

Shadows and Inferno

[Game Kids Book 2]

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To my friends and family, once again for believing in me.

To you as well for picking up this book.

Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for giving my kids a chance.

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Chapter 1: Rabbit Hole to Hell

Dante had chased fires for as long as he could remember.

It was hard not to, with a curiosity as endless as his. He'd burned himself on the stove despite his mother's warnings and he'd burned himself in the sun despite the protection his father slathered over him. They were both so busy with their work that Dante wandered aimlessly towards the fires.

He drew friends for tea parties, but those niceties grew boring. He counted eyeballs and their parts to himself in play, but it always ended on the same numbers. Searching for a proper adventure, he traipsed down the winding mountain trail behind their home.

(He was barely seven. Not even seven.)

(It was supposed to be a birthday gift.)

Usually, his mother or father held his hand the whole way down. If he was lucky, he'd get to play with Damon and Damon's Nanny. Mostly, though, he counted to himself until his mother became upset and his father carried him out of their space.

He was left alone more often than not.

Dante liked being on his own.

The path wound quite a ways, shrouded in shadow by the late afternoon sun. Dante wished to watch it like he could the rest of the stars. Wished he could one day go supernova just to prove he could.

Fire was unruly. Fire was fair. To bite back when handled without consideration; that was the goal Dante strove towards every day. To be known as something not to be toyed with.

At the end of the path was a dark cave. Not the iron door that usually greeted him. Someone had torn it out, maybe, and Dante peered inside, hoping to glimpse the cause of such destruction. A melting giant of slime resting in these mountains, perhaps. One of his good tea time friends with their spindly limbs and black blood, could be. Or perhaps a more traditional monster, like those in the storybooks he was so fond of.

(It wasn't a monster.)

(Dante was the monster.)

The sudden thought made him jolt back, made him doubt. What was he doing here again? Wasn't he supposed to be at school, with his friends?

Marina Royal. For gifted youth. Shadows, shadows, shadows, all sitting in rows of desks, staring at him from across the classroom.

Their blank white eyes were funny. Their stapled grins kept them laughing.

Dante shook off those foreboding images and walked down into this cavern. He'd find something fun at the end. He always did.

There were no lights, so Dante made his own. He followed the trail down, down into the heart of this beast. The deeper he went, the stuffier it seemed. Like he was inside some living thing, breathing around him and making the air musky.

(Wet and flesh walls. Eating him alive.)

He reached out to touch the wall and met with coarse rock. Enough to give him a scrape and he flinched back. So, not some belly. All the same, as he kept walking, he had the distinct impression that he was being swallowed.

The air grew thick with ash. Distantly, he could hear burning. Cackling. A steady hum, the whir of technology. Dante's parents always seemed to have spare tech around. Misfit eyeballs were his favourite. He loved pulling them apart and reassembling them in different configurations. It was something his parents actually encouraged. The differently coloured irises and each unique error were fun puzzles to solve. Which pieces fit together, which equations were correct, Dante had the most fun with those.

The ground beneath his feet gave out suddenly, without warning. He fell, fell into pitch black, unable to even scream.

He closed his eyes and curled himself into a ball, bracing for impact.

It never came.

When he opened his eyes, he was sitting on the ground in an unfamiliar and red landscape.

He stood up slowly, taking in as much of it as he could. The dirt below his now bare feet was a reddish brown. Plateaus, his mind helpfully supplied. The sky above his head was the colour of broken hearts. No clouds. No draw distance. And, situated around him in a neat little ring, was that fire he knew to be living beneath his skin.

Hell.

This was Hell.

It had to be.

He took an experimental step forward. The fire moved with him. He took in a deep breath and stretched himself up on his tippy-toes. The fire rose with his efforts. Delighted laughter bubbled up

from him and he ran out to the edge of the plateau to look down into the frozen lake below, the ice just as red as the skies above.

(Simple times. Simple curiosity.)

"You certainly took your time getting here." A voice said from below him. He squeaked in surprise and tried to step out of their way. There was no one around him that he could see, however. "How dare you keep royalty waiting. Now, confirm your designation so that we may get started."

"Hi. Who're you?" Dante looked around the area once more, but it was a futile effort. At least they spoke Italian. Damon's English was hard to grasp at times. "Where are you? I'm Dante."

"No, no, that won't do." They laughed, a cruel and mechanical tone. Dante noticed the way his shadow rippled with the sound. "You're supposed to give me your designation. You're supposed to be frightened of me."

The shadow stretched out long like it was sunset, then pooled together in a spot just outside of his fires. The figure which rose from it was familiar. A friend. Their blank white eyes and stretched white smile made it unique. Different from all the other friends Dante had ever drawn. It had hair, too. Or, the impression of such.

"I am the first child, ruler of all the Kingdoms in Hell."

Dante hopped towards them with an excited, "Nice to meet you. Unless you're a part of me. In which case, it's nice to make your acquaintance again. You came out of my shadow."

The child stared at him for a moment, silent in contemplation. Silent as it loaded. Hell was for sinners and bad people. At least, that was what Sunday school always said. But Dante was much too curious to see how it really looked. Much too interested in this new friend, whom he was sure looked too familiar to just be new. Maybe even his parents would like this, would actually let him talk to them for a change.

(Never. Couldn't trust them. They caused this.)

"Designation: Inferno. Subject: Delta." The child said, its voice wholly mechanical now. Wholly devoid of familiarity. "Processing speed: bit crushed due to complications in framework."

"Ugh, again?" Complained another voice. A different voice. This one was much deeper than even Dante's father, sounded as gravelly as the stony wing beats which accompanied its arrival. "What's causing this issue? My White Rabbit won't be happy if we can't get this resolved in time."

Dante watched closely as this stately Gargoyle landed beside the shadow child. He'd seen them before adorning churches, in pictures, on the telly. This one had deep red eyes, much like his own. Had claws and a beak and wings as big as its body.

He didn't get a chance to ask anything of it, as it next advanced on him, hovering right over that circle of fire, and stabbed one of its claws right into his eye.

He screamed so loudly that he was sure he tore something in his throat.

"Hm. No response." The Gargoyle said, withdrawing its claw. The fires around Dante flared up, licking and biting, but the Gargoyle paid them no mind. It said to the child, "Subject 00, locate the anomaly within Subject Delta's framework."

The child snapped back into focus, into life. "Obviously, it's that nose of his. Gumming up the works." They said, an amused sort of taunt to their more natural tone. "I think it should get removed."

"Worth a shot, if just to isolate the code there."

The Gargoyle hunkered down, like a robot running out of batteries. The air around it hitched weirdly, pixelating and growing unfocused until it smeared the whole thing out of view. The splotches of grey that once made up its body turned into a more flesh-like colour until it sharpened right back into focus, revealing a Chimera where it once stood. A lion's head with a mane of fire, the body of a crocodile with fleshy scales, and three rows of sharp, shark-like teeth.

"Now hold still and this will go much more smoothly than last time."

It leapt at him and tore at his face with those teeth. Ripped at his body with its claws. Again, Dante screamed and the fires rose and no amount of flailing would get it off him. The pain was so searing that, as he faded from consciousness, he fell into a white void instead.

Recalibrating. Reconstructing.

Rebooting.

Dante blinked and his feet were once again on the ground of these red-brown plateaus, his body no longer torn apart. There was a hole in his face, though. He touched gingerly at the spot where his nose should have been and met with air. Surprisingly, absolutely painless. He stuck his whole hand inside the space devoid of all the important things, like his skull or blood or a brain.

"Stop messing with your code, Dante." The Gargoyle snapped, making Dante straighten up at attention. The Gargoyle was back. It held something small and fleshy between its claws. "This was, indeed, the cause of the error. Thank you for your scan, Subject 00."

"And you call me the unstable one." The child laughed, clapping its mitten hands together gleefully. There was no sound. Shadows didn't make sounds. Didn't have bones, either. Weren't constrained to things like sense and logic. "Delete the whole thing and start from scratch. This one's obviously a failure."

"You may be right. But that would be a waste of time." The Gargoyle turned its eyes sharply on Dante and he flinched. His whole body trembled from the memory of being ripped to shreds and the flames around him quivered in agreement. He had no power here. "Subject Delta. Do you know why we gifted you with this particular signature?"

(Change. Always changing.)

(Rules, glammers, warping.)

(Inferno, shadows, Hell.)

The Gargoyle approached him and he was, once again, frozen to the spot. A deer in the headlights. "Curiosity led you here. Creativity led to this realm's creation. And fear led to your demise." The Gargoyle said. It placed the nose back on Dante's face and he winced this time as it clicked and reconnected painfully. "Each of these things shall be your punishments. Keep providing us with the data we need and your life shall be spared."

"Until the day Hell reclaims your soul." The child joined in.

They cackled once more and, this time, the sound was completely off. Not the same as before. Mechanical, harsh, hurtful. He knew that voice. He checked the Gargoyle next and screamed at its suddenly human eyes. Suddenly recognisable and brown and disapproving.

Now, finally, he broke into a run.

As fast and as far as he ran, it didn't change the fact that he was in Hell. He couldn't log out. Still, his feet carried him as the fires died down, refusing to listen in his distress. His stomach was too cramped, begging for something to fill it. Starving himself of power, his flames of danger. He heard singing and continued to run. He heard a chorus of voices all clamouring for his attention, for his companionship, and broke free of all their tendrils grasping at his back.

He tripped down into one of the plateau's gaps and fell towards the frozen lake.

As he plummeted to his freedom, he closed his eyes and thought one desperate, commanding statement:

Wake up!

He gasped as his back hit the ice and his form shattered completely.

(All that was left was fire.)

(All that was left was fear.)

When he landed on his feet, he was no longer barefoot. No longer fire. He was almost seven once more, standing outside that cavern on that mountain path. Home again, home again. Was this Hell or reality? Was he awake or was he still dreaming?

His skin was too warm. Too restricting. Dante went to tear it off, to peel away the layers and release the fires pleading to get out, but was stopped by a startlingly solid, "Haven't you caused enough damage?"

When he looked up, his no longer empty stomach lurched. The world around him was full of demons, spectres, shadows, and ablaze with an unrelenting Inferno. The shadows stood amidst the thrumming flames, watching him with their blank white eyes.

No longer grinning. No longer laughing.

He wasn't the cause. He hadn't done this. He couldn't have.

"Don't lie to yourself, Dante." They reprimanded him with their many silent, booming voices.

He ran from the sight, up the path and towards his home. When he burst inside, the White Rabbit was there. Waiting for him. "Will the Queen be returning to join us for supper? Or have you made him late again?"

Her eyes were red, too. Devious and uncaring. And her voice echoed, as if coming from everywhere all at once. Dante wanted to scream again, but only a billowing cloud of smoke escaped his mouth. At this, the White Rabbit clicked her teeth together at him in disapproval.

"No fires inside, deerling. Burning our equipment would mean instant liquidation."

His friends, the shadows rose up all around him. Each one uniquely maimed. Each one missing something necessary. They clawed at his body with their dripping, messy limbs and whispered it was his fault, his fault, his fault.

They were all he could hear.

No matter how much he tried to answer them, all that would come out of his mouth was that choking, suffocating smoke.

(Marked for Hell. Marked for Hell.)

His mind shouted at him over and over as the shadows tore into his flesh, pulling him apart chunk by bloody chunk, searching for his heart.

Then all he could hear was singing, urging his head to pop and more smoke to spew from the flames.

Chapter 2: Smothered Rebellion

He startled awake, disoriented but not chilled. Never chilled. The fires inside him broiled uncomfortably hot, too hot to ever let him be cold.

A pair of piercing light blue eyes popped into view above him, along with the familiar face of his roommate (and friend) to whom they belonged to. "Morning." Petel greeted in their slightly gruff, whispery voice. "You okay there? Looked like you were having another nightmare."

Dante let out another breath, this one softer as he managed to calm himself down. He wasn't seven anymore, he was fifteen. Almost sixteen, even.

Hell was far behind him.

He didn't have to worry about falling back down there. It was impossible to find something that had been erased, after all.

He met Petel's eyes, noting how their black hair fell into them even as they leaned over Dante's bed. He'd missed this wolf. He'd missed everyone, actually. Having to spend the holiday with his parents was a stark reminder as to how differently his friends treated him compared to his parents' more hands-off coldness.

Careful not to collide with his roommate as he went, he sat up and said, "Yeah. It was. Just a nightmare."

They'd heard enough of Dante's rambling over unbelievable things to need more of an explanation than that. They stood back as he stretched the sleep out of his body. Though Dante had accepted most of Petel's wolf-like qualities, this steady gaze still unnerved him. It was as if they were observing their prey, waiting for the perfect moment to pounce and make good on that threat to eat him while they had the opportunity.

"Are you, uh. Excited t-to have us back?" Dante asked, trying to distract himself from those thoughts.

"Of course." Petel nodded, then set about getting ready themselves. "Missed you. And now we can continue to the next level."

Dante's gut sank and he had to pause in the middle of pulling on his socks. "You. You mean in the game?"

"Yeah."

"So soon, though?"

He looked pleadingly at Petel, who met his gaze with determination. "We've got time now." They said, as if this was completely reasonable. They returned to their task of pulling their signature red coat on over their uniform jacket. "Besides, we suggest it first and beat the Prince to it and he'll hopefully keep quiet about it for a little while."

There was no talking the stalwart, single-minded wolf out of this decision. Despite how every particle of his being wanted to reject this, Dante smothered out any further protests he could make. Petel was right about Vektor's insistence. Dante couldn't escape this either way.

Last term, they discovered and made their way through the first level of this immersive virtual reality game, the Rabbit Hole. While their other friends considered it fun and a fantastical adventure, Dante knew there was something severely amiss about it all. Firstly, the shadows hung about at every turn, threatening him in bolder and bolder ways as he danced around the topics he knew he couldn't speak on. Secondly, there was the pair of unwitting AI programs they pulled out of this game who contributed to their inability to just stop before the tragedy was fulfilled; Vektor and Vektoria.

While Vektoria acquired the help of Damon, the Kingpin of the school whom Dante was no longer friends with, Vektor requested the help of Petel and their little group. Or, pack, as Petel liked to call them all. Both programs had the same goal: return to the Mainframe Kingdom, their home and the final level of the game. Their reasons, however, put them at odds with one another. Of the two, Dante definitely preferred the wide-eyed and infuriatingly inhuman Prince of the kingdom, Vektor, but neither were exactly a welcome presence at their school. At least, not as far as Dante was concerned.

Once they were dressed in their uniforms, Dante left with Petel for the cafeteria to get breakfast. The one and only aspect Dante would miss about being confined to that house was his mother's cooking. That, and the view of the comforting green Mediterranean. Here, it was still snowy outside; a stark contrast to the mostly warm shores of Southern Italy. So perhaps it wasn't all bad, being so far from his home.

Petel no longer wore their hat for the colder weather, allowing flakes of ice to catch in their hair. They had, at most, two more months of this before spring would bring the world into bloom. Dante loved seeing all the different flowers and their star-shaped petals, but he'd miss the snow-covered scenery immensely.

As they neared the main building, where all their classrooms and the cafeteria were located, Frank hopped over to join them. "Welcome back!" He greeted them cheerily, most of his curly black hair hidden under his knit cap and all bundled up against the freeze. His vibrant green eyes conveyed all of his usual energy, as his mouth was near covered by a rather drab green scarf. "Well, you've been here the whole break, Petel. Dante and I are the ones who are back. Are you ready to dive into the next level?"

"You know it." Petel chuckled.

Dante pondered dropping face first into the snow and refusing to move until the end of time, but that would be far too disrespectful towards his friends. Besides, the pitchfork imps were actually out

and about today, ready to prod him with their red hot irons if he showed such blatant negativity. It was always such a battle between him and the spectres when he hadn't had the time to put up any of his wards. Why bother continuing like he did? Frank took notice of his unenthusiastic reaction, oddly, and gently said, "I mean. We can always wait a day or two if you're not ready to go at it again so soon."

Petel paused to also look Dante's way. Another strange thing. Frank was sensitive to others' opinions, similar to Dante himself, so it made sense for him to suggest this. But Petel, the reckless wolf, not simply overriding any concern Dante (or anyone else, really) had about this? Put on the spot and a bit nervous, Dante stuttered out, "Uh, well. Vektor, h-he wouldn't, um. Wouldn't want us to — to wait."

Frank and Petel shared a quick glance between them, then Petel said, "That's not your opinion, though."

Their concern threw Dante off completely. It was as if the faceless critters had interrupted to spin their songs of confusion. Since when had his opinions mattered? He was used to being thrust into situations that he had no say in, forced to do something he hated (such as every time he and Damon were pitted against one another). Why make sure he was okay with this when they'd probably just forge on ahead anyway?

Or. Would they?

Dante had to remind himself that he wasn't at home anymore. He was among friends who professed to actually like and care about him. Did they value him enough that he could stop it all right here, right now, if he wanted?

No one had to get hurt. No one had to play the pawn in these games any longer.

Though hesitant at first, Dante nodded in the end. "I'll. I'll be okay."

Petel's expression lit up out of eagerness while Frank positively beamed. "Then it's settled." Frank cheered as they resumed walking.

"Don't push yourself." Petel added, offering up their hand to Dante. "If it gets to be too much, let us know. We'll try our best to help if things are too uncomfortable for you."

"Yeah, I promise not to shoot you again." Frank laughed.

There was an uneasy edge to it, but Dante laughed along after taking Petel's hand. Despite all the regrettable experiences, he decided to keep doing this with them. He couldn't leave them to finish this without his fires. Even if it might cause problems, even if he wasn't the best choice, even if he'd have to continue lying to them, they were his friends. For better and worse, he'd stick by them through this nightmare.

Frank urged them along inside the cafeteria, saying, "C'mon, let's get some nosh. It's freezing out here."

Petel laughed softly as they were shoved inside. It was pretty packed with the other boarding students, all equally hungry and escaping the cold. Dante could name every single person here, including all the staff, though he only knew Petel's group personally. Petel spotted Sonya and Levy first, two out of the three they shared Music and Band with, and headed straight for the two. Their having Dante's hand meant Dante was pulled along and Frank happily followed. Dante scanned the area and picked out Paige, their Navigator and, at Petel's insistence, their leader, sitting at a table with her tray of food and staring at her phone. She was always so timely, an admirable trait. Petel pulled him right between himself and Sonya in the line, cutting off his curiosity over what she might be looking at.

"Morning." Sonya greeted, casual and polite. He was always soft and gentle, at least when not being ruffled up by Levy or Petel. His black and beady eyes meant that nickname of Birdie really suited him, despite how much he hated it.

"There you lot are." Levy said, much louder in contrast. He had a cat's grin, full of mischief and amusement, and the green eyes to match his freckles and orange hair. "Grateful to be back? Or are ya dreading the start of a new term and all the work it'll bring?"

His boisterousness tended to be more fun than panic inducing, Dante had learned over the previous term. Frank bounced on his feet and said, "I'm happy to be back."

"How were your Holidays, Ernest?" Sonya asked.

"Eh. The usual." Frank shrugged. "Mum made a bunch of great food and I got all the chocolate coins 'cause William sucks at dreidel games. You and Petel stayed here, right? Does the school put up, like, a tree? Or a Menorah?"

"Bet'cha missed us bein' around." Levy teased, leaning against Sonya's shoulder.

Though flustered, Sonya shoved Levy off much gentler than expected. "Of course I missed everyone." He admitted. "The school was mostly quiet, but Petel, Paige, Vektor, and I spent most of our time together."

"And they gave us some great nosh." Petel added.

"Sounds like a lot of fun." Frank said, resting his hands behind his head and grinning. He turned next to Dante and asked, "How about you? What's your family do for the Holidays?"

Panic bubbled in Dante's chest, but quelled after a second. He had an easy out here. "My — um. My parents w-were working, mostly."

"What? Lame." Levy yowled.

Frank winced in sympathy. "Even during the Holidays, huh?"

Petel scrunched up their nose in distaste. Though none of them had ever met Dante's parents, it seemed to be a subject he couldn't escape. Sonya ushered them all forward diplomatically, saying, "Hopefully, being back with us is a welcome change from that."

Levy scoffed. "Obviously is."

They were kind in their own ways. Dante couldn't keep himself from smiling at that. As they were served, Petel asked, "Have you started using that sketchbook?"

"Huh?" Dante frowned, having to think for a second on what Petel meant. "You mean. The one, um. J-Jonathan got for me?"

Petel nodded. Behind them, Frank laughed brightly. "The territorial wolf strikes again."

Levy laughed as well while Sonya shook his head at the two. Dante wasn't sure what they meant or even what they were talking about now. Why was Petel asking in the first place? It seemed so out of nowhere. "Uh. D-Did you — did you want to see?" Dante ended up asking.

Petel made a wry expression, but replied warmly. "I'd like that, thanks."

Maybe even Petel wasn't sure why they'd asked. Or what they had meant by it. Now that they all had their meals, they joined Paige at her table. Her blonde hair was always impeccably straight and though her blue eyes weren't as piercing as Petel's, it was a pretty shade all the same. Before any of them could offer up their greetings, she held her phone out towards Frank and announced, "Big news in the tech industry today."

Frank eagerly accepted her phone to examine what she was looking at. Petel went about eating, completely uninterested, while Levy and Sonya waited in anticipation for an explanation. Dante sank into his seat, already dreading the inevitable barrage of questions.

When Frank finished, he looked to Paige for confirmation. She said, "We may be closer to the bleeding edge than we thought."

"No way, mate." Frank breathed out, too stunned to do much else besides hand Paige's phone back. "So that's why your parents were working through the Holidays. Why didn't you just say so, Dante?"

Dante flinched, hunkering down further. Levy made grabby hands at the phone and whined a soft, "What is it? What's happened?"

"The Vicario Company has announced the successful results of several experiments in using virtual reality software to help fight diseases, mental illnesses, and memory loss." Paige replied, half reading from her phone and adding some dramatic flair. "They're planning to release the first public test run this summer and will announce more details soon, along with their next model of computer."

"Woah." Levy sat back, reeling. "Duckie'll be thrilled to hear about this."

"Virtual reality can do all that, huh?" Frank grinned, lowering his voice as if imparting a secret they all shared. "To think, ours is just a fun little game."

"Still, someone managed to beat them to it." Sonya pointed out.

Unless this was a pet project they had been working on for years, Dante wanted to counter.

He couldn't, however. If he wanted to remain safe, he couldn't step out of line. Returning home hadn't settled the grumbling of the pig goblins, the snickering of the pixies which hovered about behind him, or any of his self-inflicted fears. He had to swallow back his warnings, his bitterness, and keep diverting their attention with that damn distraction.

It wasn't like any of their group had the caution to leave this alone even if they knew the whole scope of it. But no one at this school regarded Dante with the proper caution a fire deserved. They weren't immune to his distraction, no matter how many warnings he laced into it, yet they refused to leave him alone. This information just reinforced that belief that their silly little game couldn't be harmful. They had a mission, after all.

They weren't exactly wrong. Dante was the true danger. From the fires fighting to pop from beneath his skin to the many spectres that whirled around his babbling head, he held ruin and terror within him.

Fire, shadows, Inferno. Creativity, curiosity, fear.

In the midst of their excited buzz, Vektor arrived and sat beside Paige. His grey hair and golden eyes contrasted nicely with his nearly ink black skin. Without so much as a proper greeting, he asked, "We're continuing our advancement through the Tundra tonight, correct?"

"And one hyper advanced AI program." Frank said with a giggle.

"Yes, that's the plan." Paige said, waving him off. To Frank, she asked, "What sort of equipment you think they're using for this? It could really be they've repurposed the tech from the Great War in order to get these results."

"Knowing them, it could be anything." Frank threw his hands up in the air, excited enough that he could barely contain himself. "I mean, my first thoughts go to our system and the scanners, but it could be something similar to the Great War stuff. That'd make sense with hospitals, since that's actual replacement stuff."

Paige nodded along. Perplexed, Vektor broke in again and asked, "What are you talking about? What about technology and the Great War?"

Rather than explain it again, Paige simply handed her phone to the Prince and said, "Read about it. It's an exciting development for our world."

"Can you read it? Does all the code get in the way?" Sonya asked, leaning around Paige in concern.

"Thank you for your concern, Ravenell, but I can untangle this now." Vektor replied, less dismissive than he might have been a month ago. He really did learn fast. After about a minute, he said, "I still don't see how this pertains to the Great War as it was explained in Professor's theatre performance, but thank you for including me on this conversation."

Levy chuckled while Paige shook her head in exasperation. Frank shrugged, saying, "We were kinda discussing how the tech might be possible, it doesn't say much about how they achieved what they did in that article."

"Warping and glamours, I understand perfectly well. The capabilities explained in this article, however, are nothing outside of my own." Vektor said, growing huffy. "If you needed an explanation as to how any one of them were possible, I'm fully capable of—"

"Aww, are you getting jealous?" Levy teased.

"Hey, Paige, are you gonna finish your spinach?" Frank asked, neatly cutting off Vektor's response before it could cause a fight.

Paige frowned and shoved her tray in Frank's direction. He laughed and thanked her for the extra food. The matter being settled, they all returned to eating (besides Petel, who was finished) and discussed less sensitive things. They would probably draw Abraham and Kalyuga into the discussion later, but Dante was spared having to hear any more for now.

As he pushed around his omelette half-heartedly and watched the wriggling maggots that were revealed, he fought hard to bite down all his ready explanations for their questions. He could offer crazy and unbelievable, even were he to tell them the truth plainly, no distractions or anything. But he really wasn't in the mood to lose his head or possibly have his heart torn out. That would upset his friends further and he wanted to avoid that as much as possible.

Hell might not exist anymore, but the shadows very much still did.

Even if it meant lying again and again, he wasn't ready to forfeit his life like that. Not so long as he had these friends to keep him steady.

Chapter 3: Revival and Tribulations

The Grey Tundra reminded Petel a little of home. Less forest and more barren, of course, but the harsh cold and grey foggy skies were familiar. The path of grey ice which stretched out into the distance, the dusting of fresh snow that allowed their footsteps to trail for a little while and fade back to pristine and untouched grey, it was all very delightful to a wolf such as them. Cold outside and cold inside; Frank and Abraham complained about it being demoralising at first and huddled close to Dante's fires for warmth.

AIR sent a welcoming committee after they reached the first checkpoint and wiped them all out. That was quickly becoming par for the course with this game.

The next week, the atmosphere was immediately hostile the moment they landed. Petel could smell it in the air. Paige's voice echoed above them, saying, "Got a Stinger and a Walker headed your way."

"Only those two?" Abraham asked cheekily as he pulled his rifle off his back. "Should be child's play after those three Sharks."

Frank groaned at the reminder, unhooking his gun from his holster. Petel grinned, flexing their claws in preparation. "Let's have fun." They said.

They pounced onto the path and ran on all fours for maximum speed. Abraham and Vektor gave chase, leaving Dante and Frank to bring up the rear. The path wasn't so narrow that they couldn't go around their slower members, but Dante and Frank were more support roles anyway.

Whether it was the emptiness or just the harsher environment, this ice level bred bigger, hardier enemies. The Stinger, a manta ray creature with a darker grey top and a lighter underbelly, was big enough for Petel to walk across its back. The Walker, a towering and thin metal structure with only four legs despite supposedly being a spider, was fun to scale all the way to the top, too. And the Torpedo Sharks, which they tangled with last time, had round bullet-like bodies and could shoot at them from across their area of visibility at threatening speeds.

Petel scaled this Walker's legs to its flat body at the top, appreciating how nice the little touches on it were. Like its six blinking red lights where its eyes should've been and the metallic fibres pretending to be hairs all down its legs. They swiped their claws across its metal back, scratching the surface with some satisfying clanks. The area distorted a moment before pulling itself back together, a sure sign they'd done a decent chunk of damage. It alerted both monsters and the Stinger's tail bolted upright, poised to strike, while the Walker stopped to buck Petel off.

The shot of Abraham's rifle rang out and struck the Stinger's fin, making it veer off course. Petel sank their claws into the Walker's back to anchor themselves as it shook.

"Please don't play with them, Wolf." Vektor shouted up at them.

"Yeah, we don't want to attract more of them if we take too long." Frank shouted more casually.

Petel laughed. "Then help. Abraham and I shouldn't have all the fun."

"You know very well that I can't do direct damage." Frank lamented.

"And I have to conserve my magic for activating our checkpoints." Vektor said in aggravation.

Petel snorted through their nose in amusement. Abraham shot the Stinger again, this time catching its underbelly. A good shot, as usual. Petel ripped their claws out of the Walker's back just as it decided to shake again and they tumbled off.

Dante shouted something they didn't catch and Vektor replied to it, so hopefully it hadn't been immediately important they hear it. They caught themselves using one of the Walker's legs, stopping about halfway to the ice plateau below.

They called, "What was that?"

"I said—"

Whatever Vektor was going to say was drowned out by a strange, inhuman roar. Something grey and black stood beneath the Walker, nearly tall enough to reach Petel. It grabbed two of the Walker's legs and yanked them down, toppling it and allowing Petel to land on the path unscathed. As the Walker crashed and shattered into code, this thing jumped and batted the Stinger out of the air, similarly shattering it with a single strike.

It stood towering before them in the resulting silence. Its body was a mangled grey of stitching and animal-like features while its black hair looked coarse, like the mane of an unkempt horse, hanging halfway down its emaciated torso and over its face. Petel could just barely see its yellow eyes, which looked like death, and they instinctively recoiled away from it. Vektor gasped softly and said, "The Guardian of the Grey Tundra. So soon?"

"You!"

Frank rushed forward, his hands outstretched and glowing with power. He dropped his gun on the ice and it slid to the edge, but that didn't seem to matter as purple runes crawled up his skin, glowing from his hands and pulsing on the ground under his feet like footsteps. His eyes glowed as well, like Vektor's would when using his powers or overwhelmed by emotion.

"The sight of you sickens me. You're supposed to be dead!"

As Frank advanced on the Guardian, it leapt away with its long, powerful legs onto a pointed icicle out in the middle of the foggy abyss, far out of Frank's reach. Frank continued advancing, seeming not to care that he was headed for the end of their platform. Petel shouted out a warning, as did Abraham and Dante, but Vektor held them all from running after him with a sweep of that golden key

staff of his. The air around Frank crackled in a glitchy state, reminiscent of that time his powers had altered Dante. Petel's fur prickled and they asked, "Berserk?"

Abraham nodded slowly. "No doubt."

The Huntsman's hand went to his throwing crosses, a wary sort of gesture. Dante could only watch, his eyes wide and his fire erratic. Vektor, blissfully ignoring the current atmosphere of danger, called, "Doktor, there's no need to regard the Resident as a hostile. It is the Guardian of the Grey Tundra."

"Which means Frank's its ward or whatever." Paige noted, a bit upset and a lot exasperated. Her echoing voice caught all of their attention (except Frank's, of course) and was a nice little reminder that she was there with them. "Get ready, everyone. The system's still loading, but, uh. That's a lot of data it's trying to bring back."

"Still loading?" Abraham questioned, pulling his crosses off with a decisive finality.

"D-Data? Bring b-back?" Dante joined in, shrinking away.

The glitching air and purple runes flowing from Frank finally seemed to click with the system. All at once, the Walker and Stinger they'd just destroyed rematerialised, their colours changed to the purple and green scheme of Frank's normal enemy revival fashion, along with a multitude of other enemies, including the Non-Hostiles of the level, the Zeppelin Whales. There were enough to clog the air and completely surround all of them.

Dante shrieked and Petel swore loudly. Vektor and Abraham expressed their shock much quieter, shrinking back from the abundance of sudden enemies around them.

Paige said, "I did warn you."

All of the revived enemies seemed in complete chaos, some attacking each other and some honing in on Petel and them. All of their eyes flashed from purple to red to green and over again, their colours shifting from their normal grey to the green and purple of Frank's control. One of the Stingers dove down to allow Frank to step onto its back, carrying him towards the Resident's perch and out of the rest of their reach. So much for solving the problem like that. Faced with an onslaught, Petel brandished their claws at a Torpedo Shark and barked out a commanding, "Do your best to survive!"

"Understood." Abraham said.

He tossed his crosses out towards one of the Walkers, scraping at its sides and legs. Vektor twirled his staff out with a flourish, his visor coming down over his face in a flash of gold. "Surviving is the least of our worries, what with Doktor's powers being so amplified as they are." He said.

"We sh-should run!" Dante shouted.

Petel launched himself at the Torpedo, not even considering Dante's words. Dante had to raise his fires to block off a Stinger going after him, yelping in surprise. Petel tore into the Torpedo's back

with their claws and it spun as it tried to knock them off, colliding with the Walker and Zeppelin Whale beside it. Petel dug their teeth into its smooth skin and one of the Zeppelin Whales and a Stinger joined Frank's advance towards the Guardian.

The Guardian regarded the situation with an air of indifference. Petel couldn't say what would happen if the enemies of the White Forest turned on Shiranui, considering it never happened. According to Vektor, the Guardians were too powerful to defeat. The Resident spoke with a surprisingly human voice; despite its overlaid growl, its tone was convincingly mournful. "Persistent as ever. Of course you'd hate me."

It jumped into the foggy abyss and disappeared. The enemies continued after it until they were destroyed by the fog, revived once more and destroyed again. Petel would have watched further, but the Torpedo Shark spun again and their grip came loose. They scrabbled against its back for a moment, doing just enough damage to make it fizzle out of existence and they swore even louder.

Overhead, Paige said, "If you can get back to the checkpoint, I can help you all out. Until then, all I can tell you is that I don't think fighting's doing anything, considering Frank just keeps reviving everything once it's defeated."

Petel meant to affirm that they heard, but they only shouted wordlessly as they dropped out of the air. They watched the Torpedo Shark rematerialise and could do nothing but continue shouting.

Getting zoned out was the most painful way out of the game. Bar none. Landing at the bottom after that drop tore the body apart into a million pieces. The sudden explosion should've made it easier, but then the computer had to reassemble all the bits and the pain was simply prolonged as they hung in the void, waiting to land back in reality.

Before Petel dipped below the fog and into the abyss, they were suddenly engulfed in flames. The claw gripped them a bit too tightly, searing their skin, and yanked them back onto the plateau. Once their clawed feet were on the ice, the flames dissipated and left them to catch their breath.

It was Dante, his hand outstretched towards them and eyes blown wide in terror, who saved them. Of course it was Dante. Vektor dissipated both his staff and his visor and shouted, "Just run for it!"

"Sorry, Frank." Abraham called towards their friend, who had nearly reached the abyss himself.

The Huntsman dodged the charge of a Torpedo Shark, stumbling into Vektor in the process. Dante ducked in order to dodge the attack as well, then cried out in pain as a Stinger struck his back with its tail. Petel tried to move forward, to help, but another Torpedo Shark bowled into their back and knocked them out.

They fell forward for a while in the black void before slamming hard back into reality, stumbling against the front of the scanner they were in. Paige, muffled by the metal but understandable, said, "Careful, Petel. Don't break anything."

The scanner doors opened and they groaned as they exited, standing on their own two feet. Woefully human and no longer wolf-like. The tower was lit brightly, all the way to its ceiling, too bright for this time of evening and how dark it looked outside the windows. The room was spacious enough, each scanner a long tube placed around the walls, while at the centre was a special white scanner and the computer Paige currently sat at to operate the whole process. Petel headed over to her side as one of the other scanners opened to reveal Dante, leaning against the sides in his exhaustion.

"You gonna be okay?" Paige asked, clear concern in her tone.

Dante stumbled out of the tube and clung tightly to the back of her chair for support. "Th-That. That always takes m-more than I expect." He said.

Petel wrapped an arm around his shoulders and exhaled a short, "That sucked."

"Should've called him Necromancer instead of Doktor." Paige half-agreed. Petel shook their head at the reminder of the odd names Vektor called them all. Speaking to the computer, she said, "You're making good progress, Abraham, Vektor. The checkpoint should be in view now."

"I see it." Abraham's voice said over the speakers, out of breath. "Did Petel and Dante make it out okay?"

Paige glanced to the two and Petel offered their thumbs-up as Dante nodded quickly. "They're both here with me." She told the Huntsman.

"That's good to hear. Though, I'm unsure as to why you were worried, Professor." Vektor said. His voice seemed more robotic than usual coming out of the computer.

One of the other scanners opened, making Paige and Dante jump. Petel let go of Dante to see if Frank needed help as Abraham's voice came back through, saying, "We've made it, Philips."

"R-Right, just a mo'."

She snapped back to attention, typing the necessary manual log-out information. Petel peeked inside the open scanner, finding Frank sitting in the middle and holding his head. They offered their hand with a sympathetic, "Can't complain about being underpowered anymore, can you?"

Frank shook out his head, mumbling a despondent, "That was. Sorry, I kinda lost it there."

"That's what a Berserk's like." They said in understanding.

Though not comforted, Frank accepted their hand and they pulled him to his feet. Abraham and Vektor emerged from their scanners, Vektor immediately crumpling to the floor on trying to step out and Abraham striding purposefully over to Paige. She swivelled her seat to face him, knocking Dante off-balance, and asked, "When will you next be available?"

"Not until after next week." Abraham dragged a hand slowly down his face. "My father's been obsessed with going over hunting exercises with us since the start of the new term."

Petel rolled their eyes. "Sounds fun."

Vektor managed to pull his face from the floor and sat, directing his gaze over at Frank. "If I may ask, Doktor, why did you immediately go into attack mode on seeing the Guardian of the Tundra?"

Frank bristled, pushing past Petel in order to confront the Prince. Right as he reached Vektor, though, he stopped himself. "It's not — I'm not — That thing — it knows what it did."

He turned his glare at the computer, not wanting to direct his ire at the Prince. Abraham took a step towards Frank, offering up a sympathetic, "Nags at your brain, doesn't it?"

Frank deflated, sighing out his anger. Paige looked to Dante and said softly, "Sorry, didn't mean to knock you off."

Dante bowed his head, mumbling something completely inaudible. The fireball hated being the centre of attention. Petel stepped in, a little overprotective of their friend. "Let's turn in. We're all tired."

"Agreed." Frank said, still subdued.

Vektor sighed. "The Resident is the oldest Guardian to the system. Its job is to watch over those that were lost or abandoned."

"It's the one who abandoned everything." Frank snapped, cutting Vektor off.

Petel, Abraham, Paige, and Dante flinched back from their friend. Unbothered, Vektor said, "This is the first time you've encountered it. How can you say that?"

"I can't explain it, okay?" Frank said, annoyed. "It's just. That creature shouldn't be a guardian of anything, let alone the one I have to be tied to."

"I'm sorry." Vektor said. Frank paused and Vektor stepped closer to him, placing his hands on Frank's shoulders. "This is upsetting to you and I'm sorry."

The glint of that friendship bracelet caught Petel's eye. The gift Frank had given the Prince for their gift exchange at the end of last term. The gold of the chain mirrored Vektor himself and each charm was a representation of each of their group, showing him they were all his friends. Frank relaxed, saying a small, "Thank you."

He removed Vektor's hands and walked out of the tower. Abraham, Vektor, and Paige made no move to go after him. Dante left the room next, definitely not heading back to the dorms. Not with the level of upset heat he radiated, melting the snow around his feet as he walked. Vektor said to Abraham, "So. You're available after next week?"

"Sorry, mate, but I can't get out of schoolwork or my father's plans." Abraham said, nodding dejectedly. "Perci hates hunting, so he tries every time to sneak off, but our father's the best. Nothing gets past him."

"Unless the both of you work together." Paige pointed out.

"Or if your dad sleeps in." Petel said next.

Abraham frowned in thought, as did Vektor, at these possibilities. Petel nodded to Paige, then took their leave from the conversation. The school was fairly small (and covered in snow), but if Dante was anywhere, it would be by that tree in the courtyard they all liked to sit beneath.

As expected, they found him huddled up beneath it. The surrounding area where he sat was completely free of snow, warmer than the rest of the brisk and chilly night. Petel stopped in front of him, just outside of that circle, and asked, "You sure you're not pushing yourself into this?"

His head snapped up and he met Petel's eyes, unwavering. Were they still in the game, this wall he kept around him would be more literal. Fire and danger, a clear projection of his desire to be left alone.

But this wasn't the game. And, despite Petel leaving their wolf limbs in that virtual reality, Dante had no such luxury.

"I'm. I'm getting dirt on my uniform." Dante said, his voice small.

Petel breached the barrier, sitting down right next to him, and asked, "What else is bothering you?"

Dante let out a soft, resigned breath. "I'm sorry."

"Why? You didn't do anything."

"I'm really, really sorry."

He bowed his head, raising those walls ever higher in spite of Petel's best efforts. Always trying to keep everyone at arm's length, always asking them just beneath his words to abandon him already. They'd discussed this issue before. Guessing at the reason, Petel asked next, "Is the Berserk thing still bothering you?"

"H-Huh?"

Dante looked over at them, confused. They said, "The Berserk. Last time, when it was me."

They grimaced at those memories, unable to finish their explanation. It was just virtual reality, but they recalled the charcoal flesh, the burns on their tongue, with crystal clarity. The desire to eat up their friend, to crunch up his bones and tear open his skin and keep him forever more inside their stomach, their lungs, hadn't gone away at all. Contemplative now, Dante said, "That doesn't — w-we talked that out. I'm, um, o-okay with that."

That was interesting. Perplexed, Petel asked, "Then what's gotten under your skin?"

"Fire." He replied instantly. Then, after a small little giggle (and, again, Petel was so taken off-guard by the fact that Dante made a joke at all that they could only laugh along), he said, "No, that's. That's always under my skin. I'm, uh. I'm worried about the, the English assignment."

Any previous concern was dismissed instantly. Petel grinned at their fireball friend with an incredulous, "That's what you're worrying about?"

"It's — important!"

The two of them devolved into laughter, leaning against one another. Officer Riviera stepped in front of them, drawn over by the noise, and told them, "Get to your rooms, kids."

"It's not curfew yet." Petel protested.

"Not the issue." Officer Riviera fired back. "You two trying to freeze and catch a cold?"

"C-Can't catch what you d-don't chase." Dante said defiantly.

His teasing caught both Petel and the Officer by surprise, allowing him to grab Petel's hand and walk away without any repercussions. Not that they would have gotten in trouble anyway. As Petel said, it wasn't curfew yet and all.

To think that they worried over possibly not liking this fireball.

The wolf really did desire him, flesh and fire and all.

Once inside their room, Dante had to change out of his uniform (he really did get mud on his skirt, a real shame) and plucked out his class notebook to work on his bed. He didn't immediately sushi himself into that seaweed green blanket he hated, so Petel would leave the matter for now. They sat on their own bed to work on their schoolwork and resolved to ask again later.

Dante would tell them about whatever it was when he could no longer suppress that burning. Of this, they were sure.

Chapter 4: Fire, Fire, Everywhere

During lunch that Wednesday, Abraham strode over to their table, eyes wild with glee. They all noticed him before he reached them, except Dante, who flinched as he placed his hands forcefully down against the surface. He said in a rush, "My father has graciously granted me a reprieve for today."

Paige and Petel both perked up while Vektor and Frank grinned in return. Dante didn't share their enthusiasm, sinking into his seat in pure dread.

"Shall we play the game this evening?" Abraham asked.

"I don't have any problems with that." Paige said, looking around the table at the rest of their group for confirmation. "Does anyone else have other plans?"

"Nothing I can't reschedule to later." Frank turned suddenly to address Dante. "You gonna be okay?"

"Uh." Dante, taken off-guard, floundered for a moment. Petel knew there was nothing to be concerned about. He accepted with a soft, "Yeah. I'll be. If everyone else wants to go, then. I'm o-okay."

Abraham and Frank both grinned, pleased with that. Vektor, also satisfied, turned to Paige with a succinct, "It sounds like a plan, then."

Paige nodded, Abraham sat to join them at their table, and they were soon all abuzz with excitement. When Kalyuga, Sonya, and Levy arrived to tease them over their addiction to this game, they all laughed it off, undeterred. Dante kept his head down, drumming his fingers intermittently against the table. He smiled and responded every time he was addressed, but he was definitely pushing himself. Petel meant to check in with him, but they didn't share any classes with the fireball for the rest of day.

It was fine. Dante knew his own limits.

As agreed, they all met up after classes ended and headed for the tower immediately. No Band today and all. Paige let them in and went straight for her seat at the computer. Vektor stepped inside the centre scanner while Petel, Abraham, and Frank took their places inside the outer scanners. Dante hesitated a moment, as he usually did, but joined them nonetheless.

The floor dropped from beneath them and it was go time.

Petel landed on the grey ice of the level, inside the igloo-like structure of the checkpoint, along with everyone else. Paige's voice reverberated over them, closer than usual due to the lower ceiling. "Okay, get moving before AIR or that Guardian decides to mess with us again."

"Right, we want to make as much progress as we can while we've got the opportunity." Vektor said, leading the way out of the checkpoint and onto the path.

"AIR sure likes being unfair with us." Frank said in lament, getting a laugh from Abraham and a chuckle from Petel in agreement.

They allowed Abraham to go first, then followed so that Frank and Dante could bring up the rear. Making sure Frank was protected seemed to be a top priority to all of them, especially after what happened last time. Vektor had to lead, despite the path of this level seeming fairly straightforward compared to the overgrown, winding Forest, and Abraham and Petel liked to be right there with him in case some enemies popped in.

Vektor charged along the way, using his key staff more like a lance. The solid grey ice below their feet sounded so like snow and only had enough slide to throw them off-balance with enough momentum. Being the fastest, Petel could test this easier than Vektor, who happened to be their slowest.

The Prince skidded to a stop suddenly, making all of them similarly halt. Before any of them could ask, Vektor swung his staff out towards the side, pointing at a checkpoint across the way from them. "That's ultimately where we're headed." He said, then looked up towards the sky for confirmation. "Right, Navigator?"

Paige's voice echoed over in response, exasperated. "I guess? It's inactive, so I can't exactly tell which number it is."

"So then how are we supposed to get over there from here? Will our path take us there eventually? Or are we meant to jump that gap?" Abraham asked.

Petel scanned the area and spotted a platform delicately balanced on a spike of ice between them and the other side of this path. Frank, also catching sight of this, pointed at it in excitement. "There's our way across. C'mon, let's go!"

"Not so fast." Abraham grabbed Frank's hood, stopping the other boy from dashing straight to it. "That thing looks like a trap. Like that waterfall in the Forest."

Frank's enthusiasm fell to a pout. Vektor, again, looked up to the sky. "Navigator, what does the map say? Is this path safe or a trap?"

"Why do you think I can see that sort of thing?" Paige asked, exasperated.

Dante's expression fell to frustration and he walked to the edge towards the platform in-between the two stretches. Petel watched him curiously, wondering what he was planning on doing.

"It does seem like the path will lead you over there eventually, there's no dead-ends or anything tricky like that." Paige said, recapturing their attention. "There's another checkpoint along the way, too, so this might be the one after that."

Frank grinned triumphantly up at Abraham, who countered by asking Paige, "Would this game really be okay with us skipping ahead like this?"

Vektor brightened up, snapping his fingers. "That's it. Navigator, you can see this platform on your map, correct? Then you should be able to check its structural integrity. Please let us know the results of your findings, thank you."

Paige groaned in annoyance and Frank spoke up with a pleading in his tone, but a flash of movement caught Petel's eye. They quickly turned to see Dante land on the precarious platform. The whole thing shifted under his weight, making him stumble and the fires flare up, but he stayed on his feet.

Petel sprinted over to the edge and thank goodness they did. As soon as they neared the drop off, the platform tipped and Dante shrieked in surprise. Frank, Abraham, and Vektor startled and watched Petel dive across, over Dante's fire in order to scoop him up into their arms, then leap to safety on the other side. The platform toppled over completely, disappearing into the grey abyss below.

Petel rolled away from Dante's fires before they could take too much damage, then sat up to ask, "You okay?"

"Is he okay?" Frank cried from across the gap. "Are you kidding, Petel? You both just nearly fell."

"Of all the players I'd expect to fall into the clutches of this trap, I wasn't expecting you to be the one, Inferno. Your impatience could cost us our progress again." Vektor joined in, the pure aggravation clear in his tone alone.

His harshness registered as hostility and Petel, as the wolf they were, raised their hackles and growled in warning. Of course, the Prince never seemed to care about the danger the wolf posed. Dante curled in on himself, drawing his knees up to his chest and shouted, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

Abraham frowned incredulously over at Vektor. "You're the one who started this whole mess. You have no right getting this upset over his taking action."

"We asked Navigator to verify the path for us. His impatience could jeopardise our good fortune and cost us our whole day."

Vektor huffed, stepping closer to Abraham in order to glare down at him. Using his height to his advantage for once. Sometimes, Petel wondered if the Prince was aware of how much taller he was than all of them. Abraham didn't back down and Frank looked ready to step in and separate the two, but Paige interrupted with incredible timing. "No use arguing, what's done is done. The best you can do is hurry along the path to reach them before AIR gets involved."

Relieved, Frank said, "She's right. We gotta hurry."

Abraham stepped back and nodded, though his jaw was clenched tightly. Vektor, having no other option, gave an overdramatic sigh of defeat. "Fine." He swept his key staff around to point directly at Dante, making Dante flinch and Petel growl again. "Try not to leap into things without our consideration, Inferno."

"Hey, that's not—!"

Abraham's protest was cut short as Vektor's visor materialised on his face and he took off running down the path. Perhaps not as impactful as it might have been were he faster, but he was clearly finished with this conversation. After giving a frustrated growl, Abraham charged after him. Frank spared Petel and Dante a glance, his expression a mixture of annoyance and disappointment, then he followed the other two.

Left alone, Petel scoffed after them. "They act like it's the end of the world."

They turned to Dante and grew concerned on seeing how he'd buried his face in his knees and trembled with silent sobs. His fires had died down so low, sparking up weakly and erratically, just as distressed as Dante looked. Petel inched as close as they could to the edge of the flames and spoke gentler.

"Hey, calm down, it's gonna be okay. It's not really the end of the world, you know."

"But — But he's right!" Dante met their eyes directly, his fury taking them by surprise. "I'm just. A screw-up. A liability. I'm not adding a-anything by being here, there's no point in me joining you lot."

His face was wet with tears, though that anger was the most prominent emotion. A miserable, despairing sort of anger at himself, it seemed.

He squeezed his eyes shut and buried his face back into his knees, frustrated and upset and still unable to get his fires to flare up with any sort of danger. "You should just. Bring someone else in to play. I'm not worth it. You'll all just. H-Hate me in the end."

It was a tragedy, really. Petel's resolve strengthened at the sight of their friend sitting there, so unsure of his own worth. They stood and hopped over his pitiful flames, then sat right against Dante, pressing their side against his. He jumped in surprise, the fires mimicking that quick movement, but they died right back down to their non-threatening low without so much as harming Petel.

"Wh-What — What are you doing?" He asked.

"You're pack." Petel said, reiterating this for him. "You're friend. Won't abandon you. Need you here."

That anger drained out of him, replaced by his defeat at knowing Petel wouldn't change their mind. He struggled to find more to ask, but settled for the simple and broad, "Why?"

Petel already had the answer for that one. "Remember last time? You saved me."

Dante frowned, ready to argue. "N-Not for. It didn't really. It didn't matter in the end."

"There's a lot you can do." Petel insisted. "You helped when I went Berserk, too."

"But that's n-not really—"

"And even if you didn't help, we'd keep you." Petel smiled, a way to punctuate their point. "You're our friend. You don't want to hurt us. Remember?"

Dante, growing frustrated, said, "But there are plenty of times I've been a hindrance!"

Petel snorted in amusement. "Good vocabulary."

"Shouldn't those — th-they should. Cancel out."

Neither of them were going to convince the other at this rate. Petel rolled their eyes and switched their angle of attack. "You trusted me."

"Wh-What?"

Dante stared at them blankly, losing all momentum. Petel tilted their head from one side to the other as they found the best way to explain this. "I'm a wolf. Said I could eat you. Yet, still, you trust me when I say I'm not going to. That matters to me. It matters a lot. Therefore, I trust you in return."

Dante thought it over for a minute, his expression falling to resignation. Finally, he said, "You really shouldn't put so much faith in me."

And, of course, they were right back to useless ominous bullshit. Petel leaned all of their weight against him in protest, saying, "Then you shouldn't put your faith in me, either."

Dante snapped his head up, still so full of arguments, and knocked against Petel's head with a loud clonk. They both recoiled back, Petel hopping to their feet in order to exit the fire surrounding Dante, and held their heads from the sharp pain. Above them, Paige said, "Sorry to interrupt this heart-to-heart, Petel, but AIR's sending some enemies your way."

Petel cursed softly, then turned their gaze towards the sky to ask, "How many?"

"Two. A Spider Walker and a Torpedo Shark."

Dante, too, mumbled some choice words under his breath. AIR was much too fond of sending the Class III enemies after their group. Petel took a quick scan of the area and spotted the enemies in the distance, heading towards them from the path stretched out before them. Dante stood up, the fires weakly attempting to flare back up with him, and muttered, "Just two. It's, it's j-just two."

Petel found themselves grinning. "It is a game." They said. They flexed their claws, debating between the Spider Walker and the Torpedo Shark. In the end, they gave a cheeky, "Keep the Shark busy while I take down the Walker."

Dante looked to them, incredulous. "Wh— A-Are you sure?"

He was willing to go with it. They nodded one last time. "Just be careful not to hit me when you're done."

Though very hesitant, his fires barely back to their usual height, Dante gave a nod in return. Petel took off running towards the enemies and scaled the Walker's legs as Paige said, "Be a little careful, Petel. You're at 85% health after all that."

They laughed as they dug their claws into the metal and leapt up to the Walker's body, ready to tear this thing to pieces. "Thanks for the info. Keep us updated."

They slashed at the Walker's back as they landed. A fireball flew by, pelting the Shark's nose and distracting it from Petel. They latched onto the Walker as it shook to fling them off and watched as the Shark charged straight for Dante. It barrelled through another fireball and crashed into the side of the checkpoint. Petel kicked off the Walker and landed on the path to see if Dante was okay and was reassured by Dante's half-screams. He'd dodged the Shark, flat on the ice.

Paige spoke again, making Petel look up towards the skies. "Oh. Uh, be careful with that checkpoint. Apparently, they're not indestructible."

Petel tripped up the Walker, keeping it from advancing on Dante. It tipped into the foggy abyss, which was a plus. The checkpoints could be destroyed, huh? As if they didn't have enough things to stress over. Dante shouted, "Sorry."

"I don't expect you to take the hit instead, Dante." Paige reassured him.

The Shark pivoted, preparing to charge again. Petel hurried to get in-between it and Dante, protecting their friend as he got to his feet. Unfortunately, the Walker's legs scrabbled back onto the path, making both of them jump. Its metallic limbs couldn't find a good hold, but it wasn't down yet. Petel and Dante both switched their focus to it, attacking with claws and fire to put it out of its misery.

The Walker fizzled out finally, but they'd taken too long. They couldn't stop the Shark.

It bowled over Dante and knocked against Petel's side, shooting clear out of their range. While Dante was, once again, flattened against the floor, Petel slid to the edge of the path and it was their turn to scrabble against the ice, desperately trying to not fall off.

A growl of frustration tore from their throat and they clawed their way back onto the path in order to chase after this Shark, determined to destroy it.

Shots from Abraham's rifle rang out and struck the Shark as it pivoted to face down Petel. This time, when it charged, they redirected it with their claws and it barrelled off past them and their team, avoiding everyone. The blow made their paws ring, like the vibrations of a bell, but it was worth it.

Vektor went for the checkpoint, focusing his golden light on it, while Frank knelt by Dante with his gun at the ready. Paige gave a concerned, "Jeez, that hit took you down to 5%, Dante. And Petel, you're at 65% now. Abraham, the Shark's down to 50%, keep at it."

"It's a good thing we arrived when we did." Vektor scoffed loudly, lowering his hand from the newly activated checkpoint.

"And we pulled out a net positive." Frank said, shooting Dante in the arm.

Petel glanced over to their Huntsman, who switched to his throwing crosses and continued after the Shark with the same dogged intent Petel had. They stopped over by Dante and Frank, allowing Frank to shoot them as well, and asked, "How're you doing?"

Frank gave a thumbs up while Dante said, weakly, "I can't handle this."

"Good job surviving it?" Frank said after a second of unsure debate with himself.

The Shark charged one last time, knocking Abraham off the edge as it dissolved into code. Petel went to dive after their Huntsman, but Frank caught their arm and surprisingly stood his ground well enough to keep them from leaping into the foggy abyss. Abraham plummeted and faded out of sight, no way to catch him or help.

Frank gave a mournful, "Seeya on the outside, bruv."

Vektor headed inside the checkpoint without waiting for the rest of them. "Navigator, if you would so kindly return us to your realm. We're done for the day."

"Just a mo', you impatient Prince." Paige said, sounding just as fed-up as him. "Everyone get inside the checkpoint, please."

Dante stood, a bit unsteady on his feet, then the three of them followed Vektor inside. Petel offered their arm towards Dante, but he shook his head. The fires and all. It was only a minute or so later when the floor dropped from beneath them and they were logged out.

Once back on their feet in reality, exhaustion overcame Petel and they stumbled out of the scanner as it opened its doors. Frank and Abraham, similarly, staggered out looking just as tired. Vektor predictably fell out of the centre scanner (though he managed to catch himself this time) and even Dante, who usually came out the best off, seemed short of breath and still a bit wobbly.

Paige tapped a few keys, putting the monitor to sleep, then swivelled around to look at all of them. "We made progress, so no griping over it. Okay?"

"Yes, please." Abraham agreed. "Two checkpoints in one go is good for us. Almost like we're getting better at this."

"And yet, we're decidedly not." Vektor said, glaring pointedly over at Dante. The fireball bumped into the scanner behind him as he reflexively flinched at the scorn. "Inferno, that was reckless and dangerous. I must kindly ask that you refrain from making such rash decisions in the future."

All Dante could say in return was a mumbled, "S-Sorry."

Before Petel could snap at the Prince, Abraham stepped forward in Dante's defence. "No need to be so critical, Vektor. He took action when the rest of us were busy debating. It might not have been the best course of action, but things worked out this time."

Petel nodded in agreement, as did Frank and Paige. Vektor said, "Yes, this time. That's not the point I'm trying to get at here, though."

"What is your point, then?" Paige asked.

"The point is communication." Vektor explained, taking most of them by surprise. As he continued, he focused back on Dante with an accusing, "Inferno, you didn't announce properly that you were going to test this path. You just did it. The fact that you didn't even participate in the debate shows a clear disregard for our most important connecting foundation and that is our communication."

He made a valid point for once. Even Dante seemed taken aback by this. Under his breath, Frank muttered a sarcastic, "Communication sure didn't stop us from jumping into that waterfall. Or him from helping you make progress then."

"You're hardly a team player yourself." Petel pointed out, hoping to bite into the Prince's self-righteousness.

"I'm working on being better. I'm merely a learning program." Vektor fired back, oblivious as usual to the danger. This time when he returned his ire to Dante, the fireball didn't flinch. In fact, that anger seeped into him, infecting him as it poured out of Vektor. "What is your excuse exactly, Inferno? Are you that desperate to impede our progress? Do you wish that I never return to my home? What is it?"

While notable that he didn't accuse Dante of outright subterfuge, it was still enough to make the fireball snap. Even across the room, Petel could feel the building heat as he shouted, "You'll never understand. None of you will. I never, ever wanted any part in this."

Paige and Frank grew apprehensive at the heat as well and Abraham shifted closer to the two of them. A protective older brother instinct. It'd be cuter if they weren't so in danger of the fires right now. Vektor asked, purely frustrated, "Then why are you still here?"

Immediately, Abraham shouted an offended, "Uncalled for, mate."

"You can't just say something like that, you absolute wanker." Paige joined in.

"Yeah, what the heck?" Frank agreed, throwing his arms in the air. "Dante's our friend. You're the one who said that it had to be him helping us."

"Helping you." Petel added with a growl.

Still burning with that fury, Dante gave a forced, "Good night."

Then he ran out of the tower, knocking against Petel's shoulder in his hurry. Just that small bit of contact made them wince; burning was right. Paige and the others grew even more into an uproar, chastising Vektor for his callousness, and while Petel wanted to join their barking, they knew their pack had it handled. They had to make sure their roommate, their friend, was okay.

As they headed out the door, they heard Vektor loudly protesting, "Why am I not allowed to ask that? We're supposed to be communicating."

Sometimes, Vektor's ability to seem human came to an infuriating halt and reminded them all that no, Vektor was just a program incapable of fully grasping the intricacies of humanity. It wouldn't be surprising to find out Vektoria was exactly the same. Petel rolled their eyes as they trudged through the slushy leftover snow of Dante's trail of anger.

They didn't bother knocking on their shared room door, opening it to find Dante sitting on his own bed, right in the centre, curled up on himself. A ring of fire hung around him, illuminating the darkness and giving off a sweltering, oppressive heat.

Dante looked up to acknowledge their intrusion and ordered, "Close the door."

That uncharacteristic demand gave Petel pause. Danger, the wolf inside of them warned. Futilely, of course, because Petel refused to heed all warnings concerning this fireball.

They entered defiantly, closing the door behind them to satiate at least one point. Dante made some strangled noise of frustration, the fires around him dancing ever dangerously, and he buried his face into the tops of his knees. "Of course. You don't feel fear." He mumbled to himself, his low and clipped tone muffled and still conveying every bit of danger he held. "No matter what I do, what I say, you just refuse to leave me alone. You refuse to save yourself."

Petel frowned shortly in annoyance. "I like you." They said, needing to repeat their points once more.

"I will destroy you." Dante retaliated, raising his voice just enough to make Petel flinch back.

His hair ignited with his anger, lighting up the room even more with that blistering heat. Under his glare, they were very much a wolf backed up against a cliff with nowhere to run but directly into the heart of the forest fire before them.

"I'm volatile, explosive, manipulative. I'm worthless, a failure, unchangeable. Why should you find me likeable? I'm the reason everyone here's unable to recognise the danger they're in, why can't I make you understand even that?"

Time to start running.

Petel ducked under his ring of fire floating in the air around him, climbed up into his bed with him, and pulled him into their arms despite his searing heat. Their skin steamed at the contact, making them wince in pain. He went to shove them off, thought better of it, and gently removed himself from their grip instead.

"Aren't you listening to anything I'm saying? The pain I'm causing?" He asked, voice wavering with his emotion. "I will destroy you."

"You wouldn't." Petel stated simply. "You're incapable."

They didn't, however, attempt another hug. Just sitting this close to him on fire was enough to hurt. They didn't need to touch the sun again to know it would sear their skin. Dante asked, "How can you say that? After all I've done?"

"You're our friend. You don't want to hurt us." They replied.

Dante sighed and the ring of fire around him faded from the air. His hair still burned, his skin glowed red hot, but that was one source of heat gone. Petel could breathe again without that oppressive, painful burn. "I don't want to hurt a-any of you." He confirmed. "That's why. It's better. If we stopped playing this game. If you all stopped being friends with me."

"But we like you too much." Petel said with a grin.

"But you like me too much." He admitted in defeat, his hair finally losing its fire and settling back on his head like normal hair. "I don't get it. I don't think I ever will. How can all of you look at someone as w-worthless as me and still — a-and still."

He trailed off, expression scrunched up in distaste. Now that he wasn't on fire or literally glowing from the heat, Petel scooted closer to lean against his side. It lingered around him like a constant reminder of what broiled beneath his skin and Petel refrained from a full hug this time, but they made contact nonetheless. "You're not worthless." They told him. "You're part of the pack. You're friend. I like you too much to let you call yourself things like that."

Dante watched them a moment, almost calculating. Almost cold. (He was fire. He couldn't be cold.) Then, he said, "When we finish this. Once we return Vektor home. You'll see, then. How I've betrayed you."

Petel pulled back just enough to meet his eyes once more. They had to repress a shudder at the truth in him. At the lack of heat. "It might seem that way now." They said. "But we trust you. And you trust us. No matter what, that's all that matters in the end."

"I'm warning you now because I like you, too." He said. He bowed his head slowly, defeat overcoming him and snuffing out the rest of that heat. "I like all of you. Too much. I wish I wasn't cursed with this."

"Change it, then." Petel said.

"How?" Dante asked. Before Petel could suggest anything, he said, "My hands are tied at every possible juncture. Take this step, get jabbed for it. Try that avenue and it bites back. I'm bound to silence. I cannot convey the depths at which I'm restrained to this fate waiting for us at the end."

Petel had to think only a minute before the answer came to them. "You're only bound to it for as long as you believe it." They said.

Dante stiffened in fear. "Wh-What?"

Fear was much more recognisable. Petel didn't even question it. "You've changed so much since we first met. And you're so much more powerful than you let yourself believe." They explained. "You don't like your fate? Just change it. You can do that."

Something akin to hope sparked in his eyes. Slowly, he said, "You can't feel fear. You can't comprehend. The Hell I've lived. The darkness inside me."

They shrugged and knocked into his shoulder encouragingly. "You're a fire. I'm a wolf. Think that describes it pretty well."

After a minute of tense silence, he bowed his head, breaking their eye contact. "I guess. None of us are strictly human anymore."

"Who said that's a bad thing?" They asked with a toothy, cheeky grin.

They leaned in and licked Dante's cheek, startling the fireball into a small yelp. Then he was laughing, just like before, cute and genuine and beautiful.

Petel laughed along and the mood lifted to one of amicable serenity. Petel could breathe so much easier without the heat and upset suffocating them.

They had to talk about this with Paige. Dante using words like 'worthless' and 'failure' for himself wasn't a new thing and that was concerning. He was neither of those things. Weird and neurotic, sure. Disagreeable and stubbornly ominous, definitely. But not worthless. Not a failure.

Never a failure.

They managed to get Dante in a better mood for supper. Vektor was absent from their group, but that was to be expected. Petel pulled Paige aside afterwards in order to figure out how best to show their friend that he was loved and appreciated. Paige agreed whole-heartedly, launching right into brainstorming ideas for this.

If anyone protested, they'd have to deal with the persuasive fangs of the wolf. A fair enough trade.

Chapter 5: A Snake in a Bed of Roses

Dante was alone when he woke up the next morning. Strange for Petel to be gone already. He was usually the one to wake up first, being unable to sleep for long due to the constant nightmares and prodding spectres. Last night, however, was exhausting after his fires exploded out of him in that unrestrained despair, so he'd actually slept until the morning bells.

It wasn't like he said anything damning. Lacing his warnings with enough distraction was usually enough to deter any punishment. The absence of his friend seemed to imply otherwise, though.

If Petel had fallen into the hands of the shadows, then what was the point to all these rules?

The simplest answer was that Petel had gotten a head start and let Dante sleep. It could be that innocuous. He didn't have to jump to such conclusions about this.

Things were never that simple, however. Not when he was at the centre of it all.

Swallowing back that nagging fear, he got ready and headed out himself. The snow continued falling, though it turned to slush on the ground. A real shame since the pristine blanket was such a comforting thing to look at. He waved to Mister Thatcher as he passed the groundskeeper, who worked steadily at keeping the walkways clear and returned the greeting. The slush was less appealing, but it made for a much less losing battle in keeping the walkways clear.

As Dante continued his trek to the cafeteria, he was surprised to see Vektor headed straight for him.

His body halted immediately.

No.

It was too early.

He had to run.

"Inferno." Vektor called in greeting, quashing that flight instinct before Dante could act on it. Deer in the headlights, his parents often reminded him. He may have had the speed advantage, but this AI program was unrelenting. Vektor waited until he stood exactly across from him, then continued. "I was told that I should apologise for my actions yesterday. As such, I apologise."

Dante waited a minute, then drooped in disappointment. That was it? Tentatively, he asked, "Is that, uh. All you wanted?"

"No." Vektor gestured for them to continue along and said, "I would like to propose that, should Professor be free again, we continue our venture through the Tundra. In spite of your heedless mistake, we made a lot of progress and it would be best to keep up our momentum."

Heat flared all the way up to Dante's tongue and he had to clench his hands tightly to keep it back. Vektor was just a computer program. He didn't understand when it came to things outside of his basic programming, like how irrational emotions could make a person. That didn't make it any less callous or hurt any less. Dante had to carefully pace his breathing as the witless Prince blathered on.

"It's an admirable turn of phrase, wouldn't you say? To keep up one's momentum. And as long as you focus all that untapped power you hardly ever utilise properly, we should be able to make progress."

"Stop." Dante interjected.

He nearly let the flames take over as the heat rose out of him in smoke, but kept his control. Shadows couldn't gather in this snow, yet his mind reminded him all the same of their dangerous, whispering voices.

Noise was unpleasant. He had to remain under control.

Vektor frowned at him as they paused along their walk. Dante couldn't keep his head with his breathing exercises alone. He had to say something or he'd explode.

"Stop treating me like that. Stop talking like the game is the only realm which matters." He met Vektor's eyes and was encouraged as Vektor flinched back from all the fire and fury he held. "I'm not numbers and potential. I'm a person. Stop treating me like that or I'll walk out. Okay?"

"Walk out?" Vektor asked. "But we're outside currently?"

Dante rolled his eyes. "I'll withdraw from the game."

"But you—!" Vektor paused, seeming to register the whole of Dante's statement. "The way I'm treating you. How is it incorrect?" He asked instead.

He really didn't get it.

Of course he didn't. All those ingrained habits were hard to shake without proper awareness of them.

Dante had to count to three once more, exhaled more smoke than steam, then said, "Treating anyone like a liability more than a friend is upsetting."

"Upsetting."

Vektor stood back and pondered this word. The same as he had done when considering friendship and communication. Despite all the aggravation it brought, it was still fascinating to see just how advanced at learning Vektor was.

And Dante hated that he thought about it that way.

Reaching some conclusion, Vektor nodded and met Dante's eyes again.

"I shall make a better effort not to condescend towards you in the future, Inferno, since it's upsetting you. I apologise again for my words and actions." He said.

He was blissfully ignorant of the danger Dante posed. Just like everyone else in this place. Those burns Petel sustained last night came to mind and Dante bit his tongue to smother out the rest of his heat. It didn't work, not really, just balled that fire up in his chest, but it was enough to make him stop breathing out smoke. He mumbled, "That's acceptable."

He left the Prince, entering the cafeteria on his own. It was too early for this burning. Abraham should still be too busy to play the game, allowing him to settle these stoked flames to their usual heat.

The inside of the cafeteria was uncomfortably warm. He spotted Sonya and Levy at a table with their food and Frank still in line, but no Paige or Petel. Maybe the two had taken their food elsewhere for today. It couldn't be the shadows taking them as penance for him revealing too much emotion. That would break the illusion far too soon and wasn't even a part of the deal. He shook that thought from his head and got in line, focused instead on seeing what the meal was for the morning.

Maggots and rotten bits, he could deal with. Something hurting his friends due to his thinking on it long enough was unacceptable.

The familiar lab coat in front of him caught his attention, a nice distraction from the intense nattering all around him. He greeted the upperclassman with a friendly, "Jonathan."

But he looked too far up, at the back of Jonathan's head. He saw, nestled in the thick black hair, that second face grinning manically right back at him.

That shouldn't be possible. He was thinking too hard if something like that manifested. It wasn't supposed to affect real people.

Jonathan turned around and brightened noticeably on seeing him. "Hey, if it isn't Vicario." He greeted, casual and normal and not at all two-faced to the point of growing one out of the back of his head, like Dante kept thinking. "That sketchbook do you good over the break?"

Dante nodded in affirmation, the movements stiff from his heart-stopping panic. Jonathan faced forward, chatting with the person in front of him (Vektor, Dante's mind supplied him; the Prince had somehow gotten ahead of him) and much cheerier than his usual dour personality. There was no longer any second face on the back of his head and Dante refused to look at anyone else for the rest of the tense wait.

Projecting onto others was too dangerous. This had to stay between him and the forces of Hell. It had to be his life on the line and no one else's.

He wanted to just curl up in the snow and sleep off this burning heat.

He collected his food and sat down with Frank, Sonya, and Levy. Strangely, no Vektor, even though the Prince had been in front of him. Once Dante was settled, Sonya tentatively asked, "Petel's not with you, either?"

Dante shook his head, too rattled to speak. Frank leaned back in his chair to look around the cafeteria again. "Wonder what Paige and them could be up to. Think they got their food already and just skedaddled?"

"They're probably making plans or something." Levy said, waving a hand with his flippant indifference. "We can grill 'em for the details once they get back. 'Cause you know they'll be back before the warning bells ring."

He winked over at Dante, as if Dante might understand the joke he was going for. If he was even going for a joke. Dante still didn't understand Levy all that well. Frank said, "At least it's Mister Schmidt on meal duty today. His lasagne is perfect for days like this."

Again, Dante nodded slowly. Was it the appearance of that second face on the back of Jonathan's head that made everything seem so incomprehensible right now? Or was it his earlier anger? It was hard to tell what was even going on in reality when the spectres around him were deafening.

Vektor arrived and Dante focused instead on picking the maggots out of his food. He didn't care to actually eat any of it right now, but it was nice to have some distraction as he worked to empty his mind. He'd been thinking too hard, giving everything too much presence. Petel was right about one thing, though probably not in the way they expected.

Dante's mind could never truly be emptied. The threat of the Queen loomed too close over his neck.

Paige and Petel joined them as classes started, barely making it to their seats before the bells rang. Just as Levy had said. That proved they were, indeed, safe from the shadows. Paige didn't mention anything about it, only concerned with the lesson. It was proof enough that nothing interfered; if anyone was willing to interrogate Dante on snapper dragons uprooting the spots of normal fauna or pixel pigments infecting their skin, it was Paige. She'd seen the fires living beneath his skin, he doubted she'd ignore something like the shadows.

When lunch rolled around, Dante stumbled into her having a heated argument with the Kingpin. That twisted, blind snake who had told him that he may as well not exist.

The fires leapt right back up from where they were coiled in his chest, burning at his palms as he stomped over before he realised what he was doing. He shoved himself in-between the two of them, protecting Paige, and kept the embers contained in his fists. Pleased at his intrusion, Paige separated herself from this confrontation. Damon, meanwhile, grew apprehensive at the recognisable danger.

"What do you want, Fireball?" He asked.

He was one of the few who intimately knew the fires which roared beneath Dante's skin. And he was appropriately wary. Slowly, enunciating each word carefully, Dante said, "Stop bothering my friend."

It was still cold enough for Dante's breath to steam without suspicion. Not so much for his feet to melt the slushy snow completely, forming a clear circle of ground around him. Not so much for the sparks crackling from his knuckles. Damon grimaced in distaste, saying, "What's it matter to you? And who said I was bothering her?"

"He was very much bothering me." Paige supplied cheekily.

Damon's frown went to her a moment, then he drew himself up to his full height with that air of unassailable confidence. Doing his best to be that intimidating, flawless Demon King. "Are you gonna do something to stop me?"

He was only as tall as Vektor. Dante wound back quickly, his heat boiling too hot, and punched Damon right in the nose.

"Oh my god, Dante!" Paige exclaimed.

Damon recoiled, shouting a pained, "What the fuck, mate?"

Dante shook out his fist and the fires with it. "We're not mates." He said. "And you'd do your best to remember that."

Damon growled in frustration, holding a hand to his nose. As much as Dante aimed to break it, to burn him, it was impossible. That bed of roses kept the Kingpin perfectly untouchable. It was by design.

But he could hurt. Dante was very capable of dishing out pain. Damon was more aware of this than most. He couldn't win.

He huffed out a pathetic, "You'll get yours, Vicario."

Then he fled, miserable and defeated. A familiar sight and, for once, very gratifying. Paige didn't shout any taunts after him, still in shock. She watched Dante with concern in her eyes. "Are you. You're not. Okay?" She tried to ask.

It was as if she had to confirm that it was still him. That the fires hadn't overtaken him, made him Inferno and nothing else. The fight eased its way out of his muscles as he defaulted to his usual hesitance, lowering his palpable threat levels. "I'll, um. I'm okay." He reassured her.

The few students who stopped to watch the spectacle continued on their ways, murmuring to themselves. Paige didn't look fully convinced, either. She took his arm and pulled him inside the cafeteria and away from the circle of heat and anger he'd imprinted in that spot.

That was a reckless move. Damon would be wise to inform a teacher of the incident. Or perhaps one of the witnesses would get there before him.

What could they possibly do to Dante, though? Expel him? Place him on some sort of probation, maybe? His parents wouldn't allow it.

Nothing would change.

Paige stuck by him as they navigated the crowded cafeteria to get their food. Once they sat down with the rest of their friends, Petel greeted them with a succinct, "Took your time."

"Dante just punched that bloody Kingpin in the face." Paige replied immediately.

Abraham and Sonya stood from their seats in shock while Levy and Frank gave an excited whoop each. "Truly? You punched that Demon King?" Abraham asked.

Vektor frowned at Dante with a confused, "I thought you lot said getting into fights wasn't a good idea while we were in this realm."

Petel was too taken aback to say anything. Kalyuga asked, "How did you not get in trouble? Do you need to go to the infirmary?"

"I don't think any of the staff saw. I was too focused on getting us out of there." Paige answered. The shock hadn't worn off yet. "Are you — you're sure you're okay, Dante?"

Her eyes were filled with concern. Not fear or panic; that was an important distinction to make. Most of the others shifted towards the same (save Petel, who looked downright proud, and Vektor, who was confused) and Dante was kind of sick of it. He said, "Never better."

He ate resolutely. Seeing as they weren't about to get much else from him, Frank and Levy excitedly asked Paige for the details to this encounter. Abraham and Sonya sat again, asking their own questions here or there, while Vektor settled for simply listening to what was being said. Kalyuga's apprehension never faded and Petel lamented, "I wish I could've been there to see it." As well as adding, "Told you he's the bravest."

Dante allowed them to talk, shovelling his food into his mouth with no regard for sorting out maggots or rotten bits. His knuckles stung from that punch and his skin tingled from the fires, but his accelerated healing came in handy for things like this.

Once the excitement died down, Vektor attempted and failed to make a case for playing the game later that day. Abraham wouldn't be free again until Saturday evening, so the impatient Prince would just have to wait. Despite the grilling they got (also just as Levy promised), Paige and Petel acted as if they hadn't mysteriously been absent that morning, keeping whatever they were doing to themselves.

If Dante made himself as small and boring as possible, would they disregard him then? Petel proved too many times that they weren't about to leave Dante alone. When would Dante allow himself to trust them?

Rejecting their kindness made him no better than Vektor. No better than the Demon King himself.

The heat fought against his throat, wishing to pour from his mouth and went on burning in his chest. Why was he so angry about this? Being unable to identify why left him without a solution and that stoked his fires to greater agitation.

That evening, Band finished and it was supper and still no Petel. They always returned at the same time on a Band day, they had their violin to care for. Too fed-up with this hanging threat, Dante left to find the wolf and, quite startlingly, caught Yasha and Vladimir in the middle of dumping the wolf into the dumpster behind the cafeteria.

Those bullies chose the wrong day to taunt the flames.

He pressed his waves of heat against the two, melting the slush at their feet. They both shuddered at the sudden change in temperature and it was quite satisfying how, upon seeing his approach, Yasha actually shrieked.

"Get back, Vlad. That Fireball's on the rampage!" Yasha shouted, abandoning his target and slipping on the muddy ground in his haste to get away. "We gotta get out before—!"

He lost that fight and face planted into the snow. Vladimir helped the drummer to his feet, abandoning Petel in the trash without a second thought. "Careful, Yasha, sheesh." Vladimir chided him.

"This is no time to be careful." Yasha snapped at him, grabbing one end of his scarf and yanking him down a bit too hard in his panic. "Didn't you hear? He punched the Kingpin. We'll be next if we stick around."

"Vicario didn't punch the Kingpin, Yasha. That's ridiculous."

"What's ridiculous is your refusal to see the forest for the trees. That guy's a menace."

"Maybe to you, considering your obsession with his friend."

The two successfully fled and Dante snorted an extra bit of steam after them. Vladimir refused to believe, as per these protocols outlined in Dante's rules. So that was how he avoided any punishment. Yasha seemed to be the only one unaffected by any of the pretences Dante put up.

A note for later. Right now, Dante had to calm those flames, settle them back into his chest, and focus on Petel. His friend, who was staring at him with something a little stronger than apprehension.

It couldn't be fear. The big, bad wolf couldn't feel fear.

Therein lied their biggest folly.

Dane offered his hand and pulled Petel out of the dumpster, saying, "You're going to have to wash up now."

Petel shrugged, eyeing him warily. "Wouldn't be the first time." They said. Then, after a tense minute, "You're really hot right now."

"It happens." He countered easily.

He closed his eyes and focused on his breath. His father taught him the technique.

One, two, three; inhale. One, two, three; exhale.

Skipping supper to curl up in his bed sounded appealing, but that sort of thing drew attention. Being alone wasn't ideal either, as it would just encourage the roaring carcasses growing ever deafening.

Petel next said, "I didn't howl. You came anyway."

The rest of that fury popped right out of him. He bowed his head self-consciously and stuttered out, "Oh. Uh. S-Sorry, I. I didn't think about it. Um. Is that — Is this, uh, okay? Are you mad at me?"

He had completely forgotten about that promise, too driven by the fires and heat. He protected Petel, but that was only corollary. His flames broiled in his chest, restless and a testament to that. He had to put on this harmless affect, to assure everyone he wasn't worth thinking about too closely. Petel smiled in the end and said, "Nah. I'm not mad. Thanks, Dante."

"You're, um. You're welcome."

Though Petel clearly wanted to touch him in some friendly way, the wolf refrained from doing so and headed towards the dorms. Dante watched them go, breathing in the cooler air and setting aside that burning fury. He had to take care around Yasha. He could cause real harm to that bully, unlike with Damon. His fires weren't something to tame; why couldn't Vektor understand that instead of insisting Dante was only his potential?

Both of them were familiar with that darker side lurking beneath his code. Dante may have been besieged by his fear, his unwillingness to make use of his Change, but he could still exercise control where needed. This pain and despair was his most constant reminder that he lacked any lasting control. Why waste all that effort?

"Still stringing that poor wolf along, Fireball?" Fiamma asked, coming up behind Dante. He flinched away, making her laugh. "And they called Caro the Heart Breaker. Perhaps you do take after him in more than just your looks."

He glanced quickly from her smirk to her crossed arms. Hiding the black at the tips of her fingers, where the strings dripped from. Careful not to meet her cold, black eyes, he asked, "Wh-What do you want, Fiamma?"

She stared him down, making sure he was properly cowed, then shrugged. "Nothing. Just came over to investigate a fun-looking scuffle."

Always indecipherable. It was partially her woodenness, partially her cruelty. It was always cruelty bestowed by the shadows.

Dante had to include himself in that. They filled him as much as they did Fiamma, Vektor, and Vektoria.

He left before she could find anything else to tease him about. Before she could call any of those she puppeted. Inside the cafeteria, he joined Sonya at a table and got an amicable smile for his appearance. "Evening, Vicario." Sonya greeted him. "Are you looking forward to tonight's supper? Petel said they wanted to get you."

It was rude to pry. But that curiosity could no longer be restrained. Instead of replying politely, Dante asked, "Why did Petel have to become the wolf?"

Sonya couldn't answer right away, taken aback by his bluntness. Dante held firm, refusing to look away from Sonya. Falling to a murmur, Sonya said, "Petel's parents were killed by a wolf. Didn't they tell you this?"

Dante bit down on his tongue briefly, then nodded. "But. Why stop feeling fear?"

"Yeah, what's up with that?" Levy joined in, sitting on Sonya's other side and sandwiching him in. Sonya jumped at Levy's arrival, then dropped to annoyance. "We're talking about Petel, right? I'm curious about them, too."

"Yes, that's the topic." Sonya said, minding his frustration. "If they didn't tell you about it, I'm not sure I should share. It's rather personal, after all."

Levy elbowed Sonya's side, wheedling. "C'mon, Birdie. We're all good enough friends by this point, right? Put us in the know."

Dante nodded along with a soft, "Please."

Though still unsure, Sonya relented and said, "Fine, okay." He took a second to compose himself, then explained, "Petel was there with their parents when they were attacked and killed. It deeply traumatised them for a long while after. They couldn't go to school for two months, saying they saw the wolf everywhere and not even leaving their room most of the time."

Levy sat back, surprised. Dante was with him on that one. Trying to imagine Petel being afraid at all, to the point of shutting themselves away, was almost unbelievable.

"I visited them as often as I could, but most of our other friends and classmates gave up and made fun of them instead. Old Bassoon was out often, too, leaving them alone in that house. My sibling and I — um."

"And then they just decided to become it." Levy said after Sonya trailed off.

Sonya nodded, deflating. "One day, they told me that they had an idea as to how to stop being afraid. The next time I saw them, they were much like how they are now."

Dante gulped back the wave of gnawing guilt nearly overtaking him. Sonya snapped upright again, desperate to spin it more positively.

"But! Um, but it's not wholly a bad thing. I mean, they've always been a bit reckless and hungry for adventure. They would drag me along to explore the woods around our houses a-and we even caught fish with our bare hands from the river."

Levy frowned, shaking his head. "What they're doin' is unhealthy."

Sonya deflated in defeat and admitted, "Yes. But you can't change their mind about it now."

Levy grimaced in frustration, adding no further arguments. The more Dante thought about it, the more he had to accept that he and Petel were really very similar in the end. They'd been twisted and tormented, abandoned by most of humanity, and coped with their trauma in odd and unhealthy ways. It was no wonder Petel had become so quickly attached to their self-proclaimed pack. To anyone willing to stick around, really. Somehow, that just made Dante guiltier.

Sonya stood then, pragmatism taking over. "Let's get our supper and talk about something less personal. Like, how is everyone settling into their classes this term?"

"Ooh, how about Chocolate Day plans?" Levy supplied with a grin.

Sonya's face went red and he shouted, "I said less personal!"

The two headed off towards the growing line, bickering with one another. Dante watched them go and was again reminded of how close everyone seemed to be with one another in their group. He hadn't understood it at first, but after his own conflicts with Petel, it seemed like it took a certain closeness to comfortably argue and remain friends.

Dante may have ruined things between himself and Damon, but he refused to let the same happen between him and Petel. Between him and their whole group. Even Vektor deserved some leeway, as infuriating as the Prince could be. Learning and adapting was a process to be commended. It was more than the Demon King was capable of, after all.

It was more than Dante himself was doing.

Chapter 6: The Life of the Party

"Got two Spider Walkers headed your way." Paige warned as they stepped out into the level.

It was Saturday evening and they were, indeed, back in the game as promised. Petel took a quick scan of the area, sniffing the chilly air and detected the two enemies behind them. Those metal limbs had a different scent than the salty skin of the Zeppelin Whales, the sandy waves of the Stingers, and the gunmetal burn of the Torpedo Sharks. Vektor gave an affirmative, "Duly noted, Navigator, thank you."

Abraham pulled his rifle off his back and said, "Let's see if my aim's improved after so much practice."

"Bruv, it was practically perfect to begin with." Frank teased.

Vektor seemed to hesitate a moment as they all lingered just outside the checkpoint, then asked, "Should we engage these enemies to clear our way? Or should we bide our time and allow them to catch up to us? Which would everyone prefer?"

"You're asking our opinion?" Frank asked in return, incredulous.

"I thought battle was half the fun here." Abraham offered up.

Petel, of course, knew only one option and turned their gaze towards the sky to ask, "Paige?"

"They're still far enough away that continuing along would be a viable strategy." She said. "And it would at least discourage AIR from spawning anything worse as well as minimising the risk to the checkpoint."

Petel nodded to the group and said, "Settled."

"So be it." Vektor agreed. He dashed forward, taking the lead and next said, "Wolf, stay up front with me. Professor, you and Inferno make sure Doktor stays safe and keep an eye out for when they catch up to us."

Petel and Abraham gave their confirmation and even Dante gave a short, "O-Okay."

"That's a hefty 'when' and not 'if' there." Frank said as their group followed their Prince down the path.

"I'm aware of my lower Speed in comparison to all of you." Vektor replied, refreshingly straightforward for once. "The important thing, right now, is making progress."

Petel chuckled at his single-mindedness showing through. He may have gotten better about it, but he was still just a program. Frank and Abraham weren't as amused and Paige disagreed by retorting, "Just make sure you stay alert. I'll let you know if anything—"

Her sudden cut off made Petel look up, skidding to a halt. The rest of their procession stopped as well, just in time for a looming figure to leap out of the mists below and land in front of them. The thing's stitched together grey skin, its long coarse hair, and its animal-like limbs were just as chilling as last time. Petel recognised this thing.

"That's, uh. That's the Guardian."

Paige's voice echoing above snapped them out of their shock. Vektor narrowed his eyes and his visor flicked on over his face as if on reflex. Petel tensed their muscles, prepared for battle, and Abraham grabbed Frank in an attempt to drag the young scientist away, to prevent him from seeing or getting upset with the beast. Unfortunately, Frank was already advancing. It was already too late. Frank shouted in a booming, distorted voice, "I told you I never wanted to see you again!"

As the purple runes crawled up Frank's face, the air around them twitched to life as he called code into the area. Petel could already hear the desperate *danger, danger, danger* warning repeating in their head. Abraham continued restraining Frank to the best of his abilities, but a discoloured version of himself materialised and tore him off Frank.

Petel's ears flattened on their head and they whimpered a soft, "Not again."

"Not again?" Paige questioned.

This revived Abraham looked exactly like Dante that time Frank accidentally shot the fireball with the wrong bullet, only without the glitching. Green and purple garb, dead eyes as green as Frank's, and his weapons highlighted lavender. Similar versions of Petel and Dante rose as well from the code snapping about in the air, along with all the lingering enemy data. The same as last time. No off-colour versions of Vektor or Frank himself, strangely, nor any of Vektoria's gang. These off-colour versions of them turned familiar attacks on them and Dante shrieked. Petel swore loudly and tackled the Abraham copy away from their Huntsman, giving him time to shout, "He can just do that?"

"Those look like exact copies of yourselves, but under Frank's Control." Paige hummed softly in thought, then said, "Guess you're all pretty screwed."

Frank advanced towards the Resident, his arms outstretched and the runes bleeding off his hands. They melted into the air where they dripped off, making everything around him twitch erratically and seem as unreal as it actually was. The copy of Dante went with him instead of focusing on Petel or Abraham, wielding lavender flames menacingly.

Paige was right. They were pretty out of luck here.

Vektor summoned his key staff in a swift motion to assist Abraham in knocking the copy of Petel away from Dante. "I refuse to accept defeat like this." He shouted in frustration.

"Then good luck outrunning them, 'cause you remember that fighting them's pretty useless, right?" Paige pointed out.

Resident hesitated to back away so quickly this time. Even as the copy of Dante tossed fire and claws at it, it stood firm and grumbled, "So much anger you harbour against me. Do you truly remember who I am?"

Frank shouted back, voice too distorted by anger to be comprehensible. Petel wanted to keep watching, but the other revived enemies joined in on the battle and that Abraham copy slammed its rifle down against Petel's back, demanding their attention.

Paige was right again, they'd learned well enough last time that fighting anything was useless. Frank's powers would simply revive it the moment they defeated it.

Petel barked out a gruff, "Run!"

They rolled out of the way of another swing from that rifle, then bolted back the way they came. The two Spider Walkers Paige mentioned earlier reached them, engaged immediately in fending off a Zeppelin Whale and a Stinger. Still strange to see the enemies attacking each other, but at least they were distracted. Petel slid right beneath their legs and kept running. Vektor called after them, "Wolf, I thought we were going to press onward, not retreat."

"That way's open!" Abraham argued.

While it pained Petel to ditch their team like this, there was nothing they could do to help outside of carrying everyone. Their Speed was the highest, so it was unlikely anyone could keep up otherwise. They made a mental note to make up for it later as they reached their previous checkpoint.

Safely inside, they collapsed to the floor in a panting heap. Above them, Paige's voice came over and said, "I'll get you out in a mo', Petel. Vektor, I'd highly recommend you don't continue on. The next checkpoint's not for a while, as far as I can tell."

Petel was too far away to hear the others, but had no doubt that the Prince would give some stubborn and petulant reply. They shook their head as they regained their breathing and said, "Thanks, Paige."

Surprisingly, Dante slid into the checkpoint next, followed swiftly by Abraham. Petel had enough time to smile at the two before falling back to reality. When they landed on their human feet and the scanner doors opened, they were less winded but still wobbly.

They joined Paige by the computer, flopping across the back of her chair, and said, "That was not great."

"No kidding." She agreed.

She typed rapidly and didn't look up at them, so they allowed her to work. The other scanners opened, releasing Dante and Abraham. The Huntsman leaned against the side of his scanner and rubbed

at the back of his head through his wild red hair. At least, what wasn't pulled back in his short ponytail. "We really should have seen that coming." He said.

"Y-Yeah." Dante agreed, drifting over to stand by Paige and the computer. "That was. Um, Frank is — is pretty powerful."

Petel's ears would have perked right up if they still had them. Recognition of that companionship they all shared. "Sure is." They said as they ruffled a hand through his hair.

Dante batted them away, though smiled shyly. As he fixed his hair, Petel fell to apologetic.

"Sorry for leaving you all behind."

"No worries." Abraham waved Petel off easily, stepping over to join them. "I did the same, I forgot to grab Vektor to help him keep pace with us."

Dante nodded in agreement, wilting a bit. Petel looped their arms around the both of them and pulled the two into a tight hug to show their affection, what with their lack of tail to wag. Dante squeaked in surprise while Abraham laughed and returned the hug with enthusiasm. Petel was so grateful to have these friends for their pack.

The final two scanners opened and Petel released their mates in order to better see the remaining members tumble out onto the floor. Dante winced in sympathy and went to Frank's side, helping him sit up. Abraham and Petel followed, equally concerned. Frank groaned tiredly and rubbed at his head as he muttered, "That's another headache alright."

Vektor made a noise in aggravated agreement from his place on the floor. He at least caught himself from face planting into the ground. "Once again, I am forced to reiterate. There is no need to regard Resident as a hostile, Doktor. It is a Guardian and it will not attack us so long as we have you amongst our ranks."

Frank grimaced and ducked his head. "I don't wanna talk about it right now."

Petel helped Frank to his feet and said, "Later, then. When no robotic Princes are around."

While Vektor huffed at this, recognising that the jab was aimed at him, Frank giggled. "Are you implying there are others besides ours out there?" He asked. Then he continued swiftly with a definitive, "Deal. For now, we're just gonna have to head back empty-handed."

"Technically, we never return empty-handed." Paige said, putting the computer to sleep. She lifted Vektor off the ground, slinging his arm around her shoulders and illustrating her point without further explanation.

Abraham chuckled in agreement. "Correct you are."

She carried the Prince out, ignoring his protests over their treatment of him. Some days, he really couldn't fool them into treating him otherwise no matter how hard his programming tried. Abraham waved to them in parting, then headed out towards his own home. As Frank, Dante, and Petel

headed after Paige and towards the dorms, Dante quietly said, "That really means. Once we finish. Vektor will be — he won't. He won't b-be here anymore."

Frank grew similarly downcast. "Yeah. I almost forgot about that."

Petel frowned at the two's reactions, tilting their head to the side in confusion. "Don't you want him to get home?" They asked.

"Sure, of course I do." Frank straightened up, pretending to look as unbothered by this as possible. "It's just. Y'know. After becoming friends, I'm really gonna miss him."

Dante had to jolt forward to keep up while Petel ambled along at an easy pace. The snow lightened even more, but continued to fall around them and stuck to the ground, making it too cold to loiter outside. They entered the warmth and comfort of the dorms and Dante mumbled, "He's just, uh. A program. Following his code as written."

Petel gave it a moment of thought, then agreed. "Makes it hard to tell how much is genuine, how much is us projecting our own thoughts on him."

"But he's a learning program." Frank countered quickly. "Sure, he's more infuriating than he needs to be a lot of the time, but you gotta admit, no one's programming this many unique responses and stuff into a tutorial NPC. The level of artificial intelligence he's got — it's mind-boggling."

Dante nodded along vaguely, his voice quiet with bitterness. "The learning is. It's, um. Far more advanced than. Than anything I w-was expecting."

"Which means it's better than your parents' tech, yeah?"

Frank grinned cheekily up at Dante, who withdrew further in on himself. Petel rolled their eyes and said, "You're nicer to him than he deserves."

Frank said in a swift counter, "It's not just wolves that pack bond with things, Petel."

Dante rose his voice to be perfectly audible, actually upset at this. "He's sentient and his own person, e-even if he's — they — c-code and programming." He bowed his head and drew back, forcing himself to quiet down. "Even if he's. Incredibly infuriating."

Petel expected Frank to stick up for their robotic Prince. Seeing Dante do the same, in spite of Vektor's treatment, left them baffled. The wolf would have protested, as the Prince was too new to their pack and continually undervalued all of Dante's contributions, but it begrudgingly had to acknowledge that if Dante was going to stick up for Vektor, of all of them, then the fireball could very well handle himself.

Which, Dante had proven many times by this point. The wolf was simply getting overprotective again, unsure of how else to handle this attraction.

Frank patted Dante on the shoulder, saying, "That's a good way of putting it. Anyway, I gotta get some meds before this headache gets any worse. Night, mates."

He waved to them and walked up the stairs, leaving the lobby. Dante exhaled a shuddering breath. No steam this time. The fires roared in Petel's memory and the burns lingered in upset red splotches. Their fireball was danger and heat. All of it crawling just beneath his skin.

Petel was too fond of him to heed those warnings.

They offered their hand and asked, "Ready?"

Dante met their gaze and smiled wryly. "You, um. Don't have to wait for me."

"Sure don't."

They smiled brightly, not moving. It was no small victory that, even as he shook his head at their ridiculousness, Dante accepted that offered hand and they headed to their room together.

The next day, they all ignored Vektor's complaints over their focus on their schoolwork. Had to keep up their grades as part of the agreement allowing them all unrestricted access to the towers. Abraham sent them a heads up on his inability to join them for the day and Vektor headed off to sulk on his own. On their way to grab their violin after breakfast, Petel ran into Damon just outside the cafeteria. Just him, no Niculaie or Aglaé or any of his usual gang.

"Ah, the Wolf." Damon greeted somewhat stiffly, making sure to keep his distance for once. As if the wolf might bite. "Wasn't expecting to run into you here. Or, at all."

Petel smiled in amusement and pointed out, "I live here."

"I mean. You know what I mean." Damon waved them off, acting incredibly shifty for some reason. It was kind of amusing, seeing the smooth and confident Kingpin so flustered for once. "Anyway. So, uh. How's Abe been? It's been a record while since he last called us disgusting creatures of the night or whatever his phrase of the day is."

His forced casualness wasn't convincing at all. He and Niculaie were famously connected to the Huntsman, as they all lived in the same area, and it wasn't clear if they'd ever been friends. Paige and Frank had their theories and even Petel thought at first the Huntsman and the Vampire were simply having a lover's quarrel. What they were compelled to say, however, was, "You and Dante used to be close, too."

Damon bristled visibly, also interesting to see. From the short time Petel had been friends with him, the only thing to ever truly get under his skin like this was Paige's refusal to fall for his charms like the rest of the school. Even then, it hadn't visibly broken his careful facade of smooth, casual Kingpin. "Calling it 'close' is a gross overstatement." Damon scoffed. "My folks handle his parents' affairs, that's all."

"Why did you decide to cut him out until you made him an enemy?" They asked next.

Damon practically squirmed where he stood and he hissed a bit as he said, "Who said I ever liked him in the first place? We've always been forced to—"

He had to pause, to take a moment and recollect himself. They were happy to wait, observing this rare side of the Kingpin. After reconstructing his mask and making sure not even a hair was out of place, he met their gaze with a direct, warning glare.

"Look, Wolf. I get that you like to pry. It's in your nature. But stay out of this one. Nothing you uncover'll be worth the burns."

Taken aback, they responded automatically. "You don't know Dante if you think he'd put himself in a position to hurt anyone."

"Didn't you get the memo? Kid punched me in the face."

Damon rolled his head back in exasperation. Again, they couldn't help but instantly counter that claim. "Treated with disrespect, fire bites back."

He spared them a baleful look, then said, "I don't know why I'm arguing with you, the fearless wonder."

It really didn't make sense for him to act this ignorant of Dante's strengths, especially when taking into consideration that the two had, at the very least, been around one another in their early childhoods. It was very immature.

In that moment, it was blatantly obvious that the two had indeed been close at one point.

How ridiculous.

"I'm not telling you to stop being his friend or anything, trust me. I'm not that stupid." Damon clarified. "Just. Be prepared to find out exactly how dangerous that Fireball is once he pops."

Petel scrunched up their nose in distaste, a snarl curling their lips to bare their teeth. "Yasha says those things, too."

Though newly intrigued, Damon could see that getting any further civil conversation out of the wolf was impossible. He gave a short parting, then smartly retreated for the time being. They snorted after him in disgust, finally understanding Paige's disdain for this Kingpin.

Whatever relationship Dante and Damon had before, Damon seemed convinced that it was worthless now. Dante, too, seemed to have cast the Kingpin aside entirely. A pack mate's well-being took priority, so Petel wouldn't hold back from biting next time Damon dared to speak of their friend with such a flippant attitude.

Frank approached and asked, "Was that Asheford just now?"

The wolf was sated instantly on seeing their actual friend. "He asked how Abraham was." They reported.

"That figures." Frank said with a small laugh. It petered out and he fidgeted awkwardly where he stood. "Hey, um. You know how you offered to talk with me later?"

Petel turned their full attention onto him. "Is it later now?"

"Yeah. Uh."

Frank glanced around the area briefly, then grabbed Petel's wrist and led them inside the main school building. Finding a nice, private place for their talk, apparently, since outside was too cold and both of their rooms were likely to hold an extra pair of ears. Petel went along easily, allowing Frank to decide what constituted a safe enough space for this talk.

"Thanks for this, by the way." Frank said as he wove his way down the halls, searching for an empty and open classroom.

"Of course." Petel said simply.

"It's kinda stupid, but. I really appreciate that you're willing to hear me out."

"If it helps to talk it out, then it's not stupid." They assured him.

Frank found an open room and ushered them both inside. It looked to be Miss Honda's class, as Petel recognised the Calculus equations still scribbled on the board from Paige's assignments. The picturesque Egyptian deserts and Japanese cherry blossoms plastered on the walls were good tells, too.

They took a seat at one of the desks and Frank hopped up on the one in front of them, sitting backwards with his feet on the chair in order to face them.

"Okay. So." He began, gearing up in a way that told of not being completely sure where he was going with this. "This is going to sound crazy, but. That thing. The Guardian. It — It reminds me of my dad."

Petel frowned, perplexed. "Do you not get along with him?"

"Kinda? I guess you could say that." He shrugged, unsure. "He left, like, right after I was born, so. I don't even remember him, I just know what my mum and William have said about him."

They drew back, even more confused. Quickly, he waved his hands in protest.

"I know, I know, that's why I said it's crazy. I have no memory of him, but. This particular Guardian, it — it triggers that anger in me and I just. I end up losing it."

He bowed his head and kicked at the chair, his normal boisterous energy subdued in his admission. Petel didn't want to probe, but they also desperately wanted to probe. "What do you know about your father?"

Snapping upright, he grew annoyed just thinking it over. "Not that much. Mum said, even when he was around, he was pretty stand-offish and obsessed with his work. Sometimes, I think she's glad that he just disappeared one day. William doesn't remember much, either, but he said that. Well."

His annoyance turned to melancholy and he went back to tapping his toes against the seat of the chair. It was the same hesitance that Jonathan or anyone else had when talking about William's condition. They recognised it and waited for him to make the decision whether or not to voice it.

"You, um. You know how William. He's gotta live off-campus?" He paused and Petel nodded in affirmation. After another minute, he rushed out the rest of his words. "He got that from our dad. Apparently, sickness just runs in that side of our family."

Petel gave a hum in thought at this information. After a moment, they asked, "Did it not get you?"

"Apparently!" He threw his arms up in aggravation. "Mum said I was super sick when I was born, but I just shook it off or something because here I am, fit as any other kid my age." He settled down, glaring off to the side as he grumbled. "It's crazy. William's been dealing with it his whole life, but me. I'm totally fine. Got nothing to show for someone I can't even say I knew, and still can't help but hate."

His fingers clenched around the edge of the desk, curled up tight enough to show some real strain. Again, Petel had no basis for relating on this topic. Their parents were dead without leaving any such complicated feelings. Perhaps that was weird in itself, but it did make finding some sort of reply a lot harder than it should have been.

"I guess. All I can say, in the end, is that I'll try my best not to let it get to me like that again." He said with an air of finality, hopping to his feet and down from the desk. "Thanks for letting me get all that stuff outta my head. That helped a lot."

They nodded in reply, then said, "You bring life to those around you."

"What?"

He frowned, bemused by such an oddly disconnected statement. Undeterred, they explained, "Your powers in the game are to heal and revive. You can't directly attack because you're meant to be life itself."

After a good minute of staring at them, searching for some sort of meaning or reason for this, he laughed brightly and patted their arm amicably. "Mate, that's a pretty philosophical take on my shitty build. You're reaching a bit there."

"I've been thinking about it. Why our forms in the game are the way they are." They said with an air of pride. "I'm wolf, Dante is fire, Abraham's a hunter, and you're life."

Frank went to retort, but paused to think it over. "I guess. That does make some kind of sense. You might have a point in there." He mumbled.

They had him. Their grin widened as they went on. "Vektor says he's a Prince, but he's really a knight. Loyal to a fault and protective of what he believes."

"Yeah. Yeah!" Frank hopped in excitement. "Zima's a bat since she's energetic, Vladimirescu's a vampire 'cause it's in his heritage, Desrosier is a beast underneath all that beauty, Asheford's similarly a demon, and Vektoria's sneaky and conniving enough to earn her Thief title."

Petel tilted their head in confusion at that last one, prompting him to grimace at the thought.

"Let's just say she makes Health a chaotic experience when she's in the mood to needle our Prince."

That explained it alright. They wrinkled their nose, making him laugh at their very clear agreement. From the few times they had seen the two computer programs in the midst of their petty arguing, they absolutely believed Frank's description to be entirely accurate and also a woeful understatement. They said, "I'm glad he's our headache instead of her."

"Hard same." Frank agreed, mimicking their resignation. After a moment, he snapped upright and said, "Speaking of classes, though, I've gotta go work on my assignments if I want 'em done before they're all due tomorrow. Wanna join me until lunch?"

"Sure." They smiled, standing to stretch out their back. "My room, though. Easier to practice there than in the Library."

He gave an intrigued, "Got Music stuff, huh? I don't think I've ever heard you practice before."

The two of them headed back to the dorms, sharing in less serious topics. Frank asked which bands they were into specifically, which was mostly grunge or classical or whatever they could get their hands on. Pretty much anything Sonya introduced them to. Frank gave a few recommendations of his own favourites, none of which Petel recognised, though he explained them to be jazz or rhythm and blues. They were both so involved in this conversation that Frank forgot about his own work and had to duck out after they reached Petel's room.

Dante was inside, as expected. They gave a wave in greeting and, also predictably, Dante closed his sketchbook so they couldn't see what he was working on. He did wave in return and even smiled a little. Their entire body swelled with positivity and, oh yeah, they were still crushing pretty hard on their roommate. They pulled out their violin, revelling in the way it got his full attention instantly, and they hummed a few notes experimentally, recalling the tune Levy whistled after Band the other day.

Frank returned not too long later, taking over Petel's desk and listening to their playing. He fit in so naturally, as if this were his own room. After lunch break, Paige joined them and she and Frank quickly devolved into their usual discussion of gossip. Dante went back to his sketchbook, but Petel listened to Frank and Paige's voices intently, matching their energy as they practised.

"I really think Juarez is more likely to be interested in Sorala or Gaëlle than Zamorano, of all people." Paige said, going at an impressive rapid fire pace. This was really her element. "I mean, that lazybones? Really? I'd believe her dating Karpusi number three before him."

Frank nodded along, following perfectly. "It really is a shame about that crush Gus has on Sorala. But if you don't think it's Huesos, then who could Juarez be crushing on? Cirino said Huesos has been actually active in things lately, so he's also gotta be motivated by something."

"Could be impressing Molotch." Paige supplied. "I've seen Huesos hanging around that Beatbox when he isn't bothering Voclairn or the Rose sisters. Oh, by the way, I heard that Raptis and Aniketos made their relationship official the other day."

"Nice." Frank clapped his hands together in delight. "It only took them, what, two years to admit they've been snogging behind closed doors?"

"How do you — nevermind." Paige rubbed a hand over her face as Frank laughed at her aborted question. "I really don't have any idea for Juarez besides Sorala or Gaëlle. How much do you wanna bet Demir will do something about her crush on Angelov this term?"

"My bet's on next term, before summer break. Mini's not completely sure if she should take the risk yet." Frank said, arms crossed and suddenly serious. "I'll bet Wendell will confess to Pedreira — the tame one — before the term's up, though. They've been making eyes at each other forever, Jonathan said."

Paige laughed and said, "I'll take that bet, I don't think the Hound's got it in him to admit he's even chasing that fox. Usual terms okay with you?"

"Absolutely." Frank agreed.

The two shook on it, all business-like and utterly incomprehensible. Petel ended their piece and pulled their violin away from their chin as they said, "I don't get how you two find so much gossip."

"It's a really small school." Paige said, flippant as she shrugged. "Where I went for Primary, I didn't even know the rest of my grade. Here, it's easy to learn everyone's names."

"And it's fun to see what all drama everyone's up to." Frank said, grinning in good humour. "Especially when they get loud about it and announce things in the middle of classes. Or out in the courtyard."

"It's also a way to pass the time." Paige admitted, growing a bit self-conscious. "Our bets are just a bit of fun. No harm, no foul, really."

"Yeah, we've both been wrong plenty of times and had a good laugh about it." Frank said next. "There's no way either of us are crazy enough to force things one way or another. Observing's easier and more fun."

"Interfering would be cheating them the development they need to admit their feelings."

Paige and Frank nodded to one another, in agreement about these boundaries. It was still weird. Petel shook their head at them fondly, then took a seat on their bed and set about taking care of their violin. "Kalyuga's birthday is at the end of the month." They said, changing the subject.

Paige perked up at the mention of their friend. "Right, it is. We'll have to plan something for her as well."

"I wonder if she'd appreciate getting more rubber ducks for her collection." Frank mused, pretending to give the thought the utmost seriousness. "D'ya wager she'll ever get tired of being associated with them?"

Levy had told Petel about it; that rubber ducks were an inside joke around the Vicario Company's offices and how they became an encouraging symbol for her, as she had her heart set on working there. She loved getting them so much that she vowed to amass her own army, thus beginning her obsession in earnest. Smiling, Petel said, "Not a chance."

It was similar to Sonya's obsession with bird feathers and how he always wished to fly with them one day. Had they all met when they were younger, Petel was sure their bonds would be even stronger than they were today. But that was sort of a useless train of thought considering how they were all here now, close as they were after a single year together.

Their mind turned to Dante, who continued sketching and tuning out the conversation. Would they have become friends with the fireball had they met him earlier in their life? Or would Dante insist on keeping them at a distance like he continued doing now? It was hard to say for certain, as they couldn't clearly recall much of their life before the wolf took residence in their mind. They weren't sure if Dante had always been this afraid, either.

Dante noticed their stare and looked up, squirming uncomfortably in his seat. "Um. Did you have, uh. Something to. Um." He stuttered, unable to form a complete question.

Frank and Paige looked to Petel as well. Petel smiled and said, "I'm glad we're friends."

Dante seemed more confused than before, but Paige and Frank whooped in whole-hearted agreement. Petel packed away their violin, finished with its maintenance, and went to sit down on Dante's bed. It crowded the fireball, as Paige and Frank were seated on Dante's side of the room too, and it was a great improvement that Dante didn't squeak or otherwise freak out. He merely accepted this and gave a quiet, "Me, too."

It was even less begrudging than before. They were getting through to him. Petel's smile broadened into a grin and they listened as Paige and Frank launched right back into their gossip, tossing around the names of their school mates with a blinding speed and having fun in all their speculations.

Unquestioningly, without a doubt, Petel loved them all.

Chapter 7: Cold Snap

"We need to get moving or Vektoria will overtake us." Vektor stressed to them during lunch on Friday.

It had been a whole week since they last played the game. One blissfully normal and safe week in which they did their schoolwork and concerned themselves with regular school activities. Dante even kept Yasha at bay with the suggestion of fire, the reminder of heat, whenever they crossed paths. It kept Petel out of the dumpster and free of that cretin, but it seemed to spark a strange curiosity in Vladimir. The taller guy had to be dragged away every time and Dante really hoped to avoid that confrontation for as long as possible.

Vektor, however, seemed to have lost his patience. "I can't say whether she's gaining on us or if she's passed us yet, but either is hardly preferable." He said. "We should head back in as soon as possible so that we may make progress this time."

Their break was mostly for Frank's benefit, allowing him the time to cool off after his whole Berserk thing. Thinking of that revived copy of himself as focused on a single directive as it had been (attack, attack, always just attack) was enough to make Dante shudder. This small break allowed the spectres to settle as well. For some reason, all the wards he'd placed in his room to keep them at bay had gone missing after the Holidays. Strange behaviour for them to change anything while he wasn't present.

Before Vektor could keep going, Levy cut him off with a sarcastic, "We get it, chap. You don't have to keep saying it."

"Do you really?" Vektor asked, mirroring that annoyance right back at him.

"Yes, we do." Paige answered, dragging a hand down her face. "Let's plan for Sunday, I've got too much to worry about tomorrow."

"That's—!"

Vektor sputtered, growing increasingly upset. Abraham said, "Sunday works for me, too." He leaned back in his seat and stretched his arms above his head. "We're doing some extra work for Theatre today after classes and that promises to bleed into Saturday. I'll be much more free Sunday, once all that's finished."

Again, Vektor tried to protest. "You can't expect me to—"

"Settled, we're going Sunday." Frank interrupted, standing and grabbing his tray. The bells rang, signalling the end of lunch, and the rest of them stood to head out as well. "I've got plans to help Jonathan in the labs, so I'll see everyone for supper."

Kalyuga and Sonya chorused their well wishes and left things at that. Vektor remained at the table, petulantly holding back what was no doubt a tantrum. Dante waited until the others were far enough away, then softly said to the Prince, "Surely, they must have programmed you with patience."

"How can I be patient?" Vektor grumbled, settling on a pout. "If that Thief surpasses us, then she'll cause even more chaos for our people and the kingdom could be lost."

"That's not how the story goes." Dante countered.

Vektor went to reply, then paused as he had to think it over. It took maybe only a second for him to finally force out a robotic, "Error — Missing Dialogue — Story_response4."

Dante wrinkled his nose, glad the others weren't around to hear this. "Yeah. That sounds about right." He mumbled to himself as he turned his back on the Prince and headed towards the Art room.

They tore the shadow child in two, but neglected to make either part whole afterwards. They tore them despite already having a child. How typical for them to leave the details unfinished, leave it to fill in later once they had access to their Babbling Artist and his creativity.

They picked him clean. Pick, pick, pick. He was so over what they had done to him.

He took a deep breath to settle that annoyance burning in his throat. It wasn't Vektor's fault that these Creators had such skewed priorities. It wasn't Vektor's fault that Dante was blessed with these accursed fires beneath his skin or that Vektor was a constant reminder of the Hell he'd left behind.

Art was enjoyable, at least. Dante could ignore Damon completely and just focus on the assignments and whatever lesson Mister Lee had for the day. He was getting more confident in his lesson plans, it seemed, which meant Dante could have more fun interpreting them creatively.

When Petel wasn't practising for class, they tended to spend time studying at the library with Sonya, Levy, and Kalyuga. Dante caught himself sketching the wolf twice now; the way they moved and their serious expression was so intriguing. He wanted to copy them onto paper, to explore more sides of the wolf than he had with his holiday painting for them.

That painting remained up on the wall of their room, above Petel's bed. Dante had taken special care with the eyes, of course. Petel's eyes were so lovely. The desire to sculpt those eyes and pull them out of his paper was near overwhelming.

His Create wasn't stable enough for something like that, however. He was fire and danger. He couldn't put on a tea party for his old friends and that was much less complicated than enhancers and all their parts.

At breakfast that Sunday, Vektor practically vibrated in his seat, barely able to restrain his impatience. That certainly answered Dante's question on the matter. Frank and Levy teased the Prince mercilessly for it and Sonya mentioned that Vektor tended to pace whenever he had an idea stuck in his head, even leaving to walk the campus after hours if it bothered Sonya too much. Paige gave a pointed, "We can't make much progress if you're too tired to do anything, you know."

"I never tire." Vektor replied succinctly.

"Pfft. Okay." Levy shook his head at the Prince. "That's some poppycock if I've ever heard it. Whatever helps your boat float."

"Returning to my home before that Thief would settle my nerves immensely." Vektor shot back, not missing a beat.

Levy grimaced, though didn't argue further. Which, of course, got Petel to growl in warning. Their usual display of protectiveness. It was expected and normal by this point. Also annoyed, Sonya asked, "Is that all you're capable of thinking of?"

Vektor actually paused a moment to contemplate the question. It seemed so simple to deduce what was going on in that processor, but Dante remembered being surprised by it as well. The more time Vektor spent with them, the more he adapted to their styles and priorities. Reaching some decision, Vektor said, "I enjoy the time I spend with Jonathan."

Paige looked to Frank in alarm while the rest of them sat there in confusion. Of course, logically, Vektor was capable of interacting with others at this school, if through the classes he took and nothing else. Hearing about it seemed so wrong, though. Vektor was just an AI program. A bunch of coding parading around, doing its best to pretend it wasn't scrambled together.

"I also value all of your friendship." The Prince went on, holding up his wrist for emphasis. That charm bracelet dangled there, each one jangling with the action and its golden links glinting in the light. "I appreciate that my understanding of these realms has expanded so vastly and, through whatever means necessary, if you'll have me, I'd like to come back and visit even after returning home."

Both Frank and Sonya swelled up with joy. "Of course we'll have you." Sonya assured the Prince.

"I'm so glad you liked that." Frank said next.

Petel gave a grumbled, "I'll allow it."

The wolf didn't seem overly fond of Vektor, not that Dante could fault them. It was so different from the way Petel accepted Dante into this pack, as they called it. Dante was convinced there was no way he could understand it, though he desperately wished to ask and settle that burning curiosity at the tip of his tongue at times.

Vektor certainly didn't count as human, being half shadow and all coding. Did Petel, though? The child known as the Wolf around their school who stopped feeling fear, who snarled wordlessly in their intense emotional responses, had certainly discarded some level of humanity.

As had Dante. The fires licked at his throat, a reminder that he'd never be free of them. A reminder of their promise to consume him.

He shuddered at the thought and disregarded it. Perhaps the idea of humanity needed a thorough definition before he could categorise himself or any of his friends.

As they all waited for Abraham to arrive, Sonya and Levy eagerly explored this friendship they had with Vektor in vastly different manners. While Levy teased and prodded, trying to find a point at which the computer program might get upset or ruffled, Sonya pursued information, asking question after question about even the most mundane things. Vektor seemed confused by Levy's attempts, but happily gave Sonya every single answer. His home was the Mainframe Kingdom. He was forbidden from leaving the castle due to the danger of the Mainframe. He was trained since childhood in combat, to keep peace in his kingdom and help it thrive.

Both methods were gathering knowledge and, again, Dante wondered how this mischievous cat could remain such good friends with a nervous birdie when they were so different.

The sight of the three of them was interesting enough to make Dante's fingers twitch restlessly. Drawing those he saw daily could only end in disaster. If he could project onto Jonathan without meaning to, then it was best to ignore a more dangerous impulse like this.

They all left the cafeteria and met up with Abraham before Dante could grab his sketchbook. As the Huntsman greeted them, he lamented, "Trudging through this snow just to enter a frozen tundra makes it hard to really get motivated."

"Speak for yourself." Petel teased with a grin.

They separated from Sonya and Levy, who headed back to the dorms together. Frank latched onto one of Vektor's arms and asked, "What's the next level gonna be like? C'mon, get us hyped to get through the rest of this one."

Vektor stumbled, thrown off-balance and asked in return, "How will knowing what awaits us help us get through the Tundra any quicker?"

"Duh, motivation."

Frank beamed up at him. Paige gave a contemplative, "I'm interested, too, actually. You called it the Brown Hollows, right? Compared to the White Forest and the Grey Tundra, or even your Mainframe Kingdom, it doesn't really tell us what to expect."

They walked through the outside eating area, staying out of the snow as long as possible even if it made the walk just a bit longer. Abraham said, "It certainly is a curious choice of word."

That was a good point. As they stepped out into the snow, their footsteps crunching as they went, Dante realised that he never really questioned it, since English had so many intricacies that he long since resigned himself to never fully understanding. But what, exactly, was a hollow? Was it plural? He couldn't even say based on its design, as this was his first time experiencing any of these levels. Vektor frowned and said, "The Hollows are a broken place and the residence of the Librarian, Latin. I wouldn't know how to describe it any more than that."

Paige let out a disappointed exhale as they reached the tower. She opened the doors and reminded them, "Shake the snow off your boots before you go in."

"I guess that's fair. You see things weirdly and all." Frank admitted in defeat.

Abraham shook out his coat to get the snow off his shoulders and asked, "How would you describe the White Forest and Grey Tundra to us, then?"

"I've already done so." Vektor replied, taken aback. "Don't you recall? It was the first thing I said when we entered both times, welcoming you to each level."

The misunderstanding clicked for all of them then and Dante said, "That wasn't. Uh, th-those weren't. We mean, um, a visual description."

Paige closed the doors now that they were all inside and stomped the snow off her own boots before going to sit at the computer. Vektor's frown fell to one of frustration and Frank released him to give the Prince an encouraging pat on the arm. "Guess we'll just have to wait and see for ourselves, huh?" He said, teasing just a bit.

"Visually." Vektor pondered to himself, too deep in concentration to notice Frank's light jab. While Frank, Abraham, and Petel went off to a scanner each, Vektor remained at the entrance. Dante hung by him, unwilling to wait in a den where shadows gathered. Finally, Vektor's head snapped back up and he said, "I'm not sure my descriptions would be sufficient, but I can tell you that the classification in the code for the Hollows is 'city' and at its centre is the Library."

"A-A city?" Dante asked, too surprised to stop himself.

Frank cheered. "Sewers level!"

"Not a sewer level, please." Abraham groaned in contrast.

Petel laughed at the two's reactions and Paige asked, "Is that enough motivation for you?"

"What do you mean, sewer level?" Vektor asked.

He went to the centre scanner, so Dante entered the remaining empty one to wait. Paige loaded them in shortly after and they all landed inside their most recent checkpoint of the Grey Tundra. Not that Dante could much tell the difference between all of them. Despite everything, he'd forgotten a moment that they were here and not somewhere else. As they all filed out and onto the path of ice, footsteps crunching like snow. Frank said, "Of course you wouldn't know, but it's a whole trope that there's always a sewer level in video games. While not technically true one hundred percent of the time, it does happen often enough that it sure seems like it is."

Abraham heaved out a breath as he pulled his crosses off his belt. "No kidding. Pretty much every FPS I've ever played has one. You'd think it'd grow old hat for the developers after a while."

Vektor swung out his key staff into existence, frowning at all of this information. Dante never had any normal games to play, so hearing about them (and that Abraham, who seemed the most mature

after Paige, even played them) was a bit bewildering. Petel remained quiet, listening to the conversation attentively, so at least Dante wasn't alone in this.

"Are there any enemies we need to watch out for, Paige?" Abraham called up towards the sky.

Apparently, playing video games was a natural part of life. As much as it could be when they were all so connected to this one, down to their framework. Paige said, "Looks like there's a few Stingers ahead, but that's still a ways off from your position."

"Just a few? Should be easy after last time." Petel said with a grin.

Abraham nodded and the two took off down the path. Petel was faster, taking the lead over him, though that didn't seem to deter the Huntsman. Vektor made a noise in distaste and called after them, "Please, allow me to lead. I know where we're going."

"It's a straight path, though. They're not gonna get lost." Frank pushed Vektor along, getting them started after the two. "They're gonna leave us behind if we don't hurry, c'mon."

Though upset, Vektor obliged and hurried after the other two with Frank. Dante glanced back towards the empty, cold path behind him for a moment. No Guardian, no enemies. Not even any Zeppelin Whales. Just the grey of the ice, the mist below, and the cloudy sky. After last time, he really expected to see those revive doubles again.

Lavender fire burned hotter than the red and yellow he usually used. It was something to try, something to think about should he ever open his skin and reveal them again.

Petel and Abraham slowed to an easier pace, walking side by side now. They were too fast for Vektor to surpass them, almost intentionally so, but Frank and Vektor stuck as close as they could. Frank said, "So, by a few, you meant three, right, Paige?"

"Yes, there are three." Paige replied. "Sorry I wasn't specific before, the signals weren't consistent for a bit there."

Vektor frowned up at the sky. "They weren't consistent?"

"Yeah, but they've settled now. And you've almost reached them."

Petel hopped forward just enough to get ahead of Abraham, who readied his crosses just as eagerly. As she said, the three Stingers soon flew into view above them. "I've got the one on the left." Petel declared.

They leapt into the air and sliced at its fins. Immediately, the three rose their stinger tails, prepared to strike. Sneaking past them was never an option in the first place. Dante lamented the lost opportunity to go without fighting just once as Abraham tossed his crosses out and said, "I'll handle the one on the right, then."

"Meaning we get the middle one." Frank said, an odd giddiness to his tone despite his inability to directly harm anything. Dante still found that very odd. Frank jostled Vektor out of contemplation

with a push on the shoulder, which made his armour clank against itself. "You gotta be the one who starts it, I can't do anything."

"Right. Of course." Vektor said, his voice a bit more robotic than it was previously. As he formed a glowing light in his free hand, which manifested as a giant ball of ice, his tone evened out back to normal. "My apologies, I reached a conclusion based on the information relayed that was both alarming and a bit distressing."

"Wow, you actually named some emotions." Abraham caught his crosses as they circled back to him and spared a moment to grin at the Prince. "You've come a long way, mate."

Vektor chucked the ice boulder as Petel dodged each of the three Stingers' strikes. They all targeted the wolf as they darted about, the closest thing to strike. As the ice shattered on impact and rolled off the middle Stinger's body in uneven shards, Vektor looked to Abraham and said, "We're not even halfway through our journey, that's not a long way at all."

"And there's our robotic Prince." Frank said, rolling his eyes.

Abraham laughed as he tossed out his crosses once more, which struck along the rightmost Stinger's fin. Petel leapt onto the back of the left one, digging their claws into it. A favourite strategy of theirs, Dante had noticed. Vektor lobbed another ice boulder at the middle one and it shattered in notably the same pattern as before. Paige's voice above them said, "Good work, chaps. Petel, that one's got 45% health left. The one you've got, Abraham, is at 65%. Vektor, yours still has 50% left."

"I can't do two more and perform my duties as your guide." Vektor grumbled. He turned on Dante suddenly and said, "You should be helping as well, Inferno."

"I — uh." Dante hiccuped, too surprised by the quick shift to reply without stuttering. "My — um. My fire doesn't — it won't reach."

"Concentrate." Vektor ordered.

Petel dodged another attack while Abraham continued with his crosses. The middle Stinger was preoccupied with Petel but that was just for now. It would notice them, too. The fires thrummed in a wavering mess as Dante struggled to find something, anything, to explain how focusing that much wasn't possible. Not right now. Maybe not ever.

The fire lived. The fire breathed. And its core was too tangled to properly grow in someone like Dante.

Frank smacked Vektor's armour again and said, "Make another boulder."

Vektor's frown lost its frustration for confusion, but he did so without any arguments. Frank looked next to Dante with an understanding and gentle smile.

"Now you, put your fire in there. That way, it's easier for you to make it travel."

"His fire inside my attack?" Vektor questioned. "I'm not sure the code will mesh properly. But let's test and see."

The Prince offered the ice boulder towards Dante, actually willing to try this and listen to someone else's strategy. Too curious, Dante reminded himself. Always too curious.

They would die by that curiosity. Both of them.

He was the misfit yet again.

He swept some of his fire into his hand (it was being extra unruly today, concentrating into too big a glob), then shoved his fist and fire combo into the boulder as deep as his arm would allow. The coding melted for him, allowing him to alter it and place that fire at its centre.

Once he withdrew his hand, Vektor threw the boulder immediately at their target, wasting as little time as possible. The boulder struck and shattered once more, this time in a completely different pattern and freed the fire within.

Dante gripped his hands into fists, doing his best to keep it burning. He helped it spread across the Stinger's wings, up its tail, along its underside, until it engulfed the entire thing. Embers spilled off onto the other two Stingers, who were too close to avoid the collateral (and Dante winced as the fire grew, grew, all it wanted to do was consume), and it didn't take long before the Stinger's form fizzled out.

Though Dante attempted to rein the fires back, to draw them to him once more, they jumped to the Stinger on the right, Abraham's target, and devoured its body whole as well.

Frank watched in awe, his jaw hanging open. Abraham gave an encouraging whoop. Vektor said, "A successful experiment. Perhaps we should work this into our future strategies."

"Holy shit, Dante, you're just eating through what's left of their health." Paige said, sounding as awed as Frank looked. "Did Vektor's magic do something to your damage output?"

Dante wasn't breathing. Fire needed oxygen to burn and the only way he could get it to stop, stop before it melted the whole place was to hold his breath. The moment the right Stinger's code fizzled out, the fire had nothing left and Dante's concentration rebounded right back at him in full force. He stumbled back a step, gasping in a deep breath as the fires around him dipped and wavered unsteadily. "Um. Uh."

"This is what I'm talking about." Vektor sighed, easily sliding right back into annoyance. "We could be handling things much more smoothly if only you'd utilise that power of yours, Inferno."

Dante panted, hardly even able to hear Vektor. For a second, a brief second there, he was nearly consumed himself. They lived just beneath his skin, broiling and burning and starving.

He was fire and danger and consuming. Endlessly consuming. Petel spoke of devouring, of being a wolf, but fire burned. It burned and burned and burned and Dante kept it hungry, purposely starved it until he had no hopes of stopping it from biting down on flesh—

Frank and Abraham startled out of their argument with the Prince by Petel's yelp of pain. All of their focus snapped back to the battle still happening in front of them. The remaining Stinger Petel stood on took advantage of their distraction. Frank started forward though there was nothing he could do (the fire ate the code, it burned everything up, nothing left, nothing left). Abraham swapped to his rifle and Petel rolled out of the way of the next strike, dragging their claws along the Stinger's back and ripping into it, destabilising the code there.

Then, in a brilliantly foolish move, they took a running leap off the Stinger and shouted, "Catch me."

Dante and Frank cried out, startled. Abraham and Paige both shouted back, "What are you doing?"

"Wolf, no!" Vektor joined in.

They fell towards the abyss. Instinct drove Dante stumbling forward, too concerned to bother with his unsteady footing. He swept his fire out in a claw, once again grabbing Petel out of the sky before they could fall into the mists below. It was too rough, too tight, but he got Petel back to the path and deposited them onto their feet before the fire could catch. Before it could destroy them, too. He recalled it a bit too quickly and it rose around him in a flare. He stumbled again, this time crashing to the icy path on his butt.

Abraham made short work of the remaining Stinger while Frank checked on Petel. Vektor, of course, was furious. "Why would you go for a risky manoeuvre such as that?" The Prince asked, his eyes glowing from how intense the emotion was. "Inferno hasn't proven his reliability enough for something so dangerous. You could have been voided and lost."

"I knew he wouldn't let me fall." Petel said, smiling directly at Dante instead of properly addressing Vektor.

Vektor made some noise in frustration. All of his logical, limited ways of evaluating the situation couldn't account for the spontaneity of humans. Or the recklessness of one wolf. Dante wasn't sure he could ever really grow used to that, either. Above them, Paige said, "You should probably heal them, Frank, they're barely hanging on at 10%."

"Sheesh, any closer and I'd need to revive you instead."

Frank swapped out the bullets in his gun. Dante stood on his wobbly, unsteady feet and said, "Please don't, um. Don't do that again."

"Yeah, kinda too freaky." Petel agreed, as laid back as ever about these sorts of things. They took the shot from Frank, then said, "Let's keep going."

"Yes, we're too close to our next checkpoint to fail after all that."

Vektor took the lead, steaming but working out that anger with his charge forward. Petel comfortably loped along after him, leaving Frank, Abraham, and Dante to follow after. Dante stumbled in his hurry, nearly falling again, and had to stay a few steps behind the Huntsman so as to keep him out of range of the fires. They flickered in uncertainty around Dante's feet, mirroring his own unsteadiness.

He took uneven and deep breaths. One, two, three; inhale. One, two, three; exhale.

"It's alright for you to be wary of this power you apparently possess." Abraham said.

Panic spiked through Dante and he stumbled, making his fires flare up. "Huh?" He asked dumbly.

"Admittedly, I wasn't wholly convinced before, but this definitely proves your strength. At least, it does so in my eyes." Abraham continued. "Being cautious with it, knowing it could greatly harm the rest of us were you not to take as many precautions as you do, is just fine. Wise and quite adult, even. Don't let Vektor tell you otherwise, his impatience seems to make him unreasonable."

Abraham smiled encouragingly and the fires settled. It was okay to be afraid. It was okay to take caution. Dante was dangerous.

They all knew this. Abraham knew this. Yet still, they refused to abandon him.

"I'm not that impatient." Vektor protested in a huff.

In perfect unison, Abraham, Frank, and Petel all said, "Yes you are."

Indignant now, Vektor went to argue, but stopped right as they came upon the next checkpoint. His expression changed in an instant to elation and he ran the rest of the way, saying instead, "Here we are, the fourth checkpoint."

"Wow. We're almost done here." Frank said.

In a flash of golden light, Vektor had the glacial structure open and active for them. Paige asked, "Gonna keep on? Or are we stopping for the day?"

"Regrettably, we must adjourn." Vektor said, hanging forward in defeat. "I only have enough magic for the next checkpoint. Were we to run into more enemies, I wouldn't be able to help fight them off."

"But we've got all of us and Dante." Frank noted, gesturing to their group. "I've still got most of my health shots. I can keep our wolf here alive."

"While I'm proud of your willingness to take a break, I'm inclined to agree with Frank." Paige said, making them all look towards the sky. "The path's pretty clear right now, so might as well try it, right?"

Petel nodded along, eager to continue. That adventurous spirit refused to pause. Dante really admired that recklessness sometimes.

It was a bit too taxing, what they asked. The fires thrummed with his heart, still starving and unruly and roaring.

But he had to try. For his friends, he wanted to try and ignite that Change inside him.

Unable to refuse them this opportunity, Vektor grinned triumphantly as he gestured for them all to continue following him. "Well, if you're confident, I'm sure we'll manage."

Frank cheered, then hopped along with Abraham and Petel. The wolf overtook the other two with ease and Dante stayed behind them all at a safe distance. Abraham's words were comforting, but he was right. Dante was dangerous and volatile. The more he extended himself, the more his fires threatened to bite back. Controlling them was much the same as stuffing ravioli until it burst.

He kept them wrapped beneath his flesh until they burst from him. He hated them, hated these fires, hated his flesh.

A burst of chill in the air made him shiver. Though there didn't appear to be anything within visibility, his fires flared up defensively. They were surrounded by ice, it didn't make much sense for the air to grow colder. But Dante's breath suddenly steamed in the air. The new drop in temperature made the fires and his skin burn hotter.

"Uh-oh." Paige's voice came over next, heightening that terror gripping his chest. "That doesn't look good. Watch out, looks like there's something—"

She was too late in warning them. A wave of ice blasted into view and over all of them with enough force to knock Frank off his feet. The flames reacted instinctively, rising around Dante in a protective pillar and keeping most of the shock wave from reaching him. The snaps of cold air that did make it through were piercingly cold, making him flinch in pain.

This was familiar.

It was ice instead of fire.

Just as deadly, maybe, but it wasn't him. He didn't do this.

The sheets of ice subsided after an agonising few minutes and the fires melted back into their place once the danger had passed. Now that he could see again, he was startled to find himself completely alone. Panicking, he called up towards the sky, "P-Paige! Did, uh. Are Petel and them—?"

"Yeah, everyone got taken out." She answered his unfinished question. "Whatever that attack was, it rinsed through all of your health. It even took you down to 15%, Dante."

Dante put it together quickly. "A Berserk."

"My thoughts exactly." Vektor agreed, though his voice was distant.

"Whose do you think it was?" Frank asked next, sounding closer and alright. As he continued, Dante relaxed the tension out of his shoulders. "The only ones we can rule out are Vladimirescu and Vektoria. I'm curious as to who my Berserk buddy is here."

"Why Vektoria? What makes you think it's not her?" Abraham asked.

"Obviously, she and Vektor have to share their Kingdom."

"Don't lump her in with my standing." Vektor protested. "She doesn't care one bit about the Mainframe, I refuse to have it called her home or her kingdom."

"Where else would her home be? You both came outta the game." Frank said in counter.

"Dante, you should get back to the checkpoint." Petel cut in, taking Dante by surprise and making him (and the fires) jump. "Paige'll get you out and then we can get lunch."

That sounded nice. Eating something and sating a different hunger. He nodded along vaguely, facing the way they'd come as Frank tried again to get their attention. "C'mon, mates. Who do you think went Berserk on their side? We only got Zima and Asheford to choose between."

"An impromptu blizzard doesn't really sound like either of them." Abraham said. "That Demon King isn't cold enough and Zima comes off as too cheery to be a snowstorm. Unless you can provide us with some insight, Paige?"

"I-I don't know. The only connection I can think of is that Nat's originally from Russia, but that doesn't make much sense."

Paige's voice held a note of distress. The fires shrank in concern as Dante stepped out of the melted indents his feet had made in the path. Just like the sands and the pull of the tide, his mind supplied. He headed back towards the checkpoint just out of the draw distance. Petel said, "It's an orphan's name."

That seemed to get everyone's attention, as a jumble of voices asked, "What?"

It was harder to tell who was speaking when there were two distinct sources for their voices. Petel said, "Zima. It's a commonly used surname for orphans. Means snow."

After a short pause, Paige said, "She was adopted, though."

"I, too, assumed it was the surname she inherited from her parents." Abraham muttered thoughtfully.

There was another beat of silence. Dante could just imagine Petel's displeased face. Not that he really understood why they would be upset over this. Alarmed all of a sudden, Paige said, "Something's headed towards you, Dante. I think it's whoever went Berserk, but it looks weird."

Dante tripped over his own feet and his fires flared up with his fear. "What — um. What should I do?"

"Do not engage." Vektor answered, much closer and louder than he'd been before. "The signature says it's not hostile and it barely has any health left, so refrain from causing it to enter its desperation mode."

"Desper-what now?" Frank asked.

"So that's what all that info means." Paige said, much less confused. "How can a Berserk be non-hostile, Vektor?"

"They're in-between Attack and Desperation. See right here? This shows the player's build in its current state, though most of the finer details are obscured."

There was a pause in which Vektor was no doubt pointing at something on the screen. Paige said, "So all that's readily accessible. Has there — is this information listed in everyone's profiles and we've just never looked at it before?"

As Vektor went to explain, Frank and Abraham lobbed in their own questions, turning it all into a cacophony. Dante winced, then noticed something floating within his view from across the expanse of nothing. It glistened, as if made of ice, and bobbed up and down stiffly. There was no way this floated in from nowhere. As they neared, Dante could just barely make out that it was Natasha. Her game outfit was missing, no wings or skirt and vest or anything, and she'd become an ice sculpture of just her frame. Her edges were a bit too polygonal and, true to actual ice, it didn't look like she could move.

She drew towards him as he was the only thing left in the area and he had to admit that he was curious. With what Vektor said, it sounded like it wasn't just the Inferno that was complicated. An initial blast and a desperation phase. Hard to believe they used that coding in another build.

"We should really have another sit down about this whole Berserk thing." Frank said, drawing Dante's attention back to the conversation happening around him.

"I told you before, telling which coding belongs to each player is impossible until it surfaces when activated." Vektor replied, solidly annoyed. "Listing each framework and catalyst will do you no good if there's no build to connect it to. Each player's coding is unique to them."

"Is it really, though?" Frank continued needling. "Petel and Vladimirescu both kinda just turned into big animals."

"You and this one were quite different, so I'm willing to believe him." Abraham said.

"If you'd all submit yourselves to a full scan, then I'd have all the data in a complete format for further referencing." Vektor said with a huff. "I've already recorded Inferno's intricacies, it wouldn't take long to gather the rest of yours."

Natasha reached Dante and floated around him in a circle. Like a shark. Trying to ignore that, Dante shouted a bit too loudly in his apprehension. "It's, uh. Zima!"

"Is she okay? How's she doing?" Paige asked, instantly concerned. "Can you talk to her? Can you help her?"

"The only way to help by this point would be to attack and force a log out. You should know this." Vektor said.

Natasha continued circling Dante, making his fires rise higher protectively. It seemed to be the only thing keeping her at bay, though what her intentions even were was unclear. Dante called up, "Sh-She's, um. She's not l-leaving me alone."

"Didn't you say she wasn't hostile?" Abraham questioned.

Petel growled dangerously. Vektor raised his voice, attempting to defend himself. "If anything, she might be acting on instinct alone. Or attempting to communicate. All I can tell you is what the readings tell me."

"Knowing her, she's probably freaking out." Paige said.

Whatever she said next was interrupted by shouting somewhere in the background, followed by Petel growling louder and Frank and Abraham yelping in surprise. Dante winced and looked to Natasha, wondering how best to communicate with this ice sculpture.

Paige definitely cared about her friend and roommate. Just as Frank did for Jonathan. Just as Sonya did for Vektor and Petel did for Dante. Something about being trapped in a room with someone for extended periods of time; Petel said it was better to be civil when they first talked.

A bit unsure of how to phrase it exactly, Dante took a deep breath before addressing the circling sculpture in Natasha's image. "Um. Paige says. You're going to be alright, Zima."

Natasha hovered in place for a minute. The voices were still a jumble, but Dante could make out Aglaé and Niculaie's, which explained both Petel and Abraham's hostility. Without much warning, Natasha advanced on Dante. His flames rose to stop her, burning her form, and she didn't seem to care. Dante yelped and backed away as much as possible, but she was insistent. She wanted to get burned.

"No — Stop!"

"Dante? What's happening?" Paige asked.

Her voice managed to come through the clearest over all of the arguing behind her. Natasha's form shattered into code, ejecting her out of the game. He collapsed to the ground on his knees and a sob was ripped from him.

It made perfect, logical sense, of course. What else was there to do after ejecting your whole team and then some besides subjecting herself to the same fate? No one wanted to remain trapped inside this place. All it had to offer in the end was pain and loss and too much change.

And all of it by Dante's own hands.

Couldn't even say it outright. That went against the rules.

Dante hated the fall, hated the whispering, hated the depths this Rabbit Hole sank to.

He was so, so tired of following those rules. Over and over, bound to these restrictions layered and layered over him, refusing him any control in his own life.

Bound by his eyes. Bound by his tongue.

Ashes to ashes.

"Shark!" Paige exclaimed, her voice echoing all around the sky and snapping Dante out of that spiral.

All the extraneous noise stopped, too. A lone Torpedo Shark approached him from across the divide. Ready to barrel over him. He wiped the tears from his eyes and stood to square off against it, bracing himself for impact. "Go on." He taunted it quietly. His voice was thick, the emotions locked in his chest shining through. "Do your worst. I know you, what you really are. You don't scare me."

Paige asked, "Are you seriously going to fight it yourself?"

It shot forward and struck him directly. He could only process pain as he was slammed briefly through the void and back into reality. The scanner doors opened and he tumbled out onto his hands and knees, thoroughly winded. Petel, Frank, and Abraham rushed to his side, helping him up, while Paige watched them all from her seat at computer in absolute annoyance.

"Guess that answer was yes." She mumbled to herself.

Chapter 8: The Fragile Nature of the Prince

It was soon to be Kalyuga's birthday. Vektor stopped nagging them about finishing the Tundra after Petel explained it to him and sufficiently distracted him with that wide-eyed wonder of his.

"Celebrating the creation of our friends is a worthy endeavour." He said during breakfast. "It helps that the last we saw of the Thief's team was a Berserk, so we know they're still struggling in the Tundra as well."

Petel rolled their eyes, but continued eating their omelette. His limited understanding, while plenty annoying, was endearing in its own way. They'd give Sonya and Frank that. Levy agreed with Petel's annoyance, rolling his eyes as well. Frank asked, "When's your birthday, anyway?"

"Do you have one?" Paige asked.

Vektor brightened in that way he did when he got the chance to explain something. "My date of creation as recorded in my files is the twenty-eighth of August."

Sonya sat back in awe. "So that kind of thing is tracked."

"Wait. You're a Virgo?" Paige asked, similarly flabbergasted if for a completely different reason.

Vektor scrunched up his nose at the foreign word. "Virgo?"

"You, uh. Do the Astrology thing, Paige?" Dante asked.

Paige ducked her head, growing embarrassed. "Not really. I look into it for, you know, the compatibility thing. Nothing that serious." She waved off that embarrassment and grinned at Dante. "What's your constellation? Mine's Libra."

"I'm a Pisces." Frank volunteered cheerily.

Petel turned towards Dante, intrigued. Paige explained the whole chart to them once and it struck Petel as very hilarious that Sonya, a Capricorn, was highly compatible with a Leo like Levy. Fidgeting nervously, Dante said, "Um. It's, uh. Aquarius."

Immediately, Frank recoiled. "The water bearer?"

"Definitely wouldn't have guessed that one, Fireball." Levy agreed.

Paige gasped and clapped her hands together in excitement. "That means your birthday's soon. Unless it passed already and you didn't tell us. When is it? Come on, let us celebrate with you."

Levy added his cheer of approval and both Frank and Sonya nodded along with eager grins. While Dante shrunk into his seat, Petel sat up a bit straighter. Perhaps this was the perfect time for them

and Paige to implement their plan of an appreciation party. Dante stuttered a hesitant, "Th-The — um. The thirteenth of February."

"Wow. Right before Chocolate Day, huh?"

Levy gave a sympathetic smile, one that was genuine and surprising to see on the mischievous cat. It spoke of some understanding, that Levy did see the panicked fireball as a friend. If Petel had their ears and tail from their game form, both would display their pride at such a heart-warming scene.

Dante worried too much about all of their bonds when, clearly, they had been friends for a lot longer than any of them realised.

"That's also in just two weeks." Paige lamented, pulling out her phone to make some notes. "We have so much to plan for, I don't even know what sort of gift you'd like."

"Ooh, yeah. Tell us what you want us to get you for your birthday."

Frank hopped up in his seat. Flustered and panicking, Dante protested in confusion. "I-I don't — You don't have to — It's okay, I-I don't need—"

Paige held up a hand, cutting him off. "Don't tell us you don't need anything. We know that."

"Just tell us what you'd like anyway." Sonya said, giving Dante a gentle pat on the shoulder. The fireball didn't flinch this time. "We want to get you something that would bring you joy whether or not you need it because we're your friends. Seeing you happy will bring us joy, too."

Petel gave a nod in agreement. Levy leaned over to drape an arm around Frank's shoulder as he drawled a casual, "Wow, Birdie, you some kind'a card over here? It ain't even his birthday yet."

Frank giggled, fully accepting his job as Levy's leaning buddy. As anyone sitting beside the cat had to do. Sonya frowned over at Levy and fired back, "Articulation is important for getting the sentiment across properly."

"Whoo, now that's some good use of vocabulary right there."

Levy kept grinning and Sonya decided to disengage, though he puffed up cutely in his annoyance. Dante kept his head bowed, drumming his fingers against the table. Embarrassed, but notably not upset in any way. "Um. M-Maybe. Cake?"

Petel would have wagged their tail harder at that. Little by little, they were getting through to him. Vektor said, "Wait, I'm confused. Are we to have another gift exchange? I thought our previous one was due to the Holidays being celebrated over the Winter Break. Are these Birthdays considered significant calendar dates in your realm such as to constitute a gift giving event?"

Levy laughed and Paige dropped to exasperation. Sonya said, "You were there for my birthday, Vektor."

"You'll get to see what it's like tomorrow, since you need the refresher." Frank said.

"But they're not counted as holidays, no." Sonya went on. "More like personal celebrations just between immediate friends and family."

Vektor sat back, holding a hand to his mouth. "Celebrations." He mumbled to himself.

"We can also discuss this more with Abraham and Kalyuga next break." Paige said, putting away her phone and going back to her breakfast. "I'm sure they'll want to know something this important, too."

A bit hesitantly, Dante asked, "Is it r-really that important?"

"Uh, of course." Frank said. "Birthdays are super important."

"You're our friend, ain't'cha?" Levy joined in. "We're all important to each other."

Dante kept his head down. But, just barely, he smiled. "Um. Th-Thank you."

The whole table's spirits seemed to brighten and they headed off to classes with a vigour they didn't normally have in the mornings. Sonya even reached that twittering tone he got when too pleased to use his deeper register, which was something Petel hadn't even realised they'd missed. They kept an arm wrapped around his shoulder as they entered their class, joking and laughing together.

The next day, they all surprised Kalyuga with a shower of gifts during first break. Levy boasted over being instrumental in cataloguing all her rubber ducks and she, of course, loved each and every new one they gifted her, thinking up silly names for them on the spot that had Petel laughing throughout the day. Mister Williams wished her a happy birthday, of course, and Mister Locke presented her with a cupcake for lunch. They all sang for her, including Dante.

The fireball's voice was already so musical and round. Petel was desperately curious to hear him sing on his own. To hear that voice sing rather than imply it in his staccato style of speech.

When asked, however, Dante didn't seem to know much about music. "I know a-a few opera and a few songs from an artist my father likes, b-but that's it." He said, not knowing how little of a disappointment that actually was. Hearing him sing in Italian might be even better. "I-I couldn't, anyway." He went on, almost predictably so. "They — um. It w-would be too loud."

He seemed genuinely remorseful about it. Like he wanted to sing. Maybe he even enjoyed it. Petel wrinkled their nose and said, "Who tells you to be quiet all the time?"

"Huh?"

Dante hiccuped in surprise. The two were safely in their dorm room for the evening, so Petel sat on Dante's bed, boldly right next to the fire. The wolf so badly wanted to taste him, to see how much it might burn their tongue. Shaking that desire off, Petel clarified, "You keep saying that sort of thing. That you making noise is bad. Who told you such an awful thing?"

Dante bowed his head, growing unmistakably warm. "It's. It's just the way a-a child should be. Seen. And — And never heard."

Petel scoffed at that statement. They would like to tear his parents' faces right off their heads, they wanted to say. They would rip out those tongues and silence them instead.

Dante's voice was lovely. Small and timid as it was now, it carried a lovely tune. As if he had been born singing and longed to return to it every syllable he was forced to stutter.

Which perhaps was the case. Italian had a certain musical rhythm to it that English (and Russian, for that matter) lacked. Petel said, "I like hearing you."

"Yes, you. You've made that quite clear."

Dante sighed softly, taking the remark much less encouragingly than Petel meant it. Frustrating and perfectly Dante. Petel would convince him one day that he was loved and desired without a doubt. As a friend, as a mate, as a person, everything. It might take years, but they would do it. Their heart for their pack mate, as the wolf urged them on.

Their group agreed to head back into the game after classes on Friday. As expected, Vektor practically vibrated with excitement, hardly able to sit still for a meal let alone his classes. It was a very Vektor sort of endearing and Petel wished once again to see this Prince in one of his classes. His being a third year kept him away from the troubles of the wolf, unfortunately.

Once classes ended, they all filed towards the towers, their shoes crunching against the worn snow. Vektor said, "Let's aim to reach the end of the Tundra this session. We've not much farther to go before reaching the Hollows."

"We'll do the best we can with our shit luck." Paige said in reply.

Frank and Abraham shared a laugh at this. Dante, too, smiled at Paige's crassness. Vektor grimaced and muttered an annoyed, "Yes, hopefully AIR won't prove to be too much of an obstacle this time."

It was an agreement, which meant they were getting somewhere with this stubborn Prince. Smiling to himself, Petel joined Paige at the head of their pack, eager to get in there and act the wolf that itched inside their body.

Their group stomped the slush off their boots at Paige's insistence as they entered the tower, then headed into the scanners. Petel liked the enclosed space, the anticipation of the drop. The fall was short this time, then Petel's clawed wolf feet stood on the grey ice of the Tundra, inside their most recent checkpoint.

"Four outta five." Abraham muttered, pulling his rifle off his back and stepping out onto the path. "We're almost there."

"Let's get going." Petel said, baring their sharper teeth gleefully.

Vektor nodded, rushing out in order to lead their group. As he joined them, Frank said, "No sign of that Guardian, right, Paige?"

"Not that I can see, no." Paige said. Abraham overtook Vektor, being just faster, and Dante followed after Frank and Petel, staying behind them all. As usual, his fires looked as nervous as him. Frank relaxed out of relief as Paige continued. "The path looks pretty clear right now, actually. Looks like we might really have some good luck today."

Vektor's posture straightened in an excitement that Petel recognised immediately as Frank's. That was something Frank would often do. "Keep aware of our surroundings. AIR can be unpredictable." He said.

His pragmatism clashed with that excitement, but that part was very much Vektor. The Prince did seem to be paying attention to them, though whether it was out of survival, considering he needed them to return home, or if it was a friendship thing, was hard to tell.

Learning program, Petel reminded himself. No matter the reason, he would adapt and mimic them all as a part of his programming.

Their group hurried along the path, which bent in a sharper angle than before. Always in a place that was out of sight from the last, always in a seemingly random direction. The first shockingly unnatural structure they'd come across so far. Abraham put his rifle away to run better and Petel paused just once to look over their path closer. Frank and Dante skidded to a halt behind them, Dante's fires catching Frank's boots briefly, which convinced Petel to keep moving.

"Checkpoint's just up ahead." Paige said, her echoing voice breaking their concentration.

"Thank goodness." Vektor breathed out in relief.

"Any enemies yet?" Abraham asked.

Paige said, "Just a few Zeppelin Whales. Nothing hostile so far."

Dante gasped out a probably too loud, "Where?"

His excitement caught Frank and Petel's interest. "Is there something about them that worries you?" Frank asked.

Dante drew his arms to his chest in embarrassment. "Oh. Um. N-Not really."

Thinking back on what Dante said about the Pixie Birds from the White Forest, Petel asked, "Are they normally more dangerous than they are here?"

"Well. Y-Yes, but." Dante fidgeted with his hands, the fires around his feet wobbling with his nervous energy. "I mostly. I just, uh. They're, um, v-very pretty."

Frank tilted his head to the side in confusion and Petel gave a hum in understanding. While the enemies in the White Forest appeared incomplete or monstrous in some way, they all looked like something Dante would draw. It made sense, then, that the ones here would fit into that category as well. Besides the whole being purely white (for the Forest) and purely grey (for the Tundra) thing.

As the checkpoint popped into view, so did those Zeppelin Whales. Vektor went straight to work unlocking the structure of ice while Petel, Frank, Abraham, and Dante stared out at the Whales in varying degrees of awe.

"At least we know for a fact that they're not gonna attack you." Paige said, snapping Dante out of his admiration.

"Would they, do you think? If they were sufficiently provoked. Do you think they'd be capable?" Abraham asked. He placed a hand on one of the crosses on his belt but didn't pull it off.

"They attack when I revive 'em." Frank pointed out.

"Everyone, please." Vektor broke in, his key staff out and pointed towards the path which lay ahead. "Let us continue while we still can. Our route turns more perilous from here, so concentrate on following me."

"Perilous?" Paige asked.

"That's a good word." Frank said.

Vektor said, "AIR and Resident have recognised we're ready for more of a challenge. We need to proceed with caution from here on out."

That would explain the more angled slopes. Petel grumbled to himself as they followed along compliantly. Vektor's pace slowed in his caution and Frank, Abraham, and Dante dutifully fell into step after Petel. Dante stayed last in line, those fires preventing him from a comfortable middle.

Petel knew he was dangerous. Those fires existed beneath his skin outside of the game. They couldn't fight down that instinct to touch, to show their adoration the best they could, however.

Dante was needed. Was loved. They loved this fire so much, it was crazy. The two of them hadn't known each other for long, yet it didn't matter to the wolf which decided this fire was their perfect match.

Wolves were known to mate for life.

A wolf could recognise one of its own ilk better than anyone.

He did his best to keep those flames from biting, the same as the wolf.

The path narrowed sharply, forcing them to walk in a single file. Vektor, using his key staff to help him balance, said, "The paths converge here."

Petel stared forward, also concentrating on their balance. None of them had the proper context for such a statement. Paige's voice rang out above them in alarm, saying, "Torpedo Sharks. Three of them, headed your way and fast."

Abraham pulled out his rifle and grinned. "Knew it wouldn't last."

"Finally. Some bad luck." Frank said, drooping forward.

The narrow path didn't make for an ideal place to fight. Seeming to have the same thought, Vektor shouted to them, "Try to retreat where the path is less treacherous."

"Why not keep pushing forward?" Frank asked.

One of the Torpedo Sharks barrelled into view, shooting just past Dante and making him stumble from the momentum. Importantly, not from impact. Petel cried a panicked, "Dante!"

"I-I'm okay." Dante called back, equally panicked but trying to reassure the wolf.

"Looks like there's no time either way." Abraham said. He aimed after the Torpedo Shark as the other two came into view. "Spread out, everyone. Make sure they can't knock us off in one go."

The other two shot past just above them, making them stumble as well, and they all spread themselves out along the path quickly. Petel tensed their legs, ready to pounce onto the first Shark that charged them. Abraham fired, striking the first Shark as it readied its second attack. The other two pivoted slower, though they wouldn't take long to fully charge their next attacks. Vektor created an ice boulder and chucked it at the first Shark while Dante and Frank watched on in fearful anticipation.

"It had to be three, didn't it?" Abraham said humourlessly. "Mighty familiar, ain't it? Kind of AIR to bring up such fond memories."

Petel laughed out of genuine humour. "You can remember that, but not your first boyfriend?"

Abraham frowned at them, retort on the tip of his tongue, but Dante screamed as the Shark rocketed towards them and there was no more time for friendly banter.

Petel leapt onto the Shark as it passed, ripping and tearing with both teeth and claws, while Abraham switched targets to one of the others. The thing carried Petel much farther out into the grey abyss than they'd anticipated, meaning they couldn't finish it off without some careful planning.

As if hearing that thought, Paige said, "That one's got 25% health left, Petel. Try not to take it out while you've got no solid map beneath you."

"Yeah, don't make Dante need to catch you again." Frank called.

Petel wanted to say that they trusted Dante with their life, an odd truth but a truth nonetheless. The Shark rolled, however, and Petel sank all four sets of their claws into it to keep from getting flung off. Hearteningly, they heard Dante call out, "Hold on, Petel!"

"Focus on the Class IIIs before us, Inferno." Vektor ordered.

The fireball was just as concerned for them as they were for him. That was nice to know. Dante had caught them twice now. That should have made this more obvious. He could be such a hard read at times, as if purposely obfuscating himself from scrutiny. (Obfuscating. That was a good word.) The

Shark stopped spinning for a second, giving Petel a moment to shake the dizziness out of their head. They took quick stock of how far they were from being able to leap to safety.

They were far enough over the abyss that Dante and the others were lost to the grey fog and limited draw distance. Even with their more powerful legs, they didn't want to chance it. Their footing wasn't exactly the most stable. There was another path in view, hard to make out due to everything being so grey. It looked just as narrow, a parallel to their own side.

Good news, they now knew what Vektor meant.

"Professor, watch out!" Vektor shouted.

The Prince shoved Abraham to the ice as the other two Sharks pelted into him, knocking him into Petel's view. They flung the Prince out into the abyss and he disappeared into the fog below.

Driven purely by instinct, Petel leapt off the Shark right as it went for another spin. Their angle was thrown off and the added momentum propelled them onto this other path. A fortunate side effect, the Shark in question dissolved into code. The unfortunate reality, they crashed hard against the grey ice and barely avoided slipping off by anchoring themselves with their claws.

They heard Frank cry out, "Vektor!"

Shortly after, Abraham shouted, "Frank, no!"

"Frank!" Dante shouted as well.

Petel hoisted themselves onto solid ground, surprised to see the scraping marks they made didn't fade immediately like their footsteps would. The path retained these gashes, just as it had those melted indents from Dante's feet. The two remaining Sharks rotated to face Dante and Abraham, paying Petel absolutely no mind. Must've been out of range. Paige asked a frantic, "Can you catch them, Dante?"

Vektor's voice called up to them, too faint to discern his words. Panicking, Dante could barely manage a frustrated, "They're too — I can't reach!"

Gritting their jaw tightly, Petel took off in what they hoped was a forward direction, looking for this point of convergence Vektor mentioned. They could lose connection for now, for just as long as it took them to find their way back to their companions. They had the speed. A hunter, just the same as their Huntsman.

"Petel took out one of the Sharks, at least." Paige said. They could still hear her. "There's one still at full health and the other's at 75%. If you want to just head back to the checkpoint, then make sure you're careful."

No point in continuing without their guide to show them where the exit was. Or to even open it for them. Yeah, Vektor was pretty crucial to their playing experience, annoying as it could be. The path did, indeed, take a bend and widened back to normal, leading to a platform that looked like it would make for a great arena for a final scuffle. There was a branch to a separate path, just as Petel suspected.

A parallel strip. They skidded on the ice as they changed direction, leaving more claw marks, and continued running at full speed.

Petel was nowhere near fast enough to outrun a charging Shark. If these enemies weren't so big, they'd live up to their name and fly as fast as bullets. Probably wouldn't do as much damage then.

Gun for healing, sentient bullets, and a regular rifle. This game ran the whole gambit.

Paige called, "Petel." At their name, even while running, Petel's ears perked up to better hear her voice. "Dante and Abraham are headed back towards that last checkpoint, but the Sharks are blocking off their way forward."

"Use that incredible speed of yours." Frank's voice came over next, right by Petel's ear.

No input from Vektor. Petel could worry about that later. They focused on sprinting down the path, sliding dangerously along the thin ice until they caught up to Abraham. Dante had a head start and was faster, staying ahead of their Huntsman.

There wasn't enough room to move around him or stop gracefully, so Petel scooped Abraham up into their arms. One of the Sharks shot towards them and Petel dropped to their knees, sliding right beneath it as it rocketed past.

"Ah, hello. You don't have to carry me, I'm not that slow." Abraham protested past his fluster.

"No room." Petel said.

They grinned down at him and he laughed out of embarrassment, settling to hold on tight around Petel's neck. They closed the distance between them and Dante next and Dante squeaked in surprise, his fires flaring up out of reflex. Were it not for those and Abraham in their arms, they would grab him up as well. The second Shark charged them and Dante swept out his flames to redirect it, stopping it from knocking into Petel and Abraham. They were caught a moment, wanted to press all of their affection onto him. Perhaps after they were safely out of this situation, they could do just that.

The path widened enough to let Petel pass the fireball. As they took the lead, Dante suddenly stopped. They skidded to a halt, scratching claw marks into the ice again, and gave a confused, "Dante?"

"I'll distract them." He declared, sweeping the fires up into his hands.

He was danger and beauty, all wrapped into one. Their breath caught in their throat. They let Abraham down and started. "You don't have to—"

"We can't have them destroy the checkpoint." Dante interjected, speaking strongly for once. Speaking with conviction. A strong, round voice. He lobbed his fire, one for each Shark, and yanked them off their paths as they both shot forward by engulfing them in flames. He gripped his hands into fists and embers sparked off his knuckles. "Go on ahead. I won't let them claim this victory without a fight."

Petel was so, so far gone for this fireball. Abraham pulled out his crosses and tossed them at the burning Sharks with a cheer. "That's the spirit, Dante."

"I mean, I guess that's one way to do things." Paige said. "You've got 'em both down to 50% already, so good work on that."

"You're amazing." Petel gushed breathlessly.

Dante smiled briefly at them, then forced both Sharks off course again. One shot off towards the abyss below while the other rolled in an attempt to shake off the flames eating its body. It was dragged close enough to the path for Petel to sprint over and rake their claws through those flames. It promptly fizzled out. Abraham felled the remaining Shark before the abyss could claim it and caught his crosses with a whoop.

Dante sank to his knees, letting out a laboured breath as his fires cropped up around him. Taking a word from Frank and Paige both, Petel said, "That was bloody brilliant."

"Yes, good job on that." Paige said, a bit distracted. "Now hurry back to the checkpoint please so I can get you out of there. AIR's spawned three more enemies, one of each Class, and I'd rather you not get distracted with that."

"Classy." Abraham joked, at least making Frank giggle.

Both were subdued, though. Something was wrong. Petel asked, "What happened?"

Dante grew just as apprehensive, seeming to catch onto Petel's line of thought. "Where's — um. Is Vektor o-okay?"

There was a beat of chilling silence, then Paige said, "We'll discuss it more once I get you out. If I can get you out."

Though her last words were mumbled, they were still clearly audible and Dante jumped to his feet with a panicked, "Wh-What?"

He stumbled on the ice, having gotten up too quickly for his body to handle. Both Petel and Abraham offered their arms, though it would be impossible for either of them to help without getting burned. He stayed upright on his own and Abraham asked, "Did something go wrong with the log-out procedure?"

They all hurried together the rest of the way to their last checkpoint without waiting for an answer. Doing her best to be reassuring, though her unease was still present, Paige said, "I'm not entirely sure. The computer isn't saying there's some system failure, at least, but it's stalled on Vektor's code. For some reason. Not like he hasn't gotten forcibly ejected before."

"But he hasn't been through this." Frank said. Must've been very close to Paige and the computer, as his voice came through loud and clear. "Vektor never voided out before, he didn't go with us into that waterfall and neither did Dante."

Dante gave a small, "Oh."

He allowed Petel and Abraham to enter first as they reached the checkpoint. Now that they had a moment to breathe, Petel collapsed to the floor in their absolute exhaustion. Dante stepped inside and the floor dropped Petel into the void for a blessedly short minute. Then they were upright, on their human feet, and exiting the scanner back into reality.

Paige and Frank were at the computer, Paige working hard and Frank watching in worry. The centre scanner was still closed, humming away busily as if in the middle of some process. Abraham and Dante exited their scanners as well and though self-conscious of their earlier thoughts, Petel offered their hand to the two. Not that they were the most sturdy on their feet at the moment, but they liked to help.

Abraham clasped Petel's hand, flashing a short smile at the wolf, before walking over to join Frank and Paige. Dante smiled hesitantly in return, too nervous to accept their hand. No touch for now, then. Petel nodded and, once Dante was comfortable enough to stand with their friends, they joined the rest of their pack. They asked Paige, "Did our Prince get stuck or something?"

"Or something, indeed." She tapped a few keys and the screen of the computer changed somewhat. Petel couldn't really tell what it said or what she was pointing at, but tried to follow along as she explained, "It's this bit of code that's causing most of the problem. It usually doesn't get called by normal functions, but the missing close bracket means that when it does, the whole process breaks down. It's treating the rest of what follows as a part of this function, which is causing some type of infinite loop that the computer thankfully refuses to crash from, but it also means the whole thing's a second from overloading. It doesn't help that there's an extra forward slash here to—"

She paused, noting that only Dante seemed to be following along. Which, good for him, Petel was very proud, but also very confused. Sighing, she sat back and returned to typing.

"In the most simplest of terms, the protocol for a void out called different code from both health depletion and manual log outs, therefore this code being broken made the system stall when it tried to interpret the incomplete phrase."

Dante pressed his fist to his mouth, expression scrunched up in deep displeasure. Doing his best to parse out Paige's explanation, Frank tentatively said, "So. Can you fix the code and make it work properly?"

"Unfortunately, there's not much I can do from here." She sat back in annoyance as the screen changed once more, though Petel had no hope of understanding any of it. "The system needs some sort of key or the admin passwords in order to edit the code directly. And even if I could, the whole infinite loop thing means we have to wait for the system to inevitably roll over and retry itself before any changes are taken into account. Which may take a while, considering how stuck it is."

"And we have no idea how long that will take." Abraham concluded in defeat. "Would you like us to wait with you, Philips?"

"No, that's okay." She answered instantly. "We have classes tomorrow, so it's best only one of us spend all night here if it comes to that."

"You think it'll really take all night?"

Frank reeled back, incredulous. Petel placed a hand on Paige's shoulder and said imploringly, "You can't stay the night here. It's too cold."

She smiled tiredly at them, gently placing a hand over theirs. "I'll be fine. Just gotta get some blankets and I'll be snug as a bug in a mug."

While reassured by her small laugh, none of them made any move to head out. Petel withdrew their hand, yet couldn't make themselves leave. Perhaps they could convince the wolf by gathering the supplies she needed. Abraham said, "I'll be back tomorrow as early as I can get away with. Seeing as I'm the only one here who can't actually stick around without arousing suspicion."

Petel gave the Huntsman a sympathetic smile, as did Frank. "Sorry, mate." Frank said. "We'll keep you updated if Vektor comes back before that."

"We?" Paige questioned.

"Look, you can't really just expect us to leave you here on your own all night."

Frank placed his hands on his hips and huffed with all the authority she normally held. Grinning, Petel nodded along and demanded, "Keys."

They held out their hand, using that same confidence. Abraham laughed at their resolute silliness and left the tower to head home. Dante hopped up as well and gave a determined, "I can. Um, keep it warm, too."

Paige frowned at him, this one more alarmed than defiant. They'd only seen the flames burn from Dante's body when he was under emotional duress; was it safe for him to offer such a thing? Petel trusted him, but the fireball didn't seem to trust himself.

His decision was made, however. He said to Petel, "Go, uh. Get some blankets. A-And pillows, please. You, too, Frank."

Frank grinned, bright and eager. "You got it."

He ran out of the tower with a renewed energy. Petel looked to Paige, who rolled her eyes and handed them her keys. "Fine. Guess I can't stop you lot."

"Thanks."

Petel took them and headed outside into the snow. Melting, sure, but cold enough to linger on the ground. As the doors closed behind them, they saw Dante produce a small fireball in his hands. He seriously meant it. He took their words to heart. Petel found their own vigour renewed and charged towards the dormitory building, a wolf on a mission.

They went to Paige's room first, since it might look weird to show up holding a bunch of blankets. They knocked politely and, after a moment, Natasha opened the door in surprise and said, "Vitayev, hey."

"Hey." They returned.

"Paige isn't here, sorry."

"I know." Petel held up Paige's keys and gave them a bit of a jangle for emphasis. "Just here for some supplies."

Natasha frowned, but compliantly allowed them to enter her room. As they grabbed Paige's pillow and blanket, Natasha asked, "Are you all staging an all-nighter or something?"

Petel shrugged. Telling her was probably fine. "Vektor got stuck in the system."

"Stuck?"

She tensed, growing concerned. Petel nodded, saying, "Code's broken or something. We're gonna wait for him to get out."

"That doesn't sound great." Natasha said. "Hope it works out."

"Thanks." Petel called back as they left.

They went to their own room next, grabbed their blankets and pillows, then left the warmth of the dorms and headed back out into the cold of the night. It wasn't actually snowing, so they thankfully didn't have to worry about protecting the blankets from getting damp.

Frank met up with them in the outside seating of the cafeteria and they asked, "Ready for a night?"

"Definitely." Frank gave a nod, preoccupied with something else. They walked together a moment before Frank said, "Jonathan got weirdly upset, hearing about Vektor."

Petel refocused on him, interested. "Oh?"

It wasn't like the cold, detached Jonathan to get upset over anything. At least, as far as Petel had known him. Frank said, "Yeah, he got all worried, asking me a bunch of questions, though he didn't want to admit he was even concerned."

Petel gave a gruff, "Weird."

"Guess those two're closer than we all thought." Frank half-agreed with a shrug.

He opened the tower doors for Petel and they stepped inside the noticeably warmer area. Paige waved to them with a relieved, "Thanks for doing this, mates."

Dante quickly snuffed out his fire and withdrew his hands to his chest. He wasn't quick enough, as Frank charged right in and exclaimed, "You were just holding a fire!"

Dante shrank away, but said clearly, "I-I was."

He didn't deny it. Petel swelled up with pride for their friend. Paige tried for a diplomatic, "Don't make too big a deal out of it, Frank."

"Sorry, is it not a big deal that he can use his game powers here, in the real world?"

Frank threw the blanket and pillows to the floor in order to throw his hands up in exasperation. Dante flinched again and could barely stutter out, "It's — ah. Um, it's n-not that, uh, th-that—"

"Have you been able to do this the whole time?" Frank asked, accusatory in his shock.

Petel threw their own pile of things with Frank's and blocked him off from Dante protectively, even letting out a growl of warning. Not that Frank would ever hurt Dante, but the wolf was territorial and Dante was in distress.

Frank didn't seem to notice, continuing to gesture wildly and ask questions he didn't wait for anyone to answer. "Did something happen to make this possible? Was it that time I glitched you with that shot? Or was it something more recent?"

Paige tried to break in with an exasperated, "Calm down, Frank."

"How long have you known about this?"

He turned his accusation on her and Petel, too upset to be so easily placated. Petel shrugged and said, "The dance last term. Saw him on fire then."

"That's when I found out, too." Paige said with a sigh.

"And neither of you thought to tell the rest of us?" Frank asked.

Petel frowned, annoyance creeping into their tone. "Not our place to tell."

"No one should have figured it out." Dante said darkly. He seemed fed-up now, no longer affected by that shock. "I'm still surprised that Hell hasn't reclaimed me yet for showing any of you."

Dante's tone was the same as it was that night he nearly set their room ablaze. Calculated and chilling; too cold for a fire like him. His explanation that he gave, that being the glitch Frank had caused, never sat right with them, yet Petel wasn't able to question it until now. Like a film being peeled off, a mask slipping enough to glimpse the true face beneath. Frank backed down, losing a lot of that betrayal in his confusion. Quietly, he said, "Are you saying. You've had the ability to make fire since before you even came here?"

"Do you want me to tell them for you?" Paige asked gently.

Dante shook his head, adamant all of sudden. Slowly, taking great care, he told them, "These fires. They're, um. From Hell. I brought them back with me after I returned. From Hell."

He held out his hand (and Petel gave him some room by standing beside Frank), closed his eyes, and breathed out with a careful control. Fire sprung from his palm as if it was contained beneath his skin and eager to have the permission to leak out, to burn. It formed a solid ball floating just above the centre of his palm. All of that heat he normally radiated was concentrated solely in it, which made a lot of sense now that Petel gave it another thought. Realising something along those same lines, Frank said, "You're really telling the truth about this."

Paige said, "Hard to deny when the proof's right there."

"Hell is a real, physical place that you can visit. That you've been to."

Frank stumbled a few steps back, reeling way more than the rest of them. Immediately concerned, Petel asked, "Are you gonna be okay?"

"Is Dante gonna be okay?" Frank fired back at them. He then turned to Dante. "Are you okay? How did you get back? With fire?"

"Aren't they going to be upset with you for showing us now?" Paige asked, pressing her fists together fearfully.

"Th-They shouldn't." Dante gripped his hand shut and snuffed out the fire. His anger lingered in the air, that ever-present oppressive heat. All those fears constantly nipping at his heels could have been more literal than any of them believed. After a minute, he released that tension in his shoulders and looked up to meet their eyes. "I don't want to talk about it anymore."

At least he was being much more upfront. Small progress was still progress. And, judging by all the weird shit that happened last term, it was best if they didn't force the issue. Petel gave a reluctant, "Okay."

"I guess that's fair." Frank relented as well. He went over to the blankets pile and picked out Paige's, a bright yellow one that was fluffy and thick, and draped it around the chair and Paige's shoulders. "While we're here, we should at least try getting some sleep. Or study, if we can't accomplish that."

Petel made a noise of disgust, getting a laugh from both Paige and Frank. They helped Frank arrange the pillows and blankets around Paige's chair, where she snuggled into her own blanket, then they pulled Dante over into the pile. Dante's body was warm and, even if he protested at first, he settled in once Frank and Petel had him sufficiently tied up with cuddles.

Frank fell into a doze quickly, but Petel and Dante were both much more reluctant. Paige worked at the computer for as long as she could keep her eyes open, drifting off herself after a while. Petel lost track of time after that, awoken by the sound of the scanner opening and depositing its contents.

Dante startled, though it didn't seem like he'd been asleep. "Vektor."

He scrambled to get out of their cuddle pile, jostling Frank and Petel in his haste. Frank gave a groan and rolled over, but Petel was shocked into full consciousness by how instantly the comfortable heat left once Dante was gone. Paige was slow to wake as well, stretching her arms out as Dante reached Vektor's side. "Vektor?" She parroted groggily.

The Prince was there alright, lying on the floor and complaining. "Inferno, really, no need to fuss. Though, how did you get out before I did?"

"You lost time. That makes sense." Dante mumbled. He helped Vektor sit up and said, "Your code's, um. Y-You got stuck."

"Stuck? How troublesome." Vektor sighed, accepting Dante's explanation too easily. Dante hoisted Vektor onto his feet, mostly draping Vektor's body over his shoulders. Petel rose to help him and Frank sat up as well, now awake. "How much time did I lose? Was it a large setback?"

"Just a few hours." Frank said, yawning.

"It's three in the morning." Paige corrected with a wince.

Shifting half of Vektor's weight onto their shoulders, Petel groaned tiredly. "Getting back to the dorms is gonna be fun."

"Especially with all our bed stuff." Frank agreed. He rolled out of the pile and stood, regaining his usual liveliness. "Who's ready to become a blanket monster?"

"You, obviously." Paige said with a laugh.

She threw the blankets over him, getting a yelp and a laugh shortly after. Petel joined Frank under them, dragging Dante and Vektor along with them, and they gathered all the pillows in their arms before exiting into the dark and freezing night. With all the blankets over them, it was hard to see where they were going, even with the faint moonlight glistening off the slushy snow. Thankfully, both Paige and Vektor knew Officer Riviera's patrol route well enough to avoid him completely. Though they did have to duck out of Jonathan's view, even as Vektor kept trying to wave and greet him.

"Save your flirting for later." Paige said to him in a hushed annoyance.

"But we made plans to discuss our literature assignments tonight." Vektor huffed right back.

It was a little too weird to think about while this groggy, so Petel let it be as they made it inside the dorms. They all went up to Petel and Dante's room, piling all the blankets and pillows onto their beds and decided to sleep there for the rest of the night. Frank and Vektor snuggled up on one bed while Petel and Paige sandwiched Dante on the other. The warmth was so comfortable that they all fell back asleep easily.

The morning bells announced the day much too soon. Before any of them could properly shake off their drowsiness, Vektor said, "We have to finish the Tundra today."

"You're really gonna start off with this first thing?"

Paige groaned, flopping back onto the bed. Frank sat up and dangled his legs off the side, asking, "Will you be able to be logged in? You were stuck in there past midnight."

"I'll be able to go in today." Vektor said.

He sounded so sure that the wolf didn't doubt him for a second. Petel sat up as well and said, "Let's finish this after classes."

Frank grinned as he rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. Paige sat up and asked Dante, "You okay with this?"

Though hesitant, Dante said, "We were so close."

Petel hopped to their feet with an energised, "Time to get going."

"Slow down there, Petel. Not all of us are as fast as you."

Paige shook her head at them, but they were much too excited to be dissuaded. She, Frank, and Vektor left for their own rooms, taking their things with them, leaving Dante and Petel to get ready for the day. While Petel gathered their things, Dante put both of their beds back together, an odd little pout to his motions. Petel dragged him to breakfast before he could get too distracted with the task.

Abraham and Sonya were relieved to see Vektor well and unharmed while Levy and Kalyuga were enthralled by the tale of their near victory. Then, once they were all full after supper, they headed right back into the game.

Chapter 9: Broken Momentum

The moment their feet landed inside that final checkpoint, Petel took off onto the path. "Any enemies, Paige?" They called up into the sky.

"I think so? They're not near enough to be any issue" She said in reply.

Dante waited for Vektor, Abraham, and Frank to follow Petel out, then joined everyone on the path. His fires were wobbly from yesterday's strain; no telling if they'd listen to him today.

"Careful on your way." Paige went on as Vektor overtook Petel in order to lead the charge. "You don't want to draw any unwanted attention."

"We'll take care." Vektor assured her.

Dante glanced towards the horizon, hoping not to find those supposed enemies. If he had better ears, like Petel, then maybe he could hear their approach. His fires rippled involuntarily and he shuddered at the odd sensation. Was it a rebellion of sorts? Anticipation? Hopefully, their group wouldn't have to confront another stressful bout of trouble so soon after yesterday.

The path narrowed and they had to file along one at a time. Petel pointed out the claw marks they scraped into the ice and Dante noted the faint imprint of his own feet where he stood his ground to face those Sharks. When they were well and truly trapped on this path, Petel's ears perked up and they paused, making Abraham, Frank, and Dante stop as well.

"Voices." Petel said in explanation.

"Voices?" Abraham questioned.

Vektor's entire demeanour dropped to anger and he growled out, "Vektoria."

"Her lot's busy with some Stingers right now." Paige informed them. "But they're headed the same way as you, so be ready for them."

"We have to reach the end before they intercept us." Vektor said, doing his best to pick up his pace. A bit of a futile effort, considering how slow he was.

Petel snorted through their nose at the Prince's impatience while Frank gave a disheartened, "If we end up in a fight, I can't really do much."

Dante's fires trembled enough to make him stumble as they kept moving. In his current state, he wasn't sure if he could fend off Damon, let alone help Petel and them should they need it. Abraham chuckled with a humourless air, but didn't say anything this time. He definitely had his own worries to shoulder, considering the volatile nature of his own hatred for his Vampire nemesis.

As much as they tried to hurry, it took a tense seven minutes for them to reach the final platform. Dante counted. It was definitely seven, which wasn't a three or even a multiple of three, and that was more unsettling than it had any right to be. The solid end of the level was wider and they were blocked from progressing further by a wall of ice that stretched as high as they could see. It had no definition, so it blended well with the grey of the sky and the surrounding emptiness.

Unfortunately, Vektoria and the others arrived at nearly the same moment as them.

Vektor gave a roar and charged towards them, but Petel grabbed his shoulders to stop him. "Don't get distracted." They barked.

"We need you to open the way." Frank said.

Vektor struggled a moment, but quickly gave in as it looked like Vektoria wasn't interested in engaging with him. Though, that seemed to be mostly due to Damon urging her along, as Petel was doing for Vektor. Aglaé and Natasha glanced their way while Niculaie stopped in his tracks.

A deer in the headlights. The same reaction as Abraham.

Dante hesitated as well, caught between wanting to hurry out of this place and wanting to help a friend. His friend. Someone he genuinely wished to not see in this distress any longer.

They'd taken so, so much from all of them. If Dante could just do one thing for his friends, who had been hurt so much already, he'd do it in a heartbeat.

Vektoria's magic broke through the wall first, creating a jagged opening for her group to exit through. "Catch me if you can, you failure of a Prince." She screeched in taunt at them.

"C'mon, Nicu, hurry up." Damon called before disappearing through that opening.

Niculaie startled out of his stupor, but oddly headed straight for Abraham instead of their exit. Dante threw out his hand, intending to interject, but his fires refused to listen. They refused his directions, flickering anxiously around his feet in their infuriating circle.

"Niculaie, don't." He shouted instead.

"Remember me." Niculaie said, forceful and desperate, only stopping once he towered over Abraham at his full height. "Please. You have to remember me, Abe."

Abraham was rooted to the spot, staring up at Niculaie as if something wasn't processing right. As if conflicted in his orders.

If he didn't move, then Niculaie would break him.

Dante was, if anything, very good at making bad split-second decisions.

And since his fires wouldn't listen...

He rushed over and shoved Niculaie away, being careful not to catch Abraham with his fire. Niculaie winced at the brief burning and it snapped Abraham back into the moment. The Huntsman grabbed Dante's arm roughly, despite the burning, and yanked him out of the way with a snarled, "Don't interfere, Inferno."

Dante stumbled as he was tossed, but kept his footing this time. Aglaé grabbed up a handful of Niculaie's cape and dragged the Vampire towards their exit, shouting, "Now's not the time."

Frank grabbed one of Abraham's arms and said, "That's Vektor's word for Dante, mate."

"Abraham, what the hell?" Paige joined in.

Abraham tossed Frank off him similarly and shouted, "Don't stand in my way. That Vampire must perish."

"Here we go again." Frank mumbled in annoyance.

"Professor, please, we can satisfy that code later." Vektor shouted back at them, making Dante jump in surprise. He hadn't noticed that Vektor opened their own exit out of the level, a doorway in the wall of ice leading into another checkpoint area. "For now, we must catch that Thief before she gets away."

Aglaé and Niculaie disappeared through their own exit. And though Dante's heart pounded in his ears and discomfort choked at his throat, he hurried after Vektor and Petel as Frank pushed Abraham along with them. They passed through the end and into the hub and Petel utilised their speed to pounce on Vektoria, pinning her to the floor before she could reach the next level on their path. Damon leapt back as Vektoria screamed, her fury a wordless noise. Vektor charged forward as well and knocked Natasha away from prying Petel off.

"I refuse to allow you to obstruct our path with more destruction." Vektor shouted down at the Thief.

She kicked Petel off and rolled to her feet before Vektor could get his strike in. "You want destruction?" She snarled, a wild and dangerous grin on her face. "I'll give you destruction."

Her hands glowed black with a menacing power as she slammed them down onto the path, making it crack instantly. Petel and Vektor scrambled away from it, as did Aglaé and Niculaie, and the white of the connecting walkway shattered into a pixelated mess. The split grew until it completely separated them from the entrance to the next level. It was the same as the gap between the Forest and the Mainframe. The reason why they had to go through every level in the first place.

Satisfied, Vektoria stood and crowed a triumphant. "Let's see you recover from this, you hopeless idiot."

"Vektoria, what the hell? We're still over here. Are you really just going to ditch us?" Aglaé shouted, startling Dante once more.

He ran forward and collided head first with the invisible wall which blocked them from falling into the void. He slammed his claws against it in frustration, each hit pinging the barrier into view momentarily. Vektoria scoffed and turned her back on them all. "Ugh, whatever. You're the ones who couldn't keep up." She walked to the next level with a dismissive, "Let's get going. Tick tock, everyone."

All the air was punched out of Dante's chest.

Why would she remember that, of all things? Why use it in the same way?

He collapsed to the floor as the visceral fear clogged up his throat, even as Abraham turned on Niculaie in an attempt to fight and Petel and Frank had to work together to hold the Huntsman back. They really were lucky to have Vektor instead of her. She was just as impatient. just as cruel, and just as stark of a reminder that he could never escape this Hell.

He wasn't sure he could handle that.

"Get us outta here, Jonathan." Aglaé shouted up at the sky.

He held Niculaie back from the Huntsman, both of them ready to fight one another. Vektor sat down by Dante, as close as he could get considering the fires, and buried his face in his hands with a defeated, "Again. I couldn't stop her again."

"Abe, bruv, you need to chill out." Frank pleaded. "Fighting them's not gonna do us any good. They're just as screwed as we are."

Vektoria, Damon, and Natasha were gone. Dante took in a shuddery breath, but it didn't help him regain any of that wind. Abraham yanked his arm free of Frank's hold and tore his knife out from its place in that front pocket on his ammo belt. He stabbed at Frank in a surprising move and Petel clamped their jaws around his shoulder, making him yelp and drop the knife.

Frank backed far enough away to be out of his reach with an offended, "Bruv."

"You detest me so much that you'd attack even your own friends?" Niculaie questioned, more furious than Dante had ever seen him.

Abraham thrashed against Petel's grip, elbowing their chest, then trying to pry open their jaws when they refused to yield. They sank their claws into his arms, pinning him down as much as possible. Abraham yelped again, then forced out his snarled, "The Vampire must be eradicated. No rest until vengeance is achieved."

His voice didn't seem quite right. It got Dante to sit up, distracted him from his own distress. Niculaie ceased struggling against Aglaé's hold, though his deep voice became booming in his fury. "I see. This all comes back to that. It always comes back to that, doesn't it?"

He glared down at the pitiful Huntsman, actual contempt in his expression. His red eyes were piercing, practically daggers in their own right. Before Aglaé or Frank could add their sarcastic takes to

the conversation, Niculaie and Aglaé looked up sharply towards the sky as Paige said, "I can't log you out, Vektor, but I can log the rest of you out so we can retire for the day."

Vektor let out a long, agonised sigh, then said, "The most logical course of action here, I'm afraid."

Both Niculaie and Aglaé let out an incredulous, "What?"

Frank frowned at them once more. They had their own navigator to operate their system. Dante wondered what it was Jonathan reported to make them react like that. Aglaé tossed his head back with a groan and said, "Just get us outta here, then. I want to go home."

"I'd like that, too." Niculaie agreed, deflating as all that rage left him.

After a minute of silence, the two dropped through the floor as they were logged out. Abraham jolted after them, but couldn't break free from Petel's hold. Frank asked, "Now what?"

Dante drew his knees up to his chest and mumbled a sorrowful, "We can't get you home anymore."

They couldn't continue like this. Wasn't this all Dante wanted from the start? Why did this sting of defeat so much? It wasn't like they were meant to succeed in the first place. It wasn't like there was anything besides destruction waiting at the end.

Stories weren't to be overwritten. Not in this state. Like a maths equation, there could only be one solution no matter the method taken to reach it.

No room for error. No room for deviation.

No room for change.

"I think I may be able to solve our issue here." Vektor said, snapping Dante out of his thoughts and grabbing everyone else's attention as well.

The Prince stood, his hands glowing with that soothing golden light, and knelt by the edge of the broken pathway. He pressed the glow of his hands to the floor and, though nothing happened, stayed rooted to the spot for more than a couple of minutes.

"You lot should head back. This might take a while. Oh, and. Tell Jonathan I regret the cancellation of our meeting tonight, please."

"Wow, you really do plan it out." Frank mumbled.

Petel released Abraham from their jaws and the floor dropped from beneath all of them. Dante plunged into the black, glad to be away from the fires for a short while. Hopefully, they'd settle before he had to use them again. He landed on his feet with them stored away beneath his skin and exited the scanner with a quiet sigh.

"At least tomorrow's Sunday, so you won't be missing any classes." Frank said as he exited his own scanner, a bit wobbly on his feet.

Abraham and Petel stumbled out as well, Abraham falling to his knees and Petel holding onto the side of their scanner for support. They had exerted themselves quite a bit this round. From the computer's speakers came Vektor's reply of, "Even were it a day with classes, the system is designed for such an event. My hope is that this doesn't expend all of my magic, as it did the last time."

"Does even trying expend your magic?" Frank asked.

"Hang on, there's a much more important issue here." Paige interjected, spinning around to face Frank. "What do you mean, they plan it out? What do you know about this that I don't?"

Frank and Vektor both went to answer, but were interrupted by Abraham's shout of pain. He held his hands to his head, face scrunched up, and that same wrongness was in his voice again. It wasn't a regular pitch, it was more like Vektor's mechanical tone.

It wasn't human.

Paige, Frank, and Petel all went immediately to his side in concern. Even Vektor, from the computer, gave a worried, "Was that Professor? Is he glitching again?"

"Abraham, what's wrong?" Paige asked.

His eyes opened and he screamed. The sight of it froze Dante to the spot. His eyes were no longer his usual grey-blue, nor were they anything like a normal eye. They were glass and mechanical instead of flesh. An outlawed bit of technology.

A virus that could utterly reprogram a human's brain, could alter their whole perception of the world.

He knew those components.

"Enhancers." He breathed.

"What the fuck?" Paige agreed.

Abraham's voice sounded the same as Vektor's at his least coherent, robotic and not human. "Error in primary objective. Conflict in execution of command."

It wasn't just Dante who could see this.

It wasn't something he wove into reality like the shadows or his many spectres.

"Abe, snap out of it." Frank shouted.

"You're not a robot." Petel said. "You're the most human one here."

Abraham kept speaking with that mechanical tone. "Failure. Failure."

Faulty programming. That explained all of it. There was a reason enhancers were banned from use after the Great War. The warping could drive one mad, destroy their mind entirely, while the framework could easily rewrite brain functions and bypass personality.

They had to be removed right now.

Dante reached forward, shadow tendrils stretching out from his fingertips, wholly intent on plunging them into Abraham's eye sockets and ripping that technology out of his head. It should have been outmoded and retired so many years ago. He could disconnect the wires and take it all apart, save his friend from the dissonant perception he was trapped inside.

Abraham's screams picked up, making all of them jump back.

Petel took control, hefting Abraham into their arms and rushing him out of the tower. Frank followed first with Paige quick on their heels. Dante pulled those shadows back into his fist and said towards the computer, "Sorry. We — We'll be back later."

Vektor didn't even have time to reply as Dante ran out to follow his friends.

Chapter 10: Just Beneath the Surface

The whispers hounded after him, clawing at his back as he followed his friends to the infirmary.

One of us. One of us.

They chanted after him, grinning gleefully as he passed them by.

He didn't have time to wipe his hands of their marks. He didn't have time to focus on them. Abraham was in trouble and Dante could finally, maybe do something to help, to show that he'd accepted these friends, to prove he wasn't the failure they thought him again and again and again.

These were his friends. They didn't deserve this.

He reached the nurse's office just after Paige and Frank. The nurse checked over Abraham as Petel hovered nearby anxiously. By the blue highlights in their brown hair, Dante could tell it was Nurse Mara and not Nurse Aster, which at least meant there was less of a chance that Officer Riviera would get involved. Abraham had calmed for the moment, lying quietly on the bed and staring blankly up at the ceiling.

His eyes looked flesh and natural again. The glammers were back.

There was no way to get around this.

"Nothing seems to be wrong physically, at least. No broken bones, no cuts or other visible wounds." Nurse Mara said, leaning in to check something on Abraham's face. Probably his eyes.

Petel, Paige, and Frank huddled closer to one another anxiously and Dante joined them this time, holding his breath just as much as them. After a minute of searching for some response, Nurse Mara shook their head and straightened back up.

"We'll have to contact his guardian, see if they can come get him for the night."

"No." Petel shouted.

Nurse Mara frowned in confusion at them. Paige stepped in and said, "He's part of the Tower Extracurriculars. We were sort of hoping to work on our current project before curfew."

"I'll need to contact his guardian." Nurse Mara reiterated, continuing towards their desk.

They sat at the computer there and looked something up, then grabbed their phone and left the room. Frank said, "Well, you tried."

"Yeah, I figured that wouldn't work." Paige said, deflating.

Dante moved around them to stand at the side of the bed, inspecting Abraham's eyes himself. They really did look normal flesh and blood. Their glamours were much more advanced than the technology usually utilised. He reached again for them, then hesitated. "Is it, um. Alright if I touch you?" He asked.

Abraham didn't acknowledge him at all, in too much conflict to function. Though still hesitant, Dante tapped a finger to the glass base, where he knew the switch was. The glamour remained active even as Abraham's right eye opened and ejected the small chip kept inside of it.

A shudder ran through Dante's body, but he took it, then the one from Abraham's left eye as well.

"We can't let his dad take him." Petel said, adamant.

"But how can we stop him?" Frank asked. "It's Abraham's father. Unless it's, like, probable he's a danger to Abe, there's nothing we can do."

"This is a rich kid's school." Paige reminded them, arms crossed over her chest in frustration.

The three of them huddled in their own little circle so they wouldn't block the door or the other beds. Dante carefully pocketed the two small chips and stepped back, saying in as authoritative a tone as possible, "Resume free mode, Subject Memory."

His voice got the others to glance over at him in alarm. All of Abraham's muscles relaxed and he blinked a few times before sitting up on the bed. "Acknowledged." He responded, voice and tone blessedly back to its usual tenor.

"What did you just say, Dante?" Paige questioned.

"I'm sorry, is Abe actually a robot?" Frank asked.

"Philips? Ernest?" Abraham started, confused and just a bit panicked. As expected, considering his lack of functionality. "What's — I-I can't see anything, m-my eyes—!"

"Stay calm, Abraham." Dante said, keeping his tone even and reassuring. "Your eyes won't work without the chips right now. We'll have to rewrite the program so it won't cause so much conflict with your own mind. Until then, you'll have to pretend this sudden blindness isn't the result of more than stress."

Petel's expression turned to scrutiny. "Dante?"

"Rewrite the program?" Abraham questioned, still panicking. "You can't just. But I'm not—!"

"Just trust me, please. This is my speciality." Dante insisted.

As Frank, Petel, and Paige went to protest more, Nurse Mara returned and said, "Oh, you're up now, van Helsing."

"R-Right." Abraham nodded carefully, too panicked not to be completely stiff and unnatural. "Sorry about the scare, I. I must have fainted due to stress."

"I'm just glad to see you're up now." Nurse Mara said, smiling brightly. "Your father's on the way to pick you up. If you don't mind, I'd like to ask a few questions to understand what happened."

"I'm pretty sure it was just stress." Abraham tried again.

"It's just to make sure there are no underlying issues." Nurse Mara countered. Then they turned on Petel, Paige, and Frank and ushered the group to the door. "Please wait outside for this. I know you're worried about your friend, but I can't have you listening to confidential information. You, too, Vicario."

Dante gently took Abraham's hand and said, "You're gonna be okay. I promise."

He let go with just as much care, then left the room to join the rest of his friends. As soon as the door closed behind him, Paige grabbed his arm and dragged him far enough away in order to ask, "What the hell just happened?"

"What did you do to him?" Frank joined in, hopping over to Paige's side.

Petel joined both of them, staring at Dante with an intrigued and intense gaze. Their eyes were as pretty as ever. Dante gulped thickly, only half-building up the distraction he needed to deter their questions. "I used to play with the replacement eyes, since my parents had a bunch of the outmoded enhancers around."

Paige frowned, taken aback by the actual answer. Frank gasped and said, "Right, the Vicario Company existed even before the Great War."

"We just need to modify the program in these." Dante went on, pulling the chips out of his pocket and presenting them to his friends for emphasis. "Whatever their perception program is seems to be causing too much dissonance with his mind. At least the glamours are built into the hardware themselves, so we don't have to worry about that."

"Holy shit." Frank took one of the chips to look it over. "They said all the enhancers were destroyed 'cause of all the veterans rioting over them."

"What do you mean by glamours?" Paige asked as Petel took the other chip to look it over. "And how do you know how to command someone with these installed?"

Dante waited for Frank and Petel to hand him back the chips, then pocketed them once more. Time to lay that code on thicker. "Well. Um. I'm still, uh, learning about the history behind all of it, so."

"How do we fix the programs in them?" Petel asked, moving the conversation along. A perfect response, as usual.

"Vektor can probably help us with that." Frank said.

"He, um. He should be able to, yes." Dante agreed. "We'll need, uh. An adapter, so he can see it."

"I might have one." Paige said, pulling back and rubbing at her forehead. "If you really don't want to explain it, fine. I guess it does make some sense, considering your parents."

"He might not be able to." Petel pointed out.

"Is there something keeping you from telling us about it?" Frank questioned.

"That reminds me." Paige pivoted on Frank, who grinned in reply. "You have to tell me what you know about Jonathan and Vektor."

"Aww, but it's more fun to keep that insider info to myself."

Dante let out a short breath, glad Paige no longer had him pinned down. She was often less affected by his distraction. Something about her own odd quirks, like how Damon's charm never worked on her. There probably wasn't anything dangerous about explaining the differences between perception code and the more sophisticated glamours. Information on enhancers was readily available and all. Examples were out of the equation, but using how Abraham's eyes appeared to work, which they had all seen, should be enough for them to understand.

For such outmoded technology, that was really impressive. Dante had never suspected Abraham's eyes weren't flesh and blood. And that code was built into the machines themselves, which made him more curious about the program written for their perception. How did it sort out enemies from friends or neutral parties? Was Niculaie singled out, or did it group him with Damon in the same category? Surely, it didn't handle his Memory argument. That had to be handled by the framework itself or another enhancer.

His mother came to mind suddenly and Dante pushed all of these thoughts to the side.

He refused to be like her.

These were his friends and he refused to be like her.

The door to the infirmary opened, jolting them all out of their conversation. Nurse Mara looked troubled, but did their best to smile at the group as they said, "You can stay with your friend until his father gets here, but you have to return to your dormitories immediately after."

Dante and the others agreed, then headed inside to see Abraham. Nurse Mara stayed outside, leaving them neatly alone for now. That wasn't comforting. Frank rushed over first and said, "Bruv, hey, you doing alright? We're still here for you."

"Ah. Welcome back?" Abraham replied, unsure and nervously keeping his hands in his lap. "I, ah, still can't see anything. So that's throwing me off."

"I'm r-really sorry for that." Dante said, fidgeting with the ends of his school coat. "You weren't, um, responding a-and I knew how to help."

"It's alright. I appreciate the sentiment." Abraham said, relaxing somewhat. "Can you explain what's happening exactly? My eyes, are they broken?"

Paige, Frank, and Petel turned to Dante, intrigued to see what he might say. Laying the burden of explanation on him, in other words. He supposed he was the most qualified here, it was fair. He said an equally nervous, "Uh. Kinda? It's less, your eyes are broken and more, um. The enhancers are working w-well enough, since their, uh, their glamour coding still works."

"Yeah, they look like totally normal eyes again." Frank said.

"That's. Another thing." Abraham paused, hesitant. "My eyes. They're really — I have enhancers? The same technology outlawed after the Great War?"

"I can't believe it, either." Paige said.

"But we saw it ourselves when you collapsed at the tower." Petel said.

Dante nodded, then said, "The program wh-which handles your perception is, um. Is the thing that broke."

"I suppose that makes sense. The reason I can't see, I mean. Why I even have enhancers is still a mystery to me." Abraham sighed, deflating with it.

"You don't remember ever getting them installed?" Frank asked.

"Not even slightly. Quite maddening, really." Abraham sat back up, looking forward instead of at any one of them in particular. His eyes were unfocused, but completely human looking. Completely normal. "What did you mean, might I ask, when you said to act like being blinded temporarily was just due to stress? Is there some sort of trouble I'm in should it come to light that I have enhancers installed in me?"

"You called him Memory, I want that explained." Paige said.

Dante turned to Petel for help, sure that answer would get him in trouble. He recognised right away what was actually happening once he saw the enhancers. Based on Petel and Frank's misgivings over Abraham's father and Percival's scant details about what happened the last time Abraham glitched out, it was easy to piece the puzzle together. Abraham's argument as Memory made much more sense (though why his designation was set as Professor was baffling) with all that in mind, but it was difficult to explain without forfeiting his rights to his head.

Admitting to any of that knowledge when he'd revealed so, so much already was sure to bring their wrath down on him. They could name him as the one to blame for it all and still, it wouldn't be enough. The shadows would come for his heart before he could even try to distract from that truth.

The door opened and Dante squeaked in surprise. Nurse Mara entered, leading in a man wearing a hat like the one Abraham had in the game and a brown leather coat. Petel said, lowly, "Your father."

"Father?" Abraham questioned.

Dante shrunk behind Petel instinctively, hoping the man wouldn't recognise him. He'd never met anyone's parents in-person, but people seemed to know him as the Vicario son by his appearance alone. The man walked straight over to Abraham, making Paige and them have to move out of his way, and said, "Did your eyes break again? Honestly, if it weren't for how good this place has been to us, I'd pull you out and finish up your schooling myself."

His voice was surprisingly thick and he was a lot paler than Abraham or Percival. Paler than Petel, even. Dante couldn't see his eyes, but very much did not want to for once. Abraham perked up quickly and replied with a cheery, "No need for such talk, father. Were it not for my friends here, I'd be worse at human relations than I am."

"Indeed." His father agreed.

He glanced over at Paige and them. Paige straightened up along with Petel, ready to fight this adult. Dante remained behind Petel and Frank took his hand, just as ready to fight as Paige and Petel but choosing to protect Dante.

Satisfied by what he saw, Abraham's father said to his son, "You've made some fine friends. I'm happy you could find so many like-minded folk who accept you."

Abraham grinned and stood off the bed. "They are quite fine, thank you."

His father took hold of his shoulder and said, towards Paige and them, "Thank you for sticking by my very foolish son."

"Slander! How cruel." Abraham cried out dramatically.

Frank smiled at the more familiar tone and Petel and Paige stood down for the moment. After thanking Nurse Mara, Abraham and his father left the room. Paige hurried the rest of their group out as well, unwilling to get escorted back to their dorms by the nurse. They had to wait for Officer Riviera to resume his patrol after seeing Abraham and his father out in order to head back to the tower to talk more with Vektor and maybe get a look at the coding on these chips. Paige had to get her adapter and Dante checked the modem for any ports in the first place, to satisfy his own curiosity.

"We're back, Vektor." Frank announced, hopping into the computer chair. Petel growled at him briefly, making him laugh. "Abraham's gonna be okay, but he's got some crazy old tech for eyes."

"Ah, I figured that's what was causing the issue." Vektor said, his voice coming from the computer's speakers. It was a bit comforting, a bit easier to swallow, hearing the Prince inside there instead of seeing him in real life. "The coding on those is so bizarre, it even shows up on his form here. Perhaps once he's comfortable enough, I could ask him to show it to me in more detail."

"And of course you already knew about it." Frank joked in exasperation.

Vektor said, "It didn't seem like a relevant thing to bring up at the time."

"Well, you're probably gonna get your chance to look into it now." Petel said, looking to Dante where he was on the floor next to the modem.

Dante jumped, standing and backing away from the computer. All the ports on the modem were cleverly hidden, giving it a sleek and efficient design. Just how the company preferred. Paige entered as Vektor gave a concerned, "I thought you just said he would be okay? Removing any of the three from his code would cause a shutdown of the functions they handle."

"Three?" Dante asked, intrigued that he'd been right for once.

"He's only got two eyes." Frank protested.

He hopped up from the chair so Paige could sit and she handed the adapter to Dante. He fumbled it a moment, but didn't drop it and made sure the chips fit into it. Vektor said, "Yes, three. His eyes and neck. It's located at the back, near where he rubs when talking about things he can't recall, if you were curious as to its exact placement."

"His neck, huh?" Paige grimaced at the thought, then said, "We only have the stuff from his eyes, we didn't know about the third."

"Yes, by this point I'm sure my own 'broken' eyesight is what allows me to be aware of these things hidden to your own perception." Vektor snarked in reply. His tone was a pretty good mimic of Frank's, making the boy brighten in delight. Dante plugged the adapter into the modem, fairly certain it shouldn't cause any issues. It was what the system was truly built for, even if the method had to be as archaic as this. "But either way, let me know when the data is ready so we can give his eyes back. I've more or less finished all I can do in here until the cycle rolls over."

"Did you really find a way to fix the path?" Petel asked.

Vektor was silent for a beat as Paige typed away. "More or less." He repeated.

"Okay, I think I can just send you the data directly." Paige said, bemused at the system's willingness to cooperate for once. "Weird, but. Hey, it works."

"I was built for this. I'm quite proud of that." Vektor said, sounding, indeed, quite proud. He went silent as he and Paige examined the code until he next said, "No wonder Professor kept running into problems when faced with Vampire. The writing here is amateurish and too open for edits with so many exceptions it's a wonder it functions as well as it does half the time."

"Agreed." Paige said with a grimace.

"So it's just bad code?" Frank asked, leaning onto one of the chair's arms. "That means we can rewrite it so it's not bad, right?"

"We can rewrite the eyes, but it could cause issue if it contradicts the third perception code." Vektor said. "If the two programs don't agree with each other, it might trigger an even bigger breakdown than the ones we've seen before."

"How did it break in the first place?" Petel asked. "Can you explain what the code says, exactly?"

"Primary objective listed is to take revenge against Vampire. Secondary objective is to uphold family legacy, though terms are not listed clearly." Vektor began in a very mechanical manner. The detached tone made Dante shudder; it was like listening to his parents go over their patch notes. "There's a list of exceptions to this main directive which includes, encouragingly, all of us, as well as family members, non-hostiles, entities described either as normal or unreal, uninvolved individuals, vehicles, those in authority, fellow schoolmates—"

"It goes on like that." Paige cut in.

"Doesn't 'fellow schoolmates' contradict with Vladimirescu and Asheford?" Frank asked.

"It lists each of us specifically?" Dante joined in.

"You see, now, why this is such a mess and continues causing issues."

Vektor's tone dropped to annoyance. A good mimic of Abraham's, now that Dante noticed it. Paige sat back in her seat, pinching the bridge of her nose in a similar exasperation. "How is it you dumb boys ended up with bad coding?"

Dante flinched as Frank and Petel laughed at her joke. If it really was meant as a joke. Wanting to move the topic along, Dante said, "If we — um. If we get the last chip and m-make the programs match, then. Uh, then it would help s-stop the glitching, right?"

"Removing it entirely would be much better in the long run, but it being placed where it is concerns me." Vektor hummed in thought a moment. "If I could get a full scan of Professor's code, perception and all, then this would be a much easier issue to solve. I may not have the ability to remove the danger, but I could at least place a seal over it to bar any future tampering. That in itself, however, could lead to further breakdowns, and so such an extreme action should be considered more a temporary solution than anything."

"You can grab it out of him." Frank said, excited at his own suggestion.

The memory of Vektor's hand dipping into Dante's chest came sharply into focus and Dante shuddered as it gripped him. Petel stepped in quickly with a firm, "Let's focus on what we've got in front of us now and worry about the rest when it's relevant."

"Yes, that would better concentrate our efforts." Vektor agreed pretty easily. "Now, how exactly would you prefer we go about rewriting this?"

Frank, Petel, and Paige looked towards the computer in surprise. "Why are you asking us?" Paige questioned. "You're the experienced one here."

"You were 'made for this', as you've said." Petel added.

"I. I am unsure of how far to go." Vektor admitted, sounding hesitant for once. "Professor. He's not just another program with an easy to predict set of protocols. The intricate frameworks which contribute to your persons is much more interconnected than what I'm used to. This isn't the same as removing a stray error, this is a full reworking of his perception and I don't wish to alter him in an unintended manner by adding anything superfluous or making assumptions about how best to go about this."

Dante was taken aback enough to mutter a gobsmacked, "You care."

"Aww, you really care." Frank gushed.

"Of course I do. You are my friends." Vektor said with certainty.

Even Petel seemed overjoyed by this. Paige smiled as she said, "If it's that complicated, then all we really should do is make sure he can see."

"No caveats. No protocols or exceptions." Frank confirmed.

"Ah, then that wouldn't interfere with the coding in the third part." Vektor said, growing excited. "Good solution. I never would have considered that. All of you really are quite integral to our group. I'm amazed at just how much I still have to learn from everyone."

"I'm impressed at how much you're actually learning." Petel said.

"If only you could fix those open exceptions in your own code." Paige muttered.

"Not sure we want him basically performing surgery on himself." Frank said.

"I can't pull out my own coding even just to look it over, unfortunately." Vektor informed them. "I've reworked the code and saved it. Please, send me the next one."

Dante squeaked in surprise. "That w-was fast!"

"A simple program determining a single function isn't even a challenge." Vektor said.

He really was built for this. Paige nodded along and Dante swapped the two chips. "Easier, at least, than rerouting a lock-unlock mechanism or recreating the whole path to the game levels." She said.

"I'm not quite finished with the latter, but thank you for your confidence."

Vektor went silent as Paige typed away, getting him access to the chip's data. Dante settled onto the floor a bit more comfortably, wondering what he might see if he watched Paige work. Would the coding visibly change as Vektor rewrote it? Paige made a noise in disgust, then said, "At least the same shitty code was in both eyes."

"One small thing, yes." Vektor agreed.

After a minute of silence passed, Frank asked out of concern, "Are you sure you don't want us to wait with you again?"

"It will be easier if I stay in here until tomorrow's session." Vektor said, his tone showing some exhaustion. "That way, I can be logged out with the rest of you and not miss out on any of my 'obligations', as you've called them."

"He is learning." Petel said with a smug look in Dante's direction.

Dante shrugged in reply, not sure why Petel would aim that at him. Paige's eyes lit up and she looked to Frank as she said, "Okay, spill your insights. What exactly has Jonathan told you about his and Vektor's weird friendship?"

"Ah, did you by chance inform him yet about my unfortunate cancellation?" Vektor asked.

Dante and Petel both turned their attention on Frank, just as interested in this query. It seemed they were all better friends with Vektor than they liked to admit. Or it was a natural curiosity to know how this AI program made friends with someone outside their group. Frank held up his hands and protested, "Woah, it's nothing super juicy." Having tempered their expectations, he said, "You remember how Jonathan got all worried when Vektor got stuck yesterday?"

Paige and Petel nodded, so Dante did as well. Even though he hadn't heard about that.

"Well, he got all self-conscious about it and told me it was just because he's run into Vektor so often on his night walks that they've become friends. And now they plan their meetings."

"It's much more efficient this way." Vektor interjected, sounding oddly downcast. "Before, it was by chance if we would even see one another. I do so hate to cancel like this when he was as worried as he was."

"I mean, at least he should understand. He knows you were in the game tonight." Frank pointed out.

"I can't believe you actually went and befriended him." Paige said, sitting back and placing her hands on her hips. "He's ten times as insufferable as you and always isolates himself inside the labs for extracurriculars. How does he even stand you?"

"I-I don't think Jonathan's that bad." Dante protested weakly.

"Yeah, once you get to know him, he's pretty fun to have a chin wag with." Frank joined in.

Petel snorted in disbelief, arms crossed over their chest. Vektor, a bit embarrassed, said, "I wasn't aware your opinions on him were so divided. You invited him to our gift giving friendship holiday, didn't you?"

"He's Frank's roommate and friend." Paige said in reply.

Frank grinned. "And now he's Vektor's friend, too."

It still seemed odd for Vektor to have anything to do with anyone outside of their group. Anyone who assisted Vektoria, even. Dante's head snapped up and he started, "Doesn't he — um."

"Doesn't he work the computer for Vektoria?" Petel finished for him, apparently having the same thought.

Vektor was quiet a moment, then admitted, "I hadn't considered that." Then, in a bit of a panic, he asked, "Am I the one utilising dirty tactics now? Associating with someone in her midst with such friendliness?"

"Don't think about it too hard, you'll pop a circuit or something." Paige warned in a deadpan tone.

"I mean, you're not actively interfering with them, right? Paige and Zima are roommates and they're still friends. And I'm Jonathan's roommate. so I'm in the same boat." Frank pointed out.

Dante frowned at the floor, thinking of his burnt and broken bonds with Niculaie and Damon. Despite showing his devotion to the Kingpin, Dante didn't want to actually hurt the Vampire. Petel looked up towards the ceiling with a wry expression, also probably considering one of their peers. In the end, Vektor said, "I suppose it's an answer dependent on each player individually. I've saved the new code onto this one, by the way. All of you should go and rest for the evening."

Frank deflated in disappointment, but kept his tone cheery as he said, "Night, mate. Make sure you get some rest, too."

"At least there's no worries about AIR knocking you out." Paige said.

"I'll make sure to have the path finished for your return and the lock removed from the entrance." Vektor promised them. "We should be able to make it to the first checkpoint at the least. We'll fall too far behind otherwise."

"Don't push yourself there." Frank said with a worried chuckle.

Dante stood, as did Paige, and the group of them left for the dormitory. While Petel prepared for lights out, Dante put the two chips on his desk. Out in the open and exposed was better than hidden away somewhere. There was evidence this way, they'd be seen by another person.

Finally, he checked the damage to his hands. His fingertips were marred black with the residue of the shadows. They'd dripped from him, the same as they did for Fiamma.

He was one of them.

He shuddered and pressed his hands to his chest. No, no, he was human. Burnt flesh and red blood, not white eyes and stapled smile. He had to be.

He just had to be.

Surprisingly, Petel didn't ask after why he knew so much about enhancers. Whether his distraction had worked or it just made sense that the son of the company behind such technology would know about such a niche thing, he couldn't tell. The Vicario Company led that charge into the age of technology with their advances in medicine and computer science. It was only natural for Dante to have some insider knowledge of the sordid history behind it all.

Playing with human minds had always been their speciality. The Rabbit Hole was just the natural next step.

They met up with Abraham in the tower first thing the next morning. Petel, Paige, and Frank all trusted Dante with the task of restoring his sight. Percival, too, stepped back to allow Dante to work. Under all their scrutiny, their trust, Dante had to swallow back his apprehension and disregard all the spectres hovering just at the edges of his sight.

Eyes were just so fascinating. Their parts were simple and he liked how each one fit together, how they came apart. It was something he understood almost inherently. Almost too naturally. He couldn't exactly ask to take apart Abraham's eyes for the curiosity, for the sake of nostalgia, but it was nice to work with something he was familiar with again that didn't terrify him to uselessness.

"Okay. I'm going to open the ports and replace the chips now." He said, making sure to focus heat to his hands in order to alert Abraham of his nearing presence. Abraham nodded once, eyes still unfocused and presenting their glimmers. "It, um. Your vision might be a bit weird at first, but, uh. Please d-don't move until I'm done. It should be real quick."

"Alright." Abraham confirmed.

Dante tapped the switch, just in case, then inserted the first chip. He did the same to the other eye, then took a few steps back. "Okay. Your vision sh-should be restored now."

Provided Vektor hadn't screwed anything up in the programming. Abraham blinked a few times, his focus finding Dante first, then he grinned broadly. "So it has. Thank you, Vicario. Thank you, Dante."

He rushed forward to hug Dante before Dante could get more than a weak yelp out. Percival and Frank both relaxed from relief, then Abraham moved on to hug each of them as well.

"I can see again. And I'm not stuck this time. Although, apparently, I have the same tech from the Great War in my head?"

"That is very weird, even I had no idea." Percival said, patting his brother's back as he was squeezed.

"Good to know you didn't get completely wrecked by this game stuff." Frank added, straightening out his coat from the hug.

"And hopefully it won't happen again, though we won't know that for a while." Vektor joined in, reminding them all that he was still in the computer, waiting for them. "If you allowed me to take a full scan of your person, then we might be able to figure out that third enhancer at the—"

"Wait, there's a third?" Abraham asked, pulling back from hugging Petel in alarm. "I have three pieces of this tech in me?"

Percival, newly flabbergasted, said, "That's even more weird."

Dante had never really thought about it before, but Abraham's ponytail was kept low on the base of his head. Covering the area there from prying eyes. But, considering his glammers, there really was no need for it. He wondered if Abraham could even feel it when he rubbed at the side of his neck. Vektor huffed over getting interrupted, then said, "A conversation for later, I suppose. Shall we continue on our way now?"

"I guess that would be top priority to you, considering our situation." Paige said.

With a roll of her eyes, she took her seat at the computer as Petel and Abraham went to the scanners. Frank grinned over at Percival and asked, "Do you wanna see how it goes? Maybe we can see what you look like inside there."

"No, that's alright." Percival took a step back, smiling politely despite his unease. "I never really enjoyed fighting games like this."

Frank fell to a pout, though it was still very affectionate. "Aww. Stick around for lunch, then. We can chat more about English and stuff."

"That, I can do."

Percival relaxed with that same fondness, then Frank went to one of the other scanners. Meaning Dante had to as well. The doors closed him into the dark for only a short while until the floor dropped him into the black. He took deep, even breaths, then landed on the path of the level select.

It was still broken. His stomach dropped.

"I thought you said you fixed it?" Petel began, turning their accusing glare solely on the Prince.

Vektor said, "My apologies, but there's been a change in destination."

"We gotta go through a whole other level now just to catch up?" Frank cried in outrage. "We really are behind. That's so unfair."

The path now stretched out from where they stood outside the Grey Tundra to connect with the sphere in the centre. The previously unreachable level. A sick fear twisted Dante's insides, causing the fires around him to thrum in a manic rhythm and rise higher.

This couldn't be good. This really couldn't be good.

The path continued through the centre sphere to their destination, showing how they had no other options. Sighing, Abraham said, "I feel I must apologise as well. Were I not caught up with that Vampire, then we might have been able to prevent this."

"What's done is done. All that's left is to hurry." Vektor replied.

Frank hung his head forward in defeat. As they walked to this other level, Petel asked, "What's the deal with this one, anyway? Why wasn't it part of the loop?"

"The Seventh Circle was quarantined due to the unstable nature of its inhabitants." Vektor said. They all paused just outside and Dante really didn't like this. The name didn't fit at all. "My knowledge of its finer details is a bit lacking, I'm sorry to say, but we should be able to pass through. After all, we have the one designated to the Guardian here amongst our ranks."

"That's convenient." Frank said with a sarcastic bite.

"Quite." Vektor agreed.

The Prince stepped inside the sphere first and the others followed quickly. Dante waited a second for them to be fully through, then stepped into it himself.

This time, the sensation was more like wading through a cloud of smoke. Ash and heat instantly filled his mouth, raising even more alarm bells in his panicked mind. The level loaded in quickly with those red-brown plateaus, the sounds of the Tormented, and the angry red sky stretching out above. In the air was smoke, where there were cracks in the plateaus arose steam from the frozen red lake below, and puddles of shadows around them had multitudes of blank white eyes staring out at them.

Dante was too afraid to check behind them for the metal door in the mountainside he knew they'd passed through to enter.

This was Hell.

This place was Hell.

Dante couldn't even breathe as that fact hit him harder than any jab the spectres could toss his way.

"Welcome, my friends, to the Seventh Circle." Vektor said, gesturing out to the flat expanse of dirt and rocks before them. "I'm so sincerely sorry."

Chapter 11: Inferno

Dante's fire went out completely as they all stood inside this Seventh Circle.

"Inferno, are you going to be able to make it through this session?" Vektor asked, being the first to notice Dante's lack of reaction.

"You don't have to force yourself through it." Paige cautioned while the rest of them were stuck in speechless surprise. "If you want to sit this one out, there's no shame in that."

Dante, for his part, took a good few seconds to even react. "Huh?" He blinked himself back into the moment, his eyes losing that terrified glaze and the fires cropping back up around him. "Uh. It's. I'm, uh, I'll be okay. Sorry."

The apology seemed tacked on as an afterthought and it made Petel uneasy. Still, they had to trust Dante on this and progressed onwards, searching out the first checkpoint. They ran into a humanoid snake that was more reptile than woman (a Naga, according to Vektor, the Class I of the level) and a Chimera (the Class II, with the head of a lion, the body of an alligator, rooster talons at the front, a snake for a tail, and three rows of teeth in its mouth), which Petel and Abraham tag-teamed to take down. Vektor summoned a wave of featureless shadow people when he reached for a projectile, which rose from the surrounding area and surprised them. Quite a far cry from the boulders he created in the previous two levels. Frank revived the Chimera to take with them and Dante hung back without contributing at all.

They reached the first checkpoint, a rock spire with a green ribbon of stone wrapping around it, which opened into a dome-like covering with entrances on all sides when Vektor activated it, and decided it was a good stopping point for the day. As they stepped inside the checkpoint to get logged out, Dante said, seemingly unprompted, "I never wanted to see Hell again."

It made them all pause, if only for the unmistakable bitterness in Dante's voice. Vektor said in an odd display of agreement, "It is a difficult level to traverse, it seems."

He completely accepted Dante calling this level by a different name, strangely. Hell was certainly fitting for it, with its red sky and red-brown plateaus over a great frozen lake, glinting red from the surrounding sky box. But Petel chose to let it be, to practise their piece for the upcoming evaluation performance as they spent the rest of the night in their dorm room.

When they next entered the Seventh Circle, Dante broke down at the appearance of a Class III enemy, a stony Gargoyle with red eyes and a craggy beak. He near hyperventilated while Petel, Abraham, and Vektor fought it and the accompanying two Chimera off. Frank did his best to defend Dante, but was taken out by the Gargoyle, which proved a much harder enemy than anything else Petel had sunk their teeth into thus far. Abraham's bullets similarly didn't seem to even phase it.

"What is happening, Inferno?" Vektor asked, standing over Dante with an exasperation that Petel couldn't fault for once. "We just had this discussion. If you refuse to communicate, then we can't assist you."

"Dante, please." Paige joined in. "Tell us what's going on. Do you need a break?"

Dante didn't even respond, still sobbing quietly and miles away from them. Petel jumped over his pitiful fire to carry him the rest of the way to the second checkpoint, where Paige logged them out for the day.

Even outside the game, Dante was inconsolable. He brushed past all of them and left the tower. Petel found him in their room, properly sushi'd into his seaweed green blanket. At least he wasn't on fire this time.

He couldn't even manifest it in the game. This was all a bit concerning.

They sat down on his bed and said, "So. Wanna talk about what happened in there?"

"I hate that place." He said, soft and venomous.

That gave the wolf pause. Just like before, that coldness was unnatural on the fireball. They asked, "You've been there before?"

"Hell is Hell."

His assuredness was chilling, but the wolf grew frustrated. "That's not an answer." They growled out.

After a second, Dante sighed and sat up, uncurling himself from that sushi. "Sorry, I. I know I'm being stupid about this."

He was doing better than before. Petel had to remember that. Softening, they leaned in to press their head against his. "Not stupid." They assured him.

He stared at them a while, until they pulled back to meet his eyes. Then he said, "As much as I don't want to, we have to keep going. Vektor — he needs to get home."

"Yeah." Petel agreed.

They very much wanted to kiss this fireball.

The sudden urge was out of place and Petel returned to their own bed, embarrassed. It wasn't like the Seventh Circle could be modelled after a real life Hell. There was no way a real life Hell existed in the first place.

But Dante was willing to continue and Petel wanted so much to kiss him silly for it.

The next they went in, Vektor led the way out of the second checkpoint with his usual gung-ho attitude. Frank happily went along while Abraham pulled out his rifle, the both of them ready to face

any troubles. Dante hung back, fires flickering weakly with his hesitance. Petel kept by him, resolved to ease his fears.

"Any enemies, Paige?" Abraham called up towards the sky.

"Three Naga, but they're too far ahead for you to worry about right now." She answered.

Dante relaxed just slightly, though his fires remained weak. Their group walked for a while, the checkpoint easily blipping out of sight behind them. The faint sounds of someone singing wafted through the air, making Petel's ears prick up. That wasn't a snake sound. It was a fully rounded voice, light and ringing with a practised vibrato. Frank stopped in his tracks and asked, "Is that. Background music?"

Dante also froze mid-step, eyes going blank. Danger, warned the wolf. Petel took off running and dove behind an outcropping of rocks that popped into view as they neared without a second thought. The flames surrounding Dante rose, burning bigger and hotter than ever before, and everyone else was too slow to react. The wave of flames exploded from Dante and blasted through them all. Even Petel wasn't spared as fire sliced through the rocks and spread long past the visible horizon in every direction.

Petel winced at the heat, at the burns. It was very much like that night in their room, only twice as unavoidable. Paige's voice came over, a mixture of shock and confusion. "Okay, so. That was the Guardian, I take it, who wasn't anywhere near you this time."

Muffled by being farther away, Frank shouted, "How's that any fair? Why can this Guardian just make a Berserk happen without even showing its face?"

"That's the Midnight Bard for you." Vektor groaned, also somewhere away from the computer. Closer than Frank and no doubt on the floor, though. "I was afraid this might happen. Inferno's volatile nature was too much a match for this."

"Don't say that like it's his fault." Abraham protested, indignant. "Berserk is not a choice, it just takes over the player."

"But it is the same as Zima's. At least, it's similar." Frank said, closer now and growing contemplative. "Is that what you meant, Vektor?"

The fires died down, thankfully. Petel was sure they'd nearly been burnt up just like the others. Vektor said, "Yes, that was my implication. Thank you, Doktor. This setback — it's no one's fault except for the Guardian's."

He sounded actually upset about it. Petel grimaced. "Why's Shiranui the only one not to mess with us?" They asked.

"I don't think the Resident intended to cause as many issues as it did." Abraham said.

The air finally cleared of the lingering fire and heat. Petel peeked out from behind their cover, looking for Dante. The draw distance in this level was terrible (Abraham's words, not theirs) and Petel had gone a bit too far to see Dante anymore. Or he was completely gone. No, he'd be outside if that were the case. "Is Dante still here?" They asked in the end.

"He should be just there on the path." Paige said. Then, softer and more to herself, "His Berserk really cleared out the whole level. Crazy."

Petel leapt over their refuge and traced their steps back. The scorched circle on the ground came into view first, then Dante in the middle of it. He was crumpled on the floor and only recognisable due to his wavy blond hair, which seemed to shimmer now. Like fire itself. His game outfit was grey and tattered, as if turned to ash, and his skin was charcoal black. Brittle-looking.

There was no fire surrounding him. He was without his claws, without his teeth. Defenceless.

Petel crouched by this burnt and crumpled Dante and gently nudged his cheek with their paw. "Hey. You still in there, Dante?"

"Be careful, Petel." Paige said, distracting them from their endeavour. "Dante's only at 9% health and real brittle right now. You've only got 15% yourself."

"Get back to the checkpoint and get out." Vektor ordered. He sounded clearer, closer, and much more like the royalty he professed himself to be. "We'll just have to regroup and redouble our efforts another day."

"At least we're two checkpoints in already." Frank said encouragingly.

Dante stirred, drawing Petel's attention back to the game. Slowly, he sat up and coughed out a few puffs of black smoke. "Burnt." He managed, his voice rasping and just as charcoal as the rest of him. "I'm Burnt."

He looked up and his now completely blank and white eyes sent chills all the way through Petel's body. Their fur and ears stood on end at the terrifying, empty expression. The only red of his left was a thin ring around these blank white eyes.

It was better not to stare. Not to think of how much he looked like some shadowed being right now.

"Can you walk? We need to get home." They said.

"Home." Dante repeated softly. Each breath was an exhale of black smoke.

Dante stood, looking like charred paper with how wobbly he was. Petel didn't want to chance touching him, considering how fragile he seemed. They could, at least, help retrace their steps and led the way back to their previous checkpoint.

Now that Dante was standing, they took note of his clawed and gnarled hands. His sharp and animalistic feet. He may have looked fairly brittle, but there was also the potential for a beast. It made the wolf shudder once more.

"The. The music." Dante said, voice still rasping.

Petel paused and, sure enough, the singing had stopped. The air was completely dead, without even the moans of those pools of shadows and eyes. For that matter, none of those things were even around anymore. Dante really had wiped out everything on the level. "Yeah." Petel confirmed, not sure how to reconcile the unease prickling along their shoulders.

They continued walking in the silence. Their footsteps didn't even crunch in the red-brown dirt of the plateaus. Finally, Dante said, "Sorry."

"It's okay." Petel said instantly.

"I-I couldn't stop it. Or control it."

"That's generally how Berserk works." Petel said.

They remembered the time they were only teeth and claws, when all they could comprehend was fight and tearing everything in their vicinity to shreds.

Frank had gone through it. Now Dante had.

Abraham and Vektor had to be next.

"Heads up, AIR just spawned two Chimera right in your path." Paige said, making Dante flinch from the sudden and loud interjection.

Petel frowned in displeasure. "Are we close, at least?"

"You're nearly at the checkpoint." Paige assured them.

"That's a problem, actually." Vektor said with a sigh.

"Be careful." Paige said next. "You don't have much health to spare."

The checkpoint came within view, materialising on the border of their available vision. Relief washed over Petel right up until the enemies popped in and the sound of stony wings reached their ears.

Dante backed away with a panicked croak of protest. This was bad. Petel snarled at the two enemies, unable to actually protect Dante as they circled like vultures. "They weren't Chimera, Paige." They shouted.

A jumble of everyone's voices asked, "What?"

Then Paige let out a strangled yell. "Gargoyles? AIR changed their bloody signatures!"

"It can do that?" Abraham questioned in disbelief.

One of the Gargoyles dove at Dante and Petel shoved him out of the way and met it head-on with their claws, redirecting it. Unfortunately, a chunk of that charcoal tore off Dante from the jostle. He couldn't even scream as his head exploded in a spray of black liquid. Petel and both Gargoyles flinched away as a column of black smoke spilled out of Dante's neck and his body stayed upright on his feet.

For once, Petel sincerely hoped it was just that Dante had been taken out. Would soon be logged out of the game.

"Paige?" They called up, unsure.

"Whatever just happened, it doesn't look good." She said, a bit distracted with all that data no doubt in front of her. "Dante's stats went up by a 400 times multiplier when he hit 5% health and the system's having some issues processing this."

"Four hundred?" Frank shouted.

"And so Desperation mode activates." Vektor said in a mumble.

A sickening crunch reverberated around the area as the creature formerly Dante straightened itself up, now taller and its shoulders snapping out. His claws grew gnarled and whiffs of black smoke emanated off them, the same as Dante's exhaled breaths before his head popped. His legs curled backwards and his clawed feet became stumps, nearly hoof-like. A constant stream of black blood oozed from the stump of Dante's neck, leaving a dripping trail along the ground.

All Petel could say was a succinct, "Dante's head came off."

Again, they received a chorus of, "What?"

"That's how it manifests?" Vektor questioned loudly.

The Gargoyles charged Dante, who effortlessly dodged and swatted one out of the air. It burst into code before it even hit the ground. A loud buzz of — something settled in Petel's mind and they said, doing their best to stay calm, "His head's gone, but he's still. H-He's still."

Their paws and voice shook beyond their control. This creature wanted to destroy them. Frank's voice grew louder as he leaned closer (probably) and asked, "How's he still moving about if his head's gone? Nothing like that ever happened to us."

"None of you are programmed with a Desperation mode." Vektor pointed out.

The curiosity trembled in Petel's chest, as desperate as this buzzing making them shake, but their words caught in their throat. If they forced it, all that would come out would be whimpers and whines. Dante grabbed the remaining Gargoyle before it could escape and tore its wings off, then tossed it away as it dissolved into code.

He turned next on Petel.

There was no other instinct.

Their ears flattened, their tail tucked, and they ran.

Chapter 12: Desperation

It pursued.

Petel ran as fast as they could manage, but it wasn't enough. "It's after me." They said between pants. Their heart hammered against their chest and it was so hard to breathe. "He's after me. Shit, fuck, it's going to get me, it's going to kill me."

Even if anyone could reply, they weren't sure they'd hear it. They had to focus too hard on dodging out of the way of every swipe, of every wave of sludge; black lava that Dante's claws tossed up as he scraped them against the red-brown plateaus. Petel's legs were sore from being burnt and they were near hyperventilating they were panting so hard, but this was life or death. They were so used to being the fastest and yet this thing utterly outclassed them.

It craved their destruction.

Their heart pounded in their head and their chest heaved painfully with every breath right up until, finally, Dante caught them in those claws.

Their scream ripped from their throat in the same way their body was torn asunder.

It didn't make a sound. It was headless, after all.

Petel plummeted into the black, falling once more to reality.

Once they were on their more human feet, inside the scanner, their mind calmed. They were away from the danger. They stepped out and were greeted by Abraham and Frank, who caught them before they could collapse.

"You gonna be alright there, mate?" Abraham asked.

"I didn't stand a chance." Petel said. Though they could breathe again, they were absolutely winded. After a moment, they chuckled as they added, "Told you he was powerful."

Abraham laughed, reassured, while Frank stared at them incredulously. Vektor glanced their way to toss over a matter-of-fact, "Inferno has the highest Attack, of course he's the most powerful by technicality."

"That was the closest I've been to scared since I was a kid." Petel said next, ignoring the Prince's words.

"If that was the closest, I don't wanna know what actual being scared's like for you." Frank teased in a playful manner.

"Wait." Abraham turned to face Vektor, leaving Petel to stand on their own. "Did you just say. Dante's Attack stat?"

"Of course he can see those." Petel grumbled, leaning a bit more on Frank for support. Frank obliged happily, helping Petel over to the computer with Abraham.

Vektor was completely engrossed in the information, along with Paige, and missed Abraham's question entirely. "It's an overflow problem." He said to her. "That's what's causing this reaction in the system."

"Okay." Paige said in reply, exasperated as per usual. "How does that help us right now?"

"You're not understanding. Inferno's the one causing this overflow." He said. "Were he to exit now, it would no doubt warp the entire system to fit his perspective of the Seventh Circle. Keeping him contained in there would be more assured had we made it deeper into the level."

"Uhh, I'm sorry? What are you even talking about? Why would he leave the level while he's Berserk?"

Vektor hesitated a minute, really struggling with the thought. He had to force himself to say, "It's too dangerous. We can't allow that level of warping to infect the rest of the system. We have to seal it away."

Immediately, Frank rose to fury. "You can't just seal away our friend." He protested.

Petel, too, growled with a dangerous show of their teeth. "He's our friend."

"How would you even go about sealing him off? We need to get through that level to reach your home, don't we?" Abraham asked.

Strangely adamant, Vektor said, "I would give up my ability to return home if it meant protecting the whole of the Rabbit Hole from as dangerous an overflow such as this."

The statement was startling enough, but then the meaning of it hit Petel. They surged forward, out of Frank's grip, and grabbed the front of Vektor's uniform jacket. "We are not trapping Dante in Hell." They snarled in his face.

"He hates that place. That would be too cruel." Frank agreed.

"As cruel as allowing his warping to twist the rest of the system, inside and out. I am aware." Vektor nodded, showing a modicum of guilt at the least. It wasn't enough to sate the wolf and so Petel continued growling in his face.

Abraham said, "You keep saying that, warping. What does that mean?"

"It should be obvious." Vektor said. His tone remained calm, casual, and absolutely infuriating as he gestured to Petel, as unconcerned with the danger present before him as ever. "Just take Wolf's reaction into account. They disabled their fear response long ago and yet that overflow infected them,

changing their code while within Inferno's proximity. Is that not explanatory enough? Should that not concern all of you more than it has?"

"Disabled?" Paige questioned.

Despite themselves, their curiosity was piqued. "How do you know that?" They asked.

"He can see it in your code, probably." Frank answered for the Prince. He and Abraham pried Petel off Vektor and stood between the two, keeping them from attacking the Prince again. "But mate, danger or no, we're not gonna lock Dante away in there."

"Such a solution would never be an option for us." Abraham agreed.

Petel relaxed just a little knowing their pack was willing to stick up for Dante. Knowing they were all against this very bad idea. Paige said, "You didn't answer earlier, but how would you even seal him inside the level? You've never mentioned anything like that being within your powers before."

"There is a seal on the Mainframe. My family has watched over it for generations." Vektor told them. Though Petel was still upset with the witless program, they were intrigued to hear more information about the story to this game. Vektor hardly mentioned it, despite it being his whole motivation. "Our castle is built upon the doorway, a fortification to the seal, and that magic has been passed down through my family for as long as we have ruled. Whipping one up to block off the Seventh Circle is well within my capabilities."

"But. You're a Key." Paige said next. She frowned at him and pivoted in her chair, no longer watching the activity on the computer screen. "You're meant for unlocking. Wouldn't you need Vektoria's power to lock something so it could never be opened?"

"Like she does whenever she locks you in a room around the school." Frank supplied.

Vektor bristled at the mention of the Thief, but did his best to remain calm as he said, "I can perform this function just fine on my own. It is, after all, an inheritance I've gladly accepted."

Petel looked to Paige worriedly and she gave a shrug in explanation. Nothing must've been of their concern right now. Quietly, almost fearfully, Abraham asked, "What is the full extent of that inheritance? Can you tell us?"

His expression scrunched in distaste as the word left his mouth. Inheritance. A struggle the Huntsman knew all too well. Vektor frowned at the floor a minute, then began to explain slowly. His voice held an odd edge to it, not robotic this time. It was something less human. Something darker. "For generations, the Royals of the Kingdom have guarded the Mainframe. It is our sworn duty to watch over the data of the Rabbit Hole. To archive, to scan, to calculate. Our Kingdom has known peace under my grandfather, but it is not always so simple a living."

Just as softly, just as darkly, Petel said, "It killed your parents. Didn't it?"

"It did." Vektor confirmed. He flinched at the memory, then shook it off and raised his head to meet all of their gazes once more. "Inferno's warping can damage this realm and mine irreparably, but it is containable within the Seventh Circle. I understand, however, that this is not an option worth considering in all of your eyes."

"You are learning." Paige said with a fond exasperation.

She pivoted to watch the computer again as it beeped. Vektor snapped out of that odd tone and joined her. The jumble was no clearer to Petel, nor to Frank or Abraham, so the three of them settled down on the floor to watch the two handle everything.

"At least AIR's sending in Class IIIs." She said.

"At least, yes." Vektor agreed. He pointed at one spot and said, "Odd behaviour for the Midnight Bard. Almost like he's confused on how to properly run away."

"I wouldn't blame him, considering how much of a mess Dante is right now." She said.

After a brief pause, Vektor said, "Odd behaviour for AIR, too."

"Um, 'scuse me." Frank broke in, raising his hand and successfully getting both of their attention. "Can you explain the whole stats thing?"

"Yes, please." Abraham joined in.

Vektor looked to Paige, almost asking for permission. That got the wolf to perk up. Had the Prince really noticed and mirrored something like that? She rolled her eyes and tapped a few keys on the computer, switching the screen to an equally incomprehensible one. "Be my guest." She told him. "Saves me the trouble."

Brightening, Vektor launched right into it, gesturing to the screen as he explained. His attempts to illustrate his points were woefully useless on Petel, Frank, and Abraham, unfortunately. "Your stats, or abilities, all correspond to your efficiency inside and out of the Rabbit Hole. As you've observed about my own lack of Speed and Wolf's abundance of it, it can be determined easily in quantifiable outputs. Inferno here, as you can see, has altered Berserk stats that produce an overflow in the system due to the multipliers added to them. However, even normally, Inferno has the highest Attack stat out of everyone."

"Even compared to Vektoria's group?" Frank questioned.

"You are rather slow even out here." Abraham mumbled to himself.

Vektor turned his gaze towards the ceiling as he thought. "I haven't had enough chances to parse out any of our opposition's stats clearly. Neither have I had the chance to fully dissect all of yours." He mused. "While I can tell you that Inferno's Attack is the highest, that Wolf's Speed is the highest, and that my Speed is the lowest, determining the exact amounts for the rest is much more difficult without access to the full range of data."

"You really want to scan us all, huh?" Frank teased.

"That suddenly makes a lot of sense, considering your history." Abraham said.

Paige tapped a few keys and changed the screen back to what it was before (presumably; Petel could neither tell the difference nor parse out anything that would make it recognisable), drawing Vektor's attention to it once more. The two of them examined it a minute before Vektor said, "He really is overpowered."

"Disgustingly so." She agreed,

Deflating, Frank said, "Dante took out those Gargoyles, huh?"

"It would be much less aggravating if he could at least utilise that power better." Vektor went on, disregarding Frank's comment. "Perhaps. Were he not so held back by that Fear of his."

"Good luck with that." Paige said, knocking her fist to Vektor's head rather rudely. Petel chuckled at the gesture and resulting pout from the Prince. "Dante's just like that for the most part, no matter what we try."

"He's getting better." Petel protested, puffing up a bit.

"Yeah, but he's still Dante." She fired back.

It was going against rank. Still, Petel repeated, "He's getting better."

Frank gave a coo of, "Aww, it's not just possessiveness after all."

Paige, too, softened in understanding. "Okay, you've got me there, Petel."

They grinned at the acknowledgement. Abraham smiled along while Vektor went back to musing, though this time less thoughtful and more annoyed. "Inferno's capacity for adaptation is certainly lacking, considering his core argument. I suppose, were he any worse at it, he could be as bad as Vektoria."

That got the wolf's attention. "Vektoria?" They questioned.

"She's the worst." Frank groaned, throwing his head back. Abraham and Vektor both nodded along in agreement, frowning at the memories. "It's like she's refusing to learn her lessons out of spite. Jonathan and I've gotten pretty good at keeping Vektor from getting into it with her, but she's always trying to goad him into some petty argument or other. She's the worst."

"She's like that in Phys Ed, too. That Demon King and his cohorts can barely contain her." Abraham added.

Petel hummed in thought. "Refusing to learn her lessons." They echoed.

It did sort of sound like Dante, although Dante was much better about it now.

In fact. Now that Petel was back on that topic, Vektor shared a lot of similarities with Dante as well.

"So glad we didn't end up escorting her around." Frank said under his breath.

"She's really not that much worse." Paige protested weakly.

Abraham laughed softly at the two. Vektor gave an offended, "Ending up with either of us, as you've put it, seems to be viewed as a less than desirable event to begin with."

"Don't be that way, mate. We're quite glad to have you for a headache." Abraham said, standing to loop an arm around the Prince's shoulders and drawing him in for a side hug. It looked a bit uncomfortable, what with Abraham being so much shorter.

"Yeah. You're our headache by this point." Frank joined in, giggling.

Vektor huffed at the both of them, but relented. "This sort of ill-natured name-calling still makes very little sense to me."

"Teasing out of love's what we do." Abraham said in a sing-song tone.

"Gotta be close for the harshness of truth to cut without harming." Paige added.

Frank gave an, "Ooh, that's a good way to put it."

"That's why Sonya's liked Levy since they met." Petel agreed.

Vektor simply huffed again, though made no other protests. The computer beeped, garnering both Paige's and his attention. This time, Paige balked at the screen and gave an incredulous, "That many, AIR?"

"Odd behaviour indeed." Vektor mumbled.

"Gonna guess this is like that time with the Monkeys in the Forest." Frank said.

"Truly a wonder the system hasn't crashed from any of this." Abraham said with a shake of his head.

"There are measures in place to prevent catastrophic system failure." Vektor explained near automatically.

Paige sat back in her seat out of frustration and asked, "Why specifically the Gargoyles? That's so many moving parts. Surely, the system can't really—"

She stopped, eyes going wide in surprise. Though Abraham, Frank, and Petel stared at the screen as well, they couldn't see whatever it showed her. Vektor pulled out of Abraham's hold to get a better look, then gave a matter-of-fact, "Disgustingly powerful, as you said."

Catching on, Frank asked, "Are they even gonna be able to get him out?"

Petel had the sudden realisation hit them and they asked, "Could we send you in, Paige?"

She jumped, then gave a hurried, "No, we — I'd better not, I'd have no idea what I'd be doing or what my form would be."

"Navigator's build is Will-o-Wisp." Vektor said, smiling at the chance to exposit some more.

That nervousness switched to dread as she asked, "Will-o-Wisp?"

"Yes. A Ghost of both ice and fire." He answered.

That seemed to unsettle her further. Thankfully, the scanner opened and Dante tumbled out, back in one piece and as normal as he could be. Petel rushed to his side, helping him to his knees and giving an encouraging, "Easy, easy now."

"So glad you're okay, mate." Frank said in a whoosh of relief.

He, Abraham, and Paige drew over as well, Abraham and Paige chiming in with their agreement to the sentiment. Petel near growled at them, intent on keeping their mate safe, but this was their pack. There was no threat here. Vektor switched off the monitor and Dante, holding both hands to his head, gave a shaky, "I'm not. I w-won't. I'm s-so sorry."

"No need to apologise, we're just glad to see you're okay." Abraham told him.

"You destroyed the checkpoint." Vektor said. Before Petel could snap at him, he went on. "But, considering the circumstances, that's the much more preferable outcome here."

"You can just say you were worried, too." Frank chided him.

"I didn't want to mention that detail." Paige grumbled.

She and Abraham offered their help and, though Petel didn't want to relinquish any bit of Dante to them, they allowed their pack to help carry their fireball friend. Dante, for his part, gave a quiet and sincere, "Thank you. For waiting for me."

"We wouldn't leave you on your own." Abraham assured him.

"Vektor wanted to seal you away in there." Paige said.

Petel aimed a glare at the Prince, but Dante laughed. It was bitter and a little too harsh, but he was laughing. "W-Was it my, um. My warping?" He asked through that laughter. "Because. Yeah, that — that would make sense."

"I'll admit, you are powerful and we should heed that properly." Vektor said.

Dante gasped. "Wait — seal? Don't you — you wouldn't be able to get home!"

"A sacrifice I was willing to make for the sake of both our realms." Vektor confirmed with a nod.

Their group moved out of the tower and to the dorms, all piling into Dante and Petel's room. They were all a little concerned over Dante, wanting to make sure he was more okay than hurt by this.

After supper separated them and it was just Petel and Dante again, Petel refused to return to their own bed. They stayed at Dante's side. Attached, almost. Content to know their mate was here, wasn't trapped where he was miserable, had his head without the danger of it exploding.

"I'm sorry for hurting you." Dante said with a remorseful little shrug.

Petel knocked their shoulder against his. "We're even now."

"You. You did scare me then." He admitted, giggling nervously. "I know. It must've h-hurt a lot."

Petel shrugged this time. "You're not scaring me away that easily."

"Nothing deters you, does it?" He teased.

They laughed along with him, heart full and dizzy. "Can't fight the unyielding bite of a wolf." They said.

"That's both of us with good vocabulary." Dante giggled some more.

His smile was warm and fond. Then, a bit teasingly, he offered his hand up to them.

"Not even being burnt to ash could get you to stop."

"Definitely not."

Heart racing, they accepted his hand and pressed their teeth lightly against his skin. He was soft and flesh, not flame. He was warm and full, not charcoal.

He laughed and they decided, right there, that this was truly a heartfelt adoration.

Chapter 13: Sun Struck

They were all due for some stress relief. Even their Prince agreed when he didn't suggest right away that they continue on through the game.

Paige mentioned that the yearly fair was in town, the sure signs that spring was finally here. Whatever that meant. Before the end of the day, Dante had all of the off-campus passes they needed to visit it that Sunday. Petel couldn't fault him for his eagerness, though Abraham lamented over being unable to flex his own parent's authority on this one.

"What sort of festival is this a celebration for?" Vektor asked as he bounced excitedly in his seat on the bus, staring out the window at the passing scenery.

Petel was thankful they got to sit beside their boyfriend instead of beside that bundle of energy. Jonathan didn't seem too upset by it, at least. Sonya and Abraham sat a row behind them, Paige and Natasha a row in front of Dante and Petel, and Frank with Percival a row in front of the two girls. Levy and Kalyuga ended up going with their own families, meaning they'd have to meet up once they had all arrived. Jonathan said, "Not a celebration. Just a pop-up fair for spring."

"Are you quite certain?" Vektor asked, not even turning to face his seat mate.

Abraham leaned forward against the back of Vektor's seat and said, "Some fairs just travel the country seasonally. This one stops here every so often."

"So you've been before?" Sonya asked, looking a bit relieved.

"But why go through so many steps if it's not a specific celebration?" Vektor insisted.

Jonathan rolled his eyes at the Prince as Abraham said to Sonya, "Yes, I've been before."

"We used to go every time it came around with our friends." Percival called back.

"You remember how you had to pay to get into the pool? Same concept." Jonathan explained.

Before Vektor could protest further, Frank shouted, "They have a roller coaster this time."

All of their group turned to look. Sure enough, the metal bones of the coaster could be seen above the treetops, along with several other taller rides. Petel grinned as they said to Dante, "We have to ride that one."

"Aren't they, um. S-Scary?" He asked, shrinking away just a bit.

"Surely, that mess of framework can't possibly support even one of us." Vektor complained. He had both his hands and his nose pressed against the glass, obstructing Jonathan's whole view. "That

structural integrity is worse than even the plateaus of the Seventh Circle. Than the Grey Tundra's trap! Not to mention the mix of metals in its makeup."

"I'm not surprised that you've never seen a roller coaster before." Paige said with a sigh.

Natasha laughed. "All of the Tundra was like a giant trap, huh?"

"Just wait until you try it." Jonathan said, pulling Vektor away from the window by the back of his suit coat.

The Prince aimed an upset frown at his seat mate. "Why would I try something that is so obviously a death trap?"

Petel jumped in with a decisive, "For the thrills."

"For the thrills." Frank agreed with a cheer.

"I knew you lot were freaks for being so gung-ho about this game." Jonathan said in a fond sort of snark.

Percival laughed, as did Abraham, while Paige shook her head and Natasha cheered along with Frank. Dante turned in his seat to look back at Vektor and said, "There's, um. Always the Ferris Wheel if you'd, uh. Prefer something slower."

Vektor's distaste changed instantly to interest. "Ferris Wheel? What a bizarre name." He said.

"That's a romantic thing, Dante." Frank pointed out.

"Not all the time." Jonathan protested. "Friends can ride it together, too."

"Or you can ride it alone if they let you." Sonya joined in.

That settled, Petel slumped against Dante's side, their head on his shoulder. "Wake me when we get there." They said by way of explanation.

"Y-You can't really take th-that short a nap, can you?" He asked in protest. Importantly, he didn't force them off, accepting the contact.

"They are a wolf." Paige pointed out cheekily.

"Pretty sure those are called catnaps." Sonya said in counter.

"Dogs take catnaps, too, though." Natasha protested.

"They're a wolf." Dante reiterated.

It was pleasant noise. Petel drifted off into a light doze, wrapped up in the sounds of their pack and the warmth of their lovely boyfriend. When the bus arrived at their stop, Dante woke them gently and they held his hand the whole walk into the fairgrounds. Paige, Frank, Natasha, and Percival buzzed

in excitement while Abraham, Sonya, Jonathan, and Vektor discussed the logistics of the public transportation system.

As they drew closer to the site, the rides only towered higher. The conversation soon turned to ticket prices and Dante, Abraham, and Vektor volunteered to pitch in the most.

"You have money of your own?" Frank asked the Prince.

"I'm surprised, too." Vektor confirmed.

"You really are a Prince." Natasha said with a laugh.

Paige, Petel, Frank, Jonathan, and Sonya did their best to pitch in as well. Soon enough, they stood inside and amidst the hubbub of people, food stalls, and carnival games.

Petel didn't recognise any of these people, many of them being adults or younger kids. A proper crowd.

"We should see if we can find Levy and Kalyuga first." They said. "Then, roller coaster."

"Sounds good to me." Frank said. He grabbed one of Vektor's hands, giving it a tug. "C'mon, you gotta try it, mate."

Vektor was unmoved, staring fixedly at the Ferris Wheel. "That contraption. How lovely." He said, eyes sparkling with his interest. "The formula. The framework of code. Such elegance is simply breathtaking."

Frank deflated with a short, "Aww."

Jonathan gave a dramatic sigh, taking Vektor's hand from Frank. "Looks like it can't be helped. I'll be your second, since it looks like it requires pairs."

"Are you sure?" Dante asked. "I-I could go with him."

Petel clung tighter to their boyfriend, a reflexive sort of possessiveness rising up their throat. Vektor, it seemed, was content with Jonathan's grip and gave an uncharacteristically agreeable, "Can't be helped. We've no other choices."

Paige laughed as she said to Dante, "You're not getting outta this that easily."

"After your date, you can ride the roller coaster with us, Vektor." Abraham said with a grin.

"Can't leave Jonathan out, either." Frank added, just as jovial.

"Date?" Vektor asked Jonathan.

"Don't confuse him, this ain't any date." Jonathan complained.

The surly guy dragged Vektor off, even as the Prince protested loudly. "Wait — Cat and Duckie! We have yet to rendezvous with our friends!"

Natasha laughed as the two were swallowed by the crowd. "Aww, Jonathan's embarrassed."

Dante sighed softly, crestfallen at the missed opportunity to escape. He held fast to Petel's hand, anchoring himself. Petel smiled at him and said, "Don't worry. I'll be right here with you."

He smiled just slightly in return. Full of warmth from their fireball of a boyfriend, Petel pulled him along as their group headed for the line to the roller coaster. As they went, Frank flipped around to walk backwards and said to Paige, "So, what's your take on that?"

"Don't ask me, you're the one with the insider info." She said, shaking her head.

She and Abraham made sure to watch out for him, but he was adept enough to avoid running into anyone the whole way. The line to the ride (named "Snake Bite", according to the sign) was pretty long and the wolf's anticipation only grew. Frank then asked, "What're you all most excited about for this one?"

"High speeds and long drops." Petel said.

Laughing, Abraham said, "The loops are my favourite, personally."

Levy and Kalyuga seemed to appear from nowhere to join them, Levy looping an arm around Abraham's shoulders (having to reach up a bit to do so) and saying, "Then you're gonna love this one loop ride they got here. S'called the Ouroboros or something."

"Hey, you found us!" Paige exclaimed.

She and Natasha both went to hug Kalyuga, giddy at the sight of their friend. Intrigued, Abraham said, "They brought the Ouroboros back, did they?"

"I'm not riding it with you ten times in a row again." Percival said quickly at his brother.

Frank gasped in a playfully offended manner. "He has not ridden something ten times in a row."

"He did. Puked his guts out after, too." Percival confirmed, nodding seriously as if this was some grave offence. Most of their group laughed at the tidbit, Abraham included. "You should've seen the look on — on his boyfriend's face. He was right worried."

Percival grew downcast at the sudden thought. Trying to keep the mood upbeat, Frank gave his shoulder a gentle nudge and said, "You gotta have a fave here, too. Right, mate?"

After a moment, Percival nodded and perked right back up. "Yeah, the Zip Zedlin. We should go on that one next."

"And try our hand at all the shooting games." Abraham said.

"Aw, c'mon, mate. No one's gonna outshoot the actual Huntsman on our team." Levy complained.

Their group continued bantering and laughing together as they waited. Again, it was such a pleasant noise. Dante even seemed to lose himself in the atmosphere, following along with all the conversation and participating here or there.

His smile was so bright, so adorable, so genuine. Petel really could die a happy wolf here.

They had to split their group, unable to ride all at once. Levy, Kalyuga, Paige, Sonya, and Natasha went first, since Levy and Kalyuga had to get back to their families afterwards, leaving Petel, Dante, Frank, Percival, and Abraham to take the next ride. Paige laughed like a maniac as she went, getting Kalyuga to laugh along, and Petel could just barely make out the way Sonya hung tight to the bars as Levy kept his arms up the whole time.

Once their group exited, Petel and the others were allowed on. Dante's grip on the safety bar as it clicked into place was worryingly tight, but he was willing to get on. He sat next to Petel and didn't attempt to run this time.

"I'll get you a treat after." Petel promised him.

The statement caught his attention, but that was quickly ripped away as the ride buzzed loudly and the cart shuddered as it started along its tracks. The entire climb up the first drop, Frank and Percival chanted some odd countdown of their own design while Abraham whooped with anticipation. Then it was the wind rushing past, the clacking and roaring of the cart hurtling down the track, and the momentum slamming them into the sides with every turn.

The whole time, Dante was strangely silent.

All too quickly, the ride ended. As the cart settled into the station and right as the bars clicked up to release them, Dante let out a shuddery noise. Frank bounced out with an energetic little, "Spooked the soul right outta him."

"Can you stand? You alright, mate?" Abraham asked, also amused but appropriately concerned.

Dante didn't seem ready to move, so Petel hefted their boyfriend out of the cart, onto his feet and onto more solid ground. Once he found his footing, he said, "That was. A rush."

Delighted, Frank asked, "Did you like it?"

Once more, he walked backwards in order to face them as they all filed out of the area. Though Dante clung to Petel's hand like a lifeline, he was pretty steady on his feet. Able to walk on his own despite the shakiness of his voice. "Um. I guess, uh. It wasn't s-so terrible."

Frank cheered as Percival said, "From you, that's pretty good praise."

Dante relaxed finally, drooping a bit out of genuine sorrow. They met up with the rest of their group briefly to gush over the experience, then all split up to have their own little adventures. Abraham,

Frank, and Percival went to try out all the shooting galleries. Paige, Natasha, Sonya, and Vektor went to try out some of the other game stalls. Jonathan went to ride the roller coaster on his own. Which just left Dante and Petel to get some ice cream in peace.

"Are you sure you d-don't want me to, um. To help?" Dante asked. Though unsure, he still accepted the offered cone; chocolate, as an interesting note.

Smiling easier, Petel said, "I want to treat you." They took their own bowl, Neapolitan, and paid the vendor. Then they bumped their head against Dante's gently. "Really, thanks for going along with us on that. Was real brave to go so far out of your comfort zone."

They grinned to themselves, satisfied at the chance to preen over their wonderful, patient boyfriend. As they led Dante over to a shaded little bench to sit and rest, Dante said, "I mean. Nothing worse than the game, really."

Their laughter turned to delight. "Guess that's a good way to look at it."

Dante nibbled slowly on his ice cream, staring into it as if pondering it deeply. Finally, he said, "I've been through. Much worse. But no matter what. You always try to keep me included."

He turned that deep, piercing gaze on them, then smiled so brightly that Petel stopped breathing.

"I really appreciate that. All of this, actually. Thank you."

This was no doubt what being star struck was like.

While Dante went back to his ice cream, Petel was a bit too flustered to do the same so immediately. Why did their boyfriend have to be so cute? They were a wolf in love and they couldn't believe how much that fact surprised them every time they realised it.

Needing contact, they slumped themselves against his side and went back to eating. He seemed content to have them there and do much the same.

They were nearing the end of their treats when Paige, Sonya, Natasha, and Vektor crowded over. While Paige seemed sour about something, hands on her hips and exasperation in her face, Natasha giggled in amusement and Vektor seemed wholly bemused. Petel asked Sonya, who just looked as anxious as usual, "How'd it go?"

"Did you know there was a way to win carnival games even when they're rigged?" Sonya asked in return.

"I still don't understand why that upset the vendor as much as it did. Surely, the point of the stand should be to hand out prizes. Why rig it for failure in the first place?" Vektor asked, explaining things perfectly without even realising it.

Before Paige could bite him with her annoyance, Jonathan appeared behind Vektor and gave the Prince's head a shove. A surprisingly tactile response from the usually disconnected lab rat. "Sounds like someone still doesn't understand basic economics."

"Jonathan!" Vektor protested.

"How do you know weird details like the exact dating of the walls in our school but not the concept of goods and services requiring money?" Sonya asked, exasperated.

"Aww, Jonny boy likes your guy better than ours, too." Natasha said with a laugh.

Jonathan rolled his eyes and took a step back, shoving his hands firmly into his coat pockets. "What's there to like about a screaming mad computer program?" He asked.

"Ooh, confirmation." She cheered.

"If you don't like her, then why assist her at all?" Vektor asked, holding his head and pouting.

Jonathan shrugged in reply. A very non-committal and Jonathan answer. Natasha said brightly, "She's so funny, though. Treating everything like it's the most troublesome chore ever and that she's the only competent person to have ever existed."

"Truly a riot." Jonathan drawled, sarcasm laced in his tone like barbed wire. "Especially if you don't find it condescending or infuriating first."

Vektor paused, then looked to Jonathan and asked, "Aren't I condescending and infuriating as well?"

While Natasha and Paige burst into noisy laughter, Petel chuckling along, Jonathan said quickly, "It's in an endearing way, though."

"You're doing your best with what you've got." Sonya added.

"You're a-actually learning." Dante agreed. "That's more than she ever will."

Vektor watched all of them a moment longer, continuing to pout. In the end, he said, "Truly, I do not understand what it is about relationships that makes this sort of slander okay."

"It's the familiarity." Petel said, elbowing his side.

"It's the willingness to confront the ugliness inherent in all of us and embrace it." Jonathan agreed.

Sighing, Vektor decided to give up while he still could. Learning program and all. Petel offered their last bites of ice cream to Paige as Abraham, Frank, and Percival rejoined them. The casual conversation turned towards the prizes each of them held in their arms.

"Ooh, you actually won stuff." Paige said.

"To our own detriment, unfortunately." Abraham confirmed.

"Who won?" Petel asked, grinning.

Frank hopped up at the opportunity, though the rather large stuffed seal he held made it impossible for him to wave his arms about for that dramatic effect. "It was a valiant effort on both sides. We battled head to head, rifle to rifle, but in the end I'm not as experienced as Abe is."

He shrugged as he finished, dropping all of that drama immediately. Abraham gave an amused, "That being said, it was very close. His two victories to my three."

"And one draw." Percival supplied.

Natasha, Sonya, and Vektor all gave an appreciative clap for the two. Paige asked, "And what do you plan on doing with all those while we're on the rides?"

"Think this place has some lockers to rent or something?" Frank asked the Huntsman.

"Doesn't have a bag hold, why would it have rentable lockers?" Jonathan asked in return.

Seeing the opportunity, Dante said, "I, um. I wouldn't mind sitting out a-and watching over them."

Petel frowned in a pout at their boyfriend. "But we still have to ride that spinny one together."

"Ooh, the Warp Pipe?" Paige asked, growing eager.

Dante, predictably, just looked at them in horrified shock. "But. Ice cream." He protested.

They nodded. "Exactly."

Natasha laughed at the sheer disregard for any upset stomachs while Dante continued staring at them in disbelief. Paige and Percival both winced. "You're responsible for cleaning up any puke." Paige told Petel.

"I'll sit this one out." Percival said, taking the prizes from both Frank and Abraham. "Those ones make me too woozy."

"They make me just as sick and I'm going on it." Abraham teased.

"Yeah, but you like making yourself sick." Percival teased right back.

He sat down on the nearby bench, settling the matter neatly and making Abraham laugh. As their group headed for their destination, Sonya said, "I'm noticing a pattern here, van Helsing, with how you treat yourself at this fair."

"I just like the feeling. Like butterflies in your stomach." Abraham admitted, growing a bit sheepish. He even rubbed at the side of his neck. Close to where that third illegal enhancer was, supposedly. "It's nostalgic, in a way. Reminds me of when I was young. When I was in love."

His grip tightened as his eyes hardened and that flicker of upset, of anger, was just enough to show in a brief blink that his eyes weren't as flesh and blood as they appeared. Something changed Abraham forcefully and Petel desperately wished for confirmation on who they suspected it to be.

Seeing the odd mood, or possibly just being his normal computer self, Vektor asked, "Are you no longer in love, Professor?"

"Leave it to a rich brat to be wholly unconcerned about casually puking." Jonathan said with a shake of his head.

A laugh of pure surprise burst from Abraham as he asked, scandalised, "Brat? Think I'm a little old for such a label."

"Entitled prat, then." Jonathan supplied.

"That's the same thing."

Abraham laughed too hard to protest any further, which infected Natasha and Frank. Also finding the whole situation hilarious now, Petel gestured to the Huntsman and said to Dante, "Rich kids, right?"

Without missing a beat, Dante said right back, "I'm a Vicario, Petel."

Petel wrinkled their nose, confused as to how that could matter. Jonathan actually laughed before they could ask and said, "You got a point there, Vicario."

Intrigued, Paige turned on Dante and said, "Be honest. How much extra spending money do you actually get?"

"While we're on the subject." Frank joined in, turning towards Vektor. "How do you have any dosh at all?"

"It's not a lot." Dante said to Paige.

"There was a supply included with that box of required items." Vektor answered.

"Can attest, he did find some amidst the books and things." Sonya said.

Throwing her hands up, Paige gave an exasperated, "Rich kids."

Natasha and Abraham laughed while Jonathan gave Vektor a nudge, sharing a joke that their Prince just didn't understand. All the attention off him, Dante relaxed and, surprisingly, found Petel's hand on his own and held fast to it. His unnatural warmth was comforting by this point. Petel kept close to his side, content as the conversation around them shifted to which rides they'd visit next.

"I cannot fathom how this realm sees these jumbles of equations and decides to use them for recreation." Vektor professed as they stood just outside the flat, cylindrical contraption that was currently in full spin. The thrilled and terrified screams coming from it seemed to unsettle him. "So many things should be going wrong. How are none of you wary of this?"

"Science works in incomprehensible ways." Jonathan said.

"Science is cool." Frank said in contrast.

"It's a safer danger to court than most other things." Natasha pointed out.

"Safer than the game, that's for sure." Abraham agreed.

Dante scoffed in agreement, though didn't voice his complaint. Petel gave his hand a reassuring squeeze, which eased his annoyance. The ride slowed and, soon enough, they were all strapped into their spots with the single safety belt harness.

Safer than the game, indeed.

The mechanical whir of the ride as it started sparked a buzz of anticipation in Petel's gut. The spinning was slow at first, but as the speed built and they were pressed fully against the walls, they had never felt more at one with their skeleton. They were just meat and flesh stretched over it and it was a glorious reminder.

Then the ride slowed, the pressure lifted, and Petel hung forward as much as they could to allow their body to breathe and settle. A good number of others walked off completely fine, including Dante and Paige, while the rest of them stumbled off in varying degrees of dizziness. Vektor, predictably, crumpled to the floor as soon as he came unbuckled and it took both Jonathan and Sonya supporting him to get him off the ride.

"How are you completely fine? That one always gets me a bit woozy." Frank asked Dante and Paige, needing to speak louder than usual to be heard over Abraham vomiting into a nearby rubbish bin.

Dante shrugged, watching the way Jonathan, Sonya, Vektor, and Petel all collapsed onto the bench and taking it over while Percival helped his brother. "Um. If you use a-a fixed point while spinning, it, uh, it helps."

"That's a dancer thing." Paige said.

Frank slumped against the arm of the bench, considering it was full, while Natasha hung onto Paige for support. Vektor pulled himself up from the bench in order to stumble over to peer into the rubbish bin Abraham was hunched over. While at least Abraham finished puking, Petel did not envy their Prince this curiosity in the slightest. "Why does it have colour?" Vektor asked in the end.

He then sunk to the floor, unable to hold himself up. Exasperated, Jonathan said, "I shudder to think what puke is supposed to look like for a computer program."

"Battery acid, probably." Paige surmised.

"Could his body handle that?" Percival asked, still rubbing his brother's back.

"Who knows?" Dante said in a mumble.

He helped Vektor off the ground with a bit of difficulty, then carried the Prince back to the bench and laid him across their laps. For some reason. It was probably easier than fitting him back in-

between them all, so Petel wouldn't complain. Percival helped his brother sit against the other arm of the bench, allowing Frank to ask the Huntsman, "You gonna be okay, mate?"

"Just need to let my stomach settle and I'll be good as usual." Abraham said, waving Frank off. Sonya pulled out a water bottle from the pile of things and handed it to Abraham, who accepted it gratefully. "Once we're all good, we can ride the Ouroboros. Right, chaps?"

"That's not letting your stomach settle at all." Percival said, throwing his hands up in complaint.

"Continued aggravation of your trachea with such acidic matter will cause more damage than necessary, Professor." Vektor said, staring straight at Abraham from his spot across their laps. Despite his inability to support himself, his voice was always strong. "Why is it you want to put yourself through such a thing more than once?"

"Fun." Abraham answered easily.

"Definitely fun." Natasha agreed with a giggle.

Vektor frowned, even as Abraham reached over to ruffle his hair. "Truly, you lot are incomprehensible. Completely illogical as well, while I'm at it."

Dante laughed suddenly and its loudness was startling. "You should have learned that when you first met us." He said.

"He's got a point." Jonathan said with a teasing prod to Vektor's cheek.

"Yeah, catch up, Vektor." Frank joined in.

Vektor waved them all off irritably, making them laugh some more. After a few minutes of just sitting and further teasing their robotic Prince, Vektor stood up as a protest. When he stayed standing on his own two feet, they all decided to get back into their day of fun.

Petel fell into step beside their boyfriend, knocking his shoulder with theirs. It got his attention and, unexpectedly, he said, "Even I learned that faster than he did."

Smiling, Petel said, "You did."

They took his hand and it was just as warm and wonderful as ever. While Frank and Percival went to ride the Ferris Wheel together, Jonathan, Abraham, and Paige convinced Vektor onto the Ouroboros with them despite his hesitance. Paige and Natasha whooped in enjoyment, Dante screamed on this one, and Abraham ended up laughing so hard that he had trouble disembarking once it was over. Their next destination was the Dragoon, a swinging boat ride that actually got Vektor to shriek in fear. The blaring music gave Paige and Frank mild headaches, though, leading their group to split up for another break.

Sonya went off to meet up with Levy and Petel dragged Dante over to find Kalyuga. The three of them took a trip through one of the fun houses that they definitely weren't too big for and definitely

didn't have to slyly cheat their way into. Kalyuga laughed at all the scare tactics while Dante jumped at each one, allowing Petel to enjoy the best of both reactions to the thing.

Once they parted ways with Kalyuga and met back up with the rest of their group, they all went on a ride called the Zip Zedlin, which was modelled after a zipper and definitely Petel's favourite so far. The way each seating cage was flung about in its own rotation as the whole of the ride spun really made it seem more dangerous than it probably was. Frank managed to convince Jonathan and Vektor onto the Carousal next and Petel took Dante over to the Ferris Wheel. The others were busy watching the Rapping Violinist and his impromptu performance, so the two of them could get away with it.

Dante leaned into Petel's side as their bench seat rose slowly, revealing the whole of the sunset view to them. Though the idea of grabbing a supper that would no doubt make them sick tomorrow was enticing, they had a curfew to abide by. They wrapped their arm around Dante's shoulder, intending to make the most out of this grand finale.

"I want to be a firework." Dante mumbled sleepily.

Petel snorted through their nose in amusement. "That came out of nowhere."

Dante hummed softly in some sort of reply, then said, "No. That's not right, is it? What I want to be. Is the sun."

Laughing quietly at their own joke, Petel said, "Light of our lives?"

"Burning. Unflinching. Fixed." He explained rather unhelpfully. He nuzzled into Petel's side, definitely too sleepy to watch what he was saying. "The sun is. Important. The sun is. Beautiful. Can't blame it for hurting. Gotta treat with respect."

They found themselves nodding along. "Fire's like that." They agreed.

"Fireworks pop. They fizzle." He said, gesturing vaguely with his hands now. "Bright and loud and colour. But they're fleeting. They won't last. Just pop, then no more."

"They still burn if not handled with care." Petel pointed out.

"They're dazzle. Beauty without bite." Dante argued right back.

Grinning toothily, Petel said, "And you have so much bite."

He giggled at their words. They reached the peak and the whole of the sunset was laid before them.

He wanted to be like the sun, huh? Softening, Petel said, "Call me a wolf of the sun, then."

"No."

Dante shook his head and Petel turned their inquisitive frown down at him. "No?"

"Wolves are of the moon." He said. He met Petel's eyes directly as he went on. "You're a wolf of the moon. That's what makes us go together so well."

They met those lovely, serious red eyes. "We go together well?" They asked.

"Moon reflects sun." He explained. "They're always dancing, you know. Around each other. Sun and moon. It's beautiful, isn't it?"

Slowly, they nodded. "I'm a wolf of the moon." They agreed.

The sun was a star and they were definitely struck by it. Gradually, as the ride descended, they both returned to watching the view before them. Petel could hardly breathe, they were so caught by this fireball.

How they desired him, burning and all.

How they adored him, charcoal flesh and bone.

They only discovered that he'd fallen into a doze once it was their turn to disembark. They scooped their wonderful and sleepy boyfriend up into their arms and carried him back to the rest of their pack. As they took a seat on the bench, situating Dante on their lap properly, Frank greeted them with an energetic, "Hey, Petel. How was your Ferris Wheel date?"

He grinned, as if there was some big secret behind this. Petel said, "Relaxing. The Carousel?"

"It spun, like that Warp Pipe attraction, but not enough to disorient." Vektor answered.

"Looks like it's about time to head back." Paige said with a fond sort of nod towards Dante. Natasha and Frank whined in protest while Percival and Sonya chimed their agreement. Paige rubbed at her arms as she next noted, "It's still pretty chilly, anyway. I think the only ones who'd be okay are you two, Petel."

"And none of us want to miss supper." Abraham joined in.

"I guess that's a good point." Natasha said with an air of defeat.

"Do you need help carrying him?" Sonya asked Petel.

Jonathan and Abraham drew over, just as interested in helping. Petel's grip tightened reflexively, the possessive wolf rearing in the back of their mind. They had to relax, had to quell that instinct to bite, and said, "I've got him."

The three accepted this and their group made for the exit to this place. Entering was such an event in itself that the lack of any such fanfare as they simply walked out was a bit of a hollow feeling. As if something was missing. They walked along the path and were soon at the bus stop, along with several other patrons, waiting to return to their regular schedule.

Not that virtual reality games and their AI Prince were regular in the slightest. Looking around at all the unfamiliar faces, Petel wondered what all their stories might be. What all were these others doing in their own lives that they wound up visiting this seasonal attraction?

The darkness began to settle, smothering the last reaches of the sun, when their bus arrived. They all filed on, taking three to a seat where they could, and headed back to the Boarding School. The lights of the attractions could be seen even as they pulled away and Frank, Paige, and Sonya pressed their faces against the bus windows in order to watch them fade into the distance. Vektor, Abraham, Jonathan, and Natasha became engrossed in a quiet conversation amongst themselves and Percival, just like Dante, ended up leaning against Frank's shoulder and dozing peacefully.

It was nice to see the fireball so serene for once. Petel let their head lean against his and never once considered this adventure to be a mistake.

Chapter 14: The Heart in the Fire

"You don't have to go back in yet if you're not ready." Petel reassured Dante as they sat together in Study Hall.

Frank and Percival were off at their own table, excitedly talking over something. Petel sat right next to Dante, almost annoyingly so. As insistent as ever. Dante wasn't sure he'd ever fully understand this wolf. "Um. Is that really okay?" He asked.

It was Hell. He very much did not want to traverse the nightmare of his childhood. He was, however, the one assigned to Orpheus. And Orpheus never liked playing nice.

The bard would sing endlessly, pretending to play along, all the while expressing the full weight of his resentment at being little more than a babysitter.

"We can play a little while without you." Petel said, leaning over to rest their head against his. "Take as long as you need. I know it's hard for you."

Part of him wondered how much of this was out of genuine concern and how much was out of the desire to not have Dante screw up again. After going into that desperation mode and his head popping, he wouldn't blame them for being scared. That fear infected everything when his power was so enhanced.

But Petel was weirdly and willingly cuddly. Had been especially so even before their trip to the fair. It really was quite difficult to understand this wolf at times.

"I. Um." Dante started, getting Petel's attention. This was a bad decision. Still, it was one he had to make. "I want to be there. Even if, uh, I'm not going in."

Petel smiled at him with an open affection that was actually a bit embarrassing. "I'll appreciate being able to hear you and see you once we're done." They said.

How was he supposed to react to that? All he could do was sit and fidget with his hands as Petel continued leaning against him, perfectly content to do nothing else.

The hugging was fine. Dante sort of understood hugging and how to respond to it now. This level of cuddliness was a bit much, though. Fitting for Petel, but Dante wasn't sure how to handle so much contact. No matter how many times the wolf was burnt, they returned to be burned once more. Frustrating that they never learned, but also proving that Dante was stuck with them no matter how dangerous he revealed himself to be.

At the very least, none of the spectres could touch him like this. Dante hardly had time to give any of them thought, too busy with this much more tactile Petel and the confusion which came from that.

Once classes ended and their group headed to the tower, Vektor asked, "Are you certain about sitting out this round, Inferno?"

"Give him time, Vektor." Frank said, cutting in before Dante had a chance to answer. "I'm surprised he's willing to be in there at all. You sure you'll be okay, Dante?"

He turned his concern on Dante at the end. He was so good at walking while facing backwards. Dante braced himself, then nodded in reply. "I. I want to support you all."

"We're glad to have you with us, even if not in the game." Abraham said, his tone reassuring. "Don't feel pressured to get back into it before you're ready. We're plenty capable on our own."

He turned to Vektor with a grin, prompting the Prince for a response. As Paige opened the doors and they stepped inside, Vektor frowned in deep thought. "I'm much less worried about our capabilities, if I'm totally being honest here." He said in a mumble.

Petel, Frank, and Abraham went to a scanner each, ready to dive back in. Dante followed Paige to the computer, more willing to watch the data than risk seeing any more shadows. As she sat in her chair and set about typing, she said, "Well, whatever it is you're bothered by, I'm sure everyone can handle it."

The system hummed as it loaded them all in and the screen sorted out each of their profiles. Wolf, Doktor, Professor, and Prince; they really were defined by their designations. It made sense why Vektor called them by those so insistently. Their voices also came from the speakers, which was fascinating if a bit weird to hear. "Let's get going." Frank cheered.

"We have a lot of ground to cover, what with the second checkpoint requiring restoration." Vektor said in his very matter-of-fact tone. The one which made him sound more computer program than human and never failed to get Dante to flinch a little. "As long as we go unnoticed, we should be able to at least regain our progress from last time."

"I wouldn't call that progress." Paige mumbled.

She glanced to Dante a moment, unsure over the sensitivity of the situation. Dante grimaced, but spoke loud enough for them to hear. "If Orpheus notices you're without me, then you won't have long to react."

"Not to mention AIR's own interference." Vektor confirmed with a short sigh. "Out of all the Guardians, it has to be the Midnight Bard who takes his role the most seriously."

"Perhaps we can make an appeal?" Frank suggested.

"It's worth a shot." Abraham said in agreement.

Dante deflated against the back of Paige's chair, wondering why everything about the Rabbit Hole had to be so difficult. Paige tapped a few keys to bring up the map, showing a surprisingly detailed layout of the whole level.

Those green markers placed by the first checkpoint were Petel, Frank, and Abraham. Meaning the black one leading the way had to be Vektor. The checkpoints, the path Vektor laid out for them so far, and a few enemies were also denoted on there. It was a vast and empty space mostly, but familiar all the same even in this overhead format.

Paige spotted the enemies and said, "Heads up, AIR's sending some Chimera your way."

Each one had a 'II' on them. So Vektor's classification was more literal than they thought. Petel, immediately eager, asked, "How many?"

"Three." Paige replied.

The system beeped and a new signature appeared, this one a bright red. A dangerous red. Dante took a step back instinctively, but that was silly. It was in the game, not here in reality. Just as his spectres couldn't get to him in there, these Hell things couldn't reach him out here. Abraham asked, "Are they close?"

"Not right now, but." Paige stopped as the unknown signal zipped over to the three enemies. Far too quickly, the three were struck from the display. Paige sat back and gave a puzzled, "Huh. That's something."

"AIR change 'em up again?" Petel asked.

"Is someone singing?" Frank joined in.

Dante said, "Orpheus."

"That's what I was afraid of."

Vektor sounded resigned. The red signal seemed to teleport around the area, erratic and terrifying. That was Orpheus alright. Abraham said, "We didn't get to actually see the Guardian last time."

"I don't think we want to." Frank said, appropriately apprehensive.

"We have to hurry. We're almost back at the second checkpoint." Vektor said. "I've no doubts the Midnight Bard will revoke our access and I do not wish to lose our progress this quickly."

Dante looked to the group of green markers and, sure enough, they were near the inactive marker for the second checkpoint. Those were numbered, too, though the other inactive ones were obscured to mask their proper order. He couldn't help leaning in again, watching everything in rapt interest. Paige paused in the middle of typing and glanced back at him with an appraising look. He avoided meeting her eyes, guilt rising in his throat, just watching the markers on the map crowd around the broken checkpoint. Right as it was reinstated, Orpheus zipped across the map and he shouted, "Look out, he's coming."

"Dante?" Petel questioned.

Frank yelped in surprise as Orpheus stopped right before them. Even just seeing the markers on the map, it was menacing. Vektor slipped into his more regal affect, saying, "Oh, noble Guardian of the Seventh Circle. Please allow us to—"

His voice cut out and Abraham shouted as Frank cried in protest. His mark vanished off the map and, a few moments later, the Prince tumbled out of the centre scanner.

"Let the record show I did, indeed, try diplomacy." He said into the floor.

Dante went over to help him to his knees as Paige said to the others, "I don't think picking a fight with the Guardian is the best option, mates."

"It might get us out faster." Frank said weakly.

"If he were interested in fighting back at all." Abraham grunted.

Petel snarled unintelligibly, which caught Dante's interest. The wolf did think of Vektor as a part of their pack. He looked at the Prince next to him on the floor, frowning. Did creatures like them really deserve such loyalty? Paige said, "If it helps change your minds, you're not even doing any damage."

"The Guardian cannot be harmed by us players." Vektor said, able to sit up on his own now. "Another precaution. There's no telling what might happen were they to encounter the log-out procedure."

"They're certainly powerful. Took you and the enemies out with a single blow." Paige quipped.

"That gatekeeper thing makes a lot more sense now." Frank said.

Orpheus didn't seem to be talking to them. They definitely would have said something about it. Paige went to reply, then leaned away from the computer in aggravation. The other three scanners opened to allow them out and she said, "You finally got through to him."

"I'm sorry, Inferno, but we'll have to wait until you're ready to go back in." Vektor said.

He sounded genuinely apologetic, which was something. Better than before and it shouldn't have been that intriguing. The others gathered around Vektor, offering to help him up as Paige stood to join them with her hands on her hips. "That better be okay with you, Prince." She said.

"It has to be." Vektor accepted Frank and Abraham's hands, standing to his feet after some difficulty balancing himself properly. Petel pulled Dante up and Vektor faced them with a much more cheerful, "Now, it's supptime, is it not? I'm excited to see what meal awaits us this time."

Frank grinned and Abraham smiled along, relaxing at Vektor's easy acceptance. Petel and Paige relented as well and it was shocking that Paige didn't bring up how Dante could understand the computer. Their group headed to the cafeteria to eat, not giving this detail a single mention. Sonya and Levy were amazed to hear about how Orpheus treated them, but encouraging all the same.

Dante really was lucky to have them trust him so much. How, after everything, they hadn't discarded him for never speaking the truth.

The next few days were quiet. Dante would have completely forgotten his birthday if not for Mister Williams dropping by their dormitory the afternoon before.

"Got some mail, Vicario." Mister Williams said, handing a letter to him with a gentle smile. "Happy Birthday."

He left and Dante sat down with the letter, opening it slowly. Looking strangely annoyed, Petel asked, "That from your parents?"

"No." Dante said, going over the simple birthday card. "It's. I-I had no idea my grandparents even knew I was here."

It was the same as most years, wishing him well and hoping for his eventual integration into the family's company. The fact that they'd bothered, though. That meant a lot.

He put the card away, nestled safely in the back of one of his drawers where his other precious gifts from his grandparents were hidden. The three would keep it safe until he could take it home and place it with the others. Then he and Petel headed to supper as Petel insistently wished him a happy birthday. Even though it was tomorrow and not right now. It was a little silly and it made Dante laugh.

He had to send his grandparents a thank you card. As long as they were dedicated enough to keep this up, it was only right for him to do the same.

Petel continued their very cuddly streak the next morning, as they practically refused to separate from him the whole time they were getting ready. Paige and Frank were just as giddy to wish Dante a happy birthday as well. Sonya and Levy joined in cheerily, too. Even Vektor seemed proud to wish Dante well, still not upset over the past few days of nothing relating to the game.

"I thought we were waiting until lunch to do this?" Sonya noted, a bit flustered.

"Sorry, I'm just so excited." Frank said with a grin. "I bet you were able to say it to him first thing, huh, Petel?"

Dante nodded in agreement, bowing his head bashfully. That look of annoyance came back and Petel said, "Actually, no. Mister Williams beat me to it."

"Aww, you must've been whining for hours about that." Levy teased.

"Mister Williams really does go above and beyond what he needs to for us here." Sonya said with a fond sort of smile. "He's so good about wishing everyone a good day on their birthday, even if they haven't taken his classes or if they live off-campus."

"It's the least he can do for us, I heard him say once." Paige agreed confidently. "He's a real idol, even if he's a big ol' grump most of the time."

Dante was a bit unsettled by this implication that there were plans for later, but, for now, there were classes to attend and school things to take care of. Both the Headmistress and Mister Satou (as well as Mister Williams, again) wished him a happy birthday anyway and he really needed to divert all this attention on him.

The spectres were already agitated with him from his refusal to give them enough thought.

He could see them constantly at the edges of his vision, just out of reach and cackling throughout the whole morning.

They couldn't get close, though. Petel was too clingy for that.

For lunch, their group of friends "surprised" him with a big, boisterous celebration. They even chose to sit outside, despite the stark chill lingering in the air and arranged, somehow, for there to be a cake.

"We didn't know what type of cake was your favourite, so it's just chocolate." Frank explained.

"Chocolate's always a safe bet." Kalyuga joined in.

The meal was a nice caprese salad. It was more thought than had ever been put into it before, which was odd. A good kind of odd, like a fireplace warmth in the middle of the summer. Were Dante better at this whole fire thing, he'd curl up right in the heart of it and sleep in the soot half the time, just to be in that comforting heat.

"We know you don't want it to be a big deal, but we've just gotta celebrate." Kalyuga said, pressing her gift into his hands.

"We appreciate you being our friend." Paige said next, scooting her own present closer to his place at the table. "That's what we wanted most to tell you."

"You're stuck with us, after all." Frank said next. "If nothing else, that's the true mark of friendship."

"That, and the way you do care about us." Petel said, knocking their shoulder against Dante's in their own affectionate way. "You wouldn't protect us so much if you didn't like us."

Dante bowed his head a moment, a little overwhelmed by all this warmth. Outside had been the correct choice; with his heat, it made a nice little bubble for all of them and it meant he wouldn't overheat to the point of flames in their midst. "I-I don't even know what to say." He managed in the end. Stupidly. Uselessly.

His friends took it in stride, smiling and having fun. Not judging him for his awkward acceptance of their celebration. They each got him a card on top of the cake and two gifts. Kalyuga, Sonya, and Levy had collaborated on getting him a box of assorted candies, with fizz flavours and chewy gummies and even a few chocolate coated biscuits. Levy joked, "Whichever's your fave in that bunch, we'll get more of just that for ya next year."

Frank, Paige, Abraham, Percival, and Petel got him a very soft and beautiful lavender blanket. "To replace the one Petel says you don't like." Abraham explained.

"Perci gave it some unique embroidery, so it's one of a kind."

Frank gestured to Percival beside him, who grinned bashfully. "It's just on the corner, I hope it's not too much. I felt bad ruining the softness there." He babbled nervously.

"It's fine, it looks really good." Paige told him.

Dante had to flip the folded blanket over in order to find this intricate embroidery at one of the corners. The pattern looked like several of Dante's own wards, modified so they could weave in and out of each other.

Familiar enough to recognise. Specific enough for him to know exactly where they came from.

"Th-These. These were the ones. B-Before Winter break."

He looked to Petel, presenting the embroidery. Petel, for their part, grew apologetic. "Found 'em and thought they'd help keep you safe. Like you said your other one does."

"They're really pretty designs." Percival said. "Sorry I took some liberties with them, but they flowed together too well to make them separate."

Dante took another good look at the embroidery. He hadn't been too surprised when they disappeared over the break. This wasn't how he'd thought they'd been taken, but Percival had talent and the design he'd strung them into did look nice.

A stamp of friendship. Meant to keep the bad things at bay. Did he explain, then, that the magic was in the gift giving to begin with? That the wards were unnecessarily overpowering the already precious, heartfelt sentiment?

"It's. Thank you." He said in the end. "Thank you, this is — it's wonderful."

The table was relieved and everyone enjoyed a slice of the cake. The hubbub was filled with wild questions and more comfortable conversation, as it usually was. Frank wanted to know if Dante had a favourite cake flavour (he did; red velvet) while Kalyuga asked if he had a favourite kind of sweet. That was harder, since the only answer he could come up with on the spot was fizz, which was decidedly not a sweet in the traditional sense. Everything Dante had come to expect from this group of friends was presented to him right here and even then, it was more than he could rightly ask for.

Once the bell rang, they all pitched in to help clean up before heading their separate ways. As Dante went to return the cake platter, Vektor followed. He regarded the Prince with a bewildered, "Did you, uh. Want to talk about something, Vektor?"

"Everyone wished to show their appreciation of you. Including myself." Vektor stared down at him steadily, his golden eyes glowing even in the unnaturally bright lighting of the cafeteria. "I hope my gift to you properly conveys my gratitude for all of your support."

"G-Gift?"

Vektor raised his hand and, too quick, tapped the glowing light at his fingertips to Dante's forehead. As Dante reeled back from the shock, nearly fumbling the platter in the process, Vektor smiled and gave a simple, "You deserve a reprieve from those pesky punishment protocols for today."

"What did you do?"

Dante's voice shook with the need to shout, but Vektor walked away without further explanation. Heart hammering in his ears, Dante delivered the platter to Mister Locke (who wished him well with a few signs and a smile), then hurried off to Art.

It only struck him as he was heading back to his room for the day that the spectres were completely gone.

He was embarrassed to say that his first response was to think hard on the winged serpents, the shadows, the goblins meant to rip out his toes.

Nothing appeared. Of course nothing did.

This was supposed to be a good thing, right? A reprieve, as Vektor said. The absolute silence, the lack of anything otherworldly filling his vision no matter how hard he tried to conjure them up just made that panic rise higher and higher in his throat.

No imps. No dancing dragons. No mud golems or pig goblins or pixies. Absolutely nothing. Just the school's landscape, as it should be, students scattered about as they lived their own blissful lives.

Normalcy. For one brief minute, complete normalcy.

Dante hated this.

He ran back to his room, much too panicked to bother with not looking the absolute lunatic he was, and went straight to all his hiding places around the walls, beneath the desk, behind the beds and posters and that painting of a wolf he'd gifted Petel before break. All the wards were still there, still working right, but this wasn't their doing. He knew that. Why was he checking? His own code had been sealed, the code on these was fine.

Was he writing his own code with these and every fear he imposed upon himself? His own warping, his specific Creation, it wasn't an easy thing to gauge. Not with the fires beneath his skin and destruction at his fingertips.

He was change. He was supposed to be change.

And still, the moment change happened upon him, he fell to pieces.

He held out his hand and, as some small solace, the fires sprung from him to manifest in his palm.

He still had those.

He was still himself.

Someone knocked at the door.

He abandoned his existential panic, snuffing out that fire, and answered, finding Paige and Frank outside. Both of them grinned widely. "We came to be your study buddies." Frank said.

"As long as you don't mind, of course." Paige added diplomatically.

It was fine. Things were going to be fine.

The seal couldn't last. Whether it was on his sight, his warping, or his Creation overall, there was no way it could alter him for long. On his own, Vektor couldn't seal something so complex. Vektor wasn't made to suppress.

Dante ushered the two of them inside and sat on his bed. Paige took Petel's and Frank sat at Petel's desk. Frank asked, "Got any hopes for tomorrow?"

"T-Tomorrow?" Dante parroted in confusion.

He'd forgotten most things in his total panic. Paige rolled her eyes and said with a smile, "Chocolate Day, silly. I know it's weird timing, what with your birthday, but still."

"Oh."

Dante frowned at his lap. Chocolate Day. That sure was a thing. He'd never been fond of the obligatory ritual of providing the whole class with chocolates, if one was to bring chocolates at all. The tacky cards were fun to burn, at least.

"Is it a-a common thing for everyone to bring chocolates around here?" He settled on asking.

"Chocolate Day's for couples, Dante." Frank said in an overblown shock.

"Has no one asked you out before?" Paige asked half in sympathy, half in disbelief.

Dante's mood instantly dropped. It had to do with dating, did it? It distracted him from his panic, at least. "No, I don't think so."

Others knew to avoid him, after all. Smarter, less tampered with others. Even the thought of some random person trying to tempt him with chocolate was unappealing. Frank and Paige shared a quick look, their expressions turning to apprehension, then Paige said, "So then. There's not one person here you'd be happy to receive chocolates from?"

"Receiving chocolates is fine." Dante said, able to draw himself out of that sour mood. "Although I, um, don't have any to give in return. Sorry."

Paige relaxed and smiled with an easy, "That's fine. Next month's the return favour deadline."

"Friendship chocolate's the only acceptable thing, huh?" Frank said with a defeated sigh.

Dante shrugged, unsure himself. He had no idea how to turn anyone down, much less accept such a weird offer. The whole romance thing was maybe never going to make sense to him. He took a quick stock of the room, considering his open distaste (the snitching snails hated any emotion without the salt they craved), but it was empty. Still nothing. Not even any grunting from a pig goblin or the snickering of pixies. This was very, very dangerous.

The three of them worked on their schoolwork after that. Figuring out English vocabulary, getting a peek at Paige's Film class assignment, and listening to Frank ramble about Chemistry, it was easy to think of it as normal. Just another day. The lavender blanket laid neatly on top of Dante's sheets and the pile of cards stacked next to the box of sweets on his desk reminded him just how much his friends cared.

They made so many concessions for him. Even Vektor. Dante needed to do better by all of them, no matter how much he hated Hell.

Evening without any spectres was an interesting experience. He stood right behind Jonathan again as they got their meals, yet heard nothing from that second face hidden at the back of his head. Didn't even see it when he peeked up at the other boy. That tense wait for things to resume never left, though, even if he slept peacefully that night without the distracting cries of sky whales or lamenting lynxes.

That he saw the winged serpents over his bed on first waking up in the morning was an immeasurable relief. He and Petel got ready for the day and left together for breakfast, surrounded by these things but never touched by them.

Chocolate Day was a tiny little holiday. At least, it always seemed so to Dante. His parents didn't celebrate it, which was probably why he'd never noticed the apparent romantic connotations behind it. Frank, Paige, Abraham, and Percival gave them all chocolates, which was nice. Kalyuga gave hers only to Levy, Sonya, Petel, and Paige, which got Paige all flustered, and Petel insistently supplied all of them with more of that delicious Russian candy throughout the day. Vektor didn't quite understand the whole thing, similar to Dante, but by the end of the day he had a mysterious note to ponder over.

"Someone left this in my locker during Phys Ed." He told them at Frank and Paige's emphatic requests. "I suppose it's related to this Chocolate Day ritual you've all indulged in."

"Right. Just all of us. Because I don't remember you partaking at all in the chocolates Perci and I brought." Abraham teased in a good humoured manner.

"You're one to talk, Mister 'I get chocolates from a secret admirer every year and refuse to look into who it could be'." Frank fired back.

A wistful sort of expression took over Abraham as he said, "It's for the best I don't investigate. Wouldn't want to ruin this last good thing we've got between us."

"Wait. Do you actually know who it is?" Paige questioned.

"Not even slightly. Just a feeling that I get." Abraham's mood picked right back up and he laughed heartily. "Anyway, I'll see you all tomorrow."

He waved as he left, ending the conversation there. It was nearly time for supper, Dante supposed. Kalyuga wished them well, too, then their smaller group moved from beneath their tree to inside the cafeteria.

As they settled into their room for the night, Petel suddenly asked, "Can I sleep with you tonight?"

Perplexing. Consistently perplexing. Dante stuttered out a bewildered, "Uh, I-I guess? Sure? I'm, um, n-not easy to be close to. The heat, and all."

"I remember."

Petel climbed in right next to Dante, even pulling him against their chest. Not deterred in the slightest. He really should've remembered that they'd been through this once before. Kind of. Petel's body was cool to the touch and an ease took over him, allowing him to fully relax into the hug. The fabric of their night shirt was soft, different from the fur of the wolf, yet not unpleasant.

"Can't call you a sushi anymore." Petel said, unprompted.

Shaken from his roaming thoughts, Dante gave an undignified, "Huh?"

"Got you a new blanket. You're no longer sushi." Petel clarified, as if that was all the context Dante might need for this suddenly introduced idea.

"I'm. Sushi?" Dante questioned.

Petel nodded. "Right. Because of the green."

"Y-You mean. My blanket?"

"Like the colour of seaweed, so sushi."

"Is that why you said you could eat me?"

Dante sat up at this shattering realisation. Snorting in distaste, Petel sat up as well and said, "I said I wouldn't eat you."

"But you could."

"Are you asking me to right now?"

Petel grinned, baring their teeth just enough to show that they meant it. There was hunger in those wild eyes, but not one Dante fully recognised. A shudder ran through his whole body and he forced out a tentative, "N-No, we. We'd better not."

It was anticipation stoking those flames for once.

Anticipation for what, though? Why this mixed desire to give in and allow the wolf to consume him? That didn't make any sense. Dante didn't want to be eaten. Right?

Petel relented easily, saying, "Yeah, probably best not to for the moment. Goodnight, then."

They leaned in to press their nose and lips to his forehead, then settled down into the bed. Just more confused than before, he laid against Petel's chest and resolved to leave this line of thoughts for the night.

He dreamt of the beach.

It was the Mediterranean, green and beautiful, but the sand was black. Ground up charcoal, drifting ash, the same as his burnt up skin. His hands were clawed and thin as paper, cold without his ever present fires to keep him warm, yet Petel stood stalwartly next to him, holding his hand tightly in their own.

They had claws as well. Fur covered their skin and the pads on their paw were rough, but he held on just as tightly to them. It scratched away at his charcoal, a pain inflicted upon him that was no doubt similar to the pain of his claws digging into their flesh, yet neither of them let go of the other.

They wouldn't let go. They couldn't let go.

Staring out into the sea, holding onto each other, Dante thought that things would turn out fine this way. If this was the end in store for him, then he'd be glad to see it through. Hand in hand with his wolf of a friend.

Chapter 15: Bad Omens

They were met with similar disappointment after classes Saturday.

Petel and Abraham insisted on trying again on their own. They even managed to finish repairing the checkpoint this time. That damned Midnight Bard found them too quickly, though, and ejected them from the session.

"At least we made some progress." Abraham said as he climbed out of his scanner.

Petel growled irritably in response. Why was Shiranui the only agreeable Guardian so far? As Frank helped Vektor sit up off the floor, the Prince said, "I'm simply satisfied knowing our opponents are impeded in their progress as well."

"You and Jonathan really do just talk about the game, don't you?" Frank teased.

"Is he capable of discussing much else?" Paige asked with a knowing look towards Vektor.

The Prince huffed, but wisely didn't attempt to refute it. Petel moved beside Dante, behind Paige's chair, content to be within their boyfriend's warmth once more. No ring of fire would stop them, even in reality. Frank's tone switched to bright and cheery as he said, "But yeah. I'm also glad we managed to repair that checkpoint. That'll make continuing on easier when Dante's ready for it."

"Hey, real quick." Paige swivelled in her chair, facing Dante. And, by proxy, Petel. "How come you never mentioned before that you can read the computer, like Vektor and I can?"

Dante shrunk back a moment, then steeled himself over and said, "Sorry, it just. It never came up before, a-and."

"Inferno is not registered to handle navigation." Vektor broke in.

Petel and Paige both shot an exasperated look towards their Prince, but Dante next said, "H-He's right. Even if I wanted to, I-I couldn't operate it."

"You can't, hm?" Abraham asked.

"You're just able to read it and that's all?" Frank joined in.

Petel was intrigued as well. That he called out accurate data for them, discussed it with Paige as they played, did seem connected to this whole business of him knowing more about computers than he let on. Dante took a deep, steadying breath, then nodded in affirmation. "I want. I want to go with everyone tomorrow. To try again." He said.

"Truly?"

Vektor bolted upright and nearly toppled right back over from his own unsteadiness. Paige shut off the monitor, then stood from her chair. "As long as you're up for it." She said, concern overriding her interrogation mode. He gave them an adequate answer this time, it didn't surprise Petel that she dropped it so easily. "That okay with you, Abraham?"

"Of course." Abraham replied with an easy grin. "I'll get here bright and early, you can count on it."

Frank shot a grin over at Dante, a sentiment which Petel mirrored. Dante had lowered that wall of flames so much. Petel could just cuddle up to him and kiss him silly.

They didn't do that, of course. They had to take things slower than that, since Dante was already stepping far out of his comfort zone. They didn't even ask to sleep with him again, though they very much wanted to.

As far as the wolf was concerned, the two of them were mated for life. Human relationships were more complicated than that, Petel knew, and so reaching that level of intimacy would take a little more trust.

Breakfast was abuzz with anticipation for their task ahead. Damon and them arrived just after Abraham and Petel relished the idea of another race as they headed for their tower with the rest of their pack. They weren't stuck on the same level, unfortunately. Vektor was right about the Thief not playing fair.

"Be prepared for the Midnight Bard to verify that we have his chosen with us this time." Vektor told them as they all went to a scanner each. "He'll no doubt try to eject us again the moment he detects our presence."

"Hopefully he won't attack before that." Frank said.

"Hopefully." Dante agreed with a sigh.

Paige loaded them in and they all fell into the checkpoint. Petel poked their head out first, checking to see if their luck might be that bad. Paige said, "Coast is clear for the moment. No Guardian and no AIR."

"You let us know the moment that changes." Abraham said as he stepped out next.

Frank and Vektor followed after, then Dante was last. His fires were with him again, that was good. He looked normal and not like that headless version of himself, also good. Vektor took the lead, glancing around cautiously at all the pools of shadows with their empty white eyes staring back.

Gesturing to the closest pool of them, Abraham asked, "What are those, anyway?"

"The Tormented." Vektor responded in his usual matter-of-fact manner. Having something to explain helped him relax. "They're this level's Non-Hostiles. Pay them no mind."

"Tormented." Frank mumbled to himself.

"This place really is its own Hell." Abraham agreed with a tone of disdain.

Dante kept his gaze forward, unwilling to look at any of them, which made Petel reconsider their appearances. Black goop. Blank white eyes. Hadn't Dante described one of his fears like that before? They may have been missing any notable shape or limbs, but they were basically shadows. Dante feared those ones the most. Paige's voice came over before they had a chance to ask just how hostile these Tormented might actually be. "AIR's spawned some Naga ahead of you. Still no Guardian."

"Peculiar." Vektor said to himself. Then, raising his voice, "How many are there, Navigator?"

"Two going your way, two heading for the others on the map." She answered.

That got everyone to look up in alarm. "Is — Is it Vektoria?" Dante asked.

"Looks like." Paige said. Vektor continued forward, summoning his staff and visor in a flash of gold. She laughed, the sound reverberating above them in the sky. "If you catch up to them, you can maybe ask what they're doing here."

"Small talk will not be necessary." Vektor warned.

Petel rolled their eyes at the Prince, grateful to reach the Naga then to give the wolf an outlet to its aggression. They launched forward with a snarl, clamping their jaws onto the one on the left, while Abraham tossed his crosses at the one on the right. The Naga hissed in pain from their assault, thrashing its slithery body to throw Petel off. When that didn't work, it went for a retaliation bite.

They kicked off it to dodge and landed on the other one to tear into it with their claws. Vektor rammed into the first with his staff, driving it back into a nearby rock outcropping and dissolving it into code on impact. The one Petel had also broke into code and they ducked away as Frank shot it to reform it.

"They were just Class Is." Frank noted with trepidation.

Vektor gave a low and dangerous, "A warm-up for the battle ahead."

He charged onward, as fast as he could go. It would have been much more effective were he even just a bit faster. As it was, Petel had time to glance Frank and Dante's way, since Abraham followed Vektor without question. The more rational members of the pack didn't seem enthused by the idea of confronting their opponents in this game, but what other choice did they have?

Petel followed the Prince, resolving to get some answers about this.

It only took a few minutes for their next checkpoint to pop into view. Abraham opened fire on the other players gathered around it with his rifle, getting a yelp from Natasha. Damon shouted, "Get down!"

"Blasted Prince." Vektoria shrieked, whirling to meet Vektor's attempted jab head on. "You're not welcome here."

"If we were welcome here, we wouldn't be fighting in the first place." Frank pointed out sarcastically.

"None are welcome in the realm of the Seventh Circle." Vektor said as he went for another jab, only to be parried once more by Vektoria.

"Hey, Jonathan, maybe tell us next time before loading us into a goddamn trap." Damon shouted towards the sky.

Petel hung back by Frank and Dante, making sure Vektor and Vektoria's battle didn't hurt the two of them. Vektor may have been the slowest, but he was able to meet each of Vektoria's strikes with his own parry, able to dodge her jabs when not even Natasha or Aglaé could handle her speed.

Damon next shouted, "Stay out of it, stay out of it. Do you wanna get shot?"

"He can't have infinite bullets." Natasha argued.

Dante's head snapped up, as did Frank's, at the distant sound of singing. Petel caught it, too. Paige said, quite ominously, "The Guardian's made his appearance."

"That's not the same song as before." Frank noted to himself.

Niculaie screamed, grabbing all of their attention. Abraham had the group cornered behind the checkpoint (which, Petel just realised, was open as if Vektor had unlocked it) and stood over Niculaie with a wooden stake in hand. Petel had no idea he even had such a thing in here.

As the Huntsman prepared to strike, Damon surged forward and that warning of danger kicked in.

Petel shouted, "Get back!"

They hurried both Frank and Dante away from the area as, behind them, Damon's form twisted and grew. He grabbed Abraham up into his now gargantuan fist and crushed the Huntsman, dissolving him into code after a cry of pain and some sickening snaps. The horns growing from Damon's head multiplied to six, all twisting out at uneven lengths. His face elongated into a snout and he grew until he towered over all of them, like some giant colossus.

He flexed out the claw that crushed Abraham, then grabbed that sickly red wing off his back and tore it out. It transformed into a blade and he swung it down, striking the checkpoint and destroying it with ease.

Dante surged forward, his fires flaring up in conjunction with his upset tone. "You—! You can't keep pretending you're better than me!"

"I wouldn't try fighting that thing, mates." Paige said, her voice at least snapping Dante out of that visceral rage. "Looks like it's got a proportional amount of health to its size, as well as the standard stats multipliers for a Berserk."

Sounding impressed, Frank asked, "Can you see his stats?"

"Nothing specific, just a general power level." She clarified. "The system looks like it hides the exact data from me. I also can't tell which marker belongs to who on their side."

"Besides Vektoria. R-Right?" Dante asked.

After a moment of silence, she said, "That's right. She does stand out amongst their signatures."

"That anyone can make sense of this mess is still amazing to me." Abraham's voice came over from somewhere behind Paige.

Petel perked up in relief, then drooped with an equal amount of sympathy. "Glad you made it out okay." They said.

The colossal Berserk Damon slammed its claws down trying to catch Vektor or Vektoria as the two continuing battling. Idiots, truly. Dante and Frank jumped back as the ground shook. "M-Maybe we should help w-with the situation now." Dante said.

"You want to help?" Frank asked.

Dante nodded just once. Good enough for Petel. They dashed forward, weaving between the sword and Damon's arm in order to scale up to the beast's shoulders. Thankfully, it looked like Natasha and Aglaé moved Niculaie out of its range, giving the sensitive guy some time to recollect himself. Dante also seemed to be ready to put his words to action, gathering the fires into his hands and running beneath the colossus-sized Damon. Frank shook his head, but made sure his Naga was adequately prepared before sending it in as well.

Petel dug their claws in where they could as they climbed. Damon was disturbingly fleshy and the wounds didn't pixelate like usual. They didn't bleed, either, which was somewhat of a relief. Once Petel made it on top of Damon's back, Natasha landed beside them and said, "Thanks for helping. Jonathan said his HP's shot up to four hundred thousand percent."

"Yikes." Petel replied automatically.

Natasha grinned. "So, you see why we're grateful for the help."

"Especially Vicario." Aglaé said, climbing up Damon's side to stand with them. "Jonathan says he's already taken off five thousand HP."

Petel smiled in pride at their very capable, very powerful boyfriend. As Aglaé and Petel went about clawing into Damon's back, Natasha said, "Wait, Aglaé, does that mean — Is Nicu okay?"

"I'm fine." Niculaie said, landing in their midst. From the slice in his cape, Petel could see all the way to his shoulder and his lack of arms more clearly. That explained a few things.

"Can you possibly convince Vektoria to stop attacking us as we deal with this?" They asked.

Aglaé groaned and ducked as Damon started thrashing, attempting to shake them off. Natasha and Niculaie both jumped up to hover in the air, safe from the beast, and Petel had to dig their claws in deep to keep from getting flung off. Natasha said, "We can definitely try. No promises, though."

"Ernest and I can provide backup." Niculaie said, drifting towards Damon's head. "Just shout and we'll get to you."

Petel would've nodded in reply had they not been hanging on for their life. Natasha hovered a bit higher to take aim, then tossed her bat clip at Damon's head. Once the shaking stopped, Petel and Aglaé resumed their attack, working together quite well for once.

Above them, Paige said, "Vektor, be careful over there. Everyone else is focused on Damon right now, they won't be able to get to you fast enough if you're in trouble."

Whatever Vektor replied, Petel didn't get to hear. Aglaé paused for a moment, then said, "We were hoping to avoid your group completely while going through here, but it's just our luck that this went so sideways."

Petel asked, "How did you end up here instead of the next level?"

"We were absolutely trounced the minute we stepped inside the Hollows. Made absolute fools." Natasha lamented, floating by them briefly. "We didn't even have much time to take in the scenery. Next time we loaded in, it was outside the Tundra, so we had to go through this one, too."

After a brief pause, they both groaned in aggravation. "No matter how many times you say it, it's still frustrating." Aglaé tossed towards the sky.

"The only one still upset with you's 'Toria, Jonny boy.'" Natasha added in.

Aglaé snickered at the ill-fitting nickname while Petel was perplexed. Natasha laughed at whatever Jonathan's reply was (if he replied at all), then floated up to join Niculaie on Damon's head. Petel went back to clawing Damon's back alongside Aglaé, needing to pause as Damon tried to shake them off once more. The colossus swung his horns at Niculaie and Natasha, batting Niculaie out of the sky and to the ground. Frank and Dante cried out, hurrying towards the guy. Even Aglaé let his grip slip as he called, "Niculaie!"

Frank helped Niculaie stand as Dante kept Damon's attention off them with the fires, using them to both block Damon's sword and chucking them at his face in fireballs. Petel couldn't help but whoop enthusiastically. "You're doing great, Dante." They shouted.

Dante glanced up towards them a moment, then went back to concentrating. Abraham said something, but Petel missed it as they were grabbed suddenly by Damon's claws. That got Dante to scream, followed shortly by Frank calling Petel's name.

Petel was definitely due for a reminder to stop getting distracted in the middle of battle like this. They bit down on Damon's fingers, but his grip only tightened. They actually yelped at the pressure; this was far worse than the burning grip of Dante's fire.

Damon would pop them. Just as he did to Abraham.

Petel went to bite harder, to tear into the flesh with their teeth as desperation hit (and the wolf specialised in acts of desperation), but Niculaie flew past them, straight into the sky, baiting Damon into striking himself with that sword and dropping Petel from the resulting jostle.

Good to know that Niculaie was just fine after that hit. Also good for him that Petel could land on their feet.

"Frank, that attack took Petel's health down to 35%." Paige said.

Frank hurried over to Petel's side in order to shoot them with a health bullet. "Thank goodness he didn't outright squash you." He noted.

Dante came over, too, with a concerned, "You're not too hurt, are you?"

He cared. Care from the boyfriend! Petel smiled lop-sidedly, doing their very best not to leap over that fire and lavish Dante in loving licks. Not while they were in the midst of such a dangerous situation. Not while Petel had to keep their end of the promise to not consume Dante. "Got Frank to heal me." They said with a nod to Frank, their tail wagging animatedly. "I'm ready to go back in."

"Good, 'cause we need all the help we can get." Natasha said, zipping over to hover by them and making Dante squeak in surprise. "Jonathan said he's only down to three hundred and fifty thousand percent so far."

Frank and Petel said, in unison, "Yeesh."

Dante's expression fell to exasperation. "This is going to take a while." He said.

He drew his fires back to his hands with a flick of his wrists and dashed over to the colossus, sliding beneath him to rake the flames along his underside. Damon slammed his sword down in protest, barely missing Niculaie in the air and splitting Natasha off from Frank and Petel. Grinning, Petel flexed their claws before climbing up Damon's arm and rejoining Aglaé on his back. Paige's voice came back over with an informative, "Keep out of range, that thing hits for almost half of your overall health at a time, if not more. Vektor's headed back your way as fast as he can and no activity from AIR yet."

"Shame. We could use more help." Petel said.

Aglaé glanced at them, then went back to work. Paige made a short sound in clear disagreement, which made Petel chuckle, then she said, "Vektoria's still after him, yes. He's down to 50% health himself, so you should heal him when he gets there, Frank."

Petel jammed their claws into Damon's shoulder to anchor themselves, then searched the visible horizon line for the Prince. They could still see Frank, who sat a bit further to avoid Damon's swings, and Natasha hovered beside him. She seemed content to just chat with him, so Petel wouldn't worry about it for now. As they withdrew their claws to keep going, Aglaé said, "If Vektoria continues being a hindrance, Nat and I can try to keep her busy until Jonathan pulls her out or something."

Petel frowned for a moment at the idea of Vektoria being worse than Vektor in ranking. All bark and bite was not a good combination in Damon's friend group. Petel knew that from personal experience. "Don't we need to be inside a checkpoint to be manually logged out?" They asked.

Aglaé actually paused in confusion. Always a good sign. He then shouted up at the sky, "Is that why you've never pulled us out on request? We need to be in a checkpoint for it to work?"

"If everyone can defeat Damon, then restoring that checkpoint should be a top priority." Abraham said.

Petel was surprised the Huntsman hadn't left for home yet. Paige next asked, "Why are you talking about proper log out procedures, Petel?"

Petel jammed their claws in again as they replied, "Apparently, Aglaé and them had no idea—"

Damon lurched to the side, nearly dislodging Petel and sending Aglaé flying off. Scrambling for a better hold, Petel dug their feet into Damon's back as well and, when that didn't keep them from slipping, they grabbed a mouthful of flesh in their jaws. Paige sighed and said, "To be stuck with an over-explainer or one who explains nothing."

"I much prefer our Prince over that alternative." Abraham said.

There was a beat of silence, then Paige burst into laughter as Abraham protested whatever was said in a flustered mess. Petel could only imagine it to be Frank keeping things light-hearted as usual. Paige cleared out her laughter and said, "Sorry, you're right. Vektor's just about there, Frank, but Vektoria's right on him. Dante, you're down to 45% health, be careful."

Petel's ears went up in alarm this time. They freed up their mouth in order to shout for Niculaie. The Vampire was rather quick to respond, swooping around and catching Petel as they were finally tossed off Damon's back with a last thrash. Niculaie set them down and gave a soft, "Need some healing?"

"Dante does." They answered.

"Oh, is Vladimirescu able to heal?" Paige asked.

Niculaie seemed hesitant, but gave a nod and ran beneath Damon's body to find Dante. Abraham muttered a confused, "A Vampire's ability to heal is usually tied to turning their prey into one of them."

"Frank heals you by shooting you with a gun." Paige said in counter immediately.

Petel chuckled along, though it was cut short as they had to dodge another blow from Damon's sword. The ground shook from every impact, but never in a way that seemed dangerous. Despite them being placed atop the plateaus with that frozen lake beneath, it didn't seem in any danger of collapsing. Petel couldn't hear the Midnight Bard's singing anymore, they realised.

"Oh wow, that was. That's pretty efficient." Paige went on, which was all Petel needed to hear.

Vektor appeared in their bubble of visibility, thrown onto the ground by Vektoria and startling Frank. Natasha tackled the Thief and flew her out of range before she could strike the Prince while he was down and Frank and Petel both hurried to his side to help.

"You're back up to 100%, Dante. Vektor, you're at 35% health now." Paige said.

"I got him." Frank said, shooting Vektor in the arm.

"Thank you, Doktor." Vektor stood, brushing himself off. Not a very useful thing, since the red-brown dirt didn't seem to cling to them like it would in reality, but a learned gesture all the same. It was kind of endearing to see him picking up their mannerisms, if Petel was completely honest. "My apologies for not being able to return earlier. Omen's Berserk is much more fearsome than we expected, it seems."

"Were you expecting this to happen? 'Cause it sure wasn't on my list." Frank joked.

"Four hundred thousand percent HP." Petel said.

"Yikes." Paige said.

"Somehow, it's fitting for that Demon King." Abraham said with a sigh.

Vektoria broke free of Natasha's grip to rush them. All of them. It didn't seem like she cared about catching Frank and Petel in the collateral. Frank yelped and Vektor moved in front of them both to block her jab, redirecting her key sword to the ground below them. "Your quarrel is with me, Thief. Leave my friends out of it." He bellowed, properly king-like for once.

"Friends?" She laughed, haughty and cruel, as she jabbed at him with blinding speed. "You can't make friends of your subjects. No wonder you're so weak, you're filled with sentiment."

Vektor blocked each and every attack, keeping her from reaching Frank and Petel. "Sentiment is not weakness." He fired back at her. "True sentiment takes communication. And proper communication is strength."

He shoved her back and Petel grinned. He was learning really well, falling into his place in the pack. Frank seemed to agree as he cheered, "Get her, Vektor."

"Caring for others just makes you vulnerable." Vektoria spat. "Concerning yourself with only your own survival is the way to make it in your pathetic life. That's why you'll never defeat me."

She pivoted, darting around Vektor in order to aim at Frank. She had the skills of a hunter, Petel had to remember that. This time, they blocked her off with a swipe of their claws. "Being vulnerable isn't a bad thing." They argued. They kept their tone even, aware that their growling would only be meeting her at her own level. "Survival isn't the only thing that matters. Keeping yourself closed off can be worse than the mortifying process of being known."

"Good vocabulary there." Paige quipped in automatically.

"Being known isn't the issue here, Wolf." Vektoria continued striking and Petel continued meeting each one. They seemed to either be just as fast as her or slightly faster, as they kept up easily and didn't miss a single block. She grew frustrated and rose to a piercing scream. "I am chaos and destruction. If you stand in my way, then you shall be deleted from existence. When my name is uttered, it should be fear that fills your soul, not any useless sentiment!"

She leapt back and gathered that dark energy in her hands. Petel recognised that as something they couldn't combat and also quick stepped back. Natasha shouted, "You can't delete them just 'cause you're upset, 'Toria."

Vektor's hands lit up with his golden light as he warned, "Don't let her reach you with that Void magic."

"Let me prove my point, you fake Prince." Vektoria said with a wild grin.

Natasha tackled into her side, stopping her before she could throw that dark energy at any of them. Aglaé darted over as well with a breathless, "Keep fighting Damon. We'll handle her."

He joined Natasha in restraining Vektoria, who devolved to screeching in her fury. Like a spoiled child throwing a temper tantrum. "Royalty, Beauty, get off me. You promised to help me destroy that lying Prince and this is not helping."

Frank glanced to Petel and Vektor, about to make a comment, but gave a shocked, "Watch out!"

Petel saw the sword falling towards them and yanked Vektor out of the way with their jaws. Frank, Natasha, and Aglaé all managed to move in time as well, abandoning Vektoria in the process. The full brunt of the strike landed on her, cutting off her voice and ejecting her from the game. Thank goodness.

After they all picked themselves up, Paige's voice came over with a resigned, "Guess that takes care of that."

"Even hearing only one side of that whole thing, that seemed rather exhausting." Abraham agreed.

"We can focus on the Berserk now." Frank said, still trying to keep their spirits up.

Their group had to dodge again as Damon swung his sword into the ground. After regaining their footing, Natasha gave a defeated, "Just three hundred thousand percent more to go."

"Everyone say thank you to Dante." Frank said.

Petel nodded in agreement, joining the chorus of, "Thanks, Dante" from Natasha, Aglaé, Paige, and even Abraham. Then Petel ran forward to rejoin the fight. Aglaé and Natasha followed them and Frank hung back with Vektor, both of them careful to dodge around Damon's swings.

The lot of them working together at least kept anyone else from getting ejected. Niculaie's healing was pretty efficient, jumping each of them back up to full every time at the cost of him needing

to bite them somewhere. "I'm drawing too much from Damon." He explained when Petel finally asked. "His health is so insanely high, it's making mine overflow or something."

"You have to use your own health to heal?" Petel asked next.

Niculaie just smiled in apology, unable to explain it further. Their builds, as Vektor called them, really were all strange.

By the time they had Damon just below halfway, AIR spawned in some Chimera for them. Damon made quick work of them, which allowed Frank to revive them both and help for a few minutes. Dante stepped back for a break then, looking truly drained, and Aglaé sat with him to make sure Damon didn't take advantage of that exhaustion.

It took four hours in total, by the end of which Petel was definitely ready to pass out. Damon's form dissolved into code and they could all breathe finally, most of them collapsing to the ground in a sprawled out mess.

"I have no idea how we managed that as well as we did." Natasha said, breaking the silence. She stood on the ground, her wings folded up against her back in order to rest.

"I don't care how. I don't care if it's in bad taste." Aglaé turned to Petel, Dante, and Vektor and sat up, presenting himself to them with his arms out. "Get me out of here. Please. I want to go home."

Petel and Dante could only stare for a minute, dumbfounded. "Are. Are you sure?" Dante asked. "It's going to hurt."

"I have to walk back, spare me the extra steps."

Aglaé didn't back down, so Petel shrugged and complied. It took four good slices of their claws for Aglaé to dissolve into code and no one else stepped in to help either way. Petel looked next to Natasha and Niculaie, offering up their claws. Both held up their hands in protest, Natasha even hopping back as she said, "I'm good, thanks."

"My health's still overflowed, it's probably better for me to get logged out normally." Niculaie said next.

Petel gave a nod in understanding, dropping back down to their knees. They watched the two trek off, towards their previous checkpoint. Vektor, the only one still standing, faced forward and said, "If we hurry, we can reach the next checkpoint before AIR sends anything else our way."

Frank groaned loudly. "Do we have to?"

"Are you n-not going to repair this checkpoint?" Dante asked.

"Would you rather we start again at the same place as them?" Vektor asked the both of them.

He then marched forward on the path, not even waiting for their responses. Petel could actually see the Prince's argument here and, more distressingly, agreed wholly with it. They gave an upset snort

through their snout and followed after their guide. Frank groaned again and Dante sighed softly, but the two pulled themselves to their feet and followed as well.

The walk was only another fifteen minutes or so. They were mostly silent, listening to Paige and Abraham discussing the data on the computer. All of them were tired. Petel wanted nothing more than to eat supper and crash into bed for the night.

When the checkpoint came into view and Vektor had it unlocked, Abraham asked, "Isn't this the fourth checkpoint?"

"Th-That means we're almost done. Right?"

Dante looked to Vektor, hopeful. Vektor grimaced, never a good sign, and said, "The Seventh Circle has seven checkpoints. Hence its name."

"Oh."

Dante deflated as Vektor entered the checkpoint. Frank went after him with a heated, "Seven? Why's this place get so many?"

"That does explain why it's got the worst draw distance of the ones we've been through so far." Abraham muttered to himself.

"We can talk over food. I've no doubt everyone's hungry after all that." Paige said to them.

Petel looked to Dante, their tail wagging idly behind them. Dante met their gaze, confused but smiling tiredly in response. He was such a good boyfriend. Petel's tail picked up with their own happiness and they entered the checkpoint as close to him as possible.

This time, the drop hit them like an anchor. They stumbled out of the scanner, nearly collapsing to their knees. Vektor flopped out, once again, like a damp sock. He'd gotten so good at catching himself, too. Frank and Dante also fell out of their scanners, neither of them able to keep standing. Abraham went over to help Frank as Petel stumbled their way over to Dante's side. Paige turned the monitor off, then went to help Vektor at least sit up and not be face planted into the floor.

"Glad I stuck around." Abraham said with a chuckle. "This is very reminiscent of our first venture, isn't it?"

"I feel like I just participated in a three day game jam." Frank said with a whine.

Since Petel was steadier on their feet, even if only just, they helped Dante to his and kept him standing. He mumbled a miserable, "We missed lunch."

"I don't want to wait for supper." Frank agreed.

Paige carried Vektor on her shoulders as he couldn't even keep his head up on his own. "You didn't even use that much of your magic." She said.

"Ridiculous, isn't it?" Vektor agreed with her sentiment. He sounded as tired as he looked, an odd change from his usually strong voice. "Prolonged activity in the Rabbit Hole appears to be physically taxing on us all. A good incentive to never encounter that sort of situation again."

Abraham and Frank gave a near automatic, "Hear, hear."

Paige shook her head at them and took Vektor out of the tower, towards the dorms. Abraham did the same for Frank while Petel took Dante to the cafeteria. There should still be staff in the area, as it wasn't that long after lunch.

Petel looked at their phone quickly — nearly fourteen in the afternoon. Scraps from lunch were better than nothing.

Dante didn't question them. They got their exhausted boyfriend into a seat, then went to the line to request something. Sunday meals could be a toss up as to who was in charge, since most of the regular staff also had the day off, but thankfully it was Mister Locke. He happily provided Petel with the lunches they and Dante had missed and even promised to do the same for Frank, Paige, Vektor, Jonathan, and Natasha whenever they arrived. Then Petel settled into their place right beside Dante, their trays of food before them, and worked on notifying everyone of the good news.

Dante leaned into their side in his tiredness, watching them text rather than eating his food right away. Smiling a bit foolishly, Petel said, "I'm not really used to this keyboard layout."

Their phone, like Paige's, had been provided by the school since they didn't have their own computer to do some of the schoolwork. Dante hummed softly in acknowledgement, then said, "Thanks for being here with me."

Pure joy leapt right to the top of Petel's body. They turned briefly to nuzzle against Dante's head (his hair was so soft, smelled nice from that lavender shampoo he used) and replied, "Of course." Then, as the thought occurred to them, "You were really great today, you know. We definitely wouldn't have handled that half as well without you."

Dante hummed again. "I might burn you. If you stay with me."

Despite what was, no doubt, yet another ominous warning, Petel knew well enough by now to consider it mostly toothless. He made no move to get off of Petel. In fact, even as he took his first bite of food (completely intact, no rooting around this time; he really was exhausted), he continued leaning into Petel's side. They very much wanted to wrap him up, to hold him until their bodies were melded to one another, but instead gave a cocky, "Been playing with fire for this long. Can probably handle it."

Dante laughed softly, taking his joke at face value for once. "Probably." He agreed. He agreed! "I think. If you did eat me. I wouldn't mind, either."

That got the wolf's full attention. An invitation. An acknowledgement. Desire. They had to reign in that instant want to comply, had to not just bite down on their dear friend's skin in the middle of the

cafeteria where the remaining school staff might take issue with that and separate them. Bad impulse. Good, but bad impulse.

Dante laughed again at Petel's lack of reaction (maybe; he was very tired) and next said, "You were. Um, you were cool, too. Seeing you protect everyone, using your abilities to fight, it's. Uh, it's always very inspiring to me."

Smiling at the high praise, Petel pressed their face into his head again. "Glad to inspire."

They'd give him a pass for the odd phrasing. He'd come so far from where they began and Petel wanted to appreciate that more than nitpick the details. Dante continued eating and Petel took care not to jostle him too much as they focused on their own meal.

Paige and Natasha were the first to join them, followed by Frank and Jonathan. Then Sonya arrived with Vektor and Levy and their whole group, though tired, enjoyed the lower energy warmth that came from each other's company.

"Vektoria dipped the moment she could after getting ejected." Jonathan told them after Paige and Frank expressed concern as to where she, Damon, Niculaie, and Aglaé were. "Aglaé, Damon, and Niculaie all headed home together once everyone else exited."

"It's just you and me left, Jonny boy." Natasha lamented.

Jonathan shot an annoyed glare at her while Paige giggled at the silly nickname. Frank leaned against the table as he said, "Abraham left after making sure I got back to my room okay."

"For everyone's sake, I hope he didn't run into Damon and Niculaie on his way back." Paige said in an annoyed grumble.

Frank, Jonathan, and Natasha nodded in their agreement, their expressions souring. Dante and Vektor remained silent, contemplative. Or dozing. Hard to tell between the two. Sonya asked Jonathan, "Do you happen to know what made them hate each other the way they do?"

The rest of the table looked to Jonathan as well, intrigued. He seemed resigned as he said, "Unfortunately, that's not something either of them have ever been keen on revealing to us."

"Not even Aglaé or Gaëlle want to talk about what happened." Natasha added.

"Something something blood feud going back centuries something something hunters always after vampires." Jonathan said, waving his hands in his mockery. "Bull crap like that's the best we ever get."

Petel hummed softly. This nagging mystery was fascinating, too. They had to find time to speak to Abraham about all this, considering part of the problem had to be those enhancers he had in him. It had to be after they finished their trek through Hell, though. One thing at a time.

There were more immediate issues to settle. There always were.

Chapter 16: Burnt Out

"Why's it called the Rabbit Hole?" Paige asked.

Dante and Vektor's heads both snapped up. "Pardon?" Vektor asked.

"You keep calling the game that." Paige said. "I was just wondering if there was a reason behind the name."

They sat at a table in the cafeteria for breakfast and Dante was still recovering after the agonising slog of yesterday. His fires were strained to their absolute limit, to the point where he was sure his own heat had been dampened. He hadn't even stirred from a nightmare, sleeping straight through the night. Levy, Sonya, Frank, and Petel turned towards their Prince, eager to hear his response. A bit befuddled, Vektor said, "We fall into my realm. And it is the domain of the Creators."

"Who are the Creators?" Frank asked next.

"The deities to whom my Kingdom owes its very existence."

He didn't elaborate further. Satisfied with his answer despite his somewhat haunted expression. Petel frowned as they asked, "Do they not have specific names?"

"The only names I know them by is simply the Creators." Vektor replied.

"So they're the ones who made the game, whoever they are." Frank said with a nod.

Dante couldn't help but ask, "Are you s-sure they don't have a-any other names?"

That haunted look only seemed to intensify. Vektor could reach for the memories all he wanted, but he would never unlock them. They were restricted. They had to be. "Quite sure." He said in the end.

"So much for that lead." Levy said with a pout.

"At least we know more clearly now that whoever created this thing programmed themselves into a deity role for their world." Sonya pointed out.

After a beat of silence, Paige asked, "Do you see us as your subjects?"

"Of course not." Vektor sat up straight, growing heated. "You are all my friends. Even the other members of my Kingdom, they're not simply my subjects but my people. They've all helped me, raised me into the understanding King I wish to become."

Paige raised her hands with a placating, "Okay, I got it. Sorry, just had to ask after yesterday."

"Natasha told you the whole thing, didn't she?" Petel asked.

Paige nodded and Vektor settled down, though he remained irritated. Tentatively, Dante raised his hand as he said, "Can we — um. Would it be alright to wait a while before going back in?"

"Yeah, I'm still tired from that whole experience." Frank said in agreement.

Petel nodded along and Vektor took a moment to calm himself down. In a much less aggravated tone, he said, "That's probably for the best. We all need time to recuperate after that particular Berserk."

"So what was it like to actually battle an HP sponge enemy?"

Levy leaned forward, grinning broadly. Petel smiled along as they answered, "Appropriately hellish."

Frank groaned at the joke while Paige and Levy laughed. Dante simply grimaced at how fitting it was.

The Demon King, a giant monster who refused to go away even after enduring so much. Who made himself much more of a hassle than he had any right in being. He had no hope of winning against anyone. Pitiably at one time, maybe. But Dante had burnt that bridge by this point. He had no intentions of opening relations with Damon ever again.

For the rest of the week, they took things fairly easy. Petel continued being their extra cuddly self, which Dante wasn't so opposed to. They were more like a lap dog at times, though Dante would never say that to them. The most he did to test this was, one evening, looking over at them and patting his lap. It got him a whole night of cuddles which, while hilarious, was actually nice.

Perhaps there was one person Dante wouldn't mind spending his life with. He really did like Petel.

By the end of the week, they were all a bit restless to get back to the game. Vektor being the antsiest, of course. Abraham and Paige had good fun teasing him for his lack of patience while Frank, Kalyuga, and Petel laughed at the spectacle. Levy continued needling Sonya about unrelated things and Dante didn't understand their friendship any better, but maybe he didn't need to. Friendships seemed very individualised depending on who it tied together.

"Since we made it to the fourth checkpoint last time, that leaves three more to go." Vektor said as he marched in front of their group towards their tower. "Considering the fragility of this level's checkpoints, keeping up our pace would be best."

"Thank you, oh master tactician." Paige said with a roll of her eyes.

She smiled as she did so, meaning her sarcasm wasn't completely out of aggravation. Dante hid his own smile with a hand as Petel knocked against his shoulder with their own amusement. Vektor frowned briefly at her, then faced forward again in order to open the tower's doors. "I cannot tell whether or not you're being genuine, Navigator, but I thank you anyway for the compliment."

"You're almost there, mate." Frank said, giving the Prince a comforting pat on the back.

They filed inside and into a scanner each while Paige took her seat at the computer. Dante closed his eyes before the doors shut on him this time. Nervousness rose in his throat, but it wasn't entirely overwhelming. He didn't need to be afraid right now. His friends were there. He didn't need to think on anything extraneous.

The drop through the void and landing in the checkpoint, then the fires springing to life around him, were less strenuous a thought this time. As he stood, he took a deep and steadying breath. For once, the fires rose and settled with him.

He could do this. He had no other choice.

Frank charged out first with a cheery, "No HP sponge Berserk this time. Right, Paige?"

"It's just you lot so far." She replied. Relieving, actually, and Dante could relax just that bit more. "Not even anything from AIR yet. I'd get going if I were you."

"Exactly what we plan on doing."

Vektor exited with intent and strode off along the plateau. Petel followed first, then Abraham, then Frank and Dante. The level was very flat and appeared more empty than it actually was due to the terrible draw distance. Outcroppings of rocks or breaks in the plateau that allowed steam to rise up from the frozen lake below popped into existence in such a jarring manner that it was a constant reminder that this was all fake.

They were inside a game. Playing a game. Had it always been this fake? Had Dante really never noticed it before?

The rock outcroppings held pools of the Tormented huddled in their shade. Their blank, white eyes followed each of them as they passed. While Vektor paid them no mind, Dante watched each one until it popped out of existence.

There had to be something to them. Their designs were too closely linked to the shadows.

They reached their next checkpoint and it was still eerily empty. Unnervingly quiet. As Vektor activated the spire, Dante drew close to ask, "Um. About the, uh. The Creators."

That golden glow faded from Vektor's hands as he turned to face Dante with a polite, "Yes?"

He refused to let the words get stuck in his throat this time. He had to ask. "Didn't they — I-I mean. There has to be a way to — to tell them apart, isn't there?"

Vektor continued along the path as he thought this over. Petel slowed to cover their backs and Dante kept as close as he could to Vektor. Frank and Abraham crowded behind his fire, intrigued to hear the answers.

Why was he doing this? Fishing for information he knew already wouldn't get them anywhere. There were rules in place. An ending that couldn't be negotiated. Something about that made him want

to break open the truth. Getting caught, having it all come crashing down on top of him, might be better than this uncertainty. His friends deserved to know.

Vektor slowly explained, "There are two Creators specifically and though we oft refer to them as a pair, their boons upon my Kingdom are different. One granted us the ability to perform our tasks in a timely manner. All schedule keeping is thanks to her. The other granted us our lands, our minds. The ability to reason, to feel, is thanks to him."

Dante stopped abruptly, baffled. "One was. Compassion?" He asked.

The Queen only had eyes for his Rabbit. He was a distraction, first and foremost.

They both were. She would trample everyone in pursuit of her goals, including them.

Frank, Abraham, and Petel had to stop due to Dante's fire and Vektor paused to turn around to face him. "Compassion is just one aspect, but yes." He said. "Without timeliness, our minds would have no purpose. Without reason, there'd be no need to keep to a schedule. You see, now, why the Creators are always bundled together when mentioned."

"I really don't." Frank volunteered, still eager despite his words. "But you said 'he' and 'she', so they're a pair who use different pronouns from one another."

"Hate to break in, but AIR's finally realised we're here." Paige said, making all of them go on alert in an instant. "Three Gargoyles are headed your way. The next checkpoint doesn't seem too far, at least."

"Another round of only Class IIIs?" Abraham asked in a playful whine.

Frank deflated with an actual whine as Abraham drew his rifle and Petel tensed all their muscles, ready to leap at the first enemy that came into view. Vektor summoned his staff and flicked on his visor with a sigh. "By this point, it's just getting predictable."

"They're also, unfortunately, coming towards you from said checkpoint." Paige informed them.

"Let's give 'em a good greeting, then."

Petel dropped onto all fours and sprinted off. Vektor had to dodge and Dante yelped a fruitless, "Petel!"

"I agree. Keep pushing forward." Abraham said, leaping after their wolf friend.

Vektor recovered his footing and hurried after the two. "Take care where you step, the path makes a sharp right up ahead." He called after them.

Frank followed at a more leisurely pace while Dante ran after them as well. The fires shuddered in anticipation. He could allow them to burn freely. The Gargoyles were hardy targets, why not allow his powers to shine through for a change? His friends appreciated his ability to take charge and he was so starved for that validation.

Flaunting that power was easy. Tapping into that fury, that rainbow heat nestled in his chest was as natural as the pounding of his heart.

But no.

No, he was much too volatile to trust.

Being filled, it turned out, was more of a curse than that drowning hunger. Knowing satisfaction only meant that the pangs grew harder to ignore.

The checkpoint popped into their field of vision at the same time as the three Gargoyles. Petel leapt onto one's back and tore at its wings with their fangs while Abraham and Vektor focused on the other two. The three enemies didn't seem to even notice, continuing forward with every flap of their stony wings.

"Oh, that — that's strange." Paige said somewhat to herself.

The Gargoyles caught sight of Dante and Frank and changed course, heading right for them. Backing away in a panic, Frank asked, "What? What's strange? Paige?"

"You're not actually damaging them." She said, making Petel and Abraham jolt in shock. Petel tore into the one in their claws with an extra fervour, but it continued on until it and the other two had Dante encircled. They spun around him, like sharks. Like vultures. Like proper monsters. "Actually. Hang on, something in their signatures doesn't seem right."

"Strange behaviour yet again." Vektor agreed.

"Dante!" Abraham called out.

There was little any of them could do. Vektor went for the checkpoint, never breaking eye contact from the odd spectacle. Frank stood on the sidelines helplessly, gun in hand but absolutely nothing to use it on.

There was nowhere to run. They had Dante surrounded. The fires flickered to the erratic beat of his heart, quick and unsteady as dread took hold of him.

If the Gargoyles were invincible. If they were singling him out.

Panic, clean and concentrated, sliced him like a knife.

"I-I didn't break any rules." He shouted at them, rushing to explain before they could pass judgement for his actions. "All I did. I just asked. H-He didn't have the correct answer!"

"You wish to know of the Creators?" The Gargoyles all asked in perfect unison. It was the same voice. The same goddamn voice from all his worst nightmares. "You wish to hear the details of your Gods?"

"Are — Are the enemies talking?" Paige asked, incredulous.

"You can hear them, too?" Frank asked right back.

Petel kept tearing, kept snarling, but to no avail. These weren't supposed to be here. His voice shaking even as he tried to stand strong, Dante said, "I can. I-I have fire. I'll — again! Y-You can't. You can't!"

The three closed in suddenly, calling his bluff and making him scream. "Ask for time. Ask for mercy." They taunted. Two of them continued chanting as they circled and the third pressed in even closer. "You'll receive neither. The Creators have decided your fate."

It wrapped its stony claws around his throat, its jagged nails and texture scraping against his skin. Frank shouted, "Dante!" And Abraham shot it repeatedly in an attempt to get it to drop him. Even Vektor shouted his name, sounding genuinely distressed.

Then Paige said, "Guardian — That's the Guardian."

And those fires exploded in Dante's stomach.

He tried to hold on to his sanity. Tried to struggle, to break himself free, to get away before the worst could happen. But the fires crept up his skin and seared the Gargoyle's stony flesh, making it burn molten red even as it dropped him with a pained hiss.

"Again?" He heard it grumble.

Dante didn't so much fall to the ground as he splashed against it. The fire consumed him, erupted off him, leaving nothing in its wake.

He didn't mean to. He never meant to. He had no control over it.

No control.

No control.

He surrendered to it, too tired to fight anymore.

He was fire.

He was flames.

He was resignation and dread, anger and fear.

Roaring and roaring with all that heat which hungered to burn.

Burning.

Burning.

Burnt.

He was burnt.

When he oozed back into himself, his skin was charcoal and his clothes were ash. Everything ached. Nothing felt solid. His limbs were paper, his head was sand.

He could, at least, sit up. He could, at least, exist all in a pile without getting swept away into the air. Holding everything together may not have been fully up to him, but he could sit and wait for things to settle for a while.

The area was empty. No Petel this time, no desperation making his head pop, nothing. The checkpoint was the only thing left standing, activated and open and too far away for his shaky charcoal legs to carry him to.

It was also chillingly quiet.

"You forget your place, Subject Delta." Orpheus said.

His appearance made Dante jump to his feet despite the motion making him aware of his fragility. Even his own friction hurt. "Wh-Why can't I hear them?" He asked.

Each breath was an exhale of smoke. Each breath a reminder of the extinguished fire in his lungs. There was no wind, no atmosphere in Hell, but his whole body trembled. Shaking from pain, from agony, from fear. Orpheus stared down at him with annoyance, with contempt. "Hell has always been special for you. Don't you remember?"

He leaned in close, red eyes glowing and menacing. He didn't need to worry about the fire. He never had. Dante stumbled back a step and protested, "There wasn't supposed to be a Hell to begin with."

"I'd delete you and your world, too, if I had the option."

Quick and rough as ever, Orpheus shoved him with that hard metallic hand. He looked like a robot, a doll, with his synthetic white hair, metal limbs, and ball bearing joints. Dante fell, fell into the air. Fell towards that frozen lake waiting for him at the bottom.

Again, he had no control.

No control.

His body hit the bottom with enough force to shatter him completely.

The message was very clear: They were, indeed, watching.

There was no escape.

It took a while for the void to piece him back together. For that overwhelming pain to dull. When he was finally, finally deposited onto his feet and allowed out of his scanner, he more tumbled out than anything.

Who else would be there to catch him before he hit the floor than Petel, his darling wolf?

Frank, Abraham, and Paige crowded around him, too. There was the usual, "Glad you're okay," from Abraham and Petel and a particular, "That was an experience," from Frank. Dante needed some time to recover, the fires had yet to rekindle in his chest.

Then Paige was saying, "Dante. Dante, I'm sorry, but I have to ask. What was all that about? What happened in there?"

"Why were the enemies talking all of a sudden?" Frank joined in.

"Why target you specifically?" Abraham asked.

Petel questioned with their gaze, dread most prominent behind it. Even Vektor, who stood helplessly just behind them, seemed at his most lost. This wasn't something the Prince could explain for all of them.

But Dante could.

Dante took a deep breath, counting to three in his head (him, his friends, his siblings), then said, "I want to tell you now."

Paige and Frank seemed shocked by his ready compliance. Abraham grew apprehensive and Petel, sweet Petel, who knew the worst of it and still couldn't fully understand, asked, "Are you gonna be okay?"

Slowly, Dante nodded. "I'll have to be. Because I want to say it."

His fears had to accept that. His friends, too. They had no choice but to accept. Dante was tired of these self-imposed rules. He was tired of throwing distraction after distraction to trip up those he cared for. He lost all control the moment they carved this change into his being.

He was so tired.

Petel helped him out of the tower and their group headed for the cafeteria. The cool evening wasn't especially chilly, not that Dante would notice, but a fog had settled in and made everything almost glow. Breathing it in, tasting its dampness, he was certain of his resolve.

He wanted them to understand. Wanted to show even this side of himself. And if they were to reject him at last, then at least they'd know the danger. At least they'd see him for the Inferno he was always meant to be.

Chapter 17: Hellfire Consumed

"I told you that I'd walked into Hell when I was younger." Dante said, subdued but keeping his head up in order to meet their eyes.

They all sat in the cafeteria, long finished with their supper. Dante insisted that they remain there while the other students trickled out. The emptiness only amplified this unsettling prickle at the back of Petel's neck no matter how much they tried to shake it off.

When most of their group nodded in affirmation, though Dante had only told Paige and Petel this, he continued. "Well. That's the Hell I've been to."

"But how?" Vektor asked. "Hell as a level predates all others, sure, but there's no way you could have walked into it from just anywhere."

He seemed rather heated, as if not having the information was infuriating. Dante met his anger for a moment, then asked in genuine confusion, "How can you say that when you see that I'm an experienced player of the game?"

"You've been playing the game since you were a kid." Frank said in a hollow realisation.

"It's been around since you were seven." Paige said next, as a way to clarify her own shock.

Petel was similarly gobsmacked as their own thoughts honed in on one fact. The wolf. Their parents. Blood in their mouth. Death on their hands.

But no, no, there was no way that could be related. It had to be a freak accident. It wasn't Petel's fault.

Abraham spoke up, quiet and hesitant. As if his words might hold that same sort of truth that needed caution when approaching. "Damon used to. And Niculaie. Did they also — when they were younger?"

"Who made this game?" Sonya asked next.

Dante shied away from their gazes finally, drumming his fingers against the table. "Two — Two fairies." He said in the end.

Instantly, confusion overtook the atmosphere of hesitation that hung about them. It seemed like a breath they could finally take. There was no way Dante was serious. Vektor shouted in surprise, "Not the same fairies from our foundational myths, surely."

"They. They programmed those stories into you?" Dante asked in return, growing confused.

Back in his element somewhat, as this was something to explain, Vektor's voice grew fervent as he said, "The fairies granted us the way to guard the Mainframe. They blessed us with a ruler who split in two in order to better protect the Kingdom."

"Huh."

Dante bowed his head in thought. Levy gave an exasperated, "Okay, but you can't actually be telling us that fairies exist and that they created this technology."

"Why not?" Dante snapped his gaze to Levy, making Levy flinch back from its intensity. "They've untwisted the broken, brought life to shadows, and exerted their will onto our reality. Calling themselves deities can hardly be treated as strict blasphemy."

"That's insane." Frank protested.

Dante only nodded in agreement. Both Levy and Frank sat back in their seats, exasperated with the lack of logic to this. Paige seemed similarly annoyed, though made herself ask, "Is this why you were so reluctant to tell us what you knew about it all?"

"You don't have to believe me. It's probably better if you don't."

Dante sank into his seat, falling to resignation. It was fairly unbelievable. Just like a great many things Dante was prone to saying. And yet, he had fire at his fingertips. It was hard to argue that he'd never been to this Hell before, he had plenty of souvenirs to show for it. As completely insane as it sounded, it couldn't be denied.

"I just. I wanted to tell you. So you'd know, at least." He said in a mumble.

He sat there, head down and fiddling with his fingers, as they all took in his words. His sincerity alone was enough for Petel to believe him despite the impossibility of his claims. Or, at the very least, believe that this was his truth. Petel leaned against the table and asked, "Did your parents ever meet these fairies?"

Dante's shoulders bunched up to his neck and a flare of heat poured into the air. Frank said, "There's no way they'd talk about it if they had. No one would believe them, nor would they be the renowned geniuses they are today."

"Maybe they never met them, but the tech is similar enough to argue some kind of connection." Paige pointed out.

Seemingly fed-up, Vektor said, "Whatever the case, we've nearly finished the Seventh Circle. We should do our best to focus once more on the task before us rather than speculating over unknowns."

"Right — you're right. Sorry." Frank said, conceding the point. He ran a hand down his face, still exasperated but accepting how inconclusive this discussion was. Considering their history with asking Dante questions, it was all they could expect. "We're at the, what, sixth? The penultimate?"

"Love that word." Levy quipped.

"Wasn't it the seventh, actually?" Abraham asked.

"It can be easy to lose count." Sonya said in sympathy.

Vektor gave a succinct, "Doktor is correct here."

"Not quite ideal, then." Abraham sank into contemplation. "Our luck's always at its worst when the end is right within our sight."

Petel and Paige each agreed with an upset frown. Petel turned to Dante and asked, "What else can you tell us about the Hell from your childhood?"

The others looked to them in confusion, but Dante, who'd remained at that broiling point as the conversation moved on, jumped at the sudden question. "Um. It's." He had to take a moment to properly structure his thoughts, then tried again. "It's basically the same. With the Chimera a-and Gargoyles, and. And everything."

"It is the earliest known level." Vektor added quietly.

"You mean, your kingdom wasn't the first?" Frank asked in surprise.

Levy joined in with a teasing, "And you talk like that place's been around for centuries."

"Perhaps it would be considered young by your world's standards, but my realm runs on a different cycle than yours." Vektor said in reply. "Honestly, that's what I've feared most as we've fought our way towards it. That by the time we reach it, the worst will have already come to pass and my grandfather might not..."

He trailed off, his distress keeping him from completing that thought. Frank immediately bowed his head in guilt while Abraham reached around Petel in order to give their Prince's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. Dante next asked, "What order w-were the levels created in?"

Vektor took a moment to shake off that horror, then jumped right into his explanation. "First, there was the space in-between. I believe you've called it the 'hub' or 'level select'. Next was the Seventh Circle and the Garden, they seem to have been formed almost at the same time. After that—"

"Garden? You've never mentioned a garden before." Paige said.

That usual grimace at being interrupted appeared, but Vektor remained diplomatic. "The Garden is not a level one passes through traditionally. It is solely the realm of the Guardians, so there is no need to concern ourselves with it."

"The Guardians have a space for them collectively?" Sonya asked, intrigued.

"I thought their levels were their homes." Abraham added in.

"But they're not around all the time, they seem to pick and choose when they show up." Paige said next with a gleam of realisation. "Having their own place to go, that explains a lot."

"So is it, like, their characters get stored there until they're needed? That's a pretty usual trick for games to pull." Levy said.

"And they can see each other there." Frank said, grinning.

The Guardians did seem more real than just bits of code. Different from Vektor, too, who was doing his best to pretend to not just be code. Petel had played with Shiranui. Had heard Resident's odd, wistful statements, seen the Midnight Bard's vindictiveness first hand.

These seemed like real people. Real players, like them.

But how would that even be possible?

Petel looked to Dante once more, checking how their boyfriend was handling the conversation. He watched as Levy and Frank grew frustrated with one another, disagreeing on the merits of verbal communication between computer programs. Vektor, strangely, didn't jump in, content to also watch things unfold. The way the Prince and the fireball turned from one speaker to the other as each one listed their points, it struck Petel suddenly.

Dante and Vektor shared a lot of quirks. Maybe not so much appearances or mannerisms, Dante being so paralysed with fears and Vektor being so impatient, but there was something. There was something doing its best to swipe at Petel's ears.

That was more blatantly ridiculous, though. Petel settled for helping Sonya, Paige, and Abraham quell the situation before it could get out of control. Levy just didn't know when to quit and Frank was his own flavour of headstrong, it seemed.

They didn't have to consider it again, either, as they spent a good majority of their Sunday curled up at Dante's side while they studied. Their group reached the final checkpoint of this Hell and made plans to complete things next Sunday, since, as Abraham predicted, AIR didn't allow them to finish that easily.

"Three Chimera and a Gargoyle." Abraham said again as they sat together for lunch the next day. "At least not three Gargoyle again, but still. I'm proud we managed to handle it as well as we did."

"Now our practice is paying off." Vektor chimed in with a satisfied little grin.

Frank and Levy laughed at the Prince's simple joy while Kalyuga said to Abraham, "Just think. At the rate you're going, by Summer Term, you'll have finished the whole thing."

"Then Vektor would miss graduation ceremonies." Sonya pointed out with a note of distress.

"Aww, Vektor wouldn't miss those stuffy ceremonies for anything." Frank said, waving off Sonya's worries. "Right, Vektor? Ceremonies and princes just go hand in hand."

He grinned over at Vektor, so clearly phishing for a response that it made Petel laugh. Vektor considered the request for a moment, face deep in concentration, before he finally admitted, "I have no idea what this graduation ceremony is you're referring to. Is it a rite of passage in this realm? Something specific to my being here?"

"Didn't you have a school where you came from?" Paige asked in counter.

"I attended schooling is what I said." Vektor answered. "Though, since you've connected the two, is this ceremony similar to a coronation? Who are the intended participants? Are they being ushered forward to continue their lines as I am for my family?"

"How do you not know what graduations are? Your whole world exists on a school campus." Levy protested.

Kalyuga took it upon herself to explain the whole process of graduation, wisely avoiding any more misconceptions Vektor might build up if they didn't step in immediately. Abraham and Frank added what they could and Dante listened with just as much interest as Vektor to what they were saying.

They both liked learning. Liked listening to the conversation around them. Petel wasn't getting rid of this notion as easily as they hoped.

When they headed to their tower next, Petel said, "Saw Damon and them around."

"Yes, we'll no doubt have company again." Abraham said with a sigh.

Immediately, Frank and Paige both turned around to face him. "Don't flip out this time, mate." Frank said.

"And if you do, make sure to keep it to a minimum until after you reach the next level." Paige said next.

"I know your eyes didn't break last time, but I think we'd all really like for that not to happen again." Petel added.

"Yes, we'd prefer to not witness you breaking anything in your code, Professor." Vektor joined in.

He strode in front of their group to open the tower doors for them and gestured them inside. Paige gave Abraham a last warning look while Frank gave the Huntsman's arm a comforting pat. Petel chose a scanner beside Dante this time, since Dante seemed more tired out by this level and they liked being able to help their boyfriend.

The world dropped them into that familiar void and they were once more within the wolf's skin.

They leapt out of the checkpoint, ready to dash for the exit. "How's the situation, Paige?" They called up towards the sky.

"AIR just spawned two Naga on your path ahead, but it's otherwise all clear." She reported.

Abraham stepped out with a laugh. "We should be able to finish before lunch, in that case."

"Everyone follow me and stay close." Vektor said, pushing his way forward in order to take the lead.

He had his key staff out already, serious as ever. Abraham and Frank fell in line behind him, willing to go along with whatever he had planned. And while Petel really wanted more time to explore this place, they walked beside the Prince. Dante, as usual, had their backs covered.

The landscape seemed flatter here, with less rock outcroppings for cover, but still had plenty pools of those shadow things puddled around. It didn't take long for the Naga to pop into view. It took even less for Petel to dispatch one while Abraham and Vektor handled the other.

"Good work, mates." Paige said as Frank revived one of them. "I think you're nearing the end? But it looks like Vektoria and them are headed your way now, so heads up on that."

Vektor's hands gripped his staff tighter for a moment, then he forced himself to say, "Keep moving. Let's try to keep ahead of them instead of engaging."

"Good call." Frank said.

He patted Vektor's arm as they resumed their earlier pace. Just as they were hitting their stride, however, Dante gave a panicked yelp.

Immediately, they all turned towards their fireball friend in alarm. "More Gargoyles?" Frank asked.

"Is it the Guardian?" Vektor joined in.

Dante's fires were raised around him, defensive, but it was just keeping an outcropping of those shadowy things with the many eyes from reaching him. They melted back to their spot on the ground, no rocks to hide beneath this time. Once Dante noticed Petel and the others watching, he gave a hurried, "It's — I'm—! Th-Those, um. I was just, uh, s-startled. That's all."

Frank and Petel dropped their guard in relief. Vektor grew annoyed and said, "We need to hurry, Inferno. Please pay the Tormented no mind, they're not here to harm us."

"R-Right. Sorry."

Dante stepped forward and their procession resumed. The draw distance didn't allow them to see much, but Petel's ears were better than most. They could pick out Damon and Vektoria's voices now, loud and argumentative, coming from somewhere behind them. Within range to be audible. They also noticed the abundance of those Tormented, which seemed to pool more and more at the edges of their bubble of vision. All those blank white eyes following their group as they went; suddenly, Non-Hostile seemed an ill-fitting description.

"Hey, Paige. Can you see the Non-Hostiles on your display?" Frank called up, just as nervous as Petel.

Dante looked panicked, too, exemplified by his erratic and climbing fires. Paige said, "Kind of? Their signatures are different than anything else, almost like they're made to blend in and go unnoticed. Which, I guess, makes sense when considering their non-threat levels."

"Something concerning you, Doktor?" Vektor asked.

The Prince turned around to better address Frank, continuing to walk even as he faced backwards. Now that was a cute thing to see him pick up. Abraham smiled at the realisation as well. Not noticing, Frank said, "Just, there seem to be a lot more of them than usual. And, y'know, the Zeppelin Whales in the Tundra were technically Non-Hostiles, but I revived them and they had attacks, so."

"You also use them for your own attacks." Abraham pointed out. "Which, you haven't done since we entered, I'm realising."

Vektor went to argue, but tripped and landed right in a puddle of the shadowy beings. Out of their amorphous mass rose spindly, clawed hands, which latched onto him and dragged him down into their darkness. Frank shouted and Abraham quickly drew his rifle out, but fire beat them both to it, severing their claws and chasing them back. "Don't — You can't." Dante shouted.

"Okay, I didn't want to actually be right." Frank complained.

Vektor stood and assessed his position, still protected by the flames but surrounded both by them and the Tormented. Dante wasn't protected, for once. Petel dashed over without even thinking, without checking, and slashed at the tendrils clawing next for Dante. He squeaked in surprise, which broke his focus and brought the fires back to himself. The shadows caught Frank's Naga next and Abraham switched to his knife to drive back the claws reaching for him as well.

"How much damage are these things doing?" Frank asked, swapping out his magazines as his Naga thrashed against the arms restraining it.

"Looks more like some kind of poison damage than a solid chunk all at once." Paige reported. "They drain your health as long as you're within their hold."

Frank shot his Naga, but it was dragged down fully into the Tormented's bodies and lost to their puddle of darkness. They swallowed it whole, dissolving from the area to leave the dirt of the plateau and nothing else. Abraham started, "So then, Vektor and myself—"

"They took off 12% off Vektor and only 5% off yours, Abraham." Paige interjected. "And 5% off Dante's. Sorry, I was trying to figure out how that even happened."

Petel snarled at these shadows, but they continued swarming around their group, continued reaching for all of them. Vektor swatted at their tendrils with his key staff and made a noise in

aggravation when they didn't budge. "We need to keep progressing." He said. "I refuse to come this far only to be thwarted—"

A shrill shriek cut him off. That wasn't any of their voices; Niculaie, Petel recognised. Damon and Aglaé's shouts joined the noise, as well as Natasha's panicked cries. Frank looked to Petel, distress clear in his face. Should they even consider helping? Before Petel could make the decision, Vektor snapped his fingers and hurried over to Dante's side, as close as he could get.

"That's it. Inferno, your fires are perfect for clearing our path. Do you think you can handle that? We'll keep you safe as you focus on allowing our progress."

Dante drew back, hesitant. Petel couldn't fault him on that one. He took a deep, steadying breath, then swept out his hands to command the flames around him. "I — I'll try." He said.

The fire sliced right through the shadows, forming a path clear of them. Frank gave a whoop and hurried onto it while Vektor nodded his thanks and did similarly. Abraham kept his back to Dante, knife drawn to deter the Tormented creeping towards them. "Isn't that the way we came?" He asked.

Still focused and stalwart, Dante said, "We should. I-I think. I'd rather help them when it involves shadows."

Petel loved him so much. They gave him a quick lick on the cheek, then swiped at some of the reaching claws, assisting Abraham in keeping their fireball safe. Dante seemed perplexed, but moved them back towards the others with relative ease. Above them, Paige's voice echoed with her usual tiredness. "That really a wise decision there?"

"You want us to let these things hurt your friend?" Petel challenged.

She sighed. "No, of course not." Then, much more casually, "Sheesh, those things are really choking up the map. If the game crashes again, you'll know why."

"Hell can't crash." Dante said.

His certainty was a bit unnerving, but there was little time to dissect it as they came across Damon and the others. Aglaé slashed at the Tormented with his claws, the same tactic as Petel, while Natasha held onto Nicualie desperately to keep him from being swallowed into a puddle of darkness. Vektoria had torn several holes in the plateau, which the Tormented filled with their shadowy bodies, and Damon had his red wing blade in hand to keep them from reaching himself and Vektoria. Apparently, that wasn't just a Berserk thing.

"Zima, let go." Dante called.

Their gazes all snapped to Dante as he swept his flames through the shadows to clear the way. Natasha seemed reluctant at first to listen, but had no choice as the fires severed her from her friend and dipped into the shadow space to scoop him out with that clawed hand. Distracted by the sight, Damon shouted, "You can just do that?"

"I am the Inferno. The fire is me." Dante shouted back.

Once Niculaie was safely on his feet, clear of the Tormented, Dante surrounded all of them within his protection. Vektoria raised a hand towards him, glowing with that dark magic of hers, and shrieked, "We don't need your charity."

She was promptly restrained by both Aglaé and Natasha. "Do not delete the thing protecting us, 'Toria.'" Natasha pleaded.

"Yeah, at least let us get somewhere safe before going straight into headstrong battle mode." Aglaé said.

Dante looked to Vektor, who was startled from his own shock. The Prince pointed them towards their next direction and, at a slow walking pace, they all went on their way. The Tormented's claws reached over the wall of flames, grasping for them, so Petel and Abraham discouraged them with extra swipes. Seeing this, Aglaé and Damon joined in, leaving the job of watching over Vektoria to Natasha and Frank. Softly, Niculaie asked, "Why are you helping us?"

The Vampire seemed a bit singed, but otherwise fine. Petel knew that feeling. Frank said, "We're all friends, right?"

That was a good enough explanation for Petel. Dante didn't seem to agree, scrunching up his nose in distaste and making his fires flare up higher. Niculaie said, "You might be, Ernest, but Vicario and I. We aren't."

"There's a contract I have to keep." Dante said. His determination, his heated statement, stoked his flames higher, cutting off those shadowy tendrils from reaching any of them. "They're not allowed to hurt anyone else. That would break the rules. They wouldn't want that."

He cut a very intimidating figure. Petel was very much in awe of him. His duality of beauty and terror was perfect on him. It defined him. Petel hated that they had to tear themselves away from the sight in order to help the others keep the Tormented from getting past his fire.

Abraham said, "Even a vampire wouldn't deserve that end."

Niculaie stuttered in his steps a moment, shocked to hear Abraham approaching anything near magnanimous. Frank and Natasha, too, were surprised enough to let their grip on Vektoria slip. She wrestled free of them and Petel tackled her to the ground before she could reach Vektor. They growled at her with a barely coherent, "We're trying to help."

"What did I just say?" Aglaé said with an aggravated roll of his head.

"We don't need your help. We can make it to the end on our own. I'll delete all of you if you refuse to destroy our enemies." Vektoria spat.

She may have been fast, but Petel was stronger than her. Natasha said, "Stop tearing holes in things, 'Toria. It's not helping any of us."

She pulled Vektoria up and Niculaie wrapped his cape around her arms, showing a shocking amount of dexterity with it. "You're not allowed to delete anyone." He told her.

"If you stand in my way, then you're my enemy, too."

She continued struggling, continued seething, but the two had her sufficiently restrained. Petel rolled to their feet and went back to helping Abraham. Vektor paused a moment, unsure. Then he asked Damon and the others, "Why don't you stand with her? You're her friends, are you not?"

Aglaé let out a long, aggravated noise as Natasha laughed nervously. Even Niculaie didn't want to speak up, looking a bit frustrated and guilty. Damon scoffed, resting his sword on his shoulder a moment. "Friends. Right. Good luck convincing her of that."

"Those values aren't worth raising when you lot are obligated to my cause no matter what. Why expend the effort?" Vektoria said right back at Damon.

He shook his head at her and sidled over to Abraham's side to help, making the Huntsman tense up in annoyance. Petel, in turn, swapped to help Aglaé. Vektoria stopped resisting so much, going along reluctantly with Natasha and Niculaie as they pressed onwards.

"That's why your downfall will be so much sweeter when we reach the end, you stupid Prince." She taunted with a cruel grin.

Vektor met her clear challenge, then continued directing them along the path. "We are at odds even about this, it seems." He muttered to himself.

"Oh, looks like you're right at the end." Paige said, her voice catching Petel and their group's attention.

Dante let out a relieved, "Finally."

His exhaustion showed through just a moment, his fires flickering lower, but he kept them in place. Petel asked, "Are these Tormented clearing out at all?"

"The area ahead of you looks slightly less choked with them, but it's hard to tell." Paige answered.

After a second, Natasha called up towards the sky, "Hey, Jonathan. Are we getting close to our end of the level?"

"You think we'll be able to make it to ours with all these Tormented?" Damon joined in.

Petel frowned to themselves. It was a strikingly odd choice, keeping their communications line separate. Once the two had gotten whatever response from Jonathan, Damon grimaced in annoyance while Natasha sighed and drooped forward. Frank went over to pat her arm, saying, "We can wait and make sure you get there if you want."

"No, you'd better not." Natasha said. "'Toria'll just try to attack you again if you do."

"Because they're our enemies." Vektoria shouted.

Natasha smiled at Frank, ignoring Vektoria's outburst. Frank grinned in return, stepping closer to Dante's side. The fires surrounding them all flared up suddenly, startling Abraham and Aglaé away and even forcing the pools of the Tormented to give them some space. "That's the end." Dante cried in triumph.

"So it is." Vektor confirmed.

The Prince strode forward and Dante parted the wall of flames for him. The edge of the Seventh Circle, it seemed, was a sloping pathway leading down towards the frozen lake below. The plateaus continued stretching out into infinity, making the sudden dip seem a little out of place, but the Tormented weren't along the path at all, meaning they had at least that going for them.

Frank and Abraham followed Vektor down. Petel looked to Dante, who was hesitant to leave the others.

"Are you. Gonna be okay?" He asked them.

Aglaé nodded with a quick, "We'll manage."

"Our exit isn't too far from here." Vektoria grumbled.

Smiling, though still uneasy, Natasha said, "Good luck."

"Seeya in the next level." Damon said with a wink.

"Don't tempt me to crush you after all that." Dante warned.

He withdrew his fire into his hands in a very clear threat. Damon turned quickly to slash at the Tormented before they could swarm in, unwilling to meet Dante head on. That certainly garnered the wolf's interest. Natasha and Niculaie released Vektoria and the Thief charged off, shouting, "I refuse to let that lying Prince outdo me again."

"You keep calling him a liar, but I don't think he's lied once." Natasha said in counter.

The group hurried after Vektoria and Petel extended a paw towards Dante with a short, "Let's get out of here."

They couldn't actually hold Dante's hand in here, especially not when he had them engulfed in flames, but the sentiment was recognised. Dante met their eyes and nodded, letting the flames melt back into place around him. The puddles of shadows seemed to have hit an invisible wall, as a clear line broke them off from reaching where the path dipped down. Petel and Dante followed Vektor, Frank, and Abraham down and, above them, Paige made a soft noise in surprise. "Oh. It goes. Down? That looks weird on the map."

"To descend is the only way forward." Vektor confirmed.

He didn't sound very enthused about it. Which was also an odd thing. Frank hopped over and held onto the Prince's arm where there was no armour and said, "We made it, though. C'mon, Vektor."

"She really doesn't consider them friends." He said in a hollow tone.

Frank dropped Vektor's arm, grin falling to an expression of concern. Abraham crossed his arms and said, "A monster in her own right. Befitting their Hellish crew of demons and night fiends."

"Please, none of that right now." Paige broke in, exasperated.

Frank moved to Abraham and tried for a cheerier, "Good job keeping it together while we were walking with them, by the way. You did really great."

Abraham dropped his scowl to an unsure smile. "Thank you, Frank."

The path descended all the way to the lake. Right where it met the frozen waters, Vektor said, "Here we are. At last."

He sounded weary, but Petel and Frank perked up. Abraham, too, seemed newly interested in their exit. Vektor's hands glowed gold as he crouched down on his knees and held them to the red ice. It opened up into a black pit with starry lines darting through the darkness, like the ceilings of the checkpoints. A way farther down. Once it was fully opened, Vektor stood and shook out his hands.

"Let us be rid of this Hell and continue our journey." He said.

With a little cheer, Frank dashed forward and jumped straight into the pit. Vektor gave a small noise, startled, and Abraham laughed at the Prince's uncharacteristic jumpiness. Petel was quick to follow Frank through their exit, cannonballing straight through.

Good riddance to this level, indeed. They'd be glad to explore the next, even if it would be the last.

Coming out standing on the path was a bit jarring, as much as falling back into reality was. They stepped out into the middle of the white path with Frank and smiled down at their friend. "Good work out there."

"I didn't even do that much this time." Frank laughed.

Abraham stepped through next, followed by Vektor. The two joined Petel and Frank and, finally, Dante stepped through last.

"We made it." Frank cheered, jumping into the air.

"Congrats, mates." Paige joined in.

Petel loped over to Dante, their tail wagging and their heart full. Dante smiled at them in return, amused. Vektor asked, "Shall we open up the Hollows for our next session?"

"Aww, we're not gonna try to sneak a peek right now?" Frank teased, giggling.

Dante rose his voice, grabbing their attention. "I'd, um. I'd like a break, please."

"Understandable, Inferno. You exerted yourself quite a bit in there." Vektor nodded along, surprisingly agreeable again. Petel's ears perked up and they looked over at their Prince, intrigued. "Which, thank you for that. Were it not for your efforts, we would not have made it to the end as intact as we did."

He bowed to Dante briefly, then faced their next level along the path. Abraham gave a delighted laugh, saying, "Why so formal?"

"You really are learning." Frank said, grinning brightly.

Dante, too, seemed flattered, keeping his head down to hide his little smile. "Um. Th-Thanks, Vektor."

He was adorable. Petel loved him so much. They hopped over those warm, comforting fires and wrapped their arms around him, resting their head against his shoulder. Dante jumped in surprise, but laughed and placed his hands over theirs.

"Petel, careful. I-I might burn you." He warned.

Petel hummed in recognition and remained right where they were. Their snout wasn't the right shape, unfortunately, if they didn't want to frighten their boyfriend. Dante might know that particular wolf fact, but it was better to wait until they'd exited the game to express all this adoration inside them.

That telling click of the next level being unlocked sounded in the void, drawing their attention away from their beautiful and wonderful boyfriend. Vektor stepped away from the next level's entrance, brushing off his hands.

"Right then." He started. "Navigator, shall we conclude for the day?"

"Gimme a mo', I'll log everyone out." Paige agreed.

Petel snuggled closer to Dante, getting a squeak from the fireball this time. "P-Petel, please." He protested with a laugh.

Frank watched the two of them with a delighted expression while Abraham kept his gaze politely averted. Petel gave Dante's cheek another lick, getting some more laughter for their enjoyment. Dante had such a pretty laugh. Petel was glad to hear it from him after such a trying, terrible level.

Damon, Vektoria, and the others exited onto the path right as the floor opened up beneath Petel and they dropped into that loading zone. Their feet touched the ground of reality not long after.

For once, Petel was glad to be back in their more human body.

"They made it, too." Frank announced as he stepped out of his scanner.

Vektor stumbled out onto the floor with a frustrated, "They did, indeed."

Abraham went over to his side with an encouraging, "You've gotten real good at catching yourself there, mate."

"Sounds like it was a close race once again." Paige said, smirking.

Petel hurried out, tripping a bit over their feet, in order to join Dante's side. He seemed a little wobbly, but he held himself up just fine. He startled as Petel approached, then smiled shyly up at them. "You're, uh. Really clingy right now."

"Want to kiss you." Petel replied.

"H-Huh?"

Petel moved in, wrapping Dante up in their arms in order to kiss him. Dante went stiff in surprise. And hot. Like, burning hot. Petel had to break off with a wince and, ah, that explained it. Dante's hair had gone aflame again. "Hm." Petel frowned. "That might make things difficult."

Dante pressed his hands to his mouth, incredibly shocked. That also didn't seem quite right. Abraham gave a startled, "Is Dante on fire?"

Frank joined in with a less surprised, "Why's Dante on fire again?"

"Again?" Abraham exclaimed.

Paige was drawn over as well (and Vektor, though that was more due to Abraham being the one supporting him) and Dante, realising how much attention was on him, gulped in a deep breath to settle the fires and dissipate them. "It's — I'm—" He tried to go for reassuring, but ended up blurting out, "You kissed me."

Petel needed to approach this cautiously. "Yes?" They started. "Was that — were you not ready for that yet?"

"You kissed me!" Dante repeated.

Petel frowned. This wasn't going how they hoped it would. Frank grew giddy and said, "Oh, congrats. I didn't know you two had made it official."

Realisation sparked in Paige's eyes and she asked, "You are formally together, aren't you?"

Dante looked at Petel, questioning. Had they not mentioned this before? They wracked their brain for that moment in their room, where Dante allowed them to bite and — oh.

Oh, shit.

All they could offer up was a panicked and pitiful, "I forgot to say anything."

"You forgot?" Paige and Frank both shouted in disbelief.

"I'm sorry, can we return to the fact that Dante was on fire just now? In reality?" Abraham interjected.

"Inferno's fires are nothing new, Professor." Vektor said, because of course Vektor would act like he already knew something as mind-boggling as that. The Prince smiled, though, which wasn't as expected of a reaction for him. "I've had my own experience with this sort of scenario. I can offer you some advice, Inferno, if you'd like."

"You have?" Frank asked, whirling on him immediately.

"You mean someone's actually snogged you?" Paige joined in, just as gobsmacked.

"Yes. It was a rather silly experience, if I might say so." Vektor replied, nonchalant about the fact that someone had decided a computer program was a good candidate for a crush. He next said, to Dante, "Full and open communication is important in establishing boundaries as well as understanding in this area, especially with two moods like Wolf has. I recommend doing just that as soon as possible."

"Who the hell kissed you?" Paige pressed.

"And why haven't we learned about this until just now?" Frank joined in.

Vektor frowned at them both, confused by their strange insistence on this topic. Petel still wasn't exactly sure why it appealed to the two. Abraham mumbled an upset, "This is too much for one day. I'm glad we kept our session short."

Petel had to turn away from those four and focus back on Dante.

Dante, whom they'd just kissed. Dante, whom they'd been treating like their boyfriend this whole time. Dante, who stared at them in some complicated mixture of bewildered and puzzled and perplexed.

"I'm. I'm so sorry." Petel began.

"You kissed me." Dante reiterated. It seemed more out of surprise and not anger, which was reassuring.

"I meant to say something. I really did." Petel went on.

"I don't know what I could call you." Dante said next. Petel froze as dread stabbed right through their back. "I mean. Boyfriend isn't n-neutral enough, so. I-I don't know, what should I call you?"

Relief.

Instant, deflating relief.

"That's your biggest worry about this?" Petel ended up asking.

"Well. It's a good worry." Dante pointed out.

"I kiss you after forgetting to ask you to date me for like a month now, even forgetting to just confess in the first place, and your main concern is how you'd refer to me romantically?"

"I like you, too."

Dante nodded definitively, as if that solved everything. Entirely incomprehensible. As Petel should have expected by now. They let out a short, relieved laugh and moved back in to scoop Dante right up into their arms, to cuddle him as closely as possible. "I like you so much."

He squeaked in surprise. "Wh-Why — Why again?"

"Datemate." They said, nuzzling against the side of his head. "I can be your datemate. Do you wanna date me? Will you? Please?"

"Petel — p-per favore, Petel."

Laughter bubbled out of him, genuine and embarrassed and perfect. It was like carbonation, like fizz, and it made Petel laugh as well. They continued nuzzling against him, continued twisting from side to side with all of that unrestrained joy.

"Yes, I." Dante had to pause from that laughter, had to breathe and smiled so beautifully and wonderfully and gosh, Petel just adored him. "I'd like it if we could date. If, um. If you still want to."

He ducked his head in embarrassment at the end and Petel swooped in to press a quick kiss to the top of his head. "I'd like nothing more."

Dante ended up devolving into giggles again. He was probably just tired enough to be edging on delirious. Petel found that so endearing as well. They kissed the top of his head again, and then once more, before he reached up, grabbed their face, and pulled them down for a much more proper kiss.

Petel returned it with all the enthusiasm they had to offer.

Chapter 18: The Fire and Wolf, Again

Paige and Frank reminded Petel of lunch. They all had yet to eat lunch. The wolf growled at having to separate from their wonderful (and now official) boyfriend — though relented as Dante promised to talk more with them about this new development afterwards. Paige, Frank, Abraham, and even Vektor offered their congratulations, which made Dante blush a fiery red and Petel was sure this had to be true contentment. They sat down with their food and their pack and their mate and wanted to shout about it from the roofs of the towers.

They and Dante were dating now. Dante was dating them now!

But they kept it inside for the moment, until they could discuss what Dante was comfortable with. Dante didn't like having too much attention on him, after all. Dante's comfort here was important.

Sonya and Levy were, of course, very supportive. Levy even called Kalyuga right then and there to break the news to her. And, no matter how much Paige and Frank grilled Vektor, the Prince refused to give up any details over his own experience in being kissed.

"I can't believe someone kissed Vektor." Dante said.

After the whole shock of Petel's confession had settled, he seemed to be just as caught on that detail as Paige and Frank were. Petel rolled their eyes and leaned against Dante's shoulder, the two of them sitting together on Dante's bed in their room. "It's not that strange. Someone was bound to find him attractive."

"But. He's just a program." Dante protested. "He shouldn't be so casual about it. It shouldn't just be something that happened to him."

Petel snorted through their nose. "Fair enough. But also, consider. Attraction doesn't care about logic or rationality."

Dante looked to them with a sudden, "Since when did you consider us to be dating, anyway?"

Well, shoot. They really should have seen that coming. "After the first time you went Berserk." They admitted, cringing.

Dante reeled back, both amused and bewildered. "That's when you decided you wanted to date me?"

Petel tried for a short, "Okay, listen."

But he kept going, laughing now. "Why would that make you realise you wanted to date me? I'd just torn you apart. I was Berserk."

"You let me bite you." Petel interjected hurriedly. Dante paused, thankfully, allowing them to elaborate. "That was acceptance. Recognition. I've liked you since last term, but that. That made me realise we could work together."

"You've liked me since last term?" Dante asked next.

Though he was taken aback by all of this, he seemed to be having fun. At least, he was smiling. That was a better reaction than Petel had expected initially. They rolled their eyes and said, "I think you're beautiful and bright. Your passion and even your anger are mesmerising. Of course I found myself liking you before I knew it."

That shut him up, if only because he now sat there with his head bowed, fidgeting in his embarrassment. Petel smiled and allowed their tone to soften as they went on.

"Your laugh is so good and nice to hear. And your voice, it's almost musical. You're cute, too, in the most unexpected ways. Like that time you were so proud to tell me wolf facts or when taking a sip of my coffee."

"O-Okay, okay, you've made your point." Dante protested, giving their shoulder a little shove.

Petel grinned and nudged him in return. "Even when we disagree, we're able to talk it out and come to a better understanding of one another. I truly do like you with all of my heart, Dante."

They punctuated their point by leaning in to press a kiss to his cheek. His face went warm again, so much so that it seemed to glow red with that heat. "Um. Ah." He faltered. That red hot went all the way down to his arms and hands. Petel could feel the burning from how close they were sitting and suddenly wondered what it might be like to have those hands burn imprints onto their body. "You. Uh. That's — um. That's quite a lot."

They wanted to touch more, to express this adoration which flowed from them like a stream. To avoid getting burned, however, they simply said, "I can keep going if you'd like."

"No, n-no, that's. Um, that's okay." Dante cleared his throat and the heat lessened, his skin losing that red hot glow. He looked up to meet Petel's eyes directly and said, "I liked you, too. When we first, um. Became friends. Maybe not — not romantically, but. Uh, but I liked you a-and I liked being your friend."

A fond smile spread over Petel's face. "Good to know."

"And. And recently, um." He ducked his head briefly, collecting his nerve, then met their eyes with that intense resolve once more. "I thought that. I wouldn't mind so much. Uh, staying with you. Romantically, I mean."

Petel leaned in to rest their forehead against his with a soft, "Also good to know. Glad we're on the same page."

"Petel, please."

He laughed shortly, embarrassment creeping in at the edges. Petel kissed him on the nose, enjoying the way his heat made their lips tingle a bit.

He regained his composure and said, "You've always been, um. S-Safe. Even at your — uh. Your most dangerous, you. You're safe and cool and wonderful and it scared me for so long. Because — w-well. Because you, um. You could very well destroy me."

They nodded in understanding, though it was their turn to be subdued in embarrassment. "I did say I could eat you."

"And. I-I think I'd like that now if you did."

Petel pulled back with a startled, "What?"

His stare seemed even more intense. It broke through all that ever-present ice in their veins and warmth flooded them. They were too hot, way too hot, for once in their life, but they couldn't look away. They couldn't break free of this heat which devoured them.

"You. Want me to eat you?" They questioned.

They could barely voice it. It seemed far too intimate a thing to be asking. But Dante gave a single, definitive nod as he smiled so bashfully and beautifully. "Yeah." He affirmed. "Maybe not right now in this moment, or even this year, but. When it happens. You'll treat me carefully, because I'm fire and you're a wolf, won't you?"

He was breathtaking. Petel was so caught in this fire's spell, unable to break away, to heed the warnings of danger. They pulled Dante against their chest and said, "Of course I will. I promise."

"Thank you, Petel." He said, a bit muffled from being pressed against their chest. It was a lovely sound and they wished to hear more of it as they kept exploring this new level of their relationship. "I'll, um. I promise, too. Uh, to take care not to burn you too much."

They were perfectly matched in destruction. They were perfectly matched in volatility. They were perfectly matched and Petel was so, so happy they had taken a chance on befriending this wonderful, dangerous fire. They had grown to adore Dante and, it seemed, Dante adored them right back.

The two of them spent their time before supper cuddling and finishing up their schoolwork. Dante relaxed for once, free of worries over all the things that tormented him. It was such a rare treat. Petel melted against his side in the heights of their joy.

Chapter 19: Change

Petel had kissed Dante.

That moment had a vice grip on Dante's mind.

Petel had gone right up to him after they made it through Hell and kissed him.

They liked him. They liked him enough to have considered them dating.

And, surprisingly, Dante liked them back.

That was the jam in the works here. That was the one snag in the machine, the typo on the equation. He liked Petel just as much as Petel liked him. Enough to risk everything for them. Enough to subject himself to being devoured by this wolf.

But he was a liar. He was out of his mind. The Babbling Artist. The Inferno enacting Change.

Who could ever truly love someone as wicked as him?

The thoughts spun around in his head as he sat in his room, on his bed, drumming his fingers against his drawn-up knees. The air was absolutely choked with slithering serpents, but no shadows yet. That was important. The night brought darkness and darkness brought shadows and shadows attracted all the rest.

The lavender blanket was a gift. It meant that nothing could touch him while under its protection.

And Petel had kissed him.

His notebook sat at his side, woefully neglected. Designing new wards seemed impossible due to this new blanket, his friends, Petel. He never planned out what he might do should he actually get attached to anyone.

Others knew to avoid him. He was Hellfire incarnate.

Normal people saw the signs of danger, knew to shy away from the flames.

Petel was not a normal person. Neither was Paige, nor Frank, nor Abraham.

No one at this Boarding School was a normal person.

And they all had Dante to thank for that.

He took a deep breath, then looked directly at all the winged serpents in the air. They knew, of course. The shift was noticeable to them, too, and they all looked back at him with their shiny, gem-like

eyes. Each of them glittered like rainbows, the feathers of their wings white as clouds and reflecting the colours of their scales.

With deliberate intent, he said to them, "I unmake you."

They were torn to ribbons instantly, unravelled out of existence. He could breathe easier for a moment. He plucked up his notebook, placed it in his lap, and found a blank page in order to start this list.

The Pros of being romantically involved with Petel Vitayev.

For starters, Petel was passionate. They were uncompromisingly themselves and always knew how to make a serious problem bearable. They were safety. They were bright and charming. They seemed to know just how to make Dante laugh when he needed it most. Even when he didn't need it, they could make him laugh.

He nodded to himself at his half page of reasons. That was good enough for now.

Next on the docket: The Cons of dating the Wolf of the Forest.

They were infuriatingly headstrong at times. They were sure to get into more disagreements with him the longer they remained entwined. They were serious about consuming him. They frightened him. The longer they stayed in such close proximity to him, the more it was likely they'd be burned. Worse than he'd burned them before. They were in danger and they had no fear to know it.

Dante's thoughts hitched on those last points. Petel ignored all warning signs. They blindly followed the game's siren call, eager to have an adventure. They flirted with the fire, with burns, in getting too close to him.

Self-destructive. Dante added it to the list.

Looking at both sides now that they were neatly laid out didn't actually help as much as he thought it might. He could have all the components to the equation before him, but this was one problem that didn't have an easy solution. He could make an argument for either side with this.

Being with Petel was exciting, reassuring, wonderful.

Being with Petel was dangerous, stupid, sure to end in disaster.

He was a disaster. Everything about him was a mistake, a tragedy waiting to happen.

How could anyone love someone like that?

The door opened and Petel came in, making Dante jump. "Supper time." They announced, watching him scramble to shut his notebook with an odd little smile. They placed their violin case down by their bed, then offered their hand out to him. "Hungry?"

He nodded, not really paying attention to the word. Too caught up on the gesture to really hear it. He tentatively accepted Petel's hand and followed them out of the dorms.

They did this all the time. This hand holding thing. But they were a couple now. Right? It meant something more now that they were involved with one another in that way. Right?

The cafeteria was fairly crowded. Paige, Sonya, Levy, and Frank sat with their food at a table together. Vektor was still in line, chatting with Jonathan. The two of them were as friendly as ever. Still weird, but Dante was slowly coming to terms with it. If Vektor could have romantic relations, then a friendship outside of their group couldn't be considered so outlandish.

"Roast beef." Petel said.

Taken off-guard, Dante gave a surprised, "Huh?"

"Tonight's meal." They said.

They tilted their head towards the front, where other students held trays with roast beef, mashed potatoes, green beans, and bread as they left the line. Curious, Dante asked, "Do you, um. Like roast beef?"

"S'good." Petel answered. "Not my favourite, but still good."

"What, um. Is your favourite?" He asked next.

They spared him a smile and said, "Probably ukha. My grandpa made that most often since we had a lot of fish. But blini and pirozhki are good, too. And you can't go wrong with shashlyk." After a moment of silence, they chuckled and explained, "Fish soup, flatbread, meat and bread pockets, and skewers of meat and vegetables."

"Oh." He nodded along, understanding much better now. "Those, uh. Do sound pretty good."

"You can cook, right?" They asked.

"Um. Yeah, actually." He frowned up at his friend (datemate?) curiously. "How did you. Uh. How?"

"Just a guess." They continued smiling, undeterred. "I can make ukha and blini. I think you'd like those the most."

Quietly, he admitted, "I do like fish." Then, a bit louder, he said, "Acqua pazza is, um. One of my favourites."

"We should swap meals sometime."

They gave his hand a squeeze and he was suddenly filled with the desire to — something. Burn them? Kiss them? His added heat didn't bother them, at least, and soon they had to pull away in order to gather their food.

For some reason, as he collected his own food, he thought back to that dream he had. Of him and Petel standing on the beach, hand-in-hand. And he wished, desperately, to swim in that salty sea with his datemate. To wade with them for days and discolour their bodies.

He forgot all about the maggots in his food until he bit right into one.

Right. Of course.

That was why he searched first, never trusted blindly before eating.

"Hey, Vektor." Levy said in greeting, loud enough to break Dante out of his disgust. Vektor sat down with them, his own tray of food in hand, having somehow taken more time than Dante and Petel to arrive. "What took you? Making out with your secret mate?"

"My friendship with Jonathan is no secret." He said, smoothly ignoring Levy's obvious bait. "Have you lot heard of the squabble between Blanche and Fisherman?"

"Ten to one Fisherman will admit her feelings before the end of the year." Paige said.

"We've been caught in the argument between them longer than you'd think." Frank explained.

Vektor frowned at them, as did Levy, then went about examining his meal. Sonya gave him a friendly nudge and said, "Never get tired of doing that, huh?"

"Of course not." Vektor said, offering up a sly sort of smile in response. An intriguing expression. One Dante recognised as Levy, but also maybe Frank? Or Paige, perhaps. He set aside the bite he was dissecting currently, only for Vektor to then point right at the wriggling maggot it contained. "Though it shall never be as interesting as Inferno's, I'm afraid."

Dante held his breath as the rest of the table directed their attention to the maggot. He was too late. He couldn't stop thinking on it.

And by their reactions, they could all see it, too.

Paige leapt back with a yelp. "Bloody gross."

Frank also stood and backed away a few steps, shouting, "Ew, what the heck?"

Horried, Levy dug through his own food in search of more. Sonya stared at the wriggling thing, mystified, while Petel glared at it. Vektor sat back to observe, far too content with his transgression. He knew exactly what he was doing. Heat flared up Dante's throat and he held up his hands, placating. "It's okay." He said. "It's not — There's nothing—"

"That is not okay." Paige said, grabbing up Dante's tray with a fury that could rival the depths of Hell. "I can't believe — the whole of the cafeteria staff should know better than this. This needs to be brought to the Headmistress' attention."

She sped off towards the kitchen area. There'd be no convincing her otherwise. Things were veering too far off, Dante had to distract. Had to use that code to keep everyone from causing a fuss. Levy, finished tearing apart his food and having found nothing, said to Sonya, "You're going to have to rip open my guts and see if I ate any by accident."

"One, ew. No." Sonya said, frowning at Levy and knocked out of his fascination with the maggot. "Two, you would've noticed had you eaten any."

Frank sat back down, staring after Paige as she talked with the most confused-looking Mister Locke. Dante let out a soft breath and mumbled, "They do have a pretty distinct squish."

Frank's head whipped around to him. "You ate one?" He asked, eyes wide in disbelief.

At Dante's nod, both Frank and Levy shuddered. A resolute sort of upset took over Petel as well and they stood to join Paige's side. Mister Williams and Mister Schmidt joined Mister Locke, all of them puzzling over the state of Dante's food. They pulled out more maggots and a few rotten bits. He could tell even from here. He couldn't suppress any of it now that it'd been noticed.

Dread gripped him and he took a quick stock of the rest of the cafeteria. There was Fiamma, watching the spectacle in some twisted contentment. She raised a hand to wave at him, showing off the trailing black strings dripping from her fingertips.

"Why not explain what's happening, Inferno?"

Vektor's sudden voice made Dante jump. He righted himself with a shaky, "H-Huh?"

Vektor stared at him, a very odd expression on his face. It wasn't quite Levy's mischievousness nor was it quite Petel's imploring. It was something new, something his own. Levy deflated and gave a woeful, "I can't eat anymore. G'night, mates."

"Night." Frank said in sympathy.

"Feel better." Sonya said, concerned.

Levy gave a weak wave, dumped his tray in the trash, then left the cafeteria. Ian and Jonathan, sitting at the same table with Fiamma, watched as Levy went. Her hands had marks. She had the strings. Dante shot to his feet, making Frank and Sonya flinch in surprise. Vektor simply frowned, growing confused.

He had to get out. He had to get away. He'd lost control.

"I-I forgot. Schoolwork." He managed to lie.

Frank let his head loll back as he groaned, "Ugh, that reminds me, I've still got some Chem questions on the worksheet."

"Are you running away?" Vektor asked.

Instead of answering, Dante hurried out. Out of the cafeteria, out of the room, out from under all those prying eyes.

Eyes brought attention. Attention brought rules.

Rules brought shadows.

Shadows, which would drag him away and down into Hell.

Shadows, which came like puppets from the strings dangling from Fiamma's fingers.

Outside was dark. Late in the evening. Cool in the early spring.

Dante barely made it in-between the main building and the dormitory before their whispering reached him.

He skidded to a stop on the dirt path, looking around him frantically. In a neat circle, just like his fires, the shadows pooled and grew. They melted up from the darkness, surrounding him with their bleeding limbs and stapled grins.

They fed off his fear.

He was always afraid.

He deserved this.

They hissed at him with their silent voices, booming in his ears and making him wince. He raised his hands, trying to block them out, but they tore directly into his head with an overwhelming presence.

Broken rules. Broken rules.

He broke the rules.

A spark of heat lit up in his chest, a momentary slip of his mind. Self-preservation. He smothered it out quickly, saying instead, "Don't — Don't do this. You can't — not yet."

Broken rules, they continued chanting.

Their silent voices only grew louder as they closed in, splaying their tendrils against his face, his skin. Again, fire crept up his throat. They sizzled as it fought to pour from his mouth.

He couldn't. Not again. That would just break more rules.

Several of their strings wrapped around his throat, like wires, and squeezed.

He'd lose his head.

"Dante!"

Then there was nothing and the night was quiet once more.

He could breathe again.

That was Vektor's voice.

There was no time to look or even refocus on the world around him as his knees gave out and he collapsed, dry heaving smoke and embers which refused to be swallowed down. He may have smothered his fire successfully, but it certainly wasn't happy about it.

"Easy now, Dante." Vektor said, his voice low and comforting. He sounded close, had a hand on Dante's back rubbing in a soothing manner, and his eyes glowed bright in the darkness. "Let it flow. Let it run its course."

His magic did wonders in settling the flames sizzling against Dante's throat. Once the smoke stopped pouring out and his breath was clear, Vektor then helped him up to his feet. The Prince stared directly at him, eyes still glowing. Expression completely serious. It was enough to make Dante shy away, reminded of the home and life he would never return to after this.

He should be grateful. Thanking Vektor would be the correct action here.

What he ended up saying, however, was, "You called me by name."

"They would have responded favourably to your designation." Vektor reminded him.

"Why did you do that?" He asked next.

Heat flooded in once more, this time gathering in his hands. He had to close his fists to keep the embers contained. Frowning in bemusement, Vektor asked in return, "Did you wish for them to carry out their punishment protocol?"

"You brought them upon me to begin with." Dante rose to a shout, having to expel this heat in some way. "You brought attention — You broke the rules."

Even more confused, Vektor said, "I was simply following your lead. Unless, you no longer wish to be truthful to everyone about your own warping?"

He was only a learning program.

He was doing his best.

All of that anger left and Dante exhaled a huff of steam. "I. I have to do it myself, Vektor. Otherwise."

"Punishment." Vektor nodded along, glancing around them as a show of his understanding. "My apologies, then, Inferno. I did not mean to cause you such distress."

"It's. It's okay." Dante assured him. "You were. Just doing what we taught you."

"Will you be alright in returning to your room?" Vektor asked, sincerely concerned. "I can walk with you if you'd like. Ravenell and the others are still discussing that issue of yours with the staff."

He really was trying his best, though his phrasing made Dante wince. "Thank you, Vektor." He said simply.

He allowed the Prince to lead the way, just like in the game. He was a bit wobbly on his feet. Vektor's healing was the only reason he was able to stand in the first place. As they stepped inside the dormitory, Vektor said, "So, as I understand it, you would not like me to inform our friends that their efforts over this whole business are fruitless. Is that correct?"

"M-Maybe not that far." Dante said. He took the lead now, heading straight for his room. "I'd rather they not bother with something that can't be helped."

Giving a nod, Vektor said, "I shall inform them, then. Later, of course."

They reached Dante's room and, before Vektor could depart, Dante started, "Oh, Vektor. Um."

He gestured to his face, his neck, hoping that conveyed what he meant. Though confused, Vektor said, "The residual marks of the shadows? Of course, they're invisible to all without the sight for it."

Relief and annoyance in equal measures helped Dante relax. "Thanks." He said again.

Vektor took his leave and Dante sat down on his own bed, drawing his knees to his chest. His lavender blanket sat bunched up against the wall from earlier and he placed his hand on it, stroking its softness for some comfort. The seaweed green one was retired, folded up neatly with his three friends at the back of his drawer. He had yet to decide on whether to burn the thing or simply take it home and stuff it away in his room.

His heat burned them.

The sudden thought came to him, made him uncurl from his position. In the game, too, he kept the Tormented at a distance with his flames.

Perhaps he could persuade his fears to leave a fire well enough alone.

Perhaps, were he more in control, he could use this fire to his advantage more often.

Petel could be right. He had power. Why not put his core argument to better use?

He raised a hand and lit up a small flame in his palm. It danced and glowed, but weakly. It was still upset with his earlier actions.

He snuffed it out, dashing away those thoughts. No, there was no way he could do any of that at his current level of control. There would only be destruction and pain were he to grab for his freedom with such a hasty plan.

It wasn't too long later when Petel returned for the night. After washing up, the two of them sat cuddled up on Dante's bed and fell easily into dozing. Petel's colder temperature was comforting, almost a balm on his own overheated existence.

Petel was his datemate now.

They really were dating.

And he knew how exactly to utilise his own coding against them.

Not that he would anymore. He had to tell the truth now.

Petel — and everyone — deserved the truth.

The shadows really would take his head at this rate.

His dreams were plagued by stress, by the building failures of his own hands. Waking up to see Petel there with him seemed to make all of it fade into the recesses of his mind, however. He pressed his forehead to theirs tenderly, then headed for breakfast after getting ready for the day. Somehow, the intimacy of it served to fluster him more than any of their kisses.

Getting their food was all good and normal, though with the added embarrassment of Mister Locke apologising for yesterday. The poor man had nothing to feel sorry for and yet he was made to feel it was his failing that caused this. Dante did his best to reassure him and hurried over to sit with Paige and the rest.

As they took their seats, Frank waved to them with a jovial, "Morning, you two."

Levy, in contrast, paled at their arrival. "Please tell me there's no more maggots. I just finished eating."

"You didn't have any in your meal yesterday." Sonya said, trying to reassure him.

"I'm sure the problem's solved." Paige said, grinning in satisfaction. "Only one way to find out for sure, though."

Vektor gave Dante a curious look. An inquiry, really. Dante couldn't quite get himself to speak up, to say anything, so he simply cut open his pancakes, located the first maggot he could, and pulled it out for everyone to see.

The chaos was immediate, Paige shouting, "Are you bloody kidding me?"

"So it didn't work." Petel said, narrowing their eyes at it once again.

"It's. Um." Dante said, breaking in before they could grow too upset. "It's not — It can't be changed. Look."

With an ease of all his previous practice, he pulled out several more maggots and a few rotten bits to add to the pile. All while his friends watched on. Vektor nodded appreciatively, saying, "Good show, Inferno."

"How is this possible?" Paige asked, slowly sitting back down. Acceptance crept into her tone. She had no other choice, after all.

"It only affects you. Is that what you're saying?" Levy asked.

Dante confirmed with a succinct, "I told you. I walked into Hell a long time ago."

"And you've been living with this ever since." Petel said lowly.

"That kinda sucks. And explains why you eat the way you do." Frank said.

Levy raised his hands into the air, making a kneading motion, as he yowled, "Then I lost my guts yesterday for nothing."

"You actually went and threw up after that?" Sonya asked, growing concerned.

Levy deflated onto the table, drawing Frank and Petel's concern as well. Shaking her head, Paige said, "It's still not right. Someone should be able to do something about this."

"We made it through Hell." Petel assured her. They turned to Dante next and their steady gaze was a comfort all on its own. "We can help you through this, too."

He had friends now. He had the adequate support.

He wanted to stop forcing that distraction onto all of them.

Nodding in reply, he gave Petel's shoulder a gentle nudge with his own. They relaxed into a smile and breakfast continued on with everyone wondering over the logistics of Dante's peculiarities, worries over their classes, and discussion over when to start the next level of the game. Frank's birthday was coming up and they all decided it was best to wait until after that party.

"There's something else that's very important for Dante and I to do first, too." Petel told everyone.

That was news to him. "There is?" He asked.

Petel grinned at him and said, "We have to go on an official date."

The rest of the table seemed in agreement instantly. Even Vektor. Dante, however, blurted out his most pressing thought: "There are unofficial dates?"

Chapter 20: To Burn and Mark

Apparently, Dante had a lot to learn about this whole business of dating.

"That trip to the fair. That was a date in their mind." He explained in rapid-fire Italian to his three trusty companions.

Fiero, Oscura, and Regnita all sat on his bed, freed from their hiding place at the back of his drawer for the moment. They were good choices to turn to when he had something big like this. And when he had time to do it, when others wouldn't shatter his illusion.

"But I didn't know it, so now's our first official date. I guess." He paused in his pacing to face them, settling on Fiero first. "So. What do you think I should do?"

The lion plush had a beautiful mane of reds and golds, like fire, and suggested in their squeaky little voice, "Pretend you no longer speak English. Make up a whole new language."

"There's not enough time for that." Dante said. Oscura nodded approvingly.

"Going on a date at all is a waste of time." She pointed out. The white rabbit's ears were droopy, a bit worn at their joints where they were stitched to her head, and her little puff ball tail was flattened oddly from being hidden away for so long. "Tell them you'd prefer studying instead. Then at least you can pretend like you're doing something worthwhile."

Dante frowned, though gave an agreeable, "That might work best."

"But that's no way to treat your datemate. They'll be upset if you up and change plans like that." Regnita protested. Her blonde ringlets and regal red dress were also flattened a bit, but her porcelain skin and glass brown eyes were in perfect condition. The crown atop her head was a bit chipped and the glue keeping it there was visible. "What sort of boyfriend would you be doing such a thing?"

Guilt brought Dante's mood down further, though he'd done nothing worthy of that yet. "Then. Movie it is." He said, resigning himself to this.

"Fizz! Theatres have fizz." Fiero cheered.

"At least sugar gives you the energy to work." Oscura mumbled.

"Dark environment, romantic movie. Sounds like a perfect setting." Regnita cooed.

Dante wasn't sure which movies were out, much less which one Petel planned for them to see. Reacting to that thought, Fiero said, "Horror flick. One about pasta and octopi."

"The shortest one." Oscura countered. "The less time away from your work, the better."

"You know my input." Regnita said.

Dante sighed. "It's not up to me. I have to ask them what it is."

"Communication is important." Regnita reminded him.

"This is such a waste of time." Oscura complained.

"You're going to have fun." Fiero assured him. "You really like this one."

That made a nervous warmth spark up in his chest. He did like Petel. That was very true. He moved in to give Fiero's head a pat, saying, "I really don't want to screw this up."

"You're not the one at fault for this." Fiero reminded him.

"Don't lie. Everything lands back on him." Oscura argued. "Cushioning the blow now simply complicates things in the future."

"Some of it does stem from your involvement. But you had no choice to begin with." Regnita conceded.

The three of them could never agree. That was why their counsel was so useful. Easier than falling back on drawing up a tea party for his old friends, that was for sure.

Those friends were no longer safe to call upon, judging by the marks left on his face, the whispers of their grip around his neck.

Dante gathered the three toys into his arms as the door to the room opened. "Dante." Paige called, entering grandly with Petel behind her. Dante yelped and fell against his bed in some attempt to get out of her way, having to hold up his toys in order to not squish them. "Get ready for — oh, sorry. Didn't mean to startle you."

She plopped down next to him onto the bed while Petel sat on their own across from them. Dante sat up properly, arranging Fiero, Oscura, and Regnita carefully next to him and said to Paige, "How, um. R-Ready for what?"

"I was gonna offer to help you get ready for your date, since I helped out Petel." She gestured to the wolf, who perked up proudly. They wore black lipstick and had eyeliner, emphasizing the blueness of their eyes. A nice touch. She returned her attention to him and gestured to his dress with a smile. "But you seem to have that handled. And, I'm more interested in what'cha got there."

"I didn't know you had toys here." Petel joined in.

Dante pulled the three toys closer to his side, then drooped in defeat. No use trying to hide them now. "They're, uh. Gifts. From my grandparents." He explained.

"Aww, that's cute." Paige cooed.

"May we look at them? Or would you prefer us not to?" Petel asked.

It was too late anyway. They were just toys once more, nothing special. Slowly, he pulled Regnita over first. "This is — uh. This is Regnita." He handed the doll to Paige for her to examine, then picked up Oscura next. "And. This is Oscura." He handed her to Petel, then he set Fiero in his own lap. "And this. This one's Fiero."

"You have names for all of them." Paige said, marvelling over Regnita's curls and the fine stitching of her dress.

Petel turned Oscura over in their hands, contemplating something. Finally, they said, "Little Queen. Dark sound. And a fire."

Paige frowned at them, puzzled. Dante snapped his gaze instantly to them and said, "They're not — um. That's not really correct, they're childish names."

Understanding dawned on Paige and she smirked at Petel. "Trying to impress your boyfriend over there?"

"Maybe a little." Petel admitted, smiling. They swapped Oscura for Regnita with Paige and took their time looking over the doll as Paige played a bit with the rabbit, flopping her ears and patting her body. "But I am right about these referring to you and your parents. Aren't I?"

They turned those piercing, knowing eyes on Dante and he had no choice but to tell the truth. "My mother. Uh, th-they called her Conglietta. M-My grandparents, I mean. It means 'little rabbit'."

Paige hummed in recognition as Petel continued examining Regnita. "And you said your father's a Queen." She noted.

Dante nodded in affirmation, running his fingers through Fiero's mane to keep himself busy. It was always in threes. Him, his mother, his father. Fiero, Oscura, Regnita. Hell, the shadows, Inferno.

Curiosity. Creativity. Fear.

Petel stood and handed Regnita over to Dante, saying, "Thank you for telling us about them."

"Yes, and for letting us see them." Paige added, smiling brightly.

Dante pulled his head out of that moment and accepted Regnita, then Oscura, and placed the three back into their hiding place at the very back of his drawer. "It's, um. You're, uh, welcome." He said for lack of anything better.

When he stood up straight and smoothed out his dress, Petel gave an appreciative, "You look cute."

He ducked his head as heat fought its way up to his face, insistent in its burning. "You — Your makeup l-looks good. Like a wolf."

Petel chuckled, pleased. "Thanks."

"You two are still incomprehensible." Paige said from the sidelines. She smiled, though, and stood as she next said, "But, hey. It works for you, so who am I to judge? Enjoy your date."

She waved and they chorused their parting as she left. Then Petel turned to Dante and asked, "Ready to go?"

There were so many ways he could get out of this. So many ways to activate his coding, to brush Petel off, to convince them to choose someone else.

He was dangerous. He was fire and burning and fear.

He really liked Petel. He wanted this wolf to lose all control and consume him, blood and bones and all.

He took Petel's hand and nodded. They seemed pleased again (and Dante could practically see their wagging tail, their perked up ears) and they headed out together. He showed Officer Riviera their off-campus passes as they walked out the gate. The Officer seemed amused and said, "Be back before dark, you two."

Petel nodded in affirmation and Dante hurried them along before the Officer could ask them anything. No one really needed to wonder what he was doing with these passes or how he'd secured them in the first place. Everyone just assumed he did the same thing as Abraham, flexing his parents' influence, and that was right enough anyway.

He and Petel walked along the path of trees leading away from the Boarding School and towards the rest of the city. Spring had kicked into full force, the trees flush with green leaves and the carefully tailored flowers along the path in full bloom. He might not have known their species, but their pretty whites with black centres were eye-catching. He reached out to touch their silky petals, their waxy leaves, and was surprised by how solid they were. For some reason, he expected to pass through them, like in the White Forest.

"The theatre's not too far from here." Petel said, breaking the silence and catching Dante off-guard. He met their intense, gentle gaze as they asked, "Wanna walk? We can also take the sub or something."

He asked, "How long would it take? Will we be, um, late for the movie?"

"We've got time." Petel assured him.

They would know best, having picked the venue. Dante said, "What, um. I-I haven't seen a movie in a long time."

"I chose one that looked interesting." Petel said with a chuckle. "I asked Paige, Ian, and Levy for suggestions. It's some kind of thriller, takes place during the events leading up to the Great War."

Though he wasn't sure what a thriller entailed, he wasn't surprised at all that had been Petel's choice. Smiling a bit, he said, "I don't mind the walk."

"Walk it is, then."

They chuckled and nudged him playfully with their shoulder. A very familiar, very comforting gesture by this point. It made him warm, like a pleasant fireplace.

"Shouldn't have gone with the lipstick." Petel mumbled after a minute.

Dante looked over at them with a confused, "Why not? I-I think it looks good."

"Can't touch anything without getting it everywhere, even with sealer." Petel explained. He hadn't thought of that, either. Smiling lop-sidedly, they said, "Thanks, though. You're very cute today."

Giggling a bit, Dante said, "I think you mentioned that already."

"It bears repeating."

"Am I cute enough to eat up?"

He broke into genuine laughter at his own little joke. That shouldn't have made him laugh so hard. Petel smiled along, adding to it with a mischievous, "Always." After a brief pause, they asked, "Why dresses, anyway?"

Dante gave a dumb, "Huh?"

"You wear the dress uniform, too." Petel pointed out. "Aren't they harder to move around in? I hated running in the one I had to wear for fancy occasions."

The question registered in his mind and Dante brightened at the tidbit he could share. "Dresses are pretty." He said. "My mother — she, um, always got them for me because they're, uh, elegant."

Petel hummed briefly, then said, "You do look elegant."

The two of them continued laughing about dumb things until they reached the theatre. It was right at the edges of the city, for some reason, and was fairly busy despite its odd placement. The movie was called, 'Assassination Machinations', which sounded very thrilling indeed. Petel bought the tickets and Dante insisted on buying the snacks. "I'm the one who wants a fizz." He pointed out.

"Why do you like fizz so much?" Petel asked.

They ordered a popcorn and a water for themselves while Dante got a candy bar and a fizz. As he paid, he shrugged and quietly admitted, "My parents. They didn't r-really let me eat, uh. Junk food l-like this."

Petel hummed thoughtfully. "Seems to be a common trend in rich families."

"B-But! Um." He fumbled with his words, having started too strong and needing to dial that energy back. Lest he draw in the—

No. He wouldn't deem them with thought. Not today.

"I, uh. I really like the carbonation. The bubbles and fizzles make me feel like. Um, like it's t-tickling inside."

He frowned in distaste, not quite having the words to explain it properly. Petel seemed interested, at least. "Tickling, huh?" They mused. "I've never tried it, but it sounds neat."

"Why do you like hot drinks?" He asked after a moment of awkward silence. "Aren't they. Um. Hot?"

Petel laughed and the two of them gathered their things, then went to their theatre. They were a bit early, but there were still a good amount of people already sitting inside. Petel gestured for him to choose the seats, so he settled somewhere in the middle row. Squished in, so there'd be less of a chance he'd panic and run.

He did his best not to give them form, but he heard them slithering through the air anyway. The winged serpents were always his go-to nervous creations.

"I like hot things." Petel said, finally answering the question. And catching Dante off-guard yet again. "Would be weird if I didn't, since I said I could eat you."

They winked, then chuckled in embarrassment. He ended up laughing along, saying, "I think. We're both very weird."

"Agreed."

The two of them settled into their seats, munching on their snacks while waiting for the movie to start. When the room darkened ominously, Petel assured him this meant the start. But it took a few trailers of upcoming films for him to realise they still had a handful of minutes. There was one about a dog that promised to be very sad, another was definitely more horror-adjacent and he couldn't help being awed by what little of the creature design it showed, then there were a few others that didn't catch his interest.

He wondered what it might be like for his parents to sign away their lives for a movie. Lietta kept a memoir of her life and Caro had so many stories from before he met her. Perhaps it was best they kept their lives to themselves, but Dante couldn't help but wonder. Couldn't help being curious.

Once the actual movie started, he pulled himself out of those thoughts. The overdramatic retelling of the events leading up to the assassination which sparked the conflict all over the world, with as many creative liberties taken as possible, was far less interesting than Abraham's play, however. The whole thing was already so ridiculous, why stretch it out to absurdity? Dante missed the musicality of Abraham's play, as well as the romantic aspect, surprisingly. This movie seemed more intent on shocking the viewer with twists that were far too obvious to anyone who had a modicum of knowledge about the history than exploring any of the players it had set up.

Oh, wait. Wasn't this a date? Was it a bad thing that he wasn't enjoying the movie? Did that mean the date was a bust? But he'd been having fun with Petel until now.

He glanced over at his datemate and couldn't say he wasn't enjoying himself. The movie couldn't hold his interest, but the darkness of the room, the proximity of the wolf, being away from the Boarding School for a bit; it was all still nice.

After the credits rolled and the two of them were standing just outside the theatre, in the chill of the late afternoon, Petel gave a blunt, "That really sucked."

Again, Dante laughed out of pure relief. "I-I'm glad it wasn't just me." He managed to get out.

"That was the equivalent of a merry-go-round. No thrills at all." They went on. "I'm complaining to Levy once we get back. That movie was awful."

They took Dante's hand as they started back. He was a little too caught on the hilarity of the situation to do much else besides go along with the wolf and giggle. So the movie had been bad; so what? Petel didn't seem to take that as a sign of failure. The two of them were still having fun. Relief couldn't begin to describe how much easier he was breathing at this revelation.

"Sorry about the shitty movie." Petel said after a minute, once Dante's giggles had died down. "Hopefully, you still had a good time."

He nodded, saying, "You make me feel safe."

They paused, their expression of concern turning to confusion. "You said that before, too."

"Well. Um." He took a deep breath, then looked up to meet Petel's eyes directly. "Being with you. It's nice. I really feel that — that everything will turn out okay. That everything. It'll work out."

He smiled a bit shyly, embarrassed. Perhaps that was a bit too forward of him to say. Then again, nothing about this made sense. Petel smiled as well and said, quite simply, "I want you to burn me."

It was Dante's turn to blank. "Huh?"

"I said I could eat you." They said by way of explanation. When he remained confused, they went on, "It's desire. To consume, to own. I want you inside my lungs. So, of course, I want you to burn me as well."

He settled on frowning. "That doesn't sound right."

"I'm a wolf. You're a fire." They pointed out next. They paused in order to face him, their eyes intense with their passion. "Surely, you know the same desires. Fire consumes and owns, too. Fire marks whatever it touches forever."

They took one of his hands and pressed their lips to the back. Their lipstick made a mark, emphasizing their point. Quietly, Dante echoed, "Fire consumes and marks forever."

Petel's words clicked in his mind finally. It went against everything he had done so far in his life, of course. Giving in to that base reckless instinct to destroy and allow emotions to rule. This whole thing went against the careful control he lived in.

Perhaps it was time to grow unhinged. Perhaps it was time to cut ties to those fears which controlled him.

That decision made, he gave a nod and said, "If you wish to burn, then I'll be glad to supply the heat."

Petel's expression lit up in delight. Their tail and ears were nearly visible with their open expression. Dante pulled them in close, letting heat flood to his hands and head. Enough to steam in the early spring afternoon.

Petel couldn't feel fear. That was why they so doggedly pursued one as dangerous as him. This time, he couldn't think of that as such a bad thing.

Just as Petel left the lipstick mark on the back of his hand, he burned a light imprint against Petel's wrist. Nothing serious, nothing too damaging. Just enough to mark. To burn. The hiss of pain Petel gave was the price they paid. One they did so willingly, too, if the adoring look and gentle nuzzles Dante received as they continued on their way back to the Boarding School were any indication.

Undoubtedly, Petel's eyes were the most captivating thing in the world. Their wildness, their intense blue, the way they seemed to always snap to Dante no matter how crowded the room. He loved them the most. That they were just as captivated by him seemed too good to be true.

He watched this wonderful, mesmerising wolf and all that filled his head was the desire to burn them all the way down their throat.

Chapter 21: Fire Bites Back

His first order of business was to confront Yasha.

Vektor may have been impatient, but even he wouldn't argue with their waiting until after Frank's birthday to continue the game. Their Prince learned very well. Too well, really, considering that subtle shift in his priorities. But that was besides the point. Dante had no qualms with the computer program currently. He hadn't hurt Petel in the way this bully had. He made amends to the best of his capabilities, even if he didn't know the half of it.

No, that wasn't fair. Dante needed to treat the first as separate from Vektor. Possibly Vektoria as well. It was clear that Vektor had evolved into an entirely separate entity and Dante should respect that.

Catching Yasha alone seemed to be the hard part. Always, always at his side was Vladimir. The two were nigh inseparable, joking and laughing with one another like old and familiar friends. Like Niculaie and Damon, absorbed wholly in one another with no regard to their surroundings.

Dante was patient. He could sit back and observe, wait for his chance to strike. He was a Vicario, after all. Why deny that at this point?

It was indescribably freeing, this not giving the spectres any mind. The usual suspects still hung in the air, surrounded him, but he could force their distance by refusing to acknowledge them. Consequences were for a later date. Once his mind snapped out of this bold new direction where fear wasn't his first instinct.

He chose to sit outside Monday once the final bell rang while Petel no doubt went to their room. He'd have a good while to himself, a perfectly approachable and harmless beacon. Innocuous, even. He was so very good by this point at pretending to be less dangerous than he was.

As anticipated, Vladimir took the bait.

"How'd you manage it?" He asked as he approached.

Instead of answering the inquiry or getting confused and flustered, Dante met Vladimir's eyes directly and said, "I've been waiting for you."

The unexpected tripped Vladimir up. It was a deliberate show of this not being the conversation he expected. He squirmed a bit under Dante's gaze, his eyes darting from the school's main building to the open area leading to the front gate to Dante in uncertainty.

He had brown eyes. Completely normal brown eyes. Eyes Dante would have had if not for the whole Hell thing.

Slowly, Vladimir asked, "What do you mean, you were waiting for me?"

Dante bit back his admonishment. Don't ask stupid questions; they'd told him that time and time again to the point where he'd just resolved to stop talking altogether. Vladimir didn't need that. "You're curious about Petel's and my relationship." He said instead. "You're wondering if it's possible for you to have the same."

If Vladimir wasn't on edge before, he certainly was now. Everyone in this school owed their lack of danger recognition to Dante in one way or another. Still, he could amp it up to overwhelming. Force them to acknowledge him. He could force overflow, force change. It was his core argument. Vladimir recognised it, his whole body tensing as he took another quick assessment of how easy it was for him to run. "How—? What are you talking about?" He asked.

"I know a lot more about everyone here than I care to." Dante professed, smoothing out his skirt over his lap. The texture beneath his fingers was calming, kept him grounded. Kept him human, not fire. "Like how you, Vladimir Russell, are taken by your closest childhood friend, Yasha Ivanovich."

Vladimir's face instantly coloured in his embarrassment. "Don't — not out loud!" He protested.

"I don't have the advice for you that you were hoping to get." Dante continued, standing to his feet. "You could be upfront and truthful, but it might backfire. Seeing as he's a bit preoccupied with my datemate."

Saying it aloud, to someone not in his close knit group of friends, was odd. A weird taste in his mouth. He'd like getting used to that. Vladimir's shoulders bunched up to his ears and he tried next for an incredulous, "I don't — that's not — Yasha and I are just friends."

"Which is why you approached me with the intent to ask after how Petel and I ended up together." Dante said with a roll of his eyes. The jab worked as intended, making Vladimir flinch back in shame. "I'm not stupid. Just because I myself held no romantic inclinations doesn't mean I can't tell when they're present. Especially when they're as obvious as yours or Yasha's."

Though, to be fair, Yasha was much more difficult to figure out, what with how intense that bullying got. A conflict in coding, maybe, like Abraham and Niculaie had. Dante had to put a stop to that. Vladimir assessed the fire before him, expression steeling over, before he finally relaxed. "And here I thought Fireball was an ill-fitting nickname for a timid chap like you."

"I'm not here to be patronised." Dante snapped. It was better than being praised for his status as a Vicario, but not by much. Vladimir flinched again and Dante did his best to train that annoyance out of his tone. "Sorry. I'm here to request that you allow me the chance to speak with Yasha alone."

Vladimir frowned, growing suspicious. "You need to speak with him alone?"

"He needs to know that nothing will protect him from my wrath." Dante explained bluntly. "I've no doubt you'd burn yourself in your attempts to shield him if you were present, which would in turn damper my meaning and not convey the proper message were he to face me on his own."

"You can't just — I wouldn't automatically — are you planning on threatening him?" Vladimir asked, stuck between protesting two things. Concern for his friend, it seemed, won out in the end.

Predictable. Dante could work with that. "Yes."

"What the hell? Why are you going to threaten my friend?"

"He may be your friend, but he could really take it up the ass as far as I'm concerned." Dante said flatly. "He's thrown Petel, my friend, in the dumpster numerous times. His actions towards Petel are nothing short of harassment. I feel that my escalation is the only appropriate response in the face of such abuse."

Vladimir had the presence of mind to look appropriately guilty there. "Okay. Warranted." He conceded. "Still. You can't just expect me to allow you to do that to my friend."

"It needs to be scared out of him." Dante insisted. "If you want any chance of him accepting your feelings, then he needs to be dissuaded from his obsession with Petel. Besides, you should owe us this much for constantly assisting him. He'll no doubt grow more violent over my dating Petel."

"He wouldn't do anything specifically just 'cause you and Petel are dating." Vladimir protested weakly.

Dante shook his head, undeterred. "He's proven already that he's willing to be petty. No one wants to admit to it, but hate is petty and love pettier."

That seemed to finally unsettle Vladimir again. "Love? I, uh. I think you might be mistaken there."

He was going to play ignorant, then. "Denial won't save you from the facts." Dante said. Using those words wasn't ideal, but they held true no matter how much the taste of them made his skin crawl. "You can either accept that Yasha's unhealthy obsession was born out of romantic nature or you can keep pretending like you don't understand it to save yourself the heartache, but the truth remains unchanged."

Vladimir glanced behind himself, searching for an escape route once again. He couldn't really blame Vladimir on that one. Harsh truths were just as valid to run from as the fire looming dangerously before him. "How do you even know all this?" Vladimir asked in the end, deciding against running.

That was a much easier explanation. "I am a Vicario. Whether I want it or not, I am cursed with knowledge."

Vladimir grimaced, which was also fair. Dante hated that he had to live with this. Making use of it now was a small consolation for the years he spent cowering.

"Ruin will come for me. I'm aware of the consequences for what I've done." He said next, as if explaining his own fate might dampen some of that bitterness. "But I'll pay that toll after I've made sure Petel will be okay."

Vladimir met his steady gaze, searching for something in there. A shred of humanity, perhaps. The last sign that Dante wasn't simply fire wearing a human skin, maybe. Whatever he found, it made him smile tiredly. "You really do love them, huh?"

Or, perhaps, it was simpler than Dante's assumptions. He ducked his head a moment, then met Vladimir's gaze with a strong, "More than I ever expected to."

"Fine, then." Vladimir backed down, raising his hands in a nervous shrug. "Just ask Yasha to meet you where you wanna have that talk. He may be afraid of you, but he'll agree just to save face."

"Good to know." Dante said, cursing inwardly at how easy that ended up being.

"I ain't happy about it." Vladimir said quickly. "But, I can't deny, he does need a reality check. Especially with the two of you dating now."

Dante nodded in agreement. Transaction completed. He could enact his plan tomorrow during lunch, if Yasha really was that easy to get alone.

Something stalled him from walking away, however. Leaving Vladimir like this, it wouldn't be right.

Slowly, quietly, much less like the steam he charged forward on, Dante said, "I may not, um. Know much about romance — or, or even romantic emotions, but. Uh, you should t-talk with him. About how you feel."

Intrigued by this return to his usual meekness, as he should be, Vladimir asked, "Where'd all that confidence go, Fireball? You're not gonna make a good case to Yasha like that."

"You let me worry about that." Dante snapped, irritation flaring up his throat. "Right now, I'm trying to give you some advice. To make up for luring you in the way I did."

Vladimir laughed, finding amusement in his annoyance. "And what advice is that? You admitting you don't know much about dating?"

"Communication is the key to any relationship." Dante said, interjecting before he could get teased much more. "Understanding comes from communication. Talk to him about whatever's coiled up inside of you and it will bring you closer."

"Or it might break us apart." Vladimir said, being contrarian.

"Then he wasn't worth the time you put into him." Dante fired back.

Vladimir recoiled in shock. "How can you say that? He's my best friend."

"If he was truly, then communication should help you reach an understanding in your friendship." Dante said. "If you don't believe your friendship can survive such a small bump, then the one obstructing it is probably you, not him."

"It's not just a small bump, as you've called it." Vladimir continued protesting.

"The more you build it up in your own mind as an insurmountable obstacle, then the more power it holds over you." Dante said. "If you trust your friendship, your companion, then you'll find that they'll forgive a lot more than you'd expect as long as you tell them the truth. Take it from someone who's learned all this the hard way."

After a tense moment of silence, Vladimir turned away entirely. "Thanks for the advice. Good luck with your plan to threaten my best friend." He said.

As good as it was going to get. Smiling, Dante said, "I hope you and him can work out your feelings for each other."

"Please." Vladimir scoffed.

He walked off, unwilling to stick around. Dante pressed his hands to his chest and took deep, even breaths.

Him, his friends, his siblings. His resolve, his powers, his life.

One, two, three.

They couldn't exist without his say-so. They couldn't punish him as long as he assured himself this was allowed.

He was Change. He could change his rules.

Petel was right, there was no need to keep silencing himself when he was the one enforcing these ridiculous rules in the first place.

It went against everything he knew to cast aside his role as the distraction.

He was supposed to keep quiet unless absolutely necessary. Noise was unpleasant. Noise was distracting.

As long as he didn't give it any thought, they couldn't catch him for it.

The next day, he took the opportunity. Before even grabbing his food, he said to Petel, "I'll be back in a bit. I have something to take care of first."

Though confused, Petel gave an affirmative, "Okay."

Dante watched them reach the line, then surveyed the cafeteria quickly. Yasha arrived with the usual flow of students, in a heated debate with Vladimir. Perfect. Dante strode over to stop them and asked, "May I have a quick word with you, Ivanovich?"

Yasha bristled, panic clear in his face. Vladimir looked to his friend, curious to see his decision despite assuring Dante yesterday of his compliance. Yasha's eyes darted to Vladimir a moment, then he held himself taller and said, "Fine. If it's quick, it should be fine."

"Thank you."

Dante gestured for Yasha to follow, then walked out of the cafeteria. Surprisingly, Yasha followed. Without Vladimir, too. Dante led him to the side of the building, where there were no prying eyes. Right where the dumpsters were, in fact. As they drew towards them, Yasha grumbled loud enough for Dante to hear. "Can't believe I'm doing this. You better not make me your first victim, Fireball. My parents won't hesitate to go after even the Vicario Company itself, I've an important legacy to uphold, too, you know."

He was completely panicked. The poor idiot. Dante scrunched up his nose in distaste, but checked the area to make sure it was truly clear. No stragglers, no other witnesses. "You're not even close to the first." Dante assured him.

There was no one else around. Probably why Yasha chose it as the place to drag Petel off to each time. Dante could do this. He allowed his anger to rise to the surface, igniting his hair and spreading out of his hands. Yasha let out a scream, absolutely terrified and oh, what a satisfying sound.

"And you certainly won't be the last."

"I-I knew it. Y-You are — I was right! You're going to burn the whole school down!" Yasha shouted, pointing fearfully at Dante. He backed up against the wall; nowhere to run and still trying to present himself as the bigger threat.

"That's right." Dante said with a slow, careful nod. He had no idea if the flames flickered in his eyes while in this state, but he hoped they did. He was Hellfire given form and if that were to be the defining trait of his existence, then so be it. "And if you don't cease your mindless bullying of Petel, then you'll know just how much it hurts to have that knowledge."

"Y-You can't make me." Yasha protested, speaking much too quickly in his terror. "The Wolf and I — We share classes. Ones you're not a part of."

Dante gave a short hum to feign his thought process. "Then I guess I'll have to force your hand."

He took a step forward. One single, menacing step. Yasha pressed further against the wall, as if it might save him. "F-Force how?" He couldn't help but ask.

"If your body and soul are ash, then there's nothing you can do."

Dante extended a hand forward, flames dancing along his arm merrily. Yasha shouted impossibly faster, "No, no, no. You can't — you wouldn't — you'd be a killer!"

"Fire has no morality. Only the desire to burn."

"I don't want to die!" Yasha shrieked.

There. That was what Dante was looking for. Compliantly, he stepped back and lowered his arms, withdrawing the flames beneath his skin. Even his hair fell flat on his head, back to pretending it

wasn't fire. "You will never lay a hand or unkind remark upon Petel ever again." He demanded. "That's all I ask. In exchange, I will allow you to keep your life."

"Understood. I get it. I'll stop hunting the Wolf." Yasha promised.

"They are mine." Dante said, allowing this odd possessiveness to take him a moment. "Mine to burn. Mine to mark. I will reduce you to nothing should I hear that you've even spoken to them again."

"Okay. No talking. I won't even look the Wolf's way."

Yasha cowered before him, a trembling mess. Dante took one more step back, unpinning the sorry bully from the wall. "That's all I wanted to impart. I trust you'll take my words to heart."

Yasha sprinted away, only to pivot once he thought he was sufficiently out of range. "The whole school's learning about this. The Vicario name will be ruined if I have any say in it." He shouted.

Dante smiled bitterly, ruthlessly, and taunted him with a sing-song, "No one's going to believe you."

That only seemed to upset him more and he ran off, disappearing around the building. After a minute, Dante let out a whoosh of breath and collapsed to his knees on the ground. He'd get dirt all over his skirt, but he needed the time to collect himself.

That was reckless. This was too much. The fires thrummed in his head, grumpy at being contained.

He was so close to triggering another Inferno, just as he had at the market so many years ago.

Sudden clapping shattered the silence, making him bolt to his feet and search for the source.

"Fine show there, Fireball." Fiamma drawled, standing just beside the dumpster. She couldn't have been hiding there the whole time. There was no way. "So you can experience more than destruction. Gotta say, I never saw it coming."

The tips of her fingers were marred black. He glanced around for any shadows, but none had manifested yet. Somehow, that was worse. He gulped thickly, then stuttered out a weak, "I-I don't want to m-miss lunch."

"No, I suppose not." She taunted, grinning with that usual woodenness. "Perhaps I can lend a hand. I'd so hate to miss out myself."

He relit his flames at the exact moment he was surrounded. Shadows, shadows, all grinning their stapled grins with empty eyes. He tried to exude that danger he had inside himself, but his heart hammered in his chest at the thought of their fingers, their fingers, slithering down his throat or behind his eyeballs or even around his neck.

"Aww, where'd all that bravado go? Ain't got much when it's just you?" Fiamma asked, a faux sympathy in her cooing tone. Her smile gave her away, of course. Her woodenness gave her away.

"They're your friends, you know. How can you treat 'em so callously when they haven't had a chance to reconnect in so long?"

"D-Don't touch me." He shouted at them.

He was no stranger to blind panic. He knew exactly what he'd done to Yasha. This was all such a bad idea.

Being bold was for the fearless. Being cruel was for his parents.

"Relax." Fiamma said with a giggle.

The shadows swarmed and wrapped him up in their grasp, like ash and darkness and void. They snuffed out his fires and dragged him down into their puddle and her next words reverberated from seemingly yards away.

"Just take a deep breath, count to three, and return to where you truly belong."

Chapter 22: Hell in Every Sense of the Word

Dante never returned for lunch.

From the sounds of things, Dante had gone missing entirely. He was absent for his last classes, wasn't in the dorms when Petel finished Band, and that wasn't like him at all.

"He did tell you he'd be back, didn't he?" Paige said as they sat together at a table in the outside seating area. Frank, Vektor, Sonya, Levy, and Abraham were all too anxious to put this off for after supper. "Maybe what he had to do. Maybe it got him in trouble."

"You're the one who saw him punch out the Demon King." Abraham said agreeably.

"But why miss his classes, too?" Frank asked. "None of the teachers heard about any sort of punishment. At least, as far as I could gather."

"The only thing we've got is how Ivanovich was screaming about seeing him on fire." Sonya said with a subdued titter. "At first, I just thought he was mad, but if it's really true that Vicario's capable of such a thing."

He trailed off, too concerned to continue. Petel leaned against the table with a whimper. Based on all the things Dante feared, it was truly not something they could just brush off. Vektor seemed just as concerned as the rest of them, saying, "There's no way this is natural. Even considering Inferno's coding, he couldn't have purposefully done this."

The rest of the table nodded along, their mood sinking past grim into downright mourning. Except Levy, who frowned over at Vektor curiously. "Even considering his coding? What's that mean?"

"There's no way he burned himself." Paige protested. "We saw him — the fire. It doesn't hurt him."

Burns on his ankles. Something invisible about his nose. The thoughts struck Petel suddenly, even as Vektor said, "There's a lot more to Inferno than just fire, Navigator."

"We're talking about his powers existing in reality, Vektor," Frank noted with a touch of annoyance.

"As am I." Vektor fired back. When it seemed no one understood, he went on. "Perhaps I best explain. It's not something that comes across very well in either his person or profile. And, seeing as I have scanned the full extent of his framework and have been given permission to say—"

"Get to the point." Paige snapped.

Petel met Vektor's gaze directly and asked, "What have you been hiding now?"

"I wasn't hiding anything. Not without reason." Vektor said quickly, growing irritable himself. "Inferno's complications are a delicate matter. I fear, in actuality, that my pressing him may have caused this misfortune, considering our last interaction."

"Get to the point!" Frank shouted.

Vektor flinched at that and actually looked hurt for a moment. Which made Frank droop in guilt. Vektor's reflexes were faster than any of their own and he launched into his explanation. "Inferno suffers under his own set of rules tied to his Creation. Never speak too loudly, else the goblins will come for your toenails. Laughter is strictly forbidden while the pixies are present. Any mentions of the Truth to All Things is punishable by the immediate forfeiting of rights to a head and a heart. And so on and so forth."

Frank gave a bewildered, "Huh?"

"Forfeit his rights to his head and heart?" Paige questioned, alarmed.

A different detail caught Petel's attention. "Creation?" They asked. "Isn't that. That's what you called your magic, right?"

Vektor's face scrunched up in distaste. "Unfortunately, my powers are limited to mostly healing and standard attacks." That distaste faded and his tone became more subdued, more reverent. "Inferno, though. His powers are bound only by his own creativity."

Paige gasped. "That's — one of the curses. One of the curses he said he'd received from Hell, he said it was creativity." She rushed out.

"Curse is an apt name for it." Vektor commented.

"Do you remember the others?" Abraham asked as they all turned towards Paige now.

"Can this help us find him?" Sonya asked next.

They were all a bit desperate. They had all grown to love their fireball as a friend. Petel would find more pride in that if they weren't sick to their stomach right now. Thinking deeply, Paige's words came out slowly and carefully. "Curiosity. I think that was another one. Curiosity — and fear."

The whole of their table deflated. "Those are definitely Dante things." Frank said.

"The Creation is the most important." Vektor told them. "It's what allows him most of his powers to begin with. As long as Inferno believes it to be possible, then it will be frightfully real to him."

"Wait. Hang on." Levy interjected. "If he's making all this stuff up — literally — then how come no one's ever seen it before?"

"Fail-safe." Vektor replied instantly. "That's why the rules are in place. As long as Inferno keeps in line with them, his powers are invisible to the eyes of everyone else."

"Then. How come we saw those maggots?" Sonya questioned.

"I think. It's 'cause he believed we could, maybe?" Frank guessed.

"That, I cannot answer, unfortunately." Vektor said in resignation. "Those maggots seemed to have slightly different coding than Inferno's unique powers, so they might operate under different rules than those etched into his framework."

"But he was the one to make them." Paige stated.

She looked to Vektor for confirmation, who sighed tiredly. "Yes. Those were undoubtedly formed from his Creation."

"Is he gonna be okay?" Frank asked next, shrinking with a potent guilt. "You're telling us all this when it's supposed to be a secret. That's breaking the rules for him, isn't it?"

"Bruv, he's already missing." Levy pointed out. "As far as we know, something's already happened to him."

Frank hunched up even further, sniffing a bit in an attempt to keep himself from crying. Sonya shoved at Levy's shoulder and hissed, "Don't be insensitive."

"I'm just saying." Levy protested, raising his arms up in exasperation. "There's no use worrying over these weird rules when the worst could've happened by now."

Petel growled out a sudden and heated, "We're going to find him alive."

"Yes, of that I have no doubts." Vektor agreed, sitting upright with a renewed fervour. "Now, as to possible locations he could be—"

"We searched the whole school already." Frank protested, glaring at the Prince with tears in his eyes. "If he's not here — which we checked—"

"Do you think he would have run off outside of the school?" Abraham asked, just as concerned.

"That would certainly make it a lot harder to find him." Sonya said, deflating.

Vektor frowned at all of them, annoyance taking over him once more. "If you'd let me finish, I was about to suggest the Rabbit Hole."

They all stared back at him blankly. "He shouldn't be able to get in without Jonathan's or my help." Paige said.

"Though, true, none of us thought to check the towers." Abraham conceded.

"Why would you think he's in there?" Petel asked.

"Considering the intricacies of Inferno's coding, and that he's undeniably associated with the Seventh Circle, it's simply the most logical conclusion to come to."

Vektor nodded definitively and Petel hated that what he said made a lot of sense. Of course Dante would get sent back to Hell when things were at their best. Of course he wouldn't be able to shake off his trauma so easily when it continually drew him right back in.

It made so much sense that it was infuriating.

Petel stood and said, "Let's go."

"Right."

Paige stood as well, as did Frank and Abraham. Vektor got to his feet slower, as did Sonya and Levy. "You really think we'll find him inside that game somehow?" Sonya asked.

"Van Helsing's right. It's the one place none of us checked." Levy said.

Their group headed for the tower, Paige swiftly getting the doors open to allow everyone inside. They all crowded around the computer, even though Paige and Vektor were the only ones who had any chance of understanding it. And Dante, apparently, Dante could read that jumbled mess of information, too.

Petel frowned at the thought. Dante was connected to this whole thing. So, then, why didn't the wolf see it as a betrayal? Why couldn't they dig into this truth with their usual fervour? They loved Dante, but that didn't make them lose all sense. That didn't make the facts of the matter ring any less true.

Perhaps it was stifled by how Dante acted. As if he had no other choice but to lie, to pretend like the disconnected third party. Certainly, this made sense now with what was happening. There was real danger for him.

But then, what did it truly mean for him to be so connected?

"Oh, wow. I think that's actually him." Paige said, snapping Petel out of their thoughts.

They drew closer to her chair with an eager, "Really? Dante, Dante can you hear us?"

They all waited a moment with no response. A quick survey of the room showed that all of the scanners were open, inactive, which was a little chilling. Paige frowned and mumbled, "The signature's odd. And if he can't hear us—"

"Of course!" Vektor exclaimed. He stepped away and pulled out his phone, his ecstatic mood a stark contrast to the situation they found themselves in. "Jonathan — we have to get Jonathan's help."

"Jonathan?" Petel questioned, scrunching up their nose.

"He gave you his number." Frank said, quiet in his awe.

Sonya and Levy shared a short look as Vektor made the call, then Sonya said, "If he's inside the game and you can't reach him from out here, perhaps you should send us inside to check on him."

"Excellent idea, Ravenell." Abraham said with a grin. He strode over to one of the outer scanners as he continued. "I, for one, would very much appreciate getting to see our friend in order to quell our worries."

"Oh, me, too."

Frank hopped over to another scanner and Paige sighed. "Sure, I can do that. Looks like we might not have to get Jonathan involved at all."

"It would still be nice to have a better understanding of things." Vektor said. Then he resumed speaking into his phone. "Yes, we need your assistance. If you please, meet me at your tower. There seems to have been a mishap involving your system and our friend."

He strode out of the tower, too focused to properly explain more to them. Levy said, "I'm gonna go with him, mates. Just in case."

"Keep us informed." Frank called.

"I'd like to go into the game with you all." Sonya said as Levy zipped out after Vektor.

Petel smiled at their dear friend, then nodded to Paige. "Load me in as well."

"Okay, okay." She shook her head at them, already busily typing away. Sonya went to one of the free scanners and Petel took the last, relieved as the doors closed them in. "Let me know how he is once you find him. Oh, I'm loading everyone into the fourth checkpoint of the Seventh Circle, Dante's between that one and the third. He's moving pretty fast, so you should see him once he arrives."

Her nervous babble faded as the floor dropped Petel into the void. Once they landed on their more wolf-like feet, inside the checkpoint, they could breathe just a bit easier. Frank, Abraham, and Sonya loaded in with them, all experiencing a similar sort of relief.

Sonya, true to Vektor's word when they first met, had the wings and plumage of a crow, as well as the sharp talons and a fitting beak. There were feathers in his hair, fluffing it up and making him more bird-like. Similar to Petel, he only had shorts, which were black and would have blended in with the feathers covering his body if not for their iridescence, which made him look quite realistic.

"Any enemies to worry about, Paige?" Abraham called up.

"No, AIR's not spawned anything yet." She replied. Sonya jumped at the sound of her voice echoing above them, distracted from examining himself. "If you want to catch Dante, also, you should get out there. He's almost reached you."

"I'm impressed he knows his way around enough to stick close to the checkpoints." Abraham said in a mumble.

Petel gave their friend an encouraging nudge, then leapt out of the checkpoint and onto the path. The moment they exited, they understood exactly how Dante could stick closer to it than expected; the

ground seemed to have a glow to it, leading off towards what was undoubtedly the next checkpoint. Was this what Vektor could see all the time?

"Now this is fascinating." Abraham noted as he and Frank looked over the same thing. "I suppose it's in place in case we ever needed to retread our steps through a completed level?"

"Why would that ever come up, though?" Frank asked. "It's not like we'd ever need to grind for levels. The story's pretty straightforward."

At the same time as Dante ran into view, looking a bit disgruntled and pretty enraged if the threateningly high fires were anything to go by, Levy emerged from the checkpoint with a soft, "Woah. So this is what it's really like."

"Levy?" Sonya questioned loudly.

Dante, too, gave a startled and loud shout. Frank and Abraham rushed to his side and he had to genuinely take a moment to relax, to ease the viciousness of his fires. Sonya and Levy crowded over as well and Petel went along, just glad to see their boyfriend unharmed.

Levy wore a tight black bodysuit with orange tiger stripes, a tail extending out his back and a pair of cute black tiger ears poking out from his hair. His hands and legs were similar to Petel's, only cat-like instead of wolf-like. He had whiskers as well, though they were too short to be used for their intended purpose. "And Dante." Sonya went on. "We're so glad we found you."

"How'd you get in here? Was it Vektoria who stuffed you inside?" Frank asked.

"You are unharmed, aren't you?" Abraham asked, torn between wanting to reach out and pat Dante's shoulder and not wanting to get burnt. "Please, let us know what happened to you. We were all very concerned at your sudden disappearance."

Dante shrank away from them, from Abraham's attempts to touch. Not in a good mood, then. "Um. No, it. It wasn't Vektoria who did this."

"Vektoria and I do not possess the capacity to operate the computers on our own." Vektor's voice said above them, making all of them jump. Frank, Abraham, Sonya, Levy, and Petel all snapped their gazes towards the sky while Dante looked up much less frantically. "No, whoever did this — it wasn't one of us, that's for sure."

"Did you — are you back with Paige?" Frank asked.

"I'm still with Jonathan." Vektor replied cheerily, further confusing the situation. "Removing the block on communications was a much simpler matter to attend than any of us expected. Oh, and it appears as if Dante was loaded in utilising the centre scanner here, meaning I couldn't go in on this side if I wanted."

"At least someone understands this stuff." Jonathan grumbled.

"Oh, hey. I can hear both of you now, Jonathan, Vektor." Paige said, her voice light in the realisation.

"I'm glad you understood my directions, Navigator." Vektor said brightly. "Shame that the communications block wasn't a universal rule, but at last, we can now converse much easier with everyone inside the game."

"You say that like it's a good thing and not a future headache I'll have to deal with." Paige said in a deadpan sarcasm. She switched straight into her authoritative tone, next saying, "I'm glad we were able to find you, Dante. Now we can get you out and—"

"I have to exit through the end." Dante interrupted.

Paige stopped, which meant she could hear him, too. Their whole group looked to Dante, curious. "What do you mean? Can't we just log you out through the checkpoint?" Frank asked.

Which they really did share with the other system on this level, Petel realised. Dante shook his head, his expression dropping right back to annoyance. "The only way out is to descend to the next circle. That's what I was told."

"We could try, at least." Sonya said.

Dante was silent a moment, then gave a short, "Sure. If it will convince you faster."

He walked into the checkpoint without further argument, resolute and weirdly distant. Sonya and Frank, noticing the odd behaviour, shared a glance between them, unsettled. Petel followed their boyfriend, unwilling to let him out of their sight for now. From outside, Abraham called up towards the sky, "Are either of you able to do anything?"

"Of course I can't. He's not under my jurisdiction right now." Paige said.

"His signature's weird on my end, too." Jonathan noted, at least speaking loud enough for them to hear. "If I could understand anything the computer was saying at me, I might be able to tell why that is."

"Oh, can you not understand Italian?" Vektor asked.

Dante's head snapped up. "It's — Yours is in Italian?" He asked excitedly.

The way his whole person perked up, so happy to hear something of his native tongue, it was very cute. It was also immensely relieving. This was still Dante. This was still their friend, their mate. Jonathan gave a noise in aggravation, then said, "If you can read this, that means Vektoria can, too. She's been saying it's not an issue this whole time, but look."

Vektor was silent just long enough to allow them all to figure out exactly what he might be holding back.

"You want to say she has a point, technically, don't you?" Jonathan asked flatly.

"Sorry, Jonathan." Vektor said. Genuinely, too, as he next offered, "Want me to translate some things for you?"

"Please."

Jonathan grumbled to himself, but thankfully didn't distract from Vektor's voice. "Let's see. Unrecognised origin point. That's why the signal is strange, the system doesn't recognise that Inferno's point of origin is the scanner linked to this system."

"Okay. I understand that." Paige said, sarcasm lacing her tone.

Dante grimaced wryly and spoke up before Vektor had a chance to get offended. "It means resetting the origin point is the only way to solve the issue."

"And the only way to do that is to enter the space in-between. Or, the level select hub, as you lot call it." Vektor added, growing downcast. "You're only at the fourth checkpoint. I can see how this is quite the predicament you've found yourself in."

"But how'd that happen in the first place?" Sonya asked from outside.

Dante exited the checkpoint, rejoining their group, and Petel followed him. Frank next asked, "How's someone even get in here with that sort of error?"

They all looked to Dante for explanation, knowing Vektor wouldn't be able to provide it this time. Dante met their gazes with a surprising amount of conviction and said, "I got dropped here." Then he began walking along the path they could see now, headed towards the end of the level. "We can talk more while we move. I want to get out of here."

"Hell has always been special for you." Vektor murmured.

Dante's footsteps faltered a moment, then he continued with a shake of his head. "I don't even want to know why you know that."

Petel kept as close as they could behind Dante and the rest of their procession trailed along after. Sonya and Levy were a bit distracted in looking around the level and at themselves and there was a notable lack of Tormented, no eyes or pools of shadows to watch their progression. Levy's tail swished about just like a cat's and Sonya's tail feathers were similarly life-like.

Their group made good time, the fourth checkpoint blinking out of sight and the next popping into view. Abraham called up, "Any activity from AIR?"

"No, none yet." Paige said. Somewhere in the background, Jonathan sighed. "Hopefully, having both systems active is keeping it from spawning anything."

"Right, you mates said it's usually just Damon and his crew when you encounter 'em in here." Levy said with a nod.

"That makes you one of the Kingpin's gang." Frank pointed out cheekily.

Levy laughed at his joke, tail twitching about in amusement. "Well, it's not like he's that bad a guy. Just a little awful at taking a hint. I mean, the whole school likes him for a reason."

"They don't have a choice in the matter." Dante said coldly.

That dashed the easygoing atmosphere right quick. Petel frowned at the back of their boyfriend's head. It wasn't like Dante to speak with icy certainty or even act cold at all. He was a fire. It was usually heat and embers he spoke with. Then again, he did dislike Damon a whole lot. Nervous now, Sonya quietly repeated his earlier question. "So. How does one get dropped in here?"

Dante took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. Their group passed the fifth checkpoint, not even giving it a glance. "The shadows were displeased with my progress." He said.

"And. What does that mean?" Abraham asked.

Dante again needed a second just to breathe. Pulling answers from himself seemed just as arduous as the pulling teeth process it was for all of them. "I'm not allowed to cause a fuss." He said. "Unruly children are to be taken in for recalibration until they're compliant once more. Failure to conform will result in liquidation using whatever means deemed appropriate according to punishment protocol."

All of them collectively shuddered at his words. "You're, uh. Sounding more robot than our Prince there, mate." Levy said.

"Liquidate? Recalibration?" Vektor questioned softly. "Surely, not. They wouldn't actually. Your punishment protocols wouldn't include such dangerous guidelines, surely?"

His tone was pretty desperate. He was also genuinely concerned. "All that matters to them is my mind." Dante said. The bitterness in his voice was yet another chilling thing to add to the pile. "They picked the artist clean until all that was left was a babbling lunatic. And even then, they kept picking the bones. Pick, pick, pick."

He was back in his ominous statements, but these weren't exactly toothless anymore. Maybe they never had been. Not for the first time, Petel remembered that night it sounded like Dante was choking. Of all the times Dante was plagued by his invisible terrors. Still quiet, Vektor said, "It's not. You didn't, perhaps. You aren't the Creator of the Rabbit Hole. Are you?"

Dante scoffed, his fires flaring up in his irritation. "If I had any more say in this game, Hell would no longer exist."

"Yeah, mate, pretty sure there's no way Dante's the Creator on this one." Frank agreed hesitantly.

"Didn't you say there were two, anyway?" Abraham pointed out. "A he and a she."

Their procession passed the next checkpoint. Just one more before they reached the end of the level. Petel stared at Dante, careful not to draw too close. For once, his danger was loud and clear to the

wolf. For once, they wanted to listen to that instinct to leave well enough alone. "But you do know who they are. Don't you?" They asked instead of doing that.

Letting his fires settle somewhat, Dante said, "I told you. The two fairies wrote everything."

His gaze snapped to the side, his fires flaring up defensively, making Sonya, Levy, and Frank startle away from him. Then, overhead, Paige said, "So, uh. AIR's just spawned what I can only describe as a shitload of enemies."

"That really is apt." Jonathan agreed, chuckling darkly.

Dante pulled his fire into his hands and in that menacing, even tone, asked, "How many of each Class?"

Paige and Jonathan both made unsure sounds, which wasn't exactly comforting. Petel tensed their legs and flexed out their claws while Abraham pulled his rifle off his back. Ever the computer, Vektor said, "Five Class I, three Class II, and seven Class III."

"Fifteen." Dante nodded and let the flames crawl up his arms, engulfing his shoulders. "For a second, I was worried this would be difficult."

The first of the enemies popped in, a mixture of each Class. Sonya squawked in surprise while Levy gave a whoop and rushed forward alongside Petel to meet them. Levy was nearly as fast as Petel, able to confuse the Naga he targeted by zipping about. Sonya didn't seem eager to jump into the fray, which served Frank well, as he could stick by the birdie until he got his chance to help. Abraham fired several shots at one of the Gargoyles, then gave an incredulous shout of, "Dante — Dante!"

Petel released the Chimera from their grip, its form disintegrating, just in time to see Dante rush in and punch one of the other Gargoyles with his flaming fist. His fire swallowed it in seconds and he dodged nimbly around its next attack in order to focus on the other Naga in the area.

The way he weaved between the enemies and their attempts to catch him, spreading his fire onto each of them until he had them pressed to the ground under his pressure, was nothing short of mesmerising. Frank, Sonya, and Abraham all completely forgot to participate in the battle (Levy at least was plenty distracted in testing out his capabilities), watching the fireball work in awe.

He was danger. He had experience.

Petel had never been more attracted to someone in their life.

Once the current wave of enemies had been dealt with and the fire cropped back up around Dante in its usual ring, he continued down the path. He was very much on a mission. Vektor's voice came over, snapping Petel back into their body, with a cheerful, "Now there's two Class I, two Class II, and four Class III. Magnificent work, Inferno."

"What the hell even is your attack stat? How do you rinse through their health like that?" Jonathan questioned. Even he sounded awed.

"Dante actually has the highest Attack." Paige supplied. "At least, out of our group."

"Everything burns." Dante said, his tone unsettlingly even.

Sonya tried to counter with a soft, "That's not entirely true."

Dante said again, "Everything burns."

Levy hopped over to Petel's side, his tail flicking out in pleasure. "Makes sense to me, I guess." He said. "Hey, didja see me back there? I knew tangling with Kalyuga and my sisters would pay off someday."

Deciding to abandon it for the moment, Petel smiled and gave Levy a friendly bump with their shoulder. "You were great."

They all had to rush after Dante and, soon enough, more enemies blinked into view. This time, Levy shoved Sonya out with a playful, "Go on, Birdie. I bet you could use those wings to fly."

Sonya stumbled forward and shouted, "I-I've no idea how to fight these things."

"Follow after me." Petel told him.

They dashed over to the Chimera in the bunch, ducking beneath a swipe of its claws and latching onto its back. The thing roared and its snake tail bit at them, but they caught the thing in their jaws and snapped its bones to cripple it. Abraham tossed his crosses out against the two Naga while Levy made sure to stick by Frank this time and Dante focused his fires on the two Gargoyles.

Once the Chimera was sufficiently damaged, Petel leapt off it and shouted, "Now, Sonya."

The poor birdie's feathers all puffed up in his distress, making him look bigger than he actually was. This seemed to work as intended, as the Chimera and Naga shrunk away from him, intimidated. It gave Abraham the opportunity to finish both Naga off and Petel tackled the Chimera's side to take care of it. Frank revived that one, startling Levy, and Dante gave a quiet, "Wow. That's not an ability I would've expected to see work in here."

"That looked like it halved the enemies' stats. Whatever you did, Sonya." Paige informed them. "Nice work."

"Ugh, I want to see what that data is like, too." Vektor complained.

Since Dante had burnt through the Gargoyles and the path was clear once more, he continued. Petel and the rest were quicker to follow this time, Petel making sure to give Sonya a quick hug for his participation. "Knew you could do it." They said to their friend.

"Honestly, I don't even know what I did." Sonya shook them off, his feathers still very much ruffled. "Being put on the spot so suddenly is not an enjoyable experience. I think I've gained a new respect for all of you for handling this as well as you do."

Levy joined the two of them with a cheeky, "You forget who you're talking to there."

"Petel is pretty reckless about everything." Paige conceded.

Petel laughed and said, "I'm dating a fire."

Which got Levy, Abraham, Paige, and Frank to laugh as well. Dante even broke out of that chilling determination for a moment to smile back at them, soft and gentle and beautiful.

Oh, how the wolf desired him. Wished to consume him, flesh and all.

The last of the enemies appeared right as they reached the final checkpoint. Only, they were all Gargoyles. Vektor said, "Oh. AIR changed all the remaining enemies into Class IIIs and added four more."

Dante's expression went right back to annoyed. "Too little, too late."

He lobbed fire at two of them, pinning them to the ground under the waves. Abraham went after the third while Frank had his Chimera tackle the fourth. Levy went after the fifth and Petel the sixth, leaving one to go after Sonya.

Sonya yelped as it flew at him, reacting on instinct and leaping out of its way. He could, indeed, use those wings to fly, as he lifted much higher into the air and stayed hovering as he flapped.

Levy called up, "Now use those talons, Birdie."

His distraction gave his foe the chance to strike him with its claws, sending him skidding along the plateau. Petel and Sonya both cried out and Frank ran over to his side to help him up, gun at the ready. Jonathan gave a flat, "Okay, that did way more damage than normal."

"It appears Cat has much lower defensive capabilities." Vektor mused. "I know that mine are abnormally high at the cost of my Speed, but Wolf doesn't share this imbalance."

"May I remind you that Dante has half the health everyone else gets? This game is designed unfairly." Paige said.

"You only have half health at all times?" Frank asked Dante, incredulous.

Dante finished the two Gargoyles he'd targeted and yanked down the Gargoyle chasing after Sonya (they could fly, too, after all), slamming it into the ground with his claws of fire and taking it out instantly. "Price of the flames." He said in reply.

Rejuvenated from Frank's heal, Levy hopped to his feet and dove after his Gargoyle again. This time, he stuck to its back, clawing into it like an angry cat. Sonya landed on the ground as Abraham, with the help of Frank's Chimera, took out their two Gargoyles, and Petel finished off the one they'd been fighting with a last rip of their fangs to its wings.

Again, the moment the enemies were cleared, Dante continued along the path.

"You'll have to use Vektoria's exit, right?" Frank asked. "Since you were loaded in on her side and all."

"I'm really not sure he was." Jonathan protested.

"To descend is the only way forward." Dante replied.

"Okay. That's it." Paige cut in surprisingly, completely fed up. "Either actually explain yourself or don't say anything at all. This ominous bull crap is really getting on my nerves."

Petel gave an amused snort. "Join the club."

Dante, at least, cringed and seemed chastised. "Sorry. It's just. It's what comes naturally."

"Don't fault Inferno for the restraints he's under." Vektor fired back, though his voice was too gentle to give his statement any punch.

"You said they were self-made, though, right?" Frank joined in.

Dante sighed, halting in his steps and his fires gaining an edge of agitation. "Of course. That's how you knew." He muttered to himself. Then, speaking loud and clear, he said, "I'm the son of the heads of the Vicario Company. I was marked for Hell when I was seven and have lived in fear ever since. I know I'm volatile and manipulating, but I'm trying to work past that. I don't want any of you to be hurt more than you've already been."

Petel frowned at this statement, perplexed. A sentiment the others shared. Paige said, "I understand, but that's not an adequate excuse nor is it a good apology."

"I don't want you to understand the whole scope." Dante said next.

"Wha— Why not?" Vektor asked this time, voice rising to outrage.

Dante stood firm, all that conviction and annoyance keeping him unmoved. "As long as you don't know, the consequences won't be real." He said. "Keeping you in the dark on certain things keeps me alive."

Sonya covered his face with his wings in horror, a miscalculation due to his altered anatomy. Frank asked a nervous, "Those shadow things. They wouldn't really kill you, right? That's just an exaggeration, it has to be."

Levy nodded along, desperate for the mood to stop being so serious. Dante fixed them all with his fiery gaze and said, "Look where my attempts have landed me so far. And I wasn't even saying anything egregiously close to the truth."

He turned then and walked on, towards the exit. Frank and Sonya both drooped in defeat while Abraham frowned in contemplation. "He's a little too good at winning arguments when he's actually trying." The Huntsman said.

"That sure was some vocabulary he was usin'." Levy said with an air of complaint.

Petel caught up with their boyfriend, falling into step as beside him as they could get and saying, "If you let us help you, we could figure this out better."

Dante spared them a glance, that crueller face melting just a bit. "I've hurt everyone enough with my words. With my actions." He said in admission. "This is something I need to confront on my own, so you won't get caught in the flames."

"I want you to burn me." Petel insisted, just as stubborn.

"You'll die, Petel. All of you will die." Dante said. "I'm not even resistant enough. If I cause your death — any of you — I wouldn't be able to forgive myself."

"We know the danger." Petel continued on. "We accepted it in befriending you. I know. You're capable of destruction, but you'd never harm on purpose."

They had to stop walking a moment, reaching the descent towards the frozen lake below and the exit to the level. Dante smiled sadly as he stared into Petel's eyes, saying a simple and final, "You are too important to me."

He stepped forward, pressing Petel into his fires and making Petel wince. Then he kissed Petel gently, lovingly, and all Petel wanted was to exist in this moment.

Of course, the moment passed, and Dante pulled away to descend down the path towards the end of the level.

"You two's relationship is baffling." Jonathan quipped.

"I say it makes perfect sense." Vektor countered. Then, with that commanding, princely tone, he said, "You'd best make haste to the exit as well, Wolf. AIR doesn't seem to have taken kindly to your trouncing its efforts and is sending more enemies your way."

Frank, Levy, Sonya, and Abraham caught up with Petel and they nodded to their group encouragingly. "Let's hope this'll get Dante out." They said.

"Let's hope this'll knock that attitude outta him, more like." Paige grumbled.

Abraham led the way down the spiralling path to the exit. Dante had, no doubt, jumped down already. Levy and Sonya marvelled at the way the frozen lake was just as red as the sky, how the exit was a simple trip through the checkpoint-like darkness out into the level select hub. The two's excitement helped cheer Petel up and they were much more hopeful about conquering this weird blockade as they stepped onto the white path in the void of black.

"Just give me a mo' to log you all out, then we can go see Dante." Paige said.

"Yeah, uh, please hurry on that." Jonathan pleaded.

Petel's ears went up in alarm, but they were dropped through the floor before they had a chance to ask. The fall to reality was brief (always falling, always falling; to descend was the only way forward, Dante had said, a phrase Vektor had used, too), then Petel rushed out of their scanner on less than steady legs in order to charge towards the other tower.

Paige and them could catch up. Petel had to see their mate.

The other tower was, disappointingly, pretty much an exact copy of their own. High ceiling, four orange outer scanners, one central white one, computer and chair located near that. The computer's modem looked bigger and the screen smaller, maybe, but that was about it.

The real difference came from Dante, sitting just outside the centre scanner, dripping with what looked to be black sludge. It coated the entirety of the inside of the centre scanner and had spilled out onto the floor. It looked more like a stain, more like a shadow from some tricky lighting, wherever it touched.

Petel crouched by their mate, holding Dante's shoulders in spite of protests from Jonathan and Levy. "Dante. You're okay." They said, gentle and trying to convince themselves as much as they were trying to convince him. "You're with us now. You're okay."

Dante leaned into their touch, all of that unsettling callousness rolling right off. As Paige and the others arrived and more conversation filtered in, he relaxed further. Petel fielded the questions, knowing he wasn't in any sort of state to answer them.

Then, as Petel got him up and to the showers to clean off all this mess, he began crying.

Loud, ugly sobs echoed around the room. Those were the cries of his heart, which had gone dampened for so long. Usually, Dante did a good job at keeping quiet while he cried, afraid of being too loud. Not this time.

It was utterly heartbreaking and Petel welcomed it.

They sat together in bed, both clean of that shadowy muck and Dante's sobs finished. Petel said, "Take your time about this. Okay? I'll be here whenever you're ready to talk."

Dante nodded in reply, the only answer he gave.

Chapter 23: The Fire at the Market

There once was a fire at the market.

Dante waited a few days. Gave the event time to breathe, the spectres time to forget. They had to. He wouldn't allow them to hold onto this like it was muscle memory. He let it ebb from him, a slower process than expected.

There once was a fire at the market.

Paige and Frank were the most adamant about getting all the details from him. "Once it's safe for you to know." He told the two.

He had to explain his absence to the Headmistress, had to actually call his parents for confirmation, then all was forgiven. Of course it was. He was the son of the Vicarios, ruthless to the bone and able to get his way with a little smile, a harsh tone, a cowardly stutter.

His ankles were burned at that fire in the market. He carried those scars with him forever as a reminder of that day.

Petel was sweet, barking at the others when they demanded too much of him and holding his hand whenever they had the chance. Dante loved the taste of them. Loved the way they refused to be afraid. He had to keep them safe, absolutely safe, from the monsters that had controlled him for too long. The monsters that controlled all of them for too long.

Because there may have been a fire at the market, but it was only brought there by its mother.

That day had been a trying one. Lietta had to get new English textbooks for Dante, couldn't leave him with Caro if she wanted the work to get done. Dante had been eager to get out, two years into his Hellish existence and still so naive to the true dangers that came from being marked for damnation. He grappled with his fires at school, so surely this would be no different. Surely, nothing could go wrong so long as Lietta was there to watch over him.

Lietta was controlling. Punctual. Unkind. To keep to her time schedule, she had to be.

Though Petel was loathe to allow Dante to go anywhere on his own, they couldn't quite avoid that their schedules were at complete odds. Nary a class shared between them by the end of the day. Dante took full advantage of that. Not only would it be hours before Band ended that Thursday, but he could follow the shadows to their source without having to get caught up with Paige or Frank. He didn't even need to explain anything to Vektor, who could hardly look at him anymore due to the residual shadow code.

Hard to face what he once was. Hard to reconcile that this code and his shared more than their basic structure.

It was easy to find the Puppet. Dante went right to her dorm room and knocked. The moment Fiamma answered, he said, "I need you to bear witness to my fires."

She seemed unsettled, of course. A wooden puppet burned nicely. Still, she had to save face in front of her roommate (Rouge Stetson, good girl, could weave her straw hair into gold if she tried) and put on that haughty air as she said, "Sure, Fireball. I love to see a good self-destruction."

It rang false, because anything that forced would, but Dante didn't care for that right now. He grabbed her arm and led her back to the main building, to the science labs, keeping the upper hand as much as he could. He'd need it for this confrontation.

That day at the market, Dante had wanted to die. Smoke filled his lungs and flames burned out of his skin, but they refused to let him go that easily. They always refused.

"So, Fireball. What's the plan here?"

He let go of Fiamma once they were inside an empty room. He put himself furthest from the door. Allowing her the option of escape when she'd need it. There was no escape for him. "I need you to tell my old friends to stop bothering me." He said.

She was taken aback. "Huh? What do you mean? Do you really not know?"

"I know they're dancing at the ends of your fingertips, Puppet." He spat the words out. Anger and heat filled him, igniting his hands and his hair and he let it take him. Oh, he let it take him. "I want to tell the truth. So I need them to rescind their deal to take my head and my heart for speaking that truth."

"Great. Tell them that yourself." She spat back, trembling in fear. He could hear the way her wooden joints clacked against each other. She could only force this much bravado because he gave her the upper hand. "The shadows aren't mine, idiota. I can't command them nearly as much as you think I can."

A particularly large snap of flames burst from him. Still, he kept his tone calm as he asked, "Why must you and Damon insist on lying to me?"

"You think I'd lie about this? When you're the one threatening my life?"

"If I were the one controlling them, they'd have torn me to shreds long before I made it to sixteen."

"Who do you think was tempering their claws, huh?"

He laughed at that, a harsh and angry sound. "Don't flatter yourself. You were the one encouraging them to go harder, tormenting me with them the moment you were given life. Even if you were holding their reins, you sure as hell didn't temper their claws."

She winced and backed down a step. The idea to flee reached her dead black eyes. "Fine. Okay. But, for truth here, I am not the one handling most of their activity."

She reeked of rotten fish. Of puppeteering and oozing cuts at the market. Dead eyed. Haunting. "Then I suppose it was just coincidence you were there when they dragged me back to Hell." He said, voice dripping with contempt.

She shrugged, flippant and no longer considering running. "So what if I helped that one time? They were already pretty up in a frenzy due to your actions."

"I'm tired of having to shoulder the responsibility." He told her. He ground out the words. "I'm tired of being the one who's at fault. The one who's behind it all. The one who's to blame."

Seeing her opportunity, she snarked, "Oh, aren't you, though? The Babbling Artist who lent his creativity to the Creators. That is you, isn't it?"

He had to shut his eyes, the heat of that fury too intense.

Lietta had told him not to dilly-dally by the fishes. But Dante loved fish. Their gaping mouths, their gills and fins; they were perfect sea creatures. He wished to swim with them one day.

Naughty children, however, were to be punished.

And so the shadows rose around him and drew out his fires, his fear, that desire for death.

"I can face my consequences later." He said, rapid fire and deliberate. Following a rhythm, counting to three, holding back that Inferno. "But I want you to admit to yours, too. I want the Creators to pay for all the harm they've inflicted."

"Then try and bargain for it, Fireball."

Fiamma flicked out her hands, the shadow strings falling from her fingers to accompany that wicked grin. Instantly, there was a circle of shadows surrounding him. Burn, burn, burn, they chanted. Consume, consume, consume. Fear stabbed at his throat, but he swallowed it back. His fires wavered and shook, but he continued to burn.

His throat was dry. He couldn't face this. He wanted to be strong, to face those fears and come out alive, but that was no longer an option.

"Let me tell them." He said to the shadows, all of them staring at him with their empty white eyes and blank stapled grins. All of them hearing, not comprehending. "They deserve to know. Let me tell them."

Burn, they continued chanting.

All at once, their spindly tendrils were on him. Sticking down his throat, past his eyeballs, into his flesh. He couldn't scream, the pain was so much.

He couldn't scream, his head full of sand.

The fires exploded from him and finally set the room ablaze. It banished the shadows and stopped the bleeding (and Fiamma was gone), but flame and smoke and pain continued pouring from his mouth, his lungs, his mind focused on one thing and one thing only.

Consume. Burn.

Fire marked what it touched forever.

Fire burnt everything it could envelop in its grasp.

The last thing he could comprehend was that his skin was charcoal and his insides were ash.

There was a fire at the market once.

And now there had been a fire at his Boarding School.