Soul of the Dragon 2: Enter the Void

by lisiechan

Summary

The Dark Signers have been defeated, but the Crimson Dragon and Oracle of the Sea aren't done yet. There are plenty more bad guys to battle and prophecies to be heard, which means that Lise and Fish are far from done. Read how the two of them and the whole gang of characters from the series deal with a new threat: The Emperors of Yliaster!
“I’m surprised you managed to get here in time. Only one bridge has been finished and it’s been mobbed by people going both ways,” Martha commented good-naturedly. She sat comfortably at the head of her dining table, the sun at her back, and smiling at the faces of those she still considered her kids.

“Lise and I chose the nontraditional path,” Fish explained, a huge grin splitting her face. She snagged another cookie from the plate Martha had set out.

“Yep, they left us in the dusty traffic,” Crow complained with a smile. “The jerks.” Fish grinned at him, not ashamed in the slightest.

“Still, it’s good to see all of you,” Martha’s smile dropped slightly. “Where are you staying right now if you don’t mind me asking? It’s been at least two weeks since you defeated the Dark Signers and I find it hard to believe you’re all in that subway again.”

“Oh, we’re not,” Lise said immediately. “I’m staying at Akiza’s home, and so is Luna because the guys are at the Twins’ mansion and Luna got fed up with them after a day. Leo’s excited to be having a sleepover with his heroes though-“

“And I’m with my grandparents again,” Fish finished for her.

“We’re trying to find a place for the five of us,” Jack explained grumpily. “We want a place with at least two rooms, so we can have some separation.”

“And a kitchen,” Yusei added, tearing his eyes away from Lise for a moment, and then after a little hesitation; “And a garage for our runners.”

“And wi-fi,” Lise said, her smile increased dramatically as Yusei slid his fingers in between hers under the table. “I can’t live without it anymore.”

Martha chuckled and stood up. “I have water boiling for tea. Anyone want some?”

Jack, Lise, and Fish raised their hands instantly.

Martha nodded and came back with four no handled mugs and a steaming teapot. She made a long show of pouring the tea, handing out the mugs, tea leaves and pouring the water. She regarded the five of them coolly over her mug and took a long sip as if she were mulling over something she was mentally debating whether to tell them or not. “I might have a solution for you,” she finally spoke when the tension in the room had become palpable.

“We can stay here?!?” Jack asked hopefully, rising and knocking over his chair.

“No, we don’t have any available rooms with Crow’s additional rug rats here.” Jack stuck out his bottom lip sulkily and earned several laughs when he tried to seat himself again and failed.

“They’re being good right?” Crow demanded.

“Yes, and behaving better than the five of the Enforcers ever did,” Martha raised a purposeful eyebrow.

“It’s a wonder we didn’t kill each other by the time we were teenagers,” Lise laughed.
“You grew up just fine,” Martha said. “Anyway, I have a friend who lives by the waterfront in New Domino. She might agree to let you live in the back of her clock shop.”

“What’s her place like?” Yusei asked.

“Like a three story loft in the back of the shop. It has a garage, kitchen and either three or four bedrooms. I can’t remember. It’s empty because her three sons moved out a few years ago.”

“We’ll take it! It sounds perfect! I could get my own room,” Fish decided, wolfing down the last few cookies.

“I’ll call Zora to tell her you’re coming, and here’s her address,” Martha slid over a piece of paper after she’d finished scribbling the address. “But be warned, she’s a stubborn old thing on good days and downright unreasonable on bad. Hopefully today is a good day.”

“Thank you so much, Martha, we really appreciate it,” Lise told her, trying to lace her voice with all the sincerity she felt.

“Don’t thank me yet,” Martha’s lip twitched into a reluctant half smile. She watched the others go. Her smile became genuine when she saw Yusei and Lise holding hands. “So you’re officially together? Dating? Going steady?”

“Martha!” Lise burst out, embarrassment obvious in her red cheeks.

“Yes…” Yusei murmured, his face glowing red too.

Their foster mother laughed and shook her head. “You two are too cute. Go catch up with the others so I can call Zora.”

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“Okay, so how do we wanna do this?” Yuseis asked, braking a short distance from the clock shop.

“What you mean?” Crow furrowed his brow. “We go in, ask her how much she’s renting and take it.”

“Exactly!” Jack agreed, and without another word strode into the shop. Yusei and Crow were right behind him.

Lise and Fish stayed outside. They had a funny feeling this strategy wasn’t going to work.

“I give them three minutes,” Fish smirked.

“They’ll be thrown out by then for sure,” Lise smiled crookedly.

They watched Zora’s eyes narrow suspiciously at the sight of three boys entering her shop. She was a small woman with brown eyes, graying hair pulled into a tight bun at the back of her head, a washed out blue dress, and enormous glasses with a chain falling around her neck. All three boys were a good foot or so taller than her, but Zara was no pushover as they’d soon find out.

“Hello, Zora, my name is Crow. How much are you charging for your place?”

“You’re going to have to be a little more specific, sonny.”

“Aren’t you renting out your spare rooms?” Yusei said, cocking his head in confusion.
“Yes, but not to three nosy boys like you. Unless you’re going to buy a watch or clock, get out!”

“But...”

“Shoo!” Zora chased them out with her broom to Lise and Fish’s laughter.

“You should see your faces!” Fish squealed with laughter.

“Did you even mention Martha at all? That would’ve helped,” Lise shook her head. “Just sit tight,” she said. “We’ll handle this.” She and Fish shoved the door open and went inside.

“Hi Zora,” Lise said as friendly as she could, trying to ignore her sweating palms.

“Did Martha call?”

“Yes, she did.” Zora admitted reluctantly.

“Oh good. I’m her foster daughter, Lise, and this is Fish. Nice to meet you.”

Zora’s hard expression dampened slightly and she shook both girls’ hands. “I’m glad someone has manners. Those boys mobbing me like that,” she shook her head and scowled. “Anyway, I do have space since my sons moved out and my husband has passed. Are you interested as well?”

“The five of us are, yes. Is that all right?”

“There isn’t enough rooms for you all to have your own.”

“We’ll share,” Fish waved that concern away with her hand easily. She pulled out her wallet as she spoke. “What do we owe you for our first month of rent?”

“As long as you two girls are there to keep those unruly boys in line, there’s no charge,” Zora told them with a smile. It made her face appear ten times friendlier.

“Free! Oh no we couldn’t!!” Lise’s eyes grew wide. “We can pay and keep paying when we get jobs, I promise!”

“Martha said you were all goods kids and I believe her,” she threw a dirty look at the boys staring curiously inside. They immediately whipped around, not subtle in the slightest. “Mostly. I’ll have the place cleaned today so you can move in tomorrow.”

“Perfect!” Fish grinned and exited to tell the guys the good news.

“Thank you so much, we really appreciate it,” Lise bowed respectfully and followed Fish out. “We’re in!”

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“Why do you have to live on the very top floor?” Jack grumbled to Leo as the two of them attempted to put as many boxes in the elevator as possible.

“Hey, we just live here. Mom and dad pay for it.”

“And don’t knock the place, Jack, you liked the Jacuzzi too,” Fish scolded him.

“I will miss that,” Jack admitted.
“It’ll be nice to have our own beds though. I don’t think my back could take another night on the couch,” Yusei said, stretching out said back.

“That’s the last of it,” Lisa said with finality, tossing the last two boxes into the elevator.

“Good, now I can stop holding the doors open. Most boring job ever,” Luna complained, massaging her sore thumb.

“Leo gets to do it when we unload the damn thing downstairs,” Crow slumped onto the couch, cracking his knuckles. “I didn’t know we had so much junk.”

Lise flushed crimson. They hadn’t grabbed any of her things at Akiza’s yet, and her art supplies alone was a lot. “Hopefully we can fit everything. We’ll buy anything else we might need.”

“Like what?”

“Silverware.”

“Oh… yeah.”

“Okay,” Fish reentered the room with a surprisingly empty elevator. “All the stuff is packed into Akiza’s dad’s car. Next stop is Zora’s to unload, then Akiza’s for Lise’s stuff, then mine for my stuff.”

“Wow, how did you load it so fast?”

Fish winked at Crow. “I used my secret skills. Oh, and Akiza’s driving.”

“Let’s meet her there.”

“Race you!” Lise challenged, rising into the air.

“You’re on!” Yusei accepted, dashing into the elevator.

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“Okay guys,” Akiza groaned. “I think that’s the last of all of your shit.”

“It isn’t shit!” Jack glared at her.

“Hey, it ain’t hers, so its shit,” Fish barked. She pulled a list out of her pocket. “Zora said there are three twin beds, one for each of the upper rooms. That means Lise and I have to grab new beds.”

“You two can have two of the beds. You shouldn’t have to go out and get new ones,” Crow said.

Lise gave him an are-you-fucking-serious look. “Please, we want new beds. Three sweaty dudes we don’t know used those things before us. Also, there are three bedrooms but five of us. How are we divvying this up?”

“I figured we could all share the third room as like a hang out space?” Jack suggested quietly.

The others chewed on the idea for a minute.

“That actually seems fair,” Akiza amended, nodding. “You could get a couch with a pull out bed in case anyone decided to visit.”
“Who would visit us?”

Luna rolled her eyes. “We would. Leo loves having all night dueling sleepovers.”

“We did have a few pretty spectacular nights,” Lise smiled. She peered over Fish’s shoulder at her list. “The three guys can work on pushing the three twin beds into the largest bedroom. Fish and I will share the middle room and the smallest room can be our media room.”

“We’re on it!” Yusei saluted the girls, and Leo, and lead the way upstairs.

“Awesome. I already did a quick look through and unless you guys have your own dishes you’re sunk. So I went out and grabbed a few sets of silverware, bowls, plates, mixing bowls, the works for you.”

“Wow, shopaholic,” Leo commented.

“Akiza, you didn’t have to do that. You already helped by letting me stay with your family and carting all our stuff over,” Lise said, she twisted her hair nervously.

“Hey, anything for you and Fish. The boys are lucky to have a place with you or they’d all be homeless. That still leaves a lot to buy, I’m sure,” she regarded Fish’s list. “Let’s check out the room’s size before we get two queen size beds, Fish. We also have to unpack all the dishes and silverware.”

“Then let’s get started,” Lise heaved two boxes of her stuff onto her shoulder and ascended the stairs to her and Fish’s room.

Fish and Akiza came in behind her with more stuff. The boys had already moved the twin bed out of the room, but they could still hear Jack’s swearing, Crow arguing with him, and Yusei trying to get them to work together.

“Yeah, two queen beds won’t fit in here, much less get through the door,” Akiza sighed.

“At least you have a window,” Luna pointed out.

“Twin beds are fine,” Fish snapped, clearly unhappy with the conclusion, and making a note on her list. “That still leaves bed-making shit like mattress pads, sheets, comforters, pillows, lamps, and… I was gonna say desk but Zora left us desks and tables in the garage and kitchen so we should be good there.”

“Then let’s go shopping. If the guys wonder where we are they can page me or something,” Akiza held up her cell phone. “Luna, can you help Leo set up the kitchen?”

“Sure.”

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“All right,” Fish settled onto their new, grey, and very cheap couch in the garage. “We should be set for at least the next month, food wise. Luckily we were able to find simple and cheap bedspreads with all your favorite colors. “We’ll do more when we all have jobs, but I think we’re okay. I saved just enough. Now…we’re totally broke.”

“We’ll fix that as soon as we can. Right now let’s just eat and go to sleep. It’s been a long day.”

“A long but good day. We have to pay Akiza and Zora back as soon as possible,” Lise said,
slurping down her noodles.

“No, you don’t, and I’m sure Zora will say the same,” Akiza said firmly. “You guys became my friends when no one else did so it’s the least I can do.”

“Well, on that note, thanks for letting us stay in your apartment, Leo and Luna,” Yusei smiled at the twins. “It was nice of you.”

“We’re just lucky our parents didn’t stop by while you were there,” Leo blurted.

Luna gave him a reproachful look and stirred her noodles awkwardly. “Our parents don’t really like…”

“People with marks,” Leo finished. He stared at his shoes.

Yusei scowled darkly. He opened his mouth to say something, thought better of it, and kept his mouth shut.

Crow sighed. “That sucks, but it doesn’t surprise me. I’ve already run into that plenty just in Satellite.” His gaze shifted pointedly to Yusei, and he put his fingers up to one of his many marks. “We’re going to see a lot more of it living here in the city.”

“Joy,” Lise said sarcastically, slurping down the last of her noodles.

“Maybe someday we can change your parents’ minds. I know I changed your minds.”

“You betcha!” Leo’s grin returned with renewed fervor.

“If they ever come home longer than three days,” Luna glared at a point somewhere near her shoes.

“Well,” Lise stood up. “I’m gonna go to bed. Akiza, Luna, Leo, you’re welcome to stay the night.” She kissed Yusei briefly and went up the stairs.

“You’re smiling like an idiot,” Fish snarled at Yusei.

“Oh, leave him alone. Crow and I waited two years for those two to get together. That and it’s the most we’ve ever seen him smile in a long time.”

“And it’s cute,” Crow added, strategically avoiding Fish’s death glare.


“I have some extra pillows and blankets so you guys should be comfortable no matter where you sleep.”

“Thanks, Fish.”

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“Good morning!” Lise yawned as she jumped down into the kitchen in her pajamas.

“An hour later and it’d be afternoon,” Crow scolded. He brandished their spatula at her. “You’re lucky we eat a lot.”
“Thanks,” Lise sat next to Yusei, saving him from half of Fish’s scrutiny. No doubt she would have fried Yusei with her eyes through Lise if she could. Lise started gobbling up scrambled eggs the second Crow placed the fresh plate before her.

“So what’s the plan for today?” Jack demanded, pulling a pen and a piece of paper out.

“Switch your shampoo with blue hair dye,” Fish suggested immediately with a sly grin.

“You do that, I kill you.”

“But—”

“We’ll think of something safer,” Crow interrupted.

“We’re still pranking him right?”

“Hell yes!”

Fish and Crow high fived. Jack’s disgusted frown was priceless, and Lise and Yusei couldn’t help but crack smiles.


“Finding a job will not cramp your style, man.”

“You have to have style for that to actually occur,” Fish snapped, earning her another high five from Crow.

“If you’re making a list, Jack, put Yusei’s birthday on the list.”

Yusei immediately reddened. “It isn’t for another month and it isn’t a big deal,” he said.

“It’s in three weeks and yes it is a big deal. It’s your birthday. Speaking of which, Fish, what do you and Akiza want to do the next month? If you haven’t worked that out you should probably call and figure something out.”

“Ew…” Fish groaned, lying dramatically across the table. “Communication and maintaining social skills!”

“Yeah it’s terrible but there’s a reason we’re friends and texting and calling helps with that.”

“Fine.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Yusei interrupted them. “I never agreed to celebrating my birthday.”

“No worries cuz I sure as hell won’t be.”

“Then no cake for you,” Lise smiled bitterly at Fish and polished off her eggs.

“Cake?”

“Why not? Martha always made us cakes,” Lise got up to begin washing the dishes. “Not saying I will, since I can’t bake for shit, but cakes are mandatory for birthdays.”

“Okay,” Yusei acquiesced quietly. He drew awkward circles in the table with his fingertips, trying to keep his head down to hide his red face and pleased smile.
“You’re so weird. Your girlfriend,” Fish dry heaved after ‘girlfriend.’ “Wants to celebrate your birthday and you’re all stone-faced and unimportant about it.” Fish sniffed and crossed her arms.

“I’ve never had a girlfriend before…” Yusei murmured. “I just don’t wanna mess it up.”

“Just don’t become more of an asshole than you already are and you’re good,” Lise smiled and saluted him playfully.

Crow and Jack dissolved into laughter. Fish made gagging sounds, and fell out of her chair to dramatically finish dying on the kitchen floor. Both Lise and Yusei blushed a brilliant pink.

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“Okay,” Crow slumped onto the garage couch, his chin resting grumpily in his hand. “Getting jobs is a lot more exhausting and hard than I thought.”

“It’s because we’re unqualified teenagers,” Lise sighed. “Our education consists of home schooling and the re-education center’s bullshit. We might have to consider getting GEDs.”

“I still went to school,” Fish said. “I graduated and I’ve had job experience, so if you guys need help, let me know. I can ask my former coworkers to see if they have spots available.”

“Thanks, we might need it at this point.”

“Anything to keep my pseudo baby from going back to the hell hole known as education,” Fish dragged Lise into a bone crushing hug. “The rest of you can rot in unemployed hell.”

Jack rolled his eyes. Crow chuckled and stretched.

“You know she really means it right?” Yusei told Jack.

Jack sniffed indignantly. “Jack Atlas does not need to work, and I can get a job any time I want.”

“You know what?” Lise said when she’d managed to extract herself from Fish’s grip. “I’d say we deserve a vacation.”

“Vacation? But we have absolutely nothing to pay for a vacation.”

“We can go to the beach near here that my mom always took me to. It doesn’t cost a thing, one, and two we just saved the whole damn world. I think we deserve some down time.”

Yusei frowned, considering the idea. “Relaxing sounds nice, and it beats waiting around for potential employers to call.”

“That’s two for the beach!” Crow held up two fingers.

“Three,” Fish added.

“Well of course I have to come too,” Jack said.

“I’ll call Akiza, the twins, and Rally,” Lise grinned and left to ask Zora to borrow her phone.

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“BEACH PARTY!” Leo screamed at the top of his lungs. He raced for the waves with Luna and Rally right on his tail.
Akiza and Crow spread out the biggest blanket she could bring from home. Jack and Yusei settled all their extra supplies atop the blanket.

“Thanks for inviting us out here with you,” Nervin inhaled and exhaled deeply, breathing in the sandy/salty air.

“Sure. I always wanted to show this place to you guys, and now I can,” Lise smiled widely.

“And I hear more bridges are on their way!” Tank exclaimed.

“Now I feel kinda bad about teasing your mysterious man story, Crow,” Blitz admitted.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m just glad we’re on the way to a better, more diverse and accepting, New Domino.”

“Not entirely,” Fish frowned at a family walking a further distance away from the group’s blanket. They had spotted Crow and Yusei’s markings. “But it’s a start.”

“Well, I’m gonna walk along the water. Don’t eat everything,” Lise got up and headed towards where Rally was trying to steal Leo’s dinosaur floaty.

“Do you think we could build a sand castle?” Yusei asked. He sidled up next to Lise and slid his fingers in between hers.

“We could try, but I doubt we’d get very far. I was gonna look for shells.”

“I’ll help as long as Fish doesn’t drown me.”

Lise looked back at their blanket and laughed. Both Crow and Akiza were holding Fish back and conversing with the others. “Hopefully she won’t break free for at least an hour.” She squeezed Yusei’s hand and smiled. Her heart fluttered when Yusei responded with a smile of his own.

“Give it a rest, Fish,” Crow was saying. “They’re a new couple. Of course they wanna spend a lot of time together.”

“Have something to eat. My mom and I packed a shit ton of food,” Akiza pulled out sandwiches and passed them around. “So how goes the job search?”

“Not very good,” Blitz and Crow reported.

“We’re residents of Satellite, so even though we don’t have marks, or if we moved to the city, people would still be reluctant to hire us,” Nervin explained patiently.

Akiza frowned. “But that’s just stupid. You’re excellent workers and people, all of you.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Tank hung his head. His half eaten sandwich was suddenly less delicious.

“People don’t want former scum or criminals making them food or selling them anything,” Blitz said in a low voice.

Jack crossed his arms. His brow furrowed in confusion. “But I thought Lazar was going to fix some of those problems. Have the police gotten better?”

Blitz lifted a shoulder. “Sort of. I think Trudge is trying to make a difference, and so is the new chief Mina Simington, but too many of the officers continue to chuck Satellite residents in the facility more than New Domino residents.”
“That’s…that’s just…” Akiza petered off, unable to verbally express her anger and indignant feelings about such an injustice. She watched Leo and Luna playing with Rally like they had been friends forever.

“I know, Akiza, it really fucking sucks,” Crow crammed the rest of his sandwich into his mouth.

“Guys,” Fish finally spoke up. “I promise, as the Oracle of the Sea, not to murder Yusei today if we all forget our problems just for today and have fun.”

Tank frowned in confusion. “Why would you murder Yusei?”

“Why does Fish do literally anything?” Jack pointed out.

“Good point,” Crow nodded.

“Deal,” Akiza and Fish shook hands.

Fish stood up and brushed crumbs off her person, grabbing her camera. “Last one down to the water gets eaten by my kraken!”

“You’re on!”
“Good news, guys!” Crow rolled into the garage and dismounted his runner. His gray eyes were alight with excitement. “I got a job! And they didn’t care about all this crap!” Crow gestured to his heavily marked face. “They didn’t even ask how I got them!”

“That’s awesome!” Yusei popped up from the side of the runner skeleton he was working on. “Finally, some good news.”

Jack raised an eyebrow over his tea. “What job did you get?”

“Oh, uh, delivery for a fast food place, but still it’s a job!”

“That’s beneath you,” Jack sniffed.

“Hey, it pays and right now we need some serious dough,” Crow sat down on the second, rattier couch they had set up in the garage. “I start tomorrow. What about the girls?”

Yusei shrugged. “They left earlier to see about a few different places. Lise texted and so far no luck. Most places told her to apply online, and Fish is seeing if she can work at the pet store.”

“What’re you looking at?”

“Freelance mechanic work? I was thinking about putting up a sign about fixing just about anything.”

“Good idea. You can fix anything,” Crow smiled and gave his friend the cheesiest thumbs up he could muster.

“Maybe not anything, but I’m willing to try.”

“What have you done besides sit on your ass?” Crow fired at Jack.

Jack glared at Crow, making him wait until the cup was completely drained. “Enjoyed the day.”

“In other words, absolutely nothing. You are extremely lucky Zora doesn’t make us pay rent.”

“We have the girls to thank for that. We really messed that up,” Yusei admitted, scratching his head.

“Do you think it was our marks?”

“No, Jack doesn’t have one. I think it was that we came on too strong and none of us is very good with words.”

“Yeah…So what do you guys want for dinner?”

“Ramen!” Jack suggested immediately.

“Not for the third night in a row, man. I can cook, but I’m not sure what we should have tonight. I was thinking a mild curry or maybe waffles.”

“I vote waffles!” Lise said, hand in the air as she kicked the door open. Yusei threw a sheet over the runner skeleton as subtly as he could.
Thankfully Crow was ready with a distraction. “Hey, somebody’s happy. Success?”

“Yes! I got an interview and I can work from here! I’ll be writing about tourist destinations and stuff you can do there, and I’ll have to come into the office on occasion, but I got it! What about you?”

“The same. We have a source of income!”

“We should celebrate with waffles and whip cream.”

“Excellent plan.”

“I’ll text Fish to pick up whip cream on her way back. I think she’s checking out a book store just in case the pet store doesn’t follow through,” Lise said excitedly, settling down next to Crow. “It’s a great start. I just wish I could sell my art somehow. For now, I’m satisfied with painting our place.”

“We were going to paint our rooms this weekend right?” Yusei asked, tugging playfully on the curl of hair Lise had twisted up throughout the day.

“Yes,” Lise grinned and her cheeks turned pink. “I got Fish to agree to an orange and blue nebula explosion, but you three still have to agree on a color.”

“Blue,” Yusei said immediately.

“Black,” Crow shook his head.


Lise sighed. “I can’t do all- wait.” She ran up the stairs and scurried up the ladder to the third floor. The boys looked at each other.

“We didn’t say anything different?”

“No.”

“We’re still all for different colors?”

“Yes.”

Lise came back with her sketchbook and a few markers. “How do you feel about racing stripes?”

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“So why are we helping you paint your room?” Jack asked grumpily. He was moodily pushing a roller covered in orange paint across the wall.

“Because Lise is painting your room next, so shut it,” Fish commanded.

“Yeah, but it’ll look tacky.”

“Since when do you care about looking tacky Jack Ass-less?”

“Why you-“

“I think Jack has a nice butt,” Carly interrupted. She adjusted her spectacles as if to get a better
view of Jack’s rear end. She was smiling so wide it was a wonder her face didn’t split in half. She seemed so happy to be included.

Lise wiggled her eyebrows mischievously. “Yusei has a nice butt too.” She poked it, making Yusei jump.

“Hey!” he protested, dabbing Lise’s face with his paintbrush and leaving an orange smear.

Lise laughed and got him back by smearing his chin with more orange paint.

“Good thing we’re wearing our throw away clothes,” Crow chuckled, watching Yusei pull Lise into a paint splattered kiss.

“Yeah,” Carly sighed longingly.

Fish made vomiting motions behind Carly’s back. Jack cracked a small smile and resumed painting.

Deciding to break up the silence, Fish dug out her IPod and the small speaker Yusei had been able to fix years ago. She scrolled down and selected her current favorite artist.

“Fall Out Boy!” Carly gushed ecstatically.

“I love them too!”

“Are you ready for another bad poem? One more off key anthem!” Lise and Carly instantly started singing along.

“Isn’t Fall Out Boy like super old by now?” Crow scratched his head in thought. “I mean I thought they disbanded before we were born.”

“Awesome is timeless, mate,” Jack grinned widely, watching Carly twirl in between furniture, singing along to all the lyrics. Her slightly scratchy tune perfectly complimented Fish’s lower tone and Lise’s slightly higher voice.

“At this rate the nine of us will be done in no time,” Akiza announced her presence with a grin. “But you didn’t tell me we’d be making a party out of it!”

“Nine?” Yusei frowned at her. “Don’t you mean seven?”

“Nope, eight!” Luna popped into the room with her brother in tow. “But it might be too crowded in here for all that.”

“We can spread out,” Lise suggested. “I still have to paint the boys’ room too.”

“As long as we stay up all night dueling. Luna promised it’d be an all night dueling sleepover if I helped!”

“We’ll see. Let’s go, Leo,” Lise took the younger boy’s hand and pulled him into the larger bedroom.

“So are you going to put dragons and Morphtronics and spell cards and trap cards all over the walls?” Leo asked, bouncing with excitement as he watched Lise open a can of blue paint.

“Um, no, that’s a little much. The guys couldn’t agree on a color or design, so I decided to make a design with all the colors they want. Hand me the blue tape and go ask the guys what they’re
“Aye aye, captain!” Leo saluted and raced back into the other bedroom. He returned momentarily, humming the tune of the next song blasting through the house. “Crow says 8, Jack says 1, and Yusei said 77.”

“All right then,” Lise ripped the last line of tape off the roll. “Whattaya think?”

“Super cool! Wish my mom would let me paint my room!”

“My mom wouldn’t let me either,” Lise handed Leo a blue roller and paint pan. “Start on the left wall and don’t extend past it or the tape, okay?”

“Got it.”

Lise waited until Leo had started to begin painting Jack’s wall. He preferred white, so she left his wall mostly blank. She dug out a pencil to trace a large circle around a hub cap she’d rescued from the street in the middle of the wall. In the circle’s center she drew a large block shaped number 1. The lines surrounding the circle were painted black, and then the racing stripes extending to both adjacent walls were black and blue. Maneuvering around Leo, she did the same for Yusei and Crow’s walls.

“Racing stripes? I never would have thought of that!”

“Well, when you have to figure out how to make three people happy at once you have to do some adjusting.”

“Okay, most of Yusei’s wall is done. I got as close as I could to the racing stripes. Crow’s side now?”

“Yep, and great job avoiding the windows. Crow wants black, not blue by the way.”

“Knock, knock,” Yusei rapped his knuckles against the open door. “How’s it going?”

“No! You can’t come in yet! We’re not done!” Lise hurried to shut the door.

“Sorry, but Fish wants you to put the finishing touches on,” Yusei walked in with one hand deliberately over his eyes.

“Right! Leo, I’ll be back in an hour. Make sure none of them peeks!” she ordered, dashing back into her bedroom.

Akiza, Carly and Luna took over. Leo sighed with relief. He didn’t have to keep going alone. The girls promptly kicked Yusei out and barred both Crow and Jack from entering too.

“This had better be good,” Jack grumped. “I left my duel disk in there.”

“Why do you want your duel disk right now? I’m starving,” Crow descended the ladder to the second floor kitchen and pulled out crackers and juice.

“To duel to pass the time, of course,” Jack explained matter-of-factly.

“There’s like six people working on our room right now. I’m pretty sure it’ll be finished soon,” Yusei pointed out.

“I can’t believe how late it is. I’ll start dinner,” Crow pulled on his apron and rifled through the
kitchen. “Shit, Yusei can you run to the nearby little market? We’re out of sesame seeds and rice flour.”

“Sesame seeds and rice flour, got it,” Yusei repeated, grabbing a handful of cash on his way out.

“Making sesame balls?” Jack asked eagerly, his mouth watered.

“Yep, and I made sure to thaw the brown candy the night before this time.”

“Having ramen for another night didn’t kill us, mate.”

“Good thing some of us know how to cook, huh?” Crow raised a purposeful eyebrow at his friend.

“Hey, Fish and Lise can’t cook!”

“But they do the dishes every night, and Lise can make potato soup. Your skills begin and end with dueling.”

“Whatever.”

“Man, it got dark quickly,” Fish commented, jumping down to the kitchen floor. “But that smells awesome. The paint fumes really make you appreciate the smell of food.” She moved towards the sink to scrape off the dried paint on her hands.

“How is our room looking?” Jack tapped his foot impatiently.

“Very cool, but Lise made sure that our room looks cooler.”

“Yeah right.”

“There’s a secret ingredient to ours,” Lise said, leading Carly, the twins and Akiza down into the kitchen.

“We’ll check both out after dinner,” Crow said. “I’ll have it done A-SAP after Yusei gets back from the mini market.”

“I’d take a rain check on that, Crow,” Yusei said, ascending the stairs. He put the unspent money back in their change bowl. “I wasn’t allowed in on account of this.” He jabbed an irritated thumb at his mark.

“Are you serious?” Lise’s eyes narrowed, her face red with anger.

“Completely, and when I told him I was just getting some stuff and that I would pay, he gave me this.” On Yusei’s other cheek was a red bruise slowly turning a shade of purple.

“Did you give him one to match?” Jack growled.

“No, and I wish I did. He deserved it,” Yusei clenched his fists as if he could still feel the phantom impulses of a good solid punch to the jaw. “But I didn’t want to confirm anything he thought about me because of my mark.”

Lise tossed the kitchen towel back on the counter. “Grab the cash. Let’s go.”

“You’re not going to beat the crap out of him are you?” Yusei asked hurriedly, afraid Lise was going to do something she would regret.
“No. Grab the cash and follow me,” she said, descending the stairs.

Yusei looked at everyone’s confused and worried faces. He shrugged, grabbed the cash again, and followed.

“I really hope she’s not going to kill him,” Leo expressed nervously.

“I don’t think so, but sometimes it’s hard to tell when Lise is mad. Yusei can reign her in if need be though,” Akiza said, though she too looked worried.

Fish shrugged, but she was grinning evilly. “If she does end up beating the shit out of the guy, I hope she takes pictures.”

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“Lise, you sure you’re okay?” Yusei blurted when he couldn’t take her angry silence any longer. He would have appreciated the beauty of Fountain Plaza at night much more if they were both in better moods. At least the lampposts’ light made it easier to see.

“Define okay. I’ve got an idea, but after tonight we probably won’t be going back again.”

“Oh,” Yusei swallowed, playing with the coins in his pocket. Lise’s eyes were cloudy with thought, whether it was good or bad, Yusei wasn’t sure.

Even so, he let her approach the middle-aged man leaning up against the store besides the door. Despite where he worked, the man clearly took great care with his appearance. His slacks and button up shirt were free of wrinkles, and not a hair on his head was out of place. The only thing ruining his put-together appearance was the cigarette between his fingers.

“Are you the cashier?” Lise fired at him.

The man looked her up and down, cocked an eyebrow and smiled oily. “Yes, I am. Can I get you anything?”

“Do you recognize him?” Lise pointed at Yusei, who waved helpfully.

“Ain’t you the piece of trash I threw outta here five minutes ago?”

Yusei opened his mouth to protest, but Lise was faster.

“What the fuck is your problem? He’s a human being!”

“Look lady, we don’t serve rejects like him. Boss clearly says no markers allowed in the store, and rightfully so. Too many of them are thieving scum.”

“Well, let me tell you something, you piece of shit,” Lise snarled, anger flowing off of her in waves. “My boyfriend is a better human being than your sorry ass will ever be. So that means that you are going to let us in the fucking store, like you should have ten minutes ago, and let us pay for the fucking things we came here for. Then you’re going to consider the reason why your disgustingly prejudiced boss of this store will never be getting our fucking business ever again. And if you’d like to discuss the matter further, then you can answer to the Chief of Police, whom I just so happen to be close friends with.”

The cashier swallowed. “R-Right away, miss, uh, w-what is it that you wanted?”

“Sesame seeds and rice flour,” Yusei reported. He strolled into the store first, a smile on his face.
Lise and the cashier followed. Both stayed near the counter to wait for Yusei to finish. He had a tiny smile on his face as he watched the cashier take the money, and give back the change.

“H-Have a nice n-night,” the cashier stammered as Lise and Yusei took their items.

“Fuck off,” Lise snapped, her eyes like daggers.

“Thanks,” Yusei responded, much more cheerfully.

The bell on the door jingled on their way out, but Lise’s anger didn’t fade until the door snapped shut behind them.

“Is your cheek okay? I can’t believe that coward actually punched you,” she curled her lip in disgust.

“Much better now.”

She blinked in confusion. “Why are you smiling like that?”

“I love you.”

The redness filling Lise’s face no longer had anything to do with anger.

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“Good morning and happy birthday, mate!” Jack greeted as soon as Yusei jumped down into the kitchen.

“Huh? Is it really July seventh already?” Yusei paused in running his fingers through his hair.

“Yeah man, you’re nineteen today,” Crow chuckled at his friend’s nonplussed expression.

“I totally forgot I’ve been so busy trying to find work, fixing our runners, and building another.”

“Well, good thing I remembered to make you your favorite breakfast,” Crow joked, placing Yusei’s plate on the table.

“Thanks. Do we have any plans for today?”

“Not any that you made, mister ‘I can’t decide,’” Lise reminded him, sitting down next to him.

Yusei chuckled sheepishly, and sat down in front of his plate. “But we do have plans, right?”

“Rollerblading. The twins insisted on footing the bill, so we invited just about everybody.”

“Rally?”

“Yep.”

“Tanner?”

“Yes.”

“Martha?”

“And every kid she has in that house.”
“Blister?”

“Yeah.”

“Damn, you thought of everyone!”

“When I asked if they wanted to celebrate a certain birthday, they all seemed rather agreeable. Actually, Leo only agreed when I promised food afterwards.”

“Oh for the love of god,” Fish rolled her eyes. “If you two are gonna make out then do it already!”

“Quick, she gave permission!” Lise joked, laughing.

Yusei laughed too and pulled Lise into his lap. Fish bravely stomached their lip locking without vomiting. She couldn’t resist pulling a few faces though.

“Well, eat up everybody,” Crow demanded. “We’re going to need all the energy we can get.”

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“I’m too old for this, but it’s certainly fun!” Yanagi chuckled shakily while he tried to remain upright. He seemed to be slowly doing the splits even though he was desperately clutching the edge of the skating ring.

“Come on Gramps, it’s easy! I’ve lapped you at least five times by now!” Tanner prompted as he slid by.

“Speak for yourself, Tanner!” Tank looked like a large bird as he tried to maintain his balance. “I’ve fallen so many times now I’m just glad to still have all my fingers!”

“All right, Tank, let’s do a couple laps together, okay?” Blitz took one of Tank’s arms to steady his friend.

Nervin took Tank’s other arm. “We’ll never catch up to Fish. She’s lapped everyone at least 20 times by now.”

“Eh, we’re playing four corners next. Hopefully we’re lucky.”

“WHOO HOO!” Rally screamed as he zoomed past his friends with Leo and Luna in tow.

“You gotta try this!” Leo yelled as his sister screamed and giggled in delight.

Carly was skittering along, slowly, but Jack was coaxing her out to the middle to practice going a little faster. Yusei was trying to teach Lise and Akiza how to coast backwards with varying degrees of success. Akiza was shaky and Lise had to be reminded to keep her eyes open. All of Crow and Martha’s orphans crowded the skating rink with their erratically cheerful rollerblading.

Fish zoomed past everyone, gleefully taunting all attempts at skating without dying. Sure she hated that Yusei was dating Lise, which made him happy as well as Lise, and she hated it when both he and Jack were happy. Still it was nice to see all of her friends enjoying themselves together despite the lack of good developments at the present time. Circumstances would get better, and she would be right in the middle of making it happen.

“Okay everybody!” the MC rolled onto the arena brandishing a microphone and an enormous die. “Time to play four corners! When the music stops, glide into the nearest corner and I’ll roll the die. If I land on your corner, you’re all out! If it lands on a five or a six I reroll. On the last round if I
“Roll your corner you all win! Let’s play!”

“Hurry, Tank, move!” Nervin cried frantically. He, Tank and Blitz had hardly moved since they
had latched onto each other.

Everyone else seemed to have the same idea as they skated faster to the music.

“It’s been a long day without you, my friend
And I’ll tell you all about it when I see you again.
We’ve come a long way from where we began,
Oh I’ll tell you all about it when I see you again.”

Lise was unwittingly mouthing the words, blading backwards and doing a weird dance with her
hands.

“Hey, you got it!” Yusei shouted to her as he passed.

“I what? I oh,” she quickly realized what she was doing, nearly fell over, and bladed forwards
again. “Uh, almost.”

“You’ll get it eventually,” Yusei assured her, no doubt in his voice.

“If we keep coming back, definitely,” Lise nodded.

The music suddenly stopped and everyone scrambled for a corner. Tank, Nervin, and Blitz inched
their way into the nearest corner, one.

Rally and the twins practically collided with corner three
Fish, Akiza, Carly and Jack claimed corner two.

Lise and Yusei rolled into corner four.

The kids all scattered into the four corners. Everyone waited with baited breath for the MC to
throw the giant die.

“Lise?”

“Yeah?”

“I um- I just wanted to- I- thanks. Thank you for today. I don’t think...Well, it’s been a long time
since I’ve felt so happy and had so much fun,” Yusei blurted awkwardly, chewing a bit on his
thumb.

“Of course, I love you. And it wasn’t just me. Don’t forget to thank Martha, Jack, and Crow. They
helped too,” Lise waved to Martha, who was leaning up against the side of the rink.

Martha smiled and returned the wave, and then Yusei’s. She was diligently watching all her
children, but she had never looked more serene.

“Thanks for not asking for Fish’s help. She would have planned a surprise murder.”

“It isn’t a surprise if you know she’s been planning it since day one!” Lise laughed and briefly
kissed Yusei. “Happy birthday.”
Summer Birthdays

“Thank you so much for this, Martha,” Akiza said as sincerely as she could. “I haven’t had a birthday with friends since I was little.”

“Anything for you kids,” Martha pulled Akiza into a hug. “You’re always welcome, and the kids love any excuse to eat cake.” She winked and Akiza giggled.

Jack poked his head in the window. “Martha, how do I get the kids off of me?”

She shrugged and turned back to her cooking. “Stop being Jack Atlas.”

Akiza laughed again and rejoined the others outside. She and Fish had birthdays on the 15th and 16th of August and it was incredible to be able to share it with her again after so many years. Her and everyone else there. Martha’s yard was packed.

Kids were climbing all over Jack like a jungle gym. Yusei and Crow were dueling a couple kids on the ground since the kids didn’t have duel disks yet. Rally, Tanner, Blitz, Tank, and Nervin were playing tag or hide and seek with a few kids, it was hard to tell since the rules always seemed to be changing. Yahagi was entertaining a small group of kids listening to a story of one of his various travels. Lise had been caught by a few of the older kids and were learning how to throw some nice punches and kicks. Fish was treating one kid at a time to a waterslide ride. Blister sat on the front stoop, surveying to make sure everyone was present and remained safe.

Akiza’s parents intercepted her immediately.

“Are you having fun?” Setsuko’s eyes were wide.

“Is this what you wanted?” Hideo clenched and unclenched his hands like he wanted to do something but wasn’t sure what it would be.

“Yes and yes,” Akiza grinned. “This is perfect and definitely as big as I could have imagined.”

“If you’re sure,” Setsuko still sounded doubtful. “Sorry, but I wish I could help. Martha kicked me out of the kitchen.”

“She kicks all of us out!” Crow shouted up to them.

“Yes and yes,” Akiza grinned. “This is perfect and definitely as big as I could have imagined.”

“If you’re sure,” Setsuko still sounded doubtful. “Sorry, but I wish I could help. Martha kicked me out of the kitchen.”

“Exactly. You’re here and you care. That’s what matters,” Akiza assured her parents. “Have fun, and under no circumstances should you challenge Fish to a water fight.”

“Wasn’t planning on it,” Hideo chuckled.

The two of them watched their daughter race to join everyone.

Akiza stuck around Fish and Lise the most. The three of them just chatting and watching everyone else play or hang out with each other. Akiza and Fish couldn’t stop couldn’t stop smiling. This was their best birthday in years, and they had all grown so much. Gangly, awkward, and with eyes too big for her face, Lise had grown far away from the little girl she used to be. Now she was comfortable with her height, on the way to being more confident and, Akiza thought, absolutely adorable with her slightly sunburned cheeks and talking with her hands. Fish’s personality hadn’t changed in the slightest. She was still super confident, impulsive and prone to long bouts of lack of communication. Fish’s witty mouth often got her in trouble nowadays. Akiza felt her own changes
just being surrounded by her old friends and new ones. She too had grown out of her awkward adolescence into beauty, but a beautiful rose always had thorns. She would do whatever it took to keep the new happiness she had had ever since joining the Signers.

“Okay! Cake time!” Martha shouted, kicking the front door open. “And it’s filled with plenty of chocolate as per request.”

“Yes!” Akiza and Fish cheered, high fiving. Chocolate was their favorite.

“Cake then presents or presents then cake?” Crow asked. The kids were getting antsy.

“Presents first,” Fish declared. She put her hands on her hips in stubborn challenge. Nobody argued. “Excellent. What’s first?”

The three boys presented her with a very soft and squishy stuffed animal that resembled some sort of sea dragon.

“We asked if they had a kraken,” Jack said.

“Unfortunately this was the closest we could get,” Crow said.

Fish hugged the dragon. “It’s perfect for my bed!”

“Glad you like it,” Yusei said, amused.

Akiza and Lise had bought her a new quirky t-shirt for her collection that read “That’s Bullshit, Sweetie” and a few Attack on Titan pins.

“They’re almost too good to wear!”

The twins watched Fish nervously unwrap their present. It was quiet while Fish stared at her new Shakespeare book filled with all his plays.

“We weren’t sure what you wanted,” Leo blurted.

“But I thought I remembered you saying you really liked Shakespearian stuff and his plays so-“

Luna stopped talking when Fish swept her and Leo into a giant hug. Leo was so relieved he had to rub his eyes.

“It’s perfect,” Fish smiled at them. “And you’re right. Shakespeare was a dirty genius.” She winked and bowed grandly to Akiza. “Your turn!”

Akiza laughed and sat down in Fish’s newly vacated chair at the head of the table. “I’m ready.”

Jack proudly presented her with a bouquet of red and black roses the exact same shades as Akiza’s beloved Black Rose Dragon.

“We spent all day yesterday looking at florists,” Yusei admitted.

“It was hell,” Jack said. His eye twitched slightly.

“But we made it out. You wouldn’t believe what kind of flowers they had. I thought my eyes were gonna pop outta my head from so many bright colors,” Crow joked.

“These are absolutely beautiful, thank you,” Akiza beamed widely and breathed in the flowers’
sweet scent.

“Here,” Leo shoved a white mug with a bare tree on it into Akiza’s hand.

“Oh,” she frowned at it. “Is the tree supposed to be dead?”

“No, no! It’s a magic tree mug!” Luna smiled widely. “You pour something hot into it and flowers appear!”

“Really?”

“I’ve got just the thing,” Martha slipped back inside and came back with her teapot ready to pour some steaming tea. “I’m glad your gift reminded me I had this warming up on the stove. I could’ve burned the place down.” Even so, she jauntily poured tea into Akiza’s waiting mug.

She gasped and smiled so much her cheeks hurt. “Cherry blossoms! Look!” Akiza set the mug down so everyone could see. She was right. Bright pink cheery blossoms decorated the once bare tree, grandly filling the mug’s surface.

“Wow!”

“Cool!”

“I want one!”

“Okay, quiet down. She has one more present to open,” Martha told the children, her voice firm but kind.

“This is from both of us,” Lise placed a small, delicate box in Akiza’s hand. “If it’s too much we can take it back or exchange it or something.”

Her brow furrowed with worry, Akiza opened the box slowly. Inside was a cell phone plug with three charms attached. Two were three dimensional, scratch proof red and black roses, and the third was a glass and gold reinforced dragon claw.

“We were worried it would break easily, but the saleswoman assured us it wouldn’t happen for a billion years. The claw was custom order…we…um…” Fish petered off, not sure what to say next.

“D-Do you like it?” Lise said awkwardly. Akiza hadn’t moved for at least a minute.

“I love it,” Akiza practically sobbed. She dragged Lise and Fish into a bone-crushing hug and tried unsuccessfully not to cry.

“You didn’t even get our present yet,” Setsuko laughed.

“Oh right,” Akiza used her arm to wipe her tears away.

“We’re paying for you to take lessons in order to get your turbo dueling license,” Hideo announced. Hideo Hiijjjjj

Hideo announced.

“No way! Super cool!”

“No fair!” Leo whined. “I wanna be a turbo duelist too!”
“Maybe when you’re a bit older?” Yusei said.

“And taller, and can ride a normal bike,” Luna put her two cents in.

“Hey!”

“Thanks,” Akiza hugged her parents. “I just hope I don’t uh…crash and die.”

“We do too,” Hideo said quickly, glancing at Setsuko’s livid expression.

“Oh, Fish, I forget, Yusei and I got you something else,” Lise sighed like she wanted to withhold this particular gift. “For the next day Yusei and I will not make out.”

Fish narrowed her eyes suspiciously. “Even when I’m not in the room? I will be able to tell. I have a spidey-sense for that kind of thing.”

“Even when you’re not in the same room,” Yusei groaned.

Fish sniffed, actual tears came to her eyes, and she pulled both Lise and Yusei into a hug. “That is the most beautiful gift you could have given me. Thank you so much.”

Yusei scowled deeply. “Okay, okay, don’t milk it. Geez.”

Fish let them go and proceeded to devour her piece of chocolate cake like a starving bear.

Martha seemed to glow with pride the more people commented on her cake. The cake wasn’t big or small, so Akiza thought she had Martha had made a second. Instead she just kept cutting smaller and smaller pieces till there was a slice for everyone present. No one complained that the slices were tiny, and the cake was homemade.

“This is the best birthday I’ve ever had,” Akiza grinned.

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“Crow! What do you want, damnit?!” Fish shouted, tackling him to the floor.

“Geez, Fish! I’m 18 today so I just want to adult in peace!” he shouted at her. “Can I go to work please?”

“Don’t you want a cake or something? I can make something for dessert.”

“I just want a quiet night after I get home from work, okay?” He shoved Fish off of him, and mounted his runner.

“Why are people yelling so early in the morning?” Lise yawned, stepping down into the garage.

“Ask Fish,” Crow grumped, and drove out of the garage.

Yusei and Jack meandered downstairs just in time to watch Crow leave.

Fish grinned and whipped out her cell phone. “The bird has left the nest, I repeat the bird has left the nest. Deploy the armies.”

“Oh God, Fish, what did you do?” Jack groaned.

“Whatever it is,” Lise yawned, and smiled widely when Yusei wrapped his arms around her from
behind. “It’s way too early for.”

“Crow’s and Martha’s kids banded together to make Crow drawings and banners. I hate kids more than I can say, but they mean a lot to Crow. So I invited them here to celebrate when he comes back for work. Akiza and the twins are coming too, ya know, help set up decorations and coral small children.”

“Fish, that’s an awesome idea,” Yusei admitted, blinking in complete surprise.

Lise nodded in agreement. Words seemed to have failed her.

“That is…surprisingly considerate and thoughtful,” Jack commented.

“Don’t get used to it, Assless. I’m not doing anything for your birthday.”

“Wouldn’t want it any other way.”

There was a soft knock on the door and a ton of kids spilled into the garage when Fish opened the door. They proceeded to cover the place in their marker and crayon-made drawings of Crow, his duel monsters, cake and birds.

“I’m gonna need to be dressed to deal with all these children,” Lise said weakly. “And coffee.”

“I’m on it,” Jack said gleefully. He loved coffee even more than Lise did. He was out in a heartbeat, donning his coat and snatching some change from their change jar.

It was hard to keep all the kids entertained, but they settled down when Lise unrolled a huge sheet of butcher paper from her room for everyone to color on. Every marker, crayon and pen was utilized in the house. Zora even poked her head in to check everything was okay they were so quiet. Not around lunch time though. Everyone was fed, but the gang rang out of bread incredibly quickly.

Finally, it was the end of Crow’s shift.

Lise felt a small hand tugging on her shirt. It was one of the littlest kids. Annie. “How much longer?”

“I think just 15 more minutes. You’ve all been great. It’s just a few more minutes and think of how happy Crow’s gonna be,” Lise replied, hoping she sounded encouraging instead of nervous. She didn’t hate kids, but they made her uncomfortable. She didn’t want to accidentally create a tiny asshole.

“I think that’s him!” Leo cried. “Hurry everybody hide!” He switched off the lights and dove behind the covered runner in progress.

The kids hid in nooks and crannies and the teenagers squeezed behind the couch. No other place was large enough to conceal them.

Crow opened the garage and frowned in confusion. “Why are all the lights off? Hm, guess the guys went out.” He flipped the switch.

“SURPRISE!” the kids shouted, unable to hold themselves back any longer.

Crow was very quiet. He surveyed every single face beaming up at him. Then he saw all the drawings the kids had made.
“I know you said you didn’t want anything big,” Fish broke the silence. “So we didn’t get any cake or big decorations, but the kids wanted to make you something for your birthday… Is it okay? Is it too much? Should we have done nothing? H-Happy birthday? Is it-? Are you-? Um…” She inhaled sharply as if she wanted to add more but couldn’t find the words.

Crow swallowed and suddenly the kids swarmed forward. They enveloped him in a huge hug.

“Thank you guys so much,” Crow choked out. He rubbed his eyes but tears kept sliding down his cheeks. “I’ll keep all of them forever.”

Fish sighed with relief. She leaned over to Jack, who had to bend down to hear her whisper. “He started crying. You owe me $50.”
“Hey, you’re up early,” Yusei commented when Lise stepped into the kitchen just past eight in the morning.

“Yep,” she yawned and sat down at the table with a bagel. “How do you get up so early every day? The morning is evil.”

“I guess my body just likes the morning, but we’re getting off topic,” he reached for Lise’s free hand. “Is something wrong?”

She didn’t answer for a minute. Lise’s knee jiggled impatiently like she was in a rush, but slowing down for Yusei’s benefit. “It’s November 10th,” she said softly.

“Oh,” Yusei murmured, his tone gentle. “Do you want me to come with you?”

“If you want, but I’m leaving as soon as I’m finished here.” Lise held up her bagel.

“I’ll be ready long before then,” Yusei assured her.

“Unless you can’t find something black.”

“Fat chance,” he kissed her forehead and ascended the ladder to the third floor.

Lise pulled a piece of paper off of the yellow legal pad they kept in the kitchen and quickly scrolled a note to Fish, Crow, and Jack. She polished off her bagel and counted what little cash she had. Just enough to pay for flowers and a small snack.

“Okay, here I go,” she took a deep breath and grabbed her jacket.

“Not without me.”

“Are you sure? I can go by myself, ya know,” Lise turned around when she had her jacket on. Her eyes widened considerably, making her large blue eyes appear even bigger.

“What?” Yusei looked down at himself, flushed with color. “Is it too much?”

“No! But when did you get a suit?”

“Oh, Zora gave us her sons’ old stuff. She said she couldn’t bear to get rid of it, so she let us take our pick. We kept some and gave away the rest.”

“It suits you,” Lise said. The corner of her mouth twitched at her tiny pun. She adjusted the collar and buttoned the jacket. “Thanks for doing this.”

“I don’t want you to feel like you have to do this alone.”

She patted his chest with finality. “I haven’t thought that in a long time.”

“Good,” Yusei took her hand and lead them down the stairs to the garage. He pushed the door open and gestured for Lise to go first.

“I promise we won’t stay long,” Lise said, hugging herself for warmth in the chilly November air.
Yusei gave her a sideways glance and fell into step beside her. “We’ll stay as long as we need to. This is your first time seeing…it…right?” He hesitated at mentioning what he assumed Lise’s plan was.

She nodded, and they didn’t talk until they stepped inside the market they now used instead of the small mini mart by their place. Yusei waited, watching Lise pay for a large bouquet of purple and red roses, and dark chocolate dipped dried mangoes.

“Okay, we’re here,” Lise mumbled at the gates of the cemetery. She shook herself out of her reverie and pushed through the gates without another word.

She and Yusei walked through the rows and rows of headstones. Many were rooted in large family shrines and had plenty of space for more relatives’ names to join them. Lise’s mother had been unrightfully disowned by her family after giving birth to Lise with Roman, so she looked for a much smaller marker.

Suddenly Yusei stopped at one of the larger grave markers. His parents’ names were etched into the stone, and he couldn’t bring himself to stop reading them.

“What’s wrong?” Lise whispered.

Yusei couldn’t respond. He sank, shakily, to his knees and ran his fingers over their names.

Lise made an understanding sound in her throat, and put the bag of mangoes down. Yusei heard her rustling around in the back of his mind, like he was at the bottom of a well. “Here,” she thrust two roses into his hand, a purple and a red flower.

“But—“

“I don’t think mom would mind,” she smiled sadly at him, pecked him quickly on the lips, and went to find her mom’s burial site.

“Thanks…” He placed the two roses, side by side, before his mother and father’s names. “I know I got to see you, and I know now that you really loved me, but I wish we’d had more time to be a family.”

Lise had found her mother’s lonely grave. It was wedged in the back. From a distance it looked sad, but when Lise sat down before it she laughed out loud. Her mother’s name was written boldly on her marker, and a quote.

“‘We are who we choose to be, in life and death,’” Lise read aloud, smiling through her tears. “You always said you wouldn’t go down without a fight, or at least the last word.” She set the flowers down in front of the grave.

“You okay?” Yusei asked, rubbing his eyes as he sat down.

“Yeah, you?”

“Working on it,” he sighed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make this about me.”

“It was a shock to see your parents’ graves. I get it. Mango?”

“Sure,” Yusei took the dessert without thinking. “Wait, shouldn’t you be leaving this for your mom?”
“She wouldn’t mind if we shared a little bit,” Lise smiled and popped the mango into her mouth. “Mom would tell me not to waste food.” She sealed the bag and set it next to the flowers.

“I think your mom has the coolest grave.”

Lise chuckled. “It’s a huge ‘fuck you’ to her family. They disowned her so she got to do whatever she wanted. Especially since she and dad never got married.” She sighed and leaned her head up against Yusei’s shoulder.

He rested his head on top of hers. “Maybe next year we can bring the others and remember everyone’s parents.”

“We should. It’s easier when you’re with someone. Then there’s love from the living and the dead,” Lise whispered.

They stayed like that for at least another hour. By then they had to leave. A cold snap had worked its way into the air, and it started to rain.

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“Oh, everybody’s here. Come in, make yourself feel at home,” Zora said when she opened the door. She stepped aside to let the gang in. “Sorry my place is so small, but the couch is new and I made cookies.” Zora nervously rung her hands.

“Why are we celebrating New Years’ here?” Akiza whispered to Fish. “There’s no space to breathe.” She pointed to Leo and Luna trying to squeeze onto the couch together.

Fish shrugged. “Zora invited us and her sons moved out a long time ago and her husband passed, so we figured we’d make sure she wasn’t lonely.”

“What a great idea,” Akiza smiled.

“Wasn’t my idea. I’d much rather spend it at the twins’ place. They have a Jacuzzi!” Fish grumbled.

“Don’t worry about the space,” Lise told Zora, taking up the last seat on the couch. “It’s perfect to watch the fireworks together.”

“Oh good. My place is small, I don’t need a lot of space, but until now there’s been no need for much ever since it’s just been me.”

“Don’t you have your soaps?” Jack asked, sitting cross-legged on the floor.

“Yes, but they could never replace my three boys,” Zora sniffed, throwing a disapproving glance at him.

“You sure do have a lot of pictures of them,” Yusei chuckled. One of the walls was completely covered with photos of all three boys growing up with Zora and her husband.

“Cookie?” Lise handed him an extra.

“Sure.”

“I think Zora liked being a mom a little too much,” Lise joked, munching on her cookie.

“Good thing she doesn’t have facebook,” Yusei muttered.
Lise smiled and polished off her cookie. “Damn Zora makes good cookies. Good thing I snagged a couple before Fish and Leo devoured them all.”

“Hey, um, about midnight…” Yusei said. He bit his thumb nervously and looked down at his shoes.

“Do you not want to watch the fireworks or something?” Her eyebrows contracted with concern.

“No, no! I really want to!” Yusei said adamantly. “I just…um…right after midnight on New Years’ day…people, especially couples, they um…they uh…”

“Oh,” Lise nodded. “They kiss, right. Well, what’s wrong about that? I mean, we’ve kissed a few times by now.”

“I know, but kissing because we’re expected to just feels weird and kinda stupid,” Yusei ran a hand through his hair. “I like kissing you…just because…”

“Well, ya know,” Lise looked slyly out of the corner of her eyes. “You could kiss me just because it’s New Years’ day. I’m just glad you actually like to kiss me.”

“Of course I like to kiss you. That’s one of the best parts of being together,” Yusei smiled shyly, his cheeks a little pink.

“I like that part too…”

Crow butted his head in between them. “HEY! Why are you two standing here acting like weirdoes?” He frowned at them. “We’re setting up a few games to pass the time. You guys should play.”

“Sounds like fun!” Lise’s eyes lit up with excitement. “Leo will love the chance to cream Yusei at something again.”

“You lose at Go Fish one time,” Yusei sighed good-naturedly.

Everybody squeezed into the chairs surrounding Zora’s single table the best they could. A lively game of rummy ensued when Zora pulled out her numerous stacks of playing cards. Hilarity broke out during every round. Even with ten decks of cards in play Lise and Leo had trouble going out nearly every round. Jack still needed Crow to explain to him what was going on midway through the second round, but he picked it up quickly after that. Luna and Zora were practically wiping the floor with everyone as they took turns going out almost every game. Akiza and Crow lucked out with low numbers and cards almost every game. Fish and Yusei ranged from high numbers to low numbers, and Yusei kept score.

“Oh, fireworks in five minutes!” Zora popped out of her seat like a firecracker, pointing at her ancient TV set. “That means champagne for me and sparkling soda for the rest of you!” She began to grab drinking glasses from her cupboards and ignored all protests that it wasn’t necessary.

With no other choice, everyone gathered with anticipation at the TV.

Leo looked like a bouncing pop rock candy he was so jittery. “Just three more minutes!”

“Geez, Leo, slow down before you pee yourself,” Luna scolded, but she only did it with half the usual conviction. She was just as excited.

Akiza smiled, knowing exactly how to calm and excite the twins. “What type of fireworks do you
think they’ll use?”

“Big ones that change color!”

“Green ones!”

“Golden waterfalls!”

“Green ones!”

“Those cool spiral screamers?” Lise suggested. “Those are my favorite.”

“I hope they play Star Wars during the show,” Crow remarked.

“Always a classic,” Jack agreed.

“You’re such nerds,” Fish rolled her eyes.

Jack shook his head. “Nerd culture takes hard work, I can see why you would take a different path. It wasn’t the nerd world you were looking for.”

Yusei grinned widely.

Lise had to cover up a snort with her hand when Fish looked at her accusingly. “I don’t think Fish has ever seen Star Wars.”

“What?!”

“No!”

“That is a total crime against nature!”

“We must rectify this disgusting lack of culture immediately!” Crow declared dramatically.

“How about after you all wake up tomorrow morning?” Zora said sternly, joining everyone. “There were too many glasses to carry.” She gestured to the table housing their glasses and swirled her own with a small smile.

“Thanks, Zora,” Lise took a glass and stood behind the couch.

“You’re all mighty welcome. I haven’t had a New Years’ Eve this fun in years.”

“Glad to be here, Zora,” Leo and Luna grinned, doing their best not to spill.

“Oh okay, 15 seconds left! Everybody ready to countdown now!” Jack cried, his free hand clenched with the effort not to start prematurely.

“10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1! HAPPY NEW YEAR!”

Lise dragged a laughing Yusei into a kiss by his shirt collar. Zora’s cheeks became pinker the more she toasted with the others. Leo and Luna had long since downed their sodas and were jumping up and down excitedly, watching the explosions on the TV unfold. Fish, Jack, Akiza and Crow happily toasted and drank to each other, Fish saying Happy New Year in different languages just because she could along the way.

“I don’t remember why I was so opposed to this,” Yusei said after he broke away for air.
“Yeah, you really shouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth,” Lise chuckled.

“Speaking of gifts, I’ve gotta start planning for you birthday.”

“What? No, why?” Lise turned pink and buried her face in her hands. “Whatever it is it’s gonna be embarrassing. Just don’t do anything! Celebrate Jack’s instead. His is a week before mine!”

“I’m not dating Jack. I’ll get him a number one duelist foam finger or something, but you did something great for my birthday so I wanna do something great for yours.”

“Okay,” Lise relented, burying her face in his shoulder. “But nothing too public okay? Too many people I don’t know in one place freaks me out.”

“That I can work with,” Yusei smiled and placed a small kiss on Lise’s hairline right as spiraling screamers erupted across the TV screen.
“Okay, it’s a week late, but finally we were able to do this,” Yusei said, he bit his thumb and sat down next to Lise at the kitchen table. “Dinner should be ready soon.”

“It’s been two weeks since my birthday,” Jack sniffed. He crossed his arms and put his feet up on the table.

Carly bit her lip and adjusted her glasses. There was tension in the air. She could feel it, and she didn’t like it one bit.

Akiza rolled her eyes and shoved Jack’s feet back to the floor. “Oh come on. We’ve all been busy. A new year just started. I’m going to duel academy, Crow, Lise and Yusei have jobs, and Fish is being catty.”

“Where is Fish?” Leo asked, his eyebrows knit together. “Shouldn’t she be here?”

“Yes,” Lise said immediately, her tone hinting that she would not like to further discuss the matter.

Crow coughed to break the awkward silence following Lise’s short reply. “Uh, well, we’ve been having…roommate disagreements with her, and she didn’t exactly take our honesty well.”

“She’s at her grandparents’ house today,” Lise added, her scowl deepening.

Akiza shuffled her feet and looked at her hands. She found a hangnail to occupy her until she could come up with something to say. “Fish is…I think she’s going through withdrawals.”

“From her powers?” Luna said.

“Yeah. She said the Oracle allowed her three chances to borrow her water powers in an emergency, but Fish has had the ability to control water since she was born.”

“That seems kind of cruel,” Carly said quietly, her voice reflecting her careful thinking. “Maybe it would have been better if the Oracle had made it so that Fish didn’t remember having those powers, ya know, like with me when I was a Dark Signer?”

“But that’s talking whole years, several incidents, Carly, not just a few days or even weeks. In Fish’s case, it’d be like giving up most of her life. It is cruel though, Carly, but now that Fish doesn’t have it anymore, it must be so hard to feel completely powerless.”

“She wouldn’t be if she would let me help her learn how to defend herself,” Lise snapped, crossing her arms. She and Jack looked almost like they were mirroring each other.

“Look guys, let’s forget about Fish tonight,” Yusei said, sighing heavily. “Yeah, she should be here, and yeah, she’s acting immorally, but it isn’t about her. Today we’re celebrating Jack’s and Lise’s birthdays.”

Jack raised one eyebrow curiously. “Did you make our favorites?”

“Of course,” Yusei shot him a look. “What do ya think I’ve been doing in the kitchen for the past hour? Speaking of which,” he slid out of his seat and back into the kitchen to make sure he wasn’t spoiling anything.

“So how is duel academy?” Lise asked the twins and Akiza. “Do you three like it?”
“Oh, it’s awesome!” Leo piped up instantly, glad to be included. “I’m in class with Dexter!”

“We made new friends too,” Luna smiled and the room instantly felt lighter. “Monique and Brad.”

“I’m still working on making friends. I’m just not very good at it,” Akiza chuckled, rubbing the back of her neck.

“You and me both,” Lise agreed, stretching out her limbs like a cat would. “I just wanna get back past all the stupid small talk shit, and be as open as I can.”

“Not knowing someone doesn’t stop you from calling them out on their bullshit,” Yusei reminded Lise, poking her side, and making her jump.

She swatted his arm and laughed. “I hate it when you do that!”

“But he’s right,” Crow smiled for the first time that day. “Food?”

“Help yourself. I’ve finished everything up, so—“

Everyone zoomed out of their chairs like rockets. Because of Lise and Jack’s birthdays being so close together they had generally just celebrated on the 13th or 14th of January. Instead, both their birthdays had come and gone with little recognition, meaning they had decided to meet up the first free Friday afterwards. Yusei had volunteered to cook this time around, no reason why (his words), but everyone agreed Martha could use a break. That and Yusei was great at cooking.

For Jack, there was garlic buttered crab, and prawns. Lise had chosen rice balls and sesame balls. Weird combination, and both time consuming, but Yusei figured it was worth it. Crow had pitched in a little bit too. Together it was like making a machine, except the end result was much more delicious.

They were halfway through the meal when a knock came from the door. Luna, Akiza and Lise were trying to see how many sesame balls Leo could fit into his mouth, and the boys were good-naturedly scolding Jack for his expensive dinner choices. Carly had been trying valiantly to defend Jack’s birthday wishes.

“I’ll get it,” Lise grabbed a napkin and rubbed the butter off her hands as she descended to their front door. “Who is it?” she called through the door.

No answer.

She frowned and, against her better judgement, opened the door. “Trudge?” Lise’s eyebrows flew up toward her hairline. She leaned over, realizing Trudge was far from alone. “Mina too? Oh and some random guy we don’t know. Great, well, come on in.”

“Sorry to call on you at such a late hour,” Trudge apologized immediately after walking past the threshold.

“But we wanted to speak to you as soon as possible about a couple things,” Mina said curtly. All business as usual.

Lise nodded and gestured to the single couch down in the garage level of their home. “Let’s make this quick.”

“I wholeheartedly agree,” a rather stiff-looking woman in a plum colored business suit adjusted her glasses. She threw a dark glance at Mina and Trudge, and the continuous tapping of her square
spectacles suggested she was impatient to leave.

“So what can I do for you?”

“First,” the woman sniffed and reached into her briefcase. “Is the manner of your inheritance. You are the single child of Mayoko Kururugi and Roman Goodwin, yes?”

“Yes, but what inheritance?”

“Your mother has left you a will.”

“Why am I just hearing about this now? It’s been two years,” Lise’s eyes narrowed.

“You were a resident of Satellite for ten years, and Satellite residents cannot inherit property,” the woman sniffed.

“If it was my mother’s will then it was meant to be mine in the first place, lady,” Lise hissed, her hands curling into fists.

“Same goes for your friends,” the woman continued as if Lise’s comments meant nothing. “I’m here to give each of you the wills of your families, as well as assure you that their accounts are now in their names and unfrozen.” She handed Lise four large envelopes and closed her briefcase. “Is that all you needed me for?” She smiled widely when Mina nodded. “Excellent, I’ll be leaving now.”

“Good riddance,” Lise muttered under her breath. She held the envelopes up and examined them. Her full name, as well as Jack’s, Crow’s, and Yusei’s were typed out in plain ink. How could something so significant to them be contained in something so small?

“Lise?” Yusei’s voice carried down the stairs. “Is everything okay?” He poked his head in to check on her. “Trudge and Mina?”

“Good timing, Yusei, do you think you could grab Jack and Crow too?” Mina smiled kindly, but Trudge’s refusal to meet anyone’s eyes threw off the idea that they were there for kindness’s sake.

“Um…” Yusei glanced at Lise. She nodded. “Sure.” He vanished and reappeared at the top of the stairs with Jack and Crow in tow. All three boys wore varying expressions of confusion until Lise handed them their envelopes. “Are these-?”

“Your parents’ wills, yes,” Mina said swiftly. “But that’s not why we’re here.” She shifted to look at Trudge, gesturing with her arm that he should begin explaining why the two chiefs of police were there.

“We were wondering, well I was wondering,” Trudge corrected hastily after a dangerous look from Mina. “If maybe any of you would consider giving us a hand.”

The four teenagers did nothing to encourage him to continue.

“We’re, the police, and Mina and I in the higher up sections are doing the best we can, but we’re not doing so well in the eyes of the people right now.”

Crow’s eyes glinted angrily. “You mean with keeping the peace between Satellite and City folks?”

“Yes, exactly!” Trudge smiled gratefully, glad they were catching on. “I got an idea to ask you guys to go out in public and, ya know, maybe say we were doing the best we could.”
“An outstanding job? That things are so much better, and the police are doing their jobs?” Lise said quietly.

Akiza, Carly, and the twins had slunk down the stairs. They had heard everything that Trudge had asked.

“I get it,” Akiza’s voice sounded like ice. “You want the saviors of the world to give you a public endorsement to make you look good.”

Trudge swallowed. He did not like where this was going.

“Well, the bridge is an improvement, and the fact that they’re making more,” Leo scratched his head, and kicked at some dust.

“But it isn’t enough,” Luna’s voice was unnaturally harsh. “People still don’t like markers or Satellite residents.”

“And there’s no fucking way in hell I’m saying you did a great job. Do you have any idea what my uncle, the Director Goodwin, did to me? He was in charge of the police for years and you want me to say you’re all amazing? No way. Not when I’m still seeing murderers walk free.”

“Murderers?” Jack gasped.

“Dude, seriously, you need to read more,” Crow scolded and then directed his next words to Mina and Trudge. “I got all my markings from helping out kids who needed me. Why was I arrested for something that wasn’t wrong multiple times?”

“Yusei?” Trudge appealed to him almost desperately. “We’ve had our rough patches, but we’re trying to do good here.”

“No,” Yusei shook his head and pointed to his mark. “You taught me a permanent lesson about what one little ‘rough patch’ can do on my face.”

Mina directed her attention to Jack. Her eyes widened hopefully. “Jack?”

The boy took a deep breath. “What can I say? I knew a life in Satellite was a one way ticket then and it still is today even with the bridge. If you can fix that, then we’ll talk.”

“But-“

“Until your cops stop murdering and get fired for when they do instead of getting suspended,” Lise said calmly. “We’re not helping you. There’s too much corruption.”

“Then I think we can show ourselves the door,” Mina rose from the couch, nodded respectfully, and headed out. Trudge followed her silently, head down, and his hands in his pockets. “I told you they wouldn’t go for it,” Mina whispered. Then the door slammed behind them.

“Well that was stressful,” Lise remarked. She sat down on the recently unoccupied couch.

“So what now? Do we open these?” Crow regarded his envelope like it would suddenly burst into flames or claw his eyes out.

“They are our parents’ wills,” Jack slid his open. He started reading, slowly, and the others did the same.

“Quite the birthday present, huh?” Crow nudged Jack when they’d all finished.
“Wow,” Akiza wiped her eyes. She and the twins had been reading over everyone’s shoulders. “I guess you guys are set for a while then.”

“That means we have to be responsible,” Crow gave Jack a look.

“Who knew?” Yusei smiled and closed up his envelope again. “I guess we won’t have to worry about money for a long time.”

“Among other things,” Lise said, tucking something into her pocket. “So, shall we go back to dinner?”

Luna smiled, leading the way upstairs. “Don’t forget we have to figure out how many sesame rolls Leo can fit in his mouth!”

“I think we stopped at 14,” Leo recalled jubilantly.

“Oh god, for my stomach’s sake, please don’t keep going,” Akiza groaned, but her smile sort of negated her words.

“Are you okay, Lise?”

“Yeah,” she answered, taking her fingers away from her lips. “I was just thinking about something. I want to help people, not the way Mina and Trudge suggested, but I don’t want any more people turning up in the newspaper unjustly killed.”

“We’ll figure something out,” Crow said, his brow furrowed with determination. “We can start with Leo and Luna’s parents.”

“Our parents?” Luna bit her lip. “They’d have to be in town for that.”

Leo shifted uncomfortably. He wasn’t hungry anymore.

Jack clapped his hands together. “Can we think about something else? I thought we were trying to celebrate my birth?”

“Excuse you, but you’re not the only one having a birthday. You’re only six fucking days older than me, Jack,” Lise challenged, a new smile on her face.

“That is six days of extra wisdom, my friend,” Jack teased.

“Below the belt!”

“Then I guess that’s the perfect cue to give you this,” Lise picked up a big box and handed it to him.

Jack set it on the table and backed away. “It’s heavy, you didn’t get me a bomb did you?”

Lise rolled her eyes. “Yes, Jack, I went out shopping for the perfect bomb to murder you on your birthday.”

“Okay…” He quickly tore off the wrapping paper. For several seconds he just stared at the box and what the side pictures revealed was inside. Next second he was pulling Lise into a huge hug.

“Thank you so much! This is the best!”
“Dude, what is – oh no,” Crow groaned. He sat down heavily with his head in his hands. “Good God why?!"

“What?”

“Huh?”

“Are we missing something?”

“Lise?” Yusei gave her a scathing look and crossed his arms. “Why did you give Jack an espresso machine?”

“I couldn’t help it!” Lise confessed, guilt evident in her nervous smile. “Jack brought me over to the café and had me try the blue eyes roast once and then I was hooked because it was fucking good, and I hate his guts so much for doing that to me, so technically the machine is for both of us so we spend less money on $30 dollar coffee!” She said all in a rush.

Crow blinked and weighed the options. “That might actually be smart in the long run.”

“Especially since it’ll be just the two of us,” Jack grinned widely and high-fived Lise.

“But you are welcome to try some coffee at any time,” Lise said quickly.

“All right, good luck topping that, guys,” Jack rubbed his hands together.

“Just wait until he has to set it up,” Akiza whispered to Crow and Yusei, the both of which smirked.

The twins presented Jack with the movie about himself, to which he proclaimed they were watching that night. Crow resupplied Jack’s amount of hair gel for the next month. Apparently Akiza and Crow had had the same idea, but Jack was just as pleased with an enormous supply of ramen as he was with the hair gel. Yusei handed him polish for his runner in the hopes that he would be encouraged to also fix it up, not just make it look good.

“Thank you all so much,” Jack’s smile was so wide it was a wonder it fit his face. “We’re watching my movie now!” He ran up the stairs into the media room like a giddy pony at a parade.

“We’re only watching because he’s our friend,” Crow muttered, following Jack up the stairs with the others in tow.

Yusei grabbed Lise’s hand. “We’ll come back in a couple minutes. It’s your birthday too.”

“I told you not to do anything too big!” Lise’s eyes widened with anxiety, but she followed Yusei back down to the garage.

“And I didn’t!” Yusei insisted, squeezing her hand. “I just got you a couple presents! You made my birthday fun, and you didn’t want to do anything big, so I figured I’d make you something big.”

“Oh…” Lise spoke softly, her face reddening.

“Okay,” Yusei turned the lights off before they stepped down. “Close your eyes.”

“Yusei, I don’t-“

“Please!”
“Fine,” she sighed and closed her eyes. “Just don’t do anything weird.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Yusei pulled her further into the dark garage. He dropped her hand and went to turn on the light. “No peeking!” He took the sheet covering up what everyone had thought was a new engine and pulled it off. “Okay, now…” He stepped back, twisting his gloves in his fingers. She was just staring at it. “Do-Do you like it?” Yusei stammered, biting his thumb.

“You…built me a duel runner,” Lise murmured, bending down and touching the front hesitantly. Her eyes were wide as Saturn’s rings, watching the orange paint job gleaming as it caught the light. “This is really mine?”

“Yeah, and I figured I’d show you how to ride since you’re 18 now and can get your license,” Yusei rocked back and forth on his feet a little. “I can start over if you don’t- MMPH!” He laughed into Lise’s kiss, relieved she was so pleased.

“Thank you,” Lise grinned. “I can’t wait to start learning how to turbo duel.” She raised an eyebrow. “But you do know you’ll never be able to top this, right?”

“Challenge accepted,” Yusei pulled something small out of his pocket.

“Oh my God, I was kidding!” Lise gasped, her face flushing even deeper red.

“I did say a couple presents, didn’t I?” Yusei smiled and opened his fist.

“Jewelry? Really?”

“First, it’s a super cool dragon, like you,” Yusei seized the tail and snapped it off. “And it also functions as a jump drive.”

“I’m actually impressed. It’s fashionable and functional,” Lise nodded approvingly.

“So you’ll wear it?”

“Of course.”

“Can I…?” Yusei put the dragon back together and held up the necklace.

“Oh yeah,” Lise turned and pulled her hair out of the way, allowing Yusei to shut the clasp behind her neck. “Thank you so much,” she whispered, throwing her arms back around Yusei’s neck and shoulders.

“I’m sorry it wasn’t finished on your actual birthday, and if the paint job isn’t right we can-“

“Yusei, shut up, okay? I love it,” Lise assured him, brushing his cheek with her fingers.

“Happy Belated Birthday then,” Yusei smiled and pushed Lise’s hair behind her ear. His face had been getting pinker, but turned red at Lise’s touch.

“I love you,” Lise whispered, embarrassed, but earnestly.

“I love you too…”

“Hey guys, it’s been a half hour, and Jack is getting miffed that you’re not watching the – oh,” Crow walked in in the middle of Lise and Yusei heavily making out. He chuckled quietly to himself and went back upstairs, not interrupting them in the slightest. “I think Jack will just have to understand tonight.”
“I thought you said you had six friends?” Luna and Leo’s mother snapped. She was a tall, elegant woman with long green hair and eyes to match. Her pink business suit was impeccable and not a fleck of makeup was out of place. She exuded a no-nonsense attitude that liked things when they were going as planned. Her features hinted at what Luna might resemble when she had grown.

The twins’ father coughed in agreement. “We were scheduled for dinner at seven, correct?” In contrast to his wife, Mr. Collins was rather boring. His dirty blond hair was styled simply, and his eyes were so light there hardly seemed to be any pigment. He carried himself in the same self-assured way his wife did.

“It’s just five minutes past, dad,” Leo grumbled, moving his food around on the plate with his chopsticks.

“Lise and Yusei went on a quick date today. They didn’t do everything they wanted to on Valentine’s Day and White Day so they decided to go out today,” Luna explained quickly. She wasn’t eating either.

“So…” Crow began awkwardly, inwardly wincing at his crappy opener. He wanted to be polite though, so he plowed on. “What is it that you two do?”

Mrs. Collins grinned, but it seemed much more like a business smile. “We work in the stock trade, and our job specifically requires a lot of travel.”

“That’s why you’re almost never home,” Leo added, stabbing his tomatoes savagely.

“You have your tutors,” Mrs. Collins said as if that solved the matter.

“And us,” Akiza added, hoping to brighten the mood. “We were really lucky to meet them.”

“Of course,” Mr. Collins nodded. “Our children are educated by the best in the world and in the best possible status they could be in this town.”

“You’re our senator’s daughter, right?” Mrs. Collins brought up before anyone else could jump in. “And you were that famous turbo duelist, right?” Her attention changed to Jack quickly.

Jack and Akiza shared a look. “Yes…”

“Good choice, Luna,” her mother patted her arm. “They’ll be good company in the future.”

“Excuse me,” Fish pushed her empty plate away and set her feet up on the table. “But if you’re just concerned with who we are in concerns to status, then I’m going to leave.”

“How rude!”

“Look, I don’t have any so called status worth mentioning here. I like your kids because they’re good, loyal friends. They could be poor and Jacuzzi-less, but we’d still be friends.”

“Um, Fish?” Luna tugged on Fish’s t-shirt. “Now isn’t a good time to be um…ya know, you.”

“Fine,” Fish sighed, rolling her eyes, and lowering her feet back to the floor. “I’ll be civil.”

Both parents were confused, as made evident by their eyes darting between their children and Fish.

“Um, the food is delicious,” Jack broke in, hoping to distract the Collins.
“Thank you, dear, we have a professional chef in our employ. He is a true delight to come home to,” Mr. Collins said flippantly. “You must have had the same as the king of turbo duelists.”

“Well, not all the time,” Jack admitted carefully. “Nowadays my friends and I usually cook for ourselves.”

“Really?” Mr. Collins frowned. “Why would you-“

The elevator dinged and Lise and Yusei stumbled out wet with rain. Despite being damp, they were flushed with rosy color and wide smiles.

Fish inhaled and exhaled deeply, allowing the scent of rain to fill her nostrils. The smell of water, any water, still soothed her even after the loss of her power. Sometimes it was the only comfort she had anymore.

“Sorry we’re so late,” Lise apologized, peeling her coat off and squeezing into her seat beside Luna. “We lost track of time.”

“It’s only fifteen minutes,” Luna assured her, relief evident in her voice. She was glad to have Lise’s warm strength to help her. She missed her parents, but disliked their nature of avoiding anything not related to their work.

“Still it was rude,” Yusei said simply, picking up on the room’s tension and that Leo’s and Luna’s parents only seemed to have eyes for his left cheek. “We apologize.” He slid into his seat next to Lise.

Mrs. Collins ignored his words and rounded on Luna. “You didn’t tell us Crow wasn’t the only one of your ‘friends’ with a mark,” she hissed angrily.

“Why should it matter?” Lise threw out there, her voice hard. Both she and Yusei’s cheeks had lost the rosy glow.

Mr. Collins chuckled as if it were obvious and gestured rudely to Crow’s heavily marked face. “The two of you are clearly criminals. Only people who have been to the facility are marked, so clearly you committed a crime.”

“Let me ask you something,” Crow leaned his elbows on the table. “Is it truly a crime if the government condemning you is corrupt and against your basic human rights?”

“B-But the government’s ruling is always right,” Mr. Collins sputtered. “Leo, are your friends anarchists?”

“No,” Lise shook her head. “Government is supposed to be run by the people for the people. Wanting to protect orphaned children,” she indicated Crow with her palm facing upwards, and then Yusei in the same way. “Or visit a nearby island is not a crime. If the government condemns my friends for being who they are then I can’t agree with its decisions.”

“But you’re just one person,” Mrs. Collins scoffed, turning up her nose. “And I assumed Mr. Atlas and Ms. Izinski would have better judgement.” She directed a deep glare at her children. “As would my own flesh and blood.”

Leo glared deeply at his parent’s disapproving stares. Luna fidgeted with the hemline of her skirt, her face red and dripping in sweat.

Fish grinned at the rising conflict and put her feet back up. “This is better than I expected.”
Akiza’s fork flew to the ground and clattered there loudly. She hadn’t touched it, but her psychic powers were reacting to her anger. She clenched her fists, keeping her rage and power contained. “My judgement is just fine now, thank you. For your information, I was with an extremely shady group of people because they made me feel loved and accepted even though it was all a lie. The man I trusted more than anyone was actually a power mad jerk who just wanted me to be his soldier. The people in front of you made me realize that. They are loyal, kind, and honest friends that would never try to manipulate me. I wasn’t so lucky when I was Leo and Luna’s age to have friends like them.”

“I’ve made some mistakes too,” Jack said softly, clasping his hands thoughtfully. “But along the way I’ve learned that status does not mean you have it made. On that note, thank you for the food, but we should probably get going.”

“Excellent idea, Jack,” Lise rose from her seat too.

Mr. and Mrs. Collins were stunned. Their dinner guests were getting up one by one to collect their coats. They were actually leaving.

“Wait for me, guys!” Leo shoved his chair away from the table and hopped down.

“Leonard Collins, you stop right there!” Mr. Collins commanded, standing up and pointing at his son.

Leo froze.

Mr. Collins smirked triumphantly. Mrs. Collins joined him. “Come back to the table and finish our dinner together, Leonard, and we will forgive you for befriending such trash.” She ignored the deep glares of all but Luna and her husband. Luckily no one had heat vision or she would have been an ash pile on the carpet in seconds.

“No.”

“No?”

“I said no,” Leo crossed his arms as defiantly as a nearly eleven-year-old boy could. “They’re my friends, and the best thing that’s happened to me since Luna and I were always left alone. If it weren’t for them and Luna I would be lonely…so…no…”

“Honestly, Leonard,” the boy’s father growled. “Why can’t you be more like your sister? We forbid the two of you from seeing any of these people again, but I have a feeling only Luna will obey us like the good child she is.”

“They’re Luna’s friends too!” Leo insisted, but his shoulders drooped as he gazed sadly at his sister. “Look sis, I get it if you don’t wanna come with us. This kind of thing is hard and I know being with mom and dad means a lot to you so—“

“N-No!” Luna suddenly gasped out. Her face was still red, but she no longer looked like she had been trying to hold her breath until she popped. She took a deep, shuddering breath and stood up. Luna swayed a little, her footing unsteady, but her words were calm and clear. “Mom, dad, I love both of you very much,” she swallowed. “But Crow and Yusei are my friends. Their marks don’t make them bad people, but thinking they are makes you bad. You don’t even know them! S-So, I’m going with them, with Leo,” she started shaking again, but Leo took her hand. “I’m sorry.” She gave her parents one last look at their stunned silent faces, and climbed into the elevator with her friends.
They accepted her with smiles and open arms. Akiza and Lise swept both twins into hugs.

“I’m so proud of all of you,” Lise said and shook her head in confusion. “Scratch that. I’m proud, but not like in a motherly way.”

“Talk about gross. No kids for us,” Fish agreed.

“I know right? They might turn out to be better people than us,” Akiza winked at the twins who beamed with pride and joy.

“Sorry about that,” Crow said sincerely. “I wasn’t expecting to change their minds at all, but we should have been…more appropriate.” He plucked at his sweatband habitually.

“No worries, Crow,” Leo shrugged. “Honestly that was better than I expected.”

“We’ll have consequences to deal with later,” Luna reminded him, twisting at the folds in her clothes again.

“Do you want to go back?” Jack knelt to Luna’s eye level to question her like an equal. He looked into her green eyes with his violet ones. “We would completely understand if you did.”

“No,” Luna smiled weakly. “I know I made the right choice. It just scares me right now.”

“That means party at our place!” Fish cheered pumping her fist in the air in time with ding of the elevator at the bottom floor.

“Ramen night!” Jack agreed jubilantly.

The twins laughed, finally being able to wind down their tense muscles after the day with their parents.
"I think I’m more bruises than body now," Lise groaned, allowing Yusei to help her back to her feet.

“It’s all part of the process. You’ll get it. I don’t know anyone else that’s that tenacious,” Yusei assured her. Together they pushed Lise’s runner back onto its wheels, and sat down to take a break. “Remember I wasn’t exactly the best when I made my first runner.”

Lise took off her helmet and shook her hair loose. “Oh god that was hilarious. You sailed perfectly right through that broken window like it was a target.” She laughed at the memory.

“Yeah, not the best day. That’s for sure,” Yusei chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck. “But I was teaching myself how to do everything, so I was lucky I didn’t kill myself.”

“More like Martha didn’t do it for you,” Lise smirked, shoving his shoulder.

“Heh heh, yeah…” He was having a hard time getting the words across. “I guess I’m just glad I can show you how to do all this too. You could have just, I dunno, decided to fly to turbo duel instead…” Yusei tugged on his gloves, his cheeks turning slightly pink. “So…it just really means a lot to me that you want to train so hard to use and maintain your runner.”

Lise inhaled and exhaled deeply. She draped an arm over her knees. “I did actually consider flying and refitting my duel disk. It’d be much easier, right?” She kicked a stray pebble away. “Flying feels so amazing,” she looked up at the gray clouds swirling above them. “All that speed and power is exhilarating…But it isn’t me. I’m not going to be the Vessel forever. If I turbo dueled like that it would feel incredible, but it wouldn’t be right. Turbo dueling and flying aren’t all that different,” Lise smiled. “They’re both connections to the world of speed, but learning how to turbo duel with my own skills will mean so much more in the long run.”

“If you can remember what screw driver to use,” Yusei waggled his brows teasingly.

“How the hell was I supposed to know which one was which?!”

“You handed me an entire bouquet of screwdrivers!”

“Granted, but now I know that the notched end is Philips and the flat heads are…well flat.”

Yusei laughed so hard he was clutching at a stitch in his side in no time. Lise laughed a little too, her face red, but it felt okay somehow. Like it was safe to laugh at herself with Yusei; he’d laughed at himself too just five minutes ago.

“Ready for round 100?” Yusei asked once he’d calmed down.

“More like bruise 100, but yeah,” Lise got up and slung herself over the runner again.

“Okay, you’ve made it through at least half of the course by now. Let’s go for three quarters this time. Oh, and don’t forget to slow down a little on the sharper turns.”

“You got it,” Lise slipped her helmet back on and gunned the engine. She was racing off in seconds.

The two of them kept at it even after it started to rain. Eventually they both had to call it a day
when thunder started booming.

“You know that saying about April showers?” Lise sneezed. She was wringing her sopping hair out in the warmth of the garage.

“Oh, they bring May flowers,” Crow helped, leaning on his runner casually. A wrench hung lazily in his hand. Clearly he’d been in the midst of work.

“Well, it’s a lie,” Lise blew her nose. “April showers just bring May showers.”

“Can’t argue with that,” Crow nodded to the open garage door that showed rain continuously pummeling the ground outside. “But are you getting any better?”

“Yes she is,” Yusei smiled crookedly, shyly showing teeth. “She’ll be riding backwards in no time.”

“If I can keep my eyes open long enough,” a corner of Lise’s lips lifted. “Then I can try riding without any hands!”

Crow laughed and shook his head. “I’d try that after you’ve mastered not crashing in the rain. Jack just finished boiling some water if you want hot chocolate, by the way.”

“Excellent!” Yusei lead the way up the stairs.

“Want us to grab you a mug?”

“Yes please!”


“Absolutely,” Jack slurped at his drink, which supported a small tower of what looked like whipped cream. “I figured out how to make a latte, and made the creamer look like a leaf!”

“And bought whipped cream,” Yusei raised an eyebrow.

“For hot chocolate, mate, not coffee. Have some taste,” Jack sniffed, getting whipped cream on his nose.

Yusei rolled his eyes and pulled three mugs down from the overhead cabinet.

“Speaking of taste, I’ll get some dinner started,” Lise joined Yusei at the stove where he had just finished pouring the water for their hot chocolate.

Jack gasped and nearly upended his mug all over himself. His face was hit by a lot of whipped cream though, making him resemble a strangely young Santa or Dumbledore. “Please tell me you’re not going to try to make cream puffs again!”

“You try to make something nice one time,” Lise grumbled. She pulled down the largest stew pot they owned.

“We try not to think about it,” Yusei smiled, pecked Lise on the cheek, and turned back to the stairs to bring Crow his hot chocolate.

“Well, good thing I restocked our potato supplies,” Lise sat down with a cutting board full of potatoes, the food scraps bin, and a peeler.
“Oh, your potato soup is amazing. Especially on cold days,” Jack admitted. He located a napkin and removed his makeshift beard.

“Thanks, I appreciate that,” Lise smiled and sat down with the potatoes, a cutting board, a peeler, and the yard waste bin.

It was quiet for a while. The only sound was the soft peeling of the potatoes, and the occasionally muttered “fuck” whenever Lise accidently hit her own hand, or dropped a potato.

“Oh, I’ll start putting the rest together,” Yusei offered when he came back up and saw Lise slicing the potatoes up.

“You remember how to do it this time?” Jack raised a dubious eyebrow and drained the remainder of his hot chocolate.

“Yeah, I mean choosing sour cream over cream cheese was a very…interesting choice,” Lise teased, smirking as she brandished her potato cutting knife.

“So I forgot the ingredients one time. Sue me,” Yusei grumbled, measuring out water and milk.

“Oh, potato soup, awesome!” Crow grinned. Clearly he had smelled the food cooking, and joined the others in the kitchen to investigate. “Where’s Fish?” he added, sitting beside Jack.

Lise shrugged. “I’m not really sure. I don’t think she left the house today. Hopefully, she’s up cleaning her half of the room.”

Crow frowned slightly. “Has it gotten that bad? I mean, I know you’re both messy.”

“Well yeah, but if she’s going to refuse to help us do chores then she can at least keep her side of the room clean. Dinner’s ready, so I’ll go check,” Lise cleaned her hands off with a towel and ascended the ladder.

Sure enough, Fish was seated on her bed with her computer. Her clothes were all over the floor, making the small room even smaller than it actually was. An unfinished puzzle was still on the carpet, and a tiny pizza table was still on Fish’s desk.

“I see you’ve been productive,” Lise snapped irritably.

“Oh yeah,” Fish looked up from her computer with a smile. “I was just writing some more of my fanfic. I haven’t finished my Hetalia one for a few years, and I just thought of a great new chapter idea.”

“But I asked you to clean up, do some laundry, toss that pizza table out, or put away that puzzle if you’re not gonna finish it. And how many of those things have you done? A big fucking zero, Fish.”

“All right, all right, geez. I’ll get to it tomorrow,” Fish grumbled.

“Really, Fish? Will it be done tomorrow? Or are you going to wait another month again? I can’t keep telling you that you should clean things the fuck up!”

“Then don’t! I like it this way!”

“Well I don’t! And I get a say too because this is my room too! All I ask is that it stays relatively clean for a week!”
“Well, you’re messy too!”

“But I don’t leave my clothes on the floor for three months and then deny all claims that the clothes smell!”

“They don’t!”

“Yes, they do! I’m tired of picking up after you because I’m not your mom and I’m not your maid! Get it the fuck done! And when you’re finished dinner is ready!” Lise screamed, and slammed the door behind her.

Crow, Yusei and Jack exchanged glances over their soup. None of them said a word as they watched Lise storm back down the ladder and sit in front of her bowl.

Lise savagely added dill and bacon bits to her soup, and stirred it up with a vengeance.

Crow spoke up, but kept his eyes on his thumbs. “Would you prefer Fish had a different room? We can move her into the media room.”

“I’d prefer her to go back to her grandparents to be quite honest. That way she doesn’t have to impose on anyone that isn’t family,” Lise growled in between bites.

“But she’s your friend,” Crow said, his voice low.

“Don’t care. Friends are supposed to respect space that multiple people are living in. She won’t pick up her stuff and she won’t do any chores unless I tell her to. I shouldn’t have to fucking police her,” Lise sighed. “What do you guys do? I don’t think I’ve ever seen you fight about your room and the three of you share it.”

“We trade-off who cleans like every two or three weeks,” Jack shrugged. “I made a chart.”

“Really?” Lise raised an eyebrow. “The man who downright refused to clean a toilet made a room cleaning chart?”

“What?” Jack huffed. “I can’t get to sleep if Yusei’s and Crow’s clothes are all over the floor. It ruins my style.”

“You actually have to have style for that to work,” Yusei quipped. “And I’m just going to wear my jacket again later, so-“

“I know right?” Fish jumped down into the kitchen and served herself some soup.

“Dear God the apocalypse is happening. Fish actually agreed with Yusei!” Crow dramatically put a hand to his heart and the other up as if he were shading his face from a blinding light only he could see.

The mood hadn’t lifted despite Crow’s valiant attempt. Lise pointedly wasn’t looking at Fish, and Fish was maintaining a relaxed façade that was slightly ruined by the fact that she was bending her spoon in half.

“So um…” Yusei said carefully. He pulled a large rolled up piece of paper out of his coat and unrolled it on the table. “I saw these posters in town today while Lise and I were training. Are you guys interested in entering?”

The poster had two duelists racing across the page on one of the newly constructed duel tracks in
New Domino City. Their monsters were squared off under the four letters stretched triumphantly across the top.

“W.R.G.P?” Jack’s interest was piqued.

“The World Racing Grande Prix?! Holy fuck, it’s a tournament!” Crow jumped out of his seat in excitement, knocking his chair to the ground.

Lise was the first to finish reading the description of the tournament at the bottom. “Oh cool, it’s like a tag match, but with a team of three people versus three other people! Held in September, people from all over the world! This sounds awesome!”

“So everybody’s in?” Yusei asked hopefully.

“You bet your fucking ass!” Yusei was glad to see a wide smile spread across Lise’s face. “I’ve gotta call Akiza and the twins. They’ll definitely be on board too!” She hurried up to her room to get her cell phone from its charger.

“What do you think, Fish?” Crow smiled at her. “We should think of team names for when we register!”

“Oh, and new riding suits,” Jack said pointedly.

“Are you sure we need that? I’d rather spend our money on developing the new engine,” Yusei tapped his chin thoughtfully.

“Well,” Fish shoved her empty bowl away from her. The bent spoon fell to the floor. “It sounds boring and stupid to me.”

The boys’ excitement died. They stared at Fish like she had turned into an alien.

This time it was Lise’s turn to come down to a room full of tension. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, I just voiced my opinion on the whole ‘turbo dueling’ craze is all,” Fish put quotations around turbo dueling with her fingers. “Apparently I have an unpopular opinion.”

Crow scowled. “It’s fine if you don’t like turbo dueling, but you don’t have to call it boring and stupid in front of us. We don’t tell you that Homestuck is boring and stupid.”

“Ya know what,” Fish stood up and kicked her chair away. “Fine, do whatever you want. See if I care, because apparently my opinions don’t matter.” She stalked across the room, climbed up the ladder, and slammed the bedroom door behind her for the second time that day.

Lise inhaled and exhaled deeply, rubbing her eyes and temples tiredly.

“Damn…” Jack murmured. “What got into her?”

“I don’t know,” Yusei said.

“I don’t either. I mean she had a shitty time growing up, but-“

“But that’s no excuse for her to start treating her friends like they don’t matter,” Lise said grumpily. “Look, the WRGP sounds awesome, but it’s been a long day for all of us, and I think we just need to sleep things off. I’ll see you guys in the morning.” She didn’t wait for the boys’ responses.
Both Lise and Fish climbed into bed, turned away from each other, and stared at the walls until they fell asleep.

“What’s wrong with you?” Yusei asked Crow. He took out the last milk carton in the fridge, swished what little milk was left, and decided to drink from the carton.

“You know I hate it when you do that,” Jack grumped, joining his friends in the kitchen.

Yusei shrugged. “I’ll buy more milk. Crow?”

“I wanted to ask Fish to hang out with me today,” Crow held up a note with barely legible scribbles on it. “But Fish went to visit her grandparents.”

Jack and Yusei exchanged similar wary glances.

“Um,” Yusei sat down and tugged on the collar of his shirt. “When you say hang out-?”

“I don’t mean as a date. I just like hanging out with Fish. She’s fun to talk to, and I figured she could use a good chat after…” Crow trailed off. His gray eyes darted up to the door of Fish and Lise’s shared bedroom.

“Maybe, but maybe she needed it with her grandparents more,” Jack suggested lightly as he made his daily coffee.

“Especially since we’re celebrating the twins’ birthday early,” Lise added. She stepped down from the ladder and yawned, stretching. “Their parents are gonna be here for most of June, so Leo and Luna wanted to celebrate for sure without interruption.”

“Someone’s up early,” Yusei commented.

Lise sat down solemnly with an apple. “I didn’t exactly sleep very well.” She put on a smile though. “But I’m excited for the twins’ party tonight. I just hope Luna likes my gift. It’s a book and I wasn’t sure what she liked to read.”

“There’s always returns or exchanges,” Crow pointed out. His demeanor had shifted in tune to the mood of the conversation.

“If I can find the receipt in my giant collection,” Lise laughed. “I hate balancing my checkbook.”

The four of them continued talking for hours. It felt good for all of them to be talking about nothing and everything without any tension.

“Oh crap, we need to get ready to go,” Crow realized when he checked the time. “Presents wrapped, clothes that aren’t pajamas, the whole thing.”

Jack chuckled good-naturedly, and polished off his last sip of coffee. “I doubt Leo and Luna would care if we showed up in pajamas.”

“Leo would take it as the best present ever. Another all-night dueling sleepover,” Yusei agreed.

“Oh god. I can’t last past three AM, so I don’t know how in the world that little boy does it,” Lise groaned, remembering the last time they had stayed the night at the twins’ place.

“Excitement, adrenaline, and candy,” Crow counted off on his fingers.
“Speaking of excitement, let’s make it a race. Whoever gets to Leo and Luna’s fastest wins the biggest slice of cake,” Jack wagered confidently.

“You are so on!” Crow exclaimed. “You in, Yusei? Lise?”

“Yep.”

“I’ll pass this time. I’m still getting the hang of my runner and I want to check to see if Akiza or Fish need a ride over or home.”

“Oh, good idea.”

“See you guys down here in a bit,” Lise smiled briefly and went back to her room to change.

Lise was still a bit angry at Fish, not angry enough to not call, but angry enough to call Akiza first. She was angry, not heartless. She slipped an orange t-shirt on as her phone dialed Akiza’s number.

Akiza picked up on the third ring. “Hi Lise, what’s up? Did you forget birthday gifts for the twins?” Her tone was teasing.

“No,” Lise giggled. The voice of her friend was kind and calming. She leaned the phone in the crook of her neck and shoulder to be able to talk and pull on her jeans. “I was wondering if you needed a ride to Leo and Luna’s or a ride back? Or ya know, just somebody to walk with you so you don’t have to go back alone.”

“Oh thanks, Lise, but I should be okay.”

Lise nodded and then realized Akiza couldn’t see her. “Having psychic powers tends to make the night a little less scary, huh?”

“Well, yeah, but Fish and I are gonna walk over together. She’s staying over at my place tonight so we’ll watch each other’s backs.”

“Wait,” Lise paused and nearly dropped the phone on the floor. She finished adjusting the button on her jeans and held the phone in her hand. “Fish is at your house right now?”

“Yeah… Is there something wrong with that?” Akiza’s voice had changed from cheerful to a touch of confusion.

“No. It’s just…she told us she was at her grandparents’ house. I was going to call there next to see if she wanted a ride too, but I guess now I don’t have to,” Lise said through clenched teeth.

Silence came from Akiza’s end. The psychic was quiet for so long Lise was afraid she had hung up, but then Akiza spoke up. “So Fish lied to you.” It wasn’t a question.

“I guess so.”

“I’m so sorry, Lise. I didn’t-“

“No, Akiza. It isn’t your fault,” Lise sighed heavily, rubbing her tired eyelids. “You were just being a good friend. I’ll see you later tonight, okay?”

“Okay,” Akiza agreed solemnly. She sounded like she didn’t know whether to be angry or sad.

Lise hung up.
Akiza clicked end on her cell phone. Suddenly the couch she had been sitting on was no longer comfortable.

Her mother walked in and noticed her daughter’s conflicted expression. “What’s wrong, sweetie?”

“I-I… I need to talk to Fish,” Akiza decided, getting up, and clenching her hands into fists.

“Is everything okay?”

“No,” Akiza admitted, ascending the stairs to her bedroom.

Fish was reading one of Akiza’s books on her bed. Akiza had time to catch the book’s title, Small Gods by Terry Pratchett, before she snatched it out of Fish’s hands.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Hey, I was reading that!” Fish protested indignantly.

“You lied to Lise,” Akiza spat.

“Yeah,” Fish shrugged.

“Why?” Akiza looked on at her friend incredulously.

“I don’t know. I just thought she’d be mad if she found out I was here instead of at my grandparents’ place,” Fish took her hat off and spun it in her hands.

“Fish, for God’s sake, we’re adults, and friends. I think Lise can understand the fact that you want to hang out with another friend. What I don’t understand, and maybe what she doesn’t understand, is why you felt the need to lie to her about it.”

“Okay, bad idea. I won’t do it again,” Fish reached for the book still clutched in Akiza’s hand, but Akiza tossed it to the ground.

“Do you know that you made me a liar too?” Akiza growled. “You made me an accomplice in your plan to lie to Lise, and I am not okay with that. Lise is my friend and I would never lie to her. The fact that you thought that was acceptable is demeaning and stupid. We can handle when you want to hang out with other friends, but I can’t handle when a friend lies to me over something as stupid as this.”

“Look, I said it won’t happen again and it won’t,” Fish spread her hands, palm up. “What more do you want?”

Akiza shoved her phone in Fish’s face. “Call your grandparents and ask them to spend the night. Then get the hell out of my house. At the party tonight you are going to apologize to Lise and me for lying, because that’s what adults do, Fish. Start acting like it.”

Fish stared at Akiza’s face, hoping to find some part of her friend that was kidding. There wasn’t. Fish sighed, took the phone, and started dialing.

“‘You’re here!’ Leo cheered jubilantly.
Luna watched her brother pinball around the room in his excitement as she let Jack, Crow, Lise, and Yusei into their apartment. “He had ice cream before you got here.”

“Oh…”

Leo hopped up onto the couch. “Presents go in the kitchen!”

“I’ll take them,” Lise opened up her arms, and carried all the gifts away.

Luna watched her go, and tugged on Yusei’s jacket when she had disappeared. “Is Lise tired? She doesn’t look good.”

“Sad and angry too,” Yusei sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “She and Fish aren’t exactly on good terms right now.”

“Oh,” Luna’s gaze followed Lise and Leo playing tag through the living room. “Well, maybe we can cheer her up.”

“I think this party is helping,” Yusei granted Luna a short smile.

“Hey!” Lise called to them. “We can’t play tag unless you guys are in too! Leo cheats!”

“I do not!”

“Do too!”

“It’s definitely helping,” Luna smiled hopefully and raced after her brother.

Akiza and Fish arrived soon afterwards. Fish took her chance to hide under the guise of bringing presents into the kitchen. Akiza seemed to be ignoring Fish.

“Glad you could make it!” Leo said, waving. “I’m winning at tag!”

“Only because he’s small enough to fit between the couches!” Jack cried adamantly just before tripping and landing spectacularly on the floor.

“Damn, face first,” Crow chuckled.

“That’s gotta hurt,” Yusei nodded, helping Jack up.

Lise, Luna, Akiza, and Leo were in stitches with laughter.

“So,” Fish interrupted awkwardly, wringing her hands. “Presents, dinner, or cake first?”

“PRESENTS!” Leo roared speeding past Fish into the kitchen.

“I guess that answers that question,” Luna giggled and followed her brother.

The twins seated themselves at the heads of the table. Now that everyone was here neither twin could hide their excitement.

Jack had found a Morphtronic Celfon figurine for Leo, and a Kuribon figurine for Luna. Neither twin could stop themselves from running to display their new treasures on their desks. For the rest of the night, Jack had a smile that was impossible to get rid of. Akiza had bought new X-Box games and more X-Box live points, to which both Leo and Luna were anxious to use. Crow had found them small Lego sets of Harry Potter and Star Wars. Fish gave Leo a Power Tool Dragon
button, and Luna an Ancient Fairy Dragon button. According to Leo’s preferences, he did not like assembling Gunpla figures, but liked them very much. So Yusei had painstakingly assembled the figure, and Lise had meticulously painted every detail. Lise presented Luna with the first five volumes of the Amazing Agent Luna series. Yusei slid Luna a bookstore gift card just in case she wanted more.

Amidst all the excitement, Fish was able to tap on Lise’s shoulder unnoticed. Lise finally looked at her for the first time that day.

“I lied to you and I just wanted to say I’m sorry,” Fish said, her words quiet and hurried.

“All right,” Lise said.

“So you forgive me?” Fish relaxed.

“I didn’t say that,” Lise responded gravely. “Apologize to Crow too, and we’ll see.”

Fish groaned and rolled her eyes. “Why Crow?”

“Because he wanted to be there for his friend, and was hurt to find he couldn’t be when he called her grandparents before we left.”

“Oh…”

“We’re your friends, Fish,” Lise said sadly. “And to me that means we deserve the truth.”

She left Fish alone to consider what her next course of action was.
“You can try again next week, Lise,” Trudge said quietly. His hand drifted towards Lise’s shoulder, but he withdrew the gesture, thinking better on it. “Whatever’s bothering you is a distraction you need to get rid of. To be a turbo duelist you have to be completely focused.” He gave her a kind nod and went off to test the next student.

Lise extracted her knuckles from the handlebars of her runner slowly. She hadn’t passed, which meant no riding back, so she tossed her helmet on the seat and started pushing.

The way home was much longer than she’d thought. That or it was definitely shorter going as fast as she could on her runner. Lise hoped no one would be home. She didn’t want to face anyone at the time.

It had started to rain just as Lise pulled into the garage. She locked her runner into place and looked around.

Thankfully, it seemed quiet so Lise went up into the kitchen. A note was on the table in Yusei’s messy scribble-like handwriting. *Lise, if you get home before we do, Jack is at the café, Crow is working, and I’m answering a fix request. Can’t wait to see you tonight! Sorry we missed your test, but you can give us a play by play tonight. Crow is making your favorite. Love you, Yusei* 

Lise groaned and dragged herself up the ladder. Seeing them was going to make it even worse. She already felt stupid and pointless. Add that to the fact that her room was so empty and lonely after Fish had moved out.

Fish hadn’t told a soul. She had bided her time until all four of them were out of the house for some reason. At the end of the day Crow, Lise, Yusei, and Jack had come home to an empty house, and half of an empty bedroom. She hadn’t even left a note.

Lise threw herself down on her bed. Her bed sheets were just as cozy as they had been when she woke up, but they weren’t comforting enough anymore. Lise kicked off her wet shoes and jacket and curled up into a ball, trying not to cry.

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“Lise?!” A loud knock resounded on her door.

Lise’s eyes flew open. A quick glance at her alarm clock informed her she’d been asleep for several hours. It was five PM, and clearly the boys were home.

Yusei knocked again. “Lise? What’s wrong?”

Lise dove under the covers and pulled them over her head. She didn’t want to see or be seen at all. “I-I’m just tired! I’ll eat dinner later!”

“Are you sure?” Yusei opened the door a crack. “You’re decent, right?”

Lise rolled her eyes and pulled the covers farther up. It was easier to be annoyed than miserable. “Yeah, I’m fine, just tired.”

“You sure?” Yusei opened the door fully and sat on the edge of the bed.
“Yes, for God’s sake!” Lise snapped.

“It’s just that I thought I’d find you blaring your music and dancing around like a crazy person,” Yusei said softly, his tone gentle, mildly probing. “That is…if you passed your test.”

“I don’t wanna talk about it.”

Yusei sighed and leaned back heavily on his hands. He scanned the empty side of the room. “Were you thinking about Fish?”

“No,” Lise said thickly.

“You do know you didn’t do anything wrong, right?” Yusei continued. He took his boots off, turned, and crossed his legs on Lise’s bed.

“I know that,” Lise sat up, rubbing her eyes. “It just hurts so much.” She looked at her hands in her lap, hating that Yusei was seeing her look this pathetic after failing.

Yusei threw his coat and gloves on the floor. “I know how much it hurts. I felt the same way after Jack basically betrayed me. Although…” he paused and held one of Lise’s hands in both of his. “I suspect this is going to hurt much more.”

“I didn’t think about that,” Lise admitted quietly. “When Jack left it hurt me too, but then again he wasn’t my best friend.”

Yusei nodded. “But Jack is still our friend now because he admitted what he did was wrong and apologized. Fish is never going to admit her actions were wrong or apologize for treating you so badly. That’s why her leaving is going to hurt you more.”

“Ugh, goddamnit, Fish,” Lise attempted a laugh that sounded more like a hiccup.

“But you’re strong,” Yusei flashed her a thin-lipped smile. “You’ll get through this, and get your license. It’s a setback, a speed bump, not a brick wall.”

“Thanks.”

“And this time we’ll all be there cheering you on,” Yusei’s smile widened.

“No way,” Lise shook her head. “I hate people looking at me.” Light pink color crept onto Lise’s cheeks.

“But I like looking at you,” Yusei murmured, pushing Lise’s messy hair out of her face.

Lise’s face went from pink to red, and she laughed for the first time in hours. Yusei relaxed, his shoulders lowering slightly. She wasn’t okay yet, but she would be. “So…” he tugged playfully on her twisted hair. “Pity party today?”

“To get back up again tomorrow,” Lise agreed. “I should call Akiza. She’s great at parties, the pity kind and the fun kind.”

“Already done.”

Lise blinked in surprise. “Really?”

“I figured something was wrong when you didn’t text or call, so I phoned Akiza. She agreed and said she’d be over as soon as her classes were done for the day.”
“Oh…wow…” Not knowing what else to do, Lise threw her arms around Yusei’s neck. “Thanks, sorry I’m so needy.”

“It’s not being needy. It’s being human. You told me that was okay. It’s okay for you too, ya know,” Yusei whispered into Lise’s hair, rubbing her back as comfortingly as he could.

“You seem to be feeling better already,” Akiza broke in. She smirked at them and raised one eyebrow knowingly at her friends’ red faces. Her arms were weighted down with candy, popcorn bags, and movies. “Oh, don’t stop on my account. We can still watch movies.”

Are you doing okay?” Yusei asked.

“Well, my hands are super sweaty and shaky, and it feels like my stomach is going to explode, but yeah. I’m totally okay,” Lise nodded jerkily and adjusted her grip on her runner’s handlebars.

“So no?” One of Yusei’s shoulders pushed upwards.

“You’ll be better than okay. You’ll be fantastic!” Akiza squeezed Lise into a hug. “We’ll be up in the stands cheering you on.”

“Yay…” Lise tried to sound strong, but her voice came out more like a whimper.

“Good luck, mate,” Jack nodded encouragingly.

“We’re rooting for you!” Crow gave her a cheesy thumbs up.

“Look,” Luna and Leo held up two little flags. “We made flags for you!”

Lise handed Yusei her helmet. “Here, bash this into my face until I die.”

Yusei chuckled, but his eyes widened as he pushed Lise’s helmet back into her hands. “How about I do that as a last resort?”

Lise groaned and hunched over her helmet. “Somehow this is worse than the first time.”

“Are you gonna hurl or are we going to duel?!?” Trudge called, readying himself at the start of the track. “Don’t think I’ll go easy on you!”

“Wouldn’t want it any other way, Trudge. On my way,” Lise responded, she had expected her voice to wobble, but she sounded much better than she felt.

“That’s our cue to go. Good luck,” Yusei whispered. “You’ll do great,” he kissed Lise’s temple and followed the others into the stands.

Lise inhaled and exhaled deeply three times to calm her nerves. Now it was just adrenaline making her antsy, but she could work with that. She put her helmet on and met Trudge at the starting line.

“I almost thought you were going to back out on me. Your fan club didn’t psych you out?” Trudge called, readying himself at the start of the track. “Don’t think I’ll go easy on you!”

“Wouldn’t want it any other way, Trudge. On my way,” Lise responded, she had expected her voice to wobble, but she sounded much better than she felt.

“That’s our cue to go. Good luck,” Yusei whispered. “You’ll do great,” he kissed Lise’s temple and followed the others into the stands.

Lise inhaled and exhaled deeply three times to calm her nerves. Now it was just adrenaline making her antsy, but she could work with that. She put her helmet on and met Trudge at the starting line.

“I almost thought you were going to back out on me. Your fan club didn’t psych you out?” Trudge taunted, a smirk decorating his face.

“Not at all Trudge,” Lise canted her head to the side. “Do you have an invisible fan club that you didn’t tell us about?”

Trudge laughed and revved his engine. “Hopefully you’re still trash talking when this is over.”
“Let’s just turbo duel, Trudge.” Lise revved her runner’s engine too.

“Good attitude,” Trudge muttered with a smile.

The countdown ended and both turbo duelists burned rubber as they gunned for the first turn. No autopilot meant whoever took the corner coming up first would get the first turn.

Lise bit her lip, remembering her sorry performance last attempt. *Last time all I could do was tail Trudge, but this isn’t last time. Focus on the here and now. Go forward!*

“Hmm,” Jack tapped his lip thoughtfully. “I hope she’s not letting Trudge take the corner first. She’s got to be more aggressive as a turbo duelist. Some duels get very rough.”

Crow nodded and tapped the railing in front of him. “Maybe she has a plan?”

Akiza and Yusei watched quietly, both unable to tear their eyes away. Yusei had removed his glove and was proceeding to chew on his thumb with vigor. Akiza picked at the skin on her fingers without looking. The twins clutched at their flags and stared intently at the two duelists below.

“You don’t seem to learn very fast!” Trudge jeered back at Lise, who was once again right on his tail. He started to lean into the turn.

Lise saw her chance and took it. Trudge was taking the turn a little wide, so she had to take the run tighter to be able to go first. She increased her speed to pull out from behind Trudge and even with him, braking hard to turn sharply, and pouring on the speed as soon as her front wheel came out of the turn.

“She used Trudge as a wind break!” Yusei grinned crookedly, unable to hide his excitement.

“All right! Go Lise, go!” Akiza cheered, pumping her fist towards the sky.

“Whoa!” the twins cheered, waving their flags fervently.

“Well done,” Trudge muttered, nodding. He watched Lise like a proud father. “But you’ve still gotta beat me to get your license.”

*Lise: 4000*

*Trudge: 4000*

“I draw!” Lise was nervous, but she had practiced enough to drive with only one hand. “I summon Phoenix Flare in attack mode! Then I’ll place one card facedown and end my turn!”

*(Phoenix Flare: Atk: 1900 Def: 1300)*

“Good thing you aren’t too scared to draw!” Trudge began his turn. “I set one monster in facedown defense position and one facedown. Your move.”

“All right then! I play one monster in facedown defense position as well. Now Phoenix Flare, attack Trudge’s facedown!”

“I’m gonna stop you there,” Trudge sneered gleefully. “I play my trap No Entry!! This card changes all your monsters in attack mode to defense mode.”

Lise growled under her breath and rode on with a frown. “I end my turn.”
“Then it’s my move again!” Trudge declared, drawing a new card. “I’m summoning out Samurai Sword Baron in attack mode! Sorry Lise, I want you to get your license, but I like winning much more!”

(Samurai Sword Baron: Atk: 1600 Def: 1200)

“If you win, Trudge,” Lise reminded him over her shoulder and increasing her speed. She couldn’t help but smile. The speed and the wind in her face was exhilarating.

Trudge cocked an eyebrow and came up on Lise’s tail. “We’ll see, won’t we? I flip summon my Sinister Sprocket and tune him with Samurai Sword Baron to synchro summon Stygian Sergeants!”

(Sygian Sergeants: Atk: 2200 Def: 1800)

Trudge’s new monster was like a more grotesque version of himself. A draconic monster, it rode a security duel runner as well, and had two gold and purple heads.

“Uh oh…” Leo uttered.

“I think Lise might be in a spot of trouble,” Jack crossed his arms, his violet eyes clouded.

“My Sergeants love ‘good cop, bad cop,’ but unfortunately for you they both like to be the bad cop,” Trudge smirked, pulling even with Lise. “Stygian Sergeants, attack Phoenix Flare!”

Lise winced as her monster went up in a blaze of white and yellow chips.

“Now my Sergeants gain 800 attack points to attack again!”

The monster Lise had placed facedown also went packing for the graveyard. Trudge rammed the side of his runner into Lise’s. She kept herself upright, but Trudge used her correcting efforts to pull ahead of Lise.

Yusei bit down so hard on his thumb he drew blood.


“Huh?” Yusei looked down at his bloody appendage and accepted a band aid Luna had scrounged from her pocket.

“Leo’s always hurting himself somehow,” she explained.

“Thanks.”

“So what are you going to do now?”

“How about summon a new monster?” Lise countered with a smile. “My facedown monster was Masked Dragon, which means I can take a dragon type monster in my deck and summon it to the field if it has 1500 attack points or less! I summon out Pyrus Starburst in attack mode!”

(Masked Dragon: Atk: 1400 Def: 1100)

(Pyrus Starburst: Atk: 1000 Def: 1000)

“Not bad, but let’s see what you do with your turn.”
“Be careful what you wish for, Trudge, I draw,” Lise smiled widely. *This is awesome! I’m not winning or losing, but I’m having so much fun!* “Since I have five speed counters, I can play my Fissure speed spell! Since you only have one monster on your field, it goes bye-bye!”

“What?!” Trudge exclaimed, eyes wide.

“That’s right!” Lise accelerated heavily and pulled ahead of Trudge. She smiled widely at his scowl. “And now that your field is wide open I think I’ll summon out another Masked Dragon to keep Pyrus Starburst company! Now Pyrus and Masked Dragon attack Trudge directly!”

*Lise: 4000  
Trudge: 1600*

“Yeah!” Leo cheered loudly, doing a little victory dance that involved a lot of bird-like arm movements.

Luna laughed at her brother’s comical behavior and cheered, waving her flag. “Go Lise!”

“She’s winning! She’s winning!” Akiza cried, jumping up and down.

“Not quite,” Crow’s eyes were cloudy with his thoughts. He tapped his chin with his fingers. “I doubt that’s all Trudge has in store for her.”

“Oh…” Mood dampened by anticipation, the onlookers kept rapt attention.

“You managed to knock a chip out of my lifepoints, but real turbo dueling is grueling, Lise. You beat me once, but you won’t beat me again,” Trudge declared, his jaw set rigidly.

“Oh yeah?”

“And my monster Search Striker is going to help me out!”

(*Search Striker: Atk: 1600 Def: 1200*)

“Now I play the speed spell Double Summon, which I can play because we both have six speed counters. It allows me to summon Jutte Fighter to my field as well!”

(*Jutte Fighter: Atk: 700 Def: 900*)

“With his ability, I switch your Pyrus Starburst into defense mode and attack with Search Striker!” Trudge snickered with glee. He was enjoying himself a little too much. He had liked defeating Lise her last attempt, and although he was no longer on poor relations with the others, he enjoyed the challenge of facing an old rival. “I’ll end with a facedown. Keep up! If you can.”

“I’ll do more than keep up!” Lise drew a new card. “I sacrifice Masked Dragon to summon my Inferno Wolf!”

(*Inferno Wolf: Atk: 2100 Def: 600*)

“Inferno Wolf, melt his Jutte Fighter!”

“I think not,” Trudge smirked and widened the distance between himself and Lise. “I play my second No Entry!! Now as you know, your wolf can’t attack because he gets switched into defense mode!”
“Damnit,” Lise swore under her breath. “I play one card facedown and end my turn then.”

“Damnit, Crow,” Akiza echoed Lise’s sentiment. “Why did you have to be right?”

Crow shrugged and put his hands palm out. “What? Trudge isn’t a bad duelist and it isn’t like he’d make it easy for her!”

“Still, I think Yusei is on his way to losing his thumb.”

“Do we have to sit on your hands?” Jack offered Yusei, who had chewed the skin on his thumb raw.

“No, no, I’m just worried.”

“You’re telling me.”

“It’s my turn and I summon out Stygian Security,” Trudge began. His new monster looked like a very safety conscious blue bat with its police officer gear and emergency light glowing annoyingly on its head.

*(Stygian Security: Atk: 100 Def: 600)*

“This little guy is going to tune with my Search Striker to synchro summon my second Stygian Sergeants!”

“No way! You have two?!”

“Absolutely! And that means double the trouble for you!”

“Shit,” Lise cursed, biting her lip. “This is gonna sting.”

“Stygian Sergeants attack Lise’s Inferno Wolf, and now that he’s out of the way, attack her directly!”

*Lise: 1000

*Trudge: 1600*

“You should just throw in the towel. With only a thousand lifepoints left, it’s only a matter of time before I beat you again,” Trudge taunted. *Sorry kid, but these turbo duels get tough, and you are too. Show me what you’re made of!*

“Since when did I give up? I have everything I need right…” Lise put her hand on her deck. “Here!” she drew her next card. The spectators watched with baited breath as Lise cracked the tiniest of smiles. “It’s time to take down those big ugly Sergeants of yours for good. First up, I play my facedown card Call of the Haunted to bring back my Inferno Wolf from the graveyard. Then I summon out my tuner monster Solar Butterfly! I tune my two monsters together to synchro summon my new monster Fire Opal!”

*(Fire Opal: Atk: 2200 Def: 1700)*

Lise’s new monster was a gorgeous, tall woman with fiery red hair pulled back into a ponytail and framing her face. She carried a bow meant for shooting arrows in her four arms, and a luminous opal was set in the pale skin of her forehead.

“Next I play my speed spell Riryoku, by taking away two of my eleven speed counters, in order to
halve the attack points of your Sergeants!

(Stygian Sergeants Atk: 2200 --> 1100)

“This isn’t good,” Trudge muttered, his earlier smile long gone.

“But I’m not even at the best part!” Lise gunned her engine, zooming past Trudge like a rocket.
“For every monster you control, Opal gets a present in the form of 500 extra attack points!”

(Fire Opal: Atk: 2200 à 2700)

“That’s perfect!” Akiza gasped, her face hurting from smiling for so long.

“A perfect win!” Jack’s smile was full of pride. “I guess we’ll have to make room for another turbo duelist in our garage.”

“I thought we already did,” Crow chuckled, his eyes shining. “The license just makes it official.”

“GO LISE!” Leo and Luna waved their flags around like maniacs on a sugar high.

“Go Fire Opal! Attack Trudge’s Stygian Sergeants and end this!”

Fire Opal raised her bow and drew her free arms back, fiery arrows emerging for her to fire. The monster’s aim was true. The fire arrows lodged in Stygian Sergeants and sent it packing.

Lise: 1000

Trudge: 0000

Trudge coughed, waving away the smoke pouring out of his runner the best he could. He came to a halt on the track, smiling despite his loss.

“WHOOHOO!” Lise squealed at the top of her lungs. She threw up both fists into the sky in her excitement, and had to quickly balance herself or risk crashing. Lise laughed at herself and stopped abruptly. She took off her helmet and leaned back on her runner. “I did it…” she muttered as if she could scarcely believe it.

“That you did,” Trudge smiled with no hint of competition or menace behind it. “Congratulations, Lise, you’re a turbo duelist.”

“Thanks, Trudge,” she granted him a weak thumbs up.

He chuckled and returned the gesture. “I’ll leave you to collect your license on your own. I have more kids to test, and I have a feeling you’ll be just fine.” Trudge turned his runner and rode off.

Lise sat up and dismounted just in time for Yusei to tackle her into a huge hug.

“You did it! I knew you would, but I got to see it! You did it!” Yusei set her down for a minute so she could breathe and see her other friends too. “You’re officially part of the world of speed!”

“Not the drug, the turbo dueling speed world,” Crow joked, a grin spreading across his face like warm butter over toast.

“Good to be here,” Lise couldn’t stop grinning, getting fist bumps from Jack and Crow. They knew Leo, Luna, and Akiza were already glomping onto Lise so much it was a wonder she could still breathe.
Lise eyed the sky and the entirety of New Domino City on the way to getting her actual physical license. It was just sitting there, waiting for her to turbo duel in. “Good to be here…”
A New Threat

The sun beat down on Earth and its moon steadily. The planet sat innocently enough, but upon closer inspection, not as innocent as expected.

An enormous stone tablet flew through the recesses of starry space, picking up speed as it entered Earth’s atmosphere. It burned like fire and crashed into the surface of the world.

Yusei rode his runner through the new highways of New Domino City. It had been a year since the battle against the Dark Signers, and the city was on its way to being a more progressive, inclusive city. The borders between the city and Satellite had vanished, that was something. The changes and people were far from peaceful yet, but acceptance of others was on the horizon. Yusei could practically see it already. That and something else just wasn’t right. The uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach told him so.

In the head of the security bureau Lazar was pacing like a mad man, which wasn’t a stretch considering his usual clown attire. “How stressful!” He cried, and slammed his hands down onto the desk that used to belong to Rex Goodwin. “He’s late! He’s very late!” A vein was popping in the tiny man’s forehead. “The new Director is supposed to come today, but where is he?”

The phone rang, and Lazar strode over to pick up. “What is it?” He snapped, putting the phone to his ear and staring irritably at the hologram of a worker before him.

“A giant meteor just crash landed in the outskirts of the city,” the employee reported.

“This isn’t the time for- A giant meteor? That’s very important!” Lazar panicked, his eyes bloodshot, and practically tearing out his hair.

Smoke poured off of the tablet in its massive crater. Even though there was absolutely nothing keeping it upright, the tablet was resolute. Its secrets hidden to the sun shining on its back, and not the carving adorning its front.

Three men stood beside the tablet. They wore similar clothes, white robes with machine-like adornments, but were separate in age. The youngest resembled a child. The second man appeared to be in his early thirties or late twenties. The last of a much older age, as evident by his wrinkled skin.

“The first one finally arrived,” the young man stated with a smirk.

The youngest pouted. “Aw, it’s Placido’s card.”

The oldest man’s eyes narrowed. “It means we don’t need to get involved yet.”

“Since I’m first,” Placido suggested, confidence lacing his voice. “I’ll finish this before you get your chance, Luciano and Jose.”

The other two, clearly Luciano and Jose, shot Placido disapproving glances. They didn’t have time
to scold their comrade; police cars had parked on the edge of the crater.

Lazar hopped out of one of the cars. He led the way for the officers into the crater. “Someone’s already here? Who are you?” Lazar stopped and pointed dramatically at the three white clad men. “This area is off limits!”

“The welcoming committee is here,” Jose observed, amused.

“Good timing,” Placido and the others turned to greet Lazar and his troupe. “I’ll have you haul this away.”

“What? Do you know who I am?” Lazar cried indignantly, brandishing a tiny fist at the three white-clad men. He advanced idiotically.

“I should ask you the same, stupid clown,” Placido halted Lazar in his tracks with a sword leveled at the clown man’s face.

“Stupid?” Lazar murmured, his face contorted from fear and uncertainty.

Placido lowered his blade and Luciano stepped forward. “Starting today, we’re your new Directors.” He chuckled creepily.

“That means…you’re from Yliaster!” Lazar shook with the knowledge of his mistake, and he threw himself to his knees for a deep bow. “I’m sorry!” He got back to his feet and pointed again. “Take that stone tablet to the Public Maintenance Department immediately! Stop dawdling! You’re making me look bad!”

The officers saluted awkwardly and did as they were told.

Placido looked back at his tablet, and smirked deeply. *I’ll test it out right away.*

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That night a lone duelist looked back in fear from atop his runner. A dark, menacing shadow fell over him, and a mechanical face was reflected in the duelist’s visor. It was the last thing he saw before crashing violently.

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Police officers arrived on the scene later. They had the damaged area blocked off, and the injured duelist on his way to the hospital. Still, this strange attack had them all spooked.

Mina arrived on the scene with Trudge in tow. She flashed her ID. “I’m Mina Simington, Section Chief of Security Special Investigations.”

Trudge did the same. “Trudge, Section Chief Assistant.”

The officer in charge nodded and let them in. “We have the duelist in question here. He’s in critical condition and unconscious, but he’s on his way to the hospital.”

Mina frowned and put her fingers thoughtfully to her chin. “That means we can’t get his testimony.”

“This is bad,” Trudge’s eyes widened when he saw the twisted, gnarled remains of the duelist’s runner. “Ghost must have done this.”
“It’s his fifth victim,” Mina sounded frustrated. “We have to do something…”

///

In the gang’s garage, Jack accelerated the new engine prototype steadily. Crow and Yusei kept watch at the monitor.

“Output 70 percent,” Yusei reported. “75 percent.”

“Awesome!” Crow turned to Jack with an excited smile. “This’ll work! Slam it into the red zone!”

“Leave it to me!” Jack declared with a confident grin. “There’s nothing that I can’t do.” He gunned the engine further.

Yusei’s teeth clenched and his eyes widened. His screen was flashing a huge warning sign. “Jack, lay off the accelerator!”

“What? I can’t hear you!”

“The accelerator!”

“Guys, what’s all the noise about?” Lise asked, pulling into the garage with shopping bags in tow.

An explosion rocked the apartment. Black smoke billowed out from the windows and open garage door. The people in Fountain Plaza all paused in their relaxing Saturday afternoon. It wasn’t every day the clock saleswoman’s home went up in smoke.

Lise sat up wearily, clutching at her head. “Not exactly the greeting I was expecting.”

“Sorry,” Yusei coughed out, pushing the large piece of metal he and Crow had been hit with away. He got up and removed his goggles. “Everybody okay?”

“Sort of,” Crow brushed the grime off to the best of his ability, and stood up.

Jack extracted himself from underneath the pile of engine rubble. “What happened?”

Yusei knelt by the pieces. “Our engine…”

“Damn, that’s the third one this week,” Lise bit her lip, jumping down to see how she could help.

“It’s your fault for pushing it too far,” Crow pointed out, scowling purposefully at Jack.

“What?” Jack clenched his fist in indignation. “You’re the one who wanted the accelerator at full throttle!”

“Oh, I didn’t know Jack Atlas was the kinda guy who did as he was told! Any sane person would lay off when he hears strange noises!”

While Jack and Crow argued, a crowd of people swarmed the windows. Yusei and Lise did their best to ignore their friends and the crowd.

“What? You want a fight?” Jack stalked over and grasped Crow’s shirt collar in his fist.

Zora opened the door with a bang, and a scowl to match Godzilla’s grimace.

“Zora!”
“Nosy old lady,” Jack muttered.

“How dare you say that!” Zora put her hands on her hips, her glare deepening. “I’m letting you stay here because you know Martha, but I can kick you out any time I want!”

“Wait, this was an accident!” Jack insisted.

Crow just smiled, rubbing the back of his head guiltily.

“The new engine-“

“Making excuses already?” Zora snapped furiously. “A real man takes responsibility for his actions!”

“Sorry, Zora,” Yusei said when he could get a word in. “We went too far with our tests on the engine.”

“We can pay for damages,” Lise added quickly, standing up.

Zora sighed through her mouth, and descended the ramp. “One or two mistakes is fine. Mistakes are the shortcuts to success!”

The three boys, and girl stared in bewilderment at Zora. She was being unusually fair. Normally she just yelled until she ran out of steam.

“I’m just trying to save face,” Zora leaned in to whisper to Lise, but badly since it was more like a stage whisper. “Since I’m the landlord, I’m supposed to yell at you.”

“Right,” Lise agreed, awkwardly, her eyes darting in all directions.

A police siren wailed outside in the square, drawing the attention of everyone around. A car parked right outside Zora’s door.

She raced back up the ramp to greet Trudge. “Security? Sorry! We didn’t intend to cause so much trouble that Security had to get involved.” Zora gave Trudge her best smile.

Yusei, Lise, Crow and Jack came out into the sun to see what was going on.

Trudge just shook his head. “So you failed again.” He addressed Zora next. “Don’t worry, we’re here for other reasons.”

Zora’s eyebrows raised in surprise. “I see…”

Mina stepped up beside Trudge, looking official as always. “We need to talk to the four of you.”

The six of them headed back indoors. Mina and Trudge stood tentatively at the edge of the engine pieces pile.

“Developing duel runners as usual, I see,” Trudge smiled fondly.

“Yeah…” Yusei groaned, rising from the debris with a piece in his hand. “In order to win the Grand Prix we need a new engine.”

“We’ve got three people to enter,” Crow pointed to the poster hung up on their ramp behind him. “We’ve gotta upgrade three vehicles, so we’re kind short on time.”
“Wait, you wouldn’t upgrade mine?” Lise fired at Crow immediately.

“No, I never said that,” Crow said.

“We just have to develop one engine to fit all of our runners,” Yusei spoke firmly.

“Anyway…” Jack cleared his throat. “Conveniently the Grand Prix will be held here in New Domino City. We plan to become legends in the turbo dueling community by winning the Grand Prix’s opening year.”

“So you’re building machines and holding jobs at the same time?” Trudge’s eyebrows raised. “Aren’t you famous enough to get sponsors?”

“We don’t need them,” Crow smiled with confidence. “It’s only worth it if we win the tournament with our own strength.”

“Exactly,” Yusei agreed, striding forward. “City and Satellite are starting to become one, which means we’re finally citizens. We want to prove members of Satellite can be a part of New Domino City, you know, contribute to a sense of community.”

“That’s why it means so much more to do things on our own,” Lise said quietly.

Mina smiled, crossing her arms before her. “I expected nothing less.”

“So what did you want to talk about?” Jack’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. He remembered the last time Mina and Trudge had decided to pay them a visit.

“Have you heard the rumors about the Ghost?” Trudge said.

“Ghost?” The gang chewed on the name for a half a second.

Crow folded his arms behind his head. “I heard about him. He appears on the highways at night, challenges people to a duel, and causes them to crash.”

Trudge nodded. “Ever since we built the special duel courses, and Speed World 2 came out, more and more people have started showing up. So at first we didn’t think much of it.”

“That’s the problem with his method,” Mina jumped in. “In a normal turbo duel, there can never be an accident that deals real damage.”

“So Ghost is using an illegal method to make people crash?” Jack clarified.

“Exactly, Jack, how astute of you,” Mina praised, her cheeks slightly pink.

“Don’t compliment him, it’ll make his ego even bigger,” Trudge murmured to her.

Crow, Yusei and Lise just rolled their eyes.

Crow paused mid eye roll, and pointed at the Security heads. “Did you come here to ask for our help solving your case?”

“Correct,” Trudge nodded. “So are you up for it?”

“That actually sounds like a good idea,” Lise reasoned, one of her hands extended, palm outwards. “If a member of Satellite catches a criminal affecting everyone then it makes other Satellites look good in the eyes of the people of the City.”
Yusei smiled thinly. “Exactly. I don’t mind helping o-“

“No!” Crow interrupted forcefully. “We’re busy getting ready for the Grand Prix in September! Yusei does our mechanical development, and to fund the project with our own money, Lise, Jack and I don’t sleep much so that we can work at our jobs! We can’t go along with this plan either.” He seized Mina and Trudge by the ends of their jackets and pushed them out the front door. “Sorry we can’t help you, but thanks for stopping by. See you!” He bolted the door behind the Security heads. “Let’s continue with the tests.”

Lise blinked in disbelief. “With what? The engine is just a pile of scrap, again. The least you can do is help me put away the groceries first.”

“Uh…”

“Oh…” Yusei said slowly, his brow tight with uncertainty.

“Right,” Jack agreed. “Right after we find more parts.”

///

Mina broke the silence of the car ride first. Trudge’s silence was bothering her. “You backed off pretty easily. Last time you put up more of a fight.”

“Well, Crow is right,” Trudge admitted, keeping his eyes on the road. The city’s skyline passed them as they drove. “They already did their part when they saved the City, Satellite, and the world from the Dark Signers last year. They’re all finally a part of the City’s citizens. We shouldn’t rely on them anymore.”

“You’re right,” Mina conceded.

///

That night Trudge decided to take matters into his own hands. He waited until dark to issue orders to a group of hand-picked officers to help him.

“The Duel Chasers will start our investigation on Ghost tonight!” Trudge declared before he and his officers peeled out into the night. I’ll take care of Ghost by myself.

///

It was almost one in the morning, and still no luck. Yet Trudge was anything but gloomy. “It’s my first turbo duel in a long time, not since the good old days of chasing Yusei and Lise in the pipeline. But I’m different than I was back then… I’ll protect the city without having to rely on them anymore.”

As Trudge reminisced, a lone rider pulled up behind him. Its stats came up on Trudge’s monitor, which were mostly unknown. “That vehicle isn’t registered with the Public Maintenance Department. I’ve found Ghost!”

Both Ghost and Trudge accelerated across the highway.

“Challenging me to a duel, huh? I accept! I activate the Speed World 2 field spell!”


Immediately the highway sides rose, declaring a duel was taking place. Ghost and Trudge merged
to the right into their specific duel lane, and then through a previously closed gate that provided
them with their own personal duel track.

_Trudge: 4000_

_Ghost: 4000_

“My turn!” Trudge declared, taking the lead. “I summon Samurai Sword Baron!”

(Samurai Sword Baron: Atk: 1600 Def: 1200)

“I can’t attack on the first turn, so I end my turn.”

“My turn… I summon Wise Core in defense mode. I set two cards and end my turn,” Ghost said,
his egg-like monster looking less than threatening.

(Wise Core: Atk: 0 Def: 0)

_Playing a monster with zero attack and defense? I get it; you want me to underestimate you.
Although those two set cards are suspicious. “I won’t go easy on you, Ghost! My turn!” Trudge said._

(Jutte Fighter: Atk: 700 Def: 900)

“When Goyo Guardian destroys your monster, it brings it over to my field. Hope you’re ready to be
arrested! Goyo Guardian, attack!”

“I activate my trap Negate Attack,” Ghost countered.

Trudge cringed in frustration. “You won’t let my attack succeed so easily, but you’ll have trouble
overcoming Goyo Guardian’s attack points. I activate the Speed Spell Count Up. When I have two
or more speed counters, I gain two more counters for every card in my hand I send to the
graveyard. Next, I activate Speed World 2’s effect! By removing four speed counters, you take 800
points of damage for every speed spell in my hand! I have two, which means you take 1600 points
of direct damage! Take this!”

Flames sprouted from Trudge’s runner, washing over Ghost like an inferno.

_Trudge: 4000_

_Ghost: 2400_

“Because you took damage from Speed World 2, you don’t lose speed counters,” Trudge
explained, slowing down so that Ghost was in the lead. “It’s your turn!”

“My turn,” Ghost said. “I activate the trap Spark Breaker. All monsters on my field are destroyed!”

Trudge’s eyes went wide. “What? You destroyed your own monster?!”

“When a card effect destroys Wise Core, I can special summon Meklord Emperor Wisel from my
deck or my hand!” As Ghost spoke, five cards emerged, arranging themselves like petals on a
A burst of light temporarily blinded Trudge. When he opened his eyes, a green infinity symbol was sucking up Goyo Guardian into the light! “What?!”

Whatever Ghost had summoned changed. Its attack points rose from 2500 to 5200 in the blink of an eye.

“No way!” Trudge screamed as the attack washed over him…

///

Lise sat bolt upright in bed. Something had washed over her like a sonic blast. The cold sweat on her back told her it wasn’t just a dream.

///

Working late into the night, as usual, Yusei noticed something strange too. “Huh?” His computer screen went fuzzy and the image seemed to roll and blur. It lasted maybe five seconds, max, but it wasn’t every day your computer was that unreliable.

“Did you feel something too?” Lise whispered. She had assumed Yusei would still be up, and needed someone to talk to about her growing unease.

Yusei started and then clutched at his heart in relief. “You scared the crap outta me. I thought you were asleep.”

“I was,” Lise winced. “But something woke me up.”

“And my computer spazzing? Doesn’t sound like a coincidence.”

///

A small explosion rocked the duel track. Trudge’s runner lay on its side, in pieces. He lay in a tattered heap, unable to move he was so badly injured. His helmet nearby had its visor completely shattered. The crash looked like the end for Trudge…

///

Crow rode by on his way home. He’d been working and was trying not fall asleep at the wheel. “It’s really late,” he yawned.

Suddenly he came across the blinking lights and sirens of Security. But it wasn’t just Security. An ambulance sat there too, its back open to accept a body for medical care.

Crow removed his goggles to see better. “Trudge!” The boy’s jaw dropped open. “No way…”

///

Crow and Mina waited for Trudge in the hallway. It was quiet. Crow had already called Lise, Yusei and Jack. Mina had arrived as soon as her police officers had informed her her assistant was injured.

“Is it true? Somebody hurt Trudge?!” Jack demanded to know, barging in first with Lise and Yusei right behind him.
Mina and Crow rose to meet them. “Yes,” Mina nodded.

“How is he?” Yusei said.

“In the emergency room,” Crow said gravely.

The doors opened and Trudge’s gurney was wheeled out. Trudge was bandaged heavily across his chest and face. He looked more like a mummy than a human.

“Trudge!”

“Out of the way!” One of the doctors demanded.

The quintet ignored him.

“Trudge, what happened?” Yusei cried.

“We’re going into emergency surgery!” the other doctor shouted, her voice full of panic.

Only one Trudge’s eyes was free of bandages. It swept wearily over the group of friends. “Don’t use synchros against Ghost…”

“What?” Lise blurted, her brows drawn in confusion.

“Synchro?” Yusei whispered, equally confused.

“Don’t talk, let’s go!” the doctors pushed past into the operating room. The light above the door blared bright red, leaving the gang in silence.

“Why did Trudge go after Ghost alone?” Jack fired at Mina.

She turned her head away, her face pained. “He felt he shouldn’t rely on you anymore, so he used himself as bait. It’s my fault…"

“No, it isn’t,” Lise put an arm around Mina. “Whoever did this to Trudge is responsible. Our favorite officer can be pretty stubborn. He’ll pull through.” I hope.

Mina granted Lise a small, grateful, smile, but her face fell back into worry. “I’ll stay here. You should go home. I’ll call you when Trudge wakes up.”

///

“Damnit!” Crow pounded his fist into the WRGP poster in anguish. “It’s my fault Trudge got hurt! If I had just said we’d help…”

“Stop it, Crow,” Yusei said firmly. “What’s done is done. Ghost must be skilled to defeat Trudge so badly.”

“So what? Are we gonna sit here and wait quietly?”

Yusei tossed Crow his helmet.

“We have a better idea,” Lise smiled, tugging her fingerless gloves on.

“If Trudge can’t do it then we’re more than qualified,” Jack boasted.

“Awesome! I am so in!” Crow slipped his helmet and was the last to mount his duel runner.
The garage door slid up, and one by one the four turbo duelists peeled out. They entered the highway and split up.

“Bring it on, Ghost!” Jack challenged.

“Show us what you’ve got!” Crow agreed.

///

It had been quite a few hours and nothing more exciting than paint dry had happened.

Crow frowned at the skyline where a thin line of turquoise was breaking the midnight blue of night. “The sun is about to rise.”

“We’ve driven everywhere, but he hasn’t appeared,” Jack scowled with deep disappointment.

Lise yawned. “I’m gonna need two cups of coffee just to stay awake today.”

///

An unknown duelist flashed his lights behind Yusei. All his stats appeared unknown as well on Yusei’s monitor. “He’s here! It’s Ghost!”

“What?”

“Never mind! I’m awake!”

“Speed World 2 set!”

“Duel Mode on. Autopilot standby.”

Duel Lane indicators popped up. Holographic signs informed cars and trucks to vacate the duel lane immediately. A duel track from the street rose to make a pathway for Yusei and Ghost. Just like earlier, the two duelists drove through a gate into their designated duel track.

“Here I come, Ghost!” Yusei challenged, fierce determination in his eyes.

**Yusei: 4000**

**Ghost: 4000**

“My turn,” Ghost began. “I summon Wise Core from my hand! I set one card and end my turn.”

“A monster with no attack points…My turn!” Yusei declared. “I’m not pulling any punches. I summon Max Warrior!”

*Max Warrior: Atk: 1800 Def: 800*

“Max Warrior attacks Wise Core! When this monster attacks, it gains 400 attack points! Go, Max Warrior!”

“I activate the trap Labyrinth of Kline!” Ghost intercepted quickly. “Battle damage becomes zero this turn, and monsters aren’t destroyed. Then the attacking monster’s attack and defense points are switched until the End Phase of next turn!”

Yusei gritted his teeth in frustration. His monster had taken a major attack points hit, from 1800...
down to 800. “So he’s protecting that card. Guess I’ll destroy the key to his strategy. In that case, I special summon Turbo Booster!”

(Turbo Booster: Atk: 0 Def: 0)

“When I successfully summon a monster, I can special summon Turbo Booster from my hand. And by releasing this card, I destroy the monster that battled against my other monster this turn!”

Instead of being upset that his only monster was gone, Ghost pulled up alongside Yusei with a creepy giggle. “You fell for it.”

“What?”

“When an effect destroys Wise Core, all monster on my field are destroyed. Then from my deck or my hand, I can special summon Meklord Emperor Wisel Infinity, Wisel Top, Wisel Attack, Wisel Guard, and Wisel Carrier!”

Yusei’s mouth fell open. His guard had completely dropped. “You summoned five monsters at once?!”

“It’s too early to be surprised,” Ghost smirked with the knowledge of his monster’s ability. “I activate Meklord Emperor Wisel’s effect!” All five of Ghost’s monsters merged into one terrifyingly huge machine monster.

Meklord Emperor Wisel’s shadow fell over Yusei like a shroud of darkness in the light from the new day.

“The show is about to start!” Ghost promised with a satisfied smile.

“What the hell is that thing?!!”
The sun shone beautifully over New Domino City. Night had turned into the hope of a new day.

Crow, Jack and Lise found a way onto the duel track Yusei and Ghost were using. All four of them could see Ghost’s monstrosity in the light of day.

“I’ve never seen a monster like that before!” Crow commented, his jaw tight with uncertainty.

Jack gasped in realization. “That must be the monster that defeated Trudge!”

Lise tapped into her monitor. “I’m calling Akiza and the twins! They need to know about this too.”

After three rings Akiza finally answered. She sounded groggy, but in her defense it was nearly six in the morning. “You know most humans sleep in on Saturdays,” she yawned.

“Thanks for picking up anyway. Hang on. I’ll see if the twins can conference in,” Lise pressed a few buttons and waited.

“Leo! Get your hand off the monitor!”

“Luna, quit pushing me!” Leo complained loudly.

“Oh good you were up already. I’m sending you the stats of this monster. Yusei’s in the middle of a duel with a monster we’ve never seen before!”

“Holy- what do you want me to do?” There was a rustling sound on Akiza’s end. She was clearly out of bed and wide awake.

“Get to our place as soon as possible! We’ll fill you in when we get back,” Lise bit her lip nervously. “If Yusei makes it through this.”

“You got it,” Leo smiled with determination. “Finally some action!”

“Be there in ten minutes tops,” Luna agreed, signing off. Akiza followed.

“Check this out,” Crow gasped, reviewing the monster’s stats on his screen. “That single monster? It’s actually made of five different monsters!”

“That and we have no idea what its abilities are!” Jack added. He scowled deeply. He didn’t like their situation one bit. “We’ll have to find out its power in his duel against Yusei.”

Lise frowned, remembering what Trudge had said. “Yusei can’t let his guard down then, and he can’t use synchros either.”

**Yusei: 4000**

**Ghost: 4000**

Yusei consulted his hand and his field. “I set two cards facedown and end my turn.”

“My turn then,” Ghost snickered, enjoying the panic he was creating. “Go Meklord Emperor Wisel, attack Max Warrior!”
"I activate my trap Shock Reborn! For this turn all battle damage is halved!" Yusei’s body tensed as the damage swept over him from Wisel’s attack. “I felt a real impact…”

**Yusei: 3150**

**Ghost: 4000**

“Due to Shock Reborn’s effect, I can special summon a monster from my graveyard whose attack points are equal to or less than the damage that I took! So come on back, Turbo Booster!”

Ghost just smirked. “I set one card and end my turn.” He laughed to himself with the strategy he had in mind.

“My turn!” Yusei frowned to himself. This new monster was formidable and he had to give himself time to think. **Meklord Emperor Wisel has 2500 attack points, so in order to overcome that…**

“I play the speed spell Angel Baton. When I have two or more speed counters, I draw two cards from my deck and send one card in my hand to the graveyard! Next I summon Debris Dragon to the field. When Debris Dragon is successfully summoned I can special summon a monster in my graveyard with 500 or fewer attack points! So the card I sent to the graveyard earlier gets to join the party; come on out Gauntlet Warrior!”

*(Debris Dragon: Atk: 1000 Def: 2000)*

*(Gauntlet Warrior: Atk: 400 Def: 1600)*

“Level four Debris Dragon tunes level three Gauntlet Warrior and level one Turbo Booster!”

“Wait Yusei! No! You can’t synchro summon!” Lise shouted, but she was too late.

“I synchro summon Stardust Dragon!”

*(Stardust Dragon: Atk: 2500 Def: 2000)*

“All right! Now their monsters can go toe to toe!” Crow clenched his fist in excitement.

“No! This is bad! This is really bad!” Lise’s eyes were wide with worry.

Ghost snickered quietly to himself.

“Now I activate the trap Meteor Wave. My synchro monster gains 300 attack points this turn,” as Yusei spoke Stardust Dragon’s attack soared from 2500 to 2800.

“Hopefully that’ll be enough,” Crow smiled, feeling more confident in Yusei now.

“Good play, Yusei, now let him have it!” Jack grinned too.

“Go, Stardust Dragon!”

“I activate Wisel Guard’s effect!” Ghost cut in. “Wisel Guard makes itself the target of your attack instead!”

“What?”

Instead of eliminating Ghost’s massive union monster, Stardust’s stream of cosmic power hit the Meklord Emperor’s right arm piece.
Yusei wasn’t about to back down though. “Due to Meteor Wave’s effect, because my monster was stronger than yours, even though your monster was in defense mode you still take the point difference as damage!”

**Yusei: 3150**

**Ghost: 2400**

“Interesting, so now we know that even though Meklord Emperor Wisel is a union type monster, it doesn’t combine into one card, and the pieces can support the overall structure of the monster,” Lise said, her voice low, as if she were making a mental list of their encounter.

“I’m setting one card facedown and ending my turn,” Yusei growled, clearly frustrated.

Ghost smirked. “What a fun opponent. I chose well, Yusei Fudo. Time to see something interesting! It’s my turn, and I summon Wisel Guard 3!”

A new white, shell-like monster appeared. It extended into an arm that fastened onto the previously empty arm socket of the Meklord Emperor.

“Unbelievable! It’s almost like it repaired itself!” Crow’s mouth dropped open in shock.”

“It can combine with other parts to power itself up even more!” Jack too was surprised.

“Shit, that’s not good,” Yusei remarked sourly.

“It’s no use, Yusei,” Ghost laughed evilly. “Meklord Emperor Wisel is immortal.”

I see. He probably has plenty more parts to repair that monstrosity in his deck. I’ve gotta come up with a new approach!

“Beautiful, the face of the tormented. I always get to see it when my opponent realizes the terror of my Meklord Emperor. But the real horror is only starting!”

“Oh yeah? If you have so much power then why do you need to attack other duelists?”

“Other duelists? I don’t care about them. I want those useless monsters in their decks destroyed!”

“What?! Useless!”

“Exactly! Those useless things you call synchro monsters! The tools for your hope spawned from combining the might of your monsters! Take away those useless tools and this city will stay the way it was meant to be!”

“Meant to be? What the hell does that mean?!” Lise cried indignantly. Her hands tightened on her handlebars. She had a pretty good idea what Ghost meant.

“To keep Satellite and City apart, of course! Synchros are evolutions of people combining together! The world doesn’t need useless things like that!”

“Bullshit!” Yusei spat before Lise could jump in with the same phrase.

Ghost laughed like the maniac he was and sped up. “Taste my synchro killer, Yusei!”

“Synchro killer?!”
“This just went from bad to worse,” Lise said apprehensively.

“Meklord Emperor Wisel’s effect activates!” As Ghost spoke, the glowing infinity symbol on the Emperor’s chest sprouted white tendrils. They reached for Stardust Dragon, ensnaring the great beast, and dragging it closer.

“Stardust Dragon?!”

“Once a turn, Wisel can absorb a synchro monster on your field!”

“No way!”

Stardust roared in challenge, but it was no use. In a flash of light, Stardust vanished into the depths of Wisel’s infinity symbol.

“No way! Stardust Dragon’s been stolen!” Crow and Jack were beside themselves with surprise and fear. This was a whole new brand of villain.

“Stardust Dragon…” Yusei’s eyebrows pressed upwards and his shoulders slumped at the loss of his friend.

“I knew there was a reason Trudge said no synchros!” Lise exclaimed fearfully. She had no clue what to do, and her markings were starting to ache.

“This monster can capture synchros and use them against you!” Yusei realized his error much too late.

“Correct, and Wisel gains attack points equal to the attack of the synchro monster it equips,” Ghost was practically glowing his despicable grin was so wide. “Stardust Dragon has 2500 attack points, therefore Wisel gains 2500 attack points!” With Stardust’s added attack power, Yusei was looking at 5000 points of very hurtful damage.

“Five thousand attack points?!” Jack whimpered.

“Go Meklord Emperor Wisel; attack Yusei directly! How does it feel knowing the power of your own monster is going to defeat you?!”

“This is bad! Yusei, play something!” Crow shouted in desperation.

“Yusei!”

“I activate my trap Scrap-Iron Scarecrow! When your monster attacks, this cards negates that attack. The best part is I can set it back on my field.”

For the first time, Ghost scowled, but it didn’t last long. “How stubborn. I set two cards and end my turn.”

“My turn,” Yusei said. “I summon Bicular in defense position.”

(Bicular: Atk: 200 Def: 200)

“I set one card and end my turn.”

“You can’t do anything. You’re hanging on by a thread, and that thread is going to snap!”

Yusei’s expression darkened. He’s right. There’s nothing in my hand that can turn the tables. For
now I just have to survive.

“My turn! I activate the Trap Wise A3! By sending Wisel Attack on my field to the graveyard, I
can special summon Wisel Attack 3 from my hand!” Wisel’s left arm vanished, and a new, bladed
arm appeared. It extended and fitted itself to the left arm socket. “Wisel Attack 3 increases
Meklord Emperor Wisel’s attack points! Go Meklord Emperor Wisel; attack Bicular!”

Yusei gritted his teeth. He was going to just barely scrape by this round, he knew it. “I activate the
trap Scrap-Iron Scarecrow!”

Behind the duelists, Crow, Jack and Lise rode in worry.

“He’s barely managing to survive,” Crow said.

Jack nodded. “But he can’t let his guard down. If he allows the opponent to slip through…”

“Then it’s game over,” Lise said gravely.

“But what can he do? Yusei’s ace monster was stolen.”

“The same strategy won’t work against me twice! I activate my trap battle Return! When a monster
couldn’t battle this turn, it can attack again by halving its attack points!”

“Fucking A!” Lise blurted.

“Go Meklord Emperor Wisel!”

“This is gonna hurt,” Jack predicted grimly.

In a flash Bicular was cut in half. Smoke billowed over Yusei, and he struggled to remain upright
on his duel runner.

“Wisel Attack 3’s effect activates. You should know how this one goes. If my monster’s attack
points are greater than your monster’s defense points, you take the difference as damage!”

\[
\begin{align*}
Yusei: & 650 \\
Ghost: & 2400
\end{align*}
\]

“But I’m activating Bicular’s effect! When Bicular is destroyed in battle, I can special summon
Unicycular from my deck or my hand!”

As opposed to Bicular’s blue, two-wheeled appearance, Unicycular was red and atop a single
wheel.

\[
\begin{align*}
(Unicycular: & \text{Atk: 100 Def: 100})
\end{align*}
\]

“That weakling can’t do anything!” Ghost scoffed. “I activate my Trap Recycle card! I discard one
card from my hand to activate it this turn, allowing me to bring a trap card in my graveyard back to
my hand! I select Battle Return! But I can’t set the card I added to my hand this turn.”

“Damnit, if he sets that card next round then Yusei can’t stop it!” Crow was at the end of his wits.

“Come on Yusei, you can’t lose here!” Lise encouraged, pumping her fist in the air even though it
made her markings ache even more. The Crimson Dragon did not like Stardust Dragon being
captured one bit.
Jack pointed dramatically at his friend. “If you lose to this second rate minor villain I’ll never forgive you!”

Yusei took a deep breath and drew his next card. “My turn!” Sonic Chick. He groaned in frustration.

“Aw, did somebody not get the card they wanted?” Ghost taunted. “Without the power of synchro monsters, you’re going to be destroyed!”

“I activate the field spell Speed World 2’s effect! By removing seven speed counters, I can draw a card from my deck!” Yusei ignored Ghost’s jeers and put his fingers to his cards. *Everything depends on this draw!*

With a burst of energy, all of Lise’s markings flashed into light. Yusei’s followed almost immediately.

“Our marks!” Crow looked down and found the tail branded to his arm was glowing brightly.

“Whoa!” Jack’s wings marking was a glow too.

///

Akiza stopped her pacing across the empty garage and looked down at her arm. She had felt the struggle, fear and worry before the burst of light from her arm erupted.

Luna’s claw was glowing too. “I can feel us all drawing together just like the first time!”

“Cool!” Leo breathed, watching the red light of his sister and friend’s markings dance before his eyes.

“Let’s give them everything they need,” Akiza’s brow was laced with determination.

“You got it,” Luna nodded, her pigtails bobbing.

A moment later everyone’s marks vanished.

///

Just in time, Lise braked and locked her runner. Next second she vanished.

The dragon seal suddenly appeared on Yusei’s back. The top card of his deck glowed gold, and Lise in her soul form flew through the air.

“The seal of the Crimson Dragon…”

“Let’s use everything we got to take this asshole down!” Lise decreed with a cheesy grin to match.

“You got it! Ghost, there’s nothing you can do to stop us and our evolution! Here’s the proof; I… draw! I summon Majestic Dragon!”

(Majestic Dragon: Atk: 0 Def: 0)

“I activate the trap Synchro Material! Synchro Material lets me use a monster in your field to synchro summon!”

“What?!”
“Return, Stardust Dragon!”

“What?!” Ghost repeated in shock. “But you can’t!”

“I can and I will!”

In another flash of light, Stardust Dragon emerged from the depths of Meklord Emperor Wisel’s clutches. It spread its claws and roared with power.

“Hey Ghost, I think Stardust’s still mad about being locked up!” Lise grinned.

“All right!” Crow cheered.

“Now level one Majestic Dragon tunes level eight Stardust Dragon and level one Unicycular! Shining stars come together to illuminate a new miracle! Become the path that lights the way! I synchro summon Majestic Star Dragon!”

(Majestic Star Dragon: Atk: 3800 Def: 3000)

“Since Meklord Emperor lost Stardust, it loses attack points!”

Ghost’s eyes widened with fear as his monster’s 5400 attack points dropped down to 2900. He was down but not out. “But due to Wisel Guard 3’s effect, it’ll block your attack!

“Too bad for you. Majestic Star Dragon negates your monster’s effect!”

“Even if you negate it, your attack can’t defeat me!”

“Meklord Emperor Wisel is a monster made of five cards, now that your effect is negated, I can attack any of its parts I want!”

“How did you figure it out?”

“I’m attacking Meklord Emperor’s head! Go Majestic Star Dragon; attack Wisel Top!”

Yusei’s beautiful crystalline dragon slice through Wisel Top like butter. Headless, Meklord Emperor Wisel was useless. It exploded, sending Ghost’s lifepoints spiraling down to nothing.

Yusei: 650

Ghost: 0

Ghost’s duel runner kept going despite his loss. He no longer had control, and went sailing over the duel track’s railing!

“What the?”

Crow and Jack braked and ran to the edge of the duel track. Luckily they hadn’t been over the ocean when Ghost had lost, but over a large wooded park. Smoke billowed ominously from the crash site.

“Oh no!”

“We’ve gotta go help him!”

///
Smoking and crackling, Ghost looked worse for the wear. A sturdy old tree had stopped his progress, and he wasn’t moving.

Placido approached him calmly. He ignored Ghost and extracted the duel disk still containing the five cards representing Wisel’s pieces. Placido glanced upwards at the dragon still swooping through the air. “Yusei Fudo and the Elizabeth Kururugi’s powers. Interesting. We’ll settle this another day.” He smiled and left without looking back.

///

Majestic Star Dragon dissolved back into Lise’s soul. Her body glowed red, and she whirled back into her corporal form. “Let’s go!” She soared back into the air, and into the wooded area. The boys were as close behind as they could be.

The four of them approached Ghost’s sparking body cautiously.

“Are you okay?”

“We’ll take you to the hospital right away,” Crow said, reaching for Ghost’s arm.

At his touch the arm broke off and fell to the ground!

“What the hell?” Crow recoiled in horror.

“He’s a robot!” Yusei realized.

“Geez, what next?” Lise threw up her hands exasperatedly. “A unicorn rave?!”

“At least then we’d know what was going on,” Jack muttered.

“I’m gonna get what I can from this thing,” Yusei knelt by Ghost’s decimated frame.

Lise nodded and squeezed his hand for a half a second. “I’ll grab my runner and head back to our place. Akiza and the twins will wanna know what happened.”

///

The twins and Akiza stayed throughout most of the day. Leo alone had asked for a play by play at least once every hour. Everyone else was still reeling from the crazy that had gone down.

Trudge and Mina came by after six. Trudge had been released from the hospital around 5:30, and the Security department heads wanted to compare notes.

“It’s a ridingroid that Security is currently developing,” Trudge said after a single glance at the pictures the gang had taken of Ghost.

“Ridingroid?”

“A robot that handles duel runner violations,” Trudge clarified.

“The test machine was stolen about ten days ago,” Mina said. “I’m surprised this bot turned out to be Ghost.”

“Who did this?” Jack said, arms crossed moodily.

“I don’t know, Trudge admitted. “A monster that steals synchros, a security robot terrorizing
people, and real damage. There are a lot of mysteries. If only it left behind a memory chip.”

“There wasn’t any data on the Turbo Duel chip,” Yusei tossed the chip at Trudge, who fumbled it but caught it eventually. “It was programmed to wipe all the data if it lost.”

“You know it’s a crime to tamper with evidence!”

“Dude, we’ve broken so many laws, good and bad, it’s not even funny,” Lise rolled her eyes, unconcerned with Trudge’s worry.

“Yeah, don’t be so uptight,” Crow jabbed his thumb at Yusei. “Yusei’s skills are better than security analysis.”

“Well, that’s true, but still-“

“I wish I could’ve seen the robot in person,” Leo’s eyes were wide as he examined the photos for the hundredth time.

“Leo, people were hurt!” Luna reminded him.

“Right, sorry…”

“But who and why would anyone want to capture synchro monsters to keep everything the way it used to be?” Crow asked.

“Don’t know,” Jack said. “But it’s clear we’re facing a new enemy.”

“Which means we’re not backing down,” Yusei said.

Lise crossed her arms. “Our city is going to evolve towards the future, and if whoever is behind this has a problem with that, they’ll have to answer to us!”

“Couldn’t have said it better myself,” Akiza smiled in agreement.
Zora was sweeping up in front of her shop in the hot sun. As usual, there wasn’t a hair out of place, but she still looked glum.

The gang was just returning from grabbing some new parts to rebuild the engine prototype. They picked up on Zora’s mood.


“It’s none of your business!” Zora snapped.

“Um…something wrong?” Akiza tried next.

“Thank you for asking, dear,” Zora smiled widely for her.

Crow looked like he wanted to jam the large, metal part he was holding in Zora’s eye socket.

Zora continued. “During the town meeting, they decided to replace my clock with a new one.” She pointed to the handsome, old clock nestled above her shop’s doorway.

“But isn’t it broken?” Crow tried again.

“Shut up!”

Crow winced at Zora’s onslaught. Lise patted his back. “You tried.”

“That’s sad,” Luna said, and Leo nodded in agreement.

“Yeah…”

“I just don’t get it!” Crow burst out, making everyone jump back a step. “Why is she only nice to the girls?!”

“All my children are boys, so it’s nice to talk to girls for a change.”

“Um…right…” Lise’s eyes darted back and forth, and an uncomfortable smile made it across her face.

Jack frowned. “But you seem to be…grouchier than usual.”

“Any reason why?” Akiza jumped in quickly before Zora could explode at him too.

“Well my youngest son is coming to visit. We haven’t spoken for a while,” Zora leaned close to Crow. “So I’m practicing!”

“Why me?!” Crow complained, to the laughter of the others.

///

Back in the garage, everyone was helping adjust the gang’s duel runners.

Yusei was at the computer, trying to fine tune his runner before the others. If he made any mistakes, he preferred to mess his runner up instead of everyone else’s. “How’s the balance now?”
“Looking good!”

“Check mine next,” Crow said impatiently.

“How cool! That D-Wheel’s wings are awesome!”

“I know right?” Crow grinned with pride.

“And Wheel of Fortune is also cool!”

“Oh of course!” Jack cried indignantly. He hadn’t liked the ‘also’ thrown in there. “This D-Wheel is the only one in the world!”

“I also like duels, but I haven’t reached turbo dueling level yet.”

“Neither have I, but I’m going to work on it this summer,” Akiza said.

Lise looked up in total bewilderment. “Wait a minute, whose talking?” Her index fingers swept over her friends to be met with confused shrugs and shakes of the head.

“Oh sorry, that was me,” a boy with blond hair stepped into the garage. He had a round face with a nose ring, a bag slung over his shoulder, jeans, sneakers, green t-shirt, yellow jacket, and a red bandana securing his long hair. “This place is so cool! You converted the bottom floor into a duel runner garage!”

“Oh sorry, that was me,” a boy with blond hair stepped into the garage. He had a round face with a nose ring, a bag slung over his shoulder, jeans, sneakers, green t-shirt, yellow jacket, and a red bandana securing his long hair. “This place is so cool! You converted the bottom floor into a duel runner garage!”

“Who is he?” Crow leaned down to whisper to Yusei.

“Maybe a WRGP rival team member?”

Jack dismounted his runner and confronted their visitor. “This is our garage. Who said you could come in here?”

“Technically me,” the boy scratched his head. “This used to be my room.”

“Oh, you must be one Zora’s son!” Lise realized, sliding over her duel runner too.

“That’s right! I’m Lyndon, Zora’s youngest!”

“He’s a lot different from what I expected,” Crow mumbled.

“Did mom tell stories about me? She does love to brag!”

“I get it now. Crow reminds Zora of her least-liked son,” Jack nodded. “That’s why she’s mean to him specifically.”

“Makes sense,” Yusei agreed.

Crushed by the revelation of these facts, Crow’s jaw dropped open. Tears leaked uncontrollably from his eyes like waterfalls.

“All of mom’s stories were probably about me! I’ve been gone for a while, but I’m back now!” Lyndon grinned widely.

“I heard you left three years ago to study,” Yusei said.

“That’s right! I finished my training and came home!” Lyndon’s cheerful demeanor suddenly
dropped. “It was three years ago… The clock in front of the shop suddenly broke. I never studied clocks, but I figured how hard could it be? My dad fixed clocks all the time, so I figured I was at least better than an amateur. However, I had to give up. Mom and I had a big fight over dad’s death, and I ran out.”

“Dude, that’s heavy,” Lise commented, crossing her arms.

“But you ran away,” Yusei said.

“That’s pretty childish,” Crow added.

“Well, when you put it that way…” Lyndon fidgeted with his hands uncomfortably.

“So you went to study to learn the skills you needed, right?” Akiza encouraged.

“Yeah, I trained a lot!” Lyndon’s smile returned, and he laughed with renewed vigor. “I’m now a semi-famous clock mechanic! Pros recommend me, and my teacher wants me to succeed him!”

“Then go meet Zora,” Jack said. He was having none of Lyndon’s bragging. That was his job. “Tell her you can fix the clock now.”

“Well…”

“You’re worried you’ll break into a fight with Zora again.”

“Right.”

“Really?” Crow blinked.

Akiza nodded. “The stronger the bond between parent and child, the more it hurts when you fight.”

“You’re exactly right!” Lyndon leapt up and clasped Akiza’s hands. She was so shocked by his overwhelming enthusiasm that she froze.

“Okay, you are way too close,” Lise grabbed a fistful of Lyndon’s jacket and dragged him away from Akiza.

“Sorry!”

“Look,” Yusei broke in. “If you want to fix the clock, you need to hurry.”

“During the town meeting they decided to replace the old one with a newer model,” Crow explained.

Lyndon gasped, his brown eyes wide. “Seriously?!.” He raced for the door. “Oh no!”

“Wait! You can’t go dressed like that!” Akiza called after him. Lyndon stopped, looking at her in bewilderment. “If you want to make a good impression on your mom, you’ve gotta fix yourself up a little bit.”

“Good point.”

///

Outside the shop in his new suit, Lyndon was having trouble with the tie. “I never learned how to do this…”
Jack seized the neck tie. “I’ll do it!” He proceeded to yank so hard on the tie that Lyndon couldn’t breathe.

“Jack stop!” Akiza shoved him out of the way, glaring forcefully at her friend. “Are you trying to kill him?” She turned back to Lyndon. “For a neck tie…” In just a few seconds she had it tied just right.

Yusei nodded with approval. “Well done.”

Lise clicked her tongue and gave Lyndon a cheesy thumbs up.

Akiza shrugged. “I sometimes tie my dad’s neck tie. All good.”

Crow grinned widely, and clenched his fists. “All right, good luck Lyndon!”

He and the gang hid by the shop while Lyndon collected his wits at the door.

“You sure this’ll work?”

“Positive,” Crow said. “Do your best. We’ll be right here.”

Lyndon walked forward. The bell rang when he came through the door.

Zora looked up from her counter. “Welcome-“ She gasped, and stood up in amazement. “Lyndon?”

“H-Hi mom! I came back because I wanted to fix your old clock.”

“The clock?”

“It’s still broken, right? I-I was off learning how to fix clocks.”

“Learning?”

“Yeah, and my teacher said I’m a master! A genius that only comes along once every ten years!” Lyndon bragged. “So I thought I should finally pop over and fix that clock of yours!”

“Does he really think that’s an apology?” Jack raised a disapproving eyebrow.

“You know all about apologies, Jack,” Lise patted his shoulder.

“Yeah. Wait what?”

“So you’re finally gonna fix the clock, huh?” Zora picked up her chair. Sensing danger, Lyndon booked it for the door. “I wonder who it was who broke the clock!” Zora chased after him, throwing the chair into the street.

Lyndon tripped over his own feet. The chair broke into pieces just beside his head.

“How dare you speak to me that way when you’re the one who broke the clock!”

The gang collectively gasped.

“What’s she talking about, Lyndon?” Crow asked.

“That’s… Three years ago, I was tired of tightening the screws on the clock every day. See, it’s an old clock so it has to be done by hand. I noticed one of the cog wheels wasn’t turning, so I started hammering and tinkering. Only it didn’t stop there. More and more kept stopping, and I kept
hammering. Before I knew it, I’d, well, I’d broken it.”

“So now you have the confidence and the skill to fix the clock? Answer me!” Zora demanded furiously.

“Don’t I have to try?”

“If you’re just going to try then get out of here! I don’t remember having a freeloader son like you!”

Lise winced sympathetically. “Harsh.”

“Feeling sorry for him?” Jack asked, his eyebrows raising into his hair.

She shrugged. “A little. He’s still an idiot, but I think parental issues is something we can all understand in some way.”

“Point taken,” Jack said.

“Fine!” Lyndon wailed, getting to his feet with tears in his eyes. “I won’t come back anymore!”

“Wait, Lyndon!” Crow shouted after him. “Are you really fine with this? This is your chance to show your mom all you’ve learned!”

“Forget it! I didn’t train just so she could treat me like this!”

“Then why come here at all?” Crow persisted.

“Shut up! How could an adult like you understand?”

Crow looked like he was going to chew Lyndon out, but he bowed his head instead. He took a deep breath, and raised his head. “I understand, but before you leave; duel me!”

“Duel?”

“Yeah. If you win, you’re free to go wherever you want and whatever. But if I win, you have to give Zora a proper apology! Zora’s like a second mother to us! I won’t let someone who hurts her like that walk off so easily!”

Lyndon sniffled, and rubbed his nose. “Fine then.”

Zora’s eyes widened. She hadn’t expected her son to accept so easily.

“Is he trying to force Lyndon to talk to her?” Jack thought out loud.

“No,” Yusei shook his head. “Crow has a plan.”

Crow: 4000
Lyndon: 4000

“Duel!!”

“It’s my turn, draw!” Lyndon began. “I summon Monster Clock!”

(Monster Clock: Atk: 0 Def: 0)
“I end my turn.”

“My turn then,” Crow decreed. “I summon Blackwing Fane the Steel Chain!”

*(Blackwing Fane the Steel Chain: Atk: 500 Def: 800)*

“Crow, beat that boy into the ground!” Zora cheered.

Lyndon scowled darkly in her direction.

“Have you ever once really talked to Zora?”

“I did!” Lyndon insisted. “You’re the one who won’t listen!”

“Is that so? If you ask me, you have no confidence. Anyway, when this duel is over I’ll listen to your answer. Since there’s a Blackwing on my field, this card can be special summoned from my hand! I special summon Gale the Whirlwind!”

*(Blackwing Gale the Whirlwind: Atk: 1300 Def: 400)*

“Go Gale the Whirlwind!”

“Now’s the time! I activate Monster Clock’s effect!” Lyndon countered. “Monster Clock can absorb the attacking monster!” Lyndon’s purple monster’s tongue darted out, swallowing Gale whole! The poor Blackwing became the perfect bird to Monster Clock’s cuckoo clock!

“What?!"

“Awesome, right? Monster Clock’s attack points increase equal to the absorbed monster’s attack points! Now Monster Clock has more attack points than Fane!”

“Shut up! I can still attack you directly! Fane the Steel Chain attack!”

*Crow: 4000*

*Lyndon: 3500*

“I end my turn.”

“You’ve really done it now!” Lyndon growled. “It’s my turn! From my hand, I summon Clock Knight 12! Next from my hand, I activate the spell card Clockwork! This card can special summon a monster in my hand that has a lower level than a Clock Knight on the field. I’m calling out Clock Knight 3!”

(Clock Knight 12: Atk: 1200 Def: 1200)

(Clock Knight 3: Atk: 300 Def: 300)

“My Clock Knights can toss a coin once per turn, and if it’s heads, hen hey can raise their attack points by 1200 until the end phase!”

“Up to 1200…” Crow mulled this ability over.

“In addition, if there’s another Clock Knight on the field, I can re-toss a coin toss!”

“What?”
“He might be a bit stronger than we’d thought,” Jack commented.

“Not necessarily. His power relies on the Clock Knights being out on his field, and chance,” Akiza reminded him.

“So with his combo he can flip the coin twice to begin with,” Leo said.

His sister nodded. “And then twice more if he doesn’t like the toss.”

“Now then 12 starts! Heads is the sun! Let’s go sun! Come on sun!” Lyndon started performing a crude dance of luck as his knight tossed the coin. “It’s the moon! Damn it! With Clock Knight 3’s effect, we can redo the toss. Now appear sun! All right! It’s the sun! Clock Knight 12’s attack points rise by 1200!”

\[
\text{Clock Knight 12: Atk: } 1200 \rightarrow 2400
\]

\[
\text{Clock Knight 3: Atk: } 300 \rightarrow 600
\]

“And then with Clock Knight 3’s effect, I can do another coin toss! Bring out the sun! And first try! Now Clock Knight 3’s attack points double too!”

\[
\text{Clock Knight 3: Atk: } 600 \rightarrow 1200
\]

“Battle! Clock Knight 12 attack Fane the Steel Chain!”

\[\text{Crow: 2100}\]

\[\text{Lyndon: 3500}\]

“That’s not all! Attack directly, Clock Knight 3!”

“You’re too arrogant! From my hand I special summon Blackwing Ghibli the Hot Wind in defense mode!”

\[
\text{Blackwing Ghibli the Hot Wind: Atk: 0 Def: 1600}
\]

“This monster can be special summoned during a direct attack! Still want to do battle?”

“No sir! Since I can’t defeat your Blackwing with Clock Knight 3, I’ll end my turn here.” Lyndon’s knight lost their additional attack points with the ending of his turn.

“You don’t take many risks unless you can sway your gamble in your favor,” Crow observed coolly. “Don’t use such weak tactics! Real life is about making your own luck! It’s my turn!” He checked his new draw. \text{Mirror Force. I can destroy all his attacking monsters with this!} “I set one card face down. Next, I summon Blackwing Blizzard the Far North!”

\[
\text{Blackwing Blizzard of the Far North: Atk: 1300 Def: 0}
\]

“Since I successfully summoned this card, I special summon Fane the Steel Chain from my graveyard in defense mode! Here I come! I’m tuning my level two Fane the Steel Chain with level three Ghibli the Hot Wind and level two Blizzard the Far North! I synchro summon Blackwing Armor Master!”

\[
\text{Blackwing Armor Master: Atk: 2500 Def: 1500}
\]

Lyndon mouth opened impossibly wide. He hadn’t expected such a powerful monster.
“Blackwing Armor Master attack Clock Knight 3!”

_Crow: 2100_

_Lyndon: 1300_

Lyndon’s demeanor visibly drooped. He turned away. “Let’s stop.”

“You’re giving up?”

“What’m I supposed to do with that monster? It has 2500 attack points! It’s not like I can win!” Lyndon was actually in tears as he pointed miserably at Armor Master.

“Don’t complain!” Crow demanded firmly. “You’re giving up without even trying? For someone who brags so much, you sure do like running away! Why won’t you make up with Zora? You were training to fix the clock and make up with your mom! Don’t you have the confidence to try?!”

“Shut up!” Lyndon sobbed. “Clock mechanic school was terrible! I couldn’t do the simplest thing! My teachers all yelled at me! I had to work through almost every night to catch up!”

“So even after all that you don’t have the confidence to make up with Zora, or to fix your father’s clock? You’re still a child! Wasn’t Zora waiting for you to return a confident man? I end my turn. If you’re really giving up, then go!”

Lyndon sighed and took a deep breath. “It’s my turn…draw.” He pulled his next card. “This is dad’s card…”

///

Lyndon as a much younger child sat crying under a tree.

“What’s wrong?” A man that was clearing Lyndon’s dad sat down next to him. “In trouble with mom again?”

“Yeah. I want to go out and be a pro duelist so I don’t have to fix clocks, but she won’t let me!”

“I see. That’s troubling, but mom is only saying that because she cares about you.” Lyndon’s father reached into his jacket and produced a card. “Here.”

“It’s Time Wizard! This is a rare card!”

“You said you wanted one, didn’t you?”

“Yeah! Thank you so much!” Lyndon smiled widely, tears dried, and let his father pat his head.

“You…should follow the path you want to. If you want to do something, then give it your best.”

///

“That’s right,” Lyndon whispered to himself. “I’m using this card! I summon Time Wizard!”

_Time Wizard: Atk: 500 Def: 400_

“Time Wizard huh?” Crow smiled. The duel was more enjoyable with an opponent as pumped as himself.
“This is the card my dad gave me! I activate its ability; Time Roulette! If it lands on the gas, all your monsters are destroyed! But if it lands on a skeleton then all my monsters are destroyed, and I take half their total attack points as damage!”

“Good play!” Leo exclaimed excitedly.

“If it works,” Luna reminded him.

“Then it can get past Armor Master’s abilities,” Yusei said.

“Now spin! Show me the way to my win!” At Lyndon’s command Time Wizard’s dial started spinning. Now I remember. I remember I loved watching my dad repair clocks. And mom was always there for me, whether I wanted it or not. Mom… “Time Roulette stop on my victory!” The dial slowed to a stop. “Success! Time Wizard, destroy Armor Master! Now battle! Monster Clock and Clock Knight 12 attack Crow directly!”

“Oh no! If he takes those attacks, Crow will lose!” Luna gasped.

“But Crow wouldn’t lose that easily,” Jack crossed his arms.

“Then his facedown should be a reversal card,” Yusei reasoned.

Crow just waited for the attacks with a crafty smile. Monster Clock slashed at Crow’s shoulder, and Clock Knight 12 punched his other arm.

Crow: 0
Lyndon: 1300

“You really do have a heart of gold, Crow,” Lise muttered to herself, shaking her head. “All according to plan.”

“He really lost?” Leo’s mouth was in the shape of a perfect letter O.

“He really did,” Luna explained slowly.


“Like hell I’m leaving!”

Zora was frozen with disbelief. Crow smirked at his handiwork.

“That’s right! I wanted to work harder so that eventually I’d be able to fix it. As I studied clocks more and more, I understood how great my dad was. My dad’s clock is important to me! I trained so that I could fix it if I just tried! Because my dad died before I could finish the job, and how ashamed I was for breaking such an important clock, and ashamed of myself for not being able to make my mom happy! My dad’s clock is here! My mom is here! This is my important place! Where else would I go?!” Lyndon was crying again, but then again so was Zora. “Mom, I’ll fix it! I will!” Before his mother could refuse, Lyndon raced inside.

“Lyndon…” Zora smiled for the first time since seeing her son.

“You lost on purpose, didn’t you?” Yusei asked, not accusingly but good-naturedly.

“You went through all that trouble just to get him to quit being a baby?” Jack laughed.
“I’ll trust Lyndon.”

“What a stubborn mother and son,” Crow grinned.

///

By sunset Lyndon had kept his word. The clock chimed loud and clear for the first time in three years.

“It’s moving!” Leo pointed.

Six little wooden statues spun at the bottom of the clock’s opened interior. Each one played a different wooden musical instrument.

“Everyone, look!” Luna yelled loudly.

No one was more moved than Zora. She burst into tears. “The clock is repaired! He did it!”

“Mom?” Lyndon emerged from the shop hesitantly.

“Lyndon!” Zora dashed for her son and wrapped him in the biggest mama bear hug she could muster. “You’ve done well!” She let him go for a moment to look him in the eye. “You’re your father’s son, and I’m so proud of you.” They dissolved into sobbing and hugging again.

Up above the six wooden musicians, the clock had a second small wooden scene. That of a mother, father, and child. There hadn’t been space for two more, Zora would always argue in her late husband’s defense, but each of her sons liked to believe the child was them. Today it was Lyndon though.
I am SO sorry this chapter took so long to come out! I was super busy, and I'll continue to be busy until next Tuesday afternoon. Not looking forward to finals but it's a part of college life. But after Tuesday I'll be free to do some more writing! Wish me luck, and thank you all so much for sticking with me!

“Hey,” Lise shoved a mug into Yusei’s face. “How long have you been working?”

“Um considering I started after dinner? A few hours. It’s like nine.”

“In the morning, not night,” Lise said, sighing.

Yusei eyes widened in surprise and he looked out the windows for the first time in hours. “Holy… I did it again…” Yusei groaned, pulling at the skin of his face down wearily. There were purple bags under his eyes. “What’s in this?” He finally asked, staring at the contents of the mug Lise had handed him.

“Coffee, with a little vanilla syrup.”

Yusei shrugged and emptied the mug in just a few seconds. “A little too heavy on the syrup this time around.”

“I was experimenting this morning,” Lise smiled briefly, but then her brows knit together. “You should take a break, relax, eat something. Function like a human, okay?”

“Sure,” Yusei yawned, stood up, and stretched. “I’ll certainly sleep like a baby tonight. Going out for a while?” He’d spotted Lise’s slightly more formal attire.

She nodded awkwardly, tugging on her shirt’s hem. “My boss wants me in the office today. Hopefully I’ll be home before rush hour.”

“Do you have to be in the office tomorrow?”

“No, why?”

“Do you wanna go on a date tomorrow?”

“You’re supposed to be taking a break and relaxing,” Lise reminded him, but her cheeks had turned pink.

“You relax me. We can go for a walk and see a movie.”

“Only if you actually sleep tonight,” she touched the mark on Yusei’s cheek just under the tired bags framing the bottom of his eyes. “And I pick the movie.”

“Deal,” Yusei smiled. “Can I kiss you before you go?”

Lise smiled too and quickly pecked him on the lips. “Gotta go now, and we’ve been together long
enough that you can just surprise me with a kiss.”

“Noted,” Yusei’s smile turned into a full blown grin as he watched Lise drive off.

///

“Okay,” Lise slid down the ladder and into the kitchen with a warm grin on her face. “I’m ready to go.”

Yusei’s smile was less enthusiastic. He pocketed his phone and looked sheepish.

“What?” Lise’s mood dampened. She knew that look, and she didn’t like it one bit.

“I just got a call about fixing something?” He said it like it were a question, not an actual event.

Yusei could tell by Lise’s frown that she wasn’t happy about the development. “I’d have to go over since the family can’t bring their fridge here. It shouldn’t take too long. I can have it done in time to catch our movie later! I swear!”

“But usually ‘not too long’ is a very long time with you, Yusei. You get so invested in a project that you don’t stop and by then it’s like hours later.”

“But this is just a quick fixer upper!” Yusei protested pleadingly. “Come on, with Jack’s spending habits we could really use the extra cash right now.”

“Fine,” Lise grumped, crossing her arms.

“I’ll buy the popcorn,” Yusei offered. He bit his lip, feeling guilty.

“And I get to take my own runner instead of riding on the back of yours,” Lise nodded.

“But it’ll be easier if we just take mine.”

“One, sitting squished between the arc and you is not fun in the slightest, and two; we can’t race on one runner.”

“Is that a challenge?”

“It’s whatever you want it to be,” Lise smiled coyly and hopped aboard her bike. “So where is this place?”

“Follow me and find out!”

“Cheater!”

///

“This is the place,” Yusei said. He pulled up a second after Lise did.

She took off her helmet and surveyed the location. “It seems kinda quiet for a family home. You sure this is right?”

“Uh huh,” Yusei pulled his tools out of the compartment underneath his runner’s seat. “I triple checked.”

Lise stared suspiciously up at the brick and metal home. It was gray, bland, and fairly large. Nice trees, shrubbery, and grass lined the yard. There were no cars in the driveway, and the garage doors
were sealed shut.

Three men hid in the shadows of the house’s trees. Lise hadn’t spotted them and Yusei hadn’t so much as glanced at their hiding spot.

One of the men took out his phone and began typing furiously. *He brought a woman with him.*

He waited briefly for a reply. *Describe her.*

**Blonde, tall, probably his girlfriend. I dunno. What do we do?**

*Bring her along. Don’t do anything more than I’ve ordered.*

“I’ll wait out here,” Lise finally said.

“I’m sure you can come in too. They won’t bite you.”

Lise shook her head. “I’m not here for them. I’m here as a favor to you. I’ll be just fine out here.”

“Okay…Text me if something comes up.”

“K,” Lise reached into her own runner’s secret compartment and brought out one of the books she kept there.

Yusei sidled up to the door. He rang the doorbell and waited. Nothing. He rang it again, starting to think Lise’s vibes were getting to him.

A muffled scream came from indoors. Even Lise looked up in surprise. “Should we-“

“I’ll go in and see if everyone is okay. If I don’t text you in five minutes, call Trudge!” Yusei shoved the unlocked door open and raced in.

Lise stood tense and at the ready by her runner. Her phone poised in her hand, and her book forgotten.

She practically jumped out of her skin when her phone began ringing. It was Akiza.

“Now isn’t a very good time, Akiza!” Lise’s voice came out strained and panicky.

“Are you okay? You sound stressed. I just wanted to call and ask when I could come over. I need help with my calculus and literature homework again and I-“

“Look, can I call you back? I think Yusei might be in trouble.”

“Where are you? Are you two okay?”

“I don’t-“ Lise was cut off by someone smacking her arm. Reflexively she dropped her phone, which shattered on the concrete, and she turned to kick her attacker in the stomach.

He went down hard. His second companion attempted to kick Lise in the head, but she blocked and kneed him in the crotch.

“MPH!” Lise’s muffled cry of confusion rang out when the third thug covered her nose and mouth with some sort of cloth from behind.

He snickered in her ear as Lise tried to pry his arms away from her. “You’ve gotta breathe some
time.”

Lise managed to free herself, but she’d inhaled too much of whatever she’d been drugged with. Her last thoughts were of panic as her vision turned black, and she conked out on the pavement.

///

Yusei raced up the stairs. He hadn’t found anything on the first floor. Anything resembling humans or furniture that is. The home was completely empty.

On the second floor, Yusei spotted a body lying on the floor. “Hey are you okay? Answer me!” Yusei shook the man’s body.

The body rolled over and smirked at Yusei. “I’m much more okay than you!”

The three men from below emerged from the doorway. The largest one brandishing a bat, and the next thing Yusei knew was the sharp pain of the bat’s impact against his skull and the wooden floors of the fake house he’d been falsely led to.

///

Yusei sat up slowly. It was dark which meant he had to wait to be able to see. “Where am I?” He winced, and felt his head. “Oh that’s right; those assholes smacked me with a bat. This bump will be a nice bruise by tomorrow.” He felt the ground beneath him. “The floor is warm, and… vibrating?” He felt around him and his hand rested on a wall. The wall had two handles, but no doorknob. “Is this a door?” Yusei pulled on the handles and rammed his shoulder into the wall, but to no avail.

Not knowing what else to do, Yusei leaned against the wall. “Think. You were attacked. The ground is warm, vibrating, and there are handles on a door that won’t open. That means…” He blinked, his eyes finally adjusting to the darkness.

“Lise!” Yusei bent down and shook her shoulder. “Hey, you okay? You’ve gotta get up. I think we’re in a truck.”

She sat up painstakingly slowly. “Oh god. My head feels like clouds and maple syrup.”

“They didn’t knock you out?”

Lise rolled her eyes. “No they knocked me out with some drug. Is there a reason I can’t see besides drugs?”

“I think we’re locked in the back of a truck,” Yusei told her. He helped Lise to her feet, keeping her steady since her head was still spinning a little.

“One mystery solved, but where exactly are we going?”

“Why you’re going to join my turbo dueling team, of course.” Light flooded the interior of the truck from a large screen in the side. It was about the same size as a flat screen TV, but Lise and Yusei weren’t lucky enough to be met with merely a boring sports game. A middle aged man with gray hair and a spotless suit sneered at them from a superb desk.

Lise and Yusei blinked at him, exchanged glances, and directed identical looks of skepticism and anger at him.
“Not in this lifetime,” Yusei said.

“You could have just asked. Fucking kidnapping us is a huge turn off,” Lise added.

The man shrugged, not put off in the slightest. “I own the greatest turbo dueling team in the world, and I had to make sure you were on it. I wasn’t expecting Yusei to have company, but the team will be better for it.”

“We didn’t sign up for anything, so I suggest you have our truck pull over and let us out.”

The man slammed his hands onto his desk. His features were warped by his anger, and he leaned close to the camera. “I own a top notch company and I do not take no for an answer. As you can probably tell, I’m not a well-balanced person.” He snickered, his close proximity to the camera making his less than friendly smile all the creepier.

“That explains the truck then,” Yusei growled.

“But dude, seriously? What the hell was your plan here?” Lise shook her head pityingly. “Talk about pathetic. You kidnap us and then expect us to be on your turbo-dueling team? What was the angle you were going to spin? Ransom? Threaten someone we care about? Exceedingly large amounts of cash? If it was a ransom plot, we’d ignore it and go break Yusei out. Threatening our friends would get you nowhere. Money wouldn’t appeal to us at all. Yet you went with kidnapping. Well, we’re kidnapped, so what now? What could possibly keep us on your turbo-dueling team? Will you keep us in here until it’s time to duel? Feed us scraps of food like animals? I mean, how well did you really think this through?”

“Well I – you see – it’s just – basically… shut up!”

“You’ve got nothing to make us stay, but this truck,” Yusei grinned. “And once it’s open, we’re gone.”

“Good luck with that,” the man sneered and sat back in his arm chair to watch over the two of them.

“Now to find a way out,” Lise crossed over to where a large sheet was covering something and dragged it off. “At least they thought to bring our runners.”

Yusei nodded in agreement. “Leaving them out in the open would only raise suspicion.”


Maybe instead of pushing and shoving…” Lise struck a low stance, pivoted, and aimed a carefully crafted sidekick at the crack where the doors met. “OW!” She exclaimed, bouncing off the doors like a rubber band. She bounced up and down on her good foot, clutching at the other as it ached.

“Guess it could hurt to try again,” Yusei chuckled nervously. “Now what?”

“I dunno. I’m guessing we don’t want to be here when this truck gets to wherever it’s going?” Lise grunted out.

“Can you use your energy to stop the truck?”
Lise put her foot down and shook her head. “No, I can’t see where we are and who’s around us. If I cause a crash, somebody might get hurt.” She was silent for a moment. “Can we use your tools to dismantle the doors?!”

“Not unless the hinges are built on the inside.”

“Oh…” Lise’s exuberance deflated like a popped balloon.

“Could you use your energy to break the door down?”

“I can try,” Lise flexed her fingers, and the truck illuminated with a faint red glow from a red energy disc. Lise crossed her arms and uncrossed them in a swift sweeping motion. Her energy disc whizzed across the two doors, denting one of them on impact, but overall barely scratching them.

“Shit,” Yusei swore. “It’ll take a million of those to get through.”

“Akiza called me before everything went down. Maybe she can help.”

“They took our phones. Think you can contact her via the Signer link?”

“It’ll be faint, she and I don’t have an empathy link, but maybe I can nudge her in the right direction,” Lise sat cross-legged on the truck floor and closed her eyes.

///

“Mina! How soon can you get here?!” Akiza demanded the second the chief of police picked up her phone.

“Akiza what’s wrong?”

“I think Lise and Yusei have been kidnapped!”

“You’re at school, right? I’ll be there in five minutes.” Mina hung up without another word.

Akiza waited at the sidewalk nearest the entrance to duel academy. She shifted restlessly from foot to foot as she dialed Crow and Jack’s numbers.

“This is Crow Hogan for-“

“Crow! It’s Akiza!”

“Akiza?” Jack’s voice came through too. “What’s wrong?”

“Yusei and Lise have been kidnapped!”

“What?!”

“Shit,” Crow swore. “I’m working right now. I’ll call my boss, and keep riding around looking, but that’s the best I can do right now.”

“You sure?” Jack asked. “Yusei was going out on a job and Lise went with him for a date afterwards.”

“I think so,” Akiza hopped into Mina’s police cruiser, and they took off. “I called Lise a little while ago to see if she wanted to hang out, and she sounded panicked. The last thing I heard were a few
voices I didn’t recognize and something shattering. Mina and I are looking around.”

“All right,” Jack climbed aboard his ride and raced into town. “I’ll do a run of the outskirts of the city and Satellite. You take downtown, Akiza. Crow, keep your eyes peeled wherever you go.”

“Roger,” Crow saluted.

“Keep us posted,” Mina said and Akiza hung up.

Akiza scanned the streets and cars rapidly. Her left leg bounced unceasingly and she bit her nails every few minutes.

Mina rested one hand on Akiza’s resting knee. “We’ll find them. It’ll be okay.”

“Thanks,” Akiza smiled gratefully.

Both women nearly jumped out of their skins when Mina’s police radio crackled to life. “Elizabeth Kururugi and Yusei Fudo are in a soda truck heading north on Blue Hill Route in West Valley Area.”

“Hey, who is this? How did you get this frequency?” Mina demanded, fruitlessly trying to retrace the anonymous tip.

“Forget who it is. Let’s go!”

Mina scowled, but she turned onto the highway, and kept her eye out for soda trucks.

Akiza’s expression lightened when she spotted a soda delivery truck driving below them. “Mina! It’s that one! Follow that one! Get on the lower road now!”

“Hang on!” Mina exited their highway, dodging cars on her way up to the truck Akiza indicated.

Akiza looked down and smiled. “My mark is glowing! I’m sure of it! This is them. Can you get closer?” She unbuckled her seatbelt and stood up, hanging on behind Mina’s seat.

Mina changed lanes and pushed on the gas until Akiza could see into the driver’s seat.

“No way!” she gasped. “Nobody’s driving!”

“It must be remote control!”

Despite not having a human driver, the truck was driving itself rather well. It poured on the speed and shot ahead of Mina’s cruiser.

“Looks like whoever’s pulling the strings doesn’t want us to get our friends back,” Akiza growled angrily. She drew her duel disk out of her backpack. “Get as close to the back of the truck as possible.”

Mina did so smoothly so as not to throw Akiza overboard.

“I summon Rose Tentacles!” At Akiza’s command, her plant-like octopus monster emerged from a pool of white light. It lifted its leafy tentacles and fastened itself to the top of the truck.

///

“You’re going to fail, you know. Then you’ll have no choice but to join my team.”
“For the last time,” Yusei growled at the screen depicting their capturer. “Shut the hell up. You’re not helping.”

“Exactly, because there’s no helping you! Just accept that you’ll be on my team and-“

“Do I have to reach through that screen and punch you? What part of no do you not understand?!”

“Okay…” Lise frowned, her eyebrow twitching. “Making it really hard to concentrate.”

“Sorry, I can’t seem to get him to shut up or find the off button. Did you manage to make a connection?”

“I can’t tell. She’s too focused on something else right now,” Lise stood up.

“Well, our marks have been on and off. Maybe that’s a good sign?” Yusei suggested hopefully.

Lise smiled thinly at him.

_Thud!_

The noise came from the doors, and then was gone just as quickly.

“Do the doors look…slightly closer?” Yusei raised an eyebrow.

“Oh thank god. I wasn’t the only one who heard it,” Lise exhaled slowly. “Whataya think it was?” She rested her ear on one of the doors, her brow furrowed disbelievingly.

“Too loud to be just a rock.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” their capturer waved the concern away with his hand, however, his sweating forehead said otherwise.

Another loud thud clearly dented the doors about a foot, sending Lise colliding with Yusei like bowling pins.

“Ow, sorry,” Lise cringed apologetically as she and Yusei got up.

“That’s two bumps on my head now,” Yusei mused, massaging the tender spots with a grimace.

“Sorry,” Lise repeated, pulling him back to his feet.

There was another loud thud and the opening widened to reveal Akiza and Mina!

“Prison break!” Lise cheered, shoving the doors fully open.

Akiza laughed. “I hope you two ordered a rescue!”

“With extra please and thank you,” Yusei smiled too.

“Oh no you don’t!” At their kidnapper’s words, the truck sped up again. “If I can’t have you, no one can!”

Rose Tentacles was thrown off the truck, and was instantly destroyed.

“I’ve had enough of you!” Lise roared. Her arm glowed with red energy and unbidden orange electricity. In one punch she shattered the screen, cutting off the connection permanently. Her power faded and she turned sheepishly back to the others. “Sorry, was that okay? He was getting
on my nerves.”

“That was awesome,” Yusei stated.

“Quit flirting you two and get out!”

“Right, right.” The two of them donned their helmets and readied their bikes.

Mina was having trouble staying out of the way of the damaged doors. Their erratic swinging put her on edge, and she didn’t want Akiza to get skewered.

The doors broke free and Akiza reacted instinctively. She jumped past them, narrowly missing getting her arm sliced. Her duel disk and Mina were not so lucky.

Mina skidded to a grinding halt, and avoided getting hit by the doors and Akiza’s duel disk. She tried to contact security for more help, but her cruiser’s systems were down. A lone turbo duelist whistled by her without a chance for a second glance.

Akiza had landed safely in the back of the runaway truck. Not what she had planned, exactly, but better than hitting the pavement at top speed.

“Akiza, you okay?” Lise rushed to her side and helped pull her up.

“Yeah, just some bruised knees, but now we have a bigger problem. How am I gonna get off this thing?”

“You can ride with us,” Yusei said. “But I’d make it fast.”

Akiza’s face turned white. “Ya know what? I think I can make a jump.”

Yusei shook his head. “We don’t have time to argue!”

“And we prefer you alive,” Lise pulled Akiza firmly over to her runner. “Can Starfire handle the extra weight?”

“She should be fine, but will you?”

Lise tossed Akiza an extra helmet. “Absolutely.” Lise took a deep breath and slid aboard her runner. She didn’t have time to doubt herself. “You go first. We’ll be right behind you.” She dragged Akiza onto the bike behind her.

“You’d better be,” Yusei frowned with extreme dislike for their situation, but he accelerated and leapt out of the bed of the truck. His runner touched down, and he righted himself easily. “Come on Lise, you can make it,” he muttered under his breath.

A masked turbo duelist raced past Yusei at top speed. He was only able to catch the unusual shape of the runner’s frame before it raced out of sight.

“Who was that?”

///

“Okay, so I’ve been putting off getting my license. It sounded awesome at first, but being on a super-fast object while it’s going super-fast is too much! I can jump, really!” Akiza was sweating with panic.
“We’re going to make it, Akiza,” Lise aimed for the open doors of the truck and gunned the accelerator. “Just hang on tight!”

She and Akiza went shooting for the doors just as the truck hit the side rail. The back end of the truck lifted, giving the two girls a boost in their jump. The truck continued its descent into the ocean below, empty.

The back end of Lise’s runner hit first, and then the front wheel at full speed. “Okay, we made it. How’re you doing?”

“Better,” Akiza wheezed out. “That was less life threatening than I thought.”

“I can pull over if you-“

“I don’t zink so,” the turbo duelist that had passed by Yusei wheeled around to draw even with Lise and Akiza. “Desolee, but Elise Kururugi, I challenge you to a turbo duel!”

“What? Right now?” Akiza was aghast. “But we literally almost died!”

“Unfortunately, you don’t have a choice,” the mystery turbo duelist pulled ahead, activating their dueling gear. “Your duel disk was rigged beforehand. If you quit in duel mode, your runner will explode! You can’t back out now!”

Lise’s systems immediately responded. “Turbo duel mode engaged. Autopilot standing by.”

“Of course, you couldn’t challenge me like a normal person would,” Lise scowled.

The fields of New Domino City activated too. “A turbo duel is about to commence. Please vacate the combat mode immediately.”

Lise frowned slightly and followed the mystery turbo duelist challenging her onto their designated track. “Still, this should be interesting. Sorry Akiza, I can’t stop.”

“It’s okay!” Akiza was in awe, watching the challenger ride in front of Lise and the duel track spreading out before her. This is amazing. I’ve never seen a turbo duel like this before. For the first time, I’ll see it from Lise’s perspective.

Lise: 4000

Mystery Duelist: 4000

“I go first!” the challenger decreed. “I summon Sacred Knight Spearholder in defense position!”

(Sacred Knight Spear-Holder: Atk: 800 Def: 400)

“I set one card and end my turn.”

“Then it’s my turn,” Lise drew a card. “I summon out Phoenix Flare Chick!”

(Phoenix Flare Chick: Atk: 600 Def: 600)

“And I’m activating its special ability! I can send it straight to the graveyard to summon Phoenix Flare out to the field!”

(Phoenix Flare: Atk: 1900 Def: 1300)
“Now Phoenix Flare attack Sacred Knight Spear-Holder!”

Lise’s fiery bird opened its beak and unleashed a flurry of fireballs.

“I activate Floral Shield!” Lise’s opponent countered. “It negates your monster’s attack, and I draw one card.” Flowers erupted from the trap, creating a shield that blocked the fireballs.

“Nice play,” Lise mused. “I set three cards face down and end my turn.”

_They’re about equal on the first turn. _Akiza thought to her herself.

“My turn! I summon ‘orse of the Floral Knights!”

_(Horse of the Floral Knights: Atk: 400 Def: 800)_

“When I successfully ‘orse of the Floral Knights, I can draw one card from my deck,” the unknown turbo duelist explained. “Zhen I active zhe speed spell Overboost from my ‘and! Zhis turn I gain four speed counters, but my speed counters drop to one at zhe end phase.” Their duel runner sped up accordingly to the gain in speed energy.

“Four speed counters!” Akiza’s mouth dropped open.

“Guess I’m not dueling a novice,” Lise cracked a tiny smile.

“Next I activate zhe speed spell Speed Fusion! When I have four or more speed counters, I can special summon a fusion monster! I fuse Sacred Knight Spearholder and ‘orse of the Floral Knights! Appear; Centaur Mina!”

_(Centaur Mina: Atk: 2200 Def: 1600)_

“Centaur Mina attacks Phoenix Flare!”

The duelist’s purple haired centaur knight turned around and headed into battle against Lise’s fiery bird.

“I’m gonna have to turn your attack around with a trap of my own I like to call Swallow! This card negates your attack and then you take the damage I would have taken!” Lise countered.

“Ah, not so fast. Centaur Mina’s ability activates. Once per turn she can negate your card’s activation and effect, as well as place it face down again!”

“What?!”

Centaur Mina’s hooves flattened Lise’s trap back down to the field. The monster wheeled around behind Lise and Akiza before promptly vanquishing Lise’s monster.

_Lise: 3700_

_Mystery Duelist: 4000_

“Whoa!” Akiza exclaimed, caught off guard.

“You okay?”

“Yeah…” Akiza trailed off, lost in her thoughts. _This duel is different from a normal duel or even a psychic duel. It’s like the speed force is racing right through my heart._
“I set one card and end my turn. Due to Overboost’s effect, my speed counters decrease to one.”

“Then it’s my move!” Lise declared, drawing her next card. “I can special summon Inferno Wolf from my hand because you control monsters and I don’t anymore!”

(Inferno Wolf: Atk: 2100 Def: 600)

“Next I normal summon Solar Butterfly to the field, and because she was successfully summoned I can draw two more cards from my deck.”

(Solar Butterfly: Atk: 300 Def: 0)

“Now I think you know where this is going. Solar Butterfly tunes with Inferno Wolf to synchro summon… Fire Opal!”

(Fire Opal: Atk: 2200 Def: 1700)

“And while I’m on a roll, I think I’ll have Fire Opal attack your Centaur Mina! They may have the same attack points for now, but Fire Opal gains 500 more for every monster on your side of the field. That means she’s at 2700!”

“I play my trap Fleur Guard! One monster on my field is not destroyed by battle!”

Fire Opal’s blast of flames was halted by Centaur Mina’s shield.

“But you’ll still take the damage!”

Lise: 3700

Mystery Duelist: 3500

“I end my turn with a face down card. You’re up!”

“Incredible,” Akiza murmured. “They’re both completely stopping each other’s attacks. It’s like they’ve met before.”

“This person isn’t like the others.”

“Huh?” Akiza was pulled out of her quiet reverie by Lise’s words.

“They’re acting completely different than the assholes who kidnapped us. For one thing, they’re enjoying the duel.”

“My turn! I summon the tuner monster Fleur Synchron!”

(Fleur Synchron: Atk: 400 Def: 200)

The little orange and pink sprouting flower monster popped onto the field.

“I smell an ace monster on its way,” Lise said.

“That’s not good,” Akiza bit her lip.

“Level two Fleur Synchron tunes level six Centaur Mina! I synchro summon Chavelier de Fleur!”

(Chevalier de Fleur: Atk: 2700 Def: 2300)
Lise smiled to herself. “Knight of Flowers. Very coolio.”

“When Fleur Synchron is used to synchro summon, I can special summon one level four or below monster in my hand! I summon Apprentice Knight!”

(Apprentice Knight: Atk: 1000 Def: 500)

“I have Swallow on my field still, and Fire Opal’s ability means she has a thousand extra attack points,” Lise told Akiza in a low voice. “This duelist doesn’t seem the type to forget that. He must have more to his plan.” She smiled. “I can’t wait to see more.”

Akiza’s eyes widened in surprise. Lise is actually enjoying this?

“Chevalier de Fleur attacks Fire Opal!”

“What? But its attack points are lower!”

“Not if I play my quick play spell Rush Recklessly. Chevalier de Fleur gains an extra 700 attack points!”

(Chevalier de Fleur: Atk: 2700 à3400)

“I play my trap Swallow! Now your attack is negated and you take the damage I would have!”

“I was waiting for zhat! I activate Chevalier de Fleur’s aility! She can negate and destroy one of your trap or spell cards!” The duelist’s monster sliced through Lise’s trap, and then through Fire Opal.

“Well done,” Lise admitted. “But now I know how your monster’s ability works! I activate the trap Call of the Haunted! That means Fire Opal returns for an encore!”

Lise’s opponent only seemed mildly amused. “I set two cards and end my turn. Well done, Elise Kururugi.”

“Huh?” Both Akiza and Lise wore identical looks of confusion.

The duelist hit the brakes and skidded to a stop before them.

“Knew it,” Lise chuckled softly. She too slowed down.

“Wait, Lise, don’t! We’ll be blown to pieces!”

“Somehow, I seriously doubt that,” Lise braked to a stop right in front of her opponent.

“We’re…not dead.”

“It was a fake. Who are you?”

The duelist stood and removed their helmet. Long blonde hair previously hidden by headgear fell loose. The duelist turned to the girls with kind, light green eyes. “My name is Sherry LeBlanc, and I was testing your abilities.”

Akiza blinked, grounded by her continuous shock. “Another female turbo duelist?”

“Desolee about the lie, but I’m ’ere to recruit you, Elise Kururugi. I don’t want any other team to claim you!”
“Crow!” Yusei had driven right past his friend on the way back to the city. Both of them wheeled around and halted beside each other.

“Yusei, you’re all right!” Crow grinned widely, and quickly signaled Jack, who joined them shortly. “I mean, you are okay, right?”

“Well, I wasn’t. I am now. Did Akiza tell you what was going on?”

“She told us you and Lise were kidnapped, mate,” Jack said, his violet eyes darkened with concern.

“We were. Akiza found us and helped break us out.”

“Um, us?” Jack canted his head to the side in confusion.

“Yeah, us. Lise should be right behind…me…” Yusei’s face went pale. The street behind him was completely empty and silent. “I swear to god I thought she was right behind me!”

“Dude, how could you lose your girlfriend?”

“You forget to cherish her,” Crow said, nodding matter of factly, pointing at his friend.

Yusei face palmed. “That- It’s not- You- Just help me find Lise and Akiza, okay?”

“Sure, I’m off the clock now.”

“Another needle in the haystack. Great,” Jack groaned, but he followed his friends anyway.

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Lise blinked in total shock and confusion. “Claim me? Uh, should I be flattered or freaked out?” Her face was a light shade of pink.

“I want you to be on my team for the WRGP,” Sherry paused and smirked dramatically. “And win it all.”

“What?”

“I don’t need an answer today. Zhis is a meet and greet. Let’s ‘ave fun,” Sherry put her helmet back on and sped away.

“Hang on!” Lise turned to her friend. “If you want to get off, now’s your chance.”

“No way, I want to see your turbo duel through to the end. That and I don’t trust this girl,” Akiza frowned, her brows drawn together with determination.

Lise smiled, understanding Akiza’s need to stay. “All right then. Hold on tight!” She gunned her engine and they flew forward once again.

“I knew she’d come,” Sherry grinned.

_Lise: 3700_
“It’s my turn!” Lise said and drew her card. “I summon out Smoke Raven to my field!”

(Smoke Raven: Atk: 800 Def: 1000)

“Now Fire Opal, attack Chevalier de Fleur!”

“Trap card open! One Dream allows me to prevent my monster from being destroyed in battle by sending Apprentice Knight to the graveyard!”

Akiza gasped. *A great move. With Fire Opal’s ability, because Apprentice Knight leaves the field Opal’s attack drops by 500, so Sherry’s monster will survive and Lise’s won’t!*

“Say *au revoir* to your monster, Elise!”

“How about no? I activate Phoenix Flare’s ability from the graveyard! I can remove it from play to prevent the destruction of a fire monster on my field! You can guess what my Opal is!”

“You ‘ave an answer to everyzhing!” Sherry sounded angry, but she was smiling.

“As far as you know, Sherry,” Lise grinned. “But first Smoke Raven cuts its attack in half and attacks you directly!”

*Lise: 3700*

*Sherry: 3100*

“I end my turn with a face down.”

Sherry observed the field carefully. *Elise knows Chevalier de Fleur’s ability destroys a card per turn. Is she bluffing about a strategy with those face down cards, or baiting me?*

Akiza was confused. She had hoped Lise would do more. From where she was sitting, it didn’t look like luck was in her friend’s favor. “Lise, what’re you trying to do?”

Lise smiled. “Chevalier de Fleur’s ability can only be used once per turn! What’s your plan?”

“Keep trying to surprise me and you’ll find out. I have a better strategy than you! I play my trap card Closed Gate! Until the end of my next turn, you can’t activate spell or trap cards!”

*Amazing! She totally shut down Lise’s strategy! She’s going to lose a ton of lifepoints!*

“Don’t worry, Akiza.”

“I draw, and Chevalier de Fleur attacks Smoke Raven!”

*Lise: 1800*

*Sherry: 3100*

“This is bad,” Akiza winced.

“We’re fine.”

“I’ll end my turn with a facedown card,” Sherry smirked. “You might be able to last two more rounds, but my Chevalier de Fleur will survive longer than your Fire Opal.”
She’s right. Lise looks pretty stuck to me.

“All right, time to up my game. I draw! I summon Fire Rose to the field in attack mode!”

(Fire Rose: Atk: 1000 Def: 1500)

Lise’s new monster looked like a tiny fairy nestled on a rose made of flames. It looked like the current from the winds should blow the small monster away.

“Fire Rose! Attack Chevalier de Fleur!”

“But it’ll lose! What are you thinking?!”

Lise winced as her lifepoints decreased. “Strategizing.”

Lise: 100

Sherry: 3100

“Please tell me you’re not aware of what you just did!” Akiza paused in her panic. Lise is so close to losing now. Why is she smiling?

“I activate Fire Rose’s ability! She isn’t destroyed and I can special summon a monster from my deck with attack equal to or less than the damage I just took! I special summon Aurora of Chemical Fire!”

(Aurora of Chemical Fire: Atk: 700 Def: 800)

This monster looked like a plain, black pot with oil in it. Like an old fashioned candle that had melted.

“Anozher synchro monster on zhe way? I see. You will do anyzhing to synchro summon.”

“You better believe it! Aurora of Chemical Fire give Fire Rose a tune up! Open the gates to hell and unleash your fury! I synchro summon… Fire Demon!” At Lise’s words the pot came alive with a rainbow of colored fire. The rainbow changed to deep red and engulfed Fire Rose to give birth to the new synchro monster.

(Fire Demon: Atk: 2000 Def: 1900)

“My little friend here can half the attack of one of your monsters once per turn, and who better than your Chevalier de Fleur? Now it has 1350 attack points!”

“I activate a trap; Compulsory Evacuation Device! Zhis card sends one monster back to your hand, but your monsters are synchros, so zhey will go back to zhe extra deck instead! I banish your Fire Opal back to zhe extra deck!”

“You saved yourself from a loss, not from hurt! Fire Demon, attack Chevalier de Fleur!”

Lise: 100

Sherry: 2450

Finally, Sherry’s ace monster went down in smoke.

Lise beamed with pride, her smile wide and smug. “Your turn.”
Akiza’s eyes widened. *Lise is having fun even though she’s in the middle of a fight.* Her gaze extended to Sherry. *So is she. This is different than my duels with Lise in the past. Against Crow, Jack, and Yusei too. Even against Sherry, who she’s only met for the first time, Lise is dueling with everything she has in her heart.*

“*Elise,* even though you destroyed Chevalier de Fleur, you’ve left yourself wide open at 100 lifepoints. With Speed World 2, if I have four or more speed counters and a speed spell I can deal 800 points of damage for every speed spell in my ‘and. I have five speed counters, and zero cards in my ‘and. Your fate depends on my draw. The instant I draw a speed spell, you lose.”

“Oh, that’s right!” Akiza remembered.

Lise scowled deeply. Sherry wasn’t done yet.

“*Elise,* you’re past the Turbo Duel safety line. You ride side by side with death in the world of speed.”

*World of speed.* Akiza let Sherry’s words wash over her. The speed and the wind rushed past like a familiar dream wrapping itself around her.

“My turn!” Sherry drew with a flourish. The girls waited with baited breath and then; “I summon Sacred Knight Shield Bearer in defense position.”

(*Sacred Knight Shield Bearer: Atk: 800 Def: 1300*)

*It wasn’t a speed spell.* Akiza breathed a sigh of relief.

“I activate Sacred Knight Shield Bearer’s effect! By removing a Sacred Knight in my Graveyard from play, I can draw one card from my deck!”

“She can draw again!”

“Oh boy,” Lise bit her lip in anticipation.

Sherry smirked and drew her next card. Her smile fell. “I set one card and end my turn.”

“Close one,” Lise murmured.

“I had many chances, but fate abandoned me,” Sherry was smiling despite her temporary poor luck. “I want you on my team even more!”

Akiza frowned indignantly. “Hey!”

“*Elise,* why do you duel?” Sherry ignored Akiza. “Are you entering the WRGP alongside your friends?”

“I haven’t really made any concrete plans if that’s what you’re asking.”

“That means you have nothing.”

*Why do we duel?* Akiza asked herself, mouth open as if she wanted to reply too but couldn’t quite find the words.

“What’s your point?” Lise demanded.

“I have a goal. I have a ‘uge goal called revenge.”
Revenge? Lise’s eyebrows went up with sympathy. *I know what wanting that feels like…*

Sherry had the same sadness in her eyes that Lise did. “Zhe LeBlanc family was in zhe card business for ages. I was zhe only daughter. I ‘ad a ‘appy life wizh my kind parents. ‘Owever, my parents’ smiles soon vanished from zheir faces. A corporation was trying to buy zhe company zhat my fazher managed. My fazher refused. ‘E gave me a teddy bear zhat I cherished. Zhen, one night I ‘eard fighting and gunfire. I went to my fazher’s office and found my mozher and fazher dead in zheir own pools of blood. Our trusted butler, Mizoguchi, got me out of zhe ‘ouse before I too could be killed. Since I survived, zhe company chased after me. I fled around zhe world and learned zhat a certain organization was behind zhe company.” Sherry’s story paused for a moment. When she spoke again it was like she had laced her voice with deadly venom. “It was Yliaster.”

“Yliaster! I heard that name before. I think my dad and uncle both mentioned it.”

“I’ve heard of it too,” Akiza said. “Sayer said they were one of the Arcadia Movement’s enemies.”

“Yliaster is a legendary organization zhat surpasses the ideas of good and evil. Zhey will do anyzhing to eliminate who gets in zheir way. Like my family!”

“Sherry…” Lise felt her opponent’s pain more than she could say.

Akiza was silent with empathy.

“I began to understand why zhey’re chasing me,” Sherry said. “*Elise*, ‘elp me. Yliaster is pulling zhe strings of zhe upcoming WRGP.”

“What?”

“I want to win zhe WRGP so zhat I can get closer to zhem! I need to know what Yliaster is planning to do! I want to know why my parents ‘ad to be killed! Zhat’s why I need you, *Elise*!”

Akiza couldn’t sit idly by any longer. “But we already have a team to fight alongside with! Lise isn’t gonna just abandon Yusei, Jack and Crow! What do you-“

“I didn’t ask you!”

“Wait a second! You don’t know anything about Lise!”

Lise watched their exchange, unusually quiet.

“Yes I do!”

“Huh?” That took Akiza aback.

“After just zhese few turns, we now understand each ozher! Zhe speed and wind communicate to me everyzhing I need to know about *Elise*’s ‘eart. And mine as well. Zhat’s somezhing only turbo duelists can understand! Just like zhis speed, I’m battling at the edge. *Elise*, don’t you also desire zhis type of dueling? If we battle togezher, you’ll be able to find a goal!”

“I uh…” Lise wasn’t sure how to respond.

“I don’t zhink it’s a bad proposal,” Sherry’s smile had returned. “Zhink carefully. It’s your turn.”

*What’s with her?*

“My turn!” Lise was able to calm herself by focusing on the duel. Sherry’s offer had rattled her a
bit more than she would ever care to admit. “I summon Solar Butterfly in attack mode!”

(Solar Butterfly: Atk: 300 Def: 0)

“When Solar Butterfly is successfully summoned, I can draw two cards from my deck! Now I’ll have Fire Demon attack your Sacred Knight Shield Bearer!”

Sherry braced herself for the attack. “I play my trap Liberty at Last! When a monster on my field is destroyed by battle, all monsters on the field return to our decks!”

“That’s not good.” Akiza commented dryly.

Lise frowned, but she wasn’t backing down just yet. “I activate the effect of Speed World 2! By lowering my speed counters by seven, I can draw a card! Then I lay three cards face down to end my turn.”

*Lise’s field is wide open. If Sherry draws a speed spell or a monster next turn, Lise will lose.*

Akiza’s brow shook with worry for her friend, her almond shaped eyes wide.

“My turn! I summon Sacred Knight Joan!”

(Sacred Knight Joan: Atk: 1900 Def: 1300)

“Oh no! A monster!”

“Due to Sacred Knight Joan’s effect, it loses 300 attack points when it attacks. Sacred Knight Joan attacks you directly!”

“I play my trap Synchro Spirits! I can remove from play a synchro monster in my graveyard to special summon its synchro material monsters to my field! I remove Fire Opal from play and special summon Solar Butterfly and Inferno Wolf in defense mode!”

Sherry’s monster ended up slicing through Inferno Wolf with her blade instead of Lise herself.

“Interesting,” Sherry remarked, not unpleased. “I end my turn.”

*She’s incredible. Such fast offense and defense. These two are... Is Sherry right? Does a turbo duel allow two people to understand each other’s souls? That means Lise knows what’s in her heart. It’s probably true. In the speed and wind, Lise battled her and felt her anger, screams, pain and joy! Just like whenever she turbo duels with the others! Trudge, Jack, Crow, Kalin, Yusei; are they all connected in a world I’m not a part of? Can you only get this feeling from other turbo duelists? I had no idea there was so much power from dueling like this...*

“My turn, I draw!” Lise cracked the tiniest of smiles. “I play the speed spell Tremendous Fire! Because I have at least two speed counters now, this card gives me the power to destroy two cards on the field!”

“I see, trying to destroy Sacred Knight Joan,” Sherry smirked. *But if an effect destroys Joan, I can add one spell card in my graveyard to my hand. A speed spell.*

“Might want to double check there, Sherry. I’m destroying my Butterfly and my other set face down card.”

“What? Your Butterfly?!”

“That’s right, but I’m negating that effect with my other face down. It goes by the name of Phoenix
Blaze!

“Merde!” Sherry swore, furious.

Lise laughed. “Swearing means I’m on a roll! With Phoenix Blaze, if two or more of my cards are going to be destroyed, I can negate the destruction and then special summon Crimson Starburst Dragon to the field from my extra deck!” Lise held up her ace monster’s card with pride.

Sherry’s scowl of frustration turned to confusion. The bridge running over their dueling track gave way, revealing another enormous truck about to flatten all three girls into pancakes!

“Damn…” Akiza murmured in horror.

“Shit!” Lise’s mouth dropped open.

She and Yusei’s former captor stood atop the bridge. He wore a sneer and was shadowed by several men. “You won’t be entering the WRGP, and neither will Yusei Fudo! This is your punishment for defying me, Elizabeth Kururugi!”

“Now what?!” Lise growled, furious that two other people were going to get flattened alongside her. “I don’t think I’m powerful enough to stop it in time!”

“Leave it to me, Lise!” Akiza snatched Lise’s card from her.

“Whoa, whoa, what’re you doing?!” Lise shouted, half of her attention on Akiza and the other half on the looming truck.

“I’ll summon it!”

“It’s not exactly the right time to be continuing the duel!”

Akiza ignored Lise’s panic and readied the card. She had to summon it at just the right moment. “This is all I can do for you right now. I summon Crimson Starburst Dragon!”

Lise’s ace monster took to the skies. Sherry was right beneath the truck seconds before it was going to hit her. She closed her eyes in anticipation, but instead of colliding with her she sailed on. Crimson Starburst Dragon had stopped the truck with its body, Akiza’s psychic powers making it tangible. She and Lise followed Sherry, unharmed.

“A psychic duelist!” Sherry realized.

Crimson Starburst Dragon moved out from under the truck, following its friends. The truck on its back slipped off, smashing into the track, and sending shattered glass everywhere. Both Lise’s and Sherry’s duel runners canceled the duel due to the accident. Even though they were safe, both girls braked to a stop.

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“Damn,” the company guy and his three goons jumped down from the edge of the bridge in disappointment.

They didn’t get very far though. Mizoguchi, Sherry’s butler, Yusei, Crow, and Jack had seen the whole thing and were far from pleased.

“This asshole tried to drop a truck on Lise and Akiza,” Yusei said darkly, cracking his knuckles. “I want the one in the middle.”
“All yours,” Crow did the same.

Jack acknowledged Mizoguchi beside them with a nod. He seemed to be in the same boat as them. “We’ll introduce ourselves when we’re finished.”

“Excellent idea,” Mizoguchi agreed.

Their four opponents were already either crying or begging for their faces to be spared.

///

Akiza dismounted from Lise’s runner. She and Sherry were still staring each other down.

The boys had made quick work of the attackers and joined the girls on their damaged piece of track.

Yusei, Jack and Crow parked near Akiza.

“What’s going on?” Crow whispered into the silence.

“Sh!” Akiza frowned at him.

Mizoguchi parked next to Sherry, bowed respectfully to her, and stared at Lise. He was enormous, easily just as tall if not taller than Jack. He wore a crisp suit, and his runner was just as refined. His silver eyes were calm, but hardened by life. His helmet hid his gray hair, but not his gaze. “Elizabeth Kururugi. I like the look in your eyes.”

Sherry smiled. “I do too. Well, Elise I suspect you would have attacked Sacred Knight Joan with Crimson Starburst Dragon, and then Solar Butterfly would have attacked me directly. A valiant effort, leaving me with 1850 lifepoints left. You didn’t beat me yet.”

“Yeah,” Lise nodded. “The whole thing would have come down to your next draw, Sherry.”

Sherry smiled pleasantly and put her fingers to her deck. The air was so filled with tension, it could easily be cut with a knife.


Akiza flushed bright magenta and gasped loudly in her embarrassment.

“Au revoir!” Sherry called as she and Mizoguchi left.

The tension in the atmosphere left with them.

Lise slid off her duel runner right into Yusei’s arms. “I’m so sorry! I thought you were right behind me! I’m really sorry! How did all this happen?”

“How did it happen?” Lise took a long breath. “Today has been rather long and stressful. Not exactly the relaxing date we wanted.”

“Relaxing is overrated!” Crow butted in. “Who was that?!?”

“Sherry LeBlanc. She’s a very interesting woman,” Lise smiled and scratched her head. “I’m, like, 70 percent sure I just went on a date with Sherry instead of you.”
“You’ve got more game than Yusei does,” Crow joked.

“Hey-oh!” Lise and Crow high-fived while Yusei sighed.

He crossed his arms moodily. “I guess I deserved that. All this did happen because I had to answer that stupid call.”

“How about you skip one of them in exchange for a movie date at home next time?”

“Deal,” Yusei smiled gratefully.

“I just hope Sherry didn’t notice I wasn’t really strategizing. Dueling her was amazing though!”

“You weren’t?!” Akiza swooped at Lise like a vulture that had spotted a dying animal.

“I improvised,” Lise laughed sheepishly, her palms out in surrender at her friend. “I was having so much fun I wasn’t thinking; just dueling, ya know?”

“Of course,” Jack nodded. “All great duelists improvise at times. Just like yours truly, the master of faster.”

“I’m just glad you two are safe,” Yusei said, ignoring Crow and Jack starting in on an argument about whether improvising was really ‘the king’s way of doing things. Yusei slipped his hand into Lise’s and kissed her temple. Lise flushed red and grinned.

Akiza smiled, but her smile fell slightly. She hung back a little from the others, watching them. She felt separated from them, just a little, but that wouldn’t last.

*I want to know this world. By becoming the wind among the speed, I’ll be able to understand my friends’ hearts. But I’ll have to be a turbo duelist to enter the world of speed.*
So sorry this chapter took so long to be released! I had finals, college is super hard, and I am currently obsessed with the new show Miraculous Ladybug! It is amazing in Korean, French, and English! I NEED MORE EPISODES! Well, while that sits on the back burner, I can write more chapters for you guys! Hope you enjoy this one!

Also, feel free to check my art out on DA. I should be posting some new Ladybug fanart on there soon. My username is yusfishfulgirl. Send me a comment!

“Review the laws of the road, and then the specific laws for duel runners for your written test,” the dueling coach explained to his students. “I know it isn’t for a week, but it never hurts to start early. Cramming will get you nowhere, so I suggest you get to it. Class dismissed.”

Akiza got up from her desk and started to shove her books into her bag. Her red duel academy uniform designated for girls was a tiny dot in the sea of blue boy duel academy uniforms. She was the only girl attempting to get her turbo dueling license that quarter, making Akiza feel even more isolated than usual.

It reminded Akiza of her lonely days before the Arcadia Movement. One class she had experienced a panic attack so intense that she had to run to the bathroom in order to calm herself down alone. She didn’t want her power to get out of control and hurt anyone. When she had been calm enough to leave, class had ended. The coach had sympathetically given her a copy of the notes, and defended her from the inevitable onslaught of teasing and bullying afterward. She could see the pity in his eyes every time he did though. Akiza hated it. She hated feeling so weak. Now she wanted her turbo dueling license more than ever, and this stupid class was part of the journey there. If she could get through this, then she could get through the rest. Just one more week to go.

A trio of boys bumped into Akiza. Their snickers as they left her to pick up her scattered books made it clear they had done it on purpose.

Akiza sighed and restocked her bag. She was the last to leave the classroom, aside from the coach who was in the process of finding the right key to lock the door behind him.

In the parking lot, Akiza was met with an unusual sight. “Mina?”

The chief of security offered a minuscule smile for Akiza. Her normally cheerful gold eyes were slightly downcast. “Hi Akiza. Your parents said I could find you here today.”

“Is something wrong? Did something bad happen again?!”

“Well, yes and no,” Mina fidgeted, tugging on her sleeves. “I discussed this with your parents and they agreed that you were old enough to make your own decision on the matter.”

“What matter? Mina, you’re scaring me.” Akiza clutched her book bag to her chest.

Mina took a deep breath and clasped her hands. “We found Sayer. He’s been arrested and is being
held in a maximum security cell in the facility.”

Akiza gasped, her emotions roiling inside her like turbulent waves in an ocean storm. “He’s alive!”

“Yes,” Mina nodded as if it took her great effort. “Do you want to see him?”

Akiza’s yes froze on her lips. This was the man who had helped her when she needed it most. He had taken her in and given her a home. He had helped her begin to learn how to control her powers. He was also the man who had murdered her best friend’s mother, Misty’s brother, and countless others. He had tortured Lise and Fish, and lied to Akiza. He had even controlled her and tried to kill her new friends. All that just to use her as a soldier to take over the world.

“I-I need a minute,” Akiza stammered nervously. With shaking hands she pulled out her cell phone and dialed Lise’s number.

///

“And then sprite came pouring out of Tank’s nose he was laughing so hard!” Rally stammered out in between gasps for breath he was laughing so hard.

“That is the last time I ever made nachos,” Nervin smiled widely. It was a stark change from his worrisome ways in the past.

Blitz shook his head. “And I was the one who tripped.”

“But I got a mouthful of nachos!” Tank smiled. “And a burning nose from all the sprite up my nostrils.”

Jack, Crow, Yusei, and Lise were laughing almost as hard as Rally. Tears streamed down Rally’s face he was laughing so hard.

“It’s just really great things are looking up,” Rally said once he’d finally calmed down. “We managed to find decent work and we have a roof over our heads. All thanks to you guys.”

Yusei shook his head. “We just cleared the way. The rest you all did on your own. It can only get better from here.”

“Not to be a wet blanket, but making improvements is just like renovating a house; it always looks worse before it looks better,” Lise said. She smiled for a small second. “I’m really glad you guys are doing great though. I don’t think I’ve ever seen Nervin so relaxed.”

“I didn’t know you could relax, man,” Crow punched Nervin’s shoulder lightly.

Jack chuckled and ruffled Rally’s curly hair. “You all seem a little less stressed. I’m sorry we haven’t been around to say hello lately.”

“Aw, don’t worry about it,” Blitz waved his hand dismissively. “You’ve been busy, and so have we.”

“It’s just nice to see you,” Rally wrapped Jack into a hug to let him know all was forgiven.

Jack looked like he was going to burst with happiness.

“Why won’t you answer me?! Hello? This is your cell phone!” An extremely loud voice cried.

“What the hell?”
“Sorry,” Lise got up, her face red with embarrassment. “That’s my ringtone,” she added just as her phone yelled “whattaya think you’re just not gonna answer me? You’re keep me in your pocket like some dirty little-” She answered as the dialogue ringtone was beeped out. “Hello?”


“Akiza! Good to hear from you,” Lise went into the hallway so she wouldn’t be distracted by conversation. “Everything okay?”

“Well…no, not really.”

“What is it? What do you need? I can be there in 15 minutes if you need me.”

“I-I’m not sure,” Akiza took a deep breath. “M-Mina said they found S-Sayer. She’s offering me the chance to see him. I…I’m not really sure what to do.”

Lise’s free hand opened and closed into a fist. Her teeth were clenched so hard she couldn’t speak.

“Lise, I know how you feel about Sayer, but I’m not sure how I feel at all. I’m just afraid if I never go to see him that I’ll always regret it.”

“Are you afraid of Sayer, Akiza?” Lise unclenched her teeth with a massive effort.

“I don’t know. I just…I need a friend to be with me. I have to do this.”

“Okay,” Lise took a deep breath. “Where do you want me to meet you?”

Mina’s muffled voice carried through the call. Akiza reiterated more clearly though. “The facility. How soon can you get there? Mina will drive me.”

“A half hour at most if there’s traffic. See you then,” Lise hung up and dragged her hand down the skin of her face wearily.

“Everything okay?” Rally tugged on Lise’s shirt. He and Yusei stood worryingly in the hallway.

Lise knelt down to Rally’s height. “I’m not sure, but my friend Akiza needs me right now. I’m sorry, but I’ve gotta go.”

“I understand,” Rally hugged Lise. “It’ll be okay. Call us more often, okay? I miss you.”

“I miss you too, Rally,” Lise hugged him back, and ruffled his hair. “And I will, promise.”

“Is Akiza okay?” Yusei asked quietly after Rally returned to the living room, his blue eyes almost black in the slightly darker hallway.

“Sayer’s been arrested,” Lise said.

“They found him?! I thought he’d been killed by Misty’s immortal.”

“Me too,” Lise nodded. “Mina told Akiza they had him in custody. Akiza wants to see him, and she wants my help.”

“Then go.”

Lise looked up at him in surprise. “I thought – you know Sayer and I don’t mix well. What if-“
“You can keep it together. Akiza needs you. You’ll be there for each other. Like Rally said, you’ll be okay,” Yusei pushed her hair out of her face and kissed her forehead.

Lise’s shoulders lowered and she wrapped her arms around Yusei. He’d dissolved at least some of the tension she’d been feeling ever since Akiza’s call. “Thanks, I’ll text you when I’m on my way home.”

“No,” Yusei shook his head. “Call me the second you leave the facility. I wanna know you guys are all right.”

“You got it,” Lise smiled and ran out the front door.

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“Lise!” Akiza threw her arms around her friend the second she saw her. “I’m so glad you’re here!”

“I wouldn’t be yet. Remember; this is the man I hate the most.”

Akiza nodded and pulled back. She played with the hem of her uniform skirt. She looked tired as well as nervous, like the news of Sayer’s arrest had accelerated the hours of her day to twice as fast.

“Hey, I’m here for you,” Lise took one of Akiza’s hands and squeezed. “We can go whenever you’re ready.”

Mina walked into her office to join the girls. She handed them each a mug of coffee. “This is gonna be really hard, but I’ll have men on standby in case Sayer tries anything.”

“Thanks Mina. We appreciate it,” Lise said. She put her mug down on Mina’s desk. She wasn’t in the mood for coffee.

Akiza sucked her coffee down like it was an elixir that would cure her problems. Unfortunately the coffee wasn’t that good, but she needed the boost. “Yeah thanks. I’m still shaky about this.”

“Hopefully this will turn out to be a healing experience and not a hurtful one,” Mina smiled weakly and held the door open.

Akiza went out first, still claspng Lise’s hand like it was a life preserver. They waited for Mina to close her office door before following her.

Mina chatted nervously about nothing as she lead the girls downstairs. Akiza and Lise ignored her, allowing her words to fill what would have been silence. Mina took them outside and down to a lower section, beneath the main roads.

Lise noted that the sky looked as stormy as she felt. She also knew that just by looking at Akiza’s face that her feelings were nothing in comparison to Akiza’s.

“Hey, this is the detention facility Yusei and I were held at,” Lise realized as Mina was showing her clearance information to the guards.

Mina giggled nervously, pulling at her shirt collar. “Um yes, that’s correct. Sorry about that. Should’ve warned you.”

“Yeah, I’ll say. What section is Sayer being kept in?”

“A private one in the basement. We didn’t want him influencing anyone he could come in contact
with. His meals are delivered robotically three times a day.”

“I see,” Lise said.

“Almost there. Last elevator.”

Akiza was practically hyperventilating she was so nervous. Her hands were covered in sweat and she was shaking.

“It’ll be okay, Akiza,” Lise said comfortingly.

“No, I don’t think it will be!!” Akiza cried. “I was this sad, hurtful, mean person when I was with Sayer! He took me in and molded me into this malleable soldier he could control! I don’t know if that means I’ll revert back to who I was back then or if I’m afraid of him and all that he’s done! I don’t know if I can do this!”

“You can,” Lise hugged her friend. “No matter what happens you’re not alone. I’m here for you and the guys will be too if you want them to be.”

Akiza was still shaking, but her breathing returned to normal. “All right. You’re right.”

Mina patted Akiza’s shoulder. “We’re here.”

The three girls walked forward to the door. At Mina’s command the door was lifted like the maw of a giant beast. The light inside the single person cell was dim, revealing very little.

“Okay,” Akiza took a deep breath. “I want to go in by myself.”

“What? But I thought-”

“It’s not that I don’t want you there. I really do, Lise. I just need to do this alone. You’ve made your peace with Sayer, but I haven’t. If he tries to hurt me, I’ll let you know.”

“Fine,” Lise inhaled and exhaled. She pointed at Akiza. “But if he does anything more than talking to you I will break his legs.”

“Good to know,” Akiza said. Before she could second guess herself she walked forward. The door closed behind her with a finalizing snap. She walked forward, hoping she sounded more confident than she felt. “Sayer? It’s me, Akiza.”

She could hear a clanking noise in the semi-darkness. “Oh really?” The simpering voice of the man who had been her surrogate father echoed in the chamber. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I’ve come here to show you that I’m not the same person I was under you, and I’m not afraid of you!” Akiza declared boldly.

“Hmm,” Sayer’s voice bounced off the walls ominously. The clanking sound grew louder and louder and Sayer lunged at Akiza.

Akiza screamed and back pedaled quickly. She fell on her butt, and Sayer stopped just short of her. The chains binding him to the ground didn’t go any further. Sayer laughed cruelly, and sat down. “I’d say by the looks of things you are very afraid of me.”

Akiza groaned and got back up to her feet. “No! I-I don’t want to be afraid of you! You ruined me!”
Sayer laughed at her again, lounging on the floor in his chains. Somehow even in his ratty prison garb and burned face he was still intimidating. Despite sitting while Akiza stood, she felt powerless. “I ruined you? Akiza, I made you into the best psychic delist you could be.”

“No, you made me into a violent person who enjoyed hurting people! You turned me into a monster!”

Sayer frowned at her moodily. “If you’re going to whine at me like a petulant child, I suggest you leave. You are not blameless here.”

“What’re you talking about?”

Sayer rolled his eyes and extended his hand in a wide sweeping gesture. “Akiza, you silly child, look at you. You’re surrounded by friends, and doing well in duel academy I assume. Yet here you are, trying to confront me to alleviate yourself of blame.”

“That’s not true!”

“Isn’t it?” Sayer raised an eyebrow. “Akiza, you never had to obey me. You acquiesced to my beliefs and desires. You’ve always needed someone to guide you, so I supplied your need. The choice to do as you were told was yours and yours alone. You share just as much blame as I do.”

“But…But I…” Akiza collapsed to her knees. Is he telling the truth? Maybe he’s right. Maybe I am truly a destructive, cruel person. I thought I was stronger, but I’m just as weak as I’ve always been… Tears slipped down her cheeks. “But that’s not me anymore! I don’t want to be like that! Like you!”

“No one can hide from who they really are, especially you!” Sayer sneered, crossing his legs. “Your true self is just like me. Accept that and rebuild the Arcadia Movement with me.”

“What? How?”

“I plan to play my part and get out early for good behavior. We’ll have to wait, but I prefer to at least start my plan looking like a model citizen. Jail time will serve as a rehabilitation in the eyes of the public.”

Akiza shook her head. “No, I won’t help you.”

“Why? Will mommy and daddy miss their little monster? Will your so called friends? You need me Akiza, you always have since the day I saved you.”

Akiza stared sadly at this man she had once believed to be her savior. True, he had given her a home when she’d needed it most, but this pitiful shell of a human before her was nothing like the father figure she had previously adored. He was burned inside and out. The world had treated him so cruelly that he honestly believed that the violent future he had planned for the Arcadia Movement was the only way forward. Sayer had lied to her about the Arcadia Movement’s purpose and used her powers to recruit people as well as hurt others. Most of all was his careless murdering of those he deemed useless or in his way.

“You’re right, Sayer,” Akiza finally said, wiping away tears even though more kept coming. She got back up to her feet. “There is a cruel, horrible side to me. And maybe I do need guidance every once in a while, but who doesn’t? I don’t have all the answers, but I do know that I’m never following you again.” Her almond shaped eyes closed as she turned away. “I think I understand you better now, Sayer. Like me, the world hurt you more times than you can count, but you’re also not like me. There’s just nothing inside you, nothing at all. The world you want has nothing in it.
too, but I want a future that’s bright. I’m sorry Sayer, but this is good bye.”

“What?” Sayer popped up to his feet, the chains clattering loudly as he struggled against them. “Don’t you walk away from me! I created you! I made you! You owe me! You-“

The door opened just long enough for Akiza to walk back out. It closed like an exhaling creature, releasing a relaxed breath after trouble passed.

Lise ran up immediately. “Are you okay? What happened? What did he say? Are you still you? Do you need me to get something for you?”

Akiza wordlessly pulled Lise into a warm hug. The ordeal she had been through was short, but it felt like a lifetime had passed. “Thanks so much for being here,” Akiza choked out. “I needed the extra strength. I’ve been so pathetic lately.”

“No, you’ve been strong in your own way, and there’s nothing wrong with that,” Lise corrected. “But it’s okay to not be strong when shit goes down. That’s what we’re here for.”

“We?” Akiza let go of Lise and cocked her head in confusion.

“I hope you don’t mind. I called the twins. I figured they’d wanna help you out. Leo and Luna are waiting for us upstairs.”

“You’re the best,” Akiza smiled widely.

“You look…better,” Mina said tentatively. She clasped her hands. “How did it go?”

“Not well, but I think I needed it,” Akiza admitted. “I wasn’t just confronting Sayer. I was confronting myself.”

“I know it’s cheesy, but I’m really proud of you,” Lise smiled at her friend. “Most adults I’ve met never get up the courage to confront their mistakes and their true selves.”

“It is rather draining. I just want to go home and sit down for a while,” Akiza said.

“That can be arranged. Right this way,” Mina said. She directed them to the elevator that had brought them down.

At ground level, when the elevators doors parted, a surprise lay in wait for the girls. Not just the twins, but Jack, Crow, Yusei, and even Carly were there.

“Akiza!” Luna cried out. She reached the psychic first and hugged her as hard as she could.

Leo was next, and then Carly glomped on too. “We’re so glad you’re okay!”

Lise and the boys joined in as well. They had to let go quickly or risk toppling over though.

This time Akiza was crying because she was happy, not miserable. “Thanks for being here, guys. It means a lot,” she said, rubbing away her tears.

“We decided we’d rather hear in person instead of wait around for a phone call,” Yusei explained.

“It was Leo’s idea,” Luna said, elbowing her brother.

Leo blushed heavily. “I just thought that I’d like some support if I had to see Sayer again. He’s really scary.”
Akiza nodded slowly. “In more ways than one. Thanks Leo.”

“Sure. Hey! Your pocket’s glowing!”

“Huh?”

Sure enough; Akiza’s pocket was glowing with a pinkish light. She reached fearfully inside and drew out a new card. “It’s a new synchro monster!”

“What?”

“Cool!”

“No way?!”

“What is it?!”

“Psychic Rose Dragon…” Akiza breathed, in awe. Her new monster’s card was stunning. The monster resembled Black Rose Dragon, but with a cybernetic twist. Each of Psychic Rose Dragon’s petals were metallic and the beast was a level nine. Its ability was the same, but in the case of its destruction, Black Rose Dragon could be special summoned from the graveyard or extra deck. A definite upgrade. “Wow…”

“This could help us fight against the synchro stealers!” Crow realized excitedly.

“An evolution synchro,” Lise mused, tapping her finger to her lips thoughtfully.

“Show me how to do it, Akiza! I want an evolved synchro too!” Leo begged, bouncing around Akiza like a bouncy ball. “Please!”

“Uh, I’m not even sure how I managed to do this in the first place!”

“Too bad,” Jack said, voicing his thoughts aloud. “Evolving all our methods of summoning could really help us get through this new threat we’re up against.”

“It’d give you the edge you need!” Carly agreed. “All we know at this point is the Ghost robots are somehow connected to someone who wants to steal other duelists’ synchro monsters to use against them.”

“Right now Akiza is the most prepared to take them down. Which means we all have to find a way to up our game. We’ve got some time before the tournament, so let’s get training.”

“You got it!”

Chapter End Notes

First off, thank you for reading this chapter. It means a lot to me, and I hope you read more as they come on. Second, info on the chapter! Since I'm rewriting 5Ds, I really want to give Akiza and Luna more time in the spotlight. I feel like they were brushed under the rug a lot in season 2, which is seriously NOT okay. They deserved some development and facing their problems just as much as the boys. Personally I believe after everything Akiza's been through she would have some sort of anxiety problem,
especially being back at duel academy. She is definitely doing much better, but anxiety disorders don't really care whether you're trying to be strong or not. I did my best to capture Akiza's anxiety at being so isolated again, and then having to confront the person she was in the form of Sayer being alive and imprisoned. She's definitely not 'fixed' at all, but I believe I've put her on the path to healing herself and accepting that the darker pieces of her personality are a part of her that she can choose to accept. All humans have the potential to do good and bad and Akiza wants to make the active decision to accept the darkness she has and not to feed it. That's why she gains an evolution synchro monster. It physically embodies the beginning of her positive growth.
Suicide Squad

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning! For more sensitive readers, there is mention of suicide and one of the characters trying to commit suicide. If you fear you may be triggered, then please do not read this chapter. I just want to make sure people are safe, so be careful. Enjoy the chapter when you are strong enough! Thank you for your time.

Yusei’s runner cut across the desert easily. A small dust cloud followed him, but otherwise he and Lise were alone. Numerous mountains broke the monotony of the landscape, but Lise had still fallen asleep leaning on Yusei’s back. She hadn’t been happy about being squished in the back against his runner’s arc again, but they’d figured it would be best to take his. Yusei had been driving for a longer time after all. Hopefully Jack and Crow would be fine for the few days the pair would be gone.

“There it is!” Yusei said, more for Lise’s benefit than his own. “There’s Crash Town.”

Lise yawned, rubbed an eye sleepily, and peered over Yusei’s shoulder. “Not much to look at.”

“Maybe it has more appeal when we’re actually in town?” Yusei parked atop a nearby cliff. He raised the left arm of his runner and dismounted.

“Why are we stopping here?” Lise yawned again and got off the runner less than gracefully. “Oh god, I’m so stiff. I fucking hate that arc.” She started to stretch her aching limbs out, cracking them whenever possible. “Next time, we take my runner.”

“Uh huh,” Yusei said, not really paying attention. He was watching the town. From this distance it looked deserted. His gaze slid directly beneath the cliff.

Wooden posts rose up out of the ground with duel disks strapped to them, too many to count. A scream broke across the silent desert, drawing the attention of both Lise and Yusei.

Lise skidded up to the edge of the cliff beside Yusei, and the two of them knelt to the dusty ground to watch.

Three men dressed in blue clothing resembling jumpsuits were running away from more men dressed as cowboys.

“Don’t try to escape! Stop!”

Cornered up against the cliff, the three blue-clad men began to climb as quickly as they could. The two cowboys chasing them seemed to be the only people with duel disks. They grinned wickedly and drew a card from their decks. One of the men dressed in blue reached into his clothes and retrieved something. He allowed himself one look and then threw an object up onto the cliff Lise and Yusei were hiding atop.

“You can’t escape from here.”

“Please don’t!”
The cowboy placed his card on his duel disk. Instantly the three men in blue keeled over amidst screams of pain.

“I’m increasing the power!” the second cowboy promised, doing the same as the first, and sure enough the three men’s screams of pain grew louder until they passed out.

“What’re you doing?!” Yusei couldn’t stay hidden any longer.

Lise stood too, but she went to pick up whatever that one man had thrown up there.

“Huh?” The two cowboys looked up. “Oh, we’re just punishing these slackers for ditching work and running away.” The gathered the three men like they were nothing but garbage.

“Let them go!”

“Can’t do that. You two look like duelists. Our town will welcome you then. If you’ve got skills, you can earn lots of money,” the two cowboys laughed as they dragged their three charges away.

Yusei grit his teeth angrily. “They looked like they liked hurting those men. What kind of place is this?”

“Dunno, but I do know those guys were nothing but slimy,” Lise’s brows were knit curiously over her open hand.

“What did you find?” Yusei lowered his head closer to Lise’s to look.

“I think it’s a pendant,” Lise let the strand hang from her fingertips. Weighing it down was indeed a pendant. The shape was that of a raindrop with three triangles pointed down on the surface. Two of which were solidly colored black, and the third an outline with two smaller triangles inside.

“It’s beautiful. Why would someone throw this away?”

Lise frowned and slipped the pendant onto her own neck for safekeeping. She tucked it into her shirt alongside her dragon necklace and her own pendant. “Just another question to add about this place. We’re not even in the town yet, and I already hate it.”

“Well, we came here for a reason. Hopefully our visit will be short.”

“Knock on wood,” Lise added just in case.

Yusei smiled slightly, and climbed back aboard his runner. “Shall we see the town then?”

“And find your letter writer? Sure,” Lise swung aboard behind Yusei and hung on tightly.

The letter. Yusei had received a strange letter just last week from someone in this town. He or she had explained that Yusei’s friend was in town. He or she had somehow discovered this friendship, and bid Yusei come to town and save said friend. Saving meaning taking him away from the town, otherwise the town would kill said friend. It was signed simply; Barb.

Yusei had shown the letter to Lise, who read it once and said she was coming with him. Yusei had to smile at that. She always knew when he was going to do something reckless. In this case, it was following up on the wishes of an incredibly vague letter. If one of their old friends was stuck in this town, they figured they had to at least check it out.

Inside the town wasn’t much better. The shops and homes were like conjoined cubes flimsily put together. All the windows and doors were closed up, and literal tumbleweeds rolled through the
dirt streets. Not a soul could be seen.

Yusei parked in the square. Not knowing what else to do, Lise and Yusei dismounted and looked around for some people.

“That your duel runner?” Three more cowboys emerged from the dust. Two were rather large, and the one in the middle was skinny.

“An interesting pair has arrived.”

“The two of you want to duel?”

“Sorry, but I generally make it a rule not to duel against amateurs,” Yusei quipped.

“What?”

Lise laughed and crossed her arms. She raised an eyebrow at Yusei. “Somebody woke up on the asshole side of the bed this morning.”

“But I’m your asshole,” Yusei pointed out. The corners of his lips twitched upwards.

“We’ll see,” Lise responded coyly.

“Hey! Don’t ignore us!” The three cowboys spread out, surrounding Lise and Yusei. “Those are some pretty strong words, you two, but the more arrogant you are the quicker you go to hell.”

“To hell?” Yusei’s eyes darted between them.

“Damn, and I thought I was already in hell,” Lise joked. She blinked, unamused.

“Oh no, hell is in the mountains. Before you know it, you’re gonna be thrown in with the rest of ‘em!”

“Show us your skills!”

Lise and Yusei raised their duel disks, both ready for a fight.

“Stop!” A pretty dark haired woman carrying flowers emerged out of the flower shop. She was dressed in a black top that bared her midriff as well as her shoulders. A red skirt fell just past her knees, and was held in place with a pink sash. A necklace, earrings, and bracelets added accessories to the woman’s look. “It isn’t duel time yet,” she insisted. “You’re breaking the laws of Crash Town!”

“Um…what?”

“I don’t want to gather flowers for funerals anymore,” the woman shoved her bouquet into the hands of the skinniest cowboy. She approached Yusei and Lise with a smile on her face. “I asked them to come.”

“You did?” Yusei and Lise shared a glance.

“Yes,” the woman turned to face them, revealing lovely brown eyes. “I wrote the letter. I’m Barbera.”

“Now the name Barb makes a lot more sense,” Lise nodded.
Barbera took the couple back to the cliff they had originally arrived at. She waited patiently while Lise and Yusei did their best to hide Yusei’s runner in a desert bush. Eventually Lise just pushed the runner on its side, much to Yusei’s chagrin, and covered it much more effectively. Only after Lise promised to touch up the paint job upon their return home, did Yusei relax.

“So,” Yusei sat down next to Barbera, and took Lise’s hand in his when she joined them. “Your letter said you wanted to save my friend from this town.”

“Yes,” Barbera answered simply. She removed a rock from a small flower, freeing it from being crushed.

“I see.”

“This place is very dangerous. I’ve never felt so tense;” Lise said.

Barbera nodded. “And when the sun sets the town gets even more dangerous.”

The trio watched the evening sun descending closer and closer to the horizon in the distance. From the mountains on both sides of town came two large gangs of duel runners. They met and parked at the town’s square.

Barbera pointed to one group. “The gang wearing the red scarves is the Malcolm Family. Their leader is Malcolm, in front.” She pointed to the other group. “Facing them is the Ramon group. The thin man in front is their leader, Ramon.”

“What now?”

“You’ll know soon enough. Watch.”

Lise squeezed Yusei’s hand, hoping to comfort him. She was uneasy too, and she didn’t want to tear her eyes away for a second.

Malcolm’s sneer was directed over his shoulder to one of his gang members. “I’m counting on you, Giant. If you defeat him, I’ll give you as much money as you want.”

A large man with rippling muscles jumped off the back of the wagon. His entire body looked like it was made of rocks. His head was practically as thick as his arms. He cracked his neck cockily as he advanced. “Which of you is the cheater who keeps winning?” He stopped in the square, the only place the sunlight from the setting sun still reached.

Ramon smirked with confidence too. “Everyone talks tough before a duel begins. They never realize it’ll be the last thing they ever say.”

Giant growled furiously to the jeering laughter breaking out in Ramon’s group.

“I’m counting on you, master.”

As if he emerged from the sun, a lone duelist approached. His shadow fell long and dark across the desert sand. His hair was silver and very long. He wore boots, the standard pistol duel disk, dark pants, a faded purple shirt and a dark jacket that flapped in the breeze. A relaxing tune emanated from him, coming from the harmonica pressed to the duelist’s lips.

“No way,” Lise gasped. “That’s-“
“Kalin!”

“At dusk, duel time lasts until the sun vanishes below the horizon. One of them will vanish along with the setting sun,” Barbera said.

“How would that get Kalin killed?”

“You’ll find out. Watch.”

The doors and windows in every home and shop in town opened. Everyone emerged to watch. A horse drawn carriage filled with coffins was waiting anxiously to see who would emerge the victor and who the loser.

A small boy pushed his way up to the front of the Ramon group. He smiled widely at Kalin’s back.

The moment was almost upon them. The sun inched closer and closer to the horizon line. Giant kept his hand hovering over his duel disk. He was ready. Kalin did nothing to prepare himself.

The sun hit the horizon!

“Duel!”

In seconds, Kalin placed his duel disk, unfurled it, and drew his entire hand. Giant had merely fastened his duel disk to his arm.

“I’ll go first,” Kalin said.

Kalin: 4000
Giant: 4000

“I draw. I summon Infernity Mirage. I set one card and end my turn.”

(Infernity Mirage: Atk: 0 Def: 0)

“Kalin’s acting strange,” Yusei observed, his dark eyes serious. “He’s not fighting with any soul behind it.”

“Exactly, he came to this town because he’s looking for a place to die,” Barbera explained.

“Wait, die?” That got Lise to look away. She knew what that pain felt like.

Barbera nodded. “This town reeks of death.”

“Death?” Yusei repeated at barely a whisper.

“It all started when we learned that mountain contained a mineral named Dyne, which is sued to build duel runner parts,” Barbera explained, pointing to the tallest mountain near the town. “Like a gold rush, many people arrived and built this town. When the dust settled it was Malcolm and Ramon in control of the mountain. They competed for workers to dig the mineral. In the end they decided to compete for workers by dueling.”

“Makes sense,” Lise admitted grudgingly.

“Dueling ruled the town. If you win a duel, you receive lots of money. Many skilled duelists came to this town.”
“What happens to the losers?” Yusei asked, almost afraid to know the answer.

Down below Kalin had won his duel. The sun was gone.

“The loser must work for the winning side, and he’ll live in the mountain for the rest of his life. He’ll never escape from the hellish darkness of that mountain.”

Lise and Yusei shared a look of surprise. Both of them remembered the three men in blue from earlier.

*Those were people sent to the mountain after losing a duel!*

*Is that kind of life really what Kalin wants?* Lise looked back at their old friend. She had had plenty of misgivings about Kalin and this trip, but even he didn’t deserve that kind of life. It was a fate worse than death.

*I hope not.* Yusei turned back to Barbera. “What happened to him?”

“He…” Barbera hesitated. “Kalin is using this town to commit suicide.”

“That kind of life would be suicide,” Lise murmured.

Ramon walked forward, happy to be on the winning side. “Thanks. The Giant had no dueling skills, but he looked like a hard worker. That’s why you’re the master,” he put a hand on Kalin’s shoulder. “That’s your 50th win in a row.”

“Damnit, Ramon!” Malcolm cursed in his rage. “You’re mine next time! I’ll send you and that jackass to the mountain!”

Ramon rolled his eyes. “Take your best shot.”

In the last rays of daylight, the two gangs mounted their rides and left.

“Kalin!”

Hearing his name, Kalin slowed to a stop.

“Kalin!” Yusei yelled again.

Shocked, Kalin gasped. He hadn’t expected to hear that voice calling his name. He peeked behind him, and his eyes were met with the unmistakable images of Lise and Yusei. Still, he didn’t answer. Instead he kept riding.

“Kalin, why won’t you answer me?!” He, Barbera, and Lise watched him go.

“If he won’t respond to you directly, you’ll have to duel him,” Barbera said.

“In this town that sounds like the stupidest thing we could ever do,” Lise sighed. “But I don’t think we have any other options.”

“What do we need to do?” Yusei and Lise turned to Barbera.

“Find some work.”

///
Malcolm was treating himself like a personal water fountain. He was on his fourth beer, red in the face, and drunk off his ass. “How dare Ramon make a fool out of me!”

“Boss, you shouldn’t drink too much,” a gang member advised gently.

“Shut up!” Malcolm tossed his empty bottle to the ground, where it shattered. “You’re all useless!” The Malcolm gang members gave Malcolm a wide berth. “If my younger brother Lawton came home right now, that punk Kalin would be… He’d win in a single turn!”

“Hey.”

“Huh?” Malcolm paused in his drunken ramblings. “Who are you?”

“You’re…from before!” The three cowboys from earlier realized.

“Hire me,” Yusei demanded. He flung aside the folds of his poncho to reveal a new standard pistol style duel disk.

*Oh, you are so milking this.*

Yusei mentally smirked at Lise. *And you’re not loving sneaking around like a ninja?*

*Hey, I’ve always been a ninja. The all black just makes it official. Good luck.*

*Same to you. See you later.*

“Bring it on!” the three cowboys challenged. “We’ll be your opponents!”

“Fine,” Malcolm shrugged. “I’ll see just how skilled you are. If I like you, I’ll hire you. If I don’t like you, you won’t leave unscathed.”

“Let’s get started then,” the corner of Yusei’s mouth curled up ever so slightly. “You can all fight me.”

All three cowboys set their duel disks and drew their cards. Yusei did the same.

*Yusei: 4000*

*Cowboy 1: 4000*

*Cowboy 2: 4000*

*Cowboy 3: 4000*

“I’ll go first. I draw. I summon the tuner monster Changer Synchron in defense mode. I set one card and end my turn.”

*(Changer Synchron: Atk: 0 Def: 0)*

“My turn!” The first cowboy declared. “I’m almost disappointed you came by yourself. It won’t be as much fun beating you without your pretty girlfriend to save you. Oh well.”

Yusei’s smiled turned into a fierce glare. “She has her mission and I have mine. Make your move.”

“Be careful what you ask for! I summon Fuse Ray Blaster! Due to battle royal rules, neither of us can attack on the first turn. I end my turn.”
“My turn,” the next cowboy was up. “I summon Fuse Ray Blaster!”

“Shoot!” The first cowboy’s monster shot a laser blast at Yusei. “When Fuse Ray Blaster is in attack position, if another Fuse Ray Blaster is summoned, you take 800 points of damage.”

Yusei: 3200

“I end my turn.”

“My turn,” cowboy three’s chance to go. “I summon Fuse Ray Blaster.”

“Shoot!”

Yusei: 1600

“I end my turn.”

“We have plenty of bullets remaining!”

Yusei stood back up and brushed himself off. It was his turn again, so he could take as much time as he wanted. Besides, it would rile his opponents up that much more. “My turn! I have to get through these guys. Once I’m cleared to duel Kalin, I can beat him, and the three of us can grab him before he’s taken to the mountain. “I send one monster card in my hand to the graveyard. This lets me special summon the tuner monster Quickdraw Synchron from my hand.”

(Quickdraw Synchron: Atk: 700 Def: 1400)

“When a tuner monster is on my field, I can special summon Quillbolt Hedgehog from my graveyard.”

(Quillbolt Hedgehog: Atk: 800 Def: 800)

“I tune Quickdraw Synchron with Quillbolt Hedgehog to synchro summon…Nitro Warrior! Then I summon Gauntlet Warrior!”

(Nitro Warrior: Atk: 2800 Def: 1800)
(Gauntlet Warrior: Atk: 400 Def: 1600)

“Now Changer Synchron tunes with level three Gauntlet Warrior to synchro summon…Armory Arm!

(Armory Arm: Atk: 1800 Def: 1200)

“Due to the effect of Changer Synchron sent to my graveyard, your Fuse Ray Blaster switches to defense mode!” Yusei pointed to the third cowboy’s monster. “Next, O activate Armory Arm’s effect! By equipping this card to Nitro Warrior, he gains 1000 attack points!”

“Three thousand eight hundred?” the first cowboy gasped.

But Yusei wasn’t done just yet. “From my hand, I equip the spell Junk Barrage to Nitro Warrior. Since I activated a spell this turn, Nitro Warrior gains 1000 attack points for one battle! I’ll beat all three of you this turn! Go Nitro Warrior!”
“No way!”

The third cowboy’s monster was switched from defense mode to attack mode, and promptly obliterated.

“No way!”

“When Nitro Warrior destroys a monster, it can switch a monster from defense to attack position and attack again. Then with Armory Arm’s effect, when the equipped monster destroys a monster in battle, you take damage equal to that monster’s attack points. Lastly, due to the equip spell Junk Barrage, you take damage equal to half the destroyed monster’s attack points. I’m flipping over my trap card Synchro Overlimit! A synchro monster that destroyed your monster in battle can attack again this turn!”

“No way!” Malcolm’s mouth hung open in total shock.

“After Nitro Warrior’s attacks, the effects of Armory Arm and Junk Barrage activate!”

Victorious, Yusei folded his duel disk back up. He couldn’t resist adding an extra few twirls before sliding the duel disk back into its holster.

“Show off.” Lise’s voice mentally scolded.

“Three people in one turn? One turn, three kill. Incredible! You might be able to defeat Kalin! Can you do that again?”

“I was hoping you’d say that, but my fee is rather expensive.”

“Not a problem.”

Definitely the asshole side of the bed. You’re lucky you’re cute.
Duel for Death Part 1

“Cheers!” Ramon shouted, toasting Kalin with a large beer in hand.

The two of them, as well as the rest of Ramon’s gang were celebrating at their end of town’s bar. The members were a tad over excited due to their large intact of alcohol.

“If you keep winning, Malcolm will run out of pieces,” Ramon continued once he’d slammed his now empty desk down onto the counter. “Then the Ramon Group will control the mountain! Thank you!” He reached for more booze, and began pouring more into Kalin’s untouched glass.

Kalin stood up, too gloomy to be in a partying mood. “There’s always a chance that I’ll lose tomorrow.” He turned to leave.

Ramon scowled moodily. “He could be more friendly.”

“There’s no way he’ll lose,” one of the boys at the bar said firmly. “He discards his hand and destroys the enemy with no cards. It’s a scary technique. Risky too.”

Ramon scowled deeply and downed his next drink. “He could still be friendlier.”

///

In the dark of the night, Kalin played his harmonica alone. A single star shot across the sky, a gorgeous beacon of light in the darkness untainted by city lights.

By all appearances, Kalin looked calm and tranquil. However, his mind was preoccupied with the mistakes of the past. Memories of his time as the bloodthirsty Dark Signer flooded his head, just like they had every night since his revival.

Why did I remember that? I want to erase my guilt. Why are Yusei and Lise here? Maybe fate is further punishing me.

The small boy from the duel earlier approached Kalin. He smiled when Kalin caught sight of him.

“You again?”

“That was incredible, Kalin,” the kid sat down next to him without being invited. “No wonder you were the leader of the Enforcers!”

“Stop it,” Kalin murmured.

The boy smiled widely. “I’m going to become a powerful duelist like you and rescue my father from the mountain.”

“Just give up. Those who went to the mountain will never come back.”

“That’s not true! If I become strong like you-“

“Dueling doesn’t help,” Kalin interrupted the boy. “You and your sister need to leave this town before dueling possesses you.”

“But I can’t just leave my dad!”
“If he’s not dead yet, then he will be. My fate is to die there.”

“I certainly hope that’s not the case. The leader that I know would never just lay down and surrender.”

The boy whirled in surprise. Kalin didn’t move. He knew who the voice belonged to. “It’s been a while, Lise.”

His companion glared at her. “What do you want?” The boy demanded.

“Easy West, she’s an old friend. Lise, West. West, Lise,” Kalin introduced them in a monotone voice.

“Nice to meet you. Mind if I sit down?”

“If I say no, will you leave?” Kalin sighed.

“Nope,” Lise sat down on Kalin’s other side, her legs dangling off the edge of the cliff. She watched the sky in silence, in awe of its beauty. “There are so many stars out here. It’s like the horrors of this town don’t even exist when you’re looking at a sky like this.”

“Those horrors are going to be my punishment. I’m going to die here. That’s why you and Yusei were supposed to come here.”

Lise tugged on her hair, entwining the soft strands round her finger. She dropped her hands to pick at the dead skin of her fingertips. “Do you really want to die that much, Kalin?” she asked quietly.

“It’s the only way to atone for what I did. I almost killed Yusei, and I hurt you. How could you ever forgive me after all that?”

West gasped shortly. He couldn’t imagine his hero being so cruel.

“I almost didn’t forgive you,” Lise admitted. She brought her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. “But I know what it’s like to be manipulated like that, to feel so alone and full of hatred for others and yourself that you just want to end it all. It’s a terribly dark place to be. But you admitted you were wrong when Yusei freed you, and that you were sorry for everything you’d done. He wouldn’t want you to be dueling like this; with no soul, so you could die working in a merciless mountain.”

“I don’t want you to go to the mountain either!” West insisted. “I believe in you, Kalin!”

Kalin shook his head. “I’m not sure I understand. You and Yusei should hate me. I have no idea why West likes me. My life is worthless.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Lise shrugged. “But we’ve chosen to forgive you and help you out because we’re still your friends.” She hesitated for a few seconds and then spoke again. “Being with Yusei has made me realize how trusting he is, and how distrusting I am of other people. Generally Yusei is a good judge of character though, and he feels it’s better to trust and regret than to do nothing and regret. After we learned we were here to save you, he didn’t hesitate. He decided to stay and help you get outta here. If Yusei decides that you’re worth trusting and worth saving, then I’ll believe in you too.”

Kalin was speechless. West was too. Both of them stared at Lise.

She got up and cracked her neck. “Okay, well, I’ve gotta go. Please think about what I said, Kalin,
and keep West close. He doesn’t idolize you for no reason. Be careful, and I’ll see you later.” Lise waved and walked back into the darkness, her dark jeans and top blending seamlessly into the night.

“It’s almost morning,” Kalin said flatly. “You should get some sleep.”

“Are you gonna be okay?” West’s big brown eyes looked up at him with concern.

“I’ll be fine.”

///

The next morning dawned bright with hope as the sun’s rays hit the desert landscape full blast. Tumbleweeds drifted lazily through the town’s streets. For now it was quiet, peaceful even, but as soon as the sun hit the horizon it wouldn’t be anymore.

Yusei set a chair down in the sunlight and sat. There was nothing for him to do but wait. *This town is only alive during sunset. It’s practically a ghost town right now.* He gave his pistol duel disk one last polish and placed it back in its holster.

Barbera walked out with a nice bouquet of white roses. “The plan is all ready to go.”

“Thanks, good to know,” Yusei smiled shortly at her.

Lise jumped down from the roof opposite the flower shop. She landed a little shakily, which was explained by the half-moons under her eyes. She had been up all night spying on the town, so of course she was tired. Even so, she was nowhere near as tired as she had been when she had stayed up for three days and nights straight.

“I’ll grab another chair,” Barbera disappeared back into her shop.

“Thanks,” Lise yawned and stretched. “It was really nice of you to let us stay at your place too, Barbera.” She accepted the chair brought for her and sat down in it backwards.

“Of course. A bed is ready for you upstairs too,” Barbera smiled and left again.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this town, and that includes her,” Lise said when Barbera was out of earshot.

“You mean aside from the enslavement?” Yusei said, his voice low.

“I think so. I watched both gangs for hours last night. Both Malcolm and Ramon are greedy and morally questionable, but unfortunately both seem to be adequate duelists. It explains how they were initially able to gain control, and the townspeople accept the crazy way things are because of fear. I talked to a kid named West for a little bit last night. They’re afraid they’ll be sent to the mountains too.”

“So basically it’s a dual dictatorship?”

“More like an oligarchy, but yeah. But West says he hasn’t seen his dad since he disappeared into the mountains.”

Yusei’s dark blue eyes searched Lise’s lighter eyes. “You want to free the people trapped in there, don’t you?”

“Don’t you?”
“I think with Barbara’s help, we can definitely rescue Kalin, but I’m not sure about a whole
mountain of people.”

“If we can trust her,” Lise muttered irritably.

“We can,” Yusei said simply, his voice careful. “She’s been really helpful.”

“A little too helpful if you ask me,” Lise’s eyebrows knit together and she put a finger to her lips.
She spoke very low to ensure Barbara couldn’t hear her. “Don’t you think it’s a bit convenient that
she sent a letter to the one person who just so happened to be Kalin’s friend when the town’s
conflict is escalating? Kalin is a good duelist, even if he’s dueling without heart. We’ve
encountered people who would pay good money to have great duelists, but what if this situation is
the exact opposite? We were called to get rid of a great duelist?”

“What would Barbara possibly gain by getting rid of Kalin?” Yusei whispered back.

Lise raised one shoulder. “I don’t know, but I hope rescuing Kalin from the mountain will be
enough. He seemed like he was in a really dark place last night.”

Yusei’s jaw dropped open. “You talked to Kalin last night?!”

“For a little bit, yeah,” Lise was quiet for a minute. “He sounded just like me from a while ago.
Yusei…what he did to you…as a Dark Signer… He really thinks the only thing he can do is to
die.” She rubbed her eyes. “By dueling he’s drawing it out, making himself suffer even longer.
He’s even more depressed than I was. He-He might be too far gone.”

“Hey,” Yusei’s caution melted away and he pulled Lise’s chair around so the back of the chair
didn’t separate them. He pushed her hair out of her face and rested his nose and lips on top of her
head. “We’ll get him back. It’s never too late. I’m not saying we can fix him, but maybe we can
show him he’s not alone.”

Lise smiled, inhaled, and exhaled slowly. Then she yawned so loudly she shuddered.

“I think you need to go to bed. You’ve been up all night, and you’ll need your strength for tonight.
In the end all of us will be okay,” Yusei said, stroking Lise’s cheek.

“Okay,” she yawned again, stood, bent to kiss Yusei’s cheek, and then dragged her chair back
inside.

Love you.

Love you too, Lise.

///

Sunset came all too quickly. The townspeople gathered to watch. The wagon and its drivers were
all set to carry the loser away.

Barbera stepped out of her shop, carrying the flowers. Lise waited in hiding on the roof of the
flower shop.

Malcolm’s gang came riding in first. Ramon’s wasn’t far behind though.

Ramon parked and smirked at Malcolm. “The muscleman you gave me yesterday was useless,
Malcolm. He’s already passed out. I hope you have someone energetic today to make sure that
doesn’t happen.”

“You won’t brag for much longer!” Malcolm seethed. “I’m sending your grim reaper to that hellish mountain today!”

Ramon laughed skeptically. “Our master duelist won’t lose. Kalin, end this quickly, as usual.” Kalin stepped forward at Ramon’s request. The gang leader turned back to Malcolm. “Bring out the guy you’re sending to the mountain.”

“You’re up, stranger,” Malcolm growled.

Yusei emerged calmly from the Classy Ass Flower Shop. He stopped right in front of Kalin, squaring off in the middle of the town. Meanwhile, the sun was still inching closer and closer to the horizon.

“Kalin.”

“I knew you’d be my opponent,” he said in response.

“I’m here to take you home,” Yusei said, since hellos were not apparently in order. “We both are, so let’s go home together, Kalin.”

“I can’t go home with you,” Kalin said, glancing apologetically for a brief second up at Lise. He’d seen her the moment the Ramon gang had come even with the outskirts of town. “One of us is going to the mountain.”

“I won’t let that happen!” Yusei declared. Mind made up, he set his jaw with determination.

“You’re the guy who tried to talk to our master yesterday!” Ramon realized. “Wasn’t there a woman with you, too? You all know each other?” he demanded of Kalin.

“It’s not important. I have a duel to win,” Kalin said slyly. “Unless, you think I’ll lose on purpose?”

“Of course not,” Ramon insisted quickly. “Because if you lose, you’ll be sent to the hellish mountain.”

“You really want to battle?” Kalin said.

“Yeah,” Yusei answered shortly.

“Fine.”

The two boys readied themselves for the draw the second the sun touched the horizon. Yusei threw the flaps of his poncho behind him and out of the way. Kalin moved the coattails of his jacket back.

Everyone in town was tense with anticipation. Everyone but West. “You can do it, Kalin!”

Then…BOOM! Sunset.

“Duel!”

At exactly the same speed and time, Yusei and Kalin drew their cards. The townspeople and gang members gasped. Who was to go first in the event of a tie?
“You were quicker,” Yusei blinked impassively.

“It seems so,” Kalin agreed in the same neutral tone.

_Yusei: 4000_

_Kalin: 4000_

“Who was faster?” Malcolm demanded one of his henchmen.

“Looked like a tie to me. I dunno.”


(Infernity Randomizer: Atk: 900 Def: 0)

The monster looked like a jackpot wheel with a sinister face attacked to it.

“I set one card and end my turn.”

_He summoned a monster in attack position on the first turn, and it has only 900 attack points. Is he trying to trap me with his set card? Even so, I’m gonna go for it._

_Just be careful. You can’t afford to lose._

_I will. We’re all getting out of this._

“My turn! I summon Speed Warrior!”

(Speed Warrior: Atk: 900 Def: 400)

“When Speed Warrior is successfully summoned,” Yusei explained. “It’s attack points are double. Next I equip Speed Warrior with the equip spell Fighting Spirit! Speed Warrior gains 300 attack points for each of your monsters. Speed Warrior’s total attack points are 2100! Speed Warrior attaches Infernity Randomizer!”

“I flip over my trap card Infernity Reflector,” Kalin revealed once his monster had been destroyed. An intense wind kicked up and dissipated just as quickly. “When an Infernity monster is destroyed, I can send all the cards in my hand to the graveyard to negate its destruction, and you take 1000 points of damage.”

_Yusei: 3000_

_Kalin: 2800_

_His handless combo… “I set one card and end my turn!”_

“My turn,” Kalin said. “I set one card. I activate Infernity Randomizer’s effect! Once per turn, I draw a card and send it to the graveyard. If the card is a monster card, you take damage equal to its level multiplied by 200. If it’s any other card type, I take 500 points of damage.”

“You’re going to rely on luck? That’s not like you, Kalin!”

“It’s just a duel,” Kalin said. “I’m going to win.”

“That’s right! There’s no way our master would make a mistake!” Ramon said adamantly.
Kalin shrugged and drew the top card of his deck. “It’s level six.”

“Level six? He’s cheating!” Malcolm complained loudly.

“Be quiet.”

“What?”

The taller man in the wagon stood up to his full height.

“Damn,” Malcolm grumbled, but he did as he was told.

Kalin’s Infernity Randomizer lined up six shots that fired all in a row at Yusei.

Yusei: 1800

Kalin: 2800

“I end my turn.”

What am I doing? At this rate, I can’t reach Kalin at all! I have to win, then Barbera can use the dynamite she has hidden in her flowers as a distraction. Lise and I can swoop in and take Kalin before he’s dragged to the mountain.

Yusei reestablished his stance. The six shots had unnerved him slightly, but he wasn’t backing down now. “My turn! I summon Max Warrior!”

(Max Warrior: Atk: 1800 Def: 800)

The second warrior monster joined Speed Warrior on the field. It was dressed in robes, armor, and carried a large staff.

“I’m not holding back! Max Warrior attacks Infernity Randomizer! Due to Max Warrior’s effect, it gains 400 attack points during the damage step!”

“I wish we could have dueled longer.”

Yusei: 1800

Kalin: 1500

“I activate the trap card Damage Gate. I can special summon a monster from my graveyard that has equal or less attack points than the damage I took. I summon Infernity Beetle.”

(Infernity Beetle: Atk: 1200 Def: 0)

“Speed Warrior attacks Infernity Beetle!”

“They both have 1200 attack points,” Ramon remembered. “He must be aiming for mutual destruction. By destroying the equip spell Fighting Spirit, Speed Warrior isn’t destroyed. I end my turn.”

“You never change,” Kalin’s smile would have been bright if his eyes were less dead-looking. “You’re not just trying to win. You’re trying to draw out my heart too.”

“So what?”
“Sorry, but it’s no good. I don’t care.”

“What don’t you care about?”

“If I live or die.”

“Why? You’ve always been ready to tackle things head-on! Kalin…”

“But I remembered,” Kalin said gravely. “That I was a Dark Signer. That I battled against you. Due to a slight misunderstanding, I hated you and tried to kill you. Even Lise got caught in the crossfire. Even though we were teammates, even though we were friends…”

“But Kalin, I forgave you! We all did after our last duel!”

“I still carry the scars of my guilt. Dueling was everything to me. I couldn’t live without it. But now I hate it. Yusei, Lise, Jack, and Crow were more important than dueling, but I made you suffer.”

“Kalin, we didn’t suffer!”

“That doesn’t matter. I just want the pain to go away.”

“Kalin…”

“But I still couldn’t abandon dueling. In this case, dueling and I will die together. Before I knew it, I was in this town. I’ve been waiting for someone who could end my life. As fate would have it, it turns out to be you. It’s ironic, but it’s good.”

“We came here to rescue you!”

“I’ve been saved many times already. Now it’s time for you to finish me with your own hands, Yusei.”

“No! I know you’re still full of life! I’ll find that light!”

“Yusei, my passion is gone. I’m just a ghost that draws cards.”

“Kalin…” West’s eyebrows turned upwards with concern.

“Stop talking!” Malcolm demanded. “Hurry up and continue the duel!”

“My turn,” Kalin obliged. “I activate the spell card Zero-Max. I can activate this card when it’s the only card in my hand. I select one Infernity monster in my graveyard and special summon it. Then all monsters who have equal or less attack points are destroyed.”

“What?!”

“Appear, Infernity Destroyer!”

(Infernity Destroyer: Atk: 2300 Def: 1000)

“All monsters with 2300 or fewer attack points are turned to ash. When Zero-Max is activated, I can’t battle this turn. I end my turn.”

“Kalin, you’re still a strong duelist. You haven’t given up on dueling at all. Similarly, you haven’t given up on living!”
“You’re wrong. Dueling possesses me. It won’t let me go. It’s pulling me towards a living hell.”

“Then we’ll give you hope! My turn! I summon the tuner monster Junk Synchron! When this monster is successfully summoned, I can special summon a level two or below monster from my graveyard in defense mode. Come, Speed Warrior! When a tuner monster is on my field, I can special summon Boost Warrior from my hand in defense mode.”

(Boost Warrior: Atk: 300 Def: 200)

“Now level three Junk Synchron tunes with level two Speed Warrior! I synchro summon, Junk Warrior! When Junk Warrior is synchro summoned, it gains attack points equal to the total attack points of level two or below monsters on my field! It gains level one Boost Warrior’s 300 attack points! Then I activate Boost Warrior’s effect! A warrior type monster on my field gains 300 attack points! Junk Warrior, attack Infernity Destroyer!”

Yusei: 1800

Kalin: 900

“Kalin!” West cried fearfully.

“If my monster is destroyed by battle when I have no cards in my hand, I can special summon Infernity Avenger from my graveyard in defense position.”

(Infernity Avenger: Atk: 0 Def: 0)

“When this effect summons Infernity Avenger, its level becomes the same as the destroyed monster.”

“What?”

“Infernity destroyer’s level was six. I have 900 lifepoints. Just a little more and I’ll be dead. It fits that you’ll be the opponent that sends me to the grave.”

“You’re wrong! There’s no way!”

“It can’t be helped. I can’t betray you or dueling. Therefore, I’ll have my teammate and friend finish me in a duel. That will satisfy me.”

“Kalin…” Lise’s whole body ached with empathy for him.
The town was still aglow with the light of the setting sun. The entire town watched, waiting for the winner. Barbera waited by her shop, hugging her bouquet of flowers tight to her chest. Lise stood just above her on the roof, her brow furrowed with worry, and her muscles tense with anticipation.

Yusei still had his two monsters as well as a facedown on his field. Kalin’s possessed only a lone monster.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Yusei: } & 1800 \\
\text{Kalin: } & 900 \\
\end{align*}
\]

“What’s going on?” Ramon fired at Kalin. He was in complete bewilderment.

“I told you that I won’t lose on purpose. In fact, I can’t,” Kalin’s voice possessed a slight lilt of irony as he spoke. “The duel and the cards are possessing me. They can’t allow that. In order to escape from this hell, I have to battle Yusei with all my strength. I just hope that will set me free.”

One of Ramon’s gang members raised his deck of cards. “That means you want to lose! Let me step in!”

“No, you’d lose much faster,” Kalin smirked at Ramon and his eager lackey. “For some reason, I’m still here because I keep winning.”

“What?!”

Ramon put his arm out to stop his lackey. “That’s why the master is the master. He wouldn’t be undefeated if he wasn’t crazy. Sorry, master,” he smirked with confidence at his duelist.

“What’s taking so long?!” Malcolm demanded. He clenched his fists with impatience. “Continue the duel!”

“Kalin…” Yusei said, his words petering off. He knew he couldn’t say anything to make his old friend change his mind.

“My turn,” Kalin said monotonously. “I summon Infernity Dwarf.”

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Infernity Dwarf: } & \text{Atk: 800 Def: 500} \\
\end{align*}
\]

“Then level six Infernity Avenger tunes level two Infernity Dwarf. I synchro summon Infernity Doom Dragon.”

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Infernity Doom Dragon: } & \text{Atk: 3000 Def: 2400} \\
\end{align*}
\]

“I’ve never seen this dragon before,” Yusei said, a tiny bit panicked.

“When I have zero cards in my hand, I can choose not to battle once per turn. One monster on your field is destroyed, and you take damage equal to half its attack points.”

In a flash of purple fire, Junk Warrior was destroyed. As a result, Yusei’s lifepoints took a large hit.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Yusei: } & 350 \\
\end{align*}
\]
Kalin: 900

“I end my turn.”

“Master’s taking this duel seriously!” Ramon cheered in relief.

“My turn!” Yusei declared, drawing his next card with gritted teeth. “I destroy the set trap card Limiter Overload to special summon Card Breaker from my hand!”

(Card Breaker: Atk: 100 Def: 900)

“Since Limiter Overload was destroyed, its effect activates! I special summon Speed Warrior from the graveyard! Next, I release the warrior type speed warrior to special summon Turret Warrior from my hand!”

(Turret Warrior: Atk: 1200 Def: 2000)

“I’m tuning level one Boost Warrior with level two Card Breaker and level five Turret Warrior in order to synchro summon…Stardust Dragon!”

“See that!” Malcolm chuckled rudely. “Our duelist has an incredible monster too!”

Ramon openly scoffed at Malcolm and Yusei’s Stardust Dragon. “But Master Kalin’s dragon has higher attack points!”

Yusei and Kalin ignored them. “I set one card and end my turn.”

“My turn. I set one card. Infernity Doom Dragon attack Stardust Dragon.”

“I flip over my continuous trap Power Frame!” Yusei countered. “When I take an attack from your monster, that battle is negated! Then Power Frame equips onto Stardust Dragon. It gains attack points equal to the difference between Stardust Dragon and your negated monster’s attack points! Stardust Dragon and Infernity Doom Dragon’s attack points differ by 500 points!”

All right! Their attack points are equal now! Lise smiled to herself.

Kalin stared across the square at his old friend. The two of them were done talking. Now it was a fight to the finish. And whoever was finished first, was the first to meet death. Yusei is also serious, but for different reasons. Kalin smiled to himself. “I end my turn.”

“My turn!” Yusei said. “I summon Second Booster!”

(Second Booster: Atk: 1000 Def: 500)

“Stardust Dragon, attack Infernity Doom Dragon!”

“This is bad!” Ramon exclaimed. “Mutual destruction will empty his field, and then Yusei can attack him directly with Second Booster!”

Kalin barely even blinked. “I flip over my trap card Infernity Break. When I have zero cards in my hand, I can remove an Infernity card in my graveyard from play to destroy a card on your field. I destroy Power Frame. Stardust Dragon’s attack points return to normal.” Kalin took a deep breath. The moment he had been waiting for was almost upon him. He could practically taste it. This is my full strength. Whatever’s next...

“Second Booster’s effect activates! If my monster’s attack points change, I can release Second
Booster to increase that monster’s attack points by 1500!”

Ramon and his troupe gasped. “You can do that?!”

“Yusei!”

“Go, Stardust Dragon! Attack Infernity Doom Dragon and end this!”

\[
\text{Yusei: 350} \\
\text{Kalin: 0}
\]

A tiny smile made its way across Kalin’s stone-like face. Good. I’m finally free from dueling. He waited patiently for the wagon and its drivers to take him to the mountains.

The taller driver lassoed Kalin in one throw. He started to drag Kalin into the wagon bed.

“Barbara, now,” Yusei said in a low, but urgent voice.

“Okay,” Barbara lowered her head, her red lips parted in a wicked smile. “You asked for it.”

A ball of white and red light shot out of Barbara’s bouquet. It hit Yusei square in the chest, knocking him flat on his back.

Barbara approached Yusei, a triumphant sneer decorating her face. Smoke billowed out of the stunning gun she had fired.

Lise was in total shock. She had suspected Barbara wasn’t all she had said, but she was just as surprised as Yusei. “Wh-Why? Wh-What now?”

No one but the tall wagon driver moved. He finished dragging Kalin into the wagon and tossed him into a coffin. He shut the lid with a laugh and no objections.

Barbara snickered at Yusei’s attempts to get up. “Since I shot you with this shock gun, you won’t be able to move for a while.” She threw what remained of the flowers onto the ground.

The sound of a new duel runner filled the air. From just over the hills drove a much younger man than Malcolm, riding an enormous four-wheeled duel runner. He skidded into town with a smirk and the stature to match his confidence. Six arms bearing six duel disks detached from the massive duel disk like some sort of grotesque, mutant spider.

Who’s that?

Good question. What the hell is going on?

The duel runner’s driver stood up to cheers from the Malcolm gang. The duelist detached one of his duel disks from his ride and hurled it at Ramon. The duel disk fastened to the gang leader’s arm, and knocked him to the ground.

“You’re Malcolm’s younger brother!” Ramon realized, watching the duelist remove his helmet. Lotten!”

Lotten had tanned skin, muscles, and a nasty smile. His long hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and his brown eyes were full of nothing kind. His clothes were casual cowboy; the usual shirt, vest, bolo tie, jeans, and boots. He was a tad easier to look at than his brother, but then again neither of them were much to look at.
Lotten pursed his lips and checked the sun’s location. “Wait,” he instructed the wagon bearing Kalin and his coffin. “There’s someone else you need to take with you.” He jumped down from his duel runner and confronted Ramon. “Let’s duel!”

“Are you crazy? The sun’s about to set. There’s no time!”

“There’s enough time for a single turn.”

“What?”

Just one turn?

A one turn kill?

Both Lise and Yusei watched with avid curiosity.

“I challenged you to a duel. You going to chicken out?” Lotten taunted.

Ramon growled furiously, his pride damaged, and got to his feet.

“Duel!”

“I drew first, so I get to go first,” Lotten said. “My turn! I summon Gatling Ogre!”

\[(\text{Gatling Ogre: Atk: 800 Def: 800})\]

“Then I set five cards.”

“Are you stupid?” Ramon laughed. “The player who goes first can’t attack on the first turn! You beating me in one turn? Yeah right. You’re an amateur that doesn’t know the rules!”

“No, that would be you actually. Fire!” Lotten smiled as he watched his monster unleash its arsenal of bullets on his opponent. “This isn’t an attack. Due to Gatling Ogre’s effect, you take 800 points of damage for every card in my spell and trap card zone that I send to the graveyard.”

“That’s dirty. How could I have stopped that?” Ramon muttered indignantly.

Lotten: 4000

Ramon: 0

Ramon collapsed on his face. The tall wagon driver came and collected him for the mountains as well, tossing him into a second coffin.

He won in one turn!

How is that possible? Is he rigging his deck? Did he somehow turn the automatic shuffler off? When will you be able to move again? Can we still save Kalin at this point? What do we do? WHAT DO WE DO?? Lise was panicking. Their situation had just turned from bad to worse.

I don’t know! Just please stay hidden!

Lotten climbed back onto his duel disk and approached what was left of Ramon’s game with duel disks primed and ready. “If any of you have the guts, I’ll take you on! But if you’d rather not work in the mines, we’ll give you a red scarf and let you join the Malcolm gang.” Lotten crossed his arms triumphantly as all of Ramon’s remaining gang members threw their duel disks down in
surrender.

Then the wagon drivers came for Yusei. They held him by both arms at the lip of the wagon’s bed.

“Sorry, but my brother came home from training and created a plan to take over this town in a heartbeat,” Malcolm explained.

Yusei gritted his teeth. He’d been played and he knew it. Lise had been right all along.

Lise gripped the sides of the flower shop’s rooftop like she was trying to strangle them. There was nothing she could do, and yet she had to do something!

Barbera continued, her palm up. “But to pull it off, we had to defeat Kalin first. Lotten could have beaten him no problem, but it’s better to save your ace. That’s why I wrote you; Kalin’s friend from the Enfo-whatever.”

“Wait, so, you never cared about Kalin at all!”

“No of course not! Why would I care about a dead man like him? I like powerful men,” Barbara crooned as she leaned on Malcolm’s shoulder. She giggled and approached Yusei. “But you’re not bad yourself. You fought hard for a guy who wants to die. If you want, you can be my slave. I’ll put in a good word with Malcolm for you.”

“No thanks,” Yusei growled.

“Oh well,” Barbera shrugged, straightened up, and gestured to three boys nearby. “You three, there’s a girl on the roof of my flower shop. Bring her down here.”

Yusei’s eyes widened fearfully. “Lise! No! No, you can’t! Just-”

“Shut up!” Barbera exclaimed, her hand flew with malice, smacking Yusei upside the face.

Lise recovered from her shock quickly. White hot rage exploded inside her, and she snapped two whole pieces off the roof. “Okay, that’s it!” She backed up, ran forward, and jumped off the roof just as the roof door behind her creaked open.

Barbera was completely taken off guard by the well placed sneaker making full contact with her jaw at breakneck speed in a perfect side kick. She screamed and crumpled to the ground.

Crash Town was deadly quiet. Every eye was fixed to Lise as she rose fluidly, like a cat.

Barbera recovered from her shock and touched her face. It was already bruising and blood trickled from her lip.

“Don’t ever touch him again, you bitch,” Lise spat. Fiery rage fueled her every word.

Yusei started panicking immediately. This situation was just going from bad to worse. “Lise, behind you!”

At Yusei’s warning, Lise sidestepped one boy’s lunging punch. She whirled to defend herself and found she had neglected to properly think things through.

“Shit,” Lise muttered under her breath.

Still, she put up a good fight. It wasn’t really a fight, more of an intense scuffle of misplaced attacks. Instead of wasting her energy fighting, Lise put her efforts into dodging and letting her
attackers hit each other instead

Apparently Barbera hadn’t received the ‘don’t mess with us’ message. She had risen to her feet and spat blood onto the sandy streets. She signaled the gang.

Yusei watched anxiously. He hated not being able to move, much less help. He had no clue how they were going to get out of this mess.

“Hey!”

“Oh no…”

A rope lasso had ensnared Lise, pinning her arms to her sides. The boy who had caught her was smiling only for a brief second. Lise used her own body to drag him towards her and kick him away, forcing him to release his grip on the rope. Lise leveled a death glare at Lotten.

“More!” Lotten ordered, catching on.

“No!”

More lassos fell across Lise’s shoulders and midriff. Even so, she was still putting up a tremendous fight. Lotten actually had to take a step back she was advancing so stubbornly.

Barbera had such a nasty smile on her face that Yusei’s blood ran cold. She dragged Lise back to her, and started to tie her up despite her struggling.

“Lemme go!” Lise cried. Her struggling against the bonds grew tinier the tighter Barbera made the ropes.

“Now why would I want to do that?” Barbera whispered into Lise’s ear. She yanked hard on the ropes binding Lise’s wrists together at her back to tighten them. She tied a tight knot to hold everything in place, and Barbera smiled at her handiwork. The bindings were so tight Lise could hardly move her hands. Barbera smiled devilishly at Lise, twisted a few strands of Lise’s blond hair around her finger, and whispered again so only Lise could hear. “Who’s the bitch now?”

Lise recoiled in disgust, hating that she couldn’t do anything to get Barbera away from her.

Reassured of his safety, Lotten approached. He had been watching Yusei out of the corner of his eyes. He knew something was up by the way Yusei’s chest rose and fell erratically and how Yusei had started grinding his teeth together.

Lotten’s massive shadow fell over Lise, and she turned towards him. “Don’t touch me,” she growled, jerking her chin away from his grimy fingers.

“My, my, Yusei, what a pretty girlfriend you have. You called her Lise, right?” Lotten ignored Lise’s words and pulled her face up to his with two fingers. “In fact, she’s a little too pretty for you, but we can take her off your- AAH!” Lotten exclaimed and withdrew quickly from her, wiping at his nose.

Lise had spat in his face. “You can’t fucking hurt me, so let me go!” she demanded ferociously.

Yusei’s minute smile at Lise’s sheer daring was short lived.

Lotten sneered at Lise once his face was clean. In that moment Lise wished he would hit her. A singular bout of explosive rage would be better than whatever his cruel mind was coming up with.
She was going to pay for spitting on him. She could feel it.

“I can’t hurt you? Really?” Lotten purred. He clasped his hands behind his back and walked over to Yusei. “Want to test that theory?”

“What’re you-?” Lise’s eyes opened wide at the sight of Lotten raising his fists. “Wait, no stop!”

Lotten ignored her again, his fist connecting with Yusei’s jaw perfectly.

“Stop it!” Lise shouted over the sound of fists connecting with flesh. “You know he can’t fight back you fucking coward! Stop it!” Her rage was the only thing keeping her from crying. If she just kept yelling swear words, maybe that would make him stop.

Lotten did eventually stop, but only when a trickle of blood ran from Yusei’s lips. “There. Now we’re even.”

“Even? You’re nothing but a coward and a cheat! You’ll only fight when you know you can- MMPH!” Barbera had slapped a well-placed ‘X’ of duct tape across Lise’s mouth.

Lise’s struggles doubled. She was tied too tightly for movement to do her much good. She did let off a chain of muffled swear words though.

Yusei spat blood into the sand. If he had been angry before, now he was pissed. “Let her go, Lotten. She told you not to touch her.”

Lotten paused in squeezing Lise’s cheeks so that her lips and the tape puckered slightly. He slid his fingers down Lise’s face to cup her chin around the curve of his meaty fingers. “I don’t think either of you are in a position to make demands. Besides, I want Lise up here where I can see her pretty face.”

“Please! I’ll stay in the mountains if you just let her go,” Yusei begged.

Lise wiggled our of Lotten’s grasp, and shook her head at Yusei.

Lotten was too busy laughing to notice. The other gang members joined in.

“Once you’re slated to go to the mountain, there is no getting out of it. You have to learn to live with the hand you’ve been dealt,” Lotten grabbed a loose rope binding Lise and yanked her over to him and Yusei. “In this hand, your queen,” Lotten paused to grasp Lise’s cheeks. He smiled into her deadly glare, shaking her head back and forth. “The lovely Lise, has been captured,” Lotten allowed Lise to pull away from him. “And you are the joker powerless to do anything about it.” Lotten patted Yusei’s cheek patronizingly. “Get the picture?”

”I get it,” Yusei spat. His face was almost as red as his mark. It was a wonder he wasn’t breathing fire. “If one of us tries to escape, the other pays the price.”

Lise turned away, her feelings mixing up so much. This really was a lose-lose situation.

“Exactly,” Lotten simpered, clapping his hands together. “I don’t make deals when I already like the one I’ve got.” He pointed at Yusei. “You stay in the mines until you die,” his malicious grin grew wider as he yanked Lise’s head back around.

”Mph!” Lise protested.

”And we get to keep miss Lise for ourselves,” Lotten patted her head like she was a small child.
Barbera tugged Lise back to her by the same stray rope Lotten had used earlier. She dug her index finger sharply into Lise’s cheek, making her grapple with her bonds and utter gagged sounds of displeasure. Barbara’s smile was like acid as she spoke; “And don’t worry, Yusei, we’ll take good care of her.”

Lise had never seen Yusei so angry before, not even when Jack had stolen Stardust. He was well past pissed off at this point. He found the strength to curl his hands into fists.

“Boss,” the tiny wagon driver spoke up. “We need to go. He’s starting to move again.”

“Then it’s time for Yusei…to go bye-bye,” Lotten said dramatically. He waved mockingly.

He, Malcolm, and Barbera had identical sneers as they watched Yusei’s coffin lid close over him. Before it closed, Yusei caught Lise’s eye. Even through their anger, they were both scared. For themselves and each other.

Barbara dragged Lise back to a large wooden post by one of the other shops. “Don’t worry,” she crooned, making sure Lise was tied tightly against the post. “You’re little boyfriend will die long before you do.” She pinched Lise’s cheek before stalking away.

West watched the wagon pull away with sadness in his brown eyes. “Kalin…” His sister put a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Nico… What do we do now?”

“I don’t know,” Nico admitted, bending lower so she could embrace her brother.

///

Two cowboys lead Yusei, Kalin, and Ramon through the mountain’s interior. The tunnels were dark. Light came from small and sparsely placed lanterns. All three men were shackled to makeshift guillotines, minus the blades.

“It’s pointless to think about escaping,” one of the cowboys told them.

The two of them proceeded to free the three boys just to fasten shock collars around their necks. The other cowboy held up his duel disk threateningly. “Step out of line and I can shock you just like that.”

Just like before! Yusei realized. There’s gotta be something I can do to get these collars off. He scanned the floor for something, anything, he could use as a makeshift tool.

“It’s all your fault!” Ramon exploded. He grabbed Kalin and started shaking him. “If you hadn’t lost, this wouldn’t have happened!”

“Stop it!” The two cowboys went to intervene. “Break it up!”

Yusei spotted a loose nail in the guillotines. He bent down while the cowboys were distracted and managed to wiggle the nail free.

“You’re the reason we’re here! Answer me!” Ramon cried.

“You sent a bunch of people down here too, but starting today, the town belongs to us,” one cowboy reminded Ramon, dragging Ramon back by his hair. “Let’s go.”

“You’re coming too!” The second cowboy old Yusei. “Welcome to the workplace from hell.”
The five men made their way further into the tunnel, emerging into the inner cavern. The lighting was much better, but it was far from better.

“This place is…” Yusei didn’t continue. He had no words to describe the horrifying forced labor and brutal conditions all the workers were under. There was no hope down there.

Ramon started trembling as they watched many sick workers being shocked for ‘slacking.’

“You’ll work in this group. It’s a simple job. Dig up dyne!”

Kalin, Yusei, and Ramon were each given a pickaxe in turn. The two cowboys split Yusei and Kalin from Ramon, all three of them to continuously pick at the walls of the mountain to find more dyne until their deaths.

Yusei stared with dislike at the mountain he had to pick at before him. “Kalin…”

Kalin stubbornly didn’t respond. Until one of the cowboys used his whip on Kalin’s back. He stumbled to his knees.

“Kalin!”

“What are you standing around for? Start working!”

Kalin ignored Yusei and raised his pickaxe. He set to work with grim determination.

“Kalin,” Yusei repeated sadly. He didn’t have much of a choice. He too joined Kalin in picking at the rocks.

Time passed slowly. The rock was sturdy and didn’t give way easily. They would be there for a long time. Dyne was apparently deep in the rock, not mercifully near the surface.

Kalin hit something that sounded more like metal than dirt. His pickaxe crashed to the earth, and he received another punishing lash to his back.

“Stop staggering!”

“Kalin,” Yusei stopped to make sure his friend was all right.

Kalin gritted his teeth and rose once more. He had wanted this after all.

“Stop resting!” the cowboy ordered Yusei.

The boys continued to work, sweating in the stifling conditions of the mountain. In Kalin’s case, coughing as well.

An almost alarm-like sound resounded through the cavern. The workers continued to mine, sift and direct conveyer belts, but the cowboys watching them met another group of cowboys at the tunnel’s entrance.

“It’s finally time for a shift change,” one of them said.

“It’s hard to breathe in here,” another complained.

“We’re not ants.”

“Anything out of the ordinary?”
Their words were drowned out as Yusei looked around for an escape route. There was no way in hell in he and Kalin were staying here. He knew Lise would much rather die than live here.

*Lise?*

*Yes?* Was her immediate reply. She’d been quite bored tied to a post for several hours. Sure, Barbara, Lotten, and Malcolm had entertained her for a little while, but their interests had left more bruises than she would have liked.

*You okay?* Yusei felt the pull of Lise’s facial features curling into a look of disgust.

*Let’s just say I’m really glad we don’t have gross pet names for each other.*

*Oh ew.*

*Be glad you don’t have to look at it. Have you escaped yet?*

*Working on it. How about you?*

*Also working on it. And you said I wouldn’t need my fans.*

*I stand corrected, as always.* Yusei scowled a little deeper as he watched the cowboys out of the corners of his eyes and continued to look for an opening to escape. His jaw was starting to bruise, he could feel it aching. *See you soon!*

*Yeah?*

*I may have found our ticket out of here!*

*Good, because I’m about halfway out. I feel like a Christmas present.*

*Good luck…* Yusei hesitated for a half a second. *I’m sorry. I was too trusting.*

Lise waited for a minute to reply. *Kalin’s worth it. He’s our friend and he needed help, however misguided it came to him. You have a good heart…It’s one of the reasons why I love you. We’ll get outta this.*

Yusei felt warmth spreading in his chest and across his face. His situation, and Kalin’s, sucked majorly, and it was technically, definitely, his fault. Yet Lise was telling him what was done was done. Now all that was left was to get through.

*Bring Kalin out okay? We’ll need him.*

*Got it, and Lise? I love you.*

The cowboys were just finishing up their conversation when one of the workers collapsed.

*“Are you okay?”* one of the men tried to shake him into consciousness.

*“Out of the way!”*

*“Move!”*

*“Wake up!”*

The cowboys pushed the other workers away and slapped the fallen one’s face. He didn’t respond.
He’d been worked too hard. Two cowboys hefted the fallen man onto their shoulders and dragged him away.

Yusei grimaced angrily. He knew they weren’t taking the guy anywhere near a hospital.

“Don’t do it,” Kalin spoke for the first time, putting a restraining hand on Yusei’s shoulder before he could call out.

“Did he collapse from exhaustion?”

“That makes how many today?”

“What’s going to happen to him?” Yusei asked in a low voice. If there was no hospital, then…

“Who knows,” Kalin said gloomily. “There are no hospitals in hell.”

“They’re using dueling to do horrible things!”

“You’re an idiot,” Kalin said. He went back to working. “You followed me to hell to save me.”

“I’m not staying here,” Yusei stated. “We’re going to escape together.”

Kalin laughed humorlessly and pointed to his collar.

Yusei pulled out the nail he had stolen and made sure the guards weren’t watching. He put one hand to the collar, so he wouldn’t accidently stab himself, and pushed the nail into the collar’s controls until it shorted out. With a tiny click the collar popped open.

Kalin blinked, actually surprised. “As usual, your knowledge of machines comes in handy.”

“When the guards change shifts again, that’s our chance. I found an unused tunnel behind one of the machines. We’ll sneak inside and look for an exit.”

Kalin just returned to working.

“Kalin?”

“Escape alone. I’m staying here.”

“Lise and I came here to save you!”

“You’ve already saved me. I’m going to die here just like I wanted, along with dueling.”

“No, that’s not a life. It’s a living hell!”

///

Fireworks exploded over Crash Town and the mountains. Malcolm and his gang were still heavily partying throughout the night.

Lise watched idiots perform feats of drunk driving she would have deemed worthy of circus acts. She was also fairly certain Malcolm was on his sixth bear. Lotten just watched everyone celebrate with a satisfied smirk. Barbara, on the other hand, rotated between dancing and schmoozing it up with Malcolm. It made Lise cringe with disgust every time.

“The town finally belongs to me!”
“No, it belongs to you,” Malcolm declared grandly. “I’m renaming this place Barbara Town!”

“Oh Sweet Cakes, I’m so happy!”

“Anything for my little Dew Drop!”

“Yay!”

Lise made sure Lotten wasn’t looking when she made her last move. She sliced off her bindings and ran silently into the darkness. She yanked the tape off of her mouth and held in the scream of pain until it had passed.

“Okay, looks like I should be ok- whoa!” Lise nearly smacked straight into West and Nico. The two kids were pushing Yusei’s stolen duel runner out of the town.

West gasped and froze like a deer caught in the headlights. Nico put up her fists like she was ready for a boxing match.

“Just what do you think you two are doing?” Lise whispered urgently.

“Huh?” Nico and West exchanged looks of bewilderment.

Lise walked past them and pressed a few buttons on Yusei’s runner. “It’ll move a lot faster if we take the lock off.”

Nico breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank goodness.”

West grinned widely, a beacon of white in the dark night. “We figured you guys could use all the help you can get. We wanna help get Kalin, Yusei and our dad outta there.”

“Me too,” Lise smiled thinly at the boy. “You two push, and I’ll cover our tracks. We don’t want to leave a path straight to us.”

“Got it,” West started pushing again.

Nico joined him, making the task slightly easier. “It’s much easier to push now.”

“Good, let’s hurry,” Lise’s small blasts of chi from her hands erased the duel runner’s tracks as well as their footprints. Still, Lise had a sinking feeling that it wouldn’t be enough.

///

Lotten’s gaze fell back on the post holding Lise. At least it had been. The ropes were at its base, and Lise was nowhere to be seen. So was Yusei’s duel runner.

A drunken cowboy walked by Lotten.

“Hey,” Lotten called out. “Where’s the girl? And didn’t you put Yusei Fudo’s duel runner over there?”

“I don’t remember,” he shrugged. “Maybe Barbara decided it was time the girl learned a few things? I dunno.” He took another swig from his beer as he walked on.

Lotten scowled suspiciously at the mountain. “Just in case, I’d better go make sure those rats stay dead.”
“Kalin,” Yusei tried again.

“Leave me alone,” Kalin responded, sounding worn out and done with his old friend. “I’m dead. I’m going to die here.”

“I won’t let you die. Neither of us will. We’re bringing you home.”
Nico and West were halfway up the mountain in no time. They were having a bit more trouble pushing uphill, but they were making good time. Lise followed slowly, at a distance, still erasing their tracks. All three of them were getting tired, but they were far from stopping.

“Yusei will free Kalin from the mountain, right?”

“Of course,” Nico declared, a determined gleam in her eye. “Then they’ll need this to take down Lotten together!”

“Yeah!”

///

Kalin and Yusei were still hard at work mining when the shift change bell rang. Their overseer smirked and went to meet the relief team. They chatted with no concern for their charges.

Yusei recognized his moment. He dropped his pickaxe and pulled his busted collar off. “Now’s our chance. Let’s go.”

Kalin didn’t respond, but he did stop working.

“I’ll do whatever it takes to bring you with me, Kalin,” he lunged for his friend, slamming a well-placed fist into Kalin’s stomach.

“Yusei! You-!” Kalin managed to get out before he fainted.

Yusei took off Kalin’s collar the same way he had his own, and pulled him onto his back. With Kalin in tow, Yusei made his way for the secret tunnel he’d spotted earlier.

The guards still hadn’t noticed anything out of the ordinary. They were reveling in their positions above the workers. “How many will pass out today?”

“I’ll bet eight people.”

Yusei slipped away without being seen easily. It was hard to see in the darkness of the tunnel, but it was slightly easier to breathe. After a few minutes, Yusei stopped to make sure he wasn’t walking into a dead end. A bit of fresh air rejuvenated his senses. There had been no good air working in the mines.

“There’s a breeze! We’re close.”

In just a few more minutes Yusei and Kalin had made it out of the caves. The moonlight was more than enough to see by.

“We made it,” Yusei smiled with relief. There were many more things to take care of, but one step was out of the way.

Kalin raised his head groggily. He slid off of Yusei’s back.
“You’re awake.”

Kalin blinked and looked around. “No!” He seized the front of Yusei’s coat. “I told you to leave me alone!”

“Kalin!”

The two boys’ fighting brought them tumbling down the hill. They landed before the many posts holding up duel disks of the fallen. There were so many, it looked like they stretched on for miles.

“What is this place?” Yusei murmured. He didn’t like the eerie feeling hanging in the air.

“There’s so many,” Kalin said, forgetting his anger for a moment. “Because of me these are here.”

“Kalin, what’re you talking about?”

“Don’t you see, Yusei? This…” Kalin sank to his knees. “This is a graveyard. I as good as killed these people.”

“Kalin…”

Yusei heard the sound of people approaching. Thinking someone had discovered their escape, he looked around for cowboys. Instead his eyes fell on Nico and West pushing his runner.

Kalin had seen them too. “West, Nico!”

The two of them stopped pushing Yusei’s runner. “Kalin!” Their small faces lit up with excitement.

Yusei and Kalin ran up to them. “Why do you have Yusei’s duel runner?” Kalin asked.

“I knew you’d be okay! The Enforcers can get out of anything!” West grinned widely.

“Wait,” Yusei looked around. “Where’s-“

“Okay, I think that’s all of our tracks. I’m pretty sure that’ll only slow down any pursuers though, so we should really.-“ Lise said as she ran up to meet the others. She stopped talking when Yusei practically bowled her over, holding her so tightly Lise’s feet left the ground. She smiled and returned the gesture. “I’m glad you’re okay too. I missed you.”

“You have to hurry and escape!” Nico broke in. “Take the duel runner and go!”

“Don’t be stupid,” Kalin scolded. “Why would you put yourselves in danger like this?”

“Look who’s talking,” Lise pointed out. “It’s just as stupid to stay here.”

Nico nodded, clasping her hands. “You’re not meant to be in this town. You’re our hero.”

“But isn’t there someone more important to you that you want to rescue?” Kalin said gently, kneeling down to the eye level of the kids.

“Yes, but for now we need to rescue you.”

“Someone else they want to rescue?” Yusei mumbled. He gasped in realization. “Lise, the pendant.”
“What? Oh!” She extracted the pendant’s chain from the other two around her neck and pulled it off.

“That’s my dad’s pendant!” West pointed.

“Seriously?”

Lise handed it to West, who examined it in his palms. Nico leaned over her brother’s shoulder.

“It’s dad’s!”

“You’re right!”

“Did you guys meet our dad?” West immediately fired at Lise and Yusei. “Was he okay? Why do you have this?”

“He threw it up on the cliff when we first got here. I figured I’d better keep it just in case,” Lise explained.

“He wasn’t in the same cave as me and Kalin,” Yusei eyes drifted hesitantly towards the duel disk grave markers. He hoped the worst had yet to happen.

“Then Nico and I will become as strong as Kalin to rescue our dad!” West said, clutching his father’s pendant with determination.

“Not just your dad. We’ll save all the people in the mines,” Lise stated boldly.

“You will?” Kalin blinked in surprise.

“Well, we know how to take their collars off. That’s a start,” Yusei said. “After witnessing the conditions of the mines, we can’t just leave them.”

“You were planning this from the start.”

Lise smiled and shrugged. “More or less.”

“But you should go, Kalin. Take the kids and go. We’re not letting you die in this mountain,” Yusei told him.

“Why are you all doing this for me? I’m worthless.”

Before anyone could respond, the sound of a duel runner reached their ears. The light from the runner’s headlights were like a beacon in the relatively dark night.

Everyone’s eyes widened fearfully. “That’s-“

“I knew you wouldn’t just lay down and accept your deaths!” Lotten shouted angrily, coming up on his prey quickly. “I’ll finish you in an instant. Don’t let them escape! Corner them in the mountain!”

“Gotcha!” The cowboys following Lotten responded. Their headlights joined Lotten’s in flooding the mountainside with light.

“Kalin, the kids!”

“You two, follow me!” Kalin instructed, leading the kids into the mountain’s caves.
“What’re we gonna do?” Lise was watching Lotten and his lackeys get closer, nervously clenching and unclenching her hands. “They’re practically on top of us.”

Yusei jumped aboard his runner, put his helmet on, and tossed Lise her helmet and duel disk. “We meet them head on!” He yanked Lise on board with him, and gunned the engine. “Hang on!”

“What, whoa! You didn’t let me get on behind you!” Lise protested, but she still wrapped her arms around Yusei’s shoulders.

“There wasn’t time. Just hang on!” Yusei drove between Lotten’s cowboys and was forced to pull off to the side in the face of Lotten’s massive duel runner.

Lotten smirked down at them. “I’m not letting you get away.”

“Then bring it! We’ll take you on!” Yusei challenged.

“Both of you at the same time? Interesting. I’ll crush two birds with one stone!”

“You ready?” Yusei asked, speeding ahead of Lotten.

“Born ready,” Lise declared, sliding her duel disk onto her wrist dealer. “Although, it’ll be a tight squeeze when I draw cards.” She scowled at Yusei pointedly.

“Sorry,” Yusei flushed pink. “I wasn’t thinking.”

“Well, start thinking,” Lise said as Lotten followed them into one of the mountainside’s many caves. “Because we’ve got ourselves into a tight duel.”

“Fine by me!” Lotten shouted up to them.

“Duel!” Speed World 2 engaged, and all three duelist’s decks were automatically shuffled.

Yusei: 4000
Lise: 4000
Lotten: 4000

“I’ll go first!” Lotten decreed. “I’ll finish you both off no problem! I summon Gatling Ogre!”

That’s-

The monster from before!

*Its ability works in place of an attack, but what if he can’t use his ability? “I send Effect Veiler from my hand to the graveyard to activate its effect! Your monster’s effect is negated until the end phase!”*

Lotten froze with all his cards in his hand. *He stopped my one turn kill! However... “I set five cards!”*

*Yusei negated his monster’s ability, but it’s not stopping him.*

“I end my turn.”

///
Nico and West were running as hard as they could to keep up with Kalin. It didn’t help that the cavern was uneven as well as dimly lit. That and their pursuers were catching up quickly with the help of their duel runners.

“Damn,” Kalin swore. It didn’t matter what happened to him, but they were not going to hurt Nico or West while he was around.

///

“My turn,” Yusei reached around Lise for his card. Gatling Ogre may have a powerful effect, but its attack points are a different story. I’ll get it out of the way for Lise’s turn. “I send one monster in my hand to the graveyard in order to special summon Quickdraw Synchron. I can use Quickdraw as synchro material in place of a tuner monster with synchron in its name.”

Lotten laughed. “If you summon more monsters in this tiny tunnel, it’ll be too tight. I’m afraid I can’t allow you to synchro summon. I activate the continuous trap Narrow Tunnel! All players can only summon one monster. If there’s more than one monster on your field, you have to destroy them until there’s only one left.”

Great, now I can’t use Quickdraw to synchro summon, or summon out any more monsters. It’s the same for him, but he has Gatling Ogre’s effect. He did activate one of his traps, so now he only has four set cards. He can’t beat either of us in one turn, but he can take one of us out next turn if he manages to set another card. If he chooses to beat me first, then my duel runner will automatically stop. Lise will have to keep going on her own, which means flying. Lotten can’t know she’s the Crimson Dragon or he’ll never let her out of his sight. Looks like this is my best bet. “I set two cards face down and end my turn!”

“It’s my turn then,” Lise drew her card with less flourish than usual so she wouldn’t elbow Yusei in the stomach. She consulted her cards, allowing Yusei to steer them through the perilous paths of the mountain. I can try to destroy his Gatling Ogre with a card or a monster, but his set cards could stop me. Maybe that’s what I should let him do. If he uses up his cards, he can’t use his one turn kill to beat either of us instantly. Okay then, here goes. “I’m summoning Flame Alchemist to the field in attack mode!”

(Flame Alchemist: Atk: 1500 Def: 900)

“Now Flame Alchemist attack Gatling Ogre!”

///

“I’m sorry, Kalin,” Nico said, still running beside him and her brother.

“Why?”

“This is our fault.”

“Don’t apologize. It’s not your fault. This is my fight. I won’t let anyone hurt you, I promise!” Kalin exclaimed. His promise looked like it would be short-lived; the cowboys were gaining on them. “Damn!” Up ahead Kalin spotted an unmanned rail cart. “Over there!”

Nico and West hopped in. Kalin pushed the cart forward. It lurched forward unwillingly, but eventually it picked up speed with the help of the downward sloping tunnel and gravity. When the cart was going fast enough Kalin jumped inside too.

“Damn!”
“We won’t let you escape!”

The cowboys followed Kalin’s cart deeper into the mountain.

///

Lotten chuckled to himself. “Sorry, little lady, but I’m afraid I’m going to have to stop you right here. I play my trap Negate Attack!”

“Say what?”

“Which ends the battle phase, allowing me to keep my ogre out on the field.”

“We’ll see how long that lasts. I place two cards face down and end my turn.”

“Now it comes down to his next draw. He won’t be able to defeat us, but he can still dish out some major life point damage,” Yusei reflected. His eyebrows were knit together tightly.

“Luckily, I made him use one of his cards,” Lise added. “Hopefully it’s not a spell or trap.” She crossed her fingers since knocking on wood in their current predicament was not possible.

“I…draw!” Lotten dragged out revealing his type of card dramatically.

“Come on… Is it a spell or a trap?”

Lotten placed his new card in his wrist dealer. “I can’t take out all your lifepoints, but it doesn’t hurt me at all to watch you cling to what’s left! I’ll send my remaining three facedowns to the graveyard to deal Yusei 2400 points of damage!”

Yusei: 1600

Lise: 4000

Lotten: 4000

“But I’m not done there!” Lotten grinned with malicious glee. “I’ll be tributing my Gatling Ogre in order to tribute summon Full Armor Ogre!”

(Full Armor Ogre: Atk: 1600 Def: 1600)

“You have more?!”

“Of course. There are many scenarios in this fight, but all of them end with my victory! Full Armor Ogre, show them what I mean, attack Quickdraw Synchron!”

“If this attack succeeds you’ll be past the Speed World 2 safety line!”

“Working on it! I activate the trap card Desperate Tag!” Yusei countered just as his monster was sent packing to the grave. “When my monster is destroyed in battle, battle damage becomes zero. Then I can special summon a level four or below warrior type monster from my hand! I summon Max Warrior!”

“But there’s still the bullet,” Lotten reminded him cheerfully.

“Huh?”
Yusei and Lise looked up to see a giant bullet looming above them.

“I activate Full Armor Ogre’s effect. When it destroys a monster in battle, you take 1000 points of damage!”

“That’s where you’re wrong! I play my other trap Return Marker! This negates the effect of your monster and you lose life points equal to your monster’s attack points!”

“All right!” Lise cheered, her smile unusually bright in the darkness of the tunnel.

“Uh oh!”

Yusei: 1600
Lise: 4000
Lotten: 2400

“I end my turn,” Lotten growled angrily.

“I’ve gotta be careful these next few turns. If Lotten has two speed spells in his hand by the time he gets four speed counters, he can wipe out all my lifepoints,” Yusei thought out loud.

“It might be your turn,” Lotten pointed out. “But don’t forget the odds are stacked in my favor.”

///

The track Nico, West, and Kalin’s cart was sliding down had turned into a rollercoaster. A rollercoaster that was exceedingly dangerous, no fun, and with four cowboys on their tail.

Mercifully, the cart kept rolling into a less stomach churning tunnel. Even so, the cowboys were far from slowing down.

“I’ll slice that mine cart in half!” the driver of the first runner declared, his ride sporting sharp saws.

“Don’t come any closer!” West shouted.

“Yeah, go away!” Nico agreed forcefully. She joined her brother in picking up the rocks left behind in their cart and hurling them at their pursuers.

“Hey!” the cowboys protested, falling back slightly at the onslaught of debris.

“We did it!” West laughed.

“Stop it! Stay behind me!” Kalin scolded.

“No way! We wanna fight too! We’re gonna help you escape!”

“Why would you two go so far for me?”

“I watched you in town,” West said. “I learned that no matter what happens you keep fighting. That’s why, no matter how hard it is to rescue my dad, my wishes will come true if I don’t give up and keep battling, like you, Kalin! That’s why you’ve gotta fight again! You can’t give up now!”

“You’re wrong,” Kalin shook his head, the wind from their speeding cart blowing his hair back. “I
wasn’t fighting. My heart was always dead. You were seeing what you wanted to see.”

“You’re wrong!” West insisted.

“I believe in you too!” Nico said fervently.

Kalin turned to her, but caught sight of the track ahead. It was going to hook very sharply to the right.

“Playtime is over!” the cowboys had caught up again.

Kalin gritted his teeth and pulled back, hard, on the brakes. The cart immediately began to slow.

“Kalin, they’ll catch up if you use the brakes!”

Despite West’s warning, Kalin kept a firm grip on the brake. The cart tipped on its side, riding the track on only two wheels, but it made the turn.

The pursuing cowboys were not so lucky. Too caught up in their chase, they had neglected to remember their surroundings. Both of them crashed headfirst into the cavern’s walls.

“Nice one!” West cheered, pumping his fist in the air.

“Kalin!” Nico smiled so brightly at him, she could have been acting in a toothpaste commercial.

Kalin stared in bewilderment at the two kids who had more faith in his life than he had in himself. I’m fighting right now though. I’m fighting to live.

“Kalin!” West pointed ahead of them at the next cavern.

“What is it?”

The cart came to a halt at the edge of what looked like a giant circle. The circle turned out to be a large turnstile that brought the cart around 180 degrees. Before the trio could tell what was going on, the cart had been locked into place and tipped over. The cart’s cargo, people and dirt alike, came tumbling out. Nico, West, and Kalin slid down a conveyor belt and landed in a heap at the very bottom.

The dust from their fall cleared quickly, revealing two armed cowboys standing over the kids and Kalin.

“Don’t fight back!”

The cowboys raised their duel disks threateningly, but gasped when they realized Kalin’s neck was bare. “He removed his collar!” They pulled their guns instead. “Try anything and I’ll shoot you with this shock gun!”

“Stand up!”

The three did as they were told. Even West’s smaller hands were held up in surrender.

Kalin took a second to look around. It resembled the place he had been working with Yusei, but much quieter, as well as deeper in the mountain. This is another work site.

“Kalin?”
“When I give you the signal, run,” Kalin whispered to them. “There’s another mine cart at the end of the rail. Get in and escape.”

“What about you?” Nico whispered back.

“Don’t worry about me. Just worry about staying alive!” Kalin shouted, aiming a nice right hook at the cowboy in front of him. “Run!” Before the second cowboy could pull his gun, Kalin had him on the ground too. “Go!”

Nico and West did as they were told and ran for the second cart. Kalin picked up the cowboys’ fallen shock gun and fired it at the group of cowboys coming to stop them. He hit two out of the three faster than they could draw their weapons.

West and Nico were just about to climb aboard the next cart when they stopped. Both of them looked like deer caught in the headlights.

“Get in, West! Nico! What’re you doing?” Kalin demanded in confusion, joining them by the cart. At the sound of the two kids’ names, an older man looked up. “West? Nico?”

“Dad!”

“Dad!”

West and Nico broke into similar grins of delight and ran into their father’s arms.

“That’s their father?” Kalin murmured. He ducked just in time to avoid getting shock blasted. More cowboys had come. He fired randomly at them and yelled at the kids. “Hurry up and get in the cart!”

“But dad is-“

“You two need to escape.”

“No!” West protested. “We finally found you!”

“I’m sorry, Kalin, but we can’t leave dad behind,” Nico insisted calmly.

“Then bring him along!” Kalin cried exasperatedly. “Follow me!” He continuously fired at the cowboys while Nico and West helped their father into the mine cart. Once the gun was empty, Kalin ditched it and got the second cart rolling too.

“Damn,” one of the cowboys swore as the cart rolled out of range. “Get the duel runners! We’re going after them!”

In no time, the cart had two duel runners following. Both equipped with sidecars for maximum cowboy involvement. Just perfect.

“They’re coming!” Nico warned.

“They don’t know when to quit,” Kalin commented dryly.

“We’ll be fine,” the kids’ father said, holding his family in his arms. He didn’t care what happened to him anymore. He was with his family again.

I’ll fight to protect this family. Kalin found himself silently vowing.
“My turn!” Yusei began his next turn. “I release the warrior type monster Max Warrior to special summon Turret Warrior! Turret Warrior gains attack points equal to the released monster’s attack points! Max Warrior had 1800 attack points, so Turret Warrior’s attack points become 3000!”

“What?”

“Turret Warrior attacks Full Armor Ogre!”

_Yusei: 1600_

_Lise: 4000_

_Lotten: 1000_

“But, when Full Armor Ogre is destroyed, I can special summon Gatling Ogre from my graveyard!”

“In fairy tales ogres stay dead once you beat them!” Lise reminded Lotten angrily.

“Well, this is no fairy tale, little girl. On my next turn I’ll have seven speed counters. Which means if I draw a spell, you can say goodbye to your boyfriend!”

Chapter End Notes

Little extra tidbits I thought ya'll might enjoy
*Yusei pulled Lise on in front of him because he remembered Lise saying she didn't like being shoved up against the arc of his runner. He totally forgot it would make it harder for the both of them to turbo duel. (oops)*
*Lotten is mostly going after Yusei in the duel because he considers Yusei to be more of a threat than Lise. He also assumed Nico and West helped Lise escape. Considering I made him treat Lise with abhorrent sexism in the previous chapter, I figured this fit with his character.*
*If Nico and West's dad doesn't tell Kalin his name in the next chapter/episode, then I will just go with the dub name for him, Jordan*
*Lise didn't need the empathy link to know Yusei was glad she was safe and that he missed her during their hug. Mostly because she felt the same way. ;)*

Also, I'm going to try to update this story every Friday or Saturday. My Miraculous Ladybug story, for any readers interested, will most likely be updated on Mondays or Tuesdays. Stay tuned and thank you for all your support!
Kalin, Nico, West, and their father kept barreling down the tracks in their little rail cart. Two duel runners carrying cowboys pursued them.

“My name’s Jordan, by the way,” he reached his large hand up to Kalin.

“I’m Kalin,” Kalin shook the other man’s hand with some hesitation, but he was glad for some friendliness in the face of distress.

“We always capture our prey, dead or alive!” Speaking of distress, the cowboys were gaining on them. “No one escapes this mountain!”

“Kalin!” West warned his friend. He and his family had other things to focus on, cutting their reunion short.

He slowed the cart down in response. “Don’t worry, I won’t let them catch us!” Kalin promised, socking the cowboy driver off his ride. “How’s that?” Kalin smiled, genuinely smiled, for the first time in what felt like decades. This family was worth protecting.

“Damnit! It’s time we send the grim reaper back to the afterlife!” One of the cowboys growled. He looked closer and spotted Jordan’s collar was still intact. He grinned wickedly. “Do it!”

Another cowboy slapped a card onto his duel disk. Instantly, Jordan cried out in pain. Although he was used to the shocks, the pain still hurt anew every time.

“Dad!” Both kids exclaimed in worry. There was nothing they could use to remove the collar.

“It’s the collar. I’m fine,” Jordan groaned, sinking to his knees.

Kalin grit his teeth. He’s lying. I’ve gotta do something. He moved to the back of the cart and braced himself against the edge.

“What’re you doing?”

In answer, Kalin leapt off of the edge of the cart. He landed a perfect front kick to the lone driver of the nearest duel runner. The cowboy flew off, and Kalin landed awkwardly spread out in the driver’s seat, like an awkward starfish unsure how to cling to the uneven terrain beneath it. Kalin right himself and stopped the collar’s shocking.

The other duel runner pulled even with Kalin’s. “I won’t let you escape!” He rammed into Kalin’s runner sideways.

Kalin’s runner and shoulder dragged against the cavern’s walls as he kept moving. Unfortunately Kalin plowed straight into a steel beam holding the tunnel up, throwing him from the duel runner’s
seat. He managed to grab the edge of the cart for about two seconds, but before he could fall to his
doom, Nico grabbed his hand with both of hers.

“Nico!”

West braked heavily at the front of the cart. He couldn’t think of anything else that could help get
Kalin aboard again.

The two cowboys still following spun out of control. When they finally righted themselves, they
were still impatient to catch Kalin and the others.

Nico was still hanging on to Kalin for dear life. Her hands were starting to get sweaty, but she dug
in with her nails. She was *not* going to let go of Kalin no matter what. She slipped under Kalin’s
weight despite her resolve.

“Nico!” West came to the aid of his sister. He wrapped his arms around her so she too wouldn’t go
flying out of the cart.

“It’s fine, Nico, just let go!”

“No! I won’t! Never!”

“No…”

“Don’t you dare let go either!”

“I won’t…” Kalin whispered, giving Nico his other hand.

Jordan’s hands joined them next. With the help of all three of them, Kalin was easily pulled back
into the cart.

Kalin landed heavily in the cart’s bed, breathing heavily.

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” Kalin got back up to his feet.

Nico smiled with relief at him.

Kalin couldn’t help but return her expression. His features fell seriously when he turned to Jordan.

“Thank you, you saved me.”

“Same here,” Jordan’s eyes were bright. “It’s all thanks to you.”

“Stop it,” Kalin closed his eyes and turned away in remorse. “You’re in this situation because I
kept winning.”

“It’s the same for me.”

“Huh?”

Jordan’s eyes had a different kind of light. Regret and determination mixing paradoxically in his
brown irises. “Nothing I ever did paid off, so I ended up in this town. I was winning, and I was
happy. I always looked pathetic to my children, but I showed them I was strong. That strength was
an illusion though. I knew I’d eventually end up like this. I finally realized I was looking for a
place to die.”
“A place to die…” Kalin’s eyes widened considerably. *Just like me.*

“Most people who come to this town feel the same as me. But even I heard the rumor that a man kept winning in this land of death. Everyone called him ‘the grim reaper.’ But I disagree. After seeing you now I’m certain! Even if this is a place to die, you have a strong will to live!”

///

**Yusei: 1600**

**Lise: 4000**

**Lotten: 1000**

“I happen to like my boyfriend where he is, douchebag!” Lise drew her card. “I play my speed spell Subtraction! By lowering my speed counters by 3, I can destroy one monster on the field!”

“Trying to get my monster out of the way? Ha!”

“I destroy my own monster; Flame Alchemist!”

“What!” Both Yusei and Lotten were caught off guard.

Lise barely winced as her monster went up in golden smoke. “I dislike the rules of your Narrow Tunnel, so I think I’ll just get rid of it. I summon Flame Enchantress to the field and activate her second ability! She can destroy a spell or trap card on your field! Say good-bye to Narrow Tunnel!”

“Now we have some room to move around!” Yusei smiled.

Lotten growled angrily. “But you used up your own cards in order to destroy mine!”

Lise cracked a small smile. “But that ugly look on your face was worth it. Oops,” she put a hand to her heart dramatically. “That was just your face. I use the speed spell Double Summon, since I have two speed counters left, I can normal summon an additional time this turn, and summon Smoke Raven! Flame Enchantress can’t attack right now, but Smoke Raven can half its attack points to attack you directly! Go Smoke Raven!”

Lise’s monster cawed loudly, turned translucent, and swooped straight through Lotten.

**Yusei: 1600**

**Lise: 4000**

**Lotten: 600**

“Your turn,” Lise said sweetly, saluting Lotten mockingly.

(**Flame Enchantress: Atk: 1000 Def: 200**)

(**Smoke Raven: Atk: 800 Def: 1000**)

Lotten ground his teeth together like he was trying to shred paper between them. “You might have been able to chip away at my lifepoints, but I’m not done yet. I just have to draw a speed spell or a trap and it’s bye-bye to your boyfriend!”

“Not this again,” Yusei complained.
“He does like being dramatic,” Lise agreed.

Lotten drew his card painstakingly slowly. “Well, well, well, looks like you got lucky again. But I release Gatling Ogre to special summon Big Cannon Ogre!”

“He’s releasing Gatling Ogre again?”

“Another strategy?”

“Yes. There are several endings, but they all spell out bad news for you two!”

(Big Cannon Ogre: Atk: 2400 Def: 2400)

“His monsters just get uglier and uglier,” Lise scowled deeply.

“When Full Armor Ogre is in my graveyard, I can special summon Big Cannon Ogre by releasing Gatling Ogre from my field.”

“But it only has 2400 attack points. It’s not getting past my Turret Warrior at 3000 attack points.”

“Oh, that doesn’t matter. This time you’re not the target. I want a piece of your pretty girlfriend!”

“Aw, you’re mad,” Lise taunted, but she braced for impact.

“Big Cannon Ogre attack her Smoke Raven!”

Yusei: 1600
Lise: 2600
Lotten: 600

When the smoke cleared, Lise thought she was in the clear. But another giant bullet fell from the air and collided into her. Lise clenched her teeth to keep from crying out.

“Due to Big Cannon Ogre’s effect, you take double the damage!”

Yusei: 1600
Lise: 800
Lotten: 600

“You okay?”

“I will be,” Lise groaned, unclenching her teeth.

“Don’t worry, Yusei. Next turn I’ll finish you off next turn. Your move.”

We’re all barely hanging on by a thread. Lise is past the Speed World 2 safety line, and I’m not far behind her. This isn’t good. I’m gonna need a major game changer.

///

The rail cart was going so fast it was practically careening out of control every few seconds. Kalin had to constantly man the breaks to ensure everyone stayed alive.
Behind them the dim light of the cowboys’ duel runner began to come into focus.

“These guys just won’t quit,” Kalin murmured, irritation in his voice.

Jordan poked his head up. He spotted the cowboys behind them, and then a rail switch with two pathways ahead of them. “Kalin, if we go right at that point, we’ll be outside!”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah, easy peasy!” West declared with a grin. He pumped his fist in the air enthusiastically.

“They must be kidding. They’re not taking a single step outside.” The cowboy in the sidecar pulled out his rail switch controls and typed in the code. With just another push of a button, the tracks switched to the left!

“The course changed!” Kalin’s jaw dropped open the same second Jordan’s did.

“It’s never easy, is it?” Nico sighed.

Their cart kept rolling into a massive cavern. The track followed a circular pattern, hugging the walls, and threatening a steep drop to death if the four of them were thrown overboard.

“You’ll fall into the depths of hell!”

West gasped and pointed near the midway point of the track. It had broken and ended with a very long fall! The only hope was the opposite route that lead back into the mountain. “We’re gonna fall!”

Kalin’s features hardened. “Damn!” He spotted another track switch near the ending of the rail. “If we can just change that point…”

Jordan had spotted it too. If I break that console, I can manually change direction with that lever. He picked up a fallen piece of rock from the bed of the cart and put it inside his blue jumpsuit for safekeeping. He pushed Kalin gently out of the way.

“Dad?” Nico and West looked questioningly up at him.

“Kalin, please listen to my request. Please take care of my children.”

“You’re not going to-“

“I want to show them what I’m capable of again.”

“Stop! You need to show them that you’re still alive!”

“I’m fighting in order to live!”

Kalin retreated slightly, taken aback. He suddenly knew there was no stopping Jordan.

“Dad!”

“Don’t do it!”

Nico and West shouted fruitlessly as their father jumped to the control switch below. His aim was true, and he hung from the lever of the switch like a flag on a windless day. Jordan’s strength was already wavering. It was taking everything he had to hang on.
“Damn! I won’t let you!” The cowboy with the controller pressed another button, locking the switch in place.

Jordan was prepared for this though. He took the rock from his clothes and pounded on the switch’s locking device until it shorted out.

“What?”

With everything he had left, Jordan began pushing the rails back to the right.

“No! Shock him!” The driving cowboy did as he was told, and played a card.

Jordan screamed from the pain shot into him from the collar. He slipped back down, pulling the rails to the left as he did. Sweat rolled off him, but he couldn’t give up yet.

“Dad!”

Jordan didn’t let the continued shocks stop him anymore. In one last push, the rails changed to the right. But the shocks had become too much. Jordan hung on to the rails with only one hand.

“Dad!”

Jordan smiled sadly at his kids. “Nico, West, I want you to live! Live the best lives you can since I couldn’t! I love you both!” With one last smile he let go.

“DAD!” Nico and West screamed as their father fell to his death.

The three of them rolled to safety, thanks to Jordan.

Nico and West had started sobbing uncontrollably.

Kalin, on the other hand, was frozen with fear and confusion. “Why?”

“Don’t let them escape!” The cowboy in the sidecar ordered as the two of them drove after.

“Oh, we won’t!” Kalin declared, punching the driver out.

The driverless duel runner kept going, plowing into one of the rocks, and tossing the cowboy from the sidecar. Kalin punched him out too, just for good measure.

He pilfered their ride with ease after that. West rode in the sidecar and Nico behind Kalin.

Both kids were still crying as Kalin drove into a different tunnel.

“It’s gonna be okay, guys,” Kalin told them as gently as he could. “Your dad didn’t want you to end up dead. He showed you how to live by protecting you! I know it sucks now, but it’ll be all right. I promise. I’m here for you, and I’ll show you how I live too!”

“Kalin…” Nico whispered.

“Hang on tight.”

“Okay.”

///

“My turn!” Yusei reached around Lise again to get at his next card. “It’s here!”
“Sounds like we’re getting somewhere!” Lise grinned.

“I activate the speed spell Fallen Synchron from my hand! I can activate this card when I have five or more speed counters. By removing the required synchro material monsters in my graveyard from play, I can special summon a synchro monster! I remove Level one Sonic Chick and level five Quickdraw Synchron in my graveyard from play! I synchro summon Drill Warrior!”

(\textit{Drill Warrior: Atk: 2400 Def: 2000})

“Drill Warrior’s effect activates! By halving Drill Warrior’s attack points, it can attack you directly!”

“What!”

“All right! Finish him!” Lise cheered.

“Drill Warrior attacks you directly!”

“I activate the trap card Explosive Wall from my graveyard! By removing this card in my graveyard from play, your attacking monster and all cards on my field are removed from play!”

“Well, how about I get rid of that trap?” A new voice declared loudly.

“Kalin!” Both Lise and Yusei smiled up at him.

“Hold on tight!” Kalin instructed the kids.

“What?” Lotten looked up just in time for Kalin to land heavily on top of his runner. He swerved dangerously, and skidded against the cavern walls.

Kalin landed perfectly, and sped up to meet Lise and Yusei.

“We’re home free!” Lise grinned widely, and pointed ahead of them at a spark of light at the end of the tunnel.

“It’s the exit!” Yusei realized speeding up.

Kalin was right behind him.

“I won’t let you escape from this mountain!” Lotten declared, gaining on everyone. He pushed a button on his runner.

“What?”

All five of them looked back in time to watch Lotten’s enormous runner extend its legs in order to drive right past them, and settle back down in front.

Lotten sneered back at them and continued. “Activate, Explosive Wall! I’ll not only blow up all the cards, but also you!” Lotten held something up.

“What’s he talking about?”

“I’ll find out!” Lise flipped off of Yusei’s runner into midair before he could even open his mouth.

Lotten tossed the white object over his shoulder, and looked back for a brief glimpse. He raised an eyebrow. \textit{Interesting. Miss Lise can fly.}
Lise approached the object midflight and froze, her eye twitching. “It’s a…bomb…” She caught the countdown clock as it hit the ground. One second left! She didn’t have time to think. Lise turned and threw her arms wide, materializing protective bubbles around Yusei’s runner and Kalin’s.

The bomb went off, engulfing the entire mountainside in smoke. Lise absorbed the full brunt of the blast, and was instantly knocked out. Her protective bubbles faded along with her. Nico, West, and Kalin were thrown off of their duel runner, as was Yusei. Lotten, the only one fully aware of what was coming, managed to stay seated despite being sent hurling through the air. All the duel monsters dissolved, the battle canceled.

“Kalin!” Nico called desperately. She reached for him.

“Nico!” Kalin did the same, trying to get closer to her.

“Kalin!” Nico screamed his name, fearfully watching their hands drift apart.

“Nico!”

West had been knocked out too. His hands were loosening their grip on his father’s pendant.

Yusei and his runner tumbled end over end into the canyon below the mountain. Lise, Kalin, and the pendant soon followed him.

Nico and West had landed at the canyon’s edge. Their landing had knocked them out, and they were nowhere near awakening.

Clutching at his bruised arm, Lotten walked up to the cliff’s edge. He snickered at the immobile bodies of the kids and turned to stare suspiciously at the dark canyon below. “There’s no way they could survive a fall from this height.”

Without a second thought, Lotten gathered up the kids, tied them to his runner, and drove back into town.

Malcolm was just waking up from the town’s rather rowdy night. “What’s going on?” he tried to move and found he was tied tightly to a chair. “What’s this?”

“G’morning bro. You finally woke up,” Lotten sat down beside him with a confident sneer. He snagged a yet to be emptied bottle and downed some.

“Malcolm drank a lot and partied hard,” Barbera explained, smirking down at Malcolm.

“Barbera?”

Barbara’s smirk deepened. “You said this town belonged to me. You renamed the town in my name and signed over the deed to me. I had to make sure it was official,” she explained, removing the deed from the confines of her shirt.

Malcolm’s eyes went wide as Saturn’s rings. “What’re you guys talking about?”

“See, if the town belongs to Barbera,” Lotten pulled Barbera into his lap by her waist. “Then it belongs to me as well.”

“Huh?”

“I may have forgotten one teensie little detail,” Barbera giggled. “I’m married to Lotten.”
“Married to Lotten!” Malcolm glared at his brother and who he had believed to be his girlfriend. “You betrayed me!”

Barbera kicked the table, sending it and Malcolm crashing to the sandy desert.

“Starting today, this is Lotten town!”

“You think you can get away with this?!” Malcolm cried, but even as he said it, he knew just by the many goons surrounding him, that his brother could in fact do whatever he wanted.

///

Yusei was just coming to at the bottom of the canyon. His helmet had saved him from any extreme injuries, but he was still sore with bruises. He got up, removed his helmet, and slowly made his way over to Lise.

She was a short distance away, also on her stomach.

Yusei rolled her onto her back gently, and shook her a little. “Lise? Lise?”

Thankfully she was a tad more responsive than she had been in similar situations of the past. Lise’s eyes opened and she sat up on her own. “Oh god, my head hurts,” Lise groaned, pushing her helmet off.

“Sorry, this trip was supposed to be short and simple. It’s my fault we’re in this mess,” Yusei helped support Lise’s back. He didn’t want to let her go until he knew she was okay on her own. She had just taken the full blast of an explosion.

“You’re right, but bruises heal. Why don’t we focus on more important things right now instead of the blame game? Afterwards, I will tease you relentlessly though,” Lise offered a small smile.

“I don’t doubt it.

“Hang on, you drew a speed spell so couldn’t you have used Speed World 2’s effect to defeat Lotten?”

Yusei face-palmed. “Oh shit, you’re right! I’m such an idiot. Wait a minute, couldn’t you have put an energy shield around the bomb instead of us?”

“Fuck, you’re right! I wasn’t thinking!” Lise put her head in her hands in complete frustration with herself.

“Well, that settles it. We’re both idiots.”

“I don’t think there’s a word to describe what’s worse than worse.”

“I couldn’t do anything.”

Lise and Yusei’s attention was drawn by the angst-filled words of Kalin. He was waking up too.

“Nico, West, Jordan, Lise, and Yusei… You all protected me, but I couldn’t protect anyone.”

“That’s not true,” Yusei spoke up. “You did everything you could to protect those kids.”

“What’s the point? I failed…” He caught sight of the pendant West had dropped and picked it up.
The three of them collected themselves enough to stand. They’d been extremely lucky not to have broken or cracked anything, but bruises were already blooming along everything that had been battered against the rocks.

Eventually they found themselves back at the duel disk graveyard.

“We’re back here again,” Kalin said quietly. He walked towards one of the posts.

“I didn’t notice just how big this graveyard is during the night,” Lise whispered, her voice haunted. “So much death.”

Kalin held up the pendant and slipped it onto the post. If no one was going to make a grave for Jordan, then this at least would be his grave marker. Kalin doubted Jordan would mind sharing.

Yusei and Lise joined him, both aware that silence was best at the time.

“I’m sorry,” Kalin uttered softly. “I failed. I was a corpse after all.”

Light from the duel disk suddenly illuminated Kalin’s face.

“That duel disk is still working!” Yusei told him.

“Is that even possible?” Lise gasped.

“Apparently,” Yusei shrugged.

“I see. You won’t allow this to be my final resting place.” Kalin took the pendant back and slipped his arm into the duel disk. He raised the duel disk high above his head. “I’ll become the grim reaper again! I’ll drag them down and show them what real hell looks like! And this time, I’ll save Nico and West!”

“We’re in too,” Lise pounded her fist into her palm.

“Together,” Yusei nodded in agreement.

The three of them watched the sun reach its zenith.

“We’ll lend each other our strength!”
Just like always, the sun was nearing sundown. Even so, the town was totally different. Barbara and Lotten controlled everything.

Two men were changing the sign depicting the town’s name. It had been labeled Crash Town, but the new sign read Lotten Town.

Just as the sign was nailed into place, a commotion in the square stole the attention of the two working cowboys. The crows in the town squawked loudly and flew off, their feathers drifting through the air.

Barbara expertly brandished her whip, slicing off the nearest cowboy’s scarf. She did the same for the cowboy beside him.

Nico and West, tied to the same post Lise was earlier, watched the scarves fall to the sandy desert just as the other gang members did.

“Why?” The first cowboy demanded, brandishing a fist at Barbara. “I thought you let us join your group! That’s what Lotten said, right?”

“Yeah!” his friend beside him agreed. Both of them had their hands clenched in fists, but their knees shook slightly.

“Did I really say that?” Lotten emerged from the crowd of cowboys with a smirk. Barbara blew him a kiss and turned back to the two unlucky boys. “We don’t need soldiers anymore. We lost two workers last night, so you two will duel to see who replaces them. Since Lotten rules this town now, we’ll still need a steady flow of workers even if we’re not competing for them. That’s just how we’re going to survive.”

The small, fat man and the tall, muscled man parked their wagon in the usual spot. They were ready to apprehend the next loser at a moment’s notice.

The cowboy with red hair decide to make a break for it.

Barbara wasn’t having any of that. She flicked her wrist and her whip encircled the boy’s neck. “Take out your duel disk and battle!” she demanded, maintaining a firm choke hold with her whip.

“Help me!” the cowboy wheezed, appealing to the other cowboys watching in shock. “This’ll happen to you too!”

“I just have to win, right?” the duelist chosen to duel the red head slapped his duel disk on. “I refuse to die!”

“You-I won’t die either!”

Barbara smirked and let the cowboy go. She watched with a satisfied smirk as the two waited for the sun to hit the horizon.

Both boys were trembling though. Despite their resolve they were sweating as well as breathing heavily.

Lotten put his hands on his hips and addressed the two children. “I can’t send you to the mountain.
Work like that would kill you two. So you’ll be replacing Lise as Barbara’s slaves. See how this town is really like?”

“No! Kalin is gonna save us! He’ll beat you!” West insisted, struggling against the ropes that bound him.

Lotten leaned close to the small boy’s face, grinning wickedly. “Kalin is dead, just like he wanted.” He laughed and stood back up to his full height.

“Kalin’s alive!” Nico hung her head, her eyes full of light despite her worry. “He has to be…”

“Stop having hope. You’ll live in despair, just like them.” His gaze fell on the two duelists still awaiting their fate.

“We’ll eventually end up like them, right?” One of the two cowboys working on the town’s sign whispered.

His friend didn’t answer. Something distracting had caught his attention. “That sound!”

Suddenly Kalin’s dark silhouette appeared like a beacon across the horizon. The darkness of his clothing was a stark contrast to the warm orange and yellows of the sun behind him. The sound the cowboy had heard was Kalin’s harmonica. Somehow he had managed to save it.

“It can’t be!” Barbara gasped.

Nico and West, in contrast, were ecstatic. Their smiles filled up their entire faces.

Kalin stopped in the middle of the square. The wind continued to tussle his hair and coat though. “I came back from hell.”

“Kalin!”

“You’re alive?” Lotten’s mouth dropped open.

Kalin ignored Lotten. “But this place is also hell. You’re fine with this? You do know they’ll sacrifice all of you eventually?”

“That’s right, we don’t have to obey him!”

“Don’t be getting any ideas!” Lotten growled. “You have nowhere to go! Don’t forget that your lives belong to me!”

“I see,” Kalin blinked calmly. “So if you’re gone, their lives won’t belong to anyone.”

“Stop talking nonsense! We have hostages!” Barbara jabbed her thumb at Nico and West.

A metallic, wheeled sound filled the air.

“What’s that sound?”

Yusei was driving full throttle into town aboard his runner. Lise rested right behind him, hovering slightly to make the runner as light as possible.

“Ready, Lise? Ready…Now!” Yusei leapt into the air, aiming right for Nico and West’s post. He could feel Lise’s fingers clutch at the back of his jacket.
“I don’t think so!” Lotten snatched Barbara’s whip. He snapped the whip at Yusei, dragging him off the runner by his neck.

“Yusei!” Not having much of a choice, Lise sat down and took the controls. She landed in a skid, spraying sand everywhere, but braked into the skid until the runner stopped. She dismounted and ran for the kids.

“Nico, West, don’t worry. We’ll get you out of there!” Kalin promised, going for the kids too.

Lise drew her fans, their steel blades gleaming in the sunlight. Kalin was right behind her.

“No you won’t!” Barbara stepped between them. Lotten tossed her whip back and she twirled it menacingly. “No one is taking these kids anywhere.”

“Oh really? You know you can’t beat me or Kalin,” Lise glared at her. She was itching for a fight.

Barbara smirked and smacked her whip into her hand repeatedly, as if testing its strength. “I don’t have to beat you. Our boys here will just ship you three all back to the mines if I just give the word.” She stepped closer to Lise. “And I seem to remember you didn’t fare so well against multiple enemies last time.”

“Lise, we can’t,” Kalin put his hand out to stop her.

“Fine,” Lise growled. She sheathed her fans and ran over to Yusei who was just getting up. She put a steadying hand on his back. “You okay?” she asked in a much gentler voice.

“Yeah,” Yusei winced, and spit sand out of his mouth on his way up to his feet. “I think.” He pulled his helmet off.

Lotten snickered at the three of them. “I gotta hand it to you, I never thought you three would crawl out that canyon alive. But if this is the way you want it, I’ll finish you off here.” He fastened his duel disk and holster to his waist. “I’ll make sure to bury all three of you this time!”

“Looking forward to it,” Kalin said calmly.

“Yep, that’s pretty much why we came here.”

“And when we win, you have to get the hell out,” Lise’s eyes narrowed at Lotten.

“Don’t do it!” Nico shouted at them. “Run away! Don’t worry about us!”

Kalin shook his head. “I told you I’d show you how I live. I promised to protect you.”

“Protect us?” West whispered, blinking in confusion.

“This disk belongs to the dead.” Kalin held up his duel disk and holster. “I’ve returned as the grim reaper to carry on their wishes in my life!”

“Kalin…”

“So don’t give up! I promise to rescue you! Just like your father did!”

Despite their rather dire situation Nico and West couldn’t help but smile.

“You’re gonna let him talk to you like that?” Barbara frowned at Lotten.
Lotten just chuckled softly. “I’ll let him say his last words. It’s almost duel time after all.”

Lise, Yusei, and Kalin got into position. Lotten faced off against them alone. The stage was set, and the sun was merely inches from the horizon.

“I’ll battle you all at the same time, but in return I get a small handicap. I get 15 cards for my first hand. That’s three people’s worth, so I think it’s fair.”

Lise’s brows squished together. “That’s almost half your deck on the first turn. Sounds pretty stupid if you ask me.”

Fifteen cards in his hand? Yusei’s eyes widened. Is he planning to go first and defeat all three of us in one turn?

“So what’ll you do?”

“Kalin, we can’t. He’ll-“

“I don’t mind,” Kalin shrugged.

“Right,” Yusei smiled at his friends.

“If we’re afraid to die, we’ll lose. The first move goes to whoever draws fastest,” Kalin made no move to attempt to draw first.

“Kalin…Yusei…Lise…”

Horizon and sun collided just a moment later.

“Duel!”

The four of them drew quickly. Lise, Yusei, and Kalin were ready with their five cards each. Lotten held up his hand triumphantly. He spread his fingers apart, revealing he had drawn not five, but 15 cards.

“Fifteen cards,” Yusei scowled.

“I hate to admit it, but that was pretty impressive,” Lise grumbled, crossing her arms.

“I was the fastest,” Lotten smirked.

Lotten: 4000

Kalin: 4000

Lise: 4000

Yusei: 4000

“My turn!” Lotten drew his next card. “I summon Gatling Ogre! I load the bullets, and for every set spell or trap card that I send to the graveyard, Gatling Ogre’s effect deals you with 800 points of damage.”

He’s got all the bullets loaded, however, I have Effect Veiler which can stop his one turn kill. Yusei reached for his card.
“Don’t move, Yusei,” Kalin said.

“Huh?” Yusei paused with his hand over his cards.

Lise’s head whipped around and she stared at Kalin with her eyes wide. Her eyebrows were halfway into her hair they were so high. “Wait, what?! Why not?”

Kalin ignored her. “Bring it, Lotten.”

“You truly are the grim reaper!” Lotten laughed. “Since you want to die so badly, I’ll send you to hell again! Fire!”

“Kalin!”

The ogre’s rain of bullets blasted full force into Kalin. He fell backwards, almost in slow motion. Like a tiny whisper, Kalin fell into the sand. They waited a few seconds, but Kalin wasn’t moving.

“Kalin!”

“Kalin, no!”

Lotten: 4000
Kalin: 0
Lise: 4000
Yusei: 4000

Lotten chuckled cruelly, the barrel of his ogre’s gun smoking. “Guess you just couldn’t stop my one turn kill. The grim reaper is-“ Lotten stopped midsentence.

Kalin was getting back to his feet no problem. A dark, rippling aura surrounded him though, making his dark ensemble look even darker. Kalin’s hair moved of its own accord inside the aura’s power, and he stepped back into place beside Lise like it was nothing.

“Impossible!” Barbara exclaimed, her eyes wide and her hands trembling.

Now it was Kalin’s turn to smirk. He still had zero lifepoints.

“How?” Lotten demanded, his fists clenched. “You have no lifepoints!”

“I told you I’m the grim reaper who has returned from the depths of hell. A grim reaper can’t die,” Kalin explained. The aura surrounding him turned into a monster that hovered over Kalin’s head.

“A monster?”

“When effect damage reduces my life points to zero, I can discard all other cards in my hand to special summon Infernity Zero in defense mode. When Infernity Zero is on the field, I don’t lose even if I have zero lifepoints. However, I get a death counter for every 500 points of damage that I take. When I have three counters, Infernity Zero is destroyed, and I lose.”

(Infernity Zero: Atk: 0 Def: 0)

“What? That’s a crazy monster!”
“No, it’s brilliant! All right, Kalin!” Lise grinned widely, brandishing her fists, and jumping a little bit.

“Creepy little… you really are the grim reaper.”

“Exactly,” Kalin chuckled. “I’ll show you how a grim reaper lives!”

“Right,” Lotten rolled his eyes and grabbed more of his cards. “I still have bullets left. I reload all the bullets! Kalin, every bullet here is for you! Fire!”

Suddenly, Gatling Ogre’s ability stopped, like someone had hit the pause button. A cowboy-like skeleton monster held a gun to Lotten’s head.

“If I take effect damage when I have no cards in my hand, I can remove Infernity Doom Slinger in my graveyard from play to negate the damage.”

(Infernity Doom Slinger: Atk: 100 Def: 100)

“Next,” Kalin continued. “You get to choose Infernity Doom Slinger’s effect.”

“What?”

“I’m gonna draw the top card of my deck. If it’s a monster card, you take damage equal to the effect damage that I received plus the effect damage that was negated. If it’s not a monster card, I take damage equal to the effect damage that I received this turn. If you decline to choose, you can’t deal effect damage this turn. What will you do?”

Lotten looked like he wanted nothing more than to throw Kalin into a wood chipper. He still had to focus on the duel, and Kalin’s monster still pointing a loaded gun to his sweaty head. If he draws a monster card, I’m finished. If it’s not a monster card, Gatling Ogre’s effect damage will fire three consecutive death counters, and he’ll lose.

Kalin grinned, loving the turmoil he could see in Lotten’s face. “Honestly, I forgot how many monster cards I put in my deck. Come on, Lotten; what’s it gonna be?”

Lise and Yusei shared a look.

You think he’s leaving life or death decisions to luck again?

Lise bit her lip, her eyes darting between the other two men. I certainly hope not.

Lotten, on the other hand, was the most uncomfortable out of all of them. His face was covered in sweat. Due to battle royale rules, he can’t attack on the first turn. That means I should just strike him on my next turn. I’m clearly in the better position, so I don’t have to take an all or nothing risk. “I decline to choose. I end my turn.” As Lotten made his decision, Doom Slinger vanished.

“You afraid of the grim reaper?” Kalin taunted.

“Say whatever you want! I’d rather play smart.”

Kalin shrugged and placed his hand on his deck. “My turn.”

Did he draw a monster card?

Kalin smirked at Lotten, and shook his head. “Too bad. I set one card and end my turn.”
Lotten growled with the fury he felt. *It wasn’t a monster card! If I had chose, I would’ve won!*

“My move,” Lise declared. “Because you control monsters and I don’t, I can special summon Inferno Wolf to my field.”

(*Inferno Wolf: Atk: 2100 Def: 600*)

“Then I play the spell Target. By choosing my Inferno Wolf as the target, you can’t attack any other monster on the field.”

Lotten snorted, and shook his head. “Making yourself a target, huh? Not a smart tactic, but don’t worry. I’ll beat you last, and show you how it’s done.”

Lise wrinkled her nose and grimaced. “Hard pass, ass face. I place two cards face down and end my turn.”

“My turn,” Yusei’s glare was particularly fierce as he began his turn. “I summon Justice Bringer!”

(*Justice Bringer: Atk: 1700 Def: 1000*)

Yusei consulted his cards.

*I’ll use this card on Lotten’s next turn to negate Gatling Ogre’s ability.*

“I know you have Effect Veiler in your hand!”

A hole was blasted through Yusei’s card. He looked up to find Lotten had activated a card.

“I play the trap card Pinpoint Shot! If I can guess the name of a card in your hand, that card goes to the graveyard.”

Yusei just frowned as he sent Effect Veiler to the graveyard. “I set one card and end my turn.”

Even with the three of us working together, I knew Lotten would be hard to beat. After dueling him only once before, he figured out my strategy for this duel.

“My turn!” Lotten drew his card, and barely glanced at it. He already had a plan in motion. “I switch Gatling Ogre from attack to defense position. Then I activate the equip spell Double Arms from my hand! Gatling Ogre now deals double the damage!”

“So instead of 800 points, it’ll deal 1600 points of damage,” Yusei clarified, his scowl deepening.

“Well, shit,” Lise swore. She consulted her cards, but right now she didn’t have anything that could stop Lotten’s monster.

“You’re gonna try to defeat me with a single blow? Interesting,” Kalin smiled, merely amused.

“Kalin, take Gatling Ogre’s effect! Fire!”

“I flip over my trap card Dodge Roll!” Kalin countered swiftly. “Once per turn I take zero damage!”

“Too bad for you; I’ve still got ammo! Fire!”

Yusei quickly stepped up to bat. “I play my trap Half Shield! Battle or effect damage is halved!”

The bullets still went through, hitting Kalin with force. However, their effect was dulled. Kalin straightened up to find a fiery, blue doom counter hovering beside him.
“A doom counter…”

“Since Gatling Ogre’s damage was halved, you took 800 points of damage,” Lotten’s smirk was disarmingly confident despite his monster’s ability being semi-thwarted. When you have three doom counters, your life is over!”

“It’s fine. Keep shooting at me. Send me to hell.” Kalin’s voice never wavered as he spoke. “You still have bullets left.”

Lotten’s grin turned into a frown. He consulted his field. But even if he takes another bullet, he’ll only gain one doom counter.

Kalin put a hand right on his chest. “Shoot me.” His unblinking gaze was starting to rattle Lotten.

Does he really want to die in this duel? Yusei wondered, watching his friend bait Lotten.

I don’t think so. Lise shook her head. Nobody who wants to die could smile like that.

Yusei watched closely. Either way, I don’t think he’s leaving anything to luck anymore.

“What will you do?”

I see now. He’s acting as a decoy so that I’ll run out of bullets. Lotten returned his gaze to his opponents. “I’ll save my bullets. I end my turn.”

“Well that was anticlimactic,” Lise grinned at her old friend. “I like this version of how you duel. There’s more power behind it.”

“It’s not mine,” Kalin shook his head, but he did smile minutely. “I’m dueling for all those who have died in the mountain, for Nico, West, and their dad. Back when I was leading the Enforcers I thought I was dueling for the good of others. But when I became I Dark Signer, I learned I was only dueling for myself. I lost everything that mattered and I didn’t know how to pick up the pieces of my life. But now I’m fighting for people who believe in me, and I feel alive.”

“Kalin…” Yusei blinked, his eyes wide and blinking rapidly.

“I won’t run away any more. I’ll live and battle for those who believe in me. This is my new way of dueling! My turn! I special summon Infernity Archfiend!”

(Infernity Archfiend: Atk: 1800 Def: 1200)

“If I draw this card when I have no cards in my hand, I can special summon it. When it’s special summoned, I can add one Infernity monster in my deck to my hand. I summon the Infernity Mirage that I added to my hand! When I have no cards in my hand, I can release this card to special summon two Infernity monsters from my graveyard. I summon Infernity Beetle and Infernity Beast!”

(Infernity Beetle: Atk: 1200 Def: 0)

(Infernity Beast: Atk: 1600 Def: 1200)

“I activate Infernity Beetle’s effect. By releasing it, I can special summon I can special summon two Infernity Beetles from my deck, hand or graveyard.”

“This is how a grim reaper lives…” Lotten whispered to himself.
“Nice! If the four monsters’ attacks succeed, Lotten will have zero life points!” Yusei realized, a small smile etching itself onto his face.

“Go for it!” Lise cheered.

“No! Lotten you’re not allowed to lose!” Barbara screamed at him.

“That’s why Kalin is my hero,” West declared, his chest puffing out as much as it could under the ropes.

Nico smiled too. “Kalin!”

“Infernity Beetle attacks Gatling Ogre!”

“I flip over my trap card Back Attack Ambush!” Lotten interrupted the attack halfway through. “I can activate this card when your monster attacks. The battle phase ends, and I special summon Ambush Tokens in defense position equal to the number of monsters on your field in attack mode!”

If Kalin felt any frustration at all, his poker face concealed it well.

“When I summon Ambush Tokens, you take 500 points of damage for each one I release!”

“Each one deals 500 points of damage?” West’s eyes had grown large.

“He’ll have three doom counters!” Nico gasped.

“Don’t let them win, Lotten, you hear me?!” Barbara reminded him. She smirked triumphantly, crossing her arms.

“You’re going to die right here, grim reaper. You’re finished, Kalin! Burn the grim reaper to a crisp!”

“I activate Justice Bringer’s effect! The effects of all your special summoned monsters are negated!” Yusei swooped in, and not a moment too soon. Thanks to Justice Bringer, the tokens fiery wheels of death were stopped in their tracks.

“How dare you!” Lotten complained.

“He saved him,” Nico sighed, releasing some of the tension she’d felt just a second ago.

“Thanks,” Kalin nodded in acknowledgement.

“I’m not about to let my friend die.”

“And neither will I,” Lise agreed. “We will beat him.”
“Defeat me?” Lotten scoffed, shaking his head. “You and the grim reaper can’t do anything!”

“I beg to differ,” Lise frowned.

“Since he’s the grim reaper, he can save this town,” Yusei nodded, his brows furrowed.

“Yeah! Save the town!” West cheered, a smile brightening his face.

“Kalin, we believe in you!” Nico added, smiling just as widely as her brother.

Kalin granted the two kids a small smile, then directed a glare at Lotten. “Leave it to us, we’ll defeat him soon.”

“Yep.”

The cowboys watching were getting restless. Many shared looks of confusion and turmoil.

“They believe they’re going to win. Are they really going to save this town?”

Barbara snapped her whip immediately at the sight of the indecision in the men. She knew she had to squelch that growing bud of disloyalty for Lotten immediately. “Enough nonsense! Lotten will win! If you betray him, you go straight to the mines!”

_Lotten: 4000_

_Kalin: 0 (1 doom counter)_

_Lise: 4000_

_Yusei: 4000_

“It’s my turn,” Lise drew her card, thankful she could use the full extent of her arms. “I summon Flame Enchantress to the field in attack mode! She has two abilities, but right now I only need one. She halves her attack points and attacks you directly!”

_(Flame Enchantress: Atk: 1000 Def: 200)_

_Lotten: 3500_

Lotten winced as his lifepoints were reduced. “You’re going to regret that.”

“I bet you anything I won’t,” the corner of Lise’s lip turned up. “Next, I’ll have my Inferno Wolf reduce your Ambush Token count by one. Attack!”

_Inferno Wolf slashed its claws, and the defense position Ambush Token was sent packing._

“I end my turn with a face down card.”

“My move,” Yusei began. “I send a monster card to the graveyard to special summon the Quickdraw Synchron from my hand. Then, when a tuner monster is on my field, I can special summon Quillbolt Hedgehog from my graveyard. I tune my Quickdraw Synchron with Quillbolt Hedgehog and synchro summon…Nitro Warrior! Nitro Warrior attacks Gatling Ogre in defense
“Good,” Kalin smiled minutely when the ogre went up in smoke. “That annoying monster is finally gone!”

Lise’s eyes narrowed with suspicion. She didn’t like Lotten’s calm façade. He should have been visibly panicking after losing his key monster.

“When Nitro Warrior destroys your monster, your other monster in defense position switches to attack mode, and Nitro Warrior can attack again!” Yusei’s monster proceed to flip Ambush Token from defense to attack mode. “Nitro Warrior attacks Ambush Token!”

*Lotten: 800*

“Next, Justice Bringer attacks Ambush Token! I set two cards and end my turn.”

*Almost there!* Lise bit her bottom lip, flexing and unflexing her hands in an attempt to get them to stop sweating.

*Hopefully next round we can beat him. But for now…* “With no set cards, you’re out of bullets. You also don’t have Gatling Ogre anymore.”

“Impressive,” Kalin bowed his head in a slight nod. “We’ve chipped him down to the wire.”

“No to go for the rest of him,” Lise grinned, shifting her weight so that she was ready for anything.

“Shut up! You won’t be cocky for long! It’s my turn! I activate the spell Card of Burial Magic from my hand! I remove three spell cards in my graveyard from play to draw two cards from my deck. Then I tribute my last Ambush Token to tribute Summon Long Barrel Ogre!”

(*Long Barrel Ogre: Atk: Def: 3000*)

“Long Barrel Ogre,” Kalin repeated slowly, his features sullen.

Yusei scowled deeply too. “Sorry guys.”

“Don’t be,” Lise growled. “Lotten is the only one who’s gonna be sorry.”

“Long Barrel Ogre’s effect destroys your monster in attack position with the most attack points,” Lotten sneered, loving the angry faces of his opponents. “Oh, and you take damage equal to half the destroyed monster’s attack points!”

“What?”

Lotten ignored the exclamation. His eyes fell on Kalin’s field. “Due to Infernity Zero’s effect, you won’t lose even when you have zero lifepoints, but you get a death counter for every 500 points of damage you take. When you have three death counters, even the grim reaper will die. Long Barrel Ogre, shoot Infernity Archfiend!” Lotten’s monster shot a hole straight through Kalin’s Archfiend, and the bullet hovered dangerously over Kalin’s head. “Infernity Archfiend has 1800 attack points. Half of that is 900. Here’s to a second hole in your dead heart!”

“Kalin!” Both Lise and Yusei cried.

Their friend had been in mid-fall, but he steadied himself on his knees. Kalin was shaking, but he got back up to his feet. He had two doom counters hovering over his head as he rose.
“If I give you one more death counter, you die! I can use Long Barrel Ogre’s effect twice per turn.”

“What?!"

“Time for the third hole in your heart; the one that finally kills you! Die!”

“NO!” Nico and West screamed, helpless to stop Lotten and his monster.

“I flip over my trap Skill Twist!” Yusei countered quickly.

“What?!"

“Yusei?”

The smoke cleared, revealing Yusei and no Nitro Warrior. “Skill Twist redirects a monster’s effect to a different monster.”

*Yusei: 2600*

“Yusei…” Kalin blinked, the tension in his shoulders dissipating.

“I told you, I won’t let you die,” Yusei smiled at his friend, flashing a bit of teeth.

“Being friends with a zombie would be really gross. We prefer you alive,” Lise joked, winking at Kalin.

“But you lost 1400 lifepoints, Yusei,” Lotten threw his hands up, palm out. “I don’t care if you die first, but it’s cute you want to help each other out. I set one card and end my turn.”

“There’s no way we’ll die before you,” Kalin declared, drawing his next card. “I activate the spell card Blaster Cartridge from my hand! I send four cards from my deck to the graveyard.”

Lotten gasped quietly. He had caught a glimpse of the first card Kalin was sending to the graveyard. *That card is Infernity Doom Slinger, the grim reaper’s envoy.*

“I draw one card, and the activated spell card Blaster Cartridge is placed on top of my deck. When I draw this card, I send it to the graveyard.”

Lotten pursed his lips as he thought. *Infernity Doom Slinger’s effect is a roulette ability. You risk life or death, but I know the identity of his top card. The top card of his deck is a spell card, not a monster. The moment he uses Doom Slinger it’s my win, but how do I get him to use it?*

“Guys, the key to our win is defeating his Long Barrel Ogre,” Yusei said.

“I know,” Lise nodded.

“Got it,” Kalin said. “I summon the tuner monster Infernity Randomizer. Infernity Randomizer tunes with both my Infernity Beetles and Infernity Beast! I synchro summon Infernity Doom Dragon!”

“All right, Kalin’s ace!” Yusei grinned up at the winged creature.

“Three thousand attack points…” Lotten broke into a devious grin. “That’s not enough to blast through Long Barrel Ogre.”

“Yeah, but I want Long Barrel Ogre to accidentally fire its gun. With Infernity Doom Dragon,
when I have zero cards in my hand one of your monsters is destroyed, and you take damage equal to half that monster’s attack points.”

“What?”

“Say good riddance to your ogre!” Lise saluted Lotten mockingly.

“I’m flipping over my trap card Metal Coat! It equips to my monster, and the equipped monster can’t be destroyed by card effects!”

Kalin snarled in frustration. “When Infernity Doom Dragon uses its effect, it can’t attack on the same turn. I end my turn.”

Lotten opened his massive mouth and laughed loudly. “I thought you were going to defeat Long Barrel Ogre and then me? Maybe I’m the grim reaper.”

“Don’t flatter yourself!” Lise growled. The irises of her eyes had turned red she was so furious. “Yusei and I are still here! That means if I can’t beat your fucking ogre, then he can! That’s why we’re a team!”

“Lise…” Yusei’s tone was more warning than worry. He had already felt the increase of gravity around her.

Her hair was moving slightly in her self-created wind. “I’m fine,” Lise said, her expression dangerous. She drew her card. It’s here! “I summon Solar Butterfly to the field in attack mode! Because she was successfully summoned, I can draw two cards from my deck. Then I think I’ll perform a little synchro summon! I tune Inferno Wolf with Flame Enchantress and Solar Butterfly to synchro summon... Crimson Starburst Dragon!”

Lotten merely raised an eyebrow. “Your little dragon, thought just as beautiful as you, can’t even compare to my ogre’s attack points.”

“You forget, I have more cards. I play the spell Megamorph and equip it to Crimson Starburst Dragon! This makes the original attack of my monster 1000.”

“How stupid can you get?! Megamorph lowers your monster’s attack points because you have more lifepoints than me!” Lotten snickered like a child at her.

Lise breathed in and out through her nose. “True, but I needed a monster with lower attack to pull off my move.”

“Your move?”

“I play my other spell Heroes Helper! I select a monster on my field with 1000 or less attack points and then that monster can attack you directly!”

“What?!”

“Go Crimson Starburst Dragon; burn up his lifepoints!”

“Oh no!” Lotten’s eyes went wide as he realized what Lise’s attack would do to him.

“Stop!” Barbara cracked her whip, halting the battle phase, and Lise’s attack. The cowboys under her employ leveled shock guns at the trio.

Lise, Yusei, and Kalin watched as the cards and monsters on the field vanished. In just a few quick
glances they realized they were surrounded.

“This duel is over,” Barbara declared, brandishing her whip in front of Nico and West.

“Barbara…”

“Lotten, we chose who’d win and lose from the start,” Barbara reminded him.

The short, fat man in the wagon gasped. “You’re breaking the town’s most important dueling rule?”

Barbara smirked at the cowboys leveling more shock guns at the wagon drivers. “Lotten controls this town! He makes the rules, and if he wants he can break them too. So you’re not allowed to win. Right?” Her smile at Lotten was like poison it was so nasty.

“You can’t just-“

“Surrender! Then we’ll make sure you three die together, or the kids will die in your place.”

“You can’t do that!”

“Nico! West!”

“C’mon! Surrender already!” Barbara smiled devilishly and cracked her whip in the direction of Nico and West.

“Stop it!” Kalin shouted at her, and began to remove his duel disk.

“No Kalin, you have to keep dueling!” Nico insisted. Her words and voice were strong, but tears began to fall down her face. She knew exactly what she was doing. “You’re not battling just for us! Weren’t you going to set the people in this town free? You’re not the grim reaper! You’re this town’s savior!”

“Shut up!” Barbara cracked her whip at the kids again, and raised her whip for another swing.

A cowboy aiming his shot gun at her head stopped Barbara in her tracks. “We won’t follow your orders anymore!” He and the cowboy beside him pulled off their red scarves.

“That’s right! We control our own destiny! We’ll bet on Kalin and his friends!”

“Really?” Kalin released his duel disk, letting it stay on his arm. He set his jaw. “I won’t surrender.”

The rest of the cowboys removed their red scarves as well.

Lise smiled and held up her duel disk. “Shall we continue with your defeat?”

“You guys…” Barbara’s lips curled in an ugly grimace.

A shock blaster’s fire rang out. Both cowboys standing near Barbara went down.

“Lotten!” Barbara grinned at her husband, free to move again.

He smirked triumphantly at her. His blaster’s barrels were smoking.

“Stop!”
“That’s cheating, and you call yourself a duelist!” Kalin ground his teeth together.

“I’m a realist,” Lotten turned to the three of them with his most disgusting sneer of the day. “Barbara is right. We chose who would win and lose from the start. You were marked for death from the beginning. You’re spirits that this town killed!” Lotten leveled his shock blaster at each of them in turn. “Adios!” His finger twitched against the trigger.

Lise tensed, her hands outstretched. She had planted her feet earlier, ready to push off of them at a second’s notice.

Luckily she didn’t have to do anything.

Suddenly a card came spinning out of nowhere. It hit Lotten’s blaster before he could fire it, knocking him off balance. The card fell into the sand, displaying its Blackwing monster.

“Crow has arrived!” Their red-headed friend announced from the roof of the nearest building.

“Crow?!” Kalin’s mouth dropped open.

“Yusei, Lise, thought you two could use a pick up!” Crow grinned and flashed them the cheesiest thumbs up he could muster.

“Nice!” Lise cheered, doing a victory jump.

Yusei returned Crow’s gesture with a smile of his own.

Barbara had lost her patience. She untied Nico and West, then dragged them after her. She never let go of her whip as she held the two kids in a death grip.

“Kalin!”

“Nico, West!” Kalin stepped forward to rescue them.

“Stop!” Barbara ordered. “I can’t promise they won’t be hurt!” She held up her whip threateningly.

Next second Barbara was gasping in the dirt of the desert. She looked up at her attacker.

“Even though you’re a lady, Jack Atlas won’t allow you to be cruel!”

“Jack too?” Kalin was thoroughly confused. He hadn’t expected more old friends to join them.

Jack smiled at him, then raised an eyebrow in irritation at Yusei and Lise. “Next time leave a note would ya? You’ll be easier to find.”

“Oh fuck,” Lise face-palmed. “I knew I forgot something!”

Kalin laughed, lighthearted for the first time since he’d arrived in this town. “This is the best! The Enforcers are back together!”

“Wow,” West gushed, jumping up and down. “The legendary Enforcers all together are so cool!”

Barbara shuffled closer to Lotten. Both of which had deer-in-headlights eyes.

Sirens and shouting erupted from the mountain like an explosion. Trudge and an army of his officers were evacuating the workers, and arresting the cruel cowboys.
“Damn…” Lotten reached into his pocket and pulled out a trigger. He pressed it and the entire town exploded!

Smoke billowed out in every direction. It covered the former enforcers, townspeople, Nico and West in a dark curtain.

“Lotten?!”

“Outta my way!” Lotten shoved his wife away, and used the cover of the smoke to make his getaway.

“Nico, West, you okay?” Kalin gathered the kids in his arms, making sure they were all right despite their coughing.

“Yeah!”

“Damn, Lotten’s getting away!” Kalin swore.

“Kalin, take my duel runner!” Yusei said when he could speak without coughing. “Finish the duel! Finish him in one turn!”

“Thanks, Yusei,” Kalin smiled. He ran for the red bike, donned the helmet, and sped after Lotten.

“You won’t take me!” Barbara screamed fiendishly. She snatched up her whip again and scuttled to her feet. “You can’t arrest me! I’ll take you with me!” She snapped her whip at Nico, West, and the Enforcers.

Lise threw herself into the line of fire. She caught Barbara’s whip on her wrist and dragged her arm backward. “I’ve had just about enough of you and your piece of shit husband these past few days.” Lise advanced on Barbara like a one-woman army. “And now when you have nothing left you try to attack my friends. I have no patience left,” Lise snarled, grabbing Barbara by her shirt collar. Barbara whimpered and covered her eyes. “You’re finished, and I don’t even have to throw a single punch.” Lise dropped Barbara back into the sand, and went to check on the kids.

Yusei grinned at her. “That’s my girlfriend!”

Jack and Crow rolled their eyes while Yusei’s chest pushed out further.

“You guys okay?” Lise asked.


“Not in prison,” West smiled.

///

Kalin accelerated quickly, gaining on Lotten. Lotten gunned his accelerator, driving over the small peninsula of flat land over a ditch. He believed he was in the clear, but Kalin used the ditch as a jump. He threw himself off Yusei’s runner and knocked Lotten off of his. The two men rolled in the sand for a short distance, and stopped when Kalin had Lotten pinned.

Kalin caught his breath and glared down at Lotten. “It’s your turn.”

“What are you talking about?” Lotten said.

“I’m not letting you get away the easily, and I can’t let you disgrace dueling like that. I battle to the
end. That’s how I live my life.”

“Tsch, how lame.”

“If you win, I’ll let you go. I won’t hand you over to security. Will you accept this bet?”

Lotten opened his mouth, but paused before he spoke. The top card in his deck is a spell. He’ll definitely use Infernity Doom Slinger. When he does, I win. “Fine. I’ll accept your challenge!”

The two faced off in front of the last rays of sunlight still shining across the desert. Lotten replaced his duel disk, and Long Barrel Ogre appeared back on his field. Kalin did the same, Infernity Doom Dragon and Infernity Zero returning as well.

“My turn!” Lotten declared. “I activate Long Barrel Ogre’s effect! Shoot Infernity Doom Dragon! You lose 1500 lifepoints, which is half of Infernity Doom Dragon’s 3000 attack points. In other words, the final death counter will stop your heart!”

Kalin didn’t move and the bullet that had destroyed his dragon to hover over his head whizzed past.

“What?”

Once again Doom Slinger leveled his weapon at Lotten’s skull.

“I activated Infernity Doom Slinger and Infernity Climber’s effects from the graveyard. You know the deal. If the top card in my deck is a monster, I win. If it’s any other card, I lose. If you don’t choose, you can’t deal effect damage.” Kalin shrugged nonchalantly. “I honestly don’t know how many monster cards I have left. What will you do, Lotten?”

Lotten narrowed his eyes as he made his decision. “Pull the trigger.”

Kalin closed his eyes and drew from his deck.

“Haha! Great Snipe!” Lotten smirked.

Kalin revealed his card with no emotion behind it. “It’s the monster card Infernity Climber!”

“What? Impossible!”

“When I have no cards in my hand, Infernity Climber’s effect returns it from the graveyard to the top of my deck.”

Lotten screamed in anger and frustration. Doom Slinger’s bullet rang out loud and clear. The solund of Kalin’s victory.

The sun went down, the last rays of light clinging to the earth.

“Grim reaper…” Lotten’s lifepoints dropped to zero and he dropped to the ground in a dead faint.

“That name doesn’t suit me anymore,” Kalin smiled and turned back towards the town. “I no longer want to die. I have a purpose again.”

///

The next day bloomed bright and blue. The townspeople were already working to repair the
extensive damage to their town.

Trudge’s men closed their truck’s doors. Barbara and Lotten, the leaders, were their sole passengers. The two other trucks housed Lotten’s loyal cowboys. All three trucks began the drive back to New Domino City.

A small voice inquired of Trudge; “Are you going to arrest us too?”

Trudge shook his head. “There were no warrants for your arrest. You’ve made mistakes, but your rehabilitation can be fixing this town.”

The townspeople smiled and got back to work with renewed fervor.

Trudge smiled at the teenage boys and girl he’d come to call his friends. They were just saying good-bye.

“So you’re staying, Kalin?”

He nodded, and placed one hand on Nico and West’s shoulders. “Yeah. I want to live in this town and protect Nico and West.”

“Kalin,” the two kids smiled up at their hero with admiring smiles.

“Yusei, Lise, if you hadn’t come here to save me, I would’ve…”

“Anytime,” Lise smiled at him.

“Thanks,” Kalin returned her smile.

“We’d do it again,” Yusei added. The three of them exchanged fist bumps.

“It was awesome reforming the Enforcers,” Crow mused, a grin plastering his face.

“I’ve had enough of those cray days,” Jack shook his head, but he too was beaming. “But it was fun to get back together after such a long time.”

“So...I have to ask this; are you and Lise dating now?”

“You figured it out?” Yusei blinked in surprise.

“You didn’t exactly keep it a secret, and you’re holding Lise’s hand right now,” Kalin pointed out.

Yusei flushed pink with embarrassment. Lise burst into laughter, grabbed a handful of his t-shirt, and stole a quick kiss. Yusei reeled backwards when Lise broke away, turning from pink to red.

“Yep, definitely dating,” Kalin chuckled.

“Ew,” Nico muttered, but West was beaming along with Kalin.

The five of them exchanged cheesy thumbs up, as was their trademark. They knew it was stupid, but old habits die hard.

“Bye! Good-bye!” Nico and West began waving as their friends mounted their runners.

Before Lise could climb aboard in back, Yusei snagged one of her belt loops. “You stole a kiss from me.”
“I seem to remember you stealing one from me too. I think that makes us even,” Lise laughed slightly, sliding her arms around Yusei’s shoulders.

“You mind if I make it an even number today?”

“Not in the slightest.”

“Good,” Yusei pulled Lise up into his arms, letting her sit on his lap instead of behind him on his runner. They finally left when the kiss broke.

The four of them vanished over the horizon, but Nico and West were still waving.

Kalin smiled at his old friends and the kids with pride. He turned his gaze back to the town. *I have a new life to look forward to here; protecting these kids.*
Lise opened her eyes. Floating all around her were tiny balls of light. They streamed upwards and downwards like conflicting river currents. Lise looked down at her hands, her entire body swirling with reds and oranges richer than gold. Nothing was corporeal, and yet everything felt right. The way this in between world glittered was calming, despite the lack of familiarity.

The lights jerked awkwardly out of their pattern. A disturbance had occurred, small but still significant.

Lise watched as a few colorful lights merged together and a woman emerged. Her blond hair fell in waves over her shoulders, and her blue eyes were the piercing blue of the sky.

“Are you me?” Lise whispered, suddenly fearful.

She didn’t answer. Instead, her body too filled with color. This other Lise’s body was colored purple and black, the two of them competing for dominance like an infection.

“Hello? What do you want?” Lise tried again. She didn’t know yet whether she should step back or forward. Either way sounded wrong. For days she’d been having this dream, but no part of it had ever changed.

Until now. Lise two’s purple eyes glowed with malice. “I am you.”

“What?” Lise began backing up, deciding in a split second.

“I am your own destruction. I am your inadequacy, your insecurity, your selfishness. You cannot hide from me.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Your humanity will cease, then I will take control. Die!” Lise two lunged.

///

Lise awoke with a scream that ached in her back. Had the copy of herself struck her there? She couldn’t remember.

Lise’s bedroom door opened with a bang. Yusei, Jack and Crow came barreling in.

“You okay? We heard you scream,” Yusei sat down next to Lise on her bed.

“Nobody’s attacking you?” Jack fired at her, scanning the room for suspicious activity with his violet eyes.

“Nobody’s attacking you?” Jack fired at her, scanning the room for suspicious activity with his violet eyes.

Crow did the same. “And Roman isn’t in your head again?”

“Geezus guys, it was just a nightmare! Get out!” Lise threw a pillow at Jack and Crow’s general direction.

“We just want to make sure you’re okay,” Yusei said calmly. He placed his hand on top of Lise’s, and searched her eyes with his own. “You sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah, it was just the same dream from before,” Lise winced slightly. Adjusting her weight had
hurt a little. She hadn’t expected that.

“The other you?” Jack asked, deciding the room was secure.

“Whataya think it means?”

“Well, until she starts making sense or beating me to near death, I don’t know.”

“I don’t like this at all. It makes you tired and cranky,” Yusei said, pushing hair out of Lise’s face.

Lise frowned at him slightly. “It was just a dream, Yusei.”

“At this point I don’t think there’s anything else we can do” Crow yawned, stretching his hands towards the ceiling. “I’m going back to bed. See you in the morning.”

Jack followed Crow back to their room. Yusei, however, was more reluctant to go.

“I’m fine, Yusei,” Lise offered him a reassuring smile and squeezed his hand. “It was just a dream.”

Yusei shook his head. His hair tousled softly, slightly messier from sleep. “With you, they’re never just dreams.”

“But this one is. I promise.”

“I’d feel better if I stayed here.”

“No, not tonight. I have to get up for my job tomorrow. And I can’t get to sleep if there are cute distractions hanging around.”

Yusei hesitated, clearly not happy with leaving Lise alone, but he returned the squeeze of the hand. “Okay, I’m going back to my bed, but let me know if you need me.”

“G’night,” Lise said when Yusei was at her door. She fell back onto her pillows, snuggling in.

“Night…” Yusei wasn’t sure what else to say, so he closed the door behind him with a snap.

///

After a week Lise was looking much worse, not better. Dark purple half-moons ringed her eyes, and she was going in to work more and more often. When she was home, she seemed to never have time for anything but working. One day she almost bit Jack’s head off she was so irritable.

Yusei came home from a late night fix job at the end of the week, and found Lise slumped over her computer at the kitchen table. Her cheek was plastered to the keyboard. The word document she had been working on had stopped mid-word, and then continuously typed the letter ‘h’ for what must have been hours since the document was stretching over 20 pages.

“Lise, Lise?” Yusei gently shook her shoulders. “You should sleep in your bed, not at the table.”

She grumbled, moving sluggishly, but she lifted her head up off the keyboard. Lise blinked slowly in the blue light of her computer screen.

“Hey, you okay?” One of the corners of Yusei’s lips turned up; the keys of the keyboard were imprinted onto Lise’s cheek.
“Hmm, what time is it?” Lise murmured, rubbing her eyes.

“Almost two AM. Come on,” Yusei wrapped an arm around Lise’s waist and helped her to her feet. She complied sleepily, allowing Yusei to steer her to her bed. Normally, she would have protested, which was alarming to Yusei. “You sure you’re okay?”

“J-Just tired,” Lise yawned, but pulled herself up the ladder.

“I’m worried about you. Do you mind if I stay with you tonight?”

“Just to sleep, right?” Lise’s expression turned severe at the top of the ladder.

“Of course,” Yusei frowned, a little insulted. “I’ll join you in a little bit. Give you time to change.”

“Thanks,” Lise yawned again and closed her bedroom door.

Yusei sighed on his way back to his room. “I wish I knew what was going on with her.”

///

Lise was able to get her pajamas on, and was out immediately once her head hit her pillow.

Yusei came in to find her only half under the covers. Despite his worry he still chuckled in amusement. Lise was cute no matter what. He crawled into bed beside her and threw the covers over both of them.

“I’ll be here if you need me,” He whispered, smoothing back some hairs that had fallen into Lise’s face.

///

“Please, just tell me what you want!” Lise cried, throwing her hands up, and dropping her shoulders. “I’m so tired of all this! I get it; you’re my other half. You’re all my negative emotions, qualities, and traits, but what are you trying to tell me?”

The purple and black version of Lise stared, unblinkingly at her double. Her fierce expression had never wavered, and her hair floated in a nonexistent wind. She shook her head ever so slightly. “It is not about what I want, no, it is…I am a warning.”

“A warning? Is this about Yliaster?” Lise was finally getting somewhere and she was glad for answers of any kind.

“Yes and no. You’re running out of time.” Dark Lise began to warp and change along with the tranquil scenery.

“What? What does that mean? What’s going on?” Lise looked down to find the entire world spiraling into oblivion. She raised her arms to protect herself, and cover her eyes.

Everything stopped spinning and sunlight hit Lise gently. Although the wind blowing all over the place was far from gentle.

Lise opened her eyes and looked around wildly. “Stardust Dragon? And Crimson Starburst Dragon? What-What’re we doing in the stadium?”

“I’ll activate Stardust Dragon’s ability!”
“Yusei?” Lise eyes widened. She looked across the field to see who his opponent was. “Me?!”

Lise watched with growing fear as the other her went into full on glow mode. Other’s Lise’s feet parted with the ground, her eyes glowing red, and the wind getting even worse.

Through the gale, Lise saw Yusei play his trap card, ending the duel, but her double was still going critical in the Eye of the Dragon.

Before Lise could step in, the scenery changed again. Disoriented, Lise’s knees fell against metal grating. She put out a hand to steady herself, and froze. Underneath the metal grating, water flowed heavily, and Yusei and Meena were floating just above its surface.

A bloodcurdling scream ripped through the air, making Lise jump. The scream turned into a roar that send Sayer flying past Lise.

“Oh no,” Lise murmured, unable to move.

She observed herself come at Sayer like a mad, red bullet. “You took everything from me!” Sayer whimpered from the punch to his face. “You wanted to turn me into a weapon-!”

Lise covered her ears, unable to listen anymore. “Please stop! I don’t want to see this! I don’t want to hear it! Please stop!” It didn’t matter that Lise had covered her ears and closed her eyes. She could still feel every attack she had thrown at Sayer that night. It was like reliving the pain all over again. The crushing weight of it all had nearly destroyed her, and it was even worse experiencing it for a second time. Tears streamed down Lise’s face. “Please stop,” she begged.

Suddenly Lise slipped through the grate like rushing water, but the grate was gone. Meena, Yusei, and Sayer were gone too.

Dust and dirt hit Lise when she collided with the ground. She opened her eyes, and got to her feet. “What is this place?” she whispered, turning 360 degrees to absorb everything around her.

She was in some kind of old cavern. Rubble and dust was collected at the room’s perimeter like a garbage dump. A stone dais carved doubtlessly thousands of years ago rested beside Lise, and five circles had been carved into the ground, all connected to the dais. Huge stone columns rose up to the ceilings, and an array of people dressed in white Lise didn’t recognize were assembled like it was a church day.

“Prepare the children!” someone ordered and the crowd of strange people moved.

One of the larger women tossed a boy, bound and gagged, onto one of the circles.

“Yusei!” Lise ran to him, but stopped. His eyes had passed right over her as he struggled to free himself. “Yusei? You can’t see me, can you?”

“You can’t do this!” Akiza’s voice cried angrily as she was thrown onto the circle next to Yusei’s. She was shortly silenced with a gag too.

On the next circle was Jack, then Luna, then Crow. A sixth person was holding back Leo and a blue-haired boy Lise had never seen before.

She turned back to the dais and found a woman tied to it. She had platinum blond hair and green eyes that were almost neon they were so intense.

The people clad in white raised swords in a sick kind of salute.
Yusei managed to get his gag off because he immediately started shouting. “Stop! You’ll kill her!”

But he was too late.

“WHOA!” Lise exclaimed, blown backwards by the sudden explosion of red light. It rocked the temple, destroying everything in its wake. The columns joined the rest of the rubble, and more rained down from the ceiling. Several white clad people were tossed aside like bowling pins. Luckily, the Signers were too low to be hit too badly by the explosive power. Smoke flowed in heavily, cloaking the cavern.

“Everyone okay?” Lise asked, forgetting for a second she couldn’t be seen.

The white-haired woman from before emerged from the wreckage like a glowing death weapon. She roared and slammed her fist into Lise’s stomach. If Lise was intangible to her friends, to this woman she was very corporeal.

Lise’s body plowed through what was left of one of the columns. Her muscles were screaming in agony. But her attacker wasn’t done yet.

The woman plowed her knees into Lise’s back, making a Lise sized crater in the ground. She yanked Lise up by her hair and threw her back against the dais.

“Time to put you through the hell you put my people through for 5000 years!” The woman brought her fists down on Lise’s back, over and over again. Her plan, apparently, was to pound Lise through the ground.

Lise shrieked loudly from the pain, too shocked to fight back.

“We’ve gotta get out of here!”

“Before the whole place crushes us!” Crow’s voice added, speaking at a much higher volume in order to be heard over the sounds of the cavern collapsing.

“What about Lise?” Akiza shouted back. “We can’t just leave her!”

“She’s going to die if we leave her!” Yusei agreed, his voice riddled with panic.

“And if we stay here then we’ll die!”

That’s right. Lise reminded herself. I am not going to die, and neither are they!

Before the next hit could connect, Lise rolled over and kicked upwards with both feet. Her attacker crashed into the ceiling with a bang.

That hit wasn’t enough to stop her though. She came barreling back down at Lise in no time, and Lise flew up to meet her in midair.

Grunting with the force of her efforts, Lise sank blow after blow into the woman’s body. She did her best to block, but mostly focused on attack. She had to put this woman down before she tried to hurt anyone else.

The two women’s fists connected, each trying to push the other back.

“You cannot defeat me!” The woman screamed. “I’m not the one dying here!”

“Oh yeah? Well, neither am I!”
The woman’s green eyes closed in mirthless laughter. “Child, you’re already dead. I’m you.”

“What?” Lise backed off, floating and looking down at herself. She was clad in different clothes, with wounds covering her entire body. The entire front of Lise’s shirt was stained with blood…and five swords stuck out of the gruesome wound.

///

Lise awoke screaming bloodcurdling murder. She frantically patted herself down, checking for wounds.

Yusei, always the light sleeper, was immediately awakened. “Lise, what-“

“I-I-I think I’m okay. Just g-gimme a minute,” she shakily walked out of her room and into the bathroom.

Yusei pulled the covers off and got up too. He met Jack and Crow at the bathroom’s door.

“Another nightmare?” Crow asked quietly.

“I think so,” Yusei nodded. “She didn’t tell me anything, but she looked like she was trying to get rid of a spider or something.”

Jack shook his head, crossing his arms. “It wasn’t something as silly as that. I haven’t heard her scream like that since…” Jack hesitated, but he continued. “Since the nightmares she had, when we first met her, about her mom’s death.”

Crow’s eyes widened. “You’re right. This is serious. What do we do?”

“Well, first thing in the morning I’m calling her boss to let her know she’s taking a sick day.”

“I’ll unplug her alarm clock,” Jack said, already halfway up the ladder.

“Good plan. Should I make some breakfast?” Crow asked. He checked the time on the kitchen’s digital clock. “At 4 AM? Never mind. I’ll just make sure she has something to eat when she gets up.”

“See you in the morning,” Yusei agreed, yawning a little.

///

Lise rested her trembling hands on either side of the sink. She wasn’t injured in the slightest, but she still felt sore and weak. For a minute or two she had actually believed that she was fighting that woman…herself…for real.

But she had been someone else before. Who was she? Why did she want Lise dead?

Her nightmares always seemed to have more questions than answers.

Lise sighed. The cryptic nature of her dreams reminded her of how absent the voice of the Crimson Dragon had been lately. Something was definitely wrong, but what? She looked up and into the mirror, running a hand down her cheek and the purple bags underneath her eyes. Is there something wrong with me?

“Lise?” Yusei knocked softly on the door. “You all right in there?”
Quickly, Lise ran the tap water and splashed it onto her face. She turned off the water and rubbed her face dry with a towel.

“More or less,” Lise said when she opened the door. “Sorry. I know I woke everyone up.” She wouldn’t meet Yusei’s eyes.

“Talk to me, please,” he said gently, reaching for her hand. “What happened?”

Lise was quiet for what felt like hours. Then she said; “Not here. My room.”

“Sure,” Yusei didn’t let go of Lise’s hand even when they were both sitting on her bed.

“I…the other me turned into all the times I’ve used the Eye of the Dragon,” Lise pushed some hair behind her ear, her eyes darting as well as slightly manic. “Which, granted, hasn’t been much, but… when I go into the Eye of the Dragon am I really in that much rage and pain?”

Yusei took both of Lise’s hands in his. “What else would activate it? The Eye of the Dragon is there for a reason, but I’m glad you haven’t lost your humanity as a result of using it too long.”

Lise bit her lip.

“That’s not all, is it?” Yusei raised an eyebrow.

“No… it’s not. Afterwards, the dream changed,” Lise admitted. She slowly explained everything she recalled about the nightmare, including what seemed to be her own demise. “I’m not sure what it all means, but it…it feels like a vision.”

Yusei’s eyes had been wide her entire recounting, but now he narrowed them in thought. “If it is a vision, then I don’t think there’s much we can do for now. At least your other two dreams were technically memories.” He put a finger to his lips.

“Do you think the Crimson Dragon is trying to tell me something? I haven’t heard her voice in months.”

“Maybe that’s a good thing?”

“Considering all the shit with Yliaster right now, I kinda doubt it,” Lise sighed, and rubbed her head wearily. “All this thinking is giving me a headache.”

“You’ve been overworking and overthinking this entire week. Maybe it’s time to give yourself a break? I’m not saying your concerns are invalid or anything. It’s okay to let me worry about this instead for a change though, okay?”

Lise swallowed and rubbed her eye like a child. “Okay.” She yawned and laid down on her pillow. “You’ll stay with me, right?”

“You’re much more agreeable when you’re tired,” Yusei acknowledged, but he covered them both with the covers again. He let one hand rest on Lise’s shoulder. “I’ll stay with you all night.”

///

“Good morning,” Jack greeted over his morning coffee.

“Morning,” Lise greeted groggily. She looked worse for the wear with a blanket draped around her shoulders, and her wrinkly pajamas. She started getting items assembled for her own morning coffee.
“I made waffles if you want some,” Crow offered, looking up from his own breakfast.

“Thanks,” Lise yawned. “What time is it? Where’s Yusei?”

“It’s just after 11 and Yusei’s working on the engine downstairs.”

“Okay,” Lise started pouring her creamer into her mug.

“Um Lise?” Crow raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah?”

“You feeling okay?” Jack had noticed too.

“Why?”

“Because you’re pouring your creamer all over the table.”

“Huh? Oh, oops. Sorry guys,” Lise put the bottle down and put a hand to her forehead.

“Are you sick?” Crow got up to help clean the mess.

“No, I’m not. I’m just really, really tired. I-“

“You’re sick?” Suddenly, Yusei was right beside Lise, pulling off his glove with his teeth, and checking her temperature.

“How the fuck did you get up here so fast?” Lise swore in her surprise.

Yusei lifted a shoulder and his cheeks turned pink. “Crow said you were sick. Now I wasn’t lying when I called your boss.”

“You called my boss? Why?!” Lise had to sit down to process this information. “What did you tell him?”

Yusei smiled devilishly, but scratched at the back of his neck under the pressure of Lise’s gaze. “I told him your boyfriend was calling to say you were out sick for the day. I guess you ended up working so hard you made yourself sick.”

“Lucky me,” Lise grumbled, resting her head in her hands.

Crow rubbed his hands together as he stood. “A thinking fever huh? Well, Martha always said to starve the flu and feed a fever. I’ll head out for supplies.” Before Lise could protest he was already in the basement racing out aboard his duel runner.

Lise groaned and glared half-heartedly at Jack and Yusei. “You guys are loving this aren’t you?”

Jack couldn’t hold back a cocky grin. “You being sick? Not at all. Go back upstairs and I’ll bring you some breakfast.”

“And coffee?”

“Of course,” Jack rolled his eyes. “I’m not an animal.” He stooped with a roll of paper towels to clean up Lise’s mess.

“I guess being sick has a few perks, but I’m not going back to bed,” Lise managed to drag herself
up the ladder and let herself into the extra room. She flopped down onto the couch and turned the TV on.

Halfway through an episode of Lise’s latest show-bingeing, Yusei emerged with a bagel and warm coffee. “Jack sends his regards,” Yusei chuckled, unable to keep a straight face as he handed them over.

“Thanks, I appreciate it. Sorry about all this.”

Yusei shrugged and smoothed a few of Lise’s messy hairs back from her face. “You’re sick from working too hard. Just relax today, okay? It’s no trouble at all. If you need me, I’ll be right downstairs working on the engine.”

“Okay,” Lise bit her lip, and tugged on her hair. She swallowed and laid back against the couch.

Yusei’s dark blue eyes watched her, waiting to see if she was going to say something else. Lise was silent, so he left. The uneasy feeling he had had the night before gnawing at him again.

///

“Ohay!” Crow announced his presence in the extra room loudly. He jarred Lise awake from a short nap as he walked in, swinging his bag of goodies. “I got you sour watermelons, some mini cakes, chips, and…this cool mug!” He handed her a black mug with a pirate-like skull and crossbones adorning one side.

“Wow, thanks Crow!” Lise took the mug from him and drank from it.

“This will be your sicky cup. That way we know not to drink out of it.”

“Gee, thanks,” Lise repeated with much less enthusiasm.

“Sure, and I already made you some hot chocolate so here you go.”

“We doing any better up here?” Yusei walked in. He was covered in grease from head to toe, and looking a little tired himself. “Mind if I join you?” He picked up Lise’s brand new mug and sipped from it.

“Dude! I just said that’s Lise’s sicky cup!” Crow threw his hands up into the air. “I’m gonna cook dinner because now we’re gonna have two sick people to take care of! Idiot!”

Yusei laughed slightly, and sat down next to Lise on the couch.

“You so did that on purpose,” Lise shoved his shoulder and took her mug back.

“Eh,” Yusei rubbed at a grease spot on his arm. “I’m not having much luck with the engine. I think I’ve got as far as I can get today.”

“Hey, you’ll get it eventually. I don’t anyone else who’s such a genius with machines,” Lise leaned against his shoulder.

“Thanks,” Yusei smiled minutely and inched his fingers in between Lise’s. “I just feel like there’s so much pressure on me to get it done, especially since I’m the only one who can get it done.” He sighed slowly and looked up at the ceiling.

Lise dragged herself out of the fog of her sick brain. She needed to be focused for a conversation like this. “You know we’d help if you asked.”
“That week there were more explosions,” Yusei groaned, running a hand through his hair. “I just don’t know what to do.”

“Hey,” Lise squeezed Yusei’s hand harder. “Whether you can get it done or not, we’ll still be friends with you. We can still win the WRGP.” She raised and lowered her shoulders, her free hand palm up. “With or without an edge.” She kissed Yusei’s cheek. “Either way we’ll still love you.”

“Good to know.”

“Good to know I’m not the only one who’s been stressed out.”

“Guess we both needed a day off,” Yusei pulled Lise onto his chest, and turned the volume on the TV up.

Laying on Yusei’s chest, letting him play absentmindedly with her hair, her ear right on top of his steady heartbeat, Lise was finally able to sleep in peace.
“Yusei,” Lise murmured sleepily. She’d just woken up, her naps making her sleeping schedule a tad wonky. “Yusei?”

Yusei groaned and adjusted his position on the couch groggily. His ocean blue eyes cracked ever so slightly to stare at Lise’s blond hair. He ran his fingers through the stray strands. “Yeah? It’s late. Do you need something. I’m kinda tired.”

“Sorry,” Lise whispered, rolling over so that she was facing him. Her chin rested on her fingers. “But I wanted to tell you…”

“Tell me what?” Yusei rubbed his eye in an attempt to get the sleepiness out of it. His hair was messier than usual from sleep. “I’m listening.”

“There’s something else that’s been bugging me. You remember that letter Barbara sent you?”

Yusei frowned and his fingers paused in Lise’s hair. “Vividly, since you don’t pass up a chance to tell me you told me so.”


“You did?” All traces of sleep were instantly gone from Yusei’s expression. “From who? Where?”

“It’s from Peru, from a woman named Terra.”

“You can’t trust her. You know that, right? What did her letter say?” Yusei sat up straighter, the worry reflecting in his eyes.

Lise’s light blue eyes focused mostly on her fingers as she spoke. “She said she wants to help me. She has a temple, a dojo, in the deserts of Peru. She found out who I was from the fortune cup broadcasting. She wants to train me.”

“That sounds like the exact same thing Barbara did to me, and we both know how that turned out,” Yusei frowned, his eyebrows angling far down, wrinkling the skin of his face drastically.

“When you got that letter, you decided you were going to go anyway,” Lise said carefully, her words measured. “Then when we saw Kalin, we both knew we had to stay and help. This feels like that kind of thing. I feel like if I don’t at least go and find out what she really wants I’ll always regret it.” She looked directly into Yusei’s eyes then, her light blue irises matching his darker blue irises. “And I don’t want to regret not taking this chance.”

Yusei sucked in air through his teeth and angled his head back at the ceiling. He slowly let his breath go, staring at the ceiling above him. “I don’t like it,” he finally said.

“But-“

“But I know I can’t stop you,” the corner of Yusei’s lips turned up. “Just promise me I can be there to help.”

“I guess we’re buying plane tickets then,” Lise grinned.

“After we get a good night’s sleep,” Yusei yawned, lying back down on the couch.
“Good plan,” Lise pecked him quickly on the cheek before settling back down. She was out like a light in no time.

///

“All coach passengers may now board! Now boarding coach!”

Lise and Yusei were jarred awake by the airport’s loud announcement. After waking up early for their 8 AM flight, last minute packing, driving over, and getting through security they were fairly exhausted. Lise had never fallen asleep so quickly.

“Coach, right, coach that’s us, right, right,” Lise said in between yawns to help wake herself up.

“That is us,” Yusei covered up a yawn with his hand. He used the other to push his suitcase towards the doors. “Did you bring sleep meds?”

“I always bring sleep meds,” Lise groaned, shaking her purse. The rattling sound emanating from its contents indicated she’d brought many. “Sleep meds, pain meds, and allergy meds. I come prepared.”

“Good, I’ve got the tickets.”

Lise nodded and walked aboard the plan first, claiming the window seat for herself.

“Everything is in place and good to go,” Yusei sat down and yawned again. “Sleeping meds?”

“Yeah,” Lise handed Yusei two pink tablets. “Chewable kind.”

“Thanks.” Yusei popped the pills in his mouth, and shoved his carry on underneath the seat in front of him. “So, you ready?”

Lise wiped sweat from her palms on her jeans. “Not entirely, but I can manage.”

“I love you. Don’t stay up too long,” Yusei murmured. He kissed Lise’s cheek and leaned back in his seat.

She wanted to sleep, but she was too restless. She’d fought through the melatonin before. Lise was exhausted; the kind that was so tired you couldn’t close your eyes.

The plane took off and Lise watched New Domino city vanish underneath the clouds. Its lights and bridges winked up at her just before they disappeared. “I wonder what I’m going to find in Peru,” Lise whispered.

///

“This is your captain speaking. We’ll be arriving in Lima, Peru in 20 minutes and this is your signal to please buckle your seatbelts.”

“Yusei,” Lise nudged him, then harder when he didn’t stir. “Yusei, we’re landing.”

“I’m up…” Yusei said groggily. “You get any sleep?” He rubbed his eyes and yawned.

“A little, Lise wasn’t looking at Yusei as she rummaged around with her things, zipping them back up for safekeeping.

“You didn’t sleep,” Yusei commented, running a hand through his hair.
“I’ll be fine. Let’s go.”

“Do you know where it is?” Yusei asked as the pair of them were leaving the airport, luggage in tow.

“Of course, it’s right outside of Lima! One problem though,” Lise stopped in front of a sign. “Um, can you read Portuguese?”

“No.” One of Yusei’s eyebrows disappeared into his bangs. “You don’t know where it is, do you?”

“Yes I do!” Lise insisted, but her fidgeting gave away the truth.

“So we came all this way, literally without a clue?!”

“You didn’t have to come with me!” Lise fired back. “There’s not really an address on the letter. It just says to head towards the Nazca Lines from Lima!”

“So your plan was to die in the desert?”

“No! I just um…”

“Fine, let’s ask for directions. Hopefully we can find someone who speaks either English or Japanese.”

“Sorry,” Lise mumbled, wheeling her bag through the city streets.

Yusei came up behind her with the same lack of enthusiasm. “It’s okay,” he sighed. “I just wish you had more of a plan.”

“Me too,” Lise mumbled. “I mean the letter was really unhelpful and…” She trailed off as she passed a dusty alleyway.

“Lise?”

“I think we should go this way.”

“Seriously? You remember you have zero sense of direction, right?”

“I’m aware. It just feels right.”

Yusei’s annoyance suddenly switched off. “Is this one of your Crimson Dragon things?”

“It feels like it,” Lise held up her hand. “Sort of like the tension of my sixth sense is on overdrive.” She blinked, clenching and unclenching her hands. She couldn’t quite explain it, but it felt like a hook had worked its way around her navel, tugging her in the direction she needed to go.

“Then lead the way.”

///

“I know this sounds stupid and cliché but are we there yet?” Yusei whined. He had long since taken his jacket off and tied it around his waist. The folds of his t-shirt were sticking to him in the heat, and he was already covered in sweat from head to toe.

“Almost,” Lise responded shortly. She too was drenched in sweat, but hadn’t complained in the two hours they had been hiking.
“I almost think…they’re trying…to keep people out,” Yusei wheezed in between breathes.

Lise didn’t respond immediately, but she stopped at the top of a decent sized plateau. The Nazca Lines stretched out for miles behind them. Hot wind wafted through the area, disturbing the sand and both teenagers’ hair. “Maybe they’re keeping the wrong people out? This place is incredible.”

“You mean the Nazca Lines? Yeah they are, even though they’re used to seal the Earthbound Immortals into the earth.”

“Not them, this,” Lise put her hand out and it landed on something flat in the middle of the air.

“Are you touching solid air?” Yusei’s eyes were wide.

“No,” Lise smiled and pushed her hand forward. “It’s a door.”

The air warped from Lise’s touch like a disturbance made in a tranquil pond. Color bled into the air, revealing two enormous wooden doors. Then the ripples spread to reveal the walls of an enormous fortress palace mix with pagoda roofed buildings stretching towards the sun.

Yusei’s head tilted back further and further to be able to take in the full effect. “Holy shit…”

Lise had finished opening the front doors with a smile on her face. “Shall we?” She strode in with her bag.

Immediately two women intercepted them. One was tiny, old, and very angry judging by the red of her face. She wore a kimono-like dress with patterns to reinforce the illusion she was taller, and a beautiful hair ornament to tie back her white hair. The other woman was roughly the same age as Lise, maybe a bit older with reddish brown hair tied back into a ponytail. She wore loose pants and shirt, with white wrappings around her arms and bare feet. Neither of them looked happy to see their visitors with narrowed eyes and crossed arms.

“Um, hi?” Lise waved weakly. “I uh-I made it. Nice to meet you. I’m Lise,” she held out her hand.

Neither woman took it.

“How the hell did you get in here?” The redhead demanded. “You shouldn’t have been able to find this place.”

“Not to disappoint you, but the door is behind us,” Yusei jabbed his thumb back at the closed doors.

“Sasha,” the older woman put her hand out to stop the much taller woman beside her. “Why are you here?”

“This letter,” Lise dug into her pockets and extracted the sweaty, crumpled letter she had brought with her.

The older woman accepted the letter and began silently reading. Sasha read over her shoulder, her eyes jumping upwards every few sentences to glare at Lise and Yusei.

“We didn’t send this,” the old woman finally said. She did not, however, give the letter back. Her gray eyes studied Lise and Yusei sagely, as if she were x-raying them.

“But then who did?” Lise frowned in complete bewilderment. “I-I-I don’t understand.”

“You think it might have been the clan, Master Terra?” Sasha ignored Lise.
“Perhaps. They are getting rowdier nowadays,” Terra answered. She tucked Lise’s letter into her kimono. She turned her piercing gaze back to Lise and Yusei. “No ordinary people can find this place. You two are interesting, and clearly connected.”

“Uh…” Yusei and Lise exchanged uncomfortable glances.

Terra was right in front of Lise when she turned back around. Lise didn’t dare move, much less breathe. “You have two souls inside you. There is a risk of death, but you said you wished to come here and train?”

“Oh, um, y-yes,” Lise stammered, clearly uncomfortable.

“Do you wish the same?” Terra fired at Yusei next.

“I’m just here for Lise.”

“Interesting, you must pass the entrance exam in order to stay and train. Are you ready?”

“Right now? We can’t, like, shower first?” Lise rubbed her arm, thinking about her extremely sweaty armpits.

“No, you cannot. Shall we begin?” Master Terra produced a long scroll from her sleeve, at the bottom of which had an empty line for a signature, and a pen.

“I…uh…I,” Lise stared at Yusei, who shrugged, Sasha, Master Terra, the dojo’s facility, all in a blurry panic. “I-I-yes.” Lise took the pen and scribbled her name down. “Yes, I’m re-“

Master Terra didn’t give her a chance to finish. The second Lise had agreed, Terra had sprung into action. She used her fingers to draw a symbol in the air, then she promptly pressed her middle finger to Lise’s forehead.

Lise dropped to the ground like a stone. Master Terra, in contrast, simply nodded to Sasha and fell into the taller woman’s arms.

Yusei’s sweat had gone cold, his eyes widened, his breathing accelerating, as did his heartbeat. “No, Lise? No, not again! Wake up!” He pulled Lise up by her shoulders, her head and limbs limp.

“This has happened to you before?” Sasha’s fierce expression dropped for a moment in surprise.

“The last time some weirdo did that to Lise he nearly killed her! Tell me she’s going to be okay!” Sasha pursed her lips and adjusted her grip on Master Terra. Her eyes wouldn’t meet Yusei’s. “I can’t promise that. I’m sorry.”

“That’s not good enough!” Yusei growled, getting to his feet with Lise in his arms. “What if she never wakes up again?”

Sasha shrugged. “She might die, or she might be trapped in her own circle of hell forever. Master Terra will leave if Lise is not capable of passing within two days.”

“You’re kidding me,” Yusei whispered in horror. It took everything he had to prevent his knees from buckling.

“Come with me.” Sasha didn’t wait for a reply. She began strolling casually across the dojo’s large facilities.
Yusei tightened his grip on Lise, biting his lip. He didn’t know what else to do, so he followed.

Sasha went on walking for quite a distance. She never wavered, never spoke. Yusei marveled at the numerous tall buildings, the long track stretching a mile, and the lush greenery the landscape seemed to support within the dojo’s walls. Sasha pushed aside a curtain of leaves and stood to the side to allow Yusei to follow.

“Wow…” Yusei whistled in awe. A small gazebo on the edge of a tiny pond glistened like a beacon in the pure sunlight. The water was pristine and constantly flowing from the mountain it vanished into. There was a small clearing across the pond, both the clearing and gazebo were surrounded by exotic plants.

“We’ll set them down at the gazebo. We keep beds there.”

“This kinda shit happens often, then?” Yusei snapped, but he didn’t protest.

He set Lise down gently on one of the simple beds. If he hadn’t been so afraid for her, Yusei might have actually enjoyed the tranquil pool.

“Here,” Sasha set down a pile of leaves, mortar with pestle, a pitcher of water, cloths, Lise’s signed scroll, and a large menacing-looking dagger on the table between Lise’s and Master Terra’s beds. “If she hasn’t passed by the second sunrise, stab the scroll and she’ll wake up.”

“Why shouldn’t I just do that now? What’re the leaves for?”

“You chew the leaves into a paste and pound them together to make a healing salve. You’ll most likely need this sooner or later. It depends on how connected her body and soul are.”

Not a second after Sasha had finished talking, Lise’s body unexpectedly jerked upwards. Her peaceful expression had changed to pain in an instant. Blood poured out of a fresh wound in Lise’s shoulder.

“I’d wait on that dagger,” Sasha said, watching Yusei stare wide-eyed at it. “She signed the contract for a reason. No one does that without a burden they wish to alleviate. Would you really be doing her a service by breaking her out first thing?”

“But what if she dies?”

“That was her choice.”

“Oh, but in the end it’s my choice to use the dagger by the second day or not?” Yusei growled. He wanted to say more, but Lise was bleeding in more places than one. He got to work on the leaves immediately.

“If she can’t endure this, then she can’t overcome what’s ahead of her. Good luck to you both.”

///

“Is that all you have?” Master Terra floated above Lise in their phantasmagoria. “It’s only been a few hours and you have yet to impress me.”

*Where is it?* Lise was grinding her teeth together in her frustration. She was exhausted, and felt just as broken down as the rubble of their battlefield. *Where is the answer? This projection is meant to be a manifestation of my own strength, so then how do I win?*
“Your two days aren’t up yet. Let’s get to it!”

“I have more than you think!” Lise turned in a circle, moving her arms in a similar fashion, and encased an enormous piece of rubble in a bubble of energy. She stepped forward and thrust her hands in front of her, sending the rubble at Terra.

Terra just sighed and waited. At the last possible moment she turned into a reverse back heel kick that sent the rubble smashing back into Lise. “You’ll have to be more creative, dear. This is a life or death situation, please act like it.” She attacked Lise at full power, forcing the teenage girl to block Terra’s strikes like mad. Eventually Terra managed to sneak a strike in, snatch Lise up by her collar and throw her like a missile into the ground. “How many times have you tried to defeat me now? Sixty? Seventy? Can you even get back up?”

///

“Lise’s mind and body are more aligned than I originally thought,” Sasha commented when she returned with more leaves and water.

“You don’t say?” Yusei snapped irritably, wrapping up another wound. He wiped the sweat away from his brow. He’d been going on like this for hours now.

“Still, I do have to give her props for hanging on this long. It’s been nearly two days, which means they must have been going on for at least ten days in their shared phantasmagoria.”

“What?!”

“Time is accelerated there. She’s clinging to the last vestiges of her soul by now. It might be time to use that dagger come sunrise.”

“Ten whole days?” Yusei murred, staring at Lise’s wound covered body and then the dagger still innocently resting on the table.

///

Master Terra sniffed indignantly. “So that’s all? No wonder you’re already dead.” She began to walk away from Lise’s open-mouthed, blood soaked corpse.

No…I’m not dead, but I was once. The Crimson Dragon saved me. I haven’t heard her voice in so long. She’s not coming to help me now. I hate this. It’s always the same. I’m always one step behind everyone. Always staring at their backs, trying to catch up… Not anymore.

Terra’s body suddenly shook with a jolt. She’d let her guard down for half a second too long.

“RAAAAA!” Lise roared, plowing her elbow into the older woman’s back. Terra went flying, but Lise wasn’t going to let the broken buildings have all the action. She flew into Terra’s path, using her feet to smash Terra into the ground.

Terra retaliated, laughing like a maniac. “You have drive, child! A hunger to be strong like your friends, and then stronger! Let that feeling wash over you, but that isn’t going to be enough to beat me! You’ll have to do more digging than that!”

Both women charged their bodies up with as much power as they could muster. The impact of their attacks shattered what little glass windows remained in the few skyscrapers still intact.

It’s still not enough… Lise cursed herself wearily as she fell back down to the ground slowly. Can I
really not win?

Leo’s face suddenly swam in front of her. *We’ll defeat the Dark Signers together!*

Luna’s joined him. *Yeah! We’re not alone!*

Jack. *I learned that it’s even better to be on the top when you have friends to share it with!*

Crow. *Just like my kids, I’d protect you guys with my life!*

Akiza. *It’s nice to have friends who will be there for you.*

Yusei. *We can protect each other.*

*The power my mom gave me! Her love for me and the desire to protect me… Absorb it. Make it my strength!*

Just before Lise hit the ground she stopped and filled the sky with blinding orange light emanating from her body. “Because of those I love I’m still here! I will protect them!”

“Well done,” Master Terra descended peacefully to meet Lise in midair. “Now that you have discovered where your true strength lies, let’s test it out.”

Lise smirked with newfound confidence. “Bring it on.”

///

“Shit,” Yusei swore, pacing up and down the deck of the gazebo. Dark circles ringed his eyes and he was still making salves for Lise’s wounds. “The sun’s about to rise. I literally can’t wait any longer. This is bad.”

He suddenly reached for the dagger, holding it ready to strike at the scroll. Yusei took a shuddering breath.

The first rays of sunlight had fallen across the paper roll so innocently that Yusei hesitated. “But if I break her out like this, she’ll never forgive me…Ugh!”

He threw the dagger on the gazebo floor. “Why is this decision up to me?! She could die if I don’t, but then if she doesn’t she won’t be able to get stronger!”

Yusei sighed and turned his chair so that he was sitting at Lise’s bedside. “I saw that look in your eyes. You were scared but determined, and you trusted me to be here for you no matter what.” He took Lise’s hand in his and held it so tightly his knuckles turned white. “I believe in you. I believe you can do this, and I love you. You can wake up on your own, I know it.”

More sunlight flooded the gazebo, making the fallen dagger glint dangerously.

Yusei swallowed uncomfortably and glanced at the day breaking over the horizon. “But what if you can’t? You’ll be…gone…” He dove for the dagger, snatched up the scroll, and held the scroll in place at Lise’s side.

“I’m sorry!” Yusei plunged the dagger downward as fast as he could.

All of a sudden the blade stopped. It hovered inches over the crackling paper.

Yusei froze, staring at the two fingers that had stopped him mid-stab.
“I’d prefer it if you didn’t do that,” Lise smiled pleasantly at him, sitting up in bed. “Good morning.”

Yusei didn’t move for a second, drinking everything in. “Thank god,” he murmured, throwing his arms around Lise. He didn’t care she was covered in blood and sweat. He didn’t care that it had been two days since either of them had moved from the gazebo. Lise was alive and that was all that mattered. “Please, please don’t ever do that to me again!”

Lise laughed and briefly kissed Yusei. “No promises.”

“I look forward to working with you,” Master Terra had sat up too. She was sipping the tea Sasha had brought her. “Let’s get started with the rest of your training.”

“Awesome!” Lise grinned and hopped off the gazebo bed.

“Oh no you don’t!” Yusei snatched Lise up by her belt loops, stopping her in her tracks. “You haven’t showered in two days!”

“She was sleeping the whole time,” Master Terra shrugged. “Why stop now?”

“That was not sleeping,” Yusei insisted firmly.

“Oh all right,” Terra rolled her eyes. “Bathe and explore for today, but tomorrow the real work begins.”

“Yes, Master Terra!” Lise bowed excitedly.

///

“So, where’s your boy? The edgy one?”

“Was he really that on edge?” Lise chuckled, allowing Sasha to sit down beside her on one of the rooftops. “I guess I shouldn’t really be surprised. He’s pretty quiet and soft-spoken most of the time, but there is a kind of tension to him sometimes.”

“You have it too,” Sasha said. “It isn’t as obvious as his, but you have it. You didn’t answer my question though.”

“He’s napping. He didn’t sleep the whole time I was…incapacitated.”

Sasha smiled the widest Lise had ever seen since her arrival. “He loves you very much. Not many people would have stayed and nursed you for two days.”

“Yeah,” Lise sighed dreamily. A second sigh escaped her lips, one much heavier with unhappiness. “And I love him too, which is kind of a problem. I can’t focus if he’s here.”

///

“Good afternoon, sleepyhead,” Lise set her book down when Yusei finally woke up.

“Oh god, what time is it?” he yawned.

“A little after three,” Lise sat down on the bed, placing one of her hands on top of Yusei’s. “But I needed to talk to you before dinnertime.”

Yusei sat up straighter in bed, and held Lise’s hand tighter. “What’s this about? Are you still hurt
from the phantasma-whatever?"

“No, I’m healing just fine, thanks to you,” Lise smiled briefly at Yusei and then looked down at their intertwined hands. “I love you so much, but…”

Yusei wanted to speak up. Fear of the worst kindled in the back of his head, but he shot it down. Let her finish first.

“I think you should go back to New Domino City until the end of the month.”

“You want me to leave? Did I do something wrong?” Yusei’s dark eyes were wide with confusion.

His expression just about killed Lise. “No! The problem is that I love you, and if you stay with me this whole month I won’t be able to focus.” She dropped Yusei’s hand and clutched at her own knees until her nails dug painfully into the skin. “I’m so sorry that I’m being so selfish, but I need to stay here and do this. I can’t if you stay too.”

The room was quiet. For a place so tiny the silence made the floor space massive.

When Yusei cleared his throat it was like a sudden stampede had found its way into the room. “You have to call me every day.”

Lise perked up, staring at his eyes between the dark locks of his bangs. “You’re serious?”

“I’ll go if you promise to call me every day, and,” Yusei held up his index finger. “You video chat with me every weekend. It’s nonnegotiable.”

“You’re the best!” Lise cried, throwing her arms around Yusei’s shoulders. “Thank you!”

“Don’t thank me yet,” Yusei smiled, a twinge of sadness in his lips. He hugged Lise back, as tightly as he could make it. “Just promise me you’ll come back home, okay?”

“Promise,” Lise whispered.
“Rise and shine, Lise. It’s your first day of training!” Sasha knocked loudly on Lise’s door. She didn’t wait for an answer and barged in to violently wake up her new friend.

Lise groaned loudly in protest and sat up. She rubbed her eyes, yawning. “What time is it?”

“Just before dawn. It’s time for you to meet everybody and get started.”

“Can’t that wait until after daylight?”

“Nope, up-n’-at-em’,” Sasha said sternly. She seized handfuls of Lise’s blanket and dragged it off. “Since you don’t have covers anymore, meet us outside to warm up.”

“Fine,” Lise grumbled. She started pulling off her pajama pants.

When she joined the others for breakfast in the courtyard she was greeted by more than Master Terra and Sasha. Another girl and two boys stood beside them. One boy was tan with dark hair and eyes that sparkled when they caught the sun. His Spanish accent made his words sound musical. The second boy was a stark contrast to the first with extremely pale skin, honey-colored hair, and hazel eyes. He had a German accent that gave his deep voice even greater impact. The girl standing next to Sasha looked at Lise with green eyes that were as bright and warm as dew-covered grass. Her beautiful dark skin caught the first rays of sunlight peeking over the horizon, and her purple-tipped dreadlocks hung over her shoulders.

Lise swallowed and approached. Her hands had already begun shaking and sweating. She had to keep reminding herself to smile, calm down, and think positively. “H-Hi,” she waved meekly.

The dark-skinned girl waved back and then shook Lise’s hand. “I’m Jarra. Nice to meet you!”

“Nice to meet you too, I’m Lise,” she relaxed a little, glad to shake amicably with this new person.

“This’ll be so fun,” Jarra smiled.

“If she survives training,” the pale boy remarked with a tiny smirk.

“Be nice, Garrett,” the tan boy scolded. He exchanged his scowl for a toothy smile when he addressed Lise. “Don’t worry about him. Just focus on surviving. I’m Jose, by the way.”


“Now that you’ve met everyone,” Master Terra addressed her students. She tapped her cane into the dirt twice to grab their attention. “You have 15 minutes to eat breakfast, then we will begin.”

///

“Good morning!” The smartly dressed duel academy greeted her students with a wide smile that filled her whole face. Her red hair fell in crisp curtains by her chin, and her eyes were kind and bright.

“Morning!”

“Good morning, Professor Barlett!”
Leo and Luna sidled up to their teacher. Leo in his blue uniform, and Luna in her red, they were ready for the day. Leo was practically dancing he was so excited.

“Today is another day to improve your dueling,” Professor Bartlett said.

“Yes, ma’am,” Leo and Luna said.

“Leo! Luna!” Akiza ran up, toting her school bag, and waving to her friends.

“Akiza!”

“G’morning!” Luna said. “You just made the high school section’s top grades, right?”

“Awesome!” Leo gasped, clenching his hands into fists. “All right! I’m gonna be the grade school’s top player so I can be just like you, Akiza!”

Akiza chuckled a little, and scratched the back of her neck. “Thanks, and good luck, Leo.”

///

“Attack!” Dexter commanded. He gleefully watched as his monster took Leo’s down, winning him the match.

Leo tumbled backwards from the impact. He lay in a heap, zero life points to his name, and groaning in frustration.

“I did it!” Dexter jumped for joy.

Professor Bartlett gave Leo her best encouraging smile. “You did your best, Leo”

Luna shook her head. Sometimes her brother was just too much. “You’re all talk, Leo! You can’t aim for the top if you keep losing!”

“Warriors just aren’t my style,” Leo said. He pulled the next card from the top of the deck. “No! If I had this one turn earlier I could have summoned Power Tool Dragon!”

“Leo, class today is about warrior-type decks! You can’t go adding in any card you want!”

“But I’m much stronger with my own deck of machines!”

“Leo! Play me next!” A large boy with gray eyes and brown hair demanded.

A brown-skinned girl with moss green eyes and blond pigtails pointed at herself. “Then me too!”

“First Bob then Patty, huh? Wow, I’m getting popular!”

“Well, not really. If we duel you, our grades will go up when we win!”

“What the-!? What’s that supposed to mean?!” Leo complained.

///

A tall, lanky man in a red suit stared down at the academy’s duel arena filled with grade school students. His long gray hair was messy in back and coiffed in front. “You won’t be in such high spirits much longer, little scum.” The man turned around to go back to his office, grinning mischievously. He had yellow goggle-like glasses. Combined with his tiny mustache and goatee he
looked like a sinister teacher.

///

“Are you going over there today?” Bob asked the twins once school had ended and the kids were gathered in the courtyard.

“Yeah, you guys wanna come?”

“Let’s go!”

“Leo, isn’t it an inconvenience if we go over there to hang out every day?” Luna whispered into her brother’s ear. For a while it had just been the two of them stopping by, but when their classmates found out they always tagged along when they could.

“I wouldn’t sweat it,” Leo said, shrugging.

“Oh, Sly,” Luna called when she caught sight of their quieter, aloof friend walking by. “Are you going home alone? You should come with us!”

“Nah,” Sly narrowed his violet eyes over his shoulder. “I wouldn’t want to become little scapegoats. Just go home already.”

“Sly…”

Leo wrinkled his nose in disgust. “Man, talk about rude.”

“He is kinda weird,” Dexter said.

“Forget about him. Let’s go!” Bob said.

“Yay!” Patty squealed. “We’re gonna see Yusei, and Lise, and Jack, and Crow!”

Sly paused mid-step. “That’s where they’re going?” He bit his lip and followed. At a distance, of course.

///

“Okay, so does that make sense now?” Sasha put down her pointer in the chalk till of the chalk board.

“Uuuuuuuuuuhhhhh,” Lise scratched her head, her eyes darting a little. “Sure.”

“Technically, you can already manifest your chi,” Master Terra said. She sipped her tea calmly, seated with her knees folded beneath her. “Your problem is that you don’t know how to gauge it.”

“What?”


“Think of the speedometer on your duel runner. You can control whether you go 100 miles per hour or 200, right? Well, if 200 is your max for your chi, but you only need 50 for one of your punches, you don’t have the capacity to adjust or gauge the amount you use right now.”

“Oh,” Lise said, nodding. “So it’s like I’m either at 0 or 200!”
“Exactly, which is why we’re going to be doing this technique for the next few days to help you learn regulation.”

“Cool.”

///

“Eighty…ninety…” Yusei said, monitoring the next engine test closely.

“Hey, are you sure this is going okay? We don’t have time for any more explosions!” Crow said. His brows were furrowed deeply over his silver eyes.

Jack laughed and kept going. “No chance! Yusei’s probably already perfected it by now!”

“Well, this time we don’t need to worry about the engine,” Yusei admitted, but he was still biting his lip as he watched the results come in.

“Really?”

“We don’t?”

“WHOA!” Jack gasped as the card lock threw cards up into the air like confetti.

Smoke poured out of the engine, but at least the engine prototype didn’t explode.

“You’re too loud!” Zora complained, barging her way in the front door. “I swear, why is it you’re never happy unless you’re causing a racket?! Honestly, I can never tell if you’re building something or breaking something!”

“Sorry, Zora. We’ll try to be quieter,” Yusei said.

“You can’t just tinker with your machines all the time! Both Fish and Lise are gone and I have half a mind to send the three of you out after them! I can’t wait until Lise comes back!” Zora screeched and slammed the door behind her as she left.

“What kind of preferential treatment is that?” Jack grumped.

“Well, I prefer her yelling at us than putting on that creepy-ass, fake smile,” Crow lamented, holding up his hands like Zora’s squared half-moon spectacles.

“Come on guys, she is letting us stay here rent free.”

“Yeah, I guess. Anyway, we’d better start playing 54 card pick-up,” Crow said.

The doors burst open for a second time. Instead of a cranky old woman, a group of freshly freed duel academy kids stormed in.

“Yusei! Jack! Crow!” Luna greeted. “We brought some friends!”

“Hey there, always a pleasure,” Crow said, greeting the kids with a smile. He never got tired of seeing good kids, big or small.

Jack was less than enthused. “Not you guys again.”

“Whoa,” Leo took a look at all the cards scattered across the floor. “Kinda disorganized today, huh?”
“What happened here? Another explosion?” Luna said.

“Close.”

“This baby seems to be stuck in a bad mood,” Crow said.

“Oh,” Bob gasped in delight. “It’s a duel runner!”

“Awesome!”

“It’s a test frame, right?”

“It’s so cool!”

“Hey! No touching!” Jack glared down his long nose at the kids.

“Oh, can we ride it? Can we?” Patty begged, ignoring Jack’s dour mood.

“If I won’t let you touch it, what makes you think I’d let you ride it?” Jack muttered.

“How about if you help us pick up these cards, we’ll let you ride it,” Crow suggested, his index finger pointed skyward.

“Really?!” That got the kids’ attention.

“Crow! You can’t go saying whatever!”

“What’s the harm? Let’s get cracking!”

“Yay!” the kids split up and crawled over the floor collecting fallen cards.

The corner of Yusei’s lips twitched for half a second. “Thanks. He got up to join the card hunt, but stopped when he spotted another boy standing at the top of the stairs to the front door.

“Sly?” Luna said.

“Why is he here?” Leo said, his lip curling with distaste.

Sly turned to go, but Luna raced up to him. “Sly! Sly! What are you doing? Come on!” She grabbed his hand and dragged Sly further into the garage. “This is our classmate, and he’s a good duelist too! Right, Sly?”

“Nice to meet you,” Yusei said quietly once Sly had wrestled his arm free of Luna’s grasp.

“So you’re Yusei, huh? And Jack, and Crow? I thought there were four of you, but I gotta say, I’m not impressed.”

“What?” Leo sat back on his heels.

“Hey, quit standing around and flapping your mouths!” Crow shouted. “Back to work!”

“Right!” the kids diligently went about their task.

Luna dragged Sly down to the ground to help.

“Why am I doing this too?” he muttered darkly. He looked around and spotted the synchro monster Stardust Dragon.
“Pretty cool, right?” Yusei said as he retrieved the card. “It’s my favorite. Wanna see it?”

“S-Sure,” Sly’s eyes widened and he took the card with a slightly trembling hand. He read the effect and looked at the card’s design for what felt like too little time, but which held so much. “Wow…”

Yusei smiled. It wasn’t a big one with any teeth, but it was the first in the few days since he’d returned from Peru.

“Is that a smile I spy?” Crow pounced on Yusei with the reflexes of a puma, wrapping his arm around his friend’s shoulders.

“About time we see some happiness in ya, mate,” Jack grinned, getting in on the teasing.

Yusei rolled his eyes. “Come on guys, I haven’t been that bad.”

“What’s going on?” Sly asked Luna.

The girl’s face lit up and she answered swiftly. “Normally four of our friends are here. Lise went to Peru to do some training a couple days ago.”

“And Yusei’s been moping around the house ever since he got back!” Crow chimed in, grinning from ear to ear.

“He’s been burying himself in work to keep busy,” Jack added, smiling almost as widely as Crow. “Didn’t even unpack his bag.”

When Sly still looked bewildered, Luna came to the rescue again. “Yusei and Lise are dating. He misses her.” She giggled a little. “They try to video chat when they can, and it’s so cute.”

“Oh…”

“Just don’t ask Yusei how she’s doing,” Luna whispered to Sly under her breath. “Leo learned that the hard way the other day.”

“So many photos,” Leo cringed.

///

The next morning Yusei was up bright and early busy with the new engine again. He was still at it when an older man dressed in a purple suit knocked on his door.

“Excuse me, but is anyone home?”

“I am,” Yusei raised his head to see the newcomer.

“You can fix anything, right? You’re Yusei Fudo?”

“That’s right. What’s been broken?”

“Well, you see,” the man grimaced and scratched at the back of his neck. “I wouldn’t say broken exactly. More like it’s out of control and won’t stop. I think you can fix it if you just tighten the screws a little.”

“Tighten the screws? What kind of machine is it, exactly?”
“It’s called the Heitmann.”

“Heitmann?”

///

“Silence!” the red-suited man from yesterday was yelling at the Twins’ class. “Regardless of what anyone else says, this matter is not open for discussion!”

“Why is that?!” Patty demanded.

Bob pounded on his desk in agreement. “Why are we all being expelled?”

“Because, entering this term, the class curve for the whole school dropped rapidly! This is not at all befitting Duel Academy, the epitome of duel academia! Meaning that, I have decided to expel the failing, lowest-level class!”

“Mr. Vice Principle, that’s too far!” Professor Bartlett spoke up. “The principle always says skill level doesn’t matter as long as the children are willing to learn!”

The Vice Principle smirked at the teacher. “This matter has already been approved by the principal.”

“He did?” Professor Bartlett murmured, her lips a thin line of worry.

“My educational policy finally got through that easygoing principal’s head, it seems.”

“I can’t believe that!”

“Please,” Luna stood up. “Don’t expel us!”

Leo did the same. “We’ve spent so much time working hard together, it’s not fair!”

“None of you have the right to say that!” the Vice Principal snapped, his yellow glasses gleaming. “Especially you, Leo, since your grades are ranked the worst!”

Leo glared but he couldn’t retort. His grades were the worst.

The door buzzed and Akiza stalked into the room. Judging by her expression she was just as pleased as the soon to be expelled class.

The vice principal’s glasses gleamed as he gazed with satisfaction at his student. “This, students, is Akiza Izinski, the top student of Duel Academy.”

“You call yourself a professor?”

“What are you so mad about? I think an exceptional student such as yourself would agree with me.”

Akiza’s eyes narrowed and she planted her feet. “I never approve of lazy teachers who won’t do their jobs!”

“This is bad,” Leo whispered to his sister. “If Akiza gets too angry she could bring the entire place down on top of us!”

“What’s wrong, Akiza?”
“Yusei?” Akiza turned to see her friend was in fact standing in the doorway, much like she had been a minute ago.

“Interesting, the champion of the Fortune Cup has decided to pay us a visit, Yusei Fudo.”

The entire class lost their heads. Their pending expulsion forgotten, they all jumped out of their seats to get a better look and exclaim in delight.

The vice principle was less than amused. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to do a job.”

“A job?”

“I took a request saying there was something in this classroom that needed to be fixed,” Yusei explained.

“Too bad you can’t fix these children’s grades, but that would be impossible.”

“You’re going too far, vice principal!” Professor Bartlett tried again.

“You can’t discard an entire class based on grades alone! They have passion to duel and that’s what will make them better students in the future!” Akiza insisted.

“I’ll have you know I’m no fool, so expelling this class is by no means foolish! No matter how much these children study, it will all be pointless!” The vice principal brought up a holo-board and displayed the cards of different students with the flick of his hand. “For one thing there are nothing but a bunch of low-level, loser cards in these children’s decks. All these duelists are low-caliber, so they only use low-level monsters.”

“I disagree,” Yusei said, speaking calmly and clearly. “All cards are essential, not one of them is useless.”

“Outsiders have no business sticking their nose where it doesn’t belong!” the vice principal snapped. “Fix what you came here to fix and leave! What did you come to fix anyway?!”

“I’m supposed to fix something called a Heitmann.”

“Huh?” the vice principal’s mouth dropped open. “Heitmann?”

“Yeah, they told me that I just needed to retighten a few loose screws,” Yusei said.

“What?” the vice principal guffawed. “Are you talking about me, Rudolph Heitmann?”

“Huh?!” This time it was Yusei’s turn to be surprised. He wasn’t expecting to fix a person!

“Yusei, you’ve gotta help!” Leo jumped back up before anyone could recover from their shock. “We’re all gonna get expelled!”

“Please help us!” Patty said, her brows knit together.

“Do something!” Bob begged.

“All right,” Yusei said. “I think I get it now. Looks like I’m here to fix more than one problem. Heitmann, I challenge you to a duel. If I win, none of these kids gets expelled.”
“Enough of all this nonsense! I’ll teach you that these failures have no business dueling myself! Understood!”

///

“Will he be okay?” Professor Bartlett murmured to Akiza, away from the innocent ears of her students. “The vice principal’s deck is quite powerful.”

“There’s nothing to worry about,” Akiza smiled at the professor. “Yusei’s my friend, and I sincerely doubt he’d lose to someone like Heitmann.”

“You can win, Yusei,” Luna said. “I know you can.”

“Thanks,” Yusei smiled shortly at each kid. “By the way, I have to ask you guys for a favor.”

“A favor?”

///

Yusei and Heitmann were ready to go in the Duel Academy’s arena. Luna, Leo, Akiza, Professor Bartlett, and the rest of her class watched from the seats. The future of their duel monsters education was riding on this duel.

“With my Ultimate Winners Deck, your eyes are in for a treat!” Heitmann promised, turning his duel disk on.

“Let’s duel!”

Yusei: 4000

Heitmann: 4000

“I’ll go first,” Yusei said. “I draw. I summon Flamvell Guardian in defense mode!”

(Flamvell Guardian: Atk: 0 Def: 2000)

“You can do it, Flamvell Guardian!” Bob cheered from the stands.

“I place two cards face down and end my turn.”

Heitmann scoffed, unimpressed, at Yusei’s lone monster. “Is this level one tuner monster the only thing you can summon? I’ll show you a real monster! My turn! Here it is! Here it is! Here it is!” Heitmann giggled gleefully to himself. “I summon Ancient Gear Statue!”

(Ancient Gear Statue: Atk: 500 Def: 800)

“Now then, by using this level two monster, I shall teach you a special lesson.”

“Special lesson?” the class wondered aloud.

“Yes, indeed,” Heitmann said. “No matter how many low-level monsters you summon, you cannot win a duel. I’ll show you what I mean! I activate the spell card Machine Duplication! This card special summons two machine-type monsters with attack power at 500 or less from my deck! I choose my two other Ancient Gear Statues!”

“He has three of the same monster,” Leo said, not quite connecting the dots.
“I activate my Ancient Gear Statues’ effects! By releasing these monsters, they all special summon the three Ancient Gear Golems in my hand, ignoring summoning requirements!”

(Ancient Gear Golem(x3): Atk: 3000 Def: 3000)

“Attack power of 3000, and there’s three of them!” Luna gasped, hanging at the edge of her seat.

“Ancient Gear Golem are really rare cards though!” Dexter said. “How did he manage to get ahold of three of them?”

Heitmann spread his arms wide. The better to behold the beauty of his favorite monsters. “These are the vintage monsters that only elite professors selected by Duel Academy are allowed to use! Low level monsters only serve as material for high level monsters! And low-level duelists must also be released to make way for the elites!”

“Enough bragging.” Yusei quipped. “It doesn’t matter what monster you’ve summoned, power is just power. It doesn’t guarantee you’ll win.”

“Only sore losers say things like that once they’ve lost. Are you suggesting you have a chance of winning?”

“Before battle, I’ll activate my trap,” Yusei moved quickly. “Tuner’s Barrier! This prevents any tuners on my field from being destroyed this turn!”

“Typical low-level resistance. When Ancient Gear Golem attacks a monster in defense mode, the difference is dealt as damage! Now attack!”

Yusei: 1000

Heitmann: 4000

“He’s down 3000 lifepoints in just one turn,” Akiza said. She was actually starting to get a little worried. Even so, no matter what happened she wasn’t letting these kids get expelled.

“This is the end! I activate the spell card Level Thunder! You get hit with damage equal to 11 times the combined levels of all monsters on my side of the field!”

“That’s 2400 more points of damage!” Akiza realized.

“Is Yusei gonna lose?” Luna asked Akiza. Her hands were sweating buckets just thinking about it.

“Huh?”

“This is a one-turn kill! Only made possible by the dueling elites!”

“By discarding Wingwata from my hand, it reduces effect damage to zero!” Yusei countered swiftly. That had been too close.

“All right! Wingwata is awesome!” Patty cried, her frown turned back into a smile. Yusei was still in the fight!

“Honestly, you have more lives than a cockroach!” Heitmann groused. “I end my turn.”

///

Sasha lead Lise into one of the smaller temple’s rooms. Candles flickered, casting strange shadows
against the dark walls of the small room. Along the center of the room was a line of metallic spikes. It reminded Lise of the weird spikes on the shell of Bowzer from the mushroom kingdom.

“Not to be a downer,” Lise said. “But this room is giving me the creeps. It’s like, almost seven AM.” She yawned. “I can manifest my chi and I understood your explanation. Can’t I go back to bed?”

“Nope. This is the first exercise in controlling your chi output. Now manifest your chi in your arm.”

“Which arm?”

“Doesn’t matter. Pick one,” Sasha’s lip curled and her forehead wrinkled considerably.

Lise thought it best not to argue. She allowed her chi to manifest in her left arm despite being right handed. She wanted an extra arm free in case she had to punch something.

Sasha gestured for Lise to join her next to one of the spikes. “Here, put your chi right on top of this spike.”

“Okay…” Lise agreed. She was obeying but she still had a feeling she would not like whatever came next.

Before Lise could stop her, Sasha had grasped her legs and flung Lise up into a one-handed hand stand atop the dangerous spike. The only thing stopping Lise from being impaled was her chi.

“Hey! Hey! Hey! What the hell! If I stop I could die!” Lise protested loudly. She was already sweating from the effort.

“Precisely,” Sasha said, as if dangling new friends over deadly weapons happened every day. She pointed at the candles still flickering. “So those 12 candles?”

“How could I not?” Lise grunted.

“They’re each specifically made to last a certain amount of time. The first one there only lasts an hour. When the hour is up, you switch arms.”

“Got it. For how long?”

“Twelve hours.”

“What?!!?!?!!” Lise practically screamed through her teeth. “But you’re sentencing me to death!” Her eyes followed Sasha as she walked calmly for the door. “How can I possibly maintain this much chi for twelve hours?!”

“You can’t. That’s the point. Ha, point, get it?”

“Not the fucking time!”

“Right. Sorry, but this is the easiest way to ensure you learn regulation of your chi. Once you’re in darkness, then you’re done.”


“Don’t talk too much. You’ll need your strength. Tomorrow you have leg day to look forward to, so see you later!” Sasha left without another word.
The first hour wasn’t easy, but it was doable.

As was the second.

The third and fourth hours passed by too slowly.

The fifth and sixth hours were absolute agony.

Agony that refused to stop. Six hours was only the halfway mark.

It was like a constant cycle.

Push and pull.

Tired but needing to keep going.

Her hands and arms had been shaking for who knew how long.

The blood rushing to her face, making everything blurry when coupled with the waves of exhausting washing over Lise whenever she was weak enough to let them.

Then she’d rile herself back up again to repeat the process.

The only thing that mattered was when another candle snuffed out.

Then she could relieve one arm for a short while.

Suddenly Lise opened her eyes to see nothing.

Nothing.

Darkness had completely fallen. No more candle light.

Lise gingerly swung herself down out of harm’s way. More like threw herself, but she was so shaky she didn’t care. On her way back into the sunlight she paused to use the bathroom to puke and pee. Her exhaustion was so overwhelming she simply threw herself onto her bed and was out like a light.

///

“I think it’s my turn to teach a lesson,” Yusei smiled. “These kids aren’t low-level duelists and they nevr will be! I’ll show you!”

“Absurd,” Heitmann blinked in disbelief. “There’s nothing you can do to save yourself from my Ancient Gear Golems.”

Yusei ignored him. “My turn! I play the spell card Treasure Card of Tuning! By sending a tuner monster in my hand to the graveyard, I’m allowed to draw two cards.”

“You can do that?”

“I summon Eccentric Boy!”

*(Eccentric Boy: Atk: 800 Def: 200)*

“When Eccentric Boy is used in a synchro summon, I can select one monster from my hand to use for the synchro summon! I’m tuning my level three Eccentric Boy to my level five Turret
Warrior!

“Tuning with a monster in your hand? Is that even allowed?” Heitmann cried.

“It is if you read the card,” Sly allowed himself a tiny smirk. Then went back to brooding before anyone noticed.

“I synchro summon Stardust Dragon!”

Heitmann raised an eyebrow in skepticism. “Your monster is impressive, but it’s no match for my three Ancient Gear Golems!”

“True, not by itself, but I just need a little help from my friends!” Yusei exclaimed. “From my hand I play Variety Comes Out! By returning Stardust Dragon back to the deck, I can special summon tuner monsters from my graveyard whose combined levels are equal to Stardust Dragon’s eight!”

“What?!”

“I summon Eccentric Boy, Wingwata, and Debris Dragon!”

(Wingwata: Atk: 200 Def: 0)

“What’re you thinking? Why would you use your high level synchro monster as a footstool to special summoning your low level tuner monsters? Wait a minute!” Heitmann went as rigid as a board.

“Yes, these are the monsters in the decks of the kids you called losers!”

“You can fill all the numbers you want, but low-levels are still low-levels!” Heitmann insisted. “My monsters still have higher attack power!”

“Neither level nor attack power determines the winner. I activate my trap Tuner Bomb! By destroying monsters on my field equal to the number of monsters on my opponent’s field, this card destroys all monsters on your field!”

“It can’t be?!” Heitmann wailed as Wingwata, Eccentric Boy, and Flamvell Guard sent his monsters aflame.

“By the way, for each monster destroyed, you lose 1000 points of damage!”

Yusei: 1000  
Heitmann: 1000

“Now Debris Dragon attacks you directly!”

Yusei: 1000  
Heitmann: 0

“He did it!”

“Yusei won!”

“Our monsters beat the vice principal’s super rare monsters!” Patty squealed.
“It can’t be,” Heitmann said. He had fallen to the ground after his loss and hadn’t bothered to get up again. “How could my Winners Deck be defeated? Did low-levels always have this much potential?”

“Of course,” Yusei said. He approached the vice principal amicably. “Levels aren’t important. A heart that desires to learn no matter what is important. These kids are doing just that.”

“As expected of Yusei Fudo,” the purple-suited man from that morning walked out onto the arena. “It seems you’ve tightened the screws just as I’d hoped.”

“Principal!” Heitmann said, still on the floor.

“Principal?”

“Forgive me, Yusei, for deceiving you all this time. I had a hard time getting through this hard head of his, you see.”

“You really wanted him to repair me, principal?”

“Yes, and?”

Heitmann sniffled and fidgeted, not making eye contact. “I made a mistake.”

“Yusei!” The class cheered as they swarmed their hero.

“The children’s expulsions…!”

The celebrating stopped. Duel Academy’s arena was unusually quiet.

“…shall be revoked,” Heitmann finished.

“YAY!” the kids quite literally jumped for joy.

“Thank you, Yusei,” the Principal nodded respectfully at the teenage boy.

“Oh, Sly,” Yusei bent down and held out Eccentric Boy. “Thanks for letting me use your card. I won with it.”

“Whatever,” Sly rolled his eyes and snatched his card back.

“See you around.” Yusei turned to go. The gaggle of children followed him as he left, laughing, giggling and jumping around him.

“It’s almost noon,” Yusei murmured at the clouds rolling lazily by outside Duel Academy’s doors. “I hope Lise is awake.”
Lise inhaled and exhaled slowly. Tempering her breathing helped maintain her chi gauge. She balanced one footed on the spike she had been suspended over yesterday. At first she felt like she was doing shitty yoga over a deadly spike, but then again, it was rather calming once she got over the fact that if she stopped she could die.

“Hanging in there?” Sasha’s voice was cheerful. She was smiling.

“More or less,” Lise opened one eye. “Can’t skip leg day, right?”

Sasha’s brown eyes flickered with warmth in the candlelight. “Of course not! Hopefully you won’t get sick this time.”

“You know about that?” Lise gasped. She flailed wildly, losing her balance for a brief time and then righting herself.

Sasha raised an eyebrow. “You didn’t exactly clean up after yourself. Granted, you were exhausted, so we’ll let this one slide. Hopefully, you can at least get some dinner before falling asleep.”

“I’ll do my best,” Lise closed her eyes again, and returned to steadying her breathing and chi output.

///

The sun shone down on New Domino City on another bright day. Crow, Jack and Yusei were racing for the Satellite on one of the newer highways built between the two islands.

“Man, this place looks totally different!” Crow said, gazing back and forth between the tall skyscrapers framing the road.

“Yeah, the Satellite we grew up with is gone,” Yusei said.

Jack nodded. “The people in the city are helping to rebuild. Looks like it’s working.”

The three of them rolled to a stop right outside Martha’s house. Her home had remained undisturbed during the city’s renovations, but more space for the elderly had been built around her too.

“It’s big bro Crow!” Little Annie and two boys followed her out to greet the trio. “Long time no see!”

“Good to see, Yusei, Jack, and Crow,” Blister said. He waved his hand in greeting and placed it on his hip.

“Where’s Lise?” Martha asked, looking around for her adopted daughter.

“Peru,” Yusei answered briefly, removing his helmet. “She’ll be back soon.” He bit his lip and changed the subject. “So, Blister, you’re really living here?”

“It just felt like home, and I couldn’t just let Martha’s good cooking go to waste.”

“You kids been good?” Crow bent down to their eye level.
Annie stuck out her lower lip and crossed her arms. “Of course we have! We study every day too!”

“Really? Then you’re not causing Martha any trouble, are you?” Crow got back up to his feet.

“Trouble? The four of you were much more trouble at their age!” Martha joked.

“Ouch!” Crow laughed, scratching at the back of his neck. The kids joined him.

“All right now, we shouldn’t stand and chat, so come on in,” Martha said.

“right, I’ve got something to show you,” Blister lead the way in and sat down at his computer. “I thought I’d let you know,” he said as he brought up an aerial view of the city, then zoomed in on where the meteor from earlier had fallen. “You already know about the meteor crashing on the city’s outskirts, I take it?”

“Yeah.”

Crow spoke up too. “They made the place around there off limits.”

“I’ve heard some strange rumors,” Blister continued. “It seems that what came crashing down wasn’t a meteor, but a stone tablet of some kind. It appears the Public Security Maintenance Bureau covertly recovered it.”

“A stone tablet? Now that I think about it, Ghost showed up around then,” Yusei realized.

“Think it’s connected?” Crow asked.

“I can’t say for sure at this point, but it feels like there’s something hiding in the shadows.”

“Ghost…He had the power to steal Synchros,” Yusei said. He agreed with Blister wholeheartedly: something was definitely going on that the rest of the city wasn’t supposed to know.

“Best to keep on your guards, regardless,” Blister advised.

“Right.”

///

“Quite a jam, I’d say,” Doctor Schmitt was saying when the boys joined him and Martha downstairs.

“Yes, Bashford is getting really old, after all,” Martha agreed.

“Huh? Something happen?” Crow inquired.

“Oh, you boys,” Dr. Schmitt smiled fondly at them. “Martha’s caught in a jam.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Well, there’s an old man living by himself in the old section of town. We tried asking him to come here since we’re worried about his safety living by himself, but…” the doctor trailed off.

“He’s a stubborn one,” Martha picked up where Schmitt had left off. “He keeps refusing our offers.”

“Big bro Crow, you should do something,” one of the kids said.
“Me? How? Old people make me nervous.”

“Oh well,” one of the boys smirked deviously. “Guess big bro Crow can’t do it.”

“What?!”

Annie caught on quick and nodded. “Uh huh, betcha he can’t.”

“Can’t, my ass!” Crow growled, getting riled up. Exactly what the kids wanted to do. “If that’s what you think, then I’ll handle that old man for sure!”

“Hey, Crow-” Jack spoke up to try to talk his friend out of an embarrassing situation.

“I said leave everything to me!” Crow pointed at himself, puffing up his chest. “So, who and where is this old man?”

The kids giggled to themselves softly. “Same old big bro Crow. He’s so easy to manage.”

///

Bashford stared longingly in the dark of his home. If he squinted and tilted his head just right, he could see his son asking him for a duel.

“Kouki…”

Bashford blinked and his son was gone. He was alone with his house, and his thoughts, again. He sighed and reached for his treasured family portrait.

A commotion out front stopped him. Bashford hobbled out to see what was disturbing his home now.

“What the hell is this?!” Crow’s mouth was wide open in shock.

Trash was piled up as far as the eye can see in a suffocating ocean. The old man’s house was like a tiny island at the center of a fortress. Despite the garbage, the house was practically spotless.

“Piles upon piles upon piles of junk!” Crow was still going on.

“It’s like a castle,” Jack remarked, cupping his chin in his hand. “He lives here alone?”

“Sure does,” Blister said.


“Don’t come any closer!” a loud voice reverberated out from the house, all four males were forced to cover their ears.

“That’s our old guy?” Crow pointed to Bashford in the window of his home, clutching a megaphone. He didn’t notice the four ropes hanging behind him. “Say, old man, wouldn’t you rather live at Martha’s place?!” Crow shouted through his hands.

“Nice job, Crow,” Jack rolled his eyes. “Calling him old will definitely get him to come with us.”

Sure enough, Bashford was yelling back in opposition; “This is my house! I don’t feel like moving!”
“Yeah, but it isn’t safe to live alone!”

“Don’t treat me like some daft old man! Scram!”

“Fine then,” Crow smirked and cracked his knuckles. “I’ll just have to drag you back to Martha’s!” Without a second thought, he raced into the trash heap supporting Bashford’s home.

“Wait, Crow!” Blister couldn’t stop his hotheaded friend.

“Trap activate,” Bashford said, pulling on one of the ropes.

A Scrap Iron Scarecrow, made from actual scrap, whipped upright. It smacked Crow in the face, and sent him flying into a trash heap.

Crow got up and shook himself off. “This means war, old man,” he promised with fists clenched. He ran down the trash pile.

“You’re persistent,” Bashford said, pulling another rope.

A trap hole opened up in front of Crow. He scoffed at it and leapt into the air. “That’s not gonna stop me!”

“Oh really?” Bashford pulled the third rope.

A second trap hole opened up, right where Crow was landing! “AAAAH!” He wildly tried to grab something, but he crash landed at the bottom of Bashford’s trap hole.


“This is no time to be impressed!” Crow insisted, extracting himself from the trap stubbornly. “Damn that old man! If that’s how you’re playing it, I’m bulldozing through!” Contrary to his words, Crow walked forward tentatively. He was tenacious, not stupid.

“They never do learn,” Bashford said, pulling his last rope.

Crow walked right onto the next trap; a spring-loaded platform that sent him flying off into the junk piles.

“Crow!” Yusei and Jack lost sight of him.

“Ow…” Crow muttered, getting up from where he had fallen. “Whoa!” He’d caught sight of an enormous two-headed purple dragon bearing its fangs at him. Crow intelligently decided that backing away slowly was his best bet, which he did until the beast vanished. “Where am I? A duel arena?” Crow got to his feet in safety. “What’s the big idea? That was all solid vision?”

“Crow!” Yusei, Blister, and Jack raced up to him.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’ll manage.”

“A duel arena? Why is this here?” Blister looked around the makeshift duel arena. “It looks homemade.”

“Hey!” Bashford came running up to the duel arena angrier than before. “Get off of there right
“I was flung here by your trap, old timer,” Crow reminded him, a pinch of annoyance in his voice.

“Spare me the grumbling and beat it!”

“Hold on, old timer,” Crow said. “If you can duel, how about dueling me?”

“What’d you say?”

“If I lose, I’ll leave no problem. In return, if I win, you have to live at Martha’s.”

Bashford scowled even deeper than before. He was not taking any chances.

“C’mon!” Crow spread his arms as if to mimic the wide expanse of duel arena he stood upon.

“You have this amazing ring! We just have to duel on it! I’ve always dreamed of playing in a duel ring like this! It’s just like the old ones Yugi Mutou and Seto Kaiba used!”

“You…think this place is fun?” Bashford could hardly believe his ears. No one else had ever been so interested before.

“Course! Who wouldn’t?” Crow smiled.

“Fine then. I’m pretty tough, though,” Bashford warned, his mind changed after all.

“This idea doesn’t sound very good,” Yusei said.

Jack shrugged. “Let’s just leave this to Crow for now.”

The arena’s control centers raised them up into optimal dueling position. Crow and Bashford were all set to go.

Crow: 4000

Bashford: 4000

“I’ll take the first move! Draw!” Bashford said. “I summon Maternal Junk in defense mode!”

(Maternal Junk: Atk: 300 Def: 1500)

The small monster looked like a small, traditionally, female-like robot assembled from various junk pieces.

“I place a card face-down and end my turn!”

“All right! It’s my turn then!” Crow said. This was exciting; he could almost pretend it was like he was dueling at the very beginning of the duel monsters era. “hope you know I’m not pullin’ any punches just cause you’re old. Draw! I summon Blackwing Vayu: the Emblem of Honor!”

(Blackwing Vayu: the Emblem of Honor: Atk: 800 Def: 0)

“And this can be special summoned from my hand when there’s a Blackwing on my side of the field; Blackwing Bora the Spear!”

(Blackwing Bora the Spear: Atk: 1700 Def: 800)

“When he attacks a monster in defense mode, and Bora’s attack is greater than the defense of your
monster, you take damage! Go, Blackwing Bora the Spear!"

“Trap activate,” Bashford countered. “Scrap-Iron Scarecrow!”

“Oh?” Yusei smiled at the use of the familiar card. “He uses a junk deck like mine!”

“Scrap-Iron Scarecrow allows me to negate an opponent monster’s attack and reset it on the field!”

“Not half bad, old timer,” Crow admitted with a smile.

“It’s my turn,” Bashford said. “Draw!”

Suddenly the ghost of his son was admiring the duel field. Bashford had built the duel field just for him a long time ago. Now the boy was gone…

Bashford reached out to try and recapture the memory, but to no avail.

Crow frowned. “Uh, something wrong, old timer?”

“Boy, you’re annoying,” Bashford growled. He didn’t appreciate being brought back to reality so jarringly. “Just shut your yap for once! I summon Paternal Junk!”

(Paternal Junk: Atk: 1600 Def: 400)

Bashford wasn’t done there though. “When a Maternal Junk is on my side of the field, this card increases in attack power by 500! Next I activate the field spell Junk Factory from my hand!”

“What?”

“This increases the power of monsters with Junk in their names by 500 points.”

“Oh? Nice! Its attack power went from 1600 to 2600 just like that!”

“It’s practically settled by now,” Jack crossed his arms. “All that’s left is getting a straight flush when the other one comes.”

“This isn’t the time to be impressed,” Blister reminded him. “If Crow loses then…”

“Please,” Jack scoffed. “Crow isn’t going to stand down for much longer.”

“Battle! Go Paternal Junk!”

Vayu went up in a cloud of feathers and yellow chips. Crow’s lifepoints took a beating too.

Crow: 2200

Bashford: 4000

“You’re better than I expected,” Crow said. “But Vayu is a special tuner that can only synchro summon from the graveyard! Time for my comeback!”

Bashford didn’t seem worried. On the contrary, he was actually smiling slightly. “Junk Factory’s effect activates!”

“What?”

“Junk Factory can return the card destroyed by a monster with ‘junk’ in its name back to the
opponent’s deck!” Bashford explained.

“EH?!?!?” Crow cried, watching the field spell pluck his monster out of the graveyard and place it back in his deck. “Guess I can’t use Vayu’s effect, can I?” Crow said. He picked up his cards and shuffled manually.

“I’ll set three cards face-down and end my turn,” Bashford said.

Jack’s frown grew deeper. “Why won’t he play it?”

“It?” Blister asked.

“My turn!” Crow decreed with an added flourish. “I activate the magic card Blackwing Shoot! By sending a Blackwing in my hand to the graveyard, it can destroy one monster in defense mode! I send Blackwing Shura the Blue Flame to the graveyard to destroy your Maternal Junk!”

“Trap activate: Scrap-Iron Barricade! On this turn, the monster protected by this card cannot be destroyed via a card’s effect. Scrap-Iron Barricade, just like Scrap-Iron Scarecrow, can be reset after its activation.”

“I ain’t done yet,” Crow vowed irritably. “I summon Blackwing Blizzard the Far North!”

\[
\text{(Blackwing Blizzard the Far North: Atk: 1300 Def: 0)}
\]

“When he’s successfully summoned, I’m allowed to special summon a level or lower Blackwing monster in my graveyard! I summon Blackwing Shura the Blue Flame in defense mode!”

\[
\text{(Blackwing Shura the Blue Flame: Atk: 1800 Def: 1200)}
\]

Bashford smirked and made his next move. “Trap activate! Scrap-Iron Trap Hole!”

“Eh? You’ve got more?!?”

“Scrap-Iron Trap Hole negates the special summon of a monster my opponent controls and returns it to your hand!”

“What?” Crow grumbled under his breath and took his card back. So, his field is full of Junk Traps, huh? I’ve been easing up on the slack, but this might not turn out well. This old timer fortifies his field like his house. I’ve gotta find a way around his defenses.

“I guess the odds are against Crow now,” Jack said.

Yusei nodded. “Those three traps are simple yet powerful.”

“I activate the magic card, Treasure Card of the Blackwings from my hand! By sending a Blackwing in my hand to the graveyard, I can draw two cards from my deck,” Crow said. “When there are Blackwings on my field, Gale the Whirlwind can be special summoned from my hand! Gale the Whirlwind’s effect activates! It can halve the attack and defense of one of your monsters! All right, now Bora the Spear attacks Paternal Junk!”

“Trap activate; Scrap-Iron Scarecrow!”

“I figured he’d do that,” Crow scowled for a second, then broke into a grin. “I won’t fall for the same trick twice! Gale the Whirlwind attacks Paternal Junk!”

“Gale the Whirlwind and Paternal Junk both have 1300 attack points. Is he trying to force a draw?”
Blister wondered aloud.

“I activate the monster effect of Blackwing Kalut the Moon Shadow! By sending her to the graveyard, Gale the Whirlwind gains 1400 attack points!”

*(Blackwing Kalut the Moon Shadow: Atk: 1400 Def: 1000)*

“So that was his plan!” Blister broke into a wide smile.

“Attack!”

Crow: 2200

Bashford: 2600

The impact of the attack disturbed the surrounding piles of junk. Already extremely unstable, they were beginning to steadily collapse.

“Good job, kid! But now, I activate a trap; Junk Spirits! When a monster with ‘junk’ in its name is destroyed and sent to the graveyard, this trap will special summon that monster during the end phase!”

“What?” Crow was completely taken aback.

“I play a face-down to end my turn. Come back, Paternal Junk! Maternal Junk and Junk Factory’s effects increase Paternal Junk’s attack power by 1000 points!”

“Don’t you find it bizarre?” Yusei said.

“Yeah,” Jack said. “This old man who lives by himself, is firmly fixated on family.”

“I see,” Blister finally realized. “So, Paternal is the father, and Maternal is the mother… So if Kid Junk turned up on the field, Paternal Junk would protect the Kid with a power up of 1000 points. That kind of power is nothing to sneeze at. He’d win with that.”

Jack dipped his head. “but if he wanted to do so, he would have a long time ago. Paternal Junk and Maternal Junk’s effects allow you to add a Kid Junk from your deck into your hand.”

“Well, why wasn’t he done it, then?”

Yusei gasped and started to walk off.

“Hey, where are you going?” Blister asked.

“To get the key card.”

Blister cocked his head to the side. “Key card?”

Yusei smiled, nodding his head. “If my hunch is right, Crow has nothing to worry about.” He left in a hurry.

“Really? Hey, Yusei!”

“I activate the spell card Junk Barrage, and equip it to Paternal Junk! Battle!” Bashford commanded. “Paternal Junk attacks Gale the Whirlwind!”
Crow: 900

Bashford: 2600

More and more junk collapsed. There was simply just too much of it to hold up under the force of
the duel.

“When the monster equipped with Junk Barrage destroys an opposing monster, it deals damage to
half that monster’s attack!” Bashford said.

Crow: 250

Bashford: 2600

Crow cried out as the damage hit him. He hadn’t expected to get this beat down. The old man
wasn’t bad at all.

The mountains of junk had reached their limit. They were falling apart so quickly, the ground was
shaking.

“What the-!”

“The acoustics of the duel have started to make the junk piles crumble!” Blister cried.

“Crow!” jack called down to them. “Get out of there!”

“Right! Old man, we gotta go!”

“Don’t be stupid,” Bashford dismissed the idea. “We have to settle this duel first!”

“Why you hard-headed, stubborn geezer! Fine then! Trap activate; Black Thunder! When a
Blackwing on my field is destroyed by battle, it inflicts 400 points of damage for each card on my
opponent’s field! You have seven cards on your field. That makes 2800 points of damage!”

Crow: 250

Bashford: 0

“No…I lost…” Bashford froze.

“Get down!” Crow jumped off the duel platform and raced across the arena. He tackled Bashford
and the two of them vanished under the onslaught of falling debris.

The piles of junk kept coming though. The build-up collapsed, destroying Bashford’s house, and
decimating the duel arena in one fell swoop.

“Crow! Old man!” Blister and Jack shouted, racing for where they had seen their friend disappear.

The lid of an old fridge opened up. Inside rested Crow and Bashford. They were a little banged up,
but otherwise okay.

“We’re okay,” Crow sighed in relief.

Bashford didn’t agree with that assessment. He ignored the boys and wobbled over the half buried
duel arena. “Kouki’s ring!” He tried to walk further out, but Crow stopped him.
“Stop, old timer!”

“My prized possession is in that house!”

“Everyone okay?” Yusei asked, rejoining them.

“Yusei!”

“Where’d you go?”

Yusei approached Bashford before anything else. “The ring may have broken, but what you wanted from the house, was this, right?” Yusei handed the old man the picture he had retrieved.

Bashford took it wordlessly. The wrinkles on his face suddenly seemed years deeper than when he’d been dueling Crow.

“It’s a family photo,” Crow said.

Blister raised an eyebrow. “You had a family, old man?”

“Yeah, a long time ago.”

“Kid Junk was never in your deck from the start, was it?”

“What?”

“Yeah,” Bashford sighed. “I gave that card to my son, Kouki. I sure am a fool, aren’t I? I was so busy working that before I knew it, all I cherished had left. I thought my son would come back someday if I just kept his duel ring going, but…”

“So, that’s why you didn’t wanna leave,” Blister said.

“There’s no chance of that now…” Bashford’s chin trembled and tears dripped onto the photograph he clutched in his hands.

“Old timer…” Crow trailed off sadly. He took a deep breath and smiled. “If you want a son to scold, then there’s one right here!”

“Huh?”

“See?” Crow spread his arms again. “You’ve got four, all big and strong!”

“Yeah,” Yusei agreed, a small smile making its way across his face. “Next time, I’ll come to learn more about junk decks.”

Jack cleared his throat. “Well, if it’s every once in a while, I can spare some time for you.”

“Besides, if you come to Martha’s you’ll have plenty of grandkids to shake a cane at!”

Bashford finally smiled a real smile. It took up his entire face. “You boys!”

///

“Wow!”

“That’s amazing!”
“It looks just like the real Stardust Dragon!”

“No! Even better!”

The kids of Martha’s orphanage couldn’t get enough of the new sculpture Bashford had installed.

Bashford dismounted his ladder and scratched the back of his head. “Okay, okay,” he chuckled in embarrassment.

“Good for you, old man,” Yusei said.

“Looks like he has a whole new spark,” Crow said.

“Absolutely,” Jack agreed.

“Oh, Crow, perfect timing. Massage my shoulders, would you? They’ve really gotten stiff.”

“Eh? Why me?” Crow complained.

“You dumbass, cause obviously massaging dad’s shoulders is a son’s duty.”

“Aw man…”

“You heard him, Crow,” Yusei shoved his front over to the geezer.

“You’re up, Crow,” Jack smirked.

“Ah, that’s nice,” Bashford sighed as Crow massaged his shoulders. “C’mon, put more muscle into it.”

“Like this?” Crow squeezed and a nasty cracking sound came out.

“Ow! Ow! Ow!”

“You okay, old man?”

“You’re supposed to be gentle with your elders, you lousy son!”

“Good grief…” Crow groaned.

///

Yusei took a deep breath and clicked the call button on his skype account. The other night Lise hadn’t responded. He’d tried for a half an hour, but no response. He knew Japan was 14 hours ahead of Peru, but still. Hopefully he’d have a better chance of getting through in the morning, night for her. “Please pick up, Lise.”

She picked up on the second call. “Hi you!” Lise was grinning so widely her eyes were closed. She looked like she’d been through a fire. Half her face was covered in soot, soaked with sweat, and in a similar outfit to what he’d first seen Sasha wearing.

“What the hell have you been doing?” Yusei’s eyes widened considerably.

“Huh?” Lise’s brows squished together. She looked down at herself and her expression relaxed. “Oh,” she scratched at the back of her head. “Training exercise. We were climbing the lava wall.”

“There’s a lava wall? Are you okay?”
“Oh yeah, just got too close. Thank god Jarra was there.”

“Jarra?”

“My new friend,” Lise smiled again. “She’s awesome, but what have you been doing? I miss you.”

“I miss you too,” Yusei rested his head on his hand. “I wish I could kiss you.”

Lise flushed red and laughed a little. “It’s kinda hard through the computer screen.” Lise settled down on her arms, resting her chin on them. “Tell me what’s been going on with you. How’s the city?”

“Okay, so the other day this old guy stops by and asks me to fix something right? He called it the…”
Two men looting a small house tossed a monitor out onto the cobbled street.

“Anything will do! Take anything that’ll make some dough!”

“Gotcha!”

A grotesque man stood smirking at a handful of cards as his men looted the place. He was dressed in the best mustard yellow suit money could buy. Each sausage-like finger housed an ugly, jeweled ring.

“Wait, please!” A tiny man pleaded to the uglier man. “I will pay you back, I swear! I beg you, please stop!”

“Boss Garome, look at this!” One of the man’s goons had unearthed a deck of cards.

A woman and child cowered fearfully in the corner.

“My cards!” the small kid cried. He raced forward and tried to take back his deck.

“Out of the way!” The goon backhanded the child to the ground.

The mother went to tend to her kid.

The goon on the other hand handed his boss the cards. The grubby little sausages perused the cards like a scorpion waiting to strike. He shook his head and sighed. “You sure have got some measly cards here. Oh, here’s a rare card. Better than nothing, I guess.” The guy pocketed the cards, ignoring the sobs of the watching child, and walked off into the night.

///

Lise woke up to the fourth day of her continued isolation. All she’d been given to be able to survive was a knife and a heavy winter coat.

Snow was piled up like a stack of fluffy blankets outside the mouth of her cave. Her breath steamed in the frigid air, and she shivered, but pushed herself into the chilly drift.

She walked through the snow the short distance to the small lake she had discovered housed fish. Lise snagged a tangle of her hair and tied it to the small strip of cloth she had ripped off her shirt on day two. Now all that was left to do was wait.

Every few minutes Lise had to shake herself. Her eyelids were heavy, and her body was exhausted.

After over two hours of no success, Lise punched the pile of snow next to her.

“AAAAARRRGGGGH!” She stood up and kicked another snow drift. “I won’t back down! Stay awake! It’s just three more days! You can do this!”

She took a shaky breath and got back down on the ground with a fresh knot of hair for her lure. The next four hours she amassed all the fish she could and dragged them back to her cave.

“You will survive,” Lise told herself as she prepped a fire. “You will.”

///
“Stubborn, isn’t she?” Sasha said.

“I like her,” Jose said. He smiled at the bubble of icy tundra the group was watching. “She’s got a bite to her.”

Master Terra nodded, observing quietly. “She has a will and determination to live that is unbreakable.” She began to leave. “When she returns, let her rest for the night. Tomorrow she will be in the desert land for a week.”

“Don’t you think this is going a little too far?” Jarra asked. She bit her lip. “I-I don’t mean to question you, Master Terra. I just think she might be over working herself.”

“Do you feel that I overworked any of you? You all went through the same tests and challenges, yet here you stand,” Master Terra said. “I will be at the mediation circle if I am needed.”

Yusei was hard at work on the new engine. He knew where Jack was, but Crow was taking a nap after finishing with his deliveries.

A knock came on the door, and a young boy let himself in. “Hello!” He had dull brown hair and sported regular jeans, t-shirt, and sneakers. “I came to pick up Dupont’s computer.”

“You’re helping Dupont today, Marco?” Yusei looked up from his work with a smile. “Working hard, I see.”

“Yup,” Marco said, returning Yusei’s smile with one of his own. “My brother and mom are sick so I’m doing what I can to earn money for them.”

“Just give me a second,” Yusei walked over to his shelf of tools and gadgets to find the one in question.

Marco took the extra time to gaze longingly at the duel runner engine prototype.

In no time at all, Yusei and Marco had the computer loaded on Marco’s cart. “See you later!” he called as he pulled his cargo away.

“Yeah, later,” Yusei called.

He went back inside in time to catch Crow walking downstairs in uniform.

“You okay?”

“We’re in the red again,” Crow said glumly. “Geez, it’s great that Satellite got connected with the city, but I never figured the price of things would go up like this! At this rate, I dunno if we’ll be able to enter the Grand Prix!”

“I guess we’ll just have to do it step-by-step,” Yusei said.

“So, where’s Jack? He better be looking for work.”

“Nope, he’s at his usual place,” Yusei sighed, spreading his arms.

“Usual place?”

///
“Thank you for waiting,” the brown-haired waitress said. She placed a teacup full of coffee on Jack’s outdoor table.

“Mmm, Jack Atlas settles for nothing less than Blue-Eyes Mountain. Such a distinct aroma,” Jack nodded approvingly.

“Dah, please enjoy!” the girl bowed awkwardly and ran back inside the café. “Oh… I couldn’t say anything today either!”

“Jack!”

“Huh?” The girl peered out of the café doors to see who had joined her crush.

Carly ran up and sat down beside Jack. She had her camera gear in tow. Clearly she was in pursuit of her next scoop.

“What’s four eyes doing with Jack?” The waitress seethed quietly.

“Hello Carly,” Jack said. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m doing a report on the Duel Shrine near here.”

“Duel Shrine?”

Carly nodded. “Word on the street is that it’s making a pretty nice profit.” She pulled her bag over and started rummaging around in it. “They say there are people who come to leave monetary offerings and make a wish. See?” Carly produced photos that she put right under Jack’s nose.

The waitress was grinding her teeth down to nubs she was so furious.

A lovely stone shrine, meticulously carved, was humbly pictured in Carly’s photo.

“Nonsense,” Jack scoffed.

“Jack!” Crow stood over their table looking ready for a fight.

“Oh, Crow, you’re done with your deliveries?” Jack said pleasantly.

“Yeah, a long time ago. Afternoon!” Crow greeted Carly rather informally and sat down.

“Want to order anything? The Blue-Eyes Mountain is delicious,” Jack suggested.

“Blue-Eyes Mountain?” Crow’s eyebrows raised in confusion. He glanced at the check. “Thirty dollars for a cup of coffee?!?!!?”

“Great, right?” Jack grinned. “To think I’d be drinking such sweet-smelling coffee just a block from our place!”

Crow slammed his fists down on the table. The cup of coffee shook and almost spilled.

“What? What? What?” Carly looked between the two boys so quickly it was a wonder she wasn’t suffering from whiplash.

“What are you doing? Do you really plan on entering the Grand Prix?” Crow rose from the table, along with his anger.
“What about it?” Jack’s smile turned into a scowl. “Of course I’m entering.”

“Then how about you work a little? Buying even a single part costs money! That’s why Yusei is earning money taking repairs and I’m driving my runner doing deliveries!”

“I’m aware of that, but since there are no suitable jobs for me, I can’t be blamed!”

“There’s no job suitable for you?” Crow growled, regaining his seat.

“All right now, let’s settle down,” Carly said, trying to make peace.

“You stay out of this!” Crow yelled at her.

“What do I do? What do I do?” the waitress bit her lip.

“Afternoon!” Marco greeted her. “I’m here to pick up the cardboard boxes!”

“Oh, it’s you, Marco. Good to see you,” the waitress smiled at the boy. “Good to see you!”

“Thanks,” Marco accepted the folded up boxes from the waitress’s manager. He added them to his cart.

“Keep up the good work!” the waitress waved at the boy as he left.

“Geez, talk about the opposite of you,” Crow said. “Marco goes out and supports his family like that from sun-up to sundown. Why don’t you take after his example?”

“Who do you think I am?” Jack scoffed. “Don’t lump me in with that kid.”

“It’s that attitude that keeps you from getting a job!” Crow shouted in frustration. “You’re always ‘Jack Atlas this’ and ‘Jack Atlas that,’ like you’re too good for everything!” Crow imitated Jack’s rather pompous attitude with great exaggeration. He leaned over the table to drive his message home. “Times are different! Who the hell remembers you?!”

Carly gasped and scowled deeply at Crow too. “Crow, that’s too far!”

“If you’re so upset, try making some scratch! If it weren’t for us, you could forget about enjoying any meals!”

“Fine!” Jack stood up. “If you insist, then just wait! Get ready for a mountain of cash I’ll throw at your feet!” Jack stalked off and didn’t look back.

“Jack…” Carly looked back at him, pouting at not getting to spend more time with him.

///

“Behold!” Jack decreed, displaying his monstrous food concoction. “This is Jack Atlas’ Special Synchro Bento Box!”

“Get out!”

Jack shed his apron and walked back into the job hunting fray. Lunches weren’t always his thing, but Lise had always liked books. He decided to try a bookstore next.

“Good afternoon!” A well-dressed man came in with a delivery for the shop.

The manager stared in disbelief and ran over. “Hey, wait, what are you talking about? You’re fired, you weirdo!”

All right, books weren’t Jack’s thing. Maybe a dry cleaning business was a good first step.

“What the hell is this hole doing here?!” The manager screamed, looking straight through an otherwise opaque shirt.

“The customer said to remove the stain, so I did. Now he can bare his arms just like me!” Jack exposed his mark of the Crimson Dragon proudly.

“You’re fired!”

Jack sulked as he walked through the city. “The whole lot of them are clueless!”

“Oh,” Carly watched Jack from afar. She’d been tailing him all day, unsure how best to intervene. “I want to help, but I don’t want to humiliate Jack…”

///

Night had fallen on the city. Crow and Yusei were safe at home and hard at work.

“Jack’s not back yet?”

“Guess not,” Crow said, a satisfied smile spread across his features. “Hopefully he’s managed to keep a decent job.”

“Hmm,” Yusei was less than certain.

///

“I’m surrounded by a bunch of hardheaded dolts,” Jack complained, tossing pebbles into the water beneath his bridge. “These commoners don’t know my worth.”

A smoke trail, carrying the smell of good food wafted by Jack’s nose. He was so hungry, but there was no way he was going back to Crow without something to show for his efforts.

Carly looked up hopefully from below the bridge. She was fanning the smoke, and the smell of her cooking fish, up to Jack. “It’s okay, Jack. You shouldn’t strain yourself. You can’t work on an empty stomach.”

“Huh?” Just when Jack had decided to investigate the scent of good food, he spotted Marco. The boy looked like he was going somewhere. Jack decided to follow him.

Carly misunderstood his intentions when he vanished from her sight. “Here he comes! Plates! I need plates!” Once she finally had her fish ready on a plate, Carly realized Jack was headed in the opposite direction.

She quickly packed everything up and raced after him. “Where is he going?”

Carly moved just a little bit closer and caught sight of Jack’s goal. “The Duel Shrine? Why is he going to the Shrine? He wouldn’t…rob the offerings?! No Jack, you can’t!” Jumping to conclusions, Carly ran into the shrine’s wooded grounds and bumped directly into Jack.
Before she could scream or gasp, Jack quickly covered Carly’s mouth. He moved them into the shadows. “Just be quiet!” he whispered angrily.

Carly nodded and Jack removed his hand. “What’s wrong, Jack? What’re you doing?” she whispered back.

Jack pointed at Marco. The boy stood in front of the shrine, moonlight bathing him in a soft glow.

“I thought he was acting peculiar so I followed him,” Jack said.

Marco took out his cards, took a deep breath, and placed them atop the shrine.

“Cards?”

“I beg you, Duel Shrine,” Marco prayed. “I don’t have any money, but please use these cards to help us get rid of Garome!”

“Garome?” Carly gasped.

“You know him?”

“Of course I do!” Carly’s eyebrows were angled down so sharply, her whole face looked like she could cut trees with a look. “He’s a loan shark who exploits the poor, and rumored to be a big time jerk. After lending you money, he makes you sign one fake contract after another, and then he robs you blind! I bet that boy’s family was tricked the same way.”

“Big brother!” A smaller boy who appeared to be a tiny version of Marco came running into the Duel Shrine’s grounds.

“Miguel?!”

“Your cards!” Miguel pointed at the deck still resting on the shrine.

“It’s all right. It’s so we can get rid of Gerome.”

“But without your cars, you can’t duel! What happened to riding a duel runner one day and entering tournaments?” Miguel argued stubbornly. He was not going to let his big brother give up on his dream no matter what. “That’s what you said you’d do, remember?”

“I had hopes when Satellite was connected to the city. I thought the world was starting to change, so that even people as poor as us could duel as much as we wanted. I was so hopeful, but in the end nothing’s changed!” Marco cried in frustration. “Poor people like us aren’t even allowed to dream! Besides, even if I kept these cards…”

“Marco?” Miguel said softly.

Marco shook himself out of his memories. “Let’s go, Miguel. Mom is going to worry.”

Miguel sighed, but he nodded. “Okay…”

Jack watched the two brothers leave in silence.

Carly was a bit more vocal. “Garome should pay for what he’s done! The nerve of him extorting kids like that!”

“Does Garome duel?” Jack said.
“Wait a minute,” Carly whirled on him. “Jack, you’re not-“

“Does he?” Jack asked a second, more forceful, time. He didn’t wait for her answer. He went to the shrine, and Marco’s cards.

“If you do that, you’ll incur the Duel Shrine’s wrath!” Carly exclaimed, but Jack ignored her. “And he’s doing it…” She sighed exasperatedly. She loved the guy, but sometimes he could get carried away when he made up his mind.

///

“Did you see the look on that Marco kid’s face?” one goon laughed.

A second goon pitched his voice high and squeaky, a cruel imitation of the boy’s voice. “Oh Garome, not our money, please! We need that to buy our mommy’s medicine!”

Garome and his lackeys burst into cruel laughter. Laughter that abruptly ended when a well-placed, white boot kicked their door open.

Jack walked calmly into the lion’s den.

“Who the hell are you?” All the goons stood, but Garome remained seated.

Jack’s violet eyes swept over the group. He finally settled on his target. “I take it, you’re Garome.”

“What a pleasant surprise,” Garome sneered and opened his arms in greeting. “What business would the prestigious Jack Atlas have with me?”

“Jack Atlas? Who’s that?”

“Beats me.”

Garome kept going. “If you’re in need of money, I’ll gladly supply you with as much as you need. Of course, all you have to do is return it whenever you make some money of your own.”

“Who said I want anything to do with you?” Jack grumped. “I came here for those contracts.”

“Contracts?”

“You and I will duel,” Jack said plainly. “If you win, you’re free to do as you please. However, if I win you’ll hand over all those contracts!”

“Are you aware of how valuable these contracts are?” Garome wasn’t even rattled. “I won’t just hand them all over. Especially when all you have is your former title as King, which is already utterly worthless.” Garome stood up, his disgusting smile getting bigger. “Although, you did take the time to make a visit. How about this? If I win, you’ll give me your Red Dragon Archfiend?”

“What?!”

“And throw in your Phoenix Whirlwind while we’re at it. If that all suits you, then I accept your duel.”

“Fine then.”

///
Yusei had finally convinced Crow to go out searching for Jack. They had figured on foot would serve them well enough since Jack too was on foot.

“I swear, you have to do everything for this guy,” Crow complained.

Yusei stopped, but Crow kept walking. “It’s Jack.”

“What’s he doing?” Crow backpedaled and rejoined his friend.

“A duel, looks like.”

“Jack!”

“Oh, it’s you two,” Jack greeted them like dueling a con artist in the middle of the night was perfectly normal.

“What’re you dueling here for?” Yusei said.

“What’s going on? Where are you taking me?” Marco complained. Carly had found him and dragged him all the way there.

“There he is,” Jack said.

“Marco?!” Both Yusei and Crow gasped.

“Yusei? Crow? Jack?” Marco was just as bewildered. He glanced at his friend’s opponent. “Garome!”

“So, we’re clear? If I win, you’ll give me your Red Dragon Archfiend, and your duel runner?”

“Say what?!” This was even worse than Crow had imagined.

“Jack Atlas never goes back on his word!”

“Jack, do you really want to do this? That’s a huge loss!” Yusei was worried for his friend. The stakes were just too high.

“I just wanted you to get a job! Not this!” Crow gestured wildly at the duel arena. “You’d better not lose!”

“cut him some slack, guys,” Carly said. “He’s dueling to get some contracts back.”

“Don’t do this, Jack!” Marco shouted. “Don’t risk everything for me!”

“This isn’t about you. This is a battle for those who follow their dreams!”

“Dreams?”

“Let’s duel!”

Jack: 4000

Garome: 4000

“I’ll go first, draw!” Garome said. “I activate the spell card Upstart Goblin! This effect allows me to draw and give my opponent 1000 lifepoints.”
“He’s giving him lifepoints?” Carly blinked in confusion.

“Jack is reliable enough, so I’ll supply him with as many lifepoints as he needs.”

“Don’t be fooled, Jack!” Marco called out. “He always sucker you in but cheats you at the end!”

“Don’t worry. Just sit back and watch,” Jack said.

“I special summon Hell Trader!”

(Hell Trader: Atk: 0 Def: 0)

“This card can be special summoned when my lifepoints are lower than my opponent’s! Next I summon Toichi the Hell Collector in defense mode!”

(Toichi the Hell Collector: Atk: 800 Def: 1300)

“I place a card face down and end my turn! Time to pay me back for the lifepoints you owe me!” Garome demanded.

“I don’t owe you anything! It’s my turn!” Jack declared dramatically. “This card can be summoned without a sacrifice when my opponent has two or more monsters on their side of the field! I summon Power Invader!”

(Power Invader: Atk: 2200 Def: 0)

“It appears that you have no intention to pay me back,” Garome shook his head and clucked his tongue disapprovingly. “You leave me no choice then. I activate the trap Infinite Loan! When the opposing player summons a monster, this special summons a Loan Token on the opponent’s side of the field in defense mode!”

“Loan Token?”

“This Loan Token is going to help pay back the lifepoints you borrowed. Toichi the Hell Collector will be dropping by to do the collecting. If there are Loan Tokens on my opponent’s field, Toichi is allowed to inflict 1000 points of damage for each one.”

“That’s way too high!” Carly’s mouth dropped open.

“Attacking Toichi won’t do you any good, either. Toichi cannot be destroyed by battle as long as there are Loan Tokens. Loan Tokens can only be destroyed by sending a card in your hand to your graveyard!”

“So to prevent from taking any damage, he has to get rid of his cards,” Yusei said. “Not good.”

“Jack! You’ve got to pay a card before you get into real trouble!”

“Who would pay off an unfair loan they don’t remember doing?” Jack scoffed, brushing off the rule. “Power Invader attack Hell Trader!”

Jack: 5000
“Nice one, Jack!” Carly cheered.

“You don’t seem to understand what you’re dealing with,” Garome snarled. “when Hel Trader is destroyed by battle, it special summon a Loan Token on my opponent’s field in defense mode.”

“That’s two tokens,” Marco said.

“Even if you summon a monster, the number of tokens just adds up,” Yusei said.

Crow was not having any of this. “It’s a literal Loan Token Hell!”

“What shall you do? Will you discard from your hand to pay the loan?”

“Hurry and pay!” Marco shouted out to Jack again.

“I refuse! I place two cards face down. I end my turn.”

“Refusing to pay to the bitter end,” Garome said, malevolently twisting his mustache. “Guess I’ll just make my collection then. I draw! I equip the Corrupt Business equip card to Toichi the Hell Collector! This doubles effect damage!”

“Oh no! That’s 4000 points of damage!” Carly cried.

“Its monster effect activates!”

Jack: 1000

Garome: 2800

“How does it feel to be beaten by my Loan Combo?” Garome snickered. “I end my turn.”

“Please, Jack, just pay off the loan!” Marco pleaded. He hated to see his friend get so hurt over this.

“No!” Jack refused stubbornly. “I will never be at this cretin’s mercy! My turn! By sending a card in my hand to the graveyard, I can special summon this monster! Come on out, Smile Kid!”

(Smile Kid: Atk: 0 Def: 0)

“My card?” Marco realized with a start.

“It seems you’re still oblivious to my Loan Combo. The effects of Infinite Loan special summons a Loan Token in defense mode to your field.”

“Just pay already, Jack!” Marco begged.

“I am not paying unfair loans! I activate my trap Compulsory Reentry Device! By sending a card in my hand to the graveyard, it returns a monster on the field to my hand. Next, by sending a card in my hand to the graveyard, I can special summon Smile Kid!”

“Why would he do that again? Wouldn’t he get another token?” Carly scratched her head.

“No,” Yusei shook his head. “His field is full.”
“Right, you can’t summon a monster if there’s no place to summon it!”

“It looks like you can’t take out any more loans,” Garome said. “You have 1000 lifepoints left. Next turn Toichi will collect 6000 lifepoints due to Corrupt Business! You’ve already lost, Jack Atlas! Red Dragon Archfiend and Phoenix Whirlwind are mine!” Garome shared his disgusting laugh with everyone, confident of victory.

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Jack smiled. “Trap card; Zero Hole!”

“Zero Hole?”

“Zero Hole destroys all cards on the field when your hand is at zero,” Yusei explained, a small smile on his face too.

“What?”

“That’s why Jack reduced his hand,” Carly said.

“And I’m guessing that monster’s effect…”

“Smile Kid’s monster effect activates! When destroyed by a card’s effect, it special summons Smile Angel from my deck!”

(Smile Angel: Atk: 1000 Def: 0)

“An attack power of 1800?!”

“Smile Angel, direct attack! Super Smile!”

“Whoa!” Garome was so blown away by Smile Angel’s smile his hair flew clean off his head and he tumbled to the ground.

Jack: 1000

Garome: 0

“All right, Jack won!” Carly cheered exuberantly. She threw her arms around Marco and they both jumped for joy.

“Garome, sir!”

“No way! How did I lose?!”

“As promised, hand over the contracts!” Jack demanded.

“Run for it!” Garome picked himself up and dashed away with his goons right on his tail. One of which, tossed the bag of contracts over his shoulder as they made their escape.

Jack proceeded to tear each and every contract in half. “Now you won’t have to pay any more unfair loans.” He crumpled up the tattered papers into a ball and tossed it away. “You can have this back.” He took Marco’s cards out of his pocket and offered them back to their owner.

“But even if I keep it…”

“It’s true life can be hard, but you can never lose your dreams,” Jack said. He smiled down at Marco warmly. “Never give up and your dreams can come true. I look forward to dueling you in
the pro leagues some day.”

“Jack…”

“We’ll have to turbo duel one day too, of course.”

“Uh huh!” Marco agreed and gladly took his cards back.

“Thank goodness,” Carly said.

“You figure he’ll be different from now on?” Crow asked Yusei quietly.

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

///

“You’re fired!” The café’s manager kicked Jack out.

“Don’t have to tell me twice,” Jack scowled. “I’m quitting this lousy café.”

“Jack!” the waitress pouted deeply at having lost her crush.

“These commoners truly don’t know my worth,” Jack sniffed indignantly.

“And I thought we were gonna work together…”

“I guess people don’t change that easily!” Crow laughed. “Oh well…” He and Yusei both sighed.

“I gotta get going,” Yusei waved to Crow. “Lise said she’d try to say hi this morning, her evening, before she went to bed.”

“Say no more,” Crow waved back. “Tell her I say hi.”

“Will do!” Yusei called over his shoulder.

He ran inside and logged onto his shared video chat line with Lise as quickly as possible. Yusei wasn’t worried when the first call didn’t go through. He was much more worried when his fifth call still garnered no answer. Finally, he decided to just call her cell phone. She had international minutes stored up just in case.

Yusei stared at Lise’s icon and username, 0rngLis3, while his cell phone tried to reach her. Maybe if he stared at it long enough, she’d sense how much he needed to see her, or at least hear her voice.

“Uh…hello?”

“Who is this?” Yusei demanded. He was in no mood for anyone’s voice other than Lise’s to be on her phone.

“Sasha. Sorry Lise hasn’t been answering. She’s exhausted after training, so she’s sleeping right now. Do you want me to tell her you called?”

“Can she call me when she gets up?”

“Probably not.”

“Oh… I’ll just…”
Sasha must have taken pity on him because she spoke up in a voice that wasn’t flat. “Why don’t you try again the day after tomorrow? These two days have been the roughest so far, and I swear we’re not trying to keep you two away from each other. We’ve all gone through the same training. It just takes a lot out of you.”

Yusei smiled minutely. He felt a tiny bit better. “Thanks Sasha. I’ll do that.”

“Stay strong,” Sasha said and hung up.
Chi Walkers in Training

Lise rolled over in her makeshift tent onto sand. The grainy pieces sliding sneakily past her lips. With exasperated resignation, Lise pushed herself into a sitting position and spit out the mouthful of sand.

Today was her last day in the desert land. Just like her time in the frozen wasteland orb, the going was brutal. Lise almost missed the frigid cliffs and icy lake. They were much more stable than the sandy dunes that gave way beneath her feet every few yards.

Lise packed up her things and fashioned her tent rags back into the light coverings she wore to avoid getting a debilitating sunburn. She just had to go back to the circle that had brought her in and she would be zapped back to the temple. Easier said than done.

She walked with her knife hanging comfortably in one hand. Every time she came across a cactus she would lazily slice off a limb and drink what little water was inside. She’d lived like this for seven days; living off cactus juice and the occasional bug that met misfortune when it crossed her path. Her starving stomach had staved off Lise’s usual pickiness.

Finally, she spotted the stone circle and started running. Her trials of heat and cold were over. Now for the fun to begin. Well, after she ate a decent meal and fell asleep in an actual bed.

The most remarkable parts about these journeys? Only three days total had passed out in the world, but Lise had experienced two whole weeks and a day. It was Master Terra’s incredible chi power that had created these tiny bubble fragments of worlds that bounced around the cellar of her rooms. By using her chi to bind her soul to the temple’s very essence she had become incredibly powerful, but incapable of ever leaving the grounds of her beloved temple. Scooping pieces of the world into bubbles that defied time and space had a price, after all. It was perfect for teaching her students though, and Master Terra gladly used them to assist in speeding up the process.

Lise wanted to collapse onto the stone circle in exhaustion, but held herself back. She wasn’t out of the woods yet. She went to the circle’s center and waited.

In a flash the desert landscape surrounding her vanished. Her senses were flooded with the slightly musty smell of a room that lies underneath the Earth’s surface and the sound of sloshing water.

Lise gulped down the water bottle Jarra offered her ravenously. She reached for the bowl of rolls offered to her next.

“Pace yourself,” Master Terra said. “You don’t want to get sick. You must eat what you can and rest. You do have the weekend off.”

“Today is Thursday,” Lise said in between mouthfuls.

Master Terra smiled. “Yes, so after you begin your weaponry training with Garrett, you have two days to yourself.”

“Awesome!” Lise smiled.

“We can show Lise the village and the city!” Jarra clapped her hands together excitedly. “She needs some good food in her after all that. I know I did.”

“Great idea,” Jose said, his smile dazzling even in the dim light. “I’ll introduce her to some of our
“I appreciate it, guys, but right now I just really want to eat and sleep,” Lise said.

“Of course,” Sasha said, nodding. She didn’t mention a bath, even though judging by the way she wrinkled her nose when Lise passed, the dragon girl desperately needed one.

“See you tomorrow then” Lise yawned and walked back to her rooms.

She was asleep the second her head hit the pillow.

///

The next morning she awoke at the crack of dawn without Sasha’s assistance. Excited to finally be training with the others, she donned her new gear and raced to the open dining room.

“Good morning,” Sasha said when Lise sat down.

“Morning,” Lise replied and stared, drooling, at the mountain of food before her. Being starved for nearly two weeks had been terrible. She could afford to be picky again, but her growling stomach forced the feeling down her throat. She would eat like a queen today. “Oh man, I forgot how great food tastes!” Lise groaned as she shoveled forkful after forkful into her mouth.

“Don’t go too fast! You’ll get sick!” Jose chuckled. He straightened his bowtie with pride. “I made it myself.”

“He’s our best chef and our best explosives technician,” Jarra said.

“What are you?” Lise asked.


“You built your own car?! Jarra, that’s awesome! Yusei built all our duel runners!” Lise gushed. “Well, except for Crow’s, but still. I wouldn’t have Starfire if not for him. She was a birthday present.”

Garret’s spoon clattered to the table. “No vay. You have a custom built duel runner? No fair!”

Lise grinned widely. “Uh huh. I’m sure Jarra could whip something up for you. It should be no problem if she made her own car.”

“I totally could!” Jarra agreed, getting excited. “My convertible, Fuego, is my baby but I’ve always wanted to turbo duel! Will you show us Starfire, please?!”

“Well,” Lise scratched at the back of her head. “I’ll have to give the airport at Lima a call. There was a mix up and my runner was put on a different flight by accident. Maybe it’ll be there by this weekend?”

“You have the weekend off, so feel free to go into the city,” Master Terra said as she entered the room.

“Oh, speaking of calls, Yusei tried to get a hold of you yesterday. I told him you’d get to him when you could,” Sasha said.

“Why didn’t you say so earlier?!” Lise shouted, popping up from the table like a freshly popped
She raced to her room and frantically tapped at her computer. It was being unsympathetically slow about booting up.

Finally, Lise was able to press the call button. Now all she had to do was wait. She was beginning to worry when her third call didn’t go through, but she held her breath and clicked call again.

“Lise!” Yusei’s blue eyed face smiled back at her. He had shed his jacket and gloves in exchange for the grease stains all over him. It was about early afternoon in Japan, meaning he’d been hard at work on the engine for several hours. “I miss you so much! It’s so good to see you!”

“It’s good to see you too,” Lise said, her heart aching as she said it. “I’m so sorry I didn’t send word these past few days. I was…” she struggled to find the appropriate word here.

“Training?” Yusei cocked an eyebrow, familiar with Lise’s usual explanation.

“Intensely,” Lise nodded, and smiled again. “Any luck with the engine?”

“Not really, no,” Yusei sighed and shook his head. He ran a hand wearily through his messy hair. “I fix one thing and then another thing breaks. It never seems to end.”

“Don’t beat yourself up about it. I’ll still love you no matter what.”

“Even if I killed a man?” Yusei joked, his eyebrows practically dancing.

Lise laughed and shrugged. “Where do you wanna hide the body?”

“Nowhere. I want this month to be over already so I can come see you…”

“Can you not see me?” Lise frowned at her computer’s camera teasingly. “I thought you fixed this thing?”

“I can’t hold your hand through the computer, Lise,” Yusei said.

“Training in five minutes,” Sasha knocked on Lise’s doorframe and left just as quickly as she came.

“I wish I could touch you too,” Lise murmured, her face burning.

Yusei sighed and rubbed at a grease spot on his cheek. This only smeared the muck further across his face. “Guess you have to go.”

“How can I? You make it so hard cuz you’re so fucking adorkable!” Lise cried exasperatedly.

Yusei broke into a crooked grin, his cheeks turning pink again. “I love you, Lise. If you don’t call tomorrow, call the day after, okay?”

“K, love you!” And she signed off.

///

“All right. Today ve are vorking on more zhan just your swordsmanship. Ve vant to start vorking as a team,” Garrett said. “Today ve start vith ze basics, zen Sasha vill lead us as ve try to vork togezer.”
“Okay…” Lise hefted her sword up, her body feeling lighter than ever.

“First, drills,” Garrett grinned wildly at these words. He was a stickler for the rules, so practice seeking perfection were always his favorite activities.

Garrett came at Lise in various different practice exercises. He explained the usual methods for controlling a single sword, then went on to describe what else could be done in the cases of a sword with a dagger or two long swords, and so on.

By lunch, Lise had learned that blocking, thrusting, flowing, and twirling were a few methods she could utilize with her blade. She had sustained many bruises, but could attack with a thrust as well as block one from her opponent.

Garrett was pleased with her progress, but his mood darkened when the five teenagers began to work on team drills after lunch.

“Okay guys, we need code names,” Jose said immediately, stuffing extra enchiladas from lunch into his backpack. He didn’t seem to care about the mess, and swung the bag onto his back. “I say Sasha should be…Lightning!” Jose spread his hands dramatically at the pronunciation of the word.

“Zhat is ludicrous,” Garret said, crossing his arms in contempt.

“Aw come on, Garrett,” Jose threw an arm around his friend’s shoulders. “I can see it now! Your codename is…Comrade!”

“Zhat is racist.”

“Knife guy?”

“Zhat is pazetic.”

“Sword dude?”

“Stupid.”

“You know what? You’re stupid!” Jose sniffed and crossed his arms too.

“Calm down you two,” Sasha said firmly. “We’re a team, and I value both of your skills despite the two of you…clashing heads. Garrett, Jose just wants to make things easier when it comes to issuing attack patterns.”

“Vhatever,” Garrett sniffed.

“Jose, Garrett doesn’t like being reduced to his race or…blades. Yes, they’re a big part of him, but try to be a bit more sensitive when you come up with our codenames, okay?”

“Fine,” Jose said.

“Okay, let’s get started,” Sasha clapped her hands together. She lead her team to the middle of the large track where several training dummies had been set up. Sasha positioned everyone in front of the biggest dummy, taller even than Garrett. “Now that we’re a team of five, we have to be able to work around each other and formulate attacks and combinations around and with one another. We’re just starting out today, so I’ll keep it simple to start with. Then we move on to the trickier stuff.” She knelt in the sand and started sketching out a battle plan to the others. “So, can you do it?”
“Yes ma’am!”

Lise and Garrett dove into action first. Jose, Sasha, and Jarra circled the dummy and their teammates, waiting for their turn.

Garrett was faster and dove in whirling two knives like a high speed chainsaw. He attacked the bottom of the dummy, never staying still even for a second.

Lise took her chance when Garrett moved out of the way. She jumped into the air, tucked into a roll, and kicked the dummy’s head twice. She got in a few good punches on her way down too. “Jarra, now!”

Too late to stop, Lise realized she had spoken too soon. Garrett was too close, and Lise’s foot snagged on his wrist. She toppled into the sandy ground, and Garrett yowled in frustration as Jarra’s custom cables tied him to the lacerated dummy.

Sasha had been seconds from punching the dummy armed with her custom chi gloves, but she pulled back at the last second. She didn’t want to shock her friends. Lise had stupidly gone to try and get Garrett unstuck from the dummy.

Jose, unfortunately, hadn’t caught on quickly enough. He’d tossed one of his custom bombs that would have finished off their opponent, had their attack gone well that is. The bomb exploded, trapping Lise and Garrett against the dummy with giant globs of sticky rice.

“Oops…”

Lise extracted herself from the rice with difficulty. The rice was gross as well as everywhere. Garrett’s nose was practically blowing steam he was so furious. “Zhis wouldn’t have happened if you had been on your mark!” he spat furiously at Lise.

“My mark?” Lise instantly matched his anger. She was prepared to be blamed, not to be attacked. “Last time I looked, this wasn’t a fucking stage production!”

“Boz require full presence for zhe situation at hand! Which apparently, you don’t have!”

“I’m not a genius!” Lise shot back. “How do you expect me to get everything right on the first try?!”

“Hey!” Sasha shouted, loud but assertive. She put herself in between Lise and Garrett, her hands pushing them apart. “Stop that! We’re a new team of five now, and we can’t just expect everyone to know our styles and moves from the get go! We’re new so we have to gain trust between each other! Fighting like this only makes gaining that trust harder! Take a breather and come back in five.”

They kept trying. By the time the sun went down, the giant dummy looked more like a sad bark chip that had been through the wood chipper too many times. Finally, they had managed to execute their plan without a hitch.

“It took some time, but this is a good start,” Sasha said. “We can get better from here. Going in to the city together tomorrow should help our team get stronger too. See you bright and early!”

///

“I thought I was finally used to these early mornings,” Lise yawned and stretched. For the first
time since she had begun her training, Lise was wearing street clothes. It felt incredible to be wearing a t-shirt and shorts for a change.

“Oh you will be when you leave at the end of the month,” Jose said. “Ready?”

Before Lise could answer a sleek, red convertible shredded through the sand and dust. The car came to a stop in front of Lise and Jose.

Jarra was at the wheel clad in sunglasses and an unusual smirk. Sasha sat in the passenger seat, and Garret, moodily, in the second row.

“Lise, meet my baby,” Jarra grinned. “We’re going into the city in style!”

“Wow!” Lise gaped in admiration as she swung herself into the second bench. “You built this, Jarra?”

“Every piece. All aboard?” Jarra adjusted her mirrors.

“And buckled!” Jose reported, clipping himself into his seat last.

Jarra’s grin widened and she gunned the engine. The car raced forward like a spooked horse. Lise and Jose whooped and yelled, racing their fists to the sky, reveling in the speed and wind. Garrett stayed twisted sullenly in the corner, and Sasha basked in her own pleasant silence. The ride was short but exhilarating.

Jarra parked, swinging her keys as she exited her vehicle. The others followed her lead. “Welcome, Lise, to Mercado Indio, or the Indian Market of Lima!”

“I keep thinking you guys can’t surprise me anymore,” Lise laughed.

The market declared itself on a large red banner welcoming visitors to climb up stairs that lead to a grassy field beyond. The gang climbed up the entry stairs, into the grassy field, and looked around at the first row of shops.

“And it goes on for four blocks!” Jose said. His grin suddenly dropped into a serious expression. “But don’t buy any fossils or fake silver. You can’t take the fossils out of the country.”

“Oh…”

“But anything else is up for grabs!”

“Awesome!”

“We go shopping and then meet up here for lunch? Yeah?” Jarra pointed at each team member in turn.

“Agreed,” Sasha nodded. “I’ll take Garrett and peruse his favorite weaponry stand.”

At this, Garrett’s ears perked up and his eyes glittered. He jauntily followed Sasha into the crowds.

Jose and Jarra seized Lise’s arms and dragged her into the fray. Everywhere Lise looked there were more things to marvel at. More colors than she had dared to imagine met her eyes. There were leather bags, cloth bags, clothing, some made from genuine alpaca fur. Different masks and bowls, each uniquely carved, lined walls like a beautiful procession. All the jewelry gleamed when it caught the sun, and the beautiful dolls smiled out into the hallways. The three of them had the most fun trying on hats more ridiculous than the last in front of the mirrors.
“I kinda want a poncho,” Lise said as the gang ate lunch at a picnic table in the sun. “I just dunno what color to pick though.”

“It’s so hard to pick, right?” Jose nodded sagely. “On one hand blue would make your eyes pop beautifully, but you said your favorite color is orange, right?”

“Yeah, a red one would be nice too,” Lise laughed.

“You have plenty of time to make a decision, that is if you want to,” Sasha pointed out. “You should look at weapons with Garrett. He might be able to point out something you’d be comfortable and skilled at wielding.”

Garrett paused mid bite over his food. Clearly he had not expected to be a part of the conversation.

“That’d be really cool of you, Garrett. I’d actually really like that.” Lise smiled gently at him, nervous about ruining his good mood.

“Sure, I’ll recommend something that suits you.” Garrett downed the last of his food and stood.

“Thank you!” Lise stuffed the last of her chips into her mouth and raced after her friend. “Oooo,” her eyes went wide when they feasted on the vast display of weapons.

“You have excellent taste too,” the redheaded woman manning the stand winked at Lise. Half her head was shaved, the other half overflowed with long, rich, red locks that were woven into a braid. Her dark skin was beautiful, as were the dark and light clothes she adorned herself with. Gold earrings hung from her ears, neither of which were as dazzling as the woman’s smile.

“Don’t flatter her, Yaretzi. A giant sword would never suit her,” Garrett scolded.

“What?” Yaretzi spread her arms innocently. “My family makes the finest weapons in all of South America. I’d never try to give her something that doesn’t match her.”

“Considered lowering the price on that staff?” Garrett asked, motioning that Lise should walk through Yaretzi’s stand.

“Not a chance,” Yaretzi crossed her arms. “That was my final offer.”

“Stubborn as always,” Garrett shook his head. “When do you get new gear?”

Lise browsed through the shelves and displays of weapons, her eyes widening further and further. It was incredible, the detail on all the handles of swords and knives. There were even a few steel fans of various colors adorning the wall.

Suddenly her mind was overwhelmed with this heavy presence. Lise clutched at her head and scanned the crowd outside Yaretzi’s stand. The feeling had hit her like a bulldozer; the desire for revenge. The deadly kind.

“Lise? What’s wrong?” Garrett put a steadying hand on Lise’s shoulder.

“We need to get out of here,” Lise wheezed. “Now.”

“I’ll get the others,” Garrett said. “We’ll have to put pause on our deal, Yaretzi.”

“Be careful,” Yaretzi said, nodding. Her eyebrows were tight with worry. “Let me know when you make it home.”
Garrett nodded and helped Lise through the crowd towards their friends. “Ve have to go. Ve’re being followed.”

“Move out,” Sasha said immediately. “Get to the car as fast as you can, subtly.”

Lise followed after her friends to Jarra’s car. More people with similar intentions popped up everywhere she looked. It would be a miracle if they made it out alive.

“I’ll drive,” Sasha said. Jarra tossed her the keys without protest. Sasha started the car and began rolling away slowly. Without warning the car rocketed off through the streets.

Lise unbuckled her seatbelt and stood up, bracing her foot against the seat. “They’re following us on the rooftops.”

“Damnit,” Jarra swore. “If they break my baby, someone’s gonna die and it’s not gonna be us!”

Two people dressed entirely in white, masks covering their faces, landed on the hood of the car. More identically dressed people were racing across the rooftops.

The group leapt into action. Jose tossed his signature food bombs at the assailants on the rooftops. Garrett whipped out two knives and attempted to force the two assailants off the hood of the car. Jarra shot cables at every white clad person she could see. A few of them went down, but more dodged her attacks. Sasha was ignoring everyone in an attempt to keep the car going steadily.

Lise clenched her fists in concentration. She was ready to help with her newly controlled powers.

“No,” Sasha said calmly, placing a hand on one of Lise’s.

“But, I want to help!”

“These people might not know who you are. I don’t want to confirm their suspicions and give them a reason to take you away.”

“Okay…” Lise frowned and lowered her arms.

Jarra was able to snag one of the two fighters on her car. Without the use of his arms to keep him balanced, he fell off the car when Sasha made a sharp turn.

“Scheiße!” Garrett swore as the second white-clad fighter ensnared his hands in ropes, and nearly pulled him over the windshield.

“Garrett!” Jarra and Jose seized their friend’s shoulders and dragged him back into his seat.

The fighter slammed up against the windshield, and Sasha took her chance. She stood up, pressing her foot to the gas pedal, and placed her hand on the assailant’s foot. Green lightning seemed to course through her hand, into the attacker, and shocking him. He tumbled off the car after his partner.

“All right! We’re home free!” Jose cheered.

The followers on the rooftop weren’t done yet. They set off explosives at the end of the street. The end buildings crumbled and toppled into the one-way street, effectively cutting off the escape route to the temple.

Everyone, except Sasha because she was driving, glared at Jose. “You were saying?”
“Too soon?” He half giggled, half hiccupped.

“Lise, use your energy! Make a ramp!” Sasha cried out suddenly.

“What?”

“If you make a ramp we can jump over it and get out of here!”

“But you just said-“

“I know! But we have to get out of here together and no one else can do this!” Sasha turned to Lise for a split second. Her brown eyes were urgent, pleading.

“Okay…Okay!” Lise had started hyperventilating without her knowledge. She swallowed painfully to gain control of her breath. You can do this. Focus. Lise inhaled and raised her hands close to her chest on the exhale she pushed her hands out.

An isosceles triangle-like ramp erupted feet from the decimated street. It glowed with the power of Lise’s dragon energy.

“Yes!” the others cheered.

Sasha poured on the speed before the rooftop followers could stop her. In no time at all the car was sailing through the air. Lise dropped her arms and the ramp dissolved into nothingness. The second Jarra’s car touched dirt again, Sasha was off and gunning it like a madwoman. She wasn’t giving their followers any chance to capture them.

The gang crashed through the temple doors without stopping.

“Land!” Jose cried, dramatically flinging himself to the ground once Sasha had braked to a stop, and kissing the dirt. “Oh thank goodness.”

Sasha and Garrett rolled their eyes. Lise smiled awkwardly, a bit too drained for more. Jarra was screaming and sobbing over her car’s dented bumper and battered hood.

“What…who were those people?” Lise asked when she could speak again. “And why did they want to kill us?”

“They’re what’s known as the Dragon Clan, descendants of the People of the Stars,” Sasha said. “Until recently they’d been fairly docile. Since you arrived they’ve been…”

“More violent,” Garrett said.

“Sasha?” Master Terra came running onto the dirt track towards her trainees. For an old woman she was quite fast. “Garre? Jarra? Jose? Lise? Are you all right?”

“We’re okay but…”

“You need to tell me everything about the Dragon Clan,” Lise said, looking Master Terra straight in the eye.

///

“How could you have let her escape?!!” A woman with white hair, also wearing only white seethed. She punched a stone column that immediately crumbled and collapsed.
The woman’s followers cowered further into the shadows. “She-her friends assisted her.”

“Irrelevant! You should have been able to capture her when she arrived with the boy! Why were you unable to trap her I will never know, it seems!”

The others avoided the woman’s gaze. Her green eyes almost glowed in the darkness.

“We need a new approach. We will get our retribution. You will all get what you have worked for, what you deserve! We are the Dragon Clan, and those who humiliated us will pay for what they have done…”
Spirited Away

Crows called into the foggy day and took off. Their feathers scattered on the forest floor and over Leo, Luna, and Dexter's heads. The three of them were staring into the dark confines of the forest before them.

“Uh, here’s an idea,” Leo said, his hands shaking. “Maybe we should head back.”

“You’re the one who dared us to go in here, Leo,” Dexter reminded him. He broke into an evil little grin. “Don’t tell me you’re scared?”

“No! I was just making sure Luna wasn’t scared!” Leo pointed at his sister helplessly.

Luna rolled her eyes. “I’m fine.”

“Oh really? Great, then so am I!” Leo put his hands on his hips, trying to strike a confident pose. It was the only way to disguise his shaking hands.

The trio wandered deeper into the forest. Gnarled trees and bushes seemed to be reaching out onto the path, hoping to grab someone. Leo kept a tight grip on Dexter’s backpack, letting him take the lead. Luna wandered curiously behind them, uninhibited by the malicious-looking trees.

Suddenly Luna stopped. Something dark in the distant trees had caught her eye. “Something’s up ahead…” A fog seemed to roll over her consciousness. She left the path, disappearing into a different part of the forest just as her brother and friend did.

///

Lise was training with Garrett again that morning. She was by no means a master already, but she was getting faster.

Garrett parried a few of her strikes, grinning. “Better, but let’s see if you can pick up the pace!”

In a blinding flash of blades, Garrett came at her twice the speed and twice the power. Slice, parry, lunge, block, twirl. He just kept going like a one man wrecking machine. Lise had to recall everything Garrett had ever taught her for fear she would be impaled.

Just when Lise raised her arm in an umbrella block that Garrett’s sword would slide down, Lise froze. She dropped her swords and then to her knees. Garrett had to pause seconds before his strike connected with Lise’s head.


///

Kuribon’s spirit wailed in alarm, but Luna kept going. She hadn’t heard him.

“Ruka! I’m sensing some strong spirits ahead! Turn back now!” Regulus’s spirit warned.

Luna ignored both of them. She kept walking, the powerful force of the spirits warding her own spiritual friends off. Powerless to do anything, Regulus and Kuribon vanished.

///
“Spirited away?” Yusei turned to stare incredulously at Crow.

“Yeah,” Crow said. He was busy eating a sandwich and keeping Yusei company in the garage. “That’s the rumor that’s been going around lately. They say a lot of people have gone missing in the forest. The kids in the neighborhood said that some monster is behind it, or something like that.”

“Does it have anything to do with the Ghost?”

Crow shoved the rest of the sandwich in his mouth. “I think you’re overthinking things. Kids love that kinda junk. On that note, I’m off to work.” Crow waved and drove off into the city.

Yusei watched him go. All stories had some kind of truth to them, and he doubted he’d like this one.

///

Luna had walked so deep into the forest she couldn’t see the sky anymore. The trees had grown so thickly together it looked like night, and the fog wasn’t helping either.

Luna stepped on a twig that snapped under her foot. She gasped and the spirits’ spell was broken. “Huh?” She looked around. “Where am I? Leo? Dexter? Hello?”

The forest didn’t look any different no matter which direction she turned. The only thing she could determine for sure was that the presence she had felt earlier was still as strong as ever. “There really is something up ahead.”

Vines began to descend from the trees. They wrapped around the tree trunks before Luna’s eyes. In no time she would be trapped.

“Somebody help me!”

The card Heavy Storm activated in the midst of the woods. All of the vines instantly turned to gold dust and shattered. Luna was free.

“Are you okay? You’re not hurt, are you?” The silhouette of a young boy called out.

Luna hadn’t moved. “Who are you?”

The boy walked into the light. He had light blue hair, and darker blue eyes. His clothes were on the formal side, and in various shades of blue. His tie was a bland yellow color. “I’m Michel,” he said. “And you are?”

“Luna.”

“Pleased to meet you, Luna. It’s dangerous to be here alone. There are evil spirits in this forest,” Michel said.

“Evil spirits?”

“You should come to my house. My sister Claire would love to meet you. You’d be safe there.”

Before Luna’s eyes the fog cleared just enough to reveal a small lake, decrepit dock and boat, and an amazing brick, Victorian style house across the water.

“There’s a mansion in a place like this?” Luna murmured.
Lise groaned, shook her head, and came to.

“Lise, what happened?” Jose immediately asked.

Her friends were gathered around her in a jumble. Garret was holding onto Lise’s shoulders, and the others were squished close by, making sure she was okay.

“I’m okay now,” Lise said. She put a hand to her head and tried to stand. She was a little shaky, but Jarra was there to hold her up. “But I think Luna’s in trouble. Get me to my computer.”

“Hi Lise,” Yusei smiled widely at his girlfriend. It’d been a good decision to get up so early. “This is a surprise.”

“I think something’s wrong with Luna!”

“Whataya mean?”

“I just got that same funny, fuzzy feeling I got when Luna went to the Spirit World during our fight with the Dark Signers!” Lise put a hand to her head like she was afraid the feeling would return.

“Yusei!” Dexter screamed, barging his way into the garage. “Yusei!”

“Let me guess, Luna’s in trouble?”

“Luna’s lost in the forest!” Dexter nodded frantically.

“I knew something was going on!” Lise cried. She tugged on her hair worriedly.

Dexter clenched his hands into fists. “And Leo went in after her! I can’t find them anywhere!”

“I’ll go get them back. Dexter, you wait here.”

“Call me the second the three of you are okay. I’ll keep my phone on me,” Lise said.

“I will.” Yusei grabbed his jacket and drove out the door.

“Luna!” Leo called, running pell-mell through the dark trees. “Luna!”

A deep, ominous rumble echoed through the trees. The dark fog obscuring the pathways wasn’t helping either.

“Wh-What was that?” Leo stammered. His knees were knocking, but he couldn’t just go home. “I can’t get scared. I’ve gotta find Luna! Luna!”

“Please,” Michel lead Luna do his doorstep and stood aside so that she could join him.

Luna walked into the dusty, cobwebbed entryway. Michel shut the door behind her. The light was dim, but just enough to see by.
“So, you beat the evil spirits of the forest with dueling?” Luna said.

“Yeah, but no one believes me,” Michel said.

Luna smiled. “I believe you. I can see duel spirits.”

“I figured you could. I could feel it when we first met. You have a mysterious power.”

Luna’s smile grew wider at the compliment, and she followed her new friend up the stairs.

Michel stopped at a lone door at the end of the hallway. He knocked twice and opened his sister’s room. “Claire, we have company.”

“Hello,” Luna approached the drape-covered bed slowly. She couldn’t see well through the hangings but she didn’t want to be rude in case Claire was shy.

“Claire, say hi,” Michel coaxed gently.

Luna lowered her voice to a whisper. “Maybe she’s sleeping?”

“She’s always sleeping when she gets really sick,” Michel sighed. “Claire’s always been scared of the evil spirits. I’m the only one who can protect her.”

“Is it just the two of you in this big mansion?” Luna asked. “Where are your parents?”

“They left a long time ago,” Michel said, avoiding Luna’s gaze. “Without a word.”

He’s just like me!

Michel must have heard something since he suddenly dashed to the window.

“What’s the matter?”

“An evil spirit is coming! Stay here with Claire! Don’t take one step out of this room!” Michel’s tone changed completely to a commanding one.

“Wait! I’ll go with you!” Luna gasped as the door closed and locked behind Michel. He hadn’t even touched the door.

///

Leo had managed to find the mansion. It was progress, but it wasn’t exactly his sister. “What is this big thing doing out here? Don’t tell me someone’s actually living here?”

The two front doors swung open with a bang, revealing Michel. Chilly winds blew right through Leo.

“I’m not letting you get any further, evil spirit!” Michel promised. “Come on and duel!”

“Evil spirit? Me?” Leo was totally taken for a loop.

///

Luna ran to the window and parted the curtains. Michel was advancing on… “Leo?!”

///
“What the heck are you talking about?” Leo asked.

“What?”

Leo gasped. “Luna!” His sister was inside the mansion at the window!

The front doors closed of their own accord, stopping Leo in his path.

“I said that’s as far as you go!” Michel glared fiercely.

“Are you keeping Luna locked up? Why would you do that?” Leo didn’t get an answer, so he reached for the next best thing; his duel disk. “Fine, if you won’t talk, then I’ll get Luna back by myself!”

///

“Claire, your brother, he’s-” Luna stepped back from the window. If she couldn’t reason with anyone, maybe she could appeal for some help. She pulled back Claire’s bed curtains.

Resting on the pillow was only a doll!

///

“Duel!”

Leo: 4000

Michel: 4000

“Luna, I promise I’ll save you!”

“Leo…”

“I’ll go first. Draw!” Michel said. “I activate the continuous spell Circle of Life!”

“Wh-What is this?” Leo looked down at the glowing ring full of strange markings that he and his opponent were now standing on.

“Now unless we send a spell card in our hands to the graveyard on each of our turns, we can’t use any spells.”

“What?”

“Let me show you my combo! I send Imprisonment Mirror to the graveyard! Then I activate another continuous spell Circle of Terror!” A purple circle joined the first on the field. “Now unless we send a monster card in our hands to the graveyard on each of our turns, we can’t summon monsters!”

Leo watched as a dark, sinister purple light danced like fire along the edges of the old mansion. “Is what’s keeping Luna locked up this guy’s powers?”

Now I can’t do anything unless I discard from my hand each turn!

Michel smiled, basking in his skill. “I send the Undead Sleeping Beauty to the graveyard to activate its effect. As long as Sleeping Beauty is in the graveyard, the level of an Undead type in my hand has its level lowered by one! Meaning that my level five Hollow Spirit becomes a level
four, and capable of being normal summoned!”

(Undead Hollow Spirit: Atk: 1200 Def: 1000)

“The player who goes first can’t attack on the first turn, but… you’ll take Hollow Spirit’s effect all the same! When there’s an Undead monster in my graveyard, it deals 800 points of damage to the opponent!”

Leo: 3200

Michel: 4000

“I end my turn.”

Leo was able to stop panting, but that attack had taken a lot out of him. “It felt like I was getting the life sucked out of me. What is this guy – a psychic duelist?”

Leo shook his head to clear it. “I gotta get it together. If I get freaked out, then I can’t protect Luna.

“My turn! Draw! I place Morphtronic Datatron in the graveyard.”

“It’s pointless if you just keep summoning monsters. The Imprisonment Mirror I sent to the graveyard doesn’t allow for attacks unless you sacrifice the same type of monster. However, Undead and Machine type monsters are excluded.”

Leo grinned, a bit of his confidence restored. “Then it doesn’t work on my deck! I summon Morphtronic Scopen.”

(Morphtronic Scopen: Atk: 800 Def: 1400)

“A Machine-type deck!” Michel realized he didn’t have the advantage he wanted.

“That’s right! Through Scopen’s effect, I special summon the level four Morphtronic Videon from my hand!”

(Morphtronic Videon: Atk: 1000 Def: 1000)

“I tune the level three Morphtronic Scopen to my level four Morphtronic Videon! Now I synchro summon… Power Tool Dragon!”

(Power Tool Dragon: Atk: 2300 Def: 2500)

“You get lucky,” Michel scoffed. “But I’m not losing to something that doesn’t have a soul.”

“Don’t mock Power Tool! His effect activates! I can randomly add one equip spell from my deck to my hand! I send Morphtronic Cord to the graveyard to equip Break Draw to Power Tool!”

The sound of an engine, a strange sound in the middle of the forest, filled the area. Yusei came racing onto the field like a bullet. He braked heavily beside Leo.

“You okay, Leo? Where’s your sister?”

“Yusei!” Leo grinned from ear to ear.

“Another evil spirit?” Michel glared deeply at both of them.

“You, don’t worry about me. Just save Luna! She’s in that house!” Leo pointed at the window
Luna was watching from.

“Luna!”

“You won’t be taking one step into this house!”

“Then I won’t ‘step’ into the house,” Yusei gunned his runner and took off.

“No!” Michel cried.

“You’re facing me!” Leo reminded his opponent. “Power Tool Dragon attack Hollow Spirit!”

*Leo: 3200*

*Michel: 2900*

Next second, Yusei was crashing through the front doors. He parked in the creepy front entrance hall. “Luna!?”

“Yusei!?”

Leo smirked. “Break Draw’s effect activates! When Power Tool destroys an opposing monster, I draw one card!”

“You’ll pay!” The dark aura surrounding the house seemed to appear around Michel too. “Anyone who tries to hurt my sister will pay dearly!”

///

Yusei had heard Luna’s call, but he couldn’t tell where she was. He walked up to a painting he’d spotted hanging on the wall. “What’s this? Oh right, Crow’s story! That boy out there must be one of the two children!”

///

“Is he the evil spirit?” Leo wondered aloud. “That just means I really can’t lose!”

“When Hollow Spirit is sent to the graveyard, the gates of the graveyard open!” Michel’s eyes had taken on a ghostly glow. “Appear now, Hollow Ghost!”

A new monster rose out of the dark depths of the earth. This spirit was longer, blue skinned, and crazy-looking.

*(Hollow Ghost: Atk: 2600 Def: 0)*

“An attack power of 2600? And I just managed to beat Hollow Spirit too!” Leo complained.

Leo took a deep breath as he watched his opponent’s new monster. *Calm down. I just gotta find a way to defeat him!*

///

“A noise made her jump. She slowly turned towards the source of the noise.

A girl in a pale dress sat, staring at the wall. She had blond, curly hair that hid her face.
“Where’s my brother?” the tiny voice whispered.

“Are you…” Luna approached the nearly transparent girl cautiously.

“Don’t leave Claire alone!” the girl stood and began clawing at the wall as if she believed it had answers. “Big brother…"

“You’re Claire, aren’t you? Tell me what’s going on, please,” Luna said. “Claire?”

“Big brother, big brother…”

///

“I’m placing a card facedown to end my turn,” Leo said.

“You can try to possess my sister and take her life all you want, but you’re wasting your time! I’ll protect Claire or die trying!” Michel promised valiantly. The dark shadow aura surrounding him grew into something resembling a skull.

“Sister?”

“Here goes! My turn! Hollow Ghost attacks Power Tool Dragon!”

*Leo: 2900*

*Michel: 2900*

“I send Break Draw to the graveyard to negate Power Tool’s destruction!”

“Hollow Ghost’s effect activates! When a card is sent to the graveyard, it inflicts 600 points of damage to the opponent!”

“Oh oh!”

*Leo: 2300*

*Michel: 2900*

“Next, Circle of Life and Circle of Terror will send both a spell and a monster to the graveyard! And Hollow Ghost’s effect will make you take 1200 more points of damage!”

*Leo: 1100*

*Michel: 2900*

///

Yusei didn’t like the look of the dark glowing door at the end of the hallway, but he figured if Luna was anywhere, she’d be in the place he least wanted to go to.

Something stopped him in his tracks. The door beside Claire’s was suddenly glowing too. Voices were coming through the doorway.

“Hello? Is someone there?” Yusei called out. He reached for the doorknob and slowly opened the door.

“Help us!”
“Let us outta here!”

Yusei was completely taken aback. There were people floating around in cards right before his eyes! “These are-! Could these be the people who were spirited away?”

///

“Now I end my turn.”

Leo was still recovering from that last attack. He didn’t have much left in his tank. “You’ve been trying to protect your sister, haven’t you? I understand how you feel, and that’s why I won’t lose!”

Luna is my irreplaceable sister! “My turn! Draw!” Maybe if what’s keeping Luna locked up is this Circle’s power...

“Trap activate! Morphtronic Impact Return! This card returns a Morphtronic in my hand to the deck, so that I can then return Circle of Life and Circle of Terror to your hand!”

“What?!”

///

The shadowy glow of the circle’s aura vanished just as Yusei turned the doorknob of Claire’s room.

“Luna?”

“Yusei!”

“Are you okay?” Yusei knelt down to the small girl’s eye level.

“I’m fine, but we need to save her quick before it’s too late for her or Michel!” Luna pointed at the ghostly girl still trying to claw her way through the wall.

Abruptly, Claire put her hands to her eyes and turned around. She seemed to be crying softly. “Where are you, Big Brother?” Claire took her hands away from her face, opening large, green eyes. “Big brother?”

Something began to glow around the fake Claire nestled in the bed. Luna reached over and pulled the covers off. The doll was holding a card!

///

“Curse you!” Michel cried furiously. “But by sending a card to the graveyard, you’ll take Hollow Ghost’s effect!”

Leo: 500

Michel: 2900

This time Leo brushed the pain off. “Power Tool’s effect activates! It adds one equip spell from my deck to my hand!

Please be what I need…” Leo peeked hopefully at his new card.

Then the widest grin he’d sported all day broke out across his face. “Here it is! I’m equipping Power Pick Axe to Power Tool! Power Pick Axe’s effect removes a monster with a lower level...
than Power Tool’s from the graveyard! I remove Hollow Spirit! When Hollow Spirit is no longer in your graveyard, Hollow Ghost’s attack power reduces to zero! Then, Power Tool’s attack power increases equal to half of the removed Monster’s attack power!”

*Power Tool Dragon: Atk: 2300 à 2900*

“Battle! Power Tool Dragon attack Hollow Ghost!”

*Leo: 500*

*Michel: 0*

Michel crumpled to the ground as the full effect of his lack of lifepoints washed over him. “Was I not strong enough to protect Claire?”

“That’s not true!”

Michel turned to see who had spoken. Yusei and Luna were standing on the front step of the mansion.

“Luna!”

“Leo!”

“Big bro!” Claire floated out of the house and down the front steps.

“Claire, what happened? You should be resting in your room!” Michel ran to intercept his sister.

“Big brother, don’t hurt these people,” Claire said. “He’s been trying to protect his sister as well.”

“Huh?” Michel watched the twins with confusion.

The two of them rushed to hug each other.

“Luna, you’re safe!”

“Because you fought so hard,” Luna said.

“Big brother, you don’t need to protect me anymore,” Claire said. “Didn’t you notice? We’re both already…dead…”

“Claire, I wasn’t able to protect you…”

“You’ve already protected me enough,” Claire smiled kindly up at her brother.

“Luna, Leo, I’m so sorry,” Michel said.

“It’s fine,” Luna waved it off. “You were just trying your best to protect Claire.”

Leo nodded in agreement.

“Here.” Luna handed Michel the card she had taken from Claire’s room.

“Shall we go, big brother?”

“Yeah. Leo, do your best for me.”
“I will,” Leo promised. “I’ll protect Luna!”

The two ghost kids clasped hands. Their bodies rose into the air, and vanished in a cloud of glowing dust. Their home quickly followed. The people that had been carded were left safe and sound in the wreckage of the mansion. The morning rays of the sun were bright and shiny again.

“Who’re they?” Leo asked.

“The people Michel spirited away. He didn’t realize that he was already dead, and his strong feelings towards protecting Claire had probably kept them both rooted to this place. He thought everyone who came nearby was an evil spirit and locked them up when he defeated them,” Yusei explained.

“I feel like I can understand how we must’ve felt,” Leo said. “If he was alive, we might’ve been friends!”

“Same here!”

“Well, let’s head home. I’m sure Lise and Dexter are worried sick,” Yusei said.

“Right! I forgot…” Leo admitted sheepishly.

Luna sighed and shook her head. “Oh Leo…”

Yusei immediately answered the call trying to get through on his runner. “Lise!”

“They seem to look okay,” Sasha was scratching her chin as she stared into the camera.

Jose, Garrett, and Jarra were also squished into the camera’s frame. Lise was looking rather disgruntled to have to share her camera space.

“I didn’t know there was a party waiting to see if we were okay!” Leo chuckled.

“You’re all right? All three of you?!” Lise shoved the others far away and leaned close to the camera. She wished she could actually see her friends, and not through a screen.

“Thanks to Leo, yeah,” Luna said, smiling.

“Thank god. I was so worried. I could feel it. You two need to be more careful,” Lise sighed with relief.

“Says the girl who climbs lava walls,” Yusei reminded her.

Lise smiled fondly at Yusei. “This is different.”

“They don’t have bruises, as far as I can see,” Jose and the others pushed themselves back on camera.

“Drink lots of tea! Tea solves everything!” Jarra insisted.

Lise rolled her eyes, but she smiled. “Glad to see you’re all okay. I miss you, and I love you. Hopefully, I’ll see you soon!”

Yusei sighed, looking sadly at his blank runner screen. “I wish this month was over already.”

“She’ll be back soon,” Luna patted the highest part of Yusei’s back she could reach.
Leo decided he should hold back his comment about being glad he couldn’t see the two of them making out.
“Lise, are you up? Breakfast is getting cold, and—” Jarra stopped dead in her tracks at the door of Lise’s room. “What’re you doing?”

Lise looked up at her friend sheepishly. “Cutting my hair?”

“You see any scissors lying around in here?” Lise gestured to the tiny room she was in.

“No,” Jarra admitted with a sigh. “Let me help. You don’t want it cut too short. It takes forever to grow back.”

“Okay then,” Lise said. She relinquished the knife to Jarra and sat as still as she could.

“What is taking you guys so long?” Jose came in next, looking rather offended no one was eating the breakfast he had cooked up out of the good of his heart.

Jarra and Lise froze. The knife was inches from cutting off the clump of long hair Jarra held in her hands.

“Uh…”

Jose rolled his eyes. “If you wanted your hair cut, Lise, you should’ve said so. Follow me.”

Lise and Jarra shared a look of confusion, but Lise shrugged. “Better than doing it myself.”

Jose immediately got to work. He got Lise’s hair wet to make it weaker, and had her stand in front of the only mirror in the temple.

“I’m thinking just below your shoulders, yeah? The bob look doesn’t exactly do you justice. You like to play with your hair,” Jose said as he brushed Lise’s hair out.

“You sure about this, Lise?” Jarra said. She eyed the scissors Jose had taken from his room, a pronounced scowl upon her face.

“It’s in the way when it’s so long. Go ahead, Jose.”

“Okay.” Jarra waved her hands dismissively. She settled in to watch.

Jose grinned widely as he snipped off inches of Lise’s long blond hair. In no time he had reduced the hairs’ extent to a much more manageable length. He even blow dried the wet strands at his insistence.

“Whattaya think?”

Lise grinned in the mirror. “Much better.”

Jarra nodded in agreement. “Ass kicking hair.”

///

Jack and Carly were huddled in a dark alleyway of Neo Domino City. Carly had her camera ready
for anything, and Jack was just ready. Carly had heard about a duel runner smuggling ring increasing their thefts ever since the WRGP’s announcement. The two of them were on a stakeout, hoping that they could catch someone in the act.

Before their eyes, a team of men emerged from an alley across the street. They ran into the unattended duel runner garage Jack and Carly were watching. In seconds they had the security measures in place cut, destroyed, or off.

Carly caught shots of the five of them riding off with their stolen loot. The photos looking almost like a stop motion animation of their escape, Carly snapped so many.

Unfortunately, she was slower on pursuit. Jack, on the other hand, shot out of the alley atop his duel runner like a cannon.

“Heh heh!” one of the thieves laughed. “Easy as pie!

“Think again!” Jack cried. He launched his duel runner from one highway, to the highway beneath it that the thieves were using. “You band of stealing miscreants! Don’t think you can get away from me, Jack Atlas!” Jack landed behind the five thieves with hardly a shudder.

“Why you no good gnat!” The thief riding point pulled out a gun, aiming for Jack.

“Don’t do it, Syd!”

Syd didn’t listen. He fired a disrupter beam at Jack, but one of the four other thieves intercepted the hit. His duel runner smashed into the asphalt, throwing its rider. He rolled to a stop shortly, and made no moves to get up.

“Whoa!” Jack skidded to a halt.

The four other thieves kept going.

“You’re damn annoying, y’gnat!” Syd shouted back at Jack before he vanished into the night.

Jack ignored Syd’s retreating words and ran for the fallen biker. “Why did he protect me? Are you okay? Hey, you have to hang on!” Jack knelt down to see if he could help.

A police cruiser pulled up a moment later.

“Trudge, I got a member of the theft ring her-“

“Kaz!” Trudge gasped as he stepped out of the car. He knelt down beside Jack. “Kaz, hang in there! You jackass, what’ve you done!” Trudge demanded of Jack.

“Huh? Whataya mean?”

///

Later that night, Trudge and Jack had managed to shuttle Kaz to the hospital. Carly was at a loss as to what was going on, but she figured she’d better tag along just in case. Yusei and Crow had been called too, and sat waiting quietly.

Trudge shoved Jack away by his collar. “You punk! Thanks to you, all that work we did is dead in the water!”

“Jack had no idea that person was undercover!” Carly insisted, trying to calm Trudge down.
Trudge grunted with frustration and shoved Jack away from him. “Kaz is a top-class turbo duelist among the Duel Chasers. He wanted to make sure those thieves paid for their crimes, and he said he would catch them himself, no matter what. He accepted the risks and infiltrated the theft ring.”

Jack bit his lip as he listened to Trudge. It seemed like forever before the Surgery in Progress light went off. Their small group could go in and see Kaz.

The officer’s head was clad in bandages, blue hair spilling out of the gaps. He was unconscious for the time being, and breathed evenly under his blankets. The surgery was a success, but it would be a while before he woke up.

Jack’s gaze fell on Kaz’s deck. The synchro monster on top was dark, fiery, and ominous. A strange choice for a correctional officer. Nevertheless, Jack took the synchro monster. “I’ll be borrowing this.”

“Hey, you can’t…” Trudge was momentarily caught off guard by Jack’s stubborn personality. “what do you plan to do with Kaz’s card?”

“Jack, where are you going?” Carly asked. Her eyebrows angled upwards with concern.

Even Crow was surprised by his friend’s actions. “You’re not honestly going after the theft ring?”

“You all stay out of this,” Jack said from the doorway. Without looking back, he went on his way.

“Jack?”

“Jack!”

///

“Duel runner theft ring?” A black market dealer in the shadiest black market alleyway Jack could find looked at him like he’d asked to buy an elephant.

“Mm-hmmm,” Jack nodded. He picked up a part for sale; his version of trying to be subtle. “I heard they’re dropping off their stuff around these parts.”

The salesman wasn’t buying Jack’s act. “And what do you plan to do once you find out where they are, mister?”

“Just going to settle a few accounts with them.”

“Accounts, eh? Hold on,” the salesman said. He scribbled something down on a scrap of paper and held it up. “It’s on the house, as long as you didn’t get this from me.”

“Right, thanks,” Jack said. He took the paper and left.

The directions brought Jack to a dead end alleyway. Dark gray walls with the occasional pipery poking out was the extent of the “info’s” worth.

“Odd,” Jack commented. “According to the map, it should be right here.”

Six guys swooped down from above. Jack was surrounded in three seconds flat.

“What’re ya sniffin around for, all shady like, eh?! It’s for your own good if y’don’t go meddling in other’s affairs. Former King!”
The first boy charged, and Jack sidestepped, kicking him to the ground. Jack punched the next guy down into a third. “I don’t have time for you small fry! Now, take me to your boss!”

“No need for that!”

Jack turned in time to get nailed in the face with a pipe. He crumpled into a heap on the ground, out cold.

///

“About zhe codenames,” Garret said. His hazel eyes were weary, tired of bringing up the subject. “Are zhey necessary?”

“Yes and no,” Sasha cut in before Jose could begin his usual speech about the creativity of it all. “It will help me coordinate attacks better if I can simply name an attack pattern or those involved in the attack without giving away who is who beforehand. On the other hand, codenames can be… distasteful…”

“No way!” Jose huffed, crossing his arms. “They’re a creative outlet through which I express myself in fighting if I can name myself something that reflects my cool disposition but my bubbling need for fun!”

Lise squinted at him in disbelief. “They are?”

“Of course!” Jose threw an arm around Lise’s shoulders. “We get to name ourselves. It’s an extension of ourselves, of our artistic and creative qualities! Of our new skills that we use to fight for justice!”

“Um…”

Sasha sat in thought while Jose babbled on. She finally smacked the ground beneath her to call everyone to attention. “I’ve given this a lot of thought, and I agree to codenames. However!” She spoke up loudly before Jose or Garret could say anything. “I’ve picked your codenames, and I’m coming up with names for attacks we coordinate as a team. We’ve gotta be able to defend our home and Master Terra, and I think this can either make or break our team. Whattaya say?”

“As long as you’re picking,” Garrett said.

“Works for me. Don’t care,” Jarra shrugged.

“Just call me something cool,” Lise said.

Jose crossed his arms and looked away. “Fine.”

Sasha smiled. “Then Jose is Bomber, Lise is Powerhouse, Jarra is Cables, and Garrett is Arsenal.”

“Now zhat, I can live with,” Garret actually smiled with approval.

“I like mine. Powerhouse!” Lise waved her hands around like mysterious magic power would come out of them at any moment.

“And Cables swings to the rescue! Cooler than Spiderman!” Jarra high fived Lise.

“Whatever,” Jose grumped.

“Now that that’s established, let’s work on our team attacks. I’ll also have us play some games to
gain each other’s trust, one on one matches, and races. Any questions?” Sasha said.

“Yes,” Lise raised her hand. “Do we get bathroom breaks?”

“No if ya don’t work! Let’s go!”

///

“Jack!”

“Jack!”

Carly, Crow, and Yusei slowly came into focus. It looked like he was in the hospital, but he wasn’t sure. There was a pounding in Jack’s head, but it was otherwise a speed bump on the way to his goal.

Jack sat up slowly and looked at the people surrounding his bed. “Where am I?”

“What were you thinking?” Crow fired back at him. “You can’t just storm to the theft ring’s hideout! And now they know your face!”

“Please Jack, this is too dangerous!” Carly begged.

Jack wasn’t listening though. “This is where I personally draw the line. It doesn’t involve any of you.”

“Like hell we aren’t!” Crow countered, furious with his concern over his friend. “Everyone’s worried about you!”

“Jack,” Trudge said. He had been so calm Jack hadn’t noticed him earlier. “You don’t get it at all. These guys aren’t an ordinary theft ring. It’s a terrifying criminal organization. The boss, Syd, is especially brutal. In the past, he’s gotten rid of so many people who’ve stood in his way, like bugs.”

Jack took a deep breath. “How is officer Kaz doing?”

“Unfortunately, he still hasn’t regained consciousness.”

“Look Jack, if Security can’t catch him, then what makes you think you can?” Crow argued, using reason this time. “There’s no way you can do this by yourse-“

Jack ignored Crow and got up to leave.

“Hey, I’m talking here!”

“Let him go,” Yusei said.

“Yeah, but-!”

“It’s fine,” Yusei said. He was worried for his friend, it wasn’t really fine, but no one could stop Jack when he got like this. “This is just something he has to do.”

Jack reached up to scratch at the itch on his head. He found bandages wrapped around his head from his injury. With one small tug, Jack ripped the binding and left the bandages on the floor.

///
“Right.”
“That’s it.”
“All right, let’s hit the next spot.”

The gang of thieves was at it again. They climbed aboard their truck and drove off.

Jack stepped into the middle of the street. The light from the truck’s headlights swept over him, and the driver quickly put on the breaks. The driver had given Jack his “info.”

“How dare you trap me like that earlier,” Jack said. His anger squelched the tiny bit of fear he’d had. This time he had a plan.

“Say what?”
“What’re ya talkin’ about?”

Three boys jumped off the back of the car.

“Don’t act dumb!” Jack growled, advancing. “Take me to where they are on the double!” He opened the driver’s door and grabbed the driver by his collar.

More lights filled the street. The truck was surrounded by more gang members riding duel runners.

“Thank goodness, huh?” The driver sneered. “You don’t even have to go cause they’ve come to you!”

“Back for another ass beating?”

“We should’ve been a little more careful beating you to a pulp!”

The gang of thieves charged Jack again. He punched the first two guys out, and kicked a third. A fourth guy struck him in the head with a pipe again. Jack went down, and stayed down as the thieves started kicking him.

Eventually they got bored.

“Worthless.”

“Already passed out, the bum.”

“Let’s go.”

The thieves climbed aboard their vehicles and peeled out.

“And don’t come back, ya jackass!”

“Damn smallfry!”

Jack waited until they had all left. He slowly picked himself off of the street.

///

“Jose, you’ll be fighting Lise. Jarra you’re fighting me.”

“What about me?” Garrett complained.
“You’ll referee today.”

“Fine. Jose, Lise, to the battleground.”

Lise swallowed and entered the ring. Jose lazily tossed a small grenade up and down in his hand as he stepped into the ring.

“Just breathe, Lise!” Jarra called out to her. “You’ll be fine!”

Lise inhaled, exhaled. Jose just continued playing with his explosive.

“Begin!”

Lise charged at Jose. He sidestepped. Lise whirled into a trip, but Jose back flipped out of the way. Lise cartwheeled over to him, aiming kicks at Jose’s head. He dodged and tossed two explosives over his shoulder.

“Whoa!” Lise batted the bombs away.

Jose ducked his own bombs and wrapped his arms around Lise’s torso, locking himself into position. Lise bent down and grabbed her own wrist. In one backwards thrust she had reversed Jose’s grab and flung Jose into the air.

“Gotcha now!” Lise leapt into the air with her fist cocked.

“Hate to burst your bubble, but not quite,” Jose said, a triumphant lilt to his voice. He slipped out two more bombs and threw them at Lise.

She had no time to get away, or change direction in midair. Lise raised her arms to protect herself from the blast.

Jose’s bombs went off, covering Lise in foam. Lise gasped half in relief and half in surprise. The foam instantly hardened and trapped her.

Jose landed deftly on the ground a second before Lise did.

“Jose is the winner,” Garrett said.

“Good try,” Jose said. “This is a new high density polymer foam I’m working on. It immobilizes, but it can also be broken fairly easily. You just can’t be completely encased in it.” Jose raised his leg and brought it down in an axe kick on the foam. It instantly shattered, freeing Lise.

“Cool,” Lise said, trying to hide her disappointment.

“Both of you did well,” Master Terra said.

All five heads turned in her direction. No one had been expecting her to watch.

“Keep developing your techniques, Jose. I want to see those chi activated bombs you’ve been so eager to develop. Lise, never assume you’ve won a match until it’s over. You’re certainly improving, but don’t get too cocky.”

“Yes, Master Terra.” Both Jose and Lise bowed to Terra and sat to watch Jarra and Sasha’s fight.

“Begin!” Garret said with much more enthusiasm.
Jarra shot her cables into the ground the second Garrett finished speaking, flinging large rocks up to Jarra’s eye level. One by one she kicked them at Sasha. Sasha wasn’t distracted in the least as she gracefully navigated between the rocks. Jarra threw her last rock, the biggest, at Sasha. She shot her cables out again, on either side of Sasha and launched her body forward. Sasha was busy punching through the big rock and was surprised to see her opponent hurtling towards her when the dust had cleared. Jarra took her chance and snagged Sasha’s wrist with a cable. Jarra landed behind Sasha and pulled as hard as she could, flinging Sasha across the ring. Sasha scowled, but she wasn’t panicking. She grabbed the cable encircling her wrist and readied her chi glove. She landed heavily, cracking the ground beneath her slightly, and sent a shockwave of her chi back up through Jarra’s cables. Jarra let out a piercing scream as the attack washed over her and immediately released Sasha. Next thing Jarra knew Sasha’s face and hand were inches from her nose. Sasha slammed Jarra into the ground by her face and delivered a jolt of chi to her for good measure.

“Sasha is the winner!” Garrett announced, his fist raised.

“Whoa…” Lise breathed. Her eyes were wide. She kept replaying Sasha’s attacks over and over in her head. They were the most precise and nearly vicious techniques she had ever seen. Before Master Terra could deliver her verdict, Lise was tapping Sasha on the shoulder. “Can you show me how you do that?”

Sasha blinked at her friend, and then broke into the widest smile Lise had ever seen on her. “Of course.”

///

Aboard a fright boat docked in the city’s harbor, the ring of thieves counted their inventory.

“Time to say goodbye to this city, huh?” the shady shopkeeper lamented.

“Well, there’s no helping it,” Syd said. He said in a chair, watching his thieving ring members at work on the massive conveyer belts. “That damn Security spy was really close to learning about this factory, after all. Means now’s about the right time.”

A loud bang came from the hideout’s entrance. One of the thieves who was supposed to be guarding the door landed on the boat’s floor.

“What the hell?”

“The jigs up!” Jack declared, astride his duel runner.

“You’re Jack Atlas! How’d ya find this place?”

“He lead me right here!” Jack pointed at the crooked salesman.

He began patting himself down. There had to be some explanation, a tracker of some sort? In his shirt collar he found his answer. A transmitter. “You mean, back then when you grabbed me?”

“You screwed up, Gus!” Syd growled.

“F-Forgive me!”

“Y’bastard. Screw with us, will he?!”

“This time we’ll be sure to finish you off!” the band of thieves charged for Jack.
Jack was having none of that. He gunned the engine of his bike, and raced down one of the factory’s conveyer belts. He knocked a thief out of his way, and the gun Syd was aiming at him out of his way.

“I’ve already called Sector Security about this place! You’ve got no place left to run!” Jack cried, landing spectacularly on the factory floor.

Syd didn’t surrender. On the contrary, he laughed. “You’re right, I lose. I give up! If Security knows about this place, I throw my arms up in defeat! So, how’s about we duel until your entourage comes?” Syd sneered.

Jack’s eyes narrowed. “A duel?”

“It won’t be any ordinary duel. We’ll be playing a game of my very own.” Syd gestured to the two pronged conveyer belt behind Jack. Two lines lead to two trash chutes equipped with trash compacter and everything. “We’ll be dueling atop this.” He clambered up the ladder onto the conveyer belt. “It’s set up so that when your life points get reduced, the conveyer belt will move, and if your life points get depleted, you get turned into a sandwich over there.”

“What?”

“So? You’re not being forced. It’s okay if you’re too scared and wanna quit, former King.”

“Fine, I accept your duel,” Jack huffed. He stepped aboard his conveyer belt and readied his duel disk.

“Listen up, neither of us are getting down until the other loses. Now, let’s hurry up and start, former king.”

“Duel!”

Jack: 4000  
Syd: 4000

“I’ll start, draw!” Jack said. “I summon Mad Archfiend!”

(Mad Archfiend: Atk: 1800 Def: 0)

“I place a card face down and end my turn!”

“My turn!” Syd said. “I summon Assault Wheel!”

(Assault Wheel: Atk: 2300 Def: 0)

Jack didn’t like the looks of this monster. “An attack power of 2300?”

“Assault Wheel, attack Mad Archfiend! When he takes an attack, Mad Archfiend switches to defense mode, right? And when Assault Wheel attacks a defending monster, and its attack power if greater than your defense power, it inflicts damage!”

Jack: 1700

Syd:4000

Syd sneered cruelly, watching the conveyer belt take Jack further away. “That’s a chunk of your
life points gone! So, how’s it feel to be one step closer to hell?”

“That’s the way!” Gus said. “Hurry up and get sandwiched already!”

“My pride as a duelist can never be crushed!” Jack insisted nobly.

“Can the crap,” Syd yawned. “When Assault Wheel attacks, its attack power reduces to zero until my next standby phase. I place two cards face down to end my turn. C’mon now, you better come back at me quick before it’s too late to save yourself!”

“I don’t need you telling me that,” Jack sniffed. “My turn! When there are only monsters on my opponent’s field, I can special summon Vice Dragon from my hand! If summoned by this effect, its abilities are halved. Next, the magic card, Polymerization! I fuse Big Piece Golem and Mid Piece Golem in my hand! Appear now, Multi-Piece Golem!”

(Multi-Piece Golem: Atk: 2600 Def: 1300)

“And now I normal summon Archfiend Interceptor!”

(Archfiend Interceptor: Atk: 1400 Def: 1600)

“Battle! Multi-Piece Golem attacks!”

“Think again! Permanent trap Torture Wheel open! As long as this is on the field, Multi-Piece Golem can’t attack or change its battle position! Plus, it inflicts 500 points of damage to you during each of my upcoming standby phases!”

Jack scowled deeply, clearly miffed, but he wasn’t stopping there. “Then, Vice Dragon will attack Assault Wheel!”

“Trap activate; Brander Decoy! When a monster on my field is attacked, it gains control of a level four or lower monster other than the one attacking! I’ll be taking Archfiend Interceptor now!”

“What?”

Syd chuckled. “This fellow’s effect is pretty handy! As long as he’s on the field, every time you attack, it inflicts 500 points of damage to your life points! So are you attacking or not?”

Jack’s scowl merely grew.

“Sorry, but you’ve helped me out of another jam! By the way, how’s he doing? Dead, I take it?”

Syd canted his head to the side in mock sympathy.

“I will never allow you to insult officer Kaz like that! Burn it to ash, Vice Dragon!”

“You’re a damn fool, either way! Get ready to eat your monster’s effect!”

Jack: 1200

Syd: 4000

“Now you’re even closer to Hell!”

“Same goes for you!”

Jack: 1200
Syd: 3000

It was Syd’s turn to slowly edge backwards, and closer to certain death by trash compacter. His smile never dropped, however, he was planning something. *Idiot. This conveyer belt is set up to stop short of the presser.*

“You should start praying that Security comes before you get crushed! I end my turn,” Jack said.

“Do you *really* think Security is gonna come? That’s why you’re a damn fool!”

“What?”

///

Crow, Yusei, Trudge, Carly, and a few more police cruiser pulled up to the harbor’s dock.

“What’s going on?” Crow demanded. “According to Jack’s call, it should be here…”

“Hey! I was told a tanker was docked here,” Trudge said, joining the two boys.

“A tanker?” Crow said.

“So, that’s the theft ring’s hideout,” Yusei said.

“Okay, but it’s…kinda gone…” Carly pointed out.

///

“With these chi gloves I developed with Jarra, I can hyper focus my chi into my hands,” Sasha was explaining to Lise. “I can send a huge devastating blast through the ground, or I use it to disrupt the chi flow of my opponent. It manifests itself to the eye as an electrical shock or current, or I’ve been told it feels like that when I use it against an opponent.”

“Amazing!” Lise looked up from her notes. “Don’t you need to match the chi wavelength of your opponent to devastate their chi senses so badly?”

“Not entirely. I half match them to sneak my chi into theirs, but I keep it half mine so that it acts like a virus. The body recognizes my chi as foreign. With my gloves, I amplify the two reactions so that my opponent is paralyzed in pain.

“What if you reversed it?” Lise suggested, her eyes on Sasha’s gloves.

“You mean give them my chi?” Sasha’s brows thrust downward into a frown. “That wouldn’t exactly help me.”

“No, I mean, what if you used these or a similar technique to take the opponent’s chi, make it your own, and use it for yourself?”

“Steal chi? Hmmmm…” Sasha put a finger to her lips. “I suppose it’s possible, but it’s extremely difficult. Not to mention risky. Let’s begin practicing then, shall we? Jarra, may we borrow a cable?”

“Sure,” Jarra chirped, a smile on her face despite her earlier loss. She shot a cable out of her cable backpack and handed it to Sasha.

“Here,” Sasha handed Lise one end of the cable and sat at the other end. “I’ll send stronger and
stronger blasts of my chi through this. Try to match your chi to mine first, then we can move on to the more difficult stuff.”

“Thanks, Sasha.”

“Don’t thank me yet,” Sasha grinned. “I’m basically going to be electrocuting you.”

///

“Wait, you mean the factory itself is actually the inside of a huge tanker?!” Jack gasped.

“I do, so let’s treat ourselves to a nice, relaxing cruise. Though, the only thing left for you is a one way ticket to hell! My turn, draw! Torture Wheel’s effect activated! Each of my standy phases, it inflicts 500 points of damage to you!”

Jack: 700
Syd: 3000

“Next, I summon the tuner monster Cannon Wheel!”

(Cannon Wheel: Atk: 500 Def: 1000)

“A tuner?”

“I’m tuning my level two Cannon Wheel and level four Archfiend Interceptor to synchro summon… Combat Wheel!” Syd announced triumphantly.

(Combat Wheel: Atk: 2500 Def: 1200)

“When Cannon Wheel us used as material in a synchro summon, it inflicts 500 points of damage to you!”

Jack: 200
Syd: 3000

“It’s been fun, Jack,” Syd said. “But this is where we say goodbye. Combat Wheel attack Vice Dragon!”

“Trap activate!” Jack countered swiftly. “Nightmare Demons! With this effect, I will release Vice Dragon to special summon three nightmare tokens to your field!”

(Nightmare Tokens: Atk: 2000 Def: 0)

“The attack target is gone, huh? I cancel my attack. I activate the continuous spell card Block Dugout! When the combined level of monsters on my field is greater than your monsters’, you can’t attack! Thanks for giving me the three level six presents, you damn fool!” Syd taunted.

“My turn!” Jack drew his card. “I summon Dark Sprocket! I’m tuning my level one Dark Sprocket with my level six Multi-Piece Golem! Lend me your strength, Kaz! I synchro summon Demon Chaos King!”

(Demon Chaos King: Atk: 2600 Def: 2600)

“With Multi-Piece Golem gone, Torture Wheel’s been destroyed,” Syd said.
“That’s not all!” Jack reminded Syd. “When Dark Sprocket is used as synchro material for a dark attribute synchro monster, it destroys one face up spell or trap card on the field! I’m destroying the Block Dugout on your field! That eliminates the only wall protecting you!”

Syd wasn’t rattled…yet. “You sure are one sad sap! Combat Wheel’s effect activates! I discard one card in my hand, adding half the attack power of all monsters on my field from itself to Combat Wheel! It’s attack power if 5500! This effect makes it so that you can only attack Combat Wheel! You’re completely helpless!”

“You will pay for mocking Kaz and pilfering a turbo duelists’ pride; their duel runners! Battle! Demon Chaos King will attack Combat Wheel!”

“Finally gone off your rocker, eh, former king? Seeing as how you’re taking your dive into hell all by yourself?”

Jack smiled minuscule. “When Demon Chaos King attacks, it switches the attack and defense powers of your monsters until the end of the battle phase!”

“W-What?!”

“Go Demon Chaos King!”

Jack: 200
Syd: 1600

“There’s still more!” Jack promised. “When Combat Wheel is destroyed, its effect will destroy all Nightmare Demon Tokens on your field! Then, those Nightmare Demon Tokens effects will inflict 800 points of damage to you for each one!”

“What?!”

Jack: 200
Syd: 0

In defeat, Syd fell to the conveyer belt. Jack remained standing, the winner.

“Ha!” Syd sneered. “It’s fine! My conveyer belt had a stopper in it from the very start!”

Unfortunately, right as the words left Syd’s mouth, his conveyer belt’s stopper broke! He fell backwards towards the metal clamp of death the trash compacter promised.

Jack’s arm suddenly swooped down. He grabbed Syd by his shirt and punched him in the face. Just for good measure, Jack threw him down to the waiting band of thieves.

“Why you!”

“You bastard!”

Jack looked down at them and started laughing.

///

Syd’s giant tanker was completely surrounded by New Domino City’s air and naval police officers. In no time, troops had stormed the tanker. Yusei, Crow, and Carly were right behind them.
“Jack!” Yusei spotted their friend first.

“Hey there! You’re late!” Jack said. He was covered in bruises, but otherwise seemed just fine. He was throwing the thieves he had fought with into a beat pile for the officers to arrest.

“Jack!” Carly couldn’t contain her excitement and relief.

///

That morning Jack met Kaz, who had regained consciousness, on the hospital’s roof. His leg and head were pretty banged up, but he was supposed to make a full recovery.

“Here,” Jack handed Kaz his synchro monster. “I was able to win thanks to this.”

“I’m amazed. You were able to stop Syd’s gang all by yourself!”

“Only because Security does sloppy work,” Jack blurted out.

Trudge rolled his eyes. “Such a way with words…”

“Hey Jack, once my wounds heal, how’s about we have a turbo duel?”

“Sure! Jack Atlas never turns down a challenge!”

The two men shook hands as friends.
Blindsided

Lise sighed deeply with joy as she flew through the sky. The sun beat down heavily, but she could hardly feel its heat so high up. The back, long sleeved coat she had donned kept the cold of the wind and clouds at bay, but Lise didn’t mind. Flying like this was heavenly. Well, as long as a bug didn’t buzz into her open mouth. That part always sucked.

Lise soared over the spider of the Nazca Lines. It didn’t make her uneasy and freak her out anymore, but it always reminded her of her father. What little she had known of him wasn’t good. She did hope he was treating her mom the way she deserved, wherever the two of them were in their afterlife.

Something flashed in the corner of Lise’s eye. She wheeled around to see better. Nothing. The sandy desert was empty so early in the morning.

“Must’ve been a mirage or something,” Lise said. She shrugged and zoomed off in the opposite direction, further from the temple.

Lise took a deep breath, concentrated, and shot off at twice the speed. She rose into the air, doing loops and aerial gymnastics. Ever since her ordeal in Master Terra’s world spheres she’d felt lighter, stronger.

Suddenly a whisking sound met Lise’s ears. She whirled to see its source.

Next second, a heavy, sharp pain exploded from her left shoulder.

Lise screamed and started falling the pain was so debilitating. She clasped her left shoulder gingerly with her right hand, feeling as she fell the extent of the wound. An arrow had lodged itself in her shoulder. It was bleeding, but not too terribly yet. Removing it would certainly make the bleeding worse, and possibly release a poison through her body.

There was no time to discern who had shot her. Lise was bleeding too badly and still falling.

“Come on, Lise,” she grunted to herself. “Focus through the pain.” She grit her teeth and tried to control her ragged breathing. The ground was getting closer and closer, and Lise wasn’t healing any faster. “Focus and-!”

A second before impact Lise stutter stopped her falling. It took all her leftover mental capacity to focus on staying airborne. Finally, she landed, slightly rockier than she would have liked, on her knees in the dust.

“I…I need help,” Lise muttered to herself. “Gotta get back to the temple.”

In a daze, she picked herself up. Lise’s vision was going wonky; the sand looking fuzzier than usual. Her energy was practically depleted. She held her injured arm gingerly with her right hand, and walked. To make matters worse, she was headed in the wrong direction.

The sun was on its way down when Lise came upon a small, wooden home. “That’s not the temple…”

A small boy and girl stood near the front door. The boy was shorter, and younger than his sister. Both had dark skin and hair. They looked at Lise with wide eyes, their hands shaking.
“Greiger!” the boy suddenly screamed, darting into the house.

Lise wobbled, her head spinning. “Greiger? From…Fortune Cup? How is he…? Why here?”

The little girl didn’t move. She stood shaking, and staring at Lise.

“What is it, Max?” Greiger came through the doorway. He bent down slightly just to be able to make it out without banging his forehead. “You’re not normally this spooked by anything.”

He was exactly the same as Lise remembered. A giant wall of power, taller even than Jack. His dark hair and eyes caught the sunlight exactly the same way his brother and sister’s features did. Even his sense of style hadn’t changed.

“You!” Greiger’s eyes widened.

“Yo,” Lise managed to get out before she collapsed in the sand on her good shoulder.

///

Yusei awoke with a start. His left shoulder suddenly hurt like hell. He rubbed it tenderly, wondering if this sensation was what it was like to be shot. Is something going on with Lise? I hope she’s okay. Maybe I should call her, just to be sure.

Still nursing the phantom pain in his shoulder, Yusei got out of bed. He grabbed his phone on the way out, and closed the bedroom door behind him. Yusei clicked Lise’s number in his speed dial and waited, listening nervously to the rings.

“Heyo! This is Lise! Duh duh duh duh, duh duh duh duh, duh duh duh, duh duh duh duh duh duh, duh duh duh duh duh, duh duh duh, duh duh duh, duh duh duh duh duh duh, what the fuck do you want?”

Yusei smiled even though it went to Lise’s voicemail. It was nice to hear her voice. Plus, her voicemail was hilarious.

“Hey Lise,” Yusei said after the phone had beeped to signal he could leave a message. “Is everything…are you okay? I felt something…wrong, I think it was through the empathy link. Please call me back. I need to know you’re okay. Love you…bye…”

Yusei hung up, somehow feeling worse than before. He stared at his blank cell phone screen. It might as well have been mocking him. There was nothing left to do but try to catch a couple more hours of sleep.

///

Meena and Trudge watched Crow chow down on his steak dinner. Yusei and Jack, who sat beside their friend, were not touching their food. Neither were Trudge and Meena, but they were nervous after the day’s events. Yusei and Jack were just waiting for the reason behind their outing.

“Thanks!” Crow exclaimed, his mouth full. “I dunno what this is about, but whatever! Hey, you eat too, Yusei, Jack. This is too good not to eat!”

“This is strange,” Jack said. He narrowed his violet eyes scathingly at Meena, and crossed his arms.

Both she and Trudge coughed evasively. “What? Why would you say that?”
Yusei leaned forward. “Martha always told us “nothing in this world is free. Be thankful of those who speak strictly. Watch out for a person who speaks too nicely.”

“Trudge and Meena wouldn’t treat us like this for no reason,” Jack agreed.

“Wh-What’re you talking about?” Trudge stammered.

“Then there are no strings attached?” Jack said.

“No! Of course not!” Trudge bit his lip and leaned forward. “Well, the truth is, I do have a small favor to ask of you.”

“I knew it.” Jack scowled.

“It’s not that difficult,” Meena said. “We recently found a person with amnesia, and were wondering if you could take care of him.”

“Why should we do something like that?”

“Right now, Neo Domino City is busy with new tourists and turbo duelists. It’s okay, it’s just for a little bit,” Meena said. She folded her hands into a plea. “Plus, I don’t have space and Trudge has a cat which the guy is allergic to!”

“Our garage isn’t a hotel!” Jack said indignantly.

Crow nodded, still chowing down. He spoke with his mouth open; “We can’t take care of anyone else right now, anyways.”

“We’re leaving in a couple of days to get Lise in Peru,” Yusei explained. “Akiza, the twins, and Carly are coming with us.”

“If you help us, we’ll pay for his plane ticket!” Meena said quickly.

“We will?” Trudge asked her.

“Yes,” Meena said, deliberately staring at Trudge.

“No thanks,” Yusei said.

“Please, Jack!”

“No.”

“Please reconsider.” Trudge begged, bowing his head.

“Nope,” Crow said.

“So you guys are being treated to something like this and you still plan on refusing?” Trudge scowled.

Crow scowled at Trudge. “Well, when you put it that way… Where is this guy, anyway?”

“That is…he should have been here a long time ago, but…”

Crow’s scowl turned into a satisfied grin. “Well, if he’s not here, there’s nothing we can do about it, so…” He happily returned to eating.
“That was close. We were about to take in a stranger,” Crow said. He and the others were down in the parking garage to get their duel runners. Only Crow had eaten.

“This is all because you were eating all that food without paying attention to the details!” Jack cried.

“But that’s because I never know when I’ll eat food like that again!”

The boys rounded the corner to find a boy squatting by Jack’s duel runner. He was tall with bland jeans, sneakers, a white, blue, and yellow jacket, and blue hair. “Oh, that’s great. I’ll improve this part as well,” the boy said, muttering to himself.

“You! What are you doing to my duel runner?!” Jack demanded, furious that someone he didn’t know was touching his prize possession.

“Huh? The boy seemed surprised to find he had company.

“Are you a duel runner thief too?!” Jack was beyond furious. He pulled the mystery boy up by his collar and socked him in the jaw. The boy landed in a bruised heap. “Don’t ever come near my duel runner again! There’s no mercy for you next time!” Jack sped off, still seething.

“Hey Jack!” Crow called after him, but his words fell on deaf ears.

“Are you all right?” Yusei asked the fallen boy.

“Just forget about him,” Crow said.

“After Jack just punched him?” Yusei gave Crow a ‘really?’ look.

“What’s wrong? We saw Jack leave in a huff,” Meena said. She and Trudge ran over to check out the commotion.

“It isn’t his fault,” Crow said. “It’s because we saw this guy messing with Jack’s Phoenix Whirlwind.”

“Bruno?!?!?” Both Trudge and Meena gasped.

Meena frowned disapprovingly at the boy. “What are you doing down here?”

“S-Sorry!” Bruno bowed repeatedly as he spoke. “I saw an amazing duel runner and I got completely sucked into improving it!”

“Hey, is this the dude you wanted us to look after?” Yusei asked.

“That’s him.”

“Really? What should we do, Yusei?”

Yusei frowned up at his friend. “Even if you ask me…” He and Bruno got to their feet.

Jack suddenly came racing back into the parking garage. He snagged Bruno, dragging him onto his lap, and kept going without even slowing down. “I’ll return him later!” Jack called to Meena and Trudge over his shoulder.
“What the hell?” Crow scratched his head.

“Let’s go, Crow,” Yusei jumped onto his duel runner.

“Yeah!”

“Let us handle the rest,” Yusei told Meena and Trudge.

Both he and Crow sped off after Jack. Meena and Trudge were left blinking in bewilderment at each other.

///

Lise opened her eyes to find more darkness. The earthy roof above her was broken up by wooden support beams. She smacked her lips together, feeling how unusually dry they were. “My mouth tastes like sand paper…”

She sat up and her shoulder screeched with pain, shooting waves of it through Lise’s body like crashing, stormy waves. Lise gasped sharply and winced. She moved slower, putting more weight on her right arm.

She realized she was only wearing her bra, which wouldn’t be acceptable if she wanted to leave this tiny bedroom in search of food. Her tank top was mostly blood stained, but the coat she had been wearing was missing its left sleeve. Perfect. They, whoever they were, must have cut it off to get to Lise’s wound.

The door creaked when Lise opened it. Sure enough, Greiger was sitting at the tiny kitchen table.

“So it wasn’t a dream,” Lise murmured.

“Good afternoon,” Greiger said. He got up and went to the kitchen.

Lise didn’t move. The bizarre nature of this scenario was throwing her for a loop. Greiger wasn’t a bad person, but he had done some pretty underhanded things to get revenge on Goodwin. He’d been a dark signer for a brief period too. Lise had never actually dueled him, but from what little she’d experienced of him, Greiger was a powerful person to be feared. What do you say to someone like that?

“Here,” Greiger plunked down a glass of water, a couple pills, and a steaming plate of chicken and rice. “For the pain.” He pointed at the pills.

“Thank you,” Lise said. She was so hungry she didn’t care that Greiger was staring at her. She swallowed the pills with the help of the water, and ate until there was nothing left. She sat back in her chair when she was finished with a satisfied sigh.

“Would you mind telling me how you ended up bleeding in the middle of the desert?” Greiger finally broke the silence. “I mean, seeing the Crimson Dragon again is a nice surprise, but not when she’s injured.”

Lise smiled thinly, appreciating that he was making light of the situation despite its weirdness. “You can call me Lise. I’ve been here for almost a month now. I’ve been training to help… understand the Crimson Dragon’s power better. Can I ask what you’re doing here? Who are those kids?”

The kids in question had been watching from the crack between the door and the wall. Their brown
eyes suddenly widened, and the door to their room slammed shut.

Greiger chuckled and smiled fondly at the shut door. “You’ll have to excuse them. My brother and sister are very shy. They’ve been especially distrustful ever since they were released from my Earthbound Immortal.”

Lise nodded. “My uncle does that to people.”

Greiger stretched, cracking his knuckles. “As for why I’m here, I felt it was my duty. I swore to protect the Nazca Lines in hopes of preventing another uprising of darkness any time soon. The land here is sacred too. I doubt much good can come from disrupting it. I hope to prevent that.”

“That’s brave of you,” Lise said. “Although, I’m pretty sure the next battle between Signers and Dark Signers won’t happen for another five thousand years.”

Greiger shrugged. “Even so. You still haven’t told me who would want to shoot you and leave you for dead.”

“I think it was this clan that’s made up of the descendants of the people of the stars. They’re somewhere out here, but I dunno where.”

Greiger’s brow furrowed. “I’ve heard rumors about them in the marketplace, but I didn’t think they’d stoop to such ruthless tactics. Well, until you’ve recovered you’re welcome to stay here.”

“Oh, I couldn’t stay any longer. It’s no trouble. I can just fly back to the temple.”

“Nonsense,” Greiger said. “At least wait until tomorrow morning. You need to have time to heal first.”

“You’re sure?” Lise looked at the door concealing Greiger’s siblings. They hadn’t looked like they wanted to be anywhere near her.

“Of course. They’ll get used to you, don’t worry.”

///

Jack threw Bruno face first onto their garage floor. He recovered quickly and put his arms up, hands open, in a surrender type position. “Please stop! I’m against violence!”

“So Jack, what’s gotten into you all of a sudden?” Crow asked.

Jack ignored him. Instead he yelled at Bruno. “Now say it! What did you do to my Phoenix Whirlwind?!”

“What’re you talking about, Jack?” Yusei canted his head to the side.

“My duel runner’s power has increased!” Jack said.

“What?”

“All I did was adjust the computer in the duel runner a bit!” Bruno cried, clasping his hands in the hopes he wouldn’t be pummeled again.”

“No way! Yusei tried to increase the power of our runners so much, and this guy did it in less than an hour?” Crow breathed in awe.
“That’s the only thing I can think of,” Jack said.

“Will you tell me how you did it?” Yusei knelt down to Bruno and put his hands on the boy’s shoulders.

In no time Bruno was typing away at the maintenance computer. Schematics for Yusei’s runner, Jack’s, Crow’s, and Lise’s filled the screen. “This is it. I changed the timing of the boosters. Now it can power up slightly.”

“I see, I hadn’t noticed that.”

“What’re they talking about?” Crow asked Jack quietly.

“I have no idea, but don’t let your guard down. I’m not sure we can trust him.”

“These also apply to the other duel runners here, but the fourth one… Doesn’t seem to be here. I can’t do work on a runner that isn’t here, sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry! Boost my runner’s power too!” Crow was practically jumping up and down he was so excited.

“Crow? Are you listening to what I’m saying?” Jack huffed, putting his hands on his hips.

“I’ll adjust it right away,” Bruno said, turning to look at Crow with a smile.

“Yeah! Do that!” Crow grinned.

Jack groaned loudly and face palmed.

“Then you said your name was…” Yusei trailed off.

“My name is Bruno, at least I think so.”

“I’m-“

“I know, Yusei, Jack, and Crow,” Bruno said, turning to each of them as he spoke their name. He turned back to the computer. “Oh, then this last duel runner must belong to Lise Kururugi.”

Yusei smiled briefly and nodded. “Bruno, with your skills, I want you to look at this. It’s not moving so well.” He pushed a button on the computer, changing the display from the runners to the planetary gear engine design. “This is the momentum gear using the planetary design,” he explained briefly.

“Does it still rotate?” Bruno asked.

“No, not yet.”

“It’s just using a program right now, but it’s better for us to use that. The momentum in a duel runner engine gets worn down as it’s used, but we can use the program to improve the speed.”

“Hey Yusei, you can’t just show this guy all of our secret designs! This is a mistake!” Jack insisted loudly.

“Stay quiet for a bit, Jack. We’re talking about something important right now,” Yusei said. He turned back to Bruno and his computers.
“Wait! Then are you saying we don’t have important conversations?” Jack stepped back, a little hurt by his dismissal.

“What if we do this here? With this, the power will be more stable,” Bruno was saying, both he and Yusei ignoring the others.

“Y-Yusei…”

“Let’s leave it to Yusei,” Crow said, un Concerned. “Right now, those two are talking about something important.”

“You too?” Jack growled, his fists raised. “Fine, do as you want!” He stalked off.

“But if that happens power will be lost,” Yusei was saying to Bruno. The two of them were completely wrapped up in their task.

“That’s the troubling part, I see. Then there’s this method too.”

Hours passed. Crow cooked dinner, ate, and came back downstairs to check on them. The boys had switched positions, but otherwise nothing had changed.

“For instance, in this part…”

Crow yawned and watched them with detached amusement. “That Yusei, it’s like he’s a fish that found its water.”

///

“Are you a duelist?”

“Huh?” Lise looked up from practicing her techniques. It was difficult without her left arm, but she was managing all right. There was little else to do until morning.

“Are you a duelist?” Greiger’s little sister repeated. She stared up at Lise with her big brown eyes.

“Yeah, and I have a duel runner back at the temple,” Lise’s smile turned into a wider grin. “My boyfriend built it.” Her smile fell. “I really miss him and my friends.”

“I’m Mara, n-nice to meet you,” she stammered. “Being a duelist must be cool.”

“It is. Are you a duelist too?”

“No,” Mara said, shaking her head. “I mean, my brother and I both have decks, like our big brother, but we still lose to him all the time.”

“Hey.” Lise knelt down to Mara’s height. “Losing is part of the deal a lot of the time. I’ve found that with dueling and fighting, the better you get, the more you lose because you meet more and more people who are good too.” Lise smiled. “Plus, I’ll bet Greiger is a great teacher.”

“He is!” Mara finally grinned for the first time since meeting Lise. “I was so glad he was okay. Max and I thought we’d never see him again!”

“Big brothers can be pretty cool, huh?”

“Mara! Lise! Dinnertime!” Greiger called from the front door.
“Coming!”

///

“Wouldn’t this concept work?”

“There’s enough reason to test it.”

The next morning Crow was snoring away. Yusei and Bruno were still hard at work on the engine designs.

“Thanks, Bruno. You’ve been extremely helpful.”

“No, no, your basis for it was solid. As expected of Professor Fudo’s son,” Bruno said. He turned to the counter loaded with Jack’s ramen cups. “Mind if I have one of these?”

Yusei’s brows knit together. “You know about my father?”

“His planetary particle research is in all the duel runner engines, isn’t it?” Bruno struggled with the cup’s cellophane wrapper. “Any duel runner mechanic would know. Come to think of it, Yusei, I’m guessing your name came from the planetary particle gear. Yusei means Planetary.”

“Really? My girlfriend told me it meant wandering star?” Yusei flushed slightly pink.

Bruno shrugged. “Before technology people believed the planets were wandering stars, so I guess we’re both right. The planetary gear is pretty interesting though. One gear alone won’t do anything.” Bruno came back to the computer with his noodles, slurping them down. “The central gear uses the surrounding gears to rotate. If we’re just parts of the wheel, what’s the central gear that moves us?”

“That’s obvious; the duel monsters that are with us in our turbo duels. Not just the bonds with my monsters, but with my friends too.”

“I see, that sounds beautiful,” Bruno said in between mouthfuls.

“Bruno, Meena told me you lost your memory, but…”

Bruno nodded, set his empty cup down, and folded his arms. “Yeah, I woke up on the beach a couple days ago.”

“Were you in some sort of an accident?”

“I don’t remember at all, but working on duel runners and dueling just feels right.”

“I see,” Yusei said. “If it’s okay with you, you can stay here for a while. See, for the WRGP, we need a new machine. If we work together…”

Bruno’s eyes lit up with excitement. “If you’re okay with me staying here, then I’ll definitely become a gear that helps you make the perfect engine!”

“Thanks, Bruno.”

“Same here.”

The two of them shook hands.
The day stretched on with little change. Jack and Crow watched them from the couch, unsure of how to feel about seeing their friend, but not seeing him.

“Hey Yusei, let’s play! The twins rushed in with excitement. “Leo found a new combo he wants to try!”

Akiza came up next. “Yusei, I could use some help on my physics homework…” She trailed off when she saw Yusei was busy.

Crow shushed the three of them.

“Who is that person with Yusei?” Leo whispered.

“He’s a refugee entrusted to us by the Public Security Maintenance Bureau,” Jack said.

“Right now, he’s a super mechanic working with Yusei.”

“A super mechanic!” Leo grinned crazily, as only a young boy can. “Will he make me a super duel runner if I ask?”

Crow rested his chin on his clasped hands. “Maybe.”

“This is weird. How can there be that much to talk about?” Luna said.

“Now the amount of time they’ve talked has surpassed how much I’ve ever talked to Yusei,” Crow grumbled.

“They’re literally two peas in a pod,” Luna said.

“But I thought I was Yusei’s bestest friend,” Leo said, sniffling a little.

Luna rolled her eyes. “You’re so dumb, Leo.”

Before Leo could respond, Akiza groaned in frustration, audibly.

“What’s wrong, Akiza?”

“I’m going home,” Akiza turned back towards the stairs. “I don’t wanna hang around if I’ll just be bothering people.”

“Aw, are you jealous, Akiza?” Leo taunted, his smirk mischievous.

“No, I miss my friends. Leave me alone, Leo,” Akiza practically snarled. “I just hope our friend can pull himself out of his work long enough to get his girlfriend in a couple days.” She walked out before anyone could stop her.

“Dang, she’s really angry.” Leo shivered with relief.

“Is this really okay?” Luna asked. Her green eyebrows squished together.

“Like I would know!” Jack grumped.

“Me too,” Leo added.

Crow sighed. “Well, it’ll be worth all the trouble if we can get one step closer to completing a new engine.”
Bruno and Yusei kept working. Yusei had even brought down his second computer from his room so they could work side by side.

“Yes!” Bruno exclaimed with excitement, his fingers were typing so quickly he could barely see them. “With this we can do it!”

“Yes, it’s finished!” Yusei cried, jumping out his chair in his excitement.

“We did it, Yusei! This is probably the best program in the world!”

“Yeah.” Yusei nodded. He hadn’t felt this happy for almost a month.

“But I think it’s time we rested for a bit,” Bruno said, yawning and stretching. “I’m exhausted since I haven’t slept for two days.”

“Yeah, me too. We’ll install it into the machine tomorrow.”

They turned off the lights and finally crashed. Bruno went to the couch, and Yusei to his shared room with Jack and Crow.

While the boys slept, someone picked the lock on the front door. They snuck in and stopped before the two computers. The thief smiled; they’d found what they were looking for.

///

“Good morning,” Greiger said when Lise walked into his kitchen, the next morning bright and early. “How’s the shoulder?”

“Better,” Lise said in between mouthfuls of her breakfast. “Thank you. I’m not sure how to repay you.” She downed her glass of milk in one go and burped loudly. “Uh, sorry…”

Max and Mara laughed. “Do you really have to go?”

“Yeah, my friends are probably worried about me. I need to get back to them,” Lise smiled softly and ruffled Mara’s pretty, dark, and curly hair. “But I’ll be back to visit.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.” Lise hugged the little girl. “Who knows, maybe next time I’ll bring a few friends with me.”

“Be careful out there. I’d hate to see you at my doorstep, injured, again,” Greiger said.

“I will. Thanks again for everything.” Lise put her used dishes in the sink. She shook hands with Greiger. “Until next time, big man.”

Greiger nodded. “Until next time, dragon girl.”

Lise laughed and saluted Greiger’s family. She closed the door behind her and took off into the sky once more.
Hey guys! Thanks for all the Kudos! I'd appreciate some comments too! They help me gauge what you like and don't like, as well as whether you'd like me to update on a regular basis. Like that'll happen, right? Anyway, I love hearing from you and talking about my story with people who care, so let me know what else you'd like to see! Lisiechan out!

“LISE!” Jarra half screamed, half squealed when Lise landed safely back at the temple. She crushed Lise into a hug.

“Ow! Shoulder, shoulder!” Lise complained.

“Oh, sorry!” Jarra immediately released her.

Jose hugged Lise next, with slightly less enthusiasm. “We were so worried about you!” He sobbed into Lise’s good shoulder.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t plan to get shot out of the sky.”

“No one does,” Garrett said. He wasn’t much of a hugger, but judging from his smile, he was still glad to see Lise.

“Glad you’re all right,” Sasha said, putting her hand on Lise’s good shoulder.

“Since you’re injured, now is as good a time as any to focus on the spiritual half of your training,” Master Terra said. She sniffed and straightened her back. Her gaze was concerned, but her anger buried most of it. “What if you had been killed? The Dragon Clan is getting out of control. No more physical training or exertion until that shoulder heals. I will not have them take you, not now, and not ever.”

“But-!”

“I said no,” Master Terra snapped. She turned to go. There would be no arguing with her. “I’ll expect you to be up with the sun tomorrow to begin your spiritual training.”

“Yes, Master Terra.” Lise bowed, and so did the others as Master Terra left for her quarters.

“Let me guess,” Garrett said when Master Terra was out of earshot. “You’re still going to train with us?”

“I’ve only got a few days left. I want to make up for lost time.”

“Then let’s get started,” Sasha smirked. She smacked her open palm with her fist. “The day has only just begun.”

///
“Whataya mean the data’s been stolen?” Jack screeched the next morning.

“I was careless,” Yusei shook his head sadly, and clenched his fists. “I should’ve made a backup”

“You did it! I knew you were suspicious from the very beginning!” Jack shouted, grabbing Bruno.

“N-No! It wasn’t me!”

“Let him go, Jack.” Yusei put his hand between the two taller boys.

Jack glared at his friend. “Don’t stop me, Yusei. I’ll get everything out of him!”

“Stop it already!” Crow shouted too.

“Are you trying to protect him as well?” Jack accused.

“Nothing to protect,” Crow said. He spread his hands, palm up, gesturing to the entire garage. He pointed to Bruno next. “If he was the culprit, he would have run away after stealing the data. What kind of thief would stick around after stealing something?” Crow raised his pointer finger matter-of-factly.

“That’s true…but…” Jack’s argument petered out. He changed tactics and shoved Bruno away. “Can’t you create the program again?”

“It’s not that simple,” Bruno said. “Creating a program needs lots of work, ad libbing, and it’s complicated. Recreating it from scratch is impossible.”

“Then we have to find the thief?” Jack said.

Crow was already on it. He blew dust off of all the desk space in search of fingerprints. “But it doesn’t look like the thief left behind any evidence. I can’t find any fingerprints.”

“Without evidence, how do we find the thief?”

Bruno gasped and walked over to the cart of ramen cups.

“What’s wrong, Bruno?” Yusei asked.

“One of the ramen cups have disappeared.”

“What?!?” Jack whirled in a fit of cup ramen rage, his fists clenched tightly. “He stole my cup ramen!”

“Hmmm.” Bruno bent over the trash can. He had a hunch, that was for sure. He pulled out a drawer of tools, located the tweezers, and bent over the trash can again. With the tweezers, he snagged the piece of cellophane in the trash can. “I found it! The thief’s thumbprint! The thief ate the cup ramen while stealing the data.”

“What?!”

“Now that’s just sloppy,” Crow said, shaking his head.

“The thief must’ve had trouble with the cover, just like I was earlier, so he removed his gloves.”
“We’ve been doing a few one on one and two on two matches, but today we’re doing a free for all. Everyone against everyone!” Sasha announced.

“Scatter!” Jose said immediately. “You know the rules! Don’t get knocked out of the ring and stay conscious!”

Lise moved to the edge of the ring, looking to size people up before she attacked.

Jarra immediately attacked Garrett from a distance. His weapons were wooden for training, but he was better at close combat. If she allowed him to get close he’d easily defeat her.

Jose tossed firecrackers in every direction. Sasha was drawn in close to him to escape the noise. Everything Jose threw at her, she electrocuted in midair.

Lise went for Garrett and Jarra. While Garrett was distracted with Jarra, Lise came up behind him and kicked him in the crook of his knees. He tumbled into Jarra’s cable, wrapping him up just as perfectly as a caterpillar.

“Thanks,” Jarra said as Lise half kicked and half dragged Garrett out of the ring.

“I wouldn’t thank me yet,” Lise said. She winked at Jarra, tackled her, and threw her one handed in between Jose and Sasha.

Jarra screamed as she collided with a bomb, and Jose. They skidded to the edge of the ring. Jarra took her chance, and rolled Jose right out of the ring.

“Damnit,” Jose swore, and crossed his arms in disappointment.

“HA!” Sasha cried, aiming her electro glove and an enormous blast of chi at the floor of the ring.

“AAAAHHH!” Both Lise and Jarra screamed from the pain of the blast.

Sasha smirked, and knelt so that she could keep the blasts going in consecutive waves.

Jarra felt every wave like a continuous stampede of rhinos. She struggled to stay on her feet.

Lise struggled with the pain from her shoulder. It had begun to throb, and the constant shocks of Sasha’s chi wasn’t helping. Still, she had trained with Sasha to accept this, accept it and make her stronger.

“What?” Sasha gasped.

Jarra had just lost consciousness, but Lise was slowly getting to her feet. Sasha was frozen in place as she watched Lise walk painstakingly slowly over to Sasha.

Lise smirked down at her friend. “See? I-It works.” She passed out a second later.

“So…Sasha is zhe winner?” Garrett said, laughing awkwardly. “I’m surprised. No one’s ever lasted so long against Sasha before.”

“I’d love to see what she does to perfect the technique, but I think she and Jarra are done for the day.”
“Are you really doing this, Yusei?” Jack frowned with dislike at the computers Yusei and Bruno were typing at again.

“Yes,” Yusei said. “If we enter the fingerprint into the Security’s database, we can find the thief.”

“But Security’s database is protected by a strong firewall. If we make a hacking mistake, we’ll get caught.”

“That’s why we’re rerouting our signal through a lot of world servers. With this protecting us, we can get in within five minutes. Bruno, you ready?”

“Yep, let’s do it.”

“Well, should we stop, Jack?” Yusei asked. His friend seemed to be the one most worried about breaking into Security.

“You haven’t listened to me for two days. Why start now?” Jack huffed, crossing his arms.

Bruno smiled back at Jack. “Don’t hit me if we fail.”

“Of course I’ll hit you!”

Bruno turned back to his computer screen. “Okay, here we go! Access allowed… Okay, we’re in,” Bruno said after a few seconds.

“Can you do it?”

“Oh yeah, it seems like a simple system,” Bruno said.

“I don’t really get it, but…” Jack admitted, staring dumbfounded at his hacker friends with Crow.

“What an amazing guy,” Crow agreed.

“All right, if we can pass this last one, we’ll be in the database.” Bruno’s hacking pathway brought him from a digitally rendered black and green hallway into a rocky duel monsters field.

“Hey, what’s this?”

“It looks like…a simulation duel!” Yusei realized.

“I see, so Security set up this simulation duel as the password?”

“So we can’t go any further until we solve this,” Jack said.

“Yes, it seems so,” Yusei scowled at his computer screen. They only had four and a half minutes to crack the code.

“We have to solve this in so little time?!” Crow’s gray eyes widened considerably.

“Well, let’s see what we’re up against,” Bruno Suggested optimistically. “The opponent has 2,300 lifepoints, and five monsters. They have one set trap card, and the continuous spell card Dark Door. On our field there’s Tragoedia, which gains 600 attacks points for each card in your hand. Our hand has six cards, so Tragoedia has 3,600 attack points. We’re supposed to win in this turn.”

Yusei nodded, his fingers poised over the keyboard. “Since it’s like this, the set card on the opponent’s field is troublesome.”
“In any case, we just have to make the opponent’s lifepoints zero on this turn, right?” Crow clarified. “All right, leave this to me!” He kicked Bruno off the computer and got to work.

A tiny, chibi, version of Crow appeared on screen. “Let’s get this duel started!”

///

Lise yawned loudly the next morning. When Master Terra said dawn she meant it.

The two of them stood under the very last of the moonlight near Master Terra’s favorite creek. Lise could see the gazebo across the water.

Master Terra was dressed in her most plain set of robes, which was saying something. The blue and purple stripes were wavy, probably because the colors were calming. Someone must have told Master Terra stripes made her look taller because she wore them all the time. She would be taller if she wore shoes, but Master terra rarely wore shoes.

Lise’s clothes were simpler. She wore plain dark pants that ended just below her knees, a plain orange tank top, and no shoes. Because she wasn’t doing anything overly exerting, Lise deemed it safe to wear her usual headband.

“So Lise, you know how to gauge your chi now, but do you know how to best make your energy and the Crimson Dragon’s flow?”

“No,” Lise rubbed at her eye. “I guess not.”

“All right, basics it is,” Master Terra took the knowledge in stride. She rolled up her robe’s sleeves. She plucked a stick from the ground and stirred the water with it. “Like energy in our bodies, the water in my creek swirls and flows. However, life is messy and things often fall into the creek.”

“So then…the creek doesn’t flow?”

“Precisely,” Master Terra nodded. “Opening the chi paths within you allows your blocked energy to flow.” She sat down by the water’s edge, the moonlight reflecting off the water made the garden look mysterious. “Be seated.”

Lise sat, slowly. She was afraid she would soon be subjected to a Sasha-like lesson where pain was translated into power. That is, if you could hang on.

“I’m warning you now,” Master Terra’s expression turned cold. “The process of unlocking your chi paths is a messy one. You might see visions, and it might leave you feeling weak and drained by the time we’re done. However, once the process begins, we cannot stop.”

Lise inhaled…then exhaled. “I’m ready.”

“Then we start with earth, located at the base of the spine. It’s ruled by survival, and blocked by fear. What are you afraid of?”

Lise closed her eyes. A cold, startling feeling washed over her. Afraid...

*Reddish light enveloped Lises memories. There was Roman’s leering face as he held her and Yusei at his mercy. When she thought Goodwin was going to kill her during the earthbound immortal turbo duel. This new threat looming in the distance… The silhouette of the ghost robots and more unknown figures standing behind him…*
They gave way to dead figures; Lise’s mother, father, Akiza, Martha, Yusei, Rally, Crow, Tank, Jack, Nervin, Leo, Luna... All dead. Then a shadowy figure came for Lise.

“No, NO!”

“Lise, your vision isn’t real. You are concerned for your survival and the failure of keeping those you care about alive. Now, like the creek, let your fears flow down them...” Master Terra’s voice was calm, quiet, and soothing.

Lise hadn’t realized she was breathing so heavily. Sweat beaded her forehead. She had ragged breath, but she swallowed, with difficulty, and calmed her breathing. In one fell swoop, her fears washed away like leaves.

“Your chi has been opened,” Master Terra said.

Lise opened her eyes and half laughed, half sighed. She wiped the sweat from her brow. “Are they all going to be like this?”

“No.”

“Good.”

“Some are harder.”

“Oh,” Lise’s hopeful expression died. She regained her composure. “What’s next?”

“Next, we move to a more scenic place. The sun is up. Let’s make the most of it.”

///

“With a monster packing 3,600 attack points and Shooting Star Bow, the answer is simple!” Crow declared confidently. “I equip the spell card Shooting Star Bow to Green Gadget! I lower its attack points by 1,000! Go Tragoedia! Attack Green Gadget!”


“What!” Real Crow and not chibi Crow was sent reeling with astonishment.

“Because of Dark Door, both players can only attack once,” Yusei said. “This isn’t good.”

“Crow! You’re wasting our time!” Jack complained, jerking on Crow’s jacket collar.

“I just wanted to find out what the face down card was! You’re welcome!” Crow shoved Jack’s hands away irritably.

“I just wanted to find out what the face down card was! You’re welcome!” Crow shoved Jack’s hands away irritably.

“Stand aside then! It’s time for Jack Atlas, a real duelist, to take a crack at this!” Jack shoved both Crow and Bruno aside to take a seat.

A little chibi version of Jack popped up as the duelist on screen. “The best duelists in the world use their power whenever possible. And I should know since I’m the great Jack Atlas!” Chibi Jack declared gallantly. “I equip Tragoedia with the spell Ax of Despair! He gains a thousand attack points, so now he can attack Green Gadget!”

“Trap activate; Mirror Force.”
“Why the hell did you just go and do the same thing I did?!” Crow pulled Jack out of the chair, clearly exasperated.

“I wanted to see if the card would be the exact same every time or if it was different!” Jack grabbed Crow’s shirt again. “Don’t you dare question my brilliance!”

“All right, all right, let go of my shirt all ready!” Crow shoved his friend off of him.

“Guys, I’d stop fighting and start focusing? We only have two minutes left,” Yusei warned.

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to take a crack at it,” Bruno said.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I may not remember who I am, but dueling and fixing duel runners just feels right. I know I can do this,” Bruno said.

“Then go for it,” Yusei smiled at his new friend.

Bruno smiled too. Possessing the trust of such a brand new friend was a great feeling.

“Are we sure about this?” Jack asked.

“Don’t complain, there’s no time!” Crow scolded him. “Can you do this in two minutes?”

“Yes, here I go!” Bruno leapt into action.

///

“All right,” Master Terra said when they were settled in the gazebo.

Water was everywhere, even below them. Lise could even hear the faint sound of a small waterfall in the distance.

“I’m guessing this is the water chi path?”

Master Terra nodded. “Very good. This one is located near the crotch, governed by pleasure, and-“

Lise laughed and snorted. “Pleasure in the crotch.”

Master Terra gave her a reproachful look.

“Sorry,” Lise cleared her throat, and focused up.

“It is governed by pleasure and is blocked by guilt. What do you blame yourself for?”

Lise closed her eyes.

An orangey pink vision swept across Lise’s mind. The death of her mother, when Sayer had told her he had done it in order to control her. Those three boys that had almost been sucked into Uru, and when Martha had fallen into Uru. Kalin attacking Security and killing an officer, what being in the facility alone had done to him. Akiza’s pain during their duel in the hospital.

“All those people got hurt because of me…”

“This is life,” Master Terra said, a harsh hint to her voice. “These things happen, but you cannot allow them to follow you like weights. We all fall into and influence the lives of others, and you
must forgive this part of your humanity.”

“We hurt each other, and that’s natural,” Lise breathed. “I can only control myself.”

“Your water chi path is open,” Master Terra smiled at her pupil.

///

Chibi Bruno took the stage in the lock duel. He decided to take his time instead of leap straight into action. “First, the problem is that Mirror Force. We can’t let that card activate. The only thing that can seal off Mirror Force is…Antique Gear Soldier, which isn’t affected by trap cards when it battles.”

“Okay, but that’s on the opponent’s field,” Jack said.

“We’ll use Tragoedia’s effect. He allows us to gain control of an opponent’s monster as long as we discard a monster from our hand with the same level. However, Antique Gear Soldier’s level is four. The only monster in my hand is the level six Divine Fowl King Alector. I have the spell card Cost Down though! Cost Down allows me to reduce the levels of all monsters in my hand by discarding a card from my hand.”

“I get it,” Crow said, nodding. “You’ll use Cost Down to change Alector’s level.”

“Exactly.”

“I activate the Cost Down spell from my hand,” Chibi Bruno said. “I discard Remove Trap from my hand to the graveyard, and change Alector in my hand from level six to four! Now through Tragoedia’s ability, I can gain control of Antique Gear Soldier by discarding Alector!”

“Right! Now equip Ax of Despair and attack Green Gadget!” Jack clenched his fist in anticipation of victory.

“No, not yet,” Yusei interrupted.

“What?”

“It’s just as Yusei says,” Bruno agreed. “If I raise the stolen Antique Gear Soldier’s attack points with Ax of Despair, and even if I use Shooting Star Bow to lower Green Gadget’s attack points to 400, the total damage inflicted will only be 1,900. That won’t be enough.”

“Then what do we do?” Jack inquired impatiently.

“Look at the screen again. One thing stands out, the effect of Stronghold Guardian.”

“Uh…”

Crow frowned at the screen, not quite understanding. “But Stronghold’s attack points are 3,000.”

“Yeah, but Stronghold’s attack points are only at 3,000 when all three of the gadget monsters are on the field. If even one of them is gone, it has no attack points.” Bruno smiled.

“I think you’ve got it,” Yusei grinned.

The two of them nodded.

“By using Shooting Star Bow in my hand as a cost, I can activate the spell card Offering to the
Dead! I destroy Green Gadget! Now Stronghold Guardian’s attack becomes zero!” Chibi Bruno quipped. “Then I equip Ax of Despair! Antique Gear Soldier’s attack points become 2,300! Go Antique Gear Soldier; attack Stronghold!”

The boys watched with satisfaction as Gear Soldier’s giant axe smashed into the now rendered tiny Stronghold Guardian.

“Opponent…passed. Access granted,” the lock robot opponent announced.

“We did it!” Jack and Crow cheered.

“Great work, Bruno,” Yusei gave him a thumbs up.

“Thanks, but we should hurry up and match the fingerprint.”

The four boys waited with baited breath as the Security database did its thing.

///

“Next,” Master Terra was saying from the roof of the eastern-most pagoda roof. The mid-day rays of the sun washed over the two of them. “Is the fire chi path. It is in the stomach, is governed by willpower, and is blocked by shame. What are you ashamed of?”

_These visions were bathed in a sickly yellow light. Almost killing Sayer when she lost control. Herself when she admitted to Yusei she hated herself. How afraid she had been to discover she was the Crimson Dragon, so much so that she had yelled at Yusei. She had gone so far as to deprive herself of sleep just so she wouldn’t have to deal with the haunting darkness of her father. Her anxiety about the future inhibiting her._

“My anxiety has made me such a burden on people. It just won’t go away. I almost killed Sayer.”

“Anxiety is a part of your mind, and it is likely it will never go away. The people who care for you do not see it or you as a burden. Yes, it inhibits you, but you do not have to allow it to continue. You must accept that or you can never be balanced. Accept who you are, even your mistakes, and that includes nearly killing Sayer.”

Lise took another deep breath. “My anxiety is a part of me, but it does not define me. I can still be successful in what I choose to attain. I have a choice in the use of my power.”

“Correct,” Master Terra said.

Lise uttered a tiny burp. “I guess that one really is cleared,” she said patting her stomach.

“Very funny,” Terra chuckled.

///

The fingerprints were quickly scanned through and discarded until it landed on a match. The Security mainframe supplied a picture of their culprit.

“This guy is…!” Jack trailed off midsentence he was so surprised.

“Do you know him?” Bruno had never met the guy, so he wasn’t all that shocked.

“This guy is the Vice-Director of the Public Security Maintenance Bureau,” Yusei said, his blue eyes hard with seriousness of their discovery. “His name is Lazar.”
“This isn’t good,” Crow muttered.

“No kidding,” Jack added.

“Hey guys, whatcha doing?” Leo and Luna walked in with two large duffel bags.

“Where do you want us to put these? By the garage doors? On a couch?” Luna asked. She held her bag over each place in turn.

“Carly, I think the plane only allows one carry-on, not two,” Akiza was telling her darker haired friend as the two of them joined the twins.

The four boys shared a dumbfounded look.

“Oh, right, I remember now,” Crow said. “I did start packing…like one t-shirt…”

“What is going on right now?” Bruno stared at everyone in complete bewilderment.

“Yusei,” Akiza groaned. “Please tell me you didn’t forget going to Peru to pick up and see your girlfriend for the first time in a month.”

“I forgot to call her the past couple days. Bruno and I were hard at work on the engine,” Yusei admitted sheepishly. “Did she-“

“She’s called me a couple times since she left. Lise told me she was okay, not to panic, but there was an incident.”

“I knew that pain in my shoulder wasn’t my imagination!”

“Well chop chop! Let’s get packing! We don’t have time to sit around! We need to be almost ready to go when we wake up tomorrow!” Carly said, getting everyone back on target. She made chopping motions with her hands, and followed Jack, Crow, and Yusei as they ran upstairs.

The twins snickered when they heard Carly scolding Jack for trying to pack his entire collection of turbo dueling gloves.

“I’m Akiza, the girl with glasses is Carly, and the twins here are Leo and Luna,” Akiza said, holding out her hand.

“N-Nice to meet you,” Bruno stammered, completely overwhelmed.

///

“Our fourth chi path is located in the heart,” Master Terra explained as she brewed some tea. She
had brought Lise to the meditation circle surrounded by the brightest vegetation her garden was growing. The earthy carvings of the meditation circle made it calming in the otherwise bright and somewhat overwhelming vegetation. “It is governed by love, and is blocked by grief. Lay all your grief out in front of you.”

*Lise opened her eyes into an earthy green vision. Delicate wafts of smoke puffed into the landscape. Lise waited and her mother and father appeared in the smoky landscape. They were together, and smiling at her. Lise smiled minutely back at them. As she watched her parents were suddenly engulfed in the green smoke. Lise reached out her hand, but it was as if she was being pulled away from them.*

“Yes, you have felt a great loss,” Master Terra’s voice broke into the vision, and became a part of it. “But the world is full of energy, and it swirls all around us.”

*The green smoke reached for Lise and lifted her gently up into the air.*

“Your mother and father’s love for you has not left this world. It is still inside of your heart, and is reborn in the form of new love.”

*The green smoke transformed, and took on new form. Lise saw Garret, Jose, Sasha, Jarra, Tank, Rally, Nervin, Blitz, Blister, Martha, Kalin, Jack, Crow, Leo, Luna, Akiza, and Yusei. They smiled at her, Yusei in front and holding his hand out to her.*

“Let the pain flow away…”

Tears streamed down Lise’s face, but she was smiling. Losing her family had hurt, but she had never imagined feeling so warm and happy from the loved ones she had found. She raised her hand and wiped away her tears. “Thank you,” she said breathlessly when she opened her eyes.

Master Terra’s smile was peaceful. “Have some tea, child.”

///

“I checked the mail and Meena and Trudge kept their word. They even put a passport for you in here, Bruno,” Crow nodded with surprised approval at the large envelope. “I completely forgot you need one of those to leave a country.”

“I can’t believe you forgot about Lise,” Akiza shook her head disapprovingly.

“Sorry,” Bruno coughed awkwardly.

“No, it helped me get the engine done, Bruno. Don’t be sorry. Honestly, I needed it. I’ve been missing Lise for almost a month now, and I needed to take my mind off her to get this done,” Yusei said.

“But you forgot about the trip you organized. Who does that?” Akiza threw up her hands, flabbergasted.

“Tunnel vision, mate,” Jack said, all seriousness.

Crow nodded. “I once found him down in the garage at 3 in the morning on his fifth cup of coffee. I told him to go to bed, and he told me time doesn’t exist.”

“Well it doesn’t,” Yusei insisted, folding his arms.
“I’m super confused,” Leo said, his grin eyes pinballing from one person to the next.

“That’s okay. What matters is we’re pretty much set to go tomorrow,” Luna sighed with relief.

“I’m not ready for a long flight though,” Carly scowled. “I don’t sleep well on planes.”

“That’s what melatonin is for, and we have plenty,” Crow announced. “Both Lise and Yusei have sleep problems.”

“Count me in on that front,” Bruno chuckled awkwardly.

“I’d say welcome aboard, but this isn’t a fun train,” Yusei joked. Nevertheless he and Bruno fist bumped.

“I’m gonna tell Lise you forgot about her,” Akiza said.

Yusei’s eyes nearly came clean out of their sockets he turned so quickly. “Please don’t.”

“I’m just kidding,” Akiza chuckled. “It was so worth it to see that look on your face. She probably will be all right with it though. She’d be pissed if it turned out you were useless without her.”

“Hey, I’ve been useful long before we were together.”

“Useful for getting us in trouble,” Crow muttered. “But then again we all were.”

“What’s Lise like?” Bruno asked tentatively.

Everyone else in the room audibly groaned. Bruno didn’t think it was possible to get even more confused.

“Now you’ve done it. You’ve gotten him started,” Jack griped.

Yusei had turned pink. “I’ll keep it short, I promise.”

Akiza fake coughed into her fist. “Liar.”

“Why don’t you wait to actually meet her, Bruno?” Luna suggested sneakily. “Then you can decide for yourself what she’s like.”

“Good idea, Luna. On that note, I’m gonna hit the hay,” Crow yawned. “I’m beat.”

“Excellent idea,” Jack took the hint and darted after his friend for their beds.

The others followed suit and collected themselves, slowly, into arranged beds for the single night.

///

“The fifth chi path is sound, located in the throat,” Master Terra explained. She had brought Lise close to her prized, purple amethyst wind chime. Every time the wind blew just a tad, the chimes let out a distinct, soothing ‘ting’ sound. “It is governed by truth, and is blocked by lies. The ones we tell ourselves.”

Blue colors washed over Lise’s visions. She was awakening as the Crimson Dragon when she was still in the Enforcers. She was talking to Yusei in Goodwin’s garden about transferring the dragon’s power. She had felt so weak then, clinging to the dragon’s power.
“I never wanted this, but I kept it because I believed it made me important.”

Master Terra’s voice gained a scolding edge to it. “You cannot lie about your own nature. You accepted the Crimson Dragon’s power, and you are her Vessel. She chose you for a reason. Accept it. Accept the power it gives you and the power it does not. You create your importance, not the dragon. That is why you are here.”

Lise breathed sharply and opened her eyes.

“Good. Follow me.”

As the two of them left the vicinity of the wind chime, Lise noticed the sun was nearly down.

“Whoa, how did that happen?!?”

“Visions exist in their own spatial dimension. You take as much time as you need. It feels like only a second has passed when it has been two hours.”

“That long?” Lise ran a hand across her forehead and through her hair to digest this news.

“Yes, although the journey is different for everyone. Garret has still not unlocked his fourth chi path, while Sasha unlocked all seven within two hours.”

“You’re literally blowing my mind here.”

Master Terra laughed. “The day isn’t over yet, child. Sit here.”

She had chosen a spot where the last colorful rays of the sun shone red, orange, blue and purple in a dazzling sunset. The colors were iridescent compared to the banal sands of the desert.

“The sixth chi path is light. It’s located in the center of the forehead. It is governed by insight, and is blocked by illusion,” Terra said. “The greatest of which, is separation. The earth and space, land and sky, day and night, here and there, are all just pieces of one universe. We live in division, but we are one people that found different answers to life depending on where they grew up.”

“So…we’re all connected?” Lise asked. She watched the fading daylight exacerbate the details of the Nazca Lines.

“Yes,” Master Terra grinned with pride. “Even your friends, while you are here and they are in Japan have bonds with you. Our connections grow when we share our experiences with each other.”

“So, one more chi path then?”

Master Terra nodded. “Come, we will be climbing and I’d rather not climb in the dark, but we will need it once we arrive at the top.”

“O-Okay,” Lise quickly got to her feet and followed the shorter woman for the last time.

The two women walked up a stone cobble pathway. It was all the way at the back of the temple, halfway embedded into the side of a hill. The hill’s top plateaued enough to be able to sit comfortably on. Like the garden, it was lush with greenery, but less wild. Small pink flowers dotted the hill’s grasses, and swayed in the chilly night air.


“Wow…” Lise whispered in awe.
Thousands of stars winked down at her from their perch in the heavens. Living in the city all her life, Lise had never seen so many stars. They were even more luminous than she had imagined. She couldn’t see nebulas, but she was certain it was so clear out there in the desert she could see galaxies.

“This is your last chi path, but your spiritual training doesn’t end here. Once we have opened your last chi path, it will be up to you how to proceed with understanding yourself and the dragon within.”

“Sounds good,” Lise nodded.

“The thought chi path is located at the crown of the head. It’s governed by pure cosmic energy, and is blocked by attachment. What attaches you to this world?”

_The visions came so readily this time, colored a beautiful purple. Her time in Martha’s hospital as an injured Enforcer; Yusei had kept her company. Yusei carrying her out of the Old Reactor. Listening to Yusei tell her he loved her. Their first real kiss…_

“Now, let all of those attachments go. Let them flow down the river, forgotten.”

“Wait, what?” Lise’s eyes flew open. “You want me to do what?”

“Let go.”

“Why would I let go of Yusei?” Lise stared at Master Terra like she had been asked to turn into a frog on the spot. “I-I love him!”

Terra smiled minutely. “Learn to let him go, or you can’t let the pure cosmic energy flow in from the universe.”

Lise wrinkled her nose in disbelief. “Why do I have to choose? How can it be a bad thing that I feel an attachment to him? Three chi paths ago that was a good thing!”

Master Terra spoke with more force. “You must learn to let go.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t just…do that.”

“Lise, to gain understanding about you and the Crimson Dragon you have to open all the chi paths. Surrender your self.”

Lise sighed. “I’ll try, but if you start singing that Frozen song, forget about it.” Another deep breath…and she was off.

_The stars had turned red and gold, gleaming in the darkness. They fell to the Earth, bathing it in the purple light._

“Now think about your attachments, and letting them go…”

_Yusei appeared amidst the purple landscape. He looked exactly as Lise remembered; dark, spiky hair with gold highlights, dark shirt and jeans, blue coat, brown boots and gloves, and his blue ocean eyes looking right at her. His small smile was almost too much to bear as Lise allowed him to recede into the cosmos._

“Let the pure, cosmic energy flow.”

_Lise flew up to the recesses of space, and alighted on the red aurora borealis she had so often seen._
Her spiritual self waited for her at the other end of the aurora borealis, along with the Crimson Dragon’s draconic form intertwined with Lise’s spirit. The closer Lise came, the brighter her markings glowed.

When she was close enough, her spiritual self engulfed her in the ball of energy held between her two hands. Lise could feel it; the merging of her two powers. Becoming whole.

A scream broke her solidarity. “Let me go!”

Lise turned to find out what had disturbed her spiritual connection.

“Why do you hate us so much?!” Yusei demanded of someone Lise couldn’t see. She could see that he was chained to stone columns, and that his cheek was bleeding.

Without thinking, Lise bolted. She raced for the vision as fast as she could, back down the aurora borealis.

Behind her, Lise’s spiritual self vanished. The aurora borealis swiftly followed. Then there was nothing keeping Lise up in space. She screamed as she fell back to Earth.

“I—I have to go!” Lise popped up to her feet the second her vision broke. “Yusei is in trouble!”

“Stop!” Master Terra commanded before Lise could take another step off the hill. “By choosing your attachment you’ve locked your last chi path! Without it, you won’t be able to connect with the Crimson Dragon or go into the Eye of the Dragon at all!”

Lise swallowed. Then she kept running.

She skidded into her bedroom and snatched her phone. She vaguely recalled that Japan was 14 hours ahead of Peru, but Lise hoped that meant he was just getting up.

He picked up on the second attempt and Lise breathed for a half a second.

“Hello?” A tentative voice that was certainly not Yusei’s responded.

“Who are you?” Lise demanded, then she shook herself back to her senses. “Never mind, you’re not important. Where is Yusei? Is he okay? Has something happened to him?”

“Um…it’s for you…” Lise heard, and then—

“Lise?”

“Yusei!” Lise almost burst into tears she was so relieved. “Are you okay? Nothing’s happened, right?”

“Like what? You sound like you expected to hear I was dead,” Yusei said. It sounded like he had sat down to talk. “What’s got you so rattled?”

Lise ran a tired hand through her hair. “Training. I—I had these visions that you were… Being held somewhere, and you were yelling at someone to let you go, but I couldn’t see who you were talking to. I was worried…”

“Hey, I’m okay. I’m a bit tired, but otherwise I’m fine. I promise. Maybe this vision wasn’t meant to be? I mean half of Fish’s didn’t turn out to be true,” Yusei said.

“Yeah, yeah, you’re right. I’m sorry to call you like this. I just… it’s been a long day,” Lise sighed.
“For me too,” Yusei sighed in the same way. “I’m so glad you’re coming home soon. I can’t wait.”

“Me too. There’s so much I want to tell you.”

“You can’t tell me right now?”

Lise considered it. “I want to tell you in person. Lots of my news is more along the lines of face to face stuff.”

“Oh, I get it. See you soon?”

“Yeah, I love you.”

“I love you too, Lise. Bye.”

“Bye.”

Lise hung up, somehow feeling worse than when she’d called.

///

“You missed?!” The white clad woman screeched. She punched a stone pillar, and it crumbled to the ground. “How could you miss and fail to bring her in?! After we had the Crimson Dragon it would have been simple to use her as bait for the others!”

“M-M-My lady, she was rescued by the hermit who lives on the outskirts of the Nazca Lines with his siblings. W-W-We did our b-best!”

“No, you got sloppy because you were afraid to kill her!” The woman turned to her similarly white clad followers. “This time we all man the airport. Whichever comes first, the boy or the girl, we take them as bait for the others. I’ll be there myself to ensure there are no mistakes. No exceptions.”

“Yes, my lady,” was the chorus as their leader stormed off to make preparations.

“The Signers will never humiliate us again.”
“We are beginning our decent at the Lima airport in Peru. Please make sure you have all your personal items as returning lost items is difficult. Remember to set your watches back by 14 hours, since Peru is 14 hours behind Japan. We hope you had an excellent flight and we hope to see you again.”

Yusei yawned and stretched as much as he could in his cramped seat. He reached over and shook Leo and Luna. “Come on guys, time to get up.”

“Are we there yet?” Leo murmured sleepily. He rubbed his eye and yawned.

“Yeah,” Yusei smiled at the drowsy twins. The pair were pretty cute.

Crow and Bruno were up across the aisle. They were playing rock-paper-scissors to see who would wake up Jack, miss beauty sleep. He’d brought headphones, a mask, and a large stuffed teddy bear for the plane ride. Neither Bruno or Crow fancied being the target of Jack’s wrath.

Akiza and Carly were zipping up all their things.

“You know the plan, right?”

“Yeah!” Leo raised his hand like he was back at Duel Academy. “We go and grab our luggage and then go out front to wait for Lise’s friend Sasha to pick us up! Then we surprise her at the temple!”

“Because we won’t be able to see the temple,” Luna added.

“You’ll be making the call for Sasha to pick us up then?” Carly poked her head into the aisle. Her spectacled gaze fell on Yusei. “Do they even have a phone there?”

“Sasha has one that they all share. It’s a landline.”

“Ew, that’s old school,” Jack, finally awake, recoiled in horror. He shoved his mask, headphones, and teddy bear into his carry on.

“We don’t want to tip Lise off that we’re here, so I’m not complaining.”

The plane reconnected with the Earth and came to a slow stop. In no time, the gang was out the doors and looking for baggage claim.

Yusei went up to the large glass front doors of the airport and pulled out his phone. Baggage claim was all the way at the other end of the airport, but Yusei could see Akiza’s unmistakable red hair even from this distance. Plus, their group wasn’t exactly the usual crowd of people.

He pressed the number Sasha had given him that he’d saved into his phone. Voicemail. Yusei hung up and tried again. By the fourth try, Yusei was about ready to give up, but he pressed call one last time.

“Hello,” Sasha’s nearly monotone voice crackled slightly but distinctly. “Need a lift?”

“You bet. How soon can you get here?”

“Maybe a half hour. How many people?”
“Uh…” Yusei turned back to his friends manning the baggage claim. He was surprised to find none of them. How had they all vanished so quickly? He couldn’t spot Akiza’s red hair, or Jack’s blond hair anywhere to distinctly mark his group of friends. Even Bruno was nowhere to be found. “Well, I thought there were eight of us, but…”

“Whataya mean ‘were’?” Sasha’s tone suddenly turned sharp.

“They were here a second ago,” Yusei said. He turned around in time to see a woman with white hair thrusting a small, white cloth at his face. “Whoa!” Yusei sidestepped her, dropping his phone, and putting his hands up defensively. “Please tell me you didn’t just try to chloroform me.”

“This one’s smarter than he looks,” the woman smirked. “And exactly like your description.”

Another person grabbed Yusei from behind and slapped an identical cloth to his nose and mouth. Yusei struggled, but he wasn’t making any progress while his breath was held.

“Everyone needs to breathe, child,” the white-clad woman sneered. She used her index finger to force Yusei to look up at her by his chin. “But soon you’ll be begging me to take your last breath.”

Yusei wanted to make a sarcastic response, but the fog in his brain was too heavy. His head hit the cold, airport floor of Lima, Peru, and then everything went dark.

///

“Ugh,” Lise groaned and fell back onto the sandy track.

“I win again!” Jose grinned widely and did a victory twirl.

Jarra and Garrett were untangling themselves from Jarra’s cables, and Garrett’s weapons. Somehow the wooden spikes of Garrett’s mace had interlaced themselves with Jarra’s purple dreadlocks. Even stranger was how Jarra’s cables had managed to tie Garrett’s shoulder to his ankle. Clearly the two of them had toppled over in a collision.

“How…do you…run…so fast?” Lise wheezed from her sand pile.

Jose winked. “I’ve always been fast. Back home, I won all the races between the neighborhood kids. The called me the Flash!”

“No they didn’t,” Jarra grumbled, joining her friends with Garrett. Both looked worse for the wear.

“Oh, they didn’t,” Jose admitted, scratching at the back of his head. “But they could never catch up with me to get revenge for losing, that’s for sure!”

“Lise!” Sasha yelled as she ran outside of their barracks.

“Oh no,” Lise groaned again, turning her head to watch Sasha run over to them. “I’m too tired to move. No more training for today.”

“Tired after our swordsmanship this morning?” Garrett teased.

Lise stuck out her tongue at him, smiling. “No, I’m tired after trying to wade my way through smoke in a mile-long race.”

Garrett chuckled and Jose grinned. Jarra giggled and held out her hand. Lise accepted it and let her friend pull her to her feet.
“Lise!” Sasha paused to catch her breath, her chest heaving. The others had never known her to be out of breath before.

“Is something wrong, Sasha?” Lise knelt down, her hands outstretched to catch her friend, just in case.

Sasha waved her off. “Your friends are here, but-“

“Wait, what? Whattaya mean?”

“Yusei, Akiza, Jack, and I can’t remember the others, but they’re all here! They’ve been-“

“What’re they doing here? I’m not supposed to leave for another five days!”

“Let me finish!” Sasha snapped. She was so agitated her fingers were shaking.

Lise swallowed and shut up. Something serious had happened.

“Your friends came here to surprise you, I was in on it, and I was going to pick them up for the surprise. Yusei just called, but he dropped the call. I heard him shout and his phone shattering, but I think they’re in trouble! I think – I think the Dragon Clan took them.”

Lise’s eyes widened and her mouth turned dry. “We’re going to go save them. Now.”

“What?”

“But we don’t even know where the Dragon Clan lair is!”

“Master Terra vould never let us charge into battle like zhis!”

“But they’ll all be killed!”

“We can’t just sit here and do nothing!”

“Stop,” Lise got up and waved her hand to get everyone to quiet. “I’m going to go rescue my friends. You can come with me, or stay here. It’s your choice, but I AM leaving with or without you.” She clenched her fists. What she was asking was a death mission. She wouldn’t be surprised or judgmental if anyone wanted to stay.

“Don’t be stupid.”

“Huh?” Lise watched Sasha stand back up.

“Jarra, how soon can you get Fuego ready to go?”

“Five minutes tops!”

“Good, go. Garrett, Jose, feel free to stay. The rest of you, meet back here in five minutes. Grab your gear, and get ready for battle.”

Before Sasha could run off to follow through on her instructions, Lise grabbed her arm. “Thank you, Sasha. I…I appreciate it more than I can say.”

“You would do the same for me. Now go.”

///
“Oh good, you’re up,” Akiza whispered.

Yusei blinked again, to make sure he wasn’t dreaming.

The sunlight filtering down from the hole in the ceiling was hazy as it disrupted that mostly dark cavern. Old stone columns lined the edge of the room. The only doorway was at the opposite end, like an empty archway that was once great. Dust covered anything like an absurd substitute for snow in the sandy desert. Rubble from broken columns was strewn everywhere, some still intact and some joining the dust. People clad in white from head to toe stood at the columns still holding up the earthen ceiling.

“Please tell me we’re not dead because this is a pretty shitty place for heaven or hell,” Yusei said.

Akiza raised an eyebrow at him. As if she were saying ‘you have time to joke right now?’ She adjusted herself so that she could sit forward, and Yusei noticed her hands and feet were bound with strong ropes.

Yusei tried to move and found he was tied in exactly the same way. His gaze adjusted to the partial darkness of the bizarre cavern, Yusei spotted Leo, Luna, Jack, Crow, Carly, and Bruno. All lying near he and Akiza, all bound by their hands and feet.

“I woke up a little while ago,” Akiza said in a low voice. “Those people in white haven’t moved. What do you think they want? Who are they?”

“I have no clue,” Yusei said. “I wish I knew what to do.” He’d never felt so helpless before. Could they try to climb out the hole in the ceiling? No, the white people would stop them, and they wouldn’t get far with their legs tied together.

“Hey, what the?” Crow exclaimed when he tried to move.

“Welcome to the party,” Akiza grumbled as the others also awoke.

She went to calm down the twins, or rather Leo. He was panicking so badly he was hyperventilating. Luna and Akiza did their best to soothe him without the full use of their limbs.

Yusei saw something out of the corner of his eye and turned towards the old archway. One of the white clad people was leaving.

What does that mean?

“I take it this is not the usual greeting in Peru?” Bruno half chuckled, half hiccupped as he sat up.

“Please tell me someone came up with a plan so I don’t have to,” Jack said.

“Great, we’re probably going to die, but at least we can still joke about it,” Carly said, rolling her eyes. Her chin was taut, but her hands were clenched tight around the fabric of her Capri pants.

“Die?!” Leo squeaked.

“We are not going to die,” Luna said firmly. “We’ll find a way out of this. Yusei, can you talk to Lise?”

“My phone broke.”

“Not that way!” Akiza exclaimed. “The other way!”

“Oh, right! I can try,” Yusei said. He pushed himself to his knees and closed his eyes. Inhale. Exhale. Breathe. Think. Reach. Reach for Lise. Lise? Can you h-
Yusei lost his focus when a booming voice echoed across the chamber. “Good morning, children!”
A white clad woman, who also had white hair, stormed in.

This woman was smiling, but the way it pinched her face, it looked like it wasn’t something she regularly did. Her eyes were green, like acid, and they were full of fire and malice. Her hands rested on her hips as she walked forward, but the way they kept twitching towards the handles of the two swords clipped to her belt, she was itching for blood. Blood and battle…and revenge.

“Did she fall into a toxic vat of flour?” Leo whispered.

Jack and Crow almost choked on their laughter. This woman was so intimidating that it was comical for Leo to make such a comment. Leo hadn’t meant anything by it, but laughter was clearly not what this woman wanted to hear.

The white woman clasped her hands behind her back and stared down at her catch. No one spoke.

“So, who can tell me what I want? Who has the answers?”

Shared looks of confusion passed between the Signers and friends.

“I assure you, this can be quick and painless,” the woman said. “My name is Mitka. I am the leader of the Dragon Clan. I was waiting for the chance to meet all of you, so I seized the opportunity. Nice to meet you.” Her smile was as poisonous as her eyes.

Again, Mitka was met with silence.

“Uh,” Luna spoke up tentatively, trying to be brave. “Wh-What do you want?”

“Yes, for asking, dear,” Mitka said. “I want to know the location of Master Terra’s temple. It’s been hidden from me, and I want what it’s existence threatens to be extinguished.”

“We don’t know where it is,” Yusei said immediately. He didn’t want this scary lady’s attention on anyone else. The look in her eyes was dangerous.

“Really?” You don’t know?” Mitka’s lips pursed into a pout. “Well, that’s half true.”

“What?”

“You were here with the girl a month ago, weren’t you? The Dragon Girl?” Mitka turned to one of her white clad followers, instead of Yusei, who nodded fervently. “Oh perfect!” She drew one of her swords, twirled it, walked forward, and sliced through the bonds tying Yusei’s ankles together.

“You can tell us where the temple is!” She snapped her fingers and two white clad goons stepped forward.

They grabbed Yusei’s arms, dragging him up. “On your feet.”

Yusei stumbled towards Mitka. She was looking at him the way Jack looked at a bowl of ramen, and he didn’t like it one bit.

“Tell us where the Temple is.”

“No.”

“Why not?” Mitka pouted.

“Well, A, I don’t know, and B, even if I did I wouldn’t tell you.”
“You have no connection to the temple,” Mitka said. She started circling Yusei. “You’ve been there once, so you can find it again. Please tell us where it is.”

“Not gonna happen.”

“In that case,” Mitka stopped circling Yusei and kicked him back down into the dirt.

“Ow,” Yusei groaned, spitting sand out of his mouth. “If you were just gonna knock me down, why did you bother getting me up?”

“Let’s try this again,” Mitka lowered her knee onto Yusei’s back and stuck her sword into the sand. “Tell us where the temple is, or I’ll start killing your friends.”

Leo and Luna whimpered in fear as Mitka’s followers leveled blades at them. A few more followers pulled back the drawstring of their bows, ready to shoot Jack, Crow and Bruno in an instant. Akiza and Carly were next once the others were gone, and they knew it.


“You won’t kill us. You need us,” Yusei grunted, his eyes watching the blade warily.

“I don’t need all of you. I’m fairly certain there are a couple of you that aren’t Signers. Start talking.”

“What makes you think I’d sell Lise out to you?” Yusei spat back up at Mitka.

“That’s the spirit. Now we’re getting somewhere.”

///

“Okay, we’re all good to go,” Jarra announced, pulling up to the main gates of the temple.

“Is Garrett not coming?” Jose asked as he jumped into the back of Fuego.

“Looks like he isn’t. Let’s go,” Sasha instructed. She slid into the passenger seat and directed Jarra towards the airport.

“Wait!” Garrett came running up to the car. Every weapon he ever owned was strapped to his being.

“Garrett?” Lise stood in surprise.

“I zhink zhis is crazy, and ve’re breaking a dozen rules, and ve’ll probably all die-“

“So light and cheery with you,” Jose rolled his eyes.

Garrett glared at Jose briefly, but continued. “But ve’re friends. Vhat kind of friend vould I be if I didn’t help zhem when zhey needed me?”

“Oh Garrett, you do have a heart!” Lise swept Garret up into a bone crunching hug.

“Yes, yes, now let’s go before your friends are killed!”

“Right, right!”

Jarra took off at full speed towards the desert. Sand kicked up behind them like waves in the ocean.
“I thought we were going to the airport to see if we could find any clues!” Lise shouted over the engine.

“No point!” Jarra shouted back. “We’re going to find their hideout and crack it open like an egg!”

“How are you going to do that? Your two temples haven’t been able to find each other for years!”

“We were kind of hoping you could do that part for us,” Jose said.

“What?”

“You’ve got some kind of link with that edgy boy right?” Sasha said.

“Edgy? Wha- Oh, you mean Yusei! Yes! The empathy link! But it isn’t completed! I don’t know if it’ll work!”

“Remember what Master Terra taught us!”

“Don’t bother me while I’m drinking tea?!”

“Well, yes, but that’s not what Garrett’s talking about,” Jarra said. “Master Terra taught us everything is connected. You might think the bond you have with Yusei and your friends is weak, but it’s strong. You have to believe that.”

“Okay, but-“

“Here,” Jarra pulled over on the flattest piece of desert she could find. There was zero differences in the desert in every single direction.

“Come with me, Lise,” Sasha unbuckled her seat belt and got out of the car.

“Um…” Lise did as she was told. She bit her lip and tugged on her hair. “I haven’t done this kind of thing for over a year. I haven’t needed to!”

“You can do this. Remember Lise,” Sasha sat her friend down. She put her hands on Lise’s shoulders and looked into her eyes. “Everything is connected.”

“Everything is connected,” Lise said. She took a stuttering breath. “Everything is connected.”

Sasha backed away and stood by the car. She and the others watched silently. Well, mostly.

“Do you think she can do this?” Jose whispered to them.

Garret shrugged. Both Jarra and Sasha elbowed Jose hard in the ribs.

“Shut up.”

“Everything is connected,” Lise breathed, closing her eyes. She undid her crossed legs, her hand reaching for the desert. “Everything is connected…” Lise took one last breath and pressed her hand to the sand.

Gravity instantly doubled the second Lise’s eyes snapped open. Red light emanated from her body. It crisscrossed all over her limbs, and even her eyes glowed. From her palm, a line of red began stretching across the desert. Lise’s line of vision followed its progress, drawn by Yusei’s presence, and their connection through the empathy link. The Signer link strengthened the power too.
Lise was suddenly thrust into a cavern beneath the monotonous sandy landscape. People wearing white clothes were brandishing weapons at her friends. Even Carly and some... blue haired guy she’d never met were there. They were all bound hand and feet, but Yusei was missing. Lise’s presence moved over them lightning fast.

Finally she found him. He was a short distance away, being threatened by an extremely mentally unstable woman wielding a sword.

“Yusei!” Lise removed her hand from the ground. She ran over to Fuego and her friends. “They’re all being tortured! We have to go now!”

“You go on ahead! You’re the fastest, so we’ll catch up. Which way do we go?” Sasha said.

“That way, about a mile or so,” Lise pointed northeast. “It’s underground, but there’s a hole in the ceiling. You’ll know it when you see it.”

“Great, now go!” Jarra started up the car again.

“Will you guys be able to-“

“GO!”

“Right, right!” Lise’s feet parted company with the Earth and she sped off for the secret temple like a bullet.

///

Luna looked down and gasped. Red light poured into the chamber from her arm. “It’s glowing!”

Suddenly Jack, Crow, and Akiza’s markings were alight too.

“Interesting,” Mitka’s creepy grin returned. She watched Yusei’s arm glow with hungry eyes. She took some of the blood from the cut she had inflicted on Yusei’s cheek upon her fingers and licked off the blood. “Looks like I don’t need you anymore, pretty boy.”

“What?” Yusei had felt his mark the second Lise’s presence had touched it. Normally, its glow would have comforted him, but today he was filled with panic.

“It looks like your little girlfriend is coming here! Saves me the trouble of having to hunt her down,” Mitka smiled, dragging her blade across Yusei’s exposed cheek again, and deepening the cut. “I wonder what our little Dragon Girl’s reaction will be if she finds you without a head? I mean, she’s the only person we need alive for the ritual to work, and it’ll be so much easier to get her to do what we want if she’s distressed. Up for a little out of body experience?”

“Not particularly!”

“No!”

“Stop!”

“You can’t kill him!”

“Silence them!”

Yusei watched in horror as his friends were either kicked or hit into silence. Luna and Leo had started crying. Carly had looked away in preparation, and Jack had done his best to comfort her...
with his tied arms. Crow, Akiza, and Bruno were too shocked to look away.

Mitka easily jumped off of Yusei’s back. She licked her blade and positioned herself, executioner style, by Yusei’s throat. “I enjoyed our time together, but you’ve got to go.”

Yusei squeezed his eyes closed. He didn’t want to see that terrifying blade again. He didn’t want to see his friends’ faces. He didn’t want to see anything before he died.

“Good night, pretty boy.”

He heard the swish of the sword and then-

Yusei jolted, startled that he had heard the clinging sound of metal on metal, instead of his own demise. He opened his eyes to find Mitka’s blade about an inch from his nose.

“Sorry I’m late,” a woman’s voice broke the silence. “I seem to have lost my invitation to this little party.”

Yusei sat up in time to watch a new woman join the fray, jumping down to the dusty temple floor.

Every eye in the room was drawn to her, Signer, non-Signer, and enemy. She was unmistakably Lise, but she looked different too. Maybe it was the slightly shorter hair. Maybe it was the cloth-wrapped arms. Maybe it was the orange tank top, loose brown pants, and black boots. Maybe it was the weapons strapped to her belts. Maybe it was the goggles she had swapped out for her usual headband. Maybe it was the casual way she picked her teeth with a sharp sai. Either way, Lise seemed to be an entirely different person compared to the last time the team had seen her.

“By the way, you should get a new guard,” Lise was saying as she casually waded through the crowd to her friends. “This one was way too easy to knock out.”

Mitka was seething, grinding her teeth together so hard she actually made a woodchopper sound. “You won’t be so calm when we kill all of you. A mere month is not enough time training to defeat us all.”

Lise’s eyes narrowed, but that was the only indication she gave that showed Mitka’s words registered. “So you sent the letter?” She adjusted her grip on the sai and used it to slice through the ropes binding Yusei’s wrists. Her foot lightly nudged the guard of Mitka’s fallen sword, and she tossed the weapon back to its owner.

“I did,” Mitka smirked for a brief moment, but her expression returned to a fierce snarl. “But we were unable to retrieve you or pretty boy there before you found Terra’s temple.” She directed a pointed glare at some of her followers who avoided her gaze and fidgeted restlessly.

Lise let Mitka continue talking, and began whispering to Yusei when he rose to his feet, massaging his chafed wrists. “I have a plan.” She handed Yusei the sai. “Free the others and stay out of the way for now.”

“What’re you going to do?” Yusei whispered back.

He caught the edges of Lise’s lips turning upward. “You’ll see.”

Lise advanced forward, but Yusei stayed where he was. He wanted to make sure Lise would be okay before he did anything.

“But I thank you for saving us the trouble of kidnapping you,” Mitka knelt and picked up her
sword. Her acid green eyes never wavered from Lise. They had a new kind of hunger to them.
“Now we can kill the Crimson Dragon together.”

“Cute.” Lise blinked. She stopped at the center of the temple.

“Funny,” Mitka cocked her head to the side. “You don’t seem frightened at the prospect of being killed.”

“Oh, I’m not afraid of you,” Lise shrugged and folded her arms. “I’m afraid I’ll die. I’m afraid my friends will die. I’m afraid I won’t be enough to protect them.” She paused and took a deep breath, lowering her arms. “But I won’t get anything done if I’m overcome with fear.” She glanced at the dragon clan members surrounding her. “But I’d say you’re more afraid than I am.”

“Let’s test that theory. Grab her, now!” Mitka ordered.

About a quarter of Mitka’s followers did as they were told. The rest stood back from those surging towards Lise.

She bent her knees and flipped upwards above their heads. Seconds later Lise’s fist came crashing down into the ground. Dragon clan members went flying backwards in all directions, pushed backwards by the whirlpooling circle of damage Lise had created.

Lise was rolling out of harm’s way, but the more skilled clan members were already recovering. Blades and arrows came whistling Lise’s way. She avoided them gracefully, but many still managed to nick her, however, not enough to slow her down.

Ropes with round weights, bolas, were thrown at her too. Lise dodged the first one by sliding behind a half destroyed column, but the second one wrapped around Lise’s hips, pinning her wrists to her sides.

Instead of getting frustrated, she grinned at the oncoming rocks thrown at her. Lise tightened her gut, stepped forward, and roundhouse kicked the first small boulder out of the way. She spun with the momentum of her kick and backheel kicked the second small boulder.

“You’ll have to try harder,” Lise said, flexing her arms and breaking the bonds of the bolas.

Yusei cracked a smile and ran over to start sawing through Leo’s bindings.

“Who is that?” Bruno stared, open-mouthed, at Lise.

Yusei grinned with pride as he freed Luna next. “My girlfriend.”

“How’s this?” One of the members advanced on Lise, fists flying. More members soon joined the first, overwhelming Lise with numbers.

Before she could break free, three clan members sent Lise flying with their coordinated chi punches. She slammed hard into the wall, making a Lise-sized crater in the stone.

“Okay, that’s better,” Lise admitted in a gruff voice. She winced and began forcibly extracting herself from the wall.

Suddenly she had to jerk her head to the side. Two seconds later, three knives had embedded themselves in the stone. “Wow,” Lise joked, ignoring her now bleeding cheek, shoulder, and torso. “Thanks for the haircut guys, didn’t need it, but thanks.”
Lise leapt off the wall, a dangerous panther-like figure in the spotty light of the temple, and seized the shoulders of the nearest clan member halfway through her descent. She was still falling, meaning gravity was on her side. Lise flipped in midair, pulling the unfortunate clan member she had snagged with her, and threw him once she’d landed at his comrades like a bowling ball.

One guy aimed a punch for Lise’s stomach, but she maneuvered, snake-like around his punch, and flipped them both over with their arms linked. He ended up in the heap of fallen clan members. Lise landed safely, clear of the pile of tangled limbs.

“I call that a spare,” Lise said, dusting her hands off. “Next time, I’ll go for the strike.”

Another group tried to pursue Lise. She turned tail and headed for one of the columns. She jumped from one to the other in a perfect wall jump, and flipped off the second column into clear space. The clan members tried to mimic Lise’s tactic with little success.

Finding herself with a little time to kill, Lise glanced up at the hole in the ceiling.

“Leo, no!” Luna’s voice carried out uselessly, echoing in the temple.

Leo was racing out amidst the clan members. His expression was gleeful, eager, ignorant of the danger he was in. The boy paused and looked on in fear at the clan member who had raised his sword to slice off Leo’s head.

There was no time to think. Lise just moved.

All of a sudden, Lise was pulling Leo out of the way. Her body acted as his shield, the sword swiping across Lise’s back like a bladed battering ram. It took everything she had not to scream, but blood trickled down her chin, bubbling out from her lips.

Yusei fell to his knees. The shared pain from Lise’s wound ripped through him.

“The Dragon Girl isn’t so indestructible after all.” The boy smirked, admiring the blood on his sword.

Leo looked at Lise in horror. She still hadn’t moved since the two of them had landed. “L-Lise, are you okay?! I d-didn’t mean to! I wanted to help! I-”

“I know,” Lise grimaced, opening one eye. “But I’ve got a plan. I’ll be fine. Just sit tight with the others for now, okay?”

“O-Okay.” Leo got up, and raced back over to the Signers.

His sister scooped him up in a hug. “Idiot, you almost died.”

“Should we help her?” Akiza made a motion as if she were trying to draw from her duel disk, and frowned deeply when she remembered she had nothing to activate her psychic dueling powers.

“No, stay there,” Lise grunted. She pushed herself up to her knee. “I promise we’ll all be okay.”

“Oh come now, Dragon Girl.” A woman wielding sharp claws and spiked boots sidled up to the boy who had tried to behead Leo. “We all know that’s a lie. “You’ll all be dead soon.”

“Well, you’re all so dramatic,” Lise leapt to her feet, and spat blood on the dusty ground. “It’s gonna be fun to kick your asses.”

“Yah!” The boy charged at Lise, aiming a sidekick at her stomach.
She raised her arms in a guard, but she was still pushed backwards from the force of the blow. Right into the clutches of the clawed woman. Lise delivered a powerful punch and right hook to her before she could slice Lise into finely diced cubes. The boy front kicked then roundhouse kicked, neither kicked, but both combatants’ back heel kicks canceled each other out.

Unfortunately Lise was still outnumbered. Both the boy and the woman sidekicked Lise, this time connecting. She fell backwards, rolled to her feet, and pushed off the ground with an added dose of chi blast. Another chi punch sent the boy flying off, dropping his weapons.

The clawed woman advanced, but Lise was ready. She reached for her belt and threw her metal fans into the air. Lise caught them deftly, striking a protective stance. The sound of metal on metal clanged throughout the chamber when Lise’s fans collided with the woman’s claws. She kicked the woman’s next attack out of the way, folded her fans, and pounded two punches into the woman’s chest and stomach. Lise got her again with a left hook, an axe kick pushed her arms downward, then a chi uppercut sent the woman straight upward. “Heh…Yeh!” One last chi punch and the woman smashed through a column like an irregularly shaped wrecking ball.

“June!” The boy watched the woman sail past him. He snarled in fury at Lise and launched himself at her. He roundhouse kicked for Lise’s head, but she ducked and twirled, aiming a trip kick for the boy’s legs. He flipped backwards to avoid the attack. Lise tried a front kick, but the boy suddenly turned into a Beyblade.

His kicks came whirling so fast Lise barely had time to raise her fans in defense. The boy managed to get a hit with a reverse hook back heel kick that knocked Lise to the ground.

Lise rolled backwards, ignoring the stinging pain in her back, and got back up to her feet. *Hmm. Time for a different approach.*

The boy kept coming, and instead of facing him head on, Lise slowly backed away from his flurry of kicks. Front kick, roundhouse, jump front, reverse back heel, crescent kick, front kick, roundhouse-

Lise spun into a duck underneath the roundhouse kick, elbowing the boy in the chest. He stumbled off balance, allowing Lise to grab his arm. She swung him around, jumped into a spin, and executed a perfect roundhouse kick into the boy’s face. He was out cold.

“You will pay dearly for that!” Mitka screeched. She emerged from the shadows, her clothes flapping bat-like in her wake. “That was my son!”

“Well, I’d say I was sorry, but then I’d be lying,” Lise said.

“RAH!” Mitka roared as she raced for Lise with her more ardent followers in tow.

With her fans folded in her hands, Lise sidestepped Mitka’s swords and temple punched her. She twirled to her left, unfurled her fans to block a sword strike, and blocked another blade aiming for her collarbone.

Surrounded by men and women, Lise was in another sticky situation. She threw her fans into the air and pounded the ground again, scattering the nearest clan members.

Two of them struck for Lise simultaneously. She deflected their attacks with a flowing lotus-like move with her open fans that turned into a cartwheel to get out of the way.

Before the nearest girl could attack, Lise flipped backwards, pounded her feet into the girl’s head, then the ground, and backflipped off of her to join the Signers.
Suddenly a decent sized explosion rocked the temple. The structure shuddered dangerously, but the gaping hole in the roof was the only damage sustained.

Four people swooped in from the hole in the ceiling.

One girl had reddish brown hair. She wore steampunk style gloves over her hands that crackled with electricity. Her clothes were black, even her shoes, but her eyes were a warm brown.

The other girl had black and purple dreadlocks. Her dark, beautiful skin caught what little sunlight that shined down into the dusty temple. Her green eyes were bright, but ready for battle, which was a stark contrast from her white shirt that clearly depicted the word ‘love.’ As was the metallic backpack and gauntlets strapped to her person.

One boy had dark hair, eyes, and stubble upon his chin, but a bright disposition. His grin was wide as he landed and proclaimed “The cavalry’s here!” in a singsongy voice. Large pods lined the boy’s belt, as well as two loops that wrapped around his shoulders and torso. He tossed one gleefully in his palm.

The second boy had sandy hair the color of honey, and hazel eyes. His skin was so light it was almost blinding in the darkness. Every weapon known to man was strapped to his being, explaining the necessity for his tight clothing.

“Took you long enough,” Lise said, but she was grinning with relief.

“Took you long enough,” Lise said, but she was grinning with relief.

“Lise didn’t tell us she was friends with the power rangers,” Leo said.

“Oh my god, Leo, really?” Luna complained, rolling her eyes at her brother in exasperation.
“All right! We’re here and ready for some action!” Garrett grinned widely and drew a sword and knife from his belt.

“Wait a minute!” Eyes wide and gasping, Mitka pointed wildly at Lise. “You-You were just stalling!”

“Duh,” Lise smirked, raising her fists. “I’m not stupid enough to take you all on by myself.”

“Forget the ritual! Kill them! Kill them all!” Mitka screeched, her fury consuming her.

José leapt into action against the wave of attackers hurtling at the chi walkers, signers, and friends. He detached one of the bomb belts he had strapped to himself, and flung the activated bombs at their opponents.

Unfortunately, Mitka was ready. She and her closest followers sent a barrage of chi attacks at the bombs that detached them from each other and sent the active explosives hurtling back at their owner.

The gang glared at José. He shrugged helplessly. “Okay, so maybe it wasn’t a good idea to throw an entire belt of bombs at them.”

“Gee, ya think?” Lise growled.

“We’ve got this covered,” Sasha told her teammates. “Bomber, Cables: divide and conquer. Powerhouse: shields up. Stinger, deploy!”

At Sasha’s command, the team split up. José and Jarra charged into battle in the crowd opposing them. Lise whirled and threw up a wall of energy hexagons to protect her friends from attacks.

Garrett and Sasha stepped forward. Garrett lowered his stance, and Sasha placed her hand on his shoulder. Instantly, a gray circle glowed beneath their feet, infusing Garrett and his blades with the gray light. Garrett slashed his blades across his body, spinning with their momentum, and sending gray lines of light from his sword and knife that collided with José’s bombs in midair and exploded on impact.

“Nice work! Now go; Weaponizer! Powerhouse, maintain position. Cables with me on point!”

Jarra and Sasha pushed forward into the crowd. Jarra tied up people in single shots, and Sasha used her chi to shock people into passing out with one touch.

Garrett and José worked as a team to maintain the signers and chi walkers’ distance from the clan. José used special food bombs like his sticky rice explosives to nonlethally incapacitate his attackers. Garrett clashed, weapon against weapon, disarming adversaries quickly.

One of them managed to slip past Garrett’s grip and fling his knife into the air. More armed enemies swarmed Garrett before he could attempt to retrieve it.

“I got it!” José declared, running straight for the knife’s path. He jumped from the ground, onto one of the clan member’s head, and sprung into the air. He snatched Garrett’s knife in midair by his teeth. “Catch!” José threw the knife back to his friend as he fell.
Garrett caught the knife deftly and smirked at his opponents. “Now, where were we?”

“Sasha!” Lise cried out. “They’re breaking through!” She was managing to keep the shields up with one hand, but had to fend off a few clan members with her other hand. Her concentration was beginning to shake. Nevertheless, she had no problem punching a decent sized boulder into pieces without even looking at it.

Sasha glanced back at the situation to see how best to help. “Lise, above you!”

A colossally large, and muscular woman towered over Lise. She raised her foot for an axe kick.

“Oh shit,” Lise swore, looking resigned as she watched the giant woman’s foot come down. Her large shield dissolved in favor of a smaller disc-shaped shield the size of her attacker’s shoe.

She brought her foot crunching back down, pounding Lise into the earth. The ground crumbled underneath her.

“Get ‘er off!” Lise screamed. Her back was aching painfully. Yusei felt the pain too through the empathy link.

“Whip it! Help Lise out! We want her awake if we’re gonna make it out of here alive!” Sasha ordered.

“Got it!” Jarra flung herself and Jose at the giant woman, slingshot style, from between two columns.

Jarra landed on the woman’s shoulders, knocking her off balance. Lise took her chance and rolled out of the line of fire. Jose landed beside Lise, and tossed a sticky rice bomb at the giant’s feet.

The woman couldn’t take another step, but that didn’t stop her. She knocked Jose off his feet, and Lise narrowly avoided the same fate by ducking.

With both hands, the giant woman enclosed Jarra in them. “You’re not so annoying now, little mosquito,” the woman smirked.

“Hate to break it to you, but this ‘mosquito’ is stronger than she looks!” Jarra shouted, kicking the giant in the chest.

Jarra was instantly released. She landed and backflipped out of harm’s way. She joined Lise and Jose where they were regrouping.

“Thanks,” Lise smiled.

“Don’t thank us just yet,” Jarra said gravely, standing at the ready.

The colossal woman was standing up.

“Shit! What’s it take to make this dude stay down?” Jose complained. He pulled two more bombs from his belt.

“You’ll find out later. Weaponizer regroup! Powertrip! Go!” Sasha called out, racing up to them.

“But—“

“I will protect your friends,” Sasha’s voice was cold, but not lacking in compassion. “Go.”
Lise nodded, and charged for the colossal woman. She jumped over the crater her body had made earlier and landed right at the giant woman’s feet. She dodged a punch by rising into the air. Jarra shot a cable at Lise, who caught it, and ensnared the giant’s fist. Lise ran up her large arm, grabbing Jarra’s second cable, and jumped down behind the giant. She wrapped the second cable around the giant’s foot, rose into the air, and pulled.

Together, the two girls yanked on both cables. Lise pulled from the air, and Jarra from the earth. The giant woman started to slowly go down, with her free fist she braced herself against the ground.

Before Lise and Jarra could tell what was going on, the giant had pushed herself backward, dragging Lise and Jarra with her.

“Whoa!” both girls exclaimed.

Lise was unlucky to be the closer of the two. The next punch sent her flying across the cavern like a jet.

“Lise!” Jarra exclaimed. She shot another cable at her friend. “Catch!”

Lise flipped around and grabbed Jarra’s cable. She then used the momentum to push herself in an arc, using her energy powers as a booster.

“Brilliant!” Sasha grinned as she took down a boy with a well placed jab. “Livewire!”

“HAH!” Jarra cried, swinging her cable around.

“Bomber, now!” Sasha yelled.

“You got it!” Jose flipped across the battlefield, and tossed three more sticky rice bombs at the giantess’s feet.

Lise was ready for the attack. Especially since her large opponent couldn’t move. “YAH!” Lise roared, pounding her fist into the giant woman’s face.

She skidded backwards like a car tire, destroying another column as she went. The pieces rained down on top of the fallen giant. She was still alive, but she was not getting up again.

“That’s how it’s done!” Jarra grinned.

“Nice work!” Lise agreed, slapping a high five with her.

“Watch out!” Jarra shoved Lise out of the way. Both of them narrowly avoided being shish-kabobbed.

“None of you are getting out of here alive!” Mitka screeched. She lunged for Lise, thrusting with her two swords.

Lise grabbed her fans from her belt, and blocked Mitka’s assault. Her back skidded across the ground again, but she bit her lip to distract her from the pain. “No one is going to die today!” Lise promised through her clenched teeth. She brought her feet up and kicked Mitka in the stomach.

“Cables, help me out!” Sasha ordered. “Arsenal, Powerhouse; Dragon Claw!”

Garrett intercepted Mitka’s blades with two of his own. “Okay Lise, just like ve practiced. Ve can do zhis! Forty-seven seconds, yes?”
“Right! That’s all I need!”

“Let’s do zhis,” Garrett spun his blades and advanced on Mitka.

“Get out of my way!” She pointed her sword at Garrett’s chest. “I must slay the Crimson Dragon!”

“I vill. If you can beat me,” Garrett said.

Mitka snarled and engaged Garrett in a loud sword battle like a vicious tiger. Their constantly clashing blades filled the chamber with echoes of steel against steel.

“All right,” Lise took a deep breath and unfurled her fans. As she spoke, her movements became more fluid; like she was blurring the lines between her soul and the soul of the dragon within herself.

    Fire of my heart
    Give me your power

Lise’s movements were swift and strong. Another deep breath and she was free and light.

    Air of my life
    Courage to be free

Lise was suddenly slow, deliberate and precise in the next breath.

    Water of my soul
    The strength to change

Now Lise’s stance was widest, firmly rooted in power.

    Earth of my home
    Protection over all lives

Lise spun to unite her four summons. Her body a unifying point for all.

    That which was one
    Will now become two

    My energy
    I give
    Unto you

    Your energy
    I gratefully
    Accept

    Now as two
In one
Nothing of
Darkness or
Death
Can stand against us!

Finished with her chant, Lise began to glow with steady, red light. Underneath her lay a spiraling circle of red light patterns, identical to the purple one her father had meant to capture her in so long ago. “Garrett, I’m ready!”

“Right!”

Mitka saw her chance and jumped for it. “Die, dragon girl!”

“Not today!” Garrett grabbed two knives from his belt and sank them into Mitka’s long, white robes and the ground.

“What?” Mitka tugged at the restraints, but she was stuck fast. She wouldn’t be able to escape quickly enough.

Lise stepped forward, her red circle following along with her, into a spin, then a jump that utilized the momentum and power she’d gained from her movements. She landed, bringing her fans across her body, and aimed them straight at Mitka. “Heh…HUH!” A huge beam of energy blasted full force into Mitka. Luckily, Garrett jumped out of the way just in time. Mitka crumpled like a rag doll into the wall.

The temple became deathly quiet. More rock tumbled to the ground while Mitka shifted back to her feet. “I want them dead, NOW!” Mitka shrieked. “Starting with her!” She pointed crazily at Lise.

The dragon clan kicked it into overdrive. They might have been outmatched, but the more zealously aggressive were realizing their true advantage was numbers. In no time, the chi walkers and Signers were backed into a corner.

“Zhere’s no back door here!” Garrett shouted.

“Running out of options here, Sasha!” Jarra repeated. She didn’t have any cables left.

“J-Just gimme a minute to think!” Sasha stammered, looking frantically in all directions.

“Sasha?” Lise said warningly.

“Okay,” Sasha responded after one more scan of their surroundings. “I think I have a plan. José, use whatever you have left to widen the hole in the ceiling! Lise, glow it up!”

“Ew, did those words really come out of your mouth?” Lise’s lip curled in disgust. “You can’t be serious.”

“I am! Do it!”

“But it’s never worked before!” Lise insisted.

“Then make it work! We’ll cover you!” Sasha didn’t wait for a retort. She, Jarra, and José leapt
into the front lines, leaving Lise with little choice.

“Okay, okay,” Lise murmured, glancing at all her friends; those in battle and those behind her.

The voice of the Crimson Dragon had started to call her. Let go… Let go…

“Here goes,” Lise said quietly. Lise sat down with her back to her friends, and closed her eyes. She inhaled and exhaled deeply.

Let go. It isn’t forever.

Lise opened her mind’s eyes. Her bare feet rested on a path of red aurora borealis. She was dressed in comfortable jeans and a t-shirt. The Earth slowly rotated beneath her pathway. Stars twinkled for vast numbers of lightyears. Despite the pressing darkness and cold of space, Lise was warmer than she’d ever felt. At the end of the aurora borealis lay an ethereal version of herself, bonded with the Crimson Dragon.

Lise hesitated, biting her lip, and reaching for her hair. She turned to look behind her. As she deliberated, the stars turned into people.


Lise wiped away tears she didn’t even know were falling until they dropped to her chest.

“You’ve grown so much,” Martha pulled Lise into a hug. “We miss you. We’ve been disconnected for too long.”

“But to do this, I have to let go!”

Mayoko clasped her daughter’s hand. “It isn’t forever. You can let us go for this power. You are not letting go of us forever. You can never truly let go of this much love.”

Lise laughed and allowed Roman to dry her tears. “We’ll always be with you.”

Mayoko embraced her daughter next. “Be strong, my little Lizzie.” She squeezed once and then let go.

Everyone rushed for Lise at once, vanishing once their arms wrapped around her.

Lise opened her eyes to find herself alone. She steeled herself, turned around, and ran across her pathway. Her bare feet slapped the surface, getting louder and louder, like the beats of a drum, the harder she ran.

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Red light began to wash over Lise’s body. She opened her eyes, and rose to her feet like a graceful summer breeze. Lise strode forward, her peaceful grin turning into a confident smile.

“All right! It’s working!” Jarra grinned.

“Give her space!” Sasha shouting, drawing everyone else back so Lise continued on alone.

Lise’s entire body had been turned red with energy. She parted the crowd of dragon clan members as if she were the Red Sea in human form. She smacked her fist into her palm.
We are one. Our bond has never been stronger.

I can feel it! But we don’t have much time; we have to finish this quickly. Let’s kick some ass!

I could not agree with you more!

Jose’s bombs detonated at precisely the right moment. Clan members scattered to avoid getting crushed by falling debris. The temple was in the midst of collapsing. There wasn’t enough structural support left to sustain it much longer.

“Kill her!” Mitka screamed, but her words were lost in the ruckus.

Lise bent low and raised her arms with deliberate tension. Four enormous energy boulders appeared, circling their creator. She spun in place, directing her arms in similar motions, and thrust them outward. The energy boulders intercepted the closest clan members, plowing them out of the way.

Lise turned to her left, pulling her arms with her in fluid, sweeping patterns. She conjured a curved wall of energy nearly the same height as the temple. The energy wall shoveled up clan members as it moved. Lise spun back to the left, mimicking the same pattern, and creating a second energy wall. When the two curved walls had rounded up every single clan member, Lise brought her hands together to form a bubble, and twisted her hands to seal them in.

She moved forward, steadily raising her hands as she did to direct the bubble up and out through the hole in the ceiling.

Once she was certain the clan members were at a safe distance, Lise raised her hand and brought her hands down swiftly. The energy bubble dissolved.

Lise rose into the air and spread her arms. Beneath the feet of her friends, appeared a long, red pathway of energy. Lise directed the head towards the hole without hitting any rubble. Underneath the hole, the pathway spiraled like a corkscrew to avoid any mishaps involving falling.

Jose was right behind Lise when the pathway hit the lip of the hole. He helped pull people out of the temple as they came up, while Lise constantly fed the pathway upwards. She didn’t stop until the last person, Jarra, made it out.

Her task completed, Lise raised herself back to a standing position. She took a deep breath, and lowered her hands. All the red energy faded away, and Lise’s eyes became blue once more. She sank to her knees, exhausted.

Jose, the team’s medic, bent to help Lise. “Damn, you messed yourself up really badly this time,” he said. He began to pull back the tattered edges of Lise’s tank top to get at the long cut on her back. “The bleeding’s stopped,” Jose added as he applied temporary bandages. “But I wouldn’t advise doing much more than walking.”

“Good because I can’t use energy anymore. At least not until I sleep for like, three days,” Lise said wryly.

“If Master Terra doesn’t kill you first,” Garrett reminded her.

“I’m not worried about her right now,” Lise’s gaze fell on the surviving dragon clan members. “I’m worried about them.”

Some clan members stared back at Lise and her gang of friends. Some looked ready for a fight.
Others just seemed lost. They still outnumbered chi walkers and signers easily, but they all seemed to be waiting.

“Should ve punish zhem?” Garrett suggested quietly. His muscles tensed, ready to use his weapon at a moment’s notice.

“You’re not going to kill them, are you?” Crow asked immediately.

“No,” Sasha steadied herself. “We’ll give them a choice.” She stepped up to the clan. All their eyes zeroed in on her like lazers, but Sasha didn’t waver. “We defeated you, and got you out of harm’s way. The fact that you have not attacked us yet makes me believe you are directionless; aimless and unsure as to what to do without a clear leader. You have become used to listening to orders from Mitka. However, that is no longer the case. You all have a choice to make. You can choose to rebuild your clan with a new, better purpose, or you can go out in the world to remake your lives. We will help in any way we can, and we won’t stop you. But, if any of you attack these people or our temple again we will not hesitate to defend ourselves to the end. Time to decide.”

The crowd of people clad in white shuffled awkwardly. Some whispered to each other. Some didn’t break their gaze from Sasha, as if hoping she had more answers.

Finally, a single woman broke from the masses. Her hands trembled, but she spoke with an unwavering voice. “I wish to begin our clan anew, but I am unsure as to how. Mitka was our leader, and we followed her rule because we believed if she saw our unwavering support for her she would be able to get through her hardships. What can we do to atone for her and our mistakes?”

Lise watched Sasha approach the woman with a scowl on her face. “This feels like we’re letting them get away with attempted murder.”

Jose made a disapproving sound in the back of his throat. His tone was low when he spoke, his Spanish accent softening his words. “You would have us reject them with the same hatred and closed minds as they attacked us with? No,” Jose gestured to Sasha shaking hands with the clan woman like an equal. “We’ll attempt to understand and help them, and maybe most of them will return the kindness by bettering their lives.”

Lise’s scowl deepened. “I still don’t like it. What happens when they take advantage of this kindness?”

“Are you going to stop us? We won’t take kindly to a second offense on their part.” Jose raised a questioning eyebrow.

“No. I’m not stopping anyone.”

The dark-skinned woman turned back to her crowd of clan members and raised her fist. “I am Valente of the Dragon Clan, descendants of the People of the Stars! I choose to rebuild what has been broken! Who is with me?”

Roughly half the people raised their fists in support. Whether the people had joined Valente or not, they all exhibited signs of fear and doubt.

“Rest assured; our new friends have agreed to help the clan rebuild as well as assist those who wish to seek out their own fortunes.”

Sasha rejoined her team with a smile, the clan members behind her much more assured of their futures.
“You really zhink ve can help all of zhem?” Garrett asked quietly.

“We can try. Some people actually want to come to our temple to train in our ways instead. Most of the people who don’t want to rejoin the clan want to go out into the world. We can spare some money for wherever they’d like to go, at the least,” Sasha said.

“Sounds good to me,” Jarra nodded with approval. She smiled at Lise’s bewildered group of friends. “Sorry your visit was a little… rocky, but we can get you to our temple no problem.”

Lise had been quietly making sure her friends were all right when she stopped dead in her tracks. Her eyes widened, sweeping wildly over everyone.

“Is something wrong, Lise?” Akiza approached, her brown, almond shaped eyes trembling with concern.

“What’s Yusei?”

“Mitka is missing too,” Valente told Lise when their eyes met. Her sorrowful gaze was steady. “She must have taken your friend back into the temple. I am truly sorry. We were not aware Mitka was beyond help.”

Lise swallowed and took a steadying breath. “It’s not your fault, but thank you.”

“Lise, you can’t go back in there. You’ll be killed and-“

“Hey!” Garrett’s loud exclamation cut off Sasha’s words. “Zhose are mine!”

Lise clipped Garrett’s dual wielding swords to her belt and kept running. “Sorry! I need to borrow them! I’ll be right back!”

Before anyone could stop her, Lise had jumped back into the temple.

“Ugh,” Sasha grunted in frustration. “Jarra, start ferrying people to the temple immediately. Garrett go with her. The rest of you might want to start getting ready to get the hell out. We’re still on unstable ground here.”

“We’re not going anywhere until Lise and Yusei come out of there,” Akiza announced. She planted her feet and crossed her arms.

“What she said,” Carly nodded, mirroring her friend.

“Fine, just stay safe, and out of the way,” Sasha conceded.

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Yusei had tried struggling against the ropes binding his wrists, as well as biting the fingers of Mitka’s hand muting him.

She had merely laughed at his meager attempts to free himself. “I am no stranger to pain,” she had whispered into his ear, her voice filling Yusei with icy chills.

Mitka dragged Yusei into a deeper part of the temple. Every movement felt like the whispered catalyst that could bring the rest of the temple crashing down on top of them.

The lower level of the temple was darker. Light filtered in from the cracks in the ceiling, and rubble lined all the walls.
Yusei gasped when he caught sight of the dais at the center of the room. This was the place from Lise’s vision all those weeks ago.

Mitka kicked Yusei down into the dust and dirt. “Scream all you want, but no one can hear you down here.”

“Then I guess the two of us will be stuck down here for a while,” Yusei said, sitting up.

Mitka snorted and rolled her eyes. She retrieved the chains left sitting on the dais, and began chaining Yusei to two of the few pillars still standing. “I’m no fool. The Crimson Dragon will come to retrieve you. Once I’ve defeated her, I’ll kill you. Then she’ll beg me to end her agony, and I’ll mercifully oblige. She must pay with her life for what she, what all of you, did to my people!”

Yusei stared at Mitka’s manic expression. There was no sense in those acid green eyes. “What did we do to make you hate us so much?”

Mitka bristled, her fists shaking. The boy’s blue eyes were full of pity, and she hated it. A well-placed right hook to the cut she’d made earlier on his left cheek wiped the pity right off his face. In its place was a grimace of pain. Pain she could deal with and ignore, whether it was hers or someone else’s. “You took away my purpose,” Mitka spat, unable to keep the sting of her wrath out of her voice. She stuffed a gag into the boy’s mouth, and melted into the shadows to await the Dragon Girl.

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Lise alighted cat-like onto the floor of the temple’s first underground level. She couldn’t feel the energy of anyone on the level she stood upon, but she could sense the shakiness of the temple’s structure. She would have to be careful to avoid being buried alive.

Lise dashed over to a fallen column. Only an eighth of its length jutted above the floor. The rest was buried into the second floor below, but there was a hole large enough to get through.

Lise slid down the column’s length to the second floor. She blinked in the sudden darkness, silently allowing her eyes to adjust.

“Yusei?” she whispered tentatively. She was afraid of using the empathy link, because of the resulting glow giving away her position. She heard clanking and muffled shouts, then moved closer. “Yusei?” When she was close enough to see him, Lise gasped, ran up to him, and pulled out the gag.

Dark blue eyes wide with fear, Yusei said only one word; “Run.”

Suddenly Mitka plowed into Lise like a steamroller, jamming a knife into Lise’s shoulder. Lise rolled backwards, grinding her teeth together from the pain, and kicked Mitka off with both feet.

Mitka landed nimbly and giggled. “You made it, Dragon Girl. I knew you would.”

“You didn’t exactly make it hard,” Lise said, grunting as she removed Mitka’s knife from her flesh.

“It’s much easier to kill someone who walks so willingly into their own demise,” Mitka shrugged and drew her two swords. “And I will kill you.”

“No one is going to die today,” Lise repeated, doing the same as her opponent.
“Try and stop me then!” Mitka leapt into battle, her blades gleaming in what little light they caught in the dark under cavern.

At first, Lise and Mitka seemed to be evenly matched. Both could barely see, and metal upon metal constantly echoed in the temple’s chambers.

All of a sudden, Lise slipped up. Mitka managed to nick her shoulder. Blood, red and rich, flowed from the wound.

Mitka cackled and twirled her swords expertly. “Looks like our little Dragon Girl isn’t a master.”

Lise dropped her fingers from the wound, and readied herself for the next attack. “I don’t need to be a master to beat you.”

Despite her promise, Lise’s performance only grew worse. Every opening Mitka found was another cut for Lise.

Yusei could feel every single injury as if he were being stabbed as well. The sheer number of them was staggering, and he was suddenly grateful that the chains were keeping him upright.

Mitka snickered at Lise’s panting exhaustion. “I’m so glad you’re finally fighting seriously! The pain on both your faces is exhilarating!”

“Both?”

Lise glanced at Yusei for a split second. His face was beaded with sweat, and his body was shaking limply in the chains. He was breathing just as heavily as Lise.

Mitka took advantage of Lise’s divided attention by tripping her. Lise fell to the ground, and tried to roll to regain her dropped swords, but Mitka was too fast. She stomped down on Lise’s fingers and used her sword to rip off the bandages lining Lise’s back. “You might be used to this pain, but he isn’t. Let’s test how deep your precious empathy link is, shall we?”

Next second, Mitka sank her sword into Lise’s newly exposed wound without mercy. Pain exploded across Lise’s back like a wildfire. She convulsed erratically and multi-colored spots danced in front of her eyes. Both her and Yusei’s screams filled the temple with their shared agony.

Mitka withdrew her sword from Lise’s back, and flicked it with her wrist. Blood sprayed across the dusty ground. “That agony is nothing compared to the pain you’ve caused my people! You deserve to pay for their losses!”

“Maybe I do,” Lise choked out in between her shallow, shaky breathes. “But Yusei’s doesn’t.”

Before Mitka could stab her again, Lise rolled out of the way, and swept Mitka’s feet out from under her. Lise quickly retrieved her borrowed blades, and began to glow red.

_Are you sure this is what you wish?_ The Crimson Dragon’s voice asked, her voice laced with sadness.

“Yes,” Lise responded immediately. She allowed her own swords to shallowly cut through the symbols adorning her palms.

“Lise, no!” Yusei realized what she was doing. His voice was so desperate Lise hesitated for half a second. “Don’t do it!” Yusei knew even as he said it she wouldn’t stop. Tears were suddenly streaming down his cheeks.
Lise and Mitka’s swords clashed again, but Lise was ready. The power of her decision made her entire body glow red. “Yusei!” Lise whirled to strike at Mitka. “I release you!” She slashed her two swords down onto both of Mitka’s.

Instantly the four weapons shattered at the same moment Lise’s energy released from her body like a tiny nuclear blast. Pieces from their broken swords flew in all directions.

Lise’s energy wave washed gently over Yusei. The weight hanging over his body faded. Yusei suddenly felt light in body, but where his chest had once been whole, now felt as empty as the vacuum of space. The change in his body was overwhelming and he passed out from the sheer volume of the experience.

Mitka was so pale she could have been a ghost. She stared at Lise’s freshly cut palms. “You dissolved the empathy link.”

Lise looked at her calmly. “I did.”

“Fine then,” Mitka reached for her remaining weapons clipped to her belt. “Either way you two will die here.”

Lise drew her fans and hurled them through the air like Frisbees. Mitka easily dodged them and engaged Lise in much closer combat.

“You missed,” Mitka sneered at Lise’s passes of her attacks.

“I wasn’t aiming for you,” Lise smirked. She nodded her head at her weapons’ intended target. Mitka turned and watched Lise’s fans slice through the weaker links in Yusei’s shackles. Freed, his body crumpled to the ground. While Mitka was distracted, Lise flipped over the dais and retrieved her fans.

Mitka came after her, eyes gleaming with manic revenge.

That’s when everything else shattered.

The temple’s remaining columns crumbled and the first level’s floor came crashing down at an angle. Light suddenly flowed, bright and blinding, into the cavern. The ground beneath the three of them shifted in the opposite direction, and a gaping crack opened like the mouth of a monster. Lise and Mitka braced themselves from falling behind what was left of a few columns.

Yusei’s body began sliding towards the crack, limply following the loose rubble to its doom.

“How kind of my temple,” Mitka crooned. She stalked towards Lise slowly, covered in dust from head to toe, a grotesque angel of death. “Your energy wave weakened it enough to give me this perfect chance. Like shooting fish in a barrel.”

Lise whimpered fearfully, frantically trying to get Yusei back to safety. He was too damn heavy, and Lise was too afraid to think clearly.
“Don’t worry. We’ll see each other again in hell.” Mitka raised her knives.

*What do I do? I don’t have any more energy left!*

In a last ditch effort, Lise pulled one of her fans off of her belt and threw it at Mitka the moment she lunged for her.

The fan buried itself deep in Mitka’s clothes, and pinned her to a collapsing column.

Lise shuddered with relief, suddenly warm with sweat. With a grunt of effort, she swung Yusei back up to relative safety. She kept a careful eye on Mitka as she set Yusei down behind a column foundation so he wouldn’t slide to his death again.

A loud, childish wail erupted out of Mitka like a violent, volcanic eruption. Lise whirled into a guard, but quickly realized she didn’t need to be so defensive.

Mitka ripped Lise’s fan out of the stone and her clothing. She threw the fan back in Lise’s direction. Lise hesitantly picked up her weapon, staring at Mitka throwing herself to the stone cavern’s floor. Her continued sobbing echoed off the walls. “I don’t understand! Why?”

Lise lowered her hands and stared at the woman before her. She was breaking apart. Her energy was small, flickering, like a weak, little candle.

“I think I understand now,” Lise said softly. “We’re the same.”

“We are nothing alike!” Mitka spat up at Lise. “You don’t understand anything about me or my people! We strove to be the Crimson Dragon’s chosen for thousands of years! Now we have nothing!”

Lise shook her head. “I could have just as easily turned out like you. We’re both stubborn, powerful, and willing to do anything to protect the ones we care about.”

“So what? You and your friends were chosen when my people were not! What were we supposed to do? The dragon clan, my people, with no purpose after thousands of years proving ourselves worthy! I was alone! I had to do something!”

“I was alone too,” Lise said. She lowered herself to her knees before Mitka, who watched with wide eyes. “You think there was someone around to tell me how to do this stuff?” Lise chuckled at Mitka’s stunned expression, surprising even herself. “I’ve been alone with this power for my entire life. I’ve watched it destroy and create. I’ve also had to go through my own share of problems. I know what it’s like to work your hardest for something and still not make it in the end. It must have been so frustrating and painful.”

“Don’t pretend! You’ve always had people around you who love you! I was truly alone. I had to make all the decisions alone. Now my people are betraying me!”

“That’s not true,” Lise shook her head. “Your people stayed because they were loyal to you, and they still are. They stayed with you because they wanted you to see you had a support system behind you that would follow you no matter what you decided. They wanted you to realize this revenge act of yours was wrong. You have to know that.” Lise’s tone had changed from soft to firm with the truth of her words. She pointed at the sloping roof. “They’re waiting for you up there. You can still join them.”

Mitka chuckled slightly and rubbed her eyes. She shook her head, a shuddering breath escaping her lips. “I don’t understand. You should hate me. I tried to kill you and the people you love. Why
won’t you kill me?”

“Because I don’t have that kind of power,” Lise took a deep breath. In. Out. “I don’t think… anyone has the right to be judge, jury, and executioner, or at least I don’t.” Lise looked bravely into Mitka’s eyes. “Being the Crimson Dragon has taught me that all life is precious, and I have no right to take yours. As much as I hate you, that’s something I can never do. Being alive means you have the chance to change.” She held out her hand to Mitka. “Your people want to help you, and we can too. You can start over. This doesn’t have to be the end.”

Mitka blinked wearily at Lise’s outstretched hand. “A mere apology isn’t going to fix things. “I’ve done some terrible things in the past few years, and I don’t think I’ll be able to make up for it so easily.”

“It won’t be, but fixing your life will help. Come with us. We can get out and no one has to die.”

Mitka met Lise’s gaze and new tears bubbled up and fell down her cheeks. Her green eyes had lost their manic rage for death and revenge, and were beautiful with clarity. “No.”

“What? No? Mitka please!” Lise reached for both of her hands. “You can come with us! It doesn’t have to end here!”

“Go,” Mitka said as the temple began to shift again. “There’s not much time left.”

“But Mitka,” Lise’s eyes had begun to water too. “I can’t just leave you! We can leave toge-“

Mitka seized Lise by her shirt collar and dragged her within inches of her face. “Take the boy and get the hell out. I’m staying. This will be my sentence. I choose this.”

Lise swallowed, sniffled, and nodded. “I’ll be back for you.”

Mitka released Lise and watched her dash over to Yusei. “I won’t be here when you come back.” She adjusted so that she was sitting cross-legged instead of on her knees. “Goodbye… Lise Kururugi…”

Lise slung Yusei over her shoulder, wrapping her arms around his torso to secure him.

The temple was collapsing around them, and Lise was forced to shuffle awkwardly between the falling rubble. Lise took a deep breath to steady herself. Two seconds later she was off, springing from falling rubble to rubble up to the next floor. She ran up the fallen column back up to the ground level.

Already the gaping hole was crumbling in on itself like a black hole made of earth.

Lise zoomed to a safe distance, away from the danger zone of the falling former temple. She gently laid Yusei down, the severed chains dangling from his gauntlets clanking. Lise put two fingers on his neck and her ear to his chest. She let herself breathe again when she got a pulse.

“Thank god you’re alive,” Lise sighed. “Now to get Mitka.”

She sped back towards the temple grounds. Everything began collapsing in on itself. Faster and faster the temple destroyed itself. The last supports gave way, and the temple collapsed in a jumbled heap of cluttered stone, dust, and earth.

Lise froze as if she had run straight into a wall. She had felt Mitka’s death; the energy leaving the body. She stood there, numb. Mitka was dead. It was too late.
Lise dropped to her knees. Her hands splayed in the sand. Her gaze was downward, but she saw nothing. She couldn’t even feel the sand in between her fingers.

Something inside her had snapped and was welling up. It broke free in a devastating wail. Everything came to the surface, banging at Lise’s psyche.

Her friends; Signer, chi walker, and non-signer alike didn’t dare touch or disturb her. Even Yusei, when he woke up was shell shocked.

Overwhelming grief, pain rage, vulnerability, frustration, helplessness, guilt, and failure swept over Lise in tidal waves. Tears streamed down her cheeks, making clean tracks on her otherwise filthy face. The pain was hers and Mitka’s, and it demanded to be felt in every fiber of Lise’s being.
Lise gasped when Jose began rebandaging her back. She was exhausted, absolutely nothing left in her tank. Her head wavered from side to side with her dizziness.

“She’s lost a lot of blood,” Jose’s voice sounded like he was speaking through water in a deep well.

“She’s got wounds on her hands too,” Yusei told him. He held Lise steady by the least blood covered places on her shoulders.

Lise let out a half scream. Yusei’s fingers had brushed against the knife wound in her shoulder.

“Oh shit, Lise, I’m sorry!”

“It’s okay,” Lise murmured before she passed out.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself,” Jose said, finishing his stitching, and applying a thick bandage to Lise’s back. He’d seen Yusei’s mortified look. “There’s not much of her that isn’t bloodstained, battered, and bruised.”

“Let me help,” Akiza lowered herself to her knees. She held out her hand for a roll of bandages.

“Thanks,” Jose handed her a roll.

Akiza immediately got to work wrapping up Lise’s cut palms.

When she and Jose were finished, Lise looked like a crappy Halloween mummy.

“Come on, guys! We’re the last ones!” Leo shouted over to them.

“Five more minutes, kid,” Jose said. He quickly cleaned off the blood from Yusei’s cheek and slapped a bandage on the wound. “That’s more than sufficient for you. Okay, let’s carry Lise over to the car.”

“I’ve got it,” Yusei said. He gently pulled Lise into his arms and walked with her towards Fuego.

Jose blinked at the two of them, then Akiza. This was unusual for him.

“He’s had a lot of practice,” Akiza explained. She stood and dusted her skirt off the best she could. “So, let’s see about this temple you’re all determined to bring us to.”

///

Lise woke up when Jarra had parked right outside the doors. She was groggy, sore, and feeling fragile.

“Hey, how are you?” Akiza handed Lise a water bottle.

Lise took it and downed the entire thing before she responded. “Lousy, but I’ll be okay.” She slowly inched her way out of the car, hating the way both Yusei’s and Akiza’s eyes never left her person.

“Wow! You were right, Jarra! This place is beautiful!” Luna was gushing.
Jarra chuckled and unbuckled her seat belt. “Wait till you see the inside.”

“Thanks again for the save, guys,” Crow said.

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure we would’ve died today if it weren’t for you,” Jack added. He scratched at the back of his neck and adjusted his coat.

“Are you guys gonna teach us how to stab bad guys here?” Leo asked, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

“Definitely not,” Garrett came up and ruffled Leo’s hair. “Can I have my swords back now, Lise?”

Lise paused like a deer caught in headlights. A guilty look spread across her face. “Uh…I uh…well, I…shattered them…” Lise smiled apologetically at her friend. Garrett’s mouth dropped open. His eyes nearly popped out of his head. “You vhat?”

“I shattered them…” Lise repeated miserably.

“I forged zhose swords myself!”

“I’ll make you new ones!”

“It took me months to make zhose swords!”

“I’m so sorry,” Lise put her hands together and bowed her head. “I’ll make it up to you, I swear!”

“MONTHS OF WORK, VASTED…” Garrett whimpered, wobbling dejectedly towards the temple doors. “I’ll have to start from scratch again…”

“He’ll get over it,” Jose waved away Garrett’s dejection. “Lise, you need to soak in the healing waters of the creek and eat something immediately.”

“Right,” Lise nodded, helping as much as she was capable to open the temple’s doors.

Everyone took a giant leap backwards when a long cane came swinging out of nowhere. Lise bent backwards like she was playing limbo to avoid getting wacked upside the head, wincing from the pain in her back.

“ELIZABETH KURURUGI!!!” Master Terra thundered. She came after Lise brandishing her walking stick threateningly. “You deliberately disobeyed my rules!” Terra punctuated every word with a swing of her stick. She seemed to be swinging harder every miss.

“Um…should we break that up?” Crow jabbed his thumb at the two of them.

“Could have been killed! You could have gotten your teammates killed! How dare-“

“Nah,” Jose shook his head, laughing nervously. “I’d rather not die, and I can stitch Lise back together-“

“I’m sorry!”

“After Master Terra is done lecturing her. Lise! I’ll stitch you back up after dinner!”

“Thanks!” Lise called back as she ducked.
“Oh, you’ll be scrubbing the tea room’s floors before you sit down to a real dinner!” Master Terra yelled at her. “That’s your punishment! No getting out of it! If you can train while you’re injured, then you can certainly scrub floors!”

“Yes, Master Terra,” Lise accepted her punishment, bowing respectfully.

“In the meantime, we’ll show you all to your rooms.” Sasha smiled and heaved the twins’ bags onto her shoulder.

“When’s dinner?” Leo grumbled simultaneously with his stomach.

Jose broke into a wide grin. “When I’m finished making it.”

“Really?” Leo’s green eyes lit up like fireworks. “Awesome!”

///

“Feeling any better?” Akiza closed the sliding door behind her.

Lise looked up from the concealed end of the creek she was soaking in. “Better actually,” she rubbed her eyes.

“You’ve been crying,” Akiza sat at the edge of the pond. She picked up Lise’s hand and squeezed it. “Tell me what happened.”

Lise smiled gratefully at her. “It’s hard to explain. It’s just…super weird… I mean-“

“I’m here for you, just like you were there for me with Sayer. Start from the beginning.”

Lise nodded and started talking. She recounted every gory detail of the fight with Mitka. She started to choke up when she reached the details of Mitka’s death and her extreme reaction.

“Oh Lise, you idiot,” Akiza sighed and pulled Lise into an awkwardly placed hug. She didn’t seem to care Lise was soaked, and soaking her. “It’s not your fault. She chose to die there. You couldn’t have stopped her, Mitka made her own decision. Don’t let her ghost haunt you for no reason.”

“Yeah?”

“You reached her, I promise,” Akiza pushed a few wet hairs behind Lise’s ears. “But grieving like this is normal. It’s okay to let yourself feel whatever you feel about this. It’s messed up and twisted, but you can’t control the choices people make. Don’t beat yourself up over it, okay?”

“Okay,” Lise cracked a tiny smile.

“You should get going on scrubbing the tea room floor,” Akiza said. She squeezed Lise’s hand again, and got to her feet. “Whatever Jose is making smells delicious. I’ll see you then.”

///

When Lise finally got her battered body into clean clothes, she made her way to the tea room. Master Terra had left her scrub brushes, and a bucket of warm, soapy water. Lise put her shoes by the door, and rolled up her sleeves. She got to work on the far corner so that she’d end at the doors.

It was slow going. The tea room wasn’t large, but it hurt Lise’s injured shoulders to be in constant motion.
“Mind if I help?”

“No, I’ve got it,” Lise answered automatically. She turned around to find Yusei taking off his boots. Lise turned pink and swiftly returned her gaze to her work. She was at a total loss as to what to say or do. Technically she hadn’t seen Yusei for a month, and their reunion had been less than sweet.

Yusei got to work on the other corner. In no time he matched Lise’s progress.

“Um, you really don’t have to do this,” Lise said, breaking the silence. She cringed. That was stupid.

“I know,” Yusei said calmly, his eyes darting over to her for a split second. “But if I let you do this by yourself, you’ll never finish in time for dinner.”

Lise didn’t respond. He was right. Why was this so awkward? She risked a peek at him and froze. The left side of his face was bandaged.

Before she knew what she was doing, Lise found her fingertips on the bandages obscuring Yusei’s cheek. “You were hurt. I’m so sorry.”

Yusei stopped working. His dark blue eyes found the light blue of Lise’s. His hand covered Lise’s at his cheek, but he didn’t push her away. “This is nothing.”

“But it is my fault.”

“No, this was not because of you. The only people we can control are ourselves.”

Lise tried to pull her hand away, but Yusei kept his grip tight. It hurt too much for her to keep trying. “You were listening to my conversation with Akiza.”

It was Yusei’s turn to blush pink. He let Lise take her hand back. “Yeah, I-I-I didn’t want to just pop in on you when you were taking a bath. Sh-Sh-she was right, Akiza th-that is.”

Lise stared at him. She had no idea what to say there was such a jumbled mess of emotions inside her.

Yusei’s eyes stared between his own hands and Lise’s face. His own grew redder and redder. “I swear I didn’t see anything at all!”

Lise burst into laughter. “That’s what you’re worried about?!?” She laughed until her shoulder wounds ached. She clutched at the stab wound, wincing.

“Why are you worried about me? You’re the one always getting covered in blood,” Yusei half joked. He let Lise lean on him for support, knowing it was killing her to need help.

Lise exhaled sharply, choking on a laugh. “Maybe I’m just stupid?”

“You’re not stupid, and neither is how you feel,” Yusei whispered into Lise’s hair. He held her as gingerly as he dared.

“It feels stupid to cry over someone who tried to kill us,” Lise sniffled, starting to cry into Yusei’s chest anyway.

“We haven’t exactly been in many normal situations. I’d say this one qualifies as okay to cry about,” Yusei said. He held Lise, letting her cry, and fruitlessly willing his heartbeat to slow down.
Well within the dinner hour, Lise and Yusei joined the others.

“Zhe Dragon Girl returns. Did Master Terra shatter anyzhing of yours?” Garrett was only half kidding.

“No, they were totally doing it. That’s why they’re so late,” Jack teased, his eyebrows waggling.

Yusei immediately turned red. Lise was rather pink too, but she heaped her plate with food while she addressed her friend. “Yeah, Jack, we did it in the bath. You weren’t planning on taking one later were you?”

“Ew!” Jack wrinkled his nose. “Get it out of my head!”

Crow burst into nonstop giggles. “Oh man, she got you good!”

Lise smirked. “And I’m really sorry, Garrett. Let me know what I can do to get you new swords.”

Garrett sniffed moodily. “You can help me barter with Yaretzi for something.”

“Deal! So what’s the damage on everyone else?”

Akiza shrugged. “Chafed wrists are the worst of it. We actually got lucky considering the circumstances.”

“Speak for yourself,” Lise winced theatrically, and pointed to her bandaged shoulders. “And there’s plenty more where that came from.”

“That’s what happens when we go charging without a plan,” Sasha reminded her friend, pointing her chopsticks meaningfully.

“I’d just like to point out that if she hadn’t charged in, I would probably be dead,” Yusei said.

Akiza rolled her eyes. “And then we’d all be picked off likes lambs to the slaughter.”

“Well, that’s a great mental image,” Lise said sarcastically.

“My bad,” Akiza laughed nervously.

“Not as bad as the image of you two having s-“ Jack was cut off mid-word by a well thrown apple to his nose.

“Anyway, on a better note, this food is amazing,” Akiza laughed.

“So good!” Leo moaned with his mouth full.

“Thanks,” Jose smiled, his chest puffing out. “I did my best to make a meal similar to what Lise described you eat in Japan. Is it just as good?”

Luna gasped. “Oh my gosh, I didn’t even notice! It’s just as good as the food back home!”

“Dude, you’re good!” Crow nodded in approval.

“It’s a tad spicier than I would have preferred,” Jack shrugged, but continued eating.

“Ignore him, we usually do,” Bruno said, finally finding his moment to break into the
“I’m so sorry, but I think we met briefly before via cell phone?” Lise smiled apologetically at Bruno. “I wasn’t exactly kind so I wouldn’t count that.” She held out her hand. “Hi, I’m Lise. Nice to meet you.”

“I think back in that death trap was introduction enough.” Bruno smiled and shook Lise’s hand amicably. “Don’t worry about the phone call. You were worried about Yusei. I’m just excited to see what else you can do.”

“You should see her turbo duel,” Yusei threw out casually as he ate.

“Ignore him,” Lise shoved Yusei’s shoulder affectionately. “I don’t give up all my trump cards so easily.”

“Trump cards? As in more than one?”

Lise’s eyes slid slyly to Yusei. “Sorry, no sneak peeks.”

“Gross, they’re flirting,” Leo curled his lip in disgust.

“At least they’re not making out at the table,” Luna whispered to him.

“But they are making goo goo eyes at each other.”

“You’re all welcome to join us for training tomorrow,” Sasha said. “To watch or to participate, though I recommend watching.”

“I’m in!” Crow raised his hand.

“Not at zhe crack of dawn, you’re not,” Garrett warned him.

“You have been getting up at the crack of dawn for a month?” Akiza blinked dubiously at Lise.

“Not happily, but yes. I miss coffee so much.”

At the mention of coffee, Jack picked up the conversation immediately. Crow threw in his two cents about the money all of Jack’s coffee was costing them.

Master Terra eventually joined them too. She sipped her tea and smiled serenely at all the children eating heartily at her table.

Lise smiled to herself too as she ate. It was weird to see all her friends together. Weird, but not bad weird.

“Hey, so I’ve been testing firecracker type explosives—“

“Awesome!” Leo interrupted.

Jose paused to high five Leo for a split second. “And I have a few I’ve yet to test. Wanna join me outside?”

There was a mad dash to get outdoors. Jose told everyone to wait for him in the courtyard, and ran to his room to grab his experiments.

Lise floated up to the flat part of the roof to get the best view of the explosions when they went off.
Also to stay out of the exploding range in case shrapnel rained down.

“I see there’s a ladder here,” Yusei quipped when he made it to the roof to join her. “Now that is definitely because of you.”

Lise smiled and turned towards him. “Master Terra got tired of me sitting up here by myself so she had the ladder made.”

“Why were you by yourself?” Yusei sat down next to her.

Lise just pointed up at the night sky.

Yusei frowned in confusion. He did, however, follow the direction she indicated. “Wow…”

Constellations blared at them from the night sky like a high definition display. There were more stars than Yusei had ever seen in his entire life. The sheer quantity of it was a stark contrast to the smoggy skies of New Domino. Sure, the city was getting better, but there were nowhere near as many stars as here.

Lise shifted her toes around in the slats of the roof. She stole glances at Yusei every couple of seconds. “I stayed up late a couple nights just to look at all of it. It reminded me of you some nights…when I missed you.”

“Yeah? I missed you too,” Yusei directed his gaze towards Lise. He reached for her hand and held it in his lap. “So uh…the empathy link…”

Lise’s eyes fell to the bandages on her free hand. “It’s gone.”

“So it worked. You did sever it,” Yusei confirmed, biting his lip.

“Yeah,” Lise shrugged. “I mean it was doing more harm than good.” She blew a stray hair out of her face. “Besides, you said it was annoying when I got a song stuck in my head because then it got stuck in your head too.”

“Could you remake it?” Yusei couldn’t keep the excitement out of his voice. His eyes combed Lise’s for answers.

She blinked in surprise, fully looking at him now. “I think so, but why would you want to? The link wasn’t even complete and all it did was hurt you.”

“Because no matter what it’s another connection to you,” Yusei gently pushed his forehead to Lise’s. “You knew where to find me because of it. This,” he touched the bandage on his cheek again. “Is the worst of it because you found me in time. I want to be able to find you when you need me too.”

Lise turned bright pink. “I-We don’t need the link to be connected.”

“I know. It confirms the connection though,” Yusei pulled away, scratching at the back of his neck. “It’s stupid, but I miss the place where the piece of your soul was.” His free hand rested loosely on his chest without his knowledge.

“Me too,” Lise put her forehead back against Yusei’s. “And it’s not stupid.” Her expression became serious. “You know what this means, right? I’m going to get you out of bed with shitty Justin Bieber songs in your head.”
Yusei had to chuckle at that one. “Right,” he pushed the hair Lise had been trying to get out of her face behind her ear. “It means we’re both going to get hurt at one point or another, but we’ll always be there for each other.”

Lise nodded. “The empathy link is a promise to protect each other forever.”

Yusei smiled at her, his dark eyes twinkling. “How do we get started?”

///

“All right,” Master Terra said. She and Sasha finished drawing the dragon seal on the Earth with a flourish. Terra tossed her chalk away. “Enter the circle and invoke the Crimson Dragon.”

“Got it,” Lise swallowed. She hadn’t expected to be doing this out in the courtyard. The public courtyard where everyone else was watching them expectantly. “R-Ready?”

“Uh huh,” Yusei nodded and took a deep breath.

“Okay, Crimson Dragon, let’s go,” Lise bravely stepped into the circle first.

Red light immediately erupted out of the drawn chalk lines, and Lise’s markings. Yusei’s mark ignited when he too entered the seal’s boundary.

“Wow…” Lise murmured.

“It’s so warm…” Yusei marveled.

“Whenever you’re ready,” Master Terra spread her hand in a wide gesture, and returned it to her cane along with her other hand.

Lise swallowed, her hands suddenly sweaty. They’d done this before, so why was this so nerve wracking?

“Your lips are chapped.”

“What?” Lise’s eyes darted back and forth in confusion.

“Kissing is going to hurt.”

“Are you crazy?”

“I didn’t notice earlier, but your hair is shorter,” Yusei said. His face was getting as red as the light glowing on his arm.

“I cut it. It was getting in the way. That’s not the point!” Lise flicked a strand of hair away from her face. “Are you having second thoughts or something?”

“No.”

“Then what’re you-“

“Your eyes have stars in them,” Yusei said, leaning closer.

Lise looked incredulously at him. She grabbed his t-shirt and dragged him to her. “Shut up already.” She seized both of Yusei’s cheeks and pressed her lips to his.
Lise’s burst of anger evaporated. Yusei laughed into her kiss. This was what she’d been so nervous about. Last time they’d tried she didn’t want to go through with it because she was scared her feelings weren’t reciprocated. Was Yusei really having second thoughts? Is that what the laugh meant?

Lise broke the kiss. Her hands trailed down Yusei’s chest. Nothing had happened anyway.

“Sorry, that was…dumb,” Yusei admitted, shaking his head. His hands found the small of Lise’s back and pulled her closer.

“Huh?”

“I’ve always wanted to kiss you,” Yusei whispered. He pressed his forehead to Lise’s. “Always.”

“And it’s always going to be you,” Lise murmured with a smile. She kissed him again, smiling as she did so.

Everything else melted away. Yusei tightened his hold around Lise’s waist, pulling her as close as possible. Lise’s hands and arms reached around Yusei’s neck and shoulders. The red light of the seal beneath them grew brighter and brighter, kicking up its own breeze, until it broke apart into two red-glowing orbs. The orbs circled Lise and Yusei once, one orb became half dark blue and the other orb became half orange. The orange and red orb vanished into Yusei’s body, and the red and blue orb disappeared into Lise’s body, just as the two of them had to break apart to breathe.

“Contract complete!” Master Terra announced, grinning broadly.

Lise laughed breathlessly. “Are you sure we got it?” she joked, still red.

Yusei beamed ecstatically at Lise, his face pink with pleasure. “God, I love you.”

“And I thought I was bringing the fireworks,” Jose quipped, setting down his supply.

“Don’t give Leo fire!” Luna cried, chasing after her brother on his mad dash for the fireworks.

Jose chuckled and divided everyone into groups with fireworks and lighters. Leo was a tad bitter about having to share his lighter with Luna, Bruno, and Sasha, but he rallied when he watched the fireworks whistle off and explode in the night sky.

“Whoo!”

“YEAH! SPARKLERS!” Luna let loose with slightly safer fireworks, holding six in her two hands and running around.

“Luna, you were supposed to give half to me!” Leo ran after his sister, protesting loudly.

Jack, Crow, Garrett, and Carly were gathered around a pack of fireworks Jose had given them. Lise, Akiza, Jarra, and Yusei had been given another.

The sky was soon filled with colorful explosions, and a small twinge of sulfur.

Master Terra was watching again. She was getting too old to romp around with the children as much as she used to. Still, it always pleased her to see those she considered under her protection happy and bright.
Yusei was actually surprised when he found he slept in a little. When he thought about it, it made sense. The time zones were different and yesterday he and all his friends had come too close to death.

He got up, stretched, and went to find Lise. She was probably training. The chi walkers had said they were up at dawn every day to train together.

The first person Yusei saw was Jose, sitting cross-legged in the sandy middle of the large track the pagoda-like buildings of Master Terra’s temple was encircled by. He had clearly drawn swirls in the sand, and put rocks in for a makeshift rock garden to calm himself.

“Uh…”

Jose opened one eye. His smile brightened his entire face despite only having a single eye open. “Lise is in the gardens.”

“Oh,” Yusei felt his face grow a little warm. “Thanks.”

“Sure,” Jose’s eyebrows fluttered a few times, like a butterfly trying to flash its wings, and he closed his eyes. “We’re doing our own calming exercises and then getting back into the nitty gritty. See ya later, edgy boy!”

The heat in Yusei’s face increased, but he walked back into the forest. The last time he’d been in there, the situation was slightly more stressful. He preferred enjoying the view of the multicolored plant life Terra had procured and cared for.

The pathway lead him past the gazebo, and across the creek. A tiny bridge over the slowly flowing waterway gave him the perfect view of an earth-like circle directly across from the gazebo. Small lanterns, their waxen candle centers mostly melted, had been placed along the edge of the circle. Wind gently breezed through, ruffling the leaves and petals of plants. The area was clearly meant to unite the elements with the creek and earth nearby.

Lise sat at the center of the circle. Her eyes were closed, and she breathed deeply. As Yusei watched, a small smile played across Lise’s lips. She raised and outstretched her hands, forming a small ball of red energy.

Lise’s body rose to its feet as if she weighed nothing, and the wind had carried her upright. She gracefully began moving. The ball of energy stretched in sync with her movements, encircling her in her own rolling energy waves. Lise had never looked so at peace.

Yusei finally moved again when Lise stopped. She brought her knife hands down in a finishing movement. The energy she had created dispersed.

“That’s quite the control,” Yusei leaned against one of the trees next to the pathway.

Lise startled, her bright, blue eyes finding Yusei and relaxing. “You scared me. G’morning.” She looked unsure as to how to greet him exactly, a stark contrast from the serenity of her energy training.

“Good to know I can still sneak up on you,” Yusei joked. He saved Lise the trouble of finding the right words. “Walk with me?” He held out his hand.
“Sure,” Lise slid her hand into Yusei’s with a wider smile than earlier.

Yusei returned the gesture with a satisfied squeeze. “So, looks like you finally learned how to control the Crimson Dragon’s power.”

“That’s why I thought I came here,” Lise shook her head. “But I actually learned how to accept the Crimson Dragon’s power, and me. Plus, the dragon’s power is a lot more than that.”

Yusei chuckled. “Fighting and looking bad ass?”

Lise rolled her eyes, but she was still smiling. She held out her free hand, palm up. Just above her hand formed another energy ball, this one smaller. “No. The very root of the dragon’s power is life itself. I can manifest energy as the purest form of warping the power of life, it’s energy, from the earth. Life is precious and the core of the Crimson Dragon is ensuring it goes on.”

“Wow, that’s amazing,” Yusei smiled at Lise and the little energy ball.

“Do you wanna try?”

“What? Using energy?” Yusei was baffled by the question. He might have been a Signer, but he was no Vessel.

“Holding it,” Lise said. She took Yusei’s hand and transferred her hovering energy ball to his palm. “Give it your own life, your own energy, and then it’s also yours,” she said gently.

“Uh…” Yusei looked helplessly down at the little red ball resting on his palm. It was warm, swirling with the familiarity of Lise, the Crimson Dragon, the feel of the water, the smell of the earth, and the sound of wind chimes. “Wow…” A tiny dab of dark blue appeared on the ball’s surface. Next second, the bubble shook and burst into nothing. “Sorry I burst your bubble.”

Lise smiled and shrugged. “It happens. Don’t worry about it. Hey, aren’t you hungry?”

“No,” Yusei lied the moment his stomach decided to gurgle loudly.

Lise laughed and shook her head. “Go eat. I’ll see you later. I still have some games to play with my chi walking friends.”

“Aren’t you gonna eat?”

“I ate when the sun came up, about an hour ago. You do the same.” She smiled again and walked down a different path. “See you soon!”

///

“So Lise,” Jose said as the chi walkers regrouped. He had a mischievous gleam in his eye, and his smirk. “Love your boyfriend.”

“The edgy one? With the dark hair?” Jarra asked.

“That’s him,” Lise laughed as she tightened her arm wrappings. “Me too, Jose. That’s why I’m dating him.”

Jose put his hands up. “Oh I know. I meant I love looking at him. He’s rather fine.”

Lise couldn’t resist licking her lips at the memory of the last time she’d kissed him. “You should tell him that. I’d love to see his expression.”
“Oh I will,” Jose’s eyebrows danced as his mind raced. “But I’m curious, are any of his friends gay? Or Bi? I kinda like the blondie, and Bruno’s not bad either.”

“Geez Jose, you’re gonna end up dating her whole circle of friends!” Jarra teased.

“Only if they say yes. Long distance relationships are the worst.”

“This discussion of your love lives is absolutely fascinating. Can we get back to training?” Garret complained, his voice oozing sarcasm.

“Excellent suggestion, Garret,” Sasha agreed with a curt nod. “Let’s get to work.”

///

Lise and Garrett were sparring with Garrett’s spare swords when the Signers finished breakfast. Lise was still covered in bandages, but she was fairing rather well. Sasha, Jarra, and Jose were stuck in their own version of battle royal. Sand flew in all directions, their hand to hand combat session was so intense.

As they watched, Garrett managed to get one of his swords past Lise’s grip and twisted her left sword out of her hand. Lise didn’t bother trying to retrieve it. She had to focus on doubling her efforts to counter both Garrett’s swords.

Garrett kicked Lise to the ground, and brought his swords down. Lise blocked him, deflected his blades, and rolled to her feet, picking up her fallen sword along the way.

“Much better,” Garrett nodded approvingly. “You’re certainly not a newb any longer.”

“The trick is nearly dying,” Lise smiled.

The intricate ballet of their sword fighting continued. Their blades’ constant clanging nearly drowned out the sounds of Jarra, Sasha, and Jose’s fight.

“Don’t look now,” Garrett said suddenly. “But we have an audience.”

“What?” Lise froze.

Don’t look or you’ll mess up!

She hated being watched. It made her nervous and afraid of making a mistake where everyone could see it.

Garrett swiftly disarmed her. The tips of his swords were aimed at Lise’s throat.

She quickly put her hands up in surrender. “Guess I deserve that after shattering your best swords.” Lise laughed nervously.

“Can’t win them all, especially if you don’t check your weakness. Gotta get used to people watching you.”

Lise flushed pink. “Thanks Garrett.”

“Thank you for being a great sparring partner,” he sheathed his swords and bowed respectfully to Lise.

She did the same, mirroring Garrett. “I’ll have to get my own swords at home to practice.”

Lise was surprised to find Garret hadn’t been kidding about their audience. Before she could register what she was doing, her feet had taken her running towards Yusei.
He walked forward, ready to intercept her, and caught Lise as she jumped into his arms. She laughed a breathless “good morning!”

Yusei spun Lise around, smiling widely. He set Lise down and kissed her quickly on the lips.

“What was that for?” Lise inquired.

“I haven’t been able to kiss you for a whole month. I’m stealing one whenever I get the chance.”

Lise turned from pink to red. She reached around Yusei’s neck and kissed him again. He responded almost desperately; pulling Lise as close as physically possible by the small of her back and the nape of her neck.

“Seriously guys?” Jack shook his head. “You just saw each other literally an hour ago.”

Even Crow felt a little uncomfortable. “We should probably separate them.”

Akiza laughed. “And how do you propose we do that?”

Jose cupped his hands over his mouth like a megaphone. “I hear if you suck face like that, you’ll get herpes!”

Both Lise and Yusei extracted one arm from each other to flip Jose off. At first he was pissed, but perked up a bit when Jack started laughing like a maniac.

Master Terra sighed. “When you kids are done goofing off, we’ll have our race to finish the days-worth of training. Then you’re free to go into town. Hopefully today’s visit will be less deadly.”

“It would certainly be more relaxing,” Sasha agreed. “So, chi walkers need to get ready for the race. Everyone else, follow me to the stands.”

“Why can’t we race with everybody else?” Leo bounced along beside Sasha.

She smiled kindly down to him. “Because our version of racing is a bit more…hands on. I’m not sure how to explain it. Obviously it isn’t deadly, but it isn’t just a race either…” Sasha tapped her lips as she tried to find a way to explain to this kid without being overly wordy. She wasn’t very good with kids.

“Uh, how about you explain the rules?” Akiza suggested, throwing Sasha a landline as they all settled into seats beside the mile-long track.

“Good idea!” Sasha smiled gratefully. “Racers are not allowed to stab, maim, slice, or kill their opponents, however, interfering with their progress is allowed. The racers circle the mile-long track by any means necessary. While they can interfere with each other, they are not declared the winner even if they defeat all their opponents. The winner is determined by the first person who crosses the finish line.”

“Very cool,” Akiza nodded in approval, watching the competitors below.

Lise tightened her arm wrappings, a grim, determined scowl on her face. Jarra retracted and shot her cables out repeatedly to make sure that her gear was working perfectly. Jose checked his belt for the third time; all his specialty bombs were locked and loaded. Garrett twirled his wooden practice weapons. They still packed a punch, but they wouldn’t accidentally kill anyone.

Sasha turned to watch them prepare. A satisfied smirk decorated her face, and she picked up the
makeshift flag used for their races. She began handing out industrial size police shields for riots while Master Terra found a seat.

“They look so serious,” Luna said. She rested her head in her hands to watch more comfortably.

“This race must be a big deal,” Leo said, practically bouncing in his seat.

Jack sat silently observing. He had accepted a police shield like the others, but didn’t seem to be very interested in the race itself. He was a little bitter about not being able to wear his signature turbo dueling suit in the hot weather. Carly sat next to him, drinking in all the excitement. Her reporter senses told her that this race was gonna be something she wouldn’t have missed for the world.

Crow and Bruno accepted their shields with even less enthusiasm. “Uh, what’re these for?”

“You’ll see,” Sasha said evasively. Her own shield leaned against her leg.

“These things make me nervous. I’ve dealt with the police enough for one lifetime,” Crow said. He held his shield as if he were afraid it would bite him.

Bruno chuckled nervously. “I’m sure it’s nothing that bad.”

“They’re specially ordered. No funny stuff.”

Yusei leaned forward, watching Lise with rapt attention. “So who’s been winning, Sasha?”

“Jose has the winning record right now,” Sasha said. She shrugged and added; “there’s not much you can do when you’re stuck in sticky rice.”

“Will he teach me how to make bombs?!” Leo piped up, his green eyes full of playful mischief. “OW!”

Luna removed her elbow from her brother’s stomach. “No way. I don’t wanna wake up to find you destroyed the kitchen.”

“All right racers! To the starting line! Peanut gallery ready your shields!” Sasha shouted, gripping her flag tightly, and hefting her shield.

Lise, Garret, Jarra, and Jose shuffled to the line drawn in the sandy track. All of them stood in various positions with their knees bent, ready to move. Jarra slipped on her fingerless gloves, Garrett tightened his boot straps, Jose tugged on his belt until it practically suffocated him, and Lise fastened the bandages encircling her arms.

Sasha raised the flag high into the air. The atmosphere was suddenly so still and quiet, you could hear an ant breathe. “Ready? Set? GO!” Sasha swiped downwards with the flag, making it snap in the wind.

The four racers took off like a bolt of lightning. If not for the police shields, all the spectators would have been covered in a cloud of dust and sand.

“And they’re off!” Sasha cheered, jumping up and down in excitement.

Jose quickly took the lead with Garrett right behind him. Lise was quickly approaching too. Jarra lagged behind but purposefully. She readied her arm and shot out a cable.

Lise heard the sound of the cable’s release and sidestepped the attack. Garret was not so lucky. His
legs were instantly locked together and he crashed into the dirt. Jarra giggled at Garrett’s intense scowl and ran on in front of him.

Jarra’s next target was Lise. She kept aiming, missing, and retracting her cables incessantly.

Lise had a plan though. At the curve of the track, she kept on running straight. She leapt into a wall jump that took her from one temple wall to the next until she alighted on the roof of the far temple building. Unimpeded by others and with a flat surface to run on, Lise sprinted from one building to the next.

“Whoa! Can she do that?” Yusei pointed in awe.

Sasha nodded. “It’s not illegal, but it’s also a big risk. By using the temple roofs, she makes the circle longer, but she avoids direct interference. Jarra needs to find a new strategy.”

Sasha was right. Lise had the high ground and it didn’t matter how Jarra shot her attacks, Lise saw them coming a mile away and dodged accordingly.

Meanwhile, Garrett had finally managed to free himself and was running like a mad man towards Jose. He threw wooden throwing knives at Jose’s back periodically, forcing him to dodge and slow down.

Just as Jarra swung on top of the roof behind Lise, the dragon girl slid down the last rooftop. She pushed off the edge and flipped onto the air.

Garret sent another knife flying at Jose, and Jose threw a sticky rice bomb at the same time. Both Lise and Garrett avoided the bomb, and Jose dodged Garrett’s knife.

Next second, Lise landed in a cat-like crouch on the dusty track, and was up and running. Garrett chased after her, but cables ensnared his arms.

Jarra slammed her feet into Garrett’s back, propelling him into the dirt. “Hey!” Garrett spit sand out in fury. “Stop doing zhat!”

“Stop falling for it!” Jarra snickered back. “Whoa!” she exclaimed as Garrett’s hand on her ankle sent her crashing to the ground.

Before she could recover, Garrett stuck a wooden knife through her loose shirt, and into the sand. “Neither of us goes anywhere.”

Sasha squinted at the other side of the track, using one hand to shield her eyes. She shook her head. “Looks like Jarra and Garrett took each other out again.”

“Go, Lise!” the twins cheered.

Jose smirked and kept running. He stole a glance behind him. Only Lise was still pursuing him. “Think you can keep up?” Jose taunted, tossing more sticky rice bombs.

Lise didn’t answer. She jumped over the first bomb’s explosion of confectionary genius and spun away from the other.

“How about I let you know right now, the answer is no!” Jose shouted back to her. He tossed another bomb, this one a smoker. Jose lost sight of Lise’s deepening scowl in the smoke. He threw more in his wake, and started running backwards to bask in the genius of his handiwork.
Lise emerged from the smoke, wearing her goggles on her eyes, and parting the darkness like a deadly, sweeping lighthouse beam. Jose’s lips parted in a tiny squeak, and he slowed down so much he was almost stopped.

Lise didn’t stop at all. She picked up speed, and leapt at Jose. Using him like a stepping block, Lise’s shoes hit his chest and then squished Jose’s nose as she transformed her humanoid stepping block into a spring board.

She leapt into action, funneling chi into every step. Lise kicked up a whirlwind of dust and sand while she ran pell-mell for the finish line. Each of her opponents lay fallen in the sand, meaning Lise was home free to cross the finish line.

Sasha waved the flag like a mad woman as Lise crossed the finish line solo.

The second wave of dust and sand died down and Lise jumped skyward. “WHOOHOO!” She screamed, and collapsed onto the track. “I’m done for the day…”

Master Terra chuckled. “You did well, but I sure hope not. Congrats on your first victory.” She cocked her head to the side. “Although, I thought you were going to show your friends the city today?”

“Oh yeah!” Lise quickly hopped to her feet in one fluid, sweeping motion, like breakdancing. “Let’s go, guys!”

“We’re going shopping?!” Both Akiza and Carly perked up.

“To the best place in town for shopping,” Jarra nodded. She had extracted herself from Garrett and come running over. She smirked at the peanut gallery. “And only those who get ready fastest can ride in Fuego.”

///

Almost everyone had gone to change into less filthy clothes. Even with the shields, the peanut gallery had received a nice layer of dust and dirt over their shoes.

Still, it was strange to see the chi walkers in regular teen clothes of jeans and t-shirts.

“Wow, you all almost look normal,” Jack commented when he saw them waiting out by Jarra’s car.

“We might be martial artists, but we’re still people,” Jose sniffed indignantly.

Jarra chuckled as she hopped into the driver’s seat. “We still look better than you, Jack, don’t worry.” She flashed him a grin, donning sunglasses.

Jack scowled, crossing his arms. Even Carly snickered at that one.

It took two trips, the first one harboring the twins since Leo couldn’t wait any longer to see the market, but everyone managed to pile in for the market.

Akiza and Carly immediately stole Lise away to go hunting for souvenirs for family members, and themselves, of course. She did promise to meet up with Garrett, Yusei, and Bruno later for weapons shopping as her friends dragged her away. Jarra happily joined them to point out what was fake, where the best deals were, and the best quality.
Jose tagged along with Jack, Crow, and Sasha. She tried to hide her mortification every time Jose attempted to flirt with the two of them. The four of them wandered aimlessly through the shops and stalls, taking in the sights and wondering just what exactly Jose was doing.

The twins ended up following Yusei, Bruno, and Garrett around. Garrett wasn’t much of a shopper or a tour guide. Wherever the twins lead the group in their quest to explore, he was always impatiently jiggling his leg, or tapping a finger to his arms.

Garrett was almost glad to see the girls laden with their shopping bags when they joined up again for a late lunch. He could finally look into buying new weapons, since Lise was going to pay for them.

“IT’s like a shopping wonderland!” Leo shoveled food into his mouth and talked just as fast. “The shops never end and there’s always something cooler to look at! Luna, can we live here?”

“Ew, Leo, chew with your mouth closed!” Luna cringed away from her brother. “And if we lived here our parents would kill us!”

“It is rather amazing, isn’t it?” Jarra grinned. “I’ve spent a whole day here before and I didn’t even see everything!”

“Well, anyone who wants to ride back with me after lunch is welcome too. I need a little break,” Sasha said.

“We’re done!” Jack and Crow immediately raised their hands.

Jose’s phenomenal pout made Jarra snort with laughter. “Don’t give up now! It’s barely been 24 hours!”

“I’ll call it a day too,” Carly said. Jack shot her a small smile, and mouthed ‘thank you.’ Carly had never been redder.

“We still need to chat with Yaretzi,” Lise gestured to herself and Garrett. “Maybe we can get her to throw in something good for half the price.”

“Good luck wizh zhat,” Garrett chuckled.

“Yareesi sells weapons?” Bruno asked.

“Yar-et-zi,” Lise said slowly. “And yes, she does. The best in Peru, actually. She’s really nice too. The first time we met she insisted on adding me to her contacts, and she’s always sending me photos of her newest creations.”

“Look at you, making artsie friends,” Akiza gently shoved Lise’s bandaged shoulder. “And you said you didn’t know how to make friends.”

“I still don’t. As a matter of fact, I don’t remember why you stick around, but I’m glad to have you as always.” Lise grinned at Akiza, who winked.

“Let’s get going,” Garrett got up and rubbed the dust away from his hands. “I’d hate to catch Yaretzi on a day she decided to pack up early. Sasha, mind coming back for us after the first batch?”

“No problem. Nothing too big now.”
“Large isn’t exactly my style,” Garrett cracked, a tiny smirk on his lips. “But we’ll see what we can do. Coming, Lise?”

“Yeah, just a sec,” Lise took a long gulp from her soda and stood up. “Ready!”

“Can we come too?” Bruno asked. He was followed by Yusei, and surprisingly Leo.

“Sure.”

“Well hello there!” Yaretzi greeted the moment she saw Garrett’s group approach. “How is my favorite customer?” Her red hair shone beautifully in the sun, and her dark skin almost glowed.

“Hi Yaretzi!” Lise chirped, waving.

Yaretzi leaned forward onto her table, scattering papers. She didn’t seem to care as she stared at Yusei, Bruno, and Leo. “Which one is yours?” She demanded of Lise.

Lise flushed pink, suddenly feeling self-conscious. “Uh, well um, this is Yusei, Bruno, and Leo. I’m uh…dating… that is… Yusei is my boyfriend.” By the time she had finished speaking, Lise’s entire face was red.

Garrett and Leo had long lost interest in the conversation and were perusing Yaretzi’s displays of weapons. More than once Garrett had to rescue Leo from being sliced to bits by the numerous blades the younger boy insisted on trying to play with.

“He’s fine,” Yaretzi waggled her eyebrows, watching in delight as Yusei slipped his fingers in between Lise’s.

Feeling like a third wheel, Bruno excused himself to go help Garrett lift a large ax off the ground where Leo had dropped it.

“So, when are the two of you gonna get hitched and make beautiful blue-eyed babies together?”

“What!”

“Oh!”

“No—we’re not—we’re still kids—we haven’t been—kids are too much—no—not that that would be bad—no!—or terrible—we’re still—I’m not even 20 yet—“ The two of them continued to babble, awkwardly talking over and around each other, so surprised were they by Yaretzi’s rather forward question.

Yaretzi burst out laughing. “You should see your faces! I was just kidding!”

“Eh heh, right…” Lise scratched at the back of her head.

Yusei shoved his hands in his pockets, and did his best to look less red in the face.

“Tell ya what,” Yaretzi walked out from behind her small counter and beckoned for Lise and Yusei to join her. “Because that was goddamn hilarious, I’ll let you leave with a twin pair of swords for half the prize, and a bow staff at ten percent off. Sound good?” She winked at Lise.

Garrett couldn’t contain himself. “Zhank you, Yaretzi! Zhat means a lot to me.”

“My pleasure. I’ve gotta treat my best customers every now and then.” She reached over and snatched a knife out of Leo’s hands as quick as a flash of lightning. “I’ll make it 20 percent if you get this clown out of here.”
Leo laughed nervously and put his empty hands up. “My bad.”

///

“So,” Garrett said. He balanced his two new swords on his shoulders. Lise carried his new bow. “You guys are in town for another day. What do you want to do with it?”

“Train,” Lise said at the exact same second Leo said “Eat!” The two of them laughed, and Lise pressed Leo for details about his desired food.

Yusei sidled up beside Garrett. “Do you think you could teach me how to use those swords?”

Garrett raised an eyebrow, and studied the other boy. After a prolonged silence, he finally said “I get up every day at 4. You think you can swing that? I don’t do complaints either.”

“None here. I’ll see you then.”
“Lighter on your toes! Use your other arm as a guard and for balance!” Garrett instructed Yusei.

Both boys had been up at the crack of dawn, just like Garrett had said. They’d been at sword fighting practice for almost three hours, the day getting lighter and lighter. Yet the sun still hadn’t risen.

After Garrett had disarmed Yusei for the hundredth time. He took stock of their progress. Yusei was covered in sweat, and breathing hard. He still reached for his swords to keep going another round. Garrett noticed Lise getting up and going inside. Neither he nor Yusei had noticed that she’d been watching.

Garrett frowned and checked his watch. “You know what? Why don’t we take a break? We’ve been going at it for almost four hours now.”

“What? Seriously?” Yusei looked around, noticing for the first time that it was lighter outside. His stomach let out an extremely loud rumbling sound.

“It seems you agree with me,” Garrett chuckled at Yusei’s red face.

“You guys okay with eating outside?” Lise came back out, helping Jose support a large basket of food. Jarra and Sasha followed along behind them.

“Definitely, but where’s everybody else?” Yusei sat down to eat with the others in the sand.

“Sleeping,” Lise yawned. “Like normal people.”

“Don’t worry,” Yusei grinned, nudging Lise a little, and avoiding her bandages. “Jack kept the coffee machine warm for you.”

Lise punched him affectionately in the shoulder, rolling her eyes. “I managed without it. Plus, I missed you guys way more. I’m just so glad you’re here.”

“Us too!” Jarra gushed, her green eyes lit up like they were spring itself. “With the new recruits from the dragon temple and you guys here, the temple has never had more people! I’ve always wanted to be a teacher.”

“And you’re a great one,” Lise agreed. “All of you are. I’ve learned so much while I’ve been here. I’m gonna miss you.”

“We’ll come visit,” Sasha said. “I’d love to see your home.”

“And we’ll take a buncha photos for Master Terra since she can’t leave the temple.”

“Just don’t get shot again,” Garrett nudged Lise’s foot. “You scared us when you disappeared for a day.”

Yusei’s head whipped over to Lise so fast, his neck cracked. “You got shot?”

Lise’s eyes darted back and forth over her glass of water. “No…” she finally said, slowly taking a drink. “Maybe.” She did her best to ignore Yusei’s narrowed eyes and disbelieving scowl, but it didn’t work. “Yes.”
“I’m not an idiot, Lise, I knew something was up when I woke up with my arm practically on fire.”

“You could feel it too?”

“Empathy link,” Yusei said.

Lise face palmed. “Oh fuck, I’m such an idiot. I totally forgot. Sorry, I just didn’t want you to worry. Greiger patched me up just fine, so no big.”

“You met Greiger too?”

“Here of all places, right?” Lise agreed. “It was super weird, but yeah he’s here guarding the Nazca lines from the other side of the desert.”

“Oh, the hermit,” Jose’s confusion suddenly melted away and he nodded knowingly. “He’s got his brother and sister with him. Cute kids, but shy.”

“We did all the worrying for you, Yusei,” Sasha said. She crossed her arms and leveled a firm grimace at Lise. “She was gone for more than 24 hours and we didn’t get a single message. We thought the Dragon Clan had managed to kill her.”

“Sorry guys,” Lise scratched at her head, and stared at her shoes.

“But the important part is that you’re alive and still here,” Jarra clapped her hands to make peace.

“Speaking of here, Yusei,” Jose fired at him. Yusei looked surprised to be directly addressed. “The blond guy, and the blue-haired dude; are they single?”

“Um, why do you want to know?”

Lise leaned over and whispered in Yusei’s ear. “Jose is gay.”

“Oh… Okay, uh, Bruno sort of lost his memory, so nobody knows about him. Jack and Carly might be trying to get together so, I guess no?”

“Damn it,” Jose whined, crossing his arms. “All the hot men are always taken. Lise, set me up with someone as fine as Yusei!”

“I’m what?!” Yusei’s entire face turned bright red, even the tips of his ears.

Lise chuckled. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you so red!”

Yusei made a point of staring only at the sandwich in his hand. Heat surged through his face the more the others laughed.

“So Lise, are you ready for your final exam?” Sasha said casually.

“No,” Lise eyes widened and her face paled. “Wh-what is it?”

“Master Terra changes it every time. It depends on the person,” Jarra explained. “She had me take everyone down in a king of the hill free for all. It was really tough.”

“Sounds like it.”

Jose chuckled. “Yeah, Terra made Garrett defeat her without hurting her.”
“LISE!!!!” Leo came running out onto the field, Luna right behind him. He tackled her into a huge hug.

“Sorry,” Luna huffed, catching her breath. “I tried to stop him.”

“No harm done,” Lise laughed. “What can I do for you, Leo?”

Leo’s eyes glittered like sequins. He was so hyped up he couldn’t stand still. “Show me the lava wall! I wanna climb it so bad!”

“Badly,” Luna corrected under her breath.

“Sure,” Lise stood up, jamming the last of her sandwich into her mouth.

“Yes!” Leo cheered, and followed along with a skip in his step.

“I’ll go with to make sure they don’t die,” Luna ran after them.

“So, Yusei,” Garrett stood, holding his dual swords. “Shall we continue?”

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“Come on, Leo, you can do it!” Lise called down to him.

She had long since made it to the top. Leo, not so much. He was having trouble getting around the lava crevices a third of the way up.

“Just breathe, calm down!” Luna called up.

Master Terra watched from her rock garden. She sipped tea serenely, making up her mind.

“Leo, stay put,” Lise decided after another five minutes passed. Leo was too scared to move. “I’m on my way.”

When Lise was finally even with Leo, tears and snot ran down his face. He was blubbering like a seal, and shaking. He was also coated in sweat. “L-L-Lise, I’m s-s-s-scared! It’s s-so h-h-high, and h-h-h-hot!”

“Hey,” Lise said in a calm, low voice. “It’s okay. It’s okay that you’re scared. This is scary, and really high.”

“Y-y-you’re scared too?” Leo sniffled, he wiped his nose on his sleeve.

“I was, for a long time, but everything is gonna be okay. I’m here, we’ll make it to the top together, sound good?”

Leo nodded. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it. Just focus on getting to the top.”

“Okay.”

Leo clambered, slowly, after Lise. She waited patiently for him at every stop. Multiple times Lise coached Leo into where to put his foot. Leo was so focused on climbing he forgot to look down. Then he almost couldn’t believe it when he made it to the top.
“You did it!” Lise raised her hands to the sky in celebration.

Leo stared out at the temple grounds. Then he looked down at the tiny speck that was now his sister. “I did do it! I did it!” His features split into a grin and he laughed to himself. “I DID IT!” He jumped for joy, screaming at the top of his lungs.

Lise beamed at him. “Yes, you did. Ready to go back down?”

“No!” Leo whipped around so fast he almost fell off the top of the lava wall.

Lise laughed. “Don’t worry, we’ll take the easy way down.” She bent down on one knee. “Just don’t choke me.”

“Oh!” Leo wrapped himself securely onto Lise’s back.

“Ready?”

“Uh huh.”

Without another word Lise stepped off the lava wall. Screams immediately filled Lise’s ears from Leo’s panic. After another three seconds, Lise swooped upwards. Leo forgot his terror and whooped loudly. The rush of wind was invigorating.

Lise landed right in front of a smirking Luna. “Well, looks like you had a good time.”

“Luna, it’s awesome up there!” Leo slid off Lise’s back and appealed to his sister.

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“Hmmm.” Master Terra drained the last of her tea.

///

“I’ve decided what your last training exercise shall be here,” Master Terra announced to Lise after lunch.

“Oh wow, um okay,” Lise said. She wasn’t sure exactly how to feel about that.

“Everyone,” Master Terra leaned to the side so she could address the others. Lise was a rather terrible window so.

“Meet in the courtyard as soon as possible, please.”

“Dishes can wait,” Jose said, dumping his load in the sink. “Master Terra is awaiting.”

Twisting her hair like a nervous fiend, Lise followed Master Terra to the sandy arena. The Chi Walkers followed her, as did the Signers and non-Signers.

Once, all her students were assembled and the others were seated comfortably, Terra turned and thrust her cane strongly into the Earth. “Today we will see how far you have come, Lise Kururugi. You are welcome to return here at any time, but understand that the future of your training is up to you.”

“Yes, Master Terra,” Lise bowed respectfully.

“I have decided that you will face me on this, your last day of intensive training in my temple grounds.”
“Oh, okay,” Lise nodded her head from side to side, weighing the meaning of a match between herself and her master.

“But you will not be alone. You must command and direct your friends so that they may assist you.”

“You…you mean? But Sasha is the leader. I don’t want to usurp her or anyth-“

“You are not replacing her. You are simply acting in her role for this exercise. Today, you must be their leader and take my cane from me,” Terra said, shrugging a little. “In say, fifteen minutes.”

Lise’s brain was going a hundred miles per hour. I have to be leader? But I’ve never been a leader! I’m no leader! Half the time I don’t even know what I’m doing!

“Lise,” Sasha put her hand on her friend’s shoulder. “Remember all the things we’ve taught you over this month. Ignore everything else. Focus on your objective, and lead us. We will do as you ask.”

“Thanks, Sasha,” Lise breathed for the first time in a full minute.

“In one minute, the game begins,” Master Terra extracted a small pocket watch from her long sleeve. She tossed the watch to Luna, who fumbled with it until she was able to safely grasp it. “You may be our time keeper, dear.”

“Oh um, okay,” Luna’s cheeks flushed pink, pleased at having been chosen to help.

“Surround her,” Lise said. “Then we strike.”

The Chi Walkers fanned out. In a circle, they corralled Master Terra.

“Thirty seconds!” Luna shouted out.

Lise readied herself, thinking instead of a strategy. It’s five against one, but that doesn’t mean anything against Master Terra. She said to win we have to take her cane from her, but our real objective should be to subdue her. While she’s able-bodied and ready, she won’t let us take the cane for sure. We’ve got to lock her down then, make it so she can’t move. First, I need some distractions to confuse her…

“Go!” Luna cried.

“Everyone full frontal assault!”

The five chi blockers raced inwards, straight for their prey. Master Terra yawned and dodged all five attacks by leaping straight into the air.

“Line charge!” Lise instructed.

She arrived at Terra’s new position quickest. Lise slid, baseball style underneath Terra’s swinging cane, leapt to her feet, and was immediately brought down to the ground by a swift hit to the pit of her knees.

Terra engaged in a wooden sword fight with Garrett, using her cane. Sasha saw an opening, and tried to shock Terra with her glove, but Terra knocked Garrett’s sword into Sasha’s line of fire. Jarra shot her cable at Terra’s feet, hoping to trip her up, but Terra practically danced out of the way. Instead, Jarra ended up tripping Lise up again.
“Don’t tell me that’s all you children have,” Terra said. She casually dusted some sand off her sleeve.

“Now what?” Garrett twirled his sword, his lips drawn in a dismal scowl.

“Um… Master Terra, can we uh…could you give us your cane?” Lise asked, flashing an awkward smile.

Terra lifted an eyebrow. “An amusing try, but no.”

“Zhe fuck vas zhat?” Garrett practically spat.

“What?” Lise spread her hands. “I figured it was worth a shot!”

“Time is running out, my children.”

“You have nine minutes left!” Luna added helpfully.

“Okay, Jose you’re with me, Garrett cover us from a distance, Sasha and Jarra, wait for my signal. Work together! Go!”

Lise and Jose attacked at Terra from different angles. Lise fired energy blasts, and Jose fired a variety of bombs. Garrett offered support from afar, tossing his wooden throwing knives. Terra gracefully dodged each attack like an older ballerina. The three of them managed to get her closer to Jarra and Sasha though.

“Now!” Lise yelled.

Jarra shot her cables right at Terra’s feet. Sasha aimed her special glove at the cables and charged them with electricity.

At the last second, Terra twirled out of the way. Jose got the full brunt of the makeshift taser.

“Jose!”

The girls stopped their attack. Jose looked okay, but he was certainly more crispy than usual.

“Oh no, Jose are you okay?” Lise asked.

“No I know what Kentucky fried chicken feels like,” Jose groaned, but he managed to get to his feet.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Lise said.

“I’m sorry, Lise. We seem to keep messing up,” Jarra said. She stuck out her bottom lip. “She’s just so fast.”

Lise’s face suddenly lit up. “Maybe we should use that! I think I have a plan, listen.”

“While the football huddle is adorable, you do have a time limit,” Terra reminded her students.

“Oh, you have three minutes left!” Luna told them.

Lise, Garrett, Jose, Jarra, and Sasha stormed Terra in a circle of attacks. They never ran ahead of each other, or slower, but they never broke their order. Terra dodged attacks accordingly, trying to figure out why the deliberate pattern.
“Jarra!” Lise suddenly cried.

Again, the girl shot her cables at Terra’s feet.

“And I thought I taught you better,” Terra leapt out of the line of fire.

Jarra ensnared Jose again, and dragged so that he was right under Master Terra’s landing.

“Have a nice fall!” Jose winked at his Master, and left behind a bomb.

“Garret!”

The explosive detonated a second after Terra’s landing. She would have moved out of range if it weren’t for Garrett’s well-placed knives pinning her robes to the ground. The resulting sticky rice ensnared one of Terra’s legs.

“Quick! Before she can escape! Jarra! Sasha!”

Once again, the two girls aimed the ‘shocking’ cables at Master Terra. Except that Terra had already freed herself from the sticky rice with one chop from her cane.

“That won’t stop me!” Terra sidestepped the cables.

“Think again!” Lise created a giant shield bubble, not unlike the one she had once used to hide from her father. With the red energy bubble encasing Master Terra, she couldn’t run from the electrified cables.

Grunting with effort, Lise shrunk the bubble’s size, forcing Master Terra to adjust to the smaller space and avoid the same thing that had happened to Jose.

Master Terra closed her eyes. Her breathing slowed, controlled. In. Out.

Suddenly her fist slammed into the side of Lise’s bubble. The shield was instantly cracked.

“Uh oh,” Jose bit his lip, unsure as to what to do.

Lise sunk down to one knee. She still maintained her shield, though the effort was clearly taking its toll. “Jarra, Sasha, don’t stop! Garrett, Jose, be ready to take the cane!”

Master Terra punched again, further cracking the bubble.

“Here she comes!”

On the third punch, the entire bubble shield dissolved. Jose and Garrett leapt for the cane.

Lise pushed herself back to her feet, and did the same.

Jarra adjusted the angle of her cables to where Terra had moved. Sasha gritted her teeth with the effort of maintaining her electrifying power.

Terra moved out of the way at the last second, and both of Jarra’s cables ended up shocking Jose and Garrett. Then, Terra smacked Lise away with her cane.

“OW!” Lise complained, sitting up in the dirt.

“And time’s up!”
“You so enjoyed that!” Lise accused. “You’re still mad about me disobeying orders!”

“Yes, a little,” Master Terra smirked.

“Well, you got your revenge,” Lise grumped. “We couldn’t get your cane, which means I failed.”

“When did I say getting my cane means you’ve won?”

The Chi Walkers shared disbelieving looks.

“But-I thought-You said!”

“I said you had fifteen minutes to try and take my cane, not that you needed to in order to succeed. I think you more than proved you can be a successful leader.”

“You lost me.”

Master Terra stretched herself to her full height, which wasn’t much. Still, she was taller than Lise while she sat on the ground, so Terra was going to take what she could get. “You lack confidence, and often become frustrated when you cannot do things perfectly on your first try. Excellence comes with practice, and you can certainly lead people if given the chance. Go into the future more confident in yourself and occasionally stepping into the role of a leader. You never know, you might need to lead one day.” She shrugged and adjusted her robe. It had become rather wrinkly from their fight. “Still you cannot expect to win all your fights, we are human after all. Today was a success though.”

“Um…still not seeing how?” Lise stood up, brushing herself off.

“You were forced into a position where you had to take charge. It was rocky, and you didn’t achieve your end goal, but you stayed with it. You didn’t give up in the face of adversity, and you came up with new and different, creative methods to attack your opponent when your first attempts failed.” Terra smiled up at Lise. “I’m proud to have been your Master during your time here. I believe this will not be our last meeting, and I look forward to seeing how your future turns out.” She bowed respectfully.

“Thank you, Master Terra,” Lise sniffled, but she was able to get through a respectful bow of her own without unleashing the water works. “Um, I’d…like to hug you now, if that’s okay?”

Master Terra sighed. “Fine, you’ve earned it.” She spread her arms.

Lise half tackled her in a big hug. It was difficult to gauge hug intensity due to Master Terra’s tiny size, but abundant strength. You never knew when she was going to play the “old” card.

Leo frowned, crossing his arms. “I don’t get it. She’s hugging Master Terra because she lost?”

Luna facepalmed, and Akiza rolled her eyes with a small smile upon her face.

“So…” Garrett held up his wooden practice swords. “Are we going to continue training today?”

“I think I’d rather spend my last day relaxing, honestly,” Lise laughed.

Fingers laced in between Lise’s. She smiled at Yusei’s familiar touch. “Besides, our plane’s supposed to take off tonight at 12:30.”

“I’m up for relaxing too!” Carly piped up. “I saw some beautiful gardens back there. I wouldn’t mind a soak in the baths either.”
“The gardens are mostly for meditation,” Garrett winced.

“Well, we can ‘meditate’ on the fact that we’re relaxing so much,” Akiza pointed out.

“I am all for that,” Jarra’s green eyes were alight with a blaze that made them resemble flaming gems. “If anyone wants their hair braided just say the word!” She enthusiastically lead the girls for the natural pools.

“Got outvoted, mate,” Jose winked at Jack, in a spot on imitation of the boy’s accent.

Jack pretended not to notice. The light pink color that crept onto his cheeks said otherwise.

“Teach me how to throw knives!” Leo pleaded, doing his best cute eyes he could muster up at Garrett.

“I zhink not.”

“Aw…”

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“And I think that’s everything.” Akiza and Carly stood back from Fuego. Its trunk was crammed with so much luggage, the back end of the car sagged.

“If my baby breaks down carrying so much crap, I’m holding all a you responsible,” Jarra threatened.

“Noted,” Jack nodded, swinging himself into the backseat.

Lise broke off her hug from Jose. “Thanks so much for dinner again, Jose. You’ve got the best cooking in all of South America.”

“Aw,” Jose covered his blushing face and waved Lise’s compliment away. “I dunno about all of South America. Maybe most of it.”

“Yeah, because there are other people here that can literally make culinary explosions,” Lise rolled her eyes and punched Jose’s shoulder affectionately.

Jarra swept Lise into a hug next. She hefted Lise into the air, her hug was bone-crushing. “We’re gonna miss you!” she sobbed. “You have to text me often, okay? Nothing is too stupid or off limits. I wanna know everything!”

“Even the embarrassing parts?” Lise wheezed.

“Especially those!” Jarra gasped, setting Lise back down on the ground. “They’ll make you grow into an excellent warrior!”

“I’ll take your word for it. Send me embarrassing training photos too.”

“Deal,” Jarra agreed, fist-bumping Lise.

Sasha wasn’t much of a hugger, so she extended her hand. Lise took it and they shook hands firmly. “You are a worthy opponent. I look forward to seeing how far you go with my own eyes one day.”

“I accept your challenge,” Lise smiled. She and Sasha bowed in respect to each other.
Lise bowed again to Master Terra. “I can never thank you or repay you enough for all your help and training, so I guess, until I see you again?”

Terra hugged Lise, surprising the girl. “You’re welcome back any time. We are students and teachers both.”

“Thanks,” Lise sniffled, hugging Terra back.

“And take this,” Master Terra extracted herself from Lise to allow Garrett to come forward.

He held a long staff that he presented to Lise. “I’m not very good at saying good bye, so I thought I’d make you this instead.”

Lise held up the bow, staring at it with her mouth wide open. Traditional Chinese dragons were carved into the meaty middle of the bow. They swirled and roared in the clouds. The bow had been painstakingly painted black, and then the eyes had all been dabbed the red of rubies. The painted finished even gleamed in the receding light of day.

“Zhe perfect veapon for zhe dragon girl, no?” Garret beamed at his handiwork.

“Thank you so much.” Lise yanked Garret into a hug. The waterworks had finally gotten the best of her. “It’s beautiful.”

“It’s mostly for forms, so don’t vack anybody wif it. I zhought about blades, but zhat vould be harder to get zrough customs, so…yeah.”

“Good call, good call,” Lise nodded, pulling away and wiping at tears.

“But when you get back to Japan, practice your swordsmanship. Yusei seemed very adamant about becoming proficient.”

“I will,” Lise promised. She slid her new bow back into its protective wrappings. “Good bye!” She hopped into the passenger seat of Fuego.

Jarra turned the ignition, and the gang was off towards the airport.

///

Crow stretched in his seat aboard the plane. “I’m glad we visited Peru, but it does feel nice to be going back home too.”

“Yeah,” Bruno agreed. “It was a bit more excitement than we bargained for.”

“All I want to do now is to sleep.” Jack yawned. He pulled out his travel pillow, mask, and teddy bear. “No one disturb me until this plane lands.”

“Yes, sir,” Akiza rolled her eyes. “But it looks like Yusei and Lise beat you to dream land.”

“What?” Leo exclaimed. “No! We still have to finish our tag match!”

“Leo, let them sleep,” Luna scolded her brother. “They’ve had a long day. Besides, after climbing that lava wall, you’re gonna crash soon too.”

“I am not!” Leo insisted stubbornly.

“Just watch,” Akiza whispered to Carly. “He’ll be snoring in a half hour.”
“Better fall asleep before he does then,” Carly giggled.

The others continued to chatter as they waited for the plane to take off. In the window seat, Yusei had fallen asleep almost immediately. He had flipped up the arm rest beforehand, just in case Lise wanted to…sleep with him? Cuddle? Neither of those words felt or sounded right.

It didn’t matter. She’d slumped against his shoulder, and passed out. An entire month had passed since he’d been able to feel the joys of her head rested on his chest or shoulder. The warmth and trust alone from the unwitting gesture had always made his heart feel lighter.

He smiled and kissed Lise’s hair. “Night, Sky Eyes,” he murmured, and quickly joined Lise in sleeping soundly.
“We’re finally home! Jack cried, groaning from the ache in his limbs from the plane and then their taxi ride.

Bruno climbed out next, rubbing the bags under his eyes. “How does my body simultaneously want to go back to sleep and do push ups to make up for all the sitting?”

“Planes suck,” Lise stated. She stretched, her spine and knuckles cracking. “It’s good to be home though.”

“Forget home,” Leo complained. “I’m hungry! I need food for energy!”

“Don’t worry, buddy, we’ll order some take out,” Crow assured Leo.

“Pull yourself together, weirdo,” Luna whispered.

“Okay,” the cabbie added up the bill on his tablet. He was smiling like driving a ridiculously oversized vehicle that could house twelve people was finally going to pay off. “Your tab is… $250.”

“I’ve got this,” Akiza whipped out a small purse, produced a shiny credit card, and handed it over. “What?” she added when she noticed everyone was staring at her. “Being a Senator’s daughter has its perks sometimes. It’s all on dad.”

“Sounds perfect to me,” Jack grinned. “I’ll grab the luggage.”

“Oh no you don’t!” Crow ran after him. “You’re gonna help with everyone’s bags! Not just your own!”

The cabbie handed Akiza her card, and bowed. “Have an excellent evening, miss.”

Judging by her smirk, Akiza liked that bow. She turned back to her friends as the cabbie drove off. “So food?”

“PLEASE!” Leo screeched.

“Let’s get our stuff inside and then order a pizza or something,” Lise agreed. She lead the way into the garage entrance.

“LISE!” A tiny person with red, bushy hair tackled her to the ground in a big hug. “Welcome home!”

“Whoa!” Lise was so surprised she fell to the ground, and one of her shoes popped off. It flew straight at Bruno, who surprisingly, snatched it out of midair before it could smack him in the face.

“Nice reflexes!”

Thanks,” Bruno was staring at his own arms like he’d never seen them before.

“Rally!” Lise gasped and hugged Rally back. “What’re you doing here?”

Lock and Key Part 1
Rally pulled back, his eyes shining. “We were watching your place while you were gone! It’s been
awesome, but I’m so happy to see you! I’ve started school too, and Yusei said you were in Peru,
and I’ve gotta show you- come on!” Rally kept talking as he pulled Lise back up to her feet and up
the stairs into the kitchen.

“Tank, look! Look! It’s Lise!” Rally announced once he’d brought her into the kitchen.

“Hi Tank, Nervin, Blitz,” Lise waved at all of them as she saw them. “It’s been forever!”

“Lise!”

They took turns hugging, and then when Yusei, Akiza, Jack, Crow, Leo, Luna, and Bruno walked
in there was even more hugging.

“We should all sit down,” Blitz finally said.

“Yeah,” Nervin adjusted his glasses. “We didn’t make dinner for nothing.”

“And there’s plenty to go around,” Tank added, his mouth watering.

Rally sat at the head of the table beside Lise and Yusei, at his insistence of course. He talked about
how starting fifth grade had been. That is, when he wasn’t shoveling homemade riceballs into his
mouth. Akiza sat on Lise’s left, next to Crow. Tank was across from them, giving an update on his
new job at a bakery. Jack had somehow gotten into an arm wrestling match with Blitz that Leo was
gleefully refereeing. Nervin and Luna all shared a collective glance, as if they were all thinking
how the hell did this happen? Our friends are weird.

It was Bruno who was hit by a sudden realization in the midst of shoveling a bite of beef into his
mouth. These people were like a family. A weird, unorthodox, thrown together family of three
teenage boys, two teenage girls, three kids, three middle aged men, and himself; the amnesiac. It
also hit him that perhaps he hadn’t had a family, but he’d certainly had people he cared about too.
Nevertheless, it felt right to be a part of this family. That they’d help him find his own people soon.
That and the first step in doing so was to help them find their program.

Akiza, Leo, Luna, Rally, Tank, Nervin, and Blitz all had to leave after dinner. Akiza, the twins, and
Rally all had school the next day anyway.

“Time to hit the hay,” Bruno yawned. “See you in the morning.”

Crow and Jack yawned in response, and followed him up to the third floor.

“Hey, before we go to bed, can I ask you something?” Yusei blurted out at the bottom of the
ladder.

“Me?” Lise stopped.

“Yeah,” Yusei picked at his fingertips. “I was thinking of letting Bruno have my bed so he
wouldn’t have to keep sleeping on the couch.”

“Okay,” Lise nodded slowly. She wasn’t quite sure where he was going with this. “And you would sleep…”

“With you?” Yusei’s cheeks flushed pink when he saw Lise’s eyes widening. “N-Not like that! Just
being, I mean, sleeping in the same bed…”
“More than just one night where we’re not trying to forget all the shit that’s traumatized us?”

“Especially boring nights.”

Lise’s cheeks went from light pink, to fuchsia, to fire engine red. “So technically share a room.”

“Yeah, I didn’t want to just move in without asking you.”

“We should do it,” Lise nodded. “But…You can’t leave grease stains anywhere but the garage.”

“Oh, for a second there I thought your conditions would be harder than just showering every day,” Yusei smiled and tickled Lise in the sides.

She laughed and punched his shoulder, then kissed him quickly on the lips. “Let’s go to bed. I’m tired, and I think sitting on that plane for 14 hours turned my spine into a loose sack of pebbles.”

“Yeah, mine too.” Yusei chuckled, following Lise up to bed.

///

Next morning, Lise was the last to wake up. Her sleep schedule was the most used to Peru’s since she had spent a month there, not merely four days. She dropped into the kitchen yawning.

“Sleep all right?” Jack asked after his morning cup of coffee.

“Nope,” Lise grumbled. “Got two hours, maybe. Just messed around on my computer until I fell asleep.”

“Ah,” Jack got up and stopped Lise from pushing the regular coffee button on their espresso machine. “No, my friend. This calls for a double espresso,” he said.

“Sounds good,” Lise yawned again. She got to work on putting together a bagel with cream cheese for her breakfast.

“So,” Bruno leaned on the table. He steepled his fingers and gazed at each of his friends in turn. “what do we do about our stolen program?”

“What?!” Lise gasped, whirling to stare at Bruno. Her eyes were almost as wide as her mouth. “You guys got robbed?”

Yusei and Bruno shared an equally shameful look.

Crow sat down at the table across from them with his own breakfast. “Are you going to tell her or should we?”

Lise and Jack took their seats too. She bit into her finished bagel. “I’m listening.”

“Well,” Yusei bit his lip, and picked at the dead skin on his thumb. “Good news, Bruno and I finished the program for a new engine.”

“That’s awesome! I knew you could do it,” Lise’s expression fell. “Oh wait, there’s bad news.”

“Yeah, bad news is it was stolen,” Bruno said.

Yusei scratched at the back of his head. “By Lazar.”
“And you didn’t back it up, or save it?”

“No, we’d kinda been working on it nonstop for three days.”

“Without sleep,” Bruno added.

Lise polished off her bagel, and sighed. She put her hand to her head, and took a long sip of her coffee. “So let me get this straight. You two spent three days without sleep or human interaction making an engine program. Then you finish it, but you’re too tired to remember to save the damn thing in any way shape, or form, which sucks because a clown broke into our house and stole it the night before you went to Peru to meet me?”

“We only figured out it was Lazar because he ate some of our ramen-“

“My ramen,” Jack interrupted, sniffing indignantly.

Yusei rolled his eyes and kept going. “And analyzed the fingerprint he left on the cellophane by hacking into the Security Database.”

Bruno nodded. “I’d say that about covers it.”

“And you routed the source through a bunch of different servers, right?” Lise asked.

“Of course,” Yusei crossed his arms. “I’m not an animal.”

“Just checking,” Lise said. She took another sip of her coffee, and stood up. “The problem now, or at least the one I can see, is it’s been four days and the trail has almost definitely gone cold.”

“Exactly,” Crow said. “We might never get it back.”

“There was a lot of adlibbing and spur of the moment stuff too, so it’s not like we can just recreate it either,” Yusei said.

Lise nodded, processing the information. Whether she was conscious of it or not, she began to pace back and forth. The boys watched her do this for about a minute, unsure if they should stop her or not.

“Could you hack back into the database?”

Bruno shrugged. “It might be harder this time, but together we can manage.”

“What’re you getting at?” Jack sat his empty coffee cup down.

“You’ve confirmed Lazar stole the program right?”

“And my ramen!” Jack reminded everyone.

Everyone ignored him.

“The database matched the fingerprint to him, no doubt,” Crow said.

“If I’m right, then I think we can at least find out where the program might be,” Lise said.

“No way.”

Crow frowned. “Ya lost me. Lazar could be anywhere. It’s been four days.”
“Yes and no,” Lise said. “Lazar is the vice director, the second highest position someone can hold in this entire city, so he has access to heavily secured buildings. Places with lots of security always have cameras.”

Yusei popped up to his feet. “My god, Lise, you’re an evil genius!” He kissed Lise’s heavily blushing cheek and swung himself into the chair before one of their computers.

“Still lost over here,” Jack said, frowning deeply.

Lise motioned for them to join Yusei at the computers. Bruno logged on to the other computer to help when he was on the same page.

“Lazar is like anyone with a job. You come and go constantly from the same place over and over again in a pattern. Stealing our program was a break in that pattern. So if we can find the other break in his pattern, where he stashed the program, we can go and get it. Lazar is the vice director, so if we can access the security cam footage of his usual comings and goings, and then of the break in the pattern in a different building, we’ll find the program. Lazar isn’t a total idiot, so he wouldn’t bring the program into the building he works at, but as vice director he has access to other secure buildings he could stash it at.”

“I sure hope you’re right!” Crow grinned, but then he tapped at his chin. Something had occurred to him. “Hey, if the building Lazar hid the program in is super secure, how are we going to get in?”

“Uh…”

“I’ll give Blister a call,” Yusei said. “He’s the best at hacking and forgery last minute.”

“First, we have to sift through this footage to find out what building we need to access in the first place,” Bruno pointed out. He had joined Yusei’s furious typing, and they’d breached the security database even faster than last time. “Even if we’re only sifting through four days worth, it’s a lot of data.”

“Something still doesn’t make sense,” Crow said. He tapped his knuckles to his lips. “Why would Lazar steal our program anyway? Did someone tell him to steal it?”

“We could ask him,” Jack suggested.

Everyone stared at him.

“What? We know him. We could set up a meeting or something.”

“Maybe as a last resort.”

“Hmm,” Bruno scratched his chin as he brought up and discarded information. “The program could be useful to anyone who steals it. If he did give it to someone else, he could sell it for a high price.”

“Oh, then maybe he would be acting alone,” Yusei said.

“I think we should try and contact Lazar after we get the program back,” Lise spoke up.

Jack’s eyes glistened, like he was trying not to cry. “You agree with me?!”

“For interrogation purposes, yes.”

Bruno turned back to his computer.
“Hey,” Yusei put a hand on his shoulder. “That program is something that connects the two of us, and everyone else with our dream to win the WRGP. We’ll find it.”

“Thanks,” Bruno smiled.

“We’ll definitely get it back.”

///

Four days ago, Lazar had brought the jump drive containing the program to the Security Bureau. He immediately contacted the new directors.

Placido took Lazar’s call.

“As you commanded, I stole their program,” Lazar held up the jump drive.

“You left without a trace, didn’t you?” Placido said.

Lazar slumped against his desk, smiling and giggling a little. “Of course not! I wouldn’t make mistakes like that at all!”

“Fine,” Placido said. “Then bring it to me. I’ll send you the location.”

“Me?”

Placido drew his sword. He was only a hologram message, but Lazar still stepped back in fear. His eyes crossed just to keep the sword’s tip in view. “Of course, you! Bring it now!”

“U-Understood!”

Twenty minutes later, Lazar entered a building that looked like a large, metal Nike swoosh. Signs outside stated the building was closed for maintenance.

“Really now, why do I have to do this kind of labor?” Lazar complained, walking down a darkened hallway. “It was a lot better with Director Goodwin.

At the end of the hallway he came into a massive room with a control panel. It looked like something straight out of Star Trek.

Placido was at one of the many computers in the control panel. He turned to Lazar with a scowl when his lackey came in.

“Sorry for being so late. I made sure to cover my tracks, so don’t worry,” Lazar grinned and bowed cheerfully. “The program is right here, as you can see.” He pulled the drive out of his sleeve and handed it over.

“Not bad for a clown,” Placido said. “Good job.”

“It was nothing,” Lazar said. “I’m the vice director of the Public Security Maintenance Bureau, and without telling any of my subordinates. I infiltrated their home myself, and stole the data. In return, it really isn’t much, but won’t you tell me what you’re using the program for?”

Placido stood. He drew his sword once more, and slashed it in a figure eight before Lazar’s nose. “Don’t stick that nose of yours into things that don’t concern you. It’s better for you not to know.”

Lazar trembled pitifully. He was mere inches from the sword, but this time it would actually hurt
him if Placido decided to use it.

Something beeped on the control center’s dashboard. Placido turned to it, and sheathed his blade. “It seems you tripped the alarm. In case we do get some rats, good to know it works so well.”

Lazar bit his lip. “Y-Yes, w-well I’ll be on my way now!”

Placido didn’t acknowledge Lazar leaving. He was done with the clown anyway. “Just in case, I’ll leave an extra surprise.” He waved his hand over the keyboard.

///

“Got it!” Bruno was saying back in present day. He paused the footage and zoomed in. Security cameras picked up Lazar going into this abandoned warehouse three days ago.”

“I’ll wake up Lise,” Yusei grinned. He patted Bruno on the back. “I knew we could do it.”

“And since it’s abandoned we shouldn’t need any security codes or keys to get in.”

“Nice,” Yusei dragged Lise off the couch she’d conked out on. “Come on, Lise, wake up. You’ll be pissed if you miss this.”

She groaned in protest, still half asleep. “No…”

“Jack, Crow!” Bruno called. “Get ready! We’re gonna get our program back!”

“Maybe you should ride with me, just to be safe,” Yusei suggested.

Lise yawned, stretched, and rubbed at her eyes. “That’s probably a good idea.”

///

“Doesn’t really look like much,” Yusei stated once the five of them had pulled up.

Jack scowled. “You sure this is the place?”

Bruno looked at the address he’d written down. “Yes, this is it.”

Lise yawned and dismounted Yusei’s bike. “It looks brand new. Why would it just suddenly be abandoned?” She pointed at the caution tape marking the building as off limits.

“Guess we’ll find out,” Crow ducked under the tape first and lead the way inside.

The hallways and rooms were dark. Ceiling panels were only half installed, and the half-assed piping was drooping down. Other than that, it was state of the art gear that had halted out of the blue. It was almost like walking through a haunted space station.

The hallway split off into two directions.

“I say we split up,” Crow said immediately. “Jack and I will go to the right, and Bruno go with Lise and Yusei to the left. If we run into any trouble, call.”

“And we’ll back outside in an hour,” Yusei added.

“Got it,” Jack agreed. He and Crow raced down their hallway.

Lise, Bruno, and Yusei advanced, keeping their eyes peeled. The air grew colder the farther in they
walked, until they could see their breath steam in the frigid air.

Lise shivered. “If this place is abandoned then why do they keep it so cold?”

“It’s either the weirdest looking meat locker-“

“Ew!”

“Or they keep machines down here,” Yusei said. “My guess is whatever was keeping them cool went a little too far, which is why it feels like an ice box.”

“Oh goody,” Lise grumbled.

They passed a door and a small window mounted beside it. Inside the room were dozens of conveyor belts and assembly machines. All of which were switched off.

“What kind of factory is this?” Bruno blurted. “What were they making?”

“Yeah, this is the first time I’ve seen machines like these,” Yusei agreed.

An alarm started blaring.

“Security cameras must work too,” Yusei muttered.

Metal doors started to descend from the ceiling.

“It’s sealing us in!” Lise was the first to bolt for the door.

“Hurry!” Yusei ran right behind her.

Lise dove and rolled to the other side. Yusei managed to do the same a second before the door closed with a snap.

“Bruno!” Yusei got back to his feet.

“Sorry, I couldn’t make it!” Bruno yelled back through the door.

“Damnit, now what?” Lise punched the wall irritably.

“Can you cut through it?”

She shook her head. “It’d be like that soda truck all over again.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Bruno said. “I’ll go back and try to find Jack and Crow.”

“We’ll keep going then. There’s no other way to go,” Yusei said.

“Be careful!”

Yusei turned to Lise. “Let’s go.”

Lise nodded and followed him at a jog down the darkened hallway. Eventually they reached a door that, once opened, lead into a lit garage.

///

The sound of tearing paper rippled through one of the darkened rooms. A white line of light
illuminated and expanded into what looked like a small tornado. Placido stepped out of the portal, sheathing his sword. The portal immediately closed up behind him.

“Time to see if my new toys are ready.”

///

“Whoa, an empty garage,” Lise said sarcastically. “Honestly, I was hoping for something a bit more dramatic.”

“Stay on your toes,” Yusei glanced warily around. “I don’t like this at all.”

They surveyed the catwalk they were on and the garage floor. The giant doors were made of the same metal from the one behind them, but nothing really interesting caught their eyes, except for the stairs leading down into the main part of the garage. Even that was dull though. Lise flew out over the center to see better from a bird’s eye view, and preferably find an exit.

“I think we’re at a dead end,” Lise sighed.

Yusei had walked down to the floor below her. “But why try to stop us from getting into an empty garage?” His next step sank to the floor as a square panel.

A panel slid open in front of him, and a massive, yellow robot rose up from the level below them. Lightbulbs flashed where eyes, ears, and hair normally would have gone. Antennae stuck up at its shoulders, and the torso grew smaller until it sprouted into enormous industrial equipment sized treads for feet.

“More like a trap,” Yusei scowled deeply.

The robot’s eyes fixed on the two teenagers. “Analyzing.”

“Uh,” Lise and Yusei glanced at each other, wondering what to make of this bot.

“Confirmed: Yusei Fudo. Confirmed: Elizabeth Kururugi. I challenge the two of you to a duel.”

“And if we refuse?” Lise crossed her arms.

The robot regarded her coldly. “I am connected to the security doors behind me. They will only open if you can defeat me.”

“Figures,” Lise grumbled. She dropped back to the ground. “Me and my big mouth…”

“Let’s duel!”

///

Bruno realized, after he’d run off, that’d he’d forgotten his phone. He cursed himself. Of all the times to forget it.

He opened a door at random, hoping for the best. “Where is this?” All that met him was pure, pitch blackness. Bruno had no doubt that if he walked in and the door shut behind him, he wouldn’t even be able to see his hand in front of his face. Bruno’s question was still echoing off the walls, indicating the vast size of the room.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” a deep voice said.
Bruno jumped, and whirled to find himself staring at Placido. “Who are you?” Pain exploded across all the nerves in Bruno’s head. He clutched at it to try to get the pain to stop. Somehow he knew this person in white. “Y-You’re…”

Placido didn’t give Bruno time to remember. He punched Bruno, hard, in the stomach. Bruno went down faster than a dead horse.

“I won’t let anyone interfere,” Placido said. He stepped over Bruno’s body and into the room Bruno had opened. He approached the control station. “Rise my Riding Roids, and show me the power you now all possess!”

Greenish-white light swept outward from Placido’s control station. An innumerable amount of Ghost duel robots glowed with the same light. The program had just finished uploading into all their robotic brains.

///

“I’ll go first,” Yusei decided, drawing a card. *We don’t have time to mess around. The sooner we can win, the sooner that door opens, and we can get out of here.*

*Speedy.* Lise agreed silently. *We can do that.*

*Guess I’ll see what this bot is made of.* “I play the One for One spell card! By sending Speed Warrior to my graveyard, I special summon Level Eater from my deck in defense mode. Next, I normal summon Junk Synchron from my hand, and because of his ability I special summon Speed Warrior from my graveyard. I tune level two Speed Warrior with the level three Junk Synchron, and synchro summon…Junk Warrior! There’s more! Junk Warrior’s attack points go up equal to the attack points of all my level two or below monsters. It gains Level Eater’s 600 attack points! On that note, I set one card facedown and end my turn.”

“The probability of synchro summoning on the first turn…45 percent,” the robot said. Its eyes flashed 45% as it spoke. “That’s what the data says.”

“What is this thing calculating?”

Lise made an *I-don’t-know* sound, shrugging her shoulders.

The robot ignored them. “Therefore, the strategy that will be carried out the second turn is… sealing of high level monsters.”

“What?”

“You can do that?”

The robot began its turn. “From my hand, I activate the continuous spell card Level Limit Area B. Through Level Limit Area B’s effect, all level four or higher monsters on the field are switched to defense mode.”

“Well, that backfired,” Lise said.

“I set three cards, ending my turn.”

“Okay, then it’s my turn!” Lise drew a card.

*I think this thing might be using a Lock Deck to buy time.*
Lise nodded. *But he’s a robot. Who the fuck does he need to buy time for?*

*Beats me.*

*Even if it is using a Lock Deck, he doesn’t have any monsters. Technically, Junk Warrior an’t attack, but Level Eater could because its at a level below four.*

*Just be careful, Lise.*
“I’ll summon out my Smoke Raven!” Lise declared. Her small, shadowy bird alighted on her shoulder. “He’s not a level four or above monster, so he doesn’t have to switch into defense mode. Smoke Raven, attack his lifepoints directly!” The small bird took to the air and swooped towards the robot. “My raven has a special ability that doubles his attack points when he attacks directly! So instead of just 800 damage, you get 1600!”

“Then I’ll play my facedown card Graceful Revival! This trap allows me to special summon a level two or below monster from my graveyard, so I’ll bring back Speed Warrior!”

While Lise’s Smoke Raven had been attacking, the robot made no move. Once Yusei had played his trap, the robot’s eyes lit up again. “Probability of special summoning a monster than can attack through Level Limit Area B… are 98 percent.” The eyes flashed 98%, just like they had before with 40%.

“Uh oh.”

“At this time, Counter Trap, Malfunction, activates. By paying 500 lifepoints, the opponent’s trap is negated, and reset on the field.”

At the bot’s words, Speed Warrior was dragged back into the card, where it then lay flat again.

“So much for Speed Warrior,” Lise said, laughing a tad.

“Next, after countering the opponent’s card, Lock Dragon is special summoned in defense position.”

Robot: 3500
Lise: 4000
Yusei: 4000

The robot’s little dragon had a creepy smile, bug eyes, tiny wings, and nose shaped like an unusual key. It didn’t look like much, but it had a strong enough defense to knock Lise’s Smoke Raven back.

Robot: 3500
Lise: 3600
Yusei: 4000

(Lock Dragon: Atk: 0 Def: 2000)

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” Lise answered grudgingly. This is bad. That bot managed to counter both of our moves with just one card.

“Lock Dragon can be special summoned when a counter trap negates an opponent’s card,” the robot was explaining. “And as long as it remains on the field in defense mode, special summoning is not allowed.”
So no synchro summons at all!

I’m thinking that’s what its analysis was about earlier. It’s completely reading our moves.

Okay, but why? What’s the point of this thing in the first place?

“Continuing on, this card is also activated.”

“What?!” Yusei gasped.

“You mean, you’re not done!” Lise cried.

“The continuous trap Counter Force. Counter Force gains one counter when a counter trap is activated. By removing this card from play, a thousand points of damage will be inflicted for each counter.”

///

“Damnit!” Crow pounded on the closed garage door. “What’s going on? We were all supposed to meet back here by now!”

“Are you sure you got the time right?” Jack asked.

“Yes!” Crow grumbled to himself, and checked his phone for what felt like the hundredth time. “Still no signal. I can’t reach Lise or Yusei or Bruno.”

“Well, we can’t be of any help out here. Besides, we didn’t even find the program. It couldn’t hurt to take another look,” Jack scowled at the warehouse. Something was giving him a bad feeling. If their friends were in trouble, wouldn’t they have tried to say so.

“I’m in if you are,” Crow pocketed his phone.

Jack nodded and they raced back inside.

///

Placido surveyed his army of dueling robots. Sure, they were just cold, unfeeling machines, but he was their commander. Their king, so to speak. Forget the other Emperor’s. He was tired of waiting. The circuit would be finished sooner rather than later.

A security camera feed popped up. It showed Lise and Yusei trapped with the dueling robot, Jack and Crow back inside, and Bruno still unconscious on the floor.

Placido smirked. “So, the rats were able to discover that stupid clown. It matters little now. They can’t stop me.”

///

“I’m placing one card face down and ending my turn,” Yusei said. *I just hope we can keep it distracted long enough to get the hell outta here.*

You’re telling me. I’m almost afraid to try anything.

“It’s my turn,” the robot said. “I activate the continuous spell card Summon Pass. Summon Pass allows all players to draw a card when an opponent summons a monster, and the type of card is guessed. If the opponent’s drawn card is different from the type of card guessed, the summoned
“monster is destroyed. The chance of you two summoning a monster… decreases further by 15 percent.”

“I never thought I’d hate robots so much,” Lise muttered.

“I set a card face down and end my turn.”

Lise’s fingers paused over her deck. *Okay so, before I do anything, and because I’m massively sleep deprived, what’re we looking at?*

*For starters, it has five spell and trap cards on the field, face down and up.*

*With the goal of locking our moves, and gaining more Counter Force tokens. Maybe we shouldn’t try to break our way through as fast as possible.*

“All right, let’s see how this monster summoning mess of yours works,” Lise decided. “I summon my Flame Enchantress to the field in attack mode!”

“Due to the effect of Summon Pass, I draw a card,” the robot said. “If you guess wrong, your Enchantress is destroyed.”

Lise bit her lip and surveyed the field. *Okay, let’s see. It has one monster, and all the spell and trap card zones are full. I think the bot’s ultimate goal is get more counters for that Counter Trap combo he has, which means… “I say it’s a trap.”*

Question marks lit up in the robot’s eyes. “Correct, but how.”

Lise shrugged. “I mean, it doesn’t take a rocket scientist. You’ve got one monster, and like a billion spells and traps on your field.” She smiled. “Which means I get to keep my Enchantress. She comes with a little bonus too. She has two abilities, one of them is halving her attack points to attack you directly, but I think I’ll use the other one, which is destroying one spell or trap card you have in play, and I think I’ll destroy your Summon Pass card!”

“All right!” Yusei smiled.

“I thought about going after your Level Limit B, but that’s something you have to protect. Otherwise, our synchro monsters can attack.”

“Understood,” the bot said. “Analyzing counter measures.”

Lise scowled. “Okay, guess I’ll play it safe and end my turn with a couple face down cards.”

“It’s my turn then,” Yusei drew his card. *I think you’ve got the right idea. We’ve gotta get through his defenses however we can.* “I change the defense position Level Eater to attack mode. Next, from my hand, I activate Synchro Gift! By lowering a Synchro Monster’s attack points on my field to zero, I can give its original attack points to Level Eater!”

“Twenty-nine hundred attack points! That’s what I’m talking about!” Lise cheered.

“Level Eater, attack Lock Dragon!”

“Counter trap activate: Negate Attack.”

“What?”

“This card negates an opponent’s attack and ends the battle phase. Since Negate Attack activated,
Counter Force’s effect activates. When a counter trap activates, this card’s counter increases by one.”

“Great, now it has two,” Yusei growled. “Synchro Gift’s effect ends, and Level Eater’s attack returns to normal.”

The bot seemed unconcerned. “My turn. I set a card face down and end my turn.”

Another facedown? Lise, I’ve got a facedown that needs to be played. I can’t let that thing negate it. What about your cards?

Lise shook her head. They’re both in case it attacks. I’m getting crap right now. All I can do is try to attack directly with my Enchantress. No doubt his two facedowns will try to stop her from destroying anything else.

Definitely. I don’t think we can risk that strategy again.

“My turn, so I’ll draw,” Lise said. “I’ll have Enchantress use her second ability! She can half her attack points to attack you directly!”

Robot: 3000

Lise: 3600

Yusei: 4000

///

Placido chuckled to himself as he watched the footage. “Looks like you two are in a tight spot.”

“Placido,” the face of the head Emperor, Joel, appeared in a new holo-message. It was a tad difficult to discern because his mask, hair, and robe covered most of his face, but he did not look happy.

“What do you want?”

“Just what exactly are you planning?”

“I’m carrying out my plan,” Placido replied simply. “I’d appreciate it if you stopped watching me.”

“If you keep doing whatever you want, my plan will fall apart!” Joel’s one visible eye narrowed dangerously.

Placido’s expression darkened. “I don’t care about your plans. I’ll do what I want.”

“Wait, Placido!”

Too late. Placido had already put out his hand to dismiss Joel’s holo-message.

Placido smirked and raised his arms dramatically. “The Diablo, my Riding Roids with newfound power! Go out into the city and wreak havoc!”

At Placido’s words, the eyes of each of the robots glowed white. Their hangar door opened, and one by one they all drove out into the city.

///
Joel shook his head. He and Luciano sat in their nebulous throne room. Stars danced in figure eight patterns, and raced across the midnight blue sky. The pocket dimension they had created in the Director’s office was beautiful, and only accessible to the three of them. However, it was the two of them that watched the chaos Placido’s deviation had wrought in their holo-sphere suspended between their three thrones.

“What is Placido thinking?” Joel sat back wearily in his throne.

“He’s being immature,” Luciano said bluntly. “Weren’t you like that too?” He snickered at his own joke.

If not for the mask, Luciano could have sworn Joel was pouting. “I stopped acting like that a long time ago.”

Luciano shrugged. Placido was just another stupid adult. Why should he be concerned? “Placido isn’t interested in your method of using the Signers for the Circuit. He’s trying to force the Circuit with his own plan.”

“Using the Riding Roid army, huh? But how did Placido know that the Signers were developing a new engine program?”

“Are you interested?”

“What?”

“It’s not complicated,” Luciano smirked. “He had the clown bug their home the second he learned where the Signers lived. However, our motive is to complete the Circuit, but there’s no right or wrong way to reach that goal, right?”

Joel made a skeptical sound in his throat. “It’s foolish to change plans when we’re already so close!”

“It’ll be fine! To think, that after I grow up I’d end up like you two? I’d rather not grow up at all,” Luciano snickered again, content to watch how things turned out.

“What a troublesome brat,” Joel muttered.

///

Bruno was just coming to. The noise of so many duel runners driving past was something almost no one would be able to sleep through.

///

Placido stepped leisurely down towards the warehouse’s main control station. The last of his Riding Roids were leaving.

“Time’s up,” Placido smirked at the video monitor’s recording every angle of Lise and Yusei’s duel with the robot. “I won’t let myself become a mere follower of Joel’s plans. A shame all the Signers aren’t here, but at least I won’t be needing this factory again.”

He raised his hand over the keyboard. The controls responded like they were supposed to be fireworks for the New Orleans Mardi Gras celebration. When the technicolor lights settled down, Placido had initiated the countdown to self destruct.
“This is an emergency announcement. This factory will self-destruct in ten minutes. Please stop what you are doing and evacuate immediately.”

The alarm began sounding in every room of the warehouse.

Two loud noises in a row, and Bruno was finally getting to his feet. His head felt like he’d dipped it in liquid nitrogen and lava a billion times, but other than that he felt okay.

He peeked into the room he’d opened the door for earlier. The control panel glowed a soft green, but something small glowed red.

“The program!” Bruno dashed in and swiped it. He put the program in a secure pocket of his coat and zipped it shut. “Now to find everyone.”

“Hopefully you’ll all die here,” Placido turned away from the screens.

Sword in hand, he sliced it in a downward arc. The blade tore through the air, creating another portal. Placido stepped through, leaving the doomed warehouse without looking back.

“Oh fuck, this day just keeps getting better and better,” Lise groaned.

A digital countdown clock had sprouted above their heads, just past the robot’s shoulder.

“I guess we don’t have all the time in the world,” Yusei grumbled.

“Just when I thought it couldn’t get any worse!” Crow complained, running down the hallway with Jack right beside him.

“Don’t ever say that!” Jack shouted.

Crow skidded to a halt when the hallway forked off to the right. He’d spotted someone. “Hey, Bruno!”

“What happened? Where are Lise and Yusei?”

“We got separated in a hallway,” Bruno hung his head miserably.

“Damn it! Where did they go?!?”

Jack frowned and looked around. He pointed upwards. “There, that looks like the main control room. If we go there, we might find out where they are.”

“All right, let’s go!”

The three boys raced into the control room in no time. The threat of the explosion looming over their heads was motivation enough.
“Okay, here we go!” Bruno relaxed a little bit. The machines he could deal with, but the threat of death not so much.

“I hoped that was just a malfunction,” Jack pointed solemnly to the countdown clock. “We’ve got less than ten minutes now.”

Bruno got to work immediately, typing like a madman across the keyboard. Sweat broke out on his forehead.

“Can you stop it?” Jack asked.

“I’m trying, but it’s no good! The controls aren’t responding!”

The holo-screens Placido had been watching before he left suddenly popped up. Crow, Jack, and Bruno had three angles of their friends in mortal danger in high definition.

“It’s Lise and Yusei!” Crow gasped. “Are they dueling that robot?” He looked around and then leaned down when he found what he was looking for; a microphone. “Hey, Lise, Yusei! Can you hear me?”

“Are you okay?”

“What happened?”

“Jack?”

“Crow?”

“Bruno?”

“Is that you?”

“Of course it’s us!” Jack yelled irritably. “What’re you standing around for? Hurry up and get outta here! This place is gonna explode!”

“God fucking dammit!” Lise swore. “What kind of warehouse has a self destruct option? What, were they shopping at Evil Villain Supplies dot com? Motherfucker!”

Yusei winced as Lise continued her tirade at a lower volume. “We can’t leave! Unless we win, the door won’t open!”

“What?!”

“That can’t be…” Bruno whispered, his eyes wide.

“Then stop wasting time and win already!” Jack shouted.

“Gee, why didn’t I think of that?” Lise said sarcastically, rolling her eyes. “Oh wait, I did.”

“Look, you three need to get out of here. We’ll join you as soon as we win,” Yusei said. He looked directly into the camera above them.

“What?”

“We can’t do that!”
“Don’t worry,” Yusei cracked the tiniest of smiles. “I have a plan.”

“And I have a backup plan, just in case,” Lise added.

“Everyone go! We’ll be okay!” Yusei insisted.

“Yusei…”

Jack clenched his hands into fists and then slowly unclenched them. He turned to his friends. “I understand. We’re leaving, Crow, Bruno.”

Bruno gasped in horror. “I won’t leave them here! If you’re gonna leave, leave by your-“

Jack cut him off by punching Bruno in the face. He went sprawling against the computer.

“What’re you doing?”

“If you won’t run, then I’ll drag you by force!” Jack growled. His fists were still cocked.

“What?”

“You’re not the only one that doesn’t like this,” Crow said softly. His lips and brow were trembling with the effort it took to force himself to leave.


“We’ll be waiting for you guys!” Crow called back as they left.

“I won’t forgive you if you die in a place like this!” Jack shouted at them before he lead the way back out of the control room.

“Good luck,” Bruno said.

“Go!”

“Right!”

Jack hmphed loudly as he ran. “You don’t understand them at all. They don’t want us to worry, so we can escape with our lives.”

“But we’re not giving up,” Crow forced a smile onto his face.

“Even if there’s no chance of winning, they’ll make it out alive. One way or another.”

///

“Goddamnit. I just wanted to sleep today,” Lise whined, looking like she was going to crumple into a puddle.

“Lise, I know you’re scared. I’m scared too, but we’re gonna make it out. I promise,” Yusei offered her a small smile.

Lise took a deep breath. “I know. I’m prepared no matter what. It just pisses me off is all.”

“Good. Use it to win the duel if I can’t.”

“That’s not comforting.”
“Sorry, I think it’s my turn!” Yusei drew a card. “I summon Drill Synchron! Then I play the spell card Assassin’s Strike! Until this turn’s end phase, one monster gains the defense points of an opponent’s monster as attack points.”


“What?”

“By discarding one card, the activation of a spell card is negated, and destroyed. Then I activate Counter Force’s effect. When a counter trap is activated, the counters on Counter Force increase by one.

Now it’s my turn. I draw. From my hand, I activate the continuous spell Messenger of Peace. Both players cannot attack with monsters with 1500 or more attack points.”

“All it knows how to play is defense,” Lise frowned.

“The probability of you two losing on my next turn is 90 percent.”

“See, this is why I hate math,” Lise joked. “Oh, and would you look at that; only two minutes to spare.”

*The time limit is just a distraction. Just stay calm and power on through.*

*Couldn’t have said it better myself.*

Lise took a deep breath. “It’s my…turn!” She peeked hopefully at her card. “All right! I play Giant Trunade! This card returns all our spells and traps to our hands!”

“Counter trap activate!” The robot said immediately. “God’s Declaration! In exchange for half my lifepoints, this card negates the activation and effect of a spell, trap, or monster summon, and destroys it.”

Lise’s spell went up in a burst of golden sparks. “So much for that plan.”

*Robot: 1500*

*Lise: 3600*

*Yusei: 4000*

“Next, I activate Counter Force’s effect. Now Counter Force has four counters. Defeat for Yusei Fudo and Elizabeth Kururugi is now at 100 percent.”

“Then I guess my turn is over,” Lise said.

“I wouldn’t say we’ve lost yet,” Yusei smiled minuscule.

Lise’s eyes darted between Yusei and the robot. “We haven’t?”

“What?” The robot’s eyes turned into question marks.

Yusei’s smile grew. “You made a mistake in your calculations.”

“I do not make mistakes.”
“You’re right, there are no mistakes in your calculations,” Yusei said.

“Okay, I’m thoroughly confused,” Lise groaned.

“See, if the bot uses Counter Force’s effect, it’ll win, so it went out of its way to protect Counter Force using God’s Declaration. Now its lifepoints are halved, so, especially now that you’ve ended your turn, I have an opening for a reversal.”

“Oh awesome!”

“Unable to understand,” the robot said.

“It’s my turn! I release Level Stealer to summon Earthquake Giant!”

(Earthquake Giant: Atk: 1600 Def: 2100)

“Through Level Limit Area B’s effect, all level four or higher monsters on the field are changed to defense position.”

“But now I can activate Earthquake Giant’s effect,” Yusei said. “When Earthquake Giant is switched from attack to defense mode, I change the position of one of my opponent’s monsters.”

“All right!” Lise cheered with a grin. “Lock Dragon has zero attack points!”

“Now for our victory! I play the trap Panic Wave! This card destroys a card on my field, and all the face up cards on the field have their effects negated for this turn! Now I’m tuning my level five Junk Warrior and level three Drill Synchron to synchro summon…Stardust Dragon!”

“Total reversal percentage: 100 percent!”

“Go Stardust Dragon, attack!”

Robot: 0000

Lise: 3600

Yusei: 4000

“Lock is being released,” the robot stuttered out. Steam drifted out of the bot’s joints. “Lock is being released.”

The garage door rose behind the robot.

Lise was immediately dashing for the exit beyond the door. “Move it or lose it!”

“Right behind you!”

“Ten seconds remaining. Nine…”

*We’re not gonna make it!* Lise ground her teeth together in frustration as she ran. *Unless...* She reached out with her hand.

“Eight… Seven… Six… Five…”

Yusei wasn’t sure what Lise was doing. Holding hands before they exploded seemed kinda nice, but he much preferred living to be able to do that any other day. Nevertheless, he still clasped her
hand firmly in his. “Whoa!”

“Four… Three… Two… One…”

///

Crow, Jack, and Bruno had just exited the building. They had gained enough ground to be safe from the worst of the blast.

The warehouse went up in a blaze of black and orange smoke. The three boys lay still as debris rained around them, protecting their heads the best they could.

“Oh no…” Crow was the first to move.

“Are they…?”

“They’d better not be dead,” Jack said, his voice unusually husky.

They couldn’t make out anything through all the smoke and flames. Then something slowly came into view.

“Lise and Yusei!” Crow sighed with relief.

“They’re okay!” Bruno smiled with tears in his eyes. “Jack was right!”

“Of course I was! Let’s go get them.”

///

Lise held Yusei’s hand tightly as she flew. She didn’t really fly often with passengers, so it was taking everything she had to keep it together. Sure, she’d flown with Leo once, but he was like a feather in comparison.

“Nice quick thinking back there,” Yusei was saying. His cheeks were a little red. “For a second there I thought we were goners.”

Lise smiled down at him. “I told you I had a backup plan, one way or another.”

She set Yusei down on the grassy field they came across. It was far away from the warehouse’s fiery explosion.

Lise landed beside him to catch her breath. “I’m so tired,” she sighed. “Sorry I wasn’t much help.”

“No,” Yusei took her hand. “You’re why we’re both still alive. I’m sorry your first day back was… not so great. I’m glad to have you back in the city.”

Lise’s face turned pink. “Thanks. It’s good to be back.”

“Lise!”

“Yusei!”

Bruno, Crow, and Jack were running up the hill to meet them. Lise was confused to see Crow throw a wadded bill at Jack, which he collected happily.

“They have an ongoing bet now,” Yusei whispered in Lise’s ear. “I don’t know all the details, but I
think it has to do with us making out.”

“Oh gods,” Lise rolled her eyes, but she was smiling.

The three boys tackled them in a hug.

“You’re okay!”
The three Emperors were watching the Signers utilizing their illegal technology. They had holo-screens for Luna, and Akiza despite the two girls not living with the others. The addition of the bugs Lazar had planted meant they didn’t have to exert more power than was necessary for visual and audio of their prey.

“This is taking too long,” Placido pouted, clenching his fists.

“We must be patient,” Joel said, glaring at Placido. “Your plan is risky. It would be better to wait for the W.R.G.P. Then once all the Circuits are complete, the power enveloping this world will be unleashed.”

“But will things really go so easily?” Placido said. “Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten the Crimson Dragon. Goodwin’s plans failed because of her. As long as she and the Signers are free to do as they please, our plans will never proceed as scheduled.”

Luciano rolled his eyes. “What’s your point? You’ve already made your precious robot army.”

“Let me defeat Yusei Fudo. I’ll defeat him and steal Stardust Dragon. If even one card is stolen, the Crimson Dragon can’t interfere.”

“Why does it have to be Yusei?” Luciano sneered. “Your Ghost robot couldn’t even defeat him, so what makes you think you can?”

“What did you say?” Placido growled, leaning forward in his throne.

But Luciano wasn’t paying attention to him anymore. He was looking up at their holo-screens. The largest one depicted another meteor crashing down to Earth. “It’s here! It’s my tablet! I’ve been waiting for you! Now Placido won’t be the only one who gets to have fun!”

Everyone outdoors saw the meteor fall. It soared over the city, and crashed into the mountainous outskirts.

Crow pulled up to the garage, stripping off his work uniform. “Guys, did you hear?!”

The twins and Akiza were over after school as usual. Jack had decided to take a nap, and Bruno was checking the drive containing their program for any potential viruses. Lise was drawing and trying to stay awake, while Yusei tinkered with his runner.


“Yeah,” Crow said. “Apparently it’s making a big stink, from what I heard.”

“So, that shaking a while ago was a meteorite, huh?” Leo said.

Akiza frowned. “Didn’t Ghost appear right after a meteorite crashed the last time?”
“Yeah,” Crow nodded.

“Let’s go check it out,” Lise suggested.

“Hopefully it won’t be quite as ominous,” Luna said, though her nervous giggle indicated she didn’t really believe it.

///

When they arrived, a huge crowd had already amassed at the base of the mountain where the meteorite had landed. Police held people back. More scavenged the scene itself. Even from this distance, it was clear to see the meteorite had cleaved the mountain in half.

“Oh no,” Crow cringed at the sight of the crowd. “I hope this isn’t…”

“It’s exactly what it looks like,” Carly came stomping angrily from the front of the crowd. “Everything beyond this point is off limits.” She threw her pen and paper to the ground. “Every time there’s a great scoop I can’t even get close!”

“What about the meteorite?”

“Security took it away a while ago,” Carly hmphed, crossing her arms.

“Damn, that bites,” Crow face palmed. They were too late.

“Aw, that sucks,” Leo agreed. “We can’t even see the site?”

“Oh, hi Carly!” Lise waved.

Carly smiled at her friend. “Hi! Good to see you back in the city!”

Yusei was suddenly struck with an idea. “Well,” he glanced at Lise from the corners of his eyes. “We can’t see the site, but maybe…”

Lise curled her lip as she mulled it over. “I’d need a lot of altitude, so I doubt I’ll be able to see much.”

“Anything is better than nothing!” Carly gushed. She gasped dramatically, and reached into her bag. She handed Lise her camera. “Here! Take photos! You use this little toggle to zoom in.”

“All right, I’ll give it a shot,” Lise smiled slightly at her pun. She slung the camera over her shoulder. “I’ll find a good spot to take off and meet you back by our runners in 20 minutes.” She turned and ran into the trees.

Twenty minutes later, Lise landed a short distance from their runners.

Carly was the first person to reach her. Her grey eyes were bright with excitement. “Show me! Show me! Show me!”

“There’s wasn’t much to see,” Lise said. The others crowded around behind her to see too. Lise knelt a little so the twins had a decent view.

“the mountain is definitely busted,” Crow joked.

“But look at this,” Carly pointed at the actual indent the meteorite had made. “It looks like they’re filling it in.”
“Weird,” Akiza commented, her brow furrowed. “But what kind of meteor makes a perfect rectangle shape? And why does Security wanna cover it up?”

Carly looked so happy she could have burst with excitement. “It’s a scoop, and you can bet I’m gonna get to the bottom of it!”

“Just be careful. Last time a so-called meteorite fell, the Ghost robot began to appear,” Yusei said.

“I will!” Carly called as she ran off.

///

“Good morning!” All the children in Ms. Bartlett’s duel academy class chanted the next day.

She smiled at her students. “Today, I’ll be introducing a new friend. Please come in.”

A boy walked into the classroom. He must have been waiting in the hallway. His features were elfish in a mischievous kind of way. His eyes were a pale green, and his long, reddish hair was platted over his shoulder.

“This is Luciano, our new transfer student.”

“I’m Luciano,” he smiled politely and bowed to the class. “Pleased to meet you.”

Leo looked around in complete disbelief. A lot of the girls had dreamy looks on their faces, and even some of the boys. Leo leaned his chin into his hand, his dismal mood just growing worse.

Luciano’s eyes settled on Luna, and he smiled wider.

Taken aback, Luna smiled and her cheeks flushed light pink.

“Everyone is familiar with the Juvenile Grand Prix that takes place at the Duel Academia East Branch?” Ms. Bartlett asked.

“It’s the tournament that’s tough to even enter, right?” Bob raised his hand.

“Yes, and Luciano won that tournament.”

“Huh?” Patty gasped. “He won it?!”

“If you have any questions, feel free to ask Luciano. I’m sure it will help your studies.”

“He seems really nice, doesn’t he?” Luna whispered excitedly to her brother. Her cheeks were still pink.

“You really think so?” Leo raised an eyebrow at his sister. *No way he won. He was just lucky, that’s all. I could beat him no problem.*

///

Leo exclaimed in fear. He wasn’t doing so well in duel in P.E. In fact, he was losing again.

Luciano, his opponent, smiled. “Gear, Golem the Mobile Fortress attacks Morphtronic Videon!”

Leo fell to the ground in defeat. The last of his lifepoints were gone.

“Luciano wins!” Ms. Bartlett announced.
“Nice combo!” Patty cheered.

Bob grinned, clenching his fists. “That’s a veteran champion for you! Leo isn’t even on the same level!”

Luciano shrugged. “It’s no big deal.”

“Well then,” Ms. Bartlett said. “Next up is Luna and Bob. Swap places with Leo and Luciano.”

“Oh, thank you! Make sure to watch my duel!” Luna grinned, and scurried to her position.

Luciano smirked to himself. Of course I will, little Signer. Show me your power.

“Okay, begin!”

“My turn,” Luna declared. “I summon Sunlight Unicorn. I place two cards facedown and end my turn.”

“Here goes! My turn!”

///

On the way back to their usual classroom, Luciano stopped Luna.

“Oh Luciano!” Luna’s face felt warm, and she hoped she wasn’t blushing too much.

“What happened in your duel just now?”

Luna was taken aback. He looked so angry.

“With your skills, it shouldn’t have taken you more than a minute to beat someone like that!”

“Wait!”

“Are you not feeling well or something?”

Luna waved her hands frantically. “That’s not it! Those were my skills!”

“But…”

“We can talk about it later. We should really catch up to the rest of the class!” Luna said, and dashed off.

Luciano glowered at Luna’s back. “She’s hiding her true identity as a Signer here, is she? Guess I’ll need to go with Plan B.”

///

Luna and Leo had run straight to Zora’s after school. Leo with less enthusiasm than usual.
When they arrived, the twins found Yusei and Lise brandishing swords in the courtyard. At first they were worried, but judging by how both teens were smiling, they weren’t trying to kill each other.

Yusei slashed at Lise first, who countered, and aimed for his throat. Yusei had to quickly meet her sword and sidestep to avoid getting skewered. Lise stepped into his space, knocking him off balance with her shoulder. He stumbled, but got his balance back quickly enough to stop Lise’s stab to his stomach. Lise brought her sword up to stop Yusei from slashing her collarbone, and kicked him backwards. This time Yusei fell to the ground, and lost his sword. He put his hands up in surrender when the tip of Lise’s sword fell above his chest.

Lise smiled, and sheathed her blade. She held out her hand, and helped Yusei back to his feet. “You’re getting better. Your reflexes have definitely improved.”

“Thanks,” Yusei smiled a little, but his smile grew when he saw the twins over Lise’s shoulder. “Let’s take a break. The twins are here.”

Lise turned and waved. “Hi guys!” She went to grab Yusei’s fallen sword, and sheathed it.

“Cool! Where’d you get those?” Leo stared at the swords.

“Special order from Yaretzi,” Lise said. She sat down next to Yusei on the edge of the fountain. “But I doubt that’s why you’re here.”

Luna sat down on the ground across from them and immediately launched into telling all about Luciano. Leo’s expression fell, but he grudgingly sat beside his sister. Lise and Yusei listened as they drank from their water bottles and cooled down.

“And he’s just so cool! He executed that combo so perfectly!” Luna squealed.

“Sounds like you like him a lot,” Yusei said.

“Yeah, he’s really nice too,” Luna grinned.

Leo rolled his eyes. “He’s not that great.”

“What makes you say that?” Lise raised an eyebrow.

Leo stood up, and grabbed his backpack. “Nothing. I’ve got homework. I’m going home.” He started walking out of Fountain Plaza.

“What’s up with him?” Yusei frowned, gesturing to Leo as the small boy left.

Luna waved her hand dismissively. “He’s just mad cuz Luciano won their duel. He’ll get over it.”

“I dunno,” Lise said, her lip curled a little bit. “Leo seems more depressed than usual after a loss.”

“He could be jealous,” Yusei suggested.

Luna frowned, and tapped her chin. “I didn’t even think about that. I’ll go talk to him. I’ve got homework anyway.” She grabbed her backpack and rushed off after her brother. “See you guys later!” she waved.

///

“Good morning! Good morning!” the twins greeted their classmates the next morning. Leo was in
a much better mood too.

“Luna!” Luciano called out to her. He was waving at the school’s entrance. Obviously, he’d been waiting for her. “Good morning!”

“Oh, Luciano!” Luna blinked at him, and then glanced at her brother.

“I’ve been waiting for you. I want to talk to you about something,” Luciano said.

“To me?” the twins paused in front of him.

Luciano nodded. “Do you have time after school?”

“Nope,” Leo immediately answered. “Never, absolutely not.”

Luciano ignored him. “Would you like to come over to my house?”

“Um, what for?” Luna could practically feel sparks flying off of Leo’s glare.

“I want to show you something. I can’t say what here, but you’ll see when you come over.”

“I said no,” Leo growled, getting between him and Luna. “We have plans after school, so we’ll be busy!”

Luciano glared at Leo. “I’m talking to your sister, not you.”

“We’re twins!” Leo yelled at him, losing his temper. “That means we’re a package deal! If I can’t come, then neither can she! Let’s go, Luna.” He grabbed his sister’s hand and pulled her away from Luciano.

“Hey, don’t pull so hard!” Luna complained. She turned and waved apologetically at Luciano as Leo dragged her away. “Sorry, Luciano!”

“Why do you hate him so much?” Luna demanded, once they were walking to their classroom.

“Like I told you last night, I don’t hate him,” Leo snapped. “Just leave me alone.”

Fortunately, the rest of their school day passed smoothly. Girls and boys were still swooning over Luciano, but at least none of Leo’s friends talked about him.

Leo and Bob were walking back from a bathroom break when Ms. Bartlett stopped them.

“Leo, I was wondering if you’d mind staying late today. There’s something I’d like to discuss with you,” she said.

“Oh, uh okay,” Leo said.

“I appreciate it,” Ms. Bartlett said. She didn’t say anything else as she walked away. Strangely, she walked into an empty hallway and transformed back into Luciano! He snickered to himself. Fool.

///

With the school day over, Luna said good bye to Bob and Patty. She began her walk, alone, back home.

A large black limo pulled up beside her. The back window rolled down. “Hey there, Luna!”
Luciano greeted brightly.

“Luciano?!” Luna gasped. “That’s one fancy car!”

Luciano merely smiled pleasantly up at her. “You’re not with Leo, are you? Want a ride?”

“But…” Luna hesitated.

“We can go to my house,” Luciano pressed. “I still really want to show you something.”

“Well…okay,” Luna gave in. Her desire to be closer to her crush outweighed her brother’s jealousy. She slid into the seat beside Luciano with a smile.

///

Leo sat impatiently at his desk. School had been out for at least a half an hour, and he was getting impatient. Where was Ms. Bartlett? “What could she be doing?” he wondered aloud, slumping against his desk.

Ms. Bartlett walked by the open classroom door holding a clipboard. “Huh? Leo, what’re you still doing here?”

“Oh, professor!” Leo sat up attentively.

“What are you still doing here? You should have gone home a long time ago!” She walked away, feeling bewildered.

“HUH?!”

///

Luciano’s driver took them through the main gates. Luna watched all the perfectly shorn hedgery of the courtyard go by in amazement. The yard was huge, the house was huge, even the fountain in the middle of the courtyard was huge!

“Your house is amazing! It’s like a palace!”

“You could say that,” Luciano said with a shrug.

A man with grey hair, and dressed in a grey suit greeted them in the entry room with a bow. “Welcome back, young master.”

Luna waved, suddenly feeling very underdressed in her school uniform. “I’m just visiting.”

“Welcome, young miss.”

Luciano smirked. “Placido, tea and sweets for our guests.”

“Without delay, sir.”

///

Leo ran at full speed through the city. Luciano had definitely taken his sister. He could feel it. After getting some helpful confirmation from Bob and Patty, who had seen Luna and Luciano driving off together, he wasn’t any happier to know his hunch was correct.
He caught his breath at the gate of Luciano’s mansion. “This must be the place. In that case…” he grasped the bars of the gate and started climbing.

Placido watched Leo climb over the gate from the security room. “Looks like we have one more guest…”

Leo hopped from bush to tree to shrub, trying to stay out of sight. So far he didn’t see any sign of his sister. Then he caught a glimpse of Luciano over a hedge.

Luna, and even Leo, watched in awe as Luciano did skateboard tricks on his own personal skating ramp.

“How amazing!” Luna gushed. Her green eyes followed Luciano’s every move as he soared through the air.

Luciano came to a stop in front of Luna. He stepped off the board, and handed it to Luna. “Now you try!”

“Oh no, I couldn’t! I’d be terrible!” Luna said.

“I’ve got plenty of these. I want you to have one.”

“What?” Luna’s eyes widened.

“Yes, it’s my gift to you. Please, take it.”

“Thank you!” Luna accepted the board, and was surprised to find it was lighter than she’d expected. “But, why me?”

“I want to duel you using these duel boards,” Luciano grinned. “An actual Turbo Duel.”

“A Turbo Duel?”

Even that got Leo’s attention. “You can use those to Turbo Duel?” he whispered.

Luciano nodded, and showed Luna how to work the board. “By inserting this cord here, and connecting this plug here to your duel disk, you can use the board to Turbo Duel!”

“Awesome!”

“Here, I’ll teach you how to ride it.”

“Okay.”

Leo frowned and used the cover of the hedge to make his escape. Placido, due to his height, was able to spot the boy’s green ponytail sticking just over the hedge as he passed.

“W-Whoa!” Luna’s legs shook as he tried to maintain her balance.

“That’s right! You’ve got it! Look forward more!” Luciano called to her. “Don’t focus so much on your legs!”

“I’ve brought refreshments,” Placido announced blandly.

“Thank you,” Luciano smirked. “Where’s our other guest?”
“I believe he left.”

“I see. All according to plan,” Luciano snickered. “Sorry about making you do all this butler stuff.”

Placido frowned, and directed his gaze at Luna. “No need to apologize. I wanted to see one of the Signers myself.”

“That so?”

///

Leo crashed through the garage like a small hurricane. Jack, Bruno, Crow, Yusei, and Lise all looked up in surprise.

“Okay so thenewguyatschoolbroughtLunatohishouseandIfollowedthemandthentherewasthishugehouseandl-

“Whoa, whoa! Leo slow down,” Crow cut him off, spreading his hands palm down. “Take it from the top, but slower.”

Leo tried, he really did, but he couldn’t sit still or talk slow enough for his friends to figure out what he was saying. “Um, could I draw it?”

“Yes!” Lise got up and wheeled over their large whiteboard. She cleared off most of their diagrams, and handed Leo a large black marker. “Take it away.”

“Oh, so it’s called a Duel Board,” Leo explained as he hastily sketched an excellent likeness of what he’d seen. “You link up your duel disk here,” he pointed to where the cord connected the two devices.

“Excellent work, Leo,” Lise nodded her approval, and Leo beamed.

“Now I get it,” Jack said. “With that, you could have a simplistic version of a Turbo Duel. Clever.”

“Whattaya think, Yusei?” Leo turned, wide-eyed to his friend.

Yusei had been quiet until then. “Well, in theory, it’s pretty simple, so I could probably build one out of some spare parts, but I dunno.” Turbo Duels could be dangerous. He didn’t like the idea of his extremely young friend getting into a more serious Turbo Duel.

“Please!” Leo begged. His big, green eyes were full of determination. “I really wanna beat Luciano! He’s such a jerk, and I just feel like I can’t do anything about it! C’mon, Yusei, can you?! C’mon, can you? PLEASE!”

“Okay,” Yusei gave in.

“Yes!” Leo cheered.

“But only, if you promise to be careful. That means a helmet, kneepads, and elbow pads.”

“Deal!” Leo grinned.

Jack snorted. “You sound like a doting father.”

“Shut up, Jack.”

///
“Thank you for today,” Luna said. She held her new duel board right outside her apartment. Placido had driven them over.

Luciano smirked up at her. “No problem. I’ll wait for you again tomorrow.”

“Okay,” Luna nodded. “Oh, can Leo come too?”

“Leo?” Luciano raised an eyebrow.

“Leo’s been saying he’s wanted to Turbo Duel since forever. I’m sure he’d love the Duel Board too!”

“Of course,” Luciano smiled slyly. “I’ll see you later. Take care!” He rolled up the window, and Placido pulled out.

“Bye!” Luna waved until she couldn’t see Luciano’s car anymore.

She let herself into the penthouse. “I’m home! Leo! Leo?!” Luna looked around, but the place was empty. “Guess he’s not home yet?”

///

Yusei had immediately got to work on Leo’s duel board. He’d cut the largest piece, and attached the wheels. He took a break with Leo to measure his feet for the foot guards, while Lise painted the details Leo’s preferred shade of blue. She also kept Yusei company late into the night as he programmed the Duel Board. Leo had fallen asleep hours ago, and Yusei had given him his jacket as a blanket.

///

Luna sat up from the couch. She’d been watching TV as she waited for her brother. She must have fallen asleep. “Leo? He didn’t come home last night…”

///

Leo had thanked Yusei and Lise a thousand times the next morning. They had purple crescents under their eyes, and communicated very little until Bruno made breakfast, but they assured him it was no problem. Bruno had also insisted Leo eat something before he went out to test his new Duel Board. Impatiently, Leo had done so, and run out the door brandishing the Duel Board like Christmas day had been made for years.

Leo found a road that was under construction, but since it was Sunday the crew most likely had the day off. It was a great place to practice. As promised, he donned kneepads, elbow pads, and the helmet.

The Duel Board was perfect. It zoomed around smoothly, so long as Leo kept his balance. But every time he fell, Leo got right back up again. The thought of Luciano laughing at him falling on his butt, again, kept him at it.

“No way I’m giving in.”

Just when Leo had finally managed to glide through a curve without falling, he spotted his sister on the road. She was in identical gear, but with pink colors instead of blue. She held her own board to her chest.
Leo braked to a stop in front of her. “Luna, what’re you doing here?”

“I went by the garage, and the guys said you’d probably be here.”

“Shouldn’t you be going to Luciano’s house again,” Leo scowled.

Luna nodded, and kicked at the asphalt. “I’m sorry I went without you. You still wanna beat Luciano, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll cheer you on,” Luna smiled. “Let’s practice together.”

Leo grinned. “All right!”

“Whoo hoo!” The twins cheered, loving the wind in their faces, and playing together again.

They passed under a bridge in their fun. Leo glanced back, and then did a double take. Someone was standing on top of the bridge, and staring right at them.

“Who is that?”

The mysterious boy jumped off the bridge, and onto a duel board himself. Leo had to lean backwards to avoid getting landed on. He completely lost his balance and fell onto the road.

“Leo!”

The boy sneered and pulled out ahead of Luna. “I have no need for him. I only have need for you. No more waiting; we duel now!” He whipped out his flashy duel disk.

Luna’s automatically engaged as well. “Huh? Whoa!” She managed to keep her balance, but the board wasn’t responding to her anymore. “It’s moving on its own!”

“Follow me!”

“Leo!”

“Luna!” Leo cried. He leapt back to his feet, and zoomed after them. “You’re not getting away with my sister!”

“Fine!” the boy grinned. “I’ll take you both on! I set Speed World 2!”

“A duel is starting. A duel is starting,” the computerized voice that relegated the city’s turbo duels announced. The mysterious boy lead the twins towards the computer’s selected lane. A mysterious white light surrounded all three children, in the shape of an infinity sign.

“What should we do, Leo? I’ve never Turbo Dueled before!”

“Don’t worry! We can do this together! Just like how we beat Devack!”

Luna nodded. Her brother always knew how to make her feel better.

“Let’s duel!”

Mysterious boy: 4000

Luna: 4000
Leo: 4000

“You start! Bring it on!”

“Then I draw,” Luna said. “I summon Rose Bird and end my turn!”

(Rose Bird: Atk: 1800 Def: 1600)

“Eighteen hundred attack? Then it’s my turn! I summon Absurd Stealer from my hand!”

(Absurd Stealer: Atk: 100 Def: 0)

“When this card is successfully summoned, it reduces an opponent’s monster’s attack points to zero! Then it makes its attack power equal to that monster’s defense points until the end phase! Absurd Stealer attacks Rose Bird!”

Mysterious boy: 4000

Luna: 2500

Leo: 4000

Luna winced as the force of the attack washed over her. The blow was so strong she was thrown into the sky!

“Luna!”

“Huh?” Both boys watched in awe as Luna seemed to magically stop in midair, and land back on the track unharmed.

“Thank you, Regulus!” Luna called out to thin air. The duel spirit had saved her.

The boy sneered at the twins. “Whattaya think? In this duel, you’ll be able to actually feel the damage!”

“The damage is real?!” Leo gasped.

Luna winced as her mark suddenly burst into light. Their situation must have been bad for the power of the Crimson Dragon to have to protect them.”

///

Back at the garage, the Signers all exchanged knowing looks.

“Whoa!” Bruno looked up. “Why is everybody glowing?!”

“Luna’s in trouble,” Lise said gravely. She snatched up her helmet and her phone. “I’ll call Akiza and meet you guys there.”

///

Luna wasn’t giving up yet. “Rose Bird’s effect activates! When its destroyed in battle, I can special summon two plant type Tuner monsters from my deck! I special summon Nettles and Spore in defense mode!”

(Nettles: Atk: 1200 Def: 400)
“I place three cards face down to end my turn,” the boy said.

“How dare you hurt my sister?!” Leo growled. “I’m going to defeat you! My turn! I summon Morphtronic Datatron! Datatron attacks Absurd Stealer!”

“Gotcha now!”

“What?”

“I activate Exus Summon! It returns an attack targeted monster to my hand, and special summons a monster from my hand with lower attack points! I special summon Sky Core!”

(\textit{Sky Core: Atk: 0 Def: 0})

“An attack power of zero?” Leo frowned. That didn’t make any sense to him.

“Next, I activate Torrential Tribute! When a monster is summoned, it destroys all monsters on the field!”

Luna frowned in confusion too. “Even his own monsters? Why would he do that?”

“When Sky Core is destroyed by a card effect, it destroys all monsters on my field, and from my deck, hand, or graveyard, special summons Machine Emperor Skiel Infinity, Skiel Top, Skiel Attack, Skiel Guard, and Skiel Carrier!”

“Five monsters at once?!”

“Machine Emperor Skiel Infinity’s effect activates!” At the boy’s words, the five monsters combined into one large, flying beast. On its chest, it had the same nebulous star in an infinity symbol as the monster Ghost had wielded.

(\textit{Machine Emperor Skiel: Atk: 2200 Def: 2200})

“It’s huge!” Leo breathed.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys! Lisiechan here! So yeah...it's been a while since I've regularly updated this fic... I lost motivation and there was a lot of depression and anxiety swirling since February so... yeah... I'm using this fic and Nanowrimo to get back into the swing of writing for myself, because that's why I started writing this fic in the first place. I doubt I'll reach 50,000 words just writing this fic alone, but I'd appreciate at support! Leave a review, leave a comment! I'd love to hear from you! Thank you so much for sticking with me all these years!
The mystery boy snickered loudly. “Thanks to you I was able to summon my greatest monster! Now show me what you’re made of! I’ll show you what real dueling is about!”

///

Placido and Joel watched calmly from their pocket dimension.

“Luciano is getting ahead of himself,” Placido scowled.

Joel blinked, unconvinced. “That is just how children are. I remember those days well.”

Placido’s scowl deepened. For the time being, he decided to keep his mouth shut.

///

“A combination monster?” Leo murmured aloud to himself. “Is this what Yusei battled with Ghost? I remember they told us something about these monsters, something important… What was it? What was it?”

Kuribon wailed loudly. He cowered fearfully behind Luna. “Kuribon, what’s wrong?”

“Be careful, Luna!” A deep voice warned her.

“Regulus?” Her lion spirit friend ran beside Luna and her brother.

“I’m sensing this boy is extremely dangerous!”

“Dangerous?” Luna said. “Was this a trap?”

///

Yusei, Jack, and Crow were speeding down the highways. Their marks were leading them deeper into the city. Still no sign of Leo or Luna though.

Yusei’s arm throbbed and he winced momentarily. This pain. Luna must be in trouble. It’s getting worse.

“Hey guys!” Akiza shouted up to them. She rode on the back of Lise’s duel runner, her red hair flying backwards in the wind. “Lise filled me in! Have you seen anything?”

“Nope,” Crow bit his lip, scanning the streets.

“I just hope we’ll make it in time,” Akiza said.

///

The mysterious boy rode in zig zags before Leo and Luna. He grinned widely, confident of victory.

“What to do? What to do?! Now’s your chance to surrender!” he taunted.

“Like we’d surrender to you,” Leo growled. He drew a card. With this trap, if he attacks directly, it’ll let me special summon… “I place a card face down and end my turn!”

“It’s my…turn!” the boy drew his card with a dramatic flourish.
Mysterious boy: 4000
Luna: 2500
Leo: 4000

“I play my trap Trap Stun! During this turn, the effect of trap cards are negated!”

“Uh oh!”

“Machine Emperor Skiel attacks directly!” The boy wheeled around on his duel board as his monster aimed, and fired its cannon directly at Leo. A large cloud of smoke kicked up from the impact.

“Leo!” Luna cried. Unlike her, he didn’t have spirits to help him out. Luna sighed deeply when her brother came wheeling out of the smoke cloud. He’d managed to keep going and stay upright. He was a little bruised and battered, but he’d survived!

Mysterious boy: 4000
Luna: 2500
Leo: 1800

“How’d you like that direct attack from Machine Emperor Skiel?” the boy jeered. “I’ll make sure to make it extra painful next time! I place a card face down and end my turn.”

Luna glared at him. “You won’t be hurting Leo anymore! It’s my turn! I summon Sunlight Unicorn! Next, I activate the effect of the Spore in my graveyard! I remove Nettles in my graveyard from play and special summon Spore! He can then upgrade his level using the level of the monster I removed from play! I’m tuning my level three Spore to my level four Sunlight Unicorn! I synchro summon… Ancient Fairy Dragon!”

(Sunlight Unicorn: Atk: 1800 Def: 1000)
(Ancient Fairy Dragon: Atk: 2100 Def: 3000)

“There it is,” the boy’s grin was the widest the twins had seen yet, full of malice and cruelty.

Luna didn’t let that stop her. “Ancient Fairy Dragon can special summon a level four or lower monster from my hand! I special summon Fairy Archer!”

(Fairy Archer: Atk: 1400 Def: 600)

“Once, during my turn, Fairy Archer can deal 400 points of damage to my opponent for each light attribute monster on my field!”

“She’s got two, so that’s 800 points,” Leo said.

Fairy Archer shot a gem-tipped arrow straight into the boy’s back. Leo and Luna waited for the smoke to clear. When the boy emerged from the cloud, he was still smiling serenely as he brushed himself off.

Mysterious boy: 3200
Luna: 2500
“He didn’t feel the damage at all!” Luna gasped.

“What?! No way!” Leo’s jaw dropped open.

“Sorry, but I’m not the type to feel such a tiny amount of pain,” the boy snickered.

Luna frowned. “I place two cards face down to end my turn.”

The gang of teenagers passed through a tunnel and suddenly they were driving right next to the street Leo and Luna were dueling on.

“Giant robot!” Akiza pointed. “Is that what Ghost used?”

Yusei pulled up closer to it. “No, this one is different! But it has the same mark on its chest. There’s no doubt they come from the same people.”

“Geez, how many of those things are there?” Crow complained.

“Oh no! Leo! Luna!” Lise shouted out to them.

“This isn’t good,” Jack agreed. “Ancient Fairy Dragon has been summoned!”

The boy’s malicious grin was back. “My turn! Machine Emperor Skiel’s monster effect activates! Once per turn, it can absorb a synchro monster on my opponent’s field!”

“Absorb a synchro monster? This is what Yusei was talking about!” Leo realized. Too late.

“The synchro prevention!”

“Great, they all have it,” Jack grumbled.

Skiel’s chest emblem expanded, glowing white. White and green tendrils sprouted from the infinity and wrapped around Luna’s dragon.

“Ancient Fairy Dragon!” Luna watched in horror as her beast was dragged into Skiel. “No…”

“Stop it!” Leo clenched his fist. “Give my sister her dragon back!”

“Damn, we were too late!” Crow swore.

The boy laughed. “Ancient Fairy Dragon is mine!”

Leo was beside himself with fury. He’d messed up, failed to protect Luna, and now her dragon had been stolen. He had to figure out a way to turn this duel around.

The mystery boy skated up the wall of the duel track. His moves reminded Leo of…Luciano… The boy whizzed past Leo with his now usual smirk. Leo managed to glimpse the boy’s eyes through his darkened vizor. The boy had green eyes…

“Luna! That’s Luciano!” Leo shouted up to his sister as Luciano passed.

“Luciano?!”

“Just like always, Leo, you’re too late!” Luciano snickered. “Now I’m going to make you draw the Circuit. My monster’s effect activates! Machine Emperor Skiel’s effect increases its attack power
equal to the attack power of the equipped synchro monster!”

“An attack power of 4300!”

“Next, I activate the speed spell Summon Close from my hand! When I have four or more speed counters, my opponent can’t special summon this turn!”

“Not again!” Leo complained.

“I see right through your mediocre tactics, Leo. Machine Emperor Skiel attack him directly!”

Leo wailed as Skiel’s laser came closer and closer. He had nothing to defend himself!

Luna leaned back and put herself between Leo and the laser. “Trap activate! Twinkle Wall! By taking damage equal to half an opponent’s monster’s attack, this card negates the attack!” She put her arms up to protect herself from the small laser shots raining down around her.

“Luna!”

Luciano: 3200

Luna: 350

Leo: 1800

She emerged from the smoke with a few new bruises, but she was still going strong. *I can handle this pain. If it weren’t for me, this wouldn’t have happened.*

The four five teenagers looked on in worried silence. They wanted to help, but there was nothing they could do but follow.

“Good, Luna, that’s the way! I place a card face down and end my turn.”

“My turn!” Leo growled. He consulted his cards. “You won’t hurt Luna anymore! I’ll protect her! I summon Morphtronic Scopen!”

*Morphtronic Scopen: Atk: 800 Def: 1400*

“While Scopen is in attack mode, Scopen can special summon a level four or below monster with Morphtronic in its name from my hand! I special summon level four Morphtronic Boomboxen!”

*Morphtronic Boomboxen: Atk: 1200 Def: 400*

“I’m tuning level three Scopen with level four Boomboxen! I synchro summon… Power Tool Dragon!”

*Power Tool Dragon: Atk: 2300 Def: 2500*

Luciano rolled his eyes. “A synchro monster? Idiot.”

“Synchro summoning is risky,” Yusei said. “Why would Leo synchro summon now?”

“What is he thinking?” Jack ground his teeth together. “Synchro Monsters don’t work on that thing!”

Leo wasn’t done though. “Next, I activate the speed spell Summon Speeder from my hand! When I
have four or more speed counters, I can special summon a level four or below monster from my hand! I special summon level one Morphtronic Vacumen in defense mode!"

(Morphtronic Vacumen: Atk: 0 Def: 0)

“While in defense mode, Vacumen can equip a monster on the opponent’s field to itself!”

Crow broke into a small smile. “I get it! He’s gonna remove Machine Emperor Skiel from the field!”

“I’m equipping Machine Emperor Skiel to Vacumen!”

“Trap card open; Ghost Convert!” Luciano countered. “When a monster on the field is selected as an effect target, this can change the target to a monster in my graveyard!”

“Crap,” Akiza pounded her fist into the side of Lise’s bike. “He avoided it!”

“Hey, what did Starfire do to you?” Lise scowled back at her friend.

“Sorry. That just bites!”

Lise turned her attention back to the duel. *Come on, Leo. I know you can do it!*

Luciano snickered cruelly. “Your pathetic plans just won’t work on me!”

Leo clenched his fists, but he didn’t let Luciano stop him. “I place a card face down and end my turn!”

“My turn!” Luciano sneered.

“Trap activate!” Leo immediately interrupted Luciano’s next move. “Power Break! When Power Tool Dragon is on my field, it returns all equipped or absorbed cards to the deck!”

“What?”

“And, for each card returned, you take 500 points of damage!” Leo pointed triumphantly at Luciano.

Luna smiled as her dragon was set free. “Ancient Fairy Dragon!” She sighed with relief, watching the dragon descend into her duel disk.

Luciano: 2200

Luna: 350

Leo: 1800

Luciano screamed as Leo’s move hit him.

“I’ll never let you have Ancient Fairy Dragon!” Leo declared, his brow set with determination. “I’m no Signer, but Luna is my sister! I’ll protect her and everything she cares about!”

“Leo,” Luna smiled back at her brother.

Jack smiled. “Got his sister’s dragon back, did he?”

“Getting Ancient Fairy Dragon back was Leo’s plan all along!” Crow was full on grinning.
“Way to go, Leo! Now that’s dueling!” Lise cheered.

Luciano was not having it. He clenched his fists. “Now you’ve done it! I’m going to pound the crap out of you two! You’ll regret ever making me mad! I activate Speed World 2’s effect! By removing seven speed counters, it lets me draw a card. Then I play the trap Sky A3! This sends a monster with Skiel Attack in its name from my field to the graveyard, and special summons Skiel Attack 3 from my hand!”

“Whoa! It upgraded!” Leo watched Skiel’s attack points go up.

“Next, I release Skiel Attack 3 to special summon Skiel Attack 5!”

“He powered up again?” Yusei said.

“Skiel Attack 5’s monster effect activates! Machine Emperor Skiel, attack Leo directly! Die!”

This time there were no cards in play to save Leo. He was helpless to stop the laser. The attack hit him, full force, Leo’s monsters vanished, and Leo went flying into the air.

Luciano: 2200
Luna: 350
Leo: 0

Luna skidded to a stop. “LEO!”

Leo had been knocked out from the force of the attack. He fell to his death, several stories below.

“No!” Lise slammed on the brakes. The others followed her example. She ran for the edge of the street, and dove off the edge.

“Huh?” Luna looked down to find her mark was aglow.

Yusei, Jack, Crow, and Akiza’s marks followed suit. Lise turned into the Crimson Dragon mid-swoop. She looped back up towards the sky with Leo in one of her massive claws. Lise transformed back into a human with Leo in her arms.

“He’s safe!” Akiza breathed again, watching Lise alight back on the street.

“Luna! Leo is safe!” Yusei called out to her.

Luna sighed in relief. She was lucky her friends had been there to help. “Thanks guys.”

She followed after Luciano. Their duel wasn’t over yet. Yusei, Lise, Crow, Jack, and Akiza followed. Leo rested soundly on the back of Crow’s duel runner.

“What a loser, barely making it out alive,” Luciano scoffed. “But you won’t be so lucky, Luna! I play a card face down to end my turn.”
"I’m not going down so easy! Leo’s not a loser and neither am I! I draw!" Luna yelled. "I summon Regulus!"

*(Regulus: Atk: 1700 Def: 1000)*

"I activate Ancient Sunshine! When Regulus is on my field, I can remove Ancient Fairy Dragon from the game, and inflict you with 2100 points of damage; the same as Ancient Fairy Dragon’s attack power!"

"All right!" Jack said. "IF this works, he’ll only have 100 lifepoints left!"

Luciano snickered. "I activate my trap Infinity Force! When a monster with Infinity in its name is on my field, and effect damage from an opponent’s card occurs, it cancels the damage and destroys all monsters on the opponent’s field! You’re out of options now! It’s my turn! Machine Emperor Skiel attack Luna directly!"

"Luna!"

The laser attack hit, kicking up a cloud of smoke. Luna had been expecting more pain, but nothing happened. She lowered her arm and gasped. All of her duel monster spirits were protecting her! "Kuribon! Everyone!"

"Amazing," Akiza breathed. "I can feel them all drawing together to protect her."

But the little spirits weren’t enough. They’d fended off the lasers as long as they could. The attack finally reached Luna.

"Oh no! Luna!"

*Luciano: 2200
Luna: 0
Leo: 0*

"Wha-Whoa!" Luna was still going, struggling to maintain her balance. She’d lost, but she was still alive. Thanks to her duel monster spirits, that is. Her Duel Board kicked up steam as it stopped in
The five teenagers sighed with relief. Everyone was okay.

Luciano glared back at Luna. Despite being the victor, he looked furious. He kept riding until he was out of sight.

Luna took a deep breath and pulled her helmet off. “Thank you, Regulus. You too, guys.” She nodded with respect at her spirit friends.

///

“B-B-But…” Leo and Luna stared in disbelief at the grassy field that had been Luciano’s mansion.

“Ain’t nothing here,” Crow said.

“I know it was here,” Leo insisted. “A mansion this big! Right, Luna?”

Lise frowned and alighted in the center of the grass. She knelt, pressing her hand to the dirt, and closed her eyes.

“Were we wrong?” Luna asked.

“Feel anything?” Yusei said.

Lise removed her hand from the grass, and stood up. “It definitely feels like there was something here. I don’t have a connection with it, so I can’t be sure what.”

“So I’m not crazy!” Leo grinned. Someone believed him. “Wait a sec! I’ve got an idea! Bob!”

The gang managed to track down Leo and Luna’s classmate. However, when questioned, the boy gave them a funny look. “Luciano? Who’s that?”

“You know him! He’s the new transfer student!” Leo said.

“A transfer student? What’re you talking about? I’ll see ya around.”

“What’s going on?” Luna frowned. “How come only we remember Luciano?”

“These Emperors are bad news,” Akiza said. “Can they really warp reality?”

“Who cares?” Jack made a fist. “I’ll pulverize them myself!”

“Jack might be on to something,” Crow admitted. “But if Akiza’s right, we’re up against some seriously powerful people.”

“First things first,” Yusei said. “We need to find ways around their synchro prevention monsters.”
It was late at night in New Domino City. For once, all five teenagers living in Zora’s garage apartment were asleep. Crow was snoring softly, Bruno was drooling a little, Jack snuggled his teddy bear, Yusei had one arm around Lise as he slept, and Lise had fallen asleep with Yusei’s warm breath wafting across her hair. Though they wouldn’t be sleeping soundly for long.

Knocking resounded at the front door. Yusei and Bruno, the lightest sleepers, were immediately awake.

“Don’t worry about it,” Bruno waved Yusei off when they both came to their doors. He yawned and descended the ladder. “I’ll take care of it.”

Yusei nodded and leaned against the door frame, yawning himself. “Okay, just be careful.”

Bruno padded up to their doors. “Who is it? Why so late?” He didn’t wait for an answer, but unlocked the doors.

At least a dozen police officers burst through the doors. Bruno fell to the ground in his surprise, but the officers didn’t even blink when they stepped over him.

The last officer stood at attention by Bruno’s head. “We have a warrant to search this home,” he said, producing said warrant.

Crow joined Yusei, rubbing his eye. “What’s all the racket?”

Officers barreled past them without explanation. They all seemed to know exactly what they were searching for. All the boys were too sleepy and confused to do more than stare at the police that had gone right into the boys’ room.

Jack sat up at the loud bang of the door. He stretched, and scratched at his head. “Morning already?”

“Jack Atlas,” another officer produced a second sheet of paper. “We have a warrant for your arrest. We’ll be taking you to headquarters immediately.”

“What did you say?” The officer’s words snapped Jack to attention. That and the handcuffs they slapped on him.

The police allowed Jack to take his coat, but they ushered him forcefully from the garage. Seeing their friend in cuffs was enough to snap his friends back to their senses.

“Wait!” Yusei, Bruno, and Crow ran after the officers.

“Why are you taking him?”

“What’s going on?”

But they were powerless to stop the police from taking Phoenix Whirlwind and Jack.
Lise received a nasty shock the next morning when Yusei woke her up early. Her friends’ news was less than stellar too. Mortified that she’d slept through the entire ordeal, she was very quiet on the way to the Public Security Bureau Headquarters.

Mina met them in the lobby with a somber expression. She didn’t even try to start conversation on the way to her office. Neither did Trudge when he joined them.

Mina grabbed a remote control and turned on the TV behind her desk. “This is the footage caught from a highway surveillance camera.”

All four teens gasped. Jack’s unmistakable duel runner and physique were deliberately ramming a fellow duelist. Enough to make them crash.

“Phoenix Whirlwind?”

“Red Dragon Archfiend too?!”

“He’s been turbo dueling with the intent to force his opponent to crash,” Mina continued as more and more recorded incidents piled up.

“After thinking about it, he was the only one who could have done it,” Trudge sighed.

Crow crossed his arms. “Could he really have…” He trailed off, hating just the thought of it.

Trudge and Mina jumped to attention. “You remember something?”

“Well…about a week ago,” Bruno said.

///

Bruno and Lise watched Jack, Crow, and Yusei speed around the Kaiba Dome. They’d signed up for a practice hour provided for all the teams in the WRGP. They needed to practice working as a team anyway.

“I’m tuning my level five Big Piece Golem and level three Dark Resonator!” Jack declared. “Red Dragon Archfiend attacks directly!”

Their holographic opponent dissolved in defeat. Without an opponent, the boys pulled into the pit station.

Jack smirked and removed his helmet. “That was perfect, wasn’t it?”

Crow marched over like a one man battalion. “Jack, why didn’t you use that card?”

“What’re you talking about?”

“Idiot, lemme see your hand,” Crow grabbed Jack’s cards. “I knew it!” He pulled one of them. “You drew Trust Guardian! We were practicing so you could use this card! How many times do I have to tell you before you understand?!”

“I’m tired of hearing your yammering,” Jack grumbled. “I have no intention of using a weak tuner to synchro summon.”

“Why do you hate it so much?” Bruno asked.

Yusei frowned at his friend. “Trust Guardian is a tuner that protects synchro monsters. What’s
“Wrong with that?”

“Red Dragon Archfiend doesn’t need any help, and it’s just not my style.”

“Are you stupid?” Crow yelled in Jack’s face. “It’s not about your aesthetics! This is about the team!”

Jack pushed Crow away from him. “Shut up! What’s wrong with my style?! Why can’t you agree?”

Crow turned away. “Yeah, I agree that you can’t do anything on your own.”

Bruno and Yusei blinked at Crow. Even if he was mad, that was a bit harsh. Lise bit her lip and tugged on her hair. She wanted to say something, but wasn’t really sure how to.

“What?!” Jack growled. “Who do you think you’re talking to?!”

“Jack,” Yusei said in a calm voice before Crow could butt in again. “We’re supposed to be a team. If we just do whatever we want, we can’t win the WRGP.”

“Hmmph,” Jack scoffed. He turned away from his teammates and donned his helmet. “I’m done for the day.”

“You’re just gonna leave?” Crow smirked, sure he was right. “Like you could stop me,” Jack fired back. He drove off in a huff.

“Jack, wait!” Yusei called out to him, but his friend just sped up.

“Let him go,” Crow said. He spread his hands like it was no use. “He’ll see reason when he calms down from his temper tantrum.”

///

“Jack!” Crow pounded on the glass dividing him and his friends from Jack. Mina had brought them to the meeting rooms for guests and prisoners, so they could see Jack for a little while. “What did you do?!”

“I didn’t do anything!” Jack insisted. He refused to look at his friends. It was humiliating enough being arrested, but he didn’t want his friends to remember him being in the slammer.

“ Weird, isn’t it?” Crow kept going. “No one else has Red Dragon Archfiend. It’s a one of a kind! Who else could have done it?!”

“How should I know? All I know is, I didn’t do it!”

Crow sighed and shook his head. “I’m sick of your way of thinking. You can’t do anything by yourself, so you left to jeopardize our chances at even entering the WRGP!”

Yusei, Lise, and Bruno’s mouths dropped open. This was just insult to injury at this point.

“You…” Jack gritted his teeth, turned to face Crow, and clenched his fist. “Do you really think I’m the kind of man who would do something like that?!”

“Yes, I do!”

“Crow,” Yusei put his hand on Crow’s shoulder, but he brushed him off.
“How long will it take for you to realize nobody likes you? You’re the most selfish man in the world!”

“Crow!” Yusei had to grab Crow and drag him back from the railing. “Stop it!”

“Get down here and say that! Take it back!” Jack shouted up at him.

Two officers ran in to restrain Jack. “Hey, quiet down!” They began to escort him back to his cell.

“Who’d apologize to you?” Crow jeered.

“Crow!”

“That’s enough!” Lise yelled at him.

Crow struggled against Yusei, but he refused to let go.

“You guys just don’t get it!”

“I get that you need a time out.” Lise pinched Crow’s ear, exactly the way Martha used to, and dragged him away. “We’re done here. Thanks Trudge, Mina!”

///

Crow wasn’t speaking to any of them when they came home. He turned on the TV, and adjusted the volume to drown out the others.

Angela was reporting on the news channel. She stood in front of the Kaiba Dome. “Concerning the recent turbo dueling accidents, the Public Security Maintenance Bureau has named Jack Atlas as a suspect. According to reports, the suspect, Jack Atlas, committed the majority of his crimes last night. Despite the allegations, Jack Atlas maintains his own innocence.”


“Yeah,” Lise agreed. She held up her phone. “Both Luna and Akiza just texted. It’s all over Duel Academy too.”

///

“What is this report?” Carly’s boss, Mr. Pitts, threw her article back on his desk. Papers scattered across the floor. “It’s different from the news story!”

“But Jack is saying he’s innocent!” Carly argued. She absolutely refused to budge on her stance. “We should believe in him!”

“Our readers don’t want fluff and bunnies! They want dirt! You pull this crap again, and you’re fired! Get out of my office!”

Carly sighed, collected her article’s pages, and left. “But he didn’t do it…” She leaned heavily on her desk. “I know he didn’t, but how can I prove it?”

///

“You haven’t heard anything?” Akiza asked when she walked in after school.

“Nothing,” Yusei shook his head.
“Well, that sucks,” Leo scowled, walking in behind Akiza, sister in tow.

“Crow, you didn’t have to say those things,” Bruno said. He crossed his arms, and gave Crow his best stink eye.

Crow sighed. “I know. I regret it more. I just got caught up in the moment.”

“So, what do we do now?” Leo asked.

Yusei scowled. “Since Jack was arrested, the crashes have stopped. It’s not looking good for him.”

“He’s got no alibi either,” Bruno pointed out. “Jack seems to be guilty.”

“But we know he’s not,” Akiza reminded them.

“Right,” Lise nodded. “But there’s no way to prove that.”

“We could find out who really did it!” Leo suggested. “Maybe somebody stole Jack’s identity!”

“Okay, but how are we gonna find this guy?” Luna said. “He got Jack arrested, and is probably laying low. We don’t have any clues.”

“Could you do that energy thing to track him?” Yusei asked Lise.

“Oh yeah!” Leo burst out. “That was awesome!”

Lise shook her head. “I don’t know the dude, and I have no connection with him. I can find all of you easily, with Yusei being easiest, and Bruno being the trickiest, but part of that is the Signer connection.”

“Oh,” Leo slumped, defeated, back against the couch.

“So there’s really nothing we can do right now,” Bruno sighed. “Hopefully Mina’s investigation will be successful.”

///

“Trudge! Hey, Trudge, wait!” Officer Kaz called out to his friend. He stopped Trudge with a hand on his shoulder. “Jack isn’t the kind of man who would do something like this! You know him! He’s all honor and courage!”

Trudge cringed. “I know. It’s just…”

///

Jack laid on the cot in his cell. He stared at the ceiling, but it didn’t have answers.

Mina had been by a while ago. Her news had been less than great. The circumstantial evidence surrounding Jack’s arrest and the lack of crashes meant the case was closed. There seemed to be no need for further investigation.

Jack got up and punched his door in frustration. There was nothing he could do, and even less so sitting in a cell. Someone out there is posing as me. I can’t forgive them.

As Jack debated what to do, a small cybernetic bug crawled across his cell window. The little bug alighted on the lock mechanism. Its head, a red light, flickered on and off faster and faster until it
exploded. The lock was blown to bits too.

“What the hell?” Jack gasped, pushing the cell door open with ease. Deciding not to look a gift horse in the mouth, Jack took off.

///

Trudge and Mina raced for Jack’s cell. Many officers were already on the scene.

“Any sign of him?”

“Any clues?” Mina paused to grab her ringing cell phone. “Yes? …Jack did what??”

“Crap,” Trudge growled. He face-palmed. “I should’ve known he’d go straight for his deck and duel runner.”

Mina sighed. “Guess we should go catch him.”

///

Jack kept his eyes peeled as he drove across the highway. He might have been free, but he wasn’t out of the woods yet. *If no one’s going to find out who the real culprit is, I’ll do it myself. No one smears my name and gets away with it!*

“Huh?” Jack stared as a duel runner identical to his own pulled up alongside him. “Phoenix Whirlwind?”

The copycat laughed. He looked almost exactly like Jack. “You’ve finally appeared! I’ve been waiting for you!”

“Just what are you?!” Jack demanded.

Copycat shrugged. “I’m the King! I’m Jack Atlas!”

“Don’t screw with me! Why are you acting like me?”

“Oh, it’s no act,” Copycat snickered. “The real King wouldn’t be stupid enough to be captured by Security.”

“What did you say?”

“You couldn’t even pick the lock,” Copycat shook his head pityingly. “But you *did* escape, so props for that.”

Jack gasped. “The one who destroyed the lock, are you saying that was you?”

In response, Copycat rammed Jack with his duel runner. Jack went spinning out of control.

Carly yawned deeply. She was half asleep at the wheel after a long day at work. Mr. Pitts was still giving her a hard time. She just wanted to go home and sleep it off.

Next second, she was screaming at the top of her lungs. If she wasn’t terrified out of her mind, she might have registered she was about to crash into Jack!

Luckily, Jack engaged the extra engine thrust in his duel runner. Using the extra momentum, Jack’s duel runner did a full backflip over Carly’s car.
Carly braked and adjusted her glasses with shaking hands. “Two Jack Atlas’! I think I need Lasik or at least a new prescription!” She slammed her foot on the gas. “I’ve gotta follow them! Oh, where did I throw my camera?!”

“How dare you?!” Jack growled.

Copycat just snickered and rammed into Jack again. He purposefully kept on banging into Jack until the boy’s eyes were practically red with rage.

“Those eyes! That’s what I’ve been waiting for! That fierce stubbornness, rising above everything!”

“What?”

“Well, don’t you want to duel the King?”

“Don’t even joke about that! Like I’d lose to an imposter.” Jack grit his teeth. “I’ll take you on, right here, right now!”

“Nice choice! I’ll show you what a true King looks like!” Copycat smirked.

With Speed World 2 in effect, white light surrounded Jack and his imposter. The two joined circles resembled an infinity symbol.

“What’s with this light?” Jack muttered.

The city-wide turbo dueling interface selected a lane for Jack and Copycat to duel on. They headed for the combat lane while traffic got out of their way. That is, except for Carly in her little yellow car.

///

“What?! Jack escaped?!” When Yusei’s cell had rung, he’d expected something a little less exciting. Everyone crowded around him to hear better.

“Yeah,” Trudge said. “We don’t know how, but if he goes there you have to call me.”

“Got it,” Yusei hung up.

“So Jack actually escaped?” Akiza’s eyes were wide.

“What a stupid thing to do!” Crow cried.

“I’m sure he’s trying to find the real culprit!” Leo argued.

Lise grinned and rubbed her hands together. “Exactly! Now I’ve got something to work with!” She raced down the stairs.

“What’s she-”

“I dunno,” Yusei shrugged.

They followed him downstairs where they found Lise sitting on the cobblestones outside the garage door. Everyone exchanged looks.

“Um, Lise?” Leo ventured tentatively.
She opened one eye. “Uh huh?” Lise’s cheeks turned pink. “Why are you all staring at me?”

“She, are you doing the thing you did in the desert to find me?” Yusei asked.

“Yeah, but don’t all look at me. It’s weird,” Lise said. “I need to focus.” She closed her eyes again.

Okay, what else do we look at?” Leo whispered. His sister just shrugged.

“So…do you need like Jack’s sock, or something?” Crow blinked in confusion as Lise bent down to touch the ground.

She glared at him, lip curling in disgust. It was creepier since her eyes were closed. “No, I’m not a dog.”

Crow put his hands up. “Whatever.”

Lise focused again, placed her hand on the ground, and took a deep breath. “Everything is connected.” Red light burst forth from her markings, and her eyes glowed red when they opened. Self-created wind tousled her hair.

“Cool,” Luna whispered.

After a second, a red line of light took off, twisting and turning through the city. Lise’s line of sight followed the line as it went. “So far all I can tell is he’s on a highway. Gimme a minute.”

“Yeah, a highway doesn’t exactly narrow it down in this city,” Crow said.

“Choosing to ignore that,” Lise said. “I got him! It’s the Gleetman Highway!”

“Well then,” Akiza climbed aboard Lise’s duel runner. “Let’s go!”

///

“I’ll go first,” Copycat said. “The King always moves on ahead.” He laughed mockingly. “I like being chased! A true King always has his back to his subjects! Time to take my turn!”

Jack: 4000

Copycat: 4000

“I summon Dark Resonator in defense mode!”

Jack gasped. “You have Dark Resonator too?!”

“I set three cards face down and end my turn!”

He’s not just acting like me, Jack realized. He has my cards too!

“It’s your turn! Now entertain your King!” Copycat demanded with a smirk.

“Shut up! How long are you going to keep this charade up? I’ll show you the difference between us! It’s my turn!” Jack declared, drawing his card with a flourish. Trust Guardian? If I use it now, I can summon Red Dragon Archfiend. But…

Crow’s voice echoed annoyingly in Jack’s head. “Are you stupid? This isn’t about your style. It’s about the team!”
Yusei was next. “Indulging in individual plays won’t help us win the WRGP.”

Jack shook his head. “Thinking about them isn’t going to help me win. I can special summon Vice Dragon when only my opponent controls monsters. Next, I summon the tuner monster Dread Dragon! I tune level five Vice Dragon and level two Dread Dragon to synchro summon… Exploder Dragon Wing!”

(Vice Dragon: Atk: 2000 Def: 2400)

(Dread Dragon: Atk: 1100 Def: 400)

(Exploder Dragon Wing: Atk: 2400 Def: 1600)

“Battle! Exploder Dragon Wing, attack Dark Resonator!”

“I activate Dark Resonator’s effect!” Copycat countered.

“Yeah, I know,” Jack cut in. “I already know Dark Resonator isn’t destroyed by battle once per turn! I said I would show you my power, so it’s time to deliver! When Exploder Dragon Wing battles a monster with lower attack points, it skips the damage phase, and destroys the monster! In addition, you take damage equal to Dark Resonator’s attack points; thirteen-hundred! I set a card face down and end my turn!”

Jack: 4000

Copycat: 2700

Copycat scowled. He was by no means impressed. “Weak.”

Jack’s grip tightened on his controls. That look was almost worse than the creepy smiles.

“Weak, weak, too weak! Are you underestimating the King?!” Copycat cried. “With overwhelming strength you fight! Overwhelming the opponent with your strength is the King’s strategy! Since you can’t understand that anymore, you are no longer the King! Got it?! You’re not Jack Atlas!”

“What?” Jack gasped. “This guy…he…” He stared at his hands, shaking at the controls. “Am I scared? I…am?”

///

Yusei, Crow, Lise, Bruno, Akiza, Leo, and Luna were pulling up beside Gleetman highway. So far they’d seen nothing, but the night was still young.

“Look!” Leo pointed up to the raised highway beside them. “There’s a duel going on!”

“Think it’s Jack?” Crow asked.

“It’s him,” Lise nodded knowingly.

“Let’s find a way up there,” Yusei said.

///

“I declare it now!” Copycat grinned wickedly. “Next turn, you’ll be overwhelmed by the true King’s strength!”
It was Jack’s turn to scowl. “What nonsense are you babbling? My lifepoints haven’t even decreased. You must be joking.”

“Oh really? I activate my trap Shock Wave!”

“Huh?”

“Your weak blow against my life has satisfied this card’s activation requirements. If my lifepoints are lower than my opponent’s, I destroy one monster on the field, and deal damage equal to its attack points to both players! I select Exploder Dragon Wing!”

*Jack: 1600*

*Copycat: 300*

The attack was only a card effect, but Jack felt like his skin was peeling off. *This pain is...* “Why am I feeling real damage?”

Copycat laughed. “Makes it more interesting, doesn’t it? We play with our lives on the line!”

“But with that effect, you decreased your own lifepoints too!”

“If the King had attacked at full strength from the beginning, it would have been over in an instant! The King’s duel must be for entertainment! I summon Mad Archfiend!”

(Mad Archfiend: Atk: 1800 Def: 0)

Jack cringed. *Mad Archfiend’s attack is 1800. If it goes through, I’ll lose. But I won’t let that happen.*

“I play my trap Boosted Resurrection! I can special summon a level four or below monster from my graveyard and equip it with this card! I special summon the Dread Dragon in defense mode. Next, because of Boosted Resurrection, its defense points are raised by 100, and its level by one!”

Jack smiled to himself. *Now even if I take damage through Mad Archfiend’s effect, I’ll still have 300 lifepoints.*

Copycat smirked. “I also play Boosted Resurrection.”

“What?!”

“I special summon Dark Resonator from the grave! Were you thinking I’d use Mad Archfiend to attack? How weak! A true King is one that pulverizes the opponent with absolute strength!”

Copycat pointed skyward dramatically. “There’s only one King! That’s me! Now, watch the King’s duel in awe! I tune level four Mad Archfiend with my now level four Dark Resonator!”

Jack’s eyes widened. “Level eight? That means...”

“I synchro summon... Red Dragon Archfiend!”

“This can’t be!” Jack gasped. The familiar monster flew over him. Its only difference from his own dragon was that this one possessed purple markings, not red. “Red Dragon Archfiend is a monster that only I have!”

“Red Dragon Archfiend, attack Dread Dragon!”
“There’s no mistaking it! This overwhelming power is…”

But Copycat wasn’t done destroying just one monster. “Next, trap card open! Pedigree of the Destruction God!”

“Say what?!”

“During the turn an opponent’s defense position monster was destroyed, I can select a level eight monster on my field, and it can attack a second time! Red Dragon Archfiend attack directly!”

“Impossible!” Jack screamed. There was nothing he could do. The attack hit him head on.

Jack’s duel runner went careening out of control. This time he couldn’t stop it. He crashed through the side of the duel lane. Shattered glass rained down everywhere, and the cold water below rose to meet him.

For someone else to use Red Dragon Archfiend this well…

Jack: 0

Copycat: 300

Jack’s copy pulled up to the gaping hole in the glass. The flames from his dragon’s attack still burned brightly behind him. A triumphant smirk adorned Copycat’s features.

Just who is he?

“Wolf who has lost his fangs, use those unbelieving eyes and look! Look at the true face of Jack Atlas!” It was true. The double’s face was identical to Jack’s. The only difference was the black, Egyptian-like markings beneath Copycat’s eyes.

Jack and his duel runner disappeared beneath the waves. An enormous splash kicked up, raining briefly on the duel lane.

Yusei, Crow, Lise, Bruno, and the twins came to a stop. They saw only the broken glass, Copycat, and his fake Red Dragon Archfiend.

“Jack!”

“What did you do?!” Crow demanded. He didn’t like Copycat’s smirk one bit.

Copycat raised his hand, and extended two fingers. His dragon did his bidding and blew fire at Jack’s unsuspecting friends.

They all screamed, and moved to protect themselves, but the attack quickly dispersed. Copycat was even quicker to vanish.

“Hey, it didn’t burn,” Leo sounded relieved as he looked at his unharmed arm.

“But Jack is gone,” Akiza said. She sat back on Lise’s duel runner and sighed in defeat.

Unknown to all of them, Trust Guardian had fallen on the rocky shore below…

Chapter End Notes
Hey guys! Me again! Sorry this chapter took so long. Work has been super busy lately. I’ve never been looking forward to Black Friday less. Wish I could say the next chapter will be out shortly, but we’ll see. My style is rather sporadic as of late. Anyway, I still appreciate your support! Thank you so much for keeping up, and reading along for so much time! I feel like we’ve grown up with Lise together. PM if you feel up to it. I know Carly is about to get a bit more time in the limelight thanks to an interesting suggestion, so keep your eyes out for her!
“Jack Atlas, who was arrested by Security last night, still seems to be missing. Security has closed off certain areas of the highways, and warns citizens traveling on the highways to be careful.”

Angela smiled brightly for the camera.

Crow turned the TV off. Angela’s smile was creeping him out. There was nothing new anyway.

They’d searched for hours, but they hadn’t found anything. Even Lise had been completely at a loss. Finally, after Leo had collapsed from exhaustion, they’d called it a night and tramped back to the garage.

“Seriously,” Leo rested his forehead on his knuckles. “Where did Jack go?”

“Maybe we should go over our clues again,” Akiza suggested. “Maybe there’s something we missed? A different angle we can look at things?”

Lise shook her head. She leaned back on the couch, and stared at the ceiling. “No, what we need is more clues, new information. Something just doesn’t add up here.”

Crow sighed. “I dunno. That sure looked like Jack last night.” He fidgeted slightly, thinking about whether he should keep his mouth shut or say something. Even if it was hard. He took a deep breath. “What if…what we saw last night was Jack? I don’t like it, but maybe he just isn’t our friend anymore.”

Yusei shook his head. “Call me optimistic, but I can’t believe Jack would just… do something like this again. Something’s wrong. I think Lise is right. We don’t have all the pieces.”

“Either way,” Akiza said. “It sounds like our best bet is to find Jack. The old fashioned way, it seems.”

“I’ll start with the net,” Bruno offered. He jumped on one of the computers and started combing the web.

///

“Mr. Pitts!” Carly cried, surprising even herself. She slammed her hands down on her boss’s desk. “I’m telling you; Jack is innocent! I’m sure the truth is he’s trying to find out the real culprit! My pictures-“

“I’m not here to listen to your opinion!” Mr. Pitts yelled back. “And to hell with your pictures! Anyone could have doctored those up with photoshop! If you spout nonsense like this again, this time you’re really fired!”

“I don’t care anymore!” Carly left her article and the copies of her photos on Mr. Pitts desk as she stormed out. “You can fire me or do whatever! I’ll find someone who believes me!”

Carly slammed the door behind her. Her coworkers exchanged nervous glances. They liked Carly, but she was skating on thin ice.

“Shit,” Carly swore as she climbed into her car. She almost never swore, but her best friend was in trouble. “I hate this car! Why did you have to overheat just as I was getting close!”
She picked up the photos she’d developed from last night. Carly had just barely managed to take a
dozen photos of Jack and...Jack Two as she’d decided to call him. If she hadn’t seen it herself, and
taken photos, she would’ve thought she were going crazy.

“Who’s gonna believe me?” she asked herself. “I could bring these to Security, but they’ll take
weeks to analyze them. They still haven’t even found Jack anyway…”

Carly suddenly gasped, sitting up straight. “Of course!” She dove for her phone, and hit the speed
dial with one hand, and the other hand started up the car.

///

Lise jumped when her cell phone rang. Lindsey Stirling’s Shatter Me broke the silence of the
garage at full volume.

“Jesus! Why do you always have the volume so loud?” Crow complained.

“I don’t hear it otherwise,” Lise said. She pulled the phone out of her pocket, accepted the call, put
the phone to her ear, and said simply; “Yo.”

“Lise!” Carly’s voice sounded excited with mad energy. “I’m so glad the call got through. I
thought you might be sleeping!”

“Nope, what’s up, Carly? Everything okay?”

“No! Or yes, uh maybe. That’s not why I’m calling you. I might have a lead on what’s been going
on with Jack!”

“With Jack?” Lise’s eyes widened. “Seriously?!”

Suddenly Lise was crowded by her friends, all trying to listen in.

“Did she see him last night?!” Bruno demanded.

“Does she know where he is?” Crow asked.

“Is Carly with him?” Luna said hopefully.

“Where is she right now?” Yusei said.

“Is it a ransom demand?” Leo gasped.

“Good god, guys, I’ll put it on speakerphone,” Lise backed up to get some space, and hit a couple
buttons on her phone. “Carly? You still there?”

“Yeah, and I’m on my way there right now. I’ve got something you need to see!”

“We’ll see you in five minutes,” Akiza told her.

Both Lise and Carly hung up.

“I hope it’s good news,” Akiza lamented.

Carly pulled up to their garage door in three minutes. She was even quicker about dispensing the
photos she had taken.
“Two Jacks?” Yusei gasped.

“There are two…Phoenix Whirlwinds?” Crow could scarcely believe it either.

“Coolio,” Leo muttered.

“But that’s impossible,” Yusei shook his head. “There’s only one Phoenix Whirlwind in the world. It’s Jack’s signature duel runner. If there really are two of them, that means…”

“We’ve got a very good look alike on our hands,” Akiza finished the thought.

“A copycat,” Lise agreed. She smiled and pointed at Akiza, then Carly. “So if we find this copycat, then we find-“

“Jack!” Carly’s eyes glittered behind her glasses.

“Supposedly,” Crow said. He hung his head, refusing to look anyone in the eye. “I just hope we can find him, but where do we even begin?”

“The same place we were last night,” Bruno said. “I’ll go with you to help you find it.”

“We’ll meet you there then!” Carly was already halfway back to her car. “I have to get a new tank of gas and drop these pictures off at Security! See ya later!”

///

The gang arrived at the rocky beach beneath the crash site. The broken glass had been cleaned up, but the duel lane was blocked off for safety’s sake. Waves beat against the rocks steadily, making them slick with water.

“Okay, the rocks are wet, so let’s be careful not to trip and-“

Before Akiza could finish her sentence, Leo took a spectacular slip on the aforementioned wet rocks. He landed face first.

“Fall,” Akiza finished. “Thank you, Leo, for demonstrating.”

“No problem,” Leo said weakly, giving her a thumbs up. He chuckled a little. “I’m okay, so no worries.”

Luna helped pull her brother back to his feet. “So uh, what kinda clues are we looking for?”

“I’m not sure,” Lise said. “I mean, I can feel faint traces of Jack’s presence. But it also feels like if there’s a trail to follow, it’s being blocked.”

“You think someone’s interfering with the Crimson Dragon’s power?” Yusei asked.

Lise shrugged. “I dunno. They’d have to be incredibly strong to do so in the first place.”

Suddenly Crow gasped and ran to the edge of the first cliff. He skidded down to the second cliff, and ran to the waterfront.

“Crow!”

“Crow?”
The others followed him, slowly picking their way over the rocks. Leo especially had no desire to fall again.

Crow knelt on the rocks to get a closer look. Nestled in the watery cliff was a card. “This is…” He stood up with it between his fingers.

“What did you find?” Akiza asked.

“It’s Trust Guardian…” Crow fell back to his knees, his fist clenched. “Damnit! I said all those horrible things, and I can’t even take them back!” He dropped Trust Guardian in his anguish.

Yusei knelt beside him, and picked up the card. “Jack… where are you?”

“I can hear you breathing!

I can see you coming!”

Yusei stood and answered his ringing phone. “Trudge?”

“Come quick!” The officer was shouting so loudly, Yusei had to pull his ear away. “It looks like Jack’s appeared on the highway again!”

///

The real Jack struggled against his bonds. When he’d woken up, he’d been surrounded by black, spore-like spheres. In between the spores was a nebulous purple and magenta colored space, devoid of stars. The spores had fastened tendrils around Jack’s limbs, preventing him from escaping.

To make matters worse, Jack had a perfect reflecting pool in the nebula to watch his double destroy his reputation.

“Just what are you? What do you want from me?” Jack demanded.

Copycat smirked through the connection. His red-violet eyes were soulless and cruel. “I have only one thing to say to you! The way you are now, you could never win against the person you were in the past!”

“What?!”

///

Copycat raced across the highways. Officer Kaz and a battalion of police officers chased after him.

“Jack! Why are you doing this?!” Kaz called up to him. “What happened to the honorable man I knew?!”

Copycat didn’t respond. He lead his pursuers into a tunnel, and put on a burst of speed to drive up the walls. Copycat sped across the light fixtures, shattering the glass. The officers behind Kaz were caught in a multitude of crashes trying to avoid the broken glass shards. A cloud of smoke kicked up that only Kaz emerged from.

“Jack, stop! You’ll only make your crimes worse!”

Copycat just laughed cruelly. “Eemember this; crushing bugs is how the King does entertainment!”
“No!” The real Jack yelled fruitlessly at his double. “What’re you doing?! Stop!”

The Emperors looked down at Jack’s struggle with varied interest.

“Joel, can’t we get rid of this guy? He’s already lost to the imposter,” Placido asked wearily. He was tired of all the sneaking around. His army was ready to go at a moment’s notice, but no. Joel wanted him to wait.

“No,” Joel said. “He has the power of the Crimson Dragon. If we try, there’s no guarantee that it would interfere again.”

“Well, if it comes down to that, it’s up to you guys,” Luciano said. “Copying his cards was hard.”

Jack grunted in frustration. Nothing he’d tried was working. He had to break free somehow!

“Stop right there!”

“Huh?” Jack stopped for a minute. He knew that voice! Through the portal he saw his friends racing up right behind officer Kaz.

“Whoa!” Kaz exclaimed. “The whole gang’s here!”

He was right. Yusei and Crow took the lead. Lise rode with Akiza, and the twins kept up with their duel boards by hanging onto Yusei and Crow’s duel runners.

“You!” Crow growled. “How dare you try to kill Jack!”

Kaz gasped. “He killed Jack?! What do you mean?!”

“That’s not Jack!” Yusei explained.

“He’s a copycat!” Luna pointed at the fake they were all chasing.

“What?!”

Copycat laughed. “How rude of you! I am the true Jack Atlas!”

“Don’t screw with us!” Crow spat back. “You’re not Jack! Sure, Jack was selfish, and annoying, and dramatic, but he’s an important friend that I was proud to fight alongside! I didn’t trust him when he was telling me the truth!”

Jack watched Crow defend him when he believed Jack couldn’t hear him. “Crow…”

“I have to ask him to forgive me! That’s why, I’ll beat an answer out of you!”

“Just try it, I dare you,” Copycat smirked. He braked until he was inches from Crow’s duel runner, and fired his back lights directly into Crow’s face.

Crow held up his hand to shield his eyes. In doing so, he lost control when Copycat’s duel runner
hit his. The duel runner bucked like a scared horse, throwing Crow off. Leo managed to escape the worst of the impact by pushing off the runner.

“Holy-!” Lise had to veer off into Yusei’s slipstream to avoid Crow’s duel runner. “Grab Leo!” Akiza snagged the young boy’s hand as they drove past. “Got him!”

“Thanks!”

“Crow!”

“Are you okay?!”

“Keep going!” Crow sat up. His voice was a little shaky, but he waved his friends onward. “I’ll catch up!”

Copycat laughed at Crow’s misfortune. “Crushing the opponents that get in my way is proof I’m Jack Atlas!”

“That’s not true!” Yusei shouted back. “The real Jack knows true strength comes from your heart and your friends!”

“Don’t be stupid,” Copycat scoffed. “A King doesn’t need friends! That means I definitely don’t need you!” He kicked up another cloud of smoke. The cloud covered everything, and obscured Copycat’s pursuers’ vision. He backed up in the smoke, and flashed his lights at the nearest person; Yusei.

Who realized what was happening a split second before the impact. Yusei pushed Luna out of the way, and next second he couldn’t see.

Akiza caught Luna’s hand, and hauled her out of harm’s way. Just in the nick of time too. The back wheel of Yusei’s duel runner was only an inch away from Luna’s nose, and then both rider and duel runner were rolling backwards. They skidded to a halt quit a ways back.

“Yusei!” Lise started to slow down. They’d lost both him and Crow to crashes.

“Stay on him!” Yusei managed to get out. “I’ll circle back for Crow! I’m fine!” He added when Lise looked doubtful. He knew she could feel all his new cuts and bruises too, but there was nothing to do about them now.

“All right!” Lise turned her attention forward. “Leo, Luna, Akiza; hold on tight.” She gunned the engine until she was even with officer Kaz.

///

“That’s it,” Jack growled. “How dare you! Doing that to my friends!”

Electric sparks raced up and down Jack’s limbs. The tendrils binding him suddenly snapped, and the space Jack floated in shattered like glass.

Jack opened his eyes. A vizor covered his eyes. It was connected to the large metal chair he was sitting in by dozens of wires. He stood and pulled the vizor off, tossing it. The vizor must have been fragile because it too shattered against the dark, dank, rocks of the cavern he’d been tucked away in.

His white duel runner stood out like a beacon in the darkness. Jack went to it, and, sure enough, his
deck was still in the duel disk.

Jack didn’t waste any more time. He crashed through the hidden doors, sped across the rocks, and drove into the city.

///

Kaz decided to radio for more of his fellow officers. “I’m with suspect, speeding along Center Field. There are injured people on the road behind me! Requesting assistance!”

“And there’s about to be four more!” Copycat giggled cruelly. He glanced back at Lise’s duel runner with four people clinging to it. “Don’t think I forgot about you!”

Lise tightened her grip on the controls. She’d need a lot more than just her riding skills to avoid crashing with this many people at stake.

“You!” Jack burst onto the scene, quite literally. He jumped into the duel lane like the star of Circque du Soleil. “Imposter! I won’t let you do as you want any longer!”

He landed directly on top of Copycat’s duel runner nose. Both of them went spinning out of control.

“There are two Jacks?!” Kaz gasped.

///

“Yusei!” Crow pulled up and knelt down to help his friend stand. “You okay?”

“Yeah, just some scrapes, but I’ll be fine,” Yusei groaned. “How about you?”

Together they pushed Yusei’s runner back up onto its wheels.

“The same,” Crow said. “But we should really… No way!” His eye had caught the footage of Jack’s duel frequency his duel runner was sending to Yusei and Crow’s runners. “Jack’s alive!”

“Well, let’s catch up to them!” Yusei swung aboard his runner.

“Right behind you!”

///

“Wanna do the honors?” Lise held out Trust Guardian.

Akiza smiled at her friend, and took the card. “Jack, catch!”

He caught the card deftly. “You guys really want me to use this card, don’t you?” He sounded annoyed, but Jack was grinning from ear to ear for the first time in days. He put the card in his deck, and the automatic shuffler did the rest. “You said that who I am now can’t win against my former self. If you’re my past self, then I’ll teach you that you can’t win against the current me!”

“Yeah, you tell ‘im!” Leo cheered.

“Don’t back down!” Luna agreed enthusiastically.

In unison, the two Jacks set their Speed World 2 spells. Once again, the white light of the infinity symbol enveloped both duelists.
“This light again?” Jack commented warily. “Now the damage in the duel will be real.”

A duel lane was selected, and rose out of the sea to meet its duelists. Jack and Copycat were the first to take the new route off the highway. Lise and company followed.

“Let’s duel!”

**Jack: 4000**

**Copycat: 4000**

“My turn,” Copycat said. “I summon Archfiend Interceptor! I set a card face down and end my turn. Now entertain your King!”

(Archfiend Interceptor: Atk: 1400 Def: 1600)

“Don’t think it’ll be so easy! It’s my turn!” Jack declared. He gasped. The card in his hand was Trust Guardian! *If I had used this in our last duel, I would have been able to synchro summon Red Dragon Archfiend before him. But I let my fight with my friends cloud my judgement. “When only my opponent controls monsters, Vice Dragon can be special summoned from my hand. Next, I summon the tuner monster Trust Guardian!”*  

(Trust Guardian: Atk:0 Def: 800)

“That big sap,” Lise sniffled a little and grinned. “He actually summoned it.”

“I’m tuning level five Vice Dragon and level three Trust Guardian to synchro summon…Red Dragon Archfiend!!”

Carly and Bruno came speeding up to the duel in her little yellow car. Bruno was at the wheel, while Carly was trying to get a good angle for her next photo.

“Finally, we made it! You drive like my grandma!” Carly complained. “Step on it already!”

“Sorry! I didn’t wanna get pulled over!” Bruno apologized, but he did indeed speed up.

Carly grinned devilishly at Jack’s signature dragon. “All right! Jack is fighting! I’ve got a scoop for sure!”

“Hey, miss, you need to pull over! Duel lanes are not permitted!” Officer Kaz told her.

“It’s okay!” Carly shouted back. “I’m a journalist!” She held her camera at the ready.


“Interceptor’s effect activates,” Copycat said. “If attacked, five hundred points of damage are inflicted.”

**Jack: 3500**

**Copycat: 4000**

“But Archfiend Interceptor is destroyed!” Jack reminded him.

**Jack: 3500**
Copycat: 2400

“I set one card face down and end my turn.”

“It’s my turn!” Copycat sneered. “Since there are only monsters on your side of the field, I also special summon Vice Dragon!”

“Is it coming?” Jack wondered aloud.

“Next, I summon the tuner monster Flare Resonator! I tune level five Vice Dragon with level three Flare Resonator to synchro summon…Red Dragon Archfiend!”

(Flare Resonator: Atk: 300 Def: 1300)

“So the imposter’s dragon is here too,” Jack commented dryly.

“Undeniable proof!” Carly pointed and started snapping photos. “Keep us steady, Bruno!”

“The synchro monster that used Flare Resonator as synchro material gains three hundred attack points,” Copycat said. “Now battle!”

Jack: 3200

Copycat: 2400

Jack winced from the pain, but he wasn’t done yet. “But the synchro monster that used Trust Guardian as synchro material isn’t destroyed by lowering its attack points by four hundred!”

“I set one card facedown and end my turn,” Copycat shook his head, his confident smirk never leaving his face. “Lowering Red Dragon’s attack points to protect it from destruction? How desperate!”

“Say whatever you want,” Jack scowled. “But those who are too absorbed by power are destroyed by it! It’s my turn!”

“That was surprisingly deep and intelligent,” Lise said, nodding.

Jack faltered midway through his drawing phase. “I can be smart!”

Lise chuckled. “I know, man. I’m just messing with you. It’s good to have you back.”

Jack smiled, and pointed at his opponent’s monster. “Battle! Go, Red Dragon Archfiend! Rid that imitation from the field!”

Copycat smirked. “Your side has lower attack points! What are you trying to show me?”

“Continuous trap; Assault Spirits!” Jack answered. “By sending a card with a thousand or lower attack points to the graveyard, during my turn, that card’s attack points are added to Red Dragon Archfiend’s! Disappear, you poor imitation!”

The monsters collided awkwardly, punching each other in the face.

“Normally, this would be a draw, but…”

“That’s right,” Jack interrupted. “Trust Guardian’s effect! By lowering its attack points by four hundred, my Red Dragon Archfiend isn’t destroyed! I set one card face down and end my turn,
which means Assault Spirit’s effect wears off.”

“That injured monster isn’t Red Dragon Archfiend anymore,” Copycat taunted. “Let me show you! The King’s ultimate divine play! It’s my turn!

Since only you have monsters on your side of the field, I summon Big Piece Golem without tributing! Next, I activate the speed spell Angel Baton! I draw two cards from my deck, and discard a card. Then I play Boosted Resurrection! I special summon a level four or lower monster, Small Piece Golem, and equip it with this card. Through its effect, its level and attack points go up! And since I have two Golems, Big and Small, I special summon Mid Piece Golem to the field!”

(Small Piece Golem: Atk: 1600 Def: 0)

(Mid Piece Golem: Atk: 1600 Def: 0)

(Big Piece Golem: Atk: 2100 Def: 0)

“A fusion summon of Multi-Piece Golem through Speed Fusion? Hardly divine,” Jack scoffed.

“So naïve,” Copycat whirled his duel runner around so he drove backwards. “I use your trap card Assault Spirits as a cost and special summon Trap Eater!”

(Trap Eater: Atk: 1900 Def: 1600)

“A tuner?”

“I’m tuning my now level four Small Piece Golem and level four Trap Eater to synchro summon… Red Dragon Archfiend!”

“What?!”

“A second one?!”

Like the first copy dragon, this one’s colors were off. The first had purple markings, and the second had blue markings.

Copycat was far from finished though. “And since a synchro summon was successful, I special summon Synchro Magnet from my hand!”

(Synchro Magnet: Atk: 1000 Def: 600)

“I tune Big Piece Golem and Synchro Magnet! I also play the trap Rebirth Ring! By releasing my level four Mid Piece Golem, I special summon a monster from my graveyard that has double its level! Appear now, two Red Dragon Archfiends!”

The purple dragon joined the blue, and a new, yellow marked Red Dragon Archfiend rounded out the trio nicely.

“He summoned three Red Dragon Archfiend’s?!” Jack’s mouth would have hit the ground had he not been driving his duel runner so quickly.

“What the actual fuck?” Lise said.

“No way!” Akiza gasped.

“I don’t believe it!” Carly nodded in agreement. “But I’ll make sure the public does!” Her camera
began flashing nonstop.

Copycat laughed triumphantly. “It all ends here! The climax of a once in a lifetime show! Three Red Dragon Archfiends attack your shell of a dragon!”

**Jack: 1200**

**Copycat: 2400**

Jack clenched his teeth. “Withstand it!”

“One more attack! Third Red Dragon Archfiend attack!”

“Oh no! If this attack goes through, Jack loses!” Luna cried.

“This is bad!” Kaz exclaimed.

“No!” Carly shouted. “Don’t lose, Jack!”

The flames from the attack washed over Jack. He was so deeply engulfed, his friends couldn’t even see him. Copycat just laughed and laughed.

Then the smoke and flames cleared. Jack was still riding!

“He’s okay!” Leo sighed.

**Jack: 400**

**Copycat: 2400**

Copycat sniffed with disgust and turned his duel runner back around. “You activated Ray of Hope and halved the Damage, is it?”

Jack ignored him and addressed his dragon. “Red Dragon Archfiend, you withstood the attacks well. As long as you’re here, my soul won’t be defeated! Ray of Hope’s additional effect activates! At the end of the battle phase, I special summon a level one monster from my hand! I special summon Dark Bug!”

(**Dark Bug: Atk: 100 Def: 100**)

“I end my turn,” Copycat said. “That injured Red Dragon withstanding all those attacks. Having lost its claws, lost its fangs; it’s like a former image of yourself! Having lost everything that you were before!”

“You’re wrong!” Jack shook his head. “I was a selfish and stupid man who only believed in my own power! But now I have friends I believe in!”

Leo burst into tears. “He’s talking about us!”

“The Red Dragon Archfiend that fought sustaining all those injuries, and Trust Guardian, who protected Red Dragon, are the proof of those bonds! I’ll show you what true strength is! It won’t disappear in my own ambitions!” Jack held up his arm. The Signer mark was in full on glow mode.

Akiza, Luna, Yusei, and Crow’s marks ignited too.

“Oh man, Akiza, I’m sorry, but you’ve gotta take the wheel like right now,” Lise said.
“What?”

“Time to do a little Crimson Dragon, saving our friends type thing,” Lise said before she vanished.

Akiza yelped and grabbed the controls. “It’s okay! You’ve been practicing for this!”

“Jack!” Luna yelled. “Go for it!”

“Your bonds…” Jack said. The full dragon seal appeared upon his back. “I’ve received them! I’ll show you! The current me! The true power of Jack Atlas! My turn! Appear now! Majestic Dragon! I tune level eight Red Dragon Archfiend, level one Dark Bug, and level 1 Majestic Dragon to synchro summon… Majestic Red Dragon!”

(Majestic Red Dragon: Atk: 4000 Def: 3000)

“Hello Lise,” Jack smiled at her soul form. “Thanks for the help.”

“Anytime,” she winked.

“Majestic Red Demon’s effect lets him gain the attack points of one of your monsters until the end phase!”

Copycat looked pale all of a sudden. “Seven thousand attack points?!”

“Majestic Red Dragon, attack!”

Jack: 400

Copycat: 0

As his lifepoints dropped down to zero, the force of the attack seemed to strip the flesh off of Copycat’s body. A metallic scream echoed from him, and his mechanical head exploded.

“He’s a robot too?!” Leo’s mouth dropped open.

The rest of the robot burned to ashes in the fires of Majestic Red Dragon’s attack. His cards went everywhere, falling onto the duel lane.

All duelists braked to a stop in front of the cloud of smoke that had kicked up from the attack. As they watched, Copycat’s cards dissolved into stardust, then nothing.

///

“So, did it end in failure after all?” Placido smirked and lounged in his throne like a new king himself.

Luciano scowled deeply. “After all the trouble I went through… Wasted.”

“Wait,” Joel silenced them both.

A large map of the heart of New Domino City appeared before them. The majority of the map was a deep purple. However, a few roads and paths were highlighted a light yellow. As they watched a new path blazed bright white, then settled amongst the others as a white line.

Joel smirked this time. “He fit into the circuit just fine.”
Jack came to a stop a short distance from his friends. Lise reappeared too, beaming at them all.

“JACK!” Leo glomped onto his friend with tears in his eyes. “You did it!”

“And I’ll testify as a witness that you weren’t the culprit,” Kaz grinned.

“With all this evidence, Jack is proven innocent!” Carly sniffled, rubbing her eyes.

Crow pulled up alongside Jack a moment later. Yusei was right next to him.

“Jack!”

“Crow,” Jack acknowledged his friend calmly. He wasn’t sure what was going to come out of Crow’s mouth. He wasn’t expecting tears though.

Crow rubbed the tears away with the back of his hand. “Y-You’re alive!” He sniffled and hit his eyes using his entire forearm he’d started crying so badly. “Well, if you’d died so easily, I wouldn’t care!”

Jack smiled and allowed the tension to ease out of his shoulders. “That’s why I told you it wasn’t me from the beginning. Come to think of it, weren’t you gonna ask me to forgive you?”

“How do you know that?!”

“Don’t worry, I already did,” Jack assured him through his chuckling.

The gang pulled up to the rocky hills Jack had been held captive in the next morning. The rocks and bushes looked perfectly normal, nothing sinister lurking about.

“Are you sure this is the place?” Crow asked, looking around.

“Yeah, but there’s nothing here,” Jack said. He stood up and turned in a full circle. “Even my duel runner tracks are gone.”

“Lise, what about you?” Akiza asked.

“I can definitely feel Jack’s energy from inside this little mountain here, but it’s faint. Like someone tried to cover it up.”

“How weird,” Jack said. “Who programmed that robot? And why was it acting like me?”

“If it’s a robot, then it could be connected to Ghost too,” Crow said.

“Ghost, Jack’s double, Yliaster,” Yusei frowned, resting a knuckle on his lips while he thought. “Somehow they’re all connected. I know it.”

“Don’t forget the guy Luna and I dueled,” Leo reminded them. “He wasn’t a robot, and nobody remembers him!”

“That’s the weirdest part,” Luna said. “You guys all remember Luciano right?”

“Well, we watched your duel, so yeah,” Crow said. “But what does it mean?”
Lise spoke up, her voice slow as she thought through the jumbled pieces. “I think at this point, we can assume that whoever is doing these things can warp reality.”

“What?” Leo blinked.

“You lost me,” Crow frowned.

“Think about it,” Lise said. “We’ve had incidents with the Ghost, Luciano, and now Jack’s copycat. With the Ghost, the Machine Emperor pieces were taken from the deck before even the police could get them. In Jack’s case, his prison here is completely gone. Like it never existed.

But the real kicker is Luciano. We’re all in agreement that he exists, and was at the twin’s school for at least two days. Then after the duel, he up and vanishes. Not as a missing person, but from existence. Nobody but us remembers him, and even his entire home disappears.”

She appealed to Yusei, Jack, and Crow. “We dealt with police cover ups for years in the Satellite. We know what they look like, but even they can’t erase reality. They can’t build a home and tear it down in just one night.

I think if we are dealing with Yliaster, we have to assume that whoever is after us has the ability to basically warp reality.”

“Then the only reason we aren’t affected is because we’re protected by the Crimson Dragon!” Akiza gasped.

“Oh god,” Crow clutched his head. “My brain hurts.”

“That conclusion just adds more questions,” Yusei said. “Like why us? What’s their goal? How do we stop them?”

“I don’t know,” Lise shook her head. “I wish we knew more about Yliaster, but the two people we can ask are dead.”

Luna shivered. “I’m not grave digging.”

“We weren’t going to,” Akiza said.

“That reminds me,” Jack said. “Lise, when we were fighting about Trust Guardian, why didn’t you say anything?”

Lise blinked, surprised to be in the spotlight. “Uh, what do you mean?”

“You totally had an opinion, but you didn’t say anything. You always have an opinion. You even have an opinion on pockets.”

“You totally had an opinion, but you didn’t say anything. You always have an opinion. You even have an opinion on pockets.”

“Yes, I think they should all be bigger, but that’s every woman’s opinion on pockets,” Lise said. “So what?”

Jack sighed. “Look, just get out your two cents. I promise I won’t be mad.”

“Oh…Well…” Lise’s eyes darted between her friends. She didn’t like that they were all now looking at her with mixed expressions of confusion and impatience. “I kinda wanted to say I agreed with…Jack…”

“What?!” Crow blurted out. “You can’t be serious!”
“Ha! I knew I had a point!” Jack smirked.

“Like hell you did!” Crow yelled in Jack’s face.

“Hey!” Lise broke them up. “I also agreed with Crow and Yusei!”

Crow smirked up at Jack, and crossed his arms. “In your face.”

“Wait, I’m confused,” Yusei said. “You think we should use our own styles, but also work as a team?”

“Well, you were both half right,” Lise said. “You can use your own styles as a team, and as an individual.”

“Are you still speaking English?” Leo scratched his head.

“Oh, how do I explain this?” Lise tugged on her hair. Her expression brightened. “You guys remember Garrett, right?”

“The Russian sword dude?”

“Yes,” Lise nodded. “Garrett is great at fighting with weapons, but he still can’t unlock his chi. He’s also a great teacher and friend, but when we suddenly had to work as a team, we were terrible.

We were tripping over each other, yelling at each other, and electrocuting each other. It was a totally new dynamic with five people instead of four. Yeah, we were great as individuals, but we didn’t know how to work as a team yet.

A lot of the chi techniques I’ve developed are delayed attacks. I need time to set them up, but in that time a lot can change on the battlefield. That’s where Garrett came in. He asks as my vanguard; keeping my opponent away from me, and making sure they stay put. Because I can have all the power in the world, but it’s worthless if I can’t hit anyone with it.

It also works vice versa. Sasha and Master Terra had me learn how to sword fight to help Garrett, the team, and myself. You never know what might happen, so if my dragon power and my chi power is somehow blocked, I can still defend myself.

So, what I’m saying is, you’re both right, but you’re also wrong. Whoever wins the WRGP is going to be the team that blends their styles the best. Because opponents can take advantage of your strengths just as much as your weaknesses. You blend all your styles into a new style that has you all working together. Plus, it’ll be especially surprising if you can use each other’s styles just as fluidly as your own in the tournament.”

Lise realized everyone was still staring at her. She kicked at a rock. “Uh, does that make sense?”

Jack nodded and smiled. “I think we just found our team leader.”

“What?” Lise blinked.

“Seconded,” Crow winked at her.

“Me too,” Yusei grinned.

Lise’s cheeks flushed pink. “Are you sure?”

“Considering you have the most experience working in a team at the moment, I’d say it’s a pretty
good bet,” Akiza nudged her friend affectionately. “And we’ll promise not to blame you if we lose.”

“You’d better not!”
“All right,” Yusei stood up and rubbed the sweat off his brow. This only smeared the grease on the back of his hand across his forehead. “The tune up is all done.”

“Come on, Akiza,” Lise dragged her friend into the garage. “Since when are you so nervous about your clothes??”

Akiza’s face was almost as red as her hair. “These clothes just don’t feel like me!”

“Nonsense,” Jack smiled at both girls. “A proper turbo duelist should have the best riding suit to go with it.”

Crow nodded in agreement. “It does suit you, no pun intended, of course.”

“And you’ll have your own duel runner frame to take the last parts of the test on,” Lise said, gesturing to the model they’d been working on.

“For me?” Akiza’s eyes watered.

“Yeah,” Yusei said. “I built it out of spare parts, so it’s not the best, but it should manage fine for practice.”

“Besides, the practice runners they give you are terrible,” Lise added. “Like driving a giant Razor scooter as a 90-year-old blind dog.”

Akiza rubbed her eyes. “Then I’ll definitely use this to get my license! You guys are the best!”

///

“When the WRGP being held here in New Domino City, we’ve had an influx of prospective turbo duelists in these classes. You may have passed your written exam, but next comes the practical exam. Believe me when I say, theory won’t do you any good. Practice makes perfect. Sign up for practice times on the track with me after dismissal!”

Akiza breathed a sigh of relief. She’d passed! Well, the written exam, not the actual riding and turbo dueling part. “Here goes nothing,” she said on her way to sign up for her practice times.

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“When gonna enter the WRGP solo?” Leo asked with a grin. He, Luna, and Lise joined her on the bench outside Duel Academy’s practice ring.

“Oh, hey guys,” Akiza looked up from her reflection in her helmet with a smile. “I’m nowhere near WRGP level. I want to ride and duel with you, and the others. I want to feel the same wind, see the same things…”

Lise put her hand on her friend’s shoulder. “You will. I have no doubt about it.”

“This is no place for girls,” the three boys that had tormented Akiza in her class approached her group of friends. “Turbo Duels are for real men. You’d be better off playing with your dollies at home, missy!”

To the surprise of everyone, Luna spoke up first. “Take your stone-age sexism somewhere else!”
Don’t you have any shame!”

“Ooh, scary, scary,” the boys jeered.

The leader of the trio, a boy with red and brown hair snickered. “We’re just giving you a warning. Turbo duels aren’t easy, missy.”

“I never thought they would be,” Akiza said, her voice controlled even though she would have liked nothing more than to give these boys a taste of their own medicine.

Lise’s jaw and fists clenched. Her irises turned red. “Just say the word and I’ll kick the crap out of them.”

Luckily the coach cut in. “Do you want your practice hours or not?! Move it!”

“R-right!”

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“It might be harder, but in order to pass this test you’ll need to do it without the autopilot,” the coach explained. “The turbo duelists in the WRGP won’t be using autopilot either, so the duels depend on your skills alone! Understood?”

“Yes!”

“First rider, you’re up!”

Leo, Lise, and Luna watched the boy with red and brown hair drive out onto the track first. They’d settled into the stands to wait for Akiza’s turn.

“How is it going?” Yusei asked. He sidled up to his friends with his hands in his pockets.

“Well…” Lise said, her eyes on the rider.

The boy went rocketing through the first turn. He slid, screaming, into the sand bags lining the edge of the track to prevent more serious crashes. “Damnit,” the boy whined when the dust had cleared.

“Not great,” Lise finished.

“Jackass, you went too fast!” the coach reprimanded him.

Leo frowned. “How does he know Jack’s nickname?”

Luna and Lise snorted. Yusei chuckled to himself.

“Next!”

“Yes, sir!” The next rider went painfully slow through the turn. “I made it!”

“Wrong!” coach yelled. “Drive that damn slowly and you’ll get rear ended! Next!”

“Yes sir!” Akiza responded promptly. She gunned her engine and went sailing across the track.

“Go, Akiza!” Leo cheered.

“Good luck!” Luna shouted.
“Come on,” Lise bit her lip in anticipation.

“Wow,” Akiza murmured to herself. *This acceleration... I’m on a real turbo dueling course!* “This feels great!”

“Akiza, slow down!” Yusei called out to her. “You’re not gonna make the-“

Akiza screamed as her duel runner hit the sand bags at full speed. She went flying in the opposite direction.

All four of her friends winced sympathetically. Luna and Lise even covered their faces.

“I’m okay!”

The day wore on and Akiza kept practicing. Even after the others had all gone home, she still kept at it.

“Wow, she’s working really hard,” Leo said after Akiza attempted the turn for what must have been the millionth time.

“Yes,” Yusei nodded. He nudged Lise with his elbow. “Reminds me of when you were getting your license.”

“I forgot how embarrassing it was to crash so many times,” Lise peered through her fingers, hoping against hope that Akiza would make it this go around.

“You were there for all of my crashes too.”

“The one where you broke a window was the best,” Lise smiled.

Akiza took the turn wrong again. This time diving head over heels for the pavement. She pushed herself back up again.

“Akiza, are you okay?”

“Do you wanna take a break?”

“I almost had it too,” Akiza grumbled. She suddenly gasped. “I got it!” She popped back up to her feet. “If I stick it out there a little longer and hit it in one shot, I might make the turn! Yeah, that’s it! That’s gotta be it!”

“Um,” Leo looked after her. She’d completely ignored her friends. “Did she hit her head?”

Akiza tried three more times. Each crash was more spectacular than the last.

“Akiza, I think we should think about heading home soon,” Luna said. They’d walked with her back to the starting line. “The sun is going down. It’s going to be dark soon.”

Akiza took off her helmet. “I think after that last one, I’ve got it. Just one more. Please!”

“Okay, but this is the last run for today,” Yusei said.

Lise gave her a thumbs up. “Show us whatcha got.”

Akiza grinned and raced back to her bike. This time she took off with a plan in mind. Reckless abandonment had made her crashes worse. “My speed and angle of entry are okay, and I’ve got a
steady grip. Now to boost the acceleration!”

Before Akiza knew it she was sailing through the turn like a pro. “I did it!” she squealed.

“Yes!” Lise jumped up, punching the air above her.

“She did it!” Luna cried.

Akiza pulled back up to the edge of the stands. She pulled her helmet off and spat hair out of her mouth. “Well, that was definitely better. Who’s ready to go home?”

“I’ll get Leo home to the boys, and then I’ll join you later,” Luna said.

“See you then,” Lise waved.

Akiza glanced between them. “Wait what?”

“We invited ourselves over tonight for a sleepover!” Lise explained, a huge grin on her face. “Carly will be coming over later too.”

“Whoa, seriously?” Akiza’s jaw dropped. “What about my runner?”

“Leo and I can take it back to the garage. I need to do some more tune ups,” Yusei said. “You banged it up pretty badly.”

“Oh, sorry,” Akiza swung off the bike and groaned audibly. “Oh my god, so many bruises!” She started to push her runner out to where her friends were parked.

“You get used to it,” Lise said. “I’ve already got my stuff, so we can go directly to your place.”

“I’ll have your runner ready for you bright and early tomorrow, Akiza, so don’t worry,” Yusei said.

“Thanks, Yusei,” Akiza smiled and mounted Lise’s duel runner.

He nodded, and pulled Lise into a quick kiss by her belt loops. “See you tomorrow, love.”

Akiza rolled her eyes. “Seriously?”

Both Lise and Yusei’s faces were redder than usual when they drove off. Luckily, this didn’t hinder Lise’s driving. She and Akiza enjoyed the wind in their faces, and the amazing views of the sunset over the water.

“Good thing my parents love you,” Akiza was saying when Lise parked in her parents back driveway. She didn’t want to leave her runner in the front gardens where anyone could see it. “Or they’d be a little miffed you invited so many people over to their house.”

“Oh please, it’s not a party. I didn’t invite a stripper.”

Akiza laughed and wrapped her arms around her friend. “I’m so glad I got the chance to spend time with you.”

“Me too,” Lise hugged her friend back just as warmly. “But we can spend time together any day.” She broke the hug to grab her things from under the seat.

Akiza shuffled her feet. She stared at her hands, and wouldn’t meet Lise’s eyes. “Well…not really recently.”
“Whattaya mean?” Lise followed Akiza to the doors, wheeling her bike in, and walked into the large, luxurious kitchen.

“I just…just come on,” Akiza took the lead towards her room.

Bewildered, Lise followed. “Did I say something wrong?” She threw her stuff on Akiza’s queen bed, and sat down.

“No,” Akiza shook her head and sat next to Lise. She sighed and took off her riding gloves. “Well, ever since you and Yusei started dating, I’ve just felt like…you don’t have time for me anymore. You’re always together, and then you were in Peru for a month, and…it feels like I see you, but I don’t…at the same time.”

“Akiza,” Lise took her friend’s hand. “I’m so sorry that you’ve felt like that. I didn’t…I wasn’t trying to… I didn’t know you felt that way. I swear I wasn’t trying to ignore you or hurt you in any way. You’re right. I’ve been kinda neglectful of my other friends. Yusei is my friend who I just so happen to make out with sometimes, but-“

“Sometimes?” Akiza raised a single eyebrow.

Lise flushed red again. “Okay, all the time, but in my defense he tastes really good.”

“Ew!” Akiza shoved her friend, giggling, off the bed. “Lise! I didn’t need to know that!”

Lise was still laughing, but she calmed down quickly. She had a point to make. “I’m sorry. I promise to make time for you too. You’re an amazing friend, Akiza, and you deserve better.”

“Thanks, I’ll hold you to that.”

The doorbell rang and the girls were joined by Carly and Luna. Sayoko, Akiza’s mother, trailed in behind them.

“You girls want some pizza?” Sayoko asked.

“Absolutely!”

“Cheese, please,” Luna said.

“Mushrooms!” Carly suggested.

“Ew no, meat!” Lise made a face, her lips wrinkling in disgust.

“I’ll go halvsies,” Sayoko laughed. She left to go make the call.

Akiza changed into her pajamas while Lise and Carly argued the values of meat over mushrooms. Luna just listened in, laughing when the arguments became more and more ridiculous.

Carly rattled herself when Akiza sat back down on her bed. “But we’ll get good pizza either way. This gal is getting her turbo dueling license soon! That’s so awesome!” She pointed dramatically at her friend.

“I know!” Luna squealed. “She looks so cool too!”

Akiza’s face turned almost as red as her hair. “Not when I’m crashing!”

“That’s half the fun!” Lise said. “We’ve got photos of my best crashes.”
“If you took photos of my crashes, I will kill you,” Akiza was only half joking.

“I swear we didn’t,” Luna said hurriedly.

“So Carly,” Lise nudged her as she sat down on the bed beside them. “How is your latest scoop going?”

Carly’s eyes glittered, and her glasses shined when she smiled. “My last article, the one about the Jack clone, was a success! Mr. Pitts says he’ll give me some real scoops to right on now!”

“That’s great!” Luna grinned.

“Right? But my research on Yliaster is coming up with squat!” Carly frowned. “I’m beginning to think there’s only so much data to find on them. If I can’t build a decent file on them, then there isn’t anything to investigate. The only thing I’ve found is a single sentence in a book about dimensions. It stated that Yliaster is essentially an in between dimension connected to the Spirit World and our world that acts as a balance between the two worlds. There was nothing about the people in Yliaster, or even if anything lives there. The book made it sound like Yliaster just…is…”

“ Weird…” Luna scratched at her head, jostling one of her pigtails. “But I guess that makes sense. Maybe something bad happens if the Spirit World and Earth are connected.”

“I’ll have to do more research,” Carly adjusted her glasses. “It’s hard to discern what’s right and wrong info though.”

“I can imagine,” Akiza sighed. “We’re still at square one.”

“But if there’s nothing we can do right now, we should figure out what movies we’re watching tonight,” Luna said, her tone very serious.

“An excellent endeavor, my friend!” Lise pointed at her dramatically.

“Ghibli marathon!” Akiza leaped off the bed and lead the way downstairs.

///

Next morning everyone was back out on the practice track bright and early. Lise and Akiza had conked out first the night before, but Akiza had insisted on getting up early to practice all day again.

Which continued for well over a week. Akiza practiced whenever she got the chance until she could run the track perfectly.

The day of her practice test, she couldn’t stop smiling. Not even the sour moods of her fellow classmates could dampen her spirits.

“Time to announce the results of the test!” her coach barked at his four students. “The only one who passed the class was Izinski! Everyone else failed!”

Akiza thought she’d been happy to run the track so well, but now she was over the moon. I passed! Now on to the final exam!

Her classmates scowled with intense loathing at her. “Damnit, beaten by that girl?”

“Talk about lame…”
“Your final exam is tomorrow,” Yusei said. He’d driven his runner onto the track beside Akiza’s. “You can qualify, no problem.”

“Okay,” Akiza nodded. She leaned over to Lise to whisper in her ear. “What’s he getting at?”

“A trick to get you out of a jam,” Lise explained. “He explains it better than I do.”

Yusei tilted his head from side to side. “I guess, but from my experience, there’s one more thing you should know how to do. It’s not in your lessons, but like Lise said, it can help you in a jam.”

He took off down the track, and turned to come back. In a sweeping, fluid motion, he switched and was suddenly drifting backwards at a leisurely pace. “You need to learn how to drift backwards.”

“I’m guessing it’s harder than it looks.”

“You have no idea,” Lise muttered.

“Yeah, if you can master this, you can handle almost any situation.”

“All right, I’ll try,” Akiza said.

She mounted her bike and took off. “Okay, now just switch to backwards and…coast backwards…” Akiza whirled at top speed, the momentum throwing her back and forth. Her friends winced sympathetically when she crash landed again.

“Maybe we need a different approach?” Lise said.

///

“When you said we were gonna try something different, this wasn’t what I had in mind!” Akiza cried, hanging onto the walls for dear life.

Yusei and Lise had brought her to a rollerskating rink. Leo and Luna had been overjoyed, but Akiza had some doubts. Especially since everyone was zooming past her no problem.

“Come on, Akiza, it’s fun!” Leo laughed as he whizzed by.

She glared at his and his sister’s backs. “Not when you fall every ten seconds.” She directed her glare at Yusei and Lise. “How do you guys even like this place anyway?”

“We come here for dates all the time,” Yusei explained. His cheeks were a little pink. “Lise is much better at blading and riding now too.”

Lise rolled her eyes. “I just come for the fries. They’re excellent comfort food when you’ve fallen on your ass for the twelfth time.”

“And I’ve got pictures of all your best falls,” Yusei pulled Lise into his chest and started tickling her sides.

Lise laughed, and hugged herself to try to protect her sides. “Stop! You’ll make me pee!”

Akiza fake coughed meaningfully into her fist. “So, how does this apply to turbo dueling?”

Yusei immediately stopped, and both he and Lise looked sheepish. “Sorry.”
“It’s good practice for learning how to drift backwards. Let’s get you back into the swing of how to blade first,” Lise said. She took Akiza’s hand and pulled her away from the wall.

“Oh, okay,” Akiza’s knees shook and she clung to Lise’s hand. “I forgot how to do this.”

“It’s okay,” Lise said. “Back on the horse one stirrup at a time.”

They kept at it for hours. People came and went, but their little group was still practicing. Leo and Luna took a break to grab fries, drinks, and to watch for a short period. Yusei kept gliding around until Leo fell and accidently tripped him. Everyone got a good laugh at that. Akiza picked it up faster than she thought she would. Then she and Lise took turns switching to backwards and falling all over the place. Her butt was sore afterwards, but it felt good to fall around and mess up with her friends.

Eventually she was gliding around backwards almost as good as Yusei was.

“I got it! I just have to be careful about switching my balance!”

///

The morning of Akiza’s official test was just as cheery and optimistic as she was. This was her moment, and she was ready for it.

She knocked on the garage door as she let herself in. “Good morning! Whoa! Is that my duel runner?”

“Uh huh,” the boys and Lise rose to greet Akiza.

The original frame had been completely redone. Now the bike had style with a new duel disk set up, wing-like extensions, and twin exhaust.

“I did the brakes,” Crow said, puffing up his chest a little.

“And I got the new engine fitted and ready for you,” Yusei added.

“Jack helped me paint the exterior after those two finished,” Lise said. “He was surprisingly good at it.”

“Hey!”

Lise ignored him and put her hand on her friend’s shoulder. “Are you ready?”

Akiza sniffled and wiped at her eyes with the back of her hand. “I’ll make sure to get that license.”

“Just do your best,” Yusei nodded.

“You head over,” Lise said. She glanced at her and Jack’s paint-stained clothes, and Yusei and Crow’s grease-stained clothes. “We should probably clean up before we meet you there to cheer you on.”

///

The four of them arrived just in time to watch the first guy peel out to take his test. Leo and Luna were already there. They exchanged greetings and took seats.

The would-be turbo duelist drove too close to the edge of the track. His wheel caught and he slid...
into the sand bags with a loud thumping sound.

“Ended before it started, huh?” Jack commented.

Trudge pulled up alongside the stands and removed his helmet. “Don’t think a duel to qualify for a license is gonna be so easy.”

“Long time no see, Trudge,” Crow crossed his arms.

“Lots of familiar faces, I see,” Trudge grinned at the gang. “But just because I know you all, doesn’t mean I’ll go easy on any of ya.”

“Oh, we know,” Lise said dryly, rolling her eyes.

“So Akiza,” Trudge smirked at her. “You’ve gotta beat me to get your license. Because who better to ensure new turbo duelists in the WRGP are safe than an officer of the law?”

“Even when we’re his friends, he can’t cut us some slack,” Crow complained.

“Just hope Akiza will be okay,” Jack said.

“Just you watch, Izayoi,” the trio of boys that had been harassing Akiza the past few weeks had their own smirks upon their faces. “One way or another, you’re not finishing this test.” The boy with red and brown hair tossed a tiny, white device up and down in his palm.

Akiza and Trudge, unaware of the potential threat in the stands, keyed up at the starting line.

“Izinski,” Trudge said. “I’m not holding back.”

“Fine by me,” Akiza responded.

At the start of the commencement ding, Akiza blasted onto the track. Trudge wasn’t far behind her. He set the Speed World 2 field spell.

Akiza kept her gaze firmly on the first turn. *I’ll take this turn first, and go first in our duel! I’ll see what she’s got in her...* Trudge thought to himself.

*Got it!* Akiza grinned, taking the curve first!

“All right!” Leo cheered.

“Yes!” Luna cried. “She gets to go first!”

“What’s wrong? You’ve got the first move, right?” Trudge rammed his duel runner into the side of Akiza’s. “Come on and play! If this is enough to spook you, then you can’t handle a turbo duel!”

“That jerk is hazing her!” Crow got up from his seat, fists clenched.

“He’s doing exactly what he did for my test,” Lise said. “Everyone is different. I already knew about people trying to get in your face during a turbo duel, sometimes literally like that, but Akiza doesn’t. All her experiences with this stuff is brand new.”

Jack nodded. “She’s right. Getting that rough is more and more common these days.”

Akiza took a shaky breath, and removed her hand from the handlebar. “It’s my turn, draw! I
summon Revival Rose in defense mode! And now I activate the speed spell Summon Speeder!”

(Revival Rose: Atk: 1300 Def: 1300)

“Action prohibited,” Akiza’s duel runner told her.

“What is she doing?” Crow facepalmed.

“You need speed counters to use speed spells,” Jack said simply.

“She’s more nervous than we thought,” Yusei said.

Akiza grimaced at her display screen. “That’s right, I forgot about the whole speed counter thing.”

“Quit stalling!” Trudge complained.

“T-Turn end!”

“My turn!” Trudge’s smirk turned into a gleeful grin. “I summon Stygian Street Patrol!”

(Stygian Street Patrol: Atk: 1600 Def: 1200)

“Battle! Stygian Street Patrol attack Revival Rose! Then Stygian Street Patrol’s effect inflicts damage equal to the monster it destroys in battle equal to its level times one hundred!”

Akiza: 3600

Trudge: 4000

“I place a card face down and end my turn.”

I’ve gotta overcome this fear! Akiza clenched her teeth.

“What’s wrong? Come on, Izinski!” Trudge backed his runner into the nose of Akiza’s.

She wobbled a little, but she regained her balance. “My turn! I draw! I summon Twilight Rose Knight! When this monster is successfully summoned, I can special summon a level four or lower monster from my hand! I special summon Lord Poison!”

(Twilight Rose Knight: Atk: 1000 Def: 1000)

(Lord Poison: Atk: 1500 Def: 1000)

“Now she’s really hitting her stride!” Leo grinned.

“I’m tuning level three Twilight Rose Knight to my level four Lord Poison. I synchro summon… Black Rose Dragon!”

Trudge scoffed at Akiza’s beast. “Just because you’ve summoned your dragon doesn’t mean you’re going to win, Izinski.”

“Black Rose Dragon, attack Stygian Street Patrol!”

Akiza: 3600

Trudge: 3200
“Good, but not good enough,” Trudge said. “I activate the trap Death Penalty! When a monster is destroyed by battle, it inflicts damage equal to its attack power, and not only that, but the monster that attacked is destroyed!”

“What?!”

Akiza: 2800

Trudge: 3200

Crow winced sympathetically. “She’s getting completely pushed around!”

“Akiza!” Yusei called out to her. “Shake it off! You can still win!”

“When my monster is destroyed, I can special summon Revival Rose from my graveyard,” Akiza said. She was far from finished. “I place two cards face down and end my turn!”

“My turn! By removing Stygian Street Patrol from my graveyard, I can special summon a Stygian monster in my hand with an attack of two thousand or less! I special summon another Stygian Street Patrol! I summon Stygian Security next!”

(Stygian Security: Atk: 100 Def: 600)

“I tune level one Stygian Security with level four Stygian Street Patrol! I synchro summon Stygian Sergeants! Battle! Stygian Sergeants attack Revival Rose! But that’s not the best part.”

“Huh?”

“God, I hate that monster,” Lise scowled deeply.

“The best part is if Stygian Sergeants succeed in destroying an opponent’s monster, it can attack again with eight hundred more attack points!”

“Uh oh, if this attack hits, then Akiza will lose!” Yusei realized.

“Direct attack!” Trudge laughed.

“Trap activate!” Akiza countered just in the nick of time. “Offensive Guard! When I’m attacked directly, it halves the monster’s attack until the end phase of the turn, and allows me to draw a card from my deck!”

Akiza: 1300

Trudge: 3200

“That’s my girl!” Lise grinned, pumping the sky with her fist. “Hanging on by the skin of our teeth!”

“What? You survived, eh? But, it’s still my turn,” Trudge said. “I activate the speed spell Speed Storm! When my speed counters are at three or more, it inflicts one thousand points of damage!”

Akiza: 300

Trudge: 3200

“She managed to get through that, but she only has three hundred lifepoints left!” Crow clenched
his fists, shaking them lie he wished he could use them to help.

“I place a card face down to end my turn.”

“My turn, draw! I summon Black Rose Witch!”

(Black Rose Witch: Atk: 1700 Def: 1200)

“When this card is successfully summoned, I draw one card from my deck. If that card is anything other than a monster, it’s destroyed. Draw! The card I’ve drawn is Dark Verger!” Akiza declared.

(Dark Verger: Atk: 0 Def: 1000)

“Trap activate,” Trudge countered. “Stygian Barricade! I can activate this when an opponent’s monster is summoned, which makes all level four or lower monsters unable to attack during this turn! Meaning your Black Rose Witch is frozen! On top of that, Stygian Barricade will deal five hundred points of damage for each of my opponent’s level four or lower monsters during the end phase! If you don’t beat me this turn, it’s game over!”

Akiza frowned, but she wasn’t giving up. She looked at her display stats. I have four speed counters, so… “I activate the speed spell Summon Speeder! It special summons a level four or lower monster from my hand! Say hello to Dark Verger!”

“Now she’s got it,” Yusei smiled.

Lise beamed at her friend. “Time for a game changer.”

“I’m tuning my level four Black Rose Witch with level two Dark Verger! I synchro summon… Splendid Rose!”

(Splendid Rose: Atk: 2200 Def: 2000)

“Splendid Rose’s effect activates!” Akiza cried. “By removing a plant type monster in my graveyard from play, it halves the attack power of one monster until the end phase of this turn! I choose your Stygian Sergeants to halve their attack points. Now battle! Splendid Rose attack!”

Akiza: 300

Trudge: 2100

“Not bad, kid,” Trudge admitted grudgingly.

“We’re not through yet! Here’s payback for earlier!”

“Say what?” Trudge gasped.

“I activate my trap card Blossom Bombardment! When a plant type monster destroys an opponent’s monster, it inflicts damage equal to that monster’s attack power.”

Akiza: 300

Trudge: 1000

“Wasn’t expecting that,” Trudge said.

One of the boys in the stands scowled. “That idiot is losing to her.”
“Damn girl,” the boy with red and brown hair raised his small device. “About time we finish her off.” His finger pressed the button.

A construction crew had left a rack of pipelines to be installed later by the side of the track. At the push of the button, their restraints snapped. Pipes began tumbling and rolling across the track!

“No! Akiza!” Lise shouted. She wanted to help her friend, but she couldn’t interfere. If anything caused Akiza to stop, she’d fail.

The boys nearby smirked. “Look at her squirm.”

“Huh?” Jack heard the trio snickering, and turned to look at their gleeful grins.

“Uh oh, that’s not good,” Trudge frowned, looking back at the mess behind him. “But, if she wipes out, the test is over.”

Akiza was practically hyperventilating she was so scared. Those pipes had flown straight at her head, and almost killed her! Surprisingly enough, it was Sherry’s words just two months ago that came to her now.

*Zhis speed and wind? Zhey’re telling me all I need to know about Elise’s ‘eart. And my ‘eart as well. Zhat is somezhing only zhose who turbo duel can understand!*

“I want to know too!” Akiza cried. She set her jaw, and looked onward. “I won’t be stopped here!”

She poured on the speed, dodging pipes as graceful as a ballerina. Akiza’s duel runner slide into gliding backwards like she’d been doing it for years.

“Awesome!” The twins gasped.

“I knew it’d come in handy,” Yusei smiled.

“You are such a dork,” Lise grinned at him, and turned her attention back to Akiza. “Show him what you’re made of!”

“I’ll be damned,” Trudge said. “She avoided all of them!”

*I’m going to be one with the wind too!* Akiza vowed. “During the battle phase in which it attacked, by removing a plant type monster in my graveyard from play, I can halve its attack power and attack once more! Splendid Rose attacks directly!”

**Akiza: 300**

**Trudge: 0**

Trudge came to a stop. His runner let out steam, as if it too were catching its breath. “Well done,” he said once Akiza had come to a stop too. “You pass.”

“Yes!”

“Nice!”

“She did it!”

Jack hmphed in disgust and walked back over to his friends. He’d left the trio of Akiza’s bullies with some choice bruises first. Nobody messed with his friends.
Sherry had taken the time out of her day to watch. She smiled down at the track from the streets. She didn’t want to intrude, but she did want to see the psychic girl get her license. Akiza was rather interesting. “Another female turbo duelist in the world. I can’t wait to see her turbo duel again.”

She rode off with a smile.

“You passed! That was fucking amazing!” Lise glomped Akiza the second she was close enough.

“Welcome to turbo dueling,” Yusei said with a nod and a grin. “Glad to have you with us.”

“Akiza’s gonna be the best!” Luna declared moving in for a hug too. Her brother followed suit.

“Guys,” Akiza had to rub at her eyes again. “Thanks for all your help. I’m so…so happy! I get to join you in the wind!”
Yusei sat up in bed, stretching. His bones creaked with the weariness of sleep. He turned to find he was alone. The outline of where Lise had been sleeping beside him was fading. Her warmth barely clung to the sheets. She’d been up only a short while.

Odd. Lise hardly ever woke up before him.

Still, that wasn’t quite worrisome. Yet.

Yusei slid out of bed and put some pants on before climbing down into the kitchen. Lise wasn’t in there either, but Yusei didn’t let that stop him from pulling out plates and bread for toast. He popped the bread in their toaster and glanced out the window.

There was Lise. She was practicing her martial arts on the lip of the fountain at the center of Fountain Plaza. By the looks of it, she was focusing on her balance.

Yusei threw on his boots on the way out the door. “Hey, g’morning!” he called out to her.

Lise jumped in the midst of her next move. She tried to right herself, but the lip of the fountain was too slippery. Half her body went one way, and the other half followed suit as Lise tumbled into the fountain.

She came up, spitting water out of her mouth, just as Yusei came running over.

“Shit,” he swore, wincing in sympathy. “Sorry, are you all right?” He extended a hand to help Lise out.

“Yeah, just a little wet,” Lise joked, since she was clearly soaked through. She accepted his hand, but instead of letting him pull her out, she pulled back.

Yusei’s eyes widened, and he fell, limbs splaying, into the fountain next to Lise.

She was laughing so hard she snorted. “Your face! Priceless!”

“Oh yeah?” Yusei smiled, and smacked the water with a cupped hand. A wave splashed into Lise. “Now that’s funny.”

Lise shoved wet hair out of her face, grinning. “You’re on!”

They splashed each other relentlessly. Both Lise and Yusei were soaking wet, but neither of them seemed to care. By the time they stopped to take a breath, the cobblestones around the fountain were just as wet as the marble floors of the fountain itself.

“Truce,” Lise wheezed in between laughs and deep breathes.

“Truce,” Yusei agreed, resting on his back. The water was freezing, but he couldn’t stop smiling. “Damn, I missed you.”

Lise leaned back onto her knees. “I missed you too.” She wanted to say more, but he couldn’t quite put how empty spending an entire month away from her friends had felt. Sure, she’d had fun training, exploring, and meeting her new friends, but she’d missed life back in the city too. Especially Yusei’s warmth when he slept next to her. She inched closer to him.
Yusei raised his head out of the water. “Hey, we should get out before we catch a cold or something.”

“In a minute,” Lise murmured, cupping his face in her hands, and pressing her lips to Yusei’s.

Yusei blinked, not expecting a kiss. The heat creeping across his cheeks no longer had anything to do with the chill of the fountain water. Lise’s nose was squished against his, and her hands held him so gently, giving him the chance to pull away.

Yusei sighed into the kiss, pulling Lise closer by the small of her back. He sat up further, Lise settling into his lap. Her hands had moved into his hair, clutching at the wet strands. Her lips were soft and warm, despite the fountain’s cold. And she was holding him just as tightly as he held her.

It was way too soon when the kiss broke, or at least, that’s what it felt like.

“I love you,” Yusei murmured.

Lise opened her mouth to respond, but her features contorted strangely. Next second, she sneezed onto Yusei’s chest.

“Shit, I’m sorry!” Lise covered her mouth, eyes wide. “I’m so sorry! That came out of nowhere! Sorry!”

Yusei chuckled and pulled them both to their feet. “It’s definitely time to get out of this fountain.”

“And these wet clothes,” Lise sniffled.

They changed into drier, and much warmer clothes to eat breakfast in. They were just finishing up when Crow walked in with their mail.

“Bill, bill, another bill. God, being an adult is so fun,” he commented, voice dripping with sarcasm. “Oh, wait,” he perked up a little. “These are for Zora! Be right back!”

“I was gonna say, we don’t technically pay rent on this place,” Lise said, finishing up her coffee.

One corner of Yusei’s lips curled downwards. “Technically we should, but I’m not complaining.”

“So,” Crow came back in with fewer envelopes. “This is our mail, but it’s a little wrinkled because Zora used it to chase me out of her apartment. There’s two fan letters for Jack, a post card from some girl named Sherry, my paycheck, and – oooo, what’s this?!” He held up the smallest letter from the back of their little stack.

Any average joe would call the envelope white. However, the envelope itself was clearly a cream color, for those who were informed enough to say so. Gold trim edged both sides of the envelope, and the envelope was sealed with a golden sticker.

Crow waggled his eyebrows. “Fancy.” He read the name the letter was addressed to in navy blue, scrolling ink, and his eyes bugged out of his head. “It’s for Elizabeth Kururugi.”

“That is my birth name,” Lise grumbled. She hated her real name. Nevertheless, she picked up her butter knife, and put the envelope down on the table, facing away from her.

“What are you doing?”

“If this is a glitter bomb, or something, I don’t want it exploding in my face,” Lise said.
“Fair enough,” Crow admitted.

He and Yusei watched, crouching at the edge of the table.

Lise opened the envelope using the knife, like she was slitting someone’s throat, on the seal of the envelope. It came open easily. Nothing happened.

“Well, that was anticlimactic.”

“I mean, considering the letters we got from Barbera and Mitka, so far so good,” Yusei said.

Lise slid the letter out of the envelope. The first letter of her real name, Elizabeth, was written in ridiculous, fancy, navy blue script, as was the rest of the letter. Her expression grew from mildly amused to an intense grimace. “Oh goody, a party.” She threw the letter back on the table.

Crow and Yusei exchanged looks. “Can we-”

“Go ahead,” Lise waved her hand irritably, and went to the fridge.

“Elizabeth Kururugi, congratulations. You have been invited to…the Budokai Ball?” Yusei read aloud. His eyes widened and scanned quickly through the rest of the letter.

Crow made a face. “‘Budokai Ball?’ They couldn’t have named it something else?”

“I know, it’s so cheesy,” Lise’s scowl never left her face as she downed an entire glass of milk in one gulp.

“Lise, what the hell is this?” Yusei asked. He’d finished reading the letter.

Lise frowned, her brows squishing together. “Did I not tell you?”

“Lise!”

“It’s not anything serious or bad! I just signed up for a martial arts tournament back before we left for Crash Town!” Lise explained quickly. “That’s it!”

“Oh okay,” Yusei took a deep breath, calming down considerably. “But why did they send you a letter like you’re the queen of England?”

“Probably because of their sponsors,” Lise scowled heavily at the letter. It sat innocently by on the table. “I didn’t realize till after I threw my name in that most of the contestants are from martial arts families. Ya know, big wigs that have been around since they discovered rice.”

“Sounds awesome!”

Lise and Yusei stared at Crow.

“What?” He shrugged. “If these rich asshats are gonna throw a party, and we get to go. Free food!”

“We’re going too?” Yusei asked.

“Uh yeah, the letter says she can bring guests.”

“Up to ten,” Lise said. She seemed to be trying to ignite the letter with her eyes.

Yusei picked up the letter again to check. “The party is in five days. Okay, that should be doable.”
“You’re forgetting one crucial detail,” Lise said. “It’s a black tie event.”

Crow shrugged. “So?”

“Our aesthetic is grungy at best,” Lise said. “We need professional help.”

Jack strolled in, and didn’t even look at the coffee machine. “Did I hear black tie event?” He was grinning like a mad man. “I’ll go look for a custom suit right away!”

“Oh no you don’t! You are not wasting more of our money!” Crow followed him briskly.

They continued to argue relentlessly. The coffee machine being turned on again made even more noise.

Yusei pushed his bangs back from his face, sighed, and let them fall back into his eyes. He sat back down too.

“You don’t have to go,” Lise said immediately.

“No, I’m going. I’m also going to the tournament.”

Lise tugged on her hair, and picked at the dead skin on her fingers. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner. I honestly thought I told you. Guess I forgot.”

Yusei lifted a shoulder, but he didn’t offer any assurance or comfort.

“Why were you so freaked out about the party?” Lise asked gently. “I-I’m just asking because I don’t think it’s because you’d have to wear a suit.”

“I just…uh…” Yusei scratched at the back of his neck. “It’s stupid, but I thought you’d… something changed and you wanted someone else.”

Lise held up her hands like scales. “Hmm, a sweet, but dumb mechanic who legitimately cares about me and his friends, or a posh asshole who dresses like a penguin all the time, and only talks about himself because he makes so much money.” She raised her right hand. “I think selfish penguin man wins.”

“Okay, I get it,” Yusei rolled his eyes, a small smile on his face, and took Lise’s raised hand. “Thanks,” he said, but his expression fell. “But seriously, what’re we gonna do about this whole black-tie thing?”

“I will call Akiza,” Lise said, pulling out her cell phone.

///

“I got here as fast as I could,” Akiza said the next day. “Yesterday I was spending time with my dad, but today I am all yours. Honestly, I thought you were having a stroke yesterday when you called me about getting suits and dresses for some event we’ve been invited to. But this is totally legit, right? You’re asking me for help with fashion?”

“They are,” Jack jabbed his thumb at his friends. “I’ve already ordered my custom suit, with top hat.”

“Oh, classic,” Akiza pointed at him, smiling widely.

“Right?”
“No, an enormous waste of time and money,” Crow grumbled. He crossed his arms, and retreated so deeply into the couch he looked like a grouchy turtle.

Akiza rolled her eyes, and hefted her bag off the floor. “Okay, I’m gonna change out of my school uniform, and then we’re going into town for suits,” she pointed at the boys. “And dresses,” she grinned and pointed at Lise.

“Uuuugggghhh,” Lise slid down the couch. “I regret everything!”

///

Jack’s eyes lit up with glee the second they entered the first store. “I’m gonna go try some on!” He raced off before Crow could stop him.

“All right,” Akiza clapped her hands together. “So, first rule is: don’t look at any of the price tags. The twins will be here in a second to help out with decisions and paying. My dad comes here for personal suits all the time, so they know me here. Second rule is: you will try on everything I give you until we find something that’s perfect.”

“But that could take hours!” Crow groaned.

“Exactly,” Akiza grinned. She clapped a little and ran into the nearest rack.

“Okay, Crow, if you’ve got Jack, we’ll stick with Akiza. When the twins get here, we’ll send them your way,” Lise said like she was a football coach and telling her players a game plan.

“Got it,” Crow saluted her, and ran after Jack.

When Yusei and Lise found Akiza, her arms were already laden with different hangers full of suits.

“We’re trying all of those on?” Yusei asked, eyeing the suits nervously.

“Yeah, and the next rack too,” Akiza said. “We’ve gotta find your size first!”

“This,” Lise nodded around at the store. “This is how I die.”

Jack and the twins came over to them. The three of them were pulling a sobbing Crow behind them.

“What happened to him?” Yusei stared at his friend.

“He looked at a price tag by accident,” Leo said.

Luna nodded, and did her best to keep Crow from collapsing on the ground. “Yeah, and I think he’s having an existential crisis.”

“So much…money…” Crow whimpered.

“Excellent, the gang’s all here. To the dressing rooms!” Akiza cried.

She, and her band of less than merry friends, headed over to try things on. Akiza had it all planned out by person. The maximum for each room was ten items, which she slapped into both Crow and Yusei’s arms, and shoved them into rooms.

“Okay, judges,” she pointed to Leo and Luna. “Are we ready?”
“Yep!”

Lise looked awkwardly between them. “Uh…should I just…go? I mean, you didn’t pick anything out for me.” She laughed nervously, pointing at the door.

“Oh, it was too much to carry,” Akiza disappeared behind a rack, and came back dragging an entire wheeled pipe rack of dresses. “So I put all my choices for you on here.”

“Yes, I’m definitely dying here,” Lise sniveled. “Surrounded by dress hell and beige walls.”

“Come out for judging when you’re ready!” Akiza hung Lise’s first ten options in the room, and left.

For hours, Akiza, Leo, and Luna judged every single outfit they forced their friends to try on. Even the sales clerks who normally would just watch their patrons come and go, got in on it. They’d never had so much fun finding clothes for people before, despite three of them obviously disliking the process.

“No, Jack, you cannot get a purple suit. You already have the one you ordered to be tailor-made for yourself,” Akiza had to remind Jack for the tenth time.

“But this suit is for the main event! The one I ordered will be for the party, then the purple is after party!”

“He does look really good in purple,” Leo admitted.

“Yeah, it makes his eyes look awesome,” Luna said.

“I thought so too!” Jack grinned.

“You’re not getting two suits,” Akiza said.

“You could get purple accessories instead,” one of the salesladies suggested. Her nametag read Yoko. “What color is your custom suit.”

“White! That’d be perfect!” Jack ran back into his dressing room to change into his usual clothes.

“So, what is this thing again?” Yusei came out again, in a red suit. He pointed at the cummerbund around his waist. “It’s not just a super fat belt is it?”

“Basically, that’s what it is. It’s called a cummerbund.”

“Oh, please don’t make me wear one after I die,” Yusei said.

“Oh, stop being dramatic,” Akiza scowled. She circled him, scratching her chin. “We’ve finally found your size, but the red is just too much. It works so well with your runner that I thought…Well, we’ll have to try something else. Thoughts from the peanut gallery?”

“It kinda just makes him look angry?” Leo tilted his head to the side.

“Oh, I was thinking about Deadpool. Red, ya know, for the blood,” Luna said casually.

“Okay, no red for me,” Yusei walked back into his room.

Crow and Lise came out at the same time. Crow in a green suit, and Lise in a feathery blue dress.
Akiza, Leo, and Luna all took one look at Crow, collectively pointed at him, and spoke. “No.”
Crow threw up his arms exasperatedly, and went back into his dressing room. “I am so done.”

“Guys, I thought I said no weird textures?” Lise complained. She adjusted the hemline of feathers fruitlessly. “This makes my skin itch.”

“Blue does look good on you though,” Luna said. “Just not in that dress.”

“Thanks, I think?”

“Next!”

Jack came swirling out in his usual jacket, and grabbed Yoko. “Help me find some excellent violet accessories, would you? I need the best if I’m going to look like a masterpiece.”

Yoko gulped and flushed crimson. “Sure! Right this way!”

“Guys, we’ve been here for hours,” Lise said when she came back out of her dressing room for the billionth time. “Can we please go home now and eat ramen in our pajamas?”

“I’m up for anything that’s not this hell anymore,” Crow said. He came out wearing a black suit with orange trim, and a midnight blue shirt.

“Did someone say ramen?” Jack ran back into the fitting room so quickly it was a wonder he didn’t leave skid marks. “We can eat the new spicy town cups I got!”

“Only if we find something for you to wear!” Akiza said. “Jack, you can go. Crow, I approve. That’s your outfit. Lise, try a different one.”

“Finally!” Crow dashed back into the dressing room. “Jeans! Take me back!”

“What about accessories?” Luna asked, while Lise grumbled all the way back to her room.

“We can grab those in the next few days,” Akiza said. “I’ve got Lise covered, but I think Yusei and Crow are gonna need some help.”

“I can cover that,” Jack settled in next to them. “They could end up wearing corsages, and we can’t have that.”

Luna giggled behind her hands.

Leo frowned. “What’s a corsage?”

“Okay,” Yusei said, emerging from the rooms. “This is all I have left.”

He wore a simple, white shirt, but it worked with the jacket. It wasn’t flashy, but it was a darker blue that was highlighted well when coupled with the white shirt and black pants. It matched Yusei’s eyes almost perfectly, making them pop.

“That’s the one!” Luna clapped her hands together, her eyes shining.

“Nice!” Leo agreed, giving him a thumbs up.

“Almost as sharp as your chin,” Jack nodded.
Yusei rolled his eyes. “As long as I can wear my own coat again.”

“Look,” Lise was saying when she came out of her room again. “I’ve got three more dresses in there, but I’m done for the day, okay? This is it.”

“It is,” Akiza nodded approvingly. She folded her hands, lacing the fingers together. “That’s your dress.”

“Yeah?” Lise looked down at herself.

She wore a crimson red dress that hugged her waist, but fell in layers past her knees. The trim was black lace woven in star and moon patterns. The red fabric ended right above Lise’s chest, and became more black lacework of stars and moons.

“Fit for a dragon girl,” Akiza winked.

“So we take these off, and you pay then?” Lise’s cheeks were pink.

“Yep.” Akiza waited outside her friends’ dressing rooms, and grabbed their yeses when they tossed them over.

“So,” Crow said. He, Lise, Yusei, and Jack were watching Akiza and the twins pay for everything.

“This shit show is really happening?”

“It’s really happening,” Lise said.

Jack shrugged, his hands palm up. “But at least we’ll look good when shit hits the fan.”

“Excuse you, but we always look good,” Lise teased. “But seriously guys, thanks. It’s good to know…you support me.”

“Always will,” Yusei took Lise’s hand. Both their faces were a little pink.

“We’ll be the best dressed at this weird ass shindig, that’s for sure!” Crow laughed.
“Ready for three hours of party prep?!” Akiza grinned. She walked into the second floor carrying two large, black cases that glittered whenever they caught the light.

Lise checked the time. “The party doesn’t start for like four and a half hours, Akiza. Do we really need that much time to get ready?”

She and Yusei were lounging on the couch. Lise was reading her newest book, and Yusei was fiddling with a speaker. Apparently one of the TV’s speakers had decided it didn’t want to play sound any longer.

Akiza huffed loudly. Her eyes looked like small, almond-shaped pots of fire. “Of course! You have to shower, do your hair, your makeup, and get dressed!”

“What about the boys?”

“Take clothes off, put suit on. Should take all of 2 minutes,” Yusei said without looking up from his work.

Lise kicked his knee. “You have to shower too.”

Yusei shrugged. “Okay, five minutes.”

Jack suddenly came barreling down from his shared bedroom with Crow. “Is it time to start getting ready for tonight?!”

“You bet,” Akiza smiled.

“I’m so excited! I’ll call Carly!” Jack raced back into his room.

“So that I have time to make you gorgeous as well as myself, I’ll hop in the shower first,” Akiza hefted her bags, which Lise strongly suspected held several different kinds of makeup and accessories, and locked herself in the bathroom.

“Damn rich people,” Lise muttered. She glared at her book as if it had personally offended her.

“Hey, we can be in and out of there in an hour. Then we can leave without being rude,” Yusei said.

“That’s what I’ve been telling myself ever since I got that letter,” Lise said.

Jack poked his head out again. “Carly’s on her way over!”

“Are you gonna tell her that you like her tonight or no?” Lise called up to him.

“I will tell her when the moment strikes me,” Jack sniffed.

“If you wanted me to hit you, you just had to say so,” Lise said, grinning.

Jack stuck his tongue out at her, and closed his bedroom door once more.
“All right, I’m squeaky clean,” Akiza came out of the bathroom with her towels wrapped around her. “Don’t take forever, Lise.”

“Fine,” Lise grumbled, sliding grudgingly off the sofa.

“Do you want me to join you?” Yusei said, his face calculatingly neutral.

Lise socked him in the knee. “Not tonight, perv.”

Yusei smiled slightly, his cheeks light pink. “Then I’ll see you in about three hours then.”

///

Over the next several hours, Akiza poked, prodded, smeared, and polished off hers and Lise’s looks. It was not easy. For starters, she’d had to practically drag Lise out of the shower when she’d stayed under the pouring water for nearly 45 minutes.

Jack, unbelievably, took even longer. By the time Crow came home from work, all the hot water had been used up. Crow was rather unhappy, to say the least.

Akiza frowned at Lise as she leaned against her friend’s desk. She’d tried a few different hairstyles, but none that looked right. Lise didn’t seem to mind as she scrolled through her phone.

“I think you were right before,” Akiza said. “Simple is the way to go.”

She picked up her comb again and carefully separated a thick lock of hair from the rest. Akiza quickly braided it, and clipped the braid to the back of Lise’s head. She did the same on the other side, and then tied the two braids together in the back.

Akiza stepped back to admire her handiwork. She nodded. “Yep, simple yet effective. Now for makeup.”

Lise made a face. “Is that necessary after the moisturizer and lotion? I already feel slimy…”

“I won’t overdue it, I promise.” Akiza placed a hand on her heart to solidify her vow. “A little goes a long way. Eyes, eyebrows, lips, and you’re done.”

“Okay,” Lise said. She fidgeted relentlessly, scratching at the skin of her fingertips, but she held still otherwise. It also took her massive effort not to cry when Akiza came for her eyes.

“All right, besides your dress, and shoes, you’re done,” Akiza capped her lip gloss. She handed Lise a small hand mirror. “Whattaya think?”

Lise lifted the mirror slowly. She brought her eyes to stare at her reflection. “Oh… there I am.”

Akiza beamed. “Yes, there you are.”

Akiza had been quick, but efficient. She’d brushed mascara over Lise’s blond lashes, darkening them and highlighting Lise’s light blue eyes. Akiza had used the eyeliner sparingly, so she wouldn’t force her friend to cry and ruin her work, but ever so slightly in the corners. The eyebrow pencil had done the same trick, and Lise’s lips had been painted a light pink that wouldn’t clash with her red dress.

“See, now everyone will know you have big, beautiful eyes,” Akiza squeezed her friend’s shoulders.

“No problem. Let’s get in our dresses, and get going. Jack will throw a fit if we make him late.”

///

Yusei and Crow had changed into their suits. Both boys kept tugging on the sleeves or fiddling with the buttons. The suits were quite the change from their usual attire.

There was a knock on the door. When Yusei answered it the twins came rushing past him. It took him a second before he realized he was standing alone with the open door. He rejoined Crow and the twins, who were talking a mile a minute.

Luna wore a sweet, peach-colored dress. It was simple, yet pretty in a way that Luna appreciated. She didn’t want to be flashy, but she did like looking nice.

Her brother, on the other hand, wore a powder blue suit. The same one he’d worn to meet Sayer, as bad as that had turned out, Leo still liked the suit. It made him look good, or so he said, but he still got to wear shorts. Leo insisted, despite his sister’s refusal, that they were ‘formal’ shorts.

“Well, I’m glad you guys are enjoying yourselves. I feel like a monkey in a costume,” Crow pulled at his shirt.

“Not my kind of party,” Yusei agreed.

“Lise, slow down!”

“Nope,” Lise came down the stairs at a brisk walk.

Akiza’s work was perfect; hair, makeup, and dress, everything. The only thing that ruined it was…

“You can’t go to a formal outing in sneakers!”

“Akiza, I’m wearing a dress,” Lise scowled, holding up her hand. “Let’s not push it, okay?”

“Wow! Lise, you look beautiful!” Luna gushed.

Lise’s expression softened. She wasn’t in the greatest of moods, but that wasn’t Luna’s fault.

“Thanks. You look great too.”

“Yep,” Luna did a twirl, grinning. “Is Jack coming?”

Crow rolled his eyes. “He’s taking his sweet time. We’re gonna be late because of him.”

“Okay, fine,” Akiza tried again. “You don’t have to wear heels, but I have some flats too. Would that work better?” She held up the shoes.

Lise glared at them. Then she looked at Akiza’s expression. She wilted under the pleading look Akiza’s almond-shaped brown eyes gave her. “Fine.” She kicked off her sneakers and socks, then slipped on the flats. “Happy?”

“Much better,” Akiza nodded, and sighed. “Crisis averted.”

Lise rolled her eyes. “Now we’re just waiting on Jack?”

“Yes,” Crow nodded.
Yusei hadn’t moved or said anything since Lise had come in. He looked like a deer caught in the headlights his eyes were so wide. Crow reached over and subtly pushed Yusei’s chin up to close his mouth. Yusei came back to reality like a fish gulping for air. “Wow… I mean… I just… you’re… wow…”

Lise’s cheeks turned scarlet.

Jack emerged at the top of the stairs like a queen ready to begin her personal parade. His suit was pure white with penguin-like coat tails, golden filigree designs, a top hat, and violet tie.

Carly trailed behind him in a plain white dress. Around her shoulders, she had wrapped a purple shawl that matched Jack’s tie.

“Oh no!” Lise exclaimed. “Jack’s been turned into a hideous monster!” She smirked. “Oh wait, that’s just his face.”

“Haha, very funny,” Jack rolled his eyes. “Shall we get going?”

///

The car provided had taken them the short distance to downtown. The driver dropped them off at the curb, and Lise’s invitation got the gang to the top floor of a hotel none of them would ever have been able to afford.

“I feel so out-classed,” Crow murmured in the elevator up.

“We just have to survive for an hour,” Carly reminded them, adjusting her glasses. “That should be enough time to get the scoop on the best martial artists here.”

“Well of course, I, Jack Atlas, am one of them!” Jack grinned.

Lise glowered at him. “Don’t make me regret bringing you here.”

The elevators dinged and deposited the gang into the midst of a glamorous top level, floor to ceiling wrap around glass windowed, rooftop party room. The top of the glass ceiling, in the center, a round oculus hole was cut. Exotic plants that should not have been able to grow in urban Japan were centered underneath the oculus. An enormous stage lined one wall, with a DJ playing classical music, and an even larger dance floor extended beyond the stage. Large, round tables were scattered about the entire floor where people sat eating, drinking, and chatting. The wall opposite the stage was a long table piled high with plates of different food from around the world.

“We are so out of our league here,” Crow stage-whispered to his friends.

“It’s just one hour, just one hour,” Lise said in between deep breathes.

“Food!” Leo cried. He raced for the buffet table in the back.

Not knowing what else to do, the others joined him. Carly and Jack, however, had already joined the crowd of people with ease. Somehow Carly had managed to smuggle in a pad of paper and pen, and was writing furiously while her subject continued to speak. Jack was busy charming three identical girls who were wide-eyed as he regaled them with a story about his days as King.

“How long has it been?” Lise asked when her friends had settled into chairs at an empty table.

Luna consulted her watch. “Seven minutes.”
“Shit,” Lise swore.

“There are a lot more people here than I imagined,” Akiza said. Making conversation seemed like a better idea than eating in silence.

“The best martial artists in the world are here,” Lise said. She scanned the crowd for a minute, and then pointed briefly at a man with dark hair, and black eyes in his late twenties. “That’s Kota Inugami. He was runner up in the Japanese division.” She nodded at a middle-aged woman with red hair that flowed down to her ankles. “That’s Anya Zolotova. She’s won the Russian Adults Martial Arts Tournament four years in a row.”

“You’ve got your work cut out for you,” Yusei whistled lowly.

“There’s so many people though,” Luna said. “They’ve gotta weed them out somehow.”

“I guess we’ll find out on the first day of competition,” Lise said. “You’re right, Luna. They’ll have to narrow it down to either 16 or 8 competitors.”

“Hello competitors!” In a flash of light and smoke the same MC from the Fortune Cup arrived onstage. “How is everybody doing tonight?”

Some lackluster cheers and claps came from a smattering of people.

The MC remained undeterred. “Welcome to the Budokai Ball! We’ll get started with having every competitor join me onstage and the dance floor!”

Three quarters of the crowd got up from their seats.

Lise turned to her friends, her eyes wide. “Murder me,” she begged.

“Nope,” Yusei took her hand, and squeezed once. “Go. You can do this.”

Lise swallowed, and downed her entire glass of water in one gulp. “Okay.” She got up and joined the other competitors.

The MC began rattling off names and backstories. His list was long, and the participants rejoined the crowd with their rulebook, safety contracts, and information disclosures slowly.

The MC wasn’t even halfway done with his list when he reached Lise’s name. “Elizabeth Kururugi! Our resident Phoenix Gal! I had the pleasure of narrating her duels during the Fortune Cup! We can expect to see more great things from her in this tournament!”

Lise grabbed her book and papers, and practically sprinted back into the crowd. Her face burned, and all she wanted was to hide it somewhere no one would look at it.

She sat back down in her seat, and tried to stop her hands from shaking. Her friends kindly ignored her putting her forehead down on the table.

A cool hand with long fingers traced lines up and down her back. Lise let out a shaky breath, relaxing into the touch. “Yusei, please kill me,” she whimpered.

“When?”

“Preferably tonight,” Lise said. “And make it quick. I don’t wanna feel anything.”

“Such a demanding way to go out,” Yusei joked. “Should I do it before, or after you take the dress
Lise laughed, and Yusei smiled. She was relaxing. “After.”

“But there’s no drama in killing you in your pajamas.”

“Honestly, that’s the worst way to kill me,” Lise raised her head, her expression serious. “Killing me in my pajamas, in my clothes of comfort? That’s pure evil.”

Yusei pushed stray hairs out of Lise’s face. “But you do look more amazing than usual tonight.”

Lise’s cheeks turned red again. “You clean up nice too.”

Carly and Jack joined the group just as the MC finally finished announcing the last name. All party-goers were officially allowed to stay to chat and dance. No one took the MC up on the dancing offer since the DJ continued to play classical music.

Carly immediately started talking to Akiza and Luna about all the competitors. Each one sounded stronger than the last. Jack showed Crow and Leo all of the phone numbers he’d received from men and women.

Lise threw her napkin onto the table. “I’ve got an idea. I’ll be right back.” Before anyone could stop her, she’d run off to the DJ’s station.

Five minutes later, Lise came running back with a grin. “I paid the DJ to play real music for like an hour or so. This night doesn’t have to be a total waste.”

“Sounds like fun!” Luna cried.

Abruptly, the Waltz of the Flowers turned into a robotic beat. The singer began immediately.

*Can I make a little toast?*

Lise gasped and grinned widely. “I love this DJ!” She ran out to the dance floor to start moving to Lose Control by Hedley. Akiza, Luna, and even Carly ran out behind her.

*In my body in my bones*

*Drop the beat and free my soul*

*When I hear that rock and roll*

*Oh my god, I lose control!*

Most of the adults looked distastefully at the few dancers. The teens and early twenties attendees were more inclined to join in the dancing. Modern music was more their speed than the last great classical music era artists.

When Crow had recovered from his shock, he shed his suit jacket, and went out to the dance floor too. Jack, not one to be upstaged, followed. Yusei, knowing he wasn’t exactly the best of dancers, stayed behind to watch.

Lise even managed to get the DJ to play a Disney song. Luna was the biggest Descendants fan ever, but she was a bit too shy to ask directly. Sure enough, Good is the New Bad played, and Luna, to the cheers of her friends, danced the routine from memory.
A slower song came on next, but Lise went to sit it out with Yusei. Her face was flushed, and her feet hurt a little (flats were basically zero support), but this was the most fun she’d had all night.

“Water?” Yusei pushed a new glass over to her.

“Yeah, thanks, I needed some,” Lise gulped down a sip. “You okay?”

“I’m just not much of a dancer. I remember stepping on your feet a lot when we had that party in the Satellite.” Yusei scratched at the back of his head.

Lise shrugged. “Didn’t make me like you less. It still doesn’t.”

Yusei’s cheeks went from a peach color to nearly magenta. “Uh…”

“Come dance with me,” Lise stood up and held her hand out. “I wanna dance with my favorite person.”

Yusei’s entire face turned vermillion. He couldn’t stop his hand from shaking as he reached for Lise’s.

“Well, I intend to make me your favorite person,” a boy with fluffy dark hair simpered.

Before either Yusei or Lise could react, the boy had snagged Lise’s hand and dragged her back to the dance floor. He held Lise close as Brittany Spear’s Toxic started playing. Lise sank her nails into the boys shoulder, but he held fast.

“I’ve been meaning to officially meet you,” the boy said. His smile reminded Lise of a snake. His eyes were acid green, a familiar color, but from where? Who? “Our last encounter left little for introductions.”

“Sorry, have we met?” Lise snapped. She wasn’t even trying to be polite.

“Yes, I believe you attacked my fellow followers and destroyed my temple.”

Lise blinked. “Still not ringing a bell.”

The boy scowled, his grin vanishing. “You hurled me into a kick to my face.”

Lise’s expression brightened. She smirked. “Oh, that was you? I’d say I was sorry, but then I’d be lying.”

“No doubt,” the boy’s smile was back. “Which means I know who you are,” he leaned close to Lise’s ear to whisper; “Dragon Girl.”

Lise’s knuckles cracked she held onto the boy’s shirt so tightly. Her irises turned ruby red with rage.

“Oh, scary eyes, but if you attack me, you’ll be disqualified from the tournament. Same goes for if anyone in your party attacks me. He looks very inclined to do so,” the boy jerked his head behind him. He turned the two of them as they danced.

Lise caught a glance of Yusei standing by the edge of the dance floor. His arms were crossed, and his dark blue eyes, normally calm, were ablaze with anger. Lise had only seen Yusei that angry twice.

She caught his eyes briefly, and they softened. ‘You okay?’ he mouthed.
Lise nodded back slightly. She redirected her rage towards the boy forcing her to be his dance partner. “What do you want?” Lise growled at him.

“Just to say that I look forward to fighting you, and enacting revenge for my mother.”

“Your mother?”

The boy spun the two of them to a stop just a few feet in front of Yusei. “My name is Mako, nice to meet you, Elizabeth Kururugi.” He kissed Lise’s free hand with a smirk. Lise’s other hand was clutched in a fist that she was trying to tell herself not to use to beat the shit out of Mako. “See you in the tournament!” Mako waved cheerfully and disappeared back into the crowd.

Yusei watched Mako go, wishing he could burn the guy to a crisp with his eyes. It felt like his whole body was on fire he was so mad.

“Are you okay?” Lise touched his arm.

“I should be asking you that,” Yusei said, feeling most of his anger evaporating. “Did he do anything to you?”

“Just being a dick,” Lise said. “So um, about that dance? If you don’t want to, that’s okay.”

“No,” Yusei took Lise’s hand. “One dance won’t kill me.”

Yusei quickly remembered, as he stepped on Lise’s foot for the fourth time, that he was terrible at dancing. He kept looking down at his feet, trying in vain not to step on Lise again.

“Sorry, sorry,” he muttered when he stepped on Lise’s foot again.

“Hold me up, will you?” Lise said.

“What?” Yusei looked on in bewilderment as Lise used him to prop herself up to take her shoes off. “Um…”

Lise kicked her shoes off the dance floor, and stepped onto Yusei’s feet. “There. Now we’re even.”

Yusei laughed, and felt the tension in his shoulders ease out. He hadn’t realized he’d been so tightly wound. Dancing always made him nervous, especially because Lise was so much better at it.

“Better?” Lise’s eyes searched his face.

“Much, thanks,” Yusei said. He swayed slightly to the music, finally able to hear the song. “Oh, Chasing Cars. I love this song.”

“Me too,” Lise said. She rested her head on Yusei’s chest. His heartbeat matched the beat of the music.

“Thanks for doing this. I know it isn’t exactly your thing, but I appreciate it,” Lise said. She half hoped the music was too loud, and that Yusei’s shirt muffled her words. She could feel her face growing warmer.

“Of course,” Yusei said, responding in the same tone as Lise. “I love you.” He rested his head on top of Lise’s. “And this kind of dancing I don’t mind.”

“Looks like Jack and Carly like it too,” Lise pointed across the dance floor.
Jack had swept Carly into what he had apparently interpreted as the tango. Carly didn’t seem to mind. She was laughing with joy every time Jack spun her.

Akiza and Crow had taken a swing at slow dancing too. They kept trading off who was in the lead, and spinning each other.

Even Leo and Luna were awkwardly shuffling around in circles.

“Now I feel better about my dance skills,” Yusei chuckled.

Lise took a deep breath. “Look, I can’t promise I won’t get covered in blood during this thing. I can’t promise I’ll win either, but—“

Lise sighed into Yusei’s kiss. It was brief (they were in public), but warm, soft, and comforting.

“I’m just hoping to see you kick ass during this tournament.”

Lise grinned. “Challenge accepted.”

Chapter End Notes

(Hi guys! I can’t promise consistent updating, sorry about that, but new chapter! PLEASE, for the love of god, leave a comment. Big or small, I appreciate knowing what it is you love about my writing. Comments are like pieces of candy for fanfic writers. PLEASE leave me candy!)
“Do you hear that pounding sound?” Jack asked, rising sleepily from his bed.

Crow pulled his pillow over his head. The fluff of the pillow did little to block out the sound. “Maybe it’s our friends having sex next door,” he grumbled.

“Nah,” Jack shook his head. “That’d sound more like a creaky bed.”

“Hey guys, have you seen Lise?” Yusei poked his head into his friends’ room.

“I’ll check the other side of my pillow.” Crow grabbed his covers and pulled them up over his head.

“No,” Jack said. “Thankfully, she hasn’t been in here. Is that what’s making that pounding sound?”

Yusei rolled his eyes. “I dunno. She’s up before me, which isn’t normal. The pounding might be coming from outside. Do you want breakfast?”

“I wanna sleep before I have to work!” Crow snapped. He threw an extra pillow at the door, which Yusei easily dodged.

“Sorry. I’ll see what’s going on.”

Yusei closed the door and made his way outdoors. Ever since the party for the upcoming Budokai, Lise had been getting more stressed every day. It seemed like as the days counted down, it only increased Lise’s worry. She’d been practicing and working on developing techniques almost nonstop.

Still, it came as a surprise when he found Lise in the Plaza. Punching a tree, of all things.

“Honestly, I don’t know what I expected,” Yusei muttered to himself.

Other people had started to come outside to see what the commotion was. None of them looked happy to see a teenage girl punching a tree.

“Uh…Good morning!” Yusei shouted over the loud sound of Lise’s fists colliding with the tree.

“Good morning!” Lise shouted back.

“How long have you been up?”

“A couple hours!”

“Seriously? Lise, it’s like seven thirty!”

“So?”

Yusei glanced nervously at the growing crowd of angry people. “You okay?”

“Just fine!” Lise stopped for a second. “Why?”

Now that she’d stopped it was easier to see she wasn’t exactly fine. Her eyes were bloodshot and wild, mostly from lack of sleep. Sweat dripped down her arms and forehead. She cracked her
knuckles restlessly. They were scabbed and a little bloody, but Lise didn’t seem to have noticed.

“Um, don’t you think this is a bit much?” Yusei said slowly. “I mean, you’ll be just fine for the tournament in a few days.”

“No, no, no,” Lise spread her arms, her eyes widening. “I’m still developing techniques, and I’ve been slacking on them so much! I still can’t do a shundo without tripping over my own feet. I haven’t perfected my chi attacks, and my stamina is much lower since I got back from Peru! I have to spend the time I have left training!”

Yusei swallowed. “Lise.” He took one of her hands, gently so she could pull away easily. The manic look in her eyes slightly died down. “I think you should come in and eat breakfast, take a break. If you keep going like this, you’ll be burned out by the time the tournament starts.”

“There’s no time!” Lise turned back to the tree, taking her hand with her. She punched it again. Lise’s energy gave out, and she fell onto her back. In the fight of Lise versus tree, tree one, Lise zero. To make matters worse, all the tree’s leaves detached and fell on Lise in a cloud of bright green. So the final standings were actually; Tree two, Lise zero.

“Uh, you okay?” Yusei said, peering at the mass of green Lise was buried under.

She blew leaves out of her face and sighed. “Maybe I do need a break.”

“Come on,” Yusei offered his hand. “I’ll make waffles.”

“Chocolate chip?”

“Sure.”

Lise accepted Yusei’s hand. He pulled her back to her feet. He also picked twigs and leaf bits out of Lise’s hair while they walked back to the garage.

“Please don’t tell anyone I lost to a tree,” Lise whispered before they went inside.

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“So,” Crow came downstairs a couple hours later in a much better mood. “How is she?”

“Back at it,” Yusei said. He sat down with a cup of coffee next to Crow, who was digging into the leftover pancakes.

“That bad, huh?” Crow said around a mouthful of food.

“How could you tell?”

“You’re drinking coffee. You never drink coffee.”

Yusei stared at the contents of his mug. He’d just made the cup of mud without thinking. Normally, if he decided he needed a mug, he’d at least sweeten it. He sighed. “I’m scared. She’s practically unraveling.”

“At least she ate something,” Crow said.

Yusei leaned closer to his friend. “She’s been up since five, and that pounding? She was punching a tree.”
“Did she win?”

“Crow!”

“Sorry!” Crow put his hands up in surrender. He ran a hand through his hair, quietly munching on his waffle. “I’m not very good at this kinda thing, but I’ve also never been a boyfriend before. Maybe if you tried to work with her, she’d feel better?”

“You mean, train with her?”

“Yes, that’s the word I was looking for. If you show her you want to help her with her goals, she might feel better. She definitely does need to rest and take breaks, but maybe if you were coming from a similar place? I dunno how to phrase it, but if someone constantly told me I needed to slow down or stop, I’d be kinda annoyed.”

“I’ll give it a try,” Yusei said, nodding. “She did only agree to eat something when she lost to a tree.”

Crow grinned, popping his eyebrows up. “So she lost?”

Yusei got up from the table. He mustered his best glare. “Don’t tell her I told you that.”

Crow chuckled and continued to wolf down more waffles.

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This time Lise was trying to attack the dummy she’d turned her punching bag into. In a rather interesting way though.

One minute Lise stood with her hand up against the punching bag. Next minute she’d jump back, circling the punching bag, hands at the ready, like a rabid vulture. Then she’d go back to the bag with her hand again.

“Ugh!” Lise groaned, roundhouse kicking the bag in frustration. The makeshift foam head she’d repurposed from a dodgeball toppled to the ground. She kicked the bag again with her opposite leg, just to even herself out, and sat down on the ground. “It’s just no good!” Lise laid down on her back and dragged her fingers down her face, tugging at the loose skin.

“Um…” Yusei’s shadow fell over her again. “Do you mind if I join you?”

“On the ground?” Lise squinted up at him.

“No.” Yusei bounced on the balls of his feet. “Training.”

“Seriously?” Lise got up and retrieved the fallen dodgeball. She bounced the ball as she thought it over.

“Seriously,” Yusei nodded.

He’d changed into shorts and sneakers. Boots and his jacket were a little too heavy to be training in. Lise took this all in, her face turning slightly pink. It had occurred to her that Yusei looked like he was ready to play basketball, or something similar.

“Okay,” Lise finally said. “But there’s not a lot you can help out with.”

Yusei shrugged. “I’ll give it a shot. What’s first?”
Lise cracked her newly wrapped knuckles. “A run, and then chi exertion.”

“What?”

“You’ll see,” Lise cracked a mischievous grin, leaving Yusei to wonder what he’d gotten himself into.

“I got it,” Yusei said a couple minutes later. Lise had finished explaining their running route. He did some quick calculations. “Hang on, that’s almost three miles. Are you sure that’s right?”

“Yes. Just long enough that it’s tiring, but short enough that I have to gauge how much energy to use so I won’t be too exhausted by the end. Ready?”

“Uh…”

“Go!” Lise took off jogging out of Fountain Plaza.

Without much choice, Yusei dashed after her. At first it was easy. The jogging pace was light, and Lise had a pattern in place for herself. She’d clearly run her self-created path before. Yusei made the mistake of not creating his own running pattern. He slowed down, and lost sight of Lise about halfway through, when they were rounding back through the cemetery.

“Hey, you made it!” Lise grinned at the sight of Yusei running the last few yards back to Fountain Plaza. She was covered in sweat again, but looked far calmer. It helped that she didn’t have any leaves stuck in her hair anymore.

Yusei groaned and laid down on the cobblestones of the plaza. “The ground is so cold. It feels good. Hey,” he said, rolling onto his back. “When you do this, how much blood is in your mouth?”

Lise gave him a funny look. “None…?”

“Oh right, the normal amount,” Yusei nodded to the best of his ability, trying to get his breathing back to normal.

“Um, do you want me to grab you some water?”

“Yes, I would like that very much.”

Lise dashed into the garage for a couple water bottles.

Her training methods were a lot harder than Yusei had expected. Sure, he wasn’t in the greatest shape, but he was at least decent. He’d kept up with her for a while, but going for almost a 5K right out of the blue was not a good idea. He was definitely going to be sore tomorrow. It was worth it though. Lise seemed much more relaxed.

“Here,” Lise had come back, and pressed something cool to Yusei’s forehead.

He opened his eyes and took the water bottle off his forehead. It was ice cold, fresh from the fridge. Yusei downed half of it in less than a minute. “What’s next?”

Lise swallowed another mouthful of water. “You’re gonna kill yourself going full steam ahead this entire time.”

“And you’re not?” Yusei raised an eyebrow at her.

“I took the prerequisites,” Lise smiled slightly. “Master Terra has some interesting methods of her
Yusei’s eyes widened. He finished the rest of his water. “Like what?”

“Let’s just say I know what cacti and scorpions taste like.”

“Gross,” Yusei stuck out his tongue.

“Yeah, I’ll say.” Lise got up and clapped her hands together. “Ready to keep going?”

“I’ll probably need another water bottle, but sure.”

Lise tapped her lip with her fingertip. She seemed to be examining her punching bag. “So… do you just want to stretch for the next hour? I’m basically going to be doing the equivalent of a hand stand and the tree pose for an hour.”

“What? You’re gonna do yoga for an hour?”

“Just do what you can, and take a break if you need to,” Lise said, instead of answering him.

Without another word, she spun into a cartwheel and jumped onto her punching bag. Lise pulled out her phone as she balanced herself, pressed a couple buttons, and reversed her position so that she supported herself atop the punching bag by her left hand. Lise then placed her phone beside her hand.

“Okay…” Yusei said. He blinked, and it wasn’t until Lise glanced at him from the corner of her eye that he realized he’d been staring.

“You’re kinda freaking me out,” Lise said, her voice slightly wobbly with the effort of speaking and holding herself up. “Ya know, with the staring, and all.”

“Sorry, I’ll do push ups or something…”

Yusei tried, but doing push ups for 15 minutes gets old quickly. He took another water break after ten minutes of one minute on and one minute off.

Lise was still balancing herself on her left hand when he came back. She was coated in sweat, but she wasn’t budging. The phone buzzed an alarm that Lise quickly silenced, and switched to her right arm.

“Is Lise doing the tree pose on her punching bag?” Crow came outside to watch while he ate his lunch. He was all geared up to go to work.

“I think so?” Yusei said, shrugging. She’d gone through her right arm, and left leg entirely. Now Lise was finishing up the last fifteen minutes on her right leg. “I’ve been trying not to stare.”

“Dude,” Crow chuckled. “You’ve always been staring at her since we were kids. Good luck with that. Sandwich?”

“Shut up,” Yusei said, but he accepted a sandwich.

Lise’s last alarm went off, and she finally relaxed.

“Yo!” Crow shouted up to her. “Want lunch?! I made sandwiches!”

“Sure!” Lise jumped down from the bag and came over to eat.
Both boys watched with wide eyes while Lise stuffed four sandwiches into her mouth in a row. Then downed an entire bottle of water.

“Jesus, did you breathe in between bites?” Crow asked incredulously. There were usually leftovers. Lise was a slow eater.

“You try balancing your chi on that thing for an hour. It’s hard, but an hour is nothing in comparison,” Lise said. She got up, and dusted crumbs off her pants. “Now it’s time for the real stuff.”

“That wasn’t the real stuff?!”

Lise didn’t answer. She replaced the makeshift dodgeball head on her punching bag. The weird hand touching, circling, and touching again started up once more.

Crow leaned over to whisper better. “Dude, she’s completely lost it.”

“I noticed,” Yusei whispered back, a bit snippily. His expression fell. “I just wish I knew how to help more.”

“Maybe start with whatever she’s doing now? It looks like she’s having a slap fight…” Crow got up. “I’ll bring in the dishes. I gotta go to work, but tell me if I need to swing by the hospital later.”

“Not funny!” Yusei called out to his friend’s back.

///

The next day was much of the same. Lise was still going full throttle, at 200 miles per hour with no brakes. She’d slept even fewer hours, maybe. She wasn’t sure when Yusei had, gently, asked her.

On the third day, the real kicker, was when Akiza and the twins came by for a visit. Lise was still training, but differently this time.

“Why is Lise charging around like a rhino out there?” Leo asked.

“Training, she says,” Jack answered vaguely. He’d tried to talk to Lise earlier that morning. She was even scaring him, and she’d practically bit his head off when he’d suggested a break. “Don’t try to stop her. I tried, but Yusei should be out there making sure she doesn’t kill herself.”

The three of them easily located Yusei. He was standing, with a wrench, and watching Lise. His leg was bouncing uncontrollably, and he twirled the circular end of the wrench around his finger.

“Is Lise okay?” Luna asked softly.

“Nope,” Yusei answered shortly. He stopped spinning the wrench, and clenched it in his fist. “She didn’t sleep last night. I’m worried she’s going to collapse. I don’t even know what she’s doing.”

“Have you asked her?” Akiza said.

Yusei started to say yes, but then thought about it. He’d asked Lise to take breaks, and he’d trained with her as much as he could. He’d never actually asked her what she was doing. “No, now that you mention it.”

Akiza watched Lise push off from the ground. For a second she seemed to vanish, but then Lise was visible again, skidding against the cobblestones of the plaza on her sides. Akiza winced in sympathy. That did not look comfortable at all. “Well, let’s ask her.”
“Are you sure that’s safe?!” Leo yelled to her as Akiza marched over to her friend.

Before Lise could scrape herself up, again, Akiza tapped her on the shoulder. “Hey, mind telling me what you’re doing?”

Lise jumped, and whirled with her hands raised in defense. “Oh, it’s just you.” She relaxed. “Hi Akiza, what’s up?”

“Well first, you’re going to take a break while we patch you up. Your shoulder is bleeding. Then you’ll explain what you’re doing so we can help you properly.”

“But I-“

“No!”

“I just-“

“Lise, you’re bleeding. You’re going to give Yusei a heart attack. Let him patch you up, and explain to us what you’re doing!” Akiza’s almond-shaped eyes softened, and she clasped Lise’s hand. “Please, you’re scaring us. We want to help, and you’re getting downright weird. It looks like you’re tripping over an army of angry mice.”

Lise swallowed. She glanced at Yusei, noticing the twins for the first time. The three of them were staring, unsure what to do. If something broke out between the two girls, none of them were entirely sure who to jump in front of.

“But I’m fine,” Lise muttered, picking at her fingers. “I’ve gotta train so I can win the tournament…”

“Oh, you think you’re going to win, do you? How many more days do you have before it officially starts?” A fire had sparked behind Akiza’s normally pleasant brown eyes.

“Two?”

Akiza shoved Lise, and she toppled to the ground. “There. I win.”

“Say what?!” Lise looked up at her friend, completely at a loss.

“How are you going to win the tournament if you can’t even beat me?” Akiza said, eyes burning. “You’re running yourself ragged, trying to get things perfect, and make your stamina go up or whatever! If you don’t slow down, you’ll kill yourself! Now let’s get you cleaned up, and you can tell us what’s going on, okay?” She reached her hand down, waiting for Lise’s.

Lise groaned, running her hands across her face, and through her hair. “Fuck,” she murmured. “Okay.” She accepted Akiza’s hand, and allowed her friend to pull her to her feet. “I’m sorry. Thanks for knocking some sense into me.”

“That’s what I’m here for,” Akiza smiled. The fire in her eyes had died, and she sighed. “Yusei! Got a first aid kit?!”

“Coming up!” Yusei broke into a smile and ran into the garage.

Lise went to the twins, kneeling to be at their eye level. “I’m sorry I scared you. Are you two okay?”

“Yeah, what were you trying to do anyway?” Leo looked much happier now that Lise wasn’t
trying to throw herself into the cobblestones.

Luna hugged Lise tightly. “Please, don’t do that again.”

“I won’t,” Lise squeezed Luna back briefly. “Sorry, I’m kinda bloody and sweaty.”

“I’ve never let that bother me before,” Yusei said, emerging with the first aid kit. “Let’s get that shoulder wrapped up.”

He sat Lise down and immediately got to work on her shoulder. It wasn’t serious, but the skin was shredded pretty badly.

“I’m sorry,” Lise said. Yusei had finished the cleaning and disinfecting part. He paused with the bandages in his hand. “I was so scared, I didn’t have time to slow down. I just felt…”

“Alone?” Yusei supplied, wrapping Lise’s shoulder up. “After all that training, we’re nowhere near your level anymore. But we’re still here for you, ya know. You scared us a lot.”

“Maybe I should’ve said I was scared too. I’m still scared.”

“Me too,” Yusei said. He fastened the bandage with a satisfied pat. He put the bandages away with a long sigh. “I’m sorry too. I wanted to help, but I didn’t end up doing anything.”

“Well, your legs look better after the running,” Lise teased, tapping Yusei’s knee with her toe. Her smile fell and she tapped her fingertips together, thinking of the right thing to say. “Sorry I kinda went off the rails. The techniques I’m working on aren’t progressing, and it’s making me even more anxious. I’m sorry I worried you so much.”

Yusei slid his fingers in between Lise’s. He quickly pecked her on the forehead. “I think we both should’ve called Akiza sooner.”

Lise laughed.

“Yo, quit flirting you two!” Jack yelled at them. “If I’ve gotta find out why the plaza has become a warzone then so do you!”

“Sorry!”

The two of them joined the others. Akiza handed Lise a dry erase marker. Jack and Crow had wheeled their dry erase board outside.

“Ready for super special awesome extra curriculars of fighting awesomeness!” Leo pumped his fists in the air.

“God this is weird,” Lise muttered.

“Just start from the top. We’re here to help,” Akiza said.

She sat down with the rest of their friends, and Lise began.
“Okay,” Lise said when she’d finished her explanation. The whiteboard was filled with diagrams when she turned away. “Does that make sense?”

“Uh…” Leo’s eye was twitching. His head was spinning. None of the diagrams made any sense. “Could you make it more simpler?”

“Even I’m lost,” Akiza said. She snapped a photo with her phone. “But this is good stuff. I wish I’d known how to control chi like that sooner. Maybe I could have learned how to control my psychic power better.”

“You still can,” Lise pointed her marker at her friend. “Chi manifests itself differently in everyone.”

“So everybody has chi?” Jack asked. He rested his cheek on his knuckles, blinking tiredly up at the whiteboard.

“Yes,” Lise said. She tapped her lips with her finger. “Maybe I should start from the beginning, beginning. Chi is kind of difficult to wrap your brain around if you’ve never used it before.” She picked up the eraser, and raised it up to the corner of the board.

“Wait!” Yusei said. He was scribbling on a piece of paper with a pencil, both of which Luna had lent him from her schoolbag. “Okay, good now.”

Lise turned back to the board, her face pink.

“Dude, you’re taking notes?” Crow leaned over to see Yusei’s paper.

“Yeah, this stuff is interesting,” Yusei said.

“Just take pics with your phone like Akiza did,” Crow said.

“I’ll use that for the diagrams. I can’t draw for shit,” Yusei said, pencil still poised over the paper.

This time, Lise finished up with a small drawing of Akiza and herself. Akiza’s figure had the symbol of the Crimson Dragon beside her, and figure Lise had what looked like a simple orb with a flame inside.

“So,” Lise drew the claw marking on her figure of a Signer. “The way the Crimson Dragon’s power is that it draws energy from life. It’s power goes in and strengthens us, the users of its power.” She drew arrows going inward to her Akiza drawing.

“Oh, I get that! That’s why the air always felt heavier around Luna!” Leo cried excitedly. He was glad to finally understand something. He was usually laughed at by his peers for how long it took for lessons to sink in. “She was taking the power of the dragon!”

“Exactly!” Lise grinned. “But chi works the opposite way. It’s an individual…exertion, almost. Everyone has chi, but some people have more and some people have less. Some people can even see chi, and what colors they are.”

“Like an aura?” Akiza frowned.

Lise nodded. “Yeah, but it comes from within. Your chi goes outward instead of inward.” She drew
arrows on the drawing of herself going out. “You also replenish your chi as you use it. Some people don’t even notice they’ve used chi, but you regain it slowly depending on how much you used. Like a cycle because your body is still alive, so you replenish as you rest. However, most people can’t even see chi unless it’s exerted at a strong amount.

“Master Terra explained that I already had a lot of chi. I just had to find a way to gauge it.” Lise drew a little fireball over her drawing’s chest with lines extending to her limbs. Then she drew a meter similar to a speedometer by the drawing of herself. “Master Terra had me doing different things to force my body to engage my chi, but only use what I needed.” She drew the speedometer’s arrow at 200 miles per hour.

“She explained it like I was driving my duel runner.” She appealed to all her fellow turbo duelists. “We can easily control whether we’re going 50 or 200 miles per hour, but it takes practice. To regulate my chi, it was the same kind of thing.

“I had to learn how to exert my chi at different levels, so I wouldn’t be burned out after one attack. At first, all my attacks were at 200 because I couldn’t regulate it. Now…” Lise erased the speedometer’s arrow and redrew it at 50. She sketched a quick doodle of her punching. “I can lower or raise the amount of power I need to use at will. It’s just figuring out how much and when to use it that’s the trick for developing techniques.”

“Question!” Luna raised her hand. “How does this apply to the Crimson Dragon’s power? Are you gonna use that and your chi in the tournament? What techniques do you have already?”

“Well, using the basic principles of chi, but reversing them, I developed the techniques for using the Crimson Dragon’s power. Ya know, the move I used to take down Mitka in the Dragon Temple with Garrett’s help? Instead of focusing my own power out, I focused the Crimson Dragon’s power in, and then blasted it out in an attack. In either scenario your body is the focus.”

“Isn’t using your chi and the Crimson Dragon in the tournament almost…cheating?” Crow spoke up before Lise could answer Luna’s other questions, and spread his hands.

“I’m developing techniques for both, as well as combining the two powers, but I’m not using the dragon in the tournament.”

“What, seriously?” Yusei looked up from his paper.

Lise passed the marker between her fingers. “No. I was born with the dragon’s power, but it isn’t really mine. I want to win with my own power.” She clenched her other fist.

“Wow, well we’ll be happy to see what you can do on your own then,” Crow grinned.

Lise smiled at him. “Okay, then, back to Luna’s last question.” She went back to the whiteboard.

She drew a small, chibi, version of herself on the board twice. The first one was running, and the second was touching Lise’s punching bag. “I’ve got one completed technique, but I’m still currently working on two. The first one…”

She pointed to the drawing of her running, and highlighted her drawing’s feet. “Is a technique where you use your chi to push off the earth and sort of run really fast? Uh, I guess you could call it a flash step, but it’s generally known as a shundo. I’m having trouble with it because you have to get the amount of chi you use just right, or-“

“Or you’ll face plant into the street,” Akiza finished.
“Heh heh, yeah,” Lise scratched at her head. She shook herself and moved on.

“So the second technique is something theoretical I’ve been working on. It was something I started considering after thinking about the dynamics of how Yusei’s empathy link with me works.” Lise’s cheeks flushed pink again.

Yusei turned pink too. “You mean, the pieces of each other’s souls we have?”

“Yes and no. I figured if I could technically have, like two and one eighths worth of souls inside me, then maybe I could do something similar with chi. This technique is risky for three reasons.”

Lise clasped her hands, the marker between them. “One, I’m taking someone else’s chi by force. Two, I’m forced to temporarily become compatible with another person’s chi. And three, without properly testing this technique, it can become deadly if I accidently extract all the chi a person has.”

“What? You can take all of a person’s chi?” Jack gasped.

“Potentially,” Lise spread her hands. “This is entirely theoretical, I mean it’s technically plausible. I managed to do it by transferring bits of my chi to my punching bag, and then extracting it. But that was with my own chi, and at no risk to anyone’s life. The other variable I can’t account for is chi I don’t recognize. Of course I can give and receive my own chi because it’s mine. My body instantly recognizes it and accepts it. If someone’s chi is completely different from mine, I’d have to temporarily alter my own chi to match it, then extract it. There’s no way to test it.”

“Well, we can help with that,” Akiza piped up immediately. “We’re your friends, so you can start your tests with me.”

Lise popped the marker’s cap off and on. “It isn’t that simple. You’re my friends, and my chi instantly recognizes yours. Plus, if anything goes wrong…” She drew a line across her throat, and dropped her head, her tongue lolling out. Lise straightened and put her marker down. “Believe me, I considered asking any of you, but I couldn’t take the risk of accidently…”

“Killing us,” Jack’s violet eyes were wide.

“That’s why you were so stressed out…” Yusei breathed. His notes lay forgotten. Suddenly the idea of using chi didn’t sound so great.

“Yeah,” Lise murmured. She picked at the dead skin on her fingertips.

“What if you only took a tiny bit from us?” Luna suggested quietly.

Everyone turned to stare at her. Such an idea coming from her was almost ludicrous.

Luna shrank in her seat a little. The attention was a little daunting, but she cleared her throat. “I was thinking, if you recognized all of our chi, couldn’t you, I dunno, combine pieces of them together? Then you’d make a new kind of chi, and you could practice with that.”

Akiza pointed at her. “That could work!”

“Whoa!” Jack backed up in his seat, his hands up. “I’m not letting someone extract my actual life force, even if we are friends!”

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” Luna said quickly. She hung her head. “I just thought… maybe it could work…”
Lise nodded, picking up her marker. Lost in thought, she passed it through her fingers over and over. “Maybe it could. The technique is theoretical to begin with, so Luna’s idea could also work.” She looked over at Jack immediately. “I won’t force anyone who isn’t comfortable, or guilt trip them. This is risky and dangerous because it’s never been done before. It’s a last resort kind of thing, so no pressure. I want to make it less dangerous, so I’ll only start with two people.” Lise stopped and cleared her throat. “That is if anyone does want to help. I’m not forcing you.” Akiza and Yusei immediately stood up. “We’re willing to give it a shot,” Akiza grinned, hands on her hips. “How do we get started?” Yusei asked.

The corners of Lise’s lips twitched. “You guys are serious? If it goes wrong, you could potentially die. This is just for a stupid tournament. It isn’t to save the world or anything. You know that, right?”

“Some day we’re not going to be Signers anymore. I think developing something we can use for that day going forward is important,” Yusei said.

“I never thought of that,” Luna said. She touched her arm holding the claw marking. Akiza nodded, having given the idea some thought. “Which means, after this tournament, you’re spilling all your chi secrets!” She pointed at Lise.

“Yeah!” Leo jumped up. “We’ll become the next power rangers! And we’ll have our own TV show!”

“Oh yeah,” Crow gasped. “I’d be the black ranger. Leo, you’d be green!”

“Yes!” Leo and Crow high fived.

Lise rolled her eyes, and smiled. “Deal.”

///

The day of the tournament dawned bright and sunny. A temporary stadium had been set up on the waterfront of the opposite side of New Domino City. The waters between Satellite and the city were still treacherous, and mostly fitted with bridge supports.

The arena itself extended into the water. It was large enough to hold thirty people easily with plenty of breathing room. Small walkways lined the wooden arena for the MC and referees to watch as well as make calls. The stands circled a wider square, encompassing a large portion of the water and the arena. All the stands were shaded by traditionally styled rooftops; flat tops that sloped downward. The four corners of the rooftops curved into different animals. One corner was a tiger, a bear, a monkey, and the fourth corner was a dragon.

Sturdy columns dotted the waters, and supported the rooftops of the stands. A small section extended off from the regular stands, and over the water. Half was for commentators, and the other half was for the actual 16 competitors.

Everyone had arrived early to scope out the arena. To develop strategies for their future opponents too. The tournament didn’t officially start for another half hour or so, but the stands were already mostly full.
“Crap,” Crow nearly swore. He’d brought a pack of kids from Martha’s with him. He was watching his language for their sake. “We’ll go find seats before they all start to fill up. Maybe if we drop Lise’s name, we can get better seats.”

“Technically you can,” Lise consulted her rulebook. “Friends of competitors are allowed priority seating if they so desire.”

“Sweet,” Crow grinned. He puffed up his chest and lead the kids away like a mother and her baby ducklings. “Let’s find a good seat to watch Lise kick butt, guys!” The kids cheered and followed happily.

“They’re sure cheerful for so early in the morning,” Jack yawned. “I’ll go with and see if there’re any food vendors at this thing.”

Both twins hugged Lise fiercely.

“Good luck!”

“Yeah! We’ll be rooting for you!”

“Last minute rule checking?” Yusei asked. He didn’t want to leave Lise just yet. The tension was so palpable, he could cut it with a knife.

Lise nodded, still reading. She’d sat down on one of the railings, but her knee jiggled with nervous energy. “Just a reminder of what’s acceptable for people to attack me with.”

Akiza peeked over Lise’s shoulder. “No bladed weapons of any kind allowed. Also, no projectile weapons?”

“Missiles,” Lise said.

“They had to write that one down?” Akiza’s eyes widened. “Damn. This might be more intense than I thought.”

“You can use non-lethal projectiles, and other weapons,” Lise said. “You can’t use wooden knives or swords, but you can technically use sticks.”

“Couldn’t you have used yours?” Akiza asked.

Lise smiled, side-eyeing her friend. “I’m stronger barehanded now.”

Yusei raised an eyebrow. “You didn’t even show us all the techniques you have, did you?”

“Nope. I’ve got a couple trump cards up my sleeve.”

“And I look forward to defeating you anyway,” Mako appeared out of nowhere. He completely ignored Yusei, winked at Akiza, and tipped Lise’s chin towards his with his fingers. “I can’t wait to see you lose. Your agony will be priceless on that beautiful face of yours.”

Lise’s face went dark with fury, and her irises turned red. She clenched her fists so tightly the knuckles turned white. “You have two seconds to stop touching me before I rip all your fingers off.”

Mako chuckled, and withdrew his hand. “Whoa, save it for the arena, Dragon Girl. Although, I can kill you right here and now if you prefer.”
“Can I hit him?” Yusei asked through clenched teeth. He cracked his knuckles.

“Get in line,” Akiza growled. She too leveled a death glare at Mako.

“No,” Lise spat. “We attack him and it’s immediate disqualification.”

“Besides,” Mako smirked triumphantly. “I’d wipe the floor with you. The Dragon Girl is the only one at least worth a challenge.” His expression didn’t change, but a fire blazed in his eyes. “And that’s only because I want revenge for my mother.” He pretended to tip an imaginary hat. “Ta ta.” He spun on his heel and strode off. He was gone as easily as he had arrived.

“Make sure to kick his ass extra hard,” Akiza said gruffly, her voice heavy with the weight of her anger.

Lise shook her head and snapped her rules booklet shut. “That’s exactly what he wants. Although he’s definitely a slime ball.”

“And what the hell was he talking about? Revenge for his mom?”

“Guess we’ll find out later,” Lise stood up. “I should get changed into my fighting gear.”

“Oh, right!” Akiza’s face immediately brightened. “About that. We have something for you.”

Lise’s eyes darted between Akiza and Yusei. “You mean other than the fact that I basically stole pieces of your life force from you?”

Akiza pushed that fact away with a wave of her hand. “We had this idea way before all that.” She reached into the large bag she’d brought and extracted a handful of lumpy items. “Yusei noticed a few things while you were training.”

“Other than the fact that you were killing yourself,” Yusei said.

Lise rolled her eyes. “I need to eat more?”

“Well yeah, but mostly that your gear kept getting thrashed after all your fights and training.”

“So,” Akiza set a pair of shoes down, and unfolded the two other lumpy items. “I had these whipped up for you.”

Akiza handed Yusei one thing, and she held the other. One of the items was a pair of pants. Pants that were billowy, black, and breathable. The top, which Akiza held, was also black. It was a folded shirt, almost like a gi, but softer and easier to move in. The trim was orange, Lise favorite color, and buttoned to the side.

“We also have a new belt and goggles since your last pair was broken in Peru,” Akiza said. “And we made sure they fit you. It was a pain to get your measurements without you knowing, but we managed.”

“But the best part is the back of the shirt,” Yusei said.

“It gets better than this?” Lise snuffled, rubbing at her eyes. It was taking everything in her power not to cry.

“Oh right,” Akiza flipped the shirt, displaying the back. “Yusei saw a few of your dragon insignia drawings and sketches for new gear, so we had it all made for you.”
Lise was full blown crying by this time. The insignia on the back was her favorite sketch. A red dragon spreading its wings, and lifting up into the air.

“And then…” Yusei dug into his pocket and took out what looked like a roll of white athletes tape. “I made this too.”

Akiza frowned at it because Lise was too busy crying to be confused. “Tape? Seriously?”

“It’s a high density polymerized titanium. Ten times stronger than steel,” Yusei explained. “And comfortable so you can wrap your arms without the wrappings getting torn apart.”

“Thank you,” Lise said thickly, rubbing her eyes. “Sorry, I’ve gotta go get ready…but I…Thanks.”

Akiza swept everything back into the bag, including the arm wrapping tape. She handed it to Lise and hugged her. “Go get ready, and kick ass for all of us.” She let go and started for the stands, waving as she went. “We’re rooting for you!”

“So,” Lise said when she and Yusei were alone. “When did you have time to make arm wrappings as strong as steal?”

“When we got back from Peru,” Yusei smiled. “I used the local college labs to develop them.”

“And they just let you in?” Lise raised a doubtful eyebrow.

“No,” Yusei sighed, remembering the whole ordeal. “I had to fill out a ton of paperwork to get IDs for the buildings, the specific rooms I needed, and then the equipment I wanted to use.”

“Ouch,” Lise said, wincing slightly.

“Yeah, it was a nightmare, but then it was just going in whenever I had the time.”

“Thank you,” Lise said quietly. She had to make a massive effort not to cry a second time.

“Uh yeah, so good luck,” Yusei said. He scratched at the back of his head. “Um, right? Cuz break a leg is for plays, and-“

Lise cut him off by seizing his cheeks and kissing him. Yusei responded in kind, pulling Lise as close as possible. He didn’t care if the whole world had been watching.

Lise’s cheeks were red when the kiss broke, which was also the color Yusei assumed his face was. It felt warm enough to match.

“Please don’t die,” Yusei whispered. His worries bursting forth.

“I won’t,” Lise whispered back. “Everyone I love has told me not to, so I won’t.”

“Okay,” Yusei took a deep breath, and kissed Lise’s forehead. Then he finally let Lise go. “You’ll be amazing, as always. We’ll be watching.”

“Don’t remind me,” Lise laughed. She smiled, hefted her new bag of supplies, and went to get ready with the other competitors.
“You made it just in time!” Luna waved Yusei over from their group’s seats.

Crow had found a section by the railings. Everyone could either sit or stand close to the action. He was busy keeping all the little kids in line. Carly had shown up and seated herself next to Jack. She was perusing a rulebook and events leaflet, briefing Jack on the tournament’s proceedings. He listened to her patiently, looking over her shoulder. Akiza and Bruno were discussing his many meetings with Trudge and Mina, and their lack of progress into his identity. The twins were bouncing excitedly by the railings.

“So yeah, we’ve gone through like ten different identities, but none of them feel right,” Bruno sighed. “That’s why I’ve been out so much.”

“We’ll find out who you are,” Akiza said, patting his shoulder. “Don’t worry.”

“Thanks,” he smiled minutely, and directed his attention to Yusei. “How is she?”

“Nervous, but I think she’s ready,” Yusei said, sitting down on the railing beside the twins.

“SH!” Leo waved off his friends’ conversations. He pointed to the arena. “It’s starting!”

“Heeeeeelllllloooooooo, New Domino City!” The MC burst onto the arena in a cloud of smoke and confetti. Camera drones buzzed all around him like large, recording insects. “It’s the moment you’ve all been waiting for! It’s time to get this Budokai started!”

Resounding cheers roared through the audience. Musical fanfare blared out in all directions.

“Reminds me of the Fortune Cup,” Jack commented. “Except for all the lies and set ups from Goodwin.”

“Yeah, not having that is definitely a bonus,” Crow chuckled a little bit.

“For those of you just joining us,” the MC continued. “We have nearly five hundred competitors gunning for a spot in this tournament’s bracket! Competition is fierce, so the preliminary rounds are based on elimination rules! Eight rounds of randomly shuffled fifty or so people battling it out for their spot! You get knocked out of the ring, and you’re out! The last two people standing per round are in the bracket! So, to all our competitors, good luck! Let’s go to the shuffle boards!”

The MC pointed to a large holographic board that popped up behind his head. A second board popped up in front of him so the audience could see from any direction. The screens were massive, large enough to hold all nearly 500 challengers. The audience watched as the photos of the competitors were shuffled together like cards, and separated into eight groups.

“Lise is in the seventh round,” Akiza found her friend first. “We’re gonna be here a while.”

Leo slumped against the railing. “Ugh, that’s gonna take forever!”

“Actually it might not,” Carly said. She pushed her glasses further up her nose. “The leaflet says the preliminary rounds are just three minutes. There are so many people per round, that three minutes might be too long in some cases.”

“What happens if more than two people are left after three minutes?” Luna asked.
“Sudden death goes into effect,” Carly read. “First person to be knocked off their feet is out. The rules say any instance of not being on one’s feet then counts as being out.”

“What about if you do a hand stand?” Leo asked.

Luna rolled her eyes. “Why would you try to win with a hand stand?”

“I dunno,” Leo shrugged, spreading his hands. “Maybe it’d be funny?”

The gang sat and watched impatiently as round and after round went by. Some were over quickly, but others went to the last second. Most people’s strategy was to let everyone tire themselves out, and then knock all other competitors out of the ring.

Faster than they realized, it was round seven. The new group of fifty or so people emerged, filling the ring.

“Finally!” Leo squealed. He pointed to one of the smaller people, easily visible due to the blond hair. “There she is!”

Lise stood off to one side. She was stretching her arms, taking calming breathes. Dressed in all black, with the dragon insignia gleaming on her back, she looked formidable. Wrappings encircled her arms, vanishing into the short sleeves of the shirt. The new goggles, red belt, and orange trim catching the sunlight.

“She looks beautiful,” Yusei sighed, resting his chin in his hand.

“Just in time to have the crap beaten out of her,” Crow joked.

Yusei flushed pink, remembering he was not alone, and where they were.

Akiza sat down between Yusei and the twins. “We did good with the outfit. Too bad it’s gonna be rags after this is over.”

“You two have weird priorities,” Bruno said.

“All right, New Domino!” the MC grinned into his microphone. “Time for the seventh-round showdown!”

The commencement bell went off with a loud ding. Competitors immediately started throwing each other out of the ring.

“Hey, she’s not even fighting,” Leo frowned. “What gives?”

“There’s at least fifty other people in that ring with her,” Carly explained. “If she tried to fight all of them, she’d lose in a heartbeat.”

Luna cocked her head to the side. “Almost looks like she’s dancing.”

She was right. Instead of actively fighting the others, Lise was gracefully dodging attacks. One guy tried to punch her in the face, but just jerking her head to the side, the attack missed Lise and hit someone else.

In the first minute alone, people were knocked out of the ring like shooting fish in a barrel. Lise and roughly ten others were all that was left.

“Now that most competitors are out of the way, the fun begins! The last dozen or so will have to
“get creative if they want to be the last two standing!”

“Now it’s getting interesting,” Lise smiled. The tension was gone from her limbs. She’d all but forgotten about the crowd watching.

Somebody’s massive hand clamped down on Lise’s head, lifting her up into the air by her hair. “Sorry, little lady, but I’m gonna toss you out before you get hurt,” the hand’s owner said with a light southern accent.

“Wow, what a gentleman,” Lise’s scowl paired well with her sarcasm.

She twisted out of the man’s grip, kicking him in the side as she came back down to Earth. One good solid punch, and the man was sent careening out of the ring. He landed in the water, splashing audience members nearby.

Lise backed up into the center of the ring. She ran into another girl, almost a foot shorter than Lise. The girl had brown hair, skin, and eyes, all the color of rich, mahogany. She and Lise glanced at each other, and then nodded slowly.

Most of the other competitors had taken each other out. It was just four guys against Lise and the only other girl.

“Alliance?” the girl asked, holding her fist out.

Lise shrugged. “Sure, why not?” They tapped fists.

“I’ll take the big one,” the girl grinned, cracking her knuckles, and launched herself at the largest boy.

“Just one minute left folks! The last six are in for the fight of their lives!”

“Yeah! Go Lise!” Leo cheered.

“Rip it, roll it, and punch it!”

Akiza put her fingers to her lips and let out a sharp whistle. The others joined in with various cheers and whistles.

The first boy attacked with a roundhouse kick. Lise brushed past, seized his leg, and used his momentum to toss him out of the ring like he was made of air. The second guy tried to backhand her out of his way, but Lise whirled downwards, like she was shrinking into a top, and kicked the guy’s legs out from under him. He tumbled backward, the boy the brown-haired girl had attacked smacking into him, and taking both of them out.

Lise and the girl turned their attention to their last opponent.

He put his hands up with a smirk. “Sorry, I don’t hit girls.”

“How chivalrous,” the girl rolled her eyes.

“I don’t hit girls, but that doesn’t mean I can’t win!” He shundoed over to Lise, thrusting his fist upwards inches from her nose.

“Uh…” Lise blinked. *He didn’t even hit me. What the?*

Next second Lise was soaring into the air. She flipped over and over, wind whistling in her ears.
Crap! A chi blast! If I don’t land back in the ring, I’m out! Lise attempted to angle herself back towards the fight.

Meanwhile, the girl back in the ring didn’t bat an eye. She ran at the boy, and used him as a springboard to leap into the air.

Like a bullet, the girl zoomed straight for Lise. Once she was close enough, she looped arms with Lise, and spun in a circle. Dragging Lise along with her, she had enough momentum to throw Lise back at the ring.

Lise readied her fist. Orange chi sparked briefly across the limb, and went out in a circular blast when she punched the arena upon her landing.

The last boy standing was lifted into the air. Lise’s new friend came down from her fall, and graciously kicked the boy out of the ring with a perfect sidekick in midair.

The girl landed, and straightened up. Lise did the same.

Both girls were the last two competitors standing.

Explosions of cheers erupted in the audience. The MC gestured grandly to the girls, but Lise and her new friend weren’t listening to him.

“Mika,” the girl said. She wiped sweat off her forehead, and held out her hand. “Mika Cardoso.”

“Lise Kururugi,” Lise took Mika’s hand. They fist bumped, and a wave of wind expanded from their hands.

Even up in the stands, the gang could feel the shock wave. The wind wasn’t strong enough to be dangerous, but it was clearly powerful.

“Whoa,” Leo breathed. “That was awesome!”

“Looks like Lise has a new friend,” Carly smiled.

Akiza crossed her arms. “She’s already got a best friend.” She suddenly felt very territorial over those she cared about.

“Lise Kururugi,” Mika was saying back in the ring. Both she and Lise had noticed the shock wave. Mika sounded like she was testing out the name’s sound on her tongue. “I look forward to meeting you again in the final round.”

Lise grinned. “Me too. Just don’t lose.”

“Not even in my vocabulary.”

“Well folks, that’s all for today!” the MC was wrapping up. “We now have our 16 opponents! So don’t go anywhere these next few days, and place your bets! The real Budokai is just getting started!”

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Crow had shuffled the orphans to the van waiting to take them back to Martha’s. The others were just waited outside of the arena for Lise.

She’d changed into her street clothes, and looked a little weary, but her eyes were sparkling once
she emerged.

“That was so awesome!” Leo cried, glomping onto Lise. “Awesome, awesome, awesome!”

“Really?” Luna rolled her eyes. “All you can say is awesome?”

“Well, it was awesome,” Leo insisted.

“Why don’t you tell me about it back at the garage?” Lise suggested, ruffling Leo’s hair.

“Yeah, we all need to rest up for tomorrow,” Yusei said quickly.

Akiza quickly hailed cars for their larger group. She was happy to pay, on her father’s dime, of course.

Lise mouthed ‘thank you’ at both of them. All she really wanted to do at that point was eat and sleep.

Bruno had ordered pizza, so everyone got busy demolishing three boxes worth once they got home. The air was practically electric, it buzzed with so much excitement. If those eight rounds was only a taste of what was to be expected, the next rounds would be even better.

“So, what are the new rounds looking like?” Jack asked. He was on his third slice of pizza.

Carly pulled out her rulebook and leaflet. “Now the matches are one versus one. They’re fifteen minutes long, but all rules of engagement still apply.”

Leo frowned. “Rules of engagement?”

“They’re not allowed to stab me with knives,” Lise said.

“Oh…”

“And if the matches hit fifteen minutes without a clear winner, the winner will be decided by electronic poll.”

“Oh, so audience members vote for their favorites,” Akiza said.

“Or whoever they felt fought better,” Carly continued. “Competitors may only exit the ring for up to twenty seconds. Any longer and it counts as an automatic loss. A winner is determined when one of the competitors is unable to continue.”

“Because they died?” Leo asked.

“No!” Luna cried, shaking her head. “If someone can’t move!”

“Or falls unconscious. The loser needs to be incapacitated for at least twenty seconds.”

“Seems fair,” Jack nodded.

“Hey guys, what did I miss? Oo, pizza!” Crow came charging into the garage, parked, and snagged the last piece of pepperoni.

“Okay, I’m gonna call it a night,” Lise extracted herself from the couch, and yawned widely. “See you all tomorrow.” She waved sleepily and climbed the stairs up to her room.
“This is gonna sound bad, but I can’t wait to see her kick someone’s ass tomorrow,” Akiza grinned. Yusei shook his head. “I feel bad for her opponents, but me too.”

///

“Hello again, and good morning New Domino!” the MC was just as cheerful as ever. It was rumored that perhaps he kept all his enthusiasm stored in his enormous hairstyle. “Welcome back to the Budokai tournament! Yesterday’s matches were quite a spectacle, and we’re hoping there’s plenty more where that came from today!”

The gang assembled into their seats, in a slightly different place. Crowds had come and go, shuffling the spectators around slightly. Luckily, their viewpoint was still top notch. No one wanted to miss anything.

“So let’s go on to the shuffle board! Remember, these next few matches are completely random! Who is it gonna be?”

The holo screens popped up. They shuffled like lottery machines through the photos of competitors.

“I’m so nervous, and I’m not even fighting,” Crow chuckled to himself.

“Yeah,” Carly agreed. Her camera was poised to go at a second’s notice. “I’m not even sure what to hope for? I mean, in terms of which match Lise fights in.”

“First is the worst,” Leo said. He spoke from experience.

Luna nodded, and patted her brother’s shoulder. “Fingers crossed.”

“All right! We have our first competitors! Mika Cardoso versus Danny Powers!”

Akiza breathed a sigh of relief. “Lise isn’t first. I feel bad for the first loser though. That’s gotta suck.”

“It does,” Leo sniffed.

“Don’t worry, Leo. You’re still a great duelist,” Luna said.

“Thanks.”

Bruno studied Mika and Danny as they entered the ring. “That’s the girl Lise finished the preliminary rounds with. She was so fast I could barely see her.”

“Maybe we’ll be able to see what kind of techniques she uses today,” Yusei said.

DING! Went the bell. The match was on!

Danny and Mika rushed each other instantly. Mika kept her fists up while Danny kicked at her repeatedly. Danny was average height for a boy, but, based on how wild his kicks were, he wasn’t used to fighting smaller opponents.

Mika had yet to throw even a punch after a minute. She kept dancing out of the way.

Danny’s face was bright red. He clenched his teeth, sweating profusely. The strain from not making a dent in Mika’s strategy was getting to him.
“Hold still you little insect!”

“Make me!” Mika taunted.

“Uh, well, folks, it seems this match is more a game of tag than a fight! Neither opponent seems to have made any progress! Quite a soft opening for our second day!”

“This is just weird. Why on earth hasn’t she attacked?” Jack threw his hands up, shaking his head.

“She’s wearing him down,” Akiza said. “Being small is working to her advantage in this case. Maybe she saw he doesn’t have a lot of chi?”

“Then how did he get into the bracket?”

Carly whipped out her phone like she was unsheathing a sword. “The web says he waited while everyone took each other out, then defeated the stragglers with…shadows?”

“That’s not what it says,” Crow took a look, brow furrowed, but then clicked his tongue. “Okay, I stand corrected.”

“This is getting old,” Danny growled. He extended his hand and clenched it into a fist. His shadow peeled itself off the ground like it was an origami swan. He did so again and Mika’s shadow rose up as well.

“Cool!” Leo leaned over the railing to get a better look.

“How did he do that?”

“I think he poured his chi into the shadows?” Akiza said, staring intently at the shadowy figures advancing on Mika. “Or it’s magic.”

Mika wasn’t daunted in the slightest. She hopped onto the nearest shadow, her own, jabbed it in the neck with a knife hand, and leapt away. Her shadow turned to dust, and then returned to her as a normal shadow.

“Shit,” Danny swore. He and his own shadow dove for Mika together, going for her head and legs.

Mika stepped away, and then was suddenly standing behind Danny’s shadow. A shundo. She extended two fingers on her hands, and swiftly hit several of the shadow’s vital areas.

The shadow froze, encased in an invisible ice block. Before it could dissolve, Mika slammed the heel of her palm between the shadow’s shoulder blades. Danny’s shadow went careening back at him.

Danny collapsed the moment his shadow made contact.

Mika stood nearby. Her expression gave nothing away as she brushed off her pants.

“I…I can’t move!” Danny screamed.

Silence. The clock had just hit the six minute mark.

“Um…I guess I’ll start the twenty second countdown?” the MC was just as star struck as the audience. “Twenty! Nineteen!”

“You don’t need a fucking countdown!” Danny shouted irritably at him. “I can’t move, damnit!”
Bruno laughed nervously. “I guess danger comes in small packages these days.”

“No kidding,” Yusei said. “What did she do anyway?”

“There you have it, New Domino! Mika Cardoso is our first winner!” the MC declared.

“This tournament just gets better and better!” Akiza grinned.

“And Lise is next!” Luna pointed at the holo screens. Half were playing highlights from Mika’s match, and the other half were displaying the next matchup. “Lise versus…Satomi Konoe?”

“I don’t remember seeing her in the preliminaries,” Crow scratched his chin, studying the girl’s picture.

Carly consulted her phone again. “Probably because she wasn’t fighting. Here, let me read her bio. ‘A technological genius, Ms. Konoe is an expert in biological technology. Ms. Konoe is a prodigy, graduating college at fourteen, and continuing her research into technological enhancements for the human body. Now at sixteen, her greatest creation, as she calls it, is Cyborg. As the name suggests, Cyborg is a perfect blend of human and robot. Originally known as star football player for the University of Washington huskies, Erik Nakia has recovered marvelously from an incapacitating injury thanks to Ms. Konoe. Together, the two of them are a team helping other physically disabled kids regain their freedom with their work.’”

“That’s amazing,” Akiza breathed after Carly had finished.

“So technically they’re a team,” Crow said. “Is that allowed in the rules?”

“Satomi did build Cyborg. He’s her fighter, but she can’t be remotely controlling or helping him. It’s her life’s work at risk, so she’s got to trust that Erik will measure up,” Yusei said. “It’s like Bruno and me with duel runners, except Cyborg is alive. He can definitely measure up to expectations. Although, I’m still rooting for Lise.”

“We all are,” Jack reminded him. “This match is going to be good. I can feel it.”

Cyborg and Lise came into view, about to enter the ring. Lise was staring at Cyborg while Satomi gave him one last pep talk. He was a sight to see, in Lise’s defense.

Cyborg’s armor was blue and silver, glinting dazzling from every angle. His dark skin, and one dark eye were visible from the human half of his face, along with tiny bits of his arms that were still organic as well. His other eye was cybernetic, outfitting with glowing red sensors. Every other part of Cyborg was metal, even down to his fingers. All that, and Cyborg was six feet, ten.

Satomi, in comparison, was a dwarf. She was tiny, barely four feet, six inches. Her brown hair was swept into two braids to keep it out of her face. She had glasses that rivaled the size of Carly’s, making her eyes look enormous, reinforcing the idea of a tiny insect. Cyborg smiled down at her, bent over to allow her to hug his arm.

“Good luck, Cy,” Satomi said.

“Thanks, but I don’t need it,” Cyborg smiled at her. He flexed his fingers. “I’ll show everyone how amazing your work is.”

“Without further ado,” the MC said. “We have our second match of the day! First, in this corner is Satomi Konoe’s finest work! He’s the cybernetic bruiser, the iron fisted smasher, the metal hulk, it’s Cyborg!”
Cyborg waved to the crowd.

Satomi pointed at him from the competitor’s box. “That’s my boy!”

“And then challenging him is our local favorite! She’s a little spitfire, a blazing beauty, a firebird of power! Lise Kururugi!”

“Hey, he got her name right!” Luna said, laughing a little.

“Go Lise!”

The bell dinged, signaling the beginning of the match.

In an instant, Lise was right next to Cyborg. “Whoa!” She took his hand, holding it up to examine the robotic digits better. “You’re incredible! What’s your power source? Is it lithium? Do you need to be plugged in every night? Do you have a phone built into your arm? Do you download apps into your mental hardrive? Can you see in infrared with your bionic eye?”

Yusei facepalmed. “She’s not even focusing on the match!”

“She seems pretty enamored with Cyborg,” Akiza laughed. “You might be in trouble, Yusei.”

“You think so?!”

Jack and Crow burst out laughing. They had to hang onto each other to keep from falling over.

“Um, excuse me, Ms. Kururugi,” Cyborg shook his head. He’d been put off by Lise’s questions. He’d been prepared for an attack, but not a barrage of queries. “I’m sorry about this, but I do wanna win so…”

“Huh?” Lise looked up.

Just in time for Cyborg to backhand her. She’d tightened her gut just in time, but it still hurt like hell when she smacked into a column. Lise started to slide back down to the ground, but Cyborg didn’t give her a chance to recover. He cocked his fist and sent Lise smashing through the column.

Crow and Jack immediately stopped laughing.

“Holy shit.”

“That had to hurt!”

Yusei winced. “Oh it did.”

“Uh oh! Both contestants have left the ring! If they don’t return in twenty seconds, they’re both out!”

Cyborg swept his hand to clear his arm of debris. A cloud of smoke had kicked up, obscuring his vision. However, he didn’t have only human eyes. His robotic eye scanned the smoke, searching for a heat signature.

“Target located. Ten meters and closing,” Cyborg’s helpful AI reported.

Cyborg acted accordingly, using his leg in a sweeping motion. Lise jumped over his leg, landed on Cyborg’s shoulder, and then gracefully back in the ring.
Now that Lise was visible again, she was looking a little bruised. Cyborg’s attack had hurt, but not enough to slow her down.

“System recalibrating. Increase punch speed. Execute strategy.”

Cyborg cracked his knuckles, jumped, and aimed another punch at Lise’s head. She intercepted the punch with her own, their fists colliding. Lise held her ground, the earth beneath her cracking from the sheer force she’d withstood and held back. Broken pieces of the ring lifted and fell back to the ground.

“Error. Error!” Cyborg’s AI was practically screaming at him. Red error messages popped up in front of his red eye’s vision. “Multiple damages sustained to finger units two, three, and four! Error!”

“Uh oh.”

Lise grinned, and pulled her free hand back. Chi sparked across her entire arm, a personal storm of orange lightning.

“AAAAAAAAGGGGGHHHH!” Lise yelled, sending her fist slamming into Cyborg’s arm.

The limb exploded from the sheer force of impact. Metal pieces and shrapnel went flying in all directions.

“Error! Right arm loss detected!”

“Yeah,” Cyborg groaned. “I detected that too. Time to get serious.”

He switched tactics, Cyborg’s remaining hand detaching itself from the arm. The middle finger uncapped, like a marker, revealing another bionic eye. The other fingers acted like legs, skittering around as if the hand had become an insect.

Lise swallowed, watching the hand warily. “That’s so gross.”

“Standard issue with cybernetic body parts,” Cyborg smiled.

“I’ll take your word for it,” Lise said. She leapt at Cyborg. “Especially considering you made it that much easier to beat you!”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

The spider hand shot off from the ground, propelled by a mini jet engine. It snagged Lise by the back of her shirt, stopping her from touching Cyborg. Lise put her arms up, and then Cyborg’s kick blasted her backwards. The spider hand ripped off of her from the strength of the attack.

“Shit,” Lise swore to herself after the spider hand had thwarted her offensive plan a third time. This isn’t working. I need to find a way to get rid of that hand!

“This is so bizarre,” Carly said. “How is she supposed to fight a hand and a person?”

“Thumb wrestle it,” Leo blurted out.

Even Bruno gave him a funny look.
Leo shrugged and his cheeks turned pink. “What? It could work.”

“I guess?” Luna said, curling her lip slightly.

Akiza frowned at her. To which Luna spread her hands, shrugging. Both girls sighed, and turned their attention back to the match.

Lise threw the spider hand off of herself again. “God, that thing is creepy!”

“My buddy comes in handy though!” Cyborg insisted with a grin.

“I beg to differ,” Lise muttered, shivering at the thought of the spider hand touching her again.

She charged for Cyborg again. His spider hand followed behind her.

“Intercept target. Predicted plan of attack, jump, and then kick to face,” the AI said.

The spider hand’s engine flew it up behind Lise, ready to grab her the second she jumped up at Cyborg’s face.

Instead, Lise jumped and slid on her side. Water from when the two of them had returned to the ring made the going easier. Beeping loudly, the spider hand changed directions a little too slow to stop Lise. She caught Cyborg midstep, tripping him. The spider hand clamped onto Lise’s arm, trying to drag her into the line of fire.

With a grunt of frustration, Lise tore the spider hand off and threw it underneath Cyborg a second before he fell flat on his face. The weight of his body crushed his own hand to pieces.

Before Cyborg could get up, Lise flipped into the air, and came down with both feet on Cyborg’s left arm. Both his arms had been smashed to pieces.

Bruno whistled to himself. “She’s not just good. She’s ruthless.”

“Just don’t make her mad,” Crow chuckled.

Akiza nudged Yusei slightly. “Come to think of it, both of you are pretty scary, no matter the battlefield. But when it comes to each other, you just up and melt.”

“Wha-! Akiza!” Yusei’s whole face had turned red.

“Aaw,” Carly rested her chin in her hands. “That’s so cute!”

“That isn’t,” Jack said. He was still watching the match.

Cyborg had refused to give up despite having no arms. Lise had responded by ripping off his left leg. Cyborg had to hop away from Lise while she tried to smack him with his own leg.

“Yeah, Lise! Hit a home run!” Leo cheered.

Lise did finally manage to hit Cyborg out of the ring. He only had one leg, so he was already off balance. Then Lise used his own leg to hold him out of the ring for twenty seconds.

“Okay then that secures it!” the MC announced. “In the weirdest match I’ve yet to see, Lise Kururugi pulls a win quite literally out of Cyborg’s circuits! Hopefully Satomi can repair him, but we won’t be seeing Satomi and Cyborg in the ring. That honor goes to Lise Kururugi!”
“Yes! She won!” Yusei smiled from ear to ear, fists pumping in victory.

“She fucking demolished him,” Akiza laughed.

“Yeah, I hope Mr. Cyborg is okay,” Leo stood on the railing to see better.

Lise was taking care of the aftermath already. She hefted Cyborg’s leg, and then supported him out of the ring.

Satomi rushed up to meet them. “Oh Cy, you’ve really made a mess of yourself,” she said, fussing over his exposed circuits.

Lise handed her the leg. “Here. Sorry I tore Cyborg apart. I’ll grab the other pieces.”

“Really?” Satomi watched as Lise started gathering the salvageable parts scattered across the arena. “Thank you!” She turned to her friend. “Cy, you were WAY to reckless!”

“Hey, she was good!” Cyborg argued. “I did what I could!” Satomi finished reattaching his leg, and he sighed with relief. “Now I can walk again. Thanks.”

“Don’t change the subject! I can’t believe you were fine with your arms getting blown off!”

“I’m sorry about that,” Lise had rejoined them. Her arms weighed down with all the parts she’d managed to gather. “Are you gonna be okay? You can repair him, right? I went too far, ya know, with your arms being pieces now...”

“Oh no,” Satomi waved her hands. “I’m not mad at you. I’m mad at him... Well, moreso myself than either of you. I should’ve known Cy needed upgraded armor for this tournament.

And don’t worry! I can definitely fix him!” Satomi grabbed Lise’s shoulders. “But I should be thanking you! This was Cyborg’s fighting debut, and I’m already formulating new armor ideas to protect him from chi attacks!”

Lise frowned and cocked her head to the side. “So... this was a test run?”

Satomi wasn’t listening. She’d whipped out a notebook and started scribbling furiously. “High impact and crash durability is a must for all my prosthetics moving forward. Most of my patients are extreme sport enthusiasts. They’ll love having highly durable limbs. I’ll have to analyze the footage of the fight later. Maybe I can start making test armor and do some trials with a chi expert this week.”

Cyborg laughed and turned back to Lise. “You’ll have to forgive her. She doesn’t hear anyone else when she gets like that.

Thanks for testing my durability against a chi master though. We should have a rematch some time soon.” He held out what was left of his right arm, a nub.

Lise grinned, and shook his nub. “Sure, hit me up whenever you’re ready.”
“Welcome back to New Domino’s Budokai, folks!” the MC announced the next morning. “After yesterday’s matches, we’re down to only eight competitors! Today is looking bright and sunny, but it can change to rainy and gloomy for any of our future losers!

Speaking of which, the matches are as follows; Mako Cardoso versus Keith Yeun! Mika Cardoso versus Kotaro Inugami! Lise Kururugi versus Anya Zolotova! And Kori Star versus Rachel Bird! Good luck to all of you! We’ll have Mako and Keith up first!”

“Wait so…” Leo’s face screwed up in concentration. “Are Mika and Mako related?”

“Brother and sister, yes,” Mika popped up next to the gang. “Do you mind if I join you?”

“Uh…” Luna glanced at her brother. He shrugged, and looked to the older teens.

Carly spoke up first, adjusting her glasses. “We’re not going to be rooting for your brother though.”

“Oh, I’m not either,” Mika said breezily. “I just wanted a place to sit with interesting people to watch my brother’s match, and Ms. Kururugi’s match.”

“Interesting people?” One of Akiza’s fists clenched. She wasn’t sure if she wanted to punch Mika or shake her hand. The girl was hard to read.

“Yes,” Mika said. “Most of you are Signers, and with all of you together like this it’s like a fireworks display of chi.”

“You mean you can see chi?” Yusei asked. He’d remembered Lise’s lesson about chi, and that some people could see it, but he never imagined he’d meet someone who could.

Mika nodded and seated herself on the railing between the twins. “Yes, and I suspect you can too.”

She pointed at Akiza. “It starts off faint, like the glimmer of light that peeks over the horizon when the sun rises. But I think if you continue to look, you will be able to see chi without even trying.”

“Seriously?!” Akiza gasped. She thought she’d been going crazy. During Lise’s lesson she’d blinked and seen orange currents of energy pulsing through her friend’s body. Another blink and it was gone. She’d seen brief dots of forest green in the shadows during Mika and Danny’s fight too.

“Aw man!” Leo complained, slumping against the railing again. “Everybody else gets the cool stuff!”

“Wait, back up,” Yusei spread his hands. “So you can see chi?”

“Yes.”

“And Akiza can see chi?”

“Yes, she’s awakening the skill.”

“And can you make it so other people can see chi?”

“I can extend my skill to people I’m touching if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Um…yeah,” Yusei blinked. Mika was more forthright than he’d expected.
“So what does my chi look like?” Jack broke the silence.

Mika smiled at him. Her eyes glimmered brighter for a half second. “White; bright, bold, and uncompromising.”

“Amazing,” Bruno breathed.

“And Mako Cardoso is our winner! He’ll move on to the semi-final matches! Next up we’ll see who joins him because it’s Mika Cardoso versus Kotaro Inugami!”

“That’s my cue!” Mika hopped back to her feet. “I’ll be back to watch Ms. Kururugi’s fight! See you then!” She dashed off for the ring, a spring in her step.

“Well, she was…interesting,” Crow said slowly.

“I wish I brought my notes on chi,” Yusei said. “Maybe she can tell us more.”

“Maybe she can allow us to see chi for a short while,” Carly suggested. “I’d love to see what Lise’s chi attacks look like from the inside out.”

“Right,” Jack nodded. “Right now we can only see chi when a powerful attack is being used.”

“There has to be an internal process that we’re not seeing about the directional force and variety people use chi,” Bruno said. “Hey Akiza, can you see how Mika uses chi? Or Mako?”

“Sort of,” Akiza frowned at the match going on in front of her. “I think Mako breaks the rules. His chi goes out and then he takes it back into himself? I think? I can only see flashes of color right now, like little hints of the chi’s pathways. Mika’s is subtler. It feels like… waves of power beating up against an immovable cliff?”

Luna frowned. “But the oceans erode the earth away?”

Akiza shook her head. “I know, but that’s just what Mika’s chi feels like. It’s precise and… unyielding.”

“Give it up for Mika Cardoso, folks! She’s our second winner of the day!”

“Lise is next!” Leo pointed.

Lise and her opponent, Anya, were taking the ring. Anya’s red hair was pulled back in a top knot, the rest elegantly framing her face. Her fighting outfit looked more like she’d decided she was going to be riding horses that day. She even had fancy epaulettes adorning her shoulders.

Anya tossed a stray hair out of her face. “I commend you for the effort, my dear, but your outfit screams ruffian, not elegance.”

“Um…okay?” Lise said, blinking. “I don’t really see how that’s…relevant? But go off, I guess.”

“Very well, I shall win for the glory of beautiful Russia!”

“A little dramatic, isn’t she?” Carly laughed a little. She nudged Jack. “Reminds me of someone I know.”

Jack sniffed and crossed his arms. “I’m nowhere near that ridiculous.”

Crow choked on his own spit he laughed so hard. The others couldn’t resist little smiles either.
“And…go!” The MC and the commencement bell went off at the same time.

Anya dug into one of her pockets. Next second, she was flicking tiny, rounded objects at Lise.

“Whoa!” Lise leapt out of the way of the barrage. It was like extreme side-stepping the projectiles were coming so fast. They sounded like bullets the power was so intense.

“Holy moly! Ms. Zolotova comes right out of the gate with an explosive attack!” the MC marveled. “Wonder what she’s using?! Either way, those holes in the columns are deep! I wouldn’t want to be on the receiving end of those shots!”

Lise sneaked a peek at the damaged columns. “Shit,” she murmured. Holes at least six inches deep dotted the columns. “Okay, note to self. Don’t get hit with those things.”

Waves of the tiny projectiles came one after the other. Anya laughed, loving watching Lise dodge her attacks. “Well, what’s it gonna be?! Give up already?!”

Lise ignored Anya, bending backwards to avoid another wave. She frowned as the projectiles passed over her. “Wait.” Her hand reached out, snagging a projectile, and she spun backwards into a kneeling position.

Between her thumb and forefinger Lise held the projectile. “No way! You’re attacking me with five-yen coins??!”

Crow’s hands shot up into his hair, practically tearing out all the strands in their grasp. “That’s such a waste of money!!”

Jack snickered into his hand. “Now that’s hilarious!”

“Is that even legal?” Leo scratched his head.

“Heh heh, well technically,” Carly said. “Five-yen coins aren’t deadly, but Anya seems to be making them deadly.”

Mika popped up out of nowhere. “Anya might be a bit over the top, but she’s excellent with weaponry. Even if it isn’t a weapon, she can turn it into one. That, and she also likes to throw her wealth around.”

“Must be nice,” Crow whimpered.

“Oh yes, my dear,” Anya grinned widely. “That is indeed money! Such an interesting story at the bank! Would you like me to tell it?”

“No thanks,” Lise scowled, tossing the coin she’d snagged into the water.

“It was a lovely morning, as it always is for me!”

“I said no!”

“And the bank teller was very confused when I asked for a million yen! Then even more confused when I asked him for a million yen in 5-yen coins! He grabbed another teller to count out my money! Then—“

“I don’t want your frigging backstory!” Lise punched Anya so hard in the face she flipped over backward.
Anya righted herself with ease. “Very well! I shall engage you without my noble tale of acquiring my weaponry for this day!”

Lise rolled her eyes, and raised her fists. “God, you’re annoying.” She closed the distanced between her and Anya in a second. A shundo.

“She did it!” Yusei’s fists clenched. “A perfect shundo!”

“Now she’s got the advantage! Anya can’t shoot the coins so close!”

Mika pursed her lips. “I wouldn’t say that.”

“Oh, I’m annoying, am I?” Anya leveled her hand, primed with a five-yen coin right at Lise’s face. “Well, I’m not limited by distance.”

It happened in the blink of an eye. Flick. POW!

The five-yen coin hit Lise smack-dab in her forehead. Lise landed on her back, several yards away from Anya.

Carly, Akiza, and Luna’s hands flew to their mouths. Leo was stunned into silence. Jack clung to Carly, and the orphans’ tiny hands suddenly all snagged onto Crow’s. Not even Yusei spoke.

Only Bruno got a grip on himself. “What the?”

“Ow…” Lise mumbled, scowling. Her forehead was already bruising.

“Oh, get up already,” Anya growled. “I saw your match with Cyborg. You’ve withstood far more than that.”

“Hup,” Lise jumped up onto her feet. “Yeah, but it still really hurt. I admit, using coins was pretty smart.”

Anya smirked. “And there’s more where that came from!” She reached for her pocket, but the pocket was gone! The remains of the pocket hung in tatters on her suit. “Huh?”

Lise held up a handful of fabric and coins. “Looking for this?”

“What?! When did you?” Anya gasped. “When you shundoed over!”

“Yep,” Lise smirked. She threw all the remaining coins in the water, dusting her hands off.

“Oh, she took a hit to take away the coins!” Bruno realized. “Brilliant!”

“Still, that was reckless,” Yusei frowned, rubbing his forehead.

“How’re you holding up?” Akiza asked him. “I forgot about the empathy link’s pain connection.”

One of the corners of Yusei’s lips twitched. “It’s not as bad. Lise has gotten pretty good at suppressing the Crimson Dragon’s power. It dampens the empathy link, so it kinda twinges instead of hurts. It feels like buzzing or static instead of clear cut signals.”

“Interesting,” Mika said, her eyes subtly glimmering again. “That explains why you have different colored chi.” She tapped her chin. “Come to think of it Ms. Kururugi’s chi is the exact opposite; orange with a hint of dark blue.”
Yusei’s cheeks flushed pink. “Uh… is that… what does that mean?”

“It does make me wonder how your chi influences each other? Does it feel different? Does it have a taste?”

“Um, I’ll get back to you on that…”

“Of course,” Mika shook herself. “The match!”

Anya had busted out what looked like a long, clear whip-like weapon. She came at Lise more actively, cackling the closer her swipes came. Close or at a distance, Anya was prepared for anything.

Lise changed tactics. She leapt between columns, then back into the ring just under the wire. At first Anya swung her whip with abandonment, but that was less than useful. She too switched strategies, and watched Lise jumping in between columns.

“Dear, I’d really appreciate it if you’d STAY STILL!” Anya flicked her whip upwards.

Her technique was flawless. Anya caught Lise mid-jump, almost zero chance of dodging. Lise cried out in pain. The whip had snapped against her shoulder.

She spun and smashed into the rooftops of the stands. Tiles rained down on the audience members below. Lise groaned, moving slowly to test the extent of her injuries.

“Oh no, dearie! People who waste money don’t get time to recover!”

Anya snapped her whip, circling it expertly around Lise’s middle. Lise gasped, and reflexively raised her hands to protect her face.

Not a second after, Anya dragged her across the rooftop. More tiles broke off and smashed into Lise as she and Anya tore up the roof. She managed to protect her face, but Anya was ruthless.

Anya whirled around, and brought her whip cracking downwards. It retracted from around Lise, sending her flipping, end over end, into one of the railings.

When audience members realized where she was going, they quickly gathered their things and booked it. An entire section vacated their seats as quickly as possible.

Lise crashed heavily, an audible groan escaping her lips. Shrapnel flew in all directions. The wood had buckled and collapsed under Lise’s weight. She lay in a pile of broken wood. Her breathing was heavy, and she was scraped up badly, but otherwise she seemed okay.

“Is that all ya got?” Lise pulled herself to her feet. She landed back in the ring, tearing a chunk of wood out of her left leg. “Cuz I’m just getting started.”

Anya cracked her knuckles. “Be careful what you wish for, dear!” She flipped the whip around, sending the larger end of her whip at Lise’s stomach.

Lise hit one of the stone columns with a crunch. She’d put up her guard, but two big hits to her back hurt more than she’d care to admit.

She stumbled. Clutching at her head, she tried to get her bearings back. Did she have a concussion? That would be bad. Like, incredibly bad.

Anya advanced on Lise, slamming her back against the column. Lise’s vision was foggy. Was
Anya right in front of her? It felt like she was waking up from a dream.

Metal suddenly coated her tongue. Had she bit it? Or her lips? Was she bleeding?

With one hand, Anya held Lise’s body against the column. Her other hand pocketed her whip and pulled back as far as it could go. “Sweet dreams, dearie!”

It took massive amounts of concentration for Lise to pull herself out of her fog. Vision clear, she saw Anya’s punch coming.

“Shit!” Lise exclaimed. She ducked, and Anya’s punch cracked the column like a meteor smashing into Earth.

“Better luck next time,” Lise grinned. She wrapped her arms around the broken column, for leverage, and kicked Anya in the stomach with both legs. She kept the kick going, using it to right herself against the column’s surface like spider-man.

That was close. Way too close. Lise hopped back into the ring.

So far I’ve been trying to avoid her and somehow get the whip away from her, but maybe I should be doing the exact opposite...

Lost in thought, Lise hadn’t seen Anya’s next attack. Anya charged into Lise, shoving her backwards with her elbow. Before Lise could right herself, Anya snagged Lise by the arm and hurled her at the scaffolding of the stands.

The whip retracted, but Anya kept charging at Lise. If she wasn’t dressed like a fancy, horse-riding prince, she could have easily been mistaken for a rhino.

Audience members behind Lise’s trajectory were quick to leave. They’d seen what the last crash had been like. No one wanted to be in the warpath of destruction.

Lise twisted in midair, and snagged the nearest support beam with her hand. Using the momentum from being blown backwards, she spun around the beam.

Anya was just close enough. Lise smashed her foot into Anya’s face in a perfect roundhouse kick. Crescent kick to get Anya back on course, and then Lise side-kicked her back into the ring. She too jumped back in the ring, sliding into a crouch. She was lithe, like a cat, ready for anything.

Yusei clutched at his chest. “I think I’m gonna have multiple heart attacks before this is over.”

“This has been the most destructive fight so far,” Akiza laughed a little, her foot bouncing up and down restlessly.

Mika shrugged. “Anya will like that. She’s gotta have a record for something, and she likes a flashy presentation.”

“You think she’s gonna lose?” Leo asked.

“At this rate? Yeah,” Mika said.

A sharp gasp rang out. Anya put a hand to her shoulder. One of her epaulettes was missing.

“You’ve ruined my outfit! And you kicked me in the face!”

Lise straightened up. Her eyes swept back and forth, like she was trying to find someone who agreed with her. “Um…well…I mean…we are in the middle of a fight…”

“You’re gonna pay for that!” Anya screeched. She snapped her whip out, and got it tangled around
Lise’s wrist again.

“Oh, I think it’s time for this to be over,” Lise sighed.

“Yes, time for my victory lap!” Anya grinned and pushed a small blue button on the bottom of her whip. “My whip has this ‘shocking’ little ability!”

Lise threw her head back, screaming. Electricity raced across the whip and through her system.

Anya smirked. “I can send an electric current through it. Unfortunately, it won’t kill you. Product risk, or so my legal team tells me. But it’s still fun to watch you scream.”

“Scream?” Lise’s shrieks turned to laughs. “Oh man, that’s hilarious!”

“Huh?” It seemed the entire audience was just as confused as Anya. Practically everyone was exchanging looks.

Electricity continued to crackle across Lise’s body, making her look demonic. Especially since she was smiling so widely. She was practically made of neon lights. “You call this shocking? One of my good friends fucking electrocuted me to test out a theory of mine. I passed out almost twenty times. So this? This is nothing.”

Lise lifted her leg, wrapped it around the whip, and stomped her foot into the ground. Anya was still gripping the whip tightly, so it was too late for her to regret tying herself to Lise. She flew forward, straight for Lise. All Lise had to do was wait for Anya to be close enough to sink a punch into her stomach. Which Lise did.

Upon contact, the electricity coursed through Anya’s body too. She shrieked and twitched until Lise took the whip away.

Eye twitching, and looking crispier than usual, Anya sat motionless on the ring.

“Okay then, in a ‘shocking’ turn of events, the twenty seconds is up, and Lise Kururugi is our winner!” the MC shouted. “We’ll, uh, also be taking a brief recess between matches to repair the stands. Stay with us, folks!”

Lise rubbed the tiny trickle of blood from her lips with the back of her hand. Despite her protests, the nurses on standby for the tournament insisted on checking her over.

It wasn’t her friends who were waiting right outside the nurse’s office, but Anya. She too was sporting some choice bandages. Her hair still smelled burnt.

“Well,” Anya sniffed deeply, looking down her nose at Lise to the best of her ability. The two women were of similar heights. “You beat me. I have enough honor to acknowledge that.”

Lise smiled at her. “Thanks. You were a tough opponent. I thought I was a goner for a minute there!”

“But you know what this means, yes?” Anya said. She held out her hand. “Upon my honor, I cannot abide by a future loss. You’ve got to win this tournament, or my loss will have been for nothing.”

Lise’s smile grew into a grin from ear to ear. “Deal.” The two girls shook hands.

“Oh,” Anya whipped out a marker and doodled a few digits on Lise’s palm. “And call me.” She
winked, flipped her hair over her shoulder, and strutted out.

Words failed Lise. She stood there for a good minute, face entirely red.

“Hey,” Akiza found Lise, and waved her hand in front of her friend’s face. “Hello? You in there?”

“Uh yeah,” Lise showed Akiza her hand. “And I think Anya just hit on….”

“Holy crap, you got her number!” Akiza gushed, grabbing Lise’s hand. “Yusei is so in over his head.”

“Oh no, Dragon Girl,” Mako melted out of the shadows like cafeteria slop splatting on a plate. He smirked, and tugged on a strand of Lise’s hair. Both she and Akiza curled their hands into fists.

Mako’s smirk grew. He twisted Lise’s hair around his finger. “You’re in over your head. This match is just an excuse to get what I want in front of everyone.”

“Please tell me you want more than just revenge for your dead mom,” Lise said, doing everything in her power to keep her voice level. “Because believe me, that doesn’t change a damn thing.”

Mako’s eyes suddenly turned deadly. He pulled hard on Lise’s hair. “I’m going to show everyone your corpse tomorrow. Mark my words, Dragon Girl, there will be hell to p-“

“Why don’t you go home, and cool off,” Yusei snagged Mako’s shoulder and dragged him away from Lise and Akiza. “We’re going to do the same.”

Mako looked at the three of them, weighing his chances. With a sniff and an adjustment of his jacket, he was back to himself. “Fine. See you all tomorrow.” He turned on his heel and stalked out.

“I really hate that guy,” Yusei growled, cracking his knuckles.

Lise nodded. “I’m gonna enjoy kicking his ass tomorrow.”
Akiza sat with Lise while she got ready for her match the next day. It was tricky to get her arm wrappings on correctly. Despite figuring out how to tie the wrappings with one hand and her teeth, Lise would prefer a helping hand if she could get one.

“You ready for the last day of matches?” Akiza asked.

Lise nodded, putting the end of her wrappings in her mouth while she tightened with her other hand. “Yep, would you help me fold this under?”

“Yeah,” Akiza got up and helped Lise tie the wrappings tightly. She stood back when she had the other arm’s wrappings secured. “You still look good.”

“And everything is comfortable and breathable. This is the best gift I’ve ever had,” Lise grinned at her friend. She flexed her arms experimentally.

Lise still had a few bruises, but she was healing well. If anything, she looked even more fired up than she had the past few days. Akiza took this all in with the eyes of an analyst, now aware of her new abilities. Now that she knew what she was seeing, it was clear that there were three bodies of chi inside Lise. Akiza could see them if she looked closer, eyes narrowed. The fireball of chi brimming with exuberance at Lise’s chest was a swirling yin-yang of red and orange. A tiny pinprick of ocean blue nestled safely between the two other colors.

“You okay?” Lise asked, peering at Akiza. “You look like you’re having trouble seeing me.”

Akiza blinked and shook her head. “Yeah, I’m fine.” She smiled widely. “Let’s get you to the ass kicking of the century.”

Lise slapped her fist into her palm. “I’m gonna knock Mako’s stupid hair off his stupid head.”

“That’s the idea.”

Yusei knocked on the door, pushing it open when he got the all clear. “Dressed and ready to go?”

“Hell yeah.”

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“Are twelve long, grueling battles, it’s time for number thirteen!” The MC announced to the roaring crowd. “Yes, it’s already the last day of the Budokai! That means today’s semifinal matches and finale match-up are sure to be the real show stoppers! Now according to our bracket, the first match is Lise Kururugi versus Mako Cardoso!”

“Woohoo! Yeah!” Leo cheered. He shaped his hands like a microphone and shouted into them. “This is gonna be awesome!”

Carly pushed her glasses up her nose, her eyes alight with their own kind of fire. “I can’t wait for this match. I made sure to have an empty memory card and a fully charged camera to get the best photos.”

“But the whole thing is already recorded,” Crow pointed out, indicating the drones that had been buzzing around filming since the beginning.
“My followers want blog original content,” Carly insisted. Her camera sat at the ready.

“Carly does get good angles,” Jack mumbled, his cheeks a light blush color.

Carly beamed with pride.

Akiza and Yusei joined them, out of breath from racing to their seats so quickly. The twins made space for both teenagers.

“Made it just in time!” Luna grinned. “The MC was just about to bring in Lise and Mako.”

“Excellent,” Mika slid in between Yusei and Akiza with a bag of popcorn. “Would you like me to give you a play-by-play?”

“Is that necessary?” Crow frowned at Mika. She’d made herself comfortable with their group way too quickly.

“Mako might not look it, but he is fast. He’s also good with his hands.”

“Right,” Crow said. He wasn’t quite sure what to make of Mika.

“All right!” the MC said. “First up is the bruiser with lightning fast reflexes! The muscled mad man! It’s Mako!”

Mako stepped into the ring. His brown hair was a little too perfectly windswept, sticking upwards in fluffy hills. He ran his hands through the strands, and shot flirty looks at girls in the audience. His acid green eyes brimmed with confidence.

“And Mako’s opponent is an oldy, but goodie, from the Fortune Cup! She’s not only good with a deck, but with her fists too! She’s your Phoenix Girl, Lise Kururugi!”

“Phoenix Girl,” Yusei nodded, smiling. “I like that one.”

“Hard to tell, from this distance, if she likes it,” Akiza squinted down at her friend.

Down in the ring, Lise was making last minute adjustments to her gear. Once she was satisfied, she cracked her knuckles, spine, and neck. Her eyes never left Mako’s personage.

“Players ready!”

Mako stopped flirting with audience members, and turned to face Lise. He held up his fists and winked at her.

Every nerve in Lise’s body bristled, like a cat preparing to strike. Her eyes blazed. She’d never wanted someone’s blood to be on her knuckles so badly.

“Three! Two! One! Battle!”

The second the bell dinged, Mako was moving at lightning speed. His fist came flying at Lise’s gut before she’d barely registered an attack was coming. He was already zipping away by the time Lise had half a mind to counter.

“What the hell?” Lise whirled wildly.

Mako was so fast, Lise could hardly see him. He made a dozen more passes at Lise, hitting her in non-vital areas. That first attack had taken her by surprise, but now that she knew an attack was
coming, it was easier to block. But she couldn’t keep defending. Eventually the stalemate would end.

Where is he? Where is he?!

Punch to her kidney, and Mako was gone in the time it took Lise to meet him.

He’s too fast! What do I do?

NO.

Lise closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. Focus. He’s using the shundo. Figure out how to stop him.

The next punch came at Lise’s shoulder, but she didn’t react. Instead, Lise tracked Mako’s movements.

Finally; she could see him!

In a flash, Lise saw Mako’s next move. He was going for her other shoulder. She sank to the ground, whipping her leg out into Mako’s path.

The effect was instantaneous, and spectacular. Mako tripped, running straight into Lise’s leg. He fell flat on his face, and skidded at least a foot. His flailing arms and legs added to the hilarity.

“I see Ms. Kururugi has discovered the weakness of the shundo,” Mika remarked, smiling to herself.

“Is that what happened? I can’t even see what’s happening,” Crow said. His head was spinning from vertigo.

Mika nodded knowledgably. “The shundo can be extremely disorienting if you’re not used to it. Ms. Kururugi discovered the weakness of the shundo. You can’t change direction mid-step.”

“Awesome!” Leo cheered. “I just wish I could see what was going on…”

Lise was following Mako, shundo for shundo. They raced across the ring, trading blows like competing bolts of lightning.

“Well,” Mako was smirking. “Many people have seen through my shundo, but no one’s ever tried to match me blow for blow.”

“It’s more fun that way,” Lise countered.

“Guess I’ll have to kick it up a notch.” Mako’s shoes squeaked against the ring’s flooring as he put some distance between himself and Lise.

Despite Lise’s shundo, she was still too late to stop Mako’s powerup. His attacks were suddenly stronger, more forceful. The blowback was forcing Lise backward. She had to up her anti to match him, and avoid getting blown out of the ring.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Did that asshats just take a steroid?! Those are against the rules!” Crow pointed indignantly at Mako. At least he did his best to point at Mako. Most of the time the two fighters were moving so fast, he only saw blurs.

“Crow!” Annie, one of the orphans, happened to be sitting next to him. She put her tiny hands on
her hips, glaring up at him. “That was a mean word!”

“Sorry,” Crow folded his hands in his lap.

Mika chuckled, and ate some popcorn. “It’s not a steroid, although that is a good name for the ability. Normally, we expel our chi, but Mako also draws the chi back into him. The cycle of the chi constantly flowing in and out of his body enhances his muscles. He quickly becomes practically invulnerable, but he does it in stages. Going full Man of Steel from the get-go drains him too quickly. He builds as he goes on, getting his body used to the strain. It’s effective for longer battles like this one.”

“So, steroids,” Jack concluded.

The twins laughed. Carly snorted into her palm.

Crow rolled his eyes. “Great, another arrogant idiot who thinks he’s superman. And I thought Jack was bad enough!”

“Hey!”

Lise sidestepped Mako’s next punch, and side-kicked for his stomach. Mako allowed the kick to connect, pulled Lise’s leg as well as the rest of her, to the ground with him.

The two landed side by side on their backs. Both were briefly shocked, but Lise got over it sooner. Her backfist to Mako’s nose was blocked, as was the backfist to his crotch.

Mako sat up and attempted to roll over on top of Lise, but she spun into a roundhouse kick to Mako’s cheek. The kick helped propel her back to her feet.

_Time to give this a test run._ Lise allowed chi to build in her arms. By the time Mako was back on his feet, Lise already mid-shundo.

“Trump Card!” Lise bellowed, cocking her elbow and fist back. “Chi Impact!”

Orange lightning exploded out from Mako’s back as Lise’s elbow and fist smashed into his flesh.

Dust from the explosive attack cleared quickly. Mako stepped forward, straightening himself out. His muscles rippled, and he cracked his spine.

Lise’s eyes widened. “You’re not even- But how?!”

Aside from the gaping hole in the back of Mako’s shirt, there wasn’t even a single indication she’d hurt him.

Mako faced Lise. His lips were turned up in an arrogant smile. “Nice trump card. Almost tickled a bit.”

“Is he superman now?” Leo tugged on Mika’s shirt.

“Not yet,” Mika shook her head. Akiza leaned back so Mika could talk to Leo at his eye level. Mika pointed at her brother. “Can you see little, squiggly lines that look like black lightning?”

Leo shook his head. “Nope.”

“So, not yet. Trust me. You’ll know.”
Yusei hadn’t been able to take the strain of sitting and watching, so he’d stood up. Now he held the railing in a death grip. “Come on, Lise!”

Both fighters were doing more than matching attacks. They were matching chi in a strange, frustrating, yet violent dance. Like concrete walls bashing against each other repeatedly. Neither gaining ground, and neither any more worse for the wear.

“Getting tired yet?” Mako taunted.

“Shut up!” Lise’s face was red with her frustration.

Mako laughed at Lise’s attempts to hit him in vital areas. “So pathetic! Like a little butterfly I can rip the wings off of!”

“Prove it!” Lise snarled.

She jumped back to the edge of the ring. Orange chi raced up and down her left arm.

“Time to show these people what a real impact looks like!” Mako grinned. His arm did the same, the chi on his arm a bland, grayish color.

“That doesn’t look good for us,” Akiza observed.

“Yes, I suggest ducking,” Mika said. She, the twins, and Akiza, jumped down from the railing to brace themselves against it.

Lise and Mako’s chi attacks collided in a blaze of grey and orange. The shock wave sent them flying. Wind from the wave passed through the audience. Hats were blown off heads. Those closest to the water were immediately drenched.

The two fighters landed on the roof of the stands on opposite sides. Broken roof tiles rained down into the water.

“Where did they-?” Luna started to ask. The shockwave seemed to have cleared. People were standing back up.

“The roof,” Yusei answered. “Lise is above us.”

“Uh…” the MC blinked at the empty ring. “It seems our competitors have vacated the ring! If neither of them return in twenty seconds, they’re disqualified! Still, what an explosive match!”

Lise groaned and sat up. She rubbed the back of her neck. Crashing into the roof for a second time was far from comfortable.

She opened her eyes to Mako racing across the rooftops for her. He moved one arm across his body in a circular motion, two fingers extended on his hand, and then did the same with the other arm. Chi gathered, he snapped his right arm up.

Rolling out of the way in the nick of time, Mako’s chi wave imploded with the rooftop. More tiles were destroyed, and even more fell into the water.

Mako chased after Lise, who had taken off down the roof. “And to think, that smoking crater could have been you,” he sounded disappointed. “But I like chasing my prey. Scared already, little Dragon Girl?” He grinned, and picked up the pace. Like a mouse caught in my trap.

Lise came to a stop at the end of the roof. Her heel nudged the roof decoration, knocking it too into
the ocean. *Not quite.* She changed direction, speeding straight at Mako. She used the same technique Mako had just tried to use on her.

Mako was going too fast to change direction. Putting his guard up just in time, he was blown backwards. His body followed the trajectory of Lise’s attack, sending his back into the sloping rooftop right above the MC booth with an audible oof.

Lise jumped back into the ring with a few seconds to spare. Mako sat up, a wicked grin on his face, and cracked his neck. He rejoined Lise in the ring.

“Seems I underestimated you a bit,” Mako said.

Lise smirked, despite a compliment feeling like slime coming from him. “Most idiots do.”

“It’ll make it that much more fun to kill you.”

“Say what?”

Mako didn’t answer. He was gone.

*Another shundo? But where-*?

A kick in the back came out of nowhere. Lise’s back arched as she fell forward. Next second, Mako was above her, pounding his fist into Lise’s nose. Blood spurted out, warm and red.

“What kind of shundo was that? He just appeared behind her!” Yusei bit his lip. The railing in his grip started splintering.

“A curved shundo,” Mika said. “Used to get behind an opponent, and a bit more difficult than the straightforward shundo.”

“Oh, like turning your runner at full speed without slowing down?” Akiza said quickly. She sounded like she was trying to distract herself from all the blood covering her friend.

Mika shrugged, her face impassable yet paler than usual. “I guess.”

Mako hit Lise again, and she allowed the force of the blow to carry her away from him. She put out her hand, using it to come to a grinding halt at the edge of the ring. With her other hand, Lise assessed the damage to her nose. It hurt, a lot, but it wasn’t broken. She didn’t have time to mop up the blood falling past her lips, and down her chin. Mako was still coming after her.

The barrage of attacks seemed like it would never end. Mako looked like he was getting a sick kind of pleasure batting Lise back and forth like a pinball.

“I drew first blood, Dragon Girl! I’m going to make my mother proud, by killing you in her place! Show me your power so I can kill the real monster you have in you!”

“The hell are you talking about?” Lise growled, avoiding Mako’s next kick. The floor of the arena cracked underneath the force of Mako’s foot, exactly where Lise had been standing just a second ago.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Mako sounded exasperated. He stopped his attacks for a second, gesturing to himself. “I’m Mitka’s son. Son of the rightful owner of the Crimson Dragon’s powers.”

The memory came back to the Signers, Leo, Carly, Bruno, and Lise in a flash. The Dragon Temple. A boy with green eyes, like Mitka’s. Lise had knocked him out. Mitka’s screech of anger
and revenge.

“Holy…” Crow breathed.

“He has some serious issues,” Luna blurted. She realized who Akiza and Yusei were sitting beside, and cleared her throat. “Um, but I’m sure he’s not all bad?”

Mika shook her head. “That idiot. He’s chosen a vengeful path. He never did use his own brain for much.”

A terrible thought had occurred to Leo. “He isn’t really gonna kill, Lise. Is he? That’s against the rules, right?”

“Mako has never cared about rules.”

“We can’t just let the match go on if he’s gonna murder her!”

Mika laughed. It was dry and humorless. “Rules and moral codes are not going to stop my brother, whether the match continues or not. It stops when Ms. Kururugi wins, or he kills her.”

“Damn,” Akiza swore. She clenched her hands into fists. She hated it, but Mika was right. There was nothing they could do. Nothing.

Yusei looked like someone had shot him in the chest. All he could do was watch, and he knew it. Nobody else could beat Mako.

Back in the ring, Lise spit blood out of her mouth. She regarded her opponent with new eyes. This boy who blamed her for the bad in his life.

“Well? Stop stalling!” Mako cracked his knuckles, advancing on Lise. “Show me the power of the Crimson Dragon, so you can answer for all you’ve done!”

Lise cartwheeled away from Mako’s next flurry of kicks. “Ya know, maybe you should try putting your IPod on shuffle! You’re singing the same old song as your mom!”

“Don’t joke about my mother!” Mako snarled. He snagged Lise’s foot in the middle of her kick, and dragged Lise to the ground. He put a heavy boot down on her chest. “But you will give me what I want! Defeating you as a pathetic, stupid, little girl has no honor! I will have my victory over the real Dragon’s power!”

“Whether I use that power or not,” Lise lifted her legs up, and jammed the heel of her foot into Mako’s crotch.

He made a sound like a drowning cat. His hold lessened just a little, but it was enough.

Lise whirled, pushing Mako away from her with her feet. She stood up. Her face looked wild, especially with all the blood, but there was a small, quiet pride in her eyes. “I am the Crimson Dragon.”

With that declaration in the air, she dashed out of the ring. She shundoed behind a column to hide and regroup.

Okay, so you’re fighting a dude who using his chi to make himself invulnerable. Basically superman, but I doubt his weakness is kryptonite. Oh, and let’s not forget he wants to murder you.

“I like to play games, Dragon Girl!” Mako cackled. “But in this game of Cat and Mouse, you’re the
Now I know how prey feels,” Lise muttered.

“Come on! Show me the power!”

Wait a minute. Power! Right now, he’s exuding and absorbing more and more chi by the minute. If I could get him to his maximum and then…! It’s risky, but he’s made it very clear my life is in danger.

Suddenly the column behind Lise shattered, propelling her forward. She rolled from her shoulder to her feet, standing in the shallow water of the oceanside.

“Wow!” the MC gasped. He dabbed at his forehead with a handkerchief. “Um, while this match seems to have taken a deadly turn, it’s… uh… certainly full of surprises!”

“You want surprises? I’ve got plenty!” Mako grinned. He kicked another column, splitting it from its base cleanly. He pulled the column up onto his shoulder like a baseball bat. “In the name of my mother, I’m going all out! That’s the only way to ensure you die for your sins!”

Lise rolled her eyes. “My pleasure.”

Mako swung his improvised, stone bat at Lise. She ran for the ring, and flattened herself just in time for the column to pass harmlessly over her.

“Strike one!” Mako grinned manically, moving closer, and swinging the column again.

Lise jumped up onto the column, and bolted down its length. Her footsteps were loud, but the column was so heavy, and the momentum of Mako’s swing too great to stop. Lise’s feet slammed into Mako’s face at full speed. She backflipped off his face, returning to the ring.

Mako dropped the column, clutching at his bleeding lip and nose. “Now we’ve both drawn blood!” His eyes had that same manic look Mitka had had. Like it gave her great joy, even ecstasy, to inflict pain on her enemies.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!” Lise shouted, ducking the column Mako threw at her. It missed her by inches, landing in the water with a colossal splash. Thankfully, it hadn’t hit anyone in the audience either. Lise glared with renewed vigor. “I am so done with people like you!”

“Oh, really?” Mako chuckled, engaging Lise in close combat.

They traded blows swiftly. Neither reacted much to the hits, and resulting bruises such close quarters fighting usually required.

“Yes!” Lise yelled, using her words to strengthen her fists’ punches. “I’m tired of you, your mom, and my own father being all ‘I stole your power’ or ‘I’m going to pay with my life!’ It’s bullshit!”

She grabbed Mako by his shirt, pitched him over her shoulder, and smashed him into the floor of the ring. Cracks spread out in all directions from the force of the impact.

“This was supposed to be a tournament I entered for fun!” Lise scaled the nearest column, and jumped off of it. “All I wanted was to test my own power! Without being afraid of dying, or some fucking lunatic who wants revenge! It’s all just fucking bullshit!” She came crashing down, gunning for Mako’s ribs. “Cuz I’ve. Had. Enough!”
Mako rolled out of the way at the last minute. Her attack missed him, cracking the ring even further. He quickly recovered, punching at Lise before she could stand up properly. “Pathetic words an insignificant girl can hide behind! I see now I’ll have to tear out that power by force!” He smacked Lise with the back of his hand, flinging her to the edge of the ring.

Lise stumbled against the edge. Her temples and nose ached. Her ears rang, and the bleeding had only just seemed to ebb. She tried to get back onto her feet as her vision blurred. Their fight had been going on for so long. Not much longer and she could be looking at more than a defeat. It couldn’t go on like this.

Mako, unfortunately, recovered much more quickly. He got up, and seized Lise by her hair and neck. He began shoving her head towards the water.

“No. No! NO!” Lise protested. She attempted to elbow Mako in the ribs.

He just snickered until he’d pushed her head under. “It isn’t exactly the glamorous way I wanted to kill you, but if you won’t give me what I want, then I’ll gladly let you die a worthless human.”

Lise’s struggles doubled desperately. She had to get Mako off her before she ran out of air. Hitting him was like throwing pebbles at a steel wall. A minute passed, and the water around Lise’s head was turning pink from the blood.

“I can’t watch this,” Luna sobbed, covering her eyes with her hands. Leo sniffled and hugged his sister. She returned the gesture, neither twin even glancing at the ring.

“Mika, there has to be something we can do,” Yusei said hoarsely. He had to look away, but he also couldn’t.

“Screw just sitting here!” Crow popped up to his feet and marched down to the others who were standing. “We can’t just let this psycho kill her over his psycho mom!”

Mika’s words sounded like she was pinching them out, her throat was so constricted. “Interfering will only delay his wraith. You’re going to have to believe in Ms. Kururugi.”

“She can still win?!?!” Akiza grabbed Mika’s shoulders, shaking the smaller woman so badly the popcorn bag fell to the ground.

“Yes,” Mika said simply.

Finally, Lise’s body stopped struggling. She went limp. Her inner light extinguished.

“There,” Mako sighed, and relaxed his grip. He ran a hand through his hair, grinning wickedly at his handiwork.

Suddenly Lise’s legs shot up and locked around Mako’s waist. She braced her arms against the edge of the ring, and threw all her weight forward. Mako went sailing, head first, into the ocean.

Lise ended her roll, standing upright in the waves. She coughed up water, breathing raggedly, and collapsed, spread-eagled, in a puddle onto the ring.

“Now I know how my soaking dishes feel,” Lise mumbled, coughing up more water.

“She’s okay!” Akiza practically sobbed with joy. “Luna, Leo, look!”

“Yeah!” Carly cheered. “That’s our Phoenix Girl!”
The crowd had been silent before, but now erupted into cheers.

Mika smiled, nodding. “Yes, show her you believe in her.”

“RAH!” Mako roared, silencing the crowd. He emerged, dripping wet, and eyes burning with hatred. Steam practically wafted off his body from the heat of his rage.

Lise sat up wearily. When she saw the murderous look on Mako’s face, she hustled to her feet.

“We’re not done yet!” Mako screeched. The water and earth shook beneath his footsteps. Grey waves of power radiated off Mako like angry clouds. “I’m killing you today, Dragon Girl!”

He threw all caution to the wind and leapt at Lise. She rolled backwards, and kicked him back. He hit the fallen column he’d thrown earlier, and cracked it in two.

At this rate, he’s going to get everyone here killed! But I don’t know how to get him to be still long enough for me to stop him!

Mako took the broken pieces of the column and hurled them at Lise, much like Anya had in her previous match. She punched one of the larger pieces away from her face, but another slipped under her guard and sliced through her side.

Mako’s curved shundo brought him right behind Lise, and her new wound. His fist ground brutally into the new cut. Lise’s scream echoed through the arena.

Mako kicked Lise down to the ground, keeping her there with his foot on her back. A knife unsheathed from the folds of Mako’s shirt. Its blade glinted in the sun. “Stay down if you know what’s good for you,” he snarled.

Lise’s breathing sounded more like short, hyperactive gasps. Everything in her body hurt. Blood still leaked from her personage, at the wound in her side this time, and not her nose.

She clenched her fists, trying to sit up. Stand up? Maybe. Something. She had to keep going. Somehow.

“I’m going to carve out your heart. All these people are going to see how much you can bleed.” Lise didn’t need to see Mako’s face to know he was grinning.

“Come on, Lise!” Luna suddenly shouted down to her. “Get up!”

The others seemed to be shaken out of their collective fog. It was overwhelming seeing Lise come so close to death over and over. It was different than the previous times. Most of those battles were within her, thanks to Roman. Watching in person was terrifying.

Leo cupped his hands again. “You can do it, Lise!”

“Kick his teeth in!” Jack yelled.

Mako hardly realized what he was doing. He found himself at the edge of the ring, closest to where the Signers were cheering. “Shut up! All of you!”

They ignored him and his knife.

“Yeah! Go, Lise!” Crow shouted.

“Get him!” Carly agreed.
Lise’s smile looked more like a half grimace, but she began to pull herself up. Mako was still trying to get her friends to be quiet.

“Little girls are strong too!” Akiza cried.

“You can still win!” Bruno yelled.

*You’ve always been stronger than you think, my love.*

“Hey, Mako.”

The boy turned irritably back towards the ring.

Lise stood there, smiling. She was beaten, bruised, and bleeding. Still she smiled, despite the mess she’d been turned into. “I find it only fair to warn you. If we keep going, I’m not losing. I refuse to lose to a pathetic, mama’s boy with his head up his own ass.”

Mako was inches from Lise in a second. His knife all but forgotten, he grabbed her by the shirt collar, hoisting her into the air. “Quite smiling, you freak. What do you have to be smiling about anyway?” He shook Lise slightly, and remembered he still had his knife to threaten her with. “You used up your trump card, and you’re gonna die! You’ve got nothing left!”

Laughter, cold and dry, came out of Lise’s lips. “You’re an arrogant prick, ya know that?” She smirked. “Nobody else would be stupid enough to drop their guard this close to their opponent, even if they thought they’d won.”

Mako blinked and then looked down. Lise’s hand was plastered to his chest. He dropped his knife in shock, and threw Lise away from himself. “Wh-What did you do to me?”

Lise extended her hand, palm up. At her will, gray and orange chi welled up, encircling her hand. “I took your chi. Not enough to kill you, of course, but just enough to make the ‘Man of Steel’ mortal.”

“Yes!” Yusei pumped his fists victoriously.

“It works!” Akiza grinned, high fiving Yusei.

“Oh,” Lise smirked. “And by the way.”

Mako paused. He was so enraged he had no idea what to do with himself.

“Your chi tastes terrible.”

Yelling like a wounded animal, Mako broke into a curved shundo. Lise responded with the same move. They continued to speed back and forth across the ring like cheetahs playing high speed tag.

*Shit! He’s still fast! Must be from all the practice cycling through his chi! I’ve gotta finish this quickly. I dunno how much longer I can keep this up!* Lise hopped up onto a column to do some quick thinking. *If only I could trap him. Then I could use our combined chi to beat him, but it’s not like I have time to set up a trap.* She pounded her fist into her knee in frustration. Then she paused, staring at her arm wrappings.

“Wait, ten times stronger than steel!” Lise reached for the bindings of her opposite arm. “Whoa!” she exclaimed.

Mako had found her, and taken the liberty of destroying the column’s base. Lise had to jump back
into the ring, but she began unraveling her arm bindings with her teeth mid-fall.

Mako charged for her again, but Lise was ready. She dodged Mako’s punch and swiftly wrapped his arm up in the bindings.

“Hey! What’re you-!”

Lise didn’t answer, but she did wrap up Mako’s leg too. She proceeded to drag him to the fallen column closest to the ring, and tie him to it.

“What the hell? What’s this stuff made of? I can’t break it!” Mako strained and pulled against the bindings, but they wouldn’t budge.

“Good! That’s what they were made for!” Lise smiled as she rolled under Mako’s attempt to kick her with his free leg. She loosened the bindings on her other arm.

Yusei cracked his first smile since the start of the match. “That’s my girlfriend.”

Jack rolled his eyes. “We know, mate. We live with both of you.”

“It’s been hell,” Crow half-joked, slugging Yusei’s shoulder.

Lise finished tying up Mako’s other two limbs. She fastened the bindings and stepped back to inspect her work.

Mako could barely move he was tied so tightly. “When I get out of this-“

“I’m not going to give you that chance,” Lise said. “Time to put your chi to good use.”

She turned away until she was at the edge of the ring. Lise sighed, a long, drawn out sigh, meant to calm herself. She’d made it, and in one more move, she’d beat Mako.

Lise turned to face him. She lowered her stance, raising her fists. Chi built up in her arms, manifesting whirling arcs of grey and orange lightning. In one deep breath, she transferred all that built up chi into her right arm. “Trump card number two; Chi Stealer.”

In one shundo, Lise was right in front of Mako. His eyes were wild, and wide with fear. Lise’s fist collided with Mako’s face at point blank range. He might as well have been hit with a cannonball an inch from his face.

The strain from holding Mako up from such a blow caused the supports Mako was tied to crumble and collapse. He fell to the ground, out cold.

Lise regained her footing, and merely stood there. The only sound in that giant arena was her heavy breathing. Twenty seconds went by and still no one made a peep, not even the MC.

Lise didn’t seem to notice. She realized her nosebleed had slowed down, and rubbed at the lower half of her face with the back of her hand.

When the audience burst into cheers of applause, she nearly jumped out of her skin. Lise looked around like a deer caught in headlights. She did manage to wave a tiny bit, and offer a small smile.

“Okay!” The MC glided into the ring, and held Lise’s arm aloft. “Seems we have our winner! Let’s hear it for Ms. Kururugi!”

Wolf whistles joined the cheering as Lise’s cheeks turned pink.
“No!” Mako had come to. “I was supposed to kill you!”

The crowd ignored him. He was beaten after all. Mako had only been able to sit up, anyway.

“Look,” Lise sighed, extracting herself from the company of the MC. She knelt in front of Mako, making eye contact with him, even though she hated eye contact. This idiot needed to get the fucking message. “You lost. Now is when you accept that.

“I didn’t kill your mom. She chose that fate for herself, and I’m not responsible for that. But you need to examine yourself to find out why the Crimson Dragon didn’t choose you. This power isn’t for killing or destruction. It’s the essence of life, the protector of life itself. That’s something neither you or your mom understood. I’m still learning about everything the Crimson Dragon can do.

“But your mom believed she didn’t have the strength to change. What hurts me the most is that she didn’t have the chance to change, like you do now. Live your own life, away from your mom’s shadow, and get your head out of your ass.”

Lise stood up. She was done talking. Everything that needed to be said had been said. That, and she really wanted to eat something before her next match. She made her way out of the ring.

“There you have it, folks!” the MC was still hyping the crowd. “Ms. Kururugi pulled through for a death defying victory! Mika Cardoso’s match with Rachel Bird is next! Although, due to excessive damages, the next match will be delayed. Stay tuned for the final matchup!”

Lise finally collapsed on a chair in the med tent. Her whole body felt drained.

A nurse got to work on her immediately. The two of them were alone while she patched Lise up for about a minute. Then Lise’s friends burst into the med tent.

“You won!” Akiza squealed. She swept Lise up into a huge hug.

“Crushing me,” Lise grunted.

“Sorry, sorry!” Akiza pulled back to give the twins a chance to hug Lise too.

“We’re just happy you’re okay!” Luna cried.

“And you’re alive,” Yusei added, pecking Lise swiftly on the forehead.

“I like that part too,” Lise laughed.

“Oh man, you should’ve seen yourself!” Leo gushed. He emphasized his words, if you could call them that, with goofy hand movements. “You were like wooshew, bam, whua! And Mako was all like ‘ahhh! Oh no! But I wanna kill you! EEEKKK!’ It was awesome!”

“I have no idea what that means, but thanks, Leo,” Lise laughed. “Can we get some food? I feel like I could eat a horse.”

“I’m paying,” Bruno chuckled a little himself. “My treat.”

“Good man,” Jack clapped him on the back.

“But after all the amazing shots I got, I have no idea how your next match is gonna top this one!” Carly said, excitedly brandishing her camera.
“Let’s think about that once we’ve all got some food inside us, yeah?” Crow said. “Let’s go, guys.”

“Thank you!” Lise grinned. She looked to the nurse for the okay.

“Go,” she said. “You just needed a patch job, luckily. Your nose isn’t broken, but be careful in your next match. I look forward to seeing it.”

Lise smiled, and allowed her friends to take her out to eat. It was weird. The match had been incredibly difficult, and Mako had tried to kill her. Yet it had been fun to fight someone without holding back for once.
“Are you ready New Domino City for the finale of the Budokai!?” the MC extended his microphone forwards to capture the ensuing roar of the crowd. “All right! It’s been a long couple of days, but it’s finally here! In our final round we have two major contenders that more then proved their right to be here!

“Our first contender is tiny, but packs quite the punch! Her hands are practically magic; cutting off enemy power and dropping them like flies! Give it up for the skills of Mika Cardoso!”

Mika waved shyly at her accolades. She’d defeated her last opponent in another epic duel, but she was not generally privy to so much attention.

“Let’s see if my sister can beat the Dragon Girl,” Mako sidled up beside Yusei, and sat on the railing. His left arm was bandaged and in a sling. A patch adorned his cheek from a nasty scratch he’d gotten from colliding with the rooftop.

Everyone stared at him. Mako just grinned, immune to the tense atmosphere.

Eventually, Akiza said; “Her name is Lise.”

Mako nodded. “And quite the spectacle. I’ve never been defeated before.”

“She’s defeated you twice,” Yusei reminded him, refusing to look at Mako straight on.

“Dude, could you, like, leave?” Crow asked, not sure how to phrase his request in a kinder way.

No one present especially cared for Mako.

“And miss all the fun?” Mako turned his attention back to the arena. “I wanted to witness this match with the Dragon Girl’s friends. That’s all.”

“Your Phoenix Girl; Lise Kururugi!” the MC was wrapping up his routine.

Lise joined Mika in the ring. She stretched and thought, coming up with strategies. Her belly was full, and the air practically crackled around her. Lise was ready for a good, clean fight. She never took her eyes off Mika.

“And without further ado, let the match...begin!”

DING!

Lise immediately bent down and slammed her fist into the arena. The newly repaired stage cracked once more under the power of the attack.

Like she had intended, Mika was sent into the air from the force of the rolling impact wave. Lise intercepted her with a shundo, and punched Mika back down to Earth.

Mika rolled out of the resulting crater and righted herself. “I see you’ve picked up on my previous strategies.”

“Running away only works so well,” Lise smiled.

“Time to change strategies then,” Mika too smiled.
Lise cracked her knuckles with a grin. “I was hoping for a good fight.”

The girls collided, their fists slamming together. The shockwave expelled like a fluttering sigh, slowly settling into a steady rhythm.

Mako’s smile had slipped off. A deep pout had taken its place. “The Dragon Girl was nowhere near as enthusiastic for our fight.”

“You were trying to kill her!” Carly cried indignantly. She lost her grip on her camera for a second. The camera would have fallen to the ground and cracked if Jack hadn’t stooped to catch it. Carly was so flustered she almost let the camera fall again when Jack handed it back to her.

“It’s still not fair,” Mako whined, oblivious to Carly and Jack.

“Don’t you have something better to do? Or somewhere else to be?” Yusei snapped at him.

“Yeah, like far, far away from here,” Akiza added.

Mako sniffed. “I have just as much right to be here as you.”

“Whatever,” Akiza rolled her eyes.

Lise and Mika were in the midst of a rapid-fire exchange. Neither of which had managed to land a blow, but where going so fast they’d quickly become blurs. Their hands a swirl of colored chi in all directions.

“Our two competitors are matched at every turn! How will they break the stalemate!” the MC decided he needed to build some suspense.

Finally, the pattern was broken. Mika had whirled out of their hurricane of traded chi punches, and made several quick jabs to Lise’s right arm. Lise had barely righted herself by the time Mika had finished. Lise whirled into a roundhouse kick, and backheel kick, to ward Mika away from her.

Lise held up her arm. She could still move it, but it felt funny. Like the insides were staticky, a lost radio connection. “What the hell?”

“Do you like it? I used a similar technique with Danny,” Mika was smirking.

Lise flexed her fingers, testing the difference. “What did you do?”

“It’s called chi blocking. You’re a strong chi wielder, so you can still move, but I cut off the chi pathways in your right arm.”

“So I can’t use chi attacks with my right arm,” Lise said, her expression hardening.

“For a short while, but that’s all the time I need,” Mika grinned.

“Oh no!” Leo gasped. “If Lise can’t use her chi, then how’s she gonna win?!”

“She can still move,” Luna pointed out.

“I’m impressed though. Mika hasn’t gone all out with her chi blocking techniques in forever,” Mako said. “She must’ve realized she couldn’t win otherwise.”

“Do you know how to chi block?” Bruno asked cautiously.
Mako shrugged. “Just a little. Mika liked it more than I did. I preferred my mom’s style of combat.”

“That explains a lot,” Yusei grunted.

Back in the ring, Lise was a little off balance. The loss of her chi in her right arm was getting to her. Now she was the one dancing away from Mika’s attacks. Mika pressed her advantage too. She was giving Lise no time to breathe, much less think.

On Mika’s next attack she desperately swung her leg out. Mika helped herself to chi blocking Lise’s leg, and didn’t see Lise’s next kick to her sternum.

Separated at last, Lise took stock of herself. *Okay, so you can’t use chi attacks in your right arm and left leg now. How do I stop her? I don’t know how to chi block, and I have no idea how long the effect will last either.*

*What do I do?*

*What do I do?!*

*NO!*

Lise slapped her own face and shook her head.

*Panicking won’t get you anywhere. Focus on taking her out and give it all you’ve got!*

Just in the nick of time, she was ready to intercept Mika’s attack. She blocked Mika’s hands with her already chi blocked right arm.

“Using your body as a shield, I see,” Mika huffed irritably.

“I’d love to hear a better idea if you’ve got one!” Lise joked.

Lise changed strategies entirely. With Mako it was about countering his powerful moves in clever ways, but Mika was the exact opposite. Mika was just as clever as Lise and could also change tactics at the drop of a hat. They were equals in ranged and close combat. However, Mika was the one with the advantage due to her chi blocking techniques. All she had to do was land a blow to a central pressure point, and it would be all over.

Throwing all caution to the wind was Lise’s best strategy. She had to get Mika to use up her chi just as much as Lise had to rely on her remaining two limbs for chi.

Mika’s face was hard with concentration. She preferred her running away style of fighting, but she was clearly unable to do so in this situation. Lise was doing everything she could to pin her back. She’d resorted to using her chi just to fend off Lise’s attacks. She might have only two limbs left to direct her chi with, but it took a lot out of Mika to match her chi’s strength at every turn.

Face beaded with sweat, and red from the exhausting fight, she drew two wooden sticks from her belt. “Not that this hasn’t been fun, but you’re making me mad!” She made an ‘X’ in front of her, and thrust her hands outward in a sweeping motion.

Lise guarded just in time, blown back by the force of the move. “Whoa!”

Mika whirled into the air, sticks spinning dangerously. She planted her feet and thrust one stick right for Lise’s stomach. Lise sidestepped, grabbed Mika’s hand, and crescent kicked her to the
Lise seized her chance and aimed an axe kick down at her opponent. Mika got up and shielded herself, making another ‘X’ with her sticks. She lost one stick, but didn’t let that stop her.

She spun into a reverse sidekick that Lise ducked and countered with two quick jabs. Mika dodged those, so Lise switched to a roundhouse kick with her right leg.

Mika swung recklessly with her remaining stick. The frustration from not chi blocking another limb in several minutes was getting to her.

Lise twisted backwards, out of the way. She used the momentum from her turn to back fist Mika in the face.

The blow stunned Mika. She rolled backwards, and righted herself with the stick she’d managed to keep.

“I hope you don’t mind,” Lise kicked Mika’s other stick up into her hands. “But I’m going to borrow this.”

“Not at all,” Mika grinned. This fight was frustrating, long, and difficult. Also, dare she admit it? Fun!

“Is Lise…having fun?” Yusei asked after another minute had gone by. The stadium crackled with the sound of the girls’ sticks hitting each other.

“I think so,” Luna said, a little surprised herself. But she realized the words were true when they left her mouth.

“She didn’t have that kind of fun with me,” Mako grumped.

“Please,” Jack groaned, rubbing at his temples. “Just go home.”

“Or better yet, go to jail for attempted murder,” Crow muttered under his breath.

Lise ducked Mika’s next downward slice, and blocked downward with her stick in an umbrella guard. Mika’s stick slid harmlessly down Lise’s, and Lise aimed a strike at Mika’s head, who had just enough time to smack the opposing stick away from her.

Mika spun her stick rapidly in one hand. She gripped it in both hands, and attempted to slam the butt of the stick into Lise’s head. Lise bent backwards to avoid getting smacked, and swept her legs out to trip Mika.

She tumbled to the ground, and used her stick to do a miniature pole vault backwards. Lise came at her again, spinning her stick dangerously. She jabbed swiftly at Mika’s head, legs, and her head again, but stepped forward.

Orange chi sparked up Lise’s left arm as she landed a solid uppercut to Mika’s gut.

In just a few seconds, Mika was back on her feet. She rubbed the spit off her chin, still smiling.

“Glad to know I haven’t stopped you yet.”

“Wouldn’t be a decent fight if I gave up at such a little road block.” Lise rested her stick casually across her shoulders like a baseball bat.

“Guess I’ll just have to step up my game,” Mika smiled, and cracked her knuckles. She rolled her
shoulders, gripping her stick again. Green chi crackled over her hands.

The girls engaged again. Just like in Lise’s fight with Mako, Mika and Lise were moving so fast they became colored blurs of green and orange chi. The only indication that anything more than a color war was going on, was the steady thwack of their sticks echoing through the stadium.

“Whoa!” Leo covered his ears. “It sounds like a thunderstorm!”

“And looks like a colorful one!” Luna agreed. She too had her ears covered. “Lise is like a storm!”

“Mika is using quite a lot of chi to keep the Dragon Girl in check,” Mako observed.

“‘In check?’ What does that mean?” Akiza demanded. She curled her hands into fists as if she thought she’d have to beat the answer out of him.

“Like Mika’s chi blocking, she specializes in neutralizing her opponent’s attacks,” Mako explained, taking a condescending tone. “Her chi manifests as an equal to her opponents that essentially-“

“-Cancels out both of their moves,” Akiza finished for him. “That’s why it felt like she was ‘unyielding.’ Her chi style is basically an equal and opposite force.”

“And then regardless of how she uses her chi, by chi blocking she gains a huge advantage,” Yusei finished.

Mako nodded. “Precisely! Especially if her attacker isn’t a chi user or isn’t especially good at wielding their chi. Then she can make them incapable of moving for a short amount of time. Of course, she can do that to chi masters too, but only if she hits a more vital pressure point, closer to the heart, or the center of where your chi is sent throughout your body.”

“Fascinating!” Carly exclaimed, snapping photos like a madwoman. “Mr. Pitts is gonna love this!”

But the girls’ stalemate had to come to an end eventually. Lise misjudged a strike with her stick, and Mika stepped into the opening with a strike of her own. In the nick of time, Lise avoided the brunt of the blow, but the butt of the stick scraped against her cheek.

Mika attempted to follow through with another attack to Lise’s stomach, but she smacked the stick away, snagged Mika’s hand, and brought the butt of her stick crashing into Mika’s chest.

It was a miracle Mika managed to hang onto her stick, but she did. Already she could feel her chest bruising.

She saw the sparks of orange before Lise. Her own chi came to her at her bidding, and the sticks collided so heavily that they splintered, breaking into four pieces.

Lise recovered first. She threw aside her now useless weapon, and roundhouse kicked Mika in the head. Mika’s vision was blurry, but she was able to sidestep Lise’s reverse sidekick.

Now! Mika seized her chance, and jabbed at Lise’s left leg. Lise was a hair’s breath too slow in retracting her leg, and felt the connection to her chi being cut off.

“Shit!” Lise swore, and shoved Mika, using her height to her advantage.

Rolling to the ground gave Mika just enough momentum. She kicked Lise off of her, and got back up on her feet.

Lise did the same in a fluid, almost breakdancing movement. More chi whirled around her left arm,
and she shundoed for Mika.

Not one to back down, Mika mirrored her opponent.

Their fists collided in another shockwave. Smoke billowed out. The impact exploding outward in a violent wave that rocked the arena’s foundations, and stirred the nearby waters unnaturally. Those with hats had to hold them down or else lose them to the wind.

When the smoke cleared both girls were still there. Lise was kneeling, body heaving with the weight of all the energy she had lost. Mika had fallen to her knees. Both girls were bloody, bruised, and breathing heavily, but otherwise still all right.

“How…How long do you…think we’ve been fighting?” Mika asked in between deep breathes.

Lise gave her a funny look. “I dunno. Twelve minutes? Thirteen? At least ten by now.”

“That sounds about right,” Mika nodded. She slowly stood up, and offered her right hand. “You’re a pretty great opponent.”

“You’re not so bad yourself,” Lise laughed slightly in between her wheezing.

“I’ve never been able to go all out before.”

“Me neither,” Lise said. She grabbed Mika’s hand and pulled herself up to her feet.

“So let’s finish this right here and now,” Mika said.

“What?”

Mika’s grip tightened forcefully on Lise’s arm. “You’ve got your left arm still right?”

“Yeah.” Lise’s eyes narrowed.

“Then let’s give it everything we have left. One final attack. All or nothing,” Mika grinned. “Oh, and before you say no, I’ve already used my chi to suture us together. There’s no running away now.”

Lise broke into a grin too. “Who’s running?” She tightened her grip as well.

Mika’s eyes widened, and then she grinned again. “I hope you brought your ‘A’ Game.”

“You too. No holding back!”

“Ready?” Mika cocked an eyebrow.

“Bring it!”

Simultaneously, the girls stepped back, raising their left hands. The gravity in the entire stadium instantly doubled, then tripled. Both Lise and Mika were removing all the stops.

“Whoa!” Yusei held up his arm to shield himself from the ensuing wind blasts. “They’re really going all out now!”

“No kidding!” Akiza screeched.

The twins had dived behind the railing and hung on for dear life. The wind was getting so strong
that the youngest kids had to hang on to something or risk being blown away.

Part of the ring had even collapsed beneath Lise and Mika, the power they were gathering was so great. Chi raced everywhere around the arena in arcs of neon green and bright orange. The colors gathering in the hands of their perspective owners.

“Oh, she’s going to use her most powerful attack,” Mako said, his voice shaking with nerves. Whether he was talking about Lise or Mika was unclear. “I’d suggest finding a large object and ducking behind it.”

“What do you mean?” Bruno looked, wild-eyed at Mako.

“Well, there’s a genuine chance we could be seriously injured here…” Mako had already braced himself snugly against the railing. He hung on with his good arm.

The others followed his example and ducked down as far as they could while still being able to see what was happening.

“Spirit of my soul!” Lise had begun chanting. The chi unfurling from her fingertips beginning to take shape.

“Power of me and power of you!” Mika had done the same. Her chi had started mirroring Lise’s. They continued to chant together, building up their power.

“Answer the call!”

“Answer my call!”

“From the ashes of defeat!”

“Strengthened by hearts of two!”

“A phoenix of dawn!”

“My enemies shall fall!”

“Always rises again!”

“If one does not yield!”

“No matter who I meet!”

“When victory is in reach!”

“My light shall never die!”

“On any battlefield!”

“Forevermore!”

“Then your defenses!”

“This dragon shall fly!”

“Cannot be breached!”
“ROAR! OF THE DRAGON!!!!!!!!” Lise screamed. Her chi had swirled into the form of an orange dragon opening its fanged mouth around her.

“ULTIMATE CANCEL!!!!!!!!” Mika screamed back. Her chi had become Lise’s match; a neon green dragon.

“AAAAAAAAAHRRRRRRRRRRR!” The girls yelled, bringing their open hands, and their beasts forward.

Both dragons collided in an explosion of light, smoke, and wind. Several audience members screamed, and were blown backwards. The light was so blinding that everyone had to shield their eyes.

When the light faded, and the wind finally died down, people started to collect themselves. Crow did a quick head count of all the kids in his care, and breathed a sigh of relief. Each one of them was still there. Carly and Jack disentangled themselves from each other. Akiza made sure the twins were all right. Yusei and Bruno nodded to each other. Everyone was disheveled and a little battered, but okay.

“I’m okay too if anyone was wondering,” Mako popped back up.

“SH!” Akiza shushed him quickly, motioning for him to get lost.

All their eyes were fixed on the point Lise had vanished in the smoke.

“What a ride, folks!” The MC had come to his senses. “The match’s time limit is almost up, so hopefully we’ll be able to see a winner through all this smoke!”

Smoke began dispersing painstakingly slowly. It was so thick, it was difficult just to make out their silhouettes.

The first person to emerge from the smoke was Mika. She stumbled and coughed, but she was relatively all right. She had a few new bruises that already ached, but she was okay.

Lise appeared second. Her cheek was bleeding, and she too was bruised all over. She took a step forward.

*I can still fight. I’m not done.*

Mika raised her fists, ready for whatever came next. But Lise’s next step took her crashing to the ground. Mika gasped, but didn’t lower her fists.

*No!*

Lise grit her teeth and reached forward. Her hand was shaking, and she gripped the ground like it was going to push her back to her feet. She left finger trails in the dust from her struggles.

*Shit! No! NO! I’m not done! I can still fight! I just have to…have to get up! Get up, damnit!*

“It’s not over is it?” Leo murmured.

“It is,” Yusei said thickly. “It was too much. Her body can’t move anymore.”

*Damnit! Move, body! MOVE! For fuck’s sake!*

Lise’s hands clenched into fists. Even that was too much. Her vision was subdued. She wasn’t
going to pass out, but she could barely move another inch.

“She’s done.”

A referee came up to the ring, and put her hand up at Mika. She relaxed and waited for the call. The ref knelt by Lise, gently assessing the damage.

The referee stood and shook her head. It was official.

Lise had lost.

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“We’ll be finished bandaging her up in just another few minutes,” one of the nurses explained. He shuffled his papers around, aligning them. “She should be okay, but she’ll need plenty of food and rest. Oh, and make sure the cut on her face doesn’t get infected.”

“Will it leave a scar?” Akiza wondered.

The nurse shrugged. “Probably. It depends on how it heals.”

“Thanks,” Bruno said, and the nurse shuffled away.

“So,” the nurse from earlier that day poked her head out of the med tent. “Who gets to see her first?”

“We have to take turns?” Leo frowned.

“No, but she seems…fragile…right now. Any takers?”

Everyone kind of side eyed Yusei, expecting him to stand. At least to say something.

Instead, it was Akiza who spoke up. “Yusei, you go.”

“But I thought you’d want to—“

“I handled the tough love stuff when she was working herself to death for this tournament. I don’t think that’s what she needs right now,” Akiza smiled at him.

“Are you sure?”

“Go.”

“All rightie then,” the nurse pulled the curtain aside to let Yusei inside. The ceiling of the tent was half see through so people could still see inside. Curtains marked off rooms. “She’s at the very end, on the right.”

“Thanks,” Yusei said. There wasn’t anywhere to knock, so Yusei brushed aside the curtain with his arm. “Lise?”

She was putting on a fresh shirt. Yusei watched the scars on her back disappear underneath the fabric. It occurred to him that he’d seen both scars, the one on her shoulder and the long scar across her back, when they’d been made. Mitka’s influence had followed them even here in New Domino City.

“Oh hey,” Lise said. She’d glanced at him for barely a second. “I’m ready.”
Yusei shook himself out of his thoughts. “Hey, are you okay?”

“Yep,” Lise said curtly. She’d responded too quickly.

“You’re sure?” Yusei watched her gather her things, his brow furrowing.

“Yeah,” Lise said carefully. She still wasn’t looking at him. “I’m okay.”

Yusei wasn’t buying it. “You’re acting weird.

Lise opened her mouth and then closed it, biting back a response. “I’m not. I’m fine.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

“Am I not allowed to be upset after…?” she trailed off, trying to swallow the lump in her throat.

“No,” Yusei shook his head. “But this is different. Something else is bothering you.”

“What makes you think that?” Lise shot at him over her shoulder. She still hadn’t looked at him once.

“Because…” Yusei trailed off, thinking about it. It wasn’t odd for her to not want to look and be looked at after something like losing the match. What did feel off was… “You’re expecting me to say something that you’re not hearing. What’re you ready for, anyway?”

Lise stopped putting her gear away. “N-Nothing.”

“It’s not nothing.”

“It’s stupid,” Lise sat down on the bed, her back still facing Yusei. She picked at her fingers. “It’s really stupid.”

“Well, I’ll never know if you don’t tell me,” Yusei sighed gently. He slid his hands into his pockets.

“I… you know how you won the Fortune Cup?” Lise began hesitantly.

“Well, I was there so yeah.” A corner of Yusei’s lips moved up.

Lise didn’t laugh, but she did hiccup a little. She spoke again, going faster in the hopes that that would make it easier. “At first I entered the tournament for fun. Ya know, to see how far I’d come. Winning would be awesome, of course. Then I was thinking about the Fortune Cup, another tournament, and that you won that. And then I thought oh cool, here’s my chance! If I won the Budokai it’ll make us…even…”

“Lise,” Yusei gasped. “Oh my god.”

This was, apparently, not a response Lise was expecting. She finally turned around.

Yusei had started pacing back and forth. “I-You-That’s,” he stumbled over his words, agitated that he couldn’t seem to find the right ones. Worse yet, he didn’t want the most horrible words coming out. To be safe, Yusei clamped a hand over his mouth, and continued his pacing.

Lise didn’t know what to do, so she didn’t move. Her eyes followed Yusei’s path back and forth like ping pong balls.
Finally, Yusei stopped pacing. He uncovered his mouth, and ran both hands wearily through his hair.

“First off, you were right. That’s probably the stupidest thing you’ve ever said,” Yusei said coldly.

“Wha? How is it-“

“Because it isn’t true!” Yusei interrupted vehemently. When Lise still looked confused he went on. “Lise… Please tell me. Did I ever say…or-or do anything that would make you feel like you had to prove you were good enough for me?!”

“No! I-“

“Is it the other way around too? Do I have to prove that I’m good enough for you?!”

“No, of course not!“

“Then please,” Yusei took one of Lise’s hands. “Don’t ever do that to yourself again. I’m not going to break up with you over some stupid notion that we both have to be the best at all the stuff we do, or we’re not worthy of each other. You’re always going to be enough for me, win or lose.” He kissed Lise’s forehead. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” Lise whispered. “So much.” She used her free hand to rub at her eyes, but there was no stopping the tears now.

Yusei climbed onto the bed with her, holding Lise as she cried. He drew circles on Lise’s back with his fingertips.

“I wanted to win,” Lise sobbed, her hands clenched in fists. “I wanted to win so…bad.”

“I know.”

“God, this sucks.”

“It does,” Yusei agreed. “But it’s okay to lose.”

Lise laughed a little to herself. “You were right. That was so stupid.” She rubbed at her eye again.

“It makes the top ten,” Yusei said softly. “But if you want me to remind you how much I love you, just ask.”

“I might have to take you up on that offer,” Lise said, lifting her head up.

“Good,” Yusei smiled. “I’ll finally be able to use the list I’m working on.”

Lise produced a miniscule smile, and took a deep breath. “Just ask…” she suddenly muttered.

“You okay?” Yusei frowned at her, hoping this wasn’t a new bad idea she’d gotten into her head.

“Yeah, actually, I am,” Lise hopped off the bed. She pulled one shoe on, impatiently tying up the laces. “When does everyone leave? Where is Mika?”

Bewildered, Yusei remained on the bed. “Uh… after the awards are given out? I think? And I think Mika is with Mako in the competitor’s viewing box? He got third place from the online polls. They were just waiting for you.”
“Perfect.”

“You sure you’re okay? You’re not gonna, like, assassinate her, are you?”

“What? No,” Lise tugged her other shoe on and shot off down the tent without warning. She’d managed to grab her bags along the way.

“Wait up!” Yusei raced after her.

Lise burst out of the tent in a flurry of energy. “Hi guys, bye guys!” She didn’t even stop to give an explanation.

Yusei came tearing after her.

“What is she-?” Akiza started to ask.

“I dunno!” he responded, not slowing down either. He didn’t want to lose sight of Lise for fear of consequences.

Everyone exchanged glances and ran after Lise and Yusei. Lise dodged people with more ease than the others, having had recent experience with avoiding things.

“Mika!” Lise called when she spotted the other girl. Mika and Mako were indeed waiting by the side of the ring for the awards ceremony.

She raised her head and looked around. Mika could have sworn she’d heard her name.

Lise came sliding to a halt in front of Mika. A few seconds later her friends came huffing and puffing to a stop. Most of them sank into seats to catch their breaths. Lise wasn’t even winded.

“Oh, hi,” Mika looked uneasy. Like, she expected Lise to try something heinous in revenge for being defeated. “Can I help you with something?”

“Yes!” Lise’s eyes were glimmering. “Can you teach me how to chi block?”

“Really?”

“That’s all you wanted to ask?” Yusei groaned. “Why didn’t you say so?!”


“No shit,” Bruno wheezed.

“So, will you do it?” Lise turned back to Mika, bouncing up and down with her hands clasped. “Please teach me how to chi block! Please!”

Mika blinked slowly. Then her frown gradually turned into a smile. “Sure! I’d love to!”

“Oh,” Yusei stood up. He’d finally caught his breath. “And we’re throwing a party tonight for Lise. You should swing by.”

“You can’t be serious.” Lise looked mortified.

Yusei grinned slyly. “Oh, I’m serious. Win or lose. I meant it.”

“We all do,” Akiza added.
“Aw, you guys,” Lise gathered as many of them as she could in her arms. The rest squished in.

By the time they went out to accept their awards, Lise and Mika had exchanged phone numbers. And both their smiles were genuine.

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Carly insisted on hooking her camera up to the TV downstairs. She set the TV to scroll randomly through all the photos she’d taken of the Budokai. She also took care of the music.

Except for the kids from the orphanage, the gang had all gathered at the garage. Crow late, of course, from dropping off the kids. Rally, Tank, Nervin, and Blitz had come over, bringing with them even more food. Which turned out to be a smart decision because Satomi, Cyborg, Anya, and Mika swung by too.

Mika came in smiling shyly. She immediately located Lise. “Just wanted to warn you and apologize.”

Lise frowned at her. “What for?”

“Hello, party people!” Mako burst in through the open garage door. The talking stopped for a half a second, then everyone went back to their conversations.

“That…” Mika finished lamely.

“Oh great,” Lise groaned.

“Sorry,” Mika winced. “He followed me, and I couldn’t shake him.”

“As long as he’s civil,” Lise muttered.

“Lise, you looked so cool!” Rally had located her too. “We watched all your matches on TV!”

“Right?” Leo smirked as if he had personally won second place in the tournament as well. “She’s magic now.”

Mika frowned, not understanding. “That was chi, not magic.”

Lise chuckled a little. “That’s just how Leo is. A little over the top.”

“Did someone say my name?” Mako joined the conversation uninvited. He leaned on Lise’s shoulder.

“Excuse me,” Lise said. She pursed her lips, pushed Mako’s arm off of her, and went to grab more food. When she looked back Mika was talking quietly to Mako, who did not look happy about it in the slightest.

“So, Lise, I’ve been interviewing all the other tournament competitors,” Carly said, pouncing on Lise with the dexterity of a puma.

“Of course,” Lise smiled, familiar with Carly’s brand of tenacity. “Is there something you still don’t know?”

Carly adjusted her glasses. An unusually confident grin adorned her face. “Actually, just a few clarifying questions. Did you have four trump cards all along? Are you going to make more? Was Mako actually going to kill you? How does it feel to win second place?”
“I had four trump cards in the works, but I didn’t know if they would work. Half of them were experimental at best. I’ll probably think of more, and some with a combination of my Crimson Dragon power and my own power. Yeah, I’m pretty sure Mako was gonna kill me. He has… issues… Uh…Second kinda hurts a little bit, not gonna lie, but I didn’t back down for a second. And the refs didn’t count me out until I was out, ya know?” She thought for a minute. “Did I miss a question?”

“No, you were thorough,” Carly was scribbling madly over her notepad. “Tell me more about your most powerful trump card; the Roar of the Dragon?”

“Weirdly enough that one was the easiest to perfect. Just, once I conceptualized it, I knew I could use it. Now I know it works with my left hand too. To me the technique is sort of…a physical manifestation of what I feel my chi looks like, so I summon it and shape it, and attack with it.”

“And I got like a gazillion photos of it,” Carly grinned. “This article is going to be fantastic. I see Mika. I’ll talk to you again in a sec!” She hopped over the couch and made a beeline for Mika.

“Now I know I heard my name,” Mako appeared again, trailing his finger up and down Lise’s arm.

“Please don’t touch me,” Lise said curtly.

“I’m not hurting you,” Mako said, his lips puckering in a pout.

“Don’t touch me,” Lise said again. She finished heaping her plate with chips, and walked over to where Bruno and Yusei were talking.

Akiza sat down on Lise’s other side and then Satomi joined them. Luna and Rally joined too, quietly listening in. Tank, Nervin, and Blitz were graciously attempting to entertain Mako. Leo and Carly were still regaling Mika with the amazingness of her matches. Jack and Crow were talking to Cyborg and Anya. Anya was eyeing Jack in a not so subtle way, and he was loving the attention, to which Crow kept laughing and rolling his eyes. Cyborg was a bit bewildered, but he became much more animated with Yusei and Bruno when the subject switched to duel runners.

Their conversations still continued, but Yusei slid his hand into Lise’s. His lips gently brushing her knuckles. Lise’s heart soared. Sure, she was still bummed about second, but her friends weren’t treating her any differently. That little doubt had been a stupid thought anyway.

“Excellent party, Dragon Girl,” Mako sidled onto the couch between Lise and Akiza. His hand cupped Lise’s knee.

“Stop touching me,” Lise demanded, voice hard.

“And get off the couch,” Akiza added, throwing him to the floor by his collar.

Mako shook himself and glared at Yusei. “He gets to touch you.”

“Because he’s my boyfriend!” Lise said incredulously. “And the boundaries of what’s okay to touch has been established after eleven years.”

Mika took her brother’s arm. “Let’s get you some more food, and then send you home, okay?”

“Yes to food, no to leaving,” Mako whined, shooting another glare at Yusei and Lise.

“We’ll talk about it,” Mika insisted, dragging her brother away.
“Well,” Luna spoke up, breaking the silence. “I’m glad my relationship with Leo isn’t like that.”

“We’re not grown-ups,” Leo pointed out.

Everyone laughed, easing away the tension.

“You okay?” Akiza whispered to Lise.

“Yeah, and this is really nice. I just wish so-and-so wasn’t here,” Lise whispered back.

“On a happier note,” Anya was passing out glasses. “I know we don’t really know each other that well, but I had a lot of fun in the Budokai.”

“Me too,” Cyborg said with a grin. He wrapped one massive arm around Satomi. “All thanks to her.”

“Oh stop,” Satomi blushed and waved away Cyborg’s flattery.

Mika came back around the pathway of the glasses, filling them carefully. “It’s soda,” she said when Luna looked concerned.

“Oh good.”

“Aw man,” Leo pouted, crossing his arms. “I wanted to try alcohol.”

“Exactly,” Luna laughed at her brother’s petulant expression.

Everyone held up their glasses.

“To some excellent fights!” Anya grinned.

“To my future wife,” Mako came out of nowhere, draping himself around Lise’s shoulders. “The only woman who has ever defeated me!”

“Bruno,” Lise finally said into the ensuing silence.

“Yeah?”

“Can I borrow a wrench? Biggest one ya have.”

“Um…okay?” Bruno produced a large pipe wrench from the folds of his jacket.

Lise took it, testing its weight in her hands. “Yep, this’ll do it.”

In one motion, she extracted herself from Mako, and whacked him upside the head with the wrench. Mako had barely seen stars before he crumpled in a heap.

“Holy shit, is he dead?” Tank blurted.

“Nah,” Lise handed the wrench back to Bruno, sounding disappointed. “He’s fine, just out cold.”

Jack stood up. “Then I think we should take out the trash. Gentlemen?”

“Oh, yes please,” Yusei grinned and joined Jack and Crow to drag Mako out of their garage.

“I’m glad somebody hit him. Sorry it wasn’t me,” Mika chuckled. Her face darkened. “I’m sorry for bringing him. He’s become obsessed.”
“It isn’t your fault, or your job to control him,” Lise settled back down on the couch. “Maybe he’ll get the hint.”

“I generally don’t hate people, but I really hate that guy,” Yusei sighed, sitting back down on the couch.

He, Jack, and Crow had closed the garage door behind them.

“As I was saying…” Anya cleared her throat. “To the Budokai!”

“To new friends,” Mika smiled shyly at their group.

“Cheers!”
(Oh my god, guys, I have the worst cold ever. I hate it so much! It hurts to brain, but I’m glad I got this chapter out there. Yusei looks extra pretty in it, so it’s a win-win! Thank you so much for your love and support!)

My life was decided over one card. My father and mother lost their lives because of this card, and I nearly did as well. Sherry reminisced to herself.

She and her faithful Mizoguchi were walking through the dark hallways of a rather luxurious hotel under the cover of night. Laying in her pocket, as always, rested the card in question. After everything she’d been through, Sherry never let the card leave her person.

Sherry lifted her head with new resolve. But I’m different now. I’m no longer afraid of death.

Goons when flying. Sherry and Mizoguchi had found the room they were looking for. Of course, such bigwigs always had to have people there meant to protect them. People that were never a match for Sherry.

She approached her target, the seedy executive who had been following her every move for as long as she could remember. Oh, how the tables had turned. Especially since she’d brought the chase to him.

“Why? Why are you here?” The man tried to back away.

Sherry grabbed him roughly by his shirt collar. A slimy, corrupted man, Sherry would have preferred not to touch him, but her curiosity was stronger. She wanted answers. Her eyes were icy, merciless, and she held up the card to the man’s sweaty face. “You’re going to tell me something. What exactly is this card?”

“I don’t know!”

Sherry tossed the man through his glass door onto the balcony. Shattered glass scattered everywhere. It crunched underneath Sherry’s boots exactly the way she intended to crush this man before her.

“Don’t know? You people were chasing me around for this card!”

The man cowered against the balcony railing, allowing Sherry to take hold of his collar again. “Wait! I’ll tell you! I’ll answer you!”

Her eyes narrowed, but Sherry did not release her grip.

“I-It’s true I was ordered to obtain that card. But, I swear, I don’t know who gave the order! Probably someone important! With a lot of money!”

“Is that all?” Sherry lifted the man off his feet.
Feet dangling, and having trouble breathing, he whimpered pitifully. “Y-Yes! If you care for your life, you should stop putting yourself into pointless-”

Grip tightening, Sherry cut him off. “I’m not afraid for my life. I can’t be if I want revenge.”

“S-Stop!” the man protested, but his pleas fell on deaf ears.

Sherry tossed him unceremoniously from his balcony. Screaming like a child, the man fell to his death.

Several floors down, Mizoguchi reached out and snatched the man up by his wrist. Sweat, snot, and tears poured from the man’s many orifices, but he was otherwise unhurt.

“You shouldn’t scare a person like this, Lady Sherry,” Mizoguchi sighed.

He lugged the man behind him like he weighed nothing, scaling back up to Sherry’s balcony without even breaking a sweat. There was a reason Sherry’s parents had chosen this man to protect their daughter. He wasn’t even showing off. He didn’t need to.

Mizoguchi dumped the man beside his fallen bodyguards.

“As I thought, these people don’t know anything,” Sherry said. She crossed her arms, lower lip pushed out. “Looks like we’ll have to analyze the card ourselves.”

“Ourselfes? But we don’t have anything that can do that.”

“No, but there is just one place in town that has the kind of tech we need. A super computer that can analyze anything.” She looked out the window at the building she was referring to, its lights blinking on and off in the dark.

“The Public Maintenance Bureau. Are you serious?”

///

Trudge frowned at his lunch guests, arms crossed over his large form. “I see, so your memory still hasn’t returned?” He, Meena, Yusei, Lise, and Bruno had agreed to meet for lunch that morning in the small cafeteria and café in the Public Security Bureau.

“Yeah,” Bruno nodded. “I can’t remember anything.” He stared down at his mostly untouched food.

“Security wasn’t able to find any clues?” Yusei asked.

Meena reached into her bag. She laid a spreadsheet onto the table, in between all the dishes. “We inputted his fingerprints and photograph into the database, but… there weren’t any files.”

“Oh…” Bruno said. Each category on the info sheet read unknown. He didn’t have anyone. Just photos and basic information on his height and weight.

“We’ll keep looking,” Trudge said. He turned to Lise and Yusei. “Sorry, but can he stay at your place a little longer?”

“Sure, it’s no problem,” Lise smiled at them.

“Thanks,” Bruno returned the smile for both Lise and Yusei. “I appreciate it.”
“While we’re on the subject of Security,” Meena said. “We arrested that boy, Mako, from the
tournament. He was briefly in custody.”

“Briefly?” Yusei raised an eyebrow. “Why?” His smile turned into a deep scowl.

Meena winced slightly. “His sister paid his bail. We released him into her custody, under the
conditions he stay in her residence with an ankle tracker.”

Lise crossed her arms. “Why am I not reassured?”

Trudge raised his hands. “It was the best we could do. The kid is messed up, so he needs his family
more than something that reminds him of why he’s so messed up.”

“Besides, you’re recovering well,” Meena spoke quickly.

“She should be moving around less,” Bruno pointed out, avoiding Lise’s glare. “That’s what the
doctor said.”

“It’s not my fault Akiza had me go shopping with her!”

Yusei scratched at his cheek. “She did have a point though. Most of your clothes *were*
trashed.”

“It looks good,” Meena said, smiling. Her brown eyes were warm. “The red suits you.”

Lise’s new clothes, curtesy of Akiza, were chosen specifically for Lise’s style. Akiza was good.

The top was black, long sleeved, and shoulder-less. Two orange straps had been added over each
shoulder in Lise’s preferred shade. Her new fingerless gloves were red and grey, with silver buttons
adorning the top in a line stretching from the pinky to the wrist. The jeans were a dark blue, artfully
ripped too. Lise had insisted on keeping her usual orange sneakers, so those weren’t new, but her
orange headband was. The real eye-catcher was the new jacket; a collared, bright red, zip up with
long sleeves, and plenty of pockets for Lise’s things and her cards.

Yusei grinned and put his arm around Lise’s shoulders. “Akiza sent me a photo when they were
finished. New screensaver.”

“Oh my god,” Lise hid her blushing face in her hands. “You’re such a dork.”

“And you’re cute,” Yusei said, kissing Lise’s temple.

“Third wheel over here, guys,” Bruno said, loudly.

“Sorry.” Lise and Yusei separated to Trudge and Meena’s laughter.

///

Trudge and Meena had to leave to get back to work. They had insisted rather vehemently on
paying for the bill. The teenagers parted with waves and smiles.

Bruno stared out at the city through the elevator’s glass walls. He wasn’t really seeing it though.

Yusei noticed first. “What’s wrong?”

“When I see the city like this, I wonder… ‘is there someone out there waiting for me?’”

“Don’t rush yourself.”
“Yeah, it’s not your fault you can’t remember,” Lise added.

“The truth will come,” Yusei nodded.

Bruno blinked. “The truth, huh?”

///

Trudge was hard at work in the Bureau. He and several other staff members were answering calls, directing traffic, and reviewing police data for the entire city.

“Hello, Special Investigation,” Trudge responded to his next call. “What is it?”

“A disaster! Someone’s saying they’ve planted a bomb in the Public Security Maintenance Bureau!”

“You sure it’s not a prank?”

“Yes! We’re still trying to locate the source of the call, but…”

“Hey! Hello!? HELLO?!!” Trudge yelled fruitlessly into the phone as the other line fizzled out. A voice came laughing onto the loudspeaker. “It’s just as you’ve heard.”

“Who the heck are you?!” Trudge demanded, getting to his feet. Sweat already dripped down his forehead.

“I’ll be detonating the bomb sometime soon.”

“Don’t say things like that! There’s no way!”

“Then, shall I confirm the truth?”

A blast rocked the building. The lights shut off. Phone lines instantly went dead. The alarm began to sound.

“Give the order!” Meena yelled.

Trudge nodded feverishly, and turned to the other employees. “Everyone evacuate!”

///

Lise, Yusei, and Bruno’s elevator had stopped, and the lights had gone out. The alarm, however, continued to sound. An order went out over the loudspeaker informing everyone of the bomb and to evacuate as well.

“A bomb?” Yusei looked at the ceiling, as if he hoped it had answers.

“Th-This is horrible!”

“And that’s just great. We’re stuck in here,” Lise grumbled. “Well, I guess I can break the door down.”

///

Meena and Trudge had already set up a relief center a block away from the Bureau. All employees flocked to the area like frightened geese.
“Chief! Everyone here has been evacuated,” Trudge reported to Meena. He had swiftly checked in with all the evacuation teams responsible for their employees.

“Understood.”

“What are the demands of the criminals?” A balding man with a short, bushy mustache asked.

“Nothing yet,” Meena told him.

“Director Daly! The person responsible for the bomb has not-“

“Daly! What do you think of this-“

All of a sudden the man was mobbed by reporters, bloggers, and workers. The rest of Meena and Trudge’s crew were running around trying to figure out what to do next, and if they could get any information.

Trudge frowned and scratched at the back of his head. “I feel bad for Director Daly too. Ever since Lazar disappeared, we don’t know where the other directors are. Poor guy.” He crossed his arms.

“Just what is going on here?”

The moment Trudge finished speaking the metal shutters the Bureau was equipped with for emergency situations went down. The whole building was effectively on lockdown.

“Hey! Why are the shutters down?!”

“I don’t know. That isn’t protocol. This keeps getting stranger and stranger!” Meena burrowed through her data, looking for anything with answers.

///

Sherry and Mizoguchi, having successfully infiltrated the Bureau in their disguises, ditched their hats and sunglasses. In Sherry’s case, she unfurled her hair from its tight knot.

///

“And…got it!” With one last wiggle of the screwdriver, Bruno and Yusei finally managed to get the elevator doors open.

“I wanted to break the door down,” Lise pouted as the boys shoved the doors open further.

“You can break the next one down,” Yusei promised her.

“Now we have to get out of here!” Bruno cried.

He, Lise, and Yusei began the race to find the stairs, but stopped. Even in the darkness, they’d been able to see Sherry and Mizoguchi running deeper into the Bureau.

“Isn’t that…?”

“You know them?” Bruno asked, eyes wide. Surprise after surprise today.

“Yeah, come on,” Lise put one hand on the railing and vaulted onto the floor below. She took off after Sherry and Mizoguchi.

“Damnit, I hate when she does that,” Yusei muttered under his breath. “Come on, Bruno.” He ran
for the stairs.

“But wait! The bomb!” Bruno groaned and ran after his dangerous friends.

///

Sherry finished typing into one of the few computers still operational beside the super computer’s room. “Okay, now all zhe locks have been set. Let’s go.”

She and Mizoguchi stepped into the doorway to reach the super computer. They didn’t make it any further.

“Sherry!” Lise called when she came sliding into the room.

Yusei and Bruno came in just behind her, a bit more out of breath though.

“Ah, Elise Kururugi, it’s been a while. Have you decided to join my team?”

“This isn’t the time for that!”

“We have to leave quickly!” Bruno urged, panic sliding into his voice. “A bomb’s been planted here!”

Sherry didn’t seem concerned in the slightest. “Zhat blast was rigged for effect. Zhere’s no bomb anywhere.”

“So it was you?” Yusei gasped.

All three teenager’s mouths dropped open.

“Why?”

“Desolee, but only my teammates are privy to zhat information. I don’t ‘ave zhe time to explain myself to you.” Sherry turned for the super computer’s door.

“Wait!” Lise, Yusei, and Bruno rushed for the door. Mizoguchi blocked their approach with his body. “You can’t just leave after all that!”

“Watch me,” Sherry smirked. Another metal shutter began to lower behind her.

“Sherry!”

Yusei and Lise split up, taking opposite directions around Mizoguchi. Bruno ducked and ran for the door as fast as he could. Mizoguchi tripped Yusei with his leg, and used the majority of his body to block Lise, but her new instincts kicked in. Lise jumped into a roll, that took her over Mizoguchi, and she kicked off his back to roll under the shutters. Frustrated, Mizoguchi threw a screwdriver at Bruno to trip him up too, but Bruno’s trip took him sliding right under the shutters a second before they closed with a snap.

“Forgive me,” Mizoguchi said quietly. “I could only stop one.”

“Bruno! Lise! Stop Sherry!” Yusei yelled through the shutters.

“On it!”

“Leave it to me!”
“Guess it can’t be helped,” Mizoguchi said. “Sherry is on her own now.” He went to the door’s control panel, and smashed the glass. He took out the two green wires hanging there, and inserted them into his duel disk. “But you, Yusei Fudo, I cannot allow to get through.”

Mizoguchi activated his duel disk. The display lit up with his lifepoints: four thousand. The lock inside the door’s control panel lit up with the same thing.

Yusei’s eyes narrowed. “I take it the door won’t open unless your lifepoints reach zero?”

“Yes.”

“Well then, I need to get through,” Yusei walked out far enough that there was enough space to duel. “My friends are on the other side.”

“Duel!”

Yusei: 4000

Mizoguchi: 4000

“I will begin,” Mizoguchi said. “Draw! From my hand, I summon Spirit Summit Warrior!”

(Spirit Summit Warrior: Atk: 1200 Def: 1500)

The monster resembled a wise, old samurai. He had the gear and everything.

“Next, I activate Spirit Summit Warrior’s effect! I can special summon a level three or below warrior type monster from my hand. I summon Liberated Rear Warrior!”

(Liberated Rear Warrior: Atk: 0 Def: 1000)

“But they won’t be sticking around for long. These warriors will tune together to synchro summon… Driven Daredevil!”

(Driven Daredevil: Atk: 2400 Def: 2100)

Mizoguchi’s new synchro beast was a large samurai warrior. A younger man who brandished two blades. “I end my turn with two facedowns.”

“My turn!” Yusei declared. “I send Quillbolt Hedgehog to the graveyard to special summon Quickdraw Synchron! Next, when there’s a tuner monster on my field, I can special summon Quillbolt Hedgehog from my graveyard! I tune level two Quillbolt Hedgehog with level five Quickdraw Synchron to synchro summon… Nitro Warrior! Nitro Warrior attack Driven Daredevil!”

Yusei: 4000

Mizoguchi: 3600

Mizoguchi braced himself against the attack. His monster held off Nitro Warrior’s giant, green fists with his swords. “I cannot allow you to pass! I activated Driven Daredevil’s ability!”

“What?”

“When Driven Daredevil is attacked with a monster that has higher attack points, it survives and destroys the opponent’s attacking monster!”
Yusei watched, powerlessly, as Daredevil sliced clean through Nitro Warrior.

“Next I activate the continuous trap Master and Servant Resolve. When a monster is destroyed through another monster’s effect in battle, the controller of the destroyed monster takes damage equal to its attack!”

From Mizoguchi’s card, a saber emerged. It flew across the room where it stabbed Yusei in the stomach. He grunted from the residual pain, but was otherwise unhurt. Luckily this wasn’t a psychic duel.

Yusei: 1200

Mizoguchi: 3600

“And in order to keep this card in play, I take one thousand points of damage at the beginning of my turn,” Mizoguchi said.

“But you’ll only last four turns.”

“‘By giving your flesh, cut into the enemy’s bone.’ That is the Samurai deck’s philosophy!”

“Such strong resolve,” Yusei muttered to himself. He was already in trouble, and his first turn had only begun.

///

Outside, Trudge, Meena, and several workers were already attempting to get inside. They were using high powered blowtorches to cut a hole in the shutters.

Trudge thought to himself as he watched the team work, tapping impatiently on his arm. After the bomb exploded, there’s been nothing. This has to be part of the criminal’s plan. There’s something seriously weird going on here…

“Trudge,” Meena got up from her work to show Trudge her holo-screen. “Someone’s accessed the Super Computer from inside.”

“What?! But no one should be inside!” Trudge gasped. Then he gasped even more when he realized the same thing Meena had.

She nodded. “The bomb threat was a lie!” She addressed the two cutting through the shutters. “The criminals are inside!”

“Hurry up!” Trudge added.

///

“Sherry, please!” Lise held up her hands, doing her best to project calm with her voice. “We don’t have to fight!”

“If you are going to try to stop me, zhen I see no other choice!” Sherry rushed Lise again. She’d been attacking her nonstop since the shutter had closed.

Lise had quickly pushed Bruno out of the way, and engaged Sherry. Up till then Lise was just dodging, weaving away from Sherry’s attacks. Her patience was wearing thin. Sherry clearly did not want to talk.
“Please Sherry, we want to help you, but there has to be another way!”

“I’m tired of waiting. I want results now!”

Bruno stood by the Super Computer, staring between the two girls. He was sweating like a cornered antelope on hunting grounds. He could shut off the computer? Or try to open the shutter? Should he try to help Lise? He wasn’t much of a fighter, but… what could he do?

///

“I summon Triculer in defense mode,” Yusei said.

His new beast resembled a three-wheeled little machine monster. It’s markings flashing blue and silver in the darkness.

(Tricular: Atk: 300 Def: 300)

“I’ll also set one card and end my turn.”

“My turn.” Mizoguchi drew his next card. “Master and Student’s Resolve effect activates, and I take a thousand points of damage!”

Yusei: 1200
Mizoguchi: 2600

“Driven Daredevil attack Tricular!”

Daredevil’s blades sliced through another one of Yusei’s monsters, but he was ready. “However, when Tricular is destroyed in battle, I can summon Bicular from my deck!”

Bicular was similar to Tricular, but with two wheels. Its paint job was yellow and blue.

(Bicular: Atk: 200 Def: 200)

“I activate the trap Retrieved Blade! During the turn I’ve destroyed an opponent’s monster in battle, I can destroy a monster on your field with a level lower than the one destroyed!”

Another sword cut through Bicular like swiss cheese. Yusei shielded himself from the shards of his destroyed monster.

“In addition, both players take damage equal to the destroyed monster’s attack points.”

Yusei: 1000
Mizoguchi: 2400

“I set a card facedown and end my turn.”

This guy… I can’t keep a monster on the field! I just hope Lise and Bruno are doing better than I am.

A new alarm sounded, and a holo-display opened beside the duelists. Trudge and a bomb squad had cut through the shutters.

“That’s not good,” Mizoguchi said.
“Sherry, I don’t want to hurt you,” Lise’s hands clenched into fists. “But you’re not listening!”

Sherry opened her mouth to respond, but was cut off by her cell phone ringing. She removed the phone from the folds of her disguise and answered. “What’s wrong?”

“Lady Sherry, Security has cut through and entered the building. We should hurry if we want to escape.”

“I understand,” Sherry said. “But I’m having trouble getting to the computer for analysis.”

“But-“

“I can’t give up here.”

“I understand.”

Mizoguchi hung up his phone.

“Do you plan on continuing the duel?” Yusei asked. “Even if you defeat me, it’s only a matter of time before you’re caught.”

“I’m already prepared for that. No matter what happens, Lady Sherry must be allowed to analyze that card.”

“Card?”

Sherry sighed and put her phone back in her coat. “Looks like I need to speed this up.”

“Um…what?” Lise exchanged a glance with Bruno, who shrugged.

“And judging from the strength you demonstrated in your tournament, I can’t beat you. So I guess I’ll have to cheat.” Sherry pressed a button on her duel disk, opening a customized section displaying two, small metal rods that sparked with electricity. She slammed the two rods right below Lise’s solar plexus.

Lise screamed from the force of the blow, but the electricity didn’t bother her. She ground her teeth together and put her hand on Sherry’s duel disk to push it away. “That’s not going to be enough to stop me.”

Sherry responded with a good kick to Lise’s head. She crumpled, and Sherry lowered her duel disk. “Desolee, mon amie, but I have to know the truth.” She leveled a glare at Bruno. “You’re next.”

Bruno waved his hands in front of himself. “W-Wait!”

Sherry came at him with a flying kick, but Bruno managed to step out of the way.

“We don’t need to fight! T-Time out!” He fell to the ground avoiding Sherry’s next kick.

“Begging won’t help you!”
“Stop! You’ll be caught if you don’t run away soon!” Bruno gasped, already out of breath.

“Irelevant. I’ve come too far to stop now,” Sherry bent down and grasped Bruno’s shirt collar.

“Why go so far?” She was still in a fighting mood, but at least she was talking too.

“My parents lost their lives over one card. If I analyze that card, I can get one step closer to Yliaster and revenge for my parents. That’s why I won’t let anyone else interfere!” Sherry shouted, aiming her duel disk’s rods at Bruno’s face.

Something happened within Bruno. His eyes took one look at the sparking electricity coming for his face, and suddenly began to glow. Next second, he was spinning backwards, forcing Sherry to back away from him.

Not intimidated, Sherry aimed another round house kick at Bruno. He caught her ankle, and tossed her away. Sherry recovered quickly, sliding backwards on her feet, but not fast enough.

Bruno caught Sherry by the throat, and aimed a punch for her face. Suddenly, Bruno’s attack stopped. He’d spotted the card sticking out of Sherry’s coat, and retrieved it. He still held Sherry by the throat as his strangely glowing eyes stared at the card held in his hand.

“Return it,” Sherry demanded, her voice hoarse. “Zhat card is zhe truzh I’ve been searching for.”

“Truth… you’re searching for,” Bruno repeated to himself. The light faded from his eyes. He released Sherry, and stood up.

Sherry coughed, able to breathe again. Her guard was still up. Who was this strange man? What had just happened?

Bruno placed the card on the computer’s scanner and got to work.

“What are you doing?” Sherry stood behind him. This time, if he was going to take her by surprise, she would be ready.

“Operating this machine will be difficult. I can do it.”

“You don’t have to,” Lise came out of nowhere, tackling Sherry to the ground. She pinned Sherry’s arms down with her knees, and leveled her fists menacingly. “Bruno, you can stop now. I got her.”

“He volunteered,” Sherry said, her voice rising and falling with her confusion.

“You what? Did I wake up in la la land? We…You’re…I… We’re helping her now?” Lise clutched her head. “What happened?”

“I don’t know myself,” Sherry said. “But could you get off, please?”

“I guess we’re friends again,” Lise grumbled. She stood up, and offered Sherry a hand.

She gladly took it, and smiled briefly as Lise pulled her back to her feet. “Sorry I tricked you.”

Lise shrugged. “It was pretty clever, but next time let’s just talk.”

“Agreed. Speaking of talking, why zhe change of ‘eart?’”

Both girls stared at Bruno. He didn’t look up from his work to respond. “I don’t know myself,
but… I think everyone has the right to know the truth about themselves. That includes me and you.”

///

“So you came here to get closer to Yliaster for revenge?!” Yusei shook his head disbelievingly.

“Please try to understand Lady Sherry’s feelings,” Mizoguchi said.

“If you really cared about her, why aren’t you trying to stop her? Yliaster is dangerous! She’s going to get hurt!” Yusei knew from watching Yliaster twist the lives of Lise’s family that going up against such a threat wasn’t something people could do alone. He and Lise had barely made it out alive from just one duel with Roman. He’d hate to see what Yliaster would do to Sherry.

Mizoguchi’s face was impassive. “If that’s what you believe, then you can’t understand.”

“In that case, I won’t hold back! It’s my turn!” Yusei declared. “I summon Debris Dragon! Using Debris Dragon’s effect, I can special summon a monster from my graveyard with five hundred or less attack points! I’m bringing back Tricular!

Next, during the turn I’ve successfully summoned a monster, I can special summon Turbo Booster from my hand! I tune level one Turbo Booster, level three Tricular, and level four Debris Dragon to synchro summon… Stardust Dragon!”

“Stardust, is it?” Mizoguchi looked only slightly amused.

“That’s right,” Yusei smiled, glad to have his friend by his side. “Stardust Dragon negates a card destroying effect, and destroys it. Now if I attack Driven Daredevil, Stardust will be destroyed, but Stardust negates a card destroying effect, and will destroy Driven Daredevil. As a result, Master and Servant’s Resolve will deal you Daredevil’s attack points, twenty-five hundred, and your lifepoints will become zero.”

“We’ll only know if you try it,” Mizoguchi said. “But what if I stop Stardust Dragon’s effect with my facedown card, and through Master and Servant’s Resolve your lifepoints become zero?”

“So that means it all comes down to this next move.”

“True.”

“Stardust Dragon attack!”

“Trap activate,” Mizoguchi countered. “Pause of the Certain Kill!”

Stardust’s attack still went through, despite the trap card’s activation.

**Yusei: 1000**

**Mizoguchi: 2300**

“I activate Driven Daredevil’s ability! During battle with a monster with higher attack points, it survives, and destroys the opponent’s attacking monster!”

“Not so fast!” Yusei cried. “I negate the effect by releasing Stardust Dragon! Victim Sanctuary!”

“Shame, but while Pause of the Certain Kill is activated, you can’t release cards!”
A ring came out of Mizoguchi’s card, binding Stardust to the field.

“Finish it in one more hit!” Mizoguchi ordered. “Master and Servant’s Resolve!”

Daredevil’s blades attempted to cut through Stardust again, but before they could reach Stardust vanished!

“But how?!”

“Simple! I play the trap Space Jump! With this card, I can remove Stardust Dragon from the field, and deal damage equal to its attack!”

_Yusei: 1000_

_Mizoguchi: 0_

With his lifepoints at zero, the shutters to the computer finally opened. Mizoguchi bowed respectfully. “You may pass, but please be kind to Lady Sherry.”

Yusei paused before going inside. “I never said I was handing you over to Security.”

“What?”

“Let’s go. We’ll have a better chance of stopping her together,” Yusei said, smiling kindly.

///

“The results of the analysis,” Bruno said, staring wide eyed at the screen. “Impossible!”

“It’s a lie! Zhis analysis is wrong!” Sherry insisted.

The screen displayed the card as well as the analysis. Nothing unusual in the slightest. Normal.

“I mean, it is just a card. Right?” Lise said.

“But nozhing?” Sherry shook her head. “Zhen why was I chased all over zhe world for zhis card? That can’t be!”

While the three of them were speculating, the card took matters into its own hands. Bright yellow light suddenly burst out of it.

“Whoa!”

///

What had been a beautiful, blue sky was suddenly darkened by purple clouds and flashes of lightning. The wind kicked up as well.

“What is this?!” Meena looked up in horror at the storm unfolding over the Bureau.

///

“Sherry! Bruno! Lise!” Yusei called out to them, shielding his eyes.

Mizoguchi walked into the computer’s room right behind him. “Lady Sherry!”

Everything was going haywire. Wind and light spiraled in all directions, lowering the visibility
significantly. A dark energy pulsed from the card in waves. It was all Sherry, Bruno, and Lise could do to hold on.

Yusei took off running for his friends. The next second, the light exploded from the card in a massive bubble that swept across the room.

“Lady Sherry!” Mizoguchi screamed. He passed out when the light hit him.

///

Sherry, Bruno, Lise, and Yusei found themselves suddenly in a new place. It resembled a three-dimensional white room that expanded in all directions. It looked like a dimension made of graph paper.

“Where are we?” Yusei asked.

“I don’t know,” Bruno said.

Sherry was just as confused. “We were supposed to be in zhe computer room.”

Lise was the first one to turn around. “Uh guys, we’re not alone.”

The others turned to look at what Lise was pointing at. A metallic oblong shape, spun to face them. At least it seemed that way. It was difficult to determine what the machine’s face was, or if it even had a face. Exhaust pipes and machinery spiraled out of the machine’s center, like a metal snail shell into an up side down arc. The device had an eerily familiar presence to it.

Feelings of dread, fear, misplacement, and being watched washed over all four of them. It was as if this metal thing, whatever it was, was analyzing them.

Before Yusei blacked out, the last thing he remembered was thousands of ones and zeros scrolling past his eyes.

///

“WHOA!” Trudge yelled. What happened?! The super computer looked like it had been burned into charcoal. Lightning, or something just as powerful, must have struck it.

But that was all there was to find; the damaged computer.

///

It was night when everyone finally came to. The lights of New Domino City sparkled across the water. Clouds drifted across the sky. Everything was normal.

“Everyone all right?” Mizoguchi asked. He held Sherry’s unconscious body in his arms.

“More or less,” Lise grumbled. She accepted Yusei’s hand to pull her to her feet.

“Mizoguchi, did you save us? How did we end up here in Satellite?” Yusei wanted to know.

“No. When I woke up, we were all just lying here. Sherry has had a long day, but I am indebted to you, Yusei Fudo. We shall see you all again.” Mizoguchi bowed respectfully, and left with Sherry in tow.

“This is strange. Just what was that thing we saw in the light?”
“I don’t know,” Bruno said. “But maybe that creature allowed us to escape.”

“Creature?” Yusei put a finger to his lips, puzzling over what this meant.

“We should head back home,” Bruno said. He took the lead. “Jack and Crow are probably worried about us.”

They walked in silence for a while. All of them silently pondering what had just happened.

“Lise? What do you make of this?” Yusei asked quietly.

“I’m not really sure. There’s still so much we don’t know about Yliaster.” Lise cracked her knuckles as she thought, and then tugged on her hair when that was through. “There’s something else.”

“Yeah?”

“That thing that we saw in there? It – he - that creature felt like…you.”

Yusei’s eyes widened and he stopped in his tracks. “What?! But I was right next to you! I wasn’t – I would never!”

“I know, and I felt that too,” Lise’s expression was serious, weighted down with the pain her new senses had shown her. She clutched at her head. “I don’t know what that thing was, but it felt like you, but all wrong! Like all the good parts were gone, or patched over, o-or locked away! It felt more like a machine than a person, but that’s just what I felt. I’m sorry, this is so confusing.” She dropped her hands and clasped Yusei’s.

He returned the gesture, squeezing tightly. “The more we uncover, the more questions we have.”

“I’m just glad I’m not by myself in all this mess,” Lise smiled gently up at him.

Yusei returned the smile. “Me too.”

“Guys, please don’t make me a third wheel again,” Bruno called back to them.

“Sorry.” Lise and Yusei laughed a little bit.

Lise held her hand out, and Yusei slid his fingers between Lise’s.

Bruno glanced back again, and decided hand holding was better.

“You want in on this?” Yusei asked, holding up his and Lise’s intertwined hands.

“I’ll pass,” Bruno said. “But thanks.”
Take Flight Part 1

Lise rolled over in her bed. She smacked her lips sleepily, rubbing away some drool. Her clock read just after six in the morning.

She got up to pee. Her eyes were barely open, and she yawned widely.

She closed her bedroom door behind her to go back to sleep, but paused. The bed was empty. None of the pillows or blankets on Yusei’s side had been disturbed since Lise had gone to bed.

“Guess he slept on the couch again,” Lise said to herself, throwing the covers back over herself.

Yusei had slept on the couch for the past three days. He had been working on a few duel runner repairs lately. There was a lot to do now that their engine plan was back in the right hands.

Still, Lise let her hand rest on the cold side of the bed for a moment. There was no warm cheek to meet her palm. She shivered and rolled over, not wanting to face the unusual emptiness beside her.

///

Surprisingly, Crow was up and about. Not on deliveries that morning, but in the graveyard.

The grave of his friend was like any other. Plain, with just a name. Flowers marked the grave as special, thanks to Crow.

“Robert Pearson,” Crow sighed. “Man time flies. It’s already been three years.”

Crow remembered the day like yesterday. Flames everywhere, consuming all of Pearson’s home and hard work. A fallen lantern must have started it. Pearson was pinned under collapsed beams. He was going nowhere. The last thing Pearson had done before he died was give Crow his duel disk, duel runner, and the kids he cared for. If it wasn’t for his friends, and Pearson’s friend Bolger, Crow knew he would have ended up in a much darker place.

He mounted his duel runner, looking out across the waters. Sunlight sparkled on the calm waves, and birds flew overhead. Crow would have preferred Pearson alive, of course, but a grave by the sea wasn’t a bad last resting place.

Crow donned his helmet, and gunned the engine. Instead of switching on, as usual, the display fizzled. It couldn’t seem to decide whether it wanted to be on or not, like a computer that couldn’t settle on its own brightness setting. “That Bruno. He did something weird again,” Crow rubbed his chin. “Geez, I can’t tell if he’s fixing it or making it worse.”

He tried again, and the engine spurred into life. “Oh good,” he sighed. “See ya, Pearson, I’ll be back.” Crow saluted and drove back into the city.

///

Bruno scowled at his computer as he typed away. “That’s strange. Why won’t the engage system work if I activate the decompressor?” He scratched his head and tried something else.

Everything seemed to be working just fine. Except whenever Bruno thought he’d fixed something, something else went wrong. He was getting tired of the droning error message that blared in his face. “What even is this error, anyway?”
More error messages popped up. This team even more insistent, and complete with flashing lights. A red dot kept blinking over the center of Crow’s duel runner blueprints displayed on the computer.

“Haven’t been able to fix it yet?” Yusei asked, yawning a little. He threw the blanket off the couch, and stood up.

“No, there’s something weird about this circuit.”

“Strange circuit?” Yusei rubbed one of his eyes, bending over to see the computer screen too. Bruno pointed to his screen. “It looks like it has something to do with this part, but…”

“That is weird,” Yusei said.

Crow walked in laden with groceries a moment later. He gasped and dropped them all, rushing to his runner’s side. “Hey! Hey! Hey! What are you trying to do this time?!”

“Oh, Crow,” Bruno said. “I was adjusting the program and found a strange circuit.”

“Strange circuit?” He peered over Yusei and Bruno’s shoulders to see the computer screen.

“No matter what I do, I can’t access it any further.”

Crow hung his head in defeat. His mechanically gifted friends never let a mystery go when they’d sunk their teeth into one. “Well, in any case, be careful and try not to break it. If I don’t have Black Bird, I can’t do my job.”

“It’s okay, Crow. We won’t do too much,” Yusei said.

“Shall we investigate it further?” Bruno couldn’t help but smile.

Crow did not like that smile one bit. What had he gotten his beloved Black Bird into? “Let’s look at this part,” Yusei suggested quietly.

“Excuse us,” Trudge greeted. He and Mina had walked through the open garage doors.

“Sup,” Crow responded. Nothing against the two of them personally, but Trudge and Mina never seemed to show up with good news.

“Got a minute, Crow?”

“Uh, sure,” Crow followed the two officers outside. “So what’s this about?”

“The truth is, it’s about Robert Pearson,” Trudge said.

“Pearson?!” Crow’s mouth fell open. “How do you know him?!”

“I was stationed in Satellite a long time, ya know. I picked up a few things.”

“But why now?”

“We have something we wanted to ask you regarding Pearson’s death,” Mina said.

“Okay…”
Mina continued. “Before the accident occurred, we realized that Pearson was dueling someone.”
She pulled a small packet used for evidence gathering out of her coat. “This is the card the
opponent was using during that duel.” She handed the bagged card to Crow.

“We’re looking for the person who used this card,” Trudge said. “Have you seen it before?”

“Blood Mephisto… Never seen it before,” Crow said. He was telling the truth, but the card itself
made his spine go cold. It looked like a wizard draped in black, or a vampire considering there was
‘blood’ in the monster’s title.

Trudge sighed, putting his hands on his hips. “I see.”

“It happened a long time ago, but at one time cards with new effects were undergoing research,”
Mina explained. “Among them were some dangerous cards that could inflict real damage to
players.”

“Real damage? Like in psychic duels?”

Mina nodded. “Of course, research was stopped immediately. However, during the process a few
of the cards were lost. That’s one of them.”

“So that means Pearson was killed by this card’s effect damage?” Crow had half a mind to tear the
card to pieces on the spot. He was quite literally holding the very reason his friend had died.

“In any case, the cards are few in number. If we find the owner of this one, we can find Pearson’s
killer too. We thought you might know something,” Trudge said.

“Blood Mephisto…” Crow murmured, glaring down at the card.

///

Jack smiled to himself. The crisp morning air was a perfect match for his favorite Blue Eyes Roast
coffee at the nearby café. He brought the china teacup to his nose. “This aroma…always so great.”

Crow pulled up beside Jack’s table. Only he wasn’t riding his own duel runner. “Jack!”

“Huh?” Jack paused in his enjoyment of his coffee.

“I’m borrowing this!” Crow shouted. He bolted out of Fountain Plaza before Jack could even stand
up.

“Hey!” Jack glared daggers at Crow’s vanishing back. “That guy, taking my Phoenix Whirlwind!
What’re you planning, Crow?”

“Um excuse me, Jack?” The café waitress said.

“What?” Jack faced her, too quickly, and spilled his coffee all over the cobblestones.

“Sorry…um, more coffee?”

///

Crow sped across the highway. He might not know anything about this card, but he knew someone
who might. Bolger had been Pearson’s closest friend, and he was just a short drive away.

He pulled up to and parked in front of a duel runner manufacturer. Holo screens and
advertisements were everywhere. There were so many visuals and so much noise, all trying to get viewers and listeners to buy duel runners. Crow was only on the outside of the building, but already his head was spinning. Even so, he kept going. He had to get answers now that he was so close to them.

///

Bolger rode in his private car back to his company. Gone were his tattered jackets and jeans he wore in the Staellite. He wore proper business attire as a CEO should, and his glasses completed the look. The only evidence that Bolger wasn’t your average CEO was the fiery colored, small, fauxhawk he sported.

He clenched his briefcase of rare cards in his hands. His usual business partner was getting gutsy. First editions of older cards no longer satisfied him. Now, of course, he wanted the legendary Black Feather Dragon.

A card Bolger didn’t have.

His car was pulling up to the front gates of the company just as his security team was throwing Crow out.

“Let go! Let me go, I said!”

Crow grunted as he was thrown unceremoniously on his rear. “What the hell?! I have business with Bolger!”

“If you want to meet the president, then set up an appointment,” the security guard said.

“No,” Bolger walked into their conflict. “It’s okay. I don’t mind if it’s him. He’s one of my close friends.”

Crow’s face lit up. “Bolger!”

He smiled down at the teenager. “It’s been a while, Crow.”

///

“Sorry about the guards,” Bolger said. He’d lead Crow up to his private rooms. It was the only place he could pour himself a drink. He needed it after such a disastrous deal earlier. “I didn’t expect to see you today. Want something to drink?”

Crow smiled. “No, I’m fine.” He returned his attention to Bolger’s numerous photos of his many accomplishments. “I heard the rumors, but you’ve become quite an accomplished businessman. As expected of the world’s best duel runner maker.”

“Our new test course was finally completed too,” Bolger smiled, chest puffing up with pride. “Our employees worked hard.”

Bolger took a sip of his drink and sat down. “It sure has been a while.”

“Yeah,” Crow put the photo down he’d been looking at and leaned against Bolger’s bar. “Three years.”

“Three years? I see, almost to the day. To think…something so terrible would happen…” He trailed off as both of them remembered that horrible day.
“See, that’s why I’m really here,” Crow said. “We might be able to find Pearson’s killer.”

“What?” Bolger leaned back in his chair, his hand tightening its grip on his drink. “Pearson’s killer?”

“Yeah. Before Pearson was killed, he was dueling somebody.” Crow’s gray eyes searched Bolger’s. He had to have some answers. Crow would take anything at that point. “And they used this card.” he pulled out the evidence bag, placing it on the bar between them. “I thought you might know something.”

Bolger’s eyes widened at the sight of the card. His lips practically disappeared into a thin, white line. Bolger got up from the bar, his back facing Crow.

“You do know something! Tell me; who killed Pearson! Bolger!” Crow shouted at his friend.

“Just forget about it, Crow,” Bolger finally said.

“Huh?”

“What’s the point of finding the criminal now?” Bolger made the effort to look Crow in the eyes. “Even if you did find the killer, would that really make Pearson happy?”

Crow didn’t know what to say to that. It wasn’t like he could ask Pearson. That was the whole reason he was there in the first place.

“More importantly,” Bolger kept going, putting his hands on Crow’s shoulders. “I’d love to have you test my new course.”

“Are you…being serious? About all of this?” Crow pushed Bolger away. “I can’t believe you would say that! That I should forget about Pearson! He was your friend! I get it,” He turned away. “For the successful president, there’s not time to think about the past, huh? I was so stupid for coming here. Sorry to bother you.”

“Crow!”

His hand was on the door handle by the time Bolger finally spoke. Crow stopped.

“Fine,” Bolger said, a hard edge to his voice. “If you’re so insistent, I’ll tell you. But only if you defeat me in a duel!”

“A duel?”

“That’s right. I’ll tell you if you can beat me.” Bolger went to his window, staring out at the city. “However, if I win, I take your Black Feather Dragon.”

“Black Feather Dragon?” Crow repeated. It sounded familiar, but the card had never been Crow’s. “Oh, you mean the one Pearson used? I thought the fire…”

“Don’t try to hide it,” Bolger spat. His gold eyes had narrowed, the kindness from earlier gone. “I already know that Pearson entrusted Black Bird and Black Feather Dragon to you before he died.”

“What are you talking about? I never had that card.”

Bolger sighed through his teeth. “I’ll be honest. I’m in trouble right now because I’m low on capital. At this rate, the whole company will go under. But if I have Black Feather Dragon, I can use that as collateral to gain an investor!”
“Collateral?”

“I know what you’re going to say. You can’t forgive me for using the card Pearson left behind like that, right?” Bolger stopped in front of his wall of pictures, slamming his fist into the wall. “But just let me say this… Pearson was also my close friend, and he was probably thinking the same thing.”

“He was?” Crow glanced at the photos of smiling people with Bolger. Even if Bolger said that, it somehow didn’t feel right.

“Think about it carefully; whether or not Pearson wanted something like that,” he pointed at Crow. “If you still want to know, challenge me to a duel. The location will be my new test course.”

///

Crow pulled up to Martha’s house a short while later. Yusei, Jack, Lise, Akiza, and the twins were already there. Even Carly was there.

Kids were playing on Jack like he was a jungle gym. The self-proclaimed master of faster seemed to be having trouble keeping track of them all, and holding them up by just his arms. Carly sat nearby, using her deck to read some of the kids’ fortunes. Their eyes grew wider and wider with each prediction. Yusei was quietly fiddling with a couple smaller duel disks, obviously kid sized, by himself. Leo and another boy were dueling on an old duel mat by the house’s door. Luna sat nearby to give her brother pointers, and to color with a few other kids in coloring books. Lise was with a few other kids, and what looked like a family of birds. Crow remembered Lise’s bird Stupid, the largest one that was nibbling affectionately on Lise’s hair, but there were others too. Judging by the bright yellow and black plumage, the birds were Stupid and his family. The kids were taking good care of them.

Crow wanted to join in, with any one of them, but he was still lost in thought. Bolger’s words and his challenge had really rattled him.

“Crow?” Akiza came up to him. Judging by the white flowers in her hair, she’d been in the gardens. “Everything okay?”

He hesitated for a half a second. But when he opened his mouth, the whole story came flooding out. Crow even showed Akiza Blood Mephisto.

“Oh no,” Akiza’s expression softened. She knew what a card that dealt real damage could do. “Then Pearson is really…?”

Crow nodded. “He’s dead, but he entrusted me with Black Bird. It was before Kalin was arrested. I was lost and wandering around aimlessly. Then one day, I tried to defend a man being kicked around by some grimy Domino City businessmen.

I wasn’t able to do anything. I couldn’t even help one man. Then out of nowhere, these two guys on the most amazing duel runners I’d ever seen show up. It was Bolger and…Pearson.”

Akiza smiled softly, her almond-shaped eyes warm. “What did he look like?” She asked gently.

Crow cracked a smile too. “Cool as hell. He wore green, his favorite color. He had red hair, but darker than mine. It didn’t stick straight up like mine, but it was messy and, in his face, all the time. Big eyebrows, and brown eyes. He also had a crappy beard cuz he just never bothered to shave the patches.”
“Sounds like a stand up guy.”

“He was. He and Bolger parked between me and the city folk. Of course, they challenged him to a duel. He won with Black Feather Dragon. I never forgot that, or the looks on those idiots’ faces. They ran for it, and that’s how I met him.

Pearson took care of kids in Satellite, like I did, but he also worked to allow those kids to reach their full potential. I believed in him too, and I helped him with his research. Pearson gave me the hope I needed to keep on living.

His dream was to create an engine with parts from Satellite that would shock all the people in New Domino City. But that day, I found him half buried under his burning home.

After losing Pearson, I did my best to keep the kids happy by stealing cards. Bolger’s done so much more though. He carried on Pearson’s will by bringing the duel runner to Satellite. In the end, I’m not so sure I did anything to carry out Pearson’s dream.” Crow clenched his fists. It took everything he had to keep his tears in.

Akiza waited a minute before she spoke. “I might not know what you all went through growing up here, but from my perspective that isn’t true at all.”

“What?” Crow raised his head.

“I’d say you carried out Pearson’s will just fine,” Akiza said. “Look.” She pointed at the kids Crow had been taking care of before they stayed at Martha’s.

“Big brother Crow!”

“What’re you doing?!?”

“Yeah! Let’s hurry up and play!”

“See their faces? Looks like those kids always had some hope things would get better, thanks to you,” Akiza said.

Crow cracked a smile, rubbing his eyes a little.

“I’m sure Pearson loved duel runners, but he cared about these kids more. Just like you. You did the right thing, and you’ve never stopped.”

He took Akiza’s hand. She balked a little at the sudden touch, but let him squeeze just once.

“Thanks, Akiza.” He let her go as quickly as he had touched her.

“Anytime.”

///

That night Crow worked tirelessly on his bike. He, and all his friends, knew he didn’t have Black Feather Dragon. It didn’t matter. He needed answers, which meant his bike had to be in tip top shape.

Crow had to wipe away a few tears when Bruno, Lise, and Jack got to work to help out. Yusei, wordlessly, joined in later.

///
Ashes.

Ashes coated Yusei’s face, his body, and even his tongue. He gagged on the unpleasant taste, spitting it out of his mouth. He stood and looked around.

The city was gone. That was why he woke up in ashes. Skyscrapers had been leveled. The new bridges were rotting, falling away into nothing. Wind blew through the empty streets, rustling the ash.

“My… my friends,” Yusei muttered to himself. He stumbled, corrected himself, and took off at a run.

Shattered glass and debris crunched under his feet. What little was left of the buildings hung open like festering wounds. Bodies lined the streets.

“No… No! NO!”

There in the square lay Leo. Luna was close by. Rally, Nervin, Blitz, and Tank, bloody and lifeless. Jack lay curled on his side, as if he were sleeping. Carly’s glasses and camera were shattered, just like her broken body. Martha and all the orphanage kids were tossed about in puddles of horror, Crow beside them. Akiza and Lise’s hands were nearly touching; they must have been holding hands when it happened.

Dead. All of them.

“No…” Yusei sank to his knees. “How did this happen? Who did this?” Tears streamed down his face. His friends were gone. Forever.

“Who did this?” The same ovular creature he, Sherry, Bruno and Lise had encountered hovered in front of Yusei. Its laugh came out tinny and mechanical. The mechanical monstrosity opened, revealing brown boots.

Yusei kept looking up the figure. A belt kept blue jeans in place. A blue coat over a red and black shirt. Brown gloves and orange accents. Black and gold hair. A mark. Dark blue eyes. Yusei was staring at his own face.

His double laughed again. An unusually cruel smile played across his lips. “Who did this, you asked? That’s obvious. It was you.”

///

Yusei woke with a start. Sweat beaded on his forehead, and his breathing was heavy. It took him a moment to realize he was crying.

He put his forearm over his eyes as he calmed down. He was on the couch in the garage. It was still dark out, but it was a long time before Yusei fell back to sleep.

///

Next morning, Crow showed up bright and early to Bolger’s duel track.

Leo, Luna, Jack, Yusei, Akiza, and Lise watched from the observation deck.

Crow and Black Bird were ready at the starting line. Bolger was too in a flashy turbo dueling suit, and new runner.
“Are you really fine with this?” Bolger asked.

“Of course,” Crow said. “I’ll carry out Pearson’s will in my own way.”

“Fine, let’s settle this, Crow.”

Both duelists donned their helmets. Speed World 2 was set. The second the timer hit zero, both turbo duelists raced ahead.

Bolger pushed a button, and suddenly his duel runner blasted forward. In no time, he was far ahead of Crow.

“What’s with that acceleration speed?” Jack gasped. Even from so far up he could see the duel runner’s incredible speed and power.

Crow scowled deeply. “As expected of the top duel runners.”

Crow gunned his engine, coming neck and neck with Bolger. It wasn’t enough. Bolger’s enhanced duel runner system allowed him to take the first corner with ease.

“Let’s duel!”

**Crow: 4000**

**Bolger: 4000**

“I made it first, so I go first,” Bolger said. “I summon White Warriors: Fog the Treasured Shield in defense mode!”

(White Warriors: Fog the Treasured Shield: Atk: 300 Def: 2000)

“I set two cards facedown and end my turn!”

Bolger’s monster resembled an angelic guard. They had long red hair, white flowing robes, and a large shield. Both the monster and its shield had wings.

“Two thousand defense points?” Crow muttered to himself. “Then it’s my turn! When only my opponent has monsters, I can normal summon this card without a tribute! I summon Blackwing Sirocco the Dawn!”

(Blackwing Sirocco the Dawn: Atk: 2000 Def: 900)

Like most of Crow’s beasts, this monster resembled a giant bird man with blue feathers on its head, and black feathers on the rest of its body. The only human trait was the face peeking out from inside the bird’s large beak.

“Next, this card can be special summoned when there’s a Blackwing monster on my field. I summon Blackwing Bora the Spear! Through Sirocco the Dawn’s effect, I can concentrate my Blackwing’s powers into Bora the Spear!”

Sirocco flew above Bora, blasting him with blue light. The light increased Bora’s attack points from 1700 to 3700!

“All right!” Jack grinned, raising a fist in support. “He surpassed that monster’s two thousand defense points!”
“So naïve, Crow,” Bolger said. “I activate my continuous trap White Out! White Out negates all of my opponent’s monster effects!”

Crow gasped. His monster’s power boost vanished!

“Individually, these monsters aren’t very formidable, but companions call out to each other, and gather strength. That bond is the Blackwing deck’s specialty! And if that’s the case, I’ll sever those bonds! Your Blackwings are isolated as long as I have White Out on the field. Blackwings can’t rely on each other’s strengths, or lend their strength to others!”

“Well, that’s not good,” Akiza remarked.

Crow grit his teeth. Walked right into that one. “I end my turn.”

“It’s my turn. I summon White Warriors: Hall the Iron Hammer.”

(White Warriors: Hall the Iron Hammer: Atk: 1800 Def: 1600)

Like its predecessor, this monster sported white robes and wings. He did, like his name suggested, sport a hammer larger than himself.

“Next, my other continuous trap card Heaven’s Arrow! In the End phase, both players take 400 points of damage for each of their monsters that were destroyed.”

“Four hundred for every destroyed monster?!” Crow knew what that meant; trouble.

“Hall the Iron Hammer, attack Bora the Spear!”

Crow: 3900

Bolger: 4000

“And, when Hall the Iron Hammer destroys an opponent’s monster in battle, it destroys another monster on the opponent’s field!”

“No!” Crow watched, helplessly, as both his monsters imploded into yellow chips.

“And along with the end of my turn, you’ll take the effect of Heaven’s Arrow!”

As Crow looked on, two arrows descended from the sky. They pierced straight through him.

Crow: 3100

Bolger: 4000

“Crow!” Jack cried.

“Shit, I know how that feels,” Lise winced as if she too had been struck by arrows again.

“He uses White Out to sever their bonds, and Heaven’s Arrow for damage,” Akiza speculated. Luna gasped. “It’s an anti-Blackwing deck!”

Bolger and Crow swept through the next curve of the track at top speed. Crow wasn’t regretting the decision to duel, but he was thinking that he got more than he bargained for. In a bad way.

“Come on, Crow,” Bolger smirked back at him. “It’s your turn!”
“Come on, Crow,” Bolger taunted. “It’s your turn.”

Their duel had taken a turn, in Bolger’s favor, that is. He had his two monsters on the field, Hall and Fog. He also had the two trap cards White Out, and Heaven’s Arrow. Crow, on the other hand, had a completely empty field.

“It’s my turn! I draw!” Crow said. He grit his teeth. He had to think of a way out of this mess. This is bad. At this rate, I can’t use my Blackwings’ effects. First, I should destroy White Out. This card will do perfectly.

“I set one card facedown. I’ll also summon the tuner monster Blackwing Mistral the Silver Shield in defense mode!”

(Blackwing Mistral the Silver Shield: Atk: 100 Def: 1800)

This bird looked like your average black bird. If you didn’t consider the large, metallic shield covering the bird’s face and chest.

“I end my turn.”

Bolger smirked to himself. Too easy. “My turn! Draw! I summon the tuner monster White Warriors: Snow the Rope Whip!”

(White Warriors: Snow the Rope Whip: Atk: 0 Def: 0)

Clad in white robes, this new monster sported blue hair and a blue cape. He also carried a long, lethal-looking whip with a blade on the end.

“This card gains 100 attack points for each card on the field,” Bolger explained. “there are seven cards on the field, so its attack rises by 700! In addition, Snow the Rope Whip can attack you directly! Go!”

Crow grunted. The monsters were holograms, but it wasn’t exactly comforting to have a holographic, bladed whip go through you.

Crow: 2400

Bolger: 4000

“Aw man, this is not looking good,” Lise held her fists at the ready. Like she wanted to punch something to get her frustrations out, but couldn’t punch anything.

“Now since a direct attack was successful,” Bolger continued. “I activate Fog the Treasured Shield’s effect! I can destroy one of the opponent’s spell or trap cards. Do it, Fog the Treasured Shield!”

At his command, the monster directed his shield at Crow. Waves of power radiated off the shield, blasting Crow’s trap away.
“Oh no, Trap Stun is gone!” Crow had only Mistral to protect him now.

“Did you think I wouldn’t notice, Crow? How many times do you think we’ve dueled?”

“A duel in which they know each other’s moves well,” Jack nudged Yusei a little. “Kind of like our duels, mate.”

Yusei moved back, away from Jack’s reach. He did nod a little in acknowledgement.

“I end my turn,” Bolger said.

“My move then!” Crow drew his card. “I summon Blackwing Shura the Blue Flame!”

(Blackwing Shura the Blue Flame: Atk: 1800 Def: 1200)

This monster’s avian body was covered in blue and black feathers. Sharp claws and talons gleamed in the morning light.

“I tune Shura the Blue Flame with Mistral the Silver Shield! I synchro summon… Blackwing Armed Wing!”

(Blackwing Armed Wing: Atk: 2300 Def: 1000)

The synchro monster was more humanoid than birdlike. It still had large wings, but also carried a long gun in its hands.

“Good! He was able to synchro summon!” Akiza smiled, some of the tension easing out of her shoulders.

“Armed Wing,” Crow commanded. “Attack Snow the Rope Whip!”

“Monster effect activate!” Bolger countered. “Snow the Rope Whip returns to my hand when it’s chosen as an attack target!”

“Fine!” Crow yelled back. “Then I attack Fog the Treasured Shield! When Armed Wing attacks a monster in defense mode, it increases its attack by 500! Armed Wing can inflict piercing damage equal to the difference between defense and attack points!”

Crow: 2400

Bolger: 3200

“So he managed to destroy one monster at least,” Jack said.

Akiza nodded. “And because of Heaven’s Arrow, Bolger will take the 400 points of damage this time.”

“I set one card and end my turn,” Crow said.

As the card required, an arrow came hurtling down from the skies. This time, it pierced through Bolger, and not Crow.

Crow: 2400

Bolger: 2800
“Bolger, I can’t afford to lose this duel! I have to catch Pearson’s killer!” He had to do this. For the sake of his friend that would never get to see his dream carried out.

“I see you’re determined,” Bolger said. “Then I’ll tell you! My turn! Once again, I summon White Warriors: Snow the Rope Whip! I tune Hall the Iron Hammer and Snow the Rope Whip! I synchro summon… Blood Mephisto!”

(Blood Mephisto: Atk: 2800 Def: 1300)

“Blood Mephisto?!” Crow gasped.

“Blood Mephisto?! Gross! That’s like an emo vampire name.”

“Lise,” Akiza sounded exasperated. “That’s the card that killed Pearson!”

“Oh,” her mouth opened in a perfect letter ‘O.’ Lise’s head swiveled manically between Akiza and the duel, eyes wide. “Oh shit,” she finally said.

Despite the serious situation, Leo had to hide his giggles behind his hand.

Blood Mephisto did indeed look like a goblin had sex with a vampire. Its skinny, bony limbs and long nose were a pale green. It had even greener hair, and beady, mean black eyes.

“Bolger! Why do you have that card?” Crow asked. He didn’t want to believe it. His own friend. There was just no way. Yet the evidence was right there in front of him. “YOU killed Pearson?!”

Bolger didn’t respond. He didn’t need to. One look back into Crow’s eyes was all it took to confirm the truth.

“Why?” Crow choked out. “You were Pearson friend, so why?!”

“Obviously, it was to create the ultimate duel runner.”

“Ultimate duel runner?”

“That’s right,” Bolger said. “As you already know, that was our dream. We stopped our research due to lack of funds. But one day, men from the city came. They’d heard of our problems and came with an enormous amount of money as an investment.”

“Whoa…” Crow blinked. He could imagine what such an offer must have felt like. So close to what you wanted.

“But he refused!”

“He did?”

“Yes!” Bolger ground his teeth together. Just thinking about pushing away all that money made him furious. “Completing the duel runner wasn’t what was important to him. He wanted people to remember his name for becoming a Satellite duel runner researcher!

I couldn’t forgive him! Trying to get himself approved by the city through his work! That’s why, when the time came, I…”

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A younger Bolger, in grungier clothes, yanked the flash drive from the computer he and Pearson
“Bolger! What’re you doing?” Pearson stared at his friend. He couldn’t believe what he was doing. Taking their research like that?

“I’m taking this. If you want to stop me, you’ll have to defeat me.” Bolger activated his duel disk.

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Present day Bolger continued his tale. “I don’t regret it! By defeating him, I was able to complete the duel runners we tried so hard to make! Now even people in the Satellite can enjoy turbo duels! I was able to create the duel runner of my dreams! Even if I’ll be known as a murderer, I’ll defend my actions!

If you understand, give me Black Feather Dragon! I know Pearson gave Black Bird and Black Feather Dragon to you! Give it to me!” Bolger turned back, hand outstretched.

Crow’s grip on his runner was so hard, his knuckles turned white. He’d lost his friend over such a stupid reason! He wiped away the one tear he allowed to fall. “Like I would believe that… I’ll never believe Pearson was that kind of man!” he cried, resolve even firmer than before.

Bolger hmphed and faced his console. “Then I have no choice. I’ll get Black Feather Dragon by winning! Even if I have to do the same to you as I did to Pearson!

I activate Blood Mephisto’s effect! Once per turn, I inflict 300 points of damage for each card on my opponent’s field!”

“What?!”

A red orb appeared in the cruel monster’s hand. It thrust its hand out, and the orb exploded upon impact with Crow. Smoke kicked up from the force of the attack.

“Crow!” came the collective cry of the onlookers.

Crow: 1800

Bolger: 2800

Crow drove out of the cloud of smoke. He was all right, but that blast had been powerful.

“Blood Mephisto attacks Armed Wing! Cursed Blood!”

Blood erupted out of the monster’s mouth. Armed Wing was covered in seconds, rotting away until it was destroyed.

Crow: 1300

Bolger: 2800

Crow screamed from the pain. Mina and Trudge hadn’t been kidding. The damage from the duel was real!

“This is worse than a psychic duel!” Akiza’s hands seized her hair.

“This pain… It feels like my body’s being torn apart…” Crow murmured to himself.
“Real damage? That must be Blood Mephisto’s power!” Jack cried.

“Along with the end of my turn, Heaven’s Arrow activates.”

**Crow:** 900  
**Bolger:** 2800  

Damage was raining down on Crow from all sides. He had to find a way out of the cycle of pain.

“You can still save yourself, Crow. Surrender to me! Pearson wasn’t a person you should risk your life for!”

“Like I would just surrender!” Crow yelled back. “I believe in Pearson!

It’s my turn! I activate Speed World 2’s effect! By removing seven speed counters, I draw one card from my deck! Yes! I summon the tuner monster, Blackwing Kochi the Daybreak in defense mode!”

*(Blackwing Kochi the Daybreak: Atk: 700 Def: 1500)*

Kochi was a sweet looking little birdy. His long snout was trumpet shaped, and the tips of his feathers were black, red, and blue.

“I set one card and end my turn!”

“I activate Blood Mephisto’s effect! If the opponent sets a spell or trap, 300 points of damage are inflicted!”

Another orb came crashing into Crow. At this point, his lifepoints were being slowly, agonizingly, picked away.

**Crow:** 600  
**Bolger:** 2800  

Crow’s screams of pain filled the arena. Even his duel runner was feeling the damage. The back left wing of Black Bird ripped right off, crashing onto the track.

“If that’s what that thing does to his runner, I’d hate to see what it does to Crow!” Akiza bit her lip. She wanted to look away, but couldn’t. She had to make sure Crow would come out of this in one piece.

“At this rate, you’re going to die,” Bolger said matter-of-factly.

“Then do it,” Crow challenged. “End of turn!”

“I see. Then I have no choice. My turn!

Through Blood Mephisto’s effect, you take 300 points of damage for each card on your field, for a total of 900!”

“Crow!”

“Trap open! Downburst!” Crow quickly countered. “I set all face up spells and traps on my opponent’s field to face down!”
“What?!"

“I activate another trap: Delta Crow – Anti Reverse! When there’s a face up Blackwing monster on my field, it destroys all my opponent’s set spell and trap cards! Now the number of cards has been reduced by two! Which means the damage I take is only 300!”

Crow: 300

Bolger: 2800

Bruno’s attention hadn’t been focused on one spot for nothing. Black Bird had been damaged again, and something was stirring inside it.

“Your will to live is persistent, but your lifepoints are but a candle ready to be blown out by the wind,” Bolger said, albeit grudgingly.

“I summon White Warriors: Sleet of the Sacred Flail!”

(White Warriors: Sleet of the Sacred Flail: Atk: 0 Def: 0)

Like the others, the warrior wore a white robe, with a metal wing extending from his back. This warrior donned a purple cape, and a metallic headdress.

“By sacrificing this card, when Blood Mephisto destroys a monster, half of that monster’s attack points are dealt as damage!”

“I hope Crow has a card that can get him out of this,” Jack said.

“I’ll use Blood Mephisto to attack Kochi the Daybreak! Cursed Blood!”

“Oh no, Crow!”

Crow moved fast. He had to, to save his own ass. “By sending Blackwing Jet the Blue Sky from my hand to the graveyard, I negate the destruction of a Blackwing monster!”

“What?”

Akiza breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank goodness.”

“Next turn, it’s over,” Bolger promised. “I set a card facedown, ending my turn.”

“Damn,” Crow sore. If I set a card now, I’ll take damage, and my lifepoints will become zero. Is it impossible to win against Blood Mephisto after all?

“Big brother Crow!”

“Crow, look!”

“big brother Crow, can you hear me?”

Crow looked up to the observation deck. Bruno and the kids had joined his friends. Every single kid he’d ever helped was there. They even had signs they had made.

“We’re cheering for you!”

“Good luck, big bro Crow!”
Crow smiled genuinely for the first time that day. “Everyone…” He closed his eyes, letting the support of his friends and the kids, his loved ones, reach him. Their support was everything to him right now. “I want to protect it! Their feelings, and Pearson’s will!”

Bright red light flared, and Crow opened his eyes. His arm was aglow, bright with the mark of the Crimson Dragon.

A green screen popped open on Crow’s display. Password, Accepted, it read, Code: Black Feather Dragon.

The spectators all gasped. Every screen in the tower displayed the card. Black Feather Dragon was everywhere!

“That’s what it was.” The memory came back to Crow. “He fought for the kids! That’s why he turned down the money! Pearson…your feelings… I never stopped living them! It’s my turn!

I summon Blackwing Bora the Spear! I tune Bora the Spear with Kochi the Daybreak! I synchro summon…BLACKFEATHER DRAGON!!”

(Blackfeather Dragon: Atk: 2800 Def: 1600)

Majestic as it was beautiful, Blackfeather spread its wings for the first time in three years. Steel accoutrements extended out of the Dragon’s lean, metallic body. Blackfeather’s three, white feather tails flapped in the wind. Dark feathers trailed down from the beast’s head, and wise, red eyes peered out from a beak-like snout. Blackfeather’s best feature was its wings. They extended from the shoulders, in two pieces, the first small, and the second larger. Each feather was white and black, lighter than a cloud, but sharp in its beauty.

“It’s official,” Lise smiled at Crow’s new dragon. Her markings across her entire body had lit up.

The marks of her friends, increased the red glow inside the observation tower.

“We have the fifth Signer Dragon!”

“You’ve finally shown yourself, Blackfeather Dragon!” Bolger tossed a nasty look over his shoulder. “but this match has already been decided! Trap activate; Synchro Rivalry! During the turn an opponent’s synchro monster has been summoned, monsters on my field can’t be destroyed in battle!”

“I play the speed spell Angel Baton! When I have two speed counters, I can draw two cards from my deck, so long as I send one card in my hand to the graveyard. I send Blackwing Zephyros the Elite to the graveyard, and set one card.”

“But if he does that, Blood Mephisto’s effect will activate, and it’ll be over!” Jack said.

“Blood Mephisto’s effect activates! When the opponent sets a spell or trap, it inflicts 300 points of damage!”

“Big bro Crow!” the kids cried out.

“I’m not out yet!” Crow smiled. “I activate Blackfeather Dragon’s effect!”

“What?”

“Damage Drain! When damage is inflicted due to a card effect, by reducing Blackfeather Dragon’s
attack points by the same amount, the damage is negated!”

“What? Negating damage?”

Crow’s combo wasn’t done yet. “Next, I can special summon Blackwing Zephyros the Elite in my graveyard by taking 400 points of damage, and returning a card on the field to my hand!”

(Blackwing Zephyros the Elite: Atk: 1800 Def: 1000)

This monster had a humanoid stature, multicolored armor, and large, black wings.

“However, through Blackfeather Dragon’s effect, the damage is negated!”

“It’s attack points went down again,” one of the kids commented.

Bolger’s eyes narrowed. “Just what are you planning, Crow.”

“When Zephyros has been summoned by this effect, it’s destroyed by setting a card,” Crow said. He did exactly that, again taking and negating the damage from Blood Mephisto.

Crow kept on going. Returning the card to his hand, summoning Zephyros, destroying it by setting a card, and returning the card back to his hand. All the while Blackfeather Dragon took and negated the effect damage, its attack points lowering every time. Its wing feathers turned from white to black with each negation.

“By using its body as a shield, through pain, it faces any difficulty,” Bolger spoke softly to himself.

“Bolger, you should have understood! Pearson wasn’t trying to complete the duel runner! He wanted the kids to know that they could do anything if they believed in themselves! They didn’t have to rely on the city for anything! That’s why Pearson refused the money!”

Bolger gasped, watching the attack points of Blackfeather continually decrease. “Could it be…I…made a mistake?”

“That’s right! Pearson said he understood how those kids felt! They lost their parents, their homes, their will to live! They didn’t think they could do anything with their lives! This Dragon is the same as Pearson! They absorbs others’ pain so they don’t have to take it! It encompasses Satellite’s sadness and pain! Just like Pearson, who achieved Satellite’s release by completing the Satellite-made duel runner! That’s why Blackfeather Dragon is flying next to Pearson!”

“Blackfeather Dragon is completely black!”

“Yeah,” Leo agreed. “And with no attack points!”

“Bolger! Blackfeather Dragon’s black feathers are the pain Pearson received from you! You feel that pain as well! I activate Blackfeather Dragon’s effect! Once per turn, I restore its attack points reduced by effect damage to its original, and I reduce my opponent’s monster’s attack points by the restored amount! Black burst!”

Blackfeather Dragon’s and Blood Mephisto’s attack points switched. Blackfeather was at 2800, but Mephisto was stuck at zero.

“Blackfeather Dragon, attack Blood Mephisto!” Crow commanded. “Nova stream!”

Fear clouded Bolger’s eyes at the sight of the attack coming for him. But he lowered his head in defeat. He’d been wrong, after all.
Crow: 300

Bolger: 0

“He won!”

“Big bro Crow won!” the kids cheered.

“Well done,” Akiza said. She hadn’t realized she’d been holding her breath.

Bolger’s runner let out steam, forcing him to a stop. Crow braked right behind him.

“Pearson…” Bolger removed his helmet, staring up at the great dragon before him. “To think that you cared about this kids so much… So it was me… who was blinded by money. I’m sorry…” Bolger hung his head, tears dripping and splashing on his helmet.

“Bolger,” Crow said softly.

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Crow went back to Pearson grave the next morning. This time, he brought his friends.

“Thanks for letting me spend the night,” Lise said. She lay spread-eagled on Akiza’s large, comfy bed. “It was nice.”

Akiza smiled warmly, plopping herself down on her desk chair. “I’m always glad to spend time with you.”

“Me too. You’re the best,” Lise smiled at the ceiling.

“I know,” Akiza grinned, but her expression fell a moment later. “So… is everything okay? Not that I think there’s any correlation, we’ve been hanging out a lot more since I got my license regardless, but you seem…sad? Yusei was kinda distant the last time I asked for help on my calculus homework. We didn’t even end up working on it together. He left me a note with tips after looking it over one night. It just…isn’t like him.”

Lise sat up. She rubbed at one of her eyes. “You noticed, huh?” She sniffled a little bit.

“Hey,” Akiza was next to her in a second. Her brows were drawn tightly together over her warm, brown, almond-shaped eyes. “What’s wrong? Did you two have a fight?”

“No,” Lise shook her head. “I don’t know what’s wrong.” Her voiced warbled, chin trembling, as she tried to hold in tears. “It’s been almost two weeks. He hardly talks to anyone. He hasn’t been eating or sleeping much, and I just know something’s bothering him. He looks like I did when I was depriving myself of sleep, after my powers awakened.”

“All that jazz with your dad?”

“Yeah,” Lise said. “He disappears for a couple hours a day too. I spotted him one day at one of the towers, just looking at the city… Every time I ask him what’s wrong, or if everything is okay, he just says he’s fine. I know he isn’t. I’m not sure what to do.”

“Wow, and I thought he was being a dick to me,” Akiza joked.

Lise half laughed, half choked. “You sound like me.”

Akiza’s warm smile returned. She rubbed Lise’s back while she thought. “The worst part about this, is that I don’t think there’s anything you can do. You two might have some magic mind link, but you can’t make him cough up his secrets. That sucks.” She moved on to braiding Lise’s hair.

“I know,” Lise rubbed her eyes again, letting Akiza take charge of her hair. “I really wanna help him, but I can’t.”

“Not unless he lets you,” Akiza said with a sigh. “I could call Fish to get her to come and kick his ass for you.”

That made Lise laugh for real. Her head jerked out of Akiza’s grasp, loosening the braid she was working on. “Sorry.”

“No worries,” Akiza said. She got back to work. She didn’t mind. Lise’s hair was soft, and could be styled fairly easily.

“I don’t think Fish is the answer,” Lise finally said. “I’m glad you’re still friends with her. Nobody
deserves to feel lonely.”

Akiza made a small hum of agreement. “For now, the best I can tell you is to remind him you love him whenever possible. I know you’ll be there for him. Like you were there for me.” She snapped Lise’s braid into place.

Lise hugged her friend. She hadn’t realized it, but she needed some love and support. “Thanks, Akiza.”

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As the gang watched, five new engines were lowered into their duel runners. Phoenix Whirlwind, Yusei Go, Black Bird, Starfire, even Akiza’s new bike.

“This is so amazing!” Bruno watched every detail. He tried, but he couldn’t stop grinning.

“By using the Momentum System, the acceleration has increased by 150 percent! This is the result of our best technology,” Rick, Bolger’s former right-hand man, explained. “We even inputted Yusei and Bruno’s program.” He gestured to the display before them with a number of graphs and charts. “We tested the new components digitally as well.”

“Now we can use the program to win,” Bruno grinned. “Right, Yusei?”

Yusei hung back far enough to be out of reach, but just close enough to watch the screens. He nodded, offering a tiny smile that quickly fell.

“Is this really okay?” Crow asked Rick. “Isn’t the company in trouble after Bolger went to jail?”

“Well yeah,” Rick admitted. He adjusted his suit. “Our president is in prison, however he left us strict instructions to help you out to try to make up for his actions.”

“Didn’t he leave in shame?” Jack said. “He’s probably not coming back, right?”


Rick shook his head. “It’s fine. It’s true, Bolger probably won’t come back. Nobody hates him here, though. Everyone knows the President loved duel runners from the bottom of his heart. Until the mistakes of the past are corrected, we’ll protect this company.”

“I see,” Crow smiled. “Thank you, Rick.” He held out his hand. “We’re that much closer to achieving our dream.”

“Our pleasure.” Rick and Crow shook amicably, as friends.

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“Good thing our bikes are ready in time for the practice runs,” Crow said. “We can have everyone test their new horsepower.”

Lise and Akiza shared a look. “Us too?”

“Of course! You’re on the team too,” Jack scoffed in a how-dare-you-suggest-such-a-thing kind of way.

“Guys!” The twins were waving to their friends from one of the many rosters posted outside the practice arenas.
“Thanks for inviting us,” Luna said.

“The preliminary rounds are up already!” Leo pointed at the chart. He was practically bouncing up and down. Duelists and duel runners were everywhere. It was like being in a dream.

“They’re like a league,” Luna observed.

Akiza nodded. “There are 32 teams participating in total. There are eight blocks, and the ones in each block compete in the league. The ones who advance are the top two in each league. The sixteen teams left play out the tournament.”

“There are four teams in each block,” Bruno said. “So, if you advance, it’s like you’re in the semi-finals.”

“Looks like you’ll face Team Unicorn,” Leo pointed at the screen. “In the first block, and in the first round!”

“They won the Atlantis tournament,” Jack said huffily, crossing his arms. “People seem to want them to win, but they’re not so tough.”

“That’s some rough luck,” Leo sighed.

“But we’ll win!” Jack clenched a fist dramatically. “We’ll defeat anyone standing in our way!”

“He’s right. It’s a tournament, so we were bound to face strong opponents sooner or later,” Crow shrugged. “It just happened to be sooner, rather than later.”

“I guess,” Leo grumbled, folding his arms too.

“It’s almost our time to practice,” Bruno noticed. “We should go.”

“Last one there washes dishes for a week!” Lise cried, bolting down the hallway.

“No fair!” Crow complained, racing after her.

“Yeah! No shundo!” Akiza agreed.

Bruno and the twins laughed at their friends. Their enthusiasm was contagious, mostly. Yusei took up the rear of the group going out to practice, quiet and somber.

“Let’s go to the stands to watch,” Bruno suggested.

The twins nodded emphatically.

///

The three of them made it to the stands just in time. “From now on, this lane will be used by Team…Temporary Name Jack Atlas and…Friends… for practice…” The announcement said. “Other teams, please leave the practice lanes.”

Leo’s lip curled. “Ew, why is that the name?”

Bruno scratched at his head. “Uh…well we had to submit a temporary name for the time being. We need to get a lot more done, but in hindsight, letting Jack pick our placeholder name was not a good idea.”
“No kidding,” Luna giggled. She paused, pointing at a familiar personage at the road below. “Is that Trudge?”

“It is! Let’s go say hi!” Leo ran down the steps. Luna and Bruno didn’t have much choice but to follow him.

“Trudge!”

“Oh hey,” Trudge smiled at the unusual trio. “You here to support your team?”

“Yes.”

“What’re you doing here in your old uniform?” Leo asked.

“Just look,” Trudge pointed his chin at the twisting and turning practice lanes. “Every lane is busy with practice runs. They rotate each team out every half hour or so, but they won’t be able to use autopilot in this tournament. I’m wearing this uniform in case of an accident.”

“Oh.”

“I see,” Bruno said, nodding kindly.

“Look, they’re coming out!” Luna pointed.

First Jack came rolling out, with a signature cocky grin. He happened to like their temporary name, thank you very much. Lise and Crow had no business chewing him out for being an egotistical idiot.

Crow, Yusei, Lise, and Akiza came quickly out behind him. They waved to Bruno and the twins as they passed by.

“Wow!” Akiza’s eyes and grin were wide. “This is so amazing!”

“Almost like flying!” Lise couldn’t help it. She spread her arms, coasting forward for a good ten seconds.

Jack nodded. “The acceleration is better.”

“I really am Crow the Bullet!”

Even Yusei couldn’t help cracking a tiny smile. The wind and speed always felt perfect. Good for his soul.

Lise smiled when she caught Yusei’s brighter expression. It was the happiest he’d looked in days. She’d missed the light in his dark blue eyes. She missed him more than she could say, but, for the time being, she rode on into the wind with her friends.

All too soon, their thirty minutes was up. The announcer told the turbo duelists they had only a minute to exit for the next team.

“Aw man, already?” Lise complained, slumping against her duel runner.

“Yeah, I can’t get enough of that wind.” Akiza breathed in deeply, her face the picture of serenity.

“Come on, practice is over,” Jack said.
“Can’t I just take another lap?” Crow begged. His fingers inched for the accelerator.

“As much as I want to too, we shouldn’t,” Akiza said. “Thirty-two teams need to practice.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Crow grumbled, pulling his fingers back.

All five turbo duelists parked back in the hangar they’d emerged from.

“That was so fun! I just want to keep riding around the city forever!” Akiza gushed.

“Hell yeah!” Crow raised his fist. “We’ve got the best runners in the city! We just need new riding suits, and a way better team name.”

“What’s wrong with the name?” Jack sniffed, crossing his arms defensively.


///

One of the teams had been watching the entire time, hidden in the shadows. Compiled with the ridiculous team name and how cute the duelists had been with their new toys, they couldn’t help but laugh.

“What fearsome opponents, huh?”

“They’re enjoying themselves a little too much. I don’t think they’ve felt real fear yet.”

“Someday, they’ll meet true fear.”

///

Akiza stood at the ready with her stopwatch. The seconds ticked by quickly.

The WRGP was fast approaching. Crow and Jack had recommended Lise and Akiza practice. The two of them were the most novice team members. Best case scenario, neither of them would have to duel. It never hurt to be prepared though.

Lise skidded to a halt past Akiza. “How was that?” She drove back up to her friend, and parked.

“Best time yet,” Akiza showed her the stopwatch.

“Looks like you’re working ‘ard,” Sherry’s voice called. She pulled up right beside Lise’s runner.

“Sherry!” Akiza gasped. She could feel her cheeks getting warm.

Sherry grinned at the two other girls. She pushed her visor back to talk freely. “We’re in different blocks, so I came to say ‘Salut,’ because we won’t be meeting each other in the preliminaries.”

“So, you’re participating after all?” Akiza knew Lise hadn’t exactly agreed to be the third member of Sherry’s team.

“Zhere are some dangerous people participating,” Sherry said. Her expression had darkened significantly. “I’m worried zhey could be people ‘ired by Yliaster. It’s a good idea to be careful.”

Lise laughed a little. “That’s kinda rich, coming from you.”

Sherry smirked, quirking one of her eyebrows up. “What can I say? I’m a dangerous woman. Zhis
is somethin I ‘ave to do. Alzough, we should talk more later. About zhat zhing we saw.”

“What?” Akiza’s eyes were like pinballs bouncing back and forth. Neither Shery nor Lise gave her any hints.

Lise’s blood went cold. She clenched her hands into fists. That thing that felt like Yusei, but wasn’t Yusei. It’s presence was chilling, like it didn’t belong.

“Anyway,” Sherry waved away the topic like she’d merely brought up the weather. She popped an ollie, looking like a knight on a bucking horse as she did so. “Stay safe until the preliminaries, Elise. Au revoir!”

Without another word, she drove away faster than she had arrived.

“Show off,” Akiza mumbled under her breath.

“Sure you’re not just jealous?” Lise teased. She pumped her eyebrows up and down.

“Stop that,” Akiza giggled a little. “My turn now.”

///

“Martha!” Crow waved cheerfully at his foster mother. “Jack and I decided to visit you.” He carried groceries. Now that he could afford it, he never showed up to Martha’s place without bringing something to help.


“Where’s everyone else?” Blister asked. Martha had insisted the boys stay for a cup of tea.

“Lise and Akiza are practicing, Bruno took the twins home, and we don’t really know what Yusei’s been up to these days,” Crow said.

Jack held his tea like the king he was. “Probably testing his engine, again, instead of accepting Martha’s invitation to see her before the tournament.”

“I hear he, Crow, and Lise are all doing well at their jobs,” Martha was having none of that nonsense. “I heard from Zora, you don’t lift a finger anywhere!”

Jack nearly choked on his tea. He set the cup and saucer down, and crossed his arms. He also stuck his nose in the air, but didn’t make eye contact. “I have no comment regarding that subject.”

Crow laughed. Against Martha, none of them had any defense. “Hey, where are the kids? Did they go somewhere today?”

“Hey kids!” Martha called to the door she knew was cracked just a tiny bit. “Come in.”

The tallest boy nodded and pushed the door open. He, two other boys, and two girls, including little Annie, did as they were told. Judging by their smiles, they were happy to do so.

“Hey kids,” Crow got up to talk to them. “Aren’t you going to say hi to your big bro?”

The kids shuffled around, instead of responding with the usual jibes Crow expected. When they were finished, they’d unfurled a banner they’d made themselves. In crayon, they’d drawn Crow riding his duel runner to victory.
“This is… you guys made this?” Crow didn’t know what else to say.

“They did,” Martha nodded, a proud smile upon her face. “They went through a lot of trouble to finish it for you.”

“We’re gonna bring this to the WRGP to cheer you on!” Annie said, her face glowing with happiness.

“Good luck, big bro Crow!”

“You’d better win!”

They handed Crow the banner. He took it, still unable to find words. “You guys are the best kids ever,” he sniffled. Crow pulled all five kids into a big hug. “Thank you. Thank you so much!”

Jack rolled his eyes.

“Don’t worry, Jack. We’ll make one for you too,” Blister said.

“I don’t need anything like that!”

“What’s wrong?” Martha teased, wiggling her fingers at Jack. “Are you jealous?”

///

Next morning Crow was up early. The streets and duel lanes were practically empty. It was too early for business of any kind.

Crow grinned as he took a wide curve with ease. “More! I can go even faster!”

Suddenly Crow was racing straight toward another turbo duelist! He swerved to avoid crashing into the other duel runner’s wheel. “Look out!”

Crow tried to pull out of the turn, but it was no use. His back wheel was completely locked out. He couldn’t make the turn.

Black Bird capsized, spilling Crow out of the driver’s seat head first. He was seconds from smashing his head into the pavement, but saved himself by putting his hand down. He flipped and landed, pancake style, on his back. His runner skidded on its side until it grinded to a halt.

Crow got up slowly. All he could see was Black Bird. The other turbo duelist was gone. “What happened?”

He tried to push himself back to his feet. Sharp pain blasted through Crow’s right shoulder. The same shoulder of the arm he had used to right his fall. “No way…”

///

“My shoulder is fractured?!” Crow stared at his doctor. He’d been rushed to the hospital to treat his shoulder. The bone had been reset, the arm given bandages, and a cast.

Of course, his friends had also made it to the hospital as fast as they could when they heard the news.

“Yes,” Crow’s doctor nodded. “It will take about a month to fully recover.”
“A month?!” Jack cried.

“But the preliminaries are in a week!” Akiza gasped. *Crow can’t duel!* She put her hands to her mouth, the truth drowning her with the force of its bluntness.

“Please do something!” Crow clenched his uninjured fist. “I have to participate in the tournament no matter what!”

“But you’re injury…”

“Please, I’m begging you,” Crow dropped to his knees, pleading with everything he had. “I don’t care if I can never duel again! It’s even okay if I lose! But I have to participate in this tournament! So please do something!”

“Don’t say such things,” the doctor scolded. “It’s impossible for you to participate in the tournament in your condition!”

“You quack doctor!” Crow yelled at him. “I’m only asking for this one favor! I don’t need this cast!” He got back to his feet, and tried to take the cast off. He couldn’t even touch his shoulder without sending knife-like jabs of pain through his body.

“Crow.”

“Fuck it,” Crow’s eyes watered. *This isn’t fair. Why now? Of all fucking times.* “What am I supposed to say to them?”

///

Back at the hideout, the team weighed their options. Crow was not going to get better any time soon. They had two spare riders. Both were newbies, semi-intermediates at best. Bruno couldn’t ride as their registered mechanic. The twins were absolutely not an option.

“Should we participate with just me and Yusei?” Jack suggested, finally breaking the silence. Someone had to just come out and say it.

“Well, the way the rules work, you have twelve thousand lifepoints to fight with between the three of you,” Bruno said. “If you fight with only two, it’ll be reduced to eight thousand.”

Lise swallowed. “That’s a big handicap.”

“We can’t just give up!” Jack insisted.

“I’m not saying we should,” Lise said. “This team has come so far. We can’t just throw it all away.”

“Then we’ll win!” Jack pounded his fist into the table he sat at. “We’ll win if I, the Jack Atlas declares it! We cannot participate in a duel with the intention of losing!”

“Exactly,” Lise nodded her agreement. “Which is why I think Akiza should be the third turbo duelist this time.”

“Me?” Akiza squeaked. She assumed Lise would be the third wheeler. She had received her license after Lise after all.

Lise smiled at her friend. “Yeah, I think you’re ready.”
“Great idea!” Bruno’s smile had returned. “We can still fight with a three-person team!”

Akiza took a deep breath. This was going to be hard, harder than anything she’d ever done before. Still, she owed it to her friends. They had been there for her, now she wanted to be there for them when it counted. “It’s true, I’m not the best turbo duelist, but we’re a team. You can be there for me just as much as I’m going to fill in for Crow. So please, give me the chance to do this!”

Crow hmphed loudly, and stepped out into the rain.

“Wait, Crow!” Akiza called out to him.

“Shut up!” He shouted back at her. “You think you understand how I feel?!” He ran off without a second glance.

Akiza and her friends stood there in dumbstruck silence.

“Should we go after him?” Bruno asked quietly.

“And say what?” Jack said. He eyed Bruno, waiting for an answer. He didn’t have one. Jack cleared his throat. “I don’t have a problem with you as our third wheeler. What about you, Yusei?”

The others had nearly forgotten he was there. He’d been so quiet the past week and a half, he practically melted into the shadows. “I’m fine with it,” Yusei said, voice a tad hoarse from lack of use.

“It’s decided then,” Jack said.

///

Crow had run until he couldn’t any more. At least the rain seemed to be agreeing with him. This was a lousy night. Lousy day too. It wasn’t fair.

He sighed. This wasn’t going to get him, or his team, anywhere.

Drenched, he went to find cover. He had a phone call to make.

///

Akiza stared at her bike. She’d driven to her parents’ home and parked her duel runner in their garage. It wasn’t giving her answers anyway. Not about the impending tournament pressures, or what to do about Crow.

“I have to work hard. For everyone’s sake, and especially Crow’s,” she said aloud to herself. “I’ll be the best I can be. They trust me.”

She paused. Her cell phone was ringing. Akiza held her helmet under her arm while she dug out her phone.

When she saw who was calling, she hesitated only a second to answer. “…Crow…?”

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“Um…okay…” Akiza wasn’t sure what her role in this conversation was. He certainly could yell at her more, if he wanted. She hoped that wasn’t why he’d called. “I’m sor-“

“Don’t apologize,” Crow interrupted her.
“Okay,” Akiza repeated. She winced. She must sound like a real genius. Way to inspire confidence.

“Look,” Crow sounded like he was straining to get words out. He was crying, which made it difficult. “I’m the one who should be sorry, and I am. I’m sorry.

This thing… This injury isn’t your fault. None of it is. I’m angry and frustrated, and I took it out on you. I’m sorry.

Lise is right. You can do this, and I wanna help. If you’re going to be in top shape for the WRGP, you’re going to need to start training a hell of a lot harder.”

“So…you mean?”

“I’m trusting my feelings, and the feelings of my kids to you,” Crow said.

“Crow.” Now Akiza was crying too. It was too much. This undying trust, and love, and friendship. She never thought she could feel so happy.

“We’ll start first thing in the morning,” Crow walked into Akiza’s garage. He hung up his phone, and smiled weakly at her. “Right after we get some decent sleep.”

Akiza sniffled deeply and rubbed her eyes. “C-Can I hug you?”

“I’m soaking wet, but sure,” Crow laughed through his tears. He rubbed at his eyes with his good hand.

“I won’t let you down,” Akiza said, squeezing as gently as she could. Crow hugged her back one-armed. “I’ll work twice as hard.”

“You’ll have to,” Crow joked. “To be as good as Crow ‘the Bullet.’”

Akiza laughed into his chest. “Yes, sir!”

///

“Did Crow ever come back last night?” Lise asked, stepping into the garage.

Jack and Bruno were suiting up. Yusei was buried under a large blanket on the couch he’d been sleeping on. He hadn’t responded, even when Lise had shaken him a little. She hoped he was just tired.

Bruno shook his head. “I’m worried about him. He was really hurt.”

“That being said, where did he go? What a man-child,” Jack scolded.

Lise rolled her eyes. “Like you’re one to talk.” She sighed as she donned her helmet. “We’d better go look for him. Maybe Akiza knows. I’ll give her a call.”

They sped out of the garage. The city was huge, made bigger still by the bridges connecting the city to Satellite, but still. It couldn’t be that hard to find their friends.

After Lise tried, and failed, to reach Akiza, they decided to check the usual places Crow and Akiza frequented. Crow had the day off, so he wouldn’t be at work. It was also Sunday, which meant Akiza wouldn’t be in school.

“Couldn’t hurt to check the training grounds, could it?” Lise said.
“Worth a shot,” Bruno nodded in agreement.

///

Exactly as Crow had said, he and Akiza had been practicing since the crack of dawn. Crow held the stopwatch, timing Akiza again and again. She was getting faster, but they had to keep pushing.

“Don’t be scared!” Crow encouraged her. “You can’t replace me if that’s all ya got! Show me your skills!”

“Right!” Akiza called back. She circled around for another go.

“Well, whattaya know?” Lise grinned down at her friends.

“They made us worry for nothing,” Jack grumbled. He was smiling too. He loved his friends, he’d never admit it, but he was glad they were all right.

“No kidding,” Bruno sighed with relief.

“Akiza! My feelings and the kids’ feelings are all with you!” Crow raised his fist in solidarity.

Akiza smiled at him. She also gave him a peace sign. For extra luck, of course.

“Looks like we have our third turbo duelist,” Lise said with certainty. “But we’ve gotta work on the team name. It sucks ass.”

“I happen to think it is creative and to the point,” Jack insisted. He crossed his arms and turned his nose up to the sky. “There’s nothing wrong with Jack Atlas and Friends!”

“Oh my god, there’s not enough time in the world to tell you all the reasons why it sucks ass.”

“Listen here you-“

Lise and Jack started arguing back and forth. Poor Bruno was watching their exchange, not sure whether he should stop them or stay away. He just hoped not to get caught in the crossfire.
“So, in chi blocking, the entire body technically becomes a weak point,” Mika was explaining.

She’d pulled out an old chalkboard she’d inherited from her father. He had been an old-fashioned schoolteacher. She drew a generic human body on the chalkboard in red, illustrating the chi paths in blue.

“Of course, the weakest part is your heart and stomach. Stomach more so, to the point that it’s called the sea of chi.”

Lise was sketching furiously. She smiled a little, listening raptly to Mika. Her blue pen drew squiggly waves over her drawing’s stomach.

Akiza leaned over Lise’s shoulder. “Can I copy your notes? This is a little over my head. I’m not even a chi user yet,” she whispered.

“No problem,” Lise said.

“There are several different types of jabs you can utilize,” Mika was moving right along at a brisk pace. “Two fingers, fist, and knuckles are usually what I employ, but it also depends on where you’re striking!”

Mika had the girls get up and practice a couple drills. “So the person who throws a punch will be the one getting blocked. Chi blocking is about reacting, allowing your opponent to give you their limbs. Then you strike like a viper!”

“Then I’ll punch first, since I won’t lose the use of my limbs,” Lise suggested.

“Thank you,” Akiza nervously tousled her hair.

The girls practiced for a while. Eventually Akiza was the first to get the move right.

“It’s only because I can see chi,” Akiza said.

Lise shook her head. “No,” she shook her arm out. She hated the weird, fuzzy feeling. “It’s because it feels almost like a psychic duel.”

“Really?” Mika’s eyes widened. She tapped her chin with her index finger. “I’ve never thought about it that way.”

Akiza thought about it, and then nodded. “Yeah, you’re right! I remember a lot of Sayer’s strategies revolved around exposing his opponent’s weaknesses, attacking them, and rendering them helpless.”

“That’s a more sinister way of looking at it, but yeah,” Lise said. “I’ll be glad to have a great partner.”

“But that’s enough for today,” Mika said. “We’ve been at it for about an hour and a half. You guys want a snack…or dinner?”

“Sure!” Lise shouldered her bag.

“Dinner would be great,” Akiza grinned just as her stomach made a loud gurgling noise. “Guess I
was hungrier than I thought.”

“No worries. I can whip up some curry real fast,” Mika lead the way up and into her apartment.

Lise and Akiza carried all the gear. Mika pushed her dad’s chalkboard into the elevator.

“What happened to your dad, if you don’t mind my asking?” Lise said.

“It’s no trouble,” Mika smiled at the question. She lead the way with her chalkboard when the elevator reached floor 15. “He used to be a part of the Dragon Clan leaders, like my mom. When Mako and I were born, it was around the time the Crimson Dragon was supposed to return. Mom and dad waited until we were ten, but we still hadn’t been chosen to be Signers. When we heard that the fight was in Japan, and none of us would be chosen, mom was furious.”

Mika stopped at door eleven. She reached for her keys.

“Dad was bummed, of course, but he argued that our lives still had meaning. No one would listen to him, so he decided to leave the clan. There it is.”

The key unlocked the door easily, and the three girls walked inside. As apartments go, it was nowhere near Leo and Luna’s level of fanciness. Not even close. It was still homey.

On the left Mika had a cute, blue love seat, tiny black coffee table, and TV screen. Her old computer lay open on the coffee table, plugged into the TV screen. Behind the couch was a desk and chair. Underneath was a litter box, and to the left was an enormous cat scratching post and playground. The cat post lead onto the small deck with two dinged folding chairs, and succulents everywhere. The small hallway lead into the kitchen on the right, with a makeshift cot set up nearby. The bathroom was just behind the cot, and Mika’s room straight across. A tiny door between the bathroom and bedroom was half open, revealing a washer and dryer. Various musical instruments lay strewn about at random.

“Sorry, it’s a little messy. If we’re lucky, Mako is still in therapy. Feel free to make yourselves comfy!”

“Do you have a cat?” Lise asked, her ears straining to hear the sound of little paws.

“Yep, she’s a tuxedo cat named Kiki.”

“Cute!”

Mika smiled. “I was talking about dad…leaving the clan. Right. He wanted to take both me and Mako, but he couldn’t. Mom wouldn’t let him. She made him a deal. It broke his heart, but he accepted. He could take one of us, and leave, or he could be killed by the rest of the clan.”

“Shit,” Lise swore. She and Akiza sat on the couch.

“Yeah,” Mika got to work in the kitchen. “It wasn’t exactly a good situation either way. Dad chose me and ran off. He said… he told me Mako was too much like mom. He wasn’t sure what to do about him, but he figured I had a chance. He believed mom would try to come after you guys, the real Signers, so he went to Japan. He ended up falling in love with dueling and studied to get his degree and taught at Duel Academy. Eventually… he had a heart attack… There was nothing they could do.”

“So both your parents?”
“Yeah,” Mika nodded solemnly. She laughed a little to brighten the mood. “You guys want some hot chocolate too?”

“Absolutely!”

“That sucks about your mom and dad,” Lise said, accepting the food and hot chocolate Mika offered her. “I know how that feels.”

“It was lonely without daddy for a long time,” Mika said, nodding. She sat down on the coffee table. “Luckily, by then I was eighteen, so it was a little better. I’ve been very lucky.”

“I’ll say. Your place is great,” Akiza dug into her curry with gusto.

Lise was hungry too. Her mom always said camping and hard work were the best for working up an appetite. She felt warm, at least happier than she had in a few days. It was getting exhausting pretending to be okay. Keeping herself busy did the trick… mostly.

She’d just picked up her mug of hot chocolate when the door flew open. “Hey sis!”

Mika rolled her eyes. “Hi Mako.” She drank from her own mug like a disgruntled old man.

“We have company I see,” Mako said, loud and obnoxious, as usual. He wiggled his eyebrows at Akiza.

“Bite me,” she said.

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep,” he taunted back.

“Mako, close the door, and stay in my room, would you? You lower the entire IQ of a room when you walk in,” Mika growled at her brother.

“Okay, soooooorry,” Mako rolled his eyes. His lower lip extended in a pout. “Nobody ever wants to see me.” He went into Mika’s room and slammed the door shut.

“Sorry. He’s still a man-child.”

“We know what that’s like,” Akiza giggled.

“So how have you guys been lately?”

Akiza’s grin widened. “I’ve been training hard with Crow almost twenty-four seven! I want to be as good as I can, so I don’t let my team down.”

“Oh wow! Good luck! That’s in only five days! I’ll be watching for you,” Mika gave her a thumbs up. “What about you, Lise? Besides our chi lessons.”

“Work is pretty good, and flexible. I like that. I’m still drawing here and there…” Lise said. She stared into the contents of her cup. Her fingers traced the edge of the mug.

“She’s still worried about Yusei,” Akiza supplied helpfully. “He’s been… distant lately.”

“Two weeks,” Lise croaked.

Mika thought for a minute. She had to phrase this gently. “Is it possible he’s cheating?”

“No, god no,” Akiza scoffed at that one.
Lise smiled a tiny bit at that. “He doesn’t leave the house much anymore. I’m really worried about him.”

Mika put a hand on Lise’s shoulder. “He’ll come around. Sometimes things just take time.”

“I hope so,” Lise meant to smile in gratitude, but it felt more like a wince to her.

Akiza recognized a moment she needed to intervene. “So Mika, mind showing me your bedroom? Do you have more instruments in there? Can you play all of them?”

“Sure,” Mika stood, taking the hint. “I’ve got a few more. My favorite is the cello.” She lead Akiza into her bedroom. “Mako, off the bed.”

“Ya know, you can’t keep ordering me around,” Mako scowled at her.

“Then don’t be such a baby.”

“Whatever,” Mako slunk out of the bedroom before either girl could notice.

“So, heard you have boyfriend trouble,” Mako announced himself by flipping over the couch. He settled into a seat right beside Lise.

She side-eyed him. Hard. “I wouldn’t phrase it that way, but sure.”

“Oh please, he’s just not treating you right.”

“Excuse me?” Lise’s voice had a hard edge.

Mako didn’t take the hint. “I’d treat you right,” he declared, emphasizing his gallantry with a hand on his heart.

“Whatever you say,” Lise rolled her eyes, and put her empty cocoa mug on the coffee table with her empty plate.

Suddenly Mako’s fingers were on her chin, and she was staring into his cocky face. “I can prove it to you.”

Lise wasn’t sure what was going on. She didn’t want this. Mako was all wrong too. His hair was brown, not black and gold. His eyes were a horrifying acid green, not deep, ocean blue. His face was clean of marks, although god knows he deserved one.

Mako’s breath ghosted across Lise’s chin and she knew what he was doing.

Lise’s hand came swinging. She smacked Mako, before he could kiss her, so hard, he almost fell off the couch. Her handprint was fire engine red, stinging hot on Mako’s face.

Lise stood up, her whole body shaking. She had to clench her fists, nails digging into the palm, to keep from hitting him again. “Don’t you ever try to do that to me again, or I will end you.”

Mika and Akiza came back in. The smack hadn’t exactly been subtle. Lise was already out the door.

It was late, but still light out. Lise could practically feel her emotions bubbling below the surface. She shoved them down her throat, and kept walking.

She made it to Fountain Plaza before the dam she’d built began to burst. Lise got to the lip of the
fountain and threw her socks and shoes off. She fell in backwards, making a tremendous splash. Then…she let the tears fall.

///

Yusei got up feeling better than ever. He didn’t feel tired, or horrible, or afraid. Everything was right. He had amazing friends, an amazing girlfriend, and the WRGP was practically already there. The synchro problem was a thing of the past. He wasn’t responsible for any death or destruction.

Crow, Jack, and Bruno were running around taking care of last minute stuff. Their note on the kitchen table said so.

Akiza and the twins had texted. Just to say hi, and to say they were working hard too. In their own way, of course.

The clock read just after 9:15. Lise was probably still asleep.

He went up to their room. Sure enough, Lise was sleeping soundly. Her back to him.

Yusei knelt by the edge of the bed. “Lise…” he murmured into her messy hair. “Time to get up…”

Lise sighed sleepily. “Don’t wanna…”

“Please?” Yusei teased, lips finding the side of Lise’s neck.

Just as he planned, Lise’s shoulders squeezed him out. She was so ticklish. It was cute. She laughed a little. “Okay, okay.”

She rolled over and dissolved into ashes and bones.

“What the?!” Horrified, Yusei jumped back from the bed. The house around him dissolved into ashes, littered with bones. The skeletons of his friends; Jack, Akiza, Leo, Luna, Crow, Lise, Martha, Rally, Nervin, Blitz, Tank; absolutely everyone.

Their bony jaws all opened at the same time. “You killed us. It was you.”

Yusei awoke with a start. He was in the garage. On the couch. Again. He sat up, rubbing at his head.

Something wet dropped onto his hand. It rolled down to his blanketed lap. A tear… no tears. He was crying. He sobbed quietly until he exhausted himself back to sleep.

///

That Saturday the WRGP sponsors threw their own party. All competitors, team members, reporters, and sponsors were invited. In formal attire and at the same location, of course.

“This is just like the Budokai party!!!” Leo gushed. “Food, cool people, and food!”

“You said food twice,” Luna pointed out.

“I like food.”

Teams were having their photos taken too. Photographers and reporters hounded Team Unicorn especially. Even Carly!
“Hi guys!” she waved to her friends when she spotted them, and ran over.

“Hi Carly!” Lise greeted her warmly. “Getting the latest in scoops?”

“You’re damn right, I am! Everyone’s been waiting for this WRGP premium event! There are front runner teams here too, and I’m gonna report on them like crazy!” Carly’s dark eyes were burning with her reporter fire that she got when she was incredibly motivated. “By the way, where’s Jack?”

Crow rolled his eyes. “Late, as usual. He said for us to go ahead.” Crow raised his fingers to use as air quotes. “He said he wanted to ‘arrive in style.’”

“Sorry to keep you waiting!” Jack entered with sweeping elegance. He had a new suit too. This one in violet, adorned with white tie and top hot.

“He didn’t,” Crow gasped.

“He did,” Akiza sighed.

“How did you pay for those?” Crow demanded.

“Perfect fit, aren’t they?” Jack smirked, spreading his arms grandly.


“A little dip in my savings,” Jack sniffed. He looked away for a second. “And yours…”

“There you go wasting cash again!” Crow lost it on him. “Not to mention wasting my money as well as your own! Do you know how much time it took to make enough money for something like this?! And you don’t even have your own job! You already have a nice suit too!!”

Carly was wearing a flowy dress that breathed easily, but she was beginning to sweat. Crow wasn’t exactly being subtle. Thankfully the lights dimmed. “Oh, the announcements are starting,” Carly pointed.

Lazar came out on the tiny catwalk above the partygoers. Holo-screens popped up, so everyone could see and hear him no matter where they were.

“I would like to welcome you all to this premium event for the WRGP. As you all know, New Domino City has gone through a great number of changes these past couple of years. Following the opening of the Daedalus Bridge, the boundaries between the city and Satellite have vanished, transforming the city into a place where everyone and anyone can enjoy dueling. The WRGP is an event that serves as a symbol for the newly reborn New Domino City. A major event that will build bridges to peace forever!”

“That’s my cue!” The bushy-haired MC took Lazar’s place on the holo-screens. “I’ll be giving you the rundown on this fantastic tournament! The course will be the circulating tracks currently being finished in New Domino City’s suburbs. The course will be ever-changing!”

Everyone watched, mesmerized as a holographic map of the city illuminated over the partygoers’ heads. There were so many different routes the course could take turbo duelists on. Nobody had even begun dueling yet, but it already looked amazing.

“Wow,” Akiza murmured.

Crow and Jack looked more apprehensive than she did. The WRGP kept getting more and more
challenging. They needed to shape up their game and fast. They only had two days left.

The others took to enjoying themselves. Lise and Yusei, however, were off in their own little worlds. Not connected, or even good worlds. There was so much to be worried and stressed over. It was like standing on the ocean with the entire world, but no one noticed two people drowning.

“Yusei Fudo? And Elizabeth Kururugi?”

“Huh?” Lise peered around Yusei at the brown-haired boy trying to get their attention.

His reddish-brown hair was spiked backwards, aside from his sideburns. He’d also, hopefully on purpose, seemed to have several hairs pointing out like a unicorn horn.

“Yes, you were both in the Fortune Cup,” the boy smiled kindly, shaking both their hands. “I was excited to see your win, Yusei. Word gets around fast,” he explained further when Yusei and Lise still looked dumbfounded.

“Oh, sorry, we should have introduced ourselves! We’re Team Unicorn! I’m Andre, the blond is Breo, and our leader back there is Jean.”

“Hey, I know you guys!” Crow stepped in, saving his friends the trouble of responding. “You’re the team on a hot streak! You did great in the Atlantis tournament!”

“And you are?”

“I’m Crow. Lise and Yusei are my teammates,” Crow jabbed his thumb back at his friends.

“I’m gonna step out,” Yusei said. He didn’t wait for anyone to say otherwise.

“Hey, wait!” Crow’s plea fell on deaf ears. “Sorry about that. He hasn’t been himself lately. I’ll go…uh…”

“I got this,” Lise said, patting Crow’s shoulder.

He mouthed ‘thank you’ at her. She could only return the gesture with a small smile.

“Yusei?” Lise’s voice was quiet when she finally caught up with him. He kept walking, so Lise stepped in front of him. “Are you okay?” She tried to get him to meet her eye, her cheek, forehead, anything would have been better than their feet.

He wasn’t. It was obvious. Sure, he was wearing a suit, but only because he had to. His eyes were bloodshot, with purple circles lining the undersides of his eyes. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d taken more than just a rinse off, or more accurately, a sink shower.

“Yusei-“

“I’m fine.”

“Oh…” Lise swallowed. “Okay…” She didn’t move as Yusei walked by her.

That is until an older gentleman screamed just a couple feet from them. A giant, three wheeled duel runner came crashing in through the floor to ceiling windows.

Yusei would have been flattened by tires nearly as tall as him if Lise hadn’t tackled him out of the way. They rolled a short distance, but Lise was already getting to her feet, and running to find their friends.
Glass shards flew everywhere. Guests screamed and ran in all directions to avoid getting run over.

The driver circled around multiple times, laughing. He had criminal markings, pale, sunburned skin, and no hair. He looked like he weighed almost as much as his ridiculous runner.

“Look at all ya’ll! Meeting her for your fancy-shmancy stupid party!”

“Oh, it’s the town roughneck, Duvackle!” Carly realized.

“Who now?” Jack asked, standing in front of her just in case.

“Ya know, like a redneck? I think?” Carly shrugged helplessly.

Security came running in, doing their best to subdue the party crasher. They also had to deal with hysterical guests scattering in all directions.

“WRGP, my ass!” Duvackle was still yelling. “Turbo duels are not some stupid game!” He ripped a WRGP poster into pieces.

“Get him, boys!” Trudge ordered.

“Outta the way!” Duvackle hopped back at the controls. Tables, guests, and officers were plowed out of his way. “C’mon people! Don’t you know how to have a little fun!”

“Akiza!” Lise slid over to her friend. “Where are the others?”

“I dunno. We got separated after that idiot broke in!”

“Who you callin’ an idiot?” Duvackle snickered and drove straight for the two girls. “Move it or lose it, ladies!”

Lise smirked. “Good idea.”

Akiza pulled out her duel disk with a grin. “You move.”

“Lise!”

“Akiza!”

Lise held up her hands. The glow of the Crimson Dragon illuminated her arms, and the irises of her eyes. A wide, thick shield made of the dragon’s red energy erupted.

“I summon Black Rose Dragon!” Akiza’s beast roared as it entered the party. She hovered protectively by the two girls.

“Brace for impact!” Lise yelled back to Akiza.

Duvackle screamed as he slammed into Lise’s energy shield. The shield cracked, but remained standing. Lise bent her knees, and crossed her arms in an ‘X,’ lowering her stance to keep the duel runner firmly at bay. It wasn’t stopped; Duvackle’s foot was heavily on the gas pedal.

“Black Rose Dragon; whip it!” Akiza commanded.

Her beast raised its tail, flicking it like a whip. Duvackle was blown backwards, back through the windows. More glass rained everywhere as he capsized completely.
“Officers, get him!” Trudge ran out to detain Duvackle.

“No way am I goin’ to jail!” Duvackle righted his runner quickly. The tires screeched as he sped away.

“Duel chasers, move out!” Trudge ordered. Tonight was not his night.

///

“I’m bored of this,” Placido complained. He got up to leave. “If I can’t duel one of the Signers, then I’m going to at least teach this brainless oaf not to interfere with our plans!”

“So impatient,” Joel sighed.

Luciano snickered, raising his hands innocently. “The way he acts, you would think he’s the child. Not me!”

///

Placido easily outdistanced the police officers trying to catch Devackle. It was the first time he had personally gone out to duel, but he was careful with his Ghosts. They were by no means perfect copies, but they were modeled after him for a reason.

“Could that be…?”

“Was it the Ghost?”

///

The policemen left behind were forced to assist in cleaning up the mess. The reporters, both small and big, loved all the commotion.

“What?!” Trudge’s eyes bugged out of his head. “The Ghost!”

The name caught the attention of quite a few duelists.

///

“Please no!” Devackle whimpered. His runner was about to give out on him. It couldn’t take another attack. “I’m beggin’ you!”

Placido just smirked. When they begged for their lives; that was always his favorite part.

///

“Are we really going after the Ghost?” Akiza asked. She and all her friends were running for their cars and duel runners.

“We might not be able to stop him,” Crow amended.

“But we can try and get some answers! The great Jack Atlas will beat the answers out of him!”

///

Devackle had lost. He skidded, and crashed. The duel runner exploded, sending flames licking towards the sky. His work finished, Placido sped along the track. He wanted another five minutes
out in fresh air, before going back to his cold associates.

///

“Whoa!” Lise, the fastest out of their group stopped first.

A man dressed in blue and grey had surprised her down in the vehicle hangar. His hair was blue too. It was difficult to tell if his eyes were also blue. He wore a dark, red visor over them.

“The hell are you doing? Trying to scare us half to death?” Crow yelled at him impatiently.

“How is this guy?” Leo whispered.

“How should I know?” Luna whispered back.

“Out of the way, already!” Jack shoved the guy and kept going.

“You’ll just be wasting your time. Even if you go now, the duel would be over. And even if it wasn’t, those of you who haven’t evolved your synchro methods, cannot defeat the Ghost.”

“Like Akiza’s new monster?” Luna asked.

The man nodded. His gaze, or at least what must have been his gaze, fell over each of their team members. “In order to achieve a new synchro method, you have to face your own weaknesses in order to surpass yourself.”

“Surpass…myself?” Yusei whispered to himself.

“Face a weakness…” Lise hugged herself for warmth. This guy was giving her the heebie-jeebies.

“I can show you, if you like,” the man said.

Crow narrowed his eyes. “How do we know we can trust you? We don’t even know your name.”

“You don’t, but you can call me Visor. Will you trust me enough to let me be one of your opponents?”

A duel. To show us another way of fighting… Lise thought. Something different to shake things up. She smiled. “Yusei should do it.”

“Me?” Yusei pointed to himself.

“Yes, unless you’ve changed your name in the past five minutes?” Lise smiled briefly.

“It’s decided then,” Visor crossed over to a sleek dark blue runner with a giant wheel, and a small wheel.

“But… I…”

“We’ll watch from upstairs,” Lise said. She lead the way back into the building.

Jack felt like his head was spinning, but he did follow her. Akiza smiled knowingly and corralled the twins after them.

“Good luck, man,” Crow gave Yusei the thumbs up and joined his friends.

“It’s decided then,” Visor put his helmet on.
Yusei stood there, his hands hanging limply at his sides. He wasn’t really getting a choice in the matter.

Visor smiled gently at Yusei. “Follow me.”
Visor and Yusei sped onto the highway. Visor lead the way on his sleek, blue runner. Yusei Go followed at a short distance.

*Could I really unlock a new synchro method? Solving this problem can’t be that easy. And why did Lise say I should go? Akiza’s the only one with an evolved synchro monster. She should have gone instead. Still, I should at least see what Visor wants to show us.*

///

Akiza, Leo, Luna, Jack, Crow and Lise watched from the balcony they’d left just a short while ago. Caution tape had been pulled across all the areas with broken glass. Most people had left by then, but a couple officers hung around just in case.

Lise winced when she put a bit too much weight on her left ankle. She’d hoped no one noticed.

Akiza noticed. “Lise, your ankle. It’s a little swollen.”

“Yeah, must’ve twisted it. It just hurts a little now. Adrenaline wore off, all that jazz. Don’t worry about me,” Lise waved away any concern for her. “Right now, I think it’s important we watch Yusei’s duel.” *And hopefully it helps kick his ass back into some sense of normalcy. I miss Yusei, the real Yusei… my Yusei…*

“I still don’t trust this Visor guy,” Crow said, crossing his arms.

“Are you at least good to fly, Lise?” Jack asked. “I don’t like this either. I’m not sure we can get to our runners fast enough.”

“Come on guys, this is Yusei we’re talking about,” Leo held up his fist in support. “He can totally do this.”

“Normally I’d say you’re right, Leo,” Luna said. “But Yusei doesn’t look so good.”

///

“Let’s start with a test,” Visor smiled to himself. He accelerated rapidly, leaving Yusei behind.

“Huh? What gives?!” Yusei called after him.

Visor didn’t answer. He waited to see what his opponent would do. *You’ll never surpass yourself if you only follow with caution. Show me what you can do.* He sped up more, challenging Yusei to keep up.

“Fine, if that’s the way it is,” Yusei set his jaw.

The two of them increased their speed, sailing through turns so quickly they practically flew. One wrong move, just a dash of hesitation, and at their speeds a crash could easily kill them. They circled in each other in a dance of speed.

A sharp curve came up. Instead of slowing, Visor increased his speed further, taking the curve so quickly he could have merged with the wind.
“I accept your challenge!” Yusei yelled. The light in his eyes seemed to have returned. He mirrored Visor, taking the turn faster than was necessary by far.

He wasn’t used to something quit so reckless. It took him a minute to correct himself, but he managed to balance and chase after Visor.

“Come on, Yusei,” Visor chuckled. “If this trifle bit of speed frightens you, you’ll never beat Ghost!”

He took two turns at high speed. Wind whipped around him furiously, but Visor seemed immune to its stinging resistance.

Yusei did the same, straining to keep up his speed for two turns. The wind tried to claim him, unable to claim Visor. But Yusei fought back. No way would he give up now when he could get one answer to so many questions.

“You’ve got guts! Now I’ll show you the dueling that will beat Ghost, like I promised!” Visor said.

Speed World 2 Activated, the duel lane was selected…and the duel began!

“Let’s duel!”

Yusei: 4000
Visor: 4000

///

“This is strange,” Crow said. “Why the race to build up to the duel?”

“Maybe the new synchro method has to do with speed?” Luna suggested.

“I hope so. Otherwise, Visor put Yusei through a lot of danger for the fun of it,” Akiza scowled down at the turbo duelists.

“Your soul has to be awake to change,” Lise murmured.

///

The duel was in full swing in no time. Yusei had gone first with nothing flashy. He was here to witness after all.

“I tune my level two Tech Genus Striker to my level three Tech Genus Werewolf!” Visor announced. “I synchro summon… Tech Genus Power Gladiator!”

“That’s it?” Yusei frowned up at the blade-toting, green clad warrior. Doesn’t look like much.

“Next, I normal summon the tuner Tech Genus Cyber Magician! When I synchro summon using this card, I’m allowed to use a monster needed for the synchro summon from my hand! I tune level one Tech Genus Cyber Magician to my level four Tech Genus Rush Rhino! I synchro summon… Tech Genus Wonder Magician!”

(Tech Genus Striker: Atk: 800 Def: 0)

(Tech Genus Werewolf: Atk: 1200 Def: 0)
"Two synchro monsters?!" Yusei looked up at the beasts, eyes narrowed. Considering how quickly Visor had got them out, this was definitely not where this strategy ended.

"Let’s go! Tech Genus Power Gladiator attacks your Trycler!"

Yusei: 2000

Visor: 4000

Yusei absorbed the blow like a slug trying to get out of the way of traffic. He had to really step on it to get back to Visor. The long, nearly sleepless nights were taking their toll.

“What’s wrong, Yusei? You’re staggering.”

“I’m fine,” Yusei insisted. “Since Trycler was destroyed, I can bring out Bicular from my deck.”

“Then Tech Genus Wonder Magician will attack Bicular!”

“Then when Bicular is destroyed, I can special summon Unicycular!”

Visor smirked to himself. At least he isn’t giving up. “End turn.”

This is strange. Yusei thought to himself. Two synchros can’t be all there is to beating the machine emperors. True, the emperors can only absorb one synchro monster per turn, so you’d have one left over, but… this just seems too simple.

“Well, what’s the matter, Yusei? It’s your turn!”

“It is, draw!” Yusei said. “I play the speed spell Synchro Defuse. When I have two or more speed counters, this card allows me to gain control of a synchro monster on your side of the field until the end of my turn!”

///

“Ah, so he’s attempting to steal his opponent’s monster,” Jack said.

Crow nodded. “He’s recreating the same situation when Stardust was taken by Ghost.”

“So he is still in there,” Lise smiled.

///

“I choose Power Gladiator!” Yusei pointed at the beast.

Visor didn’t look concerned. In fact, he sped up! “Allow me to show you, the battle style that will defeat Ghost! Accel Synchro!”

“Accel Synchro?”
The winds kicked up around Visor. The contrails of the speed force around him turned blue and purple, absorbing him and his synchro monsters into the speed force. A green ring of light burst forth, and Visor drove straight in, synchro monsters and all. Intense light reached even Lise, Akiza, Jack, Crow, Leo, and Luna.

When the light faded, Yusei looked around. He was driving…alone…? “He vanished!”

Suddenly, the green ring of light was back. It radiated power, forcing Yusei to move out of its path. Visor tore through the light, bursting back onto the track beside Yusei. He reclaimed his place in front of Yusei, with a brand new monster!

“What the hell just happened?”

“Accel Synchro monster Tech Genus Blade Gunner!” Visor announced.

(Tech Genus Blade Gunner: Atk: 3300 Def: 2200)

“Accel Synchro monster?” Yusei stared, wide-eyed at his opponent. “Impossible! You synchro summoned with two monsters on my turn!”

“It’s an even greater synchro summon conducted by a synchro tuner and a synchro monster,” Visor said. “That is Accel Synchro.”

A synchro method that goes beyond regular synchro summoning. Is this what he meant about surpassing our weaknesses?

“Come on, Yusei! Try to defeat me!” Visor taunted, pulling further ahead.

“Blade Gunner’s attack is thirty-three hundred. In that case, I activate the speed spell Angel Baton! With two or more speed counters, I can use this card I can draw two cards as long as I send one card in my hand to the graveyard. I summon the tuner monster Drill Synchron! When I have a tuner on my field, I can special summon Quillbolt Hedgehog from my graveyard. I tune level three Drill Synchron with level one Unicycular, and level two Quillbolt Hedgehog! I synchro summon… Drill Warrior!”

(Drill Warrior: Atk: 2400 Def: 2000)

“Drill Warrior can attack the opposing player directly by halving its attack power!”

Yusei: 2000

Visor: 2800

“I end my turn with a facedown.”

“Yes, Yusei!” Visor encouraged, grinning over his shoulder. “Don’t be shy and don’t hold back! Fear shrinks your potential!”

///

“Fear shrinks your potential…” Lise repeated to herself.

He was right. Her fear of losing her mother, then fearing she could lose another loved one. Fear of failure… In all that she cared about, inadequacy too. Or right now; the fear of making the first step…vulnerability.
“Lise, are you okay?” Luna placed her hand in Lise’s. She didn’t like how far away the older girl looked. Luna’s hand acted like an anchor, bringing Lise back to the present moment.

“Yeah, thanks Luna.”

///

“My turn!” Visor declared. “I attack Drill Warrior with Tech Genus Blade Gunner!”

“Trap activate; Wave Force! When a synchro monster becomes the target of an attack, it destroys all monsters on my opponent’s side of the field in attack mode!” Yusei smiled. “That takes care of your monster.”

“I can use Blade Gunner’s effect to send a card in my hand to the graveyard, and negate an effect that targets it!”

**Yusei: 1100**

**Visor: 2800**

“I play the trap Miracle’s Wake! It special summons one monster destroyed in battle this turn! Welcome back, Drill Warrior!”

Visor smiled. *There’s the real Yusei. “I end my turn.”*

_I managed to keep Drill Warrior, but Blade Gunner still has more attack. As long as Drill Warrior only has 2400, he can’t do anything. I have Speed Energy and Chromic Barrier: Silver Force in my hand. Speed Energy will increase a monster’s attack by 200 times the number of speed counters I have. Next turn, I’ll have four speed counters, so its attack will raise by 800. Drill Warrior will still only have 3200 attack points…_

“What’s wrong, Yusei? Given up?”

“Nope! It’s my… turn!” Yusei put all his hope into his next draw. He was in luck this time! “I play the speed spell Speed Energy! Drill Warrior’s attack power increases by the number of speed counters times two hundred! Next, I summon Gauntlet Warrior!”

*(Gauntlet Warrior: Atk: 400 Def: 1600)*

“By releasing this card, I can increase the attack of a warrior type monster on my field by five hundred points! I release Gauntlet Warrior! Now Drill Warrior’s attack increases to thirty-seven hundred! Drill Warrior attack Tech Genus Blade Gunner!”

**Yusei: 1100**

**Visor: 2400**

Visor smirked to himself. *That’s the spirit. I won’t let you learn all of Accel Synchro’s tricks yet. You never know who might be watching.*

“I end my turn!”

“My turn!” Visor drew his card. “I summon Tech Genus Metal Skeleton, and end with two facedowns!”

*(Tech Genus Metal Skeleton: Atk: 1100 Def: 0)*
“It’s my move,” Yusei said. *Seems easy enough, but then again, he might be baiting me. I’ll bet one of his facedown cards brings back Blade Gunner. Since Drill Warrior’s attack points are back to normal, that could pose a problem… Well, here goes.* “I summon Sonic Chick in defense mode! Now Drill Warrior, attack Metal Skeleton!”

“Trap card open: Mirror Force!”

“Mirror Force?” Yusei winced as his Drill Warrior was shattered mid-attack. At least he’d thought to summon out Sonic Chick on defense to protect himself. “I place one care facedown, ending my turn.”

“I summon Tech Genus Gear Zombie in attack position!” Visor got right down to his turn.

*(Tech Genus Gear Zombie: Atk: 600 Def: 0)*

“Tech Genus Gear Zombie attacks Sonic Chick!”

The tiny pink bird followed Drill Warrior to the graveyard. Yusei hoped his trap card had been enough to deter an attack, but it wasn’t enough.

“Now Tech Genus Metal Skeleton attack Yusei directly!”

Yusei winced as the attack washed over him. Smoke billowed out of his runner that cruised to a stop. It’d been a while since he’d lost. No big deal. Now that he’d seen Accel Synchro he was hooked. He had to know how it worked.

**Yusei: 0**

**Visor: 2400**

“That new monster, the light, that was Accel Synchro?” Yusei asked when Visor pulled up alongside him.

Visor nodded, a solemn expression on his face. “I can’t tell you anymore, but now that you’ve seen it, you can get there.”

“By surpassing myself.”

“Yes,” Visor cracked a smile. “I look forward to dueling you again, Yusei.” Without another word he dove off into the night.

Yusei watched him until he could no longer see the mysterious turbo duelist.

///

“Oh no, Yusei lost!” Leo stuck his lower lip out in a pout. He hated watching his idol lose. *Superheroes weren’t supposed to lose!*

“But he looked…happy for the first time in two and a half weeks,” Akiza pointed out.

Crow put his hand on her shoulder. “Let’s hope it sticks.”

“Or we’re screwed Monday,” Jack added rather bleakly.

///
Lise woke up the next morning a little earlier than she usually did. Instead of reaching for her phone as usual, she stared at the ceiling. Her ankle was still a little sore, but manageable. She didn’t need any distractions if she was going to actually do what she had decided to do. It had been long enough. The WRGP was tomorrow. No more waiting.

She got up. Of course, she peed first. You couldn’t talk to someone seriously with a full bladder.

“Yusei?” Lise stepped into the garage in her bare feet.

He wasn’t on the couch. He hadn’t been in their bed either. His duel runner was missing.

Lise made a growling sound under her breath. Her phone was back up in her room. This was happening today.

She snatched her phone from her room, and hopped back into the kitchen. She stuffed an apple in her mouth, and savagely pressed the button to turn the coffeemaker on.

Lise pressed Yusei’s number in her speed dials. It rang through Lise making herself coffee. No answer. Lise tried again. And again. She made it to five calls before she was getting ready to call it quits.

“Come on, I know you have your phone on you!” Lise resisted the urge to toss her own phone across the room. “I have to go soon too, damnit.” She’d agreed to meet Martha that morning for lunch. It’d been a while since Lise had seen her foster mother, and after all the crap she’d been feeling, she needed the support.

Lise switched to texting in a last-ditch effort. She figured she had a pretty good idea where he was, but she wanted to be sure when she came back home.

Where are you? Are you okay?

“Whoa,” Crow said when he caught sight of Lise’s expression. He’d just come down for breakfast. “Did Siri yell the N-word at you or something?”

“No, I’m trying to get ahold of Yusei. He’s not here, and I need to talk to him,” Lise explained. She took a deep breath, and ran a tired hand through the snarls in her hair. “He won’t talk to me.”

“Are you sure?” Crow asked gently.

Lise showed him her five outgoing, unanswered calls. Her text message too. “Has he talked to you guys the past two and a half weeks?”

“No,” Jack answered, coming down too. “You’re talking about Yusei, right?”

“Yeah,” Lise said. She took a deep breath. None of them had any time to waste. “Can you two go talk to him? I promised to meet Martha this morning, so I’ll have to join you later.”

“But where is he?” Crow said.

“I think he’s at one of the towers they’ve been building. Some of them overlook the city, and some overlook the water between the city and Satellite. Text me when you find him, please?”

Jack nodded. “We will.”

“Thanks guys,” Lise hugged them both. She was halfway up the ladder when she paused. “Hey, where’s Bruno?”
“Our room. He said he still wasn’t feeling well, so we were gonna bring him some breakfast later,” Crow explained.

“Right, I’ll see you guys later then.”

///

“Martha, Lise is here! Lise is here!” Little Annie came bouncing inside with the news.

Martha smiled at the little girl. “Thanks for telling me, sweetie. She’s right on time.”

Kids swarmed around Lise and her duel runner once she’d parked. All of them asked for her to help them with something. Either that or just to play with them. Even Stupid fluttered down from his perch to nuzzle Lise, cheek to cheek, and chirp excitedly in her ear.

“All right, everyone,” Martha said loudly and firmly. “Let’s give Lise some space to breathe, and you kids can play with her after you’ve had something to eat.”

The children muttered disagreeably but they did as they were told. Lise mouthed ‘thank you’ to Martha, who chuckled good-naturedly.

“So glad to have you,” Martha said. She set cups of tea down for the both of them. Once she was settled in her seat, she brought her cup to her lips. “It’s been a while.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry,” Lise smiled sheepishly. She’d had a lot on her mind lately, but that wasn’t an excuse.

“But with the WRGP tomorrow, I suspected you were busy,” Martha said. “Blister, Schmitt, and I have been busy too, so no worries.”

“You let us off the hook much easier than Zora does,” Lise laughed. She sipped her tea. Blueberry, her favorite. Martha never forgot even after all this time.

“Oh, I’m sure. Always been a stubborn one, Zora has.”

“Yeah, and the kids?”

“Playing hard, learning lots, and doing their best to stay healthy,” Martha said. She sipped her tea again, brown eyes practically x-raying Lise over the rim of her teacup. “We’ve been granted an expansion of the house by the city to accommodate more kids.”

“That’s great!”

Martha nodded. She’d never stopped her x-raying gaze.

“Martha,” Lise began slowly. “How do I… I’m not sure how to say this… But, have I always had a problem with being intimate?”

A raised eyebrow. That was the extent of Martha’s reaction. “You’re not talking about sex are you? That’s an entirely different ballpark.”

Lise’s face reddened, taken aback by Martha’s question. “What?! No!” She was glad she hadn’t spilled any of her tea, but what a question. “I mean, I guess that applies, but sex hadn’t really crossed my mind in that context.”

“Ah, you mean vulnerability then,” Martha set her teacup down.
“Yes.”

“From my experience watching you grow up, you were the most vulnerable in your younger years than the others,” Martha said. “I’m not saying you should have got over your mother’s murder sooner. That’s not exactly something anyone can get over, even if they’re older than seven.

But unlike the other kids, you had known a different life however brief. Even though we were aware of the injustices done here, you had experience with a slightly more just world in the city because you were born there.

But your struggles were different as you grew older. Especially at the reeducation center. I was terrified that one day you or Yusei would never come home. The reeducation center threw off your sense of self-worth.

Suddenly, no matter what you did, nothing was right. You were different in so many ways, and that scared those people.”

Lise rubbed her eyes at the memory. “I remember. Puberty hit me like a fucking truck,” she laughed a little. “God, I felt like a monster doomed to be lonely forever.”

“And there will be people who try to make you feel like that everywhere you go,” Martha said. “You’ve always been different, and it is so hard to be different. It’s so hard to be different, especially in a world that wants you to be anything but. I’m proud to be the foster mother of someone so strong.” She tucked a few loose hairs behind Lise’s ear, who was trying very hard not to cry.

“So, I wouldn’t say you can’t be vulnerable, sweetie. You want so badly to be vulnerable with those you love that it aches, and it terrifies you that someone could see all the stardust you’re made of, and still not want you.

…Does this have something to do with Yusei?”

“Yes, and no,” Lise answered. This stuff was still hard to talk about, but Martha always knew how to make her feel better. Loved, the way no one else could. “I’m afraid to be real with just about everyone I meet, but until this morning I was afraid to talk to him.”

“Did something serious happen?”

“I’m not sure,” Lise sipped her tea. “He’s been distant for about two and a half weeks now. When we last saw Trudge and Mina. There was a huge debacle with the Public Security Bureau and a fake bomb.”

Martha closed her eyes, taking a big gulp of tea. “My children grow up to make smart, safe choices. They are not in danger as much as I worry they are.”

Lise laughed at that. “I guess I was less afraid today because I didn’t care if he hated me afterwards. I just wanted Yusei to be happy, whether I knew what was bothering him or not. I mean, ideally there’d be talking and we’d figure things out, or whatever, but he’d be better. Something is really bothering him…”

So I guess, I’m afraid of not being understood and not being allowed to understand. I want, so much, to help, but I can’t if I don’t have any puzzle pieces.”

“Were you able to get through to him today then?”
“No, but I asked Jack and Crow to help. If I can’t break through, they can.”

“There ya go,” Martha pointed at her adopted daughter. “You were vulnerable with them! You expressed your feelings with them, and they understood you. They want to understand too.”

“I hope it works,” Lise said. “Yusei almost seemed to be back to himself last night when he dueled this mystery guy, Visor.”

Martha made a big show of getting herself nice, cozy, and comfortable in her chair. “Tell me everything.”

Lise smiled over her mug. “You got it.”

///

“Found him!” Crow pointed triumphantly at their friend.

Yusei was slumped over the railing. The purple circles under his eyes were even bigger that morning. His eyes were unfocused, the wind tousling his hair not touching his soul in the slightest.

Jack came up to Crow. They approached, together, cautiously. “Yusei?”

It took a couple seconds for Yusei’s eyes to focus on them. “Hi,” he answered shortly. His eyes darted to his duel runner a short distance away.

“A hi? That’s all we get?” Crow sat down at the railing, his back to the water.

Jack sat on Yusei’s other side. They were there for him, but Crow and Jack were not going to let him run away again. He’d wanted to be angry, but he remembered when Carly had done something similar for him. She’d been gentle, and supportive. “Hey mate, mind telling us what’s going on?”

Yusei’s hands tightened on the railing. His teeth were gritted.

“Cuz we kinda need you,” Crow held up his arm, snug in its cast. He took a deep breath, letting the edge out of his voice. “Just like you need us right now.”

“I’m sorry,” Yusei pressed his forehead to the cold, steel railing. “I’m so sorry.” He’d been trying so hard to close himself off. From his feelings, from his friends. But all it took was them saying they needed each other. He sank down to his knees as tears rolled down his cheeks.

“It’s okay,” Jack said softly. He rested his hand on Yusei’s shoulder.

Crow rested his good hand on Yusei’s back too. They stayed like that while Yusei cried. His eyes were so raw and red, it was too easy to keep crying after doing so for two and a half weeks.

“I’m sorry,” Yusei said again, rubbing at his eyes.

“Just start talking, whenever you’re ready,” Crow added.

Jack decided to get things started. “Did something happen?”

“Yeah,” Yusei sniffed. He turned around, putting his back against the railing like his friends. “So, you remember that weird creature Lise, Bruno and I saw?”

“Lise said it felt like you, but wrong, right?”
Yusei nodded. “I got scared. I didn’t know what that meant. It could actually be me, or not, or eventually. I don’t know. There’s no way to know for sure.

But yeah, I got scared. What if that thing really is me? What if I woke up one day wanting to… What if something made me hurt you? I could never live with myself if I was responsible for something so terrible.”

“Mate,” Jack said. “If something like that happened, we’d bring you back to yourself.”

“Kinda like how we’re doing now,” Crow pointed out.

Yusei sniffed again, and laughed just a little. He hadn’t felt this good for a while. He hadn’t talked to his friends, much less his girlfriend, for a while. “Oh god, Lise.” Yusei buried his face in his hands.

“You should definitely talk to her too,” Crow said, thinking that was what Yusei meant.

“And say what? Sorry I’ve been sleeping on the couch. I’ve been afraid I’ll go crazy and try to murder you based on the aura, or chi, or whatever, you felt from some weird creature machine thing we met once?”

“Yes, all of that,” Jack chuckled a little.

“You don’t think she’ll want to break up? Or laugh at me?”

“Honestly, I think she’d be happy to have you talking to her again, and that’s setting the bar pretty low. Especially considering you’ve been mute for practically three weeks.”

Yusei pushed his bangs back from his face, and then let them fall back over his forehead. “That long… I’m so sorry, guys.”

“We forgive you.”

Jack nodded in agreement. “Yeah, just don’t let it get this bad again. We’re friends, so we’re here for you.”

“And so is Lise…and the twins, and Bruno, and Akiza.”

“And tomorrow the WRGP starts,” Yusei realized. He stood up. “I’ve gotta go talk to Lise.”

“Not so fast,” Jack snagged the hem of Yusei’s jacket before his friend could get much further. “Huh?”

“You’re gonna need to eat something.”

“Okay, no problem.”

“And shower. Like with real shampoo and soap,” Crow added. “We’ll wash your clothes too.”

“Right,” Yusei’s cheeks turned a little pink. “That’s a good point… So uh, where is Lise?”

“Martha’s. We’ve got a solid two hours.”

///
“What a night,” Martha shook her head. “How is your ankle?”

“I just twisted it a little, so it’s no big deal,” Lise said. “I can put weight on it, so I should be okay.”

“All right, but if it gets worse I can have Doctor Schmitt take a look.”

“Thanks.”

“Hello again, Martha,” Crow waved as he walked in.

“Good to see you again, my boy,” Martha smiled, polishing off her tea. “To what do we owe the pleasure?”

Jack walked in too, pushing Yusei a little bit. Yusei was more nervous than he looked, but at least he was clean and fed. His eyes still had purple half crescents beneath them, but he certainly looked better than he had in days.

“What a surprise, all my boys are here,” Martha raised an eyebrow at Yusei.

Lise wasn’t sure if she was supposed to stand or stay seated. She had expected she would go home and do this, not that they would come to her. She took a deep breath to stop freaking out. What did she want to do to make amends? To understand and be understood?

“You’re looking better,” Lise said amicably. She stood up.

“Yeah, we had him eat a cheeseburger,” Jack joked.

“No you didn’t,” Yusei grumbled under his breath.

“Point is, he’s better,” Crow rolled his eyes.

“Um,” Yusei spoke before anyone else could speak over him. “I wanted to talk to you…just not with quite so many people…watching…”

“I agree,” Lise said. “Let’s have a duel first.”

Yusei blinked at her. That was not what he’d been expecting. “A riding duel?”

“Yes, exactly,” Lise nodded. She didn’t wait for a response, just went out to her runner.

Yusei followed her, at a loss. Martha had smiled cryptically at him. Jack and Crow were no help either. “Are you challenging me?”

“Yes, wasn’t that obvious?” Lise pushed the button on her helmet to make her visor go down. She mounted her duel runner. “Follow me!”
“Crow?” Akiza yawned into her phone. It was Sunday. She’d been sleeping in. Sure, it was a little bit past eleven, but how often did she get the chance to rest for so long? Not lately. “I thought we weren’t training till later today.”

“Oh, we’re not, but I figured you’d want to see this! Lise challenged Yusei to a turbo duel!”

“She did what?!” Akiza threw off her covers, fully awake. “Where are you guys? I’ll be right over with the twins!”

“We’re by Martha’s place, and they’re gearing up, so be fast!” Crow cried.

“You got it!” Akiza hung up and threw open her closet. She’d have to really step on it this time.

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“So uh…is this because you’re mad at me?” Yusei asked tentatively. Tact had never been his strong point. Then again, if you wanted straight answers sometimes you had to get straight to the point.

Lise thought about it for a second. “I’m not mad, per se. Frustrated yes, but this is less violent than punching you in the face.”

Yusei reddened. It wouldn’t have been the first time she’d punched him. Dueling was definitely better. “Guess I just don’t understand yet.”

“Me either,” Lise smiled.

She waited for Yusei to don his helmet, and slide aboard his runner before driving off. It had been a while since she’d turbo dueled, much less regular dueled. Her days had been filled with worry, pushing down the worry by keeping herself busy, and training. Of course, Mika’s stupid brother made it worse too.

Lise took a deep breath, letting the wind soothe her worries for the moment. It was the closest thing to flying, and it was still exhilarating. “Okay, Speed World 2, do your thing!”

Both duelists entered the streets. Speed World 2’s activation alerted the duel lane computer. In no time, their lane was selected, vacated by pedestrians, and clear for their duel.

“All right, here we go,” Yusei whispered to himself. He pulled up alongside Lise.

“Let’s duel!”

*Lise: 4000

*Yusei: 4000

///

“Here, we can watch from my runner,” Jack said. He pulled up their frequency.

Martha, Crow, and a couple kids crowded around the screen.
“I haven’t watched a turbo duel in a while,” Martha commented. Sure, she had a TV, and the kids loved watching duels, but she’d always been rather busy to catch more than a few minutes. Thank god for Blister’s help.

“And you get to watch one with your kids,” Crow grinned.

Martha nodded. “Considering the circumstances, I’d hope it would be on a happier note. But beggars can’t be choosers.”

Jack nodded. “It’s a weird duel, that’s for sure.”

“I just hope Akiza and the twins get here soon,” Crow peeked at the time. He shifted from foot to foot, staring at the nearby road, willing his friends to show up.

///

“Ladies first!” Lise grinned. “I draw! I’ll summon Flame Alchemist, set a card facedown and end my turn! You’re up!” She saluted him, cheeks pink from more than just the wind.

(Flame Alchemist: Atk: 1500 Def: 900)

Even though it was far from her first turbo duel, Lise never got tired of having her duel monsters beside her in the wind. No wonder the boys got addicted so quickly.

“All right, I draw,” Yusei said. Now that he really thought about it, he and Lise had never turbo dueled before. **Hopefully, this will be fun. Is...Is that what she wanted to do? Just have fun? I mean, I know I’ve been stressed lately but...**

Yusei shook himself out of his thoughts. Whatever the reason, he was going to give it his all. “I summon out Max Warrior in attack mode! He’s attacking your Alchemist!”

(Max Warrior: Atk: 1800 Def: 800)

“But Flame Alchemist’s ability prevents him from being destroyed in battle once a turn!” Lise reminded Yusei.

“You’ll still take the damage! And an extra four hundred due to Max Warrior’s ability!”

Lise braced herself. Her hands white-knuckled the controls. Max Warrior’s weapon smacked Flame Alchemist upside the head. Neither of them were psychic duelists, but that didn’t mean losing lifepoints going 60 miles per hour was comfortable.

Lise: 3300

Yusei: 4000

“Since Max Warrior used its ability, his level reduces to two, and his attack and defense are halved! I end my turn with two facedowns!”

“Not a bad start,” Lise admitted. “But let’s make it more interesting. I summon Flame Enchantress!”

(Flame Enchantress: Atk: 1000 Def: 200)

“You remember her two abilities, right? I’m using one of them right now to halve her attack points, and then she can attack you directly!”
Lise’s Enchantress shrank in size, her attack points changing proportionately to 500. She threw a small fireball at Yusei.

“I play my trap Doppelganger!” Yusei countered. “Because I’m losing lifepoints due to your monster’s special ability, you lose the same amount!”

The fireball hit Yusei in the chest, depleting his lifepoints. A small fireball flew out of the Doppelganger card, slamming into Lise’s back.

Lise: 2800

Yusei: 3500

“That backfired,” Lise grunted, but she was still riding forward steadily. *We both ended up getting hurt because of one person... Kinda like the last couple weeks. Damn that hurts, but I’m not giving in here.*

“Flame Alchemist, incinerate Max Warrior,” Lise commanded.

Her blue-clad warrior snapped his fingers. The spark coming from his gloves was tiny, but the flames Max Warrior became engulfed in were anything but.

Lise: 2800

Yusei: 2900

Yusei winced, his field empty of monsters. Lucky for him, Flame Enchantress had already used her ability to attack.

“I set one card facedown and end my turn!”

///

“Crow, Jack!” Akiza waved. Behind her, she pulled Leo and Luna on their duel boards.

Crow’s face lit up. “Good morning!” he waved back.

“Yusei and Lise are dueling? They’re really dueling?” Leo’s eyes were alight. He could barely hold still he had so much excitement in him.

“For real,” Crow chuckled a little.

“Wow, they’re pretty even,” Akiza commented, watching Jack’s screen intently.

“Not for long,” Jack said.

“This is so exciting,” Martha smiled.

///

“My turn, draw! By sending Quillbolt Hedgehog to the graveyard, I can special summon Quickdraw Synchron to the field! With Quillbolt’s ability, he’s summoned to the field from the grave because I’ve got a tuner out!” Yusei said. “I take it you know what comes next?”

“If we’re playing our greatest hits, then yeah,” Lise smiled. *Perfect.*
“Time to synchro summon! Come on out, Nitro Warrior!”

“We interrupt this program to bring you, my trap: Raigeki Break!” Lise’s smile became a grin.

“What?!”

“I send a card in my hand to the graveyard, and Raigeki Break destroys a card on your field!” She waved at Nitro Warrior. “Say bye-bye to Nitro Warrior!”

Nitro Warrior went up in yellow chips. He didn’t even get the chance to do anything, and Lise had already eliminated him. Yusei scowled at Lise’s back, but she remained unmoved.

“Fine then, I summon Tricular in defense mode, and end my turn with a facedown.”

(Tricular: Atk: 300 Def: 300)

True to its name, Tricular was indeed a machine tricycle. It was adorable, driving next to Yusei.

“My move then, draw!” Lise said.

She consulted her cards. Okay, so I can have Enchantress work her magic again, but then I’d take the damage too. At this point, it’s a calculated risk, considering we’re still pretty much neck and neck. But Yusei would lose more lifepoints once I plow through his bike trio. For now, attacking and defending is my best bet.

“I’m summoning out Flame Alchemy Carrier! She’ll chill here in defense mode.”

(Flame Alchemy Carrier: Atk: 600 Def: 1800)

“But her friends want some action! Flame Enchantress attack Yusei directly!”

“Not this time! This one’s an oldie, but goodie: Scrap-Iron Scarecrow!”

It was Lise’s turn to scowl. “I really hate that card.”

“That’s why it’s still in my deck,” Yusei couldn’t help but grin, just a little.

“But thankfully, I have more than one monster to attack you with! Flame Alchemist, incinerate!” Lise pointed at Tricular.

“When Tricular is destroyed, Bicular is summoned from my deck to take his place!”

(Bicular: Atk: 200 Def: 200)

The second little blue, bike monster drove onto the field in defense mode.

“End turn.”

“I draw, and since I’ve got six speed counters, I can play Angel Baton! I draw two cards from my deck, and pick one to keep, and one to send to the grave!” Yusei said. “Speaking of favorites, come on out Junk Synchron! Thanks to him, I can summon out the Tuningware I just sent to my graveyard!”

(Junk Synchron: Atk: 1300 Def: 500)

(Tuningware: Atk: 100 Def: 300)
“Tuningware also acts as a level two monster when he’s part of a synchro summon! So I’m tuning these two to synchro summon… Junk Warrior!”

“Oh boy, I’m in trouble,” Lise muttered under her breath. All I’ve got is Urgent Tuning on the field, so this is gonna hurt.

“Thanks to Tuningware, I can also draw a card,” Yusei continued. “Because Bicular is a level two monster, on the turn Junk Warrior is summoned, Bicular can give Junk Warrior a two-hundred-point power boost!”

“I’m really in trouble,” Lise repeated. “Just gonna have to hang on.”

“Go Junk Warrior, and attack Enchantress! Scrap Fist!”

In one go, fifteen hundred lifepoints were gone. Enchantress with them. It took all of Lise’s willpower not to scream, her jaw and hands clenched tightly.

Lise: 1300
Yusei: 2900

“Your turn,” Yusei said quietly. He could feel the frustration and pain radiating off her. But what else was he going to do? This was a duel after all. It’s like… we’re both being backed into corners...

I’m not done yet. Not even close. Lise reached for her deck.

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“Ouch,” Akiza cringed, lip curling. “That was quite the attack.”

“The gap has widened,” Jack agreed.

“At least they’re talking,” Martha said.

“They are?” Leo wrinkled his nose. “No, they’re dueling.”

Luna rolled her eyes. “Leo, not everything is so cut and dry.”

“What? What did I do?!”

“Nothing, just watch the duel.”

Akiza watched with rapt attention. It’s like… they’re trying to express how the past few weeks made them feel...

Luna took her hand. “Their duel monsters say they’re sad,” she told Akiza.

“Even right now?”

“Well…less so now, but it’s like remaking a connection.”

“That makes sense,” Crow nodded. He’d been listening to the girls’ conversation. “They haven’t dueled much in the past few weeks, and they haven’t dueled each other for ages.”

“Not since the Fortune Cup,” Martha said.
“Here goes nothing,” Lise said. “Since I have seven speed counters, I can easily play the speed
spell Lost and Found to special summon the tuner monster Pyrus Starburst!”

(Pyrus Starburst: Atk: 1000 Def: 1000)

Lise’s monster resembled a tiny version of Crimson Starburst Dragon. Still, it flew its tiny self
valiantly beside its friend.

“When Pyrus is summoned, I can special summon a level four or below monster with a thousand
attack or less from my graveyard. I think I’ll bring Smoke Raven out!”

“Now that’s an oldie,” Yusei said, smiling at the bird-like monster.

“But it never hurts to shake things up a bit. Now I regular summon Fire Ferret!”

(Fire Ferret: Atk: 400 Def: 1200)

The little furry creature looked more like a furry, red panda. He was new, but rather tame in
comparison to Lise’s other fire-based creatures. Fire Ferret had cuteness points.

“Now that we have all the pieces, it’s time for a synchro summon! Come on out; Crimson Starburst
Dragon!”

(Crimson Starburst Dragon: Atk: 2500 Def: 3000)

Lise’s monster was just as beautiful and terrifying as she was. Its long body flowed freely in the
wind. Wings made of fire, and eyes blazing.

“Crimson Starburst Dragon, attack Junk Warrior!” Lise ordered, pointing at her target.

“Did you forget Scrap-Iron Scarecrow?” Yusei asked, activating the trap.

“Noope, I just needed it out of the way so my Alchemist can send Bicular packing! Flame
Alchemist, incinerate!”

Bicular went up in smoke too. “Since Bicular was destroyed in battle, Unicycular takes his place!”

The last bike monster wheeled onto the field. True to the name, the monster was a little red,
machine unicycle.

(Unicycular: Atk: 100 Def: 100)

“Then my turn is over,” Lise said.

Yusei watched her taking the turns as they came up for a minute. She’s still frustrated, but she’s
doing what she can. Indirectly getting to me… Hanging on… But that isn’t going to last.

“I draw, and I’ll have Junk Warrior attack your Flame Alchemist! He won’t be destroyed, I know,
but your lifepoints are a different story!”

Another nine hundred lifepoints down the drain. Lise was beginning to rethink using Flame
Alchemist. I’m giving it everything I have, but there’s always another way to get around my
defenses! It’s like no matter what I do, he can keep hammering away at my lifepoints!
Is this what he felt? Like there wasn’t any other choice? I thought it’d be anger, but I’m feeling fear more than anything else from this!

Lise: 500
Yusei: 2900

///

“Uh oh, she’s below the Speed World 2 safety line,” Crow said.

“The safety line?” Martha said.

Crow nodded. “Yusei and Lise both have nine speed counters at the beginning of Lise’s turn. If Yusei draws a speed spell on his next turn, he can use four of his speed counters and Speed World 2 to deal eight hundred damage to Lise, and win.”

“Just like that?” Martha gasped.

“Yes,” Jack said. “You can remove seven speed counters to draw a card, and you can remove ten speed counters to destroy any card on the field. But that’s only if you have a speed spell in your hand.”

“That’s not good.”

///

“Okay,” Lise took a deep breath. She was down, not out. “Rather than hope you don’t draw a speed spell, I think I’ll take care of this problem now. Flame Alchemy Carrier can restore five hundred of my lifepoints by destroying my facedown card.”

Lise: 1000
Yusei: 2900

“And as much as I’d like to attack, your Scarecrow is in the way. So I’ll switch my Alchemist to defense and call it good.”

Yusei smiled a little to himself. “Now I can’t use Speed World 2 to finish the duel. Clever.”

“It wouldn’t be any fun if it just ended here.”

“You’re…having fun?” Yusei blinked, staring at Lise.

She glanced back at him. Her eyes, for as long as Yusei had known her, the color of the sky. “Aren’t you?”

“You probably won’t be after this turn,” Yusei swallowed, but he reached for his deck. “I summon out Effect Veiler!”

(Effect Veiler: Atk: 0 Def: 0)

“Next, I use the Vision Wind speed spell to bring Tuningware back from the graveyard! Effect Veiler tunes Junk Warrior and Tuningware to synchro summon…Stardust Dragon!”

Yusei’s ace joined Lise’s. Stardust’s silvers and blues were a deep contrast to Crimson Starburst’s
reds and oranges. The two dragons stared each other down.

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“Oh yeah!” Leo cheered. “Clash of the dragons!”

Luna’s hand squeezed Akiza’s tighter. “This is it.”

“The end of the duel?” Akiza asked gently.

“No,” Luna shook her head. “All that pain has to go somewhere.”

///

“I’ll end my turn there.”

“K then,” Lise took a deep breath, and drew her card. *Damnit! All I can do is hope I can hold out through the next turn! There’s…nothing else I can do…* “I’m setting one card facedown, but I’m destroying it with Flame Alchemy Carrier’s ability! Hello five hundred more lifepoints!”

*Lise: 1500*

*Yusei: 2900*

“Go,” Lise said shortly. Her hands white-knuckled over the controls again. She hated this. Waiting to be of use, to help. There had to be another way, but there wasn’t.

“My turn, draw!” Yusei said, his brows drawn taught over his eyes. *It’s not just the duel. She’s been in this kind of pain for as long as I’ve been in mine…* He took a deep breath.

“I play the speed spell Synchro Blast Wave! By paying five speed counters, and because I have a synchro monster on my field, I can destroy a monster on your field! Who better than Crimson Starburst Dragon?!” Yusei Go slowed down in accordance with the amount of speed counters lost.

Lise’s jaw clenched, but she sent her ace, her protector, to the graveyard. It was like she was losing a good friend.

“Next, I summon Speed Warrior! You know his attack points double the turn he’s summoned, so Stardust Dragon and Speed Warrior attack Flame Alchemist!”

Finally, Lise’s Alchemist was destroyed. She only had his counterpart, Flame Alchemy Carrier left.

“Our turn, Lise.”

*He’s in pain too…* Lise realized once the attack had finished washing over her. *It’s the same as my deck right now. I want their help, their support, but I can’t seem to find it! And this fear! It’s almost overwhelming! It’s much more than just losing this duel.*

“I…I’m not giving in,” Lise murmured, drawing her new card. “I play Angel Baton too! I can since I’m maxed out on speed counters! Like you said, I keep one card, and ditch the other! I summon Tail of Fire Feathers in defense mode!”

*(Tail of Fire Feathers: Atk: 900 Def: 1200)*

Like its name suggested, the red peacock’s tail was made of fire. Each long feather, of course with a male peacock’s signature eye design, but on fire.
“When this bird is successfully summoned,” Lise pointed back at Yusei’s field. “All your spells and traps are destroyed!”

“I forgot she had that card,” Yusei said. His three traps burst into yellow chips, and vanished to the graveyard.

“I end my turn!”

“I draw, and I’m sacrificing Speed Warrior to summon out Turret Warrior!” Yusei wasn’t wasting anymore time.

(Turret Warrior: Atk: 1200 Def: 2000)

“Because Speed Warrior was a warrior type monster, Turret Warrior gains his nine hundred attack points! Stardust Dragon attack Flame Alchemy Carrier! Turret Warrior attack Tail of Fire Feathers!”

Lise didn’t lose any lifepoints from the attacks. Her monster had been in defense mode for a reason. But her field was empty. That’s how every duel started, but the looming fear and her empty field together had never made her feel so alone. It feels like I’m being crushed! Lise clutched at her chest, trying to alleviate this isolating pain.

“I end my turn.”

She was shaking, but Lise managed to reach for her deck. “I… draw…” Lise peeked at the card. “All right!” Maybe she wasn’t as alone as she thought. “I play the speed spell Double Spell! I pay six speed counters, and then I can use a spell in your graveyard!”

“Mine?”

“You bet!” Lise smiled. She was still a little shaky, but she had a chance. A chance she was more than willing to take. So what if she slowed down so that she was riding behind Yusei. “I think I’ll borrow your Angel Baton to draw two more cards! I summon the card I kept, Solar Butterfly, in attack mode!”

(Solar Butterfly: Atk: 300 Def: 0)

Lise watched her tiny butterfly fly in circles around her. Wings of pure light, it warded off the darkness trying to hurt her.

“And when I successfully summon Solar Butterfly, I can draw two more cards from my deck! I set two cards facedown and end my turn!” I just hope they can get me through the next round!

“It’s the end of the line, Lise! Stardust Dragon, attack Solar Butterfly!”

“No it isn’t! I play Impact! My monsters aren’t destroyed this turn! I play Fireheart’s ability from my hand too! He halves my battle damage if I send him to the graveyard!”

Lise cried out from the force of the attack. She’d saved her butterfly, and her lifepoints, but Stardust’s cosmic flare was anything but gentle.

Lise: 400

Yusei: 2900

“You forgot,” Yusei said. She’s held out for so long, but it’s over. “I have Turret Warrior too!
Turret Warrior attack her butterfly!

“Trap card open!” Lise moved fast. She was using everything she had left. This duel was going to last until she said it was over. “Magic Cylinder negates your attack, and you lose lifepoints equal to Turret Warrior’s attack points!”

“No way!”

Lise: 400
Yusei: 800

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“Wow! Quite the reversal!” Crow exclaimed.

“It isn’t over yet,” Jack said.

Akiza frowned. “But Lise is still at a disadvantage. There’s nothing in her deck than can save her from Yusei’s monsters again.”

“At this point, I don’t know what it means. Is it bad if Lise loses? Is it bad if Yusei loses?”

Martha shook her head. “Not necessarily. As long as they’ve seen what they need to.” To understand and be understood. I think you’ve done it, Lise.

///

Yusei consulted his hand. His two traps, Urgent Tuning and Synchro Barrier, weren’t going to do him much good. He sighed. “You’ve got one turn left. Make the most of it.”

I will! Um, I think? Lise bit her lip. She needed a miracle, and her deck was, more than likely, fresh out.

Maybe she was still a little bit shaky, or maybe she was tearing up. Either way, it looked like little, tiny sparks of fire were circling her deck.

“Okay,” Lise breathed a deep, calming breath. “I trust you. I…draw!” She looked again at her new card, and then at her deck. The sparks were still there, telling her something. “Here goes everything. I summon out Ener-G in attack mode!”

(Ener-G: Atk: 1400 Def: 1300)

Lise’s little nuclear monster was basically a nuclear blast contained in a suit of armor. It clunked awkwardly in the suit as it ran beside its friend.

“He can special summon a pyro type monster that’s level two or below from my hand! Come on out, Implosion Salamander!”

(Implosion Salamander: Atk: 200 Def: 200)

Normally, Lise’s scaly monster would be destroyed immediately because of his own ability. This time, Ener-G’s special summoning meant the red, orange, and black lizard could stick around.

“Wait, what?” Leo tapped Jack’s screen to make sure it was working properly.

“Hey! No touching!” Jack pushed Leo’s hand away. “Sorry,” he added when Martha gave him a scathing look.

“Did you know Lise had a level two synchro monster?” Crow nudged Akiza’s shoulder gently with his good arm.

“Nope,” she shook her head.

“I synchro summon Ash Protector!” Lise cried.

Her new monster resembled a small girl clad in a dark cloak. She clutched at a golden egg-shaped box in her arms like her life depended on it. Despite the fact that Lise looked nothing like the little girl, she had dark skin, eyes, and hair, she felt as small, helpless, and vulnerable as this monster looked.

(Ash Protector: Atk: 500 Def: 500)

It hit Lise that this monster couldn’t do anything against Stardust or Turret Warrior. She was going to lose. After everything. She was still going to lose.

“Ash Protector’s summoning allows me to draw a card. I end my turn,” Lise said.

Her teeth clenched, and her grip tightened on the handles of her runner. Yusei rode in front of her… yet to be met… Damnit! God fucking dammit! I got so close, but I couldn’t even reach him!

Yusei drew his card. “It’s okay, Lise,” he smiled a little bit. “I haven’t felt like this in a long time.” Nevertheless, he had a duel to win. I’m sorry… “Stardust Dragon, attack Ash Protector with cosmic flare!”

Tears fell into Lise’s lap. She barely saw her monster’s destruction. But I still don’t understand! This pain of loneliness and isolation! Why?! She rested her head on the dashboard of her runner. I just wanted to understand what you were going through…

“Turret Warrior, end this duel; attack Ener-G!”

Fire, roiling and bright, suddenly burst out of Lise’s duel runner. Colors, blue, green, yellow, orange and red, competed for dominance in their fiery dance.

Lise’s lifepoints dropped like they were in slow motion. Ener-G was taking his sweet time dying too.

“Whoa!” Lise yelped, she raised her arm to protect her face. Fire licked up the surface of her duel runner, over Lise’s skin and body like she was made of dry twigs. In no time at all, she was consumed in flames.

“Oh no!” Luna gasped.

“Lise is literally on fire!” Leo screeched.
“We gotta get down there!” Akiza ran for her duel runner. “She could be hurt!”

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A second later, Lise realized that she wasn’t in any physical pain. She lowered her arm, wiggling her fingers experimentally. “It…doesn’t burn…” she murmured.

An orange glow exploded out of her duel disk. Not, from her deck, but from her graveyard! The glow pushed into her extra deck, and a new card popped out, glowing orange. Lise grabbed the card out of the air, suddenly no longer afraid.

“I synchro summon Shining Phoenix Dragon!”

“What?!” Yusei’s mouth dropped open into a perfect letter ‘O.’ He’d already stopped, thinking he’d won, but he had to remove his helmet to take in the full effect.

Lise: 0

Yusei: 800

Lise’s new monster was beautiful. Shining was no exaggeration; it practically glowed. Like the Crimson Dragon, Shining Phoenix was a long, skinny dragon. Unlike the Crimson Dragon, Shining Phoenix had gold and red wings that doubled as its arms. Her angular face tapered into a beak-like snout. Light blue eyes stared out of a golden, feathery head. Horns sprouted from behind the eyes. Scales lined the dragon’s throat and belly, winding down to the tail. Additional tailfeathers twirled gracefully in the breeze. Flames burned warmly on the dragon’s head, and the tip of the tail. The dragon’s talons were at least half the size of Lise’s duel runner.

Yusei was almost too consumed with the new monster to remember he was still dueling. Even though he’d stopped, and the attacks had gone through, it wasn’t over. His runner still read Lise with zero lifepoints, and him with eight hundred. It did not, however, say winner as it was supposed to. What was this monster? “Uh…end turn?”

Lise smiled as she drove past Yusei, making her duel runner skid to the side. She threw out her hand. “Shining Phoenix, attack Stardust Dragon!”

The flames had condensed to encase only her. Blues and greens swirled, matching her eyes. Yellows, oranges and reds burned harmlessly, making Lise’s hair appear like it was made of flames.

“Beautiful…” Yusei murmured. The flames consuming his dragon, and the rest of his lifepoints, didn’t burn at all. Yet his face still felt warm, heart warmer than it’d been in weeks.

Lise: 0 (winner)

Yusei: 0

Smoke blew out of Yusei’s runner once the fire had cleared. He’d forgot about that part. Coughing, he quickly dismounted, using his helmet to blow some of the smoke out of his way.

Exhausted, he sank to his knees. She’s been in just as much pain as I have. God, I’m such an idiot.

“Yusei?” Lise joined him on the ground. She was breathing hard, but the last of the flames had flickered out. “Are you okay?”
“Yeah, just tired. Are you okay?”

Lise nodded, picking at the dead skin at her fingertips. “Um so…” she swallowed and took another deep breath. “The duel…you felt isolated but on purpose? What made you so afraid you would do that?”

“Right, yeah, I haven’t been okay,” Yusei sighed. He pushed his hair back from his face, and let it fall back over his eyes. “I- That thing we saw, that felt like me? Remember?”

“Yes,” Lise said softly, nodding.

“I got scared. I didn’t know what it meant, or even what to do about it. I have no idea if that thing is me from the future, or something worse. There was nothing I could do about it without more information.

So I jumped to the worst conclusion. I thought even if it wasn’t me exactly, it could still make me do things. I thought if I stayed away from you, all of you, I wouldn’t end up hurting you. That thing wouldn’t be able to use me to hurt you.”

Lise’s hands clenched into fists in her lap. She looked out over the water the track was suspended above. “You thought you were going to be possessed.”

“Yes,” Yusei’s voice was quiet.

“It never occurred to you to ask what it’s like?”

Yusei turned pale. He’d suddenly remembered that particular detail of whom he was speaking to. “Oh God. Lise…no. I never even considered…”

“I’ll say,” Lise tried to laugh it off, but it came out more like a strangled hiccup. “I mean, at least I’m possessed by a good dragon, right?”

“You don’t have to-“

“No, it’s important,” Lise’s voice was shaky, but she didn’t stop. “I’ve never told anyone what it’s like. Not even Akiza. Of course, I don’t think my experience is universal, but I’m not sure.

Anyway, it’s different when I’m in the Eye of the Dragon and when I go full dragon. At least now in the Eye of the Dragon, I have control of what I’m doing.”

She licked her lips, trying to steal herself for the rest. Yusei waited. This was something he should have asked about ages ago.

“In full dragon mode… It’s like I’m suddenly this pinprick. Everything I am is suddenly no bigger than a sewing pin. I can’t even tell what’s going on. I see flashes of things, but nothing concrete. It’s like being asleep.

Uh, during your duel with Jack, the end of the Fortune Cup, how long do you think we disappeared for?”

Yusei shrugged. “I dunno, maybe fifteen or twenty minutes at most.”

Lise smiled briefly. She rubbed at her eyes.

“Oh,” Yusei’s eyes widened. “You don’t remember anything, do you?”
“No,” Lise shook her head, sniffing a little. “All I know is I collapsed in Goodwin’s viewing box, and woke up on the track.

But I got lucky that time because I woke up with you. When I woke up in Goodwin’s private exam room? It was so terrifying! I didn’t know where I was, or where you were! I didn’t even know what he did to me.

But, my point is, do you remember everything you’ve been doing? There are no blank patches? You didn’t feel like you fell asleep in one place and woke up in a different one?”

“No,” Yusei sighed in relief. “I remember everything, every painful detail of these past few weeks.”

“Good,” Lise rubbed at her eyes. It did nothing to stop more tears from coming. “I’m sorry for telling you about that creature. I was so confused, and I didn’t know what to do. I should’ve known it would hurt you. It wasn’t like we could do anything about it anyway. I’m sorry.” She rested her head on Yusei’s chest and threw her arms around him. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” Yusei returned the gesture, and he was crying now too. “I’m sorry too. I’m so sorry for keeping you in the dark. I could feel your frustration, and you just wanted to help, but I kept pushing you away. I’m sorry.”

That was how Akiza found them a moment later. She hit Crow’s number in her phone. “They’re okay,” she said when Crow picked up. She was smiling. “They’re talking. Oh, and crying. A lot.”

“I knew they would be,” Martha’s voice came through. Crow must have had it on speaker. “All they needed was to understand and be understood.”

“I’m gonna head back then. I have a feeling we’ll see these two in a little bit,” Akiza laughed and hung up. Couldn’t be on her phone and drive at the same time.

Yusei rubbed his eyes a little, breathing through Lise’s hair. It’d been forever since he’d held her like this.

“I missed you,” Lise murmured into his chest.

“Mmm,” Yusei agreed, he pulled Lise’s hair out of the way. His lips found the side of her neck. Lise gasped sharply, her nails digging into his back. “I missed you too.” Why had he ever thought he could stay away from her?

Lise pulled back, just a little. She needed enough space to trace Yusei’s criminal marker with her fingers. Yusei leaned into her touch, closing his eyes, and holding her hand there with his own once her thumb reached the little triangle part of the mark. There was the warmth, love, and safety she felt from him.

“I love you so much,” Lise blurted at the same time Yusei had turned his head to kiss her palm. Her cheeks turned scarlet.

Yusei covered up his own blushing face by kissing Lise’s forehead. “I love you too…so much.”
Yusei awoke from his nightmares with a start. Once again, he’d lost his friends to something horrible. Something he was somehow responsible for.

He felt heavy with the weight of the dream. It should have been easier by the millionth time, right? He sank back into the bed heavily, and rolled over with a sigh.

Warm legs crossed over his under the covers. And then an arm reached over Yusei’s side, the second hand nestled in the folds of the back of his t-shirt. Lise’s breath was warm too as it ghosted over the back of his neck.

Yusei sighed again, a different, lighter sigh. His hand found Lise’s, pressing it to where it had fallen; just under his sternum.

It wasn’t perfect. The nightmares weren’t magically going to go away. But it helped to have Lise’s warmth beside him.

///

That morning, Yusei woke up before Lise, as usual. She was on her left side, facing away from him. Her body rose and fell in synch with her breathing. She didn’t snore, but her hair was a mess.

Yusei pushed the hair off Lise’s neck. She doubled up slightly when Yusei’s lips met the back of her neck.

“That tickles!”

“Sorry, but you’ve got a cute mole right there.”

Lise yawned and rolled over. It felt so good to have Yusei back in the same bed. He wasn’t cured by a long shot, but every inch of her was happy to have him back. “You’re so sappy,” Lise tugged teasingly on his messy bangs. “I missed you so much.”

“I missed you too. I was such an idiot.”

“I’ll say,” Lise said. “If you really wanted to distance yourself you should’ve broken up with me.”

Yusei lowered his head. Maybe if he pushed his head deeper into the pillows and blankets, they’d eat him. In hindsight, breaking up made sense, but he was glad he hadn’t done so. If he’d learned anything from the fight against the Dark Signers, going it alone was not always the best option. “That never even occurred to me.”

“Oh, you didn’t- I wouldn’t- You’re so…” Lise wasn’t sure what to say to that. Yusei was so dorky and cute. She loved his good heart so much. “I’m kinda glad you didn’t.”

“Me too!” Yusei blurted, raising his head. His cheeks were pink, and he bit his lip. “I just feel so stupid for learning the same lesson twice.”

Lise lifted one shoulder. “Sometimes we need reminders. This time was your turn.”

“Yeah,” Yusei nodded a little, thinking to himself. After maybe a minute, he noticed Lise was staring. “What?” His face heated up.
Her cheeks were red too. “It’s stupid.”

“Please?” His fingers closed around Lise’s hand.

“I missed you,” Lise said, staring at their joined hands. The longer she spoke, the faster she went. She also turned redder and redder. “I missed how weirdly soft your hair is even though it’s spiky too. I missed your ocean blue eyes. I missed tracing your mark. I missed the smell of your coat when I use it as a blanket. I missed your light little touches whenever you walk by me. I missed your cooking. I missed your smiles, and I missed waking up with you! I just… I really missed you.”

Yusei brushed away the little tear trying to make its way down Lise’s face with his thumb. “I missed you too, so much I ached…and that’s not stupid.”

“Heh,” Lise half hiccupped, half laughed. She pressed her lips to Yusei’s forehead, his bangs in the way. “I wish I could say stuff like this more often. I want to, but I feel…weird…”

“I like hearing nice things about myself,” Yusei agreed teasingly, tugging on a strand of Lise’s hair. “But sometimes I like that you do it sparingly.” His cheeks turned pink. “Makes me feel special.”

“I love you,” Lise whispered. He understood, and she had zero hope of explaining how weightless that made her feel.

“I love you too.”

///

Leo and Luna came busting through the doors bright and early. The opening ceremony of the WRGP didn’t start until noon, but they couldn’t hold in their excitement. Besides, Crow had invited them over before the tournament started so the whole team could go together.

“Good morning!” Luna yelled, hoping her politeness would cancel out her brother slamming the doors.

“Perfect timing,” Crow grinned up at the twins. He spread his hands to the best of his ability, eyebrow cocked. “Like our new riding suits?”

“They arrived just in time,” Akiza added.

She was clad in her red and black riding suit, looking dangerous and powerful. She was ready to prove her merit beside her friends.

Yusei’s resembled his usual blue coat and black t-shirt, but tighter. The coat was brought in, and shortened. Orange and black patches stretched across his torso and one pant leg. The zipper across his new riding top cinched everything together nicely.

Crow’s was brown, like his usual coat, but with black, armor-like accents. He’d donned black gloves designed to look like feathers, and a belt-like accent piece stretched across his chest.

Jack wore his white riding suit, as usual. Minus his long coat though. He wanted to be fast, and, according to him, he was already fashionable enough to ride his duel runner with style too.

At Akiza’s insistence, Lise had a suit too. She’d gone for the coat style too with a bright red riding jacket and orange accent stripes. Her top was black, but folded and buttoned tightly and comfortably at the side. Her new gloves were also black, but shorter than Crow’s and Yusei’s. She
wore similar jeans to her blue, ripped ones, but without the rips. She wanted to be aerodynamic and fashionable.

“Oh man, you do look cool!” Leo squealed, fists clenched. “I’m so jealous!”

Luna peered closer at the small white, red, and gold logo emblazoned on the equivalent of everyone’s left breast pocket. “Team 5Ds? That’s the new team name?”

Jack crossed his arms and sniffed. “Yes.”

“It was a team effort,” Akiza explained. “We brainstormed last night before we went to bed, and Lise did all the sketches and designs. Crow and Jack got everything to merchandising, which I paid a rush service for.”

“What’s 5Ds mean?” Leo blinked at her.

“Well, 5Ds means there are five D’s, right?” Bruno piped up. “There’s D for Devil, D for Destroy, D for Death hit, D for Dark, and Daisuke-Bruno’s D! Because everybody loves Bruno!” He pointed at himself with a cheesy grin.

Jack punched him in the head.

“I was only kidding…” Bruno whimpered.

“We wanted the name to reflect all of us as a team,” Lise spoke before Jack could say something mean, or biting about the team name. “When we really sat down to think about it, we were all connected through the Crimson Dragon and our dragons.” Lise peeled off her gloves, revealing the spiral markings on her palms.

“Yes,” Jack agreed, nodding sagely. He rolled up his sleeve to expose his wing marking. “For our marks.”

“Really?” Luna rolled her sleeve back too. She’d never thought about it like that. In the past, Leo had generally been the one to introduce her to new friends. Her mark had been the guiding force for meeting their friends gathered today.

Yusei smiled at them. “Yeah, we felt our bonds were solidified by the Crimson Dragon.”

Leo returned the smile. “Yeah, we met all of you because of Luna’s mark!”

“But I’m not in the name!” Bruno protested. He grinned cheekily again. “The name should be Bruno and 5Ds!” This declaration earned him another punch from Jack. “I told you I was kidding!”

Akiza sighed, shaking her head. Sometimes these boys were a little much.

Lise put her hand up to whisper in Akiza’s ear. “Just be grateful he didn’t make a dick joke,” she said.

Akiza snorted and had to hide her giggles behind her hand. “I think it’s a good name,” she said once she’d regained control of herself.

“All right, hands in everybody.” Yusei extended his bare right arm, mark exposed. Lise’s hand went in after his, Akiza’s followed. Luna reached timidly in, pulling her brother’s in too. To which he was so grateful for, he had to rub his eyes with his free hand several times. Jack, Crow with their marks, and Bruno, were the last hands in. “From today onwards, we… are Team 5Ds!”
They pushed their hands down and pumped their fists together. “YEAH!”

“Oh, and we didn’t forget you guys either,” Lise grabbed the team 5Ds hats she and Akiza had made.

“We really are a team!” Luna squealed, putting hers on immediately.

Leo just sniffled, rubbing at his eyes. “I’m putting this on my shrine.”

Akiza beamed. “Glad you like them.”

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Buzzing with people, the arena sounded like a beehive of activity. Jets whizzed by, emitting smoke that eventually spelled out WRGP in the sky. If the perfect blue and fluffy clouds was any indication, the day was perfect for the beginning of a tournament.

Team 5Ds versus Team Unicorn!

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Luciano laughed as he and his associates watched. “It’s finally begun! Wouldn’t it be great if the Circuit were completed today?”

Joel looked at the holo-orb before them. The teams were powerful, yes, but it was wishful thinking to believe their plans would be completed so soon.

“Fat chance,” Placido muttered under his breath.

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“Today, our tournament kicks off at the Kaiba Corp Tournament Arena!” the usual MC declared. “Facing off today are two amazing teams! First there’s Team Unicorn, the winners of the Atlantis cup! The three duelists; Breo, Andre, and Jean! Their opponents today are Team 5Ds’ Yusei Fudo, Akiza Izinski, and Jack Atlas!”

The crowd roared appropriately. Leo and Luna’s classmates were in the audience. Even Akiza’s parents had made an appearance.

“Both these teams are favored to be the WRGP winner, so this early face off is sure to be fantastic!”

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“All right, what’s the game plan?” Leo asked. “Should we do a team huddle?”

Luna rolled her eyes. “Leo, this isn’t football.”

“We were thinking Jack goes first, then Yusei, then Akiza,” Lise said, counting them off on her fingers.

“I thought Yusei would go first?” Luna frowned.

“Not today,” Yusei said. “I wanna see what I’m up against first.”

“Besides,” Jack clenched his fists. “My power deck will wipe the floor with them before they can
cry uncle!"

“I wouldn’t hold my breath on that one,” Bruno said.

Both Jack and Andre pulled up to the starting line. The teams were doing last minute tune ups, and pep talks.

Jean made his way over to Team 5Ds.

“Whoa, what do you want?” Crow’s eyes narrowed.

Jean put his hand up, a friendly gesture. “Don’t worry. I just wanted to introduce myself, and offer my sincere sympathies for your injury.” He pointed to Crow’s cast.

Crow decided to take that as a small challenge. He smiled, gesturing to his friends with his good arm. “Yeah, it’s too bad, but Team 5Ds is still strong without me.”

“Oh, I know,” Jean shrugged. “We consider you guys our greatest rivals in this tournament. It’s time to settle things.”

Yusei nodded. “Yeah, let’s give it our all today.”

“Of course,” Jean’s expression went from friendly to threatening at the blink of an eye. “The battle has already begun!” He walked away to the stunned looks of Team 5Ds on his back.

Crow growled, making a fist. “What’s with that guy? He sure is talkative today.”

“Hmph,” Jack sniffed. “He’s just trying to rattle us. He knows we’re strong. As long as Jack Atlas is the first rider, a win is guaranteed!”

“Shut up before you jinx us, idiot,” Lise teased, rolling her eyes too.

“All right, once our teams’ pit crew returns to the pit, we can get this show on the road!”

“See ya later, Jack! Good luck!” Leo called as the team ran off the track.

“This is so exciting,” Akiza said. “But I’m super nervous. Are you sure it’s a good idea for me to go last?”

“Absolutely,” Yusei said. “It takes pressure off of both of us. Don’t worry. Jack and I will clear a path for you.”

Akiza smiled at her friends.

“Speed World 2, set on!”

The countdown started. It was really happening. At the sound of the buzzer, the WRGP was officially beginning.

Jack and Andre gunned their runners like there was no tomorrow. They sped across the track, neck and neck for the first turn.

“The duel starts after the first corner!”

“Phoenix Whirlwind won’t lose!” Jack declared.
Andre shook his head. **Sorry Team 5Ds, but I’m taking the first corenr with my secret weapon.** He hit a button next to one of his handles.

Blue flames shot out of the back of Andre’s duel runner. He went screeching past Jack like a bullet.

“What the-?!” Bruno couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

“An overboost system,” Yusei realized, grimly.

Jean smiled at his screen. **“Good. Operation D is well underway.”**

Breo nodded, a conniving smile stretched across his face. “You were right. We’re fifty percent closer to victory.”

**Sorry, Jack, but the WRGP isn’t your average tournament. I’ll teach you all what it means to fight as a team.**

Jack ground his teeth together. “Fine, go first!”

“And Team Unicorn takes the first turn! The duel begins!”

“Let’s duel!”

*Jack: 4000*

*Andre: 4000*

“My turn!” Andre drew his card. “I summon the tuner Unicorn Familiar!”

(Unicorn Familiar: Atk: 0 Def: 1000)

“Next, by removing a spell card in my hand from play, I can special summon Monoceros!”

(Monoceros: Atk: 1000 Def: 1000)

“A synchro summon right off the bat,” Jack grumped.

“I set two cards and end my turn,” Andre said.

Yusei cocked his head at the screen. “This is fishy,” he muttered.

“Something wrong, Yusei?” Leo asked.

“Why didn’t he synchro summon?”

“Maybe he knows Jack’s power deck strategy?” Bruno suggested. “He could be shoring up his defenses.”

“I don’t think so,” Yusei shook his head. “When Monoceros is used as synchro material for a beast type monster it can revive a tuner monster from the graveyard. Even if he synchro summoned, he’d still have two monsters on the field. Synchro summoning would have given him a stronger defense.”

Lise grinned at him. “You’re kinda smart.”

Yusei’s cheeks flushed pink. He adjusted his gloves, laughing nervously, a goofy smile on his face.
“First off, I’m gonna declare this a no flirting zone, you two-“

“Sorry,” Lise and Yusei spoke simultaneously.

“Second,” Crow continued exasperatedly. “Then why wouldn’t he synchro summon?”

“I dunno, but I’m getting a bad feeling from this duel.”

“Let’s go!” Jack declared, drawing a card. “I’ll show you my power cuz it’s my turn! I can special summon my Vice Dragon when you control monsters, and I don’t! Because it was special summoned, its attack and defense points are halved. Next, I summon Dark Resonator! I tune level five Vice Dragon with level three Dark Resonator! I synchro summon… Red Dragon Archfiend!”

“All right! That’s Jack Atlas for you! He didn’t waste any time getting his ace monster out!” The MC reported cheerfully.

“When Red Dragon Archfiend attacks a defense position monster, it destroys all the other monsters in defense mode! Go Red Dragon, Absolute Power Force!”

Jean smiled to himself. “He fell for it.”

“I activate Unicorn Familiar’s effect!” Andre countered. “When this defense position monster is attacked, I can remove it from play by removing another monster I control from the game!”

“What?”

“Now his field his empty!” Crow gasped.

“I get it!” Jack realized. “He’s trying to draw me into a trap! Then, since conditions have changed, I choose not to replay the attack!”

“Shame, but that’s not possible! Through Unicorn Familiar’s effect, the attack can’t be stopped!”

“What?!”

“Jack Atlas, eat your own power! I play the trap Different Dimension Barrier-Lost Force! When a monster is removed from my field, except from battle, I return the attacking monster’s attack!”

Jack’s mouth dropped open. “You can do that?!”

*Jack: 1000*

*Andre: 4000*

“Jack!”

“Why you-!” Jack growled. He hated to admit it, but he’d been thoroughly duped.

“Oh no! Jack has instantly been countered and taken three thousand points of damage!” The MC was aghast.

Nevertheless, Jack rode on. Judging by his fierce expression, he was beyond pissed. “I set three cards face down, and end my turn!”

Breo grinned at his screen, crossing his arms. “Jean, your plan was a success!”
Jean smirked, his pose mirroring his teammate’s. “When they chose Jack as the first wheeler, and since Andre got the first move, the damage was already decided.”

“I’ll bet on this strategy,” Andre said. “My turn! At this time, Unicorn Familiar that I removed from play due to its effect returns! Different Dimension Unicorn Knight can’t be normal summoned, but by reviving Monoceros, I can special summon it!”

(Different Dimension Unicorn Knight: Atk: 1800 Def: 1000)

“I tune level three Monoceros and level two Unicorn Familiar! I synchro summon… Thunder Unicorn!”

(Thunder Unicorn: Atk: 2200 Def: 1800)

“Thunder Unicorn only has twenty-two hundred attack points! It’s no match for my Red Dragon Archfiend!” Jack reminded his opponent.

“True, but Thunder Unicorn can reduce your monster’s attack points by five hundred for each monster I control besides Thunder Unicorn.”

“Even so, Red Dragon still has more attack points! He won’t lose to you!”

“Hold on,” Andre smiled back at his opponent confidently. “You’re forgetting this guy’s effect. I activate Monoceros’s effect from the graveyard. When Monoceros is used with a beast type monster for a synchro summon, it can revive the tuner monster. Be revived Unicorn Familiar! Now I have two monsters on my field, excluding Thunder Unicorn! Red Dragon Archfiend’s attack is reduced to two thousand!”

“What?!”

“Go, Thunder Unicorn!” Andre commanded. He whirled his runner so that he rode backwards. He wanted to see Jack’s ultimate dragon’s destruction. “Thunder Spear!”

Jack: 800

Andre: 4000

“Impossible!” Jack gasped once the attack had finished washing over him. “Red Dragon Archfiend was defeated so easily!”

“Andre sure is frightening,” Breo said. “He’s playing that deck perfectly, no mistakes.”

“I told you already, he’s a genius in card playing,” Jean said. “He can read the situation in an instant. That remove from play synchro deck is brought to its full potential through Andre’s card playing sense.”

“Scary, scary!” Breo shivered, hugging himself for extra warmth from the chill going down his spine. “I’m glad a guy like that isn’t our enemy.”

///

“Uh oh!” Bruno’s computer screen was flashing a warning sign at him. Something was wrong with Jack’s duel runner! “Guys, look!”

“What’s wrong?” Yusei asked.
“There may be a problem in the air intake. What do we do? Should we bring him into the pit? Even though the speed counters will be taken away…” Bruno bit his lip. This was a hard choice to make.

“Yeah,” Lise nodded, crossing her arms. “Bring him into the pit. It doesn’t hurt to be safe.”

///

“I set one card face down, and end my turn!” Andre said.

“How dare you!? Using such tricks! If you’re trying to take my power, I’ll turn it up so far that you can’t take it!” Jack declared. This humiliation would not stand!

Jack spotted Leo and Luna from the sidelines. They were waving to him, the pit stop sign out for him to stop. He kept driving.

“Are you nut? Telling me to go into the pit at a time like this? Don’t fuck with me!” Jack roared. He was well and truly fired up. It was crucial to come back from such a heavy blow with as much firepower as his soul could muster. “I’m continuing the duel! It’s my turn!”

“Oh geezus, Jack plans on continuing the duel!” Bruno cried. He couldn’t help out if Jack refused to cooperate!

“I summon Mad Archfiend! Next, I activate my trap Boosted Resurrection! I special summon a level four or lower monster from my graveyard, and equip this card to it! The equipped monster gains a hundred attack and defense points and its level will be raised by one! I special Dark Resonator from the graveyard! I activate my next trap Raging Synchro! By sending the monsters needed for a synchro monster in my graveyard from the field to the graveyard, I raise that synchro monster’s attack by five hundred and special summon it! I send level four Mad Archfiend and level four Dark Resonator to the graveyard to revive Red Dragon Archfiend!”

Andre gasped. “Thirty-five hundred attack points?!”

“Go, Red Dragon Archfiend; Absolute Power Force!”

“Trap activate!” Andre countered. “Dimensional Trap! By removing a monster on my field along with a trap in my graveyard from play, I can activate the removed trap’s effect!”

“What did you say?” Andre had an answer for everything Jack did!

“I remove Unicorn Familiar and Different Dimension Barrier-Lose Force! Lost Force’s effect activates on the field! It negates your attack, and deals damage equal to the attacking monster’s attack points!”

“This is bad! Stop the attack, Jack!” Yusei yelled at the screen.

“He’ll lose if he takes that!” Crow exclaimed.

Jack actually roared with frustration. “If you think you can stop my attack, then just try it! I activate my trap Overpower! This card negates a card that negates a monster’s attack and destroys that card! Go Red Dragon; Absolute Power Force!”

*Jack: 800*  
*Andre: 2700*

Andre’s lifepoints and his blue and yellow Thunder Unicorn went down. It wasn’t much, but Jack
hadn’t backed down for a second. Now was not the time to pull any punches.

“Oh, he’s good,” Breo smiled, acknowledging skill when he saw it.

Jean nodded grudgingly. “To think that he could counterattack from that situation. Jack Atlas, what a terrifying genius.”

Crow took a long, deep breath. He hadn’t realized he’d been holding it. “He survived the turn.”

“While nearly giving us heart attacks,” Lise said. “I just hope his runner can hold out.”

“Not just his runner, but his plan,” Yusei said. “It looks like we made a grave mistake in our strategy.”

“What do you mean, Yusei?” Akiza blinked at him.

“Andre’s deck specializes in taking down decks like Jack’s Power deck,” Bruno explained.

“We were too naïve,” Yusei scowled deeply. “They must have researched us. Our decks are all over the innerwebs after the Fortune Cup. They must have studied up.”

“And that’s allowed?” Akiza gasped.

“IT IS,” Lise nodded, eyes glued to their screens. Her hands tightened on her arms. “Most people would look to see what to expect, but it looks like Team Unicorn didn’t just want to see what they were up against. They specifically devised strategies to counteract our styles of dueling.”

“Oh!” Bruno’s eyes went wide. “That’s why they skirted regulations to go first! They wanted to set traps to counter the power deck!”

“Has Team Unicorn really predicted all of this?” Akiza clasped her hands. If she was nervous before, she was practically shaking with anxiety now.

“Yes,” Yusei said.

He and the team stared at their opponent’s booth. They were met with sly, knowing smirks.

“Looks like they’ve finally realized our plans,” Breo grinned.

“True, but it’s too late,” Jean sat back comfortably in his chair. “Jack Atlas’s loss is inevitable.”

///

“How expected of you, Jack,” Andre said. “To counterattack in such a situation, however, you can’t win the WRGP with such a simple strategy.”

“Shut up!” Jack shouted back. “I don’t need any advice from you about dueling!”

“But that attack just now helped me!”

“What?” Jack’s hands clenched into fists over his controls.

Andre smiled innocently. “Now my victory has been decided thanks to you. I activate a trap card; Parallel Select! When a synchro monster on the field is destroyed, I can add a removed from play card to my hand. The card I return is the speed spell End of the Storm!”
“What?”

“It’s my turn!”

///

“This is bad!” Yusei blood went cold. A speed spell in the opponent’s hand, and Jack at only eight hundred life? That had trouble written all over it.

Jean’s smirk grew. His hand, digits extended, bobbed up and down like he were a spider playing with his fly of a dinner before he ate it. “Jack’s lifepoints are only eight hundred. This turn, Andre’s speed counters are at four!”

“Time to get ready to roll,” Lise said solemnly.

“On it,” Yusei went for his duel runner.

///

“I activate Speed World 2’s effect! By removing four speed counters, you take eight hundred points of damage for every speed spell in my hand!” Andre said. He had his own devilish smirk. He reversed his duel runner once more. “You lose, Jack Atlas.”

Jack: 0
Andre: 2700

Jack screamed as his lifepoints depleted. Instead of drifting slowly to a halt, and steam sent billowing up, Jack’s wheel locked.

“What’s this?”

Something exploded. The left wing blew off, and then Jack was sent spinning and careening across the arena. His runner skidded until it kicked up into the air, throwing Jack overboard.

“Oh no! Jack Atlas has crashed!” the MC exclaimed.

The rest of the stadium was quiet. Everyone on the edge of their seats. The tension was palpable. Jack wasn’t moving. It was like an immense, heavy pressure had them all by the throats, choking them with their concern for Jack.

“Jack!” Carly had been in the audience. Her boss wanted exclusive pictures, but she let her camera drop. The camera strap saved her camera’s life, but Carly was more concerned with someone else’s life. Carly hadn’t hesitated in taking off. She was headed for the pit station. She wanted to be there for him. She had to be.

///

“Damn,” Crow slammed his good fist on their dashboard. “There was a problem with his runner after all.”

Lise grabbed Akiza’s wrist as she raced out of the pit. “Come on!”

“Lise? Akiza?” Leo called after them, his hazel eyes wide.

“Jack!” Lise shouted at her friend, racing onto the track.

“Jack!” Akiza joined in once she realized what they were doing.

“Stay back!” Jack yelled out through clenched teeth. Lise and Akiza stopped immediately. Blood trickled down Jack’s face, dripping off his chin and onto the track. He pushed himself to his knees. His vizor was cracked. “Have you forgotten the rules? If an outsider helps a turbo duelist during the race, then all of us will be disqualified! Return to the pit!”

“But Jack…” Lise trailed off. She clenched her fists.

“Jack?” Akiza’s widened as she watched her teammate stand and push his runner upright.

“Amazing!” The MC said. “How could this be? Jack Atlas is starting to push his duel runner!”

“I’m not giving up,” Jack clenched his teeth, and started pushing towards the pit. “I can’t let our dream end here!”

“It looks like Jack Atlas’s duel runner is broken!” The MC pointed out. He was right. The left side of Jack’s runner resembled a crushed soda can. “It looks like he’s trying to push his runner to reach Yusei Fudo, the second wheeler!”

Teeth clenched, Lise grudgingly lead the way back to the pit. Akiza followed behind. They hated to leave Jack like that. He needed help, but he wasn’t going to let them throw away the tournament to help him.

“An indomitable spirit, that’s expected of you, Jack Atlas,” Jean commented breezily.

///
Carly ran through the hallways like a professional running champion.

“Whoa!” the guard standing watch at the entrance to the team pits’ underground entrances stared at her. “This is a restricted area, ma’am!”

“I have a stage pass for journalist privileges!” Carly didn’t even slow down as she screeched past, her sneakers squealing in protest on the smooth floors.

“O…kay then…” The guard sat back down exasperatedly.

///

“Jack Atlas is valiantly pushing his runner into the pit!” the MC continued. “But he has a big problem!”

“It’s gonna be close,” Lise remarked. She’d returned to the pit, but she hadn’t stopped pacing back and forth.

“What will?” Leo asked.

“According to the rules of the WRGP, the more laps the other team completes, the more speed counters we’ll lose,” Bruno explained. He latched onto the question; anything to keep his mind off their stressful predicament. “Team Unicorn’s speed counters have reached the maximum, twelve. Now, our speed counters will start to be reduced.”

“But we’ve only got four left! What happens when we hit zero?!”

“If our speed counters are reduced to zero, then we lose,” Yusei rolled his runner into the ready position. Jack would make it. He had to believe that.

“No way!” Luna gasped.

///

“Our speed counters have maxed out,” Jean’s face split into a devilish grin. “From here on, Team 5Ds countdown to death begins. In just four laps, Team 5Ds will lose!”

///

“Come on, Jack!” Leo ran into the pit stop lane. His sister followed him.

Crow was close behind too. “You can do it, man! We believe in you!”

///

Andre smiled to himself as he completed a lap. “Just three more to go.”

///


Their speed counters dropped to two.

///

“Two more,” Jean said.
“Ready?” Akiza asked. Her hands were shaking. She’d given up hiding it.

“As I’ll ever be,” Yusei responded curtly.

“I’m so nervous, and I’m not even going out there yet!” She laughed a little.
Yusei smiled at her. “I’m just glad you’ve got my back.”

///

“Now, here he comes!” the MC was practically screaming into the mike. “There’s only one more lap! Can Jack Atlas reach Yusei Fudo before then?!”

Jack didn’t let up even for a second. His friends were counting on him. He couldn’t afford to feel the pain. He inched forward stubbornly.

Andre wasn’t letting up either. He had a much smaller and attainable goal in comparison.

With the last of his strength, Jack tore off the Team 5Ds active rider patch on his left arm. He leapt forward, reaching as far as his long arms could reach.

He wasn’t going to make it.

Yusei leaned over, closing the distance between them. Jack had made it.

“He’s here!” the MC screeched, sending waves of sound interference across the arena. “It’s the last corner!”

Yusei slapped the patch on, found his controls, and blasted out of the pit.

“Good luck!” the twins called after him.

*I won’t let your efforts be in vain, Jack!* Yusei didn’t let up. He pulled even with Andre.

Bruno stooped to help Jack. He slung his friend over his shoulder.

“Phew,” Leo sighed. “That’s a relief.”

“It isn’t over yet,” Lise said grimly. “If he’s overtaken then…”

“We still lose?!” Leo’s panic mode was back on.

“If Yusei Fudo loses the lead in the first corner, Team 5Ds will lose!” the MC confirmed.

It all seemed to happen in slow-mo. Yusei and Andre were neck and neck at the turn.

Silence fell again.

Silence as the whole stadium held its breath.

Silence as teeth and hands clenched, eyes wide and unblinking.

Silence as everything that was on the line would be decided right then and there.

Silence as Yusei’s front wheel edged out an inch before Andre’s.
Then Yusei was racing ahead of Andre to take Team 5Ds’ turn!

“They made it! Team 5Ds has made it!”

“WHOOO!” Lise pumped her fists in the air. Her cheers joined with everyone else’s, and the stadium’s sudden roar of approval. She shook Akiza crazily. “They did it! THEY DID IT!”

“I know! I know!” Akiza jumped with frenzied relief with Lise.

“Oh my god,” Lise sat down hard. “I feel like I need to lie down for seven years. That was so stressful! Was this what it was like to watch me in my tournament?”

Akiza joined her, cross-legged, on the ground. “Worse,” she laughed.

“The second wheeler, Yusei Fudo, will begin his fight back!”

“Well done, Yusei,” Jack sighed. Bruno had brought him to the rest of the group. “Akiza, the final key is yours.” He promptly proceeded to pass out.

“Jack!” Bruno exclaimed.

“Holy shit,” Lise swore, jumping to her feet, and running over. “Medic!”

“Right!” Two medics dashed up, pushing a gurney.

“Jack!” Carly emerged from the tunnel. She helped her friends and the medics load Jack on the gurney. “Is he gonna be okay?”

“We need to get him to the emergency room first,” one medic said.

“We’ll go with you,” Lise said.

“No, that’s okay,” Carly said. “I’ll go with him.”

“You’re sure?” Lise brows knit together. Why couldn’t she be everywhere at once? Being the leader was harder than she’d thought. How was she supposed to know what choice was the right one? What if she made a mistake? How could the team trust her again? “Um, good to see you, by the way, Carly.”


Lise smiled gratefully at her. “I’m glad he has you. Thank you, Carly.”

“No problem,” she smiled, and turned to the medics. “Come on, let’s go!”

“Oh, right! Come with us, miss!” The three of them ran back into the tunnel, pushing Jack as they did so.

Lise shook her head. “You are one lucky, stubborn, little, idiot, Jack.”

///

Andre scowled at Yusei’s back. You might have been able to stay in the duel, but let’s see if you can catch up!
“Let’s duel!”

Yusei: 4000

Andre: 2700

“It’s my turn!” Yusei drew his card. Andre has Different Dimension Unicorn Knight on the field, and a couple facedowns. He also has twelve speed counters, meaning I’ve gotta rev things up or risk getting run over. Here goes.

“I special summon Quickdraw Synchron to the field by sending my Dandylion from my hand to the graveyard! In addition, when Dandylion is sent to the graveyard, I can special summon two fluff tokens to my field! I tune all three of them together to synchro summon…Junk Archer!”

“Not so fast, Yusei,” Andre smirked. “I admire your explosive start, but that Junk Archer is toast. I play my facedown Bottomless Traphole! Junk Archer has more than fifteen hundred attack points, so he’s removed from play!”

Yusei grit his teeth. *Damn. Another remove from play move!* “Then I’m summoning out Max Warrior in attack mode! Max Warrior,” Yusei pointed at Andre’s monster. “Attack Different Dimension Unicorn Knight!”

“A good try,” Andre admitted, but he was still smirking. “But I play my trap Mirror Force!”

“No!”

“Oh yes. All your, sorry, your *one* attack position monster is destroyed,” Andre’s smirk grew.

Yusei turned back around, grinding his teeth together. Even though he’d done anything but lie down right out of the gates, Andre still had an answer to everything. “I end my turn with two facedowns.”

///

Breo smiled amusedly at his computer. “So it’s true. Yusei isn’t bad at all.”

Jean’s smirk mirrored Andre’s. “He certainly tried, and he didn’t hesitate. He’s at a significant disadvantage though. Andre has twelve speed counters, so he has the advantage of being able to activate any speed spell. Yusei has no choice but to go all out, but Andre’s definitely already read through this situation.”

“Oh, and Andre still has End of the Storm in his hand. It destroys all the monsters on the field, dealing three hundred damage to the controllers for each monster destroyed.”

“An emergency trump card,” Jean nodded.

///

“It’s my turn!” Andre said. “I summon Nimble Momonga in attack mode!”

(Nimble Momonga: Atk: 1000 Def: 100)

“Different Dimension Unicorn Knight and Nimble Momonga attack you directly!”

///
“Oh no, that’s thirty-eight hundred damage!” Bruno watched his computer screen helplessly.

“Then he’ll be at two hundred lifepoints, and below the Speed World 2 safety line!” Luna added.

“Come on, Yusei,” Lise murmured, picking at the skin of her fingertips as she paced.

///

“I play my trap Scrap-Iron Scarecrow! I block Different Dimension Unicorn Knight’s attack!” Yusei countered.

Yusei: 3000
Andre: 2700

“So, you managed to stay in the game,” Andre sniffed. “Fine, I set two cards and end my turn.”

“My move,” Yusei drew a card. “Because I’ve got four speed counters now, I can play this spell; Dark Core! By discarding one card in my hand, I can remove from play a monster on your field! I choose Different Dimension Unicorn Knight!”

///

“Yeah!” Leo cheered. “Andre’s not the only one that can remove monsters from play!”

Lise nodded in agreement. “It’s time for some offense.”

Akiza inhaled and exhaled slowly. I can’t afford to get complacent. Yusei will do what he can, and I’ve got to prove my friends’ trust isn’t just for nothing!

///

“Next up, I summon Junk Blader!”

(Junk Blader: Atk: 1800 Def: 1000)

“Junk Blader attacks Nimble Momonga!”

Yusei: 3000
Andre: 1900

Andre grunted in frustration. “You just won’t accept your team’s going to lose!”

“Well, if we’re going down, then we’ll go down fighting!” Yusei shot back at him. “C’mon then, make your move!”

“Be careful what you wish for!” Andre drew his card. “I set one monster in facedown defense position and set a card. Your turn!”

“In that case, I draw, and now Junk Blader, attack his facedown monster!”

“Once again, I play Mirror Force!”

“Another one?” Yusei gasped.

“That’s right, Yusei,” Andre’s smirk grew. “Your only monster is destroyed again!”
“I’m setting a monster in facedown defense position. Turn end.”

///

“We’re back on track,” Crow breathed. “After that upset with Jack, I didn’t know if we’d be able to recover.”

“We’re not out of the woods yet. Andre and Yusei might be evenly matched, but we’re on our second rider while Team Unicorn still has their first rider out,” Lise pointed out. Her knuckles were white she clutched her arms so tightly.

“Right,” Bruno said. “It’d be great if Yusei could win against Jean, but we’ll see. We’re still at a disadvantage.”

“At least it’s not boring,” Akiza amended.

///

“Then it’s my turn!” Andre said. “I’ll set another monster in facedown defense position to start off. I’ll use the ability of Speed World 2!”

“What?” Yusei frowned. "He's not using End of the Storm?"

“I choose the ability to draw a card from my deck! I’ll end my turn with two facedowns!” Andre smiled to himself. Well, Breo, I think I’ve done all I can. Our surprise worked, having me go first, but the real punch in the gut comes from you.

“I draw, and I summon Hyper Synchron!”

“Well, Breo, I think I’ve done all I can. Our surprise worked, having me go first, but the real punch in the gut comes from you.

“No way!” A sacrifice play!? That’s why he set all his cards! The WRGP rules say anything on the field goes to the next rider! He’s giving them all to Breo!

Yusei pursed his lips, brow furrowing. Team Unicorn never seized keeping them on their toes. Now he had an entirely new duelist to contend with.

“Oh my!” The MC gasped dramatically. “Andre has self-destructed! Team 5Ds has their first win under their belt! But, it came at quite the cost! Yusei battles Breo with only three thousand lifepoints!”

///

“That isn’t all,” Crow grimaced. “Because Andre negated the summoning on Yusei’s turn, the battle phase is skipped, and Yusei’s turn automatically ends.”

“How amazing,” Bruno said. “He ripped right through Jack, dealt damage, and set the field up for his teammate.”

“This is so over my head,” Lise sighed. “How are we ever gonna catch up to them?”

“We’re all new at this,” Akiza said. “Me most of all. I’m gonna need a lot of help out there.”
“You’re right,” Lise put her hand on her friend’s shoulder. “We’re still in this, guys, together.”

///

“I’ll let you handle the rest, Breo,” Andre said once he’d pulled into the pit. He handed Breo the team’s active rider badge.

“Yeah, leave it to me, Andre,” Breo smiled and took the badge, fastening it to his left arm.

“Breo,” Jean said. “I know you won’t forget, but don’t try to finish this yourself.”

“Yeah, for the team, right?” Breo donned his helmet. “Don’t worry.” His confident grin never dropped for a moment as he drove into the arena.

“You did okay, Andre,” Jean said to his teammate.

“Okay?” Andre lowered his head, coy disbelief evident in his voice. “You can’t say it like that after all I’ve done.”

“Of course, I expected you’d be able to do everything you did.”

“Really now…you’re overestimating me,” Andre chuckled a little.

///

Breo swiftly joined Yusei in the arena. In no time at all they were even. Yusei gave Breo some heavy side-eye action. He did not appreciate his team being studied in the slightest. Even so, he knew his team could get through the handicap.

“The duel continues with Team Unicorn’s second wheeler; Breo’s turn! What kind of a duel will he show us, after Andre?”

Yusei: 3000

Breo: 4000

“I’d be happy to show you,” Breo said with the air of a gentleman. “I begin my turn with a facedown defense position monster, and another facedown card. Your move, Yusei!”

Yusei narrowed his eyes at his opponent. *I can’t stop meeting their challenge head on!* “I’ll set a monster in facedown defense mode too, and end my turn.”

///

Jack was just waking up in the ER. His injuries weren’t too serious considering how he’d powered through like the stubborn fool he was. He’d still need time to rest and recover.

“Jack?” Carly asked, her fingers hovering over his arm in case he needed help.

“Is it…is it over yet?” Jack choked out.

“No, not yet. Akiza still has to go, but for now Yusei is still in this.”

///

*Dang, this crowd…following a genius like Andre isn’t going to be easy. Not to mention Jean*
himself is our master strategist. No. Breo shook himself out of his thoughts. Focus. I have to carry out my task carefully. Breo’s features split into a conniving grin. “It’s my turn! I summon Rhinotaurus!”

(Rhinotaurus: Atk: 1800 Def: 600)

“Next, I can activate the speed spell Instant Fusion since I have more than two speed counters, and by paying a thousand of my lifepoints!”

Yusei: 3000
Breo: 3000

“I fusion summon… Flower Wolf!”

(Flower Wolf: Atk: 1800 Def: 1400)

///

“A fusion summon?!” Akiza’s eyes had gone wide. “You can do that in a turbo duel?!!”

“It’s legal,” Crow nodded. “Of course, you’d need fusion monsters in your extra deck. Although, because he used Instant Fusion, the monster can’t attack on the turn its summoned.”

“That’s a relief,” Luna sighed.

“Breo’s not done,” Bruno reminded them.

///

“Because you kindly didn’t destroy Andre’s facedown monsters, I’ll flip summon one of them now,” Breo said. “I flip summon Elephun!”

(Elephun: Atk: 500 Def: 300)

“I tune the level two Elephun with level five Flower Wolf to synchro summon… Voltic Bicorn!”

(Voltic Bicorn: Atk: 2500 Def: 2000)

“Well, he didn’t waste any time,” Yusei muttered.

“Oh, but don’t forget I have another facedown monster on my field!” Breo continued, arrogant smirk adorning his face. “I flip summon the tuner monster Key Mouse! I’ll then tune level one Key Mouse with the level seven Voltic Bicorn to synchro summon… Lightning Tricorn!”

(Key Mouse: Atk: 100 Def: 100)

(Lightning Tricorn: Atk: 2800 Def: 2000)

“That’s troubling…” Yusei admitted quietly to himself.

“Like a bolt of lightning himself, Breo has exploded out of the gates with a fusion summon, and a double synchro summon in one turn!” The MC exclaimed. “What will he do next?”

“Allow me to show you,” Breo pointed at Yusei’s facedown monsters. “Lightning Tricorn attack!”

“Time for a blast from the past! Remember this card?” Yusei smiled a little.
“Mirror Force?” Breo gasped, and then his face curled into a nasty look of disgust. “The card Andre used on you.”

“Twice,” Yusei reminded him as Lightning Tricorn and Rhinotaurus went up in yellow chips.

“But I’ll bet you weren’t ready for this!” Breo wasn’t one to lie down on the job. “Lightning Tricorn’s ability allows me to special summon Voltic Bicorn or Thunder Unicorn from my graveyard! I special summon Voltic Bicorn! Voltic Bicorn attack his facedown!”

“Don’t forget I also have Scrap-Iron Scarecrow!”

Breo ground his teeth together irritably. “I’m not through with you yet. Because I have more than two speed counters, I play the speed spell Summon Speeder to special summon another Key Mouse to the field! I tune him with Voltic Bicorn to synchro summon out another Lightning Tricorn!”

“You have two?!”

“Yes,” Breo smirked openly at Yusei’s ashen expression. “Luckily for you, my battle phase is over. Your turn.”

“I draw!” Yusei declared.

///

“Damn, Breo doesn’t leave much room to breathe, does he?” Crow growled.

Akiza nodded. “Summoning out all those monsters like it’s nothing? Incredible.”

“This is so high stakes!” Leo couldn’t sit still. He kept jumping around with his fists clenched. “I’m so excited!”

“That makes one of us,” Lise half joked. Her eyes were riveted to Bruno’s screen.

///

“I play the speed spell Fissure! This card destroys the monster with the lowest attack, but since you only have one monster, I don’t have to choose!”

“But when Lightning Tricorn is destroyed by battle or card effect, I can special summon Voltic Bicorn or Lightning Unicorn from my graveyard!” Breo said. “I choose Voltic Bicorn again!”

“Then I’m summoning Turbo Synchron to my field! I’ll be flip summoning my two facedown monsters Tuningware and Tricular!” Yusei said.

* (Tuningware: Atk: 100 Def: 300)

* (Turbo Synchron: Atk: 100 Def: 500)

“When Tuningware is used as synchro material, he’s a level two monster! I tune level one Turbo Synchron with level two Tuningware and level three Tricular to synchro summon… Turbo Warrior!”

* (Turbo Warrior: Atk: 2500 Def: 1500)

“I’m setting one card facedown. Now battle! Turbo Warrior attack Voltic Bicorn!”
Breo rolled his eyes. “They have the same attack points! They’ll only destroy each other.”

“That’s where you’re wrong!” Yusei corrected his opponent. “See, during the damage stage Turbo Warrior can halve the attack points of a level six or above synchro monster it attacks!”

“What?!” Breo watched his monster’s attack drop to 1250, unable to stop the impending attack.

Yusei: 3000

Breo: 1750

Breo’s grip on his runner’s controls tightened. He was down, but not out. “Funny thing about Voltic Bicorn. When its destroyed by you, through battle or card effect, both of us discard the top seven cards of our decks!”

“Seven cards?!”

///

“Whoa!” Leo breathed.

“That’s quite the move out of left field,” Bruno said.

“Yeah, no matter how you get rid of it, Voltic Bicorn’s destruction comes at a cost,” Crow said.

“Unless,” Lise spoke up. “You can get your opponent to destroy it themselves.”

///

Yusei grudgingly took the top seven cards of his deck and sent them to the graveyard. Breo did the same with a much more satisfied expression.

“End turn.”

“My turn!” Breo said. “I set two cards and end my turn.”

“I draw!” I summon Junk Forward to my field in attack mode,” Yusei said. His window of opportunity was right there and he had to take it! “Turbo Warrior, Junk Forward; attack Breo directly!”

(Junk Forward: Atk: 900 Def: 1500)

“That’s where you’re wrong!” Breo countered. “I activate both my Dimensional Prison facedowns! Both Turbo Warrior and Junk Forward are removed from play!”

“No way!”

“Yes way!” Breo’s smirk was back. “Now finish up your turn, so I can take some of your lifepoints too!”

I can’t keep anything on the field longer than one turn! Breo has a reversal for everything! Yusei spoke through gritted teeth. “I set one card facedown and end my turn!”

///

“Look,” Jean twiddled his fingers excitedly. “He’s getting frustrated. Well done, Breo.”
Andre chuckled. “Even as his teammates, that guy excels at being a pain in the ass.”

“Exactly why I weaponized that particular talent to work in our favor,” Jean said.

“You think he can take out Akiza too?”

Jean shrugged. “If he keeps toying with Yusei, maybe. Sooner or later, this in-between duel has to end.”

///

“I’ll be using my speed counters to play another Instant Fusion speed spell!” Breo said. “Once again, I fusion summon a Flower Wolf to my field! I’ll also be playing another Elephun, just for fun.” He grinned devilishly at the withering look Yusei shot back at him.

Yusei: 3000
Breo: 750

“I’m synchro summoning my second Voltic Bicorn!” Breo continued. “And he attacks you directly!”

“Not gonna happen, thanks to my Scrap-Iron Scarecrow!”

“You survive one more round,” Breo conceded. “But I’ll beat you next turn.”

“Don’t bet on it,” Yusei quipped, drawing his card.

“I summon the tuner monster Junk Anchor! Due to his ability, I can special summon a monster with ‘Junk’ in its name from my graveyard, and immediately use the two of them to synchro summon! I choose Junk Blader!”

(Junk Anchor: Atk: 0 Def: 0)

“I’m tuning level two Junk Anchor with the level four Junk Blader to synchro summon… Drill Warrior!”

(Drill Warrior: Atk: 2400 Def: 2000)

“I activate Drill Warrior’s ability! He can halve his attack points and attack you directly! Go Drill Warrior! End this duel!”

///

“This is gonna win it!” Luna grinned.

“It can’t be that easy,” Akiza frowned.

“You’re absolutely right,” Lise said.

///

“I activate my trap King’s Consonance!” Breo countered. “When you attack me directly, the attack is negated, and I can remove a tuner and any number of non-tuners in my graveyard from play to synchro summon immediately!”
Yusei’s eyes widened. “Another Lightning Tricorn?”

Breo chuckled. “Not quite, but close. I’m synchro summoning Naturia Leodrake in defense mode!”

(Naturia Leodrake: Atk: 3000 Def: 1800)

“Not good,” Yusei mused. What do I do? I’ve got Drill Warrior and Junk Servant on my field. He has Voltic Bicorn and Naturia Leodrake. He looked at his hand. I’ve got to get to more cards. “I play my speed spell Angel Baton! When I have two or more speed counters, I can use this card to draw two cards from my deck. Then I pick one to keep and one to send to the graveyard!

“Next is Drill Warrior’s other ability! By sending a card in my hand to the graveyard, I can remove Drill Warrior from play until my next standby phase! I can then return Drill Warrior to the field, and a monster in the graveyard to my hand!”

“You’re getting desperate,” Breo laughed. “We’re going to smash straight through you and Akiza! From the moment Andre went first, our win was sealed!”

“I end my turn!” Yusei ignored Breo’s jab. Just gotta hold out for one turn!

“I draw, and Naturia Leodrake attacks Junk Servant!”

“Scrap-Iron Scarecrow negates the attack!”

“Then Voltic Bicorn attacks!”

Yusei winced as Junk Servant’s destruction left his field bare. Just a little more!

“Your turn, Yusei. Make it count!”

“I…will!” Yusei drew his next card. “Since it’s my standby phase, Drill Warrior returns to my field! And using his ability, I choose the tuner monster Effect Veiler to return to my hand, which I’m instantly summoning! I tune level one Effect Veiler with level six Drill Warrior to synchro summon…!”

///

Crow tapped on the screen, scowling slightly as he did so. “Is this thing busted?”

“No, stop that,” Bruno said, tugging the computer out of Crow’s reach. “Why?”

“Yusei doesn’t have another level seven synchro monster.”

Akiza smiled conspiratorially. “He does today.”

Lise’s eyes widened, and her mouth dropped open into an enormous smile. “You didn’t, did you? You did. You totally did. Right?”

“I did.”

///

“Black Rose Dragon!”

///
“YES!” Lise squealed. She shot up out of her seat, hugging Akiza like they were both seconds from death. “You brilliant fucking bastard! GENIUS!!”

“Haha!” Akiza laughed, hugging Lise back. “I thought we’d trick the tricksters back.”

“GENIUS!”

///

“Black Rose Dragon?!” Andre and Jean wore identical looks of astonishment.

“But that’s Akiza’s card!” Andre pointed out.

“Looks like we’re the victims of a little bait and switch,” Jean scowled.

///

“Black Rose Dragon’s ability activates! When she’s synchro summoned, all cards on the field are destroyed!” Yusei continued, loving Breo’s equally shocked look.

Every card, monster, spell and trap card alike went up in yellow chips. The field was completely empty.

Breo spoke through clenched teeth. His eyes looked like they were practically on fire, or trying to set Yusei’s back on fire. Whichever came first. “Don’t forget, we send the top seven cards of our decks to the graveyard when Voltic Bicorn is destroyed!”

“Not a problem,” Yusei said, sending seven more cards to his graveyard. “I end my turn with two facedowns.” He saluted Breo. “You’re up.”

“This is not over!” Breo growled. “I draw! I play the speed spell Deceased Synchron! By paying all eight of my speed counters, I can banish a tuner and one non-tuner in my graveyard to synchro summon the third Lightning Tricorn to my field!”

///

Jean frowned deeply at his screen. “He’s getting reckless.”

“Maybe he forgot this was a team battle, after all?” Andre suggested with a shrug.

“Maybe,” Jean tapped his chin, deep in thought. “We all know we have no choice but to go all out with Team 5Ds. While, he might be starting me out with less speed counters, leaving me Lightning Tricorn will put me at a significant advantage, especially since Black Rose Dragon wiped everything else out.”

///

“Lightning Tricorn, attack Yusei directly!”

Yusei let out a yelp as his lifepoints went down drastically.

The time for games was over. Breo wasn’t playing with his food anymore. He had a duel to win after all. As much as he wanted to help his team out, he knew without a doubt he could beat Yusei and Akiza no problem.

Yusei: 200
“Such a complicated duel!” The MC remarked. He’d been quiet for a while, watching the duelists’ back and forth like an intense pinball machine. “Our two duelists are absolutely evenly matched!”

///

“Uh oh, they’re both under the safety line!” Luna realized.

“So, whoever draws a speed spell next turn…” Leo said.

“Will win. They both have enough speed counters,” Lise said solemnly. She crossed her arms and sat down, her leg jiggling impatiently with her anxiety.

///

“I end with a facedown. Your turn, Yusei, and this time I mean it! It’s your last!” Breo promised.

“I’ll do my best then,” Yusei said coolly. “First, I place a card facedown, then summon out Changer Synchron to my field! I then play Call of the Haunted to bring back Black Rose Dragon! I tune Changer Synchron with Black Rose Dragon to synchro summon… Stardust Dragon!

“I use the ability of Speed World 2!” Yusei continued. “With a speed spell in my hand, and by paying four speed counters, I deal eight hundred points of damage to you!”

“No!”

“You said to use my last turn, well here it is!”

Sorry Jean… Breo sighed. *I wanted to defeat Yusei and Akiza all by myself, but at least I can do this much...* “I activate my quick play speed spell Poison of the Old Man! When I have at least two speed counters, I can activate the ability to deal you eight hundred points of damage!”

///

“Double suicide!”

“Yeah, they took each other out,” Crow said.

“Meaning we’re even for this last match,” Akiza breathed. Finally. It was her turn to prove her stuff.

///

“I play the trap Wicked Rebirth!” Yusei was not going to let Breo be the one with the last laugh. He’d leave Akiza with more than just his Stardust Dragon. “I pay eight hundred lifepoints and special summon a synchro monster from my graveyard! Come back, Black Rose Dragon!”

Yusei: 0

Breo: 0

“It’s…OVER!” The MC decreed dramatically. “Our two teams are neck and neck as their final riders are set to duel! Jean versus Akiza is sure to be just as explosive as this match-up! Especially because both duelists will have their ace monsters out on the field! Who will triumph?! Who will lose?! I can hardly wait!”
(OMG, guys, writing original duels is SO hard! I’m glad to be getting back into writing, especially with NaNoWriMo coming up this November. It keeps me happy to keep writing and drawing. I missed it, and I’m so glad I still have people like you willing to read my work! Thanks so much for your continued love and support! It means the world! Special shoutout to @overthemoonday, @DelilahAzure and @LightSpecter141 for being some great familiar faces in the reviews! I bestow internet hugs on all of you!)
Yusei drove into the pit station, and removed his helmet.

Akiza was already ready to go out. All she needed was the team’s arm badge from Yusei, and the cards he’d left her on the field, which Bruno and the twins quickly transferred over to her.

“Good luck,” Lise squished Akiza into a big hug. “Win or lose, we love you, and you’re still awesome.”

“Thanks,” Akiza relaxed, letting out a long breath against Lise’s shoulder. She hadn’t realized how much she needed a hug until then.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t do more, Akiza,” Yusei said. He stood on Akiza’s other side, helmet dangling awkwardly in his grip.

“Are you kidding?” Akiza laughed, allowing Lise to extract herself. “You got through one and a half people! I’ve only got one guy to deal with. You did fine.”

Yusei’s smile was thin, but he visibly relaxed. Like the worry he’d bottled inside deflated, releasing the tightness in his chest. “And you’ll do even better. Good luck!”

“Don’t need it,” Akiza smiled, lowering her visor. “I’ve got you guys.” She gunned her engine and soared out of the pit, into the arena.

“That was so great!” Lise squealed. She threw her arms around Yusei, her grin uncontrollably bright. “You summoned Black Rose Dragon! I’m still geeking out about it!”

Yusei’s grin widened, his teeth visible. He returned Lise’s hug, squishing his face into the crook of her shoulder. “It was Akiza’s idea,” he murmured against Lise’s neck. She inhaled sharply, nails digging into Yusei’s back.

“Guys, seriously,” Crow groaned. “No flirting zone!”

“Sorry.” Lise and Yusei separated, faces burning red, but they joined the others holding hands.

///

Breo pulled into the pit station. His smirk had fallen off the second Yusei had made it a double sacrifice play. “I’m sorry, Jean,” he said, halting beside his leader. “I couldn’t stop him.” He pulled off the team badge, and his helmet, handing over the badge.

“We might have surprised them, but Team 5Ds is very good,” Andre admitted, his lower lip jutting out. “Yusei just might be a genius too.”

“Might?” Breo raised an eyebrow at his friend.

Andre shrugged. “He beat me and you.”

“Technically it was a draw,” Breo fired back.

“Please,” Jean put his helmet on. “We’ve made it this afar. Defeating Akiza is my job now. I’ll beat her, Team 5Ds, and take us all the way to the final round.”
“You’re right,” Breo admitted with a sigh.

“T’m always right,” Jean assured him, driving out into the arena.

///

“Hmmnn,” Jack groaned in his hospital bed.

Carly popped up out of her chair. “Jack?”

He was finally stirring from his sleep. She’d been watching the tournament to keep her mind off of how worried she was.

“Carly?” Jack’s violet eyes opened. He sat up slowly, blinking in the sudden, harsh light. “Where are your glasses?”

“Are you feeling all right?” Carly frowned at him. He’d hurt himself pretty badly. She wasn’t sure if he was talking or the painkillers.


“Yusei made it through Andre, and then pulled a double sacrifice play on Breo. Akiza is going up against Jean now.”

“How is she going to fight him?” Jack muttered, thinking out loud.

“I’ve been wondering the same thing. Andre has defeated all of Team Unicorn’s opponent’s solo. Nobody knows what kind of duelist Jean is,” Carly said.

“I could tell, Jean’s the leader,” Jack said. “He’s also most likely the one who’s plotted out their entire strategy.”

“So… Does that mean he’s stronger than Breo and Andre?”

Jack nodded solemnly. He watched his friend and her opponent silently for a moment. He sighed, adjusting his injured arm in its sling slightly. “Distract me a little, Carly. Why no glasses?”

“Huh? Oh,” Carly’s cheeks flushed pink. “I still have them.” She pulled the spectacles out of her jacket pocket. “I saved up enough to get Lasik. I still need the glasses for reading, but…yeah.”

“Your eyes are beautiful.”

“Uh-I-I-um…th-thanks,” Carly stammered. Her cheeks changed from pink to red in an instant.

“I’m going to go help my friends,” Jack pulled his hospital bed’s covers off his lap. “Can I get some help?”

“Oh, yes! Yes, of course!” Carly’s arms waved about manically as she attempted to sort out her wild emotions.

///

“Now it’s finally time for our two last riders to duel! From Team Unicorn, we have the cunning mastermind Jean! On Team 5Ds, we have the black rose with thorns, Akiza Izinski!”

This is a true team duel. After meeting Andre and Breo, working to fight together, we became
stronger than we could have ever been alone. For their sake, I cannot lose this duel. “Akiza, allow me to show you the way a team truly fights!” Jean declared.

Akiza took a deep breath. Now is the time. “I’m ready.”

“Duel!”

Akiza: 4000  
Jean: 4000

“I’ll begin,” Jean said. He drew a card. “I set three cards facedown and end my turn.”

“It’s my turn!” Akiza drew her card. “I summon Phoenixian Seed in attack mode! It’s ability immediately activates, by sending Phoenixian Seed to the graveyard I’m allowed to special summon Phoenixian Cluster Amaryllis from my hand!”

(Phoenixian Seed: Atk: 800 Def: 0)  
(Phoenixian Cluster Amaryllis: Atk: 2200 Def: 0)

“Sorry, but I play my trap Torrential Tribute!”

“What?” Akiza gasped.

“Because you performed a summons, all the monsters on the field are destroyed.”

“No!” Akiza looked on in horror as Stardust Dragon, Black Rose Dragon, and Phoenixian Cluster Amaryllis were washed away.

Jean lost his monster, Lightning Tricorn, too, but he was smiling. “Lightning Tricorn’s ability allows me to special summon either Voltic Bicorn or Thunder Unicorn from my graveyard! I choose Voltic Bicorn!”

///

“Uh oh,” Bruno was already sweating.

“He’s not wasting any time,” Yusei remarked, frowning deeply. “Jean is their leader. He was bound to be strong.”

“But just like that, her advantage is gone,” Lise breathed.

///

“You’re not even close to the level you need to be in order to beat me,” Jean scoffed. His duel runner pulled slightly ahead of Akiza’s. “Your team is new, and you’re an even bigger newbie,” he said, matter-of-factly.

“Oh no!” The MC gushed. “All Akiza’s monsters are gone! Normally Stardust Dragon could help out, but Wicked Rebirth negates its ability! How will Akiza get out of this mess?!”

Akiza stared at her runner’s display. Just like that, everything is gone. Her hand wasn’t empty, but it might as well have been. What do I do?

She drove past the pit station. The faces of all her friends followed her progress across the arena.
No! Akiza shook her head. It’s only the first turn! I can’t give up here! I can hang on, and I will!

“I set two cards facedown and end my turn!”

“My move, then,” Jean smiled confidently as he drew his card. “I summon Trident Warrior to my field in attack mode!”

“You mean, that would have happened if I didn’t have my trap Bottomless Trap Hole!” Akiza countered. “When you summon a monster with fifteen hundred attack or more, it’s destroyed and removed from play!”

“But not before I use his ability to special summon Lock Cat to my field in defense mode!”

**(Trident Warrior: Atk: 1800 Def: 1200)**

**(Lock Cat: Atk: 1200 Def: 1000)**

“This is gonna sting,” Akiza muttered to herself.

“Voltic Bicorn, attack Akiza directly!”

Akiza: 1500

Jean: 4000

“Guess I was cautious for nothing,” Jean smirked with a shrug. “You’ve got one turn left.”

“We’ll see about that! I draw!” She smiled at her card. She could do this. “I set one card facedown, and then I’ll set one monster in facedown defense mode! I end my turn!”

“That’s it? Doesn’t exactly make me shake in my boots,” Jean said. **I’m not even breaking a sweat. She’s so obvious.** “I summon the tuner monster Elephun to the field! I tune him with my Lock Cat to synchro summon… Naturia Beast!”

**(Naturia Beast: Atk: 2200 Def: 1700)**

“Time to lose, Akiza!”

///

“She’s done for,” Leo sniffed.

“Don’t count her out just yet, Leo!” Luna cried. She clenched her hands into fists. “She’s gotta hang on! She’s gotta!”

Crow stared at her as she drove by again. “Come on, Akiza."

///

“Voltic Bicorn, attack Akiza’s facedown monster!”

The facedown monster went up in yellow chips. Jean smiled, and glanced behind him. He wanted to see the look on Akiza’s face when he beat her. But she wasn’t angry, or devastated in the least. She was smiling.

“You destroyed Blue Rose Dragon, Jean! When Blue Rose is destroyed, I can special summon a
plant type monster or Black Rose Dragon from my graveyard!”

“No way!”

“Oh yes!” Akiza grinned. She threw her arm to the skies. “Be reborn, Black Rose Dragon!”

“Oh my! Jean may be doing his best to beat Akiza, but she’s not giving in! Her ace monster is back!” the MC announced, just in case it wasn’t clear.

Jean scowled at his opponent and faced his controls. “I end my turn with one facedown.”

“I draw! I summon Twilight Rose Knight! His ability allows me to special summon a level four or below plant type monster from my hand. I special summon Rose Fairy!”

(Twilight Rose Knight: Atk: 1000 Def: 1000)

(Rose Fairy: Atk: 600 Def: 1200)

“I tune Twilight Rose Knight with Rose Fairy to synchro summon… Splendid Rose!”

(Splendid Rose: Atk: 2200 Def: 2000)

“You can summon as many synchro monsters as you want, but they can’t defeat my Voltic Bicorn!” Jean reminded Akiza.

“That’s what abilities are for!” Akiza quipped. “I play my facedown card Call of the Haunted! Come forth, Stardust Dragon!”

///

“She has three powerful monsters again,” Andre remarked. He scratched at his chin.

“She’s a newbie, but she doesn’t duel like it. Perhaps Jean underestimated her?” Breo suggested.

Andre shook his head. “Jean does his homework. He can counter anything Akiza does.”

Breo stroked at his stubble as he thought. “True. She thinks more about protecting herself than actually utilizing what her teammates gave her.”

///

“I use Splendid Rose’s ability to remove one plant monster in my graveyard from play, and halve Voltic Bicorn’s attack!” In an instant, Voltic Bicorn’s attack had become 1,250. “Now Stardust Dragon, attack Voltic Bicorn; Cosmic Flare!” Akiza commanded.

“Not so fast,” Jean countered.

“What?”

“My trap Dimensional Prison removes the attacking monster from play, and since I’m not destroying Stardust, you can’t use his ability!”

“Ugh,” Akiza let out a growl of frustration. She still had two other monsters. “Splendid Rose, attack Voltic Bicorn!”

Akiza: 1500
“Voltic Bicorn’s effect activates! When he’s destroyed by one of your cards, you send seven cards from your deck to the graveyard!”

“All right,” Akiza said, doing so. “Black Rose Dragon, attack Naturia Beast!”

“Splendid Rose’s second ability activates! I can remove another plant type monster in my graveyard from play, to halve Splendid Rose’s attack points, and then she can attack again!”

“I set one card and end my turn,” Akiza said.

“My turn,” Jean drew his card. I might have underestimated this girl. She’s adapting almost as quickly as me. However, she’s still predictable.

“I summon X-Saber Anu Piranha to the field in attack mode! Next, I play the spell Summon Speeder! Since I have more than two speed counters, I can special summon another Elephun! Synchro summon! Come to the field, Naturia Barkion!”

(X-Saber Anu-Piranha: Atk: 1800 Def: 1100)
(Naturia Barkion: Atk: 2500 Def: 1800)

“Barkion, attack Akiza’s Splendid Rose!”

Akiza winced as her monster went up in yellow chips. Just when I think I’ve finally turned things around, he hits back even harder!

“Akiza is putting up a valiant effort, but Jean’s attacks just keep coming!”

“I end my turn,” Jean finished.

“I draw!” Akiza declared. She grit her teeth, frowning deeply. Even with her Black Rose Dragon on
her field, there was nothing she could do. Not really this turn. “I set two cards facedown and end my turn!”

“You can feel it, can’t you? I’m closing in!” Jean’s manic grin was back. “I draw! I set a card. Barkion, attack Akiza’s Black Rose Dragon! And this time, make sure it stays down!”

**Akiza: 1100**

**Jean: 1850**

“I’m not letting it end there! I play my trap The Rose’s Thorn! I can special summon this card in defense position as a plant type monster!”

“Actually, that would’ve happened if it wasn’t for Barkion’s effect,” Jean smiled wider. “See, by removing two cards in my graveyard from play, I can negate and destroy your trap card!”

Akiza grit her teeth. “But when Rose’s Thorn is sent from the field to the graveyard, you take three hundred damage for every card in your hand!”

Jean laughed, shaking his head. “A good try, but I don’t have any cards in my hand. Your turn!”

Akiza’s eyes went wide. She gazed at Jean’s back as he drove in front of her, mocking her. *He really has planned out every single step of this game! If he’s just going to counter all my moves… But I can’t surrender! All my friends are counting on me! What do I do? WHAT DO I DO?!

“AKIZA!”

“Huh?” Akiza was shocked out of her head. The voice was familiar, but it couldn’t possible be… “Jack?”

It was Jack! Supported by Carly, he’d hobbled out into the pit. Her whole team was there. Jack still wasn’t looking good, but he’d made it out to cheer her on.

“Akiza!” Jack shouted again. “You can’t win if you’re afraid!”

“Afraid…” Akiza murmured. “But I’m all alone out here…”

Jean’s presence felt like a descending weight. It was crushing her, slowly, like a pathetic little grape. Akiza needed help. Her field was empty. Barkion would destroy any trap she tried to use to save herself. What was she to do?

“Akiza!” Another voice, an older sounding one. It was also vaguely familiar, but coming from the stands. “Akiza!”

Akiza looked into the stands. Her eyes finally settled on her mother and father! “Mom? Dad?”

“Akiza, you can do it!” Her father shouted down. He was standing in the stairway, frantically waving an enormous flag with the team 5Ds logo on it.

“Yes, you can win!” her mother joined in.

Her teammates also added their two cents.

“Go, Akiza!”

“We believe in you!”
“We’re here for you!”

Akiza didn’t realize she was crying until her helmet started to fog up a little. She sniffled and flipped up the visor so she could rub her eyes. “Thanks mom, dad, Jack, everybody,” she whispered. She put her visor back in place, and took a deep, calming breath. “I can do this.”

“Finally decided to resume the duel?” Jean asked. This time, he meant it. Despite everything being against her, this woman was not about to quit now. It made the duel fun, more fun than he’d played in ages.

“It’s my…turn!” Akiza drew her next card. “When you have monsters, but I have none, I can special summon Aromage Daisy! Because she was summoned this way, I gain a thousand lifepoints!”

Akiza: 2100
Jean: 1850

(Aromage Daisy: Atk: 2000 Def: 1800)

“I end with two facedowns!”

///

“That’s a relief,” Lise sighed. “She can do this. I know she can.”

“I thought she was gonna give up for a second,” Leo admitted. “But Akiza would never give up.”

“That’s why she’s the best at Duel Academy,” Luna smiled.

///

“Keep the challenge coming, Akiza!” Jean drew his card. “I set a card, and activate my own Call of the Haunted trap card! I special summon Naturia Beast from the graveyard!”

“I play my trap Star Siphon!” Akiza reacted swiftly. “When a synchro monster is special summoned, I can special summon a token to my field equal to its level, and the synchro monster’s level I borrowed becomes one!”

“Did you forget about Barkion’s ability? I remove two cards from play in my graveyard to negate and destroy your trap!”

“No,” Akiza muttered, smiling a little smile meant just for her.

“Barkion attacks Aromage Daisy!”

“I play my second trap; Negate Attack! Your attack is negated, and the battle phase is ended!”

///

“She’s fighting back,” Andre nodded at his screen.

“And adapted. She never wanted to activate Star Siphon. Her real goal was Negate Attack, but Barkion can only negate one trap card per turn,” Breo said. “Very clever.”

///
“I end my turn.”

“Then it’s my move!” Akiza drew her next card. *Okay, so because of Naturia Beast and Naturia Barkion the first spell or trap card I play will be negated and destroyed. Gotta play this smart.*

“I set one monster in facedown defense position, and switch Aromage Daisy to defense mode! I end my turn with a facedown!”

“I draw,” Jean said. “I use Naturia Barkion and Naturia Beast to attack your facedown monster and Aromage Daisy!”

Once again, Akiza’s field was laid bare. She knew she could fix that though. “You destroyed Lord Poison! His ability lets me special summon a plant type monster from my graveyard when he’s destroyed! Say hello again to Phoenixian Seed!” Akiza’s monster chilled in defense mode, keeping her company.

“End turn.” *She is relentlessly stubborn. I’ll give her that. Still, I wish she would lose already.*

“I’m setting another monster in facedown defense position,” Akiza said. “That’s the end of my turn.”

“Eager to lose are we?” Jean grinned. Victory was in his grasp. He could feel it. And because of what he’d just drawn, he was absolutely certain of it now. “I play the speed spell Speed Fusion! Now by paying a thousand lifepoints, I can fusion summon!”

///

“Another fusion summon?” Bruno grumbled. “With synchro monsters?”

“Hey, nobody said this duel would be easy,” Crow said.

“How are you feeling?” Yusei asked Jack. He helped Carly Jack into a seat gently.

“I’ve been better, but nothing can keep Jack Atlas down!”

“He’s fine,” Lise rolled her eyes, but she was smiling. “So is Akiza.”

///

“I fusion summon… Naturia Exterio!”

(Naturia Exterio: Atk: 2800 Def: 2400)

“I’ll summon out my Trident Warrior too! His ability allows me to special summon Delta Flyer from my hand!”

(Delta Flyer: Atk: 1500 Def: 900)

“Trident Warrior, destroy Phoenixian Seed! Naturia Exterio, destroy her facedown monster! Now, Delta Flyer, attack Akiza directly!”

“I play my trap Ground Capture!”

“Naturia Exterio’s ability activates!” Jean countered Akiza’s move again. “By removing a card in my graveyard from play, and by sending the top card of my deck to the graveyard, I can negate and destroy one spell or trap card of yours per turn!”
“Uh oh!”

Akiza screamed as the attack washed over her. Still, she was lucky. If Naturia Exterio had attacked directly, she’d be done for.

_Akiza: 600_

_Jean: 1850_

///

Breo crossed his arms. “She fought bravely, but this is the end.”

“Jean’s plan was just too good,” Andre agreed. “Perhaps we’ll see Team 5Ds again, if they manage to get through their other duels.”

///

“It’s your last turn, Akiza.”

“No, it isn’t!” Akiza said firmly. If she believed it, it’d come true. She peeked at her new card, and then broke into a grin. “I set one monster in facedown defense mode. Your turn.”

“A last ditch effort! I admit, you fought well, but I have all the monsters, and you’re below the Speed World 2 safety line! I draw, and Naturia Exterio attacks your facedown monster!”

“Just what I wanted,” Akiza’s grin grew.

“What?”

“When Blue Rose Dragon is destroyed and sent to the graveyard, I can special summon a plant type monster or Black Rose Dragon from my graveyard! Once again, be reborn, Black Rose Dragon!”

///

“Incredible!” Luna gushed, clasping her hands. Her eyes were wide with hope as she watched Akiza’s ace monster return to the field.

“She absolutely is,” Lise concurred.

Crow cupped his hand into a makeshift megaphone. “You go, girl!”

///

“What’s the matter, Jean?” Akiza smiled at Jean’s deep grimace. “Weren’t you gonna attack?”

“I end my turn.”

“Time to finish this duel, and take home the gold!” Akiza declared. “I summon the psychic tuner Esper Girl in attack mode!”

(Eesper Girl: Atk: 500 Def: 300)

“I tune Esper Girl with Black Rose Dragon to psychic synchro summon… Psychic Rose Dragon!”

///
Leo started jumping around ecstatically. “She’s using her new monster! She’s using her evolved synchro!”

“This is gonna win it!” Luna could hardly stand the wait.

///

(Psychic Rose Dragon: Atk: 2800 Def: 2100)

“A psychic synchro summon?” Jean’s mouth dropped open. The data never mentioned this card! Who is this woman?!

“I activate Psychic Rose Dragon’s ability! By removing one Psychic monster in my graveyard from play, I can reduce the attack points of one monster on your field to zero! I remove Esper Girl in my graveyard from play to drop Naturia Exterio’s attack points to zero!”

“No way…” Jean breathed. He’d lost. Just like that.

“Psychic Rose Dragon, attack Naturia Exterio and end this duel! Psychic Flare!”

“NO!”

Akiza: 600
Jean: 0

“She’s done it!” The MC cried. “Akiza has defeated Jean, securing a win for her team! Team 5Ds wins! Team 5Ds wins!”

Jean’s runner stopped immediately, belching out grey smoke. Akiza kept on driving.

///

Everyone in the pit had froze.

“Is it really over?” Bruno was the first to break the silence.

Luna was just as hesitant. “I… I think it is!”

“Yes!” Jack clenched his good fist. “It’s our victory!”

“We win!” Leo squealed.

“She won!” Lise jumped into the air she was so excited.

“Team 5Ds wins! Vic- Mph!” Jack was cut off by Carly seizing his cheeks and kissing him.

Carly let him go quickly though. Her face burned crimson. “Sorry, I-I got carried away.”

“Who said you could stop?” Jack narrowed his eyes down at her. But he smiled down at her so she knew he wasn’t mad.

Needless to say, Jack and Carly resumed kissing.

“Whoa,” Crow’s mouth dropped open.

“Bold move,” Bruno nodded.
“Oh, but this is a no flirting zone, for sure,” Yusei smirked at Crow, sarcasm dripping from his every word.

“I’m gonna have to start banning people,” Crow chuckled.

///

The stadium lit up with Akiza’s image on the holo-screens. Akiza on the other hand was suddenly aware of all the attention on her. She pulled to a stop in the arena, right across from the pit, and removed her helmet.

“That girl’s my daughter! That’s my daughter! She won! She won for Team 5Ds!” Akiza’s dad was yelling to anyone who would listen.

Setsuko was clapping along with the rest of the audience. She was trying to calm her husband down, but he was too excited for Akiza.

“Akiza!”

“Oh!” She laughed and returned Lise’s hug. The twins piled in too.

“You were so amazing!” Carly said, pushing herself in for a hug as well.

“You came out on top,” Jack added.

“Never doubted you,” Yusei said, patting Akiza’s shoulder.

“That’s our girl,” Crow grinned. He leaned forward like he was going to hug her too, but then awkwardly held his left hand out.

Not knowing what else to do, she shook his hand. “I thought I was gonna lose for a minute there. Team Unicorn is terrifying! But uh, are you okay, Jack?”

“Yeah,” Jack waved away her concern. “You did great, Akiza. We’re all so proud.”

Akiza sniffled and rubbed at her eyes. “You’re gonna make me cry again.”

“Look,” Luna whispered. She pointed at Jean.

He had pulled up behind Akiza, across from his team’s pit station. Jean’s expression was unreadable as he pulled his helmet off and dismounted.

Akiza mirrored him. She glanced at her friends, who shared nonplussed expressions.

“Jean?” Yusei asked.

“We used all the means we had to win this tournament,” Jean said. He walked slowly towards Team 5Ds. “Andre and Breo tried their best for victory. But in the end, I underestimated you, and your resilience. I was too confident in my plan, in the data.” He stopped in front of Akiza.

“What’re you acting so cool over?” Andre teased. He and Breo joined their teammate.

“I’m sorry I put your hard work to waste,” Jean said.

“It wasn’t a waste,” Breo shook his head. “We gained some new experience, and we learned something.”
“And we found opponents we’ll do anything to win against.”

“True,” Jean sighed, chuckling a little. “I did have fun against you, Akiza, unexpectantly so. Almost enough that I’m still happy despite this loss.”

“Almost,” Breo laughed, clapping Jean affectionately on the back.

“What I’m trying to say,” Jean said. “Is thank you for such a spirited duel.”

“We want to thank you too,” Yusei spoke up. “Before today, we didn’t quite know what it meant to fight as a team.”

“Going up against Team Unicorn taught us what real teamwork really means,” Lise said.

“Definitely,” Crow sighed exasperatedly. “You three are stronger than anyone we’ve ever faced!”

Jack leaned forward. He looked as menacingly friendly as he could in his hospital garb. “But you won’t be next time we face each other.”

Jean held out his hand for Akiza. “We feel the same. The next time we fight, Team Unicorn’s gonna win.”

“It’s a deal,” Akiza grinned and took his hand. They shook hands as amicably as frenemies can.

“Let’s be sure to meet in the finals,” Jean said.

“Yeah, Team 5Ds vs Team Unicorn; rematch!” Lise beamed ecstatically. She threw her hand in on top of Jean’s and Akiza’s.

Crow shoved his hand in particularly fast, his fingers brushing against Akiza’s. Breo and Andre’s hands joined Jean’s. Yusei and Jack were the last to put their hands in.

Akiza laughed at all their hands in the circle. “It’s a deal. We meet again in the finals!”

The crowd roared with approval. Team 5Ds and Team Unicorn’s promise was broadcast for everyone to see.

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The same three boys from before, shrouded in darkness, rolled their eyes at the two teams.

“Wait until they see what’s in store for them.”

“All in due time. We just have to wait for our chance.”

///

That night the team celebrated. The first duel of the tournament had been extremely stressful, and quite a few of the team members wanted to blow off some steam. Of course, Leo, Luna, Bruno, Carly, Nervin, Blitz, Tank, Rally, Crow’s kids, Zora, and Martha were invited too.

Jack held up his drink with one hand. His other hand was still a little tender from his crash, but he was happy to let Carly hold it for the time being. He hadn’t been able to stop smiling since the tournament. “To Team 5Ds’ first win!”

“Cheers!” Everyone took a drink from their cups.
Leo surprised no one by emptying his soda in a minute. On the dot. “Man, when Jack lost I was so worried!”

“Leo, what’re you trying to say!” Jack growled.

Carly took his drink before he could do something violent with it.

“Uh,” Leo took a step back. Jack’s face was making him nervous.

“Are you trying to pick a fight with me?”

Crow and Akiza shared a knowing look. Jack never changed.

“No! I didn’t mean anything like that!” Leo insisted, starting to panic.

“Wait a sec, Jack,” Crow said. “There’s nothing to get so angry about, right?”

Akiza sighed with relief. Crow would diffuse the tension.

“I mean, that is what happened.”

“What?” Jack rounded on Crow faster than Officer Trudge switched pursuit targets in the old days.

“Really now,” Crow continued, despite Akiza shaking her head no behind Jack’s back. “Just because I left, Team 5Ds is in shambles!”

“Why you! What makes you so smart?!” Jack fired back. “I don’t need to hear that from you! Especially since you couldn’t participate with such a minor wound!”

“A minor wound?! I had a note from the doctor!” Crow yelled back at him.

The continued to argue back and forth. The twins’ heads swiveled between the two of them like pinballs.

“How did this happen?” Leo groaned.

Luna rolled her eyes and crossed her arms. “Because you had to open your big mouth!”

“I can’t tell if everyone is happy or angry…” Bruno said, a drop of sweat sliding down his cheek.

“They’ll get over it. Crow and Jack fight all the time,” Lise wasn’t worried. “But something’s been bothering me for a while.”

“Yeah?” Yusei raised an eyebrow.

“Did anyone else notice Jean doesn’t have eyebrows?” Lise spread her hands.

Yusei started laughing, the hand that wasn’t around Lise’s waist went up to cover his eyes. “Oh my god, Lise!”

“No, she’s right!” Bruno’s eyes and mouth were wide open. “He didn’t have eyebrows! That’s why he was so creepy!”

“I knew it!” Lise pointed at him, sipping her soda with a satisfied expression.

“I love you,” Yusei whispered once he’d calmed down, and kissed Lise’s temple.
“You did amazing today,” she whispered back. Her hand came to a rest on top of his.

“Wow, a party?”

A new voice broke through the arguing and polite chatter.

“Team 5Ds is already celebrating after one win?” Sherry walked into the garage with her helmet tucked into the crook of her arm.

Everyone fell silent. Sherry’s smirk didn’t slip in the slightest. She liked the sudden attention her interruption had caused.

Lise was over her shock first. “Sherry?”
“Sherry?” Bruno repeated. *The woman from the Public Security Bureau…*

“You know each other?” Crow asked. He and Jack had never met Sherry.

“We’ve had a few close encounters,” Lise said, her hand going to her sternum.

“I’m Sherry Leblanc, for those who don’t know,” Sherry’s confident grin grew as she walked further in.

“Is your first round already over?” Yusei asked her.

“Yes, after Lise refused to join me, I had to fight alongside Mizoguchi, just the two of us,” Sherry said, a twinge of bitterness in her voice.

“Just the two of you?” Bruno logged onto the garage computer. “But then you’d only have eight thousand lifepoints.”

“So did she lose, then?” Carly whispered. She winced. She hadn’t meant to sound so cruel.

“Sherry!” Bruno gasped, staring at her open eyed. “You beat three people all by yourself?!”

“What?” Jack’s expression mirrored Bruno’s.

“Three people in a row?” Akiza whispered to herself.

Sherry rolled her eyes. “It’s not that impressive. I just ‘ave to win, no matter what.”

“Right,” Lise nodded. “Yliaster.”

“Did somebody say my name?!” Suddenly Mako was sliding into the garage with his sister close behind.

“Sorry!” Mika ran in after him, and hunched over, breathing heavily. “I tried to stop him!”

“Wifey!” Mako spread his arms and made a beeline for Lise.

She rolled her eyes and Mako smacked right into an energy shield with a loud THONK! Lise snapped her fingers and Mako was encased in a bubble of her energy. “You were saying?” She gestured to Sherry to continue.

Sherry recovered quickly, however, she did glance at Mako every few minutes from the corner of her eyes. “I wasn’t able to find anything new. ‘Owever, ‘here is information ‘at zhe Ghost you met is connected to Yliaster.


“It’d make sense,” Yusei said. “If Yliaster is the one controlling Ghost…” He trailed off, unsure what the connection meant.

“Yliaster is already among us,” Sherry continued.

“That’s right,” Leo realized, his hazel eyes round with his discovery. “But all the proof has
disappeared!”

“There was Luciano,” Luna started counting them off on her fingers. “Ghost, the Jack-Bot…”

Jack crossed his arms. “The enemy after us has some incredible technology. Especially at that factory Lazar took our program to.”

“That’s right,” Crow said. “We never found out what they made there.”

“Something they needed our engine program for,” Bruno mused.

Crow frowned at him. “Weren’t you able to see anything?”

“No,” Bruno shook his head. “I got knocked out by some guy in a white robe.”

“Geez.”

“Sorry…”

“But why is Yliaster after us?” Luna asked.

“That’s probably because you are Signers,” Sherry said.

All the Signers and those familiar with the Crimson Dragon exchanged glances. They normally didn’t talk so openly about that kind of thing with others.

“So, you know about the Crimson Dragon?” Yusei broached the subject first. His hand had tightened around Lise’s waist.

“Of course,” Sherry rolled her eyes. Were these people really so clueless? “I would never invite someone to join my team without knowing everything about them. Besides, Elise just used her power on that idiot.”

“Sorry about that,” Mika piped up immediately. “He’s become obsessed.”

“I just reacted without thinking,” Lise’s face was a little warm. “Don’t worry about it, Mika.”

“Um…he can still breathe in there, right?” Mika asked.

“I think so, as long as he doesn’t use up all his air at once.”

“About being Signers,” Crow raised his uninjured hand, getting them back on topic. “It isn’t like we try to hide it these days.”

“But why go after the Signers?” Jack pointed out.

“Lazar might know something,” Akiza suddenly spoke up. She’d been quiet as she thought about the pieces to the unfinished puzzle they had.

“That’s right!” Crow pointed at her. “He stole our engine program! He’s gotta know something!”

“But Mina and Trudge haven’t seen him for a long time,” Akiza said. “Mina told me he just up and left the headquarters and hasn’t been seen since.”

“Did he run away? Would his assistant know anything?”

“What about the mysterious director?” Jack added. “Has anyone even seen him? Does Mina know
anything about him?"

“All she told me was that three new directors were assigned.”


Jack’s frown deepened. “Could we arrange a meeting with them?”

Akiza shook her head. “Not even Mina or Trudge has seen them. I think Lazar is the only one who saw them.”

“How strange,” Bruno commented. How could a city function if the people didn’t know who was in charge? If they had no idea they could trust who was in charge?

“It’s still worth a shot,” Akiza said. “I can call Mina, see if we can actually get a meeting scheduled.”

“Good idea,” Luna said. “I mean, the worst they can say is no.”

Sherry sighed. “We don’t know anything. We couldn’t even learn anything at the Public Security Maintenance Bureau.”

“That whole bomb scare?” Crow said.

“What exactly happened that day?” Akiza asked, shooting a pointed look at Lise, Yusei and Bruno.

“Back then, we… from the computer room in the Bureau, the card suddenly transported us to…”

“A different dimension,” Lise finished.

“You’re sure it wasn’t just an illusion?” Jack said, eyes narrowed. He wasn’t quite ready to believe that was possible.

“It wasn’t,” Sherry glared scathingly at him. How dare he suggest they experienced a shared hallucination. “I’m sure that creature ‘olds the key to everything!”

“Could he be Yliaster’s boss?”

“I don’t know,” Sherry admitted.

At the thought of the creature being linked to Yliaster, Bruno suddenly felt weak. The table saved him from falling to the floor, but Bruno needed it to keep himself upward. Sweat rolled down his back.

“We know it has a similar energy signature to mine,” Yusei said.

“It does?!” Leo’s eyes were practically bugging out of his head.

“Merde, what does that mean, exactly?” Sherry blurted.

“We don’t know that either,” Lise said. She gripped the hem of her shirt so tightly her hand was shaking. Tiny beads of sweat formed on her forehead. “I can remember exactly how that thing felt. It was like Yusei, but all wrong. Like a human machine with all the important things put back in wrong.”

Sherry pushed her hair back out of her face. She need to clear her head. This was getting to be too
much. “Whatever zhat creature is, I believe zhat if I can win zhis tournament, I can get closer to ‘im.”

“Mika, do you know anything about Yliaster?” Lise asked. “Your family are their descendants, right?”

Yusei glanced at Bruno, and then did a double take. “Bruno?”

“What’s wrong?” Luna had noticed too. “Are you okay?”

Bruno was clearly not okay. Pale was an understatement regarding his facial color. “I’m just…a little overwhelmed. I’m gonna get some fresh air.”

He walked outside, past Sherry’s runner. The only familiar place, unassociated with his new friends, was the beach he had been found at. He headed there to make sense of…something. He wasn’t sure what.

///

“Here I am again,” Bruno sighed heavily. The gaping hole of emptiness his lost memories weighed on him more than he could say. “Where I was found…” The gently rolling waves did nothing to unscramble his jumbled thoughts.

“Mew…”

Bruno looked down to find a tiny Siamese kitten brushing its head against his ankles.

“Aw, are you lost too?” Bruno scooped the kitten up.

“Mew!” The kitten slowly blinked at Bruno.

He gasped, his eyes glowing. This cat. He’d met it before. Driving in the streets. But when was that? Had he crashed? He remembered the man in the white robe too.

“Do I…know that man? Does he know something about me? It feels like I had a mission assigned to me…”

The information was suddenly pouring in. Bruno’s eyes continued to glow, ones and zeroes streaming past his vision faster than he could comprehend.

Bruno dropped the cat, clutching at his throbbing head. His screams joined the frightened yowls of the cat in the night.

///

“Honestly, you’re all idiots,” Mako had taken advantage of Lise being distracted to pop his head out of the bubble. He grinned devilishly, or at least as best as one could whilst suspended in a large, red bubble. He looked like a floating maraschino cherry. “Mika doesn’t know anything about the People of the Stars, but I do.”

“I think that’s as good as any cue to leave,” Martha had noticed her kids had seized playing. Most were picking up on the tense situation the teenagers were entangled in.

“Us too,” Nervin said.

“Aw,” Rally stuck his lower lip out pointedly.
Lise knelt to Rally’s eye level. “We’ll come see you again soon,” she promised.

“And we’ll bring junk food,” Yusei added.

Rally grinned and gave them a hug. Of course, he had to hug everyone before allowing himself to leave. “I’ll watch all your duels in the WRGP! See you guys soon!” He followed Nervin, Tank, and Blitz out into the night. Martha and her kids left too.

Lise’s smile dropped off so fast that the glare she leveled at Mako should have incinerated him on the spot. “You were sitting on information this entire time?”

“Well, not everything about this predicament today, but I can fill in a few gaps, yeah.”

Yusei crossed his arms, his grimace just as fearsome as Lise’s. “Mika, can we trust him?”

Mika shrugged helplessly. “I honestly don’t know. Dad wasn’t exactly the sharing type when it came to his former life. I can do my best to mitigate though. I know of the traditions of the People of the Stars, at least.”

“So, first question, what exactly is Yliaster?” Akiza posed the question with her palm up, inviting conversation.

Mako’s grin widened. “I never said I’d just give you the information for free. I want a deal.”

Crow rolled his eyes. “We’re not selling Lise to you.”

“Aw…” Mako pushed his lower lip out. Pouting was cute on Rally, but not on Mako. “Not even a little bit?”

“No!” Luna cried.

“What about a rematch?”

“Talk!” Sherry yanked Mako towards her by his shirt collar. “I’m tired of waiting!”

“Shan’t say nothing if you don’t say please!” Mako trolled in a sing-songy voice.

Leo’s eyes narrowed as he tried to piece that one together. “Please?”

“Nothing!” Mako giggled. His laughter was cut short when he saw the faces of his audience. He cleared his throat. “Or how about a rematch?”

“Pass,” Lise said immediately.

“It’s more reasonable in comparison,” Jack admitted. “Why not?”

“Because I’d have to prepare mentally and physically, and then schedule a day and time, and that’s just too much effort for someone I don’t give a fuck about,” Lise said, a deeply disgusted scowl on her face.

“I vote we just toss him out back again,” Yusei grumbled.

“No, we need ‘is information,” Sherry said, tightening her grip on the boy’s shirt. “What do you want?”

“Within reason,” Akiza added.
“You’d have to have something else I want,” Mako said.

“We could have your house arrest reduced,” Jack suggested, throwing his hand and the idea out there like it was nothing.

Mako’s eyes widened and narrowed just as quickly. “You can’t do that. Can you?”

“We know the chief of Public Security,” Akiza mentioned just as coyly.

“If you can get my house arrest reduced, we have a deal.”

“I’ll call Mina tomorrow,” Akiza smiled at him. “Now about my question.”

Lise snapped her fingers, and the energy bubble disappeared. Sherry let Mako go too.

“First of all, Yliaster is an in-between dimension. It connects this world with the Spirit World,” Mako said, brushing his clothes off.

“I knew it!” Carly blurted.

Luna had gasped. *The Spirit World is connected to Yliaster?!*

“Anyway,” Mako continued. Devoid of attention, he was glad to have the limelight for once. “The People of the Stars worship the delegates of Yliaster, our ancestors. They’re powerful beings that determine who the Signers are going to be every five thousand years.

The idea of my people was that we devote ourselves to Yliaster, be good people, and they will choose five of us to be Signers.”

“How’s that working out for ya?” Yusei allowed himself a small smirk.

Mako sniffed in Yusei’s direction, wrinkling his nose distastefully. “For your information, this was the first time the Crimson Dragon chose the Signers. Not the delegates of Yliaster.”

“You did?” Akiza asked Lise. She wasn’t sure how to feel about that. Her dragon armk had brought her a lot of happiness, yes, but also quite a bit of pain.

“What?” Lise was taken aback, she waved her hands frantically back and forth. “No, I didn’t choose!”

Mako rolled his eyes. “Not you, Lise, the Crimson Dragon herself. She started with your father, a choice she made with the assistance of the delegates. When that didn’t work out, she insisted on being allowed to choose on her own. Her plan was to keep her soul bonded to yours and meet the Signers she had chosen.”

“She did want to experience being human,” Lise breathed. *I had no idea what that really meant to her... But the delegates... a decision... why does that sound familiar?* Lise dug in her coat pocket for a scrap of paper and a pencil.

“She was also protected in her weakened state by choosing someone to carry her soul,” Mako said.

“But the People of the Stars weren’t sure what to make of this, so my mother took things into her own hands. When the opportunity presented itself, of course.”

“But what does that mean for Yliaster?” Sherry said exasperatedly.
“Well, it was the birthplace of the Crimson Dragon, but her spurning of the delegates’ help threw everything off. As far as I know, it’s chaos up there.

“We wear white in honor of the delegates of Yliaster. They have lots of power, and we inherit only fractions of that power. They can’t set foot on Earth though, not without severely fracturing their own existence beyond repair.

All members of the People of the Stars are named after the delegates of Yliaster.”

“That’s just confusing,” Leo said.

“Yeah, and there’s no creativity in it,” Akiza added.

Luna bent over Lise’s shoulder. “What’re you drawing?” she whispered.

“I think I remembered something important,” Lise whispered back. “Mako.”

Mako stopped in the middle of his heated debate about culture versus cultism with Akiza and Carly. “Yes?”

“Do the delegates look like this?” Lise held up her sketch. She’d drawn a dark-skinned, older woman clad in a white cloak. Half the details were a little fuzzy, but the face was just recognizable enough. Everyone crowded around to get a good look.

“Yes,” Mako blinked, too shocked to be obnoxious about it. “That’s how all our statues looked, a bit more generic, but yes. How did you know?”

“I think I saw them in my dreams. A long time ago,” Lise turned the drawing back around. “If I remember correctly, this woman has the same name as you, Mika.”

Crow whistled low, his eyes wide. “This is freaky.”

“So, about zhe delegates,” Sherry frowned. “Zhey can’t come to Earth, you said?”

“Not without damaging themselves, becoming slightly human. They’re basically demigods.”

“My dad called me that when I dueled him,” Lise said. “He said gods cannot interfere, and all the Crimson Dragon’s power was suddenly gone.”

“The Crimson Dragon belongs to both worlds,” Mako explained. He held up one hand. “Born from the light of Yliaster,” he held up his other hand. “And the will of humanity. She’s only whole when the five pieces and the soul come together, so she can’t maintain dragon form for long. The Crimson Dragon knew the risks, and accepted that her existence would always be fragmented. My guess is when you dueled Roman, the pieces were stretched too thin, and couldn’t offer you protection from darkness so powerful.”

“Tactically it’s smart,” Carly tried to push up her glasses. Then she remembered she didn’t need them, and wasn’t wearing them. Awkwardly lowering her hands, she kept going. “Because she’s in pieces, it lowered the chance that all of you would turn to the darkness.”

“We could also protect each other.” Yusei’s fingers closed around Lise’s.

“Okay,” Sherry grunted impatiently. “Zhank you for zhe history lesson, but back to zhese delegates. Could some of zhem be zhe mysterious directors?”

“Holy…”
“Oh my god…”

“Is that…possible?” Yusei asked. He’d stiffened significantly.

“Theoretically,” Mako raised his palms upward. “It’s never been done before. Ever since the Crimson Dragon changed things almost nineteen years ago, we’ve been exploring in the dark. The future has changed so many times. The Dark Signers were supposed to do you in, but when that didn’t work out, it was my mother’s turn.”

Lise’s blood went cold. She could see that future clear as day. “We were supposed to die in that temple, weren’t we?”

Mako met her eyes. Shame, and the heavy weight of the truth was all Lise saw. “Yes.”

“But we didn’t,” Yusei reminded them. “We’ve changed the future twice now.”

“Exactly,” Akiza gasped. “So if someone didn’t like our changes—”

“Yes,” Leo added. “They’d send someone to fix it!” Crow also realized.

“That’d explain how the people who targeted us can warp reality, like Lise said,” Leo said. “Oh god,” Jack groaned, covering his eyes with his hand. “My brain hurts.”

“If these delegates, or directors, are indeed pulling these strings, it’s even more important that I win this tournament,” Sherry said.

“I have a question,” Luna said. She raised her hand. Her face flushed a little at having everyone’s attention, but she went on. “You said Yliaster is connected to the Spirit World?”

“It’s connected to Earth and the Spirit World,” Mako said. “But the entrance to Yliaster is in the Spirit World.”

“Could we go to Yliaster through the Spirit World?” Luna asked.

“Theoretically?”

“It could be done,” Mika nodded. “But it’s never been done before. Like Mako said, you’ve all completely changed the script. Nothing is set in stone.”

“Well, I see my path ahead clearly. Winning this tournament is the best bet of getting closer to these directors, these delegates,” Sherry stated. “Thank you, for more answers.” She nodded respectfully to Mako and hopped aboard her duel runner parked outside. “I hope we don’t meet each other in the WRGP, Elise.” Then just like that, she was gone.

It was quiet for a minute. Nobody had realized how strong Sherry’s presence was until she was gone.

“Luna?”

“Yes?”

“What’s the Spirit World like?” Lise asked, she tapped her lips with her thumb as she thought. Her eyes remained fixed on the drawing sitting innocently on the table.
“Um,” Luna rubbed at her arm, the one with her marking. She didn’t meet anyone’s eyes either, especially her brother’s. “I didn’t see much of it, but I couldn’t use any of my Signer abilities. I had a lot of help from my friends, but I’ve only been there once.”

“Twice actually,” Leo said. “The first time was when we were three.”

“But my head was in the Spirit World, not the rest of me.”

“Oh…right…”

Crow tapped at the table. “What’re you getting at, Lise?”

Mika spoke up before Lise. “Mako, you’re sure the entrance to Yliaster is in the Spirit World?”

“Oh yeah,” Mako nodded. He slipped his hands into his jeans. “Mom talked about it all the time. A few members of the People of the Stars could go into the Spirit World, mentally not physically, but it’s extremely rare. Mom always dreamed of going to the Spirit World. She wasn’t granted the power though.”

“Lise, if you’re thinking what I think you’re thinking, then I’m in,” Yusei said. He’d already connected the dots.

“It’s up to Luna,” Lise said. She raised her head, her light blue eyes unusually serious. “Could you take us into the Spirit World?”

“Isn’t that dangerous?” Akiza put her hand on Luna’s shoulder before the younger girl could answer. “All the times Luna’s been in contact with the Spirit World, she’s nearly been trapped there.”

“Me too,” Leo said. He scratched at the back of his neck. He hadn’t even been trying to get into the Spirit World. Helping his sister was his sole goal at the time.

“It is,” Lise admitted. The gears in her head were turning furiously. If this plan worked, they could have more information than they dreamed. “That’s why if we do go to the Spirit World, we need to train, prepare.”

“It’s doable,” Mako said. He started picking at his fingernails. Lower lip extended, he pouted at losing the spotlight so soon.

Luna took a long, deep breath. “I can take us into the Spirit World.”

“And what would we be doing once we got there?” Jack frowned. He slammed both his hands down on the table. “We’ve still got the rest of the WRGP to worry about. Should we really be focusing on another plan right now?”

Crow sat down, resting his injured arm on the table. “As much as I hate to admit it, I’m more inclined to agree with Jack. If we go through with this, we might be giving our enemies the distraction they need.”

“But look at who we’re up against,” Luna blurted out. She cleared her throat and started again. “Ghost, Luciano, the Jack robot, and the factory have all been erased. If we’re gonna fight people like that, then we need to know more. I…” She clutched her arm harder so that her hands wouldn’t shake. “I’m scared, but I think Lise is right. I think if we can do something, we should.”

“Our next match is in nine days,” Crow said. “Can we go to the Spirit World and back by then?”
“I think so,” Luna said.

“If we can’t use our Signer powers, we need to get you guys ready for a fight,” Lise said. “Best case, you never have to fight. Worst case scenario… well, let’s just say it’s better to be able to use your chi in a tight spot.”

“You think you can teach us how to use chi?”

“I’ll help too,” Mika immediately volunteered. “If you can’t unlock your chi, I can at least give you chi blocking lessons. They come in handy more than you think.”

“I wanna help too!” Mako waved his arm around like a plucky kindergartner.

“NO,” everyone said at the same time.

Mako’s pout increased. He sat down huffily in the nearest chair. “Nobody likes me…” he whined.

“Not with that attitude,” Crow groaned.

“Could you call your friends in Peru, Lise?” Akiza suggested. “Maybe they have an idea for speeding up the process. I think it’s a good idea to have back up abilities that we can use if we’re going to the Spirit World.”

“Good idea!” Lise checked the time. “Oh, but tomorrow morning. The time zones are a little wonky.”

“I’m gonna head out then,” Mika said. “Keep me updated though. I want to help however I can. Come on, Mako.”

Mako bowed low, walking out the garage door backwards. “Until we meet again, mon Cherie.” He blew a kiss at Lise.

“Die lonely,” she responded in a deadpan voice.

“I’m going to bed,” Jack yawned, stretching his limbs out. “That guy is too much.”

“I’ll say,” Yusei’s jaw ached he’d been clenching it so hard. Mako always knew how to grind his gears the wrong way.

Crow nodded at their guests. “Leo, Luna, Carly, Akiza, you’re welcome to spend the night. We’ve got blankets and a couple couches to spare.”

Akiza smiled at him. “Thanks.”

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Lise yawned deeply when she awoke the next morning. She stretched out to the best of her ability. Yusei had pulled her against his chest in their sleep. Her ear rested right over his steadily beating heart.

This close to him it was hard to tell if he was still asleep, or if he’d woken up and decided to stay in bed. Either way, Lise was happy for his warmth. She pressed her lips to his collarbone, moving up to his throat, right beside Yusei’s Adam’s apple.

A low groan escaped Yusei’s lips. Lise laughed a little, planting one last kiss on his jawline before rolling over to grab her phone. She had a phone call to make, that is, before her anxiety made her
She yawned again and hit Sasha’s number in her contacts. While it dialed, Yusei scooted closer to throw his arm around Lise. He teasingly kissed at the mole on her back.

“Lise?” Sasha picked up.

“Hi Sasha,” Lise sat up to talk easier. “Is it a bad time?”

“No, we’re doing afternoon training exercises before dinner. What’s up?”

“LISE!” Jarra’s voice was suddenly screaming at maximum volume through the phone. She was so loud Lise had to hold the phone away from her ear or risk ear damage.

“Holy-!” Yusei rolled over and threw his pillow over his ears.

“LISE! SO GOOD TO HEAR FROM YOU! CAN YOU HEAR ME? IT’S ME, JARRA!”

“Jarra, you don’t have to yell!” Lise said exasperatedly into her phone. Just in case, she extended her arm again.

“Jarra! Give me back the phone! You’re gonna give Lise ear damage!”

“But I wanna talk to her!”

“Hi Lise!”

“Oh, hi Jose,” Lise said weakly. He must have taken the phone when Jarra and Sasha got distracted. “What’s up?”

“Training, cooking, oh, and I have my own class now! The former People of the Stars are fast learners.”

“That’s great! Where’s Garrett?”

“Teaching his weapons class. He won’t admit it, but he loves it. So why did you call?”

The fighting seemed to calm down in the background of the line. “I actually wanted all of your advice. We have an idea to go to the Spirit World, but we can’t use our Signer powers there. We decided to train everyone to use chi. Any advice?”

“You all want to train now!!” Jarra had snatched the phone back.

“That’s going to be difficult,” Sasha said, but she sounded more thoughtful than discouraged.

“We can totally help! We’ll be there by tomorrow!” Jarra said, and promptly hung up.

“Uh…” Lise froze awkwardly, phone still to her ear.

“So…?” Yusei sat up, leaving his question dangling.

“They said yes to helping,” Lise said, facing him. “And they’ll be here tomorrow.”

Yusei’s eyes went wide. “Holy shit. Did you ask if they wanna stay here?”

Lise was texting about sleeping accommodations to Sasha. “Already on it.”
“Well, now that we’re irreversibly awake, thanks to Jarra,” Yusei began.

Lise laughed a little. Talk about a wake-up call.

“Do you want waffles?”

Lise put her phone down, mouth and eyes wide. “Waffles? You’re making waffles?”

“Yes?” Yusei’s eyes darted back and forth, not sure what to make of such a reaction.

“Good god, I love you,” Lise murmured, kissing Yusei’s cheek.

He chuckled, kissing Lise back in her messy, but soft hair. “I love you, too.”
"Hi, guys! Welcome to Japan!" Lise waved at Sasha, Jarra, Jose, and Garrett as they entered the baggage claim area. She and Yusei had been waiting for their plane to land.

“Lise!” Jarra tackled her into a bone-crushing hug. “I missed you!”

“I missed you too, Jarra,” Lise wheezed.

“How was the flight?” Yusei asked. He took a couple of the carry-ons from their friends. They’d been carrying their things for hours. The least he could do was carry them for a couple minutes.

“Not bad,” Jose grinned.

Sasha and Garrett went to the baggage carousel to wait for their other items.

“We slept through most of it,” Jose went on. “And Jarra made us watch a couple movies to ‘stay current,’ or so she put it.”

Yusei raised an eyebrow. “You guys aren’t that isolated are you?”

Jose tilted his head back and forth. His hand waved to and fro. “Kind of. I mean, we have Wifi and all that, but there’s not a lot of time to watch the news. What’s been up with you guys?”

“The WRGP,” Lise said. She’d managed to peel Jarra off her.

“And, ya know, the evil plot to destroy us, synchro monsters, and the city,” Yusei added.

“Hopefully our assistance vill prevent zhat,” Garrett said. He and Sasha had collected everyone’s bags. “Shall ve go?”

///

Lise had finished tying up her arms when Akiza joined the others for training. Her father’s car dropped her off, both Akiza’s parents wishing her well.

“Ready to get started?” Akiza grinned at her friend.

“Ready to be a student again,” Lise said. She flexed her fingers experimentally. The wrappings Yusei had made for her still worked perfectly.

“It’s always fun to learn a new weapon,” Garrett said. He’d unwrapped his stock, of which was difficult to get through security at the airport. Eventually the TSA agents had conceded once the nature of Garrett’s profession became clear.

“Ready for training!” The boys, and Luna, had made their way out to join the Chi Walkers.

“First off,” Garrett stood, holding a wickedly sharp katana. “Ve need to judge what ve’re working with. I assume most of you are beginners, with Lise being the most advanced. The best way to determine how much ve need to push you, the closest in skill level to Lise must duel.”

“Regular duel or turbo duel?” Jack raised his hand. “Because either way, you can bet I’ll win.”

Lise rolled her eyes. “Not that kind of duel, idiot.”
“A sword duel,” Garrett nodded, holding his blade aloft. It caught the sun in the mid-morning light.

“That’s all you, dude,” Crow shoved Yusei forward.

“Uh, but—” Yusei was not about to fight his girlfriend to the death. Besides, he hadn’t exactly been practicing as much.

“Don’t worry,” Jarra giggled at the expression on Yusei’s face. “You won’t be able to touch her.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Lise said. Her face looked a little muddled too. This was not what she had in mind when she asked for their help.

“Question!” Leo raised his hand. “How is sword fighting gonna help us in the Spirit World?”

“Some of you might not be able to unlock your chi,” Sasha said, matter-of-factly. “It helps to have skills you can use in an emergency, just in case. Lise’s training might have been chronologically only one month, but she basically spent another two weeks training in the phantasmagoria. It’s Master Terra’s skill that allows her to speed up training processes in suspended realities.

“Obviously, we don’t have that here. We have about a week to make the six of you as strong as you can get. That means enhancing chi and fighting techniques.”

“Zhe can literally save your life,” Garrett added.

“Shall we begin the duel?” Jose asked, grinning gleefully. Lise was so easy to tease. He loved her facial expressions, and especially Yusei’s. Neither of them seemed keen on fighting each other.

“Everyone back up,” Garrett made shooing motions with his hands. He then handed two katanas to Yusei. “Your job is to stay on your feet as long as you can, and to keep your swords.”

“Huh?”

But Garrett was already walking over to Lise. “Defeat him without killing him.”

Lise huffed frustratedly, raising her fists. “Like I was gonna kill my boyfriend.” She scowled at the Chi Walkers. Mock battles with their wooden swords was one thing. That was just training. This was basically throwing them in a fire without warning and being told to find your way out.

“Um…doesn’t Lise get swords?” Yusei asked. This was all happening so fast.

“She doesn’t need zhem,” Garrett said. “Whenever you’re ready!”

“Oh this is gonna be awesome,” Jack whispered to Crow.

“Definitely,” Crow agreed.

“Oh… Aren’t you guys worried?” Bruno whispered over to them.

“No.”

“Why? Are you?”

Bruno glanced back at the match up. Yusei was taller, and holding two katanas. Lise was shorter, in comparison, but not by much, and empty-handed. Still, that didn’t mean Yusei would win. The entire thing made Bruno uneasy. “Yeah…”
“Wait!” Akiza called out, and ran up to Lise.

“What now?!” Lise threw up her hands. She just wanted to get this over with. Jarra, Jose, Garrett, and Sasha were, no doubt, just doing this to tease her.

“I’ve got an idea,” Akiza smiled conspiratorially. “Just hear me out,” and then Akiza was whispering too low into Lise’s ear for anyone else to hear.

Lise’s eyes nearly bulged out of her head. “What? N-No! I can’t! NO!”

Yusei’s eyes darted between the two girls. Then the boys and Luna. All they had to offer him were shrugs. The Chi Walkers were more excited than scared, not in the least helpful or comforting.

“Just try it, okay?” Akiza gave Lise a cheesy thumbs up and rejoined the boys.

“Fine,” Lise grumbled. She inhaled through her nose. Exhaled through her mouth.

“Ready?” Garrett held up his arm.

“Sure,” Yusei said, raising his swords.

Lise closed her eyes and took another deep breath. When she reopened her eyes, they were so deadly-looking Yusei almost took a step back. It was like an ice age had cleared all the kindness and love inside the blue depths of her eyes. What had Akiza said to her?

“Ready.” Lise raised her fists.

“Begin!” Garret dropped his hand.

Yusei immediately went for a stabbing motion. He had to move fast if he wanted to win. Maybe not win, but survive as long as possible. He had to use the advantage the swords granted him.

Then Lise suddenly wasn’t there. “What?”

He turned around to find Lise gently stepping to the ground. She barely even disturbed the dusty cobblestones of the plaza. He hadn’t even seen her make a step. A shundo?

When did she get so fast?

He’s…so slow! For a moment the cold, unfeeling glare was gone. Then Lise blinked, and the cold mask slipped into place again.

Counterattack! Don’t give her a chance to attack! Yusei remembered he was holding weapons, and made slashing movements.

Lise ducked and dodged his movements with ease. The most infuriating was when she’d simply sidestep his thrust attempts at a stab. Not that Yusei wanted to stab his girlfriend, not at all! But how could she make it look so easy to go up against sharpened steel?! He was already sweating, and she only looked just as furious as she had when the match began.

Yusei groaned out loud in frustration. Lise had shundoed away again! He turned around, searching wildly. Lise was nowhere to be seen.

Cold fingers suddenly sent chills down Yusei’s spine. She was right behind him! Yusei whirled, slashing with his sword.
Lise ducked both swords. She popped back up just as quickly, kicking the sword in Yusei’s left hand out of his grip.

Maybe his friends and the Chi Walkers were cheering. Maybe they were quiet, or reacting sympathetically. Yusei didn’t know. In the midst of the fight, they had become irrelevant. The fact that he only possessed one sword made his situation that much more glaringly obvious; Jarra was right. He couldn’t even touch Lise. And she wasn’t even using the power of the Crimson Dragon!

Yusei stepped forward, swinging his remaining katana. Lise bent backwards, rolling onto the ground, and coming out with a trip that sent Yusei sprawling. He hadn’t even had a chance to take advantage of Lise being on the ground for what must have been a split second.

He’d regained his footing to find Lise brandishing his fallen sword. That’s why she didn’t need any of her own. Yusei gulped, holding his sword out in front of him in hopes it’d protect him. Lise’s cold eyes still kinda scared him.

“Yah!” Lise dashed into battle, her sword clanging mercilessly against Yusei’s. It took all his strength to keep the sword in his hand.

Lise’s blade moved like a figure eight, then a stab maneuver. Then she changed it up just as quickly. Yusei backed up over and over to keep the majority of Lise’s sword away from him. All he could do was defend. There was no room for retaliation.

Then Lise’s sword blade turned around his own, snaking over to his hand gripping the handle. Yusei let go just before the tip of Lise’s sword would have plunged into his knuckles. The katana went flying up into the air.

Empty-handed, Yusei backed up with his hands in front of him, fruitlessly hoping that’d protect him.

Lise caught the second sword, crossing them in an ‘x’ right in front of Yusei’s throat. Frightened, Yusei dropped to his knees, hands up, and bent backwards to keep the blades from accidentally nicking his neck.

“And zhat’s zhe match,” Garrett said. He sounded like he was trying not to smile.

“Whoo!” Akiza cheered, clapping a little.

Bruno, Leo, and Luna clapped politely. Jack handed Crow a coin with a grimace so furious it could have peeled paint.

Lise blinked and pulled the swords back. Her eyes were normal, warm and alight again. While the fight hadn’t tired her much, her cheeks flushed now. “Y-You okay?” She extended her hand.

Yusei took it, allowing Lise to help him back to his feet. “Uh huh…” He’d never seen her so ruthless before, not towards him anyway. If she’d been mad for real, he might have been more afraid or intimidated. He couldn’t describe anything that was going through his head, but he couldn’t stop staring at Lise either. She could literally kill him, that was clear now. So why did that excite him? Also, how did Akiza get her to come at him like that?

“Yusei lasted for about sixty-four seconds,” Jarra was reporting.

“So, you want us to last a minute against someone better in the Spirit World?” Leo asked, his eyes narrowed in confusion.
“No,” Garrett shook his head. “The idea is that Yusei held his ground long enough that he could have escaped at the right moment. You will absolutely not become masters in seven days, but I can give you the skills to hurt your attacker long enough for you to escape.”

“Oh,” Luna nodded. *Good. When worst comes to worst, sometimes you need to hide and regroup.*

“So, Sasha and Jose will help you all with chi,” Garret said.

“And I’m helping Garret out with weapon training,” Jarra grinned, hugging Garrett from behind. Jarra was a small woman, but she lifted Garrett up no problem.

“Let’s get started,” Sasha said. “For real.”

///

“I don’t get it,” Leo said after fifteen minutes.

He, his sister, Lise, and Akiza were practicing chi training with Sasha and Jose. Akiza and Crow had insisted on breaking up the two groups as so. No one could argue with their reasoning behind Lise and Yusei being separated, Leo being with the girls to retain any ability to focus, and Jack not being around anyone he was trying to impress. Luckily, Carly had opted out, especially when she was forbidden from taking photos.

“How is breathing gonna help me with chi stuff? I already know how to breathe,” Leo complained.

“Proper breath technique is important,” Sasha said as if that were obvious. She gave Leo a scathing look that he balked at.

Leo looked down, pretending to be studying the holes in the cobblestone plaza. *Why does this stuff always make me feel stupid?*

Jose frowned at Sasha. He sat down next to Leo, flashing him an encouraging smile. “What Sasha means is that, we use breathing to calm ourselves to use techniques. It also helps with just your everyday life. A lot of people forget to breathe when they’re learning how to fight or just doing push ups.”

“Oh, I guess that makes sense,” Leo nodded. He smiled back tentatively at Jose, still unsure of himself.

“Don’t worry if you’re not getting it,” Jose added. “Garrett still can’t use chi. He usually borrows some from Sasha if he needs to.”

“Okay, now when you think you have a firm grasp on the current of your chi, try to direct it to your index finger,” Sasha was saying to the girls.

Luna’s little face was screwed up in concentration. Sweat dripped down her forehead. All her concentration was focused on pushing this ability through her.

Akiza and Lise, in comparison, were calmer. As a slightly more advanced student, Lise was concentrating on the meditational calming aspect more. She had so much chi that it needed to be prevented from explosively leaving her system without warning. She peeked at the others to check on them from time to time. Akiza’s finger was already sparking with a reddish-black color. She held her hand out, hoping to hold her chi, but it fizzled just as quickly as it had enveloped her finger.
“Keep trying, Akiza,” Sasha said. “You’re doing well.”

“Luna, try to go slower, use the breathing to calm yourself,” Jose said gently. “You shouldn’t have to hurt yourself so much.”

“I know,” Luna sighed, her shoulder slumping. “I’m just not sure what my chi is supposed to do.”

“To do?” Jose cocked his head to the side. “Whattaya mean?”

“You use yours for your bombs!” Leo interjected, his eyes bright. “I wanna be able to blow stuff up!”

Luna giggled. Her brother was a dumb dork sometimes, but he always knew how to make her feel better. “Sort of what Leo’s getting at,” she explained. “Your chi detonates your special bombs. Sasha’s is stronger with her gloves. Lise can even steal chi now! I’m just not sure what my chi is supposed to do.”

“Oh,” Jose nodded. He sat down heavily, looking down at his hands. They were calloused, rough, and generally smelled like whatever he’d been cooking. Evidence of his hard work. How was he supposed to phrase this answer? “Luna, hard work, like everyone’s chi, is different for everyone. Once I unlocked my chi to the point I could use it at will, it just made sense for me to use it the way I do. It took years of practice and development, and of course there’s still more I can do.

“I guess, what I’m saying is, your chi and even your chi, Leo, will have a different purpose. Sometimes it isn’t something you can attack with, and sometimes it doesn’t even seem useful. But it’ll be yours, and a part of what makes you yourself.”

Jose patted Luna’s shoulder. “Just don’t rush it, okay? We’re here to help.”

“Thanks Jose,” Luna smiled up at him.

Leo nodded seriously. “I hope my chi gives me laser eyes.”

Lise couldn’t help but smile a little. Leo was so funny, and his enthusiasm was often contagious. Her expression fell as she returned to her own contemplations. She’d seen how pained Luna looked when forcing herself to get through this. Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea.

///

“This is fun,” Crow was saying. He watched Bruno take down Jack again. Having an injured arm got him out of the more strenuous stuff, but he did what he could.

“Speak for yourself,” Jack grumbled, brushing himself off. He’d hated this constant humiliation when Lise was teaching. Now he had it four times as worse with her friends.

“I was,” Crow smirked. Jack stuck his tongue out at him.

“I don’t see the reason for me to train with you,” Bruno said. “I’m not a Signer.”

Jarra shrugged, handing everyone water. “Best to be prepared. We’re not sure how far Luna’s ability will be able to stretch.”

“At best, she can take all of you. At worst, she could probably only take Lise. We’re hoping for a happy medium of Signers and Vessel,” Garrett explained. He blocked Yusei’s stab move, disarmed him, and kicked him away.
“Aw man,” Yusei grumbled, getting to his feet. “I thought I had you that time!”

Garrett tossed back the sword. “You have heavy footsteps, probably from those boots you usually wear. I could hear you coming a mile away.”

“Haha,” Jack teased. He smirked at the scowl Yusei shot him.

“Oh,” Garrett’s smile took on a devilish air. “I have a new sparring volunteer. Come on, Jack.”

Yusei tossed him the sword. “Good luck, man.”

Jack turned red, fumbling the wooden training sword, and dropping it. Jack snatched the sword off the ground, and sniffed as he walked past with his chest puffed out. “I don’t need luck.”

Jarra had Bruno and Yusei practice release and escapes. Crow joined in, the others going easier to prevent Crow from falling on his already injured arm. He was scheduled to have the cast removed soon, so another accident was not top of the list.

To their amusement, Jack was thoroughly disarmed and ‘murdered’ by Garrett no less than ten times. He resembled an awkward, white fish flopping around trying to retrieve its fallen food. Garrett called out mistakes ever few seconds.

“Don’t turn your back on your opponent! … Use my techniques to come at me with your own! … Stop rolling everywhere or I will stab you for real!”

“I wish I had a camera,” Crow snickered.

“Don’t worry,” Jarra couldn’t help but giggle a little too. “You’ll all be able to defend yourselves for a decent amount of time by the time we’re through with you.”

“That’s… comforting…” Bruno finally decided on a word that didn’t quite capture his feelings towards the exercise. Watching Lise and Yusei fight with real blades was terrifying enough. He never wanted to be in that position.

///

At lunchtime the two groups reconvened to eat the meal Jose had insisted on cooking. Crow and Bruno had argued with him for at least fifteen minutes about the rules of guests versus hosts etiquette. They only stopped when Leo wailed for food with the urgency of a starving child.

“How is chi training?” Yusei asked.

“Super hard,” Leo groaned, spreading his arms across the table, collapsing on it with defeat. “My legs fell asleep.”

“You’ll get it, Leo,” Jose said. He came in with steaming piles of food that made everyone’s mouths water. “But for now, eat up!”

“Yes, sir!” Leo grinned. He started shoveling food into his mouth like he feared it would disappear.

“I can get the chi to my finger,” Luna said. “But that’s it.”

“Oh the first day? That’s great,” Crow said. He smiled at the little girl.

Luna smiled back at him, happy for the praise. Still, she felt it wasn’t enough. How on Earth was she supposed to use her chi well enough by next Saturday? Could she even use it to protect herself
in the Spirit World? She had too many questions, and nobody to talk to about them. Maybe Leo would understand. But some other time. At the moment, she was hungry.

“Jack, why do you look so dingy?” Akiza frowned at him.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Jack responded curtly. He spooned a large gulp of food into his mouth to prevent an answer even if he had wanted to give one.

“He got creamed at sword fighting with Garrett,” Crow told her, smirking.

Jack pointed his chopsticks at Crow. “I’d like to see you try with just one arm!”

“Maybe I will!”

Crow and Jack got in each other’s faces.

“Oh yeah?!”

“Yes!”

Bruno shook his head. He was content with eating silently.

“Anyway,” Akiza pushed some hair out of her face. “Chi training is interesting, especially combined with the stuff I learned from Mika. We should get her to teach some chi blocking to everybody.”

“And give everybody noodle arms!” Lise giggled.

“The noodle arms!” Akiza wailed, also laughing breathlessly. She and Lise proceeded to wave their arms around like stringy noodles in what was clearly an inside joke.

“As long as I don’t have to be the dummy,” Lise said once she’d calmed down, wiping tears from her eyes. “I hate that fuzzy feeling.”

“Like when my legs fell asleep?” Leo asked.

Lise considered it for a second. “Sorta. It’s more like that fuzz is a side effect of something invisible clamping down on your chi supply. You can still feel it there, and you can still move, but you can’t use it. It’s just cut off.”

“Spooky,” Bruno shivered. “I vote no on dummy duty too.”

“Ah, but who is the dumbest?” Crow teased, an eyebrow waggling.

“You mean stupidest?” Leo added, his expression mirroring Crow’s.

“Should we do a poll?” Akiza sighed. *If you can’t beat them, join them.* “What’s the height of stupidity then?”

“I dunno,” Lise said. “Jack, how tall are you?”

“Oh, I’m about six – Hey!”

Jarra grinned evilly at all of them. “Laugh while you can, guys. You’re all going through hell this week.”
Crow nearly choked on his laugh. He gulped, swollowing the frog in his throat heavily. “There’s more?”

“Plenty,” Sasha said. Her neutral expression gave nothing away, like a noh-mask.

Lise was the only one who didn’t look surprised. She did share her friend’s fear. The process for training to use one’s chi was painful, and Lise knew that better than any of her friends.

///

Chi training kept on over the next few days. The groups remained separate for a short amount of time. Jarra, Sasha, Garrett, and Jose agreed to rejoin everyone for the sake of combining the physicality of chi-using.

Akiza and Luna had progressed well. They could summon their chi at will, but had yet to develop any techniques with them.

Leo was still trying to get his chi to his finger. Like Jose had said, he’d improved, enough to feel his chi flowing through his body. Moving and using the chi was another story entirely.

Bruno had been unable to sense his chi. Not to be discouraged, he’d focused his attention on repairing the duel runners and Garrett’s weaponry lessons.

Jack had lorded his progress in chi over Crow for a whole lunch period. Until Crow had discovered his chi manifested as tangible shadows when given direction. Ability unlocked.

Yusei’s chi was being difficult. Sometimes it was more than happy to manifest wherever he chose, but sometimes it remained elusive. Sasha speculated it had to do with inner turmoil.

To Garrett’s satisfaction, all his students could last at least ten seconds against him in sword fighting. Jarra had ensured her students could escape from any kind of hold after drilling them over and over to the point that any of them could escape from someone in their sleep.

///

On the fourth night of training, Yusei found Lise outside. She sat on the wall dividing the plaza from the water, staring at the ocean stretching out over the horizon. Even in the dark, Satellite was alight. It was quite a difference from when they’d been kids looking out to the city.

“Hey, are you okay?” Yusei yawned, stretching so that the hem of his shirt came up, exposing his stomach for a brief moment. “Aren’t you tired?” he added when Lise didn’t respond.

“Yeah, I am,” Lise yawned. She tapped her fingers together as she thought.

Yusei sat beside her, his back to the ocean. “Something else bothering you?” As the person who always had something bothering him, Yusei was practically the expert. He still had nightmares about Zero Reverse, and about the mysterious creature.

“Yeah,” Lise said slowly. She swung her leg over to straddle the wall. “I’m not sure we should keep going with this.”

Yusei raised an eyebrow. “Learning how to use chi?”

“Yeah…”

“We’re improving pretty good, considering our limited time frame,” Yusei said gently. “But that’s
“No, I’m just…afraid, honestly, of what happens next,” Lise spoke haltingly, trying to find the right words. “This stuff is so hard for Luna, for Leo, and this is just the first step. I know you won’t be going through the same stuff I did, but it’s painful stuff. It’s so painful.”

“Because of that phantasmagoria stuff you went through?”

“Yeah, but I also ate a scorpion. A scorpion, Yusei. I was starving in that desert and starving on that iceberg. I didn’t have a choice if I wanted to survive.

And not that I think Sasha would intentionally try to kill them, but that’s not stuff you just walk away from. It stays with you,” Lise raised her hand. Orange chi crackled along her arm, nestling in her arm, and vanishing. “I was put through so much pain and pressure from those trials that it had to get out to keep me alive. I don’t know if we can force someone to go through that kind of pain and pressure if they don’t need to.”

Yusei was quiet for a minute. It was a lot to digest. Lise had gone through hell to get the skills she had.

Finally, he said; “I was thinking about what Jose said about our chi being different. Like it has a nature to it, not just a color. So maybe going through that kind of pain and pressure isn’t necessary. I think this first stage, breaking through that barrier is the hardest. We’ll get there our own way.”

Lise smiled at him. His eyes were like sapphires in the moonlight. “I hope so. Seeing Leo and Luna going through all that is hard.”

“It is,” Yusei said, nodding his head. He fit his fingers in between Lise’s. Her thumb caressed the back of his hand. His expression brightened. “But the process is interesting too.”

“Yeah, that thing about chi having natures?”

“Uh huh,” Yusei said. “I think you said it yourself. Your chi’s nature is survival.”

“That…that sounds right,” Lise put a finger to her lips. “I’d never thought about it before.” She nudged Yusei’s knee. “Do Sasha next!”

Yusei chuckled, but he obliged. “I’d say Sasha’s is precision.”

“So I guess that means you have to tap into your inherent nature,” Lise pointed out.

“Tell me what Mako’s is then.”

“What?” Lise blinked at him. That was quite the abrupt subject change. “Why do you wanna know about him?”

“Well,” Yusei’s back stiffened, and he scratched at the back of his head. “Not Mako specifically. I just remember during the Budokai that you said Mako’s chi tasted terrible.”

“Oh, it did,” Lise stuck out her tongue, shivering with the memory of Mako’s essence. “Like tofu that’s gone bad mixed with bleach. Why?”

“Just curious,” Yusei responded far too quickly. He cleared his throat with a slight cough. “You took pieces of mine and Akiza’s chi. What does ours taste like?”

Lise’s eyes lit up like fireworks. “Akiza’s is like the fall! The crisp air, warm cider, the leaves
changing, and like her hugs!” Her face was a little pink. She hadn’t meant to be so forthright.

“That sounds right too,” Yusei said, smiling at her. “Then I guess Akiza’s nature could be change.”

“She’s certainly adapted well to dueling in the WRGP.”

“Then, what about mine?” Yusei’s voice lowered slightly. Lise could barely hear him over the waves.

Still, she had heard him. Her face, from the roots of her hair to the tip of her chin, turned red. Hopefully her hand wasn’t too sweaty.

“I-I-It feels l-like… Drowning in warmth, a-a perfect machine that’s safe and reliable, but burning with a little, hopeful light, and…and…” Lise rested her head on Yusei’s shoulder. Everything felt too hot, bubbly and good at just the thought of Yusei’s chi, his life force, sweeping through her again. It was too much; she couldn’t keep looking at him or she’d explode. “Chaotic and unpredictable, like the ocean…”

“I know that doesn’t make sense, but when I took some of both of you, that was like pouring more into an already filled cup.”

“Hmmm,” Yusei responded cryptically. Lise couldn’t see his face to judge his expression, but she didn’t have to. He had brought Lise’s hand to his lips. “Now I have to know what yours feels like. Though I have a pretty good idea already.”

Lise smiled, still red-faced. “We should get to bed. It’s late, and we still have three more days’ worth of this stuff ahead of us.”

“Good point,” Yusei gave Lise’s hand a little squeeze. “By the way, what did Akiza say to make you come at me like that?”

The red in Lise’s face became mottled. “It’s embarrassing,” she said, but she allowed Yusei to escort her off the wall.

“It can’t be more embarrassing than describing what my life force feels like,” Yusei insisted.

“No, it is,” Lise’s neck had turned red too.

“Please?!” Yusei begged. “I swear I’m not mad about it. It was kinda cool.”

“I-can’t.”

“I’ll tickle you,” Yusei threatened playfully. He raised his other hand to make good on the threat.

“Okay, okay,” Lise gave in, pushing the tickle claw away. She shuffled from foot to foot, suddenly cold. That is except for the heat in her face. “Akiza said to pretend you were Mako.” Lise’s eyes darted down to her feet, up to Yusei’s face, then back to her feet.

Yusei blinked at her, then his eyes widened. It was a full two minutes before he responded, in which Lise had seriously considering throwing herself into the ocean. “Wow.”

“Sorry, I didn’t think-“

“No, don’t be sorry,” Yusei laughed a little. He couldn’t help but grin, just a little. “It explains the murderous look in your eyes during the match.”
“Was I scary?” Lise asked as they walked inside, hand in hand.

“Yeah,” Yusei swallowed, his collar suddenly a little too tight. “And kinda…pretty… In a “I’m- gonna-murder-you kinda way,” he added quickly.

Lise laughed. “You’re weird. I think I’ll keep you.”
Luna took a deep breath. She was going to try again. Everything was perfect, or as perfect as it could be. She wasn’t hungry, her friends were nearby in case she needed help, and she felt strong enough to give it a shot.

Going into the Spirit World. Solo. Intentionally.

She’d been separated from the rest of the group. With Sasha’s help, she was training herself to go into the Spirit World. She could easily call on her chi by now, but she still wasn’t sure what to use it for, or what it was intended to enhance in herself. Still, she kept at it.

“Keep breathing, Luna,” Sasha instructed. “Good…”

The two girls sat across from each other. Both were cross-legged, but Luna was the one with her eyes closed.

“It’s still not working,” Luna sighed. She opened her eyes, untangled her legs and pushed at a loose pebble with her finger. “I’m not sure what I’m doing wrong. It’s like everything is bubbling to the surface, and then poof.”

Sasha raised an eyebrow. “Poof?”

“Ya know,” Luna made an explosion motion with her hands. “Poof.”

“Do you think it’s because you’re pushing yourself? Going in the wrong direction? What’re you trying to do?”

“I’m trying to take you and me into the Spirit World.”

“Okay, try to focus on just getting yourself there first. Sometimes it helps to envision the way you do it. How do you imagine you were taking me to the Spirit World?”

Luna flicked the pebble away from her. “It was kinda blurry… but it…was like we were pushing on light that wouldn’t budge no matter how hard I tried.”

Sasha thought about this for a moment. “Tell me how you got into the Spirit World the other times.”

“The first time was by accident. I was dueling, and hearing voices, and suddenly I was in the Spirit World. I had no idea I’d been in a coma here the entire time.

The second I was hypnotized by this really creepy guy in the Fortune Cup.

The next time I could hear Ancient Fairy Dragon calling me, so I just…listened to her, and this light took me to the Spirit World.”

Sasha’s hand fell on Luna’s shoulder. “Then focus on that feeling; the light, Ancient Fairy Dragon’s voice, and use that. It sounds like the best way to go to the Spirit World for you isn’t by force. It’s gentle…an invitation almost.”
“An invitation,” Luna’s green eyes were alight. Sasha was right. Luna had never accomplished her goals by being overly aggressive. She preferred to do things quietly, in the background if she could. Luna was not a very forceful person, and neither was Ancient Fairy Dragon. They’d done things aggressively when they felt they had no other choice.

Luna smiled up at Sasha. “Guess I should knock and ask to come in then.”

///

“So tell me,” Jarra was saying.

She and Garrett had given their trainees a break. Crow and Jack were downing water like they expected never to see another drop. Leo and Bruno were starfishing over the cool cobblestones of Fountain Plaza. Akiza was talking to Jose about what she could do now that she’d discovered her chi enhanced her psychic abilities.

Jarra’s green eyes fixed on Lise and Yusei. “What have you two been doing?”

They glanced at each other. “In terms of…?”

“The empathy link,” Jarra rolled her eyes. “What did you think I meant?”

“Right, the empathy link,” Lise wheezed, clearly believing Jarra had meant an entirely different topic. “What about it?”

Yusei recovered almost as quickly. His ears had turned a slight shade of pink. “Are we supposed to like… enhance it somehow?”

Jarra’s shoulders dropped. “No, I meant have you strengthened it? Explored the boundaries of what you can do?”

“To be honest, I never really thought about it,” Lise admitted. She picked at the dead skin on her fingertips.

“We can speak to each other psychically, if that’s what you mean,” Yusei said.

“No,” Jarra shook her head. She steepled her fingers together. “It’s…I saw in the temple how you can feel each other’s pain, and that can be good. But I refuse to believe that the empathy link, something you forged through your love for each other, is only meant to connect you through pain.”

Lise’s eyes nearly bulged out of her head. “Holy…” She trailed off. Jarra had a point, a huge, glaringly obvious point. Something she and Yusei should have acknowledged a long time ago.

“I did manage to make you stronger at one point,” Yusei said. He clasped his hands, staring at nothing in particular as he thought. “When we fought Roman the first time.”

“That’s a start,” Jarra’s face brightened. She wasn’t quite back to her usual exuberant self, but it was closer.

“But wouldn’t that just be using you as a battery?” Lise pointed out, one hand extended palm out. Her expression hardened.

Battery or not, she refused to use anyone, drain them in that way just to make herself stronger. But then was her chi stealing technique any different? It was certainly no better than using Yusei as a
battery. She’d already used him and Akiza just to prove a theory about chi. They’d consented, yes, but did that make it right? What if she had accidently killed them?

Yusei deliberately kept his gaze on the ground beneath him. His sneakers shuffling in the dust. “I don’t mind.”

“No, it was bad enough that I did it for the tournament,” Lise shook her head. “We can find other things the empathy link can do.”

Yusei pursed his lips, but said nothing. He knew he would give everything he had if Lise needed it, but was she saying she wouldn’t take everything he had to offer? Was she afraid of killing him? Was she afraid to give as much? He hated these questions swirling in his head. Nevertheless, the desire to be there for Lise remained.

“How do we get started?” Yusei finally asked.

“I think we should see how ranged the psychic connection is,” Lise said. “Then we can go from there.”

Yusei sipped his water bottle. “Jarra, you really think there’s more to the empathy link?”

Jarra nodded fervently. “Oh yeah, absolutely. I think the two of you can make the empathy link more than a connection between two people, but something unique and special.”

///

“So,” Lise yawned as she handed Luna a mug of warm milk. She joined Luna on their couch. Luna had left the dinner table early that night, get away from everyone for a little bit. “How is it going?”

“So-so,” Luna said. She accepted the mug and sipped gingerly. “This tastes…different.”

“Bad different?”

Luna shook her head, her pigtails swinging. “No, good different.”

“I put almond syrup in it, experimenting a little.”

“I like it.”

Lise smiled down at her. “Thanks.”

They were quiet for a little. Sitting in the dark of the garage, drinking warm milk. It was peaceful.

“I’m scared,” Luna finally said.

“Yeah?” Lise said, her voice low, gentle. She didn’t want to push Luna.

“Yeah?” Lise said, her voice low, gentle. She didn’t want to push Luna.

Luna nodded. Her nose sniffled a little. “What if I can’t do it? What if your friends came from Peru for nothing?”

“It’s okay, Luna,” Lise straightened up, and set her mug down so she could put her hand on Luna’s shoulder. “To be honest, I’m feeling the pressure of them being here too. It’s…a little suffocating. I love them, but I think everybody’s feeling the pressure a little. Not as much, but I’m sorry to have put you in this position.”

“No,” Luna rubbed her eyes on her arm. “I want to do it. I want to help. I wanna be a part of Team
5Ds too. I just…don’t know what else to do…”

“Luna…” Lise took a long breath. “You don’t have to be ‘useful’ to be a part of the team. You just are, and honestly I’m glad to have everyone on the team with us. It reminds us we’re not alone.”

“So…you won’t be mad if I can’t do it?”

“No,” Lise shook her head. “Of course not. If anything, we’ve all become stronger in our own ways. I also don’t have all the answers either.”

“I thought grown ups always knew what they were doing?” Luna frowned. She cocked her head to the side.

Lise laughed, and let out a long breath. “I’m gonna let you in on a little secret, Luna. No adult ever knows what they’re doing no matter how old they get. My status as an eighteen year old means little to nothing. I barely know what I’m doing tomorrow.”

“There’s no magic to it?”

“None whatsoever. I still like Pokémon as an adult too, which my mom would have absolutely been disappointed in.”

Giggles escaped past Luna’s lips. The knot in her stomach loosened a little. “Thanks, Lise.”

“No problem.”

///

“How are the knives treating you?” Garrett asked his students. His teeth split into a knife-like grin themselves. He was enjoying this way too much.

“I like the swords better,” Yusei said. He frowned at the small knives in his hands. “Not as much reach with knives.”

“Knives are precise,” Garrett nodded. “Deadly, and require close proximity. There is no detachment from your prey allowed.”

Crow leaned over to whisper in Jack’s ear. “Why does he look like he just opened the best gift ever? He’s talking about knives for christ’s sake.”

“I think Garrett is knife-sexual,” Jack whispered back.

Akiza had to put her hand up to her lips to stifle her laughter.

“Haha,” Leo grinned. Then his expression dropped into a frown. “I don’t get it.”

That set Luna off, then the others, until Garrett’s class became a laughingstock. Garrett’s toothy grin fell into a sharp scowl that silenced all giggles.

He put everyone into teams. The chi-walkers were each leaders of their group. Sasha took Lise and Luna. Garrett versus Akiza and Yusei. Jarra against Crow and Jack. Jose, last but not least, with Bruno and Leo.

“Remember, the goal is just to disarm your opponent with your knives! Go!” Garrett bellowed.

I’m not going easy on you,” Sasha immediately said to Lise.
“Please,” Lise rolled her eyes. “Don’t insult me. Ready, Luna?”

“Uh huh!”

“Let’s go!”

Luna wasn’t comfortable with a deadly, not to mention sharp, knife in her hand, but she was going to do her best. She charged in with Lise.

True to her word, Sasha didn’t hold back for one second with Lise. They would go in and out of each other’s space, trading blows, and attempting to immobilize the other like writhing snakes in a dance. The only thing that threw Sasha off was when Luna stepped in.

Garrett only had one knife, but he was practically a living weapon. Every time Yusei and Akiza thought they had an opening, Garrett would grab one of them, tossing each other into the other’s path. In just a few minutes, Garrett had thrown Akiza in Yusei’s way four times, and Yusei in Akiza’s way five times.

“Your control is good!” Garrett grinned at them as they breathed heavily. “You’ve managed to come at me without hurting each other!”

“Is he trying to tick us off?” Akiza grumbled to herself.

“I have no idea,” Yusei groaned. He moved back in to try again.

Akiza sighed and rolled her eyes, following him.

“Come on boys!” Jarra was giggling as she twirled around Crow and Jack effortlessly. “Can’t you even touch me?”

Jack and Crow had tried their best, but Jarra just twirled away from their blades. She was like a deadly ballerina, practically dancing into her attacks. Neither of them had even touched her the entire sparring match.

“If every spirit is like this in the spirit world, you can count me out,” Crow wheezed in between deep, heavy breathes.

“S…Seconded…” Jack added weakly.

Leo and Bruno had already given up a long time ago. Jose had just launched into a freakishly long lecture about the practicalities of explosives over the use of bladed weaponry. Complete with a PowerPoint presentation.

“And…Time! That’s five minutes!” Garrett announced.

Everyone collapsed. Even Lise. She hadn’t expected to go all out.

“That was only five minutes?” Crow whimpered.

“I know,” Akiza whined. “I need to lie down for like seven years.”

“So…A coma?” Crow turned his head so she could see him raising an eyebrow at her.

“Yeah, a light coma sounds good right now.”

“No!” Came the chorus of all her friends.
“I was just kidding.”

“Oh, Lise, your arm is bleeding a little,” Sasha pointed out. “I must’ve nicked it when we were on the ground.”

Lise sat up, examining her arm. “Yeah, it’s shallow though. No worries.”

Yusei sat up too. His fingertips brushed the edge of Lise’s cut. “Um, do you want me to-“

“It’s just a cut,” Lise pulled her arm away. “I don’t need you. I just need a band-aid.”

Yusei watched her get up, his hand falling back down. The grey, ashen look on his face made him look like he’d just been stabbed.

Lise’s lips pursed, but she said nothing as she patched herself up. Yusei’s expression hadn’t escaped her notice.

The others exchanged looks. Jarra especially seemed nervous. She was suddenly biting at her nail beds like a starving hamster.

“Uh, let’s call it a day,” Jose suggested.

Garrett nodded. “Agreed.”

///

“Sasha,” Luna tugged on the older girl’s shirt.

“Yes?” Sasha bent down to Luna’s eye level.

“I think I just realized something. Can you watch my body while I try to go into the Spirit World?”

“Yes,” Sasha smiled.

The two of them went back outside.

“What made you realize…this?” Sasha asked once they were seated cross-legged from each other.

“I talked with Lise the other day. I always thought if I were older, or more like my friends that this fighting stuff would be easy.”

“Completely untrue,” Sasha said. “If it were, Jose would be much less exuberant.”

“Haha, yeah,” Luna smiled. “But Jose also made me think then that my chi isn’t like the others then. My chi is meant to strengthen my connection to the Spirit World and its spirits.”

“Very good,” Sasha smiled.

Luna did too. She took a deep breath, and closed her eyes. “Here goes.”

This time Luna focused her chi inward, searching. She probed for the familiar sensation. The sound of Ancient Fairy Dragon’s voice.

*Hello, Luna, my friend.*

*Ancient Fairy Dragon! You heard me!*
I have always been here waiting to help you with your gift. To the Spirit World?

For a minute. How does this work?

I will transport your spirit. Your body will remain in the physical world. Be careful. As a soul in the Spirit World, you are vulnerable to all kinds of attacks.

Great. It never gets easier.

Luna heard a tinkling sound in the back of her head. Ancient Fairy Dragon was laughing.

I suppose not. You are still a Signer, despite not having Signer abilities in the Spirit World. Use that. Here we go.

Luna felt a small tug just behind her belly button. Like a fishing hook at lodged there. Then weightlessness as her spirit left her body.

Luna opened her eyes. Forest spread out far and wide as long as Luna could see. It looked exactly like her Ancient Forest field spell. “I did it!”

Yes, Luna. All you need to open the door, is to ask. Do you want to keep going?

“No,” Luna grinned up at the glowing fairy lights dancing along the trees. “This is good enough for now. Can I bring friends with me next time?”

Ancient Fairy Dragon’s voice waited a second before she responded. Luna, this plan of yours is very dangerous. I cannot guarantee anyone’s safety.

“That’s okay. We’ve been training. See you soon.”

Luna closed her eyes. When she opened them again it was Sasha and New Domino City before her again.

Sasha was grinning, a rare occurrence for her. “I take it, your idea worked?”

///

“I don’t need you” swirled in Yusei’s head for hours. He and Lise had been quiet ever since their knife-training exercise. They’d gone to bed without talking either.

They’d been testing out the empathy link every now and then. They’d found out the psychic link worked within a ten-mile radius. Lise could say hi in their heads from Satellite and Yusei could hear it from Zora’s house. Lise had outright refused to try any one-sided power ups. Why did she just assume only she was getting anything from those incidents? When he’d reinforced Lise’s power against Roman, Yusei’d received a blast of Lise’s feelings. She’d been so scared and injured, but determined to do something even if she died. Yusei had absorbed those feelings, and given back his own. The cycle of their trading emotions had built up so quickly, too quickly, and then Lise had unleashed it in a beam of red light that knocked Roman on his ass.

But she had done those things. She’d saved herself every time. Sure, Yusei had helped, but Lise was usually the one doing the saving…

Yusei drifted to sleep mid-thought.

A soft flash of blue light woke Lise from a similar fitful sleep. Her left hand was curled lazily in front of her as she slept. Maybe she’d imagined the light. She and Yusei didn’t sleep with a
nightlight after all.

But something felt different. Lise sat up in bed, and pulled off the small wrapping she’d bandaged her hand in. The cut Sasha had made was gone.

That flash of blue light! It was the same color as Yusei’s aura.

“His chi…heals…” Lise gasped under her breath. To what extent she didn’t know. The cut hadn’t been deep. One night with the bandage was all she would have needed. Still, that wasn’t anything…

No, if Lise really thought about it, Yusei’s chi healing people made sense. He brought people together, made friends everywhere. He’d been there for her through everything. Her worst, her even worse, and her good moments too. He was so good and kind…and she wasn’t.

She’d told him she didn’t need him. Like an idiot. Lise rubbed at her eye. She couldn’t keep pushing him away. Not if she wanted him to stay.

///

The next morning Yusei was up first, as usual. He dropped sleepily into the kitchen, still in pajamas, to make breakfast.

Lise was up shortly afterwards, unusually. She and Yusei glanced at each other sideways when Lise came down the ladder too.

Yusei expected to hear the sound of the coffee machine booting up. Instead he felt arms encircling his torso. “Lise?” He tried to crane his neck back.

“Don’t look at me!”

“K,” Yusei blurted, facing front again. His face burned. What the hell is going on?

Lise’s grip tightened on the folds of his t-shirt. Her forehead resting on the curve of his spine, between Yusei’s shoulder blades. “I’m sorry.”

Yusei’s gaze dropped down to his hands. He was still holding the little cup of yogurt he’d retrieved from the fridge.

“I’m sorry,” Lise said again. The back of his t-shirt was wet. She was crying. “I’m sorry I said I… didn’t need you. It was cruel…”

“I’m sorry too,” Yusei said. He traced the circular lid of the yogurt with his finger.

“What?”

His hands rested on top of Lise’s. “I’m sorry I acted like you needed me to help you and protect you. It isn’t fair for me to treat you like you’re fragile. Things are different now. You’re more sure of yourself, and that’s good. But you were right, you don’t need me,” Yusei chuckled a little wryly. “You’ve never needed me.”

“No, it was cruel for me to say that, especially because it isn’t true. You’re kind to everyone, even to Jack after he took Stardust. You let it go. I just…you’re so good and kind, and I’m not, and…I need you because I love you because…I want to be kinder like you…”

“Mmmm,” Yusei hummed a little. “You’re kinder than you think.” He brought Lise’s left hand up
to his lips.

“And you underestimate your importance,” Lise shot back.

Yusei’s eyes roamed around Lise’s hand. His brow furrowed. “Where’s the cut?”

“Oh,” Lise closed her eyes. The memory of the blue light bubbled into her head as she nestled her head against Yusei’s back. Last night, I think I found out what your chi does.

Yusei saw the memory too, from Lise’s eyes. Wow…so healing, huh?

I think so. I’m not sure to what extent.

Yusei suddenly stiffened. Wait, he’d actually seen that memory. Had Lise given it to him? “Lise, can I look at you now?”

“But I’m all red-eyed,” Lise mumbled, only half kidding. “Okay…”

Lise pulled away so Yusei could turn around. But Yusei kept a firm grip on her hand, using it as an anchor to spin himself around. Momentarily distracted, Yusei had to remember why he’d wanted to turn around for a second. Lise was super cute in her Pikachu pajamas.

“I have an idea, a hunch really,” Yusei explained. He winced a little bit. It wasn’t much of an explanation, but if he was right…

He cupped Lise’s face gently and pressed his forehead to hers.

He started easy. The first time they’d kissed for real; after Goodwin had been defeated. How elated he’d felt after Lise had said she loved him too. The awkward beginning to the kiss, and then how weightless it felt.

Talking after the Enforcer’s first run-in with Kota. He’d been so terrified that Lise had come so close to being lost forever. He’d wanted to kiss her smile the day she started reading Harry Potter to him in that hospital bed. To be the reason she smiled most.

Lise saw them both bubbling through her head. It was strange to see herself from Yusei’s point of view. Yet, the ocean of emotions waved past too, as if she was being filled.

The last one she saw was herself and Yusei taking down Roman with the beam of light. Hers and Yusei’s emotions swirling together, making the beam stronger, as equals.

Yusei pulled back, his hands still on Lise’s cheeks. “I think…I think we can share memories.”

“The empathy link…”

“Yeah.”

“That’s what you wanted, right?” Lise asked, hesitantly. “To be…partners…to share like we did then?”

“Yes,” Yusei smiled. “It’s…I’m not a battery, and I never will be. You make me stronger too.”

Lise’s light blue eyes reflected the excitement in Yusei’s, the relief and safety. She usually hated being touched like this, and for so long. Instead, she kept Yusei’s hand on her cheek with her own. “Now I wanna see what else we can do together.”
“Okay, Signers ready?” Sasha asked. She, Jose, Jarra, Garrett, Leo, and Garrett were tasked with waiting for their friends to return from their Spirit World journey. Even Carly was there, fussing and fretting over Jack.

Lise adjusted her goggles and tightened her arm wrappings. “Orange leader standing by.” She tugged and clipped the armor for her shoulders, arms, and legs into place. Last but not least she clipped her fans and new knives to her belt.

Yusei pulled on his own set of armor. He slid the strap holding his sword and shield onto his back. “Blue leader standing by,” he said as he tugged his gloves on with his hands and teeth.

“Sick,” Crow grinned, admiring his black armor pieces. He’d opted for sticks; non-lethal but could still pack a punch. They were strapped to his back in an ‘X.’ “Oh, I mean, black leader standing by.”

Jack’s armor blended practically seamlessly into his white clothing. He always did like blinding people with his inimitability. “White leader standing by.” Jack grinned down at Carly as she admired the armor’s sheen, and simultaneously clung to his jacket with worry.

Akiza spun to test out the dexterity of her edited look. She’d shortened her skirt to make it easier to run, as did her new combat-ready boots. Her armor pieces fastened into place one her shoulders, arms, and legs, making her look even fiercer than usual. “Red leader standing by.”

The gravity of the situation was suddenly weighing on Luna. Watching all her friends gear up, and wearing her own set of pink armor? The Spirit World housed a place of danger for this mission. The Spirit World wasn’t their final goal, but it wasn’t until she buckled on her armor pieces, and her friends did too, that Luna realized the Spirit World was not the kind, gentle place she remembered from her three-year-old journey so long ago. Going to the Spirit World and then into Yliaster was going to be more dangerous than any of them could even imagine.

Still, they had to try. Luna took a deep, calming breath, and tightened the last strap. “Pink leader standing by.”

“Yeah!” Leo cheered, pumping his fists into the air. “May the force be with us!”

Sasha frowned at him. “What?”

“We had a Star Wars marathon. They promised to sound off like the pilots before they left,” Leo said. His small face could barely contain the sloppy, fanboy grin he wore.


Garrett beamed and blew across his fingers like he was blowing smoke from a gun barrel. “It was nozhing. I alvays vanted to try making modern armor.”

“Ready, Luna?” Jarra asked.

Luna nodded. “You bet.”

The Signers sat in a circle. Luna put her fists together and closed her eyes.

“Remember, there is no need to worry. We will all be here protecting your bodies, if need be, and we will be here when you return,” Sasha said.
“Thank you,” Lise smiled at her friend.

Together, the others mirrored Luna. Everyone had their fists together and eyes closed.

*Ancient Fairy Dragon? It’s me again, and my friends.*

*You may enter, all of you. Be careful. You may find more than your nightmares ever imagined where you plan to go.*

*Thank you… My friend…*

Luna felt the now familiar tug right behind her belly button. She reached out mentally, encircling her friends in the Spirit World’s pull. The same tugging sensation in Luna’s gut spread to the others. They were going to the Spirit World.

Hands clenched and back tight, Luna held on to the connection. She had to get all her friends safely into the Spirit World. That forest she remembered. But there was also that river she, Torunka, and Regulus had fallen into. Not to mention the little city she’d been in last time, and the Ape King’s castle.

Pain split across Luna’s head like she’d been struck by lightning. Too many locations. Too many people. Too much. But they were still going. Going in the wrong direction.

Luna reached out for her friends. They were too far away. Only Lise managed to hang on. Their mental hands reaching out, clasping tightly.

Finally the darkness cleared. Sunlight shone through Luna’s closed eyes softly.

Slowly, Luna opened her eyes. The forest! Exactly as she had remembered it. She’d done it!

But when she looked around, Luna saw only herself and Lise...

Chapter End Notes

(Sorry it’s been so long since the last chapter! But happy holidays! Here’s an update, lol. I’m SO excited to FINALLY write the Spirit World and Yliaster journey chapters. I’ve been planning this thing for a LONG time, so get ready! Oh, and if you want to see a little peek of what I imagine Yliaster to be like, you can check out my Instagram @lisiechan, and look for The Dream comic pages I have up there. The little mini comic was completed back in the summertime, but it’s still there if you wanna take a look at Yliaster.

Thanks so much for everyone’s love and support! It makes me happy to know someone is listening, and is a huge motivator! See you next chapter!)
“Lise!” Luna screamed. She held on to her friend’s hand for dear life as they crashed into the river. Both girls emerged from the waves treading water. No one else had surfaced. They were on their own.

“Luna!” Lise cried out. The cold waves had woken her up instantly. Her hand was slipping out of the younger girl’s grasp. “Where are we?”

“The river!” Luna coughed. “Torunka and I saved Regulus here! I don’t see him now! Regulus! Regulus!”

Out of nowhere the river dropped into a waterfall. Neither girl had anything in her power to stop their fall. The Crimson Dragon’s power didn’t work in the Spirit World. Even worse, the girls lost their grip on each other.

“No!”

They hit the waves below, heavier than their fall into the river itself. It was dark beneath the crashing waters once the current picked them up again. Unfortunately the current took them further downstream, where the river split in two.

“Luna, I’m losing you!” She knew it was useless, but Lise kept her hand outstretched for her friend.

Water engulfed Luna’s head. She fought back to the surface. Lise had to know where to find her.

“Meet me in the Spirit World village! Ask for me, Torunka, and Regulus!” Luna managed to yell before she went under again.

_Torunka, Luna, and Regulus. Torunka, Luna, and Regulus._ Lise repeated to herself. She struggled to stay above the waves.

This was bad, incredibly bad. Sure, everyone had prepared for separation, but not like this. Not from the beginning.

We’ll be okay. We’ll find each other. Lise told herself.

A cave’s mouth reared its ugly head before Lise like a hungry sea monster. Waves climbed up to the top of the cave’s maw, smashing against the entrance and breaking off stalactites like teeth.

Lise took a deep breath and dived. It was that or risk cracking her head open on the ceiling…or worse. Lise didn’t wanna think about worse.

The current rolled her through the cave. To keep from getting sick, Lise had to focus on one fixed point after the other. She couldn’t close her eyes. That’d only make her sicker. Speaking of sick, she was running low on air too.

Just when Lise didn’t think she could hold her breath a second longer, the current ripped upward. The waves practically spit Lise out of their thrall.
She collapsed on her back, folding in on herself as she coughed the water out of her lungs. Her coughs echoed strangely, multiplying and amplified in the small space.

When she could breathe with minimal pain, Lise sat back to empty her shoes. She also checked her gear. Miraculously, she hadn’t lost anything. All her armor was still attached, and she’d kept both her fans and knives. That was comforting.

Lise put her shoes back on and stood. Books lined the curved walls of the cylindrical room, like a well of books.

“ Weird,” Lise marched over to the nearest wall and pulled a book off the shelf. She thumbed through the pages. It was pristine. “This should be all mildewed…” She replaced the book, not sure what to make of the place she’d ended up in.

The bottom of the book well was divided in two evenly in the shape of a yin-yang. One side was land, the other water. Minus the dots. The well of books extended upward, farther than Lise could see. Turquoise orbs hovered at the ready every few shelves, yet they were out of reach for her.

Not sure what else to do, Lise started climbing. She didn’t know what the hell the orbs were for, or if they took library tenants to the shelf they wanted. Problem was she didn’t know how to call for one of them. Climbing it was.

At least her clothes were drying. Win some, lose some.

Exhausted, Lise made it to the next story, and pitched herself over the edge of the well. There were plenty more bookshelves to climb, but she needed a rest. She still didn’t know if she needed to eat in the Spirit World.

“Hello?!?” Lise called out. Only her voice echoed back. Huh, pretty empty for a library.

Lise closed her eyes as she rested. She’d need her strength. There was something funny about the light in the room. Sunlight shone weakly down from above, yes, but orangey light and bluish light were mixed in.

Curious, Lise looked around. The blue light came from another orb. It hung suspended in the air by itself at the center of a rounded temple, like the Parthenon in Rome. Square pillars held up arches surrounding the orb in a circle. Light reflected from the orb all the way up to the oculus window above. Streams of long stardust drifted down from the oculus. They twirled around the orb, caught in a moonlight dance.

Lise crept closer, studying the orb. Except it wasn’t really an orb, but a crescent moon. It even had a face that stared sternly down the tip of its long nose at Lise’s damp form.

The other side was similar, but with a sun pattern. The arches were more angular, the pillars’ designs more severe. Stardust-like strands descended from the oculus above, but contrasted heavily with the orange and yellow sun floating at the center of the ring. Its face was puffy, but its eyes were not fierce, strangely enough. It was like it couldn’t decide to be angry or not.

“Where the hell am?” Lise whispered.

///

“Just a little further. I’ll make it in a few more minutes,” Crow told himself.

He’d been saying the same thing for hours now. Perhaps it had been hours, or just twenty minutes?
It certainly felt like hours. Hours of walking to nowhere in nothing.

Darkness blacker than black surrounded Crow. Magenta light followed him, lighting his surroundings, and on the horizon. Wreckage from cities? Towns? Lined the edges where the magenta light touched. Crow didn’t look at the broken pieces of past civilizations unless he had to. Every time he seemed to reach the end of the horizon, there was just more nothing.

It was starting to drive him nuts.

How was he going to get back to his kids? They were depending on him, rooting for him. He was almost due to get his cast off soon too.

Yet here he was walking around no man’s land. What was he going to do for food?

“Luna!” Crow yelled as loud as he could. “Jack! Yusei! Lise! Akiza!”

Crow’s stomach sank. Not even an echo to keep him company. He’d felt a tiny bit better saying his friend’s names though.

“Where am I even going?” Crow muttered, but he kept going.

///

“Lise?!” Luna cupped her hands to her mouth. “Hello?! Anybody?!”

Only the squawk of birds answered her.

Luna swallowed. She tried not to cry while she thought of what to do. Not that anyone would have seen her anyway, and she was also soaking wet. Still, she couldn’t afford to cry. She had to find her friends.

Luna wrung her shirt out, the excess water plopping unceremoniously onto the sand.

When she’d woken up, Luna had found herself at the end of the river. The edge of the ocean looked strange though. If she squinted a little, Luna swore she could see what looked like a city beneath the waves. A golden city covered in seashells and barnacles.

Immediately, Luna had turned tail and walked further up the beach. She couldn’t remember its name, but she’d seen that field spell before. There was no way she was going to investigate when she didn’t know what she was doing. Besides, she was lucky enough to still be in the Ancient Forest, right next to the Spirit World village.

Now Luna had to hope everyone else would make it. Her path was clear; just follow the river.

She cursed herself while she walked back upstream, wringing her hair out as she went. If Luna had just stayed focused this wouldn’t have happened. Everyone would have conjured perfectly in the square of the village, instead of being separated. Instead of being tossed into the river, Lise and Luna would have landed on the bridge. Instead of being swept downstream, separated, lost and alone…

Luna sank to her knees. She rubbed at her eyes. The one time she could actually do something to help the team and she flubbed it up.

But once she got to the village all she could do was wait. The journey had only begun and she was already so tired.
Jack dove into the next cave with the grace and accuracy of an Olympic athlete. He’d been running and hiding like this since he’d landed next to the mouth of a volcano. He figured his best bet was to make his way down. Especially since he thought he was in the real world at first. When the fire and fiend duel monster spirits showed up, he had a feeling he was still in the Spirit World.

He still wasn’t sure if he needed to eat at some point. At the moment he wasn’t hungry, but that could change easily. His physical body would need food, but maybe time was different in the Spirit World? The team had established before they left the plan was not to stay for multiple days. They had time to find each other and get information, Jack was sure.

He just needed to get down from this volcano without being burned alive or eaten.

Luna had made the Spirit World sound nicer, but maybe the spirits’ nature differed based on location. It wasn’t Luna’s fault she didn’t know everything.

Jack sighed. He wished there was a clear solution, someone to blame. It was so much easier to move forward with a goal or a clear person to be angry with.

But he didn’t need to be angry. He needed to find his friends.

Jack strained his ears. Nothing. He adjusted his armor and made his way out of the cave.

///

Akiza groaned as she came to. Her entire body ached. Arriving in the Spirit World felt like being pummeled through a bottle neck. She’d been hoping for something more comfortable at the least.

Tiny pink eyes stared into Akiza’s brown eyes.

“AAAH!” Akiza screamed, scrambling backwards on her hands and feet.

“AAAH!” The little bamboo shoot screamed too. It scuttled behind a rock, peering around the edge at her.

Akiza put a hand over her rapidly beating heart. She’d need her wits about her if this creature turned out to be dangerous.

“Who are you? What do you want?” Akiza demanded. She reached for her cards and duel disk to be safe.

“I should be asking you,” the bamboo shoot squeaked. “I’ve never seen a duel spirit like you before!”

“I’m not a spirit,” Akiza said. She stood up, looming over the tiny bamboo sprout.

Mud and weeds clung to her skirt. Made sense. Apparently Akiza had plummeted face first into a garden.

“Then what are you?” the little bamboo shoot scowled up at her, tiny fists balled. “You’re not the Dark Signers come back for revenge, are you?”

“No, of course not!” Akiza snapped at the sprout. “Do I look like a monkey?!”

“Guess not,” the sprout relented. It lowered its fists, but only a little. “Then who are you? What’re
“You doing here?”

“You can call me Akiza. I’m here with my frie- wait, have you seen them?”

“People like you?”

“Yes!”

“No. But maybe my village has seen them. I can take you there, clean you up.”

Akiza hesitated. “I dunno…” She stopped trying to get the dirt off her skirt. She wasn’t making any progress anyway. “I don’t even know your name.”

The sprout climbed up the rock and extended its hand. “I’m Naturia Bamboo Sprout. Nice to meet you, Akiza.”

Akiza giggled a little, and shook hands. “That’s a long name. Can I call you Sprout?”

“Sure!” Sprout grinned, glad to have a nickname. They jumped down from the rock, and waved Akiza on with them. “We’ll get you something clean to wear, and see about finding your friends.”

“Thanks,” Akiza smiled.

She hoped this wasn’t some kind of trap. Receiving help right off the bat seemed too good to be true. But if Sprout and the other Naturia duel spirits genuinely wanted to help, she’d gladly accept.

///

Yusei woke up in the middle of the road.

“Whoa!” he gasped, and dashed for the road’s shoulders.

Chest heaving as he calmed down, Yusei looked around. He was on the edge of a highway. Then… was he still in the city? Had Luna teleported him? Was that possible?

But if that were the case, the highway would have cars and duel runners. Well, one car at least.

This place was off, wrong somehow. It was definitely not New Domino City. Yusei never imagined there would be a highway in the Spirit World.

Yusei sat down to consider his options. He took out his shield to help him think. At least if something attacked him, he’d be ready.

He was on a highway in the Spirit World.

Not New Domino City.

His friends were separated from him.

He was most likely alone out here.

Unbeknownst to him, a fog began to roll in. By the time Yusei looked up again the entire highway was covered in thick clouds.

“Interesting. Looks like someone or something doesn’t want me to leave.”

Right or left, the street looked exactly the same. It was practically up to chance.
He wanted to try the empathy link, but he was worried it wouldn’t work. The link was part of the Crimson Dragon, and those powers didn’t work in the Spirit World. But they’d worked hard to make the link their own. He’d try to contact Lise if he got nowhere fast.

Yusei drew his sword and slashed an ‘X’ in the pavement. With that done, he sheathed the blade, picked a direction, and started walking.

///

“This is so trippy,” Leo commented. He waved his hand in front of his sister’s nonresponsive face.

All of the Signers wore identical expressions. Eyes closed, sitting cross-legged in their circle. It was like movie night, but everyone was watching the movie in their own heads.

“We should draw a mustache on Jack’s face,” Bruno suggested.

“He’ll hit you,” Carly warned.

“I know…”

“It is fascinating,” Sasha agreed. She scratched her chin as she examined the circle. “Almost like Master Terra’s phantasmagoria ability, but they’re actually in another dimension. Not one Luna created.”

“I hope they’re all okay,” Jarra said. She doodled on a scrap of paper at the work table. There wasn’t much else to do.

“At least zhey’re armor vill protect zhem,” Garrett said.

Bruno picked up a wrench. He needed to do something to take his mind off his friends’ condition. Something that made sense. Like duel runner maintenance.

///

“Why, you’re in the Spellbook Library of Royal Magicians!”

Lise jumped out of her skin. Luckily she landed in a fighting stance, but she couldn’t cover up how spooked she’d been.

The man who had spoken cocked his head. His red eyes stared not unkindly down at Lise, his dark skin highlighted by the reds of his clothing. He wore dark, tight pants with gold armored boots and knee guards. A long red tunic and cape hovered just above the floor. Armor adorned his hips, shoulders, and arms, adorned with red and orange gem-like accessories. His helmet was fashioned similarly, golden horns reaching skyward. His staff was like a crab’s claw, a red-orange orb suspended in the curve of the claw.

Lise said nothing as she took all this in.

“Oh! The red man straightened before bowing politely to Lise. “Forgive me. I seem to have forgotten my manners. I am the spirit known as Dark Red Enchanter.”

“Okay. What do you want?”

Dark Red Enchanter blinked at Lise. He wasn’t expecting such a biting response. “Uh…welcome to the library?”
“No way, this is a library?” Lise rolled her eyes. If this library belonged to magicians, it would explain why all the books nearest the water were pristine.

“You seem less than enthused based on the sarcasm.”

“Maybe it’s because I lost my friends, fell in a river, got coughed up into a magic well, climbed up the well, and now I’m talking to a spirit that appeared out of nowhere?”

“Ah, I see. It’s been a long day.”

Lise’s stance faltered. Just a tad. “You could say that.”

“Your journey here might have been less than stellar, but very few outsiders get to see this library.” Dark Red Enchanter gestured to the sun and moon orbs suspended across from each other, and the yin-yang like divide below them of land and water. “This library maintains the balance of the Spirit World. Believe me, you would not have liked to see the library when those monkeys and the minus curse staffs were everywhere. Took just about every spellcaster we had just to keep everything from exploding.”

“Eh heh,” Lise laughed slightly. She dropped her guard, but that didn’t mean she trusted Dark Red Enchanter. “Hey, mind if I call ya Red?”

“I suppose,” Red pursed his lips whilst he mulled it over. “For simplicity’s sake.”

“Can I get your help with finding my friends? If you could just point me in the direction of some village where… Regulus, I think it is, lives, that’d be great.”

Red nodded. “The magical lion, yes. I remember him.” He raised his staff, beckoning Lise to follow him. “And I am absolutely capable of showing you the way, but I could be remembering wrong…I think I can provide a map of the Spirit World.”

“Really?” Lise’s whole body felt like a weight had lifted off it. “That’s great!”

She followed Red onto one of the turquoise orbs. From the outside the orbs were opaque, but from the inside, riders could see in all directions.

“Ah yes, here we are,” Red directed their orb with ease. “The cartography and the geography sections.”

“So uh…” Lise followed behind Red as he ran his hand along the spines of books in his search. “Why’re you helping me? You said outsiders aren’t allowed in this library?”

“Theoretically. Only magicians and spellcasters usually come to the library. The other spirits can’t utilize the spells in the magic books. They do have access to all the knowledge here if they’d like though.”

“Okay,” Lise rolled her eyes again. “You didn’t answer my first question.”

Red smiled down at Lise as he pulled a book off one of the many shelves. “It isn’t every day the Crimson Dragon visits the Spirit World.”

Lise’s eyes widened and she stepped back. “How—How do you know that?”

“The Spirit World is exactly that; a place for spirits, souls. Those who know what to look for, any one of us, if we focus enough, can see the contents of your soul.”
“Damn,” Lise whistled. “There’s no way to hide that?”

Red chuckled, thumbing through the book. “Not unless you can hide your very nature.”

Lise smiled. Red seemed all right. “I’ve never been good at that.”

“Darn, wrong one,” Red scowled, reshelving the book. He muttered irritably to himself as he moved deeper into the library.

“Uh, what book are we looking for?” Lise’s eyes combed the shelves. Most of the book titles looked like gibberish. At least a few looked like human languages.


Lise frowned at it. “For a history book, it doesn’t look very comprehensive.”

“That’s not how this book works. Carrying around a book that weighed a ton would be cumbersome,” Red explained. “You use the book…” He grasped the two covers. “Like so; show me a map of the Spirit World!” He pulled open the book, and held it open for Lise.

The pages spun unnaturally. A map that should not have been physically possible arose from the book. Tiny three dimensional structures dotted the landscape. Red took the book to one of the tables spellcasters in training would use to study, and the book unfurled page after page until an entire map covered the table.

“Whoa…” Lise didn’t have anything else to describe her awe.

Tiny, scrawled words in rushed, sloppy handwriting labeled landmarks. None of it was in English, but the landscapes spoke for themselves. Forests, more than Luna’s Ancient Forest dotted the landscape like little, green push pins. There was a volcano, an icy landscape, what looked like Atlantis, a highway, and much more all encircling a center village.

Lise jumped up on the table for a better view. The map didn’t show her real time of all the Spirit World’s citizens, but maybe she could find more than just the village. It was clear the village Luna was talking about was the village marking the center of the Spirit World, the center of the pie pieces. The next step would be to find the entrance to Yliaster.

“We’re here,” Red pointed with the tip of his staff to the library. It was nestled on the far west side of the map. “The river from the village splits in two, so it would have taken your friends down here.” The staff pointed southwest to a patch of water.

“The ocean?”

“Close enough,” Red shrugged. “The map can also change languages. You just have to ask for it when you open it.”

“Anything else the map can do?”

“Provide you with a history of the Spirit World. That’s basically it. I wish I could be of more assistance.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Lise said, eyes still on the map. “Here.” Lise’s finger rested on a tiny dome marking the northern-most point of the Spirit World. “What’s this?”
Red’s expression changed. Before, his face was open, kind, eager to help. It changed, guarded against his emotions.

“Red?”

“I believe you know what that place is.”

“The entrance to Yliaster.”

“Yes,” Red’s voice had become deathly quiet, haunted almost.

Lise looked up. Red sounded completely different. “What’s wrong?”

Red cleared his throat. He adjusted his grip on his staff. He had to choose his next words carefully. “Yliaster has become a place of evil. They no longer serve the good of mankind or Spirit-kind, peacefully maintaining the balance. I suggest if you see anyone clad in a white cloak, you run.”

“Okay,” Lise nodded solemnly. She didn’t like the look on Red’s face. He wasn’t kidding. She jumped off the table.

Red smiled softly at Lise. “When you’re finished, you tap the book like so.” Red tapped two fingers to the corner of the map.

Instantly, the book made a slurping sound. Pages were sucked back into the book’s covers like playing a board game in reverse on a snail shell.

“Cool,” Lise nodded. She accepted the book. “Red,” Lise put her hand on his arm. “Thank you for helping me. It was… refreshing. Most people want to kill me when they find out who I am.”

Red’s smile grew, his teeth blinding in the dark of the library. He bowed again. “It was my honor…?”

“Lise.”

They shook hands.

“I can take you back to the surface world, but after that you’ll have to continue your journey alone.”

“I understand,” Lise said. The book in her hands suddenly felt a lot heavier. “I have one more question.”

“Yes?”

“It’s about empathy links.”

///

“That’s the fifth time!” Yusei growled.

The ‘X’ he’d slashed into the ground was still there. He’d been walking in circles! How the hell was he supposed to break the cycle? He couldn’t even see where he was going most of the time thanks to the fog.

Yusei sat down on the ‘X’ so he wouldn’t have to look at it. He spread out in a starfish on his back. At least the Spirit World was boring so far. Empty streets. Empty paths. Only the fog to keep him
company. He still didn’t know if he could use the empathy link.

His own thoughts were getting to him. Normally it’d be fine. Yusei liked alone time, but in the Spirit World this was dangerous. He needed to find someone, anyone, from their group.

If Yusei didn’t know any better, the Spirit World was not designed for humans.

An engine’s revving motor reached Yusei’s ears.

“Huh… I know that sound…”

Something nudged his hand. Yusei rolled over. “Tricular?”

The tricycle-based monster nudged Yusei’s hand again. It’s engine revved, and its headlight eye clicked on and off.

“Tricular? What’re you doing here?” Yusei got up. He’d forgotten how small the bike trio monsters were. Tricular only came up to his knees.

Tricular waved one of its robotic arms. It pointed at Yusei, itself, then the foggy highway streets.

“Are you…are you going to lead me out of here?”

Tricular nodded. Its eye clicked on and off, engine revving peppily. The monster turned in happy circles and lead the way.

“Wait up!” Yusei hefted his shield and sword onto his back, and chased after Tricular.

Tricular took Yusei up and down through the streets. All of them were eerily similar. Clean yet deserted, aside from Tricular and himself.

A second engine joined the sound of Tricular’s. A blue and yellow bike monster pulled up beside Tricular.

“Oh Bicular,” Yusei grinned down at the two monsters.

They seemed to be communicating in their own language. Morse code through headlight blinks, engine revs, and robo-arm gestures.

“So then…” The two of them kept leading Yusei along. “Is Unicycular gonna join us too?”

Both monsters nodded emphatically.

Just when Yusei couldn’t take anymore streets that looked exactly the same, Unicycular came out of the streets. The three monsters kept going, trading off leading the way and encircling Yusei with excited engine revs.

Tricular, Bicular, and Unicycular came to a stop at the end of the street they’d taken Yusei to. In the distance, Yusei spotted what looked like a mountain. The edge of the street broke off jaggedly into hard, rocky earth. He was out of the world of highways and never ending streets.

Yusei bent down to the trio of monster’s eye level. “Thank you.”

Unicycular smiled brightly up at Yusei. Bicular patted Yusei’s knee. Tricular shrugged, waving away its assistance.
Each monster received a pat of gratitude. “Guess I’ll see you three next time in my deck.” Yusei waved as he crossed the border between earth and street.

The trio waved back until the fog swallowed them again.

///

Jack tripped on a rock and face planted just as he’d made it down the volcano.

He sighed, brushing himself off as he stood. “Finally get down this blasted volcano, and make a fool of myself. Luckily no one saw me.”

Despite being at the foot of the volcano, it was still warm. Trickles and rivers of lava lined the landscape like dangerous ribbons. Considering it was the Spirit World, Jack hoped some of the lava rivers had bridges. Most of the duel monsters that had attacked him had been sporting wings, so that hope was slim.

More lava and hot landscape awaited Jack on the right. The left crackled off and gave way to…a street? That was strange, and impossible.

But after what Jack had been through, anything in the Spirit World was possible.

Jack narrowed his eyes. It was hard to tell with the dark skies of the volcano world mixing with the fog coming off of the street, but it looked like a dark figure was climbing its way over the molten rock.

“Another duel Spirit?” Jack muttered to himself. He gazed out warily from his hiding spot behind a long ago hardened lava bank. Sure, the great Jack Atlas could fend off as many duel spirits as required of him, and then some! But Jack was getting tired. He needed rest, not another attack.

“Wait, that’s no duel spirit!” Jack’s scowl turned into a grin.

He jumped over the hardened magma bank and ran as fast as his tired legs could take him. “Yusei!” Jack waved frantically as he ran. It’d been so long since he’d seen a familiar face.

Yusei didn’t even have to narrow his eyes to see. Jack’s white clothes and armor were like beacons in the darkness of the volcano’s world. “Jack!”

The two boys crashed into each other, laughing and grinning. They slapped each other’s hands, fist bumped, and hugged. Seeing a familiar face after enduring so much alone was such a relief. Words couldn’t describe their elation.

“I’m so glad to see you!” Jack couldn’t stop grinning even after they’d stopped hugging. He jabbed his thumb back at the volcano. “This place has been hell!”

“You’re telling me!” Yusei agreed just as enthusiastically. “I’ve been trapped in a maze for hours!”

“So what now?”

“Now, we compare notes, and we try to contact the others.”

///

True to his words, Sprout and his people had cleaned Akiza up. They’d also cleaned her filthy clothes as well as provided her with new ones.
The bath felt so good. It’d been forever since Akiza had felt so good and clean. She hadn’t expected the Spirit World to be so relaxing.

“So, did you find anything that could help me find my friends?” Akiza asked, emerging in her new clean clothes. It was just a simple white dress with green trim, but she’d never worn anything lighter.

“We’re still looking,” Sprout reported.

They were surrounded by three little beans. One was enthusiastic, chasing a second bean around in a game of tag. The third bean was crying in its pod. When it saw Akiza, the bean cried harder and pulled the pod closed with a snap.

“Uh, your kids?” Akiza asked.

Sprout nodded.

Sprout’s front door sprang open. A pineapple hopped inside, closing the door with one of its leaves sprouting from its underbelly. “We’ve been looking into a solution, but we’re very limited out here, Sprout.” The pineapple didn’t waste any time getting straight down to business.

It took Akiza a moment to process a talking pineapple. Then again, she’d already accepted a talking bamboo sprout. What was another strange plant?

“This is Naturia Pineapple.” Sprout must have noticed Akiza’s nonplussed expression.

“Please to meet you, miss,” the pineapple extended a leaf.

Akiza shook the leaf. “Likewise.”

Pineapple addressed Sprout again. “As I was saying, we don’t have anything here in Naturia Forest that can tell us about the rest of the Spirit World. I consulted with Naturia Landoise, the town chief, miss. He’s a tortoise made of earth.”

“Oh…okay…”

“He suggested we go see Naturia Guardian. Ask him for advice on what to do.”

Sprout nodded, scratching under his chin folds. “I was just thinking that was our best bet too. Guardian might be a tad scatterbrained, but he is wise too.”

“Guardian?”

“She’s a tree,” Pineapple said.


“Sure,” Akiza nodded, spreading her hands in defeat. “Let’s go talk to a tree.”

Sprout and Pineapple led the way through the forest. Moss lined the way like a cheerful, bright green carpet. Sprout walked, but Pineapple bounced. It was comical, almost like a fairy tale.

The forest grew darker gradually the deeper they went. That is until an archway of vines met them. From the canopy of trees above to the forest floor, vines blocked out a circle of forest from entrance, except through the archway.
Akiza gulped. If this was a trap, she was glad to have brought her duel disk and cards. It never hurt to be cautious.

“Guardian?” Sprout spoke gently.

The only light came from fireflies flitting around lazily. A tiny lake lined with stones brought travelers directly to the largest tree Akiza had ever seen. It was easily wider than her home back in New Domino City. A small stone ledge allowed visitors to stand or sit before the great face of the tree. It appeared to be sleeping.

Akiza sat down in awe. The tree was beyond old. Probably older than anything alive. Probably older than life itself. She had wrinkles resembling the knobby nature of wood lining her entire trunk. Deeper ridges above the eyelids were her eyebrows, and a large brown knot of wood was her mouth. The pointy branch sticking out at such a low height wasn’t a branch but her nose.

“Guardian?” Sprout tried again, gently.

Guardian sniffed, her eyes screwing up as she stirred, warping her bark. The bark split to allow the Guardian to open her eyes. Another branch poked out of the open knot that squished and squashed exactly like a mouth. “Oh…” Guardian groaned. “It’s been ages since I was awoken.”

“Terribly sorry about that, Guardian,” Sprout said quickly.

“But we require your wisdom,” Pineapple said.

“Yes, yes,” Guardian yawned, smacking her lips. “A human. It’s been years since a human came to the Spirit World.”

Akiza waved weakly, feeling small. “Hi.”

Guardian smiled like a grandmother proud of a family before her. “You have a gift with plants, dear.”

Akiza felt her face grow warm. “I do have a small garden at home. I do my best to care for it every day.”

“And your plant monsters care for you very much,” Guardian said. Akiza imagined if she did have a living grandmother, she would be similar to this duel spirit. “Well, what is your question, child? What knowledge do you seek?”

“Um, I’m wondering if you could tell me where my friends are? Or where I can find them.”

“Hmmmm…Humans like you?”

“Yes.”

Guardian dipped ten of her vines into the pond. The fish duel monsters scattered, but the vines didn’t harm them. Instead the vines descended into the earth like veins.

“Guardian’s vines and roots cross all over the Spirit World,” Sprout explained quietly. “That’s part of the reason why she knows everything.”

“Oh…wow…” A sense of honor filled Akiza. She was lucky to have seen this old creature. A being of pure nature.

“I see them. They are all safe. Relatively.”
“Relatively?” Akiza was a little taken aback. That was a quick assessment.

Guardian withdrew her vines from the pond. She shook them, resembling a woman pulling back her wet hair after a shower. “Yes. My child, you should stay put.”

“That’s it?” Akiza frowned at the old tree. She wasn’t making any sense. “My friends are, maybe, safe and I should do nothing?”

“Yes,” Guardian’s vines rustled. “Nothing.”

“Well… what do you mean? I can’t just sit here and do nothing! What if they need help?”

“They do not require help currently.”

Akiza hung her head. This tree was supposed to have answers. Not give her cryptic advice. Maybe Guardian’s sense of time was off. For someone so old, Akiza’s entire life seemed like nothing more than a short nap.

Guardian’s vine stretched over to Akiza, delicately lifting Akiza’s head back up to face the wizened tree. “My child, you must be patient. Your time will come. The powers of nature will always be by your side.”

“I’ll try,” Akiza sniffled. “Thank you.”

///

“Hey! Leave her alone!”

That voice... I know that voice!

Luna sat up to find Lise frantically waving her fans around. She seemed to be fending off what looked like a red cloud.

Upon closer inspection, it was a Cloudian duel monster spirit; the poison cloud! That’s why Luna had felt so tired! The cloud had surrounded her, poisoning her! Luna licked all around her mouth, assessing the damage. The effect didn’t seem to have lingered. The poison could probably only hurt you when the Cloudian monster was around you.

“And stay away!” Lise yelled at the monster’s retreating back. Her expression softened. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, thanks to you.” Luna allowed Lise to pull her to her feet.

“Water? It’ll help with the poison.”

“Yeah, thanks. How did you find me?”

Lise pulled what looked like a small, white paperback novel from her belt. “This map.”

Luna frowned at it. That tiny thing? “That tiny thing? ‘That’s a map?’

“It’s a magic map,” Lise grinned. “I asked for it to lead me to the village you described, and found you along the way.”

“Now that’s handy.”
“It is and it isn’t. It can’t tell me where anyone is, but it can get me to different places faster than I could on my own.”

Luna smirked up at her friend. “Cuz you have no sense of direction?”

“Smart ass,” Lise teased, booping Luna teasingly on the head with book’s spine.

Luna giggled and peered over Lise’s shoulder. “Looks like I was right; we just follow this river back and then turn right to get to the village.”

“Sounds like a plan to me,” Lise smiled at the younger girl and clipped the map back to her belt. “After you.”

///

Crow had been walking so much his legs felt like they were vibrating. He’d give anything for a rest. Absolutely for a bed. Maybe some water too. His lips were dry. Definitely some water.

The darkness and eerie magenta light were exactly the same. Still. Hour after hour and nothing had changed. Nothing.

He didn’t have an echo for comfort either. Nothing.

He’d started to think he was born there. That this was all life was. All his life was, at least.

That his friends weren’t real. They were hallucinations. Dreams. None of that life was real. He’d never met anyone or anything. Never driven a duel runner. Never owned Security, or flown with his winged duel runner Blackbird. None of it was real.

The blackness. The magenta light giving him a headache? That was real.

Not even the kids were real. Just his imagination trying to give him something to love, cherish, protect, and keep safe that wasn’t himself.

He was going to die here.

Unknown.

Alone.

In the dark.

The cold, unfeeling darkness.

He needed to conserve his liquids, but Crow couldn’t help it. Tears started rolling down his cheeks.

Crow tripped and fell over some debris. Dust clouds kicked up and fell as quickly as they’d come.

“Please!” Crow sobbed. “Let me out! I can’t take this!”

“Crow?”

“Crow? Is that you?”

Crow popped up to his feet. Voices! Voices that weren’t his!
He inspected the debris he’d tripped over. It didn’t look any different from the other debris. Any other corner of a building, or wall, or something resembling what used to be a building.

“Hello?!”

“Crow!”

“Crow! Keep talking! We’re trying to find you!”

It was true. He wasn’t hallucinating. It was Lise and Luna!

///

“Where is Crow! Show me Crow!” Lise was screaming at the book, paging through it like a madwoman. It remained stubbornly unhelpful.

She and Luna had made it to the village after another couple of hours of hiking. They’d kept up a good, relaxing pace, and could rest. Or so they thought.

Both girls had heard Crow’s voice when they passed through the shadows of an alleyway. They’d refused to move from the shadowy corner of the building Crow’s voice seemed to be coming out of.

“Crow! It’s me, it’s Luna! Keep talking!” Luna put her hands on every stone she could reach. The wall didn’t respond in the slightest.

“I’m here! I’m here! Help!”

“Show me the secrets of the Spirit World!” Lise tried again. Tears sprang from her eyes in her frustration. She couldn’t lose Crow. No one was going to be stuck in the Spirit World forever. Not if she and Luna could help it. Getting stuck was not why they were there.

“Let me try,” Luna offered. Lise was taller. She could reach more of the shadowy wall.

Lise gave her the book without a second thought. She scratched and dug frantically at the impassive stonework. “Crow!”

“I’m here! Down here! I’m stuck!”

“Map of the Spirit World, show us where we are!” Luna commanded, ripping open the book. The map unfurled for her in miniature 3D. Two little green dots sat innocently in the central village. That was her and Lise. Then where was Crow? How were they supposed to reach him?

Luna closed the map’s pages. “I need a map of the Spirit World’s layers!” That was no good. It just showed her the slices of different areas they could travel to.

“Keep trying!”

Luna snapped the map closed again. “Show me….the Spirit World’s underground network!”

A new map unfurled before Luna. It was still small, but the three dimensional pie chart-like diagram had been split in half to reveal the underground network of the Spirit World. Directly below them and the central village was Yami, the dark field spell. Then below that was the graveyard. The darkened parts on the topographical section of the map marked the entrances to Yami.
“Here!” Luna cried. She dropped the map and to her hands and knees. Without a second thought she plunged her hand into the shadowy divide between the cobblestone street and the stonework of the wall. Her arm sank deep into the shadows, all the way to her shoulder. “CROW!”

“CROW!” Lise mirrored Luna, getting down and offering her hand too.

///

From the darkness, two hands emerged. The small one was Luna’s, the other slightly larger one wrapped in bandages was Lise’s. Their hands and arms were like comical limbs for the broken house corner they wiggled from.

Crow would have laughed if he wasn’t so desperate. “You found me! I’m here!” He grabbed both their hands and allowed them to drag him to the seam line of the debris and the ground.

He started to pass right through, along with their hands and arms.

///

“CROW!” Lise gasped, choked, and cried all at once. She’d never been so happy to see that crazy red hair before.

“Crow!” Luna sobbed.

The girls braced themselves and dragged Crow out of Yami, into the sunlight of the central village. His head and shoulders emerged from the wall and ground divide, then his torso, waist, hips. Legs and feet came too with a final, satisfying pop.

All three collapsed into a heap on the warm cobblestones. Safe. Relatively. They were still in the Spirit World.

“It’s over,” Crow was still crying. “It’s finally over.” The warm hands of his friends had been real. The cobblestones and sunlight were real. The wind, the smell of the air. This land of everything in comparison to the land of nothing he’d emerged from.

Lise and Luna held him as he cried. He was cold as ice, and he was covered in dust. But he was here. Alive.

Chapter End Notes

(So school picked up again! I was also in Japan for two weeks, and WAY to exhausted for any writing considering how crazy jam packed the two week trip was! LOVED it though! I bought A LOT of Yusei stuff after quite a bit of searching, and I can’t wait to put it all in my new ita bag coming soon!
I also just want to say thank you to everyone out there still with me and following this story. It means so much, and I should make a more consistent writing schedule…Right after I magically have a consistent sleep schedule. Haha, but thanks again. Thank you to you for reading and commenting and being here. I’m still here, I have a lot more to write, and I hope you’ll stay with me until this story ends. Not any time soon, but it will. Thank you. Just thank you…so much <3)
"Hey," Lise sat down next to Crow the next morning. She handed him a cup filled with an
undetermined drink. It was a kind of off yellow orange color. Like it could be orange juice, but
probably wasn’t.

Crow shrugged and downed it. Better than nothing.

“Feeling better?”

“Much, thanks,” Crow gave the cup back, letting out a long sigh. The air was heavy with the
weight of his exhale. “But not entirely.”

“Yeah, you went through a lot,” Lise picked at the skin of her fingers. “Do you want to go back?”

“You mean, out of the Spirit World?”

“Yes,” Lise said quietly.

Crow couldn’t look at her. The fountain at the village’s center spat water without a care in the
world. He’d been in a part of this world that was not kind or cheery in the slightest. The worst the
Spirit World had to offer. The little inn a spirit had allowed their human trio to stay at was nice. So
were the sheets covering Crow, but it all felt so fake. A lie.

He’d been trapped in a never-ending hell of deprivation. His time there had felt eternal, but it had
only been a few hours. Even less time than that had passed in the physical world. Technically
everything that was happening was all in his head. It would be nothing short of amazing to escape.
But how could he?

What kind of friend would I be if I just left you to save myself?”

“You’re sure,” Lise didn’t smile. Her hands clenched on the edges of the chair she sat on. “I won’t
judge you. Neither will Luna. It’s been hard, but what you went through was a literal nightmare.”

“I’m sure,” Crow said again. “I’m not leaving.”

Lise’s smile was miniscule. “Okay. Luna and I are ready to go whenever you are.”

“Just need some breakfast.”

“Crow!” Luna’s face lit up when he and Lise joined her outside at the fountain. She ran to meet
them. Luna was eating lunch with a few duel spirits she had met. She, Princess Pikeru and Ebon
Magician Curran nibbled cookies. “You’re okay!”

“Yeah, watch the arm,” Crow hugged her back one handed and patted Luna’s green haired head.
“Thanks for saving me.”

“I’ll do it again if I have to,” Luna said, suddenly solemn. “The Spirit World is a lot scarier than I
remember.”
“Not your fault,” Crow waved away her concern. “So,” he sat down on the lip of the fountain beside Lise. She was consulting her map. “Where to?"

Lise unfurled the map a little so that Crow and Luna could see. “We’re here in the central village,” she pointed to the circle at the center of the map. “The forests Luna and I came from are in the West, but we want to go north to the entrance to Yliaster here.” She slid her finger up the map to the tiny dome she had located earlier.

Crow nodded. “Seems simple enough.”

Luna traced the map with her own finger too. “We can go right in between the volcano world and the Naturia Forest. Hopefully that way we run into fewer duel monsters. Just in case.”

“Sounds like a good idea,” Crow said.

“Wait,” the little girl magician wearing a black dress tugged on Luna’s sleeve. “Luna, are you leaving?”

“You’re not gonna play with us anymore?” Princess Curran’s big eyes swelled with unfallen tears.

“No, right now I have to go,” Luna patted both their heads. “But I can come back some other time. Then we can play tag all we want!”

“Yay! Come back soon, okay?!”

“Yeah, we’ll be waiting for you!”

The little magicians waved as they left until none of the three humans could see them anymore.

Luna tossed cookies into her backpack. No wrappers or anything. Loose cookies.

Lise wrinkled her nose. “What’re you doing?”

“Packing. I want snacks. We don’t need to eat here, but it never hurts to be prepared.”

“That’s such Leo logic,” Crow chuckled.

Lise stood up, snapping the map book shut. “Let’s get moving.”

The three of them gathered their supplies and met at the northern gate of the village. It was time to head back into danger. Trees met them where village met earth. Farther than could be seen.

Lise handed Luna her book. “Ask it for a safe path to the Yliaster portal. I’ll climb up and look for landmarks.”

“Okay.”

“We can’t ask that thing to tell us where our friends are?” Crow peered over Luna’s shoulder.

Luna shook her head. “No. It wouldn’t even tell us where you were. We have to be specific without being specific at the same time. It’s annoying.”

“But you still found me, and we can still use it to get through here.”

“Right,” they smiled at each other. “We’re a team.”
Lise alighted on the highest branch that she felt confident could hold her weight. Emerald green leaves and rich, dark branches met her eyes. The sun glowed a warm, pinkish color in the distance. Wind whistled gently through the eaves, whipping Lise’s hair to and fro. She breathed in the scent of fresh wind. It would have been so beautiful if the Spirit World didn’t seem to have it out for them.

The view was still breathtaking. At the edge of the forest, the landscape swept out into a bowl-like depth black with molten lava long since hardened. The domed portal glowed ominously, nestled safely in the blackened magma, its swirling colors were easy to spot. Seemed easy enough, but looks could be deceiving.

Lise’s hand brushed a small branch as she leaned closer to see better, eyes squinting. It broke apart in her hands, throwing off her balance. Lise looked down at what had once been a budding branch and found ash sprinkling down and dusting her hand.

“Ash?” she murmured to herself.

She was too far into the forest for the lava to have reached the trunk of the tree, and so high up too. Forest fires were more likely, but not likely in the Spirit World if all the pieces were separated so well.

Lise noticed grey patches adorning other trees, like a disease. A sickness seeping into the world. She couldn’t remember if she’d seen anything like it back at the library. It did seem familiar. Was the Spirit World sick?

Too many questions. Lise shook her head and started rappelling down the tree. The ashen spots worried her. Somehow, she knew, they would be connected to their journey here.

“So?” she landed gracefully back on land with her friends.

Luna pointed to the book, and the forest floor. “The book says we basically walk to the edge of the forest and follow the line dividing Naturia Forest from the volcano.”

“The forest is deceptively deep., but I could see the portal. We should make it there soon.”

“I just hope the rest of our friends are okay,” Crow said. He followed Luna into the forest.

Lise fell into step beside him. “Me too.”

///

“Jack,” Yusei whispered. He nudged his friend’s sleeping body. “Jack!” Yusei shoved Jack’s shoulder a little harder.

“What?” Jack grumbled, rubbing at his eyes, but not getting up. “I’m sleeping.”

“I don’t think we’re alone anymore,” Yusei whispered.

His eyes combed the trees. Before, when the two of them had gone to sleep, the trees seemed harmless. Now the rustling leaves, the fake stillness of the trees, and sunlight streaming down from between the leaves and branches seemed like they had all sprouted eyes.

“I think we’re being watched.”

“Then we’re fine because they haven’t done anything yet,” Jack yawned, cracking his stiff neck.
He stretched and sat up. “But if you’re that paranoid, then we can get a move on, I suppose.”

“Come on, man.” Yusei got to his feet. His eyes never left the darkness between trees. “You know as well as I do this place isn’t built for us.”

“Fine,” Jack yawned again and walked into the forest.

“Hang on, we don’t know which way is safe yet.”

“Oh please, it’s just a forest. It’s perfectly—” Jack was cut off by the ground collapsing beneath the two boys.

The fall was short and unceremonious. Both boys landed haphazardly at the bottom of a pit.

“Ow…” Jack muttered, rubbing his sore behind.

“You were saying?” Yusei frowned at Jack, who at least had the decency to look ashamed.

Jack held his hands up. “So I was wrong, but we should probably find a way out of this hole.”

“No kidding.”

Jack pointed at the edge of the pit above them. “Maybe they can help?”

Tiny plants with eyes peered down at the boys. They whispered amongst themselves, furtive looks passing between them.

Yusei counted a cherry, a tulip, a pumpkin, and a sunflower. If he wasn’t trapped in a pit, he would have laughed at being surrounded by the equivalent of childhood drawings.

“Should we eat them?” The tulip whispered.

“I dunno,” the pumpkin yawned and scratched its chin with a leaf. “They kinda look familiar.”

“Tulip, Pumpkin, Cherry, Sunflower!” A new voice barked. “What did you find there?”

“Are we in trouble?” Jack whispered. He raised his fists just in case.

“Not sure,” Yusei reached behind him for his sword. Never hurt to be prepared.

A pineapple’s face joined the other four. “Humans!” Its yellow face split into a grin. “Just like the first!”

The four other plants exchanged looks. So did Jack and Yusei.

‘The first?’ Jack mouthed.

Yusei shrugged in response, pulling his sword out of its sheath with a shing! Nothing above them sounded good.

“Well don’t just stand there!” Pineapple threw up its leaves and pointed down at the boys. “Help them out of there! Akiza will be pleased!”

“Akiza?!”

///
“I feel like I should make lunch for them too, but it’s not like they can eat anything like that,” Carly said. She sat down at the kitchen table, with her freshly made sandwiches.

The five Signers and their Vessel hadn’t moved for two hours. Their circle unbroken, bodies unmoving.

“Makes me wonder what they’re doing in there,” Bruno said. He took a sandwich, chewing as he thought.

Leo finished his first sandwich and reached for a second. “So, do they have bathrooms in the Spirit World?”

“I’d imagine…no,” Carly said with a little chuckle. “But you’d have to ask your sister.”

“Aw,” Leo stuck out his lower lip.

Bruno stared at the circle again. Their markings continued to glow, eyes still closed. Exact same positions. It would have been impressive if it wasn’t so creepy. It was worse than when Lise and Yusei talked to each other telekinetically. At least they were awake, or conscious? Either way it was better than this strange, suspended state of connection through another world.

With a shiver, Bruno returned to his work.

///

“Yusei! Jack!” Akiza tackled them into big hugs when she spotted them. Pineapple and his posy had led them into the Naturia Village. “You’re all right!”

“More or less,” Yusei said.

“I’m tired,” Jack groaned, putting his full body weight wearily on Akiza as they hugged.

“Well, don’t fall asleep on me!” Akiza laughed and shoved him off. She clasped her hands. “I’m so relieved! Guardian said to wait and she was right! I thought I was gonna go nuts here!”

“Hang on,” Jack leaned close to Akiza, eyes narrowing. “You mean to tell me, while we’ve been lost on a highway, and battling duel monsters down a volcano, you’ve been relaxing, and talking to plants!”

“Not relaxing!” Akiza waved her hands around. “I was really worried about you! But the villagers here took me to a tree, Guardian, and I asked her how to find you, and she just said to wait here! She was right!”

“Well, if we’re staying in the village for a little bit, I’m taking a bath,” Yusei said. “We don’t need food here, but my soul needs some refreshing.”

“Just follow Cherry,” Akiza pointed at the duel monster.

“Thanks, we can set out once we regroup properly. Glad to see you’re all right too.”

Akiza smiled. “Just ask, and the Naturia villagers will help you find me again.”

Yusei nodded and took off after Cherry.

“Wait for me!” Jack chased after them.
“So,” Akiza spread out a crudely drawn map of the Spirit World on Sprout’s table. “Sprout tell them what you told me.”

“Happy to oblige, miss Akiza,” Sprout jumped onto the table. It was easier for them to address their taller guests when they could properly see them. Sprout pointed at the village. “You’re here.” Their leaf skirted over to a small dome a short distance away. “This is that portal you wanted to get to. Should take you about two hours of walking.”

“It’s that close?” Yusei scratched at his cheek, deep in thought.

Jack crossed his arms. “Seems too good to be true.”

Sprout shook their head. “No joke. That’s the portal. Of course, your legs are significantly longer than my little stumps, so you’ll probably get there much quicker.”

“Perfect!” Akiza grinned, clapping her hands together. “We can leave right now!”

“Can we keep this?” Yusei pointed at the map.

“Of course,” Sprout jumped off the table, doing a loop-de-loop for the fun of it. “And sorry about the trapping-you-in-a-pit thing. We’re not exactly the most predatory of duel monster spirits, so we discourage the more aggressive monsters from…”

“Eating you?” Jack suggested, remembering the talking pineapple from earlier.

“Yes,” Sprout sniffed. Their expression brightened at the sight of Akiza’s hand reaching down for them.

“I just wanted to say thank you for all your help and kindness, Sprout,” Akiza said, her brown eyes glittering. “We would never have been able to reunite and continue without your help.”

“Anytime, miss Akiza,” Sprout smiled warmly. “You’re welcome back here at any time!”

///

“Luna?” Lise spoke up. She, Crow, and Luna had been walking for a few miles or so. They were making good time, but nowhere near the end of the forest.

“Yeah?”

“Does something seem…wrong with the Spirit World?” Lise’s eyes lingered on another grey patched tree.

Luna’s eyes followed Lise’s line of sight. The grey patch. “Yeah, I noticed it when I we were walking outside the village. All those dusty parts.”

“Crow, did you notice these down in…” Lise trailed off. Probably not a good idea to ask about his experience down there.

The light faded for a moment from Crow’s eyes. He swallowed, wiping sweat from his forehead. “Even if I had, I don’t want to remember anything from down there.” He clenched his good fist. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Lise’s hand fell on his shoulder, and left just as quickly. “We’ll figure it out
anyway.”

Crow swallowed again. He managed to flash Lise a grateful smile.

“Whattaya think those grey patches are? What do they mean?” Luna voiced her concerns aloud.

“I was hoping you could tell me,” Lise said.

Luna was quiet for a minute. The leaves rustled in the gentle wind, their shadows rocking to and fro. “It’s not like the Minus Curse, but it’s similar. It’s like…like the life is draining out of the Spirit World.”

“Is that even possible?”

“Yeah,” Crow agreed. “Wouldn’t Ancient Fairy Dragon have told you if something that horrible was happening?”

“I think she tried to. She told me bringing everyone here was extremely dangerous,” Luna said.

“This just gets better and better,” Lise sighed.

///

“Okay…” Yusei lowered Sprout’s map. Raised it to his face again. Lowered it. Raised it. Lowered it. “This is the portal.”

“It’s…less amazing than I thought it would be,” Jack said.

The portal’s dome swirled with colors, like a never ending kaleidoscope, but nothing out of the ordinary. White stripes, stretching across the dome like tiny shooting stars shot by every now and then. It was like something volatile waiting for its moment to strike. Other than that, the portal seemed harmless.

“We’ve gotta wait for Lise and Luna to open it, right?” Akiza asked. She still reached out her hand to touch the smooth surface of the chaotic portal.

“I’m not sure,” Yusei admitted. “Judging by what’s been happening here, and in the real world, logically we could say the portal is-“

“-already open,” Akiza finished for him. Her arm had just disappeared up to her elbow.

“But how?” Jack gasped as Akiza withdrew her unscathed arm.

“Whoever is pulling the strings in Yliaster,” Yusei said. His lips pursed into a thin, grim line. Whatever was on the other side of the portal was probably the most dangerous thing they’d ever face.

“Well what are we waiting for?” Before the others could tell him to stop Jack marched into the portal, completing vanishing through its surface.

“Damn,” Akiza swore. “We should wait for the others.”

Yusei nodded. “But we can’t leave Jack alone in there.”

Akiza sucked air into her cheeks and let it escape, barely, through her teeth. She rolled her eyes. “Fine.”
She and Yusei closed their eyes and stepped through the portal into Yliaster.

Instantly a sheet of cold, moisture seemed to hit them, yet remained dry as ever. Like standing under a waterfall and feeling the cold mist on your face, but without getting wet. The surface of the portal warped and pulled away from them, allowing entrance like being sucked through jello.

Jack smirked at the two of them, perched atop a cloud. “Took you long enough.”

A land of whiteness, almost too bright to look at, shined from every direction. The only break from the light was a slight shadow from the cloudy castle a short distance away. At least it felt like a castle. There wasn’t a drawbridge, but it was vast and complicated enough to resemble a traditional European style castle. If castles were made of clouds. The sky was like a two-sided mirror, broken into two circles. One side resembled the Earth. As the trio of Signers watched, it zoomed into different locations, sharpening onto the lives of humans or animals on its surface, then returning back to the planet. The other circular mirror side was the exact same thing, but of the Spirit World. A forest, volcano, a library, all back to the Spirit World’s entirety.

“Whoa…” Akiza breathed. She couldn’t say much more. The effect was breathtaking.

Entranced, the three of them walked around the fluffy clouds, and into the castle before they knew where their feet were taking them.

“We should really double back,” Yusei finally said. The sudden darkness of the castle’s interior shook him out of the fascination with Yliaster. “I don’t think it’s smart to keep going without comparing notes with Lise, Luna, and Crow.”

“Can you contact Lise at all here? I think we should do a little snooping. It’ll be easier to move around just the three of us than six of us,” Akiza pointed out.

Jack raised his hand. “I’m with Akiza. If we can grab some answers quickly and get out, maybe Luna and the others don’t even have to come here.”

Yusei scratched his chin as he thought about it. None of them were really leading the trio, but they couldn’t really move forward well without unanimous decisions. “Okay,” he conceded, drawing his sword and readying his shield. “But we should keep up our guards just in case.”

“Good point,” Akiza nodded. She pulled out her duel disk, slapping it onto her arm. Her deck was ready, with Black Rose Dragon at the top.

“This way,” Jack gestured for them to move on.

They moved stealthily from door to door. And boy did the cloud castle have a lot of them. It was like a labyrinth. Everywhere they turned a corner looked exactly the same as the last. Whereas when they had entered, two white and gold fancy doors had greeted them, the hallways all had red doors with yellow trim. At first it was cool, but since every door was exactly the same.

“Not this crap again,” Yusei groaned. They’d ended up exactly where they started. The big white doors were definitely mocking them. He could feel it.

“Maybe this is where we should start?” Jack suggested, thinking nothing of his new strategy. He walked open to the doors and pushed them open far enough for all of them to wiggle through.

“This is a bad idea. This is really really bad,” Yusei whispered, but he followed his friends inside.

The moment Jack had entered the doors, they seemed to ooze with a threatening pressure.
Purple flames erupted in the braziers adorning the walls, throwing frightening shadows across the walls. The room was a giant circle, almost as vast as a football field. Seats, like white marble stairs stretched out on either side of the trio. The seats all faced the seal of the Crimson Dragon tattooed in bright red to the floor.

“This is exactly like Lise described,” Akiza smiled.

Jack nodded. “Very cool.”

“No, something’s wrong,” Yusei insisted. Every cell in his body was telling him to run. Sweat beaded his forehead and coated his hands. Hands that were shaking so badly he had to remember to grip his sword tightly.

The purple flames changed from purple to white.

“We need to get out of here. Right. Now.” Yusei reiterated.

The extra light illuminated what looked like a throne in the middle of the dragon seal. What looked like a young man wearing white robes was seated upon it. He had reddish-orange hair, green eyes, and a smile that had long ago lost all semblance of friendliness.

“My guests have finally arrived,” the man said.

Jack raised his fists, eyes narrowing. “Who the hell are you?”

“I…” the young man stood up, towering over the three Signers. “Am Mako. And I am the solution.”

He came at them fast. Jack was on the ground faster than they could blink. None of them had seen him coming, or could tell what he had even done.

Akiza synchro summoned Black Rose Dragon. Mako ignored her, walking underneath the powerful dragon, and ripping Akiza’s duel disk off her arm without blinking. Black Rose Dragon faded, and Mako batted Akiza out of his way like a tennis ball. She too fell and crumpled.

“What did you do to my friends?!” Yusei leveled his sword at Mako’s chest.

“I knocked them out,” Mako said, calmly advancing. “They were in my way, and humans are so annoying awake. So much chatter.” He waved his hands to illustrate his point, and the silence that fell when he stopped talking.

“Stay back,” Yusei demanded.

Mako smiled acidly, teeth like sharpened knives, pressing the tip of his finger to Yusei’s sword. He effortlessly pushed the blade away from him. “But don’t worry. I have a special task for you, consort of the Crimson Dragon.”

Chapter End Notes

(CLIFFHANGER! Haha, but don’t worry, I’ve already got the next chapter mostly done! It helps to write it out beforehand because your brain wants to get to the juicy stuff!)
Anyway, I just wanted to say thank you, SO MUCH, to all the readers who still stick with me. It’s been literal years, and this last semester of school has REALLY kicked my ass. It was difficult, and challenging, but I made it through. Yet my story here suffered, and for still being here, thank you so much. I’m holding myself to posting more frequently this summer because this summertime will be dedicated to improving my art and writing! Working hard for the best me I can be. Thanks again to the best readers a writer could EVER ask for!)
“Shouldn’t we have run into the others by now?” Crow asked. They’d made it to the portal. He was a bit bummed Yusei, Jack and Akiza weren’t there to greet him. Actually bummed was putting it lightly. It was worrisome they weren’t there.

“Maybe they already went to Yliaster?” Luna suggested. “The portal looks open to me.”

“It is,” Lise’s eyes widened. Half of her body had vanished into the portal when she’d tripped a little. “But, but how? That was part of the journey here, to open the portal!”

Luna rested her hand on Lise’s forearm. “It makes sense,” she said softly. “Somehow, they got the portal open to interfere with us directly. That explains how the changes in New Domino these days.”

Crow nodded, watching the colors warping across the portal. “So that means one part of the mission changes. We close the portal.”

Lise took a deep breath to calm herself. “You’re right. After we find our friends.”

“And answers,” Luna added.

///

“Jack!” Carly raced over to his body. He’d fallen back out of his cross-legged position in the circle. She held him in her arms, cradling his head. “Jack, what’s wrong? What’s happening?”

“Is he back?” Bruno rushed over from the duel runners.

Carly shook her head. “No, he’s still in the Spirit World, but something’s wrong! I think something hurt him!”

Leo had been fidgeting frantically nearby. He glanced warily at his sister every few seconds. She seemed okay, but then Leo felt bad that he was glad Luna was all right when something was wrong with Jack. “What do we do? Should we bring them back?”

“I don’t know,” Bruno said.

Carly sat more comfortably to be able to continue holding Jack. “I don’t think there’s anything we can do.”

///

“It looks just like my dream,” Lise said, taking in the full effect of Yliaster. She and the others had made it through the portal seamlessly.

“Then we’re in the right place,” Luna said. She tried to sound more cheerful than she felt.


“Sounds good to me,” Lise replied. She checked her knives and fans one last time. “Stay close, and
Lise took a step forward and fell to her knees. An invisible tidal wave must have hit her or something. But she didn’t feel hurt at all. Quite the opposite. The wave of power was being imbibed into her being, infusing her skin, bones, her very soul with power.

“Lise?” Luna’s voice finally got through to her. “Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

“Yeah, you’re glowing brighter than usual.”

Lise stood back up effortlessly. She flexed her fingers and arms experimentally, the light shining off her marks like red spotlights. She felt fine, better than fine. “I’m okay, but I feel… I feel like I could level a country.”

“How?” Luna stared at her friend as the glow faded.

This is my birthplace. The Crimson Dragon’s voice spoke to Lise. I am both mystical and mortal. Here in Yliaster, we are at our most powerful. But you must be careful. The Eye of the Dragon’s effects are accelerated here, and nothing can restore your humanity.

“This just keeps getting better and better,” Lise grumbled.

“I take it we need to be careful with our dragon powers,” Crow said.

Lise bobbed her head once. “But no pressure.” She sighed wearily. “Let’s storm the castle.”

There were more people for Lise, Crow, and Luna’s go around. All in white robes, hoods pulled over their heads to hide faces. They entered room after room to avoid the people, and to search for any information about Yliaster’s plans. But they were finding not much more than living quarters with few possessions and a small library. Lise marked each door with a tiny ‘X’ using a knife to ensure they knew which places they had already been to.

After what felt like hours, the millionth hallway, give or take, ended. At a balcony.

“Okay, uh, now what?” Crow threw up his good arm. “Is that the whole damn maze?”

“We could ask the book for a map of the castle, right?”

“I think it only works on the Spirit World,” Lise said. “But good idea anyway, Luna.”

Luna smiled gratefully up at her friend. She just wished she could be more helpful. Nothing was going as planned, and she couldn’t help but feel some of it was her fault.

Footsteps reached their ears from behind. Someone was coming up the stairs.

“Quick hide!” Crow hissed, grey eyes darting around.

“Where?!” Lise whispered back. There were no doors, not even a potted plant or a box to hide behind. They could throw themselves off the balcony or get caught.

“The shadows!” Crow swept his arm in a circle, and melted all three of their presences into the shadowy corner.

The three of them held their breath, Crow his concentration. Just in time too. Another white clothed person stepped into the balcony entryway.
Luna and Lise watched as the person walked to the edge of the balcony. “The corruption is worse today,” they spoke with a feminine voice, heavy with her observation.

“The grey dust we saw in the Spirit World,” Luna whispered, green eyes wide.

Lise put her finger to her lips, nodding. “It must be here too.”

They fell silent as the white-clothed woman walked back inside. Beads of sweat had appeared on Crow’s forehead. He couldn’t hold the shadow covering much longer.

The woman’s head disappeared below the stair’s landing, and Crow relaxed. Luna and Lise caught him so he wouldn’t faceplant.

“Thanks guys,” Crow smiled at them.

“No, thank you.”

“Yeah,” Luna agreed. “We would’ve been in a lot of trouble.”

“Well, let’s get a move on then,” Crow straightened up. “We haven’t anything we’re looking for.”

“Right.” Lise took the lead down the stairs. Crow behind her, and Luna behind him.

Together they creeped downstairs, looking for doors they hadn’t tried yet. Just about every door on their way back was marked with a tiny ‘X.’ They would need to look elsewhere.

Out of nowhere the white clad woman from before burst out of one of the rooms. “Who are you?!” She seized Crow by the throat and hurled him at the wall. She held him there with her left hand, and aimed a knife for his eyeball with the other.

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“Oh no you don’t!” Akiza jumped onto Mako’s back. She’d only been pretending to be hurt, but she did not like having her duel disk taken away.

Yusei took his chance and sliced at Mako with his sword. He wasn’t sure how, but Mako was blocking the blade with his bare hands.

“Such pests,” Mako growled.

Akiza yanked Mako’s hood off, pulling at his hair. They needed to keep Mako off balance. Without Jack and the rest of their team, Yusei and Akiza were at a huge disadvantage.

Mako reached back, grabbed Akiza by the back of her shirt, and hurled her away. Akiza rolled in midair, and skidded back on her hands and knees to a stop.

In seconds, Mako was on top of her, hand at her throat. “You’re not much of a threat without your duel disk,” Mako’s frightening grin was back. Akiza clawed at Mako’s hand, but he wasn’t budging.

“Leave her alone!” Yusei sliced his sword between them, forcing Mako to drop Akiza. “You okay?”

Akiza massaged her bruised throat. “I will be,” she coughed.

“Here,” Yusei handed her the fallen duel disk.
“Thanks.”

“Ready?”

“You bet,” Akiza pulled out Black Rose Dragon.

“Oh no, I’ve had enough,” Mako straightened his robes. Then he was gone again.

His fists were pounding into Akiza before she’d even seen him. He moved so fast, Yusei was afraid to swing for fear he’d hit Akiza too. With a blow to her head, Akiza was out. She crumpled to the ground just as Jack had.

“Now, back to where we were before such a rude interruption,” Mako smiled hungrily. He grabbed Yusei’s blade, its sharpness not bothering him in the slightest, and tossed it away.

Yusei raised his fists. “What do you want with me?”

“Not really with you,” Mako shrugged. He grabbed Yusei’s shirt and slammed him down onto the ground, knocking the air out of Yusei’s lungs. He put his boot on Yusei’s right arm. “But I need all the pawns here for my plans to work.” Mako pulled a small white knife from within the folds of his robe. “Especially the Crimson Dragon.”

“I’m not telling you where she is,” Yusei growled through clenched teeth.

Mako’s evil smile grew. He ripped off the armor and sleeve covering Yusei’s left arm. “You misunderstand. I don’t need you to tell me where she is. I just have to put you in as much pain as possible, and she’ll come running.”

“No!” Yusei turned away as the knife pierced his arm.

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Luna gasped, her hands raising into tight fists. Her arms were too close to her body to protect herself, and she shook like a leaf.

Lise took a different approach. Immediately, her hands and eyes ignited with the glow of the Crimson Dragon’s energy. She stopped her hands an inch from striking both the woman’s throat and stomach. “I suggest you let my friend go. Right now.”

Crow stopped struggling a little. His vision was certainly getting a little spotty due to the slight, but unwavering pressure on his throat, however, with both his life and this woman’s being threatened they were at an impasse. He watched the woman’s grey eyes glance in Lise’s direction, then at Luna’s terror, and then back to Crow. His brain noted they were a lighter grey than his own eyes.

The woman’s eyes lingered again on Lise and her glowing form. Even though Crow knew his friend was still behind those red, glowing eyes, they had always unnerved him. They seemed to make this woman nervous too.

Next second she was smiling as brightly as the sun. “You’re the Crimson Dragon! You’re Elizabeth Kururugi!”

Lise’s fierce expression faltered. “Uh yeah. How did you know my name? Who are you?”

The woman didn’t seem to have heard her. “And you must be her friends; the Signers!” She grinned at Luna and Crow. “Oh goodness, I’m so sorry about this.” She released Crow, who was
happy to be able to breathe again, and clasped Lise’s hand between hers. “It’s wonderful to finally meet you in person!”

“Do-Do you know her?” Luna whispered, finding the courage to step beside Lise.

“No,” Lise said, but she powered down the glow of the dragon’s power.

“Oh that’s right, you wouldn’t technically know me or remember who I am,” the woman said. She released Lise and tapped her chin thoughtfully, picking at a scab when her finger discovered one.

“Should we make a break for it?” Crow suggested quietly.

Footsteps echoed down to their odd little group, getting louder by the second.

“We can’t stay here. Let’s go somewhere quiet we can talk,” the woman said, glancing over her shoulder. “Come with me.” She gestured to the doorway she had come through to attack them.

Lise, Luna, and Crow exchanged glances, as if hoping one of them had an answer for all the bizarre occurrences that day. No one did. They shared a shrug and followed.

///

“Okay,” she whispered to the trio when the hallway seemed to be quieter. The woman had brought them to a small room that looked like the interior of a paper lantern painted white. It must have been the woman’s bedroom since she seemed at home with sitting on the foot of the bed and gesturing to the nearby table and chairs for her guests.

Lise didn’t know what to think. This whole scenario was so bizarre that her brain had switched off. She could almost feel the gears of that section of her brain straining to move, but she couldn’t let them yet. Not until something made sense. This Spirit World adventure was exhausting.

Luna sat down first. She was a little tired and the woman seemed nice, however strange she may be. Cookies sat atop a plate on the coffee table. Luna reached for one and bit in with a loud chomp before anyone could stop her.

“I didn’t poison the cookies if that’s what you’re thinking,” the woman said, sounding slightly offended at the looks of both Crow and Lise. She sniffed and sat up, rubbing her temples.

She looked just as lost as Luna felt. Some guide she had turned out to be. She’d messed up the entry, froze at the slightest hints of danger, and she had no idea how to get anywhere despite being the only person to have ever gone to the Spirit World before. She couldn’t do anything right.

“I wish something would go right here,” the woman said to herself. She folded her hands in her lap and took a deep breath. “Please, sit. We need to compare notes, build trust. I am Mitka of Yliaster, part of the Council of the Stars. It’s nice to meet you.”

Crow sat woodenly, noticing as he did he had been wrong. This woman’s eyes were a subtle, kind grey unlike the crazy, green, vengeance eyes of her namesake on Earth.

“You have the same name as a woman I knew,” Lise said. She gripped the back of the chair she was supposed to be sitting in. She found it difficult to sit with so much tension in her body.

“Yes,” Mitka nodded. “Our descendants on Earth frequently used the names of their ancestors from here in Yliaster to name their children.”
“Well that’s not confusing,” Crow joked half-heartedly.

“I-I think I do remember you!” Lise gasped, needing to sit in order to process her revelation. “I had a dream about you and the Crimson Dragon a long time ago! You were…choosing the Signers! And then, in the city… I was in a coma, and I saw you having an argument with someone…”

Mitka’s smile was thin-lipped. She nodded, her eyes twinkling a little. “The Crimson Dragon must have shown us to you. It’s been a while since then. So much chaos.”

“We wanted to change that,” Luna ventured bravely. She brushed cookie crumbs off her lap, suddenly aware of everyone watching her. “Um, there are three guys in Neo Domino City calling themselves Emperors of Yliaster. We hoped - that is we thought – we could find some sort of weakness here that could help us defeat them.”

Mitka shook her head. “There is nothing that can be done by you here, except your own destruction. The Emperors are followers of Mako. He has seized control of Yliaster in a grab for power and domination of the future.”

“Wait, what? Yliaster controls the future?” Crow’s eyes were wide. “There’s no way.”

“We don’t control the future,” Mitka shook her head. “We can guide it though. We helped create the Crimson Dragon. Yliaster acts as a sort of check and balance mechanism in synch with the forces of light and darkness.”

“Oh,” Luna nodded in understanding.

“Like how America’s government is supposed to work,” Lise said, only half joking.

Mitka smiled again, wider this time. “Yes, exactly. The Council here has always been… in disagreement, but has never dissolved into such turmoil. It all started when you became the Dragon’s Vessel instead of your father, Elizabeth. Although, if I remember correctly, you go by Lise because Yusei gave you the name and you’ve had deep rooted affection for him for some time now. I can’t remember though; are you currently together?”

“Uh, yeah,” Lise turned red, and folded herself into a smaller position in her seat. “That’s one way of putting it.”

“What was so bad about Lise being born?” Luna prodded, completely sucked into the story. She was leaning forward, her cookies forgotten.

“Half the Council believed that Roman was a better choice as the Vessel, not a Signer because of the power he possessed as well as his adult status, he could attain change much faster and more efficiently.

But the Crimson Dragon is a living being that can think for itself. Yliaster can influence her choices, but cannot force a decision. She chose Roman’s daughter, seventeen years before the 5,000 year battle, as her host.

The Council was in an uproar. Never before had the Crimson Dragon so flagrantly denied a choice. She had agreed a host could protect her soul much more safely than the cards the Signers held, however, we were-“

“Slapped in the face?” Crow supplied, a sympathetic smirk tugging at the corners of his lips.

“More or less,” Mitka nodded. She stared at her hands. “We’ve been alive up here for so long that I
think many of our members have forgotten what being a child is like. Yes, children are malleable and so easily broken, but they can learn more readily too. I believe the Crimson Dragon saw this, and wished to see humanity in the same way; with new eyes untainted by years already lived.”

“She wanted to grow up!” Luna laughed. Somehow, it comforted her to know that a centuries old deity wanted to learn and be more human.

“She wanted to see what life really was, and why she protected it,” Lise said softly. She stared at her palm, aware that if she willed it, her hand would glow with the light of the dragon’s power. “I didn’t understand what she meant before.”

“Yes, I understood her reasons, as did many others here in the Council. Mako did not. He could not understand, and he continued to be furious with each one of the Crimson Dragon’s choices. She had never chosen children to be her Signers before, especially one so young as you, Luna.

Mako had already decided to take action before Lise was born, tainting Roman with whispers of the future. He believed the Crimson Dragon and her chosen deserved to lose and for the Earth to fall for ignoring him and the Council. He continued to interfere in the lives of Rex and Roman, hoping they would defeat you in the end.

His plan failed, so Mako decided to take a different approach. He started taking power from the Spirit World, draining it of life. Then he took over the Council with a majority vote. He has sent his most devoted followers to Earth with the protection of the Arc Cradle.

Because to rule all of fate requires him to control all three realms.”

“The Spirit World,” Luna gasped. Tears slid down her cheeks. “He’s killing it.”

Lise put an arm around her small friend. The grey patches weren’t ash. They were pieces of the Spirit World dying. One by one.

“What’s the Arc Cradle?” Crow asked softly.

“A massive up-side-down palace, the reverse of Yliaster. It distorts time-space, allowing that which should not be allowed. Oh, it cannot go back and erase you from existence.” Mitka added when she saw the livid looks on her audience’s faces. “It can only distort the present. The more power it receives, the stronger it gets. The Emperors plan to use it to destroy Neo Domino City once its power is at full capacity.”

“But the Council must know all this if you do, Mitka,” Lise said, frowning deeply. “Why are they not doing anything? Mako is actively changing the past, present, and future. If Yliaster isn’t supposed to do that, then why hasn’t anyone tried to stop him?”

“We have been trying. In my opinion, it seems no one wants to start a civil war. It has never happened before and the consequences could be disastrous.”

“We’re already fighting a war in Neo Domino, Mitka, for the future of the city and the world. If Mako isn’t stopped, then he’ll just try again. He’s gained too much power and it needs to end. Is there anything else you can tell us?”

Mitka sighed, a long, tired sigh. It was then that the trio truly saw her age weighing Mitka down. She had seen so much, and endured through it all. “You’re right. Talking has brought us nowhere. Time to take up our own decks for a change.” She shifted her shoulders, suddenly looking much younger, excited to get back into the fray. “Unfortunately, I do not know much else. I know the Arc Cradle is powerful, and hovering invisibly above your city, but it will not strike until ready. I
know there are multiple followers of Mako on Earth, but I do not know who or where.

I know Mako wanted to lead you here to Yliaster. Although, I apologize, I am not sure why.”

“That’s okay. Thank you, Mitka. You’ve been incredibly helpful. We’ll- AAGH!” Lise clutched at her arms, falling from the chair to the floor.

“What is it? Did something hit you? Is someone attacking you?” Luna bent down next to Lise’s body, trying to figure out how to help.

“No, it must be the empathy link,” Crow knelt beside her. He put a hand on Lise’s forehead, which seemed to steady her in the present moment. “Lise, can you hear me? What’s wrong?”

Mitka hovered nearby, not sure how to help either.

Finally, Lise’s breathing slowed. She pushed herself back onto her feet and headed for the door. “We have to go. Now. Yusei’s in pain.”

“What?” Crow got up and followed Lise to the door. “But we don’t know where he is.”

“I can…find him,” Lise paused, hand against the door to take a breath. Already, sweat beaded her forehead and she was shaking.

“This could be a trap,” Mitka suggested gently.

“I don’t care!” Lise shouted through her gritted teeth. She held back a scream. It felt like her arms were on fire, like someone was scratching at her skin with a hot rake. “If it’s this bad for Yusei, then it might be even worse for Akiza and Jack! We have to go help them!”

Luna swallowed and clutched at the hem of her t-shirt. “I-I’m right behind y-you, Lise. If Leo were here too, he’d want to help.”

Crow sighed. “Me too. Anything else you can tell us?”

Mitka shook her head. “No, I apologize. If I am to help you any further, it has to come from rallying my fellow believers.”

“Good luck,” the four of them said in unison.

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“Just one more turn,” Lise groaned, leaning up against the wall for support. “We’re almost there. It’s the big door.”

“Got it!” Crow ran ahead, steeled himself for whatever he was going to find, and pushed the large, white, ornate doors open.

The room was dimly lit by flaming torches that spewed soft, purple flames. Raised, white stadium-like seats seemed to glow in the darkness, framing the only entryway. The three of them crept inside slowly, weapons at the ready.

“Do you see anything?” Crow whispered to Luna and Lise.

Luna suddenly gasped and sprinted across the room. “Akiza!”

Crow and Lise spied the fabric of Akiza’s red skirt when Luna knelt next to her. Akiza lay on her
side. Bruises adorned her temple and throat.

“Oh no, Jack too,” Crow breathed. He knelt by his friend. Compared to Akiza, he was practically spotless, but Jack’s cheek was bruised a deep purple.

“Yusei?” Lise looked around wildly. “Yusei?!” The pain they shared had ebbed, but the way it had sliced through her like a cold knife was frightening to say the least. All six of them had to leave. Immediately.

There! She’d spotted him!

“Yusei!” Lise threw herself down beside him. Into a pool of blood. Yusei’s face was frozen with pain in his unconscious state, blood trickling from his lips and left arm. “Yusei…” Lise choked out her next words, sobs clutching at her throat. She handled him gently, pulling his head onto her lap.

His eyes snapped open. Her hands were the warmest things Yusei had felt in an hour. He’d held on for as long as he could, but he’d failed. Lise had found them.

“Lise,” Yusei coughed out, his eyes wide and shaking as badly as the bloodstained hand he touched hers with. “Run.”

“Finally,” Mako stepped down from his throne a second time. He pulled his hood down. Green eyes glowing like acid in the darkness, he grinned maliciously at the six humans before him. “All the cards are in my hand.”

Chapter End Notes

(Next chapter out! Oh man, these next chapters hurt not just my hands but my heart. I’m putting everyone through SO much and it makes me want to cry, but I will have them all come out okay! Ya know, like that saying “If it’s not okay, then it’s not the end.” Damn, I wanted to get to these chapters, but now I wanna get through them so they can stop being in pain so much… I’ll do my best to get the next chapters out between online classes and work! Thank you all so much, again, for staying with me and Soul of the Dragon all these years!)
Lise, Crow and Luna stared up at Mako. Considering how much blood pooled on the ground, and how strewn about Jack, Akiza and Yusei’s bodies were, Mako was much too calm.

Something stormy, dark, and painful was swirling inside Lise as she stared at him. Even though his arm was practically numb with pain, and spots flashed in his eyes, Yusei could feel the waves of energy she radiated. And it wasn’t good.

Lise finally broke the silence. Mako’s shitty smile was pissing her off. “What the hell did you do to him?”

Mako stopped just short of Yusei’s left boot. He didn’t answer. Nor did his smile waver.

Lise gently lowered Yusei’s head back to the ground. She stood up, Yusei reaching for her, hand trembling. “Lise, no! You have to run!”

She ignored him. “Well?” Lise’s face looked like murder. Her dragon markings were all aglow, faster than ever before. “What the hell did you do to my friends?!”

Her voice echoed in the chamber. The reverb bouncing back like a lonely song.

Crow and Luna looked between Lise and Mako. Neither looked like they could be reasoned with.

“What did I do?” Mako’s eye teeth gleamed in his crooked mouth. “I had a little fun before you got here. Isn’t that right, Yusei?”

Yusei’s body shuddered away. His name coming from Mako’s lips was more than disgusting. It was like a violation of his soul.

That was all Lise needed. Red enveloped her eyes, sealing her into the Eye of the Dragon. A beam of red hot energy unleashed from Lise’s chest, hitting Mako in the stomach, and blasting him backwards into his throne.

“Lise…” Yusei groaned, trying to reach her. But she was consumed by her rage, and Yusei was hanging onto consciousness by a thread. Lise’s fiendish swirling reds battling the whiteness surrounding Mako was the last thing he saw.

Crow shook himself, literally. “Luna, come on, we’ve gotta help her.” He squeezed Jack’s shoulder and stood up.

Luna was shaking so badly, she decided to stay on the ground. “B-But how?” Mina had told her, once, what Lise had been like when she lost control. Like a red hurricane. Luna had just accepted the description then. Now she understood. All that was under the red glow at the moment was rage.

“I don’t know. Come on,” Crow gestured for her to follow and ran into the battle. His shadow formed around him like a shroud, giving him black wings. Feathers assaulted Mako’s white cloak he used for protection with a wave of Crow’s shadow wings.

“You’re starting to annoy me!” Mako thundered. White lightning sparked from his eyes. His hand
shot out, snatching Crow up by one of his wings.

Crow jerked like he’d been shot. His wing came ripping off in Mako’s hands like paper.

Luna backed away from the battle. Her eyes were wide, unable to leave the scene of her friends’ battle. But they were losing. Mako was too strong.

Luna couldn’t stop herself. She looked at Jack’s body, Akiza’s, Yusei’s. None of them exactly inspired confidence, but they weren’t moving. Bruised and bloody.

*What do I do? I’m scared! I-I can’t…*

Mako finished tearing off Crow’s other wing, and punched Crow in the elbow. Crow’s screams echoed across the cold, stone room. Mako had gone for his injury. Crow passed out from the pain, his body adding to the pile.

Lise practically exploded in red glow. Consumed in raging red flames, she threw herself at Mako. She seemed to forget everything about the power she possessed, doing everything in her power to pummel him with her fists.

Mako’s hand burst through Lise’s bursting power aura as if it were made of butter. He yanked her into the air by her shirt. “I’ve had just about enough of your temper tantrum.”

The Eye of the Dragon fizzled out. Lise’s blue eyes returned, wide as her open mouth.

Mako hit the ground with his heal. The dragon seal ripped open, a gaping wound in the marble flooring. “I’ll come get you later, okay?”

He tossed Lise inside the crater. Her nails scraped against the sides, trying not to fall further. Her head hit the sides of the crater, blood pouring from hands and head. She hung on, barely able to fit even on her side.

“Take a moment,” Mako said from the tiny sliver of light above her. His hands clenched, drawing closer together. The rock obeyed his movements, closing. “And calm down, okay?”

Lise looked around, frantically trying to find a way out. The rock came closer jutting into her skin. She didn’t have much left to draw upon. Mako’s evil smile wasn’t comforting either. But she did have her hatred for him, and anger over what he’d done.

It wasn’t enough. Mako sealed her in. Lise couldn’t even see her hands right in front of her face.

Mako dusted his hands off. His work was done. He made a bell-ringing gesture and a small figure in white robes scuttled over. “I need a change of robes. I won’t be going to Earth looking like a blood splattered hobo. I’ll also need a drink.”

“At once, my lord,” the person bowed and ran off.

Luna didn’t dare move. Or breathe. Anything could remind this monster she was still there.

“Oh dear child,” Mako lifted the goblet he’d been presented with a moment later. His green eyes flicked over to Luna. “I never forgot about you. I have something special in mind for you.”

“Luna,” Lise gasped. She’d been clawing her way up to the surface, but wasn’t making any progress. “No! No one else is going to get hurt!” Her hands clenched into bloody fists as she summoned the last of her dragon power.
Mako gave his drink back to his servant. He advanced on Luna with his hand raised. “You will be my carrier.”

“NO!” Lise burst out of the ground just as Mako let off a white blast of power. She flew over, intercepting the attack with her body.

Lise’s body slammed into the wall beside Luna.

Luna jumped, shaking uncontrollably. “Lise! What do I do? He’s going to… He-“

“Luna,” Lise grabbed the younger girl’s hand. She could barely see, but someone had to make it. “Go. Get out of here. Run and don’t look back.”

“But-“

“GO!” Lise shoved Luna at the door, and lost consciousness as Mako shot her again.

Luna didn’t have time to think. She did as she was told. She ran.

“Should I go after her, my lord?” the servant asked. He had attempted to grab Luna, but missed.

“No,” Mako adjusted himself, cracking his back and neck. “She will be back soon enough.”

Mako’s face split into something greedy, hungry. His green eyes combed over the bodies of the Signers. He could’ve been a gambling patron collecting his winnings he was so indifferent to their wounds.

The servant glanced in the same direction Mako was smirking at. Yusei’s body. It seemed to glow faint white in the darkness. “My lord, do you wish to dispose of them?” He watched the white glow of Mako’s hand fade.

“No, of course not. The dragon will only pick new hosts, the Vessel reincarnated. Imprison them, not in shackles or cells, but in something they will never wish to escape.”

The servant’s grin matched Mako’s. “As you wish, my lord.”

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Tears ran down Luna’s cheeks. They spilled into her open mouth, salty, and stinging. But not as much as the sting of leaving her friends.

The giant doors of the dragon chamber were still open. She ran through them. Through the doors of the castle without stopping. She felt two invisible hands, whether they were real or not, reaching for her back. She didn’t look back to see if they were real. Her fear kept her legs going.

She HAD to get away. For herself or for her friends didn’t matter then. She HAD to get away. She HAD to.

The portal to the Spirit World admitted her without hesitation. The refreshing water-like feeling of crossing the portal did nothing to dampen Luna’s fears.

Back in the Spirit World, she didn’t stop. Her throat burned. Chest aching. Legs screaming for a stop. Still, she ran. Twigs snapped as she ran into them at full speed. Leaves and branches scraped at Luna’s legs, arms, and face, but she ran.

A tree root managed to trip her. Luna fell to the ground, skimming her knee, dirt smudging on her
hands and cheeks. Her body was finally at rest, and judging by how her legs were practically vibrating, she wasn’t about to get back up again any time soon.

She wasn’t sure how far away she was, or even if she was safe. The branches of the tree seemed to be drawing her into them, cradling her like a baby.

The branches formed what felt like a hammock, carrying her gently up into the highest tree branches. Luna didn’t have time to admire the difference in tree branches at such a height, or the small pond beneath her. Everything hurt, physically and mentally. Her heart ached, frightening images of her friends getting hurt replaying over and over in her mind.

“Sleep child,” a kind, mother-like voice whispered.

Luna wanted to protest. She wanted to ask who this person was. Why the trees were helping, and so much more. But her exhaustion took over. Her eyes closed. Tears continued to fall down her cheeks until she succumbed to her body’s needs, and fell asleep.

///

“Oh god, oh god,” Carly was crying. Her friends had fallen without warning. Yusei was covered in blood, and Lise was quickly joining him. Akiza and Crow were badly bruised. Carly still held Jack in her arms.

Luna was the only one who seemed unscathed.

“What do we do?” Bruno asked. “Should we call the hospital?”

“I dunno. I don’t think so? Yet?” Carly sniffled, wiping one of her cheeks. She took a deep, shuddering breath. “Not yet. Go… Bruno, go grab the first aid kit. We’ll patch them up the best we can, for now. Luna seems to be okay. We…Let’s…let’s give them another hour or two.”

“Got it. I’ll be right back,” Bruno raced upstairs for the first aid kit.

Leo was unusually quiet as he cried. He entered the broken circle of his friends, and sat in front of Luna. He hugged his knees to his chest. “I’m here, Luna,” he reached for her hand, their fingertips barely touching. “You can do it. You’re all gonna be okay.”

Bruno returned and Carly gently lowered Jack to the floor. She joined Bruno at Yusei’s arm, the worst of the injuries, and the two of them began wrapping his arm in bandages.

///

Luna stirred to the sound of whispers. Two people, maybe three, were discussing her.

She opened her eyes to a canopy of dark leaves. Tree bark surrounded her like a circular cabin. The floor was made of wooden rings, the interior of a tree. A curtain of leaves served as the door across from the hammock she had slept on.

Curious, Luna slowly made her way to the door. The whispering voices suddenly had form.

“She can’t stay here.”

“We can’t just send her back to the human world either!”

“I know that, but I’m not sure what else to do. The Spirit World is dying.”
“Perhaps,” a new voice, ancient and kind, joined the others. “We should allow the child to join us?”

The leaf curtain was drawn aside. Luna’s cheeks felt warm, but she stepped out into the early morning light.

Regulus, Ancient Fairy Dragon, and Akiza’s friend Sprout were seated on top of a stump beside the pond. Luna looked up at the tree and found a grandmotherly face in the bark smiling warmly at her.

“Luna, meet Guardian. She allowed you to sleep in her to protect you,” Ancient Fairy Dragon said.

“Thank you,” Luna bowed politely to the tree.

Guardian giggled a little. “It was no trouble. The Signers are welcome here as much as any Spirit.”

Luna smiled briefly at the tree and sat down amongst the others. “So…” she didn’t see any way to pretend she hadn’t been listening. “You think I should go back to the human world? Without my friends?”

Regulus chuffed a little under his breath. “I didn’t say it quite like that.”

“But they will be trapped here without your assistance,” Ancient Fairy Dragon said carefully. “We cannot enter Yliaster even if we wanted to. I am the protector of the Spirit World, but Mako was clever. He has stolen our resources without ever setting foot on Spirit World soil.”

“How is he so powerful? How is he even doing this?” Luna asked. “He…” She started to cry again, but she rubbed her tears away with the back of her hand. “He hurt my friends…he did it so easily…”

Sprout scooted closer, and put their arm around her. “I’m so sorry. We’ll help however we can.”

“We were…weighing our options,” Regulus said. He avoided Luna’s green eyes with his gold ones. He scratched at the bark lightly with his claws. “You could go back to the human world. See if you can return your friends’ souls to their bodies remotely. Though it’s unlikely if Mako has anchored them to Yliaster.

You could stay here. Wait Mako out. It would be difficult, but something would have to break from the pressure. Or-“

“Or you go back,” Guardian finished for him. “Rescue your friends.” Her bark eyebrows warped upwards, showing her concern for the youngest Signer.

“I dunno,” Luna examined her fingers.

All her options sounded terrible. She had never been good at fighting. Sometimes even her dueling skills were lackluster. She’d tied more times than she’d won lately. Not to mention she’d failed to bring everyone to the Spirit World together. All split up and put through a different nightmare. Their separation had doomed them, and all they’d wanted was some information. To know what they were going up against in New Domino, but they’d found so much worse.

“Why didn’t you tell me about this? About the Spirit World dying?” Luna’s brows drew in, fists clenched. “Why didn’t you tell me about Mako?!” She yelled at Ancient Fairy Dragon.

The dragon balked at the little girl’s fierce gaze. At Luna’s tears. She lowered her wings and her
head. “I apologize. I…did not want to…burden you with our dilemma. I did not want to add to your worries. You and your friends saved us before, and I believed you could do so again by defeating your enemies on Earth. Like before.

I believed that your mission here, to gain knowledge and information would be just that. Not this…mess…”

White hot tears rolled down Luna’s cheeks, but she rose to her feet. “But you could have warned us! Anything would have been better than going in blind with just your stupid mystery warning!”

Ancient Fairy Dragon’s eyes were bright with unshed tears. “I understand your anger. I am sorry, but blaming me will not rescue your friends.”

Luna collapsed back to the stump, hugging herself, and crying freely. “But then it’s my fault! It’s another thing that’s my fault! It’s my fault they were hurt! I brought them here! My friends are going to die because of me! I’m so scared! I don’t know what to do! I can’t do this by myself! I can’t fight! I can’t bring my friends to the Spirit World right! I can’t do anything! What do I do? WHAT DO I DO?!”

Regulus, Sprout, Guardian, and Ancient Fairy Dragon let her cry. Luna’s sobs filled the clearing, wracked with the pain and guilt. The unbearable indecision.

“Luna,” Sprout tried to comfort her again.

“No! Leave me alone!” Luna brushed off Sprout, and ran off. She grabbed one of Guardian’s branches and climbed until there were no more branches above her sturdy enough to hold her weight.

If she weren’t so distraught Luna would have enjoyed the view more. The pond sparkled in the light. Sprout’s village was bustling just a short walk away. She could see the sun peeking through the leaves if she squinted. She sat there crying for a long time. She stayed even longer when her tears dried up.

Luna spotted the Spirit World’s moon by the time Ancient Fairy Dragon wound her long body into the branches beside her.

“Luna…” Ancient Fairy Dragon began softly, cautiously. “May I…May I join you?”

“Okay.” Luna sighed. She didn’t have the energy to send the dragon away, or leave herself.

“Luna, my chosen child, do you know why I asked the Crimson Dragon to choose you?”

“No,” Luna sniffled, rubbing her nose with her forearm.

“The Spirit World is meant to be a gentle place for spirits to live in peace, regardless of what kind of spirit they are. All may have a home here.

So, when it came time to choose someone to be our Spirit World guardian, I needed someone who understood that need. Not a fighter, but someone who was kind and gentle. Someone whose powers lay in kindness, but knew when to defend their home with everything they had. And defending does not always mean fighting and violence, but doing what is right. Even when what is right is difficult.

Luna, your strength does not come from fighting and becoming powerful, but defending those who need it most. From maintaining kindness, peace, and love in the home one cultivates. From bonds
like the one you have with your brother.

I did not need Akiza’s strength, or Lise’s strength, or Crow’s strength. I needed yours, Luna. You are strong in your own way, and I believe in you whether or not you do.”

A fresh tear fell. Luna let it fall, and took a deep breath. “Thank you. I’m sorry I yelled at you.”

“My child,” Ancient Fairy Dragon brushed away Luna’s tears with an elegant, blue hand. “You felt alone and frightened. This situation is more than someone as young as you should ever have to endure. I understand.”

“I’m scared,” Luna sighed, hugging her knees to her chest. “But I need to go back. I’m just so scared. I’m so powerless here.”

Ancient Fairy Dragon pulled Luna’s chin over so that the young girl could look her in the eyes. “No, Luna. Here and Yliaster you are at your most powerful. Your strength lies in the kindness and peace you share with others. You can do this. We believe in you.”

“Thanks.”

“Are you ready?”

Luna shook her head and took another deep breath. “No, but I’ll never be. I’ve gotta go back.”

Ancient Fairy Dragon nodded. “Yes. Regulus will take you as far as the portal, but from there it is up to you.”

“Thank you,” Luna hugged the blue duel monster as hard as she could. “For everything.”

///

Regulus stopped right beside the glowing portal. He knelt to allow Luna to dismount with ease. “I’m sorry, Luna. I wish I could go further, but this is as far as I can take you.”

“It’s okay,” Luna hugged the great lion. The fur of his mane tickled her nose, but was comfortably warm on her bare arms. He returned her hug with one large paw gently on the girl’s back. “Thank you.”

“Good luck.”

Luna nodded and faced the portal. She hoped she looked braver than she felt.

There was no time to waste. She stepped through the portal.

///

The castle of Yliaster was eerily quiet. Nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary. Except for the jarring little squeaks of Luna’s sneakers on the marble floors.

She, Crow, and Lise had combed practically every inch of the castle. There didn’t seem to be any dungeons. Her stomach tying itself into knots, Luna figured her best bet was to start at the beginning.

Luna braced herself for what she was about to encounter. The dragon chambers might still be… She shook her head, refusing to think about the worst. If her hunch was right though, Mako would want to keep his prisoners close to him. That meant near his throne. Luna prayed he wasn’t in the
dragon chamber, and slowly pushed the door open a crack.

Her friends’ bodies were gone. The floor still had that scar of rubble from when Mako had ripped open the ground. The other side of the circle was stained with dried blood.

Luna swallowed. She was not going to be sick. She could do this.

Her friends couldn’t have been moved too far away. She had to think, but it was difficult with the green light coming off of Mako’s empty throne.

Wait? Green light? That was new. Mako’s throne hadn’t been glowing when they’d first entered. But it wasn’t the throne. It was something behind it.

Cautiously, Luna made her way around the throne. She gasped at what she saw, hands flying to her mouth.

It was like Mako had seen a drawing or a picture of Guardian and created his own warped version of horror. Green roots ripped through the cracked marble like unnatural fingers. The tree didn’t have leaves or branches, but bubbled out like a grotesque, acid green balloon. And suspended inside the green balloons were all of Luna’s friends.

Luna recoiled when she touched it. Her hand came back with sticky, gooey, green slime coating it. Her friends were trapped in that slime. Spirits meant to be suspended and preserved for as long as Mako wanted them out of the way. Maybe longer.

Luna steeled herself. She was going to get them out.

She buried her overwhelming disgust, swallowing, and plunged her arm up to her elbow into the muck. She reached further, the slime has difficult to get through as Jell-O.

Finally she was close enough! Her hand squeezed tightly around Akiza’s.

///

Luna blinked in the sudden sunlight. She was on her knees, a blanket underneath her. Half eaten food on plates haphazardly adorned the blanket. The blanket was on a grassy field surrounded by fluffy green trees, and cherry blossom trees in full bloom. In the distance, Luna could see the ocean water and the skyscrapers of the city.

When Luna looked around the blanket, everyone was there. Crow, Jack, Carly, Akiza, Yusei, Lise, Bruno, Leo, even Sayer! And everyone was smiling, talking laughing. Nobody seemed to think Sayer’s presence was weird.

But the real kicker, were the parents. Crow’s parents kept insisting he needed to eat more. Jack’s parents were grilling him for more details about Carly. Akiza’s parents were talking amicably with Lise’s mom. Yusei’s parents were probably talking about something scientific with Lise’s dad.

Everyone was happy. Too happy. It was weird. It’s wasn’t right. Half of these people were dead.

“It’s what they all want,” Luna whispered to herself. Fresh tears bloomed in her eyes.

She knew what she would have added if she were stuck in this prison too. Her own parents. Parents who accepted her and Leo, and their friends. Parents who didn’t leave them alone for years.

But it wasn’t real. It wasn’t fair. This was worse than being locked in a dungeon.
Luna had thought she had no tears left, but turns out she had plenty to spare. This prison was so cruel, so hurtful. It was almost worse to pull her friends from their perfect world.

But it wasn’t real. Luna had to remind herself. Her friends’ parents were dead. Akiza’s parents weren’t perfect, and neither were her own parents. Sayer was not a friend, but an enemy.

Luna had a job to do. A cruel, heartbreaking job to return her friends to reality.

“Akiza,” Luna whispered, standing, and taking her friend’s hand. “Akiza, listen to me. This isn’t real.”

The red-headed girl’s expression wrinkled. She blinked up at Luna. “What?”

“Listen to me, this is. Not. Real.”

“What’re you talking about?” The wrinkles smoothed out of Akiza’s face, and she grinned again. “Of course it’s real! Don’t be silly.” She tried to pull her hand away from Luna.

“No!” Luna held fast. “It isn’t!”

“Luna stop. This game you’re playing isn’t funny,” Akiza’s almond shaped eyes scrunched up. Her lower lip jutted out. “I don’t like it.”

“It’s not a game! You’ve gotta listen to me!”

“Is something wrong?” Setsuko asked. Her expression was all wrong. Too placid and serene to match the concern in her voice.

“No,” Akiza smiled at her mother. “Nothing is ever wrong.”

“But that is wrong!” Luna practically screamed. “How could nothing ever be wrong! That isn’t life!” She dropped Akiza’s hand, squishing the heels of her palms into her eyes in her frustration.

The others were starting to take notice. Luna’s shouting was not happy shouting. That was wrong in their world.

“Luna, it’s okay. Everything is okay,” Lise’s smile was so plastic. Fake. Eyes devoid of light.

“Yeah,” Yusei agreed, just as fake. “Nothing bad ever happens in New Domino City.”

“Yes it has!” Luna strode across the blanket, disturbing the plates of food deliberately. “Zero Reverse tore the city apart! Your parents are dead!”

“Luna, you’re being really mean,” Leo sniffled. “I wish you’d stop.”

Akiza nodded. “Yes, you’re wrong. Wrong things don’t belong here.”

Luna shook her head. This wasn’t working. She plopped herself down in front of Akiza, grabbing the older girl by her cheeks. “Akiza, please. Look at me,” Luna whispered. She ignored all the others. She didn’t care if she looked crazy. “I’m sorry. This isn’t real. Sayer is not our friend. He hurt you, and Lise, in unforgivable ways.

I know…I know it hurts. Reality sucks. It sucks a lot right now, but I need you. I need your help.”

“L…Luna…?” Light trickled slowly into Akiza’s eyes. She too began to cry. “It…It hurts.”
“I know,” Luna rested her forehead on Akiza’s. “But I’ll be there too.”

Then everything went dark.

///

Luna opened her eyes to Akiza sloshing out of the slimy tree. The girl had a cloudy expression on her face, and several bruises, but was otherwise all right.

“Ew,” Akiza said.

“Akiza!” Luna threw her arms around the older girl. She didn’t care that Akiza was covered in green slime. Her friend was back. She was no longer alone.

Akiza hugged back fiercely. “Luna, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. You got me out. You were all alone, but you still came back.”

“I had to,” Luna sniffed.

Akiza turned back to the slime tree. Lise, Yusei, Crow, and Jack were still suspended in the prison. “And we’ll bring everyone back. Together now. You ready?”

“Yes,” Luna sighed. Tension she didn’t know she’d been holding onto left her body.

The girls clasped hands and reached for the tree once more.

///

Crow burst into tears. His mother and father held him as he cried. Then all three of them vanished.

No one else at the grassy hilltop even acknowledged they were gone. Sayer had vanished too, along with Akiza and her parents.

Jack solemnly held both of his parents’ hands. Together, the three of them jumped off the blanket. Carly looked sadly on until she too vanished.

Some light leaked into Lise’s eyes. She shook herself. “Where did everybody go?”

“What’s happening?” Yusei was coming too as well.

The hill they sat on shook unexpectantly. An earthquake?

A beam of light erupted from the heart of the city, blasting it into pieces. Creating Satellite. Zero reverse. Roman changed from the father he could have been into the Dark Signer he had died as. He vanished, leaving nothing but purple dust.

Yusei turned to his parents, knowing what was happening. It was like they were dying all over again.

“We love you so much,” Haruna whispered, wrapping her son into a hug.

“I know,” Yusei responded, unable to stop his sobs as his father joined them.

“And we’re proud of you every day,” Hakase added.

They vanished.
“Mom…” Lise was crying too.

Mayoko brushed Lise’s hair away from her daughter’s face. “My little Lizzie. My strong baby girl. I love you.”

“I’m losing you…All over again…” Lise cried, hanging onto her mother’s hand as Mayoko slowly vanished.

“No…we are always with you…”

And then it was dark.

///

“NO!”

Akiza and Luna jumped.

Mako stood at the mucky puddles that were left of his prison. Crow and Jack were just coming to. Yusei and Lise had just slipped out of the tree’s grasp.

“You!” Mako thundered, pointing at Luna.

Akiza pushed Luna behind her.

“Keeping you alive was a mistake,” Mako growled. His eyes and hands began to glow white. He advanced towards the two girls. “I’ll kill you all and take the spare for myself ri-“

Mako was interrupted by a giant blast of red energy. He hit his throne, smashing it into oblivion, and kept going. That is until he crashed into the white marble seats of the dragon chamber.

Akiza and Luna turned to find Lise on her feet, hand outstretched. Crow and Jack were awake too. Lise was coated in slime, but that did nothing to diminish her fierce, and deadly expression. Everyone’s Signer marking snapped on, in sync with Lise’s markings. She looked even more frightening than before, a wild animal, a hurricane out for blood.

“Do you have any idea what you did to us?”

Chapter End Notes

(So, not done with the Spirit World yet! This chapter was a long time coming because it hurts me physically to write all this horrible stuff happening to my favorite characters. Literally, my friends. But I wanted these chapters to be important. I didn’t want these chapters to be something easy that the gang can just walk away from. Guess I should be careful not to bite off more than I can chew. But I’ll be ready when I’m ready for the conclusion of the Spirit World arc, and I hope you all are too. Prepared for some serious hurting that is. Everyone will be all right in the end, but damn does pain tend to linger. Stick with me please! I appreciate each and every one of your comments and continued support!)
“You bitch!” Mako spat. Literally. Saliva mixed with blood on the slick marble floors.

Everyone’s markings were glowing bright red. Akiza and Luna stood on either side of Lise. Jack and Crow joined them. All were a little bit ruffled, to say the least, but were every bit as pissed off as their adversary.

“Everyone ready?” Lise asked. Her eyes burned into the acid green eyes advancing towards her and her friends.

“Bring it on,” Akiza said. She cracked her knuckles.

“YAAAAHHH!” They yelled in unison. Together, everyone leapt into battle.

Jack’s white chi blinded Mako, keeping him off balance. Crow’s shadows gave him wings that shot sharp feathers into Mako’s back. Akiza summoned Rose Tentacles, the monster ensnaring Mako’s limbs before he could punch or kick Akiza’s friends. Lise flew around Mako, staying just out of his reach, and blasting energy beams at him.

Luna hung back, watching. As the bridge between Yliaster, the Spirit World, and Earth, she’d done all she could. At least as much as she thought herself capable. She needed to be able to bring her friends’ minds back to their bodies.

“Wait,” Luna frowned. Someone was missing from their battle, and it wasn’t her. Not this time. “What happened to Yusei?”

She climbed back through the rubble of the throne. The green, slimy remnants of the tree prison scattered everywhere. Slicking the floor and dirtying the dragon chamber, but less so than Mako’s throne. Luna found Yusei lying on one of the few clear patches of marble. The slime had long since slipped down his body, and he had also long since been freed from the prison. But he wasn’t moving.

“Oh no, Yusei? Yusei, come on, wake up!” Luna prodded him hesitantly with her fingertips.

When that didn’t work, she shook him as wildly as she dared. Nothing. Fearing the worst, Luna searched for a pulse just like Sasha had taught her. She found it easily. Thankfully. He wasn’t dead. But that didn’t explain why Yusei wasn’t waking up.

“Lise!”

Even over the cacophony of the battle, Lise heard Luna’s voice. The glow faded from her eyes. She took in Luna’s frightful eyes, her hand on Yusei’s chest to remind herself her friend was still alive.

“Go,” Akiza was beside Lise. She stood atop Black Rose Dragon’s back.

“You’re sure?”

Akiza nodded. She wiped some blood from her chin. “We can take him until you get back. We’ll
need all hands on deck to make him stay down.”

“Thanks. I’ll be right back,” Lise smiled at her friend, wishing there was a better way for her to express everything she loved about her friend.

Akiza returned the gesture, and returned to the task at hand. “Crow, Jack! Keep up the pressure! Keep him off balance!”

“Easier said than done,” Jack grumbled.

“What, you’ve got something better to do?” Crow tried to crack a joke. The time was bleak, so some humor was needed.

Jack shook his head, a small smile playing across his lips. “Just watch my back, mate.”

The three of them kept going. Mako was just biding his time, waiting for the perfect moment.

Lise barreled to a stop right next to Luna. “Show me.”

Luna obliged, allowing Lise to gauge Yusei’s heartbeat for herself.

“He’s okay, I think. But he won’t wake up. Lise he just… he won’t wake up.”

Lise frowned, her expression taught as a rope. Yusei had a pulse. He was fine, relatively. Lise made a point of ignoring his blood soaked arm for the time being, the torn remnants of his coat falling around the wound like frayed canyons. His mark glowed steadily, adding to the mystery.

Luna sat back. She figured Lise would want a little space.

“Yusei?” Lise touched his cheek. Her fingers traced his marking. She felt for his consciousness, his soul, with the empathy link. Lise kept probing, but the more she searched the more she came up empty. “Where are you?” she whispered.

Mako seized Jack by the throat. He’d made the mistake of staying close too long. He threw Jack at Akiza, bowling them both over. Crow swooped in, catching them in his wings. They were back on Mako as quickly as they could, but not before he’d snapped his fingers.

Luna and Lise, jarred by the sudden sound, looked away for a second. Yusei’s body flashed a white glow for a moment. He stirred slightly.

“Yusei?” Lise watched his face, his eyelashes shaking as he stirred. What was going on? Was he all right or was something actually wrong?

Luna breathed a sigh of relief. Yusei’s eyes opened. For a moment there, she thought he would never wake up. Her team couldn’t afford to lose anyone else.

Yusei sat up unnaturally. His stomach seemed to pull him into a sitting position. Like something monstrous had taken root there and was controlling him from the inside out.

“Yusei?” Lise watched his face, his eyelashes shaking as he stirred. What was going on? Was he all right or was something actually wrong?

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“Yusei?” Lise’s eyes tried to meet his. He wasn’t always the most expressive of people, but he hadn’t even rubbed his eyes when he awoke. Eyes that were strangely devoid of light.

“My servant!” Mako called out.

Yusei instantly straightened. His head snapped to attention, awaiting orders. His eyes fading to impassive whiteness.
“Yusei?” Lise repeated, waving her hand in front of his eyes. He didn’t move. Didn’t even blink.
“Are you in there?”

“Slaughter her!”

“Wha- UGH!” Yusei’s boot slammed right into Lise’s stomach. She rolled with the force of the blow, hand inspecting the damage. No doubt the bruise would be nasty. Not to mention the shock of having the wind knocked out of her.

Yusei retrieved his sword and shield. Sword spinning in his grip, he advanced. “Yes,” his lips split into a dark grin. “Master.”

“Master?!” Lise’s mouth dropped open. Eyes bulging.

“Uh oh,” Luna whimpered. Lise was staring at Yusei, the coldness he regarded her with completely wrong. Everyone was fighting for their lives. Divided in more ways than one.
And Luna had no clue what to do.

Yusei’s blade slashed downwards. Lise leapt out of the way, rolling back to her feet.

“Yusei, come on, snap out of it!” Lise shouted. “I don’t want to fight you!” She raised her fists anyway.

“Well, that’s too bad,” Yusei’s voice was cold, sinister, completely unlike him. “Because I wanna fight you, and if you don’t fight back, well, then my job will be even easier.”

“Like you could beat me in combat,” Lise muttered. It was true, she didn’t want to fight Yusei. But she would if she had to.

She sidestepped Yusei’s next attack, shoving him back with the force of her shoulder. He didn’t drop his sword, but he was thrown off balance. He righted himself easily. The malicious grin slipped into a murderous grimace.

“I’m going to enjoy killing you.”

“Killing me?” Lise continued to stay away from the wild swings of Yusei’s sword. “Since when do you want to kill anyone?”

“For the future Mako planned!” Yusei’s grin was back. “I see everything so clearly now! We have the power to change things! We were meant to die twice, but we survived against all odds!”

“That’s insane! Even if we do have that power, we can’t use it to destroy everything!”

“Not destroyed; reborn! Into a new world! Those without the power to invoke changes deserve to be crushed!”

Lise drew her knives, the three blades clashing loudly. She pushed back on Yusei’s sword, staring him right in the face. In the white emptiness of his eyes.

“Stop it!” she growled at him. “That’s bullshit! You sound like Goodwin!”

Yusei blinked. The pressure from his sword lessened for half a second. Then Yusei was kicking Lise away again.

“Goodwin was a mistake. He deviated from my Master’s plan for his own selfish reasons! The
Emperors and I will not allow that to happen again! We are the only ones capable of creating the New World!"

Everything inside Lise felt like it was being torn apart. Her mouth tasted like ash. This person who had always advocated that people were never worthless, that humanity was worthwhile, was now calling for their unmerciful annihilation. Every metallic clash of her knives on his sword only cut deeper into her hurt heart.

“Yusei, please, this isn’t like you! Where are you? This isn’t the… What happened to the person I love?” Tears had sprung to her eyes, but she rubbed them away.

Yusei seemed to be rolling his eyes. It was difficult to tell since both eyes were empty, white voids. “I told you! I learned the truth! And if you won’t join me, I’ll have to end you!”

“No!” Lise’s knives clanged against Yusei’s sword again. She adjusted, passing Yusei’s sword harmlessly before her. She kicked his hand on the attempt to bring the sword back to slice her in two. Yusei’s sword clattered to the ground.

Lise dropped her knives and claped Yusei’s cheeks. “I won’t let you,” she whispered. Before Yusei could stop her, Lise was kissing him.

She pulled back quickly. They had no time for passion now. Yusei’s unnatural, white, empty eyes stared back at Lise. He grinned toothily. “Nice try. My turn now.”

Yusei’s fist collided with Lise’s nose. She reeled back, and Yusei knocked Lise off her feet.

Yusei didn’t give Lise time to recover. He lowered himself over her, his body looming and intimidating for the first time. Lise panicked, trying to push him away. Yusei caught her wrists in one hand, pulling Lise’s arms out of his way.

Lise froze. Mind blank. In nearly twelve years she had never been so afraid of Yusei.

Yusei’s knee came down heavily on Lise’s inner thigh. She cried out from the pain. This was something she’d demonstrated a long time ago. Meant to inflict pain. Not just to pin an opponent.

Yusei’s free hand closed around Lise’s throat. “If you wanted a kiss, just ask,” his voice as crushingly cruel as his lips on Lise’s.

Tears fell openly down Lise’s cheeks. She kept her eyes squeezed shut. She didn’t want to see the soulless eyes that didn’t belong to him.

She needed air, but Yusei’s fingers were strong and unyielding against her throat. She could feel the bruises forming on not just her throat, but her wrists and inner thigh. Struggling had just made it worse.

Yusei’s tongue in her mouth wasn’t helping either. It snaked around everywhere it could reach, greedily coasting over her teeth and tongue. Possessive. Making sure she knew who was in control. Mako’s control he’d somehow gained over Yusei.

It was wrong. All wrong. This wasn’t Yusei. And that hurt more than anything this empty body could do to her.

But if his body was technically ‘empty’ couldn’t she put the piece of his soul she carried back? Remind Yusei who he really was? If there was anything left of him in there.
Lise raised her left leg. The only limb Yusei hadn’t immobilized. Yusei’s body might not have currently been his own, but he was still human. And male.

*Yusei, if you can hear me, I’m sorry!*

Lise bent her leg as close to her chest as she could get it, and bit down slightly on Yusei’s tongue. He jerked back slightly from the sharp pain. Which left Lise just enough room to slam her bony knee into Yusei’s crotch.

Yusei pulled back entirely, a choked gasp making its way out of his mouth. Body collapsing back, off balance.

Lise used both feet to kick him away. She rolled backwards into a crouch to catch her breath, and wipe her mouth with the back of her hand.

“Shit,” Yusei swore. White light crackled at the edge of his eyes. He stood up gingerly, propping himself up with his retrieved sword. “You bitch!”

“Quit toying with her and kill her already!” Mako screamed.

“Hey, eyes on the prize, ugly!” Crow growled. He’d pulled out one of the sticks strapped to his back, smacking Mako upside the face with it.

“Nice!” Akiza grinned.

Lise stood up, rubbing at her sore wrists. She still didn’t want to fight Yusei. Her heart was still in thousands of pieces. But there wasn’t time to pick them up. There was one more thing she could try, but she’d need to be close for a long time. Judging by the animalistic way Yusei kept slashing his sword, that would be incredibly difficult.

“I can’t stand you!” Yusei roared, sword flying. “Hold still so I can finally kill you!”

“What?” Lise dodged the blade again. This was new. How had she made him so mad? Aside from kicking him in the crotch. “You can’t stand me?”

“Are you kidding me?” Yusei growled through clenched teeth. “You’re a selfish liar! You don’t care about anyone but yourself, and I’m sick of hearing your whining! We get it; your mommy is dead! Boo hoo!”

“Shut up!” Lise cried. “What the hell is wrong with you?!!”

“Oh, did I hit a nerve?” Yusei’s creepy smile returned. More white electricity sparked off his eyes.

Lise flipped backwards, grabbing her knives to block Yusei’s next blow. Her inside were roiling; anger and confusion at his words and actions. So unlike himself. The person she’d known for almost twelve years.

“You can’t even win a tournament! You lost at the Budokai, and I beat you at the Fortune Cup! And I’ll beat you right here and now too!”

Lise thought it best to keep her mouth shut. He couldn’t beat her. He knew that. He was just trying to bait her.

“Hope I didn’t hurt your feelings!” Yusei’s smirk grew as he pushed. “You’ve always been such a hothead. I’ve always hated talking to you. It’s like walking on eggshells. Honestly, is there
anything that doesn’t bother you?"

Don’t fall for it. Don’t react.

“Don’t forget how much shit Goodwin put you through,” Yusei’s onslaught, like his words, wasn’t stopping. “But you just took it because otherwise you wouldn’t matter to anyone! You wanted to be important, and being the Crimson Dragon’s Vessel made you important! You know without it you’d just be a worthless little girl!”

“Yusei…”

He had never believed anyone was worthless. All people have value, and Yusei believed that with everything he had. So how could he… Did he really think that way about her? Truthfully? Did he stay with her out of pity?

“And that’s the only reason why I decided to be with you. Who better to shield myself with than a powerful dragon?”

“Shield yourself? What?” Lise blurted, unable to stop herself.

“But you took forever to gain your powers, much less use them! I mean, my God, so much hand holding!”

Yusei managed to knock Lise’s right hand knife out of her grip. She had to use both hands on her remaining knife to guard herself. Tears blurred her vision, but she let them fall.

“You were born to create misery for everyone around you, and killing you will finally free me! Free all of us! I hated you all this time! Understand?! I never loved you! I could never love someone so worthless!”

“Stop it!” Lise sobbed. She pushed back on her blade, knocking Yusei backwards for the first time since his tirade began. “STOP!”

Yusei held his blade tightly in his hands. He was already breathing hard. Granted, he was fatigued and bloody. But even exhausted, Lise could still defeat him. If she wanted to. She just needed one more push.

Lise had never been a Dark Signer, but she imagined this was what it had been like. Darkness swirling inside her. No other options. Misery at its finest. Vision blurry from tears.

Lise wiped her filthy face, smearing the tears across her cheek. Vision clear for a moment, she was able to see tears streaking Yusei’s equally filthy face. He was crying too?! He was still in there!

“Yusei?”

All at once, it dawned on her. Yusei was just throwing back everything her anxiety had already told her. No, not Yusei, his body Mako had possessed somehow. He’d seen what insecurities Lise and Yusei had shared with each other. Now that was low.

Lise picked up her knife. She took a deep breath and broke into a smile.

“What’re you smiling about?” Yusei demanded. His hands shook on the sword’s handle.

“You never loved me?” Lise forced herself to laugh. “Oh, really? Is that why you like to hold my hand?”
“What?” Yusei frowned. He came forward too, swinging his sword.

Lise blocked him and kept coming. “Is that why we spent time together? Working in the same space?”

“Leave me alone!” Yusei twirled his blade like a fan to keep Lise at bay.

“Is that why you built me a duel runner for my birthday?”

“Get away!”

Lise smirked a little bit. “Is that why you like being the little spoon?”

“Stop!”

“Is that why you didn’t tell anyone else about speaking with your father?”

“I said stop!”

“Is that why you kissed me? Over and over again?” Lise’s voice had become a whisper. She’d used one knife to push Yusei’s sword out of her way. He’d become unable to stop her somehow. “To torture yourself?”

Lise’s light blue eyes stared into the whiteness hiding Yusei’s real eyes. Refusing to look away. “This is not who you are.”

“Yes it is.” The white eyes seemed to be struggling just as their knife and sword were.

“No, it’s not,” Lise dropped her knife. “You gave me a piece of your soul because you loved and trusted me. And did the same for you for the same reasons.

You are kind, and strong, and smart, and brave. You believe in people even if they don’t deserve it, and you work hard for a future you can be proud of.”

Lise’s pressed her hand to Yusei’s chest. She could feel wisps of blue, his soul, reaching out for her. Her palm glowed the same indigo blue as the color of Yusei’s soul. The piece he had given her.

“And I love you.”

Waves of blue glow burst forth across Yusei’s body. Like the ripples in a pond. The whiteness in his eyes faded.

Yusei dropped his sword. His eyes squeezed shut, hands trying to claw Lise’s palm away from him. But she was stubborn, and the blueness of his real soul was stronger than the white nothingness of Mako’s control. He opened his eyes, the last remnants of the horrible whiteness clawing for purchase on his soul.

Yusei’s eyes snapped shut and he collapsed. Lise caught him, holding Yusei in her arms as she lowered them to their knees.

“Yusei? Yusei?” Lise’s arms were shaking. The technique was a long shot. The piece of Yusei’s soul had curled back up near her heart, warmed by the orange and red parts of her own soul and the Crimson Dragon’s. But Yusei wasn’t waking up again. “Yusei?”

His cheek was squished against Lise’s shoulder. A faint blue glow enveloped his body that was
quickly fading.

But he felt right. Weightless even. His real soul had been pushed down, beaten into a tiny pinprick, and caged away. He’d just needed to be reminded, to be filled with the correct soul. The soul Lise had said she loved.

“Lise?” Yusei’s voice was hoarse, eyelids heavy. But he had to see her. Had to know it was her warmth that held him.

“Yusei!” Lise sobbed his name. New tears streamed down her face as she kissed every available surface of his face. It didn’t matter that they were both bloody and gross. Lise kissed his cheek, his eyebrow, jawline, nose, his marking, and his eyelids. “You’re you! Have I ever told you how beautiful your eyes are?”

“No,” Yusei was crying too. He wove his fingers into Lise’s soft hair. She looked like hell; blood and bruises everywhere. But this time, it was his fault. He had done those things to her. The bruises on her throat and wrists, forcing her into such a horrible position. “Lise, I’m so sorry! I’m sorry! This is my fault! I saw everything, but I couldn’t stop it! I’m sorry… I hurt you… I hurt you…”

“That wasn’t you,” Lise said softly, shaking her head. Her hands felt warm on Yusei’s back, in his hair. “It wasn’t you.”

“Yusei?” Luna’s quiet voice broke in softly. She stood an arm’s length away. Just in case.

Lise and Yusei met her gaze. Yusei lifted one of his hands, the other around Lise for support.

“It’s me, Luna, I promise.”

“You’re okay,” Luna joined them in both hugging and crying. “That was so scary.”

“I’m sorry,” Yusei whispered. “I’m sorry.”

Luna stood up, wiping her eyes. She pointed at the others still battling Mako. “They need help.”

“Right,” Lise nodded. “Can you stand?”

“Yeah,” Yusei grimaced darkly, but he was able to get to his feet with Lise and Luna’s help.

“I’m going back over there. You’re welcome to stay with Luna. Catch your breath.”

Yusei shook his head. He desperately wanted time to recover, to process, but they didn’t have time. “No, if you’re going, then so am I.”

“All right then, stay close,” Lise said.

Luna frowned. “You’re not gonna argue with him?”

“Not this time. We need all the help we can get.”

“Fair enough.”

Yusei smiled weakly. “Besides, you can’t get rid of me that easily.”

Lise nodded, rolling her eyes a little. “Luna, it’s your choice how you want to fight. We’re going back in there to help.” She and Yusei still looked like hell, even more so after their fight, but the determination in their eyes was comforting.
“I’ll stay back and do what I can,” Luna decided. She hugged herself for warmth. Despite the heat of the battle, she was freezing with dread.

“Stay safe,” Yusei told her.

Lise took a deep breath, summoning the glow of her markings. She raised her hands, her energy ripping through the ground to raise two giant chunks of marble suspended in energy orbs. Lise pushed her hands forward, throwing the rocks straight at Mako.

The rocks plowed straight into Mako. Crow, Akiza, and Jack had, smartly, moved out of the way. Mako’s white robes were stained with dirt, dust, slime, and blood, but he was still standing. He clenched his bloody fists, glaring at Lise and Yusei. “Impossible!”

“Yo, Mako!” Lise glared back, her irises a frightening blood red. “Next time you throw me in a hole, make sure I stay there!”

Beside her, Yusei looked like a corpse. He was pale, bruised, bloody, clothes in tatters. He held his injured arm gingerly, but his face was anything but fearful. He was ready to fight Mako to the death if he had to. “My body is not your puppet, asshole.”

“You children cannot defeat me,” Mako spat back. He didn’t care they hadn’t killed each other. They would be defeated by him one way or another. “It doesn’t matter you didn’t kill each other. I’ll kill all of you and take the spare to Earth! I’ll have my powers and the power of a Signer! The future of the world, of balance itself, will be mine!”

“What you want isn’t balance, it’s death of thousands of people! That future has nothing for you,” Yusei said solemnly. He’d seen it firsthand under Mako’s control. He knew. And the Signers had to do everything they could to stop him.

“So be it.”

Crow, Akiza and Jack reengaged. They’d received a second wind from their friends rejoining the battle. They too sported bloody wounds, bruises, and tattered clothes. But they couldn’t stop, or Mako would start picking them off.

“Come on,” Lise extended her hand.

Yusei smiled at her. Her offer was just like all those times he’d pulled her aboard his duel runner. And sure, they looked terrible, but if they were about to die, at least they were together.

“I love you,” Yusei whispered, taking her hand, and letting Lise pull him into her arms.

Lise’s cheeks flushed pink. “I love you too.”

She took off, bodies enveloped in a red glow. Lise held Yusei by his waist, her free arm blasting energy beams at Mako. Yusei was exhausted, but he did what he could to share energy, fueling the cycle between them, strengthening each other.

For a little bit, it looked like they were winning. Mako was getting batted around like a ping pong ball. Crow’s feathers hit him like arrows, Jack chi punched him, Akiza’s dragon blew fire at him, and Lise energy blasted him. But it wasn’t enough.

The people of Yliaster weren’t Gods, but they were the closest anyone could get.

Mako turned the tide by ripping Akiza off of Black Rose Dragon, throwing the monster up at Lise
and Yusei. Crow flew over, catching Akiza in midair. At the last second Lise saw Black Rose coming, and immediately dropped Yusei.

“No!” Yusei reached up to her, but there was nothing he could do. Lise had made a decision.

Black Rose slammed into Lise, both of them smashing through the roof of the castle. Light from Yliaster fell through the darkened dragon chamber from the massive hole Lise and the dragon had left behind.

Jack caught Yusei a second before his friend hit the ground. “All right there, mate?”

“Thanks,” Yusei said.

Black Rose Dragon had dissolved. She merely needed Akiza to summon her again. But Lise was nowhere to be seen.

“How do we beat this guy?” Jack breathed. He suddenly looked older, as if he’d aged thirty years the past few hours. This was one battle he didn’t see the end of for once.

“I don’t know,” Yusei admitted. His stomach twisted into a knot. “At this point, we’re just fighting to stay alive.”

“How dare you!” Mako screeched. It didn’t matter how many times he knocked everyone down. They still got back up again. “How dare you all defy me! Deny my path to the future! I will annihilate you all! There will be no escape from me anywhere! My agents on Earth will end you even if I don’t!

I am inevitable! I am the solution! I am-“

Mako was cut off by Lise bursting back into the scene.

She’d crashed through the castle with Black Rose Dragon. Lise had rolled in midair, sideways along the curve of one of the castle turrets still intact. Not for long. An energy disc pulled itself, in sync with Lise’s body, through the castle turret. Sliced clean off, the top of the turret would have fallen, but Lise encircled it in a bubble of energy.

The same bubble Lise was throwing directly at Mako. “Eat this, asshole!”

“Hit the deck!” Crow shouted.

Everyone dove out of the way, save Mako. The entire force of Lise’s wrath and a building, hurtled at full speed directly on target. Mako’s body disappeared into the rubble.

Lise landed near her friends. They stared at the pile of rubble, hoping their battle was over.

“Did you just drop a building on him? A building?” Akiza turned to her friend, eyes wide.

“Half a building.”


“That’s…ENOUGH!”

Mako burst forth from the rubble. It was a good thing looks couldn’t kill. Mako’s acid green eyes looked like they were trying to incinerate everyone.
“It’s time for me to take the spare, and get rid of the rest of you!”

“The spare?” Akiza raised an eyebrow. “What the hell is the spare?”

“The Signer I can control,” Mako sneered at them. “The one I can possess, who does not fight me because they cannot. I tried to see if I could control this one,” he gestured off handedly at Yusei, rolling his eyes. “But he’s too deep in the Vessel’s thrall.”

“The fuck does that mean?” Lise demanded, her cheeks warm.

“It means I cannot possess someone with multiple souls rolling around inside them! And I certainly don’t want to be a teenager,” Mako grinned maliciously. “No, I want the youngest of you.”

Luna let out a whimper from her hiding place. She’d hunkered down in the rubble of the throne to watch, and help if she was needed. But it wasn’t her friends that ended up needing her. Mako’s plans for her were much, much worse. And all she’d wanted was to be useful for her friends.

“You can’t have her!” Akiza glowered at Mako. She was going to protect Luna with her life.

“You do not have a choice,” Mako snapped his fingers.

The giant doors opened again. White robed people poured in like milk flowing from a carton to a glass. Mako’s supporters. They leveled weapons at the Signers.

“Well, this just went from bad to worse,” Crow muttered.

“They’ll kill us before we can get to Luna and leave,” Lise said flatly.

“Then we make our stand here.”

“No, you all need to leave to protect Earth!”

“Huh?” The Signers looked around. None of them had spoken.

The big doors were opening again. People clad in red robes were pouring in, surrounding the white robed people. Mitka seemed to be leading them.

She smiled at the Signers. “You were right. It was time for us to act. Mako will be punished for his actions. We will not allow him or his supporters here to do any further damage.”

“You cannot stop me!” Mako shoved a few red robed people out of his way. He made a beeline for Luna.

And the battle began anew. The people in white attempted to attack the Signers, but were continually thwarted by the efforts of the red robed people protecting them.

“Stop him!” Lise shouted, pointing at Mako.

Luna was frozen. Mako wasn’t stopping, and she couldn’t do anything. What did he want with her? What was he going to do with her?

Crow attempted to clip Mako with his stick. Mako ducked, jabbing Crow quickly a few times, and kicking him back.

Mako tripped over Akiza’s Rose Fairy. He smacked both the fairy and Akiza out of his way.
He dodged Jack’s assault, picking him up by the collar and tossing him into Yusei. Both boys rolled to a stop back by Akiza and Crow.

Lise shundoed right in front of Mako. She hit him with chi sparking in her right hand, and the power of the Crimson Dragon in her left hand. The explosive effect stopped Mako.

For one second.

His fist uppercut into Lise’s gut with a cracking sound. She doubled over, wind knocked out of her. One of her ribs was broken. Mako flung her back at her friends.

His sinister grin grew at the mortification on Luna’s face. She clung to a piece of rubble. Every part of Luna was shaking against her will. She had to do something, but there was nothing. Mitka couldn’t help her. Her followers couldn’t help her. Not even her friends or her brother. Tears slid down Luna’s cheeks. Whatever was in store for her, it was probably worse than death.

Mako reached down and plucked Luna into the air by her shirt. He held her up in the air. A tiny flea to his spider. White light started to draw them together. Luna struggled, crying big, fat tears, but it was no use. She could feel her soul being pushed down.

“No, Luna!”

“We’ve gotta do something! He’s going to control her!”

“Worse, control her, go back to Earth, and leave us stranded here.”

“With no one to stop him on Earth.”

“Wait,” Akiza looked into the tired, dirty faces of her friends. “We have power together! Let’s give Luna our power so she can save herself!”

“That could work!” Yusei gasped. He gently clasped Lise’s hand. He helped her get up gingerly.

“I don’t know if I have that in me,” Lise admitted. Her breathing came in short, rapid gasps. Her broken rib throbbed.

“We’ll give you our strength,” Jack said. His hand fell on Lise’s shoulder.

Lise took a deep breath. She straightened up to the best of her ability. “Hit me with everything you have, and don’t let go.” She faced Luna and Mako, hands waiting for her friends.

Luna couldn’t stop crying. She’d failed. More than failed. She’d made everything worse. She never should have brought her friends to the Spirit World. They’d been hurt more than they’d found anything useful. This was worse than she could’ve ever imagined. She was so useless. Useless. And she’d wanted to help.

Mako laughed at her misery. “I can’t wait to be a God on Earth. I will be worshipped like I deserve!”

Akiza grabbed Lise’s hand. She squeezed hard, a comfort to both of them. Yusei held her other hand. Crow and Jack’s hands held her up on her back. Lise could feel all of them. Their bodies, their souls, their wills. She closed her eyes. The others did too.

All their Signer markings blinked on, blinding red light flashing. The red glow expanded, bubbling up over their entire bodies. All five of them became red energy, beings of light swirling with all the
power they could muster.

Lise opened her eyes when she felt ready to burst. “LUNA!”

Luna’s true soul was practically gone. The light in her eyes was dying. But she still had enough of herself left to find her friends in the midst of the giant battle.

“LUNA! Take it!” Lise cried.

A beam of red light burst forth from Lise’s chest. It hit Luna like a bolt of lightning.

Luna gasped, suddenly full of light and life again. She started crying again, so full of her friends’ spirits. Their love for her.

Luna could feel Crow’s sense of freedom. The ability to fly to freedom for himself and for others.

She could feel Jack’s stubbornness. The refusal to be anything but himself.

Akiza’s desire to change, to be better than she once was, swept through Luna like an autumn breeze.

She hung on to Lise’s indomitable spirit. Her tenacity to make it through anything.

Yusei’s belief in others, that they mattered washed over her like a gentle wave.

Even more so was their undying love and kindness. All five of them had different versions, but all of them loved and cherished Luna. She could feel that more than anything else they gave her.

Luna found the strength to glare at Mako.

“What is this?” He’d been shut out somehow, and he did not like it.

“You want power? Then take it!” Luna yelled. She slapped her palm onto Mako’s chest.

“No!”

Luna pumped everything her friends had given her into the despicable man that held her.

His shock turned to glee, eye teeth glinting in the light. “Yes!” Red light flowed into Mako’s veins, glowing in the light of Yliaster. “YES!” He dropped Luna once she was empty.

The others collapsed. That was their last hope. The hail Mary. There was nothing left.

Mako threw his head back, laughing sinisterly. Energy orbs formed in his palms at his will. He held them threateningly out at Luna. “Stupid girl, now I have all the power in the universe!”

“Yes,” Luna smiled a little too. She felt like she was going to pass out at any moment, but she had won. She knew she had. “But we can handle all that power because we don’t have all of it.”

A perfect red circle suddenly glowed on Mako’s chest. “What?! No!” He clawed repeatedly at his chest, but he couldn’t stop the glow from spreading. “NO!”

Mako’s entire body glowed blindingly red in no time. And then exploded.

Wind blasted out from the epicenter of the explosion. Rubble from the many battles in the dragon chamber was flung in all directions. Everyone, Signer and not alike had to guard their faces from
the light and dangerous debris.

Just as quickly, the force of the explosion died down. Mako was nothing but red ash. His desire for power had undone him. Luna’s supposed inability to oppose him had defeated him.

“Luna?” Akiza got to her feet. Her head swiveled back and forth frantically.

“Where is she?” Lise whispered.

“Luna?”

“Luna!”

Mitka and her followers joined in. The entire castle was filled with calls for the young girl. She seemed to have up and vanished. She had been the closest to the blast. The Signers refused to believe Luna had been lost. Not after she’d saved them all.

Red light shined again. The Signers markings blazed back to life.

A ball of red light opened. Right where Luna had vanished.

She spread her arms like wings. Her own power keeping her aloft. Gentle winds that affected Luna alone, tousled her hair and clothes. She’d never even so much as thrown a punch, but had won the fight. Luna smiled, and stepped daintily back to the ground.

Pink light matching Luna’s soul spiraled out from where her shoes had touched the marble floors. The pink light surged forth. It washed over everyone and everything. It’s soft feeling restoring everyone to a sense of peace. A point of love and kindness.

Luna’s aura swept out past the confines of Yliaster’s borders. A ripple effect spread across the Spirit World. The ashen death Mako had been spreading fell away. The death and destruction he’d wrought on the lands was halted. The lands, trees, leaves and more restored to their former splendor. Luna could even feel Ancient Fairy Dragon’s pride in her.

“Thank you,” Luna continued to glow pink as she shook Mitka’s hand. “For everything you’ve done.”

“And thank you,” the older woman smiled warmly down at the young girl. “For restoring life and love to our world. Your friends will need each other, and you, to give them strength.”

“This isn’t the end?” Luna frowned slightly.

Mitka shook her head. “Your battle today might be over, but Mako still has followers on Earth you must defeat. The new future of Yliaster has begun. We will strive from now on to be better than we were. We must prevent this horribleness from ever happening again.”

“Good luck,” both girls said.

“Good bye, Luna,” Mitka waved. She took a deep breath, watching the girl go to her friends. She turned to what was left of her red-robed followers. Believers in the Crimson Dragon she had gathered that believed in a better future. “Well team, let’s get started.”

“Guys,” Luna knelt down with them. She held out her hands. “Let’s go home.”

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“Luna!” Leo tackled his sister into a big, warm hug. He was already crying.

Luna, Jack, Akiza, Lise, Yusei, and Crow were waking up. They were slightly less damaged back in the real world, but their eyes betrayed the truth of the horrors they had experienced.

“What the hell happened in there?” Bruno demanded. He looked, one by one, to each of them.

“I think…” Lise doubled over, clutching at her sternum. “We need to go to the hospital.”

Carly’s phone was already in her hand. Her expression unusually solemn. “I’ll make the call.”

Chapter End Notes

(God guys, this chapter straight up killed me. I legit cried thinking of the worst possible things Yusei could say to hurt me. This chapter hurt in SO many ways. It’s going to keep hurting for some time, but the Spirit World arc is closed! I had fun coming up with my version. I always wanted to add more significance to field spells because I always thought they were cool. Cool yet underutilized in the show. But I hope you liked my interpretations of the Spirit World and Yliaster! Stay with me please, and we’ll make it through this along with the characters! Thank you for all your support!)
Crow yawned and stretched as much as he could in the hospital bed and gown. His right arm was still in a sling, but at least he could still get up and walk.

He got up and pushed the curtains open. Crow’s room wasn’t very high, but the sunlight felt good on his skin.

The 5Ds gang had been rushed to the hospital yesterday. Yusei had lost a lot of blood. He’d been given an IV and fluids immediately. Jack and Akiza were lucky to only have bruises and scrapes. Still, it was unsettling to see the giant purple bruise on Jack’s cheekbone. His jaw still ached, or so he said. Lise’s rib was cracked. Her doctor told her she was lucky it wasn’t cracked clean through. Even so, she had trouble breathing and talking. Luna was the only one who was just fine.

Crow stared down at his arm. One more week to go of wearing the cast and sling. He knew it was stupid, but he wanted it off now. He was so close anyway. He wanted to fight in the tournament for the kids. Especially after that world of…nothingness he’d walked through in the Spirit World. Black, broken nothing. Nightmares would plague him longer than just last night. He knew that much.

He wanted out of that hospital. Aside from his arm, he was fine.

“So, this is Crow’s room. I thought he would be easier to start with than…” Akiza’s voice dropped off. She held the door open for someone else.

“Akiza, please,” Crow waved her off with his good arm. “No more doctors. I’m fine.”

“That arm doesn’t look fine.”

No way.

Akiza wasn’t with a doctor. She was with-

-“Fish?” Crow gasped. He sat back down on his bed to process.

Fish was here. For real. She wasn’t wearing her hat, but it was her.

She wore a blue sweater dress that stopped below her knee. Her blue sneakers squeaked on the linoleum floor. Her brown hair fell loosely from her shoulders. Her warm, brown eyes peered out from behind purple glasses. Tiny orange fish decorated the sides of her glasses, and matching stud earrings flashed in her ears.

“Hi Crow,” Fish offered a thin smile. “Good to see you.”

“Good to see you too,” Crow blurted. His grey eyes were still wide as they could be. He wasn’t sure what else to say. He hadn’t known what to say or even text for months. “Um…you look nice.”

“Thanks. My Grandma helped me pick out the dress.”

“It suits you.”

Akiza settled herself into one of the two chairs. She made a bit more noise than necessary, clearing her throat. “Maybe we should start talking about why Fish is here?”
Crow swallowed. “Oh, uh, sure…”

Akiza steepled her fingers together. “Fish agreed to come here today to heal you, and one other person.”

“Who? Wait, Fish can still use her Oracle powers?”

“Only up to three times,” Fish said. She sat in the other chair. “I’ve already used it once, so there are two other lucky people I can use it on.”

“Me?” Crow could scarcely believe his ears. “Why didn’t we think of this sooner?”

Akiza lifted a shoulder, making her wince. Her throat was still decorated with bruises. “It wasn’t as urgent. We need three people for the WRGP match tomorrow, and we’ve got to make sure all three of our chosen riders are at full physical strength.”

“Right, the WRGP,” Fish rolled her eyes. She leaned back in her chair, crossing her legs. “So, whataya say?”

“What about Jack?” Crow asked, careful not to look at Fish.

“He said he…wanted to take a break,” Akiza spoke delicately. “I think his ego has been hurt a little. He and Carly are spending time together while he recuperates.”

“So that leaves…”

“Me, you, and Lise or Yusei. Assuming you want Fish to heal you.”

“I do,” Crow touched the sling of his bad arm. “But it just seems too easy. Like a cheat code.”

“You’re in a tight spot,” Fish argued. “I don’t care for the tournament, but it’s important to you guys. The Oracle believes it’s important. She sent me a message.”

“That’s not the only reason you agreed to this, I hope,” Akiza said quickly.

Fish shrugged, not meeting anyone’s eyes.

Crow took a deep breath. “Humor me, Fish, what did you use your healing power for the first time?”

Fish broke into a smile. It was her first real smile since she’d entered the room. “My Grandpa. He had cancer.”

“I didn’t know you could do that!” Akiza’s jaw dropped.

“Neither did I,” Fish said. “It wasn’t looking good for him, and you guys know my parents are… challenging. Knocked me out for a week afterwards. Cancer is a bitch in more ways than one.”

Crow chuckled a little at that. Akiza didn’t.

Fish noticed and dropped her head. “My grandparents are all I have… I couldn’t…they’re…”

Crow shook his head. “You don’t have to justify yourself to us. We…all of us would have done the same thing in your position.”

Fish smiled again at him. Her eyes brimmed with tears that she removed her glasses to wipe away.
“Thanks.”

“I’m sorry,” Akiza said once Fish had safely hidden behind her glasses again. “I wasn’t judging you…I… I wish we could have done something like this for Mayoko.”

“Me too,” Fish sighed heavily. “But this is something I can do now.” She took her glasses off and stuffed them into her dress pocket. She stood, cracking her knuckles. “Let’s get this party started, shall we?”

Crow smiled, holding his sling at the ready. “Go for it.”

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*The doc says you’ve exacerbated your rib’s condition. She also noticed your bloody knuckles.*

Yusei drew a card. Queen. He discarded her and flipped over a six.

*I’m not gonna lie around doing nothing. I’ll explode.*

Lise’s turn. She drew a four. She replaced her Jack with the four.

*I’d think you’d want to rest. Your ribs are painful.*

_They are, but so is your arm._

Yusei and Lise had been talking telepathically like this in circles for over an hour. Both could feel the other’s pain through the empathy link. Neither of them could fool the other. They thought playing a calm card game, Golf, would help with the back and forth.

Yusei rolled his eyes. _The ribs are worse than my arm._

*I’m not the one with a portable IV._ Lise fired back.

Even though Lise had insisted on wearing a t shirt and shorts, she was still heavily bandaged under her shirt. She’d stared at her shoelaces that morning. The realization that she couldn’t bend over and tie them herself had been so… She’d wanted to scream and throw her shoes out the window. To alleviate the mixture of helplessness, pain, frustration, and anger churning within her. It took everything in her power not to cry when Yusei had just bent down and tied them for her.

His arm had hurt putting on his own clothes. Tying Lise’s shoes had hurt too, but it wasn’t like she could do it herself. At least they were in solidarity about refusing to wear the hospital gowns. Yusei thought they made him look sicker than he actually was. He’d regained color within the last 24 hours. The IV, fluids, and food had helped. He’d kept his left arm in the provided sling as often as he could. He hadn’t realized how often he used both arms until he needed it so often. According to the doctor, all of them, Crow, Lise, and himself, would be released by the end of the day.

Yusei sighed. _Lise. It hurts you to eat, talk, and even breathe. I noticed you’ve only been talking to me in our heads._

Lise’s features contorted into a pouted sneer. She flipped over her last card, discarding a nine for a joker.

_Negative two. I win._

“Baby,” Yusei said.
Lise stuck her tongue out at him. And, despite the biting, sharp pain, she raised her hand to give him the finger for good measure.

“I love you too,” Yusei smirked, knowing he’d just made her angrier. He gathered the deck gingerly, shuffling with an arm and a half. “Go again?”

Fine.

Lise reached for the deck to deal the cards as Yusei was setting them back down. Their pinkies brushed for a split second, but it was enough. Yusei retracted his hand so quickly his chair rocked back with the momentum. It was like he’d touched an iceberg or a red hot frying pan.

Lise hesitated for a split second. This was new. Was she imagining it? Was Yusei avoiding touching her? His face remained impassive, eyes on the cards in Lise’s hands, waiting for her to deal them out.

They’d talk about it later, Lise decided, as she slowly dealt the cards. There was too much going on. Too much pain between everyone on the team. The Spirit World had broken them.

KNH KNH

A knock resounded on the door.

“Come on in,” Yusei said.

Lise put the deck down. “Hi Akiza,” she rasped out. Speaking was enough for her rib to send stabbing pains throughout her torso. She thought it best not to try to wave.

“Hi,” Akiza’s eyes shifted from the door to her friends. Her hands twisted in the folds of her skirt, like she was attempting to strangle them. “I uh… I brought someone with me.”

“Well…” Yusei shared a look with Lise. Akiza was acting strange. “They can come in too.”

“All right, okay, but it’s not… I don’t think it’ll be someone you’ll be happy to see. There’s no real good way to do this, so I’ll just… Come in!” Akiza’s hands clenched tightly on her skirts, but that didn’t stop them from shaking.

“Okay, here goes nothing,” a woman’s voice responded.

And Fish walked into the room.

Lise immediately leapt up, pointing wildly, and staring at Akiza. Who refused to meet her friend’s eyes. Her rib still hurt like hell, but Lise started pacing, talking a mile a minute in her head.

Lise. Yusei’s voice was forcibly calm in Lise’s head. Please. Getting angry isn’t helping.

I know that! But she could have at least said it was Fish! We haven’t seen each other in months! I needed a warning!

Would you have seen her if Akiza told you?

Yes! Maybe? I don’t know!

This isn’t Akiza’s fault. She just wants to help!

I know! I’m not blaming her! I’m not ready for this!
I don’t think anyone could have been ready for this… Do you still hate her?

Lise took a deep, shaky breath. It rattled her rib, bringing her back down to reality for a moment. She rested her hands on the table, knuckles white.

No… I don’t… I’m just not ready.

That’s why Akiza hasn’t left yet.

“I’m sorry,” Fish’s voice broke in. “But are you two having a psychic conversation?” She crossed her arms. “Because I can’t decide if that’s awesome or incredibly rude.”

“Well, this was kind of a surprise,” Yusei said tentatively.

Fish let out a long breath, like a deflated balloon. “It has been a while.”

“So? Uh… what have you been up to?”

Fish shrugged. “Went back to school. Staying with my grandparents. I’m happy for the most part.”

“That’s good,” Lise rasped. It hurt to say it, in more ways than one. Not because she didn’t want Fish to be happy. Truthfully she did. It was just… lonely thinking about the friendship they once shared, and continuing without it.

“Thanks,” Fish’s smile was thin again. Her fingers played with a stray thread on her dress. “Shall we get on with it?”

“Yes,” Akiza popped back into the conversation. “I asked Fish here because of the WRGP match tomorrow. We need three at capacity riders. Jack declined, Crow’s all patched up, I’m in. That just leaves one of you.”

Yusei’s eyes widened. He stiffened in his chair. “You want us to choose between us. Don’t you?”

Lise’s head swiveled between Fish and her two friends. Someone had to say he was wrong. Akiza was suddenly struck with fascination in the ceiling. Fish, on the other hand, settled herself in one of the free chairs. She spread her arms in a sort of get-on-with-it gesture.

It should be you. Yusei immediately said. His hand tightened over his knee instead of taking Lise’s hand in his. He wanted to, but he couldn’t. Not after everything that had happened. He couldn’t touch her. He wouldn’t.

Lise shook her head, ignoring the pain. No, you’re the more experienced driver. I’ll heal just fine.

Not at the rate you’re going!

And your arm will heal better than my rib?

No, but it’ll heal faster!

“They’re doing it again,” Akiza groaned. She sank onto the empty bed. “Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea.”

Fish almost cracked a knowing smile. They hadn’t changed. If Lise could speak without hurting herself, Fish imagined she would have practically spit fire at her outrage at seeing Fish. Yusei, as usual, was definitely attempting to be the hero and let Lise be healed instead. They still cared about each other too.
But a few things had changed too. Lise seemed to be angrier at the surprise than seeing Fish. She was calming down, but she could still feel the heat of her argument with Yusei. Even if the argument was entirely telepathic. Lise’s injuries were also worse than Yusei’s. Guess she had been the hero this time. Not him.

“Hey!” Fish shouted.

Shocked out of their silent argument, Lise and Yusei jumped. So did Akiza. All three of them clutched at their injuries and the pain such sudden movement had caused.

“What?” Yusei snapped.

“I’m giving you five minutes,” Fish pulled out her phone to emphasize her point. She set the timer. “If you can’t decide between the two of you in five minutes, I’m deciding for you.”

*Lise, it has to be you!* Yusei started back in on the arguing. She had to be healed. Her and not himself. He’d never forgive himself if he were healed and not her.

*Why*? *Why does it have to be me? Why do you get to make that call?!* Lise slammed her fist into the table.

Yusei buried his face in his hands. *I’m not trying to decide for you… But I can’t…*

*You can’t what?*

*I hurt you in the Spirit World. I did… I did things I can never take back.*

*That wasn’t you! It wasn’t your fault! This rib is not because of you!*

*I know…*

*And healing my physical injuries won’t change what happened.* Lise gazed down at her hands. It hurt to clasp them the way she was, but she wanted to touch Yusei. Hold him and tell him her words were true, but she was afraid too. Afraid that the heat and weight of his body would feel like the intrusion she had felt in the Spirit World. *It won’t change the mental healing we have to do too…*

*I know…*

“Okay, time’s up,” Fish rocked to her feet. She grinned, cracking her knuckles. “Eenie meanie minie moe, catch a catfish by the toe, if he hollers let him go, for it’s eenie meanie minie – Lise.”

“What?” Lise gasped, her voice hoarse. “No!”

Fish’s hair blew in a nonexistent wind. Her brown eyes glowed ocean blue. Hands spread wide, water, pulled from the air, formed into a half dome that glowed blue as it engulfed Lise’s chest.

The surging, soothing sensation washed over Lise like a gentle wave. At first, she tried to fight the healing waves’ sensation, but the familiar feeling was fantastic, and to be able to breathe again without biting pain was even better.

She looked like a mermaid floating in a glowing halo. Yusei cracked a small smile. If Lise was the mermaid, that made Fish the sea witch.

“And your worst injury is…gone!” Fish clapped her hands together. The waters evaporated instantly like a cracking a whip. The blue glow faded from Fish’s person, gone forever.
She stared at her hand, watching the wisps of power leave her. Forever this time.

The room fell into silence. Lise rolled her shoulders and stretched her arms towards the ceiling. Testing the extent of her healed body.

“It doesn’t hurt. My rib is all healed up!” Lise couldn’t keep the relief out of her voice. She could talk again. She’d missed being able to swear and breathe at the same time.

“Well, duh,” Fish crossed her arms and rolled her eyes. “The Oracle’s power doesn’t half ass anything.”

“I didn’t mean…” Lise sighed. “Thanks.”

“Yep, and my job is done here, so see ya,” Fish raised her hand in a static wave, and turned for the door.

Yusei blinked at her back, head cocking to the side. “You’re not gonna stay after all that?”

“Nope,” Fish didn’t wait for another response. She speeded out of the room so fast she was practically sprinting.

“I’ll walk her out,” Lise followed after before Akiza could even get up.

She and Yusei hoped to find the other more confident, but they wore matching looks of worry and confusion. Lise wanted to walk Fish out? What did that mean?

“We’ll be back,” Akiza said. “I’ll make sure Lise and Fish don’t kill each other.”

Yusei sent her off with a nod. He took a deep breath, looking down at his bandaged arm. Where the IV went in his arm still made him queasy. Recovering was going to be hard. Probably one of the hardest things he’d ever do.

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“Fish!” Lise called out the gates of the hospital. “Wait!”

Against her better judgement, Fish did stop. She didn’t have anywhere else she needed to be, she reasoned. And maybe Lise deserved something more… After just leaving all her former friends like that.

“Look, I already healed you and Crow. I’d say that makes us… I dunno what it makes us, but we’re not friends anymore, Lise. I’m not sticking around to pretend to be besties.”

“I know, that’s okay. Just because you came today and helped doesn’t make everything better or even okay,” Lise said in between breaths. She’d ran as quickly as she could to catch up.

Fish stared at her. Their terms of engagement were agreed upon. This interaction today didn’t change anything. So why…why was Lise here to send her off at the gate?

Lise took a deep, calming breath. “I’m not sure how I feel about this, dredging up the old hurt your leaving left. I just… I just wanted you to know I don’t hate you.”

“What?” Fish would have dropped something if she had anything on hand.

Lise’s blue eyes were resolute. Yet a tear rolled down her cheek. “It makes me sad that you didn’t want my friendship. That you couldn’t tell me that like an adult. It hurt, and some days it still does.
I don’t think we’ll ever have that kind of closeness, that trust, again.” She rubbed the next tear away, her feet planted. Sturdy and strong. “But I don’t hate you. And…I genuinely hope you are happy.”

“Wow,” Fish laughed a little. She hadn’t expected to laugh at all, seeing her old friends. She refused to cry. She was not going to cry in front of Lise. “I guess…Uh…thanks…I don’t… I’m not sure if I deserve that, but you’re able to speak again and that’s the first thing you do with it? Damn…” Her glasses were fogging up. She removed them, rubbing away at them with her sweater sleeve. She replaced them, sighing as if she were expelling all the bad blood the two of them had built up between them. “Thanks. I feel the same about you. Maybe we can try again in the future.”

Lise nodded. A sad smile played across her lips. “Yeah, maybe.”

The two girls shook hands. Fish left the hospital. Lise turned back to the hospital. Akiza was crying at the entrance. That was better than she had hoped for. She and Lise held each other and cried for a good moment.

With the wall of the hospital and then the city engulfing her, Fish finally allowed herself to cry. She didn’t bother to wipe her glasses this time. It was silly, but for a moment Lise looked like Mayoko. Had been…understanding and forgiving like Mayoko. Mayoko had been right. All three girls carried a little bit of her light with them.

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“Heavens,” Leo blurted.

He and Luna had walked into Yusei’s hospital room. Crow, Lise, and Yusei were scheduled to be released that night after dinner. Leo, Luna, Jack, Carly, Bruno, Sasha, Jose, Jarra, and Garrett all came to collect their friends. They walked in to the three patients playing a quiet game of Golf with Akiza.

“This place is way too quiet. Did someone drop a stink bomb or something?” Leo continued, oblivious.

Everyone else shared looks. Or face-palmed. Leave it to Leo to break the ice.

Luna elbowed him. “Leo, don’t be like that. We went through a lot in Yliaster and the Spirit World.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean we have to be all sad and quiet like it’s a funeral. We’re all still here.”

“Leo,” Jose rested a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “We don’t know what they went through.”

Leo bit his lip. He wanted to say something else, but he didn’t have anything helpful to say. Jose was right. His friends had been through something terrible he would probably never understand the full extent of. “Okay…”

“But we brought dinner!” Carly clapped her hands together. Leo was right that the mood definitely needed lightening.

Jack hefted the enormous bag they’d brought. Inside the two of them had made enough lunch boxes for everyone. “Bruno and Jose helped, so they’ll be much better than the hospital’s crap food.”
“Really?” Crow’s mouth was already watering.

“We even made each lunch special,” Jose bragged, waggling his eyebrows.

He reached into their bag and procured boxes one by one. The red one was Akiza’s. Pink went to Luna. Orange was obviously Lise’s. Until everyone had a box.

“Thank you for the food!”

“So Fish really healed your rib?” Jarra whispered while they ate.

“Yeah,” Lise answered in a normal voice. What a great idea. She had to remind herself to thank Jose, Bruno, Carly, and Jack later. They would all feel better sharing a meal together. It was Martha’s best remedy for a bad day. “I’m all good to go after dinner like everyone else. Real food is better for all of us though.”

“Not just our own food,” Yusei said, managing to snatch one of Lise’s octopus sausages with his chopsticks.

“Hey!” It was already in his mouth by the time Lise tried to grab it back. “Those are my favorite!”

“I know,” Yusei grinned, the troublemaking gleam in his eye back. He wasn’t at a hundred percent yet, none of them were, but the meal was definitely helping.

Lise narrowed her eyes at him and adjusted to make it harder for him to steal more of her food. He had the same look in his eyes back when they were at the Re-Education Center and he was smart mouthing Trudge. This was a good start.

“When do the doctors give you the all clear to leave?” Sasha asked.

“They said after dinnertime, so around seven? I think?” Crow scratched his head. “But it doesn’t matter,” his old mischievous grin sliding into place. “We’re all miraculously healed up.”

Luna was glad her friends were looking better. It had hurt to see them in the hospital. Bandages, bruises, scrapes and cuts…and worse. Luna hadn’t been able to escape the horrors they’d witnessed in her nightmares. And she’d basically gotten off scot free. She couldn’t imagine how…damaged her friends must have been feeling. Not to mention the next round of the WRGP tomorrow. There wasn’t enough time to deal with everything.

“Guys,” Leo’s unusually serious tone made everyone stop. The boy’s hazel-green eyes were fixated on something outside the room. “We should have a wheelchair race.”

“What?” Everyone’s eyes followed the path Leo’s had mapped out. Two wheelchairs were tucked into the space behind the floor’s main desk. For wheeling patients out after extended stays, no doubt.

Crow and Jack made eye contact. Jack arched his eyebrows, a familiar smirk playing across his lips. “I’m in if you are, mate.”

“You’re on!”

What followed was the procurement of the wheelchairs. Of course, the wheelchair race rules had to be established. A bracket was also made leading to the two finalists.

Crow and Jack went first. The hallways were filled with swear words, arguing, and labored
breathing as the boys attempted to get the wheelchairs moving at a decent speed without ramming into the corner.

Leo insisted on going next. He and Jose rocketed around the corners like the Flash. Jose wouldn’t say if he’d meant to crash on the last corner or not, but Leo was glad to have a win under his belt.

Everyone got to have a turn, and a match. With varying results.

Even Sasha and Yusei took a turn. Luckily, Yusei had been healthy enough for the nurses to take out his IV beforehand. It was comforting to watch him laugh as he tried to do tricks around the corners. Sasha was an even bigger surprise. She was generally an authority pleaser, especially in Master Terra’s case, but she refused to listen to nurses who had caught on to the wheelchair races and were attempting to get her to slow down.

Finally, the ultimate winners were ready for the championship wheelchair race. Jack’s hands were white-knuckled over the wheels of his chair. He was ready to move at a moments notice. The surprise underdog finalist was Bruno. His chest heaved, hands shook, but his eyes were narrowed with focus.

“Ready?!” Leo raised his arm. He had the biggest grin on his face. He hadn’t won the wheelchair race tournament, but being the flag guy that started the last race? Even better!

“If you win, I will hit you,” Jack threatened.

“Oh, come on,” Bruno complained.

Jack raised a shoulder. “Okay, fine, I won’t hit you, but only if I win.”

“Jack!”

“Ready?!” Leo repeated.

“Yeah!”

“Set!”

Bruno and Jack leaned forward. The time to go was upon them.

“GO!”

Both boys practically flew past Leo. They’d both had plenty of practice figuring out the best way to get the wheelchairs to do as they wanted. The best of the best amateur wheelchair spinners were in the last rounds.

“Go Bruno!”

“Go Jack!”

The cheers of their friends followed the boys as they rounded the first corner. A nurse emerged from one of the other rooms, but Jack rolled around her. Bruno saw her later, but recovered quickly, wheeling around her backwards.

“GO!!!” Everyone cheered when their friends came back around the wall and back in sight. Bruno, surprisingly, was in the lead.

“Come on, Jack!” Carly cheered.
His face was beaded with sweat, and his arms ached, but Jack was never one to give up.

Bruno skidded through the last turn too far. His turn was too wide. Jack saw his chance. He swooped into the sweet corner turning spot, taking the turn as tightly as he dared.

“And the winner is…!” Leo raised his hand again, ready to declare the second he could. “Jack Atlas!”

Jack and Bruno shook hands to the resounding applause.

“You were a worthy opponent,” Jack grinned.

Bruno nodded in agreement. “As were you.”

Leo breathed a sigh of relief. He’d been feeling guilty being so relieved Luna was practically untouched. She was his sister, yeah, but that didn’t mean he should be so happy when his friends were so hurt and miserable. He couldn’t fix them, nobody could. Not even Luna.

He caught his twin’s eye through the crowd of their friends. Luna smiled knowingly at him. She knew he’d just wanted to cheer them up. Just for a little bit. Since she was the least injured, she’d wanted to help in a way she was capable of. And Leo had been happy to help.

That’s what Luna had told him about, anyway. That Luna wasn’t the best fighter on the team, but she could help in other ways. Leo had instantly agreed, and wanted to help.

So together, they’d done what they could to make their friends happier for just one night.
Child. The Crimson Dragon’s voice tiptoed through Lise’s head.

Child. The dragon spoke again when Lise didn’t respond. Hiding and avoiding your pain like this…It isn’t good for you…

Lise sighed. The weight of the sigh pulled her eyes down to her bloody knuckles. After punching them raw again, the dry skin had split and bled much sooner than the last time. Lise knew wailing on her punching bag until her knuckles bled wasn’t healthy, but she could take out her frustrations without hurting anyone until she was so tired she could just pass out in bed. And it gave Yusei time to fall asleep without fearing he’d touch her.

Lise inhaled sharply. The cold water running over her open wounds stung.

It wasn’t just her. Everyone needed time to heal. More than a single night, at least. She and Luna had managed to close the portal as they left, so that was something. And Fish had healed her and Crow. Lise smiled to herself. The wheelchair race had helped too.

But everyone still needed their own kind of support. Crow had opted to stay with the kids at Martha’s. Being around their warmth and love was exactly what he needed after Yomi’s crushingly endless loneliness. Jack had decided to spend the night at Carly’s place. She kept him company, a comforting presence for him as always, until they both drifted off to sleep. Akiza and the twins had decided to stay at the garage. Akiza took the game room, and the twins insisted on splitting Crow’s bed for the night. Leo had refused to leave Luna’s side for more than ten minutes. She’d escaped the Spirit World practically injury free, but he could tell his sister felt guilty. Akiza had wanted to be close to her friends, reminding herself that she could take action as well as be patient for whatever was to come.

Sasha, Jose, Jarra, and Garrett, on the other hand, had opted to stay with Mika. Sasha explained that the four of them still wanted to help, and would be there when they were needed. But right now Team 5Ds needed some space.

Lise patched up her knuckles the best she could. Finally, too tired to think, she got back in bed. She hadn’t exactly planned it, but she was glad to see Yusei asleep. And really asleep too, not just pretending like he did every now and then. He said it was because Lise looked adorable in her sleep, but since Lise often woke up having drooled and wormed her hair into a rats’ nest she was skeptical of such a sentiment. She had said nothing to stop him doing so though.

Normally, if she were climbing into bed after him, she would have kissed his cheek, but she didn’t want to startle or wake him up.

Lise was too tired to think of it as stupid, but it hadn’t been stupid when she used to do with her mother. Lise blew Yusei a kiss, and fell asleep when her head hit the pillow.

///

Yusei woke up the sun’s rays gently sliding over his face from the window. He’d fallen asleep on his back, but woke up on his side. One hand on Lise’s hip.

Yusei rolled away, sitting up on the edge of the bed, bare feet on the floor to ground himself. But it was too late.
He clutched at his head as the memories flooded back in against his will. His sword in his hands, pointed at Lise’s chest. His mouth hurling horrible, cruel things at her. His fingers on her throat. Watching her tears leave tracks on her face…

And him unable to stop. Forced to watch.

Yusei came back to the present gasping for breath. Sweat beaded his face, and a tear fell onto his palm, and rolled onto the floor.

He got up and went to the bathroom to splash cold water on his face. He still looked tired. Tired and scared. Sure, the towel wiped away the evidence that something had happened, but it was a lie. The damage was still inside him, like Mako had left him cursed.

And what if it happened again? Yusei loved Lise…but he could never touch her again.

Not like this.

///

The three Emperors watched as the WRGP duels continued. Their grand plan was nearing ever closer, inch by inch.

Luciano snickered, his green eyes greedily watching the holo screens below him. “It’s on its way to being completed.”

Joel nodded. “This is the source of the power produced by turbo duels. And once the entire circuit is completed, the future shall be changed.”

Placido narrowed his eyes. Of course they would attain the amount of power they needed eventually, but why eventually? Joel was content to wait, but Placido was tired of waiting for weak small fry to eventually get their plan in motion. Why not speed up the process?

///

Bruno was helping Yusei fine tune duel runners. Blackbird, Poison Thorn, and Starfire had to be running perfectly for their match today.

Yusei barely heard Bruno’s words as they made the last check on Starfire. He was thinking about running into Breo at the hospital as they left last night.

Both his teammates, Jean and Andre, were in the hospital. Their match with Team Catastrophe had been scheduled for earlier that day.

“Breo? What’re you doing here?” Yusei had asked him.

Breo shook his head. “I’m not entirely sure myself. Jean and Andre just suddenly…crashed…”

“What?!” “How?!”

“I don’t know,” Bruno sighed.

The light for the operating room switched off. Two nurses wheeled Jean out on a gurney. His head was covered in bandages.

“Sorry, but I’ll give you a call later. See you for now.” Breo chased after his friend. “Jean, are you doing okay?”
Yusei was left to stare in silence. If Team Catastrophe could hurt Team Unicorn so badly, today’s match would be even more dangerous. He shook his head to clear it, triple-checking Starfire’s wheels and steering.

Jack and Carly walked in, coffee in hand. They settled down around Yusei and Bruno.

“Good morning,” Jack said pleasantly.

“Sleep okay?” Bruno asked.

Carly nodded, sipping her coffee. “So guys, I think I’ve got a scoop on your opponents today.”

“Oh,” Crow came in through the front door, toting his things. “Do tell.”

“This isn’t cheating is it?” Bruno frowned over his work at the computer.

“Team Unicorn already scoped out all our moves before our match,” Yusei pointed out.

“Well, rumor has it Team Catastrophe curses duel runners.”

“Curses?” Bruno turned around in his seat, scratching at the back of his head. That didn’t sound logical, but then again he had friends who were pretty much magic.

“Yeah,” Carly continued. “That’s what people are saying with Team Unicorn crashing twice in a row. Everyone’s talking about how they use sorcery or something.”

Jack rolled his eyes. “But I’ve been saying that’s ridiculous, and even if it is true, they’re not match for Jack Atlas and Team 5Ds!”

The corners of Yusei’s lips twitched upwards. It was a little blunt, but Jack seemed to be recovering his familiar arrogance.

“Besides,” Leo yawned. He tottered sleepily down the stairs. “If anyone is magical it’s me and Luna!”

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Team Catastrophe smirked to themselves, holed up in their old apartment beneath one of New Domino City’s new highways. An apartment that used to be a bar, but had since become run down and filthy. There were so many homes, stores and garages around, their own little place was easily swallowed up into the masses.

“This one, this one, this one too, There’s nothing but articles about us in every newspaper!” Hermann grinned. He was a large, stocky, muscled man with reddish brown hair. His dark eyes were alight with excitement. He wore dark clothing with the sleeves ripped off to show off his muscled arms. His face bore a criminal marking in the shape of a triangle on his forehead, and a cascading, split waterfall-like marking on his cheek. “Things are finally looking up for us, huh, Nicholas?”

Nicholas sat at the bar with a drink. He took a long sip before answering. His dark, long hair matched his dark jacket and pants. His left cheek bore an intricate criminal marking as well. His beard made his pointed face even pointier. He held up a card. “And it’s all thanks to this card that weirdo gave us.”

///
“Card of Darkness?” Nicholas stared at the card resting in his hand. His brows arched, lips pulling back slightly.

He lowered the card to get a better look at the white-clad man before him. Placido.

“And you’re just…giving this to us?”

Hans ran in, joining his teammates, his purple, spiky hair a mess. His mark stretched across his right cheek like a crooked shooting star. He wore a long coat that hid the rest of his skinny body.

“You okay, Hermann?”

“Yeah, but who is that bastard? Once he jumped in front of me, I got knocked flat on my ass.”

Placido ignored their questions. “As long as you have that card, you won’t be confined to here. You will win all your duels.” His smile grew suggestively. “You might even become King.”

Hermann stood up, intrigued. “King?”

“Card of Darkness…” Nicholas said again, tasting the words on his tongue. He smirked at their new ‘helper.’ “Sounds interesting.”

“Hey, hang on a sec, Nicholas,” Hermann and Hans ran up to their friend.

Hans shoved his hands into his pockets. “Should we really be using this card?”

Hermann nodded. “If it is a card of darkness, it’s obviously bad news. Besides, he gives me the creeps…”

The three of them turned back to Placido…or not?

“Hey, he’s gone!” Hermann gasped. “Where the hell did he go?”

“That gives me the creeps even more,” Hans shivered.

“So what?”

Hans and Hermann stared. This wasn’t usually like Nicholas.

“I’m sick and tired of it all. This town, the way we’re living now! A card of darkness? Suits me fine! If it’s to get out of this dump, I’ll sell off my soul!”

“Nicholas…”

///

Nicholas came out of his memories with a smile. This card was working. Their ticket to everything they wanted.

There came a soft clanging noise from the hallway. Hans came through the doorway with a confident smile on his face.

“Oh, Hans.”

“You’re in an oddly good mood.”

Hans face stretched into a fanatic grin. “It’s almost time for our match.”
Nicholas’s grin matched Hans’. “Then let’s go.”

///

There was a knock on the door. Crow swept it open and Breo walked into their garage.

“Sorry to drop by so early, but I figured you’d want to see this,” he gave a drive of duel runner data to Bruno.

He immediately put it into their computer to analyze.

“I found unusual data on our duel runner memory chips,” Breo explained. “I did some digging because I just couldn’t believe Jean and Andre could crash like that in a row, so when I checked…”

Everyone gathered at Bruno’s computer to see the data.

“See? Right around here,” Breo pointed to a drastic drop in the plateaus of the speeds graphed out before them.

“But that means those are traces the wheeks locked up,” Yusei said.

Leo frowned at his friend. “Locked up?”

“Mmhmm,” Bruno said. “For example, if something was suddenly caught in the wheel.”

“That would explain the crashes,” Jack said.

Carly raised her finger slightly. “Then, you mean those guys stuck something in their wheels?”

“But there’s no way they could do that in the middle of a duel,” Breo reminded everyone.

“Wait!” Crow gasped.

“What?”

“Come to think of it, when Blackbird crashed, I had a split second feeling that my wheels had locked up!”

“In that case….” Bruno did some quick sleuthing and brought up the data from the day of Crow’s crash. “It’s the same!”

Crow clenched his newly healed arm. “Which means that it was their fault Blackbird crashed. Damn it! They are going to pay!”

“Settle down, Crow,” Yusei said, his voice low but firm. “This isn’t enough evidence to label Team Catastrophe as the culprit.”

“But how did they do it?” Bruno asked. “Locking up the other person’s duel runner without them knowing isn’t easy.”

“And there’s no way for us to see yesterday’s duel before the match today…” Jack crossed his arms. He wasn’t sure if he should volunteer to step in or have faith in Crow, Akiza, and Lise. It was hard to tell which option was worse.

Carly gasped sharply, knocking her fist into her palm. “Oh, I forgot! I have footage I shot and from my friends of the duel yesterday! We should take a look!” She pulled the memory card out of the
camera strapped, as usual, to her side.

“And you didn’t say something sooner because…?” Crow was trying hard not to let the vein in his forehead burst.

“Oh…well I was…um…”

Jack swiped the memory card out of Carly’s hand. “Just say something sooner next time.”

“Sorry…” Carly poked her two index fingers together. Her muddled embarrassment brightened with a smile when Jack pecked her on the forehead.

Yusei swallowed back a lump in his throat. He turned back to the computer Bruno had finished loading Carly’s footage onto.

“So this is the first duel between Andre and Nicholas from Catastrophe.”

The boys watched a normal turbo duel unfold. That is until Andrew swerved unnaturally and crashed!

“Wait, what just happened?”

“Let’s try another angle,” Bruno perused through the files, finding another.

From a three-quarters angle, instead of profile, they all watched Andre crash again.

“Wait, rewind that!”

Bruno did so, and slowed things down for good measure.

Jack squinted at the screen. “Still no idea what happened.”

Leo shook his head. “Me neither.”

“Let’s move on to Jean’s footage…between him and Hermann from Catastrophe.”

Jean was already swerving once Bruno hit play.

“It’s already happened,” Crow clenched his teeth. “We couldn’t find anything after all.”

“Maybe not,” Yusei pointed at the screen. “I noticed both times the wheels locked up this monster was already summoned.”

“Let’s see,” Bruno did some quick research. “It’s name is Hidden Knight-Hook. Level four, attack power of sixteen-hundred, and zero defense. According to the official records, when Andre’s monster, Different Dimension Unicorn Knight, tried to attack it, that’s when the crash occurred.

“Jean’s crash happened on his opponent’s turn right after this thing activated its monster effect.”

“See! Something’s moving there!” Leo pointed excitedly.

Jack nodded. “Assuming it’s related, there’s no two ways about it.”

“Looks like the team needs to be careful today,” Carly frowned.

Crow clutched at his formerly injured arm. “Those guys…first me, now Andre and Jean…Team Catastrophe is definitely going to pay.”
“What?!” Trudge gasped. He and Mina had taken their seats in the arena. “They’re locking the wheels?!”

“Yep,” Carly’s lips were drawn in a grim line. “We don’t know how they’re doing it, but it’s one big scoop!”

“Guess those are the true colors of this team’s so called curse,” Mina crossed her arms while she mulled things over.

“Why didn’t you say something sooner then? If what you say is true, that illegal card is forcing duelists to crash!” Trudge stood up. “I’m checking that card right now!”

“Wait, please!” Breo stood up too. He’d purposefully seated himself behind Carly and the police. “Team 5Ds know that it’s risky, but they insisted on settling things on their own. They made that decision on their own.”

Trudge stopped, the two men staring at each other. Both wanted to do something, but what?

“That may be so, but…”

“Please, let Team 5Ds do this.”

Mina let out a little sigh and closed her eyes. “Let’s pretend as if we didn’t hear any of this.”

“But Mina!”

“Take your seat,” Mina crossed her arms. “Things are about to start.”

“HELLLLLLLOOOOOOOOOOO everybody!” the usual MC yelled out, his voice echoing throughout the stadium. “Are you as pumped as I am?” He paused for the fans to scream their excitement. “The preliminaries of the first WRGP to determine the turbo dueling world’s very best, is finally winding down! Today’s matchup is bound to be exciting! Let’s quickly introduce the competing teams!

First up is the team that won over Team Unicorn by forcing them to crash! Team Catastrophe!”

The three boys practically strutted across the track. Fans cheered, screamed, and whistled. Egging them on even more so were the fans dressed up as the team members.

“Tough crowd…” Carly muttered to herself. Nevertheless, she readied her camera.

“And they’re up against the team from our very own New Domino City; Team 5Ds!”

///

Lise and Akiza had come downstairs shortly after Breo went back to his teammates before the day’s matches. Luna had come down behind them.

Both girls were strangely quiet after the others explained what this next batch of duels would entail.

Lise crossed her arms. “So, the team will act as bait to find out what these guys have up their sleeves? That’s what you’re asking us to do, right?”
Jack scratched at the back of his neck. “Well, when you put it like that…”

“But…what if you all get hurt again?” Luna whispered, her hand on Lise’s elbow.

“Do you…” Akiza pulled on her sleeve. “Do you think I’m a strong enough rider for this? I mean, we still don’t know how this monster or team causes the duel runner wheels to lock.”

“I know…” Yusei picked at the dead skin on his fingertips. “But we don’t have enough solid evidence to take this to the police. We can ask Trudge and Mina to be there, and all our friends, but I’m not sure how much we can protect our riders while they’re out there.”

“Well, I’m going first,” Crow stood up, pointing his thumb back at himself. “They hurt me first, and then Jean and Andre. I’ll gladly go first to find out what we’re up against.”

“Are you sure?” Akiza’s eyebrows knit together. Her brown eyes shook with worry. “What if you get hurt or crash again?”

“I want to take that risk,” Crow said. His grey eyes were unmoving; ready to take up the challenge. “Will you take it with me?”

Akiza closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Her eyes were steadier when she opened them. “Then I’m in too.”

Lise smiled at her two teammates. She put her hands on her hips, and smiled at them. “I never said I wouldn’t ride. I was just clarifying my role here. The bait; just like old times.”

“We’re in this,” Crow took both girls’ hands. “Together. We can beat Team Catastrophe.”

“As an entire team,” Leo added, fist in the air.

“Yeah!” Luna’s fist joined his.

“Team 5Ds!”

///

The crowd was exploding with cheering. Of which, Carly contributed to. So did all of Leo and Luna’s school friends. Lise’s chi blocker friends sat in the stands as well. They had snuck in some weapons, ready for anything, just in case.

Despite not riding that day, Jack and Yusei lead their team to the pit station alongside Bruno. Crow waved casually to the crowd, and Lise and Akiza walked in behind him. All three of them were ready to ride. Leo and Luna came in the back, decked out in 5Ds gear, and waving.

Hermann smirked at Team 5Ds. “They don’t even know they’re gonna get crushed.”

Crow paused in his waving. He leveled a glare so intense at Team Catastrophe Hermann took a step back.

“Why’s that guy in their lineup?” he hissed at Nicholas. “Wasn’t he injured?”

Nicholas’s cocky smirk turned into a grimace of annoyance. “Then we crush him again. He won’t make it a second time.”

Crow made his way over to Team Catastrophe. They held their ground, watching him.
“Look at this; a former patient struts his way over here,” Hermann put his hands on his hips. “Need something?”

“What?” Crow shrugged. “I just came to say hello. And to tell you that Jean and Andre will be getting payback with interest!”

“What?”

“Oh right, can’t forget about my share, can we? I don’t know what tricks you used, but you won’t get one over on me twice! So you’d better be ready!”

Hermann chuckled a little. A droplet of sweat ran down the side of his face. “That should be my line! But you just got all healed up, so appreciate it while you can.”

“Thanks for the heads up. We’ll see ya around,” Crow flashed one last fake smile and left.

Hands ground his teeth together. “That punk’s screwin’ with us! Do you think he knows about that card?”

“No,” Nicholas said. “Just a hunch. There’s no way he could find out about our card so easily. The moment he finds out will be the moment he draws his last breath.”

“Okay, our first match is about to begin! Our first riders have taken their place, and they are Team 5Ds’ Crow and Catastrophe’s Hermann!”

“Speed World 2 Set.”

Hans settled down in his team’s pit station with Nicholas. “Hurry up and take care of him, Hermann.”

Nicholas nodded in agreement.

“Can’t say that having some friggin’ patient rag on me leaves a good taste in my mouth, but, unfortunately for you, yours truly leaves the baddest taste around. Don’t take it personally, kid,” Hermann grinned sideways at his opponent.

“Crow’s gonna be okay, right?” Luna asked. “His shoulder was just healed.”

Akiza nodded, tugging on Luna’s pigtail gently. “Oh yeah, Fish might procrastinate like nobody’s business, but she’s not sloppy.”

“Yeah,” Leo clenched his fist. “Even if he wasn’t fully healed, Crow can handle anything!”

///

Sherry watched from high up in the nosebleed section. *If those mysterious duels before were because of that card... then... Yliaster must be behind it!*

///

Even higher, on the stadium’s roof, stood Placido. He snickered to himself, anticipating the soon to be painful duel unfold.

He stopped when his snicker was joined by another. Luciano stood beside him.

“I knew this was your handiwork, Placido. I thought it was stange.”
“Luciano.”

“I’m not responsible for what you’re doing here on your own. Even if you do get chewed out by Joel later.”

Placido’s eyes narrowed. “That geezer has been dragging his heels with this WRGP. I’m doing this my way.”

“Good luck on that,” Luciano giggled.

///

“Ready? Set? Go!” The MC cried in time with the countdown clock.

Hermann and Crow gunned their engines. The pair raced for the first corner.

“Don’t tell me you’re scared?!” Hermann sneered, and slammed his runner into Crow’s.

“Hey!” Crow managed to stay upright, but Hermann used the opportunity to pull ahead.

“And Hermann has gone ahead and taken the first corner! And with Hermann’s first move, the duel begins!”

“Let’s duel!”

Crow: 4000

Hermann: 4000

“My turn! I draw, and I summon Hidden Knight-Hook! Then I place a card facedown to end my turn!”

“Thar she blows,” Lise commented dryly.

///

“That’s it!” Carly pointed, standing up for good measure. “That monster locked those people’s wheels!”

///

Crow glared up at the monster. Its two hook hands glinted dangerously in the sunlight. *I’ve been waiting for that son of a bitch. I’m going to beat you!*

“My turn! I summon Blackwing Sirocco the Dawn! Sirocco is a high level monster, but when there are monsters only on my opponent’s field, I can normal summon it without a tribute!”

*Now, come on! Show me what you do to lock people’s wheels right now!*

“Sirocco attacks Hidden Knight-Hook!

“He’s not pulling any punches,” Yusei clenched his teeth. This was much too wreckless. Not just for Crow, but for Akiza and Lise too.

“Keep your eyes peeled,” Jack instructed.

“Right,” the twins answered together.
Hermann rolled his eyes. “You think that attack’ll kill him? Hidden Knight-Hook’s monster effect, Shadow Hook, activates! When this card is marked as an attack target while in attack mode, it switches itself and the attacking monster to defense mode.”

“Defense mode?”

“With both monsters in defense mode, the battle is invalid. Next, when Hidden Knight-Hook switches from attack to defense, it inflicts eight hundred points of damage to the opponent. Take this!”

Crow: 3200

Hermann: 4000

Crow hung on as his lifepoints dropped. Somehow the sensation was familiar. What’s with this power?

“Oh no!” the MC said. “Crow seems to be losing his balance! Is the tragedy that befell Team Unicorn about to replay itself?”

Crow first glanced it from the corner of his eye. Then he got a better look. Hidden Knight-Hook’s hook had emerged out of Crow’s shadow! Crow grabbed his controls with both hands and yanked Blackbird hard to the right. The hook missed his back wheel, and vanished.

“And Crow manages to hang in there!”


///

“What was that?” Trudge had seen it too.

“Something too a pass by the wheel!” Mina gasped.

///


Akiza’s hand rested on her friend’s shoulder. “We’ve got our work cut out for us.”

Yusei bit his lip. He wished he could offer comfort like that…but he couldn’t. All he could do was be there.

///

What the hell was that? That monster’s hook hands?

///

“But how is that possible? A card that physically attacks its opponents through their shadows?” Bruno wanted someone to tell him he was dreaming.

“I don’t know,” Yusei confirmed. Bruno was not crazy, and not dreaming. “But I’m positive I saw that monster’s hook!”

“So creepy!” Luna’s hands clasped her face.
Sweat dropped down Leo’s face. “That monster isn’t just solid vision or psychic abilities is it?”

///

“Damnit, Hermann,” Hans swore.

“Don’t screw up next time,” Nicholas growled.

///

“Swing and a miss,” Luciano giggled.

///

“Who are these guys?” Yusei whispered.

Lise nodded as the two of them stared over at their opponent’s. “And where did they get that kind of power?”
Catastrophic Part 1

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Crow glared at Hidden Knight-Hook’s back. *Now it’s all clear. If that thing locks my wheels, I’m done for. I can’t let this duel drag on.*

“I place four cards facedown to end my turn!”

///
The team watched Hermann and Crow drive past the pit station.

“That Crow…” Jack’s violet eyes followed his friend. “He’s hurrying through the match, isn’t he?”

“Well, if he has to dodge that monster’s hook every time he makes a move, he doesn’t have much choice,” Yusei said, his eyes doing the same.

“Good thing we’re not rookies anymore,” Akiza half-joked, knocking elbows with Lise.

Who nodded in agreement. “We’ll need all our skills to avoid that monster.”

///

“What a waste of time,” Nicholas chuckled, a nasty smile stretching across his face. “No matter what traps he has set, as long as Hidden Knight-Hook is around, things are in the bag.”

///

“I’m not missing this time,” Herman promised. “My turn! I switch Hidden Knight-Hook to attack mode! Then, I summon Hidden Knight-Dark!”

(*Hidden Knight-Dark: Atk: 800 Def: 0*)

While Hidden Knight-Hook looked like a punk pirate, Hidden Knight-Dark resembled a punk insect. It sported sharp wings, and horns like a beetle’s.

“This card can attack opponents directly. Hidden Knight-Dark attacks directly!”

*Crow: 2400*

*Hermann: 4000*

///

“Oh no, Crow!” Leo cried.

///

“And now, Hidden Knight-Hook attacks Sirocco the Dawn! Devil Hook!”

///

“Here it comes!” Jack clenched his fists in anticipation.
As the monster’s hologram hook struck, its shadow hook emerged from the shadows again. But this time Crow was ready. He swerved hard to the right, and again to the left. He was able to continue, no problem.

“He dodged it?! That’s impossible!” Hans yelled at his screen. “It was obviously a fluke!”

“All right, Crow!” Lise grinned.

“Damn punk,” Hermann muttered under his breath.

The MC made sure to keep things going. “Uh oh? What could be wrong? Is there some trouble with Crow’s duel runner?”

Hermann seemed to think he was at a good stopping point. “I place a card facedown to end my turn.”

“You all saw that, right?” Bruno asked.

“Yeah,” Yusei nodded. “But how is the shadow attacking him?”

“My…turn!” Crow drew his card as both his and Hermann’s speed counters increased to three. “Trap activate; Black Back! This card special summons a monster with Blackwing in its name with two thousand or less attack from my graveyard! I special summon Blackwing Sirocco the Dawn! Next, I special summon Blackwing Gale the Whirlwind! It can be special summoned from my hand when there’s a monster with Blackwing in its name on my field! Gale the Whirlwind’s effect activates! Once per turn, it can have the attack of an opponent’s monster! I halve Hidden Knight-Hook’s attack power…”

(Hidden Knight-Hook: Atk: 1600 -> 800)

“And I’ll have Gale the Whirlwind attack Hidden Knight-Hook! Black Scratch!”

“But if he attacks, its monster effect…” Leo bit his lip. This wasn’t good.

“You never learn,” Hermann grinned. “Hidden Knight-Hook’s effect activates! When this card is in attack mode and is attacked, it switches itself and the attacking monster to defense mode! And don’t forget you take eight hundred points of damage!”

Crow: 1800

Hermann: 4000
This time Crow threw swerving out the window. He pulled a full on jump out of thin air, avoiding the hook’s range all together. He landed back on the ground practically flawlessly. The crowd went nuts with cheering.

///

“He dodged it again!” Hans screams at his screens. By now, the team should have been making the second wheeler crash.

///

“This guy’s unreal,” Hermann grumbled.

///

“See, didn’t I just say he shouldn’t attack it!!” Leo snapped.

“But now the monster’s in defense mode,” Bruno explained slowly.

Yusei nodded in agreement. “It can’t be beat as long as it’s in attack mode, but with it in defense mode, it won’t be able to cancel battles!”

“Oh,” Luna’s face brightened slightly. “Then, Crow did that to draw it into defense mode?”

///

“Sirocco the Dawn attack Hidden Knight-Hook! Dark Wing Slash!”

“Yeah,” Hermann interrupted. “That won’t work. Hidden Knight-Dark’s monster effect activates! When a defense mode monster is attacked, by releasing this card, it switches the targeted monster to attack mode!”

///

“No! It’s in attack mode again!” Leo put his fingers in his mouth to give his stress something to nibble on.

///

“And Hidden Knight-Hook’s effect activates!”

_Crap! Here it comes!

Hermann split into a massive evil grin. _This time, he’ll crash for sure!

“Crow!” All his teammates yelled out.

With a bellowing cry, Crow unleashed Blackbird’s wings. He flew so high that Hidden Knight-Hook’s ENTIRE shadow followed him up into the air. It was so massive, even Sherry up in the nosebleed section could see it. Even so, Hidden Knight Hook’s attack missed.

///

Cold sweat dripped down Bruno’s forehead. “So that monster’s whole body was lurking in the shadows?”
“Total overkill,” Lise commented, swallowing thickly.

///

Crow landed and sighed. *Avoided the hook again. Not so tough now that I know where you’re hiding!*

“But you still take eight hundred points of damage!”

*Crow: 800*

*Hermann: 4000*

///

“Oh Crow…” Luna uttered softly. She clasped her hands together.

“He’s below the Speed World 2 safety line,” Akiza held her tight fists close to her heart.

///

“Here I go!” Crow shouted. He might be on thin ice, but he wasn’t going down without fighting back! He owed it to his kids. They’d been such a comfort after the nothingness of the Spirit World. He’d be forever grateful for them. “I send Blackwing Etesian of Two Swords from my hand to the graveyard to activate its effect!”

*(Blackwing Etesian of Two Swords: Atk: 400 Def: 1600)*

Etesian soared into battle beside its master. It sported comfortable combat clothes, a chicken-like headdress too. Last, but not least, a katana strapped to its back.

“When a Blackwing is unable to destroy a monster by battle, Etesian deals damage equal to its friend’s attack points!”

*Crow: 800*

*Hermann: 2000*

“What an incredible struggle!” the MC spoke dramatically. “Despite Crow taking sixteen hundred points of damage, he’s dealt two thousand points of damage right back!”

///

“Attaboy, Crow!” Leo’s frown turned to a grin. He quite literally jumped for joy.

In the other pit station, Team Catastrophe was starting to panic.

“What do we do, Nicholas?” Hans shouted at his leader, despite the two of them being less than two feet apart.

“Quit freaking out!” Nicholas shouted back. “It’s true that he took some damage back there, but that guy only has eight hundred lifepoints left. This match is basically over.”

///

“Next,” Crow smiled to himself. Blackwings were never finished. “I activate the trap Urgent
Tuning! This card synchro summons a synchro monster during the Battle Phase!

“Not letting that go!” Hermann countered. “Permanent trap; Shadow of Concealing Darkness! Now my defense mode monsters can’t be destroyed in battle!”

Crow ignored him. “I’m tuning level three Gale the Whirlwind with my level five Sirocco the Dawn! Synchro summon; soar high: Blackwing Dragon!”

///

“All right! Crow’s ace monster!”

“But, why is it in defense mode?” Luna pointed out to her brother.

///

Hermann grinned. What a waste of a synchro summon. “So you realize you have no chance and you’re reinforcing your defenses, eh?”

“Who’s doing that?” Crow taunted. “Trap card open; Defender’s Cross! During the Battle Phase, it negates the monster effects of one defense mode monster on both our fields until the End Phase, and switches them to attack mode!”

///

“Nice,” Yusei cracked a smile. This was the first good news he’d seen all day. “Now he can’t use that shadow hook effect!”

“Plus, it’s in attack mode, so he can deal damage!” Bruno added.

“Go, Crow, go!” Akiza cheered.

///

Both Blackwing Dragon and Hidden Knight-Hook switched to attack mode.

Hermann immediately saw he was in trouble. “An attack power of twenty-eight hundred!”

///

“He only has two thousand lifepoints left! If this works, Crow wins!” Jack smiled as well.

Lise crossed her fingers. “Come on, Crow, please let this work!”

///

“You’re all terrible! You put Jean and Andre in the hospital! This is for them; Blackwing Dragon attack Hidden Knight-Hook!”

At the last second, Hermann played his other facedown. “I play my trap card Revival Knight!”

Crow: 800

Hermann: 0

“That’s it!” The MC gushed. “Crow with a come from behind victory! According to the tournament rules, the duel proceeds to the End Phase!”
The crowd cheered, whistled and yelled. Carly, Mina, and Trudge added to the roar.

Breo smiled wide. *One down. Two to go.*

Leo and Luna’s friends screamed with approval. All except for Sly, of course.

Garrett refused to cheer and scream with Sasha, Jose, and Jarra, but he did smile.

“I’ll be damned if I lose here!” Hermann growled. “Revival Knight’s effect activates! It can special summon one monster with ‘Knight’ in its name destroyed this turn in defense mode during the End Phase!”

Crow clenched his teeth. And here he thought he’d gotten rid of that monster.

“You won’t be destroying this monster! Now, feel the power of the Card of Darkness!” Hermann had lost, but he had a manic look in his eyes.

///

“Card…” Jack said.

“…of Darkness?” Yusei finished.

///

Hidden Knight Hook’s shadow rose into the air. It towered over Crow, looming ever closer.

But he wasn’t back down. “Trap activate; Gravity Collapse! This card works by sending a synchro monster on my field to the graveyard, negating the summoning of a monster with attack power lower than it and destroying it!”

“It’ll what?” Hermann gasped.

///

“But Crow is…” Bruno trailed off.

Yusei’s lips straightened into a tight line.

“He’s doing whatever it takes to make that monster stay dead,” Lise said.

///

*I have to destroy this monster! I won’t let it hurt Akiza! Even if I have to sacrifice Blackwing Dragon to do it!*

Both monsters, and Hidden Knight-Hook’s shadow vanished.

///

“Nice work, Crow,” Yusei smiled.

Jack clenched his fist in victory. “He defeated Hidden Knight-Hook!”

“Hidden Knight-Hook, it’s…” Hans’ shoulders slumped.

Nicholas slammed his fist into their monitor. “Damn him!”
Trudge let out a long breath, crossing his arms. *Crow... What a guy... The fact that he had a trap like that set. Did he predict that his opponent would revive Hidden Knight-Hook?*

“Looks like your plan failed,” Luciano taunted, laughing again.

Placido said nothing.

Hermann pulled into the team’s pit. Both he and Hans looked to Nicholas for his reaction.

“Sorry Nicholas...”

Nicholas clenched his teeth and yanked the team patch off Hermann’s arm. “Gimme that!” He slapped it on Hans’ arm. “Get fucking going.”

“Right,” Hans nodded. He drove off.

“Get in the damn pit, and don’t talk to me.”

“Yes, Nicholas...” Hermann hung his head and sat down in the pit.

Nicholas took his time by Hermann’s runner for a moment, then joined his teammate.

“Thinking this will be easy now that Hidden Knight-Hook is gone would be a mistake,” Yusei commented.

“True,” Lise agreed. “They’re down, but not out.”

“Akiza,” Jack said. He waited until her warm, brown eyes met his violet ones. “You might want to get ready.”

“Okay,” she nodded, returning Jack’s warm smile. She ran for Poison Thorn. Jack was right. Crow would fight on, but it was still dangerous.

“My turn,” Hans declared. “I summon Mystic Tomato in attack mode!”

*Mystic Tomato: Atk: 1400 Def: 1100*

“Mystic Tomato attacks you directly!”

“I’m not going down that easy!” Crow countered. “I play the ability of Blackwing Calmia the Haze! During your Battle Phase since I have no monsters on my field, I can banish this card in my graveyard, allowing me to special summon a synchro monster from the grave until the end of the Battle Phase! Be reborn Blackwing Dragon!”

*Crow: 800

Hans: 2600*
Both monsters vanished at the end of the Battle Phase. Mystic Tomato to Blackwing Dragon’s massive attack, and Blackwing to the card’s ending effect.

“Wow! Looks like Crow’s squeezing everything he can out of his cards to hang on!” the MC said.

“In that case,” Hans reached for another card. “I set two facedowns, and I use the ability of Speed World 2! By paying four speed counters, I can deal you eight hundred points of damage!”

_Crow: 0_

_Hans: 2600_

Crow’s lifepoints decreased, and he blew smoke out of his face as his runner slowed. He pulled into the team’s pit just as Hermann had before him. He found Akiza waiting.

“I’m sorry, Akiza,” Crow couldn’t look her in the eyes as he handed her their team marker.

“It’s okay,” Akiza rested her hand on top of his. She hadn’t even tried to reach for the marker.

Crow found the courage to stare. Just a little. Her eyes were such a warm brown.

“We’re all in this together,” Akiza smiled at him. “Don’t worry. I’ll clear the way for Lise.”

Crow didn’t even register Leo taking the marker and placing it on Akiza’s arm. He finally rattled himself once the weight of her hand left his. Akiza lowered her vizor, and raced onto the track.

“Good luck, Akiza!” he called after her.

Akiza met Hans on the tracks. Her lips were set in a grim line. _You can do this. Just don’t let your guard down._

“Both teams are down to their second rider! So long as nobody crashes, this is anyone’s game!” the MC made sure the rest of the stadium was aware of what was going on.

_Akiza: 4000_

_Hans: 2600_

“It’s my move!” Akiza drew a card. “I summon Twilight Rose Knight! When he’s successfully summoned, I can special summon a level four or below plant monster from my deck! I special summon Lord Poison! And you can guess what happens next! Synchro summon; Black Rose Dragon!”

///

“That’s my girl,” Crow had run back into the pit as soon as he could. He grinned at their screens.

“She’s ruthless, as usual,” Lise smiled too.

///

“Black Rose Dragon, attack Hans directly!” Akiza ordered. She pointed dramatically back at her opponent.

“I don’t think so,” Hans smirked. “I play my trap Negate Attack! The Battle Phase? Oh yeah, it’s over, little girl.”
Akiza clenched her fist, withdrawing as her dragon did. “I place two cards facedown, and end my turn.”

///

“Aw, come on!” Leo complained, flailing his arms in frustration.

“I know,” Luna said. “If that attack had worked, Hans would have had only 200 lifepoints.”

///

“My turn,” Hans drew his card. “I summon Mechanicalchaser in attack mode!”

(Mechanicalchaser: Atk: 1850 Def: 800)

Mechanicalchaser looked like a child’s cobbled together version of a robot. Complete with miscellaneous weapons clutched in its crude hands.

“And then I’ll be using the speed spell that defeated your buddy earlier!”

Akiza’s grip tightened on her controls. As did her jaw. This team is just a bunch of insecure bullies!

“Because I have two or more speed counters, my Fissure speed spell can destroy the monster on your field with the lowest attack, but since you only have one, it’s bye-bye to Black Rose Dragon!”

“No!”

“Oh yes! Now Mechanicalchaser, attack Akiza directly!”

Akiza: 2150

Hans: 2600

“Whoa!” The MC gasped. “In one move, Hans has practically evened the score!”

///

“Don’t let it get to you,” Jack said softly. He wasn’t the only one who could feel the waves of frustration radiating off Akiza.

“She’s got this,” Crow reminded everyone.

///

“Your turn, little girl,” Hans taunted.

Akiza took a deep breath. She couldn’t lose focus now.

“I draw, and I summon Cactus Bouncer!”

(Cactus Bouncer: Atk: 1800 Def: 300)

Akiza’s new monster, true to its name, looked like a cactus. If cacti had faces, arms, legs, and muscles, that is. Spikes around its head protected a single, magenta flower.

“Next up, my facedown speed spell!” Akiza continued. “Like you, I have at least two speed
counters, so I can play the speed spell Seed of Deception! This allows me to special summon a level two or below plant type monster from my deck! Say hello to Dark Verger in defense mode!"

Hans chuckled to himself. *What a stupid girl. Neither of those monsters can stop my Mechanicalchaser. Looks like the Black Rose is useless without her pet.*

“I end with two more facedowns!”

“Then it’s time for you to lose!” Hans snickered. “I play my facedown Call of the Haunted!”

///

“He’s not gonna…” Leo trailed off.

Lise shook her head. “He can’t. Hidden Knight-Hook was destroyed before Hans and Hermann made the switch. That son of a bitch stays in Hermann’s graveyard where it belongs.”

“Right, the rules state that only what’s left on the field is transferred to the next player,” Crow explained.

Leo sighed. “That’s a relief.”

Bruno frowned at his screens. “But we’re not out of the woods yet.”

///

“Actually,” Akiza pulled a smirk of her own. “I’m afraid you can’t do that. See, while Cactus Bouncer and Dark Verger are on the field, you can’t special summon monsters.”

“What?!”

“Sorry to throw a ‘hook’ in your plans!”

“Don’t get too cocky, little girl. You just got lucky!” Hans growled. “My turn isn’t over. Mechanicalchaser, attack Cactus Bouncer!”

“I play my facedown; Plant Food Chain!” This card gives a target plant monster five hundred extra attack points during the Battle Phase!

(*Cactus Bouncer: Atk: 1800 -> 2300*)

Akiza: 2150

Hans: 2150

“Oh, and Akiza says ace monster? Never heard of her! What an excellent way to even the scores!”

///

“Nice work, Akiza!” Carly called out.

“Keep it up,” Sasha nodded with approval.

Mina smiled a little to herself too. “If only the kids could do all our police work for us,” she joked.

Trudge scratched at the back of his head. “Don’t forget, we have to do all the paperwork.”
“Well then, we better hope they win, or the report will be extra long.”

///

Nicholas pounded his fist into their console. “What the hell is he doing?! Destroy her already!”

Hermann thought it was best to just nod along.

///

Hans ground his teeth together. His purple hair blew in the wind, but did nothing to cover up his
cheek marking. It was not going to end like this. He believed in Nicholas’s plan, and in their Card
of Darkness. “Fine! I summon Black Salvo in attack mode!”

(Black Salvo: Atk: 100 Def: 1100)

Black Salvo was basically a giant explosive. If explosives had nasty grinning faces on them.

“I can’t use his ability, so it’s your turn after I place a card facedown!”

“All right,” Akiza put her new card in her hand. “Cactus Bouncer, attack Black Salvo!”

“I’m going to interrupt you there,” Hans’ smirk was back. “In order to play my trap Fairy Box!
When you attack, I can flip a coin. If I guess correctly, your monster’s attack goes to zero until the
end of the Battle Phase!”

*He’s banking on chance?* Akiza pursed her lips, watching the digital coin flip on her duel runner
screen.

///

“He’s switching tactics entirely?” Jack mused, scratching at his chin.

“Most likely,” Yusei said. “That would be smart. Hermann fixated on Hidden Knight-Hook too
much, and that didn’t work.”

“Yeah,” Crow wiggled his eyebrows. “I made sure of that, but I dunno… Something is telling me
we haven’t seen the last of that card.”

///

“And it’s heads!” Hans exclaimed triumphantly. “Cactus Bouncer’s attack is reduced to zero!”

*Akiza: 2050*

*Hans: 2150*

“I end my turn,” Akiza scowled sourly. She accelerated slightly. She felt better riding in front. If
she didn’t want to look back at Hans’ ugly mug and even uglier monsters she didn’t have to.

“Excellent,” Hans chuckled. “I draw and enter my Standby Phase, meaning Fairy Box takes five
hundred lifepoints to stay on the field.”

*Akiza: 2050*

*Hans: 1650*
“Now I summon another Black Salvo! Now he can use his ability to special summon Mechanicalchaser from the graveyard!”

“A tuner and a normal monster. Smells like a synchro summon,” Akiza muttered.

“I tune level three Black Salvo with level four Mechanicalchaser to synchro summon…Karakuri Shogun Burei!”

(Karakuri Shogun MDL 00 Burei: Atk: 2600 Def: 1900)

Burei stood tall, a heavily armored samurai. His face was a mask of mechanics; a cybernetic samurai.

“That would’ve happened if I didn’t have my other trap Pollinosis! With this trap, I tribute Dark Verger to negate Burei’s summons, and destroy him!” Akiza quickly countered.

“But now you’re wide open for my second Black Salvo to attack you directly!”

Akiza: 1950
Hans: 1650

“Your turn!”

Akiza drew her next card with a shaking hand. Her field was pretty much empty. It was just like back in Yliaster. She’d been faced with a villain and…and she could barely do anything to help. Her dragon’s flames hadn’t left even a dent on Mako… He’d tossed her away with ease. All she could do was act as place holder until someone stronger came along. Was she even capable of beating someone so pathetic in comparison? A meager bully?

“Akiza!”

“Huh?” the redhead was pulled out of her trance by a familiar voice.

“Akiza!”

“Crow?”

“Look!” He pointed into the stands.

Akiza’s eyes combed the benches Crow had indicated. She was astonished to see her parents! But she wasn’t seeing things. Hideo and Setsuko were sitting in the stands. Well, Setsuko was sitting, cheering her daughter on. Hideo had made a flag the same size as himself with the 5Ds logo on it. And Akiza’s name to her slight embarrassment. Hideo was waving the flag like crazy.

Akiza couldn’t help but laugh a little. That’s right. She sighed, letting the negative thoughts and feelings flow out of her. It doesn’t matter how much I do, as long as I’m here to help my friends and give it my all!

She met Crow’s eyes again on her next lap. Thank you, she mouthed. Crow gave her a cheesy thumbs up.

Okay, what to do. If Hans manages to get Burei back on the field, I’m a goner. Plus, because of Fairy Box, my attacks could end up hurting me more than him. Until I can destroy it, I’ve gotta take the chance.
“I summon Rose Lover in attack mode! Rose Lover, attack Black Salvo!”

(Rose Lover: Atk: 800 Def: 800)

Rose Lover, a less powerful card, stood gracefully on the field. Her long blond hair matched her long, flowing dress. She flew beside Akiza, skirts ruffling in the winds.

///

“Oh, this is risky!” Luna cried. She buried her face in her hands. “I can’t watch!”

“But it could pay off too,” Bruno pointed out. “If Akiza forces Hans to use Fairy Box, he’ll keep it on the field, allowing it to chip away at his lifepoints.”

“Which means, because of the toll, Hans can ideally last for three turns,” Lise said.

“Oh, so it’s risky for both Akiza and Hans,” Leo realized.

Bruno smiled at him. “Exactly.”

///

“I play Fairy Box!” Hans countered. “And I’m calling heads!”

Both turbo duelists waited. The coin flipped painstakingly slow.

“Hans guessed wrong! Akiza’s Rose Lover has the green light!” the MC squealed.

Akiza: 1950
Hans: 950

///

“Yes!” Lise bounced up on her toes, punching the air. “It worked!”

“Luna, you can look now.” Leo tapped his sister’s shoulder.

Her fingers parted, but she didn’t lower her hands. “This is much too close for comfort.”

///

“I place one card facedown, ending my turn,” Akiza said.

Hans grumbled to himself as he drew his card. His scowl turned into a grin. Akiza was in trouble.

Akiza: 1950
Hans: 450

“I play my speed spell Silent Doom! Since I have plenty of speed counters, I can target one normal monster in my graveyard, like Mechanicalchaser, and special summon it in face up defense position! I’ll also play my third Black Salvo, tuning them both together to synchro summon…my second Burei!”

Akiza gasped. “You have two of them?!”
“That’s right, little missy! And he’ll be using his ability to special summon Muzanichiha in defense mode!”

*(Karakuri Bushi MDL 6318 Muzanichiha: Atk: 1800 Def: 600)*

Muzanichiha brandished a thick sword, ready for combat. Yet he was dressed in clothes and a hat meant for travel.

“I don’t know what your facedowns are hiding, but Burei will make short work of your Rose Lover!”

*Akiza: 150*

*Hans: 450*

///

“Now they’re both in the danger zone,” Yusei commented, crossing his arms.

“But Hans will have to destroy Fairy Box if he wants to continue next turn,” Lise reminded them, pointing to the card on Bruno’s screen.

“If he has a next turn,” Crow added with a confident grin. “Akiza is still in this.”

///

Akiza consulted her cards, biting her lip. This next draw would have to be one hell of a doozy. She still had Dark Verger and Rose Lover’s graveyard abilities, but they couldn’t save her without a proper catalyst.

*Think. You only have a hundred and fifty lifepoints. You have to think about the best way to leave Lise everything she needs.*

“I draw! It’s now or never! I activate the effect of Rose Lover in my graveyard to special summon Copy Plant! And when I have a tuner on my field, Dark Verger is special summoned from the graveyard in defense position.”

“Plant all the weeds you want, little girl,” Hans mocked, pulling ahead of Akiza with a cocky smirk. “They can’t save you!”

“Good thing I’ve got Dandylion to help me out then! Now, let’s tune all three of these beasts together to synchro summon…Splendid Rose! And, when Dandylion leaves the field, two tokens are summoned to my f-”

Hans laughed, gunning his acceleration. “A good try, but Burei still has more attack points. Did you forget how to do math?”

“You really shouldn’t interrupt a lady when she’s talking!” Akiza quipped right back. “By removing Dark Verger from play, Splendid Rose can halve the attack points of one monster on the field!”

“Don’t forget! Fairy Box can-“

“I haven’t forgotten that annoying thing, so that’s why I’m playing my facedown speed spell Mystical Space Typhoon!”
“She’s gonna beat him!” Leo laughed to himself, unable to stay still from the excitement.

“Don’t say that,” Luna groaned, covering her eyes again.

(Burei: Atk:2600 -> 1300)

“Now Splendid Rose, attack Burei! Whip it!”

Akiza: 150

Hans: 0

“In a stunning come from behind victory, Akiza has triumphed over Hans! Will Team Catastrophe’s last rider, Nicholas, turn the tables?” The MC asked dramatically.

Hideo and Setsuko cheered the loudest out of the audience members. Hideo also pointed excitedly at his daughter whenever anyone caught his eye. “That’s my daughter!”

Luciano snickered again. “Looks like those buffoons can’t even hold a candle to the Signers! You came up with this plan, and it’s not even working!”

Placido’s fists clenched, but he remained silent. Luciano was just being a child. As usual.

Luciano’s green eyes combed Placido hungrily for a reaction. “I can’t wait to see the look on Joel’s face when he finds out what you did, and that you failed at it too!”

“It isn’t over yet,” Placido snapped.

Hans braked to a somber stop in Team Catastrophe’s pit. He held out the team marker, head hanging. “I’m sorry, Nicholas. At least I managed to save Muzanichiha…and I left a trap for you too.”

“Shut up,” Nicholas barked. He slapped the team marker on his arm. He took an extra moment to double check his sleeve, and then he was rocketing out of the pit without a backward glance.

“And here comes Nicholas!” the MC said. “According to tournament rules, Akiza’s turn automatically ended, meaning Nicholas starts the round!”

Akiza: 150

Nicholas: 4000

“Let’s duel!”

Instinctively, Yusei reached out for Lise’s hand. He stopped right before his fingers could touch hers. She didn’t notice his hand withdrawing.
Crow did. “I hate to say it,” one corner of Crow’s lips curled up. “But you should probably get ready, Lise.”

Jack nodded sagely. “It’s unlikely Akiza will get far with only a hundred and fifty lifepoints.”

“Right,” Lise left the pit.

“Yusei,” Crow spoke tentatively. “Do you wanna talk about…something?”

He did. Truthfully, he wanted to talk to everyone. But… “Now isn’t the time. Let’s get through this match first.”

“Sure,” Jack agreed. He and Crow met each other’s eyes for a brief second, but returned to the duel.

///

“I draw!” Nicholas began. “I set two cards facedown to start. Next, I summon Nishipachi to the field in attack mode!”

(Karakuri Strategist MDL 248 Nishipachi: Atk: 500 Def: 1600)

Nishipachi was dressed in robes, sprawled out like an old man about to play board games. His robotic face peaked out from underneath his floppy, draping hat.

Akiza’s brows drew taught across her forehead. Only five hundred attack? What’s he playing at?

“I tune my Muzanichihai with Nishipachi to synchro summon…Burei!”

“You have a Burei too?!?” Akiza’s mouth dropped open.

Nicholas smirked. “And plenty more where that came from! Burei’s successful summoning allows me to special summon Ninishi in defense mode!”

(Karakuri Komachi MDL 224 Ninishi: Atk: 0 Def: 1900)

Ninishi was dressed in an elaborate kimono. She skipped along with her controller, hair immobile the buns were so tightly fastened to her head. Like the other Karakuri monsters, she had a robotic face and mask.

“Now Burei, attack Splendid Rose!”

///

Starfire sat ready and waiting for Lise. Her helmet rested on the seat. Lise caught her reflection in the helmet’s vizor for half a second. She looked tired, judging by the bags underneath her eyes. And despite being surrounded by her teammates, it was hard not to feel alone. She felt like their shared pain was driving a wedge between them instead of bringing them together.

///

“I play my trap Wicked Rebirth!” Akiza managed to get in before Burei could finish Splendid Rose off. “By paying 800 lifepoints, I can special summon a synchro monster from my graveyard! Welcome back, Black Rose Dragon!”

Akiza: 0
Nicholas: 4000

“That sneaky little bitch,” Nicholas muttered under his breath. *She opted to take herself out, and leave her friend with two synchro monsters instead of nothing. Doesn’t matter.* Nicholas smirked to himself. *I’ve got more than one chance to destroy this next bitch.* He glanced at his sleeve. *Guaranteed…*

Chapter End Notes

(Hi guys! Glad to be writing again, and weirdly glad to be writing a duel! Pretty much two duels, and then a third, since Lise vs Nicholas is coming up. I mean, the Spirit World arc was fun to write, but man was it heavy and hurt like a bitch. I also wanted to make the Team Catastrophe arc a little longer because the anime felt like it built up to a small pay off. Plus, it’s harder to duel a bunch of evil robots if you’re already exhausted. I also wanted to throw a little Firebirdshipping in there, just to explore. So far it’s feeling pretty cute and sweet. We’ll see. Once again, thank you all SO much for your continued support. It means more than I can write.)
Akiza found Lise ready and waiting in the pit station. Along with Crow and the twins. Yusei stayed at a distance.

She parked beside Lise. “Sorry…”

Lise raised an eyebrow.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t do more…”

Lise got up and wrapped Akiza in a tight hug. Her left leg hung awkwardly out of the duel runner’s seat, and their helmets bumped together awkwardly, but she still did it. She knew Lise wouldn’t yell at her or do anything mean, but she wasn’t expecting a hug.


Akiza sniffled, a couple tears escaping her eyes. She squeezed Lise back as hard as she could.

But Lise had to get going. Akiza squeezed her friend back for another half second, then pulled away. Leo and Luna needed to transfer the cards Akiza had left her and the team marker to her arm.

“Kick his ass for me, will you?” Akiza half laughed, half choked.

Lise smiled as she lowered her vizor. “Anything for you.”

Off she went. A practically even matchup awaited her on the field. Except for the Cards of Darkness.

Akiza stood, slipping her helmet off. Crow rested his arm on her shoulder. “Don’t worry. You did great.”

She smiled at him. “Thanks. You weren’t too shabby yourself.”

Crow grinned. The situation was dire, but her smile was warm, like her eyes. “After you?”

They followed the twins back to Bruno and the computers.

Yusei hung back. He held his still tender arm gently, watching Lise drive away. “Be safe…my love…” he whispered.

///

“It’s time to duel!”

*Lise: 4000
Nicholas: 4000

“And just like that, both teams are down to their last rider of the match! They’re neck and neck! Whoever the winner turns out to be, this is sure to be exciting!” The MC brought everyone up to
Lise took another second to remind herself of the field’s layout. She’d been left with Black Rose Dragon and Splendid Rose. Wicked Rebirth kept Akiza’s dragon on the field, and her second facedown…Lise grinned. *Synchro Material. Akiza, you’re the best!*

“I summon Solar Butterfly in attack mode! When I successfully summon this monster, I can draw two cards from my deck! Next, I play the trap card Synchro Material! This card allows me to synchro summon using a monster on your field!”

“What?” Nicholas practically screamed through his teeth.

“The tradeoff is I can’t conduct my Battle Phase when this card is activated, but I’ll take it. I tune level seven Burei with level one Solar Butterfly to synchro summon…Crimson Starburst Dragon!”

Lise’s ace monster took to the skies. It flew beside her, its burning wings practically glowing with power. Lise’s field was rather crowded with three synchro monsters.

“I end my turn.”

“Whoa! In one move, Lise Kururugi has three synchro monsters, and took down her opponent’s synchro! Not to mention, if you’re familiar with her fiery strategies, you wouldn’t want to be in Nicholas’s boots right now!”

“I draw,” Nicholas spoke through clenched teeth. He glanced at his new card, and smirked.

///

“Uh oh, did he just smile?” Leo’s hazel eyes widened.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Bruno said, but his pale eyes never left his screen.

///

“I summon Sazank to my field in attack mode!”

(*Karakuri Ninja MDL 339 Sazank: Atk: 1200 Def: 1200*)

“Next, I use Ninishi’s ability to special summon another Karakuri monster in addition to my Normal Summon. I choose Inashichi!”

(*Karakuri Merchant MDL 96 Inashichi: Atk: 500 Def: 1500*)

Sazank was a wooden cybernetic ninja hybrid. Clad all in black and carrying a telescope, the monster was quite intimidating. On the other hand, Inashichi’s warm wooden browns and light blue clothing was a stark contrast. Inashichi seemed to be a traveling salesman, carrying his wares on his back.

“If you’re smart, you know what happens next!” Nicholas laughed. “I tune level three Ninishi with my level two Inashichi and level three Sazank to synchro summon…Karakuri Buriedo!”

(*Karakuri Steel Shogun MDL 00X Bureido: Atk: 2800 Def: 1700*)

*This might be a problem.* Lise scowled at her screen. Bureido’s shadow was already looming over her.
Unlike the other Karakuri monsters, Bureido’s entire body was made of steel. Dressed like a metal samurai, he held two katana longer than his entire body. His helmet sported horns that were clearly just as dangerous as his blades.

“Bureido’s ability allows me to special summon Haipa to my field in defense mode!”

(Karakuri Muso MDL 818 Haipa: Atk: 2100 Def: 1100)

Haipa resembled a wooden fisherman. He brandished a sharp looking spear, and a coat to keep the rain off him.

///

Both Hans and Hermann sneered devilishly at their screens.

“This bitch is done for. Nicholas will pick those synchros off one by one, no problem.”

Hermann nodded. “And even if she has a trick up her sleeve, Nicholas has more than one card up his sleeve.”

///

“Bureido, attack Black Rose Dragon!”

Lise: 3600
Nicholas: 4000

Lise hung on as both her friend’s cards were destroyed. At least she had Wicked Rebirth and Black Rose Dragon in her graveyard. Maybe she could bring the Black Rose back.

“I end my turn with two facedowns!”

Lise frowned at her two remaining monsters. Gears of her brain turning like mad. This man, this team, was not going to beat her. Not after everything they’d done.

But Bureido was in her way. And he was going to keep sending her monsters to the graveyard with his whopping twenty-eight hundred attack points. Using Starburst’s removing from play ability only worked for one turn, and wouldn’t do much good with Haipa out on the field. Especially if Nicholas could keep summoning out monsters to protect him.

Maybe that’s exactly what I should let him do…

“I draw,” Lise’s strength renewed with the faith in her plan locked in. “I set one monster in facedown defense mode, and switch Splendid Rose into defense mode! Now Crimson Starburst Dragon, attack Haipa! Breath of fire!”

Nicholas’s smirk didn’t leave his face even though he had to send Haipa to the graveyard. “You’re grasping at straws. You can’t defeat my Bureido and you know it!” He laughed for good measure.

Lise bit her tongue to keep from yelling back. Fine, think you’ve already won. I do my best work when I’m underestimated.

///

“This isn’t looking good,” Leo bit his knuckles. “Nicholas reversed things so fast!”
Jack crossed his arms. He wore a sullen scowl, violet eyes combing the screens. “Maybe she lost her nerve. It is her first WRGP duel.”

“I’d think she’d get too angry to duel straight,” Akiza was only half joking.

“Nope,” Yusei shook his head. A little smile played across his lips, showing his teeth, but only just. “It’s called strategy.”

///

“My turn,” Nicholas said. “And I think I’ll have Bureido attack Crimson Starburst Dragon!”

Lise white-knuckled her controls, keeping her runner pointed forward. She was a noob, but she was not going to let setbacks undo her.

*Lise: 3300
Nicholas: 4000

///

“Right for her dragon then,” Bruno mused.

Yusei bobbed his head to the side. Credit where credit was due. “It’s smart. Bureido is stronger than both her synchros, but Starburst can remove monsters from play for a turn by discarding two cards from her hand. Leaving Lise the chance to use that ability is too big a risk.”

///

“I set one monster in facedown defense position, and end my turn,” Nicholas finished with a flourish.

Lise read back through her cards. Blue eyes swept the field. *He’s shoring up his defenses, and trying to back me into a corner at the same time. If I’m going to pull this off, and keep my lifepoints intact… but…what if it doesn’t matter?*

Her grip tightened painfully on the controls. This team didn’t play fair. They were nowhere near as powerful as Mako had been, or terrifying. But even when she’d been at her most powerful, and worked together with her friends…It had all meant nothing in the end. They still couldn’t defeat Mako. Technically, he’d been defeated by his own greediness.

Lise’s vision tunneled. Sweat coated her forehead and hands. What if she wasn’t powerful or strong enough? What if Crow and Akiza’s efforts weren’t enough? What if all their strategies didn’t work? Would it matter?

She managed to glance at the team pit station. A lighthouse beam, sweeping for a boat in the darkness. Luna offered a small smile. The younger girl’s hands clasped before her, eyebrows knit with worry. Like a domino effect, her friends faces whizzed by. Light in the dark.

She would be okay. She and all her friends had their own strengths. She could do this much, at least. She owed that much to all of them, especially Andre and Jean.

“Its my…turn!” Lise drew a card.

And cracked the tiniest of smiles.
“Is she smiling?” Leo pounced on Jack’s arm. “Please tell me she’s smiling!”

“I didn’t see, Leo!” Jack sounded exasperated. The stress of the duels was getting to all of them.

“Hard to tell from this distance,” Akiza said.

Luna nodded. “It was a smile.”

Crow tapped on the computer screen. “I hope that means she has a strategy or Nicholas is gonna run her over.”

“Come on, little bitch!” Nicholas slowed down until he was even with Lise. Before she could do anything with her new card, Nicholas slammed into the side of her runner.

Caught off guard, Lise swerved away from him, dropping her card in the process.

Nicholas chuckled cruelly to himself and drove ahead, kicking up winds that blew Lise’s card farther forward. “Oops.”

Lise righted herself simply enough. But grabbing her fallen card was another story.

“Shit,” she muttered under her breath. Lise’s blue eyes tracked the card’s descent before her.

“Holy-“ Jack was tearing his hair out, or at least he seemed to be making an attempt. “Did she just do what I think she just did?!?”

Crow started pacing back and forth. “And I thought the Spirit World was stressful!”

“I know! Those jerks use anything they can to cheat,” Akiza waited with baited breath.

The others, too, were frozen. Watching and barely daring to breathe.

Lise’s card was getting dangerously close to the ground. She was coming up on it, but if it fell to the ground, she was a goner for sure.

She didn’t have time to think. Lise accelerated, eyes never leaving the falling card. At the last second, when the card was likely inches from the ground, she leaned to the side, unseating herself. Lise snagged the card, and swept herself back in the driver’s seat in one fluid, dancer-like, motion.

Domino stadium practically exploded with cheering. Jarra and Jose put their fingers to their lips to whistle. Even Garret got to his feet to applaud along with Sasha. Leo and Luna’s friends were losing their minds dancing around, all but Sly. Even Trudge and Mina cheered with Carly and Breo.

Lise slowed down a little. She wanted to keep Nicholas in front of her. Best way to ensure she could see what his next stunt would be.

Only then did she allow herself to relax. For a minute. She blew a wayward strand of hair out of her
face, adrenaline wearing off. She was left shaking a little, sweat drying on her back, and eyes wide. She blew a sigh of relief. “Holy shit, I can’t believe I just did that…”

///

“She’s not crashing!” Hermann growled. He smacked his fist into one of the computers. Cracks spread out from the impact site. Permanently busted computer.

“First the bird brain, then the witch, now this freak girl! I thought this card was supposed to win duels for us, not draw them out!” Hans glowered at their one remaining monitor.

“I just hope Nicholas knows what he’s doing.”

///

Team 5Ds took a collective breath.

Jack sat down heavily beside Bruno. “I think my heart stopped for a second there.”

Yusei chuckled a little bit. Things still weren’t perfect, but he could still take pride in his girlfriend. “Now you know how I feel.”

///

“Okay,” Lise smiled. “Back to the duel. Unfortunately, after that move, I’m staying safe with a facedown, and calling it good.”

“Ha!” Nicholas laughed, accelerating. “Enjoy it while you can, bitch! This duel is pretty much over!”

“Just take your turn,” Lise shot back.

///

Yusei glared at Nicholas. His knuckles cracked. No one had called Lise a bitch in a long time, but he still hated hearing it.

“It’s not even over yet,” Crow groaned. “I just don’t want anyone else to crash.”

Akiza held onto the twins for some support, and they did the same to her. They were so close to the end, but still had so far to go.

///

“Bureido!” Nicholas cried. “Attack Splendid Rose!”

Okay, that’s fine. She’s in defense mode. Still doing okay.

“And I’ll be playing my facedown; the trap card Strike Slash!”

“What?!"

“You’re right to be scared, little girl! Strike Slash gives Bureido seven hundred more attack points, and deals damage even if your monster is in defense mode!”

*Lise: 1800*
Nicholas: 4000

That hurt more than I thought it would...But I'm still here. Lise sent Splendid Rose to the graveyard.

“I end my turn,” Nicholas smirked to himself.

This duel is in the bag. It doesn’t matter what this bitch does, I’m the one coming out on top. Soon as her little desperate attempts to defend herself are gone, there goes the last of her lifepoints. Nicholas checked his sleeve. But even if she tries to get out of her corner, I’ve got plenty of trump cards to destroy her with!

“It’s my turn!” Lise took a deep breath. If her strategy worked, it was just beginning. “I summon Baby Fire Kirin in attack mode!”

(Baby Fire Kirin: Atk: 300 Def: 300)

Lise’s new beast was a small, four legged creature. It swam through the air, as fluid as a river. It’s mane and tail were flames, and a single horn sprouted from its head the color of freshly cut rubies.

“And I’ll also be flipping my facedown monster up, a newbie, but a goodie, I hope,” Lise’s lips curled up slightly. “This is Fire Filly! Both monsters are level one, but Baby Fire Kirin is a tuner. I think we all know what happens next! Time to synchro summon! Come on out…Ash Protector! In defense mode, of course. I’ll end my turn here.”

“Time to finally end this duel!” Nicholas drew his next card with relish. “I flip summon Inashichi, and I’ll summon a new monster: Shirokunishi!”

(Karakuri Toad MDL 4624 Shirokunishi: Atk: 200 Def: 1000)

Shirokunishi looked more like a barrel than a toad. Perhaps a sentient barrel someone had brought to life via Roomba-esque personification.

But Nicholas wasn’t finished. “I’m tuning them with Haipa to synchro summon another Burei! Burei’s ability allows me to special summon a Karakuri monster from my deck! I summon Kuick!”

(Karakuri Ninja MDL 919 Kuick: Atk: 1700 Def: 1500)

Another ninja, Kuick was built for speedy stealth. He sported a blade and a kunai.

“Burei can change the battle position of one monster on the field, and I choose your little Ash Protector!

Okay, here goes…

“Bureido, Burei, and Kuick attack!”

“I play Call of the Haunted!” Lise shouted out.

///

“She must be bringing back Starburst!” Leo danced around excitedly.

Luna shook her head. “But Starburst isn’t powerful enough to defeat Bureido or Burei.”

“Luna’s right, she needs a total game changer,” Akiza said.
“I bring back…Black Rose Dragon!”

“So what?” Nicholas scoffed. “She can’t do anything to stop my monsters, and neither can you!”

“Actually, that’s where you’re wrong!” Lise stared down the three advancing monsters without flinching. “See when Black Rose Dragon is successfully summoned, she gets so excited she can’t help but destroy everything on the field!”

Nicholas froze. “Everything?”

“Everything! My cards, your cards; they all go!” Lise glared at her opponent as the entire field vanished.

“Holy moly!” the MC gasped. “Both riders are back to square one! What a comeback!”

“My turn, yes?” Lise smirked. “I’ll place one card facedown, and summon Smoke Raven in attack mode! Smoke Raven attacks you directly!”

Lise: 1800
Nicholas: 3200

“End turn!”

“I draw, and I activate Cup of Ace!” Nicholas said. “By dropping two speed counters, I flip a coin. If it’s heads, I get to draw two cards. Tails, you get two cards.”

“Oo, gambling, fun,” Lise rolled her eyes.

“And it’s heads! I get two cards. I also play my speed spell Allure of Darkness, which I can play by banishing a dark monster from my hand. Now I can draw two cards from my deck!”

“Next I summon…Hidden Knight-Hook!”

“No way! But I thought Crow-“

“Destroyed it?” Nicholas grinned malevolently. “Ha! A Card of Darkness can never die! It merely rests in the shadows until it can rise again!”

“You cheat,” Lise growled, hands curling into fists.

“You call it cheating, I call it creative opportunity striker. It doesn’t matter how you get to the finish, just that you’re the first one there!

“I’ll also set a card before having Hidden Knight-Hook attack! Slice her little bird up!”

Lise: 1000
Nicholas: 3200

Lise winced, the attack washing over her. It was almost like dueling a psychic, but the dark miasma was hard to miss.
“Here it comes!” Crow’s grey eyes zeroed in on the shadows beneath Lise’s duel runner.

“Come on, Lise,” Yusei held his breath. Remember everything you learned.

///

Lise felt the shadowy hook before she saw it. The miasma so dark it was practically choking her. She froze, remembering it wasn’t just a hook down in those shadows. The monster’s entire body was in there.

But it was do or die. As in right now!

Lise swerved hard. Maybe, a little too hard. Her balance was thrown off, and she frantically attempt to course correct.

///

“Finally, she’s going down!” Hans sat back in his seat.

“And it’s another win for Team Catastrophe,” Hermann grinned.

///

It was hard to pull herself out of it, but Lise forced herself to take a deep breath. Wait…Instead of fighting it…

She leaned low over her controls. She pushed into the swerve, moving with the flow of it. Starfire responded accordingly, doing a 180, and drifting backwards.

Nicholas looked back to see his handiwork. The unique wreckage of every crash was his favorite part of their Cards of Darkness. His team didn’t have to be good, they just had to last longer than their opponents.

“Yo asshole!” Lise called out to him, still driving backwards to allow herself to catch her breath.

“What the hell?!” Nicholas’s eyes nearly bugged out of his face.

///

“Yeah, you tell him!” Akiza shouted, pumping her fist.

“That was so awesome!” Leo and Luna were hugging and jumping up and down.

Yusei smiled, putting his thumbs in his pockets. “Yes, she is,” he whispered.

///

Lise wore a triumphant smile, but she was coated in sweat. Her eyes always a sky blue, were so intense Nicholas swore he could see fiery flames in them. She completed the circle, drifting back to driving forwards.

Nicholas could only watch her accelerate past him. Who the hell is this woman?

“Time to take us home!” Lise drew her next card. “Because Ash Protector and Crimson Starburst Dragon are in my graveyard, I can perform a synchro summon!”
“What? From your graveyard?!”

“That’s right! I synchro summon…” Lise threw her hand up dramatically. “Shining Phoenix Dragon!”

*(Shining Phoenix Dragon: Atk: 3300 Def: 2500)*

Flames engulfed Lise and her duel runner. Oranges swirled with rich blues and red. All of which matched the fiery flames of Lise’s dragon.

“Shining Phoenix, make sure Hidden Knight-Hook *never* comes back! Shining rebirth!”

Nicholas was thrown so off guard, he forgot to activate Hidden Knight-Hook’s ability. It wasn’t hard to see why. Lise had performed a new kind of synchro summoning, and she was covered in fire!

_Lise: 1000_

_Nicholas: 1700_

Lise saluted Nicholas he came to, pulling even with her. “You’re move!”

Nicholas drew a card, seething like mad. *Fine, I can’t use my first trump card. I’ll use the second!*

“I place a card facedown and end my turn!”

“All rightie then,” Lise drew her card. “Shining Phoenix, attack Nicholas directly!”

“Oh no you don’t! If I’m going down, you’re coming with me! I play my second Card of Darkness Doom’s Ray! When you attack me directly, the attack is negated, and we both take eight hundred points of damage! And since I have four cards, you can’t escape!”

Dark miasma oozed out of the trap card like a mutating disease. It reached hungrily for both Lise and Nicholas, like a mindless creature made only for consuming. The darkness latched onto Lise’s flames, greedily consuming as it surrounded her to take out lifepoints. In no time, Lise couldn’t see anything through the flames and nebulous darkness. She fumbled for her controls. She *had* to activate Shining Phoenix’s ability!

“Wait, no stop!” Nicholas screamed, trying to bat the dark miasma away from him. “You’re not supposed to affect me too!”

///

“Lise!”

“She needs help!” Akiza ran out of the pit.

“What is that stuff?” Leo couldn’t stop staring at it.

///

In the nick of time, Lise found the right button. “I play Shining Phoenix Dragon’s ability! As long as she’s on the field, the duel doesn’t end even when I have no lifepoints!”

The miasma backed off of Lise. She lost the lifepoints, but Shining Phoenix Dragon protected her. Nicholas was not so lucky.
Nicholas screamed as the miasma consumed him and his duel runner.

“Aw damn it,” Lise swore. She turned around and drove back into the miasma. She emerged with Nicholas slung over her runner. Not a moment too soon. Next second the miasma caused Nicholas’s duel runner to explode. Shrapnel rained down around them, but Lise was able to pull to a clean stop.

“You…saved me?” Nicholas got up, staring at Lise as she pulled off her helmet.

“Only so you could go to jail,” Lise responded curtly.

“You did it!” Akiza tackled Lise into a hug, making Lise drop her helmet.

“But thank god it’s finally over,” Lise laughed a little.

“All right it’s…over!” the MC cried. “Winning two games straight, Team 5Ds advance to the finals!”

Of course, the crowd responded with matching excitement.

///

Sherry’s green eyes were alight. She had to see those cards. Cards of Darkness…They might lead me to Yliaster’s master plan.

Placido scowled deeply at the celebrating stadium. “You’ve served your purpose.”

“Wow, your lackies couldn’t even defeat the Crimson Dragon!” Luciano burst into laughter. “You’ve really stepped in it now!” He stopped laughing and looked around. “Wait…Placido? Where’d you go?”

///

Ghost bots began to flow like a swarm of bees onto the many streets and highways of New Domino city.

Placido stood high atop a building to survey his army from. “Go forth, my Diablos!” he commanded, pointing dramatically. “Descend this city into chaos!”

Chapter End Notes

(And another chapter down! I kinda missed writing duels. They can be fun, but man do they take a lot out of you. I feel like I need to take a nap for 30 years. But I’d rather continue writing for now, and get my degree. That’s important. Once again, I want to say I appreciate each and every one of my readers and commenters/reviewers. It means…it means so much that people have stuck with me for so many years, and allowed my writing, myself, and Lise to grow together. So thank you, and hopefully I’ll be back next week with another chapter. Thank you!)
Sherry made a beeline for Nicholas. She was already grabbing him by the coat and shaking him
down before he had any clue what was going on. “You! Where did you get zhat card you ‘ad?!””
She didn’t wait for a response. Instead, Sherry snatched his deck out of the duel disk, and pulled
out the Card of Darkness; Doom’s Ray. Right before Sherry’s eyes, the card’s name, description,
and artwork faded to nothing.
“What’s zhis?”
///
Ghost bots, numbering in the hundreds surged into the city. The ignored pedestrians cries of
protest at nearly being run over. They also ignored red lights. Many even smashed through into
duel lanes, broken glass littering the streets.
More people watched the herds of Ghost bots overwhelm the duel lanes. Groups of four peeled off
into every single available street. There would be no escape for any duelist.
Just as the next teams were in the middle of their duel, the ghost bots surrounded the closest turbo
duelist.
“What the hell?”
One Ghost bot smirked. “We will be adding ourselves to the duel.”
The turbo duelist was forced into Battle Royale mode.
“Wait, but no one told me about this?!”
“Duel,” Ghost smirked. The white infinity lights of Yliaster’s power engulfed two ghosts and the
turbo duelist. “It’s my turn. I summon Ally of Justice Nullifier!”
Nullifier looked like a cross between an insect and a centaur. All rolled into a red robot with guns
mounted to its back.
(Ally of Justice Nullifier: Atk: 1600 Def: 1200)
“Next, I place two cards facedown and end my turn.”
The second Ghost took his turn. “My move. I summon Ally of Justice Garadholg!”
A similar monster to the previous one, this mechanized warrior brandished two lightsabers.
(Ally of Justice Garadholg: Atk: 1600 Def: 400)
“I activate a trap!” The first Ghost said. “Release and Rebirth! I release a card on my field, and
receive damage equal to its attack power!”
Ghost1: 2400
“Then I’m allowed to special summon the released monster to my opponent’s field!”
The cornered turbo duelist gasped. “He gave his own monster to the other one?”
Ghost two smirked, extending his hand dramatically. “Both of my monsters attack you directly!”
But the turbo duelist wasn’t going down without a fight. “I won’t let you! I activate my trap Negate
Attack! It negates your monsters’ attack and ends the Battle Phase!”
“It’s no use,” The first Ghost said. “God’s Declaration activates!”
“What?”
“By paying half my lifepoints, the card negates the activation of Negate Attack!”
Ghost1: 1200
“Go Garadholg, Nullifier! Attack!”
Turbo Duelist: 0
As the first turbo duelists lost, resulting in a crash, his former opponent was realizing he was in
quite the tight spot.
A third Ghost advanced on him with a sinister sneer. “It’s my turn!” He drew a card.
The four Ghost bots made short work of him too. They powered on through the smoke of the
crash. They had more victims to pursue.

Placido laughed cruelly to himself. Smoke arose from all the crashes the Ghosts were causing. “As of now, the WRGP Preliminaries have switched to Battle Royale Mode. Our duels will be over life and limb. Now, if you value your lives, finish the Circuit like death is at your heels, turbo duelists!”

“Attention!” The MC’s face appeared in the holo-sphere, voice echoing out. “We have just received some urgent news! There appears to be a large amount of accidents occurring in the preliminary matches being held on the highway!”

The sphere’s footage switched to the duel lanes of the city. The numerous crashes. The audience members watched, the tension palpable. Whispers and hushed alarm washed over everyone. “I ask everyone in attendance here at the stadium to remain in their seats and remain patient!”

“What’s going on here?” Yusei asked in a hushed voice.

“And how can we help,” Lise added.

Akiza caught Trudge and Mina leaving the stadium. “Follow me.”

Mina stood with her hands on her hips. Trudge fiddled with the police radio in their shared cruiser. “What in the world could be causing so many accidents?” Mina demanded to know.

“Control,” Trudge spoke into the radio. “What the hell happened?”

“We’re not sure. The highway’s Turbo Duel System was just overridden. It’s stuck in Battle Royale Mode.”

“What?!” Trudge’s blood went cold. This was bad.

Akiza came running up with her friends in tow. Mina greeted them with a nod. She knew her police force was going to need all the help it could get in this sticky situation.

“One second, sir. I’ve confirmed a new identifier signal…” the man on the other line gasped.

“Why are there so many?!”

“Can we get a visual on where the identifier signal is coming from?” Yusei asked.

Trudge leaned into the police cruiser’s open window. He tapped on the car’s screen. The Public Security Maintenance Bureau popped up first. The screen zoomed in on the street level. A familiar robot filled the screen.

“They’re the Ghosts!” Yusei gasped.

“Ghosts!” Jack clenched his teeth.

“An army of them,” Lise said. And I thought one of those fuckers was bad.

Sherry and Mizoguchi pulled up beside Team 5Ds. “What is it?”

“Ghosts have appeared,” Bruno reported.

“Yes,” Sherry nodded. “They showed up on the Stadium monitors too.”

“So, are they after all the teams? Or just us?” Akiza’s brown eyes darted amongst her friends.

“Looks like everyone at this point,” Bruno said. “With this many Ghosts, whoever is behind this must be trying to destroy the tournament.”

“Zhat’s my feelings as well,” Sherry said.

Yusei’s fists clenched. “Then let’s take on their challenge, and the duels of darkness they set up.”

“I agree with you,” Mizoguchi said. “But how do you plan on doing so? There’s so many.”

“There must be someone controlling them. We should all split up and search for them.”

“Sounds like a plan. I’m in too.”

“Huh?” Jack and the others blinked at the newcomer. “Kaz?”

Kaz winked at his friend. “Don’t get in the way this time, Jack”

“That’s my line.”

“Okay,” Trudge said. “But everyone needs to be careful. The highway’s system has been overridden into Battle Royale Mode.”

“This is crazy!” Bruno spread his hands. “Obviously in a duel like this, the side with greater
numbers wins!”
Yusei nodded in agreement. “In a duel with Ghost, actual damage is bound to happen. We all need
to duel quickly and carefully.”
“Even so,” Yusei raised his fist. “I’ll be damned if the peace we’ve been working so hard to obtain
for New Domino City is taken away!”
Lise took a deep breath. They weren’t out of the woods yet. “Right, so who’s going where?”

///

Joel frowned down at the map of the City’s circuit. It was being completed much too quickly.
“The Circuit’s coming up smoothly, huh?” Luciano settled into his seat. He kicked his feet up on
the arm of the chair. He continued, an air of innocence to him.
“But a circuit that depends on making Turbo Duelists ride is such a drag. In order to complete the
Circuit, we have to harness the power of Momentum. Fortunately for us, the humans of this world
have not realized Momentum’s true power yet. Only once the Circuit is complete will God’s
Shrine appear.
“But, boy, is this Circuit huge. It’s as big as the entire city!” Luciano raised his hand nonchalantly.
“When the castle shows up, the whole city is gonna be destroyed!”
Joel was unphased by his colleague’s words. “Such trivial sacrifices are needed to save the future.”
Holo-screen after holo-screen popped up. Each one with the same thing; turbo duelists being
assaulted by numerous Ghost bots.
“Lookie, lookie!” Luciano squealed. He kicked his feet like a small child. “It’s the Diablos! And
there’s a heck of a lot of ‘em!”
“Guess Placido finally got fed up with waiting and sent out his troops, huh?” Luciano snickered.
“What a beautiful sight!”
Joel’s hands clenched into fists on the arms of his chair. “Damn that Placido for doing things on his
own!”

///

“Who are you people?” One of the women turbo duelists demanded. She too was surrounded by
Ghost bots.
“Go, Nullifier! Attack her directly!”
“Oh no!”
“This card will take on that attack! Quick Attack Scarecrow!”
“What?” All four Ghost bots turned around.
Yusei, Sherry and Mizoguchi had arrived to help.
“Who are you?” The rescued turbo duelist asked.
“We’re here to help. Leave this duel to us, and get yourself and as many people as you meet to
safety!”
“Right!” The woman pulled back, heading back to the Stadium.
“My turn!” Yusei said. “I summon Junk Synchron! Next, I special summon the Quick Attack
Scarecrow in my Graveyard and the Mirror Ladybug in my hand! I tune level three Junk Synchron
to my level one Quick Attack Scarecrow and level four Mirror Ladybug! Synchro summon; take
flight, Stardust Dragon! Go, Stardust Dragon; Cosmic Flare!”
Ghost: 0
(Mirror Ladybug: Atk: 100 Def: 100)
That was one robot down. A thousand more to go.

///

“Now crash and burn! Go Clausolas!” Another Ghost was going in for the finishing blow.
“Not on my watch!” Jack cried.
Both he and Kaz jumped onto the duel track. Jack always was dramatic, but at least this time it was
for a good cause.
“I use Battle Eater’s effect! By sending this card to the graveyard, I take the damage instead!” Kaz
screamed as the monster’s talons dug into him.

Kaz: 1500

“Kaz!” Jack yelled back to his friend. “Keep being reckless like that and you’ll get injured again!”

“Yeah…” Kaz recovered well enough. “Glad to know you care.”

Jack laughed a little to himself. “If you get injured again, it would ruin my reputation. Leave the next part to me! I draw! I summon Vice Berserker!”

(Vice Berserker: Atk: 1000 Def: 1000)

The monster was like a fully grown bat man with enormous, leathery, black wings.

“Next, by using your trap card for its cost, I can special summon Trap Eater!”

(The leathery, little demon-like monster swallowed Ghost’s trap card.

(Trap Eater: Atk: 1900 Def: 1600)

“I tune level four Trap Eater with my level four Vice Berserker! Synchro summon; my soul, Red Dragon Archfiend! Vice Berserker’s effect activates! Because I used it for a synchro summon, I lose two thousand lifepoints, but my Red Dragon gains two thousand attack points! Say hello to karma! My Red Dragon is going to make you pay for all the turbo duelists you’ve crushed! Absolute Power Force!”

Ghost: 1300

///

“Gardholg, attack!” Another Ghost had a turbo duelist cornered.

“We’re interrupting this duel!” Akiza took the lead, driving full force into the fray. “I play Doppelganger! You take the same amount of damage I would take from this attack!”

Akiza: 2400

Ghost: 2400

“What?”

“And that’s not all!” Crow jumped in too. “I summon Blackwing Mistral the Silver Shield! Since I have her on the field, I can special summon Blackwing Bora the Spear! I tune level two Mistral the Silver Shield with Blackwing Bora the Spear! Synchro summon; appear Blackwing Armed Wing!”

(Blackwing Armed Wing: Atk: 2300 Def: 1000)

“Armed Wing, attack Ghost directly!”

Ghost: 0

“Uh oh…” The remaining three Ghost bots did not look happy to see their fourth member go up in smoke.

Lise smirked at them, drawing a card. “Who’s next?”

///

Placido was watching his robots’ progress. Tracking their movements on his holo-screen. Six of his bots’ markers suddenly vanished.

“Team 5Ds,” Placido growled. “It’s their doing, isn’t it?”

Placido’s map was replaced with Joel. And he looked far from happy.

“What do you want? I’m busy right now!”

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Joel growled.

“Your way of doing things is too lax. If we force them to duel, the Circuit will surface in no time! I’m tired of waiting!”

“Placido,” Joel sighed, shaking his head. “You do not understand. By forcing them to fight, we cannot draw out their full potential. In doing so, the perfect Circuit will never be completed.”

“Besides, isn’t Team 5Ds butting in?” Luciano couldn’t resist putting in his two cents. “You already lost to Yusei Fudo once, Placido, so why not listen to what Joel is saying?”

“What was that?” Placido snarled at his comrades. “Sorry,” he said in a tone that was far from apologetic. “But I’ll be doing things my way!”

“Placido!”

But Placido had already hung up. “Team 5Ds,” Placido clenched his teeth. “Don’t get ahead of yourself. I’ll show you that you humans will never be able to defeat me! By going after your hope…”
“My turn!” Jack drew his next card. He, Kaz, and the four remaining Ghost bots came up on a fork in the road. Two Ghosts peeled onto the left track, and the last two took the right path.

“What?” Jack and Kaz looked back and forth. They were alone, but why did that not feel right?

“Are they retreating?” Kaz asked.

“What’s this?” Trudge was just as bewildered. Mina watched the screen beside him.

“Did they stop dueling?”

“No,” Mina said. “That isn’t it. The signal from the Ghosts… What is this?” Both Trudge and Mina’s eyes widened.

“They’re all in the same place now!”

While this was fun, it’s time for us to say good-bye!” The last two Ghost bots raced away. Lise, Crow, and Akiza didn’t even have time to come up with a clever quip in response.

“So…Did we win?” Crow appealed to his friends.

Akiza blinked at the empty duel track. “I…don’t think so?”

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Lise muttered.

Yusei defeated another Ghost bot. Stardust Dragon was as reliable as ever. Sherry and Mizoguchi pulled even with him.

“Is it over?”

Sherry consulted her screen. All the Ghost Bots the three of them had encountered were gone. But, the situation was much too still. “Behind us!”

“Huh?”

Hundreds of Ghost bots drove behind the trio of turbo duelists. Too many to count. Every Ghost in the city must have been on their tail.

“You can’t hide, and you can’t run from me now!” Placido snickered. “Yusei Fudo, take this concentrated attack!”

“Zhese numbers are insane!” Sherry complained.

The first Ghost approached. The white infinity light of Yliaster encircled all four of them. Battle Royale Mode was engaged.

“We’re stuck in Battle Royale! Be on your guard!” Yusei told his teammates.

“Now we duel for your end, Yusei Fudo!” the Ghost snickered. “It’s my turn! I summon Ally of Justice Garadholg! I place two cards facedown and end my turn!”

“I’ll take it from here,” Mizoguchi said. “I summon Samurai of Fiendish Fore!”

(Samurai of Fiendish Fore: Atk: 1200 Def: 1200)

Mizoguchi’s samurai wore black and dark blue armor. A wiser samurai based on his age, he held his sword with practiced ease.

“When this card is successfully summoned, I can special summon a level three of below warrior type monster from my hand! I call forth Samurai of Assaulting Aft!”

(Samurai of Assaulting Aft: Atk: 0 Def: 400)

This samurai monster was smaller. His shiny red armor and blade was still intimidating.

“I tune level three Samurai of Assaulting Aft with the level four Samurai of Fiendish Fore! Synchro summon; my stubborn warrior, Driven Daredevil! Go, Driven Daredevil, attack Gardholg!”

Ghost: 3200

“I’m up next,” Sherry began her turn. “I activate the speed spell Overboost! This card increases my Speed Counters by four, but reduces them to one during my End Phase! I activate the speed spell Speed Fusion! When my speed counters are at four or ‘igher, zhis card, by sending zhe listed
monsters from my ‘and or field to zhe graveyard, I can special summon a fusion monster! I fuse Sacred Knight Spear-Bearer and Swift ‘Orse of zhe Floral Knights in my ‘and! Appear now, Centaurmina!”

(Centaurmina: Atk: 2200 Def: 1600)

Sherry’s monster was a female centaur, ready for battle as the knight she was. Armor lined her four legs and covered her torso. Her long, flowing red hair matched her shield. Of course, no knight was complete without her sword, which she brandished at the ready.

“Next, I summon Fleur Synchron! I tune level two Fleur Synchron to my level six Centaurmina! Synchro summon; sparkle, Fleur de Chevalier! Fleur de Chevalier attacks directly! Fleur de Rose!”

Ghost: 500

“My turn!” Yusei declared. “I send Quillbolt Hedgehog to the Graveyard to special summon Quick Draw Synchron through its effect! Quillbolt Hedgehog is revived from the Graveyard when there’s a Tuner monster on the field! Next, I can special summon Reed Butterfly!”

(Reed Butterfly: Atk: 300 Def: 600)

Yusei smiled at the new monster. Its wings were soft blues and greens. But the wing tips were red, the abdomen bright orange. This new card was the match to Lise’s Solar Butterfly, or at least Yusei liked to think so. The monster’s numerous colors were a combination of Lise’s fiery side, and his cooler side.

“Reed Butterfly can be special summoned when there is a synchro monster on my opponent’s field! I tune my level five Quick Draw Synchron with my level one Reed Butterfly and level two Quillbolt Hedgehog! Synchro summon; dash onward, Road Warrior!”

The gleaming gold and silver monster emerged, ready to fight.

(Road Warrior: Atk: 3000 Def: 1500)

“Road Warrior’s effect special summons Speed Warrior! Go, Speed Warrior, Sonic Edge!”

Ghost: 3100

“Go, Road Warrior, Lightning Claw!”

Ghost: 1000

“I place a card facedown to end my turn!”

“It’s my turn!” one of the Ghost bots drew a card.

“Trap activate! Synchro Prominence!” Yusei wasn’t wasting any time. If he had to chip down at all the Ghosts to win, he would. “A player that controls a synchro monster inflicts a thousand points of damage to the opponent!”

“Now go!” Sherry ordered.

“Take this!” Mizoguchi bellowed.

Ghost1: 0
Ghost2: 0
Ghost3: 2100

The two defeated Ghosts spun out. They exploded, leaving behind trails of smoke. Unfortunately, that didn’t stop the crowds of Ghosts still on Yusei’s tail.

///

“You’re in the way,” Placido grumbled. “You runts need to disappear.”

///

Ghost bot three sneered. He had his new orders. It was time to eliminate Team 5Ds, their friends, and their hope.

“I summon Ally of Justice Tractor!”

(Ally of Justice Tractor: Atk: 0 Def: 0)

The monster resembled a transformer. A smaller one that had mistakenly chosen a tractor as its disguise mode. That is, if the monster wanted to be intimidating.

“When there is a light attribute monster on my opponent’s field, I can release this card to add two Ally of Justice cards from my deck to my hand. Yusei, your Road Warrior is a light attribute monster! That means I can special summon three of these monsters!”

“Three?”
“Cosmic Gateway,” Ghost explained. “When there are two or more monsters, one of which is a light attribute monster, on the opponent’s field, can be special summoned from my hand!” Cosmic Gateway, attack Driven Daredevil!”

Evenly matched, the two monsters both went down in a blaze of light.

“A draw...Driven Daredevil…”

“I attack with my other Cosmic Gateways!” At Ghost’s command, both monsters eliminated all Mizoguchi’s lifepoints.

Mizoguchi: 0

“Oh no, Mizoguchi!” Sherry was relieved to see him recover, but he was out of the duel.

“Sherry!”

“I place a card facedown and end my turn,” Ghost three finished.

“My turn,” a fourth Ghost pulled up.

Ghost three pulled the same thing Yusei did earlier. “I activate my permanent trap, DNA Transplant! This card’s effect changes all the cards on the field to the attribute I declare! I say Light attribute!”

“I summon Ally Salvo!” Ghost four said.

(Ally Salvo: Atk: 400 Def: 300)

“Go, Ally Salvo!” Ghost sent the tiny monster in to battle Fleur de Chevalier, who defeated the monster handily.

Ghost4: 1700

“And Now Ally Salvo’s effect activates,” Ghost four sneered. “When this card is destroyed in battle by a light attribute monster, it destroys two cards on the field.”

“Oh no! What means...Fleur de Chevalier!”

Sherry’s knight and Speed Warrior went packing. Sherry was wide open.

“It’s my turn!” A fifth Ghost stepped in. “I summon Ally Salvo! Direct attack!”

Sherry: 3600

“It’s my turn,” became a haunting echo as every Ghost bot summoned an Ally Salvo. Sherry was facing a small army in no time.

Ally Salvo after Ally Salvo beat into Sherry. Until she had no more life points left.

Sherry: 0

“Sherry!” Yusei called after her.

But she had vanished behind the crowd of Ghost robots. The bots that Yusei now had to face. Alone.

Ally Salvo’s effect will destroy Road Warrior. I’ve gotta do something! But these overwhelming numbers... if they get ahold of me, I’m done for too!

Placido broke into a sickening evil grin. “Yusei, the true hell begins now!”

Chapter End Notes

(I’m back, bitches! It has been a while, but graduating takes precedence. I still plan on finishing Soul of the Dragon, don’t worry. It just might be longer than any of us think. This story is important to me, and I want to finish it! I WILL FINISH. Just not any time soon.

That being said, I want to say how much I appreciate everyone who is still here. Still reading, still commenting, and wants to see how my version of the 5Ds story ends. Thank you so much. We still have some more growing, and writing, to do. But I’m willing to keep on going to the finish line. Hope to see your comments on the next
chapter!}
Yusei: 2000
The Ally Salvos bore down on Yusei. The swarm of Ghosts was just too much. For the time being, he was doing his best to outrun them. But that wouldn’t last long. Yusei needed help. Or a miracle. Anything.
This is bad. If these attacks continue, I’ll lose. But what else can I do?
///
“At this rate, Yusei will…” Bruno trailed off. He followed Yusei’s path from a different duel lane, riding his small yellow duel runner. “But he can’t lose! He’s the hope for the future!”
The future…
Something primal stirred in the recesses of Bruno’s memory. Remember your mission.
The creature from that day at the Security Bureau burst into Bruno’s thoughts. Those eyes.
Something awakened inside Bruno. Numbers. His code rushed back into his memories.
“That’s right. Yusei must be saved no matter what,” Bruno said, new determination in his voice.
“That is my mission.”
He jumped off the track, heading for the edge of the city. The cliffs by the sea. Where Mina and Trudge had found him.
Again, Bruno jumped off the road. He ditched his makeshift, yellow duel runner. He fell, spread eagle, to the beach below. To soften the landing, Bruno flipped twice in midair and landed on the sand in a crouch.
“Come! Delta Eagle!” He commanded. More binary codes swept past his eyes.
A column of yellow light erupted out of the ocean. Torrential waves moved out of the way for the duel runner Bruno was summoning. The slick, dark blue duel runner with an enormous back wheel belonging to Vizor met Bruno on the beach.
///
Outrunning them hadn’t worked. The Ghost swarm was right on Yusei’s tail.
Sweat dripped down his back. They’ve caught up to me, huh?
“It’s over, Yusei Fudo!” One of the Ghost bots grinned wickedly. “My turn!”
///
Bruno zoomed through space, using Accel Synchro to get where he needed to go faster. At the controls of Delta Eagle, he felt stronger, powerful. He could definitely carry out his mission.
More code zoomed past his eyes. With the power of Accel Synchro, Bruno changed into his Vizor disguise. He could help his friend, help the future keep its hope, and no one would ever know it was him.
“Hang on, Yusei!”
///
“Die, Yusei Fudo!”
“Die!”
“Die!”
“Die!”
The last Ally Salvo was closing in.
“Yusei!”
Vizor had arrived!
“Vizor?”
Vizor smirked, raising his hand to his cards with practiced ease. “I equip Buster Shotman to my Tech Genus Blade Gunner! The monster that equips Buster Shotman gets its attack points
decreased by five hundred! However, when it destroys a monster, every monster that is the same type on the opponents’ field will be destroyed! Buster shot!”
Every Ally Salvo was destroyed, thanks to Vizor and his monsters. Yusei soared through a cleared track. The threat pushed back. For now.
“Vizor? Thanks,” Yusei breathed a sigh of relief. He still didn’t know if they could trust Vizor, but he wouldn’t look this gift horse in the mouth.
“Yusei, accelerate!” Vizor urged. “As long as you don’t break your speed limit, you can’t shake them off. Follow me into the slip stream!” He pulled ahead, gaining even more speed.
Yusei followed behind Vizor. His increasing speed like a furious butterfly zooming through time and space. Wings guiding him into a new world of speed.
///
“Yusei isn’t dying,” Placido growled. “Which means he and his team will keep interfering. In that case…”
Placido’s right eye covering glowed a sickly red color. He grit his teeth and jumped off the arena roof. Red light matching the sickly color of his eye covering engulfed his cloak and hood, replacing them with a silver helmet and white riding suit.
A matching duel runner raced to meet Placido’s decent. He mounted the bike fluidly, landing just as gently on one of many duel tracks.
“I will be your opponent!” Placido declared, racing towards Yusei.
///
Vizor took Yusei through winding duel tracks at breakneck speed. Despite the sharpness of the curves, Vizor didn’t slow down in the slightest.
“Such speed,” Yusei murmured to himself. But someone else was speeding just as recklessly behind them.
“Someone caught up to us?”
“Yusei Fudo!” Placido had found them! “You’re too much of an eyesore for a mere bug. I will crush you with my Mechlord Emperor!”
“Mechlord Emperor? Are you the one controlling the Ghost army?!” This guy seemed familiar. He knew the cards Ghost had tried to defeat Yusei with the first time they’d faced off.
“And what if I am?”
“Why would you do something like this? You trying to destroy the city?” Yusei clenched his teeth. If this was their mysterious opponent that had hidden in the shadows for so long, this was going to be one of his toughest duels yet.
Placido curled his lips in disgust. “A mere human cannot comprehend our way of thinking! You should just run around in fear like the bugs you are!”
“Bugs?”
“But Yusei, I’ve decided to take care of you personally,” Placido pointed dramatically. Where his Ghost bot had failed, he would not. The Emperors were Mako’s agents of destiny. Destiny did not fail. “Be grateful I’ve lowered myself to your level!”
“This is bad. I only have a small amount of lifepoints remaining,” Yusei said. “If I duel him now…”
But Vizor was already taking care of it. He pulled back, slamming his duel runner into the side of Placido’s. Placido was forced to fall back to regain his balance.
“Yusei, in order to get out of this crisis, you have to surpass your limits and find the way to Accel Synchro!” Vizor urged. Yusei had to prevail here. He had to.
“Accel Synchro?” Yusei bit his lip. He’d tried. Barely. But he just couldn’t get any faster.
“Sharpen your heart,” Vizor instructed sagely. “The Momentum inside the duel runners is not just an energy source. The Planetary particles used for the Momentum is living energy similar to a human’s heart.”
“What?” Yusei’s mouth dropped open, eyes wide. “Like a person’s heart?”
“That’s right. Both Doctor Fudo and Roman Goodwin realized this. People’s hearts are something that can change very easily. And that fact has been used for good and evil since ancient times. The
hearts that remained good and resilient despite everything they were put through, sided with the Crimson Dragon. And the hearts who could not bear the pain of their lives sided with the Earthbound Immortals. However, there is a state where a person’s heart can control the Momentum.”

Vizor’s eye met Yusei’s. “That is called Clear Mind. Yusei, in order to win, you have to acquire it now!”

“Clear Mind…” Yusei turned away. He’d failed so many times. He couldn’t even muster the strength or courage to duel in their most recent WRGP match. “But can I do something like that?”

“You can. The way to find Accel Synchro is already inside you. Feel the wind, Yusei.”


After fighting Ghost, I always kept riding… But…Even so, I couldn’t find Accel Synchro… Why is that?

The wind and light were blocked by a white monster. Mechlord Emperor. The synchro stealing beast. It bore down on Yusei, like a hunter ready to strike its prey.

That’s right. In my heart, I’m afraid of the Mechlord Emperor. A state to overcome that fear… Yusei steeled himself, closing his eyes. He accelerated, trusting his feelings and instincts. “The wind. I have to feel the wind.”

The light encircled Yusei, like a curtain being pulled gently along. It swirled in pinks and purples. The light within his growing power gentle blues and greens, bursting through the Mechlord Emperor.

“It’s disappearing…even myself…”

The light had turned gold, enveloping Yusei. He vanished into thin air. Blues, greens, purples, pinks, streaked through the air, wrapping seamlessly into the golden wind and light. The tunnel of lights pulled Yusei along, until he stopped before a giant, glowing dragon.

The dragon wasn’t fully corporeal. But Yusei could see the beast spread its wings. As if it were ready to take flight. It just needed to know when to arrive.

“What is this?”

///

Placido pressed a button on his duel runner. His bike sped forward with the help of four booster rockets.

“I said we’re dueling, Yusei!”

///

The gold glow of the dragon burst away in a shower of golden dust. A new dragon, resembling what could have been Stardust Dragon’s elder, emerged. Wings and arms spread wide.

“I can see it! Something I can only see in the world of speed! This is Clear Mind!”

A stone tablet soared through space. It fell to Earth in a fiery blaze.

///

Still engulfed in light, Yusei completely vanished from sight.

“What?” Even Placido had seen his soon to be opponent disappear.

“Yusei,” Vizor allowed himself a small smile. He saw the stone tablet falling above them. “You found it!”

“Impossible!” Placido roared. “Where did he go?!”

“Towards a new possibility,” Vizor smirked back at Placido. “I’ll be your opponent for now.”

“You’re from back then,” Placido’s eye narrowed. He’d finally recognized him. “That night, we met, I made you crash once you lost control over a stupid kitten in the road.” He smirked to himself. “Back then, you said you were here to stop me, but if that’s true, we have a lot more in common than you think.”

“You may tell yourself that, but I have no intention of confirming or denying your claims. Especially because I’m about to make you disappear.”

Placido allowed himself a little chuckle. “A good answer. Guess I’ll just have to use force!”

“Duel!”
Yusei and his duel runner came bursting out into what appeared to be a rocky desert. Nothing and no one was around. Just rock, and open, blue sky.
And a new stone tablet, waiting innocently at the center of its crater.

“Impossible!” Joel gasped. Just when he thought the day couldn’t get any worse. “That tablet isn’t one of ours!”
“How did he get one?!” Luciano demanded.
“Amazing. Can Yusei hear the voice of God as well?”
Luciano shook his head wildly. “No way! Does that mean he’s the same as us?! That’s absurd!”

Yusei approached the tablet slowly. He still wasn’t sure what to make of this new power. Yet, somehow, he knew, that this tablet was his.
“Is this…Is this what brought me through the light?”
At his touch, more golden, rainbow-like light burst out. Thousands of cards, spell, trap, and monster turned in a swirling vortex of darkness and light.
Bringing Yusei face to face with the up-side-down creature. The creature Lise had said was like him. A Yusei built wrong.
“You!” Yusei was immediately on guard. “Who are you?!”
The creature was white, gold, and silver. It had a mask that completely obscured its face. Lise was right though. It did feel strangely familiar, like himself. It was eerie. What or who was this thing?
“Yusei…You have obtained a new possibility,” the creature spoke.
“Huh?” Yusei looked down.
A card that hadn’t been there before was in his hand. “What is this?
“That is the state of Clear Mind. The card that makes Accel Synchro possible.”
“It is?”
“You have the right to accept that,” the creature continued. Its voice was even, leisurely. The two of them could have been talking about the weather for all the creature cared. Even more eerie. “All possibilities are equal.”
“And you know me?” Yusei asked. The similarities were just too much to be coincidence. Yusei swore a part of the creature’s mask, despite being up-side-down, looked like his criminal marking. The creature ignored Yusei’s question. “You proceed down the path you think is right. If you do that… Then one day…”
The creature’s figure and voice faded. It grew farther and farther away.
“Wait!” Yusei made to run after it.
But his next step landed him on the dusty rocks where his stone tablet had been. The tablet that was now blank.
Not knowing what else to do, Yusei went back to the lip of the crater. His duel runner waited for him below.
Out in the distance Yusei spotted what looked like a city. Almost like the Satellite. Before it had been connected to the city by the bridge. Somehow even worse though. Smoke curled into the air from numerous buildings. It turned the clouds and sky an inky, choking black. Something had happened over there. Something bad. Something that had to be stopped.
The path I believe is right is the one that saves this city!
Yusei slid the new card into his deck.

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Vizor: 3100
Placido: 4000
Tech Genus Power Gladiator and Tech Genus Wonder Magician faced off against Placido’s Mechlord Emperor Wisel. Vizor was ready. Every ingredient he needed for Accel Synchro was gathered.
(Tech Genus Power Gladiator: Atk: 2300 Def: 1000)
“Two Synchro monsters,” Placido said. “I see! That’s it! The true power of Accel Synchro!”

Vizor smirked back at his opponent. “I-”

Before Vizor could make his move, five Ghost bots jumped onto the duel track! They surrounded Vizor, harassing him. Their robotic laughter mocked him as they rammed repeatedly into the sides of his duel runner.

Placido drove past Vizor struggling. Protected by his small army of Ghost bots, he snickered back at Vizor.

“You coward! Interfering with my Accel Synchro?!”

“Battle Royale Mode is still in effect, ya know,” Placido taunted.

“My turn,” a Ghost bot said. He summoned out another Ally Salvo.

Tech Genus Wonder Magician destroyed the monster easily enough. But everyone who had faced the Ghosts and their tactics knew the monster was quite the threat in numbers.

“When Ally Salvo is destroyed in battle by a light attribute monster, it can destroy two cards on the field.”

“What?”

Tech Genus Power Gladiator and Vizor’s facedown card were destroyed.

Placido grinned wickedly. “What’s wrong? Don’t you have any more moves left?!”

Vizor grit his teeth. He and Placido both knew he didn’t.

“Now go to Hell!” Placido laughed triumphantly. He didn’t care if he had to cheat to do it. He’d achieve his goals by any means necessary.

The sound of a third duel runner’s engine joined the fight.

“What is that?” Placido paused.

“Yusei!” Vizor cried. He wasn’t smiling. Instead he seemed more worried than relieved.

Placido smirked. “So, you’ve come back, Yusei Fudo.”

Vizor rammed a Ghost bot out of the way. “Go, Yusei! I’ll take care of the bots. It’s up to you!”

Yusei nodded. He was still unsure of his new ability, but he was ready. He was going to face this challenge, this threat, head on! He accelerated, gunning past the Ghost bots and pulling even with Placido.

“I’m your opponent!”

“Perfect timing,” Placido’s smirk grew. “I can kill two birds with one stone. Let’s go!”

“Stop, Placido,” Joel’s face came from Placido’s duel runner screen. “Yusei Fudo has obtained a new power. You must stop!”

Placido rolled his eyes. “What’re you talking about?”

“It was a surprise!” Luciano added. He was unusually serious for a change. “He also had a meeting with God.”

“What?”

“Return now, Placido,” Joel commanded. “He isn’t an opponent you can defeat without a scratch.”

Placido’s knuckles turned white he gripped his controls so hard. “Are you saying I can’t beat him?!”

“Placido!”

Placido slammed his hand down on the screen. The call ended.

“No matter what power he obtains, it has nothing to do with me,” Placido growled, his hand curling into a fist.

Yusei searched Placido’s face. He wanted to duel more than anything. The question was, why? What did Placido need to prove by dueling him?

“I will show you my real power!” Placido declared.

His eye covering glowed the sickly red color again. Placido stood up, standing more than riding the duel runner. He pulled out the sword still sheathed to his side, and slammed it into the hole right in front of his duel disk. Placido exclaimed loudly as a green numeric glow enveloped his duel runner.

Yusei had never seen that before. “What’s he trying to do?”

Both Placido and the duel runner changed before Yusei’s eyes. Placido’s body mounted and
morphed into the duel runner. Wires connected Placido’s back to the runner, not just his lower body. The sword handle and hilt bent over, and expanded into a duel disk made of light. Placido had become a duel runner centaur.

“What the fuck?” Yusei didn’t swear often, but someone becoming one with their duel disk like that seemed like something a swear warranted.

“So this is his true form?” Vizor watched in just as much shock.

“Yusei Fudo,” Placido spat the boy’s name like he still believed him to be an insect primed for squishing. “This time I will not let you run! We will duel!”

Chapter End Notes

(Aw yes! Got another one out before the new year AND the new decade! I definitely plan on putting out more chapters because while this part is crucial to the plot, it… isn’t the most interesting… I’ll just say that. Still, it helps that this chapter was relatively short since it focuses on Yusei mastering Clear Mind and Accel Synchro. Here’s to more chapters and more consistency in the new year! That’s my resolution. To be organized enough that I can do things for school, because graduating is important, and for me! Here’s hoping I can do it! Thank you so much for everyone who is still here after all these years! I’ll see everybody in 2020!)
“Over here, ma’am!” Sasha directed a pedestrian to safety. She and her team were helping usher people into the Stadium until the Ghost bot threat was over.

The woman did as Sasha instructed, joining the crowd in the stadium.

“Okay, I think that clears out most of the streets here,” Jarra reported.

“Good,” Sasha nodded.

“I feel like we should be out there helping our friends,” Garrett grumbled. He wanted to use his newly purchased weapons, but was a little grumpy that the threat wasn’t his particular type of duel.

“We are helping them,” Jose corrected his friend. “We’re making sure the people of their city aren’t hurt.”

Garrett shrugged, lips drawn in a pout. “I guess when you put it that way…”

“We’re also trusting our friends,” Sasha pointed out.

Jarra spread her hands. “But Garret does have a point.”

Everyone gave her mixed looks of confusion.

“Crowd control is boring.”

“Oh…”

“Yeah, okay.”

“That’s fair.”

///

“Behold!” Placido gestured grandly to his centaur-like duel runner ensemble. “For this is the form of an evolved duel runner!”

The power from Placido’s new form rippled outward. The glass walls of the duel track and the glass windows of the nearby buildings shattered. Broken glass rained down everywhere, following Placido’s path. A street of destruction.

“The city…” Yusei breathed. The destruction hurt him deeply, to his core. It was like the Zero Reverse’s destruction was beginning all over again. “Stop… Stop!”

Yusei accelerated. He hit Placido’s duel runner with his own. Multiple times. The destruction stopped, but only for the moment. Yusei had to keep Placido’s attention, or he’d just start all over again.

“What’s your goal here? Why are you destroying the city?”
“You fool…” Placido sneered. “Getting in my way means defying the will of Yliaster. The will of God itself!”

“Yliaster?! You…You’re like Mako! All of you used Goodwin and the Dark Signers to bring destruction to the world, didn’t you?!” Yusei couldn’t believe this. Luna and the team had defeated Mako, but his influence was still hurting the city and the world.

“You were given a tablet, and you didn’t even know that much?”

“What did you say?” Yusei grit his teeth.

Placido laughed cruelly. Joel’s worries were for nothing. This boy, and his friends, would fall. Like the puny, struggling insects they were. “It seems choosing you was a mistake! So, I’ll crush you to my heart’s content!”

“No, I won’t let you! I will stop you!” Yusei’s resolve was steeled. No one hurt his friends, his family, and his city. At least no one did and got away with it. He drew a card. The duel had begun.

“To think you’d duel in a situation like this. I’ll smash you like an ant with my Mechlord Emperor,” Placido scoffed.

*The Mechlord Emperors have the power to absorb Synchro monsters. I’ll have to be careful, but I also have a new power I obtained inside the world of speed! I’m going to believe in my power and fight!*

“Keep going!” Vizor shouted up to Yusei. “I’ll take care of the Ghosts!”

Yusei nodded. “I’m counting on you.” He and Placido rode on ahead.

Vizor whirled around to face the swarm of Ghost bots. He too drove head on into his challenge.

“Duel!”

**Yusei: 4000**

**Placido: 4000**

The infinity light of Yliaster’s power encircled both duelists. Light that made their damage real. Real and dangerous.

“My turn!” Yusei knew he had to be decisive to win. What better way to do so than going first?

“I send Quillbolt Hedgehog in my hand to the graveyard in order to special summon Quickdraw Synchron to the field! Next, I can special summon Quillbolt Hedgehog to the field from the graveyard because there’s a Tuner monster on my field. I also normal summon Needle Gunner in attack mode!”

*(Needle Gunner: Atk: 100 Def: 100)*

Needle Gunner, a mechanized, sharp robot, spun into play. Its main color was a sleek purple, and sported a silver drill bit for a head.

“I’m tuning level two Quillbolt Hedgehog and level five Quickdraw Synchron with my level one Needle Gunner! Synchro summon; smash out, Junk Destroyer!”

*(Junk Destroyer: Atk: 2600 Def: 2500)*
Sporting four arms, and four blades on its back, Junk Destroyer was an intimidating sight. Not just because it was huge, shiny, and sharp, but because the monster’s black, yellow, orange, green, and red body were clearly built for destroying. A perfect compliment to the beast’s name.

Placido was far from intimidated. He paused his laughter to continue to mock his opponent. “To think that you’d come with a synchro summon at the start of the duel. You really are just a simple worm!”

Yusei ignored Placido’s taunts. “I activate Junk Destroyer’s effect! When he’s successfully synchro summoned, I can destroy one card on the field per material monster I used, minus the Tuner monster! That means I can destroy two cards! I destroy Wisel Infinity, Mechlord Emperor’s body, and your facedown card! Go Junk Destroyer, Tidal Energy!”

Yusei was mentally crossing his fingers. As long as the Mechlord Emperor exists, my Synchro Monsters will be taken, but if I destroy the body before his turn, then there’ll be nothing left to be afraid of.

Placido wasn’t even rattled. “Trap activate. Fork Divergence. When a Machine type monster on my field is attacked or targeted by a Card Effect, I can change the target to another Machine type monster on my field. I change your effect’s target to Wisel Carrier!” Placido smirked. This little bug was going to have to do better than that to beat him.

“What?”

“And Wisel Carrier cannot be destroyed by Card Effects.”

Yusei grit his teeth. He was forced to watch his gambit amount to nothing.

“A Synchro Monster’s effect can’t even touch me,” Placido snickered.

“But Junk Destroyer still has more attack points!” Yusei reminded him. He wasn’t out of options. Yet. “Battle! Junk Destroyer, attack Wisel Infinity! Dynamite Knuckle!”

“Idiot,” Placido rolled his eyes. “Have you forgotten that I can change the attack Target to Wisel Guard due to its Monster Effect?”

“The Synchro Monster that used Needle Gunner as synchro material can do piercing damage even if the opponent’s monster is in defense mode!”

“What?” Placido hadn’t been expecting that.

Yusei: 4000

Placido: 2600

“I set two cards and end my turn,” Yusei said.

///

“Why?!” Luciano was practically screeching at the holo-sphere. “Hey, why did Yusei get a tablet?! Those are items only given to us to guide history in the right direction! So, why did a mere human like him get one?!”

“Just shut up and watch,” Joel snapped. “By watching this duel, we will know the will of God.”

///
“Damn you!” Placido screamed through his teeth. “You mere worm! I do not know what God
intends to do with a worm like you! But I refuse to acknowledge it! Someone like you! You’re the
only one in the world I refuse to acknowledge!”

Placido’s rage kicked up a storm. Purple and black clouds gathered. Clouds spit lightning down on
the city, raining down more destruction and danger. More glass shattered. Power everywhere was
cut off. Blocks and miles of city power was shut off.

It was the middle of the day, but the sky was so dark. Like all the hope was being sucked out of the
city.

///

Red Dragon Archfiend destroyed another Ghost bot. That was the last of them. At least the few that
had been tailing Jack and Kaz.

“What?”

“What’s going on?”

Both men watched the power go off in waves. Building after building. The city was in chaos.

///

Vizor too defeated another Ghost bot. The purple lightning was getting worse.

“What…is this?”

///

Power was lost in the stadium as well. Even the holo-sphere powered down.

“A blackout?” Leo frowned up at the sky. He stayed close to his sister. “What’s going on?”

Luna’s hand found her marking. “This isn’t good.”

“We’ve done as much as we can,” Sasha came up to the twins, her team in tow. “All that’s left to
do is wait.”

Leo frowned. “I hate waiting.”

///

“M’lady?” Mizoguchi held Sherry up. Her crash had been brutal, but she seemed to be in one piece.

Sherry finally blinked awake. “Mizoguchi?”

He exhaled, shoulders lowering. “You’re awake.”

Sherry sat up. Her green eyes widened. She’d never seen anything like the storm sweeping across
New Domino City before. It looked like the end of days. “What is happening to this city?”

///

Crow, Akiza, and Lise looked up at the murky, inky blackness of the sky.

“What should we do?” Crow whispered.
“I have no idea,” Lise admitted. The last time she had felt this much darkness, this unwavering despair and pressure, was her duel against Roman. And she’d only survived that because of Rally.

_Rally. The people. Yusei... I hope he’s okay... But..._

Akiza must have had the same thought. “We should go to the hospital. Check on the people there first.”

“Andre and Jean!” Crow gasped.

Lise nodded. “Let’s go.”

///

Trudge and Mina were managing damage control. Defeated Ghost bot bodies littered the duel tracks. Someone had to clean them up and send them to the scrap heap.

“First an army of Ghosts, and now a lightning storm,” Trudge mused. “What do we do?”

Mina was fiddling with a police cruiser’s controls. “Whattaya mean you can’t contact headquarters?”

The poor police officer trying to help was doing his best. “Well...due to these lightning strikes... We can’t-“

His radio exploded in his hands.

///

Carly had done her best to get pictures of the catastrophe. Until Sasha’s team had told her she had to return to the stadium or her own safety.

Her camera grew hot in her hands. “Ow! Hot! Hot!”

The twins, Sasha, Jarra, Joel, and Garrett watched Carly play hot potato with herself until her camera exploded too.

“Even digital cameras?” Carly gasped, flabbergasted. “What’s happening?!”

///

“My turn!” Placido declared. “I summon Wisel Guard 3 in defense mode! Mechlord Emperor Wisel can absorb my opponent’s Synchro Monster once per turn! The Synchro Monster of a foolish worm...become prey to the Mechlord Emperor!”

Tendrils shot out of the Emperor’s chest, attaching to all of Junk Destroyer’s limbs. All four arms and the two legs were dragged into Mechlord Emperor Wisel.

“My trap card activates; Star Shift! This card returns one Synchro Monster to my deck and then summons another synchro monster of equal level!” Yusei countered.

“What?!”

Junk Destroyer vanished. Negating Mechlord Emperor Wisel’s ability.

“Come forth; Stardust Dragon!”
Placido’s eyes narrowed. “So you survived this play. However, Mechlord Emperor Wisel and Stardust Dragon’s attack points are the same. I set one card and end my turn. You were able to use an effect to dodge the ability of my Mechlord Emperor. You’re not half bad for a worm, but don’t think your tricks will work for long. A worm is still a worm.”

“Just watch,” Yusei growled. He was not nothing, least of all a worm, and neither was anyone else. “With my cards and my new power, I will defeat you! It’s my...turn!”

“I summon Vehicular in defense mode! I activate the trap A Leap to Awakening. When I successfully summon a monster, I can remove another monster on my field from play and then the opponent takes damage equal to the monster’s level multiplied by one hundred!”

“Hmph,” was Placido’s only response.

“I remove Stardust Dragon!”

Yusei: 4000
Placido: 1800

“And the removed monster will return on my next Standby Phase with increased attack points equal to the damage I dealt you. I set one card and end my turn.”

Okay. Now I just have to make it through his turn, and I’ll have just about everything I need to Accel Synchro. I won’t let him destroy the city anymore!

Even if he couldn’t totally stop Placido, for the moment, he could slow him down. Yusei gunned his engine, pulling steadily ahead of Placido.

An ugly, warped expression crossed over Placido. “To think a mere human would try to ride before me! Disgusting!” He accelerated too. “My turn! I activate the trap Bomb Blast! I destroy one Machine type monster that has not battled this turn. Then the opponent receives damage equal to that Monster’s level multiplied by four hundred points. I destroy Wisel Carrier.”

“What?!”

Mechlord Emperor Wisel bore down on Yusei. It’s huge shadow all consuming. The monster’s legs exploded, leaving behind smoke, and taking away lifepoints.

Yusei: 3600
Placido: 1800

It was only four hundred lifepoints, but the impact still hurt like hell. Yusei couldn’t help but let out a small yelp of pain.

“Only destruction awaits anyone who tries to go before the Mechlord Emperor! I summon Skiel Carrier 3!”

“Did you say Skiel? You mean, the Mechlord Emperor Leo and Luna fought?” This was new. Yusei had no idea the different Emperors could cross combine! Yet it was evident now that Emperor Wisel had Skiel’s legs.

///

Luciano gasped. He and Joel still had power. That was his card attached to his so-called ally’s
monster. “When did he-“ Luciano reached into his pocket, digging for his cards. “Damn that Placido! Using my card without permission!”

///

Placido wasn’t done. “And this card can be special summoned by releasing Skiel Carrier 3!”

“What?”

“Come forth, Skiel Carrier 5! I’ll show you the Mechlord Emperor’s infinite power!”

Yusei swallowed thickly. Skiel and Wisel? Two different types of Mechlord Emperors combined. If they can change like this, can the Mechlord Emperors power up endlessly?

///

Vizor’s last attack took down what remained of the Ghost bots. He smiled at his handiwork. One thing down, then on to the next. “Finally done.”

Next second the biggest, blazing bolt of purple lightning hit the duel track. The power was so great, it was like an earthquake.

“This impact… It’s like the Earth is trembling in fear…”

///

Yusei felt the power of the earthquake too. He had to right himself, or risk crashing. Placido needed to be stopped and soon, or he would continue until the city was split in two.

“Go, Mechlord Emperor Wisel! Attack Vehicular! Skiel Carrier 5’s effect activates! When I destroy a monster in battle, you receive three hundred points of damage!”

Vehicular went up in smoke. Another chunk of lifepoints came out of Yusei. Three hundred should have been nothing, but Placido was so powerful, even so little felt like slowly being crushed to death.

Yusei: 3300

Placido: 1800

But he wasn’t giving up here. “When Vehicular is destroyed, I can special summon Unicycular from my deck in defense mode!”

“I set one card. Turn end.”

Placido’s turn was over, but his monster’s power still loomed over Yusei. The monster’s dark miasma alone was frightening enough. Combined with Skiel, Wisel was almost too terrifying to face.

“No matter how much a worm may struggle, it can’t move an inch before the Chosen people destined to step on it!”

I’ve gotta do it now! Accel Synchro!

Yusei accelerated in synch with the beginning of his turn. “I draw! This Standby phase, Stardust Dragon returns with increased attack thanks to A Leap to Awakening!”
Placido was less than impressed. He didn’t even care that Vizor had caught up to them.

“Yusei, you’re finally going to do it,” Vizor said softly.

“I’ll show you the Synchro which surpasses Synchro; an Accel Synchro summon!”

Placido snickered cruelly, a perfect mirror to Luciano. “A Synchro that surpasses Synchro?” He taunted in a high-pitched voice. “Please,” he spoke normally, always with a hint of cruelty. “You can’t surpass anything. All you can do is follow your fate and end up repeating the same, stupid history!”

“What’re you trying to say?!”

Placido didn’t respond. He was waiting.

“Fine then, I’ll show you what I mean!” Yusei declared. He could do it. He knew he could do it! “I draw, and I summon Turbo Synchron! I tune level one Turbo Synchron with level one Unicycular! Synchro summon; the power of hope, synchro tuner, Formula Synchron!”

(Formula Synchron: Atk: 200 Def: 1500)

The new monster resembled an old hot wheels car come to life. One with a spoiler and everything. However, this little car was about to do a whole lot more than fall down a loop the loop track.

“Formula Synchron’s effect allows me to draw a card from my deck once per turn,” Yusei said.

The same light from before engulfed him. Accel Synchro. Yusei was going to do it. He had to.

Placido had other ideas. He accelerated too, using his power to blast out another dose of destruction. Lightning bolts blew up buildings. Broken glass littered the streets.

A whole barrage of lightning hit the duel stadium. Audience members covered their heads as the glass roof rained down around them.

“The Synchro Summon you’re trying to perform is the proof of foolish human evolution. But what happened to those who desired evolution? Have you forgotten about the Zero Reverse incident!” Placido screeched, practically in Yusei’s ears.

Yusei squeezed his eyes shut. He did remember. Of course he remembered! Roman and his father hadn’t been able to stop the destruction their evolution had caused. But he couldn’t let that stop him.

“I’m tuning my level two Synchro Tuner monster Formula Synchron with my level eight Synchro monster Stardust Dragon!”

It was working! It was working! Formula Synchron split into stars to change Stardust into a new monster. Yusei could practically see the path, the portal to that new power!

Placido wasn’t giving up either. Worms were fallible. Weak. And he would prove it. “You’re just gonna repeat the same mistakes your father made! His destiny is cursed and SO IS YOURS!”

Yusei’s eyes snapped open. Cursed? No, don’t think about that now! Just GO! “Accel Synchro!”

Then...

The light faded.
Formula Synchron snapped back into its corporeal form.

Stardust remained where he was.

Vizor gasped. “The Accel Synchro…failed?”

Placido laughed mockingly. His taunts had worked. Such a weak-minded boy. No, a weak worm. “And here I was wondering what you were going to show me. What a fluke.”

*Why? A cold sweat dripped down Yusei’s back, coated his forehead. Why did the Accel Synchro fail?*

“Trying to use the card from your tablet?” Placido pointed at his, or so he thought, proven, pathetic opponent. “You never had that power to begin with! Now you and your entire world can die together.”

More purple lightning struck in concert with Placido’s cruel laughter. The city was suffering… Again… After everyone had worked so hard to usher the Satellite and New Domino City into the future…

“Stop… STOP!” Yusei cried in his desperation. “Stardust Dragon, attack Mechlord Emperor Wisel!”

Placido smirked. He had this duel. Hands down. “Skiel Carrier 5’s ability activates! Once per turn, it cancels an attack on any of my monsters!”

“No way!”

But it was true… That was all there was to it.

Yusei faced forward. He didn’t want to see what happened next. “T-Turn end…”

“My turn,” Placido sneered with glee. His moment was here. Finally! “Mechlord Emperor Wisel’s effect allows me to absorb an opponent’s Synchro Monster once per turn. Your Stardust Dragon is mine!”

Helpless again, all Yusei could do was watch. Stardust Dragon was pulled into Mechlord Emperor Wisel by its tendrils. Tendrils that were cruelly wrapped around the dragon’s limbs and neck.

“It’s impossible for you to defeat the Mechlord Emperor, no matter how much you try! Witness the power of the true Chosen Ones!”

Chapter End Notes

(Haha, first chapter of the New Year! Of the decade! O_O How am I doing? The consistency will probably drop after January 20th, back to school, and all that jazz. My goal is to be organized, meaning I want to get at least one chapter out by each Sunday. Here’s hoping… ^^; But I want to knock these next few chapters out while I’m still on break, so who knows what will happen? Always happy to have readers, old and new. I appreciate each and every one of you! Thanks so much for still being here, especially since there’s more to come!)
The city was in chaos. Lightning continued to strike, randomly destroying whatever it touched. The streets and duel lanes were littered with broken glass. Most hopeless of all, was Yusei’s tiny Formula Synchron facing down Mechlord Emperor Wisel combined with Mechlord Emperor Skiel. Worst of all, was the Emperor wielded Stardust Dragon. The dragon, his friend, used as a weapon. It was like Placido had torn out Yusei’s hope.

Yusei: 3300
Placido: 1800

“What should I do?” Yusei couldn’t keep the anguish, the fear, out of his voice. “Now that Stardust has been taken… How do I beat him?”

Placido was loving this. He was winning. He had Stardust Dragon. He was destroying this miserable city. Everything was perfect. “By absorbing Stardust Dragon, Mechlord Emperor Wisel’s attack points are at five thousand! Your Synchro Monster is now my tribute!”

Why? Why couldn’t I Accel Synchro back then? “Am I not strong enough to defeat him?!” Yusei cried, slamming his fist into his duel disk in his frustration. I need help! But I’m all alone out here...

Vizor bit his lip. He was still following Yusei and Placido’s duel. This wasn’t good. Yusei’s losing himself. He couldn’t meet the requirements of Clear Mind. That’s why the Accel Synchro failed.

Placido grinned devilishly. “Foolish human! Kneel before my Mechlord Emperor! Accept the fate you’ve been given!”

A column, bigger than anything he’d summoned before, of purple lightning crashed down onto the Mechlord Emperor. The purple beam of light was so big and bright, everyone in the city could see it.

Yusei’s mark flashed on and off. The Crimson Dragon was trying to protect him.

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Jack had to come to a stop. The pain was so great. Yusei was fighting so hard...

///

Leo caught his sister. She’d sunk to her knees from the pain of her arm.

“It’s Yusei,” Luna explained. “He’s hurting…”

///

Both Akiza and Crow came to a stop. Their arms were glowing. Like a beacon, a call for help.

Lise had to stop too. Her back glowed with the seal of the Crimson Dragon. The star marking on her chest glowing a soft blue and orange. She rested her fist on her heart. Yusei…I’m here…
As long as I can’t get back Stardust Dragon, I can’t win against that Mechlord Emperor! Yusei stared at his deck. He didn’t have a single card that could save him. What should I do?

Placido wasn’t about to give Yusei the time to come up with a strategy. “Mechlord Emperor Wisel Infinity has another power. I activate the trap Wise A3! I send Wisel Attack from my field to the graveyard, and special summon Wisel Attack 3 from my hand!”

The Emperor’s upgrade boosted its attack points up to five thousand four hundred!

“It’s attack went up again?” And Yusei thought five thousand was bad enough.

“Not just its attack power,” Placido’s evil grin widened. He was going to crush this boy into dust. Just like the worm he was. “Wisel Attack 3’s special ability allows Mechlord Emperor Wisel to deal piercing damage even if your monsters are in defense mode!”

“What?!”

“Formula Synchron has fifteen hundred defense points, and you have thirty-three hundred lifepoints. If my attack goes through, your lifepoints go to zero!” Placido laughed, cruelly. “Go forth, Mechlord Emperor Wisel!”

“Trap activate; D2 Shield!” Yusei countered. He couldn’t do much, but he could at least hang on. He had to. For his friends. For the city. “This card doubles a defense position monster’s defense points until the turn’s End Phase!”

Yusei: 900

Placido: 1800

Wisel used Stardust Dragon’s essence to wipe away Yusei’s lifepoints. Both monster and duelist felt the pain. Friends hurting each other. Yusei needed to get his friend back.

Placido shook his head. Pathetic. “ Barely holding onto your life there? It’s fitting for a pathetic little insect like you! Skiel Carrier 5’s ability activates! When one of your monsters is destroyed in battle, you take another three hundred points of damage!”

Yusei: 600

Placido: 1800

Yusei wrestled with his controls. He’d lost so many lifepoints. The real damage being dealt, the overwhelming power of the Mechlord Emperor, losing Stardust Dragon… All alone… But this could not be the end!

“I activate D2 Shield’s other effect! If the monster it’s equipped to is destroyed, I can draw one card from my deck!”

Placido threw his head back for another cruel laugh. “I love this dance you’re weaving with death, Yusei! It fits the writhing worm you are!”

Yusei ground his teeth together. He wanted to say something back, but what? They both knew Yusei was hanging on by a thread. The way this is going, I’ll be beaten in no time!

“And you’re going to continue dancing…but not just you! All of humanity will dance in
“accordance to their fate! Just as they have danced since the beginning of time!”

“What do you mean?” Yusei demanded. It sounded like Placido was going to do something worse, but how much worse could this situation get?

“Oh Yusei, you’ve never seen a bee dance, have you?”

Bees? Is this guy’s nuts? “Um, no…can’t say that I have.”

Placido raised his hand. “Yes, bees dance beautifully. They dance to show each other what they are. They believe they are doing so of their own free will, when in reality, they are being controlled by what fate has established for them. They repeat the same thing over and over again.”

“So?”

“I mean, that all you humans are exactly the same! Humans can do nothing but dance through their assigned destiny for the rest of their lives! I end my turn! Now…” Placido snickered, his expressions becoming more and more unhinged. “Show me the beauty of the dancing bees, Yusei!”

Yusei took a deep breath. The odds were against him. True, but when had they ever not been? “I won’t let you do whatever you want any more! It’s my turn!”

Okay…I have nothing in my hand that can turn this around… In that case…

“I remove seven speed counters! Thanks to Speed World 2, by removing seven speed counters, I can draw another card from my deck!” It was a gamble, losing all his speed counters. But Yusei had to do something.

“Next, I summon Necro Linker from my hand in Defense Mode!”

(Necro Linker: Atk: 600 Def: 0)

Yusei’s new monster looked like the grim reaper’s cousin. A skeleton with a traveler’s cloak, tunic, and staff.

“I set a card, ending my turn!”

Placido crossed his arms. Just like a worm, already on its hook, struggling despite knowing its life is over. “No other choice than to grovel before me, huh? In that case, I’ll use the power of my Mechlord Emperor to make you dance even more!”

He’s right. There’s still other abilities the pieces of the Mechlord Emperor has that I don’t know about. But there’s nothing I can do but survive this next assault. At least until I can get Stardust back to me!

“My turn!” Placido drew a card. I activate the trap Wise T3! I send Wisel Top from my field the graveyard, and special summon Wisel Top 3 from my hand!”

“It’s attack points went up again…” Yusei didn’t like the new fifty-five hundred attack points the Mechlord Emperor had.

“The Mechlord Emperors are capable of anything!” Placido yelled. “They’re infinite! Battle! Mechlord Emperor attacks your Necro Linker!”

Yusei grit his teeth again. Just gotta hang on! “I play my trap Scrap-Iron Scarecrow! It activates
when my opponent declares an attack, nullifying the attack!”

Placido smiled. *Useless.* “But the Mechlord Emperor holds another power! Wisel Top 3’s effect
activates! Once per turn, one of my opponent’s spell or trap cards is negated and destroyed! Wipe
out Scrap-Iron Scarecrow!”

“What?! No!”

“No matter how hard you try to oppose the Mechlord Emperors, it’s all futile! Vile worm, dancing
like a bee… Bow before me!”

Mechlord Emperor Wisel closed in on Necro Linker.

Yusei reached for his hand. “When a card on my field is destroyed during the Battle Phase, I can
send Arbitrator of Meditation from my hand to the graveyard, and force the Battle Phase to end!”

“What?” Placido had to watch his monster’s attack retract. “Quite the defense. Turn end.”

Yusei took a deep breath. *Made it through this round, but the only way I’ll beat that Mechlord
Emperor is if I Accel Synchro!* “Please…answer me…my deck,” Yusei pleaded. He rested his
thumb and forefinger on his cards. “Please give me a way to free Stardust! It’s my…turn!”

Yusei held his breath. He peeked at the card. “Good! I summon Rescue Warrior!”

*(Rescue Warrior: Atk: 1600 Def: 1700)*

Rescue Warrior, true to its name, was dressed like a firefighter in bright orange gear. Big, blue
water barrels were strapped to his back, poised with a shooter in his hand to blast fires.

“Battle! I attack Mechlord Emperor Wisel with Rescue Warrior!”

Placido raised an eyebrow. “Attacking my Emperor with a mere sixteen hundred attack points?”

“When Rescue Warrior attacks, all damage I receive is reduced to zero,” Yusei explained.

“I haven’t the slightest clue as to what you’re plotting, but allow me to give you a taste of Skiel
Carrier 5’s effect! When a monster is destroyed in battle, you receive three hundred points of
damage!”

*Yusei: 300*

*Placido: 1800*

Losing lifepoints, again. It’d be okay. Yusei trusted his deck. “But when Rescue Warrior is
destroyed in battle, I can take control of a monster on my opponent’s side of the field!”

“You can what?!” Placido looked worried for the first time since the duel’s beginning.

“Stardust Dragon will be set free! Come back to me, Stardust!” He wasn’t out of the woods yet, but
Yusei felt a little better to have Stardust again. “Welcome back, my friend,” he whispered up to the
dragon. “Now that Mechlord Emperor’s attack will go down to three thousand! I’ll also be
activating Necro Linker’s ability! By releasing this monster, I can special summon a Tuner monster
from my Graveyard! Be revived: Formula Synchron! Formula Synchron’s effect allows me to draw
another card from my deck. Unfortunately, the Tuner monster I call using Necro Linker’s effect
can’t attack this turn. I end my turn.”
Placido relaxed. This fool was going to try again. “You managed to reset all your ingredients, but you didn’t even do anything with them.”

Yusei inhaled… Slowly… Exhale… I somehow managed to get Stardust back, and Formula Synchron… But will I be able to Accel Synchro? I’ve already failed… Can I really pull this off? No, I won’t let my fear stop me. I just have to try again! I have to believe in my strength and in my cards!

“Let’s do this together, Stardust!”

“No!” Placido screeched. “Learn the extent of your worthlessness!” He was NOT going to let this worm defeat him! He wouldn’t even let the worm try!

More purple light burst forth from the Mechlord Emperor. A cyclone kicked up. The winds were so powerful, they disrupted Yusei’s coarse. He had to keep a steady hand on the controls, or he’d risk a nasty crash.

Cars were thrown through the air. Trees were practically flat to the ground, pulled so heavily by the winds. The fallen glass shards swirled dangerously in the wind.

“This tornado… the city!” Yusei realized Placido was once again putting the city’s people at risk. Because he hadn’t been defeated yet. “No!”

///

Jack and Kaz hung onto the side of the highway. It was hang on, or risk being blown away. Or worse.

“Yusei, please be okay down there,” Jack murmured.

///

“Mizoguchi!”

“Lady Sherry!”

The two of them hung onto each other. They had to pray the duel lane would protect them.

///

Trudge, Mina, and their officers watched and waited.

“We’ll be blown away!” Mina found the strength to point behind the supposed safety of their police cruisers. “All of you, take shelter! Right now!”

“Just what is going on here?” Trudge murmured.

He and Mina followed their officers. It wouldn’t do any good if they got hurt trying to protect the policemen under their care too.

///

Carly, Leo, Luna, Sasha, Jarra, Jose, and Garrett hunkered down together in the stadium. Every audience member did the same. They had no chance. Waiting out the storm was their best bet.

///
Crow, Akiza, and Lise pulled up to the hospital just as all the glass windows shattered!

“Everyone, get back!” Akiza shouted up at the doctors, nurses, and patients. Too many of them were way too close to the windows. She dismounted her bike, but kept her helmet on. More protection wasn’t a bad idea with all this broken glass.

“And stay down!” Lise added, getting off her bike. *We won’t let anyone else get hurt!*

“I’ll go inside and check on everybody! You two stay here!” Crow ran through the doors.

“No! My cards!” A small voice yelped. A deck of duel monsters cards flew out the window, and next came a small girl! She screamed and flailed, but was able to grab the outdoor stair railing.

“Shit,” Lise swore. She raised her hands, amassing an army of red, hexagonal energy shields. They covered the windows, protecting the people already inside, but that little girl was still in danger.

*What do I do?! Should I use my psychic powers?* Akiza was frozen. That girl needed help, and she needed help now! But was Akiza capable? Was she enough?

Akiza shook her head. She couldn’t think about that now. Crow was doing something. Lise was blocking more broken glass from slicing the crap out of them. Akiza could do one thing for this girl.

“Hang on! I’m coming to help!” Akiza dashed over to the bottom of the stairs. The girl was only three stories up, but it must have felt like miles to such a small child. “Let go! I’ll catch you!”

“I-I c-can’t!” The little girl wailed. Her entire body shook, not just from the wind. She was hanging on with everything she had left to that railing. Her dark brown braids whipped erratically in the wind. Tears streamed down her face, fogging up her glasses.

*How do I get this girl to trust me?* Akiza bit her lip. She had to be quick. This girl didn’t have long. “My name is Akiza!” She shouted up to the girl. “What’s your name?!”

“H-H-Haruka!” She must have been too scared to question such a strange request.

“Okay, Haruka! I’m your big sister, Akiza, okay? I promise, I’ll catch you!”

Whether Haruka believed that or not, didn’t matter. The wind was too much. It ripped her away from the railing like a scrap of paper.

Akiza took off running immediately. Haruka screamed, flailing about helplessly in the wind. The ground coming closer.

“Gotcha!” Akiza snagged the little girl’s hand. *I was able to reach her! I was enough!*

Haruka screamed again. The wind was trying to take both girls! Akiza pulled Haruka into her arms, hanging on tight, and hoping for the best.

The wind stopped.

That was weird.

“Huh?” Akiza opened her eyes. She hadn’t realized she’d squeezed them shut.

“You two okay?!” Lise shouted over to them. She had encased the girls in a bubble of energy.
Akiza sighed. “Thanks to you!”

Haruka was having a hard time stopping her sobbing, but she clung to Akiza like her life depended on it. Which it kinda did.

“We’re okay now. It’s gonna be all right,” Akiza assured her new friend.

“Thanks…big sis…” Haruka sniffled.

///

Placido laughed wickedly. He loved wreaking havoc and destruction. This city would soon be just a memory. Just like the boy he was about to crush into the dirt. Like all worms. “My turn! You cannot defeat the Mechlord Emperor! This duel has already been decided by fate!”

“You’re wrong!” Yusei shouted back. “Fate is something you decide for yourself!”

“Ha!” Placido scoffed. “Someone who couldn’t even use the card granted to him by God shouldn’t get so full of himself! All you need to do is dance like the bee until the Circuit is completed!”

“Circuit?” Yusei murmured. That was new. What was Placido talking about?

“ Destiny is something only the almighty gods are permitted to control! It isn’t something some lowlife nobody like you can control!”

“I can’t believe that!” Yusei insisted. “Every human being follows their own path, and writes their own portion of history! Those paths flow into a larger pool, eventually guiding humanity into an ocean of potential!” And he was a portion of that potential. A drop in the ocean. Just like Lise had said before the Spirit World. That felt like a lifetime ago, but it was true. All of it.

Placido rolled his eyes. “And what, exactly, does humanity gain in the end after finding this ‘ocean’ of theirs? Aren’t you just leading yourselves into a ‘gutter’ of destruction? Son of the Momentum disaster! The Synchro Summons themselves represent what happens when humanity tries to interfere and alter power themselves! No matter how many times you snatch it back, your Synchro monster will once again be taken in by the Mechlord Emperor when my turn starts!

“I activate Mechlord Emperor Wisel’s effect! Your Stardust Dragon belongs to me!”

“No! I won’t let you have Stardust again!” Yusei accelerated. Here. Now. This was the time. Zero Reverse was not caused by him, or even Lise. They were not responsible for the actions of their fathers. They would be responsible for a new, brighter future. Starting right now. “I won’t ever allow that disaster to happen again! We will protect the city with our own hands!”

Yusei’s mark responded in kind. He was not alone! He had Stardust, and everyone he loved!

///

Jack grinned down at his glowing arm. “Win, Yusei!”

///

“We believe in you,” Luna whispered to her red, glowing arm.

“Yeah, go Yusei!” Leo added cheerfully.

///
Crow had just learned Andre and Jean were all right. As would the rest of the hospital. He’d checked each room, one by one. He had to make sure. No one was going to die today.

His arm glowed. Crow smiled knowingly. “Yusei, we’re here with you.”

///

“Look, your arm!” Haruka gasped, her glasses and eyes illuminated with light and wonder.

“Yusei,” Akiza grinned. “It’s going to be okay.”

Lise’s entire body glowed, the markings as bright as possible. She held her hand close to her chest, the blue portion of her soul swirling through her. *You give us hope…my love…*

///

*The bonds with my friends…* Yusei smiled. He felt stronger and lighter than he’d felt for a long time. *I can feel all of them… Right here with me! I can do this. WE CAN DO THIS!*

The light of Accel Synchro surrounded Yusei and his duel runner again. Everything was fading away. His bike, his cards, even his body. His self.

*I’m entering the world of speed… One with the wind…*

He opened his eyes to his new card, pulling him through the speed force. “Shooting Star Dragon…”

“Clear Mind! I tune level eight Stardust Dragon with the level two Synchro Tuner monster Formula Synchron!”

“What? Synchro summoning on his opponent’s turn?!” Placido gasped. There was nothing he could do.

“ACCEL SYNCHRO!!!!!!!” Yusei yelled. He pulled out his new card, just in time for he and Stardust Dragon to vanish.

Placido’s mouth dropped open. “He’s gone!”

A green portal opened up behind him. Yusei came speeding out of it a moment later. Yusei and a new monster!

“Be born…Shooting Star Dragon!”

*(Shooting Star Dragon: Atk: 3300 Def: 2500)*

The new dragon was beautiful! Soaring through the air, it left a trail of stardust in its wake. But Shooting Star Dragon didn’t stop there. It burst through the dark black and purple clouds, pushing the darkness away. A rainbow of colors and light descended on the city. A literal ray of hope.

“What…is that?” Placido almost whimpered. He knew. He was in trouble.

“This is *my* new power! Shooting Star Dragon!”

The light of Shooting Star Dragon touched the entire city. Everyone could see it. Felt hope in their hearts again. The darkness was retreating.
Luciano drummed his fingertips on the arm of his chair. “What’s he gonna do? Looks like something troubling came out.” Placido may have, technically, been Luciano’s ally. But he wouldn’t mind watching Placido’s gambit fail.

“How intriguing,” Joel commented. “This is the card the Gods gave him…”

“So what does that mean for us now?”

Joel ignored him. “Will the Gods side with us and our objectives? Or are our views mistaken? Let us observe carefully.”

“Here I go!” Yusei declared, smiling at his new monster. “Shooting Star Dragon!”

Chapter End Notes

(I love these kinds of chapters/episodes. People regaining their hope and strength after failing? Getting back up again after being knocked down for the billionth time? Gets me every time.

After the next chapter, 77, I’m putting in an original chapter. Just to give the characters time to breathe, ya know? These last few chapters, AND the Spirit World? These kids have been through A LOT. They need to relax, so I’m letting them before more shit hits the fan.

Might not be tonight, or tomorrow for the next chapter, but it will be coming to you as soon as I can write it!

Thank you all, again, so much for sticking with me! I appreciate all the readers that are still here. Let’s keep going into the future together!)
“Zhis light…” Sherry breathed. “So beautiful…” She shook herself. The worst of the threat was over. “Let’s get going, Mizoguchi.”

He nodded, following her lead. The two of them took off on their duel runners.

///

Jack beamed up at the light above the city. “So, you finally managed to pull off an Accel Synchro, huh, Yusei? Kaz, I’m going to head over to him.”

Kaz smiled. “Right.”

///

“What’s with all the light?” Leo gasped. His eyes shone.

“I think it should be safe to leave now,” Sasha said.

“Then we should,” Luna grabbed her brother’s arm. “We’ll text you when we find the others!” she called over her shoulder.

Jarra waved back to her. “We’ll be waiting!”

///

The wind and chaos had died down. Pushed back by the light. It wasn’t entirely safe yet, but Lise dropped the energy shields. The hospital would be okay.

“Everything is in good shape here,” Crow reported, the hospital doors closing behind him.

“That’s good,” Akiza sighed, getting to her feet. She smiled down at Haruka. “It’s safe to go back inside now.”

“Thanks, big sis,” Haruka wiped her eyes, and gave Akiza a hug.

“We should get going,” Lise said quietly.

“Right,” Crow winked at her. “Let’s go find your boyfriend.”

Lise turned pink, but she didn’t deny it. She could feel the new power and strength he had acquired. But Lise wouldn’t be at ease until she saw Yusei was okay in person.

///

Yusei: 300

Placido: 1800

“I’ve caught up to you with my new power,” Yusei said. “My Shooting Star Dragon!”
Vizor breathed a sigh of relief. “You finally managed to do it, Yusei!”

“So that’s the new monster you received from the Gods?” Placido seethed. “Don’t think this makes you my equal! I will NEVER accept the power of a mere worm like you! I activate the effect of Speed World 2! I reduce my speed counters by ten to destroy Shooting Star Dragon! Eat this!”

“I activate Shooting Star Dragon’s ability! I can remove this monster from play once per turn! When this effect is activated, one of my monster’s attacks is negated!” Yusei countered quickly. He had his new monster, and unlocked a new ability, but he couldn’t let his guard down yet!

“Dodging my attack, huh?” Placido’s fists shook. He would not lose. This boy’s powers meant nothing. “I end my turn.”

Yusei wasn’t wasting any time. “Using its effect, Shooting Star Dragon returns to my field during the End Phase! Now let’s go, Shooting Star Dragon! Our counterattack starts right now!”

///

“Placido’s done a lot more bragging than winning,” Luciano noted. He’d been surprised at first, but the duel was dragging on so long he was starting to get bored. “But one good thing is this one duel has increased the Circuit by a lot. But he’s been way too careless since the beginning of this duel.”

“But this duel alone will not be enough to complete the Circuit,” Joel said. “We must use the powers of the Signers even more…”

///

Placido took the duel back onto one of the main streets.

“My turn!” Yusei drew a card.

“No matter how many times you evolve your monster, its attacks will continue to be negated by Skiel Carrier 5 every turn,” Placido reminded him. “And Wisel Guard 3 will protect me from a second attack. Don’t go thinking you can beat an invincible Mechlord Emperor so easily just because you have a new lizard!”

“Are you sure about that?” It was Yusei’s turn to smirk.

“Say what?”

“I activate Shooting Star Dragon’s effect! Once per turn, Shooting Star allows me to reveal the top five cards of my deck. And Shooting Star can attack the enemy monster according to the number of Tuner monsters I draw!”

Placido’s eyes narrowed. **Shooting Star Dragon doesn’t follow normal attacking rules?**

“I have to rely on Shooting Star Dragon’s effect to beat him. There’s no other way to win against that five-monster monstrosity,” Yusei muttered to himself. He put his fingers on his deck. “These next five draws will show us what fate really has in store!”

He closed his eyes. This would be everyone’s win. He wasn’t the only one who had protected the city. He could feel it; his friends. Their power was giving him and Shooting Star strength!

///
Luna and Leo were rocketing as fast as they could on their duel boards through the city.

“Yusei is…” Luna trailed off, looking down at her glowing arm.

///

“ Asking for strength, I see,” Jack smiled at his glowing wings. He was almost there.

///

“We’ll give you as much power as you need!” Crow declared.

He, Akiza, and Lise had noticed their glowing body parts.

“You have all our feelings,” Akiza said.

Lise took the lead of their trio. She wasn’t sure what to say to him. Nothing seemed right, or like it could summarize everything she was feeling. *Everything I have…is yours…my love…*

///

Yusei smiled. He knew. He could feel it in every fiber of himself. The love of his friends.

“The first draw!” He turned the card over. “Is a Tuner monster; Junk Synchron!

“The second! The Tuner monster; Nitro Synchron!

“The third card! Tuner monster; Debris Dragon!

“The fourth draw! Tuner monster; Effect Veiler!”

“Four tuners?!” Placido’s eyes were practically bugging out of his head. “The hell?! That’s impossible!”

“And…my final draw! This is for our future! The fifth card is the Tuner monster; Hyper Synchron!”

“NO! FIVE ATTACKS?!”

“Go!” Yusei commanded. Every piece of the dragon, of his friends, was with him. “Shooting Star Dragon! Stardust Mirage!”

Yusei’s new dragon split into five identical version of itself. All different colors; red, orange, yellow, green, and blue. The red dragon swooped in to attack first.

Placido swallowed, sweat dripping down his brow. He could still survive. He knew he could. “The first battle is negated by Skiel Carrier 5’s effect!”

The orange dragon swooped in after the red dragon vanished.

“Wisel Guard 3’s effect activates! Once per turn, it can’t be destroyed in battle! The second battle is meaningless!”

The orange dragon hit Emperor Wisel’s shield, vanishing.

“But I still have the third battle!” Yusei reminded him. “Attack Wisel Guard 3!”
The green dragon’s attack connected! The Emperor’s right arm was blown completely off!

“The fourth battle! Attack Wisel Attack 3!”

The yellow dragon took out Emperor Wisel’s other arm!

**Yusei: 300**

**Placido: 100**

“And the final battle! Shooting Star Dragon, attack Skiel Carrier 5!”

The blue dragon, the very last one, swooped clean through Mechlord Emperor Wisel. At least, what was left of it.

“Insanity!” Placido screamed. “The Mechlord Emperor…! Me…! We were beaten by a mere human?!”

**Yusei: 300**

**Placido: 0**

Finally, finally, finally…the duel was over. Yusei had won! For now, the city was safe.

An explosion, almost as big as the statue built between the Satellite and New Domino City rocked the duel lanes. Placido went spinning out of control. His torso separated from his duel runner, as did his sword. The bike skidded to a halt immediately, but what was left of Placido’s body and sword went a tad further.

Yusei pulled up to a stop right by Placido’s top half. “Oh god, are you okay?” Yusei wasn’t sure if he should call an ambulance or…something? Wires, gears, and parts dangled out of his severed body half, not blood and guts… So it was kinda up in the air…

Joel’s mean-spirited chuckle filled the air. “There is no need to show pity towards this man after such a loss.”

Placido’s body, sword, and duel runner rose up to the jewel above Yusei. The center statue above the duel lanes dividing Satellite and City…

“If he found out he was pitied by the enemy, it would ruin his pride as an Emperor. A loss of this magnitude is enough punishment for this man as it is.”

Two more figures in white stood atop the jewel statue. A small person, and an extremely large person. Placido, if he were still in one piece, would have been the medium sized person.

“You!” Yusei recognized the smaller figure. “You’re the one who attacked Leo and Luna!”

Luciano shrugged. “I was just testing them out a bit. But Placido went and stole your program so he could design his Diablos Army. Though it was all a wasted effort in the end! Look at what a mess he’s become!” He laughed cruelly at the pain and destruction riddling Placido’s body.

“The program!” Yusei connected one of the many dots to questions they still had. “So he stole the program and created the Ghosts!”

“Technically, it was the Vice-Director, Lazar, that did the stealing,” Luciano corrected with a sniff. “But the second he realized he was in danger, he took off running like the little clown he is!”
“Just how many lives will Placido go through before he realizes he’s inferior to us?” Luciano was already bored with talking about Lazar. He reached into Placido’s hand, ripping out the deck of cards still there. “Damn bastard, taking my cards without asking! Oh whoops, I took your whole deck by accident. But it’s not like they’re any good to you while you still can’t move,” Luciano snickered. “Huh?”

“Yusei!” Lise pulled up on the street with Crow and Akiza not far behind. Maybe it was the fact that what turned out to be a creepy cyborg had been saying his name for what felt like hours. Maybe Yusei was just glad to see Lise. But either way, hearing his name from Lise’s lips was like he’d walked into a dream that he never wanted to wake up from.

She wasn’t sure what to do or say now that they were face to face. Lise knew she couldn’t…they still couldn’t touch each other. Not without a lot of hurt still… She settled for wrapping her fist in the coattails of his jacket. Sure, Yusei’s new riding gear look was, dare she even think it, sexy, but she’d missed his longer jacket too. It wasn’t the same, but she still felt his warmth and love. “I’m so glad you’re all right.”

Yusei did the same. He tugged, with a little bit of the playful nature he’d used to tickle her, on one of Lise’s zippers. His smile small, but warm. “It’s always good to see you.”

Crow chuckled a little, waving and gesturing to himself and Akiza. “We’re here too.”

“Us too!” Leo announced.

Jack pulled both twins in aboard their duel boards. They’d met up along the way, and Jack was more than happy to let his friends hitch a ride.

The team was back together. Team 5Ds, plus Vizor who remained quiet in the very back. Facing down the threat from above.

“So,” Jack dismounted. “Who are they?”

///

Sherry and Mizoguchi were on their way at breakneck speed. The faces of their friends, Team 5Ds, and the strange white clad people above them filled Sherry’s monitor.

“Seems the magnetic disturbance has settled down,” Mizoguchi said.

“Those men…” Sherry zoomed in on the two white-cloaked people.

Her answers were just ahead.

///

“Yusei Fudo…Elizabeth Kururugi…Jack Atlas…Crow Hogan…Akiza Izinski…Leo and Luna Collins… Seems your cast has arrived,” Joel commented like he was listing people for his upcoming play. “What we stand on is the monument that symbolizes the union of Satellite and New Domino City. How ironic that fate has allowed us to meet beneath it.”

“So you guys were behind all the Ghost attacks?” Crow’s hands curled into fists.

“Who are you people?!” Jack shouted up to them.

“Looks as though we have not provided a proper introduction,” Joel blinked. “How rude of us. We
are the three Emperors of Yliaster.”

“Yliaster?” Luna murmured.

“I am the leader, Joel.”

“Wha?” Luciano exclaimed. “You’re the leader?”

Joel gave him a look.

Luciano chuckled nervously, clearing his throat. “Never mind! Then I guess, I’m the sub-leader, Luciano.” He pointed down at Placido’s body. “And this guy’s our lowest member, Placido!”

“Yliaster, why are you doing this to New Domino City?!” Yusei asked.

“Why?” Luciano mimicked in a nasty voice. “As if we need a reason to do what we please with the likes of you.”

“I don’t mind,” Joel shrugged. “I’ll tell them.”

“Eh? You sure it’s okay to talk?”

“It’s not like they can do anything about it.”

“Guess you have a point,” Luciano admitted.

“Our objective is to change the future,” Joel said simply.

“The future?” Lise said.

“Yes, the future.”

Jack scoffed, raising his fist. “That kind of thing isn’t for you to decide! It’s for us to decide for ourselves!”

“Oh really? Shall we settle this now?” Luciano taunted. He rolled his eyes. “You’re all so dumb!”

“Come again, you brat?!” Jack growled.

“It’s hardly that simple,” Luciano replied, unusually serious. “If you people took care of the Earth properly, we wouldn’t be here in the first place!”

Yusei shook his head. None of this was making sense. “What do you mean by changing the future?”

“Yeah!” Crow agreed. “Don’t give us some crap about you three knowing what’s best for the future!”

“But we know the future already.”

“What?”

Luciano’s small face had turned fierce. “As long as you guys are in it, the future is as good as poisoned!”

“Bastard!” Jack shouted up to the small boy. The kid’s attitude was really pissing him off.
“All that Luciano said is fact,” Joel said. “Yliaster was created by the Gods to maintain and balance the Earth, the Spirit World, and their inhabitants.”

“Build and maintain history?” Yusei whispered.

“Our organization has existed since the beginning of time. Quietly and anonymously controlling the events occurring on Earth. You can try, but none of you will ever see or understand the full extent of what I’m telling you.”

“Don’t lie!” Crow shouted. “That’s ridiculous! Are you saying all the politicians and world leaders around the world are your allies?”

Joel rolled his eyes. Humans were so slow sometimes. “It would be nonsensical for every single human being running around to know of Yliaster’s existence.”

“So what’re you talking about?!”

“Just like all living things in the world are part of a food chain pyramid, the standings of this world also take on a pyramid form. A very small section of human beings stands at the top, under our rule. Granting them control over select countries, we in turn receive their aid in guiding the world’s history!”

“That can’t be true…” Akiza clutched her hands close to her chest. What did that mean for her father?

“Zhen my mozheimer and fathher were also a part of your agenda?!”

“Sherry?” Lise knew she had heard her, but where was she?

“Don’t expect me to remember all the people that have vanished for the rightful path of history!” Joel’s eyes narrowed. Where is this new voice coming from?

“Zhen I’m going to make you remember!”

Sherry burst out of nowhere. Aboard her duel runner, she went full throttle up the side of the Jewel monument.

“Shery, no!” Lise called out to her.

But Sherry wasn’t listening. She drove up high enough, and jumped her runner. Her front wheel was aimed directly for Joel. “I’m taking my revenge RIGHT NOW!”

“Insolent child,” Joel growled. He ducked and came up with his hand outstretched, grabbing Sherry’s duel runner in midair!

“What?!”

“Something of this lowly caliber is hardly capable of killing me!” Joel tossed Sherry and her bike away like they were nothing.

Sherry jumped off, landing on the jewel along with the three Emperors. Her duel runner was not so lucky. It splashed down into the water, sinking.

“My lady!” Mizoguchi followed his young charge up the jewel monument. He aimed his duel runner straight for Joel.
Luciano jumped up onto Joel’s shoulders. Just as Mizoguchi jumped off his duel runner, Luciano jumped to meet him. Joel back handed Mizoguchi’s duel runner, smashing its front, and sending it flying into the air. The bike promptly exploded. Mizoguchi pressed a button on his duel disk, activating a hidden knife. Luciano held Placido’s sword. The two blades met in midair.

“What?!”

“Don’t think weak attacks like that will work against us!” Luciano snickered as he kicked Mizoguchi away.

“Mizoguchi! They won’t go down that easily!” Yusei called up to him.

“My lady?!” Mizoguchi ignored Yusei’s warning. The only person he cared about was Sherry, and what she wanted to do.

“Humans truly are an arrogant, insolent bunch,” Joel commented dryly. “Repeating the same history over and over, corrupting their creations until the decay into nothing. However, that is where our strength as part of Yliaster comes into play to keep them in line. We step in to prevent you foolish human beings from choosing the wrong path, and we offer advice on what the correct path to choose is. Yet, no matter how many times we modify history, we have been unable to stop the coming tragic future!”

“Tragic?” Yusei said.

Lise’s eyes were wide. “Future?!”

“Yusei, the Momentum your father created, and Elizabeth, whose father used the Momentum to create Zero Reverse, the creation and corruption of Momentum is fated to lead the world to its doom. We hoped Roman Goodwin would destroy Momentum when we used him, but Zero Reverse only made Momentum more powerful! We decided to take control of this era, so we can directly fix this timeline.”

“Fix?” Crow frowned. He didn’t like where this was going.

“By eliminating New Domino City.”

Yusei gasped. “What did you say?!”

“And you expect us to believe this pack of lies?” Jack wasn’t buying it.

“It’s your choice whether or not to believe us,” Luciano said. “But the fact of the matter is that the curse of the Fudo and Goodwin families is still carried with them.”

“A curse…” Akiza muttered. *I thought this psychic power of mine was a curse! But it wasn’t something that could taint an entire timeline! What does this mean?*

“I won’t let you do zhat!” Sherry yelled. She regained her footing, dashing for Joel.

He batted her away, like her duel runner earlier. With his other fist, he punched off Sherry’s helmet, and held her in the air by her shirtfront. “Coming at me in such a lowly way! You maggots cannot call yourselves real duelists!”

“My lady!” Mizoguchi gasped.

“We’re only interested in *real* duelists,” Luciano sneered.
Sherry was not about to back down. These people were responsible for the deaths of her parents! She wrapped her legs around Joel’s massive arm, and used her body weight to pull backwards. Her shirt ripped from Joel’s grasp, Sherry hung on, attempting to separate Joel’s arm from his body. “I’ll take zhis arm wizh me zhen!”

Joel was starting to get irritated. “Just how far does your foolish incompetence take you?”

“What?”

Joel raised his arm. He refused to allow such a pitiful human to jerk him around even more. “Go join your parents!” He tossed Sherry off the monument!

“My lady!” Mizoguchi jumped off the monument after her.

“Sherry! Mizoguchi!” Lise let go of Yusei’s coat and rose into the air. She wouldn’t let Sherry die. Nor Mizoguchi.

Mizoguchi grabbed Sherry as they fell. He pushed a different button on his duel disk. A parachute shot out, expanding in the air. His and Sherry’s descent instantly slowed.

“You two okay?” Lise hovered nearby, just in case.

It took a few seconds for Mizoguchi to respond. He and Sherry had been badly beaten. Their pride injured. “Yes, thank you.”

“Good,” Lise nodded. She turned back to her team, giving them a thumbs up.

They returned the gesture. Everyone was okay.

“Joel, Luciano,” Akiza cupped her hands and shouted up to them. “What do you mean you’re going to destroy New Domino City?!”

“If you want to know the extent of the truth, duel us in the WRGP! We will be entering as the final challengers,” Joel said.


“All the answers lie within the WRGP,” Joel said. He paused, his gaze pointing upwards. A new meteor, a tablet, was entering Earth. “Seems mine has finally arrived.”

“What’s he mean?” Crow grumbled. He’d had about enough of these guys.

Luciano grinned, pointing up. “He means that!”

A golden meteor was headed right for them!

“What do we do?” Leo trembled. That thing was huge!

“Run!” Akiza cried.

Luciano giggled at their retreating backs. “What’s the point in doing that now?”

The meteor came closer, and closer! Even though Team 5Ds was trying to get out of the way, they wouldn’t make it in time. They covered their eyes as the tablet’s glow became too bright.

Joel extended his left hand. The meteor, his tablet, stopped in its tracks, hovering in the sky.
“He stopped it?” Luna whispered.

They watched the stone tablet leak balls of light. Light that collected in Joel’s hand. The light vanished, and in its place rested five cards. The tablet turned grey, cracking up and down, and exploded into pieces that rained down into the waters below.

Joel activated his duel disk. He placed his five new monsters on the field.

The track and waters below rumbled.

“What now?!” Crow threw up his hands exasperatedly.

“This is my power!” Joel declared. A watery figure erupted from the ocean.

A pale yellow-gold mechanical monster emerged from the waves. Like the other emperors, it had the same infinity-based chest emblem. It resembled a vehicle and a person with lobster-like arms, and treads for legs. The monster was also practically three stories tall!

“Mechlord Emperor Grannel! Team 5Ds, you must win in the WRGP if you wish to face off against us! That is where the truth lies! Let’s go!” Joel raised his hand, transferring Placido.

Luciano scowled. “Do we even have any use for this guy anymore?” He swung Placido’s sword, opening a white portal.

“This is goodbye, Team 5Ds,” Joel said. He and what was left of Placido vanished into the portal.

“Bye bye!” Luciano taunted childishly, following Joel.

“But wait!”

It was too late. The Emperors were gone. So was Mechlord Emperor Grannel. The sky was blue, they’d won the day, but the team felt anything but victorious.

///

The stadium screens popped back on. Thousands of audience members were able to finally relax.

“Power’s back,” Jose said.

Jarra took a deep breath. “What a relief! That was way too scary!”

Sasha nodded, a tiny smile on her lips. “Lise and her friends might be dangerous, but at least they’re not boring.”

Carly sniffled over her broken camera. “Such a big scoop! I didn’t capture anything, and my camera’s fried!”

“Tell me about it,” Garrett sighed.

///

“What the hell do we do now?” Crow demanded. He felt like he had more questions than answers.

Vizor climbed back aboard his duel runner.

“Wait!” Yusei stopped him. “You’re the one who told me about Accel Synchro. A Synchro that
Akiza frowned at Vizor. It wasn’t the first time she’d seen him, but he seemed different. Her new chi sight powers made her feel like her vision was blurring. Had his chi changed? And why did it look and feel so familiar?

“I don’t know,” Vizor replied. “All I knew is that you would complete Accel Synchro. However, if I were to think about it, only one person could grant you such power. You could call it a God of Destiny. Perhaps it guides lost people to their correct path.”

“God of Destiny?”

“You are the only one who can choose the path, Yusei. Along with your new power, Shooting Star Dragon.” Vizor took off before anyone else could ask him more questions.

///

“Urgent news!” Angela informed the public during her news report bulletin. “A massive incident has occurred during the WRGP being held in New Domino City. After a massive assault of turbo duelists, the highway is no longer accessible. A large amount of damage has been reported. In order to handle the cleanup of this incident, the Public Security Maintenance Bureau has temporarily suspended the WRGP until a cause behind the incident is disclosed.”

///

“So…what does this all mean?” Leo demanded. “The city has zero proof of Yliaster?”

The team, plus Sherry and Mizoguchi, were comparing notes back at the team’s place.

“What did the Security Bureau say?”

Jack shook his head. “Electricity was cut off during the incident.”

“There were no pictures taken by security cameras, and the memory chips in the Ghosts were wiped clean,” Crow added. “We have no proof at all.”

“But we know Yliaster exists,” Sherry reminded them all. “What do we do? If Team 5Ds continues with the WRGP, like zhey told you to, zhere’s no doubt you’ll be walking right into zheir trap.”

Mizoguchi’s eyes narrowed. He crossed his arms. “The even orchestrated the event to begin with.”

Yusei nodded. “Even so, we’re going through with the WRGP. They said they’d be entering as challengers. If that’s the case, we can settle things then.”

“Yeah,” Lise agreed. Her soft blue eyes were fierce with determination. This issue was, after all, personal. “We can’t let another disaster repeat itself. We’ll stop them with our evolved cards!”

Chapter End Notes

(The Emperors are still fucking shit up! But I am glad to get Placido’s duel with Yusei out of the way. The Japanese version is slightly better, but the duel still goes on
FOREVER. It makes sense in this context though. Yusei needed to regain his confidence, strength, and sense of self after everything that’s happened. And now, thanks to the city being destroyed the kids get to take a break! I’m so excited for this chapter! I hope you all are too! Also, *wink, wink* coming up is the Bonds Beyond Time movie! I’m so excited to write my favorite characters with legendary duelists Yugi and Jaden! It’s gonna be so much FUN! Paradox was a flawed, yet brief villain, but I enjoyed him. And who DOESN’T like the Malefic monsters? Those monsters are fucking awesome, am I right? Or am I right? Anyway, here’s to the next few chapters being awesome! I can never say thank you enough to all my readers. New or still with me after literal years, thank you to each and every one of you!)
“Good work! Roll with it, and…” Mika directed. She left the next step hanging in the air. Lise knew what to do from here. It was just putting it into practice.

Lise at Mika’s direction, sprang upwards into a barrel roll.

*Roundhouse kick brings me back around...* Lise was going over the steps as she did them too. *And...!*

Lise’s feet touched down. She let her weight come in next, pulling her into a crouch, that propelled her fist into the punching mat waiting on the ground. She grinned, chest heaving. *Finally.*

“That was awesome!” Mika smiled, jumping up and down. “You finally fixed the roundhouse!”

“Thanks to your help,” Lise got up, stretching and cracking her back. She flicked the punching mat into her hands with her foot, and grabbed her water bottle. The cold water felt incredible on her dry throat.

Mika joined her with her own water bottle. She sipped at it and helped pick up their other training gear. “Has anyone ever told you you’re terrifying? I mean,” Lise was giving her a funny look. “After that huge incident at the WRGP, I’d think you’d want to be relaxing.”

“I did sleep a lot afterwards. Mostly because I stayed up super late overthinking,” Lise said after a minute. “But the best way for me to release stress is punching something. I never feel like I’ve worked out right unless I’ve punched something.

“But a vacation would be nice. We do have the time since the WRGP has been suspended for now.”

Mika smiled conspiratorially to herself. She checked her phone. “Aw crap, I forgot,” she frowned. “What’s up?”

“Band practice,” Mika explained. She typed furiously at her phone, and lead the way back inside her apartment. “I forgot we were meeting today.”

“Coolio!” Lise’s eyes lit up. “What kind of band?”

“Just a cover band for now,” Mika said. She unlocked her front door, letting the two girls inside. “The WRGP is hoping to lighten the mood with a few performances after they get the next couple of matches up and running.”

“Like a concert! That’s so cool! Is your band playing?”

Mika winced. “We somehow managed to squeeze in as an opener for LiSA and Masaaki Endoh. The producers wanted a local band for some hometown turf representation. The performance is coming up faster than my band members think, and we *really* need to practice! And come up with a set list!”

“Mind if I stick around?” Lise asked. She and Mika dropped her stuff in the latter’s closet. “If you
don’t mind me being sweaty.” It’d been forever since Lise heard some new music. She couldn’t remember ever seeing a band play live either.

“Not at all. We could use an outside opinion. Feel free to use my shower if you’d like,” Mika gestured to the bathroom as the girls walked by.

“Thanks, but I’ll pass,” Lise’s elbow cocked backwards, straight into Mako’s nose! “I don’t trust this shitbag not to pick the lock.”

Mako had gone sprawling. Blood immediately spurting from his nose.

“Good point,” Mika conceded with a sigh. “Well, if you want a snack, you’re welcome to anything in my kitchen.”

“Doesn’t anyone, I dunno, care that I’m lying here bleeding?!” Mako yelled, trying to save his entire shirt from turning red.

“No,” came both Mika’s and Lise’s responses.

“Screw you,” Mako snarled. He snatched a box of tissues off the kitchen counter and slammed Mika’s bedroom door behind him.

“That takes care of him,” Mika chuckled. Her phone dinged. “Looks like the guys are on their way up.”

Lise nodded and opened the kitchen pantry. She thumbed through the snacks, finally pulling out pretzels.

She had two in her mouth when she walked out to meet the band members.

“Guys, this is my new sparring partner, Lise,” Mika gestured politely to her, who quickly swallowed her pretzels.

“Hi,” Lise waved, a tad self-conscious.

“Lise, this is Ritsu.”

Ritsu’s dark skin shone beautifully in kitchen light. Her red, curly hair was tied back with a rainbow bandana. She had freckles dotting her cheeks the color of gold. Her eyes were like smoky quartz gemstones, and caught the light beautifully. “Nice to meet you,” Ritsu smiled widely, shaking Lise’s hand.

“Y-You too,” Lise’s cheeks felt warm. Ritsu was gorgeous, and here Lise was in her sweaty combat gear.

“A martial artist?” Ritsu pointed at Lise’s arm wrappings.

“Yeah.”

“Me too!” Ritsu gushed. “I do Capoeira!”

“Dance fighting?!” Lise’s self-consciousness faded. “I’ve always wanted to learn that!”

“I’ll teach you some time.”

“Later, I hope?” One of the two boys piped up. Rich, healthy, and dark dreadlocks artfully framed
his angular face. The tips of which were dyed peacock blue. His eyes glinted the gold of tiger’s eye gems. “Raymundo,” he wiggled his eyebrows. “But you can call me Ray.”

“I love your hair,” Lise blurted out.

Ray split into a grin. “My mom did it!”

“She did mine too.” The last boy offered his hand to shake. He too had artful dreadlocks, and a blockier face, but his dreadlock tips were dyed neon green. His eyes were darker than Ray’s, a reddish-brown reminiscent of Hessonite Garnets. If Ray’s eyes had a bright mischievous light to them, his were dark and serious. “Diego. Ray’s my little brother.”

“And that’s the band.”

“Nice to meet you all.”

“You too,” Ritsu said politely.

“Yeah!” Ray cheered. “Ready to rock!” He lead the way back up to the roof, playing an air guitar.

The four of them got to practicing. The rooftop was a bit chilly, but they played up there to avoid being too noisy. Mika explained to Lise that she played the bass, Diego played drums, Ray rocked the electric guitar, and Ritsu was a wizard on the keyboard. Lise nodded along politely, but she didn’t completely understand. Hell, she couldn’t even read music notes. She couldn’t judge much, but most of the practice just sounded like noise…

It took her a while, but she finally picked up on what they were trying to play. Diego insisted on starting over every time anyone made a mistake. And they made a lot of mistakes. Diego was more by the book, and Ray was the wild card who frequently threw the book away… Ritsu was a good medium. Mika was just along for the ride.

“Diego! You’re throwing off our groove!” Ray dropped his arms dramatically. The strap saved his electric guitar.

“We should just get through one song at this point,” Ritsu picked at her nails.

Diego shook his head, his dreads swaying. “We’ll never play the song right if we can’t nail the beginning!”

“We can’t play a song right if we never actually play it!” Ray cried, throwing his arms up.

“Let’s not fight while Lise is here,” Ritsu jabbed her thumb at their new friend.

Lise swallowed another pretzel and drank a glass of water innocently.

Mika finally spoke up. “Why don’t we just play through the whole song, and call it good for the day?” She checked her phone for the time. “Lise and I have to go soon anyway.”

“Fine,” Diego stuck out his lower lip.

Everyone took their places. Lise sat up, ready for an actual song.

The electric-pop beat came in first. Then the unique drum rattling and guitars…and then… vocals!

Ritsu started singing. “You know who it is, coming round again. You want a dose of this right now, it’s K/DA, uh!”
“AAAAHHH!” Lise’s excitement propelled her to her feet. She didn’t think, and started singing.

Ritsu stopped for a second, blinking up at Lise. She had enough brain power left to continue playing at least. Then she broke into a grin, gesturing for Lise to keep going.

Both girls kept singing, everyone kept playing. Lise was so excited she couldn’t stand still. Her favorite part was coming up.

“You ready for this? Let’s go!”

Lise loved this song. She’d listened to it nonstop to get the lyrics right. It had driven Yusei nuts.

“See uhn jae deun ji nae mo se up magic
Dan han bun eh naega jabuh
Juhl daegi jook ji ahn chi uh!
Pow pow ni ga mouol ah ruh!
Gyun dil soo up ssuh won hae do
Won ha neun gae uhl gool ae boo-yah
I’m trouble and you’re wanting it
I’m so cold!
When I move that way you gon’ be so blown!
I’m the realest in the game, uh!
Said I’m on fire with a blade
You’re about to hear my name
Ringing in your head like, whoa!”

“Yes!” Ray shouted.

And then it was already almost over. The last chorus.

“Don’t lose the energy!” Mika yelled over the music.

“Ain’t nobody bringing us
Down, down, down, down, down, down
They could try but we’re gonna wear the crown
You could go another round
Round, round, round, round, round, round
Wish you luck, but you’re not bringing us down
We go hard, til we get it, get it
We go hard, we so in it, in it
We pop stars

Only winning, winning now
Ain’t nobody bringing us
Down, down, down, down!”

The rooftop was quiet for a few seconds. The band members and Lise staring at each other, catching their breath.

“That was so AWESOME!” Ray was so excited he danced around with his guitar.

“Girl, you speak Korean? That was tight as hell,” Ritsu smacked Lise’s arm teasingly.

“No, not at all,” Lise waved her hands. “I can’t. I learned how to sing those parts phonetically. I have no clue what I’m saying. It took hours!”

“Well, thanks for spicing up our practice. Hopefully we’ll see you again? Next practice?” Diego raised an eyebrow over his drum set. He spun one of the drumsticks in his hand.

Lise shrugged. “If I’m not busy with the WRGP.”

“Okay, we’ve gotta clean up our gear. It’s time for me to give Lise her gift!” Mika snapped her guitar case shut.

“Gift?”

“Yeah, but I’m going home with you for dinner tonight to give it to you then!”

“Right,” Ray hefted his guitar case onto his back. He passed his guitar pick between his fingers like it was a card.

Everyone had to help Diego pack up the drum set. They couldn’t leave it on the roof to get rained on.

“So, we’ll see you around, Lise! Bye Mika!” Ray waved on his way back downstairs.

“Get home safe,” Ritsu crushed Lise and Mika into hugs. “Nice meeting you!”

“You too!” Lise croaked.

“Let’s jam again soon,” Diego winked, and followed Ray and Ritsu out.

Lise rounded on Mika. “Please tell me you didn’t buy something ridiculous.”

“Okay,” Mika smirked. “I won’t tell you that.”

Lise followed her back into her apartment. Mika came out of her bedroom with an already packed bag. “Don’t destroy my apartment, Mako!”

“Whatever!” Mako responded petulantly.

“You can’t just give it to me here?” Lise asked, still a little shell shocked.
“Nope, it’s kinda big, and not just for you.”

///

“Welcome home, Lise,” Yusei said. He looked up from his work on his own duel runner. He wanted to make sure it was doing all right after his duel with Placido. “Oh, Mika, good to see you again.” He got up, wiping his greasy hands on a rag. Lise pulled off her helmet, and shook her hair out, which Yusei paused to watch unbeknownst to himself.

Mika dismounted Lise’s bike. She threw her bag down and fist-bumped Yusei. “Working hard, as usual, I see.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Yusei scratched at his cheek a little, smearing grease. Lise’s cheeks turned pink, watching him.

“You and Lise are two peas in a pod.”

“Well, we’re not very good at relaxing,” Lise admitted quickly. She picked up Mika’s small overnight bag to take upstairs.

Mika might have imagined it, but Yusei’s small smile seemed to be strained. A muscle tightening in his jaw maybe. Especially when she’d mentioned his and Lise’s relationship. She remembered their previous troubles, but this one seemed different. Hopefully, what Mika had planned would help.

“So, what’s for dinner?”

“Crow and Bruno have dinner duty,” Yusei said. “Are you spending the night, Mika?”

“Yeah, just for tonight.” She lead the way up into the kitchen. “Because I’ve got something special for everybody.”

Yusei’s eyes slid over to Lise. She shrugged, spreading her hands. He understood. Mika hadn’t shared any details.

“Is that Mika I hear?” Crow looked up from his work. He’d just finished pouring the broth for homemade ramen.

Bruno plopped in the little Naruto, fish cakes, into each bowl. “Oh, hi Mika! We’ve got enough for you to have a bowl too!”

“Good, that smells amazing!” Mika sat down, ready to eat.

“It’s good to see you without your brother, for once,” Yusei added.

Mika winced. “He’s my brother, and I love him and all, but…yeah… it’ll be nice to get away from him for a little while.”

Lise rolled her eyes. “Dude can’t take a hint,” she muttered.

“Jack! Dinner!” Bruno called up the ladder.

Jack joined them, taking his preferred seat at the head of the table. Bruno, Crow, Yusei, and Lise were already fully engaged in conversation and eating with Mika.

“Not to be rude, but why did you decide to join us tonight, Mika?” Jack said in between slurps of
ramen.

“Not that you aren’t welcome any time,” Crow added quickly.

“Oh right!” Mika clapped her hands together. “I almost forgot!” She polished off her last gulp of ramen before continuing. “Tomorrow I’m taking all of Team 5Ds to a hot spring!”

“Really?” Jack brightened. “How fabulous!”

“Are you sure? Hot springs can be pretty expensive,” Crow frowned.

Yusei sipped at his milk. “Could be nice, but we don’t want to put you out of your way like that.”

“No, no, it’s no trouble! Mako and I just got our uh…” Mika paused. She drew circles on the table with her fingertips. “Our inheritance from my mom’s will.”

“Oh wow.”

“Yeah, I’m surprised she remembered me, but apparently being the leader of a cult means there are multiple benefits…” she kept drawing circles on the table.

Mika had mixed feelings about her mother. About her mother’s death too. But she was doing the best she could. For herself and her brother.

“Mika?” Lise reached for her friend.

“Thanks, but it’s okay.” Mika wasn’t putting on a brave face when she smiled. She’d always wanted to do something like this for friends. Now she had friends, and the chance. “So whattaya say? The bus comes tomorrow morning to drive us there!”

“Of course, I’ll be going,” Jack gestured grandly to himself. “May I invite Carly? She’s my girlfriend.”

“Oh definitely.”

“Akiza and the twins too?”

“They’re part of the team! That’s why I hired a bus.”

“Awesome, I can’t wait to relax,” Lise spread her arms. Finished with her ramen, she collected her bowl, and Yusei’s. She had to do dishes, like usual, before relaxing at a hot spring. But dishes were better than cooking, at least in Lise’s opinion.

“Oh…thanks…” Yusei hadn’t expected her to take his bowl too. “Did you want some help with the dishes?”

“Nope. Bowls are pretty easy. You should call Akiza and the twins though, see if they want to stay here tonight.”

“Good idea,” Mika agreed.

Yusei pulled out his phone. “All right then.”

///

The bus came, on the dot, at five in the morning. Luckily, Akiza and the twins had opted to stay
the night, instead of making the journey over that morning. Getting up even earlier to be on time would be a nightmare.

“Damn this is early,” Crow yawned.

“Sorry,” Mika scratched at the back of her head. “But the springs are quite the drive away, and I wanted to get started early.”

“Just sleep on the bus,” Lise grumbled. She hopped onboard, picked a seat, and promptly passed out in it.

“Hot spring adventure…!” Leo raised his arm sluggishly. He was excited, but tired. SO tired.

The drive was just over six hours, nearly seven. Stops were interspersed for bathroom and stretch breaks though. Everyone napped for at least a few hours, except for Mika. She was the only one whose excitement made it impossible to fall asleep.

///

“Welcome to the hot springs!” Mika declared, spreading her arms dramatically.

The hot spring inn was large, wrapped smartly around the climbing hillside. Steam rose in the back, the hot springs. Nestled against the back of the inn, the hot springs themselves were protected by the natural rock formations. The surrounding trees and foliage were carefully selected and placed amongst the hand-crafted stonework.

“So nice!” Leo’s eyes shone with his excitement.

“Yeah,” Luna agreed, her eyes as big and wide as her brother’s.

“It’s prettier during the cherry blossom season, but also busier,” Mika said. “It’s the off season, so we pretty much have the place to ourselves.”

“Don’t forget me!” Mako came, practically skipping, out of the inn. He waved jubilantly at the dumbstruck 5Ds party. His acid green eyes fell hungrily on Lise.

“The hell are you doing here?!” Mika blocked her brother’s line of sight with a brandished finger.

“I knew you were planning on coming here this weekend,” Mako’s cheerful mask never slipped. “I decided I’d go the night before and meet you here!”

“Has the bus already left?” Akiza asked.

“Yep,” Crow groaned.

Mika sighed heavily. “And it won’t be back until Sunday night.”

Lise’s eye twitched. “Yay.” She sounded less than enthusiastic. Just once, I wanted to fucking relax!

“Oh Mika,” An older woman, dressed in a maple-leaf patterned kimono, came out of the inn. “This must be your party! Welcome to the Sakura Hot Springs! All your rooms are ready, so if you’d please follow me.”

Akiza took a deep breath, and grabbed her bags. “We’re already here, and I dunno about you guys, but I deserve some rest and relaxation!”
Most of the others followed her inside. She had a point. The team had been through quite a lot lately. Mako was more than happy to step aside to allow the others through.

Lise stayed outside, biting her lip as she thought. Was it worth trying to relax with this freakshow breathing down her neck?

Yusei’s dark blue eyes were cold. He wasn’t going in until Lise was. “You sure you don’t wanna leave?” he whispered into Lise’s ear, glaring at Mako.

She gave it another minute. The place was nice. Mako was the unfortunate part of the surprise. But luckily, he was outnumbered. Even the staff wouldn’t tolerate his bullshit. If they happened to catch him in the act that is.

“Let’s give it a try,” Lise decided. “I’ve never been to a hot spring. Could be nice.”

“Okay, but I don’t trust him.”

Lise smiled at Yusei. He wasn’t touching her, but she could feel his warmth. His breath ghosting past her shoulder. They were getting better. Slowly but surely. This could be good. She’d probably have to smash Mako’s head into the dirt at some point, but it’d be a good experience.

Yusei noticed her staring. “Uh…” His cheeks felt warm. “…Did I say something weird?”

“Nope, come on.” She lugged her things inside.

Mako waved cheerfully as Yusei passed. To which, Yusei used his index and pinky finger to point at his eyes, then Mako. Behind Yusei’s back, Mako stuck his tongue out.

He crossed his arms, glaring as the door closed behind Yusei. What does she even see in HIM?

The concierge was just directing everyone to their rooms. “This red room is for misses Luna, Akiza, and Mika. The green room across from them is for misters Leo, Bruno, and Crow.” She hummed to herself, walking further down the hall. “This yellow room is for miss Carly and mister Jack!”

“Couples room,” Carly muttered, turning beat red. She had to hide her face she felt so warm.

Jack beamed at her. So cute.

“And then the purple room here is miss Lise’s and mister Yusei’s.” The concierge finished brightly. “The hot springs are down this hall. Men on the left, and women on the right. Everything you need is provided, but let me know if you need anything extra. Just ask for Miss Okami. Dinner is at 6:30, and feel free to check out our game room. Enjoy your stay!”

Lise’s brain was fizzling. Sure, she and Yusei had been sleeping together for a while now. It was normal. But to have someone acknowledge it? Especially a stranger?

She almost jumped out of her skin when Akiza’s hand fell on her shoulder. “See you in the bath in a half hour?”

“Yeah, sounds good!”

Yusei let them into the room. Miss Okami had handed him the key while Lise was spacing. They’d taken off their shoes at the main entrance, for indoor shoes. But the room’s tatami mats were made for bare or sock feet. Which was nice because no one wanted to walk on futons, or any bed for that
matter, in shoes. The covers for said futons were purple, so were the wallpaper designs, and the small, simple tea set on the little table.

“Oh, so when she said purple room, she meant it literally,” Lise said.

Yusei plugged his phone into one of the outlets. Place was retrofitted too. “Even the outlet covers are purple.”

“Hmmm,” Lise put her bag down and crawled into one of the futons. For a bed on the floor, it felt pretty comfortable.

“Lise?” He looked up and she wasn’t there. Did Mako try something already or…? Nope. There she was in the futon. “What’re you doing?” Yusei chuckled a little, pulling the futon’s covers back.

“I’m a futon burrito!” Lise giggled. “I haven’t slept in one since I was a kid.”

“Oh, so you’re testing them out?” Yusei raised an eyebrow. They were finally alone after hours, and Lise looked so cute in the futon. He wanted to…to at least hold her hand… But he was scared to even brush her fingers with his own. He couldn’t keep pretending everything was okay though. It wasn’t.

“Just for a little bit,” Lise crawled out to grab what she’d need for after the bath. “If I stay in there, I’ll fall asleep, and I wanna try out the water. Are you guys going in too?”

“Uh huh. Jack’s itching for the ‘kingly’ treatment,” Yusei used his fingers for air quotes.

Lise rolled her eyes. “Can’t keep the ‘king’ waiting.” She did the same, and slipped back into her pair of indoor shoes.

“See you at dinner?”

“Yeah, see you at dinner.”

///

Luna, Akiza, and Carly were already washing themselves up when Lise and Mika arrived. There were enough stations that all five girls could wash up at the same time.

“Took you long enough,” Akiza teased. Her red hair was awash with soap. She looked like the queen of bubbles.

Luna dumped her little bucket of water over her head. “All clean!”

Lise sat down next to Akiza. “I was just looking around. I’ve never been to a hot spring before.”

“Me either,” Mika said. She sat down too. Everyone had to be clean before going in the spring water.

“We have,” Akiza and Luna said.

Carly gave them both a look. Even naked, long hair dripping, and her arms crossed Carly could be intimidating. “That’s because you’re rich.” She placed the retractable shower head of her station back in its place.

Akiza opened her mouth to respond, then thought better of it. Carly was right. Considering the girls here, and who had been to a spring before and hadn’t, it was obvious.
“But it’s nice to finally be here,” Carly’s expression softened. “I never dreamed I’d get to come to a place like this, especially when I was living out of my car.”

“Or a subway tunnel!” Lise added, scrubbing the shampoo out of her hair.

Finished washing, Carly, Akiza, and Luna went to the hairdryers. The locker room right by the springs had a whole wall full of them. The girls helped each other, especially with Carly’s long hair. They climbed into the spring water just as Lise and Mika finished up.

“Mind helping me dry my hair?” Mika asked. “I just don’t like the cold water dripping on my back.”

“Oh, sure.”

The whirring dryers made it hard to talk. Lise didn’t mind. Mika’s short, dark hair dried quickly.

“Perfect,” Mika took the hairdryer. “You’re turn.”

“That’s not- okay…” Lise gave up. It was nice to have people play with her hair.

“Your hair is really pretty,” Mika said once she’d turned the dryer off. She started braiding Lise’s hair, putting it up in the back so it wouldn’t get wet again. “Mine isn’t long enough yet to braid.”

“Your hair is pretty too. Sometimes I wish mine was darker.”

“Eh,” Mika shrugged. “It’s nice and manageable when it’s short, but I do prefer the brown over the white hair my mom had.”

“I’m…” An apology felt so hollow. Both girls had barely known Mitka. But Lise had been the one to see her die. “Sorry…”

Mika sighed. “My mom made some…inadvisable choices. It’s not your fault, or mine, or even Mako’s. Their choices don’t make us like them. We make our own choices too.”

“You seem so wise sometimes, Mika.”

“It’s the trauma, but you’re done! All ready for the hot springs!”

“Come on in already!” Carly waved. “Water’s great!”

Lise sank in to the heated water slowly, practically melting the rest of the way. “This is soooooo good…”

“I wanna live in here!” Luna splashed a little in her excitement.

Akiza giggled. She’d curled her long bangs up into buns. Princess Leia style. “And turn into a raisin?”

“I’m with Luna. All my troubles are flowing away…”

“It’s a nice, natural place too. Big enough to swim in for little kids.”

Luna nodded knowingly. “Leo is definitely using the boy’s side as a swimming pool.”

The girls sat in silence for a few minutes. They didn’t need to talk. Relaxing together was enough.
Luna broke the silence. “This might seem out of the blue, but I just want to say I’m sorry. About everything that’s happened… The Spirit World… it was such a disaster. You all got hurt, and I didn’t… so I’m sorry…”

The smaller girl’s gaze was on her curled fists in the water. She didn’t notice the older girls moving closer.

“Luna?” Lise’s voice was soft. “Have you been feeling this guilty the whole time?”

Akiza settled her hand on the smaller girl’s shoulder. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“It wasn’t anyone’s fault. We all did the best we could, and you were so strong.”

“We’ve all been hurt, and had to move forward from the Spirit World in our own way. You’re not alone.”

“Besides, this trip is supposed to be the chance to forget all about the Spirit World, Team Catastrophe, and the Emperors! At least for a little while.”

“What matters is we’re all still here.”

“Also, that I’m going to win our water fight!” Carly squealed, splashing her friends.

“Hey!”

“Oh, it’s on!”

The girls’ side was filled with shrieks, laughing, and erratic splashes. Finally, finally, they were having fun like the kids they were.

///

“Sounds like they’re having fun,” Crow jerked his thumb at the wooden wall dividing the men from the women.

“Yeah! This place is awesome!” Leo cried. He’d been swimming gleefully from one end of the spring to the next.

Bruno laughed, watching Leo do laps. “This is nice.”

“I could get used to this,” Jack sighed deeply. He spread his arms, resting them on the smooth rock behind him. “This is treatment fit for a king.”

“I know. I had no idea I was so stiff,” Yusei said. The warm waters were unraveling all the cold in his bones, the tightness in his muscles. It even felt good on the new scar decorating his left arm.

“We’ve gotta thank Mika somehow,” Crow suggested. “After everything that’s happened, this all feels like a dream.”

“If it is a dream, don’t wake me up!” Leo stopped swimming for a moment in case he needed to ward people off.

“Now that I’m here, it’s even better than a dream!” Mako announced, stepping into the waters and posing like he thought he was Superman.

“Welp, dream’s dead,” Crow said, voice deadpan.
“More like a nightmare,” Yusei muttered. He rested his head on his hand. He could practically feel the tension seeping back into his shoulders.

“Remind us,” Jack broke into a fake grin, clasping his hands. “Why are you here?”

Mako crossed his arms. “I deserve to relax too! I have a lot of stress built up!”

“Gods, I can’t imagine what that’s like,” Bruno rolled his eyes.

“But enough about stress,” Mako rubbed his hands together. His eyebrows wiggled. “Who wants to peek in on the women’s bath with me?”

“NO.”

“Aw, come on! You know you want to!”

“No, I really don’t, man,” Crow scooted as far away as possible.

“My sister’s over there,” Leo said quietly. “I…I don’t wanna look over there like that…”

“Well said, Leo,” Jack said.

“Come on,” Mako looked at each of them like the choice was clear. “Guys, naked women!”

“And we’re naked men.”

“But don’t you wanna see your girlfriends naked?”

“Course I would,” Jack admitted. “But not like this. I’ve gotta at least ask her first.”

“Plus,” Yusei got up. It was time to get out. “Especially since we’re dating, even if I had seen her naked, that’s nobody else’s business.”

“Wait,” Mako was getting desperate. The others were following Yusei out. “Wait! Are you saying you’ve seen my future wife naked?! I need details! Details!”

“NO!”

///

“No, no, no! Don’t go out! Please don’t!” Akiza pleaded. She had quite a few cards in her hand.

“Sorry ladies,” Carly clicked her tongue, drawing a card, placing her seven, and discarding a two.

“You shitty motherfucker,” Lise swore, throwing what was left of her hand on the table. “Eighteen.”

The girls were playing cards in the game room. Clearly, they’d finished their dinners early. They were all dressed in the light purple robes provided by the inn. Luna’s was a little big on her, but the other girls had clearly helped her tie the sleeves back.

“I take it you’re not playing Golf?” Yusei sat down on the arm of the couch. Close to Lise.

“Nope, Shanghai.”

“Yeah! They’re teaching me how to play!” Luna waved her new hand for Yusei to see.
Akiza stuck her lower lip out in a pout. “And Carly’s kicking our asses!”

“There’s still the last hand, don’t forget,” Lise said, passing cards to Carly for shuffling.

“And of course, I will take yours,” Mako burst in out of nowhere, grabbing Lise’s hand. Her cards spilled across the floor and table. Everyone stopped their games. Did they need to intervene or was it handled? “I see you’re stunned with happiness!” Mako’s smug smirk grew.

Lise stood up. Her breath rattled in her chest like a low roar. She flipped Mako’s hand around, using her own to press into Mako’s. A hand lock.

“Okay,” Mako went down at an awkward angle like a sack of rice. “Ow…you’re…you’re hurting me.” Lise still had Mako’s hand.

“Good,” Lise smiled sweetly. “You’ll pay attention.” She pushed harder. “I don’t want you here. My friends don’t want you here. I don’t like you, and I don’t want anything to do with you. Take some time for yourself, and figure out why. I want you to leave me alone. If you don’t, I will smash your head into the dirt with my foot. Understand?”

“Yes!” Mako squeaked.

“Good,” Lise’s sweet smile dropped off her face. She tossed Mako’s hand back to him. “Get out already.”

Tail between his legs, Mako got up off the floor. He sniffled, holding his arm like Lise had broken it. He slammed the door to the game room behind him.

“Shall we continue?” Lise collected her fallen cards.

“I’m gonna step out for a moment,” Yusei let himself outside into the garden.

“Start without me,” Lise slapped the cards she’d got on the table.

Bruno whistled after the outside door closed behind her. “Dude’s a real piece of work.”

The gardens were beautiful. Trees lined the perimeter, losing leaves for winter. The water, clearly in a man-made design, flowed decadently in a loop that started and ended at pools. Red bridges arced over the waterways, allowing visitors to see the entire garden. There was even a sand and rock garden in the very back.

Yusei had his head in his hands, standing atop the nearest bridge.

“Hey, are you-“

“That was so funny!”

Lise blinked in surprise. He was laughing? She wasn’t sure why he’d needed to step out, but laughing was not something she had considered.

“You had him in a hand lock, and he…” Yusei had to stop talking he was laughing so hard. “He looked like he was gonna pee!”

Lise felt her face heating up. Threatening Mako had felt really good in the moment. Had she gone too far? She played with the hem of her robe’s sleeve. What should I do?

“Sorry,” Yusei composed himself, clearing his throat. “He just puts me on edge, and seeing him on
the ground like that? Damn, that was funny.” He saw Lise’s expression. “Hey…” He pulled Lise’s sleeve, careful not to touch her. “That was awesome. I thought he was gonna ruin this trip, but if you keep threatening him like that, it’ll be fun.”

Lise laughed a little too. “God, maybe? It’s just too much to deal with after the Spirit World, the WRGP, and the Emperors.”

Yusei’s expression hardened, ever so slightly. She could see it in the way his jaw clenched. “It’s one thing after another it seems.” He sighed heavily, the weight of which made him sit down. And that thing Luciano said about my father. Roman too…

Lise sank down on the bridge too. She clasped her hands, staring at the starry sky above them. “I know, it’s like we can’t catch a break! Just when we think we can put our dads behind us, the next bad guy is all like ‘bitch, you thought, for five thousand.’”

Yusei’s eyes widened. That was almost exactly the same thing as he’d been thinking. “Yeah,” he nodded. “I still feel like I need to answer for Zero Reverse. Like it’s my responsibility.”

“Exactly!” Lise groaned, slapping her hands to her face, and tilting her head back. “Like, for fuck’s sake, I’m not my dad! I’m not responsible for his choices. I’m responsible for me!”

If the hot springs took away half Yusei’s stress, everything Lise was saying was taking care of the rest. Of course, it wasn’t all gone. They still had to worry about the WRGP, and protecting the city. But at least neither of them would be alone to do it.

“One thing I do feel responsible for is the city,” Yusei spoke carefully. “And not because my father’s work nearly destroyed us, or your dad’s actions. But because the city is my home, and it gives me hope for the future.”

Lise’s smile was warm, and she bobbed her head in agreement. “It’s got my favorite people in it. What other reason do I need?” Her smile fell. She picked at the dead skin on her fingertips. “My father made some terrible choices. He chose to destroy the city, and I’m choosing to do my part to save the city.”

“Me too,” Yusei frowned. “But according to that Luciano guy we’re going to destroy it somehow.”

“We’ll come to that when we get there. Not that we’re ignoring it, but what else are we supposed to do? Not fight for what we believe in?”

“These things are all something an adult with much more experience should handle.”

“Mika seems like a mature, experienced, adult, but she’s only a couple years older than us. She reminded me trauma tends to mature us before we’re ready.”

“I’m glad you’re friends with her. She seems to understand,” Yusei smiled a little. “Speaking of trauma,” he changed the subject with a cough into his fist. “I…after the…after what happened in the Spirit World, I’m afraid to touch you… It’s…It brings me back to…before.”

Lise’s gaze fell. “I’ve been in the same boat. Just the memory… it scares me. It feels wrong to me because I know it’s not who you are.”

“But it was me. It was my body. I can’t change the fact that he…he took control of me,” Yusei had to clench his hands into fists to keep them from shaking. “I’m scared. It feels like a part of me will always belong to him.”
“That’s not true,” Lise planted her hands on the bridge. Her face was level with Yusei’s when he looked up at her. “This life, this body, is **yours.** Your body belongs to you.” She pointed at his chest. “No one can ever take this away from you. Not even me.”

Yusei was quiet. It took him a moment to realize he was crying. Lise was right. That was the first step. “I hope you’re telling yourself the same thing,” he finally choked out.

Lise flushed pink and backed away. “Yeah, it’s a start. The memory of…you on me…like that…The fear has faded, but it’s still there.”

There was a pause in the conversation. Both of them were thinking through the new information the other had given them.

“It’d be easier to stop being together,” Yusei said softly. “But I don’t want to stop.”

“No?” Lise’s eyes glittered in the light of the lanterns.

“No,” Yusei repeated. “I could probably eventually find someone else. You could too. But we’ve been through a lot together. You’ve seen me crash horrifically. You’ve seen me with a roach’s nest in my ear. I’ve seen you with blood on your knuckles. I’ve seen you in a hospital bed for three days.”

Yusei pulled a lock of Lise’s hair into his fingers. “So I could start over if I really wanted to, but I don’t want to.”

“I don’t want to either,” Lise whispered. Her cheeks glowed a soft pink.

“It’ll be hard, but I think it’s worth it,” Yusei’s dark blue eyes found the light blue of Lise’s eyes. “I love you, and I don’t want anyone else.”

///

Yusei rolled over. The futon was comfortable, but he was having trouble falling asleep. Nightmares again. Nothing new.

There was a hand at his back. Yusei froze. If Lise was asleep, she would move right? He waited. Nothing. Okay, maybe her hand was too small of a trigger to give him flashbacks.

But then her hand slipped away. A finger came back, moving around like a pencil.

“Lise?”

“Hmm?”

“You’re awake?”

“Yeah,” she yawned. Her finger stopped. “Am I hurting you?”

“No… Are you drawing on my back?”

“Uh huh,” Lise yawned again. She kept going.

“What’re you drawing?”

“Guess.”
“Uh…” Yusei relaxed back into her touch. It was almost hypnotic if he wasn’t focusing. He had to focus to guess though. “A doughnut?”

“No!” Her laugh broke into a yawn. “The sun.”

“Oh.”

The warmth of her forehead and hand touched his back. Again, nothing. “I still love you though,” Lise muttered sleepily.

Her breathing got heavier and heavier as she fell back into her deep sleep. Yusei rolled around to face her, taking her hand as gently as possible. She didn’t pull back, and Lise’s expression stayed the same. No flashbacks for him either. Talking had definitely done some good.

“I love you too,” Yusei whispered.

Chapter End Notes

(Longer chapter this time! It’s been a little while since I wrote a purely original chapter. It was fun, but also challenging. I like introducing more characters because it deepens not only Lise’s personal life, but Mika’s too. Plus, music can be fun, and so can musicals! I like putting songs and lyrics into my writing because it reminds me of how I feel listening to different songs, and sometimes memories associated with them too!

But I’m super glad I decided to wedge this little filler episode in there. It’s not a beach episode, but it is a band of characters come together to relax chapter! Relax and jump a few hurdles because as the people that were the most injured from their time in the Spirit World, Lise and Yusei really needed to talk it out. And I snuck a little closure for Luna in too because an eleven-year-old dealing with survivor’s guilt? She needed some good old-fashioned older girls I look up to comforting her.

And next up? Bonds Beyond Time! Yeah! Season 2 is even LONGER due to a plethora of original chapters, and the inclusion of the movie! Yusei is SUPER sexy in it, so how could I not?! Anyway, the goal is for the next 2-3 chapters to cover the BBT movie!

Once again, and I can’t say this enough, thanks SO MUCH to all you readers! We’re all still here, and I’m so glad and thankful you decided to come on this two parter journey with me!)
Smoke curled into the air. Flames curled and licked up the sides of the beautiful European buildings. The night sky, normally peaceful, was dyed a deep, blood red from the flames.

A shadow alighted on the nearby obelisk. The winged gryphon statue beside him didn’t shield him from his attackers. He had to jump off as quickly as he landed to avoid being blown to bits by a firebolt!

The firebolt, and several more, were coming from a three headed dragon! The shadow kept running along the Venetian rooftops. The fireballs hit just behind him, until one burst into the shadow’s pathway! The side of the tall bell tower before the shadow exploded, crumbling away. His pathway was gone.

The three-headed dragon circled about. From the smoke and debris, the shadow jumped down to the cobblestones below. He landed and tucked into a shoulder roll. Letting his knees absorb the full impact would hurt later, and he needed his strength.

The shadow turned out to be a young boy. Almost a man, the edge of eighteen. He wore a red and white coat, and a dark t-shirt underneath. The boy turned around, facing the dragon still after him. The boy’s hair, a dark brown, was messy from the running, but his light brown eyes were alight with the lust for adventure. “Whew! Close call!”

The boy’s smile fell. His mouth dropped open. A new dragon had taken up the pursuit. A dragon with white wings, and rainbow scales…

The dragon’s rainbow-breath attack headed straight for the boy in red. But the boy was ready. He drew a card from his custom red duel disk. “I summon Neos!”

A gray, humanoid monster knelt before the boy. Monster and master mirrored each other, putting their arms up to protect themselves.

The rainbow beam hit the boy’s duel monster head on. The beam split, tearing through the cobblestone square in two directions, destroying the extensively elaborate church walls, rooftops, and columns.

At least the boy and his monster were all right.

“Jaden Yuki…” A man dressed in white, black, and purple stood atop one of the few buildings not burning. His pants were dark gray, with dramatic white coattails. His black top was sleeveless, but hugged his torso as if he were vacuum-sealed into the shirt. Also black were his long, fingerless gloves. Gold, sharp epaulets adorned his shoulders, and gold spikes stuck out from either side of his chest. A black and white mask, and cape, added mystery to the look. The man’s gold and purple hair fell in elaborate layers around his shoulders. “The legendary duelists capable of communicating with Duel Spirits.”

“I’m honored you know my name,” the boy, Jaden smirked.

The spirit of a man with dark hair pulled into a ponytail, and glasses appeared beside Jaden. He was dressed as a teacher, albeit slightly messy. His tie was askew, and his shirt was untucked. “So
this incident is his doing.”

Jaden nodded. “The missing monsters are all here, so there’s no doubt about it, Banner.” He grinned. Sure, he was being attacked by his friends’ monsters, but he had to admit this villain was cooler than all those he’d faced in the past. “Plus, he made them real too!”

Yubel, a half angel, half-demon, half man, half woman, duel monster appeared beside Jaden and Banner. “Don’t let your guard down. He has more extraordinary power hiding in his cards.”

“My goal here, in this era, is already complete,” the masked man said calmly.

Jaden frowned up at him. “This era?”

“Now to destroy you.” The masked man whipped a card out of his deck.

Bright lightning crackled out of the card. It careened out of the sky, splitting the ozone in two. The beam of lightning collided between the two dragons the masked man already had out on his field. Blinding light flooded the square, kicking up powerful winds.

“This is it!” Jaden’s hair and clothes fluttered in the wind. “The huge source of energy!”

A familiar dragon spread its wings on the battlefield. Beautiful, with white, silver, blue, and purple features. Stardust Dragon!

///

Emergency alert! Emergency alert!

An alarm blared. The entire city was in turmoil. Everyone was in danger. Everywhere, people running and shouting. Confused.

Only Professor Fudo knew what to do. Knew what would happen to him. Knew that he had to protect what he could. His son.

The barely two-year old infant screamed and cried. But his father could not comfort him. Professor Fudo sent his son away in a protective capsule. His son was going to live. Professor Fudo just wished he could tell his only child he loved him.

Then the light blasted through the city. New Domino City was split in two. Roman’s plan had worked. Mayoko had given birth to a baby girl. Roman had allowed his fear to control him.

Buildings crumbled, raining debris everywhere. Smashing into people. Even more people fell to their deaths in the chasm dividing the city.

Zero Reverse ripped through the city. Creating the Satellite in a devastating event no one would soon forget.

///

Yusei startled awake. Sweat dripped down his forehead. His breathing came in ragged gasps. The nightmare about Zero Reverse. Again.

He waited until his breathing evened out. The sun peeked into his and Lise’s room. The sky was a moody gray, complete with fog. Not a good sign. At least Lise was still sleeping soundly beside him.
Yusei smiled to himself. Lise had fallen asleep with her mouth open again, and her hair was all over the place. But even with drool dried on her chin, and her hair in a rat’s nest, Yusei insisted she was cute. Lise didn’t believe him, but he didn’t care.

He ran his fingers through her hair. Soft from her nightly shower. Gold in the foggy morning light.

“Mmm…” Lise murmured. She stirred a little, not opening her eyes.

Yusei pulled his hand back. Lise reached over him, pulling herself over so that her head rested right over Yusei’s heart.

“I didn’t mean to wake you,” Yusei whispered, settling onto his back. His hands returned to Lise’s hair.

“You didn’t really…” Lise yawned, rubbing at her eye. “Another nightmare?”

“Yeah, Zero Reverse.”

“That sucks.”

Yusei made an agreeing sound in the back of his throat. He was a bit more focused on gently coaxing the tangles out of Lise’s hair. “I know… Did I ever tell you I liked your haircut?”

“No. You said you thought my long hair was pretty when we were going to the reeducation center.”

“I like it short too.”

“Yeah?” Lise pushed herself up to face him. Her blue eyes were still half open with sleepiness.

“I’ve always liked your hair. Long or short.”

Lise smiled and rested her head back on Yusei’s chest. “I like yours too.”

Yusei chuckled a little. His lips in Lise’s hair now. Warm breath ghosting over her head. “Even though it never lies flat?”

“It’s unique. And soft. It doesn’t look soft, but it is.”

“Mmm… I love you…”

“I love you too,” Lise said immediately. She loved these kinds of mornings. Neither of them had to be anywhere, and Yusei was warm. Solid. Nothing beat waking up next to him. To her love. “It’s kinda cheesy, but I’ve been thinking about something.”

“Hm?”

“Our dads knew each other.” She pushed herself back up to her hands. Yusei opened his eyes to look at her. “If… If Zero Reverse never happened…” Lise was turning pink. “I think I still would’ve met you…”

Yusei’s eyes widened. Their dads had known each other! For a long time!

Lise buried her face in Yusei’s t-shirt. “Sorry! I just thought- it just seemed… um… I wasn’t trying to hurt you or anything! I-“
“No! No!” Yusei took Lise’s hands. Their eyes met. “I like the idea. That in some other version of us, I still get to meet you. To love you.” His face felt warm.

“I thought so too.” The tension in Lise’s shoulders eased. The pink in her cheeks matched Yusei’s. She’d started tracing Yusei’s mark with her thumb.

He leaned into her touch. Yusei had always loved Lise’s gentle fingers on his cheek.

“I love you,” Lise murmured.

“I love you too.”

///

Yusei felt better after waking up with Lise, but he still needed time to himself. To think about his father… Roman…Zero Reverse…

He’d eaten light and took off. He did tell the others he’d be headed to the new park overlooking the city. It’d been completed recently, and beat looking out underneath an overhang. Sometimes looking out over the city made him feel better, but a part of him was still as muddled and foggy as the sky.

“Yusei?” Crow and Jack approached him.

Lise stood off to the side, by their duel runners.

“Had that same dream, eh?” Crow’s voice was gentle.

“Did Lise tell you?” The corner of Yusei’s mouth turned up.

“Yeah,” Jack shook his head. “But you’ve been coming here more and more after having nightmares.”

Yusei nodded, his grip tightening on the railing. “My father’s research once destroyed this city.”

“But Zero Reverse wasn’t your fault,” Jack pointed out. “Nor Lise’s. We were all babies then. What could we have done about it?”

“He’s right, and we’ve helped saved the city, don’t forget,” Crow said.

“Yeah, I know…”

“Here!” Crow tossed Yusei’s helmet to him.

Yusei caught it. Slightly at a loss. He wasn’t entirely sure where his friends were going with this.

“At times like this, we duel,” Jack said.

Crow winked at his friend. “Or just ride!”

Yusei’s lost expression shifted into a smile. He was lucky to have good friends. “Sure.”

The four of them raced through New Domino City’s highways. Taking turns driving in each other’s slipstreams, they cycled through each other like a well oiled machine.

Yusei took the lead, lost in thought. *The peace we achieved in New Domino City…No matter what,*
I… No, WE will protect this city! He accelerated, pushing his friends to keep pace.

A fifth duel runner joined them. A mysterious masked man was the driver. His white duel runner was fancy, so many additional parts. Not just decoration or decals, but something different. Something none of them could quite place. The driver turned dramatically, kicking up sparks.

“That’s quite the duel runner,” Crow raised an eyebrow at the mystery man.

All four of them caught the mystery man flashing his lights. He wanted a duel.

Even Jack was impressed. “He’s got guts, challenging us to a duel!”

“Mind if I take this one?”

“Go for it!” Lise called out.

“Yeah!” Crow was just as jubilant. “We’re counting on ya, Yusei!”

“Duel mode; on.”

“All right, turbo duel, acceleration!”

///

Just when Yusei thought his last attack would get through, the mystery duelist blocked him again. His defense mode monsters went up in smoke. At least Yusei still had Junk Synchron and Junk Warrior.”

“His attacks are doing real damage?” Crow clenched his teeth. This wasn’t good!

“Yeah, but Yusei’s field is flawless! Now finish him!” Jack wasn’t one to pull punches regardless of the situation.

Lise felt something wrong from the mystery duelist. Something that had awoken when Yusei pulled Stardust out of his extra deck. But what? “I’ve got a bad feeling about this…”

“Let’s do this, Stardust Dragon,” Yusei was ready to win this duel. “Take flight; Stardust Dragon!”

Yusei’s trusty signature dragon took to the field. Its sparkling stardust filled the gray morning sky. Like a glimmer of hope.

The masked man whipped out a card. A completely blank card. Odd.

“What? A white card?”

An array of cards fluttered out of the blank card like a long rope. The cards hit Stardust, bursting forth into an encircling, violet orb. Stardust was forced to fold in his wings as the orb grew smaller and smaller. The glow grew brighter as the orb shrank, falling back into the mystery man’s blank card. The card that was blank no more with Stardust Dragon captive!

“No…” Lise’s blood went cold. The markings on her hands started flashing on and off. A warning sign, or was the Crimson Dragon panicking?

“Impossible!” Jack gasped. “Stardust Dragon…”

Crow was just as shocked. “Was just sucked…”
“Right into his card?!” Yusei finished.

The masked man pulled up alongside Yusei. He brandished his stolen Stardust Dragon. “Yusei Fudo, I’ll be taking your Stardust! You and your era are doomed!”

“What did you say?”

“Ta ta!” The masked man accelerated far ahead of Yusei.

“Hey!”

A white glow surrounded the man and his duel runner. He zoomed forward and…vanished. In a flash of light, he was just gone.

Yusei pulled up to a stop. Jack, Crow, and Lise did the same behind him. Stardust Dragon’s rightful card was empty. As if the mighty dragon had left more than one void behind.

Lise had to control the flickering sensation in her markings and eyes. The Crimson Dragon was distressed, but she wasn’t trying to force the Eye of the Dragon. It felt like… Like she was searching…honning in on what she had lost…

///

The boys had called the twins and Akiza. The others might as well know what was going on. At least as much as everyone else knew. Bruno was flabbergasted to say the least. He’d started pacing the length of the garage.

“Anybody else wanna know what the hell is happening here?!!” Jack finally burst out.

Crow clenched his fists, nodding. “That vanishing act was no joke!”

“He knew my name…” Yusei said softly. That was the other part that bugged him. If this masked man knew Yusei’s name, then he definitely knew who all of them were.

“So he was after Stardust from the start,” Jack said.

“Okay, walk me through this again,” Bruno paused his pacing. “What did this guy look like?”

The garage doors opened before anyone could elaborate. Akiza and the twins had arrived.

“Is it true?” Leo demanded. His big eyes were even wider with worry.

“Yes,” Yusei nodded solemnly.

“Then what we saw isn’t fake,” Akiza motioned to Luna. “Show them.”

“We were researching the history of Duel Monsters for a school project together when we found this,” Luna handed Yusei her small holo-projector.

He activated it. Luna had kindly bookmarked the articles she, Leo, and Luna had come across, and had kept them open.

Crow put his hand on his hip. “Quite an old article you got there.”

“I know that man,” Jack pointed over Yusei’s shoulder. His finger indicated the man in a fancy red suit with silver hair obscuring one of his eyes. “He’s the president of Industrial Illusions, Pegasus J.
Crawford. The creator of Duel Monsters.”

“And next to him is Yugi Mutou!” Bruno gasped.

Yusei nodded. “He’s said to be the strongest duelist in Duel Monster history. Rumor has it he was possessed by the spirit of a Nameless Pharaoh.”

“Can’t imagine what that’s like,” Lise tried to sound like she was joking, but it was a strain. Something was happening. It felt like every cell of her body were reaching far beyond their capacity. The Crimson Dragon was up to something, but what?

“Very cool,” Crow admitted.

“I wish I had the chance to duel him, but of course, how could you? Unless I had a time machine or something,” Jack shrugged.

“Is this what you wanted to show us?”

“No, look at the next article,” Akiza instructed.

Yusei clicked over to Luna’s next bookmarked article. Stardust’s unmistakable personage was hovering above what looked like a battle-torn Venice!

“Stardust Dragon!”

“But it didn’t even exist yet!” Jack’s shock mirrored everyone else’s.

Leo threw his hands up. “Exactly our point!”

Lise had to sit down. The blinking and flashing of the spirals on her palms was getting faster. It had spread to her eyes. Faster than she could blink, she felt like she was teleporting through snippets of...the world? History? It was too fast to make sense of any of it.

“Okay, let’s see...” Crow leaned in close to read over Yusei’s shoulder. “Dragons that have suddenly been appearing all over Europe have been assaulting Duelists one after another... The hell?”

“Was Stardust Dragon brought to the past?” Yusei whispered to himself. He clenched his teeth. That masked man was using his friend to hurt people!

“Looks like it,” Akiza said, her brown eyes heavy with the knowledge of what this thief had done. “I’d never heard about this piece of history until now.”

“Check this out,” Bruno had been squinting over Yusei’s shoulder too. He reached out with his finger, zooming in on... the masked man!

“It’s the guy from earlier!”

“Okay, so these two events are connected. What does it all mean?” Luna asked.

“Uh... before that... what’s going on with Lise?” Leo pointed at his friend.

“Lise, what’re you doing?” It might have sounded uncaring to anyone else, but after everything that’d happened, the Crimson Dragon never did anything without a reason.

Apart from the glowing hands and eyes, Lise could have been fine. Albeit, sitting there a tad
strangely with her hands resting palm up on her knees. But the glow was different than any kind of power she’d used before. Blinking off and on, her eyes darting in different directions between blinking glows.

“Is it the Eye of the Dragon?” Akiza asked timidly. She’d already backed up, the twins hiding behind her skirts.

“No…” Yusei waved a hand in front of Lise’s face. No response, at least not towards him. “The Eye of the Dragon is more for defense, but this… I’ve never seen this before.”

The blinking continued for about another minute before Lise finally responded. Her voice joined by the Crimson Dragon. “I’m… finding… my… friend…”

The others exchanged looks. Was Lise… finding Stardust Dragon? Was that even possible?

“Located.” The glow in Lise’s eyes and hands steadied. “Preparing for journey.”

“Uh… what?” Crow voiced what everyone else was thinking.

Lise was already being released from whatever the Crimson Dragon was doing. No one could ask what she was doing in her trance. The glow stopped, and she swayed a little in the chair. Lise’s eyes were back to their usual light blue. Akiza had approached when she realized it was safe to give Lise a steadying hand.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, just a little dizzy.”

“Uh guys?” Bruno pointed out the windows. “Might wanna check that out.”

What looked like black snow was falling outdoors. And once the team had made their way outdoors, they found out it wasn’t just Fountain Plaza. The entire city was crumbling. To ash.

“The city is… dissolving…” Leo cried.

Luna’s fists settled close to her chest. “Why?”

“I’m just spit-balling here, but Stardust appearing in the past must have changed history!”

Crow glared at Jack. “But that’s crazy!”

“The city… ashes… just like my nightmares…” Yusei’s eyes were wide. Sweat coated his palms. This wasn’t supposed to happen! But he remembered what the masked man had said before he left. “This was all his doing!”

“We have to do something,” Lise whispered. She wiped away a fresh tear. People were already getting crushed and killed by the falling debris.

We will.

“We will?”

This journey will ask more of you than I have ever asked. You and your friends have changed the future before, and must do it again right now! The Crimson Dragon’s voice was urgent, pleading. However, she was not going to force her Vessel. She valued Lise’s choices, as Lise valued her.
Lise felt the Crimson Dragon reaching out her hand. *Are you ready?*

“Yes,” Lise said, giving her answer in the midst of a deep breath. She took the Crimson Dragon’s hand.

The Seal of the Dragon illuminated on Lise’s back. The red glow in her eyes came back. The markings of Luna, Jack, Crow, Akiza, and Yusei all ignited. Lise touched Yusei’s back as she and the Crimson Dragon melted into one. He could feel the transferred glow of power Lise had given him. His duel runner, parked outdoors alongside his friends’ duel runners glowed the bright red of the Crimson Dragon. The same red as the enormous Crimson Dragon waiting for him at his bike.

**Yusei, let’s go…**

*Okay. Yusei ran for his bike. I trust you.*

“Yusei?! Where are you going?! where’s…? Lise?!” Akiza called out. She’d spotted her two friends. Somehow they had a plan.

“The Crimson Dragon has a plan! We’ll leave the city to you!”

Yusei drove after the Crimson Dragon. She flew right beside him.

“The Crimson Dragon, take me to Stardust! Lead the way!”

The Crimson Dragon roared in response. Her light enveloped Yusei, taking them both into the past in a flash of light…

///

“Whoa!” Jaden had to lean far back to get the full view of Stardust Dragon. “What the heck is this white dragon?”

“Jaden Yuki, this is the beast that will eliminate you!” The masked man said. “Cosmic stream!”

The dragon’s stardust breath hit Neos head on again. But this time, Neos wasn’t strong enough to protect Jaden. He and Neos were blasted backwards into the wall of the church. Jaden was a little bruised and banged up when the smoke cleared, but okay.

But they wouldn’t survive another pass of that stardust breath!

Seconds before the dragon blasted Jaden and Neos to smithereens a bright red dragon came careening in between them!

“What?” The masked man stepped back. *Crimson Dragon?*

The Crimson Dragon’s form dissolved as she arced into the sky. The head vanished right as it reached the church rooftops, depositing Lise there. She was standing, but shaky. The extent of the dragon’s body vanished over the cobbled streets, expelling Yusei.

He parked his bike. Yusei had found himself right in the middle of that newspaper article! “Stardust Dragon!”

“You travelled through time to come after me?” The masked man sounded merely amused at such a feat. “How did you manage that?”

“What’re you talking about?” Lise stepped forward, swaying dangerously. Time travel took *a lot*
“I’m right…here…” She passed out at the edge of the rooftop.

“Lise!” Yusei had to help her, but he had to get Stardust Dragon back too. “You bastard!” he growled at the mysterious man.

“Looks as though there are a few people who need your help more than you need to chase me,” the masked man sounded like he was smirking under there. “Jaden, I’ve spent enough time on you. This era, too, shall fall to ruin if my grand experiment succeeds.”

“What did you say?” Jaden gasped. He was just getting back to his feet.

The masked man laughed and climbed aboard his custom duel disk.

“Wait!” Yusei shouted.

The masked man was already vanishing behind another flash of light. He’d already time hopped.

“Shit,” Yusei swore. He got off his duel runner to check on the kid, and offer him a hand. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I’ll be all right.” Jaden accepted Yusei’s hand to pull him to his feet.

“Good. Can you tell me how to get on the roof?” Yusei asked. He pointed up at Lise, who still hadn’t stirred.

“Oh sure,” Jaden dusted himself off. “Follow me.”

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“Lise!” Finally close enough, Yusei dashed to the side of the rooftop. He knelt and pulled Lise up into his arms. She groaned a little, but didn’t wake.

“Is she gonna be okay?”

“I think so,” Yusei sighed. “This power is new. I’m not sure what side effects there’ll be yet.”

“Power?” Jaden’s brown eyes widened. “Wait, so that big red dragon earlier?” He pointed at Lise. “That was her?!”

“Yeah,” Yusei said in a curt, if-you-hurt-her-in-any-way-I-will-hurt-you, kind of way. He held Lise closer, just in case.

Jaden’s face split into a grin. “Dude, that’s wicked awesome!”

Yusei relaxed. It was rushed, and they still don’t know each other, but this boy seemed like someone he could trust. “We should compare notes and decide what to do next.”

“Right, based on what you told me, you and…”

“Lise.”

“Lise came to the past through a time slip because you were chasing the white dragon the guy in the oddball mask stole from you. Is that about the gist?”

“That’s correct,” Yusei nodded. “I know it sounds hard to believe-"
“Oh, don’t worry. Your girl here can change into a dragon, so time travel is an added bonus! This is so dangerous, but that kinda stuff gets me pumped!”

Yusei smiled wryly. “Well, my name is Yusei, and I already told you Lise’s name.”

“I’m Jaden Yuki. By the way, I’ve been curious for a while now, is that a future duel disk?” Jaden pointed at Yusei’s duel runner parked below.

“Yes.”

“Awesome! It’s evolved that much?!”

Banner chuckled a little, appearing at Jaden’s side. “I bet you want to ride it, huh, Jaden?”

“Hey, I told you not to show up without warning. You’ll freak Yusei out.”

Yubel rolled her multi-colored eyes. “Seeing us won’t be enough to freak him out.”

“He also has strong spirit powers,” Banner said.

“They mean this,” Yusei set Lise down to remove his glove and roll his sleeve back. The red dragon mark of the head was prominent against his skin.

Jaden grinned again. He knew he could trust this guy! “It means you’re a duelist chosen by the Duel Monsters too.”

“I guess so,” Yusei pulled his sleeve back down, replacing his glove. He and Jaden were on the same team, but they’d need Lise to time travel. She could get them to Stardust, but what if she needed to sleep a while to be ready to go?

Lise awoke with a deep gasping sound, prompting her to sit upright unnaturally fast. Both Yusei and Jaden jumped back. Her stomach made a loud lurching sound, and Lise licked her lips, staring at Jaden’s backpack. “Food!”

Jaden recovered quickly, laughing and retrieving his bag. “Guess time travel works up an appetite!” He gave Lise two sandwiches.

She tore into the first one. In just a few bites it was gone. Lise started in on the second, slowing down. “So… who are you?”

“Jaden Yuki,” Jaden held out his hand. “Nice to meet’cha.”

“Same,” Lise shook his hand. “Sorry I… I was hungry.” Her cheeks flushed pink. She’d been incredibly rude.

“Don’t worry about it. It isn’t every day I get to meet a time traveling dragon.”

“But speaking of time travel, you know why we’re after that masked man,” Yusei cut in. “Why were you fighting him, Jaden?”

“Lately, my friends have been telling me a bunch of their cards have gone missing. I figured I’d find out why, and found you know who.”

Lise nodded knowingly. “Voldemort.” She polished off the second sandwich, and brushed crumbs off her jeans.
“Look Jaden, we have to get Stardust back,” Yusei said. He needed them to be serious. The fate of the world was at stake. “If we don’t, that man… our city… No, not just our city: the whole world will be thrown out of whack and we’ll all be doomed!”

“Dude, that’s enough doom and gloom. I’m already in,” Jaden smiled at his new friend. Yusei was a bit more on the serious side, but they could still be a great team. “I’ll be damned if I back out now!”

Yusei bit his thumb for a brief second. He’d probably been too scary, but the situation was dire. At least he and Lise weren’t alone.

“Thanks, we appreciate it,” Lise clapped Jaden on the back.

Jaden spread his hands. “So, how do we look for the right time? He’s already got a huge lead on us.”

“Oh that?” Lise spread her hands out in front of her, cracked her knuckles, and tucked her hands behind her head. “I know where he went.”

“Uh…” Jaden blinked, eyes darting over to Yusei. “Is it a dragon thing?”

Lise shrugged. “Pretty much.”

Shaking erupted out of nowhere. The three of them struggled to keep their balance. The church was dissolving. Turning into the black dust Yusei and Lise had left New Domino City in.

Jaden gasped and looked down at his trusty Neos card. “Neos is gone!”

Half destroyed, but still standing, the remains of the church tower split in two. It dissolved slowly and painfully, along with the rest of Jaden’s era. It landed in the cobblestone square, kicking up a cloud of smoke.

“We need to move now!”

“Get to your bike, and we’ll take care of the rest!” Lise’s eyes were already glowing Crimson red.

///

The sun was bright and the sky was blue. Perfect weather for the special tournament Pegasus was hosting that day. Cosplayers posed for photos. Duelists were nervous and excited to meet their new opponents. Even Yugi and his grandfather were there!

“Goodness, there’s so many people here!” Solomon commented, his violet eyes bright.

Yugi nodded, his violet and gold hair tousling gently in the wind. “It’s because Pegasus is coming as a special guest for today’s dueling tournament!”

As Yugi finished speaking, a helicopter descended. It landed smoothly on the helicopter pad the city square had provided.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, everyone!” Three judges had lined up on the stage set up for the duels about to commence.

“Introducing the president of Industrial Illusions!”

“President Pegasus J. Crawford has arrived!”
The helicopter doors opened. Pegasus flipped his hair, smirking confidently for his fans. “Hello, everyone! I hope you’re as pleased as I am to have this tournament today in Domino City!”

The crowd roared its approval. Pegasus wasn’t a villain threatening Yugi, or his family anymore, but he always enjoyed creating a spectacle. And he was quite the spectacle.

Despite the joyous mood, the masked man was about to destroy it and more. He stood atop one of the skyscrapers circling the city square. His moment, the reason he was here, was right then and there. “Time for the start of destiny…”

Shadows passed over Yugi and his grandfather. Shadows that covered the entire crowd. The three headed dragon flew overhead. It was joined by the rainbow dragon and Stardust Dragon.

“Oh wow!” Solomon smiled up at the beasts. “Solid vision these days is sure getting advanced!”

Yugi wasn’t so sure. This didn’t seem like something Pegasus would do. These days, anyway.

Stardust reared its head and blasted two skyscrapers with its cosmic flare. Rubble fell amongst the crowd members who scattered in their fear.

“This isn’t solid vision!”

The panicking crowd swept Solomon up in their fear. He and Yugi were being separated!

“Yugi!”

“Grandpa!”

The three headed dragon spit fireballs at more skyscrapers. Broken glass and rubble fell, hitting more crowd members.

“Oh no! This is terrible!” Pegasus gasped. The people were in trouble, but he wasn’t sure what to do.

He soon wouldn’t have to worry. A low floor of the building behind Pegasus gave out. The building fell, heartlessly collapsing on Pegasus. His screams quickly died out.

Yugi came to slowly. He hadn’t realized he’d been knocked out. Maybe it was an accident as the people were trying to get away. Tiny pieces of rubble fell off of Yugi as he rose to his knees.

Yugi’s mouth fell open. The square was completely covered in debris. Broken buildings and glass were everywhere. Buildings were smashed, barely standing in their ruin.

Amongst the rubble, Yugi spotted it. His grandfather’s bandana.

But it couldn’t be. Grandpa was fine. He’d made it to safety…right?

Yugi was kidding himself. He had to know. Holding the bandana in his hands confirmed it. His Grandpa was gone. Really gone. And no amount of shadow dueling was ever going to bring him back.

“Grandpa…” Yugi sobbed, clutching the bandana to his chest. “No… GRANDPA!!!”

Laughter drew Yugi’s attention. Who could be laughing at a time like this? Someone standing atop a building wearing a mask…
“My grand experiment has been accomplished! History is forever changed!”

Red and white light caught Yugi’s eye. From the light, a giant, red dragon burst out! Yugi stepped back, but the dragon was too close to run from! The dragon’s mouth closed in around him…

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And then the red dragon was circling over the rooftops of the skyscrapers above the square! Yugi was thrown haphazardly from the dragon’s long, lean body. He flipped end over end, hitting the railing preventing him from taking a nasty fall. Yusei and Jaden, aboard Yusei Go, popped out of the dragon’s body next.

“Whoa!” Jaden cried as Yusei braked to a quick halt.

The orb absorbed the entire form of the Crimson Dragon, swirling back into Lise’s body. She was deposited gently onto the roof before the orb vanished.

“Ow, ow, ow…” Yugi muttered, massaging his bruised head.

“You okay?” Yusei asked Lise, catching her before she hit the rooftop head first.

“Just tired… and… hungry…”

“Here,” Jaden sighed, handing Lise the last of his sandwiches.

“Thank you!” Lise half gasped, half sobbed.

“Don’t forget,” Yusei tapped them both on the shoulder.

“Oh no!” Jaden ran over to Yugi. “Are you all right?”

Lise joined him. “I’m so sorry for being rough! I’m still new at time travel!”

“We’re here to help,” Yusei added, kneeling next to Lise.

“Where am I?” Yugi looked back over his shoulder. The destroyed square from earlier was back to normal. It was like nothing had even happened to it! But…the helicopter pad was empty. Pegasus wasn’t even here yet? And… did the girl say time travel? “What happened? What happened to Grandpa and Pegasus?”

“They’re safe, sir,” Yusei explained. “We’re in the same place, thirty minutes before that incident occurred.”

“Thirty minutes?”

“Look,” Jaden was looking through his cards. “All our cards are safe!”

“Well, yeah, Pegasus is still kicking,” Lise reminded him.

“Please, who are you?” Yugi’s violet eyes were trembling. This was just too much right now. Grandpa was bag so soon after he’d been gone forever? Did he dare believe it?

“I’m Yusei Fudo,” he put a hand to his chest.

“I’m Lise Kururugi,” she unwrapped her second sandwich.
“And I’m Jaden Yuki!” he pointed jubilantly to himself with his thumb.

“Yusei, Lise, and Jaden,” Yugi repeated.

“That’s right, sir.”

Lise elbowed him. “Why are you being weird?” she whispered.

Yusei’s cheeks flushed pink. “That’s the king of games!”

“Uh…you can just call me Yugi,” Yugi said. “Um, did you just say king of games?”

“Yeah, we’re from the future,” Lise said. She polished off her second sandwich. “Well, Jaden’s from your future,” she pointed at him with her left hand. “Which means Yusei and I are from the future-future.” She crossed her arms to point at Yusei.

“What?”

“Basically, we’re here to save everyone from the tragedy that happens in another thirty minutes,” Jaden said.

“Does it have anything to do with that masked man I saw?”

“It does! He’s trying to eliminate Pegasus!”

“Pegasus?”

“Without Pegasus, the history of Duel Monsters, no, the history of the world, will change! And believe me, it’s not for the better,” Yusei said solemnly.

“Whole cities are already disappearing…”

“No way…” Yugi whispered.

“Please!” Jaden begged. “Fight with us!”

“Let’s protect the world together!”

“Okay,” Yugi took a deep breath and got to his feet. The others followed his lead. “I understand. Jaden, Lise, Yusei, if you’ll have me, I’ll gladly work with you!”

Yusei smiled. “Thank you.”

“All right,” Lise grinned, shaking her fists with excitement. *She was standing next to the real king of games!!!*

“Hell yeah!” Jaden cheered, punching skyward. “We’ve got the king of games in our corner!”

///

A small fireball burst across the stage in the square below. It hadn’t hit anyone, but the wind and smoke that kicked up certainly scared them. The crowds went running and screaming out of the square.

Yubel lowered her hand. Jaden, Lise, Yusei, and Yugi were the only ones left in the square.

“Nice work, Jaden,” Yugi said. “If the tournament is stopped, then Pegasus won’t be killed!”
“I cannot allow that!”

“Huh?”

The wall of the building behind them opened up into a nebulous void. The masked man came driving into their timeline, and the portal closed behind him. He whirled around to face the four of them.

“You’re the guy from before!” Yugi shouted. This man had hurt his grandfather! And laughed about it!

“Oh, I see the king of games is amongst us.”

“Who are you? Why are you doing this?”

“Why? Hmph. Very well.” The man reached up, and pulled off his mask. He had red markings on the right side of his face. One mark that was long and arced up around his eye, also extended into a strange-looking red eyebrow. The man’s eyes were a cold, unfeeling golden color. “My name is Paradox.”

“Paradox?” Yusei repeated.

A contradiction? Lise frowned at him. Were this man’s action as convoluted as his name suggested?

“I’ve traveled time and space in search of the best history. I have been investigating any and all possibilities in history and experimenting with them.”

Yusei scowled deeply. “The best history?”

“What you’re doing is just plain destruction!”

“Are you trying to say that slaughtering everyone for gain is the right thing to do?!”

“Destruction and slaughter?” Paradox scoffed. They didn’t understand. “I see. Is that how it seems to you? That is incorrect. What was incorrect is being corrected, but you believed what was incorrect was correct. But take a moment to think, even without my actions, the world is riddled with contradictions. Environmental destruction, world disputes, human discrimination. Aren’t all of these things even more so called ‘destruction’ and ‘slaughter?’ How would any of you resolve these contradictions?”

“Those things can’t just go away over night! We’re moving forward with the hope to resolve them eventually!” Yusei snapped back. Things were getting better, they just had to keep going in the right direction!

Paradox rolled his eyes. “That answer is nonsense.”

“But we took a ruined city and revived it!”

“You brought Satellite and the City together. I’m not unaware of this, but I come from an even farther future. A distant future where the world is in ruins.”

Lise and Yusei gasped. “Ruins?”

“Yes. If history is left as it is, the world will be destroyed. I have come here to change that hopeless future. By analyzing various data in time, I determined that Duel Monsters possess a mysterious
Yusei’s hands clenched into fists. “Change the future? And you plan on destroying New Domino City along the way? No, not just the city! All the people that live there too! Pegasus, Yugi’s grandfather! Are you saying it doesn’t matter what happens to them?!”

“A sacrifice so minimal is nothing more than necessary for my grand experiment,” Paradox sniffed.

“A necessary sacrifice?” Jaden seethed.

Yugi was just as furious. “Everyone should have the right to live their future!”

“I believe people have the power to change the future!”

“And we’re going to change it right now!” Lise strode forward. “That’s enough of your bullshit!”

“How quaint,” Paradox smirked. He extended a hand. “If you’re saying you can withstand a hopeless future, then prove it to me!”

A portal ripped open in the air right behind Lise! It started to draw her in like the inescapable gravity of a black hole.

“No!”

“Lise!”

Yugi, Jaden, and Yusei ran in to help. But they couldn’t get close without being drawn into the portal’s pull too!

“Let’s see if the Crimson Dragon has enough power to time travel all the way from my hopeless future!” Paradox laughed.

Lise struggled against the portal’s drag. It had taken everything she had to time travel only twice! She didn’t have another trip in her, not for another six hours or so! Her flight and energy powers wouldn’t be able to save her this time either!

And then two hands were shoving her. Lise found herself tumbling to the asphalt. Safe from the portal. “What?”

Lise’s eyes fell on the still open portal. Her blood went cold. Yusei’s boots were already vanishing inside it!

“No!” Lise screamed. She ignored Jaden and Yugi’s attempts to call her back.

More of Yusei was vanishing as he was sucked into the portal. The portal was shrinking too. It was about the size of a manhole cover, and only Yusei’s left arm was still on their side of the portal.

Lise grabbed his hand and hung on with both of hers. The look on his face as he’d been dragged in; so scared but not regretting his decision. Lise wouldn’t let him be sent to a future so frightening. She couldn’t!

Jaden grabbed the ends of Lise’s jacket, and Yugi pulled Jaden back. There! It was working! More of Yusei’s arm emerged from the portal. Lise could see his duel disk! She eagerly reached up his arm and duel disk.

Lise’s pinky accidently clicked a button on Yusei’s wrist guard. The release button.
Duel disk and wrist guard came off in Lise’s hands. And next thing she knew she was holding both, and Yusei had been swallowed completely into the portal.

The portal that closed with a final snap of light. Jaden and Yugi relaxed, collapsing, their chests heaving. All three of them stared into the space Yusei had been just a second ago.

Paradox burst into cruel, cold laughter. “Well, that was unexpected! Yusei Fudo took your place, Crimson Dragon!”

Lise sank to her knees. She clutched the duel disk to her chest, and hunched over. Her whole body wracked with sobs as tears rolled down her cheeks.

Yusei was gone…

Chapter End Notes

(So, this ended up being longer than I thought! Probably because it’s a movie, not just an episode. But I knew, I just knew, I absolutely HAD to end on this particular cliff hanger. I’m not sure yet if Bonds Beyond Time will be a two part or three parter, but I’ll see how much I’d be forcing all ya’ll to read.
But I’m excited to write more of the Bonds Beyond Time movie! Especially because meeting Yugi and Jaden would be AMAZING. I haven’t met Jaden’s voice actor, but I have met Dan Green! He was SUPER nice, and I got his autograph! Definitely worth the effort if you get the chance to meet him!
Also, a heads up because my publishing schedule will be skewed again. School picked back up again today, which means that the next chapters will be uploaded all over the place, time wise. Mostly because I REALLY NEED TO FUCKING GRADUATE ALREADY. I’m ready to stop getting ripped off by college stuff, so…yeah…
But please bear with me. I do plan on writing this story to completion. It just won’t be consistent. Once again, thank you all SO much for still being here with me! Every little thing I get from you all about my writing encourages me to keep going, so thank you.
I’ll see you when I see you!)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!