

## § EPISODE ONE: True Beginnings; An Akashi Reborn

Hosting User: Azerith Ramiero

Date Created: 3:15 PM March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2033

Location: ██████████

**T**he scent of cherry blossoms and vanilla filled me with a warm sensation. I sat atop a rock perched over a grassy meadow. Mountains with white snowcaps dotted the horizon on one side and on the other, a valley stretched as far as one could see. The familiar pink petals played in the breeze with luminescent fireflies. The fireflies danced, twinkling in the summer air. Seeing one suspended and unmoving, it dawned on me—they weren't fireflies but droplets of suspended water.

The hair on the back of my neck stood on end. I shivered.

“Destiny is a fickle thing, wouldn't you say, Azerith Ramiero?”

I looked around for the distant voice.

“Hello?” I asked. No reply. “Who are you and how do you know my name?” I asked.

“I know more than just your name, Azerith. I know everything about you, down to your innermost thoughts. I know about your aspirations and goals, your desire above all to feel normal, and that you believe that this is merely a dream. You and I are one and the same.”

A creek cut through the plateau garbled a few meters away but the rest of the flat rockface remained silent.

I stood from the rock and walked across the meadow towards the creek. I kneeled near the edge of the stream and dipped my hand into the water. My hands burned from how cold the

water felt. I knew better than to drink it. I splashed the water against my face. The freezing water felt too real.

I stared at my face in the water and frowned. 'Really wish all this stuff would just stop. I just want to feel normal again.'

I looked down the creek to my left side. The shallow stream ran down the plateau down to the far edge. It became a waterfall that dropped further than my eyes could see. Near the edge floating a half meter above the water, the air at the far end of the stream shimmered—refracted light bounced off a multi-faceted, invisible object in the air. I stood and walked towards it.

Above the water, the air looked as if the world had been folded over on itself and the air on either side was floating inwards on an invisible line. I reached out towards the distortion. My hand touched something smooth and warm.

"These are the Gardr Mountains," said a voice from inside the distortion. "They surround the whole city. Did you know, Zekie, that giant's built these mountains for us, to protect us from the world beyond? They're beautiful, aren't they?"

As if someone had pulled either side of the fold apart, the creased distortion pulled apart and the air returned to normal.

I blinked. "What the hell?" My whole body shuddered.

I blinked again. Past the edge of the waterfall, the air shimmered again. I followed the new distortion as it floated down into a valley below. It stopped somewhere beyond where my eyes could see. I couldn't see it but... I could feel it?

Down in the valley, the distortion pulled apart. Rectangular blocks of light sprang out as the world held in the crease opened. Blocks of white light shattered into radiant polyhedrals, revealing skyscrapers and tall structures. A city of silver and gold came into existence as the light dissipated. Glittering purple airplanes flew in the sky. Cherry blossom petals danced in the breeze with the water droplet masquerade. The buildings ascended towards the sun and drank in the blossom-infused air. Seeing the city, something in me felt... Calm.

"That's our home," I heard a woman say in my head. I craned my head and stuck a finger in my ear to dislodge anything inside. "Isn't it beautiful, Zekie?"

I pinched myself. "Wake up," I ordered myself. "Just be a dream, just be a dream..." My brown skin screamed until I stopped.

I looked back at the city. Storm clouds rolled in above it. Lightning crackled in the angry, anvil-shaped cumulus clouds. They advanced, covering the whole sky in a matter of seconds.

"It looks like it's going to rain, mother." The wind carried the voice of a little boy towards me from the city below. "That cloud looks like a dragon!"

I stood from my post and walked through the shin-high grass. The choppy wind howled against my ears. The temperature against my skin dropped and my breath turned to white frost.

The woman's voice, the mother, laughed. "It sure does. It's going to swallow us up!"

She roared and the boy laughed.

The clouds flashed. Electricity rolled through their cotton-candy-like masses. Lightning crashed, thunder boomed. I slammed my eyes shut to brace against the brightness and leaped to the ground, barely avoiding the strike zone. I rolled over and opened my eyes to the lightning-struck grass catch flame. As if alive, the flames spiraled upwards, forming a column. From the epicenter, the fire spread in both directions. The inferno, using the grass as fuel, formed a wide ring with me in the center.

I raised my arms and dropped them to my side. "Any minute now," I shouted. "I'm going to wake up and Pramantha is going to laugh at me and say this is just a stupid dream."

The clouds swirled into a funnel. Slowly, they descended towards the ground. The black shapes molded themselves, swirling and spiraling from the cloud's posterior towards the dancing flames. As if made of cotton, the swirling shapes caught the flame and pulled it into its midst.

The air burst like a thunderclap. I screamed. I could feel each ring of tinnitus pounding against the hairs of my eardrums, each ring a punch to my brain. Fire exploded through the cloud's core, filling it with heat and expanding. The burning apparition of thunderclouds swelled into a lizard-like snout and a crown of horns. Fire coalesced into beady scarlet eyes and a brow drawn in contempt. Heat hissed from a newly-formed maw. Waves of sulfur passed from a forked tongue into my face. The air burned my lungs down to my diaphragm. I could taste and smell rotten eggs simultaneously. The combination made me choke and I vomited a mouthful of sulfur into the grass.

My hearing returned. I blinked. My heart sunk in my chest. With a groan, my knees tendered their resignation and I fell to the ground on my rear. "Dude. First a spider and now a goddamn dragon? What the actual hell is going on?"

I felt my eyes bulging in their sockets. The firestorm, now shaped like a dragon, snarled. "You dare to make a pact with the Grande Grimoira dela Rosso Dragore, human?"

I coughed and wiped the vomit from my lips. I couldn't tell if it was the sulfur or the piss-your-pants-type of fear that brought the tears streaming down my face. I wanted to scream. Dragons were a lot better in games or on pages of illustrations.

My mind fumbled to find a response. "The what?" I asked.

I pressed my palms against the side of my head and squeezed—the pain helped to settle the tightening in my chest and the warm fuzzies I experienced just before a panic attack. "This is just a dream. Just a dream..."

The apparition of burning clouds scoffed. "This is no dream, human. You sought to enter a pact with the grimoire of the Red Devil King and you are here to prove your worth." It said.

"I touched a book," a voice identical to mine said from my mouth. "Seriously," I said, "I don't know anything about this!"

Another wave of heat and sulfur washed over me. I held my shirt against my nose and kept myself from breathing. "You offered blood to the Grimoire and initiated the transference. Stand and bear proof you are worthy of his knowledge."

"Look, I don't know jack about any of this. I'm just a normal kid, trying to have normal dreams here! I have no idea what you—"

"Normality, is that your goal?" The voice said again. "Why do you so badly wish to be normal?"

I scanned the world for the origin of the voice.

"I want to be normal so I don't have to deal with this shit every night! I have enough problems of my own." I wheeled around, still looking for the voice. "Where and the who hell are you?"

"We're far beyond being 'normal' I'm afraid, Partner. This is only the beginning of our journey together."

A burst of electromagnetic static pounded against my eardrums. The pain reverberated through my skull and I slammed my head to the ground. Blood dripped from my ears as I panted into the dirt. As abruptly as the static came, it ended, leaving me gasping for air.

"Sorry about that," another voice said. I lifted my head from the ground and looked for the speaker. "Your brain chemistry is different than the others. Did you know that you have dozens more glial cells and more gray matter than your ancestors?"

I spat to get rid of the iron-tinged taste in my mouth. My lungs burned and my chest screamed with every exhale. My everything hurt too much to even process the voice's words.

"Probably not the best time to say that. Noted."

The dragon leaned in with its fiery face and watched me. Its lips parted and a wall of smoke washed over me, forcing me back into the dirt. I choked and turned over onto my side. Stars and black spots spun in my field of vision. My head throbbed.

A bolt of lightning struck the ground a few feet away. The light dissipated and where the lightning had struck, stood a man with white hair and cross-shaped tattoo under his eye.

"Who, wha—" Any attempt to voice my confusion didn't come out just right. "Dude, what the hell is going on?"

The dragon roared and a pillar of flame shot from its mouth towards the man.

The man raised his hand towards the stream of fire. “Wind Art,” he said, “Shield of Sidhe.”

His hands glowed and the light shot ripples through the air. The air before the man’s hand cycled and distorted as if shooting back with a cardioid current from the center of his palm. The fire struck his hand and followed the current of wind past the man. The wind then curved and looped around to form a loop of non-ending current. The dragon ceased its barrage and the man stood unscathed.

“Speak your name, *interferer*,” the dragon snarled.

“My name is Zekereih Cherubim von Mohora. And this boy here,” he waved a hand to me, “shall be your master.”

I rolled over and looked behind me. Seeing no one besides me and the man in the field, my eyes opened wide and I turned back to the man with confusion. “Say what now?”

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Hosting User: Azerith Ramiero

Date Created: 6:00 AM March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2033

System: Milky Way – Orion Arm

Location: Inver Grove, Minnesota

My body sprang forward. Cold sweat soaked my body from head to toe and left a puddle in my shape on my sheets. My lungs accepted oxygen and I gulped it in. Slowly, the tightening in my chest eased.

I rolled to the edge of the bed and cradled my head in my hands. I opened a pill bottle and swallowed one of the big, chalk-blue pills. I pressed my palms against my eyes until the hammering in my head went away.

“God, what I wouldn’t give to just have a normal morning. Just one normal dream to start a normal day.”

I exhaled and took my hands away from my face. Sure enough, blood coated the splotchy, pink skin of my palms.

‘Not again...’

I wiped the blood away with a tissue and grabbed the notebook and pen from the table on my nightstand. I frowned at the book. Normal people didn't keep dream journals like this.

I flipped open the book and penned in the details of last night's dream on a new page. The dream had changed this time. Like all the other entries spanning eight seventy-page notebooks, I dreamt of that hillside with the cherry blossoms, the water droplets floating in the air, and the city in the distance that night. The dragon appeared quite often.

"I touched a book," my voice replied, it just didn't feel like I was the one saying it.

My lungs still burned.

"My name is Zekereih Cherubim von Mohora. And this boy here," the man in my dream waved a hand to me, "shall be your master."

The dream always ended when the man said this line. I was kind of glad it ended there before the dragon had a chance to roast me to bits in retaliation. Part of me, however, felt frustrated that the dream always seemed to end right at that point.

This time, however, after the man had shown up and said his stuff, the world just seemed to stop. He and the dragon both stopped with it. They froze in perfect stasis and didn't move for the rest of my time wherever there was.

This wasn't the first time I'd seen her in this dream. It was definitely the first time, however, she'd come in at this particular point.

While I watched the dragon and the man stare each other down, another distortion between the two pulled apart.

I rose an arm to the blinding light. The light dimmed, and an orb of wispy blue flame floated in the air in its place. The ball grew and morphed as I watched it. It transformed, molding itself like incandescent clay into the form of a human figure caught within a rectangular frame. The figure grew into the shape of a woman. Wisps of long hair fell in strands around her slowly forming face. The color of the flame transformed, turning her hair scarlet, the dress covering her chest a shade of yellow, and her skin a creamy bronze. Her blue eyes were narrow with epicanthic folds and her thin lips curled into a smile.

Every time I saw her, my heart raced and butterflies bounced in my gut. My mind froze and I couldn't even speak.

"I wish our first meeting could be on better terms," she said. Her fiery lips briefly curved into a smile before fading to a frown. "But the transference isn't holding. All I have time for is to give you a message."

My blood squirmed in my veins. My heart clenched itself into a knot. I grabbed my chest—it hurt to just breathe. For a split moment, there were two of her. I watched her speak but couldn't hear the words.

For a short moment, the tightness let up and I could hear her again. "...you won't understand now, but you will. Things from here on are going to get rough. Really rough. But it'll be okay, we'll get through it. Trust in the strength hidden in your blood. Trust in Prometheus and everything will be okay."

"Prometheus? My blood?"

"I don't have time to explain," she said. "But they're coming for you."

The burning frame surrounding her began to constrict and her features began to fade.

"Wait!" I shouted. "Who are you?"

Her response came out so garbled that I couldn't understand it. I shook my head and opened my mouth to ask her to repeat herself. I exhaled the breath but I couldn't inhale. My hands grabbed my throat. The left half of my body went numb and my chest burned.

The girl smiled and her image began to fade. "Next time we meet, you'll be reborn an Akashi like me."

I'd seen her before. Tonight, was the first time I'd ever been able to hear her speak. I jotted down my encounter with her. And wrote the word "Prometheus" on its own line, followed by a question mark.

I set the journal down and crawled out of bed. My phone read 6:52 AM—two hours before I experienced the joy that is high school. I stretched to relax my stiff muscles before opening the door to the bathroom to take a shower. The light in the bathroom flickered when I flipped the switch and the bright light forced me to adjust my eyes. I crept over to the other door within the room and pushed it open.

"Mikayla, it's time to wake up," I called.

The sheets rustled and a groan came from the mound of blankets. I shut the door to the bathroom and showered. The whole while, I couldn't get the girl with red hair out of my head.

I reached down for my glasses and screamed. The bathroom door opened and Mikayla poked her head out from the other side.

"What are you screaming about?" She asked. "It's, like, 6:30 in the morning..."

"Spider," I croaked. "There's a spider on my desk."

"You're kidding me."

“That there’s a spider? I shit you not, it’s huge.”

“Oh my God...” Her head poked around the corner and she looked across at where I pointed towards the spider. “Are you kidding me, Azerith? It’s tiny!”

“That ain’t tiny.” I looked back at evolution’s greatest mistake. The eight-legged horror stepped off my glasses onto my end table. I snatched my glasses and stepped away. “Dude, it’s the size of a dime, I shit you not.”

Mikayla rolled her eyes. “Go downstairs, I’ll deal with it.”

“Do you need some matches?”

“Shut up and go downstairs. Seriously, I can’t believe you sometimes, Azerith. You’re supposed to be the older sibling.”

She shut the door to the bathroom. I heard the shower start.

I snapped a picture of the spider with my phone and sent it to my friends and uncle.

“You’re the best,” I shouted at the bathroom door.

I ignored the silence and ran down the stairs.

I walked through the kitchen and near the back door, I grabbed the wooden Japanese Shinai that my father left behind for me and headed outside to do some workouts. I’d learned how to swing the wooden sword from my dad, who used to practice kendo and enjoyed practicing martial arts. We used to come out and practice swinging the sword together every morning together. One downward strike, one horizontal strike. Return to a standing position. Repeat. I continued honing my muscle memory like this every morning. Training felt normal to me when other things in life didn’t.

“Azerith!”

I turned to the house to see Mikayla calling to me from the sunroom window.

“Breakfast is ready.”

Mikayla placed a plate of grits, eggs, and bacon on the kitchen island.

My sister sat next to the chair she’d set my food at. “You get to do the dishes,” she said.

I groaned.

“You owe me for both breakfast and the spider this morning. Don’t even.”

“Yeah but—”



“Oh, and I made your lunch.” She pointed to a cooler pouch on the counter near the fridge.  
“You’re doing the dishes.”

I looked to the sink. She’d used a separate pan for each dish she’d made this morning.

I resigned myself and ate the food she’d prepared. “Thanks for breakfast.”

“And lunch?” She corrected.

“Yes, and lunch. Though to be fair, I could have always eaten at school.”

“Sure you could have. Your options today would have been whole grain everything, stale pizza, raw chicken patties, and, my personal favorite from last week, salmonella. Yum.”

“Shut it,” I chuckled.

She shrugged her shoulders. “Just saying, you’re pretty lucky to have a sister like me who makes you lunch every day.”

Paris lumbered down the stairs fifteen minutes later and sat next to me. If it wasn’t for our last name, it would be impossible to tell that the broad-shouldered giant stomping down the stairs had any form of relation to the two of us. His dirty blonde hair and blue eyes came from his mother and her Scandinavian blood gave him pale skin. A sweater with “Inver Grove Academy Varsity Football Team” scrawled on the front had nearly grown too small for his athletic frame.

“Late night?” I asked.

“Why did you ever have to get me hooked on PC games?” He made himself a cup of coffee and rubbed the circles under his eyes. “Two more games and I swear I’ll hit plat this season.”

My phone buzzed with a text. My chest fluttered reading her name.

Mikayla moved the eggs around on her plate with her fork. “Azerith, do you mind stopping by and replacing Mom and Dad’s flowers?”

I knocked my knuckles on the island. “Yeah, Kari will probably want to stop by the graveyard too.”

The familiar aches and pains crept up and rested on my shoulder, making them sag under the weight. I got my black half from my mother, Julia Ramiero. My mother, a doctor, worked at a clinic near the University where she met my father, Raffaele Ramiero. My half-Italian father and his younger brother, Matteo, joined the Marine Corps and served for eight years. My parents met when my Dad, who worked as a detective for the Minneapolis police department, investigated a murder my Mom was a witness to. They married three years later and spent their honeymoon in California. I was born nine months later.

Mikayla nodded her head. “Make sure to get Kari’s mom some flowers too. She’d appreciate it.”

Eleven years ago, when I was seven and Mikayla was six, my parents dropped us off at my Uncle Matteo's for what was supposed to only be a weekend. My parents left us to see a friend who lived four hours away and promised me that they'd be back by the end of the weekend. They were found dead the next morning along with eight other bodies in a gas station.

I grabbed my backpack and car keys near the door and ran outside while offering a prayer we'd be on time. I knew the route up the street from my house by heart. I pulled into the driveway on time, as always. To note, I always arrived to pick her up five minutes early. After ten minutes went by, I honked my horn.

Within a minute, Karina Reeves stepped out of her front door. "Hold on, Azerith!" She yelled at me. "I'll be there in a minute!"

"By 'a minute'," I yelled back, "you actually mean five, right?"

"S-shut up!" She yelled back, accidentally letting the front door shut behind her. "I'm working on it! I'm not even that bad!"

A moment later, she realized that her mid-back length brown hair got caught in the front door when she shut it.

"You alright over there, Kari?" I laughed at her. "Do you need me to come to help you?"

She struggled to get the door open. Her fingers slipped and the keys nearly fell out of her hands before she caught them. She managed to find the right key, her face now bright red, before sticking it in the door and running back inside. Kari dropped her keys only twice more. I tapped my fingers on my steering wheel and ran through the dream with the girl again. I couldn't get her red hair out of my mind. On reflex, I rubbed my throat. Just thinking about her made it hard to breathe.

I sunk back into my seat and growled. "Can't I just have some normal dreams when I sleep for once?"

The car door opening elicited a jump and a curse. Kari entered and slammed the door shut. The blush on her face while she locked her door gave her skin the only color it'd ever experienced beyond sunburn and bruises.

I eyed her clothes and smiled watching her throw her backpack into the back. I felt my chest burn. "Looking nice today, as usual..." I mumbled.

"What was that?" she asked.

I screamed internally. "Your backpack looks nice today."

She blinked and raised a hand only to drop it. "What does that even mean?" She asked. "You're such a dork."

“Your face is weird, so there’s that.”

She rolled her eyes.

Kari and I first met when we were seven years old. Our mothers used to study together in college. We played Monster Catcher together as kids all the time when our parents would meet up. Video games quickly became the blood that bound us together ever since. Our shared interests in everything from video games to music, movies, Anime, and sports gravitated us together. Together, we played a lot of first-person shooter and RPG games.

By the time she shut the door, five minutes remained before school started and I needed ten to get there. I jammed the shifter into reverse and sped down her driveway.

I checked my watch. “Just a head’s up—we’re definitely going to be late today. I honestly thought about leaving you here at least once every two minutes.”

She tucked her chin-length bangs behind her ears and offered me a smile. “Sorry! It took me a little longer to get ready and take care of the dogs this morning since one of them peed in the house and another wouldn’t go into the kennel...” She unscrewed the lid on a bottle of diet cola. “Hey, by the way, what are you doing this weekend?”

“No.”

I swerved around a garbage can tipped over in the middle of the road.

“Really? I didn’t even tell you where yet.”

“You know I hate shopping,” I said.

“Please, Azerith?”

She whipped out her trump card and donned the puppy eyes. “I was totally thinking about going shopping this weekend and I need someone to give me their opinion on some new clothes. Please come?”

Critical hit. Her emerald green eyes were always super effective.

“Fine,” I caved. “Just let me know when you’re finished getting ready and want me to pick you up.”

“Thanks, Azerith,” she flashed a smile. “I’ll be ready on time, I promise.”

We stopped at a stop sign. I couldn’t help but sneak a peek over at Kari and admire how nice she looked today. Though I know she saw me, she didn’t say anything. Her lips curved into a grin. Embarrassed, I blushed and faked a cough before turning away.

“Hey, do you think we could stop off at the cemetery after school one of these days?”

"It's already that time of the year, huh." I glanced at her.

"Yeah..." She looked towards her lap. "Eleven years tomorrow..."

Like mine, Kari's life bore a red stain through its pages. Kari's mother, Maria Reeves, was walking home from church on a Wednesday when a creep jumped out and attacked her. She called my dad and he did the paperwork for her sexual assault case. Kari was born nine months after that. She grew up in her grandparent's house and lived the first seven years of her life inseparable from her mother.

"Do you remember when we first played Monster Catcher together?" She stared straight ahead with a bitter smile.

"Yeah," I laughed, "I was just thinking the same thing. We used to play it all the time."

"We played it that night," she frowned, "didn't we?"

Two weeks after my parents were murdered and the police did nothing to find their murderer, Kari's mother met her assailant again on her way to the bus station from church. Kari stayed at my house with us that night. Maria died after forty-seven stab wounds and the bastard left her to bleed out in the street.

"I definitely kicked your butt that night."

She laughed. "You just want to remember it that way."

"I still kick your butt at Monster Catcher to this day, actually."

"Hey, I've been watching those videos you sent me. Just you wait until I get my new team together and you get to eat it."

I smiled at her. "I'll believe it when you actually make it happen."

The loss of her mother devastated Kari. Her grandparents adopted her and I grew close to Kari, who endured the same pain as me, and we recovered together. Inseparable, we grew up as best friends. But that changed before I knew it. Kari got more beautiful every year of her life. My feelings for her changed and I stopped seeing her as a sister. It became a full-blown crush sometime in middle school. Those feelings, stuck by a fear of rejection and change, lodged themselves in my windpipe ever since.

"What are you thinking about?" Kari asked me.

I cursed internally. I definitely made a face.

"Oh me? Nothing." I said. My cheeks flushed a deep red. "W-what are you thinking about?"

“Eh. Just about the new semester and how awesome it is that we have all our classes together. I can’t wait for our internship. It’s going to be *awesome*.”

My counselor always chose my classes anyways so beyond Japanese, I never had anything more exciting than AP Chemistry. That semester, however, I’d received a chance for an internship on the University of Minnesota’s Twin Cities Campus that I felt stoked for. An internship, I thought, that would be normal enough that a high school student like me who only wanted to live a normal life, go to a normal college, and date my bestfriend like a normal teenage boy could experience a little bit of adventure and ancient history.

As a result of my family connections, Kari and I were invited to assist in the research of an old friend of my parents who worked as an archaeologist who’d recently become famous. Originally, he offered the post to my sister. She wasn’t able to fit it in because she’d overloaded her schedule with PSO courses to help prepare for college. My aunt Madeline proposed that the position be offered to Kari, who accepted, and my uncle figured it out with our school.

“Yeah, it’s pretty sweet, isn’t it...?” I grumbled. “That is if we get there on time...”

“Sorry!” She said. “I’ll make it up to you tomorrow, I promise.”

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## § EPISODE TWO: Blurring Worlds; Fractured Reality

Hosting User: Azerith Ramiero

Date Created: 5:00 AM March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2033

Location: Inver Grove, Minnesota

**W**alking through the doorway to my second-period calculus class always produced a groan. I hated math. Already a week in, I regretted all of the life decisions that led me to take this class. Coupled with an encroaching migraine, Ms. Acanari's voice would no doubt put me to sleep.

When I got to my desk, I pulled a couple of prescription migraine pills from my bag and downed them with a can of root beer. Within seconds of putting my head down, I fell asleep.

Sharp pain woke me up. Each puff of fresh oxygen burned my lungs.

"Dude, what is—" I shuddered my eyes against the pain in my head. "Damn, even in dreams I get migraines now?"

I sent the signal to my arms to move. They failed to comply. I opened my eyes and let them adjust to the blurry haze. I looked up and found the moon staring down at me. Its white rays reflected off silver shimmers behind me. I turned my head and found it constrained—I couldn't move my neck more than 45 degrees to either side.

A fuzzy feeling spread through my body. "Don't, please not right now." My muscles trembled and tightened. My stomach acid turned volatile and a swarm of angry bees bounced inside my gut. Thinking about it made my mind race worse. "And there we go. Breathe."

I tried my best to focus on my breathing to abate the anxiety gripping my body. I turned my head as best I could to see my left hand. The material preventing me from moving stretched, stuck to my body. I pulled but it refused to budge. The thread extended from under me towards the trunk of a tree. I looked to the other side and found myself within a cluster of trees of an unknown forest. The gooey thread's embrace kept me rooted where it touched my back. It took a moment for my mind to comprehend it.

"Oh, fuck no. Nope, nope, nope." I turned back to my arm and struggled against the spider web holding me in place. "What the absolute hell is this dream? Please just let me wake up now."

The web pulled against my skin and the sudden pain made my mind reel. Red splotches pushed through the fabric of my rolled-up sweater and rolled down my arm. A wet warmth spread across my back. I huffed and watched blood course down my arm.

Oxygen flowed in through hyperventilated gasps. I screamed and pulled myself up. The thread stretched and tore. Still stuck, I could sit up halfway. Through tatters in my sweater, crimson gashes scarred my abdomen and gushed fresh fluid. I collapsed back into the blood-soaked threads as the pain set in. My eyes fluttered and a wave of consuming cold gnawed at my bones.

My eyes shut. The anxiety ebbed away but the panic lingered. I took a breath.

'I'm so damn tired. What the hell...'

“Wake up.”

My eyes sprang open, pushing through a sheet of ash sprinkled on my eyelids. I blinked the thin powder away. I couldn't turn my head. The voice felt familiar.

“You're experiencing an illusionary mirage created to poison your mind and soul. You are here because you're able to fight against it. The moment you accept it as such and fall asleep, you will die.”

It took a second to connect it to the voice in my reoccurring dream. I moved and the ash covering my body sifted off my body.

“A mirage...? What is this, a game or something?” The words contorted in my throat and lodged themselves there. “Where the hell am I?”

“Not important now. It's coming.”

The web rustled. *Click, click, click.* A metallic click reverberated through the forest, bouncing off the trees. I mashed my teeth together and squeezed until my whole body shook. The first leg hooked the threads at my feet, followed by a second, then a third. When it stopped at eight, I wished I had died already.

“Oh no. Naw, screw this. Screw whatever the hell this is. You've got to be shitting me...”

A black body arose from the center of the eight legs along with a head. Eight crimson eyes the color of my blood blinked in intermittent intervals. Around a mouth of jagged teeth, two metallic mandibles clicked and the sound echoed through the forest. With legs twice as tall as me and a carapace darker than midnight, the monster crawled toward me. Its golden-plated abdomen ascended from below the web.

“Can we please just bring back the dragon, man? Anything besides whatever the hell this is.” Every word that followed was a slew of curses.

The spider stood over me and clicked its mandibles together. A mouthful of white foam spilled from its maw and flowed down onto me. The foam ebbed through my clothes. *It was warm.* It coated me in its slimy yet sticky presence.

“Steel your mind,” the mysterious voice cut in once more. “It isn't real—you're in control here.”

“The hell I am!” I looked back at the spider. It continued to click its mandibles and eyed me down. “Remind me how the hell this isn't real?”

“Focus. That being is simply an image created in your mind from the effects of a spell cast on you. You're not necessarily sleeping or dreaming in the conventional sense but you're under the influence of magic and the moment we break free, it'll disappear.”

“Spell...? This ain't no RPG game or something, man!”

“I get it, you’re scared. But it isn’t real and that thing is an illusion within your mind. It isn’t real. We can fight back against it using our own magic.”

The spider roared and spittle flew from its jaws as it clicked them in preparation for its feast.

I laid my head back and closed my eyes. “Look, I don’t give two shits what I need to do to make that thing go away but if you think we can do it, I’m game.”

“It will only work if you trust me.”

The spider raised its abdomen into the air and bent down on its two front legs. It clicked its mandibles again, this time inches from my face.

“Given the situation, do I have a choice?”

“Good point. Do as I tell you.”

I focused my mind as the voice told me to. By not focusing on my fears, my arms came free of the gooey thread holding them down. I raised them in front of me, palms forward and aimed at the spider.

“Repeat after me,” the voice commanded.

His words echoed in my mind.

I fought the urge to cry. “Are you screwing with me? How will saying that anime-shit help right now? This is ridiculous!”

Warm foam dripped from the ends of its mandibles into my face. I screamed internally and locked my lips together to avoid letting it enter my mouth.

“You feel that? Still believe this is a dream?”

“Screw you, man! Is this a joke to you?”

A mandible touched my cheek. It scraped and prickled against my skin, prodding it gently like a razor assessing the length of hair before trimming it. My bladder let go.

“No, it very much isn’t. That’s why I told you to say what I said, even if it sounds ridiculous. Your words are power. Repeat the activation phrase and we can end this.”

Tears rolled down my cheeks. “Fuck me, dude.” I closed my eyes and sucked up my tears.

“Autiro, activate,” I repeated the words echoing in my head. “Transcendent Wrath!”

An orange glow spread around the length of my arm from my elbow down to my fingertips. Like fireflies flying off from the trunk of a tree, wisps of orange and white ash burned away to reveal a



series of white plate armor overlaid upon my arm. Within the center of each hand, an orange and black eye glowed.

“Focus on your hands. Imagine a bright orange flame. Imagine the heat. The clearer you can picture that image in your head the better. I will provide what you need.”

All of my thoughts focused on a scene of me burning the spider with a flamethrower. I imagined the heat to be so hot that the spider melted before it's body could even turn to ash. My hand felt warm.

“Open your eyes now.”

I opened my eyes and found my arm no longer attached to the web. In the center of my palm sat a coalescence of blue and orange flames like the emission of a blow torch kneaded into a perfect sphere.

“Now throw it like you would a ball. Preferably, don't miss.”

I imagined the fireball in my hands shooting forward towards the spider. Following my will, the ball of flame elongated along one point, forming a shaft with a sharp head like a spear. The point jutted forward and struck the spider between the two mandibles into its open mouth. The fire splashed like water through the monster's maw and coursed down its throat.

The monster craned back on its back legs and shook. It rocked back and forth as the last of the fire left my hand. The plates of its exoskeleton began to hiss and heave. Orange cracks shattered through the metallic outsides. Steam vented through the cracks from the cooking flesh on the inside. The spider's constant pitching back and forth caused a back leg to lose its grip on the web and it slipped. In an attempt to recover, two more of its back legs lost their footing. Without enough legs to hold itself upright, the giant spider tipped backward. Pillars of fire erupted from the cracks and the whole being fell off the web. Its body crashed against the forest floor below.

“And just like that, the itsy-bitsy spider fell off its web. I don't think it will be climbing up the waterspout again for a while.”

I clenched my jaw and let myself sink back. “Screw you, man.”

The forested world began to disintegrate into polygons of matter. The trees shattered apart into polyhedrals the world pulled from the scenery, leaving triangles of white nothingness in its place. As the web disintegrated, I floated down on my back to an invisible floor in the white world.

“You did it, Partner. I knew you were the one, I just knew it. I'm so proud of you.”

“Who are you?” I asked. “And what the hell just happened?”

“As I mentioned, you were caught in an illusion created within your mind with the intent to kill you. I was able to intervene, however, and we managed to push the magic out of you.”

I shook my head. “What? Who the hell are you?”

“That’s not an easy question to answer. You see—”

“Start with a name. Maybe even a fun fact.” I closed my eyes. I wished these dreams would just stop and I could be normal. Instead, I felt exhausted and drained, even in my dreams. “I can’t handle anything complicated right now. I’m tired.”

“That’s normal. You just used magic for the first time and paid part of the cost so your body is likely low on myst. You’ll recover. As for who I am, my name is Zekereih.”

A spike of pain shot through my head like an ax splitting it in two.

“Don’t worry—things, as they are now, are fine and you aren’t in any danger now. But that won’t be the case once you wake up. I will be there to explain, but the key to all this is to not freak out and draw attention to yourself. Am I clear?”

“The opposite, actually. You’re talking about magic, and—”

“We are out of time—it’s time to wake up.”

“Wait,” I said. “Come on, man—I have so many questions.”

“I’m sure you have questions, Azerith Ramiero. And I will answer them, I promise. But for now, our time together must end. I bid you farewell and I will see you soon. All will be revealed, I promise.”

“Hold on, please. For the love of God, please. Wait!”

The end-of-the-period bell sounded and I awoke with a jump. Startled, I looked around at the familiar sights of Ms. Acanari’s calculus classroom. Preoccupied with jamming things into their bags and walking out of the room, no one paid my sudden awakening any mind.

I looked down at my pants. Fortunately, my pants remained dry. I breathed easy and sat back in the chair.

On the desk in front of me was the handout for today’s assignment. My body clenched. As if the derivatives weren’t scary enough, a black spider with legs bent at weird angles, the struggled to squirm to the opposite side of the page from me. A tiny plume of smoke trailed upwards from its deformed legs. I shuddered.

“Azerith.” My teacher’s voice brought me back to the present world. “Are you okay? You looked sick when you walked in and slept for the whole class. Was it a migraine?”

“Yeah,” I trailed off. “Something like that.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” she replied. “I left the worksheet you missed in class today on your desk. If you have any questions, email me after school. You should head to class now; you only have two minutes left.”

I lifted my backpack and dropped it on my desk. The textbooks in my bag slammed against the desk with a thud. Ms. Acanari flinched as I pulled out the worksheet and scraped the spider’s guts off the paper using the edge of the desk.

“Thank you,” I added the sheet to my folder. “I’m sorry for falling asleep in class again.”

My teacher continued to stare at the folder in my hands and only nodded her head in response. Over the four years I had spent in this school, Ms. Acanari had always accepted my condition. Though I hated her subject, I loved her as a teacher.

“I’ll see what I can do on my own,” I said. “If not, I’ll ask around first and turn to you if all else fails.”

“Good,” she replied before handing me a light blue slip of paper. “Here’s a hall pass explaining your situation. Get going.”

I thanked her one more time before walking out the door towards my classroom in the home economics wing of the school. Behind me, Ms. Acanari mashed her teeth and continued to stare at the desk I’d occupied during class.

~ § >™

Anxiety from what I had seen in my dream followed me through the rest of the day. I hadn’t fully decompressed the dream this morning yet either.

In Advanced Placement Japanese, we discussed a school trip our school put on every two years. This year, our school voted that in three months, we’d be able to go to Tokyo, Japan. I couldn’t wait to see the origin of the video games, anime, and manga that I loved so much.

Despite the fun of planning our trip that day, I couldn’t focus on anything.

“We should be good with that, right?”

I shuddered hearing a voice bring me back from my thoughts. I turned to face him.

“You alright, man?” Luke asked.

Your standard introvert, Luke loved anything with electronics, computers, or circuits. Luke spent most of his free time writing his own computer programs. If you needed help with something tech-related, Luke was the guy.

I shrugged my shoulders. "I'm good. Just stayed up too late last night I guess."

"Too busy on the grind?" Alex asked.

"Yeah, something like that."

"We can talk games now, right?" My other best friend, Jeremy "Remy" Revel asked from Luke's left. Remy hailed from a Puerto-Rican family of professional chefs that could pass as comedians and always needed computer help. Alex loved Remy's parents. He especially loved their money.

While Remy and Luke proceeded to talk about dungeon crawling and video games, my mind roamed to the dreams from this morning. Could I even call them dreams? My mind drifted back to the girl with red hair.

I closed my eyes and leaned back in my chair. 'God, she was beautiful.'

"Hey, Azerith." I shot forward in my seat. Across from me, Rosalie Taleriken smiled. "Any big plans for the weekend?"

Rosalie Talerikin's father served in the Minnesota State Senate and her mother led the school board and her own law firm. Her mother gave her both her strawberry-blonde hair and her assertive, almost controlling, personality.

"Kinda," I replied. "I mean, we're all playing video games on Sunday night I guess."

"Does that mean you're free tomorrow?"

"Actually," Kari jumped in from my right, "Azerith's hanging out with me tomorrow. He's not free at all this weekend."

"Well, I want to go to the movies." Rosalie smiled.

I winced.

"Of course you do..." Kari mumbled.

"Remember how we all went and saw that one superhero movie with Kari and her boyfriend when it first came out, Azerith? The sequel is out and I think it would be a lot of fun to go as a group. What do you think?"

"Yes, what do you think, Azerith?" Kari asked.

I looked at Kari. The look on my face told me exactly how I should think and the tapping of her fingernails against the desk echoed in my eardrums. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath to keep the tightening in my chest and the butterflies in my stomach in check.

Rosalie served as president of our school's student council and held the highest GPA out of every student in our school. She worked part-time at a nursing home to save money for college even though her parents planned to cover anything her full-ride scholarship into Yale's pre-med program didn't. Literally, she was perfect.

"Come on Azerith," Rosalie's voice peeled my eyes open. "It'll be just like old times, you know?"

I leaned back in my chair and stared at the ceiling.

Rosalie's mother was my uncle's lawyer when he'd been busted and she needed a guy to fix her laptop. Rosalie and I had been in classes together since the third grade but had never talked until then. After I finished installing a new hard drive, Rosalie surprised me by suggesting we go on a date. I took her to dinner and the movies. I mustered the courage to ask her out soon after.

I stole a look at Paris. He shook his head in turn. Remy and Luke offered the same gesture.

"I mean, I and, you know, Kari and stuff," I said.

"Why don't we all go as a big group?" Rosalie countered. "Paris, you and Megan are already going right?"

Paris froze. He looked to me. His eyes bounced back to Rosalie once she realized she was staring at him.

To his side, his girlfriend, Megan replied, "We're going to the 7:45 showing."

Remy blew out a heavy breath. "I'm out."

"Me too," said Luke. "We got a raid."

"Hey," I said. "I could do some raiding this weeke—"

"Is that okay with you, Kari?" Rosalie asked.

I wanted to bury my head in my hands. Shit was about to blow worse than the relationship between Austria-Hungary and Serbia after the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand.

"It's up to Azerith," Kari looked to me and smiled, her lips drawn tight in a smile I knew wasn't because she was in a good mood. "I'll do whatever he wants to do."

The tension in the air felt palpable. I removed my glasses and wiped the sweat from them. I looked to Kari. The glare she directed at Rosalie and the smile Rosalie offered in return told me everything I needed to know.

'Screw it, I'm over her and I'll prove it with this.'

"I mean, I guess. I've kind of wanted to see it for a while. Kari and I will already be there anyway." I asked Kari and Rosalie.

Paris slammed his head against the desk and groaned. Megan elbowed him in the side.

"How perfect," Kari replied flatly. "If Azerith wants to go, it's whatever."

"Great!" Rosalie smiled. "Should we meet beforehand?"

"Azerith and I will be busy. We're going shopping together," Kari stared daggers at Rosalie, "*just the two of us* beforehand. Sorry I guess."

The bell rang fifteen seconds later, signaling Kari and me to pack up and head over to our mentor site.

"Well, I'll drive separately, and we'll meet up at the theater. Try not to be late you two. Or rather, don't be late, Kari." Rosalie lifted her bag and went on her way to her next class.

"At least someone's happy about this situation..." Kari fought with her textbook to shove it into her bag. "Asshole Azerith always gotta be a goddamn asshole..."

Kari and I left the room together. She didn't talk to me while we walked towards the front doors to the parking lot. She continued to mumble under her breath and I heard her call me an asshole at least another three times before we made it to the double doors leading outside.

"What's up?" I poked her arm. "You've looked upset ever since Rosalie brought up going to the movies together."

She stopped and offered a deadpan look with her head turned to the side. "You're shitting me with that question, right?"

"Okay, to be fair, I tried to reject her and she did her thing. I promised you I wouldn't go for her again, remember?"

Her cheeks turned red. One of her nervous ticks, she rubbed a strand of her hair between her fingertips. "I just wish she would stop trying to flirt with you and insert herself every chance she gets. And the fact that she thinks she can just have her way after treating you like shit just because she's pretty and attractive pisses me off."

Kari stopped in the center of the hall and stared at the tile at our feet. She clenched her jaw and mulled something over in her mind. I shifted my backpack on my shoulder.

"Hey, Azerith..." She chewed on her lip. We both stepped to the side of the hallway and watched a couple holding hands walk past us out of the school. I looked back at her and she looked me in the eyes. "Do you... Still like Rosalie?"

I paused and debated my answer. “Honestly? Yeah, a little bit, I guess. I never did stop liking her.” I paused and thought about how I wanted to phrase this. “But I don’t want—I know that it wouldn’t work between us again.”

“What if you thought it would?” Kari asked. “Like, work between her and you and stuff.”

I shifted on my feet. I didn’t need to read too deep into this to know I was fucking it all up. “Okay, after how she broke up with me, it’s not worth the effort. I’m only going to the movies this time because I’ve wanted to see this movie for a while and you’re going as well.”

Kari’s lips twitched as she mulled that over. “Do you promise that you won’t go out with her if she asks you again?”

Her question put up warning flags. I studied her face. My gut burned. My heart pounded in my reddening ears.

“Why are you asking that?” I countered.

“No reason,” she cross-counteracted. “Just say yes or no already!”

“Yeah, I promise.” I continued to walk ahead of her. “But what’s with that question? And what about Chad, will he be coming?”

“Forget about that. Chad and I aren’t together anymore.”

“I’m sorry, Kari.”

“Don’t be—I’m definitely not.”

Kari’s now ex-boyfriend, Chad, loved alcohol as much as he loved being a dick. We’d only met once when he nearly ran me over outside Kari’s house. We approached the doors leading outside and I held both doors open for her. The cold winter pierced through all my layers. I hate winter.

“What happened between you two?” I asked, genuinely interested. “Well, I mean beyond the fact that he’s a sack of shit.”

“I’m just tired of dealing with him. Things are changing in my life and I know what I want right now. He’s not a part of my image for the future so I’m cutting him out. Simple as that.”

After a short walk across the icy parking lot, we arrived at my car and stopped before getting in. As I fumbled in my pocket, a question formed in my head that I had to ask.

“Hey, Kari, what does your image of the future look like? We haven’t really talked about it in a while, have we?”

Kari chewed on her lips. She turned away, trying to hide the redness setting into her cheeks. My heart pounded. A fuzziness spread through my gut like a crowd of ants marching along the lining of my stomach.

She hesitated. "Can we talk about this some other time? I mean, I know what I want already but... I'm not ready to share that with anyone else just yet for, uh... Reasons, I guess?"

"Reasons?"

"Reasons. Final answer."

I found the key and stared at my hand. Kari tried her door to no avail and looked at me. She rolled her eyes seeing the key in my hand

"Come on. We're best friends and we've known each other since we were seven. Please?" I pleaded.

"I'm not telling, so stop asking. But stay away from Rosalie, okay?"

I unlocked the doors as a gesture of good faith. I couldn't trust my gut on this one—I needed her to say it. "Why are you so fixated on that?"

"Because, well..." She stopped and looked at the sky. "You know what, never mind. Now isn't a good time."

Kari got into the car with the same flustered look and stayed that way for some time.

'What kind of answer is that? I already know that Rosalie likes me. What I want to know is how you feel about me.' I thought. Instead of satisfying my longing for an answer, her reluctance to answer gave me anxiety.

Kari remained silent during most of the drive back to my house. I tried to pry more. She replied with one-word acknowledgments.

"Are you mad at me?" I asked.

She continued to look out her window. "What was your answer when you replied to Rosalie?"

"Okay, I tried to say no."

"Did you?" She asked.

"I..." She had me. "Look, I'm sorry."

She remained silent the rest of the ride. I found myself too preoccupied with my thoughts to notice the spiders building their web in my back window.



## § EPISODE THREE: Promethea; The Grimoire Guardian

Hosting User: Azerith Ramiero

Date Created: 2:30 PM March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2033

Location: Minneapolis, Minnesota—On the campus of the University of Minnesota Twin Cities

**W**e arrived at my house with good time to spare. My uncle had a ride-share service drop us off at the mall so we could get used to riding the light rail to the university. The driver dropped us off across the Mississippi River on the opposite bank from the Weisman Art Museum. Pramantha told us to cross the bridge and the silver-paneled art building would be just across the river. The exhibit, a partnership with the University planned for the next month, would show off some of our mentor's most recent findings with proceeds going towards the Make a Wish Foundation.

We disembarked the train and stopped at a bench to get our bearings. I looked over and saw a poster near the bench my mentor's face advertising the event. Originally born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1984, Professor Emirani Pramantha received his Ph.D. in archaeology from the University College of London at the age of 25. He taught history at the UofM and had a special relationship with the school.

"Did you read the briefing packet?" I asked Kari.

“Yeah,” she said. “It seemed too good to be true. I remember grandpa talking about it when they first found the prince though.”

“Everyone was talking about it,” I said. “We even learned about it in history class, remember?”

Many years later, Pramantha and his younger brother, Epiumo Pramantha, excavated texts from an Arabian prince’s tomb who claimed to have killed mythological deities akin to those in Persian, Egyptian, Greek, and Scandinavian mythologies. The texts supposedly lead them to a dig in the Sharan Desert where they found a whole city submerged deep within the soil. Artifacts from thousands of ancient cultures, trophies from ancient wars and battles, were found within the tomb with the prince.

“Professor Emirani Pramantha Presents: Prince Gilgamesh, God-slayer,” the poster read. It seemed too good to be true.

“How do you know him again?” Kari asked.

“My dad met them while working,” I said. “But like, not in a good way or anything.”

Following their find, the brothers came overseas to Minnesota to meet a client helping fund the excavation of the city. The Pramantha brothers arrived at an investor’s office only to find the client deceased. When they went outside to call the police, the killer attacked them.

“That’s actually how my parents met.”

“Wait, really?” Kari asked.

The killer managed to slice up the two brothers pretty bad. My mother, who was just getting off a shift from the hospital, lived in an apartment a block from the investor’s office and happened upon the scene walking home. She attempted to render first aid to the younger of the two brothers.

“My dad and his partner showed up and his partner died. It really messed up my dad at the time I guess.”

“Jesus, wasn’t that all over the news?” Kari asked.

“Yeah. Pramantha’s brother died in my Mom’s arms.”

Kari’s eyes widened. She stared at me, her mouth open a brows scrunching her eyes, and turned back to the poster. “And you just never thought to mention that?”

“You know I don’t like talking about my parents.”

“Yeah but that’s insane. Pramantha’s like famous and that was a big deal.”

My uncle had recounted the tale to me a few times. My father and mother tried their best, but no amount of first aid could help Epiumo Pramantha. He bled out from his wounds and died before the ambulance arrived.

Kari and I ascended a flight of stairs a few blocks from the West Bank light rail station.

I'd met Pramantha a few times as a kid and he wrote me letters from his excavations. He always brought coins and rocks from his travels to me. His last letter four months ago told me all about his most recent discovery in the Saharan Desert. Soon after deciding to come back to Minnesota, he contacted my uncle and asked to meet me now that I was older. That's how my internship started.

The cold air punched us in the face the moment we stepped onto the bridge that connected the East Bank of the Mississippi River to the West Bank, with parts of the University on either side. Across the river, the Wiesman Art Museum's polished aluminum exterior reflected the setting sun's glare into our eyes.

I shivered and my teeth chattered. "Man, I hate Minnesota winters."

"Same," Kari said. "My ancestors who moved here suck."

My cell phone read thirteen degrees Fahrenheit as the temperature. Fortunately, the bridge had a sealed-off interior hall that ran through the center of the bridge with exterior bike walking paths on either side. The hall offered minimal protection from the cold winter wind. Presumably, when we were to become students here the next year, we would walk across this bridge every day.

If I couldn't feel 90 percent of my body, I knew Kari couldn't be fairing any better in a skirt that barely covered her legs. "Aren't you cold?" I shivered.

"I'm fine." Her chattering teeth told me she was lying. "I'm not as sensitive as you are to the cold. Thanks for worrying about me though."

"I don't think I'll ever get used to these winters," I grumbled, "I've lived here my whole life, and I'm still freezing. Aren't you even a little cold?"

"A little." She paused for a moment and blushed.

'What are you blushing for?' I thought.

"...you know what would make us a little warmer?"

"Some damn hot chocolate," I joked.

Kari grabbed my hand and pushed her fingers into the gaps between mine. She inched closer to me until our arms touched. She pulled me along until my mind caught up enough to walk with her.

“There. Isn’t that a little warmer?” Her smile warmed the freezing blood within my veins.

We walked the whole way to the art museum like this. The idea of us looking like a couple to the outside world filled me with a fuzzy warmth. The butterflies bounced in my stomach thinking about it.

Every year, the U’s different clubs painted the enclosed hall’s walls to advertise themselves. We talked the whole way about which ones we wanted to join together. In the end, the walk went by faster than I had hoped.

I held the door open for Kari and a chestnut-haired woman in her mid-twenties greeted us at the entrance. “You must be Azerith,” she smiled.

“Yes,” I answered, “and this is Kari. We’re here to see Professor Emirani?”

“Of course. I’m his assistant, Claire. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise,” Kari replied.

Claire waved a hand and had us follow her into the museum.

“Just a head’s up,” she stopped us for a moment, “he’s a mess right now. Don’t mention the opening date and you’ll be fine.”

She led us through the building to the center of the exhibit. A middle-aged man stood combing through a set of old, yellowed books. Around him, everything hung in complete disarray: boxes lay strewn throughout the room overflowing with packing peanuts, books left scattered everywhere, and a few shelves, tables, and display cases sitting in varying stages of completion. The exhibition cases remained empty and the exhibits in their cases. Dust and dirt lingering in the air gave the room a hazy, cinematic ambiance.

Professor Pramantha looked up from his book and saw Kari and I. Pramantha’s mouth formed a crooked grin. His eyes stared at our hands still locked together. My cheeks burned and I let go of Kari’s hand.

Today was the first time I’d met Professor Pramantha face to face since my parents died. His sharp facial features and amber-colored eyes hadn’t changed much since then.

“It’s been too long, Azerith.” His British accent came out smooth and deep like fine amaretto. “You are much taller now than when I last saw you. How long has it been? How have you been? Oh, did you enjoy your copy of the Sacred Exodus I sent you?”

Professor Pramantha’s findings landed him a spot in the development of a game called the Sacred Exodus as the studio’s mythology and history expert and helped make the game, which had you adventure around numerous open worlds fighting key figures from various mythologies,

as realistic as possible. I thought it was so cool when he sent me a letter in the mail along with copies for myself and Kari for free after the game came out.

“It’s been ten years,” I replied casually. “I’m doing pretty good and the game is absolutely amazing. We play it like every day with our friends. How about you? Did you hear that I was accepted into the University?”

“Busy, and yes, congratulations. I know your parents would be just as proud of you as I am. I was hoping to have you come sooner so we could have lunch or something, but I have been stuck here, preparing for this exhibit.”

He looked at the stack of boxes, lifted his arms shoulder high, and dropped them back down.

“I still have yet to come up with a color scheme for the pieces and some kind of order to it all.”

“We saw a poster at the bust stop for the exhibit,” I said. “They’re calling it the exhibit of Gilgamesh the God-Slayer or something.”

“You’re kidding.” He groaned. “I asked them not to print that. That’s not historically accurate at all.”

“Yeah, but the posters looked cool though. It got me hyped.”

He shook his head. “I’m dreadful with these kinds of things, so it’ll be nice to have an intuitive mind such as yours and Miss Reeves to help me make it ‘hype’ or whatever you kids are saying these days.”

The professor lunged forward with an outstretched hand. “Pardon my manners, Miss Reeves, it’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance. Please feel free to call me Emirani or Emir. Congratulations on being accepted to the University yourself.”

“Thank you, sir. It’s an honor to meet you,” she answered. “Please, call me Kari.”

Pramantha kissed Kari’s hand. I scowled at the blush in her cheeks.

“Sir,” Kari asked, “can I ask why you requested our help? Neither of us has any background in this field and we’re only high schoolers... Wouldn’t it have been better to have asked someone who had more experience?”

“Mostly, I extended this offer since I wanted a chance to further my godson’s career. I owe him that much. Despite having no background or training, you’re both young, bright, and creative—all things I’m not. Matteo speaks highly of you, Kari, and I trust his judgment. Now, I presume you have both read the materials that I have provided you earlier this month?”

We both nodded for him to continue.

“Excellent. Today I planned to show off the more exciting ancient relics such as this one,” Professor Pramantha said as he held up a doll-sized statue with mechanical joints and limbs. He shook it to make it dance and chuckled. “Now, most of these relics have already been shown on the internet and are old news. There are plenty of ones we haven’t shown off, however. I want the audience to experience the artifacts we have shown first so we can really wow them at the end with the new stuff.”

Pramantha opened the book in his hands and flipped to the back of the book. He jotted down a few notes.

“We have roughly five months to prepare for this exhibit and that’s as far as I’ve gotten on my own. I have discussed your class trip to Japan with Matteo, so there will be no work for those two weeks. That is valuable time, but what do you do?”

He checked the watch on his wrist.

“The first step,” he continued to read something on the digital display while talking, “is deciding what we should use and what we should send off to the museums instead. So for today, please feel free to help me unpack most of the rubbish and look through it to find the good stuff.”

He pointed to a stack of boxes near the far wall.

“Leave the big boxes marked with red tape shut for now since we will most likely need to shift them around multiple times.”

Professor Pramantha gave us vinyl gloves for our hands. A box filled with scrolls and books drew my eye. Pramantha peeked from his journal as I approached it. My first glance told me to pass them off as modern books. However, as we took off more and more lids, I realized that every “artifact” that we were supposed to be working with didn’t look as old as I’d expected. The scent of fresh dirt wafted from every page.

“Hold on, aren’t most of these artifacts over 10,000 years old?” I raised an eyebrow. “Shouldn’t they be put in some kind of sealed container or something? Are these even real?”

“Good observation, Azerith,” he replied. “That is one of the strangest parts about what we found. We tested the sediment around the tomb and the materials on the outside of the tomb to deduce the approximate year in which the city was built and when it fell below the surface of the earth. We also tested the topsoil using carbon dating with multiple samples. Everything checked out. We couldn’t find any entrances to the surface nor any evidence within the city of anything living there since it was buried. We did, however, find that one of the tombs in the center of the city had been disturbed about 2,000 years ago and that a body had since been buried there.”

Professor Pramantha walked over and pulled a book from a box near his coat.

“We tested the books too. The ink, covers, and pages of these books all test to be between 19,000 and 2,000 years old. Keep in mind that paper itself wasn’t invented until 105 AD. While

these aren't made of paper per se, these books themselves are much too advanced for their time."

Kari assisted me and together we took the top off a box Professor Pramantha pointed to and set it off to the side. The book's creators bound them with a grayish stone that felt smooth and cold to the touch. The paper frayed at the edges. I sniffed it. I balked at the heavy scent of resin used to glue the pages to the stone. Some books used ornate cloths dyed all sorts of different colors for decoration. The texture of the cloth rubbed against my skin with a soft scratchiness like the red tape the Red Cross used to bind your arm after you gave blood.

One book stood out to me above the others. I pulled a bundle of red cloth from the center of a box and unwrapped it. The wrapping gave way to the most beautiful book I'd ever seen. The creator of this book bound it in a lightweight copper-like metal as opposed to stone covers. Gold facets held all sorts of gems used to decorate its spine. The front cover featured a skull made of white diamond for its body, gold trim, ruby eyes, and alternating emeralds and sapphires for its teeth.

"Holy crap," I eyed the book. "Are these gemstones real?"

"100% authentic," Emirani replied. "That book is the most valuable thing I have ever found. While I find diamonds to be objectively worthless in reality, I'm sure the front cover itself could sell for a small fortune to some private collector."

Kari remained oblivious to the book as if she couldn't even see it. She opened a plain book and knit her eyebrows. The language scrawled on parchment-like pages featured characters that baffled every language expert in the world. According to our study materials, whoever wrote this book used a written language with an emphasis on line order and form similar to Chinese calligraphy, but the characters closely resembled those of the Greek or Phoenician alphabet. The pages didn't rip when you turned them and showed no signs of oxidation.

"So, I bet you are wondering how this is all possible." He chuckled. "Well, we don't know either and that's what makes it so exciting. Another fun fact: the composition of the books' spines matches those of meteorites with trace amounts of elements scientists haven't discovered yet."

I couldn't help but stare at him, dumbfounded. 'How is that even possible?' I thought to myself.

I looked at the golden book in my hands. I shoved a finger in my ear and wiggled it about. My ears rang with a low murmur. I looked behind me and then around.

"Do you guys hear that?" I asked.

"Hear what?" Kari asked.

My eyes twitched. I looked back at the book. I blinked. As if on fire, wisps of black smoke poured from the paper pages around the cover. I blinked. The smoke vanished.

Professor Pramantha shut the book in his hands and shifted his full attention to me. “It appears that book’s really caught your attention, Azerith. We found it in the hands of a corpse within the great tomb. The casket sealed the corpse with a vacuum seal that preserved the body within as if it had died yesterday. We believe this man was our prince. We have no idea how old these two items are. No one has been able to open the book’s lock either.”

I found the lock Pramantha mentioned on the book’s foreedge. My finger fit perfectly in the circular lock. Ice shot through the fingertip pressed against it. I pulled my hand away. The book slipped from the cloth in my hand and hit the ground before I could catch it. The murmuring in my ears swelled into a low conversation of gibberish.

“Is everything alright Azerith?” Kari said at my side, her voice distant. “Maybe you should sit down. Is it another panic attack? Azerith?”

I dropped to my knees. The desire to pick up the book dominated my mind.

I grabbed it.

Waves of frost blasted through my fingertips. I watched the diamond skull on the book’s cover come to life with a faint white glow. Vermillion cracks coursed through the white light, turning the diamonds red. The two rubies set in the skull’s eyes turned a cloudy yellow. I turned the book over to look at the lock. My thumb moved on its own. It pressed itself against the circular clasp.

My fingertip split apart. A sharp needle raised from the clasp stabbed through the skin and flesh. Blood blossomed from my torn flesh. The needle sucked the blood like a syringe, pulling it through its hollow core and back into the clasp from which it raised. The protrusion depressed back into the clasp and the now flat surface under my thumb rotated clockwise. The lock clicked and released.

I stumbled back a step and the book tipped in my hand. The ethereal smoke I’d seen radiating from its surface came to life. It stretched and formed chains around my hand and continued to coil around my arm. My head nearly split apart from the pain.

“Professor Emirani,” I stumbled again. “I don’t feel so good.”

Black spots splotted my vision. They spread, clotting out my vision with nauseous black smoke. My body convulsed and I dropped to my knees.

‘Ugh... What the hell is this book...?’

“Azerith...!”

I could hear Kari screaming but I couldn’t respond. The black spots consumed. The murmuring accelerated to loud screams.

*“Submit. Dream. Become. Ascend.”*



My body fell to the ground, the book barred against my chest by my chain-wrapped hands.

*“Complete your task. Purge the invaders.”*

~ § > ™

Touching the book returned me to the scene on the mountainside. The familiar scent of cherry blossoms and vanilla eased the coldness coursing down to my toes. Water droplets floated in the air and in the distance, I spotted the city and the familiar storm clouds.

My dream continued to play out as it always did. The clouds rolled towards the ground and a bolt of lightning lit them a flame. I puked. My eyes bled.

“I touched a book,” a voice identical to mine said from my mouth. “Seriously,” I said, “I don’t know anything about this!”

Another wave of heat and sulfur washed over me. I held my shirt against my nose and kept myself from breathing. “You offered blood to the Grimoire and initiated the transference. Stand and bear proof you are worthy of his knowledge.”

Another bolt of lightning.

“Speak your name, *interferer*,” the dragon snarled.

The man from my dreams stood opposite the dragon. “My name is Zekereih Cherubim von Mohora. And this boy here,” he waved a hand to me, “shall be your master.”

I rolled over and looked behind me. Seeing no one besides me and the man in the field, my eyes opened wide and I turned back to the man with confusion. “Say what now?”

The fiery being looked at me with its fiery eyes and growled.

I raised my hands. “Alright, look. I’m really not trying to be the master of anything. Honestly, I have no idea what is going on right now and I really don’t know this guy.”

The man named Zekereih chuckled and walked over to me. He offered his hand to help me up. “Come on, we’ve met at least once, haven’t we? Besides, we made a pretty great team dealing with that spider earlier today.”

It clicked in my mind. “*You*, you’re the voice from my dreams. The guy from the time with the spider.”

“See? Now you remember who I am. Well, given that we’ve already met and we’re stuck together for a while, why don’t we skip the formalities and you can just call me ‘Partner’? From here forward, I predict we’ll be quite close.”

The man stuck out his hand to me.

“This is how you do it here on Earth, right?”

I looked at his hand and back at the dragon. I held my eyes shut and inhaled. “I mean, hey,” I exhaled. “if you can get me out of this situation, I will call you anything you want, man.”

I took his hand and shook it.

The inside of the dragon’s mouth burned white. “Infernal being, begone!”

White fire spewed from the dragon’s mouth towards us. I screamed and Zekereih raised his hand. The white flames washed over an invisible barrier. Zekereih raised his other hand and snapped his fingers. “Dimensional Art,” he shouted, “Grand Stasis.”

Like a firework, a blue speck of light raced forward from his fingers towards the dragon. Halfway, the speck of light vanished. A few seconds later, the speck appeared again near the dragon’s head and detonated in a flash of white light.

I blinked my eyes. I blinked them a few times.

“There,” the man clapped his hands together. “Not so hot now, are we?”

A few seconds passed and the dragon remained frozen in a stunned expression.

“What’d you do to it?” I asked.

Zekereih turned and scanned the horizon behind him. “I used magic to freeze time in a small space around it for the next few minutes.

“Magic?”

Three pillars of light descended from the sky and staked themselves into the ground. My stomach gurgled. I craned over just in time to throw up into the grass. Vomit forced its way up my gut and poured out from my lips. Stomach acid and the remains of lunch splashed to the ground at my feet.

Zekereih grabbed me by the shoulders and helped me stay on my feet. “Easy there. The first seal is breaking. That’s good.”

“Says the one not puking their guts out into the grass. Damn it, my eyes...!”

My eyes burned. Droplets of sanguine fluid flowed from my tear ducts and streaked down my face.

“I’ve watched all of my descendants go through the same thing. It’s part of the process and will pass soon. Bleeding from the ducts is new though. How peculiar.”

I threw up again in the same spot. Relief came after the third time.

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand.

“Can someone please explain what the hell is happening right now?”

A shadow stepped from under the pillar of light. My bloody eyes opened wide. The light dissipated behind the shadow and Emirani Pramantha walked towards us. He dropped to his knees at Zekereih’s feet, bowing before the man at my side.

The professor bowed his head. “I have returned, my lord.”

“My lord...?” I asked. “What the hell is this?”

“I have told you many times, Pramantha,” the man ignored me. “You don’t need to bow before me. Stand as my equal, old friend.”

Pramantha followed along with ignoring me and stood as told. “As you wish.”

I turned my head and blinked twice. “Professor, what the hell is going on?”

The two other pillars of light shattered and two cloaked figures walked towards us.

The figure to the left pointed at me. “Language, Azerith.”

My jaw drooped. “You’re shitting me.”

“Language,” the newcomer spoke again. “I mean it, Azerith.”

“Pramantha,” shouted a woman to his right. She removed the hood from her head and scowled at the professor with blue eyes that could kill. “This is not what we discussed!”

I recognized the woman’s blonde hair and eyes. “Say what.” I blurted.

“What?” Zekereih smiled at me. “She’s your aunt, yes?”

The woman raced towards me and rested her hands on my shoulders. She grabbed my cheeks, turned my head, and looked me over. “Are you alright, Azerith?” My uncle, Paris’ mother, and my parental guardian asked. “You didn’t get hurt by any of this, did you? I wouldn’t forgive *him* if you did.”

The professor rolled his eyes. “Even if he did get hurt, he’s in a state where his wounds wouldn’t transfer over to his real body once this is over. So long as he doesn’t die, getting a few scratches and scrapes would be fine.”

“And you’re here *how*? Better question, why are we here and why is there a goddamn dragon?” I asked.

“Why is there a dragon, Pramantha?” My Aunt asked. “You never mentioned anything about this.”

“The book you touched earlier was enchanted by its master to bring you here,” Pramantha answered. “I planted that book in that stack to see if it’d react to your blood. It worked, but it appears a security feature was installed in the book.”

“Bruh, what?” I asked. “What...” I waved to my aunt and uncle. “Why are they here?”

My uncle looked over to the fiery dragon suspended in time. “We wanted to be here to make sure everything goes okay, even if we can’t actually help you do anything here. We couldn’t rest if anything happened and we didn’t know how or why again.”

My shoulders slumped. Memories of my parents danced in and out of my mind.

“We have about forty seconds before the magic wears off,” the man named Zekereih said. “We need to prepare ourselves so Azerith may defeat it.”

I turned to Pramantha. “What happens if I can’t beat it?” I asked. “Better yet, how do I even beat that? I don’t know anything about this magic stuff you all keep talking about.”

A bead of sweat dripped down Pramantha’s brow. “Well, about that.”

My aunt pressed her hands to her hips. “Yes, Pramantha,” my aunt smiled, “what happens if he can’t defeat it?”

Pramantha wiped a hand over his face. “Look, I said there would be a dragon, Madeline. As promised, there is in fact a dragon here.”

“Where is here?” I asked.

Pramantha shifted on his feet. “We’re in your Akashic Plane between your soul realm and Purgatory, Azerith. Madeline, I told you that beforehand. You know what that means.”

I raised my hand. “I don’t. What’s the Akashic Plane? And *how* are you here?”

My aunt clapped her hands together. “Please enlighten us, professor. What does it mean if he can’t defeat the dragon here in his Akashic Plane?”

“Look,” Zekereih stepped between my aunt and the professor. “We don’t have time to explain all of that right now in detail. To put it briskly, Azerith, the you here now is your soul, which we call Akashi. Akashi is the basis of existence that creates the living. If your Akashi is defeated here and the dragon wins, put nicely, your body will remain alive but all cognitive function will cease. We are all in a similar situation if Azerith doesn’t defeat it as well.”

I nodded my head. “So basically I’d be in a coma, right?” My face scrunched up. “Cool, cool. How wonderful. Cool, cool, cool...”

My aunt stepped around Zekereih and pointed at the professor. “That’s not what we agreed on, Pramantha. You said he’d be 100% safe and you certainly didn’t mention anything about the rest of us dying if he fails either.”

“Madeline,” the professor answered, “I specifically specified that in order to make use of the Grimoire, we would need to transfer ourselves to Azerith’s Akashic Plane and Azerith would need to defeat the Grimoire’s guardian for it to recognize him as its master. That’s the guardian, Madeline. I told you the importance of clearing this trial and having him meet with Zekereih. What has changed?”

My aunt raised an eyebrow and a primal rage crept into her eyes. The black recess of her pupil narrowed to a slit. “The possibility of him dying has been brought to my attention, Pramantha,” she snarled. “That’s what has changed.”

“Hey,” I shouted. Everyone’s gaze drew to me — their stares felt like daggers pressing into my chest. “Can we focus on the dragon here, please? I need a goddamn plan so that I don’t die to this thing.”

“Azerith,” my uncle shook his head. “Language, please. You’re doing great here.”

“No!” I shouted. “Screw that. First, there was that damn spider this morning and I barely survived that. Now there’s a damn dragon there that I have to beat and if I don’t, I’m going to die. Screw my language, I’m freaking the hell out here. Someone please; tell me you have a damn plan.”

“Hold on,” my aunt shouted, her hands and body shuddering with rage. “What was that about a spider?”

The dragon shook. Gold dust sprinkled down from its body as it stirred once more. Its eyes drifted down to our party. Embers crackled between its snarling lips. “More interferers!” The being roared at the sky and released a torrent of scarlet flames. “Challenger, you dare to allow them to stand between you and me during this trial? Inconceivable!”

Zekereih laid his hand on my shoulder. “Introduce yourself,” he commanded. “State your full name and your intent to challenge it.”

I cleared my throat. “My name is Azerith Ramiero. I challenge you, I guess?”

“To combat,” Zekereih said.

“To combat?” I asked.

“To combat.” He repeated.

“Hell no,” I replied.

“Do it or else it will roast all of us alive.”

“You do it.”

Zekereih rolled his tongue against his cheek and chuckled. His hands gripped my shoulders. “I know you’re nervous but you’re the one that needs to challenge the dragon here, Partner. We need it to recognize you as its master.”

I groaned. “I’m not a fighter, dude.”

Zekereih gave my shoulders a tight squeeze. “Fortunately, I am and I have some tricks up my sleeve. You just need to get the ball rolling.”

I closed my eyes. A single, tearless sob crept to the surface. I bottled up all my emotions and looked up at the dragon. “I challenge you, dragon, to combat. I’m going to kick your ass, not die here, and go the hell home so I can do normal high school stuff.”

Zekereih chuckled. “Alright, a little strong, but the sentiment was there.”

The dragon snorted smoke from its nostrils. “Very well.” It unfurled its wings and flapped them, firing a wave of burning air strong enough to make everyone but Zekereih stumble. “I accept your challenge.”

The dragon stomped its foot against the ground and my knees would have buckled if it weren’t for Zekereih standing behind me. The dragon’s nostrils flared. It snorted and a stream of fire spewed towards us.

My knees wobbled on instinct. I gulped my spit down.

Zekereih chuckled. “My cue.”

The mysterious man turned me around and pressed two fingers against my forehead. An azure spark cracked from his fingertips against my skin. His body glowed with a golden aura.

“Breathe,” he commanded.

My tightened lungs expanded, pulling in cool air through my mouth. The air around Zekereih distorted. The man’s body dissolved, swirling into a golden fog, starting with his fingertips and out to the rest of his body. I breathed in again. The fog rolled into me, through my mouth and

into my body. An inner warmth, unlike the heat from the dragon, spread from my lungs through the rest of my body.

“Zekereih?” I called out. A plume of golden fog escaped my mouth and dissipated into the air.

“I am here within you. This is where the real fun will start.”

The hairs covering my body stood on end. Inside my body, the fiery light coursed through my muscles, joints, nerves, and blood vessels. I held out an arm and watched as speckles of translucent white light beaded from the skin like droplets rising in the air. The beading intensified to the point of looking as if my skin burned with translucent white fire.

I lifted the back of my feet off the ground and set them down a few times.

“Feeling lighter?” Zekereih read my mind.

“A little, I guess,” I said.

“Wait until you feel this then. Autiro, activate.” The ground underfoot shook. The clouds above shifted and rays of golden light pierced through the angry gray storm. “Archangel Patriarch!”

The ground under my feet erupted with liquid photoluminescence. Lava-like, the light flowed up over my head and embraced me in a fluorescent cocoon of hard light. The cocoon shattered into millions of polygons, each scattering in a different direction. The polygons of light stopped midflight. They spun and flew back to me. The particles landed on my arm and fused together to form a glimmering coating over my limbs. The light dissipated as quickly as it had landed. In its place, armguards identical to the ones that formed when I fought the spider with Zekereih attached to my arms where the light once had formed. Other polygons assembled above my head, forming a hollow ring that floated above my hair.

The dragon roared louder than ever before and the whole mountainside quaked. My aunt, uncle, and Pramantha all fell to their knees. My legs wobbled at first but straightened out and withstood the shaking enough so that I was able to remain on my feet. The dragon craned its head down and snarled through its teeth. “Archangel,” it hissed. “Have you come to take me for the Seraphim, puppet with white wings?”

It hissed and a wave of phosphoric heat blew past me. I wiped the tears it brought from my eyes.

“I am no puppet, Guardian,” said Zekereih, his voice echoing but unseen. “You clearly were created before the Seraphim’s downfall and your master’s death. The Seraphim doesn’t exist and neither shall you. Azerith, snap your fingers.”

“Why? Aren’t you skipping something important too? What’s the Seraphim?”

“Snap your fingers. My time is limited here.”

I snapped my fingers. A chime-like ring echoed. The air between the dragon and I distorted, converging and flowing into a center point like water sucked through a straw. With a pop, the air shot outwards, creating a bolt of light in its wake. The bolt of light shot to the ground and dissipated with a metallic zing, leaving a broadsword pierced into the grass.

My eyes sparkled. “Whoa, how the hell...”

“Blade Rebirth,” said Zekereih. “It’s one of the powers the Autiro you have grants you. Currently, I’m the one using here and providing all the myst for it but someday you will be able to do that too. I think. Anyways, you should grab it.”

“That’s so cool.”

I walked over and grabbed the sword’s handle. I pulled the sword out of the ground and stumbled back, surprised that the weight I expected didn’t exist.

“Magic is all about give and take, Azerith, even something as simple as that sword. I offered myst, the substance that gives me life and the building blocks behind my Akashi, and imagined the exact form of what I wanted to make. I gave more myst to make it lighter than a normal sword. All things with magic have a cost and everything created has its own costs, strengths, and weaknesses.”

The dragon craned its head up to the coalesced sphere of flames floating above its head. Now with a diameter equal to the length of a city bus, the orb’s flames heated up and burned blue. The dragon bared its fangs at the orb and a white light at the center of its core radiated out.

“Azerith.” Zekereih’s comments brought me out of my trance. “Jump.”

“But—”

“Quit second-guessing me and trust me. As your partner, I’ll never lead you astray. I need you to jump as high as you possibly can.”

I sucked in a deep breath and folded my knees. I sprang up and an electric twang raced through the nerves in my legs. Pain shot through my muscles as I ascended into the air. Twelve feet off the ground, I reached the apex of my jump. Gravity caught me, tilted me back, and pulled me down.

“Vakna.” Zekereih declared.

Glowing polygons of light collided at my back. Four streams of glowing light jettied out from my shoulder blades in opposite directions, flowing into liquid streams the length of my arms. The light caught the air and kept me from falling any further.

“They’re crude wings and ill-formed at that, but they’ll do for the first time.”



The dragon roared. Its shout made the entire world tremble. I clasped my ears with my hands as the sound rolled over me. "All of you intruders, begone!"

The fiery apparition sucked in a deep breath through its nostrils and opened its mouth. A pillar of flame shot from the dragon's maw towards me.

While tears filled my eyes, Zekereih shouted, "Wind Art, Shield of Sidhe."

The cardioid distortion of air that I'd seen Zekereih perform before shifted the air before me. The fire washed over the distortion, flowing around the obstruction as if bent like water around a rock in a stream.

"Azerith, if you tilt yourself forward, you should be able to move towards the dragon and strike it with your sword."

I tilted my body forward. By changing the pitch and tilt of my body, I could move through the air as if floating or flying. The streams of light on my back adjusted their intensity naturally, shining brighter when they needed to propel me forward. When I stopped, the lights dimmed in response.

I tilted my body forward and the lights on my back burst with bright light. I shot forward with an explosion of speed in a trajectory towards the dragon. The apparition flapped its wings and lifted itself into the air. With a powerful beat of its wings, it ascended above my trajectory. I raced past it and the ground grew closer. The wings on my back flared out and I stopped midair.

"This will definitely take some practice," Zekereih said, "but so far this two-man team situation we have is working better than I'd expected. Our Akashi seems to have identical wavelengths, so much so that there's no resistance when I act my magic through you from here. Yes... You're very promising, Azerith."

I turned to face the dragon again. "I'm not going to pretend I understand what that means."

"Right, I forget how much you don't know. Let's give it a second go then."

My enemy lunged forward with its talons. The curved consolidation of flame slashed like a sickle, the heat alone enough to make my skin blister.

"Why is it so fast...?"

"Partner, there isn't enough time to dodge. Brace yourself!"

The dragon's claw collided with my body and sent me careening through the air. My body crashed to the ground and skidded through the dirt.

I rested in the dirt for a few moments, expecting my body to be crippled or the pain to be unbearable. I attempted to move my arm, found no resistance, and rolled over. I felt no pain lifting my arm. Seeing my hand made me jolt.

“What the hell is going on with my hand?” My eyes gazed through a hole where my pinky and ring finger had once been. Another hole sat in the middle of my forearm, the edges of which were transparent with wispy edges. I sat up and looked down at my body. I screamed seeing the right quarter of my midsection being completely gone below my shoulder.

“Dude, what is going on?”

“The body you have here, Azerith, is your spiritual body—the manifestation of your Akashi—as opposed to your physical body. The sensations you feel in this world are illusions of the physical world produced by your mind. However, when you’re injured in this world, your soul is the one that takes and reflects the damage. If you disappear fully, your soul ceases to exist and so does this world.”

The dragon roared. “Is that all you are capable of, Archangel?”

I turned my head down and to the side. “Is that all we are capable of?” I whispered into my shoulder. “That dragon is way too fast and I have no idea what the hell I am doing.”

“Azerith, all things with magic have a weakness. Our foe is primarily made of magic governed by the element of fire. The most logical solution would be to use water magic to counter him.”

“Why haven’t we just done that already?”

“Because while you have a lot of myst, there are barriers to you accessing called seals that are like one of those dam things you humans use to hold back water. I’ve poked holes out of it but your myst, the resource offered to use magic through give-and-take relationship, is trickling out so I have to use mine. If I use too much, I’ll lose consciousness and will have to leech off of you until I wake up again.”

“So poke bigger holes in the dam? Is that possible?”

Zekereih chuckled, his internal screaming almost audible in his voice. “What do you think I’ve been doing since we met?”

“That’s a very good question that I was hoping to ask you once we get out of this shitfest.”

“Azerith,” my uncle shouted. “Language!”

“Is this the time for that?” I shouted back. “There’s a goddamn dragon and a voice in my head expecting me to beat it by explaining the makings of the universe like I’ll understand what it means!”

“We don’t have time for this! Stand up, shut up, and do what I tell you.”

I picked up the sword Zekereih had made for me and clambered to my feet. The wings on my back flared as I jumped over ten feet away. A wall of flame from the dragon’s maw crashed against the rut in the ground I had landed in moments ago.

“Say the following and swing your sword right after.”

“Water Art, Blade of Melqart!”

Golden fog poured from my wrist. The fog wrapped around the handle of the sword. It flowed from the guard up around the blade. The fog turned teal as I swung the blade diagonally. From the fog, a cascade of water traced the arc of the blade in a crescent and shot like a jet at the dragon across from us. The water struck the dragon in a cloud of steam, eliciting an ear-shattering roar.

“Holy shit, I actually hit it!” I shouted. “I did it!”

“Thinking it is over will be your undoing. If it was that easy, anyone would be able to do this from my world.”

The dragon’s head flashed through the steam. It barreled toward me, despite missing half of its left eye where my attack struck. I swung the sword horizontally and another crescent of water raced towards the target. My enemy responded in turn with a jut of flame. The two forces met and steam exploded from the collision.

“Partner, engage while we have the cover of the steam!”

I jumped towards the wall of steam. The steam enveloped me, making my skin blister and burn. I reared my blade and swung again. A fiery claw pierced the steam, only to meet the blade of water. The liquid crescent sliced through the dragon’s claw, flaying the apparitions arm into two halves up to the shoulder.

“I can do one last slash, Partner,” Zekereih croaked, exhaustion apparent in his voice. “This will be the last I can do to help for now—jump and strike for victory!”

I floated down onto something invisible yet hard under my feet. I didn't waste time checking what it was. Instead, I kneeled and leaped with all my strength towards the side of the dragon's face. The invisible platform sprung like a springboard and vaulted me forward. My left wing fluttered out, forcing my body to turn. I swung with my sword and a verticle arc of liquid flew forward. The aquatic slash cleaved through the flames of the dragon's neck, turning the tendon-like flames to steam. The blade traveled through, serrating through the flames before evaporating past on the other side of its neck.

The fiery apparition imploded at the center of the two cleaved halves and a vacuum-like force sucked the flames into the area where the magic had cut it apart. The flames turned silver as the two halves merged into one. The silver fire then shot forward towards me. I swung the sword to counter the flames but no water shot forward. The flames arched around the blade and struck my hands, sticking to them like putty. Sparks erupted from where the fire touched. Instead of pain, however, a comforting warmth spread through my body. The warmth grew stronger as the flames dwindled.

"Challenger," the dragon's voice resonated through my head, "conqueror of trials. I recognize you as the descendent. Wield the power to feast at the days of rapture wisely."

The flames spun in a vortex and swirled into my hand as if sucked in. A silver glow radiated off me like an aura.

"Vakna."

The glow flickered off.

"What the—"

The flames dwindled and the strength in my body completely left me. My wings shattered into polygons of light and I fell back towards the ground. As the ground came closer and closer, I caved to the invisible weights pulling my eyelids shut and closed my eyes.

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"Zekereih!" I screamed. I opened my eyes to a world of red. I coughed a heavy breath, my lungs burning. I dragged my fingers under my eyes to deal with the wetness there. Sure enough, more blood coated the sides of my hands. I wiped the blood on the bottom of my sweatshirt. Professor Pramantha's blurry face poked into my realm of vision from above. He dangled my glasses above my nose. I took and put them on.

I turned over. My face brushed against Kari's shirt. I freaked out and rolled back. It was then that I realized that I'd fallen asleep on Kari's thighs this whole time.

"Azerith!" She brought me back to reality. "What the hell! Are you okay? Your eyes are bleeding!"

Professor Pramantha knelt next to me. "Are you feeling alright?"

"W-what the hell, man?" I pushed myself away from him until my head hit a box. "I'm back... Why the hell are you so calm?"

He smiled. "Relax. You act like you just saw a dragon or something.

"You... No, that's not what you say when I just..." I sat up and looked around. The mountains and grasses of Asgaard had returned to boxes of artifacts and books. "Was all that stuff just now..."

"Real?" He smiled. "Yes. Yes, it was."

"Even the voice?"

"Even the voice."

"And the dragon and the booms, the wings...? A-and the magic and all the other supernatural crap?"

"Yes, all real."

"Asgaard and the other shit too?"

"Asgaard and the other shit too. All real. Though I do feel obligated by your uncle to tell you to watch your language."

"Damn it," I cursed. "What the hell, man?"

Kari cleared her throat and brought our attention to her. "Excuse me, Azerith just woke up after fainting. Shouldn't we be worried about that?"

"That's not important right now," Pramantha waved his hand as if waving away her concerns. "We will worry about that in a bit," he replied. "First, however, I need to know if you believe what you saw, Azerith."

"What if he has a concussion?" Kari pressed the issue.

"Azerith," Pramantha looked me in the eyes. "Do you have a concussion?"

"I-I don't think so?" I stammered.

"See," Pramantha stood. "He's fine."

I dragged my hands down my face. My brain burned and I imagined it oozing out of my ears like goo. Unlike most dreams, which you forget shortly after waking up, the memory of the voice echoed through me like the red-haired girl in my prior dream. Surely, even Sigmund Freud would have a hard time explaining that one.

“Was that voice a part of me?” I asked Pramantha.

“Do you believe it was, Azerith?” Professor Pramantha picked up his journal.

“I think so. I’m not sure why, but for some reason, it seems so real...”

“If it was real, and it is, how do you feel after what happened?”

My tongue hung in my mouth like a heap of sand. It ground against the roof of my mouth like sandpaper. “I want to know more,” I said. “I have so many questions.”

“Even if that means you won’t be normal anymore?”

I huffed. My whole life, I’d lived and done everything I could just to feel some sense of normality, even if it never materialized. I chased the concept of being ‘normal’ because my dreams and life experiences made me feel different and weird. But this dream...

“I need to know more,” I said. “Even if it means not being normal.”

“Good.” He jotted a few notes in his book. “That will make everything much easier for us.” He looked over at the ground a few feet away from me. The grimoire he’d enchanted sat next to me, open on a page labeled “Geas<sup>[1]</sup>”.

Pramantha slammed his book shut and threw it onto his makeshift desk. “I believe that will be good for today. I had Ms. Reeves here call your ride while you were out.” He paused for a moment to look down at his watch before continuing, “I do believe he should be here shortly. Please come back on Monday, we have much to accomplish and I would greatly appreciate your assistance.”

“Hold on,” Kari shouted back. “Asking a patient if they have a concussion is *not* how you check to see if they are okay. He’s talking about hearing voices and for some reason, you’re just accepting it!”

“I’m sorry, Ms. Reeves.” Professor Pramantha removed his glasses and wiped them off, “Azerith, how do you feel?”

“I feel fine,” I answered. Kari glared at me and shook her head. I shrugged my shoulders. She resigned herself and ground her teeth. She scrunched and bit her bottom lip with her front teeth. “Really, I feel fine,” I said. “There’s no need to worry so much, let’s just go home.”

My phone vibrated in my pocket, causing me to jump. I pulled it out. The time was 7:05 pm, making it four hours since we arrived here. ‘I was out for that long...?’

I looked over at the book next to me on the ground. No black smoke radiated from its pages and the compelling desire to touch it had dissipated as well. Both the diamond skull and its ruby eyes had returned to normal.

I surprised Professor Pramantha by handing the book back to him. He took it and studied the cover. His mind drifted along with his eyes to the far wall of the room.

My phone vibrated again. Our ride had arrived.

I told Kari and grabbed my jacket and backpack. Kari did the same in silence. One look into her eyes told me that she wasn't ready to let this go.

"I'll see you next week then?" I waved goodbye to Professor Pramantha.

"Hmm?" Professor Pramantha said as he came out of his thoughts. "Oh, yes. I will see you both on Monday. Good luck, you two. Watch out for dragons on your way home."

A chill ran down my back. "That's not funny, man."

"I laughed." He smiled.

My eyes narrowed and my shoulders slumped while I glared at him.

"I thought it to be quite funny," he chuckled. "Now go, your ride is here. I'll see you both on Monday at three o'clock. Don't be late."

Kari gave him a small wave but didn't say anything else. The door opened and the cold winter weather greeted us yet again.

"It's amazing when you think about how big this school is and how many students there are here."

I received no reply.

"Right, Kari?" I asked.

"Yeah..." She shook her head as if to break a trance. Her lips forced themselves into a smile. "It's getting pretty cold out here, isn't it?"

Kari and I walked down a flight of concrete stairs to the street below. At the bottom, Kari slipped her fingers into the gaps between mine.

"It feels a little warmer like this," she commented. "Don't you think so?"

I closed my hand on hers.

“We used to do this when we were kids, right?” I asked. “We got made fun of on the first day of the fifth grade because we were still holding hands on the way home, remember?”

“But we’re not kids anymore, are we? We’re almost all grown up now... College is just around the corner, and soon we will be out in the real world together.”

“Yeah... I hope we can remain this way even through college, cause I... I’d like that.”

“Me too,” she smiled. “Who knows, maybe someday we’ll even get married.”

My heart skipped a beat.

“Just kidding,” she chuckled. The joy in her eyes faded and her lips curved down into a frown. “Let’s get going.”

It resumed and beat faster with every step towards the shuttle waiting for us down the street.

Kari planted her feet and tugged my arm so I’d stop a few feet from the van.

“Azerith,” she squeezed my hand. “We need to talk. Something’s bothering me and I can’t get it out of my head.”

My heart pounded in my chest. I gulped down a mouthful of spit. “Okay.”

“What happened back there? You fainted after touching that book. When you woke up, you talked about hearing voices. Then you lied to me in front of Professor Pramantha and made me look like a nag or something...”

I expected a confession, not an interrogation.

“I’m sorry, Kari,” I replied. I started walking and pulled her a little to get her moving too. “Really, I’m fine. And I’m sorry for making you look like a nag, but I wasn’t lying.”

“Bullshit,” she called me out. “I’m freaking out over you, Azerith, so you gotta give me something. What the hell happened back there?”

“Kari, you have to believe me. I saw what I said I did. I mean, I think I did... It was a spiritual encounter outside of this world, but it felt like it happened.”

“Alright, then explain to me what happened,” she demanded. “I can’t believe you if I don’t know what happened.”

I explained to her what happened while I was unconscious in detail. The whole time, she listened to me without saying a word. I finished my story and she looked at me with an even more serious look than before.



“Alright, wow,” she blinked a few times. “I want to believe you, but it just seems too farfetched. It seems like you’ve been playing the Crystal Chronicles too much and it’s messing with your head... I’m sorry...”

“It’s not your fault,” I replied. “It does seem crazy, but it did happen. I don’t know... I just... it felt so real...”

“Maybe it did,” she replied, “but it was just a dream. It bothers me that he just played it off though like it was real. He even let you touch that stupid book... I have a bad feeling about him.”

“He’s a good guy,” I replied. “Even if he knew that this was happening, I don’t think he meant to hurt me.”

“Well, alright... Let’s just leave it at that, alright?”

“...yeah, alright...”

Like that, the conversation about my dream stopped. Kari squeezed my hand and smiled at me. I smiled back, knowing I seemed crazy to her.

I knew then that it wasn’t a dream; it felt too real to be a dream.

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[\[1\]](#) A Geas is a chain of memories implanted within the genetic code using magic. All of Azerith’s ancestors had a Geas made by Zekereih to help him communicate with them.