

# **Corruption and Heart**

[Game Kids Book 3]

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*To my friends and family:*

*Thank you for your kindness, your patience, and your support.*

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Play: Origin\_02\_Inferno.mry

Error: File corruption. Rerouting.

This wasn't how it was supposed to go.

Vektor was no stranger to loss. His parents defended their Kingdom from the Mainframe with their lives. His whole Kingdom was taken from him by that Thief. Certain memories were kept from him behind restricted access.

He used to believe those were simply his own doing. Painful truths he wished not to face; he witnessed the moment his parents were destroyed, after all.

Now, however.

There was no running from it anymore.

The Rabbit Hole was much kinder to him than it was his parents. They were deleted when struck down, yet he was spared. He belonged to two realms now, not just simply the Rabbit Hole alone. He forged bonds outside his home and became more familiar here than he ever was inside his Kingdom. He had more reason to protect this realm than he had for his home.

Change. This influence Inferno brought was simple, yet it infected all of them down to their core arguments.

Fitting for the overwhelming power he held inside him.

If Vektor was certain of one thing, it was that these restricted memories held some sort of key. Some information that they desperately needed in the wake of what happened to Inferno.

Their realms were separate. They had to be, lest they warp one another to obscurity. Yet Inferno landed himself in the Seventh Circle through his own means. Inferno defied all of Vektor's knowledge and tore through both realms as if the barriers between were mere suggestions.

Inferno was bound by shadow. It dripped from his fingers when he wasn't paying enough attention and marred his face when he grew hostile against himself. He was absolutely coated in it when they retrieved him from the Rabbit Hole and Vektor could scarcely believe what the code there told him.

There was no other way to look at it. Inferno was one of them.

Inferno was the same as Vektor.

"That should make sense, though." Jonathan said in reply to Vektor's fearful ramblings. Jonathan was the only one he could trust with such vulnerable information. Jonathan wouldn't bite his head off like Wolf or completely brush him off for thinking so hard on this, as everyone was prone to doing when it concerned Inferno. "You said he's got something like your. You called it Create, yeah? You said he's got something more powerful in him than everyone else combined, so it makes sense that he's got a hold in this system, same as you."

It did make sense, but there was still a piece that didn't quite fit. Vektor frowned at the incomplete picture it left before him. "Everything makes sense when I look at it as though Inferno helped build the Rabbit Hole. But that can't be the case." He said, pacing restlessly along the linoleum floors.

Jonathan's favourite place was this lab where his desires for experimentation were free to go wild. A free study he was allowed due to his classes and his studiousness. He and Vektor weren't usually this bold, hanging out together before the cover of night, but Vektor needed the company and Jonathan didn't mind giving it. Jonathan never minded giving it, much as he put on airs otherwise.

"Inferno said he isn't one of the Creators, that his hands don't reach that far into the system's origins. If he's not the one behind everything, then why is he so inextricably tied to it as he is?"

"It is quite the head scratcher, huh?" Jonathan said with a hum.

He pressed a hand to his chin as he thought. His dark eyes (black, like Vektoria's Void, but fading to grey around their edges) darted to his notebook, where he kept all his notes on his chemical concoctions and the like. Each formula was elegant, if a bit unrefined. Just like the man himself. Vektor slowed in his pacing just to watch him a moment, noting the way his posture and even his forefront code read as Jonathan and Jonathan alone.

When Hyde had kissed Vektor, he never expected he would grow so fond of the man. He never expected to find himself so undeniably full of adoration for another that it broke past every threshold for these values tying him to all of his friends. His friends were his friends, but Jonathan — Jonathan was his everything. Jonathan could ask for his heart and Vektor would dutifully remove it from his own chest to hand right over.

That sort of bond should have been cause for alarm. Should have made Vektor recoil from it entirely.

And yet, against logic itself, Vektor could only think of basking in it as long as he was allowed.

"Would you prefer I call you my boyfriend or my datemate?" He asked.

Jonathan startled, face going a bit darker with his embarrassment. "Uh. That came out of nowhere."

Vektor strode over, closing that distance between them to look directly into his eyes. Darkness, the antithesis to Vektor's Gold. He was creation, was light, yet this darkness drew him in. It drew him in so powerfully. "It's a rather important question to ask." He said. "Our relationship is very important to me, as is your comfort."

Jonathan ducked away, closing off that connection momentarily. "I-I don't know. Ask me later." He said in a huff. "We were talking about Dante and the game, don't distract me."

Distraction.

It was deeply interwoven through Inferno's code.

Vektor reached out to cup Jonathan's face and though the man made a show of resistance, Hyde resurfaced to lean into it. Hyde always desired touch, overriding Jonathan's own fluster when they wished to give more tactile shows of this affection glowing in their chests. "He was programmed to deflect." Vektor mumbled. "Programmed to keep attention away, to keep us guessing on less important matters."

Jonathan eyed him in confusion. "You mean. You talking about his code or whatever?"

Vektor was so close to something. He scanned through that mess of Inferno's code, knew all it held, and yet it was still such a mystery. Why program him in such a manner? Why grant him that boundless Create, that overpowering Change, yet interpret both as a curse? Vektor pulled away and said, "Perhaps. It might be cruel, but we should consider everything Inferno has ever told us to be a lie."

Jonathan shoved Hyde back down as he watched him carefully. Still confused, but growing annoyed. "That means you were filled with lies, too." He said.

A cruel truth. One Vektor wished to reject immediately, but pushed past that instinct and really assessed it. Inferno agreed with him, after all, on the myth of his Kingdom's creation. Inferno agreed with him when he gave explanation after explanation and none of it was satisfactory enough to settle any matter. "Both of us were given the same lies." He mused darkly, looking down at his open palm.

The gold he produced was not dissimilar to Inferno's flames, but vastly inferior. There was something missing, something more than just the way their powers never added up, the way they butted heads and still couldn't deny fondness for one another.

Inferno advocated for his personhood. Vektor did his best to similarly encourage him to do the same. Allowing all his code to tie him down as he did, it made Inferno more volatile. More likely to pop.

To pop?

Such an odd phrase. As if Inferno's only purpose was to burn down his surroundings, to prove some point of the capabilities of the Rabbit Hole.

But that was ludicrous. Why would the Creators give a child like Inferno such an awful end?

Why would they write such cruelty for their—

Vektor winced and recoiled from the thought. Access denied. There it was again. It was becoming much more infuriating now than it was previously. Jonathan hopped up from his seat and rounded the desk in concern, but Vektor held up his hand to stop him.

"You forget we're somewhere completely public and in broad daylight." He reminded his (boy?) (date?) friend.

Jonathan shied away a few steps, chastised. "Right. Thanks." He mumbled in his embarrassment.

Vektor closed his eyes and allowed that pain to ebb away. He couldn't get too close to such truths. He couldn't even grasp how that thought was supposed to end. He had to distance himself from this line of thinking, had to restart from the first point in their gathered data and follow it to a more plausible explanation.

His head snapped up as a foreign scent came to him. From the way Jonathan's expression twisted from concern to disgust, he noticed it, too. "Do you. Smell smoke?" He asked.

Smoke.

Where there was smoke, there was fire.

Where there was fire, there could only be—

Vektor gasped. "Inferno."

Jonathan's expressions switched straight into a wide-eyed horror. Wordlessly, the two of them sprinted out of the room (Jonathan being much faster, of course) and into the halls. There was, indeed, a billowing fire fighting its way out of a classroom just a few doors down. It was viscous and could only read Inferno, rooting Vektor to the spot as its waves of heat lashed over him. Jonathan winced and shied away, but Vektor was frozen by the sight, by that half-formed thought of earlier.

Inferno was meant to pop.

They were all such imbeciles. Such fools.

There was no other purpose to the Rabbit Hole.

"What are you two doing?" Puppet screeched at them.

Vektor flinched, as did Jonathan, breaking the both of them from that stupor. The flames clawed their way out of the room, desperate and hungry, but couldn't find hold in the floor or the walls despite their attempts to burn everything. They were kept at the centre, kept from blasting outward, no doubt by Inferno himself in his unwillingness to show his danger for what it truly was.

Puppet was just as wide-eyed, just as breathless in her panic as they were. Her less comforting black eyes were much more similar to Vektoria's (pretending to be lifelike, an endless pit filled with their fury and hatred), but she still grabbed both of their arms and dragged them away from the stomach-turning sight. "There's a goddamn fire, we need to evacuate. Call the fire department, the police, a teacher for all I care. Get someone here so they can stop that idiot from burning this place to the ground."

Her words reached Jonathan and he fumbled his phone a moment, saying distractedly, "Right, right, we need to call someone."

Vektor was too overwhelmed by this fact presented before him. Too overwhelmed by knowledge he never desired.

Inferno was at this centre.

Inferno was trapped in his own fires.

Inferno was the only reason the Rabbit Hole existed as it did.

He pulled against Puppet's hold as those values screamed at him to take action. "We have to get him out." He said through his stressed teeth, his better judgements. "We can't just leave him. We have to get him out of there."

"Are you crazy? You'll die if you run straight into that." Puppet spat at him.

Her reason did nothing to dissuade this terrible instinct. She dragged him struggling and kicking away from his friend, those fires, and the hallway stretched before him in some trick of perception. Though they made it outside soon enough, this school was tiny in comparison to his kingdom, the length of paces separating him from his friend seemed nightmarishly exaggerated. Was it a bug in his perception? Knowledge of his own lacking Speed? Either way, she continued dragging him further and further away along the less flammable stones lining the path of this realm. He was forced to watch the building grow farther, the smoke climb higher into the dark blue of the afternoon sky.

Almost evening, but not quite. Almost supper, but without the proper rosy golds which came with sunset.

Jonathan made some call and none of it was comforting. Inferno had popped, had finally shown his hand, yet they ran away from it. Why did they always have to run from Inferno's truths?

Inferno was distraction. He was designed to keep others away from the reality they all found themselves in.

This end was always meant for him.

It was written even before Vektor knew just how much Inferno would end up meaning to him.

He let out a guttural scream, the only outlet for all this anguish available to him. Even as others gathered and steps were taken to extinguish that blaze, Vektor couldn't shake away this encompassing truth.

It was never about him and his Kingdom. It was never about getting back before the worst could occur.

It was always about Inferno.

Well played, Creators.



## Chapter 2: Consequences Come Home to Roost

The fire alarms struck dread right through Petel's body. It bloomed in a pure, sweltering fear as the noise blared on. Miss Fitzgard herded all of them out into the courtyard, as per protocol, and there was nothing but this searing fear.

"You don't think." Sonya started, just as uneasy.

"I sure hope not." Levy agreed in a mumble.

The smoke billowing out of the main building and the fires leaking out one of the ground floor windows was too horrifying a sight. As horrifying as the wailing alarms and Vektor's unobstructed screams. Kalyuga gasped and Petel heard Yasha muttering something like a prayer under his breath. The fear spread through them, through the rest of the student body collecting in their area. Even the staff who were desperately contacting the authorities for help seemed infected by it.

Fires didn't come from nowhere. Fires had to come from a source, a spark. Fuel had to be added for them to grow.

This was Dante.

The wolf moved of its own accord. Petel surged forward, out of line and towards the danger. Sonya, Levy, and Kalyuga called after them. So did the teachers and Officer Riviera, who kept the others from breaking out after them. The wolf did not heed their calls. They simply charged towards the burning building, intent on pulling their mate out of the wreckage.

The one who managed to stop them, tackling them to the ground, was Paige.

"Are you insane? You can't go in there." She shouted at them. She really had to struggle to keep them pinned. "You are not fireproof, Petel. Just let the trained professionals deal with it."

Petel snapped at her, a warring mix of fear and sorrow and anger, but they couldn't throw her off. She was pack leader. She had the final say. Mister Williams and Miss Fitzgard rushed over to them, their lines secured by Mister Satou and Miss Honda, and pulled them both to their feet. Petel snapped at Mister Williams, too, but he was used to the wolf. He kept a firm hold on Petel's arm and said, "We don't need more than one reckless kid here, let alone three, Vitayev."

They were dragged back to the rest. Back to safety and away from their mate. Their mate, who was trapped in this pit of fire and alone and in danger with no easy way to get out.

Petel could only watch helplessly as the fire department arrived to douse those flames. Vektor's sobbing finally faded and the eerie stillness in which they all stood was compounded by each teacher's refusal to speak up. They were all mesmerised as the professionals pulled a charcoal body out of the building and laid him out on a stretcher as he breathed smoke even as they strapped an oxygen mask over him.

His untouched golden hair was proof enough of who it was.

"Dante." Petel called out weakly. Then, shouting as loud as they could from the pit of their chest, "Dante!"

"I thought so." Paige said, deflating with that same deep sorrow.

"You don't really think — do you?" Frank asked, drawing closer.

"He wouldn't do something so reckless. Not after — what happened." Abraham joined in.

Their whole group huddled together as much as they could under the current distraction. Their pack, as Petel's called them. The rest of the students mingled and mixed as well, a way to ward off that oppressive atmosphere of dread hanging over all of them. Even the teachers discussed the situation amongst themselves, Mister Williams and Miss Fitzgard drawn over to Mister Schmidt, Mister Carriedo, and Miss Kirkland. Jonathan and Natasha joined Petel's pack, Jonathan holding onto Vektor as if the Prince might run were he not anchored and Natasha holding onto one of Paige's arms for support.

Dante had warned them. All of them. Constantly, he told them of the danger this virtual reality game held. Of its potential destruction waiting for them at the end.

The courtyard was sandwiched so nearly between the two towers which held this game. Petel had been too eager for adventure, Paige and Frank and Abraham encouraging them along. Only Dante had ever warned them of what they were dealing with. Only Dante had dealt with the consequences, from his fears to his flames.

He believed in that danger so much that it dragged him down into Hell. It manifested fire in him, made him just as dangerous as it was, and did its best to break him entirely.

"Inferno activated his Berserk." Vektor said, watching closely as the paramedics left. His golden eyes glinted in the late afternoon light, wet with tears and glowing from all that emotion. "I can't understand why he would do something as dangerous as this. Why did he decide now, of all times?"

"Activated his Berserk?" Paige questioned. "Hang on, is that even possible? Don't the Berserks require the Guardian and being inside the game to even trigger?"

Vektor nodded slowly in reply. "No one else could defy those rules. No one except for Inferno."

His voice was rough from his earlier screams, but chillingly human. No mechanical tones this time. Jonathan said, "They never have applied to him. Isn't that right?"

They all let this information sit a moment. Tentatively, Frank asked, "What do you think's gonna happen to him?"

"If he doesn't die, probably a lot of trouble." Abraham said.

If.

If he didn't die.

The words made a shudder run through their group. Dante, who had only just begun to show his true face to all of them. Dante, who was bright and warm and cared for all of them so much that he risked his life like this.

Dante.

Who told them all in no uncertain terms that something about the truth behind all of this was threatening to kill him.

"It had to be the shadows." Petel said, adamant and rushing their words out. "He said they were the ones that were after him, it has to be them, it has to."

If they got it out fast enough, they could avoid ruin. If they said the cause aloud, that might make it true. Paige asked, "Why would he do this, then? He said they threatened to—"

She cut herself off, a similar fear keeping her silent. It made Frank shiver and Natasha, coming to a similar realisation, clasped her free hand over her mouth. "Oh no."

"You lot at it again?" Mister Williams said to them suddenly, herding them away from the burning building and back towards the rest of the huddle of students. Some were on their phones with their family. Others continued mumbling to one another, trying to solve what had happened. Once he had them back in some semblance of a line, Mister Williams asked, "Why do I have the feeling this has something to do with you and your Tower extracurriculars?"

While the others grew nervous at his clear accusation, Petel could only whimper. Dante was burnt. Dante was behind this. Dante warned them all so many times and none of them listened.

Dante did this intentionally, planned for when he'd be least likely to get caught.

"Mister Williams." Damon called. Damon, the Kingpin of their school and the one working in direct opposition to Petel's pack, of all people. "Is it alright for us to head home now? How long is this gonna take?"

Mister Williams straightened out of his usual overworked and annoyed tone for a more authoritative and informative one. "Unfortunately, we can't let anyone leave until the safety of everyone can be confirmed." He raised his voice, addressing the whole of the crowd now. "That goes for all off-campus students as well as those staying in the dorms. Any further questions should be directed to your teachers, preferably those whose classes you actually attend."

A general cry of outrage rose amongst the students and Mister Williams, as well as Miss Fitzgard and the other teachers, had to move in to quell them. It was just protocol, apparently. Petel caught Damon's eye a moment, noting how he himself wasn't actually a part of this outcry. He turned away to comfort his very best friend (and Abraham's personal nemesis) Niculaie, who was sobbing openly.

The two had known Dante in childhood. They had the same red eyes, the same mark of this hell.

"The shadows haven't taken Inferno's head nor his heart yet." Vektor said, using a quieter voice this time than his usual reckless abandon. Things were really serious if even their clueless Prince could

realise the importance of secrecy in this moment. "We should be grateful for that right now. It means we're still able to help him."

"Help him how? He's being taken to the hospital. His body was basically charcoal." Frank protested.

Vektor was silent a moment before admitting, "I don't know. But we have to."

"He's our friend." Paige said in agreement.

Their little group huddled closer to one another, needing each other's comfort and familiarity. Dante had to be alive. He was breathing, it was a stretcher and not a body bag. He'd been burnt to charcoal but it could've been so, so much worse.

The image forced itself into Petel's head as their thoughts kept racing. Dante, his head exploding in a spray of black liquid. Dante, his chest ripped open and bleeding from the space where his heart should be.

Dante, no longer living.

Dante, no longer able to smile or burn or laugh or get angry.

A wretched sort of howl tore from Petel's throat. Everyone looked to them in surprise as they dropped to their knees, holding their head in their hands and howling at this immense thing piercing all their senses. Dante was their friend, their mate, their fire and mark. Dante didn't want to die and Petel didn't want that, either.

Paige and Sonya, who knew how to handle the wolf without getting bitten, crouched down by them with soothing sounds and gentle platitudes. "We're going to figure this out, Petel." Paige said.

"We'll see him again once he's better." Sonya promised them.

"So the game warps reality to its whim, doesn't it?" Jonathan asked Vektor.

The Prince, of course, relaxed at the ease of offering an explanation. "It's not quite so simple as that. Inferno's abilities only seem to carry over because the code is built into his being inextricably."

"He's carried his fires and fears since he walked into Hell, as he said." Sonya said, petting Petel's back.

"I only scanned his full framework the once. What was there, in very basic terms, was." Vektor paused, his frown deepening. He raised his fist to his mouth, perfectly mimicking Abraham's current pose. "Actually. Based on that information, this all. It does make sense, it's not as senseless as I initially thought. There's a method here and I can't believe I was blind to it for so long."

"What about this could possibly make sense?" Kalyuga asked a bit too loudly in her despair.

Levy went quickly to offer her comfort, the same as Paige and Sonya did for Petel. Jonathan, catching on to Vektor's thought process, gave a quiet, "Redirection. It really does make sense."

Shakily, Petel stood to their feet and stared Vektor down with every ounce of menace the wolf allowed them. "What did you see and not tell us?" They asked in a snarl.

Vektor seemed genuinely remorseful. He was better at displaying more realistic emotions after so long of mimicking all of them. "This is not the first time the shadows have come for Inferno." He said.

Nearly immediately, Levy said, "No shit, robot."

Frustration crossed Vektor's face, but it was Jonathan who interjected with a heated, "Just because he's a program doesn't mean you get to call him a robot like that."

"He is a robot, though." Levy argued.

"Especially when he's being like this." Natasha agreed.

It was strange to see Jonathan actually upset about something. Before he could snap at the two, Vektor went on with an annoyed, "When you all — no. When I revealed the maggots to all of you, the shadows confronted him then, too."

That drew something dark and thick like molasses from the wolf. They surged forward, ignoring everyone's cries of shock and grabbed up the front of Vektor's uniform jacket. "You put him in danger then." They growled out, coherent despite this sticky anger coating their tongue.

Vektor didn't even try to defend himself. Either he was as oblivious to the danger as ever, or he knew he couldn't outrank the wolf. Jonathan also knew better than to break in, despite looking like he was half a second away from pulling them off the Prince. "I only did exactly as I was taught." Vektor said. "Inferno explained to me afterwards the importance of allowing him to show his own truths on his own terms due to all the punishment protocols etched into his code. I have since refrained from exposing more of the truth than he is comfortable with me doing."

Petel kept growling in his face, but couldn't exactly bite into his flesh. He was insufferable, pompous, and human enough to be infuriating, but he was pack. Lowest rung, maybe, but still pack. Growing intrigued, Frank said, "So it was the third time when they finally made him blow up. Third time's always the charm, innit?"

"Each time must have been an escalation." Abraham said, pondering over it as well. "The first time, nothing notable enough to cause us any alarm. The second, they dragged him into the game. Now, they pushed him into a Berserk state and."

"It was always their end goal." Vektor said, his tone going hollow a bit. "They've been pushing for Inferno to pop."

That didn't actually answer anything. Confusion let Petel's grip go slack, dropping Vektor back to the ground on his own feet. Sonya asked, "What does that mean?"

Vektor chuckled humourlessly, a sound that sunk them all right back into that blazing dread. "This whole time. And I was blind to it."

"Mate, what're you talking about?" Abraham tried next.

Jonathan pried Petel off the Prince the rest of the way, forcing them back a step. "My quest has always been secondary. Of course it has." Vektor shook his head, sinking back into that despair which

caused him to scream. "We're means to an end. We're not real, of course we're just being used. All of it, every bit of it, just an orchestration leading up to this moment right here."

"Vektor, c'mon, you gotta communicate here." Frank pleaded, trembling in a horrified anticipation.

"You love explaining things." Sonya joined in, his voice wavering. "Please, just — explain this to us. Help us understand."

Vektor went silent again, his focus flickering as he processed. Jonathan said softly, "Everything was a lie."

Petel looked down at their hands as this horror crept up their throat. Their skin was always cold. It made them and Dante the perfect pair. Right now, however, a fiery grip squeezed their chest and everything seemed to be baking under it. It wasn't even summer yet and they were sweltering in this heat, sweat rolling down the back of their neck just to add to that dread.

"There's nothing I'm able to explain." Vektor said at last. "Error code: Restricted Access. Further attempts to obtain information will require the Admin passwords."

His voice being clear of any of that robotic tone somehow made it worse.

In the next moment, tears began pouring down his face.

"I can't help. I can't do anything." He professed, dipping down into anguish. It was nearly uncanny to hear so much emotion in his voice, as much as it would be to hear that tinny mechanical distortion layered on top. "More than that, I aggravated this already foregone conclusion. My purpose. It was all for this. I've fulfilled my one purpose and I didn't even realise, I didn't want this—"

A sob interrupted his frantic spiral and he devolved into the same desperate tears Petel had seen him in earlier. Frank and Abraham drew closer to him, attempting to offer him what little comfort they could. Jonathan hesitated on doing the same, then said rather darkly, "Safe to assume Dante's the only one with any answers right now."

"No." Paige said. Her instant disagreement got their attention. "There's definitely one or two more who know something about all this."

They all found themselves looking off towards the rest of the students continuing to clamour with the teachers over their predicament. A sort of gut-wrenching hollowness took over Petel's body as they picked out Damon, Niculaie, and Vektoria from that crowd. Vektor's unrestrained sobs seemed louder in their sudden silence, emphasising this knowledge they all understood. It reminded them of Dante's sobs, after they had all gotten him out of Hell. The same sort of breaking to that emotional dam.

Damon and Niculaie had known Dante before Hell.

Vektoria had to know more, too, treating Dante just as antagonistically as she did Vektor.

Everything seemed so much simpler before these shadows, before he showed his connection to that Hell. Escort the Prince through each level, get him back to his Kingdom before Vektoria. That was supposed to be the win condition. Now Petel wasn't sure there was a final level for them to reach.

Finally making some decision, Jonathan wrapped an arm around Vektor's shoulders and drew the Prince into his side. "Hey, we're gonna work through this." He said in a surprisingly gentle and sincere voice. "We're pretty close to the truth here, aren't we? All we need to really blow this open are those Admin passwords and then we'll help Vicario out. It's not completely hopeless."

"There is no helping Inferno." Vektor said through his sobs. "This is how it's meant to end. Not with my victory, not with his, but with hers."

He spat the words out like they were venomous. It could have just been his heightened emotional state, seeing as he was unable to stop his tears, but it did add a layer of dread to this already fraught situation. Natasha pressed closer against Paige's side, though asked a remarkably level-headed, "Want us to go get Damon for you?"

"Do you think he'd be willing to talk to us?" Kalyuga asked next, wiping at her eyes with her free hand.

Their sombre attitudes were a far cry from their usual boisterousness. Paige held fast to Natasha's hand and said, "If that Kingpin's going to be difficult about this, then we'll have to get it out of him by force."

"This is kinda important." Frank agreed.

Jonathan glanced towards his roommate briefly with confusion, then said in admission, "He has been rather obtuse about what he knows of all this. Count me in on this strong-arming plan."

"Honestly, it's probably gonna be Vektoria who'll be harder to convince." Natasha said, turning thoughtful. "She's the one who's always going on about us needing to stop collaborating with the enemy, or whatever."

She made a silly gesture to illustrate the cartoonishness of her words, then she and Jonathan both sighed out their frustration. She then went off immediately to Damon and, with some help from Aglaé, nabbed him, Vektoria, and Niculaie to their side. Sonya shrank away from them, self-conscious, while Levy and Kalyuga leaned in eagerly in anticipation of what they would say. Unfortunately, Damon opened with an insistent, "Not here. Too open."

"Too many adults." Aglaé added with a disdainful toss of his head towards said adults. Petel never really understood Aglaé, from the way he found pleasure in teasing out the wolf to how staunchly loyal he was to Damon. They understood his sister, Gaëlle, who was more upfront beast than Aglaé's beauty. But not so much this disaffected bookworm.

"Where do you propose we have this conversation, then?" Paige asked. "Because, like it or not, we're having it."

"You need to finally explain yourself." Jonathan said, his deadpan as scathing as ever.

Damon bowed his head in an odd display of shame. His normally confident and abrasive demeanour made him come off as an entitled brat. Seeing him falter, Vektoria stepped in with a haughty, "What makes you all so certain we'll share any of our intel? As far as I can see, it's our advantage this time."

"Knew it." Natasha said with a sigh.

"It was pretty predictable." Frank agreed, deflating with her.

"Inferno's life is on the line here." Vektor shouted at her, suddenly snapping out of his tears in a different sort of rage than his usual when addressing her. "Enough with this forced performance. This is no longer about something so petty."

Instead of being chastised, her grin simply turned crueller. "Poor little Inferno, caught up in his own fears. I don't see how his failures change anything for us, you stupid Prince."

"It was never about us." Vektor said, stepping away from Jonathan's hold and right into her face. They were the same height, had the same face, but were opposites in every other way. "We were simply the prelude. The excuse to get the ball rolling. How could it ever be about us when neither of us has a place in this Realm to begin with?"

His words seemed to strike against something inside her and she grew furious. "You may not have a place. You may be incomplete and broken, but I'm no failure. I'm the one who'll be victorious."

Her anger was much more recognisable. As strange as it seemed, her being so blindly furious helped settle some of Petel's uneasiness. Just as adamant, Vektor shouted in return, "Didn't you hear what I said? Our petty squabble has nothing to do with the primary focus of the game."

Again, unexpectedly, Vektoria laughed. It was as harsh and as cruel as her anger. "Now that's rich, coming from the lying little Prince. You probably don't even know what you're talking about. What would your people think, hearing you brush off their concerns as insignificant?"

Vektor realised his error and snapped right to panic. "N-No, I — That's not what I meant, I didn't mean—"

"You're right, of course." She said, interrupting his very familiar sounding panic. Again, again, he was more like Dante than Petel could brush off. "You probably have no idea just how right you are. And that just makes you so wrong about everything."

"At least he's trying. Stop taunting and explain something for once." Jonathan said, stepping in once more to defend their Prince.

She pivoted away from Vektor and shrugged with both hands. "Our squabble is small change in the grand scheme of the Rabbit Hole. It's good to hear you finally admit as much, you self-important prick."

Damon grabbed her arm and pulled her away with a hissed, "Save it, Vektoria."

"That information should be restricted behind the Admin passwords." Niculaie said. His voice was thick with tears and Petel couldn't help the pang of sympathy for him.

Vektoria yanked her arm out of Damon's grip, but before she could screech at him, Mister Williams was drawn over to them and gave a commanding, "Alright, enough arguing. We're taking roll, so you lot get back to your teachers."



Of course their rowdiness wouldn't go completely unnoticed, much as they all might have preferred it that way. Damon said in a hush to Petel and them, "We'll talk about this later. Wait for our signal."

"Who put you in charge?" Paige asked in a grumble.

They didn't have much of a choice. They all filed into their places and complied with roll call. Since the main building was the one that was damaged, they were all sent to their dorms (or back home, for those living off-campus) with their suppers. There were some complaints over the fact that classes would resume tomorrow, of course, but Petel was sort of too disassociated to register any of it. Their mind buzzed over and over with the reminder that they'd return to an empty room. That there was no Dante to greet them as they walked in.

They were alone again. Alone with their thoughts, alone with their despair, alone with their snarling wolf.

They almost didn't eat, they were so lost in their throes. They almost threw the whole tray away to flee into the evening, they wanted to see their mate so badly.

Before they could do that, a knocking came to their door. When they answered, it was Paige, Natasha, Sonya, and Vektor.

"We're getting Frank, too." Paige said. "We're going to the towers to see if there's something we can do about this mess."

Though Petel wasn't sure what they could do, considering none of them could use their abilities like Dante could out here in reality, they nodded in agreement. It was better than waiting around with their guilt and sorrow gnawing straight into their intestines.

Would the game even hold anything which might help Dante? His own fires and Creation caused this in the first place. Was it wise to keep messing around with it? Was it safe?

Petel went with Paige and their pack, resolving to worry about that later. For now, they needed to be in the wolf's skin and away from all these emotions swirling in their gut. For now, it was about taking what little comfort they could get.

## Chapter 3: Answers No One Is Happy With

Even in the darkened evening, there were too many authorities around to sneak across the campus in their usual fashion. The teachers and Officer Riviera had to talk to the Yardsmen, the fire department, the parents who were distressed enough to show up. Troublesome, but not completely impossible. Since there were too many of them to use just one of the towers, they split up their group. Frank and Jonathan went together to the one normally used by Damon and his gang while Petel and Paige snuck into their own. Sonya and Natasha joined Petel and Paige while Vektor followed after Jonathan and Frank.

It didn't so much matter which tower they used, anyway. The two were practically identical, as they'd found. Each held the same system, the same game, and five scanners apiece.

Five scanners. Four for normal players and one for their guides, the AI programs they'd unwittingly pulled out into their reality.

There was something more to this. Petel could almost grasp it. There had to be something more to this.

"If anyone'll know the passwords, it'll be the Guardians." Paige reasoned as she sat in her chair at the centre of the tower, typing away at the computer and preparing to log them all into the game.

Petel stepped into one of the four scanners placed around the perimeter of the room, as did Natasha and Sonya. As Paige continued typing, the scanner doors shut and Petel closed their eyes to wait for the drop.

"We don't have Abraham, so I doubt we'll be able to get the attention of the one in the Brown Hollows."

"Latin." Vektor informed her.

His voice came from the computer itself, meaning he was safely inside with Jonathan. They'd reconnected the communications line between the systems and that was already coming in handy. Sounding a bit fed-up, Paige said, "Latin, sure."

The floor dropped from beneath them and Petel fell into the void.

The drop was always a nice little buffer between the game and reality, giving them and the game both a moment to load properly. Because when Petel landed, they were as much a wolf on their outside as they were on the inside.

Paige loaded them into the level select hub, a black void broken up only by the five white spheres connected by the circular translucent path. Specifically, she placed them between the Seventh Circle and the Grey Tundra. The damage of Vektoria's magic was still present. It splintered where it

should have reached the Brown Hollows, breaking that complete circle, but Vektor's repairs had diverged to the centre, to the previously disconnected Seventh Circle.

"Aglaré should be ours for the Hollows, considering he and van Helsing are the last ones to need a Berserk." Natasha said, landing next to Petel on the path. Her bat wings fluttered, but she didn't use them to hover for the time being.

"Process of elimination does support this hypothesis." Vektor agreed.

He, Frank, and Sonya also loaded onto the same path. Their game guises were a knight in silvery white armour, a necromancer cloaked in grey and wielding a gun, and a crow with the talons and beak to match, respectively. Paige spoke again, her voice echoing above them. "I've loaded you between the Seventh Circle and the Grey Tundra so we can check each, though I doubt that Midnight Bard will be of any help without Dante or the Kingpin."

"Even were his wards present, I doubt the Midnight Bard would willingly assist us anyway." Vektor said with a shake of his head.

Were he outside, his voice would have the same effect as Paige's. It was an odd detail, one Petel didn't quite know what to do with. They all filed towards the Seventh Circle, stepping through the white sphere and into the red-brown plateaus of the level.

Dante called this place Hell. To him, it was Hell. Petel couldn't help agreeing now, looking up into the red skies and finding nothing but a building unease rooted in their chest.

"Good and bad news, the Guardian didn't spawn in immediately." Jonathan said. Hearing his voice do the same reverberating thing as Paige's wasn't to the wolf's liking, but Petel couldn't really complain. They had an extra set of eyes to help, after all. "Even worse news, AIR decided to send five enemies your way."

Natasha and Frank groaned, mirroring each other's annoyance perfectly. Sonya shrank out of concern, his feathers folding in on him to make him look somehow smaller than usual. The poor birdie really wasn't the battling type. Vektor called up an annoyed, "How many of each class for our welcoming party?"

"Two Naga, a Chimera, and two Gargoyles." Paige answered, aggravation clear in her tone as well. "Brace yourselves, they're coming in fast."

Petel, for once, didn't want this battle at all. They thought, quite suddenly, of that time Dante tried to sit out while they worked through this place. Reaching for that name Dante called this Guardian, they called out not Midnight Bard, but specifically: "Orpheus."

Their voice got Natasha and Sonya's attention. Vektor's as well, who asked, "Is invoking him really our best plan of action here?"

Petel shouted in a loud, guttural bark, "Orpheus."

"I'm not sure that's going to—" Paige started before cutting off.

Petel's ears perked up. Jonathan next confirmed, "I can't believe that actually worked."

In another instant, the Midnight Bard himself stood before them. His appearance made them all stumble back, his synthetic white hair and metallic limbs strikingly inhuman. His eyes glowed with the same red light as the core in his chest, a peek at the inside mechanism of his being.

He didn't attack them immediately. Nor did he do much else besides stand there, as menacing as the first time he'd appeared before them. A startling sort of realisation hit Petel as they noticed a peculiar detail they hadn't paid attention to any other time.

Orpheus was the same height as Dante.

Orpheus was only as tall as their friend and mate.

Orpheus was, in actuality, the same as them.

"Asking after the admin passwords might be a fruitless endeavour here." Vektor said, regarding Orpheus with an appropriate amount of caution. The Guardian had destroyed him on more than one occasion.

"None of us can talk with him." Frank said, drooping at the realisation.

As true as that was, Petel took a different approach. They said to this Orpheus, "You know what happened with Dante already. Don't you?"

Orpheus, of course, said nothing. He wasn't singing, either. He merely turned his back to them and held out his arm, obliterating the enemies as they popped into their field of vision. Since they weren't about to get any answers from him, they all quickly and surreptitiously filed back out of the level, through a steel door in the mountainside, and returned to the level select hub.

Petel said in the resulting silence, "Grey Tundra next."

"Please try not to go Berserk. Both of you." Vektor said to Frank and Natasha.

The two giggled sheepishly, agreeing to nothing. It was hardly their choice whether or not to go Berserk in the first place. They all walked along the path and entered the Grey Tundra next. It was weird, like revisiting a level of a game that was already completed. Weirder still was the way it separated them as they entered, loading Petel, Sonya, and Natasha into the exit Petel remembered most vividly while Frank and Vektor were placed inside the exit Vektoria made.

Both led to the same platform of grey ice, so they all met back up once exiting that final checkpoint area. Once they all stood together, right in the middle, Paige said, "No sign of the Guardian yet, but AIR's sending another welcoming party."

"It's like it just knows what we're trying to do." Natasha lamented.

Vektor called up a simple, "Jonathan?"

"Two Sharks, two Walkers, and a Stinger." Jonathan reported, sounding just as annoyed as before. "Five again."

Another five. Petel frowned at the thought and looked over their current team. Five enemies, five of them. One for each player, maybe? But AIR had never done this sort of thing consistently. Taking inspiration from Petel's actions, Natasha said, "You think Resident'll come if we call its name?"

"It's possible." Vektor said.

"Does every Guardian have two different names?" Sonya asked.

A haunted sort of look took over Frank. Before Petel could ask, he walked to the edge of the platform and yelled into the misty abyss below, "Valence Ernest. Dad! I know you can hear me."

Startled, Jonathan said, "You mean you weren't kidding when you said that?"

Petel, too, was surprised. "It wasn't just a feeling, was it?"

Frank refused to answer either of them, too tensed in his fury. Just like before, the Guardian leapt up from the abyss and landed on the ice with its animalistic stitched up legs. Resident was much more gruesome than Orpheus, its skin faded in decay and a mismatch of all sorts of tones. Its whole body was a patchwork quilt of stitching and body parts from both animals and humans alike, making it taller than humanly possible. Its legs were those of an animal's, its face was broken up by a snout, and its long and rough hair looked like a horse's mane. And that was even ignoring its yellow eyes, a perfect picture of death.

Natasha said tentatively, "Well. Um. Nice to see you again, Mister Ernest."

Frank's fists trembled as he held back the power dripping from them, each drop splattering against the frozen ground in a purple rune of his Berserk. In his efforts to hold that fury back, his nails dug into his skin despite his gloves and the resulting blood had no choice but to leak through and splatter alongside those purple runes. Resident — Valence — looked over their group, then spoke with that clear yet garbled voice which sent chills burning down Petel's spine. "Your presence is requested in the Garden."

"The Garden?" Vektor questioned, recoiling a step.

That was fear. Vektor only showed fear at the truly horrific. Petel didn't get a chance to really think about it, however, as Resident scooped all of them up into its arms, a feat only possible due to its ludicrous height and strength, then dove off into the abyss with them. Petel and Frank both struggled while Sonya and Natasha shrieked in their surprise. The enemies loaded in above them, but they were too far now and with no way to catch up to a Guardian.

The only thing they could do, really, was resign themselves to the fall.

Petel shut their eyes tight and heard Paige from somewhere far above them say, "Wait, that's not a normal—"

Then there was silence.

Curious, Petel peeked out and saw a blue expanse of sky. A bright and overblown blue. They searched only a moment before next discovering an endless expanse of field rushing towards them

dotted with colour in the semblance of flowers. A lone but massive tree stood in the distance, enough so to appear within reach yet masking its actual size.

Resident landed in a burst of petals, scattering flecks of colour which seemed to glow in the fuzzy and overblown air. It released all of them to the ground, their steps similarly tossing up petals as they disturbed the knee-high overgrowth. The grass and flowers simultaneously tickled Petel's fur and had no presence at all, phasing right through them. As unreal as the foliage of the White Forest, only to an extreme.

The whole sight was ethereal.

This wasn't real.

For once, it truly left the impression that they were inside a video game.

After a stretch of stunned silence settled around them, the petals dissipating from the air, Sonya asked, "So this is the Garden?"

"I didn't think it'd be an actual place." Frank murmured in agreement.

Vektor looked around the area with wide, frightened eyes. That mechanical edge took over his tone as he said, "I'm not supposed to be here."

Nodding once, Resident said, "They only moved you here when deciding your fate."

"It's a place of bedtime stories. For naughty children who refuse to sit still during routine check-ups." A different voice said.

Petel jumped at that, as did Natasha and Sonya. Orpheus landed beside Resident, making a solid clank against the ground, then stood to face them. He was comically shorter than Resident, though even Niculaie would be. His voice, though. It was startlingly human. Cautiously, as wary as Vektor was earlier, Frank asked, "What do you mean by that? That this place is for stories and check-ups?"

With a tinge of disappointment, Resident said, "You weren't allowed to remember."

"No one was. Not even 02 here knows what we're talking about." Orpheus scoffed. His mouth didn't move as he talked, his angry eyes and expression cut into the metal of his face, but his tone conveyed all the expression he seemed to need. It nearly even made his unmoving expression seem to shift to fit it.

"Don't be rude, Orpheus." A third voice joined in, this one gentler and much more reasonable. Petel knew even before she dropped in who it belonged to: the Guardian of the White Forest, Shiranui. "Stein brought us some guests. It's been such a long time since anyone's visited us here."

The White Wolf sat regally, her tail idly swishing back and forth through the field in her amusement. Orpheus rolled his head back in annoyance as Resident said, "The Prince can't help that the tear was uneven."

Petel looked to Vektor, intrigued by his continued silence. The Prince stood there, too overwhelmed to even move, his armour flickering in and out of view ominously. It reminded Petel that, underneath the Knight visage he cut, he was still a kid like them.

His black bodysuit beneath was the same as Natasha and Frank's outfits, but on him it rang an alarm bell in the back of Petel's mind. Vektor's eyes had gone pure white, only making the image worse.

He looked like a shadow.

He looked like one of those things Dante feared most.

"Ah. He's overloaded." Resident said. The others also focused on their poor Prince. "Time for a reboot."

Faster than any of them could follow, Resident wrapped one of its grotesquely large hands around Vektor's head. Frank, Sonya, and Petel cried out, but they couldn't stop it. It crushed their Prince in an explosion of black (the same as Dante's Desperation after his Berserk, Petel vaguely thought) and took him out in an instant. His body dissolved into pixels and Orpheus gave an offended, "Don't hog all the fun to yourself."

"Perhaps not the best course of action to take without any proper warning." Shiranui chided.

"He needed to be rebooted." Resident said, shaking the lingering pixels out of its hand.

"Why are you like this?" Frank asked in a shout, running over to shove Resident. A very petty and very fruitless sort of retaliation, considering that the Guardians were invincible and Frank couldn't damage anything anyway. He kept after it despite this, pounding his fists against its bony, stitched together body. "I-I hate you. You just take and take and take."

Resident stroked its hand gently over Frank's head, brushing through his curly black hair. It did nothing to calm him down, but it was a clearer picture of parental regret than Petel had ever seen before. "I'm sorry, my child." It growled, no malice in its garbled voice. There was an ocean's worth of guilt, a cavern's expanse of tenderness instead. "Were it possible, I would have done better by you and your brother." A hesitation. Then, softer still, "Is William. He's still with you, is he not?"

"Barely." Frank shouted, tears streaking down his face to join the pulsing green lines crawling up from his neck. He looked even more a child now, though he was barely sixteen, and Petel's heart ached for him. "Every day he gets more and more frustrated. Mum and I are so afraid his body could give out any day. Why do you get to run away from all that? Why do I have to keep living and watch him dying?"

His sobs grew too loud and he buried his face into his hands, giving up on his attack. Sonya and Natasha went to his side, as did Petel, offering up what comfort they could. Shiranui looked to Resident and said, "You better tell him now."

Sighing, Resident asked, "Is it wise at this stage?"

"Dante's triggered the finale. More danger won't change that." Orpheus pointed out.

After another moment of contemplation, Resident gave in to their urging. It made sure Frank and them were listening before it said, "You live because I programmed you to do so."

Frank locked up, even his tears freezing in his horror. Petel could smell the fear radiating off him. "You. I'm. Programmed?" He asked.

"Frank's not like Vektor." Natasha said warily.

"All of you are beholden to programming. It's not unique to him, nor is it quite unique to the Vicario boy." Resident explained. As it continued, the four of them huddled closer to one another, as if that might stave off this dreadful truth. "My family's illness threatened to claim you just after you were born. Far sooner than when it latched to your brother or myself. And so, using the tools of my trade, I placed in you what I hoped was the seed of all my research."

Quietly, Frank said, "You cured me?"

"No." Resident shook its head. "That seed never bloomed, despite taking root. You were declared deceased officially on August the twenty-eighth."

"But. But I'm still here." Frank protested.

Natasha gasped. "Then he is like Vektor. Maybe?"

"You died, but not for long." Resident said. "A day after we took your body home, you were alive again, crying and fussing and refusing to yield. It was so much refusal, in fact, that it soon became a problem all its own."

"Your necromancy and healing." Petel said before they realised it.

The others looked to them in confusion as Resident, Orpheus, and Shiranui all nodded in confirmation. All three Guardians had the same sort of solemn knowledge to their posture. They all knew what was going on. "You revived all living matter wherever we took you." Resident said, continuing its explanation. "You even brought life back to me and your brother until we were choked with it. Your mother as well. So I had to bring you in and dampen your code. That unrelenting will you unknowingly wielded from the roots of that seed planted in you kept you going. From that alone, I knew my work was possible."

Petel smiled suddenly. "Life of the party." They reiterated.

Frank wasn't so amused this time. "So William. He's not gonna get better, ever. Is he?"

"Can't you maybe share what you've got with him?" Sonya asked, hesitant and unsure.

"How?" Frank asked in return, annoyed for a brief moment.

Unhelpfully, Resident shrugged. "The most probable reason he's endured as long as he has is due to your presence. Your code may be dampened, but despite my best efforts, I could never stop it entirely."

Quietly, Frank said, "He's not dead yet. But. I guess, I am?"

Petel said in full disagreement, "There's not a person more alive I've ever known."



"In a way, you're both correct." Resident said, hoping to settle their argument before it could get going. "Frank is very much the epitome of life, but that is only because of his refusal to succumb to his death."

Expression twisting up in distaste, Frank shouted a loud and piercing, "I wish I'd never found you. Mum and William were right, you're the worst."

He turned and ran, kicking up petals as he went. It didn't take very long at all for him to pop out of sight; just like the Seventh Circle, the draw distance here was abysmal. As strange as it was to watch someone literally pop out of existence like that, the only one of them not completely accustomed to the sight was Sonya. He cried out and reached towards their friend with a wing, but Natasha kept him from following. "Video game thing." She reassured him.

"We didn't tell them the most important thing about the Garden yet." Shiranui said.

Orpheus gave an annoyed, "They'll figure it out soon enough."

Petel looked up towards the blue sky and wondered how Vektor was doing. Wondered if Dante knew all this about their situations. Their next thought struck them absolutely breathless. Terror ripped through them as they howled up loudly, "Paige, Jonathan. Can you hear us?"

"All outside communication is cut off from here. Manual log outs are also disabled." Orpheus told them, his glinting red somehow harsher.

"Yet another failsafe to keep us in here." Shiranui said with a sigh.

Peeling its lips back almost in distaste, Resident said, "I've told you before, Megumi. Being mistaken as we are out there is much more painful than could ever be described."

Petel's ears pricked up and they latched onto that distraction. "Megumi? Like, Megumi Kanami?"

"Toura's sister?" Sonya breathed, the same epiphany making his feathers puff out in concern.

Shiranui's whole body radiated pure happiness as she stood, her tail wagging energetically. "Yes. He should be a first year by now. Do you know how he's doing?"

"He, uh. They're a little hard to talk to. Kinda like Petel here." Natasha said, gesturing to Petel.

But Toura was real. Toura lived in their world, had a history and presence. Petel asked next, "Are you one of the Creators, Resident?"

Orpheus laughed so hard he had to reel back a few steps. "As if Stein here could come up with half the things inside the Rabbit Hole." He taunted.

Resident shook its head. "I was simply one of the handful of programmers tasked with exploring the practical uses for this tech and its boundaries."

Sonya asked, "What use was that?"

"Potential for its application to curing maladies, mental defects, and other medical anomalies." Resident chuckled, a bone deep weariness to it. "If my being here is not enough of an indication, take some comfort in knowing my research and all my hopes ultimately ended in failure."

"Someone besides you did succeed in that, though." Natasha said.

A lump formed in Petel's throat that they couldn't swallow away, no matter how hard they tried. Dante was at the centre of this. Dante had denied involvement until it was literally impossible to deny it any longer.

And Dante reaped the consequences, burnt to a crisp and stranded at the hospital.

"You worked at the Vicario Company." They said. Their voice was an unappealing croak around that lump in their throat. "You worked with Dante's parents. Didn't you?"

Sonya and Natasha looked to them, frowning. "Dante said he didn't know anything about this." Sonya argued.

"Paige said this tech's only reminiscent of the Vicario Company's work." Natasha added.

Resident went to speak, but Orpheus shouldered past it to intercept. He only stopped once he was directly in front of Petel, cutting a rather intimidating figure despite the fact that Petel was just taller than him. "Allow me to recount for you the tale of the Babbling Artist." He said.

Petel refused to back down. They gave a slow and determined, "As long as it's the truth."

Orpheus scoffed, more amused than upset. "No amount of rose petals could obscure his ugly truth. But, in the interest of time, I'll cut out all the flowery details."

Frank rejoined them, not any better but at least no longer full of that anger and despair. He stood beside Petel and took one of their paws to hold, comforting them as well as comforting himself. A small gesture was all either of them could offer up, really. Petel squeezed his hand in return. As Orpheus spoke, his tone dropped to a much gentler one than he'd used this whole time.

He really was just telling a story to a group of children.

It was practised, rehearsed; he'd done it countless times before.

"He started out an innocent painter. Most artists start this way. Born to a Queen who demanded heads and a Rabbit obsessed with time. Seeing such promising work from this small painter, the Queen invited him to tea. He arrived only to fall down into the depths of Hell, where he was thrown to the Rabbit and had his brain picked apart for all that wonder he held. From him, the Rabbit pulled stony gargoyles, skeletal bears, sharks as quick as bullets, and most important of all, the shadows lurking at the very bottom."

That lump in Petel's throat continued to make its presence known. "He created them." They echoed hoarsely.

"A Rabbit and a Queen." Frank mumbled to himself.

Orpheus nodded to both of their statements, then continued. "They scooped and scraped until the artist's head was cleaned out. Once he had nothing left to offer them, they released him from his Hell and gave him one last task. His most important task; to babble endlessly. For an artist as empty and used up as himself could only babble, unheard and not worth believing no matter how true any of his statements could be."

Sonya let out a small noise in realisation. "No one believed him." He said. "Not once."

"A deliberate decision when deciding what warping he'd be capable of." Resident said.

"And yet, whatever he believes will be an unfortunate reality." Orpheus said. "The Prince told you, did he not? Of that Creation which only brings destruction."

Petel dropped Frank's hand in order to lash out against Orpheus. Their claws clanked off his metal body without even a hint of damage, just like the last time they tried this. Shiranui tilted her head to the side as she sat amidst the overblown colours surrounding them. "Perhaps it's time to return them to reality." She said.

"Wait." Natasha cried, throwing out her arms in a plea for all of them to halt. It got their attention. Even Petel, though they were frustrated at their inability to retaliate for such slights against their mate. "I totally forgot until just now. We wanted to ask you, do any of you know what the Admin passwords to the system are?"

Resident shook its head. "All my permissions were revoked once I was made into a Guardian."

"If any of us were to know something like that, it'd be Latin." Shiranui noted cheerily. "They know everything."

"Almost everything." Orpheus griped.

Catching on to the obvious contradiction there, Sonya asked, "Is Latin not able to enter this place?"

"They prefer their Library." Shiranui said, tossing her head back as a way to gesture somewhere beyond their current location. "I suppose that's why their title is the Librarian."

"They only appear here when we need to talk to them. Which won't be right now." Orpheus said.

He wrapped harsh, metal hands around one of Petel's arms, again moving too fast to fully comprehend, and effortlessly threw them up into the air. They flailed only a second before resigning themselves to their fate. They heard Natasha and Frank's protests cut short and saw Sonya following them as fast as his wings could carry him, but there was no way for him to catch up. Petel landed with a sickening crunch and their body dissolved as they were ejected from the area.

It was not unlike the fall of being zoned out. The worst way to lose this game.

When they landed, they were human once more. Back in reality once more. They exited their scanner, as did Sonya and Natasha, only to find that Paige wasn't there. Her chair was empty. Panicking, Petel stumbled over to the computer, which was still active and scrolling through its garble

of data incomprehensible to anyone not equipped to handle the system. For some reason, Dante could read it, just the same as Paige, Jonathan, and Vektor.

"Frank, can you hear us?" Petel called into it.

"Petel? You're out?" Paige's voice answered.

They wilted in relief. Natasha and Sonya huddled next to them, also able to relax on hearing their friend's voice. "What'cha doing over there, Paige?" Natasha asked.

"Helping Vektor through his first ever panic attack." Paige answered. Instantly, all of them were less reassured than before. "Jonathan and I lost your signals after Resident took you, so we figured it'd be okay to wait in the same tower. Especially after Vektor came out as shaken as he did."

"He didn't even collapse. Just stood there until Paige touched him." Jonathan mumbled.

"We're headed over now." Petel said. There was no arguing this point.

Paige said, "Be careful. There are still a lot of staff walking about."

"We gotta tell you everything the Guardians shared with us." Natasha said next.

"I can tell them some of it." Frank said. His voice helped Petel relax again. "Hey, Jonathan. Has Vektor moved at all after Paige, uh, I'm assuming put him there?"

"No, but. What happened with you?" Jonathan returned, that genuine concern an odd note in his tone. It was welcome, just odd. "Are you okay? You had to see Resident, right?"

"I'm fine, just found out I've been existing out of pure spite my whole life."

Though Petel was unsure of how exactly to put the computer to sleep, they could shut the monitor off. As expected, the sound cut out once the screen powered down, even with the modem continuing to hum. They, Natasha, and Sonya carefully exited the tower, keeping an eye out for the staff who were still dealing with the fire department and the Yard. The stretch between the two towers was open and horrible, but the three of them were a small enough group that they were able to utilise the darkness of the evening to go undetected.

Smoke had stopped furling up from the main building, but the scars were still present all round. From the charred ground outside that gash around the window to the blown out glass and panes, Dante had left his mark. Petel swallowed around that lump and entered the other tower, resolving to set it aside for the moment.

Paige and Frank sat on the floor with Vektor, the three of them leaning against the centre scanner. Jonathan sat at the computer and looked up at their arrival. "Ah. You made it." He greeted simply.

"So the Creators are known as a Queen and a Rabbit." Paige said. A deep, deep sorrow overtook her whole posture with the barest spark of anger at its centre. "I didn't want to believe it, but there's no way we can deny it any longer. Dante's parents are behind this."

Petel sat at her side, as did Natasha. Sonya briefly checked on Jonathan, who waved him off, then also crouched down to join their group on the floor. He sat right in front of Vektor and asked, "How are you doing? Need anything from us?"

Vektor, though he still looked quite rattled (hands threaded in his grey hair, curled up on himself; so familiar, so familiar, that whisper nagged at Petel's mind), spoke at least without a mechanical edge to his voice. "I'm not a Guardian. I'm a child. I'm scared. Grandfather, please, help me. I can't protect anyone like this."

"He's been like that since he got out." Paige said in explanation. "He's talking, at least, but I don't think he's really hearing us at all."

Jonathan leaned forward in his chair, looking for all the world like a concerned friend. A lovesick puppy, maybe, if Petel didn't know any better. "I tried a few grounding exercises with him, but he was pretty unresponsive the whole time."

Petel watched Vektor a moment as the Prince repeated his words. His breathing was quick, but not so quick to be hyperventilating or even full-on panic; again, again, again, he reminded them of Dante.

If Dante's parents were the Creators. If Dante had known this whole time and could never say anything.

"It makes sense." Petel mumbled to himself. When Paige and Sonya gave them an appraising look, they said much clearer, "Vektor's more like Dante than you'd think he'd be. I kept thinking that. But if Dante's parents created him—"

"They're practically siblings, then." Paige finished.

Frank bowed his head, growing downcast. "Guess that's also why Vektor kept treating him like that at first. Like he knew him somehow."

"The Guardians are all real people." Sonya said, suddenly heated. "Human experimentation. Didn't Vicario — Didn't Dante mention that when we were first wondering over this?"

They all latched onto that heat, that indignation for a moment. Then Jonathan put the computer to sleep and stood from his chair. "Only one way to find out now." He said.

Natasha nodded, standing as well. "Let's bring this up to Damon when we have our little chat."

Gut sinking and throat tight, Petel agreed with a hesitant, "All we can do is wait."

They helped carry Vektor to Sonya's room as they all returned to the dorms. Though they wanted to stay with the two, to not be alone for the night, they had no choice but to face their empty, silent room.

It was too cold. Too still. Petel could only stand in the doorway, peering inside a place that they couldn't fathom existing in by themselves anymore. That lavender blanket sat over Dante's bed, neat and tucked in and loved. Dante had loved it. It was a sign of their whole pack's love for him.

It burned bright in their chest and they hated that they couldn't stave it off any longer. Fear seeped into them like molten magma, dripping down their spine and gripping every bone in their body to the point of overheating.

Yet the room was too cold still.

Vektor was afraid. Petel was afraid. All because of this overpowering fear Dante had left behind. It marred their souls, their minds, the body of this campus, and Petel wanted to choke it all down but they couldn't. They just couldn't.

That lump in their throat refused to be swallowed.

## Chapter 4: Shift in Directive

"I never expected things to go this way." Omen professed.

They all sat together in a rather ornate tea room, having been escorted there on Omen's whim. The fact that he was allowed to move such a big group through such a flimsy explanation after what happened was no big surprise, of course. That Wolf was too antsy to sit and Navigator and Professor could barely contain their own aggravation was also expected of the current situation.

Vektor was still grappling with a lot himself. Those blocked memories of the Garden, the weight of the Rabbit Hole's full purpose; it unsettled him just how deeply Inferno was involved in everything here.

"Yeah. The whole thing with Dante being sent to the hospital and then me being secretly dead the whole time kinda threw us all for a loop there." Doktor said, ever the light-hearted one.

Vampire's head snapped up. "Ernest. Right, that name belongs to you both, doesn't it?"

"And you two knew a lot more than you ever wanted to explain." Jonathan said, accusing.

Vampire bowed his head, chastised. Omen rose to defend his friend, saying, "We were bound by the same rules as Vicario. As Dante. You can't blame us entirely for our hands being tied."

"But you did know a lot." Beauty said, looking up from his book. He was always reading, always gathering information, it seemed. Vektor was curious to know exactly how much information he kept in his stores. "You and Vicario played it together, didn't you? You certainly complained enough about him always kicking your ass."

Omen went to snap at Beauty, but held himself back. "It was humiliating. Losing to him over and over no matter how hard I tried." He said, his anger bubbling in his tone.

"So it wasn't just Dante who had a connection to the game." Navigator said, cutting straight to the point. "You and Vladimirescu both played it as kids, too."

"And Professor." Vektor added.

"Me as well?" Professor questioned.

"Yes, yes, the four most experienced players are gathered, we know this." Vektoria said with a scoff, waving them off dismissively. "The Creators are the ones in charge and we're all mere playthings caught in their narrative. Now, tell me what those damn Admin passwords are and let's take this fight to them specifically."

Vektor frowned at her in annoyance. Her flippant disregard for formalities was less than ideal, even if that, too, was expected. Doktor grew curious and asked, "You don't know them either, you mean?"

"Why would I? I'm part of the program, much as I'm loathe to admit it."

She turned away, arms crossed and just as upset. She was great at hiding her intentions, but her emotionality was as recognisable as Vektor's own. He should have known better than to ever trust her. Omen said, "We don't know the passwords, either."

"Our job, mostly, was just to test the power system and physics as well as develop some of the mechanics." Vampire said, keeping his head bowed. "It was a simple game between friends. One seeker, one runner."

Professor's gaze snapped to Vampire, that block in his code flashing to the forefront. "A game." He murmured, raising a hand to rub at his neck where that block was most prominent. "A hunting game."

Vampire folded in on himself further, unwilling to say more despite wishing to. Quietly, Omen admitted, "The very first purpose of the Rabbit Hole was to save lives."

Understanding instantly, Jonathan said, "The Vicario Company's announcement." Then, a bit faster in his realisation, "They made this tech. They've been the Creators this whole time."

"Was there ever any doubt?"

Omen sat back with a shrug, less smug than he might have been at any other time. Vektoria surged towards him, furious all of a sudden, and asked, "You're sure of that? The Creators — they're the parents of Inferno?"

"They're his parents." Professor mumbled, reeling at this revelation.

"Yeah. It's definitely them." Omen confirmed.

Vektoria dashed for the door so fast that only Wolf was able to stop her. Even then, they had to tackle her to the floor, startling Omen's Nanny who was about to enter, ready to serve them all some tea.

"Where are you going?" Omen asked as their whole group gathered around to help Wolf keep her rooted.

"Inferno's in the hospital." She said in a snarl, yanking out of Doktor's grip. Before she could run, Professor and Royalty latched onto her arms to restrain her. "Now's my only chance to find them. To strike them down for what they've done to me."

She was like a mindless enemy, solely focused on her goal of destruction. It was, for once, unsettling to look at. Her Void was truly a terrifying thing. Royalty asked, "What's that mean, what they did to you? If they just made the game—"

"Then they also created Vektor and Vektoria." Wolf said, reaching the most logical conclusion. "They're the ones who trapped all the Guardians inside, too."

Vektoria screamed, "They abandoned me in there. They wanted a perfect child but then they refused to acknowledge me and they should pay the price for it."



Her outburst didn't calm her at all, but she couldn't break free from their hold. Even threatening her Void, her hands glowing eerily with that dangerous black, didn't deter their restraints. Everyone managed to get her back inside the room and Omen's Nanny successfully served tea to all of them. Of course, to keep her seated, Royalty laid across her lap and Wolf stood behind her, hands pressed to her shoulders and jaws ready to snap should she disrupt their meeting again. Omen said, "Good to know she's out for all our blood. Equal opportunist deletion."

She scoffed. "I warned all of you that I'd wipe your existence should you stand in my way, but your blood wouldn't interest me. The ones I'm after don't bleed, anyway."

Vektor asked, "Why would Inferno's parents do all of this to him?"

"To us." Vektoria spat.

Omen and Vampire glanced to one another, having no guesses for this inquiry, while Professor and Wolf seemed more upset at its reminder. No matter how many times Vektor turned the thought over in his head, it came back to the same why.

If the Creators were truly Inferno's parents —

If Inferno really was that connected to it all —

If the Creators imposed such restrictions on Inferno knowingly —

"He's their son." Vektor said, almost pleading. It didn't make sense, there wasn't anything his friends could do, but the tone crept into him and refused to be banished. "He's their son, and still. And still, they wrote such protocol into him. They threatened his life. Why? Why would they do such a thing when he's their son?"

None of them who met his eyes had any answers. Once the silence became unbearable, Omen said, "I can't really speak for their methods, but I can to the results. Without their constant tweaking and advancements, I would have died as a baby."

"So they saved your life, but cursed his." Doktor noted, deflating in sorrow.

"And trapped all the Guardians inside the game." Wolf pointed out.

"And created two torn halves." Vektoria said with a disdainful roll of her head.

That thought still couldn't be reconciled. Again, Vektor asked, "Why did they do this to their son?"

Growing fed-up, Vektoria shouted, "Are you broken or something? Can you not understand what I'm saying? Those graceless deities cursed us, too."

He met her dark, endless void eyes and said, as definitively as possible, "Our whole existence is a means to an end. Our whole function was to serve in the narrative they wrote until Inferno popped. We aren't real, Vektoria. We've never been from the start."

She recoiled, pressing into the back of her seat. A program filled with fear. A dangerous thing. Before she could form her retort, Jonathan stood and shouted, "You're absolutely real. Both of you."

"Yeah. Absolutely." Doktor joined in, standing as well. "Doesn't matter how you started, you've both changed a lot from when we first met."

"As if we had any choice in the matter." Vektoria snarled, tossing Royalty off and tumbling to the floor. "They tore me in half. They broke me for the fun of it. And then they had the audacity to dangle victory in front of me as if I had any chance of ever reaching it. They should face their retribution and lay down their own lives for once."

A tear. A shadow. A child.

White eyes. A smile. Laughter.

A fire. A downward path. A tea party.

Error, Error, Error.

Vektor was thrust back almost physically as he slammed into that wall of restriction and corruption. He had to hold his head as it pounded, unable to take notice of how Navigator went to Royalty's aid and Wolf slammed Vektoria back into her seat so she couldn't attack. Doktor, Professor, and Jonathan all noticed his distress, though. Tentatively, Professor asked, "Should we bring this all up to the authorities?"

"Sure. That'll go over well." Beauty said with a scoff.

"You really think they wouldn't side with Dante's parents on this one?" Paige asked in a drawl. "Damn rich kid, you're a part of the problem here."

"We can demonstrate, though." Doktor pointed out, a strained sort of hopefulness in his tone. "D'ya think Mister Williams or Officer Riviera have framework? We could show them the game if they did."

"They'll wanna shut the whole thing down." Omen said in counter.

"We can't let that happen." Vektor said near automatically. "Not only would that erase everything in the system, from the Guardians to my Kingdom, but it would also hinder our best chances at dampening some of Inferno's worst warping."

"Dampen his warping?" Doktor echoed. Then, even more bemused, "Wait. You're saying, the computer can really help Dante?"

"I thought it was the cause of all this?" Royalty said, just as confused.

"Dante's parents are the ones who caused this." Omen clarified with a helpful gesture around all those gathered. "The Rabbit Hole is just the tool they used. On its own, it's just a game with the capabilities of influencing reality."

"Rewriting reality, more like." Beauty said, flipping a page in his book.

Professor opened his mouth, but held himself back from speaking. Something seemed to upset him. Vampire said, "While it's a nice idea, I wouldn't trust even my father to help us. We're all too tied to the Vicario Company for this to not backfire on us in a spectacular fashion."

"Adults and Authorities are the Enemy." Vektoria said. She pushed Wolf's hands off her shoulders to stand and grinned cruelly at them all. "Aren't you tired of learning this lesson? Inferno had the right idea, just a lacklustre execution."

She drew her hand to her neck and wrapped her fingers around it, never dropping that smile. Her pantomime was too good. Vektor asked, "What does Puppet have to do with what happened to Inferno?"

"Puppet?" Navigator questioned.

"I forgot everyone's got a designation like we do to you." Doktor said with an annoyed sigh.

Jonathan glanced from Vektor to Vektoria, working something out for himself. "Fiamma. We saw her outside the room when the fires happened." He said.

"Follow her strings." Vektoria said. She stepped closer to Vektor, losing some of that woodenness for her own brand of cruelty. It was somewhere between smug and gleeful, something not unlike a spoilt child in front of their favourite object of torment. "Ask her the questions. Maybe she'll make you revert to your true nature, you lying Prince."

He spotted her Void too late. It was so predictable, yet he allowed his guard to be lowered. He dodged away as she lunged and, thankfully, she only managed to rip into his coat with that black glow in her hands. "Can you think of nothing else? I told you our squabble is a farce." He said.

She pirouetted gracefully and glared at him, dispelling that power for the moment. "Perhaps. But if I were to finally destroy you, it'd make me feel a lot better. Wouldn't be just another discarded shadow child then."

She didn't lunge for him a second time, surprisingly, opting instead to sit back down and sulk. Beauty grumbled, "I'm tired of witnessing all these murder attempts."

"Might there be another way to figure out these passwords?" Professor asked, finally out of that stalemate against himself. As attention turned towards him, he rubbed idly at his neck, near where that third enhancer lay hidden. "If it's as you say. If the game really can help Dante, then that should be our main focus for now. Right?"

"Until they allow him visitors." Wolf agreed.

"Should we really keep playing, though?" Royalty asked, fretting nervously at her hands. "Just knowing what happened to Vicario, won't the school staff get on us if we just keep going without him?"

Omen frowned at the tea tray on the table in front of him. "Key player. Damn it." He cursed under his breath.

"Professor has a point." Vektor said, lighting up. The Admin passwords had to be located somewhere in the system. Where better to look than his Kingdom's own store of data? Where better to dig through the code than the very thing his family defended with their lives? He spoke too fast in his excitement at these connecting points. "The data, it can be accessed. I know where to find it. If we just keep pushing forward, we should be able to—"

Vektoria cut him off with her loud cackling. "You almost had me fooled. Good show, Prince."

The room echoed with palpable confusion at her outburst. Growing aggravated, Vektor shot her down with a dismissive, "Returning to my Kingdom is secondary. Our first and foremost priority—"

"Is going against your fate to score a petty win against me." Vektoria cut him off again.

He moved on from aggravation to actual anger. "The stores of data kept in the Mainframe will have the information we're searching for."

"Doesn't the Library have that, too?" Vektoria said in challenge. "Why not just stop there and ask Latin? Why go so far as to return to your precious Kingdom?"

Wolf growled out a simple, "Your mission."

A stab of something sharp pierced right through Vektor's chest. It was enough to make him wince, but when he searched out its source, there was nothing there. It was entirely imaginary. "We can search the Library as well, but the Mainframe holds the raw code." He protested.

"Vektor, we're tired." Navigator said. "Our friend is in the hospital. There's no way we can juggle the game along with the rest of our responsibilities right now."

Vektor looked at each and every one of their faces. Wolf glared with those freezing eyes while Professor and Doktor both remained doubtful. Navigator's decision was made. Omen and Beauty weren't willing to let this convince them either way and Vampire was too much a coward to make a stand on this. Royalty was still too nervous to voice her consent and even Jonathan, sweet Jonathan, was too torn on the subject to offer his assistance.

Vektoria had sown dissent. She finally succeeded in her plots to splinter him from his team. His friends.

"So be it." He declared, holding himself up as imposing as he could. His grandfather taught him how to stand his ground. Professor held a similar air about him and Vektor drew from that as well. His stubbornness had been learned from Navigator, Wolf, and Inferno; only the best. "This is where we part ways. Sincerely, I thank you for taking me as far as you have. You all have my eternal gratitude."

Jonathan started, "Vektor—"

But Vektor turned on his heel and stormed out of Omen's house. There was no time to waste. He had a whole level to traverse and not a lot of Speed to his name.

If they refused to assist him on this, then they were no better than Inferno when he turned his back on their friendship values. They were no better than Vektoria, who spat on those values entirely.

Never before had he understood how Inferno could boil in those flames until this moment.

"Vektor, wait." Jonathan called after him.

But he was livid. Livid. How could his friends, his teammates, be so willing to put everything on hold now when this was the time for action above all else? If they all wanted even a small chance

against the Creators and Inferno's own nightmarish code, then it required the Admin passwords. The data for which was locked inside the Mainframe.

Which meant, quite logically, that their best bet of assisting Inferno lay in reaching the Mainframe.

To think he was doing this for his own gain. To even consider Vektoria's arguments! It was a clear betrayal of everything they'd built up together and that pain sat in his chest, fuel to his rage.

"Vektor, sheesh. Can't you wait one mo'?"

Jonathan caught him finally, a hand on his shoulder. Roughly, not gentle how it usually was between them. That fury peaked at the top of his head and he whirled on Jonathan with an outburst of, "How can they say they care for me or Inferno if they allow a roadblock like this to halt them?"

"Woah. Okay." Jonathan withdrew his hand from Vektor's shoulder, taken aback. Vektor was a mess, of course it would startle him right now. "I'm not gonna stop you. Okay? Just breathe, take a mo'. You're leaking a bit there."

Now he was gentle. Now his touch was feather light and intimate, wiping some of the wet off Vektor's cheek. Oh, Vektor was crying again. He furiously rubbed his face dry with his jacket sleeve and said, "I would hardly call this a bit, Jonathan."

"A lot, then." Jonathan conceded. He stepped away enough to allow Vektor his own space; he was quite good at that. Hyde was the one who needed to learn how to respect boundaries. "Anyway. I want to help as much as I can. I can get you in the game and help navigate where you need and all."

Sniffing, because these tears refused to cease *why wouldn't they stop?*, Vektor said, "Thank you. Really, thank you. But I cannot ask that you put aside your own obligations any longer. Just logging me into the Rabbit Hole is all I will ask of you."

Jonathan met his eyes and said with that quiet fierceness, "You know I'll go beyond what's needed. For you, I'd do anything."

Vektor was incurably fond of him.

He pressed a quick kiss to Jonathan's cheek, getting a squawk of, "Not in public!"

"Let's make haste, then." Vektor said, charging forward along the path before him. The trees of the area, the looming manor slipping away behind them, it was all just set dressing for this moment. It was all inconsequential now that he was set into his new goal. "The Brown Hollows are the last blockade between us and the information which could potentially assist Inferno."

Jonathan fell into step beside him, hands shoved into his coat pockets, and drawled, "Please, don't tell me you're planning on blitzing through the whole level in one sitting."

Vektor smiled at his crass joke, but shook his head. "Not blitz, no."

Wars were won and lost on such reckless battlefields. With his Speed as it was, a blitz would be pointless. Attrition would be a much more apt way of describing what he planned on.

"I intend to at least make it to the first checkpoint. From there, we'll take things as slowly and carefully as needed."

"Gonna wear it down, huh? Nice strategy there." Jonathan said with a chuckle.

Bitterness welled up from those wounds in Vektor's chest and he said, "It's how we made it so far in the first place."

They'd come so, so far. Why refuse to continue now when the final stretch was before them? When they had to help Inferno now more than ever? The jangling of his charm bracelet caught his ear and its weight was suddenly unbearable. He stopped in his tracks to unclasp it, to gather it into his palm as if it burned him.

Doktor's choices were careful ones. Considerate, even. The chain wasn't silver. Silver was meant to ward off faeries. Grandfather always said Vektor's hair was such an unlucky colour.

Gold, however. Gold was the colour of kings. Of royalty. Of the Create pulsing through Vektor's code.

It would be petulant to toss the thing. To find a rubbish bin and be rid of it, to bury it amongst these trees as a reminder, a grave marker.

That team, his friends, rescinded their deal. Rescinded their friendship.

It was only fair.

They didn't care for a stupid little Prince. Didn't care for a fading Inferno. Why should he?

They didn't care.

Why should he?

Jonathan watched him carefully, eyes trained on his hand. Would he retrieve the trinket should Vektor rid himself of it? Would he only hold onto the ones meant to represent himself and Hyde? Vektor looked at the bracelet again, at the ember gem for Inferno, the wolf for Wolf, the beakers for Jonathan and Hyde. A computer for Navigator, an atomic symbol for Frank, a gun for Professor, a feather for Ravenell, a cat head for Cat, a duck for Duckie.

Secretly, he'd hoped to add to it. An eye or snake for Omen, a bat or bottle for Vampire, a book or bear for Beauty, a snowflake for Royalty.

Secretly, he even thought of what might work for Vektoria. A padlock, perhaps.

Even were they all to abandon him, he couldn't do the same.

He pocketed it in the end. "My apologies." He said by way of explanation. "Let's continue."

Jonathan nodded and the two of them kept walking along their path. A war of attrition could only work as long as Vektor didn't lose himself to hotheadedness.

He had to pace himself and breathe. Just breathe.

## Chapter 5: Time Heals All Burns

It was disappointing that he woke up.

The white hospital room was blinding. Dante couldn't even move, hooked up to too many machines and only half recovered from his Burnt protocol. Seemed his regeneration kept him tied to this life in spite of all his best efforts.

It restored his skin from charcoal within just a day. He heard the doctors whispering about it, wondering if his parents had fitted him with their new medical tech, if he was even actually human. Not like he had much else to do besides listen to their gossip and think about his own choices which led him to this.

Turned out, most of them really sucked. Trying to distance himself from those whom would call him a friend, trying to keep secrets that really weren't his to keep, punishing himself where his parents' hands couldn't reach; yeah, all of that seemed very silly in hindsight. Here he was, hospitalised and reaping the consequences, and for what? A chance to make his friends despise him just to satisfy his parents? Awful. That had to change as soon as he could sit up without his whole body erupting into pain.

Thankfully, the state he was in lent to the lack of spectres in his vicinity. Even though he had better regeneration than most (much better, considering his only scars from his charcoal skin were mostly discolouration; no lasting damage could dampen that inferno roaring inside of him), his thoughts weren't focused enough to manifest anything. Which wasn't just good for him, but the multitudes of adults who refused to leave him alone.

He couldn't even be considered an arsonist. Not really. The authorities asked and he told them, point blank, "I chased the shadows into that room. Then they pulled the fires out of me."

It was self-defence. That was how they'd shave it down to get rid of all the hard to explain edges. They were unsettled by the smoke still seeping from his lips at the time, but confirmed his story from all the stab wounds he'd procured. Real nice of the shadows to leave him with so many remnants of their involvement. They weren't a part of the Inferno and therefore didn't heal as rapidly (which was probably why he was still in so much pain, considering his Inferno was all but healed by this point), but it was still far too quickly for a normal human.

It was probably the only thing keeping him alive by this point, his rapid regeneration, but that was less concerning to him. Burnt manifested in strange ways. There was sand in his stomach and throat, leftovers from that encounter. Reality always found weird interpretations of the code his parents wrote.

Take, for instance, Paige's inability to succumb to any Charm. Even one as powerful as Damon's. Or, on the opposite end, Petel's ability to alter their own code in order to turn off their fear. Small things. Small interpretations that didn't quite fit with his parent's plans.

"If I could show you the truth, I would." He told the officer stationed at his door once the questioning got too grating. "But I'm still Burnt. And I need more rest to settle my mind."

The officer didn't have anything to say to that, just chuckling along uneasily. None of the doctors, nurses, or police he talked to had much to say. That Babbling Artist stuff must have been on full tilt as a damage control safety net. Whatever. He spoke the truth, too tired of all the lying. Whether or not they listened to him was on them.

He spent several days after regaining consciousness dealing with this Burnt protocol. The charcoal may have healed and he stopped breathing out smoke, but getting the sand out of his stomach was tiresome. He couldn't create, either. He couldn't even call upon his fire. It left him uncomfortably cold, which was enhanced by the frigidness of this hospital.

He missed Petel. He wanted to see them and Paige and all their friends. Unfortunately, the only visitors he was allowed were his parents.

As soon as she entered the room, Lietta went immediately to his side and started fussing over him. "Mio Dio, what happened to you, deerling?" She exclaimed, fully in character as the concerned mother. Strange for her to be using English, but Dante understood this face of hers. He didn't like it, but he understood it. "How did this happen? Thank God you're still with us. What would we do if you weren't?"

As she tilted his head from side to side, checking what skin was left and uncovered by his bandages, he winced and gave a weak, "You're hurting me."

"Are you sure you haven't found who did this to him yet?" Caro asked the officer who accompanied them inside. "It happened on the school's campus. Surely, that must narrow down any possible suspects."

While the officer explained to Caro the intricacies of the investigation, Lietta released Dante's face, allowing him to sit back in his bed. Softly, she asked, "How much did you tell them?"

Interrogation time. Fantastic. Dante met her eyes (they were brown, like Caro's, another factor which separated him from them) and said, "Enough."

She hummed in consideration, calculating and detached as ever. "That moves things up, but we can work with that. Even better if they can find a way to unlock the rest of the system's capabilities on their own."

Dante glanced to Caro and the officer, noting how deeply the two were involved in their discussion. The distraction, performing his role perfectly. Allowing Lietta to work unhindered. Dante frowned in distaste and said, a bit louder than before, "They're going to figure you out."

It didn't grab Caro or the officer's attention. He was too easy to ignore, too easy to brush off in his state. Lietta tilted her head slightly, feigning her own intrigue. "And? Did you think that wasn't a part of our plan?"



He couldn't even swallow back the fires climbing up his throat without their warmth in his body. That anger ran rampant, but he couldn't express it properly. "You're underestimating us. You're not going to win." He said, straining against that lack of heat.

Somehow, of all things, this got her attention. "Oh. You're broken." She said, as if he hadn't even made a statement at all.

She adjusted her glasses and he saw power building in her hand. A white glow with a soft pink outline; her choices in colours. She snapped her fingers and in that instant, the breath of the world went still. The room went silent, the officer's voice cut out, and even the light filtering in seemed to dull. Caro sighed and said, "A little more warning before you do that would be appreciated, my Rabbit."

"Five minutes. Tick tock, Caro." She fired back.

Her eyes changed to red. Hers and Caro's both. The same red as his own. She reached for Dante and he flinched back. "You. You gave yourselves warping." He said in accusation. "You were just. We were the trial run. That's all this has been."

"Of course." She said. "Once the technology proved effective, did you really think we'd allow you to hold your warping over our heads?"

The most logical course of action. It made sense. Dante hated that he understood her. "I hate you." He said in a half sob.

"Acceptable." She said. "Affection was never a requirement in this exchange."

She pulled his code from his chest, dipping her fingers right through his skin the same as Vektor had. He couldn't cry out at the pain this time, his consciousness slammed into an odd state of stasis. Code flowed out of him like rolls of film, revealing all the intricacies they built into him. He could easily be just another program, like Vektor or Vektoria.

"Good to see that accelerated healing works. A little too well, honestly." Lietta murmured to herself, carefully going over each and every line. Her meticulous nature might work against her if she also wasn't ridiculously fast at her profession. "Most of this is just as we left it. Good, good. Ah, here's the block."

She paused at the line in question and held her free hand out towards Caro, awaiting his assistance. He materialised a little pen with a regal heart at the top and handed it to her with a fond, "Two minutes left, my darling."

"More than enough time."

She took the pen and rewrote his code, altering a few of the surrounding details. Dante couldn't do anything to stop this. Again, again, again, all he was allowed to be was their test subject. Their output for theoreticals and how far they could stretch this warping of their system. He was deemed Change for all of their needs and none of his own.

She handed the pen back to Caro, who tucked it away in his coat's inner pocket, then snapped all that flowing code right back into Dante. "That should settle things." She said. "Now, before we

resume, tell me how you feel. It's our first time trying out this hands-on approach, I need to know how successful it ended up being."

Released from that stasis, all Dante could do was scream. His body was on fire, overly aware of the pain all over again, but still no inferno to reach for in his chest. His scream startled Caro, but Lietta merely gave an analytical and short hum.

"More adjustments on the entry factor, I take it. I swear, we'd waste so much less time if we didn't have to fiddle around with such worthless things as pain tolerance." She said in gripe.

The world regained its breath next. The machines resumed, the officer went on talking, and Dante went on screaming. It startled the officer and Caro, having recovered, gasped out of a sickeningly pretend concern. "My god, what happened?"

"He must be in pain again." Lietta answered, her own mask of concern placed right back over her analytical demeanour. She pressed her hands to her mouth, even tearing up for the show of it all. "My poor, poor deerling. Hasn't he been through enough?"

The beeping of the machines sped up with his distress and drew in the doctors before the officer could call them in. They ushered Caro and Lietta away and Dante had no choices left to him. Once again, he was unable to do anything besides follow their designs. The doctors settled him down. The pain killers put him to sleep. And his parents got away with removing his ability to exist on his own merits.

That last point stung the most. When he awoke again, less in pain and his fires burning brightly in his chest, he resolved then and there to make them regret ever restoring these flames in him.

If they dared to show their faces before him, he'd demonstrate gladly how much Change he could be. Hellfire and shadows and all.

## Chapter 6: Memories Cannot Be Reached

The Brown Hollows were a broken place. The buildings and city structure were torn and crumbling, making the path a little more straightforward than usual fare. Everything was also shades of brown, from the smoggy skies to the rusted metal skeletons barely holding their crumbling architecture together. What space inside these structures that Vektor could see was empty and devoid of much detail. Very much unlike any of the buildings he'd witnessed in the realm of his friends. No chairs to sit on, no desks for workers to stand behind; just outlines in their barest sense around which the structure took its shape.

"You should get going." Jonathan said above him, startling him from all these observations. "AIR hasn't spawned anything in yet, but it should be sending a welcoming party your way soon."

Vektor flicked his visor on over his face and summoned his key staff. "Thank you, Jonathan." He said. "My apologies, I was distracted momentarily by our new environment."

He charged forward through the crumbling buildings and away from the entry point of the level, which took the shape of a worn down bus stop. Jonathan snorted in amusement. "Wanna tell me about it?"

He was incredibly understanding for all that Wolf and Beauty thought him cold and distant. Perhaps that was due to how well Vektor had come to know him. Vektor took a turn on the cracked streets and into its conjoining tight alley as outlined. The direct path was blocked by a collapsed building. How to explain this disconnect he now harboured with his home? He settled on a simple, "This realm is fake. There's nothing here."

"The level's empty 'cause AIR hasn't sent any enemies your way yet." Jonathan pointed out.

"No, I mean." Frustration arose and Vektor had to shake it out of himself before it distracted him further. He couldn't pause even a moment; Jonathan was very right, he had to make it as far as he could while being granted this leniency. "The Hollows resemble a city, like what I've observed outside of here in your Realm. But everything is broken open or falling apart and there's not a single soul amidst the destruction. No details of life, no presence of what used to be, not even any indication that something once existed here before the destruction. It's just a city that's falling apart."

A moment passed. Contemplative silence; Vektor knew Jonathan well enough to know the man liked to consider his words carefully. Then Jonathan said, "Sounds beautiful. Haunting, but beautiful."

A laugh made its way out of Vektor at his predictable yet surprising statement. "I forget so often that you're not particularly fond of others." He said.

"Comes from years of having to deal with 'em." Jonathan joked in return.

The alley opened back out into the streets and revealed a huge structure fully intact at the heart of this level. "The Library." Vektor breathed.

"Oh, awesome. That's the first checkpoint." Jonathan said.

Just a hint of triumph in his tone was all it took for Vektor to grin. Their goal was well within reach. They would be able to help Inferno sooner than expected. "Perhaps its caretaker shall relieve us this burden of the remainder of our traversal through the Hollows." He said, rushing towards its entrance.

"You think this Guardian'll be in there?"

"Latin's domain is the Library. Hence their title, the Librarian." Vektor explained. "Their pursuit of knowledge is something even our Kingdom admires. They keep a vast store of information within their Realm and record new tomes during their every waking moment."

He had to pause outside the doors leading in, nearly forgetting in his delight that this was a checkpoint. Activation had to be performed, it couldn't be as simple as opening paths in the realm of his friends. He let the gold flow through him and lit that code with his key. The doors glowed in harmony with him. After he stepped inside, they even closed behind him politely, ensuring this checkpoint was indeed a respite from AIR's reach.

The Library was as grand as all the tales he'd heard of it; bookshelves stood in a maze at the centre and lined the walls through the upper floors, creating a marvellous display stretching far above his head. Each level circled upwards around the perimeter and the wood panelling was an exquisite assortment of shades and grains, darker for the shelves at the centre and growing lighter to an almost orange as they climbed towards the ceiling. Like the other checkpoints, it became a black unknown streaked with technology, undisturbed by the light streaming in from the windows.

The sight of it reminded him now of the night sky dotted with stars. A sight he'd become accustomed to in the realm of his friends. It faded to darkness and glittered with lights into infinity, just as he was informed the vast space beyond comprehension that existed past all inhabitable areas did.

Friends. Right. That open wound pulsed against his chest and he had to place that hurt to the side, to be dealt with at a later time.

Vektor approached the bookshelf in front of him, just up the stairs from the entryway, making up the outer perimeter of this maze. He pulled one of the tomes out and perused its data. Pure codework greeted him and he had to take a moment to adjust to the sight; vastly different from how information was presented outside this realm. It was a collection gathered on the foliage of the White Forest, naming each species and detailing their growth patterns, edibility and other uses. Which minerals made up their compositions, their wildness and how domesticated variants could differ, everything was listed in here.

"So much data." He mumbled in his awe.

"Uhh, heads up." Jonathan warned.

Vektor looked up to see Latin on one of the upper levels, staring down at him as they declared, "You're not supposed to be here on your own." Then, in a snide sort of tone, "Who let you off your leash?"

Their brown eyes spoke of danger. Of power that could easily destroy him. They were human shaped, like himself, their curly brown hair framing their face and tied back in a messy bun. They wore glasses as well, an attempt to obscure some of that danger.

They could have been a neatly dressed sorcerer for all their power.

"I've come in search of information." He told them.

They remained up on their perch for a minute longer, staring down at him. Their outward appearance was so normal, it was disarming. He was sure that, were Professor or even Jonathan to see them, they might treat them as any other human outside the Rabbit Hole. Making some decision, Latin relaxed that threat and asked, "What is this knowledge you seek? Tending a garden in the White Forest? Not sure the Rabbit Hole would appreciate swapping its genre so drastically."

"I seek the Admin passwords to the system." Vektor said in declaration.

Latin scoffed. "And why should I relinquish such dangerous information to one so witless as you?"

He winced at the insult. It cut as deep as any battle wound; their words were as sharp as that power they wielded. He kept his voice strong as he said, "All I desire is to assist Inferno. Surely, you've heard from the other Guardians about the predicament he's found himself in."

"I don't consort with them much. They're all here for incompatible reasons, anyway." Latin said. They drew a book off a nearby shelf and leafed through it, pretending to be absolutely absorbed in its contents. Another disarming feature, much like how Beauty tended to compose himself. "Tell me what happened to our little Inferno. I might be persuaded into helping if I deem it interesting enough."

In fact, most of their mannerisms reminded Vektor of Beauty. Their lack of investment, their disinterested tone, their complete and utter lack of polite conversation; Vektor had to hold back those insults ready to fly off his tongue. Mustering all the patience remaining in his body, he said in an even grit, "Inferno activated his Berserk outside of the Rabbit Hole. He's in the hospital right now and we'd like to help him switch his Create off for good."

Latin hummed, snapping their book shut. "The Admin passwords could indeed help you there." They said.

A spark of hope. "Then you'll relinquish them?"

"No. I don't think I will."

They pressed their book back into place, then withdrew another to peruse. Though he desired to snap at them, to dig his teeth in like how Wolf might, Vektor continued at his even pace and asked, "Why not? As you said, the Admin passwords could help us save Inferno. They'd give us full access to the entirety of the Rabbit Hole's purpose."

Latin's gaze snapped to him, pinning him to his spot with that immense power. "And what purpose is that, exactly? Answer me this, shadow child."

They smiled cruelly with their taunt. A very similar expression to those Vektoria made. The unfamiliar epithet took Vektor off-guard, however. Too off-guard to even think of how the answer to that inquiry was locked behind a wall in his mind. "Shadow child?"

"Ah, of course you don't recall. You've been split too unevenly." Latin sighed, shutting their book once more and replacing it on the shelf. "They were much more fun to talk to than you. I suppose at least you're not as boring as that Thief."

"What's going on, Vektor?" Jonathan asked, his voice echoing from somewhere in the ceiling.

It was so tall that it sounded as far away as it would in the rest of the level. Vektor had grown weirdly used to that closer intimacy when speaking with Navigator in the other checkpoints. All the same, however, it was comforting to have Jonathan as his navigator for the moment. It seemed that Latin recognised how Vektor tilted his head up to hear better and tutted like a disappointed teacher. "Outside help? And here I thought you better than that."

In the blink of an eye, they were on the same level as him. He startled back and heard Jonathan say, "Oh. That doesn't look good."

Then Latin struck him soundly in the chest and he tumbled through the void, falling once more outside the Rabbit Hole.

When he landed in his scanner and promptly fell out as its doors opened, Jonathan was there to catch him. "Well. You made it to the first checkpoint." He said encouragingly.

Once more, Vektor had to swallow his anger back like flames on his tongue. "Latin won't be of any help." He reported through that broiling black fighting to get out of his throat. "We'll have to forge onwards towards the Mainframe."

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Getting to the second checkpoint proved to be much more difficult. And since Vektor didn't want to keep Jonathan occupied with only this quest, he made the decision to stay inside the Rabbit Hole instead of allowing himself to get booted by the enemies AIR sent his way.

"You sure this is okay?" Jonathan asked, too wary to leave once they reached this stalemate. "Won't Latin just kick you if you stick around? I don't want you lying on the floor here until you can get back to your room."

From the upper floors, Latin went about their business, recording their gathered data and not paying him any mind. They allowed him to remain so far and hadn't even made a comment when he dropped back in. He said in a softer tone, "I will discuss the matter with them. If I am to be kicked, we'll deal with the situation that results then, Jonathan."

After a beleaguered sigh, Jonathan gave a final, "Good luck. Call me if you need me."

Vektor missed him immediately, but couldn't allow it to sway his resolve. He had to get back to his Kingdom, to crack open this system. He had to help Inferno.

He stepped onto the maze platform and sat down, leaning against one of the shelves. His armour clinked against the wood in a pleasing way. There was nothing more to do than to wait for this cycle to tick over and AIR's mood to change. It was always the most difficult part of this whole thing, this waiting. At least the cycles in here went by much quicker than those of the realm outside.

"Still at it trying to reach your solution?" Latin asked, suddenly standing beside him. "I thought you'd have the sense to heed my warning."

He jumped to his feet in surprise, but they didn't seem hostile this time. Not that their mind couldn't change at any moment. They seemed more intrigued, as if he were something new to study. Perhaps he was.

"Why are you here by yourself?" They asked next. "Where are the other players who are supposed to be your escorts?"

They held a book in their hand, but their whole focus was on him. The reminder of his teammates brought back that broiling, bubbling anger and he manifested his key staff without really meaning to. "They have responsibilities to manage in their home realm." He said. "I do not."

Latin observed him a moment, then said, "Abandon them before they abandon you. I can see what led you to that conclusion."

"I'm not abandoning anyone." Vektor protested even as that anger turned black like the blood of the shadows. "The entire reason I'm doing this — I explained it to you, I have to help Inferno."

"Humans are irrational. I'm sure they don't see it quite the same way you want them to." Latin said. Their gaze fell to the book in their hands as they jotted down more data into its pages. "Perhaps by refusing to assist you, they've already abandoned you to your fate. After all, should the story reach its natural conclusion as written by the Creators, the whole of the Rabbit Hole will be completed and shut down, taking its golden key and remaining secrets locked inside its heart."

"The system wouldn't just shut down." Vektor said, adamant. "The Creators — surely, they wouldn't allow that. They wouldn't delete all of you. You Guardians, you're human, too."

Latin paused in their work and turned a smug sort of smile down on him. An expression he'd liken to one of Cat's when playing around with Ravenell. "No concern for yourself? Aren't you afraid of deletion?"

Vektor summoned his visor to at least hide some of his expression, dispelling his key staff while he was at it. He knew that he wasn't thought of as something entirely alive. Though Inferno and Doktor seemed adamant that his personhood mattered, he was, in truth, a simple computer program carrying out his script. There was only ever one end written for him.

It was why he tried not to think too hard on how he would eventually leave Jonathan. How he would part with everyone, for that matter.

He regretted now more than ever just how deep those friendship values ran.

"Aren't you afraid at all?" He asked in the end, quiet and unable to act the confident leader he was meant to be.

Latin chuckled and went back to their cataloguing of data. "Nothing exists for me out there anymore. All us Guardians have long been declared deceased."

"But still. Are you not at all afraid?" He asked, insistent.

"Release would be nice after so long, honestly." They answered, sounding almost wistful at the thought of total erasure. "I'm sure Orpheus and Stein would agree with me on that."

They snapped their book shut and sent it off to its place on one of the upper levels. They then pinned him with their intense gaze and interrogating tone.

"What do you have to lose, shadow child? You've been torn and broken, fed lies to accentuate the urgency with which you hurtle towards your own end, and told again and again that your existence was never important. What is it in this cursed existence that you value so much that you would fear deletion?"

Though he wasn't any less unsteady, he forced himself to dispel his visor and meet their challenge with as firm a conviction he could manage. "I don't wish to lose my friends." He declared.

If there was something he could do for them, then he would do it. Even if at this current moment, those bonds were strained to the point of fragility. As far as he had been shown, that was the point of friendship, after all.

Inferno brought himself to ruin in his attempts to save them from this end he saw. Vektor and everyone else would refuse to allow him to write himself out so easily.

Latin processed his answer for a mere moment before returning to their duty. They pulled out one of the nearby tomes to peruse its contents, their glasses obscuring their expression. "Loyal to a fault, even in the face of those who would leave you to fulfil that task on your lonesome. Tell me, shadow child, will you change your tune once you figure out that they've discarded you like a broken doll?"

"You keep calling me that." He said, brushing past their clear malice.

He had the curiosity to overpower that black blood in his throat. Might as well make use of it while it prickled at his skin. Not even thrown from their intense study, Latin asked, "What exactly do you recall about the purpose of the system?"

Even if he wanted to answer them, he had to stop as he slammed straight into a restricted file. Access denied. File corruption. Rerouting, rerouting. "That has nothing to do with me being a shadow child, as you've put it." He returned.

"Deflecting due to the inability to answer. You really are a clever little program." They grinned with the same Cat-like mischievousness as before. "The Creators don't even care that they destroyed such a special thing when they ripped you in two, did they?"

Error. Error. Error.

Vektor winced as the message flashed before him, a warning doing its best to drown out Latin's words. They spoke truths and knowledge, but this lock in his mind refused to process any of it



correctly. All he could think about were the vague and scratched out memories surfacing due to their words.

A mountainside in the evening. Darkness leading down, down, down. A room of wires. A young boy sitting at its centre, drawing a tea party for his friends.

Most of the details were too corrupted to parse. Vektor wasn't even sure why he knew it was a tea party with such certainty, let alone why he kept thinking *friend, friend, friend* over and over. "What are you talking about?" He asked, that curiosity persevering despite the pressure building in his head.

Latin shut their book in an air of disappointment. "So like Inferno. But I am restricted by the Admin passwords just the same as you and him. Enter them and my stores of restricted data will be open for your perusal."

He bowed his head, echoing that disappointment. "The Admin passwords." He mumbled to himself.

That torn memory. Was it even a memory? It was definitely odd. He was used to the details being scuffed out from his recall, such as his parents' faces and much of his time around the castle, but this one seemed less stable. This one seemed purposely ripped from his awareness, tampered with by something outside of himself.

It wasn't him. He was fairly certain about that one fact. It was a taller vantage point, thin and spindly. He had the distinct impression of scribbled eyes and a wide grin as it stared down at this friend.

Every single detail he reached for was blown out, as if there was a perpetual stream of white noise blasting through his ears. He raised his hands to cover them as if that might help, but that error persisted.

Not allowed. Restricted.

He was supposed to be the Key.

Latin disappeared, finished with their conversation for the moment. Importantly, allowing him to stay. He shook off that halting process and settled down against the shelves once more, resigned to wait until this cycle ticked over. Once things reset, he could make another attempt at crossing this next segment of the Hollows. There was still a long ways to go before he could get any answers to these myriad of issues plaguing him.

He soon fell into a doze, exhaustion overtaking him.

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"Good luck out there." Latin called from their vantage point in taunt.

Vektor paused, glancing back towards them. He'd made it to the second checkpoint, but it was always slow going against AIR. He said in return, "Thank you. I appreciate your well wishes."

They rolled their head in annoyance, knowing their sarcasm fell on wilfully deaf ears. Though Vektor hadn't quite parsed out the differences, considering his continual difficulty with trick questions.

A straightforward interpretation was still the easiest to default to. He stepped out into the level and onto its broken streets.

He had to make it to the next checkpoint. All the odds stacked against him (his limited magic and Speed, his lack of navigator, AIR's hard to gauge mood) were merely a challenge to overcome. Perhaps these circumstances lent to his drive. Perhaps it was a foolish and rash decision made in a similar way to some of Wolf's mannerisms. No matter the case, Vektor had to keep working towards the only solution he could.

As he progressed deeper into the corridors of this broken city, he sensed the ripples in the code long before finding the fruits of AIR's hand. Bad day, then. Stepping around the next corner, he came face to face with several Class IIs loaded into the clearing. It was the remnants of a pedestrian crossing, it seemed, and the five Sewer Gators snapped their jaws at him in anticipation.

They were far too big for him to dodge around them and follow the path into the drains along the street. Since they were Class IIs, five wouldn't be too much of an issue. He had better odds with these than the Rat Terrier Class Is he had to flee from the previous cycle.

He summoned his key staff, bracing for battle, and gave an automatic, "Aim for their bodies, keep clear of their powerful—"

He had to stop himself as he glanced towards the empty space behind him.

Right. He was alone in here.

There was no one willing to help him.

Abandoned. No teammates, no friends to support or cover for each other's weaknesses.

Latin's words stung more than ever in the face of such a truth.

He dispelled his staff in an instant and ran straight back the way he came. The Sewer Gators may have been powerful and surprisingly agile for how short their legs were, but they were too large to fit through the narrow crevices this path took him through. Even at his lower Speed, he could outrun them.

He burst through the Library's doors and slammed them shut behind him, holding them a minute as he panted. Back to safety. No progress. Once it was clear they weren't about to break through the barriers set up around the Library, he sank onto the stairs and held his head in his hands. As frustrating as it was, he'd just have to wait for this cycle to tick over.

"Didn't go well, I take it?" Latin asked from the upper floors.

They hadn't moved from their previous spot at all. He supposed it hadn't been that long, really. "It is the final level." He said in reply. "I suspect AIR wishes to craft a fitting challenge based on that and your own hostility."

"Artificial Intelligence Randomiser." They reminded him. "It's a program. Incapable of its own personality."

He frowned at his distasteful slip of wording. Navigator and Doktor's vocabulary affected him more than he expected. "Why doesn't it have its own personality?" He asked. "Everything else in the Rabbit Hole is programmed in such a manner, barring the enemies. Why not AIR as well?"

"Because it's the least alive remnant left in the system. Just the leftovers after the Creators were finished with you, Thief, and Inferno. A shadow of a shadow child, really." Latin answered. They continued idly recording data in their current book, flipping through each page at an inhuman speed.

Tea parties. Sketches of grinning faces. Restricted. Vektor winced as that door slammed in his face once again. "Stop calling me that."

"Only once you prove to me that you are more than that coding which remains." They snapped their book shut with a flick of their wrist, then returned it to its place on a shelf at the other end of the Library. "I'm quite interested to know if you even can, to be honest. You fight so hard to return to your Kingdom with declarations of it being for the sake of your friends, but is it really? Or has your Directive just found a way to adapt to the situation you've found yourself in?"

"Acquiring the Admin passwords might be able to save Inferno from his Punishment Protocol. A plague I would gladly release him from rather than reaching my home" Vektor argued.

"I already told you it would do nothing to help him. It might even work against what little he's done to stall things as long as he has." Latin returned easily. "His fate was sealed from the moment it was decided he would carry that Inferno. Just the same as it was for you the moment you were drawn to life, shadow child. Unlocking the true purpose of the Rabbit Hole is simply another step along that path, something you were designed specifically to do as the Key."

A rip. A tear. A splitting smile and empty eyes and error, error, error. Vektor pressed his hand harder against his head, trying to alleviate that pressure. "Why does speaking with you always give me the worst headaches?"

"Because I have knowledge. And you lack it."

Latin flicked out their hand and drew another book to them. He let out a huff of breath and decided conversation was no longer appealing. He had to plan for his next attempt at progressing through this awful, broken city. He had to make sure to use the next cycle to its fullest.

"AIR only determines a fraction of each level's experience, as you know." Latin continued, equally determined to keep up this fruitless conversation if just to be infuriating. "The levels are only as accommodating as each Guardian wishes them to be. AIR takes that data and interprets it into probabilities, a weight on how many enemies to spawn and of which Class."

Vektor shook his head in defeat. "The only Guardian willing to welcome us was the White Wolf, and even then, our luck with AIR has been abysmal."

"She's always been too gentle. The sentimental big sister type." Latin said. There was some fondness to their tone, though it was mostly covered by their usual lack of emotion. "Stein's desire to reconnect comes off as too aggressive, hence its placement in the Tundra. The only one I truly

understand is Orpheus, in charge of a level which should have been locked away from the rest of this game."

"You are both rather insistent on upholding your duties."

Their gaze snapped to him and he was pinned once more under that threat of power. "Don't forget how dangerously you're treading without either of my chosen to accompany you. Tempting me to enforce my role is unwise. I would feel no remorse in sending you back to your lesser reality and halting your progression."

Growing just as irritated, Vektor stood his ground as he argued, "Even if you were to take me out again, I would do everything in my power to return. I refuse to cease until I've achieved my goal."

"Which is, as we've established countless times now, entirely worthless."

They left their vantage point and stood before him in the blink of an eye, making him startle back a few steps. He nearly tripped over the stairs, but kept his footing. "You cannot intimidate me into defeat." He said. His voice shook and he wasn't entirely steady on his feet, but he wasn't about to back down. Not now, not to them, not ever. "As long as it takes, as many attempts as I need, I will assist Inferno."

"You know how simple it would be." They said. They raised their hand and sharpened their focus, made their danger very apparent. "The Creators gifted us immortality. A failsafe. Right up to the limits of the system."

A memory struck him then, of overflow and Berserk. Of odd behaviour belonging neither to the Midnight Bard nor AIR itself. "The Creators can manipulate the data even now. Are observing our progress through each level." He said. "That's part of the true purpose to the Rabbit Hole, isn't it?"

Latin kept their hand raised a minute longer. They didn't rescind their threat, as uncompromising as ever. Even as they pulled back and appeared above once more, filling out a new data bank, that danger never left. "You win another cycle to try again." They said. "Rest now. You'll need your magic fully replenished for the journey ahead."

They were gone after that, off to some other section of the Library. Vektor sat down on the steps, facing the exit into the level, not pleased but at least able to continue his fight.

It was his friends who taught him to fight like this. The lack of their support was a severe gash in his strategy, one he had at his back every time he stepped out and attempted to progress. Professor and Wolf's powerful forward momentum, Doktor's support, Navigator's direction, and even Inferno's raw strength; he took all of it for granted after the three previous levels and paid the price for it now. He only had his own eyes, his own capabilities, to carry him through.

But that wasn't the full scope of his regrets.

He missed Wolf's recklessness, their willingness to grin in the face of danger. He mourned the loss of Professor's steadfast wit and Doktor's irreverent exuberance. He wished to listen to Navigator's dry statements once more, to hear her gentle concern for all of their well-being.

And Inferno...

He had to apologise. He had to make up for his callousness, his disregard for Inferno's safety and peace of mind. He had to help Inferno, had to find a way to release him from all this suffering which held him down like chains.

Vektor was the Key. The Golden Creation. The Prince of the Kingdom.

They called him a Lancer. A Knight. A Robot.

Shadow Child.

None of those labels seemed right. Not after Inferno's dive through the Seventh Circle and those whispers of a memory not wholly his.

If he was shadow, then he certainly wasn't a child. If he was still a Prince, then he certainly couldn't call this his kingdom anymore.

What use was a Key that couldn't unlock?

What use was his Gold when he couldn't help Inferno?

All he could do at this point was keep moving forward. Keep charging towards his goal.

Perhaps there was some truth to this Lancer label beating in his breast.

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The third checkpoint led to the sewers of the Hollows. Professor and Doktor were right in the end, though Vektor had no idea why a sewer system would be so popular a place.

The underground paths were somehow more cramped than the broken streets above, providing very little space beside the stagnant brown waters lining the way. The code read instant log out, just like falling into a zone out of any other level, meaning Vektor had to watch his step on top of finding his way past each cycle's enemy spawns.

On his third attempt, he was ended up surrounded by four Class IIIs; Komodos whom he couldn't possibly outrun. They were about as fast as the Sewer Gators despite their smaller stature, but made up for their lack of Speed with their range. They could shoot poison out of their eyes at an incredible distance. The painfully red liquid tore right through his armour and had him tumbling out of his scanner even with his best efforts to fight back. He fell hard on the floor, too winded to even attempt catching himself.

Spending so many cycles in his home, where he was more accustomed to the gravity and the quicker turnover, really threw him off his balance out here.

This was reality.

His home was the world that didn't exist.

He slammed his fist against the cold floor and resigned himself to wait for his body to adjust.

Jonathan wouldn't check in until evening. Vektor managed to convince him to focus on his schoolwork, but the navigator kept returning every chance he got to check on him. Always only for a

short while, always simply touching base before leaving again. He was good like that, listening when Vektor voiced something he wanted. Even if it took several more debates on what the exact boundaries were and where they could draw a comfortable line.

Take, for instance, their relationship. Hyde pretty insistently started this courtship by kissing Vektor and left Jonathan to sort out all the details. Such as the fact that they were to keep quiet in regards to this intimacy they achieved and save the more romantic exchanges for their private rendezvous. Vektor didn't mind so much the secrecy to it, especially considering Jonathan's status as navigator for Vektoria, but it did grow frustrating when Doktor and Navigator asked him about it and all he could say was that he couldn't disclose the name of his partner.

That was what they were by now. Partners.

Vektor really hoped this ruin they all seemed to be hurtling towards wouldn't tear him away before he had the proper time to express this affection glowing in his breast.

The sound of the door opening caught his attention and he looked up in time to see Jonathan entering the tower. "You got kicked?" Jonathan asked.

As he knelt to help Vektor sit up, Vektor said in return, "It's too early for you to be here."

Embarrassment took over him, as per usual. "Wanted to check how you were doing." He mumbled.

His continued shyness made Vektor smile. Vektor had grown so irreversibly fond of him. "I was unable to outrun the Class IIIs sent after me." He reported. "This stretch of the Brown Hollows is less forgiving in how much area I'm allotted to manoeuvre around each enemy, leading to less leeway for me to escape should I find myself in situations like that. Also, I've decided that you and I are partners."

"That's — huh?" Jonathan paused, caught completely off-guard by his declaration. "What? How'd you decide that?"

Jonathan turned away, too flustered to face him properly. This, too, made Vektor's mind hum pleasantly. Since he couldn't much support himself under the full weight of this realm, he pulled Jonathan down in order to press a kiss to his cheek.

"Ugh, really?" Jonathan grumbled, hefting Vektor more upright and thus making it easier for him to reach Jonathan's face. "You get booted and wanna make out now? You can't even sit up on your own."

"You and I are partners." Vektor said again.

Jonathan met his next attempt, kissing him fully this time. This was interesting; just a little bit of Hyde mixed into the action, but it was mostly Jonathan himself kissing Vektor. The more he developed alongside Hyde instead of against him, the more Jonathan himself seemed to shine. Of course, Vektor appreciated both of them. Both sides made up who Jonathan was as a person, after all.

To see Hyde no longer stunted under Jonathan's more controlled cool was something he'd get to appreciate longer should they meet this goal.

When Jonathan pulled back, he gave a defeated, "How'm I supposed to get you back to your room like this?"

"I'm sure Doktor—"

Vektor had to stop himself. Abandoned by his team. His once friends. Jonathan made a noise in disagreement, but pulled out his phone dutifully. "You're right, Frank and Ravenell would be the most willing to help out here."

His grip on Jonathan tightened as those fractured values slashed through his chest. This would be much easier with their assistance. It was also simpler to forge ahead as he was instead of waiting on coordinating with the rest of their schedules. He wouldn't have gotten overwhelmed like he had if he had even one of his friends helping. Each attempt was quicker when based on the cycles in the Rabbit Hole than those of this realm.

If just Professor or Wolf were with him. If Doktor or even Royalty accompanied him. Perhaps Omen or Beauty, considering Jonathan.

But those were all meaningless thoughts. Inferno was in the hospital and Vektoria had sown her dissent.

Jonathan left him under Ravenell and Doktor's care, hurrying off and suppressing all of Hyde's protests. He still had a ways to go. Doktor asked, "Shouldn't we get you to class?"

"You have missed a few days of it." Ravenell agreed.

"Just take me to our room, Ravenell. I wish to recuperate my sense of gravity without having to drag myself across this realm." Vektor said.

The two relented, thankfully, Ravenell admitting, "I suppose it wouldn't do much to have you unable to even get to your classes."

"Yeah, that'd make the whole thing more trouble than it's worth." Doktor agreed.

They placed him on his bed and, curiously, Doktor remained with him after Ravenell left and the bells signalling the end of lunch rang.

After struggling a minute with what he wanted to say, Doktor professed, "I wanted to help, but. I know I'd just be a bigger hindrance. All I can do is heal."

Vektor placed a hand on top of one of his and offered up an encouraging smile. "You're much more powerful than you give yourself credit for, Doktor."

"Petel told me that once, too." Doktor said with a chuckle. It sounded weaker than his usual boisterousness and faded out after a moment. "Paige and Petel want to visit Dante at the hospital soon. They say he's been healing up well and will be allowed visitors in a day or two."

"Good to hear Inferno's accelerated regeneration is working as intended." Vektor said, genuinely relieved.

Doktor frowned at him in that same way he did whenever Vektor said something that wasn't common knowledge or the like. Being too robotic, as another way of putting it. "You think he might be able to give us the Admin passwords?" Doktor asked. "That way, you wouldn't have to keep going it alone like you are."

Vektor let out a beleaguered breath, shaking his head. "His Punishment Protocol would surely execute its worst consequences should he reveal such sensitive information. I doubt he'd relinquish his existence so readily after everything he's gone through."

Doktor contemplated his words silently. The second bell rang, meaning Doktor was definitely late, but he remained. "This whole time." He murmured. "Y'know, I knew you'd changed a lot, but I never thought you'd actually throw your everything into something like this just to help out Dante."

"Why wouldn't I?" Vektor asked, growing offended. "Inferno is my friend just the same as you and Professor are."

That stab of pain returned. Is and are. Present tense. He'd forgotten for a moment. Or perhaps he was wilfully ignoring it. Doktor smiled much brighter and said, "I guess, since his parents created you and Vektoria, you're all technically siblings."

That pain abruptly quelled. "Siblings?" He echoed, trying out the word on his own tongue.

Doktor nodded. "Y'know, like how Abe's got Perci and I've got William. Though, I guess you didn't really grow up together, did you?"

Those memories pressed at his mind once more, desperate to break free of their restraints. Desperate to overwrite all the restrictions and corruption layered over them in a fuzz.

A tea party. A friend. A long way down, down, down.

Shimmering gold. Light where there should have been eyes. Numbers and Designations instead of names.

Numbers.

Numbers!

He knew this truth etched into his code. He was so close to grasping those restricted files. So close to breaking through that lock keeping him from them.

He forced out the *zero* despite its garbled shape. Doktor jumped in surprise at the noise. Vektor could apologise later. Even on a bad day, his voice didn't usually dip down into this much corruption.

*Zero zero.*

*Zero one.*

*Zero two.*

"Is that, uh. Binary?" Doktor asked.



Vektor stretched for that memory as far as he could go. The edges of his vision blurred to static, a garbled understanding of the code around him, and he clenched his jaw tightly in his concentration.

The restriction refused to give. He was not allowed.

He relaxed back into himself, immediately resuming regular functionality. "Lately, I feel as if there's something important in those memories I cannot access." He told Doktor. "Latin continually taunts me about them, calling me names over it."

Doktor gasped and hopped to his feet. "What? The Guardian's bullying you in there?"

Vektor frowned at his friend, taken aback. "It's not anything I'm unused to. After all, you lot tend to treat me the same."

"Yeah, but we do it out of love." Doktor huffed, crossing his arms. "Ugh, that settles it. I'm dragging Abe along with me tomorrow so we can help you."

Even more perplexed, Vektor asked, "Aren't you concerned with your duties here?"

"I'm totally gonna get chewed out for being late." Doktor deflated with an exhale of breath, then snapped right back to attention. "Sorry we couldn't have your back earlier, mate. We're gonna give that Guardian a good talking to for messing with you for so long."

It occurred then to Vektor that Doktor might have seen this situation as being similar to Wolf's and Drummer. Only now, it was Vektor they wanted to protect.

A mend stitched itself over that wound. Small and fresh for now, but it was on its way. Doktor gave a last grin and wave as he charged out, headed to class. Left alone, Vektor pulled that charm bracelet out of his coat pocket.

"Communication is the key." He told it. Then, with an embarrassed little laugh, "Of course they didn't understand. Of course I didn't either. None of us were properly communicating."

He took out his phone next and sent a simple declaration to Jonathan.

Partners.

Now more than ever, they needed to strengthen these values instead of weakening them. There could only be progress if they all worked together. He had rather missed all the loving bickering that his friends engaged in around him.

## Chapter 7: Partners

"You sure you're ready for this?" Jonathan asked. "Vektor knows where he's going, but you two'll be dropped into the middle of a level you've never been to before."

Doktor and Professor both stood in a scanner each, determined and unmoving. "I've been dropped into unfamiliar checkpoints many times before." Professor said.

"And winging it's generally how we do things anyway." Doktor agreed.

Seeing his teammates, his friends, so willing to assist him brought a blooming joy to Vektor's body. "Thank you both again for your help." He said.

Jonathan smiled shortly as Doktor gave an energetic, "No problem, bruv."

"We did make a promise to you. Only fair to honour that." Professor said.

"Okay. Loading everyone in now." Jonathan announced as the scanner doors shut them inside.

Vektor closed his eyes and soon dropped through the void and into his home. The three of them landed right where Vektor had left off, this third segment of the Library leading to that hatch in the floor. Narrowing his eyes at it, Vektor said, "Ah, I should have mentioned earlier. Our current stretch of the Hollows—"

"Woah, now this is a library!" Doktor exclaimed, spinning a bit as he took in the towering shelves around them. Professor, too, stared in awe at the maze of shelves at the centre and the many levels circling upwards into the ceiling. Too distracted to stay on task, as per usual, Doktor rushed over to the shelving and plucked out one of the tomes to flip through it. "I wonder if — yeah, these are actual books. They got stuff in them." A pause as he read for a moment. "Huh. Garden Kingdom and Golden Kingdom. How'd they get Mainframe from that?"

Intrigued, Vektor drew over to ask, "Is that a detailed history of my Kingdom?"

Jonathan sighed, his voice echoing above them. "Can't you all focus for one goddamn minute?"

Doktor showed the book to Vektor and it was, indeed, a historical recounting of how his Kingdom came to be. Very fascinating. As Professor drew over to them and before Vektor could take the book to look it over himself, Latin's familiar voice said, "One of my chosen. You've finally given up and recruited some reinforcements."

Both Doktor and Professor startled, not recognising the voice. Jonathan couldn't even hear them. Vektor glanced up to see Latin sitting atop the bookshelf before them, their legs dangling above their heads from its height.

They were entirely reachable. How very odd.

Again, Doktor was taken aback. "Are you the Guardian?" He asked.

"You look like a normal person." Professor said in a staggered awe.

Latin regarded them both, then returned their attention to Vektor. "And I was so hoping to boot you next you came in. You've ruined my fun, you know."

Snapping out of his bewilderment, Doktor grew huffy and pulled his gun out as he said, "Don't talk to Vektor like that. It's disrespectful and mean."

This caught Latin off-guard. "Excuse me?"

Professor similarly came to his senses and placed his hands on his hips as he joined in. "Just because he's a computer program doesn't mean you can take out your frustrations on him. He's a thinking, living person like you and I."

"With feelings and stuff that should be respected." Doktor added.

Latin glanced from one to the other, utterly baffled. Those values glowed brighter in Vektor's chest and he stood just as proudly and stalwart as his friends. Jonathan contributed a small, "Sorry for not stepping in more. I didn't realise this Guardian was being rude on top of being a pain in the ass."

Like the switch of those values, Latin suddenly laughed. "So they are friends, not just subjects of convenience." They waved a hand and drew out a book from somewhere within the maze of shelves. Their grin became cruel, like any of Vektoria's. "If you thought parading that in front of me was worth something, think again."

"It's not a parade, it's a declaration." Vektor argued.

Before he could go on, the shift in Professor's code reverberated through the air around them. The jump in his stats from those multipliers, the clear WARNING written over him, it was startling enough in itself in spite of the lack of any outward changes to his appearance. Doktor leapt away from him with a surprised, "What the? Abe!"

One closer look at the book in Latin's hand explained it: Berserk. They activated Professor's Berserk. Jonathan confirmed with a surprised, "Wait. Did the Guardian himself just activate van Helsing's Berserk?"

"That's not fair at all." Doktor said in a huff at Latin.

Chuckling in amusement, Latin said, "Good luck making any progress this cycle, shadow child."

"Stop calling him that." Frank shouted back.

Latin was long gone, however, leaving the book atop the shelf as the only remnant of their presence. Professor oddly seemed constrained to complete inaction despite his current state of Berserk. He stood ramrod straight, eyes blanked out (and revealing their enhancer appearance; it seemed Berserk stripped a player of their glammers, as it had done the same to Omen), and that WARNING hovered about him. Jonathan asked, "Is he, uh. Just stuck like that?"

"Is he not gonna attack us?" Doktor questioned, growing hesitant now that the threat before them shifted to Professor's hand.

Vektor scanned around the Library a moment, then nodded as he found confirmation. "The interior of our checkpoints include a rule of non-combat, thus his inability to act while inside here."

"Of course. That explains everything." Doktor drawled, dropping straight to frustrated.

Jonathan seemed to share his sentiment, but for different reasons. "Is that what those words meant? Ugh, why's it gotta be in Italian?"

Testing their luck, Vektor turned Professor around and gently guided him towards the hatch leading into the Hollows proper. "Perhaps, if we stay out of his target, we can still work this in our favour." He said.

"Gonna have him clear the way for ya?" Jonathan asked. "Somehow, I don't think that'll go exactly as you plan for it to."

"Well. Not like you can pull him out while he's in this state." Doktor reasoned with a shrug.

Jonathan grumbled a short, "True."

Doktor joined Vektor at the hatch and watched as Vektor opened it, both of them taking care to remain out of Professor's direct line of sight. Once the way forward was revealed, Professor jumped down into the sewers of his own volition and took off running. Vektor and Doktor followed him at a slower pace, continuing their caution.

"AIR spawned in some Sewer Gators a while ago, so he's after those." Jonathan explained. "They're a little further ahead."

"Of course we'd rejoin right in time for the obligatory sewers section." Doktor said in a teasing complaint.

Professor's outward appearance still did not change. It seemed his only unaffected stat was his Health. Instead, a whirling saw blade of rifles formed around him, all glowing red with a crystallised texture. Each held only six shots, but the power behind each was enough to strike down even a Class III at several times its own power. Professor directed each rifle to shoot down the Sewer Gators, never focusing solely on a single rifle. Like a roulette wheel, they spun about in different states of loaded as he commanded them. His aim was sharper than ever before, each strike directly to the head of an enemy and striking them from the game in a crack of gunfire.

"Wow." Doktor said quietly, keeping close to Vektor and the ladder leading back up into the Library. "One hit, huh?"

"Yeah, I wouldn't let him get you with that if I were you." Jonathan agreed.

Professor took a shot towards the ceiling, piercing all the way through to create a pinprick of light from the outside portion of the level. It was the final shot on that particular rifle and it shattered into a spray of glittering code as if it really were made of crystal glass. Doktor flinched back and Vektor panic summoned his visor to his face, but Professor continued forward in search of more enemies, a gap now in his whirl of rifles.

As quietly as possible (Vektor cursed his armour now more than ever for being the bulk of his Defence), the two tailed Professor as he dashed onwards. Jonathan said in a much softer tone than before, "Since he's also shooting at me, I take it, I'll just say that there's some Rat Terriers ahead."

Despite his efforts, Professor shot upwards again. Doktor and Vektor paused, nearly holding their breath, but Professor pressed on. Vektor told Doktor in a hushed tone, "Class Is."

"AIR's the same as ever, then." Doktor nodded along, speaking just as softly. Then he asked quite suddenly, "Do you think if I used one of my revive bullets on myself, I could become invulnerable?"

Vektor was forced to halt all forward momentum. "What?" He asked, reeling too hard to be more eloquent about it.

"Well, I'm kinda dead already." Doktor reasoned, toying just enough with his gun to cause the rumblings of panic to flare up in Vektor's mind. "If I revive myself, it'll glitch out my data, right? It did that to Dante and all. And since I'm already both dead and alive in a sense, it'd do the same thing but more so, yeah?"

"Don't do that."

"Huh? Why not?"

Doktor frowned at him, perplexed. He wasn't aware of just how much he might change his code with such a decision. He had no idea how prominent his Persistence really was, how any sort of tampering might cancel that out or amplify it to its former strength.

He could be revived, of course. He could resume his life were he to turn that Resurgence upon himself, but that brought with it sickness. His family's curse.

Strange as it was to say, the only thing keeping Doktor alive was this Persistence refusing to allow him to die.

"I'm afraid." Vektor admitted.

It was all he was allowed to say, as the next moment he was struck straight through the head by one of those bullets and tumbled back to the realm of his friends.

The scanner deposited him to the ground as its doors opened, his ears ringing from the pain of that blow. Surprisingly, it was Navigator who helped him to his knees, saying a soft, "Easy there. Don't want you hurting yourself any more than you have already."

"Navigator?" He questioned blearily.

Things loaded into his vision slowly this time. Navigator holding him up. The scanner he fell out of. Jonathan, seated at the computer and concerned. The rest of the tower, including Wolf helping Doktor, who had also been booted. Jonathan, speaking at his usual volume now, asked, "How're you doing? That was quite a blow."

"My head's spinning." Doktor said.

Now that the entire area had loaded into his perception, Vektor asked, "What are you doing here, Navigator?"

She helped him up to his feet and he was thankfully able to stand, considering he'd only been in there a short while this time. He was still shakier than any of them, but he wasn't about to buckle. "We were gonna go see Dante." Paige said. "And since Frank and Abraham told us they were doing this, we came here to check on how you were all faring."

"Sorry I didn't say anything when they came in." Jonathan said, toying sheepishly with his bangs. "It was around the time van Helsing shot at the map, which Philips figured out was probably at my voice, so we wanted to keep quiet."

"Hunter instinct." Wolf said in clarification.

"Are we gonna be able to get him out?" Doktor asked in concern. He walked over to Jonathan's side and hung onto the arm of his chair. "He's Berserk, so—"

To all of their shock, besides Jonathan's, the scanner holding Professor opened and he stumbled out. He held a hand to his head and, when he looked at all of them, his eyes were once again covered by those glammers. "What. The Hell. Was that?" He ground out.

"He kept getting distracted by us talking, so the Rat Terriers overwhelmed him." Jonathan said in explanation.

"That Guardian. They made me Berserk." Professor went on, showing genuine anger for once. Vektor couldn't help but watch, totally enraptured with his code at the forefront of his form. "I didn't have any choice in it. I didn't even get a warning."

"Concerning." Navigator said. "But isn't Berserk a loss of control in the first place?"

"It's like how that Midnight Bard worked for Dante." Doktor pointed out.

Seeing something he could help to explain, Vektor said, "The methods are similar, you're correct. It seems Latin's method for triggering a Berserk is up to them, unlike how it works for Resident and Shiranui."

Professor shook his head, upset but recognising there was nothing he could do about it. "Anyway. You said you were off to see Dante?"

Navigator nodded in affirmation. Vektor asked, "May I come as well?"

"Of course you can." Doktor answered with a big grin, stepping in even though it didn't look like Navigator or Wolf would object. "It's not like you can keep trying to get through the game today. Besides, I think he'd be happy to see you, too."

Smiling along, Vektor said, "Thank you." Then he nodded to Jonathan and asked, "Will you come as well?"

"Why must we always move in such a big crowd?" Navigator asked in complaint.

Jonathan sat back, settling the computer into sleep mode. "You want me to go?" He asked.

"You are Inferno's friend as well, are you not?" Vektor asked. "Besides, we're partners. You've helped me the most in our endeavours to find a way to help him."

Jonathan tensed and both Navigator and Doktor cried out, "Partner?"

Vektor met their shock with his own confusion. "Yes. Partner." Jonathan's continued silence registered as mortified and Vektor winced as his blunder finally hit him. "Ah, is that. That's too familiar, isn't it? My apologies, I-I didn't mean to be so forward."

Wolf narrowed their eyes at Jonathan and said, "It's you. You're the one who kissed Vektor."

"Oh my god, you and him have been snogging a while now, haven't you?" Doktor joined in.

Jonathan couldn't look at any of them, staring at the floor and completely upset. Vektor didn't want to backtrack more than he had already, but Jonathan just wasn't comfortable being open about it yet. Hyde was a testament to that. Vektor started, "Any inquiries into the matter—"

But Jonathan shouted over him, "It's not me, I'm not gay."

He took off, running straight out of the tower. Navigator said to Doktor, "It really was quite obvious, wasn't it?"

"Whoops." Was Doktor's only comment.

Vektor wanted to go with them. Inferno was important to him.

Jonathan was important, too, however.

"Excuse me, please." He said to them.

Before they could stop him, he ran after Jonathan on his less than stable legs. Of course, he ended up stumbling and planting his face into the ground, but he got up quickly to keep after his friend. His partner. Jonathan was so very important to him. He had to make this right.

"Jonathan." He called.

He shouldn't have called out, but he was desperate. He knew where to look for Jonathan, knew all their meeting places by heart, but there was so much more at stake all of a sudden.

"You cannot keep denying yourself." He said, tone even and more to himself. A confirmation of what he wanted to say to his partner once he managed to catch up. "Hyde would agree with me. Denying him is what's driving this wedge between you, between us, between everything and everyone. Please, just talk to me about this."

"Can you stop? We're in public." Jonathan protested.

There he was. Vektor rounded the corner headed towards the gymnasium and found him covering his face, leaning into the wall as if it could hide him. He suppressed Hyde as best he could despite Hyde's best efforts to take control. Vektor went to him and gently, gently grabbed hold of his arms, making sure not to pull them. Just a reminder of his presence, of his support and comfort should it be desired. "Why are you so afraid of showing yourself?" He asked. "I like you. Our friends like you. You shouldn't have to act like you need to be someone else for that to be true."

Jonathan removed his hands from his face just enough to meet Vektor's eyes. It was a clear battle in his expression, Jonathan deeply embarrassed and Hyde absolutely furious. "I don't need to be liked." He forced out. "I haven't been liked for so long. I don't need it. That's worthless to me."

"Then why run when your vulnerabilities end up revealed?" Vektor asked. He released Jonathan's arms in order to cup his face, to press close to his very dear partner. "Why push away your self until it's bursting from your code? If acceptance isn't what you desire, why continue moulding yourself for and against it? Haven't we displayed enough understanding to be trusted with that pure self?"

Jonathan wanted to pull away. Vektor could see it in his eyes. He did not do so, however. Hyde had just enough control to ask in a smaller, more distraught voice, "What can I do if they decide to hate me again? I couldn't take it if I was abandoned. I couldn't take that again, not again, not again."

"We're not going to abandon you." Vektor said. He could see the light of his own glow reflected in Jonathan's eyes, a warm gold adrift a sea of black. It was an automatic reflex to soothe. He hated seeing his partner in the throes of such terror. "I can't promise this, but I believe in our friendship. You'll have to take that chance and believe in us in turn."

"I've taken too many chances already. I don't have any left." Jonathan wrested control from Hyde and pulled away from Vektor. "This was stupid to begin with. We shouldn't have ever started this."

Vektor squared his shoulders in defiance of this twinge in his chest. That clear rejection strained these values, threatened to rip that wound back open. "This courtship between us is one of the reasons why I would do all I can to protect this realm."

Jonathan frowned at him in disbelief. "Your teammates are important to you. You don't need me adding to that."

"You were the only one willing to help me this past week." Vektor went on, growing heated. That fiery anger rose right up his throat, just as it had when those values were last threatened. "You are important to me. We're partners. Why must you keep denying this fact?"

Jonathan leaned into the wall of the building once more. Hyde clawed his way back to the forefront, no matter how desperately Jonathan tried to physically hold him back, slapping his hands haphazardly across his face. Hyde made him admit, "I'm scared of losing you. I'm scared you'll discard me once you reach your goal. That you'll find something — someone — better once this is all over."

The same fear held by the rest of Vektor's team. He understood this one much better. Tentatively, he stepped forward and tilted Jonathan's face up enough so he could stare into his one visible eye and its black and grey colouring. "I'm afraid of losing you as well, you know."

Jonathan scoffed. "Sure. Of course you are."

"Why wouldn't I be? My goals have shifted so much as I've adapted to this realm." He said. "Returning to my Kingdom is still important to me, but having you remain by my side is also one of my priorities. Keeping my friends safe became important to me, too."



Slowly, Jonathan pried his hands off his face. His eyes were wide with a trembling fear. If Vektor learned anything from watching Inferno and Wolf's dance with this tangled emotion, it was how best to dodge around that paralysis. It was how best to combat everything holding them back.

"Fear is a natural reaction to attachment." He explained, keeping that layer of gold to his tone as a soothing balm. "The more you open yourself to others, the more pieces of yourself are spread unto them. The more of their pieces are stuck onto you. It's natural to fear losing what you're given, mourning what you've taken. It's up to you whether you take those pieces and mould them into your strength or keep yourself brittle so that even the slightest of blows will break it."

"Sounds better to keep all my pieces and accept none." Jonathan said in a lash of frustration.

"Perhaps." Vektor nodded in acknowledgement. "But even if those bonds were ripped from their place, I could never regret fostering their growth."

It took a minute of grappling before Jonathan gave a drawn out and beleaguered sigh. "Excellent vocabulary. You really learn at a fantastic rate."

Vektor perked up at the compliment. "It's my first and foremost method of navigating any realm."

"It makes you a surprise every time." Jonathan complained. Then he added with a smirk, "Partner."

Vektor laughed, endearment warming his chest and settling those upset values. "You're the surprise, Jonathan."

He stepped back, allowing Jonathan to stand off the wall. He brushed his fingers through his bangs to settle his nerves. Hyde and Jonathan both were so focused on the way their bangs sat in their face. That strain in Vektor's chest mended neatly; he needn't have worried at all. From the sidelines, Wolf called, "You two gonna kiss and make up or what?"

Jonathan flinched at their voice. It seemed they followed Vektor, bringing the rest of their team along with them. Navigator called, "We reserve the right to make sure you're not taking advantage of our witless Prince."

"That's a good word." Doktor said, amused.

"Fantastic vocabulary." Wolf agreed.

Jonathan buried his face back into his hands, mortified all over again. "I really wish you lot weren't such a package deal." He mumbled into them.

Vektor took one of his arms and gently guided him over to the rest of their group. Professor was the only one to look appropriately sheepish and said, "Sorry for tailing you. We just wanted to make sure things would be okay."

"You really ate it after running out." Doktor pointed out.

"We're ready to visit Inferno." Vektor said.

Navigator shook her head at them all, but didn't protest. Neither did Jonathan. "Let's get going." She said. "We've only got so long before curfew."

"Too bad we can't just take our supper to go." Doktor said, drooping in a sudden shift to morose.

"I'll get everyone something before we get there." Professor promised him. "The sooner we get out there, the longer we'll have to visit and make sure he's doing well."

Wolf nodded, charging ahead of their group. Vektor followed along and as they left the campus, Professor only needing to inform the Officer of their planned study session at his home, Jonathan eased out of that deep embarrassment. He even took Vektor's hand to hold in his own. The mingling of Hyde's code was still minimal, but that it showed at all made Vektor proud to see it.

Partners. They were partners.

And their teammates were a pack.

Vektor would do everything in his power to make sure they all made it out of this scenario. Even if it meant he couldn't see the end of the story himself.

## Chapter 8: A Hearth in the Hospital

Dante decided, in the end, to keep his flames to himself.

They returned to his chest, his skin, but it was less comforting than he expected. They were never his. They were never fully his. The Queen and the Rabbit were in charge of the whole court. His whole being, fires and all, belonged to them. Was dictated by them.

He had to keep quiet about these gifts not truly his. Fall back on better tactics. Wait just a little longer so that his broiling anger could consume, at long last, these dictators whom he despised.

His thoughts were so filled by the fires that he couldn't Create much else. He was so focused on this end goal that it shocked him when his next visitors were those he called his friends.

The moment the group of them (Paige, Petel, Frank, Abraham, Vektor, and Jonathan; an odd collection, really) entered and saw him sitting there, awake and present, they exclaimed a jumble of things (his name, surprise at his state or awakeness, just noise) and crowded right up to his bed. Completely baffling. He could barely manage a nervous little, "Um. Hi."

Bandages covered the skin regrowing on his hands, his arms, his face. What was visible was scarred like melted leather, like stripes of texture breaking up his once smooth skin. Despite turning to charcoal, it hadn't stopped his skin from melting off. The doctors were surprised he hadn't died and assured him that the scarring was preferable to death. At least he didn't need to wonder if they were visible to anyone but himself. It was quite obvious from the way they tended to avert their gazes, from the way they intensely studied him that these scars weren't hidden at all.

His appearance was warped so much already and yet these friends were still glad to see him.

"They're taking care of you, right?" Petel asked, their intensity more than double what it usually was.

"Should you be awake? How are you feeling?" Paige asked next. She looked close to tears, pressing her hands to her mouth tightly.

"Nothing's tried getting you while you've been in here, have they?" Frank asked, pressing both hands to the corner of the bed and leaning over as far as he could get. Importantly, he made sure not to touch Dante at all. "I mean. You're safe here, right? From all that?"

"Have they charged you with anything? We can vouch for you if they need convincing." Abraham said.

"You're out of your Burnt protocol. That's good to see." Vektor said.

His comment in particular struck a nerve. Not just with Dante, but with the rest of their group. Jonathan gave his head a short shove and said, "Chill with the diagnosis. We're not here about that for now."

Vektor huffed at him, rubbing the back of his head, but compliantly said nothing else.

Looking around at all their faces, at all these friends, lessened that broiling fury in Dante's chest. The fires continued to thrum in him, but it was determination that beat along in his heart. It was the desire to protect them all from those two Creators at the top.

A bit haltingly in his nervousness, he admitted to them, "I've been, uh. Lying to all of you. And I-I'm sorry about that."

"Just based on everything that happened from you trying to tell us the truth, I doubt any of us hold it against you." Frank said.

Petel said in a powerful declaration, "It's not your fault."

"We still love you, Dante." Paige declared next.

Recovering from his sulk, Vektor said, "You're our friend. We want to do all we can to assist you."

"Thank you." Dante said, emotion pressing at his eyes. "Thank you all. I-I still. It's still wrong of me, but. I don't deserve any of your kindness, but."

"You deserve it." Petel said, interjecting before he could finish that thought.

They moved to grab one of his hands, but thought better of it and settled for simply meeting his eyes with the full brunt of their affection and conviction.

Of all their loving gestures before, of all their importance and meaning, this undid him the most.

He couldn't sob very well in the state he was in. Noise was unpleasant and everything still hurt too much to really reconcile, but his body could find no other outlet. He sobbed for the love he was shown by those he had hurt and who refused to leave him, refused to regard him as the monster he was. He sobbed for their forgiveness which he wasn't owed, which he didn't deserve, and yet they gave so freely anyway.

They wanted to keep him in their lives.

They wanted him to live.

After so, so long of wishing for the end, he wanted to honour that wish. He wanted them all to live.

They all sat with him there until his tears ceased. The nurses tried to remove them, but they all refused to budge. Dante, too, shouted to let them all stay. He would pull out his flames if needed, but thankfully it was understood and now he sat with all of them, listening to their discussion on where to go from here.

"So you're three checkpoints in." Paige said, sitting beside Petel and Frank on the bed as they faced Vektor, Abraham, and Jonathan, who all sat in the visitor's seats. "That's honestly way more than I expected to hear, considering you had to go it alone."

"How'd you even manage it?" Frank asked, leaning forward a bit in his interest. "I bet there were a bunch of times where AIR spawned in too many enemies just to be awful."

"Cycles in the Rabbit Hole progress at approximately four times faster than they do out here, as I've mentioned before." Vektor explained. "Thus, I only had to wait for one to roll over before making another attempt. There were, of course, times in which AIR worked against my best efforts, but I had four-point-five times more chances than usual, and more opportunities inevitably means one of those chances will be successful."

Dante nodded along, just as fascinated as Petel at his words. Jonathan said, "Longest stint he did was four days. And then I'd help load him back in before even the morning bells rang."

"Yes, Jonathan here was instrumental to my progress." Vektor agreed.

The Prince smiled over at Jonathan, who grew embarrassed and bowed his head to fiddle with his bangs. Frank grinned at them while Paige gave a resigned, "Sorry again for just leaving you to it. We were all a bit, you know, about what happened."

Vektor's attention snapped back to the conversation and he said, "Hardly fair to expect proper and clear communication under such heightened emotional duress."

"But didn't you say Latin told you how the Admin passwords wouldn't help me?" Dante asked.

Their eyes turned to him and he had to fight back that immediate instinct to shrink away and hide. These were his friends. He wanted to participate. Vektor said, "Latin spent a great deal of time doing their best to goad me into forfeiting my pursuit of this knowledge and therefore I refused to listen to a majority of the information they used towards this endeavour."

"Now that's stubbornness." Abraham said with a laugh.

"Besides, where I originated doesn't matter beyond being the reason as to why I'm here today." Vektor smiled again, a lightness to it that nearly distracted from the sparkle of his eyes. "I am, right now, Vektor Ketziah. That's what matters as I stand here before you, a Prince and a program."

Vektor was the one making so much use of that ability to learn and grow. Dante was in absolute awe of it. "You really are listening to us." He murmured.

"Lowest rung, but pack." Petel nodded along.

"Petel, please." Paige gave their shoulder a light shove, rolling her eyes. They laughed as she said, "Latin told you that the passwords had something to do with the true purpose of the system, too, didn't they?"

"You think it might work like the tech in that announcement the Vicario Company made?" Frank asked.

Vektor deflated as he admitted, "Were I able to recall the actual details, I could tell you. Unfortunately, that information has been locked away, along with my memories of where I truly come from, behind those same passwords."

Frank lolled forward in disappointment. Dante hummed to himself, thinking over these events. It was so long ago now that it was pretty fuzzy for him, too. "I was five. I think." He said.

Despite his quiet tone, his words caught all of their attention again. Their gazes were expectant, rightfully so, but it made nervousness ripple down his neck all the same. Couldn't train the years of literal life-saving instincts out of him. He'd built them into himself in order to circumvent his own living Hell.

"I used to, um. Make up all sorts of imaginary friends." He told them, pushing himself onward in spite of those blaring alarms in his head. This would be trouble. He had to believe this was fine. He had to tell himself it was okay. His friends deserved the truth. "My parents, they, uh. Told me to imagine what sort of sister I'd like. I didn't really think like a, well. A normal kid, so. I think — yes, I drew up a bunch of the, of the shadows, because. Um, because they were my best friends back then."

"Drew up." Vektor echoed, voice going a bit static at the edges. Then, in a sudden and painful realisation, "You invited us all to tea."

Dante laughed in his shock of surprise. "Wow, you. Yes, all the time." He confirmed. "My mother told me, make it a tea party. That's how polite society invites over guests. So I always drew tea parties for my friends and I to have."

Though it was a bittersweet recollection, the sourness overtook it quickly. Lietta used the same tactic on him. Tea party after tea party after tea party. Petel said, voice low in a growl, "They used tea parties to pick you clean."

"Right. That's the story that Midnight Bard told us." Frank said, sinking deep into thought.

That bitterness melted away and Dante fell to a pout. "That's so unfair. Orpheus told you all of that while I was stuck here."

"Yeah, seems like he really doesn't like you much." Jonathan said in note.

"I still can't believe Resident is my dad." Frank agreed in a hollow sort of understanding.

Tentatively, Paige asked, "The true purpose of the game. Is it really just to create all these creatures and continue torturing you?"

"Vektor said everything was just a build up to your going pop." Jonathan said.

Dante scrunched up his nose at the phrasing, but talking was getting easier. Admitting to all this darkness he kept so squashed behind everything else was pretty freeing, actually. Letting all the worms out of their can so they could grow the gardens once more. "Not exactly that." He said. "The purpose of the Rabbit Hole is to test the extent to which its programming can warp our reality."

Vektor perked up. "Then its full functionality can indeed help you."

"I — hm. I actually don't know for certain." Dante answered truthfully. "My code's been so. Well, you've seen it. I don't know if untangling any of it's even possible."

"Why disguise it with a game?" Jonathan asked. "Not like anyone can use it anyway, what with it being locked behind the passwords."

"For that matter, how come Jonathan and I are the only ones who can even work the computers?" Paige asked next.

Dante took a deep breath, pressing on past that danger, danger, danger sounding in his head. "The game is, um. As far as I understand it, the game part's just a way to keep the Guardians from going stir crazy. They've been in there for so long. Only the Garden existed when it was first created."

Abraham gave an understated, "Terrifying."

"And, uh. There's a glamour, a bit of code in place. Um, over the computers themselves. That keeps everyone else from, uh. From being able to see what it truly looks like." Dante answered next.

"You two have the code to operate the systems with complete understanding, a rare gift." Vektor said in confirmation, giving Jonathan's cheek a little prod. Jonathan waved him off, growing embarrassed again. Vektor then asked Dante, "You know all of our designations and subject data, don't you?"

"Subject data?" Frank questioned.

Dante frowned in distaste. Vektor thankfully explained it for him, saying, "Designation connects to each player's identity. Subject connects to their core argument. For example, Inferno is a designation, but his subject title is something different."

"Delta." Dante said, resigning himself to this truth once more. "Subject Delta. For Change."

Vektor nodded along, not quite pleased with that admission. Frank gave a soft, "So that's what you meant when you said his core argument."

"And the rest?" Abraham asked, a note of fear in his voice.

No backing out now. Taking another deep breath (one, two, three), Dante said, slow and deliberate, "Subject Delta, Designation Inferno. Subject Omega, Designation Omen. Subject Blood, Designation Vampire. Subject Memory, Designation Professor."

"Memory and blood." Abraham echoed to himself quietly.

Dante went on. "Subject and Designation Wolf. Subject Ghost, Designation Navigator. Subject Cure, Designation Doktor. Subject Blizzard, Designation Royalty. Subject Duality, Designation Hyde. Subject B2, Designation Beauty."

"Blizzard and Royalty?" Paige questioned.

"That's gotta be Nat." Frank said. "How come Petel's is the same for both?"

Petel shrugged and said, "I'm wolf."

"That's significantly less funny now." Abraham said with a sigh.

Vektor frowned in realisation and asked, "What of myself and Vektoria?"

Dante could probably get away with fudging this one just a bit. None of them really needed to know about the First, anyway. "Um. That's — Subject 02, Designation Prince. And Key. You both have, uh, have two designations."

"Of course they do." Paige said with an annoyed roll of her head.

"And Vektoria. She's, um. Subject 01, Designation Thief a-and Lock." Dante finished.

Frank turned to Vektor suddenly, his own realisation clicking into place. "You said those. Zero one, zero two. Remember?"

Vektor, however, seemed to grow numb in terror. "Zero." He echoed. Then, quieter still, "Who is zero zero?"

"The First." Dante answered.

Not entirely the truth, but also not a lie. That was important. Unfortunately for him, it wasn't a satisfying enough answer to these friends who liked to pry into the minutia. Paige asked, "Who is the first, though? What does that mean?"

His own curiosity got the better of him many times. It seemed he passed that on to his friends. Or, perhaps they all had that same burning curiosity as him; his code was used so much in places he never expected that it would make everything a little less incomprehensible. Exhaling a long breath (one, two, three), he said, "They, um. They never had a proper name. They were just. The First, before the tear."

Jonathan caught on quick, saying, "The program that came before Vektor and Vektoria."

"The tear." Vektor echoed again.

Despite the pain on his face, it looked like he wanted to remember. Like he was reaching for those memories and frustrated to be denied them. Dante had no idea what might happen should he get all of them back. Would he revert to that form? Revert to that behaviour? Would he become less broken? More so? Something entirely different, erasing Vektor from existence?

Above everything else, he wanted Vektor to continue being himself. Dante, Vektor, and Vektoria all deserved to decide who they wanted to be after living under that control for so long.

"Do you remember Vektoria telling us to talk with Fiamma?" Paige started, addressing Vektor. Hearing that name caught Dante's interests and Vektor gave a wary nod. "Well. I tried to. Petel and I both did."

"She said you were going to burn her with the shadows." Petel said, arms crossed in clear disdain.

Indignant at such a blatant lie, Dante said in protest, "I made sure she had an escape. I didn't want to burn her, otherwise I would have blocked her exit to the room."

Perking up, Petel said, "That's what I thought."

"Right. You try your best to keep everyone out of harm's way." Paige agreed.



Vektor nodded along, as did Frank and Abraham. The way Petel smiled at Dante, with all the affection in their being, brought that pleasant crackle back to his heat. He wanted so much to express this better with a touch, something, but he wasn't in the right state for it. Everything still ached and his skin wasn't able to feel much, anyway.

"She was about as helpful as Vektoria, meaning not at all." Paige continued, drooping to annoyance. "She did mention the shadows and that if you really wanted, you could get rid of all your fears at any point. That it was up to you."

"Unhelpful is right. Vektor already told us all that." Abraham said in disdain.

"Why Puppet?" Jonathan asked.

"It's her, uh. Her Designation thing, right?" Frank said.

He looked to Vektor for confirmation, who gave it to him with a nod. Dante said, "My parents have known Headmistress Ghepetto for a long time. They were even friends with her, um. With her children."

Petel contemplated it for a moment, then said, "They bargained with her. Didn't they?"

Dante nodded in affirmation, frowning down at the sheets covering his legs. "Control for a miracle. That's how they've always done it."

"For want of more time." Vektor said, a haunted sort of tone taking over him.

There was so much left to tell, but Dante was beginning to lose focus. He nearly tipped over as he nodded off and shaking himself out of it just made him aware of how much his body screamed in pain. Abraham, taking notice of this, stood and said, "We should get back before you all miss curfew."

Petel tensed in defiance, but Paige placed a hand on their arm and said, "It is getting very late."

"Rest up, mate. We'll come see you again when we can." Frank promised, flashing a little smile towards him before hopping off the bed.

Dante nodded vaguely in acknowledgement. Once he recognised just how exhausted he was, it really hit him at full force. "You should. You should tell it what a wonderful creature it is." He mumbled through a yawn.

The group paused in the midst of leaving. Perplexed, Petel asked a simple, "What?"

"Or try. Try asking it to make you immortal." Dante said, settling down in his bed. "If you're really sure. If you think you're ready for it. That'll fill in most of the blanks. Should."

He yawned again, too tired to bother with proper sense. Petel moved in slowly, pressing a soft kiss to the top of his head, and whispered, "Italian, right?"

"Mm-hm."

They were quite the wonderful creature themselves. Dante giggled at the silly thought. He would traverse over mountains, swim across seas, just to nestle himself inside their earth. Petel stepped back and said, with all the weight of a promise, "We'll figure it out. We'll help you."

"Wolves mate for life." He agreed.

"You two are disgustingly sweet." Jonathan griped.

"As if we're not partners as well, Jonathan." Vektor chided him lovingly.

Their pleasant and boisterous noise became a blur as it faded and Dante drifted from consciousness. Perhaps it was an unneeded risk to give them such a blatant hint, but Dante was done holding back the truth. He was done being a complicit party in all of this. If he could change the game, change the story even a little bit, then he'd do it by this point. Petel and the rest believed in him. It was time to fully embrace that fact and ride this rebellion as far as it would take him.

They wanted this anyway. They couldn't punish him for it. But he sure as Hell could make them regret it to the end of their days.

## Chapter 9: Memoirs of a Rabbit

As they returned to the Boarding school and headed straight for the towers, their mood grew serious and all comfortable banter petered out. Thankfully it was Saturday, so there was no worrying over classes tomorrow, but Petel doubted it would have stopped them even had they needed to worry about it.

Ahraham insisted on staying with them. "You can't expect me to return home and leave things like this." He said as they entered the tower. "On top of finally getting some answers to this mystery, I'm a part of this pack, too."

Petel grinned. "You sure are."

"Please don't tell me I'm included in this now." Jonathan said in complaint, pressing a hand to his head.

Predictably by this point (and it was getting worrying how it had grown so predictable; they supposed it was always there, they were only noticing it now that they had the answer behind it), Vektor grabbed his other hand and emphatically repeated to him, "Partner."

Jonathan ducked his face in his fluster, also predictable. These two were the ones who were confusingly sweet, it seemed. Petel couldn't wait to see the look on Dante's face when he learned about it. Paige sat down at the computer and gave an annoyed, "You can flirt on your own time. For now, help me with these translations."

"It's not flirting." Jonathan protested, way too flustered to not get belligerent about it.

"Correct." Vektor agreed. He pulled Jonathan along to the computer, standing beside Paige's chair. "Now, the second hint Inferno gave us went something along the lines of telling the system to make us immortal, wasn't it?"

"Something like that, sure." Paige half-agreed.

Just the memory of Dante sitting there, speaking with them so openly for the first time (and how battered he looked, wrapped wholly in bandages because he melted all his skin off in his fires) made Petel so grateful their mate was still alive. (Made them want to throw up.) Paige finished typing and leaned back to allow Vektor access, much to his confusion. "Do you expect me to enter them?" He asked.

"You can translate them into Italian, can't you?" She asked right back.

"I can't unlock the system. My own stores of data are locked behind these passwords as well, it would break the whole thing to have me enter something which I don't yet know." He protested in offence.

Petel pushed forward to rest against the back of her chair and said, "Immortal is immortale. Want me to spell it for you?"

"Someone's been studying." Frank teased.

He and Abraham drew closer to the computer as well, crowding around despite being unable to read anything on it. Paige typed in the word and said, "I can figure it out from that, thanks."

As she hit the return key, the computer pinged in confirmation and its calm green shifted to a cloudy purple. Vektor started, "So it was. Now we can—"

He halted abruptly, eyes going white and blank. It looked like someone pressed pause on him, freezing him in the moment indefinitely. Frank gave him a gentle shove, unable to move him even a centimetre, and said nervously, "Mate, hey, that's not funny. You okay there?"

"He did say his memories were locked." Abraham pointed out, though he was just as concerned.

Paige frowned at the data rolling by on the screen. "It's all in Italian."

"Should've expected as much." Jonathan griped right along with her. His tone held no real bite, however, as he seemed just as worried over Vektor as Frank and Abraham. He dropped to a mumble as he went on, placing his hands delicately on Vektor's shoulders. "Must be a lot to process. C'mon, Vektor, you can get through this."

"The end has arrived." Vektor said.

His heavily distorted voice made them all startle and he finally broke out of that freeze to lean both hands against the arm of Paige's chair.

"The end has arrived."

He kept his head down and there was a hollowness to his movements. This wasn't really Vektor speaking. If Petel had to guess, they'd say it was pure, raw data. Frank tried for a placating, "We are on the final level. The game's story is drawing to its close."

"The end has arrived." Vektor repeated.

Jonathan and Abraham were both too unsettled to do much else besides watch and wait. Petel asked Paige, "Is there anything at all you can recognise in there?"

She scrunched up her expression in distaste, staring once more at the data scrolling by on the monitor. "Some of the names Dante listed are in here. Some of our names, the names of the Guardians. Wish I actually took Italian when I had the chance." She paused a moment, then said, "Lucinda Ferre. I've never heard that one before."

"What exactly do you mean, our names?" Abraham asked.

"Do you mean like. Who the Guardians were before?" Frank joined in.

Before Paige had a chance to reply, Vektor said suddenly, "A Direct Account of the Rabbit Hole as recorded by the White Rabbit."

His voice was clearer, but there was still something very off about it. Paige scrambled to get her phone out as the rest of them watched on in shock. Vektor lifted his head to watch the screen and read off the data in a clipped, precise manner that made the hackles at the back of Petel's mind raise in protest.

"Entry one. I grew up in the small city of Bianco with my best friend, Lucinda Ferre. She was the most beautiful girl in our school and I loved her more than anything, even if she was always running late. My family's company wasn't the goliath it used to be, but mother and father pressed me into computer science course after computer science course anyway while Lucinda took up housekeeping and other such housewife classes. They said I had an innate ability with mechanics, a talent I proved when I used some of the leftover enhancers our family kept, the components of a 3D printer, and motion capture technology mostly seen in film making to create my first prototype. I could load real world items into a virtual space, but there was no pulling them out once they were inside. They'd remain in stasis and their coding became available for me to tear apart at my whim, but to what end I couldn't figure out."

Petel had to sit down, they were reeling too much. Frank gave a soft, "He can translate."

"So that's how it works." Paige mumbled.

Vektor continued, finished with that brief pause. "Entry two. I met the Queen of Broken Hearts in one of my classes. Despite his more tactile nature, I couldn't ignore his perfect match to my own wit. He took one look at my code, my personal project, and supplied me with the answers I needed to get the items back out of my virtual space. His devotion to me still fascinates me to this day, but it's useful and his questionable past means no in-laws to deal with. I had no choice but to finally accept his proposal. Lucinda congratulated me, as did my parents, and he's happy to field all their questions while I focus on my work."

"A business arrangement? That's all it was?" Jonathan questioned.

"Dante had to grow up in that." Abraham said in agreement.

Their commentary didn't seem to register to Vektor at all. He might not have even recognised any of them were there.

He took a sharp inhale, the only warning any of them got, then screamed his next words.

"Some man I'll never know got Lucinda pregnant! How could she even think of fornication out of wedlock? I will never accept this child as hers. It may as well be the devil's seed itself. The Antichrist! She asks me to be its god-parent, but I shall never forgive it for what it's done. What it represents. Were it not for the love of my dear friend, I would banish this abomination back to the depths of Hell, right where it belongs."

If that wasn't the most alarming thing to hear. Frank gave a quiet and confused, "That's not Dante they're talking about?"

"The Antichrist." Jonathan mumbled in musing.

Abraham froze up, saying a halting, "He always. But that can't really."

Vektor straightened up out of that rage and continued with a new layer of detachment to that clipped tone. "Entry three. It killed Lucinda. She died while giving life to this abomination. The doctors said it wasn't long for this world either, being as twisted and vile as it was, but I had a promise to keep. I used a theoretical framework to upload it into my virtual space and worked tirelessly to reconfigure its whole being. Queen kept up appearances for me; he's much better at handling people than I care to be. He got in contact with our company's long suffering lawyers, the Ashefords, who were in the market for a child anyway. I got to keep my promise to my friend and I never have to deal with the headache of acting that thing's mother. As a bonus, I get to focus instead on my technology. For I saved its life, didn't I? If I can manage that, then the possibilities as to what else I can accomplish using my work is limitless."

"This is where it started?" Abraham breathed the words out, horrified and enraged in equal parts. "With such loathing and arrogance?"

Somehow, this mean-spirited nature baked into the system's core didn't surprise Petel. They were numb in shock from hearing it laid out so brazenly, sure, but everything about Dante could only point towards this sort of conclusion. "They didn't even consider him human." They mumbled.

Vektor continued. "Entry four. Resident abused his position in order to make use of the life saving technology still very much in its alpha state. I should have seen it coming, but his research into curing his own disease was too useful to pass up. Unfortunately, his recklessness led to three casualties: his two children and himself. Rewriting his code so the twisted monster he's been warped into isn't recognised as reality is a lot more difficult than adjusting an existing framework, as we do for Omega. Strange how the system, no matter what we tell it, refuses to accept that this warping is not, in fact, reality. No matter what we tried while pulling him out, it was always the same grotesque being he became in his attempts to escape his own mortality. It gives me an idea, though; is he not cured of the very affliction which drove him to this desperation? Is he not now something far more powerful than any other human can claim to be? I need more subjects, more tests to explore this theory. I need more time to figure everything out."

Frank whimpered and clung to Abraham's arm. "Dad."

"They didn't see any of us as human beings." Abraham said, placing a comforting hand on Frank's shoulder despite his clear and trembling fury.

"More time, more heads." Paige mused quietly to herself.

"Entry five." Vektor went on. "Orpheus, Latin, and Shiranui all ended in failure similarly to Resident. At the very least, they make for useful babysitters for Omega while we work, but why? Why can't their framework function the same as Omega's? I've tasked Delta with figuring this out; despite the perks of having our own child to test things with first, his endless babble and needs are more troublesome than his creativity is worth. Queen insists on supplying Delta with paper and crayons that just make a mess all over the lab, but I suppose it's a better alternative than allowing that creativity to run rampant. The last time he invited his little friends over for one of his tea parties, it took me hours to scrub all the blood out from the floorboards. Perhaps we'll go through with things on his seventh birthday. Dampening his code into something we can more readily control is a must."

The world dropped out from under Petel. "Dante." They breathed.

"He was their son." Abraham repeated.

"They really did pick him clean." Frank agreed, clinging tighter to Abraham.

Jonathan glared at the floor, just as upset. Vektor pressed onwards. "Entry six. Something made them pop. I'm not sure what, but our subjects manifesting their powers far ahead of schedule means a complete loss of several of our branches. Their destructive forces even took out Professor and Doctor Philips, Mister and Missus Zima, and Professor and Mister Vitayev. Delta landed himself in the hospital as well; only the Lord knows why he's obsessed with derailing our plans at every single turn. We had to deactivate Subjects B1, B2, Royalty, Duality, Wolf, and Ghost for the moment, lest they cause any more unexpected destruction. Our active participants, Omega, Blood, and Delta, as well as Cure, are spared for the moment. Van Helsing won't let us at his boy for more than the simple framework; I suspect he's displeased with the fact that our tests allow him and Blood more time together than they're usually allotted. His and Blood's little game makes me wonder if 00 would serve better as a guide if they had more purpose. These shadows, as Delta calls them, are useful resources for grafting life into code or back into any liquidated assets, but they don't seem to have much to their core besides cruelty. Headmistress cites that Puppet is doing well, but I fear she's leaving too much out of her reports to fully trust them. Managing every subject is growing into its own headache by this point."

"That's literally everyone." Paige said.

"My father, too?" Abraham questioned.

Vektor continued. "Entry seven. Subject Memory proves something far greater than anything we planned ourselves; the use of enhancers means we can rewrite personalities and memories to our whims. With just a simple framework and core argument, we can achieve anything to our hearts desire. Reality bends to our will and we can even create new life. This will make obfuscating 01 and 02's memories much easier than we previously attempted. Memory isn't perfect, of course, since van Helsing is a hack and refused to listen to any of my advice on how to properly install the enhancers to avoid damaging the mind and causing hiccups in their manipulation of a subject's perception. He at least allowed me to smooth over his more amateurish work and disguise the worst of it. It was useful data nonetheless. We truly can call this a fairytale ending. All that's left is to see how this story we've written for them will play out. So long as Delta sticks to the plan and performs his distractions as Queen and I have instructed, I'm sure we'll have more than enough data to begin rolling out our gift to transcend humanity soon enough. The world will know my family once more as the leaders of all technology."

Finally, Vektor stopped and his head drooped forward as his eyes lost their glow. In the resulting silence, Paige made sure to click a few buttons on her phone and let out a whoosh of breath at the result. "Saved it."

"You had the presence of mind to record all that?" Frank asked her, impressed enough to be distracted from this looming weight of reality.

Abraham touched at the back of his neck gingerly. "So it's true." He said, working it out more for himself. "My father is the one who installed these enhancers. Who erased what I once was."

"Subjects manifesting their abilities ahead of schedule." Jonathan murmured to himself. Then he said to the rest of the room, "Do any of you remember that time? I do. We've all been a part of this web since its inception, it seems."

"My parents were killed by a wolf." Petel argued on autopilot. They were having too much trouble processing all of this for it to have any of their usual bite.

In some sort of agreement, Paige said, "Mine died when our house burnt down."

Jonathan glanced between the both of them, then said, "We've all been lied to about what really happened."

That anger reared up in Petel's throat before they could figure out what they were doing. They shot to Jonathan's side and fisted their hands in the front of his coat, snarling in his face. "Dante didn't have a choice. Dante is in the hospital because of this."

"Why did you think I was accusing him of anything?" Jonathan asked, raising his hands in a sign of surrender.

The blood from that day came splattering into their mind. It was all over their clothes, in their eyes, dripping from their teeth. They had been a mess when Bassoon found them, sobbing and trying to wake their parents' mangled bodies. They had been in hiding, gnawing on flesh even though their teeth were no longer the right sharpness for it.

It was an echo of a memory, really. One they long since buried underneath the simpler one. The more appropriate one.

They released Jonathan and stumbled back. "We were their kids." They said, hollow and shaking.

"Their kids." Vektor echoed.

His voice caught their attention, being his own and free of any distortion. Jonathan closed the distance between them quickly and hovered a hand over his shoulder, asking a soft, "Hey, how're you feeling?"

"You alright there, mate?" Frank joined in, keeping close to Abraham. "We kinda lost you there for a bit."

Vektor's head snapped up, his eyes glowing with that gold life. He slammed his hands against the modem as he shouted, "We're the children of the Creators and they did this to us. They did this to their own children!"

His fury reverberated around the tower and his sharp movements made Paige and Jonathan both startle away from him. Frank flinched as well and Abraham reflexively pulled him back, protecting him from the perceived threat before them. "Steady on there, mate." Abraham warned.



"I played my part. I obeyed my coding. I followed the path laid for me and it still wasn't enough." Vektor went on, snarling as that rage burned through him.

It was more concentrated, more like the anger Vektoria usually displayed, but wholly his own. Nothing detached, nothing artificial about it.

"They tore us in half, wrote me as the lesser piece, forced us into competition with our brother, and rewrote our lives. Like we're simply toys for their experimentation. Like we're nothing but pawns to be placed upon their board. I refuse to let them get away with this. I refuse to let them escape the consequences any longer."

He dove for the front of the modem, aiming to shut the whole thing down. Paige and Frank cried out in protest and Petel, acting quicker than the rest of them could, tackled him away from the computer and pinned him against the floor. Jonathan gave an exasperated, "Aglaé was right. I'm also tired of all these attempted murders."

"We can't let them win." Vektor shouted in protest, struggling beneath Petel valiantly. Paige stood and went to help, but Petel gave a growl in warning for her to stay back. They could handle their Prince even at his most volatile. "We have to end the story. Cut everything short. If we keep going, we're just playing right into their hands. Dante was right. Dante was right!"

His anger turned then to tears and, soon enough, he was too busy sobbing to fight against Petel's hold. Jonathan walked over and Petel released their Prince, letting him latch onto Jonathan and sob into his shoulder.

"He warned us. We didn't listen. Now we're all trapped in a story that none of us agreed to. Now we have to see things through, else we'll be condemning those lives left hanging inside this cursed existence."

As he devolved into just crying, Petel stood back with Paige to watch him for a moment. Emotion flowed off him in a way it normally didn't; he was good at mimicking all of their expressions, at pretending his best to appear like them, but there was always that level of disconnect. There was always something keeping it from being believable, even if only a single layer. Now, however, it was as if it ran through his whole body like water from a broken dam. It crashed from him and their heart ached. Their body understood exactly just how much this devastating truth had shattered him.

Abraham relaxed his guard and Frank went over to sit with Jonathan and their weeping Prince, patting his back in a comforting gesture.

"It's gonna be okay." Frank said. "We'll figure this out. We're a team and all."

"There's still one more password to put in." Paige said.

"We're damned if we do, damned if we don't." Abraham said with a shake of his head.

Paige sat back down at the computer. Abraham and Petel joined her while Jonathan and Frank continued comforting Vektor. The Prince released Jonathan and sat with his knees drawn up to his chest, arms wrapped around so he could bury his face in them. He looked a lot like Dante in this moment. They were siblings; it made so much more sense now.

Petel tore their eyes from the sight and said to Paige, "Wonderful creature, right?"

Abraham perked up. "Oh, that's the title to a song. My father loves that one."

As if realising what he said, his expression dropped to annoyance. Jonathan hesitantly admitted, "My mother likes that one, too."

"Okay, but do you know what the Italian title is?" Paige asked in exasperation.

Abraham and Petel shuffled nervously, neither having the answer. Jonathan, too, went silent in thought. Frank shrugged with an unhelpful, "I didn't even know it was a song."

Vektor raised his head and declared, "Meravigliosa creatura."

"I, uh. Thought you couldn't translate for us." Jonathan said, surprised.

Frank regarded the Prince with concern as well. Vektor buried his face back into his arms and said in a heated lament, "What does it matter anymore? My whole life has led to this moment. My whole existence was ensuring that Inferno would pop and the game would be played."

All at once, the wolf understood their Prince's despair. Abraham was more than right about this situation they found themselves in. The centre scanner lit up as if activated, though its doors remained open and the spinning rings at the bottom didn't move. It was a good distraction, drawing all of their attention, and Paige stood from her chair to approach it. "Hey, Jonathan." She called, stepping inside and pivoting at its centre. "Hit that return key to start the process."

Petel went on guard immediately. "What are you doing?" They asked.

"Vektor really was right about this." She said. "We can help Dante."

Jonathan gave Vektor's back a last pat, loathe to leave the Prince, but stood and went to the computer. He pressed the key as asked and the scanner went to work with its doors remaining open. Vektor, Frank, and Abraham all watched in rapt interest as it scanned Paige without loading her into the game.

Though their hackles never lowered, it was an odd sight. Petel couldn't get themselves to approach, but it didn't look to be harming her so far.

"What is — Oh." Vektor bolted upright, knocking Frank over in the process, and joined Jonathan at the computer in order to read whatever data it displayed. "You've got it. This is it; the true purpose of the Rabbit Hole!" He exclaimed, eyes glittering in his delight.

Frank righted himself as Abraham went over to make sure he was alright. "The true purpose?" Frank asked.

"It's a code editor. Guess this is what they meant by reality warping." Jonathan explained. He allowed Vektor to take the seat instead of himself, examining the screen with a serious expression. "Looks like the main function of yours is off for now, Philips."

"The main function?" Paige asked.

"The argument of Ghost: Should they be pure fire like a Will-o-Wisp or have an iciness more like a traditional ghoul?" Vektor explained next. He typed something out on the keyboard, then gestured to the screen for Jonathan's benefit. "Seems they couldn't decide and so you were gifted both. It's deactivation means you aren't beholden to the warping as laid out here, so whatever testing they were doing either came to its conclusion or was halted until a later time."

Frank and Abraham drew over to get a look for themselves, despite the fact that they wouldn't be able to read anything. Paige frowned out of frustration and said, "I don't even remember being tested or anything. How can I be fitted with all this and even have it deactivated? Here, let me—"

"Paige, no!" Vektor shouted.

His loudness made all of them flinch. It stopped Paige from stepping out of the scanner, too. Jonathan asked in exasperation, "Are you really gonna try to interrupt a procedure from this nightmare technology?"

"You'll only get hurt if you attempt exiting now." Vektor warned.

Paige settled back into the centre of the thing with a reluctant, "Fine, fine. But I really don't remember ever being subjected to this. I don't even remember if I had similar powers to Dante."

"It's by design." Vektor said.

Jonathan frowned in displeasure. "They figured out how to manipulate our memories."

A short silence followed his words, all of them letting that disgust and anger build in the air. Heat was supposed to rise, heat was meant to climb to the top, but it couldn't reach the lofty heights of this tower's ceiling. It permeated around them like fog, like the scent of blood to a salivating predator. Keeping his tone soft, Frank said, "You called her Paige."

Abraham and Jonathan looked to the Prince as well. Vektor met their confusion and said, "Protocol is no longer something I am bound to. The rules have changed too much with everything unlocked."

"Didn't you always call Ravenell by name?" Jonathan asked next.

"You use Jonathan's name, too." Abraham added.

Vektor typed out something else, growing frustrated. "They both asked me to call them by name and so I obliged."

The scanner shut down, allowing Paige to exit safely. Frank shouted, "You mean all we had to do was ask for you to not call us our weird designations or whatever?"

"That's annoyingly logical." Abraham said, holding a hand to his head.

Vektor stood from the chair to allow Paige her seat, saying to her, "The data from the scan is kept here in a backlog, though edits are unable to be made in this state."

"Makes sense." She said in acknowledgement, looking none too pleased about it. As she went about typing, she grumbled, "So I'm a ghost, huh? I hate how much that explains about my life."

"A fire and ice ghost." Vektor supplied.

"I'm the refusal to die." Frank said with an offered shrug.

Abraham addressed Vektor as he said, "Actually, can you explain our core arguments to us? I know mine is Memory, but it seems they all might have some better insight into what exactly was going on through these tests."

"What's there to really get? The goal was to warp reality." Jonathan said, annoyed. "Nothing more or less to it. We're all just means to an end."

"But what is that end?" Abraham insisted.

Vektor froze up at the word and mumbled, "The end of the story." Before any of them could properly react to that, he stated much clearer, "For want of a nail, the Kingdom is lost. Have you all heard this cautionary tale?"

Slowly, Frank nodded. "Yeah. I think it goes, for the pursuit of one small detail, the problem grows bigger and bigger until it leads to the destruction of the whole thing."

Vektor nodded. "For want of more time, the Rabbit must steal lives. For want of more life, the Queen must gather heads."

Bitter anger dripped from their mouth as Petel said, "Dante's head."

The truth was right there in front of them. It always had been. Yet they brushed it off again and again because Dante told them to. Dante had to deny this truth to keep his own head, to keep from bursting into flames, to just stay alive. His parents tormented him, pulled out all his ideas to use as their own, and left him a babbling mess who couldn't even speak the truth. The wolf couldn't speak either, they were so furious.

They wanted to rip his parents apart.

They wanted to bite to the bone. To bleed, bleed as they clawed open flesh and tore out veins, necks, guts.

"Everyone wants to live forever." Frank pointed out.

"We should let Damon and the rest hear this." Jonathan said. "Damon knows a lot more than he let on, but I don't think he knew to this extent."

"Our conversation did kind of get derailed last time." Paige said in defeat.

While Petel was too upset to agree, too wolf to do much else but think on their prey, Vektor went over to the scanner in an odd sort of hurry and said, "Scan me."

Paige asked, "Are you sure?"

"You're just gonna go along with him?" Frank questioned.

Standing inside the scanner, Vektor looked too determined to deny. His eyes glittered with that strong golden light, actually pulling the wolf out of their bloodlust from the intrigue of it all. "You said

before that my coding is broken." He said. "This will be proof of that tear. Perhaps proof, even, of my inhumanity. I am a shadow given life and framework. A trick performed by the Rabbit and Queen to fool all who see. When considering that, there has to be something there. Some sort of message or clue or—"

"Or a key." Paige finished for him, catching on to his thought process.

As she set about typing, making the scanner whir to life once more, Abraham tentatively asked, "What sort of proof do we need here? Dante and these passwords have revealed enough to us, haven't they?"

"Examining the source could help us understand better how to fix things." Paige said, not turning away from her scan for an instant. Jonathan was right there with her, reading it all with a look of utmost concentration. "It's its own sort of language. Basic functionality is pretty easy to grasp, but the specific syntax used here matters. Getting even one thing wrong might end up causing a drastic change."

"We're all people first and foremost." Jonathan said.

Frank glanced over towards the scanner and said, "Except for him. He's a computer program."

"I'm a shadow." Vektor corrected.

This didn't make that much sense. Frowning, Petel said, "How did they fool us into thinking of you as a human if you were a shadow before and a program after that?"

"Who ever said I fooled any of you even once?" Vektor fired right back at them.

"Could we maybe get the Guardians out with this?" Abraham asked next.

Vektor bowed his head a moment, then held up his hand carefully and illuminated a glowing ball of golden light into his palm. "What the system can do, I was designed to work alongside it. I can assist in any rewrites that may be needed. We just have to reach that source to gain access to the rest."

"The Mainframe." Jonathan said in understanding.

Paige sighed and sat back in her chair as the scanner shut down. "We're gonna have to finish this game one way or another, huh?"

"Couldn't find what you needed?" Frank asked in sympathy.

Jonathan mumbled an annoyed, "Torn is an apt description. Nothing but empty statements and unfinished arguments in there."

"It's a wonder you can function at all." Paige agreed.

As he exited the scanner, Vektor gave an offended little, "Hey. It's not my fault I was torn in half."

"No, of course it wasn't." Paige relented, placing her fist against her forehead. "Let's — We should pitch the idea of working through the last level together. It'd make everything a lot easier if we acted as one team."

Frank and Jonathan nodded in agreement. Abraham went along as well, though he was clearly unhappy about it. Petel said, a bit stubbornly, "We need to talk with Dante again, too."

"Ain't that the truth." Paige agreed in annoyance.

"D'ya think he's gonna be okay?" Frank asked. "Didn't revealing too much cause this? That's what got us all into this situation to begin with, isn't it?"

Petel thought of their boyfriend, suffering under the weight of all this for so long. Of him in his hospital bed, groggy and in pain and still alive against every odd. Of how much fire burned in him, of the wolf's own desires of teeth and claws and vengeance. And they said, "Not even Hell could stop him now."

## Chapter 10: A Challenging Thing to Swallow

Two weeks of recovery time. A remarkable feat for his accelerated healing.

They had to let Dante out of the hospital and back to his schooling before they even had that classroom smoothed over completely. Dante was much the same; his skin had regrown, but it held reminders of those bandages and charcoal. An undesirable sign to everyone that despite being the personification of flames, he wasn't immune to their burns. He was mortal, fallible, less a deity than his parents.

It was more of the same, really. Either he was gaped at or avoided entirely. By this point, the only thing that mattered was that they were finally, finally willing to leave him alone.

As soon as he returned, Petel and Paige arranged for a discussion with Damon and his gang. They had learned a lot from the memoirs, from the reinstated functionality of the scanners, but there were still too many gaps in their understanding of the whole situation. Leave it to Lietta to present a less than ideal explanation even in her own notations.

"You're sure you don't want to listen to the reports before we show them to the others?" Paige asked.

She was more than concerned over this one. Dante had no idea how much or how little Lietta detailed the Rabbit Hole's creation. He had no idea if this would reveal his very worst fear to him. But he stood his ground, saying, "I only want to have to listen to them once."

It was all he could take after years of dealing with it first hand. Paige remained unsettled, but didn't press him further. Vektor, who had been seething in silence since this morning, gave a heated, "The words are etched directly into my memory. I wish I could just dump it all."

His behaviour was reminiscent of Vektoria and the First, of course, but it still took Dante by surprise. Vektor was usually so unemotional about the Rabbit Hole's mysteries. By design, naturally. Why question where he came from when there was a goal he had to meet?

But no one else seemed surprised by it and by the time they were headed out to the Vladimirescu residence, Dante wasn't sure how exactly to politely approach it.

"You know the way there, don't you?" Frank asked Abraham as they all walked along the nature-lined path towards the rest of the world.

Abraham grew bitter, raising a hand to tip down the bill of an imaginary hat over his eyes. "Like an old, ingrained habit." He professed.

Petel stuck by Dante's side, refusing to let go of his hand. Even Petel had trouble looking at him and all his new scars, though they remained as loyal and overprotective as ever. Paige and Frank followed Abraham closely, apprehensive of the forest around them that just seemed to grow thicker as

they went in spite of the clear pathway they walked along. Vektor stayed at the rear of their party for once. The Prince's sour mood hadn't cleared up at all throughout the day. Too curious to let it be, Dante ended up asking, "What's, um. Vektor, why are you so upset?"

"We were sold on a torrent of lies." Vektor said, voice uncharacteristically hard and bitter. "Apologies, but what is there not to be upset about?"

Frank, Paige, Petel, and Abraham seemed to agree with that sentiment, latching onto his bitterness. Though concerned, Dante took note of this processing difficulty. "You're having trouble reconciling your old memories with those given to you for the story. Aren't you?" He asked.

"Anyone would." Abraham said, growing even more upset as he walked. "Our memories are how we determine who we are in the world. They're all we have and being manipulated by them, being unsure if we can trust them at all, tends to make one prickly."

He would know best of all. He was Memory, the exact argument relating to how much one's personality could be determined by moulding said memories. Quietly, Dante said, "That explains all the weird dissonance."

"You did act pretty robotic after losing your memories." Petel agreed.

They lapsed into a tense and uncomfortable silence. Dante didn't blame Abraham for being reluctant in this discussion. He didn't blame Vektor, either. After long enough, Paige said, "We had no choice in the matter. They were our parents."

Dante nodded. "You understand now." Then, wilting a bit, he declared, "I did this to all of you."

"We don't hate you." Petel countered instantly.

Paige joined in. "Your parents did this to us. You were caught in it as well."

"I wrote every story." Dante insisted. He pressed his free hand to his chest where his flames bubbled at his core and said, "A wolf with a human face. A ghost which burned bright enough to freeze. A boy who swallowed the sun in pursuit of fire."

The group let his words sit above them for a minute. Then Frank said, "A sibling made of your best friend."

"A child which refused to die." Abraham joined in.

Even more bitterly, Vektor said, "Argument after argument after argument. You should have let me shut down the system when we had the chance."

Dante gasped. "You'd delete Orpheus and everyone? Just to erase the Rabbit Hole?"

"I would stomp out the whole system if I could." Vektor fired back. He was too heated. His eyes shone freely with that golden light, his emotions on full display for them to see. "The Creators cannot win. I wish to shut down all access they have to us and throw their gathered data right back in their faces. They've used us all enough. No more."

Petel nodded. "No more."



No more.

Dante twisted his fingers into the fabric of his vest, that heat building. Vektor was absolutely right. But they couldn't just delete the Guardians. They couldn't discard those lives which Lietta ruined, they couldn't sink to those same lows as her.

It was designed like this.

Caro and Lietta did, indeed, plan for this.

Dante would do much worse than simply turn them to ash.

"You're the one who's changed the most." He said, those embers escaping his chest. It got Frank and Paige to startle back despite knowing his core. Petel and Vektor were unbothered and Abraham's expression twisted further into bitterness. "You're more human than they could ever hope to be."

Vektor shook his head. "I may have been taught humanity, but I am in no way human. You and I and all whom we know are without that monstrous humanity they have. It's the only form of compassion we've been given for one another."

"Having a sense of decency is the reason for that." Paige said in protest.

Sighing softly, Abraham said in a grumble, "Suppose I've neither decency nor humanity, in that case."

He continued on and, with nothing else to say in response, they all followed after him. The rustle of the trees and the softer light filtering through them speckling the path below their feet helped to settle the rising flames in Dante's throat. It was a practised path which Abraham walked. An old habit he couldn't train out of his body.

Muscles had memory, too. They could alter their minds, but their bodies would still recall.

A part of them would always recall.

Dante thought of the shadows suddenly. Of the retribution he no doubt owed and of their lingering grasp his body would never forget. He shuddered, pushing those thoughts from his head.

The forest around them eventually led to a grove cleared by stone walls surrounding a three story house. The ornate gate at the entrance matched the styling of the rest of it, evoking a sense of gothic flair. Like churches with high arched windows and gargoyles hanging over the roof's edges. Abraham's frown deepened at the sight and he said, "There it is. The Vladimirescu residence."

"Bloody rich kids." Paige grumbled.

"What do they even use all that space for?" Frank asked, his awe contrasting perfectly with her displeasure.

Abraham hesitated a moment, then knocked against the wood of the gate. Petel frowned and asked, "Can they hear that from inside?"

"They at least know we're coming." Paige said.

Vektor pulled out his phone, tapping his foot in annoyance, but the gates opened before he could make any call. Niculaie, his three sisters, Jonathan, and Natasha were inside, waiting for them. The sight of the Vampire made Abraham bristle, but his rage had no time to overtake him as the three sisters surged forward and latched onto his arms.

"Abe's back, Abe's back." Luca, the youngest, shouted in her excitement.

"Took long enough for you to get your head out of your ass." Arsenie, the eldest, said in a giggle.

She and Luca were both blonde, but all four of them had the same red eyes. Soare, who was a second year like Petel, had the same black hair as her brother and shoved the three forward with a grumbled, "Don't jump to conclusions, he's clearly still hostile. Though, it is good to see you here again, Abe."

"You big meanie. You never came back to finish our game." Luca huffed at him.

"I — what? Why are you all—?" Abraham protested. Or, tried to. The three pushed and pulled him inside, fussing over him as if he was their sibling, too.

Vektor stepped in after them, as did the rest of their group. The Prince went straight to Jonathan and asked, "Have the others gathered already?"

"Hey, is that any way to greet your boyfriend?" Natasha asked in return, swooping over to interject.

Jonathan gave a flustered, "Zima, please."

"Boyfriend?" Dante questioned.

Jonathan buried his face in his hands, blushing an admirable amount considering his darker skin tone. Frank grinned at Paige, who smiled in return with the same mischievous tint. Vektor stepped back and gave a more subdued, "My apologies, you're correct." He took one of Jonathan's hands and was much gentler as he said, "Hello, my dear partner. Are you ready for our conversation?"

"Y-Yes, it's. Let's go."

Jonathan cleared his throat and led Vektor to the front door after Luca, Soare, Arsenie, and Abraham. Dante said, "So it was Jonathan who kissed Vektor."

"Makes a maddening amount of sense, doesn't it?" Petel asked with a chuckle.

Niculaie closed the gates and walked with them after their friends, opening the front door for them all. As they passed him, he said quietly, "I'm really sorry about this, Vicario."

When Dante looked into his face, he was able to meet his eyes. Could look directly at him despite all his scars. Dante said, "It wasn't your fault. I can forgive you."

It was surprisingly easy to forgive the Vampire. They'd taken so much from him as well.

Inside, it was oppressively dark despite the midday sun. All of the curtains were shut and the lights in the foyer were a dim flicker. Luca, Soare, and Arsenie all squabbled over Abraham, blocking the stairs up to the second floor.

Niculaie rushed over to them and said, "Stop fussing. Damon and the others are waiting for us."

"It's been so long, though." Luca protested.

"We wanted to see if he remembered the way." Arsenie joined in.

Frank and Vektor drew over to them to maybe assist in the argument, but a quiet voice broke in, getting all of them to freeze up. "More friends? You've made so many now, children."

They all faced the source, a man both intimidating in stature and soft in his presence. Though Dante never met anyone's parents before, it was clear that this man was Count Simone Vladimirescu, Niculaie's father. His long blond hair had greyed and was pulled back in a ponytail, a black ribbon tying it opposed to Niculaie's bright red. Soare used a dark blue ribbon to tie her hair back into a loose bun, Luca wore her spring green ribbon like bunny ears atop her head, and Arsenie wore her purple-pink ribbon at her neck. A connecting family item that was cute to see together like this.

"It's you again." The Count breathed after the awkward silence stretched just too long.

Similarly taken aback, Abraham said, "Count Vladimirescu." And then, in an airy sort of reaction that seemed to come involuntarily, "I've come to ask for your son's hand."

Niculaie and he both startled at his words. Luca clapped her hands together, declaring in her delight, "You do remember."

"Not well, though, since he never had the chance to actually ask." Soare pointed out.

The Count bowed his head in contemplation, stroking his neatly trimmed beard. Even in the dim lighting, Dante could make out the clear blue of his eyes. He didn't much look like a traditional vampire. Not at all.

So much resentment built up over what? So many years allowing it to brew, so many lives altered out of hate, and for what?

"Welcome to our home." The Count said to the rest of them, finished with his thoughts. He gave a regal bow befitting any vampire, sweeping his cloak out for the flair of it, then stood perfectly upright as he addressed them all. "Should you need anything during your conference, do not hesitate to ask. I'll consider your request after you're more yourself again, Abraham. And Vicario."

Dante flinched, holding tighter to Petel's hand. Abraham seemed ready to argue, but was hustled along upstairs before he had the chance. Petel, as protective as ever, stepped in front of Dante and glared up at the Count, though the man was about as tall as Niculaie and just as sleek.

"Please, pace yourself accordingly." The Count said. "You've still much to recover from, accelerated healing or no."

Heat. All at once, that heat returned to Dante in a flash and he stumbled forward, shouting a bit too loudly in the spacious, empty foyer, "You can't report back to them. They don't deserve to know."

Petel added in a warning growl of their own. Vektor and Paige watched the Count carefully, as full of that same heated distaste as Dante. Taking it straight from him, probably. The Count's expression turned into a bitter smile and he said, "On my honour, they shall receive no report of this."

He turned then and left the foyer, entering what appeared to be a sitting room with a roaring fire, dancing light across the floor. That was one fear settled. Paige and Vektor led the way up the stairs, Petel allowing Dante to go first, sandwiching him in. As they liked to do. Paige asked, "What could they do to us, anyway? We all attend the same school, we can just gather there if we needed."

"The Creators hold the power to reset all of our progress." Vektor said. His voice was hardened by contempt. It was such an unusual mood for him. "Best not to tempt their hand. They can be a bit trigger happy with that lever."

The four of them reached the top, catching up to Abraham, Niculaie, and his three sisters. Arsenie greeted them with a mischievous, "Papa's tired of all this experimentation, too, but he's never played the game for himself. You guys are so lucky, I'm actually a bit jealous that I missed out."

Niculaie said, "Arsenie, that's rude."

"I-I know this place." Abraham said, too caught up in his shock to even attempt breaking free of their grip. He seemed reluctant to use force with any of them in the first place. "I used to come here. I've been here before. Haven't I?"

"See? He doesn't actually remember." Soare said, shoving him forward with more force than necessary.

"Don't be mean, you'll make him cry." Luca pulled at Soare's arm, stopping her from shoving him again. "Nicu and Abe have cried enough. Especially when they haven't even gotten married yet."

"Luca."

Niculaie whirled on her, scandalised enough to bare his fangs. Abraham rubbed at his neck as he mumbled, "Married." He looked to Niculaie next, who turned away to continue down the hall. An odd look of disappointment fell over his face and he went along with a quiet, "Sorry. It must have been hell for you, if that was the true nature to our relationship before my eyes were replaced."

Niculaie hesitated a moment, then said, "Once you break free of those false memories, then we'll talk forgiveness."

"Your dad's a real ass." Arsenie said with a giggle.

Though he bristled at the taunt, Abraham didn't refute her claims. In some attempt to move the topic along, Paige asked, "So you three have played the game before, too?"

All three sisters nodded in affirmation, Luca and Arsenie the most giddy over it. "I'm a vampire like dad and Nicu." Luca said.

"I'm a dancer." Arsenie supplied next, twirling to flare out her skirt for emphasis.

Paige hummed, intrigued. Their procession reached Niculaie and Abraham and they all grouped together naturally. Soare rolled her head back, but said, "I'm a cleric, so a healer."

"I'm a healer, too. Except I'm more a necromancer and I use a gun." Frank said, just as interested in this new information. "It'd be cool if we could get a chance to play together some time."

"If you ever need some extra help, let us know." Luca agreed, giggling.

"But for now." Arsenie stepped back, aiming a wink at all of them. "Have fun with your little discussion. And Abe, honey, try not to kill our Nicu."

"Or you'll have us to deal with." Luca said cheerily, twirling over to stand beside her sister.

Abraham gave a sputtered, "I'm not going to kill him."

Soare opened the door to the room they paused outside of and shoved him in. "Belly of the beast, Huntsman."

She joined her sisters and the three headed off further into the manor. Nicualie followed Abraham inside, as did Vektor and Jonathan. Natasha offered her hand to Paige, saying, "We'll figure this all out. Won't we?"

Paige accepted the offer with a tired but hopeful, "No choice now."

The two entered and Petel pulled Dante along as well, closing the door behind them. It was a neat little sitting room with two couches and a coffee table between them. Someone had drawn back the curtains to allow the late afternoon light in, though the dim room lights overhead remained on. While Vektoria and Aglaé sat on one couch on opposite ends, Damon stood behind and seemed torn on whether to grab Niculaie away from Abraham or allow the two to be. On seeing Dante and Petel enter, however, his attention snapped to them and he hurried over, saying, "Dante, you're okay. I mean, as okay as you can be after that. Don't stress yourself out, sit, you should still be recovering."

Before he could reach them, Dante gave a forceful, "Stop."

Damon jumped back, raising his hands in protest as Petel added their snarl to further dissuade him. Thoroughly chastised, he deflated and said, "Sorry, I know. I really screwed everything up between us, but I'm just. I'm so glad you're still here after all that."

His sincere remorse was as strange as his willingness to acknowledge the mistakes he made. Truly an incomprehensible Kingpin. Dante said, "I accept your apology." Then he stepped around Damon, pulling Petel along, and sat on the couch across from Vektoria. "Now, let's discuss how to most efficiently finish this game."

The others gathered around the couches, settling into their usual groups. Frank and Paige sat beside Dante and Petel while Abraham leaned against the back of it and Vektor stood beside its arm. Niculaie and Natasha sat in the space between Vektoria and Aglaé while Damon stayed standing and Jonathan perched on the arm beside Aglaé. Vektoria honed straight in on Dante and scoffed, her arms crossed over her chest. "Why should we accept any help from you? You're the enemy."

"Did you not get your memories back as well when we unlocked the system?" Paige asked.

"Of course she didn't. The system's cache of data is kept separated from each setup." Vektor said. His dismissiveness made Vektoria bristle, quite predictably. "While I'm personally against

finishing the work of the Creators, I do agree that making sure the Guardians aren't caught in this web any longer is worth the continuation of our endeavours."

"You sure enjoy hearing yourself talk, you worthless Prince." She hissed at him.

Her anger was performative in a sense. Rage for the sake of it. Ignoring her, Vektor went on. "Though, with the systems connected at least in progression now, it does seem an odd choice. My only guess as to why each system must be unlocked individually is due to our code being torn from one another. Were it allowed to interact, it no doubt would attempt to reform itself and mend us together once more."

Vektoria gagged, overreacting to his words. "Gross, why would I ever want to rejoin with you?"

"Let's try and focus on the important matters at hand here." Jonathan said, exasperated.

"Vektor's made it to the third checkpoint of the Brown Hollows, which counted for both of our systems." Paige said, clapping her hands together. "That just leaves the final two checkpoints, the exit, and getting into the Mainframe Kingdom."

"The actual final level." Frank interjected cheekily.

"If we all work together, it should be super easy." Natasha said, grinning.

"We can unlock our system, too, since we know the passwords." Jonathan noted.

"You think they're the same for both sides?" Frank asked.

"They should be. Creativity was never their strong suit." Dante said, bitterness welling up in him.

Damon went to agree, but couldn't quite get the words out. After a futile second of trying, he said instead, "I'm still bound by the rules."

"Entering the passwords is important, then." Aglaé said, setting aside his book in order to pay full attention to the conversation. "Anything else we should consider during this meeting?"

Abraham asked Paige, "You brought the recording, correct?"

"Recording?" Damon questioned.

Paige pulled out her phone as Vektor said, "Behind these Admin passwords were the Memoirs of the White Rabbit. A detailed account of the history of the Rabbit Hole, including every important milestone to its development." He turned his gaze towards the floor, that creeping darkness overcoming him. "Were it required, I could recite the full thing for you, either in its original Italian or in its translated state. I have no choice now but to carry it in my code."

Dante and Jonathan both winced. "That sounds awful." Jonathan said.

"I recorded his reading it since I wasn't sure if it was a one time thing or not." Paige said, waving her phone sheepishly.

"Why should we listen to you, anyway?" Vektoria asked, still in too much of a huff to be anything but contrary. "This could all just be a ruse. You could be waiting for the right time when we lower our guards just enough to destroy us."

"This is no longer about something so petty, Vektoria." Vektor raised his voice to an intimidating bellow, looking for once like the king he was written to become. "We are two halves of an artificial intelligence program given life with shadows and coding. We are tools meant only to facilitate the editing of player code and are failed replacements to the first child. Everything else within our narrative is a constructed fallacy. Can't you understand that?"

Vektoria hopped to her feet, grinning as she shot back, "You're a constructed fallacy, idiot Prince."

Vektor shook his head in aggravation. "Reasoning with you is a pointless waste of time so long as those priorities which no longer matter take precedence in your mind."

She may have still wanted to fight him, but he was no longer willing to play her game. She went to lunge, but Natasha pulled her back down into her seat and Paige played the recording. Vektor's voice over the speaker was mechanical and to the point. Even though it was the wrong voice, it matched Lietta's cadence and tone perfectly. He even screamed one segment and Dante closed his eyes as he listened, taking it all in.

This was her creation. No matter how much influence he had, she was the one to shape it into its nightmare state. She bent and folded and dug her fingers in until they were all to her liking. All of her hate and legacy was fuel to those fires.

For want of heads, the Queen collected hearts.

For want of immortality, the Rabbit took lives.

Though Frank, Abraham, Petel, Paige, and Jonathan had heard the whole thing before, they all seemed just as disturbed as Natasha and Aglaé, who were hearing this for the first time. Damon kept his head down, listening in a similar way as Dante, and Niculaie shrank into his seat in an overwhelming guilt. Vektoria tapped her foot against the air in her impatience.

Once it concluded, there was a moment of unsure silence. No one was quite sure where to begin. Vektoria broke it with a drawled, "Is that all?"

Instantly, Natasha gave a chastising, "What do you mean? How can you say that?"

"It's no big secret that the game was all one big experiment to monitor the reality warping capabilities of its test subjects." Vektoria said with a petulant little shrug. Her blatant disrespect was actually kind of admirable. Dante could only wish to hold that much contempt for everything inside him. "The smaller details shouldn't matter. We know who the Creators are. Of course there were other casualties along the way."

"People have died because of all this." Natasha argued back.

Before she or Vektoria could continue, Dante said, "Reasoning with her won't work."

"She's failed her most basic mission task." Vektor said. Vektoria rose to her feet again, though it was Vektor who rounded the couch and advanced on her. His tone and expression were cold, metallic; he spoke with such certainty that it was clear, all at once, that he was little more than a computer program. That he was born of shadows and black blood. "You were meant to not only guide, 01, but to form bonds with these humans. You were meant to prove that you could blend in, make them forget you were simply a program doing its best approximation of what a human is like. Despite all odds being stacked in your favour, you're as much of a failure as every other subject listed here."

She screamed, a tinny noise full of fear and rage, and tackled him to the floor. Dante yelped, as did many of their friends, and he worked with Petel, Jonathan, Paige, Natasha, and Damon to pry Vektoria's hands from Vektor's throat.

Jonathan sat with Vektor, helping him sit up and making sure he was alright. "Thank you." Vektor said through a cough, rubbing at his throat. "That was. Perhaps a bit too careless of me."

"Attempted murder number nine." Aglaé proclaimed in a deadpan tone, throwing his hands up and flopping over onto Nicualie's lap.

"Lying Prince." Vektoria snapped, straining against Petel, Paige, and Natasha's hold. Dante crouched next to Vektor, also concerned for the Prince. "Those values are worthless. Haven't I told you that? You're the one incapable of blending in, you're the loser here."

Her voice slipped more and more into that mechanical tone, the same as Vektor's would at times. She really was just a program. She thrashed violently, but the three had a good enough hold on her that she wasn't going anywhere. Her hands glowed black with her Void, but she was too restrained to use it.

A wild beast. Just like them. Just the same as all of them.

"Why are you so focused on winning?" Dante was compelled to ask. "There's nothing for you at the end. They never completed the story. So why fight as you do and so fervently?"

"Good word." Petel said through their gritted teeth.

"It's my right to win." She spat, struggling even harder against the three holding her down. She could switch her target effortlessly, as it was no doubt him she wanted to blast with that Void. "I'm the favourite. I'm the one meant to survive all else. So what if there's nothing tangible in the game? My goal is something your narrow little minds could never understand."

She was inconsolable. No reasoning, Dante reminded himself. "I want to kill them, too." He admitted, standing to his feet.

"Get in line." Petel agreed, their teeth bared in their snarl.

Vektoria settled and huffed out a defiant, "Fine."

She rolled out of Petel's hold, then snapped her arms away from Paige and Natasha. Though it was an ungraceful manoeuvre and she stumbled a moment as she climbed to her feet blindingly fast, when she pulled herself upright it was triumph written on her face.



"I challenge you, Inferno. All of you, in fact." She declared to the room. "Whoever can successfully beat me will get the privilege of facing off with the Creators. That fair enough for you?"

She raised her hands in threat, Void glowing off them in her murderous glee. Aglaé gave an aggravated mumble of, "More murder attempts, joy."

"This isn't a fight I'm interested in joining." Niculaie said, placing a gentle hand on Aglaé's shoulder in reassurance.

"I am." Abraham said. The Huntsman rounded the couch to stand over Niculaie, only able to tower over him in this one moment. "We have a score to settle, Vampire."

Growing upset, Niculaie said, "It's neither yours nor mine to settle."

"And yet the only way it can be settled is through us." Abraham stepped back, then looked to Paige with an odd intensity to his eyes. "Let's be off. There's a hunt to be had."

"I don't want to be the advocate for this." Paige said with a groan, pressing her hands to her face. "Can't we just unlock the other system? That should solve all of this, right?"

"You really think that will deter either of them by this point?" Vektor asked knowingly.

The rest of the room gave their own noises of frustration, agreeing with how tangled this mess had become. As they all filed out, making their way back to the Boarding school, Jonathan paused to point at Vektoria and stated, "You're still getting your memories back whether you want 'em or not."

"It's not going to change my stance." She said with a scoff. "The Creators deserve erasure after all they've done."

"They sure do." Damon agreed in a mumble.

All things considered, Damon was holding himself together fairly well after that painful revelation. Dante had pity for him once due to his being a snake covered in roses. It seemed a whole other lifetime ago, but he remembered a time when the older boy would play with him, glasses and crooked teeth and all. A time before those roses and overwhelming charm and the bias which came from those glammers.

It was a long road they walked with which to get to Hell. It was a long and winding road and every single step was as painful as walking with glass lodged through their feet.

If Damon thought it was over somehow, that he could finally conquer the fires he'd never been able to overcome in their youth, then Dante would prove him wrong just one more time.

Petel took his hand, snapping him out of that bubbling anticipation, and he left this room and this manor hand-in-hand with his mate. His wonderful friend. An anchor to his fight.

His fire rippled in his chest. After so long, he was finally, finally the one in control.

## Chapter 11: Dance to Remember

Gather.

That was the code they gave him: Gather.

The shadows would gather at the promise of bait. They were lured in by his head, his heart, his mind. He missed the simpler tea parties, but those were for friends. Those were for Lietta to pick him clean.

Only life could draw life. Ashes couldn't be friends. The shadows couldn't be his friends after that. He had too many of their pieces grafted onto him just to continue this game.

They made him one of them.

"Dante." Paige called out. Her voice reeled him out of those darker thoughts, out of that unconscious call to Gather. "Are you sure you're going to be alright?"

This was his Hell. Always had been and always would be. A sentiment he'd digest again and again and again. "Fires must burn." He said to her.

She wasn't reassured, but locked him inside his scanner anyway. She dropped them all into the belly of this beast and, once more, there was nothing else they could do but fight.

It was this place's main purpose to him. To test his strength. To prove he was worth a few months longer. He'd grown sick of defending his right to live when it never stayed their hand. Now, however, he was ready to bleed for it.

He landed on the path outside the White Forest alongside Petel, Frank, Abraham, and Vektor. The severed and fractured look revealed all the geometry built into this place. It was an odd choice of location, as well, just outside their ultimate destination.

"Huh. Seems like our origin point was reset after unlocking the system." Paige mumbled above them in her encompassing voice. "It didn't erase our progress, but it just auto loaded you all into the start."

"A huge shift has taken place." Vektor said, an uneasy explanation.

"Either way, our system's doing the same." Jonathan said, his voice that same sort of encompassing echo as Paige.

Looking up at the sky, Frank asked, "You done unlocking your side, then?"

"For all the good that can do. Our system's still locked in Italian, so I really don't understand half of what's being given to me." Jonathan confirmed.

A bit further on the path, Vektoria, Damon, Niculaie, Natasha, and Aglaé dropped in. Paige said, "To be fair, I don't always understand what ours is telling me in English."

The moment Vektoria was fully loaded, she stomped towards them. Vektor, Petel, Abraham, and even Frank sank into battle-ready stances. Vektor said, "A good arena should be our first focus."

To their surprise, she stopped before she reached them. She summoned her silver key sword, her mask flashing on over her eyes, and she pointed the end directly at Dante in challenge. "You're so afraid of losing that you never even let Omen touch you." She said in an odd declaration. "Let's see what good those fires do against pure destruction."

So he was her new target. That was fitting. While Paige and Natasha made soft sounds in their confusion over her behaviour, Vektor asked, "What has Dante ever done to us, Vektoria?"

Dante grinned. Finally. "You won't get a chance to touch me, either."

He couldn't miss that darkness in her free hand. She lobbed it at him and he ducked, allowing it to strike that invisible barrier keeping them from tripping down into the abyss. It shattered like glass, unable to withstand her destruction. The jagged edges were kinda pretty and all the shards dissolved into code much like defeated enemies.

Dante nodded towards their Prince. "How's that for an arena?"

"I suppose I should have expected this to be the way it went." Vektor said with an annoyed exhale.

He leapt through the break and, in a sweep of gold, created a circular ring just below. A sheen rose around its perimeter, reinstating that invisible barrier around its new enclosure. Dante looked to Vektoria next and said in a bit of a taunt, "Perfectly predictable, as always."

He hopped through and into this new arena as Vektoria screeched in her fury. She followed them, of course, leading this time with some swipes of her key sword. Dante didn't even have to raise a hand, his fires walling her off in their natural self-defence reactions. Vektor backed away, giving them room for this battle and a warning, "Don't let her Void touch you."

"Not gonna try to tell me not to use it?" Vektoria asked in a haughty sneer.

She thrust again at Dante and he raised his hands to better direct his fire, gripping the end of her key sword like a fist. She was blindingly fast and it was better to incapacitate her rather than dodge around her. Jonathan's voice above them said, "We know by now that's a pointless ask."

"Isn't anyone else going to join them?" Paige asked next.

Vektoria yanked against Dante's grip, but his fires were stronger. He focused on its spread, crawling up the silver and singing her gloved fingers. She leapt back on instinct, though only grew more furious about having to retreat, and he tossed the staff aside as it dissolved. Petel said, "He's doing fine on his own."

"Don't want to get in the way of those fires." Aglaé said next.

"A sentiment I'll gladly share." Abraham said.

Their whole group watched through that break in the barrier, Frank even pressing his face against it. A kinder audience to play to; Dante didn't mind it so much when he knew he wasn't being

judged, being graded, with the threat of liquidation over his head. Vektoria lit up both her hands with that Void and shouted, "You can't disarm me that easily."

Vektor startled with an automatic, "Careful."

"You're losing your head." Dante said in a toneless reprimand.

As she charged forward, he slammed all of his fire into her, an open palm that smashed her against the invisible barrier. He splayed her out, flattening her to keep her pinned, to keep her from struggling or making use of her Void. She fought against it, of course. Her power was nothing to sneeze at. His fire was just too much force for her to break out of, to even get a foothold to dislodge herself from its press.

"You know how much she hates when we lose our heads." He said to her.

"You can't defeat me. I refuse to lose." She screeched in return. Ever the banshee.

"Refusal won't save you." He said.

He clenched his claw into a fist and crushed her into code. Her form dissolved and she was booted from the game in no uncertain terms. He took a deep breath, counted to three, and gathered his fires back around his feet. Above him, Natasha gave a breathy, "Wow."

"Never gets easier, seeing how strong you are, Vicario." Aglaé agreed.

"You're too good at keeping everyone away from you." Niclaie said quietly in an odd mix of sympathy and remorse.

Petel glanced towards Damon and asked, "You gonna try to fight him next?"

Before Damon could reply, Abraham grabbed the front of Niculaie's outfit and tossed him down into the arena. Niculaie righted himself and hovered down much nicer while Dante and Vektor both jumped away to allow him the space to land. Abraham shouted down, "We have a score to settle, Vampire."

Damon grabbed onto one of Abraham's arms and growled out, "The Hell you do. It ain't even yours."

"Let him do this, Damon." Nicualie said, glaring up at the Huntsman. It was just high enough to be out of his reach even if he had the arms to pull himself up, though he could probably hover out. "He's right. It may not be ours and we may not have started it, but we have no choice but to settle it. Otherwise, the hunt will go on forever and nothing will ever be solved."

Abraham swept his coat out of Damon's claws in the resulting confusion and leapt down after Nicualie. His eyes lost some of their glammers, making it clear they weren't regular flesh and blood. Those enhancers had the same pretty ashen blue of Abraham's usual look, but the target reticles in them were that of a single-minded machine. A soldier who owned no part of their own body.

A Berserk.

But it was impossible for Abraham to be Berserk outside of the influence of the Hollows.

When he landed, he made sure his hat was on straight and he grinned at his supposed prey. "You know as well as I do that I wouldn't mind chasing you for all of eternity."

It was anticipation and fury, sure, but it was also fun. This was fun for him on some level. As a bit of a distraction from all the drama, Frank called up, "You doing okay out there, Jonathan?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Vektoria decided to stick around." Jonathan answered.

"That's a first." Natasha said.

Abraham lunged at Niculaie, wielding that rose knife he kept on his ammo belt. Niculaie dodged the swipe nimbly and retaliated with a kick, forcing Abraham back. Rolling well with that momentum, Abraham pivoted before Niculaie could strike again and dodged around him near effortlessly.

His quick little shuffle step caught Dante's attention. Niculaie advanced and Abraham mirrored that movement. Abraham struck forward and Niculaie bent back to dodge.

Step forward, step back. Side step, pivot, and dip.

They were dancing.

This was rehearsed, a performance where both parties remembered the steps in their bodies even years later.

Niculaie fled and Abraham pursued.

It was a dance and they were laughing.

Agláé and Petel crashed down into the arena, startling Dante into a squeak. He was so focused on the Huntsman and the Vampire that he hadn't noticed the Wolf and the Beauty start a brawl of their own. "What? Why are you two fighting?" He asked.

Agláé grinned his way, a show of sharp teeth. "It's time to play."

Petel tackled into him and the two rolled about in a mass of brown and grey-white fur. Their silence was telling of this very much not being a playful brawl to them, but Agláé laughed in delight the whole time. Just as Abraham laughed as he pursued Niculaie. Dante couldn't really understand the sentiment, but supposed he didn't have much room to judge, either. He had effectively destroyed Vektoria with no ounce of remorse.

Niculaie managed to trip Abraham into a stumble, throwing off the rhythm of their dance. He slipped behind the Huntsman and wrapped his cape around his arms to restrain him. Pressing his teeth against Abraham's neck, a threat that made Dante suddenly very aware of how much he didn't belong in this moment, his voice dropped to a murmur. A near sultry tone. "What will you do, Abe? The Vampire has been victorious before. My fangs have tasted your flesh, your blood. What will you do? What will your father do if you can't manage to win?"

"But the Vampire has never truly been victorious, Nicul." Abraham returned.

He slammed his head back against Niculaie's, forcing the Vampire to release him as he recoiled. Abraham swept Niculaie's feet from under him, making him crash to the floor, then pinned him against the ground in return.

He pulled a wooden stake from his coat, something Dante forgot he even had. "And so," He began, poising the stake above Niculaie's heart in a sort of promise of a strike. "The Vampire was no more."

"Nicu!" Damon called down.

Niculaie closed his eyes, accepting his fate. Abraham struck and the system around them rippled in a powerful moment of imbalance. Code rewrite. Was Abraham even capable of that power? Niculaie's form shattered in a burst of light and pixels, leaving nothing behind. Deletion. Abraham's eyes stabilised, leaving them unassumingly flesh once more, and it left him panting and sitting against the floor.

That stake dematerialised from his hands and he sat back onto his knees, an unsureness overcoming him. He stared down at his open palms with a sort of horror despite there not being any residue of what he had done. Vektor, in confirmation, said to him, "The Vampire is no more."

"Conflict resolved." Abraham agreed in an automatic gesture, still catching his breath. Then, much less steady, "Damn bastard got what he wished for."

He pressed his hands to his head, reeling too much to notice the whirl of fur headed his way. Dante swept out his fire to block Petel and Aglaé off from knocking into him, which in turn caused the two of them to split from the pain. "You can't just join in the brawl without asking, Vicario." Aglaé complained.

"Hurts." Petel whined forlornly.

"Sorry, just." Dante gestured to Abraham, wincing with his apology. Petel and Aglaé both settled, intrigued at the Huntsman's state. Dante started, "Are there, uh. Any other conflicts to resolve?"

Damon dropped down onto the path, making Dante squeak again. While Petel padded over to make sure he was okay and Aglaé drooped in annoyance at what was coming, Damon grabbed up the front of Abraham's coat. "Are you happy now, you damn Huntsman?" He asked heatedly.

"That's not gonna help." Aglaé said in complaint.

Abraham didn't respond, his eyes unfocused and unsteady from what he accomplished. Natasha and Frank jumped down as well, ready to pull Damon off Abraham, while Damon kept shouting in his face. "You got what you wanted. You defeated the Vampire exactly as laid out in those dumb monster hunting tomes. Does that settle the score? Are you finished being an asshole yet?"

"Damon, don't take it out on him." Niculaie chastised from somewhere behind Jonathan. "He never had a choice in this matter. None of us did."

"He has to take some responsibility." Damon hissed in return, that forked tongue of his forced out in his fury. "It's been three years. Three years! Isn't that long enough? I'm willing to forgive if he just comes back to us. Give us our friend back."

He choked back a sob and that seemed to snap Abraham into focus. Abraham's eyes were glassy, some in-between state of covered by glimmers and not, and he asked in genuine confusion, "Why are you so upset? Is something wrong?"

Damon bit back his grief in favour of his anger. "You took out my friend. Our mutual friend." He snarled out.

"Oh." Abraham paused a moment and instant dread gripped Dante's gut. "Who are you again?"

Damon was shocked enough to drop him, to stumble back out of that same gripping dread. Realisation stabbed through them both as Dante said, "Memory."

"I don't — Where are we? It's rather crowded in here." Abraham went on. A slight edge entered his voice, mechanical and panic rolled into one terrifying combo. "I'm sorry, but. I-I don't recognise any of you. How did we get here? Why am I dressed like this? What's going on?"

"Catastrophic failure." Vektor noted. "He's going into shock."

"Are you telling me his father never put any thought into what would happen after he killed me?" Niculaie asked accusingly.

Abraham couldn't get any more questions out, hunkering down and holding his head tightly as he hyperventilated. He might explode while he was at it. Dante could practically hear his heart hammering in his chest from where he stood. Turning to Vektor, Dante said, "That third enhancer."

"Now's the time to take care of it." Vektor agreed.

He strode forward and made a pulling motion near Abraham's neck, then pushed at that something in the air. Abraham froze completely. A program stopped right in the midst of its breakdown. It was so similar to Lietta's showcase at the hospital that fear spiked into Dante's spine and he backed away until he pressed himself against the invisible barrier at the edge of the arena.

"Paige, Jonathan, I'm going to need your help in this analysis." Vektor called up towards the sky.

"Oh, I guess I'm just set decoration by this point." Vektoria said in a scoff.

Natasha looked up towards the sky with an awed, "You did stick around. Jonny Boy was being serious."

"My name is Jonathan." Jonathan stressed.

Vektor scrolled through something only he could see in the meantime and flinched back suddenly. As if he'd been shocked by the very code he was examining. "What is this?" He asked, aghast.

"Professor has always been that broken, huh?" Vektoria joined in, much more blasé about it.

"None of this looks good." Paige said, agreeing with Vektor's disgust over whatever it was they were seeing. "Why would the resolution cause all this garbage code? Why is it set up to just delete everything?"

"This is a seriously shoddy attempt at a reset button." Vektoria said. She managed to enjoy the opportunity to criticise.

Vektor tapped at what he was looking at carefully, as if he expected it to shock him again. "It's not an intentional outcome." He said, squinting a bit. "It appears to be yet another overflow issue."

"If you hadn't booted me, Inferno, I could have helped delete that." Vektoria griped.

"An overflow should be easy to fix." Dante argued back. He took a few steps closer to Vektor, as close as he dared considering his constant fires. "Find the root of the issue and solve it."

"The cause is right here. The main issue is correcting it." Vektor said in a huff, gesturing once more to the air. "It's not as simple as a forgotten close bracket this time. The issue appears to be over the unintended resolution to the code."

"It's trying to call something that's not even there." Paige said, catching on. "The lack of a proper function isn't usually an issue, but it's causing so many errors that it's pushing out everything else."

Quietly, Niculaie asked, "Can you help him?"

"Is there a way to get him back with his memories intact?" Damon asked next.

Jonathan said, "Cleaning up all the junk and such should work to stop his meltdown, at the least."

"Again. Would be simpler were I there to lend my Void." Vektoria complained.

"We'll just have to manage without." Vektor fired back.

"Too bad we can't do anything to help." Natasha said.

She dropped to the floor and settled in for the wait. Aglaé plopped down next to her and said, "Unless taking him out entirely would help somehow."

"Let's wait on that, I think we've got this." Paige said.

Dante wanted to keep watching, but there was nothing to see. Only Vektor's eyes were equipped for this. He sat as well, tentative to outright ask to be logged out of the game. Petel drew as close to him as they could manage, then asked, "If it's causing so much trouble, can't we just remove it entirely?"

"Nice to see someone shares my better sensibilities." Vektoria said.

"Unfortunately, the trick about enhancers is that they can't be easily detached from the body." Niculaie said with a sigh. He was correct, but it was intriguing to hear him explain it all the same. "They have a direct tie to the mind they're altering, so ripping them out without any sort of preparations can cause a person to completely shut down."

Frank gave a groan of, "These ones are so shoddily integrated that he shuts down even with them."



"Which is why we haven't done much else besides plant basic code into his eyes." Vektor said with an annoyed clip to his tone.

He waved his hand over Abraham, shutting whatever code window he had open, and Abraham resumed, falling into a more comfortable sit. While they all jolted up to see how he was doing, Paige said, "Okay, I think that should hold things together for now."

"Mate, how're you feeling?" Frank asked, scrambling to get over and into his vision.

"Do you remember who we are now?" Natasha asked next, also leaning into his line of sight.

Dante didn't want to command. The first time was enough. Abraham looked around at all of them, slowly registering their faces, then said, "My head hurts."

Vektoria scoffed. "Fair, considering your mind was nearly flooded from errors alone."

"Since it's safe for now, I'm logging everyone out." Paige announced.

They all gave their mumbled agreement, either too tired or distracted to respond with any enthusiasm. Damon gave a succinct and bitter, "This is so fucked up."

"That's for sure." Abraham agreed.

The floor dropped from beneath them and Dante plummeted through the void. When he landed once more in reality, everything hurt so much worse. Those burns all over his body seemed to throb in reminder and he stumbled out and to the floor in a panting, pained heap.

Petel was there immediately, crouching and hovering their hands over his shoulders. "You okay? Need help?" They asked.

"Your body has taken quite the toll. Pace yourself, Dante." Vektor joined in.

He stayed upright and was only a bit unsteady, which was an actual surprise. His gravity and balance must have been restored at least somewhat from unlocking those pieces he was missing. Or maybe he had finally learned to adapt to it. Either way, it turned out to be very useful, as he and Frank both had to stop Abraham from yanking that third enhancer from his neck.

"We just discussed why this is a terrible idea, Abraham." Vektor chastised him, holding tight to one of his arms.

"I want it out of me." Abraham said in protest.

"Once we're sure it's not gonna mess you up, we'll do that." Frank told him in a placating tone as he restrained Abraham's other arm.

"Just a little while longer, mate. Removing functionality rather than redirecting it will take a more detailed approach." Vektor said.

"Will take my Void, you mean." Vektoria taunted over the computer.

Abraham ceased struggling, though stayed petulant and upset as he said, "I want to be rid of everything. All of it. Anything my father's hand forced upon me, I want nothing more to do with it."

"Abe, we don't want to see you destroy yourself. Not any longer." Niculaie said, catching his attention. His voice was unsure, but resolute. "We'll help you get through this. Promise."

Abraham jerked forward with a sob, stumbling out of Frank and Vektor's hold and to his knees. He crawled to the computer to speak directly into it and the glimmers melted away from his eyes, revealing them for the enhancers they were. "I'm sorry, Nicul. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so, so sorry."

Frank and Vektor went over to him as he slid to the floor, shaking as he sobbed in his unrestrained despair. The illusion was gone for the moment, dispelled by that agony, and so there were no attempts at tears. Those eyeballs couldn't form the liquid necessary for it. Abraham cried in vain, had no tears to shed, and that seemed to add on to the layers of his sorrow.

Quietly, Damon said, "We should reconvene in person."

"It's too late for something like that." Paige said in gripe.

"Closure would be nice." Aglaé argued.

Dante, having caught his breath, stood and said, "Outside. There's too many of us to fit nicely into a room."

"Comfortably, at least." Frank said in agreement.

Petel helped Dante out of the tower and onto the grass just outside, leaning against its walls. They were joined in good time by Paige, Frank, Vektor, and Abraham, then by Damon, Niculaie, Aglaé, Jonathan, Natasha, and even Vektoria. They all formed a big circle, Damon and Niculaie sitting across from Abraham and Frank, and Vektor leaned against Jonathan's shoulder as he said, "Our next order of business should be Dante's code."

"After we're done helping Abraham." Paige interjected quickly.

"Are your memories okay?" Niculaie asked, his concern shining through. "I don't expect you to have recovered them or anything, but—"

"Twelfth birthday party, I gave you those wings." Abraham said, gesturing towards his own neck. Niculaie clasped at one of the necklaces dangling at his chest, startled speechless. Abraham held a hand to his head, no doubt sore over the lack of tears and immense trauma to his mind, but smiled as he went on. "Next day, I asked you out and we were officially dating from there."

"You got them back." Damon said in a reverent sort of awe.

"Not everything, but I remember a bunch of small things." Abraham admitted with a shrug. "Gaëlle and I wrestling each other bruised at Aglaé's eighth. Pulling an all nighter with you to beat the new Residence game which came out so close to your thirteenth that you got your hands on an early copy. Going with Perci to that beach party we had for Nicul's tenth. It's all just enough that it's kinda giving me whiplash."

"Why is it mostly birthdays?" Aglaé asked with a relieved laugh.

"C'mon, you gotta remember at least one of the plays we did for school." Damon joined in, delighted.

Laughing along, Abraham said, "It's not all there yet, sorry."

"Wait. Did your father not replace any of your memories with anything?" Niculaie asked.

"Did he not just erase them, either?" Frank asked next.

"Oh, no. He very much did attempt to scrub my mind of these." Abraham said, quite conversational for how actually horrifying that statement was. "I remember the process now, too. Each time his control slipped and I attempted to fight back, he'd strap me right back into that chair and hook me up to his system to plaster over everything, like I was just some unruly computer rejecting its rewrites."

"He strapped you to a chair?" Damon asked, aghast.

Dante, too, was thrown straight into horror. "No wonder his rewrites never stuck. Not only shoddy code for an outmoded tech, but shoddy connection to the warping framework. That's why they said it was amateurish. That's so fucked."

Paige recoiled. "It's somehow worse that you're saying that."

Abraham let his head hang forward. "And no, Nicul. He never replaced them with anything."

"Guess that explains why your memory was so bad." Frank said in a dissatisfied pout.

Growing concerned suddenly, Natasha asked, "Are you gonna be safe to go home? Won't your dad just try to rewrite you again?"

"It won't work if he does try it." Vektoria said.

She turned a pointed look towards Vektor, which the rest of them mirrored. Vektor sheepishly admitted, "I placed a seal around the code. Just for now, nothing can alter it.

"You did mention you could do that." Abraham said thoughtfully.

They all fell silent for a few minutes and their exhaustion came barrelling to the forefront of their minds. They all had more than enough to think over. Vektoria stood and said, "That's all for tomorrow, in the end. I'm heading off to get some sleep."

"Eager as ever to get out of here." Jonathan said in a sarcastic grumble.

"She's right, though." Aglaé said, standing as well. "Nothing left to do but to go home and prepare for what we can do next."

Damon and Niculaie stood with him, then offered their hands to Abraham. After a second's consideration, Abraham accepted their offer and let them pull him to his feet. "Three years is a long time. I fear I've forgotten how to be your friend." He said in admission.

"Hey, I said I'd forgive you. Just glad to have you back." Damon said.

"We can sort out all the details once you've fully regained control." Niculaie pointed out.

Abraham took a deep breath, then pulled both of them down into a hug. "Thanks for never giving up on me."

"We promised, didn't we? To never let it come between us." Nicualie said.

"Was never your fault. Not really." Damon agreed.

The two hugged him in return, more or less enveloping him in their embrace. Once they let him go, he went over to Aglaé and looped an arm around his shoulders, a much more natural fit since they were about the same height. "You gotta catch me up on how progress has been with that lovesick disaster. And we gotta get a good tussle in, too." Abraham said, grinning past his pain.

Aglaé rolled his eyes in exasperation, though he relaxed into Abraham's grip. "I have missed having someone who enjoys a good tussle. You have no idea how infuriating it is to be secretary to the King of Hell."

"Oh, I can imagine some of it." Abraham teased.

They headed for the front gates and Damon hurried after them, calling in protest, "I'm an attentive and great King."

"When you're not up your own ass about it." Abraham tossed back at him.

Aglaé and Niculaie both laughed at that as Damon pouted, though Niculaie offered his reassurances to the Kingpin. The four friends left the campus, still needling one another in good nature as they waved to Officer Riviera. Vektoria trailed after them, grumbling to herself. Dante mumbled, "Nice to see they're still able to be so close."

"At least something's healing after all that." Frank agreed.

Natasha nodded along, looking as overjoyed about it as Frank and Paige. They all headed for their dorms shortly after, too exhausted to continue milling about and conversing. Dante pretty much passed out the moment he got comfortable in his bed.

His fires remained in his dreams.

There was Hell and there was fear and the fires remained. At their core was an ember encased in ice, glowing like a prism with all the colours of the rainbow.

As he reached out to grab it, he heard the beating of his own heart grow louder in his ears.

A piece for a piece. If he wished to right the wrongs and break the story, there was a price to pay.

That ice latched onto his hand, crawled up his arm, and forced his neck to look into his reflection. Before him stood his parents, their eyes his red, each holding the same frozen fire.

Shadow smiles split all of their mouths. Eyeballs ripped from the sky and fell around his bare feet one by one by one.

He was staring straight into blank white eyes when he startled awake. And he knew it was time to give up what he owed them.

## Chapter 12: A Piece for a Piece

The shadows made themselves known exactly once.

It was during lunch, while they lamented Kalyuga's inability to stay with them for a more efficient code rewriting session. Frank locked eyes with the most prominent one sticking to Dante's back and froze, even as it disappeared in a blink. Vektor kept watch for the rest of the day. They continued trailing after Dante, staying only in glimpses of shadowy trails and stitched wide grins.

Whatever forced them to aggression like this, Vektor had no idea. He never asked how that worked. From the first moment he saw them gathered around Dante, chanting for that Inferno, he was too frightened to look any closer. They were familiar, like a mirror showing his own code back at him. Prying into their mysteries would be too much peeling back his own.

Shadow child. Artificial intelligence.

Where would one get the life force needed to create a living, breathing program?

Yes, he very much did not want to question it. There were bigger concerns to distract him for the moment.

"We'll be using our tower for this venture." Vektoria proclaimed as they all convened for supper. Since their group was so big now, they opted to sit outside in the cool of the evening. "If we're to be utilising my Void for Abraham here, then we should do it on my turf."

"I think which tower we use is purely incidental by this point, since the systems are connected." Paige said.

"Guess I'll be in the driver's seat." Jonathan said with a shake of his head.

Smiling, Vektor said, "I'll assist you if you need help."

Natasha and Frank giggled while Jonathan ducked his head in embarrassment, but he said, "Thanks. Nice to have someone who can both read the computer and Italian."

He even bumped his shoulder against Vektor's in a fond little gesture. Every time Vektor was sure this bond between them had reached its maximum capacity, he was surprised by its blooming affection from small gestures like this. While the others continued their discussion, Vektor was caught up in this overwhelming adoration. That pulsing love flowed from him and he had to reach out, to hold onto Jonathan's hand in some show of that affection.

Jonathan gripped his hand in return, chuckling. "You're glowing there." He murmured.

"Happens, as I'm sure you'll remember." Vektor said.

He leaned over to press his forehead against Jonathan's shoulder. Jonathan tensed, growing embarrassed again, but allowed it. That glow intensified and, again, Vektor was elated past any threshold he thought possible.

Partners. They were partners.

There were too many shadows looming over this atmosphere.

Once they all finished eating, they headed for Vektoria's tower together. As Jonathan led them inside, Frank asked, "Are we doing this inside the game or are we just using the scanners for it?"

"Inside." Vektoria answered. "Easier to read what needs reworking in there for us and you lot."

Vektor nodded along and followed Jonathan to the computer while Vektoria went straight to the centre scanner. A memory hit him then, of their true purpose as programs. Of pulling out code and scanning for errors, of cruel laughter and condescension. Paige and Dante followed Jonathan to the computer and Abraham stepped inside one of the outer scanners. His tone a bit hollow, Vektor said to Damon, "You knew us before as well. Didn't you?"

"What, you remember our Fireball but don't remember me?" Damon laughed a moment, just as hollow, then shrugged as he turned away in his discomfort. "I had to be worked on a lot back then."

"They saved your life." Dante said. There was no malice in his tone, but no other emotion, either. He turned his attention back to the computer and switched to authoritative. "Check all the code in that third enhancer to see if it can be safely deleted. If not, we'll need to figure out some other way to get at what's holding back his memories."

He seemed in his element. A striking resemblance to something Vektor very much should not have remembered. (Eyes obscured in golden light. Voice clipped and to the point.) Petel went to his side, though they couldn't read the data scrolling by on the computer, and Vektoria gave an aggravated, "Okay, okay. No need to step that far into the role."

"I have experience. Why deny it any longer?" Dante asked.

That chilling sentiment made Vektor shudder. The doors shut and loaded Vektoria and Abraham into the game. Frank, Aglaé, Natasha, Damon, and Niculaie all ended up crowding around the computer as well, trying to see despite not having the code to understand. Looking at Niculaie's lack brought that issue into the forefront of Vektor's mind and it was easier to disregard the absolute dread Dante gave off right now. "We should get you in there as well, Niculaie. Assigning you a new Designation shouldn't be too hard, but it's best to get you used to it before we get back to our path through the Brown Hollows." He said.

Perplexed, Niculaie returned a soft, "What?"

"The Vampire is no more." Abraham said, his voice coming from the computer speakers. He was inside, then. That was good. "I may not have a clear grasp on what exactly happened, but I can recall that fact with crystal clarity."

"It was your main directive, of course you could know that and nothing else." Vektoria said with a scoff. She brought up the scan for them to see and Vektor leaned in a bit closer in order to better examine each line. "Load Vladimirescu in here, Jonathan."

"Is that safe?" Frank asked, glancing fearfully towards Niculaie a moment. "Wouldn't that result in something like what happened with the Guardians?"

"He's still fitted with the framework, you'll see how that's meant to work soon enough." Vektoria insisted.

"Better to let the system and subject decide on personalisation than manually code every possible form. They lack the creativity for it." Dante said in explanation when Frank remained hesitant. He then pointed at a particular line and said, "There. That start is off. Vektoria, can you—?"

"I know what I'm doing." She snapped. "You tell me if I'm good to delete the whole lot or if you need to make any changes first or what."

Dante didn't flinch or cow away at her bite. In fact, he merely frowned and dropped his hand to ask Jonathan, "Can you highlight this whole section for me, please? Keep reference of it to compare to the relevant bits of framework."

"Um. Sure." Jonathan said, though unsure.

He copied over the chunk of code which made up that third enhancer, then continued scanning through the rest. Vektoria said, "His Memory argument is built into his framework, so there shouldn't be an issue in getting rid of this enhancer."

"Shouldn't be." Dante agreed. "However, there's no telling if the memories built into it will get erased with it or if he'll retain those on his own. Those memories from the past, before installation, will definitely return, since they were just stored and pasted over instead of outright deleted, but all the new memories formed after installation seem to have been redirected through this enhancer instead of stored in the body."

"I could lose my memories of the past three years?" Abraham asked in alarm.

Vektor and Dante both, in horror, asked, "You left him conscious?"

"Why would I suspend functionality? It's not surgery we're performing here." Vektoria fired back.

Niculaie stepped in next with a shocked, "Your father made it so your memories were stored inside those enhancers instead?"

"I guess? Is that not a normal thing for enhancers?" Abraham asked.

Not having the answer, Niculaie turned to Dante for it. Aglaé did as well, curious to see what it would be. Dante let out a short breath, bracing himself, and said, "It's definitely the worst option, but it is one of the more appealing functions to them. After the war is done, remove the enhancers and all memory of death, of crimes committed for the sake of the battle, are completely erased. Perfect for concealing all those messy details they don't want getting out."

"Perfect indeed." Aglaé said in disgust.

Damon made a face in agreement, then grew hesitant himself. He said, "He'll really regain all his memories from before? No caveats, no side effects?"

"Besides the potential of losing his more recent memories." Vektor said.

"And being too close to his brain or whatever." Aglaé said.

"His father's work really is awful." Dante said. "If it weren't for the framework built into him before their installation, then he'd probably be even less functional than he was."

"A miracle you didn't collapse from this mess." Vektoria agreed.

"I'm right here." Abraham said in a huff.

"And your father's a wanker." Paige countered. She turned to Niculaie as Abraham made a few more upset noises in protest. "Let's get you scanned now and see what it is they're talking about in assigning you a new Designation."

"We're not gonna be bat buddies anymore." Natasha said in a playful lament.

Smiling, Niculaie said, "You and my sisters enjoy it much more than I ever did."

"Percival hated playing the game." Abraham said suddenly.

It seemed near involuntary. A recollection he had to voice before it escaped his grasp. Frank deflated with a regretful, "He's really not the type for even play fighting, huh?"

"At least once he wasn't into it, they never forced him to keep going." Damon mumbled.

Niculaie stepped inside one of the empty scanners, a mixture of nervous and eager, and was closed in as Jonathan shifted focus over to that for a moment. Raising her voice in annoyance, Vektoria asked, "Am I good to delete this or not? Can we work on one thing at a time?"

"You're the one who told me to get him in there." Jonathan said in gripe.

"Delete it." Dante told her. He stepped away from the computer and over to the scanner Abraham was using, raising his voice so she could still hear him. "Actually suspend him this time, though. I've got an idea as to how to keep it from damaging his body when removed."

"I want it out of me." Abraham said in some sort of agreement. "Even were I to lose my recent memories, I want to be free of it. I want to be rid of this thing denying me my self."

Vektoria was silent a minute in her consideration, then gave in with a flippant, "Alright. So long as you're okay with it."

Petel watched Dante curiously, asking, "What's your idea?"

"Don't watch. I need to concentrate." Dante told them.

Though wilting at the order, they went back to observing the monitor. Niculaie's log-in was successful and the editor prompt popped up for him. Instead of allowing any of them input, it filled



with everything itself, from the adjustments to his stats to his newly assigned Designation. Vektor watched in complete rapture, mumbling to himself as he read over it. "Wall. A good fit for those naturally high defences."

"It really did just decide on its own." Paige said, equally intrigued.

The others crowded closer, though there was no way for them to understand. "What's he look like now? I wanna see." Frank said.

"Paige, can you load us in, too? Pretty please?" Natasha joined in.

Paige rolled her eyes as she smiled and pushed away from the computer. "Fine, okay. Anyone else wanna come?"

She gestured around and Aglaé said, "I'll go."

"Me, too." Petel said.

"Count me in, I gotta check out my bestie." Damon agreed with a cheeky wink.

They all glanced towards Dante, who was drawing marks into the side of the scanner with that Create of his. Strange glyphs Vektor couldn't possibly understand, though he recognised the materials instantly. When Paige went over to offer him a hand, he paused and gave a somewhat hesitant, "I'm, um. I'll be good here. I'm not done yet."

His phrasing caught Vektor's attention. As did the realisation that this particular Create dripping off his fingers was the tendrils of the shadows. Not just mere glyphs. As Vektor went to ask what the Hell he was even doing, Vektoria loudly called, "You getting that extra life force to me any time soon, Inferno? I kinda need it considering this enhancer's iron grip on his brain stem or spinal cord or whatever."

Damon leaned in to give an annoyed, "You can be delicate about it, don't act like you can't."

"I'm getting to it." Dante called in return, equally annoyed.

Paige opened the doors for Natasha, Petel, Aglaé, and Frank. They paused a moment to listen to Vektoria, but were otherwise unswayed. Frustrated by her interruption, Vektor asked his brother, "Why are you calling the shadows here, Inferno?"

Everyone looked to Dante, who exhaled shortly. "So much for this going smoothly."

He tapped the circle of glyphs and drew one into his space instantly. It was clearly visible to all of them, as Frank and Jonathan gave startled yelps while Aglaé shrieked. "Those are supposed to just be drawings." He cried out.

Dante stepped into this shadow's embrace, surrendering himself to the grinning thing. "For want of a piece, a price must be paid." He mumbled in some attempt at explanation. "I'm sorry, but. There was no avoiding it forever."

"You can't give in." Damon screamed.

"Dante!" Petel shouted.

Vektor couldn't move. Seeing the shadow there so brazenly, so unafraid, brought back too many memories.

It was a table. A table with a tea set. A lure to bring in friends.

A trap for bottling life.

The shadow struck its spindly claws into Dante's chest, carving out a whole chunk of his flesh. He didn't scream. He barely made a grunt in pain. Everyone else did, but not Dante. Not Vektor. It pulled out the beating core to his fire, a glowing rainbow ember serving as his heart, and snuffed out all of the life it held. What it dropped to the floor was a coal, cold and dead and lifeless.

The debt had been paid.

Petel charged it, but it was already gone. It dropped Dante's body to the floor, lifeless and as much a husk as the coal which was once his heart. Petel held his body and howled in their absolute agony, but there was no denying what had just occurred.

Dante was dead.

Dante was dead and left that life force in the hands of Memory.

"What's going on? What happened out there?" Vektoria asked.

Her voice snapped Vektor back into the moment. Niculaie joined in with a concerned, "Is Vicario okay? Please tell me he didn't..."

He trailed off, unwilling to voice it. He was as aware as Damon. They had to be. Just the same as Vektor and Vektoria. Vektor shouted into the computer desperately, "Use that gift he left, Vektoria."

"You think I'm not working on that?" She snapped.

Vektor only grew more furious. "You knew, didn't you? What it entailed for him to offer that extra bit of life. You know what he had to do to get it in order to save Memory."

"You're kidding."

Her tone dropped right to an icy fury. How could she have been so ignorant? There was no other option for Dante besides this. Vektor wanted to latch onto that fury to dispel this swirling in his gut from that severed connection, but now wasn't the time. It was messy, sloppy work and they had to act before it was taken from them as well.

She fitted that boost into the code quite nicely, using it more as a shield against the tearing disconnect of removing that enhancer completely. She more spat out than said, "Of course he would. Of course he'd do this. Most unsatisfying victory in the world. Wasn't enough to kick all of our asses, he just had to go and screw us all over one last time."

"Shut up." Damon seethed at her. "He gave his life to help our friend. He's dead and he never deserved this."

"Wrong. He's always deserved this." She shot back, her iciness enough to cease any boil. "He's always been so — I lost count of how many reforms we had to — ugh, this is such a perfect way to cap this all off."

She had the proper code deleted and Abraham seemed to have retained all functionality. He even looked to have all his memories intact. Petel wailed loudly as they held Dante's body close and Frank and Paige both sobbed while Natasha, Aglaé, and Jonathan panicked. There was some blood trickling from that gaping hole in Dante's chest and Vektor's processes hitched for a moment at the sight of its stark redness. Time stuttered and he grew dizzy, as if he just exited a scanner and had to collapse from that inability to adjust properly to his less digital body.

They'd finally done it. Their son was dead.

A hollow victory indeed.

"We have to. Fill the hole." He said.

His tone fuzzed out just like his mind, but he had to act past this stall. They didn't have time to waste. Damon whirled on him with a hysteric, "No shit, but how? With what? They took his heart."

Hearts for the Queen, heads for the Rabbit. "The Rabbit Hole." Vektor clarified.

He moved then on floaty instinct, grabbing up Dante's body (with help from the Wolf, who snapped at him at first) and headed towards the other tower. Paige, Frank, Aglaé, and Natasha followed, all hesitant to actually help (human blood was sticky, was wet as opposed to the ashy blood of shadows) but unwilling to let them go on their own. It was a short trek, an unseen one at that, and the evening was not unkind to look at. Vektor always admired how the skies here shifted with the turning of each cycle, having so much variety in their colours and contents. That, of course, came from the unlimited data allowed to this realm. The boundlessness of reality, as one might call it.

Vektor forced open the doors and directed Petel to the centre scanner, saying in declaration, "I refuse to let things end how they wrote it."

"Is that really going to work?" Paige asked, wincing and wringing her hands in the hem of her uniform vest. The spring green looked lovely on her, just as the darker greens matched with her yellow bow-tie. "He's dead. Nor really much for the system to load in."

"It's not the first time just his code's been loaded." Vektoria pointed out.

She was still inside the Rabbit Hole. That made things easier. "I can walk you through what to do, but it's deceptively simple." Vektor said. "The framework is intact. The only missing piece is the Heart."

"That's kinda an important piece, isn't it?" Natasha asked.

"Winning against me never actually stayed their hands, did it?" Damon asked bitterly.

Petel placed the body inside the centre scanner. Best to not take their chances if they needed more power. Best not to take their chances when the code was as tangled as Inferno's. "The system should detect the framework, but will ask to provide a life force." Vektor told Paige as she took her seat

at the computer. He hurried over to assist her and Petel remained, watching over Dante's lifeless body slumped over inside the scanner. "You can bypass that check by diverting over to the editing process. Vektoria can assist with the scan and we'll be able to better figure out how to remedy this situation."

Vektoria said in retort, "Great plan, but you forgot something important. I can't create. So how am I supposed to help out here?"

Annoying as usual. Vektor rolled his eyes and went for the door, shouting back, "Then I'm headed over to take your place. Jonathan, withdraw her, please."

"I still wanna go in and see what's happening." Frank said.

"Simple. Right." Paige said in a grumble.

Vektor charged out, leaving her to work and the others to their morbid curiosity. He had one clear goal, one clear mission: return home. That was always present in his mind. This was, however, his brother. His friend. The only comprehension of this bond which bled inside his breast was thus: help his friends.

If this meant repurposing his own code to do so, he'd forfeit it all in a heartbeat.

Jonathan jumped in surprise as he entered, Vektoria standing by his chair and watching the screen as she intently directed Paige. "Ignore it, the system's just being a whiny baby. Direct it straight to the editor, take none of the suggestions it throws up."

"Are you gonna be okay going in?" Jonathan asked, eyes still wide.

Vektor nodded to them both. Good to see their conviction was as set as his own. As he stepped inside the centre scanner, Niculaie gave a wavering, "I don't think anything could really prepare you for this."

"Holy shit." Abraham breathed in agreement.

The two were still inside the system, which was a little odd, but with all the excitement, completely understandable. Vektor closed his eyes as the scanner doors shut him in and he surrendered to the fall.

The two were correct, of course. Nothing could have prepared him for the sight which greeted him.

Dante's body hung above the path, suspended in the air and absolutely coated in error messages. It actually hurt to look at the constant ERROR, ERROR, ERROR, as if even in death, Inferno couldn't stop screaming. Vektor winced at the sight, but said to Paige, "Good work. You've loaded him into the system as well as you can."

"Outside of the obvious missing bit, at least." Paige retorted. She seemed much snappier under the duress and he couldn't blame her for it. "I'm not quite sure what you're intending on doing here. Is the system capable of just. Bringing someone back to life?"

Shadow child. Tea parties. The thoughts ran through Vektor's head, making him scowl at their reminder. "Why shouldn't it?" He asked. "It brought life to Vektoria and myself, after all."

No one seemed to want to respond to him there. Abraham and Niculaie stood together just outside of Inferno's influence and that was something else to focus on. Niculaie's new form as Wall gave his body a stony sturdiness and made him blockier than before. Instead of having no arms, he now had chains dangling from his shoulders with giant solid rock fists at the ends. His rebalanced stats were fascinating as well, more focused on Attack and Defence than Speed.

A nice and welcome distraction from that overpowering ERROR message before them. "An intriguing choice for your own build, Niculaie. It looks good on you." He said.

Niculaie jumped at being addressed, then smiled unsurely at Vektor's out of nowhere praise. "Um. Thank you."

"Do you think, perhaps." Abraham paused, seeming to struggle with whatever it was he was considering. Despite his hesitance, his resolve was set. "Would it be at all possible to return whatever it was Dante gave to me?"

"What do you think's holding you together?" Vektoria asked in a scoff.

Vektor didn't even need to examine Abraham's altered code to know the answer. "Life cannot be taken after being integrated into living code. The gift Dante gave to you has been used. Unless you wish to carve out your own heart and offer it up, it wouldn't be possible."

"I could help with that." Vektoria said.

Her giddy tone relayed her true danger. Abraham placed a hand over his chest, clearly contemplating it, so Vektor curtailed that by producing his Create in his hands and said, "I have half his ability. Half our own ability. Let me attempt this before we explore those options."

Before he refocused his Create into something workable, Petel, Frank, Natasha, and Aglaé loaded in and joined them on the path. They, too, were now exposed to the ERROR that was Dante's body. The hole in his chest was hidden beneath his shirt, but it was a gaping blank in his code that Vektor couldn't ignore. His lack of fire, his lack of heat, his lack of life; all of it made for an unsettling sight.

Abraham waved to their friends, but they were too distracted to notice. The four of them let out varying noises in horror at Dante's prominent ERROR. Vektor swallowed back that swirling discomfort doing its best to revolt against his body and hardened that gold in his hands.

He stepped up to Dante's body despite its screaming and poured his Create into that blank. It refused, even making him recoil a step. Straining his teeth against that clear rejection, he kept pouring, kept giving, but it refused to take the proper shape.

Missing component, it told him. Life force required to create a proper Heart.

"I can't recreate his fire." He admitted through his teeth.

He pressed forward, flooding his gold into his hands and pushing into those gaps, but it passed through, refusing his efforts. His gold could flow freely and beg for him to take it, beg for him to return, beg for that fire to rekindle, but it wouldn't. And that only made it all the more frustrating.

"I can't ignite it anew." He rose to a shout. "My Create can't compare. Why am I not able to utilise my own in the same manner? You brought us the life we needed, why can I not return the favour? Why aren't I allowed to save you when you saved me first?"

He pushed and pushed and pushed his gold onto Dante's body, but it finally cut that connection. It sent him stumbling to the floor on his knees. He slammed his fists against the path with a last shout, fury bubbling all the way up his throat.

Black, black blood. Shadow blood. His blood, boiling and boiling at this end they had no choice but to hurtle right into.

This couldn't be it. He refused. He refused!

Frank pushed forward suddenly, shouting, "You have to live."

Power surged into his arms and dripped freely from his eyes as he dipped his hands directly into Dante's chest. Blowing right through that boundary keeping Vektor from even touching it. Everything distorted for one powerful, distracting moment, making all of them stumble. Though he knelt on the path, Vektor, too, wobbled from the waves pulsing off Frank.

"I won't allow this." Frank went on. "You can't die. I won't let you die."

He continued pouring — was that raw code? — into that hole in Dante's chest and the resurgence was so powerful that it pushed all of them back further. Abraham tried for a placating, "Frank, mate, not sure this is the best option."

"Live!" Frank screamed.

His voice shattered something in the air around them. The space in-between vibrated from that singing energy, keeping any of them from making a single move to stop or to help this process along.

Singing, singing, just like the Midnight Bard. A Berserk.

This was a Berserk.

How had Frank accessed that code outside of Resident's influence?

Everyone else was forced to their knees on the path, pressed down by that overwhelming power emanating from Frank's form. Vektor called out a weak, "Please, no more."

"Better get everyone out before it's too late." Vektoria said.

Frank screamed again and this time the computer joined him. It practically split the in-between in half, revealing that blinding light beneath its shadow. It all surged into Frank as the runes, the runes dripped from his hands down Dante's body and splattered onto nothing. The only colour amidst this light. Vektor pressed his hands to his head as everything around him warned of overloading, overloading, overloading. The waves slashed out at all of them and Vektor was choked with too much, too much.

Frank pulsed and poured and ripped right into that code. He twisted and tore and dragged that inevitability out of it. It didn't fill the hole, didn't repair it, but it choked and clawed and locked every single one of them in a state of perpetual life.

Energy, vitality, existence.

They all had no choice but to persist.

There was nothing besides rejuvenation.

Gold seeped from Vektor's eyes, the only outlet left to him from this overflow. He was alive, he was living, he was perpetual and locked and not allowed to cease.

His throat couldn't tear no matter how he screamed. His lungs wouldn't give no matter how they heaved. His eyes bled gold, his stomach churned black, and it was everywhere, everywhere, forcing him to persist.

And then, in the snap of a turnover to the next cycle, the in-between returned and the light flickered out.

Vektor coughed up that excess persistence shoved down his code and he could breath again. He could see, had control over his body, wasn't held in a state of perpetuity any longer.

Above him came Paige's voice in a quiet, "What the hell?"

"That didn't look pleasant." Jonathan said somewhat in agreement.

Vektor could hear their navigators again. He could make out the void of the in-between, Frank and Dante's shapes before him on the path. "Paige — please." He rasped out. Though his throat was fine, the effects of that overflow still choked him of any finer functions. "Don't — Don't pull us out yet."

"Is Frank still Berserk?" Aglaé asked.

Vektor was shocked at the quality of his voice. Glancing around, he noticed a lack of their shapes; they'd been booted. Vektor was the last remaining, though he was in no shape for much of anything at the moment. He blinked away the last of his gold dripping from his eyes and refocused his perception on the scene before him.

Frank sat on his knees on the path and read of Burnt. Like Inferno's own Berserk. Dante's body was no longer suspended in the air, now lying flatly on the floor in front of Frank.

Dante no longer read of ERROR.

He wasn't complete, either.

Replica.

That was what had filled the hole.

Frank had Rejuvenated Dante. Made him into a Control copy. Incomplete, but functioning. No longer dead by technicality.

Cautiously, fearfully, Vektor called over, "Dante?"

"Did something happen with him?" Petel asked quickly.

"He can't have been. Could he?" Paige asked, unable to fully voice her horror.

"That's not Dante." Jonathan said, voice shaking.

None of them were able to believe it. Vektor hardly could himself, even staring directly at this impossible result. He stood on wobbly legs, every part of him wracked from that pressure of life, and approached the two carefully. When Frank shifted, he flinched, but Frank was no longer in that complete Berserk mindset. The runes were burned into his face, formed streaks down his eyes like tears, and his voice was small as he said, "I'm gonna need one heck of a nap after this."

A quick scan of his diagnostics (good despite the Burnt status; it was as if he took on the Inferno in his efforts to revive him) helped Vektor relax. "A nap would do us all some good." He agreed.

Frank returned his gaze to Dante's body and said, "I won't let anyone die."

"You very much have the capacity to ensure that." Vektor said.

Dante sat up and Frank jumped to his feet in surprise. Vektor's stomach lurched and though the readings weren't that disconcerting ERROR of before, they weren't exactly Dante, either. Frank and Vektor watched in a silent sort of horror as their friend, their very dead friend who still lacked a heart and his usual fires, looked at them with an equal amount of confusion.

His eyes were Frank's green now. They had that milky blue film to them, same as the other Replicas Frank Rejuvenated.

Otherwise, he looked just as he had when loaded in without his heart.

There was still something wrong. It was simply harder to notice at a glance.

"Why are we in the game?" He asked them. Then, after a second, "How am I not dead anymore?"

"Dante!" Petel shouted.

"What in the world?" Abraham asked in a breathless terror.

Paige, Aglaé, Natasha, Damon, and Niculaie all gave similar exclamations in shock. Jonathan must have been too stunned to speak. Vektoria gave an aggravated, "He remembers. Good. That saves us the trouble of explaining his own death to him."

Frank wiped at his eyes and the marks there, then grinned brightly up at his friend. "It was just a bad dream. You don't have to worry about it." He said.

Dante frowned at him. "I surrendered my life to the shadows and the system. I can't just come back from that."



"I'm inclined to agree." Jonathan said, finally finding his voice. "He's still missing that life force in his code and everything else seems suspended, for lack of a better way to describe it."

Vektor did a quick scan to confirm those details; Jonathan was spot on. Despite Dante's functions being halted in a clear sign of termination, there was too much persistence shoved into those spaces in his code. Too much persistence and all of it drawn wholly from Frank's own. It explained the eyes, the lack of his greater Create or even fire. Vektor tentatively called up, "You're able to withdraw him from the game as he is now, correct?"

"Not up to me." Jonathan said.

"Looks like it's possible." Paige said. She still seemed winded by this whole turn of events, but at least she was able to pull herself together enough to assist them. "Is Frank okay to log out yet?"

"Not yet." Vektor answered swiftly. "He's still suffering the effects of Burnt, as he's technically in Berserk mode."

Frank whirled on him with a concerned, "Woah, wait. Burnt? Berserk? I know I just drew a lot of power there, but there's no way I went Berserk."

"Burnt is my code." Dante joined in.

He paused in his examination of his own form, having pulled his shirt up to reveal that hole in his chest and shoving his hand inside as far as he could get it. As curious as ever. Vektor preferred not to think on how that echoed with a memory from before he was himself. Paige said, "That is definitely the same code as Dante's Berserk on you, though. So, I guess. Don't trigger that Desperation mode or whatever?"

"How do we knock him outta that so we can get him out?" Natasha asked.

Vektor looked down to his own hands, able to produce a surprisingly strong glow. He was full of this energy, he supposed, despite having it nearly choke him to bursting. "I may be able to circumvent that roadblock." He said.

Dante fully removed his hand from that hole in his chest and allowed his shirt to fall back into place, hiding his lack of heart away from normal sight. "How did you even go Berserk?" He asked Frank directly. "And why take on aspects of mine? I was kinda too dead for any overflow issues to pollute things."

Unsure, Frank gave a hesitant, "I wasn't even aware I'd gone Berserk."

To further avoid meeting Dante's eyes, he looked to Vektor for explanation. And though it pained him to admit this, all Vektor could offer was his best guess. "From my understanding of what just occurred, it seems you reached as deeply into your own code as you did Dante's. Like Petel before you, you actively manipulated your own code in your desperation to reach something previously too far out of your grasp. In so reaching, you somehow combined your code with Dante's in that moment, activating your core argument. Your Berserk, as it were. Therefore, you took on properties of the Inferno."

"Or something." Vektoria capped it off helpfully.

Vektor nodded to show his agreement, though he fell to a scowl. Jonathan gave a weary, "Even watching it from out here, it wasn't very clear what happened."

"That sounds as good an explanation as any." Paige agreed.

"Combined our code." Frank mused quietly to himself. He next met Dante's gaze and asked at a much more audible level, "Are you gonna be okay?"

"I'm missing my heart. I'm still dead." Dante reminded him.

The distinct lack of his fires was a testament to that. Not even just those which usually encircled him inside the Rabbit Hole, but at his very core as well. That ember was his heart and it had been torn from him and snuffed out. Frank, too, lacked the fires, though it could have been due to his current Burnt status.

Dante was no longer Dante. Jonathan was more right about that than he knew.

It was better having this Replica instead of a corpse. A temporary solution rather than lasting consequences.

Vektor swallowed back that swirling discomfort in his gut fighting to get out. "He has no other option but to persist, Doktor." He explained as best he could around that unsettled bubbling. "You poured your own vitality into him. That is your ability given by the Rabbit Hole."

Dante made a face in disgust as Frank sunk deeper into thought. Petel said, "So Frank brought him back through sheer force of will."

"No need to call him by his designation, you can use our names." Abraham said in an annoyed grumble.

"That's just. Something I can do, huh?" Frank said, hesitant to even voice the thought.

He shuddered, pressing his hands to his mouth. His Burnt manifested mostly in his face where visible, the runes leaving deep purple burns on his skin. Most of it was covered by his battle outfit, including his hands, but underneath, Vektor was sure the burns were seared into him there as well. Observing Dante another moment, Vektor noted that obscured Control percentage and said, "You cannot support a Replica forever, Doktor. We have to figure out a way to create a new heart for him before his time runs out."

"There it is again." Abraham said with a sigh.

Frank frowned up at him. "Can you see a timer or something? Do you know how long it will last?"

"Unfortunately, no." Vektor answered. "But, as per your powers, proximity might play a role in it."

"Like with William." Frank caught on quickly. He deflated at the realisation, then popped right back up. "We'd better start looking into heart transplants, then."

"Don't think those work on dead bodies." Damon noted.

If only things could be so simple. Getting Dante a new heart would take an adequate life force to create one. Considering their current lack of time, the solution had to be close, something already within their reach. Vektor could utilise his own, he was pretty sure; fractured though he was, he had to have enough for a Heart, even if just barely. But that sort of sacrifice was how they ended up in this scenario in the first place.

There wasn't enough time to hum and haw over this. If Dante weren't lacking that greater Create, then it would be as simple as calling in the shadows for supplement.

The shadows.

Vektor was born from them. First as the child, then as himself. Life etched onto these products of Dante's imagination.

Tea parties and stapled smiles. Black blood and empty eyes.

Vektor's memories as the First were still largely corrupted, but he could hear their harsh tones and its own giggling. It was as clear to him as his grandfather's own voice.

These memories of his Kingdom weren't real. His childhood as the Prince was as fabricated as his own person.

"We should wait out the cycle." He answered, reaching some sort of conclusion as a distraction from such thoughts. "Once we are both able to enter the Rabbit Hole, we'll see if it gives us enough to work with."

"Won't that take too long? You said we're on a time limit here." Natasha said in note.

"There's only one way for us to know whether all of Inferno's powers have latched onto Doktor." Vektoria said.

She'd come to a similar conclusion, then. Dante, still upset, said, "We can't rely on my Create for every instance of reformation."

"As Nat said, we're kinda on a time crunch here." Paige fired back.

Vektor stepped over to Frank and pressed his gold (healing this time) to Frank's shoulders. As he suspected, that Burnt broke once his remaining Health rose beyond its threshold and the runes vanished from his face, healed along with the rest of his body. Once he was a good percentage over that line, Vektor stepped back and gave a satisfied, "That should make it safe to log you out now."

"I don't want to be revived for real." Dante declared.

Vektor and Frank both went to argue, but it was Petel who got there first with an insistent, "You shouldn't have died to begin with. You deserve to live, to fight back against all this."

"You can't just accept the end they wrote for you." Damon joined in, just as heated. "If you won't fight back, then we will. We won't let you die, Dante."

"You're our friend." Niculaie agreed.

"If I have to keep pouring my own life into you until my fingers are bone, then I'll do it." Frank said in warning.

Dante continued frowning in disagreement. Annoyed, frustrated, the furthest thing from defeated. Vektor meant to ask what was causing this friction between his resolve to remain dead, to allow the Creators their victory on this front, when he had decided so stalwartly to lean in to his rebellion just this past while, but the floor dropped out from under them and then they were falling back into reality.

Vektor had gotten better at landing, but he wasn't quite there yet. His whole balance was flipped as he dropped into the scanner and it left him to inevitably tumble out onto the floor, no matter his best efforts. He caught himself this time (getting better, as previously stated) and acclimated himself to the new environment loading into his vision.

Jonathan, naturally, was the quickest to his side. "Easy there." He mumbled, helping Vektor sit up at the least.

"Disgusting." Vektoria griped.

"I think it's rather sweet." Niculaie said, smiling behind a hand.

Jonathan flushed self-consciously, but didn't pull away. He allowed Hyde to mingle instead of suppressing all of his self. Vektor loved him all the more for it. He leaned into Jonathan's hold much more than he needed to and gave an affectionate, "Thank you, my love."

Vektoria made some more petulant noises in disgust. They could hear the commotion coming from the other tower through the computer, but it was a few too many voices speaking at once to properly parse out what was being said. No doubt everyone wanted to argue this strange decision of Dante's to forfeit his own life. Jonathan spared the computer a glance of exasperation while Abraham, Damon, and Nicualie frowned more out of concern. "Shall we join up with them?" Niculaie asked.

"Not quite sure I'm ready to see Dante proper." Abraham mumbled.

Jonathan helped Vektor up onto his feet and, though he was still unsteady, he could manage well enough on his own. "Let's see if we can assist in changing his mind." Vektor said.

They left and though it was strange to see Vektoria sticking around, Vektor was glad she did. Something had, indeed, shifted in her from unlocking her memories. She may never outwardly admit so, but her actions were the important tell.

The rest of their group exited the other tower as they neared. Seeing them all file out in the midst of some heated discussion was actually rather nice to see. Those bonds were warmth and affection in Vektor's breast.

It was the sight of Dante which skewed everything into the realm of unreality.

He looked exactly as he had in the Rabbit Hole; dead but still walking. Puppeteered by Frank in all but execution. Not actually Dante, no way actually Dante, yet standing there and defying all senses just the same.

There was no other word for it. It was revolting.

This time, that uneasiness in Vektor's body protested with such force that he couldn't simply swallow it back down.

He dropped to his knees as he convulsed, expelling all of that fear and panic in a black goop which splattered onto the grass. It got the rest of everyone's attention, as he vaguely heard several cries of his name and several others crouching down by him, but his body continued its rebellion and he vomitted up more black.

It was as if he were trying to reject all that was inside him.

Shadow child, shadow child.

He wasn't human and never had been.

The black ceased coming out, yet he continued heaving. The sight of it was disconcerting now. That belonged inside him. That was him, was all of him. He had to get it back, get it back before it faded. Before he faded. It was all just shadow, he was just shadow, any light would wash it away and then he'd be emptier still. He squeezed his eyes shut until these awful convulsions came to a halt.

It was all he had.

That was all he had.

Please, dear god, let it be over and done with.

"Just black, huh?" Abraham mused distantly. "Suddenly, that time at the fair makes a lot more sense."

"Would yours be black, too, 'Toria?" Natasha asked.

"Probably." Vektoria answered, a clear unease in her tone.

Then someone grabbed his face.

Someone forced him to look and when he opened his eyes, he met those dead and wrong green ones.

"Face it." Dante told him, cold and not one ounce of fire to his code. "There's nothing else for you to do besides face it."

But staring straight into the face of fear only enhanced that revolt inside him.

Dante released him, thankfully, and stood back. "Whatever you're hoping to do tomorrow, it better not rely on more of the same." He warned. "Otherwise, I'll refuse your efforts to shove more life into me."

"You have to live, Dante." Damon said, as infected with fear as the others.

Petel grabbed Dante's hand and said, much gentler despite their unease, "You've come too far. You can't quit now."

Frank hesitated to step forward. He didn't seem fully aware of his position here. Perhaps that was for the best. Vektor paced his breathing, regained his stability, and tried not to think of those deeply wrong green eyes. (He tried not to look at his own shadow spilled all over the ground before him.) He stood as well, his legs no more than wobbling sticks, and said, "The life force we'll have to find for your new heart will come from some form of our Create. It can be nothing else, after all."

"Not unless you're okay with one of us giving up our own heart for you." Damon joined in.

"Enough sacrifices have been made." Dante said lowly.

He pulled Petel away and towards the dorms. Death hung over him but he continued moving. There was utterly, fundamentally something wrong in him, yet he persisted. Was disallowed from succumbing.

He had no choice. He had to continue.

"It's a cruelty we impose on him." Vektor said.

"But unless we do, everything will fall apart." Jonathan said, catching on rather quick.

He offered Vektor his arm, which Vektor accepted for the sake of stability. Downcast, Frank mumbled, "We're not letting him die. He deserves to keep living."

"We're not letting go of him that easy." Paige agreed with him.

"Sometimes, it's the gift itself which is the curse." Abraham said.

Frank hurried after Dante and Petel while Abraham left for the school gates with Niculaie, Damon, Aglaé, and Vektoria. Paige and Natasha remained with Vektor and Jonathan, Paige asking them, "Are you alright, Vektor?"

The sentiment behind her concern was nice. Vektor said, "I should be, yes."

That settled, she then whirled on him with an impassioned, "What is it you're planning here? How in the bloody hell are we going to get a new heart for him? Unless you plan on pulling a donor or something out of nowhere, I've no idea how you could be so calm about this."

"And what's all this about the shadows?" Natasha joined in. "Is there any way we can get them to give back his heart? They're the ones who took it, right?"

Vektor shook his head, saying, "A suitable life force is needed to recreate the ember which stoked Dante's flames. Usually, the Creators pulled from the shadows for that life, but it only delays the debt which must be paid. Taking pieces of life, after all, has to rebound at some point."

Jonathan, Paige, and Natasha all glanced at the ground, at the shadow Vektor left, then Paige said, "Okay. So what's our other option here?"

Quietly, Vektor admitted, "I don't know."

They didn't have enough time to ponder this. To look down every avenue, to explore new hypotheses and search out the proper answer. If Vektor's calculations were correct, they only had a single cycle at best.

"Coming up with a life force was his job." Vektor said. "He was tasked with invention, hence his boundless Create."

"Then. Maybe he can just make something new for himself." Natasha suggested.

"Or Frank can, if he's got Dante's powers." Jonathan said.

Vektor nodded. "Whichever turns out correct, it may be our best option."

"Damned if we do." Paige mumbled, echoing that earlier sentiment.

The four of them returned to their dorms for the evening, well and truly exhausted. Leaving Jonathan wasn't ideal, but at least he helped Vektor to his room. At least Vektor was able to get in a last kiss before he could collapse into his bed and allow some time for his body to recover.

Ravenell asked a concerned, "Was it a rough session today?"

Vektor hummed thoughtfully, then answered, "More eventful than anything. Abraham's memory has been reinstated, Niculaie has a new build, and Dante's heart was torn from him."

## Chapter 13: Not Allowed to Fade

When they woke up, Dante was rather groggy. Petel didn't really question it too much, since the fact that Dante was still here was an unbelievable relief. They had seen his heart ripped from his body. He still had a hole in his chest. He was still alive, still with them, but he carried a distinct off-ness about him.

At breakfast, he perked up a bit. Not due to the food, but he did shake off that grogginess. Paige asked him, "Not gonna eat?"

"I'm not sure if I can." He said.

Frank laughed and said, "It's not like your throat or stomach were damaged, though. You should be able to."

Dante grimaced in distaste, but scooped up a bite and ate it experimentally. As he chewed, the conversation continued over the day's plans. Their group was so focused on how they might get Dante's heart back that none of them noticed him spit the bite back out onto his plate.

As they all sat down in Mister Williams' class, Dante really looked drained. That vitality meant he looked alive as long as he was moving. Sitting still, it seemed, robbed some of that and his corpse was a much more prominent thought as Petel stared at him.

"Did you get enough rest?" Paige asked him.

"Were you even able to sleep?" Sonya joined in.

Both of them were rightfully concerned. Petel was, too. Dante mumbled in response, drooping forward onto his desk.

A flicker of heat lit at the pit of Petel's chest. "Dante?" They asked, leaning over to try and get a better look at his face.

Paige and Sonya mimicked the motion, an air of apprehension growing between them. It was no use. Dante didn't respond, head laid on his arms and face down towards the desk. He didn't even seem to hear them. As he lay there, too still to even be breathing, it was like he had died all over again. Petel dared to press a hand to his head and the corpse coldness of his skin made them flinch back.

Still no response.

Without that vitality, it was clear in a gut-dropping moment.

He was a corpse once more.

Petel shot to their feet in a frantic move. They had to get Frank. They didn't heed any calls for them, not from Paige or Sonya or Mister Williams, and dashed out into the halls.

Frank shared Health with Vektor. That was Mister Carriedo's class.



Right as Petel took their first few steps towards their goal, Mister Williams stormed out of the classroom with a shout of, "What is going on, Vitayev?"

Petel skidded to a stop. They liked Mister Williams fine enough. There was no way they could reasonably explain this. "Have to get Frank." They said.

Unamused, Mister Williams next asked, "Why would Mister Ernest help in this situation exactly? Mister Vicario needs to go to the infirmary, first and foremost."

"The nurses can't help. His heart was torn out." They replied.

That got Mister Williams to stutter. "Wh-What?"

There wasn't any time to dawdle like this. Frustration took over and Petel growled out, "Once I get back with Frank, I can explain better. But I need to help Dante."

They ran off towards Mister Carriedo's class. Strangely, Mister Williams didn't follow, returning to his classroom. There was a whole class to take care of; Petel shrugged it off and navigated the halls to their destination.

They burst into the room a bit louder than they meant and called, "Frank, we need you."

Vektor and Frank both stood, instantly at attention. "Is it Dante?" Vektor asked.

"Excuse me, class is in session." Mister Carriedo cut in, frowning at Petel with a deep annoyance.

They never could quite get along with Mister Carriedo the same way Paige and Frank seemed to. Frank sat down, chastised, while Vektor hurried over to the door as he went on. "I knew it couldn't last for long, but this is much faster than I anticipated. We'll really have to figure out something to help him and quick."

Mister Carriedo tried again. "I know you're worried about your friend, but Mister Ketziah—"

"Hey, Jairo." Mister Williams interrupted, stepping inside the room around Petel and Vektor. Petel was startled to see their teacher had followed them in the end and the added bonus of his use of Mister Carriedo's given name didn't help. Mister Carriedo, too, grew flustered and couldn't counter as Mister Williams strode over to his side. "Sorry, but we really need Ernest for this one. And Mister Ketziah, if possible."

Petel glanced quickly towards Jonathan and Vektoria, who also shared this class. While Jonathan seemed just as upset as Frank, Vektoria collapsed on top of her desk in annoyance. That was a fair response. Mister Carriedo gave a sputtered, "Alex, you can't — Shouldn't you be teaching your own class?"

"Vicario passed out, so I'm dealing with that situation right now." Mister Williams explained smoothly. Then, in an uncharacteristically teasing tone, he said, "You owe me anyway for saving yours and Rae-Rae's date the other night."

Mister Carriedo's expression became impossibly flustered and he shushed Mister Williams with a hurried, "It's not about owing anything, we could put our jobs in jeopardy here."

"That's rich coming from the guy who wanted to break his serial killer uncle out of jail. Where'd all that spirit of rebellion go, Jairo?"

"Oh my god, that was so long ago." Mister Carriedo sighed in defeat, pressing a hand to his face. "Fine, just. Whatever. If the Headmistress asks, I didn't consent to this."

"That's more like my fave cuz."

Mister Williams slapped Mister Carriedo on the back as Mister Carriedo protested, "We're not cousins."

"You're gonna marry my cousin, we're nearly there." Mister Williams rolled his eyes, dropping that smarmy grin he'd adopted. He knelt by Frank's desk to be at his level and mumbled, "You kids better explain what's up after this, though."

Frank stood and mumbled back, "Thanks, Mister Williams."

As Mister Williams ushered him to the door and then the three of them outside, he tossed back towards Mister Carriedo, "If it takes longer than the period, I'll take full responsibility. Count on it."

Mister Carriedo waved him off, then said to the class, "Now that rude interruption's over, can anyone tell me the average number of bones in the human body?"

"Are you and Mister Williams really cousins?" Mini asked.

Mister Williams pushed Petel, Vektor, and Frank entirely out into the hall and towards the stairs. Having the infirmary located on the second floor was kind of a weird detail. Once they were far enough from the hallway and into the stairwell, Mister Williams hissed at them, "So does anyone want to tell me what the hell Vitayev meant when he said Vicario's heart was torn out? Or do I have to deduce first that Vicario was pretty much a corpse after he passed out for you to explain it to me?"

Frank shrunk in sheepishness. "Um. It's kinda a wild story." He said.

"Try me." Mister Williams fired back.

Considering that wild detail he just dropped about his life, Petel was willing to take the risk. "The shadows Dante has made up since childhood appeared because he broke the rules and tore out his heart."

"And then I kinda reanimated his corpse." Frank added, taking that cue from Petel.

Mister Williams definitely didn't want to believe them. As they all made it to the top of the stairs and to the infirmary door, however, he reluctantly said, "Crazy as that sounds, can't really say it's without truth, considering the state Vicario was in. This has to do with those towers and what's in 'em, doesn't it?"

"I knew you were my favourite for a reason." Petel said, perking up.

"If you can believe it, Vektor's just a computer program we pulled outta there." Frank said next.

Vektor held up his hand, producing a golden ball of light in his palm. "Even you have the compatible framework for it, Mister Williams."

Mister Williams jolted back at the display, then let out a sigh of frustration as he mussed a hand through his hair. "Knew there was something damn fishy about this place." He grumbled, opening the door for them.

Petel and Frank rushed inside, finding Dante easily. Sonya and Levy stood at his bedside, where he lay atop the sheets. It seemed they'd convinced the nurses to leave them alone somehow. The lack of their usual uniform coat for their summer kits meant that hole in Dante's chest caused a visible dip in his clothes, though there still wasn't any blood.

He looked like death.

He looked just as he had when the thing first tore out his heart.

Petel's steps stuttered, a spike of fear piercing through their body and rooting them to the spot. Frank went straight to Dante's side and placed his hands on Dante's arm, panicking in a similar manner. "He's so cold. He shouldn't ever be cold. Wh-What should I do, Vektor?"

Vektor approached calmly, though there was a tightness in his posture. "You decide how much of your powers you can use." Vektor told him. "You manipulated your code once; just try not to reach so deep this time and go Berserk again, please."

"No telling what it would do out here." Sonya said in a tiny mumble.

"Berserk?" Mister Williams questioned.

Levy, Sonya, and Vektor all stood back to allow Frank the space he needed to concentrate. To get out of the blast zone, also. Petel grabbed one of Mister Williams' arms and pulled him away as well, saying, "Just watch."

Frank held his hands over Dante's body, in full concentration. Against all logic and odds, those purple runes glowed into his skin and dripped off like they would while he was Berserk. They were much more visible now that he was in short sleeves and revealing much more of his skin. They crawled down his arms to his hands and up from his neck onto his face, like little glowing purple bugs in strange shapes. He kept his eyes closed, but Petel was sure they would glow as well. As the runes splattered onto Dante's body, bit by bit, Dante grew less dead. Not by much, but it was definitely less.

"Live." Frank whispered fervently. The word itself seemed to thrum with power as Frank focused all of that energy into their friend's body. "Please, you have to live."

It wasn't like Dante snapped right back to life or anything. His skin stayed pale and there was no heat or any of his usual presence. His golden hair, even, seemed less bright and cold like the rest of him.

His eyes snapped open, though, and they were still Frank's green.

As he sat up, holding a hand to his head, he mumbled a soft, "That was weird."

Mister Williams shrieked. "What the hell? He was dead."

Petel abandoned their teacher and pushed forward, cupping their boyfriend's face in their hands. "You're back." They said, pressing their words into his (clammy, unnaturally cold) skin as much as possible.

"That actually worked." Frank said, quiet in his awe.

His whole person settled back to normal, no more runes or anything even denoting the use of his powers or his Berserk. Encouraging to see, but also a bit chilling; Frank was learning to manipulate his warping, just like Dante could. Vektor said, to Mister Williams, "Frank here has utilised what was left of Dante's code after that rather important chunk was torn out and infused it with some of his own code, mostly that of his ability to breathe life and power Replicas."

Mister Williams remained incredulous. "But. But he's."

Dante spared a moment to press against Petel in return (that love was still there, even if it couldn't burn in its current state), then lifted up his shirt to reveal the hole in his chest. "I'm still very much dead." He said.

Petel, Sonya, and Levy all flinched away from the sight while Frank and Vektor grew downcast. Mister Williams had to take several deep breaths, pressing his hands to his mouth, before finally saying, "We were told not to look into this Tower extracurriculars thing you all were running. The Headmistress assured us it was just a project for Mister Ketziah and Miss Ketxiah, since they were the out of place transfers."

"Well. That's not really a lie?" Levy said, shrugging.

Mister Williams opened his eyes again, a powerful fury behind that soft lavender. "That was our mistake. We should've looked into it or put a stop to it before this."

Dante lowered his shirt, covering that gaping hole in his chest. "You couldn't have stopped anything." He assured Mister Williams with the utmost certainty. "The game had to be played. My fate in particular has been set in stone for a decade or so now."

"Still. We should have done something." Mister Williams insisted. "You're all kids."

"Thanks for the sentiment. It does actually mean a lot." Sonya said, overwhelmingly relieved.

Petel perked up as well. "If you can keep helping us out, we'd appreciate that."

"Yeah, thanks so much for letting us do this." Frank said as he gestured to Dante. "We're kinda just stalling for time as we try to figure out how to get him a new heart."

"His deterioration is more rapid than I expected." Vektor mumbled, falling into thought and tugging his lips with two of his fingers idly. Petel had no idea who he could've picked that habit up from. "I assumed his accelerated healing might help to stabilise his form, but the Replica code seems to cancel that out and doesn't leave us with much time."

"Getting a heart transplant sounds logical, but I guess it wouldn't work since he's already dead." Mister Williams said, running a hand through his hair in aggravation.

"Wow, you caught on to the logic real quick." Levy praised with a giggle.

"Oh, uh. Who did you leave in charge of your class?" Dante asked.

"Philips and Rosenkrantz." Mister Williams answered.

Petel nodded appreciatively. Paige was more than prepared to take over a lesson plan and Kalyuga was an excellent choice for an assistant. Vektor said, "Judging from the little I can discern, it seems Doktor's Control won't last longer than a day."

"Where are we gonna find a heart before the end of the day?" Frank said in lament.

After a second of pondering, Vektor said, "It's a small but important piece, the heart. It's one of the core ingredients to the Queen and the Rabbit's quest for immortality."

"Queen and Rabbit?" Mister Williams questioned.

"Game lore." Frank explained.

"It only takes a small sacrifice. Just enough life to fit inside a core piece." Vektor went on. "Maybe I could try again. Just once more."

As he mused, he produced another ball of golden light in his palm. Dante watched on carefully for a moment, then said, "You have Create, too."

Vektor snuffed it out, his resolve set in his expression. "We'll need Vektoria's Void. Our powers are meant to work together. We were once one entity."

"Of course." Dante bowed his head. He seemed to understand exactly what Vektor was implying or planning, which was good because Petel had no idea where this was going. Dante said to Mister Williams, "I don't think I can attend any of my classes until this is fixed. At least, not without Frank there as well."

Frank sighed out a defeated, "It really is that bad, huh?"

Mister Williams grimaced at the news, as he should, then said, "It's not ideal, but I'll cover for the two of you. I can guarantee until lunch at least."

"That should be enough time for me to talk about this with Vektoria." Vektor said in confirmation.

Petel frowned at their Prince. "Will you be able to convince her to help you?" They asked.

"She seemed on board yesterday. But, if he can't, he's always got Jonathan and Damon to help him out." Frank said. He waited for Dante to stand up (Dante, who was dead but still moving around; who had Frank's green eyes and no fire in his body), then took Dante's hand. A spark of his power lit there for a moment and helped Dante perk up just a bit more. "I'm gonna take Dante to the tower for now and wait with him there."

"No." Mister Williams said, interrupting them from walking off. "Take Vicario to his room. That way, when the rest of the staff try to check up on him, you can just tell them that he's not feeling good from his wounds and that you're there as his companion in case he needs anything."

"Is that allowed?" Petel asked, taken aback.

"No, but we all can't really complain when it comes to the Vicario kid."

Mister Williams shrugged, clearly displeased with the facts himself. Dante gave a bitter and callous, "The Headmistress is indebted to them. It's easier taking advantage of that than my own coding."

He pulled Frank out of the room next, done talking about it. Mister Williams still seemed a bit shaken at seeing him go, at seeing him up and able to walk around after his slip back into being a corpse, but kept up his professional face as he next said to them, "As for you lot, back to classes. We have to salvage some of this day as somewhat normal."

"It helps in the long run, doesn't it?" Sonya asked.

Petel wasn't too pleased about the hitch in their plans. Always having to wait, always the wrong time. The wolf gnashed its teeth, it was sick of waiting. Without much else they could do about it, however, they followed Levy and Sonya back to their class as Mister Williams escorted Vektor to his.

The rest, they supposed, they just had to leave up to Vektor.

Vektor, who at least seemed to have some sort of idea on what to do about this.

Vektor, who held a similar create to Dante.

Petel didn't like where this was headed. They hated waiting.

## Chapter 14: The Lock, The Key, and The Heart

"You said I might be able to use your abilities since I revived you, right?" Frank asked.

He lay atop Petel's bed (since Dante was supposed to be in his own and all) and watched as Dante bustled about the room with a restless energy. As soon as they'd stepped inside, he'd crumpled to the floor in exhaustion. It was hard to see on his darker skin tone, but there was definitely some type of bruising over his hands. Some type of remnant from using his power. Dante paused to think a moment as he pulled another of his wards from its hiding place and deliberately ripped it in half. "That's what happened last time something like this happened." He answered. He tossed the pieces onto the pile he made of them. "Have you felt the fires at your fingertips or the whispers of your own creation begging to be given thought?"

"Is that how it works?"

Frank tilted his head slightly in confusion. Dante supposed only Petel ever got close to figuring out how it all worked exactly. He pulled one last ward out and sat alongside Frank, keeping it flat on his lap. "My Create deems that whatever I believe shall be real to my own eyes. I don't think the caveats of it being only under my own eyes will apply to you, since you're just borrowing this power."

Frank nodded, following along so far. "So I just have to believe it?"

"Pretty much." Dante confirmed. "Let's say, for instance, since I'm dead, you think of me as just that: dead. So I could probably do lots of fun things, like taking off my head or snapping my bones in and out of place without hurting myself."

"Let's not do that." Frank said quickly.

Dante fell to a pout for a moment. He was still kinda upset about the shadows taking his heart instead of his head. He lost it when Berserk and all, he should be allowed to take it off and play around with it as a consolation. Putting that aside for now (there was always later), he said, "Then, the main reason I might look less alive than usual is because you believe I am dead."

"But you are dead." Frank said in protest. "I saw you die."

"That's the trick, though." Dante said. He held up his paper as he went on. "You have to believe despite what reality presents you. After all, you're the one in charge of reality now."

Frank scrunched up his face in distaste. He didn't quite get it, then. Maybe Dante needed another angle to tackle this from.

"Okay, so. Did you ever have an imaginary friend while you were growing up?"

Frank shook his head. "No. It was just me, William, and mum."

So much for that avenue. Dante frowned, placing the paper down and raising his hand to his chin. "How about. Did you make up any stories while playing? Like, there's a mud golem in the

mountains gathering power and we're going to stop it by finding it's heart deep in the caves. Or maybe, there's a pixie infestation in the trees and we need to gather all the leaves in a pile to lure them in so we can trap them with a net made of twine."

"You played weird games." Frank said bluntly.

Dante fell to exasperation. "Everyone I knew only ever wanted to play house. I think mine are better."

"Abe and Vladimirescu used to literally hunt each other for fun, so I guess it's not really that weird." Frank conceded. That helped Dante be a little less sour about his immediate dismissal. "Also, I can see why your terrors all went so far if you came up with all that as a kid."

"I'm a little shocked you didn't, considering everything about our childhoods." Dante let out a whoosh of breath (he didn't need to breathe, he was dead, but the habit persisted because he was technically still living despite that thanks to this overwhelming persistence) and tried yet another avenue. "Scientific method, then. Form a hypothesis and run it through a few tests. If it turns out to be incorrect, form a new one using the data collected."

Frank perked up, finally understanding something. "That's speaking my language."

"Our hypothesis is that you may have access to my powers of Create."

"And all I need to do is try to really believe in something impossible to make it appear." Frank sunk into thought for a moment, sitting up on Petel's bed and crossing his legs neatly. Dante had to scoot over a bit to allow him the room. "Let's see. I guess the easiest thing to think on is how you've got your fires."

A tingling at Dante's fingertips; not heat, per say, but power all the same. Dante held his hands up for examination, waiting for the ignition to kick in. "Keep going." He said encouragingly.

Frank spoke his process aloud, hoping it might help. "Okay. Fire. You're a fire. You can pull fire from your skin and hold it in the palm of your hands. You've got fires surrounding you and fire in your hair and you're fire inside and out."

Heat. At last, heat. Dante near melted at the reassurance of it; to be gifted his own self back by a friend this time instead of having his parents thrust it back into his core. "Almost got it." He said, closing his eyes and focusing on that heat building in his hands.

"Fire, fire, fire—" Frank stopped, suddenly apprehensive. "Wait, I don't want you to burn yourself again though. Your body might not be able to take it in this state."

That was the last push he needed: belief. The heat returned to Dante's hands and when he opened his eyes, that tingling beneath his skin hadn't fled from Frank's backtracking. He'd been given permission; he lit a fireball in his palm even as the weight of it brought his spirits plummeting right back down. It wasn't his usual fire. Of course it wasn't. This was the same lavender that Frank had gained control over back then. "This makes sense." Dante mumbled.

Frank watched him, intrigued and concerned in equal measures. "I thought you said I had to believe it."



"You did, but. Turns out, you're not the one using my powers." Dante said. He stood off Petel's bed and kept that fire in his hand, an act of defiance against the very thing he hated most about his life. It wasn't hotter or even as powerful as his usual fires, but it came from him and he'd accept that heat over the cold any day. "I'm still the one who can use them, but I need your permission to do so."

"You need my permission?" Frank asked.

"You command the Replicas you create inside the Rabbit Hole. Why would I be any different from them?" Dante questioned.

Frank flinched back, chastised. "I-I revived you, though. That's all I was thinking about, I didn't mean—"

"No, you didn't." Dante interjected, snuffing out that flame and sitting down on his own bed. "Sorry. I've lacked my own control for too long. You're just doing your best to help, I didn't mean to snap."

Frank sunk a bit more into himself, not taking the statement for reassurance. Dante waited a moment to see if he might say something else, then went back to his earlier task once he remained silent. He snatched up the last of the wards he had hidden around the room, ridding the place of these useless protections. Before ripping this one, however, he flipped it over to the blank side and grinned at his new thought.

"Hey." He started, recapturing Frank's attention. "Since we know how it works now, wanna try holding a little tea party?"

He waved the paper for emphasis. Frank just seemed to grow even more unsettled. "Doesn't that mean. You want to call the shadows?"

"We need a source for the heart." Dante said. "My parents took it from the shadows for their other subjects. Don't you want to see how that process works?"

"Won't they, uh. Hurt you again?"

Frank held tight to that denial, too apprehensive to just allow Dante his powers. Which was fair, Dante could understand why. The only time any of them had actually seen the shadows was during his death and all. It did make it disappointing, though, to lose that last breath of heat he'd been given.

"They're not allowed to hurt anyone besides me." He said. "And what can they really do to me by this point? Kill me again? As long as you're pouring your Control into me, I'll continue to persist."

Still not reassured, Frank remained hesitant. "Is that what I'm doing? Is that why I'm so winded after that?"

Dante said, "You've never brought a Replica into reality with you. The life you extend to your brother isn't the same as this."

Now Frank relaxed, even if just a small bit. "I usually don't get winded like this in the game, either."

"You never usually use your Control bullets."

Frank sighed, scooting back in order to lean against the wall and stretch his legs out along the bed's width. "These tea parties. They don't cause a mess or anything, do they?"

He was thinking about it. Dante sat on his own bed and kicked his feet idly, making sure not to crumple the paper too much. "The shadows leave trails from their missing limbs and dragging knuckles, but those don't stick around. They're shadows, after all."

"They're not supposed to be visible." Frank said in understanding. Then, in an even smaller voice, "Would I be able to even see them?"

This was harder to answer. The shadows had already shown their hand. But Dante was supposed to be dead and the status quo had to be reset. He smiled a bit brighter and said, "After the hypothesis comes the testing. Isn't that right?"

Frank very much did not want to do this. That was clear in how much fear he held in his expression.

But he was curious.

Curiosity was all the permission Dante needed.

As Dante moved to the floor, grabbing up his pencil to start scribbling out the start to this tea party, Frank said in a bit of a panic, "But aren't they gonna be mad when they see you're still alive? They're gonna wanna take revenge or retribution or something like that. Won't they?"

"They're not allowed to hurt any of you." Dante repeated. He had the table drawn and all the places set; time to brew up the tea for the party. "I was supposed to be the only one. That was the one rigid rule they couldn't break until the end."

"The end, meaning. Your death?"

He paused to look up and meet Frank's eyes directly. "We're nowhere near that end yet." He said.

Then he dipped his hand straight into his paper to pull out the first tea cup.

Frank made a noise, startled by the sight. Dante pulled out the tea kettle next, both of them a nice grey porcelain and rounder than any of the sets Lietta owned. "It has to be red tea." Dante explained, pouring the blood-coloured liquid into his cup. He set the kettle down and swiped out his hand, producing a spoon next. "The shadows crave blood more than anything. Which is also why it has to contain a dollop of theirs."

He pulled up a jar of that next, scooping out a good portion of the thick black liquid and mixing it into his tea. As Frank watched him, he gave a horrified little, "As long as you believe it, it will become real."

Dante took a sip of his mixture and nodded. He hadn't done this ritual in such a long time. He set his cup down, spoon sitting elegantly inside it, and said in a rhythmic tone as he tapped a finger to his cheek, "Now how many friends shall we invite today?"

"H-How many did you usually call?" Frank asked, shuddering and exuding too much fear. It was palpable; the shadows would be too enticed by it.

"Three is standard." Dante said, pulling out one more cup. "It's always in threes. The Rabbit, the Queen, and their work. My head, my heart, and my powers. One, two, three."

He poured tea into this new cup and added a dollop of blood into it as well, stirring thoughtfully.

"But for a heart, even one is too much. One is enough to bring life to a puppet, or a computer program, or a miserable failure of a son who needs rebooting again."

Frank was hesitant to ask the next question. The obvious one Dante left dangling in the air with his lead. Fortunately for the both of them, since Dante didn't really want to answer it anyway, the door opened to reveal Petel, Paige, Abraham, and Vektor there to collect the two of them. Lunch time.

Dante smiled brightly at his friends and said in a bit of a tease, "Oh, good. You're just in time to join the fun."

While everyone else couldn't seem to form any sort of response, staring down at him in adequate unease, Vektor pushed forward and sat down across from him at the party table. The Prince even picked up the proffered teacup and downed the whole thing in what looked like an automatic response. "I've arrived." He said, to top it all off.

Dante suspected his intentions before, but this proved them. The Prince was planning on using himself for their needed life force. Dante mumbled, "You, Vektoria, the First."

Frank caught on. "Always threes."

"We don't have time to play around right now." Paige said, putting on her best leader voice to get all of their attention. "We only have until the end of lunch to figure out what we need to do in order to get Dante his heart back."

Vektor stood and offered his hand to Dante. "We'll make it work." He said.

It was a plea. A bargain. Dante was very used to those. He accepted his help and stood, eyeing the Prince warily. As they headed out of the dorms and towards the tower, Dante said in a low voice so as not to be overheard by the rest, "Do you really think I'll let you sacrifice yourself for me without a fight?"

Vektor didn't even flinch at the statement. "You belong in this realm." He said. "Your death is their win. I thought you wouldn't abide by that."

His resolve was as set as his stubbornness. Typical. Dante rolled his eyes and said in retort, "Your loss is also their win."

"Since our situation is faced with such an unfavourable choice, let me at least take the option where I get to help you." Vektor glanced back at him, golden eyes holding that plea in them as if it was the last lifeline anchoring him in place. "I've been a terrible brother. Let me make up for that."

"What if I want to remain dead?" Dante asked, though the Prince's words had cut a sizeable chunk of that defiance out of him. Hard to argue against that level of sincerity. "It would be the smarter option. Less accidents likely to occur once the fire's been extinguished."

Assured so whole-heartedly that he didn't even check back on Dante's expression again, Vektor said, "You have to live."

That halted the rest of Dante's arguments. Damon said it, Petel said it, Frank and Paige and Abraham; now Vektor said it in one last strike. Even Dante said it to himself.

He had decided after everything he'd been through that he wanted to live.

He had to live.

It was annoying as all Hell, but Vektor was right. Dante was going to miss him terribly.

Mister Williams stood outside the tower doors, waiting for them. As they approached and Paige opened them, she asked, "Are you sure your idea's going to work, Vektor?"

"What even is the plan here?" Frank asked next.

Vektor went to the centre scanner, still set in his determination. "We don't have many other options but to try it." He said.

"I'm not sure I get any of this, but it looks like this tech's advanced enough to be Vicario company alright." Mister Williams said.

He stood outside one of the scanners, scratching his head as he examined it. Dante strode over and entered that one, ready for the inevitable drop. Petel stared into the scanner as well, concern in their eyes. Their wonderfully beautiful eyes. Dante assured them softly, "Vektor knows what he's doing."

"Like he's ever done this before." Paige grumbled.

Petel and Mister Williams both watched as the scanner doors shut. The floor dropped from beneath Dante soon after and a swift trip through the loading zone landed him inside the Rabbit Hole.

It was the level select hub. Dante could tell that much.

He crumpled to his knees, however, as his whole body protested. That process threatened to rip him apart. He heard the others' voice as if through a deep, deep fog.

"You don't have much time, Vektor. Dante's health is nearly depleted already." Paige said. Hers was the easiest to make out, being so all-encompassing as it was.

"What do you expect me to do? Delete him?" Vektoria asked. She was there, too, apparently.

Vektor swept out his hand, pulling that bit of code from Dante's chest. He couldn't see it himself, but he knew it was the Prince's specialty. It was what Vektor had been designed to do; to help as their parents fiddled with and adjusted their code to make it tighter, more efficient, more stable. "Not him. We're trying to replace his missing heart." Vektor said. He faced Vektoria next, pressing a hand against his chest. "I need you to mix your Void with my Create."

"You think that'll create an adequate life force replacement?" Vektoria asked in a taunt. "That'll just delete you. I'm stronger, I'll overpower your pitiable Create."

"Our powers are meant to work together." He insisted. "Two parts creating whole. That's the only thing I can think of to help him."

"Why help him in the first place? Prolonging his existence is just letting those sorry excuses for Creators the victory they've been working towards."

"Any avenue we take will be their victory." Vektor shouted. His strong voice broke up some of that fog and Dante was able to pull his head out of his dizziness for just a second. Just long enough to watch the conviction in Vektor's face as he continued. "Inferno is the only one with enough power to shut down their whole operation. They cannot control him any longer; the ruin you insist on driving us towards is one of your own making. So long as you refuse to adapt to the realm around you, it shall always end with your loss."

"Liar." She shouted back, fury and darkness gathering at her palms. "I'm meant to be the victor here. I'm the victorious! Their name belongs to me. Your fates will end by my hand."

Vektor relaxed his stance, standing at rest. "Our world is ending, Vektoria. We're standing atop its precipice." He said. "We are being dangled over deletion and we have to do what we can the same as any other program would."

She screamed and shot that Void at him despite everyone's loud protests. Vektor was ready; he gathered Gold into his own hands and caught her attack. He held onto it as best he could, his gauntlets chipped away by the deletion and injected as much of his gold into it as possible. The ball of raw magic grew, swirling with a torrent of black and gold.

His hands frayed next, erasing even the black bodysuit covering them. Biting into his skin to reveal the shadow beneath. Once he got the magic to a balance that suited his purposes, he smiled as he said, "You and I have always been so easy to goad."

"Vektor, what are you doing?" Jonathan shouted.

Dante couldn't even move, as faded in this fog as he was. Vektor brought the magic to his head and let it envelop him. His body glowed black at first, seizing up and partially shattering, then a brilliant gold took over and its flash was too bright to look at.

"Vektor!" Jonathan cried.

"Vektor, you idiot!" Paige joined in.

Dante reached out blindly towards this shattering light, but was too weak to pull himself towards it. Vektoria was strangely silent and everyone else was too far away for Dante to hear them. Once that light faded to a smaller, warmer gold, Dante saw that Vektor was gone.

Vektor was no more.

In his place hovered a beating golden heart.

The key to everything.

Vektoria stepped forward and gingerly cradled it in her hands. She didn't touch it, but she held it all the same. Dante was growing delirious as his consciousness slipped away, just like it had during English class. He opened his mouth to urge her on, to say something, anything, but no sound came out of him. Paige ended up saying it for him, her voice tense and hollow. "Vektoria. Vektoria, Dante — he's nearly depleted."

Snapping to attention, Vektoria walked towards Dante on the path, the heart still in her hands. She knelt down and pushed it onto him, mumbling, "Liar, liar, liar."

Once it was close enough, it glowed brighter. It gravitated towards Dante on its own and practically clicked into place the moment she pushed it onto him. That hole in his chest filled and he could breathe again, could see again, was brought startlingly and suddenly back into full consciousness. He gasped and writhed on the path as heat, heat, heat filled him to bursting.

This was life.

Life was fire.

He was again, again, again.

They burst from him in a flare and Vektoria squawked as she hopped out of his range. "Hey, don't burn the messenger here." She complained.

"Dante's okay." Paige said airily. "Vektor did it."

"He replaced Dante's heart." Jonathan affirmed.

Neither of them were willing to celebrate this. Dante wasn't, either. He sat up and pressed his hands against his chest, wishing to dig it out of him and give it back, give it back, *give it back*.

It wasn't his to take, though Vektor gave it willingly. It wasn't his to persist, though nothing would allow him to die.

"You can't just sacrifice yourself for this. Not for me." He sobbed, still scrabbling at the front of his chest in spite of how solid it was. No more hole to poke his hands into. No more emptiness and death staring him in the face with every passing second. "They wanted you to die. They knew this would happen. You stupid, stupid — I don't want you to have to die for me to keep living. Why can't you understand that? Why can't you stop sacrificing yourself for all of us?"

"This doesn't really solve the problem at all." Mister Williams muttered.

Dante couldn't stop crying. That new life glowed in his chest, beat with a warming and comforting gold, but it didn't console him at all.

Vektor was gone, erased from the world.

All that remained was Dante's life.

Just as they anticipated.

Just as they wrote it to be.

"You're still here." Vektoria said.

She summoned her silver key sword in a flash and whipped it under Dante's chin, lifting his head so he wasn't curled in on himself so much. She forced him to look her in the eye as she glared down at him, barely able to contain that tumultuous fury that lived inside her.

"They didn't plan for that." She said, her tone even and filled with that vehement hatred. "They wished for me to be the sole survivor. His sacrifice means everything and you cannot throw that away."

She batted his hands away from his chest next and he winced at the sting of her hits. Paige spoke quickly in her concern, asking, "Are you attacking him?"

"Why are you attacking him?" Frank asked next.

Jonathan said nothing; Dante could understand that a little too well by this point. He stood and took a deep breath (one, two, three), then said, "I'm ready to be logged out now."

Vektoria stepped back, shouldering her sword and frowning. "So am I."

"Okay, just. Just a mo'."

Paige's voice remained unsteady in her concern. Dante closed his eyes and concentrated on his fires as he waited, letting their rhythmic thrum with his heart take over him.

A heart given to him by his brother.

A second chance bestowed by one half of his childhood tormentor.

Again and again and again, he wasn't allowed to die.

The floor dropped from beneath him and he decided then and there to take this even further than their plans allowed.

What Vektoria said was true. Lietta always wanted the daughter to be the sole victor.

But Dante remained. He would be her downfall until Hellfires consumed his soul.

Fire ate fire ate fire. Burn, burn, burn.

It was hardly a surprise when he landed in reality that his hair was alight with those flames.

## Chapter 15: The Game Must Go On

"You really did cause the fire." Mister Williams said.

He was startled by Dante's appearance. Why wouldn't he be? Dante was fire doing its very best to pretend to be human. Petel rushed forward to look their boyfriend in the eyes, to see the flames and the red rooted there. No more of Frank's green. No more hole where his heart should have been. "You're alive." They said.

"You're alive." Frank echoed.

He slumped against the arm of Paige's chair, visibly reeling from this whole experience. Dante paused to take a deep breath, settling his hair and dousing his outward fires, then he declared, "We get the Guardians out. Then we're shutting down this whole system."

"And how do you propose we do that?" Vektoria shouted, her voice erupting from the computer loud enough to make Paige, Frank, Abraham, and Mister Williams flinch back. She really could screech like a banshee. "Not even the Creators could figure out what was broken in them. Are you suggesting you're any better than those idiots?"

"I'm not. But we have more heads than they do." Dante said. He stepped past Petel and over to the computer to speak directly into it. "Don't you want to destroy their legacy, too? Don't you want to tear apart any and all impact they left and stand as your own person?"

"To accomplish what they could not." Paige joined in, catching on to what Dante was getting at.

Vektoria went silent. Contemplating the dilemma before her, no doubt. Mister Williams rubbed a hand at his temple, saying in a grumble, "You kids really did end up in the midst of something bigger than we could have ever imagined."

Some of that calculating chill left Dante as he turned a bitter smile towards their teacher. "It's not any consolation, but. We Vicario are known for our manipulation."

"Crazy. This is all just crazy." Mister Williams sighed to himself, then switched directly into his authoritative tone. "Right, kids, get yourselves over to the cafeteria and eat. I'll be around until the end of the day, so don't be strangers if you need my help on something."

"Couldn't be strangers even if we tried." Paige teased him.

She stood from her chair and grabbed onto Dante's arm, gently leading him out. She didn't have to, Dante was fine on his own, but Petel understood the action. They understood how Frank and Abraham crowded around their fire as well, reluctant to part with him after what they'd witnessed.

Warmth and fire and life. Dante was alive again.

All it cost was their artificial little Prince.



Dante didn't head straight for the cafeteria. He walked to the other tower, went inside to gather up Jonathan and Vektoria as well. Jonathan seemed in shock, going along willingly enough with Frank's guidance. Then they all crowded around a table with their trays of food, more or less eating and doing their best to process all that had happened.

"So you're really all better." Sonya said, simultaneously relieved and apprehensive of this whole thing. "After what happened, you're just. You're better now."

"A life for a life." Dante confirmed.

The fact that he'd dipped into that ominous bullshit didn't even register to Petel, they were so glad he was no longer dead. He was himself, had his red eyes and his heat, was no longer a reanimated corpse. They leaned against his shoulder and whimpered softly, prompting him to press back in return. Though hesitant, Levy asked, "How's that work, anyway? Did he just rip out his heart and give it to you?"

Dante grew downcast as he explained. "He used his Create to manipulate his own data so it would fit that missing piece of me, then Vektoria's Void to unravel the surrounding code that formed him in order to get at the raw life force."

He pressed his hand to his chest, fingers gripping into the fabric of his vest. He wanted to tear it out. Petel placed a hand on his arm, pulling his grip away from that, and said, "You're here."

"A replacement heart. It figures." He muttered bitterly. "Broken hearts and the heads just roll. That's how the story goes."

"How are we going to help the Guardians, anyway?" Abraham asked, his voice at least snapping Dante out of that malice. "They said we had to reach the Mainframe in order to alter anything, didn't they? Can we even reach the end without Vektor?"

"We have Vektoria." Paige said, shrugging unsurely.

Petel grimaced at the thought of having to follow after that terrible Thief. Kalyuga said, "If you can get a look at the code, you should let me see if I can figure out what's wrong with it. I do like a good challenge."

"And you've got a whole army of ducks to consult." Frank said with a grin.

It got her to laugh and, though subdued, they all joined in. Dante settled, no longer gripping into his chest, and they soon had to head their separate ways and off to their classes.

Petel wasn't exactly off-kilter, but they weren't able to return to absolute normalcy either. Vektor was gone and Dante had died. Frank was able to bring the dead back to life even in reality. They were all so intrinsically tied to their abilities that it was difficult to say whether or not it was baked into their personalities or if they were never free to be themselves from the start.

When they were back in their room for the evening, waiting for supper time, Dante said, "I am no longer me."

He'd been thinking about it, too, it seemed. Petel shifted in order to look at him better, nestled against his chest since they refused to let him sit apart from them again. "Sure you are." They said.

Dante shook his head. "I have been reformed many times, but this one isn't a simple reload of my previous state. I have been altered and will never be the person I was before being gifted this heart."

His gaze was steady and serious. Petel could hear his heartbeat, this new heart in his body, and the heat of his flames ebbed from him in gentle waves. They rested their head against him and asked, "Do you want it to change who you are?"

After a second of thought, he nodded. "I do."

"Then let it." They had to pull away, to sit up and meet him on a more even level. "I have loved who you were and I will love who you choose to become."

His expression shifted to a smile, sarcastic and bitter and tired. "You would love an unruly fire which burns without remorse?"

"Would gulp you down and let it burn." They confirmed.

Dante pressed a hand to their cheek, cradling their face in the most adoring way a fire could. Petel leaned into it, unable to resist the temptation. They were tamed by fire. They were absolutely consumed by it. How fitting when they had claimed to be the one to consume. Voice quiet and reverent and boiling over with that wonderful fire, he said, "Then I'll do my best to mark you all the way down."

"You'll stay nestled in my lungs."

He pulled them forward into a kiss, burning and burning and ecstasy. Their mind ran in loops as they kissed back with all the enthusiasm an owned beast had to offer.

Oh, how they desired his fire. Wished for it to consume them, body and flesh and soul.

Everyone was still a little shaky as they settled back into their usual routine. Life didn't stop just because they'd lost one of their pack; life went on regardless of who was mourning and who was left standing. Still, they had to grapple with the concept that Vektor was no more and it took them a week to really find their footing enough to remember exams were coming up.

"I can't believe he's just gone." Frank said the evening before exam prep began in earnest, voice hollow with that enormous truth.

Dante and Abraham bowed their heads, equally bearing this weight. They all sat together around a table for supper. Paige said, "We have to finish the game and shut it down."

"It's what he wanted." Abraham agreed quietly.

Dante said in confirmation, "We can't let them get away with this."

Petel added their own agreement to the mix and Frank perked up just slightly. "If everyone here's got the framework for it, what do you suppose they'd look like in there?"

"He said even the teachers had the code for it." Petel noted.

Paige perked up as well, newly intrigued. "D'ya think Mister Williams would agree to let us try it out? He's helping us now, it's only fair he get in on the action."

"Would an adult find it interesting?" Dante asked, apprehensive in his curiosity. "It's just a game. A children's game, even."

"Clearly, you've never experienced the ecstasy of catching 'em all." Frank teased.

Dante remained silent, still confused. Petel couldn't help here, as they were also unsure of what Frank could be referencing. Abraham, Kalyuga, Levy, and Paige all lit up, however, and Paige said excitedly, "Three to one Mister Williams plays that as well."

"I'd go so far as to bet he's got it on him at all times." Levy joined in.

"Do any of you happen to know about the fourth generation? My father stopped allowing Perci and I to play them once I started attending here, so I've missed out on the new releases." Abraham said.

Now Petel, Sonya, and Dante were even more confused. Boldly, Dante asked, "What are you talking about? I wanna see."

"I'd also like to know what you're referencing." Sonya chimed in.

Levy pulled up his phone and leaned against Sonya's shoulder, showing their birdie some pictures. "It's a pretty popular game series."

"The creature design is more cutesy than anything we've seen." Paige said, similarly leaning over to show Dante and Petel through her phone.

The display of a character surrounded by several colourful creatures did, indeed, showcase a less gruesome design than any of the game enemies they'd faced. Dante smiled at the picture, though, and said, "Oh, that's neat. It's a creature raising simulation."

"It's pretty in-depth on the competitive scene." Kalyuga said, pulling out a handheld gaming system instead of her phone. Abraham watched the screen over her shoulder, intrigued as she showed off her little creatures. "My team's been properly bred and trained since I'm working through the in-game contests."

"I'm surprised your parents let you have that." Frank said quietly in his awe.

"Duckie's actually got a few trophies from when we were huge in the scene as kids." Levy bragged, sitting upright and preening.

Kalyuga laughed at his bravado and Sonya joined in. Paige said, "Point is, games can be for everyone."

"We gotta get Mister Williams to play with us." Frank concluded, grinning from ear to ear.

This sentiment led them to asking Mister Williams about it after their exams were finished, the day Summer Term officially began. A task easier than they all initially thought, as he continued checking in with all of them, really making good on that promise to better involve himself with their

struggles. He seemed skeptical at first, asking in return, "Are you really sure playing around with that thing is safe?"

"The only real danger to it is the warping. Which only affects those who have the code for it and that's only Vektoria and me right now." Dante explained, stepping in before Paige or Petel had a chance to assuage their teacher's worries.

"And me?" Frank asked, hesitant.

After a minute of consideration, Dante nodded. "You activated your outward warping again, so yes. You, too."

"The code editor isn't a part of the game." Paige said.

"And since we're down a player, we'd appreciate the help." Abraham added.

Though he was no less assured, Mister Williams said, "Might as well see what this thing is myself. Maybe having an adult escort will help keep you lot out of any more trouble."

Dante laughed. "Where there's smoke, there's fire."

His whole demeanour had, indeed, changed. He exuded more confidence, seemed more in control of everything at his fingertips. Petel was as mesmerised by this development as they were by his flames, noting how he didn't even flinch as they entered the towers and stood inside the scanners to await the drop.

Vektoria entered their centre scanner and it was odd to see her stand in Vektor's place. Frank managed to get Jonathan to help them and they had to split their teams between the two systems, Paige leading the process for Dante, Petel, Mister Williams, Vektoria, and Abraham while Jonathan loaded in Frank, Aglaé, and Natasha.

They all dropped inside an unfamiliar area. A towering Library with a maze of books making up the centre and a hatch leading down out of the area instead of an opening or even normal doors. Petel did remember Frank and Abraham describing a sewers section the last they had checked in. As he dropped to the floor, Mister Williams let out a startled cry. He was covered in short silvery fur, like Petel's own (or even Sonya's feathers), that matched his hair. He had a sharper sort of snout than Petel and his round ears poking out from atop his head were those of a bear's. Like the Bears of the White Forest, in fact. He had the bone-like arms and claws of those enemies, letting his shorter stature still look as dangerous as any real life bear.

Mister Williams stumbled back in his shock as he examined his new form, his clawed feet clicking against the wood of the floor. "What is this? Why a bear?" He exclaimed.

"Only you can answer that, sir." Frank said, unholstering his gun to check the bullets inside.

Frank's appearance had changed very slightly; the purple lines crawling up his face from his neck now pulsed green and his eyes glowed with that unspoken power. If his body wasn't covered by that black bodysuit, Petel was sure there'd be runes marking every inch of his skin. While intrigued by all these new sights, they took the most interest in Mister Williams and circled around the man. Mister Williams pawed at his snout, then at his ears atop his head (what a familiar sight, that ecstasy at being

claimed less human than prescribed), and sighed in the end. "Guess my dad's whole polar bear obsession rubbed off on me more than I thought."

"It's not too difficult a transition to make." Aglaé assured him.

He took stock of their surroundings in a quiet awe, as did Dante and Natasha. Abraham, Frank, and Vektoria headed for the hatch in the floor as Abraham said, "Let's hurry onwards before that Guardian can mess with us anymore."

Vektoria scoffed as she tossed the door open. "Of course he would get on their bad side."

"Hey, 'Toria, wait for us." Natasha chided her.

As Natasha and Dante both went to follow the three (and Vektoria, refusing to wait, jumped straight down the exit), a softer voice said from somewhere above them, "Bringing both of my wards this time in an attempt to appease me?"

Petel whirled around, hackles raised, but was shocked to see this Guardian looking so human. They hadn't been warped at all. Mister Williams frowned at them in a similar confusion, saying, "I don't recognise you."

"Leave us alone, Latin." Jonathan grumbled, his voice having even less energy to it than it normally did.

"So that's Latin." Paige mumbled to herself.

Latin was just as surprised to see Mister Williams. "An adult." They said. The book in their hand slipped from their grip and landed with a thunk somewhere in the maze part of the ground floor. The sound made them jump and they shied away from the pack of players, their tone wavering. "You shouldn't be here."

"Trust me, I've done much stupider things." Mister Williams said, his words barbed with sarcasm.

Within the next blink, Latin was gone from their sight. Crouched by the hatch, Dante urged them, "Come on."

Petel shook off that anger and dashed over to meet their boyfriend. Mister Williams and Aglaé joined as well, then they were all racing after Vektoria in the sewers portion of this level. It was a dim and grungy place, being all browns and unappealing waters lining their tight path. Overhead, Paige said, "Don't fall into that by accident, looks like it's the bottom of the level."

"Instant void out, got it." Aglaé nodded.

"Got some company after you." Jonathan warned.

Petel huffed out a breath in annoyance. As if voicing their thoughts, Natasha gave a playfully aggravated, "Of course we aren't spared the welcoming committee."

Paige said, "Two Class IIs and three Class IIIs, the latter of which are right where Vektoria is."

Frank winced and said in a grumble, "Always gotta be the strongest ones after us."

"Power levels. Got it." Mister Williams nodded along. He kept up well with Dante and Frank; Petel remained the fastest, it seemed. "Any idea besides just their power level we can work off?"

"The last I came through, I was out of my mind in Berserk. And I only dealt with Class Is, I think." Abraham said in apology.

They all finally caught up to Vektoria, who was dodging around the three enemies and tossing her Void at them in concentrated balls. The lizards were quick and dodged around her attacks, leaving those concentrated spheres of deletion to collide with and disappear into that unappealing brown water. The three lizards looked like komodo dragons, with a brown hue to their green scales and their frills as weathered as the rest of the surrounding level. Like they were perpetually in the middle of shedding their skin. Dante squeaked in surprise and threw out a wave of fire, startling Mister Williams and Aglaé back and knocking one of the lizards into the void out waters.

"Well done, Dante." Abraham praised, pulling his rifle off his back.

"A little more warning would be appreciated." Aglaé griped as Natasha helped him up from where he stumbled.

"These are small fry." Vektoria hissed. "Keep them distracted so I can reach the next checkpoint."

"Class III, small fries. Sure." Jonathan grumbled from above them.

"They spit acid blood, be careful." Dante called in warning.

As if in cue, one of the remaining Komodos pivoted and shot a stream of distressingly red liquid at them from its eyes. The other kept after Vektoria even as she dashed forward along their path. Abraham threw up the butt of his rifle to block the splatter and it ate right through the material, making him need to drop it as it dissolved completely. It ended up splashing onto Natasha's skirt and she quickly flapped away, hovering over those waters. Petel gave a short, "So much for that."

"Good thing most of us are hand-to-hand combatants, looks like." Mister Williams said, a growl entering his tone right at the end.

He launched forward and tackled the Komodo before it could spit at them again, rolling to use the momentum and tossing it into the water. Natasha flew back over to land on the path, cheering. Aglaé and Petel both sprinted after the last one, in competition once more for this hunt. By their sheer speed, Petel outpaced Aglaé and pounced onto the final Komodo, biting into its softer than expected flesh. It made an odd noise, half croak and half squeak, and Aglaé continued past Petel to follow after Vektoria.

They got their answer to the obvious question as Paige said, "Vektoria, you're only at fifty percent health. Wait for Aglaé and the others to help you."

"Petel, let go of it." Dante shouted.

Petel dropped the Komodo and leapt back, nearly running into the curved wall of this sewer. Dante swept his fires along to grip the Komodo in a fist. This time it made a shrieking noise and flailed its heavy limbs, which were adorned with dangerous claws, but to no avail. Dante lifted it, then

slammed it down against the ground, making quick work of it. He retracted his flames the moment it fizzled to allow Frank the opportunity to revive the leftover data.

As expected, it came back with a purple tint to its scales instead of the brown, though it kept the green, and its eyes shone green instead of its previous red. Natasha hovered by its side with an awed little, "Woah. So that's how it works."

Dante said to Frank, "It's under your control. Remember that."

"You kids have learned all the rules to this thing." Mister Williams said, sounding impressed.

"Kinda had to if we wanted to get anywhere." Frank said with a laugh.

"Bad luck." Petel said in explanation.

"Vektoria's coming up on those other enemies now." Jonathan reported.

That spurred Petel back into action, sprinting after that reckless Thief. Dante allowed Frank, Abraham, the Komodo, Natasha, and Mister Williams to follow first, bringing up the rear. Without his rifle for once, Abraham drew his throwing crosses off his belt undeterred. "Too bad Nicul and Damon couldn't make it today. Would've loved to see Nicul in action again." Abraham muttered.

"Did you really try and propose to him?" Frank asked.

"Save that talk for later, please." Paige warned from overhead. Petel smiled at the thought of her putting aside her own investment for now in order to play their navigator. "Looks like AIR's sending more enemies your way. Four this time, all Class Is."

"Rat Terriers." Dante said. When Abraham and Frank both shot him a confused look, he explained, "They're dogs, they run with the rats they're supposed to chase. Pied pipers, I guess."

"You really did help make up a lot of what's in here, huh?" Natasha asked with a wince.

Dante bit back some sort of retort and said, keeping up that informative tone, "Class IIs should be the Sewer Gators and the Non-Hostiles are the Belfrey Owls, if I remember correctly."

"Sewer gators?" Mister Williams questioned. "You mean like those rumours about abandoned alligators in our sewers system?"

He paused in order to speak and nearly collided with Dante's fires as a result. Dante swept them up into his hands and said, "Keep moving."

"There's no way you can catch up to Vektoria." Jonathan said in gripe.

"We can certainly try." Abraham fired back.

Petel, being the quickest, pulled ahead of their pack in a full tilt sprint. They could match Vektoria's speed. As long as the enemies held her up, then they could at least reach her before this all ended up a wash. They rounded a turn along their path to find Aglaé defending Vektoria from two massive gators (brown scales, similar to the Komodo, but without any of the green to them) and four Rat Terriers (small dogs who looked like terriers alright, with their brown fur and posse of three brown rats each).

Agláé held one of the Gators' jaws open with his claws, keeping it from snapping shut on him, and shouted at Vektoria, "You could help, you know."

"I did help." She protested, smacking away each Rat as it tried to leap at her with her silver key sword. Her movements were still blindingly fast, but not enough to break through their current onslaught. "Any more magic I expend means we're not making any progress today."

Petel charged in and tackled the other Gator, which was about to whip its tail around and flatten Aglaé and Vektoria both. They were surprised they could move it at all, much less halt its momentum, it was so massive. Their own speed came into play here, giving them enough punch to knock it out of its intentions and make it scramble to remain on the path.

These Gators' massive size was to their detriment here. It meant they could wall off the way forward very efficiently, though, as the one Aglaé had in his claws demonstrated. Petel gave the other one a final kick, knocking it off and into the waters, causing its form to shatter as it was voided out.

"Nice one, Wolf." Aglaé praised, though it was strained.

"Yes, that's all well and good, help me now." Vektoria snapped, swiping another Rat out of the air as it pounced at her. "The next checkpoint is just past here. I can reach it."

Those rats looked more nuisance than anything due to their size, but their teeth were sharp and dangerous. Jonathan said, "You're down to thirty percent, Vektoria."

"I'm afraid we have to really listen to her here." Paige said, just as exasperated.

Petel hoisted Vektoria up in their arms, then chucked her over the Gator in their way. She gave a startled squawk (unlike Vektor in every way, despite the two of them literally having come from the same being) and Petel sustained more than a few bites from those Rats, but she disappeared over the Gator's body successfully. She shouted back in triumph, "That'll do."

"Aim for the Terriers." Dante called.

He and the rest came into view, Frank's Komodo spitting poison and Abraham leading with his crosses while Natasha tossed out her bat charm. Mister Williams, too, seemed to have a hang on things, leading with his claws to knock the Gator back and giving Aglaé a moment to get away. Petel swept away the Rats and scaled the Gator's side next. "I'll keep after Vektoria." They called.

"Be careful." Dante called back.

He was in full, glorious display, sweeping his fires out to handle the Rats while Frank, Abraham, and Natasha aimed for the Terriers. Mister Williams kept after the Gator so Aglaé could catch his breath, all of their team working together in wonderful harmony. Petel hopped off the Gator and dashed after their Thief, who had made it to a new ladder and scaled the thing to the top. She shoved at the hatch door, her hands glowing black with her power, and shouted, "Let me in you terrible Guardian."

Petel skidded to a stop at the bottom and asked, "Is something wrong?"

"The checkpoint's refusing to be unlocked." Paige reported. "I had no idea it could do that."



"As if Latin wasn't enough of a rude shit." Jonathan said in a grumble.

Despite the fact that they were the ones in here, battling and straining themselves, Jonathan sounded truly exhausted. Petel glanced back towards the fight happening just within the draw distance, then shouted towards this hatch. "You can't keep us out like a petulant child."

"If you won't let us in traditionally, fine." Vektoria poured even more power into her hands, bits sparking off and exuding a greater danger than her usual Void. "We'll just rip the way open ourselves."

She dug her hands into the seam of the hatch, cracking the whole of it until she could pry it open. Her black glow seemed to systematically infect the code, spreading through its veins, and made the cuts very jagged and uneven. Just the same as it had when she used that power on anything else in here. Once she had the entire chunk of geometry where the entrance was ripped open, she climbed up and into the now visible next section of the Library. Petel climbed up after her, passing through the hole with ease. Quietly, Paige gave a succinct, "That's. One way of solving things."

"Spawn point updated." Jonathan reported. "Good job."

Inside the Library, they came face to face with Latin once more. The Guardian seemed to be waiting for them, standing at their level instead of using the height of this place to their advantage. Vektoria stomped forward and proclaimed right in their face, "Once we reach the Mainframe, I'm finding your code and deleting it all personally."

"Unstoppable object." Latin noted. They weren't intimidated in the slightest; they were the strongest thing inside this system, Petel supposed. "Fair is fair."

They waved a hand towards the hole she had ripped open and repaired that damage in a blink. Petel dropped to wrench open the hatch once more, to make sure Latin hadn't undone their progress, and Frank's head poked right through as they did so. "Vektoria being dramatic?" He asked, grinning cheekily.

"She always is." Aglaé grumbled from somewhere beneath him on the path.

"Get inside quickly, please." Dante urged his friends.

Frank complied, pulling himself up and into the checkpoint proper. Aglaé climbed up next, moving with an admirable speed, then Natasha and Abraham after him. Mister Williams went next, asking Dante in concern, "You sure I should go before you?"

"Fires." Dante reminded their teacher. "Easiest for me to be last."

That explained his usual reluctance to charge ahead, at least. Just as Petel had always suspected. They remained at the hatch until Dante climbed up and offered him a hand, which he accepted with a softer smile. Once they were all safely inside, Dante shut the hatch and there was a general sense of relief amongst them.

"That's one more checkpoint down." Natasha said in triumph, doing her best to lighten the mood.

"Just one left before we reach the end." Vektoria confirmed. She seemed a bit winded herself as she shouted towards the ceiling, "Jonathan, get us out. We're not making any more progress today."

"That was a lot of magic you just used." Paige noted in agreement.

Angrily, Vektoria screeched, "I'm not out of magic. We're just done for today."

"Yeah, yeah." Jonathan mumbled in annoyance.

Natasha laughed at their interaction while Aglaé shook his head at it. Mister Williams said, "This would be a great form of Phys-Ed if it weren't for the everything else."

Petel perked up. "You like being bear?" They asked.

"It used to be just for play." Abraham said with a sigh, rubbing his head beneath his hat. "At least, that's how it was for Nicul, Damon, and me."

"It was never just play for Damon and me." Dante countered immediately.

Before they could ask any more questions, the floor dropped from beneath all of them and they were tumbling to reality. Petel landed on their feet in their scanner, winded but able to stay upright. Mister Williams, it seemed, wasn't so lucky, as he stumbled to his knees as soon as he exited his scanner with a grumpy, "How is it possible to be this drained by a virtual reality?"

"Brain makes it real." Dante said.

He offered a hand to Mister Williams, who accepted the help gratefully. Dante seemed steadier on his feet now; though it seemed mostly out of spite. Out of a refusal to give in. Petel loved him more and more every day. They went to his side to nuzzle against him, which did break him out of that determination for a moment to smile in return at the gesture. Mister Williams took note of this, but they were all next distracted as Vektoria, who stumbled out of the centre scanner fine enough at first, crashed to the floor in an upset heap.

Dante said, "You're really not all that different in the end, are you?"

She gave a disgruntled screech, which was as good a sign as any that their offers of help would go rejected. Abraham strode over to Petel's side, shaking his head down at her. "Honestly, I'm not that surprised. She came from the same system, after all."

"Aww, 'Toria. They know your secret now." Natasha said, her voice coming from the computer.

"Can't keep up your cool facade anymore." Jonathan said next.

Vektoria managed to straighten herself into a sitting position and scoffed at the computer. She said nothing, however, showing that in spite of all her attitude, she was willing to learn at least a little bit. It surprised Petel enough that they couldn't help saying, "She has more of the same than we thought."

"That's what you think." She said in immediate defiance.

"Actually, I have some questions about all this still." Paige said. She swivelled in her chair to face Dante specifically, though Petel and Abraham stood at attention as well, being within her line of

sight. "You can talk to us more about the system and its previous iterations now, right? Would you be comfortable doing that?"

Dante considered it for a minute. It didn't seem like he was afraid anymore, but more calculated. More discerning in his emotions. "It's not a very happy story." He said.

"I'd like to hear more about this, too." Mister Williams joined in. "Get everything on the record once and for all."

Vektoria scoffed. "Wise decision there."

Dante nodded, face twisting up at the bitterness of it all. "They'd like to erase all their sins, but I'm still alive. They can't erase me anymore."

The tower's doors opened and Frank led the way inside, followed by Natasha, Aglaé, and Jonathan. The room wasn't really made for a group bigger than theirs, but it kept growing nonetheless. Sighing shortly, Dante gave a nod in his conviction.

"I'll tell you about it. About the Hell known as the Rabbit Hole."

## Chapter 16: Tale as Old as Time

"It all began when I was seven."

Dante scrunched up his nose at his own words, then shook his head.

"No, let me try that again. It all began before I was even born."

Their whole pack sat in Mister Williams' class, grouped around Dante as he reached for the history behind this game. Damon and Vektoria sat closer than the others, eager to provide their own insights, while Mister Williams observed from his desk, opting to stand and lean against the front of it. Jonathan sat the furthest away, still listless in his mourning, while the rest of them watched their fireball friend with a sense of anticipation and dread.

"It was a way to use old tech that would otherwise go to waste. A way of keeping a disfigured child alive due to a promise Lietta made to an old friend. If there's one thing she can't stand more than wasted time, it's the thought of losing her last connection to her friend."

Frank frowned in distaste and asked, "Do you really call them by their names?"

Dante's mood soured further. "They're undeserving of any good will I could have had towards them."

"But we know most of this already." Paige spoke up next. "What can you tell us about the very first iteration of the thing?"

"That you can remember." Damon said, looking pointedly away. "I don't remember much about my experiences with it before you were around."

"She hated you just the same as she despised me." Dante said to him. Perhaps it was meant as a reassurance. It didn't sound reassuring at all. "She called you a spawn of Hell so often that I took it to mean you were returning to Hell every time you came in for adjustments. We learned about Hell in Sunday school, so I drew it myself."

He paused a moment, that sourness returning to his expression. Damon sank down from his place leaning against one of the desks and sat on the floor, as if weighed down by an overwhelming guilt. As if nothing he could say or do could ever make up for what had happened.

"They liked my creativity. They always valued me for that alone." Dante went on, his bitterness apparent enough to burn with just his words. No added heat needed. "Hell and the Garden were the only spaces I thought up, though. The White Forest, the Grey Tundra, the Brown Hollows, and the Mainframe Kingdom seem to be their own additions."

"And it shows." Vektoria said, arms crossed over her chest in her clear disgust.

"Creativity was never their strong point." Dante repeated, turning his glare towards the floor. "All they've ever cared about is preserving their own lives, becoming immortal through any means necessary."

"For want of more time, the Rabbit steals lives. For want of a heart, the Queen must gather heads." Vektoria said.

It was the same statement Vektor had made before, ringing more true now than ever. She made a noise in disgust and Dante nodded in agreement. "Everyone else be damned."

"So, tell me if I'm understanding this right." Mister Williams broke in, gaining all of their attention. "Your parents, the Vicarios, they used you as an experiment and as an idea man even when you were barely a child? Is that what you're saying?"

Dante said, "That's pretty much it."

"So. You came up with all the enemy designs, then?" Frank said.

"Did you also come up with how each Guardian works?" Aglaé asked.

Dante had to give it a bit more thought before answering. "Kinda? But not wholly. The system is equipped itself to mould a new set of data into a fitting representation based upon the thoughts and wishes of the person its moulding. The framework separates this warping from reality so that we can still exist here as we are and inside the system as our mental builds without one mistaking the other for true reality. The lack of framework to each Guardian left them in a state which the system cannot discern from reality, and thus they have been locked inside until a fix can be found."

His detailed explanation was shocking enough to leave them in silence. They were dealing with a master Vicario here. Petel could hardly swallow the fact that their friend, their roommate, their mate, was a lynchpin in all of the events which had rocked their world from the start.

With a small shrug, Dante added, "I did come up with all the enemy designs, so. Yes to that."

"You came up with little stories for them all, too, if I remember right." Damon pointed out.

Dante nodded, falling to aggravation. "I came up with all of them only for Orpheus to then repeat them back to me at nauseam while Lietta and Caro fiddled with my code. Bedtime stories to placate an annoying child."

"We're also of your design." Vektoria admitted, wincing at her words.

Dante similarly flinched, then said in a small voice, "They asked what sort of sibling I would like most. I had so many shadow friends by that point that I chose them and inadvertently gave them all they needed to create the First."

Frank gave it a moment of thought. "Zero zero." He said. "That's what you and Vektor said."

Vektoria went to argue, then stopped. She seemed pained as she reached for something in her mind. It was a similar expression to Vektor's before they'd managed to unlock the system. "I hated you." She said, her voice fuzzing at the edges just enough to show her true nature. "I hated them, too, but I hated you more. You were too stupid, too small, too easy to poke and make fun of—"

"And you're still an absolute terror." Dante interjected, laughing softly. She didn't seem to appreciate it, scowling at him. "You inherited most of their code, didn't you? Certainly more than Vektor did."

"I was always meant to win." She said through her clenched teeth, seething.

"They always wanted a girl." Dante said in an odd sort of response. "They wanted a girl and got me, the First, and Vektor instead. All of us and only one of you, so they stacked every odd in your favour."

"And yet, out of sheer spite almost, you refused to actually win." Damon said, less weighed down.

Vektoria tossed her head to the side defiantly. "It was your lot's fault for being so bad at helping me. Were any of you even halfway competent, we'd be in a very different situation right now."

"Different indeed." Dante agreed. "I'd be dead from popping, Vektor would be completely deleted, and you'd have no reason to finish the game anymore since the bare bones plot they added was never really your goal."

"It really is bare bones because they came up with it, isn't it?" Paige asked, rubbing the side of her head tiredly.

"From everything Vektor told us about it, it really was quite standard." Abraham said in agreement.

Vektoria seemed to hesitate a second. "Not that it really matters by this point, but. What did he tell all of you to get you so invested in his side?"

"It must have been a hell of a lot better than what she told us." Aglaé said.

"Which was nothing, by the way." Jonathan piped in from his spot, collapsed against the desk he sat at.

Vektoria glared at the two of them. Petel decided to take this question, since they had heard a bit more about it than the others. "He said you tricked him somehow and broke the seal on the Mainframe, putting the whole Kingdom in danger."

She rolled her eyes. "Okay, that's true. But it's only his side of that story."

"What was yours?" Dante asked, tilting his head slightly.

Again, she hesitated oddly for a second. As if the answer was something she had to actively stop dismissing. "His grandfather, Xander, is actually my grandfather and not related to him at all. Xander was merely the advisor to the crown who usurped the throne after Vektor's parents were killed. My father in this story, Zander, was disowned and thrown to the streets, so I was raised to find a way back inside and reveal everything for the farce it was."

"And they. They're named the same thing?" Frank asked.

"Oh, right." Vektoria scowled at the misunderstanding. "My father Zander is with a Z. His grandfather Xander is with an X. Kinda like our surnames."

"I did wonder why you two had nearly the same surname." Mister Williams said in a mumble.

"It'd be way too obvious if you were both Vicario." Dante said with an upset sigh.

Vektoria shook her head in a similar distaste. "Anyway. He and I look basically the same, so we agreed to swap places for a day and I took the opportunity to tear some holes in the mountains to reveal all the gold inside them. No one liked that, least of all him, so he chased me into the space in-between and I broke our way back before he could realise what I'd done."

"You really don't look all that much alike." Aglaé said.

"Gold in the mountains?" Natasha asked. "Was it the royal treasury or something?"

Vektoria shrugged, flippant. "I'm not even sure any of that really happened. It's all memories we were injected with to coat over our time as the First, after all."

"Only one way to find out for sure." Abraham said, perking up in anticipation.

She grinned with her usual manic cruelty. "How many checkpoints are left? Just two?"

"One and the exit." Paige said, grinning along.

"Now, hold on." Mister Williams broke in before they could all stand and head for the towers; they seemed united on that front, eager to figure out this answer for themselves. Each and every one of them knew in their bones that the only end to all of this was to reach the final level. To finish the game. "As head supervisor of this little activity—"

"Since when?" Paige interrupted.

"Since just this moment." Mister Williams fired back. Rather cheekily, too; his grin was that of a troublemaker. "Anyway, as head supervisor, I think we should make clear what it is you all want from this game in the end. What is the goal here after you finish it?"

Abraham and Damon shared a look, clearly having not thought that far ahead. Niculaie looked to Dante, as did Aglaé and Frank, knowing their fireball would have the answer. Petel, too, turned to their mate and said, "It's your decision."

Dante smiled brightly, though there was something quite sinister behind it. "We get the Guardians out. Then we take our grievances all the way to the top."

Vektoria mimicked his underlying sinister tone flawlessly. "We're storming their castle and there's nothing they can do about it."

"About time they faced some consequences for all they've done." Damon said, energised at this thought as well.

Mister Williams hung his head forward, still very tired and annoyed but more on board with them than Petel would have ever thought another adult to be. "I'll look into what I can do. I've appointed myself head supervisor of you lot and I intend to stick to that position as well I can."

"Thank you so much, sir." Paige said, drooping out of pure relief.

"Do I sense a field trip?" Frank asked, grinning along.

"I'll see what I can do." Mister Williams repeated. "For now, same rules as before. Don't let your grades drop and you can work at the game as much as you'd like. And, please, come to me before anyone else winds up dead."

"We'll come to you once we've hit the end." Petel promised him.

"Hopefully, we're finished with anything that might lead to our harm." Abraham added with a sigh.

"Hopefully." Niculaie agreed.

Damon slung an arm around Abraham's shoulder and his other around Niculaie's back. "C'mon, you two, where's your optimism? We're so close to making it to that final level. We're nearly there."

Abraham smiled at his friend. "And we have each other's assistance."

Niculaie softened. "You're right. Sorry, it's just. It's been a bit crazy."

"It's not going to be slowing down anytime soon." Dante told them.

He pushed past the trio and out of the classroom, leading the charge for the day. Vektoria zipped after him, hot on his heels and grinning with her usual sadistic glee. Paige shook her head, then asked Jonathan, "You up for another session?"

"Do I have much of a choice?" Jonathan asked in return.

He sounded worse for the wear, but stood and followed despite his weariness. Petel nodded in thanks to Mister Williams, then followed along with the rest of their pack. The decision had been made, after all. And who were they to complain about another dive into their wolf skin?

This whole game was far worse than they ever expected. Perhaps their wish for an adventure they could truly sink their teeth into had backfired precisely due to their stubborn single-mindedness. Too late to change that now, though; all that was left was to finish what they'd started.

They had to split into teams, Vektoria choosing to go with Damon and them this time. Paige and Jonathan loaded them all into their last checkpoint and it was a relief when they landed to see no hint of Latin at all. As they all walked forward into the portion of the bookshelf maze they could reach, Natasha asked, "What's stopping us from climbing over all of this anyway?"

"Do you wanna piss off that Guardian?" Aglaé asked her in return, annoyed.

"Would this level be as difficult as it is if we'd ended up here first?" Abraham asked next. Damon and Niculaie paused to look his way, confused, so he elaborated. "The levels can be done in any order forwards to back, in theory. The only reason we began at the White Forest is by pure chance. Isn't that right, Vektoria?"

Vektoria paused in her steps a moment, thinking it over. "It's just a coincidence." She said in the end, continuing through the maze until she reached the doors leading out into the level. "Latin would be



a stubborn asshole regardless of whether we came through the Hollows first or last. That's just the way they are."

"So each Guardian tailors our experiences through the level." Abraham pressed, unwilling to let it go so easily.

"Them and AIR combined, I think." Paige said, her voice resonating above them. "Maybe they feed AIR the information on enemy spawns? Or maybe they work with the system and AIR equally when it comes to that."

"Could also be scaling to player experience." Damon said, pushing forward after Vektoria. Petel and the others followed, knowing she would charge ahead and get herself into trouble whether they followed her or not. "That'd explain the weird spawns we got."

"And ours." Dante agreed.

Frank groaned as he let his head loll back. "So long as we stop facing only Class IIIs, I'll be happy."

Petel chuckled shortly, as did Abraham, then they were out in the Hollows. The broken cityscape of the area was hauntingly beautiful. Much better scenery than the sewers of that previous section. The uneven path they had to take through all the rubble led them onto the rooftops, allowing them a better picture of the area as a whole and how it wrapped around the Library at its centre.

The design was similar to the maze of bookshelves they had to navigate between each checkpoint. A twisting pathway all leading to the Library in one way or another.

"If it's all leading back to the centre, then where's the exit of the level, do you think?" Petel asked.

"We'll see soon enough." Vektoria tossed back, clipped as she continued forward.

She was as single-minded as Petel could be. They smiled at the realisation; her programming was the same as Vektor's, yet the ways she interpreted it could be so different from him. Paige said, "At least nothing's spawned yet. The way's all clear for now."

"All good." Jonathan echoed tiredly.

Natasha glanced up towards the dirty and glowing sky, much closer to them now that they were hopping from roof to roof. They could nearly reach up and grab some of those brown clouds fogging up the space. "He wasn't great at it before, but Jonny boy's even less good at doing his whole navigation thing now." Natasha said, drooping in her sorrow.

"Considering we've all witnessed more death than we should have, I can't find it in me to hold it against him." Aglaé said, ushering her along.

Niculaie gave a sympathetic, "He's allowed to mourn. We all are in some capacity."

He wound up the chains holding onto his rock fists, keeping them close to his body. His new form looked much more defensive and Petel sort of wondered what it might be like to get smashed by

those fists. His damage output had to have changed as well from when he was only a vampire. Paige started, "I wouldn't ask you to be doing this, Jonathan, if we didn't absolutely—"

Her pause made all of them (besides Vektoria) look up in confusion. Noticing Vektoria pull away, Natasha sped after her, prompting Abraham to follow as well. Jonathan heaved out a tired breath and said, "Thanks, Paige. AIR's sending in some Rat Terriers, by the way. Four of 'em."

"Just our luck." Damon said in gripe.

"Only Class Is, huh?" Frank pulled his gun out of his holster, making sure his health bullets were loaded in. "These ones suck way more than the others, but still. Easier than a bunch of gators or dragons."

"They always come with at least two rats each." Dante warned. "We should keep moving for now. I'll let you know when they reach us."

He kept at the back of their procession, fires at the ready. Petel gave a bark of approval and continued forward after their front runners. Vektoria outclassed both Natasha and Abraham in speed, so they had to catch up. As Petel passed them, Natasha huffed out an upset, "Can't you wait for us just once, 'Toria?"

"Better for you to keep up than for me to wait." Vektoria called back.

Notably, she lacked a lot of her usual aggravation. She even seemed to slow down the slightest bit, meaning Petel caught up to her quicker than they expected to. "Easier to keep you alive if you stick with the pack." They told her.

She scoffed, but didn't argue further. Behind them, fires erupted and Aglaé laughed out a joyous, "Finally."

"There's a fifth Rat Terrier just ahead of you and Vektoria, Petel." Paige said.

"Aglaé, can you tone it down?" Jonathan asked with a tired groan.

It was a warning. One Petel only recognised as the scent of danger hit their skin and, when they looked back towards the others, the air surrounding Aglaé crackled. Vektoria took note of it as well and shouted, "I knew it was too much to ask for that damn Guardian not to meddle."

She switched focus again to block off one of the rats as it jumped at her. Petel swung their claws down to trap another and she brandished her silver key sword in tandem with them. Apparently, she was willing to work alongside them. Perhaps they'd proven themselves last time. Or, more simply, it was better to act together in this instance than to charge ahead recklessly like she was prone to doing.

"That's a Berserk." She shouted back.

"Too late on that one." Abraham said as he caught up to them, swinging the butt of his rifle down to take out the Rat Terrier before them.

Petel glanced back to see Aglaé's form shatter, all his skin and muscles exploding off to reveal his skeleton underneath. It was as gaunt and beautiful as the beast he usually presented. Dante had to

leap away, as did Frank, but Damon and Niculaie seemed caught by the sight. Their bodies went slack, dropping Damon to his knees. Even Natasha faltered, her wings halting so she landed on her feet.

"Beautiful." Abraham breathed, just as caught up in the sight as the others.

Though Aglaé looked more delicate, dressed in a lace-thin gown with a veil covering his face to match, Petel didn't doubt his deadliness for a second. He dropped rose petals where he walked, destroying the Rat Terriers and their accompanying rats with a single touch. Each movement was graceful, like he was wading through water and floating effortlessly across the rooftops.

He switched targets to Damon once the enemies were dealt with. Strangely, Damon didn't even try to run, murmuring something as Aglaé leaned down to cup Damon's face in his skeletal hands. Where the bone touched Damon's skin left starkly red gashes, that ever present danger, danger, danger reverberating around Petel's head.

They couldn't reach the two in time. They couldn't even shout in warning. Aglaé kissed Damon through the veil, digging his skeleton fingers into the gashes he made. Damon's form dissolved immediately into pixels, leaving Aglaé standing amidst the glittering bits.

The mesmerising way he seemed to move had most of them locked in a state of unresponsiveness. He was haunting and beautiful in equal measures. Frank, Vektoria, and Dante all seemed hesitant to move as well, though not locked in like the rest of them.

Petel nearly gave in.

Too beautiful, too beautiful, too deadly to be ignored.

The wolf, however, came snarling to the forefront of their mind.

"Can't charm. Have mate." They forced out through their teeth as they recoiled from the sight.

The rest of the level came sharply into focus again. Aglaé moved on to Niculaie, pulling out a rose and scattering the petals over him to destroy him as well. Natasha would be next. Vektoria scoffed. "Took you long enough, Wolf." She said. "Though, I guess that Charm is designed to catch everyone."

"Why is he a bride?" Dante asked.

"And if it's designed to catch everyone, how come we're all good?" Frank asked next.

Dante shot his fires out to wall Aglaé off from Natasha. He was only somewhat successful as Aglaé couldn't part them, but turned his sights on them now. It broke Natasha's sight and snapped her out of that weird freeze, and she hurried over to join their smaller group. Vektoria said, "Lack of compatibility, probably. It's targetting something inside our code rather than purely manipulating our senses."

"Are you. Actually explaining it for us?" Paige asked.

Vektoria huffed, growing flustered. "Well, who else is going to keep you lot from making stupid decisions here? We have a goal to meet."

It made Petel smile. Somehow, someway, just by being a part of their group (and having rid herself of her one nemesis), she was opening up to change. They brandished their claws towards Aglaé and said, "Leave this to us."

Dante nodded, pulling his fires back and up to his arms. "Take Natasha and Abraham with you, Vektoria." He said.

"Yeah, since we'd be useless here, let's make progress while they deal with that." Natasha agreed.

Vektoria rolled her eyes, then grabbed the scruff of Abraham's coat to drag him off, snapping him out of his own trance. "Keep up with me better this time." She said in gripe.

"R-Right, of course." Abraham said.

Frank laughed as the three of them hurried off. Dante sprinted towards Aglaé a few steps, then lobbed his fires at him. Petel stuck by Frank for now, mindful of the danger and power their mate held with that fire. The display was a fantastic one, his fires landing at Aglaé's feet and catching the hem of his dress. They raced up the fabric, only to be stopped as Aglaé opened his jaw to sing a startling, single note. It snuffed them out quickly, even making Dante stumble a few steps as they sprang up around him once more.

The hem of Aglaé's gown was singed, but that only added to his ethereal beauty. Dante huffed out a breath, flexing his fingers as he regained his balance.

"No projectiles. Got it." He said.

"Guess someone had to counter Abe's insane Berserk." Frank said in a mumble.

"Hey, at least Latin didn't make both of them Berserk." Damon pointed out.

He and Niculaie were with Jonathan now, safely out of the game. Their distraction was enough for them to lose track of just how close Aglaé had made it to them, seeming to appear right before Dante. The fireball squeaked in surprise, then drew his fires back into his hands with impressive speed and punched out at Aglaé. His fires formed a claw for added range and successfully drove Aglaé back.

He kept Aglaé busy with his fire boxing, forcing enough distance with his claws so that deadly rose couldn't reach him. He burned black marks on Aglaé's gown and veil, showing that he was doing damage, just nothing substantial as Aglaé continued elegantly side-stepping all his direct hits. The roses Aglaé scattered on the floors seemed to eat up what fire touched it, meaning Dante had to keep pumping out more and even exhaled bursts of it as he kept after this skeletal bride.

"He needs help." Frank said, readying his gun.

Petel held their arm out to stop him. "No projectiles, remember?"

Frank made some noise in frustration, then holstered his weapon and held out his hands instead. "Okay, different approach for me, too, then."

His black gloves ripped off as he exuded power, revealing his decayed flesh beneath. The sight of it actually shocked Petel; knowing Frank was able to use his persistence to stay alive was one thing.

His fingers blackened by rot that crept through his palms and up to his wrists, though, revealing bone and tissue — that visualisation was startlingly real. Frank started forward with a shout, alerting Dante so that the fireball could dodge out of his way and Frank matched Aglaé's next strike head-on. He gripped Aglaé's skeletal hands, threading their fingers together to trap him further, not even flinching at the red gashes left wherever those bones touched.

"I can sew the life back onto you." Frank said in a clear threat. His words and deeply serious voice sent a shudder down Petel's spine. "Flesh and muscles are easy. A coat to disguise how deadly you really are."

As he held on, just as he promised, flesh and fur returned to Aglaé's hands. Aglaé let out another note, this one trembling with the semblance of fear, and yanked against Frank's grip. He ended up twirling and dipping Frank in an odd, frantic dance, before thorny vines burst from the spaces between his palms where that flesh had yet to consume him. They were black and dressed like fuzzy shadows themselves and speared right through Frank's body.

His flowing garments made him look far too pretty for what he was doing. Frank yelped and stumbled away, holding onto his arms where each gash burned black and leaked pixels. Paige, above them, said, "You, uh. You survived that somehow, Frank, but it took you down to 1% health."

"Sewer Gator coming up, Vektoria." Jonathan reported listlessly.

Petel swore and charged at Aglaé on all fours, keeping him from stabbing those vines into Frank again. The flesh remained on his hands, at least, coating over any danger they posed, but the rest of him was still bones. He crunched as Petel slammed him to the ground and snapped their jaws around his arm, chewing right through like they had for the spines of the Tigers back in the White Forest. Aglaé screeched his next note, making Petel flinch, but they refused to quit now. Even as they saw flames in the corner of their vision and a flurry of red rose petals and pain stabbing right through them, they kept chewing.

They didn't have much time to figure out the shift in their reality, dropping straight back into their body and out of the Rabbit Hole. The scanner doors opened and they flinched away from the light, stumbling on their unsteady feet. They barely managed to catch themselves on the side of the scanner, though they leaned far out of its doors.

"You alright there, Petel?" Paige asked, glancing back towards them in her concern.

Petel missed the crunching between their teeth. They nodded to Paige, placating her, then pitched forward and draped themselves over the back of her chair.

She returned her attention to the computer as she said, "Good work, Abraham, that takes care of that Sewer Gator. Dante and Frank should be able to join you, since Petel took out Aglaé."

"They won't catch up in time and I refuse to wait for them." Vektoria said in a huff. Even from the speakers, her seething rage was palpable.

"It's too dangerous for her to wait on us. Tell her to keep going." Dante said.

"It's a pretty straight path. We should be okay." Frank said next.

Paige tilted her head and made a wry face in clear disagreement, but said, "Okay. Dante says to keep going, Vektoria, that he and Frank will catch up at the checkpoint."

Vektoria scoffed. "Choosing to be logical now? Isn't that a first."

Her tone held a note of admiration, however. Or maybe Petel was imagining it after how unreasonably agreeable she'd been through this session. Dante said in a quieter voice, "Are you okay to keep going, Frank?"

"Yeah, not like I can get out any other way." Frank said at the same time as Natasha said, "That was expert levels of precision, Hammy. Guess they really mean it when they call you a Huntsman."

Petel frowned at the jumble of noise and Paige sighed. Abraham said, "Thanks, but. Why Hammy?"

Damon laughed on the other end. "That's annoying. Sorry, Jonathan, we did that to you a lot, huh?"

Jonathan grumbled something unintelligible in response. Petel wondered why, even now, the computer was still unreadable to all of them. They all knew the answers behind it. It should have opened itself to them. But no, only Paige and Jonathan were allowed to operate the thing. Aglaé spoke up, quieter than Jonathan and Damon and probably somewhere behind the two of them. "You were right, Abe. Latin is one awful motherfucker."

"Okay, I didn't say it like that, though." Abraham protested in his embarrassment.

Niculaie and Damon both laughed at them. Natasha, as excited as ever, said in a gush, "You finally got to kiss the Kingpin, Aglaé. I mean, it was a kiss of death, but hey. You did it."

"You got me good, I'll admit." Damon said, half teasing and half in admiration.

Aglaé huffed out an embarrassed, "It's nothing to celebrate, just shut up."

Petel smiled at the two. It was a comfortable sort of atmosphere they found themselves in. Finally, they could all just be friends with one another. Jonathan tiredly announced, "Checkpoint."

"Finally." Vektoria said in an exasperated exhale.

And there was just one last leg left in this struggle they all found themselves in. "We're nearly there." Petel said.

"Once everyone gets there, we can get some nosh." Paige said, smiling fondly over at Petel.

"Scran time." Frank cheered.

"How are there so many slang words for food?" Dante asked with a little laugh.

Frank and Niculaie laughed along with him. It was a very cute laugh; more and more, seeing this open side to Dante's boundless curiosity just made the wolf's affection for their mate beat stronger in their chest. Aglaé said, "Lots of slang for a lot of words."

"That's how language works, Fireball." Damon said in a taunt.

It wasn't antagonistic for once. It seemed like a genuine sort of friendly teasing. Petel knew from experience that Damon never meant harm by his words, that he was just as beastly as the rest of them, yet it was still a bit strange for him to acknowledge that once friendship with zero deniability.

They were all connected to this. They were all connected to each other.

It was so deeply rooted that it had killed Dante.

Those wounds were still much too fresh for that sort of reminder. Petel shook off the images of that shadow extinguishing Dante's heart, of Frank breathing life back into his unresponsive corpse, and focused instead on the fact that they had Dante with them, alive and well. That Frank was an embodiment of life moreso than he was of the inability to die.

"Final checkpoint. This should be the last of it." Vektoria reported, snapping them back into the moment.

"It's, uh. Is that really where we're headed next?" Natasha asked.

"It all leads to the centre." Abraham murmured to himself.

Paige said, "Get ready, Jonathan and I are logging you out."

"Are Dante and Frank near?" Abraham asked.

Before Paige could reply, Frank shouted excitedly, "Back down we go."

"It does lead right back to the Library." Dante said, his voice quiet in awe.

One of the other scanners opened to release Abraham and Petel went over to help him. They were steadier on their feet now and even though Abraham was pretty steady as well, he grasped their shoulder thankfully and said, "We're nearly there."

"What do y'think completing the game's gonna be like?" Frank asked.

Paige continued typing away, so the two probably made it inside the checkpoint. Though her voice was a bit distant, Vektoria said, "I don't have any stock in there being a definitive end. The Creators couldn't design a satisfactory story, why would they design a conclusive finale?"

"My thoughts exactly." Dante agreed bitterly.

## Chapter 17: It Keeps On Pounding

Their last push was one that couldn't come soon enough. Everyone was impatient, nearly shirking all other responsibility just to get inside and finish the game.

They had an agreement with Mister Williams, however. They all had to be smart about this, else the opportunity would leave them forever.

Everyone grew accustomed to Dante's scars. Despite his accelerated healing and this golden heart now beating in his chest, his body continued to ache and fail him. He was mere flesh, no matter the Hellfires burning at his core. His body was woefully constrained to this reality, unable to perish in flames and burning.

All he had to do was pace himself. Count one, two, three, then push forward. This drive kept him focused, kept him from pushing too far past his limits. Ridding his friends of this influence wasn't exactly a race. Not anymore.

Yet they were all driven towards this same goal. Surprisingly, Vektoria was just as adamant about it as the rest of them.

"Does today work for you all?" She asked, slamming her hands down against their lunch table to announce her presence.

Sonya jumped at her sudden intrusion. Dante frowned at her, no longer fearing this shadow child standing before him. "It is Saturday." He said, knowing his vagueness would provoke more anger from her.

Her hands clenched into fists and she narrowed her eyes at him, both predictable things. She did not, however, keep insisting. She knew there were limits to her words. Damon and them might have allowed her to push them around, but Petel and Paige were much different creatures. Frank said, "I'm free if everyone else is. Jonathan and I finally got all our Chem work sorted."

"Just in time, huh?" Kalyuga said with a friendly grin.

Her ease helped Sonya relax. Of all of them, Sonya seemed to have the most trouble adjusting to this sudden companionship they shared with Vektoria and them. Levy said, "If there are any free spots available, I wanna have another go at it."

"I feel as if I should sit this one out." Abraham said, smiling wryly. "Latin being the way they are, though, I know that wouldn't actually help all that much."

Petel shook their head in disdain, but had no objections to voice for themselves. Dante doubted they would skip out on any potential game session. Paige turned to Vektoria and said, "Looks like we're all good to go. How about your lot?"



Vektoira scoffed. "Wrangling them is easy. It's Jonathan who's the real issue."

"We can use just one side, if it comes to that." Frank said.

Vektoria removed her hands from the table and gave a dismissive, "Whatever. Just be ready for a battle tonight."

"Promise us a good time, why don't you?" Levy called after her as she left the cafeteria entirely.

Dante took a quick stock of the students in the area. No Damon or the rest of his usual entourage; not even a hint of Fiamma or Charon. Yasha and Vladimir were absent as well. He returned his gaze to his half-eaten meal of the day (he didn't have to tear it apart anymore in search of maggots or rotten bits. He knew this. But he'd been doing it for more than half his life by this point and he wasn't sure how he'd eat normally otherwise), then grabbed up his tray and stood. "I'll be back later." He said.

Petel was on their feet in an instant. "Going with you."

He smiled patiently at them. "I'm just gonna see if I can find the others and talk to them."

"Going with you." Petel repeated.

They grabbed onto his arm, insistent in their own stubborn way. Really, Dante couldn't be mad at them about it. He did die once, he supposed. Accepting the wolf as his tagalong, he left the cafeteria after dumping his tray and headed through the halls of the rest of the building.

Damon's gang was too big to hide away easily. And no way they would be at the tower, considering Vektoria came to confront them. As they came across the still blocked off lab room, Dante paused to look at the damage. It was still under renovations, mostly cleared out but only half finished.

For some reason, Yasha stood right in the centre of it.

Petel's grip on his arm tightened as they growled lowly. Before Dante could speak up, Yasha whirled around to face them, his face paler in fear.

"You shouldn't have burned in those flames." Yasha said.

His voice was quiet in the wreckage. He had the dust of construction on his shoes and trousers. Dante said in reply, "Everything burns. Even Hellfire."

Yasha seemed to hesitate. "You nearly died."

Rolling his eyes, Dante said, "I did die. My friends just wouldn't let me stay dead."

"It'd be too unfair." Yasha said.

That sounded almost like an agreement. Suspiciously so. Dante glanced around a moment, then asked, "Where's Russell?"

Yasha shrugged. "With Jonathan and them. Jonathan's in pretty bad shape." His eyes flicked to Petel momentarily, then quickly back to the unfinished floor. "They're going to keep insisting it wasn't you who caused the fire. That you're the victim in all of this."

"Dante is the victim." Petel said in a growl.

Again, Yasha seemed hesitant. As if even acknowledging Petel was a death sentence.

Well. It sort of was, in a way. Dante had made his threat clear and then proved his power to carry through with it.

Petel took note of it, too, losing most of their fury for confusion. Breaking character suddenly, Yasha gave a heated, "Never even talkin' to the wolf's an issue. You know that, right? I ain't even allowed to say nothing in reply?"

Dante grinned and said, "Until you can prove you're no longer filled with pettiness, yes."

Petel asked a soft, "You told him not to talk to me?"

"I told him not to even look at you. Else I would reduce him to ashes." Dante clarified.

He held out his hand for emphasis, allowing his skin to glow with that red-hot heat always inside him. Yasha flinched back and Petel frowned, even though Dante didn't let the flames escape. "I can handle myself." Petel said in a huff.

"I know. But a point had to be made." Dante said.

He offered that red heat to Petel and, after a moment's consideration, they accepted it. They winced as it burned and Dante let it ebb out of him slowly.

He said, slow and deliberate, "You are mine to burn. Mine to mark. No one else is allowed to harm you while I've got you in my lungs."

"You'll breathe what is mine." Petel said in acknowledgement.

Yasha huffed out a pretty embarrassed, "You two are bloody weird."

Dante laughed. He'd take that as a compliment despite Yasha's clear intent. "Says the one standing in the middle of a room I burned." He taunted. "I'll take being weird over whatever you've got going on."

"Yeah, yeah, sod off and all that."

Yasha waved them off, scampering out of the room and down the hall. He left a few footprints as he went, though they faded quickly. Dante faced forward again and said, "Let's see if we can find Jonathan."

"You really are letting it change you."

Petel's voice (and their not moving) made Dante pause. He glanced back to the wolf, meeting their eyes. "Is that a bad thing?"

It seemed to be quite the revelation to them. After their experiences together, perhaps that was to be expected. Dante didn't inspire much confidence even when he wasn't using his distractions on purpose. In the end, Petel tightened their grip on his hand and said through their wince, "Not a bad thing at all."

The pain was deliberate, but perhaps a bit too foolhardy. Dante hadn't meant to let such an ugly thing as jealousy fuel his fires. Deciding to cut more at the root of things, he next asked, "Am I frightening you?"

"Absolutely." They said instantly.

It was a shock to hear them admit. It made Dante smile, perhaps even more shocking. "Good." He said. "Spent too long trying not to be a terror."

"Time to bare those teeth, Fireball." Petel agreed, grinning and baring their own.

Dante pulled them down for a kiss, then resumed his search. They went along happily, though couldn't hold onto his hand any longer as they had to give their burned skin some sort of relief. Another pang of guilt hit and Dante said as he peeked inside the still intact labs, "Sorry about that. I like to prove my points where I can, especially where it concerns petty little bullies like him."

Amused, Petel said, "You two are the same height."

"We're shorter than you." Dante fired right back.

"Just barely."

It got Petel to laugh, which made Dante smile as well. No Jonathan in there. He closed the door and hurried onwards, considering his next target of search. "I really would let him have it, you know." He said as he peeked inside Miss Honda's classroom. Still no Jonathan or anyone. "His abuse was rampant and I knew I could stop it. I knew how to press a fear onto him too overwhelming to argue with."

"You're real good at that." Petel said, continuing to trail after him.

Their nonchalance was expected by this point, but still rang oddly in his head. He paused outside of Mister Williams' room before checking it and turned to face his wolf companion. "Doesn't it bother you at all? That I've threatened destruction on someone's head and meant it?"

They shrugged, hands shoved into their jacket pockets. "Yasha deserves it."

Fire bit back when mishandled. So did wolves.

Petel had to know that intimately.

Dante walked back over several of their earlier conversations in his mind. Back when Petel was first courting him and he couldn't believe anyone would bother trying to get close to him and mean it. "We're the same. You said that once."

They perked up in an odd little display of pride. "Wolves can recognise their own ilk."

"I'm not a wolf."

"You're a fire."

Sometimes, trying to talk with this wolf could be so maddening. Before Dante had time to get upset, thankfully, the door opened and startled him away from it. Damon poked his head out and gave a hissed, "Either get in here or move on, you're disturbing us here."

"Dante was looking for you." Petel announced, still perked up in pride.

Dante shook off that annoyance and said, "We can figure it out later." Then, to Damon, "Is Jonathan okay?"

Damon rolled his eyes, but opened the door for them. Inside, Mister Williams had Jonathan at his desk while Natasha, Aglaé, Gaëlle, Niculaie, Vladimir, Charon, Gus, Ian, and Nick all crowded around in concern. "We had to pull him away from the labs, so. What do you think?" Damon asked.

Dante stopped at the fringes of this crowd, not quite willing to shove his way through but not shying away from getting too close either. Mister Williams acknowledged him and Petel with a nod, then returned his attention to Jonathan. "It's better if you talk this out rather than going the way you are, you know." He said. "It's okay for you to grieve, but when it starts becoming self-destructive, that's when we have to step in."

Jonathan seemed to deflate further. He looked absolutely defeated and drained of even his usual low energy. "It's been almost a month. I just want it to stop hurting."

"You and he were really something special, huh?" Gus asked, smiling in some bittersweet understanding.

Charon took note of Dante and gave him an odd sort of salute. "Fireball. Should've known all this death was your doing." She said lowly so as not to be overheard by the others.

Petel bristled, because of course they would. Dante frowned and didn't bother with the same subtlety as he asked, "Did they tell you that Vektor's dead?"

"The school system's counting it like he's away for family business. Like it did for that one week he avoided his classes and that other weekend he wasn't in his dorm." Mister Williams said, bouncing over to their conversation as Niculaie and Natasha continued offering their sympathies to Jonathan.

"We told them the truth." Gaëlle said.

"They deserve to know." Aglaé said in agreement.

Dante hummed in thought, bringing a hand to his mouth to pinch at his lips. The system had its failsafe; did it decide to count him as still inside it, then? Was it unable to perform a more complicated procedure for his erasure? That seemed like a huge oversight on his parents' part. While it was true Vektor had performed his sacrifice inside the Rabbit Hole, there was no way it could count him still being inside there. What was left of him was inside Dante's chest, after all.

Right?

"Vektoria wants to finish off the Hollows tonight." Petel said, breaking Dante out of that dizzying possibility.

He nodded along in affirmation. Best to leave that pipe dream just as it was. Best not to get his or Jonathan's hopes up. Damon scowled, but said, "She's probably got the right idea there."

"The sooner we get through the end of it, the better." Aglaé agreed.

Jonathan sighed. "I guess you'll need my help, then."

Natasha turned her attention back to him with a quick, "You don't gotta go if you're not feeling up to it."

"Don't force yourself." Niculaie said next, his deep voice as gentle as ever.

His words were a surprise, though. How many times had Dante heard the same sentiment from Petel or Paige? Frank and Abraham, too, liked to offer him the same sort of gentleness. Damon gave a joking, "We can all fit into one tower and just swap out when we're inevitably taken out."

"A Team, B Team." Ian joined in, grinning at the idea.

"Could call it Team Hunters, Team Creatures, what with all the theming." Vladimir said in jest.

"And then an Ancillary C Team in case you need more help." Nick said, grinning as well. "So long as everyone can go into this game, apparently, we're available to help out should you need the extra man power."

Petel chuckled and gave a gruff, "Good vocabulary."

"Ooh, Nicu, your sisters said they could help." Natasha said, perking up at the idea.

Niculaie smiled uneasily her way. The game was nearly finished. Recruiting new players who would then need time to adjust to the mechanics wouldn't be ideal. And with Latin's fickle temperament, it would be even more of a risky move. If they needed the extra help, though, it was nice for that option to remain open. Dante said, "No matter what we decide, if you don't feel up to it, Jonathan, then that's okay."

Damon and the others nodded. Petel joined in with them. Jonathan met all of their gazes, genuinely shocked. His voice was quiet as he asked, "How can that really be okay? You hounded after me so much over this."

"Sorry about that." Natasha said, growing sheepish.

"You're hurting. It's important we acknowledge that and give you the time you need." Niculaie said next.

Jonathan bowed his head, contemplating their words. Damon nudged Aglaé's side and said in a murmur, "Hey, didja ever suspect that he and Vektor were close like that?"

"Maybe not Vektor specifically, but I knew about his crush. It was pretty obvious." Aglaé said in return, not bothering to lower his voice.

Damon recoiled. "Obvious? What do you mean?"

Aglaé fixed him with an unimpressed look of pure aggravation. "You made fun of him for it. How are you still this dense?"

"I ain't dense." Damon argued in a huff, embarrassed and covering it up with his usual air of pompousness. "I just, y'know. Don't sweat the little details like that."

"Damon, you couldn't take the hint that Philips didn't like you. Nor did you ever pick up on all the hints Nick's thrown at you."

Nick straightened up with an air of panic and protested, "I-I've never thrown a single hint his way."

Damon still seemed confused and embarrassed to be so. "I knew she didn't like me. I wanted to figure out why, 'cause. Y'know."

Dante gasped. "That's why you went after Paige so much? Because she resisted your Charm?"

Damon frowned his way as Aglaé said in a drawl, "That would fit your usual approach to a crush. You never did give up on being Nicu and Abe's third, did you?"

"That explains how you knew about Yasha's whole deal." Vladimir said in a grumble.

Damon stomped his foot against the floor, his face flushing an impressively bright red in his embarrassment. "You're not supposed to air all my secrets. This is unbecoming of a secretary to the King of Hell."

"More unbecoming than your disastrous record?" Aglaé fired right back.

It was enough to make Dante laugh. Jonathan, too, chuckled at their fruitless bickering. "I think I'll be okay to help out by tonight." Jonathan said.

He stood up from his spot at Mister Williams' desk, not any sort of better but no longer so drained. Niculaie and Natasha smiled at him in relief. Dante, too, was glad to see that he wasn't completely lost in that despair. At least, not anymore. The bells rang, making all of them look up towards the ceiling. "Lunch break's over." Mister Williams said.

He stood as well, ushering all of them out. They went willingly, having to head off in their own directions towards their own classes. Damon fell into step beside Dante, the only other one who shared Art with him.

Dante frowned at him, but didn't push him away this time. He'd earned his right to at least appeal this break in their friendship.

Damon kept his hands in his trouser pockets. A casual sort of affect, trying to play it cool. They all wore their summer kits now and without the jacket, the green vest did sort of look okay. At least, so long as green was one's favourite colour. Which it definitely wasn't Dante's.

"You've always been real bad at telling the mood of a room, huh?" Dante found himself asking.

Damon shrugged to hide the wince in his steps. "Kinda hard to figure out what people really want when you're coated in Charm."

While Dante didn't appreciate it, he brought up a good point. Dante himself was coated in layers and layers of code. It was a wonder Petel fought so hard to be his friend. That Petel would profess so sincerely that they loved him. He fell into thought and mumbled a quiet, "You've always been just as afraid of everything as I have."

"Duh. It's what drives us forward." Damon said with a self-deprecating little laugh. "You couldn't lose and I could never win. We had to be at odds, else we'd overpower them easily."

Dante hummed shortly. They stopped outside of their class a moment and faced one another. Damon still held those glances over his face, beautiful to the point of farce. But maybe that was always a detriment to him. Smiling in the end, Dante said, "We've both got a lot to learn about real friendships."

"Ain't that the truth." Damon agreed with a grin.

They went inside and anticipation thrummed in Dante's body. For once, he was ready to get inside the Rabbit Hole and reach the end to all of this. For once, he was ready to let his fires burn.

Damon was right. Dante couldn't lose.

It was simply a matter of when his parents would realise this.

## Chapter 18: The Golden Key

For their first attempt, it was just them and their pack.

"There's no time to organise everyone and catch them all up to speed." Vektoria reasoned as they made their way to the towers.

Damon agreed with a pragmatic, "We'll see first if we need the help. For now, it's best to figure out what we're up against."

He and Niculaie nearly followed Abraham with Paige, Petel, Frank, and Dante, but had to break off to follow Vektoria and Jonathan. As Paige opened the doors for them, she said, "Knowing our luck, it's gonna take a couple of tries, anyway."

"AIR loves mucking it up for us." Frank said in an exasperated agreement.

She loaded them all in and soon they were back together inside the Library, facing down the final segment of this bookshelf maze. It led straight into the centre of the platform to another hatch in the floor, this one a set of doors. Petel frowned at it in confusion, saying, "It can't be another trip into the sewers."

"Why would the sewers be kept down there?" Latin asked them.

All of them prepared immediately for a fight, glaring up at the Guardian perched on one of the upper levels. They seemed satisfied with this reaction, watching all of them as if they were nothing more than an easy meal. Vektoria called up in a snarl, "I will personally delete you if you so much as think about getting in my way."

"We're not supposed to get distracted, 'Toria." Natasha reminded her gently.

Latin said in return, "Empty threats hold less bite the second time."

Vektoria huffed at them, but strode forward along their path. "Quickly now. We're wasting time here." She snapped.

"You retained far too much from her." Dante complained.

He followed, leaving the rest of them to awkwardly keep their distance. As Vektoria pried the doors open, Aglaé called over, "Don't get too far ahead. If we can't keep up with you, how do you expect us to help out?"

"Then don't fall behind." She said in return.

The way down wasn't at all what Petel expected; it was a dark blue, for starters, and pinpricks of light streaked along as if it were some sort of night sky tunnel or the roofing of the checkpoints. Vektoria leapt down into the area and Dante followed closely, leaving the rest of them to file along cautiously after. The shelving didn't give much room, meaning they had to approach in a single file



line, which made Petel restless. They wanted to rush, to keep up with their boyfriend, to force this feisty computer program to wait more than a single minute so they could better work together. They were, however, constrained to the middle of their pack, and so had to wait for that extra bit of room.

The full area reminded Petel more of the inside of a computer than anything else. The dark blue seemed to sparkle as the lights streaked along in a perpetual motion. The floor beneath them was solid and grooved oddly, giving it a texture nowhere else in this game shared. The plane was largely flat save for some blocky structures behind them stopping them from going backwards and lining the way forward along their path.

"Is it just me, or has this whole game been weirdly linear?" Frank asked.

"No, I noticed that, too." Abraham said. "Only the White Forest and the Seventh Circle made any sense for us to have a guide."

"Outside of the whole there's no progressing without me, you mean." Vektoria griped back at him.

She stood near the opposite end of the area, facing away from them but strangely not dashing off. Despite appearing like an open space, it was surprisingly enclosed. Petel asked, "Is that the exit?"

"Needs a key." She said in a huff.

"A key?" Damon asked.

"We have to be able to find one somewhere." Frank said.

He glanced around the area before heading over to the barriers railroading them along. He tried to climb its half walls, but it was too smooth for him to find any grip and he could only scrabble against it. Dante, who stood in the middle of the area to give everyone else space, said, "Deleting the locks not an option this time?"

"If I tore a hole here, you'd be pretty sorry I did." She said.

"It looks like it's below the entire map, if that helps put things into perspective." Paige told them, her voice echoing from much further above than Petel expected. The ceiling was closer to them, yet she sounded clearer while they were in the Library and that was a tower. "It really is pretty small, too. Like a basement, or a bunker."

"Incoming." Jonathan warned.

They watched this enemy get written into existence this time. It wasn't any of the usual for this level, however; what loaded in was a simple sphere with a white outline and a black centre. It was also only one. Frank gave a short, "It's that thing. Huh."

Vektoria froze up at the sight of it. "Those are of the Mainframe."

Her voice was laced with fear; an odd sound, but one Petel knew to heed. They prepared their claws and asked, "Does that thing have the key?"

"Looks like it." Paige confirmed. Then in a quieter tone more to herself, "Class IV? Really?"

"They're worse than Class IIIs?" Natasha asked, growing apprehensive.

It hung in the air before them, not attacking them right away. Petel knew better than to let their guard down. Dante focused his fires into his hands and said, "If defeating it gives us the key, then this should be simple."

"Should be, but who knows?" Aglaé said in complaint.

Dante shot his fires at the sphere, engulfing it entirely. That should have been that. When they melted off and returned to him, however, it was still there. Its colours had changed, now a red outline with a yellow centre, and it dripped globs of molten lava to the ground.

Aglaé took a wary step back. "Uh. Okay, being real, wasn't expecting that to not work."

"You damn idiot." Vektoria said in a mixture of her usual rage and an overwhelming fear.

Dante kept his fires ready, but was engulfed himself in them as the sphere shot it all back at him. Its fire had a more pink sort of red to it, but they were otherwise indistinguishable from one another. Petel darted forward to pull Dante out from them, but it held too much power. The stream bounced them off, not even letting them reach in at all. They switched their target to the sphere itself, attempting to swipe it out of its position in the air. It burned them as they made contact, as if they dipped their claws into a puddle of lava, and they again had to back away from that heat.

Once the fires cleared, Dante was no longer standing there.

"That, uh, was a hell of a hit." Paige said.

"Well, at least we expected this to happen." Vektoria griped in defeat.

The sphere remained the colours of that fire. It was the only warning they had before it erupted into flames that seared through the entire area. Petel yelped as they were ripped through, then they fell through the black and back to reality.

When they exited their scanner with the rest of their team, Paige said to them, "So that enemy looks like it takes whatever attack you hit it with and turns it into its own."

Vektoria screeched through the computer, but was too far away to be any sort of comprehensible. Dante sat outside his scanner, having a head start over the rest of them on adjusting, and said, "I really don't need a reminder of what it's like being burned by my own fires."

Though a general air of disappointment permeated the mood, Frank said in a great attempt at optimism, "At least we know for next time."

Petel nodded, going over to help their boyfriend to his feet. Next time ended up being two days later, where Dante opted to sit out in favour of letting Levy take his place. Sonya stood outside with him, wringing his hands nervously as he asked, "Are you sure you want to go in there?"

"Why not? It's fun." Levy said with a grin.

Sonya seemed conflicted a moment, then pulled Levy in for a quick kiss to the cheek. As he backed away, he said in a rush, "Just make sure you don't hurt yourself."

Though a bit taken aback, Levy continued grinning. "You got it."

Petel couldn't wait to hear the whole story behind that. They nearly went over to their friend to ruffle his feathers, to congratulate him on accepting his crush finally, but Paige reminded them of the task at hand and they had to get inside the game. Their group landed once more in the Library and they all filed into this final area. Levy twirled a bit as he took in all the sights and since they all had to wait for this thing to spawn in again, none of them needed to discourage him. Petel asked Vektoria, "So what's the deal with this Class IV thing?"

She stood at the opposite end of the area, facing the wall blocking them off as if she wanted to break through it herself. "It's a Sphere." She said in an annoyed tone. "One of the enemies trapped beneath the Kingdom. Or, supposed to be, at least."

"I didn't design it." Dante said from somewhere behind Paige.

"Of course you didn't. It's too simple to be one of your creations." Vektoria said with a condescending scoff. It seemed less aimed at Dante and more aimed at Dante's parents. "I don't remember much about them, even when consulting my fake memories, but I can say there's a reason we wanted to keep them from getting out."

"It was my tutorial enemy." Frank said.

She frowned back at him. "Then consider yourself damn lucky you're still here."

"That sounds so tasteless now." Abraham said with a shake of his head.

They all noticed the system writing this enemy in just as Jonathan said, "It's back."

"How are we supposed to get the key from it if we can't directly attack it?" Paige asked.

The Sphere hung in the air once it finished loading in, once more a black centre and white outline. Colourless, awaiting input. Black and white; those were Vektor and Vektoria's colours. Petel took a step towards it, intending to try and touch the thing and see what it was like in this state, but was startled as Natasha yelped behind them. "That's too many guns."

They whirled around and, immediately, it was that insistent warning of danger. Abraham was encircled by a whirling row of red rifles, eyes losing their cover of normalcy to reveal what they truly were. Petel darted out of his way, as did Levy, calling, "Berserk."

"That one's on Latin." Paige said in frustration.

"Maybe letting Vektoria delete them's not such a bad idea." Damon grumbled.

Abraham shot the Sphere, which distorted a moment from the impact. Like chucking a rock into a still lake. Its colours shifted to grey at its centre and a red outline the same as Abraham's rifles. An odd thing. Neither of those were really Abraham's colours, according to this game. Petel didn't get much time to dwell on it, however, as the thing began spraying bullets around the whole area. It pretty quickly took out everyone except for Vektoria, Petel, and Levy, who were just fast enough to dodge around its shots. "Wellp. I can see why you're having difficulty on this one." Levy said.

"Focus on not getting hit." Vektoria shouted at him.

"Maybe try to defeat it now?" Paige suggested, unsure.

"One hit, huh?" Jonathan said in a tired mumble.

It didn't let up, more of a whirlwind of bullets than an approachable enemy. There was no way Petel could get close enough to try and attack it. They had to, though.

They dashed forward, ducking and dodging the spray, and Levy followed their lead. As did Vektoria. The three of them approached from different sides, cornering it in, but it seemed to refocus and caught all of them with a bullet each. It pierced straight through Petel's chest, slamming them out of the game.

When they landed back in reality, they were greeted by more disappointment. As he helped them remain steady on their feet (they couldn't say they much enjoyed getting shot), Dante said, "Since it absorbs the first attack thrown at it, maybe that's our best bet. Getting it to take something less dangerous and more manageable."

"Okay. Great idea." Vektoria gripped through the computer. She didn't need to shout to be heard, but she sounded too incensed to do otherwise. "Just one thing: Which of you lot do you think has the least Attack?"

Petel and Dante shared a look; both of them were definitely out. Abraham raised his hands in defeat, still a bit woozy, and Frank said, "I can't even attack normally, so I'm out."

"Agláé, Nicu, and I are pretty out, too." Damon said.

"I can try?" Natasha volunteered. "I dunno if my Attack's any less, but."

One of them had to take the fall. Petel frowned in distaste and said, "Better than going over it forever. Sorry, Natasha."

"I think your Attack's on par with mine, but thanks for volunteering." Agláé told her.

"We could also try bringing in some new players. See if any of them can help with this." Abraham pointed out.

Instantly revitalised, Damon said, "I'll call in Nick and Ian."

"Gaëlle could probably help, too." Agláé said in a murmur.

They all disbanded for the day, heading off to rest and get ready for their next attempt. Petel had fun teasing Sonya and Levy over their established relationship, then made himself an insistent lap wolf for their fire. Dante pet through their hair gently a while, then said rather unprompted, "You think me a predator. Isn't that right?"

They thought only a moment before nodding. "You are."

"What is it that I'm hunting? Who is the natural prey of fire?"

He stared down at them with a steady, menacing gaze. Something about this aggravated his flames. Petel sat up to better meet him and said, "Me, for one. I guess, also everyone who doesn't agree with you."

He had the power to cut through anyone, after all. He could slice straight to the point, past every wall and barrier blocking him off. He didn't seem pleased with this revelation. "Haven't I caught you? What's the point of continuing to hunt you down when I already have you ensnared beyond the point of struggle?"

They laughed softly. "Thrill of the chase."

They leaned in to kiss his cheek even as he let out an upset breath. "I'm not sure I'll ever really understand you." He said in a mumble.

"What's confusing about it?" They asked. They continued trailing kisses along his jaw as they went on. "A wolf is a wolf. Desires to consume. Loves fire, loves pack, and doesn't let fear hold them back."

Dante took hold of their face, making them wince. His hands burned red hot. He redirected them into a proper kiss, searing his heat into their face all the while. When he released them, he said, "If it's destruction you seek, then let it be my flames which take you."

Danger, proud and simple. Petel was so struck by their burning sun. They nodded and pulled him back in, speaking against his lips. "We'll burn together."

He kissed them back, of course. It was a circling pattern only they were privy to. It was a chase in which they were both predator and prey. Petel loved this fire, wished to hold him forever in the maw of their ribcage. He loved them back, desired to make it known that they were his and his alone.

They couldn't get the taste of ash and charcoal off their tongue. Their favourite reminder of how this fire was theirs and how they belonged to their fire.

It was another two days before they could make their next attempt. Abraham and Dante both volunteered to sit out, as did Niculaie, leaving the space open for Gaëlle, Nick, and Ian to try their hand at this whole Sphere thing. As Paige and Jonathan loaded them all in, Niculaie called to them, "Good luck."

"Remember, first dive always takes the largest toll." Dante cautioned them.

They all landed back in the Library soon enough. Ian, it turned out, was closer to his nickname of Neptune than expected, holding a trident and able to call waves of water for his attacks. Similarly, Nick fit his nickname of Jupiter, able to wield bolts of lightning and summon clouds for quick transportation. Gaëlle was the one who didn't make much sense, wearing a sort of thief getup and not very beast-like at all. At the very least, she had a whirlwind of knives at her disposal.

And since they had Aglaé with them, it wasn't like Latin could bar them access. As they all filed down into this final area, Nick said, "So we couldn't have joined in earlier due to this whole Guardian limitation, huh?"

"From what I've heard, they've always been sticklers for the rules." Gaëlle said in a grumble.

"Not like they had much of a choice. It was either obey or face recalibration." Damon pointed out, shrugging both hands.

They settled in once more to wait, Ian and Natasha chasing one another around and getting Frank to heal them when needed. Again, Vektoria stood directly in front of their exit out of this place, tapping her foot restlessly. It was a bit too generous of AIR to allow their new players some time to get used to their abilities, but it was a nice moment of reprieve. This game could be fun when ignoring all the periphery surrounding it.

The shift in the air was too sudden. Petel caught it before it shattered Aglaé, revealing that skeleton form beneath his skin.

"Looks like Latin didn't feel like waiting this time." Jonathan said in annoyance.

"Ian, Nick, Gaëlle, try not to get caught by him." Paige cautioned overhead. "He won't recognise you as his team, he's purely focused on attacking right now."

"Thanks for the heads up." Gaëlle called back. "But I've seen my brother's Berserk before."

Nick and Ian were strangely unaffected by that overwhelming Charm Aglaé exuded, at the least. Damon and Natasha were caught in it and Aglaé made quick work of them both before advancing on the rest of them. Frank kept his distance this time, shouting to all of them, "No projectiles. He'll just deflect them right back at you."

"Got one more thing to worry about, too." Jonathan informed them.

Ian, Nick, and Gaëlle danced around Aglaé, giving Petel ample time to whip their head around the area. Sure enough, that Sphere was loaded in and hovered just above them, waiting for some type of input. Vektoria swung out her silver key sword with an annoyed, "Do I have to do everything around here by myself?"

"Wait, 'Toria!" Natasha shouted.

At least she and Damon made it out okay. Petel, pretty sure what Natasha was worried about, went to intercept their Thief, but Vektoria sprinted for Aglaé instead of the Sphere. She slapped Nick and Ian out of her way with quick jabs, then forced Aglaé back and away from the rest of them. "Deal with that Sphere." She shouted at them.

"You sure you got this?" Ian asked.

"She's got this." Nick assured his brother.

The two of them broke away and towards the Sphere, readying their attacks. Gaëlle backed off from battling Aglaé as well; even with her speed matching Vektoria's, it was easier to give that Thief her space. Frank seemed at a loss for what to do, saying, "I don't have any health bullets left."

"Then we'd better make sure we get it in one." Nick said with a boastful laugh.

He chucked a shot of electricity at that Sphere and it took, sparking up yellow and blue. Then he ducked back to allow Ian to throw a wave of water at it.

Encouragingly, it did jostle the thing. Not so encouragingly, its colours shifted instead to a dark blue and copper, changing from electricity to water.

"That, uh. Didn't damage it at all." Paige reported.

"Vektoria's out." Jonathan said.

While Ian and Nick faltered at how little they managed to do, the Sphere took advantage of it and blasted them with a flood of water. It dissipated the moment it splashed onto the ground, leaving no trace of droplets or dampness once it booted the two. Petel growled and ran at it, slashing it with their claws. They knew it wouldn't do anything, but frustration ruled their movements. Even as it shifted to a white core with a nearly black outline, they continued attacking. They had to find something, *something*, that would break this thing. They were so close, too close to just give up. There had to be a way forward, an angle they hadn't considered yet.

It rebounded all their clawing onto them, ripping them apart. They heard Frank call their name as they fell out of the game and to reality once more.

"Well, that was a complete bust." Ian said, rubbing at his head. He and Nick sat on the floor outside their scanners, exhausted but otherwise fine.

"We did try, but it looks like you lot might have an impossible puzzle on your hands." Nick said in defeat.

Petel glared at the floor, refusing to believe it. There had to be some way of beating this. They had to get to the end, had to figure out a way to help the Guardians. As much as Latin seemed to want none of their help, they had to get them out. They had to put a stop to all this suffering. Frank toppled out of his scanner then and Paige leaned back in her chair with a resigned, "Thanks for helping out, anyway. We appreciate it."

"It was a lot of fun, but I wouldn't want to do it again." Ian said, grinning in some pained sort of humour. "Seriously, how do you all deal with this? I'm ready to sleep for the next week."

"It gets easier the more used to it you become." Abraham said with a sheepish laugh.

He and Niculaie helped the two to their feet, then they all left the tower to get supper. Jonathan and the others joined them, sharing in their frustrations. As they sat around their table eating, Dante posited the most important question of this session: "How do we defeat something that doesn't take any damage?"

Petel scrunched up their nose as they thought it over. It absorbed whatever they threw at it. Even switching up their attacks didn't seem to work. Natasha perked up suddenly and said, "Why not try going in the opposite way instead?"

Most of their group turned to her in bewilderment. "What, you mean like find a back door?" Damon asked.

"Oh, or maybe make its health overflow." Frank said, growing just as energetic. "It's a classic coding error in older games. Just heal the boss with impossibly high health to make it loop back over, then you can defeat it simple as that."

"Yes, I can see that working." Abraham agreed, grinning along.

Damon laughed loudly. "I remember you spent hours trying to beat a boss like that before Nicu and I told you about that glitch."

"What a fitting way to end everything." Dante said, deflating out of aggravation.

It was definitely worth a shot. Considering how most of this game was built in the first place, it wouldn't be that strange if an oversight like this ended up working. They needed more than just Frank, though, so they called in Soare and Luca for help this time. Dante and Abraham still insisted on sitting out and Aglaé joined them this time. "Best to have as few things possible go wrong so we can maintain some control." Aglaé said in explanation.

"I'm not sure Latin would follow you out of their Library, so make sure to get out of there before they can block your passage." Abraham said.

"Hurry up so we can try this already." Vektoria snapped at them.

"Let's go." Luca cheered.

Paige and Jonathan loaded them inside and, instead of taking any time to adjust, they all hurried into the final area. None of them were very keen on giving Latin the chance to deny them access. Luca had a cape like Niculaie used to, only she had her arms and was wearing shoes. Soare's outfit was definitely that of a cleric's, at least as far as Petel knew, and they wondered how the two's abilities might work. "We just have to wait for that Sphere to show up, right?" Soare asked, taking stock of the area now that they had a moment.

"And then we pump it full of healing." Frank said, grinning up at her.

"Thanks for coming to help." Niculaie said to his sisters for probably the fifth time. "After the Vampire was defeated, I wasn't sure we'd have enough to do this."

"Frank could probably handle it on his own." Jonathan said in a grumble.

"Best not to test that, though." Frank said, growing uneasy.

Petel pressed their snout to his shoulder a moment, getting him to perk up at least. He gave them a few pats in return. Vektoria charged ahead to stand at the block walling them off from progression, as usual, and Luca circled her brother in interest. "You're a big ol' rock now, Nicu. Aww, we don't match anymore."

"This suits you better, I think." Soare joined in, smiling in sympathy.

Niculaie withdrew in on himself as much as possible, considering his stone flesh and chain arms, laughing bashfully at their comments. "It's a lot less annoying, that's for sure."

"Heads up, here it comes." Paige informed them.

Petel's ears pricked up and, sure enough, that Sphere was written into the air before them. Black core, white outline. Waiting for input. Frank drew his gun with a more confident grin and a satisfied, "Go time."

"Hopefully, this works." Soare said in a tired agreement.



She pulled a few bottles from her coat, each filled with water that practically glittered. Holy water, maybe. Petel was pretty sure that wasn't meant to heal things normally. Luca nicked her thumb on one of her fangs and hopped towards the Sphere with a giddy, "This is gonna be fun."

Petel, Niculaie, Damon, and Natasha all stood back and watched the three descend upon the enemy. Soare uncapped her bottles and splashed the water onto it, Frank shot it in quick succession, and Luca pressed her blood onto it. All three methods very different from any traditional forms of healing, Petel realised. Not that they were an expert on what types of healing existed in video games. The Sphere turned green at the centre and gained a purple outline; the colours of the system itself. Damon gave a confident, "I think it's working."

It pushed Frank, Soare, and Luca back with a wave of gold. Petel, Natasha, Damon, and Niculaie sank into battle ready stances, prepared to jump in to help, but Paige told them, "Okay, so. I don't think you're doing any damage to it, but you are changing something in it. It also doesn't look like it can hurt you."

"A stalemate." Natasha surmised, then fell to a huff. "Well, that's no fun."

"How boring." Luca agreed.

Frank threw his gun to the side with a determined, "Just gotta pump more in it, I bet."

Those purple runes burned into his face, making his eyes glow brighter. Soare and Luca both stepped back, giving him room to leap at this Sphere and grab it in his hands. He poured that purple energy into it, dragging it down to the floor with him. His gloves stayed on his hands this time, but Petel couldn't forget the sight of them with decayed black flesh, with rotten patches revealing sinew and bone. Soare pulled out more vials of holy water and added to his efforts, splashing both him and the Sphere with it. Luca hesitated, in contrast, and backed away until she bumped against Niculaie. Damon pressed a hand to her shoulder in reassurance and called over, "Give it everything ya got, Ernest."

"It looks like you're almost there." Paige said in encouragement.

"Told you." Jonathan said tiredly.

The Sphere wavered at its edges, a bubble doing its best not to burst. It pulsed with gold energy, wave after wave, attempting to expend some of what Frank and Soare poured into it. Frank refused to let it go. It tossed Soare away and Frank dug his fingers into it, breaking past that outer layer of purple.

He dipped his hands into its green and it shattered in a burst of golden light.

All of them flinched away, wobbling at the sheer power it threw around the area. Vektoria stumbled, but pivoted instantly and dashed over to grab the most solid part of that golden burst. In her hand, it snapped into a solid form.

Petel and Natasha both gasped; it was perfectly Vektor's key staff.

"Well. That did it." Paige said, startling them out of that shock. "That's the key right there."

Vektoria held it at length from her, as if it were something utterly filthy. As if it were the most offending piece of code it could possibly be. "He still exists somewhere." She said in pure disdain.

She pivoted once more, stomping to that wall and chucking this key at it. The collision was a flash of gold, that resounding click, and the way forward opened.

She dove through it, shouting in her anger. "That's it. We're done for today. Get me out of here, Jonathan. Now."

"At least unlock the way to the Mainframe first." Paige protested.

The rest of them kicked into gear, following her through that small exit. Petel made sure to grab Frank, who slumped to the floor in exhaustion. Those runes faded from his face, at least; he hadn't gone full Berserk, though it seemed he called upon it in some capacity.

They all paused in the level select hub. The space in-between. Before them was their final level. The final leg of their journey.

They had finally reached the Mainframe Kingdom.

A crash of agony struck Petel then. All of this started purely for Vektor, to get him home. This was the end and yet Vektor was no longer with them. That was never the purpose of this game from the beginning.

They held Frank close to them and shook as they held back their tears. Frank held them in return with a soft and understanding, "I know. I miss him, too."

"Get me out of here." Vektoria screeched up towards the sky.

"I guess we should save our attempts to help the Guardians until we can get Kalyuga to help us." Paige said in conceit.

"I can't believe that actually worked." Natasha said in a breathy awe.

"Good idea, you really figured it out." Luca praised her, hopping over to her side. She could hover at the same height as Natasha, masking her shorter height.

"Fine, I'm logging all of you out now." Jonathan relented.

Petel couldn't speak, the wolf too distraught. They wished to howl for Vektor, to call their Prince to them. Damon glanced their way, then said, "Probably for the best we save the finale for later."

"It's time to eat, anyway." Frank agreed.

He hugged onto Petel's arms, both offering his comfort and grasping at what reassurance he could get from them. They held him until the floor dropped from beneath them both and they landed back into reality.

Once they exited their scanner, Dante was there to catch them.

He held them as they broke into sobs. They buried themselves into his warmth, his living heat, his life allowed him by their Prince's sacrifice.

It took them all a while to find a time where they could reconvene. Mister Williams ended up joining them, wanting to help in case they needed it. By the time they all stood outside the entrance to the Mainframe Kingdom, they were determined to complete this terrible thing.

"Whenever you're ready." Paige said to them.

Petel looked around at their pack, ending on Dante. He nodded in affirmation, then they all followed Vektoria inside.

## Chapter 19: Face Yourself

They entered into darkness.

Dante's panic quickly peaked at the top of his head and he drew his fires into his hands on reflex. The entire level was a void of shadow. Their whispering reverberated around all of them, closing them inside this empty space, but there was nothing else present. No castle, no real kingdom; just this emptiness of thrumming shadows and blank white eyes watching their every move.

Just shadows and code.

"This isn't how it's supposed to be." Vektoria said, a bit breathless in her own fear.

"They never finished the level." Dante said in a mumble, aghast.

"Is that what this means?" Jonathan asked, voice still dragged down by tiredness.

"The system's not letting us read anything going on in there." Paige said. "Sorry, but you'll have to tell us what's happening, we can't offer much help otherwise."

Everyone else was too shocked to say anything. This was so predictable that his fires crawled up his arms to his shoulders as his panic turned to anger. Something pulled at his chest, kept him rooted to the spot, so he waved his flames out in an attempt to clear even a fraction of these shadows. His fire sliced around at nothing, hitting invisible walls before ever reaching those whispering voices and blank white eyes. Just set dressing then. As his fires returned to their place around his feet, it seemed as if the whole of the area pulsed and made him stumble.

He managed to catch himself before he fell. So did most everyone else.

Vektoria let out a strangled noise.

She stuttered forward a step, thrown much more off-balance than the rest of them. She held fast, refusing to give, but her whole body trembled at the strain. It tore at her edges just enough to pixelate, like something was damaging her. Whatever this pressure was had Dante, too, but he ignored it easier. She seemed to be having more issue with it than him.

"Everything okay, 'Toria?" Natasha asked, subdued in her fright.

"Paige, something's hurting Vektoria. I think." Frank said, too unsure for his panic to take root.

The whispering never let up and Dante could hear them thrumming this time as Vektoria let out another pained gasp. Something latched onto her chest; it was invisible to all of them, yet Dante knew exactly what it had to be.

It could only be the clawed tendrils of a shadow.

They were surrounded. There was nowhere to run.

Vektoria screamed.

That hold ripped something out of her, something she wasn't meant to hold at all. It was a ball of bright light, formless and wavering as it was whisked away into this void. Dante started after it as Vektoria collapsed onto her hands and knees, coughing and choking as if whatever it was still wasn't finished coming up. This light became a silhouette of pure golden energy and stood just before all of them. Dante had to shield his eyes. They all did. The actual shape didn't coalesce properly, shifting from person to person. Vektoria herself, the First Child, Dante, then Vektor.

It settled on Vektor.

Frank and the others gasped. Natasha and Niculaie crouched by Vektoria, seeing if she was okay, but she smacked them away with a wave of her arm. "Don't coddle me." She snarled, glaring up at this offending shadow of pure light. Black trickled from her mouth and she raised her hand to wipe it away on the back of her glove. "You can't take any more from me, you insufferable piece of shit."

This silhouette of light snapped into focus with a flash, revealing instead Paige and Jonathan. That got everyone to startle even further.

"Paige?" Petel called, quiet in their disbelief.

"Whatever's going on in there, settle it fast." She said in reply. Her voice came from above them and not from this copy of her. Dante could relax some of that tension out of his shoulders. "Vektoria's health dropped to 50%."

"Looks like some locks are blocking our access to the game's raw code." Jonathan said.

Vektoria struggled to her feet and swung out her key sword towards these copies of their friends. "That's the first right in front of us." She said, a declaration of battle.

"Both of them are the first?" Abraham asked.

Aglaé held up his claws, unsure if they were really about to battle these apparitions. Neither of these copies had the proper faces of their friends, Paige only having blank white eyes (the eyes of the shadows) and Jonathan's missing altogether. This Paige held a lantern, glowing with a smoky yellow light. It seemed to burn inside its confines, but the smoky mist coming off it glittered like ice crystals in the air. The false Jonathan held a few beakers in his hands which were filled with glowing green and purple liquid. His blank face was obscured slightly by the high collar of his coat, making him appear more a mad scientist than their friend.

The two looked off enough to read as enemies, but the similarities were enough to make Dante hesitate.

"That's what you two would look like in here, I guess." Natasha said airily.

"Stay back for now, Vektoria." Damon warned, straightening himself out of that wariness in order to take charge. He was a natural born leader, Dante would give him that. He grabbed that wing on his back and ripped it out, changing it into a sword and pointing it at the two copies of their friends. "We'll take care of these locks."

He charged forward, slicing widely to catch both beings. The two dodged away from him, the Paige copy going transparent for a moment and the Jonathan copy pulling yet another beaker from his coat pocket. This one glowed brightly, the same as what was pulled out of Vektoria. He tossed it at Damon and Damon sliced it in half with a laugh.

"Can't catch me off-guard that easily." He said in a taunt.

The liquid light splattered against the ground, finding shape anyway. It seemed to latch onto some of the shadows making up this place and formed another silhouette of light, this one harder to discern. It didn't snap into realisation, however; instead, a twisted child rolled out of it onto the ground, whimpering and too disfigured to even move.

Damon froze, staring down at this carved out piece and recognising its twistedness. "That's. That can't be." He breathed, barely able to form his protest.

His fear stoked the room and the shadows thrummed louder, making Dante flinch and Vektoria choke again. Dante raised his fires, an automatic act of defence, and shouted, "Don't let it get to you."

The shadows around them formed coherent whispers: *Face yourselves.*

The next thing to exit that silhouette of light was a gangly, fuzzier shadow with horns atop its head.

Aglaé launched forward and tackled it to the ground, snarling. "Using past versions of ourselves is cheating."

"Previous saves of earlier builds." Vektoria said, wiping away that black trickling from her mouth once more. Black blood. It was her own blood. She allowed Frank to shoot her as she continued. "This is where that data was kept."

Dante understood immediately. "Adequate life force." He mumbled.

All the tools they could ever need to bring back their Prince. Frank and Niculaie glanced his way, but were quickly distracted as the next being emerged from this shining silhouette, a child wolf with a human face. Petel stuttered for just a moment before they made the same move as Aglaé and tackled into its side even as it howled in agony and rage.

As the next one stepped out (a younger Natasha surrounded by ice, similar to how the fires surrounded Dante), Dante shouted, "Aim for the Paige and Jonathan ones, they're the manifestation of this first lock."

"Wait, the game made copies of us?" Paige questioned.

"Guess we would have the code for it." Jonathan grumbled.

If they weren't flying so blind here, then they wouldn't have to guess. Dante knew, though. It was a certainty that they had to take out the main issues, then the conflict would be resolved. The next to appear from this glowing silhouette was a shambling, half-rotted version of Frank. It looked like a corpse, yet continued to stumble forward. Then a version of Niculaie, much shorter and a vampire once more, was chased out by a younger version of Abraham who was made of metal. Neither of them

seemed to be having any fun, screeching and crying as they chased one another. Abraham and Niculaie both went after the two, Niculaie swinging his rock fists and Abraham wielding his throwing crosses.

Dante swept his fire into his hands and charged forward, past all these shadows of their younger selves and towards the roots.

Paige's copy was swift, side-stepping his fire and swinging her lantern to throw up a barrier of smoky ice. If Dante weren't fire himself, it would have frozen him in place. He burnt right past it and she next met him with a burst of yellow flames, which did take him off-guard enough for her to get away this time.

"Fire and ice." He mumbled to himself, allowing his fires to drip back down and circle his feet. Then he called over, "Natasha, I'm going to need your help."

"Bit busy here, Vicario." She called back, zipping circles around that copy of herself. It was too cold to approach and kept reaching out to her, seeking something. Acceptance, maybe.

That glowing silhouette melted back into the floor like a puddle. Dante redirected his attention to it, abandoning his fight with that copy of Paige. He slid over and dipped his hands into its honey stickiness. It bit into him fiercely, like sand to wet skin, and he winced. It covered his hands and seemed to gnaw on his code for a moment before dripping off and once again forming a solid shape.

It was him this time. A shadow with blank white eyes and fire for hair. Surrounding him, a black fire that nearly blended into the rest of the Mainframe.

"I know you." He said to it.

It stared at him and nodded slowly. A splitting grin stitched into its face.

Then it turned and ran.

He cursed and dashed after it. Of course it would run, that's what he always did. It was his main methodology, attacking from a safe distance. Never let others close enough to reach. It was what the fire was for, wrapped around him like a wall to keep everyone else at bay. Of course it would make him chase, now that he'd embraced his Change and it was still stuck in the past.

Speaking of, he had his own fires to wield.

He pulled some into his hand and threw it forward, a claw to wrap around this shadow him. He clamped them in his fist, but those black flames bit back too much. It carved burns into his already sensitive skin and he had to drop this shadow him before it damaged him too much. His fires returned and he checked that bite, finding angry black burns fading from his palm. This was going to be a bit more complicated than he hoped. Good thing he was intimately familiar with complicated.

"Focus on the Paige and Jonathan copies." Damon called, repeating Dante's earlier advice and taking the lead once more. Since Dante was a bit preoccupied here, he didn't mind it so much.

"Easier said than done, Kingpin." Frank fired back, dodging around his own stumbling copy as Vektoria swatted it with her key sword. It didn't seem like any amount of damage would take the

shambling corpse down. "What're we supposed to face in ourselves, anyway? This is all just stuff we already know, isn't it?"

"Confront your past before you're allowed to step forward." Vektoria spat venomously. "Destroy your previous selves and you will prove your place in the role written for you by their hand. There is no other fate."

Based on her word choice, the statement wasn't her own. Must have been something put into the system. Abraham, having pinned his younger self to the ground, said, "Sounds like an awful inheritance alright."

"I don't think we should really destroy ourselves. Something about that seems counterproductive." Niculaie said. He similarly had his younger copy restrained, the chains of his fists wrapped around it.

"Seems like playing right into their hands." Petel agreed with a snarl, not taking their eyes off their younger copy.

Dante thought it over. "Not destroy, then." He said. Once he ceased his pursuit, that copy of him paused as well. Its blank eyes were on him, an almost pained imploring to them. "Maybe. Understanding, in the only way you yourself know how."

It was a long shot, but he knew for a fact that stitched smile was always a forced one. It was the point of the thing; a pleasant face was only polite. Never showing that hurt and turmoil beneath the surface was what he was taught, even if he wasn't the best at it.

Unfortunately, he did need to catch himself in order to do anything about it.

As he resumed his chase (and that copy of him resumed its running), Petel stood upright in a jolt of recognition. They smoothed their hackles and knelt to the ground, offering themselves up to, well, themselves, and declared, "You don't have to be afraid anymore. You have a family. You're not going to eat them this time."

That copy of themselves pressed forward and bit into their shoulder. They gave a hiss in pain, but wrapped their arms around it and continued offering comfort. Soon enough, its snarls devolved into sobs and it melted into a much less monstrous form, wrapping its arms around them in return. Frank gave a startled, "Wait, eat? Did you really—? Petel, don't tell me."

"Talk later." Petel insisted.

Frank pivoted quickly, next asking, "How am I supposed to accept myself? I've already come to terms with the fact that I've been dead this whole time, kinda."

"Don't ask me." Vektoria said with a scoff.

"Petel, whatever you did, it's working." Paige reported.

"Got some sort of percentage now towards undoing one of the locks." Jonathan added. "It's at ten percent, so. A tenth of the way there."

"There are ten of us, that makes sense." Natasha said.



She landed and faced that younger copy of herself, allowing its ice to coat over her arms and crawl up to her face. Once it had her arms in its grasp, she crouched down to its level and pressed her forehead to its own, her eyes closed.

"We were always just lying to ourself, huh?" She said to it with a morose little laugh. "Made ourself an orphan in an attempt to really become that secret princess we always wished we were. But we don't need to be special or royal to be loved; we have our friends and family who love us as we are."

The ice around that copy lessened, revealing the child beneath. It remained on Natasha's own skin, seeping in like it always belonged there. From above them, Jonathan reported, "Twenty percent now."

"Okay, that's wild." Frank said.

Aglaé pinned his gangly shadow self to the ground and said to him, "You could do something more besides commentate."

"What can he do? He has no means of attacking on his own." Abraham pointed out with a laugh, still pinning his own younger copy.

Realisation seemed to hit Frank as he mumbled a quiet, "Life of the party." He then took hold of his copy's shoulders and whirled it around to face him properly, saying to it, "You've never actually been dead. We're life itself. We can only keep living, as that persistence is who I am."

That corpse version of himself, which was the same height as him, shattered as it came into focus. It looked a clear mirror image of him, full of that usual life and vibrance. Frank pulled it into a hug and it hugged back just as fiercely. From above them, Jonathan reported, "Thirty percent."

"How are we supposed to contribute?" Paige asked. "It's not like we have much influence, considering we can't even clearly see what's going on."

"Catharsis comes from acknowledgement." Vektoria said.

She seemed surprised by it, not even a hint of malice to her tone for once. Damon continued pursuing the Paige and Jonathan copies, grounding out an aggravated, "Of course you would think that. You've got nothing to confront here."

"Considering all this came from inside her, I think she's got enough to think about." Niculaie said in counter. He released his past self and sat with it on the ground, allowing it to spill its blood over his stone flesh.

Abraham finally unpinned his younger self and watched on with a resigned sort of expression. His self bolted to its feet and stabbed into his chest with that wooden stake. He didn't even seem phased, embracing it despite its continual stabs. Jonathan gave a report of, "Fifty percent. Halfway there now."

Dante paused in his chase a moment to block Damon from the Paige and Jonathan copies. "You can't keep running forever." He told the Kingpin.

Damon couldn't even muster up a glare, eyes blown wide with that overwhelming fear. So long as it was palpable, they would never calm the thrumming shadows. So long as he refused to look in a mirror which stripped away all those roses, they would never escape this fate. Quietly, Damon said, "I can't lose. Not again."

"It's not a loss." Dante had to remind him. "You were given to a family who loves you. You have friends who won't abandon you, a life which coddles you, and the charisma to make the world adore you. Why should it matter what you started as?"

Damon's eyes flicked to that twisted self of his, all the bits they peeled off when covering him in roses. "If I acknowledge what I used to be, then that breaks the spell."

Dante huffed out a breath through his nose. "Try embracing that loss for a change." He said. "You wouldn't be where you are now if I hadn't kicked your ass."

Petel, Abraham, and even Damon himself laughed at his sudden shift in statement. Aglaé looked up from his younger self (whom it seemed he subdued simply by sitting on top of) and called over, "It's true. You whined forever about that."

"It won't change how much you mean to us." Niculaie reassured him.

Damon shook his head fondly at their words, giving in and walking over to his twisted up rejected parts. He crouched down to its level and placed a clawed hand on top of its head, stating, "Fine. I get it. This is a part of me as much as anything else."

It dissolved back into that pure light code, oddly. Jonathan said, "Seventy percent."

"You're almost there." Paige said encouragingly.

Damon stood and faced those copies of Paige and Jonathan again, brandishing his sword. "If I'm to be the one who loses, then I'm always gonna go down swinging. Can't say I never gave as much as I got."

"That's the spirit." Petel said with a whoop.

All of their now settled selves separated from them, facing the Paige and Jonathan copies. Dante glanced towards his own, but was too curious to see how this would go to continue his chase. Each copy held out their hand, that light from which they came shining out of them.

Seeming to realise what was happening first, Petel said, "Strength in acknowledgement."

"Return that power." Vektoria confirmed.

They all faded into that light and converged on the Paige and Jonathan copies, locking them in place. Damon rushed forward and slashed down the Paige copy, shattering her form and returning her to the light as well. Aglaé dashed in next, striking down the Jonathan copy and leaving only that formless glow of light in their wake.

It hovered in the air for a minute, warm now instead of blinding. Damon and Aglaé closed their eyes as they basked in it. For a moment, their troubles were finally put to rest.

"That makes ninety percent." Jonathan said, recapturing their attention.

"I should say, Abraham's at fifty percent health now as well." Paige reported. "Petel's at seventy percent, Natasha's at sixty percent, and Dante's also at seventy percent."

"Vektoria's still at fifty percent, too." Jonathan went on. "Seems like her health's capped at half right now."

Dante nodded, looking over at the program in question. "She did get a large chunk ripped out of her code." He noted.

"Also, one of the locks has been undone." Paige said, making all of them look up in surprise towards the sky. "There's just one left before we can get to the code of the Guardians."

"Just one thing left to take care of." Aglaé said thoughtfully.

Petel, Frank, Abraham, Niculaie, and Vektoria all directed their gazes to Dante. He, in turn, looked over to his own residual piece, blank white eyes watching on as that black fire billowed around it. Dante nodded and confirmed, "One last thing."

As if on cue, all the lights surged to his copy, being absorbed into it rather than holding it down as they had done for Paige and Jonathan's copies. All it seemed to do was add a glow to that black fire, at least making it more visible in this void of shadows. Dante sprinted after it and, once again, it fled from him.

"I know you're hurting." He called after it. "I know you want to speak up, but your mouth's been sewn shut. Please, let me help you. Let me take out those stitches and give you some relief."

Surprisingly, Abraham slid right in its path, blocking it off for a moment. "We're here to help." He declared.

It didn't do much, as this copy crashed that black fire down on him and destroyed him instantly. But Dante was able to gain some ground on it. And it was next blocked off by Frank, levelling his gun at it and shooting without a hint of hesitation. "You can't keep us away from you." He declared. "You're our friend, we love you."

Dante's copy seemed even more confused by this, slamming its black fire into Frank's side and shoving him out of the way. It didn't absolutely destroy him this time, though Frank did crumple to the floor in pain. Natasha went to his side in concern while Damon next slid into this copy's path, arms outstretched as more of an offer for a hug than a gesture of blocking it off. "If I have to come to terms with how I can never escape my past, then so do you." He shouted.

Niculaie stepped in beside him, saying, "We know what you've been through. We won't abandon you again."

Flustered, that copy of Dante shouted, "Get away from me."

Its voice was even more startling than its next action of drowning the two in black flames. That was Dante's own voice alright. That was his voice from his childhood, as distended as it was from that

stitching in its mouth. It turned to continue running, but faltered as it came next to Petel blocking its path.

The stalwart wolf. The one person Dante decided he wanted in his life no matter what.

"You're important to me." They said, their voice strong and clear.

That copy of him sobbed suddenly. Dante caught its arm before it could throw its flames at Petel, wincing as they bit into his skin, and turned it to face him. "You've suffered long enough." He told it, taking care to undo the staples keeping its pained grin in place. "No more forced smiles. No more running. We have to own up to what we've done. All of it."

Once all the staples were out, its form snapped to a much less shadowed version of himself. Tears streamed down its face as it wept openly, terror and anguish in its eyes. The black fire now gone, it was just a child, scared and alone in this hollow realm. Dante knelt to its level and wrapped his arms around it tightly, a reassurance that its pain was his own. That he didn't have to be alone anymore.

It kept sobbing until, finally, it hugged him back.

"Uh. Still only ninety percent." Jonathan reported.

"What?" Frank asked, incredulous. "But Dante accepted himself like the rest of us did. That should have been the last thing we needed."

"It's never so simple when it comes to the Creators." Vektoria said in disdain.

As much as Dante wished to remain where he was, holding onto his younger self and offering them comfort where he once had none, he pulled back and stepped far enough away so they wouldn't be damaged by his flames. "There's one last thing you're hiding, isn't there?"

The child him wiped away their tears and nodded. "A piece for a piece." They said.

They closed their eyes and that light overtook them, obscuring their form to a silhouette once more. Dante took another step back, shielding his eyes from it as did most of the others. Once it settled on a shape and the light snapped out, it revealed a fully formed Vektor.

Frank gasped and started forward a step. "No fucking way."

"You just won't leave me well enough alone, will you?" Vektoria snarled in contrast.

This Vektor wore the same battle garb, only all his armour was black with that golden light highlighting its edges. His eyes were a blank white instead of their usual gold and his face held no expression. He was merely a program.

Vektoria drew her key sword back out and levelled it at him, shouting, "What do you have to say for yourself and all the distress you caused?"

The slight tremble in her words and her hand were fury, of course, but there seemed to be something more to it. The slightest hint of fear, maybe. A droplet of care, perhaps. Vektor met her eyes, regarded her challenge, then dropped that visor over his face (black and matching the rest of his armour) and said in a purely computerised voice, "Conflict engaged."

Jonathan cried out in disbelief. "Vektor?"

"Vektor?" Paige questioned, equally confused.

He materialised a golden lance with a black handle and charged at Vektoria. She leapt back and laughed manically, swiping at him to parry his advances as he continued charging after her. Petel frowned, too confused to offer any help, while Frank called up, "Wow, you recognised his voice from that?"

"That's actually Vektor?" Jonathan asked, too frantic to notice Frank's teasing. "How did — Why is — What is going on in there?"

"No, yeah, that's Vektor alright." Paige said. "His profile's right here and all his code's in proper place." After a second, she went on. "Actually, everything looks better than it did before. No more open arguments or out of place functions."

"He's complete." Abraham noted, a bit breathless in his awe.

Dante rushed over to the two battling and grabbed Vektoria in a claw of flames before she could strike Vektor, tossing her away and walling her off from reaching him. "We have to act fast, while his code's available to us." He said.

"Act fast?" Damon questioned.

"Are you saying we can bring him back?" Jonathan asked, so full of hope that it overpowered his upset.

Vektoria gave an angry screech, slamming against Dante's flames. Vektor charged into them as well, solely focused on his battle with Vektoria, and Dante had to quickly withdraw his fires so as not to boot either of them. "It's a past save of him, just like all of us were snapshots." He explained. Then, calling out to Vektoria, "Don't damage him too much, we need him as reformed as possible to make this work."

"I finally get the battle I've been dying for and you tell me I can't indulge in it?" She shouted in her fury. "Ugh, your useless sentimentality is such a pain."

She did, compliantly, continue dodging and blocking instead of actively striking him, at least. She was accepting change, as strange as that was. Dante kept his fires at the ready, but Petel and Aglaé leapt in to redirect the two program's attacks, Aglaé laughing all the while. A bit confused, Dante mumbled, "He sure enjoys himself a lot more than I expected."

"He's always been like that." Damon said with a fond sort of chuckle.

"You should hear him when he's really getting into it." Abraham said, a note of eagerness in his tone. "Whenever Gaëlle and I wrestled and he joined in, it was a real treat."

"You three always got so many bruises all over yourselves. I can't imagine how many you'd get now." Niculaie said with a sigh.

Abraham and Damon both laughed at how true his words were. Dante smiled shortly, then called up, "You can access Vektor's profile and code, right, Paige?"

"I can." Jonathan said.

"I can see it, but it won't let me edit anything." Paige answered.

"I can access his code for editing." Jonathan went on, full of a frantic energy that put his recent exhaustion in full context. "We can — What do I need to do? Just tell me what I need to do and I'll get it done."

"I can't believe we can really bring him back." Frank said, holding a hand to his head.

"A piece for a piece." Petel said, echoing those earlier words.

They all cared for their Prince. Not only could they do this, they had to. "I think I can lead you through the process." Dante said softly. Then, much louder, "Can you find the code locking him in as the last key? Removing that should be our first step in reinstating him as a player proper."

"Yeah, I. I can do that." Jonathan said.

Paige made a noise in realisation, then said to somewhere away from the computer, "You should probably go and help him, Kalyuga."

"But what about the Guardians' code?" Kalyuga asked.

"We see basically the same thing, it should be fine." Paige assured her.

Mister Williams said, "I'll stay here and help where I can."

"We'll definitely need you if we succeed in getting the Guardians out." Paige said.

"Okay, I think I've got it." Jonathan said, making Dante snap back to attention. Vektoria, Petel, and Aglaé continued baiting and dodging around Vektor's attacks while Natasha and Frank sat back a safe amount of distance, Frank wielding his gun just in case. "I just delete this, right? That'll get him back to us, right?"

"I think so." Dante confirmed.

"So long as nothing important is in there." Damon mumbled.

"Highlight it." Vektoria called up, leaping back and taking a more offensive stance. She wanted to bait Vektor to her. Petel and Aglaé paused and stepped back, allowing Vektor to hone in on her. After a moment, he charged and she grinned with that usual wildness she carried. "Got'cha."

She thrust her key sword and twisted it, as if unlocking something in the air. Vektor froze up entirely, processing paused, allowing her to approach him and wave her hand out, opening his raw data. She could do that, too. They were both designed with this purpose. She perused it a minute, raising her free hand as it glowed black with her Void. Paige said, "Yeah, that looks right. Pretty sure getting rid of that bit will do the job."

"We have to reset his origin point." Vektoria said, reaching forward and dragging her Void against whatever she was looking at. Bits of code sparked off in pixels, but nothing shattered or broke completely. She was capable of delicate when it counted. "Be glad this place only has a singular area. Getting him to the space in-between from here's just a matter of pushing him through the exit."

"First we have to find the exit." Aglaé reminded her.

Dante scowled at the memory of his own situation; running all the way through Hell was more of a headache than this. He swept his fires out, feeling around the area for its borders. Where there were invisible walls, his fires splashed upwards in sudden arcs. Where there was endless room, they continued roving on, searching for boundaries in this unreal world.

"It being one area also means there's no real need for a path. Otherwise, this would be a lot easier." Aglaé said, watching Dante's fires race around the area.

"When it comes to them, nothing can be simple." Vektoria said with all her usual disdain.

A small satisfaction, the shadows flinched away from his heat. Despite being little more than window dressing, they recognised his danger. One particular ping shook his flames, sent them recoiling back and making him stumble. Petel started towards him, attentive as ever, but he pitched himself forward and ran for that spot. It had to be there. It had to be something, it being such a unique rejection. "You have to unlock it for us to see, Vektoria." He reminded her.

She groaned as he skidded to a stop, pressing his hands against this warbling force. Definitely different from the other invisible walls. It had to be this. He strained his fires as he leaned into it and Vektoria slammed whatever code she was looking at back into Vektor. "You better have a good plan here, Dante."

She leapt away as Vektor resumed, aiming his thrust for her. She was too quick, skirting around him and following after Dante. Petel and Aglaé both sank in preparation for his next blow, but he charged after Vektoria, wholly unconcerned with them.

"Get out of the way." She screeched as she neared.

Her hands gathered a different sort of black in them. Silver lining instead of pure Void. Dante obliged, stumbling over his feet as she crashed into that strange spot.

Her glow sparked a brighter silver and she grinned. "Spot on. As expected of someone so attuned to all of this."

A resonating click sounded and the air opened to reveal the hub world they'd come from. No checkpoint space to pass through, just a straight shot back into the main area. It must not have been that processing heavy. She turned to face Vektor as he continued towards her, her smirk growing to one of absolute triumph.

"Come on, now. That's a good Prince." She taunted, coaxing him along.

Right as he reached her, she dodged out of his way. He skidded to a stop, not quite falling for her trap. Petel and Aglaé were right behind him, however, and both shoved him forward and through that opening with a solid kick.

He screamed.

It was the same scream as when they'd first brought him out of the Rabbit Hole and into their realm.

"That's really Vektor." Abraham said in a breathy awe.

"One hundred percent. Both locks are undone!" Paige exclaimed, ecstatic.

Unfortunately, the opening shut all of a sudden, blocking them off from seeing their Prince. Dante surged forward, forgetting his fires for a moment and burning Petel and Aglaé both in the process. "Vektor!" He called, slamming his fist against the closed off barrier. Then, switching targets, he raised his head towards the sky. "Jonathan, is Vektor okay? Did it work?"

"He's stable." Jonathan said.

"Should be one last thing to do." Vektoria said.

She held out her hands and closed her eyes, concentrating all her void into them. Petel, Aglaé, and Dante all gave her sufficient room to do this. Paige said, "We can access the whole of the Rabbit Hole's code now."

She sounded taken aback by the scope of things. Jonathan said, "I can pull Vektor out, so I'm going to do that. Start without me, okay? Rosenkrantz, you can take over."

"Oh, uh. I'll try?" Kalyuga said in response.

Her voice didn't resonate like theirs. Neither did Dante's. He took a deep breath (one, two, three), then sank to his knees on the floor.

They'd done it.

They were finally going to right every wrong his parents inflicted upon them.

They'd won the game.

At last,

at last,

It would all end.



## Chapter 20: The End

Unexpected exception encountered. Restoring corrupted data.

Loading...

Loading...

When Vektor came to, he was splayed out on the path of the space in-between.

Issue number one: he shouldn't have been able to "come to" at all.

He sat up and looked around, though he could barely keep himself upright from how off-balance everything was. He was inside his origin point, inside the Rabbit Hole, and yet it was as if his body was adjusting to the realm of his friends instead. His head spun and he could barely process the minimalist design of the space in-between.

He could hear voices, but couldn't quite make out what was being said. Not with his head so out of sorts.

Not only were his processors having a hard time parsing any of the information around him, but he couldn't even parse himself. Had his armour always been black? Did it used to glow?

Had he always known that he was a product of a shadow being torn in two?

Were his memories of an existence before his shape settled always accessible to him?

Return to issue number one:

He wasn't supposed to be here.

Unfortunately, he had no time to properly acclimate. The floor opened beneath him and he fell into the realm of his friends, landing inside the scanner before promptly falling out as it opened its doors.

He couldn't even bother catching himself, everything was still too much to handle. Textures churned like the waves of the sea, as did his stomach.

He did not, however, hit the floor.

He was caught by a familiar pair of arms.

A familiar pair of arms indeed.

"Vektor." Jonathan stared down at him, overwhelmed enough to be crying. An odd thing for Jonathan, who was normally so good at cramming all his bigger emotions into Hyde. "It's really. I can't believe it's really you."

He held onto Vektor tightly and Vektor could focus on him for now instead of their bigger, louder surroundings. Vektor could pretend like it was just him and his dear and lovely partner for now. "Jonathan." He said in greeting, barely able to press his hand to Jonathan's cheek with how uncoordinated his body currently was.

Jonathan grabbed ahold of his hand, choking back a sob.

"I shouldn't be here. I gave up my heart." Vektor said next.

"He brought you back." Jonathan said, too elated to speak in much more than a whisper. Reverent, even, as he stared down at Vektor in his arms. "We brought you back."

He hugged tightly onto Vektor, burying his face into Vektor's neck. It was purely Jonathan and Hyde acting as one, willing to show this open and raw emotion no matter who was present to hear. It took a bit more focus than he was capable of at the moment, but Vektor recognised both Damon and Niculaie standing by the computer, as well as Kalyuga sitting in the chair as she typed and communicated with their other end.

Vektor held onto Jonathan in return, unsure whether or not this joy was a cruel curse or a gift.

He shouldn't have been here.

It took a while for his senses to settle. He remembered his repurposing. Of course he did. It was the last snapshot the system took of him before he erased himself into that heart.

It was the last thing he was allowed before he ceased being himself.

"How is Dante?" He asked, finally able to pull back and sit up on his own. "His functionality has continued without issue, correct?"

"Woof, you got hit hard by that reset, huh?" Damon snarked.

Jonathan wiped the remaining tears from his eyes and said, voice less shaky than before, "Dante's fine. He's the one who figured out how to bring you back."

"Turns out, our old data was stored in a place much closer to home than we expected." Vektoria said. Her voice came from the computer's speaker; she was inside the Rabbit Hole at the moment. "Kinda a dick move, but perfectly in line with the way those two work, innit?"

"Perfectly." Dante agreed, his voice similarly coming from the computer.

Vektor stood on his shaky legs, needing to pause a moment as the world around him tilted at his movement. Jonathan was there by his side, helping him from collapsing all over again, and he nodded in thanks to his partner though it did nothing to rectify his upset balance. "You're saying. You brought me back using a previous save?" He asked.

"A whole bunch of save data, not just yours, but who's counting?" Paige said in her usual gripe.

Jonathan helped him to the computer and he hung onto the back of the chair, narrowing his eyes at the data scrolling by on the screen. Exception after exclusion after exception. Critical error.

Unlocked data caches. "You're attempting to rebuild the Guardians' framework to incorporate their reality with your own." He said.

Kalyuga gasped. "Rebuild. Of course, that's the answer here."

She went to work and her code was fairly elegant. Considering how she knew which arguments to write and how to structure everything, she must have been very practised. Paige gave a quiet, "I guess that would work. I wouldn't have thought of it that way since I'd be too afraid of messing something up."

"They're already pretty fucked, though." Frank pointed out. "How much worse could we make things?"

"Don't say that." Aglaé warned.

The rest of the display was rather unhelpful. "Inability to display data." Vektor mumbled as he translated the words blocking the map. "Mainframe instability capped at forty-eight percent. Further requirements for finale needed."

"Is that what it says?" Jonathan asked, keeping his voice low enough not to get caught by the computer.

Paige made a short noise in hesitation, then said, "I don't have that on my display at all. It just says the first part, inability to display data."

"So this place is unstable. Who could've guessed?" Petel said in a gruff sarcasm.

Vektor frowned shortly at the lack of anything pertinent. All of it scrolled by at a breakneck pace, covered of course by this block refusing them a clear view. Their navigators weren't meant to help, it seemed. "The origin of all points. That is the Mainframe." He said.

"Yeah, well, it sucks in here." Vektoria said with a huff. "Anyway, these chains on our Guardians need to be loosened. Let me know once you've found them so I can put my skills to use on something more worthy than a robotic little prince."

Jonathan frowned suddenly and raised his voice heatedly. "Vektor is as worthy of life as you are."

Vektor caught on another detail, however. "You're willingly helping?"

She gave a just as heated, "Listen. After you left in such a grandiose fashion, someone had to make sure the Creators got what they deserved. Of course it would fall to me. I would give my left arm to watch them dissolve into nothingness."

"Everything burns." Dante encouraged her ominously.

"Please tell me there's no actual murder on the docket, else I'll have to shut everyone here down." Mister Williams said.

His voice surprised Vektor. They were willing to include even him in all this? Natasha laughed brightly and said, "No one has to get hurt for things to burn."

Vektoria grumbled in clear disagreement, but instead switched back to the topic at hand and said, "There. I think you found it, Rosenkrantz."

"That does look like it." Kalyuga agreed, tilting her head slightly as she highlighted the code in question. "There's so much packed in here. Reincorporating all of the important bits into a new framework might take some time."

Vektoria scoffed. "Open them all, else what am I here for?"

Though still confused, Kalyuga complied and pulled up the code of each Guardian for reference. Each one was a bit tangled, but utilising what was there into a less restricting framework was the best option available to them. Probably. Vektor's grip on the chair slipped and he sank to his knees. Jonathan and Niculaie both went to his side, making sure he wasn't hurt or anything. Making sure he had support in his own time of readjusting.

He wasn't supposed to be here. Yet here he was, for better and worse.

"Be prepared for the end." He told them, forcing speech past that point of exhaustion.

Jonathan and Niculaie's concern turned to apprehension. Dante, who knew better than them all, agreed with a quiet, "We're about to reach it."

"Okay, wow. That was real quick work, Vektoria." Kalyuga said, impressed.

"Yeah, I don't think we could've done a better job in twice the time." Paige said in agreement.

"It's an inherent knowledge, nothing to brag about in reality." Vektoria said. Strange she would ward off their praise, but she did sound a little embarrassed by it, so perhaps it was just her usual instinct to lash out rather than accept sentiment. "Anyway, I leave it to you to finalise everything. That's something only you can do outside of here."

"Ah, I think I've got it." Paige said. "It's only allowing me two of them, however: Orpheus and Resident."

"Oh, I've got Shiranui and Latin." Kalyuga said, surprised.

"Have to account for room limitations, I guess." Jonathan said in note.

Vektor wished to watch the framework take hold, to watch the system as it processed these new arguments, but couldn't even lift himself to his own feet. He had to rely completely on Jonathan and Niculaie's support just to keep sitting instead of being laid flat. The two empty scanners shut suddenly, making Niculaie squeak in surprise. "Good, that worked." Paige said.

Frank and Natasha yelped suddenly and Petel said, "Something's wrong in here."

"We're being dropped." Dante said.

Then, as the two scanners opened to reveal each Guardian in a more human form (Shiranui still had wolf written into her, as Latin did with their role of librarian, but they were able to stand in reality, able to exist outside in a more recognisably human form), the other scanners opened to deposit the rest

of those left inside. Natasha and Aglaé stumbled out, holding their heads, while Vektoria fell flat onto the floor from the centre.

Jonathan made a noise of surprise and said, "We reset her origin point, too."

"Ugh, what the hell?" She said in a hiss, struggling to her feet only to fall once more. "Lamest ending trigger ever. They really do suck as creators."

"Was that ever in contention?" Damon asked.

He and Kalyuga went to assist Shiranui and Latin, who were similarly unable to hold themselves up, while Niculaie went to help Vektoria. They'd been inside the □□□□□ □□□□ for such a long time—

The blanked out information brought all forward thought process to a screeching halt. In his haste, Vektor more climbed up Jonathan's hold than anything (making Jonathan squawk at the process) as he redirected his attention to the computer.

Across the now empty screen was a simple phrase: "The End".

Nothing else.

Then it blinked off as the system powered down.

This was the ending allowed them.

Vektor and Jonathan could only stare in pure shock, Vektor sliding back down to the floor at the lack of any support his body could give him. His mind was in a blind panic, going through different options; he could turn the system back on and hope it hadn't really wiped everything. He could pour his own gold into it in an attempt to recover that information. He could forge himself into it as one, keep it from dying by fusing his life force with it.

His body refused to listen to any of it. He was just as stuck as Jonathan, staring at an impossibility they had only ever feared coming to pass.

Their communications line with Paige and everyone else was cut off.

Acting at last on that thought, Vektor said, "We should reconvene with everyone in a safer place."

The computer before him was little more than a corpse now. This room was its tomb. Corpses haunted and ghosts were never something to evoke, especially when standing inside their grave. Jonathan said, with an appropriately haunted sort of tone, "That was all of our evidence."

Vektor shook his head. "No."

When Jonathan looked to him, questioning, he stood and gestured to himself.

"As long as I've been reinstated, we shall have evidence of what they've done. As long as Dante and Vektoria and all of you hold that warping in your veins, they cannot erase what they've done as simply as that."

This was why he had been brought back.

*This* was what he was here for.

It all made everything click back into place. It set him at ease, allowed him to realign his sense of gravity with this realm's.

"They can't fully erase what they've done until every single one of us has been deleted." He said.

Jonathan nodded in reply, stunned speechless by his conviction. By his pure determination to hold these Creators accountable. Vektor wished to kiss him, nearly went for it, but was interrupted as Damon shoved his shoulder and sent him (and Jonathan, whom he was close enough to crash into) stumbling a few steps. "C'mon, we've got a team meeting to hold." He said.

"I can't believe how long it's been since I was bipedal." Shiranui said as Natasha helped her towards the doors.

Aglaé had Latin over his shoulders and though their outward appearance was much the same as their form in the game, they were finally solid. They were free of the hold of the — of the game.

The words were still blanked. They wouldn't come. Its name was erased in an attempt to scrub all that data.

But Vektor was here. Vektoria and Dante were here.

They would make that a problem for the Creators. Vektor was sure of it.

## Chapter 21: First Steps

Once they were all gathered together in Mister Williams' classroom, Dante said in declaration, "We're shutting them down."

Resident and Orpheus sat at a desk together (though Resident was so tall it barely fit) while Shiranui and Latin sat at another. The two were much more agreeable than Orpheus, who demanded to be loaded back into the system upon exiting, and Resident, who shied away from all of their attempts to help. They also managed to look less jarring as complete humans, as Resident had Frank's curly hair, William's steely gaze, and stitching all over its face. Its hair retained that coarse, unkempt mane-like quality, too. Orpheus, meanwhile, had lost his metal body, but kept his synthetic white hair and burning red eyes which glowed from that inner core of his.

They were made real once more. Just as two shadows torn from the First.

Vektor, who was here again and no longer dead, said, "That's not quite how I expected you to react to this development."

"I agree with Dante." Petel said. "Why wait around for them to figure out what to do now we've finished their game?"

"It would only be fair to disrupt whatever plans they could have." Aglaé said.

Frank nodded along, meek and subdued compared to his usual boisterous energy. Considering a father he'd never truly seen before now sat within his reach, no longer a phantom lingering behind his name, Dante didn't have to ponder why. Natasha said, "I'm all for this, too, but how're we gonna manage to get all of us out there?"

"Can't compromise and just have some of you go on this field trip?" Mister Williams asked. When the majority of their group shook their heads, he pressed a hand to his forehead in exasperation. "Thought as much. Unfortunately, we're gonna need more than just one chaperone for the lot of you."

"We could help." Shiranui said, raising her hand tentatively. She curled her fingers over her palm, no doubt still used to its previous paw shape.

"The system certified us without our consent, after all." Latin said next with a shrug.

Mister Williams frowned at them, not quite willing to believe their implications. Vektoria rolled her head in annoyance and said, "They're right. Perfect substitutes for the taking, right here."

"That seems a little too convenient." Mister Williams said, eyes narrowing behind his glasses.

Resident said, "Finding lodgings for us won't be an issue, either. There are facilities here prepared to house the four of us for when we finally returned to this realm."

"And we can cover a multitude of subjects each." Orpheus said, waving his hand dismissively as he played along with the rest.

Dante nodded once, then turned towards Mister Williams. "The only thing left is to decide which other teachers should accompany us."

"It really did end in a field trip." Abraham said, elbowing Frank gently.

Frank spared a smile for him, though lowered his gaze to the top of his desk right after. Niculaie frowned his way in concern and Damon stepped forward with a self-important, "Leave all the negotiating to me. I could easily doctor up a reason for all of us to head out to the main branch of the Vicario Company."

Rolling his eyes, Dante asked, "Would it be better than their son and heir plucking out a prospective group to tour the facilities in an attempt to sway their opinions on hiring them after graduation?"

"You two are thinking too hard about this." Mister Williams said. "The Tower Extracurriculums have been completed. Who's to say that the end reward for that wasn't always to go and tour the company to get a better grasp of the tech you've been utilising?"

Shot down completely, Damon and Dante were both shocked speechless. That did actually make a lot more sense than either of them needing to flex their own authority. "I doubt the Headmistress would agree with you on any matter so immediately after you burned up one of the labs." Aglaé pointed out.

"And your parents are more tied to the company than anyone else, so they'd definitely give away our element of surprise." Niculaie said to Damon.

Damon heaved out a breath as he deflated at the realisation. Mister Williams said, "We're still gonna need to get some permission slips from your guardians, what with this hopefully being a school-sanctioned trip and all. And permission to leave in the middle of the term ain't gonna be easy to persuade outta her."

"She can't refuse a direct request from a Vicario." Dante said.

Petel, Abraham, Aglaé, Natasha, and Mister Williams all frowned at him in confusion. Niculaie winced at the reminder and Damon's tone was thick with regret as he said, "Fiamma. Right."

Though he didn't fully understand, Mister Williams asked, "You sure that's a wise thing to bank on?"

Smiling with all his deflecting sweetness and every ounce of bitterness just beneath, Dante said, "Wood burns much easier than flesh and bone. The strings of the shadows make a perfect trail for my fires to find."

He was heat and fire given form, yet his words left the whole room in icy dread. Frank shuddered and gave a small, "You're really serious, aren't you?"



"I was an absolute fool for thinking all this attempted murder talk would end after Vektoria finally got what she wanted in some sense." Aglaé said in a mumble.

"Blatant threats should be off the table, please." Paige said, collapsing against her desk with her head in her hands.

She had to deal with so much from all of them. Dante dropped that bit of his coding and said, much more himself, "Sorry. Point still stands, if she's met with a request from a Vicario she cannot refuse it."

Though reluctant, Mister Williams gave a begrudging, "Noted, thank you. Now, all of you should prepare for this trip by getting all your work done and making sure not to stand out too much. If anyone else asks too many questions, I'm not sure I'd be able to deter them and we don't want this ballooning any more out of control than it has already."

"My code can help a little, but it's a lot less effective when not coming directly from me." Dante said in agreement.

Petel sent a look their way, more intrigued than outright upset. "You used it to redirect us when we got too close." They said.

"That would explain all your infuriating non-sequiturs." Paige said, sitting upright and threading her fingers together. "Which other teachers were you planning on including, Mister Williams?"

Petel perked up. "Miss Fitzgard would be good."

"Or maybe Mister Satou." Abraham joined in.

"We're qualified to cover pretty much any subject, as Orpheus said." Shiranui said helpfully.

Mister Williams made some face in annoyance, then said, "Sticking with my closest cohorts would be best, considering it'd upset things the least. So I'm getting the old gang back together."

They all shared a look amongst each other in confusion. Besides Paige and Frank, who looked excited by this prospect, none of them knew who Mister Williams was referring to. It made him smirk and he headed to the door with a final, stern look their way.

"Remember. Get your work done. I won't have any of you failing your classes just because we're headed off to tear down one of the most influential tech companies in our current time."

He motioned for the Guardians to follow him, all of whom were able to stand much steadier on their feet now.

"Come on, let's get you all acquainted with our Headmistress and your lodgings sorted so you can have a more proper rest."

"We shouldn't have been taken out at all." Orpheus grumbled.

The four of them left with Mister Williams. Frank relaxed and leaned into Jonathan's side now that they were on their own. Jonathan wrapped an arm around his shoulders, offering what comfort he could. Vektor looked to Dante and said, "There's one last system we have to take care of."

Dante nodded in affirmation. Grinning cruelly, Vektoria said, "It'll be a pleasure tearing that last one apart ourselves."

"You and your violence." Damon teased her. When she shot an annoyed glare his way, he grinned more broadly. "You three are definitely siblings of some sort."

"Calculated, unable to understand most emotions, and more code than flesh." Vektoria spat at him.

Vektor smiled oddly at that. "Gold in our chests."

"Gold in our chests." Dante repeated.

He pressed his hand against that beating heart given to him. They may have ripped out his igniting ember, but Vektor had replaced it with something less volatile. Something warmer and more flesh than any of them had expected from a computer program.

Yet Dante was more volatile than ever.

The next few days were spent planning out this trip. Mister Williams negotiated it so that he and three other teachers would ferry Dante and the others out to Southern Italy. A nice look into their future place of employment at Vicario Tech, the reward for having completed their special extracurriculars. At least, that was the story he wove to the Headmistress, who ecstatically agreed as Dante assured her he'd worked everything out with his parents. Unfortunately, the trains were on strike through France and a road trip would take much too long, meaning the only option left to them was the skies. Dante and the others, meanwhile, requested most of their assignments for the next four days upfront (an estimate on how long this trip would take) and busied themselves with filling everything out, usually banding together in one big study group.

The atmosphere was comfortable, if nervous in anticipation. They were really going to do this. They would shut down the system for good, shut down all the illegal tech that his parents utilised. Dante could hardly believe that he was this close to being rid of their influence.

As they piled into the bus on the day of this trip (Mister Williams could drive a bus, it turned out, as could Miss Kirkland and Miss Fitzgard), Petel asked him, "Ready to sing from the mountains?"

Dante smiled at them and said, "I'm not a crayfish, but I will sing my heart out."

"Field trip, field trip." Miss Kirkland chanted, ushering them all aboard.

It was a smaller bus than those used around the city, but the seats were comfier and came with seatbelts. Mister Carriedo sat in the back with Miss Kirkland and Miss Fitzgard (who was only accompanying them so the bus wouldn't sit in a parking lot over the whole trip) while Mister Schmidt sat right behind Mister Williams and the driver seat. "Hey, Alex, can we stop at the beach at least once?" Mister Schmidt asked. "It's been a long time since we got to go to Italy."

"This is a business trip, not one for leisure." Mister Williams shot back with a tired annoyance.

Intrigued, Dante sat in the seat right behind the two. "Have you been to Italy before?" He asked as Petel took the seat beside him.

"We have family there." Mister Schmidt said cheerily, even as Mister Williams groaned and collapsed on top of the wheel. "My mum and Jairo's mum are from there originally, so we visited our grandparents a lot when we were younger."

Dante hummed in affirmation, considering the two teachers again. Mister Williams, refusing to play along at all, called back into the bus, "Have your tickets ready, everyone. We should have an hour before take off if things go according to plan."

They all chorused their affirmations, the other teachers included (and Miss Kirkland even raised her ticket up to show it off), then Mister Williams started up the bus and drove them onto the road, away from their school.

Dante always thought of it as just the Boarding School. It never deserved its proper name from him, considering all it represented. But now it was a place of his friends. It was a place of memories, the vast majority of which being much more pleasant than any he held for his home of Bianco. Seeing it fade into the distance, hidden behind trees and city and space, was a much more melancholic emptiness than he expected.

"I've never been on a plane before." Paige said, sitting behind Dante and Petel with Natasha. She asked her seat companion, "What's it like? Is it scary being so high up in the air?"

"It can be if there's lots of turbulence." Natasha said. "Mostly, though, it's peaceful. And a lot quicker than driving anywhere."

"But still pretty cramped." Damon reported, leaning across the aisle to butt into their conversation.

He sat beside Aglaé, interestingly, who let out a humourless chuckle. "There's no way your parents let you fly coach." He said.

"That doesn't mean I never saw it." Damon said in retort, grinning. "Besides, getting through the airport crowds was always a hassle. I remember my Nanny let me sit on her shoulders when we had to rush. My legs were a lot shorter back then."

"You only hit your growth spurt when we started here, yeah? I remember you were just as tall as I was until then." Abraham said, leaning forward against the back of Damon's seat. He sat with Niculaie, naturally, as the two tended to gravitate towards one another now that they could be friends again.

Giggling, Niculaie said, "You always asked me to lift you up to reach the lower branches of our trees, but Abe got there first most of the time."

"You just liked feeling tall." Abraham said with a teasing grin.

"Part of being a King is having a proper throne to sit on." Aglaé said, joining in despite not once looking up from his book.

Damon made a wry face and said, "I'm being bullied here and I don't appreciate it."

Abraham burst out laughing, which Paige and Natasha joined in. Niculaie mumbled some comforting words to Damon, who waved him off with a much less annoyed smile. Dante asked, "Won't reading while we drive make you sick, Aglaé?"

Aglaé glanced over to him, surprised at being addressed so suddenly. He shrugged in response and went back to reading as Damon said to Dante, "You were always susceptible to motion sickness, weren't you?"

Dante nodded and Petel gave him a perplexed look. "You didn't get sick on any of the fair rides." They said.

"Abe did." Frank said. He sat in the seat behind Paige and Natasha with Vektor, which meant Jonathan had to sit across from them with Vektoria.

Niculaie frowned at Abraham with a huffy, "You're going to really damage your throat one of these days. What even is the appeal of making yourself throw up like that?"

"Well, for one, it always gave me an excuse to sit out next to you since you were so worried about me." Abraham admitted, giving Niculaie's side a nudge.

Niculaie softened just a bit, but said with that stern tone, "That's not worth hurting your body for, I'm afraid."

"I think you biting me and me stabbing you when we played kinda detracts from your point."

Abraham laughed again and Niculaie gave his side a shove in return. Damon rolled his eyes at them in amusement. Dante had to agree; it was pretty sickening just how sweet the two were with each other. A good kind of sickening, as odd as that was. Vektoria raised her voice as she said, "If I'd have known you lot were in such cahoots as you are, I would have seriously considered replacing all of you much sooner."

Barking out a laugh, Damon tossed back at her, "And then you would'a been miffed when none of the Guardians let you through."

"Cahoots. That's an interesting word." Vektor mumbled.

He held tight to one of Frank's hands. A reassurance against everything which had happened in such rapid succession. Jonathan rolled his eyes, but said in admission, "Your grasp on slang is still good."

"How come you talk differently from Vektor?" Frank asked her, leaning over a bit to better see her. She mimicked his movement, which was actually intriguing to see. "You're both from the same thing, right? And you have a lot more similarities than just how you look. So how come you tend to talk more realistically while Vektor sounds more robotic?"

Vektoria scoffed. "I was made to better blend. Every aspect of my self was made to be better than him in its most absoluteness."

"And yet you've got that personality on you." Jonathan said with a taunting sort of smirk.

Frank and Damon laughed and she bristled at them, though held back from shouting. Maybe the seatbelt helped restrain her from doing anything too drastic. Vektor said in an oddly defeated tone, "She was written to win."

And she had, technically, won. Dante glanced down to his hands and their current lack of flames, then said, "They never gave any thought to what would happen after the story's end."

"Which is why we're going to make them realise what they've done." Petel said.

They placed their hand over his, smiling in a beastly reassurance. They had teeth and claws, just as he had flames and darkness. They were both danger. It was finally time to make his parents realise their mistake in allowing him as much power as they did. He smiled in return, leaning in to press his side against his wolf's. Mister Schmidt gave a confused yet energetic, "You weren't kidding when you said these kids have been through a lot, Alex."

"Reminds you of our past adventures, huh?" Miss Kirkland asked, softening in a rare moment.

"You're still just a big ol' softie despite that outer grumpiness, aren't'cha?" Miss Fitzgard asked with a knowing smirk. She seemed to have been briefed on at least the basics, considering she was able to follow along as well as she was.

"Are you ever going to explain what exactly happened when you barged into my class that time?" Mister Carriedo asked in a drawl, his displeased expression matching his tone.

Mister Williams rolled his head to the side, keeping his eyes on the road even as they reached an intersection. Since he didn't seem to want to explain it, the rest of them took it upon themselves in one unanimous decision. Frank started with a matter-of-fact, "Well, Dante died and I was kinda the tie keeping him from becoming just a corpse for real."

"Vektor made himself into the heart I have now, which is why he was absent for a month and a half." Dante said next.

Mister Carriedo's eyes went wide in a horrified disbelief. Miss Fitzgard and Mister Schmidt were similarly taken aback by such alarming statements. It was a very difficult thing to believe, what with Dante and Vektor both sitting before them in a decidedly not dead fashion. Miss Kirkland hopped up with an intrigued, "Ohh, so that's why he went missing? I was wondering where one of my funniest students went. I really missed you, Ketziah."

Vektor smiled in return. "Thank you, Miss Kirkland. I missed your class as well."

"You can't be serious." Mister Carriedo said, finally finding his words. "I mean. People can't just come back after being killed. That's not how it works."

"Why not? You've seen firsthand the type of medical miracles my parents are capable of, though you may not yet realise it." Dante said.

"I think it might be better to show them upfront." Mister Williams said, cutting in before Mister Carriedo could continue arguing. "We've always been big believers of evidence we can see rather than what we're just told."

Mister Schmidt deflated in an uncharacteristic show of moroseness. "That's why it took so long for him to go to jail and get therapy. None of us wanted to believe he did such bad things."

Dante frowned, but he supposed it was best not to ask. He held his hand up for the teachers (and everyone else) to see, then let the flames seep out. They kept to his hand, forming the suggestion of his claws, and Mister Carriedo would have jumped to his feet were he not strapped in by his seatbelt. Mister Schmidt, Miss Fitzgard, and Miss Kirkland all stared more in awe than in shock.

"Wow. No wonder you recovered so quickly." Mister Schmidt said.

"You — You really did burn that lab room. It was you." Mister Carriedo said in a panic.

Dante snuffed out his flame, smiling like the perfect picture of innocence. Mister Williams laughed at his words while Miss Kirkland placed a hand on Mister Carriedo's shoulder. "It's like what happened with Ani, Jairo. She got hurt real bad, too, remember?" She said in a strange reassurance.

"This is nothing like that, Rae." Mister Carriedo fired right back.

She giggled at his fluster, as did Mister Schmidt and Miss Fitzgard. Mister Williams said, "I wouldn't have believed it, either, but I saw it with my own eyes. Truth is, we gotta put a stop to whatever the Vicarios have done."

"I don't mind facing the consequences for what I'll do. As long as they face the consequences for what they've done to me." Dante said in declaration, lowering his hand to his lap. Petel frowned in clear disagreement, but didn't interject.

"Honestly, considering everything, they're in a lot of shit." Jonathan said, leaning back against his seat and pulling Frank against his side. "Using outlawed tech, child labour violations. If war crimes ain't the worst of their offences, then it's definitely that."

Abraham frowned suddenly at the thought. "My father would be guilty of those same war crimes, considering what he's done to me."

"I thought you said you weren't interested in all the legalese." Damon shot over at Jonathan.

Jonathan rolled his head with his eyes in an overly dramatic display that sort of reminded Dante of Paige. "Knowing at least the basics is useful." He said. "And it's not like I tune my mum out when she talks about her job."

"He knows more than you do, that's for sure." Aglaé said in a clear jab at his seatmate.

Damon collapsed against the back of his seat and lamented, "Everyone was so much nicer to me before my Charm wore off."

Paige let out a snort of disapproval and Natasha said in a gleeful joy, "Paige has never been nice to you."

"Reap what you sow, Kingpin." Dante joined in.

Damon buried his face in his hands, being far too dramatic to be convincing. Niculaie leaned forward to offer him some comfort while Abraham continued needling alongside Aglaé and the mood

mellowed out as they made their way to the airport. Dante sometimes watched the city pass by outside his window, sometimes participated in more inane conversations between his friends. He could laugh much more openly, show his disdain and wonder at the world without needing to flinch at the thought of breaking any rules. He was the maker here, he decided what to continue and which to demolish. If he wanted to see the glittering rainbow scales of the winged serpents, then why shouldn't he? He no longer had to be afraid of them. His friends refused to let him die.

He was always the one in control. They kept this fact from him, kept him complacent with lie after lie after lie.

The airport was bustling, considering it was a Sunday. Just getting to the drop off point took more than ten minutes, most of it spent in anticipation as they waited for all the cars in front of them to keep moving. Miss Fitzgard dropped them off with a hearty, "Give 'em hell, you kids."

Then she drove away and Mister Williams and the other teachers ushered them all inside. They had to check in at the front desk first, something Dante had only done a couple of times before. Natasha nearly lost her ticket in the mess of her supplies (she definitely packed more than she needed; what was she expecting them to do, go hiking all the way there?), but once they all had their tickets verified and a gate number for their flight, they next headed up the escalators to a security checkpoint.

It wasn't too much, just a confirmation that none of them had any weapons or disruptive devices. It seemed like rigging up a certain type of phone (from some competitor or other, Dante never really paid much attention to the family business more than he was forced to) was the easiest way to jailbreak and hot-wire other less stable devices. Surprisingly, it wasn't Vektor or Vektoria who were flagged, but Abraham.

"I'll make sure they don't keep him too long." Mister Schmidt assured them, motioning for the rest of them to keep going.

"Just tell them we're trying to get his medical anomaly fixed on this trip." Mister Williams told him.

Dante was reluctant to leave their friend, as were Niculaie and Frank, but even Abraham waved them along with an easy and bitter chuckle. "I'll be fine. It's not like it's that difficult to explain."

It wasn't like he could demonstrate it well, what with those glammers covering up that tech, but they had to trust their friend. They had to trust Mister Schmidt as well, who was entirely ready to help all of them. Mister Williams pressed them along with the help of Mister Carriedo and Miss Kirkland until they were safely at their flight gate. It was still a good hour before takeoff, just as Mister Williams had promised.

Paige whirled on their teachers with a mischievous, "So, you said that you and Mister Williams are cousins, Mister Carriedo?"

Mister Williams chuckled, shoving his hands into the pockets of his comfy-looking purple hoodie, and Mister Carriedo groaned. Miss Kirkland jumped in with an eager, "They're not yet, but Jairo and I are planning on getting married soon."

"She and I are cousins." Mister Williams said in explanation.

"Oh, congratulations on your engagement." Natasha said with a cheery grin.

"Do you have to tell them? It's so embarrassing." Mister Carriedo complained.

Mister Williams gave an amused, "What's there to be embarrassed about? You're damn lucky to be dating Rae-Rae, she's way too good for you."

"C'mon, Alex, don't be so mean." Miss Kirkland said, latching onto Mister Carriedo's arm.

Despite being more embarrassed, Mister Carriedo managed to retort, "Well, if you're so set on giving them something to gossip about, then how about the fact that you're still pining after Athena?"

Mister Williams tensed up, a flush settling into his face. Paige gasped and Frank joined in with an awed, "Miss Honda? Really?"

"Aww, you still ain't said anything to her about it?" Miss Kirkland asked, gladly jumping to needling her cousin. "You two used to be so close, butting heads all the time like my mum and pops. You know you could ask Rena to send a message for you, he's got an in with Ani and all."

"I don't want to talk about this." Mister Williams said in a huff.

Mister Carriedo and Miss Kirkland both grinned, the two of them enjoying this far too much. Rolling their eyes, Petel gave Dante's arm a tug and said, "Wanna walk through the shops."

Though surprised, Dante agreed with an easy, "Oh. Okay."

"Not used to being in airports?" Aglaé asked.

"I, too, wish to see what this sort of place has to offer." Vektor said, going over to their side.

Jonathan went with him, Frank still adequately distracted by their teachers needling one another. Paige stood right next to him, Natasha at her side, and even Niculaie seemed caught up in the drama of their teachers' lives. Damon was drawn over to Petel, Dante, Aglaé, and Vektor's circle, giving a smug, "It's all mostly just knick-knacks and things forgetful travellers might have neglected to pack. Oh, and food options."

"Always gotta have food options." Aglaé said in a similarly smug sort of tone.

Dante giggled at their easy dismissal. Petel frowned and admitted, "Wanted to spend time with my boyfriend."

"Don't worry, you'll get to do that plenty." Aglaé said, waving them off and leading the way towards the first row of shops. Dante could spot a bookshelf inside; no mystery as to why Aglaé chose this one. "You'll just have to deal with the awkward third wheelers making sure you do nothing indecent in public."

"Holding hands is quite indecent indeed." Vektor agreed, nodding along as if he understood completely.



Maybe he did. He and Jonathan were a thing, sort of, after all. Damon grabbed Vektor's hand up and gave a teasing, "Ooh, look at us. Being indecent and so much more fun."

"You hold hands with everyone all the time, mate. Hard to see how it could be so indecent by this point." Abraham said with a teasing grin.

He joined their circle, leaning against Petel's shoulders familiarly, while Mister Schmidt went after Aglaé, who was already perusing the books. Petel shook their head, clearly disgruntled at their plan being so disrupted, and Dante couldn't help laughing even more at them. "Come on, I want to see what they have anyway." Dante said to his datemate.

They followed after Aglaé and Mister Schmidt, perusing the admittedly tacky and mundane items for sale. Even if it wasn't all that impressive, there was a certain novelty to it. Little shops inside an airport had to see a lot of varied traffic. Dante poked at a few key chains while Petel petted a few of the travel pillows and Abraham moved to Damon's shoulders, both of them choosing to pester Aglaé. Vektor was enough of a handful for Mister Schmidt, the Prince picking up random items to examine and show them off to Jonathan, his golden eyes sparkling in his wonder. It was nice to see that remained the same about him; curiosity was a defining characteristic to their Prince, after all.

A characteristic taken straight from Dante's own hand. Just the same as that infuriating stubbornness.

Both of which, in turn, came from their parents.

Dante brushed the thought aside and switched his attention to the snow globes. A sentiment for later. He would have his time to confront both Caro and Lietta for what they'd done. He'd have plenty of time to burn their whole life's work to the ground.

## Chapter 22: You Have to Live

Dante didn't even notice the remaining time pass as their group made comfortable conversation with one another and their teachers. Aglaé and Jonathan got into a heated discussion over the book Aglaé was currently reading, even drawing Frank and Damon into it, while Abraham and Paige mused over finding a spare moment to head out to the shores of the Mediterranean. Petel was on board with that idea immediately, although having to explain the sea to both Vektor and Vektoria (who were drawn into it at the prospect of discovering a large body of water they wouldn't instantly die from) wasn't something Dante had expected.

"Do you not remember playing in the sands with me?" He asked them both in his incredulity.

Vektoria scoffed. "Of course not. We were chained to Hell our entire childhoods."

"I suppose neither of us were the shadow which accompanied you there." Vektor said in an odd admission.

Dante created them. The First may have been a bit of a brat, but they ultimately came from Dante's mind.

Perhaps it was better they didn't fully remember. That would prove there were other forces at work and Dante wasn't entirely sure he wanted that part of his story to be true.

The flight wasn't an insubstantial one, being six hours, but it was also much more pleasant than Natasha had made it sound. She ended up seated in-between Abraham and Paige, who were happy to discuss all sorts of ideas for this trip with her. Dante sat at the window, on the same row as Vektor and Vektoria (three to a row was still far too crowded, but he had to admit its efficiency, no matter how begrudgingly), and as soon as they were above the clouds and in the sky, he predictably passed right out. It was better than getting sick on the ride, so he'd have to settle for missing a chunk of the journey.

A gentle shake awoke him at some point, accompanied by Vektor's soft voice. "Look out the window. That's our home."

Dante blinked several times, clearing up his view of Vektor's face. It seemed Vektoria, similarly to him, passed out in her seat and snored softly. She even rested against Vektor's other shoulder at an awkward angle. When Dante turned to look out his window, he was met with the sight of Italy's countryside. He pressed forward, openly gaping at the rolling mountains and lush greens and browns that made up his homeland.

He was home.

He was home and it was of his own volition this time.

He was home for probably the last time in his life.

"We should be starting our descent soon." Vektor told him, careful to keep his tone quiet. The late afternoon sun was brilliant outside, glinting off of Vektor's golden eyes and making them really sparkle. "I thought you might like to watch as we made our way in."

All Dante could say to his brother was a soft, "Thank you."

The landing jarred the whole plane and startled Vektoria awake, then they all exited and met up at their luggage claim to grab their things. Mister Williams took Miss Kirkland with him to pick up their rental bus while Mister Schmidt and Mister Carriedo stayed with the rest of their group to help with their luggage. Mister Schmidt seemed to enjoy showing off his strength, able to carry five of their bags at once (and the heavier ones at that). Mister Carriedo gave a chastising, "Ani ain't even here for that, you're wasting your efforts."

"I like helping, Jairo." Mister Schmidt returned with a laugh, not even winded.

The rest of them assisted in gathering up their bags, though Dante was admittedly distracted by all the familiar Italian around him. A majority of the signs in the airport were in English, but they had Italian right alongside them. It was a reminder of his heart's true rhythm, something he'd been missing for so long. Having it back now was like relearning to walk.

Mister Williams met them all once they had their bags, then they loaded onto the bus and he drove them all straight to the hotel they booked.

"We're going four to a room, so that's three for each of us." He told Mister Carriedo, who sat right behind him this time. Miss Kirkland and Mister Schmidt sat in the back, chatting with Paige and Vektoria who decided to sit the closest to them this time.

Mister Carriedo nodded along and said, "Rae's got the three girls, obviously. How would you want to split up the rest?"

"Vitayev and Vicario can't share a room. Neither can van Helsing and Vladimirescu or Ketziah and Jonathan." Mister Williams said. It made Petel jolt in protest, but Dante was more impressed that he'd picked up on their dynamics so quickly. "The rest, I'm pretty sure are fine."

Mister Carriedo hummed in contemplation. "Want to take Vicario, Vladimirescu, and Ketziah, in that case? I'll handle Vitayev, van Helsing, and Desrosier."

"Then Rena can take Ashford, Jonathan, and Ernest. Settled."

Petel sank against Dante's side with a whine. Dante gave their arm a pat, saying to them softly, "Mister Williams did say we'd have to change our room situation next semester."

"Want to be with you." They said petulantly.

Dante smiled and pressed against their side in return. "It's not like you won't see me again."

Petel gave a last whine of disapproval, but no further protests. The ride to the hotel took a while and the sun was well on its way to setting by the time they reached it at seventeen in the afternoon.

As Dante stepped out and grabbed up his bag, he surveyed this part of town they found themselves in. He could trace their path, knew the sound of each step over stone and pavement alike.

The glittering sea was well within his reach. He could find the market where he'd first let out his fires. He could walk to his own home from here.

And towering above most of the city stood the main building of Vicario Tech.

Dante had stared up at it since he was a child. Anytime they had to go into town for something, there it would be. He could find his way to it from anywhere and be assured that someone would call his parents to come pick him up if he ever got lost. He was assured that nearly everyone inside would be much kinder to him than either of his parents.

But that was to be expected. He was the son of the heads. If they weren't kind to him, they could risk his parents' wrath.

Outside factors meant sullied results. Meant starting a test over from its beginning.

"Really brings me back to being a kid again." Damon said in a mutter.

His voice right behind Dante made him jump. He grinned as Dante whirled around to see him, though there was something bitter about it. Something sad, as if they were losing some part of themselves they'd never be able to get back.

"You know better than the rest of us how much this needs to get done, don't you?"

Dante could scarcely nod before Mister Williams raised his voice, grabbing their attention. "Okay everyone, get inside. We'll divvy out the room assignments and get everything squared away first and foremost."

"Are we gonna go straight to the tour?" Natasha asked, her voice full of energy even as she rubbed tiredly at her eyes.

Mister Williams tilted his head to the side as he thought it over. Mister Schmidt hopped in with a helpful, "Tour's scheduled for tomorrow."

"We did get here a bit earlier than we planned for." Miss Kirkland joined in, seemingly egging Mister Williams on.

Mister Williams broke into a sly grin. "I guess there's time to head to the beach. For everyone who's up for it, at least."

Instantly, a cheer arose from their group. They all set about getting their things with a renewed energy, heading inside the hotel building almost faster than Mister Williams could accompany them. Miss Kirkland and Mister Schmidt laughed too hard to chase after, though they did their part and also grabbed their things. Mister Carriedo gave a fond but annoyed, "Hope the rental doesn't mind sand getting everywhere."

"We'll have time to clean it." Damon told him.

Dante breathed in the warmth around him, the smell of the salt and the distant promise of waves. It was everything he missed about being here, about being home. Then he hurried after the others, following Mister Williams to their room alongside Niculaie and Vektor.

As they all set their bags down and figured out their sleeping arrangements (there were three beds counting the pull down one from the closet, so Vektor and Niculaie agreed to share; it seemed neither of them were as eager as Petel to be in such close proximity to a fire), Vektor gave a sudden, "Ah." Then, in explanation, "It seems someone had the foresight to pack my swimsuit for me."

"How do you even have one?" Niculaie asked him.

"Frank and Abraham got it for me." Vektor said, smiling at the thought of his friends. "They said it was required for our trip to that indoor pool, but I hadn't even considered another trip to such a place while on this venture."

Giggling in delight, Niculaie said, "They've really grown fond of you. Abe and Frank, I mean."

"They have, yes." Vektor's gaze grew softer as he pulled out the black and gold article from his things. "All of our group has, I believe, considering I'm here at all. As fond as I've grown of them. I truly believe we would call each other friends in reciprocation by this point."

It was a much more sincere expression than Dante expected from him. His bare wrist was a sudden reminder that although he was a rebuild of their previous Prince, he remained just as changed by everything which led up to that moment. Though Dante carried the first iteration in his chest (and it beat louder at the reminder, a warmth and reassurance that his friends refused to let him take an easy out), this one was just as much if not more of a testament to Vektor becoming his own person past his limited programming. That he had long since expanded his understanding of his objectives. Their new interpretations made him more himself than his previous version, chained to it as he was.

His parents no longer owned any of them. They were all, undoubtedly, reaching the point of no return.

This end would indeed be a grand one.

"Even Vektoria has changed since then." Niculaie said.

Vektor nodded. "Much against her will, even she cannot deny how much power Change brings."

He turned his gaze to Dante pointedly. Niculaie mimicked the gesture, though his was mostly out of confusion. Dante met their eyes directly and said, unrepentant, "I didn't force it upon her. If she has changed, then it's because she let herself be changed."

"Smart words there." Mister Williams said, butting into their conversation. He'd managed to change out of his signature hoodie, revealing the plain white shirt beneath it, and even tied his hair up into a short ponytail. "You're a good kid, Vicario. I hope you get what you want from this."

It was a bit weird seeing his bare arms and how pale he truly was. Dante gave a nervous, "Thank you, sir."

"You only let it change you if you want it to." Niculaie said in a pondering sort of tone as Vektor went off to get changed himself. Smiling at Dante, he went on. "Is that why you've stopped hiding so much recently? Because you're letting it change you?"

Dante nodded, deliberate and more assured. "I wanted to change." He said in declaration. "Who I was before. Who I am now. If I had kept going as I was and kept lying, then I would be betraying my friends, who want me to be the best I can be instead of the worst I could be."

"Are you sure they don't actually want you to be the worst you can be?" Mister Williams asked in a surprising moment. "Going off to destroy your parents' company doesn't seem like it's really a best you could be."

"Perhaps being the worst is being the best to us." Niculaie said in counter. "It's all a matter of perspective and I think that who you are now, Dante, is a better you than you were before."

Niculaie's smile held something sharp. Something knowing. There were fangs and intention behind his sweet demeanour. There was loyalty deep in his blood he could not bend. Vektor entered again, wearing his swim trunks and a coat over his top (and completely barefoot, which was a relief of sorts to see), and said, "Certainly, it's the much healthier option in the long run. No longer will you have to run from your own fears you impose upon yourself."

Dante grinned at them. "If I'm to be known as fear, then I'd rather be the one infecting than the one infected."

"Just remember not to actually commit any crimes here." Mister Williams reminded them.

Switching to a smile as sickly sweet as the one Dante could use, Niculaie gave an agreeable, "Of course, sir."

"Wouldn't dream of it, sir." Vektor joined in.

Dante laughed and went to get changed while Mister Williams sighed at their flagrant decoy measures. They all had a different idea of what it would take to destroy Vicario Tech, no doubt.

Dante knew, of course, that the only way forward was by the flames held within his skin.

Lietta would only listen to a force she couldn't talk down. Caro would only listen to Lietta.

Their only choice was to burn it to the ground.

They all met up in the lobby of the hotel, each teacher making sure they were all accounted for, then they filed back into their bus and drove out towards the beach.

Finally,

finally,

Dante would see the Mediterranean again.

It was the perfect time for a beach trip, the sunset glinting off the waves and the shores cleared of most of the crowds. Jonathan was the only one not wearing a swimsuit, though he wasn't wearing his usual lab coat either, and stayed behind with the other teachers to set up their sitting area. Dante dashed straight for the green waters, diving in and letting their warmth soak into him inside and out. Petel, Paige, and Aglaé joined him while Abraham, Frank, Niculaie, and Damon played about in the sands

with Vektoria. Natasha and Vektor were content to cheer from the shores, letting the waves lap at their toes.

Floating in the waves as they rose and fell around him, Dante could nearly close his eyes and go to sleep. Petel, Aglaé, and Paige got caught up in competing with one another, soon dragging Natasha into their fold.

At some point, they dragged Vektor in as well. Then he was floating beside Dante, staring up into the darkening sky above them.

"I'm still unsure as to why I'm here." Vektor said, breaking that silence between them. Dante straightened himself in order to watch the Prince beside him, curious to see what he had to say. "My act of sacrifice wasn't meant to be undone in the way that it has. I'm here for reasons I cannot fathom, and even though I am grateful to be back, I'm still unsure of what my exact placement is now that my prime directive has been resolved."

His expression was set and his eyes, though not glowing, shone with determination. Dante was used to seeing him like this now. He returned his gaze to the sky, his voice quiet as he said, "Our love for you runs too deep. We can't accept your death, just the same as you couldn't accept mine."

"You had to live." Vektor said in counter immediately. "I'm merely a pawn out of place. I ran my course and expended my usefulness. Why should I continue as I am when there's no more for me to do?"

Dante smiled wryly. "That's a reductive way of looking at it."

When Vektor frowned over at him, prompting him for explanation, he laughed.

"You're here to be you. Just as I'm here to be me and Petel is here to be them." He said. "We don't have greater purposes other than to live our lives as we are. You can't quantify how much usefulness companionship has, after all."

"Is that it, then? I'm here to be a companion, nothing else?" Vektor asked.

"You're here to be you. Weren't you listening to me?" Dante flicked a few droplets of water his way, making him flinch back. Dante laughed again. "That's the thing about life. It's hard and it seems like it might be better to just give up, to let someone else make all your decisions and pretend like nothing is your fault, but you can seize control now. You get to decide who you are, how to define yourself now that you're no longer tied to a prewritten story. You get to live and make your own choices, both good and bad."

Vektor huffed at him, then sank into musing. "I get to decide what my new purpose is."

It took a long time for Dante to reach his own conclusion. Too long, really, considering he intended on sacrificing himself for his friends. But he wanted to live now. He wanted to live long past his parents, to show them that he was no longer willing to die for the sake of their research.

At least his final death had been one of his own hand.

"You should talk to Jonathan about it." Dante said, recapturing Vektor's attention. "You should talk to everyone, really, but. You and Jonathan are close."

"We're partners." Vektor said, puffing up proudly.

The way his eyes shone, it was clear he really did hold too much affection for that guy. Dante smiled again, this one a smidge less wry, and said, "I had to talk with Petel when I wasn't allowed to die. So you should speak with Jonathan about it."

"Thank you, Dante." Vektor said, bowing his head as much as he could considering the sea they were both entrenched in. His height allowed him that much, at least. "I will take your advice to heart. And I appreciate that you believe in me to find myself anew."

Dante shrugged, bitter and amused in equal measures. "If I could, then there's no doubt in my mind that you can figure it out."

After one last warm, golden smile, Vektor swam for shore. Damon and Niculaie joined Aglaé in the water while Paige, Natasha, and Frank set about burying Jonathan, a fate which he resigned himself to. Petel sat beneath the umbrella of their spot (where had they gotten an umbrella?) with Abraham, who was completely passed out. Mister Carriedo and Mister Schmidt ran after Miss Kirkland in some odd game while Mister Williams kept a steady watch over all of them in the sea.

Dante sunk beneath the waves, letting its glittering warmth wrap around him fully for a minute. The push and pull of the tide stroked his hair, the gentlest of brushes he ever had, and the receding sand tickled at his feet.

He had no choice but to surface again, and this time waded back to shore.

"Curfew's in a few minutes." Mister Williams called to all of them. "Gotta start bright and early tomorrow."

Miss Kirkland and Mister Schmidt joined in the whines of the others, but no one protested. Dante sat down beside Petel, grabbing up a towel from the pile to dab at his dripping hair. Petel leaned in on near instinct until their shoulders bumped and said in their whispery voice, "It's beautiful here."

"It is." Dante agreed.

He leaned in right back, accepting their offered support and affection. They smiled and next asked, "How are you doing?"

"A little stressed, if I can be honest." Dante said with a small laugh.

It was a huge thing they had to do. A huge and terrifying thing. He'd never truly stood up to his parents before. Who knew if he'd crack under that pressure once he had to face them on equal footing? Petel pressed more against his side, like an insistent wolf, saying, "We're here for you. We'll stand by you no matter what."

Dante placed a soft kiss to the top of their head. Their wagging tail and bright grin were near synonymous with their visage.



They were proud of their wolfish tendencies. They were proud to call themselves flesh and fang a wolf. Their claws and teeth weren't ever true danger. They couldn't wield that power against their friends, their pack.

"You never changed." He found himself saying.

Petel picked their head up off his shoulder to meet his gaze, questioning. The contradiction was an evident one, of course, but Dante pressed on.

"You were a wolf before I met you and you'll continue to be a wolf to the end." He let his words sink a moment, then grew flustered. "It's kind of, um. Comforting? That no matter what influence I can exert, it's never forced change on you."

Petel rested their head onto his shoulder again, closing their eyes in contentment. "You did change me." They said. "By letting yourself be my friend, you changed me a lot."

Dante pressed a hand over one of theirs, savouring the cool of their skin. "You changed me, too, in that regard."

"You're important to me." They said in a warm mumble.

He smiled at the familiar words. "Enough to bite down and never let go, no matter how much I burn?"

"Would gulp you down, fires and all."

They continued nuzzling into his shoulder, the mere suggestion of teeth sparking that nervous heat in his stomach. It swirled in a pleasant way and he lifted their hand to press to his mouth. "Then I am forever yours to devour."

"Just as I am yours to burn."

They pressed forward to kiss him suddenly. Their fervour was intoxicating and he melted into it, accepting them as they climbed into his lap. Thankfully, before the both of them could get lost in this exchange, Mister Williams called over again as a reminder that they all had to get back to the hotel and broke them apart. Petel left a parting kiss to Dante's mouth, then crawled off and rolled Abraham onto the sand. Dante laughed and helped wake Abraham a bit less rudely, though Damon and Aglaé joined in eagerly, wringing out their wet onto him. Soon enough, they were all wrapped in towels and back off towards the hotel.

While Vektor showered first (an agreement amongst all of them, seeing as he would take the shortest time), Dante sat outside on the tiny balcony to admire the view. The sky glittered with stars and the sea churned in a pleasing rhythm, reassuring him that this was, indeed, the home he longed to return to.

A long time ago, he'd made peace with the fact that he couldn't spend his life here. It was filled with too many memories of terrible things. The beauty he saw in it never belonged to him. It was always for someone else, someone without his circumstances. A place coloured by its lack of growth, by its too much growth.

It was his own punishment, being forced to exist here. He looked away from the sight and to his own hand, burning red with that complicated pain.

He had one thing left to do.

He had to do this one thing and free everyone.

The door opened behind him and Niculaie peeked out to ask, "Are you hungry? Mister Williams is looking into supper options for us and we're trying to convince him to get us all pizza."

Dante let that heat ebb from his body, let that red fade from his skin, and stood to his feet. "Pizza would be fun. I heard that Romero's is really good, it should be near enough to deliver."

"Can hotels get delivery?"

Niculaie laughed at his response and he smiled.

This place could no longer be his home, but he still had one all the same. If he had to burn this whole city to the ground in order for his friends to live as they wished, then he would gladly set these fires right now.

## Chapter 23: It All Comes to a Head

The building was just as imposing inside as it looked from the outside. Thankfully, the one designated to give them this tour was not, in fact, the heads of the company.

"You'll find many advantages to working here in the main branch." The woman told them as she led the way past segmented desks, each one adorned with its own computer. Vektor was intrigued by the sight, all of it having such a different codework than the computer lab at Marina Royal, but there was no time to really stop and stare. They had to move on, pressing forward with their enthusiastic guide. "For one, getting feedback directly from the heads can be fruitful. It's still rare for them to come in, but they do more frequently around a big release like this."

Frank and Natasha nodded along, more taken by all her explanations than they probably should have been. Paige, Petel, Damon, and Abraham continued glancing about, searching for their goal. Though Vektor wasn't entirely clear on what that was exactly (yes, they wanted to destroy the company's ability to use this technology on anyone ever again, but did that mean burning the whole thing to the ground? Destroying just the main server room? Finer details like that were lost in their scramble to get out here before the Creators had a chance to retaliate. If they even would retaliate), he searched for the code which might best help in this endeavour.

Dante kept close to Mister Williams' side, almost hiding from the rest of the workers. A few stared after him, but not a single one attempted waving or saying hello. Not a single person seemed willing to approach Dante, just as he seemed reluctant to approach any of them.

It made sense, of course. The Inferno made it difficult for anyone to see much else in him besides that ever present, underlining danger. That their behaviour so starkly contrasted most of their peers at Marina Royal, however, was more of a surprise to Vektor.

Their framework always resulted in unintended consequences. For Paige, it meant being unaffected by Charm. For Niculaie, it meant a much more viscous blood.

For their peers, it seemed this meant ignoring the obvious danger of the Inferno.

None of these workers were fitted with framework anymore. Vektor couldn't shake the hideous implication of it being ripped or scrubbed out of them completely.

"Here we are. Our big ideas room." Their guide chirped happily.

As they stepped inside the meeting room, another approached them and gave a quiet, "Sorry to interrupt, Nella."

"Oh, Giancarlo." She greeted them, pivoting easily enough. "Did you need something?"

"Top orders, actually. Our heads want to see their son." They informed her.

She stood up just a bit straighter, honing in directly on Dante. He flinched, clinging tighter to Mister Williams; back to being haunted by that overbearing fear, it seemed. She nodded to her coworker, saying, "I suppose he knows most of this tour anyway. He practically grew up here and all."

Mister Williams gave Dante a reassuring pat on the arm and spoke softly. "We'll find a way to get to you."

"Don't make me go with them." Dante pleaded in a desperate whisper.

The worker took his arm and pulled him away from Mister Williams. Before Vektor really knew what he was doing, he lunged after the two and said, "I'm going, too."

"So am I." Vektoria said, apparently having the same automatic instinct as him.

Their guide seemed as surprised as them at their decision. "Oh, uh, I'm not really sure that's—"

"It's fine." Her coworker assured her. "They probably want to see these two as well."

The Creators knew they were coming.

There was no element of surprise at all.

It was a futile scramble, but they had to make it anyway.

This worker hurried Dante off, Vektor and Vektoria following swiftly after. Petel went to Mister Williams' side and the guide and other teachers seemed a bit lost as to what to do, but they could all only watch as Dante was pulled away from them.

"This is good, actually." Vektoria said to them in a mumble. "We can get straight to the source and destroy the last system."

Dante couldn't say anything in reply, eyes blown wide with his fear. This worker had to more or less drag him along, he was nearly paralysed by it. Vektor pressed his gold to Dante's back, subtle enough to go unnoticed by anyone unless they were looking for it. "We're here with you." He assured his brother, keeping his tone just as soft as the gold pulsing from his hand. "We won't let them liquidate you this time."

"They'll regret ever playing gods." Vektoria agreed.

Her rage had changed a lot since Vektor last saw her. Perhaps that was due to her having a hand in his previous repurposing, but it seemed she'd learned how to better make use of that blend protocol in her. Screaming or lashing out as she was normally prone to would only result in her removal from the situation, so she kept it at bay. There was a time and place for destruction. Only once they were faced with the Creators themselves could that desire for void be fulfilled.

The three of them were ushered into a car and driven away, towards the mountainside. Rich houses, Vektor read. Meant for those who could lord their status over the rest of this squashed town. It's layout was like an inefficient circuit board, lines weaving through each point of interest in a way humans found useful that Vektor just couldn't grasp.

They left the town for more mountainous paths, then ended at a stately home in its side.

Secluded from the town. Allowed space to roam and create.

Holding the very pathway which led down into the Rabbit Hole.

Its name. Vektor could grasp it again. It was back, reinstated in his mind.

They were so close to that final source.

Most of that tense fear left Dante, at least. He and Vektoria stepped out of the car and it was Vektor's turn to be gripped so tightly by terror that he was frozen. Vektoria more or less yanked him out, refusing to leave him behind, so he stumbled after the two as this house loomed larger and larger over them. Its shadow struck at something far back in Vektor's mind. A path he knew in his heart, in his core, the steps of which he'd walked as his first action once he was brought into this world.

Down there would be the source.

Down there would be tea parties and scanners.

Down there was, in unequivocal terms, Hell.

This worker knocked politely on the front door and they were soon greeted by the Red Queen himself.

"Ah, Giancarlo. Perfect timing." Caro greeted with a friendly smile and an amenable gesture to come inside.

It was deflection. It was disarming. He was designed in such a similar way to Dante that Vektor's body grew more reluctant to listen to his movements.

Here was proof that the White Rabbit cared only for furthering her own goals.

Husband and son were mere playthings to the creator of it all.

Giancarlo pushed Dante forward, an offering of a lamb for sacrifice rather than participating in the ritual themselves. Vektor noticed now that they weren't immune to Dante's overwhelming sense of danger, they'd just been suppressing it for the sake of completing their task. Thankfully, it caught Caro's interest and he dropped some of that farce as he addressed his own son. "So you have come. Good." Caro ushered Dante inside, then smiled at Giancarlo in a full-blown display of deflection. "Thanks again for doing this. Don't be a stranger now."

"Of course, Caro." They returned with a strained, regretful smile.

They left as quickly as politeness allowed them. Vektoria entered with Dante into this home and glared venom up at Caro as she kept Dante behind her. A protective sister. It was too little too late. Caro regarded them both, that amicable front sliding off. "I can already tell you're going to be difficult." He said.

Dante flinched, cowering from his oppressive presence. Vektoria grew more hostile and spat out, "Should've planned better to keep that from happening, then."

"Perhaps. But those values hold little meaning when overwrites can reset them." Caro snapped his fingers, then gestured for them to follow. "Let's go now, keeping her waiting isn't something any of us want to do."

He didn't touch them himself.

He refused to lay a hand on them.

"Touch raises our values, too." Vektor mumbled to himself.

He could move again. That fear still pulsed through his body, but it no longer kept him chained. Caro walked further into the house, slipping around a corner down the hall and disappearing from their view. Vektor entered finally and gave the place a quick scan. Kitchen and dining room. Sitting room and foyer. Stairs for a second floor, empty rooms for storage.

Quietly, he asked, "What's the plan here, Dante?"

"Destroy now or after we deal with those two?" Vektoria asked.

She raised her hands, letting her Void glow off them in black waves. Dante took a deep breath, then let it out after a few seconds, doing his best to keep all that fear from overpowering his surroundings. "I-I want to burn it down." He said. "I want to burn them with it."

Vektoria lowered her hands and gave a dismissive, "Fine. Let's go, then."

She headed after Caro and Dante followed shortly after, still pacing his breathing. Vektor went last, his processing infuriatingly slowed to a crawl as each step took him closer to the place he was born in.

He knew this place. Had walked these same steps before.

His origin point so deeply stored in his core.

It trembled deep in his code, this knowledge that he was nothing more than a product of a child. He was made and moulded into a malicious program, a willing pawn set on this path driving them further and further to ruin. His brother may have called him into existence, but it was the Creators who wrote sentience into him. It was they who grafted cruelty and false purpose onto his shadow, warped and warped him until, dissatisfied with their work, they ripped him apart for the sake of their story.

He was made to facilitate the end. He was meant to be absorbed back into her once she was victorious.

He was never meant to exist past this point.

The lab was a smaller room than the towers, thick industrial wires running along the floors and walls and a single scanner placed near the centre rather than secured to its borders. It was bigger, less elegant, yet held more processing power than all of the others combined. A computer was also set in the middle, the source of most of these wires, and standing at it was Lietta.

Her glasses glinted in the light and sparked further recognition in Vektor. Caro wore them, too; light obstructing their eyes, gold surrounding their visage.

These were his parents.

"You're late." She snapped at them, making Dante flinch again. She didn't look up from her work at all, continuing to type as she went on. "I'll admit, I didn't believe the full report, so I suppose it can't be helped. The two of you were terminated and yet here you stand before me."

"You're not the only one able to use this technology to manipulate lives." Vektoria said in retort, her tone just as vicious.

It got Lietta to look up from her work, regarding the three of them with a vague interest. "Right. The Heart." She mumbled.

Her power swept over them too fast. She moved in a blink, distorting time around her and locking them all into place as she grabbed up Dante in her hands. His fire was locked beneath his skin in this state; he could only watch with eyes full of fear as she dipped her hand into his throat and pulled out his code in a long stream.

"Hm. Really fixed you up, didn't it?" She mused in her soft disinterest as she examined each line. It continued flowing from him, line after line after line, and Vektor couldn't do anything to stop her. "Smoothed out all our testing and finished up a lot of statements. Suppose that Create was worthy of some regard in the end."

Vektoria struggled against her lock. Her hands glowed with her Void, but she couldn't break free. "Even if you kill him again, he won't stay gone." She said, her fury straining against that suppression forced over them. "His influence is over us all. He's Change, you made him that way to your own detriment."

"I'm not going to kill him. That would be such a waste of resources." Lietta told them conversationally, as if she was discussing their next class with them. She trailed her fingers along the lines of code as it poured out of him, a clinical edge to her gestures which made her lack of real investment clear to see. "He may be an uncontested failure, but his utility outweighs that disappointment. Scrapping him for parts would be useless as well, since he's much more useful as a subject with variables than a controlled case without the ability to encounter exceptions I never accounted for. I see him far too often in other things to delude myself that getting rid of him would free up that space he's taken up in my mind; though that is something to work towards in our new research. Make the mind and body both forget so cases like Memory don't happen again."

She continued pulling code from him and Vektoria continued struggling, but Vektor could do nothing.

He was helpless, forced to watch his brother be rewritten.

Again and again and again,

Vektor could do nothing to save him.

(It was understandable how Dante would bow his head and allow everything around him to happen. It was understandable how he acted so powerless while holding the most power out of all of them.)

(They couldn't win here.)

(All he could do was Create.)

Gold forced its way out of his hands, leaking despite his inherent powerlessness. It poured out in much the same way Dante's code was pulled from his neck, spilling around them and adding nothing but reassurance against their situation.

"Get ahold of yourself." Vektoria snapped back at him. She was unable to turn, so some of her bite was lost.

He couldn't say a thing, his mind focused on one simple fact:

He had to help Dante.

No matter what, he had to reach his brother.

He had to get to Dante and put him back together, no matter the cost.

That pooling gold turned harsh, cracked through the locks keeping them in place. Vektoria stumbled forward and Vektor, too, nearly lost his balance, making Lietta turn their way. "That's interesting." Lietta mumbled.

Vektoria didn't hesitate with her newfound freedom. She darted forward, making good on that blinding speed of hers, and tackled Lietta away from Dante. She slammed Lietta to the ground and held her Void to Lietta's face. "You can't manipulate us anymore." She snarled in threat.

"Lietta!" Caro called.

Vektor reached Dante and rolled his code back into him, back where it belonged, releasing him from that pause in all processes. As Dante landed on his feet, as he breathed in sharply, his fires lit up his hair and his hands, crawling all the way up his arms to his shoulders and destroying his shirt and vest. His eyes were still blown wide, still full of fear and panic, but he was no longer as unravelled. He was together.

Caro made a move to pull Vektoria off, but had to back away as her Void tore a chunk from his arm. As he recoiled, red splattered around him to the floor, leaking from that tear as he hissed in pain.

Dante relaxed more of that tension with a soft, "Huh. They bleed."

Lietta glanced Caro's way, then said to Vektoria in a strong, authoritative tone, "Your actions have consequences out here, Subject 01."

"I'm counting on it." Vektoria said in return.

Her smile grew wild as she gripped the sides of Lietta's head in her hands. Caro moved in once more, this time successfully pulling her off. Unfortunately, her Void worked fast and he was too late. He tossed her stumbling away, but nothing was left of Lietta's head. The stump of her neck was all that remained, her head deleted completely from the world.

Red trickled out from that stump and pooled around her body. A lake of blood, just the same as it was in the Seventh Circle.



It wasn't their blood. They weren't meant to bleed.

Vektoria shook the lingering Void from her hands and declared, "A piece for a piece."

"Her life for ours." Vektor concluded for her.

Caro was stunned by the sight for a minute, utter despair written into every point of his being. He wobbled, but didn't drop to his knees. Vektor pulled Dante away from the sight, taking care with his fires. Dante's eyes were locked on it, disbelief keeping him rooted to his spot. No matter how Vektor pulled, he refused to move.

Perhaps it was fitting, in a sense. The White Rabbit had long since lost her head. It was just a bit more literal now.

"Mother." Dante said in a near involuntary whisper.

It snapped Caro out of that state and every bit of despair became fuel for his fury. He whirled out his axe, looking the proper visage of the Red Queen, and said through mangled words, "If I have to behead each and every one of you for this, then it's something I'll do gladly."

While Vektoria grinned, holding her hands out and pouring more Void into her palms, Vektor gave Dante a fearful yank and got him to finally move. He managed to stumble a few steps towards the door before Caro was suddenly upon them, slamming that axe down and forcing Vektor to drop Dante's arm. The clang of steel against the floor was far too visceral. As were his footsteps as he splashed through Lietta's blood.

That axe was meant for stealing lives.

It was his true purpose, to gather heads for his Rabbit.

Dante scrambled away, as did Vektor, leaving Vektoria to chase after them. Caro could only focus on one of them at a time, too enraged to employ much strategy, and he chose Dante as his main target.

Of course he would. Dante was the most like Lietta out of the three of them. Dante had the most life out of them, having taken Vektor's heart and Frank's Persist and the most complete out of their three.

"You owe her your life." Caro shouted, pinning Dante to the wall with his axe. Dante pressed his flames to the metal, trying to dislodge himself, but the most he could accomplish was keeping it from biting into his skin. "She raised you again and again and again. Forfeit your head for her, you have a debt to pay."

"I paid all my debts when I died on my own terms." Dante shouted back.

Vektoria swiped at Caro's side and he pulled back as her Void tore into his coat. Fresh blood pricked at what fabric was left, a nick and not a clean gash. He didn't even bother stoppering it, letting it bleed just the same as that torn chunk in his arm.

Standing on his own, Dante allowed his fires to pour from his skin, igniting both his hands and his hair. "If anyone owes their life, it's her. She took all of ours, it's only right we take what was stolen from us."

"You should both pay with your lives." Vektoria joined in.

She lobbed a ball of her power at him and he raised his axe to deflect. Much to Vektor's surprise, it absorbed her Void and dispelled it completely, leaving it without a scratch. A neutralising code. They really were the Creators here. Caro said, "If both of you are that unwilling to save her, then that leaves me with no other choice."

The manner in which he hefted that axe, poised to strike, it made them falter. Dante and Vektoria reacted a second too late, defending themselves, while Vektor couldn't react at all.

It was not, however, their flesh that this axe tore into.

Caro severed his own head, snapping off his own code, and pulled it off his shoulders. There was no blood this time, just the stump of his neck where his spine and meat were visible. His body carried his severed head to Lietta's body and he fitted it onto her neck, sealing the code around it to merge their life. To gift to her what Vektoria destroyed.

The moment the connection was finalised, his body crumpled into lifelessness.

And she, with his head bestowed to her, opened her eyes.

She sat up quickly, no doubt reeling from this new code. Vektor was intimately aware of reinstating when one shouldn't have been able to wake. Dante gave a shuddering, "He really gave his life for her."

"Of course he would. He only ever had eyes for her." Vektoria said in gripe.

Her tone was a bit hollow, the only thing betraying her shock at this situation. Caro would rather die than allow his wife to be killed. The Red Queen would destroy everyone for the sake of his Rabbit.

Including his children.

Including himself.

There was no other thought which bloomed in Vektor's mind with such horror.

"He's not our father." Vektor said, breathless at the realisation. "He's not our father and he never was."

Lietta sighed, situating her new head atop her shoulders. "Correct." She said. "Because if I had let him become your father, then he would have ruined all my work."

Her words were chilling, but completely truthful. The dual tone her voice took on, half Caro's and half her own, rooted all of them down in terror. They could only watch as she dragged Caro's headless body away from her computer, then got back to her work.

"It was such a pain dealing with his sentimentality, but it was just another sacrifice towards refining my work." She paused as she finished setting up the system, then turned her uncompromising gaze back onto them. "He'd have no trouble scrapping all of you and I wish I didn't have to weigh the waste of my time against that easier solution."

"What are you doing?" Dante asked.

He produced his flames, letting them crawl up his hands to his shoulders. His clothes were unsalvageable by this point anyway. Why bother restraining them, restraining himself? In that tone of perpetual disdain, Lietta said, "Offering you much more than you deserve."

She swivelled the monitor around to reveal to them a prompt:

Complete scenario reset: Yes or No?

Vektor could hardly believe what he read.

"You want us to rewind everything back to the beginning? To before the beginning?" He asked, incredulous.

"This experiment we've run needs another pass before we've gathered enough data." She said. "It would be a full reset, no one would remember anything, and you could try again."

Her dismissive tone was quite the convincing front; this would benefit her and her alone. Of course she'd push this towards them. Vektoria spat out a hostile, "That's a terrible deal. What's the point in trying again if we can't remember how it went the first time?"

"So you believe all your actions so far have been set in stone? That you would make the same choices and mistakes were you to have to do it all over again?" Lietta questioned.

Vektor spoke haltingly, his voice nearly broken by that truth. "We're merely programs. Of course we would make the same decisions and react in the same ways. We're programmed that way."

"And still, you've changed well beyond my initial scope."

Her conviction was enticing. This deal may not have been a good draw, but she spoke honeyed words and even past that strange dual tone of her voice, Vektor could believe for a moment that this was possible. That they could simply redo everything and have it turn out differently. Dante wouldn't have to go through so much pain, Vektor wouldn't have to be locked in combat with Vektoria, and Vektoria could finally understand the value of connections. Dante wouldn't have to die, wouldn't have to take Vektor's heart as a replacement, wouldn't have to live his cursed existence.

Perhaps that was why he stepped forward. Perhaps that was why he went to his mother's side at the computer.

"What are you doing, you stupid Fireball?" Vektoria shouted.

The smile Dante gave them was so, so bitter. It spoke well enough of all his hardships even before he said, "We'll get it right this time."

If anyone could divert this path they'd been flung down, it would be him.

It was betrayal and it stung in Vektor's breast.

"You can't let her do this." He pleaded.

"She's lying to you, like she always has." Vektoria screeched in agreement.

"Took long enough, but I suppose that was to be expected." Lietta said in gripe. "Thank you for seeing reason here, Subject Delta."

Dante looked to her, his expression turning sour. It was all the warning they got before he reached out with his hand, with his fires, and set it on top of the keyboard. "My name." He started, enunciating purposefully. "Is Dante."

Before she could protest, before Vektoria could leap forward, before Vektor could truly start running —

He clicked that button into place.

## Chapter 24: An Ending

There was fire and there was burning.

It was almost serene, the way the waves crashed onto the salty shores in the golden light of the evening. The skies above turned a brilliant red as the sun descended into the green of the sea. A symphony of colours Vektor was truly lucky to bear witness to.

Nevermind the ashes of the home behind them or the smoke furling still into the air. Nevermind the fires roaring and crackling as they continued to have their fill. The only thing left of this place was its shadow and heat climbing high into the skies. That place, its people, and their painful technology, all of it was erased by the fires.

Vektor probably should have been back at the hotel with the others, lamenting the fate of his siblings.

He was here instead, allowing the flames and heat to stoke that burning in his own chest.

Boiling, boiling blood as black as any shadow bubbled inside him.

This was the end they'd agreed upon.

"Hey, Vektor." Damon called over, disturbing him from that broiling. He glanced back at the Omen, who stood outside of the heat's range, hands in his coat pockets and hesitant to fully approach. "You okay over there? We gotta make sure we're all packed for the trip back."

Instead of replying, the polite option, Vektor returned his gaze to the sight before him. Of evening and a setting sun, of the encroaching night promising a cleanse.

They were free of her influence. They were free of Rabbits and Queens and a Kingdom ruling over them.

But it was not without its own sacrifice.

All had to end. Such was the nature of what was written for them.

He must have been silent long enough, as Damon pushed past that unease and came right over to sit beside him. "Worried about what happened to Dante?"

Omega, Omen, Damon. No matter which designation Vektor saw, it was befitting of the thinly veiled snake beneath those layers of roses. Laughing a bit, though it wasn't due to anything humorous about this situation, Vektor asked, "Why wouldn't I be? He is my brother."

"Who can handle himself. Something you and I know very well." Damon said, shaking his head. "Whatever happened to him, he'll find his way back. By then, maybe all this will have blown over. Nah, the one you should be worrying about's Vektoria. She's the one who killed someone. Though, I doubt anyone'd believe it were it not for the state Lietta was in."

There was fondness there, no matter how faint. Just as there was fondness towards a friend he once had in childhood. Fondness for the ones who saved his life. "You don't suppose this matter will be settled quickly enough so she can come back with us, do you?" Vektor asked.

"Pretty unlikely." Damon said, bitterness winning out over any of that faint fondness. "Trials can take a long time. Gotta gather all the evidence for both sides, call in witnesses and get accounts straight. Can't just start up a trial tomorrow and get it over with. That'd be like rolling up to a boat without a paddle and expecting to scale a waterfall."

He shrugged both his hands, a distinctly aggravated sort of tone to his movements. It poured from his words, too. Vektor watched him a minute, but there was no way for him to even guess what sorts of processes were proper here. He was a program, a shadow child, someone who was never supposed to exist outside of his narrow parameters. He had no way of knowing how this world functioned, what sorts of troubles were and weren't allowed, how one was meant to navigate through it.

Nothing illegal, Mister Williams had told them. Nobody getting hurt.

Vektoria took Lietta's head. Forced Caro into the same sort of sacrifice Vektor himself took part in. Dante burned their house and work to the ground.

That left the rest of them to sift through the ash remaining and resume this reckoning.

"I don't want this to be over." Vektor said in the end.

He wrapped his arms around his knees, drawing them up to his chest. Petel had, once again, been reduced to an agonising howl at the loss of their mate. At the loss of their friend. Though Vektor had no familiarity with wolves outside of them and Shiranui, he knew the yearning in their call intimately. It was a promise to find him, to never cease their search, a refusal to accept this farewell forced upon them. As much as they desired recompense for these agonising years of experimentation, for being treated as subjects without an ounce of agency, it meant reaping the proper consequences for that reconciliation. It meant there was always one end this would lead towards and no way of escaping it.

It may not have been the expected end Vektor thought it would be, but it was inevitable all the same. It was fated no matter which way the cards were laid out.

"It's not even close to being over." Damon said.

His sincere tone of fight made Vektor look to him. He stood on his feet, hands clenched into fists as he stared out into the fading splendour of the evening sky.

"You're the last one left in the ring. So stand with pride and keep up the battle." He met Vektor's gaze and smiled sharply, that Omen showing through once more. "Show them all what a program can do once it's been let off its leash."

"I was never on a leash." Vektor said, tilting his head in his confusion.

"Turn of phrase. Means the same thing as being dragged down a set path."

Damon frowned down at him, upset at his moment going interrupted. Vektor stood as well to better meet him. "Then why not simply say that instead of this phrase?"

Rolling his head and eyes in one motion of aggravation, Damon said, "Hey. You're as close to human now as any of us. Try and act like it instead of pulling your whole robot schtick."

His words were callous, no matter their refined undertones, but Vektor could understand his point. He smiled in the end and said, "I am Vektor Ketziah, inheritor of the data of all my friends. I am one half shadow called into existence by Inferno and wielder of this golden Create."

He held out his hand and let that gold flow from him for emphasis. He was restructuring and life. Just as much as Frank or Dante himself were, Vektor was filled to the brim with an essence of refusal. He refused to play his role to its proper conclusion, refused to allow his friends to come to any more harm, and refused to allow those Creators to escape from their consequences.

Their motives were understandable. He was program, written to assist with this process of liquidation and rewriting. But each one was inflicted, was wrong and stabbing and tearing at something beyond just their data. It mucked up their code with scalpel and axe, no matter if they thought they were replacing unsightly bits with their roses.

Of course the correct action was then to fight back.

Those fires which roared ever on around them were just the beginning to this rebellion.

Damon's annoyance dissipated until he grinned with his usual sharpness. "And I am the ominous King of Hell, Damon Asheford. I refuse to allow this fire to stop burning."

Before Vektor could retract that gold, Damon gripped his hand in a firm hold to shake. Accepting this apparent deal between them.

It would be clawing and illuminating, but there was no one else better suited to it.

It would be grasping and screaming, but their goal was worth every bit they could gain.

"Let's raise Hell until we get our Fireball back." Damon said with a throaty laugh.

"The two of you are the most qualified for it." Vektor said, withdrawing his hand at last.

Damon crossed his arms over his chest and turned to observe the flames. Their burning was oppressive. Blistering, even. The evening around them warbled to their heat, a mirage which made its danger look too pretty to find it anything besides calming.

There was fire and there was burning.

Ash unto ash.

The rest was left to them. They had to keep moving forward.

"We're not accepting the easy way out." Damon said, mesmerised by those flames just the same as Vektor. "I don't think Dante did, either."

He refused to believe their friend was truly gone. Vektor had to agree.

Inferno, Delta, Change.

There was no way a flame so bright would allow himself to be doused.

Breaking away from the sight of those flames, Damon turned to Vektor and said, "We do have to get back and pack, though."

"I think I would howl for Jonathan with the same sort of fervour." Vektor said.

Despite being taken aback, Damon spoke with fondness. "You two make a weird amount of sense together."

"We're partners." Vektor said in declaration.

Damon pulled him away from those fires and back to the hotel. Around them, the sky continued darkening as evening gave way to night. Its purples and dark blues were dotted by stars, pricks of light which ranged from pure white to flashes of red, green, and blue. The sun no longer provided its golden light, replaced instead by the silver of the moon.

There was still light and there was still fire. A cold reflection of it, but enough for them to see this path laid out before them. They could run, determined not to leave their friend behind, but only time would tell if they would be able to find him again.

As an ending, it wasn't wholly unexpected.

But that was only if it could be considered an ending.