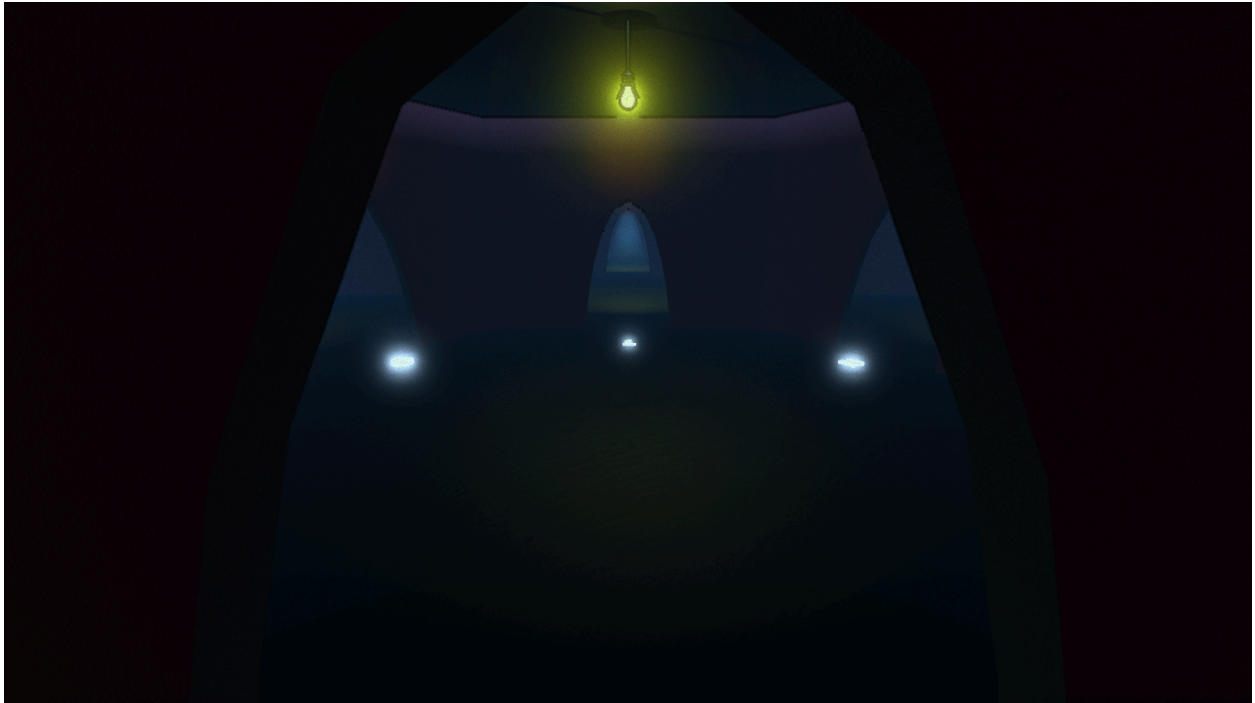


# Butterflies and Dreams.

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A nameless being awakens in a room, there's six walls all around, each with an archway, they reach for the light shining above their eyes, blocking it and feeling nothing in their reach, as they get up to further explore the area a book slips off their chest.

“...”

They reach out for the book, but their movements seem delayed, like they're fighting to move their body, dragging themselves to move, eventually the book is picked up.

[God Eater]

Whatever this book is about cannot be verified, opening it seems like an impossible task, like the nameless entity is going to crumble to age before finding the dexterity to open it, in frustration the book is allowed to simply slip off their hands, thudding on the ground, through effort this frail body is raised off the ground.

Looking closer at where they are, everything feels off, the walls are solid, but they feel like one sided glass, as if all around the walls are plagued by invisible eyes, staring at an animal at the zoo, the ground feels like it's trying to drag them back down, gravity beckons for this body, but the worst is the roof, the light from it is blinding, like staring at the sun, yet it can barely properly illuminate the room, giving a feeling it can go off at any moment.

They look through an archway, it leads to another room with another archway straight ahead, which leads to another identical room, which leads to another identical room, as far as the human eye can see, it's an endless hallway, the nameless one decides to check the other archways, they all look like they'll go on for infinity, the only thing that seems different between the six arches are a number engraved on the ground in front of them, there's nothing else of note here.

Without much choice, they pick a room at random, one, entering it is invigorating, life breathed anew upon them, the walls don't stare, the ground doesn't pull, the roof doesn't blind, before they can think about it further, a book drops in the middle of room number one. The nameless being picks it up, the title reads Reigai, although its pages are all blank it didn't look like a particularly long read, and after a moment the nameless one is no longer.

"Reigai... that's my name."

Reigai looks down on themselves, they see their joints, their naked body, it's bare, simple, doll-like, their joints visible and screaming for attention, Reigai doesn't feel anything though, looking back at where they came from, room "zero", as they decided to entitle it, the room left of it bearing their own arch, room A, it doesn't call their name like what they feel coming from the next room so they ignore it.

Proceeding to the next room down the infinite hallway one they see a marking again, two, just in front of the next room.

"Am I in... 1-1?"

> Correct.

"Who was that?!"

> You may call me the Gambler, vessel.

"W-Where are you?"

> Do you not feel me within you? The essence of your life?

"Are you... the reason I am?"

> Yes.

"Then, where are we? What should we do?"

> We are in you. I'll explain more later on, for now you should go to Hallway 1, Room 2, Section B, Room 1, or 1-2-B-1 for short. There you'll gather what's mine, and then we'll leave.

"I... see. Alright then."

Reigai, with no real options, goes to the next room, looking back again they see another archway besides A, now to the right of the way back, it reads B, they hesitate entering, alas, they do anyways, inside nothing feels weird, just bookshelves lining every wall.

> There, grab that one.

"Which one..."

But as they spoke, Reigai felt drawn to a book, drawing it from the bookshelf like a sword from its sheath, knowledge flowing into their heads, most about games and combat, and very little about other things, the overflow on their mind knocks them out.

Birds chirp, the sun rises, a human-sized doll by a mossy stone opens its purple eyes, striking visuals amongst the nature they find themselves in.

"Gambler, are we out?"

> We are, but this is just the start, get up, we need to find civilization.

They prop themselves off the ground using the messy stone they rested on, getting up.

"Any idea where we should go? I see nothing besides trees, butterflies and bees."

> We should be in the Forest of Butterflies, this place was once the land of a great sage, but now they're long gone, their people too.

"So... towards the sun? Away from it?"

> Towards the sun, we should see a lake soon if we go that direction, it's quite big so many people still use it, even if the forest isn't the best place to visit.

"I see, why would that be?" Reigai walked towards the sun, the warm heat radiating upon them was pleasant.

> Mostly rumors of liches and souls and possessions.

"Doesn't that last one..."

> No, you're not being possessed by me, you're... some sorta automaton, you look like a doll but your flesh is still humanlike, under your "Skin", you have a sorta skeleton, it's metal though, and I'm your power source, I guess.

"Ah, then are you the heart while I'm the brains? Wait... you're the smarter one, too."

> I'm just here to mostly make sure you don't die.

"Thanks... I'll need it."

After some more banter they eventually reach the lake mentioned before, Reigai looks at their reflection, purple eyes stare back, their blonde hair having some purple tips alongside purple nails.

> That's you... or us. I guess.

"We're... kinda pretty."

> The Sage had some friends who knew how to craft beauty.

"The Sage of Butterflies made me?"

> You are a wonder of magic and technology, not anyone can craft a automaton like you.

"Then-"

Reigai is interrupted by a leaf's crunch, turning to look at a girl approaching.

She wears a witch's hat, metallic horns poking through it, her hair's white and red, yellow eyes squinting to see properly who's ahead of her, a light purple dress and cloak looking great to finish her stylish outfit.



"Hey, who are you, why were you sneaking up on me?" Reigai asked, not an accusation but asking with curiosity bare in their voice. "Just here to collect water... don't mind me." She answered, raising her hands.

> Doesn't explain why she snuck up on us, though.

"Why did you try and sneak up on us, though?"

"Us? There's only you here, though... and I can't see properly without my glasses, even now you look like a blur to me, a really weird one, your skin's so gray, but your hair's so lively, you can't blame me for being careful."

> She doesn't seem to be lying...

"Alright, then... my name is Reigai, you are?" Reigai extended their hands towards Alius.

"Alius, Alius Vers, Alchemist and Mage." Alius shook Reigai's hands, the difference in coloration clear, gray skin meeting a peachy one.

"Your hand... feels weird?" Alius added.

"Is it because my body is different?"

> You look like a doll, down to the joints, far from humanlike. Merely humanoid in shape.

"Well, you do have beastman ears, but that doesn't mean anything for how your skin would feel like unless you're half a scaled subrace."

"I... I'm a doll?" Reigai asked Gambler.

"A doll...? Oh, an automaton, I guess whoever made you liked beastmans. They made your tail quite big." Alius said, reaching for the tail Reigai didn't notice until now.

"H-hey! Don't just grab me!" Reigai exclaimed, they didn't understand why they felt like they shouldn't let themselves be grabbed, but they still quickly moved their tail away.

"It's quite fluffy too." Alius said as the tail moved away.

"Hm..." They squint their eyes at Alius, staring at her.

"I wonder why you'd mind that, you don't seem weirded out being naked."

> That is true... we need to get you some clothes.

"I... just please don't touch me, alright?" Reigai asked Alius.

"Sure, sure, so what are you doing here?"

"I was looking fo-"

> They're civilization, we can just accompany them.

"-r someone I could follow back towards a village." Reigai finished after a slight stop to listen to Gambler.

"Hm. Alright, you can follow me back to my camp me n' teach's gonna go to a village soon enough." Alius said with a prideful smirk. "Just uh, can you help me first? I gotta get some water before returning." She slung a bag around her, opening it to reveal plenty of bottles and vials.

"Oh, sure, is that why you're not wearing your glasses?" Reigai asked.

> Hm? What do you mean?

"Yeah, I'll need to wash it up, it got dirty after an experiment gone wrong, you're observant on the small details huh?" They handed bottles to Reigai. "But I also need water for cooking, could use magic but it isn't potable."

Reigai and Alius worked to fill in the vials and bottles of water, after filling everything they decided to return to Alius' camp.

"...?" A horned man audibly exclaimed confusion, seeing Alius return with someone else.

"Hey, Reigai, this is my old man, teacher Antonov, he's the one teaching me Alchemy and stuff." Alius said, pointing at the man.

Antonov had pinkish horns, his hair a desaturated shade of that same color, he wore a simple clean white shirt and black pants, he wouldn't look out of place in a city, although in the forest he is the weird one.

"Oh, uh, hey, I'm Reigai, nice to meet you." Reigai bowed towards Antonov.

"Name's Antonov." He spoke.

"Also known as Ant to his close friends!" Alius added.

"Those close friends being Alius and Alius alone, as far as I know. I'm an expat of sorts, ex-merc, ex-Alchemy Teacher." That last title dragged on for a bit, like he didn't want to really say it.

"And extra annoying!" Alius once again added a remark of her own.

"Maybe if you learned how to follow the damn recipes I wouldn't be so annoying on you!" He adjusted his glasses, glaring pretty clearly at Alius. "I mean, do you even remember what some of these ingredients can do if you add th-"

"Moooving on, we brought the water! What's for dinner?" Alius quickly moved on, throwing a hand around Reigai and pulling her closer to the fireplace, a simple pot over it.

"You cook today, I'll help your new friend pick out some clothes. You really need to prioritize the important things." He added, making a gesture for Reigai to follow him.

"But my food is so bad compared to yours!"

"I'm not letting an automaton stay naked so you can eat slightly better seasoned Chicken Soup." He sighed. "And no, you can't pick out their clothes, you'd make them a visible mess."

"Fiiine..." Alius pouted, going to the bigger tent where an impromptu kitchen existed, though parts of it clearly didn't work as a kitchen, probably being Alchemy bits and pieces.

The camp was fairly simple, one big tent to conduct experiments, a fireplace and two tents where Alius and Antonov rested, Reigai followed Antonov to his tent.

“So, how long since you woke up?”

“Ehm... not too long ago? Maybe a couple hours?”

“How lucky, if it wasn't Alius finding you, you might've been in trouble.”

“Trouble?” Reigai asked, clearly confused.

“Dunno if y'know, but Automatons aren't looked at fondly.” He spoke

“Why?”

“War, mostly.”

“...”

“None were as refined as you though, mostly just followed orders, kamikaze tactics and suicide missions, impossible blitzkrieging for normal soldiers, Automata are forever tainted due to the actions of the past.”

“I... see.”

“Anyways.” Antonov pulls out a briefcase, opening it to reveal a couple pairs of clothes, some that clearly don't fit him. “I was planning on keeping them as gifts for Alius when she's got decent at Alchemy, you need it more though, at least so it's not obvious you're an Automaton.”

“Oh, uh, thanks!” Reigai could feel a slight blush forming.

Some time passed as Antonov played dress up with Reigai, plenty of compliments being thrown their way, but eventually they settled down on an outfit both seem to like.

“Gotta say, this works quite well on you, gives me detective vibes, it's fitting.”

“So, Antonov, once again, I really appreciate the clothes.” Reigai bowed down once more.

“It's no skin off my back, just enjoy it.” He lightly waved his hand,





dismissing her formalities away. "So, important question, y'know how to fight?"

"Fight? Why would I need to know that?"

"The world's far from peaceful, mostly because of the people in the shadows who used people like you to wreck chaos, I assume plenty hold grudges to today."

"I think I can fight? I have some knowledge, maybe..."

"Then how about a spar? I'll fight against ya so y'know how it sorta feels."

"That's... is that fine?"

"A spar's just a spar, no reason to fear it, besides, Alius is probably gonna take a bit longer to cook food."

"Alright then, I guess you can teach me a bit..."

"Great, there's a clearance a bit ahead of here, just follow me."

As Antonov led Reigai a bit further into the forest, he explained a bit about combat, but most of it flew over Reigai's head.

"First of all." Antonov forms an icicle in the air in front of him, gripping it and stabbing his finger, blood spilling out. "You don't bleed, Automata don't function on oil or blood or some liquid mana, there's "veins" in you, but they're mainly ways to pass mana around your body."

He crushed the icicle in his hand, then threw it for Reigai to grab, it being dagger shaped by the time it reached their hands.

"Second of all." Reigai felt a stab in her hand, ice needles piercing through her flesh. "Ow!" She exclaimed, but Antonov moved on, "You can still "bleed out", Automata are beings powered by, well, a power source, it's a mana generator since no one knows how to gather mana from air for machines, getting cut leaves mana to flow outside your body, but your body automatically uses that leaking mana to fix your skin, you'll never really get scars or anything unless you have no mana to fully heal."

Reigai looked down at their hands, no signs of any magic needles stabbing them. "Third and most important. Inside you isn't just you, Automata are formed of many "Modules", you should have your personality module, you, a combat module, a knowledge module

and some other less important ones. The one we care about here is the combat module, they'll guide you to being able to use your combat abilities, try engaging it."

"Gambler?"

> Yeah?

"Do you know how to fight?"

> That I do, my little doll.

"Can you guide me?"

> With the big guy as our target?

"Y-Yeah, him."

> Sure, hold your hands together and point at him, lemme show you your bread and butter.

Reigai did as asked, but nothing happened.

> Oh right, you must say the keywords "Six Shooter." to summon your weapon.

"Six Shooter." A gun formed in Reigai's hands, a massive revolver, arguably a hand cannon.

"Oh, yeah, that's an impressive grasp on mana you have, nice one Reigai."

> Now aim and pull the trigger.

Reigai breathes in, aiming at Antonov, they hands shake a bit as it sets in what they'll do, and after a bit of hesitation...

**BANG!**

The bullet ricochets off ice, dissolving into air.

"Nice, but as you can see, forming and firing a weapon, at least in your case, uses mana too, your health is your offense and your offense is your health."

> For you, that's not the only risk, of the bullets in the gun is, well, cursed per se, it could blow the gun in your hands, but it's a one in six! One in five now...

"Huh?!" Reigai loudly exclaimed.

"What?" Antonov asked, "Something happened?"

"I've just been told there was a one in six chance the gun would've blown up!"

“Oh, is that so? Maybe the mana in your body isn't stable... but your combat module deemed it safe enough to use, yeah? So maybe it was fine? It should only act for your benefit.” Antonov remarked.

> There's some other abilities I can do, but I believe you're not going to be in the right state to fight in a spar, much less an actual battle, your hands are still shaking, I suggest letting your mind rest while I take control of your facilities.

“Is... can you even do that? I guess it would be fine for a proper measure of my capabilities, but I'm not fond of the idea of being controlled.”

> I can't force you to concede control, but I can explain my abilities a bit in depth, do you remember the knowledge module he mentioned before? The room you initially woke in was essentially your knowledge module, a collection of every knowledge ever gathered, though most of it is locked as so you're not overwhelmed, it is also unorganized, so it's hard to find what you want or need unless you have an anchor, my ability to Resonate with the opponent allows me nail down one of their abilities to be unlocked, but to Resonate I must accomplish a certain feat that is hard or worsens our situation. I was planning on using it on him in this spar.

“That's a lot to take in... alright, I think I get it, what's the “task” to Resonate with Antonov?”

> Hit him once.

“I'm severely outmatched.”

> I suggest conceding control, at best I copy a kill of his for the future, at worst we show our capabilities and learn from it.

“I... alright, fine. I concede control of my body-”

Everything fades to black. Reigai is asleep.

“Oh, hey, your purple highlights changed to blonde now, even your fingertips are golden yellow, eyes too.” Antonov remarked, unaware of the truth.

“We'll be having a fair one, yeah? A spar. May the best one win.” Gambler said, rushing in with a gun in her left and a never before seen sword on their left, it was transparent, resembling glass.

The sword clashed with ice, the fragile looking blade holding a direct hit to it's edge, not without damage, though.

"I expected that to break." Gambler gleefully blurted out

"Well aren't you a completely different person." He spoke while blocking her slash which still carried through, unimaginable power contained in a body he before saw as harmless.

"A better fighter, too!"

BANG, Gambler tried shooting Antonov while the sword distracted them, but their mana imploded, giving Antonov enough leeway to dash back, leaving the doll to finish the slash and lean into the mana explosion.

"Damn it! You're lucky the odds were on your side!" They yelled at the Alchemist, who took a swig from a potion he got from a hidden pocket.

"Maybe the odds just aren't on your side." He taunted back, beast ears appearing besides his horns, his scaly tail growing fluff.

"We'll see about that!" Gambler respun the chamber of her revolver, firing a shot at him. Antonov easily dodged it, closing the distance with overwhelming pressure.

"Damn it, fine, I'll just win this clash!" Claws extended from their fingertips, thrusting it at the horned man when he got close, two of them breaking upon impact with his fist but three managing to scratch him.

"RESONATE!"

Antonov found himself sitting at a table in a hexagonal room, red walls, black floor and roof, a dim bulb lighting the surroundings.

"Wakey wakey. It's time to play a game." Gambler spoke, sitting at the other side of the table, "We'll play a game, a game of chance, winner wins all, how about that? I don't have much else to show you.

"Sure. Fine, what will we play?" Antonov asked.

“Ever heard of Gun Roulette? Eight bullets in an eight bullet revolver, six blanks, one normal live round, one sabotaged live round.”

“I think I more or less already get the gist.”

“Great, I’ll go first.” Gambler raised the gun to their head without hesitation. “It’s an one in eight, we can decide to fire at ourselves or the opponent, firing a blank at not you is a skip, firing a blank at yourself skips the opponent’s turn.” She squeezed the trigger, then before letting the hammer fire she aimed the gun at Antonov’s arm.

**BANG!**

It hit, “Damn it... shot before I could even act.” He coughed.

“What? No! This shouldn’t be happening! This isn’t fun at all” Gambler cried.

Antonov faded away from the room, the gun lingering in her hands.

“Fuuuuck. Why did I get so unlucky, at the first turn? Really? I couldn’t even play more.”

They threw themselves back at the chair, balancing on it.

“Whatever, I’ll just take his skill and wait for the fox.”

Back in reality, both Antonov and Reigai get up from the floor, not much time seems to have passed.

“Weird, I can’t remember anything...” Reigai spoke.

“You’ve got the purple back on you, guess that means you’re back to normal.”

“Yeah? What happened while I was unconscious?”

“Your combat module pulled a trick on me. Got sent to some sorta mental realm I’m assuming, there I lost at a game.”

“There’s no scratches on you, though.” They verbally noted.

“That’s why I’m assuming I fell for a mental trick, even my potion effects have run out.”

“So I’m good?”

“Yeah, you’re good to defend yourself.”

“Now let’s go eat Alius’ barely salted soup.”

As sun rises the next day, Antonov and Alius, alongside their new temporary assistant, disassemble the camp.

“How do you manage to make soup taste like that?”

“Hey, Reigai didn’t complain.”

“That was their first meal, ever.”

“Excuses, excuses.”

The two kept bickering and eventually everything was packed up and ready to move.

“Anyways, I’m pretty sure this is where we’ll part ways, right?” Antonov asked Reigai.

“Can’t I stay?” They asked.

“Not safe where we’ll be going, for you, at least. It’s best you forge your own path.”

“But I don’t know what to do, where to go, what my purpose is...”

“Y’know, your journey is one only you can discover, until you’re deep in it, you probably won’t even realize it started.” He stalled and sighed. “What I’m saying is. You may not know now, but you might already be on the path to knowing. Follow your heart, See what it may say.”

...

With farewells said, those words lingered in their mind.

> We should probably investigate the forest again, we woke up there after all.

Gambler spoke up, and Reigai pondered it. Their legs moving as the answer.

Back in the forest, they looked for the rock they woke up on, searching until the sun fell and the moon rose, and under the light of the moon they found it, on it laid a fox and on its mouth was a letter.

“A... fox?”

> A white fox.

“Should we approach it?”

> It’s got a letter for us.

“How do you know that?”

> I studied up recently, you do have all the knowledge of this world on you, and our world isn’t the only one, there’s tales of white foxes bringing worthy warriors to a tournament with the grandest prize, I’m assuming we’ve been chosen.”

“Still... fine, let’s take it...”

Having steeled her resolve to approach a wild fox, the fox instead approached the doll, dropping the letter by their feet.

“O-Oh, thanks.”

> It really had to upend our will like that.

“Dear ■■■■

You have been invited to the Crossroads.

- Signed, God Eater.”

“I... think I recognize this name, I saw it in the knowledge module.”

> You’re accepting, right?

“I think I have to accept it.”

The fox nods, then walks through a portal that’s been formed in front of them, the doll following behind.

The sun shines high, from dark to night the contrast is blinding, enough to cause Reigai to trip on itself.

“Whoa there, lassie, be careful.” An unknown person spoke, catching Reigai before they fell.

"Th-thanks." They rub their eyes and wait to adapt to the light, looking at a person in a green dress, there's a couple dirt stains around the foot and a wonderful white flower adorning the woman's crimson hair which obscured their right eye, only leaving a soft, kind brown eye to look at them, a basket hanging by their arm. "I almost ate dirt."

"If you had planted your face on the floor, you'd be quite the lovely flower." She looked at Reigai for a bit, then noticed the letter. "Oh, are you a competitor? You must've just got here then, seeing you've got no tag."

"Tag?" Reigai scratched their head.

"Competitors are required to carry these little things around." She looks at the floor where they were, seeing a tag on the floor, "Like that one, you must've dropped it when you came here, it's a sort of an identifier."

"Oh, I see." Reigai crouched down and picked up their tag, a necklace with a Poker Chip,

"Huh, it almost feels like I'm not touching it at all, weird."

> Your senses might be dull due to the long distance teleportation, you're still a being of machinery, it'll iron itself out with time.

"Since you're new here, would you like to know where you ended up?" The woman offered, her face holding a nice smile.

"Sure, I'll need to find a place to rest soon, so knowing where I am would be nice."

"Oh, how lucky you are, you arrived at the Kit'Inn! Besides its punny name, it is an Inn, some say it's haunted but I doubt it." She looked at the Inn, Reigai following her eye's subject. "It's a place made for competitors, so you'll just have to present your tag to get a room."

"Oh, how nice, I'll part ways here then, if that isn't too rude, I am a bit tired." Reigai explained.

"It's fine, it's fine, we'll probably meet again sometime soon..."

"Reigai, my name is Reigai."

"You may call me Chi, I'm sure we'll meet again, be sure to take care of your lovely tail."

"Su-sure." (Is my tail dirty?)

> Not really.

(Oh, you can speak with me by thoughts?)

> No reason I shouldn't, now let's go, listen to that kind lady and go get some rest.

"Yeah."