**372 – Searching the City**

*“\*W-W-What’s happening, Onii-chan!?\*”*

Shiro asked with her voice shaking from the sudden chaos she was thrown into after waking up. One moment she was in the land of dreams, and the very next she was woken up by Senkyo and falling from the sky into a burning city. Everything was happening so fast that it was overloading her brain.

*“\*We were in danger.\*”*

Senkyo said as he approached the ground at a controlled pace with his flash strike and air footholds. He made sure to land in a quiet area and entered an alleyway to sneak through the streets.

*“\*The sensors I set up detected hostile movement approaching us.\*”*

He referred to the security system he arranged using the last of his leaf talismans yesterday.

*“\*There were a lot of them but I definitely picked up Professor Gaeka’s presence. The last thing I want is a confrontation with him silencing my use of spirit power or magic, so I hurried out. Thankfully, I built the scout talismans so that they could slow down enemies around them, so that bought us more time.\*”*

*“\*Professor Gaeka!? But, didn’t Adeira say that he wouldn’t attack us if we had the thing he gave us?\*”*

*“\*He did… that’s why I’m worried. It’s a fact that the pendant kept him from bothering us the whole day, but he chose this specific time to attack us. With the city suddenly plunged into chaos, it’s hard to say that this is some kind of coincidence. I don’t know what they have planned but I’m afraid of their confidence. I know Sir Adeira said that the pendant is basically unstoppable but it could be predictable. I don’t want to use it yet just in case they have something up their sleeves. First, let’s gather as much information as possible.\*”*

*“\*O-Okay!\*”*

Senkyo remained in hard-to-spot places as he moved from building to building through the city. His first observation was that most of the people had already fled the streets. Compared to how it usually was in the daytime, instead of people being sprawled all over the place, there were only a few groups here and there. If this were Earth, he would have assumed they evacuated somewhere but this was Zerid. As Leolja explained in his backstory, the reason no one batted an eye at the presence of a demon spider on the surface was that the average person knew more than simple self-defense. In an emergency like this, it was possible that the residents were out fighting somewhere, but he still couldn’t be sure.

The second observation he made was that it was hard to tell which could be his possible enemies. In the places with patches of fire, Senkyo got to watch a few sparks of conflict. The fights would usually be civilians against guards. The guards would be first to strike and the civilians would work together to fend them off. Then, there were other times where civilians fought other civilians which made it hard to tell enemy and ally apart. For now, it was factual that civilians were the only ones on the defensive while guards and a few other civilians were on the offensive. It didn’t seem like the guards were doing this as a part of their duty, so a simple way to wrap this up is that guards are always hostile.

Because of the guards usually being the oppressors, Senkyo figured that the situation was some kind of coup. It would be great if he could check where the government’s office was but he didn’t know where it was located. From his experience, it would usually be in the center of the city, so he slowly made his way there.

As he approached his destination, he ended up in a familiar street. This was the path he would usually take to get to Haeqras. He turned to the end of the road where he would find the local Haeqras with a single left turn and saw a pillar of smoke coming from that specific location. Curious as to what happened, he cleared the road for enemies and made a short detour to Haeqras.

To avoid a group of guards that were coming from Haeqras, he ended up climbing the buildings and perching at a high but obstructed location to get a bird’s eye view of the area. There, he found that the local Haeqras was indeed in flames and unmoving bodies sprawled at its front door. There were both guards and civilians unconscious on the street with the number of downed guards doubling the number of civilians. Among the group, one of them looked more familiar than the others. He wanted to take a closer look at the scene but the problem with his position was that he could only see the front of Haeqras. He was hidden from everywhere else but that also meant that he couldn’t see anything except what he was seeing now. He was forced to move from his location.

After a bit of careful navigation, he cleared any possible hostiles in the area and sent his leaf talismans out as sensors to warn him of anyone that entered. Now that he was somewhat safe, he left the shadows and went out to the street to inspect the group of unconscious people. His eyes looked for the person that he recognized earlier. It was a guard with a tail and two horns protruding from his helmet. In Zerid, that simple description could fit just about anyone, but this specific guard was the one that he interacted with the most when he first arrived at Iqanlr’s walls.

*“\*Shiro, this is…uhhm, Rnei, right? The guard that tried to get my blood when we first got here.\*”*

*“\*Mnn… Honestly, Shiro doesn’t know. She didn’t see his face and she couldn’t care less about some guard so she doesn’t know.\*”*

*“\*You make a point but, oof. I wouldn’t want to be the subject of that descriptor. Anyway…\*”*

Senkyo took off the helmet from the person that looked like Rnei and revealed his face. He had purple skin and seemed to be young about in his late teens or a young adult, in terms of Earth standards. But what drew his attention was his half-dead face with soulless eyes and his mouth wide open with saliva dripping out of it. He even doubted he was alive and checked for a pulse. Thankfully, even though he was of a different race, he still had a pulse and had them in the same location a human would. Half-dead but still alive. He stepped away from Rnei and inspected the other bodies and found that the majority of them were in the same state. Specifically, all of the guards and a few of the civilians. This ratio of the half-dead people had the same ratio of hostiles he saw running around the city. He wasn’t foolish enough to pass this as a simple coincidence.

He thought of waking up one of the civilians who didn’t look like they were at death’s door but postponed his plans. No matter how much surveillance he had in the area, Senkyo had no desire to fight any enemies at the moment. Just to be safe, he opted to carry the bodies of the civilians that didn’t look like enemies and placed them in a building with only one entrance. Strategically speaking, it was the building that was easiest to guard and when push came to shove, Senkyo could easily make another escape exit with his magic. After moving everyone into the building, he took Rnei with him as well just so he could keep observing the state of his potential enemies. Of course, he had him tied in a rope he found while he was sneaking from building to building.

To secure their safehouse, he placed leftover rock talismans he had around the building and created a field circle to keep any sound from escaping and hide their presence. Once he finished fortifying the area, he turned to the unconscious group he kept in the corner.

**373 – The Krikrt Group**

“Shiro, can do you something to get them conscious?”

*“\*Mnn… Shiro doesn’t know if it will work, but she has an idea.\*”*

“Okay, then I’ll leave it to you.”

*“\*Got it!\*”*

A bright light formed from Senkyo’s chest and manifested Shiro as it shot out onto the center of the room.

“This should work with Onii-chan’s field circle…”

She stretched her hand out to the center where a rock talisman was placed engraved with a circuit to hide their location. Senkyo watched with interest as this was most likely something she got from Ranat too.

“Nemian Grace! Nature’s Time!”

The two spells she cast sounded familiar to Senkyo. Those were the ones Shiro used in the past to get out of precarious situations. To his memory, Nemian Grace was a spell that manifests the power of Shrio’s race and cures all disabilities. The next was Nature’s Time which accelerates the natural restoration of the target. From what he knew, both were mid-tier spells and Nemian Grace was a unique spell that could only be cast by Shiro’s race. Yet, she used both of them with ease on his field circle, making it seem like they were nothing more than mere low-tier spells.

“Ugg… Kgrhh…”

“Oh, it worked!”

Senkyo exclaimed as the unconscious group arose. The closest one to him was the first to get up. He had a large body and pig-like features. The man clutched his head and shook it from side to side as if to shake off his drowsiness and regain his focus.

“Hello? Are you okay?”

“Knh…!?”

“Whoa!”

When Senkyo first approached the pigman, he responded with a quick draw with a knife hidden in his clothes. Senkyo instinctively responded by using kindled spirit power coating one of the kunai on the utility strap wrapped around his chest to intercept and block the blade. With the knife stopped, Senkyo backed off and retracted the kunai before the kindled spirit power coating it disappeared.

“L-Let’s all calm down now, okay? I’m Yukou Senkyo, and I brought you all here when I saw everyone knocked out in front of Haeqras. I don’t mean any harm; I’m just confused at what’s happening and I want my questions to be answered.”

He appealed to the group with a calm tone and took both of his hands out, wordlessly saying that he was of no threat. Then again, the ones who were able to see how Senkyo blocked the sudden attack on him just now may think otherwise. He didn’t even need to use his body to draw a weapon.

“Yukou… Senkyo… Hey, isn’t that the person Sir Leolja was testing…?”

“Eh?”

Another person suddenly uttered something startling, making everyone’s eyes turn to him and subsequently, to Senkyo. The sudden mention of his name produced a confused voice out of his mouth.

“It’s… the person that’s taking the level S test right?”

“The bois were sayin’ he has a Nemi familiar with ‘em. Ain’t that her?”

“Yeah, I saw him come out of the testing grounds earlier! That’s definitely him!”

“I heard rumors that he passed the 2nd day faster than the first!”

“He’s that strong…? Wait, then doesn’t this mean we’re lucky!?”

The crowd suddenly got rowdier as they talked about Senkyo. He didn’t know what was happening, but the fact that the group in front of him somehow recognized him despite not ever meeting them all but exposed who they were.

“Umm, is everyone here a crawler from Haeqras?”

“Yea!”

“That’s right!”

“You got it!”

Varying responses of confirmation resounded around the room. It was just as expected. The most likely group of people to hear such rumors and get found unconscious in front of Haeqras were none other than crawlers. Though, he had to take a step back from the pressure of their united yell. From the crowd, the pigman that attacked him earlier walked up to him with his knife sheathed. He even made a show of hands to make sure everyone could see he was unarmed.

“Sorry ‘bout that earlier. I get a bit jumpy when strangers try to come up to me. It’s a habit I picked up in the business. I heard about you. Probably every local crawler has. We barely get anyone on access level S, so it was bound to happen. The name’s Krikrt, a level A2 local crawler.”

Krikrt took out his hand and Senkyo followed his example to shake hands.

“Nice to meet you.”

The firm greeting cleared up the initial tension inside the room when everyone first woke up. Since no one else was walking up to talk to him, Senkyo assumed that Krikrt immediately got recognized as the leader of everyone present. He said he was a level A2 crawler, so the man in front of him was no pushover.

“So, as I asked earlier…”

“Wait a sec.”

Krikrt cut off Senkyo with a strong voice and raised his volume, asserting that he should be the first to speak. Not wanting to stir any conflicts, Senkyo quickly yielded.

“First things first, we know more than you do, so we’d appreciate it if you told us what happened to us while we were out cold. I’ll be clear: we’ll all answer whatever questions you have, but we don’t want to hold back any decisions we could make now. The last thing we want is to sit here tellin’ stories everyone already knows while all hell is breakin’ loose outside that door. Do you got that?”

“That… makes sense. Okay, I understand.”

It was more efficient to prioritize getting the larger group up to date since the information would get passed on to more people. Because they already knew what was happening around them, they would have better knowledge of what decision to be made and when. Contrary to that, the only people who were clueless about what was happening were Senkyo and Shiro. It would take longer to explain the situation to them and the only time they can finally make optimal decisions is when that explanation ends. It was quicker to make the best decisions when Krikrt’s group get the information first.

Realizing this, Senkyo told them all about the guards that fled the scene where he first found the whole group lying on the ground outside Haeqras. He followed this up by telling them about the presence of a security system he made and the fact that he brought one of the guards into the room for observational purposes. Senkyo didn’t get into too much detail due to time constraints and because he didn’t want to expose his methods. Krikrt and the others probably caught onto this but let the subject go, perhaps due to some kind of proper manners among crawlers.

“A test subject, huh?”

Krikrt mused to himself as he turned to the unconscious Rnei tied up in a corner. Everyone followed his gaze as he walked up to the guard. He scrutinized his body carefully, pacing around him from left to right. Then, he stopped in front of him, placed his knee on the ground to crouch to Rnei’s eye level, and forcefully opened his eyelids. Finally, he spoke.

“He’s… not infected.”

His words reached everyone’s ears, creating ripples of murmurs and exclamations of disbelief, doubt, and confusion. He retracted his body from Rnei’s personal space and said.

“Y’all can check if you want, but he ain’t infected. If what Senkyo is tellin’ us is true, then we can just stay here for a while. Ah, Urikae! Everyone except for you! Get your ass over to the Lord’s mansion and deliver a message to Sir Leolja!”

“W-What!!!”

“No complainin’ unless ya wanna get slugged!”

He took the man he called Urikae by the shoulder and told whispered something to him in the corner. A few seconds later, he kicked his behind and shoved him to the door where Urikae fearfully covered his body with his black cloak and carefully exited the building as if fleeing. Senkyo didn’t know what happened there but the scene was similar to an exchange between some school bully and his gofer. After finishing his work, Krikrt walked back to Senkyo.

**374 – Behind the Chaos**

“Sorry about that. It’s a bit hard to move that guy after everythin’ that happened, but he’s our most talented scout so he’s the only one I can count on.”

“Uhh, yeah, no worries here…”

Even after half-threatening Urikae to fulfill his orders, it seemed like Krikrt recognized his ability to some extent which made it slightly more wholesome… or so Senkyo would like to think. Either way, there was no doubt that Krikrt was already making his moves just like he said he would and came to Senkyo to fulfill the other half of his promise.

“Anyway, I want to know what happened to the city.”

“That’s fine. Where do ya want me to start?”

“First… how did this chaos start?”

“I don’t know all of the details, but about an hour ago, all of the guards suddenly started attackin’ everythin’ around ‘em. We were at a bar at the time and held back the attack in the area but other places weren’t so lucky. Before we knew it, a spider from Sir Leolja came and explained a bit of the situation. Apparently, somethin’ was brainwashing all of the guards to go insane, so he asked us to take care of ‘em through non-lethal means. He definitely contacted other crawlers in the same way but who knows how many actually followed his orders. For us, well, we owe him a few favors so we did what he said.”

“Leolja, huh…?”

The thought of Leolja knowing about Senkyo’s spirit power came to mind. From what he could piece together from Krikrt’s story, he was contributing largely to controlling the situation. He still didn’t know how to treat him, but for now, he seemed to be trying to solve the problem.

“How did he contact you?”

“You know he’s originally a demonic spider from the sunken nest, right? He can take control of the phantom threaders from the nest and use them as scouts and communication devices. Somethin’ about sharing senses and using the threads and vibrations; I don’t really get it, but the point is that you can basically talk to him whenever his spider is near ya. Last we heard from him was that he was gatherin’ troops to charge the Lord’s mansion. We thought of joinin’ him but we went to check the situation at Haeqras first. Then… well, none of us really understood what went down when we got there.”

He noticed how Krikrt’s voice was tinged with a hint of anxiety and confusion as he ended his response. Senkyo didn’t plan on letting this go, so he pursued the subject.

“…What do you mean?”

“Mmnn… you see, when we got to Haeqras, there was already a group of guards tryin’ to tear the place down, so we got in a bit of a scuffle. But, before any of us even knew what happened, some of our mates began turnin’ on us. Then, just when we thought it couldn’t get any worse than that, some… large, *\*thing\** came from out of nowhere and blasted into the sunken nest. Before I could make out what it was, my vision suddenly faded and the next thin’ I knew, you were right in front of me. All of it was a blur, but whatever that thing was, it ain’t anythin’ good.”

“So, an unidentified large object came in just before everyone lost consciousness at the same time…”

He placed his hand on his chin as he suspected the possibility that the two events were connected.

“What do you think that large thing was?”

“I have no clue. All I know is that it was big.”

“That’s hardly anything to work with… Then, do you know what’s making the guards hostile?”

“I don’t have much on that side either. What we do know is that more people are gettin’ brainwashed, not just the guards. It happens randomly and the only way we can tell is the look in their eyes. The moment they look like they came from the dead, they’re gone. Which reminds me… Senkyo, did anythin’ happen to that guard over there?”

Krikrt turned to his side and pointed at Rnei tied up unconscious by the wall.

“His eyes were normal. All the guards should be infected with some kind of brainwashing, but that guy definitely doesn’t have those eyes. I was wonderin’ if you know of anythin’ happened.”

“Not that anything I know of…”

Senkyo had his eyes on Rnei the whole time and the last time he checked, Rnei’s eyes were half-dead just like the other guards that were unconscious in front of Haeqras. There should have been no chance for anyone to interact with him.

*“\*Onii-chan.\*”*

Shiro came to his side and called him out through Connect. He turned his gaze to her and responded through the same telepathic network.

*“\*What is it, Shiro?\*”*

*“\*Do you think Shiro’s magic did anything?\*”*

*“\*Your… magic, huh?\*”*

Just earlier Shiro applied Nemian Grace and Nature’s Time to his field circle to wake up Krikrt and his group. At the time, he had Rnei tied up in the corner but still within his field circle. Thinking about it, that was the only thing that could have influenced Rnei in such a short timeframe.

“Hm? Did you think of anything?”

Krikrt saw the slight change of expression on Senkyo’s face and questioned it immediately. The thought of sharing his new realization crossed his mind but decided otherwise.

“…No, Shiro just reminded me of something I need to do.”

He felt a little bad about hiding this from Krikrt since he was being so helpful, but he couldn’t afford to risk having to explain his field circle and how Shiro’s magic accidentally affected Rnei along with everyone in the room.

“Oh, were you doin’ somethin’ before you got to us?”

“Well…”

He said the first thing that came to mind just so that Krikrt wouldn’t become suspicious of him, but now he had the problem of maintaining his lie. He internally cursed himself for not thinking of an easier lie to work with.

“Yeah… uh, I’m looking for a friend… Her name’s Hira and I haven’t been able to contact her for a while.”

“Oh! Miss Hira from the academy, right? If it's her, we saw where she went.”

“What!? You did!?”

As expected was a reaction of disbelief from someone who only named someone as an excuse. He didn’t think his reason would connect with Krikrt’s knowledge, but it most certainly did. Not only did he know who Hira was but saw her at some point as well. The fact that he drew the odds of him talking to the one person that had this kind of knowledge left Senkyo’s mouth agape.

“Yeah, we bumped into her when we were in the food district. Then, well, if my eyes ain’t playin’ with me, I think I saw her just before I lost consciousness too. She went after whatever crashed into the sunken nest. Maybe she was chasin’ after it but my thoughts couldn’t hold long enough to see.”

“So, Hira-san went after the large entity…”

His last contact with Hira was some time under 3 days ago when she brought him and Shiro to Professor Gaeka’s office. Her overwhelming outward personality made her stick to his mind but what truly made her name pop up in his head was because of how someone who seemed to be her father broke into his dreams and said some strange things about using him as a tool for his goal.

Ever since she left Professor Gaeka’s office, he never made contact with her again which made him wonder what she had been doing in the past few days. Before, he couldn’t care less since it was none of his business, but now that Iqanlr was thrown into chaos and his father seemed to be scheming something behind the scenes, he couldn’t help but turn her attention to her.

“What is she after…?”

He whispered to himself as he thought about the person in question.

**375 – Senses in Turmoil**

Senkyo left the building Krikrt’s group was staying and made a quick expedition outside. With his security network around the area, he could return at any time he wanted before any guards would make it to Krikrt and the others, so he wasn’t too worried about leaving them. After hearing from Krikrt, he made his way to the front of Haeqras. The unconscious bodies were still on the ground but that wasn’t the reason he returned. Raising his head upward, he saw large chunks of rubble and destruction.

Krikrt mentioned that whatever happened in front of Haeqras ended with a massive crash on the sunken nest. Senkyo figured to investigate and found that the two concentric towers around the entrance were half destroyed. The beautiful green garden he saw in the morning was now turned into a garden of dust and debris.

“Hm? What’s this…?”

Shining through the dim lighting in the area, Senkyo noticed that something was glowing inside the chunks of rubble. Taking an amber hue, cracks that formed on the chunks emitted this light. He picked up one of the chunks and drew a line across the chuck using his palm, all the while releasing kindled spirit power to tamper with it. The chunk crumbled and revealed the core… of nothing. His head inadvertently tilted with confusion. He checked the other side of the chunk where he first saw the glow come from and confirmed that it was gone. The only thing that remained in Senkyo’s hands was a chunk of plain rock… or at least, whatever mineral the concentric hollow towers were supposed to be made of.

Senkyo went for another try and picked up a sizable chunk that had a crack of glowing amber. This time, he decided to use his sword to open up the chuck while having the glowing part remain in his field of vision. Instead of opening it with spirit power, he opted to use more manual means. Although, he couldn’t fully claim that his katana wasn’t affected by spirit power since he needed that to enchant the blade so it could cut through stone.

“…!”

With a swift strike, the chunk was cut in half and cracks quickly spread across the brittle parts, breaking down into smaller pieces on the ground. The result: gone.

Senkyo watched the glowing crack as he slashed with his blade and saw that the glow disappeared the moment his blade pierced the chunk. The glow was gone, but now he could hear the faint sound of trickling liquid. He summoned a ball of light with light magic to inspect his surroundings and found that it was coming from the chunk he just broke. Inside it was transparent liquid pouring onto the ground. It was possibly the source of the amber light. He didn’t know what the light was, but he was too invested to back off now.

It wasn’t hard to find another glowing chunk since it seemed to be inside every part of the concentric towers. This time, instead of spirit power, he tried using magic. He didn’t know if the liquid was flammable or not, so he chose to use earth magic just to be safe and summoned a rock spike to break into the chunk. He shot it across the air and made contact with the target, creating an interesting result.

*\*BOOM!!\**

“It… exploded, huh?”

Despite trying to avoid this result by using non-flammable material, the chunk still exploded. Since the light disappeared when he used spirit power before, the only possibility he could think of was that contact with mana ignited it. Whatever the glowing liquid was, it seemed to be some kind of reactive chemical.

Upon speculating this, he searched through the rubble for another chunk with glowing light. However, this time, he was looking for one that he could break using only pure strength, preferably one with a brittle coating. It took him a while to find using only a single ball of light as a light source, but he eventually obtained one. He didn’t like the thought of breaking it open with his bare hands, so he threw it at a sharp surface instead. The result: gone.

Even when he didn’t use any kind of external power to break the chunk open, the amber glow still disappeared. It didn’t explode like the previous attempt, but the liquid failed to retain its glow. Thinking about it carefully, in Zerid, mana could be found almost everywhere as if it were air. If he interpreted the results as “spirit power/mana + amber liquid = gone,” then it would make sense that merely exposing it to air would cause the glow to disappear. The only thing contradicting this conclusion was the fact that even when the chunks already had cracks where air could enter, the amber glow remained alive. Unless the chunks were somehow blocking mana from entering, his interpretation will fail to hold.

“…hmm? Wait… blocking the mana?”

Senkyo went to another chunk and found a crack of glowing amber. This time, he summoned a fireball and placed it just above the crack. When he moved his hand away and controlled the fire to move into the crack, it spread across the surface of the chunk and disappeared shortly after. The result: alive. The amber glow was still alive.

He set aside his surprise and proceeded with more tests on the chunk. Time passed quickly as he made discovery after discovery. What he learned was that whatever material these chucks were made from, they had the power to repel not only mana but also spirit power. He proved this when he tried to pour kindled spirit power into the crack. Thinking back to his encounter with Gaeka in the library the other day, something stopped his spirit power from functioning. Whatever material the chunk was made of, it had properties that could repel spirit power. If they somehow weaponized this material, then it would make sense why his powers were completely silenced in the library. The question was: how?

The test continued to answer this one question. If he knew how a weaponized material like this functioned, then he could find a hole to exploit the next time Gaeka or anyone else tried to silence him in the same way. First, he learned that a repel field will only work if a barrier of the stone material is present beforehand. The chunks are a good example of a “barrier” as they keep the amber liquid inside them alive simply by being inside the chunks. Second, he discovered what was considered as being “inside” these materials. A repel field required sealing an area completely in the material storing the amber liquid. Space between these materials was allowed as shown by the fact that it still repelled mana and spirit power despite having cracks on the chunks. The maximum distance between two pieces of the materials was roughly about 30 centimeters for it to still be considered “sealed.” For reference, a sphere of rocks of the material with a space of 30 centimeters between each other was still considered a “sealed space.” It was important to note that this needed to seal a 3D space. Simply creating a circle of rocks does not work. He confirmed this by creating a sphere of rocks with this material using Dimensional Layer.

As for the last discovery, he found that any attempt to penetrate the repelling field from the outside would work depending on how strong the material around the field was created. If the area was a conservative build of small rocks with 30-centimeter spaces from each other, then the repelling field would become flimsy, and any type of penetrating attack, whether physical or magical, will break it instantly. Conversely, if the build was stronger like how the chunks were basically large rocks with amber liquid inside them, then the repelling field would become harder to break.

After these tests, Senkyo could no longer think of other ways to use the strange material. As of now, the possibilities to weaponize the repelling material were limited to primitive means, so he couldn’t be certain that surrounding him with this material was the method Gaeka used in the library. This was why he decided to leave the subject at that for now and took a few pieces with him for future investigations.

Other than the chunks that came from the concentric towers, there was nothing much else of note in the area. Once Senkyo finished checking the perimeter of the sunken nest, he finally approached the entrance to the sunken nest itself. It was a large pit; bigger than what it seemed like from afar.

Back in the safe house, Krikrt told him that a large object had come down from the sky and crashed into the sunken nest. Searching around the area, he found a crater by the edge of the sunken nest which fit Krikrt’s story. Inspecting it closely, there seemed to be some kind of liquid on the crater. Unlike how the liquid inside the chunks showed a transparent color, this liquid was green and more viscous. The liquid trailed into the sunken nest, suggesting that whatever landed here entered the nest. Thinking it was a bad idea to jump into the unknown, he took a cautious step back and searched for traces of Hira instead.

Since her entrance wasn’t as grand as whatever made the crater, or at least it didn’t seem like it from Krikrt’s story, there weren’t many clues to work with. Reminding himself of Hira’s image to find some kind of hint, he recalled the amber gems on her uniform. Her other classmates like Vleid and Raeri didn’t have the same flashy gems on their uniforms, but for some reason, Hira did. It had the same color as the amber liquid that he couldn’t extract in the chunks earlier, which had the possibility of some kind of connection. Was it possible that the amber liquid was caused by Hira instead of being inside the material in the first place? That didn’t seem likely. Still, looking around didn’t give him any more clues than that.

It seemed like Senkyo already found everything useful in the area and decided to return to the safe house and share his findings with the Krikrt group. But, at that moment…

“…!!!!!!”

…without a sound, it showed itself seemingly out of nowhere. Senkyo had all of his sensory abilities active. The security network in the area, Detect, and even Perception Field. Everything to make sure that nothing would get the jump on him. Yet, its silent aura hid its presence despite its ginormous body. From the entrance of the sunken nest was a large bug akin to a gigantic fly clinging as if peeking from the ground, staring right into Senkyo’s eyes. The first few seconds of surprise had his senses paralyzed. Just when his rational thought finally returned and wondered what he was looking at, it was already too late.

He felt his mind numb and his vision became blurry. Confusion seeped through his mind, scrambling his thoughts into a messier chaos than it needed to be. He tried to back off but his body wouldn’t listen to him. All he was left to work with was his mind and the memories he had stored… Memories… memories that began to blur right as he tried to think back to the past.

“…A———AAAA-Ah….ghhhh…!!!”

Terrible. It was a terrible, terrible revelation that crossed his mind.

*“\*And* ————*stion, a monster…*——— *broke out of the main capital’s*—*nest. O\*\** ————*essed incredible speed, wings*—*tear the sky \*\*\*\* power*—*devour*—*memories*—\*—\*—*victims.* ——*i\*h \*\* o*— *eyes,* —*\*\*at I’ve heard. ####before you arrived here*——*must b\* cl\*se by.\*”*

*“\*\*h, so\*\*y—\*ou wouldn’t know##? It———m\*nster you encountered. \*\* takes—— memories—t\*\*d \*f killing them——r\*p\*rts—red\*\*\*—to living husks—\*ompletely forgetting———I gue\*\*—lucky——you—a victim——————\*”*

It had been on his mind for a while. Why were so many people acting so much in favor of Gaeka? How was Gaeka able to control so many people at once? How was he able to control even more people despite not being present? It was… an intervention of a third party… no, if Gaeka was able to control a monster that could can memories… a monster that actually had much more power than that… Like a monster that could bend the minds of its victims and brainwash them into its control… A monster that could strike the minds of unsuspecting victims before they even realize it… If he could control just that one monster, then everything that happened so far was possible. If his mind was being affected by the monster’s power before he even realized it… then it was possible to bypass his senses. Theoretically, the monster could have been sitting in the middle of the entrance the whole time and Senkyo wouldn’t have even realized it. For as long as he had met the locals of Zerid, he was using the memory-devouring monster as an excuse for his ignorance. But now that he was being pressured under its power face-to-face, he couldn’t help but tremble in fear.

*“\*Onii-chan! What’s wrong!? Onii-chan!! Shiro is trying to push it back!! What is it doing!?\*”*

“!!!”

A ray of light glimmered in the darkness. Her voice… Shiro’s voice… For a second, he forgot about her existence. Even when she spoke, the only reason he recalled her name was because of her strange way of referring to herself in the third person. She was… his familiar. A tool… no, someone he could rely on as a partner… Someone who cured one of the guards under the control of the monster’s brainwashing. His only hope.

“SHIIIRROOOOOO!!!! I*———Gggraahh…!!*”

With all of his remaining power, he tried to howl his thoughts to existence, but the monster’s control over his body prevented him from doing so. As the milliseconds passed by, every fragment of memory was disappearing like flames spreading through oil.

*“\*I——ORDER YOU————\*”*

In his final struggle, he screamed with all his heart.

**376 – Schemes of the High Beings**

Smoke and fire rose from the ground. Atop a certain balcony known for being one of the highest spots in the city of Iqanlr, namely the penthouse room of Elqa, stood a single man by the edge of the building watching the chaos unfold in the city below him. It was a coordinated attack he decided to commence that night because of his lack of options. Preferably for him, it would have been great if his goal was achieved through a single conversation. Yet, both internal and external factors prevented him from ending his business the way he wanted to.

In the end, he found himself leaning on the guardrails of Elqa’s balcony with his hand clutching his head. Perhaps the old age was finally getting to him. He certainly didn’t like the extra work he had to put into his goals. Although, at the very least, his final trump card seemed to be leading tonight’s event to the end that he wanted. Just to make sure everything was functioning as planned, the man double-checked with the other groups under his control through a small communication device attached to his ear.

“—Yes…. just make sure to lock him down the moment he appears. He will be a bit dizzy so the chance will be perfect…. Yes…. good… Don’t fail me.”

“SoUNds LIke yOU tHoUghT Of EVeRytHIng, sIR GaEKA.”

From behind Gaeka came a distorted voice that not a single person would ever be able to recognize. Perhaps because of this skillful cover-up, he knew exactly who he was talking to even without turning his back.

“Of course I have. Everyone knows that I would be the last person to be unprepared.”

“intErEStING… ThEn, dID YoU nEED to bE flASHy wITh YOur mEtHODs?”

“It was an inevitability. You, of all people, should know that I do not want to stand out like this.”

“ThAT Is a sTRAngE thiNG tO sAy. ArEn’T YOu AlrEady staNdINg oUt BY trYInG to meSs wItH thE BOY? OuR orDERs ARe to waTch hIM And aVoId aS MuCh dIrECt CoNtACT as PoSSiblE. YoU’rE doInG The eXacT OpposITe FrOm wHAt i cAN tEll.”

The person’s sharp words cut through Gaeka’s composure and made him furrow his brows. He turned his head sideways to send daggers with his gaze but rebuilt his formal demeanor a second later.

“Why do you care? What’s strange to me is the fact that you are here in the first place. I don’t suppose you were out on an evening walk, were you?”

“I’Ve bEEn STUck hErE For 3 yEARS. I tHOuGht a lITtlE chaNGe of PAce wOUlDN’t huRt.”

“How whimsical. Well, I suppose it fits your character.”

“…”

The person behind Gaeka returned no reply and poured themselves a cup of tea. The sound of trickling liquid, as it collected inside the cup, filled the silence in the air. The person made themselves at home by throwing themselves on the soft couch and leisurely sipping their cup of warm tea.

“DELiCiouS. I doN’T EXpeCt soMEOne As cRuDe as yOU tO mAKe THIs wHIle YOu wErE hERe So iT’s PRObaBly soMetHInG thE bOy bREweD. TeChNolOGy SUre is SomMEthIng eLse kEEpIng soEMtHing lIKe thIs wARM deSPitE tHe TIme… ThaT reMIndS me, i dIDn’T thInK YOu wERe SO cLOse wITH thE NaTurE LeAder tHaT tHEY’d hAnd yOu ONe of tHeIr baBIEs. ISn’t tHIs THe onE sHe MAde wItH Yhe CONtroL LeaDer’s hElp?”

“You’re still here? I don’t have time to talk.”

“I’m suRE yOu Do. NoTHing HaPPenS In tHe midDLE oF sENDing ouT ORdeRs ANd AcTuALLy hAVInG tHeM ComPleTEd. WHy dOn’T YOu rElaX wHIle yOU’re wAitInG?”

“Just get out.”

*\*VVVVLLSSHHHH!!!\**

A spray of blood appeared from Gaeka and shot at the person at a blinding speed. But in an instant, the blood lost all its momentum at its halfway point and splashed onto the ground.

“AH, lOOk aT tHE mESS YOU mAde; IT's juSt LIke The oNe OUTSIDE. It mAkEs mE wANt to oPEn My mOUth anD SPout soMe RANDOM wORds iN dISguSt. thIs pLACe Is my tERRitoRy, So i thINk You cAN inDULge ME aS a liTTle bIT Of cOMpenSatiON.”

“Tsk…! What do you want?”

Gaeka clutched his head with both hands and massaged his temples as he reluctantly gave in to the person’s threats.

“I tOlD YOu. i jUSt WAnt To tALK. WhY arE yOu HeRe, blOOd LeAdER?”

“Damn you… I’m taking an opportunity, can’t you see? Our orders are to watch over him and avoid as much contact as possible. The Lord said nothing about taking a few samples of blood through indirect means.”

“I rECalL yOU TRyiNg tO coLleCt HiS bLOoD FACe-to-fAcE, thOuGH?”

“Minor exceptions. Those times should have been times I completed my goal. I’ll admit that the first time was my mistake but everything would have gone perfectly the second time if it weren’t for those damn pests.”

“TwIStinG WOrDs aNd ruLeS tO YOUr CoNVenIeNCe aS aLWayS.”

“How do you think I got to my position? Standing out to the enemy is bad but standing out to allies is not. Because the Lord found me and used me, he got to destroy and take over my homeland. As for me, standing out to him was what got me this power. It’s a win for both sides.”

“WeLL? aRe You ABouT tO ReAcH yOuR GoALs aNyTIMe SOon?”

“It’s already guaranteed. My pawns stole his escape route’s destination point and my pet is already brainwashing him as we speak. There’s nothing else I need to worry about.”

“WhAT aBoUT ThE DOOr? ThE NaTURe LeADer waNTeD it bURiED, RiGhT?”

“It is none of my concern. Once I secure the boy’s blood, that’s it. I can let my pet loose to do whatever it wants after the fact.”

“Is ThAt sO?”

The person took a final sip of their cup and rose from their seat.

“i ThiNk I’Ll tAKe My lEAvE HeRE.”

“Please, have a safe trip, and don’t come back.”

“I’LL dO ExACtlY jUsT ThAT. I HaVE A feELIng YoU’Ll Be Even BuSIEr fRoM NoW On, So i’lL gEt oUT of YoUr HAIr.”

“What are you talking about?”

“iF Only YouR SeNSes weRe sHARper, ThEn mAYBE YoU WouLD ReALIZE.”

The person’s footsteps moved toward the distance and disappeared with the sound of the door shutting behind them. Gaeka let out a tired sigh after his little verbal bout. He turned his focus to the direction of the sunken nest. There, his pawn was taking over Senkyo’s mind.

“It should be done by now.”

Gaeka tapped the small communication device in his ear and activated the mechanism.

“Can you hear me? Send him back; that’s an order. The faster you get him here, the quicker we can—”

*\*BOOOOOMMMM!!!!\**

“—What!?”

A pillar of fire rose from the sunken nest. There, three figures danced through the sky. One of them, he immediately recognized. It was the monster Gaeka had under his control, with its large size it was hard to mistake. It was attacking one of the figures with the help of the other one. Its ally was Yukou Senkyo. Knowing that it already brainwashed him, it was only natural. But, what made him sharpen his eyes in confusion was the identity of the figure they were attacking.

“Is that… the boy’s familiar?”

**377 – Master and Familiar**

*“\*Onii-chan! What’s wrong!? Onii-chan!! Shiro is trying to push it back!! What is it doing!?\*”*

From seemingly out of nowhere, the dream world where Shiro usually resided as she stayed inside Senkyo’s body was quickly being infected by a dark green substance. Her barriers could hold them back but only for a few seconds. They weren’t effective against the unknown force. She tried using offensive spells and mixing different kinds of magic, but none of them worked.

Shiro was in a panic. If she had taken a second to realize that casting magic in the dream world was different from the real world, then perhaps she would have thought of a better solution rather than slowing down the dark green substance’s approach.

“SHIIIRROOOOOO!!!! I*———Gggraahh…!!*”

*“\*Onii-chan!?\*”*

Her master was in pain but she didn’t know the first thing she needed to do to help him. She called out for him numerous times yet with no reply. For a second, she even doubted if he could still hear her voice. At the very least, she understood that this was a mental attack, so that idea wasn’t impossible.

*“\*I——ORDER YOU————\*”*

Shiro’s ears and tail perked at the word “order.” It was like all of her senses dedicated themselves to hearing the next words that would come from her master. In that instantaneous moment of weakness, a powerful wave from the dark green substance rose and broke through all of Shiro’s defenses. With her hands stopped and nothing else to disrupt the substance, its complete domination was set in stone.

*“\*————CURE ME!!!\*”*

Just as the wave of ominous green was about to swallow Shiro whole, Senkyo’s final order entered her ears and everything around her changed in an instant.

“Nya!?”

This familiar sensation was her being manifested back into the real world. It was so sudden that she couldn’t help but let out a surprised scream. She manifested in mid-air as if she was forcefully thrown out of Senkyo’s body. She first tried to regain her bearings and know where exactly she was. Somewhere inside the garden around the sunken nest. That was the only thing she could make out before her body began moving on its own.

“N-Nya!?”

She entered a half-somersault, making her feet point to the sky and her head to the ground, bringing Senkyo, who was standing in the distance behind her, back into her vision. With her hand pointed to him, she cast a spell.

“Nemian Grace!”

Again with no chant, she activated the spell that cured Rnei earlier that night. Had the magic activated, Senkyo would have broken free from the memory monster’s control. But, as the mana around him formed, the fly-like monster shielded Senkyo and sprayed green acid from its mouth. Nemian Grace wasn’t a projectile that forms exposed mana that can be blocked by attacks, but the fact is that mana needs to form before magic can take place. If the mana is disrupted before it forms, it is the same as negating the cast. In this predicament, the acid that the memory monster sprayed broke down the mana that was forming to activate Nemian Grace around Senkyo. Such a feat should not be possible unless the acid had similar properties to neutral mana.

With Shiro’s attempt to cure Senkyo taken apart, Senkyo drew his sword and used flash strike to close the distance with Shiro. Soulless eyes stared her down from above as he prepared to bring down his blade overhead. A clear sign that he was already under the memory monster’s control.

“O-Onii-chan, don’t—!!”

Her lips pleaded for mercy but her body fought for life. A physical barrier coated her body as her legs spun in an attempt to disarm Senkyo’s weapon. Her barrier-clad legs clashed with his blade. Senkyo tried to empower his strike with magic but was quickly absorbed by Shiro’s natural magic barrier. With a more powerful impact than he initially expected, he was forced to strengthen his grip on the blade’s handle. This small window of time allowed Shiro to chant a spell.

“O Nature, bless me with your power, empower your children. Aid me in my plight and suppress my enemies. Overgrowth!”

“My body is a mantle of obsidian. A core as fiery as the blistering sun. Empower me and smear my body with your flaming magma. Konjou Style, Volcanic Skin!”

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

*“\*O Water, swamp the uncharted lands and claim your new heart. Solidify your body and usher in the emergence of a mighty sea. Bubble Pool!\*”*

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

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

Stems of plants began peeking from the inside of Shiro’s clothes and instantly grew into large vines. The ones that grew from her backside supported her body before she hit the ground while the others shot at Senkyo to restrict his body. Not only that, some of the leaves contained in the small bags around Senkyo’s chest grew into more vines and wrapped around his body. Familiar with the chant, Senkyo responded by casting Volcanic Skin, ramping the surface of his skin to blazing temperatures, and burning his restrictions.

But then, the moment after that, a massive bubble of water appeared out of thin air and encased Senkyo in it. The freezing cold temperature of the water doused the fire burning the vines, allowing new ones to replace them and restrict him once more. At the same time, numerous clumps of pressurized air collected around Senkyo and severed all of the vines that extended from Shiro to Senkyo. Due to the sudden appearance of a bubble of water, he was only able to free himself slightly from the vines that wrapped around his body by redirecting some of the shots of his Needle Storm.

Senkyo may have initiated the attack but his first clash of magic with Shiro ended up in her favor. Since she had a natural deterrent against magic, she had the advantage to begin with, which suggested that his sudden attack was only a desperate one to finish Shiro off before she made use of that. Unfortunately for him, for whatever reason, Shiro made quick and efficient decisions despite being under pressure and having no experience in live battles. Someone watching from the outside might have thought of her as a seasoned fighter, but her internal dialogue begged to differ.

*\*Eh. Huh?? WHAT!? Wait… HUUHHH!?!?!??? What’s happening, what’s happening, WHAT. IS. HAPPENING!?\**

Shiro used the vines supporting her back to flip herself right-side-up and planted her feet to the ground, dispersing the force pushing her body back and coming to a stop. With her body poised low and her knees bent ready to leap, she launched herself at Senkyo with flash strike, closing the distance between her and the place where Senkyo was suspended in a body of floating water.

“Nemian Grace—”

*\*KKSSSHHAAAAA!!!!\**

The fly-like monster sprayed its acid from the sky once more, disrupting Shiro’s magic from forming and attacking her from a distance. As this was happening, Senkyo wasn’t staying silent like a damsel in distress. Five stones pushed themselves out of his small bags.

*“\*O Fire, lend me your power, from the pits of hell come to mine aid. Set the first point of my retribution—O Fire, lend me your power, from the pits of hell come to mine aid. Set the second point of my retribution—\*”*

He chanted in his head as each stone passed in front of his gaze, setting the points of his spell directly onto the stones. Once he finished completing his chants, the stones spread themselves outside his aquatic confines. They formed a perfect circle around him with Shiro inside of it. Since her attention was taken by the fly monster in the skies, it took her a while to notice. But the moment she did, she knew she needed to escape and turned around to get out of the circle.

*“\*With the five keys set, open the gates of hell and begin my reckoning! Hell's Pillar!\*”*

Yet, Hell’s Pillar activated instantly, allowing her no time to flee as a massive pillar of flames rose from the ground, keeping true to its namesake. With Shiro’s magical barrier, she wasn’t hurt by this at all, but her fears weren’t about the fire; it was about the threat that was unleashed inside it.

*“\*Flash Strike: Thunderclap!\*”*

Without even lasting a second inside the flames, Senkyo reached Shiro’s location and positioned himself above her, bringing down his katana on her head. Shiro’s physical and magical barriers were able to block the attack, but they did not negate the pressure, making her lose her balance and tumble across the ground. She may not be damaged by the fire, but that didn’t mean she was unaffected.

She would be fine if she could retaliate, but all her eyes could see were flames. Whenever casters entered their own magic, they could usually navigate by assessing the formation of their magic, and as this rule can only apply to the caster, if anyone else were to imitate this, they would be walking in a fog of magic. Not only that, it was almost impossible to cast their own magic since another caster was already dominating the mana field in the area. Trying to do so was the same as attempting to make a flame from a lighter survive inside a waterfall.

*\*Eh…?\**

Shiro knew this. But even so, her body and mind moved. Almost as if anticipating this moment, she quickly regained her footing and chanted.

“O Water, our tower of strength, the stalwart bastion, emerge from the seas and take shape. Allow the lower beings to witness your splendor and repel those that dare stain your sanctuary. Hydrous Monolith!”

*“\**O Frost, let the chilling wind blow upon us once more. Form your soles with my words and firmly grip them with all your might. Frozen Land!*\*”*

A large pool of water replaced the blazing earth, swirling as it rose from the ground and overwhelmed the pillar of hell. Just when Senkyo was about to land from this aerial attack on Shiro, the unexpected change in the environment made Senkyo’s legs slip and sink into the ground. At the exact same time, the water in the ground froze over, rooting him in place. With only the floor frozen, he could still spot Shiro swimming through the water as if she were an international athlete.

Most people would expect him to have no escape. Contrary to their thoughts, Senkyo had access to spirit power which he immediately used to tamper with the construction of materials and melt the ice that bound him.

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

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

A massive cloud of black smoke appeared, hiding Senkyo from sight. He used Breath of the Wind along with the three clones that appeared with Phantom Blade and scattered in an attempt to throw Shiro off his tail. He made it out of the blazing pillar and suspended himself in the air by creating air footholds. Since the magic Shiro cast was a mid-tier spell, it was only natural that it didn’t completely overwhelm the entire Hell’s Pillar. That should have meant that he and his three clones disappeared into the flames again after exiting the body of water inside the Hell’s Pillar, making it harder for Shiro to track him down. In normal circumstances, it was impossible for her to follow Senkyo. But, the fact that she burst out of the pillar of fire and tackled Senkyo out of the sky was solid proof that this was no normal circumstance.

“Nemian Grace—”

*\*KKSSSHHAAAAA!!!!\**

Such was her attempt to cure Senkyo. Disrupted again by the monster that floated in the sky.

**378 – His Order**

*“\*O Wind, return to the origin, summon the fresh breeze. Cleanse that which dirties your sacred ground and banish the scum that tarnishes it. Lustrate Current!\*”*

Shiro activated another spell as she went against Senkyo and the monster. Somehow, dancing through the air and dashing on the ground, fighting toe to toe against the two enemies. In their clashes, Shiro always ended up one step ahead of Senkyo, but the fly monster always prevented her from dealing the final blow to him. Meanwhile, Senkyo did all he could to keep Shiro away from the monster, keeping the battle in a stalemate.

*\*How… How is this happening?\**

Shiro mused to herself as her body acted all on its own accord. It wasn’t just her that was doing something completely unexpected, but also Senkyo. After recovering from the initial surprise of clashing with him, the fact that she was nothing but a spectator to this fight finally settled in her mind. Her body may have been the one moving, but she knew better than anyone that she wasn’t the one in control. This gave her the leeway to analyze the situation just like how Senkyo would.

Was it some kind of brainwashing? Perhaps, but something was different from the image she had of it. She expected that she wouldn’t be able to form thoughts just like what she was doing now. Contrary to that, only her body moving on its own but her mind was completely intact. Was the fly monster the one that was controlling her and making her fight Senkyo? Impossible. She saw no gain in the monster using her to kill itself. But most of all, how was Senkyo and her able to fight like this?

Both Senkyo and Shiro were using chantless double-casting. Shiro’s use of spirit spells despite her body’s low spirit pool. Not to mention the fact that she was somehow always ahead of what Senkyo was trying to do.

Senkyo should have had no idea, but Shiro knew that he was an Angel that could use chantless casting. She always knew of his ability to do so but kept silent because it was clear to her that Senkyo wasn’t dumb enough not to notice the connection between chantless casting and being an Angel. The relationship between these two subjects was stated in the book of Calamitous Energy, so it would only be a matter of time before he realized what he was, if he ever discovered his ability to cast chantless spells. It was a secret she wanted to keep from him a bit longer because it would make him aware of his divine soul. As for the divine soul itself, she knew that it wouldn’t appreciate him knowing of its existence. This was the complicated relationship that she had to maintain, but now it was all getting out of hand because of the fact that the fly monster was able to force Senkyo to use his chantless casting.

As if that wasn’t already enough of a problem for her, her own body was able to imitate the same feats that Senkyo could do. Chantless casting despite her not being an Angel. The constant use of spirit power. All of it was beyond her abilities even if her body and personality were completely different. She needed to be reborn as another being to be able to perform these feats, yet she did them anyway. The only thing that Shiro could think of that would explain this phenomenon was her relationship with Senkyo as his familiar.

*\*It was Onii-chan’s order… our familiar pact.\**

Just like what Ranat explained to them, the power between master and familiar. For the first time in a long time, Shiro was given an absolute order from Senkyo to cure him. Right now, her body was doing everything it could to fulfill that order. As for whether her current power was the result of his order or not, she couldn’t say for certain.

Shiro’s body ran from Senkyo and the monster’s attacks. She evaded Senkyo’s lightning-quick attacks and shielded herself from the acid that the monster constantly sprayed at her. All while doing this, she kept a level head and placed her hands on numerous chunks around the sunken nest. There were a few close calls with Senkyo’s constant pressure on her. Even without magic, his strikes were enough to break normal barriers to pieces. The only reason she was able to hold out against him for so long was because she was pouring three times the needed amount of mana for a single barrier and layering them over other barriers.

*“\*Flash Strike: Thunderclap!!\*”*

*\*KRAAA!!\**

“Kggh…!”

His single attack pierced through three barriers at once and damaged the fourth one severely. Even without releasing the thunder magic that came with his Thunderclap, its pure pressure was still something to be feared. Shiro knew that she wouldn’t hold out any longer. Time gave Senkyo a chance to power his attacks and weaken her barrier by hitting the same location attack after attack. The fact that he could consistently attack her made the damage worse. But still, they weren’t enough to stop Shiro’s plot.

“O Wind, harbinger of nature’s trial, raise a furor as you serve your harsh lessons. Shake the earth, the sea, and the sky; I call upon the power that brings tremors to the very body of nature itself—”

*“\*O Water, the body of my temper, bridle the violent waves. Embody my pneuma and douse the blaze of wrath—\*”*

*“\*Flash Strike: Thunderclap!\*”*

“—Raging Tempest!”

*“\*—Sodden Flux!\*”*

Once Senkyo charged in for another hit, Shiro cast both of the spells she was chanting. A furious gale blew in the area, pushing Senkyo to the ground. It slowed down his attack but it didn’t stop him from taking three more barriers out of Shiro’s defenses. But, because of his close proximity to her, he was unable to avoid the thin wave of water that slowed down his movements.

“Winding sheet of the dark night, envelope the locus of my blood sport. Spread as if you are I, and I the darkness that blinds thee. Curse those foolish that enter the domain of the predator. Konjou Style, Hunting Shroud!”

*“\*O Earth, built from sticks and stones, soar the regal sky—\*”*

Shiro quickly used flash strike to gain distance and Hunting Shroud to disappear from his sight. Senkyo tried to follow her but the Sodden Flux that hit him reduced the distance he could usually cover in half, allowing Shiro to escape. Then, from behind him came the sound of rumbling earth. Even a quick glance was enough to tell what Shiro’s aim was. The large chunks of rocks she touched earlier were turned into talismans and a circuit with Spirit at the center inside the symbol of Direction overlapping another symbol of Spirit glowed brightly on every chunk of solid earth. They rose to the sky and darted at the fly monster. It tried its best to dodge the large chunks, but the Raging Tempest that Shiro cast restricted its movement severely.

Spells that were thought to keep Senkyo down were revealed to be a setup for an attack on the fly monster. Before now, the fly monster was always flying close to Senkyo so it could use him to deter Shiro, but when Senkyo chased her down with consecutive flash strikes, the violent storm kept the monster from moving with him, creating a gap between them. Senkyo tried his best to return to the monster, but the Sodden Flux that weighed his movements slowed his arrival. To make it worse, the land in front of him suddenly rose to the sky, blocking him from the monster. It was clearly a cast of Great Wall that Shiro used to hold him back even more.

“O Earth, act and hasten the course of nature. Wither the strong and impregnable, take their time and turn them into a strew. Terra Decay!”

Just as quickly as it rose, the block of earth turned into sand and dust with Senkyo’s quick thinking. But, as the body of sand and dust collapsed to the ground, it slowly revealed that no matter what he did now, he was too late.

Just a few seconds ago when Shiro disappeared into the dark shroud, she never stopped chanting.

“\*—*Display your majesty and tower over those who oppose your indestructible command. Great Wall!*\*”

“Link one to the other and bind me in your connection. Heed my every call, even if it means bending time and space itself. Terminate the impasse of space. Teleport!”

*“\*O Wind, return to the origin, summon the fresh breeze. Cleanse that which dirties your sacred ground and banish the scum that tarnishes it. Lustrate Current!\*”*

Spell after spell activated, giving rise to a towering wall of earth and transporting Shiro through the fabric of space and time in the same instance. From the blinding darkness of her own shroud into the similarly dark sky, she arrived behind the fly monster, floating as she stood on her own air foothold. The raging winds kept the monster from escaping the chunks that flew at it, forcing it to evade in a small area which made it completely vulnerable to Shiro.

“KRRRRTTT!!!”

“O Wind, return to the origin, summon the fresh breeze. Cleanse that which dirties your sacred ground and banish the scum that tarnishes it. Lustrate Current!”

*“\*O Darkness, what falls are the ignoble vipers, and what rises are only they who stay true. Seek control of the body around you and expel those that threaten your land. Pressure Drive!\*”*

The fly monster noticed Shiro but it was unable to do anything against her. The pressure of the wind. The threat of the approaching rocks. The power that prevented it from taking control of Shiro. All of them left it with no other option than to accept its fate and watch as Shiro hurled in its direction.

“O Nature, I am your medium, your voice, your soul. Resonate and express yourself through me to punish those who oppose you. Gale Howl!”

At Shiro’s arrival, it felt the gravitational pressure pushing it into the center of her vision. Then, came a massive wave of wind that pierced its skin, crushed its insides, and blew it far away into the sky. With a disgusting splat like the sound of someone swatting a bug, it flew into the distance.

In the end, the monster was unable to make full use of Senkyo and was assassinated from behind by Shiro. The technique that she used was commonly referred to as Chain Casting which was usually performed by two or more casters. It made use of the time between each spell to chant and cast another spell, allowing for the consecutive activation of spells. With her ability to chant in her mind, Shiro was able to execute the technique by herself. Even if Senkyo were to use Teleport as she did, it wouldn’t have changed the result due to this technique.

Instead, Senkyo tried to escape in a different direction from where the monster was blown into, making Shiro wonder what the monster was trying to make him do. But, that didn’t change the fact that this was already checkmate.

Shiro took out a rock she had in her pocket, extended her arm toward Senkyo, and activated her spirit power. As he was trying to escape, numerous rocks spilled from the small bag strapped to his chest and surrounded him. All of them glowed, creating an all too familiar Field Circle that made him look like he was being bound by magic. He tried to escape this by using flash strike but the stones followed him in the same way. Then, he opted to remove the strap around his chest, but it was held in place by the vines that Shiro summoned earlier with Overgrowth.

“Link one to the other and bind me in your connection—”

“Nemian Grace!”

For his last resort, he tried to use Teleport, but his struggles were for naught when Shiro cast her healing spell on a stone she had in her hand. It was connected to the center of the field circle that was contained in one of Senkyo’s small bags. The large field circle around Senkyo glowed green and silenced him in the middle of his chant. All of the tension escaped his body and lost consciousness, making his body limp and roll through the ground.

“Onii-ch—”

Shiro tried to get to him, but that wasn’t an option. Her legs motioned as if running on the ground, but right now, she was still floating in the air without anything to support her. The air foothold that she was standing on up until now disappeared and wouldn’t come back. Noticing this fact stifled her own words and replaced them with an ear-piercing scream.

“NNYYAAAAAAAAHHHH!!!!”

The control in her own body was returned to her as fast as it was taken from her. Her usual clumsy self was back almost as if the Shiro that fought against Senkyo and the monster that controlled him was all a lie.

**379 – The Spy**

“O-Onii-chan!”

Shiro exclaimed once she saw Senkyo’s unmoving figure on the ground. Just earlier, she barely survived a devastating fall from the sky by activating Zephyr right before she hit the ground. Her heart was pounding against her chest furiously but that was nothing compared to the fear she felt about her brother’s condition.

She faced Senkyo up, got down beside him, and placed his head on her lap. She checked his vitals and found that he was stable. A light sigh of relief escaped her lips but she wasn’t taking any chances and proceeded to cast healing spells on him.

“Shiro is here! E-Everything will be fine… You don’t need to worry about anyt—”

*\*BAAAAAAAANNGG!!!!\**

“!?”

A thunderous boom that split the air just like it did to the ears of everyone who heard it echoed in the sky. The noise reverberated in the atmosphere like a shockwave. It was such a familiar sound that Shiro recognized it the moment she heard it. It may be foreign to anyone who lived all their lives in Zerid, but to her who experienced the wonders and blunders of Earth, she was certain that the blast that entered her ear came from a shot from a sniper rifle.

Looking around the area where such an out-of-place item would be, she noticed that there was something in the night sky. A dot of burning flames was hurling at full speed toward the ground. From what she remembered, that was the area where her magic blasted the fly monster. She looked around even more and confirmed that there was nothing else adorning the cosmic airspace and came to the conclusion that the falling fireball was the memory monster that just attacked them.

She couldn’t get the picture of disbelief off of her face as she realized what had happened. From somewhere, a sniper shot the monster they were struggling with down in a single shot. Not to mention that the highest building in the area wasn’t anywhere close to where she blasted the monster. Whoever shot it did it from the ground, fighting space, time, and gravity, surpassing every spec that the most powerful sniper rifle from Earth could ever reach.

Shiro watched as the falling fireball reached the horizon and disappeared into the city. A few seconds of silence turned into minutes. Then, from the nearby area came a pair of footsteps closing in on where she and Senkyo were staying. She watched the corner where she could hear grass and rubble being crushed underfoot and prepared the chant for Phantom Blade in advance.

“Hmm… I wonder if they’re still here… Was it this area?”

“This voice…!”

An image of a person she knew surfaced in her mind the moment the sound of their voice entered her ears.

“Oh! There you two are!”

“…Hira-san.”

The girl with wavy brown hair and amber eyes entered a light jog to them. Her ever-so-free personality never changed from the last time Shiro laid eyes on her, but her outer appearance was a different story. She was clad in metallic armor that could only be described in modern terms as a mech suit. It was painted in black accompanied by an amber accent. Although few, there were also gaps in her suit that revealed what seemed to be an amber jumpsuit. Her gear was similar to the exoskeleton suits that Vleid and Raeri used in the mock battle they had against each other. The only difference was that the ones Vleid and Raeri used seemed to only be extensions of their bodies while the one Hira wore was integrated into her body. And finally, the item that attracted Shiro’s eyes the most, a heavy sniper rifle.

“Were you the one that shot down that monster?”

“Ah—Oh, yeah, I guess so! It was pretty sick, huh? I popped it with a quick BAANG!! I could let you use it too but it only functions when I use it, so that’s a bit unfortunate.”

She showed Shiro her gun as if she were showing a close friend something interesting she bought on a sudden shopping trip, devoid of any gravity. The sniper rifle matched her mech armor by color scheme and its futuristic appearance. She didn’t know the first thing about how it worked but there was no doubt that magic was applied to it somehow.

“—Wait, this isn’t the time. Yukou-san okay?”

Hira switched the subject as she placed her sniper rifle into a slot by her left chest which flipped her weapon over her shoulder, positioning the butt of her sniper to face the sky while its barrel was swallowed into the machine. Shiro had no idea what was happening, but for now, she answered her.

“Onii-chan looks like he’s fine, but Shiro isn’t sure since that thing took control of him. His body might be fine but his mind might not be.”

“Yeah, I guess we’ll just have to see… But hey, you were so cool back then! You took both Yukou-san and that monster on like they were nothing! I thought I was dreaming for a second there!”

“Eh?? Were you watching everything, Hira-san!?”

“Uhh, somewhere in the middle I think. Right around where you busted out of the fire and pushed him out of the sky.”

“What!? That was a long time ago! Why didn’t you help us earlier!?”

“Whoa, w-wait, look, I just wanted to know how powerful you were, okay? I mean, you were doing so good by yourself so I wanted to keep out of your way. Plus! I don’t think any of my shots were killing blows until you beat it up with your last attack! Technically, that was the best time for me to take my shot. There’s no way it survived from that.”

“Still! W-What were you even doing before you showed up? Weren’t you looking for that monster too? How did you do that without getting mind controlled!?”

“Huh? But you did the same, didn’t you?”

“N-No, you’re wrong! Shiro didn’t do anything! It was all because of Onii-chan’s order! Shiro wouldn’t have been able to do that if it weren’t for that!”

“Oh… so it was the familiar pact’s doing… Then, you don’t know anything?”

“Nothing!”

“Nnn~… that isn’t good. You can’t protect yourself, but I’m here so that should be enough. I want to say something to Yukou-san too, so I guess we can chat a bit while we’re waiting.”

“You have business with Onii-chan?”

“Yeah, just a little something. I won’t get into specifics until he’s awake, but I can tell you a bit about it. You remember when I introduced you two to Professor Gaeka, right?”

“M-Mhn, it was the last time we saw you.”

“Well, believe it or not, that was actually me ACTING!”

Hira said so proudly and puffed her chest.

“Y’see, we actually knew about the fact that Professor Gaeka was putting people under his control. I was the inside man to keep his movements in check. A spy, you could say! I went around doing his bidding and everything which gave me the info about you two!”

She pointed her finger confidently toward Shiro and Senkyo.

“…Us?”

“Yep! Well, it was actually just Yukou-san. They never mentioned anything about you, but I guess that just means that you were beyond their calculations. It should be obvious now that we did everything to get connections with you two and tried to foil as much of the Professor’s plans as possible. But, something changed yesterday. When Sir Adeira threatened Gaeka of sending you two outside of Iqanlr’s walls, that’s when he began to panic.”

“Sir Adeira… he’s a part of this, too?”

“Yep. Gaeka ain’t the only one with deep connections! Well, I guess our mistake was underestimating his connections too, so I guess we’re even. Anyway, because of that little event, we finally found out about how he was able to get so many people under his control. It was pretty much the worst possible one out of the history of possibilities, but as you know, it was the monster that was said to have broken out from the Capital of Uikakrn’s sunken nest. He sent it on a rampage until it took control of one the groups that was supposed to be responsible for your escape route.”

“Huh? Responsible for our escape route? What does that mean?”

“You see, the item that Sir Adeira gave you two is called a Recall Crystal. Once it's broken or activated in some other way, it teleports the holder to a device that serves as its waypoint. Basically, it sends someone to the location where the device it's connected to is. As for the device your crystal was connected to, Gaeka’s men used our own people against us and took it. As if that wasn’t enough, he sent it on a bigger rampage and tried to destroy the city. Our group was out all night trying to fix everything, so we couldn’t send Adeira to guard you two. All of us were so worried that you used the recall crystal already, but it's good to see that both of you are still here. If you did, everything would be checkmate for us.”

“…Onii-chan thought something was strange, so he said that we shouldn’t use it yet.”

“That so? He’s so smart, huh! It’s like he knows everything that’s happening around him! Ah, well, the whole thing about the memory monster was probably out of his control though. I’m sad I didn’t get to you two before the monster did. I could’ve gave a quick heads-up. You countered it earlier, but that monster controls people through chemicals it releases. It's not physical so you can’t see it. It’s not magical so your barrier can’t block it. It’s all hormones. The only way to counter it is by sealing your head closed or cleansing the air. Earlier, you used Lustrate Current to fend off the chemicals but I fight it using the former.”

As she said that, her mech suit extended from the neck and created a helmet around her head. Such a feat seemed impossible to do because her long hair was in the way, but her hair somehow folded itself as her mech extended to create the helmet.

“Was that… spirit power?”

“Aha, nice catch! That’s right. I’m a bit different from the other students in Xhiari, but just like I told you earlier, I won’t go into detail.”

“That… Shiro thinks that’s fine but, what does this all have to do with your talk with Onii-chan?”

“Uhnn~… You could say that—GWUGH!!”

“H-Hira-san!?”

While Shiro and Hira were talking, a shadow appeared just as fast as it exited Shiro’s vision as it tackled Hira from the side.

**380 – Cost of Lies**

Shiro followed Hira and the shadow with her eyes and saw her punch the shadow in the stomach, knocking it away from her. She quickly regained her footing and directed her eyes to the beast. It was a large monster with a body that mingled with green and brown. It had no eyes and had a large, vicious mouth to fill the space. It had three arms, one side only had one arm but it made up for the missing arm by being about the size of an elephant’s foot. All three of its arms had flaps which suggested its ability to glide in the air and the spaces between its fingers were webbed implying that it could be swift underwater. It had hind legs that looked like they could crush earth underfoot and a tail that seemed to be able to swipe anyone in the way. It stood there threateningly on all five of its limbs as its tail swung around in the air.

“WRUUUGHH!!”

“Nyah!?”

It let out a ferocious growl as it switched its attention from Hira to Shiro. Suddenly, someone gripped her wrist like a vice. She let out a frightened shriek as she turned to the source of her pain only to find that Senkyo was awake, his hand crushing her with brute strength, his body preparing to pounce on her, and his eyes as empty as the void. Yet again, even without the presence of the fly monster, he was returned to his brainwashed self.

“GRAA!!”

“N-Nemian—!!”

Immediately, she activated the only spell she knew that could cure him.

*\*KKSSSHHAAAAA!!!!\**

Just like the other times with the fly monster, the large beast that just arrived sprayed unknown acid at Senkyo and Shiro. If it had the same effects as the fly monster’s spray, then her spell would be disrupted and nothing would stop Senkyo from attacking Shiro. Unlike the last time, she could tell that she was in complete control of her body. The Shiro that fought against Senkyo and the memory monster was not coming back. There was no order for her to fulfill. The previous one had already been resolved, which left her powerless against the threat in front of her.

*“\*O Fi… O Water—! O…?\*”*

For a second, she thought. For a moment, she tried. Theoretically speaking, she should be capable of the same feats that the previous Shiro performed. Even without an order, she had the potential to fight. Senkyo’s order proved this to her. She just needed to act.

*“\*…!\*”*

Alas, such words were only simple to say but difficult to carry out. She wanted to cast a spell. Any kind of spell that could save her. If she tried, maybe chantless casting would work. But, before she even arrived at that hurdle, she had no clue which spell to use. The confusion combined with the high-pressure situation made her mind malfunction, leaving her mouth wide open with nothing done.

*\*GRKGRKGRK!\**

“—Grace!!”

But then, to follow up against the beast’s acidic spray, Hira punched the ground, making the contours of her mech suit glow blue. The ground reacted to the impact, making it rise to the air. A large wall towered in between Shiro and the beast, preventing the spray from reaching the two and allowing Shiro’s magic to take form.

“WRUUUGHH!!”

The beast roared in frustration, but now it had bigger problems than that. A burst of flames from the soles and legs of Hira’s mech suit made her shoot into the beast like a rocket. Her right arm glimmered in an amber hue as she threw a haymaker with it. The beast intercepted it using its large arm instead of dodging, perhaps because it realized that it had no escape.

Its massive arm grew even bigger and black scales appeared on its fist. The two forces made contact and created a brief shockwave, to both of their surprise, their power was even. The beast planted its other hands on the ground and threw itself into the air to use its tail to swipe Hira while its legs pointed at her, ready to kick her to oblivion. However, doing this left the area above its head open. Taking this chance, she took hold of the beast’s fist and jumped over its head where she used the momentum from both of their bodies to throw it into the ground.

She let go of its fist, maintaining the force that she used, entering a somersault, increasing her power by activating the same boosters on her legs, and delivering a devastating kick on its head. The overwhelming force decapitated its head on the spot. But then, as if such a vital part of the body was nothing to it, the beast rose and punched Hira away with its two left arms. She was forced to defend herself, giving an opening for the headless beast to run to the sunken nest. It was trying to escape.

Hira tried to catch up to it, but she was pushed farther back than she expected and the beast was too fast for her to catch in time. At that moment, a horde of cave trappers crawled out of the sunken nest and attacked the beast. It retaliated by using its arms to punch through the attack but their sheer number overwhelmed it. Realizing what this was, Hira kicked the ground below and entered the sky.

It wasn’t only cave trappers but also bomb jockeys and phantom threaders. The bomb jockeys exploded their green orbs all over the beast’s body, making it melt, and hopefully, rob it of its senses. Meanwhile, the phantom threaders created a web net around it along with the cave trappers that were holding it down and blocked the entrance of the sunken nest once every spider surfaced. With the monster immobile, Hira stabilized herself in the air, and the body of metal right behind her left shoulder flipped toward her, revealing her heavy sniper rifle. With precise and experienced handling, she quickly lined up her shot to the beast. In just a few seconds, she unhesitatingly pulled the trigger, making her weapon shimmer amber and producing an explosive shot that was akin to a laser.

Voices were silent with the only thing disturbing the air being the shockwave of Hira’s sniper rifle. From above, she could see that her attack shot cleanly through the center of the beast. Just in case it still moved, she returned to the ground slowly with her gun ready to shoot at any time. She landed on the ground but still refused to let her guard down. The spiders around her simply crawled harmlessly as she watched the corpse.

“Hira, what was that thing?”

“Oh, Sir Leolja! Thanks for the help. Ya got here just in time!”

She responded to the phantom threader that spoke to her and climbed on her shoulder.

“I don’t know, really. But it looked like it was related to the memory monster, somehow.”

“Is that so? What’s the status of the monster in question?”

“Dead… or at least it should have been. I haven’t seen the body for myself since I shot it down from afar. I think it landed somewhere near the food district. Can you check for me?”

“Yes. I’m sending nearby spiders to the area as we speak.”

“Neat. Oh, can you get me some food while you’re at it?”

“No.”

“Aww, too bad.”

Finally, Hira removed her eyes from the monster corpse, turned her to attention where Shiro was, and walked up to her location.

“I met Yukou-san and Shiro. They haven’t used the recall crystal yet, but we should really do something about that. Yukou-san got controlled by the monster but Shiro had the power to cure him, so we’re all good.”

“She could cure the mind controlled? Hmm, so this is the power of a Nemi.”

“Amazing, riiight~! Miracle Beasts are amazing, riiight~!! I want to be a Miracle Beast too~!!!”

“Hm. Well, you are in a different aspect.”

“Ehh?? Almost no one knows, tho??”

“Let’s keep it that way. Anyway, are you really going to tell Senkyo?”

“Yeah, I don’t know if it will change things, but he deserves to know at least.”

“That sounds just like you.”

“How about you? Aren’t you going to stop me?”

“I have no part in that man’s revenge. That’s why I’m dealing with Iqanlr’s government you know? Well, at most I am the communicator, so I can’t completely say I had no part.”

“You’re always such a stickler for details!”

“Say what you want.”

“Mnnn, whatever… Shiro~! Is Yukou-san good?”

Hira pulled back before she began arguing with Leolja and right as she closed in, she shouted for Shiro, alerting them of her presence.

“—uh!? Who was that?”

“Th-That’s Hira, Onii-chan! Umm, a friend. I think.”

“What!? You aren’t even sure!?”

“W-Well, it’s complicated!”

Hearing the conversation coming from beyond the earth wall, Hira’s face twisted with worry and sympathy. She placed her hand on the wall, controlling the mana that built the walls and disassembled it, making the wall crumble.

“Gya!? W-What the!? Who are yo—a spider!?”

Senkyo backed up, clearly provoked by the presence of Hira and the phantom threader that Leolja was controlling. His eyes were back to normal, indicating that he was no longer controlled by the memory monster. Still, that didn’t do anything to help the fact that he was now truly a victim of the monster’s memory-taking.

“That response… oh my, it’s just trouble after trouble, huh?”

Hira delivered her feelings of sympathy to Shiro, who was supporting Senkyo from behind, making sure that he didn’t fall down. Shiro responded only through her exasperated sigh. That alone was enough to convey the heavy weight on her shoulders.

**381 – Change of Heart**

“N-Ngh…”

“Onii-chan…?”

Just in time. Shiro’s attempt to use Nemian Grace successfully resolved and cured Senkyo just before he could do anything to her. She turned her head to the side where she found a wall of earth that separated her and Senkyo from the beast. It had to have been Hira’s doing. Had it not been for her, she doubted that she would have remained unharmed nor would Senkyo have been released from the mind control again.

She could hear the sounds of battle from the other side of the wall. Knowing that the beast shouldn’t be coming for them any time soon, she let out a sigh of relief.

“A-Ah—Who…!?”

Shiro heard Senkyo’s voice from above her. Right now, she ended up on the ground while Senkyo was pinning her down. This was the position they ended up with just before her cure finally took effect. It was clear that she had barely any more time to work with. She returned her gaze to Senkyo in order to explain everything that happened so far, but something was strange. The look on his face was unnaturally startled. Perhaps it was only natural since he just returned from being mind-controlled, but she assumed that Senkyo would have said something by now. Since he valued information so much, looking at her for so long in silence was strange. Then, she finally realized what was happening with his single question.

“…Who are you…?”

“O-Onii-chan!?”

“Wha!?”

The impact of that one question was so large that she inadvertently pushed Senkyo up and held him by his shoulders.

“Wh-What do you mean!? You know who Shiro is, right!? Y-You still remember, right? You’re just joking, right!? RIGHT!?”

“Wrong! Seriously, what the hell is happening here!?”

“—ah…!?”

Senkyo ripped her arms off his body and pushed Shiro back. He was looking at her in annoyance and anger, an expression of pure hostility that would never be directed to her by her brother.

“Nh…”

“H-Hey, what the…?”

Before she even realized it, Shiro’s vision blurred and her face moistened. All of this was too sudden for her to accept. It wasn’t just that he forgot who she was. All of the memories that she spent together with him, were they all gone? Was everything going to return to the time she first reunited with Senkyo? Or, maybe even worse? Was he going to push her away from his life completely just like he did now? The fear of loss and the possibility of losing even more hit her all at once.

“Oi, d-don’t cry on me here!”

“Nhh…!”

Because Shiro tried to stay strong or maybe just because it was an order from Senkyo, she tried her best to hold back her cries.

“Jeez, you were the one who was up close and kept nagging me. I didn’t do anything.”

For a second, he showed compassion after seeing her tears fall. It was undoubtedly an effective weapon against Senkyo, but he was quick to return to his self-important attitude the moment they were gone.

“I don’t even know you.”

“…!!!”

How? How insensitive can he be at such a time? Could he not sense the pain that Shiro was feeling? Could he not tell that she was suffering from every hostile word that he threw at her? No, impossible.

The Senkyo that Shiro knew was never so dull even without his memories. He was doing this on purpose. He was trying to get a better grasp of the situation by using her. He was treating her like an object.

This irritated Shiro.

Just like how he basically threatened her when they first arrived in Zerid, he was trying to make use of her again through his underhanded means. Was this how she was fated to be used as his familiar? Why couldn’t he just ask nicely? She had no qualms in following his every order, even without the familiar pact. But why must she be used so mercilessly?

This angered her.

Then, she thought about the worst possible future where she would be discarded by this version of Senkyo that was devoid of any memories of her. If he ever made such a decision that the Senkyo she knew would never do, this would break her more than any kind of manipulation.

This fueled her rage and made her burst.

“Of course I’d get—”

Not another word. There was no way she would accept such a future lying down. If there was one thing that he learned from the brother she loved and respected, it was to move and take the future she desired with her own hands.

“—Y-You do! You do know Shiro! You’re Yukou Senkyo and you’re Shiro’s brother! Don’t forget that!”

She suddenly cut him off mid-sentence with her loud voice, trying to convert her sorrow into fury. One step. Just so she could take one more step and get her thoughts through his empty head.

“S-Shiro? Is that supposed to be you? Why are you referring to yourself in third person? Stop being weird.”

“The one being weird is you, Onii-chan!!! Why do you think you’re the normal one here!? You don’t know Shiro! You don’t even know where you are!! How can you say you aren’t weird!!!”

“Of course, I know! Look… this… this is…”

Senkyo finally removed her gaze from Shiro and looked around his surroundings. Buildings that looked like they were made in the distant past, pillars of smoke coming from everywhere around him, a wall of earth that towered over where they stood, and the figure of Shiro’s catgirl-self standing bitterly in front of him. Her ears and tail moved fluidly, making him doubt it was anything artificially manufactured.

“U-Uhh… another world?”

“Don’t get it right!”

“I did!?”

It was just a shot in the dark, but her self-proclaimed sister scowled at him in irritation as she complained about his accurate guess. Who would believe such a person? Senkyo certainly didn’t want to, but he couldn’t argue that he had no clue where he was. The last thing he could remember was that time when he suddenly charged into the street to save a child who was about to get run over by a truck.

“Huh?? Did I really just die and get reincarnated into another world?? Wait, I got run over by a truck!? Just how cliché was my death!?”

“You’re not dead!! And no, you didn’t die in the past either!! You’re alive and well and getting on Shiro’s nerves!! Can’t you just shut up and listen to what Shiro has to say!?”

It seemed like he made her snap. No, maybe she snapped long before he even realized. Senkyo had absolutely no idea what was happening, but if there was even at least one thing that he could be certain of, then that would be that the person calling herself Shiro was related to him somehow.

“Shiro has no time for this! If you won’t listen, then Shiro will just show you!”

Shiro’s body turned into light and shot into Senkyo’s chest. The sudden incomprehensive action took him off his feet at fell to his bottom.

*“\*See! This is what Shiro can do, Onii-chan!\*”*

“H-Huh!? What just…!?”

*“\*You’re coming with Shiro!\*”*

A sudden lightheadedness assaulted Senkyo, making him clutch his head to support it. However, this did nothing to keep his eyes from closing, cutting off his vision along with his consciousness.

“GAH!!”

He violently got out of his bed… or at least, what he hoped to be.

“There you are.”

Turning to the voice behind him, he found out that he had gotten up from Shiro’s lap pillow and the two of them were still in the same place where he lost consciousness.

“Before you say anything, Shiro suggests that you look over there.”

Without thinking much about it, Senkyo followed the location where she pointed to.

“Oi… is that… me!?”

“Half correct. That is the past you. This is the dream world, and Shiro brought you here by envisaging you. It’s the same thing Shiro did when we first reunited. What you’re seeing is Shiro’s memory moments before you got mind controlled and lost your memories.”

Right now, the Senkyo of the past finished playing with the rubble in the area and was approaching the entrance of the sunken nest.

“Wait, why should I even believe you!? You’re out here knocking me out and bringing me to some weird dream world and you expect me to trust you!? Don’t mess with me! You haven’t even explained anything to me and how I got here! How am I even supposed to know that what I’m seeing actually happened!”

“Shiro just…!”

*\*…Doesn’t want to lose you!\**

With all her might, Shiro stopped herself from speaking her true thoughts. The person in front of him was Senkyo, but also not. He isn’t the brother who fawned over her and placed her entire trust in. He had no clue who she was, nor did he care. But, just like him, he wanted information the most to understand everything that was happening. If only Shiro was able to give that to him, everything would be solved, but they didn’t have that kind of leisure. What she needed the most from him right now was his cooperation. She acted emotionally to get to this point but now wasn’t the time to antagonize him by forcing her thoughts on him.

She knew Senkyo. She knew her brother. If a total stranger suddenly talked to him like Shiro did, he would never give his trust unless he was given a sensible motive. Her personal relationship with him could work, but it wasn’t strong enough. Anyone could try to act that out on someone who has no memories. She needed something stronger. A more concrete reason that could be understood universally. Switching gears, for the first time, Shiro riled her emotions and glared at Senkyo with hate.

“…Shiro just wants to live!!”

Gather the pain.

“Shiro doesn’t care about what you’re thinking right now, but if you don’t move…”

Gather the sorrow.

“If you stay ignorant…!”

Gather the love.

“If you don’t cooperate with Shiro, you’ll end up dead and so will Shiro!!

And give voice to her spirit.

“Don’t you get that Shiro can’t live without you!? Right now, Shiro is doing all she can to give you information, but she can’t explain everything! By the time you understand, it will already be too late! That’s how bad our situation is right now!! So please, just work with Shiro for now before everything ends!!”

“…!”

Senkyo gave a difficult face in response. Her words finally shook him. By placing her life and dragging his life on the line, he had no choice but to consider her words carefully. In a different sense, everything that she uttered came from her heart, making her more believable.

“Tch, agh..! Why is this happening!?”

Senkyo clicked his tongue and let out a groan of frustration. But, he didn’t try to dispute against Shiro and turned his focus to his other self. A large fly monster suddenly appeared in front of him, staring him in the eyes as if peering into his very soul. He placed his hand on his chin and observed the event occur. He never gave a reply back to Shiro, but it seemed like he was willing to watch whatever Shiro was showing him. It wasn’t a matter of trust; it was a matter of life and the possibility that he would lose it if he stayed stubborn. For a second, Shiro curled her lips into a smile before bringing her focus back to the memory.

Noticing that the battle outside was calming down, Shiro made sure to only show the important parts that led to the present. Senkyo complained as she expected, but he was forced to accept it after she explained that people were likely coming. She pitted him between the choice of watching only what Shiro showed him or leaving his body vulnerable for other people to see. As the careful person that he was, he chose to follow her will so that he could meet the people who were approaching them in person. Before they arrived, Shiro ended the memory and brought back Senkyo’s consciousness. She manifested back to the real world and assisted Senkyo in recovering from his forced envisaging experience.

“Shiro~! Is Yukou-san good?”

“Huh!? Who was that?”

Of course, Shiro gave him a quick introduction of Hira while they were watching Shiro’s memories, so there was no need for him to act clueless.

“Th-That’s Hira, Onii-chan! Umm, a friend. I think.”

Nor did Shiro need to act so timid after basically threatening Senkyo to her will. But this was what Senkyo ordered her to do. To act normally as if they never had their exchange. It all boiled down to how Hira blatantly admitted that she chose to not help Shiro, making him doubt her trustworthiness. So, instead of letting her know that they were able to collect themselves, he wanted to appear as vulnerable as possible to bring out any attempts of betrayal.

Shiro already gave a quick overview about her status as a familiar and that she would be forced to follow any order he gave, which made her acting perfect. To Senkyo, there was still the possibility that Shiro was only playing along with his orders and all of what she said was a lie, but he understood that he had no power to confirm any of these and there was no harm in giving a simple order. Before he exited the dream world, he made sure to make use of his supposed advantage over Shiro.

“From now on, swear your allegiance to me, never betray me, and always act in my favor. This is an order. If anything happens that makes me act beyond my will, save me. This is an order. If anything threatens my life, protect me. This is an order.”

**382 – The Motives That Brewed Chaos**

“Errm… So, basically, you don’t remember anything about your normal life getting all messed up by fantasy and the supernatural?”

“T-That’s a bad way to put it! It’s like you’re saying that Shiro is a bad influence on Onii-chan!”

Once Senkyo calmed down enough after Hira and Leolja’s appearance, he explained how he perceived everything around him from his point of view. Where his memories started, where they ended, and what he thought about his current situation. He took this chance to act weak and vulnerable to catch anyone showing any ill will towards him. Or at least, that’s what it was supposed to be.

*“\*What are you getting all scared for!? This definitely isn’t acting!\*”*

*“\*What do you want me to do!? Just look at those spid—AH!?\*”*

The only reason his acting was so convincing was because none of it was acting. After coming face-to-face with Hira, he stiffened up and began stuttering. Maybe it was the large, intimidating solid pieces of mech armor that looked like they could disintegrate him in an instant, or perhaps the unexpected spider on her shoulder that brought a clutter of terrifying arachnids that was currently roaming around them. Both at the same time was also a possibility.

*“\*Pathetic.\*”*

“Shiro isn’t a bad influence right, Onii-chan!?”

*“\*Shut up, bad influen—Wait, what the…?\*”*

“U-Uhh…”

They were having completely different conversations in real life and in their minds. The two kept up their ignorant act while their true feelings leaked in their heads. An experience so surreal that it would make anyone confused, especially someone who just lost their memories and was thrown into an incomprehensible situation.

“W-Well, enough about me! What about you two!? Shiro told me about you, uhh, Hira-san, but who… what is that spider supposed to be!?”

He shifted his gaze from the mech girl to the phantom threader that was perched atop her shoulder.

“….Is that you, Leela?”

Shiro asked while keeping her hand connected to Senkyo’s hand.

“That is correct, Shir. I am not here physically, but I can control multiple groups of Iwaiida from far distances. This group was something I had to draft in a hurry, so I didn’t have time to empower it with anything more powerful than a cave trapper, but I see that I made the right decision.”

“Draft them? What for?”

“Simply put, I used my powers as a Demonic Spider to get the Iwaiida in the sunken nest to assist in controlling the chaos. I have numerous groups filled with every evolution stage except for a Demonic Spider to help me. However, this particular group is an exception I gathered the moment I received a report from a man named Krikrt, saying that you and Senkyo were found fighting each other along with the presence of a fly-like creature, which just so happens to be the infamous memory monster. That is also how I directed Miss Hira to your location.”

“O-Oh… Krikrt. Thinking about it, there was no way they wouldn’t notice our fighting. Where are they right now?”

“I sent them to find where the enemy is keeping the device connected to Senkyo’s recall crystal. They cannot break it since it would allow us to connect it to another device, so they have to be guarding it somewhere. Once we recover that and get it to a safe place far from here, you and Senkyo will be able to escape.”

“Escape… huh? Hey, Leela, what’s your relationship with Hira? Do you know anything about what’s happening here? Shiro is tired of being clueless. Everyone around us has a secret to hide and it feels like everyone knows more about us than we do. It’s frustrating… making us feel like we’re strangers to ourselves and getting manipulated without even knowing it.”

“…”

Everyone fell silent at Shiro’s words. Even Senkyo didn’t dare say a word. The reason for his calmness was none other than Shiro. Back when they first bickered in their heads about Senkyo’s all-too-real acting, he found himself seeing glimpses of Shiro’s memories. They talked about it in their heads and discovered that Shiro still had the power to show Senkyo her memories even while she was manifested in the real world. It was normally something that couldn’t be done, but none of them were complaining.

While she was having her conversation with Leolja, she made sure to maintain contact with Senkyo, the single known condition that allowed her to share her memories with him. As they talked, she showed him pieces of her memories that gave the context for their conversation. This sated his thirst for information and allowed Shiro to continue the conversation uninterrupted.

“Better late than never, at least! Hey, Shiro, remember that I said I couldn’t get into detail about our conversation since Senkyo wasn’t awake yet? Well, now that he’s up, you wanna hear about it?”

“E-Eh? Weren’t you going to have a private conversation with Onii-chan? Is it okay for Shiro and Leela to be here?”

“All good, all good! It’s better if you hear this too, and Sir Leolja is technically involved, so he can do some explaining too! But, I do have a teeeeeny-tiny request!”

She gave Senkyo a glance to get his permission. He looked at the other people present before responding with a half-confused, half-serious nod—his brilliant non-false acting at play.

“Umm… what is it?”

“Just—whatever you hear, don’t get worked up and listen till the end, okay? I just want to get everything through properly. I’m sure you’ll get mad at us or something like that, so just keep calm. Oh, and know that I’m on your side! But, that’s for you to decide, not me. So at the very least, just hear me out to the end, okay? Ah, and Sir Leolja too!”

“I can’t help but notice that you treated me like an afterthought.”

“See! Just like that! Don’t jump to conclusions just like Sir Leolja did!”

Neither Senkyo nor Shiro felt the weight behind her voice. It was like Hira was about to tell some trivial secret at a girl’s party, but it wasn’t like they could just treat it as such. Senkyo was only one step away from shouting at her for that, but seeing that this was how she normally acted in all situations from Shiro’s memories, he somehow managed to hold it back. There was a hint of similarity between her attitude now and when his supposed past self first insulted Hira, so perhaps it was only a matter of personality.

“Haah… Whatever, just say it. It’s not like I have any choice. I literally have no idea what’s happening.”

“Hmm~? You’re pretty calm, though?”

“Everything’s just so crazy that it doesn’t feel real anymore. I feel like I can wake up any time now and find out that all of this was a dream.”

“That so? Well, I still got things to do so I’ll make this quick!”

According to Hira, the group she was a part of was created by the Kingdom of Uikakrn and Ridsikrn Empire. Their purpose was to monitor and protect the development of Iqanlr. As it was the city that led their latest technological advancements, it was only natural to want to have it protected in more ways than one. The group Hira was a part of, The Battery, was one of those ways. Originally, this group was never that large. In fact, it only began with Adeira and five of his trustworthy aides. They were stationed in Iqanlr 3 years ago. Specifically, in response to Nrjia’s fall. However, there was one single task that they had to prioritize over this. That being: to assist a certain individual.

When Hira and Leolja first joined the Battery, none of them knew the identity of this individual. The only thing they knew was that they existed. The only person who knew was Adeira. Not even his trusted aides knew. But just recently, their identity was finally made public. And as everyone listening could tell, this person was none other than Yukou Senkyo. No one knew how they predicted Senkyo’s arrival, but the fact that he was inside Iqanlr’s walls was factual.

The Battery. The origin of this name reflected the primary purpose of their group—to empower the man named Yukou Senkyo. This was mainly done through their researcher, more commonly known within the Battery as the Mad Scientist. His encounter with the Battery was a strange one as he approached Adeira so that he could complete the same goal. He claimed that he had the ability to make Yukou Senkyo’s body adapt faster to creation magic. No one knew of the details, but he was able to prove his legitimacy to Adeira and entered the Battery.

However, the Mad Scientist made a single fact clear to Adeira. That he would make use of Yukou Senkyo to fulfill his revenge. He accepted this but never expected that the fated day would be closer than he imagined. The target of his ire: Gaeka, entered Xhiari as a professor to research a counter for an infamous beast, or at least, that was his cover-up story. With the discovery of the memory monster and its power to not only take but also manipulate memories, the Battery found out that he used the monster to make a smooth transfer into Iqanlr. When Senkyo arrived in Iqanlr a few weeks later, the chance for his vengeance showed itself on a silver platter.

The Battery and the Mad Scientist all had a common objective, and that was to empower Yukou Senkyo. However, the Battery’s goal was only to strengthen Senkyo’s capabilities regardless of whether it was physical, magical, or mental empowerment. Meanwhile, the Mad Scientist’s goal was to kill the person he abhorred. At this moment, the Mad Scientist was producing a certain substance that could synchronize Senkyo’s body with his creation magic, but this also gave him the ability to invade Senkyo’s mental space and influence him with his hate and vengeance. Once he finished that, it was very likely that something would happen to Senkyo that would make him hunt down Gaeka and kill him. The Mad Scientist was confident in this.

This substance wasn’t something that could be made without any contact with Senkyo. It needed his DNA samples, but most effectively, his blood. At this time, Leolja admitted that in his previous two tests with Senkyo, he secretly collected these crucial materials while he was fighting. And as for Hira…

“…Yeah, that Mad Scientist… also happens to be my Dad. I’m sorry! I really am!”

Hira bowed to Senkyo and Shiro as she gave her confession, bending her hips at a near 90-degree angle.

**383 – The Cruel Man**

The seconds passed and silence dominated the air. Senkyo and Shiro watched Hira’s bowing figure with conflicted faces. Then, the stillness finally breaks with Senkyo’s words.

“W-What do you all even want from me so badly that you’d plot all this? Why does it all sound like all of you were expecting me to be here!?”

Senkyo knew. Shiro’s memories provided him enough information to know that all of them were after his creation magic. Still a concept that he had yet to grasp, but had to recognize in order to move on. He kept on his ignorant act, receiving the same information he got from Shiro’s memories while also extracting new information.

Hira stood by her word that she had no clue how everyone anticipated his arrival. Leolja was the same. However, Leolja knew of Senkyo’s access to creation magic before Hira did. The information about Senkyo was announced to the Battery only earlier this day. Before that, no one recognized Senkyo as anything other than the object of Gaeka’s attention, but Leolja knew that he was capable of using creation magic, a piece of information that wasn’t even announced to the Battery. Apparently, Hira’s father shared more information about Senkyo with Leolja than his own daughter. When Senkyo asked about this, Leolja said that it was a matter of principle. Her father didn’t want her to be involved in his revenge, so he never talked to her about Senkyo. Half of the information she currently knew about him was supplemented by Leolja.

At this point, Senkyo wasn’t affected much by being used by everyone around him. He was seeing memories of it, but he didn’t experience it directly. None of it felt real. It was either that or he was somehow numb to these negative emotions. On the other hand, Shiro was clearly frustrated by this. Hira aside, she placed her trust in Leolja who was found to be just as guilty of deceiving them as Hira. Hira kept receiving Senkyo’s questions in stride, responding in her ambiguous manner of speech that made it difficult to tell if she was serious or being silly. When it came to Leolja, he was unaffected by the insults that Senkyo threw at them from time to time, maintaining his calm and formal demeanor. Then, Senkyo’s interrogation was stopped by a sudden announcement from Leolja.

“—Hira, we found it.”

“Oh!! The device, right? Where is it? Once I get it back we can finally get these two out of here!”

The device. From Senkyo’s understanding, this was the teleportation destination device that his recall crystal was connected to.

“A-And what makes you think Onii-chan and Shiro will use it just like you want us to!?”

“Hm? I mean, it’s up to you two, really. I just came to say what I wanted to say. I talked to you two about this as a member of the Battery. Whether you place your trust in me is up to you two. I don’t want to try and convince you of anything either after deceiving you. But I will still open up an escape route for the two of you whether you like it or not.”

“Is that so?”

Senkyo gave Hira a scrutinizing gaze as he tried his best to consolidate the immense amount of information being poured into his brain. He didn’t seem like he took any offense to Hira’s announcement to leave and simply stared at her as she walked away from them.

“Yup~! Well then, I’ll leave you two in Sir Leolja’s hands. I’m off!!”

She activated the thrusters on her mech’s legs and soles as she propelled away from Senkyo and Shiro. They heard her say that Leolja would be dealing with them now, but she took the phantom threader that Leolja was communicating through, likely so that he could guide her to wherever he claimed the device was.

“If you two are wondering, I’m still here.”

“Whoa!”

“Nya!?”

From behind them, another spider that had the same appearance as the one on Hira’s shoulder walked up to the two and talked.

“Keep in mind that I can control numerous groups of Iwaiida. So long as you stay near them, more likely than not, I will be there.”

“Isn’t that, umm, a bit too powerful? Don’t you get fights with spiders as powerful as you?”

Senkyo couldn’t help but ask him.

“If it’s about the other Demonic Spiders in the sunken nest, they won’t mind. I give them food and entertainment items daily as a sign of peace, so after this whole ordeal perhaps they would likely take this chance to ask for more items to keep our peace treaty intact.”

“What?? It’s that easy??”

“I wouldn’t say that. When I first came back to the sunken nest after becoming a riser, almost all of them took control of every Iwaiida in the nest and made a coordinated attack to kill me. It was a nightmare but I repelled them with the knowledge I gained on the surface. To keep everything short, I convinced them to reduce their aggression by bringing the surface’s evolution to the sunken nest. It seems they enjoyed it greatly, so it is probably only a matter of pride that they still refuse to become risers. Oh, their killing tendencies might be a problem but food should solve that easily.”

“What? Are they feral pets? Sorry, but I can’t help but have the image of spider people turning into degenerate shut-ins with what you said.”

“Your guess is quite accurate so there is no need for apologies. Anyhow, it’s about time I guard you two properly, so please enter the sunken nest with me. We will be safe there with the other Iwaiida around for me to control.”

“Hmm…”

The other spiders in their surroundings began reopening the sealed entrance to the sunken nest. Leolja said nothing as he awaited Senkyo’s response.

“Do you… know of anything that can get me my memories back?”

“I certainly don’t, but I do know who can.”

“…Is it the Mad Scientist?”

“Unfortunately so. While we were chatting, I had the other spiders collect samples from the corpse of the beast that Hira fought. I sent them to her father so that he could examine them and find a cure. The same goes for the body of the memory monster that we found near the food district, just as Hira reported. I know you have your reserves for trusting him as well, but that man only wants revenge. Once he loses his chance for that, there should be nothing keeping him from giving you his aid. Actually, he’s already examining the corpse of the beast that arrived a while ago.”

“Wait, you have contact with him?”

“Communication is my specialty in this city, so yes. He’s quite confident that you two won’t get to him in time before Senkyo goes mad, so he took the liberty to get some work done in advance, or so he said. Ah, I assure you that I didn’t leak anything about you two on purpose, but he did figure out that we are still on the surface.”

“Just whose side is this guy on?”

“Hmm… If you are talking about me, then I simply take pride in having solid connections with a good number of groups, even in conflicts such as this. If you are referring to the Scientist, then he is a whimsical man who’s only ever on his own side. You can see where Hira takes from. Both of them may be flawed, but their negatives are countered with overwhelming talent. I can assure you that he is your best shot at finding something that can fix your memories.”

Senkyo let out a sigh but it was followed by an immediate decision that baffled Shiro.

“…Whatever, let’s go already.”

“We’re entering!?”

*“\*Are you crazy!?\*”*

An outburst of denial came from Shiro as the words of agreement from Senkyo entered her ears. Everyone present could guess the source of her reluctance. Shiro was the one who persuaded Senkyo to place their trust in Leolja. But then they found out that because of this, she allowed Leolja a chance to steal samples from Senkyo’s body which then made him vulnerable to some “Mad Scientist” that would soon take over his body just like the memory monster did. A sane person would never place trust in Leolja ever again for that, which is why she couldn’t wrap her head around why Senkyo would ever agree to follow him. Her reaction extended even to her unrestricted consciousness.

Without as much as batting an eye, Senkyo let go of the hand he kept connected to her and returned Shiro’s puzzled gaze with a serious expression.

*“\*Shiro, I’ve deduced two things. One: I think that the memories you’re showing me are too detailed, even when they’re cut short. Technically speaking, there’s still a small chance that this is one massive ploy to use me, but I feel like that’s impossible at this point. As for the second…\*”*

After a brief moment of silence, Senkyo said aloud.

“…I have to find someone… don’t I?”

“…?!”

*“\*You…\*”*

The image of Hisho Yuu flashed in both of their minds. After being supplied with so many memories from Shiro, a certain young girl with crimson features appeared many times. They only ever appeared whenever Senkyo led the conversation to how or why he arrived in another world. Curious, Senkyo began to ask leading questions that would make this girl appear in Shiro’s memories. “How” or “why” branched out to “purpose,” then to “mission,” then to “desire,” then to “love.”

That last topic became all but clear to him the moment Senkyo let go of his previous words to Shiro. Memories of spending time with her, memories of laughing, crying, teasing, excitement, thrill, captivation. And eventually, hatred, betrayal, conflict, desperation, confusion, wonder, and vengeance. So many more memories flashed through his head, making it all too apparent to him, and reinforcing his reasoning.

“I can’t let someone important to me see me like this. Hatred. Betrayal. Vengeance. All of those just look so insignificant when I feel like this. Which is why I’m sorry. I doubted you earlier to the point where you couldn’t bear it anymore. You’re important to me too, Shiro. It took me too long to realize that. That’s why… I regret having you be the first person I met with missing memories…”

Senkyo bowed to Shiro at a 90-degree angle… or at least, that’s what she thought he was doing until he proceeded to go even lower, bending his knees and bringing himself to the ground, entering a prostrating position.

“—I’m so sorry!!”

Shiro was taken aback by the sudden action, taking one step back in shock, and biting her lip to keep a hold of her own emotions.

“…Why are you just…!”

Her eyes narrowed and her brows furrowed, her voice squeaking out of her shaking lips. Rampaging emotions leaking out slowly but surely.

“…So… unfair…!!!”

Every time, whether it was intentional or not.

“…and why…”

It felt like she was being played. Like she was dancing to Senkyo’s mesmerizing tune.

“Why… is Shiro…”

It was the same as how Hira and Leolja deceived them, yet it felt somehow different.

“…such an idiot for following…!”

The word “love” appeared in her head for a moment. If she was spellbound to Senkyo by such a word, it would make for a quick explanation. Was it sibling love or a different kind of love? As much as Shiro wanted to claim it was the former, she couldn’t help but consider the latter.

“Shiro… hates this…! So, so much!!!”

Shiro crouched down to the ground and hid her weeping face. The time passed to the point where neither Shiro nor Senkyo could tell the difference between seconds and minutes. An hour could have passed for all they knew. For a long amount of time, Shiro kept herself curled up in a ball while Senkyo maintained his contact with the ground. Leolja simply watched over them and prevented any hostiles from disturbing their moment. Patiently, until the fires in the area finally subdued, the blinding darkness replaced by the gentle touch of dawn. Then, with a deep, trembling inhale followed by a reluctant exhale, Shiro picked herself up, walked up to Senkyo, and uttered a single message.

“…You have something to do, don’t you? What are you lazing around for?”

Slowly, Senkyo stood up and faced Shiro. The expression on his face was no less serious when she last saw it. No, it might have even strengthened. Shiro bitterly stretched her hand to him, confusing him slightly.

“You have no memories, right? Start memorizing your spells or remember how to use spirit power. You’re useless without them.”

Seeing her stern gaze, he quickly took it without hesitation and silently headed for the sunken nest. Leolja pointed them to the ladder that stretched into the pit by lining up his spiders as if they were walking on a red carpet, refraining from making any rude comments as his thoughtful self.

The group disappeared into the nest. The area returned to silence. And unbeknownst to them, a head that was left in that area to rot suddenly twitched. Unlike how the corpses of beings of Zerid usually disintegrated in a short amount of time. This corpse and the corpse that was recognized as the memory monster had yet to disappear. The head twitched, pumped, and tumbled repeatedly until it grew wings akin to that of a fly. The bodyless head used its newborn wings to enter the sunken nest and preyed on the first living being it encountered.

**384 – Differences Between Real and Fake**

Trekking the quiet cave path was a peculiar group. A boy and girl that refused to part their hands, a small spider that perched itself on the boy’s shoulders, and an entourage of spiders that ranged from sizes big and small, crawling everywhere on the ground and on the orange-lit walls. Anyone who frequented the sunken nest at this time would likely first think that they were lacking sleep. Even more so when they realize that the number of spiders around the two non-arachnids was only the tip of the iceberg. Scouts, a frontline, and a backline. Away from where Senkyo and Shiro stood were spiders that cleared the area of any hostiles before they could even come within eyeshot.

The sunken nest of Iqanlr was marked as an insect-type nest for its arachnid-dominant ecosystem, but that didn’t mean it was devoid of anything else besides spiders.

“…So you’re telling me there are other hostiles in here?”

Senkyo asked as Leolja broke the news to them.

“Yes. I know there was nothing but Iwaiida as enemies back when you took the tests for access level S, but the information about other species should have still been listed in the guidebook. Perhaps Shir knows something about why you didn’t check it?”

“Yeah, we just didn’t have any time to read everything. We put our focus on the enemies that appeared in the test so that we could get more time to read other books. I took a quick look at it but that’s about it.”

“…”

Senkyo’s eyes wandered away from Shiro when he heard her speak like that. After apologizing to her back on the surface, she stopped referring to herself in third person. Just like anyone else, she began using “I” and “me.” One other change that he noticed came even before she broke into tears. It only became apparent to him after hearing Shiro refer to herself as “I,” but now she only referred to him as “You” or just called him out by saying “Hey.” The title “Onii-chan” was long gone. A shiver went down his spine every time he noticed these changes. It felt very wrong despite him not having any memories of her prior to the ones she presented to him. When Shiro first used first-person, Leolja had the same reaction as him as he suddenly held his breath. But then after that, he returned to talking normally but in an understanding tone that irritated him.

Senkyo didn’t know what any of these meant, or at least, the current him didn’t know what these changes signified. He couldn’t help but feel down about it. Shiro was someone important to him, but because of his memory loss, he triggered some kind of change in her that may be irreversible. Thinking that an incompetent version of himself scarred their relationship strangled him with guilt to no end, but there was nothing that could be done. The die had been cast; there was no going back.

He took a deep breath, quelled his emotions, and returned to his mental practice of magic. The only thing worse than damaging a relationship while he wasn’t in his right mind was failing to make up for the mistakes he caused. If he acted distraught now, he would only hinder their progress and trouble everyone, Shiro included. That was something that he never wanted to repeat, so he kept his feelings bottled and returned to practice while listening to Leolja’s lecture.

“Right now, we are at level B. The only noticeable change you may have seen on the upper levels was that there was not a single enemy that appeared on levels E and D. You two may not have suspected anything since I created a guard around us, but that wasn’t because I cleared the pathway. There were simply no enemies that showed themselves. This is because I’ve been making highly evolved Iwaiida come to the surface. To the species living on those levels, it was something akin to having a pride of lions march past their village. Not a single soul would dare expose themselves to the danger of the outside. But, the story is immensely different on the lower levels.”

As he was talking, three of the five cave trappers leading the way detached from their formation and advanced. A second later, a ball-like creature smashed into the wall, making a small depression in it. A closer observation would show that it was actually an armored creature that was curled into a ball. Despite this, the three cave trappers encircled the bug, raised their sharp, heavy legs, and impaled the creature. It struggled and uncurled itself in pain, only to be met with another heavy spike directly through its horned head. The bug never stood a chance as its body ceased moving and died. The two watched this happen without stopping their trek.

“As much as we wanted to replicate the dangers of the sunken nest as it is, we had no ability to control the non-arachnid creatures that dwelled in these depths. In exchange, we made the spiders more difficult to deal with than in the real nest, but it doesn’t excuse the fact that creatures like those are not included in the crawler test. That one you see there that barely managed to escape our frontline only to be met with our group is a species called Etriag. They are beetle-like creatures that only show up in level B and below.”

“There’s more of them, huh? Why weren’t they on levels E and D? I thought all non-arachnids were there.”

Senkyo asked.

“That reasoning would stem from the fact that they dislike natural light. Since those levels are too close to the surface, they placed themselves here on level B. Also, their thick armored shells keep them safe from threats on this level. Though, as you saw, they were no match for the legs of our cave trappers, which is why they don’t go any deeper.”

“But… judging from your tone earlier, that probably isn’t everything, is it?”

He let out a tone of affirmation to Senkyo’s suspicions and explained further.

“Just like us Iwaiida, the other four insect species of this nest: the Etriag, the Eozea, the Hkrwir, and the Nexlers, all have evolutions that make themselves quite troublesome. Normally, it's rare to see many of them since the nest is largely dominated by the Iwaiida. But now that I’ve drafted almost every Iwaiida out of the nest, this is the perfect chance for them to exit their nests and expand their territories. In times like these, you would often find them joining forces just to conquer more land. Sometimes they succeed, but the other Demonic Spiders make sure to keep them from taking anything important to the Iwaiida’s rule. This is also why I have to work extra to keep my peace with them… ahh, I can already see the numbers in my wallet dropping…”

“That sounds rough…”

“Oof, you have my condolences…”

Both Shiro and Senkyo felt the pain from the grimace that was clearly delivered through his voice. For Senkyo, it was his loss of funds for his otaku hobbies. Senkyo didn’t know what it incited in Shiro, which only reminded him of his missing memories, but maybe it was just the universal feeling of loss.

“Well, my troubles aside, Senkyo, how are you faring with your magic and spirit power?”

Leolja switched the conversation to something that made him stiffen up.

“U-Uhmm, go-going good, I think? I mean, I can summon this fireball and cast a mid-tier spell. Look.”

Senkyo opened his hand and a fireball spawned just above his palm. When he threw it to the wall, he proceeded to recite a mid-tier spell.

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

He chose this magic as it was easy to control and could avoid hitting the spiders that were protecting them. It was good progress for magic seeing as he only had memories to work with. But, the same couldn’t be said for his spirit power.

“I don’t know why, but I can barely make talismans anymore. Before, I could do it in around a second, but now I can’t even do it without focusing for an entire three minutes… I don’t know what I’m doing wrong.”

“Hmm… I would like to be of assistance, but I only have superficial knowledge of the subject. I’m afraid I do not have any advice to give.”

Leolja expressed his incapability. Almost naturally, Senkyo’s eyes turned to Shiro, only to receive a blank stare. He quickly averted his eyes and tried to feign ignorance, only to hear something unexpected.

“Isn’t it just because of your mental? I’m not sure about it since I only use spirit power when communicating through Connect. But from what I’ve seen, the past you always related spirit power with mental strength. I guess that would also mean you have no chance of getting back to your former self without your memories since you didn’t actually experience any of the training you did in the past, but who knows? Maybe something will happen.”

“…”

She gave him some fairly useful advice. Ever since what happened earlier, he felt a constant rift between him and Shiro. She probably hated him, or so he thought… No, maybe that was still the case, but one thing is for certain, and that’s the fact that Shiro is still willing to assist him.

Since he didn’t ask her directly, she shouldn’t have been forced by the familiar pact, which meant that she gave that advice out of her own free will. Even if she hated the Senkyo that was standing right beside her, he was still the Senkyo that she cared about. Once he gets his memories back, then maybe everything will return back to normal. That single thought cheered him up slightly and allowed him to respond to her kindness.

“…Thanks.”

The only thing that could answer his wishes now was the future that he had to carve for himself.

**385 – What Lies Inside The Nest**

*\*Drip… Spsh… Drip… Spsh…\**

What day is it, I wonder? Who knows. Who cares?

*\*Drip… Spsh… Drip… Spsh…\**

Not I. Because I want nothing more than to die. But my natural instincts refuse to let me carry out my will.

*\*Drip… Spsh… Drip… Spsh…\**

No matter. None of it matters. Even as a member of those exiled from the surface, I was still exiled by my own kin. Everything in this dark place wants to take my life. If only any of them was strong enough to take it.

*\*Drip… Spsh… Drip… Spsh…\**

…What am I talking about? I’m getting my wish right this moment. Dripping blood from wounds beyond repair, walking in a puddle of my own blood… How did this happen? The circle of life is the only answer. I went wild, just like I wanted, and found an opponent that was more than I could handle. An Iwaiida; just like me, he was exiled from his nest by his kinsfolk. We were birds of a feather, different from others, and thrown away because of it. I wouldn’t have wanted my life to end in any other way other than by the hand of someone who shared my pain. This was the best end I could think of.

*\*Drip… Spsh… Drip… Spsh… Spsh…\**

But… why is it, I wonder, that I am still walking? Aimlessly, I travel with wet soles, covered in my own blood, walking on a trail that I thought was my own gore. Is that… my reflection? No, but it may as well be.

**…………**

Level A1. Leolja successfully guided Senkyo and Shiro past level B. The color of the walls turned blue and more cave trappers began appearing, not that they were any threat. With a Demonic Spider on their side, Senkyo and Shiro were basically invincible to arachnids. What they had to truly worry about were the non-arachnids that were coming from each corner. Leolja’s guard did their job to repel most of them, but it couldn’t be helped that some would still penetrate their defenses due to their large numbers.

“Krrrssshh!!”

“Kkkkiiiii!!!”

“—Gale Howl!”

“—Needle Storm!”

They were after their lives, but nothing else could have been better target practice. With their slow descent, Senkyo and Shiro took the liberty to use the incoming enemies to sharpen their battle senses. The foes they just fook out were a group of Flight Shades and Scissor Tails. The flight shades were the second stage of evolution of the Nexlrs, the bat race. They were large bats about half the size of the average human and had the ability to temporarily turn into smoke that could pass through obstacles. The scissor tails are also the second stage of the Hkrwir, the centipede race. Just like the bats, they grew larger in size, characterized by their deadly mandibles, the auxiliary legs growing from both sides of their head that could attack or defend, and the large poison-tipped scissors that curled above them like a scorpion’s tail.

Shiro pushed the flight shades into the wall using needle storm while Senkyo took out the scissor tails using a direct hit from Gale Howl, closing out any gaps that the flight shades could squeeze through all the while.

“Kii!!”

“O Wind, return to the origin, summon the fresh breeze. Cleanse that which dirties your sacred ground and banish the scum that tarnishes it. Lustrate Current!”

“O Earth, speak once more and deliver your will. Heaven or hell; pass upon your judgment on the mortals before you. Rise: Rumbling Land!”

With only the flight shades to deal with, Shiro used Lustrate Current, threatening to “cleanse” them from the air. They had to return to their solid forms, but Senkyo followed up Shiro’s move perfectly, making the ground below the bats abruptly rise, crushing their newly formed bodies.

“Well done. That was all of them.”

Leolja gave the two a word of praise. In all honesty, Senkyo couldn’t help but take that as sarcasm, even if that wasn’t his intention. Senkyo saw from Shiro’s memories just how much weaker he was compared to his previous self. The him that lived in the past could control both magic and spirit power, to add to that, even if it was a fluke, he was able to use creation magic at some point. “The ultimate being,” Shiro once called him. Seeing as he could use nothing more than magic, he couldn’t help but be ashamed.

For the first time in his life, or at least from what he remembered experiencing, he was using magic that could only be seen through fiction. He was fighting monsters and traveling through another world to find the love of his life. All of it sounded so fake despite knowing they were real. He thought he’d be jumping for joy, but nothing in his heart resonated with his actions. There was only one thing he could clearly think of, and that was reviving his memories. For his sake, for Shiro’s sake, and for everyone else’s sake.

“…”

Shiro stared fiercely at the scissor tail corpses. It might look like she was losing her mind from an outsider’s perspective, but Senkyo knew that she was trying to reenact the chantless magic that she performed while she was under his orders. She believed that she should also be capable of doing so even without being influenced by orders. That was because she was connected to him by a familiar pact.

His past self also thought it was some kind of pledge to subservience, but it was actually a pact between equals. If she always needed Senkyo’s orders to use chantless casting, then they would never be equal. She also theorized that the familiar pact was the one letting them share memories even while she was manifested in the real world. If that was still working, then maybe chantless casting would work too, or at least that’s what she thought but had yet to succeed. Bitterly, she took her eyes off the scissor tails and continued down the path.

“You all are so tense. Please calm yourselves.”

Even Leolja couldn’t help but comment on the current atmosphere. It may seem like Shiro and Senkyo were frustrated with each other, but the actual situation was closer to the opposite. They seemed to be irritated with themselves, vexed by their own weakness. There may not be any problems with seeking to become better, but anger didn’t fit this situation.

“Both of you, take a deep breath and look around you. What do you see?”

“?”

The two of them seemed to be confused but did as he asked either way.

“I don’t get it. There’s nothing there just rocks, walls, and tunnels.”

“Yeah, other than that, it looks like some things here were made by magic.”

“Exactly.”

The phantom threader Leolja was talking through pointed its legs at one of the tunnels Shiro pointed out. It was clearly created using magic. There were shards of ice and piles of sand in the opening, suggesting that some kind of battle happened that involved the use of the ice and earth elements. Since they just arrived, it was clearly not their doing. There were other similar places everywhere around them, making it clear that this became a battleground at some point.

“These are damages to the environment made by crawlers that trekked this nest since yesterday. When a fight occurs, especially when even just one side is desperate, larger and more destructive magic gets used. It was already written in the guidebook, but it highly discourages any flashy moves like that. What we see around us right now is normally fine, but that is because of the crawlers that are commissioned every night to fix the cave structure. Because of the chaos last night, neither Haeqras nor the crawlers had the leeway to maintain this routine, leaving it unrepaired.”

“Hmm… so we should be careful of possible cave-ins or things like that?”

Senkyo asked to confirm.

“That, too. But a little cave-in is the least of your worries. You see, Iqanlr’s sunken nest has a structure called ‘The Mainstay.’ It is somewhat like a pillar to the entire nest. This is because there is a large expanse of space that ranges from level A2 to level S. We call that place ‘The Heart,’ and from there, you can clearly see the Mainstay’s structure. It may sound like nothing bad will happen as long as the mainstay remains unharmed, but the many small skirmishes on the upper levels weaken its hold, especially if people hollow out the mainstay.”

“What? Why would anyone do that?”

“It is not on purpose. Unlike the artificial caves in Haeqras, the paths in actual nests are hard to differentiate from artificial paths made by humans or the races that live here. Almost no one can tell which portion is the mainstay on levels above A2 without specialized training. I don’t mean to order you two around, but the enemies you would encounter will most likely be aware of this fact and won’t execute destructive attacks unless they are certain they are not in the mainstay. If you two cannot fight using lighter methods, then I will simply strengthen our defenses, at least until we reach level A2.”

“I see…”

Senkyo stopped to think for a second before he connected with Shiro’s gaze. Her stare was pained but strong; it wasn’t the kind of look that would easily back down. Understanding the message, he gave a light nod and responded to Leolja.

“We got it. We’ll tone it down a bit, so please keep the defenses this way.”

“So be it.”

Leolja accepted his will without resistance. So quick that it made him look like a pushover, but his stern tone told them that he would change plans if the two didn’t take his warning seriously.

“While we’re at it, do you have anything else we should know about?”

Senkyo asked once more for insurance. Leolja took a quick pause to think before replying.

“It shouldn’t be something you need to be worried about since our destination is on level A3. But, in this nest, we have a group called ‘The Three Predators.’ They are usually seen on level S. You can think of them as the three most powerful creatures in this nest. One of them rules over the Eozea and the Etriag, while the other is actually a different race from any of the five main races in the nest, but we categorized them under the Nexlrs since they can fly. Anyway, just don’t enter level S and you will be fine.”

“Wait, didn’t you just say there were three? What’s the third one?”

Shiro cut into the conversation, calling out Leolja’s mistake before Senkyo could.

“Oh… it's a bit embarrassing to say it myself, but the third one is just me.”

Senkyo and Shiro turned to each other as if to confirm that they weren’t just hearing things. Their mutually confused gazes told more than a thousand words. Then, turned to the phantom threader on Senkyo’s shoulder to utter only a single dumbfounded voice.

“…Eh?”

**386 – Encounters of Life and Death**

It seems like I am not alone.

“…Haaaaah… fuuuu….”

In front of me was an outsider, someone not from this nest; a surface dweller. From what I can tell, they are female, and just like me, she was on the brink of death. The trail of blood I was walking on wasn’t mine, it was hers. It should have been obvious to an outsider, but you wouldn’t care much about your surroundings when you’re at death’s door.

“…Who’s there?”

In complete contrast to her critical state, the woman calmly called out to me. There was no panic in her eyes She was simply blank, like an empty shell. I approach her but she refuses to direct her gaze at me… No, that’s not quite right. She just couldn’t take her gaze away from the opening above her. Light peers down from the hole, placing her in a spotlight as if heaven was calling for her soul. I’ve never seen anything like it. Well, it's not that difficult to impress me. This is the first time I’ve ever seen natural light, after all. My kin despises it, but it just seems calming to me.

“Krrrrrtt…”

I try to respond the best I can, but I’m not capable of speaking.

“…Are you going to kill me?”

“…Kkkkrrraaatt!!”

Without hesitation, I sink my teeth into the woman’s arm. I wonder if she was expecting mercy from me? Even in this state, I cannot detach myself from old habits.

“Hm…”

For the first time, the woman turned to me. Leisurely angling her head downward as if I wasn’t chomping her arm off. More blood spilled from her body but strangely, I could feel no resistance. She made no attempts to shake me off.

“…fufu, looks like I’m not the only one in bad shape… You can’t even bite off the arm of a dying person… what happened to you down here?”

Such a strange look in her eyes. I don’t know how to describe it. All I know is that there was no malice, no bloodlust, an expression you would never find in these depths. She stretched out her other hand and brought it close to my head. Instinctively, I let go of her arm and bit her hand before it could touch me.

“…You’re feisty one… aren’t you…? A—uugg…”

Her soft voice suddenly turned hoarse. Even I was surprised by it, not that it stopped me from trying to rip her hand off.

“…aahh, aha… ha… how awful… I’m… losing my voice… I… wanted to talk… some more…”

The woman took a deep breath as she turned to the blue sky, her glossy eyes reflecting the light from above.

“…hey…”

Suddenly, her hand balled up and tightened, grabbing hold of my snout and sinking her hand deeper into my teeth. Her unexpected move made me panic and I tried to break free. But then, her hand turned red and a voice echoed in my head.

*“\*What do you do here?\*”*

*“\*W-What!? What are you doing!?\*”*

I didn’t know what was happening, but I’m certain it was her voice that invaded my head. She was basically admitting to it with that smile on her face.

*“\*G-Get your hands off me!\*”*

*“\*Why? You were the one that bit me first.\*”*

*“\*Grraahh!!\*”*

Instead of fighting it, I clamped my jaw tighter into her hand, seeking to bite it off. But unlike before, my teeth couldn’t penetrate her skin anymore.

*“\*Fufu, I’m afraid that’s not going to work anymore.\*”*

*“\*Gnnraaahh!! Rraaghh!!\*”*

**…………**

Level A2. Senkyo’s group was lucky they didn’t come across the Flame Lamia of A1, allowing for a smooth descent to the lower level. They were the second evolution stage of the Eozea. Large lizards characterized by their large body, blue scales, and power to breathe and cover their body in flames.

Setting them aside, what they needed to keep their attention on was the threat in front of them. A large group of flight shades and earth shifters. An attack from both of these at the same was known to be an elusive combination. As Senkyo and Shiro knew, flight shades could turn to smoke to pass through obstacles. The Earth Shifters possessed a similar skill. They were the third evolution stage of the Hkrwir. Compared to the scissor tail, these creatures gained a longer and more flexible body while maintaining the lethality of their previous stage. In addition to that, they had the ability to dig through the walls like a worm in the dirt. With the threat of deadly smoke and killer centipedes that could jump out of nowhere, it was annoying to deal with, especially if they were caught by surprise.

Thankfully, Leolja warned them in advance and Senkyo learned how to use Detect, allowing him to keep track of any enemies in the walls or in the air. The moment they found out that a group of flight shades and earth shifters were approaching, they already thought of a perfect counter. The spiders around Senkyo disappeared into the ground along with the cave trappers except for the phantom threader that was on Senkyo’s shoulder.

Shiro placed herself right beside Senkyo and kept a tight grip on his arm. Meanwhile, the phantom threader sought refuge inside Senkyo’s cloak. They kept walking until the hostiles got close to them. Once they did, Senkyo uttered the name of the spell he chanted earlier in advance, immediately casting it.

“—Raging Tempest!”

The wind in the area picked up violently, consuming the area in a hurricane. The flight shades were forced to return to their physical bodies, only to be greeted by a spike of ice from Shiro. Then, the ice exploded into multiple shards, hitting any earth shifters that attempted to attack them, filling the air with a cold breeze and frost shrapnel. As for the earth shifters that attempted to attack directly below where Senkyo was standing, they were intercepted by cave trappers waiting for their appearance.

This attack and defense pattern occurred more than Leolja expected. No, it was more accurate to say that this was the only attack pattern that their group ever encountered in level A2. On this level, there should be two more enemies that appear.

One of them is the Screech Prowler, the second evolutionary stage of the Etriag. They can make a piercing cry to confuse enemies and pounce from the shadows using their ability to blend with the environment. This creature was particularly dangerous in groups since it could also hide them. They are agile creatures that mainly ambush their prey like cave trappers. The other creature is the Twin Lizard, the third evolutionary stage of the Eozea. They are characterized by their twin heads that can breathe both fire and frost. Just like the flame lamina, its earlier evolutionary stage, it can also coat its scales in fire, and additionally, ice.

Leolja didn’t understand why the Eozea and Etriag races never appeared before them ever since entering the A-levels despite the nest being almost empty of its Iwaiida population. For a while, he was mumbling to himself while the other two dealt with the enemies as they always have. Then, something changes as they arrive halfway through level A2.

“…I wonder if something happened with the Hybrid Lord.”

The spider mused aloud, taking hold of Senkyo and Shiro’s attention.

“Hybrid Lord? Who’s that?”

Senkyo questioned him the second that name entered his ears.

“He is a member of one of the Predators I mentioned earlier. Out of the three, he would be the one that rules over the Eozea and Etriag. I thought I killed him once but then I encountered him again. He was a completely different being compared to the first time I saw him, to the point where I didn’t even recognize him. The only reason I knew was because he told me.”

“Does the word ‘kill’ have no weight in this place at all? It sounds to me like you were reminiscing about a friendly rivalry you had with this person. Doesn’t he hold a grudge?”

Shiro couldn’t help but retort after hearing Leolja’s casual tone as he talked about life and death. He understood where she came from, but he knew all about how different the nest was compared to the surface.

“If everyone in this place held a grudge, they would either kill their target and get killed themselves or simply just die trying. This applies to the Iwaiida especially since my race lives upon cannibalism. No one in this place has the luxury of a grudge. All of them are too busy thinking about how to survive. If not, then they are nothing more than mindless fools who will die once their instincts lead them down the wrong path. The Hybrid Lord wasn’t like that, which I assume is the reason he got to where he is now. I wouldn’t say we’re friends, but at the very least, we are not hostile to each other. It isn’t like this relationship stops our kin from fighting, though.”

“Hmm…Theoretically, wouldn’t you two be able to take over the whole nest if you two joined forces? Oh, wait…”

Senkyo shared his thoughts. He wasn’t really thinking and just spoke his mind. He only thought of the possibility that this subject wasn’t something he should touch on when it was already too late. But, despite his worries, Leolja’s straight answer showed that he couldn’t care less.

“No. I have no desire to rule over anything, and I assume it’s the same for the Hybrid Lord. Besides, unlike me, he cannot forcefully control the Eozea and the Etriag. Those who follow him only do so out of feelings of either fear or respect. Both might be another option but nothing more than that. ”

“…I see… That was…… a careless—”

“—Nemian Grace!”

“!?”

Abruptly, out of nowhere. Shiro cut off Senkyo’s weakening voice with a spell exclusive to her race. Leolja, Senkyo, and even the caster herself were confused by the sudden development. Then, from the shadows came a group of beetles, lizards, bats, centipedes, and even spiders. In the midst of the chaos, a single creature stood out from the rest.

Appearing from a large opening, at the end of the tunnel was a large monster with fly, bat, centipede, spider, beetle, and lizard-like attributes. Its body was that of a large fly, supported by large spider legs, extending at its behind, forming a tail that parted two ways like a pair of scissors. At the front, its body formed a torso that had three pairs of arms. The two sets closest to its body were larger than the average human arm while the last pair closest to its chest was colossal. Sprouting from its back were a pair of bat wings that had long, deadly spider legs at their thumbs that could fold and expand at will. Its eyeless head with beetle-like horns on both sides stared at Senkyo as if peering into his soul. Then, it opened its savage mouth, hissing aggressively at him as the signal for the hostiles to attack at once.

**387 – Unending Suffering**

When Senkyo and Shiro first arrived on level A2, Leolja immediately told them their destination. They needed to get to the Heart. Instead of navigating through the A2’s many twists and turns, they could take a quick shortcut if they climbed down through the Heart. Because of the massive open space that it provided, they could skip a level and shorten the time needed for them to arrive at Level A3.

In addition to this, the Heart was somewhat of a neutral ground amongst the locals of the sunken nest. They could still kill each other, but they would never make any destructive attacks, especially if they were near the Mainstay. Some would even choose to ignore others. This is because those who come to the Heart often seek rest as it comes with an underground waterfall as a source of hydration. The stream extends to other locations, but the Heart is the only place where most residents of the nest quell their bloodlust. Strategically speaking, this was the most optimal path for Senkyo’s group to take.

But then, once Shiro uttered a familiar cast, that plan quickly broke into pieces. Why? Because Senkyo gave her an order before lending him part of his trust—“If anything happens that makes me act beyond my will, save me. This is an order.” Upon realizing that Shiro never intended to cast Nemian Grace, Senkyo and Shiro came to the same conclusion—danger… No, it wasn’t anything that light. It was a tragedy.

The flame laminas and twin lizards of the Eozea. The scissor tails and earth shifters of the Hkrwir. The flight shades of the Nexlrs. The bomb jockeys, phantom threaders, cave trappers, and magic arms of the Iwaiida. The screech prowlers of the Etriag that worked in tandem with the phantom threaders to hide the entire hostile group from detection. Every single one of them moved to attack Senkyo’s group.

Without even having to be said, they were quickly overwhelmed. Leolja’s guard was nothing in comparison to the enemy’s fighting force. Even he was confused. Not only were they able to sneak past his tight detection network, but they also took control of the Iwaiida that he was supposed to rule over. His instincts screamed at him to flee rather than fight back, which he made clear to Senkyo and Shiro.

The first few seconds of the clash were Leolja sacrificing his entire guard to buy time for their escape. They mounted a cave trapper to make a quick exit and Shiro returned to Senkyo’s body to lighten their load and run faster. With Senkyo’s Gale Howl and the assistance of Leolja’s pawns, they were able to create an opening, only to be disrupted by earth shifters a few seconds later. The massive centipede tackled the cave trapper, wrapped around it, and constricted it to death. With their mount taken down, they were forced to continue on foot.

All of them knew just how unrealistic it was to escape this situation. At this point, Leolja swallowed his frustrations and resorted to some kind of plan that even he had reserves of using. But with that, all he asked of them was to buy time.

Anything.

Do anything just to survive. It didn’t matter what.

As the massive group of hostiles closed in, Senkyo used Rumbling Land to make the ground below him cave in. He knew it was ill-advised to use such destructive tactics, but he had no way of escaping quickly to the surface. So, with the help of gravity, he opted to go down. The flight shades and earth shifters gave chase, but Shiro was ready to greet them with Raging Tempest. It completely countered the flight shades, but the earth shifters were more resilient than them.

Even in this situation, Shiro was still unable to use chantless casting. Senkyo should have been able to, but his mind was already in fight or flight mode. He wasn’t able to keep up rational thought and use his double-casting arsenal. Even in times when Shiro urged him to, the chants of the spells popped from his mind like a bubble.

Since he was busy using Rumbling Land, he had to draw his katana for the first time in battle. Shiro was protecting him with her barriers, but he needed to kill off his pursuers. He had neither skill nor technique. He wasn’t like his past self who had strict training under Ryosei and real battle experience. All he could do was swing his sword around in hopes of repelling the threat. He succeeded in eliminating a few hostiles, but his poor grip allowed an opening for the earth shifters to disarm him. With his descent faster than the sword’s, he was never able to retrieve it as he delved deeper into the abyss.

The rest of his descent was a battle of attrition between the earth shifters and Shiro’s barriers. She was experienced in this type of field, so Shiro had no worries about her defenses breaking. More importantly, she was nervous about where they would end up. If they went too deep, they might find one of the Predators that Leolja spoke of. Then, as if to answer her worries, the walls finally opened up and saw water.

Shiro quickly activated the Zephyr she had prepared earlier, breaking the force of their fall and lightly placing them on the ground. They were at the Heart. It was obvious from the generous amount of open space and the wide stream of water that they landed on. But, none of it meant they were safe. In fact, this only exposed them to more dangers. With this much space, the hostiles that they saw earlier would have an easier time surrounding them and attacking them from all sides.

Just as they feared, the massive horde of enemies was already within eyeshot. The best move here was to use Rumbling Land again to escape deeper, even if it meant ending up on level S or maybe even past it, but the water prevented them from doing that; the tunnel would flood. Theoretically speaking, they could still pull it off as long as they used earth magic to seal the opening immediately, but then it would end up being a battle between Shiro and the earth shifters. Would she be able to continuously seal the tunnel against constant pressure from rock-breaking centipedes? It would definitely be a gamble, but better than having to face an entire army.

Perhaps realizing what they were about to do, a group of phantom threaders that were riding flight shades shot their webs at him in an attempt to bind him down. It restricted Senkyo’s movements a bit, but nothing too disruptive. Since the flight shades zoomed in first, the main horde still hadn’t arrived. So long as he broke out of the webs and used Rumbling Land again before they reached them, they should still be able to escape. But, the ominous shadow that appeared above him destroyed any chance of that.

Aside from the flight shades and earth shifters, there was one more enemy that could chase them down in a massive pit. It was the unknown monster that was basically an amalgamation of every race that lived in Iqanlr’s sunken nest. Towering over his pathetic figure, the monster opened its bat wings and extended the spider legs that protruded from their thumbs. It flapped its wings downward, bringing down the two spider legs that pointed at him. Shiro summoned numerous barriers to intercept the attack. Then, at that moment—

“Eh…?”

“H… Huh…? T… This… this is… Th-THIS CAN’T!! NO!! NOOOOO!!!”

In the small timeframe between the monster’s legs making contact with Senkyo’s defenses, a streak of light shot out from his chest, solidifying right where he stood and pushing him away from that very spot. He saw it happen as if time had slowed down. Shiro pushed him away. But why? She summoned a thick amount of barriers that should have been able to withstand the force of the monster’s attack. Even if the barriers weren’t enough, how could she be certain of that until it hit? How… How? There was only one answer to that question, and Shiro’s puzzled expression led him to realize this.

There was once a time when Senkyo doubted Shiro’s credibility. He lost his memories, so he wasn’t to blame. The orders for his safety were as follows:

*“\*Swear your allegiance to me, never betray me, and always act in my favor.\*”*

*“\*If anything happens that makes me act beyond my will, save me.\*”*

*“\*—If anything threatens my life, protect me.\*”*

“Arghh…! Aahh!! ….aaaa—……—aaahhhh!!!”

It was none other than his order that caused this. Even though he would have gladly taken the hit just to protect someone important to him, in the end, it was his own actions that endangered his loved ones.

Shiro’s figure stood in front of him, two deadly spikes impaling her body from her stomach and her chest, exiting cleanly through her backside. Blood trailed down the cold, hard spikes into the flowing river that knew nothing but to keep moving.

This… was a familiar sight. This exact situation happened once before. Instead of Shiro, it was Yuu, the girl he loved. Or at least that’s what Shiro’s memories suggest. And, just like now, because of his incompetence, he forced her to take a fatal hit to save his pathetic life.

“Why…? Does history repeat itself…?”

He should have known. Was it because he lost his memories? But even so, he saw from Shiro’s memories what had happened. What… what could he have done to prevent this? In the end, he couldn’t point the cause to anything else other than his own incompetence. He may not have memories now, but if only he didn’t have his memories taken from him in the first place, then none of this would have ever happened. His relationship with Shiro wouldn’t have been on the verge of collapsing. She would not be in the state she was now. There were so many things that could have gone better… if it weren’t for his incompetence.

Then, as if everything that happened wasn’t enough, a familiar blade fell from the sky. It was the one he failed to keep a hold of earlier. It finally caught up to them… caught up to what? The perfect opportunity to rub salt on the wound as the blade spun around, perfectly aligning itself to Shiro’s head.

“…ha… haha…”

Shiro was nailed into the ground at three points. One on her stomach, one on her chest, and the final one on her skull. What more was needed to kill a person?

“—AHA, AAAAAHHAAAAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!!”

**388 – Dwelling at My Worst**

“Kill me…”

…

“Kill me…”

Who… is talking?

“Kill me…”

Did it matter who it was? I didn’t feel like doing anything anymore. Not after… Shiro…

“Kill me…”

…Trust me, I feel the same way. Everything I do just messes everything up. Nothing can go well. How did I even get here? I just want to go back home. Back there, all I needed to keep worrying about was my own hobbies. Keeping up with the latest anime, grinding games, reading manga or light novels…

Back then, I always thought how great it would be to get caught in some kind of fantasy setting… why? …For me, the answer was obvious. Even with all of the entertainment in the world, I still felt like something was missing. I heard there were people like me who would love nothing more than to spend their whole lives doing nothing but lazing around and doing things at their own leisure. For better or for worse, I wasn’t quite like that.

I wonder how I reacted when I first discovered this insane fictional world? Apparently, Shiro never saw that. Her memories of me getting caught in this world only went as far back as when I was being fried alive by high-voltage electricity from some strange-looking kid. I don’t know all the details since she only showed me a fragment of that time, but I wonder why I kept moving?

Was I really the type of person to run head-first into death? If you ask me, I just want to leave everything and go home… This is… so strange… It’s like the current me and my past self were two completely different people. He’s the prodigy, and I’m the failure. What was so different between us? What kind of experiences did I have that made me willingly throw away the peace that I once had?

What, indeed…

…Haha, that’s funny… I hate seeing people I know die in front of my face, but… Now that I voiced out my thoughts, why do I feel like I don’t want to go back? Was being a pathetic hindrance better than that? No, not at all. I’m sick of it, really…

…I’m… so strange… Even though I was suddenly thrown into this crazy situation, I still played along. My first thought was to go back home… but why does that feel like it was in such a distant past now? I want my memories back… I want to know why I’m here… I can’t just leave everything as it is… I can’t…

“Kill me…”

It’s… that voice again.

For the first time, perhaps out of curiosity, I picked up my slack and turned to my side, rolling my body over the void-like floor. Barely any light enters my eyes and the only thing I see is a girl with shackles on all four limbs and a bone-like dagger piercing her chest.

“…You’re… Hisho… Yuu…”

“Kill me…”

The person who kept calling for her end in a low voice was none other than the girl I often saw in Shiro’s memories… Am I… already too late to save her? I don’t know. I don’t know what’s happening… I don’t want to go back to my old life, but I don’t want to live like this either…! What do I… Just, what do I do? What am I supposed to do??

**…………**

“Yo, Kitty. It's been a while, huh?”

“Wh-What!?”

The void echoed. In a blank world where everything else ceased to exist, Shiro was there, sprawled on the floor. Her head was dizzy and could barely tell left from right, and it didn’t help that there was complete nothingness around her. But, a single familiar voice called her to attention, making her voice spike in surprise.

“That was one hell of a time out there, huh? Your spirit almost perished and Master almost died. Just so you know, the only reason you’re still alive is because of Master’s order. ‘If anything happens that makes me act beyond my will, save me.’ I guess it reacted when Master lost control of his body. No wonder you were sent to me. That was a close call just now. If you took any longer to return to Master’s body after your physical form died, you might have actually kicked the bucket. Man, I was worried I had to step out again.”

The Divine Soul of Spirits. The divine soul that resided in Senkyo’s body. It was said that this divine soul already appeared in the past and was obliterated, but here he was, talking to Shiro as Senkyo’s divine soul.

“U-Uhmm, this is the dream world… right? Wait, did you release yourself?”

“You got it… but that’s not all.”

“Huh?”

Shiro tilted her head in confusion as she searched the empty space.

“Kitty, do you know what’s happening right now?”

“…”

Shiro swallowed her saliva as she shook her head from side to side. The weight in the Soul’s voice made her hold her tongue. It wasn’t even expecting her to know the answer to that question, so the Soul immediately explained.

“Just now… Master used a portion of my power.”

“!?”

She couldn’t hide her shock from his claim. For the first time after having his memories sealed by his father, Senkyo drew power from his divine soul. From someone who had knowledge of how the divine souls operated, Senkyo, who was already recognized as a worthy holder of his divine soul, had all the power to use it as he pleased. However, that was only true with normal Angels that hold a divine soul. Yukou Senkyo was a different kind of Angel.

People often say that an Angel needs to be recognized by the divine soul first, but since Senkyo’s memories were sealed, his first obstacle was finding out that he possessed a divine soul in the first place. It was an abnormal relationship, especially since Senkyo had no fault in remaining ignorant of this fact. After all, his divine soul in particular could mold his memories the way it wanted. His father’s 8 seals on him would never be so defined if it weren’t for the help of this Soul. In actuality, as long as Senkyo had this divine soul, he was completely immune to all kinds of memory manipulation or mind control. Despite this, he still ended up becoming a victim of it.

A simple explanation for why he lost his memories was because the Soul refused to do anything about it. But, Shiro wasn’t expecting any help from the Soul in the first place. Everything that Senkyo’s father was trying to do for Senkyo would have been all for naught if they had done anything unnecessary. This is also why she adamantly refused to talk about its existence. But now, the Soul itself reported that his power was used. How could this be? The confused expression on her face reflected this question like a mirror.

**389 – The End of A Happy Dream**

“You remember what that spider talked about, right? He wanted you two to buy time. And from the looks of it, you two stalled just enough for him to make it. The problem lies in what he brought back. The moment your physical form died, even I knew I had to step up to make sure none of you actually perished, so I released myself. Then, that’s when it happened.”

*“\*—AHA, AAAAAHHAAAAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!!\*”*

The black void suddenly brightened, changing everything around them, and turning the environment to the same one Shiro saw just a few minutes ago—The Heart. This was where she and Senkyo were cornered by the enemies. In the middle of the river was a scene she was familiar with. The only thing different was the change in perspective. Just now, she had been impaled by the sword that Senkyo dropped. Maniacal laughter exploded from his mouth, insanity filling the air, and finally, bombarding the colossal monster with a myriad of elements. Water to surround it, ice to encase it, earth to impale it, lightning to confuse it, light to blind it, dark to ground it, control to weaken it, fire and wind to bombard its insides, all of these in a matter of moments.

“The ‘help’ that the spider talked about was making Master rampage. If it wasn’t clear enough who caused it, then it was the Scientist. I don’t know if they already had it prepared or pushed the schedule because of the situation, but they undoubtedly influenced Master’s mental state. The way they did this was through Master’s blood. Technically speaking, Master’s blood can never truly be severed from his body. Those who have it are marked with his power, and I’m sure you remember that after all the pranks he pulled with it as a kid.”

Shiro’s childhood memories of Senkyo controlling her body came to mind, bending the space around them and sending her to the place of her memories. His father scolded him for that, saying that it was a bad practice of his powers, especially since he only followed his whims without any thought of possible consequences.

“What this Scientist person did was reverse the connection. Since Master wasn’t aware of his blood connections, this person was able to take advantage of his lack of authority and manipulated his mind. This rampaging state is all unconscious, meaning that Master probably won’t remember anything that’s happening, but he still drew power from me nonetheless. I don’t know if he’ll still be able to do this in the future. Whether or not this change was good for us all depends on how he uses it from now on.”

Shiro understood the implications of the Soul’s words. Which is why she couldn’t get the expression of anxiety off her face.

“…But, if he… if… Senkyo can only use it while he’s unconscious, it would be the same as saying he has no control over it… Am I right?”

Shiro asked, to which the Soul confirmed with a resounding “Yes.”

“That’s why I’m here to confirm one thing: Shiro, what are you to Master?”

“What do you…”

The Soul called out to her by name, making Shiro realize that this wasn’t like one of the jokes he used to pull in the past.

“I’ll make this easy for you to understand.”

The space around Shiro warped and formed a different shape once more. In a sealed cave, she faced a path that forked three ways. On the left path, she saw her memories with Senkyo as she was a child, frolicking in the fields and playing until the day came to an end. On the right path, she saw the time she spent with him in Elqa, holding each other in their arms and sleeping peacefully together, a relationship that most people would define as lovers. On the path in front of her, she saw the memory of when she successfully fought against Senkyo in his mind-controlled state and the fly monster that manipulated him. She never felt power any greater than that time.

“I’ll take this time to rant since I can’t hold it back anymore; WHAT. ARE. YOU. DOING!? Do you have any idea how bad that situation was!? Both of you were on the brink of death and the only thing that could save you two without my interference was a rampage switch from some stranger!? Even without Master’s memories, all of you could have done better! You, especially!”

Shiro kept silent and gripped her chest. For some reason, she felt like she knew where this spiel was going.

“None of you seem to realize, but the two of you are holding each other back. This was true before and after Master was mind-controlled. The only time the two of you finally helped each other was when Master was BEING controlled! Do you have any idea how ironic that sounds? Only when he finally began treating you like a tool did you empower each other! A familiar pact is supposed to become stronger when you treat each other as PARTNERS, but that was the complete opposite! None of you treat the other on the same level, that’s the only explanation.”

“…I know… I know…!”

“Oh, I’m sure you do! After all, the both of you would have become even more powerful if you just didn’t act like a baby in front of Master! Had you let him treat you as a stranger, as a tool, then he would have actually used you to get out of that situation! You realized, didn’t you!? The fact that Master didn’t give you a single order when you were escaping! He tried to solve everything by himself, just like his previous self! If you had stayed quiet about your relationship with him, I’m sure your physical body wouldn’t have died and you could have survived without needing to send Master into a rampage! Even if Master made a complete fool of himself, you were no better! You aren’t the same person you were before! You’re half-spirit now because of the familiar pact! That’s why you’re still alive right now, isn’t it!? You CHOSE this path, so face reality already!”

“…!”

“Greed consumed you both. There’s no way any of you can live in this world without sacrificing anything. You can’t have it all. If you truly realize this, then choose again, right here, right now! A little sister, a lover, or a familiar. Shiro, what are you to Master!?”

Tears had long begun streaming down Shiro’s cheeks, but she stayed strong to stifle her cries while the divine soul was speaking. She had no words to shoot back at it. The Soul was right; that’s all it was. Even if unconsciously, she realized this long ago but refused to acknowledge it. She just wanted to spend most of her time with Senkyo. Was that so wrong? As his valuable familiar, the answer to that question was a cold, hard “Yes.”

She prioritized a relationship that didn’t benefit their pact and continued to do so in order to satisfy her own desires. The worst part was the fact that she had all of the power to break this relationship. With Senkyo’s first order that gave her free will, she could have stopped this unhealthy master-familiar relationship if she wanted. But, she wanted more than just being a familiar. And because of this, everything ended up where it did.

Deep, trembling breaths circulated from Shiro’s mouth in an attempt to blow out the fire of raging emotions inside her. She must not fall here. She must not break here. She must make a choice. Ever since being released from her seal, the bare minimum conditions that she set for herself before chasing after a deeper relationship with Senkyo were these three. So that once the moment came when she had to finally give up, in preparation for the inevitable moment where she had to make a sacrifice to fulfill her role, she would not disgrace herself anymore. The choice was already made in her head and her breathing calmed down to a more stable state. But, she couldn’t help but throw her frustrations at the Soul.

“…what do you mean… a choice? The only thing I see… is some bastard coercing me out of my free will…”

“Does it feel familiar? I’m only learning from our beloved Master.”

“…ahh, sure, I get it already… I knew it too, long ago. That there was never any other option for me other than being the familiar… I get it already…”

Shiro wiped the tears off her face, took one last deep breath, and steeled herself to face the path in front of her. She took one step forward, immediately followed by another.

“I knew… and… I don’t regret doing any of what happened… Even after everything… I will never forget that… I…”

Bright light consumed her body as her foot entered the center path.

“…was happy.”

**390 – Bond Forged From Trials**

*“\*Wow… so you’re a hybrid of an Eozea and an Etriag, huh? How did that happen?\*”*

*“\*How should I know? I was alone the moment I was born from my shell.\*”*

How did I get here? No matter how much I struggled, I could never get my mouth released from the woman’s hands. It has been so long that I’m surprised I’m still alive… No, I simply cannot die anymore. This woman has been healing my wounds the whole time. I don’t know how, but I’ve been spared from dying yet again… why couldn’t it just have ended here?

The moment I realized that resistance was futile, I had nothing else to do but answer the woman’s questions. I told her about this nest and how my life has been until this day. It wasn’t much of an interrogation than it was small talk. A strange woman, she is. Even now, I sense no malice; just someone who wants to chat. This behavior would get you killed in these depths, but I can sense that this woman isn’t as weak as she seems.

*“\*I have told you just about everything now. Could you let me go already? Because of you, my regenerative cells are going to heal me back to normal. After I finally found my chance to die… a person like you got in my way.\*”*

*“\*Die? Why do you want to die?\*”*

*“\*Haven’t you been listening? I am a crossbreed. There is nothing in this place for me except pain and suffering. The longer I live, the worse it is. To me, there is no greater bliss than to cut the root of my problems—my life.\*”*

Every second I spent in this place was excruciating. The thought of escaping these depths I call my grave has always been on my mind, but there is no other exit than the surface. I know nothing of that land other than the fact that our kind was exiled from it and that the borders of that place are more vast than any of our walls. A source of endless oppressors; that is how I see the surface and those who invade our nest.

And this woman… should have been the same. But…

*“\*Then, why don’t you just kill yourself?\*”*

*“\*I am certain you already know the answer to this question. After all, one of the organs you repaired in my body was the one that facilitated my rapid regeneration. My last foe was skilled enough to realize that and targeted it. But now, their great efforts were left in vain because of you.\*”*

*“\*That doesn’t sound like much of a problem. If you really wanted to die, then why didn’t you just stay still for someone to destroy that organ?\*”*

*“\*You ignorant fool! If it were that easy then this place wouldn’t be so dangerous! Those on the lower side of their race’s evolution ladder have one trait in common, and that is our innate thirst for violence. Everyone is more compelled to fight than they are to remain peaceful and negotiate. By the time any of us evolve enough to control our urges, they become too ingrained in our personality to let go! That’s just how we are! And just like that instinct for violence, I have an urge to protect myself from any danger that threatens me. As much as I want to stand still and turn myself into food for those beasts, it always stops me! A disgusting feeling that crushes my insides when I remain unmoving. A painful pang that makes me want to claw everyone for even trying to make an attempt at my life. If it weren’t for this protective instinct of mine, then I would have long died in this place!\*”*

For the first time in my life, I’ve been able to convey this feeling I’ve been bottling up. Why was it that I was able to say it to this woman and not to anyone else? One of the most obvious reasons is that she didn’t try to kill me the moment our eyes made contact, but I feel that reason wasn’t the primary one… As ridiculous as it sounds, perhaps it was because of how she talked. Something about her made me feel that she was a person that would understand how I felt. Why was that?

*“\*…Really, now? A protective instinct… huh?\*”*

The woman shifts her gaze from mine to the sky above her. She had a soft smile on her face. Her eyes were moist and glistening with what seemed to be tears. None of them dropped before she could wipe them off.

*“\*How nostalgic… You know, I knew someone exactly like you. She was shunned and ostracized by everyone around her including her own family because of an incomprehensible ability that she had. In order for her to become useful, she needed to hurt herself and everyone around her. Friend or foe, she did not discriminate; she couldn’t. She had no idea how to control her power, and because of this, everyone saw her as a liability. After many twists and turns, her time in her hometown ended with her being banished from it. Just like you… she wanted to take her life. But, every time she hurt herself, she became stronger and more resistant. When she tried to end it all with a single strike through the heart or through decapitation, she would inadvertently take the lives of those around her to protect herself. She could not die. That was the cold, hard truth.\*”*

I wasn’t so dense that I wouldn’t realize that the woman was talking about herself. The way she spoke didn’t fit that of someone who was talking about someone else’s misfortune. How was I so certain despite having almost no interactions with other people? That was because I didn’t need it. What I saw in her wasn’t a storyteller, but a mirror that reflected my own anguish.

*“\*Because of her invulnerability, she couldn’t do anything but live her life mechanically. But then, something changed. It all happened so fast that she didn’t even know what brought her to that situation, but she was assimilated into a group called Hfixesi. Apparently, they were needed to perform otherworldly excursions. Having no goal in mind, she reluctantly played along…\*”*

The woman began telling me about her adventures. According to her, the surface didn’t end with the world we call Zerid. Other worlds exist called Earth and the Spirit Realm. In these places, she found many things she never thought of ever existing. She met many people, saw and tested their otherworldly technology, witnessed their varying cultures, caught sight of their glorious sceneries, and many more. The interest and curiosity that she once lost in the past reignited. Along with that was the time she spent with her fellow Hfixesi and the other Ambassadors. She engaged with the representatives from the other two worlds, the Heroes and the Di Manes, and learned much from them.

It was at that moment that she realized that she was no longer alone in her life. The other ambassadors were no stranger than she was and had unique quirks of their own. When she first told them about her ability, they simply brushed it aside as if it wasn’t a problem. Only when she finally used her abilities, did she understand why they gave such a reaction. Her new allies were no pushovers and accepted the pain to empower her. It was so different, much so different than any she had ever seen. In that place, with that group, she finally felt like she was “alive.”

“\**…So, this is just a hunch of mine, but I don’t think that ‘protective instinct’ of yours is exclusive to you or anyone else who lives in this nest. Everyone has this protective instinct at least once in their lives, and you still have yours. From my perspective, I can only see it like this: you are afraid to die.\**”

What nonsense. It was the most ridiculous thing I’ve heard in my life. Or at least… that was what I wanted to tell myself, but for some reason, I found it difficult to oppose the woman in front of me, and I knew why. For the first time in my life, I’ve found someone that I understood. Just like me, they lived their life in agony and had the option of suicide taken from them. They had no escape, just like me… For that reason, perhaps because of the stories she kept telling me, I was jealous.

*“\*…Hey, what do you want to do?\*”*

*“\*What?\*”*

My silence prompted her another question to me. One I couldn’t comprehend immediately.

*“\*I told you many things, haven’t I? Don’t you want to do them too? Personally, I think this is the perfect chance for you. With me here, I can guarantee you the strength to live long enough to experience these things. Just like me, you can go around the world and into other worlds and see what they’re like for yourself. If you…\*”*

The woman abruptly stops herself and pauses for a second before making a light chuckle.

*“\*…No, that’s not quite right… it isn’t you, it’s me that wants you to experience these things. After going through this much pain, the only thing that would be worse is letting it end in pain. As someone who is just like me, I want you to discover what happiness is. Be it in this world or any other, I want to give you the chance to face this cruel reality with a wide smug on your face and laugh at it with all your heart… Little hybrid, why don’t you accept my hand?\*”*

I felt the constriction on my snout loosen. The sudden sense of freedom confused me for a second. Before I realized it, the woman took her hand off my fangs and presented it to me. Her figure as she bathed in soft light and outstretched her blood-stained hand to me was nothing less of majestic. I could no longer hear her voice because I lost contact with her red-skinned hand, but for some reason, its remnants kept resonating in my head. Slowly, I walked up to the woman in order to restore my contact with her, placing my claw gently on her hand.

*“\*…Fufu, I’m so happy… If it's you, I feel like you can reach a level of fulfillment further than I ever did in my lifetime… I will lend you my power, but I want you to promise me two things. It may sound like I’m only trying to use you, but will you still do them?\*”*

*“\*Your wish is my command.\*”*

I declare unhesitatingly. Because I feel like… if it's this person, then… for once in my life, I can give someone my trust.

*“\*My, how reliable, fufu! I… truly am glad to have met you…\*”*

**391 – The Ruined Man**

“…Where… am I…?”

Senkyo’s eyelids flickered as he slowly regained consciousness. He clutched his head to try and ease the headache he was greeted with in his wake. The blur faded in his languid eyes and looked around his surroundings. Currently, he had no clue where he was except for the fact that he was inside a large cavern in Iqanlr’s sunken nest. He tried to recall the last thing he remembered before passing out, only to be reminded of a tragic memory.

“…Shiro…”

He called out her name with his head dropped to the ground. But, as he was expressing his frustration, he noticed something on the floor. They were a pair of solid black spikes. He didn’t know what they were, but they seemed familiar. He crouched on one leg and went for a closer inspection of the items. He scrutinized it for a moment while digging through his memories. Then, something clicked in his head and it all came back to him.

“T-These are… that monster’s horns!”

Looking back, the spikes he found on the ground were similar to the horns of the monster he saw just before he got knocked out. Confusion struck as everything seemed so inconsistent. How did he survive the monster’s attack? How did he end up here? Why did he have the two horns of the colossal monster that appeared in front of them? The questions began racing through his head but with no answers to sate them. Then, a sharp sensation suddenly struck him from behind.

“—AARGHHH!!!”

He screamed in pain as something penetrated his arm from behind, making him drop the horns that he had in hand. He saw the tip of the object that struck him expand its solid, serrated spike as it pushed deeper until it finally severed his arm. He immediately tried to flee as fast as he could while he squeezed the stump on his shoulder in an attempt to stop the blood flow. Unfortunately, everything came crashing down, quite literally, when his panic made him trip over a rock and fall to the ground.

“G—GA, AAHH…!”

With half of his vision consumed by the cave’s terrain, he saw the legs of what seemed to be reptiles come into view. He slowly craned his neck upward, only to find a group of Eozea surrounding him. He recognized them. Two of them were twin lizards and four were flame lamina.

“…K-Kgh… ahhh…!”

Senkyo tried to do his best to keep calm and control his cries and his writhing body. But, the fact that the lizards were circling him like sharks finding a crippled fish in the empty sea wasn’t doing him any favors. It only heightened the mental pressure as trepidation took over.

“Fuu…. Haah… haa… haa…!”

One of the twin lizards closed in, taking in his scent. Then, they revealed their tongues and licked him, savoring the feeling of his soft and tender skin. No matter what Senkyo did, his deep breaths weren’t enough to quell his racing heartbeat. He tried to think of a spell that could get him out of this situation, but nothing came to mind. The only thing that his thoughts could clearly form was this: “I’m going to get eaten.”

“—GGAAAAAAHHH!!!”

As if those very words were conveyed to the six lizards around him, the twin lizard that loomed over his head sunk their teeth into his remaining arm and shoulder. The others followed suit, aiming for a different part of his body. His shoulder, his arm, his hand, the stump that once connected his arm, his chest, his stomach, his legs, and his feet. All of them were nothing but free food in the eyes of these reptiles. Senkyo struggled, but to no avail. There was no way for him to overpower his predators. Tears finally fell from his eyes and his mouth became unable to stop his salivating from all his screaming.

“…haah… haah… haah…”

…The longer the time passed, the worse the pain. The longer the pain, the more his mind broke until he arrived to a point where his screams lulled despite the pain. His eyes barely even blinked as they reddened from the overwhelming amount of tears coming out. His mouth never closed, letting his mouth dry and the drool stain his face. Meanwhile, the lizards dined like kings with Senkyo as the banquet. At this time, both his arms were severed, one of his lower legs gone, while his other leg lost its foot. Even after all of this, there were still bite and claw marks on his body. However, not much of it was visible because of the clothes that blocked it, not that any of that mattered. Right now, he was likely about to die from blood loss.

“What a pathetic end,” he thought as his lifeless eyes stared out into the void. Even in his final moments, he couldn’t do anything to live up to anyone’s expectations. What exactly did he do? He came to this world in order to bring back the person he loved, despite being the one that endangered her in the first place, came to Iqanlr, lost his memories, lost his little sister, and now he was about to lose his life to mere lizards that he knew his past self would have taken down with ease. What exactly did he come in this world to do? He achieved nothing.

The ultimate being? The only person that can use creation magic? The Dual User? The person that can use both magic and spirit power? None of these great titles mattered. Maybe it was true to his past self, but certainly not the present. Take out all the magic and fantasy and you’d have the current Senkyo lying on the ground as half-eaten food for giant lizards. Even if he was in the same body and could do the same things as his previous self, he was not the same person. What is the value of great power if the one who possesses them doesn’t even know how to use them? He’s only as good as a normal person at this point. This is what Senkyo came to realize.

“Krrrrtt!!”

One of the flame lamina finished chewing on his bones and slowly walked up in front of Senkyo. Every footfall from the giant lizard was like the ticking of a clock, counting down his last moments of life. But at this point, none of it mattered. Senkyo… the man named Yukou Senkyo had lost everything. His memories, his family, his lover, and the next one on the chopping block, his life.

Shiro and Yuu came to his mind. Was this what they called his life flashing before his eyes? Even this small phenomenon was a reminder of how pitiful he was. Most of what he could recall was him wasting his time in his room and doing nothing he could be proud of. The fragments of him with his family were almost nothing. The only memories he had of Shiro were of him fighting her and breaking their relationship to pieces until he led her to her death. The only memories he had with Yuu were ones he got from Shiro and the short time he had with her in the dream world, a phantom memory where she asked for nothing but death. All of it was so miserable that he couldn’t help but scoff at himself. But, that wasn’t the worst part.

“—aha… fuuu, ha… ha…”

He let out a pathetic excuse of a laugh as the lizard lowered its mouth to him… Why? Why was it that he couldn’t just sit still? Even after making every mistake possible, even after placing the lives of those important to him in danger, why? Why did he still have so much desire to live? A piece of trash like him had no right to live after all that happened, whether he had his memories or not, he couldn’t forgive himself. Yet… why was he still so desperate to cling to life?

Senkyo kept repeating this question to himself while scorning himself with a barrage of insults in his mind. He couldn’t find the answer. There was no answer. Perhaps this was simply the natural instinct of a living being to cling to life. If so, then Senkyo found absolutely no value in sparing his life. But, he felt different. Even though it was shameless of him to want to find that answer, or maybe even create an answer for himself, he wanted to grab onto that tiny bit of hope. Did he deserve a chance for a second life? He didn’t know. It wasn’t up to him to be his own judge. That’s why, for now, he wanted to struggle even more. If everyone judges him to be wrong in the future, then so be it. But for now, just in this moment, he wanted to prove to himself and everyone else that the life he had was not worthless.

With the lizard’s salivating mouth hovering over his neck, his lifeless eyes found its uvula, and then he used the most basic magic he could think of. A small, trembling ball of fire appeared and shot at the lizard. He missed. All of the blood loss and exhaustion got the better of him, but that didn’t stop Senkyo from summoning more. He repeated this again and again until, miraculously, one of them hit.

“Krt?”

Only for the lizard to rehydrate its mouth with its saliva as if a speck of dust entered its mouth. Senkyo finally realized his mistake. The creature he was faced with was the flame lamina, a lizard that breathes fire through its mouth. Against a creature like that, throwing a small fireball into its mouth was the same as throwing a glass of water into the river. It had no effect. There was truly no escape from this situation but, he didn’t regret trying.

At that moment, a loud roar echoed through the room, making everything around Senkyo tremble as if an earthquake was occurring.

**392 – Our 17-Year Promise**

*“\*For the first of my conditions…\*”*

I stood in attention, listening carefully to the woman’s orders.

*“\*You see, as a Hfixesi, I need to be responsible for making sure that the next generation receives the blessing bestowed upon me. We usually wouldn’t have any problems with that, but the next generation is going to be a bit different because of our mistake… so, please, with the power I am about to give you, protect the blessing given to me by the gods and ensure that they reach my successor. Using my power, you will instinctively recognize who they are when they get close to you. But…\*”*

The woman trailed off for a bit, pondering before returning her gaze to me.

*“\*This blessing isn’t like the other blessings of my fellow ambassadors. Honestly, I think you will make a perfect fit as its next successor, but sadly, the blessing doesn’t resonate with you. So, once you meet my successor, I want you to break him. Break him both physically and mentally to the point where he cannot even tell if he is still sane. If he cannot withstand your oppression, then bring him back to the surface. But if, even after every form of violence, he still refuses to back down. If he is such a person who would become stronger through the wretched trials of pain and suffering, then please, pass over my blessing.\*”*

*“\*I understand.\*”*

The mental capacity to hold her power. It wasn’t as if I couldn’t pick up on what her words suggested, but I would only come to realize why this was an important condition to her after I received a portion of that power.

*“\*For the second condition… if my successor passes the first test, then just like what I’m doing to you now, I want you to give him a push in the right direction. Just like how that person was to me, and how I am to you, I want you to become the person that will give my successor new possibilities. The path they will have to take as an Ambassador will no doubt the treacherous, but as long as you show them that they are not alone, if you show them that there are other people around to watch over their journey, then that will no doubt empower them as time passes.\*”*

She was right. I would have never reached the height I am now if it weren’t for her meddling. She showed me another way to live, a completely new possibility that I never would have thought of ever happening. To become a person like her to someone else was a strange request to ask of me. I didn’t see myself as the same type of person she was, but if she said that I could be such a person, then I would strive my hardest to reach her expectations of me.

*“\*…Ah, Little Hybrid, if you accept these two conditions, then dig your claws into my hand and seal our contract.\*”*

Thinking back to it even now, it was a surprise for her to suddenly ask me to hurt her. I didn’t know why or how, but she was at the point where she had no escape from death. Even to this day, I do not know. It wasn’t like she was dying from blood loss or anything the average mortal would succumb to. From the outside perspective, she would have looked beaten up, but not on the brink of death. Yet, she insisted she was.

*“\*Don’t be afraid of grazing a dying woman like me… my life is already numbered. It’s only a matter of time, so I want you to become someone I can entrust my life with. Do not falter, and claw my hand. That is all you need to do to prove yourself and finalize our contract. For my sake… please, do it.\*”*

It was at this time that I realized that I knew nothing about my savior, but there was no time for me to learn anything. I didn’t even know the first thing to know someone. What to do, what to ask, all of it was alien to me. That is why I swore to myself that I would one day know. But at that moment, what I wanted to do the most was follow her will.

So I took her hand and pierced it with my claws. Unlike before, it was as soft as skin, allowing me to pierce it and draw her blood.

*“\*Fufu… thank you, Little Hybrid. This will probably hurt a bit, but please endure it.\*”*

*“\*This is my crossroads. No amount of pain will stop me here.\*”*

The woman’s red hand shimmered, the tip of her fingers solidified into crystals and abruptly extended, piercing into my skin. I grit my teeth, taking in all the pain. Then, the woman speaks.

*“\*I, Nwen of the Sorun, the Hfixesi of the Golden Generation, holder of the Divine Soul of Torment, assimilate thee into mine guard, devote thyself to the force of mine blade. Embody the name bestowed upon you. Reawaken, Asier, Guardian of the Gjia Eaixih Soul Breaker.”*

Her power flowed into me through her crystal fingers, morphing my body into a new being. My body expanded, my skin turned into massive crystal plates, my legs changed shape so that I could walk on two legs, my arms grew serrates, my claws grew and sharpened, I grew a serrated tail, my crystal-like forewings safely protected my newly evolved hindwings, and my face became fiercer than ever with the evolved horn on my head. In this form, I looked closer to an Eozea than an Etriag, but the thickness and strength of my body were greater than anything that existed in this nest.

*“\*…From now on, your name will be Asier. You didn’t seem to have a name, so enjoy this new one. It comes from a language on Earth that means ‘new beginnings.’ You will now become the guardian of the blessing given to me by the gods. Though, you will not be bound to it once my successor inherits it. You will keep your power even after you cut ties with the Gjia Eaixih, so no need to worry about any losses… Ahh, what else should I tell you…\*”*

I felt it. With the new power the woman… Nwen gave me, I felt her power drop significantly. I panicked and hurried to her side after her crystal fingers were completely consumed by my body. I wanted to do something to support her, but she never wanted any of that from me and stopped me.

*“\*No… this is fine… This… is where everything ends for me… Asier, even if I am gone, know that my spirit will always be by your side, watching you and seeing what adventures you will have in the future. So, do not be sad. My life ends here, but my soul will forever know who you are. I was never destined to have a normal grave, so this place will become my final resting place and the only thing that will seal God’s blessing away… Asier, once more… let me say… my thanks…\*”*

Nwen’s words slowly trailed away and her body soon turned to sparkling lights. In the end, I was never able to say anything back to her. I was speechless. Perhaps it was because of my new body, or simply the fact that I didn’t know how to express my feelings. I stood there, stunned as the sparkling lights gathered on the nearest wall and created an even brighter glow. By the time my vision recovered, a colossal pair of red double doors stood in front of me—Nwen’s final resting place.

For the first time in my life, I was able to know what it meant to feel sad and experienced a sense of loss. It was only just a short time, but she became more important to me than anything I’ve had in my life. For the first time, tears fell from my eyes.

“No…… Thank you…”

That was the only thing I was able to say back to her at the time.

After 17 years… the time has finally arrived to fulfill Nwen’s will. Whether or not her successor is fit to inherit her power will be decided by his actions in this nest. Prepare yourself, child. The path that she took was filled with thorns, and so will yours. Prove to me that you are capable of walking down that treacherous path!

**393 – Reforge**

“Wh… at…?”

The beastly roars shook the cave to its core, making the lizards around Senkyo freeze. The one that was just about to bite into his neck stopped and retracted its head. When he looked around, the six Eozea gave him equal distances and lined up on both sides. From behind, something showed.

“T-That’s…”

Senkyo immediately recognized the creature both from what Leolja explained to him and the familiar spike that it had on its head.

“A Crystal Juggernaut…”

Crystal Juggernauts were the third evolutionary stage of the Etriag, characterized by its extremely high defense and ability to reflect magic attacks, often found on level A3 or below. They had two thick arms and two pairs of beetle legs to walk with. Their bodies are heavily plated with crystals hiding underneath and the structure of their horns has two different variations between male and female genders. The males have a horn similar to a Japanese rhinoceros beetle typically used for ramming and flinging while the females have two horns similar to a Hercules beetle and are mostly used for piercing or pinching. Senkyo also recognized the crystal juggernaut that arrived as the one that used the same horn that severed his arm from the start.

“Wh-What are you…!?”

The crystal juggernaut approached him and grabbed his chest with one of its massive arms. What was happening? Was it planning to crush him? With those arms, it could easily snap him like a twig. But, contrary to any of his expectations, the crystal juggernaut’s arm began to glow green, allowing a relaxing sensation to spread through his body and ease his pain.

“You’re… healing me…?”

Crystal juggernauts had the option to store magic that their crystals absorb and use them for later use. For example, it could turn a barrage of fireballs that hit it into healing magic later on. Senkyo couldn’t get a good grasp of what was happening with the confusion jumbling his head. After the crystal juggernaut healed sealed his wounds and stopped his bleeding, it let go and gave him the same distance as the other Eozea that were still in the vicinity.

Then, from the shadows in front of him came a huddle of pitter-pattering footsteps. Turning to the sound, he saw a group of small lizards with large flaps around their necks. They seemed to be able to walk both bipedally and quadrupedally. Nothing looked strange at first until he realized that Leolja never told him about this evolutionary stage of the Eozea.

“Krrrrt-t-t!!”

“H-Hey!?”

The small lizards surrounded him and picked him up from the ground. Senkyo was healed, so he managed to speak normally and was safe from death, but that didn’t do anything to repair his missing limbs, so he couldn’t struggle as the lizards hauled him away.

At this point, anything could happen. Senkyo didn’t know what to expect after one strange happening into another, so he held his breath and switched to analyzing his situation. The dark cavern had no gejikr stones to light up his surroundings or indicate the level he was on. However, based on the presence of a crystal juggernaut, he had to have been on level A3 or S. Then, after turning a corner, he saw a gejikr stone shining a red light from the ceiling. As if to serve as a spotlight, the small lizards went to it and placed him down in the red light before leaving him.

Senkyo searched the area but found nothing but darkness. At the very least, this meant that the space he was in was so large that he couldn’t see the walls anymore. Nothing but darkness… except for one place in front of him. Two purple dots appeared from the shadows. When he first saw them, he thought they were floating orbs, but then they began to rise. From his eye level, the two purple orbs began to tower over him and more purple light began to appear in the darkness. All of it was so intricate and well-shaped that it felt like they were connected. If he thought of it as such and observed the figure as a whole, then it was almost like a massive dragon just formed in front of him.

“Who goes there!?”

A deep, beastly voice came from that figure and made the cave tremble with his voice alone. Senkyo’s panic spiked but tried his best to keep himself together. The colossal figure slowly stepped into the red light, making the cave shake with every step. Then, it appeared.

A dragon-like being that had crystal plates, serrated arms, deadly claws, an intimidating dragonic face, and a ramming horn that protruded from its head. It looked like a mix of a lizard and a beetle. When that thought crossed his mind, an idea lit up, but he didn’t know what to think of it. A being that was born from the mix of an Eozea and an Etriag, one that was strong enough to be considered one of the three predators of the sunken nest of Iqanlr. The Hybrid Lord.

From what Leolja talked about, the Hybrid Lord wasn’t an aggressive person who wanted to rule the sunken nest. It gave him the idea of it wanting to spend its life lying around in peace, but of course, that didn’t exempt it from the essential needs such as food and water. Not attacking other species in the nest was one thing, but Senkyo was an outsider, a surface dweller from the Lord’s perception. In other words, eating him was fair game.

Senkyo’s thoughts raced as ideas came and went to find a solution to get out of his current predicament. Then, he was reminded that Leolja used the treasures of the surface to make peace with his brethren. He didn’t know how effective it would be if he tried it on the Hybrid Lord, but it was all or—

“Child, why do you struggle so much?”

An unexpected question came from the beast. It silenced Senkyo for a while, but the piercing glare that came from the Lord urged him to answer.

“I-Isn’t it natural? I—I don’t want to die… not… not yet! How could you expect me to die… if there’s still so much I need to do!? So many… so many mistakes that I need to make up for! There’s no way I can let myself die here!”

“Is that so? Then, why did you let those mistakes you talk about happen in the first place?”

“W-What do you…”

“Enough. I have been following your ventures since the moment you set foot on this nest. My kin have been avoiding you for the sole reason of observation. Indeed, an unexpected third party disrupted that and made my kin turn on you, but none of that should have been a problem for a monster like you.”

“You… know me…”

“Just like everyone that creeps in your shadows, I am no stranger to your existence, Yukou Senkyo. For that reason, it confuses me that you have been pushed so far into a corner.”

“I—I lost my memories, so what do you—”

“Excuses! All I can hear are pitiful excuses! I saw you fight. Even without your memories, your body remained as powerful as ever. What truly held you back was not memories nor the lost experiences, but the emotions that you hold so dearly.”

“…my emotions…?”

“Correct. Yukou Senkyo, has anyone ever tried to remind you? You are not human.”

“…!!!”

Why? Why was it that his words shook him to his core? Senkyo didn’t know, but it had to have been related to his lost memories. Even without them, it must have been something that was engraved into his soul rather than the mind.

“You are a monster—a tool. A tool like yourself has the responsibility to keep all of your edges sharp. Before you mind your emotions, first you take control of your power! You have the responsibility to do so! What kind of tool becomes dull just because they forget they can cut? You, especially, are unlike every other tool in the three worlds. One mistake from you can mean the end for everyone who places their hopes in you.”

“E-Even so, if I throw my emotions—”

“Then, what!? Yukou Senkyo, after everything you have experienced in this nest, do you truly think that you are strong enough to handle both your immense power and your raging emotions at the same time? I once knew a person who did exactly just that, juggling pain and happiness, dividing her edge from her handle, and I can tell for certain, you are nowhere near what they were capable of!”

As if he had been struck through the heart, Senkyo was unable to say anything back to the Hybrid Lord.

“This is what happens when you swell your mind with arrogance and lose your priorities. I have heard from my sources. Even before you lost your memories, you were like this. Now, look around you! This is where that mistake brought you! Had you focused on controlling your power, had you known how to bring it out instinctively even without your memories, then you would have found a better end.”

“…”

He held his breath, keeping the words he wanted to say in his throat, but the Lord knew exactly what they were.

“Do you think this is unreasonable? That’s because it is. None of us wanted to be stuck in the situations we are in now, all we can do is find a way to make peace with where we are. This goes for me, and the person that once saved me. As for you, what are you going to do about all this unfairness? Are you going to keep hiding in a shell of excuses? I already told you the answer, but how are you going to act upon it? Tell me, what do you want to do with your life, Yukou Senkyo!?”

“I… I…”

I already answered this question, he thought in his mind. Insane. Insane. Insane! Everything about this situation was insane! All of this was too much for his mind to handle, but so what? If it meant shooting back his words at the beast that questioned him, then he didn’t need to think about it. All he needed was to let everything in his mind loose. Gathering his courage and turning his disappointment and frustrations into power, he began and roared.

“I told you before, there’s no way I can let myself die here!!! Maybe you’re right! Maybe I do need to throw away all of my emotions to keep control of my powers! Maybe that’s the only safe solution to survive in this world! But how do you expect someone as weak as me to do that!? You said it yourself! I’m nowhere near the capabilities of that person who can juggle their power and emotions! But even so, even if I’m weak, I can’t let myself bite the dust here! I want to live… I NEED to live if I ever want to become that kind of person! I want to prove to everyone that I’m not just some good for nothing! If everyone has their hopes on my back, then it’s my job to carry all of them! I can do it! I NEED TO DO IT!! THAT’S THE ONLY WAY I CAN EVER DIE PEACEFULLY!!!”

The Hybrid Lord listened carefully and responded flatly to his speech.

“Then break.”

His answer was so confusing that Senkyo’s head cooled a bit to try and understand what he meant. To save him from that effort, the Hybrid Lord followed.

“You and I need to break in order to become stronger. The same went for your predecessor. Once you break, you will be reforged into a stronger being. Even if that isn’t strong enough, then all you need to do is break again. That is the essence of the power that you will carry.”

From behind the Hybrid Lord, a gigantic pair of double doors lit up in red, showing its intricate design and lighting up the backside of the Lord that was hidden by the shadows, revealing his beetle-like attributes that consisted of the forewings and hindwings, and even a lizard tail that looked just as menacing as the rest of his body.

“To borrow the words of your predecessor, the one who saved me… Yukou Senkyo, after going through this much pain, the only thing that would be worse is letting it end in pain. As someone who is just like me, I want you to discover what happiness is. Be it in this world or any other, I want to give you the chance to face this cruel reality with a wide smug on your face and laugh at it with all your heart…”

The double doors began to creak loudly, the sound echoing off the walls of the large cavern.

“I, Asier, Guardian of the Gjia Eaixih Soul Breaker, recognize Yukou Senkyo as its rightful successor. With this, your fate is sealed. Welcome to the path of torment. In this place, only pain and suffering await you.”

Once the doors became half-opened, a flurry of crystal spikes shot out from them like tentacles and pierced Senkyo’s body. The sudden pang made him scream, but he didn’t complain.

“But, if you manage to overcome your trials, then I assure you, that something more than that will greet your arrival. Just like how everyone believes in your power, whether or not you know them, they will always be there to support you. Never forget this moment.”

A bright red light filled the room as the double doors fully opened, consuming everything in the cavern.

**394 – The Researcher of the Depths**

“Out! Get out of the way! C-Come on! Hey! Heeeeey! What the hell is happening over there!?”

A man complained as a wall of Eozea and Etriag blocked his path. Undaunted by the thick barrier of lizards and beetles of all evolutionary stages, he tried to push them away and squeeze through the gaps between them, but he could do nothing because of the sheer difference in strength.

“Asier!! You’re there with the boy, aren’t you!? What are you doing!? Tell your people to let me through already!!”

From an outsider’s perspective, it would be strange to see the Eozeas and Etriags not attacking him, but the man that stood before them was a little special, one that their mighty lord recognized as a trustworthy power.

“You can’t hide from me! Leolja already told me that he saw your people bring him here! And what’s with that light!? It better not be what I think it is—WHOA!?”

While the man was continuing his incessant pushing, the Eozeas and Etriags suddenly stepped away and opened a path, making him fall to the ground. Just before it was too late, the man kicked off the ground and somersaulted in the air, landing gracefully back on the ground where he let out a tired sigh.

“You could have at least warned me… whatever, this isn’t the time for that.”

He briskly walked through the darkness with familiar steps until he found a red light in his path. Picking up the pace, he turned the corner and eventually found Asier with Senkyo sprawled on the floor, unconscious. He didn’t seem injured in any way, but that wasn’t what he was worried about.

“Asier!! What was that light just now!? What happened to Miss Nwen’s door!?”

“Cursed One…you seem to be in a rush. I was busy until just now, are you here for the boy?”

“Of course I am! Why did you take him while he was in that state!? No… I guess it’s better for you to be the first person to find him rather than some stray, but why do you want him? What did you do!?”

“What, you ask?”

Asier brushed off the man’s anger and sat up straight. His crystal platings then began to radiate purple and red light, illuminating the empty cavern. When the man looked past Asier, he found nothing but a solid wall of rocks. The giant pair of red double doors that marked Nwen’s resting place and the very same holding place of her Gjia Eaixih were no longer there.

“I fulfilled my promises to Nwen, nothing more.”

“W-What!?”

The man couldn’t hide his shock and left his mouth open for a few seconds while he processed Asier’s words.

“That shouldn’t be possible! Having two sets of Gjia Eaixih is impossible! He—Yukou Senkyo should have inherited a different Gjia Eaixih before he arrived here! If not… then he wouldn’t have unlocked the power to regenerate his body! That power would have still been sealed away!”

“Say what you will, Cursed One, but as a former Guardian of a Gjia Eaixih, I can tell for certain that he possesses no Gjia Eaixih other than the one I gave him just now.”

“That… can’t be… I was sure that…”

The man clutched his head, wanting to deny Asier’s words, but he would never lie, especially when it comes to something as serious as this. If it was something that involved Nwen… he would never lie. Then, did that mean that Senkyo was truly her successor? But what would that say about the results he obtained? How did this all connect together?

“No… it… makes sense… tsk!”

With the click of his tongue, the man marched over to where Senkyo lay.

“What are you doing?”

Asier questioned, but the man didn’t answer. He continued walking to Senkyo and Asier simply watched him. The man crouched by Senkyo’s side and reached out for his arm. Suddenly, his arm was held at the wrist, stopping his approach. When he traced the source of it, the man saw Senkyo’s other hand binding his hand and giving him a sharp glare. The man panicked and fell to his bottom as he tried to flee.

“W-W-W-W-W-WHOA, TH-THAT SCARED ME!!”

The man held his wrist close to his body and stroked it repeatedly as if he almost had that wrist severed. He stared at Senkyo as he slowly rose from the ground.

“Where…… am I again?”

He rubbed his eyes and asked himself in a drowsy voice almost like he was rudely disturbed from a good night’s sleep. He looked around and found that the cavern was being illuminated by Asier. Just as he was about to say something, he saw a man he didn’t know sitting on the ground a small distance away from him.

He had long blonde hair and red eyes behind a pair of glasses. He was wearing a white lab coat over a brown suit and black pants paired with brown boots. His body didn’t seem any different from the average person, except for the fact that he had two pairs of arms instead of one. It was a bit strange to him since he expected a person with four arms to at least have larger muscles and new muscle and bone groups to support the extra two arms, but the person in front of him didn’t seem to have that body structure. Other than that, his high number of accessories was something to take note of, such as a metal choker, two earrings on both ears, a bracelet on each of his four wrists, and one ring on each finger including the thumbs, totaling twenty rings.

It seemed strange to ignore the large dragon-like beast in front of him, but nothing about this situation was normal since the start, so he decided to just go with the flow. Besides, Senkyo felt no hostility coming from Asier. The same went for the man in front of him, but he was clearly agitated.

“Who are you?”

“O-Oh, yeah… I guess we’ve never met in person before…”

The man picked himself up and patted the dirt off his clothes. After composing himself, he matched Senkyo’s gaze and introduced himself.

“It’s nice to finally meet you, Senkyo. I’m Brigan. You might recognize me as the Battery’s Mad Scientist or as Hira’s father. You can call me whatever you want, I don’t mind.”

**395 – Clearing The Muddled Facts**

“The… Mad Scientist…”

It was the man who announced that he would use Senkyo to serve his own purpose. A man fueled with so much revenge that he was willing to take control of Senkyo and throw him at Gaeka. At first, he thought he would be furious at him, but in the end, he never had any memories of him taking control of his body. Did he have second thoughts? Senkyo was planning to use him so that he could find out how to get back his memories, so he didn’t know how to feel about him.

“I know you have a lot of questions for me, but please let me start. This is very important for both you and me. Did you make contact with anything strange before you arrived here in Iqanlr? Um, I don’t know if you remember or if you even know what these are, but specifically, anything related to Divine Weapons, Gjia Eaixihs, or Empyrean Catalysts. Basically, anyone who seemed a bit too strong or transformed into something strong. It can be you or anyone you made contact with. It might not make sense to you now but I need to know if you remember anything.”

“Um…”

He tried to recall the images he saw from Shiro’s memories that matched his description. The first person he could think of who matched the description was the kid who once tried to fry him alive with lightning when Shiro was first unsealed. Then, there was a time when a person named Touma transformed into something strange, but he only saw a glimpse of that memory so he wasn’t sure about him. Another time was when a skeleton they were fighting ate something strange and turned into a colossus, that one seemed close. And finally, there was the time when he went berserk and transformed into some kind of black knight. Senkyo conveyed his thoughts to Brigan. He didn’t know if this was a good idea. It felt like he was moving by instinct at this point, but he couldn’t be bothered to think hard about it.

As he told every story, Brigan held his chin in deep thought as he listened to Senkyo’s every word. He kept up this attitude until something in him clicked upon hearing his last story.

“—THAT!! What did you do for that to happen!?”

“H-Huh? I… uhh… I think I was using a sword from someone named Ryosei. I don’t know much of him since he rarely shows up in Shiro’s—ah, I mean, I don’t remember him much. All I know is that I used a sword called… uh, Kuro Yaiba. I used it to cut my hand, and the next thing I know, the transformation happened.”

“K-Kuro Yaiba!? That’s Professor Masao’s Divine Weapon! I thought it was broken in the battle 17 years ago… No, wait… I think it was repaired and the blacksmith called it the Tampered Blade… Wait, they managed to make it work!? If that’s so, then would it still be considered a Divine Weapon? No… it shouldn’t be, but it has the same properties as one… and it can use the Release Factor… a pseudo-Diving Weapon!? If Senkyo can use it, then can everyone else do the same!? I’ve never—”

Senkyo watched Brigan awkwardly as he entered a tangent and began spouting nonsense to himself. With nothing to do, he turned to Asier in hopes of finding an answer but he didn’t seem to care about what was happening and curled on the ground. Honestly, even Senkyo was feeling sleepy from all of the jargon Brigan was throwing at him.

“It seems like you’re all having fun here.”

“Whoa!?”

From the ceiling came a spider that lowered to Senkyo’s head level by a small thread. It was a familiar voice, but his abruptness didn’t fail to surprise Senkyo.

“L-Leolja!? Y-You’re here!”

“Indeed, I am. It’s good to see you safe, Senkyo. Hybrid Lord, it has been a while.”

The phantom threader that Leolja was using to communicate hopped out of its thread and onto Senkyo’s shoulder as he greeted Asier.

“Yes, it has. Though, I doubt you came here for a friendly visit. What brings you?”

Asier responded naturally, not even flinching at Leolja’s sudden arrival. The hybrid lord raised his head as it responded to him whilst Brigan was still lost in his own world, ignoring everything that was happening.

“It’s quite urgent, I’m afraid. One of the Demonic Spiders reported to me that there has been an attack on our main nest.”

“The Iwaiida’s main nest… I never thought anyone would be so foolish to bring chaos to that place.”

“What? Why is that?”

Knowing his lack of knowledge, Leolja decided quickly to explain.

“Our main nest does have the strongest forces of Iwaiida, but the reason that makes it difficult to attack isn’t that. It's because our nest is located directly at the base of the Mainstay. If anyone attempts to let loose, there would be a chance that they could take down the whole nest entirely, so no one has ever made a destructive attack until now.”

“Then… isn’t this really bad?”

“Yes, that would be the case. The problem lies with the attacker. It seems that the monster that attacked us on level A2 is the one causing the chaos. What makes this a problem is the fact that they are not interested in our nest. We don’t know why, but it is making direct attacks on the Mainstay. Our forces are doing their best to hold it back, but he won’t last for long.”

“…!”

Everyone, including Brigan, twisted their faces as they heard the news.

“What makes things worse is that the monster somehow gained the support of the Swarm.”

Just as Senkyo was about to ask Leolja to expound, Brigan cut in and did him the honor.

“The Swarm is the term we use to refer to the extreme minority of this nest. They are a race that was on the brink of extinction from this nest until one of them became so powerful that they were enough to keep the race alive. Haeqras has them categorized under the Nexlrs, but when you compare them to Earth’s creatures, they are closer to wasps than they are to bats. The sole head of the Swarm is the Thunder Wing, one of the three predators of this nest. The only way that monster would be able to tame that beast is if that monster is the very same one that manipulated Senkyo’s memories.”

“I had a feeling that was the case. With you affirming it, then there’s no doubt about it.”

Leolja said, reinforcing Brigan’s argument.

“Well then, I believe it should be clear what our response should be.”

Asier said as his giant body rose from the ground and picked up Senkyo by the tips of his claws as if holding a kitten by the neck.

“W-Wha!? Hey! What are you doing!?”

“I’m forcing you to join me in my final clash in this nest. I can take on the Swarm but I will have you handle the memory monster. If I am not careful it can just take control of me too, so you will be the perfect counter.”

“W-What are you saying!? I don’t even know what I’m capable of!! M-My limbs are back but what even changed!?”

“Let your instincts take over, boy. That is all you need to do.”

“T-That’s too unreasonable!!”

“Wait!”

Brigan suddenly cut into Asier and Senkyo’s exchange. The both of them turned to him, asking with their eyes what he wanted to say.

“Before you go, I want to tell you that I’ve found a way to return your memory to normal along with the other victims.”

“You do!?”

A blast of excitement escaped Senkyo’s voice as he heard the news from Brigan.

“Yes, I studied the body samples Leolja sent me. That’s how I confirmed that the memory demon and the monster that attacked you are the same being. I found out that there were two eggs stored in the original body and one egg in the second one. If my theory is correct, then that monster has the ability to reborn itself so long as those eggs survive. This one should be the last one, but I don’t know if it has the ability to make more eggs inside it, so it is safer to destroy the body entirely. As for the memories, the hormones that the monster secretes have similar functions to Senkyo’s blood. As long as it is alive, it is able to control them and influence other bodies. In other words, once you kill it, its hormones will cease to function and will bring back the memories it took from you and clear any mind control it’s forcing upon you.”

“Kill it… I just have to… kill it, huh?”

Senkyo’s voice turned dry as if to ridicule himself for not realizing something so simple. Picking up on his change of attitude, Asier placed him in the palm of his hand and told him.

“That’s what I like to see! There’s no better motivation than that, boy! This is your time to take your revenge and reach your goal with your own two hands! Focus on a single goal; pour your every being into seeing it be fulfilled! Now, we go: to battle!”

Asier let out a fearsome roar that shook the whole cave. A buzz of activity could be heard in the distance as the Eozeas and Etriags charged out of the nest at Asier’s signal. Asier’s forewings flew open and his hindwings unfolded. With the spacious cavern, nothing could restrict them from expanding to show their sparkling beauty. Then, a cloud of dust covered the area as Asier’s wings flapped and sent him zooming through the caves.

When the dust and commotion slowly settled, coughing could be heard echoing throughout the large cavern. It was the last person that was left behind after everyone decided to hurry and leave.

“What an energetic bunch. I don’t think I’ve ever seen Asier get that excited for a fight. Maybe it's because he’s free now… Welp, I can’t be the only one slacking. Now that I have some new information, it's back to the drawing board for me! Everything makes so much sense now!”

Brigan, too, left with a spring in his step.

**396 – The Hunt Beyond Iqanlr**

“—Leolja! Sir Leolja! What’s happening over there!?”

“…”

Hira tried to push an answer out of Leolja, but there was only silence from the phantom threader attached to her in a web pouch. She waited with bated breath. She knew that shouting wouldn’t do anything. The reason Leolja wasn’t talking to her was likely because he was busy managing the other lines he was connected to. He temporarily cut off his connection with her to focus on other matters, that being, finding a way to save Senkyo and Shiro from a mysterious monster that ambushed them.

Before Leolja cut his line with her, he told Hira that their group was suddenly attacked by a large number of enemies and a deformed monster that looked like an amalgamation of all of the races that lived in Iqanlr’s sunken nest. Time slowly passed for Hira as she zoomed through the morning sky toward her destination.

Up until now, she was playing a game of cat and mouse with the people who had the destination point of Senkyo’s recall crystal. At first, they found it within the borders of Iqanlr, but time and time again they would move from one place to another in an instant. As anyone would suspect, it was teleportation. From the looks of it, Gaeka had long since stolen the blueprints of how to create a teleportation network from Adeira’s workshop. Hira vehemently threw a flurry of insults at Adeira through Leolja for letting so much of his equipment leak to the enemy, so Adeira helped destroy the network as compensation, leaving his post at the Lord’s mansion.

After many coordinated attacks from Hira, Adeira, the Battery, the Krikrt Group, and other people that came along with Adeira from the mansion, they finally managed to corner the enemy and destroy the teleportation network in Iqanlr. Unfortunately, it didn’t end there. When Adeira traced the locations that the network was connected to, he found out that the enemy connected to another location far from Iqanlr just before they could destroy the last teleportation point in Iqanlr. He theorized that the connection to that location had already been created long ago, it was simply not connected to the network so no one would know it existed. And in their escape, they quickly connected it and escaped that way. When they tried to use the same teleportation network, it didn’t work, meaning that the enemy cut the connection from the other side, leaving them stranded in Iqanlr.

However, there was one last hope for them. With Hira’s AW-Unit, she could travel to the enemy’s location faster than any other mode of transportation aside from teleportation. They didn’t know if the enemy had a separate teleportation network set on the other side, but it was still worth the effort to check. She brought one of Leolja’s phantom threaders to keep her connection with them and a tame owned by one of the members of the Krirt Group to track down the enemy’s trail. Leolja kept his connection online by leaving behind a trail of his webs while the tame was being carried inside the same web pouch so that it wouldn’t get blown away by Hira’s speed, waiting for the time to act.

But then, just as Hira was getting close to her destination, the news about the ambush on Senkyo’s party came from Leolja. She had been anxious ever since hearing the report but kept heading to her destination without hesitation, in fact, she went faster. Not for a second did she lose faith in Senkyo’s capabilities, besides it was her job to fulfill her end of the promise. She wanted to secure the destination point as fast as possible to make sure that if he ever used the recall crystal, then he would be welcomed by friendly forces, which mostly consisted of her.

The long-awaited result of Leolja’s report finally entered her ears… though, it wasn’t what she expected.

“What do you mean you lost connection!?”

“I’m saying it as it is. I lost my contact with Senkyo and Shiro.”

“How did that happen!?”

Without hesitation, Leolja answered.

“Brigan made Senkyo rampage.”

“D-Dad finally did it?”

“No, it was wrong to phrase it that way. I convinced him to make Senkyo rampage.”

“W-What? I don’t understand… you MADE him do it? Are you telling me that Dad didn’t want to make Yukou-san rampage yet?”

“That is correct. I’m not sure why, but there was a reason why your father wasn’t making Senkyo rampage earlier. I thought it was odd that he let us reach level A2, but that was because he couldn’t complete the proper procedures to make Senkyo rampage safely. When we were ambushed, I contacted Brigan to make Senkyo rampage so he could defend himself. But when I arrived, he told me that he couldn’t connect with Senkyo’s Gjia Eaixih.”

“His Gjia Eaixih… Wait, did Yukou-san ever mention that he had one?”

“Apparently, no. However, Brigan told me that he could tell if he had one or not. ”

“What!? How?”

“‘Make contact with the power of a god,’ in other words the blessings given to the Ambassadors by the gods. According to Brigan, that is one of the conditions that will unlock Senkyo’s power to regenerate his body. After I told him that Senkyo’s wounds immediately regenerated when I was secretly collecting his blood, he knew that he had to have acquired his Gjia Eaixih. After all, that specific condition was made so that his body would withstand the drawbacks of using a Gjia Eaixih, or so he said.”

“He somehow knew that about Yukou-san… I really have no clue what his relationship with him is. Then if that’s the case, then what do you mean by Dad not being able to find his Gjia Eaixih?”

“I don’t know much about it, but from what I gather, Brigan’s original plan was to connect with Senkyo’s Gjia Eaixih and forcibly activate its Release Factor. Using his own spirit as a catalyst, he would embed Gaeka’s image in his mind and make him hunt him down. Apparently, this was a safe way for him to control Senkyo since he would already have access to his mind before his Release Factor formed. But, just like I said earlier, he couldn’t find his Gjia Eaixih, so he couldn’t commit to making Senkyo rampage. If nothing happened, we probably would have reached Brigan’s lab without Senkyo rampaging.”

“…But then you got ambushed.”

“Unfortunately.”

“What are the risks of making him rampage without safety?”

To that question, the phantom threader shook its head along with Leolja’s words.

“We have no idea. All we can do is hope for everything to work out.”

“Is that so…”

It was an unavoidable situation. Senkyo had lost his memories, so he wasn’t as powerful as he was before. Shiro was there, so they should have been able to buy more time if Senkyo ordered her to protect him. Hira thought that she should have been enough after seeing her moves against the memory monster, but from the sound of Leolja’s voice, the situation wasn’t that simple on their side.

“Well then? What happened? How did you lose connection?”

Hira didn’t lose track of the reason he was questioning Leolja and brought it all back to her original question after all of the tangents.

“That is…”

Leolja’s voice slowly trailed off, allowing Hira to pick up on his reluctance. It wasn’t as if he didn’t know how to answer her question, but he simply didn’t want to answer it. She had a bad feeling about it, but she took the reins over her own emotions and kept a level head. Right now, she couldn’t do anything to help Senkyo and Shiro from where she was. All she could do was fulfill her purpose. If she could take back the destination point, then Senkyo and Shiro would have a safe exit away from danger. This was the best she could do to assist the two at the moment.

“Argh!! Whatever!! We’re already here anyway! Let’s just get that stupid destination point back and go back home! Town of Naen, here I come!!!”

**397 – Entering the Stage**

“This should do it. Now, go! Find their trail!”

“Eeeeeee!”

Hira ordered as she released the tame she brought with her. It was an uebat bird. It wasn’t the best to use for tracking, but that didn’t mean it could be underestimated. Mana wayfinding is one of the skills uebat birds use to judge possible prey and predators. What makes them renowned for being the best messenger birds is their ability to recognize and navigate to multiple places they’ve been to, and the secret to this is their mana wayfinding. By remembering and reading the flow of mana in their environment, they can choose the optimal path in the air to get to their destination the fastest. In addition to that, if they are given a mana sample of the person they are supposed to deliver it to, they can use mana wayfinding to find their mana signature and deliver messages to them directly. It is slightly roundabout compared to hunting birds, but their accuracy never disappoints.

The bird hovered over the town and began its hunt while Hira climbed higher in the air to prevent anyone from detecting her easily. Uebats have the perfect camouflage from below since their feathers change with the color of the sky. Meanwhile, from above, Hira could clearly spot where the bird was by searching for a fragment of the sky moving below her.

The bird passed the entire town of Naen and made a beeline for the edge of a forest near Naen’s borders. Seeing that it landed somewhere in the trees, Hira followed behind but instead of following with her thrusters to move, she turned them off and entered a skydiving position so that she could reach her destination with the smallest amount of noise. Just when she was about to reach the ground, she activated her thrusters once more and landed safely.

Hira equipped two long rods on each hand. Just before she arrived on the ground, compartments on her forearms released the rods. She did a quick search of her surroundings, but nothing was there. Assuming that the uebat bird found the enemy, then perhaps they realized this and hid immediately. She advanced slowly but surely into the forest. Not long after, she heard the sound of the uebat bird she brought with her behind one of the trees. She had the chance to make an attack through it, but she hadn’t confirmed what she was dealing with yet and didn’t want to jump to conclusions. It took her a bit more time, but she opted to move through the shadows and circled around the tree to see what was happening. Then, as she got closer, she heard the voice of another person.

“My, my aren’t you a hungry one! Calm, now. I still have more where that came from!”

“Eeeeeee!!”

“What in the…”

Hira took a peek from the trees and found a bizarre scene. In her vision was a jester feeding her uebat bird newly cooked meat by heating them with fire magic in one hand while the other was holding a silver tray of raw meat. Hira didn’t even know where to begin to analyze the situation. But, she was certain of one thing: this person was not the enemy.

“Clown, what are you doing here?”

“Oh! If it isn’t Miss Hira! Welcome, welcome! Do you care for a bite?”

“No, I’m busy right now. So, let’s cut to the chase. Do you want something with me?”

“Aww, I wish you weren’t so cold, but I understand what you mean. Yes, very, very well indeed!”

The Clown. This is what Hira had come to call this person after two encounters with him in the past. One of these encounters happened when she was only a small child. In a tragic event that eventually led to her mother’s demise, the Clown was the one who pushed her to find her mother’s research and save them from destruction. The second happened a few years ago when he told her to enter the Battery. There, she found out that her father was conducting research at the bottom of Iqanlr’s sunken nest. He apparently didn’t want her to get involved, so he pushed her away from that place and didn’t get to see what he was doing, but at the very least she found out what this mysterious “job” he was doing.

Both of these encounters were the same in the sense that the Clown always made positive changes in her life, but still somehow different from each other. Every time she met the Clown, his personality seemed to change along with his outfit. Nothing much really changed, except for the color patterns on his clothes, but she figured they were related somehow.

The first one had a red and blue pattern, possessing a serious and analytic personality. The second one had a purple and orange pattern, possessing an annoying and pushy personality. And now, her third encounter, a Clown that had a lavender and jade pattern, possessing a silly and playful personality.

The Clown called her cold but that was just because Hira genuinely had no idea how to handle him. She knew about his rumors and honestly had no idea how to break down the myth of the Stray Fool, so it was like seeing a doll come to life. Even though she knew he meant no harm to her, even though she was thankful for everything he had done, she still couldn’t get comfortable dealing with him. Her solution for this is to get her interaction with the Clown finished as soon as possible. Since he chose this specific time to appear, Hira had a good guess at what this was all about.

The Clown fed the last piece of meat to the uebat bird, threw the silver tray away, and hopped onto a large rock that was nearby.

“Miss Hira, I’m afraid this is as far as you go.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s just that this little birdie wanted to get to something that was here before, right?”

He said, tapping the rock he was standing on with his feet.

“I think they were your friends. I mean, they’re the only other people wearing giant suits of metal in these parts, so it just makes sense!”

Hira thought, processing the Clown’s words. If he truly saw people wearing AW-Units, then they were probably students from Xhiari being controlled by the memory monster’s influence. If she ever found them, then she had to be careful of dealing any fatal blows. They were just mind-controlled; they were not actually her enemies.

“Anyway, they stood by this rock and went POOF! I think that was the new teleportation thing. But, it doesn’t work anymore. They probably broke it so only they could play with it. They’re really selfish, huh? Because of that, this is as far as you will go, Miss Hira.”

“Is that why you’re here?”

“Hehe!”

Unfazed by the Clown’s provoking tone, she read his thoughts perfectly, making him let out a small giggle. The Clown only appears whenever he wants to perform his “services.” Following this rule suggested that his current “service” with Hira had something to do with catching up to the people she was chasing.

“Miss Hira, I want to do this one thing for you, and it’s to fix this toy your friends were playing with and let you have a turn. But, there’s one problem. Unlike the other times I ‘served’ you, this one is going to have to come with a price!”

“A price, huh? And what is that? Money?”

“Oh, nothing physical. I just want you to enter the stage!”

“What stage are you talking about?”

“Why, it’s this one right here! The very stage I’m performing on right now!”

The Clown said, throwing his arms into the air and tapping on the rock once more.

“It might seem silly to you, but your whole life will change the moment you enter the stage! There will be no turning back. And honestly, your father would probably be cross with me if he learned that I gave you this option! But I don’t care, because I want to hear YOUR answer!”

He extended his hand to her as if passing the spotlight to her.

“…Oh, so that’s what this is.”

There will be no turning back. These words reek of pain and danger. The very words that her parents probably came across at some point in their lives. If she took this one step forward, then she could end up like her mother, who was met with an early death. Or maybe her father, who bound himself to a curse called vengeance. These were the real-life examples of the result of these words.

But what of it? Contrary to what other people may think, these very words… This was the point that Hira had been waiting to arrive at.

“Then it’s decided!”

Hira hopped onto the rock immediately after understanding the Clown’s words. Reacting to this, the Clown hopped off and onto a nearby tree branch, allowing Hira to take the rock all for herself.

“I’ll be walking up your stage, so hurry up and send me to where they are already!”

“My, my, my! I just love your decisiveness, Miss Hira! Very well! In response to your courageous step forward—”

A teleportation circle appeared around the rock, coating everything in their surroundings in a blue light.

“—I welcome you! To the stage where death and chaos births hope!!”

**398 – Decisive Clashes**

“So, how far away is this place again?”

“Even with our AW-Units, Nrjia’s capital will still be somewhere over a week away so don’t bother asking every other second, Vleid.”

“You’ve gotta be joking…”

Inside a dark tunnel were two people wearing metal suits walking to the light that indicated its end. Vleid and Raeri were the names of these two particular people. The woman, Raeri, held a black hexagon-shaped metal device in her hand. This was Senkyo’s Recall Point. Just a while ago, they finished entering, exiting, and breaking numerous teleportation networks to shake off their possible pursuers. The two ended up in a secret room hidden in the sunken nest of a different town called Siwk. Originally, they exited in the town of Naen located in Ujlufi, but the numerous teleportation networks made them loop around the border city of Iqanlr and land in the territory of Ridsikrn, the complete opposite direction from Naen. The tunnel they were walking out of was an exit different from the main exit of the nest located a good distance away from the borders of Siwk.

They were currently being controlled by the influence of the memory monster, not that they could realize any of this. The mind-control of the memory monster was different from simply making people follow its orders. By “influence,” this meant that it had the ability to make its victims retain their personality while executing its orders. Instead of making these two follow the order “bring the recall point to Nrjia’s capital,” their minds were made to believe that “they HAD to bring the recall point to Nrjia’s capital,” as if it were of their own volition.

In a way, this was a more potent type of hypnosis as it was hard to detect. The victims didn’t act differently from their usual, they only had a compelling force to complete certain tasks. The victims themselves think nothing of this urge except for it being a “natural” part of their lives, meaning that they could still use previous knowledge they have to sate these urges. Even if the memory monster had no idea what their capabilities were, the victims themselves would use whatever they could just to fulfill the urge given by the memory monster. As such, the familiar back and forth between Vleid and Raeri never disappeared despite their situation.

*\*…vvvhhh\**

“Ugh…! This is gonna be such a—AACK!!”

“Quiet.”

Raeri mercilessly struck Vleid’s neck to silence his complaints. He wanted to shoot back at her for her sudden attack, but he quickly realized why she did that when a faint sound entered his ears.

*\*vvvshhHH…\**

“It's coming from behind us!”

“What!? Impossible! The only thing there is the broken teleportation point! There’s no way anyone should’ve been able to get there!”

*\*vvvSSHHH!\**

“Stop complaining! There’s no use thinking about it; the fact that there’s something behind us is undeniable! Prepare yourself!”

“AARGH! FINE, WHATEVER!”

Vleid and Raeri entered battle positions and prepared both their AW-Units and chants to engage. The sound from the distance quickly amplified and amber light began to glow in the darkness.

*\*VVSSHHH!!!\**

When the noise finally reached full blast, both Vleid and Raeri realized that the enemy was an AW-Unit, one that had particularly powerful thrusters that could cover the entire distance they’d been walking in just a few seconds. Taking into account the light that peered through the darkness, they could only think of one person.

“HIRA!?”

Vleid’s shout was swallowed by the blast of Hira’s thrusters and the two streaks of amber light that released from her sides. Raeri successfully summoned a shield to defend herself and Vleid boldly used the hand of his AW-Unit Frame to grab the amber light. Azure, carmine, and amber sparked as the three mech suits clashed in lighting-quick combat.

The result was instantaneous but eventful. So much so that the few milliseconds that the flashes of light illuminated the dark tunnel felt like an eternity. The identity of the amber light that Hira held was a pair of blades formed with solid light. It made direct contact with Vleid’s metal hand, but only grazed it and couldn’t penetrate its thick armor. Raeri’s shield was on the verge of destruction, but she angled it so that it would deflect the blade rather than stop it, allowing her to go for the counterattack and release the spell she had ready.

The earth in front of Hira suddenly rose from the ground, forming a line of spikes in her path. Then, as if reading this move, Vleid had his metal arm raised and prepared to smash Hira into the ground. Ignoring the rising spikes, Hira spun her body and blocked the incoming metal fist. Her blades of light caught the attack, but that didn’t stop the force from transferring to her body and pushing her to the ground. She controlled her aerodynamics by directing her thrusters to the ground and angling her body to stand slightly to prevent contact with the ground. As for the earth spikes, all of them crumbled before they could reach Hira’s AW-Unit Frame.

The first clash finally resolved, ending with Hira shooting out of the tunnel and the only person to take damage being Vleid with a grazed metal hand.

“Vleid, run back into the tunnel!”

“For what!? There’s nothing but a dead end there!”

“We’ll break into Siwk’s sunken nest, so just—”

*\*BAAANNGG!!!\**

Raeri’s order was cut short by a fierce roar from Hira’s sniper rifle. None of them were shot; only the ground at the entrance of the tunnel. Did she miss? That question was quickly answered when the ground rumbled and the entire tunnel floor was raised to the skies. Unable to escape, Vleid and Raeri were slammed into the tunnel ceiling. Thankfully, they were protected by their AW-Units and survived as the sun greeted their abrupt ascent. Brushing the dust and rubble off their bodies, they found themselves on top of an earth platform that snaked further behind them, making them realize that there was no escape even if they ran deeper into the tunnel.

“Man, oh man! You two alright? Look, both of you need to knock it off and realize that you’re being controlled already! None of them need that Recall Point there, the real enemy probably just wants their hands on your AW-Units. Come on, we don’t need to do this!”

Hira appealed to Vleid and Raeri, but as she expected, they responded with a coordinated attack. Raeri passed Senkyo’s recall point to Vleid, dashed to the edge of the earth platform, and jumped, catching herself using the same shield she used to defend against Hira. The shield she produced was a physical null barrier. Since it was a type of magic that could be fixed in place, it allowed her to use it as a floating platform to get close to Hira. Meanwhile, Vleid took the recall point, detached his AW-Unit Frame from his body, shoved it in a compartment in his AW-Unit Frame hidden by his back, and reattached his AW-Unit Frame, successfully locking it away.

“So we’re doing this, huh?”

Hira said with a sigh as she stored back her sniper rifle and reequipped the twin rods from her forearms. It would have been smarter to keep her distance, but her aim wasn’t to kill the two, she just needed to knock them out of commission so that she could collect the recall point.

Her enemies were Vleid and Raeri. Both of them were close combat fighters, but not to be underestimated by contemporary counters such as ranged attacks or maintaining distance. The reason for this was shown by their actions as Raeri tapped a scanner-like pad on her neck, making it glow white. Right as this happened, her figure disappeared from sight along with the barriers she was using as platforms. Then, on the ground, Vleid didn’t stay silent as he charged his metal suit. The massive AW-Unit Frame glowed orange all over and even his dragonic horn and scales fume with red. With his beastly roar, Vleid kicked the ground, leaving a large crater on the earth platform, and shot at Hira. The combination of the force he gathered on the ground and the rocket thrusters that blasted on the soles of his mech’s metal feet, his velocity was so fast that he became a blur in the sky.

If their target was a random person who was seeing their moves for the first time, then they would undoubtedly freeze in confusion at what was happening, but Hira was a classmate who analyzed the two’s mock battles numerous times. She knew exactly what was happening and exactly what to do to stop them.

Instead of summoning a pair of solid light blades, she slammed the tips of the rods together and removed them from each other. Then, solid amber light appeared and extended the length of the rods, creating one, long rod. She spun the rod around, leaving a trail of amber particles, and producing a combination of a battleaxe and a spear at one end of the pole. In other words—a halberd.

As Vleid closed in on Hira’s location, the amber particles that were released from the halberd’s creation turned dark purple, the color that embodied darkness, and the one that consumed the light that concealed Raeri’s assassination attempt. Around Hira appeared multiple copies of Raeri attacking from all sides. Normal clones were nothing to worry about, but clones that had high durability were a problem since their attacks could actually make contact. Durability refers to how much damage a clone can take or deal. The higher the durability, the more damage they can take or deal. This was determined by the core given to the clones, which was Raeri’s specialty.

A threat of high-durability clones coming from all sides and a massive asteroid-like body coming from below. The situation looked bleak, but this was clearly wrong once the clash finally happened. Just as Vleid was about to make contact with Hira, she quickly dodged to the side and swung her halberd at Vleid’s back. Raeri attacked in response to Hira’s movement and blasted her with magic.

As Hira’s halberd closed in on Vleid’s AW-Unit Frame, it was coated with a red hue as the massive heat began to wear the weapon. If nothing changed here, the halberd would melt before it even touched Vleid, but Hira already knew that. Her AW-Unit suddenly sparked with a fierce blast of amber light, one that coursed through her entire mech and even made her eyes shine a brighter shade. At that moment, a hint of pale blue entered her weapon, into the blade of the halberd, and produced a thick blast of ice and frost that froze the entire back part of Vleid’s AW-Unit Frame.

Thermal Shock. This was the phenomenon that Hira planned to take advantage of. From extreme heat to extreme cold, the abrupt change would weaken and crack the metal. However, not much appeared as Vleid seemed to have prepared for exact circumstances like this. Seeing as it was a clear weakness, it was no wonder he prepared for it. But, that didn’t matter anymore.

Overcome power with a greater power. That was exactly what Hira did when her uninterrupted swing crashed into Vleid’s AW-Unit Frame and completely ripped off his backside. Even without weakening his mech like she originally wanted to, the fact that Hira formed the axe especially so that it would be effective in penetrating Vleid’s AW-Unit Frame and that she used her body’s Pure ARCana sealed the dragon man’s fate.

As for the magic that attempted to harm Hira, they were all repelled with a flurry of hexagon-shaped machines detached from her AW-Unit Frame. She created a sphere of black chips that spread an even 30 centimeters apart from each other. No mana could pass her absolute defense.

**399 – The Living AW-Unit**

“Kghh!!”

“Vleid!”

From within the group of clones, the real Raeri exposed herself by speaking and rushing to Vleid’s aid. She forcibly detached his AW-Unit Frame from his body and collected the unharmed recall point from its storage. Hira wasn’t surprised it survived since she knew about the size and construction of that storage unit. She damaged his AW-Unit Frame just enough to destroy its core, making it unusable.

Carrying Vleid’s large body over her shoulder, Raeri returned to the ground using her barriers and checked for his vitals. It should have been clear that Hira didn’t do any major damage to his main body, but who would rely on such quickly asserted assumptions? Certainly not Raeri who valued the life of the dragon man, and anyone who had a person dear to them for that matter. Even if it looked like a person dear to someone only got a scratch, there are just some times when they can’t help but worry about their wellbeing.

In this situation, Raeri’s worry for Vleid took precedence over the memory monster’s influence, which is why she had yet to flee despite having the recall point safely in her hands. She might treat Vleid roughly but this shows just how much she genuinely cares for him. This proves that the biggest weakness of this type of hypnosis is the very element that it tries to take advantage of. The fact that it allows emotions to control the victims gives them chances to overwrite the orders given to them, even if not completely.

Hira lowered from the sky and caught Raeri’s relieved sigh when she confirmed that Vleid was not in a fatal condition. In fact, he wasn’t even unconscious. Hira could hear his coughs and saw his body slowly supporting himself. When he fixed himself in a good position to face her, Vleid spoke.

“It’s just like the rumors said… you’re a monster that sold their soul to apocrology…! I thought it was all bullshit at first, but that burst of power you used…! It was Pure ARCana wasn’t it!!?”

“Ya got that right!”

Hira’s eyes sparked with an amber light as she responded to Vleid’s decry with her unyielding energetic personality, sticking her chest out and wearing the truth like a medal. She affirmed Vleid’s accusations despite knowing that her practices were far from the accepted fields of apocrology. Her big smile irritated the dragon man, likely because she was absolutely unaffected by his deprecation.

“That AW-Unit… it’s built with Dwrol Stones, isn’t it? That’s the reason why my magic didn’t reach you.”

Raeri said, joining in on the conversation.

“That right! My AW-Unit, the Frame, and the hexagon-shaped chips that protected me all have dwrol stones in them! They’re the only stones that can repel mana after all, so it fits perfectly with my AW-Unit. With this, I don’t need to worry about losing the Pure ARCana my body is collecting!”

Pure ARCana. This is what apocrologists refer to as the residue produced by the use of an AW-Unit’s core, the ARC-Mana. The power source of the AW-Unit, the ARC-Mana, is typically located on the chest. It connects through other parts of the body using a specialized jumpsuit that can utilize them in tandem with spell crystals. The more activity the AW-Unit goes through such as instantly casting spells, or more commonly, connecting the jumpsuit to a mech, also known as the AW-Unit Frame, it wears down the ARC-Mana and produces a sensitive amber liquid that most have come to know as Pure ARCana.

At first, people treated it as a minor inconvenience since this amber liquid wasn’t even amber when it was discovered; it was transparent. This was because the first versions of the AW-Unit didn’t have any functions to lock away the mana in the air, which rots the Pure ARCana just like it does to corpses. The only reason people found out about the power of this liquid was when someone wanted to make a magic-proof AW-Unit and a matching Frame. They used dwrol stones in their build which not only repelled incoming magic attacks but also preserved the true form of Pure ARCana inside the mech.

After laborious research, apocrologists began calling the amber liquid “Pure ARCana,” a concentrated substance created from the ARC-Mana core that serves as another power source. When it is exposed to the mana in the environment or spirit power, the ARCana will lose its luster and rot. However, when it is exposed to a massive amount of mana at a single time, most commonly through exposed mana, it releases a powerful spark of energy. When it is uncontrolled, the newly produced energy will simply create an explosion. But, when it is properly processed, the Pure ARCana could empower the mana that triggered it. Meaning, it had the power to turn a simple low-tier fireball into a mid-tier spell or something that could even be called a borderline high-tier spell, depending on the situation.

“To think that you could become so powerful because you risked your life for a stupid gamble…”

“—It wasn’t a gamble.”

Hira’s bubbly tone suddenly turned ice cold as she disrupted Raeri’s train of thought. A gamble. Referring to her current power as that was nothing short of an insult.

“This is the vision that my Mom had for the future of apocrology. As a fellow Sorun, Raeri, don’t you get insulted by Sikrns? Even if they’re a small group, they still look down on us just because we can’t use mana the same way they can. Well, aren’t I just the perfect counterargument to that? No one other than Soruns can understand the deepest parts of an arcane structure. We’re the only people that can turn our own bodies into weapons to make something that no one else can!”

After finding her mother’s research about Soruns and Pure ARCana, she swore to herself that she would manifest her vision for her sake. To others, maybe it was nothing more than a child’s unrealistic aspirations, but to Hira, it was the last message that her mother left for her. Her mother would never lie to her and she was an excellent researcher who became an apprentice of a Hero to back up her claims. Who, other than her own daughter, would carry out her legacy?

“Everyone’s afraid, but that’s only natural when dealing with the unknown! Almost all of the theories that rejected my Mom’s research pointed at the fatal flaw of the user being exposed to dangerous elements. So what? In the end, everyone was just talking out of their asses without even taking the plunge to reject her research through real-life application! Just like how I proved the Sikrns wrong, I’ll trample those theories underfoot once I make a name for myself as the first successful person to turn their own body into a living AW-Core!!”

Hira’s amber eyes brightened once more. Neither Raeri nor Vleid could respond quick enough. Hira swung her pale blue halberd, releasing a blast of ice and frost in their direction. Raeri attempted to create a barrier, but a swarm of hexagon chips sealed the two in a tight 3D cut-out of their bodies, consuming all of the space for a barrier to form. With dwrol stones embedded into the chips, none of them could create a barrier outside of the seal. Just when Hira’s attack was about to land, the hexagon chips quickly deconstructed the seal, gave the magic space to enter, and reconstructed a seal around Vleid and Raeri with Hira’s attack inside the seal. This gave Raeri a chance to create some barriers even if it wasn’t much, but the fact that Hira’s empowered frost attack was sealed in such a tight space meant that the frost would be even more potent.

At this point, Raeri thought it would be a better outcome to destroy Senkyo’s recall point before they were encased in ice. Unfortunately, shock was what greeted her when she realized that the recall point was already sealed in Hira’s hexagon chips. She tried to break it out, but this seal was completely airtight with no space in between. With no other options, all Raeri and Vleid could do was accept their fate as cold, hard ice began to crawl up their bodies.

**…………**

“Phew… that takes care of that. Hmm… I should probably think of a better way to lock these two up before they freeze to death. Well, for now, I’ll be taking this.”

A solid case of hexagon chips floated into Hira’s hand through the hole she created in the dome of ice that encased Vleid and Raeri. The chips slowly dismantled the case, revealing Senkyo’s recall point.

“—Hira. Just in time, I have an update on Senkyo and Shiro’s situation.”

“Oh!? You do! What are you waiting for!? Spit it out!”

Picking up from Leolja’s last update, just before Senkyo began his rampage, Shiro was undoubtedly killed, or at least, her physical body was. Both Hira and Leolja knew that Shiro was half-spirit because she was Senkyo’s familiar. If the physical bodies of familiars are killed, as long as their spirit returns to the master’s body, then their lives would be saved and will be able to manifest at some point in the future. Still, this didn’t stop Hira from worrying about them. But this worry soon turned to surprise when she heard that Shiro soon re-manifested in the middle of Senkyo’s rampage.

They knew that familiars would be able to manifest again, but neither of them heard of a familiar that manifested in such a short amount of time from when her physical body was killed. Usually, the familiar would need to regenerate their energy to create a new physical body, which took a day at best and a week in worst-case scenarios. As if to scoff at these facts, Shiro manifested another physical body in less than five minutes from when she was first slayed.

With Shiro’s help in Senkyo’s blind rampage, they were able to kill all of the creatures the monster controlled and took both of the horns that were on the monster’s head. The fight resulted in Senkyo burning himself out and the monster fleeing the scene. At this point, Shiro kept guard of Senkyo’s unconscious body when a group of lizards suddenly showed up.

Neither Senkyo nor Shiro knew this, but this group of small lizards was slightly different from the Eozea. They had a high level of intelligence and took orders directly from the Hybrid Lord, Asier. Watching from afar, it seemed that the lizards successfully convinced Shiro, making her return to Senkyo’s body. Then, they proceeded to carry his unconscious body into their nest. Because of this, Leolja ordered Brigan to investigate what they saw. He would have liked to ask Asier directly, but most of the Eozea and Etriag in the nest had no idea how to differentiate a normal phantom threader from a phantom threader that was being controlled by Leolja, so anything he sent would likely just get killed. When he informed Brigan of this, he suddenly jumped out of the chair as if waking up from a terrible dream and marched his way into Asier’s nest. Of course, with a phantom threader hiding in his clothes so that he could maintain communications.

“I have no idea what’s happening over there, but at the very least it looks like everything calmed down, for now.”

Such was Hira’s conclusion. She was showing a few hints of being panicky after Leolja’s last report, so he was satisfied that this calmed her nerves a bit. But, despite everything, there was something else that really needed attention at the moment.

“Indeed. But, may I remind you that you have more urgent matters to attend to?”

“Huh? Like what? I got the recall point right?”

“Yes, I am happy about that, but you should hurry and undo your frost magic on your classmates before they die from the cold. Their AW-Units are still keeping their bodies warm but it will be dangerous once they break.”

“Huh!? WAIT, YOU’RE RIGHT!! Ah, wait, b-but, what do I do if they suddenly go wild and attack me!? I still don’t have anything to lock them down! W-W-W-W-WAAAIIITT!!! DON’T DIE ON ME! I’LL PREPARE SOMETHING SO JUST HANG IN THERE AND DON’T DIE!!!”

In the end, Hira eventually managed to secure the two safely along with their lives. Though, they might suffer from a light cold.

**400 – The Spirit That Seeks Vengeance**

A loud buzzing filled the cave tunnels with the flapping of Asier’s wings. Around him followed a horde of Eozea traversing the rough terrain while the Etriags buzzed along as they flew through the air.

“We’re almost at the Mainstay. Senkyo, do you hear me?”

“…”

Asier took a glance at the top of his palm where Senkyo was crouching on one knee. Ever since leaving the nest, he kept his silence, not responding to any of Asier’s words. It wasn’t as if something was wrong with him. Asier simply never expected his power to manifest this way.

“I can no longer tell if I’m still talking to Yukou Senkyo or a manifestation of his power, but none of that matters now. I can tell that you can still recognize my voice. Listen well, once you enter the Iwaiida nest, I need you to isolate the Thunder Wing and give us an opening to drag it out of the room without getting mind-controlled by that monster. Once you complete that goal, you can do whatever you want as long as you protect the Mainstay from destruction. Do you understand?”

“…”

He was unresponsive yet again, but Asier felt that Senkyo was preparing himself to fulfill his goals. Something was different with him. He noticed this just before they left the nest, which is why he opted to leave as fast as possible. He successfully passed down the Gjia Eaixih to him, but he had no idea what influence it had on him. But, a single fact was certain, and that was enough to convince Asier that his current constitution was not a problem. And that was: his bloodlust.

“Here we are!!”

Asier took Senkyo in his palm and threw him through the large opening above them. A new sight entered Senkyo’s vision. A wide expanse of space and a mighty pillar that stood at the very center of it. The pillar’s base was hidden beneath the surface of a river that was formed by a waterfall located at the edge of the cave. Despite being a nest for Iwaiida, there were no arachnids to be seen.

Around the pillar was a swarm of wasp-like creatures. Most of them were over the size of an average human, flying with their stingers out and their legs dangling. They had three pairs of legs in total with the lower two pairs reinforced with what looks to be a spiked shield, perhaps to protect their body, and with the last pair exposing scythe-like legs used for offense.

Among the swarm of wasps was another that spanned over ten times the size of the other wasps. Their leader, the Thunder Wing, buzzed around so fast that it was difficult to follow it with Senkyo’s eyes. With every flap of its wing released a wave of lightning that crashed into the Mainstay. The two antennae on its head seemed to be the one that it used to control magic as it lit up every time it summoned lightning. Unlike the other wasps, this one had larger wings and long legs that curled at the tips, making it closer to spider wasps than normal ones.

“Ha… hahaha… There you are, there you are, there you are…!”

Senkyo let out a low, scornful laugh as a certain creature entered his vision.

The last threat present in the room was the evolved memory monster that used its massive arms to break through the Mainstay. Parts of it were already crumbling. It wasn’t enough to break it completely, but leaving it alone would undoubtedly lead to its destruction. A curious part about the monster was that it was missing the two horns that once protruded on its head. Senkyo felt like he remembered doing something about it, but right now he couldn’t care less what it was. Everything in this room was an enemy. He wanted to charge at the memory monster, but remembering Asier’s words, he directed the anger of not being able to kill the memory monster faster at the Thunder Wing. Grinding his teeth, he let out a beastly roar as he created an air foothold and used flash strike to rush the oversized spider wasp.

Just before he got too far from the walls, a streak of light exited Senkyo’s body and landed on one of the cliffs on the cave walls that led to an opening in and out of the cavern. There, Shiro manifested her physical form and overlooked the situation from above. This wasn’t her first time fighting with this version of Senkyo, so she was unfazed by his wild demeanor. For now, she needed to fulfill the silent orders of his master. She didn’t need him to voice out what he needed; she already understood what to do.

Water began to form around Shiro and continuously flowed over the surface of her body. Then, on the back of her right hand appeared a light-grey crest. It had the shape of a tree growing inside a bright circle with its roots overflowing at the bottom. The very crest that Senkyo owned to prove that he was an Angel—The Crest of the Divine Soul of Spirits.

“Empty space, thou art the void that lacks the color of life. Wish upon mine aid, beseech the wonders of the world, and bethink thy forgotten age. I call upon thee, Lustrate Current. Incarnate.”

The flow of the wind all gathered behind Shiro, birthing a green body that released a constant soft breeze, making Shiro’s hair, ears, and tail dance with the current. A large green own formed and, with the flap of its wings, filled the cave with a zephyr that cleansed it of its impurities, clearing the hormones of the memory monster. The manifestation of the nature spell. Lustrate Current.

Right after, the water around Shiro’s body began to expand as she began another chant.

“Submit to the order, O Foolish King. Betwixt the rule of thy kingdom and the prosperous future, I impel thee to safeguard that which remains. Pass the decree, the embodiment of mine will. Encase.”

The body of water around Shiro exploded into the walls and spread over its surface. Unstopping, the waves of water continued until the entire cavern, including the Mainstay, was submerged in liquid. Then, it all began to freeze over, coating the entire cavern in a thick icescape. When the Thunder Wing and the memory monster attacked the Mainstay, not a single blow left even a mere scratch. Additionally, the icescape combined with the constant breeze that negated the memory monster’s mind control began to affect the Swarm as well. The cold slowly seeped into their bodies, making them slower and less active.

Because of this, Senkyo easily spotted the Thunder Wing’s location and threw a pile of rocks at it. The said rocks began to move by themselves and spread evenly within the Swarm. Seeing this, the memory monster switched its target and made a beeline for Senkyo. Before it could reach him, the same rocks got in its path and activated. Within the rocks, there was an element that clearly didn’t belong inside it. It was a piece of a Hkrwir fang. It had the symbol for Spirit that extended at the tip with a symbol of Domination and Repetition. Its circuit was a bit different from when he first used this contraption, but its effects were the same as ever and released a spray of deadly acid.

It quickly spread across the whole Swarm, penetrating their armor and melting their wings. The Thunder Wing maintained its flight longer than the others, but alas, it could not resist the rules of physics and fell to the ground with tattered wings along with the others. At that moment, a beastly roar made the cave tremble. From the shadows of a large opening at the bottom of the cavern appeared two floating bodies of purple. Then, a stampede of Eozea and Etriag charged into the cavern, attacking the wasps of the Swarm and taking them out of the cavern. When the Thunder Wing finally dropped, Asier’s figure appeared from the darkness and rammed into the Thunder Wing using the horn on his head, taking the entire Swarm out of the picture.

The memory monster tried to stop this from happening but it couldn’t get through the furious storm of Hkrwir acid. When Asier’s attack finally settled, a wide, bloodthirsty grin appeared on Senkyo’s face as his gaze pierced through the memory monster.

“Hehe… Hahaha!!”

**401 – The Path They Landed On**

Realizing that it couldn’t do anything to save its sole ally, the memory monster turned its back and opted to work on breaking the Mainstay.

“Where do you think you’re going!?”

Senkyo howled, giving chase to the memory monster. One after another, he created air footholds and used flash strike to catch up to it. The monster used its massive arms and the spikes on its wings to damage the Mainstay but to no avail. When Senkyo got in range, he swiftly drew a kunai and threw it at the monster. Piercing the wind, the tip of the kunai began to get coated in a red crystal. Meanwhile, Senkyo took another kunai that began to wrap in the same red crystal and stabbed himself in his left shoulder at the same time the other kunai made contact with the monster. As a result, both Senkyo and the memory monster spat blood from their left shoulders. Earning the monster’s wrath, it left the Mainstay and launched at Senkyo with the flap of its wings.

“Hahaha! That’s more like it! Let’s see what ya got!!”

Senkyo returned the kunai he stabbed himself with into its sheath, took out the twin bone daggers from his back, and activated the mechanism to revert them back to sickles. Charging at each other, Senkyo entered the monster’s reach and was greeted by the large spikes protruding from the monster’s wings. He managed to dodge both of them, but the wind pressure released by the wings pushed him back, successfully keeping him at bay. Taking this chance, the monster launched a rain of heavy punches using all of its six fists, pummeling Senkyo’s entire body.

“—hya-ha!! It hurts. It hurts. It hurts. It hurts. IT HURTS!! HYAHYAHYA!!”

Maniacal laughter escaped Senkyo’s mouth despite the skin and blood thrashing around him. Even when his muscles and bones were exposed, even when his left arm was ripped from its socket, his laugh refused to cease until a wave of energy was released from Senkyo’s body that made the memory monster’s innards freeze from the sudden pang.

“HYAHYAHYA!!! DO YOU FEEL IT!? THE PAIN FROM YOUR OWN ATTACKS!!”

“GWRAAAUUUGGHH!!!”

The sea of blood that Senkyo bathed in began to move on its own, filling the wounds and even his missing limb. His blood coagulated all at once, but not as a clot of blood, as solid red crystals. At the same time, the very same red crystals sprouted as spikes from the ground, piercing the memory monster’s skin.

Once Senkyo’s left arm regenerated in the form of red crystals, he picked up the bone sickle that he let go and used flash strike to crash into the monster’s torso, ripping a thick mass of skin and muscle all at once, causing it to spray green blood all over his body.

“HYA-HA!”

The monster struggled, and Senkyo caught its attempt to retaliate as he saw its scissor-like tail rise from the corner of his eye. When it launched at him, he reverted the bone sickle he was about to use into a dagger. Then, used the momentum that was supposed to rip another gash in its stomach to intercept the incoming attack, releasing the blade from its handle. The monster tried to deflect it but exploded upon contact. The reason for that was the clump of spirit power that gathered in the blade. Burst—an offensive technique from the Brute class that ignites concentrated spirit power. The more the spirit power, the more devastating the damage. To measure just how much power Senkyo collected, the fact that the monster’s tail was blown in half was a good reference.

“RRRAAAAAGGGHH!!!!”

Enraged, the monster grabbed the spine chain that connected the bone dagger’s blade and its handle and tugged it to pull Senkyo over. The abrupt force didn’t give him the chance to retaliate against the overpowering haymaker from one of the monster’s massive arms. The crash resulted in the destruction of the bone dagger that the monster caught along with half of Senkyo’s body. But, when the monster removed its fist, it also revealed that his heart and brain were completely intact as a result of defending himself with his crystal arm.

“YoU jUsT neVER LeaRn, hUH!?”

Even with his mouth and throat damaged from the force of the monster’s attack, he never failed to deliver the crazed fury in his muddled voice.

“WUUUURGHH!!!”

Another pang of agony assaulted the memory monster along with a plethora of red crystal spikes that rose from the ground and thrusted into its body. Sensing the impending danger, the monster instinctively opened its wings and flew away. With Senkyo being right in front of it, the strong force blew him in the opposite direction, giving it more distance.

In its quick escape, Shiro’s figure entered its vision. The whole reason it couldn’t take control of Senkyo was because she was keeping the air clear of its hormones. It didn’t know how, but instinctively, it knew that the green owl standing behind Shiro was the key to breaking this restriction. Instead of fighting a losing battle against Senkyo, all it needed to do was bring him back to its side. And the only thing standing in the way of that was the measly catgirl that had the power to release Senkyo from its control.

“RRRAAAAAAGGHH!!!!”

It accelerated its speed, shooting into Shiro like a runaway train. It twisted its body, charging all its power into a single punch from its massive arm. In response to this, Shiro simply raised her arm and outstretched it toward the incoming threat. On her unraised hand, the light-grey crest glowed once more. The water flowing through the surface of her body then crawled up her arm and formed a ball of water at the tip of her finger. This sent waves of danger to the monster’s head, but blinded by rage, ignored it and committed to its attack. Its massive fist arrived inches from the ball of water Shiro created.

“UUGGRAAAAA!!!”

“…”

It hit her. The memory monster’s attack undoubtedly hit Shiro. It even ripped off the arm she was extending and half of her body. But why? Why wasn’t she screaming? Why was there no blood pouring from her body? And why was it that it could no longer feel half of its body?

Before the monster even realized it, the damage it dealt to Shiro completely disappeared when her body rebuilt itself as if time was rewinding. In exchange, the arm it threw at her along with the two other arms on the same side of its body disappeared, creating a gaping hole on the side of its body. It wasn’t bleeding, but at the same time, it could feel that all the regenerative properties of its body ceased to function. The monster directed its glare at Shiro, but all it could see was a giant wave of water that crashed into its body.

The wave didn’t particularly hurt, but it applied an unimaginable weight on its body, making it smash to the ground. This was the innate power of the Nemi to create water that was rumored to possess the potential to rival that of a god. The Mythical Water of the Miracle Beasts.

“HYAHYAHYAAA!!! WAY TO GO SHIROOO!!”

Eclipsing the memory monster’s body from above was Senkyo. His body consisted of more red crystals, but otherwise completely unharmed. His blood-crazed eyes and maddened laughter could only be comparable to that of an insane person. A predator in its element.

“SUMMON SOULS: WRETCHED PAST!!!”

“Rise, ye feeble folk, heed mine call. The presence of the almighty sovereign brings His grace, may ye be a lowly Carl or a renowned gallant. I summon ye to arms, rush to His side, your supreme ruler. Emperor.”

A light-grey crest appeared on the back of Senkyo’s right hand. One with the shape of a tree growing inside a bright circle with its roots overflowing at the bottom. Shiro’s existing crest glowed the same way as they both spoke.

From Senkyo’s side appeared numerous clones of himself, all of them, past versions of his current self. Some of them had different clothes such as a uniform or even loungewear, and some still had their hair and their human bodies. But, they all had a single element in common, and that was the fact that they all came from times when he was troubled to his very core. This mostly consisted of his recent self, which explained the majority amount that mirrored his current self.

“HYAHYAHYA!!”

All of them rushed to the bottom where the memory monster could no longer stand. When they were about mid-way, Shiro finished her chant, arming the clones Senkyo summoned with large, deadly spears. A rain of spears penetrated into the monster’s skin from above. Not long after, the effects of Shiro’s mythic water finally faded, releasing it from its weight and shoving all of Senkyo’s clones away.

Perhaps realizing that it had no escape, the memory monster gathered all its remaining strength to blast from the ground and deal a single blow to Senkyo in a blind rage. Unfortunately, it would never reach him as a wall of his clones equipped with large shields crashed into the monster’s side, pinning it to the cave wall. More and more clones piled on its body until it could no longer move. Other clones equipped with spears poised themselves behind the shieldmen and poked through the gaps of their shields. The clones continuously stabbed into the huddle like needles relentlessly poking into a pin cushion. By the time the wall was splattered with green blood, the monster was riddled with holes, its wings completely tattered, and all the legs on one side of its body completely severed.

Its half-dead body fell to the ground with a disgusting wet noise. It attempted to pick itself up, but try as it might, the only parts left on its body were the spider legs on the left side of its body and the three arms on the right side of its body. Even if its legs were uninjured, the fact that its body was unbalanced would only give it enough power to crawl on the ground.

“Master! Stop playing around and finish this already!!”

Shiro shouted from the cliffside above, her brows furrowed in annoyance. Senkyo knew she could tell that he was only playing around at this point. It was the perfect time to release his stress, so he indulged himself a bit too much with his vicious urges.

“Alright, alright! Fine!”

He said, waving his hand in the air to brush off her scolding voice. He landed on the ground and faced the memory monster.

“Ya heard the lady, I’m ending this now. Don’t get any hard feelings now, this is all because of the grudge you cultivated; it’s your fault you ended up here. I’m only returning the favor. You killed Shiro once, after all. I’m just here to pay you back. An eye for an eye, they say… Ah, my bad… It won’t actually be that fair. You see, Shiro actually survived.”

His steady stride could be felt by hearing the sound of his footfalls as he approached the memory monster. It was at this time that a feeling other than rage or bloodlust filled the monster’s head. It was fear.

“I’m gonna collect a bit of interest. That being, your life. I’m sick and tired of everything and everyone pushing us around like a bunch of tools. Too bad. You just happen to be the only thing around. So, you’re gonna pay for all of that. Honestly, I didn’t need to go that hard on you at all. I didn’t need this power.”

The red crystals on Senkyo’s body began to crumble, revealing his unscratched skin. Just like when he first arrived in this cavern, his body was completely fine.

“The problem was me after all. I guess I have you to thank for making me realize that, not that it’ll change anything. None of this needed to happen, this is just how everything ended up happening. But I’m not all that cruel. You made for a great punching bag, so I appreciate your existence to some extent. As a little word of thanks, I’m going to make this as painless as possible…”

Senkyo took out his remaining bone sickle and turned it into a dagger. He stopped, took a deep breath, and uttered.

“…if only you hadn’t hurt Shiro, then maybe I would’ve considered that option.”

He declared coldly. The irises of Senkyo’s eyes inflamed. From left to right, the colors in his eyes changed at a rapid pace. Green : orange, orange : blue, blue : rose. He then threw his blade forward, biting into the monster’s skin. He jumped and pulled his body toward the monster. From around him, the wind began to gather and shape several spikes of high-pressure air. The typical result of Needle Storm.

The deadly wind overtook Senkyo and sunk into the monster’s skin. Then, it burst when the wind suddenly turned into raging flames, scorching the monster’s insides. The change continued and the fire turned to water, flooding its body and seeping into its deepest parts. It finally disappeared, but in actuality, it seeped into its skin and weakened it, sending cracks all over its body.

The memory monster made one last attempt for a desperate escape, but the joints in its body hardened before it even realized. As if to flaunt his poison, a single leaf that was fused with an Eozea’s scale fell onto the monster’s eyeless head. On it was a circuit of Spirit at the center, extending at the tip with Domination and Repetition. The same circuit he created to utilize the Hkrwir’s fangs. Now, instead of making it release acid, the circuit drew the Eozea scale’s inflexible property to harden the monster’s joints. Unable to take a single action, the monster could only await its impending doom.

“THIS IS IT!! DIEEEE!!!!”

Senkyo roared from the top of his lungs. The palm of his open hand held another Eozea scale. Just before he closed it to shape a fist, a large symbol of Spirit overlapped it and his hand.

“MORTAL FORGE, INTERTWINED SPIRIT!!”

His entire arm transformed into a body of hardened scales. From the sky, he crashed straight into the memory monster, sinking his hardened fist into its head, continuing all the way through its body until it all but crumbled. Soaked in a sea of green blood, Senkyo stood alone.

**402 – Another Day Passes in Iqanlr**

“Tsk! What a persistent pest!”

“Your words wound me.”

In a room isolated from the public eye was Gaeka, and standing on the windowsill of said room was Adeira. After working with his allies to rid of the teleportation network spread across Iqanlr, Adeira noticed another presence, one that attempted to flee from the scene until he put a stop to it. Chasing after the shadow, he eventually found out that their identity was Professor Gaeka. Adeira couldn’t have felt luckier.

“Do you want to die that much, Adeira!? I’ve been doing you the favor of quietly taking my leave, but you just won’t stop!”

“My, how presumptuous of you to assume that I would succumb to an early grave. After leaving you completely loose for all this time, do you truly believe that I hadn’t prepared for you, Blood Leader?”

“You cocky bastard! Fine, leaving a single casualty wouldn’t make any significant changes! It’s about time you pay the piper!”

Crimson blood began to coil around Gaeka’s body. Meanwhile, Adeira stared him down and deftly drew a hand of throwing knives from his back pocket. Right as Gaeka charged, a thick mist consumed the entire room. After scanning his surroundings, Adeira let out a disappointed sigh and returned his knives.

“He got away.”

Adeira hopped from the windowsill into the room he cornered Gaeka in. He approached the location where he last saw his figure.

“It couldn’t have been teleportation. As long as I’m here I can always disrupt it. But, there is no doubt that he suddenly vanished, so perhaps it was something similar…”

When he arrived at Gaeka’s last known location, the mist revealed a life-sized figure of his body. It was a completely pale inanimate object and it matched his exact form just before he disappeared. The details were perfect right down to the twitch of his cheek muscles.

“Substitution…huh? I never thought I’d be seeing this kind of magic today. I guess that means that he wasn’t alone, after all. My, what a troublesome bunch END is.”

Adeira took a device from his pocket and placed it on the life-sized figure. When he activated it, the figure disappeared from sight and Adeira turned his back to the mist-filled room, heading for the window he came through.

**…………**

In a dark room where natural light could not reach, only the faint flame from a torch served to illuminate the area. With how spacious the room was, all it could reveal was a small portion of the wall, the floor, and Gaeka who stood as if to attack someone.

“—DIEE!!”

A flurry of needles of blood blasted from Gaeka’s body into the darkness. Then, when he finally realized that he was in a completely different room from before, Gaeka halted his attack and searched the area.

“This is…”

“cAlm DoWN, BloOd LEaDer. HAve YoU TruLY cOMe HeRe tO dEsTRoy aLL of whAT I CulTIVaTEd? OUr ordeRS aRe OnLy TO ObsErvE unTIL THe BOY bEcoMeS A HfiXEsI. wE ArE ForBIDdeN frOM CAusInG anY troUbLE, yeT LOoK aT WhaT You’Ve doNe. yoU EvEN AtteMPteD TO KilL AN IMporTAnT KeystONE.”

The distorted voice chided Gaeka from the shadows. His brows furrowed from this.

“What? Are you telling me to fear you, who hides in the darkness!? Show yourself and tell that to my face!”

“tHIS Isn’T ABout me, bloOD LeAdeR. I am MeRElY teLliNG You TO REdEem YourSELF FrOm alL of yoUR FaILuReS BefOrE Our LOrD reTUrNS. ThIS iS ThE onLY ThiNg lEfT ThaT CaN ReCovER YoUR rePUtAtiON. i’VE stOppED yOU fRoM MaKiNG a GraVE misTaKE; You cAN RepAY ME bY LeaViNG THiS lanD. UnLEss YoU waNT Me TO drIve The FInAl NaiL IN tHE CofFIN, dO NoT Let mE FiNd YOU By NIghTfaLL.”

Just like that, the mysterious voice disappeared from the room along with its presence. Not giving Gaeka the chance to reply.

“Wait!! Where are you going!? Come back here!”

He howled into the darkness, only to receive nothing but his echoes.

**…………**

Just like Brigan said, slaying the memory monster returned almost all of its victims to normal. The reason this didn’t bring back everyone was because, in the end, the monster still fed on the memories of others. Every mind-controlled victim survived, but those who were used for sustenance were diagnosed as dead. Their minds were completely destroyed and all that remained were empty husks. This allowed Leolja to finally release the important figureheads of Iqanlr from webs that prevented them from endangering themselves along with others around them. The time was around midday when the citizens of Iqanlr began their recovery efforts.

At the bottom of the sunken nest, Senkyo’s consciousness slowly faded minutes after taking down the memory monster. The crest of the Divine Soul of Spirits disappeared from his and Shiro’s hands along with it. Asier returned and brought him and Shiro to Brigan’s lab located on both levels A3 and S. There, Brigan conducted all the possible health checks on him to ensure his safety. But, not before sending him to the bath where Brigan was forced to scrub him down due to the unbearable stench that came with the memory monster’s blood.

When Hira came back, she wasn’t too happy with the fact that no one used the recall point. She left them saying that it didn’t matter to her, but her true feelings clearly showed in her sour expression. She tried to break into Brigan’s lab to see Senkyo, but was caught and kicked out just like the other times she tried this stunt. Whatever was inside the lab, Brigan clearly didn’t want his daughter to see.

The death of the memory monster cleared up the jumbled memories of the students and staff of Xhiari, allowing them to reinstate Adeira as an instructor and send rescue trips to students, staff, and even to the general public who became victims of this incident. They also took responsibility for resupplying Adeira’s lab after the break-in that happened.

In the middle of all of this, Asier surfaced from the sunken nest along with the Eozea and Etriag that followed him. As expected, after everything that happened, everyone panicked when one of the Predators of the sunken nest suddenly appeared with an army of Eozea and Etriag. Thankfully, Adeira and Leolja calmed everyone down and explained the situation. Asier took this chance to transform his body into something more compact.

For 17 years he had been waiting to leave the nest and explore the outside world. He knew that it would be ill-suited to walk around in his large body, so he used the power of the Gjia Eaixih he guarded to make it so that he could turn his body into something that would be compatible with the surface dwellers. Now, his body became similar to an Aagri like Vleid, but instead of being a complete dragon man, he had half-beetle properties like the horn on his head and the forewings and hindwings on his back. Since not all his followers had the same level of intelligence he had, it was his responsibility to manage them so that they smoothly converted into Risers.

Just like that, the ceaseless march of time continued as the curtains slowly closed on another incident in the Border City of Iqanlr.

**403 – Siblings**

“…nhh… mnnnh…?”

“Oh, you’re finally awake. Here, I’ll let you out now.”

Light peered into Senkyo’s eyes as he rose from his slumber. What greeted him was a man standing across a glass pane. From what he could tell, he was inside some sort of capsule. He gathered the memories he could recall while the glass pane slowly opened.

Brigan. That was the name of the man in front of him. He was the Mad Scientist of the Battery as well as Hira’s father. He met him when he woke up after receiving the Gjia Eaixih from Asier. That’s when the flood of memories kicked in, and it finally dawned on him.

“I… remember… the memories I lost… and the memories after that… I remember everything.”

“That’s good. I don’t need to explain what happened until now. You can get out of there. I finished gathering data I needed a few hours ago, all I was doing was waiting for you to wake up.”

“…Huh? What time is it now?”

“3:47 in the morning. It’s almost been a whole day since you lost consciousness. You must have been really tired. Well, I guess it’s only natural. All the ruckus died down, so you can question me all you want. But first, why don’t you settle things with your partner? I’ll be in the other room when you’re ready to talk.”

Brigan said before turning his back on Senkyo and leaving the room. It took only a second to process what he meant. He could never forget what happened between him and Shiro after he lost his memories.

“Shiro, are you there? I want to talk to you.”

“You called for me, Master?”

It was impossible for her not to know the answer to that question. Whenever Shiro is in his body, she can pick up the same senses he perceives. She heard what Brigan said and feigned ignorance to make it easier to enter a conversation.

“Yeah…”

Senkyo averted his eyes for a second when he heard Shiro talk normally.

“…Um, you don’t use third-person speech anymore, huh?”

“Yes. I thought it was about time I grew up and let go of the past. Before being a Nemian, I am your familiar, Master.”

Since they were only kids, from the very beginning when they first met, Shiro had always referred to herself in third person. This is because it is one of their customs as Nemians to do so. Her mother, father, friends, and townsfolk all referred to themselves in third person. When Senkyo questioned her about this as a child, Shiro answered with a folktale.

Long, long ago, there was a time when the ruler of Nemians was decided through the power of the mythical water they created. Almost the entire population gathered to compete in this competition. With countless rows of water buckets lined up, the people dipped their hands and gathered their power to see who could make the most potent water in a set amount of time. It took almost the entire day to decide the victor, but right when everyone thought the ruler was decided, a child snuck up the stage and dipped their hands into the victor’s bucket.

*\*What’s so great about this? Pmil can do better! \** said the boy named Pmil.

The people saw this as the natural playful whims of a child. The boy watched what the adults were doing and decided to copy them. Even though he didn’t understand the weight behind the competition, he climbed the stage and imitated them for attention. Not a single person took the child seriously and laughed, amused by the child. But when someone came to finally remove him, they noticed that the bucket was completely different.

Shocked, the hosts of the event made numerous checks to try and understand what had happened. They eventually came to the conclusion that the victor’s mythical water was overwritten. The bucket was still filled with mythical water, but the victor could no longer control it. Then, who was it that had a more powerful connection to their core to be able to make mythic water stronger than his?

It was the child who snuck up the stage, the only other person who touched the victor’s bucket of water. In a shorter amount of time given to all of the contestants, the child overwrote the victor’s mythical water, deeming it more powerful than his.

*\*Pmil can do better!\** the confident claim from the child crossed through everyone’s minds.

Now that the truth was revealed, none of them could laugh anymore. Even the victor, who had the title of “strongest” taken from him by a child, could only leave his mouth agape in shock. He wasn’t mad, simply awestruck. A single child bested the entire village in terms of power. He, who came as the second strongest, could only wonder what had happened.

In the end, the result was voided. Even though the rules said that the strongest would rule the village, no one could let a child be their head. It wasn’t only a matter of pride, but also the fact that he was clearly unsuited for the position. They may be powerful, but there is a huge difference between strength and wisdom. This tale was passed down to prove that, to remind the adults to not be conceited, and to encourage the younger generations to reach for their full potential.

But, when the question was asked: what made the child so powerful? Were they born talented? Was it some kind of accident? Everyone would answer: it was because he called himself by his name. Elders of the time concluded that calling themselves by their own name would allow the Nemi a stronger connection to their core, thus creating a more potent mix of mythical water. To this day, none of it could be proven, but that didn’t stop the Nemi from adapting this into their customs.

In other words, this was Shiro’s declaration that she was willing to leave everything in the past behind. By detaching herself from her homeland’s customs, she would dedicate herself solely to being Senkyo’s familiar. At the same time, she would leave behind her fond memories with Senkyo as a child so that she could further dedicate herself to the present Senkyo as a familiar. If this wasn’t the case, then Shiro wouldn’t have changed the way she called him right before they entered the sunken nest.

“Is that so? Then, there really isn’t any going back, huh? Even if I wasn’t my normal self, I still pushed you to this point…”

“You don’t need to think of it like that, Master. You lost your memories and acted like you would with the memories you did have. You don’t need to blame yourself.”

“No, it might sound good if you put it like that, but that’s not an excuse for me to let everything slide as if nothing happened. The fact is that I still hurt you, whether you think it’s for the better or not. I want to make it up to you. I’ll do anything; just say it! If I don’t do something here, then…”

Senkyo’s voice trailed off, leaving his next words unsaid. Not that it mattered. Shiro still understood that he would be bearing this guilt deep in his heart whether or not she ordered him to do something. This was just something to clear his conscience. You could say it was for his own sake. But… she found this as a perfect opportunity to give him a piece of her mind.

“If you really want me to order you, then… From now on, Master, you will see me as your equal. Not as a little sister who needs protection, but as a partner who will be by your side no matter what happens!”

She declared, pointing her finger at his face.

“Before the memory monster attacked, you already realized that you needed to have me fight in the frontlines to bring out the familiar pact’s full potential. But, instead of ordering me to do that, you kept quiet just to keep me away from danger. I don’t want any more of that behavior from you! Even if I get hurt, even if I die! You will forever have me by your side as an equal—as your partner! Is that clear!?”

Senkyo fell silent after hearing what she truly felt. Thinking about it now, the events of the past two days could have been much less chaotic if he had just accepted her as an equal. The purpose of the familiar pact was to deepen the relationship between master and familiar, but the fact that his relationship with Shiro was already set worked against it. If Shiro asked this of him before he lost his memories, he could see himself reluctantly accepting, but not truly adhering to her will. But now, after everything that happened, Senkyo only had a refreshed feeling in his chest. Not because he knew the right answer, but because he realized that this was just a part of Shiro’s growth. He had been sheltering her all this time, but now it was time to let her make her own decisions. After using her to the point where she broke, he at least owed her this much as compensation.

“Okay. Loud and clear.”

He could now say that he accepted Shiro’s decision from the bottom of his heart. But, to his surprise, Shiro wasn’t done.

“—And! In exchange for spoiling me in the past, I need you to give me ONE selfish request to even it all out!”

“What??”

“You heard me! Give me one request! You can think of me as your OLDER sister for today. It’s my time to spoil you. This is the only time I’m doing this so make it worth your while.”

An older sister… No matter how Senkyo looked at her, partner or not, he couldn’t see a single hit of that behind her figure. Of course, he kept these thoughts locked behind a poker face, ensuring that he wouldn’t cause any needless ruckus by letting Shiro pick up on his real thoughts. But, her face was serious. He didn’t see a pleasant future for him if he didn’t give Shiro something to work with. As luck would have it, he didn’t take long to settle on an answer.

“Uhmm… then, if you say so… Instead of ‘Master,’ could you go back to calling me how you usually did? It just doesn’t feel right with ‘Master.’”

“W-What!? I… I can’t do that! I just decided I would dedicate myself to being your familiar! Calling you how I did in the past is the same thing as turning on my vow!”

“But you said anything was fine…”

“Anything but that! Why do you even want me to call you that anyway!?”

“I mean… e-even if we’re partners, I still want to treat you as family. Ah—it doesn’t need to be as a little sister, but I… you know, without Dad and all… technically you’re my only family left so… I just, um, didn’t want to… lose that too…”

Shiro could clearly tell Senkyo was having a hard time maintaining eye contact with her, even if she didn’t look at him. The amount of pauses and filler words he brought up clearly showed his nervousness. The great steel wall inside Shiro that she called her resolve slowly began to melt with his clumsy articulation and wholesome reasoning. But still, she couldn’t let herself fall here, so she compromised.

“I… still can’t call you how I did in the past, but… I guess I can still call you my older brother. So…”

Shiro brought her hand to her face and pinched her chin in thought.

“‘—Anigimi!’ That’s what I’ll call you from now on!”

Senkyo couldn’t believe his ears.

“HUUUH!? JUST WHAT PERIOD DO YOU THINK WE’RE IN!? IT’S THE 21ST CENTURY, YOU KNOW!?”

A swift rebuke came from him, destroying the wholesome atmosphere and successfully making Shiro’s cheeks red from embarrassment.

“Wh-What’s your problem!? I-I just wanted to make it as close as possible to the same formality that ‘Master’ has! If you don’t want it then let’s go with ‘Onii-sama’ or ‘Aniue!’”

“U-Urk… can’t you just throw away the formality? The formality is the problem here! I don’t like it!”

“AHH, stop complaining and just accept it!! I’m already compromising here!!”

“No! Shiro-nee-chan said that she’ll be the older sister today, so I’ll take the proper role of the little brother and whine until I get spoiled and get what I want!!”

“Tsk.”

“Eh?”

Senkyo was trying to break the ice by being a bit selfish like Shiro wanted, but the click of her tongue felt like he broke something else he shouldn’t have. With his mouth agape, he awaited Shiro’s next words with bated breath.

“Oni.”

“Huh?”

“ONII!! THAT’S WHAT I’M GOING TO CALL YOU FROM NOW ON AND THERE’S NO GOING BACK! YOU CAN BE THE OLDER BROTHER AND THE MEAN OGRE!! IT FEELS LIKE YOU’VE BEEN BULLYING ME EVER SINCE WE GOT TO THIS WORLD SO IT FITS YOU PERFECTLY!!!”

Senkyo’s face paled, but he couldn’t deny its compatibility after everything that happened. “Onii” was an informal form of addressing an older brother, just like what he wanted. But, it could also be heard as “Oni” meaning “Demon” or “Ogre,” which seemed perfect after he initially coerced Shiro to come with him on his journey across Zerid and when he hurt her after losing his memories. All he could really do against this was look blankly into space as his mental ashes were slowly taken away by the wind.

“—BESIDES! YOU ACTED JUST LIKE A DEMON WHEN YOU TOOK DOWN THE MEMORY MONSTER! YOU BASICALLY EARNED THE TITLE!!”

“Huh?”

The color in Senkyo’s face returned when he picked up something strange in Shiro’s words. Shiro, who still looked peeved, gradually calmed down when she saw his puzzled expression.

“What? What’s wrong?”

She asked.

“Um… it’s just… I don’t remember killing the memory monster at all.”

**404 – The Cursed One**

After Senkyo noticed his still missing memories, he and Shiro decided to move to the other room to question Brigan about it. There, they found him standing in front of a computer with a large screen connected to three human-sized glass tubes. The middle was filled with a red liquid while the other two beside it were empty. Noticing the two’s arrival, Brigan turned to them and greeted them.

“Are you two done settling your sibling quarrel already?”

Albeit teasingly.

“Don’t mind that now! Brigan, I said that all my memories returned earlier, but that wasn’t actually the case. I can’t remember how I fought the memory monster.”

“Hmm… is that all? Are there any other gaps missing in your memories?”

“I consulted Shiro just before we came here. Almost everything returned except for both of the times I fought the monster. When we first ran away from the memory monster in the sunken nest, I apparently turned on it and attacked it. Then, the second time I fought it was apparently the time I killed it. But, I just don’t remember both of those.”

He thought for a second. Then, moved his hand away from his chin and crossed his arms. Reaching a conclusion, he delivered his words looking Senkyo straight in the eyes.

“Both of those are the times when you went on a rampage.”

“A… rampage? Wait, didn’t you say that you made something to get your vengeance on Professor Gaeka? Is that what it was!?”

He glared at Brigan accusingly, making him raise all four of his hands as if to surrender.

“Now, now, calm down. You’re absolutely correct that I’m the one who made you rampage, but I’d like to clarify that it was an emergency. Even I didn’t want to use it as it was, but Leolja said that both of you would die if I didn’t do anything so I reluctantly used it, okay? Reluctantly! Your familiar should remember, why don’t you ask her?”

“Mn. Brigan is right. At that time, we were caught by the memory monster. I don’t know if you remember, but my physical body died at the time and was forcefully sent back to your body. But don’t worry about that now, I’m already fine.”

Senkyo’s eyes widened as he heard the story. Now that Shiro reminded him, the memories of her getting killed returned. A grim expression showed, but Shiro already reassured him of her safety, so he steeled himself to swallow the painful memories. But, that’s all that returned. After that happened, no matter how many times he told Shiro to explain in detail, the memories were blank. He made her explain the events that led to the second fight in detail as well, but no new memories showed up. All he knew was that they cut off the moment Asier threw him into the cavern.

“This is only a theory of mine but…”

When Senkyo’s probing came to a dead end, Brigan took this chance to return to the conversation with a shocking claim.

“—I think that Senkyo’s personality split into two.”

It was absurd, but the more Senkyo and Shiro stood stunned, the more time they had to process that they couldn’t actually deny the claim. Brigan continued, explaining his train of thought.

“First, let’s talk about what I used to make Senkyo rampage and what this ‘rampaging’ actually caused.”

He extended his hand toward the three large glass tubes in front of him, directing their gaze to it.

“This is something I created after learning of a revolutionary piece of technology. The credits go to a woman named Hizli. Sometime around a year ago, I returned to this lab after a little excursion for materials and engaging with other apocrologists. Miss Hizli was one of those I talked to and she was generous enough to give me a copy of her research materials. I recreated my own version of the device she built, which forcibly separates mana from spirit power.”

Brigan opened the computer and pressed a button to activate the device. When it did, bubbles began to rise from the bottom of the tube.

“It might look like nothing is happening, but that’s just because the glass I used makes it so that it will be difficult to detect the mana and spirit power inside it. To make it clear what’s happening, you should look at the screen.”

Senkyo and Shiro shifted their focus from the large tube to the image Brigan brought up on screen. On it was the image of two separate bubbles inside a tube. One was shaded in blue whilst the other was in red and the background was filled with faint grey stripes. The red bubbles were freely flowing in the tube while the blue ones blatantly avoided the red bubbles, and when they got cornered, they forced the red bubbles away.

“The red bubbles represent spirit power and the blue ones are mana. As for the grey stripes, they’re the substance inside the tube—Senkyo’s blood.”

“What!? There’s no way you collected this much!”

Senkyo said, recalling Leolja’s confession of swiping samples of his blood. But, even so, he couldn’t wrap his head around the thought of him being able to collect so much that it filled a large glass tube.

“You’re right, this isn’t actually all YOUR blood. To make you rampage, I needed to add MY OWN blood into the mix. The two empty tubes on both sides used to contain that. I slowly and carefully collected them day after day, preserved them in these tubes, and prepared them when I was about to control you. All the blood Leolja actually managed to collect was about one vial. Half of it was placed into the middle tube while I used the others for different machines I’ll be introducing later, but let’s focus on this one. Look here.”

Brigan brought their attention back to the screen.

“This is a mechanism that separates mana and spirit power. And you, Senkyo, are the only source I know that can create and hold purified calamitous energy, in other words, the creation element. This element is birthed from the harmonious merging of mana and spirit power. Now, what do you think would happen if I process that in a machine that forcefully separates them? As you can see on the screen, it separates them just like it should. But, what happens if I turn off the machine?”

When Brigan proceeded to do just as he said, the bubbles stopped flowing into the tube, and the red and blue bubbles on the screen began to merge with each other.

“…They merged back.”

Shiro described what she was seeing.

“Exactly. Just to make it clear, this machine doesn’t TEMPORARILY separate them, it processes mana so that it PERMENANTLY avoids spirit power. Yet when I stop the machine, the mana and spirit power merge right back as if they’re magnets. When separated, it is no longer the solidified form of the creation element, but when the machine turns off, they merge back and return to being the creation element.”

Brigan switches to a different tab and shows a simulation of all three tubes working together. It shows a process of the blue and red bubbles separating in the middle tube, then shows green bubbles that are in the other tubes pouring into the middle. The green bubbles then separate into gradients of red-green and blue-green bubbles, making the red-green mix with the red and the blue-green mix with the blue. And finally, when the machine turns off, the mix of red- and blue-green bubbles form into one.

“The green bubbles represent my mana and spirit power. As you can see, we Zeldians innately have significantly less spirit power than mana, shown by the larger amount of blue-green bubbles compared to red-green. They all mix into the center where I essentially force my own mana and spirit power into Senkyo’s mana and spirit power. When they merge, it turns my own mana and spirit power into the creation element. Because it is technically a sample of creation element that was also created through my own spirit power, I am able to control it to some extent. I was able to prove this about a year ago using a sample of creation element I still had in the past in exchange for exhausting that resource.”

A sample of creation element. There was no doubt that it caught Senkyo and Shiro’s attention, but they held the urge to ask and watched on silently as Brigan continued after gauging their reactions.

“This allowed me to infiltrate Senkyo’s mind at some point. But at that time, I used new blood samples I collected separately after learning that you arrived in Iqanlr. I was still able to use the creation element freely and completed my goals. Unfortunately, there is one fatal flaw. I cannot use this for a long time. It consumed the mana and spirit power I fused with yours and used up the new blood I saved in only a minute. Although it was a bit faster than my last experiment, it was all according to my plan.”

The screen showed an image of the green bubbles in the two tubes forming a single blob in each one.

“To make you rampage and successfully kill Gaeka, I saved up blood for almost a year and amassed two tubes of blood. The problem was that the spirit power which resides in them all formed a single thought. As you might be able to guess, it’s my hatred for Gaeka and basically a huge clump of vengeance. At some point, I figured that my present thoughts and willpower alone would not be able to control the rampage. But, I was confident that nothing would go wrong since thoughts of how I would use you to kill Gaeka always filled my head whenever I extracted samples. The instructions of what I needed you to do were practically embedded into the clump of vengeance. All I needed to do was confirm that nothing would go wrong despite this…”

He paused and let out a sigh before continuing.

“After I first infiltrated Senkyo’s mind, I noticed one thing: whatever I did, I couldn’t connect to his Gjia Eaixih. To enact my whole revenge plot I needed 3 things: Gaeka, Senkyo, and him having obtained his Gjia Eaixih. When I heard Senkyo arrived at Iqanlr, I hoped with all my might that he would have his Gjia Eaixih. It was the only thing that was missing from the equation and I thought that I’d be able to fulfill my revenge earlier than I ever expected. That excitement was probably what led me to make a miscalculation.”

Brigan turned to Senkyo and asked.

“You should be able to remember this, but I asked you something similar when you first woke up in front of Asier, right?”

“Yes. You were talking about Diving Weapons, Gjia Eaixih, and Empyrean Catalysts… or something along those lines.”

“Essentially, those are all tools handed down by the gods to the Ambassadors. In other words, anyone who possesses them would have made contact with the power of a god. And, you Senkyo, have a specific seal that locks away your rapid regeneration. An ability that you already possessed when Leolja began collecting your blood. The condition for that particular seal just happens to be: to make contact with the power of a god… do you get where I’m going with this?”

Senkyo was clearly shaken by this answer. He recalled that he activated Kuro Yaiba’s release factor in a blind rage. There was no doubt in his mind that it was that power that fit the description of the “power of a god.” He managed to give a proper response but couldn’t keep silent any longer.

“Are you saying that because I made contact with a different power from a god, I unlocked the seal for my body’s rapid regeneration? Mistaking it as a sign of me obtaining my Gjia Eaixih, you jumped the gun and proceeded to enact your revenge. Then, only when it was too late did you realize that I didn’t actually have my Gjia Eaixih.”

“Correct.”

“Wait, hold on! How do you know this much about me!? Are you saying that I’m an Ambassador? How did you even know that I have seals in my body!? How did you know the condition for one of them, something that Shiro doesn’t even know besides her own seal!?”

“Don’t rush. It’s literally only about 4 in the morning. You have the whole day to question me about everything; I’ll answer all of them. You just work on consolidating your thoughts and thinking about which questions to ask. But, just to temporarily satisfy any misgivings you have of me, I’m going to give you this: I was one of the people who were very close to the previous generation of Ambassadors. If you want something to reference me at that time, call me Tatari. It’s my curse.”

**405 – The Birth of A Myth 1**

Brigan continued the discussion, focusing on the subject of Senkyo’s rampage. Using the machine he built, he managed to influence the creation element extracted from Senkyo’s blood and used it to control him. The reason that the small creation element sample wasn’t being exhausted was because all he was actually doing was using it as a medium to control Senkyo, he wasn’t actually using it to cast creation magic, so all it did was consume the spirit power from Brigan’s blood in exchange for temporary control.

As he said before, Brigan realized that there was no possible way to connect the clump of vengeance that he had to a non-existent Gjia Eaixih. He tried to find a way around this problem but to no avail. Then, the time arrived when Leolja came to seek his aid. The two determined that there was no other way to save Senkyo and Shiro other than forcibly empowering him, so he activated the machine and used up all of his preserved blood.

As a result, this took control over Senkyo’s body. The very first order that came from Brigan’s influence was to use the release factor of Senkyo’s Gjia Eaixih, which he didn’t possess at the time. In exchange, he entered a state of madness that was similar to activating a release factor using all of the existing resources in Senkyo’s body. This overflowing power used the clump of hatred in Brigan’s blood as a catalyst and created a completely different personality, or so Brigan’s theory goes. None of them had any concrete proof of multiple personalities, but judging from the fact that every memory returned except for the two times his personality went wild, it wasn’t impossible.

They proceeded to record what Senkyo actually gained from “switching personalities.” Senkyo and Shiro both synchronized perfectly and used the advantages of their familiar pact. This allowed Senkyo to fully share what he was capable of with her. Magic, mana, spirit power, creation magic, and even the power of his divine soul; Shiro was able to use everything. However, Brigan added that this was no doubt a special case. There have been records in the past when both parties of a familiar pact reached their full potential, but that didn’t involve making the familiar a carbon copy of the Master’s power. This case was only possible because of Senkyo’s creation element, Brigan claimed confidently.

At this point, Shiro could no longer keep Senkyo in the shadow about him being an Angel. It wasn’t only because of the conversation, but he also remembered that he used chantless casting when his mind-controlled body fought Shiro. When Senkyo asked her to explain, Shiro went about how his father, Yukou Yuuto, wanted him to discover the crest’s existence only through his own power. Technically, this was achieved when Senkyo’s other personality used his crest in both of his battles against the memory monster through his own power and will, so Shiro reluctantly accepted this outcome.

To summarize, Senkyo’s rampaging allowed him to synchronize with Shiro, expand his use of creation magic, and use his Angel’s crest. He tested all of these to see if he retained the power. When he ordered Shiro to use creation magic, she was able to do so without difficulty. Brigan explained that when both familiar and master reach a certain level of familiarity, it typically stays that way unless both parties have a terrible falling out. When Senkyo first rampaged, his and Shiro’s emotions became one, allowing them to reach this level of familiarity. Of course, with such power, Brigan advised them not to flaunt it too much to others.

Senkyo then attempted to use creation magic. The only spell he knew that used creation magic was Deconstruct, so Shiro conveyed the other spells that she used. Those being Incarnate, Encase, and Emperor. Both of them had no prior knowledge about creation spells. Just like how Senkyo first learned Deconstruct, the other three spells came naturally to Shiro’s mind. But, instead of using one of these four spells, Shiro suggested that Senkyo use a milder application of creation magic.

Right at the end of his second fight against the memory monster, his split personality used what she described as a low-tier spell of creation magic. Just before he cast Needle Storm, his eyes cycled through several colors. Green, orange, blue, and rose, all of them representing a respective element, those being nature, fire, water, and control. When Senkyo finally shot out his Needle Storm, he managed to change the mana structure of the Needle Storm into a completely different magic, creating an explosion of flames, again turning into water, and for a final time, turning it into control magic that weakened the monster.

Senkyo did as Shiro explained and created a simple fireball. After a long process of trial and error, he eventually made it so that it could turn into a water ball, a clump of wind, a snowball, and a ball of light.

Lastly, Senkyo tried to use spirit power. Here, he was at a loss for what to do. And as it turned out, he didn’t need to do much. Shiro called out to someone, which caused a voice to echo in his head. It was an unknown voice, but their true identity was apparently the Divine Soul of Spirits. He always kept himself a secret from Senkyo, but now that he was able to draw out the crest’s power, he voluntarily revealed himself to Senkyo.

He told him that the fact that Senkyo was able to conversate with him meant that he was recognized as a rightful holder of his divine soul. He has been for a long time, but he hid his existence from Senkyo because he didn’t want him to become dependent on his powers. Supposing that he could have used his divine soul in the past, then they would never have learned to survive using their own strength. Even now, he still advised Senkyo to use him sparingly. He only revealed himself so that he became more careful of how to use his powers. Of course, if the situation begged for it, the divine soul said that he would speak up for Senkyo to use him.

After talking with his divine soul for a while, Senkyo found it inconvenient that he didn’t have a name. He asked about it but said that he had no name. Senkyo accepted that and gave him a name of his own. It was a very simple one. Nanashi was the name he gave his divine soul, and that was because Nanashi also meant “no name.” Shiro and Brigan chuckled at this while Nanashi apathetically accepted.

This signaled the end of their discussion about Senkyo’s “rampage” and they moved on to talk about Brigan’s identity.

It turned out that Brigan was one of the apprentices of a Hero of the past generation of Ambassadors. Specifically, he was an apprentice of Professor Konjou Masao, one of the best researchers and innovators of his time. He was quick to create new inventions with every wave of passion that struck him. This became even more apparent when he became an Ambassador and discovered Zerid and the Spirit Realm.

This surprised Senkyo and Shiro after hearing a familiar name. Konjou. The family name of their spirit companion, Konjou Ryosei. Professor Konjou Masao was apparently Ryosei’s grandfather. Brigan recognized the name “Ryosei” since Masao frequently talked about him. At the time, Masao took in only two apprentices in Zerid: Brigan and Hira’s mother, Yoea. Brigan and Yoea met as total strangers, attracted by the blinding talent that radiated from Masao. Day in, day out, they worked together with Masao, watching him, learning from him, and applying that knowledge to the task given to them or their own personal work.

The days passed and eventually turned into years. Brigan’s relationship with Yoea advanced to levels that they didn’t expect. They became married and had a child of their own named Hira. She was a cheerful kid who spent most of her time trying to figure out what her parents’ research papers were saying. They didn’t expect it, but she was actually able to comprehend some of their works at a very young age, not completely, only to some extent, but that didn’t discredit the fact that Hira seemed to be a genius.

Everything seemed like the future was bright for them until they got wind of a disturbing piece of news. “One of the Heroes could be fake.” Masao conveyed the information to them to make them aware. They apparently found a person who claimed to be a Hero. When they tested him, he showed all the qualities of being a Hero, but it was also undeniable that all five of the current Heroes had the same properties. Then, why was that? Little did Brigan and his family know that the situation would only grow worse after that.

In the middle of a certain night, Masao returned with a close friend, and a fellow Hero just like him, Yukou Yuuto. Both of them were badly wounded and it seemed like Masao was even bleeding from the center of his chest. When Brigan asked what had happened, the professor brushed it off as a little scuffle, something that everyone present knew was a blatant lie. Then, another person entered the room. It was a child he had never seen before named Senkyo. Yuuto claimed that he was his child and wanted Masao to help bring him to Earth. Yuuto thought that it would be too dangerous for Senkyo to remain in Zerid. That was all Brigan heard before the two entered a private room.

Never did Brigan expect to be placed at a crossroads that night.

He didn’t know how, what, or why, but something began attacking their lab. The research papers were scattered all over the ash and rubble, most of them burning in the flames. He first tried to call out for the closest person to him, Professor Masao, but he was nowhere to be seen. Worried, he got up and ran through the building to find Yoea and Hira. For minutes he continued running, searching, and shouting to the point where his breath was heavily labored. His efforts had yet to bear fruit. Then, his heart dropped when he heard a scream from a familiar voice coming in the distance.

Brigan activated a machine on his wrist that concealed his presence and rushed to the source, pushing his body to the limit and not caring for the ashes that he took in with every breath. His legs managed to carry him over to his destination. There, he saw his wife, Yoea being lifted off the ground by a suspicious old man. The large black bat wings on his back suggested that he was a vampire. Right as Brigan was about to charge into the room to save her, a voice shouted in his head. It was the voice of Yoea. She used Connect, a technique they learned from Masao that allowed telepathic communication. She spotted him in the distance before he could do anything reckless and stopped him.

Why? Yoea told him that Hira was hiding in one of the emergency capsules inside the very same room she was in. The vampire in front of her was named Gaeka and his purpose was to find the research papers that she penned. Those papers just happened to be with Hira at the time, secured inside a capsule that blocks out detection of mana and spirit power, a safe place for it to be.

Yoea warned Brigan. “Never set foot into this room until it's safe.” That voice was all he needed to hear. It was all he needed to hear to realize that Yoea had no intention of surviving that tragic night. He wanted to disregard those very words and pull Yoea back to safety, but what could he do? His wife chided him for thinking of abandoning his responsibilities as a father. What would happen if he died along with her? What would happen to their child? Who would be left to protect her? Brigan couldn’t answer and hesitated. In the middle of Yoea’s internal spiel, tears fell from her eyes. She realized that he had been silent against Gaeka for a while now. When she looked at him in the eyes, she quickly recognized that they were the eyes of someone who lost patience.

The very next second, Gaeka took Yoea’s life in cold blood. Brigan witnessed every second of it and his mind turned blank. His mouth opened as if to scream, but no sound came out only to maintain his cover. If he died now, then Yoea’s sacrifice would have truly been for nothing. Internally, he screamed and let out his frustrations while his body trembled as if it were about to break.

When Gaeka finally left empty-handed, he slowly staggered to Yoea’s dead body. He slumped to the ground and held her cold body. She placed her back on his lap and held her closer, allowing her blood to smear him as if to hold him back. Then, another voice echoed in his head. It was the voice of the man that both he and his wife looked up to. Masao.

The man left him a message. He apparently tried to contact Yoea but couldn’t, so he was the only person he could trust to leave the last piece of information he could convey. Senkyo was apparently a special existence. He learned that he was someone who could purify calamitous energy and turn it into the creation element. This was proved by the few samples that they took earlier. He said that Yuuto would be sealing his memories of his connections to Zerid, but he would eventually be back to right everything that was wronged, and he appealed to him to support him in the future.

A prophecy made by their fellow Hero predicted that he would one day arrive in the border city of Iqanlr. He then told him about three of the seals that locked away his power. The first required him to experience a near-death state to release the seal on his familiar, the next required him to make contact with the power of a god to release his rapid regeneration, and the other required him to reach a certain amount of familiarity with his familiar to release his ability to share his power and senses. These three conditions were all Brigan could hear before Masao’s voice suddenly cut out. Masao was also using Connect, so it wasn’t like a radio or a smartphone where their signal could easily sever. It meant that he was in a situation that disrupted his focus. For a man like Masao, he couldn’t imagine the reason for that to be something simple. That was the very last time Brigan ever made contact with Masao.

In a single night, he lost his loving wife and the person he admired. What would have happened if he ignored Yoea’s warning and tried to protect her? There was no use thinking about it now. This was the path that he ended up taking.

After that night, he took Hira, the samples of the creation element that he found hidden in Masao’s office, and any important research with him and fled the scene. He visited everyone he knew who was connected to the ambassadors and got wind of the news that they were all chased away by a single Hero that impersonated as one of them. He went to the Konjou clan to deliver a report of everything that happened to Masao’s children and found out that Freda was now supporting the insides of the clan. After sharing information with Freda, he gave the Konjou clan the research papers he could collect on the new inventions that Masao created. One of them contained the plans for a teleportation network, which eventually became greatly used in the Konjou clan. That was his last contact with the Konjou clan before leaving for Iqanlr.

**406 – The Birth of A Myth 2**

Brigan and Hira began living in Iqanlr. Being hailed as the forefront of Zerid’s technology, their research facilities did not disappoint, but they were still behind the research that Masao usually conducted. Brigan needed to secure a base of operations at some point but he couldn’t just get a laboratory offered by Iqanlr. He didn’t want anyone to see what research he would be conducting. He had samples of the creation element, so everyone would go insane if they found out someone among them researching something like that. While he was trying to figure out where to set up, he met someone unexpected at the bottom of Iqanlr’s sunken nest.

His only purpose was to gather materials for his research but he ended up meeting someone named Asier, a crossbreed that was clearly different from everyone else that lived in the depths. He had intelligence that allowed them to communicate, which helped him ask about the strange power that came from his body. A power that he became sensitive to after spending so many years with the Ambassadors, a weapon from a god.

Brigan asked about this and discovered that Asier was a guardian of a Gjia Eaixih. He was in disbelief to have found someone like him, but a question remained to be answered: Whose Gjia Eaixih did it belong to?

Asier gladly answered Brigan’s questions in exchange for him answering his questions. He apparently wanted to know much more about Nwen, the person he received the Gjia Eaixih from. Brigan couldn’t believe that Nwen had died, but the fact that Asier had become a guardian of her Gjia Eaixih was solid proof of that. After a long and fruitful exchange, Brigan and Asier formed an alliance to support each other for both of their goals. When Brigan asked for a space he could use to set up a lab, he was directed to a large space between levels A3 and S. He spent his years in Iqanlr, occasionally leaving to gather materials for his research and exchanging information with other apocrologists until the day Senkyo arrived.

Once he finished his story, Senkyo and Shiro began asking their questions. The first one, of course, was the third condition he heard from Masao to unlock one of Senkyo’s seals: to reach a certain familiarity with his familiar. Shiro confirmed that this condition was accurate. After all, a seal was released the moment Senkyo first went on a rampage. Shiro couldn’t find the right time to tell him. Her plan was to tell Senkyo about it after everything calmed down, but she didn’t expect Brigan to be the first one to bring it up.

Even though Senkyo and Shiro didn’t know what conditions and abilities his seals had, Brigan knew from Masao. The Professor was last seen with Yuuto, so he most likely conveyed the conditions to Masao, which he then tried to give to Brigan. The third seal that was unlocked gave Senkyo the ability to “share his senses and abilities.” This explained why Brigan was so confident when he explained his thoughts on why Shiro was able to imitate Senkyo’s capabilities. They already experienced how to share abilities but they never experienced how to share senses. The two attempted to activate this but were at a loss. In the end, they couldn’t make it work and pushed the subject aside to progress the conversation.

The next topic was something Shiro wanted to talk about. She wanted to know more about what Brigan knew about Senkyo and Yuuto. Unfortunately, Brigan already told her everything he knew about Senkyo. As for Yuuto, he didn’t interact with him much except for the times he visited their lab. He had no clue why they arrived bloody and why their goal was to bring Senkyo to Earth. As compensation, Senkyo was informed about the truth about the three worlds; the incident of 17 years ago where the efforts of the previous ambassadors were erased from Earth and the Spirit Realm along with the memories of those who lived in them, setting back the advancements of the two worlds.

After that, Senkyo wanted to know more about Masao. He was a Hero of the last generation, Ryosei’s grandfather, and the previous holder of Kuro Yaiba. His weapon was undoubtedly destroyed in battle but was repaired by a spirit smith called Raqeav, successfully turning the broken blade into the Tampered Blade, the pseudo-Divine Weapon made from Kuro Yaiba. Hearing this, Senkyo unsheathed Kuro Yaiba, eliciting Brigan’s surprise.

He told Brigan to examine the blade and what its condition was. Apparently, the blade housed no spirits, making it as strong as a decorative sword. Senkyo and Shiro attested that it was once powerful, so Brigan could only conclude that the spirit left the sword. When Senkyo began thinking about it, he strengthened his previous suspicions of Ryosei needing to be with him to draw out Kuro Yaiba’s power. Since it was in its fragile state, Brigan searched through his storage and found a strong container that could store both Kuro Yaiba and its sheathe.

Satisfied with the information, they proceeded to move to the next topic: Freda. He mentioned that he met her at the Konjou clan and they asked him why she was there. Brigan said that Freda wasn’t specific with her words, but she did say that she became a Lost Maiden, the catalyst that held the power to bestow the title of Ambassador to the chosen ones of the new generation. He then proceeded to tell Senkyo all the fine details of the weight that comes with the title of being an Ambassador and the weapons that they hold such as the Divine Weapons, Gjia Eaixihs, and Empyrean Catalysts.

Freda never told Brigan about the identity of this generation’s current Ambassadors, but he was certain that Senkyo was a Hfixesi. This was because a Gjia Eaixih had already been given to him directly by Asier, the guardian of said Gjia Eaixih. But, Brigan doubted that the title of Ambassador was given to Senkyo yet.

When he was asked to elaborate, Brigan reminded him that Freda, the Lost Maiden, kept his title of being a Hfixesi from being given to him as a precaution against enemies that would take advantage of their inexperience. Back when Senkyo fought the memory monster for the second time, he noticed that Senkyo was barely able to use the power of the Gjia Eaixih given to him. All he did with it was manifest the power of the previous holder of the Gjia Eaixih, the Divine Soul of Torment. Usually, the Gjia Eaixih should have adapted to Senkyo’s Divine Soul, but it retained the power of the previous holder instead. This gave Brigan the suspicion of him not holding the title yet.

In an attempt to confirm, Brigan asked if Senkyo felt any strange signs he called “Fated Winds.” They were apparently signs given by the gods to support their efforts as an Ambassador. Since he didn’t have his Gjia Eaixih before, Brigan wanted to know if he felt any signs that led to meeting Asier. Senkyo said that he didn’t feel anything of the sort and that his meeting with Asier felt like the result of many people anticipating the very moment he arrived at Iqanlr.

Because of this, Brigan concluded that it was more than likely that he didn’t have the title of Ambassador and advised him not to rely on the Gjia Eaixih that he obtained due to the fact that he didn’t have the ability to draw its full potential. Strictly speaking, he told him not to use its Release Factor. All he would be doing was asking for trouble if he tried to use something that he didn’t have any right to. The result of Senkyo gaining a split personality was a good example of this, so everyone including Nanashi agreed.

Finally, they arrived at the last subject that Senkyo and Shiro wanted to know more about. Who exactly was Gaeka?

Brigan explained that the true identity of Gaeka was the Blood Leader of END. When he first encountered Gaeka in the destroyed laboratory, he had yet to become a Leader. According to an inside man he had in Nrjia, the Fallen Kingdom of Vampires, Gaeka became the Blood Leader because of his efforts to destroy the Kingdom from the inside. The ultimate cause of Nrjia’s demise came from Gaeka, who betrayed his people and allowed the Kingdom to be conquered.

Brigan was there in person to witness Njria’s fall. At the time, he was in Uirdun, the border city of Frukaui and Ridsikrn. He asked the fleeing vampires what was happening and they said that the Kingdom was being invaded by END. He participated in building up Uirdun’s defenses. When he was using his technology to scout the enemies, he found that Gaeka was among them. Furious, he blindly charged into the enemy and decimated the threats. Unfortunately, he couldn’t penetrate their forces fast enough to catch Gaeka. In the end, the object of his hatred retreated and that was where his name as the “Tatari” became prominent.

Curious, Shiro asked why Brigan chose such a name. He then explained that it was nothing more than an inside joke between him and Yoea. More oftentimes than not, whenever he collaborated with Yoea, he would make silly mistakes that normally wouldn’t come from a man of his caliber which led her to call him “Tatari” or a curse. But in that moment, the name that was born from simple teasing became his malediction against Gaeka.

The reason Gaeka was present in Iqanlr was likely because he overheard Masao’s conversation with him and discovered that Senkyo would someday visit Iqanlr. This would only mean that he was the last known person to see Masao. If anyone wanted to find Masao their best clue would be Gaeka, which only made Brigan want to beat him up even more.

Once Senkyo and Shiro’s questions finally settled, Brigan went to ask Senkyo something different. He asked about the girl he saw when he first infiltrated his mind. He described her features in detail, making the two realize that he was talking about Yuu. He asked about her background, naturally making Senkyo suspicious.

Before continuing any further, he wanted to know the reason he was asking about her. So, he took out two pieces of paper from a nearby drawer. They were photographs. This led to their discussion about the eldest daughter of the previous king of Nrjia, Rnriai Mszekrnlr. Her other name—Hisho Yuu.

**407 – The Birth of A Myth 3**

After ending their long discussion, they took a short break before resuming the next subject. When Senkyo and Shiro entered the room, Brigan handed Senkyo a card.

“What’s this, an identification card?”

Senkyo mused aloud before reading the contents.

“It’s named to… ‘Eksert of the Vjzasu’ has the role of Voyager and holds the name of ‘Roaming Ace…’”

“It’s a name I came up with a bit of wordplay; it's faulty to begin with so there’s no danger of anyone suspecting you for your name. To anyone, it won’t mean anything, but to me, it means ‘he who proves the myths.’ That’s gonna be you from now on. At least, while you’re here in Zerid.”

“Me…? So this is my disguise?”

“Yep. I’m sure you already know from experience, but there are a lot more people who know you than you think, so stick to this fake identity to keep away from unwanted trouble. That is the specialized identification card that Leolja advertised. You know, these things actually need blood so be thankful that Leolja found you before anyone else did. With this, you should have no more identity problems.”

Senkyo scrutinized the card both front and back while listening to Brigan’s explanation, taking mental notes of its features. It wasn’t much different from a card on Earth but he could sense the mana flowing through it. Noticing an obvious discrepancy between this and usual identification cards, he pointed it out.

“This… isn’t completed yet, right? It doesn’t have an image of me yet.”

Senkyo said, pointing to an open space on the card.

“Yeah, I’m planning on doing that once I give you everything I need. Armor and everything. Unlike what you have on Earth, identifying people with looks is unreliable in this world since there are Zeldians have one way or another to imitate looks, so this is nothing more than a formality, but it's also used as a secondary reference. Usually, as long as the Owner Ascription doesn’t show any errors then you’re fine.”

“Owner Ascription?” He parroted. “What’s that?”

“Oh, I guess you wouldn’t know much about apocrology, huh? I’ll explain the bare minimum for now. We can continue later if you want.”

“Sure, that’ll be a lot of help.”

Shiro was a local of Zerid, but she didn’t know about the latest developments in this world since she lived in her village all her life before meeting Yukou Yuuto, so she had something to gain from this lesson as well. Brigan then proceeded to give the two a crash course on basic apocrology and how the technology worked. Senkyo’s final questions were about the information written on his card such as Voyager and Roaming Ace

“—so basically, a Voyager’s job is to keep Sunken Nests from going out of control and balance its ecosystem. The Roaming Ace is a title given to the best-performing Voyager, so it’d do you good to complete missions given to you in one or two days upon arrival just to prove your power. Both of these combined make you exempt from the two mission per month requirement to maintain your status as an active Crawler. Instead, your quota is once every three months. This is something like a consideration since you’ll be expected to travel far distances. Of course, it’s up to you if you want to maintain the active status, but don’t come crawling back to me if your card expires…”

He stopped himself and looked at the ceiling, pondering before he continued.

“Wait, I can’t do that… Ugh, whatever, just don’t let it expire so that I don’t need to pull more strings, okay?”

It seemed like he remembered his responsibility to help Senkyo and backtracked. It was nice to know that Brigan would be able to do something about his identity problem, so he took a mental note about his quota just to save him the trouble. It was the least he could do.

“You got it.”

When Senkyo assured him of this, Brigan then walked to another room and signaled the two to follow him. While they were walking, he asked.

“By the way, where do you plan on going after this?”

“Hmm… Somewhere north-east. Either Nrjia or someplace around it.”

“Oh, is that where you sense your girl?”

After their talk about Yuu earlier, Senkyo realized that he couldn’t continue his journey without learning how to use his blood to some extent. Specifically, the creation element inside his blood. It was basically an extension of his will. Brigan guided him on how to use it based on his research. What he first wanted was to know how many signals he received that were outside his body. He received a highly concerning amount of signals from every direction, which meant that samples of his blood were actually scattered all over Zerid before he even arrived.

He couldn’t do anything about that at this point, so Senkyo opted to search for Yuu, specifically. The signal came from the northeast, just as he initially expected her to be. As for how Yuu managed to get a sample of his blood, the memory of her sucking his blood came to mind. It felt like it happened years ago but he could still vividly recall her biting into his skin and sucking out his blood. That incident ended with them making a bit too much contact than intended… but he realized that he shouldn’t think about that anymore with Shiro giving him the death stare.

The point was that Yuu drank his blood. At the time, Shiro’s seal had yet to be released, the same seal that contained his mana and mana manipulation abilities. Yuu failed to detect any mana from his blood and believed that Senkyo wasn’t the person she was looking for. Although, she did realize it was some kind of mistake at some point seeing as she eventually tried to take him to Zerid.

The blood that Yuu first sucked from him could be considered an inactive state. When Shiro’s seal was released, the blood she consumed became active, allowing the creation element to flow in her veins. Of course, Senkyo kept this thought process all to himself considering what led to this conclusion… not that it kept Shiro from being suspicious. It was a good thing she wasn’t there when it happened.

“Anyway, here’s the gear I prepared for you. These are the fruits of hard work in the past 17 years I’ve been waiting, so there’s no doubt they’re of top quality.”

When they entered the new room, Brigan brought them to a table that had two blades displayed on it. A katana and a wakizashi. They both had lustrous silver blades with sheathes of blackened sheathes and red cords decorated both sheathes and the handle of the blades. Upon close inspection, the ornaments on the blades’ handles called a Menuki, and the small fragments at the center of the piece of metal that wrapped around the base of their blades called a Habaki, both had a different shade of black, closer to grey.

They were apparently made from the remains of the memory monster. Namely, the two horns that Senkyo managed to take off on their first fight. Brigan took them along with him and used them for materials. He clarified that he did this after confirming that the memory monster was dead and that the memories of its victims returned. He claimed to be ready to destroy them if it somehow tried to revive from the horns. Thankfully, that didn’t need to be done.

“I knew you could use the creation element, so these blades are based around that. They can be used to conduct every magic element. It also has Circuits engraved at the base of its blade that was specially made to have the creation element flow through it.”

Senkyo checked the blades when he said this, confirming that there were two symbols of Spirit on the blade, one engraved on each side of the flat of their blades.

“It's just a symbol of Spirit made using the samples of creation element I had, so you can use your own to extend or modify the Circuit to whatever the situation needs. As for the memory monster’s horns, I don’t know if they’ll have any lasting effects, but I did put them in just in case it does. The monster seemed to have the ability to evolve depending on what it consumed, so I thought it wouldn’t hurt since it’s similar to you, in a way. I made them so you can take them out just in case they end up hindering you.”

Senkyo did a few practice swings with the two blades. Not even Ryosei had experience of using a wakizashi in the past, so his movements were a bit awkward, but he didn’t complain. If worst comes to worst, he would just save the wakizashi as a reserve and keep fighting only with a katana.

They moved on to the next table where a plethora of small unknown devices were spread all over.

“Take these with you. From left to right, you have the D. Scout, R. Explosives, Recall Points, Recall Crystals, and Iordr Metal Accessories. The first two have simple names, but let it be. I wanted to make them specialized specifically for you, but I didn’t have enough information to do that, so they have strict requirements that you already fulfill based on the knowledge I had of you.”

The D. Scout was apparently an abbreviation of Device Scout, they were a set of white hexagon-shaped devices that could build a small spy drone and detach itself to save storage space. They use spirit power to activate. It uses the light element to send the image it catches into a contact lens that displays the image either on its surface or projects it for others to see. It is also capable of invisibility, again, using light magic.

The R. Explosives are an abbreviation of Remote Explosives. They are small circular devices with an orange gem in their center, which happens to be a fire gem. They are activated by destroying explosives that are linked to each other through Spirit Circuits beforehand, so they cannot detonate by themselves, or in technical terms, being unlinked. These devices are as flat as disks, allowing them to fit in a tight storage space. They can only be used through spirit power, so most Zeldians would have no way to disarm them, and they also had an invisibility function.

Senkyo and Shiro already knew the existence of Recall Points and Recall Crystals, but they didn’t know their inner workings. The Recall Point was a hexagon-shaped metal device that could go invisible and the Crystals were orbs with colors of purple, blue, and red. They can only be configured with the recall point and the crystals being near each other, again, using Spirit Power. Many crystals can be connected to a single Point, but their connection cannot be severed no matter the distance apart from destroying the recall point. Already connected crystals cannot connect to other Points without severing the existing connection. Destroying the crystals activates the teleportation, but can also be forcefully activated using the Spirit Power of the person who last configured the devices, but doing so also breaks the crystal.

Lastly, Iordr Metal, meaning Spirit Metal. Its other name was Grudr Metal, meaning Glassblade, the same material Kuro Yaiba is made from. Senkyo was familiar with it when the jester he encountered in Naen explained it to him. But apparently, they could also act as external storage for Spirit Power, which is what Adeira used to make the Recall Point and Crystals at Brigan’s request. Brigan was giving them to Senkyo as accessories so that he could have an alibi for using spirit power.

“I’m handing you 2 D. Scouts, 50 R. Explosives, 3 Recall Points, 25 Recall Crystals, and 10 small accessories of Iordr Metal.”

“What? Isn’t that a lot? I don’t know if I have enough space for that.”

“Ah, you don’t need to worry about where to put them. I calculated everything so that your armor can fit every single one of these! Everything!”

Brigan puffed his chest confidently, boasting about his work.

“Really?”

“Yep! Follow me.”

**408 – The Birth of A Myth 4**

Brigan showed them to a cavity in the wall that had two stands that displayed an azure jumpsuit and a set of black metal armor. Senkyo and Shiro recognized them to be an AW-Unit and an AW-Unit Frame, respectively. The Frame was endowed with four arms, making it unlike any they had seen before.

“This is your very own AW-Unit set. Different from the common external-type Frames, or so I like to call them, this is an internal-type, the same type of AW-Unit Frame that Hira uses. The external-types are typically just oversized weapons but these internal-types that my daughter made are absolutely amazing! They actually give you the feel that they’re combat suits. But I can’t really blame anyone else for not having them since they only work with Hira because she’s a prodigy! Oh, but you can also use them because you have the ability to use spirit power with mana. It also has the power to utilize Pure ARCana but not on the same level that Hira can; she’s special. You could say that any Zeldian can do the same with enough Iordr Metal, but they won’t work as efficiently as the one personally built for Hira! Oh, and you.”

“…Ah, haha…”

All Senkyo could hear was him boasting about his daughter while purposefully setting him aside, but he left that unsaid and sealed it behind with a smile.

“I made them so that they can detach and attach to your body using spirit power. It uses the same concept the D. Scouts have. I’m sure you noticed that it has one more pair of arms than you do. This is because the race that ‘Eksert’ is registered to is the Vjzasu, a race that has four arms, six eyes, and no mouth to speak with. Most of them communicate by writing words in the air using solidified mana, so I’m going to have you practice the same later, but for now, let's focus on the Frame.”

From out of nowhere, Brigan began unbuttoning his suit. This took the two by surprise but understood why he did that the moment he revealed what was hidden under his clothes. He had been wearing an AW-Unit this whole time and there was a thin sheet of metal wrapping around his diaphragm, one that provided him with an additional set of arms.

“I’m sure you were wondering why a Sorun like me has four arms, so this is the answer. The other set is fake! How do I control these you ask? Well, that’s because I also have a familiar! Uw, show yourself!”

A ball of light appeared at his chest and shot onto his shoulder, manifesting a small brown vegetable-like faceless cartoon character… it was the same creature that saved him from Gaeka when he attacked him at the library.

“This is my little assistant, Uw. He’s from a race called Inwa, which all look very alike, so don’t confuse my Uw with Adeira’s Inwa. They’re the ideal familiars that researchers can have since they are highly adaptable and tenacious. They have almost no fighting prowess but are extremely hard to kill, especially when they become familiars. The only way to kill them is to starve them to death or strike their hearts once they run out of mana, which they never use even when they essentially die. Meaning, that they can only truly die to someone with the ability to drain their mana. Their survivability spikes when they’re contracted to others since their master serves as an extension of their mana pool, and even if their cores are pierced when both the Inwa and master have no mana, as long as the master is alive, they can return to them and regenerate their bodies.”

Uw frolicked innocently from shoulder to shoulder, reminiscent of a child. It would sometimes stretch its body and use Brigan’s neck as a pole to swing itself around with elongated arms.

“As you can see, they like to play. Very much. They’re essentially harmless and also have the ability to stretch themselves and anything they consume, allowing them to eat food and other large solids. Their tenacity makes them perfect test subjects for new weapons or experiments. Oh, before you think this is inhumane or anything, this is a mutual agreement from both sides as per familiar contract so no need to worry.”

Uw stretched its hand to a large thumbs-up to support his statement.

“Their abilities to stretch also prove useful for reaching high, tight, or multiple places at once…”

Senkyo recalled when Adeira’s familiar squeezed its body through the floorboards of Xhiari’s library and stretched itself large enough to consume his body whole. As if reading his mind, Brigan used that very scene as an example.

“… and even consuming large objects to transport them, just your little scuffle at the library.”

“That was… a unique experience to say the least.”

Senkyo replied with a grimace, recalling the sensation of being handled like a fragile package by intentionally spiteful couriers.

“Are you saying that I was shrunk to their size when it swallowed me whole?”

“Yes. Their bodies have a high concentration of control magic, which allows them to be this way. They can easily shrink any solids they consume but they have a harder time dealing with liquids and gases. If you’re afraid of getting dissolved by their gastric juices, then you’d be glad to hear that they can control their production at will. They don’t produce them when transporting and do when eating. The only thing to keep in mind is to wait for an hour after feeding them before storing items to let their juices dissolve.”

Uw turned back into a mass of light and returned to Brigan’s body. He moved his two real arms and two artificial arms, extending the artificial ones to Senkyo.

“I’ll teach you more about them later and have you make a familiar pact with an Inwa. But for now, let’s get back to the main subject.”

It felt like Brigan just brushed over something absurd but he didn’t give Senkyo the time to cut in. Senkyo shaped a wry smile and tried his best to keep up with Brigan’s enthusiastic speech.

“You can control these extra arms manually using the AW-Unit, but you can also let your familiar control them.”

He crossed his real arms while the artificial arms began moving animatedly, gesturing his every word.

“Having a function like this helps me go through my work faster and multitask more efficiently. I taught Uw how I do my work and now he knows what I want before I even ask for them. This can also apply to fighting if you want to, assuming you have someone that’s experienced in fighting as your familiar.”

Senkyo nodded, understanding what Brigan was trying to convey.

“So you’re telling me that Shiro can control the extra arms on the AW-Unit Frame instead of me?”

“Exactly. You see, the Vjzasu can wield multiple weapons and cast numerous spells at the same time. Some even cast magic while clashing blades. They’re a multi-skilled race that is perfect for you to imitate. Their history will allow you to use the most out of your skillset without seeming suspicious. The only drawback is that you can’t speak and you have to communicate by writing your messages in the air using solidified mana.”

“I see… you really thought all this through, huh?”

Senkyo was genuinely impressed by everything Brigan had shown him. It was the perfect guise to walk through Zerid without getting into too much trouble. Hearing his words, Brigan paused for a bit and stared at his creations with eyes that seemed to look past the physical realm.

“Of course. I didn’t dedicate 17 years of my life to show something half-assed. Besides, sooner or later you’ll probably find yourself faced against Gaeka again. As much as I hate to admit it, I won’t be able to kill Gaeka in a fair fight, especially now that he’s a Blood Leader. The very least I can do is contribute to that bastard’s demise. So…”

Brigan turned to Senkyo with the most serious look he had directed to him so far, his most earnest feelings reflecting in his eyes.

“Please, bring our family justice.”

His body bent in a clean 90-degree angle, his tone of voice devoid of its usual playful ring. He could feel his great reluctance in his breathing, If all possible, he wanted to take revenge using his own hands, but he knew better than anyone that he didn’t have the power to do that, which led him to pour all of his heart to his work in hopes that Senkyo would carry the spirit of his grudge.

“‘He who proves the myths,’ huh?”

He recalled the name that he gave him. A smile cracked on Senkyo’s lips. After everything he discovered, especially what he learned about Yuu…

“Our feelings couldn’t be more in sync.”

He let out a small chuckle.

“I’m going to extend this chain of vengeance for just a bit longer.”

**409 – Evergrowing Iqanlr**

Gathered in a familiar room, Asier opened the door and entered in his Aagri-like form.

“I apologize for making you all wait, everyone. It took a while to teach the Esoer about processing Risers.”

“Ur good!”

“Don’t worry, we understand.”

“I just finished handing over my gift to Senkyo. I’d say you made it just in time.”

He was greeted by Hira, Senkyo, and Leolja, respectively. They were all on the second floor of Arachne Tailors inside Leolja’s office. This meeting was initially something Leolja requested of Senkyo yesterday but Hira and Asier happened to be nearby to hear the conversation. Hira insisted on letting her join while dragging Asier along with her. She succeeded in doing so under the guise of seeing Senkyo off before he left the city. Well, she likely honestly meant that to some extent so no one could refuse her.

This was the morning after Senkyo spent a whole day with Brigan gathering information and receiving the technology he created for him. Hira arrived in Leolja’s office before Senkyo. This was because he was busy preparing for his leave early in the morning such as organizing his items and returning the books he borrowed from Xhiari.

Curiously, Senkyo was able to take two books along with him. One of the books was “Foundations of the Familiar Pact Ritual; The Truth Behind the Binding Circles,” the book that Ranat gave him, which didn’t need to be returned to the library. He did try to give it back to her, but she refused saying that she didn’t need it. The other was “Calamitous Energy: The Essence of the First World, Primo,” the book that Shiro introduced to Senkyo. For some reason, when they tried to return the book, the librarian said that there were no records of having such a book in their catalog, even when they double-checked, nothing came up. Senkyo quickly took advantage of this opportunity to pretend it was a mistake and took the book with him. He felt a bit bad taking what wasn’t his, but there was no doubt that the book he had held more secrets that he managed to reveal, so he didn’t want to part with it just yet.

“I see. What kind of parting gift did you receive, Yukou Senkyo?”

“Oh, uhh… Something… interesting to say the least…”

Senkyo turned to Leolja with a grateful nod and a knowing look while the recipient of his gesture gave a deep nod. Their vague exchange couldn’t help but make someone else burst into frustration.

“Ughh!! Seriously, what was it!? I knew I shoulda snatched it when I had the chance!! Why won’t you show iiitt~!?”

When Senkyo first received the package, he only took a slight peek inside before storing it in his bag. The reason for this was painfully obvious. With Hira jumping around him and pestering him for what was inside it, he felt the need to hide it just to teach her a lesson. There was a small scuffle when Hira tried to take it from his bag, but Senkyo’s new familiar, Chi, gobbled it up and hid in Senkyo’s clothes, completely escaping her reach.

Chi was the name that Senkyo gave the Inwa that Brigan introduced to him yesterday. The Mad Scientist apparently had a room dedicated to housing the tribe that his familiar, Uw, belonged to. Chi was one of the volunteers who wanted to enter a familiar pact with Senkyo. Shiro could immediately tell that the name came from “chibi” which meant small or short.

“Anyway, how are the riser proceedings faring, Hybrid Lord?”

“Don’t ignore me!!”

After doing exactly the opposite thing Hira wanted, Leolja directed the conversation to Asier.

“All of the Esoer are successfully registered as risers and I left them in charge of processing the allied Eozea and Etriags.”

“Interesting… no matter how many times I hear it, your followers amaze me. Who would’ve thought that a new variety of Eozea would appear just for having you exist? I can’t help but think that being a guardian of a Gjia Eaixih had a play in this.”

Esoer was a new variety of Eozea that appeared due to them having followed Asier for a long time. They remain small despite going through evolution, completely different from the higher evolution stages of Eozea such as the Flame Lamina and the Twin Lizard. They were originally Eozea who were in their lowest evolution stage and made the decision to follow Asier in his early days of being a guardian.

No one besides them among the Eozea noticed the power that Asier held and became his first real followers. Perhaps because they often interacted with Asier for so many years they unlocked the power to evolve differently. Unlike the power-based Eozea, the Eoser focus on evolving intelligence, making them perfect leaders to manage the other Eozea that now followed Asier. They are characterized by their small structure, intelligence, language capability, and large flaps around their necks. They also happened to be the ones who convinced Shiro to let Senkyo go through Asier’s trial in the sunken nest and carried him to their lord.

“Right now they’re negotiating with the Lord of Iqanlr and Haeqras and handling the other riser procedures. There was a concern for the sunken nest’s ecosystem because of the large amount of Eozeas and Etriags becoming risers at the same time, but they reassured them that even with this amount, we were a minority in the nest. Believe it or not, there were many Eozeas and Etriags who opposed my power. Of course, none of them could match the followers that I cultivated so they often avoided our group. The Eozeas and Etriags may not have the same level of intelligence as the Esoers, but they recognize them as allies and follow their words as if they came directly from me. It will take me a bit longer before I get to explore the world but with everything running smoothly, I’m sure I will soon be able to set out as well.”

“Aren’t your followers worried about you leaving?”

Senkyo asked after the idea struck him from his words.

“No. In the first place, they only followed me because I promised them a prosperous life on the surface. They need no lord, but they are all aware that they won’t be able to survive on their own. It would have been trouble if my most loyal attendants hadn’t unlocked the path to becoming Esoers. Thankfully, their hard work was properly rewarded. In time, I am certain that my followers will allow Iqanlr to advance to its full potential.”

“Yes, I don’t doubt that. After all, with the Hybrid Lord’s army becoming risers, Iqanlr will hold the record for the most risers that have ever been processed based on last year’s statistics.”

Hira and Senkyo let out voices of amazement after hearing Leolja’s little trivia.

“I appreciate that. But more importantly, if Yukou Senkyo is leaving then have you decided what form of transportation you will be taking? It will take you a while before arriving at the next settlement if you head north-east by foot.”

“Ah, we already have that decided. Brigan offered to let us borrow the Veural that he uses when he leaves Iqanlr. He said that it’s capable of going home on its own so we just need to signal it when we find a good place to drop off.”

“I see. Then I’m certain you will have an efficient journey with the fastest land mount.”

“I heard. Hira-san suggested using the teleportation network she found in Naen to quickly get to the town of Siwk, but Brigan argued that it would roughly take the same amount of time to get there so he said to stick with the Veural so that it doesn’t get confused from the teleportation.”

“He’s delusional I’m telling you!”

Even now Hira still argued her point. Senkyo let out a small giggle before rising from his seat.

“Well then, I should be on my way now. I enjoyed my time here… or so I’d like to say but I can’t deny that it’s been a rough five days.”

“Haha, no need to sweat with formalities, Yukou-san! Just tell us how you feel; no one minds!”

“You’re right, my bad. Thank you all for all that you’ve done. There have been a lot of ups and downs, but there’s no doubt that I’ve become stronger because of this. If my enemy is a Leader from END, then there’s no doubt that I’ll have my work cut out for me.”

“That you do. Set a good example as the successor of Lady Nwen, Yukou Senkyo. Farewell to you too, Miss Shiro.”

“I will await the day we meet again. The both of you will always be welcome in Aracne Tailors, Senkyo, Shir.”

“Bye, Shiro, Yukou-san! Let’s have a mock battle the next time we meet! Our interior-type AW-Units dancing around the battlefield…! Maybe I can get myself a familiar too! Ahh, I can already feel the thrill!!”

A wide smile remained on Senkyo’s face as he took the black helmet with what seemed to be blue-stained glass covering the majority of his face from the chair and equipped it. He poured mana into it, allowing the blue glass to disappear into the helmet, and had it produce a black mask that covered his nose and mouth. This was a built-in function that Brigan added to the helmet called Silent Mask. True to its namesake, it suppressed any sound that came from the mouth and nose, allowing Senkyo to continue pretending to be a Vjzasu even if he involuntary screamed in pain through battles. It also served as a gas mask and an aqualung depending on the situation. With his entire set of armor equipped, Senkyo matched the gaze of everyone in the room one last time, and Shiro controlled both of the AW-Unit Frame’s lower arms and wrote the messages.

<Thank you. -Senkyo>

<Thank you. -Shiro>

**410 – Behind the Mask 1**

The first day of traveling to Yuu’s signal passed quickly and night soon came. Senkyo wanted to continue even through the darkness, but that wouldn’t be a smart thing to do since they were traveling on a living creature, not a mechanical vehicle. They needed to let the dinosaur-like animal to rest. Senkyo almost forgot about this because they didn’t take many breaks for long in the morning and afternoon. Veurals apparently had a lot of stamina, but going straight through the night was simply absurd. They set up camp under some trees, taking out their supplies from the bag that was inside Chi.

Chi had the power to shrink into Senkyo’s clothes but Brigan advised that he stay outside. This was because Inwas are playful by nature. He prepared a room for Chi inside his AW-Unit Frame in case an intense battle requires him to hide, but they prefer being out and about and playing with what they can. Their solution for this was to have Chi imitate a long item where he can play inside that small space along with some items that they added in the bag specifically for Chi to play with. To disguise him from other people, they wrapped a white cloth over him and suspended him on his back like a sword.

After eating, Senkyo would read one of the two books he brought while Shiro practiced using magic and wielding the wakizashi. Her goal was to someday have the same skill with the sword as Senkyo but for now, she focused on the wakizashi so that she could wield it while Senkyo used the katana. When they were about to go to sleep, Senkyo shot a suggestive glance to Shiro, asking wordlessly with his gaze if she wanted to sleep beside him like they did in their time in Elqa, but just as he expected, he was rejected harshly, having the words “You’re a pervert, Onii!” and other similar words being thrown at him. Such a far cry from their previous relationship, but there was nothing that could be done now. To add to that, Shiro chose to sleep outside instead of returning to Senkyo in her spirit form. He didn’t know if it was because she just didn’t want to be with him or learning to become more independent. For the sake of his mental health, he convinced himself it was the latter.

Incidentally, he entered a short phase of denial blaming the clothes that Brigan gave him specifically to hide his AW-Unit Frame. It was a set of less-than-clean cloth pants, a shirt, a leather vest, and a tattered shawl. His clothes had stains of black and purple, making him have the illusion of being a seasoned crawler. He also threw in four Bands of Magic Power and a pair of Boots of Gravity since his previous set didn’t fit his AW-Unit Frame. The previous set of armor and weapons were safely stored in his bag.

Thinking about his armor made him recall the time he was about to part from Brigan two days ago. Right as he reached out for the door, he stopped him and asked for payment. That being, 15,000 Hjor. Senkyo didn’t miss the time to rebut him. If Iaksin hadn’t given him the 20,000 Hjor, then there was no possible way that he would’ve been able to afford all of that.

But then, Brigan clarified that someone should have connected him to a large sum of money. It was apparently money that should’ve been passed to him by the Uikakrn Kingdom in exchange for creating something that exceeded the most advanced technologies of Zerid. Had he failed to get connected to said money then Brigan would take the problem directly to the Kingdom and let Senkyo have it for free. They basically used Senkyo as a medium to pass the money. Technically, that meant that he was having the Kingdom pay, not Senkyo, but that didn’t explain why this was happening.

After a bit more talk, Senkyo became aware that the Uikakrn Kingdom knew about the previous Prophecy Hero’s predictions that he would arrive in Iqanlr. It was actually Brigan who showed off his capabilities and extracted as much money as he could from them for funds, so the reluctance from his heart disappeared since this was technically Brigan’s money to begin with. But, that also meant that Iaksin recognized him from the start… No, looking back at it, his expressions and reactions seemed to be genuine when he first met him, so there was also the possibility that he only became aware of him after he got the money to give him. Either way, his current balance was at 383.85 Hjor with all of the fluctuations on his final days in Iqanlr. It was still a hefty amount considering that the exchange rate for 1 Hjor was 342.11 Yen, but instead of thinking too much about it, he focused on his current goal and went to sleep.

They would resume their journey early in the morning and both of them would practice writing words in the air using mana, sometimes timing it with real spell chants so that they would become even more believable Vjzasu. The ideal level of mastery they wanted to obtain was to be able to chant a high-tier spell that had many pre-requisite spells to be active. Brigan suggested Harrowed Deluge, which he later wrote down after returning to Elqa. If Senkyo and Shiro both used chantless double-casting then making it look like a Vjzasu was casting four spells at the same time wasn’t impossible.

At night, Senkyo would read and Shiro would practice. This routine continued for a total of three days and two nights from leaving Iqanlr before getting extremely close to Yuu’s signal.

About two days into their trip, Senkyo noticed large changes in her location and adjusted his path accordingly. In the end, he consulted the map that he copied from a book back in Iqanlr and found that he was right in front of the Praqrev Forest. He dropped from his mount and tapped it on the back rhythmically, signaling it to return home.

Senkyo entered the forest, following the signal from Yuu only to find that she was engaged in battle against mysterious beasts. He wanted to help immediately, but Shiro stopped him.

“\*Onii, don’t be hasty! Get more information about the situation first. Brigan taught you a little blood magic, remember? Use it to utilize your creation element.\*”

“\*…You’re right.\*”

The creation element was his greatest weapon aside from Nanashi. Brigan made him aware of this and taught him a few tricks on how to utilize them. Unfortunately, it was difficult to control the creation elements that had left his body for a long time, so he had to make use of the blood element to spread it.

The creation element basically worked like Spirit Power but it utilizes Mana. It was quite literally made from the power of three gods and once embodied an entire world, so it was easier to look at the element as something that Senkyo could use to will anything he wanted into existence. However, Nanashi did clarify that it still had its restrictions with how weak Senkyo’s understanding of it is along with the power still locked away by the seals inside him. He asked him to specify what he meant only to be left hanging in dead air. Whatever it was, Nanashi clearly wanted Senkyo to find the answers on his own.

Senkyo conceded to Shiro, remaining hidden within the trees while preparing to discreetly attack Yuu. He couldn’t afford to use any mid-tier blood magic since they cost too much blood, but Brigan suggested that it would be fine if he used low-tier blood magic to weaponize the creation magic in his blood. When he saw the perfect time, Senkyo shot a thin crescent-shaped body of blood at Yuu. This injected new bodies of the creation element into Yuu for him to utilize while disguising it as a battle scar at the same time.

This allowed him to peek into her recent memories, making him heave a sigh of disappointment at himself. It seemed like he saw something that wasn’t too pleasant but Shiro didn’t question it. She was about to reprimand him instead, but he snapped out of his own darkness and focused on the target at hand. By this time, Yuu regrouped with her current companions, who seemed to be a Nemi and a large wolf. Shiro quickly corrected him saying that the Nemi was actually a werewolf and the same went for the other one. When she mentioned that, Senkyo realized that they were Qeajrvs, a race that often came up in Voaul Oqr’s book, the book of calamitous energy.

He reviewed his information about the qeajrvs mentally before deciding to climb down and finally reveal himself. Just in time, a mysterious beast that was akin to the werewolves rushed at Yuu’s group from the shadows. He prepared quick low-level fire magic and exploded the beast before dramatically entering the scene, with all intention of being flashy and dramatic. The three entered high alert, naturally. So, Senkyo—Eksert began.

<Hello, I’m Eksert of the Vjzasu. I was wondering if you’ve seen someone I’m looking for.>

**…………**

Eksert somehow convinced the three of his fake identity. He followed the general template that Brigan gave him as his background but he had to adlib mid-way. Specifically, when he brought up Serka—a fake person that he used in place of Yuu. It was actually Shiro’s suggestion that he use that name. He followed her immediately and only realized what it truly meant after the situation calmed down a bit later.

Right now, he was walking backward while explaining to the group his knowledge about qeajrvs. Shiro was the one watching out for his steps. The three left him when they finally arrived at their secret base where Eksert was ordered to guard. He didn’t really know what to guard against, but taking into account the enemies that they fought earlier, none of them seemed to travel by air. He set up spirit traps all over the place which snared and lulled everyone that touched the surfaces that had his traps to sleep. He created the Circuits so that they connected to one Circuit that served as the main control panel and used Interaction as its center so that Eksert would be able to activate and deactivate them partly by will. The Interaction element still meant that he had to touch the panel to manage it.

That night, Eksert noticed that one of the people from the inside was going outside. He quickly deactivated his traps and allowed him to trek through the darkness. That said, he didn’t want to leave him unguarded. It would’ve been tragic if he was caught by the enemy while he was alone, but to his surprise, he was actually planning a scheme with the enemy. Eksert didn’t make any rash movements for now but made sure to take note of their face and name, which was apparently Xeoi based on what the enemy referred to him.

**411 – Behind the Mask 2**

The next day, Eksert was allowed to enter a meeting inside their base for some reason. There were some interesting people in the meeting, including an elder who only spoke in Zeldian, which Eksert only understood through Shiro’s translation. Another one was Miss Hizli, the person Brigan mentioned as having made the plans for the device that he used. He took note of her as well as a valuable asset. They discussed the current state of their clan, their future moves against their invaders, and they even taught Eksert some valuable information, namely how their race manipulates mana and how they change through evolution.

After finishing his business inside their base, Eksert returned to the surface for guard duty. It was night when another person decided to leave the underground base and surface. With two nights in a row of people leaving their base, he wondered if they were actually trying to keep this place secret. Although, it could have been Xeoi again who was all but confirmed to be an enemy. Whoever it was, Eksert deactivated the traps all the same and awaited them from the shadows. He saw a lone girl emerge from the base. He never knew there were children inside the base, but seeing as their entire village did flee there, then having a kid or two left behind wasn’t strange. What was, though, was the fact that the child called for him.

“U-Umm…! I-Is…! Ek…sert, around…?!”

His eyes widened as the frightful child who was barely able to squeeze out her words not only called for him directly but even tried trekking into the dark forest just to find him. He continued observing the child in confusion but when he saw she tripped on a thick tree root in the dark, he hurriedly used flash strike, caught her small body, and placed her right side up. The child’s eyes were closed shut in anticipation for the impact but it never came. When she slowly opened her eyes to see what happened, she saw a large masked man with four arms kneeling right in front of her with a few orbs of light to clearly make out his alien look.

“……!!!”

Just as he expected, she wasn’t able to handle seeing a stranger at night, not to mention someone who was so different from all of the other people underground. Her panic made her trip backward. Eksert didn’t dare approach her since that might only make her panic more, but that didn’t mean he had no intention of cushioning her fall. One of the orbs of light shot past the child and dispersed, turning into green lights and wrapping around her body softly. Right when she thought she would fall for real this time, sparkling green lights cradled her. Then, the stranger in front of her wrote in the air, producing more sparkles but in the color blue.

<Are you okay? Why did you leave the base?>

“ U-Umm…”

That was all the child managed to squeak out before turning silent once more. Her mouth might have closed shut but her eyes were following the green and blue lights coming from his wind magic and solidified mana. Noticing that her interests were elsewhere, he gathered the solidified mana he used words, turned them into a snowflake, and lightly pushed it toward the child. Curious, she gingerly brought her finger up as the snowflake slowly closed in on her. When she made contact with it, the snowflake exploded into more snow that dropped from above. The pale flakes then changed into a warm shower of orange that was akin to fireworks, playing with the temperature around the child.

A smile eventually shaped on her face followed by her light giggles as she spun around trying to catch the lights. When she sent herself into a state of vertigo, she bumped into Eksert’s body and came to a halt. She looked up seeing a few words floating in the air.

<I’m Eksert. It’s nice to meet you.>

“Y…! I’m—Yirae…!”

Yirae was still a bit nervous but she really liked the sparkling lights that Eksert was showing. After a bit more time passed, she became absorbed in her play until eventually…

“A-Ah!”

Their little light show was unceremoniously disrupted by Yuu’s arrival. Eksert took this chance to fool around with her under the pretense of getting her closer to Yirae. This had been the first time they talked to each other in so long that he began feeling nostalgic. But, that didn’t keep him from noticing the nagging feeling that something was wrong with her.

He eventually learned the answer to this after Erezil arrived. She was the one who sent Yirae to the surface so that she would catch him and Yuu alone together. She apparently did this so that she could request the two of them to protect Garin. As for why she chose them specifically, it was because she knew that BOTH of them were ambassadors. She had the ability to differentiate ambassadors from other people. One of those methods included reading the mana structure of others and sensing the mana inside them. This was why she suddenly snapped at Eksert the moment Yuu lost consciousness out of nowhere.

“S-Sir Eksert!? W-What are you doing to Miss Yuu!?”

<W-What!?>

Even Eksert was so taken aback that he inadvertently blurted it aloud. Shiro did the liberty of writing down his very words, but if it weren’t for his silent mask, his cover would have been completely blown. When he asked Erezil why she was pointing the blame for Yuu’s sudden collapse on him, it was apparently because she could sense his own mana structure inside Yuu. Most of it was apparently gathered in her head the whole time, or more accurately, around her brain. Erezil meant to ask about it later. She didn’t feel any urge to hurry since nothing bad seemed to have been happening, but just now, when Erezil mentioned the ambassadors, the mana around her brain spiked in power, causing her to faint. It was only natural for her to assume it was some kind of attack from Eksert. But he knew…

It must have been his creation magic at work.

When he deduced it as such, he tried his best to calm Erezil down and explained that he didn’t know anything about that until now. Because of this, he was forced to admit that he knew Yuu in the past but she doesn’t recognize him now. She demanded she know the reason why he was hiding his identity from her, and he returned with an unusually cold tone in his words.

“There are just some things you can’t prevent from happening. This is a problem between me and Yuu; don’t put your nose where it doesn’t belong.”

Unable to say anything back to him, Eksert picked up Yuu’s unconscious body, passed Erezil, and carried her to the infirmary. There must have been many things she wanted to ask on top of what she already did, but she knew that she would be asking for trouble if she had done so. For the time being, she realized that Eksert didn’t mean to hurt Yuu so she was satisfied with just knowing that.

The reason he shot back so sharply was because of a terrible realization he found out on his part. When he consulted Nanashi about what had happened and what Erezil explained, he told him that he was unconsciously using creation magic to influence Yuu’s mind.

Now that he thought about it, the two times that he saw her in his dreams back in Iqanlr were of her being locked in shackles hoping for death. Back when he peered into Yuu’s memories before making contact with her, Yuu was knocked out in the same manner. Nanashi explained that the first two times were because he was inadvertently using creation magic to summon her soul to the dream world. It was akin to having Ryosei or Shiro Envisage Eksert’s consciousness.

In comparison to the Yuu that he talked to earlier, she was so different that you couldn’t help but think that the other was fake. While, in fact, the real Yuu, or at least her unbridled feelings, was being locked away by his own power. He thought about it and came to the conclusion that this started from the very moment he woke up in Zerid. At that time, he swore to himself that he would live to find Yuu, an emotion so powerful that the order ended up affecting the creation magic inside her body, causing it to heal and instinctively protect her body from her very self. The only reason that his will to save Yuu caused her to forget part of herself was because Yuu, herself, was a threat to her own life.

In this little incident with Erezil, the thought of her being an ambassador triggered something inside Yuu. Unlike the first two incidences which were caused by Eksert’s ineptitude, this was caused by her own mind. Something so great that it stimulated the memories that his power locked away and threatened to break free. Well… it was either that or something else entirely that involved her mind. Eksert had no way of knowing, if not for his creation magic. Although he felt bad, that didn’t stop him from using his power to peer into her dreams.

There, he found out much more about her struggles in the past… there, he found out just how important he was to her… and there, at that very moment, he found out what needed to be done.

**412 – Behind the Mask 3**

When Yuu awoke, they met up with Erezil once more where she explained the details that happened in the Ujlufi clan in the past. Never did Eksert expect that it was about a Hero who ended up living in their village, and the fact that the said Hero was not just Garin’s father, but also Akira Leo, one of his father’s colleagues and the one person who gives him monthly allowances to maintain his solo lifestyle.

From what he could recall, he also had a daughter that he used to play with Shiro when they were kids. Her name was Akira Ren but his memories of her resurfaced only recently when a 3rd seal was released from his body. This was because she was also involved with the three worlds. Curiously enough, he remembered meeting Leo’s wife when he was a child, and one thing was for certain, that person was not Garin’s mother. He couldn’t help but scream out in surprise at the implications, which was luckily suppressed by the Silent Mask, but that wasn’t something that he needed to worry about now, and set the thought aside.

What did matter was the fact that Leo maintained connections with the Ujlufi clan and even gave Erezil a vial of Eksert’s “mana.” He didn’t know if Erezil was aware that said mana was actually a sample of the creation element but this was apparently the reason he trusted him so much despite being newly acquainted.

The day of their raid finally arrived. Just like any other sensible person who was well-versed in games, Eksert placed a save point just before they left, which to him was also known as a Recall Point. He configured 10 recall crystals to connect to a single recall point and secretly set it inside the underground base. This was especially important since he knew they were walking into a trap. He didn’t have any evidence that Xeoi was an enemy so he had no choice but to catch him red-handed, and at that time, they would probably already be in the point of no return, so the recall crystals were a must.

The whole ordeal ended more or less how Eksert expected it, although admittedly, with how the leader obtained six senlrs and the fact that he needed to utilize calamitous energy to finish him off was nowhere near what he had envisioned. Ideally, he wanted to take Xeoi back with them but they didn’t have the luxury to do so.

The next morning, Eksert had a meeting with Erezil and Hizli about what had happened which proved to be fruitful. The plan was to strike them again on the next day before they recovered. At night, he found Yuu sitting by the riverside and talked with her for a bit. Seeing as he couldn’t hide the fact that he used spirit power he explained the functions of his accessories just as Brigan planned. She asked where he got them from but since he didn’t want to name his actual benefactor since it might cause her to pry deeper for information, he named Akira Leo as it was the fastest way to convince her without getting into too many details.

“Eksert, do you know something?”

*“\*What?\*”*

“I’m an Angel. I don’t mean figuratively. An actual Angel. The ones that have divine souls inside them.”

Their conversation took an unexpected turn when she revealed that she was an Angel and talked about her relationship with her own divine soul. He already knew about most of these except for the fact that she was newly recognized again. This made Nanashi tell Eksert about the fact that her divine soul would be able to use the creation element inside her body to empower herself. He wasn’t expecting this, so he was naturally at a loss for words. Thankfully, he wasn’t talking with Yuu at the time so she found nothing suspicious.

When he asked Nanashi what would happen if they used the creation element, he said that, at worst, it would break her soul. He said that it was simple for a divine soul to use a supply of creation magic in their master’s bodies but if they didn’t have a sustainable supply like Eksert did, then there was a possibility to damage their souls in exchange for extended use of creation magic. The divine soul should be able to tell if their master’s soul would still be able to handle the pressure, but knowing Yuu, there was a good chance she would still push her limits.

*“\*Hey, I have a request for you.\*”*

“A request?”

*“\*Yeah. We’re going to raid the village again tomorrow, and if possible, could you not use the powers of the divine soul?\*”*

The night ended with him giving Yuu a fair warning, but he knew deep inside that it was probably meaningless.

The morning came and the operation began with Eksert setting up the same recall point in their underground base with another 10 recall crystals connected to it, lending a D. Scout and a contact lens to Hizli so that they could monitor the situation on the surface, handing a recall point and one recall crystal to Garin and Renig since they will be the ones to break through their defenses, along with 10 R. Explosives to break through the walls. Of course, he didn’t forget to keep the defenses around the underground base online before leaving.

It was a surprise to everyone else in the room the moment they saw Xeoi wielding some kind of ungodly power. He apparently used some kind of high-tier spell on him, but that required him to breathe embers in, which Eksert’s Silent Mask prevented. Thankfully, with Nanashi’s quick thinking, he made sure to make a whole act of spontaneously combusting with his own fire magic. Against this power, Erezil made the order to send Garin, Renig, and Yuu to the Mana-Infused Spirit Core, but only Garin and Renig could escape before Yuu was bound by gravity magic. Erezil shielded her and fought Xeoi.

“I’m asking if you’re lying or not about what you said earlier. Are these chains and daggers truly a manifestation of fear and regret?”

“Yes, it’s true. Fear and regret; those are what binds you.”

During that time, Eksert found this as the perfect chance to give Yuu a little push. He didn’t actually act on it immediately since he was still reluctant to have Yuu use her divine soul, but Shiro thoroughly scolded him, saying that he was being too overprotective of her. She said that if he didn’t let her push herself now, then he would end up making the same mistake he did back in Iqanlr. As much as it pained him to say it; she was right. So, for the first time, Eksert consciously envisaged Yuu’s consciousness to the dream world once more. As for his disguise, he used the same one that Brigan used when he invaded his mind.

This quickly turned the tables on Xeoi as both Yuu and Eksert attacked him at the same time. Yuu’s power created a hellscape that gave him the perfect chance to finish off Xeoi. It was finally over… or at least it was until his body transformed into a mass of corrupted energy. He was too much for Eksert to take on… well, it was too much for him if he kept hiding his real power. Even now, all the damage he took on was a crack on his helmet but it would soon regenerate once it repairs itself with mana. He asked Nanashi if there was a way to break through a monster that was immune to magic and hard to kill with physical attacks. He said there was but the answer was the creation element.

“\*Then, I’ll do it!\*”

“\*No, you will not.\*”

“\*Don’t you dare, Onii!\*”

He suggested taking care of the problem but both Nanashi and Shiro were opposed to it. The two wanted Yuu to end this all. Both of their reasons were so that she could prove herself to be a powerful ally, but he couldn’t help but detect something more than that in Shiro’s voice. Either way, before he could even make a decision, Yuu had already used the creation element inside her body.

He watched silently as she left a trail of flame in her wake and bloomed flowers of fire on the battlefield. Terrifying, overpowering, a scene straight out of hell, there were many ways a person could describe what she was doing, but in Eksert’s eyes, there was one word that stuck out from all.

<Beautiful.>

The conflict ended and their group stayed in Ujlufi for a while to help rebuild for a few days. They also decided what to do with the group that allied themselves with Xeoi. After much discussion, they finally decided on a path they would take and moved on. On the day before they left Ujlufi, Eksert managed to talk with Yuu one last time. The creation element inside her was all but gone, used up in her final feat in the battle against Xeoi. It wasn’t much, but this was probably the last time he would be able to speak to her heart-to-heart as Eksert.

After all, three days from then would be the final day that Yuu would know him as only “Eksert.”

**413 – Haunting Past**

*“\*Welcome home, Princess of the Fallen Kingdom Nrjia, Rnriai Mszekrnlr.\*”*

Yuu couldn’t believe her eyes. Standing before her was Eksert… no, she couldn’t call him that anymore. With the face of the person she tried to abduct into Zerid staring into her very soul, there was no way she could refer to him in any other way than what she used to.

“…Yukou-senpai……It’s… you…”

With her soul crippled from the use of Senkyo’s creation element, she couldn’t invoke the emotions and the reaction that she would have if it were undamaged. Then again, the shock of this sudden revelation would have likely conjured the same reaction either way. Senkyo poured mana into his mask, retracting the object into the helmet and releasing the seal on his mouth.

“That’s right. I’ve waited so long for this day. We have so much to talk about but not much time to work with, huh? I need to get this over before Garin and Renig come looking for us. I did put up barriers to block noise and our scent so that should buy us some time… Too bad. It’s our fateful reunion, after all. But, let’s get straight to the point…”

Senkyo and Shiro gestured animatedly with all four arms as they moved back and forth talking to Yuu. Meanwhile, all she could do was leave her mouth agape with her eyes as big as saucers.

“Yuu, I despise you.”

For the first time, Yuu’s body jerked in an attempt to back away and her face flinched along with a swallow of empty air as if she were physically struck. Her eyes and lips trembled, now failing to match Senkyo’s glare. If she could move her hands and feet, she would no doubt be trying to make moves to run away, or at the very least ball her fists in frustration. The single sentence he uttered made her heart drop, replacing all of the surprise, happiness, wonder, curiosity, fear, anxiety, trepidation, melancholy, and all else with an insatiable black hole. It felt like all of the effort she had shown so far was rendered useless. A single expression of rejection, of hatred. The unbearable silence that followed made her vision cloud as tears fell down her anguished face.

“I’ve pretended for long enough, letting you enjoy your carefree life.”

“No…”

She protested.

“That’s… not true…”

But she was ignored.

“You’ve been pretty happy as of late, huh? It’s almost like you forgot everything that happened between us.”

“No… I…”

“But I couldn’t really do what I wanted with END rampaging around, so I played along with this little farce. But man, I didn’t think you were that blissful.”

“…no…!”

*\*You’re wrong!\** is what she would have wanted to say, but her voice gradually lost its power and fell into silence. Her mind was a jumble of thoughts and emotions. So much flowed in that she eventually forgot how to think straight.

“I guess that just means that it’ll make my revenge all the better!”

He said while he unsheathed his katana and placed it against her neck.

“Your life is mine.”

His eyes sharpened with the same lethality as his blade, a look that drove a knife through her heart even with his blade remaining still, making her fall into deeper despair.

“Yuu, do you know how many times you’ve wronged me?”

Senkyo asked in a cold voice.

“It wasn’t just the fact that you betrayed me, but there were also times when you were nothing but dead weight, you stole my heart and mercilessly threw it away, it wouldn’t even be an exaggeration if I say that you’re one of the main reasons I lost my previous life and dragged me into this otherworldly madness! And worst of all… just when I finally became invested in dealing with all of this insanity…”

He pressed his blade harder into Yuu’s neck, drawing a single line of blood from her.

“Princess Rnriai Mszekrnlr… I found out that you tried to bring me as a sacrifice to your grandfather Vregdra Mszekrnlr, the traitor of the Fallen Kingdom of Nrjia and the current Blood Leader of END!!!”

Yuu’s trembling figure stilled and her wilting eyes widened at his claim. It was an instinctive reaction that betrayed confusion over her misery.

“…what… are you…?”

Senkyo thought back to when Brigan asked about Yuu. He brought out two photographs from a nearby drawer. He placed one down, showing a picture of Gaeka, and told him that “Gaeka” was nothing more than an alias. The old man’s true name was Vregdra Mszekrnlr. He became royalty after his son, Hczarel Mszekrnlr, took down the corrupt king and seized the throne. But later on, he betrayed his own son and the rest of his family for END. Then, he placed down the other piece of paper, claiming that it was a photo of his granddaughter, Rnriai Mszekrnlr, the eldest daughter of the previous king of Nrjia. There, laid a picture of a person Senkyo and Shiro were very familiar with donning a frilly dress fitting the title of princess—Hisho Yuu.

“Don’t play dumb! You’ve been helping the very man who brought down your kingdom! It doesn’t matter what the reason is, but had you successfully brought me to that man, Zeus, the god of Zerid, would have suffered the same fate as me: death. Do you really think any of this is forgivable through normal means!? Answer me, Yuu!!”

“…I…! I… don’t…!”

Her mouth opened under the pressure but her mind was too muddled to express any sensible thoughts, leaving her muttering nothing but nonsense.

“Well, I guess it doesn’t matter either way.”

Senkyo brought his thumb to his mouth and bit his skin off, drawing his own blood.

“Affix the souls, attach the bodies; bridge our fates.”

The moment he uttered this line, a large symbol appeared on the floor, coating the room with its blue glow. The symbol formed a diamond in the center of a half-arc, but half of the diamond was left without light. Senkyo stood at one end of the arc while Yuu stood on the other.

“…This is…!”

A single look was all it took for Yuu to realize what Senkyo was planning. The symbol that appeared was a Spirit symbol. It was one of the things Senkyo once talked to her about in the past when he was undergoing Yoshiko’s training. At the time, she could never tell him the truth that she was familiar with the symbol of Spirit in particular. That was because it was the exact same symbol used in a certain ritual that was renowned for binding people to the will of others.

It used a chant that was akin to a high-tier spell to shape mana in the shape of a spirit symbol which is what made it so dangerous. Purposefully mingling mana with spirit power was a catastrophe waiting to happen. The reason many strayed away from the power given by this ritual is because of its infamously low success rate and devastatingly destructive cost when it failed. A single misstep would bring about a breath of ebon flames that consumed everything in the vicinity, effectively killing both participants of the ritual.

However, many were not aware of the secret that served as the very foundation of this ritual. That being, the crucial constant balance between mana and spirit power. By controlling the mana in such a way that it didn’t aggravate the flow of spirit power, no such misfortune would befall the participants. Very few people knew this secret and even more were unbeknownst to the method to make that secret a reality.

Brigan just happened to be one of those extremely scarce individuals. Considering that he was once an apprentice of a former Hero, Senkyo was able to accept it easier when he first heard of this. He was probably also the reason why Adeira had a familiar of his own. But, despite Brigan handing down this priceless knowledge to him, he didn’t particularly need it. He merely shared it on a whim, saying that he might find someone he wanted to share it with.

As for Senkyo, the fact that he was a living production factory for the refined form of the destructive power that came from the ritual’s failure was enough to make every ritual he performed beyond any that had been done in the past. Not only did he have a guaranteed chance of success, but the power that he imbued in his ritual was of peerless quality. This was the very same power that he used in the past to perform the same ritual with Shiro before he had his memories sealed… it was another piece of the past that he recovered from unlocking a third seal.

“That’s right. A ritual for a familiar pact.”

**414 – The New Canvas**

“Yuu, there’s a very good reason why your soul was crippled and lost the ability to express some emotions. Back when you fought against the rampaging Xeoi, your soul tapped into the power of the creation element that was flowing inside your body. But, you used it too much and had to sacrifice part of yourself to sustain it. In other words, if nothing changes, then you will eventually die in due time. I could have just left you alone to let you rot, but I can use you. The power you showed before with your Divine Soul was genuine, so I’ll let you live for a while longer in exchange for power.”

Senkyo showed his bleeding thumb to Yuu.

“If you drink more of my blood, your soul will slowly use the creation element inside it to repair itself. In other words, I’m the only one that can save your pathetic life! Unfortunately, I can’t begin this ritual without your consent, so I’ll force it out of you. Accept this or die those are your only options.”

He stared Yuu directly into her eyes before saying resolutely.

“Surrender.”

At that moment, the sound of clattering metal echoed in her mind. There, she saw two keychains of a bony dagger and a spear. She knew what those were. Right before she committed to using the powers of her Divine Soul, he shared a moment with Senkyo in the dream world where they vowed to start anew, carrying only the fears and regrets of their previous relationship. At that time, it was unimaginable for Senkyo to direct such pure hostility toward her, but then the single question that she needed to answer finally appeared in her head: Why?

Right before he disappeared, he left her with a single warning, “The next time we meet face to face, I will be your enemy.” Why did he say that? This treatment was probably the answer, but why did he plan on taking this attitude instead of any other? Besides that, he was also doing something very unlike him.

Unreasonable.

There have been so many times when Yuu wanted to say this but he would only continue talking and bury her meek voice under his. She knew that he was a person who avoided being unreasonable at all costs by being calm and analytical. Whenever the situation was in chaos, he would always try to control it and try to clear every misunderstanding he could. Whenever he argued, he would always give time for others to argue back and give their perspective. For a person like that to force so many unreasonable accusations at her without letting her explain her part or even give his own perspective… it was strange.

If all his accusations were true, then why was she being chased by END in the first place? How did he even know anything about her grandfather? What did me mean he was the Blood Leader? How did he find out her true identity? What was he even talking about when he said creation magic? What did he mean she was carefree? What did he mean she wronged him? What was he on about when he mentioned Zeus’ death? There were so many holes in his accusations and he didn’t bother to address a single one of them. It wasn’t that he didn’t notice. Yuu knew how intelligent Senkyo really was, so he normally wouldn’t condemn someone so sloppily.

Why? Why was this happening in the first place?

“I…”

She didn’t know. She didn’t understand why… but deep inside her, she felt like there was only a single answer. With some of her composure regained, he looked Senkyo in the eyes and answered.

“…accept.”

“Good.”

The unlit half of the diamond on the ground released the same blue light as the rest of the symbol. Then, Senkyo walked up to Yuu and brought his thumb to her mouth. Yuu reached for it and bit into his thumb, sucking up as much blood as Senkyo allowed.

“Kh…”

A light sting coursed through Senkyo’s body.

“Nnn… aah… mmhh…”

Perhaps it was because Senkyo still kept her body in stasis that she couldn’t suck his blood properly and had to clumsily lap some of the blood that spilled and sucked on his thumb. Seconds after she began doing this, Senkyo calmly pulled his thumb away but Yuu didn’t miss his eye twitch before doing so.

He then moved to the center of the diamond where he let his blood drip from his thumb along with Yuu’s blood that spilled on his blade. Just as they were about to make contact with the ground, the drops became suspended in midair. He returned to his spot earlier at the other end of the half-arc. Senkyo performed this ritual before when he formed a pact with Chi and he even read about this in his book, so there was no problem with him taking the lead for the rest of the ritual.

“Revel, the pair that appends for their weakness. Behold, this binding ritual to the God of Sky, Lightning, and Thunder. Embody our will, almighty elements of the universe!”

Two circles appeared beneath Senkyo and Yuu along with a line that connected the two. The half-arc expanded into a crescent moon with conjoined tips, swallowing Senkyo and Yuu in the hollow circle inside it. The diamond carrying the floating clot of blood moved to the center of the two, placing itself in the center of the line.

“Hear me, the Master, and her, the servant!”

The crescent moon spun as the diamond moved beneath Yuu, consuming both circles and the line that it traveled on. The blood it carried stopped right in front of Yuu’s chest and the crescent moon returned to its normal shape of a half-arc, centering on Yuu where the diamond was placed. Senkyo continued, chanting as he stood on the crescent moon.

“Our silent voices speak the truth, our wills that form the bond, let the chalice of promise be filled with our hearts!”

The elements around them began accumulating inside the clot of blood.

“Listen to our voiceless souls, the incarnation of our pure wills!”

The blood splashed to the ground, gathering and coating the outline of the diamond and the half-arc and changing the glow from blue to red.

“Forge the covenant between our pure souls!”

The crescent moon and the diamond were both reduced to particles. The remnants of the crescent moon gathered in Senkyo’s body while the diamond gathered in Yuu. The red color that bathed the room slowly disappeared and returned to its normal color. With that, Yuu’s control over her body finally returned to her. Senkyo walked up to her, placed his face right beside her ear, and said…

“Yuu, I hold your life; you are mine. Don’t think of running away now.”

Yuu responded with a nod, but there was no reluctance to it, only conviction. Senkyo pulled back and matched her gaze. There, she saw not a face of despair, but one of determination. She didn’t know why he approached her this way. She couldn’t imagine what reason he had for trying to scare and confuse her… but he was true to his word. Somewhere under his actions reflected his fears and regrets, the only thing that he carried over from their previous relationship, and it was her job to accept them like she vowed. What those reasons could be was beyond her… but she promised herself that, one day, she would find out what the reasons were.

“Oh, by the way, don’t think to yourself that you can do what Shiro can. Someone with multiple familiars weakens because the power is distributed to other familiars so I won’t let you weigh us down like you always do. I made it so that my power is dedicated to only one familiar. In other words, even though the familiar contract is supposed to empower people with a strong relationship, to you, it’s just a contract of servitude so that you can’t oppose me. Don’t let it get to your head, ‘kay?”

Senkyo walked past her and headed for the door, but then, she called out to him.

“Master…!”

The way he addressed him struck him strange and stopped to look back at her. It was just like how it was when he first reunited with Shiro with her as his familiar. The familiar contract forced the familiar to address the master like so.

“Oh, I forgot that’s a thing… Okay, Yuu, my first order to you: act like how you normally do and don’t let your freedom be restricted by magic. Decide everything with your own will. Oh, you don’t get to refuse my orders but I will let you manifest whenever you want.”

Hearing that, Yuu gave another nod and spoke.

“That’s… fine…! Let’s… get along from now on, S-Senp… Senkyo! This relationship… is fine!”

“…”

He stared into her gaze and saw the blazing passion inside her crimson eyes. He made mana from through his helmet, activating his Silent Mask and covering his face with the blue glass. Unable to speak, he replied to her using Connect with his augmented voice.

*“\*Don’t let Garin or Renig suspect anything.\*”*

“…Yes, uhmm, E-Eksert!”

Thus, the first stroke on the new canvas they called their relationship was drawn. What the two would eventually create depended on the quality of their bond and their interchanging souls.