

Chapter 23

Letting Go, the Horrors of the Past

It wasn't long before an emergency alarm began screaming and lights flashing in a small control room within the hidden base. The alarm signaled a malfunction with one of the experimental cybernetic units which was supposedly under total and constant observation.

"Oh, what's this?" a young woman with short orange hair stirred from her absent-minded reverie as the alarm sounded at her station. She distastefully slapped a button on her console to stop the blaring screech of the alarm before giving a seemingly ancient green-light display device her full attention. With her eyes devouring the information on the screen, she raised her voice for her superior to hear. "Unit #3573's systems are autonomously rebooting. There's nothing here to indicate a necessary reboot."

A tired and brackish middle-aged man whose short, midnight blue hair spiked upward from the nape of his neck and stuck out at all angles, scowled in her direction. "Send the technician in to find out what the problem is. And next time, don't bother me with non-life threatening nonsense at—what?" He looked at his watch. "2:17am? Seriously! The night shift is meant for sleeping. Didn't you know that?" He yawned and stretched his back in his uncomfortable swivel desk chair. With his arms behind his head, he closed his eyes again to get another hour's worth of sleep before the next pointless alarm went off.

The orange-haired woman, shrugged her shoulders before she reached over to a plain black telephone receiver and punched in a couple numbers.

"TI Center," answered a brisk and rather attentive sounding voice.

Clearing the bitterness from her voice, the orange-haired woman answered, "Attendant, this is Master Control."

"Oh, hi Cindy. It's me, Syd. What's up this early in the morning?"

Ignoring all pleasantries, Cindy went on to explain the situation. "We're receiving an alarm coming from Unit #3573. It appears it has restarted prematurely."

The other line was silent for a few moments. "You really like to talk formally in front of Illian, don't you? He probably can't even hear you—you know that right?"

Cindy frowned and cranked her neck, feeling the all-too familiar agitation spiking up her spine. "That matter is irrelevant to the current situation, attendant. Deactivate Unit #3573 immediately."

"Right, right. I'm on it. The errant unit in question will not set off any more alarms tonight. Do tell sleeping beauty 'nite-nite' for me, will you?"

"Acknowledged," Cindy said as she again slammed her hand down on a button on her console to end the call. *Why did everything have to be so damn perturbing?* she thought. Letting out a deep sigh, she turned her revolving chair around to look back at her commanding officer, and just as she had guessed, Illian was already snoring away.

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Within just a few minutes, fear had complete reign over the man staring at his own reflection in the mirror. The longer he stared into those distraught eyes, one human, one cybernetic, the more he felt torn in half from the memories—the images were still fuzzy in his head, but just as there came a tapping on his room door, he thought for a moment he had seen that red-haired figure before somewhere—he knew him, somehow. But like a feather precariously perched on the surface of a still sea, the thought was gone, pulled under the waves with the shifting tide.

At first he thought that if he stayed quiet, whoever was at the door would go away, but the tapping only became louder and more incessant. Sourly ripping his glance from his own reflection in the mirror, he took a few steps toward the room door. He bent down slightly to peer through the peep hole and saw a young girl with very long, light blueish-green hair pulled back in a high ponytail on the top of her head. There was something about her that made him feel as though he had met her before, that perhaps they knew each other. Maybe that's why he felt compelled to open the door without any hesitation.

“Unit #3573,” the girl called him by his designation number. “You are supposed to be asleep. Do you know what time it is?”

When the man didn't respond and only blinked blankly at her, Syd pushed him backward with a gray, gloved hand. “C'mon, I'll put you back to sleep.”

“Wait,” he interrupted her. “Where am I? What is this place?”

“What an odd thing to ask. You're in the world's first and only Cybernetic Research Facility. You willingly admitted yourself to undergo extensive and highly experimental reconstructive surgery months ago. Don't you remember?”

“No, I— I don't remember anything.”

“That's to be expected, considering how badly injured you were. We almost couldn't even get your consent to admit you to the facility. You would have died.”

“Injuries? What injuries? Please, tell me. I don't know what's going on.”

“Look, everything will become clear once you've had a good night's sleep. That's why I'm here. One of your implants that regulates sleep must have malfunctioned during the night. That's why you woke up.”

“But that doesn't explain why I can't remember anything!”

“You will remember when the time comes. Your mind and body took a huge beating. Now, c'mon, let me adjust your implants.”

“How long have I been here? You should at least tell me that.”

“Well, figuring that spring is almost half over, maybe under 6 months? You honestly don't remember anything? When you came here, why you came here...?”

“No, nothing.”

“That's probably for the best.”

“Why?”

“Listen, I don't know if they intended you to forget everything that makes you who you are, your past and what-not, but something similar happened to me, you know. I woke up here one day without the slightest clue who I was. I know what it's like to not know anything about yourself. That's why I—” The girl abruptly cut her own thought in half as she sighed as though giving up the whole ‘I'm not telling the big secret’ bit. She always preferred the crude truth, anyway, no matter how dirty it might be.

“You were caught up in some horrible explosion, it nearly killed you. We received your consent to replace your broken body with cybernetic technology, which inevitably saved your life...whilst taking away much of your humanity. I’m afraid you are more machine than human any more. That’s probably why you can’t remember anything, your mind has been damaged so severely that it’s a wonder you have any thoughts running through that metal head of yours. You are a true bio-technological success story.”

“A success, huh? How is any of this a success?” the man said, holding both of his arms—one human, one metallic—out in front of him.

“You’re still alive! All the other subjects have completely lost their human minds. They’re nothing more than programmed robots. They can’t make complete decisions on their own. But no matter how much physical muscle and bone you’ve lost, you are still thinking and experiencing the world on your own, without any preset impulses or programming. You are still able to function solely on your own.”

He knew she spoke the truth. With words, images, feelings swimming around in his head and heart, he could know that he wasn’t just a machine—he could feel it. But then just as he felt the swell of comfort calm his anxiety, a chill rain began to cool and freeze his comfort away. “But for how long? What if I wake up one day and all my thoughts are gone...?”

“That would be wrong,” the girl shook her head as though the thought had never crossed her mind. Although she couldn’t deny the possibility, that it was fundamentally possible to remotely take complete control of any given unit at the research facility, she still hoped that those who governed the place were more ethical and humane than that. “Don’t worry, there are laws that should protect you against a hostel takeover like that.”

And for the each passing second of the three-minute shut down-to-sleep mode, the man could hear the echo of just one, single word that the girl had said.

Should...

...should...

...should...

* * * * *

Infinite colors of stars expanded endlessly across the horizon of Marix’s little in between hideaway realm. Hisoka circled the little world a dozen times before setting foot on the ground once more in front of a calm yet seemingly tired Marix. As Hisoka stepped closer, his giant golden wings folded elegantly at his back, he could see the darkness seem to spread across Marix’s face and body. He would have thought Marix was simply exhausted from using that little bit of magic to save Hisoka earlier, but something told him that wasn’t the cause. Hisoka knew to trust his instincts more than that.

“What is it?” Hisoka said, his voice echoing deeply serious.

The corner of Marix’s mouth twitched in an almost non-existent smile. “Nothing. I’m just happy to see you fly like that again. The last time, you were just a little kid, flitting around like some spring chick learning how to fly.”

Hisoka frowned. “Somehow I doubt you’re just trekking down memory lane.” Hisoka took a couple more steps closer, and looked over him intently. “What’s wrong?”

He could argue and avoid the subject all day and Hisoka would never let up, Marix thought. There had been such distance between them over the decades—not of their choosing—so what better way to bridge the gap was there than to be completely open with everything...

“It’s the curse,” he admitted. “It’s slowly been turning me into a demon. Before I would only have a few ‘dark days’ every month, and even then there was medicine that would lessen the effects. But now...”

As Marix paused, Hisoka could feel the ground disappear under his feet, his heart suddenly beat faster in anticipation and worry.

“I was forbidden to ever use my magic—healing magic. If I did, the curse would become permanent.” As though suddenly winded, Marix let out a long sigh, tasting the putrid darkness that threatened to swallow him whole. “That is why I’m so tired, Hisoka. It’s this weight pressing down on me.”

Marix paused a moment. *What would change if he learned the truth, the reason for the curse? Maybe it’s better to keep the rest to myself,* Marix thought. But Marix could see it. There was determination in Hisoka’s eyes, determination to gain control over this ‘curse’, especially if he were directly or indirectly responsible for it. That is why Marix chose truth over kindness. Hisoka deserved the truth, especially since he must—

“These black eyes of mine,” Marix continued, “see through the physical plain of existence to create images of death in my mind. Everything is dead in my eyes. I see the entire circle of life in a split second, upon which only death and decay remains. When I look at you,” he said sadly, fighting to keep a steady gaze upon Hisoka’s emerald eyes, “I see a once beautiful and powerful demigod shredded to pieces, the wings torn from his back, his limbs ripped apart, blood and anguish everywhere...! And then I see nothing but empty, vacant bones rotting the ground.” As though he could fight no longer to look Hisoka in the eye, Marix turned away, his own black wings weakly draping on the ground.

With shock and pity drenching his words, Hisoka said, “You see this every time? Every time you look at someone?”

“Yes. It’s the burden I must carry,” he said more to himself than anyone else. And the very second the words escaped his mouth, his disposition cleared as though making some unstated decision. He looked back at Hisoka, whose stench of concern was nauseating. “But it can be controlled, or regulated, at the very least. You don’t need to worry. I’m fine,” he added, failing to show his strength with an attempted smile.

Hisoka shook his head defiantly. “That’s crazy. I don’t understand why you’re okay with this! You see these horrific images in front of you every day and you’re okay with that?”

“Of course, I’m not okay with it, but—”

“—Then why don’t you do something about it?”

“Because nothing *can* be done. There is no way to remove this—it is my fate, Hisoka. It can’t be changed.”

The inner fire burst wildly alive within Hisoka, anger and disbelief fueling the desire to change the unchangeable, to construct a future of his own choosing. “That’s crap,” he said, again shaking his head. He had to believe it was possible to change fate; somehow, it had to be possible.

Marix didn't anticipate Hisoka would have made the connection that he had. It had been Marix's fate to someday become the so-called 'Destroyer'...and that's why he suffered the wrath of the curse every day—because he had failed to do what he was destined to do. But now that he was no longer a threat, the fate of 'Destroyer' was unwillingly passed on to Hisoka. If fate had its way, Hisoka would become that god of destruction in the prophecy; a destroyer of worlds, the end-all being from hell.

"No, I didn't mean—" Marix began but was quickly cut off when Hisoka raised a glowing hand.

Hisoka responded with fire. Tiny little bursts of flame began to wash over his outstretched palm and swelled over the entire length of his arm, billowing and gaining in intensity. He looked into Marix's eyes and said, adamantly, "There is no purpose for this curse. You shouldn't need to suffer any more." His own eyes clearly said, *I will not stand for it any more!*

Before Marix could say anything or even move, a wave of reddish-orange fire shot out of Hisoka's palm and pierced the center of Marix's chest. The fire easily sunk through his skin with little more than a warm, comforting sensation that erased the icy darkness in his soul. Slowly, Hisoka unconsciously took two steps forward and laid his fiery hand on the spot where the flame pierced through Marix's chest.

All sense of time and place seemed to wither away, needless and unnecessary information in a blank abyss devoid of light. Here, in the center of Marix's soul, Hisoka could feel the deep, ancient scars inflicted upon Marix so long ago, many of which were caused by disappointment, despair, and anguish. Hisoka, his thoughts delving down into the core of Marix's being, could see tiny lights flickering into existence here and there which eventually took form. Some became ghastly shapes horrifically meshed together in a blob of gunk, others were demonic eyes darting to and fro as though looking for the right opportunity to attack and swallow up Hisoka's trespassing presence. Hisoka knew that this was only part of Marix's curse; a writhing soul constantly under siege by the darkest of things.

Further down, Hisoka sensed a slightly warm breath of air that seemed to be coming from such an insignificant light source in a sea of black. Hisoka willed his mind—and his fire—toward that miniscule speck of light in the dark, lending it his warmth and strength. The speck of light seemed overwhelmed with the sudden influx of energy, flickering like a candle in the wind and nearly extinguishing itself in a puff of smoke, but slowly the light began to grow as it allowed Hisoka's fire past its well-guarded walls...and there within Hisoka understood all.

You are an abomination! The Destroyer of Heaven! How dare you, puny little insect, defile the beauty—the purity—of this place!

You should not exist.

It no longer matters. The Goddess has banished him for his traitorous ambitions. All that is left is the final incantations.

Are you ready, boy? You will never again see things as you do now. You will never again believe in hope and prosperity.

Everyone will spit upon you.

They hate you.

Your glorious form of a demigod is no more, for you are the darkest of all demons.

*That is your punishment. The Council of Three has decided.
Go now, and suffer in agony, for the rest of your days...*

So that's what they had done. That's why Marix suddenly disappeared all those years ago. Hisoka could remember it—in Aurien's memories. He was six or seven when the slender yet well-toned form of Marix, with his immaculately white wings, disappeared from heaven and left him alone to be raised by government officials because of an absent Goddess mother. Although he never knew what really happened to Marix—and for all he knew, his older brother simply got sick of hanging around with a little kid all the time and went out on his own grand adventures, exploring never-before reached stretches of heaven—he never once doubted that Marix was still out there, somewhere.

It was difficult growing up as the son of the Goddess, second in line to rule over Heaven. They were still prone to the scrutiny of council members, ministers, and of course, common folk; people looking in from the outside with little knowledge of the facts. There were pressures to learn and master magic by the age of four in order to enter into further grueling studies of battle tactics, strategy, and law by the age of nine. Once the prince reached ten years of age, he was expected to pass the first preliminary level of The Battles: The coming of age Arena Battles. Although the first preliminary round wasn't viewed as being official, it was still paramount that every descendant of the royal family must pass in order to be most importantly of all—respected.

Marix, unlike Aurien, completed all expected tasks by the required age. Aurien, on the other hand, was more interested in things “frivolous” and “petty”, things that “didn't matter.” And thusly, hardly anyone gave *respect* to the little prince.

Hisoka could remember as a child, he looked up to and admired his older brother. Marix had always been there when he needed him. He had been the one to catch him during his first flight—and subsequent fall—even though he had caused so much trouble for Marix; tickling his feet with a ‘baby’ feather as he slept beneath a golden Ambrose tree; depositing little sticky-seeds on his back without him realizing it—the usual little kid antics and pranks. But most of all, Hisoka could remember riding tall on Marix's shoulders as he walked down a stony path at nightfall to show Hisoka what a shooting Soul Star looked like for the first time.

“There, look!” Marix had said, pointing one hand to the heavens above while holding on to the child Aurien with the other.

“Uwaa!” was all an excited Aurien could say.

As they continued down the path, Aurien began wondering as more and more Soul Stars shot across the sky in an array of different colors, although most shone a harmonious blue hue. “Hey, Marix?”

“Yeah?”

“Where do the stars go?” Aurien had asked.

Curiously, Marix cranked his head, uncertain he knew the answer. “That's a good question, Kid,” he said, calling Aurien by his blunt yet affectionate pet-name.

“If we're already on top of the world,” Aurien had said, staring wonder-eyed into the sky, “then where are they going? Shouldn't they be falling down here?”

“Good point,” Marix admitted. He had honestly never thought about it before; he merely looked at the stars as they looked: bright, beautiful lights streaking across the sky. Why would there be any hidden meaning in a shooting Soul Star? Then again, Marix knew that his little brother was a bit of a dreamer, always off running around, looking at things that had no meaning, that no one else bothered to look at or think about. If it doesn’t serve a specific purpose, then what’s the point? many people thought, himself included, Marix thought shamefully. Then, Marix whisked Aurien from his shoulders and plopped him down on the cold path in front of him and said, smiling, “You’re weird, you know that?”

Aurien returned Marix’s gaze with a perplexed look, not knowing whether his brother was being serious or funny.

“A star’s just a star, Kid,” Marix added as he returned his longing gaze upon the sky. “Nothing mystical about it.”

Aurien scrunched up his face, visibly upset yet not exactly angry. “That’s not what Dad says.”

Marix threw back his head as though he should have seen that one coming. “And didn’t he say that some waterhole in a pit somewhere is the long-forgotten gateway to a higher realm? C’mon! People have got to know when to stop dreaming.”

Okay, now he was angry. Aurien irately turned and ran a short distance ahead, not wanting to show exactly how much Marix’s words had stung. He wanted to believe in those things no one could quite understand, he wanted to understand those things, know them from the inside and out—and dreaming made it all possible. He was the one, after all, who found out that the little red bugs crawling up the Ambrose tree had excellent healing properties when directly applied to a sore or wound; but typically no one even bothered to examine them, assuming nothing good could come from an insect.

High above them a few scattered Soul Stars streaked across the sky, destination unknown. Then as suddenly as they appeared they came to an abrupt end, leaving the sky ordinarily empty.

Marix stood alone on the path for a few moments before calling out to his brother. “Well, looks like it’s done.” Aurien, however, did not respond, nor did he turn around when Marix stepped closer to place an apologetic hand on his shoulder. It was as though Aurien’s mind was far, far away in the cloudless sky.

He’d probably stay out here all night if I let him, Marix thought.

Ignoring all complaints, Marix grabbed Aurien around the waist, hoisted him over his shoulder, and began walking back down the path toward home.

Shared memory. Hisoka felt many layers of Marix’s memory melt into his own existence, bestowing him complete knowledge and understanding of the other’s thoughts and feelings. He knew that Marix never meant to shatter Aurien’s dreams, his desire to find meaning in nothing, that night. He also knew that Marix held some deep-rooted doubts and concerns about their father’s irrational path toward a ‘spiritual’ nowhere. Hisoka also learned that their father may not have been entirely insane in his search for truth.

Suddenly, a spark of frightful doubt ignited in his soul.

And then came the voice...a deep, raspy voice that reverberated against the vacant walls of the red fog surrounding him. The voice was so loud and deep that there

could have been a billion voices amalgamating together to form one resilient voice resounding endlessly in Hisoka's mind.

Do you really think you can win? Do you even know what you're fighting for? After all this time, has anything really changed?

It was Akuma's voice.

I thought maybe you would have learned your lesson the first time, that there is nothing you can do to avoid destiny—fate!

The voice of Hisoka's own personal demon echoed clearly in his mind and the still raw cut on his neck ached at the thought that maybe, just maybe, the demon never completely went away.

You can avoid me just as easily as you can avoid yourself. I am you. There's no way around it.

Hisoka tried to argue, tried to convince himself that hearing the demon's voice again didn't bother him—he wouldn't let it bother him.

Ignoring me as usual, eh? Fine. But you know? What if he isn't as strong? What if your memories lead to his final end?

Impossible. It couldn't be done. A mere memory couldn't kill; it had no power, no will of its own.

Are you willing to tempt fate? After I killed you?

"You killed yourself," Hisoka finally broke the silence. Although, as he gave into the memories, the voice, the darkness—the black nothingness within Marix's soul swirled and was filled with an eerie red fog that nearly blotted out all sight of the tiny fire Hisoka had been trying to nurture and keep alive. If Hisoka couldn't see much before, to his horror, he could now see all too clearly.

A single, demonic figure floated in the abyss between Hisoka and Marix's cursed and tormented soul. Purple horns twisted out of his skull between wiry wisps of ebony, black hair; nearly a dozen leathery, black wings slithered up and down at his back. The demon's fingertips curled sharply with long, crimson claws that incessantly scraped at the thick air as though longing to touch its delicate softness—so he could rip it apart. And his eyes, Hisoka noticed, resembled nothing like what he remembered of Akuma, who had deep red eyes of hatred. This figure, on the other hand, had black eyes, gooey and thick like tar. And that's exactly what those eyes wanted to do, to pull in its victim, hold him, and eventually drown him in the depths of despair. These were the eyes of pure evil.

Ah, little child, you will never learn. There is no escape from that which you face. You are destined to die!

Although this demon appeared significantly different from Akuma, the message was the same. It would be so easy to buckle under the weight of fate on his shoulders, crushing his bones and extinguishing his newly found power, but Hisoka knew that was just where he had failed the last time—giving in to despair and futility.

The flow of memories both his own and Marix's washed over his mind and attempted to drag him down into the abyss. Nonetheless, Hisoka fought against the sorrowful memories, the demonic imagery; and detonated his reality within Marix's soul, leaving no corner untouched by his healing light.

Gradually, as the seconds ticked by in the world of tangible reality, Marix's darkened red hair seemed to lighten almost to the same shade as Hisoka's, his black and

gold eyes bleached and were once again a deep, heavenly shade of blue, even his grayish-black skin seemed to glow with the purifying light of the flame. Almost every trace of the dark and evil curse that tormented him for so long was gone.

And he could see once more.

Looking up at Hisoka in shock and amazement, tears gathering in his eyes, a single, simple word slipped from Marix's mouth, "How..?"

* * * * *

It was the middle of the night and she was wide awake. Not even an inch of her body was tired or sleepy from the crazy day that was now, thankfully, in the past. Although, with its seamless passing, came a curiously deep and heavy feeling in the base of her gut, and the horror of knowing exactly what it was yet not wanting to admit it.

She stood in front of a small mirror in an almost non-existent bathroom of Marix's little hut, staring at her own reflection, and wondered when the last time she looked into her own eyes and really saw through them, down deep into the ancient, tormented soul within. Never perhaps. But as she gazed upon her miraculously young face, as she pressed the chilled razor against her left wrist, she wondered how many times it would take this time to finish it. She had so many friends, so many people who cared for her in the past, and people she cared for, too; yet none of that seemed to matter. None of that seemed to be able to blot out the pain, to stop the voices—her voice—in her head from crying out:

I don't want to be here.

I don't want to be here.

I don't want to be here.

I don't want to be...

I don't want...

I...

Suddenly someone snuck up from behind and smacked the razor from her hand, firmly, almost painfully, gripping and holding both of her arms.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Xein yelled, frantic.

"I—I wasn't—" Kaori, her mask frozen, out of reach on the floor, couldn't answer.

"Yeah, right. You just thought it might feel neat to slit your wrists, is that it?"

"No, of course not, I—"

"What's wrong with you? Why turn suicidal all of a sudden, huh? Especially right after rescuing Hisoka. I thought you—"

"I'm not—"

"Kaori, it's too late to deny it. I caught you, it's done. Now you have to tell me what's going on."

She knew why. She knew why all of this happened. She knew the role she had played in forging this time here—now—and she wished she could forget the mistake she had made to cause it all. How could she tell anyone, especially now? Why after all these thousands of years, why let someone in now...?

She knew the answer why all too well.

“Xeiu, I’m sorry. I’ve been lying to you, to everyone,” Kaori began, hardly aware of the words coming out of her own mouth. She could only feel them, like little snakes squirming to get free. “My name isn’t Kaori.”

Xein snorted as though he could care less whatever the hell her name was. It could be Asphalt for all he cared. It wouldn’t change any—

“My real name is Youko, from Springbrook.”

“Wait, what?”

“From Springbrook, you know, in all the stories... ‘The Footsteps of God.’”

“Youko from Springbrook. Youko the Godslayer? Like as in *the* Godslayer Youko who was cursed for killing a god and has since aimlessly roamed the world for all eternity, Youko?”

The way he put it made it seem so ridiculous, so...fictitious. And yet it was true. With a slight twinkle of her usual sense of humor, she said, “Well, I wouldn’t say ‘aimlessly’...”

“You’re shittin’ me,” Xein said, again snorting as he let go of her arms as though subconsciously frightened of her—as frightened as Xein could get, perhaps.

Kaori continued to nod with growing frustration. She knew she couldn’t expect him to believe her. Who would? But she could show him, show him the curse in action and then he would have to believe her. He would have the proof of her crazy words.

She quickly reached into the sink for the razor that Xein had slapped out of her hand. “I wasn’t trying to kill myself before, Xein. I was trying to see if I was still cursed or not.”

Blinking as though he was staring down at a timed math quiz he had no idea how to answer let alone make sense of, Xein froze, for the first time in his life, unable to do or say anything as Kaori again placed the razor against her fragile skin a good distance up her forearm. With a slight flick of the razor, Kaori opened a small gash from which warm blood quickly poured out. Xein gasped but again could do nothing but stare at the blood dripping down her arm.

A few moments later, Kaori sighed with relief mingled with finite sorrow. In that instant, as her blood continued to pour from the cut and refused to stop, she got her answer.

“It’s over,” she said. “The curse... it’s been lifted.”

Xein simply shook his head. For all the time they had spent together, he had never seen or even suspected Kaori would do something as insane as this, to proclaim such absolutely ridiculous ideas. Immortality? No. Although his own cells and DNA had been manipulated to create a new form of human—one who can transform into a wolfman—he found it very unlikely that humanity would ever find the key to live forever.

“C’mon,” he said softly as he took out a small piece of cloth from inside his black jacket and spread it tightly across Kaori’s arm, pressing hard. “We all bleed, Kaori. I think we figure that out in kindergarten by tripping and falling over almost everything.”

Again Kaori shook her head. “Xeiu, you’d be surprised how long I’ve been around. No matter what happens to me, I cannot die. That was my curse. For centuries, Xeiu, I’ve been wandering around...in search for the end. And finally, it’s found me.”

“What are you talking about?” Xein’s face crunched up, irritated.

Then suddenly like lightning struck her into action, Kaori desperately looked into his eyes. “Listen to me! If the curse is gone, I don’t know how much longer...!” Like a child who had been searching day and night for his favorite and was finally told exactly where to find it, Kaori was suddenly afraid to grasp what she had been looking for, looking for the end. Maybe it would grab a hold of her first. She had finally reached the limit of her knowledge. Only the unknown stretched itself out in front of her.

With a few calm moments of thought, Kaori looked into Xein’s wolfish eyes and said, “There’s some place I need to go. Can you trust me, please, to go alone.”

Her last word struck a rather uneasy cord with him, but Xein doubted he could argue with her much longer. She’d wiggle out of his grasp somehow. “At least tell me where you’re going.”

She simply smiled. “To visit an old friend.”

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“How is this possible?” Marix whispered as Hisoka took his hand from Marix’s chest.

Marix could still feel the heat that it left imprinted there. Suddenly feeling as though everything made perfect sense, that all missing pieces to this puzzle were finally discovered and rightfully put back in place, Marix gazed upon the never-before-seen sight of Hisoka standing in front of him. The world he had seen for such a long time had been dark and decaying, the people in it he saw were on the verge of death, but now—? It was all gone, all of the dark shadows, all of the pain and sorrow was swept away by the magnitude of Hisoka’s resolve and determination. Although the doubt and fear may still exist to some degree, they could no longer hold his soul hostage. That is how clearly it seemed, how absolutely his fate now rest with Hisoka. Marix had finally witnessed first hand the ultimate power Hisoka readily had at his command.

And it sent a frightful chill through his newly restored form.

When Marix continued to stare without a word, Hisoka took a deep breath as though preparing for something. “How do you feel?”

Marix reassuringly shook his head. “Like me again,” he said with an unintentional lightness to his words. Perhaps it was hope that lifted him up.

“Good,” Hisoka said, nodding. If Hisoka was going to add anything to his words, he made no attempt to do so. He merely stood standing, looking at Marix, almost as though waiting for him to say something, maybe something about those images, those voices that sprang to life within that dark place.

It was that glint of disappointment that Marix saw in Hisoka’s eyes that brought him to speak. “What is it?”

Hisoka simply shook his head and swallowed, averting his gaze for a brief moment. When he again returned them to Marix, he added, “Seems like I couldn’t fix everything.”

Hisoka shifted his line of sight to Marix’s wings. Following his gaze, Marix unfurled them entirely, stretching his great wings in front of his body to nearly encompass both he and Hisoka in a shroud of black feathers. Now he knew what Hisoka had meant. Although his soul and body was free from the rotten stain of the curse, his

once beautiful white wings were still as dark as night. Not even the destined Destroyer of Heaven could change that.

With a hand gently reaching out to touch part of his left wing, Marix nodded as though willing himself to accept it and move on. The next moment he returned his wings to their resting position behind his back and smiled. “I guess we can’t have it all, huh, Kid?”

“I guess not,” Hisoka grinned.

“I can’t thank you enough, Hisoka,” Marix said, his face suddenly drawn again.

Through the seriousness of the moment, with fate staring him in the face, Hisoka continued to smile, “What’s a brother to do? Somebody has to put a stop to this madness.”

Marix nodded. “Perhaps.” Marix then let out a tired sigh, his bright, blue eyes glinting in the starlight. “You’ve grown strong, little brother. Maybe you have what it takes to crush the fate I passed on to you.”

Although the smile on Hisoka’s face never completely vanished, a wave of dread washed across his face. “Whoever said I believed in fate?” he said, a translucent, daring smirk accenting his words. “Not everything has been determined. Yet.”

Brimming with pride, Marix said, “Spoken like a true god.”

Hisoka nodded in acknowledgement, his smile glowing as brightly as his wings of gold. “We have a lot to talk about and decide,” he said, seriously. “But before that, there’s some place I need to go—just for a little while.”

Marix tilted his head backward, knowingly. “Are you sure that’s wise? There’s no guarantee that Gedeon can’t track us once we cross into your world. He could be on you within seconds.”

Either Hisoka wasn’t worried about it, or he didn’t care. “It’s alright. I can handle him. Watch after the others while I’m gone, will you?”

“Of course,” Marix nodded.

As Hisoka turned his back on his elder brother, he raised a still glowing red hand and waved it in the air, opening a clearly rectangular door into another reality.

“And Hisoka,” Marix called after him. “Be careful.”

* * * * *

Everything had seemingly been going exactly as planned. Granted, Gedeon hadn’t planned Aurien to awaken so suddenly. He had hoped he could have remained in command of the demigod’s powers a little longer, long enough to scar this beloved world of his. Feeling Aurien’s complete power within his grasp was almost too much for words to show how exhilarating it was to behold. As a demigod, Gedeon had been imbued with great power from his ‘birth,’ but never had he experienced such an abundance of power flowing through his body and soul, never felt such piercing desire for more—the vital *need* for more power! It nearly took every ounce of his willpower to soothe the incessant allure of what could be, of how magnificent he could become! *But never mind that now*, he told himself. *Things will soon fall even more perfectly into place.*

Starting with toying with *the key*.

Sitting up regally in his throne made of a dark and hallow metal, Gedeon raised his head as he set his gaze upon the midnight stars that were clearly visible through the

ceiling's crystal dome. Dawn would come all too soon to conclude the night, to beget the morning by executing this pleasant calm of darkness, and he secretly despised it for that one uncomplicated reason. From this, his most favorite room in the entire facility, Gedeon sat all-powerful, like the true god he was to become; commanding, molding, devouring. Although it was just the middle of the night, Gedeon longed to put his plan further into motion.

He spoke to no one, "Instruct Lt. Ijiwaru and Unit #3573 to come before me immediately."

Only a computer sensor beeped in response, apparently listening eagerly to his commands. Without a single word or phrase command that could have been considered a trigger for the computer to know when to listen and when to remain silent, the computer seemed to understand when it was being spoken to, although it gave no indication whether or not it would comply. Perhaps it had no other choice but to comply.

Within a few minutes, the elevator-like doors into Gedeon's open-sky throne room opened with a soft hiss and subsequent sigh, expelling some sort of pressurized air between the two spaces inside and out. Stepping within the throne room appeared the two figures of which Gedeon had requested to see. The first to set foot down the distant, open space of the hall was a cybernetically enhanced individual (often referred to as "Dogs" from the horribly mispronounced Japanese word *dougu* meaning "tool") enrolled in one of the many experimental institutes of the facility. The Dog's natural green hair hung low over the cybernetic side of his face, hiding the eerie glow from his very unnatural eye. Although Dogs could still be considered human, there were many aspects about them that lacked the traditional classification of a human. Many didn't eat, many lost the desire for human pleasures, and the mind of others became nothing but empty, unthinking space relying only on computations and scientific logic. More often than not if a Dog's physical enhancements such as new mechanical limbs or artificial voice didn't give them away at first glance, their actions certainly did, like their stiff and unwavering gait. This particular Dog, however, exuded *every* inhuman aspect consistent with a Dog.

Falling slightly behind the Dog tread a very unpleasant—and nervous?—Kataki. He never once looked up to meet Gedeon's gaze for fear of becoming subservient once again, Gedeon thought. Kataki had quickly changed into the expected black and gray uniform of the facility, one of the many things he detested purely because he was made to do it. He had never been one to listen to commands—he had always been the one giving them. With his head held low and to the side, he followed closely behind Unit #3573 until they came within a proper distance from their leader.

"Unit #3573 reporting, sir," the Dog said, his monotone voice swallowed by the vacant space of the throne room. It was almost magical how such a large and open space seemed to neutralize all sound.

"Thank you for coming so promptly, Unit," Gedeon addressed the green-haired cyborg before turning his tormenting gaze to Kataki. "And you, too, *Lieutenant*."

Kataki flinched at the sound of Gedeon's voice as he said the word. He knew the title meant nothing. It was just another way for the demigod to assert his ever-reaching influence and power while striking down those less fortunate.

Waiting a few beats to see if Kataki would make any sort of response, Gedeon continued, "I would like you two to take a couple other Units and retrieve my brother. There is something that we must discuss."

“Your brother?” Kataki said at last, breaking his uncomfortable silence. His eyes were now attempting to pierce through Gedeon’s eyes to find a hidden motive. “You mean Hisoka? Isn’t he dead by now?”

With a bitter flash in his cold eyes, Gedeon said, “Unfortunately, no. It’s become clear that mere death is not enough to stop him. I must talk with him, find his weakness. I believe this,” he said, tossing Kataki a small, cloth bag with something hard inside, “will help you locate him.”

Pulling the sides of the bag open, Kataki reached a hand inside and pulled out the object. *How in the hell is this going to help find him?* Kataki thought. In his one human hand, Kataki held a small red jewel encased in what appeared to be a crystal ball. It appeared to be nothing but some worthless piece of jewelry.

“Don’t worry,” Gedeon answered Kataki’s unspoken query. “Our blood has a way of finding its way home. And before you depart, I’d like a specialist to take one last look at your accompanying Master Unit. According to reports, his systems activated automatically during its sleep cycle.”

Kataki’s tongue angrily clicked in his mouth. Just what he needed, a faulty Unit. “How long is that going to take?”

“Not to worry,” Gedeon said, the grin in the corner of his mouth hard to miss. “I took the liberty to call for the specialist before I summoned you. She ought to arrive any mo—”

Before Gedeon could finish his sentence, the two double doors in the back of the hall hissed open, revealing a slender figure wearing the same customary facility colors of black and gray. The only difference between Kataki’s uniform and this newcomer was that hers was adorned with a band of gold around the high collar at her neck, and of course the matching gray and black skirt. The only other color to contrast the bleak colors of the uniform was her long blueish-green hair which was pulled tightly back and a tall ponytail. At her side she carried a compact black shoulder bag.

“Ah, there she is,” Gedeon said, his gaze rising above and beyond the two before him. Kataki took a slight step backward to look behind.

His heart stopped.

The instant Kataki set his eyes upon the figure of the girl walking toward them, he could only think of her—Sakura! It was her, he was sure of it. This girl had the same hair, and as she approached more closely, he could see she had the same eyes, too. Not only that, but she had the same light-stepping, tiny feet. Even the tiny mid-height heels this girl wore was the same Sakura used to wear on special occasions. *It has to be her,* Kataki thought. *She could be no one else!*

As the girl came to a stop beside a staring Gedeon and empty-minded Unit, she bent herself over in a respectful bow to Gedeon. Straightening her back once more, she spoke in a firm yet soft voice, “Engineer 497, Syd reporting, sir.”

“Excellent,” Gedeon replied quickly, hardly giving the girl a single look. All his attention was soaking up Kataki’s confusion and disbelief. “I’d like you to give this Unit one more glance over before sending him out on assignment.” Finally satisfied with watching Kataki struggle with the sight of this girl, Gedeon set his piercing gaze upon the engineer for the first time since she entered the hall. “How long will diagnostics take?”

The girl shook her head. “Not long, sir. I actually gave him a complete scan a few hours ago. I could sweep him through a few simpler scans to check for any abnormalities. If I do that, sir, I can have him ready for duty in under ten minutes.”

Gedeon smiled most boyishly coy. “Wonderful. By all means, you may conduct these scans where you stand. I assume you’ve brought with you the necessary equipment.”

“Yes, sir, I have everything I need here,” she patted the small bag hanging over her shoulder.

“As expected,” Gedeon commended the girl. “In the meanwhile, I’d like to have one last word with my Agent.”

The girl nodded politely before unzipping the bag to begin her work.

“Agent,” Gedeon called upon Katakai to step nearer with every intention of sounding patronizing.

With a few slow and unsettling steps toward Gedeon’s side, Katakai never once took his gaze from the girl now attending to the green-haired Unit.

“What do you think of the Engineer?” Gedeon said in such a tone that one might have thought the two were the best of friends. “Beautiful, isn’t she?”

Bearing his teeth, it took everything Katakai had to keep himself from strangling Gedeon right then and there. He didn’t want to—he couldn’t believe what he was seeing was true. “She is dead. I *killed* her.”

“You speak as though that’s what you wanted. But that wouldn’t be the truth, would it? It was an accident, Katakai; an accident because she got in the way of your conquest, your revenge.” Gedeon paused for a moment to allow Katakai to say something, although when it appeared as though he had suddenly lost the ability to speak, Gedeon continued. “It’s unfortunate you must discover the truth this way, but... I’m afraid the girl you’re thinking of is neither dead nor has she ever been *your* sister.”

That’s right, Katakai thought. He had almost forgotten. It had been such a long time ago. Sakura was never his real sister to begin with because he was adopted. Why her parents ever adopted him, he’d never know; it wasn’t like they actually loved him or anything. They always treated him like trash, like the poor street kid down the block rather than a son. Sakura, on the other hand, they loved; loved more than anything. Maybe that’s why they had to die.

“And now,” Gedeon added, allowing his words to merge with Katakai’s muddled thoughts, “*she* is why you will do exactly what I tell you.”

* * * * *

Nothing about standing in front of that slab of stone seemed real. The words engraved upon it lost all meaning as they seemingly skipped across its surface like in some ritualistic dance, fragments of words and letters forming swords and knives that pierced through Hisoka’s eyes.

Kenage Aiko
Beloved Wife, Mother, Sister, Friend.

Simply gazing upon that one, solitary hunk of rock in the ground caused tears to well up within himself, but they would never find release. Instead, they would be trapped forever deep within his crudely-stitched together soul. As Hisoka reached out a steady hand to gently rest upon the stone, he could almost hear her voice, see her face in front of him. What was she trying to say? That she forgave him? That she only wanted the best for him, to protect him, keep him safe...? Why? Why did she have to die—his own mother? What made him *so* important that she would be willing to protect him with her life? Shaking his head bitterly, Hisoka understood that maybe he would never understand; for only god knew those answers.

Taking his hand from the cold grave, Hisoka stood tall for a few more beats and sighed as though willing order to take control of the chaos in his heart. His gloriously golden wings were missing from his broad back, magically erased for easy mobility in the human world. The last thing he needed was for commoners to spy their legendary god walking down the street. If anyone should see him, he would appear as he used to be—human.

Then quietly creeping up behind came the echo of soft footsteps. He could have turned his head to see who was approaching, but it didn't matter. Nothing seemed to matter any more.

"I thought I'd find you here."

Finally turning to glance behind, Hisoka saw a familiar face. It was Kaori.

"You can't dwell on the things you cannot change, Hisoka," she added with a gentle smile.

Hisoka could only shake his head in response. "Maybe not, but I should have been able to do something. She was always there for me, and this is how I repay her?"

"It wasn't your fault."

"Of course it was my fault," he said, finally turning his head to glance at Kaori. How remarkably old she looked when she wasn't smiling, he thought. The serious face she wore now was so unfamiliar, Hisoka nearly lost his train of thought. But then he shook his head again as he glanced back down at his mother's grave. "Maybe you're right. Maybe there wasn't anything I could have done to spare her life, but I'll be *damned* if I let it happen again."

Kaori didn't need to see the flames rising up within his eyes to know he meant every word. And now that he was whole, the life, memories, and power of the ancient dragon god Aurien were again at his command, he could very easily get whatever he wanted. He was now this world's god of creation. Kaori would be very surprised if there was anyone or anything that could best him now. The only thing of Aurien's he didn't have, she was afraid to admit, was his near-immortal life span; he was still partly human, a *demigod*.

"Stop it," Kaori said at last. "You know she wouldn't want you to think that way."

After what felt like an eternity, a slight grin sprang across his soft, young face. "Guilt is one of the very few things we *can* live without.' That's something she'd say, isn't it?"

Kaori nodded, fondly remembering Aiko, Hisoka's mother, long before he was even born. They were friends in high school, who unfortunately went their separate ways in college, but then reconnected a few years later because of her husband's work at the

PCM complex. By that time, though, Hisoka was already two years old. Yet, still just a little baby, Kaori saw the fire burning in Hisoka's eyes—and she knew exactly who he was. After so many years, so many generations of friends and loved ones ageing and dying, Kaori continued to live...even when she wanted to give up and end it all, she still continued to live. It was her gift. It was her curse.

But now Hisoka—Aurien—was whole again. Her soul instantly felt ten hundred times lighter, even though her body felt ten hundred years older. The curse had been lifted, she knew, but she could only guess that along with it also went her immortality. She wanted to tell Hisoka, to explain to him how she knew everything she knew; but most importantly, she wanted—no, she *needed* his forgiveness. All of her pain and suffering over these thousands of years was nothing compared to what she inflicted on him. She was the one responsible for ripping apart his soul, fragmenting it beyond complete repair. She was the one responsible for his death—the death of a god! And heaven had every right to curse her for it.

But that wasn't the end of the destruction she had caused. Sydirna, Kaori's little sister, was unable to function after losing Aurien and soon gave up her own soul to the gods. No one ever knew the pain Kaori carried with her over the years, such ancient and unrelenting pain, because of her one true gift from god—her smile. With that weapon, she could hide any shred of pain, any lingering discomfort from the world around her. She remained strong with that weapon by her side at all times, but now she felt as though she had somehow misplaced it or forgotten how to wield it properly. She suddenly felt as though all her emotions were seeping out of her sea-green eyes, exposing all of her secrets. What would she do if Hisoka found out the truth? What would *he* do?

"Guilt is the razor we unwittingly place against our own throats," she whispered under her breath, inaudible to anyone's ears but her own.

Kaori felt like the two of them had been standing in silence for such a long time before Hisoka turned his back on his mother's grave, saying, "Why'd you come all the way over here? It's enough of a risk that I came back here, but you...?"

What a curious thing to say, Kaori thought. He was right, with Gedeon lurking somewhere out there, always watching for an easy point of attack, it was dangerous for Hisoka to come back to his hometown in Japan as opposed to the in-the-middle-of-literally-nowhere safe haven of Marix' abode. At least there they were out of Gedeon's reach and could rest up until their next move. There was so much to plan, so much to figure out. But Kaori knew how impatient Hisoka was—Aurien had been the same.

"I want this demon out of me!" Aurien said, his hands grasping handfuls of hair at the top of his head. "I can't take it any more!"

"Youko, please," Sydirna, her regal blue eyes almost glowing in the dark, gently took her sister's hand. "Can't you see he's suffering?"

"Of course, I can see that," Youko rebutted. "It still can't be done."

"But you're the town's best exorcist. If it's a demon that's tormenting him, you can get rid of it, can't you?"

"You said it yourself," Youko said, "'if it's a demon'."

"What else would it be?" Sydirna shrugged her shoulders.

Youko simply shook her head. "You really have no idea. He is not human. He isn't like us. If I perform this human ritual on him, who knows what it might do!"

“Maybe she’s right,” Aurien spoke at last. His hands now seemingly rested calmly by his sides, but he could do little to hide the horror in his eyes, the cold sweat still dripping down his face. “I can’t ask this of you. We still don’t know exactly what’s wrong with me.”

“But if she can help—” Sydirna said desperately.

“No,” Aurien continued. “I did this to myself. I can’t ask this of you.”

It wasn’t a false memory no matter how distant and wrong it felt. Aurien had said it then... what if he spoke literally about the curse. What if it was a sort of self-preservation mechanism built into a god’s soul that activates entirely on its own to insure its eventual repair. Kaori was the one who inevitably destroyed Aurien’s soul, and she was the one to send the final fragment home. What if Aurien needed Kaori specifically to atone for her sin—for killing a god—and that was the purpose of the curse: to keep her alive until she had the chance to right her wrong?

Her head swimming, Kaori never noticed Hisoka’s sudden stiffening demeanor, never noticed four figures standing on either side of her, never noticed the fifth slip a knife past her shoulder, pressing it against her neck until it was much too late.

“It’s good to see you again, Hisoka. I knew you wouldn’t stay dead for too long.”

Hisoka spat in between clenched teeth, “Kataki, let her go.” Anger flared in his eyes as he looked at the group, mostly due to his failure to see them coming in time to react. Kataki held on to Kaori’s one shoulder with his metallic hand while his human hand grasped and held a sharp knife at Kaori’s throat. The four other men taking up the rear were much more frightening looking with their half metal faces or metallic appendages or glowing eyes. With one glance, it was obvious that they were different, parts of their humanity stolen. Then as Hisoka looked them over, he noticed one in the back with green hair looked awfully familiar.

“Now why would I do that, hm? The second I let her go, you stop listening to me. Relax, this won’t take long.”

There was an odd sound to Kataki’s voice, an eerie calm as though something was missing—the anger and hatred that once fueled his actions was gone. So then why—?

“He wants to see you,” Kataki said. “I was sent to bring you to meet with him.”

“You work for Gedeon now?” Hisoka said, somewhat disbelieving.

“Uh, have you forgotten? I have been for some time now. You remember this, don’t you?” Slowly, with one arm firmly holding on to the knife pressed against Kaori’s neck, Kataki proudly rose his other metallic weapon of an arm. “I never thought you’d forget this.”

A mysterious wave of heat seemed to pass through Hisoka’s chest at the mere sight of it, as though even his body recalled the final all-out attack the last time they met. “How could I?” Hisoka said, shaking his head. Quickly getting to the point, Hisoka added, “What does he want?”

“He misses you,” Kataki answered, sarcastically. “Hell if I know!”

Hisoka calmly held his ground, thinking quickly. “And you’ll let her go if I come with you?”

“Whatever you want.”

“Don’t go, Hisoka! You’re not ready yet!” Kaori gasped. Kataki gripped Kaori around the neck tighter to keep her from speaking again.

“Fine,” Hisoka said, confidently making the decision. “Let her go.”