

Alephmon's Grand Adventure

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Content warning: flattening, macro, toony silliness, battle

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Alephmon, the Folf Digimon, strolled toward a mountain out in the distance with his head held high. His bit of light blue hair-fur, laying between his long, fuzzy, light blue ears, wiggled with the breeze. His yellow eyes glistened like diamonds in the midday sunlight. He held a broad grin on his short muzzle. His long claws on his feet-paws rubbed against the grass beneath them. He walked up the hill higher until he reached the top.

"Maf, look at this view," Alephmon said. He rushed forward and hopped onto a boulder as tall as him. It remained in place despite it laying near the hill's edge. He held a hand-paw over his eyes as he gazed at the mountain. It still had a misty blue haze from the distance. "It still looks so far away, though."

"You shouldn't be surprised," Stry the Veemon said. He reached the hill's top as well. "This is only the first day; we should arrive by sunset tomorrow." He held a map of the Digital World's region, which he glanced at. A bicycle pump lay on his back with a strap across his chest. "Though, honestly, I expect it'll take a day longer than that."

Alephmon and Stry nodded and glanced back. There, Kuromon the Shadow Wolf Digimon and his blacksmith apprentice and partner, Ember the Gabumon, pulled a

wagon behind them. At its size, it could carry a sleeping Greymon with little issues. The two struggled to pull the wagon up the hill despite it only holding food for the journey. Stry took several steps toward them to assist, but Kuromon shook his head.

When they reached the top, they flopped onto the ground, sweat covering their bodies.

"Whew. I thought I could handle this alone," Kuromon said. He wiped away the sweat sticking onto his jet-black hair-fur. "I'm glad you convinced me to bring you long to help, Ember."

"Anytime, partner!" Ember said with a child-like voice. This Reptile Digimon wore a pelt from a WereGarurumon down to the belt over the shoulder and across the belly and back instead of a Garurumon. "Always happy to help."

"Kekehehe. Just don't push yourself too much." Kuromon patted Ember around the long, sandy-colored horn.

"I won't as long as you don't." Ember rubbed Kuromon's dark gray furry arm.

Alephmon hopped off from the boulder and approached the two. He extended his fuzzy light blue arms toward them and splayed his fingers. At once, green

energy and some molts flowed out from his hand-paws. They floated toward Kuromon and Ember, filling them with regenerative energy. At once, they felt energized as though they hopped out of bed in the morning.

"Whew. Thanks, Alephmon," Kuromon said. He got up and stretched, causing the dark gray chains across his chest and back to jangle. "I thought I needed to rest in your shadow for a moment."

"It's no worries, maf." Alephmon stopped the healing flow. He rubbed the back of his head, even touching the red bandana around his neck. "Just helping out my buddies."

"With you around to heal us, we'll go on forever!" Ember hopped up to stretch as well.

Halfway into their stretching, their stomachs growled. Kuromon blushed and squirmed in place while turning his bright red eyes away. Ember and Alephmon laughed, which caused Kuromon to laugh as well. Stry shook his head and smiled while poking his tooth out between his lips. He folded the map and set it underneath his arm.

"No healing could replace having a belly full of food," Alephmon said.

Stry nodded. "Sounds like it's lunch time."

"I agree!" Ember's round belly growled louder.
"Gehehe. Maybe I need seconds along with the firsts."

Alephmon hopped onto the wagon and pulled out one of the brown bags within. He handed it over to Stry, bounced off the wagon, and sat down. Stry checked inside the bag, which contained insulation, and pulled out long ham sandwiches. He handed them off to the others before taking one for himself.

"Maf, this tastes so good," Alephmon said. A sparkly blush emitted from his cheeks. "You did an awesome job making them, Stry!"

"Vevehehe. I try, buddy." Stry wagged his long, blue tail.

"You can't beat meals like this," Kuromon said. He wagged his tail as well. Shadowy bubbles followed where his tail wagged. "What do you think, Ember?"

"I think I would like another!" Ember swallowed the rest of the ham sandwich.

"Vevehehe. Here you go." Stry pulled out another ham sandwich and handed it to Ember. "Enjoy."

"Thanks!" Ember chowed it down.

"Maf. We all need to make sure our energy is in top condition for this mission." Alephmon wiggled his tail, light gray with a light blue tip, back and forth.

"Not just for getting there, but for coming back." Stry glanced at the mountain, the group's destination, and scratched behind his left ear-like appendage. "We'll all be pulling the wagon for the return journey."

Kuromon nodded. "My dear partner," he glanced at Ember, who nodded back, "and I have made major strides in repairing the castle base. This mission will allow us to do the final bit of work on the castle and bring it to its fullest potential. Out in that mountain are a series of mines where we can collect raw Chrome Digizoid. Once we collect as much as possible and come back, not only will we be able to complete the final repairs, including fixing the castle's core that generates power, but we will also be able to create upgrades for the entire group. I bet we can make some neat weapons or Digi-Armor."

Stry turned to the reader. "Everybody got that?"

The other three Digimon turned to Stry in confusion.

"Maf? Who did you talk to?"

"Ah, er, nobody." Stry rubbed the back of his head while blushing. "Vevehehe."

Kuromon raised an eyebrow before shrugging. "It's good to remind ourselves why we're on this mission."

"Yeah, partner!" Ember stood up and rubbed Kuromon's hair-fur. "Can't let ourselves forget."

"Maf. Our dream of running a Digimon Freelance group is coming true." Alephmon grinned wide. "Maf. I cannot wait until everything is set up and running." He adjusted his black, fingerless gloves that went partway above his wrists. "We've been working on this for a long time."

Stry nodded while turning toward the mountain. "Let's continue forward. It's not as if it'll come to us, after all."

"True, maf."

The four Digimon stood up and cleaned themselves. Alephmon strolled on ahead with his arms behind his back. Stry hopped onto the wagon and returned the brown bag with the others. He hopped off just as Kuromon and Ember reached for the wagon's handles. They tugged the wagon forward. Stry went to assist, but they shook their heads.

"You need to read the map," Ember said. "And you can't do that if you're pulling with us."

"Erm. If you say so." Stry glanced at Alephmon and flinched.

Alephmon stood on the boulder again, facing the distant mountain.

"Careful there, buddy!"

"Maf?" Alephmon spun around. He blinked in confusion. "Did you—"

The boulder shifted underneath Alephmon. He yelped, falling off from it with a thud. It rolled down the hill toward him. Alephmon gulped and pulled out a white flag from nowhere. He waved it back and forth.

"Maf." Alephmon folded his ears back.

The boulder rolled on top of him. It squished his feet-paws first, ignoring his long claws in the way, and rolled over his body and reached his face. His muzzle folded up with his black nose between his eyes. He yelped, his body making squashing noises.

Stry sighed and walked toward the flattened Alephmon. He shook his head while pressing his fingertips against his forehead above the yellow V. The boulder rolled off of Alephmon, continuing its path down the hill. Alephmon lay there on the ground, thinner than the grass around him. His yellow eyes spun into spirals; his mouth stretched longer than usual. The white flag disappeared; its purpose fulfilled.

"This is the third time this has happened today." Stry reached back and grabbed his bicycle pump. "At least I brought this along."

Stry stuffed the bicycle pump's hose into Alephmon's flat mouth. At that point, Alephmon blinked and wiggled his eyes, shaking off the spirals. Stry heaved and, gripped the handles tight, pushed down on the pump. Air filled Alephmon, which puffed his cheeks and popped his eyes. Stry pumped more air into him, with Alephmon's body creaking like a stretching balloon. His head filled out, his chest puffed up, and his limbs expanded with air. His fingers splayed, unable to move against the filling air.

By the time Stry pumped the bicycle pump for the tenth time, Alephmon popped back to normal.

"Maaaaaf." Alephmon shook his head and spat out the hose. He rubbed his body, from his khaki shorts to his sword Checksum strapped on his back for anything off. Each one also returned to normal and held nothing missing. He sighed and glanced at the boulder which reached the bottom. "I thought that was solid in place."

"They always feel solid until the moment it happens." Stry helped Alephmon back to his feet-paws. "You need to be a lot more aware of your surroundings. That has always been your weakness, buddy."

Alephmon nodded while blushing. "Maf. Let's continue."

#

By midday of the third day, Alephmon, Stry, Kuromon, and Ember reached the mountain's base. It stood tall, holding a gray surface that turned white halfway up. Alephmon craned his head upward in marvel at its height of 120,000 feet. Heavy fog obscured the lay just as snow covered it. He wondered if he touched the stars if he somehow reached its tip.

"We made it," Stry said. He held the map close to his face. "This mountain is known for having one of the highest amounts of Digizoid even after millennia of mining. We should be able to find plenty of Chrome Digizoid within." He lowered the map. "We just need to find a mine. Luckily, there is one nearby, according to the map."

"Maf. Alright." Alephmon turned back to the resting Kuromon and Ember. "Do you need to rest longer?"

"Nah! We're all set!" Ember stood up and stretched.

Kuromon stood up as well. "Ready when you are."

Alephmon and Stry nodded at them. They lead the way, letting the other two pull on the wagon. The mountain lay to the right of them with little grass around. Alephmon

wincing at the soft ground, which gave way to his steps. That would not be a problem if he avoided pointy rocks underneath.

"Maf, what type of weapon were you hoping to get from their blacksmith's work?" Alephmon asked.

"Me?" Stry glanced at his hand and flexed it. "I don't need anything more than my fists for weapons! But armor? Maybe something that can allow me to Armor Digivolve."

"Woooooah! That's so cool!" Alephmon's yellow eyes sparkled. "I wonder if I can armor Digivolve too."

"I'm sure they can make something like that for you too." Stry winked at Alephmon. "Is that all you want?"

"Maf. Perhaps one other." Alephmon reached back and pulled his sword from its sheath. It shone in the sunlight, almost like it glowed white. "Perhaps they can make this stronger and sharper."

"Huh. That can work," Stry said. He rubbed the back of his ear-like appendage. "What about your shield?"

"I don't think I can summon it long enough for them to upgrade it. Maf." Alephmon shrugged. He sheathed his sword and crossed his arms behind his head. "Not that it needed upgrading anyways."

The two laughed—

A moaning sound echoed from ahead.

Alephmon and Stry blinked at the sound. They turned back to Kuromon and Ember, who stared at them in confusion. Alephmon nodded to Stry and rushed forward. He pulled out his sword, Checksum, just in case. The moaning grew louder, enough that he crouched low to sneak on ahead. He approached a ridge taller than his head, including his long ears, even if he stood straight.

He gripped his sword tight and jumped up.

Alephmon widened his eyes at the sight.

Ahead, a group of sixteen Bakemon floated above the ash-grey dirt ground on their backs, each as flat as paper. Their black eyes spun into spirals. Their mouths, each with long, pointy teeth, lay open wide. Though their off-white cloths always flopped around, they floated like pieces of paper.

Alephmon breathed in from the sight. "Maf? What happened?" He stepped forward with caution. To his right lay a mine's entrance. From where they lay in the air, it looked almost as though something had blown them out from it. "Were they after the Digizoid too, maf?" He

approached one while keeping his sword ready. "Maf. Are you alright?"

"A curssssse is upon usssss," one of the Bakemon said.

"A curssssse," all of the Bakemon said.

Alephmon gulped. "A-a curse?"

"The mine isssss no longer sssso," the Bakemon before him said. "It isssss now a temple, guarded by a curssssse."

"A curssssse," all of the Bakemon said again.

"What happened here?"

Alephmon jumped and spun around. Stry, Kuromon, and Ember had already walked around the ridge and rolled the wagon up. Kurmon and Ember pulled a lever, which locked the wagon's wheels in place. Stry placed the map on the wagon for safekeeping. The three walked over to Alephmon, who's light blue fur turned whiter.

"Th-they said that they found a temple in the mine and g-got cursed," Alephmon explained.

A device in Kuromon's pocket buzzed in an alarm. He reached into his pocket and pulled it out. The Digi Syphon device held a rectangular shape like a smartphone. However, it had a tiny screen instead of covering most of

one side. It scanned the Bakemon before him, and its screen glowed. It projected a holographic circle, holding a three-dimensional Bakemon image while a series of data about them played out. At the topmost of the list, it said:

Bakemon: Ghost Digimon

Attribute: Virus

Level: Champion

Family: Nightmare Soldiers

"Hmm. It doesn't detect any sign of a curse," Kuromon said. He scratched behind his right ear. "Are you sure—"

"We are curssssse," the Bakemon from before said. "We failed our leader."

"A curssssse," all of the Bakemon said.

Stry lowered his eyelids halfway. "Uh, huh." He turned to Alephmon. "This must be some elaborate prank."

"A-a prank? Really?" Alephmon asked. Colors returned to his body. "Are you sure?"

Before Stry answered Alephmon's question, one of the Bakemon said, "Beware," All four Digimon turned to it. "Beware of the curssssse. Beware of our leader, Ph—"

Stry sighed and smacked Bakemon in its flattened face. "Shut it! I'm trying to talk here!"

The Bakemon fluttered on the ground. Its eyes spun faster than the others.

"What a pest. 'Cursssse.'" Stry rolled his eyes and turned to Alephmon. "Yes, a prank. I mean, why else would someone build a temple in a mine?"

Alephmon shifted in place, still uncertain. Kuromon, sensing his unease, strolled to his side and rubbed his shoulder. Alephmon relaxed and smiled at him. Ember grinned and grabbed Alephmon's hand-paw close.

"Maf. Thank you." Alephmon smiled but still felt a slight unease. He glanced at the Bakemon with one question in his head. If they did plan all of this for a prank, who flattened them in the first place?

"In any case," Stry said. The others turned to him. Stry stood before the mine's entrance with his hands pressing against his hips. "We should get in and grab as much Chrome Digizoid as possible. The sooner we do that, preferably before the Bakemon recover, the sooner we can leave and head back to the castle." He whispered to himself, "And the sooner I can relieve Nekozukimon and Stormymon from watching it over."

Alephmon, Kuromon, and Ember nodded and rushed over to Stry. Alephmon gave one last glance at the flattened Bakemon before standing beside Stry. They stood before the entrance for a few seconds and then stepped inside. The mine's shadows engulfed them, leaving them in darkness.

Alephmon reached into his pocket and pulled out a flashlight. He turned it on and shined its light in front of them. Ember walked near Kuromon and rubbed against his head. Kuromon smiled and patted Ember near the horn area. Stry sighed but smiled to help cheer the others up.

The mine grew colder the lower they traveled within. Alephmon breathed out and watched his breath turn into frost. He wondered what caused the mine to grow so chilly. Perhaps the Digizoid absorbed cold just as quickly as heat. Or maybe the lack of—

A reddish-orange light shone in the distance past a corner.

Alephmon blinked and lowered his flashlight. The others flinched, each wondering what this light meant. Alephmon felt his fur stand up while remembering the Bakemon's words. He glanced at the others and, sensing their fear building up, swallowed his own. He snuck on ahead, keeping his knees low.

He turned off the flashlight and pocketed it as the light grew brighter. In its place, he pulled out his sword and held it close. Simultaneously, a shield as large as his torso, Sha-1, materialized on his left arm. A brass four-toe paw lay at the center, surrounded by blue steel. Bright steel framed around it. He held the shield before him, ready to protect his friends.

Alephmon led the others toward the reddish-orange light. He kept a determined expression despite wondering about this possible threat. They crept closer toward the corner. It grew warmer with their breaths no longer frosty.

They jumped past the corner, ready for a fight.

Nobody lurked around the area.

At least if nobody kept cover behind that statue in the center.

Alephmon nodded to Stry. Stry nodded back, and the two walked to the statue's left side. Stry prepped his arms by swinging them back and forth. Alephmon gripped his sword tight while keeping his shield ahead.

Kuromon nodded to Ember, who nodded back. Three red four-point diamonds formed and glowed on his right shoulder. They extended down in a series of red computer chip pattern lines, reaching his claws. Three shadowy

spearheads materialized in front of his right arm. Ember inhaled with blue ice-like flames leaking from between the lips. They approached the statue on the right.

All four Digimon jumped behind the statue, flanking both sides

However, nobody hid behind it.

"Maf?" Alephmon glanced around. "Is this chamber really empty?"

"It looks like it." Kuromon lowered his arm. The red lines and the three diamonds disappeared on his arm. The shadowy spearheads also disappeared. "That's a relief."

Stry glanced around the lit area. "Hmm. This still feels off."

"How so?" Ember asked.

"Has anyone seen what's lighting up this place?"

Alephmon, Kuromon, and Ember flinched in surprised and searched the chamber. Though a reddish-orange light covered the area, it came from nowhere. No torches, flashlights, lamps, or anything emitting light lay on the walls or ceiling. Alephmon shivered despite no longer feeling cold.

"Do those Bakemon have a point after all, maf?" Alephmon asked. He lowered his left arm as the shield on it disappeared. "That there's a curse?"

"Honestly, I don't know anymore," Stry said. He inched around the area. "I just don't know."

The four turned to the statue laying at the chamber's center. This tan statue of some vulpine creature sat on a tan pedestal. It held nine tails, each as long as the statue itself. Four tails curled around the legs while the rest spread around the pedestal. Its shut eyes and smirking mouth held a mischievous aura around it.

They turned to the other side of the place and widened their eyes. Behind a statue held a statue with pillars on both sides, like a temple's entrance. The pillars and the stony opening were light brown with worn-down sandy colors. Dark brown figures in the likeness of vines curled around the pillars. The floor at the entrance curved downward, with it going around a raised spot before rising and evening out the further they looked.

"How did we miss that?" Stry asked while scratching his head.

"Maybe it's because we were so focused on someone hiding around here to ambush us that we didn't notice

that," Kuromon answered. Heavy doubt lingered in his tone, however.

"Nah. That's way too obvious for us to miss," Ember said. "We'd have to be super thick to miss it."

Alephmon scratched the back of his head for a moment. He turned to the statue and blinked. Though he swore that nothing lay below the vulpine statue, a plague lay where the five lower tails cured. He took careful steps until he stood in front of it. The words on it screamed into his head, causing his fur to turn white.

You are trespassing under my domain. I've claimed this mine and converted it into my temple, keeping all of the Digizoid at the end. You're free to try to claim them but beware. Anyone who enters will fall under my spell.

Each trespasser will hold three of my marks. Within my temple lay various flattening traps. No tools or abilities you bring with you will restore you to normal. Only by paying one of my marks will revert you. But if you lose all three and get flattened one last time, you'll be kept flattened by my curse for the rest of your life.

"M-maf?" Alephmon widened his eyes. His ears flattened back down to his shoulders. "C-curse?"

"What's wrong?" Kuromon strolled over to Alephmon with a confused expression. He glanced at the plaque and widened his eyes. "Was-was that what those Bakemon were talking about?"

Stry and Ember walked over to Alephmon and Kuromon, both confused. They read the plaque and lowered their eyelids. Stry shook his head while Ember laughed.

"Man, oh man, those Bakemon must be total chumps! Ehehehe!" Ember laughed some more. "I mean, how could something like this—"

At once, the plaque glowed bright red. It shot out four white lights, each piercing the four Digimon's left arms. They all flinched and shook their arms in shock. Once the white lights disappeared and the plaque stopped glowing, three bright red tails markings lay on their arms. Each tail ended with a black tip.

"—curse us?" Ember glanced at the tails, not so confident anymore.

"That's strange." Stry rubbed on the three red tails marking on his left arm. They remained on without rubbing

off. "I never heard of a Kyubimon or a Youkomon doing something like this. I mean, that's what the statue up there is, right?"

Kuromon pulled out the Digi Syphon and turned it on. It projected a three-dimensional holographic display. With a few quick searches, he pulled out data about Kyubimon and Youkomon and compared it with the statue. "Um, Stry? That statue here isn't either of them. This one doesn't carry the thick rope around the neck, ending with bells. It also doesn't end each tail tip with a flame-like pattern."

Stry compared the miniature Kyubimon and Youkomon with the statue and scratched behind his left ear-like appendage in confusion. "Huh. You're right." He poked one of its tails. "So, what is it a statue of?"

"My guess? Just a generic nine-tailed fox." Ember shrugged.

"Maf, so there is a curse. And we're caught in one." Alephmon widened his eyes. "Perhaps we should leave and—"

"No!" Stry shook his head. The others turned to him, each surprised at his outburst. "I don't have the map with me, but I remember that the next open mine will be a few days away. I don't want us away from our castle anymore

than planned." He paced back and forth, rubbing his chin. "Maybe this is one elaborate bluff by whoever did this."

"Maf?" Alephmon tilted his head. "How can we tell?"

"Easy. By falling into one of the traps ourselves!"

The other three turned to each other with much doubt in their expressions.

"In fact, there's one just past the entrance of this 'temple.'" Stry rushed to the entrance and pointed at the floor. "Look at the floor there. See how it bent down and up again?" Alephmon walked until he stood beside Stry and nodded. Stry continued, "That means that plenty of Digimon walked inside this entrance. The worn-down spots are a safe place to stand on." He pointed at the raised center. "I bet that's the trap's trigger!"

"Maf? How can you be so sure?" Alephmon leaned in with a curious expression.

Kuromon and Ember also approached from behind. Ember leaned in with curiosity building up, but Kuromon frowned and rubbed his chin. He felt as though a gear jammed in his head.

"Simple! The fact that the worn-down flooring went around that spot meant that Digimon avoided it! Why?

Because it must be a trap trigger!" Stry winked at Alephmon. "I bet it's a pressure plate trap."

"Woooooooah! You're so smart, partner!" Alephmon patted Stry on his head.

"Vevehehe. I try to." Stry grinning while rubbing his spike nose. He turned to the hallway ahead. "Still, we need to step on it to not only prove it's a trap but also prove the validity of this 'curse.'" Alephmon nodded, though frowned at the word, 'validity.' Stry then said, "So, who will step on it?"

Kuromon opened his mouth, but Alephmon cut in before he said anything.

"I volunteer."

"Huh?" Stry blinked at his partner. "I was going to volunteer myself. After all, it was my idea."

"No. Besides, you got the pump. How will we inflate you back to normal if you got flat?" Alephmon gave Stry a cheeky smile. He sheathed his sword to his back's sheath and flexed his fingers. "I'm all ready."

"Uh, OK." Stry stepped aside while scratching behind his left ear-like appendage. He could always unsling the bicycle pump before stepping in, making Alephmon's sacrifice pointless. Still, his buddy wanted to do it, and he

knew that little would stop Alephmon once he decided.
"Take care."

Kuromon blinked and reached out, but Alephmon slipped away from his range.

Alephmon marched forward with determination filling his eyes. He stepped onto the dent part where an unknown amount of Digimon walked in and maybe out. He approached the centermost part of the hallway and stepped on the raised portion where Stry asserted held the trap.

They all heard a clicking noise, like someone pressing a button.

The two walls beside Alephmon slammed against him in half a second. It caved in so fast that Alephmon could not pull out his white flag. The other three stumbled back in shock from the force. The right wall extended farther than the left one, enough to make an upside-down L shape. Besides that, not even a crack showed how the walls once stood at the sides.

A few seconds elapsed before the walls slid back to their original positions. The paper-like Alephmon wiggled, struggling to remain upright. His eyes, at opposite sides of his flat face, lay wider than baseballs. He hopped forward a few times, with one leg forward and the other behind in

locked positions. Alephmon yelped, losing balance and fluttering onto the floor.

"Maf."

Stry rushed inside to Alephmon while avoiding the trap. He carried his buddy to the other end and set him on the floor. He unstrapped his bicycle pump from his back and put it on the floor. He smiled while stuffing the hose into Alephmon's mouth. He raised the pump's handles to the highest point and pushed down hard.

Nothing, not even puffed-out cheeks, happened.

Stry blinked, his confidence fading from his face. He pumped in more air, but Alephmon remained flat as paper. He attempted three more times before giving up. Sweat covered his face.

"What?" Stry removed the hose from Alephmon's mouth. "What's going on?"

One of the three tails on Alephmon's left arm glowed bright white. A second later, it disappeared. With an audible POP, Alephmon returned to his filled-out shape, no longer flat. He blinked and checked himself over for anything off. Outside of holding two red tails markings on his arms instead of three, nothing disappeared.

"It-it can't be." Stry folded his ear-like appendages back. His hands lay on the ground, limp while standing up. "I, uh, how?"

"It-it's true!" Alephmon's fur stood straight. "There's a curse!"

Ember gulped and took a step back. "And it got us all."

"What can we do about it?" Alephmon asked. He walked backward until his back pressed against the wall. It felt warm for some reason. "Can we do something about it?"

"Well, there is one thing we can try." Stry glanced at Kuromon and Ember. "We can leave this place and return—"

The ground shook underneath all of them. They all stumbled, with Stry losing his balance. He hopped a couple of steps to the side to regain his balance but stepped on the pressure plate. A clicking sound resonated before the walls slammed in, flattening Stry between them. Alephmon yelped and jumped toward the closed walls. He grabbed the left wall, the only part that extended outward and pulled as hard as possible. It refused to budge.

Two seconds later, the walls retracted back into place. Stry stood in the middle as flat as paper. His left leg hung higher than his right knee. His red eyes spun into spirals. He leaned onto the left foot-paw, where he 'stood' for a few seconds. After that, he fluttered onto the floor.

Alephmon yelped and pulled Stry off the floor. "Stry! Are you alright?!"

"It's just a flesh wound," Stry answered. His dazed tone suggested otherwise. "I had worse."

Alephmon gulped and carried Stry out from the hallway. He approached Kuromon and Ember, who stood beside the statue. Once passed that, they could—

Alephmon stopped and widened his eyes in horror.

The passageway heading out collapsed, with huge boulders in the way.

Alephmon felt his heart sank. "Maf! We're trapped!"

Ember sweated in fear while nodding. Kuromon rubbed his chin with a thoughtful expression.

One of the three tails on the flat Stry's arm glowed bright. It disappeared, causing him to pop back into shape. He groaned and shook his head.

"Ugh. That was a nasty earthquake." Stry glanced at the collapsed exit and bit his lip. "And this day gets worse. Still, it's not too bad." He stood up, with Alephmon letting go of him. Stry cracked his knuckles and whirled up his arms. "This should be simple to—"

"Wait!" Ember yelled with a panicked tone. "Your punch could cause this whole cavern to collapse on top of us!"

Stry blinked and, after a second of thinking, lowered his arm. "Yeah, but what else can we do?"

Alephmon spun around toward the temple's entrance. "Maf. Only one way to go."

The other three turned toward the entrance past the fox-like statue. It lay there as though beckoning them to enter. Alephmon, Stry, Kuromon, and Ember approached it with some caution. There, they stood while pondering the statue's message. Alephmon and Stry glanced at each other and nodded. They took the lead, entering the temple.

Ember raised a foot-paw forward, only to pause and glance at Kuromon. He still held a thoughtful expression on his face.

"Is there a problem, partner?" Ember asked.

"Huh? Oh. A fair amount." Kuromon rubbed the right wall, extending out more than the left one. "Something about this place feels off."

"Off?"

"Yeah. I can't put my finger on why it feels off, though." Kuromon scratched the wall a couple of times. His claw left no mark on it. "Let's stay on alert. OK?"

"You got it, partner!" Ember gave him a thumbs-up.

They nodded to each other and ran into the temple. They avoided the pressure trap along the way. Kuromon spotted the bicycle pump left behind by Stry and picked it up. He slung it onto his back, pressing it against his chains. They hurried, hoping to catch up with the others before they stepped into another trap.

Silence crept into the temple's entrance, with the statue only there.

It opened its glowing sea blue eyes.

It twisted its head toward the temple's entrance with a smirk.

A second later, it disappeared into dust as though it never existed.

Kuromon and Ember caught up with Alephmon and Stry, who stood in the hallway. Stry rubbed his chin and glanced at part of the wall. It held an engraving of some fox-like Digimon with three tails and its back away from them. It contained a red gem on its chest at around their head level.

"Woooooooah! That looks so pretty!" Alephmon watched the gem with glee. He reached for it, but Stry grabbed his arm and pulled it down. "Maf?"

"This one is most certainly a trap," Stry explained. He turned to the wall on the opposite side. Scratch marks lay near the bottom as though something heavy rubbed against them. "I bet that this here," he patted the engraving side, "will fall on us as soon as we cross the gem like a laser trap."

"Maf. How do we pass by this trap?" Alephmon asked.

"Simple!" Stry kneeled and crouch-walked underneath the gem. Once he reached the other end, he jumped and spread his arms out. "You just duck underneath it!"

"Oh." Alephmon grinned and kneeled. He folded his ears sideways. He crouch-walked to Stry without tripping the trap. "That's easy, maf!"

Kuromon watched while rubbing his chin. It felt too easy for his tastes, especially if whoever built this temple wanted intruders like them out. He ruffled his fur while glancing at the gem. Did whoever built it make it easy to throw Digimon like them off, making it easier for them to fall for sneakier traps? It would make some sense, considering the sixteen Bakemon who also fell for the traps. Still, the full answer did not fall into place in his mind.

"Hey, partner!" Ember said.

Kuromon jolted out of his thoughts and glanced at the other side of the trap.

Ember stood there with the others.

"Are you coming or what?" Ember asked.

"Uh, coming!" Kuromon wiggled his knees together and—

"Oh, look at that on the floor!" Ember pointed ahead where a Digizoid coin lay. "Now, that looks like the start of our stock, partner!"

"Huh?" Kuromon stood straight in confusion.

Ember approached the Digizoid coin with intense interest. Alephmon raised his foot-paw to follow, but Stry held him back. Stry had a confused expression on his face.

The two discussed with each other, but the words bounced out from Kuromon's head.

Kuromon wondered what that Digizoid coin meant. He doubted that the Bakemon left it while fleeing the temple, partly because it should be as flat as them. Once he ruled them out, he figured the builders placed it, but for what reason?

Perhaps they left it there as a trick.

"Ember, wait!" Kuromon sprinted forward.

His head passed the red gem on the wall.

In a split second, the wall fell on top of Kuromon. It flattened him down, blowing away any dust along the way. The hallway shook from the sheer force. Alephmon and Stry turned back, both startled by the sound and shaking.

"Huh?" Ember glanced by while grabbing for the Digizoid coin. "Boss?"

The coin sank into the ground, escaping Ember's grasp.

A split second later, the floor underneath Ember crashed against the ceiling. It squashed Ember flat as paper, making a lemon-squishing sound along the way. The temple shook from the sheer force.

Alephmon and Stry glanced at their trapped buddies in shock and horror. Alephmon reached for Kuromon, trying to grip underneath the wall. Stry rushed over to Ember and leaped for the ceiling. Both failed to find an opening, with them designed so not even a knife could slip between the cracks.

A second later, both traps retracted to their original positions. Kuromon lay flat on the ground with his red eye spinning; even the shadowy clouds near his ear-turfs and tail lay flattened. His body held grooves all over. Meanwhile, Ember lay there as a perfect circle, like an extra-wide coin. Stry lifted Ember, causing the Digizoid coin to pop back up.

One red tail marking on Kuromon's and Ember's arms glowed brightly before disappearing. A second later, they popped back into form. They groaned and rubbed their heads. They shook their shoulders before glancing at the other.

"Sorry. I panicked and forgot about the red gem," Kuromon said. He gritted his teeth in anger. "Stupid! That's so stupid of me!"

"No! No, partner. That was my fault." Ember ran over and carried Kuromon out from underneath the trap. "I

should've realized that coin was a trap. That was obvious in hindsight. You would've been safe if I didn't fall for it."

"I guess." Kuromon shook his head before punching against the wall. It left no crack on the wall. "I swear, I'm missing something here!"

"Maf?" Alephmon walked over and patted Kuromon's shoulder. "What do you mean?"

"Everything about this place feels off, but I can't understand why!" Kuromon sighed and lowered his ears. "Sorry."

Alephmon frowned before reaching over and hugging Kuromon close. He reached up and rubbed his buddy's ears. Kuromon relaxed and murred, leaning against the rubbing.

"Kuromon, dear friend," Alephmon said. His smile returned. "Just relax, maf. You have always been helpful. You even helped me with my fear of the dark. Well, mostly, maf."

Kuromon smiled back. "Thanks, buddy."

Alephmon's words struck him like finding a missing piece to a puzzle. Kuromon glanced around at this orange-red lit hallway despite nothing lighting the place. Despite this unknown light, only their shadows lay on the ground

and walls. He felt that Alephmon said a vital clue to this mystery, but how it pieced together, he still struggled to figure it out.

Ember smiled and hugged Kuromon close. "Don't beat yourself too hard on this."

"I'll try not to," Kuromon responded.

Stry coughed. "We still need to find the Digizoid in this temple. After that, we must still find a way out of this creepy place."

"True, maf." Alephmon stopped hugging Kuromon and strolled over to Stry. "Once done, our freelance group will get a massive boost!"

Alephmon and Stry laughed as they walked down the hallway, avoiding the Digizoid coin. Kuromon nodded, though he still felt tongue-tied over this mysterious temple. He glanced at Ember, who nodded back. They stood and rushed down the hallway, catching up with Alephmon and Stry.

After a minute of walking, they entered a room the size of an office. Various engravings lay on the walls around them, higher than their heads. It held a zig-zagging pattern with a line crossing through the middle. Alephmon rubbed one of the zig-zags where it pointed upward.

"Woooooah. This looks awesome, maf." Alephmon jumped up and down. "I wonder what kind of Digimon made this."

"Someone who is a joker. That's what," Ember said while shrugging.

"Or very protective of this place and treasure," Stry said.

"Hey. If they were, they would've placed a heavy door or gate out on the mountainside entrance and in front of this temple," Ember explained. "Instead, they went out of their way to lay traps while leaving the entrance wide open."

Kuromon glanced around the room with concern building up within him. An exit lay to their left, below a grinning engraving of the same three-tailed vulpine. The eyes on it held aquamarine gems on it. Its nose pointed toward the center of the room. The floor itself looked plain until he bent down. Lined revealed themselves on it, forming various L patterns. The pattern reached the center of the room, holding a perfect square surrounded by Ls.

"I don't get it." Stry rubbed the back of his left ear-like appendage. "Why make a room like this if they would leave it empty?"

"Maybe they got lazy and left it like this?" Ember suggested while straying toward the room's center. "It's either that or a trap room."

"If so, what's the trap?" Stry asked.

Kuromon glanced at the right side of the room. The line at the center of the zig-zagging pattern held a darker shade compared to the rest of the walls. It clicked in place that instant to him. Kuromon widened his eyes and extended his arm out to Ember.

"Wait! Ember!" Kuromon said. "Don't step—"

Ember flinched but still stepped on the square at the room's center. It sank and clicked like a button. The room rumbled, with the bottom half of the right wall sinking into the ground. A second later, a stone roller spun out from it.

Kuromon sprinted without thinking. He rushed over to Alephmon, who watched the roller in horror. He held a white flag already, waving it back and forth. Kuromon reached over and picked up Alephmon along the way. The roller sped up, flattening a stunned Stry and Ember along the way. Kuromon jumped and lunged toward the left doorway with a yelp. He and Alephmon fell onto the floor within.

A second later, the roller slammed against the walls between them, unable to enter.

"Maaaaaaaf," Alephmon said. The white flag held a frowning face before disappearing. He shivered and shook his head. "Huh?"

"Whew. Saved you." Kuromon slipped off of Alephmon and rolled onto his back. "For a moment, I thought I was too slow."

"Awwww. Thank you, maf!" Alephmon reached over and hugged Kuromon. He hugged back and laughed a bit. They stood up and glanced at the roller, which dominated half of the opening. Alephmon said, "B-but how will we get to the others?"

Before Kuromon responded, the stone roller rumbled. Sand fell from it, which disappeared into nothing before touching the ground. The stone roller shrank until it dissolved into nothing like it never existed. Kuromon and Alephmon blinked at the sight.

"Welp, that answered that question." Kuromon walked through the doorway.

Alephmon nodded and swallowed before rushing to Kuromon's side.

Within, Stry and Ember lay on the ground with their backs against it. Their arms and legs splayed out like in the middle of a jumping-jacks hop. They both lay there thin as a piece of paper. Stry widened a bit but nowhere near as much as Ember, who tripled in width. Both of their eyes spun into spirals.

Alephmon and Kuromon dragged their flattened partners out of this room.

A second later, another red tail marking on Stry's and Ember's arms glowed and disappeared. With another payment fulfilled, they popped back into shape. They groaned and rubbed their foreheads.

"Sorry, traffic officer, I didn't see the one who ran me over," Ember said in a dazed tone. "Maybe he was blue or brown, but it was all a blur."

"Sorry I'm late, headmaster. I've been wrestling with Plato." Stry sighed and flopped onto the ground. Alephmon helped him back up. Stry shook his head harder. "Is everyone alright?"

"Maf, we're all good here." Alephmon snickered and patted Stry's head. "And I'm glad that you are."

Stry smiled and hugged back. Ember reached up and hugged Kuromon as well. Kuromon patted Ember near the

horn, but he diverted his attention toward the opening. He thought back to the stone roller dissolving into nothing. Since it dissolved, does that mean that it would not trigger again? Either that or another roller rolled into place, waiting to be activated. That does leave an important question: what Digimon could create something like this?

"Is there something bothering you, partner?" Ember asked.

Kuromon blinked and rubbed the back of his head. "Er, a lot is bothering me."

"Anyways," Stry said. He turned toward the deeper part of the hallway. "We need to continue our mission."

They all nodded and walked down the hallway. Kuromon lurked in the back, deep in thought. Though all four of them made plattering or tapping sounds, none of them echoed. He frowned at that realization and rubbed his chin. He felt that the answer to all of this laughed in his face. It must be an obvious answer, but he thought it lacked something. Perhaps—

The floor clicked underneath his foot-paw.

"Huh?" Kuromon blinked in confusion.

The floor beneath him rose fast, slamming him against the ceiling. The others spun around, confused and then

horrified. Kuromon only saw darkness through his spiraling eyes, which felt peaceful. Ember outside scratched against the stony trap but remained firm with no scratch mark.

A second later, it lowered back to the floor level. Kuromon lay at the center as a perfect circle the size of a frisbee. He let out a cough and a sigh.

Ember picked up the disc Kuromon. "Kuromon! Are you alright?"

The second tail marking on Kuromon's arm glowed bright. It disappeared, and Kuromon popped back into shape. He fell on top of Ember, who fell back with a flop. Stry sighed and helped them back on their feet-paws.

"Ugh. Sorry." Kuromon shook his head. "I guess I wasn't paying attention like you guys were."

Stry frowned. "We didn't realize there was a trap until you fell for it."

"Huh?" Kuromon flinched and glanced at the spot he stepped on. Nothing indicated that a trap lay there. No tripwires, gem sensors, or anything on the floor or walls that could trigger a trap. When he stepped on it again, it did not sink or click like before. "W-what?"

"It looks like the traps are becoming subtler," Stry said. He shook his head. "We should be—"

The floor and ceiling slammed against each other behind Stry and Ember, almost catching their tails along the way. They widened their eyes and spun around at the trap. The bottom half of the trap extended longer than the top half. Stry reached out and rubbed the solid stone trap bottom.

"Whew." Stry sighed. "At least it missed all of us."

"Wait." Kuromon glanced around. "Where's Alephmon?"

Stry widened his eyes in horror. "Oh no."

The floor and ceiling retracted back into place. Alephmon lay stuck on the top, showing his feet-paws to the floor. He wiggled until he fell and fluttered to the floor. When he landed, the second tail marking on his arm glowed bright and disappeared. With a plop, Alephmon snapped back into shape.

"I-I didn't move an inch! Honest!" Alephmon stood up and shuffled his feet-paws all around. "It slammed against me for no reason!"

"You must've triggered the trap somehow, partner." Stry stared at him with half-closed eyes. He shook his head and walked a couple of steps toward Alephmon. "Look,

we're rapidly losing these tail markings to these traps. We only have one each remaining."

"He's right," Kuromon said. He rubbed his chin some more as he walked to Stry's side. "We need to be extra careful now. Though I wish I could—"

The floor opened up underneath Kuromon and Stry. They stood on thin air in ignorance for a couple of seconds until they looked down. Stry fell first, and then Kuromon, down into a pit beneath them. The floor closed behind them.

Alephmon widened his eyes in horror and lunged at that floor's location. "STRY! KUROMON!"

"KUROMON!!" Ember punched the floor a few times, though it would not give way. "HOLD ON! WE—"

The ceiling opened up above Alephmon and Ember. A series of rollers spun in place, each pressing against the other. Alephmon and Ember leaped away in surprise and confusion in opposite directions. It kept turning in place rather than falling and rolling them down as they feared.

Familiar yelping sounds came from above, with two pairs of legs slipping between the rollers. Kuromon and Stry exited the rollers a second later, each flattened paper thin. They fluttered face-first onto the floor. Their remaining tail

markings glowed and disappeared. The two popped back into shape, with Alephmon and Ember helping them.

"We interrupt this program to annoy you and make things generally more irritating," Stry said. His tone held a dazed manner with his eyes in spirals. He shook his head and blinked. "Huh. I know I didn't step on anything. Did you?"

"Me?" Kuromon shook his head. "No. Nothing clicked underneath me. I-I just walked near you."

"Maf. C-could this place be changing on us?" Alephmon asked. He tucked his tail near his legs.

"Uh-huh. Up is down, and left is right," Ember said with a heavy amount of sarcasm. "There's no way that whoever built this temple could cause it to transform. Besides, everything is rock—"

A jangling sound came from the hallway behind them. Alephmon, Kuromon, Stry, and Ember glanced in that direction in confusion. The ground rumbled beneath their feet-paws.

At first, they saw nothing in the red-orange lit hallway. Then, out of nowhere, a boulder rolled towards them. "AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!!!"

All four sprinted down the hallway, away from the boulder. It rolled toward them faster despite it rolling on a flat surface. Ember lagged, Alephmon took the lead, and Kuromon and Stry ran between them.

"WHERE DID THAT COME FROM?!" Ember demanded.

"MAY-MAYBE IT ROLLED DOWN FROM THE CEILING THROUGH A RAMP!!" Stry yelled back.

"HOW IS IT STILL ROLLING, THEN?! THIS HALLWAY ISN'T SLOPED!!"

"MAAAAAAAAAAAAAAF!!"

Ember tripped on the floor with a yelp.

Alephmon flinched and glanced back.

Ember struggled to get off the floor.

The boulder rolled closer.

"MAF! I'LL SAVE YOU!!" Alephmon spun back toward Ember.

"NO! ALEPH!!" Stry reached out for Alephmon, but he slipped away.

Alephmon lunged over to Ember with determination pushing him.

He grabbed Ember's hand-paw—

The boulder caught up and squashed them both.

"ALEPHMON! EMBER!!" Kuromon cried out in horror.

Time froze for Stry at that moment. He clutched his hands into fists, which seemed to burst into flames. The boulder inched toward him in that frozen moment, about to make him a victim as well. He narrowed his eyes and charged.

"STRY?!" Kuromon yelled. "WHAT ARE YOU—"

Stry swung both arms before punching the boulder with them. "BOOM BOOM PUNCH!!"

His fists sank into the boulder—

The boulder popped.

Stry widened his eyes in confusion, with the pupils mere dots in the whites. Chunks of brown rubber flew and fell all over the hallway, including on his forehead. He remained still for seconds, baffled to the bone.

Kuromon blinked as well. "Huh?!"

"Was that it?" Stry asked. His voice held no tone. He shook his head and ran forward. "Aleph! Ember!"

Ahead, Alephmon and Stry lay on the ground, both flat as paper. Their eyes spun into spirals. Their hand-paws still touched one another, almost fused. Alephmon held his tongue out in a cute way.

"What?" Stry pulled them off from the ground and pried their hand-paws off from each other. "What?" He glanced back at the balloon boulder scraps still lying around. "What?"

Kuromon picked up one of the rubber scraps off the floor. He flipped it over a few times. It dissolved into dust, which disappeared into nothing. He glanced at the rest of the scraps, including the one on Stry's head. They, too, faded into nothing as though they never existed.

The final red tails markings on Alephmon and Ember glowed bright. With the payment done, the tails disappeared, and the two popped back into form. Alephmon rubbed his head while Ember stretched.

"Maf?" Alephmon glanced at the unamused Stry.

Stry bonked Alephmon's head. "That was very foolish of you! You had no time to save Ember, yet you did it anyways! Because of that, none of us have any more chances!"

"Meep!" Alephmon folded his ears back. "S-sorry, buddy."

"Hey! Lay off him!" Ember said. "Even if what he did was dumb."

"Look, I'm responsible for EVERYONE here!" Stry responded while leaning toward Ember. "I don't need anyone doing reckless things on my watch!"

"We've been doing nothing but reckless stuff since we GOT here!" Ember said while butting heads with Stry.

"And we're going to STOP doing that!" Stry grabbed both Ember's and Alephmon's wrists. "From now on, we're going to be extra vigilant! Don't step on anything that I don't, don't touch the walls, no more testing for traps, and no more charging ahead! Do you all get that!?"

"M-maf. Yes, Stry." Alephmon sweated.

Ember sighed but nodded.

"GOOD!" Stry dragged them over to Kuromon. "Same with you! Come on!"

"Uh, yes," Kuromon said. He felt this temple grew more off with each new trap, with the boulder the oddest yet. How could a balloon boulder flatten Ember and Alephmon? Heck, it should be impossible for one to roll

over them and instead bounce off Ember's back. Even if it did happen because of a lack of space and its speed, that would not explain how it flattened them. Perhaps if Stry punched a fake one instead of a real boulder, but that raised further questions. "I don't get it."

"Are you coming or what?!" Stry yelled.

Kuromon flinched but answered, "Yeah!"

Kuromon followed the three deeper into this temple's hallway. Stry released Alephmon and Ember from his grip but still forced them to follow his lead. He took careful steps, ensuring one did not hold a trigger before stepping forward. The rest of the group stepped on the same spot. Each felt a heavy amount of stress despite not triggering any traps.

A few long, agonizing minutes later, they reached the end of the hallway.

The room stretched on for a while, about the size of a small house. No markings, engraving, or anything lay on the walls. The floors held a series of red square plates with a few black squares. Red-orange light lit the room, though a few yellow leaked in. Within the center of the room lay a pit filled with Chrome Digizoid.

"Woooooah!" Alephmon's eyes glittered like stars.
"We found it!"

"Wait!" Stry held his arm out against the others. "This is easy. Too easy, especially with what happened before. I bet there's a trap." He glanced at the floor. "Ah, now I see."

"Maf?" Alephmon blinked.

"You see those black squares and how they surrounded the pit? I bet those are pressure plates." Stry pointed at one. "So, we need to avoid stepping on those squares to avoid triggering a trap. Got it?"

The others nodded.

"Good."

They stepped in, inching closer to their prize. Each held their breath in anticipation. Though few black plates lay at the front, they took careful steps. Stry led the others to the right, where fewer black plates lay.

Alephmon swallowed but nodded in determination. Their mission for the Chrome Digizoid neared its completion. A few more steps and—

A red plate turned into a black one.

Alephmon widened his eyes but could not stop stepping on it.

It gave away and clicked.

"Maf?"

The others turned to him in shock and disappointment.

"Aleph. Why?" Stry asked. He crossed his arms.

"It-it changed—"

The walls slammed against all four of them at the same time. They yelped before the trap silenced them. The right wall extended broader than the left one on both the front and behind; otherwise, it left no sign of it being a room before.

A couple of seconds later, the walls retracted. All four hovered in the air, each flat as paper. Each held a wide-eyed expression, like dinnerplates. Alephmon saw on opposite sides of his body thanks to his body's position when flattened. Ember widened three times around the waist and belly with the legs held up. Stry kept crossing his arms while also watching at opposite sides of his flat body. Kuromon held a jumping expression, with even the shadowy bubbles flat near his ear turfs and tail.

"Thanks a lot, Alephmon," Ember said.

"I-I swear," Alephmon said. He hopped a bit. "It-it changed from red to black on me!"

"Darn it, Aleph! I TOLD you to follow my lead!" Stry lowered his eyelids halfway. "And now we're all flattened for the rest of our lives."

"Maf!" Aleph gulped and fluttered onto the ground. "I-I'm sorry!!"

"'Sorry' doesn't help much when we're all cursed, thanks to you!" Ember yelled.

"It was red before! I saw you step on it, Stry! I swear, maf!"

"It looks black to me!"

"I-I swear it changed colors!"

"How can—"

"Can everybody SHUT UP!!" Kuromon yelled at the others.

The other three turned their flat eyes at him in shock.

"K-Kuromon?" Ember asked.

"H-huh?" Alephmon said.

Kuromon shifted around briefly, thinking about what Alephmon said about the tiles changing color. It seemed

silly to think something like this could happen in a temple like this. At the same time, nothing made sense since they stepped in here. The lights from nowhere, the walls and floor traps always having one side longer than the others, the roller dissolving and even the boulder popping like a balloon made little sense. Plus, this 'tail payment' that somehow blocked pumping air into their flat bodies to restore them felt arbitrary. Not to mention how that earthquake that blocked their exit just as they thought about leaving felt too much of a coincidence.

Stuff like that does not work in reality!

Wait.

"Give me a moment," Kuromon said.

Before everyone's eyes, Kuromon sank into the ground within his own shadow. He held a severe and curious expression on his face. Within seconds, Kuromon disappeared with only his shadow remaining, a black anthro wolf shape with three red four-point diamonds on the chest.

The others watched Kuromon's shadow, with his red glowing eyes and mouth shining at them. Stry raised an eyebrow, wondering what he had planned. Meanwhile, Alephmon's lone eye shone with sparkles.

Kuromon rose from his shadow, no longer flat.

"I should've realized it sooner," Kuromon said. His tone held hints of anger, though aimed toward himself. "If only I did."

Alephmon's eyes shone more. "Maf! You're back to normal!"

Ember grinned, though with hints of confusion. "Great going, boss!"

Stry widened his eyes. "What?! How?!"

"It's a little trick I know if I want to return to normal sooner." Kuromon reached back for the bicycle pump. "Now, let's restore you all to normal."

"Maf? But what about the curse?" Alephmon asked.

Kuromon stuffed the hose into Alephmon's mouth before pumping in the air. At once, his cheeks filled out with his eyes bulging. Kuromon pumped in more air into Alephmon while grunting. Alephmon's body creaked like stretching rubber. A few pumps later, Alephmon popped back to normal.

"Maf?!" Alephmon checked himself over while spitting out the hose. "I'm free from this curse?!"

"There wasn't a curse," Kuromon said. He stuffed the hose into Ember's mouth and pumped.

"Huh? But, the tail markings, my failed attempt at restoring Alephmon to normal, and the plaque at the front." Stry blinked. "They—"

"That's the funny thing," Kuromon said. He finished pumping air into Ember. "That was done to make it convincing."

"Convincing?!"

Kuromon inserted the hose into Stry's mouth and pumped in the air.

Alephmon inched toward the Chrome Digizoid.

"Yeah. And Alephmon, don't go into the Digizoid there," Kuromon said.

Alephmon blinked and froze mid-step. "Maf? Why?"

Kuromon laughed with a hint of bitterness in his tone. "It was obvious; I should've seen through it initially. However, I was too thick to see through it until now."

Stry popped back into shape once enough air inflated into his body. He coughed and spat out the hose. He turned to Kuromon with arms still crossed and asked, "What are you talking about?"

"Think about it. The lighting, the traps, especially the boulder and roller, and this 'curse,'" Kuromon said. He shook his head and chuckled again. "They all laughed at us."

"Maf?" Alephmon tilted his head. "You're not making any sense."

"Think about it! Has *anything* made sense since we stepped in here?!" Kuromon waited for a response. When none came, he continued, "Yeah. It's been bugging me. While *maybe* some Digimon built a temple here in an old mind, *maybe* they left behind a curse for intruders, *maybe* they filled this place with traps, and *maybe* an earthquake blocked us just as we thought about leaving, but it looks ridiculous altogether. And it only gets even more ridiculous when traps triggered on their own, boulders rolled without losing speed on a flat surface, or a floor tile changed on us."

Stry rolled his eyes. "Again, we must've triggered very sensitive traps. Besides, floor plating changing? That's silly!"

Kuromon glanced at the floor. "Then why are we all surrounded by black plates now?"

The other three Digimon blinked and glanced down as well. They gasped in complete shock. Black plates surrounded all four of them, and the others turned red. No other black plate lay in the room. Stry sweated, standing still. Ember blinked in confusion. Alephmon, meanwhile, sighed in relief.

"Maf. I knew it changed on me," Alephmon said. He wiped away some sweat.

"Uh, buddy?" Stry said to Alephmon. "About before? I'm sorry I doubted you." Alephmon gave Stry a thumbs-up and a wink. Stry turned to Kuromon. "But, how?"

"How? It's simple." Kuromon brushed aside his hair-fur. "Everything here felt like some badly written adventure plot because this isn't real! *This temple, its curse, all of the traps, even the Chrome Digizoid isn't real!*"

The entire room melted into dust when Kuromon finished his last syllable. The dust itself faded into nothing within seconds. The Chrome Digizoid morphed into a rocky floor. All around, the temple faded into nothing, leaving the four Digimon in a large cavern.

It remained lit as before, with torches lined up on the cavern's walls. A large boulder lay near the right border, along with a large roller and a series of smaller ones in a

grid. Up on the ceiling lay a series of tiny bells. Alephmon, Stry, Kuromon, and Ember spun toward the exit, where nothing blocked the way anymore. Though it remained warm thanks to the fire, each felt a chill crawling down their spine.

"M-maf?" Alephmon took a couple of steps to the left. The cavern's floor felt uneven compared to the smooth temple's flooring. "E-everything felt so real."

Stry rushed over to the boulder and touched it. A pair of craters the size of his fists lay on its side. "H-huh? What's going on?"

Ember glanced around before turning to Kuromon. "So, it was all an illusion, then? But what flattened us throughout the place?"

"Those rollers and that boulder were real until they were no longer needed," Kuromon answered. "How whoever did this do the other flattening, I don't know. I know that some Digimon, like Myotismon, can do illusion. But, given the size of the boulder and roller, this—"

The ground shook all around them. All four of them froze with horror. The shaking happened again, as though someone made a huge step. They glanced around for the

source until they turned to the right wall. Stry rushed back to the others and cracked his knuckles.

"Is-is it in the wall, maf?" Alephmon asked.

The cavern shook again.

"Remember, this Digimon can use illusions so that wall is likely one as well," Kuromon said. "But that Digimon must be—"

A giant vulpine Digimon stuck his head out from the wall. His bright red fur ruffled on his shoulders with every step he took. Long hair-fur extended between his black triangular ears and lay above his right eye. This Digimon stepped on the boulder and crushed it like a soda can under his paw. While part of his body remained hidden within the illusion wall, his height of forty feet remained clear to the others.

"W-what is that Digimon?" Ember asked while taking a step back.

"Huge is what it is," Stry said while frowning.

Kuromon's Digi Syphon beeped in his pocket. He flinched and pulled it out. He aimed it at the giant Digimon and scanned it. At once, a holographic three-dimensional image of this Digimon appeared on the Digi Syphon along with some data.

Maboroshimon: Mythical Animal Digimon

Attribute: Data

Level: Champion

Family: Illusion Guardians

"Maboroshimon?" Kuromon said.

"Huh?" Stry twisted to Kuromon. "That's this Digimon's name?"

"Yeah, though I've never seen any Digimon like this before," Kuromon said.

Maboroshimon took another step out from the wall with his jet-black paws. His front left paw held longer and thicker claws compared to the rest of the paws. They also looked smaller than the front left paw, which was at least fifty percent bigger. White wrappings snug tight on the front left leg just above the paw. Two black triangles lay on his face just underneath his sea blue eyes.

This giant Digimon strolled to the side when he finished walking out from the wall. While his torso held white fur, a sage green A lay on his back. His shoulders also bore a pair of sage green triangles. A sizeable curved sword, a Tachi, slung on his back and shoulder, ready to pull out by

his teeth. He swayed his three tails, each as long and thick as his body and tipped in jet-black fur.

Maboroshimon lay on the ground and smiled at Alephmon, Stry, Kuromon, and Ember.

"So, you're the one behind all of this!?" Stry demanded. Maboroshimon nodded and grinned. Stry's face reddened and asked, "Why?! What's the point in all of this?!"

Maboroshimon glanced around.

"That's not an answer!"

Maboroshimon rolled his eyes.

"Just say something, will you!?"

Maboroshimon shifted his eyes back and forth. He lifted his front left paw and wiggled its claw tips at his throat. A few seconds later, he lowered his paw and watched.

"Stop being coy with us and—"

"Uh, Stry," Kuromon said, cutting in. "I don't think he *can* talk, right?"

Maboroshimon nodded while pointing one of his tails at Kuromon.

Stry sighed and shook his head. "Great. Just great." He lifted it and glared at Maboroshimon. "Still, what's the big deal?! Why all the trickery, the flattening, *everything*!?"

Maboroshimon exhaled and wiggled his tails. At once, four life-sized duplicates of Stry, Kuromon, Ember, and Alephmon appeared between them, facing their real-life counterparts. Stry, Kuromon, and Ember bent their knees, about to defend themselves. Alephmon, meanwhile, watched with interest.

A soccer ball materialized out of nowhere in front of the duplicate Stry. He kicked it to the fake Alephmon, who kicked it to the Ember copy. Soon, all four of the illusion Digimon played with each other by kicking the ball. Though they utter no words or sound, their joyful expression showed their fun in this game.

The real Stry blinked in confusion. "Uh, what?" Stry scratched behind his left ear-like appendage. "What does that mean?"

"We didn't play any soccer," Kuromon said. He squirmed a bit. "I-I don't get this."

"Maf." Alephmon rubbed his chin. "Maybe he wasn't being literal." The others turned to Alephmon, who

continued, "Maybe what he meant is that it was something fun, a game, to do, maf."

Maboroshimon nodded while pointing his claws at Alephmon. At once, the illusion Digimon waved at their real-life counterpart and disappeared into nothing.

"Wait. Let me get this straight. You used illusion to make this 'temple,' flatten us along the way while making us think that we're trapped and under your curse, *all because you thought it's fun?!'*" Stry asked through gritted teeth.

Maboroshimon nodded while pressing his front right paw on his muzzle to suppress a grin.

"OK, now that's just rude!" Ember yelled. "How many Digimon did you do this to also!?"

Maboroshimon shrugged and leaned to the side. A second later, sixteen Bakemon floated all around the four, each facing them. Stry, Kuromon, and Ember bent their knees to prepare for a battle. Each Bakemon remained silent. Alephmon rubbed behind his right ear and blinked.

"Wait," Alephmon said. "I recognized them, maf." The others turned to them. Alephmon continued, "Weren't they the ones we found in front of the mine?"

At once, all sixteen Bakemon flattened and disappeared.

"Yeah. You're right." Stry turned to Maboroshimon. "So, they're your victims, too?"

Maboroshimon nodded and swayed his three tails.

"Ugh. I can't stand this!" Ember growled. "You have no right to trick us or others into thinking we're cursed!!"

"Ember's right." Stry cracked his knuckles. "It's time to teach you a lesson."

"You listen well." Kuromon summoned shadow spearheads in front of his right arm. "Nobody appreciates your 'jokes' here."

Maboroshimon blinked as though confused and worried. He stood up and flexed his front left paw. He glanced around and behind at the wall he came from. Maboroshimon fluffed up his fur and exhaled.

Ember, Stry, and Kuromon approached the giant Digimon with anger ready to boil over. Blue ice-like flames leaked from Ember's mouth. Kuromon's shadow spearheads materialized and aimed at Maboroshimon's throat. As for Stry, he pumped up his muscles for a battle.

Maboroshimon took a step back while folding back his ears.

Alephmon stood still, split in thought. Part of him felt he should get angry at Maboroshimon for everything that happened since entering this 'temple.' Despite the facts, he discovered little fury within him, unlike the others. Alephmon recalled every bit of flattening and could not help but note how playful it felt rather than malicious. He glanced from his friends to Maboroshimon and then at the exit, where the real Bakemon lay outside.

Alephmon blinked and realized something. "Maf! Wait!"

The others paused and turned to him.

"Wait? This Digimon caused so many problems!" Stry stomped his foot-paw.

"He tried to trick us into believing we'll be flattened forever!" Ember yelled.

"Why should we wait on punishing him?" Kuromon demanded. He kept his spearheads aimed forward at his target.

Maboroshimon tilted his head at Alephmon before smiling.

"Because, maf, think about it," Alephmon explained. "Those Bakemon went through everything we did just now, right? Except, unlike them, *we* didn't get kicked out. Instead, he *wants* us to stay, maf. Why?"

The other's anger turned into confusion. They turned to Maboroshimon with a demanding expression. Maboroshimon lay down and flipped both of his front paws over. At once, two illusions played out.

On the left paw, the group of Bakemon floated through the front fake entrance despite the 'curse' warning. When each fell into a trap, the others ignored their fallen companion. They charged onward despite losing numbers and tail markings fast. Before long, without entering the fake Chrome Digizoid chamber, they lost all of their tail markings. A mini Maboroshimon, annoyed at them, blew all the flattened Bakemon with his breath.

On the right side, Alephmon's group cautiously entered the mock entrance. They discovered the warning and, after testing this 'curse,' they took greater care than before. Though they fell into traps, they at least attempted to puzzle them out and even saved one another. A mini Maboroshimon, amused by them, 'trigger' traps in the final hallway. Though they fell for the last trap, thanks to the

prankster Digimon, they at least reached the fake Digizoid chamber.

Maboroshimon smiled at the right paw and turned to the real Alephmon's group.

"Well, I'm glad you remembered it all, even when I tripped on a trap," Stry said. His eyelids lowered halfway. "What was the point in showing that to us?"

"I-I think he's trying to say that he has a lot more fun with us than those Bakemon, maf," Alephmon answered. "That they were disorganized, lacked teamwork, and cared more about the goal than each other. Meanwhile, we do our best to work together to the point he has to, er, cheat by the end."

Maboroshimon nodded and swayed his tails. The tails tip glowed red in a flame-like way.

Behind Maboroshimon, the rocky wall faded into dust. It went deeper by about a hundred feet, though hills worth of Chrome Digizoid blocked the other end. Red, Black, Obsidian, Brown, Cypladium, and even a few Gold and Blue Digizoids lay within. Stry, Ember, and Kuromon gasped at the sight, with the amount enough to fill their wagon ten times. Alephmon grinned wide.

Maboroshimon played another illusion for the group. It showed the four carrying as much of the Digizoid as possible. Once completed, he stood up and stood aside.

For a moment, they remained still.

Seconds later, Alephmon, Stry, Ember, and Kuromon cheered.

"This is a lot more than I imagined!" Kuromon flustered and wiggled his knees.

"Even getting a wagon full of it will last us years!" Ember jumped for joy.

"Are-are you sure you want us to take as much as possible?" Stry asked Maboroshimon.

Maboroshimon nodded with a wide grin.

Stry laughed and rubbed the back of his head. "Well, then. I guess we can forgive you for your jokes."

"Maf! Our dreams are finally getting realized!" Alephmon clapped his hand-paws. "We'll finally—"

"Oh, ho, ho. Look at what we have here."

The five Digimon flinched and turned to the source of the voice.

The sixteen Bakemon floated by the exit side, each no longer flat as paper. They all glared at Maboroshimon with enough force to melt rock into lava. At the group's center floated a Ghost Digimon with a red hooded cape. Gray cloth covered this Ghost Digimon that, combined with the hood, hid its form. A silver hazard symbol on the hood lay with a skull at the center. It carried a scythe-like kusarigama, with the chain going behind its back.

Kuromon's Digi Syphon beeped on his hand-paw and changed its display to this new Digimon.

Phantomon: Ghost Digimon

Attribute: Virus

Level: Ultimate

Family: Nightmare Soldier

"Phantomon," Kuromon said. A hint of fear leaked into his voice. "This is bad."

Maboroshimon lowered his chest and growled at these intruders. His ears flattened back. His muzzle furled into a snarl. The room increased in temperature with the torches around flaring, which the other four Digimon noticed.

"Oh, ho, ho. So, you're the one who tricked my poor, foolish underlings into thinking they're cursed," Phantomon

said. The necklace on its neck bounced up and down while swaying its arms to the Bakemon. "How rude of you."

"What are you here for?!" Stry demanded. He cracked his knuckles. "The Chrome Digizoid?"

"Of course? What else? Oh, ho, ho." Phantomon swung its kusarigama, pointing it at them. "But I'm also interested in another. After all, I can't have another Digimon humiliate my group. After all, who would take us seriously that my underlings fell for a prank by some oversized dog?"

Maboroshimon glared at Phantomon, gritting his teeth. At once, an illusion played out with life-size Bakemon carrying knives. They slashed each other, stabbing backs, fronts, heads, and under their sheets until none stood. Once the last one fell, the illusion melted away.

Phantomon laughed. "Oh, ho, ho. What a splendid display of my underlings. I'm glad that you enjoyed it."

"He wasn't praising your Bakemon, you idiot!" Ember yelled. "He was calling them a group of backstabbers!"

"Why would that be a bad thing?" Phantomon spun the spike ball at the other end of the chain kusarigama. "Those who survived proved themselves to be either the strongest or the sneakiest. Both of those attributes are

needed to survive in the Digital World. That is the way of our guild."

Alephmon snarled, gripping his fist tight and shaking it. "Betraying your comrades, friends, is not right. No group can survive for so long if you can't trust anyone, especially your partners." He reached back and pulled out his sword, Checksum. "By working together, we can go much farther than alone or stepping over others selfishly."

Stry, Kuromon, and Ember nodded at Alephmon in approval. Maboroshimon glanced at him with a curious and surprised expression. Phantomon, however, laughed and shook its head.

"What childish wish-fulfillment." Phantomon pointed at Alephmon. "My underlings, delete that pest from the Digital World!"

The Bakemon floated toward Alephmon in a swarm. Alephmon stood resolute and gripped his sword tight with both hand-paws. Stry, Kuromon, and Ember stood beside him, preparing their attacks.

The Bakemon inhaled—

A giant fireball zoomed above the four Digimon's heads toward the Bakemon. It exploded, knocking six Bakemon down and deleting one. Alephmon blinked and

twisted back to Maboroshimon. Some remaining flames leaked out from his muzzle. Alephmon grinned at him.

Maboroshimon hopped over the others while pulling out his tachi with his teeth. Its Hamon line held a flame-like pattern on its blade. He swung it, with the edge firing out a flaming beam attack. It knocked down three more Bakemon and deleted another.

"Oh, ho, ho. A strong Champion for a Data," Phantomon said. The five unharmed Bakemon regrouped back to Phantomon with a stunned expression. Phantomon pointed at Maboroshimon, and after some hesitation, the Bakemon charged. Phantomon continued, "It's almost a shame that we must get rid of you."

The five Bakemon floated fast toward Maboroshimon and slashed him. "Touch of Evil!"

Maboroshimon grunted but recovered. He swung his front left paw at a Bakemon, knocking it against the cavern wall with such force to shatter it. When another Bakemon approached, his sea blue eyes gazed at the black and yellow. Both of their eyes glowed sea blue. That Bakemon floated back to Phantomon and prepared an attack.

Phantomon slashed it in half with the kusarigama, deleting it. "Idiot! Falling for such an obvious trick. Oh, ho,

ho." The remaining three retreated, baffled, but Phantomon shook its head. "Useless! All of you, useless! That's why I'm leading this group!"

Maboroshimon growled at Phantomon in anger.

"When you need to fix a problem, do it yourself instead of unreliable underlings. That's what I must do. Oh, ho, ho." Phantomon zoomed toward his opponent while swinging his kusarigama. Maboroshimon swung his tachi at Phantomon. Their blades clashed with such force that the entire cavern shook. Maboroshimon grunted while Phantomon chuckled. "Oh, ho, ho. You may be tough for a Data, but you haven't seen real power of a Virus!"

Phantomon knocked Maboroshimon's sword away with enough force to flung it out from his mouth. Maboroshimon's eyes widened in shock, with his sword ranging on the ground and his body flung upward. Phantomon swung the spike ball weight of the kusarigama, which glowed black and purple, at Maboroshimon's exposed chest while laughing.

"Diabolic Star!" Phantomon said.

An explosion of black and purple blasted Maboroshimon back to a wall beside the Chrome Digizoid. Huge, spiderweb-like cracks spread out from the impact.

Maboroshimon coughed and slid onto the ground, flopping on his side. On his chest lay a gaping hole where data leaked out from.

"Oh, ho, ho," Phantomon said in triumph. "This is the result of clawing my way to the tip and staying there! Friendship? Who needs something worthless like that?"

Alephmon stared at Phantomon with wide, empty eyes. The shock of someone who meant well defeated like that shook him to his core. Rage and grief filled his entire body, causing him to vibrate in place.

"You," Alephmon said through gritted teeth. "*You—*"

"Aleph!" Stry grabbed Alephmon's arm. He wiggled it to break Stry's grip, but it remained firm. He said, "Maboroshimon is badly wounded but can still be saved!" Alephmon kept glaring at Phantomon. "Aleph! Only you can save him!"

Alephmon swallowed his anger and sighed. He sheathed his sword. "Right."

"Don't worry." Stry winked at Alephmon. "We'll take care of this jerk."

Alephmon nodded and rushed over to Maboroshimon. He grunted in horror at the expanding hole. He swung both arms forward, planting his hand-paws against the giant

vulpine Digimon's side. Green energy and molts flowed out and fused into Maboroshimon's body. The hole still grew, but slower.

Stry, along with Kuromon and Ember, stood in front of Phantomon. They planted themselves between the Chrome Digizoid and the fallen Maboroshimon. Phantomon swung its kusarigama in circles.

"Oh, ho, ho," Phantomon said. "You still think you can handle me?" The fallen Bakemon floated up, recovered enough to join the three unharmed ones. They all glared at Stry, Kuromon, and Ember. Phantomon pointed its kusarigama at them. "Take them out first. Then, we'll deal with the other two."

The Bakemon roared and zoomed forward.

Stry bent his knees and jumped into the air. The force from the leap cracked the stony floor along the way. He slammed his head against one of the unharmed Bakemon. "Vee Headbutt!"

The force of such an attack knocked the Bakemon toward a wall, shattering it. The cavern rumbled all around from such a force. That Bakemon grunted and collapsed, dissolving into data. Stry backflipped back with the others, none the worse for wear.

The remaining Bakemon stared at Stry in complete bafflement, leaving them open.

Kuromon, with his right arm glowing from red digital lines, summoned shadowy spearheads and threw them. "Shadow Sting!"

Ember breathed in and fired a stream of blue ice-like flames. "Blue Blaster!"

Both of their attacks either pierced or burned seven of the Bakemon. They screamed and yelled, with the three impacted by both at once dissolved into data. The remaining four fell onto the floor. Kuromon and Ember fired out more attacks, but the remaining Bakemon avoided them.

The Bakemon, recovered from their shock, charged toward them. Shadowy claws emitted in front of them. "Dark Claw!"

Stry, Kuromon, and Ember leaped away from the attacks. As a result, the Bakemon's attacks landed on the ground instead. Chunks of rocks floated upward before dissolving. The Bakemon glared at them before turning to Alephmon. Seeing him vulnerable, they swam toward him.

Stry leaped toward them and swung both of his arms. "Boom Boom Punch!"

Both fists punched against one of the Bakemon, sending it flying toward Phantomon.

Phantomon floated away, avoiding that Bakemon and letting it continue back.

The Bakemon dissolved into data before it impacted the wall.

Kuromon and Ember fired Shadow Sting and Blue Blaster at the Bakemon at their sides. Their attacks knocked down two of them. The remaining two Bakemon stopped flying toward Alephmon, turned to the other, and flew toward the exit. Phantomon blocked their way and swung its kusarigama at them.

"Shadow Scythe!" Phantomon said.

The attack slashed both fleeing Bakemon into bits, deleting them.

"Useless! They're all useless!" Phantomon grunted. It turned toward Stry, Kuromon, and Ember. "You're tough, for Rookie, but I'll take you all down! I'll take the Chrome Digizoid, empowering myself to such levels that my guild's rivals wouldn't stand a chance!"

"We like to see you try," Stry said. He cracked his knuckles. "Our freelancing group will be the best in the Digital World."

"Even if you're an Ultimate, you're not unstoppable!" Ember growled. "We'll take you down!"

Alephmon grunted, still using his energy to heal Maboroshimon. He sweated from the effort, wondering how much more it would take. The gaping wound stopped expanding and shrank, but it still dominated his chest. Alephmon breathed in and out, shoving aside his worries. He forced more of his healing energy into his ally.

Stry, meanwhile, leaped into the air, cracking the ground along the way. "Vee Headbutt!"

Phantomon swung its kusarigama at Stry, blocking the attack. The force sent shockwaves through the cavern, knocking aside the fallen Bakemon. Phantomon chuckled and tossed Stry back to the ground.

"Oh, ho, ho. You're strong for a Rookie," Phantomon said. It hummed for a few seconds. "Unusually strong for a Rookie like yourself."

Stry gritted his teeth and leaped into the air. He swung both fists at Phantomon. "Boom Boom Punch!"

Phantomon parried the attack, knocking Stry to the ground.

Kuromon and Ember flanked Phantomon's sides and fired Shadow Sting and Blue Blaster at Phantomon. The

attacks impacted Phantomon without any attempts at blocking. It shrugged off the attacks like nothing. It swung the spiky ball weight several times, with the ball glowing with black and purple energy. It threw it at the three Digimon while laughing.

"Oh, ho, ho! Diabolic Star!"

The ground exploded, sending Stry, Kuromon, and Ember flying. Digital holes appeared on their bodies, with data leaking out. Phantomon laughed louder, confident of his victory.

Time appeared to slow for Alephmon, who stared in horror. Dissolving data flew out from his friends' bodies like blood. Phantomon's glowing blue eyes shone in glee underneath its red hood, almost burning into Alephmon's head. Alephmon opened his mouth and screamed out.

"STRY! KUROMON! EMBER!"

The Digi Syphon on Kuromon's belt glowed.

Alephmon's body glowed as bright as the sun.

DIGIVOLUTION

Alephmon gritted his teeth, his very skin ripped off from his body. His sword, sheath, shorts, bandana, and fingerless gloves also dissolved. He stood with pale blue to

white glowing lines over his body like a wiring frame for a moment. A series of digital encases formed around in the shape of a Digiegg.

A second later, he felt a surge in power. New skin and fur surrounded him, much larger than his wireframe body. His body expanded to fit the new form, though not without some pain. His feet-paws held longer black claws instead of white. His tan shorts reformed larger and with silver chains replacing the side strappings. His new black fingerless gloves stretched as far back as his elbows and with a pair of red belts on each one.

Alephmon's white chest fur fluffed out, going down his chest, over his shoulders, and on his back like a mane. His new muzzle stretched out at least quadruple its original length. His fangs poked out from his lips. Yellow upside-down triangles lay below each of his yellow eyes. He grabbed his sword Checksum, with it grown as well and held a red ruby on its pommel.

One swing and the Digiegg-shaped encasing exploded around him.

A heavy amount of dirt and dust flung out, blocking Phantomon's view. "Oh, ho, ho. What happened there?"

Stry, Kuromon, and Ember groaned as they stood up. Green molts floated around with some fusing into their bodies. Stry flipped over his right arm and gasped at the small holes on it sealing up. He felt his strength, sapped by a near-fatal attack, renewed.

"Wh-what? I'm recovering?" Stry glanced around at the green molts.

The dust faded enough for him to find Kuromon and Ember. They also glanced over their bodies in amazement.

"Did-did Alephmon did this?" Kuromon asked.

"It-it can't be. Even he cannot heal all of us at once," Ember replied.

The three turned to where Alephmon and Maboroshimon stood and lay, respectively. A heavy amount of dust covered their view, but it gradually faded. They saw pale blue at the center, along with a reflective shine. The shiny part swung, revealing a large sword, and gusted away some dust.

Stry, Kuromon, and Ember dropped their jaws while craning their heads upward.

Alephmon, or rather his Digivolution, towered over them at ten feet tall.

He gasped and glanced over his body, from his new size to his muscular stature to how his white fur spread down to his elbows. When he spoke, his voice held a deeper pitch. "M-maf? I did this?"

Kuromon's Digi Syphon beeped on his belt. He pulled it out and pointed it at his friend. It displayed a holographic projection of his body while playing out information.

Cirrusmon: Beastkin Digimon

Attribute: Vaccine

Level: Champion

Family: Virus Busters

"Cirrusmon," Kuromon said in awe.

"Maf?" Cirrusmon blinked. The name felt new to him, but it also felt right. He glanced back to Maboroshimon with some level of concern. The fallen vulpine Digimon still lay there, but the gaping hole on his chest disappeared. Cirrusmon smiled. "Good." He turned to the others. "Leave the rest to me."

"Oh, ho, ho. Are you now realizing how utterly screwed you are?" Phantomon swung its kusarigama in circles. "You can't hide there forever, and I won't let you run. In this world, only the—"

Cirrusmon charged out from cover while swinging his sword. Phantomon flinched and blocked it with its kusarigama. Despite the sudden changeup, it still laughed and pushed forward.

"Oh, ho, ho! A Champion, now?" Phantomon laughed again. "That won't—" Cirrusmon stabbed with his sword. Phantomon avoided the attack, with it only catching the red cloak's edge. "—very rude, there!"

Cirrusmon glared and swung his sword again in response. Phantomon avoided and swung the spiky weight a few times while it glowed black and purple. It tossed the weight toward him while laughing.

"Diabolic Star!"

Cirrusmon raised his left arm forward and, thinking about his friends, summoned his shield. The spiky weight crashed against the shield and exploded with a fury of black and purple energy. Smoke surrounded him, covering his body.

Phantomon pulled his weight back. "I thought you realized by now that an Ultimate-level Virus is beyond anything—"

Cirrusmon charged out from the smoke, unharmed. His shield remained unblemished by that powerful attack. He

swung his shield arm forming, shield-bashing Phantomon's face.

Phantomon fell back before catching itself. "Wh-what?"

"My shield is empowered by my wish to protect my friend," Cirrusmon said through gritted teeth. "As long as that held, nothing in this Digital World can break it!"

"Still holding such childish beliefs!?" Phantomon zoomed toward Cirrusmon while swinging its kusarigama in circles. "One doesn't and shouldn't rely on such fruitless 'friendships!' The only reason to *have* underlings is to prepare ourselves when they try to backstab us! They're there to harden our skills and minds!"

"Then you'll have no one who will miss you when you're gone!!" Cirrusmon charged forward, gripping his sword with both hand-paws.

"Shadow Scythe!" Phantomon yelled out. Its kusarigama glowed black and purple.

"Divine Smite!" Cirrusmon yelled back. His Checksum glowed white and yellow.

Their weapons impacted each other.

The kusarigama fell in two, along with Phantomon.

Phantomon screamed his last words in total disbelief. "How?! How can a mere Champion like you defeat an Ultimate?!"

Cirrusmon remained silent, letting that question go unanswered for his opponent. If Phantomon thought about it, it would realize the answer like Cirrusmon did. Though Cirrusmon fought despite being at a lower level, his holy powers and being a Vaccine evened the odds against an Ultimate-level Virus.

Phantomon fell while dissolving into pure data, deleted.

The remaining Bakemon gasped at their fallen leader and turned to Cirrusmon. He glared at them with such rage that it would melt rocks. Without a word, they floated as fast as possible out from the cavern. Though a couple floated by near him, he let them go. After all, they realized defeat sooner than their leader and would not avenge such an abusive being.

Cirrusmon's shield faded, its use no longer required. He twirled sword Checksum before sheathing it into his back sheath.

"That was incredible!"

Cirrusmon blushed and glanced at his three friends, Stry, Kuromon, and Ember. He bent to his knee while grinning at them. They ran toward him, reaching his feet-paw. He picked them up and hugged them close.

"Maf. That was, wasn't it?" Cirrusmon asked.

"Yes, it was!" Stry broke free from Cirrusmon's grip and hopped onto his shoulder. "You fought like a true Digiknight!"

Cirrusmon blushed. "M-maf. Thanks."

He set Kuromon on his other shoulder and Ember on his head. They all sat down and relaxed, their battle finally over. He stood up and walked toward Maboroshimon, who still lay there with his eyes closed.

"Are you alright, maf?" Cirrusmon asked. He rubbed Maboroshimon's shoulder and shook a couple of times. "Was-was I too late?"

Maboroshimon's body glowed in pure white. Cirrusmon blinked and took a couple of steps back. Maboroshimon shrank in size along with more changes to his body shape. His tails fused into one tail. His front left paw, claws, and some of the leg slimmed, so it became similar to his other legs. The tachi sword also glowed, but it

disappeared into nothing rather than shrinking. A few seconds later, he stopped shining and woke up.

Kuromon's Digi Syphon beeped in his hand-paw. It pointed at Maboroshimon, or rather his Rookie form, and waited. It projected a hologram with a 3D image and information about him.

Kajimon: Animal Digimon

Attribute: Data

Level: Rookie

Family: Illusion Guardians

"He goes by Kajimon in this form," Kuromon explained.

Kajimon blinked and glanced over his body. Though he still stood tall compared to the others' Rookie forms, he stood at a mere six feet. The triangular markings below his eyes and on his shoulders disappeared. He still held bright red fur with a white torso, a sage green A on his back, and black legs and tail tips. He craned his head up at Cirrusmon and widened his sea blue eyes.

"Maf." Cirrusmon extended his hand-paw to him. "Are you alright?"

Kajimon nodded and smiled.

"You know, now that you're not a towering giant, you look perfectly rideable now," Ember said.

Kajimon rolled his eyes and turned to the Chrome Digizoid.

"Right. That's what we came here for," Stry said. He rubbed the back of his head. "Well, thank you. For risking your life trying to protect us."

Kajimon glanced away for a moment before hopping onto Cirrusmon's hand-paw. Rather than stand on it, he leaped from it to Cirrusmon's knee to his shoulder and finally his muzzle. Cirrusmon blinked, noting that despite his size, Kajimon felt light on his face. Their eyes locked into each other.

"Maf?" Cirrusmon asked. "Anything wrong?"

Kajimon swayed his tail. At once, miniature versions of Alephmon, Kuromon, Stry, and Ember appeared out of thin air. They all walked forward to some destination despite not moving an inch from that spot. The others blinked, wondering what Kajimon meant to say.

Before they asked, a mini Kajimon appeared from the side out of nowhere, catching up with them. They turned to this newcomer and chatted with each other despite no

sound coming from their mouths. They turned to each other and nodded before resuming their walk.

Among them, the mini-Kajimon joined their walk.

Cirrusmon blinked, realizing what it meant. "Maf? You-you want to come with us?"

Kajimon nodded while wagging his tail. The illusion display faded away.

"Huh?" Stry tilted his head. "Why do you want to join?"

Kajimon lowered his eyelids and gestured with his tail around the cavern. Cracks lay throughout it, with much of the walls falling. The floor lay shattered with boulders and significant gaps all around. Only the Chrome Digizoid side remained untouched.

"Ah." Stry blushed and rubbed the back of his head faster. "Vevehehe. Sorry."

Kajimon nodded and smiled.

Kuromon, meanwhile, rubbed his chin. Part of him doubted Kajimon wanted to come because this battle destroyed his home. After all, he doubted this former mine held a cavity this huge naturally and that Kajimon must have carved it out like this. Plus, even if he did not, he

could always use the massive supply of Chrome Digizoid as payment. He guessed that Kajimon used the destruction as an excuse rather than a reason.

"Maf." Cirrusmon smiled. "I have no objections. Do any of you?"

"If he can pull his weight, he can," Ember answered. "Just try not to prank us with your illusions as much."

"I don't think he has the strength to do this as a Rookie," Stry said. "Still, no funny business. We're in this together."

"I, well, I got no objections at all," Kuromon said.

Cirrusmon smiled and, plucking Kajimon off his muzzle, gave him a deep hug. "Welcome to the team."

Kajimon smiled and hugged back. He stared at Cirrusmon with gratefulness.

Kuromon blinked and grinned, realizing why Kajimon really wanted to join.

#

The sun reached sunset when the five Digimon approached the castle home. Each dragged the overfilled wagon behind them while ensuring none of the Chrome

Digizoid fell. Despite the heavy weight, they had an easier time pulling it toward home than away.

"Maf. Almost there," Cirrusmon said. He dragged the wagon from behind by wrapping the rope around his belt. "And then, we can rest."

Kajimon nodded while pulling. He wore a harness around his back and shoulders to pull the wagon.

"Still, at least nobody attempted to attack us for our goods," Ember said while pushing on a handle.

"Yeah," Kuromon said. He pushed on the other wagon.

"I have to ask: Do we really need to bring in *this* much Chrome Digizoid!?" Stry asked. He pushed from behind. "I mean, we're planning on only bringing as much as we can carry, not overfilling the wagon!"

"Kajimon explained it to us already," Kuromon answered. "Since he is moving in with us, he's afraid that some Digimon will steal the rest while away. He felt it would be safer to do it on as few trips as possible."

"Yes, but isn't *half* of it overkill already?" Stry wiped away some of the sweat. "After all, we already collapsed the entrance so nobody would get in."

"I highly doubt that would deter anyone hunting for the Chrome Digizoid, maf," Cirrusmon said. "Especially since that was a mine, and Digimon explored it and countless others for a long time before Kajimon took it for himself."

Stry grunted but did not respond.

Cirrusmon glanced ahead and saw two figures approaching.

On the left, a Lion Digimon running toward them dressed himself in black with a red and orange fiery pattern on the sleeveless shirt. He wore a headband underneath his sandy red hair-fur that stretched far down to his feet-paws. Much of his fur was sandy brown, which shone in the sunlight. His white wrappings draped tight around his forearms.

On the right, a Wolf Digimon running toward them wore a black cape with an electric blue inner pinned by an electric blue orb. His black shorts, snug tight with a gray belt, held electric blue on the sides. Black fur covered much of his body, with blue on his torso, inner ears, hand- and feet-paws, and underneath his long, thick tail. He wore white wrappings on his forearms and right foreleg.

Cirrusmon smiled and waved. "Maf. Hey there, Nekozukimon and Stormymon!"

Nekozukimon poofed into white smoke, replaced by a plush version of himself. At the exact moment, Cirrusmon felt a sudden weight on his shoulder. He turned to where Nekozukimon now stood, who grinned at him. He leaned against Cirrusmon's neck.

"Hey there, buddy," Nekozukimon said. "I see that you Digivolved."

"Maf. That's right. I'm known at Cirrusmon now." He smiled and gave Nekozukimon a thumbs-up.

"Hmm." Stormymon glanced at Kajimon, who stared back. "Who's this fellow?"

"That. That's Kajimon. He was the owner of these Chrome Digizoids," Ember answered. "He played a series of pranks on us before offering his supply."

"Hmm. Why is he here, then?" Stormymon approached and touched Kajimon's ear.

Kajimon flinched but did not move away.

"Maf. It's a long story," Cirrusmon replied. "Just know that he wants to help us."

"I see." Stormymon nodded. "Do you need help here?"

"It wouldn't hurt," Ember replied.

"Sounds good to me!" Nekuzukimon hopped off and landed where Stry stood.

Stormymon nodded and walked behind the wagon as well. He glanced at the massive pile of Chrome Digizoid with several questions popping into his head. He wondered most about how they managed to bring this here already. Five days passed since Alephmon, now Cirrusmon, left with a group to find Chrome Digizoid; given the amount, it should take two more days at least.

Once everyone readied up, they pushed or pulled the wagon toward the castle. Stormymon noted how unusually light it felt, like it only weighed a quarter of what it should. At first, he wondered if all of the Chrome Digizoid held air within them. He glanced out from the side and noted that Cirrusmon emitted a slight aura from his body. Perhaps he granted others extra strength by his presence alone, Stormymon thought.

Within five minutes, they parked the wagon beside Kuromon's blacksmith forge.

Kuromon glanced up and down the vast Chrome Digizoid pile. "Yeah, even with a second trip to get the rest, we won't be running out anytime soon."

Kajimon nodded and unhooked the harness with his teeth.

"Hey there, Kajimon!" Nekozukimon said. He approached the vulpine Digimon and patted his head. With his other hand-paw, he balanced his kunai against his finger. "I have neat ninja abilities. What can you do?"

Kajimon wagged his tail. A mini Nekozukimon and Stormymon appeared out of nowhere, standing in the air. The real ones stared at them in surprise and wonder. The two illusion ones passed a volleyball to one another. Kajimon wagged his tail again, causing the illusion to fade away.

"Huh," Stormymon said. "That's pretty neat."

"If you think that's neat, try seeing his illusion as Maboroshimon," Stry said. He patted Kajimon's side. "He caused part of a mine to look like a temple."

"Nekeke. That sounds awesome." Nekozukimon laughed. "I wish I join to witness that."

Cirrusmon, Stry, Kuromon, and Ember gave knowing glances to each other.

Kajimon leaned up and puffed out a fireball.

"Oh! You can use fire as well!" Nekozukimon grinned wide. He pressed his palms together and shifted his fingers to play out hand symbols. "I can too!"

Stry blinked, noticing the angle at which Nekozukimon aimed his attack. "Wait! Not at—"

Nekozukimon breathed out fire at Kajimon. Rather than the flames burning or bouncing off, he absorbed the fire. To everyone's shock, Kajimon grew in size. Nekozukimon stopped breathing out fire, but by then, he already reached ten feet tall. Kajimon glanced at Cirrusmon at eye level and shrugged.

"Uh, erhem." Nekozukimon rubbed the back of his head. "I didn't realize that you also— MROOOOW!!" He leaped into the air in pain. Stormymon stood beside him with one of his long claws glowing from electricity. Nekozukimon landed and glared at Stormymon. "What was that for?!"

"Hmm. How should I put it? Oh, yes. You aimed your fire attack at him instead of away!" Stormymon rolled his eyes. "Even if he did absorb the flame, it's still rude!"

"I didn't think it would harm him. After all, we're both fiery Digimon!"

"You still attacked him! Heck, would you appreciate it if he set you on fire!?"

"It would've been better than receiving an electrical shock!"

The two argue some more. Kajimon rolled his eyes and lay down. He set his paws in front of him, facing his paddings toward each other. Between his paws stood Nekozukimon and Stormymon arguing. Stry widened his eyes at the smirk on Kajimon's lips.

"Look out!" Stry yelled.

"Huh?"

"What?"

Nekozukimon and Stormymon turned away from each other. Kajimon slammed his front paws together at the exact moment, squishing the two. They both yelped in surprise. Ember winced at the sight. Stry meanwhile sighed and shook his head.

Kajimon pulled his paws away, leaving the flattened Nekozukimon and Stormymon stuck together. They stood in place, each flat as paper. Their eyes spun in spirals.

Cirrusmon blinked and then laughed. He reached over and rubbed Kajimon's ears. Kajimon smiled and leaned toward the rubbing, murring and wagging his tail.

Stry and Ember glanced at each other.

"Do you think this was a good idea after all?" Stry asked.

"Honest opinion. Maybe not." Ember shrugged. "Still, I doubt he'll be any more chaotic than the rest of our group, and I'm certain he'll be a good teammate."

About Author

Thank you so much for taking the time to read my story! I really appreciate it. If you enjoyed it, then you'll definitely want to check out my gallery accounts at:

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I'd love to hear from you and answer any questions you may have.

Thanks again for your support, and I can't wait to share more of my work with you soon!