick thinking. But, as the body of sand and dust collapsed to the ground, it slowly revealed that no matter what he did now, he was too late.

Just a few seconds ago when Shiro disappeared into the dark shroud, she never stopped chanting.

“\*—*Display your majesty and tower over those who oppose your indestructible command. Great Wall!*\*”

“Link one to the other and bind me in your connection. Heed my every call, even if it means bending time and space itself. Terminate the impasse of space. Teleport!”

*“\*O Wind, return to the origin, summon the fresh breeze. Cleanse that which dirties your sacred ground and banish the scum that tarnishes it. Lustrate Current!\*”*

Spell after spell activated, giving rise to a towering wall of earth and transporting Shiro through the fabric of space and time in the same instance. From the blinding darkness of her own shroud into the similarly dark sky, she arrived behind the fly monster, floating as she stood on her own air foothold. The raging winds kept the monster from escaping the chunks that flew at it, forcing it to evade in a small area which made it completely vulnerable to Shiro.

“KRRRRTTT!!!”

“O Wind, return to the origin, summon the fresh breeze. Cleanse that which dirties your sacred ground and banish the scum that tarnishes it. Lustrate Current!”

*“\*O Darkness, what falls are the ignoble vipers, and what rises are only they who stay true. Seek control of the body around you and expel those that threaten your land. Pressure Drive!\*”*

The fly monster noticed Shiro but it was unable to do anything against her. The pressure of the wind. The threat of the approaching rocks. The power that prevented it from taking control of Shiro. All of them left it with no other option than to accept its fate and watch as Shiro hurled in its direction.

“O Nature, I am your medium, your voice, your soul. Resonate and express yourself through me to punish those who oppose you. Gale Howl!”

At Shiro’s arrival, it felt the gravitational pressure pushing it into the center of her vision. Then, came a massive wave of wind that pierced its skin, crushed its insides, and blew it far away into the sky. With a disgusting splat like the sound of someone swatting a bug, it flew into the distance.

In the end, the monster was unable to make full use of Senkyo and was assassinated from behind by Shiro. The technique that she used was commonly referred to as Chain Casting which was usually performed by two or more casters. It made use of the time between each spell to chant and cast another spell, allowing for the consecutive activation of spells. With her ability to chant in her mind, Shiro was able to execute the technique by herself. Even if Senkyo were to use Teleport as she did, it wouldn’t have changed the result due to this technique.

Instead, Senkyo tried to escape in a different direction from where the monster was blown into, making Shiro wonder what the monster was trying to make him do. But, that didn’t change the fact that this was already checkmate.

Shiro took out a rock she had in her pocket, extended her arm toward Senkyo, and activated her spirit power. As he was trying to escape, numerous rocks spilled from the small bag strapped to his chest and surrounded him. All of them glowed, creating an all too familiar Field Circle that made him look like he was being bound by magic. He tried to escape this by using flash strike but the stones followed him in the same way. Then, he opted to remove the strap around his chest, but it was held in place by the vines that Shiro summoned earlier with Overgrowth.

“Link one to the other and bind me in your connection—”

“Nemian Grace!”

For his last resort, he tried to use Teleport, but his struggles were for naught when Shiro cast her healing spell on a stone she had in her hand. It was connected to the center of the field circle that was contained in one of Senkyo’s small bags. The large field circle around Senkyo glowed green and silenced him in the middle of his chant. All of the tension escaped his body and lost consciousness, making his body limp and roll through the ground.

“Onii-ch—”

Shiro tried to get to him, but that wasn’t an option. Her legs motioned as if running on the ground, but right now, she was still floating in the air without anything to support her. The air foothold that she was standing on up until now disappeared and wouldn’t come back. Noticing this fact stifled her own words and replaced them with an ear-piercing scream.

“NNYYAAAAAAAAHHHH!!!!”

The control in her own body was returned to her as fast as it was taken from her. Her usual clumsy self was back almost as if the Shiro that fought against Senkyo and the monster that controlled him was all a lie.

**379 – The Spy**

“O-Onii-chan!”

Shiro exclaimed once she saw Senkyo’s unmoving figure on the ground. Just earlier, she barely survived a devastating fall from the sky by activating Zephyr right before she hit the ground. Her heart was pounding against her chest furiously but that was nothing compared to the fear she felt about her brother’s condition.

She faced Senkyo up, got down beside him, and placed his head on her lap. She checked his vitals and found that he was stable. A light sigh of relief escaped her lips but she wasn’t taking any chances and proceeded to cast healing spells on him.

“Shiro is here! E-Everything will be fine… You don’t need to worry about anyt—”

*\*BAAAAAAAANNGG!!!!\**

“!?”

A thunderous boom that split the air just like it did to the ears of everyone who heard it echoed in the sky. The noise reverberated in the atmosphere like a shockwave. It was such a familiar sound that Shiro recognized it the moment she heard it. It may be foreign to anyone who lived all their lives in Zerid, but to her who experienced the wonders and blunders of Earth, she was certain that the blast that entered her ear came from a shot from a sniper rifle.

Looking around the area where such an out-of-place item would be, she noticed that there was something in the night sky. A dot of burning flames was hurling at full speed toward the ground. From what she remembered, that was the area where her magic blasted the fly monster. She looked around even more and confirmed that there was nothing else adorning the cosmic airspace and came to the conclusion that the falling fireball was the memory monster that just attacked them.

She couldn’t get the picture of disbelief off of her face as she realized what had happened. From somewhere, a sniper shot the monster they were struggling with down in a single shot. Not to mention that the highest building in the area wasn’t anywhere close to where she blasted the monster. Whoever shot it did it from the ground, fighting space, time, and gravity, surpassing every spec that the most powerful sniper rifle from Earth could ever reach.

Shiro watched as the falling fireball reached the horizon and disappeared into the city. A few seconds of silence turned into minutes. Then, from the nearby area came a pair of footsteps closing in on where she and Senkyo were staying. She watched the corner where she could hear grass and rubble being crushed underfoot and prepared the chant for Phantom Blade in advance.

“Hmm… I wonder if they’re still here… Was it this area?”

“This voice…!”

An image of a person she knew surfaced in her mind the moment the sound of their voice entered her ears.

“Oh! There you two are!”

“…Hira-san.”

The girl with wavy brown hair and amber eyes entered a light jog to them. Her ever-so-free personality never changed from the last time Shiro laid eyes on her, but her outer appearance was a different story. She was clad in metallic armor that could only be described in modern terms as a mech suit. It was painted in black accompanied by an amber accent. Although few, there were also gaps in her suit that revealed what seemed to be an amber jumpsuit. Her gear was similar to the exoskeleton suits that Vleid and Raeri used in the mock battle they had against each other. The only difference was that the ones Vleid and Raeri used seemed to only be extensions of their bodies while the one Hira wore was integrated into her body. And finally, the item that attracted Shiro’s eyes the most, a heavy sniper rifle.

“Were you the one that shot down that monster?”

“Ah—Oh, yeah, I guess so! It was pretty sick, huh? I popped it with a quick BAANG!! I could let you use it too but it only functions when I use it, so that’s a bit unfortunate.”

She showed Shiro her gun as if she were showing a close friend something interesting she bought on a sudden shopping trip, devoid of any gravity. The sniper rifle matched her mech armor by color scheme and its futuristic appearance. She didn’t know the first thing about how it worked but there was no doubt that magic was applied to it somehow.

“—Wait, this isn’t the time. Yukou-san okay?”

Hira switched the subject as she placed her sniper rifle into a slot by her left chest which flipped her weapon over her shoulder, positioning the butt of her sniper to face the sky while its barrel was swallowed into the machine. Shiro had no idea what was happening, but for now, she answered her.

“Onii-chan looks like he’s fine, but Shiro isn’t sure since that thing took control of him. His body might be fine but his mind might not be.”

“Yeah, I guess we’ll just have to see… But hey, you were so cool back then! You took both Yukou-san and that monster on like they were nothing! I thought I was dreaming for a second there!”

“Eh?? Were you watching everything, Hira-san!?”

“Uhh, somewhere in the middle I think. Right around where you busted out of the fire and pushed him out of the sky.”

“What!? That was a long time ago! Why didn’t you help us earlier!?”

“Whoa, w-wait, look, I just wanted to know how powerful you were, okay? I mean, you were doing so good by yourself so I wanted to keep out of your way. Plus! I don’t think any of my shots were killing blows until you beat it up with your last attack! Technically, that was the best time for me to take my shot. There’s no way it survived from that.”

“Still! W-What were you even doing before you showed up? Weren’t you looking for that monster too? How did you do that without getting mind controlled!?”

“Huh? But you did the same, didn’t you?”

“N-No, you’re wrong! Shiro didn’t do anything! It was all because of Onii-chan’s order! Shiro wouldn’t have been able to do that if it weren’t for that!”

“Oh… so it was the familiar pact’s doing… Then, you don’t know anything?”

“Nothing!”

“Nnn~… that isn’t good. You can’t protect yourself, but I’m here so that should be enough. I want to say something to Yukou-san too, so I guess we can chat a bit while we’re waiting.”

“You have business with Onii-chan?”

“Yeah, just a little something. I won’t get into specifics until he’s awake, but I can tell you a bit about it. You remember when I introduced you two to Professor Gaeka, right?”

“M-Mhn, it was the last time we saw you.”

“Well, believe it or not, that was actually me ACTING!”

Hira said so proudly and puffed her chest.

“Y’see, we actually knew about the fact that Professor Gaeka was putting people under his control. I was the inside man to keep his movements in check. A spy, you could say! I went around doing his bidding and everything which gave me the info about you two!”

She pointed her finger confidently toward Shiro and Senkyo.

“…Us?”

“Yep! Well, it was actually just Yukou-san. They never mentioned anything about you, but I guess that just means that you were beyond their calculations. It should be obvious now that we did everything to get connections with you two and tried to foil as much of the Professor’s plans as possible. But, something changed yesterday. When Sir Adeira threatened Gaeka of sending you two outside of Iqanlr’s walls, that’s when he began to panic.”

“Sir Adeira… he’s a part of this, too?”

“Yep. Gaeka ain’t the only one with deep connections! Well, I guess our mistake was underestimating his connections too, so I guess we’re even. Anyway, because of that little event, we finally found out about how he was able to get so many people under his control. It was pretty much the worst possible one out of the history of possibilities, but as you know, it was the monster that was said to have broken out from the Capital of Uikakrn’s sunken nest. He sent it on a rampage until it took control of one the groups that was supposed to be responsible for your escape route.”

“Huh? Responsible for our escape route? What does that mean?”

“You see, the item that Sir Adeira gave you two is called a Recall Crystal. Once it's broken or activated in some other way, it teleports the holder to a device that serves as its waypoint. Basically, it sends someone to the location where the device it's connected to is. As for the device your crystal was connected to, Gaeka’s men used our own people against us and took it. As if that wasn’t enough, he sent it on a bigger rampage and tried to destroy the city. Our group was out all night trying to fix everything, so we couldn’t send Adeira to guard you two. All of us were so worried that you used the recall crystal already, but it's good to see that both of you are still here. If you did, everything would be checkmate for us.”

“…Onii-chan thought something was strange, so he said that we shouldn’t use it yet.”

“That so? He’s so smart, huh! It’s like he knows everything that’s happening around him! Ah, well, the whole thing about the memory monster was probably out of his control though. I’m sad I didn’t get to you two before the monster did. I could’ve gave a quick heads-up. You countered it earlier, but that monster controls people through chemicals it releases. It's not physical so you can’t see it. It’s not magical so your barrier can’t block it. It’s all hormones. The only way to counter it is by sealing your head closed or cleansing the air. Earlier, you used Lustrate Current to fend off the chemicals but I fight it using the former.”

As she said that, her mech suit extended from the neck and created a helmet around her head. Such a feat seemed impossible to do because her long hair was in the way, but her hair somehow folded itself as her mech extended to create the helmet.

“Was that… spirit power?”

“Aha, nice catch! That’s right. I’m a bit different from the other students in Xhiari, but just like I told you earlier, I won’t go into detail.”

“That… Shiro thinks that’s fine but, what does this all have to do with your talk with Onii-chan?”

“Uhnn~… You could say that—GWUGH!!”

“H-Hira-san!?”

While Shiro and Hira were talking, a shadow appeared just as fast as it exited Shiro’s vision as it tackled Hira from the side.

**380 – Cost of Lies**

Shiro followed Hira and the shadow with her eyes and saw her punch the shadow in the stomach, knocking it away from her. She quickly regained her footing and directed her eyes to the beast. It was a large monster with a body that mingled with green and brown. It had no eyes and had a large, vicious mouth to fill the space. It had three arms, one side only had one arm but it made up for the missing arm by being about the size of an elephant’s foot. All three of its arms had flaps which suggested its ability to glide in the air and the spaces between its fingers were webbed implying that it could be swift underwater. It had hind legs that looked like they could crush earth underfoot and a tail that seemed to be able to swipe anyone in the way. It stood there threateningly on all five of its limbs as its tail swung around in the air.

“WRUUUGHH!!”

“Nyah!?”

It let out a ferocious growl as it switched its attention from Hira to Shiro. Suddenly, someone gripped her wrist like a vice. She let out a frightened shriek as she turned to the source of her pain only to find that Senkyo was awake, his hand crushing her with brute strength, his body preparing to pounce on her, and his eyes as empty as the void. Yet again, even without the presence of the fly monster, he was returned to his brainwashed self.

“GRAA!!”

“N-Nemian—!!”

Immediately, she activated the only spell she knew that could cure him.

*\*KKSSSHHAAAAA!!!!\**

Just like the other times with the fly monster, the large beast that just arrived sprayed unknown acid at Senkyo and Shiro. If it had the same effects as the fly monster’s spray, then her spell would be disrupted and nothing would stop Senkyo from attacking Shiro. Unlike the last time, she could tell that she was in complete control of her body. The Shiro that fought against Senkyo and the memory monster was not coming back. There was no order for her to fulfill. The previous one had already been resolved, which left her powerless against the threat in front of her.

*“\*O Fi… O Water—! O…?\*”*

For a second, she thought. For a moment, she tried. Theoretically speaking, she should be capable of the same feats that the previous Shiro performed. Even without an order, she had the potential to fight. Senkyo’s order proved this to her. She just needed to act.

*“\*…!\*”*

Alas, such words were only simple to say but difficult to carry out. She wanted to cast a spell. Any kind of spell that could save her. If she tried, maybe chantless casting would work. But, before she even arrived at that hurdle, she had no clue which spell to use. The confusion combined with the high-pressure situation made her mind malfunction, leaving her mouth wide open with nothing done.

*\*GRKGRKGRK!\**

“—Grace!!”

But then, to follow up against the beast’s acidic spray, Hira punched the ground, making the contours of her mech suit glow blue. The ground reacted to the impact, making it rise to the air. A large wall towered in between Shiro and the beast, preventing the spray from reaching the two and allowing Shiro’s magic to take form.

“WRUUUGHH!!”

The beast roared in frustration, but now it had bigger problems than that. A burst of flames from the soles and legs of Hira’s mech suit made her shoot into the beast like a rocket. Her right arm glimmered in an amber hue as she threw a haymaker with it. The beast intercepted it using its large arm instead of dodging, perhaps because it realized that it had no escape.

Its massive arm grew even bigger and black scales appeared on its fist. The two forces made contact and created a brief shockwave, to both of their surprise, their power was even. The beast planted its other hands on the ground and threw itself into the air to use its tail to swipe Hira while its legs pointed at her, ready to kick her to oblivion. However, doing this left the area above its head open. Taking this chance, she took hold of the beast’s fist and jumped over its head where she used the momentum from both of their bodies to throw it into the ground.

She let go of its fist, maintaining the force that she used, entering a somersault, increasing her power by activating the same boosters on her legs, and delivering a devastating kick on its head. The overwhelming force decapitated its head on the spot. But then, as if such a vital part of the body was nothing to it, the beast rose and punched Hira away with its two left arms. She was forced to defend herself, giving an opening for the headless beast to run to the sunken nest. It was trying to escape.

Hira tried to catch up to it, but she was pushed farther back than she expected and the beast was too fast for her to catch in time. At that moment, a horde of cave trappers crawled out of the sunken nest and attacked the beast. It retaliated by using its arms to punch through the attack but their sheer number overwhelmed it. Realizing what this was, Hira kicked the ground below and entered the sky.

It wasn’t only cave trappers but also bomb jockeys and phantom threaders. The bomb jockeys exploded their green orbs all over the beast’s body, making it melt, and hopefully, rob it of its senses. Meanwhile, the phantom threaders created a web net around it along with the cave trappers that were holding it down and blocked the entrance of the sunken nest once every spider surfaced. With the monster immobile, Hira stabilized herself in the air, and the body of metal right behind her left shoulder flipped toward her, revealing her heavy sniper rifle. With precise and experienced handling, she quickly lined up her shot to the beast. In just a few seconds, she unhesitatingly pulled the trigger, making her weapon shimmer amber and producing an explosive shot that was akin to a laser.

Voices were silent with the only thing disturbing the air being the shockwave of Hira’s sniper rifle. From above, she could see that her attack shot cleanly through the center of the beast. Just in case it still moved, she returned to the ground slowly with her gun ready to shoot at any time. She landed on the ground but still refused to let her guard down. The spiders around her simply crawled harmlessly as she watched the corpse.

“Hira, what was that thing?”

“Oh, Sir Leolja! Thanks for the help. Ya got here just in time!”

She responded to the phantom threader that spoke to her and climbed on her shoulder.

“I don’t know, really. But it looked like it was related to the memory monster, somehow.”

“Is that so? What’s the status of the monster in question?”

“Dead… or at least it should have been. I haven’t seen the body for myself since I shot it down from afar. I think it landed somewhere near the food district. Can you check for me?”

“Yes. I’m sending nearby spiders to the area as we speak.”

“Neat. Oh, can you get me some food while you’re at it?”

“No.”

“Aww, too bad.”

Finally, Hira removed her eyes from the monster corpse, turned her to attention where Shiro was, and walked up to her location.

“I met Yukou-san and Shiro. They haven’t used the recall crystal yet, but we should really do something about that. Yukou-san got controlled by the monster but Shiro had the power to cure him, so we’re all good.”

“She could cure the mind controlled? Hmm, so this is the power of a Nemi.”

“Amazing, riiight~! Miracle Beasts are amazing, riiight~!! I want to be a Miracle Beast too~!!!”

“Hm. Well, you are in a different aspect.”

“Ehh?? Almost no one knows, tho??”

“Let’s keep it that way. Anyway, are you really going to tell Senkyo?”

“Yeah, I don’t know if it will change things, but he deserves to know at least.”

“That sounds just like you.”

“How about you? Aren’t you going to stop me?”

“I have no part in that man’s revenge. That’s why I’m dealing with Iqanlr’s government you know? Well, at most I am the communicator, so I can’t completely say I had no part.”

“You’re always such a stickler for details!”

“Say what you want.”

“Mnnn, whatever… Shiro~! Is Yukou-san good?”

Hira pulled back before she began arguing with Leolja and right as she closed in, she shouted for Shiro, alerting them of her presence.

“—uh!? Who was that?”

“Th-That’s Hira, Onii-chan! Umm, a friend. I think.”

“What!? You aren’t even sure!?”

“W-Well, it’s complicated!”

Hearing the conversation coming from beyond the earth wall, Hira’s face twisted with worry and sympathy. She placed her hand on the wall, controlling the mana that built the walls and disassembled it, making the wall crumble.

“Gya!? W-What the!? Who are yo—a spider!?”

Senkyo backed up, clearly provoked by the presence of Hira and the phantom threader that Leolja was controlling. His eyes were back to normal, indicating that he was no longer controlled by the memory monster. Still, that didn’t do anything to help the fact that he was now truly a victim of the monster’s memory-taking.

“That response… oh my, it’s just trouble after trouble, huh?”

Hira delivered her feelings of sympathy to Shiro, who was supporting Senkyo from behind, making sure that he didn’t fall down. Shiro responded only through her exasperated sigh. That alone was enough to convey the heavy weight on her shoulders.

**381 – Change of Heart**

“N-Ngh…”

“Onii-chan…?”

Just in time. Shiro’s attempt to use Nemian Grace successfully resolved and cured Senkyo just before he could do anything to her. She turned her head to the side where she found a wall of earth that separated her and Senkyo from the beast. It had to have been Hira’s doing. Had it not been for her, she doubted that she would have remained unharmed nor would Senkyo have been released from the mind control again.

She could hear the sounds of battle from the other side of the wall. Knowing that the beast shouldn’t be coming for them any time soon, she let out a sigh of relief.

“A-Ah—Who…!?”

Shiro heard Senkyo’s voice from above her. Right now, she ended up on the ground while Senkyo was pinning her down. This was the position they ended up with just before her cure finally took effect. It was clear that she had barely any more time to work with. She returned her gaze to Senkyo in order to explain everything that happened so far, but something was strange. The look on his face was unnaturally startled. Perhaps it was only natural since he just returned from being mind-controlled, but she assumed that Senkyo would have said something by now. Since he valued information so much, looking at her for so long in silence was strange. Then, she finally realized what was happening with his single question.

“…Who are you…?”

“O-Onii-chan!?”

“Wha!?”

The impact of that one question was so large that she inadvertently pushed Senkyo up and held him by his shoulders.

“Wh-What do you mean!? You know who Shiro is, right!? Y-You still remember, right? You’re just joking, right!? RIGHT!?”

“Wrong! Seriously, what the hell is happening here!?”

“—ah…!?”

Senkyo ripped her arms off his body and pushed Shiro back. He was looking at her in annoyance and anger, an expression of pure hostility that would never be directed to her by her brother.

“Nh…”

“H-Hey, what the…?”

Before she even realized it, Shiro’s vision blurred and her face moistened. All of this was too sudden for her to accept. It wasn’t just that he forgot who she was. All of the memories that she spent together with him, were they all gone? Was everything going to return to the time she first reunited with Senkyo? Or, maybe even worse? Was he going to push her away from his life completely just like he did now? The fear of loss and the possibility of losing even more hit her all at once.

“Oi, d-don’t cry on me here!”

“Nhh…!”

Because Shiro tried to stay strong or maybe just because it was an order from Senkyo, she tried her best to hold back her cries.

“Jeez, you were the one who was up close and kept nagging me. I didn’t do anything.”

For a second, he showed compassion after seeing her tears fall. It was undoubtedly an effective weapon against Senkyo, but he was quick to return to his self-important attitude the moment they were gone.

“I don’t even know you.”

“…!!!”

How? How insensitive can he be at such a time? Could he not sense the pain that Shiro was feeling? Could he not tell that she was suffering from every hostile word that he threw at her? No, impossible.

The Senkyo that Shiro knew was never so dull even without his memories. He was doing this on purpose. He was trying to get a better grasp of the situation by using her. He was treating her like an object.

This irritated Shiro.

Just like how he basically threatened her when they first arrived in Zerid, he was trying to make use of her again through his underhanded means. Was this how she was fated to be used as his familiar? Why couldn’t he just ask nicely? She had no qualms in following his every order, even without the familiar pact. But why must she be used so mercilessly?

This angered her.

Then, she thought about the worst possible future where she would be discarded by this version of Senkyo that was devoid of any memories of her. If he ever made such a decision that the Senkyo she knew would never do, this would break her more than any kind of manipulation.

This fueled her rage and made her burst.

“Of course I’d get—”

Not another word. There was no way she would accept such a future lying down. If there was one thing that he learned from the brother she loved and respected, it was to move and take the future she desired with her own hands.

“—Y-You do! You do know Shiro! You’re Yukou Senkyo and you’re Shiro’s brother! Don’t forget that!”

She suddenly cut him off mid-sentence with her loud voice, trying to convert her sorrow into fury. One step. Just so she could take one more step and get her thoughts through his empty head.

“S-Shiro? Is that supposed to be you? Why are you referring to yourself in third person? Stop being weird.”

“The one being weird is you, Onii-chan!!! Why do you think you’re the normal one here!? You don’t know Shiro! You don’t even know where you are!! How can you say you aren’t weird!!!”

“Of course, I know! Look… this… this is…”

Senkyo finally removed her gaze from Shiro and looked around his surroundings. Buildings that looked like they were made in the distant past, pillars of smoke coming from everywhere around him, a wall of earth that towered over where they stood, and the figure of Shiro’s catgirl-self standing bitterly in front of him. Her ears and tail moved fluidly, making him doubt it was anything artificially manufactured.

“U-Uhh… another world?”

“Don’t get it right!”

“I did!?”

It was just a shot in the dark, but her self-proclaimed sister scowled at him in irritation as she complained about his accurate guess. Who would believe such a person? Senkyo certainly didn’t want to, but he couldn’t argue that he had no clue where he was. The last thing he could remember was that time when he suddenly charged into the street to save a child who was about to get run over by a truck.

“Huh?? Did I really just die and get reincarnated into another world?? Wait, I got run over by a truck!? Just how cliché was my death!?”

“You’re not dead!! And no, you didn’t die in the past either!! You’re alive and well and getting on Shiro’s nerves!! Can’t you just shut up and listen to what Shiro has to say!?”

It seemed like he made her snap. No, maybe she snapped long before he even realized. Senkyo had absolutely no idea what was happening, but if there was even at least one thing that he could be certain of, then that would be that the person calling herself Shiro was related to him somehow.

“Shiro has no time for this! If you won’t listen, then Shiro will just show you!”

Shiro’s body turned into light and shot into Senkyo’s chest. The sudden incomprehensive action took him off his feet at fell to his bottom.

*“\*See! This is what Shiro can do, Onii-chan!\*”*

“H-Huh!? What just…!?”

*“\*You’re coming with Shiro!\*”*

A sudden lightheadedness assaulted Senkyo, making him clutch his head to support it. However, this did nothing to keep his eyes from closing, cutting off his vision along with his consciousness.

“GAH!!”

He violently got out of his bed… or at least, what he hoped to be.

“There you are.”

Turning to the voice behind him, he found out that he had gotten up from Shiro’s lap pillow and the two of them were still in the same place where he lost consciousness.

“Before you say anything, Shiro suggests that you look over there.”

Without thinking much about it, Senkyo followed the location where she pointed to.

“Oi… is that… me!?”

“Half correct. That is the past you. This is the dream world, and Shiro brought you here by envisaging you. It’s the same thing Shiro did when we first reunited. What you’re seeing is Shiro’s memory moments before you got mind controlled and lost your memories.”

Right now, the Senkyo of the past finished playing with the rubble in the area and was approaching the entrance of the sunken nest.

“Wait, why should I even believe you!? You’re out here knocking me out and bringing me to some weird dream world and you expect me to trust you!? Don’t mess with me! You haven’t even explained anything to me and how I got here! How am I even supposed to know that what I’m seeing actually happened!”

“Shiro just…!”

*\*…Doesn’t want to lose you!\**

With all her might, Shiro stopped herself from speaking her true thoughts. The person in front of him was Senkyo, but also not. He isn’t the brother who fawned over her and placed her entire trust in. He had no clue who she was, nor did he care. But, just like him, he wanted information the most to understand everything that was happening. If only Shiro was able to give that to him, everything would be solved, but they didn’t have that kind of leisure. What she needed the most from him right now was his cooperation. She acted emotionally to get to this point but now wasn’t the time to antagonize him by forcing her thoughts on him.

She knew Senkyo. She knew her brother. If a total stranger suddenly talked to him like Shiro did, he would never give his trust unless he was given a sensible motive. Her personal relationship with him could work, but it wasn’t strong enough. Anyone could try to act that out on someone who has no memories. She needed something stronger. A more concrete reason that could be understood universally. Switching gears, for the first time, Shiro riled her emotions and glared at Senkyo with hate.

“…Shiro just wants to live!!”

Gather the pain.

“Shiro doesn’t care about what you’re thinking right now, but if you don’t move…”

Gather the sorrow.

“If you stay ignorant…!”

Gather the love.

“If you don’t cooperate with Shiro, you’ll end up dead and so will Shiro!!

And give voice to her spirit.

“Don’t you get that Shiro can’t live without you!? Right now, Shiro is doing all she can to give you information, but she can’t explain everything! By the time you understand, it will already be too late! That’s how bad our situation is right now!! So please, just work with Shiro for now before everything ends!!”

“…!”

Senkyo gave a difficult face in response. Her words finally shook him. By placing her life and dragging his life on the line, he had no choice but to consider her words carefully. In a different sense, everything that she uttered came from her heart, making her more believable.

“Tch, agh..! Why is this happening!?”

Senkyo clicked his tongue and let out a groan of frustration. But, he didn’t try to dispute against Shiro and turned his focus to his other self. A large fly monster suddenly appeared in front of him, staring him in the eyes as if peering into his very soul. He placed his hand on his chin and observed the event occur. He never gave a reply back to Shiro, but it seemed like he was willing to watch whatever Shiro was showing him. It wasn’t a matter of trust; it was a matter of life and the possibility that he would lose it if he stayed stubborn. For a second, Shiro curled her lips into a smile before bringing her focus back to the memory.

Noticing that the battle outside was calming down, Shiro made sure to only show the important parts that led to the present. Senkyo complained as she expected, but he was forced to accept it after she explained that people were likely coming. She pitted him between the choice of watching only what Shiro showed him or leaving his body vulnerable for other people to see. As the careful person that he was, he chose to follow her will so that he could meet the people who were approaching them in person. Before they arrived, Shiro ended the memory and brought back Senkyo’s consciousness. She manifested back to the real world and assisted Senkyo in recovering from his forced envisaging experience.

“Shiro~! Is Yukou-san good?”

“Huh!? Who was that?”

Of course, Shiro gave him a quick introduction of Hira while they were watching Shiro’s memories, so there was no need for him to act clueless.

“Th-That’s Hira, Onii-chan! Umm, a friend. I think.”

Nor did Shiro need to act so timid after basically threatening Senkyo to her will. But this was what Senkyo ordered her to do. To act normally as if they never had their exchange. It all boiled down to how Hira blatantly admitted that she chose to not help Shiro, making him doubt her trustworthiness. So, instead of letting her know that they were able to collect themselves, he wanted to appear as vulnerable as possible to bring out any attempts of betrayal.

Shiro already gave a quick overview about her status as a familiar and that she would be forced to follow any order he gave, which made her acting perfect. To Senkyo, there was still the possibility that Shiro was only playing along with his orders and all of what she said was a lie, but he understood that he had no power to confirm any of these and there was no harm in giving a simple order. Before he exited the dream world, he made sure to make use of his supposed advantage over Shiro.

“From now on, swear your allegiance to me, never betray me, and always act in my favor. This is an order. If anything happens that makes me act beyond my will, save me. This is an order. If anything threatens my life, protect me. This is an order.”

**382 – The Motives That Brewed Chaos**

“Errm… So, basically, you don’t remember anything about your normal life getting all messed up by fantasy and the supernatural?”

“T-That’s a bad way to put it! It’s like you’re saying that Shiro is a bad influence on Onii-chan!”

Once Senkyo calmed down enough after Hira and Leolja’s appearance, he explained how he perceived everything around him from his point of view. Where his memories started, where they ended, and what he thought about his current situation. He took this chance to act weak and vulnerable to catch anyone showing any ill will towards him. Or at least, that’s what it was supposed to be.

*“\*What are you getting all scared for!? This definitely isn’t acting!\*”*

*“\*What do you want me to do!? Just look at those spid—AH!?\*”*

The only reason his acting was so convincing was because none of it was acting. After coming face-to-face with Hira, he stiffened up and began stuttering. Maybe it was the large, intimidating solid pieces of mech armor that looked like they could disintegrate him in an instant, or perhaps the unexpected spider on her shoulder that brought a clutter of terrifying arachnids that was currently roaming around them. Both at the same time was also a possibility.

*“\*Pathetic.\*”*

“Shiro isn’t a bad influence right, Onii-chan!?”

*“\*Shut up, bad influen—Wait, what the…?\*”*

“U-Uhh…”

They were having completely different conversations in real life and in their minds. The two kept up their ignorant act while their true feelings leaked in their heads. An experience so surreal that it would make anyone confused, especially someone who just lost their memories and was thrown into an incomprehensible situation.

“W-Well, enough about me! What about you two!? Shiro told me about you, uhh, Hira-san, but who… what is that spider supposed to be!?”

He shifted his gaze from the mech girl to the phantom threader that was perched atop her shoulder.

“….Is that you, Leela?”

Shiro asked while keeping her hand connected to Senkyo’s hand.

“That is correct, Shir. I am not here physically, but I can control multiple groups of Iwaiida from far distances. This group was something I had to draft in a hurry, so I didn’t have time to empower it with anything more powerful than a cave trapper, but I see that I made the right decision.”

“Draft them? What for?”

“Simply put, I used my powers as a Demonic Spider to get the Iwaiida in the sunken nest to assist in controlling the chaos. I have numerous groups filled with every evolution stage except for a Demonic Spider to help me. However, this particular group is an exception I gathered the moment I received a report from a man named Krikrt, saying that you and Senkyo were found fighting each other along with the presence of a fly-like creature, which just so happens to be the infamous memory monster. That is also how I directed Miss Hira to your location.”

“O-Oh… Krikrt. Thinking about it, there was no way they wouldn’t notice our fighting. Where are they right now?”

“I sent them to find where the enemy is keeping the device connected to Senkyo’s recall crystal. They cannot break it since it would allow us to connect it to another device, so they have to be guarding it somewhere. Once we recover that and get it to a safe place far from here, you and Senkyo will be able to escape.”

“Escape… huh? Hey, Leela, what’s your relationship with Hira? Do you know anything about what’s happening here? Shiro is tired of being clueless. Everyone around us has a secret to hide and it feels like everyone knows more about us than we do. It’s frustrating… making us feel like we’re strangers to ourselves and getting manipulated without even knowing it.”

“…”

Everyone fell silent at Shiro’s words. Even Senkyo didn’t dare say a word. The reason for his calmness was none other than Shiro. Back when they first bickered in their heads about Senkyo’s all-too-real acting, he found himself seeing glimpses of Shiro’s memories. They talked about it in their heads and discovered that Shiro still had the power to show Senkyo her memories even while she was manifested in the real world. It was normally something that couldn’t be done, but none of them were complaining.

While she was having her conversation with Leolja, she made sure to maintain contact with Senkyo, the single known condition that allowed her to share her memories with him. As they talked, she showed him pieces of her memories that gave the context for their conversation. This sated his thirst for information and allowed Shiro to continue the conversation uninterrupted.

“Better late than never, at least! Hey, Shiro, remember that I said I couldn’t get into detail about our conversation since Senkyo wasn’t awake yet? Well, now that he’s up, you wanna hear about it?”

“E-Eh? Weren’t you going to have a private conversation with Onii-chan? Is it okay for Shiro and Leela to be here?”

“All good, all good! It’s better if you hear this too, and Sir Leolja is technically involved, so he can do some explaining too! But, I do have a teeeeeny-tiny request!”

She gave Senkyo a glance to get his permission. He looked at the other people present before responding with a half-confused, half-serious nod—his brilliant non-false acting at play.

“Umm… what is it?”

“Just—whatever you hear, don’t get worked up and listen till the end, okay? I just want to get everything through properly. I’m sure you’ll get mad at us or something like that, so just keep calm. Oh, and know that I’m on your side! But, that’s for you to decide, not me. So at the very least, just hear me out to the end, okay? Ah, and Sir Leolja too!”

“I can’t help but notice that you treated me like an afterthought.”

“See! Just like that! Don’t jump to conclusions just like Sir Leolja did!”

Neither Senkyo nor Shiro felt the weight behind her voice. It was like Hira was about to tell some trivial secret at a girl’s party, but it wasn’t like they could just treat it as such. Senkyo was only one step away from shouting at her for that, but seeing that this was how she normally acted in all situations from Shiro’s memories, he somehow managed to hold it back. There was a hint of similarity between her attitude now and when his supposed past self first insulted Hira, so perhaps it was only a matter of personality.

“Haah… Whatever, just say it. It’s not like I have any choice. I literally have no idea what’s happening.”

“Hmm~? You’re pretty calm, though?”

“Everything’s just so crazy that it doesn’t feel real anymore. I feel like I can wake up any time now and find out that all of this was a dream.”

“That so? Well, I still got things to do so I’ll make this quick!”

According to Hira, the group she was a part of was created by the Kingdom of Uikakrn and Ridsikrn Empire. Their purpose was to monitor and protect the development of Iqanlr. As it was the city that led their latest technological advancements, it was only natural to want to have it protected in more ways than one. The group Hira was a part of, The Battery, was one of those ways. Originally, this group was never that large. In fact, it only began with Adeira and five of his trustworthy aides. They were stationed in Iqanlr 3 years ago. Specifically, in response to Nrjia’s fall. However, there was one single task that they had to prioritize over this. That being: to assist a certain individual.

When Hira and Leolja first joined the Battery, none of them knew the identity of this individual. The only thing they knew was that they existed. The only person who knew was Adeira. Not even his trusted aides knew. But just recently, their identity was finally made public. And as everyone listening could tell, this person was none other than Yukou Senkyo. No one knew how they predicted Senkyo’s arrival, but the fact that he was inside Iqanlr’s walls was factual.

The Battery. The origin of this name reflected the primary purpose of their group—to empower the man named Yukou Senkyo. This was mainly done through their researcher, more commonly known within the Battery as the Mad Scientist. His encounter with the Battery was a strange one as he approached Adeira so that he could complete the same goal. He claimed that he had the ability to make Yukou Senkyo’s body adapt faster to creation magic. No one knew of the details, but he was able to prove his legitimacy to Adeira and entered the Battery.

However, the Mad Scientist made a single fact clear to Adeira. That he would make use of Yukou Senkyo to fulfill his revenge. He accepted this but never expected that the fated day would be closer than he imagined. The target of his ire: Gaeka, entered Xhiari as a professor to research a counter for an infamous beast, or at least, that was his cover-up story. With the discovery of the memory monster and its power to not only take but also manipulate memories, the Battery found out that he used the monster to make a smooth transfer into Iqanlr. When Senkyo arrived in Iqanlr a few weeks later, the chance for his vengeance showed itself on a silver platter.

The Battery and the Mad Scientist all had a common objective, and that was to empower Yukou Senkyo. However, the Battery’s goal was only to strengthen Senkyo’s capabilities regardless of whether it was physical, magical, or mental empowerment. Meanwhile, the Mad Scientist’s goal was to kill the person he abhorred. At this moment, the Mad Scientist was producing a certain substance that could synchronize Senkyo’s body with his creation magic, but this also gave him the ability to invade Senkyo’s mental space and influence him with his hate and vengeance. Once he finished that, it was very likely that something would happen to Senkyo that would make him hunt down Gaeka and kill him. The Mad Scientist was confident in this.

This substance wasn’t something that could be made without any contact with Senkyo. It needed his DNA samples, but most effectively, his blood. At this time, Leolja admitted that in his previous two tests with Senkyo, he secretly collected these crucial materials while he was fighting. And as for Hira…

“…Yeah, that Mad Scientist… also happens to be my Dad. I’m sorry! I really am!”

Hira bowed to Senkyo and Shiro as she gave her confession, bending her hips at a near 90-degree angle.

**383 – The Cruel Man**

The seconds passed and silence dominated the air. Senkyo and Shiro watched Hira’s bowing figure with conflicted faces. Then, the stillness finally breaks with Senkyo’s words.

“W-What do you all even want from me so badly that you’d plot all this? Why does it all sound like all of you were expecting me to be here!?”

Senkyo knew. Shiro’s memories provided him enough information to know that all of them were after his creation magic. Still a concept that he had yet to grasp, but had to recognize in order to move on. He kept on his ignorant act, receiving the same information he got from Shiro’s memories while also extracting new information.

Hira stood by her word that she had no clue how everyone anticipated his arrival. Leolja was the same. However, Leolja knew of Senkyo’s access to creation magic before Hira did. The information about Senkyo was announced to the Battery only earlier this day. Before that, no one recognized Senkyo as anything other than the object of Gaeka’s attention, but Leolja knew that he was capable of using creation magic, a piece of information that wasn’t even announced to the Battery. Apparently, Hira’s father shared more information about Senkyo with Leolja than his own daughter. When Senkyo asked about this, Leolja said that it was a matter of principle. Her father didn’t want her to be involved in his revenge, so he never talked to her about Senkyo. Half of the information she currently knew about him was supplemented by Leolja.

At this point, Senkyo wasn’t affected much by being used by everyone around him. He was seeing memories of it, but he didn’t experience it directly. None of it felt real. It was either that or he was somehow numb to these negative emotions. On the other hand, Shiro was clearly frustrated by this. Hira aside, she placed her trust in Leolja who was found to be just as guilty of deceiving them as Hira. Hira kept receiving Senkyo’s questions in stride, responding in her ambiguous manner of speech that made it difficult to tell if she was serious or being silly. When it came to Leolja, he was unaffected by the insults that Senkyo threw at them from time to time, maintaining his calm and formal demeanor. Then, Senkyo’s interrogation was stopped by a sudden announcement from Leolja.

“—Hira, we found it.”

“Oh!! The device, right? Where is it? Once I get it back we can finally get these two out of here!”

The device. From Senkyo’s understanding, this was the teleportation destination device that his recall crystal was connected to.

“A-And what makes you think Onii-chan and Shiro will use it just like you want us to!?”

“Hm? I mean, it’s up to you two, really. I just came to say what I wanted to say. I talked to you two about this as a member of the Battery. Whether you place your trust in me is up to you two. I don’t want to try and convince you of anything either after deceiving you. But I will still open up an escape route for the two of you whether you like it or not.”

“Is that so?”

Senkyo gave Hira a scrutinizing gaze as he tried his best to consolidate the immense amount of information being poured into his brain. He didn’t seem like he took any offense to Hira’s announcement to leave and simply stared at her as she walked away from them.

“Yup~! Well then, I’ll leave you two in Sir Leolja’s hands. I’m off!!”

She activated the thrusters on her mech’s legs and soles as she propelled away from Senkyo and Shiro. They heard her say that Leolja would be dealing with them now, but she took the phantom threader that Leolja was communicating through, likely so that he could guide her to wherever he claimed the device was.

“If you two are wondering, I’m still here.”

“Whoa!”

“Nya!?”

From behind them, another spider that had the same appearance as the one on Hira’s shoulder walked up to the two and talked.

“Keep in mind that I can control numerous groups of Iwaiida. So long as you stay near them, more likely than not, I will be there.”

“Isn’t that, umm, a bit too powerful? Don’t you get fights with spiders as powerful as you?”

Senkyo couldn’t help but ask him.

“If it’s about the other Demonic Spiders in the sunken nest, they won’t mind. I give them food and entertainment items daily as a sign of peace, so after this whole ordeal perhaps they would likely take this chance to ask for more items to keep our peace treaty intact.”

“What?? It’s that easy??”

“I wouldn’t say that. When I first came back to the sunken nest after becoming a riser, almost all of them took control of every Iwaiida in the nest and made a coordinated attack to kill me. It was a nightmare but I repelled them with the knowledge I gained on the surface. To keep everything short, I convinced them to reduce their aggression by bringing the surface’s evolution to the sunken nest. It seems they enjoyed it greatly, so it is probably only a matter of pride that they still refuse to become risers. Oh, their killing tendencies might be a problem but food should solve that easily.”

“What? Are they feral pets? Sorry, but I can’t help but have the image of spider people turning into degenerate shut-ins with what you said.”

“Your guess is quite accurate so there is no need for apologies. Anyhow, it’s about time I guard you two properly, so please enter the sunken nest with me. We will be safe there with the other Iwaiida around for me to control.”

“Hmm…”

The other spiders in their surroundings began reopening the sealed entrance to the sunken nest. Leolja said nothing as he awaited Senkyo’s response.

“Do you… know of anything that can get me my memories back?”

“I certainly don’t, but I do know who can.”

“…Is it the Mad Scientist?”

“Unfortunately so. While we were chatting, I had the other spiders collect samples from the corpse of the beast that Hira fought. I sent them to her father so that he could examine them and find a cure. The same goes for the body of the memory monster that we found near the food district, just as Hira reported. I know you have your reserves for trusting him as well, but that man only wants revenge. Once he loses his chance for that, there should be nothing keeping him from giving you his aid. Actually, he’s already examining the corpse of the beast that arrived a while ago.”

“Wait, you have contact with him?”

“Communication is my specialty in this city, so yes. He’s quite confident that you two won’t get to him in time before Senkyo goes mad, so he took the liberty to get some work done in advance, or so he said. Ah, I assure you that I didn’t leak anything about you two on purpose, but he did figure out that we are still on the surface.”

“Just whose side is this guy on?”

“Hmm… If you are talking about me, then I simply take pride in having solid connections with a good number of groups, even in conflicts such as this. If you are referring to the Scientist, then he is a whimsical man who’s only ever on his own side. You can see where Hira takes from. Both of them may be flawed, but their negatives are countered with overwhelming talent. I can assure you that he is your best shot at finding something that can fix your memories.”

Senkyo let out a sigh but it was followed by an immediate decision that baffled Shiro.

“…Whatever, let’s go already.”

“We’re entering!?”

*“\*Are you crazy!?\*”*

An outburst of denial came from Shiro as the words of agreement from Senkyo entered her ears. Everyone present could guess the source of her reluctance. Shiro was the one who persuaded Senkyo to place their trust in Leolja. But then they found out that because of this, she allowed Leolja a chance to steal samples from Senkyo’s body which then made him vulnerable to some “Mad Scientist” that would soon take over his body just like the memory monster did. A sane person would never place trust in Leolja ever again for that, which is why she couldn’t wrap her head around why Senkyo would ever agree to follow him. Her reaction extended even to her unrestricted consciousness.

Without as much as batting an eye, Senkyo let go of the hand he kept connected to her and returned Shiro’s puzzled gaze with a serious expression.

*“\*Shiro, I’ve deduced two things. One: I think that the memories you’re showing me are too detailed, even when they’re cut short. Technically speaking, there’s still a small chance that this is one massive ploy to use me, but I feel like that’s impossible at this point. As for the second…\*”*

After a brief moment of silence, Senkyo said aloud.

“…I have to find someone… don’t I?”

“…?!”

*“\*You…\*”*

The image of Hisho Yuu flashed in both of their minds. After being supplied with so many memories from Shiro, a certain young girl with crimson features appeared many times. They only ever appeared whenever Senkyo led the conversation to how or why he arrived in another world. Curious, Senkyo began to ask leading questions that would make this girl appear in Shiro’s memories. “How” or “why” branched out to “purpose,” then to “mission,” then to “desire,” then to “love.”

That last topic became all but clear to him the moment Senkyo let go of his previous words to Shiro. Memories of spending time with her, memories of laughing, crying, teasing, excitement, thrill, captivation. And eventually, hatred, betrayal, conflict, desperation, confusion, wonder, and vengeance. So many more memories flashed through his head, making it all too apparent to him, and reinforcing his reasoning.

“I can’t let someone important to me see me like this. Hatred. Betrayal. Vengeance. All of those just look so insignificant when I feel like this. Which is why I’m sorry. I doubted you earlier to the point where you couldn’t bear it anymore. You’re important to me too, Shiro. It took me too long to realize that. That’s why… I regret having you be the first person I met with missing memories…”

Senkyo bowed to Shiro at a 90-degree angle… or at least, that’s what she thought he was doing until he proceeded to go even lower, bending his knees and bringing himself to the ground, entering a prostrating position.

“—I’m so sorry!!”

Shiro was taken aback by the sudden action, taking one step back in shock, and biting her lip to keep a hold of her own emotions.

“…Why are you just…!”

Her eyes narrowed and her brows furrowed, her voice squeaking out of her shaking lips. Rampaging emotions leaking out slowly but surely.

“…So… unfair…!!!”

Every time, whether it was intentional or not.

“…and why…”

It felt like she was being played. Like she was dancing to Senkyo’s mesmerizing tune.

“Why… is Shiro…”

It was the same as how Hira and Leolja deceived them, yet it felt somehow different.

“…such an idiot for following…!”

The word “love” appeared in her head for a moment. If she was spellbound to Senkyo by such a word, it would make for a quick explanation. Was it sibling love or a different kind of love? As much as Shiro wanted to claim it was the former, she couldn’t help but consider the latter.

“Shiro… hates this…! So, so much!!!”

Shiro crouched down to the ground and hid her weeping face. The time passed to the point where neither Shiro nor Senkyo could tell the difference between seconds and minutes. An hour could have passed for all they knew. For a long amount of time, Shiro kept herself curled up in a ball while Senkyo maintained his contact with the ground. Leolja simply watched over them and prevented any hostiles from disturbing their moment. Patiently, until the fires in the area finally subdued, the blinding darkness replaced by the gentle touch of dawn. Then, with a deep, trembling inhale followed by a reluctant exhale, Shiro picked herself up, walked up to Senkyo, and uttered a single message.

“…You have something to do, don’t you? What are you lazing around for?”

Slowly, Senkyo stood up and faced Shiro. The expression on his face was no less serious when she last saw it. No, it might have even strengthened. Shiro bitterly stretched her hand to him, confusing him slightly.

“You have no memories, right? Start memorizing your spells or remember how to use spirit power. You’re useless without them.”

Seeing her stern gaze, he quickly took it without hesitation and silently headed for the sunken nest. Leolja pointed them to the ladder that stretched into the pit by lining up his spiders as if they were walking on a red carpet, refraining from making any rude comments as his thoughtful self.

The group disappeared into the nest. The area returned to silence. And unbeknownst to them, a head that was left in that area to rot suddenly twitched. Unlike how the corpses of beings of Zerid usually disintegrated in a short amount of time. This corpse and the corpse that was recognized as the memory monster had yet to disappear. The head twitched, pumped, and tumbled repeatedly until it grew wings akin to that of a fly. The bodyless head used its newborn wings to enter the sunken nest and preyed on the first living being it encountered.

**384 – Differences Between Real and Fake**

Trekking the quiet cave path was a peculiar group. A boy and girl that refused to part their hands, a small spider that perched itself on the boy’s shoulders, and an entourage of spiders that ranged from sizes big and small, crawling everywhere on the ground and on the orange-lit walls. Anyone who frequented the sunken nest at this time would likely first think that they were lacking sleep. Even more so when they realize that the number of spiders around the two non-arachnids was only the tip of the iceberg. Scouts, a frontline, and a backline. Away from where Senkyo and Shiro stood were spiders that cleared the area of any hostiles before they could even come within eyeshot.

The sunken nest of Iqanlr was marked as an insect-type nest for its arachnid-dominant ecosystem, but that didn’t mean it was devoid of anything else besides spiders.

“…So you’re telling me there are other hostiles in here?”

Senkyo asked as Leolja broke the news to them.

“Yes. I know there was nothing but Iwaiida as enemies back when you took the tests for access level S, but the information about other species should have still been listed in the guidebook. Perhaps Shir knows something about why you didn’t check it?”

“Yeah, we just didn’t have any time to read everything. We put our focus on the enemies that appeared in the test so that we could get more time to read other books. I took a quick look at it but that’s about it.”

“…”

Senkyo’s eyes wandered away from Shiro when he heard her speak like that. After apologizing to her back on the surface, she stopped referring to herself in third person. Just like anyone else, she began using “I” and “me.” One other change that he noticed came even before she broke into tears. It only became apparent to him after hearing Shiro refer to herself as “I,” but now she only referred to him as “You” or just called him out by saying “Hey.” The title “Onii-chan” was long gone. A shiver went down his spine every time he noticed these changes. It felt very wrong despite him not having any memories of her prior to the ones she presented to him. When Shiro first used first-person, Leolja had the same reaction as him as he suddenly held his breath. But then after that, he returned to talking normally but in an understanding tone that irritated him.

Senkyo didn’t know what any of these meant, or at least, the current him didn’t know what these changes signified. He couldn’t help but feel down about it. Shiro was someone important to him, but because of his memory loss, he triggered some kind of change in her that may be irreversible. Thinking that an incompetent version of himself scarred their relationship strangled him with guilt to no end, but there was nothing that could be done. The die had been cast; there was no going back.

He took a deep breath, quelled his emotions, and returned to his mental practice of magic. The only thing worse than damaging a relationship while he wasn’t in his right mind was failing to make up for the mistakes he caused. If he acted distraught now, he would only hinder their progress and trouble everyone, Shiro included. That was something that he never wanted to repeat, so he kept his feelings bottled and returned to practice while listening to Leolja’s lecture.

“Right now, we are at level B. The only noticeable change you may have seen on the upper levels was that there was not a single enemy that appeared on levels E and D. You two may not have suspected anything since I created a guard around us, but that wasn’t because I cleared the pathway. There were simply no enemies that showed themselves. This is because I’ve been making highly evolved Iwaiida come to the surface. To the species living on those levels, it was something akin to having a pride of lions march past their village. Not a single soul would dare expose themselves to the danger of the outside. But, the story is immensely different on the lower levels.”

As he was talking, three of the five cave trappers leading the way detached from their formation and advanced. A second later, a ball-like creature smashed into the wall, making a small depression in it. A closer observation would show that it was actually an armored creature that was curled into a ball. Despite this, the three cave trappers encircled the bug, raised their sharp, heavy legs, and impaled the creature. It struggled and uncurled itself in pain, only to be met with another heavy spike directly through its horned head. The bug never stood a chance as its body ceased moving and died. The two watched this happen without stopping their trek.

“As much as we wanted to replicate the dangers of the sunken nest as it is, we had no ability to control the non-arachnid creatures that dwelled in these depths. In exchange, we made the spiders more difficult to deal with than in the real nest, but it doesn’t excuse the fact that creatures like those are not included in the crawler test. That one you see there that barely managed to escape our frontline only to be met with our group is a species called Etriag. They are beetle-like creatures that only show up in level B and below.”

“There’s more of them, huh? Why weren’t they on levels E and D? I thought all non-arachnids were there.”

Senkyo asked.

“That reasoning would stem from the fact that they dislike natural light. Since those levels are too close to the surface, they placed themselves here on level B. Also, their thick armored shells keep them safe from threats on this level. Though, as you saw, they were no match for the legs of our cave trappers, which is why they don’t go any deeper.”

“But… judging from your tone earlier, that probably isn’t everything, is it?”

He let out a tone of affirmation to Senkyo’s suspicions and explained further.

“Just like us Iwaiida, the other four insect species of this nest: the Etriag, the Eozea, the Hkrwir, and the Nexlers, all have evolutions that make themselves quite troublesome. Normally, it's rare to see many of them since the nest is largely dominated by the Iwaiida. But now that I’ve drafted almost every Iwaiida out of the nest, this is the perfect chance for them to exit their nests and expand their territories. In times like these, you would often find them joining forces just to conquer more land. Sometimes they succeed, but the other Demonic Spiders make sure to keep them from taking anything important to the Iwaiida’s rule. This is also why I have to work extra to keep my peace with them… ahh, I can already see the numbers in my wallet dropping…”

“That sounds rough…”

“Oof, you have my condolences…”

Both Shiro and Senkyo felt the pain from the grimace that was clearly delivered through his voice. For Senkyo, it was his loss of funds for his otaku hobbies. Senkyo didn’t know what it incited in Shiro, which only reminded him of his missing memories, but maybe it was just the universal feeling of loss.

“Well, my troubles aside, Senkyo, how are you faring with your magic and spirit power?”

Leolja switched the conversation to something that made him stiffen up.

“U-Uhmm, go-going good, I think? I mean, I can summon this fireball and cast a mid-tier spell. Look.”

Senkyo opened his hand and a fireball spawned just above his palm. When he threw it to the wall, he proceeded to recite a mid-tier spell.

“O Nature, Amass your power at my word. Create my weapons and impale my adversaries. Needle Storm!”

He chose this magic as it was easy to control and could avoid hitting the spiders that were protecting them. It was good progress for magic seeing as he only had memories to work with. But, the same couldn’t be said for his spirit power.

“I don’t know why, but I can barely make talismans anymore. Before, I could do it in around a second, but now I can’t even do it without focusing for an entire three minutes… I don’t know what I’m doing wrong.”

“Hmm… I would like to be of assistance, but I only have superficial knowledge of the subject. I’m afraid I do not have any advice to give.”

Leolja expressed his incapability. Almost naturally, Senkyo’s eyes turned to Shiro, only to receive a blank stare. He quickly averted his eyes and tried to feign ignorance, only to hear something unexpected.

“Isn’t it just because of your mental? I’m not sure about it since I only use spirit power when communicating through Connect. But from what I’ve seen, the past you always related spirit power with mental strength. I guess that would also mean you have no chance of getting back to your former self without your memories since you didn’t actually experience any of the training you did in the past, but who knows? Maybe something will happen.”

“…”

She gave him some fairly useful advice. Ever since what happened earlier, he felt a constant rift between him and Shiro. She probably hated him, or so he thought… No, maybe that was still the case, but one thing is for certain, and that’s the fact that Shiro is still willing to assist him.

Since he didn’t ask her directly, she shouldn’t have been forced by the familiar pact, which meant that she gave that advice out of her own free will. Even if she hated the Senkyo that was standing right beside her, he was still the Senkyo that she cared about. Once he gets his memories back, then maybe everything will return back to normal. That single thought cheered him up slightly and allowed him to respond to her kindness.

“…Thanks.”

The only thing that could answer his wishes now was the future that he had to carve for himself.

**385 – What Lies Inside The Nest**

*\*Drip… Spsh… Drip… Spsh…\**

What day is it, I wonder? Who knows. Who cares?

*\*Drip… Spsh… Drip… Spsh…\**

Not I. Because I want nothing more than to die. But my natural instincts refuse to let me carry out my will.

*\*Drip… Spsh… Drip… Spsh…\**

No matter. None of it matters. Even as a member of those exiled from the surface, I was still exiled by my own kin. Everything in this dark place wants to take my life. If only any of them was strong enough to take it.

*\*Drip… Spsh… Drip… Spsh…\**

…What am I talking about? I’m getting my wish right this moment. Dripping blood from wounds beyond repair, walking in a puddle of my own blood… How did this happen? The circle of life is the only answer. I went wild, just like I wanted, and found an opponent that was more than I could handle. An Iwaiida; just like me, he was exiled from his nest by his kinsfolk. We were birds of a feather, different from others, and thrown away because of it. I wouldn’t have wanted my life to end in any other way other than by the hand of someone who shared my pain. This was the best end I could think of.

*\*Drip… Spsh… Drip… Spsh… Spsh…\**

But… why is it, I wonder, that I am still walking? Aimlessly, I travel with wet soles, covered in my own blood, walking on a trail that I thought was my own gore. Is that… my reflection? No, but it may as well be.

**…………**

Level A1. Leolja successfully guided Senkyo and Shiro past level B. The color of the walls turned blue and more cave trappers began appearing, not that they were any threat. With a Demonic Spider on their side, Senkyo and Shiro were basically invincible to arachnids. What they had to truly worry about were the non-arachnids that were coming from each corner. Leolja’s guard did their job to repel most of them, but it couldn’t be helped that some would still penetrate their defenses due to their large numbers.

“Krrrssshh!!”

“Kkkkiiiii!!!”

“—Gale Howl!”

“—Needle Storm!”

They were after their lives, but nothing else could have been better target practice. With their slow descent, Senkyo and Shiro took the liberty to use the incoming enemies to sharpen their battle senses. The foes they just fook out were a group of Flight Shades and Scissor Tails. The flight shades were the second stage of evolution of the Nexlrs, the bat race. They were large bats about half the size of the average human and had the ability to temporarily turn into smoke that could pass through obstacles. The scissor tails are also the second stage of the Hkrwir, the centipede race. Just like the bats, they grew larger in size, characterized by their deadly mandibles, the auxiliary legs growing from both sides of their head that could attack or defend, and the large poison-tipped scissors that curled above them like a scorpion’s tail.

Shiro pushed the flight shades into the wall using needle storm while Senkyo took out the scissor tails using a direct hit from Gale Howl, closing out any gaps that the flight shades could squeeze through all the while.

“Kii!!”

“O Wind, return to the origin, summon the fresh breeze. Cleanse that which dirties your sacred ground and banish the scum that tarnishes it. Lustrate Current!”

“O Earth, speak once more and deliver your will. Heaven or hell; pass upon your judgment on the mortals before you. Rise: Rumbling Land!”

With only the flight shades to deal with, Shiro used Lustrate Current, threatening to “cleanse” them from the air. They had to return to their solid forms, but Senkyo followed up Shiro’s move perfectly, making the ground below the bats abruptly rise, crushing their newly formed bodies.

“Well done. That was all of them.”

Leolja gave the two a word of praise. In all honesty, Senkyo couldn’t help but take that as sarcasm, even if that wasn’t his intention. Senkyo saw from Shiro’s memories just how much weaker he was compared to his previous self. The him that lived in the past could control both magic and spirit power, to add to that, even if it was a fluke, he was able to use creation magic at some point. “The ultimate being,” Shiro once called him. Seeing as he could use nothing more than magic, he couldn’t help but be ashamed.

For the first time in his life, or at least from what he remembered experiencing, he was using magic that could only be seen through fiction. He was fighting monsters and traveling through another world to find the love of his life. All of it sounded so fake despite knowing they were real. He thought he’d be jumping for joy, but nothing in his heart resonated with his actions. There was only one thing he could clearly think of, and that was reviving his memories. For his sake, for Shiro’s sake, and for everyone else’s sake.

“…”

Shiro stared fiercely at the scissor tail corpses. It might look like she was losing her mind from an outsider’s perspective, but Senkyo knew that she was trying to reenact the chantless magic that she performed while she was under his orders. She believed that she should also be capable of doing so even without being influenced by orders. That was because she was connected to him by a familiar pact.

His past self also thought it was some kind of pledge to subservience, but it was actually a pact between equals. If she always needed Senkyo’s orders to use chantless casting, then they would never be equal. She also theorized that the familiar pact was the one letting them share memories even while she was manifested in the real world. If that was still working, then maybe chantless casting would work too, or at least that’s what she thought but had yet to succeed. Bitterly, she took her eyes off the scissor tails and continued down the path.

“You all are so tense. Please calm yourselves.”

Even Leolja couldn’t help but comment on the current atmosphere. It may seem like Shiro and Senkyo were frustrated with each other, but the actual situation was closer to the opposite. They seemed to be irritated with themselves, vexed by their own weakness. There may not be any problems with seeking to become better, but anger didn’t fit this situation.

“Both of you, take a deep breath and look around you. What do you see?”

“?”

The two of them seemed to be confused but did as he asked either way.

“I don’t get it. There’s nothing there just rocks, walls, and tunnels.”

“Yeah, other than that, it looks like some things here were made by magic.”

“Exactly.”

The phantom threader Leolja was talking through pointed its legs at one of the tunnels Shiro pointed out. It was clearly created using magic. There were shards of ice and piles of sand in the opening, suggesting that some kind of battle happened that involved the use of the ice and earth elements. Since they just arrived, it was clearly not their doing. There were other similar places everywhere around them, making it clear that this became a battleground at some point.

“These are damages to the environment made by crawlers that trekked this nest since yesterday. When a fight occurs, especially when even just one side is desperate, larger and more destructive magic gets used. It was already written in the guidebook, but it highly discourages any flashy moves like that. What we see around us right now is normally fine, but that is because of the crawlers that are commissioned every night to fix the cave structure. Because of the chaos last night, neither Haeqras nor the crawlers had the leeway to maintain this routine, leaving it unrepaired.”

“Hmm… so we should be careful of possible cave-ins or things like that?”

Senkyo asked to confirm.

“That, too. But a little cave-in is the least of your worries. You see, Iqanlr’s sunken nest has a structure called ‘The Mainstay.’ It is somewhat like a pillar to the entire nest. This is because there is a large expanse of space that ranges from level A2 to level S. We call that place ‘The Heart,’ and from there, you can clearly see the Mainstay’s structure. It may sound like nothing bad will happen as long as the mainstay remains unharmed, but the many small skirmishes on the upper levels weaken its hold, especially if people hollow out the mainstay.”

“What? Why would anyone do that?”

“It is not on purpose. Unlike the artificial caves in Haeqras, the paths in actual nests are hard to differentiate from artificial paths made by humans or the races that live here. Almost no one can tell which portion is the mainstay on levels above A2 without specialized training. I don’t mean to order you two around, but the enemies you would encounter will most likely be aware of this fact and won’t execute destructive attacks unless they are certain they are not in the mainstay. If you two cannot fight using lighter methods, then I will simply strengthen our defenses, at least until we reach level A2.”

“I see…”

Senkyo stopped to think for a second before he connected with Shiro’s gaze. Her stare was pained but strong; it wasn’t the kind of look that would easily back down. Understanding the message, he gave a light nod and responded to Leolja.

“We got it. We’ll tone it down a bit, so please keep the defenses this way.”

“So be it.”

Leolja accepted his will without resistance. So quick that it made him look like a pushover, but his stern tone told them that he would change plans if the two didn’t take his warning seriously.

“While we’re at it, do you have anything else we should know about?”

Senkyo asked once more for insurance. Leolja took a quick pause to think before replying.

“It shouldn’t be something you need to be worried about since our destination is on level A3. But, in this nest, we have a group called ‘The Three Predators.’ They are usually seen on level S. You can think of them as the three most powerful creatures in this nest. One of them rules over the Eozea and the Etriag, while the other is actually a different race from any of the five main races in the nest, but we categorized them under the Nexlrs since they can fly. Anyway, just don’t enter level S and you will be fine.”

“Wait, didn’t you just say there were three? What’s the third one?”

Shiro cut into the conversation, calling out Leolja’s mistake before Senkyo could.

“Oh… it's a bit embarrassing to say it myself, but the third one is just me.”

Senkyo and Shiro turned to each other as if to confirm that they weren’t just hearing things. Their mutually confused gazes told more than a thousand words. Then, turned to the phantom threader on Senkyo’s shoulder to utter only a single dumbfounded voice.

“…Eh?”

**386 – Encounters of Life and Death**

It seems like I am not alone.

“…Haaaaah… fuuuu….”

In front of me was an outsider, someone not from this nest; a surface dweller. From what I can tell, they are female, and just like me, she was on the brink of death. The trail of blood I was walking on wasn’t mine, it was hers. It should have been obvious to an outsider, but you wouldn’t care much about your surroundings when you’re at death’s door.

“…Who’s there?”

In complete contrast to her critical state, the woman calmly called out to me. There was no panic in her eyes She was simply blank, like an empty shell. I approach her but she refuses to direct her gaze at me… No, that’s not quite right. She just couldn’t take her gaze away from the opening above her. Light peers down from the hole, placing her in a spotlight as if heaven was calling for her soul. I’ve never seen anything like it. Well, it's not that difficult to impress me. This is the first time I’ve ever seen natural light, after all. My kin despises it, but it just seems calming to me.

“Krrrrrtt…”

I try to respond the best I can, but I’m not capable of speaking.

“…Are you going to kill me?”

“…Kkkkrrraaatt!!”

Without hesitation, I sink my teeth into the woman’s arm. I wonder if she was expecting mercy from me? Even in this state, I cannot detach myself from old habits.

“Hm…”

For the first time, the woman turned to me. Leisurely angling her head downward as if I wasn’t chomping her arm off. More blood spilled from her body but strangely, I could feel no resistance. She made no attempts to shake me off.

“…fufu, looks like I’m not the only one in bad shape… You can’t even bite off the arm of a dying person… what happened to you down here?”

Such a strange look in her eyes. I don’t know how to describe it. All I know is that there was no malice, no bloodlust, an expression you would never find in these depths. She stretched out her other hand and brought it close to my head. Instinctively, I let go of her arm and bit her hand before it could touch me.

“…You’re feisty one… aren’t you…? A—uugg…”

Her soft voice suddenly turned hoarse. Even I was surprised by it, not that it stopped me from trying to rip her hand off.

“…aahh, aha… ha… how awful… I’m… losing my voice… I… wanted to talk… some more…”

The woman took a deep breath as she turned to the blue sky, her glossy eyes reflecting the light from above.

“…hey…”

Suddenly, her hand balled up and tightened, grabbing hold of my snout and sinking her hand deeper into my teeth. Her unexpected move made me panic and I tried to break free. But then, her hand turned red and a voice echoed in my head.

*“\*What do you do here?\*”*

*“\*W-What!? What are you doing!?\*”*

I didn’t know what was happening, but I’m certain it was her voice that invaded my head. She was basically admitting to it with that smile on her face.

*“\*G-Get your hands off me!\*”*

*“\*Why? You were the one that bit me first.\*”*

*“\*Grraahh!!\*”*

Instead of fighting it, I clamped my jaw tighter into her hand, seeking to bite it off. But unlike before, my teeth couldn’t penetrate her skin anymore.

*“\*Fufu, I’m afraid that’s not going to work anymore.\*”*

*“\*Gnnraaahh!! Rraaghh!!\*”*

**…………**

Level A2. Senkyo’s group was lucky they didn’t come across the Flame Lamia of A1, allowing for a smooth descent to the lower level. They were the second evolution stage of the Eozea. Large lizards characterized by their large body, blue scales, and power to breathe and cover their body in flames.

Setting them aside, what they needed to keep their attention on was the threat in front of them. A large group of flight shades and earth shifters. An attack from both of these at the same was known to be an elusive combination. As Senkyo and Shiro knew, flight shades could turn to smoke to pass through obstacles. The Earth Shifters possessed a similar skill. They were the third evolution stage of the Hkrwir. Compared to the scissor tail, these creatures gained a longer and more flexible body while maintaining the lethality of their previous stage. In addition to that, they had the ability to dig through the walls like a worm in the dirt. With the threat of deadly smoke and killer centipedes that could jump out of nowhere, it was annoying to deal with, especially if they were caught by surprise.

Thankfully, Leolja warned them in advance and Senkyo learned how to use Detect, allowing him to keep track of any enemies in the walls or in the air. The moment they found out that a group of flight shades and earth shifters were approaching, they already thought of a perfect counter. The spiders around Senkyo disappeared into the ground along with the cave trappers except for the phantom threader that was on Senkyo’s shoulder.

Shiro placed herself right beside Senkyo and kept a tight grip on his arm. Meanwhile, the phantom threader sought refuge inside Senkyo’s cloak. They kept walking until the hostiles got close to them. Once they did, Senkyo uttered the name of the spell he chanted earlier in advance, immediately casting it.

“—Raging Tempest!”

The wind in the area picked up violently, consuming the area in a hurricane. The flight shades were forced to return to their physical bodies, only to be greeted by a spike of ice from Shiro. Then, the ice exploded into multiple shards, hitting any earth shifters that attempted to attack them, filling the air with a cold breeze and frost shrapnel. As for the earth shifters that attempted to attack directly below where Senkyo was standing, they were intercepted by cave trappers waiting for their appearance.

This attack and defense pattern occurred more than Leolja expected. No, it was more accurate to say that this was the only attack pattern that their group ever encountered in level A2. On this level, there should be two more enemies that appear.

One of them is the Screech Prowler, the second evolutionary stage of the Etriag. They can make a piercing cry to confuse enemies and pounce from the shadows using their ability to blend with the environment. This creature was particularly dangerous in groups since it could also hide them. They are agile creatures that mainly ambush their prey like cave trappers. The other creature is the Twin Lizard, the third evolutionary stage of the Eozea. They are characterized by their twin heads that can breathe both fire and frost. Just like the flame lamina, its earlier evolutionary stage, it can also coat its scales in fire, and additionally, ice.

Leolja didn’t understand why the Eozea and Etriag races never appeared before them ever since entering the A-levels despite the nest being almost empty of its Iwaiida population. For a while, he was mumbling to himself while the other two dealt with the enemies as they always have. Then, something changes as they arrive halfway through level A2.

“…I wonder if something happened with the Hybrid Lord.”

The spider mused aloud, taking hold of Senkyo and Shiro’s attention.

“Hybrid Lord? Who’s that?”

Senkyo questioned him the second that name entered his ears.

“He is a member of one of the Predators I mentioned earlier. Out of the three, he would be the one that rules over the Eozea and Etriag. I thought I killed him once but then I encountered him again. He was a completely different being compared to the first time I saw him, to the point where I didn’t even recognize him. The only reason I knew was because he told me.”

“Does the word ‘kill’ have no weight in this place at all? It sounds to me like you were reminiscing about a friendly rivalry you had with this person. Doesn’t he hold a grudge?”

Shiro couldn’t help but retort after hearing Leolja’s casual tone as he talked about life and death. He understood where she came from, but he knew all about how different the nest was compared to the surface.

“If everyone in this place held a grudge, they would either kill their target and get killed themselves or simply just die trying. This applies to the Iwaiida especially since my race lives upon cannibalism. No one in this place has the luxury of a grudge. All of them are too busy thinking about how to survive. If not, then they are nothing more than mindless fools who will die once their instincts lead them down the wrong path. The Hybrid Lord wasn’t like that, which I assume is the reason he got to where he is now. I wouldn’t say we’re friends, but at the very least, we are not hostile to each other. It isn’t like this relationship stops our kin from fighting, though.”

“Hmm…Theoretically, wouldn’t you two be able to take over the whole nest if you two joined forces? Oh, wait…”

Senkyo shared his thoughts. He wasn’t really thinking and just spoke his mind. He only thought of the possibility that this subject wasn’t something he should touch on when it was already too late. But, despite his worries, Leolja’s straight answer showed that he couldn’t care less.

“No. I have no desire to rule over anything, and I assume it’s the same for the Hybrid Lord. Besides, unlike me, he cannot forcefully control the Eozea and the Etriag. Those who follow him only do so out of feelings of either fear or respect. Both might be another option but nothing more than that. ”

“…I see… That was…… a careless—”

“—Nemian Grace!”

“!?”

Abruptly, out of nowhere. Shiro cut off Senkyo’s weakening voice with a spell exclusive to her race. Leolja, Senkyo, and even the caster herself were confused by the sudden development. Then, from the shadows came a group of beetles, lizards, bats, centipedes, and even spiders. In the midst of the chaos, a single creature stood out from the rest.

Appearing from a large opening, at the end of the tunnel was a large monster with fly, bat, centipede, spider, beetle, and lizard-like attributes. Its body was that of a large fly, supported by large spider legs, extending at its behind, forming a tail that parted two ways like a pair of scissors. At the front, its body formed a torso that had three pairs of arms. The two sets closest to its body were larger than the average human arm while the last pair closest to its chest was colossal. Sprouting from its back were a pair of bat wings that had long, deadly spider legs at their thumbs that could fold and expand at will. Its eyeless head with beetle-like horns on both sides stared at Senkyo as if peering into his soul. Then, it opened its savage mouth, hissing aggressively at him as the signal for the hostiles to attack at once.

**387 – Unending Suffering**

When Senkyo and Shiro first arrived on level A2, Leolja immediately told them their destination. They needed to get to the Heart. Instead of navigating through the A2’s many twists and turns, they could take a quick shortcut if they climbed down through the Heart. Because of the massive open space that it provided, they could skip a level and shorten the time needed for them to arrive at Level A3.

In addition to this, the Heart was somewhat of a neutral ground amongst the locals of the sunken nest. They could still kill each other, but they would never make any destructive attacks, especially if they were near the Mainstay. Some would even choose to ignore others. This is because those who come to the Heart often seek rest as it comes with an underground waterfall as a source of hydration. The stream extends to other locations, but the Heart is the only place where most residents of the nest quell their bloodlust. Strategically speaking, this was the most optimal path for Senkyo’s group to take.

But then, once Shiro uttered a familiar cast, that plan quickly broke into pieces. Why? Because Senkyo gave her an order before lending him part of his trust—“If anything happens that makes me act beyond my will, save me. This is an order.” Upon realizing that Shiro never intended to cast Nemian Grace, Senkyo and Shiro came to the same conclusion—danger… No, it wasn’t anything that light. It was a tragedy.

The flame laminas and twin lizards of the Eozea. The scissor tails and earth shifters of the Hkrwir. The flight shades of the Nexlrs. The bomb jockeys, phantom threaders, cave trappers, and magic arms of the Iwaiida. The screech prowlers of the Etriag that worked in tandem with the phantom threaders to hide the entire hostile group from detection. Every single one of them moved to attack Senkyo’s group.

Without even having to be said, they were quickly overwhelmed. Leolja’s guard was nothing in comparison to the enemy’s fighting force. Even he was confused. Not only were they able to sneak past his tight detection network, but they also took control of the Iwaiida that he was supposed to rule over. His instincts screamed at him to flee rather than fight back, which he made clear to Senkyo and Shiro.

The first few seconds of the clash were Leolja sacrificing his entire guard to buy time for their escape. They mounted a cave trapper to make a quick exit and Shiro returned to Senkyo’s body to lighten their load and run faster. With Senkyo’s Gale Howl and the assistance of Leolja’s pawns, they were able to create an opening, only to be disrupted by earth shifters a few seconds later. The massive centipede tackled the cave trapper, wrapped around it, and constricted it to death. With their mount taken down, they were forced to continue on foot.

All of them knew just how unrealistic it was to escape this situation. At this point, Leolja swallowed his frustrations and resorted to some kind of plan that even he had reserves of using. But with that, all he asked of them was to buy time.

Anything.

Do anything just to survive. It didn’t matter what.

As the massive group of hostiles closed in, Senkyo used Rumbling Land to make the ground below him cave in. He knew it was ill-advised to use such destructive tactics, but he had no way of escaping quickly to the surface. So, with the help of gravity, he opted to go down. The flight shades and earth shifters gave chase, but Shiro was ready to greet them with Raging Tempest. It completely countered the flight shades, but the earth shifters were more resilient than them.

Even in this situation, Shiro was still unable to use chantless casting. Senkyo should have been able to, but his mind was already in fight or flight mode. He wasn’t able to keep up rational thought and use his double-casting arsenal. Even in times when Shiro urged him to, the chants of the spells popped from his mind like a bubble.

Since he was busy using Rumbling Land, he had to draw his katana for the first time in battle. Shiro was protecting him with her barriers, but he needed to kill off his pursuers. He had neither skill nor technique. He wasn’t like his past self who had strict training under Ryosei and real battle experience. All he could do was swing his sword around in hopes of repelling the threat. He succeeded in eliminating a few hostiles, but his poor grip allowed an opening for the earth shifters to disarm him. With his descent faster than the sword’s, he was never able to retrieve it as he delved deeper into the abyss.

The rest of his descent was a battle of attrition between the earth shifters and Shiro’s barriers. She was experienced in this type of field, so Shiro had no worries about her defenses breaking. More importantly, she was nervous about where they would end up. If they went too deep, they might find one of the Predators that Leolja spoke of. Then, as if to answer her worries, the walls finally opened up and saw water.

Shiro quickly activated the Zephyr she had prepared earlier, breaking the force of their fall and lightly placing them on the ground. They were at the Heart. It was obvious from the generous amount of open space and the wide stream of water that they landed on. But, none of it meant they were safe. In fact, this only exposed them to more dangers. With this much space, the hostiles that they saw earlier would have an easier time surrounding them and attacking them from all sides.

Just as they feared, the massive horde of enemies was already within eyeshot. The best move here was to use Rumbling Land again to escape deeper, even if it meant ending up on level S or maybe even past it, but the water prevented them from doing that; the tunnel would flood. Theoretically speaking, they could still pull it off as long as they used earth magic to seal the opening immediately, but then it would end up being a battle between Shiro and the earth shifters. Would she be able to continuously seal the tunnel against constant pressure from rock-breaking centipedes? It would definitely be a gamble, but better than having to face an entire army.

Perhaps realizing what they were about to do, a group of phantom threaders that were riding flight shades shot their webs at him in an attempt to bind him down. It restricted Senkyo’s movements a bit, but nothing too disruptive. Since the flight shades zoomed in first, the main horde still hadn’t arrived. So long as he broke out of the webs and used Rumbling Land again before they reached them, they should still be able to escape. But, the ominous shadow that appeared above him destroyed any chance of that.

Aside from the flight shades and earth shifters, there was one more enemy that could chase them down in a massive pit. It was the unknown monster that was basically an amalgamation of every race that lived in Iqanlr’s sunken nest. Towering over his pathetic figure, the monster opened its bat wings and extended the spider legs that protruded from their thumbs. It flapped its wings downward, bringing down the two spider legs that pointed at him. Shiro summoned numerous barriers to intercept the attack. Then, at that moment—

“Eh…?”

“H… Huh…? T… This… this is… Th-THIS CAN’T!! NO!! NOOOOO!!!”

In the small timeframe between the monster’s legs making contact with Senkyo’s defenses, a streak of light shot out from his chest, solidifying right where he stood and pushing him away from that very spot. He saw it happen as if time had slowed down. Shiro pushed him away. But why? She summoned a thick amount of barriers that should have been able to withstand the force of the monster’s attack. Even if the barriers weren’t enough, how could she be certain of that until it hit? How… How? There was only one answer to that question, and Shiro’s puzzled expression led him to realize this.

There was once a time when Senkyo doubted Shiro’s credibility. He lost his memories, so he wasn’t to blame. The orders for his safety were as follows:

*“\*Swear your allegiance to me, never betray me, and always act in my favor.\*”*

*“\*If anything happens that makes me act beyond my will, save me.\*”*

*“\*—If anything threatens my life, protect me.\*”*

“Arghh…! Aahh!! ….aaaa—……—aaahhhh!!!”

It was none other than his order that caused this. Even though he would have gladly taken the hit just to protect someone important to him, in the end, it was his own actions that endangered his loved ones.

Shiro’s figure stood in front of him, two deadly spikes impaling her body from her stomach and her chest, exiting cleanly through her backside. Blood trailed down the cold, hard spikes into the flowing river that knew nothing but to keep moving.

This… was a familiar sight. This exact situation happened once before. Instead of Shiro, it was Yuu, the girl he loved. Or at least that’s what Shiro’s memories suggest. And, just like now, because of his incompetence, he forced her to take a fatal hit to save his pathetic life.

“Why…? Does history repeat itself…?”

He should have known. Was it because he lost his memories? But even so, he saw from Shiro’s memories what had happened. What… what could he have done to prevent this? In the end, he couldn’t point the cause to anything else other than his own incompetence. He may not have memories now, but if only he didn’t have his memories taken from him in the first place, then none of this would have ever happened. His relationship with Shiro wouldn’t have been on the verge of collapsing. She would not be in the state she was now. There were so many things that could have gone better… if it weren’t for his incompetence.

Then, as if everything that happened wasn’t enough, a familiar blade fell from the sky. It was the one he failed to keep a hold of earlier. It finally caught up to them… caught up to what? The perfect opportunity to rub salt on the wound as the blade spun around, perfectly aligning itself to Shiro’s head.

“…ha… haha…”

Shiro was nailed into the ground at three points. One on her stomach, one on her chest, and the final one on her skull. What more was needed to kill a person?

“—AHA, AAAAAHHAAAAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!!”

**388 – Dwelling at My Worst**

“Kill me…”

…

“Kill me…”

Who… is talking?

“Kill me…”

Did it matter who it was? I didn’t feel like doing anything anymore. Not after… Shiro…

“Kill me…”

…Trust me, I feel the same way. Everything I do just messes everything up. Nothing can go well. How did I even get here? I just want to go back home. Back there, all I needed to keep worrying about was my own hobbies. Keeping up with the latest anime, grinding games, reading manga or light novels…

Back then, I always thought how great it would be to get caught in some kind of fantasy setting… why? …For me, the answer was obvious. Even with all of the entertainment in the world, I still felt like something was missing. I heard there were people like me who would love nothing more than to spend their whole lives doing nothing but lazing around and doing things at their own leisure. For better or for worse, I wasn’t quite like that.

I wonder how I reacted when I first discovered this insane fictional world? Apparently, Shiro never saw that. Her memories of me getting caught in this world only went as far back as when I was being fried alive by high-voltage electricity from some strange-looking kid. I don’t know all the details since she only showed me a fragment of that time, but I wonder why I kept moving?

Was I really the type of person to run head-first into death? If you ask me, I just want to leave everything and go home… This is… so strange… It’s like the current me and my past self were two completely different people. He’s the prodigy, and I’m the failure. What was so different between us? What kind of experiences did I have that made me willingly throw away the peace that I once had?

What, indeed…

…Haha, that’s funny… I hate seeing people I know die in front of my face, but… Now that I voiced out my thoughts, why do I feel like I don’t want to go back? Was being a pathetic hindrance better than that? No, not at all. I’m sick of it, really…

…I’m… so strange… Even though I was suddenly thrown into this crazy situation, I still played along. My first thought was to go back home… but why does that feel like it was in such a distant past now? I want my memories back… I want to know why I’m here… I can’t just leave everything as it is… I can’t…

“Kill me…”

It’s… that voice again.

For the first time, perhaps out of curiosity, I picked up my slack and turned to my side, rolling my body over the void-like floor. Barely any light enters my eyes and the only thing I see is a girl with shackles on all four limbs and a bone-like dagger piercing her chest.

“…You’re… Hisho… Yuu…”

“Kill me…”

The person who kept calling for her end in a low voice was none other than the girl I often saw in Shiro’s memories… Am I… already too late to save her? I don’t know. I don’t know what’s happening… I don’t want to go back to my old life, but I don’t want to live like this either…! What do I… Just, what do I do? What am I supposed to do??

**…………**

“Yo, Kitty. It's been a while, huh?”

“Wh-What!?”

The void echoed. In a blank world where everything else ceased to exist, Shiro was there, sprawled on the floor. Her head was dizzy and could barely tell left from right, and it didn’t help that there was complete nothingness around her. But, a single familiar voice called her to attention, making her voice spike in surprise.

“That was one hell of a time out there, huh? Your spirit almost perished and Master almost died. Just so you know, the only reason you’re still alive is because of Master’s order. ‘If anything happens that makes me act beyond my will, save me.’ I guess it reacted when Master lost control of his body. No wonder you were sent to me. That was a close call just now. If you took any longer to return to Master’s body after your physical form died, you might have actually kicked the bucket. Man, I was worried I had to step out again.”

The Divine Soul of Spirits. The divine soul that resided in Senkyo’s body. It was said that this divine soul already appeared in the past and was obliterated, but here he was, talking to Shiro as Senkyo’s divine soul.

“U-Uhmm, this is the dream world… right? Wait, did you release yourself?”

“You got it… but that’s not all.”

“Huh?”

Shiro tilted her head in confusion as she searched the empty space.

“Kitty, do you know what’s happening right now?”

“…”

Shiro swallowed her saliva as she shook her head from side to side. The weight in the Soul’s voice made her hold her tongue. It wasn’t even expecting her to know the answer to that question, so the Soul immediately explained.

“Just now… Master used a portion of my power.”

“!?”

She couldn’t hide her shock from his claim. For the first time after having his memories sealed by his father, Senkyo drew power from his divine soul. From someone who had knowledge of how the divine souls operated, Senkyo, who was already recognized as a worthy holder of his divine soul, had all the power to use it as he pleased. However, that was only true with normal Angels that hold a divine soul. Yukou Senkyo was a different kind of Angel.

People often say that an Angel needs to be recognized by the divine soul first, but since Senkyo’s memories were sealed, his first obstacle was finding out that he possessed a divine soul in the first place. It was an abnormal relationship, especially since Senkyo had no fault in remaining ignorant of this fact. After all, his divine soul in particular could mold his memories the way it wanted. His father’s 8 seals on him would never be so defined if it weren’t for the help of this Soul. In actuality, as long as Senkyo had this divine soul, he was completely immune to all kinds of memory manipulation or mind control. Despite this, he still ended up becoming a victim of it.

A simple explanation for why he lost his memories was because the Soul refused to do anything about it. But, Shiro wasn’t expecting any help from the Soul in the first place. Everything that Senkyo’s father was trying to do for Senkyo would have been all for naught if they had done anything unnecessary. This is also why she adamantly refused to talk about its existence. But now, the Soul itself reported that his power was used. How could this be? The confused expression on her face reflected this question like a mirror.

**389 – The End of A Happy Dream**

“You remember what that spider talked about, right? He wanted you two to buy time. And from the looks of it, you two stalled just enough for him to make it. The problem lies in what he brought back. The moment your physical form died, even I knew I had to step up to make sure none of you actually perished, so I released myself. Then, that’s when it happened.”

*“\*—AHA, AAAAAHHAAAAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!!\*”*

The black void suddenly brightened, changing everything around them, and turning the environment to the same one Shiro saw just a few minutes ago—The Heart. This was where she and Senkyo were cornered by the enemies. In the middle of the river was a scene she was familiar with. The only thing different was the change in perspective. Just now, she had been impaled by the sword that Senkyo dropped. Maniacal laughter exploded from his mouth, insanity filling the air, and finally, bombarding the colossal monster with a myriad of elements. Water to surround it, ice to encase it, earth to impale it, lightning to confuse it, light to blind it, dark to ground it, control to weaken it, fire and wind to bombard its insides, all of these in a matter of moments.

“The ‘help’ that the spider talked about was making Master rampage. If it wasn’t clear enough who caused it, then it was the Scientist. I don’t know if they already had it prepared or pushed the schedule because of the situation, but they undoubtedly influenced Master’s mental state. The way they did this was through Master’s blood. Technically speaking, Master’s blood can never truly be severed from his body. Those who have it are marked with his power, and I’m sure you remember that after all the pranks he pulled with it as a kid.”

Shiro’s childhood memories of Senkyo controlling her body came to mind, bending the space around them and sending her to the place of her memories. His father scolded him for that, saying that it was a bad practice of his powers, especially since he only followed his whims without any thought of possible consequences.

“What this Scientist person did was reverse the connection. Since Master wasn’t aware of his blood connections, this person was able to take advantage of his lack of authority and manipulated his mind. This rampaging state is all unconscious, meaning that Master probably won’t remember anything that’s happening, but he still drew power from me nonetheless. I don’t know if he’ll still be able to do this in the future. Whether or not this change was good for us all depends on how he uses it from now on.”

Shiro understood the implications of the Soul’s words. Which is why she couldn’t get the expression of anxiety off her face.

“…But, if he… if… Senkyo can only use it while he’s unconscious, it would be the same as saying he has no control over it… Am I right?”

Shiro asked, to which the Soul confirmed with a resounding “Yes.”

“That’s why I’m here to confirm one thing: Shiro, what are you to Master?”

“What do you…”

The Soul called out to her by name, making Shiro realize that this wasn’t like one of the jokes he used to pull in the past.

“I’ll make this easy for you to understand.”

The space around Shiro warped and formed a different shape once more. In a sealed cave, she faced a path that forked three ways. On the left path, she saw her memories with Senkyo as she was a child, frolicking in the fields and playing until the day came to an end. On the right path, she saw the time she spent with him in Elqa, holding each other in their arms and sleeping peacefully together, a relationship that most people would define as lovers. On the path in front of her, she saw the memory of when she successfully fought against Senkyo in his mind-controlled state and the fly monster that manipulated him. She never felt power any greater than that time.

“I’ll take this time to rant since I can’t hold it back anymore; WHAT. ARE. YOU. DOING!? Do you have any idea how bad that situation was!? Both of you were on the brink of death and the only thing that could save you two without my interference was a rampage switch from some stranger!? Even without Master’s memories, all of you could have done better! You, especially!”

Shiro kept silent and gripped her chest. For some reason, she felt like she knew where this spiel was going.

“None of you seem to realize, but the two of you are holding each other back. This was true before and after Master was mind-controlled. The only time the two of you finally helped each other was when Master was BEING controlled! Do you have any idea how ironic that sounds? Only when he finally began treating you like a tool did you empower each other! A familiar pact is supposed to become stronger when you treat each other as PARTNERS, but that was the complete opposite! None of you treat the other on the same level, that’s the only explanation.”

“…I know… I know…!”

“Oh, I’m sure you do! After all, the both of you would have become even more powerful if you just didn’t act like a baby in front of Master! Had you let him treat you as a stranger, as a tool, then he would have actually used you to get out of that situation! You realized, didn’t you!? The fact that Master didn’t give you a single order when you were escaping! He tried to solve everything by himself, just like his previous self! If you had stayed quiet about your relationship with him, I’m sure your physical body wouldn’t have died and you could have survived without needing to send Master into a rampage! Even if Master made a complete fool of himself, you were no better! You aren’t the same person you were before! You’re half-spirit now because of the familiar pact! That’s why you’re still alive right now, isn’t it!? You CHOSE this path, so face reality already!”

“…!”

“Greed consumed you both. There’s no way any of you can live in this world without sacrificing anything. You can’t have it all. If you truly realize this, then choose again, right here, right now! A little sister, a lover, or a familiar. Shiro, what are you to Master!?”

Tears had long begun streaming down Shiro’s cheeks, but she stayed strong to stifle her cries while the divine soul was speaking. She had no words to shoot back at it. The Soul was right; that’s all it was. Even if unconsciously, she realized this long ago but refused to acknowledge it. She just wanted to spend most of her time with Senkyo. Was that so wrong? As his valuable familiar, the answer to that question was a cold, hard “Yes.”

She prioritized a relationship that didn’t benefit their pact and continued to do so in order to satisfy her own desires. The worst part was the fact that she had all of the power to break this relationship. With Senkyo’s first order that gave her free will, she could have stopped this unhealthy master-familiar relationship if she wanted. But, she wanted more than just being a familiar. And because of this, everything ended up where it did.

Deep, trembling breaths circulated from Shiro’s mouth in an attempt to blow out the fire of raging emotions inside her. She must not fall here. She must not break here. She must make a choice. Ever since being released from her seal, the bare minimum conditions that she set for herself before chasing after a deeper relationship with Senkyo were these three. So that once the moment came when she had to finally give up, in preparation for the inevitable moment where she had to make a sacrifice to fulfill her role, she would not disgrace herself anymore. The choice was already made in her head and her breathing calmed down to a more stable state. But, she couldn’t help but throw her frustrations at the Soul.

“…what do you mean… a choice? The only thing I see… is some bastard coercing me out of my free will…”

“Does it feel familiar? I’m only learning from our beloved Master.”

“…ahh, sure, I get it already… I knew it too, long ago. That there was never any other option for me other than being the familiar… I get it already…”

Shiro wiped the tears off her face, took one last deep breath, and steeled herself to face the path in front of her. She took one step forward, immediately followed by another.

“I knew… and… I don’t regret doing any of what happened… Even after everything… I will never forget that… I…”

Bright light consumed her body as her foot entered the center path.

“…was happy.”

**390 – Bond Forged From Trials**

*“\*Wow… so you’re a hybrid of an Eozea and an Etriag, huh? How did that happen?\*”*

*“\*How should I know? I was alone the moment I was born from my shell.\*”*

How did I get here? No matter how much I struggled, I could never get my mouth released from the woman’s hands. It has been so long that I’m surprised I’m still alive… No, I simply cannot die anymore. This woman has been healing my wounds the whole time. I don’t know how, but I’ve been spared from dying yet again… why couldn’t it just have ended here?

The moment I realized that resistance was futile, I had nothing else to do but answer the woman’s questions. I told her about this nest and how my life has been until this day. It wasn’t much of an interrogation than it was small talk. A strange woman, she is. Even now, I sense no malice; just someone who wants to chat. This behavior would get you killed in these depths, but I can sense that this woman isn’t as weak as she seems.

*“\*I have told you just about everything now. Could you let me go already? Because of you, my regenerative cells are going to heal me back to normal. After I finally found my chance to die… a person like you got in my way.\*”*

*“\*Die? Why do you want to die?\*”*

*“\*Haven’t you been listening? I am a crossbreed. There is nothing in this place for me except pain and suffering. The longer I live, the worse it is. To me, there is no greater bliss than to cut the root of my problems—my life.\*”*

Every second I spent in this place was excruciating. The thought of escaping these depths I call my grave has always been on my mind, but there is no other exit than the surface. I know nothing of that land other than the fact that our kind was exiled from it and that the borders of that place are more vast than any of our walls. A source of endless oppressors; that is how I see the surface and those who invade our nest.

And this woman… should have been the same. But…

*“\*Then, why don’t you just kill yourself?\*”*

*“\*I am certain you already know the answer to this question. After all, one of the organs you repaired in my body was the one that facilitated my rapid regeneration. My last foe was skilled enough to realize that and targeted it. But now, their great efforts were left in vain because of you.\*”*

*“\*That doesn’t sound like much of a problem. If you really wanted to die, then why didn’t you just stay still for someone to destroy that organ?\*”*

*“\*You ignorant fool! If it were that easy then this place wouldn’t be so dangerous! Those on the lower side of their race’s evolution ladder have one trait in common, and that is our innate thirst for violence. Everyone is more compelled to fight than they are to remain peaceful and negotiate. By the time any of us evolve enough to control our urges, they become too ingrained in our personality to let go! That’s just how we are! And just like that instinct for violence, I have an urge to protect myself from any danger that threatens me. As much as I want to stand still and turn myself into food for those beasts, it always stops me! A disgusting feeling that crushes my insides when I remain unmoving. A painful pang that makes me want to claw everyone for even trying to make an attempt at my life. If it weren’t for this protective instinct of mine, then I would have long died in this place!\*”*

For the first time in my life, I’ve been able to convey this feeling I’ve been bottling up. Why was it that I was able to say it to this woman and not to anyone else? One of the most obvious reasons is that she didn’t try to kill me the moment our eyes made contact, but I feel that reason wasn’t the primary one… As ridiculous as it sounds, perhaps it was because of how she talked. Something about her made me feel that she was a person that would understand how I felt. Why was that?

*“\*…Really, now? A protective instinct… huh?\*”*

The woman shifts her gaze from mine to the sky above her. She had a soft smile on her face. Her eyes were moist and glistening with what seemed to be tears. None of them dropped before she could wipe them off.

*“\*How nostalgic… You know, I knew someone exactly like you. She was shunned and ostracized by everyone around her including her own family because of an incomprehensible ability that she had. In order for her to become useful, she needed to hurt herself and everyone around her. Friend or foe, she did not discriminate; she couldn’t. She had no idea how to control her power, and because of this, everyone saw her as a liability. After many twists and turns, her time in her hometown ended with her being banished from it. Just like you… she wanted to take her life. But, every time she hurt herself, she became stronger and more resistant. When she tried to end it all with a single strike through the heart or through decapitation, she would inadvertently take the lives of those around her to protect herself. She could not die. That was the cold, hard truth.\*”*

I wasn’t so dense that I wouldn’t realize that the woman was talking about herself. The way she spoke didn’t fit that of someone who was talking about someone else’s misfortune. How was I so certain despite having almost no interactions with other people? That was because I didn’t need it. What I saw in her wasn’t a storyteller, but a mirror that reflected my own anguish.

*“\*Because of her invulnerability, she couldn’t do anything but live her life mechanically. But then, something changed. It all happened so fast that she didn’t even know what brought her to that situation, but she was assimilated into a group called Hfixesi. Apparently, they were needed to perform otherworldly excursions. Having no goal in mind, she reluctantly played along…\*”*

The woman began telling me about her adventures. According to her, the surface didn’t end with the world we call Zerid. Other worlds exist called Earth and the Spirit Realm. In these places, she found many things she never thought of ever existing. She met many people, saw and tested their otherworldly technology, witnessed their varying cultures, caught sight of their glorious sceneries, and many more. The interest and curiosity that she once lost in the past reignited. Along with that was the time she spent with her fellow Hfixesi and the other Ambassadors. She engaged with the representatives from the other two worlds, the Heroes and the Di Manes, and learned much from them.

It was at that moment that she realized that she was no longer alone in her life. The other ambassadors were no stranger than she was and had unique quirks of their own. When she first told them about her ability, they simply brushed it aside as if it wasn’t a problem. Only when she finally used her abilities, did she understand why they gave such a reaction. Her new allies were no pushovers and accepted the pain to empower her. It was so different, much so different than any she had ever seen. In that place, with that group, she finally felt like she was “alive.”

“\**…So, this is just a hunch of mine, but I don’t think that ‘protective instinct’ of yours is exclusive to you or anyone else who lives in this nest. Everyone has this protective instinct at least once in their lives, and you still have yours. From my perspective, I can only see it like this: you are afraid to die.\**”

What nonsense. It was the most ridiculous thing I’ve heard in my life. Or at least… that was what I wanted to tell myself, but for some reason, I found it difficult to oppose the woman in front of me, and I knew why. For the first time in my life, I’ve found someone that I understood. Just like me, they lived their life in agony and had the option of suicide taken from them. They had no escape, just like me… For that reason, perhaps because of the stories she kept telling me, I was jealous.

*“\*…Hey, what do you want to do?\*”*

*“\*What?\*”*

My silence prompted her another question to me. One I couldn’t comprehend immediately.

*“\*I told you many things, haven’t I? Don’t you want to do them too? Personally, I think this is the perfect chance for you. With me here, I can guarantee you the strength to live long enough to experience these things. Just like me, you can go around the world and into other worlds and see what they’re like for yourself. If you…\*”*

The woman abruptly stops herself and pauses for a second before making a light chuckle.

*“\*…No, that’s not quite right… it isn’t you, it’s me that wants you to experience these things. After going through this much pain, the only thing that would be worse is letting it end in pain. As someone who is just like me, I want you to discover what happiness is. Be it in this world or any other, I want to give you the chance to face this cruel reality with a wide smug on your face and laugh at it with all your heart… Little hybrid, why don’t you accept my hand?\*”*

I felt the constriction on my snout loosen. The sudden sense of freedom confused me for a second. Before I realized it, the woman took her hand off my fangs and presented it to me. Her figure as she bathed in soft light and outstretched her blood-stained hand to me was nothing less of majestic. I could no longer hear her voice because I lost contact with her red-skinned hand, but for some reason, its remnants kept resonating in my head. Slowly, I walked up to the woman in order to restore my contact with her, placing my claw gently on her hand.

*“\*…Fufu, I’m so happy… If it's you, I feel like you can reach a level of fulfillment further than I ever did in my lifetime… I will lend you my power, but I want you to promise me two things. It may sound like I’m only trying to use you, but will you still do them?\*”*

*“\*Your wish is my command.\*”*

I declare unhesitatingly. Because I feel like… if it's this person, then… for once in my life, I can give someone my trust.

*“\*My, how reliable, fufu! I… truly am glad to have met you…\*”*

**391 – The Ruined Man**

“…Where… am I…?”

Senkyo’s eyelids flickered as he slowly regained consciousness. He clutched his head to try and ease the headache he was greeted with in his wake. The blur faded in his languid eyes and looked around his surroundings. Currently, he had no clue where he was except for the fact that he was inside a large cavern in Iqanlr’s sunken nest. He tried to recall the last thing he remembered before passing out, only to be reminded of a tragic memory.

“…Shiro…”

He called out her name with his head dropped to the ground. But, as he was expressing his frustration, he noticed something on the floor. They were a pair of solid black spikes. He didn’t know what they were, but they seemed familiar. He crouched on one leg and went for a closer inspection of the items. He scrutinized it for a moment while digging through his memories. Then, something clicked in his head and it all came back to him.

“T-These are… that monster’s horns!”

Looking back, the spikes he found on the ground were similar to the horns of the monster he saw just before he got knocked out. Confusion struck as everything seemed so inconsistent. How did he survive the monster’s attack? How did he end up here? Why did he have the two horns of the colossal monster that appeared in front of them? The questions began racing through his head but with no answers to sate them. Then, a sharp sensation suddenly struck him from behind.

“—AARGHHH!!!”

He screamed in pain as something penetrated his arm from behind, making him drop the horns that he had in hand. He saw the tip of the object that struck him expand its solid, serrated spike as it pushed deeper until it finally severed his arm. He immediately tried to flee as fast as he could while he squeezed the stump on his shoulder in an attempt to stop the blood flow. Unfortunately, everything came crashing down, quite literally, when his panic made him trip over a rock and fall to the ground.

“G—GA, AAHH…!”

With half of his vision consumed by the cave’s terrain, he saw the legs of what seemed to be reptiles come into view. He slowly craned his neck upward, only to find a group of Eozea surrounding him. He recognized them. Two of them were twin lizards and four were flame lamina.

“…K-Kgh… ahhh…!”

Senkyo tried to do his best to keep calm and control his cries and his writhing body. But, the fact that the lizards were circling him like sharks finding a crippled fish in the empty sea wasn’t doing him any favors. It only heightened the mental pressure as trepidation took over.

“Fuu…. Haah… haa… haa…!”

One of the twin lizards closed in, taking in his scent. Then, they revealed their tongues and licked him, savoring the feeling of his soft and tender skin. No matter what Senkyo did, his deep breaths weren’t enough to quell his racing heartbeat. He tried to think of a spell that could get him out of this situation, but nothing came to mind. The only thing that his thoughts could clearly form was this: “I’m going to get eaten.”

“—GGAAAAAAHHH!!!”

As if those very words were conveyed to the six lizards around him, the twin lizard that loomed over his head sunk their teeth into his remaining arm and shoulder. The others followed suit, aiming for a different part of his body. His shoulder, his arm, his hand, the stump that once connected his arm, his chest, his stomach, his legs, and his feet. All of them were nothing but free food in the eyes of these reptiles. Senkyo struggled, but to no avail. There was no way for him to overpower his predators. Tears finally fell from his eyes and his mouth became unable to stop his salivating from all his screaming.

“…haah… haah… haah…”

…The longer the time passed, the worse the pain. The longer the pain, the more his mind broke until he arrived to a point where his screams lulled despite the pain. His eyes barely even blinked as they reddened from the overwhelming amount of tears coming out. His mouth never closed, letting his mouth dry and the drool stain his face. Meanwhile, the lizards dined like kings with Senkyo as the banquet. At this time, both his arms were severed, one of his lower legs gone, while his other leg lost its foot. Even after all of this, there were still bite and claw marks on his body. However, not much of it was visible because of the clothes that blocked it, not that any of that mattered. Right now, he was likely about to die from blood loss.

“What a pathetic end,” he thought as his lifeless eyes stared out into the void. Even in his final moments, he couldn’t do anything to live up to anyone’s expectations. What exactly did he do? He came to this world in order to bring back the person he loved, despite being the one that endangered her in the first place, came to Iqanlr, lost his memories, lost his little sister, and now he was about to lose his life to mere lizards that he knew his past self would have taken down with ease. What exactly did he come in this world to do? He achieved nothing.

The ultimate being? The only person that can use creation magic? The Dual User? The person that can use both magic and spirit power? None of these great titles mattered. Maybe it was true to his past self, but certainly not the present. Take out all the magic and fantasy and you’d have the current Senkyo lying on the ground as half-eaten food for giant lizards. Even if he was in the same body and could do the same things as his previous self, he was not the same person. What is the value of great power if the one who possesses them doesn’t even know how to use them? He’s only as good as a normal person at this point. This is what Senkyo came to realize.

“Krrrrtt!!”

One of the flame lamina finished chewing on his bones and slowly walked up in front of Senkyo. Every footfall from the giant lizard was like the ticking of a clock, counting down his last moments of life. But at this point, none of it mattered. Senkyo… the man named Yukou Senkyo had lost everything. His memories, his family, his lover, and the next one on the chopping block, his life.

Shiro and Yuu came to his mind. Was this what they called his life flashing before his eyes? Even this small phenomenon was a reminder of how pitiful he was. Most of what he could recall was him wasting his time in his room and doing nothing he could be proud of. The fragments of him with his family were almost nothing. The only memories he had of Shiro were of him fighting her and breaking their relationship to pieces until he led her to her death. The only memories he had with Yuu were ones he got from Shiro and the short time he had with her in the dream world, a phantom memory where she asked for nothing but death. All of it was so miserable that he couldn’t help but scoff at himself. But, that wasn’t the worst part.

“—aha… fuuu, ha… ha…”

He let out a pathetic excuse of a laugh as the lizard lowered its mouth to him… Why? Why was it that he couldn’t just sit still? Even after making every mistake possible, even after placing the lives of those important to him in danger, why? Why did he still have so much desire to live? A piece of trash like him had no right to live after all that happened, whether he had his memories or not, he couldn’t forgive himself. Yet… why was he still so desperate to cling to life?

Senkyo kept repeating this question to himself while scorning himself with a barrage of insults in his mind. He couldn’t find the answer. There was no answer. Perhaps this was simply the natural instinct of a living being to cling to life. If so, then Senkyo found absolutely no value in sparing his life. But, he felt different. Even though it was shameless of him to want to find that answer, or maybe even create an answer for himself, he wanted to grab onto that tiny bit of hope. Did he deserve a chance for a second life? He didn’t know. It wasn’t up to him to be his own judge. That’s why, for now, he wanted to struggle even more. If everyone judges him to be wrong in the future, then so be it. But for now, just in this moment, he wanted to prove to himself and everyone else that the life he had was not worthless.

With the lizard’s salivating mouth hovering over his neck, his lifeless eyes found its uvula, and then he used the most basic magic he could think of. A small, trembling ball of fire appeared and shot at the lizard. He missed. All of the blood loss and exhaustion got the better of him, but that didn’t stop Senkyo from summoning more. He repeated this again and again until, miraculously, one of them hit.

“Krt?”

Only for the lizard to rehydrate its mouth with its saliva as if a speck of dust entered its mouth. Senkyo finally realized his mistake. The creature he was faced with was the flame lamina, a lizard that breathes fire through its mouth. Against a creature like that, throwing a small fireball into its mouth was the same as throwing a glass of water into the river. It had no effect. There was truly no escape from this situation but, he didn’t regret trying.

At that moment, a loud roar echoed through the room, making everything around Senkyo tremble as if an earthquake was occurring.

**392 – Our 17-Year Promise**

*“\*For the first of my conditions…\*”*

I stood in attention, listening carefully to the woman’s orders.

*“\*You see, as a Hfixesi, I need to be responsible for making sure that the next generation receives the blessing bestowed upon me. We usually wouldn’t have any problems with that, but the next generation is going to be a bit different because of our mistake… so, please, with the power I am about to give you, protect the blessing given to me by the gods and ensure that they reach my successor. Using my power, you will instinctively recognize who they are when they get close to you. But…\*”*

The woman trailed off for a bit, pondering before returning her gaze to me.

*“\*This blessing isn’t like the other blessings of my fellow ambassadors. Honestly, I think you will make a perfect fit as its next successor, but sadly, the blessing doesn’t resonate with you. So, once you meet my successor, I want you to break him. Break him both physically and mentally to the point where he cannot even tell if he is still sane. If he cannot withstand your oppression, then bring him back to the surface. But if, even after every form of violence, he still refuses to back down. If he is such a person who would become stronger through the wretched trials of pain and suffering, then please, pass over my blessing.\*”*

*“\*I understand.\*”*

The mental capacity to hold her power. It wasn’t as if I couldn’t pick up on what her words suggested, but I would only come to realize why this was an important condition to her after I received a portion of that power.

*“\*For the second condition… if my successor passes the first test, then just like what I’m doing to you now, I want you to give him a push in the right direction. Just like how that person was to me, and how I am to you, I want you to become the person that will give my successor new possibilities. The path they will have to take as an Ambassador will no doubt the treacherous, but as long as you show them that they are not alone, if you show them that there are other people around to watch over their journey, then that will no doubt empower them as time passes.\*”*

She was right. I would have never reached the height I am now if it weren’t for her meddling. She showed me another way to live, a completely new possibility that I never would have thought of ever happening. To become a person like her to someone else was a strange request to ask of me. I didn’t see myself as the same type of person she was, but if she said that I could be such a person, then I would strive my hardest to reach her expectations of me.

*“\*…Ah, Little Hybrid, if you accept these two conditions, then dig your claws into my hand and seal our contract.\*”*

Thinking back to it even now, it was a surprise for her to suddenly ask me to hurt her. I didn’t know why or how, but she was at the point where she had no escape from death. Even to this day, I do not know. It wasn’t like she was dying from blood loss or anything the average mortal would succumb to. From the outside perspective, she would have looked beaten up, but not on the brink of death. Yet, she insisted she was.

*“\*Don’t be afraid of grazing a dying woman like me… my life is already numbered. It’s only a matter of time, so I want you to become someone I can entrust my life with. Do not falter, and claw my hand. That is all you need to do to prove yourself and finalize our contract. For my sake… please, do it.\*”*

It was at this time that I realized that I knew nothing about my savior, but there was no time for me to learn anything. I didn’t even know the first thing to know someone. What to do, what to ask, all of it was alien to me. That is why I swore to myself that I would one day know. But at that moment, what I wanted to do the most was follow her will.

So I took her hand and pierced it with my claws. Unlike before, it was as soft as skin, allowing me to pierce it and draw her blood.

*“\*Fufu… thank you, Little Hybrid. This will probably hurt a bit, but please endure it.\*”*

*“\*This is my crossroads. No amount of pain will stop me here.\*”*

The woman’s red hand shimmered, the tip of her fingers solidified into crystals and abruptly extended, piercing into my skin. I grit my teeth, taking in all the pain. Then, the woman speaks.

*“\*I, Nwen of the Sorun, the Hfixesi of the Golden Generation, holder of the Divine Soul of Torment, assimilate thee into mine guard, devote thyself to the force of mine blade. Embody the name bestowed upon you. Reawaken, Asier, Guardian of the Gjia Eaixih Soul Breaker.”*

Her power flowed into me through her crystal fingers, morphing my body into a new being. My body expanded, my skin turned into massive crystal plates, my legs changed shape so that I could walk on two legs, my arms grew serrates, my claws grew and sharpened, I grew a serrated tail, my crystal-like forewings safely protected my newly evolved hindwings, and my face became fiercer than ever with the evolved horn on my head. In this form, I looked closer to an Eozea than an Etriag, but the thickness and strength of my body were greater than anything that existed in this nest.

*“\*…From now on, your name will be Asier. You didn’t seem to have a name, so enjoy this new one. It comes from a language on Earth that means ‘new beginnings.’ You will now become the guardian of the blessing given to me by the gods. Though, you will not be bound to it once my successor inherits it. You will keep your power even after you cut ties with the Gjia Eaixih, so no need to worry about any losses… Ahh, what else should I tell you…\*”*

I felt it. With the new power the woman… Nwen gave me, I felt her power drop significantly. I panicked and hurried to her side after her crystal fingers were completely consumed by my body. I wanted to do something to support her, but she never wanted any of that from me and stopped me.

*“\*No… this is fine… This… is where everything ends for me… Asier, even if I am gone, know that my spirit will always be by your side, watching you and seeing what adventures you will have in the future. So, do not be sad. My life ends here, but my soul will forever know who you are. I was never destined to have a normal grave, so this place will become my final resting place and the only thing that will seal God’s blessing away… Asier, once more… let me say… my thanks…\*”*

Nwen’s words slowly trailed away and her body soon turned to sparkling lights. In the end, I was never able to say anything back to her. I was speechless. Perhaps it was because of my new body, or simply the fact that I didn’t know how to express my feelings. I stood there, stunned as the sparkling lights gathered on the nearest wall and created an even brighter glow. By the time my vision recovered, a colossal pair of red double doors stood in front of me—Nwen’s final resting place.

For the first time in my life, I was able to know what it meant to feel sad and experienced a sense of loss. It was only just a short time, but she became more important to me than anything I’ve had in my life. For the first time, tears fell from my eyes.

“No…… Thank you…”

That was the only thing I was able to say back to her at the time.

After 17 years… the time has finally arrived to fulfill Nwen’s will. Whether or not her successor is fit to inherit her power will be decided by his actions in this nest. Prepare yourself, child. The path that she took was filled with thorns, and so will yours. Prove to me that you are capable of walking down that treacherous path!

**393 – Reforge**

“Wh… at…?”

The beastly roars shook the cave to its core, making the lizards around Senkyo freeze. The one that was just about to bite into his neck stopped and retracted its head. When he looked around, the six Eozea gave him equal distances and lined up on both sides. From behind, something showed.

“T-That’s…”

Senkyo immediately recognized the creature both from what Leolja explained to him and the familiar spike that it had on its head.

“A Crystal Juggernaut…”

Crystal Juggernauts were the third evolutionary stage of the Etriag, characterized by its extremely high defense and ability to reflect magic attacks, often found on level A3 or below. They had two thick arms and two pairs of beetle legs to walk with. Their bodies are heavily plated with crystals hiding underneath and the structure of their horns has two different variations between male and female genders. The males have a horn similar to a Japanese rhinoceros beetle typically used for ramming and flinging while the females have two horns similar to a Hercules beetle and are mostly used for piercing or pinching. Senkyo also recognized the crystal juggernaut that arrived as the one that used the same horn that severed his arm from the start.

“Wh-What are you…!?”

The crystal juggernaut approached him and grabbed his chest with one of its massive arms. What was happening? Was it planning to crush him? With those arms, it could easily snap him like a twig. But, contrary to any of his expectations, the crystal juggernaut’s arm began to glow green, allowing a relaxing sensation to spread through his body and ease his pain.

“You’re… healing me…?”

Crystal juggernauts had the option to store magic that their crystals absorb and use them for later use. For example, it could turn a barrage of fireballs that hit it into healing magic later on. Senkyo couldn’t get a good grasp of what was happening with the confusion jumbling his head. After the crystal juggernaut healed sealed his wounds and stopped his bleeding, it let go and gave him the same distance as the other Eozea that were still in the vicinity.

Then, from the shadows in front of him came a huddle of pitter-pattering footsteps. Turning to the sound, he saw a group of small lizards with large flaps around their necks. They seemed to be able to walk both bipedally and quadrupedally. Nothing looked strange at first until he realized that Leolja never told him about this evolutionary stage of the Eozea.

“Krrrrt-t-t!!”

“H-Hey!?”

The small lizards surrounded him and picked him up from the ground. Senkyo was healed, so he managed to speak normally and was safe from death, but that didn’t do anything to repair his missing limbs, so he couldn’t struggle as the lizards hauled him away.

At this point, anything could happen. Senkyo didn’t know what to expect after one strange happening into another, so he held his breath and switched to analyzing his situation. The dark cavern had no gejikr stones to light up his surroundings or indicate the level he was on. However, based on the presence of a crystal juggernaut, he had to have been on level A3 or S. Then, after turning a corner, he saw a gejikr stone shining a red light from the ceiling. As if to serve as a spotlight, the small lizards went to it and placed him down in the red light before leaving him.

Senkyo searched the area but found nothing but darkness. At the very least, this meant that the space he was in was so large that he couldn’t see the walls anymore. Nothing but darkness… except for one place in front of him. Two purple dots appeared from the shadows. When he first saw them, he thought they were floating orbs, but then they began to rise. From his eye level, the two purple orbs began to tower over him and more purple light began to appear in the darkness. All of it was so intricate and well-shaped that it felt like they were connected. If he thought of it as such and observed the figure as a whole, then it was almost like a massive dragon just formed in front of him.

“Who goes there!?”

A deep, beastly voice came from that figure and made the cave tremble with his voice alone. Senkyo’s panic spiked but tried his best to keep himself together. The colossal figure slowly stepped into the red light, making the cave shake with every step. Then, it appeared.

A dragon-like being that had crystal plates, serrated arms, deadly claws, an intimidating dragonic face, and a ramming horn that protruded from its head. It looked like a mix of a lizard and a beetle. When that thought crossed his mind, an idea lit up, but he didn’t know what to think of it. A being that was born from the mix of an Eozea and an Etriag, one that was strong enough to be considered one of the three predators of the sunken nest of Iqanlr. The Hybrid Lord.

From what Leolja talked about, the Hybrid Lord wasn’t an aggressive person who wanted to rule the sunken nest. It gave him the idea of it wanting to spend its life lying around in peace, but of course, that didn’t exempt it from the essential needs such as food and water. Not attacking other species in the nest was one thing, but Senkyo was an outsider, a surface dweller from the Lord’s perception. In other words, eating him was fair game.

Senkyo’s thoughts raced as ideas came and went to find a solution to get out of his current predicament. Then, he was reminded that Leolja used the treasures of the surface to make peace with his brethren. He didn’t know how effective it would be if he tried it on the Hybrid Lord, but it was all or—

“Child, why do you struggle so much?”

An unexpected question came from the beast. It silenced Senkyo for a while, but the piercing glare that came from the Lord urged him to answer.

“I-Isn’t it natural? I—I don’t want to die… not… not yet! How could you expect me to die… if there’s still so much I need to do!? So many… so many mistakes that I need to make up for! There’s no way I can let myself die here!”

“Is that so? Then, why did you let those mistakes you talk about happen in the first place?”

“W-What do you…”

“Enough. I have been following your ventures since the moment you set foot on this nest. My kin have been avoiding you for the sole reason of observation. Indeed, an unexpected third party disrupted that and made my kin turn on you, but none of that should have been a problem for a monster like you.”

“You… know me…”

“Just like everyone that creeps in your shadows, I am no stranger to your existence, Yukou Senkyo. For that reason, it confuses me that you have been pushed so far into a corner.”

“I—I lost my memories, so what do you—”

“Excuses! All I can hear are pitiful excuses! I saw you fight. Even without your memories, your body remained as powerful as ever. What truly held you back was not memories nor the lost experiences, but the emotions that you hold so dearly.”

“…my emotions…?”

“Correct. Yukou Senkyo, has anyone ever tried to remind you? You are not human.”

“…!!!”

Why? Why was it that his words shook him to his core? Senkyo didn’t know, but it had to have been related to his lost memories. Even without them, it must have been something that was engraved into his soul rather than the mind.

“You are a monster—a tool. A tool like yourself has the responsibility to keep all of your edges sharp. Before you mind your emotions, first you take control of your power! You have the responsibility to do so! What kind of tool becomes dull just because they forget they can cut? You, especially, are unlike every other tool in the three worlds. One mistake from you can mean the end for everyone who places their hopes in you.”

“E-Even so, if I throw my emotions—”

“Then, what!? Yukou Senkyo, after everything you have experienced in this nest, do you truly think that you are strong enough to handle both your immense power and your raging emotions at the same time? I once knew a person who did exactly just that, juggling pain and happiness, dividing her edge from her handle, and I can tell for certain, you are nowhere near what they were capable of!”

As if he had been struck through the heart, Senkyo was unable to say anything back to the Hybrid Lord.

“This is what happens when you swell your mind with arrogance and lose your priorities. I have heard from my sources. Even before you lost your memories, you were like this. Now, look around you! This is where that mistake brought you! Had you focused on controlling your power, had you known how to bring it out instinctively even without your memories, then you would have found a better end.”

“…”

He held his breath, keeping the words he wanted to say in his throat, but the Lord knew exactly what they were.

“Do you think this is unreasonable? That’s because it is. None of us wanted to be stuck in the situations we are in now, all we can do is find a way to make peace with where we are. This goes for me, and the person that once saved me. As for you, what are you going to do about all this unfairness? Are you going to keep hiding in a shell of excuses? I already told you the answer, but how are you going to act upon it? Tell me, what do you want to do with your life, Yukou Senkyo!?”

“I… I…”

I already answered this question, he thought in his mind. Insane. Insane. Insane! Everything about this situation was insane! All of this was too much for his mind to handle, but so what? If it meant shooting back his words at the beast that questioned him, then he didn’t need to think about it. All he needed was to let everything in his mind loose. Gathering his courage and turning his disappointment and frustrations into power, he began and roared.

“I told you before, there’s no way I can let myself die here!!! Maybe you’re right! Maybe I do need to throw away all of my emotions to keep control of my powers! Maybe that’s the only safe solution to survive in this world! But how do you expect someone as weak as me to do that!? You said it yourself! I’m nowhere near the capabilities of that person who can juggle their power and emotions! But even so, even if I’m weak, I can’t let myself bite the dust here! I want to live… I NEED to live if I ever want to become that kind of person! I want to prove to everyone that I’m not just some good for nothing! If everyone has their hopes on my back, then it’s my job to carry all of them! I can do it! I NEED TO DO IT!! THAT’S THE ONLY WAY I CAN EVER DIE PEACEFULLY!!!”

The Hybrid Lord listened carefully and responded flatly to his speech.

“Then break.”

His answer was so confusing that Senkyo’s head cooled a bit to try and understand what he meant. To save him from that effort, the Hybrid Lord followed.

“You and I need to break in order to become stronger. The same went for your predecessor. Once you break, you will be reforged into a stronger being. Even if that isn’t strong enough, then all you need to do is break again. That is the essence of the power that you will carry.”

From behind the Hybrid Lord, a gigantic pair of double doors lit up in red, showing its intricate design and lighting up the backside of the Lord that was hidden by the shadows, revealing his beetle-like attributes that consisted of the forewings and hindwings, and even a lizard tail that looked just as menacing as the rest of his body.

“To borrow the words of your predecessor, the one who saved me… Yukou Senkyo, after going through this much pain, the only thing that would be worse is letting it end in pain. As someone who is just like me, I want you to discover what happiness is. Be it in this world or any other, I want to give you the chance to face this cruel reality with a wide smug on your face and laugh at it with all your heart…”

The double doors began to creak loudly, the sound echoing off the walls of the large cavern.

“I, Asier, Guardian of the Gjia Eaixih Soul Breaker, recognize Yukou Senkyo as its rightful successor. With this, your fate is sealed. Welcome to the path of torment. In this place, only pain and suffering await you.”

Once the doors became half-opened, a flurry of crystal spikes shot out from them like tentacles and pierced Senkyo’s body. The sudden pang made him scream, but he didn’t complain.

“But, if you manage to overcome your trials, then I assure you, that something more than that will greet your arrival. Just like how everyone believes in your power, whether or not you know them, they will always be there to support you. Never forget this moment.”

A bright red light filled the room as the double doors fully opened, consuming everything in the cavern.

**394 – The Researcher of the Depths**

“Out! Get out of the way! C-Come on! Hey! Heeeeey! What the hell is happening over there!?”

A man complained as a wall of Eozea and Etriag blocked his path. Undaunted by the thick barrier of lizards and beetles of all evolutionary stages, he tried to push them away and squeeze through the gaps between them, but he could do nothing because of the sheer difference in strength.

“Asier!! You’re there with the boy, aren’t you!? What are you doing!? Tell your people to let me through already!!”

From an outsider’s perspective, it would be strange to see the Eozeas and Etriags not attacking him, but the man that stood before them was a little special, one that their mighty lord recognized as a trustworthy power.

“You can’t hide from me! Leolja already told me that he saw your people bring him here! And what’s with that light!? It better not be what I think it is—WHOA!?”

While the man was continuing his incessant pushing, the Eozeas and Etriags suddenly stepped away and opened a path, making him fall to the ground. Just before it was too late, the man kicked off the ground and somersaulted in the air, landing gracefully back on the ground where he let out a tired sigh.

“You could have at least warned me… whatever, this isn’t the time for that.”

He briskly walked through the darkness with familiar steps until he found a red light in his path. Picking up the pace, he turned the corner and eventually found Asier with Senkyo sprawled on the floor, unconscious. He didn’t seem injured in any way, but that wasn’t what he was worried about.

“Asier!! What was that light just now!? What happened to Miss Nwen’s door!?”

“Cursed One…you seem to be in a rush. I was busy until just now, are you here for the boy?”

“Of course I am! Why did you take him while he was in that state!? No… I guess it’s better for you to be the first person to find him rather than some stray, but why do you want him? What did you do!?”

“What, you ask?”

Asier brushed off the man’s anger and sat up straight. His crystal platings then began to radiate purple and red light, illuminating the empty cavern. When the man looked past Asier, he found nothing but a solid wall of rocks. The giant pair of red double doors that marked Nwen’s resting place and the very same holding place of her Gjia Eaixih were no longer there.

“I fulfilled my promises to Nwen, nothing more.”

“W-What!?”

The man couldn’t hide his shock and left his mouth open for a few seconds while he processed Asier’s words.

“That shouldn’t be possible! Having two sets of Gjia Eaixih is impossible! He—Yukou Senkyo should have inherited a different Gjia Eaixih before he arrived here! If not… then he wouldn’t have unlocked the power to regenerate his body! That power would have still been sealed away!”

“Say what you will, Cursed One, but as a former Guardian of a Gjia Eaixih, I can tell for certain that he possesses no Gjia Eaixih other than the one I gave him just now.”

“That… can’t be… I was sure that…”

The man clutched his head, wanting to deny Asier’s words, but he would never lie, especially when it comes to something as serious as this. If it was something that involved Nwen… he would never lie. Then, did that mean that Senkyo was truly her successor? But what would that say about the results he obtained? How did this all connect together?

“No… it… makes sense… tsk!”

With the click of his tongue, the man marched over to where Senkyo lay.

“What are you doing?”

Asier questioned, but the man didn’t answer. He continued walking to Senkyo and Asier simply watched him. The man crouched by Senkyo’s side and reached out for his arm. Suddenly, his arm was held at the wrist, stopping his approach. When he traced the source of it, the man saw Senkyo’s other hand binding his hand and giving him a sharp glare. The man panicked and fell to his bottom as he tried to flee.

“W-W-W-W-W-WHOA, TH-THAT SCARED ME!!”

The man held his wrist close to his body and stroked it repeatedly as if he almost had that wrist severed. He stared at Senkyo as he slowly rose from the ground.

“Where…… am I again?”

He rubbed his eyes and asked himself in a drowsy voice almost like he was rudely disturbed from a good night’s sleep. He looked around and found that the cavern was being illuminated by Asier. Just as he was about to say something, he saw a man he didn’t know sitting on the ground a small distance away from him.

He had long blonde hair and red eyes behind a pair of glasses. He was wearing a white lab coat over a brown suit and black pants paired with brown boots. His body didn’t seem any different from the average person, except for the fact that he had two pairs of arms instead of one. It was a bit strange to him since he expected a person with four arms to at least have larger muscles and new muscle and bone groups to support the extra two arms, but the person in front of him didn’t seem to have that body structure. Other than that, his high number of accessories was something to take note of, such as a metal choker, two earrings on both ears, a bracelet on each of his four wrists, and one ring on each finger including the thumbs, totaling twenty rings.

It seemed strange to ignore the large dragon-like beast in front of him, but nothing about this situation was normal since the start, so he decided to just go with the flow. Besides, Senkyo felt no hostility coming from Asier. The same went for the man in front of him, but he was clearly agitated.

“Who are you?”

“O-Oh, yeah… I guess we’ve never met in person before…”

The man picked himself up and patted the dirt off his clothes. After composing himself, he matched Senkyo’s gaze and introduced himself.

“It’s nice to finally meet you, Senkyo. I’m Brigan. You might recognize me as the Battery’s Mad Scientist or as Hira’s father. You can call me whatever you want, I don’t mind.”

**395 – Clearing The Muddled Facts**

“The… Mad Scientist…”

It was the man who announced that he would use Senkyo to serve his own purpose. A man fueled with so much revenge that he was willing to take control of Senkyo and throw him at Gaeka. At first, he thought he would be furious at him, but in the end, he never had any memories of him taking control of his body. Did he have second thoughts? Senkyo was planning to use him so that he could find out how to get back his memories, so he didn’t know how to feel about him.

“I know you have a lot of questions for me, but please let me start. This is very important for both you and me. Did you make contact with anything strange before you arrived here in Iqanlr? Um, I don’t know if you remember or if you even know what these are, but specifically, anything related to Divine Weapons, Gjia Eaixihs, or Empyrean Catalysts. Basically, anyone who seemed a bit too strong or transformed into something strong. It can be you or anyone you made contact with. It might not make sense to you now but I need to know if you remember anything.”

“Um…”

He tried to recall the images he saw from Shiro’s memories that matched his description. The first person he could think of who matched the description was the kid who once tried to fry him alive with lightning when Shiro was first unsealed. Then, there was a time when a person named Touma transformed into something strange, but he only saw a glimpse of that memory so he wasn’t sure about him. Another time was when a skeleton they were fighting ate something strange and turned into a colossus, that one seemed close. And finally, there was the time when he went berserk and transformed into some kind of black knight. Senkyo conveyed his thoughts to Brigan. He didn’t know if this was a good idea. It felt like he was moving by instinct at this point, but he couldn’t be bothered to think hard about it.

As he told every story, Brigan held his chin in deep thought as he listened to Senkyo’s every word. He kept up this attitude until something in him clicked upon hearing his last story.

“—THAT!! What did you do for that to happen!?”

“H-Huh? I… uhh… I think I was using a sword from someone named Ryosei. I don’t know much of him since he rarely shows up in Shiro’s—ah, I mean, I don’t remember him much. All I know is that I used a sword called… uh, Kuro Yaiba. I used it to cut my hand, and the next thing I know, the transformation happened.”

“K-Kuro Yaiba!? That’s Professor Masao’s Divine Weapon! I thought it was broken in the battle 17 years ago… No, wait… I think it was repaired and the blacksmith called it the Tampered Blade… Wait, they managed to make it work!? If that’s so, then would it still be considered a Divine Weapon? No… it shouldn’t be, but it has the same properties as one… and it can use the Release Factor… a pseudo-Diving Weapon!? If Senkyo can use it, then can everyone else do the same!? I’ve never—”

Senkyo watched Brigan awkwardly as he entered a tangent and began spouting nonsense to himself. With nothing to do, he turned to Asier in hopes of finding an answer but he didn’t seem to care about what was happening and curled on the ground. Honestly, even Senkyo was feeling sleepy from all of the jargon Brigan was throwing at him.

“It seems like you’re all having fun here.”

“Whoa!?”

From the ceiling came a spider that lowered to Senkyo’s head level by a small thread. It was a familiar voice, but his abruptness didn’t fail to surprise Senkyo.

“L-Leolja!? Y-You’re here!”

“Indeed, I am. It’s good to see you safe, Senkyo. Hybrid Lord, it has been a while.”

The phantom threader that Leolja was using to communicate hopped out of its thread and onto Senkyo’s shoulder as he greeted Asier.

“Yes, it has. Though, I doubt you came here for a friendly visit. What brings you?”

Asier responded naturally, not even flinching at Leolja’s sudden arrival. The hybrid lord raised his head as it responded to him whilst Brigan was still lost in his own world, ignoring everything that was happening.

“It’s quite urgent, I’m afraid. One of the Demonic Spiders reported to me that there has been an attack on our main nest.”

“The Iwaiida’s main nest… I never thought anyone would be so foolish to bring chaos to that place.”

“What? Why is that?”

Knowing his lack of knowledge, Leolja decided quickly to explain.

“Our main nest does have the strongest forces of Iwaiida, but the reason that makes it difficult to attack isn’t that. It's because our nest is located directly at the base of the Mainstay. If anyone attempts to let loose, there would be a chance that they could take down the whole nest entirely, so no one has ever made a destructive attack until now.”

“Then… isn’t this really bad?”

“Yes, that would be the case. The problem lies with the attacker. It seems that the monster that attacked us on level A2 is the one causing the chaos. What makes this a problem is the fact that they are not interested in our nest. We don’t know why, but it is making direct attacks on the Mainstay. Our forces are doing their best to hold it back, but he won’t last for long.”

“…!”

Everyone, including Brigan, twisted their faces as they heard the news.

“What makes things worse is that the monster somehow gained the support of the Swarm.”

Just as Senkyo was about to ask Leolja to expound, Brigan cut in and did him the honor.

“The Swarm is the term we use to refer to the extreme minority of this nest. They are a race that was on the brink of extinction from this nest until one of them became so powerful that they were enough to keep the race alive. Haeqras has them categorized under the Nexlrs, but when you compare them to Earth’s creatures, they are closer to wasps than they are to bats. The sole head of the Swarm is the Thunder Wing, one of the three predators of this nest. The only way that monster would be able to tame that beast is if that monster is the very same one that manipulated Senkyo’s memories.”

“I had a feeling that was the case. With you affirming it, then there’s no doubt about it.”

Leolja said, reinforcing Brigan’s argument.

“Well then, I believe it should be clear what our response should be.”

Asier said as his giant body rose from the ground and picked up Senkyo by the tips of his claws as if holding a kitten by the neck.

“W-Wha!? Hey! What are you doing!?”

“I’m forcing you to join me in my final clash in this nest. I can take on the Swarm but I will have you handle the memory monster. If I am not careful it can just take control of me too, so you will be the perfect counter.”

“W-What are you saying!? I don’t even know what I’m capable of!! M-My limbs are back but what even changed!?”

“Let your instincts take over, boy. That is all you need to do.”

“T-That’s too unreasonable!!”

“Wait!”

Brigan suddenly cut into Asier and Senkyo’s exchange. The both of them turned to him, asking with their eyes what he wanted to say.

“Before you go, I want to tell you that I’ve found a way to return your memory to normal along with the other victims.”

“You do!?”

A blast of excitement escaped Senkyo’s voice as he heard the news from Brigan.

“Yes, I studied the body samples Leolja sent me. That’s how I confirmed that the memory demon and the monster that attacked you are the same being. I found out that there were two eggs stored in the original body and one egg in the second one. If my theory is correct, then that monster has the ability to reborn itself so long as those eggs survive. This one should be the last one, but I don’t know if it has the ability to make more eggs inside it, so it is safer to destroy the body entirely. As for the memories, the hormones that the monster secretes have similar functions to Senkyo’s blood. As long as it is alive, it is able to control them and influence other bodies. In other words, once you kill it, its hormones will cease to function and will bring back the memories it took from you and clear any mind control it’s forcing upon you.”

“Kill it… I just have to… kill it, huh?”

Senkyo’s voice turned dry as if to ridicule himself for not realizing something so simple. Picking up on his change of attitude, Asier placed him in the palm of his hand and told him.

“That’s what I like to see! There’s no better motivation than that, boy! This is your time to take your revenge and reach your goal with your own two hands! Focus on a single goal; pour your every being into seeing it be fulfilled! Now, we go: to battle!”

Asier let out a fearsome roar that shook the whole cave. A buzz of activity could be heard in the distance as the Eozeas and Etriags charged out of the nest at Asier’s signal. Asier’s forewings flew open and his hindwings unfolded. With the spacious cavern, nothing could restrict them from expanding to show their sparkling beauty. Then, a cloud of dust covered the area as Asier’s wings flapped and sent him zooming through the caves.

When the dust and commotion slowly settled, coughing could be heard echoing throughout the large cavern. It was the last person that was left behind after everyone decided to hurry and leave.

“What an energetic bunch. I don’t think I’ve ever seen Asier get that excited for a fight. Maybe it's because he’s free now… Welp, I can’t be the only one slacking. Now that I have some new information, it's back to the drawing board for me! Everything makes so much sense now!”

Brigan, too, left with a spring in his step.

**396 – The Hunt Beyond Iqanlr**

“—Leolja! Sir Leolja! What’s happening over there!?”

“…”

Hira tried to push an answer out of Leolja, but there was only silence from the phantom threader attached to her in a web pouch. She waited with bated breath. She knew that shouting wouldn’t do anything. The reason Leolja wasn’t talking to her was likely because he was busy managing the other lines he was connected to. He temporarily cut off his connection with her to focus on other matters, that being, finding a way to save Senkyo and Shiro from a mysterious monster that ambushed them.

Before Leolja cut his line with her, he told Hira that their group was suddenly attacked by a large number of enemies and a deformed monster that looked like an amalgamation of all of the races that lived in Iqanlr’s sunken nest. Time slowly passed for Hira as she zoomed through the morning sky toward her destination.

Up until now, she was playing a game of cat and mouse with the people who had the destination point of Senkyo’s recall crystal. At first, they found it within the borders of Iqanlr, but time and time again they would move from one place to another in an instant. As anyone would suspect, it was teleportation. From the looks of it, Gaeka had long since stolen the blueprints of how to create a teleportation network from Adeira’s workshop. Hira vehemently threw a flurry of insults at Adeira through Leolja for letting so much of his equipment leak to the enemy, so Adeira helped destroy the network as compensation, leaving his post at the Lord’s mansion.

After many coordinated attacks from Hira, Adeira, the Battery, the Krikrt Group, and other people that came along with Adeira from the mansion, they finally managed to corner the enemy and destroy the teleportation network in Iqanlr. Unfortunately, it didn’t end there. When Adeira traced the locations that the network was connected to, he found out that the enemy connected to another location far from Iqanlr just before they could destroy the last teleportation point in Iqanlr. He theorized that the connection to that location had already been created long ago, it was simply not connected to the network so no one would know it existed. And in their escape, they quickly connected it and escaped that way. When they tried to use the same teleportation network, it didn’t work, meaning that the enemy cut the connection from the other side, leaving them stranded in Iqanlr.

However, there was one last hope for them. With Hira’s AW-Unit, she could travel to the enemy’s location faster than any other mode of transportation aside from teleportation. They didn’t know if the enemy had a separate teleportation network set on the other side, but it was still worth the effort to check. She brought one of Leolja’s phantom threaders to keep her connection with them and a tame owned by one of the members of the Krirt Group to track down the enemy’s trail. Leolja kept his connection online by leaving behind a trail of his webs while the tame was being carried inside the same web pouch so that it wouldn’t get blown away by Hira’s speed, waiting for the time to act.

But then, just as Hira was getting close to her destination, the news about the ambush on Senkyo’s party came from Leolja. She had been anxious ever since hearing the report but kept heading to her destination without hesitation, in fact, she went faster. Not for a second did she lose faith in Senkyo’s capabilities, besides it was her job to fulfill her end of the promise. She wanted to secure the destination point as fast as possible to make sure that if he ever used the recall crystal, then he would be welcomed by friendly forces, which mostly consisted of her.

The long-awaited result of Leolja’s report finally entered her ears… though, it wasn’t what she expected.

“What do you mean you lost connection!?”

“I’m saying it as it is. I lost my contact with Senkyo and Shiro.”

“How did that happen!?”

Without hesitation, Leolja answered.

“Brigan made Senkyo rampage.”

“D-Dad finally did it?”

“No, it was wrong to phrase it that way. I convinced him to make Senkyo rampage.”

“W-What? I don’t understand… you MADE him do it? Are you telling me that Dad didn’t want to make Yukou-san rampage yet?”

“That is correct. I’m not sure why, but there was a reason why your father wasn’t making Senkyo rampage earlier. I thought it was odd that he let us reach level A2, but that was because he couldn’t complete the proper procedures to make Senkyo rampage safely. When we were ambushed, I contacted Brigan to make Senkyo rampage so he could defend himself. But when I arrived, he told me that he couldn’t connect with Senkyo’s Gjia Eaixih.”

“His Gjia Eaixih… Wait, did Yukou-san ever mention that he had one?”

“Apparently, no. However, Brigan told me that he could tell if he had one or not. ”

“What!? How?”

“‘Make contact with the power of a god,’ in other words the blessings given to the Ambassadors by the gods. According to Brigan, that is one of the conditions that will unlock Senkyo’s power to regenerate his body. After I told him that Senkyo’s wounds immediately regenerated when I was secretly collecting his blood, he knew that he had to have acquired his Gjia Eaixih. After all, that specific condition was made so that his body would withstand the drawbacks of using a Gjia Eaixih, or so he said.”

“He somehow knew that about Yukou-san… I really have no clue what his relationship with him is. Then if that’s the case, then what do you mean by Dad not being able to find his Gjia Eaixih?”

“I don’t know much about it, but from what I gather, Brigan’s original plan was to connect with Senkyo’s Gjia Eaixih and forcibly activate its Release Factor. Using his own spirit as a catalyst, he would embed Gaeka’s image in his mind and make him hunt him down. Apparently, this was a safe way for him to control Senkyo since he would already have access to his mind before his Release Factor formed. But, just like I said earlier, he couldn’t find his Gjia Eaixih, so he couldn’t commit to making Senkyo rampage. If nothing happened, we probably would have reached Brigan’s lab without Senkyo rampaging.”

“…But then you got ambushed.”

“Unfortunately.”

“What are the risks of making him rampage without safety?”

To that question, the phantom threader shook its head along with Leolja’s words.

“We have no idea. All we can do is hope for everything to work out.”

“Is that so…”

It was an unavoidable situation. Senkyo had lost his memories, so he wasn’t as powerful as he was before. Shiro was there, so they should have been able to buy more time if Senkyo ordered her to protect him. Hira thought that she should have been enough after seeing her moves against the memory monster, but from the sound of Leolja’s voice, the situation wasn’t that simple on their side.

“Well then? What happened? How did you lose connection?”

Hira didn’t lose track of the reason he was questioning Leolja and brought it all back to her original question after all of the tangents.

“That is…”

Leolja’s voice slowly trailed off, allowing Hira to pick up on his reluctance. It wasn’t as if he didn’t know how to answer her question, but he simply didn’t want to answer it. She had a bad feeling about it, but she took the reins over her own emotions and kept a level head. Right now, she couldn’t do anything to help Senkyo and Shiro from where she was. All she could do was fulfill her purpose. If she could take back the destination point, then Senkyo and Shiro would have a safe exit away from danger. This was the best she could do to assist the two at the moment.

“Argh!! Whatever!! We’re already here anyway! Let’s just get that stupid destination point back and go back home! Town of Naen, here I come!!!”

**397 – Entering the Stage**

“This should do it. Now, go! Find their trail!”

“Eeeeeee!”

Hira ordered as she released the tame she brought with her. It was an uebat bird. It wasn’t the best to use for tracking, but that didn’t mean it could be underestimated. Mana wayfinding is one of the skills uebat birds use to judge possible prey and predators. What makes them renowned for being the best messenger birds is their ability to recognize and navigate to multiple places they’ve been to, and the secret to this is their mana wayfinding. By remembering and reading the flow of mana in their environment, they can choose the optimal path in the air to get to their destination the fastest. In addition to that, if they are given a mana sample of the person they are supposed to deliver it to, they can use mana wayfinding to find their mana signature and deliver messages to them directly. It is slightly roundabout compared to hunting birds, but their accuracy never disappoints.

The bird hovered over the town and began its hunt while Hira climbed higher in the air to prevent anyone from detecting her easily. Uebats have the perfect camouflage from below since their feathers change with the color of the sky. Meanwhile, from above, Hira could clearly spot where the bird was by searching for a fragment of the sky moving below her.

The bird passed the entire town of Naen and made a beeline for the edge of a forest near Naen’s borders. Seeing that it landed somewhere in the trees, Hira followed behind but instead of following with her thrusters to move, she turned them off and entered a skydiving position so that she could reach her destination with the smallest amount of noise. Just when she was about to reach the ground, she activated her thrusters once more and landed safely.

Hira equipped two long rods on each hand. Just before she arrived on the ground, compartments on her forearms released the rods. She did a quick search of her surroundings, but nothing was there. Assuming that the uebat bird found the enemy, then perhaps they realized this and hid immediately. She advanced slowly but surely into the forest. Not long after, she heard the sound of the uebat bird she brought with her behind one of the trees. She had the chance to make an attack through it, but she hadn’t confirmed what she was dealing with yet and didn’t want to jump to conclusions. It took her a bit more time, but she opted to move through the shadows and circled around the tree to see what was happening. Then, as she got closer, she heard the voice of another person.

“My, my aren’t you a hungry one! Calm, now. I still have more where that came from!”

“Eeeeeee!!”

“What in the…”

Hira took a peek from the trees and found a bizarre scene. In her vision was a jester feeding her uebat bird newly cooked meat by heating them with fire magic in one hand while the other was holding a silver tray of raw meat. Hira didn’t even know where to begin to analyze the situation. But, she was certain of one thing: this person was not the enemy.

“Clown, what are you doing here?”

“Oh! If it isn’t Miss Hira! Welcome, welcome! Do you care for a bite?”

“No, I’m busy right now. So, let’s cut to the chase. Do you want something with me?”

“Aww, I wish you weren’t so cold, but I understand what you mean. Yes, very, very well indeed!”

The Clown. This is what Hira had come to call this person after two encounters with him in the past. One of these encounters happened when she was only a small child. In a tragic event that eventually led to her mother’s demise, the Clown was the one who pushed her to find her mother’s research and save them from destruction. The second happened a few years ago when he told her to enter the Battery. There, she found out that her father was conducting research at the bottom of Iqanlr’s sunken nest. He apparently didn’t want her to get involved, so he pushed her away from that place and didn’t get to see what he was doing, but at the very least she found out what this mysterious “job” he was doing.

Both of these encounters were the same in the sense that the Clown always made positive changes in her life, but still somehow different from each other. Every time she met the Clown, his personality seemed to change along with his outfit. Nothing much really changed, except for the color patterns on his clothes, but she figured they were related somehow.

The first one had a red and blue pattern, possessing a serious and analytic personality. The second one had a purple and orange pattern, possessing an annoying and pushy personality. And now, her third encounter, a Clown that had a lavender and jade pattern, possessing a silly and playful personality.

The Clown called her cold but that was just because Hira genuinely had no idea how to handle him. She knew about his rumors and honestly had no idea how to break down the myth of the Stray Fool, so it was like seeing a doll come to life. Even though she knew he meant no harm to her, even though she was thankful for everything he had done, she still couldn’t get comfortable dealing with him. Her solution for this is to get her interaction with the Clown finished as soon as possible. Since he chose this specific time to appear, Hira had a good guess at what this was all about.

The Clown fed the last piece of meat to the uebat bird, threw the silver tray away, and hopped onto a large rock that was nearby.

“Miss Hira, I’m afraid this is as far as you go.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s just that this little birdie wanted to get to something that was here before, right?”

He said, tapping the rock he was standing on with his feet.

“I think they were your friends. I mean, they’re the only other people wearing giant suits of metal in these parts, so it just makes sense!”

Hira thought, processing the Clown’s words. If he truly saw people wearing AW-Units, then they were probably students from Xhiari being controlled by the memory monster’s influence. If she ever found them, then she had to be careful of dealing any fatal blows. They were just mind-controlled; they were not actually her enemies.

“Anyway, they stood by this rock and went POOF! I think that was the new teleportation thing. But, it doesn’t work anymore. They probably broke it so only they could play with it. They’re really selfish, huh? Because of that, this is as far as you will go, Miss Hira.”

“Is that why you’re here?”

“Hehe!”

Unfazed by the Clown’s provoking tone, she read his thoughts perfectly, making him let out a small giggle. The Clown only appears whenever he wants to perform his “services.” Following this rule suggested that his current “service” with Hira had something to do with catching up to the people she was chasing.

“Miss Hira, I want to do this one thing for you, and it’s to fix this toy your friends were playing with and let you have a turn. But, there’s one problem. Unlike the other times I ‘served’ you, this one is going to have to come with a price!”

“A price, huh? And what is that? Money?”

“Oh, nothing physical. I just want you to enter the stage!”

“What stage are you talking about?”

“Why, it’s this one right here! The very stage I’m performing on right now!”

The Clown said, throwing his arms into the air and tapping on the rock once more.

“It might seem silly to you, but your whole life will change the moment you enter the stage! There will be no turning back. And honestly, your father would probably be cross with me if he learned that I gave you this option! But I don’t care, because I want to hear YOUR answer!”

He extended his hand to her as if passing the spotlight to her.

“…Oh, so that’s what this is.”

There will be no turning back. These words reek of pain and danger. The very words that her parents probably came across at some point in their lives. If she took this one step forward, then she could end up like her mother, who was met with an early death. Or maybe her father, who bound himself to a curse called vengeance. These were the real-life examples of the result of these words.

But what of it? Contrary to what other people may think, these very words… This was the point that Hira had been waiting to arrive at.

“Then it’s decided!”

Hira hopped onto the rock immediately after understanding the Clown’s words. Reacting to this, the Clown hopped off and onto a nearby tree branch, allowing Hira to take the rock all for herself.

“I’ll be walking up your stage, so hurry up and send me to where they are already!”

“My, my, my! I just love your decisiveness, Miss Hira! Very well! In response to your courageous step forward—”

A teleportation circle appeared around the rock, coating everything in their surroundings in a blue light.

“—I welcome you! To the stage where death and chaos births hope!!”

**398 – Decisive Clashes**

“So, how far away is this place again?”

“Even with our AW-Units, Nrjia’s capital will still be somewhere over a week away so don’t bother asking every other second, Vleid.”

“You’ve gotta be joking…”

Inside a dark tunnel were two people wearing metal suits walking to the light that indicated its end. Vleid and Raeri were the names of these two particular people. The woman, Raeri, held a black hexagon-shaped metal device in her hand. This was Senkyo’s Recall Point. Just a while ago, they finished entering, exiting, and breaking numerous teleportation networks to shake off their possible pursuers. The two ended up in a secret room hidden in the sunken nest of a different town called Siwk. Originally, they exited in the town of Naen located in Ujlufi, but the numerous teleportation networks made them loop around the border city of Iqanlr and land in the territory of Ridsikrn, the complete opposite direction from Naen. The tunnel they were walking out of was an exit different from the main exit of the nest located a good distance away from the borders of Siwk.

They were currently being controlled by the influence of the memory monster, not that they could realize any of this. The mind-control of the memory monster was different from simply making people follow its orders. By “influence,” this meant that it had the ability to make its victims retain their personality while executing its orders. Instead of making these two follow the order “bring the recall point to Nrjia’s capital,” their minds were made to believe that “they HAD to bring the recall point to Nrjia’s capital,” as if it were of their own volition.

In a way, this was a more potent type of hypnosis as it was hard to detect. The victims didn’t act differently from their usual, they only had a compelling force to complete certain tasks. The victims themselves think nothing of this urge except for it being a “natural” part of their lives, meaning that they could still use previous knowledge they have to sate these urges. Even if the memory monster had no idea what their capabilities were, the victims themselves would use whatever they could just to fulfill the urge given by the memory monster. As such, the familiar back and forth between Vleid and Raeri never disappeared despite their situation.

*\*…vvvhhh\**

“Ugh…! This is gonna be such a—AACK!!”

“Quiet.”

Raeri mercilessly struck Vleid’s neck to silence his complaints. He wanted to shoot back at her for her sudden attack, but he quickly realized why she did that when a faint sound entered his ears.

*\*vvvshhHH…\**

“It's coming from behind us!”

“What!? Impossible! The only thing there is the broken teleportation point! There’s no way anyone should’ve been able to get there!”

*\*vvvSSHHH!\**

“Stop complaining! There’s no use thinking about it; the fact that there’s something behind us is undeniable! Prepare yourself!”

“AARGH! FINE, WHATEVER!”

Vleid and Raeri entered battle positions and prepared both their AW-Units and chants to engage. The sound from the distance quickly amplified and amber light began to glow in the darkness.

*\*VVSSHHH!!!\**

When the noise finally reached full blast, both Vleid and Raeri realized that the enemy was an AW-Unit, one that had particularly powerful thrusters that could cover the entire distance they’d been walking in just a few seconds. Taking into account the light that peered through the darkness, they could only think of one person.

“HIRA!?”

Vleid’s shout was swallowed by the blast of Hira’s thrusters and the two streaks of amber light that released from her sides. Raeri successfully summoned a shield to defend herself and Vleid boldly used the hand of his AW-Unit Frame to grab the amber light. Azure, carmine, and amber sparked as the three mech suits clashed in lighting-quick combat.

The result was instantaneous but eventful. So much so that the few milliseconds that the flashes of light illuminated the dark tunnel felt like an eternity. The identity of the amber light that Hira held was a pair of blades formed with solid light. It made direct contact with Vleid’s metal hand, but only grazed it and couldn’t penetrate its thick armor. Raeri’s shield was on the verge of destruction, but she angled it so that it would deflect the blade rather than stop it, allowing her to go for the counterattack and release the spell she had ready.

The earth in front of Hira suddenly rose from the ground, forming a line of spikes in her path. Then, as if reading this move, Vleid had his metal arm raised and prepared to smash Hira into the ground. Ignoring the rising spikes, Hira spun her body and blocked the incoming metal fist. Her blades of light caught the attack, but that didn’t stop the force from transferring to her body and pushing her to the ground. She controlled her aerodynamics by directing her thrusters to the ground and angling her body to stand slightly to prevent contact with the ground. As for the earth spikes, all of them crumbled before they could reach Hira’s AW-Unit Frame.

The first clash finally resolved, ending with Hira shooting out of the tunnel and the only person to take damage being Vleid with a grazed metal hand.

“Vleid, run back into the tunnel!”

“For what!? There’s nothing but a dead end there!”

“We’ll break into Siwk’s sunken nest, so just—”

*\*BAAANNGG!!!\**

Raeri’s order was cut short by a fierce roar from Hira’s sniper rifle. None of them were shot; only the ground at the entrance of the tunnel. Did she miss? That question was quickly answered when the ground rumbled and the entire tunnel floor was raised to the skies. Unable to escape, Vleid and Raeri were slammed into the tunnel ceiling. Thankfully, they were protected by their AW-Units and survived as the sun greeted their abrupt ascent. Brushing the dust and rubble off their bodies, they found themselves on top of an earth platform that snaked further behind them, making them realize that there was no escape even if they ran deeper into the tunnel.

“Man, oh man! You two alright? Look, both of you need to knock it off and realize that you’re being controlled already! None of them need that Recall Point there, the real enemy probably just wants their hands on your AW-Units. Come on, we don’t need to do this!”

Hira appealed to Vleid and Raeri, but as she expected, they responded with a coordinated attack. Raeri passed Senkyo’s recall point to Vleid, dashed to the edge of the earth platform, and jumped, catching herself using the same shield she used to defend against Hira. The shield she produced was a physical null barrier. Since it was a type of magic that could be fixed in place, it allowed her to use it as a floating platform to get close to Hira. Meanwhile, Vleid took the recall point, detached his AW-Unit Frame from his body, shoved it in a compartment in his AW-Unit Frame hidden by his back, and reattached his AW-Unit Frame, successfully locking it away.

“So we’re doing this, huh?”

Hira said with a sigh as she stored back her sniper rifle and reequipped the twin rods from her forearms. It would have been smarter to keep her distance, but her aim wasn’t to kill the two, she just needed to knock them out of commission so that she could collect the recall point.

Her enemies were Vleid and Raeri. Both of them were close combat fighters, but not to be underestimated by contemporary counters such as ranged attacks or maintaining distance. The reason for this was shown by their actions as Raeri tapped a scanner-like pad on her neck, making it glow white. Right as this happened, her figure disappeared from sight along with the barriers she was using as platforms. Then, on the ground, Vleid didn’t stay silent as he charged his metal suit. The massive AW-Unit Frame glowed orange all over and even his dragonic horn and scales fume with red. With his beastly roar, Vleid kicked the ground, leaving a large crater on the earth platform, and shot at Hira. The combination of the force he gathered on the ground and the rocket thrusters that blasted on the soles of his mech’s metal feet, his velocity was so fast that he became a blur in the sky.

If their target was a random person who was seeing their moves for the first time, then they would undoubtedly freeze in confusion at what was happening, but Hira was a classmate who analyzed the two’s mock battles numerous times. She knew exactly what was happening and exactly what to do to stop them.

Instead of summoning a pair of solid light blades, she slammed the tips of the rods together and removed them from each other. Then, solid amber light appeared and extended the length of the rods, creating one, long rod. She spun the rod around, leaving a trail of amber particles, and producing a combination of a battleaxe and a spear at one end of the pole. In other words—a halberd.

As Vleid closed in on Hira’s location, the amber particles that were released from the halberd’s creation turned dark purple, the color that embodied darkness, and the one that consumed the light that concealed Raeri’s assassination attempt. Around Hira appeared multiple copies of Raeri attacking from all sides. Normal clones were nothing to worry about, but clones that had high durability were a problem since their attacks could actually make contact. Durability refers to how much damage a clone can take or deal. The higher the durability, the more damage they can take or deal. This was determined by the core given to the clones, which was Raeri’s specialty.

A threat of high-durability clones coming from all sides and a massive asteroid-like body coming from below. The situation looked bleak, but this was clearly wrong once the clash finally happened. Just as Vleid was about to make contact with Hira, she quickly dodged to the side and swung her halberd at Vleid’s back. Raeri attacked in response to Hira’s movement and blasted her with magic.

As Hira’s halberd closed in on Vleid’s AW-Unit Frame, it was coated with a red hue as the massive heat began to wear the weapon. If nothing changed here, the halberd would melt before it even touched Vleid, but Hira already knew that. Her AW-Unit suddenly sparked with a fierce blast of amber light, one that coursed through her entire mech and even made her eyes shine a brighter shade. At that moment, a hint of pale blue entered her weapon, into the blade of the halberd, and produced a thick blast of ice and frost that froze the entire back part of Vleid’s AW-Unit Frame.

Thermal Shock. This was the phenomenon that Hira planned to take advantage of. From extreme heat to extreme cold, the abrupt change would weaken and crack the metal. However, not much appeared as Vleid seemed to have prepared for exact circumstances like this. Seeing as it was a clear weakness, it was no wonder he prepared for it. But, that didn’t matter anymore.

Overcome power with a greater power. That was exactly what Hira did when her uninterrupted swing crashed into Vleid’s AW-Unit Frame and completely ripped off his backside. Even without weakening his mech like she originally wanted to, the fact that Hira formed the axe especially so that it would be effective in penetrating Vleid’s AW-Unit Frame and that she used her body’s Pure ARCana sealed the dragon man’s fate.

As for the magic that attempted to harm Hira, they were all repelled with a flurry of hexagon-shaped machines detached from her AW-Unit Frame. She created a sphere of black chips that spread an even 30 centimeters apart from each other. No mana could pass her absolute defense.

**399 – The Living AW-Unit**

“Kghh!!”

“Vleid!”

From within the group of clones, the real Raeri exposed herself by speaking and rushing to Vleid’s aid. She forcibly detached his AW-Unit Frame from his body and collected the unharmed recall point from its storage. Hira wasn’t surprised it survived since she knew about the size and construction of that storage unit. She damaged his AW-Unit Frame just enough to destroy its core, making it unusable.

Carrying Vleid’s large body over her shoulder, Raeri returned to the ground using her barriers and checked for his vitals. It should have been clear that Hira didn’t do any major damage to his main body, but who would rely on such quickly asserted assumptions? Certainly not Raeri who valued the life of the dragon man, and anyone who had a person dear to them for that matter. Even if it looked like a person dear to someone only got a scratch, there are just some times when they can’t help but worry about their wellbeing.

In this situation, Raeri’s worry for Vleid took precedence over the memory monster’s influence, which is why she had yet to flee despite having the recall point safely in her hands. She might treat Vleid roughly but this shows just how much she genuinely cares for him. This proves that the biggest weakness of this type of hypnosis is the very element that it tries to take advantage of. The fact that it allows emotions to control the victims gives them chances to overwrite the orders given to them, even if not completely.

Hira lowered from the sky and caught Raeri’s relieved sigh when she confirmed that Vleid was not in a fatal condition. In fact, he wasn’t even unconscious. Hira could hear his coughs and saw his body slowly supporting himself. When he fixed himself in a good position to face her, Vleid spoke.

“It’s just like the rumors said… you’re a monster that sold their soul to apocrology…! I thought it was all bullshit at first, but that burst of power you used…! It was Pure ARCana wasn’t it!!?”

“Ya got that right!”

Hira’s eyes sparked with an amber light as she responded to Vleid’s decry with her unyielding energetic personality, sticking her chest out and wearing the truth like a medal. She affirmed Vleid’s accusations despite knowing that her practices were far from the accepted fields of apocrology. Her big smile irritated the dragon man, likely because she was absolutely unaffected by his deprecation.

“That AW-Unit… it’s built with Dwrol Stones, isn’t it? That’s the reason why my magic didn’t reach you.”

Raeri said, joining in on the conversation.

“That right! My AW-Unit, the Frame, and the hexagon-shaped chips that protected me all have dwrol stones in them! They’re the only stones that can repel mana after all, so it fits perfectly with my AW-Unit. With this, I don’t need to worry about losing the Pure ARCana my body is collecting!”

Pure ARCana. This is what apocrologists refer to as the residue produced by the use of an AW-Unit’s core, the ARC-Mana. The power source of the AW-Unit, the ARC-Mana, is typically located on the chest. It connects through other parts of the body using a specialized jumpsuit that can utilize them in tandem with spell crystals. The more activity the AW-Unit goes through such as instantly casting spells, or more commonly, connecting the jumpsuit to a mech, also known as the AW-Unit Frame, it wears down the ARC-Mana and produces a sensitive amber liquid that most have come to know as Pure ARCana.

At first, people treated it as a minor inconvenience since this amber liquid wasn’t even amber when it was discovered; it was transparent. This was because the first versions of the AW-Unit didn’t have any functions to lock away the mana in the air, which rots the Pure ARCana just like it does to corpses. The only reason people found out about the power of this liquid was when someone wanted to make a magic-proof AW-Unit and a matching Frame. They used dwrol stones in their build which not only repelled incoming magic attacks but also preserved the true form of Pure ARCana inside the mech.

After laborious research, apocrologists began calling the amber liquid “Pure ARCana,” a concentrated substance created from the ARC-Mana core that serves as another power source. When it is exposed to the mana in the environment or spirit power, the ARCana will lose its luster and rot. However, when it is exposed to a massive amount of mana at a single time, most commonly through exposed mana, it releases a powerful spark of energy. When it is uncontrolled, the newly produced energy will simply create an explosion. But, when it is properly processed, the Pure ARCana could empower the mana that triggered it. Meaning, it had the power to turn a simple low-tier fireball into a mid-tier spell or something that could even be called a borderline high-tier spell, depending on the situation.

“To think that you could become so powerful because you risked your life for a stupid gamble…”

“—It wasn’t a gamble.”

Hira’s bubbly tone suddenly turned ice cold as she disrupted Raeri’s train of thought. A gamble. Referring to her current power as that was nothing short of an insult.

“This is the vision that my Mom had for the future of apocrology. As a fellow Sorun, Raeri, don’t you get insulted by Sikrns? Even if they’re a small group, they still look down on us just because we can’t use mana the same way they can. Well, aren’t I just the perfect counterargument to that? No one other than Soruns can understand the deepest parts of an arcane structure. We’re the only people that can turn our own bodies into weapons to make something that no one else can!”

After finding her mother’s research about Soruns and Pure ARCana, she swore to herself that she would manifest her vision for her sake. To others, maybe it was nothing more than a child’s unrealistic aspirations, but to Hira, it was the last message that her mother left for her. Her mother would never lie to her and she was an excellent researcher who became an apprentice of a Hero to back up her claims. Who, other than her own daughter, would carry out her legacy?

“Everyone’s afraid, but that’s only natural when dealing with the unknown! Almost all of the theories that rejected my Mom’s research pointed at the fatal flaw of the user being exposed to dangerous elements. So what? In the end, everyone was just talking out of their asses without even taking the plunge to reject her research through real-life application! Just like how I proved the Sikrns wrong, I’ll trample those theories underfoot once I make a name for myself as the first successful person to turn their own body into a living AW-Core!!”

Hira’s amber eyes brightened once more. Neither Raeri nor Vleid could respond quick enough. Hira swung her pale blue halberd, releasing a blast of ice and frost in their direction. Raeri attempted to create a barrier, but a swarm of hexagon chips sealed the two in a tight 3D cut-out of their bodies, consuming all of the space for a barrier to form. With dwrol stones embedded into the chips, none of them could create a barrier outside of the seal. Just when Hira’s attack was about to land, the hexagon chips quickly deconstructed the seal, gave the magic space to enter, and reconstructed a seal around Vleid and Raeri with Hira’s attack inside the seal. This gave Raeri a chance to create some barriers even if it wasn’t much, but the fact that Hira’s empowered frost attack was sealed in such a tight space meant that the frost would be even more potent.

At this point, Raeri thought it would be a better outcome to destroy Senkyo’s recall point before they were encased in ice. Unfortunately, shock was what greeted her when she realized that the recall point was already sealed in Hira’s hexagon chips. She tried to break it out, but this seal was completely airtight with no space in between. With no other options, all Raeri and Vleid could do was accept their fate as cold, hard ice began to crawl up their bodies.

**…………**

“Phew… that takes care of that. Hmm… I should probably think of a better way to lock these two up before they freeze to death. Well, for now, I’ll be taking this.”

A solid case of hexagon chips floated into Hira’s hand through the hole she created in the dome of ice that encased Vleid and Raeri. The chips slowly dismantled the case, revealing Senkyo’s recall point.

“—Hira. Just in time, I have an update on Senkyo and Shiro’s situation.”

“Oh!? You do! What are you waiting for!? Spit it out!”

Picking up from Leolja’s last update, just before Senkyo began his rampage, Shiro was undoubtedly killed, or at least, her physical body was. Both Hira and Leolja knew that Shiro was half-spirit because she was Senkyo’s familiar. If the physical bodies of familiars are killed, as long as their spirit returns to the master’s body, then their lives would be saved and will be able to manifest at some point in the future. Still, this didn’t stop Hira from worrying about them. But this worry soon turned to surprise when she heard that Shiro soon re-manifested in the middle of Senkyo’s rampage.

They knew that familiars would be able to manifest again, but neither of them heard of a familiar that manifested in such a short amount of time from when her physical body was killed. Usually, the familiar would need to regenerate their energy to create a new physical body, which took a day at best and a week in worst-case scenarios. As if to scoff at these facts, Shiro manifested another physical body in less than five minutes from when she was first slayed.

With Shiro’s help in Senkyo’s blind rampage, they were able to kill all of the creatures the monster controlled and took both of the horns that were on the monster’s head. The fight resulted in Senkyo burning himself out and the monster fleeing the scene. At this point, Shiro kept guard of Senkyo’s unconscious body when a group of lizards suddenly showed up.

Neither Senkyo nor Shiro knew this, but this group of small lizards was slightly different from the Eozea. They had a high level of intelligence and took orders directly from the Hybrid Lord, Asier. Watching from afar, it seemed that the lizards successfully convinced Shiro, making her return to Senkyo’s body. Then, they proceeded to carry his unconscious body into their nest. Because of this, Leolja ordered Brigan to investigate what they saw. He would have liked to ask Asier directly, but most of the Eozea and Etriag in the nest had no idea how to differentiate a normal phantom threader from a phantom threader that was being controlled by Leolja, so anything he sent would likely just get killed. When he informed Brigan of this, he suddenly jumped out of the chair as if waking up from a terrible dream and marched his way into Asier’s nest. Of course, with a phantom threader hiding in his clothes so that he could maintain communications.

“I have no idea what’s happening over there, but at the very least it looks like everything calmed down, for now.”

Such was Hira’s conclusion. She was showing a few hints of being panicky after Leolja’s last report, so he was satisfied that this calmed her nerves a bit. But, despite everything, there was something else that really needed attention at the moment.

“Indeed. But, may I remind you that you have more urgent matters to attend to?”

“Huh? Like what? I got the recall point right?”

“Yes, I am happy about that, but you should hurry and undo your frost magic on your classmates before they die from the cold. Their AW-Units are still keeping their bodies warm but it will be dangerous once they break.”

“Huh!? WAIT, YOU’RE RIGHT!! Ah, wait, b-but, what do I do if they suddenly go wild and attack me!? I still don’t have anything to lock them down! W-W-W-W-WAAAIIITT!!! DON’T DIE ON ME! I’LL PREPARE SOMETHING SO JUST HANG IN THERE AND DON’T DIE!!!”

In the end, Hira eventually managed to secure the two safely along with their lives. Though, they might suffer from a light cold.

**400 – The Spirit That Seeks Vengeance**

A loud buzzing filled the cave tunnels with the flapping of Asier’s wings. Around him followed a horde of Eozea traversing the rough terrain while the Etriags buzzed along as they flew through the air.

“We’re almost at the Mainstay. Senkyo, do you hear me?”

“…”

Asier took a glance at the top of his palm where Senkyo was crouching on one knee. Ever since leaving the nest, he kept his silence, not responding to any of Asier’s words. It wasn’t as if something was wrong with him. Asier simply never expected his power to manifest this way.

“I can no longer tell if I’m still talking to Yukou Senkyo or a manifestation of his power, but none of that matters now. I can tell that you can still recognize my voice. Listen well, once you enter the Iwaiida nest, I need you to isolate the Thunder Wing and give us an opening to drag it out of the room without getting mind-controlled by that monster. Once you complete that goal, you can do whatever you want as long as you protect the Mainstay from destruction. Do you understand?”

“…”

He was unresponsive yet again, but Asier felt that Senkyo was preparing himself to fulfill his goals. Something was different with him. He noticed this just before they left the nest, which is why he opted to leave as fast as possible. He successfully passed down the Gjia Eaixih to him, but he had no idea what influence it had on him. But, a single fact was certain, and that was enough to convince Asier that his current constitution was not a problem. And that was: his bloodlust.

“Here we are!!”

Asier took Senkyo in his palm and threw him through the large opening above them. A new sight entered Senkyo’s vision. A wide expanse of space and a mighty pillar that stood at the very center of it. The pillar’s base was hidden beneath the surface of a river that was formed by a waterfall located at the edge of the cave. Despite being a nest for Iwaiida, there were no arachnids to be seen.

Around the pillar was a swarm of wasp-like creatures. Most of them were over the size of an average human, flying with their stingers out and their legs dangling. They had three pairs of legs in total with the lower two pairs reinforced with what looks to be a spiked shield, perhaps to protect their body, and with the last pair exposing scythe-like legs used for offense.

Among the swarm of wasps was another that spanned over ten times the size of the other wasps. Their leader, the Thunder Wing, buzzed around so fast that it was difficult to follow it with Senkyo’s eyes. With every flap of its wing released a wave of lightning that crashed into the Mainstay. The two antennae on its head seemed to be the one that it used to control magic as it lit up every time it summoned lightning. Unlike the other wasps, this one had larger wings and long legs that curled at the tips, making it closer to spider wasps than normal ones.

“Ha… hahaha… There you are, there you are, there you are…!”

Senkyo let out a low, scornful laugh as a certain creature entered his vision.

The last threat present in the room was the evolved memory monster that used its massive arms to break through the Mainstay. Parts of it were already crumbling. It wasn’t enough to break it completely, but leaving it alone would undoubtedly lead to its destruction. A curious part about the monster was that it was missing the two horns that once protruded on its head. Senkyo felt like he remembered doing something about it, but right now he couldn’t care less what it was. Everything in this room was an enemy. He wanted to charge at the memory monster, but remembering Asier’s words, he directed the anger of not being able to kill the memory monster faster at the Thunder Wing. Grinding his teeth, he let out a beastly roar as he created an air foothold and used flash strike to rush the oversized spider wasp.

Just before he got too far from the walls, a streak of light exited Senkyo’s body and landed on one of the cliffs on the cave walls that led to an opening in and out of the cavern. There, Shiro manifested her physical form and overlooked the situation from above. This wasn’t her first time fighting with this version of Senkyo, so she was unfazed by his wild demeanor. For now, she needed to fulfill the silent orders of his master. She didn’t need him to voice out what he needed; she already understood what to do.

Water began to form around Shiro and continuously flowed over the surface of her body. Then, on the back of her right hand appeared a light-grey crest. It had the shape of a tree growing inside a bright circle with its roots overflowing at the bottom. The very crest that Senkyo owned to prove that he was an Angel—The Crest of the Divine Soul of Spirits.

“Empty space, thou art the void that lacks the color of life. Wish upon mine aid, beseech the wonders of the world, and bethink thy forgotten age. I call upon thee, Lustrate Current. Incarnate.”

The flow of the wind all gathered behind Shiro, birthing a green body that released a constant soft breeze, making Shiro’s hair, ears, and tail dance with the current. A large green own formed and, with the flap of its wings, filled the cave with a zephyr that cleansed it of its impurities, clearing the hormones of the memory monster. The manifestation of the nature spell. Lustrate Current.

Right after, the water around Shiro’s body began to expand as she began another chant.

“Submit to the order, O Foolish King. Betwixt the rule of thy kingdom and the prosperous future, I impel thee to safeguard that which remains. Pass the decree, the embodiment of mine will. Encase.”

The body of water around Shiro exploded into the walls and spread over its surface. Unstopping, the waves of water continued until the entire cavern, including the Mainstay, was submerged in liquid. Then, it all began to freeze over, coating the entire cavern in a thick icescape. When the Thunder Wing and the memory monster attacked the Mainstay, not a single blow left even a mere scratch. Additionally, the icescape combined with the constant breeze that negated the memory monster’s mind control began to affect the Swarm as well. The cold slowly seeped into their bodies, making them slower and less active.

Because of this, Senkyo easily spotted the Thunder Wing’s location and threw a pile of rocks at it. The said rocks began to move by themselves and spread evenly within the Swarm. Seeing this, the memory monster switched its target and made a beeline for Senkyo. Before it could reach him, the same rocks got in its path and activated. Within the rocks, there was an element that clearly didn’t belong inside it. It was a piece of a Hkrwir fang. It had the symbol for Spirit that extended at the tip with a symbol of Domination and Repetition. Its circuit was a bit different from when he first used this contraption, but its effects were the same as ever and released a spray of deadly acid.

It quickly spread across the whole Swarm, penetrating their armor and melting their wings. The Thunder Wing maintained its flight longer than the others, but alas, it could not resist the rules of physics and fell to the ground with tattered wings along with the others. At that moment, a beastly roar made the cave tremble. From the shadows of a large opening at the bottom of the cavern appeared two floating bodies of purple. Then, a stampede of Eozea and Etriag charged into the cavern, attacking the wasps of the Swarm and taking them out of the cavern. When the Thunder Wing finally dropped, Asier’s figure appeared from the darkness and rammed into the Thunder Wing using the horn on his head, taking the entire Swarm out of the picture.

The memory monster tried to stop this from happening but it couldn’t get through the furious storm of Hkrwir acid. When Asier’s attack finally settled, a wide, bloodthirsty grin appeared on Senkyo’s face as his gaze pierced through the memory monster.

“Hehe… Hahaha!!”

**401 – The Path They Landed On**

Realizing that it couldn’t do anything to save its sole ally, the memory monster turned its back and opted to work on breaking the Mainstay.

“Where do you think you’re going!?”

Senkyo howled, giving chase to the memory monster. One after another, he created air footholds and used flash strike to catch up to it. The monster used its massive arms and the spikes on its wings to damage the Mainstay but to no avail. When Senkyo got in range, he swiftly drew a kunai and threw it at the monster. Piercing the wind, the tip of the kunai began to get coated in a red crystal. Meanwhile, Senkyo took another kunai that began to wrap in the same red crystal and stabbed himself in his left shoulder at the same time the other kunai made contact with the monster. As a result, both Senkyo and the memory monster spat blood from their left shoulders. Earning the monster’s wrath, it left the Mainstay and launched at Senkyo with the flap of its wings.

“Hahaha! That’s more like it! Let’s see what ya got!!”

Senkyo returned the kunai he stabbed himself with into its sheath, took out the twin bone daggers from his back, and activated the mechanism to revert them back to sickles. Charging at each other, Senkyo entered the monster’s reach and was greeted by the large spikes protruding from the monster’s wings. He managed to dodge both of them, but the wind pressure released by the wings pushed him back, successfully keeping him at bay. Taking this chance, the monster launched a rain of heavy punches using all of its six fists, pummeling Senkyo’s entire body.

“—hya-ha!! It hurts. It hurts. It hurts. It hurts. IT HURTS!! HYAHYAHYA!!”

Maniacal laughter escaped Senkyo’s mouth despite the skin and blood thrashing around him. Even when his muscles and bones were exposed, even when his left arm was ripped from its socket, his laugh refused to cease until a wave of energy was released from Senkyo’s body that made the memory monster’s innards freeze from the sudden pang.

“HYAHYAHYA!!! DO YOU FEEL IT!? THE PAIN FROM YOUR OWN ATTACKS!!”

“GWRAAAUUUGGHH!!!”

The sea of blood that Senkyo bathed in began to move on its own, filling the wounds and even his missing limb. His blood coagulated all at once, but not as a clot of blood, as solid red crystals. At the same time, the very same red crystals sprouted as spikes from the ground, piercing the memory monster’s skin.

Once Senkyo’s left arm regenerated in the form of red crystals, he picked up the bone sickle that he let go and used flash strike to crash into the monster’s torso, ripping a thick mass of skin and muscle all at once, causing it to spray green blood all over his body.

“HYA-HA!”

The monster struggled, and Senkyo caught its attempt to retaliate as he saw its scissor-like tail rise from the corner of his eye. When it launched at him, he reverted the bone sickle he was about to use into a dagger. Then, used the momentum that was supposed to rip another gash in its stomach to intercept the incoming attack, releasing the blade from its handle. The monster tried to deflect it but exploded upon contact. The reason for that was the clump of spirit power that gathered in the blade. Burst—an offensive technique from the Brute class that ignites concentrated spirit power. The more the spirit power, the more devastating the damage. To measure just how much power Senkyo collected, the fact that the monster’s tail was blown in half was a good reference.

“RRRAAAAAGGGHH!!!!”

Enraged, the monster grabbed the spine chain that connected the bone dagger’s blade and its handle and tugged it to pull Senkyo over. The abrupt force didn’t give him the chance to retaliate against the overpowering haymaker from one of the monster’s massive arms. The crash resulted in the destruction of the bone dagger that the monster caught along with half of Senkyo’s body. But, when the monster removed its fist, it also revealed that his heart and brain were completely intact as a result of defending himself with his crystal arm.

“YoU jUsT neVER LeaRn, hUH!?”

Even with his mouth and throat damaged from the force of the monster’s attack, he never failed to deliver the crazed fury in his muddled voice.

“WUUUURGHH!!!”

Another pang of agony assaulted the memory monster along with a plethora of red crystal spikes that rose from the ground and thrusted into its body. Sensing the impending danger, the monster instinctively opened its wings and flew away. With Senkyo being right in front of it, the strong force blew him in the opposite direction, giving it more distance.

In its quick escape, Shiro’s figure entered its vision. The whole reason it couldn’t take control of Senkyo was because she was keeping the air clear of its hormones. It didn’t know how, but instinctively, it knew that the green owl standing behind Shiro was the key to breaking this restriction. Instead of fighting a losing battle against Senkyo, all it needed to do was bring him back to its side. And the only thing standing in the way of that was the measly catgirl that had the power to release Senkyo from its control.

“RRRAAAAAAGGHH!!!!”

It accelerated its speed, shooting into Shiro like a runaway train. It twisted its body, charging all its power into a single punch from its massive arm. In response to this, Shiro simply raised her arm and outstretched it toward the incoming threat. On her unraised hand, the light-grey crest glowed once more. The water flowing through the surface of her body then crawled up her arm and formed a ball of water at the tip of her finger. This sent waves of danger to the monster’s head, but blinded by rage, ignored it and committed to its attack. Its massive fist arrived inches from the ball of water Shiro created.

“UUGGRAAAAA!!!”

“…”

It hit her. The memory monster’s attack undoubtedly hit Shiro. It even ripped off the arm she was extending and half of her body. But why? Why wasn’t she screaming? Why was there no blood pouring from her body? And why was it that it could no longer feel half of its body?

Before the monster even realized it, the damage it dealt to Shiro completely disappeared when her body rebuilt itself as if time was rewinding. In exchange, the arm it threw at her along with the two other arms on the same side of its body disappeared, creating a gaping hole on the side of its body. It wasn’t bleeding, but at the same time, it could feel that all the regenerative properties of its body ceased to function. The monster directed its glare at Shiro, but all it could see was a giant wave of water that crashed into its body.

The wave didn’t particularly hurt, but it applied an unimaginable weight on its body, making it smash to the ground. This was the innate power of the Nemi to create water that was rumored to possess the potential to rival that of a god. The Mythical Water of the Miracle Beasts.

“HYAHYAHYAAA!!! WAY TO GO SHIROOO!!”

Eclipsing the memory monster’s body from above was Senkyo. His body consisted of more red crystals, but otherwise completely unharmed. His blood-crazed eyes and maddened laughter could only be comparable to that of an insane person. A predator in its element.

“SUMMON SOULS: WRETCHED PAST!!!”

“Rise, ye feeble folk, heed mine call. The presence of the almighty sovereign brings His grace, may ye be a lowly Carl or a renowned gallant. I summon ye to arms, rush to His side, your supreme ruler. Emperor.”

A light-grey crest appeared on the back of Senkyo’s right hand. One with the shape of a tree growing inside a bright circle with its roots overflowing at the bottom. Shiro’s existing crest glowed the same way as they both spoke.

From Senkyo’s side appeared numerous clones of himself, all of them, past versions of his current self. Some of them had different clothes such as a uniform or even loungewear, and some still had their hair and their human bodies. But, they all had a single element in common, and that was the fact that they all came from times when he was troubled to his very core. This mostly consisted of his recent self, which explained the majority amount that mirrored his current self.

“HYAHYAHYA!!”

All of them rushed to the bottom where the memory monster could no longer stand. When they were about mid-way, Shiro finished her chant, arming the clones Senkyo summoned with large, deadly spears. A rain of spears penetrated into the monster’s skin from above. Not long after, the effects of Shiro’s mythic water finally faded, releasing it from its weight and shoving all of Senkyo’s clones away.

Perhaps realizing that it had no escape, the memory monster gathered all its remaining strength to blast from the ground and deal a single blow to Senkyo in a blind rage. Unfortunately, it would never reach him as a wall of his clones equipped with large shields crashed into the monster’s side, pinning it to the cave wall. More and more clones piled on its body until it could no longer move. Other clones equipped with spears poised themselves behind the shieldmen and poked through the gaps of their shields. The clones continuously stabbed into the huddle like needles relentlessly poking into a pin cushion. By the time the wall was splattered with green blood, the monster was riddled with holes, its wings completely tattered, and all the legs on one side of its body completely severed.

Its half-dead body fell to the ground with a disgusting wet noise. It attempted to pick itself up, but try as it might, the only parts left on its body were the spider legs on the left side of its body and the three arms on the right side of its body. Even if its legs were uninjured, the fact that its body was unbalanced would only give it enough power to crawl on the ground.

“Master! Stop playing around and finish this already!!”

Shiro shouted from the cliffside above, her brows furrowed in annoyance. Senkyo knew she could tell that he was only playing around at this point. It was the perfect time to release his stress, so he indulged himself a bit too much with his vicious urges.

“Alright, alright! Fine!”

He said, waving his hand in the air to brush off her scolding voice. He landed on the ground and faced the memory monster.

“Ya heard the lady, I’m ending this now. Don’t get any hard feelings now, this is all because of the grudge you cultivated; it’s your fault you ended up here. I’m only returning the favor. You killed Shiro once, after all. I’m just here to pay you back. An eye for an eye, they say… Ah, my bad… It won’t actually be that fair. You see, Shiro actually survived.”

His steady stride could be felt by hearing the sound of his footfalls as he approached the memory monster. It was at this time that a feeling other than rage or bloodlust filled the monster’s head. It was fear.

“I’m gonna collect a bit of interest. That being, your life. I’m sick and tired of everything and everyone pushing us around like a bunch of tools. Too bad. You just happen to be the only thing around. So, you’re gonna pay for all of that. Honestly, I didn’t need to go that hard on you at all. I didn’t need this power.”

The red crystals on Senkyo’s body began to crumble, revealing his unscratched skin. Just like when he first arrived in this cavern, his body was completely fine.

“The problem was me after all. I guess I have you to thank for making me realize that, not that it’ll change anything. None of this needed to happen, this is just how everything ended up happening. But I’m not all that cruel. You made for a great punching bag, so I appreciate your existence to some extent. As a little word of thanks, I’m going to make this as painless as possible…”

Senkyo took out his remaining bone sickle and turned it into a dagger. He stopped, took a deep breath, and uttered.

“…if only you hadn’t hurt Shiro, then maybe I would’ve considered that option.”

He declared coldly. The irises of Senkyo’s eyes inflamed. From left to right, the colors in his eyes changed at a rapid pace. Green : orange, orange : blue, blue : rose. He then threw his blade forward, biting into the monster’s skin. He jumped and pulled his body toward the monster. From around him, the wind began to gather and shape several spikes of high-pressure air. The typical result of Needle Storm.

The deadly wind overtook Senkyo and sunk into the monster’s skin. Then, it burst when the wind suddenly turned into raging flames, scorching the monster’s insides. The change continued and the fire turned to water, flooding its body and seeping into its deepest parts. It finally disappeared, but in actuality, it seeped into its skin and weakened it, sending cracks all over its body.

The memory monster made one last attempt for a desperate escape, but the joints in its body hardened before it even realized. As if to flaunt his poison, a single leaf that was fused with an Eozea’s scale fell onto the monster’s eyeless head. On it was a circuit of Spirit at the center, extending at the tip with Domination and Repetition. The same circuit he created to utilize the Hkrwir’s fangs. Now, instead of making it release acid, the circuit drew the Eozea scale’s inflexible property to harden the monster’s joints. Unable to take a single action, the monster could only await its impending doom.

“THIS IS IT!! DIEEEE!!!!”

Senkyo roared from the top of his lungs. The palm of his open hand held another Eozea scale. Just before he closed it to shape a fist, a large symbol of Spirit overlapped it and his hand.

“MORTAL FORGE, INTERTWINED SPIRIT!!”

His entire arm transformed into a body of hardened scales. From the sky, he crashed straight into the memory monster, sinking his hardened fist into its head, continuing all the way through its body until it all but crumbled. Soaked in a sea of green blood, Senkyo stood alone.

**402 – Another Day Passes in Iqanlr**

“Tsk! What a persistent pest!”

“Your words wound me.”

In a room isolated from the public eye was Gaeka, and standing on the windowsill of said room was Adeira. After working with his allies to rid of the teleportation network spread across Iqanlr, Adeira noticed another presence, one that attempted to flee from the scene until he put a stop to it. Chasing after the shadow, he eventually found out that their identity was Professor Gaeka. Adeira couldn’t have felt luckier.

“Do you want to die that much, Adeira!? I’ve been doing you the favor of quietly taking my leave, but you just won’t stop!”

“My, how presumptuous of you to assume that I would succumb to an early grave. After leaving you completely loose for all this time, do you truly believe that I hadn’t prepared for you, Blood Leader?”

“You cocky bastard! Fine, leaving a single casualty wouldn’t make any significant changes! It’s about time you pay the piper!”

Crimson blood began to coil around Gaeka’s body. Meanwhile, Adeira stared him down and deftly drew a hand of throwing knives from his back pocket. Right as Gaeka charged, a thick mist consumed the entire room. After scanning his surroundings, Adeira let out a disappointed sigh and returned his knives.

“He got away.”

Adeira hopped from the windowsill into the room he cornered Gaeka in. He approached the location where he last saw his figure.

“It couldn’t have been teleportation. As long as I’m here I can always disrupt it. But, there is no doubt that he suddenly vanished, so perhaps it was something similar…”

When he arrived at Gaeka’s last known location, the mist revealed a life-sized figure of his body. It was a completely pale inanimate object and it matched his exact form just before he disappeared. The details were perfect right down to the twitch of his cheek muscles.

“Substitution…huh? I never thought I’d be seeing this kind of magic today. I guess that means that he wasn’t alone, after all. My, what a troublesome bunch END is.”

Adeira took a device from his pocket and placed it on the life-sized figure. When he activated it, the figure disappeared from sight and Adeira turned his back to the mist-filled room, heading for the window he came through.

**…………**

In a dark room where natural light could not reach, only the faint flame from a torch served to illuminate the area. With how spacious the room was, all it could reveal was a small portion of the wall, the floor, and Gaeka who stood as if to attack someone.

“—DIEE!!”

A flurry of needles of blood blasted from Gaeka’s body into the darkness. Then, when he finally realized that he was in a completely different room from before, Gaeka halted his attack and searched the area.

“This is…”

“cAlm DoWN, BloOd LEaDer. HAve YoU TruLY cOMe HeRe tO dEsTRoy aLL of whAT I CulTIVaTEd? OUr ordeRS aRe OnLy TO ObsErvE unTIL THe BOY bEcoMeS A HfiXEsI. wE ArE ForBIDdeN frOM CAusInG anY troUbLE, yeT LOoK aT WhaT You’Ve doNe. yoU EvEN AtteMPteD TO KilL AN IMporTAnT KeystONE.”

The distorted voice chided Gaeka from the shadows. His brows furrowed from this.

“What? Are you telling me to fear you, who hides in the darkness!? Show yourself and tell that to my face!”

“tHIS Isn’T ABout me, bloOD LeAdeR. I am MeRElY teLliNG You TO REdEem YourSELF FrOm alL of yoUR FaILuReS BefOrE Our LOrD reTUrNS. ThIS iS ThE onLY ThiNg lEfT ThaT CaN ReCovER YoUR rePUtAtiON. i’VE stOppED yOU fRoM MaKiNG a GraVE misTaKE; You cAN RepAY ME bY LeaViNG THiS lanD. UnLEss YoU waNT Me TO drIve The FInAl NaiL IN tHE CofFIN, dO NoT Let mE FiNd YOU By NIghTfaLL.”

Just like that, the mysterious voice disappeared from the room along with its presence. Not giving Gaeka the chance to reply.

“Wait!! Where are you going!? Come back here!”

He howled into the darkness, only to receive nothing but his echoes.

**…………**

Just like Brigan said, slaying the memory monster returned almost all of its victims to normal. The reason this didn’t bring back everyone was because, in the end, the monster still fed on the memories of others. Every mind-controlled victim survived, but those who were used for sustenance were diagnosed as dead. Their minds were completely destroyed and all that remained were empty husks. This allowed Leolja to finally release the important figureheads of Iqanlr from webs that prevented them from endangering themselves along with others around them. The time was around midday when the citizens of Iqanlr began their recovery efforts.

At the bottom of the sunken nest, Senkyo’s consciousness slowly faded minutes after taking down the memory monster. The crest of the Divine Soul of Spirits disappeared from his and Shiro’s hands along with it. Asier returned and brought him and Shiro to Brigan’s lab located on both levels A3 and S. There, Brigan conducted all the possible health checks on him to ensure his safety. But, not before sending him to the bath where Brigan was forced to scrub him down due to the unbearable stench that came with the memory monster’s blood.

When Hira came back, she wasn’t too happy with the fact that no one used the recall point. She left them saying that it didn’t matter to her, but her true feelings clearly showed in her sour expression. She tried to break into Brigan’s lab to see Senkyo, but was caught and kicked out just like the other times she tried this stunt. Whatever was inside the lab, Brigan clearly didn’t want his daughter to see.

The death of the memory monster cleared up the jumbled memories of the students and staff of Xhiari, allowing them to reinstate Adeira as an instructor and send rescue trips to students, staff, and even to the general public who became victims of this incident. They also took responsibility for resupplying Adeira’s lab after the break-in that happened.

In the middle of all of this, Asier surfaced from the sunken nest along with the Eozea and Etriag that followed him. As expected, after everything that happened, everyone panicked when one of the Predators of the sunken nest suddenly appeared with an army of Eozea and Etriag. Thankfully, Adeira and Leolja calmed everyone down and explained the situation. Asier took this chance to transform his body into something more compact.

For 17 years he had been waiting to leave the nest and explore the outside world. He knew that it would be ill-suited to walk around in his large body, so he used the power of the Gjia Eaixih he guarded to make it so that he could turn his body into something that would be compatible with the surface dwellers. Now, his body became similar to an Aagri like Vleid, but instead of being a complete dragon man, he had half-beetle properties like the horn on his head and the forewings and hindwings on his back. Since not all his followers had the same level of intelligence he had, it was his responsibility to manage them so that they smoothly converted into Risers.

Just like that, the ceaseless march of time continued as the curtains slowly closed on another incident in the Border City of Iqanlr.

**403 – Siblings**

“…nhh… mnnnh…?”

“Oh, you’re finally awake. Here, I’ll let you out now.”

Light peered into Senkyo’s eyes as he rose from his slumber. What greeted him was a man standing across a glass pane. From what he could tell, he was inside some sort of capsule. He gathered the memories he could recall while the glass pane slowly opened.

Brigan. That was the name of the man in front of him. He was the Mad Scientist of the Battery as well as Hira’s father. He met him when he woke up after receiving the Gjia Eaixih from Asier. That’s when the flood of memories kicked in, and it finally dawned on him.

“I… remember… the memories I lost… and the memories after that… I remember everything.”

“That’s good. I don’t need to explain what happened until now. You can get out of there. I finished gathering data I needed a few hours ago, all I was doing was waiting for you to wake up.”

“…Huh? What time is it now?”

“3:47 in the morning. It’s almost been a whole day since you lost consciousness. You must have been really tired. Well, I guess it’s only natural. All the ruckus died down, so you can question me all you want. But first, why don’t you settle things with your partner? I’ll be in the other room when you’re ready to talk.”

Brigan said before turning his back on Senkyo and leaving the room. It took only a second to process what he meant. He could never forget what happened between him and Shiro after he lost his memories.

“Shiro, are you there? I want to talk to you.”

“You called for me, Master?”

It was impossible for her not to know the answer to that question. Whenever Shiro is in his body, she can pick up the same senses he perceives. She heard what Brigan said and feigned ignorance to make it easier to enter a conversation.

“Yeah…”

Senkyo averted his eyes for a second when he heard Shiro talk normally.

“…Um, you don’t use third-person speech anymore, huh?”

“Yes. I thought it was about time I grew up and let go of the past. Before being a Nemian, I am your familiar, Master.”

Since they were only kids, from the very beginning when they first met, Shiro had always referred to herself in third person. This is because it is one of their customs as Nemians to do so. Her mother, father, friends, and townsfolk all referred to themselves in third person. When Senkyo questioned her about this as a child, Shiro answered with a folktale.

Long, long ago, there was a time when the ruler of Nemians was decided through the power of the mythical water they created. Almost the entire population gathered to compete in this competition. With countless rows of water buckets lined up, the people dipped their hands and gathered their power to see who could make the most potent water in a set amount of time. It took almost the entire day to decide the victor, but right when everyone thought the ruler was decided, a child snuck up the stage and dipped their hands into the victor’s bucket.

*\*What’s so great about this? Pmil can do better! \** said the boy named Pmil.

The people saw this as the natural playful whims of a child. The boy watched what the adults were doing and decided to copy them. Even though he didn’t understand the weight behind the competition, he climbed the stage and imitated them for attention. Not a single person took the child seriously and laughed, amused by the child. But when someone came to finally remove him, they noticed that the bucket was completely different.

Shocked, the hosts of the event made numerous checks to try and understand what had happened. They eventually came to the conclusion that the victor’s mythical water was overwritten. The bucket was still filled with mythical water, but the victor could no longer control it. Then, who was it that had a more powerful connection to their core to be able to make mythic water stronger than his?

It was the child who snuck up the stage, the only other person who touched the victor’s bucket of water. In a shorter amount of time given to all of the contestants, the child overwrote the victor’s mythical water, deeming it more powerful than his.

*\*Pmil can do better!\** the confident claim from the child crossed through everyone’s minds.

Now that the truth was revealed, none of them could laugh anymore. Even the victor, who had the title of “strongest” taken from him by a child, could only leave his mouth agape in shock. He wasn’t mad, simply awestruck. A single child bested the entire village in terms of power. He, who came as the second strongest, could only wonder what had happened.

In the end, the result was voided. Even though the rules said that the strongest would rule the village, no one could let a child be their head. It wasn’t only a matter of pride, but also the fact that he was clearly unsuited for the position. They may be powerful, but there is a huge difference between strength and wisdom. This tale was passed down to prove that, to remind the adults to not be conceited, and to encourage the younger generations to reach for their full potential.

But, when the question was asked: what made the child so powerful? Were they born talented? Was it some kind of accident? Everyone would answer: it was because he called himself by his name. Elders of the time concluded that calling themselves by their own name would allow the Nemi a stronger connection to their core, thus creating a more potent mix of mythical water. To this day, none of it could be proven, but that didn’t stop the Nemi from adapting this into their customs.

In other words, this was Shiro’s declaration that she was willing to leave everything in the past behind. By detaching herself from her homeland’s customs, she would dedicate herself solely to being Senkyo’s familiar. At the same time, she would leave behind her fond memories with Senkyo as a child so that she could further dedicate herself to the present Senkyo as a familiar. If this wasn’t the case, then Shiro wouldn’t have changed the way she called him right before they entered the sunken nest.

“Is that so? Then, there really isn’t any going back, huh? Even if I wasn’t my normal self, I still pushed you to this point…”

“You don’t need to think of it like that, Master. You lost your memories and acted like you would with the memories you did have. You don’t need to blame yourself.”

“No, it might sound good if you put it like that, but that’s not an excuse for me to let everything slide as if nothing happened. The fact is that I still hurt you, whether you think it’s for the better or not. I want to make it up to you. I’ll do anything; just say it! If I don’t do something here, then…”

Senkyo’s voice trailed off, leaving his next words unsaid. Not that it mattered. Shiro still understood that he would be bearing this guilt deep in his heart whether or not she ordered him to do something. This was just something to clear his conscience. You could say it was for his own sake. But… she found this as a perfect opportunity to give him a piece of her mind.

“If you really want me to order you, then… From now on, Master, you will see me as your equal. Not as a little sister who needs protection, but as a partner who will be by your side no matter what happens!”

She declared, pointing her finger at his face.

“Before the memory monster attacked, you already realized that you needed to have me fight in the frontlines to bring out the familiar pact’s full potential. But, instead of ordering me to do that, you kept quiet just to keep me away from danger. I don’t want any more of that behavior from you! Even if I get hurt, even if I die! You will forever have me by your side as an equal—as your partner! Is that clear!?”

Senkyo fell silent after hearing what she truly felt. Thinking about it now, the events of the past two days could have been much less chaotic if he had just accepted her as an equal. The purpose of the familiar pact was to deepen the relationship between master and familiar, but the fact that his relationship with Shiro was already set worked against it. If Shiro asked this of him before he lost his memories, he could see himself reluctantly accepting, but not truly adhering to her will. But now, after everything that happened, Senkyo only had a refreshed feeling in his chest. Not because he knew the right answer, but because he realized that this was just a part of Shiro’s growth. He had been sheltering her all this time, but now it was time to let her make her own decisions. After using her to the point where she broke, he at least owed her this much as compensation.

“Okay. Loud and clear.”

He could now say that he accepted Shiro’s decision from the bottom of his heart. But, to his surprise, Shiro wasn’t done.

“—And! In exchange for spoiling me in the past, I need you to give me ONE selfish request to even it all out!”

“What??”

“You heard me! Give me one request! You can think of me as your OLDER sister for today. It’s my time to spoil you. This is the only time I’m doing this so make it worth your while.”

An older sister… No matter how Senkyo looked at her, partner or not, he couldn’t see a single hit of that behind her figure. Of course, he kept these thoughts locked behind a poker face, ensuring that he wouldn’t cause any needless ruckus by letting Shiro pick up on his real thoughts. But, her face was serious. He didn’t see a pleasant future for him if he didn’t give Shiro something to work with. As luck would have it, he didn’t take long to settle on an answer.

“Uhmm… then, if you say so… Instead of ‘Master,’ could you go back to calling me how you usually did? It just doesn’t feel right with ‘Master.’”

“W-What!? I… I can’t do that! I just decided I would dedicate myself to being your familiar! Calling you how I did in the past is the same thing as turning on my vow!”

“But you said anything was fine…”

“Anything but that! Why do you even want me to call you that anyway!?”

“I mean… e-even if we’re partners, I still want to treat you as family. Ah—it doesn’t need to be as a little sister, but I… you know, without Dad and all… technically you’re my only family left so… I just, um, didn’t want to… lose that too…”

Shiro could clearly tell Senkyo was having a hard time maintaining eye contact with her, even if she didn’t look at him. The amount of pauses and filler words he brought up clearly showed his nervousness. The great steel wall inside Shiro that she called her resolve slowly began to melt with his clumsy articulation and wholesome reasoning. But still, she couldn’t let herself fall here, so she compromised.

“I… still can’t call you how I did in the past, but… I guess I can still call you my older brother. So…”

Shiro brought her hand to her face and pinched her chin in thought.

“‘—Anigimi!’ That’s what I’ll call you from now on!”

Senkyo couldn’t believe his ears.

“HUUUH!? JUST WHAT PERIOD DO YOU THINK WE’RE IN!? IT’S THE 21ST CENTURY, YOU KNOW!?”

A swift rebuke came from him, destroying the wholesome atmosphere and successfully making Shiro’s cheeks red from embarrassment.

“Wh-What’s your problem!? I-I just wanted to make it as close as possible to the same formality that ‘Master’ has! If you don’t want it then let’s go with ‘Onii-sama’ or ‘Aniue!’”

“U-Urk… can’t you just throw away the formality? The formality is the problem here! I don’t like it!”

“AHH, stop complaining and just accept it!! I’m already compromising here!!”

“No! Shiro-nee-chan said that she’ll be the older sister today, so I’ll take the proper role of the little brother and whine until I get spoiled and get what I want!!”

“Tsk.”

“Eh?”

Senkyo was trying to break the ice by being a bit selfish like Shiro wanted, but the click of her tongue felt like he broke something else he shouldn’t have. With his mouth agape, he awaited Shiro’s next words with bated breath.

“Oni.”

“Huh?”

“ONII!! THAT’S WHAT I’M GOING TO CALL YOU FROM NOW ON AND THERE’S NO GOING BACK! YOU CAN BE THE OLDER BROTHER AND THE MEAN OGRE!! IT FEELS LIKE YOU’VE BEEN BULLYING ME EVER SINCE WE GOT TO THIS WORLD SO IT FITS YOU PERFECTLY!!!”

Senkyo’s face paled, but he couldn’t deny its compatibility after everything that happened. “Onii” was an informal form of addressing an older brother, just like what he wanted. But, it could also be heard as “Oni” meaning “Demon” or “Ogre,” which seemed perfect after he initially coerced Shiro to come with him on his journey across Zerid and when he hurt her after losing his memories. All he could really do against this was look blankly into space as his mental ashes were slowly taken away by the wind.

“—BESIDES! YOU ACTED JUST LIKE A DEMON WHEN YOU TOOK DOWN THE MEMORY MONSTER! YOU BASICALLY EARNED THE TITLE!!”

“Huh?”

The color in Senkyo’s face returned when he picked up something strange in Shiro’s words. Shiro, who still looked peeved, gradually calmed down when she saw his puzzled expression.

“What? What’s wrong?”

She asked.

“Um… it’s just… I don’t remember killing the memory monster at all.”

**404 – The Cursed One**

After Senkyo noticed his still missing memories, he and Shiro decided to move to the other room to question Brigan about it. There, they found him standing in front of a computer with a large screen connected to three human-sized glass tubes. The middle was filled with a red liquid while the other two beside it were empty. Noticing the two’s arrival, Brigan turned to them and greeted them.

“Are you two done settling your sibling quarrel already?”

Albeit teasingly.

“Don’t mind that now! Brigan, I said that all my memories returned earlier, but that wasn’t actually the case. I can’t remember how I fought the memory monster.”

“Hmm… is that all? Are there any other gaps missing in your memories?”

“I consulted Shiro just before we came here. Almost everything returned except for both of the times I fought the monster. When we first ran away from the memory monster in the sunken nest, I apparently turned on it and attacked it. Then, the second time I fought it was apparently the time I killed it. But, I just don’t remember both of those.”

He thought for a second. Then, moved his hand away from his chin and crossed his arms. Reaching a conclusion, he delivered his words looking Senkyo straight in the eyes.

“Both of those are the times when you went on a rampage.”

“A… rampage? Wait, didn’t you say that you made something to get your vengeance on Professor Gaeka? Is that what it was!?”

He glared at Brigan accusingly, making him raise all four of his hands as if to surrender.

“Now, now, calm down. You’re absolutely correct that I’m the one who made you rampage, but I’d like to clarify that it was an emergency. Even I didn’t want to use it as it was, but Leolja said that both of you would die if I didn’t do anything so I reluctantly used it, okay? Reluctantly! Your familiar should remember, why don’t you ask her?”

“Mn. Brigan is right. At that time, we were caught by the memory monster. I don’t know if you remember, but my physical body died at the time and was forcefully sent back to your body. But don’t worry about that now, I’m already fine.”

Senkyo’s eyes widened as he heard the story. Now that Shiro reminded him, the memories of her getting killed returned. A grim expression showed, but Shiro already reassured him of her safety, so he steeled himself to swallow the painful memories. But, that’s all that returned. After that happened, no matter how many times he told Shiro to explain in detail, the memories were blank. He made her explain the events that led to the second fight in detail as well, but no new memories showed up. All he knew was that they cut off the moment Asier threw him into the cavern.

“This is only a theory of mine but…”

When Senkyo’s probing came to a dead end, Brigan took this chance to return to the conversation with a shocking claim.

“—I think that Senkyo’s personality split into two.”

It was absurd, but the more Senkyo and Shiro stood stunned, the more time they had to process that they couldn’t actually deny the claim. Brigan continued, explaining his train of thought.

“First, let’s talk about what I used to make Senkyo rampage and what this ‘rampaging’ actually caused.”

He extended his hand toward the three large glass tubes in front of him, directing their gaze to it.

“This is something I created after learning of a revolutionary piece of technology. The credits go to a woman named Hizli. Sometime around a year ago, I returned to this lab after a little excursion for materials and engaging with other apocrologists. Miss Hizli was one of those I talked to and she was generous enough to give me a copy of her research materials. I recreated my own version of the device she built, which forcibly separates mana from spirit power.”

Brigan opened the computer and pressed a button to activate the device. When it did, bubbles began to rise from the bottom of the tube.

“It might look like nothing is happening, but that’s just because the glass I used makes it so that it will be difficult to detect the mana and spirit power inside it. To make it clear what’s happening, you should look at the screen.”

Senkyo and Shiro shifted their focus from the large tube to the image Brigan brought up on screen. On it was the image of two separate bubbles inside a tube. One was shaded in blue whilst the other was in red and the background was filled with faint grey stripes. The red bubbles were freely flowing in the tube while the blue ones blatantly avoided the red bubbles, and when they got cornered, they forced the red bubbles away.

“The red bubbles represent spirit power and the blue ones are mana. As for the grey stripes, they’re the substance inside the tube—Senkyo’s blood.”

“What!? There’s no way you collected this much!”

Senkyo said, recalling Leolja’s confession of swiping samples of his blood. But, even so, he couldn’t wrap his head around the thought of him being able to collect so much that it filled a large glass tube.

“You’re right, this isn’t actually all YOUR blood. To make you rampage, I needed to add MY OWN blood into the mix. The two empty tubes on both sides used to contain that. I slowly and carefully collected them day after day, preserved them in these tubes, and prepared them when I was about to control you. All the blood Leolja actually managed to collect was about one vial. Half of it was placed into the middle tube while I used the others for different machines I’ll be introducing later, but let’s focus on this one. Look here.”

Brigan brought their attention back to the screen.

“This is a mechanism that separates mana and spirit power. And you, Senkyo, are the only source I know that can create and hold purified calamitous energy, in other words, the creation element. This element is birthed from the harmonious merging of mana and spirit power. Now, what do you think would happen if I process that in a machine that forcefully separates them? As you can see on the screen, it separates them just like it should. But, what happens if I turn off the machine?”

When Brigan proceeded to do just as he said, the bubbles stopped flowing into the tube, and the red and blue bubbles on the screen began to merge with each other.

“…They merged back.”

Shiro described what she was seeing.

“Exactly. Just to make it clear, this machine doesn’t TEMPORARILY separate them, it processes mana so that it PERMENANTLY avoids spirit power. Yet when I stop the machine, the mana and spirit power merge right back as if they’re magnets. When separated, it is no longer the solidified form of the creation element, but when the machine turns off, they merge back and return to being the creation element.”

Brigan switches to a different tab and shows a simulation of all three tubes working together. It shows a process of the blue and red bubbles separating in the middle tube, then shows green bubbles that are in the other tubes pouring into the middle. The green bubbles then separate into gradients of red-green and blue-green bubbles, making the red-green mix with the red and the blue-green mix with the blue. And finally, when the machine turns off, the mix of red- and blue-green bubbles form into one.

“The green bubbles represent my mana and spirit power. As you can see, we Zeldians innately have significantly less spirit power than mana, shown by the larger amount of blue-green bubbles compared to red-green. They all mix into the center where I essentially force my own mana and spirit power into Senkyo’s mana and spirit power. When they merge, it turns my own mana and spirit power into the creation element. Because it is technically a sample of creation element that was also created through my own spirit power, I am able to control it to some extent. I was able to prove this about a year ago using a sample of creation element I still had in the past in exchange for exhausting that resource.”

A sample of creation element. There was no doubt that it caught Senkyo and Shiro’s attention, but they held the urge to ask and watched on silently as Brigan continued after gauging their reactions.

“This allowed me to infiltrate Senkyo’s mind at some point. But at that time, I used new blood samples I collected separately after learning that you arrived in Iqanlr. I was still able to use the creation element freely and completed my goals. Unfortunately, there is one fatal flaw. I cannot use this for a long time. It consumed the mana and spirit power I fused with yours and used up the new blood I saved in only a minute. Although it was a bit faster than my last experiment, it was all according to my plan.”

The screen showed an image of the green bubbles in the two tubes forming a single blob in each one.

“To make you rampage and successfully kill Gaeka, I saved up blood for almost a year and amassed two tubes of blood. The problem was that the spirit power which resides in them all formed a single thought. As you might be able to guess, it’s my hatred for Gaeka and basically a huge clump of vengeance. At some point, I figured that my present thoughts and willpower alone would not be able to control the rampage. But, I was confident that nothing would go wrong since thoughts of how I would use you to kill Gaeka always filled my head whenever I extracted samples. The instructions of what I needed you to do were practically embedded into the clump of vengeance. All I needed to do was confirm that nothing would go wrong despite this…”

He paused and let out a sigh before continuing.

“After I first infiltrated Senkyo’s mind, I noticed one thing: whatever I did, I couldn’t connect to his Gjia Eaixih. To enact my whole revenge plot I needed 3 things: Gaeka, Senkyo, and him having obtained his Gjia Eaixih. When I heard Senkyo arrived at Iqanlr, I hoped with all my might that he would have his Gjia Eaixih. It was the only thing that was missing from the equation and I thought that I’d be able to fulfill my revenge earlier than I ever expected. That excitement was probably what led me to make a miscalculation.”

Brigan turned to Senkyo and asked.

“You should be able to remember this, but I asked you something similar when you first woke up in front of Asier, right?”

“Yes. You were talking about Diving Weapons, Gjia Eaixih, and Empyrean Catalysts… or something along those lines.”

“Essentially, those are all tools handed down by the gods to the Ambassadors. In other words, anyone who possesses them would have made contact with the power of a god. And, you Senkyo, have a specific seal that locks away your rapid regeneration. An ability that you already possessed when Leolja began collecting your blood. The condition for that particular seal just happens to be: to make contact with the power of a god… do you get where I’m going with this?”

Senkyo was clearly shaken by this answer. He recalled that he activated Kuro Yaiba’s release factor in a blind rage. There was no doubt in his mind that it was that power that fit the description of the “power of a god.” He managed to give a proper response but couldn’t keep silent any longer.

“Are you saying that because I made contact with a different power from a god, I unlocked the seal for my body’s rapid regeneration? Mistaking it as a sign of me obtaining my Gjia Eaixih, you jumped the gun and proceeded to enact your revenge. Then, only when it was too late did you realize that I didn’t actually have my Gjia Eaixih.”

“Correct.”

“Wait, hold on! How do you know this much about me!? Are you saying that I’m an Ambassador? How did you even know that I have seals in my body!? How did you know the condition for one of them, something that Shiro doesn’t even know besides her own seal!?”

“Don’t rush. It’s literally only about 4 in the morning. You have the whole day to question me about everything; I’ll answer all of them. You just work on consolidating your thoughts and thinking about which questions to ask. But, just to temporarily satisfy any misgivings you have of me, I’m going to give you this: I was one of the people who were very close to the previous generation of Ambassadors. If you want something to reference me at that time, call me Tatari. It’s my curse.”

**405 – The Birth of A Myth 1**

Brigan continued the discussion, focusing on the subject of Senkyo’s rampage. Using the machine he built, he managed to influence the creation element extracted from Senkyo’s blood and used it to control him. The reason that the small creation element sample wasn’t being exhausted was because all he was actually doing was using it as a medium to control Senkyo, he wasn’t actually using it to cast creation magic, so all it did was consume the spirit power from Brigan’s blood in exchange for temporary control.

As he said before, Brigan realized that there was no possible way to connect the clump of vengeance that he had to a non-existent Gjia Eaixih. He tried to find a way around this problem but to no avail. Then, the time arrived when Leolja came to seek his aid. The two determined that there was no other way to save Senkyo and Shiro other than forcibly empowering him, so he activated the machine and used up all of his preserved blood.

As a result, this took control over Senkyo’s body. The very first order that came from Brigan’s influence was to use the release factor of Senkyo’s Gjia Eaixih, which he didn’t possess at the time. In exchange, he entered a state of madness that was similar to activating a release factor using all of the existing resources in Senkyo’s body. This overflowing power used the clump of hatred in Brigan’s blood as a catalyst and created a completely different personality, or so Brigan’s theory goes. None of them had any concrete proof of multiple personalities, but judging from the fact that every memory returned except for the two times his personality went wild, it wasn’t impossible.

They proceeded to record what Senkyo actually gained from “switching personalities.” Senkyo and Shiro both synchronized perfectly and used the advantages of their familiar pact. This allowed Senkyo to fully share what he was capable of with her. Magic, mana, spirit power, creation magic, and even the power of his divine soul; Shiro was able to use everything. However, Brigan added that this was no doubt a special case. There have been records in the past when both parties of a familiar pact reached their full potential, but that didn’t involve making the familiar a carbon copy of the Master’s power. This case was only possible because of Senkyo’s creation element, Brigan claimed confidently.

At this point, Shiro could no longer keep Senkyo in the shadow about him being an Angel. It wasn’t only because of the conversation, but he also remembered that he used chantless casting when his mind-controlled body fought Shiro. When Senkyo asked her to explain, Shiro went about how his father, Yukou Yuuto, wanted him to discover the crest’s existence only through his own power. Technically, this was achieved when Senkyo’s other personality used his crest in both of his battles against the memory monster through his own power and will, so Shiro reluctantly accepted this outcome.

To summarize, Senkyo’s rampaging allowed him to synchronize with Shiro, expand his use of creation magic, and use his Angel’s crest. He tested all of these to see if he retained the power. When he ordered Shiro to use creation magic, she was able to do so without difficulty. Brigan explained that when both familiar and master reach a certain level of familiarity, it typically stays that way unless both parties have a terrible falling out. When Senkyo first rampaged, his and Shiro’s emotions became one, allowing them to reach this level of familiarity. Of course, with such power, Brigan advised them not to flaunt it too much to others.

Senkyo then attempted to use creation magic. The only spell he knew that used creation magic was Deconstruct, so Shiro conveyed the other spells that she used. Those being Incarnate, Encase, and Emperor. Both of them had no prior knowledge about creation spells. Just like how Senkyo first learned Deconstruct, the other three spells came naturally to Shiro’s mind. But, instead of using one of these four spells, Shiro suggested that Senkyo use a milder application of creation magic.

Right at the end of his second fight against the memory monster, his split personality used what she described as a low-tier spell of creation magic. Just before he cast Needle Storm, his eyes cycled through several colors. Green, orange, blue, and rose, all of them representing a respective element, those being nature, fire, water, and control. When Senkyo finally shot out his Needle Storm, he managed to change the mana structure of the Needle Storm into a completely different magic, creating an explosion of flames, again turning into water, and for a final time, turning it into control magic that weakened the monster.

Senkyo did as Shiro explained and created a simple fireball. After a long process of trial and error, he eventually made it so that it could turn into a water ball, a clump of wind, a snowball, and a ball of light.

Lastly, Senkyo tried to use spirit power. Here, he was at a loss for what to do. And as it turned out, he didn’t need to do much. Shiro called out to someone, which caused a voice to echo in his head. It was an unknown voice, but their true identity was apparently the Divine Soul of Spirits. He always kept himself a secret from Senkyo, but now that he was able to draw out the crest’s power, he voluntarily revealed himself to Senkyo.

He told him that the fact that Senkyo was able to conversate with him meant that he was recognized as a rightful holder of his divine soul. He has been for a long time, but he hid his existence from Senkyo because he didn’t want him to become dependent on his powers. Supposing that he could have used his divine soul in the past, then they would never have learned to survive using their own strength. Even now, he still advised Senkyo to use him sparingly. He only revealed himself so that he became more careful of how to use his powers. Of course, if the situation begged for it, the divine soul said that he would speak up for Senkyo to use him.

After talking with his divine soul for a while, Senkyo found it inconvenient that he didn’t have a name. He asked about it but said that he had no name. Senkyo accepted that and gave him a name of his own. It was a very simple one. Nanashi was the name he gave his divine soul, and that was because Nanashi also meant “no name.” Shiro and Brigan chuckled at this while Nanashi apathetically accepted.

This signaled the end of their discussion about Senkyo’s “rampage” and they moved on to talk about Brigan’s identity.

It turned out that Brigan was one of the apprentices of a Hero of the past generation of Ambassadors. Specifically, he was an apprentice of Professor Konjou Masao, one of the best researchers and innovators of his time. He was quick to create new inventions with every wave of passion that struck him. This became even more apparent when he became an Ambassador and discovered Zerid and the Spirit Realm.

This surprised Senkyo and Shiro after hearing a familiar name. Konjou. The family name of their spirit companion, Konjou Ryosei. Professor Konjou Masao was apparently Ryosei’s grandfather. Brigan recognized the name “Ryosei” since Masao frequently talked about him. At the time, Masao took in only two apprentices in Zerid: Brigan and Hira’s mother, Yoea. Brigan and Yoea met as total strangers, attracted by the blinding talent that radiated from Masao. Day in, day out, they worked together with Masao, watching him, learning from him, and applying that knowledge to the task given to them or their own personal work.

The days passed and eventually turned into years. Brigan’s relationship with Yoea advanced to levels that they didn’t expect. They became married and had a child of their own named Hira. She was a cheerful kid who spent most of her time trying to figure out what her parents’ research papers were saying. They didn’t expect it, but she was actually able to comprehend some of their works at a very young age, not completely, only to some extent, but that didn’t discredit the fact that Hira seemed to be a genius.

Everything seemed like the future was bright for them until they got wind of a disturbing piece of news. “One of the Heroes could be fake.” Masao conveyed the information to them to make them aware. They apparently found a person who claimed to be a Hero. When they tested him, he showed all the qualities of being a Hero, but it was also undeniable that all five of the current Heroes had the same properties. Then, why was that? Little did Brigan and his family know that the situation would only grow worse after that.

In the middle of a certain night, Masao returned with a close friend, and a fellow Hero just like him, Yukou Yuuto. Both of them were badly wounded and it seemed like Masao was even bleeding from the center of his chest. When Brigan asked what had happened, the professor brushed it off as a little scuffle, something that everyone present knew was a blatant lie. Then, another person entered the room. It was a child he had never seen before named Senkyo. Yuuto claimed that he was his child and wanted Masao to help bring him to Earth. Yuuto thought that it would be too dangerous for Senkyo to remain in Zerid. That was all Brigan heard before the two entered a private room.

Never did Brigan expect to be placed at a crossroads that night.

He didn’t know how, what, or why, but something began attacking their lab. The research papers were scattered all over the ash and rubble, most of them burning in the flames. He first tried to call out for the closest person to him, Professor Masao, but he was nowhere to be seen. Worried, he got up and ran through the building to find Yoea and Hira. For minutes he continued running, searching, and shouting to the point where his breath was heavily labored. His efforts had yet to bear fruit. Then, his heart dropped when he heard a scream from a familiar voice coming in the distance.

Brigan activated a machine on his wrist that concealed his presence and rushed to the source, pushing his body to the limit and not caring for the ashes that he took in with every breath. His legs managed to carry him over to his destination. There, he saw his wife, Yoea being lifted off the ground by a suspicious old man. The large black bat wings on his back suggested that he was a vampire. Right as Brigan was about to charge into the room to save her, a voice shouted in his head. It was the voice of Yoea. She used Connect, a technique they learned from Masao that allowed telepathic communication. She spotted him in the distance before he could do anything reckless and stopped him.

Why? Yoea told him that Hira was hiding in one of the emergency capsules inside the very same room she was in. The vampire in front of her was named Gaeka and his purpose was to find the research papers that she penned. Those papers just happened to be with Hira at the time, secured inside a capsule that blocks out detection of mana and spirit power, a safe place for it to be.

Yoea warned Brigan. “Never set foot into this room until it's safe.” That voice was all he needed to hear. It was all he needed to hear to realize that Yoea had no intention of surviving that tragic night. He wanted to disregard those very words and pull Yoea back to safety, but what could he do? His wife chided him for thinking of abandoning his responsibilities as a father. What would happen if he died along with her? What would happen to their child? Who would be left to protect her? Brigan couldn’t answer and hesitated. In the middle of Yoea’s internal spiel, tears fell from her eyes. She realized that he had been silent against Gaeka for a while now. When she looked at him in the eyes, she quickly recognized that they were the eyes of someone who lost patience.

The very next second, Gaeka took Yoea’s life in cold blood. Brigan witnessed every second of it and his mind turned blank. His mouth opened as if to scream, but no sound came out only to maintain his cover. If he died now, then Yoea’s sacrifice would have truly been for nothing. Internally, he screamed and let out his frustrations while his body trembled as if it were about to break.

When Gaeka finally left empty-handed, he slowly staggered to Yoea’s dead body. He slumped to the ground and held her cold body. She placed her back on his lap and held her closer, allowing her blood to smear him as if to hold him back. Then, another voice echoed in his head. It was the voice of the man that both he and his wife looked up to. Masao.

The man left him a message. He apparently tried to contact Yoea but couldn’t, so he was the only person he could trust to leave the last piece of information he could convey. Senkyo was apparently a special existence. He learned that he was someone who could purify calamitous energy and turn it into the creation element. This was proved by the few samples that they took earlier. He said that Yuuto would be sealing his memories of his connections to Zerid, but he would eventually be back to right everything that was wronged, and he appealed to him to support him in the future.

A prophecy made by their fellow Hero predicted that he would one day arrive in the border city of Iqanlr. He then told him about three of the seals that locked away his power. The first required him to experience a near-death state to release the seal on his familiar, the next required him to make contact with the power of a god to release his rapid regeneration, and the other required him to reach a certain amount of familiarity with his familiar to release his ability to share his power and senses. These three conditions were all Brigan could hear before Masao’s voice suddenly cut out. Masao was also using Connect, so it wasn’t like a radio or a smartphone where their signal could easily sever. It meant that he was in a situation that disrupted his focus. For a man like Masao, he couldn’t imagine the reason for that to be something simple. That was the very last time Brigan ever made contact with Masao.

In a single night, he lost his loving wife and the person he admired. What would have happened if he ignored Yoea’s warning and tried to protect her? There was no use thinking about it now. This was the path that he ended up taking.

After that night, he took Hira, the samples of the creation element that he found hidden in Masao’s office, and any important research with him and fled the scene. He visited everyone he knew who was connected to the ambassadors and got wind of the news that they were all chased away by a single Hero that impersonated as one of them. He went to the Konjou clan to deliver a report of everything that happened to Masao’s children and found out that Freda was now supporting the insides of the clan. After sharing information with Freda, he gave the Konjou clan the research papers he could collect on the new inventions that Masao created. One of them contained the plans for a teleportation network, which eventually became greatly used in the Konjou clan. That was his last contact with the Konjou clan before leaving for Iqanlr.

**406 – The Birth of A Myth 2**

Brigan and Hira began living in Iqanlr. Being hailed as the forefront of Zerid’s technology, their research facilities did not disappoint, but they were still behind the research that Masao usually conducted. Brigan needed to secure a base of operations at some point but he couldn’t just get a laboratory offered by Iqanlr. He didn’t want anyone to see what research he would be conducting. He had samples of the creation element, so everyone would go insane if they found out someone among them researching something like that. While he was trying to figure out where to set up, he met someone unexpected at the bottom of Iqanlr’s sunken nest.

His only purpose was to gather materials for his research but he ended up meeting someone named Asier, a crossbreed that was clearly different from everyone else that lived in the depths. He had intelligence that allowed them to communicate, which helped him ask about the strange power that came from his body. A power that he became sensitive to after spending so many years with the Ambassadors, a weapon from a god.

Brigan asked about this and discovered that Asier was a guardian of a Gjia Eaixih. He was in disbelief to have found someone like him, but a question remained to be answered: Whose Gjia Eaixih did it belong to?

Asier gladly answered Brigan’s questions in exchange for him answering his questions. He apparently wanted to know much more about Nwen, the person he received the Gjia Eaixih from. Brigan couldn’t believe that Nwen had died, but the fact that Asier had become a guardian of her Gjia Eaixih was solid proof of that. After a long and fruitful exchange, Brigan and Asier formed an alliance to support each other for both of their goals. When Brigan asked for a space he could use to set up a lab, he was directed to a large space between levels A3 and S. He spent his years in Iqanlr, occasionally leaving to gather materials for his research and exchanging information with other apocrologists until the day Senkyo arrived.

Once he finished his story, Senkyo and Shiro began asking their questions. The first one, of course, was the third condition he heard from Masao to unlock one of Senkyo’s seals: to reach a certain familiarity with his familiar. Shiro confirmed that this condition was accurate. After all, a seal was released the moment Senkyo first went on a rampage. Shiro couldn’t find the right time to tell him. Her plan was to tell Senkyo about it after everything calmed down, but she didn’t expect Brigan to be the first one to bring it up.

Even though Senkyo and Shiro didn’t know what conditions and abilities his seals had, Brigan knew from Masao. The Professor was last seen with Yuuto, so he most likely conveyed the conditions to Masao, which he then tried to give to Brigan. The third seal that was unlocked gave Senkyo the ability to “share his senses and abilities.” This explained why Brigan was so confident when he explained his thoughts on why Shiro was able to imitate Senkyo’s capabilities. They already experienced how to share abilities but they never experienced how to share senses. The two attempted to activate this but were at a loss. In the end, they couldn’t make it work and pushed the subject aside to progress the conversation.

The next topic was something Shiro wanted to talk about. She wanted to know more about what Brigan knew about Senkyo and Yuuto. Unfortunately, Brigan already told her everything he knew about Senkyo. As for Yuuto, he didn’t interact with him much except for the times he visited their lab. He had no clue why they arrived bloody and why their goal was to bring Senkyo to Earth. As compensation, Senkyo was informed about the truth about the three worlds; the incident of 17 years ago where the efforts of the previous ambassadors were erased from Earth and the Spirit Realm along with the memories of those who lived in them, setting back the advancements of the two worlds.

After that, Senkyo wanted to know more about Masao. He was a Hero of the last generation, Ryosei’s grandfather, and the previous holder of Kuro Yaiba. His weapon was undoubtedly destroyed in battle but was repaired by a spirit smith called Raqeav, successfully turning the broken blade into the Tampered Blade, the pseudo-Divine Weapon made from Kuro Yaiba. Hearing this, Senkyo unsheathed Kuro Yaiba, eliciting Brigan’s surprise.

He told Brigan to examine the blade and what its condition was. Apparently, the blade housed no spirits, making it as strong as a decorative sword. Senkyo and Shiro attested that it was once powerful, so Brigan could only conclude that the spirit left the sword. When Senkyo began thinking about it, he strengthened his previous suspicions of Ryosei needing to be with him to draw out Kuro Yaiba’s power. Since it was in its fragile state, Brigan searched through his storage and found a strong container that could store both Kuro Yaiba and its sheathe.

Satisfied with the information, they proceeded to move to the next topic: Freda. He mentioned that he met her at the Konjou clan and they asked him why she was there. Brigan said that Freda wasn’t specific with her words, but she did say that she became a Lost Maiden, the catalyst that held the power to bestow the title of Ambassador to the chosen ones of the new generation. He then proceeded to tell Senkyo all the fine details of the weight that comes with the title of being an Ambassador and the weapons that they hold such as the Divine Weapons, Gjia Eaixihs, and Empyrean Catalysts.

Freda never told Brigan about the identity of this generation’s current Ambassadors, but he was certain that Senkyo was a Hfixesi. This was because a Gjia Eaixih had already been given to him directly by Asier, the guardian of said Gjia Eaixih. But, Brigan doubted that the title of Ambassador was given to Senkyo yet.

When he was asked to elaborate, Brigan reminded him that Freda, the Lost Maiden, kept his title of being a Hfixesi from being given to him as a precaution against enemies that would take advantage of their inexperience. Back when Senkyo fought the memory monster for the second time, he noticed that Senkyo was barely able to use the power of the Gjia Eaixih given to him. All he did with it was manifest the power of the previous holder of the Gjia Eaixih, the Divine Soul of Torment. Usually, the Gjia Eaixih should have adapted to Senkyo’s Divine Soul, but it retained the power of the previous holder instead. This gave Brigan the suspicion of him not holding the title yet.

In an attempt to confirm, Brigan asked if Senkyo felt any strange signs he called “Fated Winds.” They were apparently signs given by the gods to support their efforts as an Ambassador. Since he didn’t have his Gjia Eaixih before, Brigan wanted to know if he felt any signs that led to meeting Asier. Senkyo said that he didn’t feel anything of the sort and that his meeting with Asier felt like the result of many people anticipating the very moment he arrived at Iqanlr.

Because of this, Brigan concluded that it was more than likely that he didn’t have the title of Ambassador and advised him not to rely on the Gjia Eaixih that he obtained due to the fact that he didn’t have the ability to draw its full potential. Strictly speaking, he told him not to use its Release Factor. All he would be doing was asking for trouble if he tried to use something that he didn’t have any right to. The result of Senkyo gaining a split personality was a good example of this, so everyone including Nanashi agreed.

Finally, they arrived at the last subject that Senkyo and Shiro wanted to know more about. Who exactly was Gaeka?

Brigan explained that the true identity of Gaeka was the Blood Leader of END. When he first encountered Gaeka in the destroyed laboratory, he had yet to become a Leader. According to an inside man he had in Nrjia, the Fallen Kingdom of Vampires, Gaeka became the Blood Leader because of his efforts to destroy the Kingdom from the inside. The ultimate cause of Nrjia’s demise came from Gaeka, who betrayed his people and allowed the Kingdom to be conquered.

Brigan was there in person to witness Njria’s fall. At the time, he was in Uirdun, the border city of Frukaui and Ridsikrn. He asked the fleeing vampires what was happening and they said that the Kingdom was being invaded by END. He participated in building up Uirdun’s defenses. When he was using his technology to scout the enemies, he found that Gaeka was among them. Furious, he blindly charged into the enemy and decimated the threats. Unfortunately, he couldn’t penetrate their forces fast enough to catch Gaeka. In the end, the object of his hatred retreated and that was where his name as the “Tatari” became prominent.

Curious, Shiro asked why Brigan chose such a name. He then explained that it was nothing more than an inside joke between him and Yoea. More oftentimes than not, whenever he collaborated with Yoea, he would make silly mistakes that normally wouldn’t come from a man of his caliber which led her to call him “Tatari” or a curse. But in that moment, the name that was born from simple teasing became his malediction against Gaeka.

The reason Gaeka was present in Iqanlr was likely because he overheard Masao’s conversation with him and discovered that Senkyo would someday visit Iqanlr. This would only mean that he was the last known person to see Masao. If anyone wanted to find Masao their best clue would be Gaeka, which only made Brigan want to beat him up even more.

Once Senkyo and Shiro’s questions finally settled, Brigan went to ask Senkyo something different. He asked about the girl he saw when he first infiltrated his mind. He described her features in detail, making the two realize that he was talking about Yuu. He asked about her background, naturally making Senkyo suspicious.

Before continuing any further, he wanted to know the reason he was asking about her. So, he took out two pieces of paper from a nearby drawer. They were photographs. This led to their discussion about the eldest daughter of the previous king of Nrjia, Rnriai Mszekrnlr. Her other name—Hisho Yuu.

**407 – The Birth of A Myth 3**

After ending their long discussion, they took a short break before resuming the next subject. When Senkyo and Shiro entered the room, Brigan handed Senkyo a card.

“What’s this, an identification card?”

Senkyo mused aloud before reading the contents.

“It’s named to… ‘Eksert of the Vjzasu’ has the role of Voyager and holds the name of ‘Roaming Ace…’”

“It’s a name I came up with a bit of wordplay; it's faulty to begin with so there’s no danger of anyone suspecting you for your name. To anyone, it won’t mean anything, but to me, it means ‘he who proves the myths.’ That’s gonna be you from now on. At least, while you’re here in Zerid.”

“Me…? So this is my disguise?”

“Yep. I’m sure you already know from experience, but there are a lot more people who know you than you think, so stick to this fake identity to keep away from unwanted trouble. That is the specialized identification card that Leolja advertised. You know, these things actually need blood so be thankful that Leolja found you before anyone else did. With this, you should have no more identity problems.”

Senkyo scrutinized the card both front and back while listening to Brigan’s explanation, taking mental notes of its features. It wasn’t much different from a card on Earth but he could sense the mana flowing through it. Noticing an obvious discrepancy between this and usual identification cards, he pointed it out.

“This… isn’t completed yet, right? It doesn’t have an image of me yet.”

Senkyo said, pointing to an open space on the card.

“Yeah, I’m planning on doing that once I give you everything I need. Armor and everything. Unlike what you have on Earth, identifying people with looks is unreliable in this world since there are Zeldians have one way or another to imitate looks, so this is nothing more than a formality, but it's also used as a secondary reference. Usually, as long as the Owner Ascription doesn’t show any errors then you’re fine.”

“Owner Ascription?” He parroted. “What’s that?”

“Oh, I guess you wouldn’t know much about apocrology, huh? I’ll explain the bare minimum for now. We can continue later if you want.”

“Sure, that’ll be a lot of help.”

Shiro was a local of Zerid, but she didn’t know about the latest developments in this world since she lived in her village all her life before meeting Yukou Yuuto, so she had something to gain from this lesson as well. Brigan then proceeded to give the two a crash course on basic apocrology and how the technology worked. Senkyo’s final questions were about the information written on his card such as Voyager and Roaming Ace

“—so basically, a Voyager’s job is to keep Sunken Nests from going out of control and balance its ecosystem. The Roaming Ace is a title given to the best-performing Voyager, so it’d do you good to complete missions given to you in one or two days upon arrival just to prove your power. Both of these combined make you exempt from the two mission per month requirement to maintain your status as an active Crawler. Instead, your quota is once every three months. This is something like a consideration since you’ll be expected to travel far distances. Of course, it’s up to you if you want to maintain the active status, but don’t come crawling back to me if your card expires…”

He stopped himself and looked at the ceiling, pondering before he continued.

“Wait, I can’t do that… Ugh, whatever, just don’t let it expire so that I don’t need to pull more strings, okay?”

It seemed like he remembered his responsibility to help Senkyo and backtracked. It was nice to know that Brigan would be able to do something about his identity problem, so he took a mental note about his quota just to save him the trouble. It was the least he could do.

“You got it.”

When Senkyo assured him of this, Brigan then walked to another room and signaled the two to follow him. While they were walking, he asked.

“By the way, where do you plan on going after this?”

“Hmm… Somewhere north-east. Either Nrjia or someplace around it.”

“Oh, is that where you sense your girl?”

After their talk about Yuu earlier, Senkyo realized that he couldn’t continue his journey without learning how to use his blood to some extent. Specifically, the creation element inside his blood. It was basically an extension of his will. Brigan guided him on how to use it based on his research. What he first wanted was to know how many signals he received that were outside his body. He received a highly concerning amount of signals from every direction, which meant that samples of his blood were actually scattered all over Zerid before he even arrived.

He couldn’t do anything about that at this point, so Senkyo opted to search for Yuu, specifically. The signal came from the northeast, just as he initially expected her to be. As for how Yuu managed to get a sample of his blood, the memory of her sucking his blood came to mind. It felt like it happened years ago but he could still vividly recall her biting into his skin and sucking out his blood. That incident ended with them making a bit too much contact than intended… but he realized that he shouldn’t think about that anymore with Shiro giving him the death stare.

The point was that Yuu drank his blood. At the time, Shiro’s seal had yet to be released, the same seal that contained his mana and mana manipulation abilities. Yuu failed to detect any mana from his blood and believed that Senkyo wasn’t the person she was looking for. Although, she did realize it was some kind of mistake at some point seeing as she eventually tried to take him to Zerid.

The blood that Yuu first sucked from him could be considered an inactive state. When Shiro’s seal was released, the blood she consumed became active, allowing the creation element to flow in her veins. Of course, Senkyo kept this thought process all to himself considering what led to this conclusion… not that it kept Shiro from being suspicious. It was a good thing she wasn’t there when it happened.

“Anyway, here’s the gear I prepared for you. These are the fruits of hard work in the past 17 years I’ve been waiting, so there’s no doubt they’re of top quality.”

When they entered the new room, Brigan brought them to a table that had two blades displayed on it. A katana and a wakizashi. They both had lustrous silver blades with sheathes of blackened sheathes and red cords decorated both sheathes and the handle of the blades. Upon close inspection, the ornaments on the blades’ handles called a Menuki, and the small fragments at the center of the piece of metal that wrapped around the base of their blades called a Habaki, both had a different shade of black, closer to grey.

They were apparently made from the remains of the memory monster. Namely, the two horns that Senkyo managed to take off on their first fight. Brigan took them along with him and used them for materials. He clarified that he did this after confirming that the memory monster was dead and that the memories of its victims returned. He claimed to be ready to destroy them if it somehow tried to revive from the horns. Thankfully, that didn’t need to be done.

“I knew you could use the creation element, so these blades are based around that. They can be used to conduct every magic element. It also has Circuits engraved at the base of its blade that was specially made to have the creation element flow through it.”

Senkyo checked the blades when he said this, confirming that there were two symbols of Spirit on the blade, one engraved on each side of the flat of their blades.

“It's just a symbol of Spirit made using the samples of creation element I had, so you can use your own to extend or modify the Circuit to whatever the situation needs. As for the memory monster’s horns, I don’t know if they’ll have any lasting effects, but I did put them in just in case it does. The monster seemed to have the ability to evolve depending on what it consumed, so I thought it wouldn’t hurt since it’s similar to you, in a way. I made them so you can take them out just in case they end up hindering you.”

Senkyo did a few practice swings with the two blades. Not even Ryosei had experience of using a wakizashi in the past, so his movements were a bit awkward, but he didn’t complain. If worst comes to worst, he would just save the wakizashi as a reserve and keep fighting only with a katana.

They moved on to the next table where a plethora of small unknown devices were spread all over.

“Take these with you. From left to right, you have the D. Scout, R. Explosives, Recall Points, Recall Crystals, and Iordr Metal Accessories. The first two have simple names, but let it be. I wanted to make them specialized specifically for you, but I didn’t have enough information to do that, so they have strict requirements that you already fulfill based on the knowledge I had of you.”

The D. Scout was apparently an abbreviation of Device Scout, they were a set of white hexagon-shaped devices that could build a small spy drone and detach itself to save storage space. They use spirit power to activate. It uses the light element to send the image it catches into a contact lens that displays the image either on its surface or projects it for others to see. It is also capable of invisibility, again, using light magic.

The R. Explosives are an abbreviation of Remote Explosives. They are small circular devices with an orange gem in their center, which happens to be a fire gem. They are activated by destroying explosives that are linked to each other through Spirit Circuits beforehand, so they cannot detonate by themselves, or in technical terms, being unlinked. These devices are as flat as disks, allowing them to fit in a tight storage space. They can only be used through spirit power, so most Zeldians would have no way to disarm them, and they also had an invisibility function.

Senkyo and Shiro already knew the existence of Recall Points and Recall Crystals, but they didn’t know their inner workings. The Recall Point was a hexagon-shaped metal device that could go invisible and the Crystals were orbs with colors of purple, blue, and red. They can only be configured with the recall point and the crystals being near each other, again, using Spirit Power. Many crystals can be connected to a single Point, but their connection cannot be severed no matter the distance apart from destroying the recall point. Already connected crystals cannot connect to other Points without severing the existing connection. Destroying the crystals activates the teleportation, but can also be forcefully activated using the Spirit Power of the person who last configured the devices, but doing so also breaks the crystal.

Lastly, Iordr Metal, meaning Spirit Metal. Its other name was Grudr Metal, meaning Glassblade, the same material Kuro Yaiba is made from. Senkyo was familiar with it when the jester he encountered in Naen explained it to him. But apparently, they could also act as external storage for Spirit Power, which is what Adeira used to make the Recall Point and Crystals at Brigan’s request. Brigan was giving them to Senkyo as accessories so that he could have an alibi for using spirit power.

“I’m handing you 2 D. Scouts, 50 R. Explosives, 3 Recall Points, 25 Recall Crystals, and 10 small accessories of Iordr Metal.”

“What? Isn’t that a lot? I don’t know if I have enough space for that.”

“Ah, you don’t need to worry about where to put them. I calculated everything so that your armor can fit every single one of these! Everything!”

Brigan puffed his chest confidently, boasting about his work.

“Really?”

“Yep! Follow me.”

**408 – The Birth of A Myth 4**

Brigan showed them to a cavity in the wall that had two stands that displayed an azure jumpsuit and a set of black metal armor. Senkyo and Shiro recognized them to be an AW-Unit and an AW-Unit Frame, respectively. The Frame was endowed with four arms, making it unlike any they had seen before.

“This is your very own AW-Unit set. Different from the common external-type Frames, or so I like to call them, this is an internal-type, the same type of AW-Unit Frame that Hira uses. The external-types are typically just oversized weapons but these internal-types that my daughter made are absolutely amazing! They actually give you the feel that they’re combat suits. But I can’t really blame anyone else for not having them since they only work with Hira because she’s a prodigy! Oh, but you can also use them because you have the ability to use spirit power with mana. It also has the power to utilize Pure ARCana but not on the same level that Hira can; she’s special. You could say that any Zeldian can do the same with enough Iordr Metal, but they won’t work as efficiently as the one personally built for Hira! Oh, and you.”

“…Ah, haha…”

All Senkyo could hear was him boasting about his daughter while purposefully setting him aside, but he left that unsaid and sealed it behind with a smile.

“I made them so that they can detach and attach to your body using spirit power. It uses the same concept the D. Scouts have. I’m sure you noticed that it has one more pair of arms than you do. This is because the race that ‘Eksert’ is registered to is the Vjzasu, a race that has four arms, six eyes, and no mouth to speak with. Most of them communicate by writing words in the air using solidified mana, so I’m going to have you practice the same later, but for now, let's focus on the Frame.”

From out of nowhere, Brigan began unbuttoning his suit. This took the two by surprise but understood why he did that the moment he revealed what was hidden under his clothes. He had been wearing an AW-Unit this whole time and there was a thin sheet of metal wrapping around his diaphragm, one that provided him with an additional set of arms.

“I’m sure you were wondering why a Sorun like me has four arms, so this is the answer. The other set is fake! How do I control these you ask? Well, that’s because I also have a familiar! Uw, show yourself!”

A ball of light appeared at his chest and shot onto his shoulder, manifesting a small brown vegetable-like faceless cartoon character… it was the same creature that saved him from Gaeka when he attacked him at the library.

“This is my little assistant, Uw. He’s from a race called Inwa, which all look very alike, so don’t confuse my Uw with Adeira’s Inwa. They’re the ideal familiars that researchers can have since they are highly adaptable and tenacious. They have almost no fighting prowess but are extremely hard to kill, especially when they become familiars. The only way to kill them is to starve them to death or strike their hearts once they run out of mana, which they never use even when they essentially die. Meaning, that they can only truly die to someone with the ability to drain their mana. Their survivability spikes when they’re contracted to others since their master serves as an extension of their mana pool, and even if their cores are pierced when both the Inwa and master have no mana, as long as the master is alive, they can return to them and regenerate their bodies.”

Uw frolicked innocently from shoulder to shoulder, reminiscent of a child. It would sometimes stretch its body and use Brigan’s neck as a pole to swing itself around with elongated arms.

“As you can see, they like to play. Very much. They’re essentially harmless and also have the ability to stretch themselves and anything they consume, allowing them to eat food and other large solids. Their tenacity makes them perfect test subjects for new weapons or experiments. Oh, before you think this is inhumane or anything, this is a mutual agreement from both sides as per familiar contract so no need to worry.”

Uw stretched its hand to a large thumbs-up to support his statement.

“Their abilities to stretch also prove useful for reaching high, tight, or multiple places at once…”

Senkyo recalled when Adeira’s familiar squeezed its body through the floorboards of Xhiari’s library and stretched itself large enough to consume his body whole. As if reading his mind, Brigan used that very scene as an example.

“… and even consuming large objects to transport them, just your little scuffle at the library.”

“That was… a unique experience to say the least.”

Senkyo replied with a grimace, recalling the sensation of being handled like a fragile package by intentionally spiteful couriers.

“Are you saying that I was shrunk to their size when it swallowed me whole?”

“Yes. Their bodies have a high concentration of control magic, which allows them to be this way. They can easily shrink any solids they consume but they have a harder time dealing with liquids and gases. If you’re afraid of getting dissolved by their gastric juices, then you’d be glad to hear that they can control their production at will. They don’t produce them when transporting and do when eating. The only thing to keep in mind is to wait for an hour after feeding them before storing items to let their juices dissolve.”

Uw turned back into a mass of light and returned to Brigan’s body. He moved his two real arms and two artificial arms, extending the artificial ones to Senkyo.

“I’ll teach you more about them later and have you make a familiar pact with an Inwa. But for now, let’s get back to the main subject.”

It felt like Brigan just brushed over something absurd but he didn’t give Senkyo the time to cut in. Senkyo shaped a wry smile and tried his best to keep up with Brigan’s enthusiastic speech.

“You can control these extra arms manually using the AW-Unit, but you can also let your familiar control them.”

He crossed his real arms while the artificial arms began moving animatedly, gesturing his every word.

“Having a function like this helps me go through my work faster and multitask more efficiently. I taught Uw how I do my work and now he knows what I want before I even ask for them. This can also apply to fighting if you want to, assuming you have someone that’s experienced in fighting as your familiar.”

Senkyo nodded, understanding what Brigan was trying to convey.

“So you’re telling me that Shiro can control the extra arms on the AW-Unit Frame instead of me?”

“Exactly. You see, the Vjzasu can wield multiple weapons and cast numerous spells at the same time. Some even cast magic while clashing blades. They’re a multi-skilled race that is perfect for you to imitate. Their history will allow you to use the most out of your skillset without seeming suspicious. The only drawback is that you can’t speak and you have to communicate by writing your messages in the air using solidified mana.”

“I see… you really thought all this through, huh?”

Senkyo was genuinely impressed by everything Brigan had shown him. It was the perfect guise to walk through Zerid without getting into too much trouble. Hearing his words, Brigan paused for a bit and stared at his creations with eyes that seemed to look past the physical realm.

“Of course. I didn’t dedicate 17 years of my life to show something half-assed. Besides, sooner or later you’ll probably find yourself faced against Gaeka again. As much as I hate to admit it, I won’t be able to kill Gaeka in a fair fight, especially now that he’s a Blood Leader. The very least I can do is contribute to that bastard’s demise. So…”

Brigan turned to Senkyo with the most serious look he had directed to him so far, his most earnest feelings reflecting in his eyes.

“Please, bring our family justice.”

His body bent in a clean 90-degree angle, his tone of voice devoid of its usual playful ring. He could feel his great reluctance in his breathing, If all possible, he wanted to take revenge using his own hands, but he knew better than anyone that he didn’t have the power to do that, which led him to pour all of his heart to his work in hopes that Senkyo would carry the spirit of his grudge.

“‘He who proves the myths,’ huh?”

He recalled the name that he gave him. A smile cracked on Senkyo’s lips. After everything he discovered, especially what he learned about Yuu…

“Our feelings couldn’t be more in sync.”

He let out a small chuckle.

“I’m going to extend this chain of vengeance for just a bit longer.”

**409 – Evergrowing Iqanlr**

Gathered in a familiar room, Asier opened the door and entered in his Aagri-like form.

“I apologize for making you all wait, everyone. It took a while to teach the Esoer about processing Risers.”

“Ur good!”

“Don’t worry, we understand.”

“I just finished handing over my gift to Senkyo. I’d say you made it just in time.”

He was greeted by Hira, Senkyo, and Leolja, respectively. They were all on the second floor of Arachne Tailors inside Leolja’s office. This meeting was initially something Leolja requested of Senkyo yesterday but Hira and Asier happened to be nearby to hear the conversation. Hira insisted on letting her join while dragging Asier along with her. She succeeded in doing so under the guise of seeing Senkyo off before he left the city. Well, she likely honestly meant that to some extent so no one could refuse her.

This was the morning after Senkyo spent a whole day with Brigan gathering information and receiving the technology he created for him. Hira arrived in Leolja’s office before Senkyo. This was because he was busy preparing for his leave early in the morning such as organizing his items and returning the books he borrowed from Xhiari.

Curiously, Senkyo was able to take two books along with him. One of the books was “Foundations of the Familiar Pact Ritual; The Truth Behind the Binding Circles,” the book that Ranat gave him, which didn’t need to be returned to the library. He did try to give it back to her, but she refused saying that she didn’t need it. The other was “Calamitous Energy: The Essence of the First World, Primo,” the book that Shiro introduced to Senkyo. For some reason, when they tried to return the book, the librarian said that there were no records of having such a book in their catalog, even when they double-checked, nothing came up. Senkyo quickly took advantage of this opportunity to pretend it was a mistake and took the book with him. He felt a bit bad taking what wasn’t his, but there was no doubt that the book he had held more secrets that he managed to reveal, so he didn’t want to part with it just yet.

“I see. What kind of parting gift did you receive, Yukou Senkyo?”

“Oh, uhh… Something… interesting to say the least…”

Senkyo turned to Leolja with a grateful nod and a knowing look while the recipient of his gesture gave a deep nod. Their vague exchange couldn’t help but make someone else burst into frustration.

“Ughh!! Seriously, what was it!? I knew I shoulda snatched it when I had the chance!! Why won’t you show iiitt~!?”

When Senkyo first received the package, he only took a slight peek inside before storing it in his bag. The reason for this was painfully obvious. With Hira jumping around him and pestering him for what was inside it, he felt the need to hide it just to teach her a lesson. There was a small scuffle when Hira tried to take it from his bag, but Senkyo’s new familiar, Chi, gobbled it up and hid in Senkyo’s clothes, completely escaping her reach.

Chi was the name that Senkyo gave the Inwa that Brigan introduced to him yesterday. The Mad Scientist apparently had a room dedicated to housing the tribe that his familiar, Uw, belonged to. Chi was one of the volunteers who wanted to enter a familiar pact with Senkyo. Shiro could immediately tell that the name came from “chibi” which meant small or short.

“Anyway, how are the riser proceedings faring, Hybrid Lord?”

“Don’t ignore me!!”

After doing exactly the opposite thing Hira wanted, Leolja directed the conversation to Asier.

“All of the Esoer are successfully registered as risers and I left them in charge of processing the allied Eozea and Etriags.”

“Interesting… no matter how many times I hear it, your followers amaze me. Who would’ve thought that a new variety of Eozea would appear just for having you exist? I can’t help but think that being a guardian of a Gjia Eaixih had a play in this.”

Esoer was a new variety of Eozea that appeared due to them having followed Asier for a long time. They remain small despite going through evolution, completely different from the higher evolution stages of Eozea such as the Flame Lamina and the Twin Lizard. They were originally Eozea who were in their lowest evolution stage and made the decision to follow Asier in his early days of being a guardian.

No one besides them among the Eozea noticed the power that Asier held and became his first real followers. Perhaps because they often interacted with Asier for so many years they unlocked the power to evolve differently. Unlike the power-based Eozea, the Eoser focus on evolving intelligence, making them perfect leaders to manage the other Eozea that now followed Asier. They are characterized by their small structure, intelligence, language capability, and large flaps around their necks. They also happened to be the ones who convinced Shiro to let Senkyo go through Asier’s trial in the sunken nest and carried him to their lord.

“Right now they’re negotiating with the Lord of Iqanlr and Haeqras and handling the other riser procedures. There was a concern for the sunken nest’s ecosystem because of the large amount of Eozeas and Etriags becoming risers at the same time, but they reassured them that even with this amount, we were a minority in the nest. Believe it or not, there were many Eozeas and Etriags who opposed my power. Of course, none of them could match the followers that I cultivated so they often avoided our group. The Eozeas and Etriags may not have the same level of intelligence as the Eoers, but they recognize them as allies and follow their words as if they came directly from me. It will take me a bit longer before I get to explore the world but with everything running smoothly, I’m sure I will soon be able to set out as well.”

“Aren’t your followers worried about you leaving?”

Senkyo asked after the idea struck him from his words.

“No. In the first place, they only followed me because I promised them a prosperous life on the surface. They need no lord, but they are all aware that they won’t be able to survive on their own. It would have been trouble if my most loyal attendants hadn’t unlocked the path to becoming Esoers. Thankfully, their hard work was properly rewarded. In time, I am certain that my followers will allow Iqanlr to advance to its full potential.”

“Yes, I don’t doubt that. After all, with the Hybrid Lord’s army becoming risers, Iqanlr will hold the record for the most risers that have ever been processed based on last year’s statistics.”

Hira and Senkyo let out voices of amazement after hearing Leolja’s little trivia.

“I appreciate that. But more importantly, if Yukou Senkyo is leaving then have you decided what form of transportation you will be taking? It will take you a while before arriving at the next settlement if you head north-east by foot.”

“Ah, we already have that decided. Brigan offered to let us borrow the Veural that he uses when he leaves Iqanlr. He said that it’s capable of going home on its own so we just need to signal it when we find a good place to drop off.”

“I see. Then I’m certain you will have an efficient journey with the fastest land mount.”

“I heard. Hira-san suggested using the teleportation network she found in Naen to quickly get to the town of Siwk, but Brigan argued that it would roughly take the same amount of time to get there so he said to stick with the Veural so that it doesn’t get confused from the teleportation.”

“He’s delusional I’m telling you!”

Even now Hira still argued her point. Senkyo let out a small giggle before rising from his seat.

“Well then, I should be on my way now. I enjoyed my time here… or so I’d like to say but I can’t deny that it’s been a rough five days.”

“Haha, no need to sweat with formalities, Yukou-san! Just tell us how you feel; no one minds!”

“You’re right, my bad. Thank you all for all that you’ve done. There have been a lot of ups and downs, but there’s no doubt that I’ve become stronger because of this. If my enemy is a Leader from END, then there’s no doubt that I’ll have my work cut out for me.”

“That you do. Set a good example as the successor of Lady Nwen, Yukou Senkyo. Farewell to you too, Miss Shiro.”

“I will await the day we meet again. The both of you will always be welcome in Aracne Tailors, Senkyo, Shir.”

“Bye, Shiro, Yukou-san! Let’s have a mock battle the next time we meet! Our interior-type AW-Units dancing around the battlefield…! Maybe I can get myself a familiar too! Ahh, I can already feel the thrill!!”

A wide smile remained on Senkyo’s face as he took the black helmet with what seemed to be blue-stained glass covering the majority of his face from the chair and equipped it. He poured mana into it, allowing the blue glass to disappear into the helmet, and had it produce a black mask that covered his nose and mouth. This was a built-in function that Brigan added to the helmet called Silent Mask. True to its namesake, it suppressed any sound that came from the mouth and nose, allowing Senkyo to continue pretending to be a Vjzasu even if he involuntary screamed in pain through battles. It also served as a gas mask and an aqualung depending on the situation. With his entire set of armor equipped, Senkyo matched the gaze of everyone in the room one last time, and Shiro controlled both of the AW-Unit Frame’s lower arms and wrote the messages.

<Thank you. -Senkyo>

<Thank you. -Shiro>

**410 – Behind the Mask 1**

The first day of traveling to Yuu’s signal passed quickly and night soon came. Senkyo wanted to continue even through the darkness, but that wouldn’t be a smart thing to do since they were traveling on a living creature, not a mechanical vehicle. They needed to let the dinosaur-like animal to rest. Senkyo almost forgot about this because they didn’t take many breaks for long in the morning and afternoon. Veurals apparently had a lot of stamina, but going straight through the night was simply absurd. They set up camp under some trees, taking out their supplies from the bag that was inside Chi.

Chi had the power to shrink into Senkyo’s clothes but Brigan advised that he stay outside. This was because Inwas are playful by nature. He prepared a room for Chi inside his AW-Unit Frame in case an intense battle requires him to hide, but they prefer being out and about and playing with what they can. Their solution for this was to have Chi imitate a long item where he can play inside that small space along with some items that they added in the bag specifically for Chi to play with. To disguise him from other people, they wrapped a white cloth over him and suspended him on his back like a sword.

After eating, Senkyo would read one of the two books he brought while Shiro practiced using magic and wielding the wakizashi. Her goal was to someday have the same skill with the sword as Senkyo but for now, she focused on the wakizashi so that she could wield it while Senkyo used the katana. When they were about to go to sleep, Senkyo shot a suggestive glance to Shiro, asking wordlessly with his gaze if she wanted to sleep beside him like they did in their time in Elqa, but just as he expected, he was rejected harshly, having the words “You’re a pervert, Onii!” and other similar words being thrown at him. Such a far cry from their previous relationship, but there was nothing that could be done now. To add to that, Shiro chose to sleep outside instead of returning to Senkyo in her spirit form. He didn’t know if it was because she just didn’t want to be with him or learning to become more independent. For the sake of his mental health, he convinced himself it was the latter.

Incidentally, he entered a short phase of denial blaming the clothes that Brigan gave him specifically to hide his AW-Unit Frame. It was a set of less-than-clean cloth pants, a shirt, a leather vest, and a tattered shawl. His clothes had stains of black and purple, making him have the illusion of being a seasoned crawler. He also threw in four Bands of Magic Power and a pair of Boots of Gravity since his previous set didn’t fit his AW-Unit Frame. The previous set of armor and weapons were safely stored in his bag.

Thinking about his armor made him recall the time he was about to part from Brigan two days ago. Right as he reached out for the door, he stopped him and asked for payment. That being, 15,000 Hjor. Senkyo didn’t miss the time to rebut him. If Iaksin hadn’t given him the 20,000 Hjor, then there was no possible way that he would’ve been able to afford all of that.

But then, Brigan clarified that someone should have connected him to a large sum of money. It was apparently money that should’ve been passed to him by the Uikakrn Kingdom in exchange for creating something that exceeded the most advanced technologies of Zerid. Had he failed to get connected to said money then Brigan would take the problem directly to the Kingdom and let Senkyo have it for free. They basically used Senkyo as a medium to pass the money. Technically, that meant that he was having the Kingdom pay, not Senkyo, but that didn’t explain why this was happening.

After a bit more talk, Senkyo became aware that the Uikakrn Kingdom knew about the previous Prophecy Hero’s predictions that he would arrive in Iqanlr. It was actually Brigan who showed off his capabilities and extracted as much money as he could from them for funds, so the reluctance from his heart disappeared since this was technically Brigan’s money to begin with. But, that also meant that Iaksin recognized him from the start… No, looking back at it, his expressions and reactions seemed to be genuine when he first met him, so there was also the possibility that he only became aware of him after he got the money to give him. Either way, his current balance was at 383.85 Hjor with all of the fluctuations on his final days in Iqanlr. It was still a hefty amount considering that the exchange rate for 1 Hjor was 342.11 Yen, but instead of thinking too much about it, he focused on his current goal and went to sleep.

They would resume their journey early in the morning and both of them would practice writing words in the air using mana, sometimes timing it with real spell chants so that they would become even more believable Vjzasu. The ideal level of mastery they wanted to obtain was to be able to chant a high-tier spell that had many pre-requisite spells to be active. Brigan suggested Harrowed Deluge, which he later wrote down after returning to Elqa. If Senkyo and Shiro both used chantless double-casting then making it look like a Vjzasu was casting four spells at the same time wasn’t impossible.

At night, Senkyo would read and Shiro would practice. This routine continued for a total of three days and two nights from leaving Iqanlr before getting extremely close to Yuu’s signal.

About two days into their trip, Senkyo noticed large changes in her location and adjusted his path accordingly. In the end, he consulted the map that he copied from a book back in Iqanlr and found that he was right in front of the Praqrev Forest. He dropped from his mount and tapped it on the back rhythmically, signaling it to return home.

Senkyo entered the forest, following the signal from Yuu only to find that she was engaged in battle against mysterious beasts. He wanted to help immediately, but Shiro stopped him.

“\*Onii, don’t be hasty! Get more information about the situation first. Brigan taught you a little blood magic, remember? Use it to utilize your creation element.\*”

“\*…You’re right.\*”

The creation element was his greatest weapon aside from Nanashi. Brigan made him aware of this and taught him a few tricks on how to utilize them. Unfortunately, it was difficult to control the creation elements that had left his body for a long time, so he had to make use of the blood element to spread it.

The creation element basically worked like Spirit Power but it utilizes Mana. It was quite literally made from the power of three gods and once embodied an entire world, so it was easier to look at the element as something that Senkyo could use to will anything he wanted into existence. However, Nanashi did clarify that it still had its restrictions with how weak Senkyo’s understanding of it is along with the power still locked away by the seals inside him. He asked him to specify what he meant only to be left hanging in dead air. Whatever it was, Nanashi clearly wanted Senkyo to find the answers on his own.

Senkyo conceded to Shiro, remaining hidden within the trees while preparing to discreetly attack Yuu. He couldn’t afford to use any mid-tier blood magic since they cost too much blood, but Brigan suggested that it would be fine if he used low-tier blood magic to weaponize the creation magic in his blood. When he saw the perfect time, Senkyo shot a thin crescent-shaped body of blood at Yuu. This injected new bodies of the creation element into Yuu for him to utilize while disguising it as a battle scar at the same time.

This allowed him to peek into her recent memories, making him heave a sigh of disappointment at himself. It seemed like he saw something that wasn’t too pleasant but Shiro didn’t question it. She was about to reprimand him instead, but he snapped out of his own darkness and focused on the target at hand. By this time, Yuu regrouped with her current companions, who seemed to be a Nemi and a large wolf. Shiro quickly corrected him saying that the Nemi was actually a werewolf and the same went for the other one. When she mentioned that, Senkyo realized that they were Qeajrvs, a race that often came up in Voaul Oqr’s book, the book of calamitous energy.

He reviewed his information about the qeajrvs mentally before deciding to climb down and finally reveal himself. Just in time, a mysterious beast that was akin to the werewolves rushed at Yuu’s group from the shadows. He prepared quick low-level fire magic and exploded the beast before dramatically entering the scene, with all intention of being flashy and dramatic. The three entered high alert, naturally. So, Senkyo—Eksert began.

<Hello, I’m Eksert of the Vjzasu. I was wondering if you’ve seen someone I’m looking for.>

**…………**

Eksert somehow convinced the three of his fake identity. He followed the general template that Brigan gave him as his background but he had to adlib mid-way. Specifically, when he brought up Serka—a fake person that he used in place of Yuu. It was actually Shiro’s suggestion that he use that name. He followed her immediately and only realized what it truly meant after the situation calmed down a bit later.

Right now, he was walking backward while explaining to the group his knowledge about qeajrvs. Shiro was the one watching out for his steps. The three left him when they finally arrived at their secret base where Eksert was ordered to guard. He didn’t really know what to guard against, but taking into account the enemies that they fought earlier, none of them seemed to travel by air. He set up spirit traps all over the place which snared and lulled everyone that touched the surfaces that had his traps to sleep. He created the Circuits so that they connected to one Circuit that served as the main control panel and used Interaction as its center so that Eksert would be able to activate and deactivate them partly by will. The Interaction element still meant that he had to touch the panel to manage it.

That night, Eksert noticed that one of the people from the inside was going outside. He quickly deactivated his traps and allowed him to trek through the darkness. That said, he didn’t want to leave him unguarded. It would’ve been tragic if he was caught by the enemy while he was alone, but to his surprise, he was actually planning a scheme with the enemy. Eksert didn’t make any rash movements for now but made sure to take note of their face and name, which was apparently Xeoi based on what the enemy referred to him.

**411 – Behind the Mask 2**

The next day, Eksert was allowed to enter a meeting inside their base for some reason. There were some interesting people in the meeting, including an elder who only spoke in Zeldian, which Eksert only understood through Shiro’s translation. Another one was Miss Hizli, the person Brigan mentioned as having made the plans for the device that he used. He took note of her as well as a valuable asset. They discussed the current state of their clan, their future moves against their invaders, and they even taught Eksert some valuable information, namely how their race manipulates mana and how they change through evolution.

After finishing his business inside their base, Eksert returned to the surface for guard duty. It was night when another person decided to leave the underground base and surface. With two nights in a row of people leaving their base, he wondered if they were actually trying to keep this place secret. Although, it could have been Xeoi again who was all but confirmed to be an enemy. Whoever it was, Eksert deactivated the traps all the same and awaited them from the shadows. He saw a lone girl emerge from the base. He never knew there were children inside the base, but seeing as their entire village did flee there, then having a kid or two left behind wasn’t strange. What was, though, was the fact that the child called for him.

“U-Umm…! I-Is…! Ek…sert, around…?!”

His eyes widened as the frightful child who was barely able to squeeze out her words not only called for him directly but even tried trekking into the dark forest just to find him. He continued observing the child in confusion but when he saw she tripped on a thick tree root in the dark, he hurriedly used flash strike, caught her small body, and placed her right side up. The child’s eyes were closed shut in anticipation for the impact but it never came. When she slowly opened her eyes to see what happened, she saw a large masked man with four arms kneeling right in front of her with a few orbs of light to clearly make out his alien look.

“……!!!”

Just as he expected, she wasn’t able to handle seeing a stranger at night, not to mention someone who was so different from all of the other people underground. Her panic made her trip backward. Eksert didn’t dare approach her since that might only make her panic more, but that didn’t mean he had no intention of cushioning her fall. One of the orbs of light shot past the child and dispersed, turning into green lights and wrapping around her body softly. Right when she thought she would fall for real this time, sparkling green lights cradled her. Then, the stranger in front of her wrote in the air, producing more sparkles but in the color blue.

<Are you okay? Why did you leave the base?>

“ U-Umm…”

That was all the child managed to squeak out before turning silent once more. Her mouth might have closed shut but her eyes were following the green and blue lights coming from his wind magic and solidified mana. Noticing that her interests were elsewhere, he gathered the solidified mana he used words, turned them into a snowflake, and lightly pushed it toward the child. Curious, she gingerly brought her finger up as the snowflake slowly closed in on her. When she made contact with it, the snowflake exploded into more snow that dropped from above. The pale flakes then changed into a warm shower of orange that was akin to fireworks, playing with the temperature around the child.

A smile eventually shaped on her face followed by her light giggles as she spun around trying to catch the lights. When she sent herself into a state of vertigo, she bumped into Eksert’s body and came to a halt. She looked up seeing a few words floating in the air.

<I’m Eksert. It’s nice to meet you.>

“Y…! I’m—Yirae…!”

Yirae was still a bit nervous but she really liked the sparkling lights that Eksert was showing. After a bit more time passed, she became absorbed in her play until eventually…

“A-Ah!”

Their little light show was unceremoniously disrupted by Yuu’s arrival. Eksert took this chance to fool around with her under the pretense of getting her closer to Yirae. This had been the first time they talked to each other in so long that he began feeling nostalgic. But, that didn’t keep him from noticing the nagging feeling that something was wrong with her.

He eventually learned the answer to this after Erezil arrived. She was the one who sent Yirae to the surface so that she would catch him and Yuu alone together. She apparently did this so that she could request the two of them to protect Garin. As for why she chose them specifically, it was because she knew that BOTH of them were ambassadors. She had the ability to differentiate ambassadors from other people. One of those methods included reading the mana structure of others and sensing the mana inside them. This was why she suddenly snapped at Eksert the moment Yuu lost consciousness out of nowhere.

“S-Sir Eksert!? W-What are you doing to Miss Yuu!?”

<W-What!?>

Even Eksert was so taken aback that he inadvertently blurted it aloud. Shiro did the liberty of writing down his very words, but if it weren’t for his silent mask, his cover would have been completely blown. When he asked Erezil why she was pointing the blame for Yuu’s sudden collapse on him, it was apparently because she could sense his own mana structure inside Yuu. Most of it was apparently gathered in her head the whole time, or more accurately, around her brain. Erezil meant to ask about it later. She didn’t feel any urge to hurry since nothing bad seemed to have been happening, but just now, when Erezil mentioned the ambassadors, the mana around her brain spiked in power, causing her to faint. It was only natural for her to assume it was some kind of attack from Eksert. But he knew…

It must have been his creation magic at work.

When he deduced it as such, he tried his best to calm Erezil down and explained that he didn’t know anything about that until now. Because of this, he was forced to admit that he knew Yuu in the past but she doesn’t recognize him now. She demanded she know the reason why he was hiding his identity from her, and he returned with an unusually cold tone in his words.

“There are just some things you can’t prevent from happening. This is a problem between me and Yuu; don’t put your nose where it doesn’t belong.”

Unable to say anything back to him, Eksert picked up Yuu’s unconscious body, passed Erezil, and carried her to the infirmary. There must have been many things she wanted to ask on top of what she already did, but she knew that she would be asking for trouble if she had done so. For the time being, she realized that Eksert didn’t mean to hurt Yuu so she was satisfied with just knowing that.

The reason he shot back so sharply was because of a terrible realization he found out on his part. When he consulted Nanashi about what had happened and what Erezil explained, he told him that he was unconsciously using creation magic to influence Yuu’s mind.

Now that he thought about it, the two times that he saw her in his dreams back in Iqanlr were of her being locked in shackles hoping for death. Back when he peered into Yuu’s memories before making contact with her, Yuu was knocked out in the same manner. Nanashi explained that the first two times were because he was inadvertently using creation magic to summon her soul to the dream world. It was akin to having Ryosei or Shiro Envisage Eksert’s consciousness.

In comparison to the Yuu that he talked to earlier, she was so different that you couldn’t help but think that the other was fake. While, in fact, the real Yuu, or at least her unbridled feelings, was being locked away by his own power. He thought about it and came to the conclusion that this started from the very moment he woke up in Zerid. At that time, he swore to himself that he would live to find Yuu, an emotion so powerful that the order ended up affecting the creation magic inside her body, causing it to heal and instinctively protect her body from her very self. The only reason that his will to save Yuu caused her to forget part of herself was because Yuu, herself, was a threat to her own life.

In this little incident with Erezil, the thought of her being an ambassador triggered something inside Yuu. Unlike the first two incidences which were caused by Eksert’s ineptitude, this was caused by her own mind. Something so great that it stimulated the memories that his power locked away and threatened to break free. Well… it was either that or something else entirely that involved her mind. Eksert had no way of knowing, if not for his creation magic. Although he felt bad, that didn’t stop him from using his power to peer into her dreams.

There, he found out much more about her struggles in the past… there, he found out just how important he was to her… and there, at that very moment, he found out what needed to be done.

**412 – Behind the Mask 3**

When Yuu awoke, they met up with Erezil once more where she explained the details that happened in the Ujlufi clan in the past. Never did Eksert expect that it was about a Hero who ended up living in their village, and the fact that the said Hero was not just Garin’s father, but also Akira Leo, one of his father’s colleagues and the one person who gives him monthly allowances to maintain his solo lifestyle.

From what he could recall, he also had a daughter that he used to play with Shiro when they were kids. Her name was Akira Ren but his memories of her resurfaced only recently when a 3rd seal was released from his body. This was because she was also involved with the three worlds. Curiously enough, he remembered meeting Leo’s wife when he was a child, and one thing was for certain, that person was not Garin’s mother. He couldn’t help but scream out in surprise at the implications, which was luckily suppressed by the Silent Mask, but that wasn’t something that he needed to worry about now, and set the thought aside.

What did matter was the fact that Leo maintained connections with the Ujlufi clan and even gave Erezil a vial of Eksert’s “mana.” He didn’t know if Erezil was aware that said mana was actually a sample of the creation element but this was apparently the reason he trusted him so much despite being newly acquainted.

The day of their raid finally arrived. Just like any other sensible person who was well-versed in games, Eksert placed a save point just before they left, which to him was also known as a Recall Point. He configured 10 recall crystals to connect to a single recall point and secretly set it inside the underground base. This was especially important since he knew they were walking into a trap. He didn’t have any evidence that Xeoi was an enemy so he had no choice but to catch him red-handed, and at that time, they would probably already be in the point of no return, so the recall crystals were a must.

The whole ordeal ended more or less how Eksert expected it, although admittedly, with how the leader obtained six senlrs and the fact that he needed to utilize calamitous energy to finish him off was nowhere near what he had envisioned. Ideally, he wanted to take Xeoi back with them but they didn’t have the luxury to do so.

The next morning, Eksert had a meeting with Erezil and Hizli about what had happened which proved to be fruitful. The plan was to strike them again on the next day before they recovered. At night, he found Yuu sitting by the riverside and talked with her for a bit. Seeing as he couldn’t hide the fact that he used spirit power he explained the functions of his accessories just as Brigan planned. She asked where he got them from but since he didn’t want to name his actual benefactor since it might cause her to pry deeper for information, he named Akira Leo as it was the fastest way to convince her without getting into too many details.

“Eksert, do you know something?”

*“\*What?\*”*

“I’m an Angel. I don’t mean figuratively. An actual Angel. The ones that have divine souls inside them.”

Their conversation took an unexpected turn when she revealed that she was an Angel and talked about her relationship with her own divine soul. He already knew about most of these except for the fact that she was newly recognized again. This made Nanashi tell Eksert about the fact that her divine soul would be able to use the creation element inside her body to empower herself. He wasn’t expecting this, so he was naturally at a loss for words. Thankfully, he wasn’t talking with Yuu at the time so she found nothing suspicious.

When he asked Nanashi what would happen if they used the creation element, he said that, at worst, it would break her soul. He said that it was simple for a divine soul to use a supply of creation magic in their master’s bodies but if they didn’t have a sustainable supply like Eksert did, then there was a possibility to damage their souls in exchange for extended use of creation magic. The divine soul should be able to tell if their master’s soul would still be able to handle the pressure, but knowing Yuu, there was a good chance she would still push her limits.

*“\*Hey, I have a request for you.\*”*

“A request?”

*“\*Yeah. We’re going to raid the village again tomorrow, and if possible, could you not use the powers of the divine soul?\*”*

The night ended with him giving Yuu a fair warning, but he knew deep inside that it was probably meaningless.

The morning came and the operation began with Eksert setting up the same recall point in their underground base with another 10 recall crystals connected to it, lending a D. Scout and a contact lens to Hizli so that they could monitor the situation on the surface, handing a recall point and one recall crystal to Garin and Renig since they will be the ones to break through their defenses, along with 10 R. Explosives to break through the walls. Of course, he didn’t forget to keep the defenses around the underground base online before leaving.

It was a surprise to everyone else in the room the moment they saw Xeoi wielding some kind of ungodly power. He apparently used some kind of high-tier spell on him, but that required him to breathe embers in, which Eksert’s Silent Mask prevented. Thankfully, with Nanashi’s quick thinking, he made sure to make a whole act of spontaneously combusting with his own fire magic. Against this power, Erezil made the order to send Garin, Renig, and Yuu to the Mana-Infused Spirit Core, but only Garin and Renig could escape before Yuu was bound by gravity magic. Erezil shielded her and fought Xeoi.

“I’m asking if you’re lying or not about what you said earlier. Are these chains and daggers truly a manifestation of fear and regret?”

“Yes, it’s true. Fear and regret; those are what binds you.”

During that time, Eksert found this as the perfect chance to give Yuu a little push. He didn’t actually act on it immediately since he was still reluctant to have Yuu use her divine soul, but Shiro thoroughly scolded him, saying that he was being too overprotective of her. She said that if he didn’t let her push herself now, then he would end up making the same mistake he did back in Iqanlr. As much as it pained him to say it; she was right. So, for the first time, Eksert consciously envisaged Yuu’s consciousness to the dream world once more. As for his disguise, he used the same one that Brigan used when he invaded his mind.

This quickly turned the tables on Xeoi as both Yuu and Eksert attacked him at the same time. Yuu’s power created a hellscape that gave him the perfect chance to finish off Xeoi. It was finally over… or at least it was until his body transformed into a mass of corrupted energy. He was too much for Eksert to take on… well, it was too much for him if he kept hiding his real power. Even now, all the damage he took on was a crack on his helmet but it would soon regenerate once it repairs itself with mana. He asked Nanashi if there was a way to break through a monster that was immune to magic and hard to kill with physical attacks. He said there was but the answer was the creation element.

“\*Then, I’ll do it!\*”

“\*No, you will not.\*”

“\*Don’t you dare, Onii!\*”

He suggested taking care of the problem but both Nanashi and Shiro were opposed to it. The two wanted Yuu to end this all. Both of their reasons were so that she could prove herself to be a powerful ally, but he couldn’t help but detect something more than that in Shiro’s voice. Either way, before he could even make a decision, Yuu had already used the creation element inside her body.

He watched silently as she left a trail of flame in her wake and bloomed flowers of fire on the battlefield. Terrifying, overpowering, a scene straight out of hell, there were many ways a person could describe what she was doing, but in Eksert’s eyes, there was one word that stuck out from all.

<Beautiful.>

The conflict ended and their group stayed in Ujlufi for a while to help rebuild for a few days. They also decided what to do with the group that allied themselves with Xeoi. After much discussion, they finally decided on a path they would take and moved on. On the day before they left Ujlufi, Eksert managed to talk with Yuu one last time. The creation element inside her was all but gone, used up in her final feat in the battle against Xeoi. It wasn’t much, but this was probably the last time he would be able to speak to her heart-to-heart as Eksert.

After all, three days from then would be the final day that Yuu would know him as only “Eksert.”

**413 – Haunting Past**

*“\*Welcome home, Princess of the Fallen Kingdom Nrjia, Rnriai Mszekrnlr.\*”*

Yuu couldn’t believe her eyes. Standing before her was Eksert… no, she couldn’t call him that anymore. With the face of the person she tried to abduct into Zerid staring into her very soul, there was no way she could refer to him in any other way than what she used to.

“…Yukou-senpai……It’s… you…”

With her soul crippled from the use of Senkyo’s creation element, she couldn’t invoke the emotions and the reaction that she would have if it were undamaged. Then again, the shock of this sudden revelation would have likely conjured the same reaction either way. Senkyo poured mana into his mask, retracting the object into the helmet and releasing the seal on his mouth.

“That’s right. I’ve waited so long for this day. We have so much to talk about but not much time to work with, huh? I need to get this over before Garin and Renig come looking for us. I did put up barriers to block noise and our scent so that should buy us some time… Too bad. It’s our fateful reunion, after all. But, let’s get straight to the point…”

Senkyo and Shiro gestured animately with all four arms as they moved back and forth talking to Yuu. Meanwhile, all she could do was leave her mouth agape with her eyes as big as saucers.

“Yuu, I despise you.”

For the first time, Yuu’s body jerked in an attempt to back away and her face flinched along with a swallow of empty air as if she were physically struck. Her eyes and lips trembled, now failing to match Senkyo’s glare. If she could move her hands and feet, she would no doubt be trying to make moves to run away, or at the very least ball her fists in frustration. The single sentence he uttered made her heart drop, replacing all of the surprise, happiness, wonder, curiosity, fear, anxiety, trepidation, melancholy, and all else with an insatiable black hole. It felt like all of the effort she had shown so far was rendered useless. A single expression of rejection, of hatred. The unbearable silence that followed made her vision cloud as tears fell down her anguished face.

“I’ve pretended for long enough, letting you enjoy your carefree life.”

“No…”

She protested.

“That’s… not true…”

But she was ignored.

“You’ve been pretty happy as of late, huh? It’s almost like you forgot everything that happened between us.”

“No… I…”

“But I couldn’t really do what I wanted with END rampaging around, so I played along with this little farce. But man, I didn’t think you were that blissful.”

“…no…!”

*\*You’re wrong!\** is what she would have wanted to say, but her voice gradually lost its power and fell into silence. Her mind was a jumble of thoughts and emotions. So much flowed in that she eventually forgot how to think straight.

“I guess that just means that it’ll make my revenge all the better!”

He said while he unsheathed his katana and placed it against her neck.

“Your life is mine.”

His eyes sharpened with the same lethality as his blade, a look that drove a knife through her heart even with his blade remaining still, making her fall into deeper despair.

“Yuu, do you know how many times you’ve wronged me?”

Senkyo asked in a cold voice.

“It wasn’t just the fact that you betrayed me, but there were also times when you were nothing but dead weight, you stole my heart and mercilessly threw it away, it wouldn’t even be an exaggeration if I say that you’re one of the main reasons I lost my previous life and dragged me into this otherworldly madness! And worst of all… just when I finally became invested in dealing with all of this insanity…”

He pressed his blade harder into Yuu’s neck, drawing a single line of blood from her.

“Princess Rnriai Mszekrnlr… I found out that you tried to bring me as a sacrifice to your grandfather Vregdra Mszekrnlr, the traitor of the Fallen Kingdom of Nrjia and the current Blood Leader of END!!!”

Yuu’s trembling figure stilled and her wilting eyes widened at his claim. It was an instinctive reaction that betrayed confusion over her misery.

“…what… are you…?”

Senkyo thought back to when Brigan asked about Yuu. He brought out two photographs from a nearby drawer. He placed one down, showing a picture of Gaeka, and told him that “Gaeka” was nothing more than an alias. The old man’s true name was Vregdra Mszekrnlr. He became royalty after his son, Hczarel Mszekrnlr, took down the corrupt king and seized the throne. But later on, he betrayed his own son and the rest of his family for END. Then, he placed down the other piece of paper, claiming that it was a photo of his granddaughter, Rnriai Mszekrnlr, the eldest daughter of the previous king of Nrjia. There, laid a picture of a person Senkyo and Shiro were very familiar with donning a frilly dress fitting the title of princess—Hisho Yuu.

“Don’t play dumb! You’ve been helping the very man who brought down your kingdom! It doesn’t matter what the reason is, but had you successfully brought me to that man, Zeus, the god of Zerid, would have suffered the same fate as me: death. Do you really think any of this is forgivable through normal means!? Answer me, Yuu!!”

“…I…! I… don’t…!”

Her mouth opened under the pressure but her mind was too muddled to express any sensible thoughts, leaving her muttering nothing but nonsense.

“Well, I guess it doesn’t matter either way.”

Senkyo brought his thumb to his mouth and bit his skin off, drawing his own blood.

“Affix the souls, attach the bodies; bridge our fates.”

The moment he uttered this line, a large symbol appeared on the floor, coating the room with its blue glow. The symbol formed a diamond in the center of a half-arc, but half of the diamond was left without light. Senkyo stood at one end of the arc while Yuu stood on the other.

“…This is…!”

A single look was all it took for Yuu to realize what Senkyo was planning. The symbol that appeared was a Spirit symbol. It was one of the things Senkyo once talked to her about in the past when he was undergoing Yoshiko’s training. At the time, she could never tell him the truth that she was familiar with the symbol of Spirit in particular. That was because it was the exact same symbol used in a certain ritual that was renowned for binding people to the will of others.

It used a chant that was akin to a high-tier spell to shape mana in the shape of a spirit symbol which is what made it so dangerous. Purposefully mingling mana with spirit power was a catastrophe waiting to happen. The reason many strayed away from the power given by this ritual is because of its infamously low success rate and devastatingly destructive cost when it failed. A single misstep would bring about a breath of ebon flames that consumed everything in the vicinity, effectively killing both participants of the ritual.

However, many were not aware of the secret that served as the very foundation of this ritual. That being, the crucial constant balance between mana and spirit power. By controlling the mana in such a way that it didn’t aggravate the flow of spirit power, no such misfortune would befall the participants. Very few people knew this secret and even more were unbeknownst to the method to make that secret a reality.

Brigan just happened to be one of those extremely scarce individuals. Considering that he was once an apprentice of a former Hero, Senkyo was able to accept it easier when he first heard of this. He was probably also the reason why Adeira had a familiar of his own. But, despite Brigan handing down this priceless knowledge to him, he didn’t particularly need it. He merely shared it on a whim, saying that he might find someone he wanted to share it with.

As for Senkyo, the fact that he was a living production factory for the refined form of the destructive power that came from the ritual’s failure was enough to make every ritual he performed beyond any that had been done in the past. Not only did he have a guaranteed chance of success, but the power that he imbued in his ritual was of peerless quality. This was the very same power that he used in the past to perform the same ritual with Shiro before he had his memories sealed… it was another piece of the past that he recovered from unlocking a third seal.

“That’s right. A ritual for a familiar pact.”

**414 – The New Canvas**

“Yuu, there’s a very good reason why your soul was crippled and lost the ability to express some emotions. Back when you fought against the rampaging Xeoi, your soul tapped into the power of the creation element that was flowing inside your body. But, you used it too much and had to sacrifice part of yourself to sustain it. In other words, if nothing changes, then you will eventually die in due time. I could have just left you alone to let you rot, but I can use you. The power you showed before with your Divine Soul was genuine, so I’ll let you live for a while longer in exchange for power.”

Senkyo showed his bleeding thumb to Yuu.

“If you drink more of my blood, your soul will slowly use the creation element inside it to repair itself. In other words, I’m the only one that can save your pathetic life! Unfortunately, I can’t begin this ritual without your consent, so I’ll force it out of you. Accept this or die those are your only options.”

He stared Yuu directly into her eyes before saying resolutely.

“Surrender.”

At that moment, the sound of clattering metal echoed in her mind. There, she saw two keychains of a bony dagger and a spear. She knew what those were. Right before she committed to using the powers of her Divine Soul, he shared a moment with Senkyo in the dream world where they vowed to start anew, carrying only the fears and regrets of their previous relationship. At that time, it was unimaginable for Senkyo to direct such pure hostility toward her, but then the single question that she needed to answer finally appeared in her head: Why?

Right before he disappeared, he left her with a single warning, “The next time we meet face to face, I will be your enemy.” Why did he say that? This treatment was probably the answer, but why did he plan on taking this attitude instead of any other? Besides that, he was also doing something very unlike him.

Unreasonable.

There have been so many times when Yuu wanted to say this but he would only continue talking and bury her meek voice under his. She knew that he was a person who avoided being unreasonable at all costs by being calm and analytical. Whenever the situation was in chaos, he would always try to control it and try to clear every misunderstanding he could. Whenever he argued, he would always give time for others to argue back and give their perspective. For a person like that to force so many unreasonable accusations at her without letting her explain her part or even give his own perspective… it was strange.

If all his accusations were true, then why was she being chased by END in the first place? How did he even know anything about her grandfather? What did me mean he was the Blood Leader? How did he find out her true identity? What was he even talking about when he said creation magic? What did he mean she was carefree? What did he mean she wronged him? What was he on about when he mentioned Zeus’ death? There were so many holes in his accusations and he didn’t bother to address a single one of them. It wasn’t that he didn’t notice. Yuu knew how intelligent Senkyo really was, so he normally wouldn’t condemn someone so sloppily.

Why? Why was this happening in the first place?

“I…”

She didn’t know. She didn’t understand why… but deep inside her, she felt like there was only a single answer. With some of her composure regained, he looked Senkyo in the eyes and answered.

“…accept.”

“Good.”

The unlit half of the diamond on the ground released the same blue light as the rest of the symbol. Then, Senkyo walked up to Yuu and brought his thumb to her mouth. Yuu reached for it and bit into his thumb, sucking up as much blood as Senkyo allowed.

“Kh…”

A light sting coursed through Senkyo’s body.

“Nnn… aah… mmhh…”

Perhaps it was because Senkyo still kept her body in stasis that she couldn’t suck his blood properly and had to clumsily lap some of the blood that spilled and sucked on his thumb. Seconds after she began doing this, Senkyo calmly pulled his thumb away but Yuu didn’t miss his eye twitch before doing so.

He then moved to the center of the diamond where he let his blood drip from his thumb along with Yuu’s blood that spilled on his blade. Just as they were about to make contact with the ground, the drops became suspended in midair. He returned to his spot earlier at the other end of the half-arc. Senkyo performed this ritual before when he formed a pact with Chi and he even read about this in his book, so there was no problem with him taking the lead for the rest of the ritual.

“Revel, the pair that appends for their weakness. Behold, this binding ritual to the God of Sky, Lightning, and Thunder. Embody our will, almighty elements of the universe!”

Two circles appeared beneath Senkyo and Yuu along with a line that connected the two. The half-arc expanded into a crescent moon with conjoined tips, swallowing Senkyo and Yuu in the hollow circle inside it. The diamond carrying the floating clot of blood moved to the center of the two, placing itself in the center of the line.

“Hear me, the Master, and her, the servant!”

The crescent moon spun as the diamond moved beneath Yuu, consuming both circles and the line that it traveled on. The blood it carried stopped right in front of Yuu’s chest and the crescent moon returned to its normal shape of a half-arc, centering on Yuu where the diamond was placed. Senkyo continued, chanting as he stood on the crescent moon.

“Our silent voices speak the truth, our wills that form the bond, let the chalice of promise be filled with our hearts!”

The elements around them began accumulating inside the clot of blood.

“Listen to our voiceless souls, the incarnation of our pure wills!”

The blood splashed to the ground, gathering and coating the outline of the diamond and the half-arc and changing the glow from blue to red.

“Forge the covenant between our pure souls!”

The crescent moon and the diamond were both reduced to particles. The remnants of the crescent moon gathered in Senkyo’s body while the diamond gathered in Yuu. The red color that bathed the room slowly disappeared and returned to its normal color. With that, Yuu’s control over her body finally returned to her. Senkyo walked up to her, placed his face right beside her ear, and said…

“Yuu, I hold your life; you are mine. Don’t think of running away now.”

Yuu responded with a nod, but there was no reluctance to it, only conviction. Senkyo pulled back and matched her gaze. There, she saw not a face of despair, but one of determination. She didn’t know why he approached her this way. She couldn’t imagine what reason he had for trying to scare and confuse her… but he was true to his word. Somewhere under his actions reflected his fears and regrets, the only thing that he carried over from their previous relationship, and it was her job to accept them like she vowed. What those reasons could be was beyond her… but she promised herself that, one day, she would find out what the reasons were.

“Oh, by the way, don’t think to yourself that you can do what Shiro can. Someone with multiple familiars weakens because the power is distributed to other familiars so I won’t let you weigh us down like you always do. I made it so that my power is dedicated to only one familiar. In other words, even though the familiar contract is supposed to empower people with a strong relationship, to you, it’s just a contract of servitude so that you can’t oppose me. Don’t let it get to your head, ‘kay?”

Senkyo walked past her and headed for the door, but then, she called out to him.

“Master…!”

The way he addressed him struck him strange and stopped to look back at her. It was just like how it was when he first reunited with Shiro with her as his familiar. The familiar contract forced the familiar to address the master like so.

“Oh, I forgot that’s a thing… Okay, Yuu, my first order to you: act like how you normally do and don’t let your freedom be restricted by magic. Decide everything with your own will. Oh, you don’t get to refuse my orders but I will let you manifest whenever you want.”

Hearing that, Yuu gave another nod and spoke.

“That’s… fine…! Let’s… get along from now on, S-Senp… Senkyo! This relationship… is fine!”

“…”

He stared into her gaze and saw the blazing passion inside her crimson eyes. He made mana from through his helmet, activating his Silent Mask and covering his face with the blue glass. Unable to speak, he replied to her using Connect with his augmented voice.

*“\*Don’t let Garin or Renig suspect anything.\*”*

“…Yes, uhmm, E-Eksert!”

Thus, the first stroke on the new canvas they called their relationship was drawn. What the two would eventually create depended on the quality of their bond and their interchanging souls.