**­­­­316 – Border City Iqanlr**

“We made it!”

Senkyo shouted as he ran through the shadows of the forest and into the light of the open plains. It had been two days since he left the town of Naen and approximately one full week of surviving in the world of Zerid. He had been knocked out for four days after his powers went on a rampage when he fought the three skeletons back on Earth. As for the cause of that rampage, he more or less figured out that it was because he became emotionally unstable when he saw Yuu get kidnapped by the skeletons, for saving his life no less. The incident concluded with Senkyo, Ryosei, and Shiro getting trapped in another world, so Ryosei, Senkyo’s spirit companion, went off to find a way back to Earth while Senkyo was recovering through his unknown powers.

Who would have expected Senkyo to decide on abandoning Ryosei and leave without him? Partly, Ryosei had a small inkling. Senkyo wanted one thing, and it was to find Yuu no matter what it took. He knew that if Ryosei had come back and caught him, he would drag him right back to Earth, so Senkyo decided on making the valiant decision of a tactical retreat and ran for the hills with Shiro on his back.

Their trek through the unknown world led to encountering Iaksin, a Knight Commander of the Town of Naen, the first settlement in Zerid that Senkyo entered. The meeting ended with them learning many things about this foreign world. Shiro is Senkyo’s familiar and foster sister that originated from a small village of Nemi, a species hailed for their supporting prowess. She is a local of Zerid but that didn’t mean she knew much about it. In actuality, she only knew a small amount more than Senkyo did. This was due to the invasion of her village which led to her getting adopted by Yukou Yuuto, Senkyo’s father, and becoming Senkyo’s sister at a young age.

As Senkyo and Shiro were leaving Naen to set off for their next destination, Commander Iaksin gave him three bags of money that were supposedly his and his companion’s reward for taking down a Xeqrel, a beast that preyed on people inside bodies of water. Since Senkyo was the real person behind the subjugation of the beast, they saw it right to hand it over to him despite there being no obligation for them to do so. Senkyo accepted the reward and gave him funds to purchase some supplies for their journey.

Their destination was closer than they thought, seeing as they arrived only two days on foot. But then again, it wasn’t like there were any disruptions in their walk. Unlike how the games and fantasy stories Senkyo consumed back on Earth where the roads and wilderness were filled with lurking beasts like goblins, ogres, or other various creatures, Zerid had none of those threats. Sure, they encountered a hostile beast every now and then, but their power was that of a chihuahua with all bark with no bite compared to Senkyo. From Iaksin’s words, those very beasts were like small puppies for the below-average Zeldian. That just showed how much the Great Unity March, the great purge of hostile beasts on Yuwokrn, affected their environment.

Right now, Senkyo and Shiro stood in front of the Border City Iqanlr, the place where he would find more clues about where to look for Yuu. His black cloak fluttered in the wind, revealing his leather armor, fingerless gauntlets, dark pants, and leather boots. He upgraded from his cloth sheet to a leather backpack that held their supplies and his scorched school uniform. At first, he wanted to see if he could sell his otherworldly clothes for money, but since Iaksin gave him additional funds, he hid their existence so that he wouldn’t get questioned about them. He was considering selling them someplace at Iqanlr, but he didn’t know how people would react to otherworldly clothing so he was still deliberating about it.

Across Senkyo’s chest was the utility strap that was designed to be able to attach a variety of useful items. One kunai scabbard placed parallel to the strap and three smaller bags were attached across it. The small bags held leaves that he turned into vessels, objects applied with spirit power that can be turned into talismans and used for various occasions. On his hip was a combat belt that also had attachments to hold his bone daggers, scabbards for the rest of his four kunai, and two katanas, one of them being Kuro Yaiba, and the other being a blade he purchased at Iaksin’s recommendation. There, he stood, dumbfounded.

“…Huh?”

*“\*What’s wrong, Onii-chan?\*”*

Shiro’s voice echoed through his head. Since she was Senkyo’s familiar, she had the power to place herself inside her master’s body, just like how Ryosei would. This was how he was able to blend in with the locals despite not knowing the language they spoke. She would just take control of Senkyo’s mouth and speak in his place.

“No, what do you mean ‘what’s wrong?’ What IS THAT!?”

Senkyo pointed over the horizon where a ginormous metal structure shaped like a polygonal bunker towered with supporting extensions protruding at its base, sloping up to a flat roof. If anything, this seemed more futuristic than it did fantastical.

*“\*That’s Iqanlr… right?\*”*

She asked innocently, not picking up on the disbelief in his voice. He came to this city expecting a more fantastical scene like how the town of Naen was with its medieval designs but bigger and more wondrous… He couldn’t really say that this sight wasn’t wondrous in its own right but it definitely was far what anything his imagination managed to weave together. He decided to drop his expectations for any more fantasy-like scenes and simply wondered how something like this managed to exist in Zerid.

Based on the town of Naen, this world still had places that were created with a more medieval design but then there was Iqanlr which looked like something that surpassed even the technology on Earth; the difference was surreal. Then again, Senkyo never actually confirmed their technology, it only implied that from the looks of the walls around the border city. Additionally, he only visited Naen so far and was about to see what Iqanlr had to offer. He couldn’t really tell which was more dominant in this world from those two places alone. In the end, there was no use speculating in his head. He came to Iqanlr looking for a library that held a treasure trove of information waiting to be taken by people like him. To know more about this world and what he should do, he needed to go there first.

He followed the trail up to the city’s entrance and found a line of people extending from it. He’s seen this sight before. Not personally, through fantasy anime where towns and cities require some kind of identification to get inside. If this was the same thing, then that didn’t spell anything good for him. There was no way for him to get identification since he was literally from another world.

Thinking about it carefully, he could have probably asked Iaksin how to get identification but that meant going back to Naen and wasting at least four days. It was safe to say he wasn’t too keen about this outcome. When he first arrived in Naen, he was with Iaksin and his troop so no one dared to stop him, but more than that, there just wasn’t anyone stopping others’ entry. Everyone was free to come and leave as they pleased. Perhaps this was the difference between a normal town and a border city, or a medieval settlement and a more futuristic one like this, or maybe both. He wasn’t getting anywhere with these thoughts, but then it struck him. He had the perfect excuse that COULD, POSSIBLY work. Hoping that this final lifeline would save him the time and trouble to get across the city entrance, he placed himself at the back of the line.

Time ticked and it was about 34 minutes when he got deep enough into the line where the solid metal supports that extended out on both sides of the entrance closed him in, blocking the view of the grassy field on his left and right sides, leaving only the sight of the entrance in front and the long line that extended behind him. These supports were strangely extended farther out than the rest, so he surmised that they were probably used for strategic purposes. Since there’s only one entrance, anyone who wanted to siege this place from the ground would have to go through here, making large groups funnel in and clump in this narrow walkway. Senkyo instinctively turned his head upward at the thought as he saw the metal ceiling. He wondered if there was any mechanism that would blow up everyone under it, but he certainly didn’t want to find that one out for himself. With the dark thoughts circling in his mind, he just wanted to hurry up and get out of the suspicious enclosure.

“Next!”

Finally, it was time for Senkyo to get processed through whatever they had going on. He walked upon the guard’s prompt and faced him. The guard was clad in iron… no, some kind of metal armor. His face was covered by his helmet but the tail on his and the two tips protruding above his head told him everything he needed to deliberate that this person wasn’t human… or Sorun, the people who look most similar to humans in this world.

“Identification, please.”

Just as he feared, it was an identity checkpoint. He hoped it was something strange like a foreign custom of some kind that required them to stop but that was not the case. Well, it wasn’t like he lined up without a plan against this, so he shook off his fears and began.

“U-Uhm… My identity…?”

Senkyo said in a befuddled tone, talking meekly.

“Yes, please show us proof of your identity.”

“Uhh… H-How about this…?”

He unveiled his hood, revealing Senkyo’s face and the cloth bandana that he had around his head. The incident in the battle just before he got stuck to Zerid burnt parts of his hair. The unknown power he had regenerated the damages in his body, but that wasn’t quite the same for his hair, so he decided to shave it all off and this bandana replaced the warmth that his locks brought. However, that didn’t do anything to satisfy the guard in front of him. He looked annoyed at Senkyo’s actions.

“Your identification card. If you can’t show any form of identification, you won’t be allowed to enter Iqanlr.”

He said flatly with a hint of irritation. It was getting dangerous but now he gave something for Senkyo to work with.

“H-Huh…? W-What’s… an identification card?”

“What? Are you messing with us?”

Senkyo took a step back with a startled look on his face at the guard’s snark. Then, he helplessly turned to the other guards and the people waiting behind him, looking for some kind of hint in their reactions. The others just stared at him strangely, wondering why he was acting like that. Then, he turned back to the guard and said…

“I… don’t know what you’re… talking about. Can’t I just… walk in?”

“Ja, Rnei. Gaeka Wojdruia iiadrkrnlr fi drsi relbk krn vv lrdr wojrel reljoag vva?”

(Hey, Rnei. Doesn’t he seem like one of the people Professor Gaeka is looking for?)

One of the other guards wedged himself into the conversation before the guard he referred to as Rnei could say anything. Then, he stopped, taking a moment to ponder which seemed to cool down his boiling blood.

“Now that you said it…”

He took one more look and scrutinized Senkyo.

“H-Huh!? W-What did he just say? U-Uh… what… kind of language was that…?”

It was the local language, clearly. It was common sense for anyone in this world, but still, Senkyo claimed ignorance. Rnei turned to the guard that called out to him and gave him a nod.

“I see… Well then, we have a different process for people like you. Come on, follow me.”

“H-Huh?”

“I said follow me!”

“Y-Yes!”

Rnei left with Senkyo on tail and the checkpoint was taken over by the other guard that called out to Rnei.

“Next!”

The guard called for the next person in Japanese, just like how Rnei did earlier.

**317 – Blood Sample**

Senkyo was led to a different room, looking confused and bewildered all the while. At first, he did it to keep up the act, but that lie soon turned into the truth the moment he saw the technology he was working with.

He followed Rnei into a room inside the walls. They got to that location by going through multiple doors that were unlocked by the silver card Rnei had in hand and used it just like how Earthlings would with scanners and identification cards, tapping a designated area with the card and unlocking the doors. Unlike the black metal that coated the outside wall, the interior was mostly clear white. It seemed like the large walls weren’t just walls but also some kind of military building since Senkyo came across other guards and people wearing white lab coats. Senkyo did a double-take at the lab coats since there was no room for doubt that those were Earth’s clothing but he could tell from the texture that it was made to imitate a white lab coat. It looked a bit rough and didn’t possess the trim and tidiness of an actual lab coat. It was technically still a white lab coat, but not an authentic one from Earth.

“Still, I never expected to find one of you all the way over here. I guess the Professor’s crazy ideas aren’t so impossible after all…”

“W-What…?”

“Oh, sorry. I guess you wouldn’t know, huh? It’s about the monster you encountered. It takes its victim’s memories instead of killing them. I’ve heard reports of people being reduced to living husks and completely forgetting how to move. I guess you’re lucky since I could barely tell you were a victim.”

“H-Huh!? I-I encountered a scary monster like that!?”

He feigned ignorance once more. Senkyo couldn’t really say that it was good for this memory-devouring monster to be on the loose, but it’s definitely helping him get across situations like this where he lacked the knowledge of the average Zeldian.

Apparently, an unknown monster broke out of the Uikakrn Capital’s sunken nest, one that had the power to tear through the sky and devour memories. Senkyo first found this out when he first encountered Iaksin and he translated Senkyo’s confused musings as a sign that he lost his memory to this monster. It was terribly convenient, so Senkyo thought to pull out that card at the entrance. He had his doubts in the middle of his act, but things fell into place, and ended up in a room with Rnei, sitting across the table with a knife and glass vials in a vial rack.

“I’m going to need to draw a bit of your blood. Normally, we would have just turned you away at the entrance right then and there, but there’s this prestigious professor that’s always whining about how he wants samples of victims. So, in short, for you to pass through and enter Iqanlr, you’ll have to cooperate with us. If you won’t, then end of story.”

“S… So, I just have to fill a vial with my blood?”

“Yes, that’s all you have to do and the professor will sanction your entry. Annoyingly, he has that kind of power.”

“I see, then…”

*“\*Onii-chan, don’t!\*”*

Just as Senkyo was about to voice his agreement, Yuu shouted in his mind for him to stop. Confused, he turned his attention to her.

*“\*Shiro? Why, what’s wrong?\*”*

*“\*U-Uhm… uhh… That’s…! S-Sharing your blood, is bad!\*”*

*“\*Huh? Why?\*”*

She was troubled but Senkyo had no idea why.

*“\*I…\*”*

She fell silent for a second. Then, he could mentally hear the sound of her gathering her breath and letting it all out in one go as if to give herself a push.

*“\*It’s about Onii-chan’s power! It’s too dangerous for others to have! If you give your blood, you’ll give them a portion of your power! If that happens, then it might cause a lot of trouble!\*”*

*“\*My power…? Shiro… is that…\*”*

*“\*Yes! It is one of the memories that Yuuto-san entrusted to Shiro! And now, Shiro thinks it’s best for Onii-chan to know!\*”*

Shiro wasn’t just a familiar and a little sister, but she was also the only connection he had with the life he had before having his memories sealed by his father. She knew more about his childhood than Senkyo did. This also included the powers he was capable of before having them sealed along with his memories. Shiro hid this information until now because she thought he didn’t need to know yet. But now…

*“\*I see… but, then… Ah, actually I have an idea. Shiro, I promise I’m not going to let them have any of my blood, so trust me. I didn’t train under Shimizu-sensei for nothing.\*”*

*“\*I-If Onii-chan say so…\*”*

Just as Rnei was about to lose patience waiting for Senkyo’s answer in silence, he finally replied.

“Sure, no problem.”

Senkyo picked up the knife and opened a wound on the tip of his index finger, letting red liquid escape from his body. It was a small one that barely dripped any blood. Rnei looked unsatisfied with his cut but he didn’t voice it out. Senkyo hovered the wound on one of the open vials, waited for a drop of blood to drip, and the moment it made contact with the vial…

*\*Boom!\**

“What!?”

“Ah!?”

It exploded the glass vial and everything around it, making the two jump out of their seats and give distance.

“W-W-What…!? W-What was that!?”

“H-Huh?”

Senkyo continued his character as the fool and acted confused. Meanwhile, Rnei looked equally as troubled as Senkyo was playing himself off to be. The two just stared at the top of the table where the explosion happened.

“I-I thought I just had to put my blood in there? W-Why did it explode!?”

He pushed for Rnei to snap out of his surprise and got the conversation started.

“I… don’t know. Ugh, this is why I hate complicated stuff like this…”

Rnei seemed to have rebuilt his composure and got out of his startled stance.

“There are some more vials that weren’t destroyed. Use those and get this over with already.”

He said with an irked tone. Unlike earlier in the entrance, it wasn’t directed to him but more to the whole situation itself. Senkyo gave a meek nod and placed his open wound on one of the open vials. Particularly, the one at the center of the unharmed vials. His blood dripped, made contact with the vial, and exploded.

“Wah!?”

This time, it was only Senkyo who backed off and Rnei stood his ground, observing the scene from afar.

“Wh-What is this!? It keeps exploding when I put my blood in! Are you sure this is supposed to happen!?”

“Look, I don’t know, okay!? I don’t do any of these kinds of things! …Ugh, why the hell is happening when I’M in charge!?”

The clasped his head in frustration, the tail on his back waving erratically. Unbeknownst to him, the reason this was happening was simply that he was unfortunate enough to be dealing with the single spirit power user that existed in Zerid. From Senkyo’s perspective, a blue stream was poured into the vial along with his blood. That was his kindled spirit power, one of the primary weapons of an Enchanter or a Brute class of the Konjou clan. They solidify the spirit power inside them and give them form. However, they could only be seen through an ability called “Espy,” an ability common for Earthlings that engage with the unknown like the hunters of the Konjou clan. That said, it was a completely different story for Zeldians. They don’t usually deal with spirit power, so they have no countermeasures against them.

Kindled spirit power disintegrates 10 seconds after being formed outside the body and its range of effects can only work on the owner’s body or the objects that it touches. In this case, the kindled spirit power was collected in the glass and used “Burst,” an offensive ability that ignites concentrated spirit power and causes an explosion. Senkyo wasn’t so proud of making someone’s job harder for them, but he had to do this to follow Shiro’s wishes. The blood gets caught in the explosion and leaves nothing behind. With that done, there was no possible way for them to retrieve his blood and from the outside, it still seems like he was cooperating with the procedure, bringing Rnei at a loss for what to do. Then again, it seemed he was a bit too lost so Senkyo pushed for some progress.

“T-This isn’t working… S-Sir, are you sure… I can’t just enter?”

“That’s…”

He’s still confused. Thinking about the situation carefully, shouldn’t there have been other procedures if this kind of problem came up? Then again, it wasn’t like they were expecting the vials to explode upon contact with blood, but you’d expect a guard to simply follow the next course of action set for them by their employers, if there were none, then that should prompt them to turn Senkyo away because they couldn’t collect his blood. This should be true for Rnei especially since Senkyo still remembers how he ranted that he wanted everything over with. If they didn’t turn him away immediately, then does the person that wants a blood sample of a victim affect him this much? Senkyo couldn’t help but think.

“U-Umm… If you really want my… blood that much, then… c-couldn’t you just, find me in the city later? I-I… have somewhere I need to be… so….”

“I can’t just let you go! We couldn’t get a sample of your blood; how can we sanction your entry if we don’t have this one requirement!?”

“…No, but… we don’t know why… this is happening… right? But I would still give a sample of my blood… if I need to. Then… why don’t you just send someone who knows what to do? That’s… easier for you too, isn’t it?”

“That’s… hmm…”

He stopped for a bit, deliberating what Senkyo just suggested. It took him around a minute to come to a decision.

“Okay, fine. That sounds like a good idea! Less trouble for me the better… Then, I’ll be letting you loose but I’ll have someone follow you around so you don’t run away, okay? They’ll come up to you once we figure out what to do. Is that good?”

“Y-Yes… Let’s go with that…”

Senkyo couldn’t help but notice the number of problems in that reply. This guard definitely wasn’t suited for any kind of job that needed to use wits. He mentioned that someone would be tailing him but it would’ve been better for Rnei to keep that to himself. Then, there was positively no doubt that he made this decision all by himself and didn’t bother consulting the idea with his superiors. And finally, the one Senkyo was most thankful for him to have missed, is that he could have just had Senkyo detained after they figured out what to do. Rnei was so incompetent it was strange. He questioned the standards their employers gave them before becoming guards. But thanks to that, Senkyo was able to pass the walls and enter the city.

**318 – Behind the Walls of Iqanlr**

Rnei took the lead out of Iqanlr’s walls and let Senkyo past the entrance gate. He mentioned someone being sent to tail him but he couldn’t sense their presence. They were either a professional that went under Senkyo’s radar or they didn’t even exist yet. Either way, he had more important things to worry about.

Crossing the entrance to the Border City Iqanlr, he was met with another strange sight. What sprawled in front of him were buildings constructed with the same medieval designs he saw back in the town of Naen. He found himself scratching his head. After seeing the interior of Iqanlr’s walls and the technology built into them, he expected the inside to be somewhat advanced as well. The town inside the walls was a stark contrast to the walls themselves. It was as if the walls were the only thing that advanced while the town it was protecting was left behind.

The roads were still made from dirt, the buildings with their plain, minimal design of wood and stone, and the only mode of transportation is through mounts or beast-drawn carriages. There wasn’t a single sign of technological advancement here. Senkyo tried to think of a reason for this and ended up with the explanation that this advanced technology was only discovered recently and is in the middle of implementing in the whole city. That explanation would make sense, but that leaves more to be answered like how their technological advancement jumped so much or why they decided to prioritize military power like the walls instead of the city’s agriculture which would hasten their overall advancement in the long run. In the end, the speculation did nothing for him. Again, he was reminded just how important getting information about this world was to him.

*“\*Onii-chan, are we going straight to the library?\*”*

*“\*No, we know they have one here but we don’t know where it is yet. We could ask random people on the street but I have a better idea. Shiro, you’re hungry too, right?\*”*

*“\*!! Yes! Are we going to a restaurant!?\*”*

Shiro’s voice perked up at the sound of food. It was understandable for Senkyo too since they’d been eating nothing but foraged forest food for about a week now. Comparing the forageable food from Earth and Zerid was like stale bread and a nutritious breakfast thanks to the sifij mushrooms they carried that could make either baked mushrooms or mushroom soup depending on the heat it was exposed to. But even so, forest food was still forest food. The two soon grew tired of their food supply and craved a different variety, that being meat. The thought of chicken or steak doused in delicious gravy made Senkyo and Shiro’s minds melt and their mouths salivate. At that moment, their thoughts became one.

*“\*Let’s go get some food!\*”*

*“\*Let’s go get some food!\*”*

Senkyo asked around where they could find the best food in the city and were directed to what seemed to be the food district where there were restaurants along with bars and taverns. At first, Senkyo thought he would have to go to a rowdy tavern, but there were other eateries in the area that were calmer and more sophisticated perhaps because they didn’t serve any alcohol.

First, Senkyo found a quiet area to let Shiro take form. Light came from Senkyo’s chest and molded into a shape of a catgirl. The white light slowly disappeared and revealed Shiro in her usual outfit of a white robe with cat ear pockets, brown shorts, knee-high socks, and a choker with a golden cat bell.

“Onii-chan~!”

“Whoa, there, there…”

She immediately greeted Senkyo with a hug. Thinking about it, Shiro had always been clingy with him even when they were little. In the past few days, she was often inside Senkyo’s head just in case he encountered someone and needed to converse with them without looking suspicious. She would only come out when she wanted to eat, to which she would, without fail, give Senkyo a hug. Senkyo had mixed feelings about this, but seeing as Shiro was sealed inside his body for years now until the day came that her power was needed, he thought it was fine to spoil her like this.

That being said, this was… a bit strange in this situation. Shiro’s clinginess aside, what bothered Senkyo the most was her clothing.

Usually, Senkyo wouldn’t have batted an eye at her normal outfit, but that was because they were on Earth. Right now, they were in Zerid. The types of clothing aside, it was more of a problem with how her clothes were woven. The cloth was clearly high quality compared to what Senkyo was wearing. So much so that it might make them stand out depending on how observant others are. Thinking that, Senkyo had to ask.

“Hey, Shiro, can you make your clothes look a bit rougher? Like the cloth from these robes.”

He stretched out his arm and let Shiro inspect his cloak. She scrutinized it and thought for a second.

“Hmm… Shiro can try but these are the clothes Shiro had before becoming Onii-chan’s familiar. Shiro has never tried changing her clothes before, but Shiro will try until Onii-chan is satisfied!”

Shiro’s body glowed in white light and returned to Senkyo’s body. She came back out a few seconds later. There was no change in her clothes. She tried multiple times after that, but it didn’t work. Senkyo called off the attempt. Shiro looked a bit down but Senkyo quickly cheered her up but petting her head. She quite liked this treatment.

Returning to their original objective, they let their noses decide for them and ended up in an eatery with a calm atmosphere and a savory aroma coming from their kitchen. They ended up in a grill house that served a variety of meat and veggies. Then it dawned upon him. How did restaurants work in medieval times?

He tried to think back to the fantasy anime he watched before, but he was certain that all of them left the ordering part of the restaurant out of the equation and went straight to receiving their food. He could vaguely recall looking up on the internet how restaurants worked in olden times and this made his face twist uncomfortably. There were no menus in medieval times except for perhaps for the higher echelons, but this was a public establishment for the commoners. People could come in and buy food but they can’t choose the food they wanted. There were no choices. Common restaurants in medieval times gave out food but it was always the chief’s choice. Well, there should be no problem here since all they served was grilled food.

“Excuse me, I’ll have the Ufrwo Grilled Mutton!”

“Ah, mine will be the Quioa Barbecue!”

“I’ll just have the Chef’s Special.”

“Yes, would that be all?”

Senkyo couldn’t help but overhear a strangely familiar string of requests that he commonly heard in restaurants on Earth. Turning his head to the side, he saw a group of people looking at a menu while a waitress was jotting down their orders.

“Eh…”

Het let out a dumbfounded voice.

“Hello, welcome to Kehilr’s Grill! Is this for a party of two?”

“Hey, Onii-chan! A cute waitress is talking to us!”

Shiro said as she tugged on his shirt.

“O-Oh, sorry, my bad! Um, yes. Just two.”

“Very well, right this way!”

*\*Eh?\**

The waitress led them to an open table with two chairs and handed both of them a menu. They weren’t just sheets of paper, they were both sealed in plastic.

*\*Ehhhhh???\**

“Well then, please just call for me when you’ve decided on an order!”

The waitress left and went on to serve a different table.

“Onii-chan, look, look! The Quioa Barbeque looks amazing!”

“!?!?”

Senkyo quickly turned to Shiro and saw her pointing at another table with a juicy set of sticks with meat and veggies, a mouth-watering fragrance coming off along with the smoke. He breathed a sigh of relief. If she had pointed to a printed picture of the said dish, he would have lost it. Unable to keep it to himself any longer, he voiced his concerns to Shiro.

“Hey, Shiro, don’t you think this is a BIT TOO SIMILAR to Earth?”

She turned to Senkyo and tilted her head in confusion.

“What do you mean?”

Those eyes of hers. They told Senkyo all too well that she thought he was the one saying strange things. There was obviously something he wasn’t getting here. Something that even Shiro expected him to know.

“U-Uhm… It’s just, this place is way too similar to Earth. Isn’t that weird?”

Modern customs such as having plastic-wrapped menus and even waitresses that haven’t appeared before the 1600s, there should be none of that in any medieval or fantasy setting. It was like cultures from Earth were being shared with this world, and that was exactly what Shiro implied in her reply.

“Onii-chan, don’t you know about what the ambassadors are?”

“Ambassadors…? …Oohh!!”

It had been a long time since he heard that term he forgot all about it. He usually referred to them as Heroes but that was only because he was talking about ambassadors from Earth. He recently talked to Iaksin about heroes but not the ambassadors as a whole. If he were to consider Shiro’s reaction and the fact that she had never been surprised by the technological developments of Zerid despite her not knowing too much more than him, that would show just how influential all the ambassadors actually are. To Shiro, and to everyone else who knew of the ambassadors, it was only natural that their technology was like this.

“Sorry, I don’t know anything too deep about them. All I know is that they were sent to other worlds to make peace with them and that five ambassadors were chosen from Earth, Zerid, and the Spirit Realm. Depending on where they originated from, they would be called Heroes, Hfixesi, and Di Manes, respectively. And that’s… about it. I don’t know much of their history or what they’ve done except for what Iaksin-san mentioned like the Great Unity March and Haeqras.”

Shiro nodded understandingly before responding.

“That’s… not that much to work with… Shiro should have asked how much Onii-chan knew about them, but it never crossed Shiro’s mind since you seemed to be doing fine despite it being Onii-chan’s first time in Zerid. Shiro thought maybe Yuu-chan explained them to Onii-chan before…”

“Ah, she mentioned them before but she didn’t explain anything about them. There was my talk with Freda-san but she only mentioned how their job was to make peace with other worlds but that was only supplementary information she provided before revealing that I was the one being mentioned in the Heroes’ prophecy—”

Shiro suddenly jumped out of her seat and covered Senkyo’s mouth.

“Onii-chan, shhh!!! Not here!”

Senkyo was so absorbed in his train of thought that he forgot the fact that they were in a public environment. Thankfully, no one seemed to give them any mind but he realized that this type of conversation was better to be had in private. Realizing this, Senkyo gently removed Shiro’s hand from his mouth.

“Sorry, Shiro, that was my bad. Let’s talk about this some other time. First, let’s have some lunch.”

“Mn! Shiro agrees!”

She gave Senkyo a lively nod before returning to her seat and choosing what to eat from the menu.

**319 – The Strength of Hjor**

“Nyaa~! That was delicious~!”

“Haha, it’s good that you enjoyed yourself.”

Senkyo said to Shiro who was walking beside him with a skip to her step as they left the restaurant behind them. Just before they took off, Senkyo made sure to ask the waitress for directions to the largest library they had in the city and told him to go to a place called Xhiari. Senkyo made a mental note of what the waitress said and walked through the streets with her words in mind and body. He walked through the streets subconsciously following the directions but what really filled his mind was about their current budget.

*\*I guess it really wasn’t just Iaksin-san’s connections… This place has a strong currency.\**

He thought back to the night before they left Naen. Iaksin handed him three bags of silver and gold Hjor. At the time, he hadn’t thought much of it. Silver and gold, typical fantasy currency, nothing too hard to understand. But then, the problem arose when he went to the shop Iaksin guided him to and saw the prices of his purchased items.

The items he bought were: A Shadow Cloak, Swift Gauntlets, Traction Boots, leather armor, a backpack, a utility strap, a combat belt, three small bags attachments, five kunai scabbard attachments, two dagger scabbard attachments, and two scabbard holders to carry his katanas. Shiro didn’t need anything since she was half-spirit due to the Familiar Pact so physical items would just come off every time she returned to his body.

Apparently, the Shadow Cloak had the power to increase his evasiveness and allows the wearer to blend into the shadows more effectively. The Swift Gauntles could increase the wearer’s dexterity and hasten his hand and arm movements. And the Traction Boots can dig into any surface no matter how slippery. It sounded like a bunch of fantasy fraud but they all worked just as they advertised. Senkyo didn’t know how they worked, but they were undoubtedly useful.

This would cost a fortune. That was what Senkyo’s thoughts were at the time. But then, when it came to adding everything up, their total was 2,218.70 Hjor. It was cheap! That’s what he thought until he asked about the prices.

Apparently, the three that took up most of the sum were the named items he bought, the Shadow Cloak for 749.99, the Swift Gauntlets for 549.99, and the Traction Boots for 499.99. What came after were the katana for 239.99 and the leather armor for 74.99. It seemed reasonable to Senkyo.

But then the other prices came. The backpack for 20, the strap for 10.20, the belt for 12, the kunai scabbards for 5.50 a piece, the small bags for 4.95 a piece, the dagger scabbards for 7.65 a piece, and the holders for 1.95 a piece. At that moment he thought, maybe they lowered the prices on purpose because of Iaksin and they chose to deduct most of them from the small pieces like attachments and belts.

Then came their lunch at Kehilr’s Grill. Their total: 10.16 Hjor. This wasn’t just a simple two-meal order. This was Senkyo ordering two juicy-looking menu items and Shiro hoarding a whole six. There was so much that other customers couldn’t help but give their table a glance. Even the waitresses were in disbelief at how much they saw Shiro eat.

It wasn’t like Shiro was on the brink of starving to death. In fact, all Shiro really needed to survive was natural liquid since that was what all Nemi like her needed. Meat and other food sources were unneeded, all they were was a luxury. And Shiro indulged herself deep in that splendor. Their food cost more than a good number of Senkyo’s equipment, and that was only about 10 Hjor.

As for how the currency worked in Zerid, Iaksin handed him a note of the values of every Hjor coin:

Lesser Bronze Coins valued at 0.01 Hjor, the smallest coin in Hjor with a dotted rim.

Bronze Coins valued at 0.10 Hjor, a plain bronze coin slightly larger than its Lesser variant.

Greater Bronze Coins valued at 1.00 Hjor, the largest of the three variants with a silver rim.

Lesser Silver Coins valued at 10.00 Hjor, a silver coin about the size of a Bronze Coin with a bronze rim.

Silver Coins valued at 50.00 Hjor, a plain silver coin about the size of a Greater Bronze.

Greater Silver Coins valued at 100.00 Hjor, larger than any variant of Bronze with a golden rim.

Lesser Gold Coins valued at 300.00 Hjor, about the size of a Silver Coin with a silver rim.

Gold Coins valued at 500.00 Hjor, a plain gold coin around the size of a Greater Silver.

And lastly, Greater Gold Coins valued at 1,000.00 Hjor, the largest coin in Hjor with a plain gold body but an ornate rim.

Again, thought back to the time he was given THREE BAGS of SILVER and GOLD coins, apparently just from taking down a single monster. No matter what anybody said this was clearly too much. Iaksin said that those three bags were his and a few of his comrades’ reward for subjugating a Xeqrel, which wasn’t even that threatening once you knew what it was capable of. It just didn’t make any sense to him. Iaksin received an exaggerated reward and gave it to Senkyo, who did nothing to be given this much money. Seriously, of the 20,000 Hjor he got from Iaksin, he only spent 2,228.86 Hjor, leaving him with a grand total of 17,771.14 Hjor. There was no possible way for this amount of money to be a reward for taking down a SINGLE monster. What was Iaksin thinking?

Senkyo let out a sigh.

“So this is what they mean about having too much money to know what to do with…”

“Mn? Is there something wrong, Onii-chan?”

“…No, it's nothing. I guess this means we have nothing to worry about when it comes to money.”

“Oh!? Does this mean Shiro and Onii-chan can eat like that whenever we want!?”

Shiro said excitedly, her ears twitching, tail waving to and fro, mouth watering, and eyes sparkling.

“Haha, no.”

He replied flatly.

“Aww…”

Everything that was moving drooped in disappointment. Senkyo wanted to spoil her, but eating extravagant meals like earlier every single day was too much. Not to mention they might be able to use this money on good equipment. Since the named equipment he bought at the highest price were the ones that worked as they advertised, it may be possible for them to find something even better. Maybe some that even Shiro would be able to use. For that, they needed money. They may seem rich now, but they never knew that was coming for them in the long run. In Senkyo and Shiro’s current situation, there was nothing worse than underestimating a possible threat, splurging money included.

“E-Excuse me! C-Can I have a moment of your time!?”

“!?”

“…!”

A man suddenly blocked their way and yelled, surprising the two and making Senkyo take a step back while Shiro hid and took refuge behind him.

**320 – Arachne Tailors**

“I am Leolja, the owner of Arachne Tailors, and if you couldn’t tell, an Iwaiida Riser of Iqanlr’s Sunken Nest.”

The person that stopped Senkyo and Shiro was a gentleman with arachnid features of eight eyes, a spider-like mouth, small filaments across his body, and four pairs of spider legs attached to his back. Aside from his spider legs, he stood on two human-like legs wearing black shoes with his two human-like hands wearing white gloves placed in front of him which stopped Senkyo and Shiro in their tracks. He donned a white three-piece suit with a matching top hat. He made a light bow with his left arm bent at the elbow and placed it behind his back, while his right arm took off his hat and bent the same way in front of his body across the abdomen, and slowly tipped his body forward.

Senkyo and Shiro didn’t know how to react and an awkward silence strained the air. Letting the moment pass, the man straightened his body in a fluid motion with the same elegance as his bow.

“I apologize for stopping you, but there is something I must ask about! Would you please give me a few moments of your time?”

“U-Umm…”

Senkyo turned to Shiro for her opinion and found a face that was just as lost as he was. Trying to assess the situation as best as he could, he summed it up to some businessman coming up to the two of them for something. He mentioned something about “Arachne Tailors,” so he assumed he was some kind of tailor. If that’s the case, then the only thing a tailor would want from the two of them with only their outside appearances to consider, was Shiro’s clothes. He was concerned about it before so it wasn’t that hard to deduce.

The man that called himself Leolja saw Senkyo’s eyes turn from him to Shiro’s clothes. Catching on to his thought process, he responded to his unvoiced conclusion.

“It is as you surmised, but considering the subject matter, it would be best for the two of us to talk in a private environment. Ah, of course, I will repay you for taking your time in however way you want, so long as the request is appropriate. Please, I assure you it won’t take long.”

The man was sharp and pushed for Senkyo’s cooperation instead of both of their consent, perhaps after seeing Shiro’s reaction. He was good with his eyes and knew how to read the subtle signs of the other party. Senkyo considered a connection with the man. It seemed like he truly came up to them only to discuss Shiro’s clothes so there were low chances of him being led to a trap, still, it wasn’t like the chances were none. But then, there was the fact that this person may have something to offer them. Bluntly thinking, he was a spider, and that reminded him of how spider silk on Earth is actually quite strong and even used for body armor. If he took the man’s offer, then there was a chance to get access to unique types of clothing. Weighing the possible merits against the demerits, he decided.

“Mnn… Sure… we’ll go.”

“Excellent! Well then, please, right this way!”

Leolja excitedly said as he took one step to the side and pointed with both arms to the direction they needed to go, leading the way with Senkyo and Shiro in tail. Senkyo made sure to remember which turns they took and how far off course they were from the way to the library. Whether things with Leolja go good or bad, they still needed to get to the library at some point.

Senkyo found that the place Leolja had in mind wasn’t far away at all. It was a formal establishment near the food district with a signboard in front of it saying “Arachne Tailors” in both Japanese and what he assumed to be Zeldian text. They entered the shop which had employees wearing the same three-piece suit Leolja wore except for the top hat, and unlike Leolja, none of them were a spider race. Customers were browsing their wears of different types of clothes, ranging from formal attire to casual clothing, and even…

“Ah, I see this unique otherworldly clothing has caught your eye. This is what the Earthlings refer to as ‘Cosplay Costumes,’ apparel that originated from the character designs of their many sources of entertainment.”

Cosplay. What was displayed in front of them was a mannequin with four pieces of clothing. The clothes in question were composed of a chest piece, a short skirt, and two shoulderless sleeves, all designed with a mix of traditional Japanese clothing. Needless to say, there were many exposed parts such as the shoulders, the belly, and the legs.

“It may seem impractical but the main objective of this type of clothing is to cultivate creativity and is catered to people with a unique sense of fashion. Ah, I would like to be clear that although I called this impractical, we at Arachne Tailors have made even this type of exposed clothing usable in certain combat situations. Take this as an example.”

One of the spider legs on Leolja’s back thrust into the mannequin’s exposed abdomen at an incredibly fast speed. It didn’t seem like he held anything back. Normally, what would end up happening was for the strike to pierce cleanly through the lifeless doll, but before that happened, multiple black threads stretched from the chest piece and the short skirt, all intersecting at the point Leolja tried to pierce.

“This is what Arachne Tailors are capable of. It may seem like an exposed portion but in reality, nothing is without protection. Wearing the complete set activates the connection with clothes, automatically creating invisible threads over the exposed areas and protecting them the same way the clothes would. We have heard of news that some people use our clothes to trick enemies into attacking an open area but end up getting caught by the wearer’s trap and leave unscathed due to our clothes’ tight protection. Let this be a demonstration of how capable we are.”

“I see… this… is really interesting.”

Senkyo said while scrutinizing the outfit in front of him, touching its exposed parts and being met with a wall of black thread. It seemed like he lucked out on his gamble. He wanted connections with Leolja.

“Whoaa…!! O-Onii-chan, can Shiro try it!?”

Shiro said with eyes sparkling even brighter than when she devoured a six-course meal back at the grill house. Thinking about it, Shiro’s usual clothing already looked like a cosplay, so maybe she liked wearing clothes like this. The thought crossed Senkyo’s mind and immediately transitioned to questioning what clothing in this world could be justified as a “cosplay.” If Senkyo wandered around on Earth wearing the clothes he had on right now, everyone would assume he was cosplaying as some character. Well, now that he was in an actual fantasy world anything he wore could be considered cosplay. Then, the thought of Shiro wearing the costume in front of them crossed his mind.

“Huh!? No, we can’t!”

The answer came out immediately to cover his embarrassment.

“W-We’re here to do business, remember?”

That was his flimsy excuse. Unfortunately for him, Leolja was there.

“No, if you would like to try out our clothes, then please do. It may become a good reference for our talk later. By all means.”

“!!!”

His reply made Shiro’s eyes sparkle even more. She had Leolja’s permission, but she still waited for Senkyo to give his. It seemed like no matter how much she wanted to do something, she still wanted his permission, even though she was free to do so. She had the appearance of a cat but it really seemed like she was more akin to a loyal puppy. He couldn’t help but have his heartstrings tugged by her actions, frustrating as it is.

“F-Fine…”

“Yay, yay!! Shiro loves you, Onii-chan!”

“Mnn, sure. Me too.”

Just a bit of sibling affection for the first time in a long time. He kept playing it cool outside, but on the inside, he was melting from happiness.

**321 – A Hobby’s Reason**

A few hours passed with Shiro trying out a good number of different outfits. It wasn’t just the cosplay clothes, she also tried out casual wear, loungewear, and they even had sleepwear! At this point, Senkyo couldn’t see the difference between this clothing store and one on Earth. Shiro got so into it that she dragged Senkyo with her. He was already reluctant to do this, so she chose his clothes for him, picking out the same types of clothes she wore but with cool, stylish formal clothes added as a bonus. Meanwhile, Leolja eagerly complimented most of their looks. He held his breath on some, which Senkyo assumed to be a sign that he didn’t quite agree with the look. Though, he preferred a professional’s honest opinion rather than empty praise just to get more sales, so he saw this as a positive thing.

Half of the afternoon was already gone when Shiro finished her fashion spree. There, Senkyo made a mental note for someone to take Shiro to a mall when they got back home, but preferably without him present. The three went deeper into the building, arriving at the second floor where Leolja’s office was located.

“Have you thoroughly enjoyed yourselves?”

“Yes!”

Shiro made a cheery reply to Leolja’s question. All of that fashion testing must have brought him to her good side seeing as she was actually responding to him instead of just letting Senkyo take charge of the conversation.

“Then, I would like to move on to the main reason I asked for the two of you. You may already know, but are the clothes Miss Shiro is wearing authentic?”

By “authentic,” he meant if it was made from Earth, Senkyo didn’t miss this. At first, he was unsure of how to go about revealing he had connections to Earth but after seeing the influence ambassadors brought to this world to the point where this place was basically a mix of a fantasy world and Earth, perhaps talking about their sources wasn’t such a bad idea. Of course, he would abstain from mentioning that he was actually from Earth, but saying that something they had was from Earth didn’t sound too bad of a move… That was what he planned to do, but now that he thought about it, the true source of Shiro’s clothes was something he wasn’t too sure about either.

“…Well, it originally WAS authentic. You see, Shiro is my sister but circumstances had forced us to bind her with a Familiar Pact with me. These clothes are the clothes she wore when she made the pact.”

“Oh! That certainly is an unusual story. I see… so these clothes are that of a half-spirit’s…”

He pinched his chin, thinking for a second. Senkyo internally breathed a sigh of relief, seeing as Leolja wasn’t too shocked about what he said, implying that it wasn’t too farfetched of a story and the fact that he knew about Spirits in addition to Earthlings.

“Sorry, you probably wanted to know where we got these clothes.”

He was about to make a light bow, but then, Shiro tugged on his clothes, catching his attention.

“Onii-chan! Don’t we still have your clothes?”

“Oh, those ones. I do have physical clothes that originated from Earth but…”

“Ah!? So you do have samples of Earth’s clothes?”

Leolja latched onto his words as quick as he heard them.

“Yes, but unfortunately, they got scorched in one of our conflicts. I don’t think these would be something worth selling.”

The school uniform Senkyo wore was burnt and stale. Not a piece of cloth was spared from the flames of his own magic. Even if they were produced from Earth where they had advanced technology for weaving, the clothes he wore earlier were of much better quality. In fact, they were so good that he could barely tell it was made in a fantasy world. What he assumed to be spider cloth felt different from common clothing on Earth but that didn’t mean they were any less comfortable. Considering this, he simply saw no merit in purchasing his burnt clothes. Nevertheless, Leolja thought differently.

“Oh, that’s completely fine! You see, as silly as it sounds, I’m not actually in dire need of a supply of Earth’s resources. I’ve heard that clothing shops before 17 years ago always had suppliers on Earth but our establishment doesn’t need that. The real reason I called out to both of you was more on the side of satisfying my selfish curiosity. You see, I’ve learned about Earth’s weaving techniques and the like but I have never seen a real sample of their clothes. I may be able to weave my own cloth and have a clothing establishment of my own, but that doesn’t mean I’m not curious about how cloth was weaved before my time.”

He said passionately, bringing Senkyo to a nod.

“I see… Then, the reason you called out to us was that you just wanted to examine what Earth’s cloth was like?”

“Yes. It’s completely unrelated to my business, so you’re free to refuse me if you want to. But preferably, I would like for you to accept. I could take inspiration from the clothes if it strikes me and overall, have my curiosity fulfilled. With that said, would you be willing to sell me a piece of Earth’s clothes, scorched as they may be?”

“Hmm, I don’t see a problem with that. Sure, I’ll sell them.”

“Thank you very much.”

A… smile(?), or at least what Senkyo thought was a smile, formed on Leolja’s face. He couldn’t really tell because of his Arachne mouth but that’s what it felt like.

“Oh, this is embarrassing… My apologies, but don’t think I ever got your name. I deduced Miss Shiro’s name from your exchanges but I never got yours.”

“A-Ah!? So-Sorry, that’s my bad!”

“No, it’s quite fine. I was the one who suddenly called out to you and dragged you here. I didn’t give you any time to properly introduce yourselves, so I feel this is mostly my fault. I was just so absorbed with clothing that it slipped my mind.”

“…Well, in that case, I am Yukou Senkyo, Yukou is my last name while Senkyo is my first name. And as you may already know, this is my sister, Yukou Shiro.”

“Shiro is Shiro!”

She followed up Senkyo’s introduction, raising her arm in the air and doing one for her own.

“Haha, what fun siblings you two are. Well then, Sir Senkyo and Miss Shiro, is there anything you would like in exchange for the trouble I’ve caused you?”

In this situation, Senkyo would usually refuse his offer since he and Shiro already got quite a lot from trying out their clothes, but this situation wasn’t normal. He needed to use anything at his disposal to elevate his perspective of the situation.

“Actually, there is…”

Senkyo went ahead and explained his supposed situation where his memories were taken from him by a monster and ended up in Iqanlr with missing patches of memories. Since Leolja was the only person he explained this to with Shiro out in the open, he applied the same fake setting on her.

“Oh, my… that is quite an unfortunate situation. If there is anything you want to know, I will be sure to provide you with any information I can.”

And thus began Senkyo’s incessant strings of questions.

**322 – Iwaiida Riser, Leolja**

First, Senkyo began with a question addressing a term Leolja mentioned in his first introduction to them. An Iwaiida Riser of Iqanlr’s Sunken Nest, he referred to himself as such. To understand what a Riser was, he first went into detail about what a Sunken Nest is. As Iaksin explained before, they are underground habitats where all hostile monsters retreated to when the Great Unity March happened. Sunken Nests usually have a dominant species that become the most dangerous in a Sunken Nest, the people of Haeqras would mark what type a Sunken Nest is depending on this dominant species. As for Iqanlr, it was an insect type. The most dominant species inside the sunken nest is the Iwaiida race, an evolutionary race that consists of arachne, as well as the same race Leolja belonged to. Apparently, a Riser is a term used for someone that was originally born and raised in a sunken nest, but lost their hostility for people on the surface and left the nest to live above ground. An Iwaiida Riser, one born from the most dangerous race in Iqanlr’s sunken nest, was Leolja’s true identity.

This was a huge shock to both Senkyo and Shiro, and Leolja’s wry face told them how he expected this reaction. Curious, Senkyo pursued how exactly he became a Riser. The contents were a bit cruel, but that was exactly why Leolja revolted the sunken nest. Below the surface, the Iwaiida race would feed on other monsters in the nest, but due to their large numbers, there were never enough, so their race resorted to cannibalism. They ate their brethren, thinning the competitors for food, and becoming food themselves. That was normal for the Iwaiida race, but that didn’t change the fact that Leolja was disgusted by this. When he was a child, he saw mothers lay themselves down as food for their children, as well as situations with the roles reversed where mothers ate their babies for food. It sickened him. He knew all too well how different his mindset was compared to his kin but that didn’t bother him. He just didn’t like seeing what entered his eyes and that was it. There was no special reason.

Fortunately, Leolja was a talented hunter from birth, allowing him to provide food for himself without needing to resort to cannibalism. However, that didn’t make his life simple. The fact that he refused to submit to the race’s cannibalism had him become the perfect target for his Iwaiida brethren. He was a lone wolf, always on the run from his own kin. He then explained how evolutionary races work to Senkyo and that the Iwaiida race evolves from food and combat experience. The more he eats, the more his food varies, the more he turns that food into energy for combat, and the more he pushes his body to the brink for survival, every single second in Leolja’s life had him evolve to the final form of their race. They didn’t have a name for this, but the people in Haeqras referred to his form as a Demonic Spider. The most dangerous enemy in the sunken nest.

In case Senkyo and Shiro had plans of visiting the nest, Leolja showed them his true form. A large body of a spider filled the room, one with the upper half of its body turning into a human’s. Unlike how Leolja’s half-human, half-spider form earlier where the human side was dominant, this had the spider side as the dominant form, one consisting of sharp, lethal fingers the same as his fearful fangs.

Despite his terrifying look, Leolja spoke in the same polite way he did earlier. He went on about how everyone at his level was able to make threads that blend in with the environment. He cited the cosplay costume Senkyo and Shiro first saw earlier, explaining that their threads could become invisible just like the clothes. He warned him that the only way to detect them was to sense the mana running down their threads. Some races in Zerid have a simple time doing this due to their natural abilities, but there were still more that weren’t that lucky.

Leolja returned to his human dominant form, retaining the three-piece suit he donned from the start without a scratch despite his sudden body enlargement. This was also the work of his illusionary threads, he said.

Realizing the tangent their conversation took, he brought it back to how Leolja became a Riser. At first, Senkyo thought that Leolja simply had more intelligence than the others but this wasn’t the case. The Iwaiida have similar levels of intelligence and at the time, Leolja’s was average. He was a talented hunter by instinct, not intelligence. What really had him change was a strange man that did research at the bottom of the sunken nest. He tried to kill him at first but he could never do it. The man had strange contraptions that allowed him to escape his traps as if he had never been caught in the first place. The man didn’t try to strike back and just ignored him.

Time passed and Leolja eventually found out that his kin would never chase him down after a certain point. That being, the area around where the man was researching. He was wary at first, but eventually, curiosity took over and made him approach the man. He asked about it from a safe distance and the man answered that it was a type of barrier that repelled hostiles. The fact that he was able to enter meant that he wasn’t hostile, so the man never cared to pay attention to him until he called out. Leolja reminded him of the fact that he tried to kill him before, to which the man explained that it wasn’t the type of hostility that the barrier repelled. He went on about how there was a difference between hostility to murder and hostility to survive, but Leolja didn’t exactly understand at the time.

After this revelation, Leolja frequented the man’s place. He would watch from afar and observe him making his unusual contraptions. Then, at some point, got involved with his research. That was the moment he realized that he had a fatal weakness—curiosity, something he could never resist for long.

The man taught him many things about what he was doing research on and about other things outside of the sunken nest. Leolja never went into detail about what it was with Senkyo and Shiro, but that eventually led to Leolja finding his passion for making clothes. He utilized the thread he would usually use for hunting and turned them into cloth, giving birth to a new type of combat clothing. Even the man he thought could do anything was amazed.

This made the man suggest he leave the nest and live on the surface, but that was the biggest hurdle out there. The reason why Risers are so rare is that they didn’t know what the surface had to offer and what threats were awaiting them. In the past, some people tried negotiating with the ones living in the sunken nest to peacefully live on the surface, but his kin was too hostile to be reasoned with and attacked. Leolja didn’t know what would happen if he went to the surface after that, but the man reassured him and gave him a push.

After some time, Leolja gathered the courage to make contact with people on the surface. He took on a more human-like appearance and dressed himself in elegant clothing. An image of a man entering a job interview came to Senkyo’s mind but he didn’t voice his thought. Leolja arrived near the surface where he encountered surface dwellers, but in complete contrast to his initial thought, they only gave him a glance and leisurely passed him. He was surprised but eventually continued. On the surface, the ones that first made contact with him were guards which he assumed belonged to Haeqras, the organization that the researcher talked about. He thought he would be met with weapons, but instead, was given the question.

*“\*Are you leaving the Sunken Nest and becoming a Riser?\*”*

Thankfully, there were quite a few people with surprised expressions among the guard, seeing as a Demonic Spider just came out of the nest. This relieved him of the concern that surface dwellers were an emotionless bunch. But the one that he assumed to be the most powerful person in command, the person right in front of him, had a stone-faced expression, unperturbed by his appearance.

Leolja spoke to confirm the man’s assumption and was sent to the local Haeqras where he was given an identification card and sent him out to the city with an escort, whose job was to introduce him to how the surface world functioned. They strolled the town, being introduced to each and every facility he might need to use such as inns, the food district, how the walls functioned, and even some essential lessons that explained how the world worked outside of Iqanlr and some compulsory education which included the history of the three worlds. By the end of the day, Leolja couldn’t help but ask the escort.

*“\*Why does no one seem to mind that I’m a Demonic Spider?\*”*

No one cared he was from the sunken nest. It was just like how the researcher explained that would happen. The escort turned to him and clarified that surface dwellers aren’t weak. Each and everyone from every race, no matter how different they are, has a common ability to discern the hostility of another person. Of course, there were ways to hide from these senses, but the fact that Leolja looked so prim and proper had most of the people they encountered take that instinctive sense as a fact.

The escort went about how discrimination and racism weren’t prevalent concepts in Zerid. However, there was a rise in these ever since the very first ambassadors showed up, but most of them simply took that as an inconvenience in exchange for having a better state of living.

That began Leolja’s half a year of learning all about the surface world. After that half, he went on and established a business called Arachne Tailors, one that quickly shot in popularity due to its high-quality clothing and the otherworldly design they had, specifically, the designs that the researcher prepared for him from time to time. It seemed like he had knowledge of Earth and made rough sketches of the clothes they had. Leolja used them as a base and made clothes out of them with his personal touch.

And so… after a year and a half from becoming a Riser, here he was with Senkyo and Shiro in front of him.

“W-Wow… so this is actually a brand new establishment, huh? I never would have known…”

“Whoa! That’s amazing!”

“You flatter me.”

Leolja said before sipping on the tea that was served to him, Senkyo, and Shiro by an employee at some point in their talk.

“I never thought Zeldians were so accepting…”

Senkyo muttered before going deep into thought. When he considered everything that happened in Zerid where, unlike Earth, had many races that were equal in power and no single dominant species. Perhaps it was only natural for there to have few cases of discrimination and racism in this world. Not to mention the fact that they openly welcomed a race that originated from a completely different world. But then, he couldn’t help but be disappointed in humans when he heard the fact that these toxic concepts rose ever since ambassadors, or more specifically, humans came to Zerid.

“I quite enjoyed that talk. Is that all you want to ask of me?”

Leolja turned to Senkyo for confirmation.

“Ah, yes. It was a very interesting life story you gave us, Sir Leolja. I hope for the best in your future on the surface world.”

“Haha, please, you can address me without formalities if you’d like.”

“Oh, no, we couldn’t—”

“Then, let’s go with Leela!”

Senkyo’s face froze when he heard the absurd utterance from Shiro’s mouth.

“You’re Leela!”

“Leela, you say? I assume this is a type of phonetic spelling. Honestly, it sound’s a bit too womanly… but if that’s how you would prefer it, I don’t mind, Miss Shiro.”

“No! That’s unfair! You need to call Shiro the same way!”

“O-Oh…”

Leolja’s puzzled face turned to Senkyo and received an apologetic bow. He took that as his signal to play along, so he did just that.

“I see… then, how does ‘Shir’ work?”

“Shir!?”

She parroted him excitedly with her eyes sparkling.

“Shir! Onii-chan, did you hear that!? It sounds cool! Shiro has a nickname now! Shiro is Shir!”

“Haha, good for you.”

“Mn~! Mnn~!”

She hummed happily as Senkyo pet her head. Meanwhile, Leolja just overlooked them with warm eyes.

“Well then, I apologize for the trouble, uhmm… Leolja.”

“Haha, it was nothing at all. If anything, I should be thanking you two, Senkyo, Shir.”

“Thank you too, Leela!”

Shiro was incredibly cheerful today. Maybe because she made another friend which brought a smile to Senkyo’s face. But still, their job here wasn’t done. They still needed to sell his uniform.

“Okay. I’ll take out the clothes now—”

“—…Wait! Please, stop! You aren’t allowed to enter here!”

“It’s fine, I tell you! It’s fine!”

Just as he reached out for his bag, a muffled voice came from the hallway outside the room. The three turned their attention to the door. Then, it suddenly flew open, revealing a girl in some kind of uniform. It seemed like the employee tried to stop her but was unsuccessful and simply gave an apologetic bow when he saw Leolja’s face through the door.

“Sir Leolja! I’m taking these two with me!”

**323 – The Chaotic Extrovert**

“Um… This is a bit late now but, who are you again?”

“Mmn~?”

The woman in front of Senkyo and Shiro turned to them. She seemed about the same age as Senkyo with wavy brown hair that reached her waist and amber eyes that reflected the same color as the gem on her uniform. To be precise, a school uniform. One with a short-sleeved white blouse under a purple vest adorned with golden edges and a similar colored aiguillette connecting the vest to the amber gem. Her pleated short skirt bounced lightly as she turned her head around with a spring in her step, along with her black mantle that was adorned with various purple designs, wrapping around her neck with a golden chain that fastened into another amber gem. This was no doubt a clothing design that incorporated Zerid’s local magic and Earth’s, or specifically, Japan’s uniforms. That, or the design was completely based on some fantasy story that someone got from Earth.

At this point, Senkyo was already unfazed by Earth’s influence on Zerid. He literally just got out of a clothing store with clothes that were much too similar to Earth’s clothes and earlier dined in a grill that had Earth-contemporary food service. This uniform was nothing. Yet, he couldn’t help but strain his face as he watched the girl in front of him. It wasn’t because of the uniform, but more of the fact that she was eating some kind of grilled… seafood(?) on a stick. It wasn’t just the simple problem of the food looking absolutely horrendous, but it was moving along with it! It was some kind of mix of a sea slug, a fish, and tentacles on its back that wriggled slightly from time to time. He had a mountain of comments loaded in his mouth, but he stifled it and silenced himself for the last few minutes so as to not lose sight of the first question he needed to ask the most. Her identity.

Back at Arachne Tailors in Leolja’s office, this person quite literally dragged them out of the door.

**…………**

“H-Hey! Miss Hira! What are you doing!?”

Leolja raised his voice as the woman he referred to as Hira made a light jog to Senkyo and Shiro’s backs, grabbing them at the collar of their clothes.

“It’s an emergency! Prof Gaeka wants ‘em, stat!”

“The professor!?”

“Yep, yep! Ok, now that you know, we’ll be off!”

*\*Tug! Tug!\**

“Eh?”

“Nya!?”

At that very moment, she pulled both Senkyo and Shiro out of their seats and rushed out of the store. They could hear Leolja’s call for her to stop fading in the distance but there was no halting this person. Senkyo didn’t know why, but this person was insanely strong seeing as she was able to drag both of them with one hand each. He tried calling out for her to let them go multiple times but she only did so when they arrived at a street stall that sold those… things. He couldn’t help but feel insulted that his safety was of less importance than that seafood thing.

**…………**

“Oh, my bad! I was totally rude earlier, huh? Sorry, I just wanted to get out of Sir Leolja’s hair as fast as possible. I bet I wouldn’t be able to get away if I stayed for too long. My name’s Hira, by the way! Ah, and I heard that you lost some of your memories, so you probably don’t know what this uniform is!”

“M-Mn…”

Shiro hid behind Senkyo’s back, clearly overwhelmed by Hira’s lively energy. To be honest, he was a bit swamped by her too but he had to take control of the conversation before both of them get dragged by her flow.

“Y-Yes, I’m Yukou Senkyo, and this is my sister, Shiro. Earlier, you said that you know we’re missing memories. How did you know that?”

“Oh, that! Fufu, you wouldn’t believe it, but I’m actually the spy that’s been tailing both of you since you left the walls! I betcha didn’t even notice I was there, huh? But I was!! I’m so good, aren’t I!?”

She continued talking while walking forward, alternating her gaze from her front to their faces, and giving animated gestures as she spoke. Senkyo had no idea how this girl was doing this without bumping into something, but that wasn’t what he wanted to focus on. If what Hira just said was true, then it was just as she said. He didn’t pick up a single trace of her presence. This person acted like one hell of a trendy gal that didn’t care much about other things, but in reality, she could actually be capable to some extent. If only she would stop munching on that half-dead street food then maybe his opinion of her would actually go up.

“Oh, yeah! Oh, yeah! Hey, Senkyo-san!”

She cheerfully called for him, slowing down and matching his stride, placing herself right beside him.

*“\*What kind of spy is this bubbly!?\*”*

Senkyo couldn’t help but quip in his mind. It wasn’t only that she was the most extroverted person he had ever met in this world, but she didn’t even hesitate to address him by his first name right off the bat. Right now, he could only compare her to a cat on their zoomies.

“W-What is it, Hira-san?”

“I—ah!?”

She was about to say something but suddenly stopped herself, widening her eyes in surprise and placing her hand to cover the front of her open mouth. After a few seconds of letting her thoughts stabilize, she told him.

“Wait… calling you Senkyo-san is fine, right? Sorry, I’m not used to talking to people from Nairn so I ended up using your first name. Is it ok? I can change it if you’d like.”

“Oh, uh…”

As Iaksin explained before, the Nairn was a place somewhere on the southwest side of the Uikakrn Kingdom. Apparently, they had similar customs to the Japanese such as introducing themselves by their last names first and using honorifics. It was the place Iaksin assumed Senkyo came from since it made the most sense, so he didn’t waste any time adapting that information to his fake background. And now, Hira seemed to be concerned with the same assumption in her head.

She awkwardly scratched the back of her head while her bright smile from earlier turned crooked, making her seem sheepish. Senkyo wasn’t sure how to respond to that since the chaotic waves around her immediately quelled at her mistake. If this wasn’t all an act, then Hira was actually more or less considerate. He almost inadvertently blurted out his consent when he realized this, but this was where he drew the line. Senkyo felt that if he didn’t do anything to put her under control he wouldn’t get anything out of her.

“Yes, please go with my last name.”

“M-Mn, sorry about that again, Yukou-san.”

“No, there’s no need to drag the subject.”

“Y-Yeah, you’re right! Ah! But wait, then what do I call your sister? Isn’t her last name the same as yours?”

“Ah…”

A blunder. He was so focused on dealing with Hira that he forgot about Shiro’s opinion. He turned to his back where Shiro remained separated from Hira via Senkyo body shield and saw her reassuring gaze.

“Don’t worry, Onii-chan. Shiro is used to being called by her first name. Shiro doesn’t mind.”

“Is that so? You’ve grown strong now, huh?”

“Hehe~… Praise me more~!”

He reflexively stretched his hand out and pet her head, making her let out a few delighted hums. That lasted for a few seconds until Senkyo realized that Hira was still around. She stared at them with a perplexed look in her eyes, immediately averted them when she saw Senkyo turn to her, and feigned ignorance by whistling sloppily and clumsily scratching her cheek. She wasn’t fooling anyone. His face reddened slightly from embarrassment, but on the bright side, she calmed down somewhat compared to her earlier behavior so he could actually get some answers from her now. Senkyo cut his actions off with a forced cough and faced Hira.

“Hey, Hira-san, you said I was needed but where exactly are we going and who are we meeting?”

“Oh! What a perfect time to ask that!”

She dropped her sloppy act and made a light jog to the side of the road. There, she thrust her arms out as if making a grand reveal, presenting a familiar-looking structure beyond her hands.

“BEHOLD!!! The world’s most advanced apocrologic institution, and not to mention, the school I currently attend in, Apocrology Academy Xhiari!”

**324 – Xhiari**

“What!?”

Senkyo couldn’t help but raise his voice. It was the very same name he heard the waitress tell him to look for. His memories reconfirmed that he clearly asked the waitress for the location of a library. However, from what Hira was saying, Xhiari is a school, not a library. The thought of the school library came to mind, but would a school library be bigger than a standalone library? This was his first thought. But the more he looked at the school, the more that thought seemed to be plausible. After all, this school seemed to be larger than any school he’d seen on Earth.

Senkyo stopped, took a step back, and took in the sight before him. The school and the streets were separated by ornate metal bars supported by a brick frame. Beyond that was a grassy area designed to look like a park with concrete pathways that led to a large school building constructed in modern Japanese architecture with multiple rows of windows spread evenly on every floor. He could see other students near the entrance and chatting by the trees outside wearing the same uniform as Hira had on.

“So, so, what do ya think of it!? This is the place where most of the ambassadors’ knowledge is poured into! It’s awesome, isn’t it!?”

“This is… beyond my expectations.”

“Woo! I know, right!? That’s what I thought when I first got here too!”

Even just by looking at this place, Senkyo knew this would be the ideal place to supplement his ignorance of this world. If what Hira said was true, then this place is where knowledge from both Earth, Zerid, and even the Spirit Realm was collected. There was no better place he could wish for. Senkyo wanted to ask about the library immediately, but there was such a thing called an order to this situation. Right now, he wasn’t being led to the library, but to some person called Professor Gaeka. He couldn’t get to the books, so who better to extract more knowledge from than the person right beside him?

“Hira-san, you said this is an ‘Apocrology Academy,’ what do you mean by that?”

“Oh! That’s right, you lost your memories! But fear not! I’ll be here to help you out when you’re in trouble! Let's talk while we walk, okay?”

Hira took out a silver card and tapped it into a rectangular cavity on the side of the gate, just like how one would tap a scanner on Earth. This made the gates open automatically for them to enter. Apparently, this was one of the inventions of apocrology, to which she explained was the science of Zerid. She went on about many things and how it uses Zerid’s resources and Earth’s knowledge to create new technology. The key card and scanner were one of many.

On Earth, these things would be powered by electricity but on Zerid, they were powered by magic, or at least what Senkyo assumed to be magic. Wanting to be sure about the subject, he asked Hira how the contraption worked. She told him that it worked mostly on magic but it still had a few electric components, confirming the existence of electricity in this world. The difference was instead of implementing it the same way Earth did, they modified it so that their sources of electricity would be one among many options such as a magic electricity generator, lightning stones, or a person’s own lightning magic. In this world, electricity was basically self-supplied, removing the need for powerlines and electricity companies. In a world where everyone had their own way of creating electricity, such things were useless. In turn, this led to most people in Zerid being quite capable of lightning magic. Everyone generally knew how to use and control its output.

Satisfied, and also quite vexed that the people of this world, which he first thought to be a typical fantasy world without a trace of modern technology, basically ran on free electricity, he shifted the subject to hide his internal pain. The next topic he decided to touch upon was when Hira introduced Xhiari as the “world’s most advanced apocrologic institution.” She explained that the Ridsikrn Empire held the name of “The Nation of Arcane Innovation” due to the fact that it was the most advanced nation in terms of technology and magic. She clarified to him that this was also one of the biggest reasons why Hjor, Yuwokrn’s currency, was one of the strongest currencies in Zerid. Hearing this, a question came to Senkyo’s mind.

“Why is the most advanced apocrologic institution inside a Border City instead of at the heart of the Empire?”

Senkyo could recall Iaksin telling him that border cities were built between nations as a sign of peace and unity. Although, as good as that purpose may be, was it really a smart move to place such an important facility right on another country’s territory? Hira understood his question, to which she wagged her finger in disapproval. Apparently, there was no other way for Xhiari to be the most advanced apocrologic institution if it wasn’t built on Iqanlr. The Ridsikrn Empire may be the most technologically advanced country, but the ones that are most compatible with handling such technology were the Sorun race, a race local to the Kingdom of Uikakrn. By placing Xhiari on both Uikakrn and Ridsikrn’s borders, it was not only a sign of peace but also a partnership. Ridsikrn could send their technology to Xhiari while Uikakrn would provide Sorun to analyze their technology, improve them, and create more. Both countries benefited from this widely which led to Xhiari’s current state.

In addition to having the backing of two whole countries, the past few ambassadors also contributed to Xhiari by putting their knowledge into the project. One of the ambassadors a few centuries ago was an architect and made the academy similar to Japanese schools. Of course, this was modified as the years passed but with that ambassador’s architecture as a base, the academy was made into what it is now.

Now that Senkyo understood more about his current environment, he moved on to another topic he had in mind. The identity of this Professor Gaeka. He caught this name even before he entered the city. There was no doubt that this person is very influential. The problem was the fact that they were specifically asking for Senkyo and Shiro. Perhaps not them directly, since the guards at the wall clarified that they wanted the blood of a victim from the rampaging memory-devouring monster. The issue was that they wanted Senkyo’s blood, which was a huge problem, or so Shiro suggested. Senkyo didn’t actually know how big of a deal his blood was but if Shiro said so then he had no reason to doubt her. To have an idea of how to deal with this professor, he wanted information from Hira.

“Oh, the Prof, huh? Well, he’s one of Xhiari’s leading apocrologists. He’s made many contributions so far and now he’s in charge of figuring out how this elusive memory-eating monster works. For that, he says he needs the blood of a victim. That’s you two!”

“So he’s going to use our blood to fight off this monster? Is that even possible?”

“Who knows? I can’t understand half of the stuff he does, and I study here!”

She emphasized her words by patting her chest with both of her hands, indirectly implying her high intelligence. Doing so as she slurped the last piece of that… seafood-thing on a stick. There was no doubt that Hira was a student in an academy that is hailed to be the world’s most advanced institution, but for SOME REASON, Senkyo found Hira’s genius hard to believe.

“Um, Hira-san, what exactly are the requirements to attend this academy?”

She unhesitatingly answered.

“Not much!”

To which Senkyo slowly nodded his head with deep ruth, lips sealed tight to prevent any unnecessary words to be said…

“Hey!! What’s with that pitying look on your face!?”

…Not that it helped to hide those thoughts.

“Look, don’t misunderstand! The requirements for attending the academy are little to none! You just need to understand how apocrology works and have a passion to cultivate it! That’s me! But, actually enrolling in Xhiari is a different matter! This place has half of its students decided to be Soruns or anyone that Uikakrn decides to send in. Meanwhile, the other half is decided completely by who is the most capable in apocrology than others. For your information, I’m in the latter half! Sure, I’m Sorun, but that doesn’t mean I got picked by the Kingdom. They have their own thing going on there! I’m just some random from the countryside that got in with my own strength just like the others! So I can’t help but feel like you’re being really rude right now!”

She passionately gave out her speech, each and every one of her movements conveying to Senkyo her true feelings. It made him realize that Hira wasn’t joking when she said she had the passion to study here. From what she said, she had her own pride in getting into Xhiari, and Senkyo spat on that pride by refusing to take her seriously and even doubting her abilities. It was no wonder that Hira was hurt by that. Senkyo chose to be a bit hard on her just to keep her under control, but he knew that it didn’t warrant him to actually hurting her feelings.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to go that far.”

“Hmph! As long as you know.”

She turned around with a huff and continued leading their way.

**325 – AW-Unit**

So far, Senkyo, Shiro, and Hira have passed the main school building and a few others which seemed to be some kind of warehouse and large tower of sorts. Right now they were beside an open field with students in the middle of it. Senkyo couldn’t help but stop to stare the moment he saw the outfits of the students.

“Are you interested in our practical sessions?”

Hira noticed Senkyo pause for a bit and came back to him. She was a bit angry earlier but it looked like she already passed it off as water under the bridge.

“Hira-san, what are those outfits they’re wearing?”

He asked, pointing to the students wearing varying types of jumpsuits. Though, he was more familiar with these suits if he referred to them as space battles suits, the same ones he often saw in space science fiction anime where the characters pilot and fight in gigantic robots. Yet another thing he didn’t expect to see in Zerid.

“Oho? Are you interested?”

“If I had to say, then yes. It’s the first time I’ve seen anything like it.”

“Hehe, I know right? You’ve lost your memories but I betcha would’ve had the same reaction even if you did!”

She said, pointing and smirking at him mischievously.

“You’re real confident, huh? And what makes you say that?”

“That’s ‘cuz Xhiari’s the only place that produces those things! In other words, people like me! Oh, and we don’t sell these by the way. It’s all completely school property!”

Hira said something incredible just now and instinctively made Senkyo want to squeeze in a quip, but thought otherwise after being reminded of her passionate speech earlier. Instead, he opted to ask passively.

“Wow, you can make those things?”

“‘Course I can! Every student in their 3rd year and above have to be able to make their own if they want to stay Xhiari or graduate.”

“3rd year and above…? Um, how do school years work in Xhiari again?”

“Oh, I never got to that part, huh? Well, you see…”

She went on to explain that just like how the school architecture was based on Japan’s, their school year system was the same. They have both a middle school and a high school, both requiring three years in order to advance to the next level. However, unlike Earth, graduating in this world isn’t as important nor as valuable as it is on Earth. It can get you to college, but bluntly speaking, if you weren’t a merchant, it’s useless in Zerid.

This was how it usually went for the standard schools in Zerid, but in Xhiari, it was different. Third-years have the option of extending their stay in the school through the research program. This allowed graduated third-years to put their knowledge into use and become research apprentices in the apocrology field. Seeing as everyone that attended this school aimed to be involved in apocrology in the first place, almost everyone took the research program. From this point on, each student is given five years to prove their worth to the school in order to become a full-fledged apocrologist researcher. Otherwise, the student would lose their right to stay in the academy and will be forced to become an apocrologist researcher through other means.

“By the way, I’m in my second year as an apprentice!”

“Whoa… That’s actually amazing. How’s your chance of becoming an official researcher looking?”

He asked innocently, unknowingly penetrating an intangible spike through Hira’s chest. Her bright cheer quickly went into gloom.

“W-Well, y-you know… I-It’s in the process… yep…”

That reaction was all he needed to know not to pursue the subject. Senkyo didn’t know what went into this whole apocrologic research thing, so he didn’t know how to cheer Hira up. An ignorant person like him might actually just worsen the situation, making him opt to change the subject instead.

“A-Anyway, what do those suits have to do with apocrologic research? It seems like its importance is at the point where the school wants everyone to be able to make it. It’s the first requirement to entering the research program, after all.”

“Oh, yeah! That!”

Her mood perked up right away. This person’s mood swings left Senkyo confused about whether or not to actually worry about her, but that wasn’t what he needed to think about now.

“Take a good look at the students over there.”

Hira pointed to the middle of the field. At some point during their talk, a red circle appeared at the center while the group of students stood by the edge of it. Two people walked up from the group to the center of the red circle. One was a woman with white hair and red eyes donning an azure battle suit with what seemed to be a thin exoskeleton attached to her. Based on her human looks, she seemed to be a Sorun. Meanwhile, the other was a large man with black and brown scales all over his body, reptile feet, sharp claws, a tail, two bright red horns on their head, two sharp protrusions on their back, and a face that looked similar to a dragon. Such a man had a carmine battle suit and a large exoskeleton frame that made it look like he was half machine.

“What’s happening there?”

“A mock battle. Its purpose is to test out the capabilities of the suits they made and basically let students know where they need to work on.”

“Then those things are designed for battle, right?”

“Not quite. They can be used for purposes other than battle. It’s just that live combat draws out more of the suit’s problems or unexpected functions. It can be good or bad depending on what happens and statistics shows that mock battles are best for drawing them out.”

“I see.”

The two students made distance from each other and prepared to fight as they got into their fighting stances. They stared at each other in silence, watching the other’s movement as the seconds of stillness passed. The first sign of movement was seen at the very second the person in charge gave a signal.

The large dragon man was the first to move, an explosive blast under his feet propelling him toward the woman.

“Yukou-san, do you know how battles with magic usually go?”

“I’ve seen it happen multiple times before but I never fully understood it.”

The woman managed to dodge by a hair’s breadth, her pale locks grazed by the dragon man’s metal arm. Her lips opened and closed rapidly as she did so, creating a reaction beneath the ground the dragon man floated on as he made the attack. However, immediately after the woman uttered her first word, the dragon man followed with the same rapid lip movements. A spike of earth attempted to rise from the ground and impale the dragon man, but was immediately crushed right back into the ground like a pancake as a heavy force of gravity kept it in check.

“Then, ever notice how everyone always mumbles something?”

“Yes. That’s them casting a spell, right?”

“Correct. Have you ever thought why?”

“Well, spells are generally cast through words. You don’t really have to be clear as long as you get it out of your mouth and make the mana form as you want… So my guess is that they do that for faster cast time and to keep the spell secret from the enemy.”

Senkyo caught either Yuu or their enemies doing so before releasing magic before. This wasn’t an answer that came into mind at Hira’s question, but more of his thoughts of what it could be based on his previous battles.

“Ooh, you’re on fire, Yukou-san! Another correct answer! The first step in fighting with magic is to keep your enemy from knowing what you’re going to cast. Just like how the lizard guy from earlier anticipated the attack and immediately countered the girl’s magic, you won’t win a fight against someone with a wide knowledge of magic if you keep spilling what you’re trying to do beforehand. This is also why races with good earing are feared on the battlefield. As long as you hear and know how to deal with their spells, you’re basically invincible.”

The battle raged on as they had their conversation. It was mostly a one-sided attack from the dragon man while the woman kept dodging every single one. It seemed like her aim was to tire her opponent out, but if that were the case there would be no end to this, seeing as the dragon man seemed to move primarily on his machine and conserving his real stamina. That was what he thought. As the dragon man landed from another charge attack, his face paled.

“That was how it used to be. But, do you know what Angels are?”

Senkyo stared at the scene before him, wide-eyed. Seeing as he couldn’t answer the question, Hira did it for him.

“The blessed children of god. People who can cast magic with only their heads. Monsters that had complete dominance on a single power. There was once a time when they were the most powerful beings in the world. Unable to predict them, unable to know what they’ll do next, and the frustrating feeling of your mouth not being fast enough to out-cast magic they prepared in their minds. They were untouchable existences.”

Senkyo had no idea when, but the woman instantaneously took over control of the field in a blink of an eye. What spread around the dragon man were multiple clones of the woman, all of them rushing at him at the same time. They were nothing but illusions, so the only one that he should actually make contact with was the real one. That’s how it should have been. But for some reason, every single strike from every single clone sent a heavy impact on his body. Not only that, the thin exoskeleton on her body glowed at one particular strike, sending the dragon man’s large frame flying across the arena.

“Angels are a thing of the past. What we have now is the future. The accumulation of knowledge and technology from all three worlds, the pride and joy of apocrology. Angel Wing Units, abbreviated as AW-Unit, the wings that let us soar through the skies.”

**326 – The Dragon Man and the Woman**

It didn’t take long for the dragon man to realize that if he did nothing, he would be sent out of bounds. First, he confirmed that all of the woman’s clones were all on one side of him, taking away the concern of being surrounded from all sides. Then, he somersaulted in the air, pointing the flat of his feet to the sky above. At that moment, a burst of fire sent him straight to the ground, spinning as he shot downward, and digging his exoskeleton’s feet through the dirt to stop himself.

Standing just in front of the red line, he charged his arms and impaled the ground with both of his exoskeleton’s arms. Orange light emitted from the machinery, sending it not only through his gear but also through the ground, making it look like the earth was cracking apart. The woman responded by having her clones dodge the cracks and charge the dragon man all at once, aiming to overwhelm him with numbers before he could finish what he planned to do.

Pressurized steam released from the dragon man’s body as the large exoskeleton removed its grip on his person. A compartment opened from both legs of the machine and revealed two gauntlet swords, a belt, and four bands which he equipped to both wrists and ankles. Since the unequipped exoskeleton was still operating, continuing to spread orange light through the whole field, it was clear to everyone that he planned on protecting it until whatever the machine was trying to do successfully resolved. Realizing this, the woman who maintained a safe distance from the machine until now moved forward and pushed closer to the dragon man’s position.

“BRING IT OOOOONNN!!!”

The dragon man roared so loudly that his voice reached where Senkyo and the others were standing. He whipped his tail on the ground with such strength that it left a cavity where he struck. He mumbled, casting some sort of spell under his breath. The woman did the same in response to this. Then, the dragon man’s red horns began to glow along with his body, making the gaps between his scales more pronounced. The gauntlet swords, the belt, and the bands all glowed in orange as the light reached them. Finally, an explosion.

Black smoke veiled the area despite the lack of proper fuel to produce it. As the clones charged into the smoke, a wave of flame brushed them away. No one could see what the dragon man did since he was hidden by the smoke. But then, a strong gust of wind came from the woman, carrying away the black smoke that hid the dragon man, revealing his annoyed face. The gust unmasked the current state of his gear. Flames wrapped around the gauntlet swords like whips, continuing their fervent veil around the dragon man’s body.

Every time the dragon man attacked with his gauntlet sword, the flames would extend like a whip, taking out multiple clones in a single strike, making it more difficult to get to him with his erratic flames. He continued doing this near the machine, keeping a tight defense around it. Despite the vast difference in numbers, the dragon man successfully fended off every single clone in the area, leaving only him and the woman.

At this point, the machine had covered the majority of the ground with its ominous orange light. Only a little more before it completely filled the area. The situation was looking bleak for the woman. Although Senkyo didn’t know what would happen if the cracks filled the arena, there was nothing more frightening than the unknown. The best thing to do was expect the worst-case scenario—the woman’s defeat. However, despite the underlying danger, the woman didn’t seem to care and just stared at the dragon man with a blank stare. The dragon man returned this with a tense face.

The woman looked up to the sky for a second, taking his vision off of the enemy, and heaved a big sigh. She mumbled something and proceeded to place her hand on her nape. There was something there that seemed to be some kind of scanner. As she finished her mumbling, the colorless pad she placed her fingers on glowed white. In the very next moment, she was gone. Senkyo didn’t know what happened, but the same couldn’t be said for the dragon man.

He finished mumbling a chant as well. The effect erased the flame whip that wrapped his left gauntlet sword, turning the orange light to a dark purple. As soon as the gauntlet sword was completely consumed in dark purple light, the dragon man found the woman right in front of him, about to send a devastating kick to his head. This took him by surprise, but he wasn’t unprepared. The flame whip from his right gauntlet sword managed to block the attack, allowing the dragon man to have a clear shot at her small body. With her leg bound, most would think this was the end for her. However, that wasn’t the case.

Pale blue light ran up to her bound leg, causing ice to blast from her limb and onto the dragon man’s face and shoulder. This loosened his grip on her for a second, allowing her to pull her leg back and drive her fist into the dragon man’s abdomen. With the exoskeleton of the arm she just used glowing yellow, a surge of electricity spread across his body. Not giving the man a chance to recover, she followed up with another punch. This time with the exoskeleton emitting a brown light.

The dragon man knew that everything would end the moment that attack connected, but the electricity from earlier shocked his muscles, and couldn’t immediately respond with his body. Having no other choice, the orange glow on the belt around his hips intensified, turning into a red color. Noticing the strange reaction, the woman backed off. Just as she did, the space around the dragon man was engulfed in flames, the belt reduced to pieces in the process. He stretched his limbs and exercised them a bit as he stood in the fire. Since it was birthed from his own mana, they didn’t affect him, which allowed for a good safe zone to recover his body.

Preferably, he would have wanted the woman to wait for him to recover, but she didn’t feel like having any of that and switched his target to the large machine behind him. There was visible displeasure as the dragon man’s face twisted in annoyance. The woman moved, circling around the dragon man and rushing down the machine. The dragon man blocked the woman’s path and thrust his gauntlet sword at her.

“Huh…?”

As for the woman… she was stabbed, making the dragon man let out a dumbfounded voice. His head went into overdrive, trying to analyze the situation as fast as he could. The AW-Units they wore weren’t just used to cast instantaneous magic and synchronize with various technologies, they were also a formidable piece of armor, especially if the ones who made them created it with such a purpose. All of the AW-Units the students wore were screened through a set of requirements, one of them being the ability to protect the wearer from a fatal blow. If the AW-Unit the woman wore was genuine, his attack would have never penetrated her body. Instead, it would destroy the AW-Unit entirely in exchange for receiving the blow. In that case, the fact that his attack went through meant one thing. The woman in front of him was a fake.

In just under a second of attacking a clone, he quickly realized this fact and turned around to the machine behind him, catching the very moment when the woman kicked empty air. There should be no threats from a missed attack like that, but the main concern was that the exoskeleton of the leg she kicked with glowed in a brown light. The swift motion of her leg caused the earth below to rise and knock the machine off of the ground and out of the ring.

This should not have happened. The dragon man knew that the woman was using the light element to hide herself, so he purposefully charged his left gauntlet sword with the dark element to negate her stealth. As long as he had it set to that, it should have been impossible for the woman to pull off this move. Confused, the dragon man checked his left gauntlet sword and realized the cause of the problem. It was devoid of light, in other words, not functioning. His mind quickly recalled the moment the woman drove a strike of electricity through his body. At that moment, she must have focused most of her magic on his left gauntlet sword, shocking it and disabling a major weapon against her. The dragon man lost his strength and slumped to the ground.

“FUCK!! I WAS SO CLOSE!!!”

He punched the ground out of frustration. Seeing him completely drop his guard, everyone watching saw this as a concede of defeat. It seemed like the dragon man’s whole game plan was based around his heavy machine doing something to get him the win. With it gone and no other alternatives, this was the end of the line. That should have been the end of it. Except…

“Vleid, aren’t these things supposed to disappear now?”

The woman walked up to him and asked in a tired voice that only he could hear. She was referring to the orange cracks on the ground. She assumed that they would disappear the moment the large exoskeleton was pulled off the ground, but that wasn’t the case. The orange cracks kept forming, slowly stretching forward as they filled the whole circle.

“This is bad! Raeri, get out of the circle! NOW!!”

“Got it.”

Senkyo, Shiro, and Hira noticed the small commotion happening in the circle. The woman left the dragon man at breakneck speed, arriving to where the other students and the supervisor were standing. Meanwhile, the dragon man rushed over to the fallen machine, reattached it to his body, and tried fiddling with the controls. Nothing happened. Next, he impaled the same spots with the exoskeleton’s arms before trying the controls again but to no avail. Desperate, he bolted to the other edge of the circle that was about to be consumed by the cracks. He detached the machine outside the border and dug out the ground, trying to prevent the orange cracks from reaching the red circle. However, his attempts were futile as the crack would either circle around or go over every obstacle he put between them.

“Damn it! Damn it! DAMN III—!!!”

His incessant curses reached where Senkyo and the others were standing. The frustrated shouts of the dragon man were the last thing they heard before a large pillar of flame rose from the ground and consumed the skies.

**327 – A Mysterious Spell**

A blazing inferno that Senkyo was all too familiar with emerged from the ground. It was the same magic he attempted to use once against a colossal skeleton. The very same magic that almost burned him half to death and exposed him to great danger. You could say that if it wasn’t for this magic, he would never have ended up in Zerid the way he did. The high-tier fire magic, Hell’s Pillar.

“H-Hey, hey, hey, wait a minute. What’s all this!?”

Hira’s voice was filled with panic as she watched the scene unfold. She boasted about the AW-Units earlier but it seemed like she didn’t expect this to happen. Particularly, she was worried about the red circle that marked the battlefield. It was designed to contain any magic that was fired inside it to make sure anyone fighting within doesn’t involve the spectators or damage anything outside of the field. The problem was that prolonged exposure to a high-tier spell like this might destroy it. There was no telling exactly what would happen. It could end with the field getting destroyed but since this was the result of some kind of error, there was also the change of the magic going wild.

While she was thinking that, Senkyo had concerns of his own. This scene invoked a number of emotions inside of him. It reminded him how powerless he was in the face of overwhelming strength. He could learn how to control spirit power or use magic, but that didn’t change the fact that he was mortal. One mistake is all it takes for everything to fall apart. In the same way, one attack is all that’s needed to end his life. He went face-to-face with death more than once. During his battle with Fulgur and the next when he tried to use the magic that he thought would help him.

Just like what was happening in the red circle at this very moment, the path he chose was filled with many unexpected dangers like this one. In the life he chose, death could be waiting for him behind every corner. It could be from the hands of the enemy, an unfortunate accident, or an end due to his own incompetence. What the dragon man was experiencing right now resonated with Senkyo. This was clearly not something he wanted to happen, but it did, and the majority of the cause for it lay on him. Some people wouldn’t see it as such. This incident could be considered a force of nature. An unavoidable result of many factors that came together at the worst possible times, but in the end, it doesn’t excuse the fact that many things can be lost from these events. No matter what excuse people manage to come up with, the fact still withstanding—a mistake is a mistake. That’s why, the best solution for such a problem…

“I’ll never let it happen again.”

The words flowed out of his mouth as naturally as breathing.

“Thou, who hath taken form. Forged from the planet's wealth, I call upon ye. Reveal thy core and pledge to mine will. Deconstruct.”

A spell. That was clearly what it was but Shiro and Hira couldn’t help but stare at him with dumbfounded expressions. It wasn’t any spell they’d ever heard in their life. Completely unknown to this new chant, they looked around their surroundings to find what could have been the effect of his magic. That didn’t take long for them to detect.

The towering inferno quickly dispersed from top to bottom, large flames being reduced to mere embers. The air and the ground bathed in a crimson hue slowly returned to their natural color, revealing the red circle where the dragon man stood with his mouth agape, stupefied at the unexpected development. Every person was left speechless, trying to figure out what they just witnessed. In such a tense atmosphere, Hira’s energetic voice served like a lighthouse in the night, bringing everyone’s attention to her and her group.

“Wow, wow, wow, wow, WOW!! Yukou-san, that was amazing!! You took out that Hell’s Pillar like it was nothing!! How did you do that!? Hey, how!?”

“Stop pestering Onii-chan! You don’t need to know, do you!?”

Shiro, who had been quiet for a while now, got in between Hira and Senkyo in an attempt to dismiss the subject.

“You’re right, but I’ve never seen anything like it! It was AWESOME!! If possible, I’d like to use it in creating my inventions!”

However, Hira didn’t want to give up that easily. Invisible sparks clashed between Shiro and Hira, their mental battle continuing in silence. Senkyo didn’t really know how to take this, so he just let everything happen. No, it wasn’t just that. He didn’t even know how he ended up doing that.

Senkyo stared at his hand. He didn’t do any particular movements as he chanted the mysterious spell, but it just felt natural to check his palms first. His instincts took action before his mind could process what was happening. It wasn’t like his body was being taken over, but more like his body simply did as he willed. He could recall the vivid sensation of the words entering his mind and leaving his mouth in one smooth stroke. If he had to compare it to anything, it would be similar to the time when memories of his father entered his mind in the middle of his test of endurance against Fulgur.

“Excuse me, are you the one who got rid of that magic for us?”

A middle-aged man walked up to Senkyo and the group. Judging from his complete human features, the man was a Sorun.

“I am the supervisor of the practical session that was being conducted just now. I simply wanted to convey my thanks to the person who resolved the mishap. Many accidents and errors happen in these sessions, but this was the first ever time anyone has ever incorporated high-tier spells into their AW-Units. Having no prior experience in such, it is no exaggeration that you have saved us from grimmer odds. Please, accept my deepest apologies and gratitude.”

The man bowed to him, quelling the tension between Shiro and Hira in the process. Senkyo didn’t expect to be in this situation, or more accurately, he was too preoccupied to even consider it. He almost retreated to his modest attitude instinctively but managed to hold it down to consider a different path of action.

“I’m glad I was able to be here to stop it. My name is Yukou Senkyo and I entered the academy today due to a summons.”

“Ah, I see. We were very lucky to have you watching over us at the perfect time. My name is Adeira, the supervisor of class R2-S. Please, do not hesitate to call for my name when you are in need of assistance.”

“That would be greatly appreciated.”

Taking his eyes off Senkyo, the man directed them to the girl beside him.

“Miss Hira, I assume guiding Sir Yukou was the priority task you’ve been given. See to it that you do so properly and conduct yourself as a proud example of the academy.”

“Yessir!”

Adeira let a light sigh with his eyes darting slowly into empty space as her response entered his ears. It seemed like he didn’t expect her to follow his words in the first place and didn’t attempt to pursue her any further. As compensation, he gave another bow to Senkyo.

“I’m afraid I must be off now. Sir Yukou, once again, you have my thanks.”

Adeira didn’t wait for Senkyo’s response before disappearing in front of him and reappearing multiple times in a line back to the group of students. It seemed like he used some kind of teleportation magic that could travel limited distances.

“He introduced himself earlier, but I’ll tell you more about him. That person is Sir Adeira, one of the genius apocrologic researchers that pioneered teleportation-based tools. One of the biggest bigwigs of the academy! Lucky you, being able to talk to someone so important! Oh, he’s also my supervisor, by the way!”

“Your… supervisor…”

“Yep! That means the people gathered over there are my classmates in R2-S! Hehehe, I don’t mean to brag… but R2-S stands for Research Year 2, Level S! A place only for the most talented people in our year!”

Something gave Senkyo and Shiro the feeling that she was only saying this to brag, but none of them voiced it out loud. At this point, Senkyo had a hunch that she was only doing this to prove a point for disparaging her position earlier.

“You really love throwing these curveballs at me, huh? I’m sorry for what I said, okay?”

“Hehe, serves you right~!”

**328 – Professor Gaeka**

“For someone who's in a hurry, it sure took a while for us to get here.”

“Hey, it’s your fault for sightseeing and asking so many questions! You should be thankful I went out of my way to indulge you!”

“Well, you’re not wrong.”

After making a quick stop to watch class R2-S’ practical session, Senkyo, Shiro, and Hira continued their walk to their destination. Past the training field was a whole section dedicated to apocrology research. In one of the buildings there, the three entered and climbed to one of the top floors through an elevator. The sight of this advanced technology didn’t even phase Senkyo anymore.

The group stopped in front of a room with a nameplate that wrote “Gravitational Research Room” in Japanese kanji.

“We’re here~!”

Hira cheerfully announced as she spun around to face Senkyo and Shiro.

“We’ll be entering Prof Gaeka’s room now, so be on your best behavior!”

She warned them and turned around to open the door without waiting for their reply. She knocked on the door a total of five times with short pauses after her first and third knock. It seemed to be some kind of secret code to indicate that the person knocking was Hira. Senkyo wondered why there was a need for such caution. Before he could come up with anything plausible, the door opened before them and revealed the space beyond.

The room was built with sterile flooring and clean white walls. The majority of the room was colored in pale white and the ceiling was installed with glowing panels and vents. There were revolving chairs that provided seating and a fridge that stored various materials for cold storage. Numerous scientific items were spread across the desks and shelves, and most likely more behind the white cabinets and drawers filling the space in the room.

Many strange items were placed in the room. Most of them resembled items on Earth like a microscope, a Bunsen burner, a centrifuge, an incubator, and other similar items. However, they differed from Earth’s items such that gems and unknown metals modified them. Senkyo noticed from the earlier battle between the woman and the dragon man that some colored gems represent an element of power and most of the ones in this room had a dark purple gem on them, which he assumed to be the dark element. That would make sense since this room specialized in gravity magic, just as the nameplate suggested. Other than those, there were universal scientific tools such as beakers, test tubes, droppers, and other such items.

In that whole room, one person stood in front of a desk, turning around to find Senkyo and the others. He was on the elderly side around his 70s or older with white hair and a beard styled in mutton chops adoring his face. He seemed to be Sorun due to his human features, but something felt strange about him.

“…!!”

The same sensation seemed to strike Shiro at the same time, making her hair stand on end and tightening her grip on his arm. He didn’t seem to be a bad individual, but he couldn’t just disregard Shiro’s reaction.

“Why, hello there. You two must be the victims of the rampaging monster I’ve been told about.”

Donning his below-standard white lab coat, he approached Senkyo and the group.

“Heyy there, Prof! I brought them just like you asked!”

“So you did. A great job you’ve done, Miss Hira.”

“Hehe, naturally~!”

She replied, wiping some nonexistent dirt off her face with her thumb. Then, her smug face quickly turned into dissatisfaction the moment Gaeka’s next words entered her ears.

“I’m thankful for your help. You may leave now and return to your class.”

“Ehh?? Can’t I, like, stay here?”

“No, you must not. I’m afraid I will be operating in delicate work. I would prefer it if only the minimum number of people were around.”

“Aww… fine.”

Her expression conveyed her dissatisfaction, but she also knew the struggles of having unwanted elements in her research, so she begrudgingly turned to the door but not before giving a pouty face. Gaeka bowed to her leaving figure just as the door closed behind her. A still silence filled the air for a moment before Gaeka turned to Senkyo and Shiro.

“I apologize for the late introduction. I am Professor Gaeka, the lead researcher of the rampaging monster situation. Just as the wall guards requested of you, I would like to have samples of your blood to aid me in my research.”

Gaeka said, politely giving them a light bow. Senkyo occupied the silence with a few filler words as he turned to Shiro to gauge her reaction. At these times, even when her knowledge of this world was not that much better than his, her instincts were still a thousand times more reliable than his. Seeing that she had a wary expression on her face, similar to that of a cat being threatened of her territory, he concluded that he operate with the same caution in mind.

“That would be fine, but you must have heard of the trouble we had at the walls, right? Do you have anything that can solve that problem?”

Senkyo had no plans of leaving this person with anything, but he also didn’t want to do anything that could get him kicked out of the academy, worse yet the city. He finally found the perfect place to look for information. He had no intention of losing it in this interaction. His goal was to give the Gaeka a good reason to drop his pursuit of his blood, or at the very least prolong his attempts until he finished his information gathering.

“The case with your blood exploding whenever it makes contact with a vial, am I correct? I haven’t seen the phenomenon in person, so I would like it if you give me a demonstration of how it happens.”

“I don’t see a problem with that. Where should I do it?”

“First, we should test it over here.”

Gaeka showed Senkyo and Shiro to a single test tube suspended in the air by a stand. There was a small knife beside it just like how it was the first time he did this. Senkyo looked around for a second, before asking Gaeka a quick question.

“Don’t you have a syringe here?”

With all of the advanced equipment in this room, it was impossible to not have a simple syringe. One must exist somewhere, but they still prepared a knife instead.

“I would like to recreate the situation similar to the original as much as possible. I originally planned of using vials and a vial rack to collect the blood as well, but then I wouldn’t be able to examine the situation happen as clearly as I would like to. If I find nothing comes out in this test, the next one will involve a vial rack, and finally collection from a syringe. We’ll be going through these tests in that order.”

“I see…”

He nodded, trying to think of ways to end this as fast as possible. There should be no problem in the test with the test tube and vials, but the syringe was a different story. He could blow up his blood using his kindled spirit power, but that was only because he can match drop it at the same time his blood drips. With the syringe, he could blow it up from the outside, but not the inside. It may look suspicious when the blood blows up from the outside instead of the inside.

“Then, let us begin the tests.”

**329 – Blood Hustle**

Senkyo picked up the knife and made a small incision on his finger, only enough to draw tiny drops of blood. Since he planned on blowing up the test tube from the start, he didn’t want to draw too much blood. That’s what he planned to do, but the cut he made was wider than he expected. He didn’t think he was that clumsy but there was nothing he could do now. Instead, he focused on kindling his spirit power to mix with the blood and make it explode… that’s how it should have been.

“Hm, it seems like there was no reaction. It’s great that we collected a blood sample but it would be better if we found out how the phenomenon occurs.”

“H-Huh…?”

Senkyo couldn’t help but let out a confused voice. His blood trickled and so did his kindled spirit power. The blue stream that was invisible to everyone who couldn’t use Espy mixed with his blood and entered the same test tube. The problem happened when it passed through the midsection of the tube. With no warnings whatsoever, his kindled spirit power disappeared, disintegrating into nothingness before it could even reach the bottom of the glass container.

“O-Onii-chan…!”

Shiro’s panicked whisper entered his ear, telling him to do something about the situation before it was too late. The professor went to pick up the test tube. If he laid his hands on it, it may already be too late. It will look a bit unnatural, but he had to stop him.

“Ah, actually—!!”

Senkyo launched his hand so fast that no one could misunderstand what he was doing. There were problems with this option, but he had to secure the blood sample before anything else. He swiped the test tube from the table, preventing Gaeka from picking it up. Or so he thought.

“Is there something wrong, Sir Yukou?”

“W-What?”

Looking at Gaeka, he already had the tube of blood in his hands. Meanwhile, what Senkyo grabbed from the table was the stand the test tube was placed on. He couldn’t believe what was happening. There was no possible way for Gaeka to take the test tube before him. He was closer and faster. But despite these factors, the test tube still somehow ended up in Gaeka’s hands.

“…Professor Gaeka, just what did you do…?”

“What are you talking about, Sir Yukou? I just picked up the blood sample. I should be the one asking that question to you. It surprised me when you suddenly shouted and picked up the test tube stand.”

“…”

What was happening here? The thought immediately came to Senkyo’s mind. Gaeka was suggesting that he picked up the test tube while Senkyo just stood there like a statue until a few moments later when he acted to take the test tube first. It would be like someone froze time for Senkyo while Gaeka went on unhindered. Was such a thing possible? He knew magic existed in this world, but never had he encountered nor even heard of time magic. Lost, Senkyo turned to Shiro for her opinion. It would be too suspicious to whisper to each other in secret, so he opted to use Connect.

*“\*Shiro, what happened?\*”*

*“\*No way! He’s lying! Shiro saw it just like how Onii-chan did! He somehow got the blood before Onii-chan could!\*”*

It was the same as his thoughts. Normally, he would believe Shiro’s words unhesitatingly but if what Gaeka saw was true, then there was a possibility that someone froze time for both Senkyo and Shiro, making them have the exact misunderstanding they wanted them to have. Conversely, if he were to believe in Shiro, then that would mean Gaeka was intentionally hiding the fact that he took the blood before Senkyo could. This implied that he wanted his blood so badly that he was either on alert and reacted quickly to Senkyo’s movements or prepared for Senkyo’s attempt to take the blood sample from the start.

“That was a fruitful test. Okay, how about we try to do it again but this time with the same exact conditions?”

Gaeka placed a lid on the test tube and placed it on the holder he had on his belt as he pointed to the desk with a vial rack. He wanted to proceed but it was clear that Senkyo was reluctant to do so.

“Sir Yukou?”

One of two possible situations was happening at the moment. One, there is an existence of a third party for some reason that involves one of the three people in the room at the moment. Two, Gaeka is lying and is trying to get Senkyo’s blood no matter what. In two, his possible branches out to either wanting to do something about the rampaging monster, or the worse alternative, knowing and wanting the power in his blood. As an extra, there was a third possibility consisting of situations that could lead to the same results but were set aside due to their detachment from reality.

“…Sorry, I had my mind in the clouds for a bit. Let’s continue the tests.”

*“\*Onii-chan!?\*”*

Shiro shouted in his mind in surprise. It was an understandable reaction. She probably wanted to reduce as much damage done as possible. That being, how much blood Gaeka obtained. It wasn’t like he didn’t care about Shiro’s opinion. In fact, this was happening because he trusted her. It was just a matter of priority. It would be great if they reduced how much blood was given, but more than that, he wanted to find out where exactly Gaeka stood with his actions. Was he an innocent man or someone who had knowledge of who he is? That was the question he wanted an answer to the most at the moment.

Explaining this to Shiro in his mind, she reluctantly backed down. She didn’t agree with his actions, but she was dedicated to supporting him no matter what he chose. For such loyalty, Senkyo had to bring out results.

“Professor, here take this.”

“Hm?”

Senkyo took the small knife he had in his hand and gently placed it on Gaeka’s hand.

“Why are you giving me the knife? We still need to use it for this test.”

He asked with a sharp tone, displeased with this action.

“Oh, it’s just that I opened a wider wound than I intended to earlier. I could still get some blood out with this, so it should be fine.”

Gaeka shook his head at this.

“No. We are trying our best to recreate the situation in the walls that prompted the vials to explode. It is ideal for us to open up a new cut to remove as many unwanted factors as possible. Please, take it back and use it.”

Senkyo shifted his gaze a few times from the knife and Gaeka’s expression.

“…If you say so, then there’s no problem with that.”

He walked up to Gaeka again and picked up the knife. Then, he went to the vial rack and examined the vials, brushing his hand on every single one while his face was in close proximity to them.

“What are you doing?”

Gaeka asked in a calm voice, trying to peek over his head to see what Senkyo was fiddling with. Before he could catch a clear view, Senkyo retracted his body as he answered.

“No, it's nothing. I just wanted to see if something about the vials is causing an explosion somehow.”

“I see. How was your inspection?”

“Nothing unusual.”

“Hm. Then, all the more reason to conduct this test.”

Senkyo took the knife and slowly opened a wound on one of his fingers. This time, with such care that there would be no mistake that he cut only a small portion of it. A small incision opened up, just as how he wanted it.

“…”

However, the wound didn’t stop widening, opening up a larger wound than his knife even touched. He took a quick glance over to Gaeka and saw that he was taking notes on his clipboard with a stone face. Putting him aside, for now, Senkyo hovered his open wound on one of the vials, pouring spirit power along with it. The red stream of blood mixed with the blue spirit power, pouring into the open vial. And just like earlier, the spirit power disappeared before it could even reach the bottom. The thought of activating Burst before the spirit power disappeared crossed his mind, but that would ruin his whole plan.

“No reaction. Hm… Sir Senkyo, please continue filling up bottles until we find a reaction—ah!”

It was a bit delayed, but he finally saw Senkyo’s hand closing into the vial filled with blood. There should be no possible way for him to take the vial, yet that was exactly what he did. Before his hand could reach the bottle, it disappeared from that spot and reappeared on Gaeka’s hand. It seemed to be some form of teleportation. It would be difficult to confirm this with 100% certainty if he only used his eyes, but Senkyo had a trump up his sleeve.

Just before he conducted the test, he made contact with Gaeka’s hand twice, allowing him ample time to coat it with kindled spirit power and apply tracking properties to it. In the same way, he coated all of the vials with the same properties. And for good measure, he applied the same on his own hand in case some kind of effect happened to his hand without his knowing. As a result, he confirmed that Gaeka didn’t stop his movements nor did he move at unimaginable speeds to take the vial from him. Staying where he was, the vial disappeared in front of Senkyo and reappeared on Gaeka’s hand.

That eliminates the possibility of a third party. Gaeka wants this blood desperately. All that was left to do was find out why. Senkyo had a hunch what it could be, and his upcoming little trick should provide for good measure.

“A—AHH!? W-What!?”

The very moment the vial was moved, the glass bottle increased in temperature rapidly as the solid glass container turned into molten glass, deforming on the palm of his hand and evaporating the blood inside it. Gaeka instinctively shook the molten glass out of his hand. There was still lingering pain in his palm, but he shot a sharp glare in Senkyo’s direction accusingly. Senkyo caught this in his peripheral vision as he immediately turned his head to the vial rack with a surprised expression on his face. Wondering what his reaction was all about, Gaeka traced Senkyo’s gaze and caused a sharp scream from his mouth.

All the glass vials also melted into molten glass. No, it wasn’t just the vials. Every glass container currently in the room lost its shape, leaving a scatter of molten mass all over the room. And by everything, that included the test tube that was held around Gaeka’s belt, vaporizing the blood inside it and burning his leg in the process. Senkyo let his screams of agony pass with a perplexed expression on his face. Then, when Gaeka finally regained control of his body, he rushed up to Senkyo and grabbed him by the collar of his shirt.

“WHAT!! ARE YOU DOING!?”

Tossing away composure into the air, he glared at him with bloodshot eyes, shaking and sweating profusely from the burns he just received from the molten glass. Anger seethed through every word in his mouth. Shiro was about to push Gaeka away, but she was stopped by Senkyo’s orders through Connect. This ended in a situation where Gaeka was holding up Senkyo, shaking like a leaf from fear and confusion.

“I-I-I-I d-don’t know what’s happening!! I-I-I—”

“STOP PLAYING DUMB WITH ME!! I KNOW THAT—”

In the middle of his sentence, he bit his lip, silencing himself before he can say anything more. He shut his eyes aggressively and took a deep breath, trying to regain his lost composure. He glared at Senkyo one more time before he slowly placed him down. Senkyo slumped to the ground the moment he let go of his clothes, unceremoniously bringing him to his bottom. With a hostile sigh and a few coughs to clear his throat, he spoke.

“I apologize. I lost control of myself for a moment. That was unreasonable of me to blame this incident on you. Please, let us continue this session on another day. I will need some time to prepare for unexpected phenomena like this one. For now, enjoy your stay in Iqanlr.”

Gaeka tapped his unburnt pocket twice, making the door open automatically. Senkyo saw this, and clumsily got up his feet, bowing to Gaeka at a sharp 90-degree angle, and leaving in a fluster with Shiro in hand. As their figures disappeared from the room, Gaeka clicked his tongue, cursing the two behind their backs.

“Damn pests.”

**330 – Their Conclusions**

After Senkyo and Shiro got a good distance away from the room Gaeka was in, Senkyo sighed in relief.

“We got away…”

His tense shoulders slackened, or more accurately, returned to normal. Senkyo’s clumsy gait stabilized, his terrible posture straightening to its proper position. He dropped the little act he put up with Gaeka and turned to Shiro with a grin on his face.

“See, I told you it’d be fine, right?”

“Geez! Onii-chan, you need to stop worrying Shiro like that!”

She complained, raising her voice louder than usual. Senkyo took a joking tone toward her but it seemed she was genuinely upset, wiping his smug face and turning it into something more serious to match her.

“I’m sorry, but that was all I could think of.”

“Even so!”

Shiro got in front of Senkyo and wrapped her arms around his waist, locking him in place. Taken aback by this sudden development, he could do nothing but wait for Shiro’s next move.

“Shiro knows it was all an act, but… even so, it hurts Shiro when she sees Onii-chan get pushed around like that. She hates it. Shiro doesn’t want to be too selfish, so she won’t tell you to stop doing those things. She knows Onii-chan is doing that for the best. But… at the very least, please warn Shiro about it. When she saw Onii-chan’s frightened face, it scared her too. She didn’t know it was an act at the time, so she was confused about what to do. Shiro fully supports Onii-chan, she’ll do anything and everything to help you. So please, don’t hide anything from Shiro. Shiro is always on Onii-chan’s side, so please share your ideas with Shiro. She might not understand them, but she would appreciate it if you told her so she doesn’t have to worry…”

She tightened her embrace around his body, refusing to let go. It was as if she thought she would lose him the second her arms so much as loosened. It was at that moment that I clicked in his head. He had been so preoccupied with surviving in this world and being efficient with every action that he neglected to consider how those around him felt about his actions. Even when he tried to repay Shiro for her worth, it was with results. It was always about which was the best course of action and the most gain they would receive. There was nothing wrong with prioritizing it, but the way Senkyo went about that option caused unwarranted pain to Shiro. Even Hira was affected by this when he thoughtlessly belittled her position in the academy.

Realizing how irresponsible he had been, he let out a disappointed sigh for himself and returned Shiro’s hug with one of his own. It wasn’t constricting like Shiro’s embrace was. It was warm and gentle, like a snuggly blanket in the middle of a cold winter night. There, he relayed his feelings through his actions, and soon through words.

“I’m sorry. I’ll make sure it never happens again. You’re important to me, Shiro. I might make mistakes and fail to realize some things in the future. At those times, I want you to call out to me just like you did today. I don’t want to make mistakes. But most of all, I don’t want to hurt anyone I love. You’re one of those people, Shiro.”

“…Mn. Okay.”

Shiro tightened her hug one last time before reluctantly letting go. Backpedaling a few steps, she locked her sparkling eyes with Senkyo’s, and a bright smile formed on her rosy face.

“Onii-chan, you said that you love Shiro?”

The question got his voice stuck in his throat.

“What? Cat got your tongue?”

She teased him for his silence, to which he regained his composure through a tired sigh.

“Yes, I do. As a brother, that is.”

“Aww, too bad.”

Shiro walked up to Senkyo and seized his hand, intertwining their fingers. To add to that, she cuddled her arm affectionately. Just like how a lover would on a date out in the city.

“Then, let Shiro have this at least. As Onii-chan’s sister.”

“I-I’m pretty sure normal siblings don’t usually do this…”

“It’s punishment. Accept it.”

She was curt with her words, not allowing any opportunity for negotiation. Looking around, there were quite a few people who were eyeing them from afar. In his mind, he could only be thankful that this wasn’t his school. Knowing there was nothing else that could be done, he submitted to Shiro’s will and continued walking with her on his arm.

Senkyo went around asking the people around him for directions to the library, his main goal in coming to Iqanlr. And at some point, he got a good handle on the pathing. All that was left now was to get there. Shiro was still on his arm. She looked like she was enjoying herself. It pained his heart to think of ruining that mood, but he just swore to her that he would share everything he was thinking. There was the option of leaving the subject for later, but the contents of his message were too important to set aside. So, he communicated with her through Connect.

*“\*Shiro, I want to tell you something.\*”*

*“\*What is it, Onii-chan?\*”*

Her voice was serious despite her warm, outside appearance. If he had to hazard a guess, then she probably expected him to talk about this subject sooner or later.

*“\*It’s about Professor Gaeka.\*”*

*“\*…\*”*

She didn’t respond and waited for him to continue.

*“\*He knows what I am. And the power in my blood.\*”*

*“\*…Shiro thinks the same. He was too aggressive in trying to get Onii-chan’s blood. That’s Shiro’s reason but, why does Onii-chan think so?\*”*

She looked at him with upturned eyes, her undivided attention placed on Senkyo.

*“\*When I confirmed that there was no third party, I immediately activated the spirit power I spread across the room…\*”*

At the time, when Senkyo finished pouring his blood into the vial, he used a skill called Diffusion. It is an enchanter skill from the Konjou Clan that spreads the caster's kindled spirit power in a limited area through a kind of explosion from his body. With his ten seconds of free reign of the room, he used the spirit power to set the temperatures on every glass surface several degrees above their melting point, turning every single one to molten glass the moment he willed it. This was so that Gaeka wouldn’t be able to continue collecting his blood sample. Then again, this was only thanks to the fact that he didn’t think to look at the drawers and cabinets. Since they were obstructed by furniture, the kindled spirit power that spread across the room didn’t reach them.

There were other reasons why he did this such as getting rid of the blood samples that were already collected. But the most important part of it was that his trick hurt and infuriated Gaeka. Of course, this could have led to them being kicked out of the city. The only reason they were able to enter the city was that Gaeka would supposedly allow any victim from the rampaging monster to pass so long as they gave their blood sample. That was what the guards told them, yet even now when they still haven’t given a blood sample, they were still allowed to roam the city. In fact, Gaeka encouraged them to do so.

Senkyo saw this as his attempt to keep them in the city where he would be in close reach. Gaeka was desperate enough for his blood that he would overlook the earlier incident to keep him in the city. What remained was to know what fueled such desperation. Whether it was to deal with the rampaging monster or for Senkyo’s blood specifically.

Just like Shiro said, he could conclude it was the latter due to his aggressiveness, but it was more than that; Gaeka was just too prepared to the point it was suspicious. Without meeting Senkyo once prior to the earlier meeting, he was able to do something to the test tube and vials that stopped the flow of kindled spirit power inside it. He was able to confirm this when he brushed his hand over all of the vials. His spirit power successfully coated the outside of every one, but everything that tried to enter it would disappear. It was too catered against Senkyo. As far as he knew, he was the only person in this world who could use spirit power. Even if he weren’t it was no doubt uncommon since Zeldians like Yuu and Shiro had a small reserve of spirit power. But despite this fact, he was able to prepare against it with just words from the guard that reported to him about the incident.

Not only that, throughout the whole process of melting every glass in the room, Gaeka constantly sent death stares at Senkyo, accusing him of being the one responsible for everything that was happening. He knew that Senkyo was able to use spirit power despite only meeting him for the first time.

All of those pretty much confirmed his intentions, but what really put the nail in the coffin was the fact that not once did Gaeka ask for Shiro’s blood sample. In fact, he wasn’t perturbed by Shiro’s presence at all. Senkyo entered the town by himself, so the report the man should have sent was that a single person entered the city. He let Shiro out only when they got inside. There was a possibility that informants besides Hira reported Shiro to Gaeka or perhaps Hira had some kind of way to contact Gaeka while tailing them, so Senkyo didn’t focus much on that part. But the issue lay in the fact that he ignored her existence completely.

Gaeka didn’t clarify whether or not Shiro was affected by the same effects of this rampaging monster. He didn’t care about a blood sample from her. All he was focused on was Senkyo’s blood. If he was truly desperate to do something about the rampaging monster, then he would have asked Shiro for her blood too. But that wasn’t the case, which only left the other reason as his motivation.

*“\*Somehow, Gaeka knows about me and what I’m capable of. I don’t know to what extent, but at the very least he knows about what my blood does just like you do. With that said, could you tell me more about my own capabilities? People are trying to fight over my powers that even I don’t know I can do. It can’t stay like this.\*”*

After realizing what Senkyo was getting at, Shiro tightened her grip on his arm. Perhaps there was something hard to talk about but Shiro still managed to respond with a heavy nod and voiced her thoughts.

“Shiro will tell Onii-chan in the library.”

**331 – Exploring the Books**

The Library of Xhiari. It is said to be the largest collection of books and information in the whole of Yuwokrn. A prestigious study that even the public is allowed to access despite the being property of an academy. It has a whole building dedicated to it located in the park area of Xhiari Academy near the second entrance to the campus. There are guards and patrollers constantly roaming the area around the library. This is to control to flow of outsiders to only the library and ensure that the response will be quick if any trouble were to occur in the area.

When Senkyo and Shiro reached the area, a few of the patrol came up to them and asked for their identity. Apparently, this was because they were wearing outsider clothes, which no one that belonged to the campus should be wearing. This suggested that he was an outsider, but it was strange that they came from the direction of the school building. They were basically being suspected as trespassers.

Senkyo quickly tried to clear the misunderstanding by saying that they were guests. Of course, this claim needed to be confirmed, so they asked for the person who let them inside. Hira and Gaeka’s names came to mind, but it didn’t feel right for him to cite their names. Gaeka was basically an enemy until circumstances change, so he preferred it if he didn’t get word of where they planned on spending most of their time. There was Hira, but he had no doubt that the information that got to her would eventually get to Gaeka as well. It wasn’t that he saw her as an enemy it was just that her mouth was too big to keep anything secret. Not to mention she seemed to be under Gaeka’s direct control. After contemplating for a few seconds, Senkyo gave the name of Class R2-S’ supervisor, Adeira. He didn’t know if he had any connection with Gaeka, but out of all the options he had, he was the was his only choice. If it turns out that he was close with Gaeka, then there was just no avoiding that outcome. He knew it would be good to have more connections, but he never thought he’d be using Adeira’s name so soon.

This response visibly surprised the patrol. After a quick talk amongst themselves, they came to a conclusion to let Senkyo and Shiro enter the library while one of them went to confirm this information with Adeira. They explicitly told him that he won’t be able to leave the campus until they got a response but he was free to enter the library, still. Perhaps this had something to do with the library being a public space, but Senkyo felt that this decision was a bit risky on the patrol’s side. Well, he wasn’t complaining since he benefited from this. It was amazing how Adeira’s name would get them this much leeway.

They entered the library, greeted by the massive expanse of books and desks that spread across the room. The interior was designed in Gothic architecture, filling the inside with segmental arches as the bookshelves lined the walls of the room. The same layout was repeated on the floors above, which was apparent through the center of the room where multiple sets of desks and chairs were placed all under the skylight on the ceiling. A hollow rectangular space was left on each floor to achieve this, making it easy to spot categories of books.

“Ok, Onii-chan. Stay here, Shiro will be right back!”

“H-Huh? Wait, Shiro!?”

She quickly let go of the arm she was clinging to all the way to the library and trotted away from Senkyo. He tried calling out to her, but she ignored his call and disappeared into the books. He wondered what Shiro would be off to do when they just arrived at this place for the first time in their lives. Her reluctance to tell him about his own powers came to mind. He doubted she was trying to avoid the topic, but perhaps it was involved somehow. Wanting to respect her wishes, he dropped the thought of chasing her and went to the bookshelves instead. If she was going to take a while, then he might as well begin tackling his original purpose here.

He picked up some random books from the shelves, went to the nearest desk, and started reading. First and foremost, he breathed a sigh of relief that he could actually read the books. Every book he picked up was written in Japanese, saving him from the requirement for Shiro to translate for him. He thought about it ever since arriving in the city, but everyone he met so far was able to speak in Japanese. The only instance he ever heard anyone speak in Zeldian was when he first arrived at the walls. Back in Naen, he heard a few utterances of the local language every now and then, but it was almost non-existent in Iqanlr.

If Senkyo had to guess, then perhaps it was because Iqanlr is an innovative city that incorporates Earth’s knowledge into their lives. Since that knowledge came to them in the form of Japanese, then they had to the language more than usual. As he read some of the books, his thoughts were confirmed when he encountered a book with some history of Iqanlr.

Apparently, the ambassadors and researchers of Iqanlr constantly exchanged thoughts and ideas through paper rather than words due to ambassadors having to travel so much. This led to the need for the researchers to write in Japanese since the ambassadors didn’t know how to speak their language; the Zeldians had to adjust. If Senkyo had to compare this to something, it would be like how English is for the Japanese. In order to process information from foreign countries, they needed to know the language to comprehend them. Just like how English is the most spoken language on Earth, Japanese was the most spoken language on Yuwokrn due to the ambassadors’ influence.

This resulted in a rise of Japanese-written literature but it was hard to say there was a decline in Zeldian-written literature. It wasn’t that Zeldian literature wasn’t affected, it was just that there wasn’t much Zeldian literature in the past. Before the ambassadors came, there was barely anything written in text. The ambassadors were the ones who introduced the concept of books and libraries to Yuwokrn. This also meant that the only reference Zeldians had from the start was Japanese text. This resulted in the cultivation of Zeldian literature, which also adapted some aspects of Japanese writing such as writing characters vertically from right to left. Japanese-written literature may be the majority of the books in Yuwokrn but Zeldian-written literature wasn’t forgotten. It was the minority but it seemed like this was bound to happen since Zeldians advanced through the consumption of Japanese-written literature.

Looking at the names of the authors of the books he had, he would find their names written in katakana form more often than their Zeldian equivalent. Moreover, some were outright Japanese names. Senkyo couldn’t tell if these were from Japanese authors or Zeldians that were named in Japanese.

As he skimmed from book to book, he found a few interesting topics to take note of and read thoroughly later like the different races in Yuwokrn, forageable items, animals, food recipes, and finally, a detailed map of the whole continent. With multiple books opened on the desk, Senkyo cross-referenced the information and found the place he was hoping to find. His eyes focused on one particular area on the map. About north-east from Iqanlr, at the topmost region of the Ridsikrn Empire, just below the bottom-rightmost part of Frukaui, and over the south-west part of the Zelaoage Island, was a kingdom, one home to a Zeldian race he was very familiar with—Vampires.

The Vampire Kingdom of Nrjia. If he couldn’t find information about the whereabouts of Yuu’s takers, then Senkyo went for the next best thing. The place that was most likely to be Yuu’s hometown. However, there was a problem, one that made Senkyo’s eyes darken as he read the passage.

“Nrjia has fallen…”

3 years ago, the kingdom of vampires was taken over by END in a single night.

“3 years…”

*“\*It's just... I lived in this world for 3 years now. I had to learn this world's language and how it worked.\*”*

A past memory that felt like had aged for decades resurfaced in his mind. A conversation with Yuu right after they got out of school. 3 years; A perfect match between Yuu’s story and the date of the tragic event stated in the book he was reading. There was no way it was a coincidence. Yuu went to Earth to escape END’s invasion. Senkyo searched the books to know more about the incident, but before he could find anything worth noting, Shiro finally returned.

“Sorry, Onii-chan. It took Shiro a while but she finally found it!”

**332 – The Origin**

“O-Oh, Shiro. What’s this?”

Noticing his sister’s arrival, he placed down the book he was reading and turned to her. In her hand was another book. She showed it to him which left his mouth agape from his inability to read its title. At the very least, he quickly deduced what kind of book it was.

“It's… a Zeldian-written book. And an old one at that.”

The book in her hands had a tattered cover and the pages were yellowing from decay. Shiro pulled a chair over and sat next to Senkyo.

“We should keep everything we’re about to talk about in private.”

Realizing what Shiro was hinting at, Senkyo turned away from her and picked up one of the books in front of him, pretending to read. Shiro did the same, but unlike Senkyo, she hadn’t opened the book yet. Senkyo stared blankly at the pages while he gave the majority of his attention to Shiro through Connect.

*“\*This book… Shiro doesn’t know everything about it. But, Yuuto-san told me that everything started with this book.\*”*

Senkyo couldn’t help by widen his eyes and raise his brows at Shiro’s claim. She was saying that the book in her hands was the element that made his life what it is now. He wanted to let Shiro continue, but there was something that bothered him about this.

*“\*Wait, Shiro. Did you know that this library had that book?\*”*

*“\*No. But Shiro thought she might as well check. We’re lucky that they had it in this library.\*”*

Xhiari’s library wasn’t hailed for being the largest one in Yuwokrn for nothing, the thought crossed his mind. Senkyo couldn’t tell how rare this book was since it was his first time seeing it. His mind almost veered off-topic when he pondered how much of a coincidence finding a book like this here actually was, but he immediately shook that train of thought out of his head. This was just a bad habit of his overthinking. He needed to focus on what really mattered and brought his attention back to Shiro.

*“\*Onii-chan, do you remember what Shiro told you about your powers when you first woke up in this world?\*”*

*“\*Yeah. My powers are all separated and locked away behind eight seals. The first one that broke was the seal on Shiro and my mana. Then, the moment we arrived in Zerid, another one of my seals was released. The ability behind that seal was Rapid Regeneration, which saved my life.\*”*

A difficult expression floated above Shiro’s face as the last few words entered her ear. She quickly shook her thoughts away and continued.

*“\*That’s correct. Neither of us knows what triggered the release of the seventh seal because all Shiro knows about the seals is the eighth seal. The one Shiro was sealed in. The only reason Shiro knows about the powers in Onii-chan’s blood is that it’s a side effect of him receiving his mana again.\*”*

*“\*Ever since my mana was released? Then… I could’ve done something with my blood for a while now?\*”*

*“\*Yes. Shiro chose not to tell Onii-chan about it since it would’ve given you information Shiro didn’t want you to know yet. But considering our circumstances, it will be bad if Shiro didn’t say anything to Onii-chan about it.\*”*

Shiro took a glance at the title of the book in her hands before continuing.

*“\*Onii-chan, have you ever thought why other people can’t use mana and spirit power at the same time?\*”*

*“\*The thought came to me a few times, but I’ve never arrived at an answer I was satisfied with.\*”*

*“\*That’s only natural. Normally, anyone who did that would be completely eradicated on the spot.\*”*

His head involuntarily turned to the side and faced Shiro at her words.

*“\*Yuuto-san let Shiro have a look at the contents of this book before. She couldn’t understand most of what was written on it, but at the very least, she knows what it was trying to say.\*”*

She brushed the dust off the title of the book before relaying it in Japanese through Connect.

*“\*Calamitous Energy: The Essence of the First World, Primo. A book that talks about the most destructive power in existence.\*”*

No time for being surprised, Senkyo immediately analyzed her few words, relating them to his past knowledge. Yuu told Senkyo in the past when they first met that Primo was the first world that Earth, Zerid, and the Spirit Realm originated from. She told him how chaotic that world was due to the overlapping of the power of the three gods that ruled it. If he related her words to his knowledge, then it was possible that Calamitous Energy was power birthed from all three gods. When that thought came to mind, Senkyo could suddenly feel the pressure around him and Shiro.

Shiro finally opened the book and began reading.

*“\*Discarded, abandoned, and forgotten, but never lost. This marks the rediscovery of the fabled power of old. I am Voaul Oqr, and this is my record of how I stumbled upon the most fierce power left by the three gods.\*”*

The book was written from the author’s perspective, a telling of his experiences and how he discovered Calamitous Energy. Voaul was once a merchant by profession, a researcher by hobby, and an explorer by heart. He often traveled to many places. Not only in Zerid but in other worlds too. His reach was limitless and was considered one of the most successful merchants in the three worlds. This was because of the many items he would find while exploring in his travels. He had unbelievable luck and a connoisseur’s eye for discerning the worth of the items he found.

In one of his explorations, he was struck with tragedy. He was separated from his companions and ended up stuck at the bottom of a Sunken Nest. The particular nest he was inside was dominated by a species that could siphon the power inside anything. This included people and items.

As Voaul tried to find his way out of the Sunken Nest, he eventually encountered numerous enemies with this terrifying ability. He tried to avoid fighting them at all costs, but fate didn’t let him have that luxury. Eventually, he was forced to take up arms and clash with the beasts. He could use magic, but he was afraid it would simply get absorbed by the enemy’s power. He had lost all of his physical weapons when he first got separated from the group. With no other choice, he wielded an otherworldly weapon crafted from the Spirit Realm. Spirit weapons.

A purple light burst forth as his weapon shaped itself. He took advantage of the enemy’s surprise and immediately launched an attack. He took down quite a few enemies before the moment that changed everything arrived. One of the monsters snuck from his blindside and attacked him, forcing him to block with his sword. This was all the monster needed to siphon the power out of the sword.

The purple light disappeared, leaving Voaul defenseless. He thought he was going to die. All the monster in front of him had to do was slash him before he empowered his spirit weapon with spirit power again. But the unexpected happened. The monster in front of him went wild as if it was struggling against something inside it. Before anyone could understand what was happening, the monster burst into flames, consuming its body and everything around it in black flames. Every monster that was nearby was caught in the explosion, burning their bodies the same way as the first monster. All Voaul could do was put his back against the wall and watch as the monsters around them were burnt to a crisp by the unknown black flame. He was separated from the other monsters that were spared from the explosion by a wall of jet-black flames. Seeing that there was nothing else to be gained, the monsters fled.

Once the flames subsided, Voaul walked up to the remains of the monsters caught by the fire. There was barely anything left of them except ashes. But more importantly, those dreadful flames of gloom reminded him of the old folktale passed down by the elders of the single species that survived the chaos from the first world, Primo. An ever-burning blaze that could not be stopped by anything except the mercy of time. A catastrophe ignited by the spark of forcibly conjoining the two opposing powers. Calamitous Energy.

**333 – Secrets of the Past**

The conjoining of two opposing powers. In other words, mixing spirit power and mana. Senkyo reflexively took a glance at the palm of his hand. He always had spirit power inside of him. That went the same for every human on Earth. It was just never trained to be used like how hunters in the Konjou Clan used them. However, that changed the moment Ryosei came into his life, letting him know the way of life in the Konjou Clan and allowing him the ability to use his spirit power. Then, there was his mana. It was released from the eighth seal along with Shiro, allowing it to flow through his body once more. A massive amount pouring back into a body with spirit power. If they were going solely by what Shiro read so far, then Senkyo should have burst into black flames just like how the monster did when spirit power entered its mana-filled body. But this wasn’t the case for him. In fact, he was able to use both powers freely as if moving a part of his body. He never felt anything dangerous from it. He had no answers, so he opted to listen more to Shiro to find out more.

She skipped over many pages, going by memory to get to the next biggest development in the book. At this part, Voaul had begun research on Calamitous Energy. With his many connections and wealthy fortune, he was able to set the most optimal environments for testing the inner workings of Calamitous Energy. Their primary way of exploring this unknown power was through the monsters that Voaul encountered in the Sunken Nest. They were hunted, captured, and made to go through many tests to understand this power better.

Of course, being the destructive power that it is, many of these species died for the sake of research. With no way to force these species to procreate, they were left with no choice but to use what they had. Voaul expanded his resources to hunt down every one of these species until none of them was left free to roam the world. Every single one of their kind was used in Voaul’s experiments. Every single one of their kind dying day after day en masse. Every single one of their kind gone for the sake of power.

Voaul was afraid of the extinction of this race, not because of pity, but because he would lose his only way of creating Calamitous Energy. This time eventually came as the last test was conducted. Thankfully for Voaul, their sacrifices weren’t in vain as the truth behind Calamitous Energy came to light.

Having spirit power and mana make contact wasn’t enough. It needed to be activated through a massive spark in mana like magic being cast. The level they estimated was a mid-tier spell or multiple low-tier spells activating at the same time. They needed to be in contact with spirit power the whole time for the reaction to trigger. The flame caused by this lasts for approximately 3 minutes regardless of the power inputted. They are easy to spread and will catch onto anything. And finally, the flames don’t only burn physical forms, but spiritual forms as well. In simple terms, anyone caught by these flames is susceptible to having their entire existence wiped out. They consume not just the body but the soul as well. This was supported by the fact that anyone who died from them never became a spirited soul in the Spirit Realm.

With the results of the research passed, Voaul went into his reflection on this power. The contents of it were… gone. Shiro told Senkyo to turn to her and saw the last page she read out to him, the book’s cover, and ripped pages in between them.

*“\*This marks the end of the book. If Onii-chan wondering what the contents of these ripped pages were, Shiro doesn’t know either. She asked Yuuto-san when he first showed this to her, but he never responded. She thinks that Yuuto-san knew something but he didn’t tell her.\*”*

*“\*The old man knew, huh…\*”*

A thought passed through his head. It could have been that his father was just being secretive again, but the reason was likely because he was talking to Shiro. He managed to tell her all about what she knew so far, but Senkyo can see her visible struggle in conveying this information to him. If he had to hazard a guess, his father probably didn’t tell Shiro what it was because he didn’t want to burden her with any more of the truth. A wry smile appeared on Shiro’s face as he thought this. Shiro isn’t stupid. She probably thought the same thing before and chose to accept that reasoning.

With a dull thump, Shiro closed the book in her hands and told Senkyo.

*“\*Yuuto-san didn’t tell Shiro anything about the pages of this book. But he did tell her another result of Voaul’s experiments that didn’t arise until recently.\*”*

Senkyo reflexively held his breath at this sudden claim. His gaze was solely on Shiro.

*“\*That is… the birth of another element. From the original 11 elements: fire, water, nature, earth, lightning, frost, light, dark, blood, control, and null, another element was added. The 12th element—Creation. The ultimate form of magic, the purified form of Calamitous Energy, and the power that runs in Onii-chan’s blood.\*”*

Completely nonplussed, Senkyo could only stare with widened eyes at her as she continued speaking.

*“\*Onii-chan’s truest power is the ability to store this element in his body. The creation element, the tranquil and untainted form of Calamitous Energy. The ability to use both mana and spirit power freely. The ability to weave the power birthed from the three gods to your will. If Onii-chan manages to master control over this power, it would be no exaggeration for someone to call you the ultimate being.\*”*

*“\*…And this element can be found in my blood?\*”*

*“\*Yes…\*”*

There were no reactions. Just silence. Shiro waited for Senkyo’s next move, while all Senkyo could do was send his mind to overdrive to process all of this information. For now, he removed his gaze from Shiro and hung his head, supporting it with both of his hands clasped in front of it, the weight transferring to his elbows placed on both legs.

After about five more minutes of silence, Senkyo collected his thoughts and listed a few things he wanted answers to.

*“\*Shiro, how did I get this power?\*”*

*“\*…She doesn’t know.\*”*

*Unaffected by that response, he continued.*

*“\*Then, have you seen my power in action before?\*”*

*“\*Yes.\*”*

*“\*What happened at that time?\*”*

*“\*Shiro doesn’t want to answer that… But, you’ve seen it being used before, Onii-chan.\*”*

*“\*When?\*”*

*“\*Earlier today, when Onii-chan stopped the rampaging Hell’s Pillar. That was magic from the creation element. That’s why Shiro was so surprised when you suddenly used it.\*”*

*“\*…I see, so that’s the creation element…\*”*

Senkyo recalled how the massive high-tier spell was silenced by a weaker mid-tier spell. The element may be called creation but it was also capable of destruction. The most he could figure out about that spell was that it suddenly came to his head when he willed it. He didn’t know why. It could be connected to his conscious such that convenient spells would just pop up in his head right when he needed them, but he wasn’t sure if this was the case. There was no evidence and he certainly didn’t know where to start to test this. In the end, he couldn’t figure it out and decided to move progress the conversation with Shiro instead.

*“\*Am I the only person with this power?\*”*

*“\*As far as Shiro knows, yes…\*”*

*“\*When was that book created?\*”*

Shiro’s ears perked at the question and she immediately opened the book and searched for the date. Her eyes widened the moment she read it and conveyed it to Senkyo in a gingerly tone.

*“\*1812…\*”*

*“\*…about 200 years ago, huh? If this power was the result of this research, why do you think it took this long to produce results?\*”*

*“\*Shiro wasn’t informed in detail, but Yuuto-san said that it was stopped at some point and was forgotten entirely. It was a famous topic back then but everyone suddenly lost interest in it.\*”*

*“\*Why was that?\*”*

*“\*Yuuto-san didn’t tell Shiro.\*”*

*“\*Then, how does he even know something that dated 200 years ago? Is it written in the book?\*”*

*“\*Shiro hasn’t read the entire book, so she doesn’t know and Yuuto-san never told Shiro how he knew.\*”*

*“\*So, a work from two centuries ago lost traction but was suddenly revived recently, and on top of that, created a completely new element…\*”*

He summarized his thoughts out loud in their Connect network.

*“\*Then, what happened recently that could have been related to my powers?\*”*

*“\*If there was anything at all, then it would be the incident with the last generation of ambassadors.\*”*

*“\*I’ve been hearing about this every now and then. What happened with the ambassadors?\*”*

*“\*All Onii-chan knows about the ambassadors is that they were sent to other worlds to make peace, right?\*”*

*“\*Yes, we talked about it at lunch.\*”*

*“\*Okay, then it all began when…\*”*

Shiro proceeded to tell Senkyo about the events that transpired in the time of the last generation of ambassadors. All about how another god interfered with the peace and killed Hades, how one of the Heroes was discovered to be a fake and betrayed everyone, and how the tragedy ended with the memories, influences, and connections from every other world disappearing from Earth and the Spirit Realm as if their interactions with the other worlds never transpired. Senkyo discovered that this was the doing of the god that killed Hades and that Zerid was the only one spared from this effect due to the efforts of all of the ambassadors and the two gods, in a way, making Zerid the most advanced world out of the three.

Then, Senkyo asked how ambassadors were chosen. Shiro didn’t know the exact details, but what she did know was the existence of a date called Judgement Day, a day when all the chosen ambassadors are given their godly blessings. Then, he followed up that question by asking who the ambassadors of the last generation were. Shiro couldn’t recall all of them, but she clearly stated that his father, Yukou Yuuto, and his father’s colleague and acting guardian, Akira Leo, were a part of the previous generation’s ambassadors. As a side, she could vaguely remember the surnames of the other Heroes being Konjou, Yutei, and Honshou. Three familiar surnames relating to Konjou Ryosei, Yutei Yukai, and the school he was studying at, Honshou Academy. The story sent Senkyo silent for about ten minutes. His conclusion:

“THIS IS TOO MUCH TO TAKE IN!!”

**334 – Cunning Exchange**

After being reprimanded by the people around him for shouting so loudly in the library, Senkyo thought to tidy up and prepare to leave. He had all of the books he was interested in on a stack in front of him, the book about calamitous energy included, sitting on the top of the stack. He wondered if he could borrow the books from the library. He might be able to do so if this were Earth, but this was Zerid, they could have different rules. For now, they decided to ask one of the librarians for help.

“Onii-chan.”

Shiro’s stifled call of him reached his ears. Turning to her, she had another person with her. She had short brunette hair and round glasses adorning her brown eyes. A brown fur cloak with white edges covered the back of her body while a white long-sleeve shirt under her grey vest and brown shorts could be seen from the front.

Her face didn’t look too far from Senkyo’s age but there was a mature atmosphere around her. If he had to say, she was most likely somewhere in her 20s, but what took most of his attention was her unique features. Those being the two wings covered in hazel feathers protruding behind her back, the sharp nails on her fingers, her feathery legs with the same color as her wings, and the deadly talons in place of her human feet. The half-human, half-avian fantasy species—a harpy.

“This is the person that helped me find that book earlier.”

“Hello, how may I help you?”

She asked in a cool tone, her expression blank as she matched Senkyo’s gaze.

“Oh, um, we wanted to know if we could borrow these books over here.”

Senkyo presented the stacks of books to her. There were 10 books in total. She took a glance at the stack and returned her gaze to Senkyo, scanning his body.

“I’m sorry, but you’re not a student of Xhiari, are you?”

“No, we’re outsiders.”

She lightly nodded at his response.

“Hm. There will be a few complications in your request. Namely, books from Xhiari’s library cannot be borrowed by anyone except the students and staff of the institution. The library may be open to the public, but the high rate of cases of lost or damaged books in the past made it so that they are unable to borrow them.”

“Oh, is that so?”

Senkyo was afraid of something like this. He scratched his head at the thought of having to scour for these books every day he wanted to read. Ideally, he would’ve liked to take these to their lodgings and read them there so he could read them whenever he had spare time, but that didn’t seem like it was going to happen. Looking at Senkyo’s face, the librarian opened her mouth to say something…

“However—”

“Ah, you can make exceptions for these people.”

…But before she could get her words out, another voice overlapped her. Their eyes widened in surprise at the sudden interruption, inadvertently drawing them to the source of the voice. The man that stood there was a middle-aged Sorun they were familiar with. One of the most important people in the academy, Adeira.

“How are you doing, Sir Adeira?”

With quick feet, the librarian turned to him, took a step backward, and bowed politely to him, retaining her calm demeanor all the while.

“I’m fine, thank you. But, as I said earlier, it’s fine if these people borrow any books. My authority allows me to do this, correct?”

“Yes. If it’s someone with Sir Adeira’s status, they are allowed to sanction outsiders to borrow books from the library.”

As she says this, the librarian walks up to the stack of books, picks up the calamitous energy book that was laying on top of the whole stack, and placed it beside the stack. She continues to do this to the other books until two evenly stacks were made.

“In exchange, if the borrowed books of those sanctioned individuals are lost or damaged in some way, Sir Adeira will face the consequences that come with it. Despite this, will Sir Adeira continue this sanction?”

“Yes, please do so.”

“Very well. I will begin to process the books.”

The librarian went to fetch a book cart and placed the two stacks on the cart.

“Please proceed to the front desk when you are ready to claim your books.”

She said to Senkyo before leaving them.

“O-Okay, thanks…”

He stuttered, still slightly perplexed by the situation. With the librarian gone, he turned his attention to Adeira, who seemed to have taken quite a risky responsibility for him.

“Sir Adeira, is this really okay? I mean, you didn’t have to do that for me.”

“I don’t mind. You can treat this as my repayment for saving us earlier today. Though, I do wonder why you decided to name me instead of Professor Gaeka.”

“Grk…! A-Ah, that one…”

He was referring to how he dealt with the patrol earlier. He used Adeira’s name hoping everything would resolve at that, but it didn’t. The person himself approached him because of it. He didn’t seem upset, and with those raised brows, perhaps he was just curious. It was the kind of face that was trying to probe for information. Seeing as there was no other choice but to confront Adeira about it, he spoke.

“I met up with Professor Gaeka earlier, and honestly, I don’t trust him. I’m afraid of what would happen if I gave him information about where I was, so I thought maybe Sir Adeira could help me with that…”

He answered truthfully, relaying his dissatisfaction with the professor.

“I understand. Well, you aren’t the first one to have the same impression. I don’t mind filling in as your backer. But with this, it’s a bit difficult to say we’re on equal standing, Sir Yukou.”

He smiled knowingly at Senkyo, suggesting that this was his real aim from the beginning. He wanted Senkyo to be in debt to him. There was no question about it; it was for his power. It was the only thing that could have caught Adeira’s interest, after all. The real question was whether or not he was after his general strength or if he also knew about his ability to use the creation element. He had no clue. After discovering just how big of a deal the power inside him was, it seemed like everyone around him was suspicious. This was probably one of the things that Shiro didn’t want him to experience. Well, there was nothing that could be done now.

“I-I’m in your debt. I’ll do anything to assist you, so long as it stays within reasonable grounds…”

“I’ll be looking forward to working with you.”

Adeira said before bowing to Senkyo and leaving. He felt like he was having a headache from that exchange. First was dealing with Gaeka’s approaches, next was Shiro’s large load of shocking revelations, then it was this. Senkyo had no more energy left in him to think. He just wanted one thing. Rest.

Senkyo and Shiro proceeded to the front desk where Senkyo had to sign on a piece of paper for every book he borrowed, totaling ten signatures. It was a bit tedious, but it was surprisingly simple. Senkyo expected to deal with something about identification again and having to work around it. The fact that it was less of a headache than he originally thought improved his mood a little.

Before leaving, he asked the librarian where they could find a place they could stay. She named a place called “Elqa” which wasn’t too far from Xhiari. She ensured the quality they had there with unexpected enthusiasm. It wasn’t like she raised her voice or anything, she just repeated “It’s the best” over and over with the same blank tone every time he tried to ask something about it. Not wanting to deal with such eccentricity, he gave up communicating and just decided to go there.

**335 – Leolja’s Warning**

“Mmn~… mn…”

From the depths of his slumber, Senkyo’s consciousness slowly arose as a sweet voice entered his ears. There was a familiar sensation beyond his closed eyelids. There was something soft and warm wrapping around his body. A fresh, delightful scent wafted into his nostrils. Opening his eyes, the sense of déjà vu struck him.

“Sh-Shiro!?”

He tried to launch himself out of bed but Shiro’s hold on him tightened, keeping him from escaping.

“Ehehe… Onii-chan…”

She snuggled against his chest as if to claim her prize. This was just like the time Senkyo and Shiro first reunited. Her arms and legs clinging to his body, her bare skin hidden only by the bed sheets, and the severe state of fluster on Senkyo’s face when he realized that he was only one article of clothing away from being in the same state.

“How did this happen…”

The memories of last night slowly flowed back into his mind. They were deep into the night when they arrived at Elqa. They expected a simple cozy inn but what stood in front of their eyes was on a completely different level. Instead of an inn, it was better to compare it to a five-star hotel. The building was built in the same modern architecture on Earth and the reception inside was just as its image implied. Now they understood what the librarian meant by “the best.”

When Senkyo checked the list of available rooms, almost instinctively, he booked the room at the very top of the hotel. The penthouse suite. Even after everything he discovered in this world, he didn’t expect to find such a modern word on the list. He needed to investigate it and find out just how advanced this world was in terms of living standards… or so he told himself. In reality, he succumbed to the sweet allure of luxury. He had money, he was tired, and he wanted some kind of compensation after traveling for so long, why not take it?

The two were guided to the top of the hotel by a bellhop, doing them the service of carrying their luggage. The bellhop unlocked the room for them and operated a rectangular pad. Placing his hand on the pad’s surface, he charged lighting magic through it, lighting up the whole room and revealing heaven.

A whole floor fully furnished with luxury items was before them. The living room had a dining table lit under warm, relaxing lights. Uniquely designed chairs and decorations filled the desolate spaces. A fine carpet lay across the whole room. Paintings and curtains spread across the walls. Two sofas and a couch were set near the windows. And the glass wall that led to the terrace outside could be seen from the entrance. It felt like they were really on Earth instead of another world.

The bellhop explained to them that the power will be regularly maintained by the staff, so he wouldn’t have to bother recharging the room with lightning magic. That was great news for him since he was more than certain he’d just overload the pad the bellhop just operated and would end up paying for damages if he tried to do the same. After saying everything he had to mention to the guests, the bellhop politely bowed and took his leave.

Senkyo and Shiro’s eyes wandered around the room in marvel. The first thing Senkyo inspected was the sofas, couch, and carpet. Unlike the threads and weaving of the below-standard lab coats he saw earlier that day, the furniture here was completely different. They were soft and smooth just like the quality back on Earth. More questions popped up in his head because of this, but he immediately chased them away, wanting to end this tiring day without any more thinking.

A little exploring later was all it took for the two to find a large bathroom fixed with both a shower and a bathtub. Best of all, there was a panel that could regulate the temperature of the water. After traveling for days out in the wild without anything to keep themselves clean, this was nothing but pure bliss. The two settled in and got food delivered from the hotel. There was a variety of choices but Senkyo recognized almost none of them. In fear of ordering something like that… creature Hira was eating earlier that day, they went for a meal they were familiar with.

Naturally, what came after that was a relaxing time in the bath. Senkyo went in first at Shiro’s suggestion. At first, he had a strange feeling that she might try entering the bath while he was there, but that didn’t happen. When he finished his time in the bath, instead of wearing the same dirty clothes, Senkyo opted to wear the soft bathrobe that was prepared for them in the bathroom.

At this point in his memories, he realized his mistake. He was so immersed in luxury that his mind’s self-awareness was numbed. He failed to realize that under that bathrobe of his… was nothing. To add to that, he immediately threw himself on the king-sized bed and drifted off to sleep, allowing Shiro to take advantage of the situation and end up as they did the very next morning.

After forcibly taking control of the situation, Senkyo escaped Shiro’s clutches and donned the same equipment he had yesterday. He felt a bit dirty wearing the same clothes that went unwashed for days, but it wasn’t like he had an extra set of equipment lying around to wear. Even if he did, there was the complication of carrying them in their travels.

Well, buying combat equipment may not be a good option, but buying indoor clothes was completely fine. They could carry them in their bag and if it ever got full, then they can just discard them. The sleepwear and loungewear they tried out in Arachne Tailors yesterday came to Senkyo’s mind.

“Oh yeah, we never gave Leolja my school uniform, did I?”

“Now that Onii-chan says it, Hira dragged us out before we could.”

“We should get back to him today and buy some indoor clothes while we’re at it.”

“E-Ehh… indoor clothes? Onii-chan, you just want to buy sleepwear for Shiro, don’t you?”

“Obviously!”

“Ehhhh~~………”

Senkyo just realized this, but his sister really preferred sleeping in her birthday suit. She didn’t do this when they slept outside, thankfully, but it quickly changed when they got into a private room. He usually wouldn’t touch on personal preferences, but despite this large penthouse suite, there was only one bed on the whole floor. It was a king-sized bed, but that meant that the two will have to share. There was no way Senkyo was going to survive continuous nights with her naked sister. And now that he formed that idea into words in his mind, it just sounded all the more wrong. He was buying sleepwear. There was no budging him on this one.

**…………**

After spending the first half of the day lounging around and reading some of the books Senkyo picked out, he and Shiro headed to Arachne Tailors to meet with Leolja. When they first asked the staff for him, they immediately recognized them and disappeared into the backroom. The staff later came back to escort the two into Leolja’s office.

“Senkyo, Shir, welcome back.”

“It’s good to see you again, Leolja.”

“Leela!!”

The three exchanged their quick greetings as Senkyo and Shiro sat on the two chairs in front of Leolja’s desk.

“I’m sorry we got cut off yesterday. Here, I came to sell the Earth uniform.”

“There’s no need to apologize, but thank you for getting back to me. Oh, if I may ask, what happened to you two yesterday?”

“After Hira-san dragged us out?”

“Yes. I don’t mean to be nosy, but I had a few concerns with what Miss Hira said as she dragged you two out. Particularly, about Professor Gaeka.”

“…Professor Gaeka.”

Senkyo couldn’t help but parrot the name in surprise. The serious look on Leolja’s face didn’t look like he was asking for conversation’s sake. Senkyo and Shiro’s relationship with Gaeka was a sensitive topic, seeing as he is one of the people that know what Senkyo is truly capable of. There was always the possibility of other people probing him in his stead to plan out his next move. Leolja could be one of those people.

He turned to Shiro and she gave him a nod. Leolja could be an enemy, but just like Shiro, Senkyo wanted to trust him.

“Well…”

Senkyo told the story about how Gaeka was desperate about getting his blood. Due to unforeseen incidences, they got away without leaving a blood sample. He emphasized the suspicion they felt from him but never went into detail about how they thought so and why everything turned out how it did, hiding the fact that Senkyo was a special existence in the process.

“Mm… I see…”

Leolja placed his hands on the desk as Senkyo ended his story. He took a deep breath before letting out his grave voice.

“Senkyo, I must warn you about that man.”

“Oh… Why is that?”

“You see, ever since that man entered the city, some strange occurrences have been happening behind the scenes. The people I know within the guard and even the academy began acting strangely. One example you’ve seen firsthand is Miss Hira. As you may have experienced, her personality is very straightforward. She acts before she thinks and goes by her instincts. That woman has a strong sense of self. When I first met her, I was certain that no one would be able to bind her down. Yet, she now does every errand Professor Gaeka gives her. You could say that she calmed down but I feel the transition was much too unnatural. She even neglects the research she loves doing just to complete an order. I haven’t met the man, but the sudden change in Miss Hira’s demeanor is concerning. Not to mention that I’ve been observing the same changes in other people I know. I have no definite proof to back up my suspicions but I don’t need them. I’m different from how I was when I lived in the Sunken Nest, but that doesn’t mean I’ve been defanged. The senses that guided me to survival are telling me that this man is nothing but trouble. So, please be careful.”

“Hm, okay. Understood.”

“Hm!!”

Senkyo and Shiro took Leolja’s warning to heart. Then, Senkyo finally handed over his burnt school uniform. Leolja told him that his payment was prepared at the reception desk. Senkyo then informed him of how he was planning on buying some clothes from the store, to which he said that he could take the total off based on the payment. After that, Senkyo and Shiro prepared to take their leave, but not before asking them one more thing.

“Senkyo, Shir, do you two have any plans later today?”

“Oh, yes. We’re thinking of visiting Haeqras and see if we can investigate the Sunken Nest. Is there a problem with that?”

“No, I just wanted to know. Sorry if I gave any misunderstandings.”

And so, the two left the room and continued the day.

**336 – Local Haeqras**

It didn’t take them too long to be on their way to Haeqras. All they had to do was pick from the sleepwear Shiro tried out yesterday. They were buying this under the assumption it would be discarded in the long run, and more likely than not, be left unwashed. For these reasons, they planned on buying two new clothes for both of them. It wouldn’t matter if one of them gets ragged or unwashed since they had another reserve, but to save space they had to keep everything at the bare minimum, so two for each of them was the conclusion.

Senkyo didn’t care much about fashion and prioritized practicality, because of this, it didn’t even take him a minute to pick out two sets of clothes. Shiro, however, was different and not in the way one would normally expect. She didn’t care about which clothes to choose. In fact, she outright refused to choose. She kept going on about how she disliked wearing sleepwear in private. Convincing Shiro was what prevented them from leaving immediately. There was no way Senkyo was allowing a repeat of last night, so he had to be a bit forceful with this one.

Instead of having Shiro choose, he chose for her. He tried to remember which of the clothes she tried on yesterday and reacted positively to. There were surprisingly many options. It seemed like she didn’t mind wearing sleepwear for fashion. He had a hard time choosing two sets that suited her the best. Not because he was indecisive, but because it was a struggle to keep his mind in check as he went through the options. Well, on the bright side, at least he had some form of measurement so that he didn’t have to go through everything all over again. What form of measurement, you ask? We don’t talk about that here.

All that was left after that was confronting Shiro about his choices for her. He thought it would be another uphill battle but she accepted both of them quite easily. The moment the words “I picked these out for you” were said, her ears immediately perked up and caught her full attention. A frighteningly mischievous smile appeared on Shiro’s face but Senkyo didn’t want to think about it. Though, he had to make peace with the thought that tonight was probably going to be another long night.

After following the directions the staff from Aracne Tailors gave them, they eventually arrived at the local Haeqras. Unlike the modern buildings in the city, this one was built in wood and stone. If Senkyo were to speak honestly, this was a bit of a letdown. After seeing all the other modern structures such as Xhairi and Elqa, it felt like he was sent back in time with their fluctuating technology. Well, that was the perfect descriptor for the whole city of Iqanlr since their technology is so inconsistent, which made this actually natural.

Instead of Haeqras, what truly caught his attention was the structure that stood across it. The streets of the city intersect to a large circular open space at its center. Haeqras stands on the edge of this circle. However, this space isn’t open to the public. The reason for that being is that it was the place where the Sunken Nest of Iqanlr was located.

The large circular area was surrounded by a strong metal fence with a few trees, greenery, and benches placed inside of it. At its core were two concentric hollow towers built in Gothic architecture with three-pointed arches as their base. How Senkyo was able to determine they were both hollow towers was simple. Both of these towers were fragmented as if they were ruined structures.

The outermost tower was more disjointed than the inner tower with there being more frequent disconnections and more open space to reveal the inside of the tower. The inner tower was only disjointed into two halves, separating vertically at its center which held many light poles that surrounded a large cavity on the ground—the entrance to the Sunken Nest. Open sky bridges were used to connect the fragmented structures, showing that the hollowed tower had an interior of some kind. There were also many guards spread inside the metal fence and even some patrolling the sky bridges.

Senkyo stared at it in amazement. This was the closest thing to “fantasy” he had seen ever since coming to this world. It was old, impractical, and only made to look flashy, which overall, made it look cool. That should have been the thought he concluded to if it weren’t for one thing: this was real life. Unlike in games or stories, real people worked blood and sweat to create this kind of unrealistic structure. Was it only made for entertainment purposes? Maybe this stood here before the city was even made? He didn’t know the answer to those questions. That’s why instead of pondering with imagination alone, he put the thought aside and entered Haeqras.

What greeted him inside was a calm atmosphere and rows of counters placed on two sides of the room. There were seats in the form of chairs and couches at the center of the room. Unlike the typical fantasy guild house, Haeqras was more formal and its reception was tailored to clients rather than “adventurers,” or in this world, crawlers. If Senkyo had to compare this to Earth, then it was similar to a bank or similar receptions. The counters were separated into two sections. One under “Clients” and the other under “Crawlers.” The row for crawlers was desolate while most of the people inside lined up as clients, others sitting leisurely on the seats. Senkyo first thought that the clients' row would mostly be filled with merchants or people with some kind of high status but he was wrong. The lines didn’t discriminate with its balanced number of what seemed to be nobles and commoners.

Leaving that aside, that meant Senkyo had two options to explore the Sunken Nest. Going from the signs, he could either hire a crawler to go with him or apply as a crawler and go. Senkyo originally only planned to go by himself, so that should lead him to become a crawler. But then, a thought came to mind. Even if he was a crawler, would he be allowed to explore the Sunken Nest at his leisure? He didn’t know. He had been standing still with Shiro for a while now and none of the staff ever called to him, so without wasting any more time, he and Shiro approached one of the open counters under the crawler’s row.

“Hello, how may I help you?”

“I wanted to ask about what benefits I can get if I became a crawler.”

“Are you planning on applying to be one?”

“Yes.”

“Very well. Then please refer to this guidebook and ask me what questions you may have about it.”

The receptionist handed him a book and he began to skim it.

In summary, becoming a crawler requires taking an aptitude test to determine whether or not a person will be qualified to operate in the Sunken Nest the test was taken for. In other words, pass a test and you’ll be able to become a crawler. It is noted that the crawler will only be able to operate in the Haeqras branches they passed aptitude tests for. To operate in another branch, they must take the specific test for that branch and pass it.

Crawlers gain the right to enter Sunken Nests by themselves. However, they must first report to Haeqras and acquire permission to be eligible to pass the guards. Haeqras will be held accountable for lives lost in operations but this does not apply if a crawler dies outside of the missions given.

Crawlers will be given a specialized identification card to serve as proof of their identity as a crawler. This card may also function as a general identification card. To maintain an active status as a crawler, they must complete at least two missions every month. Otherwise, they would have their active status revoked, and in simple terms, be fired. The only way for them to become a crawler again is to pass tests just like before.

“Okay, I’ll apply to become a crawler.”

After understanding the basics, Senkyo gave an immediate answer. The job was simple enough and his only restriction was to finish two missions in a month. But what really caught his attention was the identification card. With that, he will finally be able to overcome problems that need this.

“Understood. We have one assessor available at the moment. However, please know that Haeqras does not have assessors present for aptitude tests all the time. If you are to fail and take the test again or succeed and take an aptitude test in a different Haeqras branch, please consider making an appointment first.”

It seemed like Senkyo and Shiro came at a lucky time with a single assessor available.

“Oh, okay. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Thank you. Now, please standby until the assessor arrives.”

**337 – Access Level**

Senkyo and Shiro did as the receptionist told them and waited for their assessor on one of the couches. The same thought came to his mind when he found a similar couch in their room that there had to have been a supplier for furniture here. From what he had heard so far, Iqanlr is the most advanced location in all of Yuwokrn. Yet, it didn’t seem like they had the technology to create couches that have the same quality on Earth. If he was correct on this, then that meant that someone other than them has the ability to come and go from Earth to Zerid easily enough to import items. He didn’t know who they were or how they do it, but their imports get to places in Iqanlr. Maybe there was a chance to run into them and ask some questions. Such thoughts passed through his head as time passed.

“Hello there, I will be assessing you for today.”

A voice called out to them from behind, which apparently came from their assessor. Senkyo and Shiro quickly stood up and turned to greet them.

“Oh, thank you for the—eh!?”

“Leela!?”

And to their surprise, the person in front of them was none other than the owner of Arachne Tailors, Leolja. The gentleman spider tippled his hat to greet them.

“Hello again, Senkyo, Shir. Did I surprise you?”

Shiro nodded her head vigorously at his question while Senkyo remained speechless.

“Since I am one of the most difficult enemies you would encounter in the Sunken Nest, I was quickly hired as one of the possible assessors when I became a riser. When I heard you planned on coming here to enter the Sunken Nest I thought to drop by just in case you planned on becoming a crawler.”

“Is it okay for you to be here? What about the shop?”

“It is in safe hands. I trust my employees enough to leave the establishment to them while I tackle other matters.”

“So whimsical!”

“Haha, perhaps. There are a few reasons I can do this but for now how about we focus on the assessment?”

Leolja forcibly changed the subject and showed them to a door. Navigating through Haeqras’ halls, they climbed down a set of stairs into the basement where they arrived in front of a large opening on the wall.

“This is one of our artificial training grounds. Ever since I got hired in Haeqras, they made these artificial caves I can use to emulate the environment down in the Sunken Nest. I can provide the same quality of danger as if you are truly in the Sunken Nest, which boosted the accuracy in assigning access levels.”

“Access level?”

“Yes. This is a system we use to rank our crawlers and assign appropriate tasks to them. Every sunken nest is separated into levels. Depending on the sunken nest, the levels may vary, but for Iqanlr’s sunken nest, there are eight levels. Starting from the most basic level down to the most dangerous, there are levels E, D, C, B, A1, A2, A3, and S. As its name suggests, the access level is what allows access to these areas.”

“Why is level A divided into three sublevels?”

“These levels are mainly separated by the resources they contain. The resources found on all levels of A are generally the same but are divided into three sublevels due to the threats that exist there. You see, the access level of a crawler is determined by whether or not crawlers can complete an escort mission on a certain level. If the crawler’s deepest accomplishment is on level A3, then their access level is A2. Their level is downgraded in consideration of the unpredictability of the sunken nest. There are cases where the enemies on A3 are seen on higher levels like A2, and in one instance, even on level C. It isn’t as if the enemies defined in a single level are strictly only found in that level. They are not machines; they are living beings, which also means they have the erratic nature of one. The one-level downgrade is Haeqras’ consideration of this fact. As someone who once lived in that nest, I would attest that this is the correct decision.”

“That makes sense… Then, how can a crawler get access level S?”

“That topic has been a difficult one to tackle in the past since no one could accurately measure that level without risking the lives of crawlers, but the solution was clear the moment I became a riser. In order to be assigned access level S in Iqanlr’s sunken nest, the crawler must be able to complete an escort mission on this level with me as an enemy. To avoid flukes, they must do this three consecutive times.”

“Does that mean anyone can try to get access level S? Aren’t there any requirements?”

“What Haeqras values the most are skill and the ability to complete a mission. It does not matter if you are applying for the first time as a crawler. So long as you have the skill to deal with the enemies on a certain level while conducting an escort mission, the hardest task a crawler can be given, then you are rewarded for your talent. How about you, Senkyo? What level are you going to test for?”

“My access level, huh?”

He pinched his chin as he pondered the question. Senkyo first thought of going to the sunken nest just so he could see for his own eyes what one would look like. Just a bit of probing in case he ended up in a sunken nest in the future. Although, if there was anything to be gained, there were two things: resources and experience.

As a hunter under the enchanter class in the Konjou clan, there was nothing more important than having many resources to work with. Senkyo learned a lot from his mentor, Shimizu Yoshiko, the person who taught him all about how to become a competent enchanter. One of the golden rules under the enchanter class is to make use of natural resources and everything in the enchanter’s surroundings. Senkyo learned how to apply techniques in the enchanter class on items on Earth, and now, he was in Zerid. He didn’t know what reaction the items in this world would have if he applied his techniques to them. If possible, he would like to examine the resources at the deepest level.

Then, there was experience. He already had experience fighting a xeqrel, but that was only one of many possible enemies in this world. It didn’t take anything over than a few glances at his surroundings to know that the races here are more diverse than on Earth. This implies that the enemies he would face will, more or less, be just as diverse. He needed to learn how to adapt to every enemy. The faster he can, the better. Another major rule to enchanters.

With these two into consideration, there was only one choice they were pointing to. However, this also meant placing his full trust in Leolja. Senkyo wasn’t complacent enough to think he was going to clear this task without using his specialty—the use of spirit power. There was a chance Leolja wouldn’t be able to detect spirit power, but gambling on that possibility was foolish when he still had the option to not use it. It would be best if he gained access to all levels of the sunken nest, but was revealing the fact that he can use spirit power worth it?

He shifted his gaze to Shiro who was trying to read his expression the whole time. If he were to make a mistake here, it will bring him and Shiro unneeded danger. He trusted Leolja once by telling him about what happened with Gaeka but telling him about his capabilities was a different story. So, he made a decision.

“I’ll go for access level A—”

“—S! Onii-chan and Shiro will take access level S!”

Or at least, he was about to. Shiro cut Senkyo off and declared something completely different. Just as he was wondering what she was trying to do, her voice echoed in his head.

*“\*Sh-Shiro thinks that Onii-chan should have more allies! Onii-chan has always valued connections more than raw power in the past! Shiro doesn’t want Onii-chan to isolate himself just because of his powers! Even if there’s a risk… Shiro wants Onii-chan to take it!\*”*

Her voice was just as powerful as her call yesterday. Those were her words. It was her decision. She had always been reluctant of letting him know about his abilities and this was one of the reasons. She knew he would begin to isolate himself the moment the truth came to light. She knew about how he was likely to spread doubt and suspicion to those around him. To counteract this, she acted like so.

As Senkyo stared silently into Shiro’s eyes, Leolja asked to confirm.

“Excuse me, but which access level did you want to take again?”

His gaze wandered to Shiro one more time before he answered.

“We’ll take the challenge for access level S.”

**338 – The Sunken Nest’s Mirror**

Dark, but not completely. The cave that stretches out in front of them glows in a deep purple hue. This was an indicator that the current level they were on was A3. Along with that light was an army of arachnids that crawled all over every surface around them. Beyond everything was an opening that glowed in red. That was the final level Senkyo and to get to. Level S. It was the level he needed to reach to fight Leolja and clear one of the three runs to be eligible to obtain access level S. It was still a long way to go. It almost seemed bleak. Yet, in the middle of all this, he smirked.

About an hour ago, Senkyo’s test to become a crawler began. Leolja was the first to go inside the artificial cave while Senkyo needed to handle a few preparations. Before he could go inside, he had to bring with him a special training dummy Leolja provided him. It could walk by itself and follow simple orders such as “move,” “run,” and “stay.” This was used to emulate the experience of an actual escort mission. Senkyo needed to complete three successful escort missions to level S in a row to be able to get access level S. For that, he needed to make sure the training dummy he was with does not receive any kind of fatal damage. Some smaller forms of damage were forgiven, but anything decisive like a fatal wound or lack of maintenance that led to fatal poisoning or blood loss was a sign of failure.

The fact that escort missions required the crawler to constantly monitor their client was what made it the hardest mission to conduct. Even if the crawler is powerful and incredibly skilled, they needed to babysit another person that had no special abilities and is susceptible to danger. Looking at Haeqras’ records, escort missions were rarely asked for by clients due to the danger it meant not just for the crawler but also for the client. These rare cases were mostly conducted for observation, in other words, for research. It is the crawler’s job to make sure the client’s purpose is fulfilled. Because of this, Senkyo’s mission was to get the training dummy to level S, remain in a designated area for 5 minutes, and collect a particular resource. His mission ends the moment he arrives back at the entrance of the artificial cave, and the mission will only be considered a success if the dummy did not take fatal damage, fulfilled the 5-minute requirement, and brought back the stated resource. After that, he needed to complete the whole process two more times. Now that Senkyo summarized everything, it all sounded like the most troublesome thing he had ever taken on.

With a heavy sigh, he entered the artificial cave with the dummy following him closely behind. Shiro was with them, but not in her physical form. Since they were about to enter enemy territory where anything could happen at any time, it was better for Shiro to get inside Senkyo’s body. Putting it bluntly, she would only be an easy target if she were to walk around in her physical form. Whereas if she were in her spirit form inside Senkyo’s body, she still had the ability to support Senkyo without being a subject of worry. With this, he can place more attention on their environment and the training dummy behind him.

A few seconds from entering was all it took to arrive at level E. Initially, Senkyo thought he would have to have a continuous light source active the whole time they delved into the cave, but such actions were unneeded. The cave was lit up by the glowing stones all around them which indicated the current level. These stones are called Gejikr and were set up by Haeqras to make it easy to recognize the limits of each level.

Senkyo took out a guidebook Leolja gave him just before he left. It had information about the resources, enemies, and natural status on every level. This was something that is given to every crawler and examinee that applies to a particular Haeqras branch. Each branch has its own guidebook due to the many variations of sunken nests, and so long as the person is a crawler that is qualified to enter the sunken nest of that particular branch, then they will have access to their own personal guidebook.

Senkyo skimmed the book while observing his surroundings and nodded lightly as he confirmed the information matches. The area was lit by stones that glowed in white and the enemies found in here weren’t particularly threatening. He expected to find spiders immediately after entering, but that wasn’t the case. In complete contrast to that, there wasn’t anything that was like a spider to be found in this area. It mostly consisted of lizard-, bat-, and centipede-like creatures. They sometimes went in to attack but most of them stayed passively on the walls. The enemies here weren’t particularly aggressive and it was possible for Senkyo to walk calmly deeper into the cave without much trouble.

One level down was level D. In this area, the stones were lit in a green color. Compared to the previous level, this one was more chaotic. The very same creatures from the above level were here, but they were in a stronger form than the ones on the previous level. On this level, there were some Arachne species, and the evolved level E species seemed to be hunting them down for prey. Senkyo observed the bat-like creatures swooping into the webs and picking spiders from them. The lizard-like creatures hid in the shadows with their camouflaging scales and hunted spiders with their tongue. Then, the centipede-like creatures are more direct, charging into the webs and releasing what seemed to be a venomous spray, melting the webs and devouring spiders.

In their hunt, a rampaging centipede charged into Senkyo but was easily fended off using Needle Storm, driving a flurry of fatal wind spears into its segments. Responding to his attack, a camouflaged lizard appeared behind them and targeted the dummy. Thankfully, with Shiro watching their surroundings, she warned Senkyo of the danger, allowing him to push the dummy away in time and using Heaven’s Pierce to combat the lizard's tongue, sending a white laser against it and piercing its body. Witnessing Senkyo’s fast and deadly responses, the other creatures that were watching everything backed off the moment they realized he wasn’t worth the trouble. With the coast clear of hostiles, Senkyo took the time to examine the dead centipede and lizard. He had no idea how their anatomy worked, but at the very least he knew which parts were worth anything because of the guidebook he had in hand.

“Hkrwir’s fangs… seem to be the only thing I can use. How about the lizard? It has… Eozea’s scales and its tongue… camouflage and elasticity. These will be good to have. Ugh, next time I kill one of these I gotta make sure not to blast its insides open…”

He collected some of the monsters’ parts with a disgusted face and placed them inside one of his chest pouches. After that, he tried to see what the bat creatures called Nexlrs had to offer, but they were too troublesome to chase down. For now, he decided to continue his trek to deeper levels.

**339 – Iwaiida’s Evolutions**

Level C. The stones in this area glowed yellow and there was nothing but Arachne on this level. Despite this, there were only a few webs in the area but what it did have were large numbers of spider sacs that glowed green. Going off the guidebook, the enemies on this floor were the Stage 1 evolution of the Iwaiida. Since the Iwaiida don’t care for what their evolutions were called, Haeqras named them Bomb Jockeys, the very same spiders that were being hunted down on the above level. These are small and incredibly fast creatures. This was how they are described in the guidebook but their size is slightly larger than the average human hand. By Earth’s common standards, it was quite big.

They did not hunt by webbing, trapping, and biting but rather by chemical disintegration through the three green orbs on their backs. They can jump around all over their target and explode the orbs on their backs to release a corroding liquid that breaks down the target into something they can consume. The creatures on the upper floor were able to hunt them and keep the corroding liquid in check using their special abilities like how the centipede’s venom could dilute the liquid and make them consumable, the lizards using their tongue to take all three orbs out before going for the kill, and the bats swooping in to pick the spiders on their underside and forcibly popping the orbs before they can get used against them. Although they were capable of hunting them, that didn’t mean they weren’t safe from their corroding liquid either. It was a constant battle of wits against the bomb jockeys and the other creatures.

This was the main reason why it was safer for crawlers on the upper level. With the presence of predators, the bomb jockeys couldn’t afford to attack recklessly. Even if they succeed in attacking a crawler, the other predators would be waiting to kill them right after. Meanwhile, all the crawler had to do was show his strength to the predators and they would leave them alone, just like what happened with Senkyo earlier. However, here on level C, the bomb jockeys had nothing to hold them back.

“Shiro.”

*“\*Yes, Onii-chan!\*”*

Senkyo called for Shiro’s support the moment he sensed the presence of multiple hostiles scuttling their way. Bomb jockeys appeared from the fork of the path in front of them, the small cracks on the walls around them, and even some from the sacs nearby. Just as the guidebook stated, bomb jockeys often work in clusters, overwhelming hunters with numbers. When Senkyo first read this, he wondered why the spiders on level D apply the same tactic, but then he remembered how the other creatures were hunting in a way that kept them from grouping. However, nothing was stopping them on level C. This would overwhelm anyone if they weren’t ready. Thankfully, Senkyo wasn’t one of those people.

He took a few steps back and placed the dummy directly to his back and gave it an order.

“Stick to my back.”

As the dummy was designed to function, it glued itself to his back, but not in a way that disrupted his movements.

*“\*Barrier Transfer!\*”*

Casting her magic, Shiro’s natural magic barrier appeared around Senkyo and the dummy, coating the surface of their bodies in blue light. Senkyo held the scabbard by the mouth and prepared to draw it. The bomb jockeys that appeared near him immediately jumped to his side and exploded their orbs. The green corrosive liquid shot out and hurled at Senkyo and the dummy. They would have melted on the spot if it landed, but as they tried to pass through the blue sheet that covered Senkyo and the dummy, the green liquid disappeared as if they were never there.

This was the effect of Shiro, a Nemi’s natural magic barrier. It absorbed all of the liquid and converted them into her own power. This would not work if the liquid was purely chemical. The only reason her magic barrier worked was that the true identity of the acid is a product of defective magic. Bomb jockeys have an incomplete body part that cannot properly process mana, therefore making them unable to use magic. The result of its trying to use magic was a mixture of various elements that turned into liquid form. As it was made from mana, Shiro’s barrier worked against it just like any other magic.

*“\*Flash Strike: Breath of the Wind!\*”*

Digging through the memories left by Ryosei, Senkyo chose the most optimal move to use in the situation. His legs quickly bent and launched him forward in less than a second, leaving a powerful gust of wind in his wake. Using the pressure from his flash strike, the wind picked up all of the bomb jockeys that were about to land after launching their attack as well as those that were in his path as he used flash strike. Then, as his body came to a halt, he controlled the wind so that it would keep all of the bomb jockeys he caught inside a whirlwind that surrounded him.

With his katana ready to draw, he chanted.

“Sheath my blade with the wind. Your power is the face of elegance. Flow as I show you the path, the line to a dashing ending. Konjou Style, Gale Fan!”

A sharp clink resounded as Senkyo unsheathed the katana and swung it horizontally toward the cluster of bomb jockeys. Gale Fan is a technique that released a lethal blast of wind that traces the path of the katana. An attack that only covered a thin line wouldn’t work against a cluster of small spiders scuttling over multiple surfaces. However, with the swirling whirlwind around Senkyo, he utilized that existing power to strengthen his attack, sending a violent storm down the cave, and killing every bomb jockey that dared block its path. The yellow glowing stones in the area were painted green from the bomb jockeys’ acid, but that wasn’t a threat in the face of Shiro’s natural barrier and allowed Senkyo and the dummy to walk leisurely forward, stopping at the fork in the path.

“Hmm… those jockeys are fast and annoying but the hardest part here is probably navigation…”

He said as he contemplated whether or not to go down the left or right path. He observed the state of each path before continuing, but seeing as there were no differences, he could do nothing but sigh, leave behind an indicator, and go down one of the paths.

Level B. The glowing stones in this level were orange. Thankfully, Senkyo didn’t have to turn back and chose the right path. Once again, he consulted the guidebook to confirm his enemies. This level had both Stage 1 and 2 evolutions of the Iwaiida race. The Stage 2 evolution is called a Phantom Threader, coined for its characteristic to weave threads and use them as a medium to utilize magic. They are infamous for their illusion traps which caution the crawler to watch for their surroundings.

One could call this level more dangerous than the previous. In reality, it should be. But this wasn’t the real sunken nest, it was only a cave made to look like it. Leolja told him this beforehand, but the only levels that actually contained threats were levels E to C. From here on out, the dangers that Senkyo would encounter will be illusions made by Leolja. As they were controlled encounters by the assessor, they were actually the safest part of the test.

Apparently, the artificial cave he brought Senkyo to was designed for crawlers that aim for access level B or deeper. There were separate caves that test for upper access levels, and crawlers that are tested on these deep-level caves were expected to pass level C with ease. It seemed like Leolja never doubted his power seeing as he accepted him to test on this cave without qualms.

Senkyo activated the null magic called Detect, allowing him to supplement his lack of mana senses. This magic gave him the ability to detect entities. Since all of the traps and enemies will be illusions, he specified the detection to mana entities, allowing him to avoid pitfalls, enemy ambushes, fake walls, and even fake paths. He was impressed with every single one of them, especially with the fake paths. They were cobwebs that were disguised as a 3D illusion with moving objects inside them. If he didn’t have Detect magic active, there was a chance for him to walk straight into a cobweb without even knowing it.

In the end, only bomb jockeys attacked Senkyo again and they were dealt with in the same fashion as before. He was a bit disappointed in not being able to even see what the Stage 2 forms looked like in person, but their actions match the characteristics written for them in the guidebook. They are more of a neutral type that doesn’t attack until their prey gets caught in their webs. They hide until the very last second and conceal themselves with their own illusions.

Although, it was noted that Phantom Threaders are at their weakest on Level B because the only other Iwaiida there were bomb jockeys. They are much more threatening with more noise and chaos happening around the target to give them the chance for assassination. He had to keep them in mind for later.

**340 – Sublevels of A**

Level A1. This area had blue glowing stones. It had the same enemies as the previous level but with the addition of the Iwaiida’s Stage 3 evolution, the Cave Trappers. Just like its previous evolution stage, it employs traps to catch its prey. Its recorded traps are trapdoors, collapsing walls, and strategic cave-ins. Its physical traps make it more difficult to detect than simply searching for mana. To make these traps these spiders need enough strength to break down cave walls and dig through them. This evolution stage gives the Iwaiida a frightening spike in power as it can hunt both with traps and with pure strength. If its trap fails, it will almost certainly chase after the target until it finishes the hunt. Its size is massive compared to the other two stages with an average size of just below the average human, and this was recorded while it was crawling.

“We’re in a cave, so it’d be best if I avoid fire magic. That limits my options, though. I have physical attacks but… I wonder if it’ll last…”

Senkyo took a look at his sheathed katana. It was one he bought back in the town of Naen. Iaksin recommended this under his condition of being cheap, durable, and compatible with magic. There were other named items in the shop but they all seemed to work only for a specific purpose. They were too specific that he was afraid that something wrong would happen if he decided to apply both magic and spirit power to it. He didn’t want to risk it and went for a katana better fit for general use. The problem was whether or not it would actually work as advertised. So far, Senkyo fought enemies with flesh and bones, but this time the enemy was a cave-digging, gigantic spider. No doubt its outer shell was going to be hard.

This usually wouldn’t be a worry if he had Ryosei with him. He could just use his other katana, Kuro Yaiba, to cut his enemies down. It was hailed for its indestructible metal but after hearing what the jester said back at Naen, it seemed that this was only true when Ryosei is present. He couldn’t fully confirm this because he didn’t want to break the precious blade in case it was true. The deciding factor that led him to preserve the blade was Iaksin identifying the blade and the scabbard as fragile metals. It was a third-party opinion that supported the jester’s claims. There was also the jester’s crowd affirming the metal’s fragility. Taking all of those opinions together, he decided to settle to fight with a substitute sword.

With Detect active, he could still sense the enemies waiting behind the walls for him to get close. It would be best if he could just pass by without triggering them, but he doubted will be that easy. Hugging the left wall, Senkyo kept his eye open for the cave trapper hiding behind the right side of the wall. Then, as he was about to cross it, the wall beside him crumbled and a gigantic spider constructed in pure blue light jumped at him. This surprise inadvertently made him jump to the other side. The moment he landed, he realized his mistake.

Since every enemy from level B onward were illusions, there was a problem of confusing the illusions that spiders made and the illusions that Leolja made. To differentiate them, Leolja specified that illusions that can kill him are in their natural color, meanwhile, illusions that are only made to trick him are made in pure blue light. Seeing the construction of the spider that came out of the left wall, it was all too clear what its aim was.

*“\*Flash Strike: Breath of the Wind!\*”*

Senkyo immediately moved as the wall behind him crumbled, revealing a gigantic spider with green and black cuticles, legs with such thickness and length that you could feel them pierce through solid rock with ease, and its vile head with eight eyes, two solid horns, and large, skull-crushing jaws lunged at Senkyo. It didn’t even take half a second for it to reach the location of its prey.

Senkyo let his guard down, but he wasn’t going to go down from a single mistake. He immediately recovered by dodging the cave trapper’s lunge by using flash strike, making the spider’s legs and jaws hit empty air by a hair’s breadth. The moment he arrived at a stop, the cave trapper didn’t succumb to surprise and instantly gave chase. Senkyo wasn’t foolish enough to make two mistakes in a row and anticipated this movement. As he stopped, he turned his body around 180 degrees to face the spider and used the second phase of the technique he used.

Earlier, he utilized Breath of the Wind to collect all of the bomb jockeys in a single stroke. He used it to hinder their movements rather than kill them. However, the true face of Breath of the Wind wasn’t a crowd control skill, but an open-ended skill that utilizes the wind pressure depending on the situation. In other words, he could use it to deal lethal damage. Even as the gigantic cave trapper was right in front of Senkyo, the speed and wind pressure he gained from flash strike allowed him to swing his sword instantaneously along with a follow-up of the pressurized wind which made an illusion for a powerful triple slash. His first strike bisected the cave trapper cleanly in half while the follow-up wind slashes hacked off all of its legs.

The spider’s eight legs sprawled all over the cave while Senkyo stood in between the bisected spider’s jaws. There weren’t any blood and guts since it was just an illusion, but that didn’t stop him from hurrying out of that area. He breathed a sigh of relief as he managed to recover from his mistake. The target dummy stayed at a safe distance away from the ruckus. Even without being ordered, the target dummy always prioritizes avoiding anything that can harm it. He didn’t know how it functioned like that but it was smart. That aside, it was time for reflection.

Senkyo was so focused on being careful of the cave trapper that he neglected his surroundings. If he paid more attention to his Detect skill, he would have realized that the mana signature suddenly appeared out of nowhere. This had to be the phantom threader’s trap. He didn’t expect it to be able to weave such a convincing trap in less than a second. It was difficult to admit, but his saving grace was the fact that he could immediately identify the trap as an illusion because it was pure blue. Had this been the real deal and a life-like illusion appeared in front of him, it would be hard to say that Senkyo would have had enough reaction time to recover. He couldn’t afford to make the same mistake again.

Level A2. This level was lit in a light purple hue. After his first encounter with the cave trappers, he found a better way to deal with the spiders. Instead of walking by and dealing with the spiders when they show themselves, Senkyo decided to attack the spiders through the walls before he even got anywhere near them. He did this by casting Crown Spikes under where the enemies’ mana signals were, piercing them from below before they could even have the chance to lunge out of their hiding spot.

Upon arriving on this level, Senkyo took his hand out to grab the guidebook from his pocket, but before he could, shards of ice emerged from the ground into Senkyo. He immediately dodged this with the training dummy safely in his arm. Turning to the source of the attack, he found the Stage 4 evolution of this level, the Magic Arm.

It was a more hideous version of the previous cave trapper. It had a similar build but its mouth split into two with its two deadly jaws and two tentacle-like parts coming out of either side of its mouth. The main difference between this stage and the previous one was that it had two pairs of arms in exchange for two pairs of front legs. Senkyo only caught a glance of the text but it uses its arms to cast and control magic. This type engages in head-on battles instead of trapping the enemy.

Using the Detect skill, he could see more than just the magic arm. There were five cave trappers in the vicinity. Two in the walls in front of him and three in the ceiling. They would jump right out the moment he attempted to close the distance between him and the magic arm. Senkyo couldn’t sense it, but he had no doubt there were phantom threaders too. This was the hardest group he had faced so far. For now, he wanted to focus on eliminating the ones in front of him.

*“\*Shiro, protect the dummy.\*”*

*“\*Got it, Onii-chan!\*”*

With her firm response, Shiro appeared out of Senkyo’s body and placed herself in front of the dummy.

“Don’t leave Shiro’s side!”

She ordered the dummy as she erected a strong barrier around them and strengthened her natural magic barrier to cover them along with it. Knowing that Shiro would be able to handle herself, Senkyo placed his focus on his front. His eyes darted around all over the place, trying to find the best opening move. The magic arm pelted Senkyo with ice attacks but before any of them could even land, his plan had already been drawn his blade.

*“\*Flash Strike: Thunderclap!\*”*

He passed through the flying icicles and rushed into the largest group of enemies. This was by the left wall where both cave trappers were in the walls next to each other while there was another one right above them. Thunderclap is usually utilized in situations where the hit needs to be immediate. That would be this moment. He aimed for the ground where the largest clump of enemies was. Before the three cave trappers could jump out of their hiding places, Senkyo’s blade made contact with the ground as he cast his spell.

“Magic Arts, Field Discharge!”

The moment it touched the ground, a massive burst of electricity discharged from the blade and crawled through the cave walls. His objective was to fry three of the cave trappers before he clashed with the other enemies. Senkyo jumped backward to safety, and at that moment, six surfaces of the walls broke down. Three of them were the cave trappers he fried through the walls before they could even jump out, resulting in them spasming on the ground, but not yet dead. The other two were the cave trappers from the ceiling that jumped down in an attempt to attack Senkyo but missed the moment he retreated. And the last one was placed right behind where Senkyo jumped to. Except, he was unfazed by this. After all, the only thing that jumped out was a pure blue spider, an indication that it was nothing more than a harmless illusion.

This time, he kept track of all of the mana signatures around him with Detect, allowing him to discover the appearance of an illusion trap that appeared at his location. Its large blue body swallowed Senkyo whole and blinded him. Normally, it would be a problem but Detect kept track of the mana signatures even if he couldn’t see them. Rather than a hindrance, this was an opportunity.

“O Nature, Amass your power at my word. Create my weapons and impale my adversaries. Needle Storm!”

The wind around Senkyo compressed and shot out at the three moving mana signatures. The illusion that blinded him slowly disappeared and showed that his attack had no effect. This was because of the magic arm that intercepted his needle storm with icicle spears. The two cave trappers lunged at Senkyo while the magic arm remained at a safe distance. Senkyo had no idea what limits the magic arm possessed. It was ideal to eliminate it right away, but then he might not have a chance fully gauge its abilities before arriving at level A3. The last thing he wanted was to get caught by surprise on level A3 or S. For now, he focused on the two cave trappers.

As the battle between the two giant spiders and Senkyo went on, the magic arm crawled to the cavity in the ceiling. Specifically, the one that was made by the cave trapper that Senkyo paralyzed at the start of the battle. It hammered two of its hands to the ground, summoning an icicle spear that penetrated the inside of the cavity. Then, a moment later, the mana signatures Senkyo detected multiplied. When he turned to look, clusters of bomb jockeys were pouring out from all three cavities made by the cave trappers. This was a bit of a problem.

Before, Senkyo didn’t even have to recognize the existence of bomb jockeys because of Shiro. But now, she was guarding the training dummy and in this situation, retreating to them would expose the dummy to even more danger, only making this battle difficult. Thankfully, two of the three clusters of bomb jockeys were fakes as defined by their pure blue color. Ignoring the fakes, Senkyo focused on the bomb jockeys closing in.

“Magic Arts: Whirlwind Burst!”

Dodging the attacks of both cave trappers, he swung his sword, releasing a powerful hurricane that knocked both of the giant spiders back along with the bomb jockeys that tried to get close. Just before they hit the ground, the wind changed directions, shoving every enemy that was caught in the hurricane away from Senkyo, Shiro, and the dummy. With the position he has, Senkyo could easily wipe out all of the enemies in one strike, but the magic arm has yet to make any movements.

As his gaze pierced through the cluster of enemies, he found the magic arm standing completely still… No, that wasn’t it. The magic arm that his eyes caught just now wasn’t the same one as earlier. It was pure blue. An illusion. But then, where was the real magic arm?

He turned to Shiro and the dummy as he searched the mana signatures with Detect. There were signatures all over the place because of the fake bomb jockeys. He could no longer use it to keep track of the magic arm. That’s when it happened. Through the chaos, Five large figures lunged from behind Shiro and the dummy. All of them were magic arms and surrounded the two. Senkyo immediately entered the stance for a flash strike. However, he was too slow. Three of them launched earth and frost magic to destroy the barrier while the other two lunged at Shiro and the dummy.

“SHIROO!!”

**341 – The Strategist and The Fighter**

Dust and white smoke veiled the scene. Senkyo was in his stance but he was too slow. This marked the end of the test. His loss was brought about by fatal damage taken by the dummy. Had this been real, then there was no telling how he would react. Not only would he have failed a mission, but a client, and worse yet, Shiro would have lost their lives. The fact that Leolja’s illusions were so life-like made that feeling all the more real. Where did he go wrong? The thought floated in his mind. Was it because he ignored the fakes, making it hard to detect the incoming magic arms? Or maybe it was the simple reason of him not finishing the battle before everything got out of hand? No, it was more simple than that. He underestimated the enemy. He miscalculated. Just as the realization was about to ease his muscles, a familiar voice entered his mind.

*“\*Onii-chan! The magic arm is approaching us from behind!\*”*

How? No, this wasn’t the time for questions. A flare lit in Senkyo’s eyes. His pressured legs launched him across the room and into the veil of dust and white smoke. As he neared the large shroud, everything made sense to him. His arm instinctively moved, swinging his katana through the air before he even entered the shroud. Then, the stroke ripped through the space between him and the shroud. The dust and white smoke divided as if curtains parting, revealing a single magic arm attempting to break through Shiro’s defenses. Senkyo’s eyes sharpened like a predator's. The deadly gaze caused the magic arm to back off instinctively, but not before being torn to shreds as Senkyo’s blade sliced through its body. It was a flurry of strikes so fast and precise that they didn’t even disturb the magic arm’s retreat. It only realized it was dead the moment it made contact with the ground and its body parts rolled across the floor.

A flat thud echoed across the room as the magic arm’s last body part arrived at a stop. The magic arm’s death was apparent from the silence. Then, the other spiders around them scattered chaotically like soldiers without their general. It seemed they lost interest in killing Senkyo. Just before everything fully disappeared, he turned around to the path he took to get to Shiro and the dummy. What stood there was a large 3D illusion of what seemed like Senkyo fighting the spiders from earlier. This was what phantom threaders were capable of. Deceit that allowed the fabrication of events and the ability to show false information. To Shiro, it looked like nothing wrong was happening, but to Senkyo it looked like he just lost. The only reason he realized it was a fake was because of Shiro’s call. If they were in the same situation but with Shiro unable to contact him, there would be nothing but certain defeat.

Senkyo turned his head to the dead magic arm disappearing as if it had served its purpose. That attack was too organized compared to other attacks he encountered from the upper levels. He dug through his pocket and took out the guidebook. Just as he figured, it was written that it had the ability to control a group of lower evolution Iwaiidas. It seems to use it to hunt other groups of Iwaiidas or crawlers that it encounters.

From this experience, Senkyo learned just how much of a threat these evolutions were if they get mixed together in a group. The bomb jockeys were troublesome and they are many in numbers, mixed with the elusive phantom threader, it can spread many mana signatures that renders Senkyo’s Detect useless. This makes it difficult to keep track of large threats like cave trappers or magic arms without constant vision of them. With all of these mixed together, the magic arm can create confusing situations just like what it did earlier.

Besides the enemies, there was one more fatal mistake that Senkyo made. He didn’t realize this until now, but he was reminded of the illusion the phantom threaders showed him of Shiro and the dummy getting attacked from behind. At that time, he was thinking too much. It had been a while since he began fighting these fantastical creatures and he did most of this beside Ryosei with him controlling his body and doing the physical work for him. It wasn’t like he didn’t know how to fight, but he never actually knew what it meant to fight with his own body in such critical situations as earlier.

He mainly fought with his mind, thinking of strategies against the enemy and relaying the best course of action to Ryosei. However, that person wasn’t here anymore. The person fighting in his body was now none other than Senkyo himself. He entered this test with the mindset of fighting just as usual but with the added trouble of executing actions with his body. This was wrong and he only realized that. The place a strategist like him belonged in was a safe place where he could carefully analyze situations and make the best course of action. A battlefield like earlier was no place for a strategist.

Senkyo kept on thinking and analyzing that he got confused in the midst of all of the chaos. Then, at the moment when time and speed truly mattered—the moment when Shiro’s barrier was about to be broken—he had to think of the most efficient move to use. It was a fabricated situation, but what if it wasn’t? Those few precious milliseconds he used to comprehend, analyze, and execute would have cost him Shiro’s life. This wasn’t good enough. The battlefield wasn’t so merciful that it would forgive him for wasting time on something like that. He needed to be a fighter, not a strategist. He needed to become just like Ryosei. A man that fought not by thinking, but through instincts. No more analysis. Just comprehension and execution. What he needed was the ability to make the correct choice just with a single glance. The type of talent Ryosei ruled in.

“Talent… huh?”

His gaze naturally shifted to his other katana, Kuro Yaiba. Ryosei’s blade. For a second, he thought about it. Would someone like him who was nothing but a useless otaku not even two months ago really be able to fight like a prodigy like Ryosei? The answer to that was painfully obvious. So much so that he couldn’t help but clench his teeth in frustration. He planned on traveling all over Zerid to find Yuu, but he didn’t even have the talent needed to survive the journey.

He shamelessly thought that level S would be attainable if he took the test seriously, but he was about to lose the test just now. He wasn’t even at level A3. With the sublevels of A separated into 3 because of their substantial increase in difficulty, what did it mean for him who made such a fatal mistake on this level? This was the experience he was looking for. This was it, but now that he had a taste of the experience, doubt seeped into his heart about whether or not he had the skill to complete this test. Shiro once called him the ultimate being, but that was if he masters his true power. Did that also mean that without this power, he was nothing? Such thoughts entered his mind.

“Onii-chan.”

While Senkyo was lost in his own thoughts, he felt something wrap around him. As his consciousness was dragged back to reality, he noticed that Shiro was hugging him from behind. Her worried voice echoed through the cave.

“What’s wrong? You look like you’re in pain…”

“O-Oh… I was?”

“Mhm…”

Pathetic. He didn’t realize that he was standing still for so long that his little sister needed to comfort him. Thinking so, he tried to force out a smile to reassure Shiro.

“It’s…”

He was about to let out a flimsy excuse but stopped himself for a moment. Was there actually anything pathetic about getting help from those around him? The past Senkyo may have thought so, but what about the present? The only reason he valued connections so much was after his best friend, Kinro brightened his life again. He realized that it was better for people to be there for him when he needed them. Shiro was one of those people. The only reason he thought of shoving her away was because of his pride. But was prioritizing pride truly the right choice in this situation?

No… it wasn’t. He could easily envision Shiro getting hurt for not sharing his troubles with her. He knew this because the same would be true if Shiro did this with him. Not to mention, if he did that, then he would be breaking the promise he made with Shiro recently. A strategist wasn’t needed on a battlefield. But right now, this was just a space with Senkyo and Shiro. It wasn’t difficult for a strategist like him to know which is the correct answer in this situation.

“… It’s just that, I don’t think I’m strong enough for this. If I make a mistake, I’d be putting you in danger… I don’t want that.”

Hearing Senkyo’s answer, Shiro giggled. His eyebrows raised at the unexpected reaction.

“Onii-chan, did you forget how you coerced Shiro into making her help you? Isn’t it a bit too late to worry about that now?”

“K-Krgh…”

Her reply felt like a blade that pierced through his chest.

“Well, this just means that Onii-chan actually cares for Shiro, so she forgives you. But Shiro doesn’t agree with him. Onii-chan is strong. The way you responded to Shiro’s call and eliminate the enemy proves it. It was so quick that Shiro didn’t even realize that Onii-chan did anything! It was the first time Shiro ever saw the eyes Onii-chan had! It was a little scary, but also reassuring.”

“Reassuring?”

“Yes! If Onii-chan can do something like that, then Shiro won’t have anything to fear! Because she knows that Onii-chan is strong!”

“I was… strong, huh…?”

“Obviously!”

Senkyo tried to recall the sensation when he acted to save Shiro. There was nothing on his mind. It was just him, Shiro, and the magic arm. He didn’t even know what he did. All he knew was that he needed to kill the magic arm before it could break Shiro’s barrier and hurt her. She wouldn’t have actually gotten hurt since it was an illusion, but Senkyo didn’t have the time to think of things like that at the time. If he moved like that, then perhaps Shiro was right.

It was nothing but verbal reassurance. There was no strategy or any power gained from that conversation. Just a bit of the right words to lighten Senkyo’s chest. Nothing concrete, but he was fine with that.

“Thanks, Shiro.”

“Shiro is always here for Onii-chan!”

For now, it was fine.

**342 – Black Smoke**

Level A3. Unlike with the other levels, Senkyo read the enemies found on this level in advance. All of the previous Iwaiida evolutions are retained with the addition of the Stage 5 evolution, the Arachne Sage. They possess the abilities of all previous evolutions and have higher intelligence than them. They are known to use the magic arm’s control ability to bring multiple magic arms under their command, and with that, they order the magic arms to control lower Iwaiida evolutions, creating a chain of command. In other words, this evolution stage is a General.

Entering level A3 will immediately put the crawler under the general’s radar. The main struggle at this level is getting through the general’s troops and killing them to pass the level. However, it is noted that this is the common situation. There can be times when the crawler will encounter two or, if they have the worst luck in the world, three Arachne Sages, leading to the crawler fighting against three armies. The only bright side in this situation is that more likely than not, this would be the result of a territorial dispute. If played well, the crawler may be able to turn the Sages against each other.

It was all interesting information, but Senkyo wasn’t about to rely on the illusions created by a single person to fight amongst themselves. At this level, his options were to aim for the sage’s head or bust through their whole army into Level S. With a client with him, it seemed like a quick breakthrough would be the solution, but Senkyo was afraid of the sage chasing after them. It wasn’t like his enemies were completely limited on the level they appear on. If they can go up levels, then they could go down them too. After pondering his next move, he finally arrived at the entrance of A3.

Knowing the enemy’s game, Senkyo immediately charged through with the dummy latching onto his back. Shiro returned to Senkyo’s body to provide support there. She used Barrier Transfer again to extend her natural magic barrier to Senkyo and the dummy. Since he couldn’t properly use his katana with the dummy on his back, he opted to have the bone dagger at the ready.

He rushed through the cave and arrived at the first fork. He used Detect to confirm both of them were real and went down the left path. Upon his turn, he found five mana signatures appear behind him. Fake or not, it didn’t seem like the enemy was planning on letting him out of this path. For now, he continued, but not before dropping a few leaves from his small bag.

A mana signature suddenly appeared above him. Was it a fake? Senkyo didn’t take that chance and accelerated to dodge. He took a glance behind him and confirmed that it was a real cave trapper. Cave trappers usually wait just beyond the cave walls, but this one had to have dug from farther above him if its mana signature was only detected just now. It was likely an order from the sage.

The cave trapper chases them down. Two more mana signatures appeared from each of his sides. Senkyo used flash strike to dodge the pincer attack and avoided the two cave trappers that broke through the walls. Eventually, the path separated into three. The path forked into two while a hole was in the middle of them. Multiple cave trappers appeared on the left path while the two other paths were unobstructed. Using Detect, he found that the right path was an illusion made by phantom threaders. By process of elimination, the hole below him was the best option, but the sage should know that. It seemed like it was familiar with how he detected the previous threats seeing as it purposefully placed the cave trappers outside his Detect’s range. There was still a chance the hole below had the worst contents of all.

“Remnants of the past, become my incarnate and bring upon the shadow of war. I call out the penumbra of the lurking devils. Konjou Style, Phantom Blade!”

Just before he reached the intersection, a dark cloud filled the area and blinded the enemy’s sight of him. Then, from within the cloud appeared three Senkyos, all with dummies on their backs. Each of them took a different path. The one that charged into the cluster of cave trappers used Gale Fan to clear the enemies to break through. However, as he reached further, the ground below him opened up, revealing a massive pit. More cave trappers appeared from behind him and pushed him into the abyss. Then, there was the Senkyo that charged into the fake path. He swung his blade, aiming to cut through the illusion. But before he could, several spider legs appeared from the illusion and pierced the approaching Senkyo. Finally, the one that delved into the hole in the ground was met with a nest of bomb jockeys jumping all over the walls. They filled all the surfaces as Senkyo fell deeper into the deathtrap. The sound of exploding bomb jockeys filled the air.

It was a dead end with no other paths forward. The three cave trappers and an additional four came out of the black smoke. Some of them chased after the Senkyo that jumped into the hole, some chased after the one that was pushed into the abyss, and the others delivered more fatal blows to the Senkyo caught by the fake path. But then, after a few seconds, that Senkyo disappeared into thin air. Just like the Iwaiida that were chasing after them, it was an illusion. With their target gone, they were about to move to one of the other Senkyos but stopped in their tracks. At that very moment, the Iwaiidas in the area discovered that the other two that charged in were fakes too. They searched the area for the real Senkyo but could find nothing. Then, as the black cloud cleared behind them, it revealed a beheaded magic arm.

A few moments ago, Senkyo sent out three copies of him to scout the paths before he committed to a path. His presence was concealed because the cloud he summoned possessed a sense disruption effect. It was the same strategy Ryosei used when he fought the three skeletons back on Earth. He stuck by the side of the wall as the three cave trappers passed him, followed by five mana signatures which turned out to be a group of four cave trappers guarding a magic arm. It was likely the one that was controlling every Iwaiida in the area, so Senkyo took the chance to cut it down as it passed by. He couldn’t see it but he could feel it pass through the black cloud as if it was an extension of his skin. The moment he confirmed there were no available paths, he turned back and rushed to switch to the other path.

A small grin appeared on his face as he left the scene. He only used Phantom Blade to clear the paths but he didn’t expect to extract useful information from that move. First of all, the cloud produced by Phantom Blade disrupts all communication from the outside. This included the Magic Arm, Arcahne Sage, and Leolja’s communication abilities. This was proven by the fact that none of the surrounding enemies turned to attack Senkyo when he first took down the magic arm at the back. The magic arm should have been the one controlling the spiders there but they continued to move despite it dying. A doubt appeared on Senkyo’s mind that it may not have been the one in control, but as he ran away, all of the mana signatures behind him disappeared.

He took this as Leolja’s way of saying there was no use for them anymore, or at least, was made useless because of control loss. If that was the case, then he was right about thinking the magic arm was the main controller. The only reason he could think of that would explain the other spiders moving despite it being dead was the fact that all of the spiders here are actually illusions in Leolja’s control. He didn’t know about the cloud’s sense disruptive effects and acted with the idea that nothing would happen if he walked into the black cloud. If this situation were real, then walking into that cloud would make the magic arm lose all control of the spiders it had under its command. Knowing that the arachne sage uses the same ability as the magic arms, this would be an indispensable tool to have. There was no doubt that Leolja would act cautiously around those black clouds from now on.

There was a large cobweb that blocked Senkyo’s path, but no illusions were on it. Perhaps this was because the magic arm died and lost control of the traps that were supposed to be there. He used Detect just in case it was an illusion purposefully made to look like that and confirmed that it was real. Senkyo cut the cobweb down and slipped into the right path.

**343 – Into The Fray**

Cave trappers launched multiple attacks on Senkyo, sprouting out of walls to land a fatal blow. However, Senkyo was too fast and avoided them with his quick maneuvers. Eventually, the cave path opened up into a large cavern. If he reaches it, he would have more room to escape his pursuers or finish them off. Then, that was the moment he realized it. A thick mass of mana signatures stood in his way. While using Detect, it felt and looked like he was running straight into an area of glowing blue mass. Was it another trap? His senses screamed that he had to avoid entering that area at all costs. Except, it wasn’t that simple. Behind him was a deadly cluster of cave trappers that were determined to corner him no matter what. They piled up so much that they were about half the size of the large area in front of him.

If the main paths aren’t available, so he quickly searched the walls of the cave. There was only one time the cave walls open up and that was when cave trappers dug through the walls to attack Senkyo. He searched for mana signatures, but none were coming to jump him anymore. They knew what he wanted to do. Preferably, he wanted to take a safe route, but there were no options left. He mumbled.

The soles of his boots skid across the ground as he brought himself to a stop, pivoting at his foot to face the cluster of cave trappers.

“O Fire, break free from your cage, exhibit your power. Scorch my path and bring upon a conflagration. Eruption!”

He stomped the ground while placing his twin daggers at the ready. Two lines appeared on both his sides and stretched into the cluster of cave trappers. The cave walls were coated with a soft orange hue as flames erupted from the ground. He didn’t want to use the fire element while trapped in a cave, but there were more benefits to using it here than there were drawbacks. Suddenly, as the flames grew in size, the floor below him crumbled. It was a sinkhole that led straight into the center of the mass of mana signatures. As he fell downward, he caught the figure of the magic arm that used earth magic to break the floor below him in the corner of his eye. Not wanting to be taken out without a fight, he kicked off the wall and dragged the magic arm down with him. The moment he was thrown into the center of the deathtrap, multiple cave trappers sprouted from the ground and impaled him with their spider legs. The seconds passed… and the impaled Senkyo exploded and released a cloud of black smoke. An illusion.

A few seconds back, just before Senkyo entered a stop, he mumbled to cast a spell that only he could hear.

“O Light, I am as I desire to be. Fighting with tooth and nail, created through falsehoods. Call upon the power to bring everything to my will, follow my word. Ephermal Clone.—Conceal.”

Senkyo turned invisible and tucked into the walls while another appeared to take his place just as he disappeared. He cast Ephermal Clone, a mid-tier light magic, and Conceal, a low-tier light magic, with such precision that it never seemed like Senkyo did anything at all. His clone turned on the pursuing cave trappers and used Eruption to take them all out. Ephermal Clone was a complicated spell that Yuu introduced to Senkyo as an Open Spell, a type of spell that was constructed in a way that could have different outputs depending on the contents of the chant. Changing certain phrases and passages will bring about different variations of the same spell. Another example of this was Knight Spell, the only other open spell Yuu taught him.

In this instance, Ephermal Clone had two inputs as open spells. The <Action Property> and the <Extra Element> placed on the last two sentences before the cast. “Fighting with tooth and nail” allowed it to become a convincing Senkyo while fighting the spiders and “The power to bring everything to my will” applied the control element to it. Specifically, the same black smoke that possessed sense disruption derived from a skill called Konjou Style, Hunting Shroud.

As the enemy fell for his trick, he walked up to the edge of the hole his clone fell through and saw an unbelievable scene. The walls were littered with round spiders crawling all over with their webs connecting from wall to wall. He never saw them before in person, but these round spiders with thin legs were the true form of phantom threaders. With numbers as large as these, it wouldn’t be strange to fill a whole area with illusions. Connecting this with the information he had, he concluded that the large mass of mana signatures was none other than a house of mirrors made by phantom threaders. An area completely controlled by their illusions. Getting stuck in the middle of that would mean certain defeat… or at least, in normal circumstances.

Even when Senkyo was out in the open for all to see, none of the other spiders took action against him. The reason for this was simple. The magic arm that controlled all of them was stuck inside the black smoke at the center of the mass illusions. He doubted something this large would be controlled by a single magic arm, especially since they knew how fatal the black smoke is to them. It was controlled by multiple magic arms but the portion Senkyo was on right now was disabled due to his clone taking the magic arm down with it.

With the cave trappers behind him burnt to a crisp, he had the option of entering one of their tunnels and going around the mass of illusions, but that would give the spiders time to recover. He weighed his options in less than a second. He dropped a few leaves onto the floor, secured the dummy on his back, and jumped inside the hole that led to the center of the spider nest. He cut down the webs in his way with a single dagger and used wind magic to soften his landing. At the center of the black smoke, he placed the dummy down and ordered it.

“Stay.”

It was dangerous to leave the dummy alone, but so long as it was within his black smoke, none of the spiders will be able to reach it because they would be cut off from the magic arm and arachne sage’s control. There was a chance a lone stray would come upon it. But with Senkyo’s ability to detect everything that moved inside the black smoke, the chances of that happening were virtually impossible with him on guard.

Senkyo planted his feet on the ground, returned his dagger, unsheathed the katana, and disappeared into the shroud. Around him were thirteen hostiles. Twelve were cave trappers and one magic arm. The magic arm was dragged here but it was still alive. If it ever got out of the smoke, it would mean trouble. The way it walked was completely different from the other cave trappers which made it easy to discern from the others. Without even a second passing after he took off, his body appeared above the magic arm and swiftly beheaded it. He thought of leaving immediately, but it could be a problem if the nearby cave trappers found their way out of the black cloud and chased them down. Nine of them were close to each other near the edge of the cloud, so it wasn’t impossible for them to get out.

He made up his mind and cut down the three straggling cave trappers separated from the clutter the same way he did with the magic arm. Then, he positioned himself to jump into the center of the clutter. He planted his feet down firmly and readied his blade.

*“\*Flash Strike: Thunderclap!\*”*

He swung his blade, coated it with lightning magic, and used flash strike. He found himself in the center of the nine cave trappers with his blade about to make contact with the ground. But before he did, he added.

“Magic Arts: Crackling Thunder!”

The blade sparked in bright white as lethal lightning burst from the blade. This was a technique that made use of concentrated lightning magic released at a high-pressured output. However, Senkyo added no holes to release the pressure and kept it all in the blade. This would result in the blade exploding if kept in this state for too long, which is why he didn’t waste any time and cast his final technique before the blade hit the ground.

“Magic Arts: Field Discharge!”

At that very moment, an explosive roar made the cave tremble as a crash of powerful lightning fried every living being around Senkyo. He used the same technique earlier but only garnered a weak output. That was because Field Discharge was reliant on the accumulated lightning used to cast it. With Thunderclap and Crackling Thunder used to supply Field Discharge, all the nine cave trappers and even more spiders beyond the black smoke died in an instant. From the outside, the scene was comparable to a thundercloud sparking numerous times as the chaos occurred from within.

Of course, Senkyo was careful not to have the output leak to the dummy and returned to its side safely. With no enemies around them, switched back to his bone daggers, picked up the dummy again, and rushed to the outside of the mass illusion they were in.

**344 – Past the Mirrors**

The moment Senkyo popped out of the black cloud, what awaited him was an impossible number of bomb jockeys, cave trappers, and magic arms charging at them. They were all constructed in pure blue meaning they were no more than mere illusions and accelerated into the turmoil.

“O Wind, coat my legs, aid my every step. Bless me with your flight that will create my path. Enhanced Speed!”

The moment wind assisted his every step, the path in front of him warped and turned into a dark spider’s nest with webs, cocoons, and spiders of all stages. As he saw before, spiders created from a 3D illusion didn’t take pure blue forms, which made it difficult to discern without only vision alone. He activated Dectect and found himself in the middle of a thick cluster of mana signatures. It allowed him to differentiate active spiders from the ones in 3D illusions, but there was still the problem of not knowing which path was real. Even if he could detect the 3D illusion, all the spiders had to do was make everything around him a 3D illusion and stray him off the path to the exit. For that reason, he activated another skill.

*“\*Perception Field!\*”*

A skill used by non-magic users of the Konjou Clan, typically used by hunters in the Brute and Enchanter class. It uses spirit power to sense everything around the user within a 5-meter radius. This included the movements of the enemies, the precise distance between him and illusions, and of course…

“HAA!!”

Sound.

Senkyo’s shout echoed through the cave, bouncing off the walls and returning to him. An advanced use for the Perception Field: Echolocation. No matter how many illusions the phantom threaders weaved, there was no deceiving the flow of sound as they bounce off the real cave walls, allowing Senkyo to find the path forward.

Block. Fake. Fake. Slash. Fake. Real. Fake. Block. Real. Real. Fake. Slash.

Senkyo pressed forward with his head immersed in complete focus. When ranged magic attacks were shot at him, he let them pass and get consumed by Shiro’s natural magic barrier. When ranged physical attacks were shot, he would block them. When a blue spider would appear, he would ignore them. When a colored spider appeared, he would cut them down before they could even reach the midpoint of his katana. When a sheet of mana appeared in front of him, he would consult his perception field to find the right path and detect any hostiles that were waiting just beyond the 3D illusion. Despite the mass of hallucinations being thrown at Senkyo’s eyes, he could only see what he wanted to see, throwing away every bit of unnecessary information as he pierced through the Iwaiida’s house of mirrors.

The moment he found the exit to the mass of illusions, he searched for possible landing spots that allowed high-speed movement and connected them like dots leading from his location to his finish line. Then, to take the enemy by surprise, he dug his feet firmly onto the ground below him.

*“\*Flash strike! Flash strike! Flash strike! Flash strike! Flash strike! Flash strike!\*”*

He zoomed past every enemy and illusion before they even had the chance to form anything block his path. His arrival at the exit was as he expected, a clutter of spiders waiting to ambush him as he made the turn. It didn’t look like they expected Senkyo to get to them with such speed and allowed him to get the jump on them. With all the wind pressure he accumulated from consecutive undisrupted flash strikes, he weaved all of them with a single skill.

*“\*Flash Strike: Breath of the Wind.\*”*

A heavy slash sent a lethal gust of wind down the path with the spiders and ripped their bodies apart as if being caught in a violent tornado. Their legs separated from their bodies and abdomen and those pieces would get ripped into smaller parts. It was a good thing that all of them were only Leolja’s illusions which didn’t produce any gore. Even if Senkyo was the one who did it, he didn’t want to stomach the sight of blood and guts all over the walls. Throwing those thoughts aside, he quickly delved deeper into the cave before enemy reinforcements got to him.

**…………**

A few minutes later, Senkyo escaped pursuing spiders and slowed down to a walk. He had been pushing both his mind and body the whole time, so he deserved a bit of rest before the next skirmish. For now, he dropped his Perception Field and continued only with the Detect spell active.

On his way, his eyes caught sight of something interesting. Different from the glowing stones in deep purple, there was a stone that possessed a lighter shade of purple. A Charged Dark Stone. Senkyo knew this because he remembered reading it as one of the resources that could be obtained on the sublevels of A. He didn’t expect to actually find any resources here since this was only a test cave and not a cave on the real sunken nest. Yet, the resource was right in front of his own eyes.

There was a possibility it was a trap but that didn’t stop Senkyo from trying to procure it. He couldn’t tell if it was an illusion or not since A Charged Dark Stone also had mana inside it, so it would naturally have a mana signature, making it difficult for him to tell if it was real or not with Detect. He put his guard on full alert as he went to collect the resource. Detect and Perception Field were both active with one hand on the handle of one of his bone daggers. And finally, he successfully picked up the stone and backed off safely. It was real.

A sigh of relief escaped his mouth. Senkyo examined the stone just in case there was some kind of trick attached to it but there was nothing to be concerned about. The reason he wanted this stone was that its description stuck out from the other resources listed in the guidebook. It wasn’t much to people in Zerid, but for an enchanter like him, this was his secret weapon. He took out one of his kunai and strengthened it to break the stone down to pieces so that they could fit in his small bags. The moment every piece of the charged dark stone was in his bag, he continued onward.

It seemed like the enemies found on this level preferred preparing for upcoming fights by setting traps and ambushes rather than weakening the crawler at random. In a way, it was good since it gave Senkyo the chance to rest, but that also meant that his next encounter with enemies would be another troublesome time. As he was thinking this, he climbed up the obstacles in front of him and caught sight of an opening that released a red glow. One completely different from the deep purple hue around him. It was the color for the next level: S.

He confirmed its authenticity through Detect, making sure that it wasn’t an illusion. It would be great if he got to it without further trouble, but the problem with enemies that liked setting up traps and ambushes was the fact that they would get in the way every time their targets get close to their objective. At this time, Senkyo’s situation was no exception.

Iwaiida of all stages appeared from all corners of the massive cavern he was in. All of them colored without a hint of blue bodies to inflate their numbers. Then, rhythmic taps resounded through the whole cavern. As if to show off, a humanoid figure appeared from the entrance to level S. A cloaked man with spider-like features. The gaps in their cloak showed a spider’s body while he stood on human-like legs with human-like arms that held a long staff in one hand. The spider legs that sprouted from its back patted each other as if clapping for Senkyo’s arrival. Finally, the spider head beneath its hood reflected a murderous gaze from its eight eyes as it stared at Senkyo. This was the Arachne Sage.

It was quite bold for it to present itself in front of Senkyo. Instead of watching safely from the sidelines, it decided to enter the battlefield on its own. Was this because an arachne sage could form arrogant personalities or was Leolja using his power to force a situation where he had to fight the sage? In all honesty, the answer was probably both. However, there was a single upside to this situation.

When dealing with enemies that excelled in using traps and ambushes, so long as Senkyo caught a feel for where they would set up their traps, then they were nothing more than announced dangers. A smirk appeared on his face, responding to the sage’s bloodlust.

**345 – An Existence Apart From Others**

The harmonic sound of chirping birds could be heard as they fly through the trees of the forest. The gentle morning sun peered through the gaps between the trees. Passing through shade and sunlight, their shadows come and go. The soft breeze ruffled the leaves accompanied by the calming ring of wind chimes. In the middle of that peaceful scene, Senkyo was alone sitting in an isolated dojo built in the forest of the Konjou Clan’s territory. There, he waited in silence, the once tense atmosphere softening from the anticlimactic wait.

After a few more minutes of enduring stillness, he could sense something send ripples across the forest’s tranquil ambiance. The ripples become bigger and bigger until finally, a heavy breeze blew into the dojo as a person arrived and pressed their arms on the wooden walls for support.

“S-Sorry! I overslept!”

It was Shimizu Yoshiko, the personal mentor assigned to Senkyo.

“N-No, don’t mind me…”

He said in an attempt to be polite to her. This was his first day of training under her; he didn’t want to leave a bad impression. Yoshiko fixed herself before walking into the dojo and placing herself in front of Senkyo.

“You must’ve heard about me from Sakurai-ojii-san. I’m Shimizu Yoshiko, disciple of Konjou Reiko, and from now on, your new mentor. If you think this is going to be a smooth ride, then think again! I’ll be sure to work you to the bone to become the strongest enchanter out there!”

Such was her declaration and the beginning of more harsh days of training.

As a start, she went over the basics of the enchanter class. Unlike fighters and casters who use magic, enchanters are hunters that fight with spirit power, manifesting their strength through talismans, items, and weapons. The most important part of being an enchanter is remembering the basic symbols and arranging them in vessels to produce various effects. There are nine basic symbols to begin with.

Connection. A symbol characterized by a basic circle. As its name suggests, it creates a connection between two properties. It can also be used to strengthen existing connections or make two properties affect each other in some way. It can also react whenever a type of connection occurs.

Discord. A symbol characterized by a basic X. It is the complete opposite of Connection and disrupts the connection between two properties. The two symbols oppose each other, but can still be used together depending on the arrangement of symbols and the property of Discord applied. This is mainly utilized for the various ways it can disrupt the connection between two properties. This can also react when a type of discord occurs.

Direction. A symbol characterized by a basic triangle. This applies movement to the vessel it is applied to or reacts to some type of movement. Often used for traps but can also be used to dictate the direction of an effect.

Interaction. A symbol characterized by a lightning bolt drawn in three lines and right angles or a deformed katakana of “sa.” To be specific, it has two parallel lines that stretch out to opposite sides with a perpendicular line connecting the two just above their bases. This can be used to activate a Circuit or react whenever a certain type of interaction occurs.

Domination. A symbol characterized by two centered parallel lines with the upper line twice as long as the lower line. A symbol that creates power by having one property superior to the other. This can be used to draw power that overwhelms targets, make targets superior at a certain property, react whenever a type of domination occurs, or other effects of the like.

Inferiority. A symbol characterized by a circle floating in between the space of a V. The complete opposite of Domination, a symbol that creates power by having one property inferior to the other. It can draw power that reduces the strength of targets or, in general, make targets inferior to a certain property. This can also be used to react whenever a type of inferiority occurs.

Equality. A symbol characterized by three parallel lines of the same length. This is a symbol that draws power from having a perfect balance or force connected properties to have a perfect balance. It is often used in tandem with Connection to create various effects. Just like with the others, it can also react whenever a type of balance occurs.

Repetition. A symbol characterized by two parallel backslashes. It is a symbol that can make a Circuit repeat itself or make a specific part of a Circuit repeat itself. This is often used when a type of repetitive cast is needed. This can also be used to react whenever a type of repetition occurs.

Spirit. A symbol characterized by a diamond placed at the center of a half-moon arc. It is the most used symbol out of the nine due to the fact that it is used to draw power from the wills of users and places them into the Circuit. This is used to manifest power based on the will of the person who creates it.

A connection of two or more Symbols is called a Circuit. The way circuits are arranged is crucial in creating different effects. This is because circuits activate from the innermost symbol and expand as more symbols are added to it. This means that the first symbol to activate is the inner symbol before the outer symbol. For example, to make a bomb that explodes upon contact requires the symbols for Interaction and Spirit. Interaction will be placed within the diamond of Spirit. If the arrangement is reversed, the circuit will draw power first before it even makes contact, exploding the moment power is placed into it.

Beyond arranging inner and outer symbols, there is also a need to arrange symbols that overlap each other. Overlapping symbols mean will often trigger at the same time. For example, overlapping Spirit and Domination with Interaction at the center allows the user to release heavy attacks based on the user’s will upon enemy contact. If they were separate with Spirit as the outermost symbol, the circuit will activate upon contact, have Domination react for domination effects, then release a normal attack. In this circuit, the Domination symbol is useless as it connects to nothing and the Spirit symbol releases an average attack with no influence from the Domination symbol.

And finally, when three or more symbols overlap, there can be times when one symbol only overlaps with certain symbols instead of every symbol. In such an instance, the effect of that one symbol will only apply to the symbols it is connected to. For example, a circuit with Spirit, Domination, and Repetition with Repetition connected only to Domination. This is a circuit that activates the moment the user applies power to the Spirit symbol. The user has the option to produce overwhelming attacks with the Domination symbol. Then, the moment Domination is used, it activates once more, producing attacks that deal twice as much damage compared to a circuit without Repetition. Had the Repetition symbol been connected to the Spirit symbol, the circuit would require twice as much spirit power. It would produce a more powerful output or a different one entirely, but this could result in needless use of spirit power. Whenever engaging in fights, enchanters are more likely to use more spirit power than brutes who take the frontlines. Enchanters must manage their spirit power consumption properly as they can burn through their supply easily.

It was nearing dusk when Yoshiko finished teaching Senkyo all about the basics and making him go through various exercises to put all of them into practice, or at least reminding him since he already knew of them through Ryosei’s memories. Naturally, Senkyo thought that they would end here for the day. However, something unexpected came from Yoshiko’s mouth.

“Okay! Now it’s time for the practical session!”

“Eh?”

By “practical session,” she meant throwing Senkyo in the middle of the dark woods and hunting him down like a predator chasing down its helpless prey.

“—GAH!!?”

This scream was made when he barely dodged the fist Yoshiko threw at him through a solid tree trunk.

“—HYAAA!!”

This scream was made when he ran for dear life as a flurry of muscle-piercing leaves rained down from above.

“—GRUKK!!”

This groan was made when he miswrote a circuit and resulting in it exploding in his face.

The situation was so one-sided that it was better to define it as torture rather than training. In this session, Yoshiko gave Senkyo one objective—to hit her. Recalling the various stories of fiction he consumed, in situations when the instructor gave simple objectives, it was likely to be one of the hardest hurdles for the protagonist to overcome. This was exactly the same.

It wasn’t that Senkyo wasn’t trying to fight back. There were rules to this training, and that was to only use spirit power and fight through talismans. All he needed to do was pick up any object lying around the forest, apply his spirit power to it and turn it into a vessel, then inscribe a circuit to it and make it a talisman, and use it against Yoshiko. It seemed simple at first, but the problem lay in the fact that he couldn’t even make a single talisman.

Every time he tried to pick up an item, Yoshiko would always have something on her sleeve to disrupt Senkyo. When he crouched to pick up sticks, an object zoomed past him, and the next thing he knew, the sticks he picked up withered to dust. When he tried to pull leaves off of the trees, they would stay connected as if it was impossible to pull them off in the first place. When he tried to go all for nothing and picked up the dirt on the ground, Yoshiko threw seeds into the dirt, making them sprout into a tree right on the top of his hand. Then, in the miraculous times he managed to make a vessel, it would get disenchanted the moment a leaf Yoshiko threw out made contact with it.

A night of training in the woods left Senkyo exhausted. The day right after, from morning until night, it was the same one-sided hunting session. It wasn’t long until he began to fear the sight of purple as he caught mere moments of her hair entering and disappearing from his field of vision. She was simply merciless when it came to training him.

Eventually, the day came when Senkyo got fed up and questioned her about her lessons. From Ryosei’s memories, an enchanter’s training was more focused on enchanting and crafting various circuits to use in battle, determining which circuits would be best against specific enemies. It wasn’t focused on live battles like the ones Yoshiko was subjecting Senkyo to. Nodding as if expecting to be asked this question, Yoshiko said.

“You aren’t like other enchanters. You can use magic on top of spirit power. Not just that, your supply of spirit power is undeterminable, but at the very least, it’s greater than Sakurai-ojii-san’s spirit power, one of the people with the greatest supply of spirit power in the clan. Not to mention you have high adaptability that was able to reduce your enchanting time from 30 seconds to 5 in less than two days. For someone like you, do you think orthodox training methods would work effectively?”

“Th-That’s…”

Senkyo couldn’t say anything back. His biggest disadvantage here was the fact that he didn’t even know what he was capable of. Since he couldn’t determine his own strength, it was left to the people who trained them to determine it and cultivate it. In other words, from his mentor’s eyes, this was what he needed to grow. However, Senkyo still couldn’t see why that is.

“—Then, how is this training method effective if you keep preventing me from creating talismans!?”

To that question, Yoshiko answered unhesitatingly.

“Real battle experience. The pressure of scrambling through your every option to fight, the pressure of helplessness against an overwhelmingly powerful opponent, the pressure of possible death. Whenever you fight me, I will make you realize just how wide the gap between our skills is. I will make you realize the definition between an amateur and a professional hunter. Then, when it all finally sinks in, I want you to overcome me.”

“What? How does that make sense?”

Yoshiko chuckled at Senkyo’s words.

“I heard from Ryosei that you’re a smart kid. Always thinking of ways to overcome the trials you face. Somehow or another, you always find those ways and break through any situation. A genius. A true prodigy. That’s how he described you. For someone as talented as you, this is the only way I will hone your skills.”

Genius. Prodigy.

Senkyo wanted to deny those words, but he knew that this wasn’t the place to be stubborn. If that was how they saw him, so be it. What he wanted to know right this moment was his mentor’s reasoning.

“So basically, you’re telling me to figure everything out for myself?”

“That’s it. Do you think I’m neglectful for this?”

Those sharp eyes she stares at him with. Those are the very eyes she uses whenever she wanted Ryosei to give a satisfactory answer. She only used them whenever she gave him enough information to figure out her inner thoughts, but Ryosei rarely succeeded, resulting in harsh punishment. If Senkyo fails to answer properly, there would be hell to pay.

Unreasonable. That was the only word that popped into his head.

“An enchanter…”

Yet.

“…is someone who innovates.”

He answers all the same.

“They build everything from the nine symbols and weave their thoughts into symbols. How I control these nine symbols are all up to me. How I create these nine symbols are all up to me… If I can’t make one thing work, then try another… If I face a problem that can’t be solved through orthodox means, then try unorthodox means… Because I’m different, I have that option… You…”

A wide smile spreads across Yoshiko’s face as Senkyo arrives at his conclusion. Then, she answers for him.

“I’m still neglectful! Correct!”

She switches from her serious tone to her playful one.

“We’ll end today’s session here! Tomorrow will be a different day. From now on, I’ll stop being neglectful!”

The next day, Senkyo experienced a completely different hell than what he saw so far. But despite this, he was able to land a hit on her five days later. On that day, an indescribable expression floated on Yoshiko’s face. It was the face of someone who couldn’t find the right words to express the chaotic mix of emotions brewing inside of her. But at the very least, she was able to leave him with these few words.

“…A step closer to an enchanter no one has ever seen before.”

**346 – The Unorthodox Enchanter**

Senkyo kicks off the battle by throwing leaves into the air, all of them possessing one circuit and a lone circle on the other side. On his hand was a single leaf with a circuit constructed with Spirit at the center followed by overlapping Direction and Connection, creating a diamond and a half-moon arc contained in a triangle that overlapped with a circle on all three points. Filling the leaf with spirit power, it glows, taking control of all the leaves Senkyo threw in the air and sending the barrage to the entrance of level S where the arachne sage stood.

The mastermind responded with the tap of his staff, summoning numerous fireballs to intercept the incoming leaves. But the moment they were about to make contact, the circuits activated. Among the leaves were three sets of circuits. First were circuits with Spirit and Discord overlapping each other with Repetition attached to Discord. Second were circuits with Discord at the center inside Spirit overlapping with Domination at its base. Third were circuits with Discord at the center inside Spirit overlapping with Inferiority and Direction.

The first circuits activated, breaking down all of the fireballs that attempted to incinerate the leaves. The second and third sets of circuits detected an occurrence of Discord, activating all of the other circuits at once. The second set of circuits exploded, clearing all of the spiders within the vicinity with a devastating explosion. The third set of circuits pierced through the smoke and accelerated toward the arachne sage. The sage tried to dodge but there were too many to handle and received the barrage. The steel-like leaves sunk into its skin, taking all of its energy and making it feel lethargic.

From within the smoke came Senkyo, speeding in the direction of the sage. Sensing the danger, the sage swing its staff with all the energy it had left, creating numerous layers of cobwebs that produced 3D illusions. Senkyo rushed forward, unhindered. Using both Detect and Perception Field, he could tell which were fakes and what were beyond those fakes. Unfortunately, by the time he arrived where the sage previously stood, it was gone. It shouldn’t have been able to move far away, but he realized what happened when he saw the backs of numerous cave trappers disappearing into the illusions. It hitched a ride on them so it could escape.

In front of him was the entrance to level S. Nothing was stopping him from entering now. However, leaving the sage alive while it was this close to him was a chance he would only have now. If he left, he would risk it preparing more traps for him on the way back. The only guarantee for safety was to finish it off right this moment while he had the momentum. Making his decision, Senkyo set down the dummy, ordered it to stay, and had Shiro guard it. The last time he did this, almost ended up terribly, but now he had a perfect guarantor.

“Winding sheet of the dark night, envelope the locus of my blood sport. Spread as if you are I, and I the darkness that blinds thee. Curse those foolish that enter the domain of the predator. Konjou Style, Hunting Shroud!”

Black smoke spread around the vicinity, seeping into every path and crack no matter how small. It expanded into level S and the cavern of level A3, preventing any enemies that entering from both sides. So long as this shroud existed, no enemy would be able to reach Shiro and the dummy without him noticing. Not to mention, the moment an enemy enters the shroud, its connection will be cut off from anything that was controlling it or anything it was controlling. This assured that magic arms, arachne sages, and demonic spiders wouldn’t dare step foot and completely prevent any controlled attacks from masterminds. This shroud lasted for about 10 seconds. It may not be much for others, but for Senkyo, this was just perfect.

He recalled the words his mentor often repeated.

*\*If you’re gonna fight, finish everything in one go!\**

This wasn’t because she was a battle-crazed maniac, but because it was how enchanters would settle fights. Comparing the energy costs of techniques in the brute and the enchanter class, the brute class would consume more spirit power with every technique used, but enchanters, although they have a lower cost, tend to require multiple uses of the same skill to become effective against enemies. Unlike the magic arts of the fighter class, enchanters don’t have a way to preserve their spirit power. Because of this, it is said that it is dangerous for enchanters to fight on their own. However, in the times that they are forced to do so, cannot escape, and don’t expect reinforcements, there is only one option for them. Since they wouldn’t be able to match an opponent in a battle of attrition, they must kill their enemy before it kills them. An all-out attack at the perfect timing was ideal.

Leaving the shroud, he was greeted with several illusions and an army of spiders rushing to kill him. With Detect and Perception Field, he cuts down every 3D illusion, and with the leaves he threw out, he pierces through the obstacles with slashes and explosions. He arrived at the center of the cluster of mana signatures and prepared. Right now, the sage was hiding somewhere close to him behind all of the illusions and spiders. Searching through every single corner would be ineffective. For this reason, he would end the battle with this single move.

*\*You are an enchanter. You are that who innovates with the world. Unlike the fighters and casters that use magic that bend the elements of the world to their wills with spells and chants, we enchanters are those that become one with the world and fight as the environment around us. Our wills do not force the world to our desires, but it is the world’s desire to move at the request of our wills. Whenever we fight, we are not alone; the world you stand on is on your side.\**

The words of his mentor flowed through his mind once more. To become one with the world. That is what it meant to become an enchanter. If that was the case, then everything inside this cavern was his to control. Every enemy inside this place, no matter where the sage was hiding, had no escape from his reach.

The floor of the cavern glowed in bright light, shaping an unusual formation that would normally not be seen in this world. A diamond inside a half-moon arc overlapping three lines of the same length connected into two large circles on its left and right sides. Inside both circles possessed the same diamond and half-moon arc at their center. The difference was that the left side had the diamond inside a circle which was placed in between a large V, while the right side had two parallel lines with the upper line twice the length as the lower one placed below the half-moon arc. This was the power of an enchanter.

The moment Senkyo realized that this was the final room that led to level S, he continuously poured spirit power into the cavern, creating a large-scale vessel. The whole time he fought, the numerous leaves he released weren’t just to keep the enemies at bay, but it was also to carve a large circuit into the cavern floor. An enchant of this scale would usually be enough to completely drain the average enchanter of their spirit power. However, Senkyo wasn’t an average enchanter. Even with the spirit power it cost him to make the cavern a vessel, along with the spirit power it cost him to activate a circuit that affected the whole cavern, it would be enough to bring any enchanter on Earth to their knees. Despite this, Senkyo didn’t feel anything at all.

The wide-ranged circuit that was embedded on the cavern floor glowed showing the symbols of overlapping Spirit and Equality connected to two Connections that contained overlapping Spirit and Inferiority as well as Spirit and Domination. Pouring his spirit power into the circuit, Senkyo was able to sense the inferior entity inside the cavern in terms of numbers—the lone arachne sage.

He immediately rushed to its location on the far side of the cave opposite to the entrance of level S. It tried to move the spiders it controlled to hinder Senkyo and create numerous 3D illusions to throw him off path, but none of them could stop him. Strangely, every spider around him slowed down as if the strength and energy were sapped from their bodies. This was because the spiders that the arachne sage controlled, the dominant numbers, were given the same weaknesses the sage was experiencing from the leaves that first hit him. This was the equality of bodily state. The circuit Senkyo created wasn’t just to search for the sage but to weaken every spider in the vicinity by giving them the same bodily state as the arachne sage.

The 3D illusions kept rising to block Senkyo but that was all it could do. The obstacles could never delay Senkyo nor did they throw him off his path to the arachne sage. Within a few seconds, the sage could only pale its face as Senkyo appeared in front of it, his cold blade running through its bare neck. For safe measure, he cut down all four of its limbs as well as the spider legs protruding out its back. After thoroughly disabling the arachne sage, he waited for everything to settle.

With their leader’s death, all of the spiders in the area scrambled out of the cavern, hiding into the small cracks they could fit in and running into the cave paths away from the area. Some of the cave trappers simply burrowed their way out of the vicinity. Seeing as the hostiles retreated, Senkyo returned to the entrance of level S where the black smoke was just about to disappear. He thought of continuing down the path, but after all of that, it was reasonable to stop for a bit of rest. Beyond this point was the area where he would fight Leolja, the Demon Spider that was able to replicate the entirety of levels B to S with just his illusions. There was no telling what would happen if he fought him in his tired state. For now, even just for a few minutes, he sat down with Hunting Shroud to secure the area.

**347 – Iqanlr’s Deepest Level**

Level S. The deepest and most dangerous level of the Iqanlr Sunken Nest. Every evolution of Iwaiida exists in this area. This includes their highest attainable form, the Demonic Spider. It possesses the powers of all previous evolutions and amplifies them to be utilized in ways the arachne sage could not. This stage gains a body capable of utilizing every power of the Iwaiida to its fullest. Strangely enough, Senkyo knew more about this evolution stage than the previous lower stages.

He walked down the red-lit cave with the training dummy still latched onto his back. Unlike the last two levels, nothing tried to attack him immediately after entering the level. So far it was calm with no enemies in sight. He kept his Detect and Perception Field active just in case something tried to deliver a surprise attack.

*“\*Hey, Shiro.\*”*

*“\*What is it, Onii-chan?\*”*

*“\*Don’t you think there’s something strange with my body?\*”*

Shiro tilted her head at Senkyo’s sudden question.

*“\*What do you mean?\*”*

*“\*I just noticed after fighting the arachne sage, but haven’t I gotten stronger?\*”*

*“\*But Onii-chan has always been strong, right?\*”*

*“\*No, not like that. I mean my physical capabilities. It hasn’t been 2 months ever since my lifestyle drastically changed but it feels like my body is already used to fighting. It's nowhere near Ryosei’s body when he was alive, but it's strong enough to survive high-intensity fights. Even after that, I only needed to rest for about 5 minutes before getting back on track. No matter what my body went through there’s no way it should have adapted this fast. Is this another type of ability I have?\*”*

He recalls the eight seals his father placed on his body. The moment he woke up in Zerid, Shiro told him all about the sealed power inside his body. Of the eight seals, two were released. The first one was released in his fight against Fulgur. It was the seal that locked away Shiro inside his body along with some of his memories, his mana, and the power to manipulate it. The condition to unlock it was to reach a near-death state, as stated by Shiro. The second was released at some point between getting burnt by his own magic when he was fighting the skeletons on Earth and when he arrived at Zerid. It was the ability to rapidly regenerate his body from even fatal injuries. The condition that unlocked it is still unknown. Shiro only had knowledge of the conditions on her own seal but she also had the ability to sense whether or not a seal was released from Senkyo’s body.

*“\*No, Onii-chan has only released two seals so far. The cause of Onii-chan’s growth is unrelated to the locked seals.\*”*

*“\*Hmm… is that so?\*”*

Just as Senkyo was about to immerse himself in his thoughts, Shiro added.

*“\*If Shiro had to guess, perhaps it’s a side effect of Onii-chan’s regenerative ability.\*”*

*“\*A side effect… just like how I gained the ability to store creation magic when I unlocked my mana?\*”*

*“\*Yes. When Onii-chan first arrived in Zerid, he was… not in good shape. At that time, Onii-chan’s regenerative abilities saved his life by replacing his right arm and regenerating other parts of Onii-chan’s body. Maybe something happened when Onii-chan’s body healed.\*”*

*“\*Hmm… if that’s the case, then I’m not just regenerating my muscles; my body is rebuilding them. Instead of just bringing it back to its previous state, it makes them stronger. No wonder it feels like I can handle the katana better.\*”*

Senkyo’s right arm received the most damage when they first got to Zerid. With four spikes piercing through it, his body had no choice but to dismember the whole arm from his shoulder instead of filling in the holes like the rest of his body did. If his theory was correct, then that meant that his right arm was completely revamped.

He turned to his arm and rolled it around a few times.

“Hmm…”

This new discovery brought new ideas into his head.

A few minutes later, arriving at a small opening, Senkyo decided to take a stop there. The area around them was big enough to move around but not too large that it felt intimidating. There was nothing inside the area except Senkyo and rocks. On top of that, the only entrances to this area were the few passageways that were connected to it.

“This is the perfect place to take out one of the requirements.”

In this test, Senkyo was expected to perform two things: find and extract a particular resource and remain in a particular area for five minutes. For the latter, the specific details entailed that the dummy should be released from any restrictions and be allowed to roam freely. In the five minutes that it is, Senkyo’s job was to make sure they remain unharmed, to a certain extent. This was to simulate the actions of a researcher. He thought of using Hunting Shroud to make sure they were safe but then if this were a real situation, the researcher wouldn’t be able to observe anything. Afraid of being disqualified, he refrained from securing the area with black smoke and instead fortified it with talismans with a circuit to detect movement.

He released the dummy from his back by ordering it to stand, followed by another one to officially begin the five minutes.

“Observe.”

Senkyo remained by the dummy’s side as it walked freely, vigilant of any reactions from his talismans or anything his senses pick up. When he first heard of this condition, it only seemed troublesome to him, and now that they were at level S, he found out he was right, but not in the way he expected. The characteristics of areas Senkyo was able to conduct the five-minute test were locations with wide spaces and little to no resources. He thought it wouldn’t take long for them to find places that matched this description but he was wrong.

There were many resources in level S and barely any blank spots. Looking back on the description of level S in his guidebook, it was stated that it had the most resources out of any of the other levels. Inside this treasure trove of a level were occasional empty spaces that wouldn’t have any resources in them. Researchers have attempted to study this phenomenon in the past, but the lack of reliable crawlers with access level S slowed down that research, and have not found any definitive answers to this day.

The time slowly passed by with a few lone spiders coming from the passageways. Senkyo quickly took care of them with his talismans before they became a problem. Eventually, the five minutes passed without anything happening. He expected to have his hands full with spiders pouring in from all sides and holding down the fort with everything he had, but that wasn’t what happened.

Senkyo pinched his chin and pondered. This test was supposed to simulate what would occur in the levels of Iqanlr’s sunken nest. If nothing happened even while they stood still in a location without any resources, would the same happen in the real sunken nest? Was there some kind of important meaning to these empty areas that would ward off enemies? He pondered, but that was the limit of his current capabilities. He had no information he could use to conclude any theories. For now, he set the thought aside and continued his exploration of level S.

**348 – The Final Search**

“Remnants of the past, become my incarnate and bring upon the shadow of war. I call out the penumbra of the lurking devils. Konjou Style, Phantom Blade!”

A cloud of black smoke shrouded the area where four Senkyos ran out and escaped to four different passageways. Ever since Senkyo left the resourceless area, he found a substantial increase in enemy encounters. With their numbers, they often tried to herd him into their traps but he always gave them the slip by using Phantom Blade or Hunting Shroud. It would have been great if they never caught his traces again, but the biggest disadvantage in the lower levels is the fact that enemies are all over the place. It doesn’t take long for them to gather more spiders and try to ambush him again.

It was around ten minutes of exploring after Senkyo left the resourceless area. Even with his prominent searching skills, Detect and Perception Field, he had yet to find the target he was looking for: the Spell Crystal. This was a valuable resource that could be used to cast spells. It can be used for daily life, but most importantly, could be used to craft the energy core of AW-Units called ARC-Mana. It could be recognized by its distinct light blue color and unique mana signature. Except, Senkyo had no way to find it.

According to the information in his guidebook, spell crystals were often found by using a mid-tier level of the spell Detect. Senkyo was only capable of using its low-tier level. This wasn’t a problem of skill, but a problem of knowledge. He didn’t know how to cast the mid-tier spell for Detect. He stopped to list down all of the spells he learned from Yuu in his head.

Aqua Surge. Crown Spikes. Detect (low-tier). Enhanced Speed. Ephermal Clone (low- and mid-tier). Eruption. Gale Howl. Great Wall. Heaven’s Pierce. Hell’s Pillar. Knight Spell. Needle Storm. Overgrowth. Paired Hellfire. Purify. Sun’s Protection. Zephyr.

Aside from the spells he knew from the Konjou Clan, these were his current mana skillset. A common trend here was the dominant number of offensive spells with hardly any utility spells. The same trend applied to the Konjou Clan’s spells, but that was because they were combat-oriented, to begin with. Overall, he knew a decent amount of utility spells from the Konjou Clan since Ryosei had them in his memories but none of them could be used to search for the spell crystal. Because of his lack of ability, he didn’t have any other choice but to search for the spell crystal manually.

His only saving grace was the fact that his low-tier Detect could still perceive a spell crystal’s mana signature. The downside of this was that he needed to get close to inspect every mana signature he detected. In a cave filled with hostile spiders that often gathered in clusters, this meant walking straight into those dangerous clusters. Ironically, the process would have been smoother if he was against real spiders instead of illusions. Since he had perception field, he could have snuck up to nearby mana signatures with Hunting Shroud and detected if there was any breathing in the area. If he detected breathing along with the mana signatures, then he would simply back off and move along, then if he didn’t, he would come up close and inspect if they were spell crystals. Unfortunately, with illusions as his enemies, there wasn’t any breathing to be detected, which forced him to walk up to mana signatures.

One solution he thought of involved ignoring every cluster of mana signatures and only inspecting mana signatures of low numbers. Yet, as if to curse him, the description of spell crystals included this passage:

*\*Spell crystals are often found in clumps. Due to the power they emit, Iwaiida are likely to gather around spell crystals and build their nests around them.\**

This unholy passage forced Senkyo to dive into every clump of mana signatures he found. Because of this, the ten minutes that would usually be nothing long for the average person felt like hours of fighting and running for Senkyo. The few seconds of walking after escaping every horde of spiders were his only solace before getting ambushed by a different group of arachnids. Another ten minutes of the same scenes happened before he finally found something that lit up his tired eyes.

“Spell crystals!”

He exclaimed the moment his eyes laid on a large vein of light blue crystals as he pierced through the middle of a spider nest. Without missing a single beat, he immediately acted.

“O Nature, I am your medium, your voice, your soul. Resonate and express yourself through me to punish those who oppose you. Gale Howl!”

A violent wind blew away the spiders in front of him. Meanwhile, those directly blocking the path from Senkyo’s position to the vein of spell crystals exploded into pieces as the wind made contact with them. With the path cleared, he used consecutive flash strikes to cover the distance and slashed his sword as the spell crystals got in range of his blade.

*“\*Flash strike: Breath of the Wind!\*”*

The smooth horizontal stroke was accompanied by a sharp wind. In a matter of an instant, pieces of the spell crystal broke and sprawled in the air. He collected the airborne minerals, handing some to the dummy and storing the rest in his small bags. Mission complete. All he had to do now was get back to the surface. The moment he shifted his attention from the crystals to his surroundings, he realized. This was going to be the most difficult part of the test.

A cave filled to the brim with spider webs, stretching from the floor to the ceiling, reaching to all sides of the cave. Every single string had a mana signature. This would usually mean that all of them were nothing but illusions, yet his senses screamed danger from all directions. Among every mana signature was one that was unmistakably more powerful than the others. The only demonic spider on this level, Leolja, arrived.

“I had a feeling you’d show up…”

Senkyo whispered to himself as if cursing. The whole time he was searching for the mana crystals he didn’t miss the constant pressure the spiders were giving him. Every time he escaped from raiding a nest, another group would always be there to ambush him the moment he got away. Depending on the situation, he would eliminate them all or run away again. The problem with running away was that another group would always be there to catch him, while the problem with eliminating all of the enemies was the incoming reinforcements that would arrive if he killed them too slowly. Leolja had eyes everywhere, so he knew his game. As long as he pressured Senkyo, he would tire him for the moment he decided to show up. Spell crystals were the perfect bait for him.

Iwaiida of all stages crawled all over the webs, all of them closing into Senkyo’s location. He attempted to slice open a path through the plethora of webs. The moment it was about to make contact, the webs in its path turned to stone and stopped his swing. With his blade stuck in the stone, the spiders closed in for the kill.

**349 – Spirit Power and Magic**

In that instant, he realized that there was no fighting his way out. He was trapped at the center of Leolja’s spider web like a butterfly with its wings stuck, ready to be eaten by the spider at any time. His skill and experience were far below Ryosei’s. He couldn’t perform the same feats he could. The fact that his slash was stopped was proof of that. He was reminded once more, he was not a fighter, but a strategist.

A memory that felt as if it had happened years ago came to mind. It was the time Ryosei stopped him from entering the fighter class and sent him to the enchanter class instead. It was the determinant of his current strengths and weaknesses. The situation Ryosei wanted to avoid was for Senkyo to be left helpless in a position just like his current one. “Stick to your strengths,” was what he wanted to convey. The result of neglecting that advice was when he first thought he lost the test back on level A2. At that time, he wanted to hold back on using spirit power for as long as possible. The difference between that time and the present was the fact that Senkyo no longer needed to hide his cards.

Small pieces of rubble fell from where his blade penetrated the stone. Without a second to waste, he acted. Senkyo let go of his katana, moving both hands, one toward the pieces of rubble and the other to one of the small bags on his chest. What he took out from the bag was a bundle of charged dark stones and leaves. Spirit power coursed through his hands into the items he held, turning the seemingly normal items into vessels. 1 second passed.

The output of spirit power coming out of his hands increased, kindling spirit power onto the vessels, tracing the exact circuit he had in his mind. His hands merged, mixing the rubble, leaves, and charged dark stones into one pile. With the influence of his mind and the spirit power that wrapped the items, the three objects moved and arranged themselves as per Senkyo’s will. At that moment, his preparations were complete. 2 seconds passed.

The Iwaiida all closed into his location. About three more seconds was what separated Senkyo from his loss. In those few three, Senkyo threw every set of charged dark stones into the air where the creation weaved through the webs and obstacles until he arrived at its designated location. The charged dark stones had a circuit built with Spirit at its center, the diamond placed on the rubble while the arc appeared on the charged dark stones, overlapping on the symbol for Direction. A symbol that overlapped over two vessels—a technique called Vessel Convergent where another vessel is used to enhance the function of a circuit.

In this instance, the Spirit symbol was used to solidify Senkyo’s will to avoid the webs and spiders. Along with that will was the rubble, a sample of what Senkyo wanted to be avoided, the circuit became more accurate and precise in how to move and weave through the obstacles. 3 seconds passed.

Of the seven sets of charged dark stones, four successfully reached the walls. The other three were stopped by the Iwaiida. The light of the circuit on each of the sets expanded to show a circle with three diamonds and arcs overlapping in the three directions the triangle inside of it pointed. Connection and three sets of Spirit symbols. The light didn’t stop there. Multiple lines extended from the outer edge of the symbols and connected to each leaf where another symbol of Connection lay and a line that connected to it. All of the leaves shot outward, weaving through the obstacles, and creating a circle of leaves inside the spider webs. Of the four sets of charged dark stones, one was thwarted before it could form. 4 seconds passed.

The other spiders tried to disrupt the other three while the rest continued their rapid scuttle to Senkyo. Less than a second remained. Before the spiders could reach any of their targets, three bright circles illuminated within the spider web. The identity of the three circles was a Konjou Clan technique called a Field Circle, the very same one Senkyo used when he fought against hollowed knights on Earth. A technique that could apply various effects to anyone standing inside it based on the will of the user that created it. It was essentially an applied form of the Spirit symbol. For the field circle to work, it must have another medium to invoke the user’s will. What is commonly used for this is a circuit.

Behind each of the sets of charged dark stones was another circuit. At its center were two overlapping symbols for Connection that shaped a Venn Diagram. Above that was a diamond and a half-arc, the symbol for Spirit. This was the basic circuit placed inside a field circle. However, Senkyo’s circuit was more than that with a single symbol for Discord overlapping with Spirit. Every part of Senkyo’s contraption activated, shrouding the whole area with black smoke. To be specific, the same smoke used in Hunting Shroud and Phantom Blade—the smoke that would disable every control Leolja would have on the Iwaiida.

Senkyo should have used a technique powered by spirit power, yet what his contraption released was a wide cast of magic. This could not be done simply by applying the user’s will to the Spirit symbol. Doing so was similar to an attempt to cast magic using spirit power. This was also a step in the process, but cannot be done entirely by it. What he needed was a vessel that would make his will take shape. A vessel that could cast magic. This was the use for the charged dark stones.

There was an item that existed called a Dark Gem which contained mana that can be used to cast dark magic. A Charged Dark Stone functioned similarly to this, but instead of having mana, it had dark-attributed mana. While dark gems can easily be integrated into apocrologic items, charged dark gems cannot be used for anything other than dark magic which makes it difficult to use in tandem with other elements. Another factor was the fact that the dark stone was useless the moment every mana was drained from it. It cannot regenerate its mana supply as gems can, but the power of magic it creates is far superior. It was deemed inefficient for most items but was still used in some items that functioned purely on the dark element and are intended for one-time use. This was one of the small bits of knowledge Senkyo learned from reading the books back in the penthouse.

The circuit extracted the dark-attributed mana from the charged dark stone and used it to carry out Senkyo’s will. The sudden veil caused all of the charging spiders to freeze up and fall off of the spider web, rolling lifelessly on the ground below Senkyo. Among the countless spiders inside the veil, only one remained moving. Leolja.

Senkyo gently placed the training dummy down.

“Shiro, take care of it.”

*“\*Yes!\*”*

Responding to his call, Shiro left Senkyo’s body and guarded the dummy. Then, he pulled his katana out of the stone. Calmly entering his stance, a deep breath left his mouth to relieve at least a small portion of the exhaustion he built up. In his mind was only one thing: defeat the enemy, before it defeats you.

“Sheath my blade with the wind. Your power is the face of elegance. Flow as I show you the path, the line to a dashing ending. Konjou Style, Gale Fan!”

A powerful arc of deadly wind traveled across the room, cutting through the thick layers of spider webs. Unlike earlier, none of the webs turned to stone or did anything to stop the attack. This was because so long as the field circle was active, everyone inside it aside from Senkyo would be unable to make any form of ranged connection. This was because of Discord cutting off Leolja’s control over the webs.

“Bring it on, Senkyo!”

As if responding to Senkyo’s will, the shout of a familiar voice echoed through the cave as the arc of deadly wind was deftly swept away by numerous strings that danced within the black cloud. It was Leolja in his humanoid form with numerous spider threads connected to his hands and the spider legs attached to his back.

**350 – Conclusion At First Contact**

Senkyo pinpointed Leolja’s location with the use of his shroud. He placed his sword in the opposite direction, sending thunder magic through the blade.

“Magic Arts: Crackling Thunder!”

An explosive roar resounded as a large concentrated mass of lightning propelled Senkyo through the air, arriving at Leolja’s location in a blink of an eye. Leolja stared into Senkyo’s soul with his composed face as the voltaic blade swung at his body. The three spider legs on his back wrapped themselves in webs and blocked the attack. Meanwhile, his two arms were busy launching his spider threads in a completely different direction. As the sparks weakened from the initial impact, the Senkyo disappeared into nothing. An illusion. The fact that Leolja barely paid any attention to it proved that he knew this. Ten deadly spider threads swept through the black smoke where sharp footfalls could be heard trying to avoid them. The real Senkyo was there trying to get behind Leolja’s back. Alas, he could only dodge as the spider threads chased him relentlessly.

Confusion filled Senkyo’s mind. How was Leolja able to find his exact location all the time despite being blinded by the shroud? He jumped into the air to dodge the threads. It was then that he noticed. Whenever he became airborne, the other threads would sweep through every possible location he could be instead of targeting his current location. Was he trying to predict his movements? No, he couldn’t do that which is why he did that. Leolja could not detect him in the air.

He landed while dodging and parrying the magic threads, then, used one of his kunai to slice the ground. One of the biggest disadvantages of moving inside his black smoke was the fact that even he couldn’t use his vision. He can detect movement inside the shroud to make up for it, but he couldn’t do anything about objects that didn’t move. He knew where floors, walls, and obstacles would be by analyzing the shape of his shroud, but stationary objects that crawled over those were a different story, much like the spider webs that stretched on every surface of the cave.

The spider webs he cut flew through the air, exposing Leolja’s detection network. He used this intricate network of spider webs to detect where his feet landed. As a response to his discovery, lightning coursed through the spider webs on the ground and electrocuted him. He tried to jump to remove his contact, but the electricity made his muscles tense, rooting him in place without any other option than to grit his teeth and endure. Leolja could transfer his magic through the spider webs. This was what he used earlier to block his swing by turning the webs to stone. The only difference between now and before was the fact that Leolja had a direct connection to his webs. Because of his field circle, he wasn’t able to use magic on his webs remotely, but maintaining direct contact with the webs was a loophole to his restrictions. However, this also meant that if Leolja becomes airborne for even just a moment, he would lose all control of his webs.

The ground around Senkyo began to rise while he was kept still by the lightning. It was trying to trap him inside. If he allowed this to form, it would lock down any chance he had of passing the test. Realizing this, he raised his katana and pierced the ground with it. Enduring the pain of the electricity and using spirit power to force his muscles to flex, he raised his body from the ground by using his katana as support, shouting to push against the pain. Then, he created a foothold in the air by using his spirit power and letting go of his katana, severing his contact with the electric spider webs.

He took a second to recover his body, but it didn’t seem like Leolja was about to let him have the luxury. Senkyo sensed ten spider strings whipping in his direction. He couldn’t dodge it due to the lingering electricity coursing through his muscles, and using his kunai to block the attack would only reveal his location. To avoid the worst possible outcome, he chanted.

“O Earth, built from sticks and stones, soar the regal sky. Display your majesty and tower over those who oppose your indestructible command. Great Wall!”

The ground rose in front of him, blocking the approaching spider threads completely. This was a temporary stopgap, proven by the fact that all ten threads simply placed themselves above the wall before continuing their attack. A few seconds was all it bought, but that was good enough. His muscles recovered enough to move, making him create a vertical air foothold behind his feet.

*“\*Flash Strike: Breath of the Wind! Flash Strike: Breath of the Wind! Flash Strike: Breath of the Wind!\*”*

He launched himself out of his previous location into the direction of his great wall. The immense speed from a flash strike would usually result in Senkyo smashing into the wall, but by manipulating the wind pressure as he pierced the wind, he used it to cushion his arrival at the wall, countering the force in his flash strike. Finally, by creating another foothold below his feet and using Breath of the Wind to repeat the same feat, he successfully made numerous sharp turns to avoid the approaching spider strings, over his own great wall, and toward Leolja’s location. Since he made no contact with any of his webs, he was completely under his radar. A straight rush to Leolja’s side should have been left. Yet, with no basis at all, the hairs on Senkyo’s skin stood on end, warning him of the impending danger. He came to a full stop in the middle of the air and thought for a second. The most threatening element that separated Senkyo from victory was Leolja’s deadly spider strings. It was the only device that allowed him to trade blows with him inside his field circle.

He focused his attention on the senses he was receiving from the shroud. There were small, almost impossibly unnoticeable, thin strings that barely took any space, but they were there. Eight strings connected from the eight spider legs on Leolja’s back to the walls of the cave. It would have been simple if only eight lines of string separated him and his target, but this wasn’t the case. In addition to the eight main strings were numerous spider strings that connected to each other, creating the shape of a spiderweb. There was no space for Senkyo to squeeze into. While he was analyzing the situation, the other ten spider strings were being whipped all over the cave like troublesome versions of laser detectors one would find in spy movies. He made sure to avoid every single one of them before catching his breath and returning to thought.

Beyond the wall of webs was his target, Leolja, who stood in his best condition. He had yet to strain himself or show Senkyo anything near the power he imagined him having. There was a good possibility he was underestimating him. Meanwhile, he was already breathing through both his nose and mouth to regulate his heartbeats and maintain his remaining energy. There was too much difference in their energy. Leolja forced him into a battle of attrition the moment he entered level S and brought him to this disadvantageous position. He could rest now while Leolja was still searching for him but there was no guarantee when he would decide to change plans. There was only one possible way to win. Before he changes his plan of action, before he gets the time to show his true power to Senkyo; defeat Leolja right where he stands.

His goal never changed. The problem was that it wasn’t possible to make contact with him without taking down the spiderweb. Leolja made sure the holes in the web were small enough to not let any of Senkyo’s leaves pass. He couldn’t attack him from his current position. Though, he noticed something. To create the large spiderweb and have it active, Leolja needed it to be connected to the spider legs in his back. Tracing the spider webs to its source, he found that at the center of all of it was Leolja who was standing just beyond the edge of the funnel-shaped spiderweb. He continued flinging his spider strings all over the place through the wall of spider webs by severing the connection before they could make contact and reconnecting them again. Only for a moment, but the strings were cut. There lay his only chance.

His eyes watched as the spider strings traveled, carefully determining at which point most of the strings severed, all the while dodging the said strings. Placing himself directly above the center of the spiderweb, waited for his moment, the very millisecond the spiderweb was most vulnerable. He dropped. Without his katana, about half of his skillset was unusable, but that didn’t mean he was useless. He took out the twin bone daggers as he fell, foul memories of the weapons in his hands entering his mind. They appeared for just a second and vanished the moment after, his mind void of everything but the goal he needed to accomplish.

The ten spider strings that searched the room intersected as Leolja’s arms crossed, his body dropping as if weaving through the thin strings. Then, he created a solid foothold of spirit power just before he made contact with the ground, using a skill called Silent Blows to silence his landing, he waited for the moment most of the strings were severed, his eyes closed tight as he focused all of his senses on the thin, borderline invisible strings. Finally, he struck.

*“\*Perception Field. Unbreakable. Diffusion.\*”*

He lunged at the center of the spiderweb while activating a string of spirit skills, giving him more accurate information about his surroundings, reinforcing his body, and spreading kindled spirit power in the area. Having everything set, he activated another skill as the first dagger made contact with the spiderweb.

*“\*Mortal Forge, First Strike.\*”*

The area on the ground with his kindled spirit power formed a diamond inside a half-arc, creating the symbol for Spirit. The moment his dagger connected to the spiderweb, the area of kindled spirit power lit up, paralyzing Leolja’s body as he tried to respond to the contact on his web. Along with that, a powerful boom pierced Leolja’s ears as his web helplessly crumbled to whatever force destroyed it. Then, from the black smoke, a sharp blade pierced through his right shoulder. It was a blade made of bone with what seemed to be a spine connecting to the shroud of smoke, the second bone dagger Senkyo held. The dagger’s bolster made a sharp noise as the blade suddenly bent at a 90-degree angle, thrusting the handle of the dagger deeper into his shoulder, and strengthening its grip on Leolja’s body.

A sudden force pulled Leolja from his location toward the source of the hook-like dagger. Senkyo appeared from the black veil and knocked Leolja down to a platform made of spirit power with his other dagger held against his neck. Leolja was held down with his life in Senkyo’s hands. Since his body was off the cave’s floor, he was unable to use the spiderwebs he had in place to break out of his position. Above him was Senkyo letting out light breaths from his mouth as he asked.

“Are you dead, …haah, in this situation?”

To which Leolja let out a light chuckle before responding.

“Yes. If this were a real situation, I would be thoroughly dead. Well played, Senkyo.”

“…Haah, says the one who was holding back!”

“My, whatever could you mean?”

He responded sarcastically before reminding Senkyo.

“Though I am dead, this test is yet to be over until you return to the surface.”

“Heh, you don’t need to worry about that.”

**351 – Hidden Mark**

After taking a few minutes of rest, Shiro returned to Senkyo’s body and Senkyo picked up the training dummy to prepare to leave. His katana was back in its sheathe and one of his daggers out while his other hand supported the dummy’s hold on him. Finally, the black shroud slowly disappeared as the field circles he prepared ran out of mana, exposing Senkyo and the dummy to the dangers of level S once more. Leolja went off ahead of time to reach the surface before he did, so Senkyo was the only one in the area. Before any spiders could catch him, he vacated the area and headed for the exit of level S.

On the way down to level S, Senkyo placed down numerous patches of leaves this was to serve as waypoints to retrace his steps. Simply following those waypoints with spirit power led Senkyo to the shortest possible route to the exit of level S with the fewest amount of enemy encounters. When he made it to level A3, he was welcomed with a grand reception of numerous spiders, but Senkyo was fast enough to outrun them before they could trap him in place. Unlike earlier when he needed to take out his pursuers to avoid future trouble, he didn’t need to concern himself with them anymore since his only goal was to get out of the cave. Even if pursuers gather, so long as he made it to the surface, he was clear.

That being said, he didn’t forget about the enormous house of illusions placed at the center of level A3. He was able to break through it before because one of the magic arms was taken out, leaving a large hole in their defenses, but now that he was traveling back, there was no doubt all of the holes in that area were fixed, leaving Senkyo to fight against the full power of the house of illusions. It would be a better decision to find a different path around the hostile area, but that would only be true if Senkyo didn’t have anything prepared to fight against that.

He fought off the enemies in his path using the bone dagger and made it to the entrance of the house of illusions. Just before he entered, he took out a leaf with a circuit on it. With Spirit at its center, two symbols of Connection intersected at the center of the Spirit symbol with the far left and right sides of the circuit extended with a symbol for Interaction. Each Interaction symbol connected to a symbol for Connection with Spirit inside of it. At the center of the house of illusions were magic arms, cave trappers, bomb jockeys, and a pile of leaves with the same circuit as the one on Senkyo’s hand. The circuit on those leaves glowed up until it arrived at the Interaction symbol. The moment Senkyo placed spirit power into the leaf in his hand, those Interaction symbols lit up and activated the entire circuit.

The leaves rose from the ground creating a circle, each of the leaves connected to each other through spirit power. That circle of spirit power then extended to Senkyo’s location, creating a tunnel of pure barrier. When the tunnel soon came into sight, Senkyo threw the leaf behind him and rushed into the tunnel. The walls of spirit power converged into the leaf on the floor and blocked the entrance. With this, he created a solid tunnel of spirit power that could protect him from any attacks. The same reaction continued to every pile of leaves Senkyo left behind up until the exit of level A3. Since the barriers were created, there was no need for Senkyo to worry about illusions and losing his path. Though, there were hostiles that got trapped inside the tunnel as it formed. Senkyo may be at a disadvantage if he used only his dagger but there was an easier solution that existed.

“O Nature, Amass your power at my word. Create my weapons and impale my adversaries. Needle Storm!”

The air around Senkyo compressed and shot out lethal gusts of wind into the enemies that were blocking his path. Needle storm not only pierced the first enemy it hit but as well as the enemies behind it. The Iwaiida outside of the barrier tried their all to break through, but it was too powerful for them to penetrate. Senkyo arrived at the center of the house of illusions while using the same spell to clear his path. From here, the barrier entered a steep stretch upward, so Senkyo climbed it by creating air footholds with his every jump. He passed through level A3 without much trouble because of his tunnel.

After that, Senkyo dealt with every enemy smoothly. The main troublesome enemies on level A2 were magic arms, but compared to dealing with arachne sages and demonic spiders, as long as you knew what they were capable of, they weren’t much of a threat. Meanwhile, level A1 didn’t even have any spiders that could unite them against Senkyo, and frankly speaking, levels B and above weren’t even a threat to him.

**…………**

“Welcome back, Senkyo. There were a few difficulties but you have successfully returned to the surface with all of the requirements accomplished. Well done.”

Leolja greeted Senkyo as he arrived from the entrance of the artificial cave. After dropping the dummy and regaining his voice with a few sharp breaths, he responded.

“…A-Are you saying that, haah, I need to go through that again… Haah, two more times!?”

He asked with a wearied voice, clearly out of any form of energy he had before beginning his test. Unfortunately, the moment he left the cave and made it safely to the surface, he remembered that the requirement for gaining access level S was to repeat that whole process a total of three times in a row. If he was this drained for the first time, then how did he expect to successfully conquer the artificial cave two more times? Leolja’s next words made his dreary eyes brighten up for a second but made them twist into confusion in the end.

“Oh, of course not, at least for today that is.”

“…H-Huh? Wait, but didn’t you say I have to do this three times in a row?”

“Yes, you are not mistaken. Except, the idea we have in mind for the phrase ‘in a row’ is for the crawler to conquer the same test for three days straight. In the first place, it is impossible for me to replicate levels B to S without running out of mana for the day. Doing this three times in one day is simply unreasonable. Implying it as if the crawler has to accomplish the test three times in the same day is just a little mental test we put our crawlers through.”

“Wait… but how does this make any difference from taking the test for access level A3 three times in a row? Their destination is level S too, right?”

“That is correct. The difficulty you experienced just now was the test for access level A3. Though, I would advise you not to let your guard down. What makes the test for access level A3 and level S different is the fact that the succeeding two tests will have escalating difficulties. Meaning that the test tomorrow and the test after that will be much harder than the previous one. This should serve as an answer for my below-average performance.”

*\*Says the one that was holding back!\**

His previous accusation came to mind. It was clear from the fight that Leolja wasn’t trying desperately to kill Senkyo just like how the other spiders in the cave were. In the end, instead of actively attacking Senkyo, he opted to hold a defensive line where his position could easily be compromised. Apparently, this was the treatment Leolja would give to crawlers aiming to obtain access level A3. The difficulty of achieving access level S could only be truly felt on the second and third time a crawler took the test. Just as Senkyo’s eyes were about to darken, Leolja went for a follow-up to counter this.

“Though, I must say, your fighting style truly was a surprise. Even though I was holding back, I had a hard time keeping up with you. I’ve never even seen over half of the feats you performed. Is this related to your race’s natural power?”

“O-Oh, yeah, something like that…”

Leolja must have been talking about how the bodies of different races can change the output of magic. Senkyo learned this from the Konjou Clan, before even getting sent to Zerid, so he knew it was better to nod along to not arouse suspicion. Then again, showing off how he used spirit power was suspicious enough in his book, so even this attempt may be useless.

“As expected, you truly are fearsome.”

“Hm? Where did that come from?”

Confused at Leolja’s strange choice of words, Senkyo couldn’t help but ask.

“The moment I laid my eyes on you, I knew instinctively just how powerful you are. To be honest, so much so that I couldn’t help but stutter. That power you hold… I wonder just how well you can use it?”

“…”

“Fufu… Well then, I will be on my way. Senkyo, let us meet again at this spot tomorrow at noon. We will resume the test by then.”

Just like that, Leolja turned his back without waiting for Senkyo’s response. There was no change in expression, nor in tone, nor in demeanor. It was the usual Leolja he always knew. Yet, right before he bid his farewells, Senkyo couldn’t help but feel that there was a deeper meaning to those words he let go.

**…………**

In a dark secluded area where the natural light never touches, a single figure tinkered with advanced aporocological tools, bouncing clings and clangs with a few cranks all over the walls as he worked on a certain device. Buried deep under the sounds of his engineering, the faint sound of footfalls could be heard coming from beyond the room. The man noticed this but didn’t bother checking. From the sanguine corridor lit by gejikr stones entered a familiar face to the man.

“Hard at work as always. When do you plan on having the decency to at least turn the lights on?”

The man who just arrive said mockingly to the tinkering man. His figure shadowed by the dark room and his contours illuminated by the blood-red light couldn’t have been anything more than frightening. Not to mention the fact that eight spider legs protruded from the man’s back. A normal human from Earth would lose their mind if they saw this sight presented to them at the end of a dark street at night. Placing his hand on a rectangular panel, he powered it with lightning magic, turning on the electronic lights in the room.

“Ugh, how many times do I have to tell you that I don’t have the time to lose focus. If you want to be my mother and take care of my room then do it. Just don’t bother me.”

“How shameless. A little word of appreciation would have been great. Well, at the very least you took the time to respond to me.”

“That’s because you have something for me, right? What do you have, Leolja?”

The face of the sole riser of Iqanlr’s sunken nest was illuminated under the clear light.

**352 – The Backhanded Gentleman**

“3 items.”

Leolja said as he opened a cloth bag and walked up to the man’s workbench. When he arrived at the man’s side, he finally decided to halt his work and directed his attention to Leolja. His red eyes glanced at Leolja’s face for only a moment before dedicating his gaze to the contents of the bag.

“I think you’ll be overjoyed with today’s haul. A bag of hair samples, a vial full of sweat, and finally—”

He placed the items he named on the workbench one by one. The man watched with a blank face as they entered his vision. Non-changing and unimpressed. Then, the last item was revealed.

“—half a vial of blood.”

“!!!”

The man couldn’t help but shove his face at the item, scrutinizing the liquid inside the vial with his similarly colored iris.

“Heh… hehehe… Hahahaha!! Good work, Leola! Nicely done!!”

Much unlike his cold treatment of Leolja earlier, the man cackled in joy and patted his shoulder as if he was his best friend.

“Ahhh, I was worried I wasn’t going to make it in time, but with this, I’ll have it done before midnight!”

“Was the previous item insufficient?”

“You got that right. Just look at it.”

The man opened a drawer and threw the item he took from it onto the workbench. It was a school uniform that was a bit scorched. Anyone who would see such an item would immediately think of an unfortunate student and relate it in some way to fire. The most common would be a fire accident perhaps on school premises or in the student’s home, but this one in particular wasn’t scorched by such mundane means.

When Leolja first handed over the school uniform after buying it from the owner, he immediately gave it to the man in front of him. It still looked like what any old scorched school uniform would look like, but now, it was completely different. The magic-less uniform now had patches of black all over the cloth. It wasn’t anything as simple as ink or black cloth. It shimmered unstably with a blue sheen much unlike anything the natural world would produce.

“The connection was rejected. The DNA sample was too inorganic to be turned into a medium. I liked your quick thinking and going after the clothes they wore, but the fact that the DNA was stuck on clothes meant that it couldn’t properly be treated as a catalyst. The same went for the other clothes they wore, so being old or new didn’t have anything to do with it. It’s unfortunate, but now that you brought me, not just his DNA, but his blood directly! Then you and I have nothing to fear. Though, how did you get these anyway?”

“From a little test. He wanted to become a crawler with access level S, so it gave me many opportunities to collect these items. But I must say, the blood was a bit troublesome to collect. I had to hide my strings in illusions he rushed past through and position them correctly so that they wouldn’t leave any wounds that were too noticeable. Originally, I only aimed to obtain a drop or two, but when I realized his wounds regenerated almost instantly, I took that as an opportunity to collect as much blood as possible. Right now, he should be walking outside without any marks. He didn’t even have any idea any of his blood was drawn.”

“Wow… he’s insane. Isn’t he a bit too careless? He took on a crawler’s test in this situation and didn’t even realize that his instructor was stealing blood right under his nose. No, before that, doesn’t he know that identification cards are necessary for crawlers to have? It takes the owner’s blood to make those so there would be no way for him to become a crawler without releasing his blood.”

“It’s as you say. It seemed like he was unaware of that fact so I kept quiet about it.”

“That’s very like you. So, what other things did you find out about him? You fought him right? Or maybe he didn’t even make it to level S?”

“Oh, I fought him. Just like my senses feared, he is a force to be reckoned with. Except…”

Leolja’s head slackened and placed it on his knuckles, getting absorbed in his thoughts.

“What? Spit it out.”

“No, it’s just that, he’s strong, but not as powerful as the image I had of him from your stories. A man that can use both mana and spirit power. I still held back on our fight like I was supposed to, but to be honest, I was expecting more from him. Perhaps some kind of power that could overwhelm me completely—”

“Wait, wait, wait!! He FOUGHT you!? As in no holds barred, full-power, magic and spirit power kind of fighting??”

“That’s correct.”

He said flatly, making the man ask rhetorically.

“Doesn’t this guy trust you a bit too much?”

“Perhaps. I do believe he showed me his whole hand casting magic, using spirit power, and applying them to symbols and circuits. Now that I fought him like that, I’m thankful you gave me the time to teach me all about the applications of spirit power. I never thought I would be able to use them, but it undoubtedly helped me follow up on his movements.”

“Well, it's no wonder. If you tested him for access level S, then that also meant fighting through all of your illusions. There’s only a limited amount of applications of spirit power that can affect illusions. So in the end, to make the experience more realistic, it's your job to make your illusions react the way his spirit skills are supposed to affect them. Did you make any misses on that part?”

“Surprisingly, it wasn’t a spirit skill that caught me off guard. It was a spell that summoned a black shroud that disrupted my control and communication over my illusions. What truly confused me was the fact it was a mid-tier spell despite its damaging effects.”

“Ah… then that had to have been a Spirit Spell. It’s a special term we use to address spells that use spirit power to compress chanting time and, if done well, apply other spells to it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Hmm, let’s say that we have a normal mid-tier spell that can make a certain effect happen and describe this effect as ‘explosive.’ Going through the method of creating spells, spirit power can be used, or specifically, symbols, to craft a spell that incorporates other spells into the new spell. This new spell is called a Spirit Spell. It uses the caster’s spirit power along with mana. This certain spirit spell has the power to produce the effects of the earlier spell we talked about in addition to other effects.”

“That’s absurd! If that’s true then…”

Right as Leolja’s words trailed off, perhaps out of the refusal to accept reality, the man mercilessly brought reality to his face.

“—It would be like casting two spells at the same time? That’s right. It creates a symbol out of the words in a chant to address the activation of another spell. Just like what I said earlier, the normal spell could be described as ‘explosive.’ A word or phrase inside of the spirit spell’s chant will be used to embody this spell, activating it along with the activation of the spirit spell. Alternatively, it can also be used in a single spell. Let’s say you have a high-tier spell and its requirements and grammar can be manipulated. You can turn that spell into a spirit spell by shortening phrases into words, making it seem like a mid-tier spell.”

“…”

Leolja could only stare at the man with a nonplussed expression on his face, unable to properly process such an unbelievable effect. Taking responsibility for accidentally sealing Leolja’s mouth, the man changed the subject.

“Enough of that. Overall, what’s your opinion of him?”

Leolja’s head lifted to the ceiling, reviewing his memories and comprehending them. About a minute of undisturbed silence passed before he arrived at a conclusion.

“Jack of all trades, master of none. That is what that man is. His techniques are too few and sloppy to become a real threat to me, or at the very least, compared to your works, his techniques are subpar, especially for someone that can naturally use magic and spirit power. Then again, his skill set is so versatile that I have no idea what that man has planned next. I was holding back on our fight earlier, but right when he defeated me, it was no doubt a complete loss. I wasn’t able to do anything against his sudden attack. If the same event happens while I was serious, the result would be the same. That being said, now that I know what he is capable of, I do not think he has enough power to defeat me on the third day of his crawler test.”

“Hmm… is that so?”

The man swept his hand over the workbench and picked up the vial half-filled with blood. He brought the item right up to his eye, just like how he did earlier.

“As he is, maybe. But I wonder if you would be able to say the same when that third day comes.”

“Surely you jest. Do you think he would be able to improve that much? He has just about two days left. It’s impossible.”

“We have no way of knowing. Even I don’t.”

“Then were you just bluffing with what you said to me?”

“Well… I don’t know if he’ll pass his test or not. But if you think about how the test is supposed to replicate a real life-or-death battle, then what I can say for certain, is that you won’t be able to kill him.”

Leolja raised his brows in doubt, yet he couldn’t help but pry his words open.

“What makes you say so?”

“That’s because that man…”

A change happened inside the blood vial he stared at for so long. A flicker of blue, black, and purple, those very same colors reflecting on his sanguine eyes. Something that would not appear in anyone’s natural bloodstream.

“…has already made contact with the power of a god.”

“…”

Again, he fell silent, trying to figure out the meaning of the man’s words.

“Well, just be cautious is all I’m telling you to do. Don’t get caught now! The more of his blood that we have the better!”

**353 – The Strategist’s Struggle**

The time reached dusk when Senkyo and Shiro finally finished the first part of the crawler’s test and left Haeqras. A long day of fighting exhausted Senkyo in both mind and body, so they made a beeline for the food district and filled their stomachs to the brim. They ate their main dishes in a single shop and proceeded to eat more after that by making rounds and buying food-to-go around the district as if it were a festival.

At the end of their food binge, there should have been nothing better than to go back to their penthouse hotel, immerse their body in a relaxing bath, and stow away into the land of dreams. However, there was one thing that stood in the way of this luxurious vision. No matter what he did, Senkyo couldn’t get the words Leolja said to him out of his head.

*“\*That power you hold… I wonder just how well you can use it?\*”*

He couldn’t help but feel like it meant something. Beneath Leolja’s polite smile and demeanor was a tone that seemed to challenge him. What bugged him the most was how close the fight was despite it being the easiest of the three runs he had to do to obtain access level S. He held back before reaching level A3, but that didn’t mean he would be able to beat Leolja on the second run. He already did all he could to defeat him earlier; fighting him tomorrow as he is was a death wish. There were options for honing his technique and preparing ready-made talismans, but there was only so much those could do in a short period of time. He didn’t even have a day before the next fight. If he wanted a faster way to secure his strength, then there was only one thing he could think of.

“Just as I thought, nothing beats the library.”

Senkyo said as he browsed through the bookshelves of Xhiari’s great library. The books he currently had in hand were spellbooks of the elements of water, nature, earth, frost, lightning, light, dark, and finally, the last book he was about to grab from the shelves, control. From the books of these eight elements, he was set on finding useful spells that he could use in tomorrow’s test. He didn’t pick these specific elements at random. Senkyo chose these spellbooks because of the guidebook he was given earlier in the test. It was confiscated after the test, but he remembered that there was a portion that suggested useful spells that crawlers often used to deal with the enemies in the sunken nest. Most of those spells were under the selected eight elements he had in hand.

In addition to these spellbooks, Shiro made a suggestion to pick up a book about the sunken nest of Iqanlr. Although he already had the spellbooks and knew which spells were suggested by Haeqras, there was still a big difference between technical knowledge and knowledge gained from experience. In general, Haeqras would have detailed information about the sunken nests they were assigned to, which Senkyo didn’t have access to since he wasn’t a crawler yet. But, that didn’t stop other crawlers or clients that entered the sunken nest to write their experiences down in books and share them with the world. By inspecting those books as well, then there was a chance for him to find unpopular strategies or come up with ideas for his future actions based on what was written in the books. He decided to take up Shiro’s idea but picked only one book to use as a reference. His books were already on the verge of hitting the double digits. It would be another problem if he didn’t find the information he needed because he overloaded himself with too many books, so he placed a limit of nine books on himself.

Senkyo and Shiro occupied an open table and began their search for knowledge. He knew only about 20 spells to use in battle. It may seem a lot for the average earthling, but a measly 20 spells wouldn’t be able to survive in the depths of Iqanlr’s sunken nest. Senkyo only compensated for his lack of power by using his versatility of magic and spirit skills. Others may value the strength of a single powerful technique or spell greater than the strength of numerous spells or techniques with average power, just like Ryosei, but Senkyo was different. For him, to become strong is to have many weapons in his arsenal. Unlike other people, learning a single spell doesn’t just give him one more spell to use in battle, but it also gave him the option to apply that new spell to his spirit techniques, just like how he did when he activated the field circles that released a prolonged shroud of black clouds. His strength lay in strategy, not power. The more knowledge he applies to his strategies, the stronger he will be to overcome the power of his enemies.

For the first three hours of reading, Shiro read through the spellbooks of water, nature, and control while Senkyo was reading all of the others. When Shiro finished reading her third book, she then stood up and notified Senkyo that she wanted to find a certain book. There were no dangers inside the library, so he let her roam free just like before.

The hours passed and they spent their time in the library until they reached deep into the night. Senkyo had two stacks of books around him. Six books to his left, two books to his right, one additional book to his side he used for reference, and a stack of papers and a pen the library let him have. In the past few hours, he successfully finished skimming and scanning through six spellbooks and listed down promising articles he found, all the while using the book about Iqanlr’s sunken nest to check which spells could be useful and can be integrated into his strategies. The two that remained on his left were the spellbooks for nature and control and the one he just finished was the spellbook for the water element. He left these three spellbooks for last so that just in case he couldn’t finish everything in one night, Shiro would have already read the three books which could compensate for Senkyo’s lack of knowledge.

He took his arm out to pick up the spellbook for nature. Then, the moment he was about to place his fingers on it, a loud bang came from in front of him as a stack of books was carelessly placed on the table. His head flicked instinctively and his eyes landed on a familiar individual.

“Yo. You’re that person who stopped my Ruerg’s malfunction, aren’t you?”

“Ah, you’re…”

It was the dragon man he watched yesterday on Xhiari’s training grounds. It seemed like he also recognized Senkyo. Well, seeing as he was the one that silenced a high-tier spell with a mid-tier spell that no one has ever heard of, it was only natural his impression on them would be huge. The distance didn’t matter; Senkyo’s image was engraved into the dragon man’s retinas.

“How about introducing yourself first?”

Behind him was the woman the dragon man fought against. Senkyo’s impression of her was a calm and collected type, but now that he got a good look at her face, she may have just been too tired to make any big reactions. His reason for thinking this was the bags under her lethargic red eyes.

“Ah, my bad, my bad. I’m Vleid of the Aagri, and this is Raeri, a Sorun. Now, we just have a few questions to ask you.”

Senkyo’s eye twitched in annoyance, seeing exactly where the flow of this conversation was about to go.

“What did you do back there!?”

An internal groan echoed in his head as those very words left Vleid’s mouth.

**354 – Their Proposal**

“Oww!”

“No shouting in the library.”

Surprisingly, Senkyo’s internal wish for the dragon man called Vleid to shut up was quickly fulfilled by his companion, Raeri. Perhaps because she was wary of their location, but the tired look on her face as she pulled the chair next to Vleid to sit down indirectly told him she just couldn’t be bothered with the dragon man’s excessive energy.

“You two are close, huh?”

“Ha? As if!”

“Mm.”

Vleid denied his claim while Raeri only shrugged her shoulders in apathy. Yesterday, his impression of them was that of two fierce rivals or at the very least a pair that wanted to crush the other opponent with all their might. Contrary to that, seeing and interacting with them in person gave him the impression of long-lived friends.

“Anyway—K-Kgh… Anyway… what kind of magic did you use to stop my Ruerg’s malfunction? Y’know, the AW-Unit Frame I was using.”

With a swift and effective kick from Raeri under the table, Vleid was forced to keep his voice down and interrogate Senkyo with a hushed tone. From the dragon man’s words, it seemed like the exoskeletons attached to their suits were called AW-Unit Frames. The suits themselves are the main AW-Unit while the exoskeletons are like extensions or frames. Senkyo had no intention of revealing the magic he used on Vleid’s machine, but the talk about AW-Units did interest him.

“That… Hmmm, sorry. The magic I know is not for sale.”

“What—Tch…!”

“Be nice.”

“Whatever.”

A click of the tongue in response to another one of Raeri’s silent discipline. If Senkyo didn’t know any better he would have thought he was dealing with a dog and his owner. Vleid returns his focus to Senkyo and continues.

“Okay, at the very least, tell us where you learned that magic.”

“I don’t know.”

“Huh? What do you mean you don’t know?”

“I mean what I said; I don’t know. Look, I’m just trying to learn some spells. If you’re going to continue bothering me, I’ll go to a different table.”

“C-Come on, just wait. Do you even have any idea what you did yesterday? You silenced rampaging high-tier magic with a mid-tier spell! ‘The magic with the superior mana cannot lose to those inferior to it’—It’s something that shakes the very concept of magic down entirely to its roots! It’d be one thing if you used an element to counter fire magic and if the magic didn’t target the high-tier magic but what your mid-tier did was exactly just that! From our perspective, you used a null element against the fire element, went against a high-tier spell head-on with a mid-tier spell, and won—Argh…!”

When Vleid’s voice began to pick up with his passionate speech, Raeri didn’t forget to take the reigns and keep his discipline in check. Though, this time he was quick to recover from her attack.

“A-Anyway, what I’m trying to say is that I want you to help us learn more about what you did. There are countless things that people don’t know yet. Those who believe they know everything are fools. It's our job as researchers to discover exactly what it is we don’t know and understand them. What you did back there—could be the very key to something that can change the lives of countless people for the better. What you did can change the three worlds for the better…! *\*Glance…\**”

Just as he realized his voice was about to pick up again, Vleid immediately subdued his volume to a whisper. His quick thinking saved him another round of one-sided beating from the woman beside him. His routine skit with Raeri aside, what he said was very interesting to him, enough to keep him silent in thought for a bit. He spoke of the concept of magic and how his creation magic seemed to break that.

Contrary to his rough attitude, he was actually earnest about the subject and conscious of his position as a researcher. Looking at the books they brought with them which consisted mostly of apocrology, and taking in the fact that they are Hira’s classmates, students of class R2-S, which was claimed by Hira to be the most talented class in their year, then they were most likely capable people despite what their demeanor might suggest. Not to mention the very two people in front of him were the same two people that engaged in the anime-like mecha battle that instantly cast magic as if they were Angels and applied them to machines they built with their own two hands. Now that he thought more of them than just annoyances to his studies, the fact that he was actually talking to amazing people slowly sank into his mind. Was Hira the same? He didn’t know because he hadn’t seen what she was capable of in action yet.

Reviewing Vleid’s little speech, what he was offering could undoubtedly benefit him. He didn’t know about what he was capable of either, so having people who know what to look for and how to teach him more about what he could do was extremely useful. Except, with pros also come with cons.

“You say that it can make change for the better but conversely, doesn’t it mean it also has the power to make change for the worse? How can you be so eager to learn about what I can do if you know it can also bring suffering?”

“T-That’s…”

Senkyo struck Vleid’s argument at the very heart of its weak points. He tried to convince him by only directing his attention to the positives and ignoring the negatives, but Senkyo didn’t miss that. Vleid was essentially speaking of the advancement of magic. If there was ever a world where the average person would be able to use creation magic, there was indeed a possibility to make a great change. However, the word “advance” carried more weight than what the normal person would think. Scientific advancement gave access to efficient resource production, improved daily lives, and solved numerous health issues, causing the advancement of the human race, or Earth, in terms of the three worlds.

The sad part was that advancement didn’t only mean an increase in positive outcomes but as well as negative ones such as allowing new ways for violence, cruelty, and suffering to occur. Wars are a simple way to summarize the point. The question was, what type of war would occur if Zerid ever advanced more than it already has? Due to the conflict of the past generation of ambassadors, Zerid has become the most advanced world over Earth and the Spirit Realm which both experienced a devolution. If Senkyo’s powers send this world a level higher than what it currently is, it could be very likely to spark a new conflict. While there may be people who would never dare break the peace of the three worlds, there were also those who seek the absolute opposite, the primary example being, END.

“I’m sorry but…”

It was decided. The cons much outweighed the pros. There was no justifiable reason for Senkyo to risk sparking conflict between parallel worlds just because he wanted to become a little bit stronger than he is now. He wanted to know what he was and what he was capable of, but at the end of the day, the reason he chose this path in his life was so that it could give more meaning to it. What person would want a life that was plagued with eternal conflict and unceasing suffering? That wasn’t what Senkyo wanted.

“Umm, can I say something?”

Raeri spoke with a listless tone. Perhaps because the situation was going south, she finally decided to raise her voice, though it didn’t sound like she cared much. Vleid shot his gaze in her direction and pointed it to the ground in dejection. It seemed like he wanted to convince Senkyo all on his own without relying on Raeri. She didn’t give him even a glance but she did pat his back. It took all of Senkyo’s power to hold back a retort about Raeri and Vleid’s strange master-and-dog-like relationship.

“It looks to me like you don’t know much about what you did and actually want to know more about it. The problem is that you distrust those around you too much to be able to rely on them with your power.”

Senkyo didn’t know if it was mind-reading or just her ability to read people, but Raeri hit his main concerns with a bullseye.

“Then, how about we compromise? How does powering up without us doing anything for you sound like?”

**355 – True Motive**

“…And what’s in it for you?”

A way to become stronger without any risks. As much as he wanted to accept those tantalizing words at face value, there was always some kind of string attached to these shady deals. Senkyo just couldn’t find a reason for Raeri and Vleid to help him without anything in it for them. In the first place, the two approached him and immediately tried to extract the information about his magic from him. Throwing away their purpose completely only increased his suspicions of them.

Despite this, Raeri stuck to her words.

“Nothing? I thought it was obvious… Well, you probably doubt us so that’s fine. The best case scenario for us is to have you share with us your magic so that we can use it in our research, or maybe even switch our research topics entirely. That being said, you don’t want to share your magic because you don’t trust anyone else with it. I’ve seen it before with other races, so I don’t care what reason you have. The fact is that you don’t want to share it with anybody. We can’t convince you to share with us. Then here’s an idea: how about we give you what you want and wait for something to happen?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“…”

Vleid didn’t seem to get it much but Senkyo could guess what she was trying to go for. Her lethargic expression unchanging, she finally removed her gaze from the book she was reading and properly faced Senkyo. For a split second, there was a faint hit of emotion in her eyes as she matched Senkyo’s stare.

“In short, the answer is the AW-Units. You clearly don’t have access to them, but like anyone, you can become much more powerful with them. From the looks of it, you’ve been researching a lot about spells.”

Raeri said as she pointed to Senkyo’s books.

“There are a lot of spells in this world. The spells written on those books you have are but a fraction of the collective of existing spells. Do you really have the confidence to embed every single one in your head? Not to mention, use them all effectively in battle without them hindering you? Let’s say that you did manage to remember every spell in those books. How confident are you that you can choose a single spell in those books that is the best for a single situation? Not only do you have to think and recall the effects of all those spells but also recite their specific chants. Frankly, it's inefficient. But, with AW-Units, it can reduce that burden significantly. You only have to think of the spell to activate it. No chants and immediate casting. Every single spell you have can be integrated into these suits and have them activated at your leisure—The same goes for that unique magic that you showed us.”

“Oohhh!”

Vleid shot his head back in understanding, finally realizing what Raeri was trying to convey.

“So basically, you want to give me power and you two will act like vultures, waiting for the moment I slip and reveal something about my magic.”

“Mhm, pretty much.”

“Hey! Don’t tell him that!”

“I don’t want to hear it. The reason you couldn’t convince him was that you couldn’t compromise. If you want to say something show me some results.”

“U-Ugh…”

Every single time. Whenever the frail-looking woman in front of Senkyo does something to keep the large, intimidating dragon man under her thumb, it sends chills down his spine. It was clear from the start that he shouldn’t get involved with these types of people but Senkyo couldn’t help but admit that what they did have was an enticing offer.

To summarize her point, she was willing to offer Senkyo lessons to learn about AW-Units and how to use them. He had the choice of applying his unique spells on it if he liked, but that would run the risk of revealing it. Though it may sound bad, the most important point here was the fact that it was nothing more than a choice. If Senkyo simply chose to never apply creation magic to his AW-Units, then his primary worries would cease to exist. So long as he kept his knowledge about creation magic away from making contact with the world, then theoretically, there was no possible way for him to slip up. So long as her words had no other purposes than that, then there were no risks only rewards.

In other words, a careless challenge. Again, the story was too good to be true. Would someone of her status really offer him something like this? He couldn’t help but doubt her motives. He began thinking. Perhaps their motive wasn’t to get anything out of Senkyo at all, but it was true that they wanted to convince him to do something. What was it? There was just too much Senkyo didn’t know.

“I will keep your offer in mind and get back to you once I make a decision. For now, I will take my leave and retire for the day.”

His danger senses blared louder than ever. It was too incoherent. Their actions and motives didn’t align. In times like this, there was always one safe action to take out of everything currently offered to him. A tactical retreat.

“Then, excuse—”

“Oh my, what a coincidence it is to find you here, Sir Yukou.”

His hair stood on end and chills ran down his spine once more, making him instinctively use flash strike to leave the area he was in. Looking back, he found Professor Gaeka with his hand suspended in the air, perhaps because it was about to pat his shoulder. Naturally, using flash strike in a quiet library caused quite a commotion. It wasn’t only sound but as well as the wind pressure that sent the countless numbers of paper in the area to a flutter. With the whole library’s attention directed to them, Senkyo responded.

“A-Ah, why if it isn’t Professor Gaeka. Y-You surprised me so much it made me jump… Sorry, did you have any business with me today?”

Senkyo continued to put on airs, maintaining his polite words as he conversed with Gaeka, all the while looking for any possible exits in the area. His eyes darted around in a panic. He tried to control them despite this, but it seemed like Gaeka wasn’t letting him off easy.

“You seem to be in a hurry. Are you busy at this time? Actually, I wanted to follow up on our previous agreement. I secured a suitable room to perform the required blood extraction. So, if you could please cooperate with us, we would appreciate nothing more.”

“‘Us?’—Wha, HEY!!”

From out of nowhere, the surrounding individuals got out of their seats and grabbed hold of Senkyo’s body, holding it down and preventing his escape. Were they spies Gaeka planted this whole time? No, he didn’t have time to think of useless things in his situation. What mattered the most now was escape.

*“\*Flash Strike: Breath of the Wind!\*”*

Whatever was happening right now there was no doubt it was all planned. Taking that into account, Senkyo dropped the idea of using magic entirely and solely relied on spirit skills. For everyone in this world, magic was the norm, and spirit power was non-existent. If they prepared anything at all to stop Senkyo, it wouldn’t affect his spirit power… or at least that was what he hoped.

Senkyo activated his spirit skill just like always, but in this instance, it refused to work. There, a twisted smile appeared on Gaeka’s face.

“Didn’t I tell you? I made my own preparations.”

It was right after he said that did the people holding him down locked him to the floor.

“O Fire, protect me with your flare—Gah!!”

This time, he tried to chant a spell, but his head was kicked into the ground and stopped his words from forming magic.

“Haha, hahaha!!”

With his cheek pressed to the floor, he could see Gaeka leisurely walking toward him with an arrogant face. No magic and no spirit power. Just as he feared, when stripped of his fangs, there was nothing left for Senkyo to defend himself. Even if Ryosei was present, he wouldn’t compensate for the sheer difference of strength between Senkyo’s body and everyone that was holding him down. If it was Ryosei’s original body, there were still options available for him, but at the end of the day, Senkyo wasn’t that kind of person. It was unreasonable for someone to expect his body to reach what Ryosei’s living body attained in the past. Just as Senkyo was gritting his teeth, desperate for other options, something strange popped out of the gaps in the floorboards.

It was something like a small brown vegetable-like faceless cartoon character that you would find in television shows. It was about the size of the tip of his finger, waving at him with its little stubby arms as it got out of the floor with its little stubby legs.

“…Eh…?”

At that moment, the small brown creature expanded, knocking everyone away from Senkyo. At first, he thought he was saved, but taking a closer look at how the creature expanded, its brown skin surrounded his whole body. The next thing he knew, he was eaten.

Silence returned to the library as the brown creature ate Senkyo and escaped through the floorboards. There was only one person that reacted to this, his face brightening from pure rage, his body shaking as if having trouble keeping his rampage in check. In the end, he let his frustration out with a single loud scream, cursing the one person that had the ability to disrupt him.

“ADEIRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!!!”

**356 – Movements in the Shadows**

“My, my, what trouble this is…”

A single man muttered to himself as he stared at the person in front of him. Lying on the ground with his face down to the floor was Senkyo. Adeira scratched the back of his neck awkwardly as he was reminded of the event that just occurred.

“This throws me off my plans…”

“U-Ughhh…”

“Ah, you’re awake, Sir Yukou.”

Senkyo’s pained groans echoed through the room, alerting Adeira of his consciousness. Slowly, he pushed the ground and fixed his body up. Looking around the room, he seemed to be in some kind of personal office but it was hard to tell what anything was with his dizzy head and the dim surroundings. The only source of light in the room was the moonlight that pierced the window, outlining the contours of a person he met just yesterday. One of the most valued individuals in the Apocrologic Academy of Xhiari, Adeira.

“S-Sir Adeira?”

Senkyo stuttered as he tried to confirm the identity of the person in front of him. With a quick nod, the man responded.

“That’s right. You were in a difficult situation back there. You have to be careful next time.”

“Be careful…? No, wait, first of all, what’s happening and why are you here?”

“Hmm, I suppose a quick lecture is in order. It would be best if you at least became aware of the situation, for the both of us.”

“What do you mean?”

Senkyo shot Adeira a dubious look, but seeing as he was the one that saved him from being cornered by Gaeka earlier, he at least owed him enough to lend him an ear, suspicious as he may seem.

“Right now, an internal strife is happening within Iqanlr’s walls. Countless disagreements, political conflicts, sudden violent outbursts. They may not be visible to the public eye, but they are indeed happening. These conflicts are similar to what you experienced earlier in the library.”

“Internal conflicts? Why? Is the government in Iqanlr that bad?”

“No, usually they’re united and organized, showing great management in this city. The problem is Professor Gaeka.”

“Oh, him…”

Honestly, Senkyo wasn’t too surprised by that revelation. He saw Gaeka as an enemy in the first place. Him causing trouble was only natural for Senkyo. The problem was how he created these problems, which Adeira explains.

“His arrival to Iqanlr was strange at best. It wasn’t like Xhiari was needing of any specialists and the official statement for his coming to Xhiari was to find solutions about the rampaging monster that appeared in the capital of Uikakrn. But this is the border city of Iqanlr, one of the farthest locations from the capital in the territory. It made no sense to send a researcher this far away from the origin of the incident. Yet, almost no one seemed to question it. As for those who initially did, they eventually stopped questioning this too, almost as if their minds stopped perceiving this as a problem. The only ones that aren’t affected by this in the institution are me and a few of my companions. After our quick reconnaissance, we found that these strange behaviors are centered around the people in Xhiari, Iqanlr’s military, and the current government. We consider it some form of mind control, but we are yet to confirm what exactly this is. As for the cause of these strange behaviors,… well, the fact that almost every single one of those affected by this was treating Professor Gaeka like a king was a dead giveaway that he was involved in this situation. Eventually, after all of us digging around, we found out that Professor Gaeka’s objective was one thing—You.”

Adeira pointed at Senkyo with his sharp gaze piercing through his body. He already knew this, so for now, he decided to stay silent and returned with a serious gaze of his own.

“The actions taken by Professor Gaeka’s pawns were usually focused on making a mess of the government in Iqanlr. At first, we thought he wanted to take Iqanlr down from the inside, but those attempts suddenly stopped yesterday. When we reviewed the positions of his pawns, we found that they were all centered around the entrance of Iqanlr. With the help of our professional trackers, he quickly grasped the situation that Professor Gaeka’s forces pulled back and poured them all on observing the man named Yukou Senkyo. We had no idea why he had such an obsession with you, but after what I saw yesterday, it was clear.”

He was referring to when Senkyo used creation magic to silence the Vleid’s AW-Unit Frame’s malfunction. It was one thing if he made a mistake and let his power slip, but Senkyo didn’t even know anything about his power at the time. In other words, the headache he was experiencing now was because of some work of nature that made him reveal his affinity for creation magic for some reason.

“From what I understand, the professor wants a sample of your blood, correct?”

“Yes. Before you say anything else, I have no intention of revealing why.”

“That’s fine. What’s important is to keep Professor Gaeka from reaching his objectives. Sir Yukou, from now on—”

“Eh!? Is this where Onii-chan is!? This is the room, isn’t it! Heyy, Ranaaat, help meeee~!!”

Adeira’s words were abruptly cut off by a loud series of banging on the door and a familiar voice that Senkyo knew all too well.

“Calm down, Miss Shiro, the door is just locked. Please, wait for Sir Adeira to open the door.”

“Wha, b-but…! Onii-chan is…!”

“Please wait.”

“B—”

“Please wait.”

“Yes…”

Senkyo couldn’t help but overhear a ridiculous conversation from beyond the door behind him. It was no doubt Shiro, which he forgot about in the heat of the moment, as painful as it was to admit. Though, it did sound like she made another friend, well, at the very least someone who can keep her under control.

“What terrible timing…”

Adeira said with an exasperated sigh as he walked up to the door and unlocked it.

*\*BANG!\**

“Ah…! Onii-chan!!”

“Whoa!”

The door immediately flung open, smacking Adeia in the face as Shiro shot through the room and leaped in his arms. He was happy to be reunited with his little sister, but he couldn’t help but feel bad about Adeira. He could only let out a wry smile as he saw Adeira’s vacant eyes.

“Thank you for your hard work.”

“Mnn… Likewise…”

From beyond the door, another person came in and gave Adeira a greeting along with a polite bow. She was a harpy with short brunette hair and glasses wearing a familiar fur cloak and brown shorts. She was the librarian that he engaged with on their first visit to the library.

“Thank you for your hard work.”

“A-Ah, yeah, good work out there…”

She turned to Senkyo and gave him the same formal bow and greeting. He didn’t know what was happening but he did appreciate that she brought Shiro back to him. After fixing himself and rebuilding his composure, Adeira locked the door and returned to the front.

**357 – The Third Party**

“This is Miss Ranat. She is… a third party you could say. I didn’t expect her at all but she was the one who first reported suspicious movements in the library to me. Namely, right around when Professor Gaeka’s pawns were gathering around you. Thanks to her, I was able to summon my familiar and got you out of that hairy situation.”

“Oh, so that little chibi doll was your familiar?”

“…Chibi doll, huh…? Well, I suppose that’s also a way to describe him. Anyway, I only cooperated with her to save you from Professor Gaeka, so I don’t know her motives either. Our partnership ends along with this meeting tonight, so if you want to ask her questions you can do that yourself. I realize that I’m a bit pushy but as of the moment, my hostility toward Professor Gaeka was revealed and now I’m on the run from his pawns. I have my ways for situations like this but there’s no doubt this will become a headache.”

“That reminds me, Hira-san said that you were the one that pioneered teleportation technology. Is it possible for you to let us borrow something that can help us for the time being?”

“You don’t hold back on your words do you, Sir Yukou? I believe you already owe me a good debt but you wish for more… I can’t say I’m impressed.”

Although Adeira’s words caused him to feel a pang of guilt, he was also convinced that this needed to be done.

“Your opinions aside, I think this is beneficial for both of us. You would reduce my chances of getting caught and I would have increased chances of escaping. Of course, if you want me to repay my debts then that’s fine, but I won’t be able to do anything if I’m caught.”

“Haah…”

Adeira let out a tired sigh, his reluctance showing clearly in his expression.

“I will hand over one of my tools. I can understand if you think it is barely anything but I think that this is the right amount to give you the right amount of protection.”

“? Why is that?”

“Because the one I’ll be giving you should ward off any reckless attempts Professor Gaeka would make to capture you. Tonight, there is a chance for them to attack you in your residence. But when he realizes what tool I gave you, he’ll be cautious. Any more than this item may give the impression that you still have other plans to do in Iqanlr. We want to make it look like you will have no hesitation in using this the moment you feel threatened. After all, the moment you use this tool, there would be nothing to stop you from leaving Iqanlr. I’d imagine that would be the worst-case scenario for the professor. Flaunt it confidently but be careful not to lose it. Don’t give any impressions that you plan to escape using anything besides the item I’ll be giving you. The last thing we want is for them to launch a desperate attack because they thought you were leaving the city. Just follow those instructions and you should be able to continue your day tomorrow as normal. I’ll be pulling some strings to ensure this, so please don’t get caught.”

“Yes.”

Senkyo responded with a firm nod. It seemed like Adeira already thought of handing him the magic tool he had in mind from the start, seeing as he prepared this detailed explanation for him.

“Let’s end the night here. Miss Ranat, please escort them to the area I mentioned earlier.”

“Understood.”

Ranat gave Adeira another bow before leaving the room with Senkyo and Shiro in tow. The door of the room closed behind them as the two gave their final words of farewell to Adeira. Looking around the hallway they entered, it seemed like it belonged to that of a large manor. They walked by the rich hallway aesthetics as the moonlight peered through the windows, making vertical shadows of the windows they passed through.

“Hey, hey, Ranat, where are we going?”

Shiro playfully asked, to which she responded in the same formal tone.

“Our destination is one of Sir Adeira’s teleportation rooms. He informed me that he will be sending you two to your current residence using that for the night.”

Senkyo carefully watched Ranat’s movements. He didn’t know what happened in the short amount of time Shiro was gone, but somehow she got to her good side quite easily. As much as he didn’t want to accept the possibility, there was certainly a chance for Shiro to get infected by whatever mind control Adeira mentioned.

“Miss Ranat, what exactly happened between you and Shiro?”

“I simply taught her a few spells and methods I know of. If you are worried about her well-being then there is no need to fret. As the master of Miss Shiro, you should be able to perceive her physical and mental conditions as you please. Using this privilege, the task of determining whether or not she is affected by the mind control Sir Adeira mentioned would be trivial.”

“E-Eh…? Wait, eh, I-I can do that?”

It seemed like Ranat immediately saw through the purpose of Senkyo’s question and preemptively reassured him of Shiro’s safety. It would be good if she was just fast on the pick-up but her answer was so accurate that he couldn’t help but think she had the ability to read minds. Well, it wasn’t like he had any way of telling for certain, so he set that thought aside for now and expanded on a more beneficial topic.

“Yes. There is more to a familiar pact than simply uniting and empowering the familiar. A familiar pact is a complex ritual that involves both mana and magic. It is generally seen as a dangerous practice for failing the ritual may easily result in the deaths of the intended familiar and master involved, as well as other spectators that are in close proximity to the ritual.”

When Ranat said this, what immediately came to mind was the calamitous energy that he read from the book Shiro handed to him. A ritual with mana and spirit power involved sounded like it could cause an outbreak of calamitous energy. The fact that he and Shiro were involved in one in the past gave him chills, but then again, considering that Shiro told him that his body had the ability to purify this energy and turn it into the creation element, there may have been no such dangers at all.

“The master has the role of caring for the familiar and giving them new potential. Because of this, there are many ways available for the master to manage their familiars. The trick to using this management properly is hidden behind the function of ‘orders’ given to the familiar. Meanwhile, it is the familiar’s duty to fulfill their master’s wishes, supporting them however they can. To help in their duty, the familiar has the ability to adjust themselves to the master’s wish. From what I have heard, the true potential of a familiar pact will only show when the spirits of both familiar and master become one.”

Senkyo and Shiro stared at Ranat’s back in confusion. Senkyo could tell she used general terms to shorten her explanation but that increased the vagueness of her message that he couldn’t get a grasp on immediately. On the other hand, Shiro’s blank eyes signaled that she shut down halfway through her explanation. Just as Senkyo was about to ask to clarify Ranat’s points, she turned around and handed him a book.

“Please take this. It is a book about the familiar pacts written by a reliable researcher. The text is all in Japanese so… it is the only downside if you cannot read it.”

“Ehhh…”

“Wow! As expected of Ranat, she’s always ready!”

Ranat handed over a book with the title “Foundations of the Familiar Pact Ritual; The Truth Behind the Binding Circles.” Senkyo could only stare at her in a confused look while Shiro cheered for her. Was she carrying that book the whole time? Did she know they would talk about familiar pacts on the way here? The more Senkyo spent time around her the more he became convinced that she had some kind of mind-reading or prediction ability. Was she really just a librarian? She seemed more like a maid. No, a secretary! These confused thoughts continued to plague Senkyo’s mind.

“U-Uhmm, Miss Ranat, why are you cooperating with us this much again?”

“Hmm… If I had to say, that is because this is also for my sake.”

No matter how many times Senkyo tried to probe, Ranat refused to dive into that topic any further.

**358 – The End of a Hectic Day**

“N-Nnnhh~!!”

A sweet moan left Senkyo’s mouth as his refreshed body sank into the soft quicksand that was his bed. After a long day of hard work, it felt like he was thrown into the clouds, a comfortable softness enveloping his body.

Recalling today’s events, he visited Arachne Tailors, fought against Leolja for the test to become a crawler and obtain access level S, then went to the library to research useful spells, had another encounter with Gaeka, was saved by Adeira, had a mysterious exchange with Ranat, and was sent back to their penthouse suite through Adeira’s teleportation technology. It was quite the day. Thinking back on it, the teleportation room they were sent to was similar to the teleportation points the Konjou Clan had. The main difference was that it was able to teleport them to a location without another teleportation circle placed.

When Adeira activated the teleportation mechanism, the next thing they knew, Senkyo and Shiro were standing right inside their penthouse suite. No matter how hard they looked there were no teleportation circles to be found. In the end, they decided to drop their search and prepared to end their day. Just like yesterday, Senkyo was first to enter the bath and refreshed his mind and body. What made this experience even better was that he was able to use proper sleepwear rather than just a bathrobe. Unlike yesterday, he didn’t feel as much vulnerability now that he had these clothes.

After relishing the sensation of his king-sized bed, Senkyo rolled over, grabbed a certain item around his neck, and placed it in the center of his vision. It was a strange pendant with a small crystal orb with shimmering colors of purple, blue, and red with red at its core and purple and blue spiraling around it. Adeira explained to Senkyo that if the crystal orb or the chain that holds it is broken, he will immediately be teleported far away from Iqanlr. It was simple but effective. Gaeka needed Senkyo to remain in Iqanlr but any attempt at his capture will immediately destroy that objective. When Adeira first handed him the item, he had doubts about how it might be vulnerable to Gaeka’s tools, that being items or techniques similar to the one he used to stop him from using spirit power. It was a valid concern, yet Adeira was adamant that nothing will be able to stop the item from activating. He gave a brief explanation about how it was made to function independently and that it locks out external influences.

Senkyo placed his trust in his words, but just to be safe than sorry, he prepared a few countermeasures of his own. As of this moment, the whole hotel they were staying at as well as the area around it was riddled with leaves with circuits that functioned to alert Senkyo of hostile movement. There were different circuits depending on their location. It cost him a lot of resources but at the very least, even if he was out of the hotel, he would be notified of suspicious activities. Although, the biggest downside to this move was the fact that it exhausted his entire leaf supply. In just one day, his entire three bags of leaves were all used up. Well, it made sense since he used two and a half bags in the crawler test, but this placed him in a rough spot.

Normally, this wouldn’t even register in his mind as a problem seeing as he could just go to a tree and pick its leaves out. But in his current situation, he wasn’t allowed to leave Iqanlr to do that unless he wanted to provoke Gaeka. Just before they parted, Senkyo asked Adeira why they couldn’t just use this to force Gaeka to move and ambush him when he does, but he reasoned with the fact that their preparations were yet to be finished, so he and his group couldn’t take action just yet. He was left with the option to find trees inside of Iqanlr. He could remember two locations where he saw trees in place. It would be great if he could just go to them but their placements proved to be very problematic. One of these locations was Xhiari, where Adeira explicitly warned Senkyo never to enter again. It was basically one of the main bases of Gaeka. Entering there was the same as offering himself to his predator. He did have Adeira’s teleportation item, but the fact that he warned him not to approach Xhiari despite knowing he had it meant that there was something he was afraid of inside the academy. It was best not to test the enemy’s power with his arrogance, so he crossed Xhiari off of his options immediately.

There was only one other place left. It was the small garden around the sunken nest of Iqanlr, the place he saw right across the entrance to the local Haeqras. He had no access to this place due to the fact that he wasn’t a crawler, but there were quite literally no other options. Fighting Leolja without his reserve of leaves and leaf talismans, which he heavily relied on, was nothing short of an insane suicide mission. He hoped that maybe contacting Leolja before the start of their test and asking him to somehow give him permission to collect leaves from the small garden would work. He didn’t know how the internal affairs in Haeqras functioned, but since Leolja was in an influential position, or at least it seems like it, then it was possible. Maybe. Perhaps.

Senkyo wanted to make more preparations for tomorrow’s test, especially since he ran out of talismans, but staying up any more than this would just hurt his energy with lack of sleep. Not to mention, he had no plans of sacrificing his well-deserved rest. Sinking deeper into the bed with his tired body, his brain naturally weakened and his concern for tomorrow’s test slowly disappeared. His eyelids grew heavy as the bell for the train to the land of dreams rang in his head. This was probably the reason he failed to notice another predator.

“Onii-chan~!”

“Eh…”

From the corner of his vision, the predator arrived. Her mischievous smile showed her clean white teeth, eyes narrowing sharply into an impish arc. Then, she struck.

“Gotchaa~!”

“G-Gah, S-Shiro, wait…! Get off…!”

“No~ can~ do~! Shiro has been waiting all day for her alone time with Onii-chan! Whatever happens, she will never yield this moment!”

She jumped on top of his body and wrapped her arms around Senkyo’s neck. Looking down at his body, he found that Shiro was wearing a set of sleep shorts and a camisole along with a bed jacket to cover the exposed arms. This should have lessened the area of exposed skin, making it easier to bare, but for some reason, this coordination of clothing only made her more attractive. Senkyo couldn’t deny that the word “cute” was echoing in his head on repeat like a broken record. His brotherly senses to protect her from everything tainted in the world became more apparent than ever. Yet, as if to conflict that, the worldly desires brewing within him were indicating that he, himself, was tainted. Such a cruel paradox made him want to bury himself in a hole and die.

Just before the feeling of self-hate set in, soft angelic breaths caressed his skin. The sudden sensation made him make a sharp jolt. It was then that he realized that Shiro already took off to dreamland. Senkyo tried to gently pry her arms off but they always tightened every time he tried. This situation was another problematic one… was it?

Senkyo stopped and looked at this situation from another perspective. A normal adolescent male might be stimulated by this situation and feel guilty. But, right now, Shiro was doing this with Senkyo as his sister, so it only made sense to respond to this as her brother. Setting aside the fact that they weren’t blood-related siblings, there was always an unspoken rule that brothers and sisters cannot feel sexual attraction towards each other in normal human society. Taking that into account, that would mean that Senkyo was NOT feeling sexual attraction toward Shiro and that this current act was NOT illicit in any way, shape, or form, and is completely and entirely wholesome. This was only some close sibling bonding. Exactly. Surely. It had to have been.

After repeating this to himself to brainwash—or rather, reconfirm his current position, he eventually joined Shiro in her sleep, drifting off to the same land of dreams accompanied by the fluffiness of a cloud and the presence of a cute angel.

**359 – The Dreamland I Wasn’t Expecting**

Huh?

*“\*Just see—for the world—\*”*

*“\*—DON’T MESS WITH ME!!\*”*

*“\*—This is… for—better—I—\*”*

*“\*Rise…—will not stop—BEHEAD—FALSE GOD!\*”*

*“\*Protect—Here, I rest…\*”*

*“\*————!!!\*”*

What? What are these things I’m seeing? I can hear voices… voices I don’t even recognize. Some of them screaming, weeping, fuming with anger, resigned to their fates, speaking of their beliefs. What is this? No, in the first place, where am I? Around me was a dark space. An empty void with voices of those I don’t know echoing. The only thing around this place is me. I feel like I’ve been in this place before… that’s right, this is the dream world. The place I ended up when Freda-san first revealed that I wasn’t human. This is where it became clear to me what I truly valued in life.

But, why am I seeing this place again? What happened? The last thing I remember was falling asleep with Shiro. I knew I went on about going to dreamland but I didn’t mean I wanted to end up in this place again. What am even supposed to—WAAAAAHHHH!!!!

As I was aimlessly walking through the dark empty space, when I set my foot down on the ground, instead of supporting my body, my foot fell right through the ground, sending me to the void. I flailed my arms and legs, trying to grab onto whatever I can, but in the end…

*“\*—GUUAAHH!! A-Ahh… That hurts…\*”*

I hit the ground. Hard.

*“\*Well, it’s not like I can die here. At the same time, that doesn’t mean I can’t feel pain… How inconvenient…\*”*

Right as I was complaining about how the dreamworld worked, I raised my head to find someone I had never seen before. He was a burly man with a large frame. A thick brown beard hung over his metallic armor as he towered in front of me.

“Are you alright? I held back but I didn’t know if that was enough.”

*“\*Who are you?\*”*

“Yes, I’m fine. I only took a scratch, nothing too concerning.”

*“\*Huh?\*”*

What? Did \*I\* just speak something different? No… my words didn’t leave my mouth at all. It’s moving on its own! I tried to move any part of my body, but it refused to listen and I stay laying on the ground. Anything I say, wherever I try to look, it’s useless. Was this even my body to begin with?

“Here.”

“Ah, thanks.”

It didn’t seem like it. The man in front of me extended his arm to pick me up and the person’s body I was inside of took his hand and rose to his feet. It looks like I can’t do anything else but watch.

“You still have a long way to go but as long as you keep training I’m sure your efforts will bear fruit.”

“I appreciate your kind words, Draui-san.”

Draui…? Did the person I’m inside of just call him Draui?? Isn’t that person… an ambassador? When I asked Shiro about the identities of the previous ambassadors, the name Draui was one of the very few she could recall. I think her reason for that was that he was just so huge that she couldn’t believe someone could grow to his size. If the person in front of me is the same Draui in question, then that would make sense. From what I can tell he was a dwarf, but unlike how fiction described them as big but short, this Draui was big and tall, and even towering over the person I’m inside in despite him standing completely straight.

“Heeey there, you two~!”

A cheery voice came from behind us and just as the person I’m inside in was going to turn around and see who called, a powerful slap hit our shoulder, making my vision blackout.

*“\*W-What is this…?\*”*

The next thing I knew, I found myself standing in the middle of some kind of battlefield. Everything around me was on fire and screams of fear and agony could be heard from everywhere.

“G-Gahh…”

My body moved by itself again, or rather, the person I was inside of decided to move. He was injured, blood running down his arms and dripping from the tips of his fingers. He limped as he walked into a safe place inside a deserted alleyway. This person was… different from the previous one. I can tell by the size of their arms. This person’s arms were bigger than the last one, not to mention his voice was different.

“Damn it! Why… why did everything have to end like this…!?”

He cursed as his eyes pointed toward the rising flames. This voice… it’s familiar… Ah, it was only brief, but I think this person’s voice was the same one that called out to us at the end of the last scene. He was so cheery back then and now that was nothing but a distant memory. All that was remaining was the anger and sadness that seeped through his shaking voice.

“Fuck!!”

With one last kick filled with his frenzied emotions, he hit the wall of the alleyway, sending cracks across my whole field of vision almost as if my sight turned to broken glass.

*“\*…!!\*”*

A new scene was brought to me. With my vision remaining broken, a different perspective appeared for every whole shard of vision, like a broken glass mirror with a different scene for every single glass shard. In some places, my perspective was running, fighting, and carrying people to safety, as well as a few others. It would have been great if there was no one talking because of this shared vision, unfortunately, it was the exact opposite of what I hoped for. The words and thoughts coming from every single perspective resounded in my head, turning it into a chaotic mosh pit of the voices of strangers… no… voices of the same person…? Wha—

*“\*A-AAHH!! Stop it! Be quiet…! Stop talking…!\*”*

The voices suddenly spiked in volume. I sealed my ears with all my might, but it did nothing to hinder the voices speaking directly into my head.

*“\*Stop, stop, stop, stop… STOP IIIIIITT!!!\*”*

I screamed out with all the air in my lungs. I didn’t expect it to work, but finally, my vision blacked out, and silence returned. I breathed a sigh of relief as I was finally freed from the noise. That being said, it might be just as chaotic on the next scene I get thrown into. Well, if I ever do get another scene. Please, just wake me up already. Make it stop.

“For Onii-chan’s sake… For Onii-chan’s sake, Shiro will do anything!!”

*“\*Huh… Shiro…?\*”*

In the next scene, I was given Shiro’s perspective. I don’t see her face, but I can tell she had determined eyes as she conveyed her emotions through her gaze to the person in front of her.

“Alright… I’m sorry about this, Shiro.”

“No, Shiro can tell that Yuuto-san has been troubled by this for a long time. Shiro wants to repay you and Onii-chan for everything!”

Ahh… it’s been a while since I’ve seen this guy’s stupid face. My father was watching Shiro with warm eyes, touched by her words. It feels a bit weird from my perspective since he’s just looking at me creepily, but… it really has been a while, so I couldn’t say anything more and just watched the scene unfold.

“Haha, repay us? What’s that all of a sudden? You’re part of the family too, Shiro. My daughter, and Senkyo’s dear little sister. Don’t talk like some stranger that’s indebted to us. Just be yourself and say that you want to help us. I don’t know about you, but hearing my daughter is willing to help an old man like me is a hundred times better than having her take pity on me!”

Another one of the old man’s lectures. Again, I couldn’t see it, yet I could tell this left Shiro dumbfounded but also brought a smile to her face.

“Hehe, you’re right… Then, please let Shiro help you, Father.”

It was one of the few times that Shiro would refer to the old man as her father. It wasn’t that she didn’t feel close to him, but rather because she preferred to call him “Yuuto-san.” It was one of her few old-habits-die-hard moments where she couldn’t help but feel awkward when referring to dad as her father. Wholesome moments like this one are the only ones that can break that habit of hers.

*“\*It… really has been a while…\*”*

**360 – A Shadow I Need to Watch Out For**

“—Don’t leave me!”

*“\*—!?\**”

All of a sudden, the peaceful atmosphere around me was broken by the pained screams of a single voice. It wasn’t only because it came out of nowhere in full volume like a jumpscare in a horror movie, but it was also because I instantly recognized the owner of this voice.

“This isn’t the time for jokes! Veoia, please!”

The person’s perspective I was seeing now was none other than Hisho Yuu, the person I’ve searching for. She was screaming, pleading, begging for someone, but at the same time, she was the only person in this room. She was talking to empty space, conversating all by herself in solitude. Yet, her emotions felt too real for this to be some kind of hallucination.

If I had to guess, then maybe someone was talking to her in her mind. Since I can use Connect and had daily conversations with Ryosei and Shiro in his mind in the past, it was one of the simplest reasons I could be satisfied with, but then that leaves the question of who Hisho-chan is talking to.

“B-But… No… I….”

My vision began to blur as tears collected in her eyes. It seemed like Hisho-chan entered a state of shock. Then, when everything finally cleared, I was stupefied by the sight in front of me. My face formed no emotions, yet they were rampaging inside of me. The sight I saw sent ripples down my very being. My emotions became a mess. Rampaging, going berserk, running wild, becoming frenzied. The shock kept my body still, but my true feelings leaked as tears fell from my eyes.

“Senpai…”

Chains. The chains rattled as Hisho-chan tried to move, binding all four of her limbs. Her eyes were just like this void. Empty, without light. It was the face of someone who wanted everything to be over with. The face of someone who suffered and reached their limit. Seeing her like this crushed my heart.

It wasn’t just the chains, but also a bone-like dagger protruding through her chest, piercing her clean through the heart. I was reminded of how she blocked the skeleton’s attack to save me back on Earth. Her sacrifice was the trigger that made me chase down the escaping skeleton and search for her, despite not knowing anything about the new world I was thrown into. Right now, she was suffering. Hisho-chan was suffering without anyone to support her.

I felt it. Fiery emotions ignited within me. It was anger. Anger at the fact that I am unable to do anything in her time of need. Anger at the fact that I’m stuck here without knowing where she is. But then, it slowly quells as I think. The rational part of me speaks. Why would I be shown something like this at this time?

Hisho-chan should have no way of contacting me nor is she capable of talking to me directly in my dreams. Not to mention, even if she had the means, would she really contact me of her own volition? As much as it pains me to admit it, I don’t think so. How can I be so sure that the scene I’m being shown isn’t something that was made to shake my composure? Was this some kind of mental attack from Professor Gaeka? Or maybe something else entirely…?

I watch the Hisho-chan in front of me in silence, trying to comprehend what was happening. Then, she speaks once more.

“…Senpai… I hate to rely on you all the time… but this one, I really want you to do… Please… kill me.”

…Why?

Why is it that you say such things that break my heart? …I have to hurry. It doesn’t matter if she’s fake or not, what does is the fact that my original goal hasn’t changed. I need to find Hisho-chan as fast as possible. My only clue is Nrjia which is located northeast of the border city Iqanlr. However, this is only her hometown, which isn’t guaranteed to have her. She was kidnapped after all. Information about bandit camps or human trafficking rings is much more reliable… no.

I remember talking to Shiro when I first woke up that she and Ryosei suspected that END was the client of the skeletons that hunted us. The worst-case scenario will have Hisho-chan at the heart of enemy territory. Although, if I were to be optimistic, then at the very least she is on or near their lands… Recalling Yuwokrn’s map in my head, those places could be somewhere in Zelaoage, the north side of Ridsikrn, or the east side of Frukaui. Since I’m on the border between Uikakrn and Ridsikrn, I can travel to the north side of Ridsikrn and search for more clues. After that, I will be in the most optimal area to extend my search deeper into Ridsikrn, cross the borders to Frukaui, or sail to Zelaoage. Then—

“You seem so serious. What’s wrong? Was that girl someone important to you?”

Just as my thoughts were filled with nothing but my future actions, another voice I didn’t recognize entered my ears. Looking around, Hisho-chan was no longer in front of me. She disappeared and what revealed itself in exchange was a body of black mist with two glowing red eyes. It wasn’t just a voice in my head, nor was it a dialogue of a scene I’d never seen before, it was something that was talking directly to me. I instinctively jumped back and made distance the moment it entered my vision.

What is it this time!? An actual intruder!?

“You’re wary of me. That’s nice to see. But I wonder, do you know what I am?”

Is it trying to extract information from me? It seems like it. I’m not about to fall for any of its schemes. I don’t know what it wants except for information. The best way to avoid leaking this is to simply remain silent.

“Not feeling like answering me? That’s fine. I like that you’re cautious… though, not enough to completely avoid any conflict it looks like. I just got news that the monkey that’s chasing you almost had you caught. Man, it must be a pain for the person who had to clean that mess up.”

It’s… talking about Professor Gaeka and Sir Adeira. From its words, it seems to be acquainted with them at least and has knowledge about the recent events.

“You’re still not talking, huh? Well, I didn’t expect much to begin with. This is more of a forced kick-start to get you going.”

“…?”

Kick-start? What is this thing talking about?

“Oh! Looks like your poker face is slipping.”

“!!”

D-Damn it. I subconsciously raised my brow. Failing to maintain full control of my body, the shadow quickly picks up on my nonverbal signs. It has no face, but I can painfully feel the sneer behind the shadow’s aura.

“In other words, I’m powering you up. I don’t care if you believe me or not, but I’m making it so that you can use your creation element better. You saw those visions right? Those are the visions of the people you can have power over. Simply put, you might be able to control them. It looks like you already have control over one of them. Though, it does seem to be subconscious.”

“…”

I maintained a stoic face, but I can’t help but be curious about what he knows. Powering up? People I can control? I’m getting sick and tired of having random strangers walk up to me knowing more about me than I do. Was I some kind of celebrity in the past? I’m starting to think that the majority of people in Zerid know me as common knowledge. I swear, can someone just stop and tell me everything about myself already!?

“Oh, I’m not telling you how it works though. These things are generally more effective when you learn them yourself.”

And now you’re reading my mind!?

“I am curious about one thing though. Why are you holding back?”

“…”

“I mean, you unlocked one of your seals, right? You made contact with the power of god, so one of those has to be unlocked. It's pretty powerful too, but I wonder why you won’t use it… Meh, no matter. In the end, you won’t be able to keep that thing hidden. I’m going to make good use of you while you’re still here, so be prepared!”

The lack of urgency in this guy’s voice irks me. Why the hell is this guy barging into my mind without permission and running his mouth off? It reminds me of a certain someone… huh? Could it be?

This black mist has been blabbering for the entire time it’s been here, so here I decided to go for a little counterattack.

“Hey, are you Hira-san’s father?”

“HUH!? How di—…HUWH!??”

Oh, bingo. This is what happens when you speak too much. None of what he said pointed to this, but his personality sure made it easy to imagine.

“W-W- W- W- W- W-Well, well well, would you look at the time! I remember I have something important I gotta do!”

The shadow began scrambling around the room in a panic. I didn’t know how it planned on getting out, but just before it gets the chance, I shoot out one last question.

“Answer me, are you my enemy?”

Just before the shadow floated off to the distance, it stopped and turned around, making its red eyes clear within the black void.

“You can think of me however you want, but I don’t consider myself on anyone’s side. I just want to do something and I’m using you to do just that. There’s no point in hiding it, so I may as well tell you this much. Although, it's probably because I have a good feeling you’ll end up doing what I want. I’m using you, so don’t think of anything and let yourself get used. I’m sure you’ll end up with a good result.”

It said in an arrogant tone as its shadow became consumed by the void. I stayed silent for a while, staring at where the shadow disappeared. After a while, my belated response to its words left my mouth.

“‘Let yourself get used,’ huh? I don’t know what you’re after, but I’ll be doing what I want. If you’re not careful, I might just bite back.”

**361 – Problem Upon Wake**

“Mn… mhnnn…”

The rays of morning light entered Senkyo’s vision as his eyelids flickered, clearing his senses as he arose from slumber. A few seconds passed until he finally became fully conscious. Looking around, he confirmed he was still on the king-sized bed in the penthouse suite without any threats in the area. None of his talismans activated while he was asleep nor were any lost, indicating that no one attempted to make any moves against Senkyo throughout the night. It seemed like Adeira kept his word, securing Senkyo’s room as a safe house.

Beside Senkyo was Shiro, sleeping snuggly as she hugged one of his arms. The question of whether or not he should be sleeping with Shiro came to mind. Even if nothing happens there was no doubt people would raise their eyebrows when they hear of this. Thinking about what would happen once Ryosei entered his body again and got a copy of all his memories here made him twist his face in agony. He thought about stopping, but then again, it wasn’t like that would erase the other times he slept with her. A quick deliberation suggested that instead of worrying about the future, he needed to focus on the present. Taking that into consideration, since no one was around to be disturbed by the two, there was no reason to stop what they were doing. Although he would never be caught dead speaking it out loud, he had to admit that he enjoyed the fluffiness of Shiro’s fur. It was a type of stress relief that worked very effectively. Considering the fact that he couldn’t use one of his natural stress-relief methods due to their situation and lack of privacy, he concluded that at the very least, this much should be fine.

Frankly speaking, he loved Yuu and could only see Shiro as a sister. He didn’t have much trouble keeping his urges in check. The fact that he quickly silenced it last night was proof of that. The chaotic mess that he called his daily life in Zerid was too hectic to be concerned with such things, not to mention the fact that the actual person he loved was somewhere out in the world without anything to confirm whether or not she was safe. There are barely any chances to rest easy because of these. Now that his train of thought arrived at this, it was about time he finished his morning musings and began preparing for the day.

“Shiro… Hey, Shiro… it’s time to wake up.”

“Nmnn… nnnhh~…”

He gently shook her body until Shiro’s eyelids slowly opened. Her pupils searched around until they landed on Senkyo’s face.

“…Onii-chan… good morning…”

“Mn, good morning to you too, Shiro. Sorry to wake you up but I have something I have to tell you.”

“Hm…?”

When Shiro fully regained consciousness, Senkyo told her everything he saw in his dream. All about the visions he saw including the scenes with Shiro and Yuu as well as the appearance of Hira’s father that broke in his dreams. After finishing everything, she hugged her knees tighter and leaned backward.

“Umm, Shiro… can I ask why we’re in this position…?”

“Because Shiro likes it. And she’s thinking.”

“…Is that so?”

Right around somewhere in the middle of Senkyo’s story, Shiro placed herself in between his legs and turned him into a reclining chair. With a pillow in her arms, she hugged it tight along with her legs, hiding part of her mouth and making some of her words muffled. Apparently, this was some sort of thinking position, or so her words suggest.

“…Shiro knows about it.”

“Oh, you do?”

She spoke in a soft voice as she searched through the memories of the past, talking about them nostalgically.

“Hmn, when you pulled pranks on Shiro and Yuuto-san in the past. It could be described as mind control but Shiro felt like it was closer to Onii-chan’s soul influencing our souls. At first, you did it often with pranks that had large effects but you slowly calmed down when Yuuto-san scolded you saying that it was dangerous to do that.”

“…I pulled pranks with my powers, huh?”

Imagining himself as a child wielding some kind of all-powerful element was a scary thought. He was glad that his father put a stop to him before his childish self did something irreversible.

“Oh, but Yuuto-san also warned Shiro about your pranks, saying that she shouldn’t become too emotional whenever Onii-chan did something. Apparently, whatever you were doing gave Shiro the ability to do something as well. But, nothing wrong ever happened in the past, so she doesn’t know for sure.”

“Interesting…”

An ability that gives Shiro another ability. Hearing this reminded Senkyo of what Ranat said about the familiar pact. The master is responsible for caring and giving new potential to their familiars. The secret to this lies in the orders they give to them.

“Shiro, when I did these pranks were you already my familiar then?”

“No, Shiro was just Onii-chan’s little sister! Shiro only became a familiar around the time when Yuuto-san mentioned sealing your memories.”

This should have meant that creation magic and the familiar pact were two unrelated things, but since the familiar pact comes from a ritual that uses both spirit power and mana, there could be a possibility that Senkyo was unintentionally using the effects of creation magic similarly to how the familiar pact is forged… or at least he thought so. All of these were only his educated guesses. Since he never actually remembered how to use the creation element, he could only think along the lines of “spirit power + mana = calamitous energy/creation element.” Mix them well and you’ll have the creation element, mix them poorly and you’ll have calamitous energy. He knew he simplified it too much but this was necessary to keep his mind in order.

“Haahh… this is going to take a bit more time to figure out. For now, he should focus on a more guaranteed source of power to use in our test later.”

“Are you talking about the spells?”

“Yep. Shiro, go get ready so we can leave. I’ll figure out what we can use, and you can tell me what you found in the spellbooks for the nature and control elements while we walk. We still need to visit Leolja and get permission to pick leaves for our test.”

“E-Ehh… can’t Shiro and Onii-chan just stay here?”

She complained as she buried herself deeper in between Senkyo’s legs. While staring at him with upturned eyes, he replied to her in a curt tone.

“No.”

“Auuu…”

She let out a dejected noise as she reluctantly picked herself off of the bed and headed for the bathroom. He felt a bit bad but there was no time to waste. Yesterday was actually more productive than he ever could have imagined. He learned more about spells, the familiar pact, and the creation element that he could use. Once he manages to understand even just one of these thoroughly, it could power him up significantly if he pairs it up with spirit power and battle tactics.

Right now, it was a race against time to power himself up. He could not afford to lose this—

“N-NYAAAAA!!!!!”

“Shiro!?”

Shiro’s ear-piercing scream came from the bathroom. In a panic, Senkyo shot out of bed and hurried to the bathroom door. The moment he arrived, the door immediately opened, revealing Shiro in her half-dressed self. He would have usually reacted to this, but he was too concerned about what made Shiro scream in the first place that he couldn’t process this properly. When he met eyes with Shiro, she looked shaken.

“Onii-chan!!”

“What happened!?”

“L-Look! The time!!”

“The… time…?”

Shiro fully opened the door and Senkyo’s gaze traced where her finger pointed to. It was a digital clock that showed the numbers “11:34.” Reading this, his eyes blinked a few times as if to deceive himself from reality, but when the numbers refused to change, his face paled as he fully understood what made Shiro scream.

“Eh…”

He could do nothing but let out a dumbfounded voice.

**362 – Returning to the Caves**

“Can’t we delay it for just a few minutes?”

“No, unfortunately not. The rules and procedures for an access level S test state that every trial must be held on time. Failure to do so will lead to the failure of the test.”

Senkyo was hit with terrible news the moment he arrived at Haeqras. After waking up and learning how close it was to the next test with Leolja, Senkyo and Shiro instantly rushed outside of the hotel and made a beeline for Haeqras, stopping only in front of an open food stall to get at least some form of nutrients in their stomach.

When they arrived, he asked Leolja if he could pick some leaves from the trees around the sunken nest. He answered that it was fine, but the real problem was the fact that the test was already about to start, which gave him no time to acquire the said resources.

“Besides, from the sound of it, you two arrived late because of oversleeping, am I correct? I think it is only right for you to compensate for your own lack of diligence. Fighting without one of your primary tools would be the perfect punishment.”

“But…”

*“\*I only overslept because of someone who invaded my dreams—,\*"* or so he wanted to say but that would just end up with him unnecessarily leaking information.

“Haeqras’ rules are made to be strict so that in times like this, the crawler should be able to do something about the problem even with the disadvantage given to them. A crawler’s value rises when they are able to deal with problems under unreasonable restrictions rather than a crawler who can only fulfill their tasks only when they are at full strength. That is why Haeqras does not compensate with time. Whatever state the crawler is in the moment the time of the test arrives, they will take it in that state no matter what. Even if they are in a severely injured state, they will not be exempted from these ironclad rules. Cases like those often end up with the crawler retaking another three-day test. And now that I’ve said this, you have arrived without the tools you need, making you take this test without them. There will be no compensation on our side. Is that clear?”

“Yes…”

Leolja spoke as an instructor, drilling Haeqras’ values into Senkyo with a stern, authoritarian voice. He could do nothing against him like this. “If you mess up, do something to fix it.” That was basically what they wanted to embed into their crawlers. It didn’t matter what reason the crawlers have that gave them a disadvantage in their test. What mattered was how the crawlers would respond in times like these and if they will be able to overcome it. In this situation, even if it wasn’t Senkyo’s fault that he arrived late, it didn’t matter. What Leolja wanted from him right now was the ability to make up for his loss. Having that fact settled in his head, Senkyo had no choice but to prepare for the upcoming test.

Forced by the rules of Haeqras, he entered a new artificial cave to begin his second test. This cave is different from the last one, making it so that he couldn’t trace the path to level S from his memories. The cave structure is different but the enemies were still the same. In levels E and D, he only walked by the creatures inside the cave without giving them anything more than just a glance and a fatal low-tier spell if they ever turn hostile. There was little to no danger on level E while he simply needed to scare off annoying enemies on level D.

Rather than the enemies, he used his time walking through the cave in collecting rocks and other resources he could use later on in the deeper levels. With his leaf supply reduced to a resounding zero, he needed to make other talismans through other means. Using pebbles and other small rocks could work as a substitute but he knew that the range of uses on weighted talismans like rocks was much less than the capabilities of thin and light talismans like leaves or paper due to the fact that they’re bigger, heavier, and inflexible.

He imagined using rocks to perform his large-scale circuits as he did on the deeper levels where his leaf talismans nimbly dodged and weaved through numerous obstacles to execute his plans. If he were to use rocks in those situations, he could easily imagine them being disrupted, stopping him from using large circuits or field circles just like he did last time. For now, these rocks were a flimsy stopgap so that he wouldn’t be completely unable to use spirit power and enchanter techniques.

Along with the small rocks and pebbles, he also harvested body parts from the enemies that were in the area. Unlike levels B and below, the enemies in the levels above them were real, allowing him to use them for enchanter techniques. Back then, he collected Hkrwir’s fangs, an Eozea’s scales, and its tongue. They were basically centipede fangs, lizard scales, and a lizard tongue. He didn’t have to use them back then since he had leaf talismans, but now with those resources exhausted, he thought these items could have their purpose.

Level C had the usual swarm of bomb jockeys, but they weren’t much of a threat against Senkyo’s wide-ranged offensive magic. Level B should just have phantom threaders which weren’t much of a threat as long as you could detect their traps, but unusually, he found a few cave trappers around the end of the level. He was reminded that the enemies in the sunken nest weren’t restricted to the levels they frequented.

As a test run, he used one of his newly learned spells.

“O Earth, speak once more and deliver your will. Heaven or hell; pass upon your judgment on the mortals before you. Rise: Rumbling Land.”

Mumbling the chant in a volume difficult for others to hear, he targeted the areas behind the walls where Detect could sense a cave trapper hiding inside. It was a spell that could make an area of land suddenly rise or cave in depending on how it is cast. Using this, he can force cave trappers to leave their hiding spot or, if the caster knew how the tunnel of the hiding cave trapper was formed, kill it on the spot.

In this situation, Senkyo couldn’t detect the formation of the tunnel with Detect, so he opted for the land to rise directly upward. More often times than not, this would cause the cave trapper to rise up and either run away or break out of its hiding spot. But in this case, when the rise was forcefully stopped at a lower height than Senkyo intended, it was a sign that the tunnel had no space above it and was likely dug in a horizontal path. Meaning, with no space above the cave trapper, Senkyo’s magic mercilessly squished it while it was inside the tunnel.

“That’s lucky… but I probably shouldn’t use this on single targets.”

Rumbling Land was a mid-tier spell. Although it was effective against cave trappers, it was a waste of mana to use it on a single target since it was designed to affect a large area. Not to mention, the guidebook specifically stated to use Rumbling Land with caution. Since it affected terrain, using this spell haphazardly could lead to massive cave-ins and destroy paths that were previously mapped out. This was also the reason why it was strongly discouraged to use the cave-in chant of Rumbling Land. Making more walls was one thing, but removing them was an entirely different issue. The only time crawlers are allowed to use highly destructive magic was in times when the danger was critical and lives were at stake.

“O Earth, act and hasten the course of nature. Wither the strong and impregnable, take their time and turn them into a strew. Terra Decay.”

Moving forward into level A1, he faced the cave trappers inside this level using a new spell called Terra Decay. It had the power to turn earth and rocks into sand and dust, making them fall onto the spiders waiting right behind them and burying them. It was an easy way to reveal and hold down cave trappers, making it simple to eliminate them with his sword. It cost less mana than Rumbling Land despite both of them being mid-tier spells and also created a wall of heavy sand that could block off any reinforcements inside the tunnels of the cave trappers. No matter how strong the cave trappers may be, their strength can do nothing against the pliability of sand and dust.

“That was easy.”

Clearing the floor, he moved on to the next one.

**363 – Careful Advance**

Level A2 is where Magic Arms often begin to appear. They are the first to gain the ability to control other Iwaiida in their evolutionary ladder. It may be difficult to fight them when someone cannot do anything against their ability to gather and control other Iwaiida, but to someone who can, it was only a matter of how fast they can eliminate them.

Their first encounter with a magic arm had them ambushed by a large number of bomb jockeys and a horde of cave trappers that soon followed. Just as always, Shiro’s natural magic barrier made the bomb jockeys completely useless while Senkyo activated the spell “Enhance Speed” and used flash strike to pierce through the wall of enemies. What mattered on this level wasn’t defeating every enemy in front of them, but simply taking out the one mastermind in the area.

Unlike Arachne Sages and Demonic Spiders, Magic Arms have a significantly smaller range to control other Iwaiida. This meant that whenever the enemies in an area attacked in coordination with each other, it was very likely that a magic arm was present nearby.

Senkyo had both Detect and Perception Field active as he cleared the area, picking up on two mana signatures inside the walls and moving away from them. Based on the small pieces of earth and rocks dropping inside the walls, it was likely a tunnel created by a cave trapper. Meanwhile, there could only be one thing waiting behind it that possessed a greater mana signature than the cave trapper. It was the magic arm.

Recognizing the enemy’s attempt to retreat, he activated Terra Decay to open up a path to their tunnel. A wall of sand and dust appeared. Of course, Senkyo still wasn’t able to reach his targets as it is. Just like how the cave trappers wouldn’t be able to break through the wall of grounded earth with brute strength, the same applied to Senkyo. However, there was an option that made this obstacle more convenient for him.

“O Wind, carry the sound of the howl and continue the chase. Cast around your scent, imprint your shape, and mark the quarry. Gale Hound!”

A sharp blast of wind pierced through the wall of sand and dust, exploding into the tunnel and creating a thick cloud. The tunnel was now accessible in exchange for his clear vision. This would usually be a problem, but not when he could clearly track the presence of his target.

Following the mana signature, Senkyo uttered the chant needed for “Needle Storm.” As he did, numerous mana signatures similar to the magic arm appeared all around him. Their appearance was much too unnatural, not to mention that magic arms would never be this coordinated when nothing was controlling them. With these thoughts being taken into consideration, he quickly deduced that they were illusions made by phantom threaders. It was a last-ditch effort for the magic arm to throw Senkyo off its trail. If he ever aimed for the wrong target, it would give the real one a chance to escape… or so it might think.

Senkyo’s aim never wavered, pointing every single deadly clump of wind at a single magic arm. He launched released the deadly wind around him into his target, making it lose control of every Iwaiida in the area and eliminating the magic arm dummies made by phantom threaders. The reason for Senkyo’s precise aim wasn’t because of luck, but instead was the work of the effects of Gale Hound, or at the very least, what should have been the effects of said spell.

Gale Hound released a strong gust of wind but it also had the ability to mark every living being that it hits. However, the magic arm Senkyo faced was only an illusion. In a real situation, he would be able to tell living beings he hit with the spell apart from those that made no contact with it. In this test, the dummies that spawned around him had a different mana signature from the real magic arm, allowing Senkyo to differentiate the supposed real one from the dummies using Detect. It was clear that Leolja was properly controlling the enemies around him to enact a suitable substitute for what should have been the result if this were a real situation.

Senkyo’s lips curled up in amazement at Leolja’s expert control, yet the very second later, they dropped, showing a bitter expression, contradictory to the earlier one he showed. Brushing his feelings aside, he continued down the path, eliminating magic arms in the same manner until he arrived to level A3.

The next level was significantly more dangerous than the previous one, making Senkyo enter it with caution. He knew that the moment he set foot onto the level meant that he was detected by at least one of the Arachne Sages on the level. Although their abilities are similar to the magic arms, it felt like a completely different ability due to how much powerful it is.

Just like Senkyo’s previous experience, an arachne sage could control entire armies of spiders from the end of a level all the way to the beginning of one. The previous strategy of ignoring everything else and targeting only the mastermind wasn’t as effective. After all, there was no possible way to target someone on the completely opposite side of the level. Crawlers oftentimes don’t hunt down a sage and simply prioritize a task or crossing the level. In fact, Senkyo would have done exactly just that if the sage didn’t appear right in front of him the last time he entered level A3. That was certainly unusual behavior, his suspicions supported by the guidebook mentioning that it was rare for arachne sages to show themselves.

What didn’t change from his previous visit to level A3 was the constant pressure that came from all directions. He quickly got a good number of cave trappers chasing him through the cave after a failed ambush. At some point he felt that he was being herded in one direction, so he turned around and eliminated his current pursuers. Last time, he fully took the bait and got led to a house of illusions, forcing him to use more resources than necessary to clear the level, and exhausting his energy. This ended with him being significantly tired when he was faced with the pressure on level S. For now, he decided to take it slow and avoid unnecessary conflict.

**364 – Shiro’s First Move**

Noticing Senkyo’s passive actions, the sage was the one that fueled the flames of conflict, placing five mana signatures the same as magic arms into his detection range. When he first picked this up, Senkyo did not know if all of the five signatures were real magic arms or illusions made by phantom threaders. For now, it was clear that the sage pushed for the offensive.

He immediately considered the worst-case scenario where all five signals were real, which was equivalent to having five platoons of hostiles coming to corner him. A quick decision was needed but not a hasty one.

“O Wind, change the currents of your gentle breeze, become the draft that alerts me of your presence. Exploration in a swift sweep; turn the expanse inside out and return the lay of the land. Scout’s Breath.”

A blast of light wind released from Senkyo, shooting into the cave path as well as the small cracks and openings in the area. Just like how Detect and Perception Field gave information about the area, Scout’s Breath was one of the most used spells in the sunken nest, being renowned for its useful detection skill and the wide range of it. It was a spell that traced out the area around the caster at a flat range of 20 meters. This value may increase or decrease depending on the flow of wind in the area. Going with the wind may increase this range and searching against the wind may decrease this. As he was in a cave without any strong winds to hinder or assist this spell, the shape of the area spanning an average of 20 meters was revealed to him.

Unfortunately, this spell cannot determine whether or not the entities it hits are illusions, as it only works with the shape of those it makes contact with. However, after confirming the five magic arms, it also scanned the area beyond them, confirming any enemies that may serve as reinforcements for the five magic arms. As it turns out, around ten more magic arms were found outside of Senkyo’s Detect range. One was behind each of the initial five he detected while another group of five closed in from his rear. With this many enemies, it was likely an all-out attack. Had Senkyo blindly attacked the initial five magic arms, he could have fallen for a devastating trap.

At this time, he couldn’t have been more thankful that Shiro read through the spellbook for the nature element before he did. Since an incident last night happened before he could flip through it, he wouldn’t have been able to use this spell without her.

Making a quick analysis of the situation, there was a swarm of bomb jockeys in front of him and above him. Those were followed by cave trappers to act as the main fighting force. Bomb jockeys were not a threat at all, but their exploding chemicals could blind his vision and allow the cave trappers to find an opening. Not only that, there was already a dangerous number of cave trappers gathering below him as well, which would most likely pop up the moment the bomb jockeys charged in. To block off his escape, there were also a large number of cave trappers waiting behind him, extending outside the range of his Scout’s Breath, making their numbers unclear. And above everything, their numbers kept increasing from thin air, indicating the presence of illusions made by phantom threaders. They seemed to be building bodies of spiderwebs around the perimeter. This situation was similar to when he raided the house of illusions last time, but this time, the enemy was building the house with him at the center.

He commentated about the situation to Shiro in his mind as he analyzed it. Preferably, he didn’t want to waste too much energy on this and save as many resources as possible for level S. Although, against an army of this size, that didn’t seem to be possible. That was when Shiro said something that he didn’t expect.

“Onii-chan, do you want Shiro to do something about this? Shiro can help!”

“O-Oh…?”

So far, Senkyo was always the one to make strategies and fight while Shiro assisted with healing and defense. Since this test couldn’t actually harm Senkyo, she focused more on defense, but never had there been a time when Shiro made a suggestion before.

“What do you have in mind?”

“Hehe, you can just do what you always do and trust in Shiro! That’s the plan!”

Senkyo had no words. He was speechless. For some reason, Shiro’s voice was filled with confidence and didn’t falter against the pressure of an army of hostiles. Usually, this was where Senkyo would outright deny the plan because he didn’t know what was going to happen, but the person that suggested this was Shiro. Instead of denouncing her mystery plan, he felt the urge to support this since it showed Shiro’s growth. He felt like a father seeing his daughter resolve a complicated family problem all on her own. His feelings preceded his logical judgment. For now, he prepared a good backup plan in mind in the event that Shiro’s plan falls apart. While he was standing there completely still, the enemy finally made their move.

He could sense the massive swarm of bomb jockeys coming from their front. Meanwhile, there were mana signatures of cave trappers coming from above, most likely there to open up holes for more bomb jockeys to flow into his location. Shiro’s natural magic barrier coated Senkyo to protect him from the incoming danger while Senkyo readied his bone daggers over his katana, prioritizing speed over damage. To compensate for the lack of damage, he turned the daggers into talismans and used spirit power to empower them, sharping their edges and increasing their durability.

The flood of bomb jockeys arrived with cave trappers breaking the ceiling, allowing more jockeys to flow in just like Senkyo expected. He counted four cave trappers before his vision was reduced to a splatter of green corrosive liquid. The liquid that was about to make contact with him was absorbed by the magic barrier, but that didn’t stop the area from getting filled by it and blinding his surroundings. At this moment, Detect became useless as the corrosive liquid that filled the room was also picked up by this skill, shrouding the mana signatures of the four cave trappers that landed.

In this situation, Perception Field was the only thing that could guide him. One of the cave trappers approached him, unaffected by the blinding liquid of the bomb jockeys. Its heavy, earth-crushing legs thrust at him. He nimbly dodged four legs, cutting them with his enchanted bone daggers as they passed over his body. With the front legs gone, he backed up and waited for the cave trapper to lose its balance. The force it used to launch forward made its attacks deadly, but with its four front legs gone, the cave trapper couldn’t maintain its weight and fell to the ground. That was when Senkyo came to behead the spider and finish it off.

He would have killed it, if it weren’t for two other cave trappers to come in to save its life. When Senkyo backed off, he noticed the mana signatures of the cave trappers from the ground rising up while the more mana signatures from above were dropping down. They were about to send the main forces at him. He couldn’t sense it anymore, but he assumed that there were cave trappers coming in from in front of him as well.

With him backed into a corner, Senkyo made a light jump and created an air foothold for him to stand on. Then, he chanted.

“O Earth, act and hasten the course of nature. Wither the strong and impregnable, take their time and turn them into a strew. Terra Decay!”

At the same time, Shiro did as well.

*“\*O Clear Canvas, I call upon thee to grow, build, and expand. Broaden our horizon and spread your influence to the masses. Greater Plain!\*”*

Senkyo meant to affect only the floor, but for some reason, his Terra Decay reached the walls and even the ceiling above. He was surprised, but with him on high alert, he immediately used a consecutive chain of flash strikes to escape his own magic. Taking a quick glance to his back, he saw that the cave trappers that tried to sprout from the ground get stuck in the sand and those that tried to break in from the ceiling lost their footing and fell on their backs. In the end, all were caught and buried under the heavy mass of sand and dust. This wasn’t just Terra Decay but also the effect of the unknown spell he heard Shiro chant in his head.

“Shiro, what did you do?”

“Hehe, impressed? Shiro learned this from Ranat while she was away from Onii-chan!”

“While we were in the library, huh…? But wait, you chanted in my head, right? How did that spell activate without using words?”

It was common sense in Zerid that magic was the product of mana being shaped through words. Without words, a normal person wouldn’t be able to shape the mana to cast a single spell. There were exceptions to this rule such as races with other means to shape mana like a race called Qeajrv that could evolve to a being that can cast without chanting depending on the power they have represented through their tails or senlr. Senkyo read about them in the book about calamitous energy. One of the scenes depicted the author, Voaul Oqr, interacting with them in pursuit of a clear definition of this unknown power.

The point was that Shiro should not have been able to cast magic in his head since her race, the Nemi, do not have a special ability that allows them to do so. To clear his visible confusion, Shiro quickly explained, or at least, to the extent she knew.

“Well, Ranat just said that a familiar like Shiro has the ability to do that! She said something about mana being controlled by her thoughts instead of words, but we didn’t have time to talk about it.”

“I see… Ranat again, huh?”

Every time that librarian popped into Senkyo’s mind, he couldn’t weave any realistic situations that he would be satisfied with that can explain her actions. She randomly showed up out of nowhere to help Shiro and then assist Senkyo by handing him a book about the familiar pact. He didn’t have any answers, so for now, he focused on the test in front of him.

**365 – Trade-Off**

*“\*They’re retreating!\*”*

Senkyo said to Shiro as the five mana signatures of magic arms fell back. Fortunately, with the information he collected from Scout’s Breath earlier, he knew that it was only a trap where five more magic arms were awaiting them further back. Along with their retreat came another swarm of bomb jockeys to blind his vision again as well as the cave trappers that would eventually engage with him. Normally, he would ignore the reinforcements and focus on the magic arms, but with the knowledge of there being five more at the back, he decided to take his time and clear the enemies in front of him.

“O Darkness, what falls are the ignoble vipers, and what rises are only they who stay true. Seek control of the body around you and expel those that threaten your land. Pressure Drive!”

*“\*O Clear Canvas, your strength lies with them who hold the brush. Lend your energy, liven the potency of their stroke, and become the medium for their passion. Power Augmentation!\*”*

Finishing their chants at the same time, the corrosive liquid and the approaching enemies around Senkyo were all pushed back to the cave walls, a strong gravitational force pressing them to the solid rocks. Meanwhile, the same powerful force was placed onto Senkyo but instead of being crushed to the walls, he was shot across the air, piercing through the cave path at an incredible speed. The dark spell Pressure Drive was one that controls the gravitational force in an area and repels enemies while it shoots allies into a direction the caster chooses.

This spell was mainly used in swarms like this since it not only pushes back enemies and gives the caster space, but also stops them from increasing by having the bodies of enemies in the area block the approach of new cave trappers or other enemies in general. Usually, it would last for only a few seconds, but with the help of Shiro’s Power Augmentation, it increased the power of the spell, extending its time and further empowering the gravitational pressure released by the spell. This ended with Senkyo’s explosive increase in speed and caught up to the retreating magic arms.

At this point, even his Detect picked up the mana signatures of the five new magic arms that awaited in the backlines. With a total of ten mana signatures of magic arms, they brought their attention to Senkyo. The never-ending swarm of bomb jockeys and cave trappers refused to cease, and now, even phantom threaders joined the fray by creating 3D illusions to mess with Senkyo’s vision and mana perception.

Before the phantom threaders could act, Senkyo embedded the location of all ten mana signatures in his mind. The very moment after, the area was covered by a sheet of thick mana, concealing the mana signatures and making Detect useless.

“O Wind, change the currents of your gentle breeze, become the draft that alerts me of your presence. Exploration in a swift sweep; turn the expanse inside out and return the lay of the land. Scout’s Breath.”

*“\*Barrier! Barrier! Barrier!\*”*

Senkyo immediately used Scout’s Breath to analyze his current position. Shiro opted to cast barriers around him to stall for time. The best part about being in a cave was that the tight space limited the number of enemies that could attack Shiro’s barriers at the same time. No matter how many more enemies pour in, that didn’t change the speed of them breaking her barriers.

This time, Scout’s Breath showed no more presence of reinforcements, meaning that this would all be over the moment they cleared this last wave. However, he was under time pressure. He kept in mind the magic arms that he detected behind him on his first cast of Scout’s Breath. If he took too long here, those behind him would catch up and make everything harder. He needed to be quick.

The cave paths around him in a 20-meter radius were projected in his mind. Overlapping this image along with the mana signatures of the ten magic arms he took note of earlier, six of those signals were on the cave paths while the other four were inside walls. The four were either illusions or magic arms that were located in a cave path or tunnel that the wind from Senkyo’s Scout’s Breath couldn’t reach. The six were likely to be real but could still be fake.

There was no confirming the legitimacy of each mana signature, and on top of that, it was simply impossible to take out all ten mana signatures before any sort of reinforcements arrive from the enemies. Senkyo didn’t have that much time or power. But, he couldn’t just ignore them and rush for the exit to level S. Doing that would just bring more trouble for him in the future when he eventually has to return to the surface, and right now, he doesn’t even know where the exit is. Taking everything into consideration, he switched objectives from taking out all ten signatures to taking out only the six that were connected to his current location.

Exploring unknown territory to take out the four signatures was dangerous. It also needed Senkyo to break down walls in order to reach them. Trying to take them out would only slow him down, especially if all of them were illusions. The trade-off in targeting the six mana signals was simply better. Relaying the switch of plans to Shiro, they prepared for their breakthrough.

“O Darkness, what falls are the ignoble vipers, and what rises are only they who stay true. Seek control of the body around you and expel those that threaten your land. Pressure Drive!”

*“\*O Clear Canvas, your strength lies with them who hold the brush. Lend your energy, liven the potency of their stroke, and become the medium for their passion. Power Augmentation!\*”*

Without the enemies being able to penetrate Shiro’s solid barriers, they repeated the combo of Pressure Drive and Power Augmentation, sending the spiders back and piercing through the illusions made by the phantom threaders. The time Senkyo spent thinking amassed an insane amount of enemies shown by the spiders that were crushed to death by the gravitational force. The space they were being shot through was narrow with the bodies of crushed spiders serving as their new walls. But, it was no time to be amazed by the carnage or the power that caused it. Setting useless thoughts aside, Senkyo took out six rock talismans and Hkrwir fangs, the fangs from the centipede-like creatures he encountered on level D.

Each rock talisman was merged with a Hkrwir fang through spirit power. All six of them had a circuit with Interaction at the center inside of Connection on the rock talisman while the Hkrwir fang had a circuit of Connection at the center of the symbol for Spirit, extending at the tip of the arc with the symbol of Domination followed by Repetition. Then, he chanted.

“O Light, I am as I desire to be. Hunting my adversaries with tooth and nail, created through falsehoods. Call upon the roar of the heavens and bring those that oppose it to a daze, follow my word. Ephemeral Clone!”

As Senkyo began his chant, Shiro followed.

*“\*O Clear Canvas, the emptiness that fills you is not the void but the mirror that reflects the spirit of the painter. Become the manifestation of their will and bring to life the perfect reproduction. Split Image!\*”*

Senkyo’s magic caused one of the rock talismans in his hand to jump out. Then, a copy of himself appeared with the rock talisman as its core. Following that, Shiro’s cast produced the exact same result. Senkyo widened his eyes in surprise but kept his head together and ordered both copies to split and rush down a different path from them. They repeated this two more times until all six rock talismans were consumed.

Their final two copies were produced and Senkyo sent one of them to a different path. In front of him was an illusion of himself that he and Shiro made. He ordered all six copies to perform one single thing—eliminate one of the magic arm mana signatures he sensed earlier. He sent the other five copies down the paths where he last sensed the magic arm mana signatures. One of them happened to be right in front of them, which is why he left one leading the way. Senkyo could have just taken out the magic arm by himself, but he wanted to see if the clone would execute like he wanted it to.

He and his copy continued down the path until a magic arm entered their sights. It had its natural color, signifying that it wasn’t supposed to be an illusion. Senkyo stood back while his copy charged forward. The magic arm noticed his copy’s approach and launched a flurry of low-tier fire and wind attacks. His copy was swift, dodging every single one. Realizing that its attacks were ineffective, the magic arm slammed its arms on the ground, creating numerous earth spikes below his clone, rising until they reached it. But, the clone used flash strike, zooming past the spikes and placing itself in front of the magic arm where it began to launch its bone daggers into the magic arm. Then, out of nowhere, the ceiling above the clone broke, and a cave trapper shot out from the hole and pinned the clone to the ground where it used its earth-shattering spider legs to kill the clone.

At first glance, it would look like the clone failed its goal. But then, the moment it disappeared, a blast of lightning struck the area around it, stunning the magic arm and the cave trapper. It was then followed by a heavy spray of acid that came from none other than the Hkrwir fang that was attached to the rock talisman. Unable to move, the magic arm and cave trapper could do nothing but stand inside the spray until the acid melted them to death.

This was an interesting technique Senkyo learned about while he was reading the spellbook for the dark element. Along with the clone, it was possible to place a core inside it. This core could act as an integrated source of energy and increase the durability of a clone depending on the physical strength of the core. In this situation, Senkyo’s earlier clone had the <Action Property> to hunt magic arm mana signatures while it had the <Extra Element> of lightning to stun enemies upon disappearing. Above all of this, the clones possessed a core that would activate the moment the clone disappears, activating Interaction and creating a spray of Hkrwir acid from the Spirit symbol. With this contraption, even if the clones failed to eliminate the target, as long as they are within close range of them, they will still die with Senkyo’s backup circuit.

The other clones should have executed similarly to the clone in front of Senkyo but there was still no guarantee how many magic arms he actually eliminated. He didn’t know which of the mana signatures he detected earlier were real or fake. And, there was one simple counter to his clones. If a phantom threader created a fake magic arm in front of the real one, his clones would attack the closest target with a magic arm mana signature, putting all their energy into killing a fake and letting the real target live. This method had no guarantees, but it was the only thing he could do to break down the enemies in the area. The arachne sage that controlled everything simply placed its pawns in the most optimal positions so that Senkyo wouldn’t be able to take them all. Facing the reality of the situation, he cut off all his losses and focused on finding the path to level S. Senkyo could only hope that this last attempt of his took down enough enemy forces.

**366 – Dangers Between Levels**

After searching around level A3, Senkyo eventually found the path to level S. He encountered a few enemies while he was searching, but nothing too troublesome to stop his search. It seemed like the arachne sage chose to leave him for now. It could have been because of his last assault strike on his magic arms but instead of worrying about that, what mattered now was the obstacle in front of him. At the entrance to level S was a floor that radiated a clear mana signature. It was an illusion to hide some kind of trap made by a phantom threader. It covered both the floor and the walls but not the ceiling. He could have dug upward, but he had an easier solution in mind.

“Hup—”

He made a light hop, entering the air and suspending himself in it by creating an air foothold.

“—Eh!?”

Or at least that was what he meant to do until his body suddenly slipped from his own air platform, hurling toward the trap in front.

“I would be more careful if I were you.”

“!?!?”

A familiar voice entered his ears and his face paled when he easily pieced together what had happened. Behind him was none other than Leolja with lines of strings extending from his fingers and over the air foothold Senkyo created. He hadn’t even entered level S, but the boss that was supposed to be inside it was already behind him. These levels serve only as an indicator where the Iwaiida often stay but that didn’t mean they couldn’t leave them. What Leolja did was leave level S and waited to ambush Senkyo once he arrived at the path to level S. He was easy prey since it was obvious he would eventually walk through it.

Leolja’s free hand ignited in flames and threw the deadly inflamed strings at Senkyo. For the first time in a while, he had to be careful about the training dummy’s safety. He forced his body to twist in the air and save the dummy latched onto his back by facing the attack head-on. He would have taken damage if it weren’t for the magic barrier and physical barrier created by Shiro.

“What an annoying ability.”

A line of complaint left Leolja’s mouth as Senkyo fell through the trap in front of him, fazing through the floor, and disappearing from the area. Right as he entered the trap, he experienced a massive attack on his senses, taking the light from his eyes and reducing his vision through blindness, his ears ringing from the deafness imposed upon him, his sense of smell ceasing, his taste dulling, and his skin failing to pick up even the gentle caress of the wind.

“—!!—!!!”

It felt like Shiro was trying to say something to him but even the senses in his head couldn’t properly understand her.

“—Purify”

Senkyo couldn’t keep up with what was happening. What he did know was that whatever Shiro did began to clear his senses. It would have been great if it ended there, but then he realized that he was freefalling into a pit of sand.

“O-O Wind, usher your gentle breeze and bring forth a draft, power of the gale! Herald your mystic breath once for conflict and twice for liberty! Zephyr!!!”

He couldn’t be bothered hiding his chant and screamed it for the world to hear, but as a result, he quickly made the air below him gather into numerous high-pressure orbs. Right as his body was about to splat on the ground, they exploded, throwing Senkyo airborne once more, but this time at a slower speed that allowed him to control himself and make an air foothold. He wanted to analyze the situation but a glance was all he could afford before a cave trapper latched onto his back and pushed him off the platform.

The cave trapper tried to attack the target dummy but Shiro’s barriers were quick to build and blocked it. Senkyo made another air foothold and shook off the cave trapper. Then, he jumped and made another air foothold to dodge another cave trapper that he sensed. It was good that the immediate threat was now gone but this didn’t give Senkyo’s chest any form of relief. After all, the one glance he took along with the mana signatures to back it up told him that this was the most dangerous situation he had ever been in these tests.

Surrounding Senkyo in a circle, a total of six arachne sages were spread with their arms stretched out as they chanted magic. This was a situation that he would never end up in level A3. It wasn’t possible to have six arachne sages work together in tandem just to crush a single crawler. But this was level S, the deepest level where Leolja’s evolution stage, the demonic spider, ruled. By controlling the arachne sages, he forced them out of hiding and pitted them directly against Senkyo. It would have been great if the sages were only strong as the typical backline strategists, but the unfortunate thing was that they were also quite the force to be reckoned with in a fight.

“O Nature, Amass your power at my word. Create my weapons and impale my adversaries. Needle Storm!”

Senkyo tried to charge at one of the sages with the support of Needle Storm by his side. But then, thick strings rose from the ground and blocked Senkyo from the sages. He poured his Needle Storm and slashed the strings with his katana but to no avail. Looking upward, the circle of strings all met with Leolja’s hand, creating a cone-like prison that encaged Senkyo. Instead of trying to break through a single side, he changed his target to Leolja where all of the spider strings gathered. Just like before, he would break through that point and finish off Leolja. Senkyo steadily rose up, using flash strike to move from air foothold to air foothold, avoiding cave trappers that were dropping from above. But before he could even get to it, Leolja’s lips twisted into a smirk as the arachne sages finished chanting their spells.

From below, two trails of ice glaciers snaked through the ground, slowly rising upward with every advance as if trying to reach Senkyo’s height. Meanwhile, from above, a heavy rain of hail pelted everything below it with their solid chunks of ice. Everything the ice touched instantly froze over, solidifying the sand below him. However, this didn’t affect Senkyo with the help of Shiro’s magic barrier. The hail that would hit him would just get absorbed.

This shouldn’t have stopped his advance but then, the environment around him changed. White clouds appeared and covered the ceiling, the ice glaciers on the ground expanded taller and wider in an instant, and the ground below pilled up with snow and hail as they unceasingly dropped from the white clouds. The sight of the cave was nowhere to be seen. The same went for Leolja, the arachne sages, and the cave trappers that attacked him. Even Detect could only find the violent winter storm around him. Confined in some kind of arctic, Senkyo could only remain still as there were no visible escape routes from this place.

**367 – The Spell of Undefined Power**

Right now, Senkyo was trapped in some kind of magic. Shiro’s magic barrier still worked, proven by it absorbing the snow and hail that tried to pelt him. But, that didn’t stop the temperature from dropping. Because the magic affected the environment instead of Senkyo’s body, the magic barrier he had could not stop this magic from forming. With them trapped in a field of frost, Shiro prioritized keeping Senkyo warm by summoning numerous fireballs around him. The pressure of the cold brought their lifespan to a mere two seconds, but she continued summoning them to keep Senkyo warm. It was only a matter of time before the cold would get to him, so he needed to make the most out of the time Shiro was buying for him.

Thinking hard about what to do to escape, he was reminded of a spell he read in the spellbook for the frost element. It was the very spell that was being used on them at the moment. Icescape Prison was the name of that spell and it required the presence of five mid-tier spells to be able to cast it. From the inside, it looked like he was trapped in another dimension, but in reality, he was simply trapped in a type of container. Contrary to the scene inside, it would only look like a mass of pale blue color from an outside perspective. This would most likely allow Leolja to gather more troops. Breaking out was already one thing but thinking that his problems didn’t end there made him have a slight headache.

Back when he was reading in the library, he quickly disregarded Icescape Prison for being hard to cast. The same went for other high-tier spells, but putting those aside, he focused more on the requirements of these spells and found that most of them often required Dimensional Layer and Structural Synthesis. From the looks of it, these were the prominent spells that could make high-tier spells. Out of curiosity, he remembered the spell for Dimensional Layer while reading the spellbook for the dark element, but since Structural Synthesis was a null element and Senkyo didn’t get the time to search it due to Gaeka’s attack, he didn’t know how to cast it.

While narrating his whole thought process in his mind, Shiro spoke up to tell him.

*“\*Shiro knows how to cast Structural Synthesis!\*”*

“…Ahaha… so you do…”

*“\*Yep! Ranat taught Shiro!\*”*

“…I thought that would be the case.”

Since Shiro apparently learned many null magic spells from Ranat, he was hoping she would know this one as well. The only way to break out of Icescape Prison was to overload the space with searing hot flames that can melt the ice faster than it can freeze. The most troublesome part of this magic was the fact that it regenerated more ice the more you damage it. If one were to make a dent, the prison will expand and thicken the ice. Theoretically, breaking down the Icescape is possible with brute strength, but only if they are able to break the entire space in a single blow and get out of the Icescape before it regenerates its walls. This varies by how strong the Icescape Prison is built, but typically, using fire was best.

Taking all of this into consideration, Senkyo was thankful to have Dimensional Layer and Structural Synthesis in his arsenal. After all, if his most powerful fire magic failed to melt the space, he would be stuck with no options.

“O Fire, lend me your power, from the pits of hell come to mine aid. Set the first point of my retribution!”

“O Fire, lend me your power, from the pits of hell come to mine aid. Set the second point of my retribution!”

…

“With the five keys set, open the gates of hell and begin my reckoning! Hell's Pillar!”

And as it turned out, after making a quick lap around the land and casting Hell’s Pillar, his most powerful spell couldn’t overpower the ice. Hell’s Pillar was able to melt the ice in the vicinity to some extent while the ice inside the column of flame was already turning into liquid. But once the spell ran out, all the damage it dealt was replaced by thicker masses of ice. At the very least, the spell warmed him up a lot.

The only way he could think of to escape was to utilize Structural Synthesis, a spell that fuses other spells. The problem was that Senkyo didn’t know how to use it and the same went for Shiro despite her being the one who knows how to cast the spell. How exactly do these spells “fuse?” Senkyo needed to understand that before being able to utilize it properly.

“Shiro, cast Structural Synthesis after my second spell.”

*“\*Understood!\*”*

Eruption, Hell’s Pillar, Knight Spell, Paired Hellfire, and Sun’s Protection. These were the only spells he knew that could utilize the fire element. Technically, he also knew other spells from the Konjou Clan, but those spells usually involve having a weapon. They weren’t fit for the highly destructive spell that he was trying to produce. The same went for Knight Spell and Sun’s Protection, but they were different in the sense that he was okay with flaunting those spells out in public.

Only now that he listed all of them did he realize how few fire spells he knew. Since fire wasn’t used in the caves because of the tight spaces, he didn’t bother reading up on fire spells. Maybe because of this Leolja used Icescape Prison on him. If Shiro didn’t learn about Structural Synthesis, everything could have very likely ended here.

“O Fire, let my hands guide you. Recreate an image of a burning hell, beginning with this small flare. Paired Hellfire!”

“O Fire, break free from your cage, exhibit your power. Scorch my path and bring upon a conflagration. Eruption!”

*“\*Invisible light that ignites the most devastating fires, you who rule the world with your omnipotent presence. I request to you: heed the call for your power, take form the shape that unites the living circuits, and give birth to a greater power. Structural Synthesis!\*”*

With a wall of flame in front of him extending outward and two bodies of fire blasting from both of his palms, Shiro cast Structural Synthesis. As a result, Senkyo tilted his head and Shiro let out a confused noise in his head.

“Nothing… happened?”

*“\*U-Umm… Sh-Shiro should have chanted it correctly! S-Structural Synthesis should have worked!\*”*

She explained in a panicked voice, clearly a bit flustered with the result of her magic.

“Calm down, Shiro. Let’s think about this for a moment.”

*“\*Y-Yes…\*”*

She slowly quieted down, but he could still feel the restlessness inside her.

“For now, let’s try out a few more combinations.”

*“\*M-Mnn…\*”*

Eruption and Knight Spell—nothing.

Knight Spell and Paired Hellfire—nothing.

Paired Hellfire and Sun’s Protection—nothing.

Knight Spell and Sun’s Protection—nothing.

Sun’s Protection and Eruption—nothing.

Every time they tried to use Structural Synthesis, they would end up with the same result. Thinking about it now, Senkyo should have stopped after the third time they failed. Right now, Shiro was down in the dumps due to the magic not working. She was probably being hard on herself for all of these failures. Senkyo would like nothing more than to comfort her but right now he was in the middle of a freezing blizzard of ice and hail. It wasn’t really a place he would want Shiro to manifest herself in. The best thing he could do now was figure out why the magic wasn’t working.

“Shiro, did Ranat say anything about Structural Synthesis?”

*“\*R-Ranat…? Y-Yes… She said to just connect it to other spells and cast it just like how Shiro usually would. Sh-Shiro thinks she’s been doing exactly what she said, but… it won’t work…\*”*

“Connect it to other spells… huh?”

Was it some kind of misinterpretation? The phrase “connect it to other spells” would probably have someone shape the mana by simply overlapping it on existing spells, but maybe that wasn’t it? An enhanced version of spells existed out there like Open Spells. It wouldn’t be weird if Structural Synthesis was another type of special spell that Senkyo didn’t know about. In fact, he already noticed signs that Structural Synthesis wasn’t like other spells he used so far.

For instance, the chant didn’t start with the usual “O <Element>.” The chant opens immediately into a sentence without this. The only other instance Senkyo remembered seeing this was… actually quite often. This pattern would only appear when he was casting a spell that the Konjou Clan taught him. Spells that were made by the clan themselves. In other words, spells that originated from Earth, not Zerid. Gale Fan, Hunting Shroud, and Phantom Blade all had chants that didn’t start with “O <Element>.” Following this trend, that would mean that Structural Synthesis was created by an earthling, not a zeldian.

Thinking about it this way, a certain phrase made him quite interested. Specifically, the part saying “take form the shape that unites the living circuits.” The word “circuit” is a common term in the enchanter class of the Konjou Clan which Senkyo was very familiar with. This thought gave him a hunch. As for whether it was right or not, there was only one way to find out.

“Shiro, I’ll try to cast Structural Synthesis. Can you observe how the mana is formed?”

*“\*…? Y-Yes, Shiro can do that.\*”*

“Thanks.”

Although a bit confused, Shiro quickly agreed. Uttering the correct string of words will control the mana around a caster. A skilled caster will be able to see and feel how the mana is being formed. As for Senkyo and Shiro, they are able to see the mana they were casting as if they were a single person. If Senkyo can figure out how this spell interacts with other magic, he would be able to find his first big lead for using Structural Synthesis.

He cast Eruption and Paired Hellfire once more. A column of flames to his front and two sprays of fire gushing out of his palms. Here, he collected the mana around him and began his chant.

“Invisible light that ignites the most devastating fires…”

Three clumps of mana highlight themselves in front of him… no, five? Six. Seven. No, unlike normal spells, this spell had no fixed number of mana it could control. As long as he willed it, the number of highlighted clumps would increase and decrease. For now, he settled with three.

“…you who rule the world with your omnipotent presence.”

Around this part, Shiro would simply connect the three clumps, placing one in each body of fire. But that doesn’t work. So, Senkyo decided to do something different.

*“\*…!\*”*

Shiro didn’t speak, but he could hear her voice piqued by Senkyo’s formation.

“I request to you:…”

Mana formations are typically made simple with the existence of spells. They would give the caster a simple guide as to how the mana should be arranged. The caster’s main job was to place the mana where they want the output to be released.

“…heed the call for your power…”

However, a spell like Structural Synthesis was completely different. The caster would be given the building blocks, but how the spell would be arranged was the caster’s responsibility.

“…take form the shape that unites the living circuits…”

This magic had no fixed form. It was a spell that was meant to be shaped by the caster to produce the result that they desire. In other words, Shiro, who had no specific image in mind for what the spell should do, could only produce nothing because of this.

“…and give birth to a greater power.”

Unlike how Shiro would support Senkyo’s previous magic by using null spells to empower them, this was not a spell that was made to support or assist. It was a spell that was made to build and create. Now that Senkyo realized this, the only person that casts this spell should be none other than a person that already has an image in mind and knows how to arrange and produce the said image. As an enchanter of the Konjou Clan, it was all too simple to meet these requirements

“—Structural Synthesis!”

A clump of mana was placed inside the product of Eruption, encasing it as if placing it inside a giant circle and two lines, the symbol for Connection and Repetition, where inside, the mana formed into symbols of Spirit and two repeats of Domination on each end of the arc. Meanwhile, the palms of his hands were encased in the same shape of mana signifying Connection, placing the symbol for Spirit in the center of Direction inside the circle. The said three circles were connected by a string of mana.

At the very moment Senkyo cast, he swept his hands through his surroundings, creating numerous cracks on the ground, all of them tracing straight lines where a second later, an enormous body of flame rose to the sky as if a volcanic eruption had occurred, save for the center where Senkyo stood unscathed. It was almost like Hell’s Pillar was cast but with a shorter height. It was just as he wanted it to happen. Instead of spewing flames, everywhere his palms point would instantly cast Eruption. A good name he thought of for this was Volcanic Palm, inspired by its effects similar to a volcanic eruption.

The ice caught by the Volcanic Palm already began to melt, but the size of this fire wasn’t even close to melting the Icescape Prison. If Senkyo waited for his flames to weaken, he would only be faced with a stronger defense. It was now or never. He hesitated for just a second after recalling a terrible memory but thinking of his goals in mind, he forced his legs and shot himself into the sea of flames.

**368 – The Fury of Hell’s Gale**

“O Fire, lend me your power, from the pits of hell come to mine aid. Set the first point of my retribution!”

“O Fire, lend me your power, from the pits of hell come to mine aid. Set the second point of my retribution!”

Running inside the flames, Senkyo began the chant for Hell’s Pillar. At the same time, he took out rock talismans and Eozea tongues from his small bags. He made sure to wrap them in his mana, just like he did with the target dummy stuck to his back, so that the flames don’t consume them and separated them into pairs. He combined the two and engraved a circuit to each one.

Placed on the rock talisman was a center of Spirit connected to a symbol for Connection by overlapping four symbols of Interaction in their ordinal directions, all inside another symbol of Connection. Meanwhile, the Eozea tongue had a center of Connection overlapping the symbol for Direction at its three points midsections, further extending the chain by overlapping another symbol for Direction at those same points, creating an inverse copy. This was placed inside the diamond of the symbol of Spirit accompanied by Domination.

“With the five keys set, open the gates of hell and begin my reckoning! Hell's Pillar!”`

*“\*O Clear Canvas, your strength lies with them who hold the brush. Lend your energy, liven the potency of their stroke, and become the medium for their passion. Power Augmentation!\*”*

*\*FVVWSSHHH!!!\**

The ground opened up, consuming the entire Icescape Prison in a devastating blaze. With the help of Shiro’s Power Augmentation, the ice in the area could not oppose the rising heat and quickly turned to liquid. As long as Senkyo continued this, he would be able to break out of the prison eventually, but that wasn’t enough for him. He didn’t expect Leolja to sit back and relax while he was stuck in the Icescape Prison. He wanted something more before breaking out. While he was inside the Icescape, despite being there to freeze him to death, it also served as a shroud to prevent outsiders from seeing what was happening inside. He wanted something that he could use to make his way to Leolja the moment he broke out, no matter where he was in the cave. For this reason, he continued chanting.

“O Darkness, spread your looming shadow away from the recognition of the naked eye and construct your boundary as you see fit. Unhindered, unfettered, unbridled: release the boundless potential that you hold! Dimensional Layer!”

*“\*O Clear Canvas, I call upon thee to grow, build, and expand. Broaden our horizon and spread your influence to the masses. Greater Plain!\*”*

A blast of dark energy sprawled within the raging flames.

“O Wind, harbinger of nature’s trial, raise a furor as you serve your harsh lessons. Shake the earth, the sea, and the sky; I call upon the power that brings tremors to the very body of nature itself. Raging Tempest!”

*“\*O Clear Canvas, I call upon thee to grow, build, and expand. Broaden our horizon and spread your influence to the masses. Greater Plain!\*”*

The flames began to dance in the sky. A mix of fire, earth, and wind could be seen as flames merged with the crumbling ground, creating molten lava and circulating it in the storm of hell. As the molten lava was not from Senkyo’s magic, Shiro placed a physical barrier on Senkyo and the target dummy to prevent it from making contact. Completely immersed in his own world, Senkyo never even realized that his life was in danger as he continued chanting his final spell.

“Invisible light that ignites the most devastating fires, you who rule the world with your omnipotent presence. I request to you: heed the call for your power, take form the shape that unites the living circuits, and give birth to a greater power—”

Volcanic Palm, Hell’s Pillar, Dimensional Layer, and Raging Tempest, all empowered by Shiro’s null magic. Senkyo summoned numerous clumps of mana and merged all of the existing magics. His mind and heart focused solely on unifying all of the various spells together to create magic on a completely different level from any of what he had cast before. The lines connected and the structure was built. Devastating magic that will turn the tides of war in a single stroke.

“—Structural Synthesis!”

The name of the spell he forged was quickly decided. Nether Firestorm.

**…………**

From beyond the walls of the Icescape Prison, Leolja was near the ceiling of the cave, standing on one of his threads, watching the sight below as a cesspool of bomb jockeys, phantom threaders, cave trappers, magic arms, and arachne sages surrounded the pillar of pale blue ice that served as Senkyo’s prison. Its exterior began to melt a few seconds ago, so he prepared the Iwaiida under his control for Senkyo’s potential breakout. He spread his threads around the vicinity to act as a net and prevent any blitz attacks on his person. He considered himself quite prepared. In fact, he was even worried that maybe he was overdoing it by putting this much pressure on his current challenger.

But then, it happened.

*\*FFFVVVVSSSHHHHH!!!\**

“!?!?!?”

A sudden blast of intense flames. He created more threads to block the pressure and placed his arms to shield his eyes and inspect the source of this attack. From the center of the cave where the thick block of pale blue ice once stood was now some sort of blazing cavity that produced the same results of a white hole. It constantly spat out a furious storm of fire and lava, the pressure making the ground crumble and fall apart, making it hard for him to see anything at all due to the cinders that assaulted his eyes despite his current defenses. He quickly tried to resolve this by creating makeshift goggles with his spider threads, only to find that his life was being threatened the moment he shaped them.

“Kghh…!”

He dodged the deadly blade that crossed this vision, sparing his arm and the spider legs on his back from being severed. Before he ever realized it, he instinctively wrapped himself in threads and launched a clump of webs into Senkyo, pushing them away from each other. Now with a bit of breathing room, he checked up on his army of Iwaiida, only to find massive clumps of his threads melting into liquid, some even dissolving. Those were the remnants of the bodies he made his illusions out of. Instead of being spread across the cave, they were collected into groups, implying that they were gathered before getting taken out. The initial blast of Senkyo’s attack almost completely annihilated the army he built up. For now, he tried to get more spiders to come as reinforcements and escape.

With the heat in the area melting his webs, it was no wonder that the net he created didn’t pick up on Senkyo’s attack. Leolja needed to keep sheeting his body with threads to maintain his armor against the storm coming from the pits of hell. Along with that, he had to create a mask and regulate artificial oxygen through it so that he could breathe. He peered through the blaze in search of an exit from the area but the heavy flames made it impossible to see through them.

He may not be able to see, but his danger senses made his hairs stand on end, warning him of the biggest threat inside the fire field. He quickly launched a clump of webs to the wall to repel him away from danger, but before it could make contact, a small cavity similar to the one in the center of the room appeared on the wall which released an aggressive blast of fire and lava, turning his webs to liquid before they could even make contact.

“G-GRAAH…!!”

Realizing his perilous position, he shaped large claws from his free arm and swiped in the direction he sensed Senkyo coming from. At the same time, the spider legs on his back spewed a blast of spider webs around his surroundings to serve as detectors and an extra line of defense. In the end, he made no contact from his panicked swipe, and neither did Senkyo continue his aggressive approach. For a second, he thought he was safe until the fog of fire and cinders revealed a peculiar rock that had some kind of tongue attached to it. When he realized that there was a circuit attached to it, Leolja could only widen his eyes before it activated.

A large blast emitted from the rock, knocking him and the spider webs he created back. But then a second later, instead of being blasted away, the force reversed and his body got sucked into the source of the blast along with his webs. Turning the explosion into an implosion, it resulted in him getting stuck in his own webs. He realized that this was what took out most of his army while he was distracted by the initial blast of Senkyo’s magic.

His body was taken out of the air with the restriction of his movements and pinned to the ground below. Senkyo stomped his body underfoot and positioned the sharp blade of his katana, threatening to cut his neck. The next thing Leolja knew, the firestorm began to calm down and Senkyo was looking at him from above with his blade placed snuggly by his neck.

“It’s over, right?”

Senkyo asked for confirmation, to which Leolja released all of the compressed air he held in his lungs in relief, limped his body, and said…

“Don’t you think that was a bit much!?”

“A-Ahh… Sorry, my bad…”

**369 – Pieces Falling Together**

After taking out Leolja, the rest of Senkyo’s time in the cave went smoothly. He simply picked a convenient place to stop and waited for five minutes while keeping enemies out to accomplish his first objective. As for the second, he searched for the target mineral at his own pace without having to deal with any extreme attacks. Without the demon spider, the arachne sages took over control to take Senkyo out but their danger was nowhere near what Leolja gave him. In the first place, the arachne sages would never place themselves in the frontline, reducing the danger Senkyo faced by a significant amount.

He often countered enemies using Pressure Drive and a few other mid-tier spells depending on the situation. It also felt like the difficulty of level S went down with the absence of a demon spider which allowed him to get used to the attacks of arachne sages at some point. Seeing as they were the second-most dangerous enemy in the sunken nest, his journey up the levels was devoid of trouble, to say the least.

Although, this wasn’t the time to get used to this, as Leolja’s last warning just before he left him on level S was him saying that there would be other demon spiders to follow in the real sunken nest. Apparently, tomorrow’s test would have Leolja come back in action no matter how many times he defeats him to simulate the situation of having numerous demon spiders on the level.

“Well done.”

Leolja greeted him as Senkyo resurfaced from the cave, the composure in his voice recovered from the last time he heard it.

“You have cleared the second day of your test. I didn’t know how today was going to turn out based on what you told me when you first arrived but it seems like it was my needless concern. You and Shir did a good job.”

“Thanks. I didn’t know what would happen too. For a second, I thought you had us with Icescape Prison but it was a good thing that Shiro knew how to cast Structured Synthesis. We would have been done for without that.”

“Yes… It was an impressive use of Structured Synthesis. I never thought I would witness such incredible magic today. Keep this up and I am certain you will obtain the right to become a splendid crawler.”

Leolja placed his hand on Senkyo’s shoulder and gave him a nod of encouragement. He returned his gaze with a genuine smile but with probing eyes.

“Hmn, thanks.”

“Well then, I must be on my way. I have already approved your entry to the surface perimeter of the sunken nest. Simply state your name to one of Haeqras’ staff and they will escort you. Collect what you must but keep in mind that entering the sunken nest itself is prohibited. Haeqras’ staff and the guards there will make sure of that. We will be meeting tomorrow at the same time, so please be prepared.”

“I’ll make sure… but, just before you go, I actually have a question.”

“Oh? What would that be?”

Leolja remained in place and kept his eyes locked with Senkyo’s, waiting for his response.

“…”

“…”

The silence continued, creating an awkward atmosphere and making Leolja tilt his head in confusion.

“…Is there something wrong, Senkyo?”

“Ah… No, I was just wondering what made you so good at handling your illusions.”

“There’s no special trick to it. I’ve seen all kinds of people both in my time in the Sunken Nest and as a Riser. It’s all about the experience.”

“Is that so? I’ll be sure to keep that in mind for the future.”

“I am glad I was able to be of service. Then, I will be off.”

Saying that, Leolja turned his back and left the artificial caves. As Senkyo saw him disappear from his vision, Shiro couldn’t help but be curious about his actions.

*“\*Onii-chan, why did you ask Leela that?\*”*

To her, it may seem like he just asked a random question out of nowhere, but to Senkyo it meant something else completely.

*“\*Shiro, I think Leolja knows about Spirit Power and Circuits.\*”*

He said to her in his mind, keeping their conversation away from the outside world.

**…………**

Footsteps echoed once more from a certain gloomy hallway. There was only one person who would walk down this red hallway that possessed a stride with this rhythm, and the person working in a dimly lit room knew this.

“Leolja, you’re back. What’s the status?”

“I thought I was going to die.”

“Not that, you idiot! How much DNA did you gather?”

“Would it kill you to be a bit more concerned about me?”

“Not when we’re this close!”

Leolja could only let out a sigh in resignation to the man’s attitude and flicked on the light switch to the room.

“Tsk.”

“Deal with it.”

He brushed off the man’s dissatisfied tone and brought him a cloth bag. He placed the contents of the bag on the workbench where the man analyzed the items.

“A vial of sweat and just shy of half a vial of blood… There’s significantly less than yesterday’s haul, huh?”

“There was nothing I could do. His attack on me burnt the hair I collected and he cleared the sunken nest with much fewer problems compared to last time.”

“That’s… a bit unfortunate. How was he compared to yesterday?”

“Like a completely different person. Honestly, I think that he was just holding back before. He used so much more magic this time than last time. He didn’t even use much spirit power and he still managed to become so troublesome.”

“Sounds like you weren’t kidding that he beat you up hard, huh? On the bright side, this is what we want too, so don’t be down about it.”

“I know that. But, did invading his mind really power him up that much? You cannot blame me for thinking it’s hard to believe.”

“Hm? Did he use creation magic on you?”

“I don’t think so, from what I can tell at least.”

“Then what I did should have done nothing to power him up. Maybe his mana flow became smoother than before but nothing decisive without creation magic.”

“What are you talking about? Then how do you explain his explosive increase in power? Are you actually going to say that he was holding back?”

“I don’t know for sure, but Adeira did say that he was in the library reading a stack of spellbooks. According to a third party, he was researching which spells would be useful for his test today.”

“Researching…? Care to explain what that means?”

“You know, handpicking spells and remembering which ones are useful… or something like that.”

“Are you telling me I lost because he spent an all-nighter cramming spells into his brain…? Do you understand just how absurd that sounds?”

“Of course I do. If you could learn spells just by remembering them and chanting them correctly, there would be no need for magic schools around the world. Understanding the mana structure of the spell, how it is integrated into their chant, knowing how to pour the right amount of mana, and manipulating said mana to produce the desired outcome. Sure, the chants of spells make it easier but that doesn’t change the fact that it’s a practiced skill. All of those are important especially when trying to cast formulation spells like Structured Synthesis. If I didn’t know who this desperate crammer was, I would have thought you’d gone insane.”

“So he is some kind of exception, is what you are trying to say?”

“…That’s the kind of existence he is. An anomaly. That’s why we’re going to use him. Nothing better than to pit monsters against monsters. Besides, this will be beneficial for him too, so don’t feel too bad.”

“Can you be more specific? Do know that it is hard to follow you up if you keep me in the dark with your cryptic words.”

“He’s… someone you’re better off forgetting. That man is destined to fall along with his power. The only thing anyone can do about that now is to lead him so that he falls in a way that’s more convenient for everyone involved. I’ll be the one to do that. Leolja, just remember, do not get too involved with him. Especially after all this trouble blows over. Someone who has never experienced the outside world like you should just stick with working for their own sake. There are better things to do out there, and getting involved with that man isn’t one of them.”

The man took the two vials of liquid, turned his back to Leolja, and resumed his work. From then on, he ignored Leolja’s presence as if he was never there. The Iwaiida gentleman could only look at his working figure with concern.

“…You never listen to me, do you?”

Leolja said bitterly and left the room.

**370 – What Could Be Lost or Gained**

*“\*So… Leela shouldn’t have been able to make his illusions react how they did if he didn’t know how Onii-chan’s spirit power and circuits work?\*”*

*“\*Basically, yes. Thinking about it, it’s pretty amazing how he made them work with the way I set my circuits. Since the output of the Spirit symbol highly depends on my thoughts and will, he was doing the same thing as reading my mind with every circuit.\*”*

Senkyo and Shiro discussed the issue with Leolja as they waited in the elevator to arrive at their floor. The time entered the evening as the nocturnal sky looked over the earth. Before returning to Elqa, their hotel, the two first prioritized securing leaves that Senkyo could use as talismans. Just as Senkyo expected, the Haeqras staff and the guards placed around the sunken nest watched him with suspicious eyes as he picked the leaves from the trees. This was more than likely the first-ever request that someone was given permission to pick leaves from trees around the sunken nest. No one understood what he was after, which led them to think that Senkyo had an ulterior motive, making it all the more awkward for him as he chanted phrases in his mind like: “You’re misunderstanding!” or “I’m just here for the leaves, I swear!” and “I’m not suspicious so please don’t look at me like that!” Of course, saying them aloud would only dig his grave deeper, so he collected the leaves in silence.

After filling the three small bags strapped around his chest with them, they dropped by the food district to eat a quick dinner and headed back home. This led to Shiro bringing up the subject with Leolja again as she summarized what Senkyo told her while they were out picking leaves and eating food. Apparently, Senkyo didn’t think of it as much at first, but after reading a more detailed discussion of how illusions work in the spellbook for the dark element, he realized that most of what his spirit power and circuits were doing should have no effect against them. Yet, Leolja still made his illusions react appropriately to Senkyo’s spirit skills.

*“\*But, that doesn't mean that Leela is an enemy, right!?\*”*

Shiro said in a panicked voice. This reaction was to be expected. She placed her trust in him, after all. The last thing she wanted to hear about him is how he was actually an enemy from the very beginning. Senkyo didn’t see her since she was still inside his body, but he could imagine the anxious face she was making.

*“\*Well, it’s certainly a possibility, but nothing certain. All in all, I’m just saying that Leolja was hiding the fact that he knew about spirit power and circuits from us. Then again, it’s not like I asked him directly about it, but you’d expect a normal person to say a word or two about it. Revealing any more of our cards was risky, so I had to be indirect about extracting information.\*”*

*“\*Then he’s… not our enemy…?\*”*

*“\*…For now, no. But he is in the grey area.\*”*

*“\*…\*”*

Shiro was down about Senkyo’s response, but he didn’t want to sugarcoat the truth and answered her honestly. Despite expecting this reaction he couldn’t help but feel the frustration of not being able to do anything about it. Shiro was the one who suggested to trust Leolja while Senkyo wanted to be more conservative. If everything here ended poorly, it could highly impact Senkyo’s future operations as it might damage Shiro mentally. As she showed earlier today, she could do more than just remain on stand-by and wait to receive attacks. If he lost her motivation or spirit here, it could be detrimental. It was clear that his main objective was to make it so that trusting Leolja was an overall beneficial decision.

Senkyo exited the elevator and entered their penthouse suite as he pondered. Shiro manifested herself from Senkyo and opened the lights for him. Seeing this reminded him of a certain order he gave her.

*“\*Fine... Shiro, I order you to act like how you normally do and not let your freedom be restricted by dumb orders or magic, decide everything with your own will, you got that!?\*”*

It was the first and last order Senkyo ever gave Shiro as her master. Because of this, she was able to manifest herself however she liked and allowed her to address him how she did before she became a familiar. Ever since then, Senkyo refused… or more accurately, forgot about the fact that he had the power to control Shiro’s will. Of course, without negating his first order, every other order he gives her would only sound like requests, but that wasn’t the point. What mattered was what a certain mysterious librarian told him recently.

*“\*As the master of Miss Shiro, you should be able to perceive her physical and mental conditions as you please. Using this privilege, the task of determining whether or not she is affected by the mind control Sir Adeira mentioned would be trivial.\*”*

Ranat went on about the depth of a familiar pact and how its true power would only arise once both spirits of master and familiar became one. She mentioned how the trick to managing familiars lay in the orders that the master gives and how the familiar should have the ability to adjust themselves to the master’s wish. In other words, the pact wasn’t made to have someone subservient to another. The real purpose of the familiar pact was a contract of mutuality which would work best if both parties of the contract were on equal standings.

Thinking about it now, Senkyo and Shiro’s relationship was far from equal. For others, it might sound like Senkyo was taking advantage of Shiro, but as embarrassing as it was to admit, it was closer to the other way around. It wasn’t like Shiro was actively taking advantage of Senkyo. He just placed Shiro in a position of higher importance than his own. The overly complicated speech he was using in his mind would simply translate in layman's terms as: “He spoiled her too much.”

Shiro watched Senkyo from the sofa as he paced through the room. It looked strange from her perspective, but it would become even stranger if she knew that the reason for his agitated behavior was that he was having an internal argument with himself trying to justify his overprotective treatment of her. At some point, he finally calmed down and checked the pile of books that he borrowed from the library on his first day of arriving at Iqanlr.

Beside the pile, there lay a notebook that he bought on his way from the library to Elqa on his first night in Iqanlr. There wasn’t much content in it, but it did have a brief list of races, forageable items, animals, and food recipes. By brief, that meant having about four to seven items on each list. He took the time to write them down before visiting Haeqras for the crawler test. Out of the whole notebook, what Senkyo focused all his efforts on wasn’t the list, but the map of Yuwokrn that he sketched onto the back of the notebook. Flipping to the last page, he took his pen and hovered over the east side of Ridsikrn. Nothing happened. Before his pen could make contact with the paper, he pulled back with a sigh and returned the notebook and pen. For a second, it felt like he was on the cusp of realizing something. It had the same sensation as remembering something important he needed to do but still had his memory fail him.

Instead of that, his eyes naturally landed on the other book that he didn’t expect to have. Its title: “Foundations of the Familiar Pact Ritual; The Truth Behind the Binding Circles,” the book that Ranat gave him. Taking his mind off of the realization his mind failed to provide, he prioritized what he did realize, which was the importance of the relationship between master and familiar.

**371 – Unsolvable Condition**

“Shiro, what does being a familiar feel like?”

“Hm? Being a familiar…?”

Senkyo took the book for the familiar pact and sat beside Shiro on the sofa. Confused at his sudden question, she tilted her head and gave Senkyo a lost gaze. Picking up the need to explain himself better, he continued.

“Yeah. Before you became my familiar, you were a normal person just like everyone else, right? No magical restrictions or strange pacts, just a life with you as my little sister. Compared to those days, is there anything different now that you’re my familiar?”

“A difference… hmm…”

Shiro stopped to think about her answer, pinching her chin between her fingers with her tail waving softly and her ears twitching from time to time. Watching her cute gestures healed a portion of Senkyo’s internal stress. It was times like this when he was reminded of how fortunate he was to have such an adorable little sister, which fueled his determination to protect her even more.

“Shiro thinks that…”

“Oh!”

With the start of her voice, Senkyo snapped back into reality and strained his ears to listen to Shiro.

“…she likes being Onii-chan’s familiar is better. Before, Shiro was just Onii-chan’s little sister. At the time, she was nothing but only an object that everyone needed to protect. Shiro… Shiro didn’t like that… No, Shiro hated that.”

“…”

“Just being protected by Onii-chan, Yuuto-san, and everyone around us. Shiro hated being a useless doll.”

“…!”

*\*Useless\**

Hearing that word made Senkyo sunder. It was like something inside him was forcefully ripping his heart in two. The most confusing part about this feeling was the fact that he didn’t know where it was coming from. Simply, from seemingly nowhere, that word resounded in his heart.

“That’s why… That’s why, right now, Shiro likes that she is able to help Onii-chan in any way possible! J-Just earlier, when Shiro began using null magic to empower Onii-chan’s magic, it made her soooooo~ happy!! For the first time in a while, Shiro actually felt like she was being helpful… That she was actually doing something for a change. So… the biggest difference between now and then is that now… Shiro is happy! Yep~!”

Shiro gave Senkyo a bright smile. Just like her countless others, pure and filled with genuine emotion. Against this, Senkyo was completely unable to fight against. While Shiro was thinking her hardest about what to answer, he was drowning in his own fantasies thinking about how it would be best if Shiro would remain untouched by the cruelty of reality and that he would keep her protected in every way possible. But now, he realized that doing so would be completely against Shiro’s will.

*“\*Shiro is happy,\*”* she said.

A joy derived from finally being free from protection. That was what Shiro’s voice seemed to relay as she said it. Flipping through the book of the familiar pact, he returned to a certain page that caught his eye when he first skimmed the book and showed a bittersweet smile. There, it wrote…

\*The formation of a single, compact soul is an absurdly grueling yet very much possible goal to reach. May it be happiness, anger, sadness, envy, excitement, malice, lust, or any other emotion possible. To a party of two people connected by a familiar pact, sharing such matching wavelengths is the key to unlocking the true potential of the pact. Having one’s own self, having one’s own goal, knowing the other’s own self, knowing the other’s own goal, and at some point, resonating with their soul for a single purpose. The familiar pact was coined such that the two related parties will achieve a partnership that transcends those that mere mortals could only dream of achieving.\*

“They meant Familiar as in ‘intimacy’ instead of a ‘demon’s henchman…’ huh? ”

Taking and giving. Sharing and compensating. The text continues on how the state of being a “compact soul” is all about parting and gaining different qualities, personalities, opinions, and the like so that the two parties involved in the pact reach a level of “equilibrium,” the state where the quality of both parties are the same. And from there, both parties must reach a sort of consensus to unlock the true power of the familiar pact.

Taking Shiro and Senkyo’s will right now, they both oppose each other. Shiro wanted to be free and unsheltered by the people around her while Senkyo wanted to keep her protected from everything that could possibly harm her. If Senkyo wanted to be connected with Shiro through “happiness,” then she, who was already happy, didn’t need to do anything else. “Taking and giving. Sharing and compensating,” reading this passage, Senkyo knew all too well what to do. But it still didn’t stop it from being hard for him to do.

If Senkyo ever wanted the chance to release the true potential of his familiar pact with Shiro, he needed to accept that it be better for Shiro to be constantly exposed to danger than being under his wing. Thinking about it normally, it would make sense since she would never truly grow if all her problems were being solved by someone besides her. But what if the problem involved having her life in danger? Would it be fine to let her fend for herself? What would happiness do if Shiro died? Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

“Onii-chan…? What’s wrong?”

Before Senkyo even knew it, he had his face to the ground with his brows furrowed, making a tense expression.

“A-Ahaha…”

Conflicted, he could do nothing but let out an awkward laugh. His terrible attempt at a poker face revealed his anxiety to Shiro.

“…”

“…”

The heavy atmosphere sealed everyone’s mouths making it seem unbearable. Or at least, to Senkyo. When he tried to look at Shiro, he found her unwavering gaze locked onto his face, making him avert them instinctively. He was ashamed. There was only one optimal solution to this problem, not to mention, it was the choice that Shiro would rather have. Yet, he couldn’t get himself to accept that. It felt like he was being a child, but his primary concern was Shiro’s possible death. Was it wrong to want to have someone precious away from death? No, it was not, but at the same time, it would be better if she were to have experience of being exposed to it. Especially in this world where everything could possibly kill her.

Senkyo wanted to have more power to protect Shiro and everyone important to him, but to empower himself through the familiar pact, he needed to place Shiro in danger. If he chose not to, then not only would it become impossible for him to unlock the true potential of the familiar pact, but he might also endanger Shiro in the long run by taking valuable experience from her. The moment a time came when Senkyo wasn’t there to protect Shiro, then she would have nothing. This was what be defined as a paradox, or better yet, a catch-22. There was no escape from his contradictory conditions. Because of this, he could only stay silent.

“…”

“…!?”

In the same way, Shiro kept quiet but unlike how Senkyo could do nothing, she placed herself in between his legs and sat there. It was the same position he found himself in earlier that day when Shiro turned him into a chair. Back then, it was a bit awkward, but now, he found his arms unthinkingly wrapping around her and his hand moving to pet her head. At this moment, Senkyo didn’t think much about anything else and simply said…

“Sorry.”

“Shiro will always be on Onii-chan’s side no matter what happens.”

“I know.”

He didn’t know what this phenomenon was or why it was working, but he could already feel his chest loosening from her presence.

**…………**

Time passed for the two. Before they even realized it, they fell asleep on the sofa. Senkyo found this out when he woke up in the middle of the night. Slightly confused as his consciousness returned, he rubbed his eyes to clear his vision.

“…!!!”

However, that wasn’t all. The reason for his wake wasn’t just a spontaneous rise, but because of a certain signal running through his head.

“Shiro! It’s time to move!!”

Devoid of the gentleness he had earlier, he quickly forced Shiro to wake up with a sudden shake.

“W-W-What!?”

She was startled, and rightfully so, but there was no time to explain the situation.

“Get inside me! NOW!”

“Hu—”

Without even getting to respond, or more accurately, getting cut off by her reply, Shiro turned to light and got absorbed into Senkyo’s body. Without hesitation, he used flash strike and headed for the balcony. Before him, numerous pillars of smoke and fire rose from various areas in the city. From the penthouse suite’s balcony where it overlooked the normally wonderful city, he could hear screams and sounds of battle from everywhere below. Setting aside his confusion, he searched for a safe place to run to and jumped off the balcony with flash strike.