**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 spirit formation?”

A spirit formation 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.

<Yes. Just before we left for the operation, I placed a spirit formation on everyone that would teleport them back to this place 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. This formation has the weakness of not activating when the wearer fails to expect a fatal attack like an assassination from behind, so I prepared physical versions that can activate manually to back off earlier rather than waiting for a dangerous situation to fall upon them.>

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 spirit formations 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 spirit formation 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 spirit formations 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 spirit formation, 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.\*”*

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.

Give Eksert (Senkyo):

Silence Mask (Equipment)

* Silence any words spoken

Scout Device (Machine)

* Small Drone controlled by mana

Recall Point (Machine)

* Hexagon-shaped Metal Device
* Can camouflage

Remote Explosives (Machine)

* Small Circular Devices with an Orange Gem in their Center
* Activated by destroying linked explosives

Recall Crystals (Consumables)

* Small Crystal Orb w/ scintillating colors of purple, blue, and red with red at its core and purple and blue spiraling around it.

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

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.”

Tell Senkyo about the truth of Zerid and Earth; the incident of 17 years ago

Take blade out of Yuu’s chest

No records of where the true hero came from

When heroes went back, they had no way to contact each other

Akira has a vial of Senkyo’s mana

Senkyo and Erezil had an argument when Yuu got knocked out (Ujlufi Arc)

Tell Senkyo reads about ailak stones; Sora learns about them

Spirit power to control the temperature combo w/ frost element

Spirit power to do wide-ranged intimidate

Spirit power to control teleportation

Orbs have spirit formations in them

It had scintillating colors of purple, blue, and red with red at its core and purple and blue spiraling around it.