

# **Fire and Wolf**

[Game Kids Book 1]

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*For my friends and family, who always encouraged me.*

*With all of my heart, thank you.*

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Chapter 1: A Wolf Pact

Chapter 2: Eyes and Shadows

Chapter 3: Tutorial

Chapter 4: The Artificial Prince

Chapter 5: Bad RNG

Chapter 6: Panic Panic PANIC

Chapter 7: Shades of Friendship

Chapter 8: Two Wolves

Chapter 9: Howl of the Heart

Chapter 10: We're Not Alone

Chapter 11: It's All Wrong

Chapter 12: For You, Confidence Isn't Worth It

Chapter 13: Like Trusted Secrets

Chapter 14: His Heart. His Heart.

Chapter 15: Open Invitation

Chapter 16: Locked Out

Chapter 17: Fires Don't Trust

Chapter 18: Communication Is Key

Chapter 19: Closure, In More Ways Than One

Chapter 20: A Wolf On Fire

Chapter 21: Confessions Not According to Plan

# Chapter 1: A Wolf Pact

Dante Vicario was, perhaps, the weirdest roommate Petel had ever had the pleasure of being stuck with.

It was his second year at this Boarding School, so it was already weird, but when this Dante had rolled himself up into his blanket like a sushi immediately after getting settled and didn't even move for the supper bells, Petel knew things would only get more interesting from there.

And when, two weeks later, this Dante still hadn't bothered to so much as speak five words to Petel, it started to rub his hackles the wrong way.

"At least he's not in your face, right?" Paige reasoned as they ate lunch together. Paige sat beside Petel's odd roommate in their English class, one of three classes Petel shared with the guy, so he'd hoped Paige might have some better insights to share. "Don't let it bother you too much, he'll probably come outta his shell once he's over his homesickness and stuff."

Petel frowned and glanced across the cafeteria, to where he saw the other guy sit down. The oddball sat by himself, his head down, occupied only with the tray of food in front of him. Possibly not even eating it. Petel turned his attention back to Paige and said, "Homesick?"

"He's a special transfer, like you and Ravenell." Paige said, giving Petel a frustrated look. "Don't you recognise his name? You actually met his parents when he first arrived, didn't you?"

Petel shrugged, much to Paige's dismay. This guy's parents hadn't stuck around, insisting they were late for something. And Dante wasn't that recognisable a name, either. At least, not to Petel.

Paige happily dropped the subject as the rest of their friends arrived to eat with them. Petel's 'pack', as he liked to call them. Sonya, his friend since primary school, greeted them with a cheerful, "Looking forward to Band after classes today."

"Absolutely." Kalyuga agreed with a giggle. She played an oboe in their Music class and wore a duck feather in her hat, though that wasn't the reason for her nickname of 'Duckie'. "You think we're doing well on the piece so far? I don't think Ivanovich has the right rhythm yet."

"And he's the drummer." Levy joked; he was Kalyuga's childhood friend and an excellent companion to Petel's recklessness. A mischievous glint entered Levy's eyes as he next said, "Good thing our big bad wolf here's the perfect violinist. Jerk can't fault him there."

"Don't be rude, Epimovich." Sonya snapped.

"What? That chap's a real arse!" Levy protested.

"That could be another factor in your inability to communicate with Vicario." Paige said, unprompted. She caught all of their attention with the use of a word from their vocabulary list. "Everyone knows you as a wolf around here. He might be afraid you're gonna eat him or something."

Levy laughed at the absurd-sounding theory while Petel mulled over this possibility. Golden, wavy hair. Tanned skin. All wrapped in a seaweed. Dante Vicario: A quiet and fancy sushi. Sonya said, "Petel's not actually a wolf, though. That seems like a weird thing to consider."

"This one's pretty weird." Paige said, crossing her arms over her chest. "Sure, the kid of the two leading computer scientists in the world is allowed to be a little eccentric, but he's just weird."

Petel shook his head, coming to a conclusion. "Not worth it. Not tasty enough."

Paige and Levy grinned, though Paige at least tried to hide hers behind her hand, while Sonya and Kalyuga just looked at Petel in shock. Which, fair. Petel hadn't meant to say it like that, but wolves weren't great at speaking. Embarrassed, Petel stood and stalked off as his friends burst into laughter at his slip. Except Sonya. That little Birdie knew how sensitive the issue really was.

Levy called Sonya 'Birdie' because of Sonya's flute playing and his fascination with feathers and Petel liked it. Even if it just reinforced the wolf's desire to consume his friend. The wolf was very protective of its pack.

Sure, Petel wasn't physically a wolf. But it lived inside his head, his body, ever since it had killed his parents. It was a part of himself, by this point. He had to adapt just to stop feeling fear.

The school's setup allowed the pathways connecting the main building, the Gym behind that, and the dormitory to be spotted with trees and grassy terrain, but the two towers which stood on either side of the front gate stayed isolated. There was a rumour to those two towers. Something about them holding something so against school code that any normal, not privately-funded school would've been shut down at the mere mention of them. They were always locked, unfortunately, and Petel had no idea where to find a key.

He returned after a few minutes of stalking about and Paige and Levy apologised for antagonising him. They meant well. Petel forgave them easily. He had to drop Track after his first year and so he continued growing more restless.

Once the end of lunch bells rang, Petel watched Dante stand, pick up his tray of food, and dump the whole thing into the trash before heading out. Petel may have been a wolf, but Dante seemed to exist in a self-imposed isolation, barely interacting with the rest of the world.

A lonely outsider. Petel's curiosity had been provoked.

That evening, Petel was set up on his bed and focused on his schoolwork when Dante arrived. They had the 'standard' setup, as Paige called it once, with their beds on opposite sides of the room against the walls and their desks facing the window, directly across from the door. Petel enjoyed having both beds to himself last year, but now he had a roommate.

Before Dante had a chance to take much more than a step inside, Petel looked him directly in the eyes and said, "I could eat you."

He froze mid-step, his eyes going wide in fear, and he stuttered out a short, "Wh-What?"

That wasn't what Petel meant to start with. Whoops. It did get his attention, though, so Petel had to run with it. He smiled lop-sidedly up at Dante, doing his best to show that he wasn't a threat. "I'm not going to, though. Eat you, I mean."

"Um. Thanks? I guess?"

Dante hesitantly walked inside, dropped his bag by his bed, and climbed up to roll himself into his blanket. Petel hadn't been as successful as he'd thought, then. An annoying setback. Two weeks and a day, now.

Petel went back to his work until, after a few minutes of complete silence, Dante poked his head out of the roll to ask, "How — um. How much d-do you remember?"

His voice was still hesitant, still quiet, as if he was afraid of someone listening in, but it was rounder and more musical than Petel expected. Not to mention that the question itself was really weird and vague. Petel frowned and said, "Clarify."

"Uh." Dante ducked his head, tugging nervously at the seaweed-coloured blanket. "Y-You. Well. Th-The wolf." He stuttered a bit longer, unable to finish a coherent thought, before giving up with a small, "N-No, never mind, it's. It's too personal."

This guy was a bundle of nerves, just as Paige had implied. And it was, indeed, too personal a thing to ask. Then again, better to keep the conversation going now that they'd started. Petel shrugged and answered in a nonchalant tone. "The wolf killed my parents, so I took on its fear."

The memory wasn't exactly pleasant, but it had long since passed. Going on seven years now, in fact. Dante gave a startled, "Ah." Then, hiding farther in his blanket, he said, "Sorry, I-I'm so sorry."

Despite the bad taste in his mouth, Petel kept that nonchalant tone. "It's fine. It's in the past." And he still had his grandpa to return home to, the old Bassoon. That thought brought up another one and Petel asked, "Who are your parents, exactly? Paige and Kalyuga say they're important."

Something about computer science or whatever. Petel hadn't really been paying attention. Dante hesitated, then looked directly into Petel's eyes and said, "Your eyes are blue."

Petel opened his mouth, intending to respond, but found he'd been too thrown from a horse. Okay. Dante didn't want to talk about his parents. That was understandable. But what was Petel supposed to say to this? He grappled for a moment, then went with the obvious on finding himself at too much of a loss for anything else. "Yeah? And. Yours are red?"

"Right." Slowly, Dante withdrew into his blanket once more. "S-So. It's better, if. If we don't talk to each other."

"Because we'd make purple?"

"N-No." Dante gave an aggravated exhale, then looked directly into Petel's eyes again. "M-My eyes. They're. I've been, um." He couldn't hold the gaze and ducked his head, fidgeting with the fabric of his blanket. "I've been marked for-for Hell. So."

Again, Petel had no idea how to respond to that. He'd gotten Dante to talk, finally, but Paige had been so right and Petel had no goddamn clue where this conversation was headed. "I'm sorry, what?" He asked.

Dante cringed, drawing the blanket closer around himself. "I-I've. I've been to Hell. I've been marked for e-eternal damnation. So, um, you really shouldn't t-talk to me or get close t-to me or they might. They might make things w-worse for you."

Red eyes as a marking for hell? Petel thought of Niculaie and Damon, two upperclassmen he'd almost befriended last year, and said, "Who would?"

"Wh-Who?"

Dante blinked at him, surprised. Fair was fair, so Petel clarified. "Who would make things worse? 'Cause if you're thinking of Damon or Niculaie, I know how to handle—"

"N-No!"



Dante huffed out a breath, looking about as frustrated as Petel felt right now. Petel said, "So then you're just saying things without explaining yourself."

"I-I don't. You shouldn't."

Dante groaned and sank into his bed. Petel sat up enough for a more serious posture and said, "Look. If you don't want to be friends, just say so. Until you can transfer rooms, however, let's at least be civil towards one another. Okay?"

Flopping face first into his bed, Dante mumbled a resigned, "Fine. Okay. I guess."

Dante stayed there and that seemed to be the end of that. Considering how unexpectedly hostile he'd been, it was a safe assumption that he was serious about this 'hell' business. Petel grimaced wryly, then went back to his schoolwork.

Blue eyes, huh? Petel smirked at that. Paige had blue eyes, too, but even she called Petel's different. Said they were like a wild beast's, pale in colour and the most wolf-like attribute about him. His straight mop of black hair really wasn't wolf-like, he'd give Paige that, but his eyes. Why did everyone always notice his eyes?

If the past two weeks had provoked the wolf out of him, now he was presented with a mystery. Petel loved a good challenge.

For breakfast, Petel chose to sit right beside Dante at the secluded table he liked escaping to. Before he could get upset or do much else besides jump from the surprise, Petel asked, "What're you doing here, of all places, Hell boy?"

Dante bristled, but kept his head down. "Please. My name is-is Dante." He stressed.

"Dante, then." Petel affirmed. It looked like Dante hadn't eaten much of his breakfast yet, though the pancakes were messily torn apart and strewn all over his tray with no rhyme or reason. Petel stabbed at his own food as he asked, "You're a special transfer, right? Why choose this place?"

From what Petel heard, this particular boarding school was hard to get into. Only a hundred or so students attended per year, with a year-long regime more akin to an Eastern school year than the standard Western. Dante deflated, overcome with an odd sense of defeat, and said, "It's the only place f-far enough away from my-my parents that would a-accept me."

Well. That was suspicious as heck, but Petel had no way of calling him out on that. Better to change the subject and keep the conversation moving. "What are you planning on doing once you graduate?" Petel asked.

Surprisingly, Dante smiled as he joked, "Not, um. Not join any cults?"

Petel laughed and, after a moment or two, Dante nervously joined in. Petel managed a breathless, "Is that really something you need to worry about?"

He'd never heard of any cults associated with this place. In fact, this school seemed much more interested in getting its students accepted into highly sought after internships and top universities. Dante desperately tried to stop his own laughter, which Petel decided was endearing enough to allow the past strangeness to rest.

Paige arrived then, making Dante squeak at the sound of her tray clattering against the table.

Petel smiled in greeting while Dante shrunk in on himself, becoming subdued once more. Sonya and Levy arrived as well and Levy grinned mischievously at Dante as he said, "Hey, it's the Fireball. You must be seriously into flambé, Petel."

"Oh, I heard about the 'fireball' thing from Natalie." Paige said, smirking over at Dante as well. "Fireball's not such a bad nickname. Better than 'Huntsman', wouldn't you say?"

Levy laughed at Paige's jab and Dante sat frozen, radiating too much heat to be natural. Just as Petel recognised the debate running through Dante's face, Dante stood in a swift motion, making their trays clatter against the table. He swept up his own and ran, pausing only to dump his half-eaten food.

They stared after him a minute. Then Paige sank into her seat and said, "Not sure what he hopes to get away from when we'll see him for English."

Sonya, meanwhile, became sympathetic. "You were right, he is a bit skittish."

"He's weird." Petel said, not quite agreeing.

The conversation continued from there, as if that strangeness hadn't even happened. Levy told the story of the fireball incident his own roommate, Ian Karpusi, witnessed and Sonya was concerned over the test scheduled for today in English.

Petel kept an eye on this 'fireball' throughout English and Phys-Ed. Dante shrank away from others, even going so far as to leave when approached. Held himself like he could hurt those around him, not like he might get hurt, surprisingly. And the wolf resting inside Petel's own mind, understanding this perfectly, made the mistake of thinking the two of them as not so different from one another.

Petel then said to Paige, "He said he's been marked for Hell."

Paige rolled her eyes, saying, "Who here hasn't?" And that was fair, too.

Petel was much too restless for Study Hall today. He let Mister Patillo know he'd be going to the Music room, then left to grab his violin. He practiced in the empty, soundproofed room for a good while, concentrating on getting his notes and rhythm just right. The piece they had for the recital was a tricky one and he had yet to master its eeriness with any such proficiency.

He didn't notice the door open, didn't see the intruder until he came face to face with that shock of wavy golden hair.

He flinched back immediately, more shocked than anything else, regretfully screeching his next note. Dante, of all people, winced at the sound. Then he smiled sheepishly at Petel and said, "That was pretty. You're, uh. You're very good."

"Thanks."

Petel lowered his violin to his hip and half-smiled in return, mind racing. What was one to do now that their prey had become the predator? Perhaps that was a bit extreme, but something about Dante was very off. Despite the frightened and weird demeanour, there was something about this guy that made the wolf inside scream 'danger'.

Not that it did anything to deter Petel's curiosity. A wolf knew when it ran into one of its own ilk.

Dante's smile fell and he bowed his head, fiddling nervously with his fingers. "Sorry. I-I saw you leaving a-and. And was curious."

As soon as the last word left his mouth, he cringed. Petel smiled easier, though, and said, "That's fine. You're from Italy, right?"

Curiosity was much easier to understand. Easier to keep the conversation going, too. Dante's eyes lit up as he replied, "Y-Yes!" He paused a moment, then continued with a much more subdued enthusiasm. "I'm from, uh, a-a smaller town called Bianco. Right at the-the bottom of the boot. Next to the, um, the Mediterranean."

He threaded his fingers together, a genuine embarrassment in his posture that really reminded Petel that they were only a year apart. Sometimes the wolf inside made Petel forget how young and human he was. Eager to get more information, Petel said, "Tell me more about it."

"A-About. My home?"

Dante frowned in confusion. Petel clarified, "Your home. Your trip to Hell. Anything."

He wanted to listen to what this strange guy had to say. Dante struggled for a few moments with finding the right words, then slowly began to talk of where he'd grown up. Of a

beach with sparkling beige sand, of the shimmering green sea that was always there to catch the sunset, and of the mountains behind his home which held the path he'd fallen into Hell by. He had much more to say than Petel anticipated and Petel found himself parsing out a rhythm to go along with the near musical quality of Dante's voice.

Unsteady and stuttering, sure. Quiet in admission, in embarrassment of the deep truths being revealed. But round, magnificent, and full of love. Full of admiration for the home he'd left behind, no matter the harsh edge it seemed to hold. Perhaps due to the looming shadow of terror that seemed to be just behind everything.

Petel picked his violin back up and attempted to capture this melancholic, adoring tone as best he could while Dante spoke. A lilt here for the jump in Dante's voice for the home he knew so well, a prolonged note there for the yearning in the way he spoke of the sea.

Finally, once Dante ran out of momentum (or became aware he was rambling), he looked to Petel and gracelessly asked, "You're, um. R-Russia, from the — uh, from Russia, right?"

Petel let the final note fade off, then nodded in reply. "Right. A town called Sharypovo. Very cold, with a forest and a river nearby that freezes in the winter."

A prime nesting ground for wolves, too. Petel grimaced at the thought. Dante averted his gaze and seemed to count the seconds before asking, "Do you like it here?"

Petel hummed softly, his mind going to Paige, Kalyuga, Sonya, and Levy. Of last year's folly with Damon and how Paige won that battle before it was even a question. "It snows during the winter and my friends accept me." Petel answered.

"But that's not." Dante stopped himself quickly and backpedalled just as fast. "N-No, you don't. Never mind, it's. Th-That didn't."

Dante shut his mouth resolutely. Whatever that was about, Petel could see he wasn't going to get much more of an explanation. Curious thing, this so-called Fireball. Too timid to present a threat outwardly, yet shying away from others in a protective manner. Petel had only to bite down just so to be caught by that curiosity.

Petel went back to practicing his actual piece and Dante watched silently, content to listen until the warning bell rang. They both had to return to check in with Mister Patillo, then hurried off on their own ways. It was no small victory that Dante waved to Petel as they parted.

As he headed to the cafeteria for lunch, however, Petel got caught by the two worst upperclassmen he had the displeasure of sharing Music with.

"What makes you think a wolf like you gets to eat inside with civilised folk like us, eh?" Yasha sneered as he dragged the snarling, thrashing Petel towards the back of the building.

Straight for where the dumpster was kept. "Untamed, unruly beasts such as yourself should root around in the trash for your meals."

Petel suspected that Yasha's shortness was the root of all this. He also had Petel good, as no amount of thrashing would get him free. He'd have to bite for that and he never needed to taste blood again. Vladimir followed along, hands in his pockets and more nonchalant than he was entitled to be in a situation like this, even as he questioned, "Why do you insist on taking the time to do this?"

Vladimir was much taller, almost reaching the heights of giants like Niculaie and Gaëlle, and should've been the intimidating one here. He seemed content to follow whatever Yasha was doing, however. Yasha aimed an incredulous glare up at Vladimir and said, "Are you saying that we, as good students at this school, shouldn't weed out the feral riff-raff like this wolf?"

"I'm just saying. As an observation." Vladimir grimaced. "You're too hung up on this guy."

"Well, it's either take care of it myself or let the Huntsman take all the glory."

"Not sure the Fourth would—"

"Excuse me." Another upperclassman, Abraham and the in-question 'Huntsman', broke in. "The 'Fourth' wouldn't what?"

Both Yasha and Vladimir froze in their tracks, caught. After that initial panic, though, Yasha waved Abraham off and grumbled, "Go away, Huntsman. This is our game."

"I think not." Abraham said, stepping in front of Yasha to block his path. Petel had never even talked to the upperclassman before out of courtesy to Niculaie and Damon. "You see, I simply cannot allow such bullying to continue while I'm around to stop it."

Yasha gave an annoyed exhale, then said, "Vlad, please handle this."

"You can't be serious." Vladimir protested.

A wordless shout interjected next and startled all of them. Taking advantage of the better distraction, Petel yanked himself free of Yasha's grip and stumbled away, out of arm's reach. Dante, in a surprise twist, hurried towards them.

Even more bizarre, Yasha paled at the sight and backed away, knocking into Vladimir in his rush. Wincing, Vladimir asked, "Now what's the problem?"

Abraham seemed delighted by this turn of events, so Petel supposed the Huntsman couldn't be as big or bad as Damon made him out to be. That Kingpin considered Abraham to be

such a thorn in his side that, again, Petel was willing to blame Abraham's lack of height. The guy looked about as tall as Paige, had wild red hair tied back in a short ponytail, and an honest face.

Dante, out of breath but determined, shouted, "You can't j-just. I w-won't let you. D-Don't hurt him! Stay back!"

Petel never expected to hear that timid, musical voice get so loud. A weapon in its own right. Yasha groaned in aggravation, trying to appear in control when he was visibly trembling. "Whatever. Let's go, Vlad. It's not worth the effort anymore."

Vladimir followed Yasha with a soft, "Seriously, dude. What's up with you?"

"The Huntsman, we can take. But that Fireball?" Yasha huffed grumpily. "He'll burn the whole school down and I refuse to get caught in the inferno."

The two faded from earshot. They smelled of fear. Not that Petel was sure how to explain why he thought that. While he was caught up in the whirlwind of it all, Abraham laughed brightly and said, "Good show, Vicario! Jolly good show. Shall we gather our lunches in celebration of this fantastic victory?"

Petel decided on smiling and gave Dante's shoulder a friendly pat. "Thanks."

Dante squeaked and his legs buckled, dropping him to the ground. After a beat of silence, Abraham and Petel both laughed. Considering what Petel learned from this oddball by now, this made the most sense.

He offered a hand to Dante and said, "That was a pretty Fireball thing to do."

Dante exhaled a whoosh of breath and hesitantly accepted Petel's offered hand. "I-I'm just glad the-the Eyesores weren't drawn in b-by the noise."

"The what now?" Petel asked, instantly baffled.

"Eyesores?" Abraham asked, equally confused. "Is that some sort of folktale monster where you're from?"

Dante's frown turned bitter as he stood. "It's. Y-You're welcome." He said, refusing to explain.

Petel allowed it to be and gestured to the cafeteria. "C'mon, eat with us." He nodded to Abraham next and added, "You, too."

"It would be my pleasure." Abraham agreed, much more easily than Petel thought he might.

Dante still seemed hesitant, but followed along after them and did, indeed, join them at their table. Paige was in a heated discussion with a curly black-haired boy whom Petel vaguely recognised as another first year they shared Phys-Ed with. Sonya and Kalyuga managed to sit on either side of Dante, sandwiching the oddball between the two of them. Levy slid into the seat beside Petel and, his green eyes sparkling with their usual mischief, asked, "We makin' a rival gang to the Kingpin here?"

Petel chuckled at the ridiculous notion. Dante, looking uncomfortable, asked, "K-Kingpin?"

"That would be Damon Ashford, heir to the largest law firm in the entire Western world." The boy who'd been talking to Paige explained. Paige rolled her eyes at the mention of that 'git', as she liked to call Damon, as the boy continued. "And you're Dante Vicario, child of Caro and Lietta Vicario, the heads of the company leading the world in computer science!"

Dante curled in on himself, fidgeting with his hands. Petel frowned at this intruder and bluntly asked, "And you are?"

"This is Frank Ernest, Petel." Paige jumped in before the intruder — Frank — could land himself in any more trouble with the wolf's protectiveness. She next looked to Dante, moving the topic along. "Your parents run an internship program for graduates here, right?"

"Is there anything you can tell us about the next big project they're working on?" Kalyuga asked, also intrigued.

Dante kept his head down and seemed to radiate an unnatural amount of heat. Sonya looked to Petel in apprehension, though Petel had no explanation to give for this. Abraham turned to Frank with a jovial, "So you're Ernest! Perci's told me a lot about you."

"He — He has?" Frank asked shyly.

"Yes, he's quite taken with you." Abraham confirmed. Frank held his hands to his face, delighted. Then, as if it made total sense, Abraham changed the subject again by saying, "Speaking of the Demon King, have you lot heard that he's planning on cracking the mystery of our school's towers?"

Dante stood, slamming his hands down against the table and rattling all of their trays. "He what?"

Petel could've easily written off the heat thing before. Now, though, it was hard to deny that it was coming from Dante. Danger, his mind whispered at him. As if he needed a reminder as to why getting to know this Fireball would be so much fun. Paige, the only one unruffled by Dante's outburst, leaned against the table in aggravation. "Of course he is." She said. "Absolutely terrible git."

"Do you think the rumour is true, then?" Levy asked, growing excited.

"I certainly hope not." Abraham said. "Having to finish my final year somewhere else would be quite regrettable, as I very much enjoy this place."

Dante hadn't sat down yet. Petel looked to the Fireball and was surprised by the mixture of fury and fear on his face. He noticed Petel's gaze and mumbled a quick, "I. I have to go."

Then he ran off, out of the cafeteria entirely. Petel had half a mind to give chase, as that was what a proper wolf would do.

His pack, though.

Curbing that instinct, he said to the table, "Why don't we solve this mystery before the Kingpin?"

Frank, Kalyuga, and Levy lit up with immediate excitement. They were eager for an adventure, same as him. Sonya hesitated to agree and Paige let her head fall to the table with a groan of, "Petel, no, please. Don't do this again."

"Why not?" Abraham asked, just as eager as the others. "Any antagonist to the Demon King and his gang of night scum are allies of mine. I'll gladly assist you lot."

He laughed, which was unsettling when coupled with his callous words. He'd helped Petel, however, so there was no need to heed those warning signs. Petel grinned around at them and gave a final, affirmative nod. "We've got ourselves an adventure, then."

The group cheered, even as Paige bemoaned their enthusiasm and Sonya warned them not to get too carried away. There could be trouble ahead.

Petel welcomed the thought of it.

He held a hand out to Frank, then Abraham, and warmly told them, "Welcome to the pack."



## Chapter 2: Eyes and Shadows

It was a Thursday when Petel came into their room with purpose in his eyes and announced, "Paige has the answer."

He plopped himself down onto Dante's bed, bouncing the both of them a little. Dante had to uncurl himself from his blanket, probably expected to respond in some way. He took a deep breath, bracing himself for any nips or pinching from the dancing imps, then asked, "To, um. To the English assignment?"

"No. Better." Petel grinned toothily, the very picture of an excited wolf. "She has a skeleton key."

Dante's breath hitched. He knew Petel and them had been excited about this rumour since they'd resolved to investigate it, but Dante had hoped they would just forget about it. Trying not to sound so disappointed, he next asked, "Why do you, uh. Why do you w-want to explore this so much?"

Petel's grin fell to a frown. "Doesn't it interest you?"

The memory of whispering voices and Hellfire made Dante shudder. That had been the last time he'd indulged his curiosity by exploring somewhere off-limits. This would no doubt prove to be much worse. In defeat, he asked, "When do you want to go?"

"We're planning to check it out tonight after supper."

Petel sat back, clearly dissatisfied with Dante's lack of enthusiasm but not enough to back off. Dante gripped the spiral binding of his notebook a little too tightly, the metal pressing into the skin of his hand. There was no avoiding this anymore. Even though he never wanted to deal with the gargoyles and shadows again, this had been inevitable.

Petel stood and said, "If you don't want to come, then don't."

He picked up his violin case and left the room. Most of the other students weren't comfortable with Petel's blunt and direct manner. Dante, however, appreciated it. It was a small reminder of the home he'd been kicked out of. A home Dante desperately wanted to return to, though he knew he never could.

Petel called himself a wolf, as did most of the school. He'd said once that he could eat Dante. Those threats meant very little, as Dante was used to hearing about losing his head and heart to the shadows that haunted his steps. They'd strike at the worst moment, squishing their long, spindly tendrils behind his eyeballs until they forced their way out his mouth.

He shuddered, then closed his eyes and slowly counted to three in his head. When he finished, the room hadn't warped into some tangled moonscape and he was still sitting on his bed, wrapped in his ugly blanket, alone. No shadows or other spectres to speak of.

He stood and picked up his dorm key from his desk. It was just about suppertime and he wasn't about to finish that English assignment anyway, choked with apprehension. Ghost serpents fed off that, slithering through the air and twisting around his head close enough so their many wings rustled his hair and tickled at his skin.

He shoved them back and hurried out of the room, locking it behind him. He probably had to rework at least one of the wards he'd hidden. But later, after Petel had gone to bed for the night and Dante was kept awake by nightmares.

As he walked out onto the campus, Dante spotted Elias and Aniketos chatting with Hedvige by the tree outside the library. Paige and Frank liked to study inside until supper, chatting about all sorts of things. Few other students were loitering about, since the weather was growing colder, meaning it was easier to spot Damon, Natasha, and Niculaie standing by one of the towers.

Dante paused to actually watch them. Natasha was Paige's roommate while Niculaie and Damon lived off campus. Were they planning to investigate, too? The same night as Petel and them? Dante took a step towards them, but stopped himself as uncertainty rooted his feet to the ground. He hadn't found the nerve to approach Damon or Niculaie yet. It had been two months already, but they were always surrounded by too many others and Dante wasn't sure what to say in the first place.

"What are you looking at?" Aglaé asked, strolling over and frowning at Dante with one of his signature annoyed looks. Everyone knew not to upset this beauty, for a beast lurked behind him. "Did the wolf ask you to spy on us or something?"

Everyone, of course, besides Petel. The two were the same year and yet, for some reason, they detested one another. Dante shook his head quickly and Aglaé scoffed.

"Fine. Tell that Wolf not to bother us, okay?"

Though there was no hint of an underlying threat, Dante heard it anyway. Any of Damon's friends had full rights to torment him, from Charon's stunt with the spiders to Fiamma tossing a rubber snake in his face. It wasn't that hard to get Dante to scream and it seemed to be a contest amongst the more daring students.

Seeing as Dante wasn't about to reply, Aglaé continued on his way over to greet Damon and the others. They easily welcomed him into their fold. No fuss, no concern for secrecy. He was their friend.

Dante gripped his hands into fists as that heat flared up in anger. He kept it inside, kept his expression neutral. The face snatchers craved human expression, especially on nights like this. Getting close to others only encouraged that heat to rise higher. Encouraged the whispers of shadows to grow around him.

The sensation of long, trailing fingers went up his back and made him stumble forward. Out here was too open. There weren't enough witnesses. The crowded and loud cafeteria wasn't ideal, but the spectres couldn't bother him inside. Only other humans could. And considering the mood, Dante preferred his chances with the humans right now.

He broke into a run, avoiding the last grasping fingers of the howling ghosts, and burst through the cafeteria doors a little too forcefully. A few other students inside turned to look at the source of the noise, then went back to their own business. Some were doing schoolwork, some chatting in groups, all absorbed with their own worlds and lives.

Dante, too panicked and out of breath, without a plan as to why he'd come here, stood out of place and susceptible to the grunting pig beasts. A normal, if worrying, predicament.

He scanned the tables, then sat at one as isolated from the loudest groups as he could get. Breaking into restricted areas on school campus had to be more difficult than a single skeleton key could solve. The possibility, though. That there might be something truly terrible inside, unleashed by their folly, their curiosity, it made Dante's hands tremble. It wouldn't be the first time Dante faced the unknown and it wouldn't be the first to go horribly wrong, either.

He pulled out his notebook and a pencil from his bag and opened to a sketch he'd been trying to finish for the past week. It was a monster, of course. A hybrid of a turtle and a gargoyle. Its red eyes were the most striking feature, the only colour Dante had included in the sketch so far. Although its craggy beak, its uneven shell, and its ragged, powerful wings were good features, too.

Dante had just been fascinated with eyes since even before Hell. Aglaé had deep blue eyes, beautiful and cold. Fiamma's eyes were black, lifeless and shadowed. Charon had dull yellow eyes, bright with mischief and a solemn knowledge. Natasha's eyes were green and lively while Ian had the same brown eyes as his two brothers. Petel had eyes like ice, piercing and expressive.

Dante frowned and gingerly touched at his own face. His eyes were the same blood red as the gargoyle turtle. The same as Damon and Niculaie's. The true sign that they were children of Hell.

He shoved that thought to the back of his mind. There was no Hell anymore. It was outmoded, forgotten.

Before he could get back to his sketch, he spotted Abraham walking through the cafeteria and towards him. He closed his sketchbook quickly before remembering that Abraham wasn't a hostile. Abraham was a neutral party in all of this.

"May I sit with you, Vicario?" Abraham asked, smiling politely. Dante nodded slowly. He pulled out the chair opposite of Dante's seat and plopped himself down. "Thank you. Are you doing schoolwork?"

Abraham stared pointedly at Dante's notebook, intrigued. Dante's shoulders bunched up guiltily. Abraham meant no harm. He was an upperclassman. Of course he wanted to help. Dante just didn't seem like the capable type.

Hesitantly, he shook his head. Abraham, in good humour, said next, "Just excited for supper, then? That's understandable. I don't often stay for meals, so I'm a little excited myself."

Abraham laughed, drumming his fingers against the table. Dante joined in with the laughter, much quieter and weaker. It was, admittedly, an interesting occasion for Abraham to eat dinner at the school with them. Weirder still for Abraham, Niculaie, Damon, and Aglaé to all still be around after classes ended on the same day. It seemed a little too serendipitous to just be coincidence.

Or perhaps Dante was thinking too hard on unknown motivations. He needed to stop that.

Desperate to ward off this awkward silence, since the claws of the whisper sticks were a pain to untangle from his hair, he said, "Um, you. H-How is your p-play going?"

"Very well, thank you." Abraham rubbed at the back of his head, pleased. "We're nearly ready to put on the whole show. Just have to get the blocking finalised now that the stage is all finished. Say, is that notebook your favourite? I see you with it fairly often."

Dante simply nodded in reply. Abraham pulled a folder from his bag, satisfied with that.

"I understand the sentiment, even if I may not share your artistic inclinations." Abraham paused, growing sheepish. "You're in Art, right? You draw?"

If anyone were to appreciate his monsters, it would be the Huntsman of the school. He could trust Abraham not to make fun of their designs, outlandish as they seemed. And he didn't need to mention their place in the long list of fears he'd accumulated.

He flipped open his sketchbook to the turtle gargoyle and shyly slid it across the table for Abraham to see. Abraham accepted it and examined the sketch, careful not to crinkle the paper or smudge the pencil. After a thoughtful examination, he slid it back over and said, "Your lines

are precise and your ability to communicate intent through this creature's expression is clear. Colour me impressed."

Dante closed his sketchbook and mumbled a quiet, "Thanks."

An unexpected compliment could only bring summons from the Queen for his head. Abraham opened his own folder to pull out a few papers, saying, "I must say, I didn't expect you to be drawing monsters, considering your timid nature. But we all have our contradictions."

Dante nodded and, thankfully, Abraham busied himself with the papers he'd pulled out. Schoolwork, no doubt. He most likely had a mountain more work than Dante, being a third year. Final projects, crunch time before exams, university applications, and other terms that Dante didn't fully understand but would have to deal with sooner or later. Even more fun, papers were a hell dog's favourite chew toy. Keeping track of everything once he got there was an overwhelming thought.

He shuddered and went back to sketching. This time, he worked on a basic human shape. It ended up becoming a female, the face distorted in a devilish grin. Dante thought to give it wings, a tail, and clawed feet, but then it would just be another monster.

"Wow, you're both here pretty early." Paige said, making Dante jump.

She approached them from behind, followed closely by Frank. Abraham waved in greeting, just as friendly as he'd been with Dante. Paige sat down beside Dante and Frank took the seat on her other side. "You sure you wanna join us tonight?" Paige asked the Huntsman, ready to get down to business in that serious way of hers. "Won't your father get upset or something?"

"It is your birthday." Frank pointed out.

"It'll be fine. I haven't had a party since I started attending here, and Perci surprised me this morning with his gift."

Abraham pulled his dark blue tie out of his school jacket and showed it off to them, surprisingly nonchalant about it. Dante could really understand that. While Frank wilted and Paige frowned in concern, neither of them asked after it further. Instead, Paige turned her concern on Dante. "Finished with your assignments already? Or are you stuck on something?" She asked.

Frank leaned back in his seat to better see Dante and joined in with a simple, "Need some help?"

Worry wrinkled Abraham's brow as well. Dante was drawing too much attention. He shut his sketchbook quickly and shook his head. Frank and Abraham mercifully accepted that. Paige

wasn't as easily convinced. "No, you don't need any help or no, you haven't finished?" She asked sternly.

Dante forced himself to reply. "The, um. B-Both, I guess."

He kept his head bowed, refusing to meet Paige's blue eyes. Not the same shade as Aglaé's or Petel's, but brighter than Abraham's grey-blue. Paige tossed her head back in exasperation, another emotion Dante was familiar with. "Well, it's your work either way."

"How exactly are we planning on investigating the towers, anyway?" Abraham asked, taking the pressure off of Dante so he could breathe. "They're supposed to be locked during normal school operation, correct?"

"Have they ever been unlocked?" Frank asked.

Paige smiled, a secretive hint to it. "Come on, let's get some supper. We can talk about it while we eat."

Frank whined as Paige stood. Abraham stood as well and said, "Fair enough."

Paige glanced to Dante, then left with Abraham to the line forming as the food was served. They trusted Frank. And, for some reason, they trusted Dante as well. Frank grinned over at Dante, amicable enough, and asked, "Waiting for Vitayev and the others?"

Frank had lively green eyes, always bright with an infectious energy. There was also the issue of trolls amongst the line, but Dante wasn't willing to try pointing them out ever again.

No one else could see these things. It was meant to be this way.

Frank seemed satisfied with Dante's nod and pulled out some papers filled with scribbles. His science work, probably. Dante stared fixedly at his shut notebook. He could go back to his catalogue of monsters, ignore his schoolwork, and sink further into his own crazy world. But a babbling artist did not make for a good companion.

He shoved his sketchbook away in his bag. He could finish some other time, when there weren't so many eyes there to judge him as incorrect. The more incorrect he was, the angrier the shadows got and the more in danger he was of losing a piece of himself. Most likely his head or his heart. The Queen always demanded more of those. Nothing else appeased that hunger.

"Hey." Frank spoke up, making Dante jump. "Don't take Philips' anger at face value. She worries about you, Vicario."

Frank was a kind soul. This wasn't something that could be waved away with simple reassurances. Dante mumbled, "Thanks, Ernest."

"Um. You're welcome? I guess."

A sharp stab against Dante's back made him wince. He didn't need to look to know that it was an imp wielding a pitchfork, cackling in glee at his pain. He just had to ignore it.

Frank went back to his papers and, for a minute, Dante took deep breaths to calm the agitated demons swirling around his head. He really had to stop thinking on them. He could only pretend the panic and stress didn't come from these self-inflicted fears for so long.

Paige and Abraham returned with their trays of food and Frank hopped out of his seat in an instant. "You're back, finally!"

In mock exasperation, Paige said, "We weren't even gone that long."

Mimicking her accent remarkably well, Frank draped an arm over his head dramatically and leaned farther back than was safe. "Oh, but you were! Those cruel supper lines are just a warzone and Vicario and I were stuck here, watching your belongings out of obligation for our dear mates off at the frontlines of the battle. How were we to know when you would return? If you would return at all?"

Abraham laughed, though he tried and failed to hide it. Paige gestured towards the line, within full view of the table they were sitting at. "I don't know, Ernest. How could you possibly have seen us through all that drama you got there?"

Frank gasped in an overblown act of being offended and leaned onto the table with both hands. "How dare you belittle our watch. Vicario and I would've waited for hours. For days!"

Paige, unable to keep up the act, devolved into laughter. Dante stared at the table, wondering if Frank was serious about that. After all, a teacher would probably come in at some point to drag them to their dorms or to classes, right? Abraham clapped and said, "You should seriously consider Theatre for your extra next year. Chops like those shouldn't be wasted in the labs."

Frank bowed to them both. "Alas, I must stay true to my first love. But maybe if they won't let me take two labs or something, I might."

Abraham and Paige both booed playfully, which Frank responded to by sticking his tongue out at them. Then he left to stand in line for supper. Paige and Abraham busied themselves with eating and working on their own school things. Leaving Dante as the odd one out. He glanced over the rest of the cafeteria a bit too frantically, but still no Petel.

Maybe sometimes Dante relied too much on the other boy. For some reason, the spectres avoided him and Dante appreciated the reprieve. Even if dealing with his overly friendly mannerisms made Dante want to scream, and this time not out of fear.

"How is the theatre class here, anyway?" Paige asked Abraham, making sure to speak only once her mouth was clear of food. Her sudden voice had made Dante jump again. "I was

interested in taking it, but worried it might not be as useful as I want it to be for my career plans."

Abraham chewed thoughtfully, then swallowed before replying. "It's not terrible. Miss Dogwood really knows how to wrangle the class together for our productions. Though, the presence of that blasted vampire really drags down the whole experience."

Abraham sneered as he thought about 'that vampire', Niculaie Vladimirescu. Dante wilted in his seat, pulling half-heartedly at the edge of the table with just his fingers. Paige looked more intrigued than she probably meant to as she asked, "Oh, really? Shame, that."

"You don't have to tell me." Abraham scoffed. "It seems Miss Dogwood got the wrong idea about our relationship, saying we have 'great chemistry' and always casting us against each other every chance she has. Can you imagine? A prolific hunter like myself having to work together with a foul creature of the night like him? The very one whom I've sworn to hunt down until my dying breath?"

"No, not at all, please tell me more." Paige said, perhaps a touch too intense.

Abraham didn't seem to notice and geared up to begin his diatribe (and, oh, it was quite the diatribe. Dante had been trapped in it a few times when Petel pulled it out of him or when he would just go off seemingly unprovoked in the middle of lunch), but, thankfully, Petel sat down on Dante's other side and asked, "This again?"

"Ugh, this again." Levy said, rolling his eyes as he sat on Abraham's left.

Sonya took the seat to Abraham's right while Kalyuga took the remaining seat beside Levy and said, "Let's not get into that, please."

Abraham grumbled, though shut his mouth agreeably. Dante was both relieved to see that the music crew had made it and disheartened at the fact that they had already conquered the supper line. Now he'd have to stand by himself, susceptible to the famine wasps.

Petel frowned at the empty space in front of Dante on the table, then slid his tray over slightly. "Share?"

"Petel, no." Paige interjected, quick as ever. Petel's frown fell to a pout, making Levy laugh. "We all need to get our own food. Remember what happens when you skip meals around here?"

Petel made a soft 'oh' noise and aimed an apologetic frown at Dante. "Sorry."

Dante let out a shuddery, slow breath. "It's. It's okay."



He stood, just as Frank returned, and left to go stand in line. Why had he ever talked to Petel in the first place? These were nice people. They didn't deserve being this close to danger. Looking into this rumour would only yield a painful truth none of them were ready to face. Or Dante would burn them and he'd end up hating himself even more.

They were good people. Their only mistake lay in placing any trust in Dante himself.

As he settled into the line for food, a deep and bored voice spoke up behind him. "Well, well. Look who it is."

Dante jumped and whirled around to see not a chimera mimicking human speech, but another student. Frank's roommate, Jonathan Wallace, to be more specific.

"Got dragged along by your group, too, huh?" Jonathan asked.

It was certainly meant to be a relatable jab they could share in. Unfortunately, Jonathan's black eyes that faded to grey at the edges were the exact opposite of reassuring in every way. The subtle two-tone to them was telling of the second face Jonathan kept hidden on the back of his head, beneath his thick black hair.

After not getting any sort of response, he exhaled heavily and mumbled, "Whatever. Line's moving."

Dante hurriedly faced forward to continue waiting in line. His movements were probably too erratic to be considered normal. Then again, when had he ever been able to consider himself normal? What even counted as normal?

Not a single student in this school could call themselves normal. And, whether they knew it or not, they could all blame Dante for that.

The two standing in front of him in line, he noticed, were Yasha and Vladimir. They griped to each other about "the wolf" (or, rather, Yasha griped and Vladimir listened impatiently) as they collected their food, then left to sit somewhere in the outside seating. Dante accepted his food with a quiet, "Thanks", nodded in parting to Jonathan, then walked back to where Petel and them were seated.

He'd have to root around for maggots or rotten bits while the others weren't watching. Meal time was generally the worst part of the day because of that. And it happened thrice, every day. At least this was better than falling down the Rabbit Hole every other day.

Petel nodded in greeting as he took his seat while Paige offered a tired sort of smile. Frank, meanwhile, grinned and cheekily said, "I see you've returned victorious from the front lines, judging from your spoils and the look of shell shock in your eyes."

"Ernest, please." Paige shushed Frank gently, then turned to Dante. "We were just discussing our plan of attack for tonight."

"Which I'll be unable to attend." Kalyuga said, sheepish. "Sorry, my parents said to come straight home after eating."

Levy gave Kalyuga's back a reassuring pat and said, "Not your fault, Duckie, no worries."

Sonya gave a short, resigned exhale. "Count me out as well. I'd prefer to not get in trouble so close to the English exam."

Petel looked up sharply. "You're not coming?"

Sonya shrugged, shrinking in on himself. "Sorry. Make sure you stay safe, okay?"

Though crestfallen, Petel nodded. Levy slumped against the table in defeat. "Guess I'll sit this one out too, if both Birdie and Duckie ain't gonna be there."

Kalyuga nudged Levy's shoulder, a comforting gesture. Sonya, on the other hand, rolled his eyes at Levy's reasoning. "I told you to stop calling me that."

"C'mon, Birdie, it's the perfect nickname for ya!" Levy bounced off the table with his usual mischievous glee, throwing his arms in the air and knocking into Kalyuga. At least all this provided an adequate distraction for Dante to pick through his food in peace. "Sorry 'bout that. You okay?"

Kalyuga nodded, too busy giggling to reply properly. Sonya stood from the table and said, "Anyway. I'm going to continue practicing today's piece in the comfort of my room while you lot go gallivanting in restricted areas past curfew. See you for breakfast tomorrow."

Petel whined softly as Sonya left. A sentiment which Levy echoed as he leaned too far back in his seat and yowled, "Why you gotta be like that, Birdie? I'm just tryin' to be a friend here!"

Kalyuga laughed heartily at this and Abraham, Paige, and Frank couldn't help but join in. Levy grabbed his tray and raced after Sonya. Those two always seemed to be at odds and ends with one another, Sonya as serious as his black eyes while Levy had the green eyes of a cat. Maybe they tolerated one another for Petel's sake. Dante couldn't understand why they went through all that trouble when it might be easier to admit their personalities clashed and go their separate ways.

Then again, Dante didn't understand why anyone put up with him for more than absolutely necessary.

Once their laughter petered out, Paige rested her elbow on the table and fixed Kalyuga with a plaintive stare. "Sure you can't stay for just a little bit longer?"

"I really am sorry." Kalyuga apologised. Paige deflated in defeat and Kalyuga seemed to copy that in agreement. "I so wanted to know the answer to the mystery of the towers, too. You'll just have to tell me your findings tomorrow."

The two perked up in determination and Paige said, "You bet. Vicario, you done?"

Dante flinched at the suddenness of being addressed and swallowed thickly. "What? Um. Yes, but."

"Great." Paige stood, grabbing her tray. "Let's get going now, shall we?"

Frank, Abraham, and Petel stood as well, the air of anticipation and excitement flooding in around them. If they weren't careful, they'd attract the bug breakers with all that adventure lust. Kalyuga laughed as she stood and the group left to deposit their trays and trash at the receptacles by the cafeteria doors. Dante jumped up to follow them, nearly tripping in his rush. "A-Actually, um. Do you think. Uh, would it be okay if."

Petel, quick as a flash, moved to grab his wrist. "You're not getting out of this."

Dante looked down at Petel's hand gripping his, then turned his gaze up at Petel in disbelief. "But. Y-You, but."

The distress was too thick, running through his whole body as if replacing his blood. Petel's determined expression faltered and he avoided looking at Dante. "I know, I said. But we need you on the team." Gathering the nerve, Petel turned back to stare directly into Dante's eyes. "I need you."

A rush of extra warmth welled up in Dante's throat. The fact that Petel, the lone wolf who always seemed able to tackle any problem headlong by himself, could admit such a thing was startling. That Petel considered Dante worthy of that closeness was high praise in and of itself.

Here they were, placing their trust in Dante. This time, Petel had managed to make it sound like a good thing.

Against his better judgement, Dante nodded. Petel grinned, a little embarrassed and a lot pleased, and the two hurried to catch up with Paige and the others.

They walked Kalyuga to the school gate, bid her safe travels, then headed for their true target. The stone walls that surrounded the campus enclosed them in their own little world and it was odd to not see Officer Riviera at his post this late. The sun had nearly finished setting, giving them an appropriate amount of darkness to take cover in. With the growing darkness came the

more dangerous spectres, the ones who weren't afraid to rough Dante up more than the rules allowed. He swallowed back that apprehension and continued on.

Petel and the others were here. As long as there were witnesses, nothing could touch him.

Paige brought them to the left side tower and pulled a necklace of twine with a few keys strung on it from her jacket pocket. Abraham leaned against the side of the tower in an attempt to block Paige from the view of the school, only they were the same height and Dante was pretty sure it wouldn't work at all. Frank stood close to Paige, keeping a lookout behind them. "Think your skeleton key'll work?" He asked.

"Hasn't failed me yet."

Paige stuck her tongue out as she concentrated, fiddling the thing around in the door's keyhole. Petel watched her work in anticipation and Dante glanced about nervously. All of that previous dread seeped back into his mind.

They were going to get caught. If not caught, then what they'd find inside the tower would kill them. If they weren't immediately dead, then the school would probably find out about the trespassing and expel them. If not expelled, then the school would certainly notify their parents or legal guardians and Dante would be classified as a failure, be recalled and then liquefied and rebooted. And that was if his parents were in a generous mood.

Sensing the growing unease, Petel asked, "You almost done?"

"Sure am." Paige grinned in triumph, her eyes practically sparkling, as the key turned in the lock. They all stared in awe as Paige eased both doors open, allowing them entry. Then she rushed them inside. "C'mon, gawk once we're safe."

She closed the doors swiftly and quietly once they'd all been shoved inside. The room's lights flickered on, probably using a motion sensor. That explained why some students reported seeing them on before. But the rest of the room wasn't what Dante had been expecting.

Some sort of computer was set up in the middle of the room, the keyboard and monitor much bigger than any of the models used in the computer lab. Both the monitor and the keyboard seemed to be set up on top of the modem, as well. An odd choice that made it look like some sort of experimental prototype his parents might come up with. A first draft to focus on processing power, able to be modified later into a more efficient, more compact design. The chair at the computer looked a little dusty, but had cushions and was firmly bolted to the floor.

A little separated from this computer console was a large, white tube that stretched a fair ways above Dante's head. The thing had doors, judging by the design, which were currently closed. A few thick wires ran from it to the computer console, implying that they were connected somehow.

Dante was drawn to this white tube enough so that he pulled free of Petel's grip. He placed his hand against the cold metal. It was much colder than his skin. Then again, most things were by default.

Frank and Abraham, who were close behind Dante judging from the sound of their footsteps, stared around the room with wide eyes and slack jaws. Paige, of course, was drawn to the computer at the centre and Petel joined her in examining the seat, the keyboard, and the modem. A light flashed periodically, but that was the only sign of life from the console.

Paige's voice echoed through the tower as she spoke up. "I've never seen—"

Every single one of them flinched from the unexpected noise, including herself. Frank sent her an exasperated look, which she replied with a quick wave of one hand in an apologetic gesture, the other covering her mouth as she winced. Abraham snapped up straight and faced Dante. "Vicario, do you perhaps recognise any of this?"

"Hey, yeah." Frank joined in, just as excited. "Is this some kind of outmoded tech, maybe? Or something a competitor abandoned since your parents won that race?"

"I-I." Dante pulled his hand back from the tube quickly, as if it had shocked him. He backed away and continued stuttering, "I don't really. Um, I don't. I-I don't."

The orange in the corner of the room caught his eye, standing out against the grey of the walls. It was another tube, similar to the white one in the centre, only the doors of this one were open. Inside, the space looked cramped and dark, but what drew his attention was the plate at the bottom. It looked like some kind of opaque glass, like a floor light, and resting around the perimeter on top of that was a metal band with blue strips of fibreglass all around the outside. The walls on the inside of the tube looked grooved, too, a track or belt of some sort to allow that band to move along them.

Flashes and stinging. Pulling him down, down, into darkness. A shadow, a voice, giggling at his discomfort. Panic and red and flames.

The room was too silent. The emptiness just rose and rose, all the way up to the ceiling, which had to be several stories high. Dante's hands shook, his breathing becoming quicker and shallow. He tried to find Paige or Petel, but only saw more orange.

There were four orange tubes in total, one for each corner of the room. Scanners, his mind reminded him. One for each of them.

Dante went to say that he'd had enough, that he'd like to go back to his room now and pretend like this nightmare wasn't happening, but whispering voices filtered through his pounding heart to his ears. A black shape climbed out of one of the tubes and lolled its head around from behind its back, revealing blank white eyes and a stapled grin.

And Dante's body refused to move.

Another one emerged from the next tube, then another and another. All of them grinning, all of them shadows, all of them a reminder as to why he knew this whole expedition was such a bad idea. Their whispers echoed around him, menacing and gleeful as they crowded in, reaching for him with their spindly arms, their claws where they had them, their black blood dripping from their faces and chopped off limbs and leaving trails along the floor.

Then there was a hand on his shoulder.

"Dante?"

Unable to stop himself, Dante screamed.

## Chapter 3: Tutorial

Petel jumped back, withdrawing his hand. The shadows were gone, but Dante couldn't get himself to stop screaming. Paige rushed over as well, hesitant to go directly to his side, and Dante held his hands to his head, trying to get himself to stop screaming.

They didn't like his noise. They hated it when he drew too much attention to himself. But they were here and this was happening and he had to get himself to stop screaming in spite of all those facts.

"Is he gonna be okay?" Frank asked worriedly.

Frank. Dante could hear other voices again. Before Paige or Petel could respond (or even Abraham; right, Abraham was there too, it was his birthday and Dante was making everything terrible as usual), Dante cut everything else off with a shaky, "I-I'm fine! Really!"

Hearing him say coherent words and getting himself to finally stop screaming did make Paige and Petel both deflate in relief. Frank, too, gave a short sigh. Persistent, Paige asked, "Are you sure?"

"We can get you outta here if you're not comfortable with this anymore." Petel said.

That he cared for Dante's comfort at all just made that embarrassed heat crawl up Dante's throat again. This group really thought themselves as friends. They thought of Dante as a friend. Gulping thickly and forcing himself into this terrible, no-good decision, Dante reassured them further with a hurried, "No. I'll be o-okay. It was just — um. Sh-Shadows."

He saw some shadows and got spooked. A believable and truthful explanation as an odd combo. Petel drew close again and took his hand once more with a resolute, "Okay, but. Don't force yourself."

After another moment of unsure silence, Paige went over to investigate the computer in the middle of the room. Frank and Abraham had drawn over to it as well. Dante held fast to Petel's hand, the only lifeline he had in this place. As much as he didn't want to be doing this, to start this whole mess, at least Hell no longer existed. And he trusted Petel to make everything else tolerable.

Paige crouched down by the modem and trailed her fingers along the metal. "No markings." She concluded. "Very curious."

Abraham went over to one of the orange tubes and half-stood inside to inspect it. "These tubes have no branding, either." He announced.

Frank crossed his arms and said, "And unless we open up the modem, we can't really check the parts. Whoever made this stuff, seems like they wanted to hide their tracks."

Dante flinched, but kept holding onto Petel's hand. Paige smiled and said, "Guess there's nothing else left but to wake this thing up."

She climbed into the chair, tapped the spacebar on the keyboard twice, and, after emitting a soft whirring noise, the modem booted to life and the screen lit up. Frank, Abraham, and Petel were drawn over instantly to watch as it awoke. Paige even seemed as surprised as they were.

"It was just asleep. Huh."

"This isn't like any interface I've ever seen." Frank deflated, disappointment creeping into his tone.

"What even is this?" Abraham asked, leaning in to scrutinise it and very much getting in Paige's way. "It's just a huge mess of numbers, letters, and unreadable data flying by. Who could understand this?"

"Um, excuse me, Fourth." Paige said, shoving Abraham out of her way. "I think I can, actually."

Frank perked up. "Woah, really? What's it look like to you, then?"

"Command prompts. Direct code input." She said. After a moment, she drew back in sheepishness. "It's. Y'know. Not entirely that out there. Especially for a developer."

Petel smirked over at her. "Hacking. Right?"

Paige laughed uneasily and said, in a sing-song tone, "I can neither affirm nor deny such a guess, else they'd have to seriously consider expelling me."

"Paige, please."

Petel laughed along. Frank, deciding it was best left alone, watched the screen over Paige's shoulder and asked, "So, then, what type of code or functions does it have?"

Paige cleared her throat, gaining her serious tone back. "It says it's linked to those... scanners." She frowned. "Also wants some log-in information, but doesn't look like it's for a traditional user."

Abraham looked around at all of the tubes and ended back on Paige with a frown. "Scanners of what, though? With how big they are, you'd think. A person could fit inside them."



"That's." Paige's eyes darted to the screen, then she started typing rapidly. "It says. It's a virtual reality game. So. Yeah. Looks like it does indeed scan people."

Frank, incredulous, asked, "Are you for real right now?"

"That's just what it's telling me." She shrugged in reply as she sat back, finished typing. "Seems like it's prepped to handle some new players or something. The program itself seems pretty simple, so we could test it out if anyone's brave enough."

Abraham tried to say something to that, but came up with a blank. Frank, too, was struck speechless by such a wild claim, and Dante continued being withdrawn and quiet. Petel looked over at one of the orange tubes.

Just from those, Dante had screamed. Petel hadn't known fear since he'd accepted the wolf terrorising him.

He raised his free hand and said, "I volunteer."

Paige let out a heavy exhale while both Frank and Dante whirled on him and shouted, "What?"

Abraham, just as concerned, asked, "Is it safe? Should we be messing around with this stuff when we don't know anything about it?"

"System looks fine to me." Paige said with a shake of her head. "Should've figured you'd volunteer, Petel."

"D-Don't go!" Dante said, tugging slightly against Petel's hand and growing ever warmer in his distress. "It's gonna — You'll be — It isn't s-safe!"

"I'll be fine." Petel reassured him. Then, smiling at the silly thought, said, "I'm a wolf."

Even though Dante continued looking distressed and Abraham frowned at him in confusion, Petel pulled his hand from Dante's and went to stand inside one of the orange scanners. His boots made a pleasing clunking sound against the panel on the floor. Frank looked to Paige, threading and unthreading his fingers, and asked, "Are you sure about this?"

"Mostly. Besides, do you wanna try dragging him outta there?"

She fixed Frank with a look, who deflated and gave an affirmative, "Good point there."

"Just because you're a wolf doesn't mean you're protected from harm." Abraham said, finally sorting out his thoughts enough to make a statement.

"You really are just okay with him being a wolf, huh?" Frank asked, side-eyeing their Huntsman.

The tube hummed lowly as it lit up inside, the doors closing and distracting Petel from the rest of the conversation. The bar around the bottom spun and rose around him, emitting even more light. Petel had to close his eyes and just listen as the thing whirred around him, stinging slightly as if zapping him with static electricity. A lot less unpleasant than he expected, honestly.

Then it was as if the floor gave out from beneath him and he fell through an endless black space.

After that, the world loaded in around him, bit by bit, forming a flat, nondescript area with no walls, no colour in the sky, and a foggy horizon that stretched far beyond sight. Petel took in the environment for a second before Paige's voice echoed out above him, seeming to come from somewhere in the sky. "Petel, are you in there? Are you alright? Say something!"

"It a-ate him!" Dante shouted.

Obediently, Petel called up, "I'm here, I'm fine."

Right in his ear, as if he were wearing a headset or something, he heard Frank and Abraham both exclaim wordlessly in surprise. Then Abraham said, his tone full of awe, "His voice came from the computer."

"Is this for real?" Frank asked, going from amazed to giddy excitement. "Oh my god, it really is some kind of virtual reality system."

Her tone thick with relief, Paige said, "I'm glad you're still with us, Petel. And, yes, it seems that it wasn't lying when it said. I-I wasn't aware that this sort of technology even existed."

That was certainly an understatement. The transition had been so smooth that Petel only just realised that his body was completely different now. His hands had become like crude dog paws, though still human enough to grab things, and his whole body was covered in light grey fur. He had pointed ears and a tail, a snout with sharp carnivorous teeth, only wore a torn pair of white shorts, and his legs were that of a wolf's hind legs. He dropped to a crouch and, yes, his arms had been elongated enough to allow him to run comfortably on all fours.

All this time, he'd longed to be able to look more like the wolf he was on the inside. It was as if the system had recognised that and granted him this desire.

"Player detected." A robotic voice sounded out from above, similar to how Paige's had. Petel quickly whirled around in search of the speaker, immediately on guard. There was no one, however. "Profile recognised as: Wolf. Proceeding with Tutorial protocol."

The area fizzled slightly, then a being materialised in the space. Petel frowned at it a moment. Tutorial? Was this really just some sort of game? He raised his head towards the sky, a stand-in for being able to properly address Paige, and called up, "Hey, something happened. A weird voice said 'Tutorial' and now there's this weird tiger here."

"Tutorial?" Paige, Frank, and Abraham all echoed.

"Tiger?" Dante asked, perfectly contrasting the others.

The tiger had a fully formed head and legs, but its spine, ribcage, and tail were the only visible bits forming its body. Its face and paws had a dusting of purple, but its fur was white with black stripes. Even on its ribcage, the jagged bones alternated between black and white. It looked intriguing, like a creature Dante might draw.

"It worked. It actually works." Abraham said, oddly giddy. "Philips, load me in as well, I want to see this for myself."

"Oh, me, too! Please, Philips?" Frank joined in, totally eager now that there seemed to be no danger.

"Alright, alright, I'll try." Paige replied. The exasperation in her voice meant she was probably rolling her eyes at them. "Petel, from what I can see of where you're at, I think it wants you to fight that thing. Y'know, like a real tutorial or something. Also, we clearly didn't hear the voice that you did. Dante, do you want to go in, too?"

Dante gave a quiet groan and Petel hummed to himself as he faced off with this tiger creature. He didn't really need to be told how to fight like a wolf, but the practice might be useful.

He lunged at the thing with a slash of his claws and it hopped back. It growled, a strange mix of artificial and realness to its noise, then it charged with a swipe of its own claws. Petel dodged back, but tripped on his feet (he was definitely used to having shoes that didn't slide so much against the floor) and the tiger's claws caught his knee.

He hissed as the pain shot through him. That had felt real. Paige made some noise of surprise as Petel got back up and retaliated on instinct, using the part of himself he knew how best to wield.

"You have a health bar. You have stats and a full player profile." Paige muttered to herself in awe. "This is just some game someone made with this too-advanced technology."

Petel would've replied, but his mouth was currently full with this tiger's bones. His sharper, more powerful teeth crunched down on the tiger's spine as it yowled and thrashed, trying to throw him off. He simply bit down harder, snapping the joints, and swatted at the tiger's face with his free claws. Where he damaged it, its form seemed to burst into pixels of light and fuzzed out of focus.

When he couldn't hold on any longer, he tossed it off to the side. Its body dissolved into fragments that disappeared into the air. Petel watched it, excitement coursing through him at the surreal sight. He hadn't expected it to be this exhilarating.

The robotic voice came back over, saying, "Tutorial completed. Returning player Wolf to level select."

Petel didn't get a chance to argue, as he was dropped into the black abyss again. He could hear Paige, at least, as she said, "If I'm reading this right, you've completed that Tutorial, Petel."

"Yeah." Petel nodded, more so out of habit than any usefulness. He hoped Paige could hear him as well. "How're Frank and Abraham?"

There was a few seconds of silence, in which he wondered why he wasn't able to hear either Frank or Abraham's responses, or even Dante, whom he was sure had stayed behind, before Paige finally answered with the most tired tone, "Figuring out their own tutorials, it seems."

The next area loaded in around Petel and he landed on a transparent pathway. It ran in a circle and connected four white spheres, all of them big enough to jump through. In the middle was another sphere, identical to the others, but with no pathway leading out to it. Dante hopped to his feet, startled enough to cry out, "Lupo!"

Petel's whole countenance perked up at the sight of his roommate. "Hey, you joined us."

He ambled over, intending to fully inspect Dante's new outfit. It seemed like simple pyjamas, red and with a yellow fire symbol on the chest that had a black core. Dante backed away and smacked against some sort of invisible barrier at the edge of the path, giving a desperate, "S-Stay back!"

Amused, Petel asked, "Why the reaction? I'm not gonna hurt you, I promised."

Dante bowed his head, fidgeting with his hands. Petel followed his gaze down and noted the fire surrounding him.

"Ah." He said.

A ring of fire perfectly sat around Dante's bare feet, isolating him from letting anyone get too close. That seemed about as on-point for his personality as the wolf was for Petel.

That settled that. Petel's ears drooped, as did his tail, and he relented for now. This new sensation had to be explored, anyway. He reached up to paw at the ears and, yes, they were definitely his. He tugged lightly at them and winced at the pull, confirming that they were also very much connected to his skin. He slid his hand — no, his paw — down to the side of his head and found that he no longer had human ears there. The fur on his chest covered his whole body and he didn't appear to have genitals at all.

He looked down the path, towards one of the spheres at the end of what was reachable. Then he took off towards it and Dante squeaked in surprise after him.

"Paige, where are we?" Petel asked.

She was silent a minute, then tentatively replied, "A level select hub, Petel? That's what the system's telling me."

Petel drew up in front of the sphere, impressed by how big it actually was. It seemed like the entrance to a room, inviting and mysterious. Paige gave an aggravated exhale and the noise caught his attention, his ears perking right back up.

"Ernest, I'm the one operating the system. If I somehow got myself inside, there'd be no one to get you lot out afterwards. And, van Helsing, please, you're going to get booted if you continue being so reckless."

Petel smiled to himself at the thought of Frank's enthusiasm and Abraham's battle lust. He pressed his paw against the white sphere and the word 'locked' forced its way into his mind. He pulled back quickly, shuddering, his ears flattening on top of his head. Dante, who'd followed him, asked a quiet, "Is it not open?"

Petel shook his head. "Locked."

"I'd hold off on that for now, Petel. Everyone might need to be there for that to open up." Paige said, making Dante jump. Petel was a bit caught off-guard as well; the way her voice echoed above them made her sound like one of the teachers. "Also, okay, van Helsing's finished now, so he should be joining you soon. Ernest, perhaps if you stopped screaming and actually focused, you'd be finished by now, too."

Petel frowned up at the sky, as did Dante. True to Paige's word, and much sooner than Petel had expected, Abraham was loaded into the area and dropped onto the path in the middle. Near where Petel had first landed. Petel grinned, his ears and tail perking up with him, and he hurried over to get a good look at how Abraham appeared inside this game thing.

Abraham grumbled to himself as he stood, flapping out his long brown trench coat. He wore a hat similar to the one he'd shown Petel that, apparently, had belonged to the van Helsing family for generations, a turtleneck, and boots with his pants tucked into them. There was a rifle strapped to his back, two white crosses connected to where his pants pockets had to be, and a knife stowed in the ammo belt draped across his chest. A woefully human Huntsman and another sensible transformation.

"My father might question my efforts had he seen that. But this game is rather strange in its rules." Abraham tapped the brim of his hat with his hand, then turned to address Dante and Petel. "Vitayev, Vicario, did that voice call you something weird as well? Because I'm not sure —"

He finally saw Petel and immediately jumped back, banging against the invisible barrier. Petel laughed and gestured at himself with a paw. "I'm a wolf."

"Sorry you had a-a rough time of it." Dante offered in sympathy.

"Yes. Well. Thank you both." Abraham cleared his throat awkwardly, averting his gaze, and continued on as casually as he could. "As I was saying, this voice called me 'Professor'. Which, I feel my nickname around the school is more fitting than something like that."

"Is that so? Is your outfit emblazoned with the number or Roman numerals, Fourth?" Paige snickered above them.

Petel smiled over at Dante, hoping to share in the joke, but Dante frowned in confusion. Abraham grimaced up at the sky and said, "You know which one I meant, Philips."

"Sorry, I had to in Ernest's stead." She cleared out the rest of her giggles, then said, "Which, he's finished now, so he'll be there too in a moment."

Petel's tail wagged in anticipation. Dante looked over towards where Petel and Abraham had landed, also looking eager to greet their friend. In an admirable display of self-control, Abraham asked Petel, "You said you had to face some sort of tiger, correct?"

"Yeah." Petel nodded in affirmation.

"I had to battle an odd alligator." Abraham said, crossing his arms over his chest in thought. "Vicario, what was it you had to fight?"

"What did it call you?" Petel asked.

Dante panicked under both of their gazes, taking a step back. Typical, really. Frank dropped in just then, saving Dante from answering as both Abraham and Petel were distracted. "Ernest, nice of you to join us." Abraham greeted the other boy warmly.

Frank stood and straightened himself up to his tallest (though he was still shorter than even Paige and Abraham), placing his fists against his hips as he huffed. "I'm not really a Doktor. I mean, I want to be a pathologist, but these powers make me more of a necromancer than a doctor."

He looked over at them and blinked in surprise. Petel was sure he mirrored that sentiment, as Frank now wore a grey hooded cloak with purple lining. A black bodysuit beneath covered his hands and legs, even going all the way up his neck, and his boots matched his cloak. He had a gun holster belt that was a lighter grey which held green, red, and purple magazine clips and an oddly modern pistol. Pulsating purple lines crawled up his face from his neck and made his green eyes appear more vibrant.

After a good minute or two passed, Frank pointed at Petel and proudly proclaimed, "You're a wolf!"

Petel ended up grinning as well. "I'm a wolf."

"Who doesn't believe in shirts, apparently." Abraham grumbled, rolling his eyes.

Frank moved on to Dante, who flinched back as he said, "And you're a fire! That's fitting for you."

The fires rose with Dante's agitation, then settled again as he nodded in response. That looked neat. Before Petel could get a closer look, Abraham loudly said, "Now that we're all here, we should see if we can figure out what we're supposed to be doing."

"You can try one of the levels?" Paige suggested.

Frank took a look around the area, then dashed off towards one of the spheres and said, "Let's play!"

"W-Wait!" Dante protested.

Both Petel and Abraham started after Frank in an attempt to stop him, but he had already reached the sphere. Abraham shook his head and asked, "What are the results of your experiment?"

Frank slowly backed away from the sphere, unsettled. "It's, um. It's locked."

Petel patted Frank's shoulder in a hopefully reassuring manner and Dante gave a short sigh in relief. Paige made a soft noise confusion, then said, "So it's not that we need four people? That's weird."

"Perhaps we need to find the keys?" Abraham said.

Petel frowned around the empty space, their restrictive path, and asked, "Where would we look for them?"

They all went quiet in thought for a moment. Frank then raised his hand hesitantly and said, "Maybe we should try again later? I'm kinda exhausted after that tutorial."

Dante kept his head bowed, twiddling his fingers together nervously. His fires stayed low, as nervous as him in a weird way. How could Petel determine that so easily? He and Abraham shared a quick look and Abraham shrugged. "I wouldn't be opposed to heading home now." He said.

Petel gave Frank's shoulder a final pat and said, "We'll figure this out tomorrow."

"Give me a mo' to figure this out, it shouldn't take too long." Paige said distractedly.

They stood there for a good minute, waiting in silence and staring up at the sky. Finally, Frank asked Dante, "What was your tutorial like? I had to work with this weird sphere thing."

Again, Dante stepped back in a panic. "Uh. Um."

"Dante didn't get a tutorial." Paige said.

Immediately, Abraham and Frank both gave a surprised, "What?"

Dante shrunk back further, holding his hands to his chest and hiding beneath his bangs. Paige said, "Yeah, the system just loaded him directly into the hub area you're all in now. It was kinda weird, but maybe the system couldn't run three tutorials simultaneously."

"Maybe." Abraham relented.

"So you didn't get to hear that weird voice call you anything." Frank said more optimistically.

Dante nodded slowly, calming down somewhat. The fires around his feet seemed agitated, but didn't crackle like a normal fire. In fact, they didn't seem to make any noise at all. Petel looked up towards the sky and asked, "How's it going with getting us out of here?"

"Almost got it." Paige answered, easing their concern. "The system gave me a wall of text because, well, whoever created this process must not have known what they were doing since the log-out procedure is more complicated than it really needs to be."

Curiosity sparked in Frank's eyes. "What's it say?"

"The command itself requires a lot more executions, for one. For another, it says there are limitations on where I'm able to manually log you out from." Paige said, her voice authoritative like a teacher. She dropped to annoyance, however, as she continued. "It also says there's a limit of one log-in and log-out per day, which just. Sounds arbitrary for the sake of being arbitrary."

Petel could almost see her grimace and chuckled to himself at the image. Abraham shrugged again, an automatic gesture to match his tone. "Perhaps there's a good reason for those limitations? This technology seems even more advanced than the enhancers used during the Great War."

"Weren't those outlawed due to the damages they caused?" Frank asked.

Again, Dante flinched back. Petel would have asked, but Paige's voice broke in with a foreboding, "Perhaps that's why this was locked in here. Maybe those rumours really did have some truth to them."



"R-Right!" Dante agreed, adamant despite his hands shaking from nervousness. "Everything here's l-locked, and the tech m-might be dangerous! We should l-leave it alone and s-stop messing with things."

"And leave it a mystery?" Petel asked, offended.

"Anyway, I think I've got the gist of this." Paige cut in before a real argument could break out.

Dante bowed his head again, glaring at the path beneath their feet. Frank frowned over at Abraham, but the floor seemed to drop out from under them again and Petel fell into that black abyss once more. It tugged and dragged at his body in both an uncomfortable and heavy manner as he fought against it. The moment he closed his eyes and surrendered to the fall, it stopped pulling so much and, all too suddenly, he was back on the ground, inside the orange tube, back in reality.

He looked down at his chest and arms and a sinking disappointment twisted up his gut. Following that, exhaustion. As if he'd been winded by a swift kick to the chest.

The doors opened and he stumbled out, holding an arm over his stomach. Frank and Abraham similarly stumbled out of their scanners, looking just as disoriented as him, and Dante stumbled in his haste to exit his.

Paige swivelled around in the chair to look at all of them in concern, asking, "How's everyone feeling? It said the first log-in might be hard on the body, since it's basically breaking you down into coding to upload into the system and then building you back up once you're logged out."

"That is illegal tech." Frank noted.

"Fine, but tired." Petel said.

"Are you gonna b-be okay getting home?" Dante asked Abraham.

Abraham waved him off as he headed for the door, then left. Though still concerned, Paige tapped a few keys on the computer to shut off the monitor, then stood and followed him out. It had only been a couple of hours or so, but the skies were completely dark with the promising chill of winter in the air. Petel was pretty sure that, if they hadn't eaten previously, they'd all be starving.

He also noticed how different it was to walk on two human legs than the more wolf-like ones he'd been granted. It was more familiar, sure, but a large part of him yearned to be that form again. The wolf part of him, neither male nor female.

He couldn't, though. He was painfully, regrettably an ordinary human.

Once inside their room, Dante tuck'd himself into his dark green blanket and Petel collapsed onto his own bed. For several minutes, the two remained in silence. Petel couldn't just pass out, he had to brush his teeth. Grandpa Bassoon always stressed that healthy teeth made for easier eating. Keeping the wolf at peak form made for easier biting.

Not that Petel was allowed to bite all that often. Even if the urge was sometimes so powerful he had to clamp down on his own hand.

"Are you. Um." Dante spoke up, rousing Petel from his doze. "Are you serious? About continuing to investigate?"

An easy answer. "Yeah."

"Why?"

Dante poked his head out of his blanket to stare at Petel. Something about his gaze was harsher than usual. More upset. Petel sat himself up and said, "It's interesting. Don't you think so?"

After another few minutes, Dante curled back into his blanket. "I guess. It's started. Can't just stop it now."

He resigned himself to adventure. All that curiosity and not an ounce of it to spend on this. Petel grimaced, then stood as he said, "Then you don't mind if we go back and check it again tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

Dante popped up in a panic, but Petel had already left the room.

## Chapter 4: The Artificial Prince

"Are you sure you're all okay?" Sonya asked as they sat together for breakfast the next morning.

"Yeah, how'd it go?" Levy joined in, leaning forward eagerly. "Was it as cool as the rumours made it out to be? Or as illegal?"

"How familiar are you with the tech of the Great War?" Frank asked, smirking cheekily.

Paige gave an exasperated, "It might be, but so far everyone seems to still be doing fine."

Petel nodded along in agreement, munching away at his croissant sandwich. Dante had already completely separated his to pick out all the rotten bits and held back his protests again. No matter what he told them, they would explore this anyway. They had to now. They'd gone inside the game, stopping it now was as futile as stopping a full-speed train.

"To answer your question, it was some sort of virtual reality game." Paige went on. "The tech itself definitely reminds me of the Vicario Company, but it's way more advanced than anything they have in the works right now."

"A game, huh?" Levy sat back in awe. "That is exciting."

"And, possibly, dangerous." Sonya pointed out, frowning.

"I mean, it's probably not built with any of that tech. That all got destroyed decades ago." Frank said, waving off Sonya's worries. "The fact that it exists at all is incredible. I mean, who makes a game out of stuff that's way beyond anything available to the public? That just reeks of mad genius."

Smirking, Petel said, "You should tell Jonathan about it, too."

"I should, yeah."

Frank grinned, obviously having a lot of fun. At least someone could with all this dread hanging above them.

"We should take precautions, though. Make sure it didn't scramble anything." Paige said next, using that authoritative tone of a leader. "When's your brother's next check-up, Ernest?"

"Next week." Frank deflated, suddenly annoyed and miserable. "That'll be a fun conversation with mum. And with our doctor, if being turned briefly into data did mess something up."

Growing just as miserable, Dante set down what was left of the croissant part of the sandwich on his plate. If regular check-ups hadn't found anything wrong with them yet, then it wouldn't now. Just the phrase 'check-up' made him shudder involuntarily.

They were like clockwork. Of course they were. The White Rabbit demanded punctuality, the Red Queen demanded heads.

Paige and Petel formed the plan to head out before supper this time, since no one in their group was tied up with clubs today. During lunch, Kalyuga and Levy went with Paige to check out the tower and Dante tried not to pay attention to all the imps hanging about in the air, laughing at his helplessness.

Sometimes, he very much regretted being sent here. Sometimes, he regretted allowing Petel to get close to him at all.

Once classes finished for the day, Petel dragged Dante along to meet up with Paige, Frank, and Abraham at the tower. Dante hesitated a step on seeing it, how it loomed and cast its own long shadow in the fading autumn sun, but Petel had his hand and kept him moving forward. He did his best to recall that warmth of yesterday, of Petel's belief in him as a good thing, and kept that heat locked in his hammering heart.

There weren't any swooping bats flying out to get tangled with their skin when they entered and the room didn't explode with fish, so Dante allowed himself to relax and made sure not to look at any of the scanners. Paige walked right to the computer, sat down in the chair, and tapped the keyboard twice to wake the screen. "Okay, let's see if anything has—"

"Who's that speaking?"

The new, sudden voice came from the computer's speakers, shocking Paige into silence. Abraham, Frank, and Petel rushed to crowd around Paige's chair, staring in shock at the monitor. Dante was drawn over, too, but went slowly.

The voice could belong to a trickster. It could be a lure to get them all trapped inside forever. It could be a fragment, the first, the creators.

The curiosity made Dante get daringly close before he knew it, standing half-behind Petel in order to look at the screen along with the rest of them.

After receiving only their stunned silence, the voice spoke again, their tone haughty. "Hello? Are you still there? Your Prince demands an answer and that you reveal yourself."

Paige grimaced, leaning forward to type a few things into the computer as she said, "I'm, uh. Paige Philips? Who are you?"

The voice scoffed. "Who else? Your Prince! Where are you? Why are you able to do that with your voice? That is a trait only the royal family is capable of, and I'm certain it's impossible for you to be related to us."

Petel looked to Dante with an incredulous expression, which Dante very much agreed with. Frank and Abraham also shared a look, though theirs seemed to be one of confusion. Paige finished typing and her face brightened on seeing the results. "Ah, okay. I see." She paused a moment, scanning the information. Dante didn't even want to read any of it. "I'm not sure what you mean about my voice, but I can see from where I am that you're a part of the game. You have health, stats, and abilities, at the least."

The voice was silent a minute, then spoke with a quiet awe. "You can see my stats? My raw data?"

"Well, not all of it, but—"

"Please." They interrupted once more, a fervent passion in their voice. "Take me to where you are. I want to see what it is you're looking at."

Paige frowned, taken aback. "You, uh. Want me to do what now?"

"Take me to where you are, whether it be the Library or the Garden or someplace else." The voice confirmed. "I'm sort of stuck here otherwise, so I'd much appreciate it on several accounts."

Paige looked long and hard at all the information, then began typing again. "Okay, it seems possible, so. Here goes."

As she busily typed away, Petel, Frank, and Abraham looked to one another with unease. Dante glanced to them, but was more fascinated by Paige's typing. She went so fast, at the pace of maybe Dante's parents, and no matter Dante's feelings on the matter, it was impressive.

The voice had a similar accent to Paige, too, only more outright proper. Dante wasn't the best at telling all the different accents apart yet (there seemed to be as many as there were in Italian), but he could at least hear the difference between Paige, Frank, Abraham, and Jonathan, and this new voice sounded the most like Abraham out of them.

After their silent debate, Frank leaned over to catch Paige's eye and said, "Philips, hey, are you sure this is the best idea?"

"His profile labels him as a player." She replied without missing a beat. "Well. Kind of. And, quite honestly, I'm interested in hearing how exactly he got in there."

She smacked a key with a flair of finality. In response, the central white scanner whirled as it came to life, humming with activity and electricity. Dante yelped and fell backwards onto the floor while Abraham took a more defensive stance, ready to fight whatever came out should it be antagonistic. Petel grabbed Frank's arm and pulled him away, growling at it.

Unbothered, Paige raised a hand to cup her chin as she murmured, "Didn't expect that, but that certainly explains some things."

The same voice that had come from the computer now resonated from inside the tube, screaming in an odd, almost electronic tone. Petel blinked in surprise, standing up straight, while Frank gasped and Abraham's expression changed to one of horror. The screaming gradually changed to be a more natural, more human-like tone before petering out.

Then the scanner's doors opened and revealed the owner of the voice sitting inside it, panting heavily and covered in sweat.

Dante stared in a stunned silence at this new addition. The way this being looked, with their fanned out hair and near black skin tone, was very familiar. Too familiar. But it couldn't be, this one's hair was silvery grey. They wore the school's winter uniform, trousers instead of the dress and leggings, as if they belonged here. But that also couldn't be true. Dante had never seen or heard of this person around campus.

They opened their eyes, revealing the shockingly gold colour, and said, "Thank you. Now, tell me; did any of you encounter that Thief?"

Frank, the first to recognise that this human-shaped person was probably not a threat, stepped out from behind Petel and asked, "Thief?"

"Yes, Thief." They moved to stand, but stumbled and fell out of the scanner and onto the floor. Frank, again, moved first and helped them up to their feet. They nodded in appreciation to Frank curtly and said, "Thank you, Doktor."

Frank gasped softly. "You're the tutorial voice."

"Tutorial?" They grimaced in distaste. "I am much more than that. I am the Crown Prince of the Mainframe Kingdom, the Golden Key and Knight, Protector of—"

"A 'key', you say?" Paige interrupted.

The self-proclaimed Prince gave a short groan of annoyance. "Yes — that's not important right now. Does your information desk tell you of her whereabouts? I have to find her before she gets too far, to make her right the wrongs and pay for what she's done."

Their breathing sounded ragged and they stumbled towards the doors to the tower. Frank glanced back at Abraham, who looked pointedly to Petel in turn. Petel went to grab the Prince,

then paused and stopped himself instead to ask, "What makes you so sure someone else is out here?"

"I-I saw her disappear." The Prince pushed the doors open, then promptly fell face first into the ground. They gave an aggravated and breathless shout. "What's happening to me? Why is the air so heavy? Why doesn't my body listen to my commands anymore? What have you done to me?!"

Abraham stepped forward and gathered the Prince up into his arms. "You look like you need a rest."

"Yeah, you're probably exhausted from the, uh. Log-out procedure thing." Frank chimed in.

The Prince frowned, still very upset, but now puzzled on top of that. "I. I'm. Did you say, 'log-out'?"

"Yeah, you're out of the game now." Frank grinned, accepting this fact a little too easily. He grabbed one of Abraham's arms and tugged the Huntsman along, towards the rest of the school. "C'mon, van Helsing, let's take him to my room. Jonathan's usually out at the labs until curfew, so we should be good until then."

"Alright, okay then. Stop pulling me, I don't want to drop him."

Despite Abraham's befuddlement, he went along with Frank's urgings, carrying the golden-eyed Prince away. Dante gulped, a sinking sensation pulling at his shoulders.

This being was inside the game. Frank called them the tutorial voice. It was all adding up, yet he refused to believe it could be possible.

Paige tapped a few keys to shut off the monitor, then hopped out of the chair and said, "I think I just accidentally brought an NPC to life."

Petel smirked knowingly over at her. "Accidentally, huh?"

She rolled her eyes and shoved at Petel's side, making him laugh.

"What's NPC?" He asked next.

"Non-player character." Paige said, then offered a hand to Dante and pulled him to his feet. "Let's go find out for certain, before nitpicking the details here."

She led Dante along and Petel followed, all of them after Abraham, Frank, and this mystery Prince character.

They were royalty. They were a part of the game. But a Thief? A Knight? Dante hadn't heard the story they'd decided on in the end.

Inside Frank's room, Dante, Paige, and Petel sat on the floor in front of Jonathan's bed while Frank sat at his desk. Abraham leaned against the corner of Jonathan's bed in order to allow this Prince to have the entirety of Frank's bed to himself. The Prince, finally catching their breath, said, "Apologies for my rudeness earlier. It seems my systems were a bit overloaded by all this new information surrounding me."

They held a hand to their chest as they addressed the group, using such a formal tone that it was entirely possible for them to really be royalty. At least, Dante could've been fooled.

"As I tried to state before, I am Vektor Ketziah, Crown Prince of the Mainframe Kingdom, and I am indebted to you all for your kindness in my time of need."

Vektor bowed to them shortly, then straightened up to sit all proper once more. Frank, the only one of them who seemed absolutely enthused by Vektor's presence, bounced in his seat excitedly as he said, "Mates, mates. He came out of the game. He has the tutorial voice. He's not repeating himself and he's responding to us in new and unique ways. Do you realise what this means?"

Paige rolled her eyes, playfully exasperated. "Don't jump to conclusions yet, Ernest. He's wearing the school uniform, after all."

Vektor frowned in pure confusion at this, looking down at their clothes to check. Dante wasn't sure if the trousers were meant to signify that, yes, the Prince was male (they came from the game, after all), but knew it to be rude to ask. After a few moments, way too long for a normal human, Vektor looked back up at Paige and asked, "Is that what this outfit is? I just assumed this was the normal garb of your level, considering the system automatically took me out of my battle gear and put me in this."

"Technically, I suppose, that's not a wrong way to look at things." Abraham said.

Paige buried her face in her hands and Frank burst into giddy laughter. Dante scooted just a bit closer to Petel, hoping this was all some weird hallucination or nightmare that came from having fainted or something.

A bit flustered, Abraham said, "And we should all introduce ourselves to you, as well."

"Oh, there's no need." Vektor held up a hand to stop them, looking very confident with himself. Abraham and Paige sat back in confusion while Petel and Frank's expressions became intrigued. "I can see your coding, so I'm well acquainted with your names and designations already."



They all shared an uneasy look. Paige took it upon herself to ask, "Our coding? What are you talking about?"

"You know, the coding." Vektor supplied, as if it was common knowledge. "The binary and equations that make up the realm. Or, rather, the world, in this case."

Frank jumped up onto his knees, sitting backwards in his seat now. "Are you saying that you see the world in binary code?"

"Of course. That was my greatest gift as the next in line for the throne." Vektor smiled shortly, then faded back to confusion. "Why, though, do you insist that I'm the Tutorial, might I ask?"

"Oh my god, I can hear it even without the filtering." Abraham slowly sat himself down on Jonathan's bed, pressing a hand to his forehead in disbelief. "Your tone is so robotic. How is that even possible?"

Vektor's frown turned offended. Frank spoke up before he could voice any complaints, saying, "Yeah, it's because of that and you called me Doktor. Which is what the tutorial voice called me, too."

Sufficiently distracted, Vektor said, "Well, that's your designation. Of course I would call you that." He looked around the room at them, starting with Frank and ending on Dante, listing them off as he went. "Doktor, Professor, Navigator, Wolf, Inferno."

Dante's breath hitched. His whole body wanted to reject this notion.

Somehow, some way, his worst fear was true and sitting right in front of him. In front of all of them, for everyone to see.

Everyone could see. It was real. It was happening.

This Prince probably didn't remember him at all. Did that make it worse? And, oh God, this meant there were two of them now.

Dante drew his knees to his chest and covered his ears, no longer willing to participate in this nightmarish worst scenario unfolding right in front of him. The rest of the room, blissfully unaware of the sudden influx of spectres cackling at this misfortune or the world ending around them, continued listening to Vektor as he went on.

"And I am the Prince, first and foremost, but I have also been called the Key, so either title will work for me. This, of course, assuming you wish to call me by those and not my civilian name."

Paige and Petel shared a look as Abraham and Frank stared on in complete fascination. Then the distinct sound of the door being unlocked made them all jump (including Dante and excluding Vektor) and it opened to reveal Niculaie stepping inside. Surprisingly, not Jonathan.

Immediately, Abraham was on his feet and possessed with fury. "What the devil are you doing here, Vampire?" He shouted.

Niculaie flinched back, thought admirably stood his ground. "Ah." He fumbled for a moment with his words, off-balance from Abraham's hostility. "I. Jonathan — erm. Jonathan asked me to retrieve his notebook for him."

Frank made a soft sound in interest, then hopped to his feet and grabbed the leather bound notebook out from Jonathan's desk. Dante suspected it to be filled with all sorts of recipes for elixirs meant to deaden the heart or to silence the faces on the back of the head, but those were just his best guesses. Frank leaned over Paige and Petel in order to hand the thing over, saying, "Good luck getting him outta the labs after this."

Abraham sputtered in protest. "Why would you help him? He's a monster!"

"Who? Vladimirescu or my roommate?"

Frank stuck his tongue out cheekily at Abraham, who huffed in reply. Niculaie accepted the notebook, bowing his head with a sorrowful, "Thank you, Ernest."

He glanced very briefly at Abraham, a clear desire to say more, but swiftly turned and left the room instead. Abraham growled and stomped his foot against the ground, livid. Dante couldn't stop himself from squeaking in surprise. Vektor, who had watched all of this with the utmost interest, asked, "Are you and Vampire not on good terms now?"

Frank sat back down at his own desk as Abraham puffed himself up with all that rage and energy. "Our families have been at war for decades. Generations!" The Huntsman ranted. "Of course we're not on good terms, we'll never be on good terms until I've driven a stake right through his cold, unbeating heart!"

He whirled around and crossed his arms over his chest. Paige wilted at the sight and Petel shook his head with a grimace. Dante would have agreed with both of them if Vektor's language hadn't struck him as odd. Without thinking of the possible consequences, Dante almost asked his question in Italian. To see if Vektor might respond in kind. Vektor, however, said first, "Fair enough. Now, since you've all gathered so nicely, I have a proposition I must ask of you."

Dante frowned at this while Paige and Frank became apprehensive. Abraham faced Vektor once more, as intrigued as Petel, who leaned forward in anticipation. Vektor took a second to structure his thoughts, then pressed on.

"Because of the chaos that Thief has caused, my people need me more than ever. Since all of you have the capacity, I would much appreciate it if you could help me to return to my kingdom. Although I have... nothing. Nothing to offer you right now, I will make sure to reward you handsomely once we make it to my home."

Frank looked down in thought. Petel grinned suddenly and said, "The journey's its own reward."

"I agree with that sentiment." Abraham nodded along, having calmed down completely from his earlier tirade. "This certainly works as that adventure you've been looking for, right, Vitayev?"

"Uh, real quick." Paige raised her hand, interjecting. "There's a once-a-day limit on this thing. You've technically reached that, since we pulled you out, right?"

"Does that count?" Frank asked. "We technically logged him out, not in."

They all looked to Vektor for a definitive answer. After a moment of thought, Vektor said, "I suppose a formal test is the only answer. This is just as new for me as it is for you."

Vektor stood, then stumbled as he tried to step forward. Abraham, being the only one also standing, caught Vektor before he could fall and helped the Prince stay upright. The decision made, Paige and Frank hopped to their feet as well. Although reluctant, Dante stood at the same time as Petel. It would be interesting to see the answer to this query.

As they headed back to the tower as covertly as possible, Dante took note that Vektor was actually taller than him. Taller than Abraham, too. The Prince seemed just taller than Petel, same as Damon. It seemed an odd detail, but Dante refrained from jumping to more conclusions. They had yet to see this Thief. Frank bounced with excitement the whole way.

At least someone was enjoying this.

Vektor effortlessly opened the tower doors before Paige even had the chance to pull out her skeleton key and entered, looking around the room with a sweeping gesture that nearly knocked him off-balance. "Blasted—!" He huffed and glared back at Paige. "Why has my gravitational centre been thrown so out of tune with my body?"

Petel growled quietly, baring his teeth in that slightly overprotective, slightly terrifying way of his. Paige, nonplussed, placed a hand on Petel's shoulder while replying. "I didn't do anything to you."

"Except make him corporeal." Frank drew closer to Vektor's side, looking the Prince over briefly before grinning. "It must be the difference of reality versus the virtual — or, what you're more used to in your home."

Vektor grimaced at this, looking ready to retort, but his eyes widened as he caught sight of one of the outer scanners and Dante could swear his eyes actually sparkled with golden light for a moment. Vektor walked over to it and stepped inside, fascinated and completely unafraid. "So this is what it looks like?" He mumbled, more to himself than to any of them. "The algorithms look so neat, so refined. And these formulas! Truly, a beautiful sight to behold."

Frank looked to Abraham, who then looked to Paige. Dante stepped closer to the scanner involuntarily. If he could see what Vektor could right now, would it be binary? Or mathematical equations? Because it sounded more like math at this point and he was curious to see which formula, which algorithms Vektor was talking about. Paige went to the computer, plopping down right into the chair and said, "Alright, let's try this."

"Ah, Navigator—"

As Vektor began to protest, Paige clacked a few keys and the doors closed Vektor inside the scanner. Right as it closed, Dante saw a pair of blank white eyes.

Whatever was said next, Dante missed it because he tried to run.

Petel grabbed his arm and held tight, effectively tethering him to his doom. "Woah there." Petel said. "It's alright, nothing bad's happening."

Dante, in pure blind panic, tugged against Petel's grip as much as possible, letting out a few quiet whines and half-screams as he fought. He managed to make it to the doors and rattled the knobs with his free hand, a mindless and fruitless endeavour as they were still very much locked.

Petel watched with morbid fascination. Paige frowned as she sat back from the keyboard and said, "It's just. It won't even register your presence in there. What's all this about?"

The scanner doors opened, allowing Vektor to step out. "As I was about to say, advanced though they may be, my coding framework is a bit too processing heavy for these outer scanners." He said. "The centre one, however, looks like it possesses enough power for my coding."

He stepped out alone. Nothing else was in there with him. Dante stopped struggling, but couldn't stop panting or trembling. Paige frowned at Vektor, sceptical, but began typing once more. "Okay, fine. Get inside that one, then, so we can see if it'll work already."

Vektor stumbled over and inside the centre scanner, still off-balance but looking better now. This time, Dante refused to watch the doors close. He caught Petel's eye instead and Petel smiled warmly at him, finally letting go. "You didn't scream this time." Petel said, a note of pride in his tone.

It was such a silly little thing to be proud of. Dante ducked his head, mortified. Frank hopped over to stand at Petel's side and said, "Actually, he was screaming, but it was less than usual, so I say that's still very worthy of such praise."

Abraham, standing beside Paige's chair, laughed in agreement. Petel frowned down at Frank and, with a slightly offended tone, insisted, "He didn't."

"And I can see there's no convincing you, as usual."

Frank shrugged, his tone oddly triumphant, which earned him a giggle from Paige. She tapped a few of the keys, then the centre tube opened to let Vektor out as she said, "Anyway, the system's telling me your limit was reached, Prince. So it looks like we're gonna have to wait until tomorrow to return you to your home."

"I see." Vektor bowed his head momentarily. Then he carefully stepped out of the tube and walked over to the computer. "That's alright, it can't be helped. And it allows me time to examine the information this console has to offer."

"Should we—" Abraham started, then quickly backtracked as everyone turned to look at him. He seemed embarrassed by his own proposal, but pressed on. "It's almost time for supper. Perhaps some nosh would help him regain more of his strength?"

"Nosh?" Vektor questioned, momentarily distracted from his examining the screen.

"You'd have to take him home with you or something." Frank pointed out. "None of us would be able to get a second portion, so we'd have to give up our own meal for him."

"Or share." Paige said.

"That one's more doable." Frank said with a grin.

"The other important matter, where is he going to stay for the evening?" Abraham asked next. "I can offer room and board for a day, but I'm unsure of how my father will take the unexpected company."

"And none of us can really host him." Petel said.

"I'll be staying right here, thank you." Vektor interjected, garnering their attention. As Paige stood from the computer, he sat down and continued staring at the screen as he spoke. "There's so much to take in right now that my time is better spent studying all I can rather than waiting for the cycle to reset somewhere out of reach."

There was a short pause, in which the group wasn't quite convinced, then Vektor turned to directly address them.

"Again, thank you for agreeing to help me return to my kingdom. Truly, I am indebted to all of you."

He stood and bowed very regally towards them, then sat and resumed watching the computer screen in rapt interest. Dante had the distinct impression that he'd be just as stubborn as Petel once the wolf had made a decision. Paige heaved out a tired breath, then unlocked the doors to allow them to file out. Petel was the last to exit, saying, "Do you think he even eats?"

"Only one way to find out." Frank said cheerily.

"So you're volunteering yourself to share with him." Paige shook her head at him, though her smile was fond. "Be careful Officer Riviera doesn't catch you sneaking around with your food."

Frank gave her a silly, overly serious salute, then rushed off towards the cafeteria. Night had settled in and Dante took a moment to breathe in the chilled air. It did nothing to stifle that trembling, unpredictable heat inside him, but it did help him calm his nerves. He was looking forward to seeing snow for the first time, since snow meant visible tracks. Just as the sandy beaches kept the spectres scarce, he hoped the same would be true for the snow.

"See you tomorrow." Abraham said to them in parting, pausing as they reached the path leading from the school gates into the rest of the campus. He rubbed at the side of his head, face scrunched in pain. "Would love to stay, but my head's killing me."

"Tell your dad so he cancels your weekend hunting trip." Petel said.

Abraham laughed, then walked off with a last wave. Taking it as a joke though Petel was very serious. It could be hard to tell sometimes. Petel told Dante once about how the walls surrounding their campus weren't difficult to climb over, as he and Paige had done so once in order to get ice cream when they'd been bored out of their minds. Dante wasn't sure how difficult it actually was to get an off-campus pass, so he'd never know whether or not this story was actually true.

It was just the three of them for supper, since Sonya and Levy had been caught by the Karpusi triplets for the evening and Petel adamantly refused to sit anywhere near Damon out of respect for Paige and Abraham. Dante wished desperately to be able to talk with Damon, to ask how he'd been doing, but Damon seemed set on avoiding him completely. They shared only one class, sixth period Art, and sat nowhere near enough to each other to make polite conversation.

They hadn't really spoken since Dante had walked into Hell, however. He'd been doomed to this life of fear and torment from the moment his parents had decided to have a child.

Once they were alone in their room, Petel asked, "You ready to go in tomorrow?"

It was a polite inquiry. A determined wolf eager to play this game. Dante avoided that piercing gaze and distractedly tugged at the fabric of his blanket.

He could tell Petel the whole truth. Let the shadows swarm him to rip out his heart, chop off his head. He could lie and present an enthusiasm so fake that it would get him impaled for his deceit. They could take his tongue or his teeth and staple his mouth into a pained smile, gouge out his eyes until only the fire remained.

Just like them. Just like them. Just like them.

The truth was easiest. Pathetic, but believable.

"I'm, um. I'm s-scared, but. I'll go w-with you." He said.

They had no choice but to believe him. He was always scared, after all. It was part of his programming. Part of his Excuse protocol. The babbling artist could speak any truth as long as it was coated with enough fear to go unnoticed.

And Petel smiled proudly at him for his cowardice.

"It's not gonna be scary. You'll see." Petel reassured him.

Petel was lucky to be so fearless.

Petel was lucky to have lived through the experiments.

Dante sank into his bed and resigned himself again to this doomed fate.

## Chapter 5: Bad RNG

"We can't just leave that guy in the tower and expect him to never be found." Paige said as soon as they sat down for breakfast.

Frank and Dante shifted uneasily in their spots, a clear acknowledgement of Paige's point. Petel was content to leave that guy to fend for himself. Something about him just rubbed Petel the wrong way. Sonya and Levy, however, shared a look of confusion before Levy asked, "You guys let another person in on your adventure thing and it wasn't one of us?"

His playfully offended tone made Petel smile and he leaned over to bump his shoulder against Levy's. "Sorry. Didn't really have a choice with this one." Petel said.

"Yeah, he came out of the computer." Frank hopped up excitedly in his seat, all that previous sheepishness dispelled. "I'm pretty sure he's a fully-functional, very advanced AI program. And we pulled him out of the game. Here, into real life!"

"I'm not sure that's entirely right." Paige said, frowning thoughtfully. "He clearly had his own profile and the game recognised that he had a physical form in our reality to begin with."

"It's cool either way, though, right?" Frank beamed. "Who would've guessed that technology like this existed out there? And that it'd be here, at our school!"

Dante shrank more into his seat, no doubt regarding the whole of the situation with the proper amount of dread. It seemed Sonya shared that sentiment, as he chimed in with an uneasy, "I don't know. It seems mighty convenient that something like that would be at this particular location, of all possible locations."

"I have to agree." Paige nodded along. As she continued, Frank slowly deflated in his seat. "We have no idea whether or not he's actually artificial intelligence or just someone who was trapped inside the game. And this is probably the most prestigious private school in all of Europe. It's not entirely pure happenstance that this technology exists on this campus or that we were able to pull someone out of it."

Petel looked from Frank to Paige, then landed on Dante as he asked, "Why is it here, then?"

Dante fidgeted erratically under the scrutiny as he stuttered, "W-Well. That's. M-Maybe."



His breathing quickened in his panic and Petel was half a second away from reassuring him that it was fine, he hadn't expected an answer right now nor was it directed solely at Dante, but the cafeteria doors burst loudly open and distracted the whole of the room.

Abraham, Percival, Niculaie, Damon, and Aglaé, all in one loud bunch, walked inside together. Petel would've laughed at the sight if it wouldn't make Abraham even angrier. As it was, Abraham broke away from the others and stormed over to Paige and Petel's table, leaving a distressed Niculaie and an aggravated Damon in his wake.

As soon as Abraham made it, he slammed his hands down against the table, clattering their trays and making Dante yelp in surprise. "I expected my walk to be free of the Vampire and that Demon King, but it appears I was mistaken." Abraham said angrily. "Some days I curse mandatory Saturday classes and today is one of those days. Can anyone update me on the Prince situation so I can have something else to think about?"

"Fix your attitude first, it's not any of our faults that you lot all live in the mansion woods." Paige said, not at all intimidated by his anger.

Petel added a growl to drive the point home. Abraham pulled his hands back, flustered by his outburst, and sat down in the free seat on Paige's other side. "You're right. I'm sorry." He admitted.

Sonya softened in sympathy, as did Frank. Levy grimaced and leaned against Petel's shoulder heavily, saying, "Sometimes a lifelong rivalry just makes you wanna kill a dude, we totally understand."

Petel snorted through his nose, unable to hide his amusement. Frank, in an attempt to divert the subject, said, "I went to check on Vektor earlier, he's still there at the computer and doing fine."

Abraham perked up and said, "He hasn't been found yet? Good to hear."

"I'm glad you're feeling better." Petel said with a short laugh. "Did you take my advice and use your headache to get out of your dad being weird?"

"Headache?" Abraham asked.

Petel's amusement dropped immediately to aggravation. Headaches always seemed to prelude memory issues for their Huntsman and it was concerning. Before Petel could tell him that he really needed to get that checked out, the warning bells rang and they had to hurry to class. Petel and them had their English test today and Petel had fun studying over the week, drawing Dante into it after making fun of the word 'gregarious' as being full of Greg and getting the fireball to laugh.

During lunch, Frank left to check on the Prince again and Sonya asked, "If he really is an AI or a computer program of sorts, how is it possible that he has a physical body? How did you bring him into the real world?"

"The system said it was possible and it was." Paige said with a shrug. "I can't explain it much more than that, though I desperately wish I could."

"So it was probably already coded into him." Kalyuga surmised, holding a hand to her chin. All of this went far over Petel's head. He wasn't even sure how it was possible for them to go in and out of the game, despite Paige's explanation. Kalyuga turned to Dante beside her and asked, "Do you know if your parents have any AI in development as advanced as this? Or, perhaps, if they're working on new medical tech that might utilise something similar to this virtual reality system?"

"You're wasting your time, Duckie." Levy broke in before Dante even had the time to shrink away from the question. "His parents probably have him under some YMCA to keep him from leaking projects to the youth they wanna recruit to the company."

"The term you're looking for is NDA." Paige corrected him.

Levy grinned at her, still in good humour, as Dante made himself as small as possible in his seat. "I-I don't know anything." He mumbled pitifully.

Levy gave a disappointed, "Aww."

Sonya looked down at the table a moment, gathering his resolve, then looked up at Petel and said, "I'm going with you this time."

Petel smiled. "Sounds good."

"Woah, really?" Levy asked, leaning over the table to look at their birdie. When Sonya nodded, he grinned enthusiastically. "Guess that means I gotta go, too."

"You do not." Sonya huffed, bristling more out of embarrassment than anger.

Kalyuga laughed at their odd way of flirting as Paige warned them, "Might not be much for you to do besides sit and wait. There are only four scanners and I'm the only one who seems to understand what the computer's saying."

"Besides our Prince." Abraham said.

Levy grinned mischievously and said, "So what you're saying is, Birdie's gonna need someone to keep him company?"

"Just admit you want to go along as well, don't use me as an excuse." Sonya shot at him.

Petel laughed as well, glad to see they were having fun. They had a while to wait, since clubs and supper were required attendance, but soon they headed for the tower once more, using the cover of the late evening and a split group to go unnoticed.

Petel went first with Paige, Sonya, and Levy. It seemed like most of the staff had stayed long past their usual end of the day, oddly. There must have been some kind of meeting happening, maybe some big plans for Monday's announcements. Petel put it out of his mind easily in favour of focusing on this new and exciting adventure.

Paige let them in and the Prince was sitting at the computer, totally absorbed in the information on the screen. Right where they'd left him. Sonya gasped quietly and advanced into the room slowly while Levy stuck by Petel's side, wary of the new face. Paige made sure to close the doors after them and frowned over at Vektor. "Have you moved at all since last night?" She asked.

Vektor blinked and turned away from the screen, finally noticing the group of them. He smiled in greeting, surprisingly amicable. "Of course I have. I took several breaks and mapped out the entirety of your school's campus for future reference."

He didn't miss a beat. It threw Paige off, so Petel asked next, "Did you ever sleep?"

"I just noted that I took several breaks." Vektor frowned, just as taken aback by Petel's iciness as they were by his robotic mannerisms. "Your realm seems to be running off a different timetable than my Kingdom, as the day-night cycle takes much longer than what I'm used to."

Vektor swivelled the chair around to stand, then closed the distance between himself and Sonya with a few purposeful strides.

He offered out his hand and said, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Crow. I am Vektor Ketziah, Crown Prince—"

"Crow! That's a bird!" Levy shouted in triumph. "You are a bird, Birdie!"

Vektor grimaced at having been interrupted, but Sonya accepted the handshake before either could get more words in. "Nice to meet you, yes. I'm Sonya Ravenell, not 'Crow' or 'Birdie' or anything of the like."

Sonya shot a glare back at Levy, who continued grinning. Vektor withdrew his hand once they were finished and looked next to Levy and saying, "My apologies, Cat, but did you mean to say—"

"And he calls me a cat!" Levy burst into laughter, interrupting Vektor once more. This time, Vektor scowled in aggravation. Levy elbowed Petel's side lightly, unable to stop his laughter. "This guy's great, I dunno why you don't like him. I bet he calls you 'Wolf' and the Fourth 'Huntsman', too."

"Yes, it's very amusing." Paige rolled her eyes at them and walked past in order to sit down at the computer. She began typing immediately as she continued, "Now, please, let's get started."

Sonya bowed his head self-consciously, as did Petel. Vektor, however, smiled and said, "Pragmatic and straight to business. I get the feeling we're going to get along just fine, Navigator."

Paige let out a strained sigh, but kept quiet as Vektor stepped inside the white scanner. Petel glanced around at the four orange ones bordering the rest of the room, then chose one at the back to step inside. Levy, who looked about ready to make another comment, was distracted by this and chose a different one to examine. Sonya gravitated closer to Levy and joined in observing the odd device, making Petel smile at the sight.

Dante, Frank, and Abraham arrived then. Petel caught Dante's eyes just as the scanner's doors closed and the thing whirred to life.

He heard Dante shriek and the others attempting to calm the poor guy, but he himself didn't have a chance to react, as he was dropped into that void. He landed quicker this time, more wolf-like once again, in the odd hub area they'd wound up in before. This time, however, the path leading off to the left side sphere had been completely broken, leaving the space empty and the sphere unreachable. Petel probably couldn't have even jumped the gap with his new, more powerful legs if he tried.

That wasn't a concern for the moment. He looked up towards the sky and shouted as loudly as he could manage, "Dante! It's alright, I'm in here. I'm okay."

"It-It ate Petel!" Dante's voice, which had the same headset quality as Frank and Abraham's had, continued shrieking. "I told you this was a-a bad idea! We're all gonna-gonna die or lose our heads or-or worse!"

"Dante, please." Paige's voice pleaded, still set apart from the rest by the way it seemed to echo from above. "Petel is fine. We're all fine. It's okay."

Abraham tried for a reassuring, "You've been in there before, chap. No need to be so frightened."

"Do you really think there could be something worse than dying or losing our heads?" Frank asked.

"Yes! Playing this game is-is worse!" Dante insisted. It was fear and distress that overwhelmed the bit of anger in his tone, though Petel could still envision the furious expression on his face. "I can't believe y-you willingly, willingly!, keep r-risking yourselves like this!"

Petel winced and shouted, "No one's forcing you to join us, Dante."

"Yes you are! You won't let me escape it!" Dante gave a short scream in real and terrified aggravation, then grew fainter as he went on. "I can't change your mind. J-Just. Get it over with, before the goblins come for my toes."

There was a minute of agonising silence, in which Petel noted that his ears had flattened on top of his head and his tail drooped, perfectly conveying his concern, then Abraham said, "For all his dramatics and screaming, I can see why you say he's brave, Vitayev."

Petel's ears and tail perked up immediately. "So he's in?"

"Yes, he's in. He should be with you shortly."

Paige heaved out a long, tired breath. Petel hopped up on his feet excitedly, his tail wagging a bit. He'd known Dante was the bravest person he'd ever met. Despite the list of ridiculous and nonsensical fears, Dante was good at overcoming all of that when push came to shove and that was all that mattered to the wolf.

Vektor's voice chimed in, having the same echoing and overhead properties that Paige's did if a bit distant. "I don't know why Inferno's making such a big fuss over all this. It's not like he's inexperienced."

Paige, Sonya, Levy, Abraham, and Frank all spoke in unison, taking issue with that statement and defending Dante. Petel puffed up with pride, his tail wagging harder. Dante dropped into the area just then, landing a few feet away from Petel's position. Petel went immediately over to greet his friend, nearly forgetting about the ring of fire which sprang to life to cut him off.

Dante uncurled himself and stood, intending to continue his rant from the anger in his face, but was quickly shocked at the state of the area. "Wh-What happened?" He asked, keeping himself as scrunched up as possible.

Petel briefly pondered if he could get away with stepping over the flames in order to reassure Dante, though he quickly decided against trying. It'd probably just spook the now literal fireball. He settled for a shrug and a straightforward, "No idea."

Paige said, "Alright, the Prince should be there soon enough. Ernest, van Helsing, you two are next."

Petel gave Dante his space, and asked, "Can you load both of them at the same time?"

"I think so." Paige replied, already deep in thought as she worked. "As long as I execute the command with both of their names in the code, it should load them both in no problem."

Vektor dropped onto the path, landing with a metallic clank and making Dante jump. Petel wasn't sure what he'd been expecting the self-proclaimed Prince to look like, but the

silvery-white knight armour was not it. It wasn't a full suit, as Vektor only wore the chest piece, joint guards, the boots, and the gauntlets. He had a black bodysuit beneath it that could easily blend in with the black of the hub area. Actually, now that Petel thought about it, Vektor's skin was a shade away from being pure black as well. He hadn't really pinned it as unnatural, considering the range of skin tones that the other students at their school displayed. Jonathan would probably have been the closest match to Vektor, though even that seemed an unfair comparison.

Vektor looked to them, his golden eyes actually glowing, and he said, "Seeing you two, I have a good feeling about our ability to progress quickly through each level in order to get back to my Kingdom."

Petel grinned in return, more to show off his teeth than to agree. "Good to know we've got your vote of confidence."

Abraham and Frank dropped into the area then. Dante didn't jump this time, at least. Vektor's expression became serious as he turned his gaze towards the sky and continued, "And your natural affinity for the computer inspires trust as well, Navigator."

Levy, from somewhere close behind Paige, mumbled, "Duckie'd love this."

"Woah, what happened here?" Frank asked, gawking at the now incomplete pathway around the area. "It's completely broken!"

Vektor's entire mood seemed to sour and his tone turned icy. "That would be the work of that destructive Thief. After chasing me out of my own Kingdom, she decided to destroy the return pathway, meaning we both now have to go through each level in order to get back to it."

He paused to raise his hand, as if to examine it. A ball of pure golden light grew in his palm, shining brightly against his armour and the black of the void around them.

"As hard as I tried, I could not reform it. Her Void refused even my Creation and I regret not being able to stop her before she used it."

Frank and Abraham shared a look, then they both turned to Petel. As if he would have a better opinion on this than either of them could come up with. He grimaced and stepped towards the reachable sphere on the unbroken path, saying, "We should get started, then."

"Yes, you're right." Vektor snapped out of it, closing his hand and making the glowing ball of energy disappear. He strode quickly over to the sphere, though he couldn't quite outpace Petel even in his determination, and rested his hand against the white of it. "The first level we'll have to pass through is known as the White Forest, where the Guardian Shiranui resides. May the Creators bless us with safe passage."

An audible click sounded throughout the seemingly endless void and the sphere flashed gold almost quicker than Petel could catch. Then Vektor sank into the sphere, being pulled inside, until he was completely gone. Frank gasped and Dante made a small distressed noise. Abraham boldly walked into the sphere after Vektor. And, not about to be outdone by the Huntsman, Petel followed after.

The sphere, no longer locked, allowed them through much more smoothly than Petel had anticipated. The sensation was similar to dipping into the water, without the getting wet part. After briefly passing through a white void area, Petel stepped onto a new pathway, this one made of white dirt, and the new area loaded in around him.

The first things to come into focus were Vektor and Abraham, of course. The pure white sky and the forest around them were written into existence next. Petel glanced back to see that the way they'd come from was an unnaturally gigantic tree with white bark that had cracked brown in places and white leaves with only a hint of green to them. It towered high above their heads, stretched out forward into the level, and had no discernible opening that Petel could see. As Frank stepped through the trunk and onto the path beside Petel, it seemed like it was merely decoration and not actually solid.

The rest of the forest before them was more colourful, the greenery of the undergrowth, leaves, grass, and the like only being highlighted with white along their spines and edges. Every stem, branch, and trunk seemed to take after the giant tree behind them, being just as white as it and without its cracks of colour.

As he slowly took the area in, Frank said, "I can see why it's called the White Forest now."

"Yes, it's very fitting, isn't it?"

Vektor smiled and extended his hand. A staff of sorts materialised into it, the process reminding Petel of the way they were loaded into the game. It was golden and had three rings at the top, looking like an ornate switch to an old-styled lamp or an oversized key without teeth. Vektor held the length of it, using it like a staff as he parted some of the undergrowth with the three rings part.

"My Kingdom's foliage is not half as beautiful as this. And your realm seems no different in that regard." He said.

"Go on, Dante, you can follow them in." Paige's voice echoed out above them, her tone soothing in that way she got whenever she tried to take care of them. "There's nothing to be afraid of. They're all fine, so you'll be fine."

Whatever Dante said in reply, if he did reply, went unheard by Petel and them. Meaning Dante also probably couldn't hear them. Petel frowned, both having expected this and being a

little aggravated by it. For someone with a vast amount of curiosity, Dante met them halfway and refused to go the rest on his own too often. Really, it was a wonder how he and Dante had even become friends through that curiosity. Maybe Petel took it for granted because of that.

Just as Petel had made the decision to jump back through and drag Dante along with him, Dante stepped through the tree and stood there hesitantly, too ashamed and smart to get closer. Still, Petel and Abraham offered up a reassuring smile each and Frank hopped over to happily greet the fireball. "Welcome to the party!"

"We're glad to have you with us." Abraham agreed.

"Inferno is required, therefore it would be strange were he not with us." Vektor stated, as if it were an irrefutable fact that made perfect sense.

Dante kept his arms wrapped around himself, the most closed-off Petel had seen him get in a while. Frank frowned at them, then fumbled a moment with his holster in order to pull his pistol out. "Check it, Vicario. I got a—"

"E-Ernest, please!" Abraham sprung back, holding his hands up in protest. "Gun safety should still apply in here."

"Whoops." Frank lowered the gun automatically, then frowned in bemusement. "Wait, it's okay. See?" He clicked the back of the pistol to eject the magazine, revealing the green bullets inside it. "It's useless 'cause all it does is heal."

Vektor smiled brightly at this. "I knew I saw that code in you. Marvellous!"

Taken aback, Abraham said, "Healing bullets? How does that even work?"

"It's a game. Screw logic!" Frank laughed, throwing his hands into the air in both sarcasm and a full acceptance of the humour of the situation. "How about you? Is your rifle wacky and weird?"

Abraham smiled as well, sharing in the joke. "Unfortunately, no. It's boring and realistic. Though, I do have these." He pulled the crosses off his belt to better show them off. "They're for throwing, in spite of all appearances, and work like boomerangs despite laws of physics."

Frank shoved the bullets back into his pistol and holstered it as he gaped at Abraham's weapons. Petel, too, was very interested to see how this would go and cheekily prompted, "Demonstration?"

"Yeah, you can't just tell us that and then not show us!" Frank said.

Vektor, growing fed up, broke in. "Please, we should be making progress. You're all behaving like children."



Frank and Abraham laughed, but Petel didn't quite agree with them on that one. He frowned at Vektor in an attempt to communicate how rude that'd been without growling outright, but it was Dante who said, "We a-are kids, Vektor."

Vektor thought a moment on that, then shrugged and faced forward. "Correct, I suppose. Now, continuing on—"

He was interrupted by the area seeming to shift around them. Petel could smell it in the air; the plant life seemed to tremble as the faint sound of a computer loading could just barely be heard. Something had awoken. Frank and Abraham, noticing the shift but looking confused as to why they would notice and why it would make Vektor freeze like that, glanced around the area as Dante stared wide-eyed in horror at the same space Vektor was, where it looked like something was being written into the code in front of their very eyes. From above them, Paige said, "Uh. Guys?"

"Drat, I knew it wouldn't be long until AIR bombarded us."

Vektor grimaced and sunk into a grounded stance. He tipped his key staff towards the thing being loaded in, as if it were a battering ram now instead of a staff. The system seemed to be having a bit of difficulty with the loading thing, as it loaded this thing in nearly pixel by pixel. A visor formed over Vektor's face, grate-like, as if ripped from the front of a knight's helmet, and it was the same white metal as of the rest of his armour.

"Prepare yourselves." The Prince commanded. "This is quite the welcome."

"Is that—? There are enemies being spawned?" Paige continued, more perplexed than Petel had heard her sound in a while. "It, uh, says they're Bears? Three of them?"

Vektor rose from his stance and gasped. "No."

The thing (a bear, apparently) finished loading in and it stood on its hind legs towering above them. It reminded Petel of the tiger he'd fought, as its fur was white and its arms were similarly pure bone structures without any meat to them. It had silver highlights and giant hand-claws instead of skeletal paws, like the antlers of a deer, dangerous and wild.

"A Class III to start with is cruel on its own, but three of them at once?" Vektor grimaced, preparing to fight once more. "Talk about bad luck."

The bear swept its claws around and swatted Vektor's staff out of his hands, destroying it and knocking Vektor back in the process. At the same time as Abraham readied his throwing crosses, Petel leapt at the bear and dug his teeth into the thing's throat, trying to rip it out. The thing yanked him off with very little trouble, its claws digging into his shoulders, and it tossed him back hard enough to hit the giant tree's trunk. He hit and bounced off it rather than passing through it. Which would be interesting if it hadn't winded him.

"Woah, are you okay?" Frank asked out of concern and fear.

The doctor, as Vektor had called him, knelt down by Petel and placed a hand on his shoulder. Petel had to stretch a crick out of his back, but he was still there, still ready to fight, so he nodded. Two more bears entered their area from the surrounding forest, making Petel's resolve waver immediately.

Frank seemed relieved at Petel's answer and pulled his gun back out. Petel noticed Dante backing up, into the giant tree's trunk, until the fireball disappeared from sight. Then Frank was talking again. "Here, let me try — you probably need this."

Frank aimed at Petel's shoulder as if he were giving a shot and not shooting Petel with a gun, then fired. The loud bang made Petel wince immediately, but instead of any pain or stinging, he instantly felt rejuvenated. He stared down at the gun in Frank's hands in bemusement. Frank, understanding marvellously, helped Petel to his feet and shrugged.

"You should see what else I can do with this. At least, if we get the chance."

Vektor charged forward to jab the bear in its stomach with another staff and made contact, though it didn't seem to have normal physics, as the staff went through the bear's body as if it could actually stab the thing. The bear roared in response, the sound exactly like that of the tiger's, realistic but with an unsettling mechanical filter overlaid.

The other two bears surged forward and knocked Abraham back as he caught his crosses. Petel leapt in to shove them back, working with Vektor who had also switched targets. The three bears continued advancing, however, and easily had them surrounded. Even as Frank shot Abraham in the arm, Petel could see that they were outmatched here.

"I-I only have so many of these?" Frank shouted.

"Then we'll start doing a better job." Abraham huffed, pulling the rifle off his back. "My apologies in advance."

He aimed very briefly and fired a shot directly into one of the bear's heads. The loud bang was exactly the same as Frank's gun, oddly enough. The bear fizzled from the impact, like its face was affected by some bad reception on an old telly, but it remained alive and advancing. Abraham blinked, genuinely taken aback and lowering his rifle in the process.

"Well. That didn't quite work in either of the ways I expected it to."

"You almost got it." Paige helpfully chimed in. "It says it's got ten percent health left."

"Oh, of course!" Vektor smacked his forehead in realisation, the metal of his armour clanking against itself. "Inferno, you could easily solve this issue with your fires. If you would, please."

Petel wasn't about to explain that. He leapt forward to sink his fangs into one of the bears instead, remaining on the offensive. Frank and Abraham glanced around quickly, then focused back on the fight as well. Vektor's confidence faded and he glanced behind them, at the giant tree.

"Inferno?"

"Yeah, about that." Paige sighed heavily, sounding about as fed up as Petel felt right now. "Dante went back into the hub area and asked to be logged out, so he's here with me."

Vektor let the information really sink in. Then he glared up at the sky, his eyes glowing with his fury as he shouted, "Are you in jest? He has the most experience here!"

The bear tore Petel off it, slamming him down against Vektor and knocking them both to the ground. And there was no more time for complaining.

Petel flipped himself upright and took a swipe at the damaged bear, making its whole body fizzle out of existence. It left a vague outline of its shape, though, as if they could do anything with that. Frank fumbled with his gun, trying to quickly switch the bullets, while Abraham fired at one of the other bears. Vektor got back up on his feet and held a hand out, trying to summon something bigger than his staff, but the other bear rammed him against the tree with its whole body.

Petel and Abraham switched targets to this one at the same time, Petel rushing it and Abraham firing off another shot. The bullet hit Petel's shoulder and this one stung, making him flinch and hesitate long enough for the bear to slice at his chest with its claws.

Then his own form fizzled, as if the world was ejecting him from the program, and then he fell through the black once more.

After a moment, he was deposited on his feet in the scanner, a bit thrown off-balance by the sudden change. The doors opened, allowing him to stumble out. Sonya and Levy were there to greet him, which was nice. Not quite as nice, however, was the sight of Dante standing behind Paige's chair, watching the screen hesitantly.

Petel nodded to Sonya and Levy in greeting, then pushed past them to slump against the back of the chair, right beside Dante. The guy squeaked and jumped back, then wisely had the state of mind to look guilty about this. Petel took a good stock of Dante's entire posture before saying, quite casually, "You backed out."

Dante nodded hesitantly in affirmation.

Petel let out a soft breath through his nose, then said, "You got scared, huh?"

Again, Dante nodded hesitantly. His hands trembled and he radiated more heat than normal in his shame, so Petel let it go at that and looked over towards Sonya and Levy. They had been distracted (or, rather, pretended to be distracted) by examining the inside of the scanner Petel had come out of. One of the other orange scanners hissed as it opened then, allowing Abraham out. The centre white one opened, too, and made Dante flinch in the process. Abraham stayed on his feet, though was wobbly like Petel. Vektor, however, fell out and landed flat on the floor, right on his face, not even trying to save himself.

All of them stared at Vektor in silence, unsure of whether to help him or see if he was dead or what. While they were unsure, Paige spoke to Frank through the computer. "Just — you can't do anything to them, so just go back to the level select hub and I'll manually log you out. Okay? Frank?"

There was no response, but shortly after, the last orange tube opened and Frank wobbled out, collapsing to the floor on his butt. "I can't even damage them on my own." He said in frustration. "Why do I have a gun if it does nothing?"

He crossed his arms in a huff and Petel smiled. That could have probably gone better. Petel turned on Abraham with a playfully hurt expression and said, "You shot me."

"Erm, s-sorry about that." Abraham chuckled sheepishly, fiddling with his ponytail in nervousness. "At least it wasn't the blow that took you down?"

Petel laughed along, unwilling to refute that. Paige sat back from the computer and asked, "What's the point of having friendly fire enabled when there are enemies that spawn in groups like that?"

"Yeah, really." Levy chimed in. "Usually, games make you turn it on rather than having to turn it off. Maybe it's in the settings somewhere?"

"When I can figure out where those are, I'll let you know." Paige said in reply.

Frank and Petel both laughed shortly at her sarcastic bite while Sonya and Abraham just smiled appreciatively at the attempt to lighten the mood. Dante clung tighter to the back of the chair, as if it could hide him. Maybe it'd been a good thing that Dante had been too scared this time. Petel could easily see the fire doing more damage than helping.

Paige turned towards Vektor, about to ask him something, when he finally shot up off the floor and said in quiet wonder, "I'm not dead."

He sat up and flexed out his arms and fingers (and toes; Petel had just noticed that this guy wasn't wearing any shoes or socks), then grinned brightly.

"I'm — I'm not dead! Fantastic! And intriguing, but mostly fantastic! Navigator!" He turned to Paige, attempting to stand and succeeding only in stumbling forward on the ground.

"We must make haste for our next return and reach the first checkpoint this time. Are you certain you cannot override the limiter on the log-in system?"

"Even if I could, I'm not sure I'd want to." Paige said, frowning pointedly at him. "Just look at the state you're in from one session."

Vektor grimaced and sunk down, quite sulky for someone so excited just moments ago. "That's an acceptable negative, I suppose. Inferno!" His head snapped up as he near barked the last word, making Dante flinch back a few steps in panic. "For our next venture, I ask that you please not allow your fear to dictate your actions. We need your assistance if we want to get through this as quickly as possible."

The accusing tone made Dante fumble with his words, starting a few sounds but unable to finish any of them as he shrank more into himself. Petel moved in-between the two involuntarily and growled at Vektor. The Prince looked up at him, unbothered and just as cold as he'd been in addressing Dante.

"Yes, Wolf? What seems to be the issue?"

Surprisingly, Petel still had the articulation to speak and said, "Don't blame him for what happened."

"Yeah, we probably did better without him there. Considering the friendly fire thing." Frank joined in, hopping over to stand beside Petel.

Petel smiled briefly at Frank, then glared down at Vektor once more. Vektor, for his part, seemed more confused than reprimanded. "I don't quite understand what you're trying to argue. The classification of attacks and whom they're enabled to damage shouldn't be a factor in this."

"Ugh, don't even try with him." Paige stood from the chair, exasperated, and walked over to offer Vektor a hand as she looked back towards Dante. "If you don't want to play, Dante, don't worry about it. We'll find someone else—"

"Impossible." Vektor interjected. He stared directly into Paige's eyes and said, "It has to be Inferno."

Paige could only stare at the Prince in bewilderment, too taken aback to be offended. Frank met Petel's eyes, then they turned towards Dante, who was cowering behind the computer chair. Dante refused to meet their gazes, still guilty and miserable, so Petel turned his attention back on Vektor without fuss. Abraham raised a hand to his mouth, processing this information, while Sonya looked too confused to even try participating. Levy took it upon himself and stepped forward to ask, "What does that even mean? That only you five are able to play the game at all?"

"It means that the computer has decided its roles with the data it has been given." Vektor said. Levy threw his head back in disappointment as Vektor continued. "Each level has a Guardian and they have chosen their familiars with the given data. Were we to change players now, they would block our passage through their realms since their chosen would be absent. Which is why I must once again thank all of you for agreeing to help me in the first place."

Petel wasn't convinced that this prissy self-identified Prince was sincere about that sentiment, but let it go for the moment. The wolf was no longer snarling at the back of his mind, sated by the situation being diffused. He shrugged in the end and headed for the doors of the tower, saying, "Let's chat more in the dorms."

"Ooh, let's go to my room again." Frank volunteered cheerfully, not as tired as the last time they went into the game. They all seemed to be doing fine on that front, excluding Vektor. "Jonathan's probably out at the labs again while they're still open."

Vektor glanced over at Frank curiously and asked, "You call him Jonathan?"

Petel paused, but remembered Frank mentioning that Jonathan had insomnia and sometimes snuck out onto the campus at night in order to not disturb Frank. It checked out, as much as it seemed ridiculous. Frank, similarly without needing to ask about it, said, "Yeah, he said he doesn't want anyone calling him by his family name, so everyone just calls him Jonathan."

Even most of the teachers and staff went along with it. Petel, who also disliked the formality of last names, could respect that. Vektor still looked baffled by this, so Petel chose to push the doors open and move them all along.

Unfortunately, his doing so revealed Mister Williams, the English 2 teacher, who looked like he'd been about to knock. In a dull surprise, the teacher said, "Ah. There you all are."

Paige, Sonya, Dante, Levy, Frank, and Abraham all froze. Petel winced, but stood strong. Vektor, the only one of them blissfully unaware, looked Mister Williams over and wobbled closer without a single concern in order to offer a handshake as he said, "Vektor Ketziah, pleasure to meet you."

"And there you are, too." Mister Williams said, more to himself as he accepted the handshake. He was completely nonplussed about finding someone who wasn't enrolled on the campus. Petel could only watch as Mister Williams ushered Vektor forward, directing the Prince towards the school's main building. "The Headmistress wanted to meet with you before getting you settled into your room."

"Yes, of course." Vektor nodded along, as if any of this made sense to him. He turned back to address all of them as Mister Williams continued directing him along. "I will return for further discussions once I've fulfilled my obligations with this protocol."

"Right, about that." Mister Williams paused and faced Petel and them, making them all cringe uneasily. He scrutinised them for an agonising minute, then glared off to the side. "The Headmistress said that as long as the lot of you aren't ditching your classes or allowing your grades to slip, then you're allowed to continue assisting Mister Ketziah with." He hesitated as he really looked inside the tower for a moment. "Extracurriculars. I guess. Just make sure those two criteria are met and we'll allow you full access to the tower."

He paused again, then faced away from them to continue towards the main building with Vektor in tow, grumbling to himself.

"Towers. I don't know. This is ludicrous. Something very weird is going on."

Petel and the others watched them go until they were out of earshot. Petel glanced over at Paige for confirmation, unsure of what else to do. She looked about ready to punch a face in, but instead drooped forward in aggravation as she said, "Alright. Let's get some rest."

The rest of their group seemed to agree with that sentiment and they all filed out of the tower's doors, irritated. At least they hadn't been reprimanded, though Petel was sure he'd have preferred that over this weird acceptance. He waited for everyone to be out, then closed the doors and followed after the group. Dante was the last to exit, the only one of them not aggravated by this turn of events, so Petel fell into step beside him.

There was no fire to keep others at bay, but Petel was sure he could still sense its presence. Dante had so insistently wanted to keep to himself that the ring of fire made too much sense. Just as it made sense that Petel was a wolf, fearless and willing to ignore that level of distance.

He gently nudged Dante's shoulder and it was no small feat that Dante didn't jump or squeak in surprise. Then he asked, "How are you doing?"

Abraham headed out the front gates as the rest of them headed for the dorms. Dante fidgeted with his fingers, unable to look at Petel anymore. "I'm, um. I-I'm okay. I'm fine. Thanks."

Petel frowned. Dante was normally withdrawn, but after all the anger and fear he'd displayed about all of this, Petel was beginning to think there was something more to this. Maybe it was the lack of tutorial, maybe it was how much of a non-participant Dante continued to be despite going along with them.

But that was some sheer paranoid bullshit that Petel couldn't prove. The simpler explanation was that Dante's own paranoia was rubbing off on him.

As such, Petel settled for a simple, "If you say so. Let me know when it's too much, okay?"

Dante met his eyes again and smiled bitterly. "Thank you, Petel."

That unexpected bitterness filled the back of Petel's mind with dread. He took Dante's hand as they went inside and upstairs to their room. For now, he should just focus on the excitement this brought. The wolf was already itching to play the game some more.



## Chapter 6: Panic Panic PANIC

"So, apparently, they have Ketziah in the system already." Paige said as she paced back and forth across the floor. They'd all ended up in Sonya's room this Sunday morning, since it was now also Vektor's room. "And he's got his own luggage, apparently. Tell me that makes some kind of sense."

She paused, then whirled on Vektor accusingly.

"Are you certain that you're a computer program and not an actual human who got trapped inside that game?"

The program in question, who was sitting on the previously unclaimed bed beside the box of his things, was unable or unwilling to recognise her aggravation and calmly said, "I've lived in the Mainframe Kingdom since the date of my creation, raised by my grandfather and the townsfolk. I'm quite certain about this, as those are the only memories in my databank that I have access to."

Paige rolled her head back dramatically, doing an admirable job of keeping herself from punching the unwitting Prince. Frank, who was sitting at the empty desk (that now belonged to Vektor), chimed in with a pragmatic, "You gotta admit, with how robotic he sounds, he certainly can't be completely human."

Abraham, who was leaning against the wall between the two desks, nodded in agreement as Vektor bowed his head to mouth something to himself. Petel sat on Sonya's bed beside the birdie, frowning in distaste. Dante, only half-paying attention to all of this, busily fidgeted with the bits of the sticky address label that remained. He'd torn it off the box the moment they'd seen it there with Vektor. Not that it mattered, it didn't have anything super important on it. He'd expected it to, but now he was just sitting in the corner between the bed and the wall, wondering what to write his parents about in his next letter to them.

They didn't care enough to respond, so maybe it didn't matter so much.

Sonya tentatively said, "The computer — or, rather, the game — is located here, in our school. Perhaps this was planned somehow?"

"Who the heck would plan something this obnoxious?" Levy asked, sitting at Sonya's desk. He gestured towards Vektor to punctuate his point, getting a smirk of approval from Petel. "If you ask me, this has gotta be the work of the Ashefords."

Dante hid his own held-back laughter with a huff of breath while Vektor frowned. Paige grimaced over at Levy, pausing long enough to place her hands on her hips. "Really? You're going to drag that bastard into this conspiracy?"

"Think about it." Levy insisted. "The Ashefords are known for their huge law firm. And anytime we tried asking about the whole rumour surrounding the towers, Damon kept brushing us off sayin' it was nothing. Then he goes and wants to investigate it himself. Doesn't that sound like a cover up? And who else could be responsible for a whole virtual reality game that probably breaks a few safety codes?"

Dante scoffed softly. "A morally bankrupt company that thinks they can get away with human testing just because they saved a few lives."

All of them turned their attention on him. He dropped the bits he'd been playing with as his hands tensed up in a panic.

"I-I mean. Well. Th-That's what, um. What it sounds like, r-right?"

"Human testing?" Abraham questioned.

"Whose lives were saved now?" Paige joined in.

Dante hesitated. He knew exactly how to play this off, how to play his part, but he was tired of being dismissed as the babbling artist.

Still, it beat getting his fingers torn off one by one and replaced by bamboo skewers.

He closed his eyes briefly, bracing himself, then actually met their gazes as he said, "The ones who made the shadows."

Still not technically a lie. The air in the room immediately relaxed as they shook their heads at him. They couldn't believe him. He bit his lip and went back to fiddling with the torn bits that were still vaguely sticky. Paige resumed her pacing, right back to irritated. "No matter. Fact is, they were very much expecting you here, Ketziah, and were well prepared for your arrival." She said.

"As is only natural based on the protocols set in place by the system." Vektor nodded in affirmation, as if he could even understand what it was that Paige was implying. Really, from what they'd seen so far, Vektor didn't seem capable of picking up subtext at all. "Your negative view on the situation doesn't sway me, Navigator. I'm actually very excited to have this chance to attend schooling with all of you."

Abraham raised an eyebrow at him. "They had a school in your Kingdom, then?" He asked.

"That's a weird detail to put in." Levy agreed.

Vektor frowned in annoyance and said, "Why would I not be schooled? I am the Crown Prince of the kingdom, my mastery in fields such as combat capabilities and magic are integral —"

"You really like explaining things, huh?" Frank interrupted with a giggle.

Growing exasperated, Vektor waved Frank off dismissively as he said, "It's in my code. I have little choice in that matter."

"Oh, right." Levy perked up as something occurred to him. "You see the code stuff, right? So, like, why do you see all of us out here, in the real arse world, as code?"

Sonya, also very interested in the answer to this question, straightened up in his seat. Vektor closed his eyes a moment, probably trying to put aside some of his annoyance, then said, "I see in code. That's the simple answer. But, more intriguing, all of you have a framework of coding that would allow your profiles to be read and used by the computer."

"Woah, really?"

Levy hopped up onto his knees excitedly. Sonya grew apprehensive as he asked, "Then. Why did you say that we couldn't earlier?"

"I didn't." Vektor said. "The issue isn't whether or not the system would reject you. As I said before, the issue is the Guardians having chosen their familiars."

"But what does that mean?" Frank asked. "Why us? Because we were the first?"

"That, I can't say conclusively. The data given has been interpreted and who's to say it was because you were first or not?"

Vektor shrugged. It was a surprisingly fluid and natural gesture, showing he'd observed them enough in order to add that into his responses. An impressive feat. Dante hated it.

As Vektor continued, he stared at Petel, then Frank, then Abraham in scrutiny. "If I had to guess, however, I would agree that it does seem to have something to do with completing this tutorial you keep mentioning. And unless you can find a way to overwrite the system's memory on that, it has to be you lot specifically."

Vektor sat back in satisfaction. Paige plopped herself down beside Sonya and next asked, "How come Dante's required, then, when he didn't get the tutorial?"

"Because Inferno is necessary." Vektor answered.

Dante grimaced in distaste. When it was clear that was all Vektor was going to say, Abraham tried again with a succinct, "But why?"

"That's how it is written." Vektor shrugged again, growing distracted by looking around the room. "This code is fascinating, were any of you aware that it has survived forty-three of your realm's cycles?"

Recognising that they weren't about to get a better reason out of the Prince, they all relented and sat for a moment in silence. Then Petel, addressing Dante, asked, "Why'd you tear that off the box?"

Dante clenched his fingers together tightly on the small bits he still held. He really didn't have a good answer for that. Thankfully, Frank hopped up and went over to the box in order to pull it open, asking, "What's even in it?"

Paige half-rose in an attempt to stop him. "Ernest—"

"My guess is belongings?" Levy said.

"I'd say school supplies." Abraham said. They ignored Paige and Vektor didn't seem bothered by their rooting through the box that was clearly meant for him, so she sat back down and rolled her eyes at them. Abraham pushed himself off the wall he'd been leaning against to join Frank in looking into the box. "Why haven't you opened it yet, anyway?"

"This is your stuff, right?" Frank asked, side-eying the Prince.

Vektor examined the box a moment before replying, "I suppose it is, but I have no previous interaction with any of it, if that was what you were asking."

Levy wrinkled his nose in distaste. "Man, Birdie, I do not envy you being stuck with Mister Robot here for the rest of the term."

Petel leaned against Sonya's shoulder and chuckled. "Terrible luck in roommates strikes again."

Sonya buried his head in his hands as Vektor bowed his head to mouth something to himself again. Frank proceeded to pull out a few sets of clothes, including, surprisingly, one mustard yellow suit that wasn't a school uniform, books for classes, and finally a phone. That grabbed everyone's interests. Besides Vektor, who was looking raptly over the clothes. Frank tapped a few of the phone's buttons, trying to turn it on, and Abraham asked, "Is that really the latest model out right now?"

"Sure looks like it." Frank grinned as he succeeded in getting the thing to react, then quickly began typing. "I'm gonna go ahead and put myself in here."

Levy hopped up to his feet and said, "Me next!"

Petel's smile became tinged with annoyance. Dante was amazed that they'd entrusted a phone to Vektor at all.

A Prince, indeed. They really did fit in here at this school in one way.

Vektor, meanwhile, pulled a pair of shoes out of the box and wrinkled his nose in disgust at them. "Even here, they're obsessed with covering your feet, it seems." He grumbled.

The others frowned at him in confusion, but Dante nearly laughed. That was the most familiar thing Vektor could've done. They'd never had the means to begin with, but they had always hated shoes. It was bitter and awful and Dante had to swallow back that laughter, lest the hounds come to tear out his tongue for such a display.

They all took turns putting their numbers into Vektor's phone until it was finally handed to Dante. And he had to know. He opened the full contacts list to scroll through all the names, but the only ones in there were this group's. It was a brand new phone, after all. He wasn't sure if that made things better or worse, if it made him angry or relieved. He simply entered his own number in, labelling himself 'Inferno' because he knew that was all he was going to get, then handed it off to someone else.

The air would be choked with chuckling dead-eyed fish if he cared to give them enough thought. Right now, there was too much heat fighting to get out of him for that.

He would lose control if he kept thinking about it and then he'd hurt these friends. Then they'd hate him, too.

Petel suddenly plopped down beside him, making him jump. Dante had gotten too caught up in his own mind to have seen him move. Petel stared at him, sitting close enough to be able to feel the heat, then asked, "What's wrong?"

Despite everything, Dante found himself relaxing and the heat dissipating. Petel was very observant, more so than Dante had really been counting on, but it could be comforting to know that someone was paying attention. Someone cared enough to press. Dante smiled, a bit more genuine than he'd meant, as he said, "Everything's falling apart."

Petel glanced around the room a moment (and Dante hadn't expected him to take it so seriously, shit), then leaned into Dante's shoulder. "Guess we'll all go down together, then."

It was so silly. Petel was just as odd as Dante could be. Dante smiled again, though this time it was much too bitter. He, in return, asked, "Why are you like this?"

Petel sat up energetically, his eyes gleaming with confidence. "I'm a wolf. You're my pack."

His matter-of-fact tone, coupled with his short nod at the end, didn't really help explain it at all. Still, Dante couldn't much argue with that. The one uncontested fact around the whole of the school was that Petel was a wolf. Even in the game, that seemed to be true.

The fable of the wolf child popped into Dante's head. Did Petel know about that? Did any of them know? Or had those been simple bedtime stories, distractions to keep Dante complacent while there was work to be done? Either possibility made him shudder and he gently pushed Petel off him.

The afternoon bell rang, catching all of their attention. Levy grabbed Vektor's arm to pull him up to his feet and announced, "Lunch time! C'mon, new guy, you must be starving."

"Starving?" Vektor frowned in confusion. "No, I'm — didn't I introduce myself to all of you? I'm the Prince."

"Yes, so you've said." Paige muttered.

Levy dragged Vektor over to the door of the room and Sonya stood quickly to follow after, calling, "Levy, wait, perhaps a proper tour—"

"He said he'd toured the place already, Birdie, it'll be fine."

The two exited the room as they bickered and towed Vektor off to the cafeteria. If this was an improvement on the situation, it sure didn't seem like one. Petel, at least, looked satisfied with this turn of events and said, "Food time."

Frank shot up, flinging his arms into the air as he cheered. Paige laughed at his overblown enthusiasm and led the way out. Abraham took a moment to check his own phone (and frowned at the result; it must've been his father), then followed after them. And while Dante would've preferred to be left behind, to allow the mud golems ample time to trap him in the walls, he was hungry enough to want to eat. If only he could ignore the maggots that always wriggled their way into his meals.

The cafeteria was crowded with all the students who stayed in the dorms. Dante tried to avoid looking around the crowd too much, but ended up noticing both Niculaie and Damon. Aglaé, however, was absent. If it weren't for the amount of sparkling gabflies in the air, Dante would go over there to ask what they were doing here, but he ignored it and continued to the line for food.

Abraham stood in front of Dante, also agitated. "I can't believe those filth are here." He grumbled heatedly. "It's not a school day and yet. And yet! They continue to appear before me, unwanted, like the true blemishes they are."

Petel, standing behind Dante, wrinkled his nose at this. Dante wanted to know what had happened between him and Niculaie to provoke all this anger. Damon had always spoken so highly of Abraham, even if it made logical sense that a Huntsman and a Vampire could never truly be friends. In-between Abraham and Paige, Frank looked back at him and said, "Hey, uh. Maybe tone it down a bit there?"

"Yeah, about that." Paige turned around to face Abraham and said, "I know we all like to keep up the joke, but if you really commit to your charade, then that's murder. You'll go to jail, van Helsing."

Bemused, Abraham said, "I don't want to murder him. I want to wipe out his existence once and for all."

Paige's expression fell flat and she turned away from him. Frank seemed disappointed with that answer while Petel asked, "Isn't that the same thing?"

"Of course not."

Abraham chuckled at them as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. Dante, at least, understood how it made sense. Frank deflated further and Petel relented with a quiet, "As long as you say so."

Paige groaned in frustration. "You're infuriating. All of you."

Petel's expression turned apologetic. Dante bowed his head in agreement and exhaled a quiet, "Sorry."

Abraham frowned, not quite looking apologetic but at least understanding Paige's annoyance. They collected their lunches, which was meat and potato stew with vegetables today, then found a table and settled in. Petel sandwiched Dante between himself and Paige, and Vektor sat right across from Dante.

There was nowhere to hide. Dante almost wanted to just hold his breath until his lungs burst.

While the rest of them set about eating, Vektor gently spun his tray around, very intent on observing his food from every angle. He stared with wide, nearly sparkling eyes, his mouth agape in awe. Which was, to say the least, completely baffling.

Levy, Sonya, and Abraham took notice of this and watched the display with similar amounts of confusion. In the end, Dante couldn't hold back the question burning at the tip of his tongue. "Have you n-never seen stew before?"

"Your realm's vast array of these 'meals' is utterly fascinating." Vektor replied airily.

The Prince continued spinning his plate around carefully to examine every inch of the otherwise standard stew. Honestly, Dante really preferred the spaghetti with meatballs or even meatloaf with mashed potatoes if he had to, but that was his homesickness weighing in. And everyone now looked at Vektor in varying degrees of bemusement. Frank offered up a simple, "He did this with everything I brought him, too."

"Did you not have meals where you came from?" Levy asked.

Vektor seemed far too distracted by the food, babbling to himself. "Just look at these formulas. This elegance! Such a refined equation for nutrition and energy consumption that seems to be both simple and effective. Like it's been hundreds if not thousands of years in the making! It's simply divine, wouldn't you say?"

He turned to Sonya for agreement, then Levy. Neither of them seemed sure how to answer. Paige set him with her best aggravated glare as she asked, "What are you talking about, you bloody computer program?"

Frank burst into laughter, as did Abraham. Petel smirked and nodded in appreciation while Sonya winced at her harshness and Levy smiled in amusement. Vektor, not seeing the humour of the situation, huffed at Paige and pointed at his tray of food as if that could help him explain anything. "I'm talking about the coding of this 'meal'. It's so impressive, in fact, that I would like to meet the one who wrote it and ask how they knew to combine this hexadecimal with that binary in just the right way for this masterpiece. Would that be appropriate, or would I then be too 'robotic', as you've called it?"

Paige's hands tightened into fists, that unmistakable urge to fight rising in her. Dante, his mind buzzing with panic, could only drum his fingers against the table, too loud to be polite but too indecisive to stand up and act as needed. Frank leaned over to pat Paige's back, keeping everything in good humour as he said, "Lookit him learning, taking what we've said to him and using it against us. You could almost mistake him for a real person!"

Paige took a moment to breathe out that fight, then shook her head. "Almost. Not quite, though."

Vektor continued to frown huffily at them, looking every bit a pampered and spoiled child. Dante was struck by the image and couldn't breathe. Something had taken his air. He'd been too focused on the conversation, he hadn't noticed the faceless raptors sneaking up with their long reptilian claws. Hands. Feet? They'd grabbed a hold of his lungs through his chest and squeezed, making it impossible for him to gasp or squeak or anything.

He needed air.

He needed space.



He couldn't breathe.

Without a second's hesitation, he stood and bolted out of the cafeteria. Maybe the others noticed and called after him.

Maybe they didn't.

It was a normal thing for a weirdo like Dante to do. To freak out over nothing like this.

He ran out into the courtyard and stopped himself from running any farther on one of the trees, holding onto it as he panted and wheezed, fighting against the raptor's lingering grip. His body shook as it wanted to run, run far away from this school and this nightmare. Run back to Italy where the torture came in a predictable schedule at least.

But that was too far. He'd never make it.

And even if he could go back there, he'd hate it more than here.

Why even bother?

His breathing was still shaky, but that hopelessness helped his body to stop trembling, to stop wanting to escape. It was futile, anyway. Running back wouldn't change anything. They'd just bring him back here, liquidate him and rewrite everything to be as if it never happened.

They had to play the game.

There was no escape.

He heard footsteps and whirled around to see Paige making her way over. It was just Paige.

Dante relaxed and leaned back against the trunk of the tree, relief easing all of that imagined pressure off of his lungs. He thought to wave in acknowledgement, but then she was right there in front of him and it would be silly by that point.

Paige looked him directly in the eye as she said, "We need to talk about what's really bothering you."

Her tone was that authoritative, unmistakable 'mom' one that she usually reserved for Petel when the wolf was being too reckless. Dante bowed his head and mumbled a miserable, "S-Sorry."

He didn't like being this way. These were just the consequences of the rules laid out for him long ago. Paige sighed softly, her tone becoming gentle. "What are you so afraid of here? What happened to you that makes you run out in the middle of conversations? We can't help if you don't tell us anything, Dante."

She placed a hand on his shoulder, a reassuringly human touch. He wilted under it as the surrounding chimps laughed at his guilt. "I-I." He gulped and carefully ducked away from her hand. "I'm just. A-Afraid."

Paige stared at him for an agonising moment before placing a hand against her forehead. "Okay." She sounded aggravated, but pressed on. "Is there anything specific? Can we do anything to help?"

That was a harder one to answer. There were so many things that could go wrong that it was impossible to think of the proper countermeasures. And the fires refused to be doused no matter what. Defeated, Dante said, "Even if I refused. You'll keep playing, and. And end up getting hurt."

"Oh, no you don't." She pressed him against the trunk of the tree, pushing him upright. He squeaked in surprise, but she continued, undaunted. "Stop that right now. Don't assume you're going to lose no matter what and try to drop the subject with me. Give me an answer, Dante. What can we do to convince you that we're safe? That you're safe here?"

This time, he couldn't avoid her glare. She had him cornered. He gestured as he tried to explain, as if that could help him finish anything. "I-I — Th-There — There's nothing you c-can do! I'm just — Nothing is — y-you're all — I can't—"

He couldn't get the words out.

Everything got so hopelessly stuck in his throat, refusing to make him look rational or believable.

Paige released him, becoming concerned. It was too late. Dante's mind wouldn't cooperate. He kept trying to force the words out as he curled in on himself, holding his hands to his head instead of doing those jerky, unfinished motions, but the panic continued rising to block his throat.

"They're gonna — I'm gonna — you'll all h-hate me — I can't — I won't — it won't — y-you'll all just—"

He shut his eyes tightly and screamed, finally getting something out.

"You're all gonna be d-disappointed in me, j-just like them!"

For every good thing he remembered about his home, they invented ten things to keep him away.

He hated them. He hated them so much.

They did this to him.

They did this to all of them. Every student in attendance.

And no matter how nice this group was, they'd never believe him.

The only one who could understand was Damon.

Paige grabbed Dante and held him close in a hug, softly petting through his hair even though he was slightly taller. Despite his heat and despite his instability, she was still willing to touch him. "We're not going to be disappointed in you." She reassured him, speaking as softly as her actions. "You're our friend. Nothing can change that."

The fear roared insistently at the back of Dante's mind. He was a failure, a mistake, worthless.

He wanted so badly to believe her.

He took a shuddering breath and stuttered, "Once w-we get to th-the end. You w-won't even want to-to talk to m-me."

"Yes, we will." Paige argued, just as insistent. "Well, at least, I will. I like you too much."

"I like you, too."

Petel joined them, hugging Dante from behind and making him yelp in surprise. Petel was always so cold, just as Dante was too warm. Paige laughed and teased the wolf with a short, "How long have you been waiting to do that?"

Petel chuckled in response. They effectively had Dante trapped between them, but it was probably the safest place he could be right now. It even helped further quiet that fear telling him he should be running.

"That's what I thought." Paige said, triumphant. "Is that the only reason you followed us out here?"

"Pretty much."

Petel released them and stepped back. Paige also released Dante, though she grabbed his hand as a way to keep him anchored. Dante's parents had never been very tactile and still, for some reason, he immediately missed the feeling of Paige and Petel's hug. That was peculiar. Dante shook it away and asked, "Is, um. Are you—? What's, uh."

He frowned at himself in frustration. Petel took it in stride, saying, "Teachers came and took the Prince. So it's safe now."

"Good to hear." Paige grinned at Dante, as if there was some sort of shared joke in the context of that statement. Had they been able to key into that fact so easily? Paige next asked Petel, "Has our Huntsman gone yet or is he still here?"

"Should still be here." Petel grinned suddenly. "Let's keep him from murdering an innocent vampire."

Paige smacked Petel's arm playfully, then pulled Dante along back to the cafeteria. Dante glanced over at the wolf, whose smile softened reassuringly.

They were both too trusting. Dante hadn't done anything to instil such generosity.

He faced forward to stare at the back of Paige's head as they walked, the winged serpents in the air parting for them. There was one benefit to continuing this.

The cafeteria was, thankfully, less crowded than before. Abraham sat at their table with Frank, Levy, and Sonya, and Vektor was, indeed, absent. As were Damon and Niculaie. Dante probably wasn't going to get a chance to speak with them about all this.

That was fine. They'd still be around for the next time Dante had the nerve. Maybe.

After they parted ways, Petel practiced his music piece in his room as Dante pretended to work on important school things while also not drawing anything in his sketchbook. Dante wasn't that knowledgeable on music. He'd learned a lot just from listening to Sonya, Levy, and Kalyuga discuss their class (though he still wasn't sure what they meant when they called things 'leitmotifs' or how there could be so many of them within a single song), but he knew nothing about instruments or how to play them. His parents mostly listened to classical pieces with the odd pop song here or there, always in Italian if there were vocals, so he wasn't sure he could even say if he had a favourite genre or song.

What he did know was that he really, really enjoyed listening to Petel practice, even if sections repeated over and over or there was a sour note here or there. The instrument itself looked dangerous, but Petel's passion made it look effortless.

Dante wanted to sketch the poses or Petel's intense expressions, but that was a touch too intimate a thing to do considering their tenuous friendship. Besides, what if he wasn't thinking and ended up drawing something monstrous out of Petel? He shuddered at the thought and repressed the urge, even if those poses were so fascinating.

After making sure his violin was properly tuned or otherwise in shape, Petel sat down on Dante's bed, making Dante scramble to clear away his school books. The second he clicked the case shut, Petel said, "I'm worried that, if I try to touch you, you'll just get freaked out."

The oddly out of nowhere statement made Dante ask, "Wh-What?"

Petel tilted his head from one side to the other, trying to find the right way to explain it. "Sometimes, I want to hug you. Or pat your shoulder. Or things like that. You know?"

Dante pondered this a moment, then said, "No? I-I don't get it. Why don't you, uh. Just do it?"

Petel made a wry face. "Because. You scream."

"I. Uh."

Dante frowned, perplexed. He screamed? How was that an issue here? He never stopped screaming to begin with. This seemed more complicated than it needed to be.

Carefully, Dante shrugged in confusion as he said, "As long as you. Um. Warn me? B-Before you do it. Um. I-It should be fine, I-I don't think I'll mind."

Petel perked up. "You sure?"

"I. I think so." Dante nodded, still cautious. He couldn't give a full guarantee, considering everything. "I — um. Think it'll b-be fine. M-Maybe."

He mashed his hands together, unsure of what else to do with them. Maybe that was showing too much trust. Petel, however, looked pleased with this and leaned over to knock his shoulder against Dante's in a teasing manner. "That so? Whatever happened to keeping your distance from us?"

"Clearly, you weren't deterred a-at all."

Dante rolled his eyes, exasperated but smiling along as Petel laughed. It was dangerous to be this close, but Dante had to admit that it was nice. Despite all the danger, being with Petel seemed almost natural. As if Petel's confidence alone could keep misfortune away. After his laughter petered out, Petel continued with a playfully offended, "What, no ominous warning this time? You're losing your heat, Fireball."

"I-I was trying to be nice." Dante huffed, though he smiled along and went to knock against Petel's shoulder in return. Something hissed behind him and made him freeze. He aborted the motion and stared down at his hands. "Y-You said. To stop. So. I wasn't — I didn't th-this time."

Petel's smile faded as Dante's fear dragged down the mood. There couldn't be a single moment where Dante could just exist without worrying about appeasing the spectres. Not if he wanted to keep all of his ribs in their correct places. Petel, in the end, stood off Dante's bed and said, "I believe you, you know."

"Huh?"

Dante looked up in confusion. Petel met his eyes directly and said, "You're one of the bravest people I've ever met. I have full confidence in your ability to burn brighter than the rest of us."

With that, Petel sat down on his own bed and pulled out some of his other school work. Dante closed his sketchbook and pulled over his History book in order to do that. He'd ask Paige about the English stuff tomorrow. Everything could be put off until tomorrow, unless it involved the skull golems that liked to gnash teeth together. Or the two shadows in human guise that had come out of the game.

No, that was unfair. They had yet to see this Thief whom Vektor hated so much. Maybe Dante was jumping to conclusions here. The judgemental rats could laugh at him for being so very wrong once they found out for certain.

He really hoped he was wrong.

## Chapter 7: Shades of Friendship

After breakfast on Mondays came the morning announcements for the rest of the week's events. Just another routine in their already fairly rigid class schedule. Petel wondered if Vektor would make the news, considering how prepared they were for him. As they filed into the gymnasium with their fellow students, Paige said, "There's that Prince. Guess he really is joining us."

Petel looked to the stage and, sure enough, Vektor stood up there with the rest of the teachers and the Headmistress. Getting formally announced, what an honour. Petel wanted to make a snide comment in reply, but the other student standing up there caught his eye. They looked alarmingly similar to Vektor in every way except for the colours. Where Vektor had silvery grey hair and nearly pure black skin, this other had black hair and sickly white skin.

From this distance, Petel couldn't see their eyes, but he imagined them to follow the theme and be the opposite to Vektor's gold. Whatever the opposite of gold even was.

"That must be the Thief." Petel said.

"Must be." Paige agreed. She seemed just as caught up in scrutinising this new character and Petel was glad to sit beside her with Dante, Sonya, and Kalyuga close by. "Didn't Vektor use 'she' and 'her' when talking about them, though?"

Petel gave it a moment of thought, then shrugged. "Frank and I wear the trousers. You and Dante wear the dress."

"Good point."

Paige smiled fondly at the thought. Then the Headmistress spoke up, commanding the whole room's attention. "Students, we have two big announcements today, so open your ears and make sure not to miss them."

A hush fell over the student body. Barely over a hundred of them and they still handily fit inside the Gymnasium with room to spare. The Headmistress nodded appreciatively, then continued.

"Firstly, the end of term celebration sign-ups are open to all who wish to help make this event as special as our Hollow's Eve dance. Miss Fitzgard, Mister Adler, and Mister Carriedo will be handling most of the details, so go see one of them if you wish to participate. Remember,

you cannot have any missing or late work in any of your classes and, if you live off-campus, you have to get your parent or guardian's written permission."

A short murmur of excitement went around the students. Paige pumped her fists subtly, whispering, "I've been waiting for this."

Petel chuckled at her enthusiasm, then the crowd quieted and the Headmistress continued. "If everything goes as planned, we should be holding it on the Saturday before exams prep. Now, our second bit of big news is that we have two new students joining us this year."

This piece of information sparked a much louder wave of murmurs around the students, and for good reason. Autumn term was half-finished, so how could a transfer even get accepted? It was pretty suspicious.

The Headmistress beckoned the two waiting behind her and presented them to the rest of the student body. "These two are Vektor Ketziah and Vektoria Ketxiah, who hail from the Kingdom of Israel." She explained. "They're both third years and I expect you all to be as hospitable and welcoming to them as you yourselves were treated when you first arrived. We want them to leave with the impression that our school is the best, after all."

She winked, which garnered some groans and some cheers. Dante grabbed Paige's hand, which she accepted in stride as she murmured to Petel, "Their names are nearly the same, too."

Petel watched the Headmistress usher the two back to their places, then said, "They came from the same world."

"Oh god, they're just a palette swap of the same model."

Paige shook her head, unable to slap a hand to her forehead as it was currently being occupied. The Headmistress turned the rest of the announcements over to Mister Adler, whom Petel knew to be a good friend of Miss Fitzgard.

After a minute, however, Paige squirmed out of Dante's grip and hissed, "You're burning my hand, Dante."

Petel leaned over to see that the fireball in question was panicked and ready to bolt again. In fact, Petel could feel the heat from where he was, too. Something had really upset him. Quickly and a bit too loudly, Dante said, "Sorry, s-sorry. I didn't m-mean to."

"Are you getting ill? You're practically burning up." Sonya said next in concern.

"Something bothering you?" Petel asked.

Dante tried to reply, but seemed too panicked to even make a sound. Recognising this, Paige carefully wrapped her arm around his shoulders and pulled him against her side despite the



heat. "It's okay, we're not trying to make you more uncomfortable than you already are. We're just worried."

Her soothing worked, as the heat lessened and Dante melted into her embrace. A pang of annoyance hit Petel, making the wolf whine, but he couldn't argue with Paige. Paige had been friends with Dante first, it made sense.

They all returned their attention back to the announcements, then were dismissed to classes. Petel was, unfortunately, unable to see either of the computer beings right away, sharing classes with neither of them. Paige mentioned during Phys-Ed that Vektor shared hers and Frank's Calculus and they managed to get the fact that this Thief was in Dante's Algebra, which served to only make the wolf more restless.

He'd asked for this adventure, yet at every turn was denied the more interesting points. And considering how distressed Dante seemed, his breath steaming in the chilly air with every puff, there had to be something off about these two programs.

At first break, they all followed Paige to find somewhere to hang out. Dante trailed behind them, which was pretty normal, but then he yelped and when Petel glanced back, Dante was being dragged away by that Thief.

Immediately, Petel charged over and grabbed Dante away from this other. "What do you want?" He growled, making sure to bare his teeth.

"Ah, the Wolf as well." This other, Vektoria, brushed her hands off in satisfaction as she addressed them flippantly. "This works out, the more to hear my plight the merrier."

Dante clung to Petel's sleeve and Petel made sure to keep himself in-between the two of them, protecting his friend. "Your plight?" He questioned warily.

Vektoria grinned. Something about it seemed cruel and performative, more an imitation of a human's emotion than an actual genuine display. "You two are helping that dimwit of a Prince, aren't you? Well, I'm here to tell you that you'll get nowhere following him. Join my gang and I'll tell you exactly what game it is we're playing here."

Petel frowned and said, "That's not a plight at all."

"There's a reason for everything." Vektoria replied easily. Her tone of voice was even identical to Vektor's, if a bit smoother and without the robotic edge to it. "I can tell you all about how his purpose doesn't matter if you just side with me. Well?"

She offered her hand out towards them, an odd invitation. While Petel was curious to hear what she had to say, they'd made a promise to the Prince first. The wolf wouldn't abide by such a betrayal. And Dante was still afraid, so the decision was made before this question had been asked.

Vektoria withdrew her hand, however, and her tone and expression grew bored. "Whatever, don't decide right now. Just know that, if you oppose me, I won't hesitate to remove your code from existence."

She left then, not awaiting a reply. They were even just as impatient as one another. Petel glanced over at Dante, who relaxed now that the threat was gone. The fireball mumbled, "She's off."

He released Petel's sleeve and stood back. Unsatisfied with that, Petel wrapped an arm around Dante's shoulders instead. Dante allowed it, not even squeaking or yelping in surprise. As they headed after Paige and the others, Petel said, "Let's see what that Prince has to say about this."

Dante replied with a succinct, "He won't like it."

"Why'd she go after you, though?" Petel asked.

Vektoria had found and picked Dante off while the rest of them had been distracted. That was a pro hunting technique that Abraham would find impressive. Petel wrinkled his nose in distaste at the thought. This whole thing was remarkably similar to how Damon first approached Petel, singling the wolf out as the leader of his then smaller pack.

At Dante's lack of response, Petel shrugged it off. For one reason or another, the fireball prompted a variety of odd reactions from those around the school. Petel switched instead to saying, "You're going to the end of term thing, right?"

"I'll. Um. I'll c-come see you play, y-yeah." Dante agreed hesitantly.

Petel perked up instantly. "Really? Guess I did hear some crayfish singing on the mountains after all."

Dante laughed shortly at the absurd sounding idiom and they soon joined Paige and the others sitting outside by one of the trees. Petel removed his arm from Dante's shoulders and sat between Kalyuga and Sonya. Frank grinned at them, something mischievous about it, as he teased, "You two took your time."

Dante sat by Abraham, a bit farther from the others. Petel said, "That Thief tried to steal us."

Vektor sprung up onto his knees and exclaimed, "Truly? She did? That conniving — I knew she would try to cheat me further."

He snapped his fingers, upset enough that it really showed through his somewhat stilted rage. Abraham turned towards Dante and gently asked, "Are you alright?"

"She didn't try to hurt you, did she?" Kalyuga joined in, also concerned.

Both Dante and Petel shook their heads. Paige, unimpressed, asked Vektor, "Haven't you called her a Thief this whole time? Cheating should be within her rights from that alone."

"She can't continue stacking the odds against me." Vektor lamented, only somewhat answering Paige's question. "She's stolen enough from me, I won't allow her to take this, too."

"We're not going with her." Petel broke in, before the Prince could really get going. Vektor looked over at him as he turned to Dante for confirmation. "We can't. Right?"

Dante flinched in surprise, then reluctantly nodded. "R-Right."

Still unenthused about playing the game. But he agreed and that lit up Petel's spirits. Vektor deflated in relief a moment, then straightened up at attention as Frank asked, "What happened between you two, anyway?"

"Yeah, what's your tea?" Levy joined in.

Vektor scowled down at his lap, then said, "Vektoria took advantage of my kindness and opened the gates of the Mainframe, which my family has guarded with our lives for generations. Without someone to assist in fighting the enemies back, the same fate might befall my grandfather — the whole Kingdom, even!"

He paused, then looked around at all of them with the fervour of a child.

"You see, now, why it is of the utmost importance that we hurry. If she finds a way back before us, she could continue her reign of chaos and doom the entire realm!"

Paige considered this, then said, "Sure does sound pretty standard as far as plots go."

"We'll help as best we can." Frank promised.

"Thank you. All of you." Vektor bowed to them, a gesture of regal formality that Petel was shocked by for a moment. It could be easy to forget that Vektor really believed himself to be royalty, considering he was just a computer program who looked within their age group. The bell rang to end break and the Prince sprang to his feet, rejuvenated. "We'll reconvene at the next break and discuss more then."

They headed their separate ways, Frank and Dante walking with Petel to Study Hall. As soon as they took their seats at a table, Frank turned on Dante and asked, "How would you know how to use your abilities, anyway?"

Surprised, Dante could only stutter out a confused, "Wh-What?"

"You didn't get a tutorial and didn't spend enough time in there." Frank said. "There's no way you could have known how to control your fires and Vektor's foolish to expect otherwise."

Petel nodded along in agreement. Dante mashed his hands together nervously and seemed hesitant to say, "I-I can. Um. I can probably f-figure it out."

Frank's entire countenance perked up. "That's the spirit. Hey, Petel, the band's gonna be performing at the end of term celebration, right? Does that mean none of you are gonna get to have fun and dance?"

Frank turned back so quickly to address Petel, it was amazing the guy didn't get whiplash. Petel shrugged in good humour. "Miss Fitzgard's having Mister Adler handle the dance part. We're just the recital, like last time."

"That's great, then." Frank's tone took on a teasing edge to it as he playfully elbowed Petel's arm. "So, are you gonna ask someone special to go with you?"

"I already did."

Petel looked over at Dante, who fidgeted under the attention. Frank laughed loudly in delight, which earned them a shushing from Mister Patillo and was a great time for them to focus on their work. Frank moved out from the seat in-between the two of them in order to sit beside Percival, the two chatting in hushed but animated tones.

At some point, Dante pulled out his sketchbook and Petel peeked over to see what his roommate was drawing. On one of the pages was a girl with a monstrous expression and an otherwise realistic body, another had a behemoth of a being with six horns and broad wings. Every time Petel was able to see one of Dante's drawings, he was impressed by their detail and creativity. Perhaps, one day, they'd be good enough friends for Dante to gift him one of those drawings.

That might've been too much of a stretch, though. Dante didn't even offer to let others see his drawings, as far as Petel knew.

As Petel and Dante were settling into their room for the night, Petel asked, "You sure you're okay with this?"

"Can't get a-any worse than it already is." Dante replied, curling himself up in his blanket.

Petel smiled appreciatively, though he was still concerned. Dante tended to give in when the fight was too much of a bother to keep up. That defeatist mentality made the wolf whine guiltily, as if it had been the one to strike Dante's hopes down. In a sudden, impulsive burst, Petel next said, "Tell me one of them."

"Huh?"

Dante stared back in mostly confusion. Petel clarified, "Tell me about the things you saw in the tower."

"Oh. Th-Them."

Dante bowed his head, visibly uncomfortable. Petel watched closely, trying to figure out some information as to why Dante feared them in the first place. Charon had taunted the fireball with snakes and spiders while Vektor's existence made Dante far more antsy than normal. These things in the tower, however, had made Dante scream bloody murder. If Dante could explain it, then Petel might yet be able to understand the whys to it all.

Quietly at first, out of fear, Dante slowly said, "Th-The shadows. Well. They've, um. They've always b-been there. A-Always."

Petel hummed softly. That wasn't super helpful. He next asked, "What do they look like?"

Dante shuddered and fought himself to get the words out. "Th-They. Ugh. They're, um. Long, s-spindly. Like, uh, l-like shadows. Faceless. Formless. With blank wh-white eyes and-and stapled grins." He paused as the shudders ran through him, then kept going. "They're — um. Sometimes, they're missing, uh, l-limbs. And th-they bleed black, onto the floor, leaving trails a-and scraping their knuckles — if, um, if they h-have hands and arms, a-at least."

"Sounds gruesome." Petel commented.

A wry smile passed through Dante's expression a moment. Then he continued. "They. Um. Really, they're just. Puppets. W-With strings attached. And-And they're always. Always."

He clenched his hand against his chest, twisting up the fabric of his nightshirt in his fingers. Gently, Petel prompted, "Always what?"

Dante exhaled, deflating. "They're always reminding me. Not to break the rules."

"Right. The rules." Petel grimaced shortly, then rolled off his bed. He crouched in front of Dante, catching his roommate's eye. "If you let them control you, they will. But you are far stronger than even you realise, Dante."

Petel knew this so well from personal experience. Dante gave a hollow smile and said, "Thanks."

"Don't act like we can't handle you, either." Petel countered swiftly, trying to hit at another angle. He stood and chuckled in embarrassment. "I mean. I'm the one who said I could eat you and all."

Dante's frown turned incredulous. Somehow, Petel was going to turn that blunder into the pillar on which their friendship was built. Not the smartest course of action, but it certainly made things interesting. Dante finally mumbled a defeated, "You're too determined."

Petel returned to his bed and said, "Paige calls it single-mindedness, but yeah. If you stop the ominous shit, we'll be good."

The lights out warning came over the speakers just then, leaving them both to settle in for the night. Dante finished sushi-ing himself into his blanket and Petel allowed himself to drift off just after the lights flicked out.

Petel dreamt of the wolf, running through the winter fields of their home. They spotted two figures, then their vision went red.

When he awoke to the morning wake-up call, Dante was at his desk, scribbling away at something. At first, Petel surged forward to bite and scratch, the wolf's residual bloodlust fighting inside him, but he tumbled off his bed in a tangle of sheets and made Dante squeak in surprise. Petel untangled himself and the wolf begrudgingly calmed. He could perform his human duties for the day without it snarling at the back of his mind over something he wasn't even sure was real.

Dante being awake wasn't that big a mystery. While Petel had thought the fireball to be a morning person at first, it made more sense that Dante was just too high-strung to keep himself asleep for long.

Frank, Paige, Sonya, and Levy greeted them cheerily for breakfast. Vektor was there, too, but was absorbed in examining his food and didn't notice their presence. Petel wanted to tease the Prince or even ask about it, but instead went with a simple, "We're playing the game tonight, aren't we?"

As expected, Vektor's head shot up, instantly at attention. "Yes, of course. Every push for progress we can make would be much appreciated."

"That's settled, then." Paige said with finality. Her countenance softened as she then turned to Dante and asked, "Are you sure you're okay with this?"

Resigned and resolute, Dante said, "It's. It's fine."

Petel frowned, unsatisfied with that answer, but the others accepted it readily. And, really, it was the best they were going to get concerning the timid fireball. As such, Petel let the matter drop and focused instead on school. Up until first break, where he was caught yet again by Vektoria.

"I've given you plenty of time, so give me my answer." This Thief demanded, straightforward.

Petel scoffed, returning with an equally rude, "No."

"It's a simple choice, you know." Vektoria argued, fed-up with Petel already. "That fool is broken, doomed to lose, and an all-around failure. I'm the favourite, I know what I'm doing, and nothing can stand in my way. You should just abandon him and be a part of something greater, something worth more than this silly little game."

She was haughtier than even the self-proclaimed Prince. Petel hadn't thought that possible. Again, he said, "No."

Vektoria eyed him in an accusing, almost intimidating way. "No?" She echoed.

"I'm not joining you." Petel clarified.

Vektoria stepped closer, glaring down at him from her slightly taller vantage point. She was the same height as Vektor, which made them both as tall as Damon. Despite this, the wolf would not be swayed. Barely able to contain her fury, Vektoria asked, "What could possibly be worth more from that liar of a Prince than everything I'm offering you?"

"Friendship."

Petel nodded succinctly, then stepped out from her space and headed off to find Paige and the others. Vektoria sputtered for a moment, then screamed after Petel with all the rage of a banshee. "Are you serious? You and Inferno are going to let a few meaningless values like that tie you down to the losing side? I hope you know that this means war!"

She sounded like a child throwing a tantrum. Petel ignored her and soon was out of earshot. Then he found his pack of friends inside the cafeteria, Dante amongst them, and sat right beside the fireball. Petel said, "We're friends, huh?"

Though surprised at first, Dante gave a confident, "R-Right."

"Vektoria catch you again?" Paige asked.

"You denied her, right?" Vektor asked next.

"Of course." Petel puffed up, feeding off of Dante's confidence. "Defecting is not an option. We're ride or die in this pack."

Abraham laughed in delight at that, agreeing heartily. Frank and Levy absolutely howled at Petel's use of slang while Sonya, Kalyuga, and Dante weren't too thrilled about the 'die' part. Paige, even as she laughed, chastised Petel like a good leader.

This was Petel's pack. If he could, he would gladly eat every single one of them to keep them inside his lungs forever.

## Chapter 8: Two Wolves

That evening, Paige strode boldly towards the tower, taking full advantage of the fact that they'd apparently been given permission for this. Vektor, meanwhile, babbled animatedly. "Once we're inside, we have to move before AIR can spawn anything. Then we'll surely be able to make it to the first checkpoint and progress towards our end goal."

"That's generally what checkpoints are for, yes."

Abraham smiled in amusement. Frank bounced excitedly as they paused at the doors to the tower. "What do the checkpoints look like? Are they actual things or are they auto save points? How far do we have to go before finding one? For that matter, how long is this level, anyway? Are the other levels longer than this one 'cause it's the first, or are they all the same length?"

Paige opened the doors and allowed them all inside, laughing. "Slow down, Ernest. One question at a time."

"I prefer you keep up that speed, Doktor." Vektor said as he entered the centre scanner immediately. His golden eyes seemed to glow brightly with his enthusiasm. "And all your questions should be answered once we dive back down into the Rabbit Hole."

Petel, Frank, and Abraham went easily to the outer scanners and Paige went to sit at the computer, but Dante shuddered at those words. That reminder of why his curiosity was his ultimate failing. He hurried to the one open scanner left, going inside before his sense could talk him out of this. The doors clamped shut and in the darkness, he kept his mouth shut.

They wouldn't come. They didn't have enough time to form and gather. He'd be out of their reach too soon for them to bother, anyway.

"I'm loading everyone in now." Paige said, raising her voice in order to be heard by all of them and doing a fantastic job. "Good luck in there."

The others gave some responses, presumably thanks, but were far too muffled for Dante to hear clearly. The scanner lit up and Dante surrendered himself to the falling sensation. It was uncomfortably familiar by this point. At least it was no longer painful on top of everything else.

Once he was deposited in the void of the hub area and his feet touched down on the broken pathway, the fire sprung to life around him. A bit too eager to be released, but that was



fine. It was good to get it out now, in here, where it couldn't harm anyone for real. Petel, Abraham, and Vektor headed for the entrance to the White Forest, adjusting easier. Frank, meanwhile, hung back by Dante to wait for him.

He cringed at the realisation and the fire shrunk with his shame. He hurried over with a small, "S-Sorry."

"It's okay, Vicario." Frank smiled, trying to be understanding in spite of everything. "We're all figuring this out together."

All Dante could really do was nod vaguely in reply. None of them had experienced Hell firsthand like he had. He tried not to let his panic rule him, but his guilt dampened the fire enough to keep it from growing. He let Frank enter first, then followed after.

It wasn't Hell. Hell stopped existing after they tore the first child. He just needed to keep telling himself that.

Once he was through the level entrance and on the path, he noted that Petel and Vektor had taken the lead while Abraham waited for Frank to come through. And they both in turn now waited on Dante. He stumbled over his feet in his rush to catch up and tripped again when hurriedly stopping himself from drawing too close to them due to the fires. Abraham frowned at them and said, "Ah. Right. That might be an issue."

"He'll be fine." Frank reassured them, leaning over to swipe his hand through some of the undergrowth. "None of this is real, so it shouldn't be able to catch fire, yeah?"

Frank's hand had jostled the plants from the motion, but otherwise went through the leaves completely. As if they only barely existed at all. Dante and Abraham watched the process, mystified. Then, curious, Dante stepped just a bit forward to reach out and try it himself. The white dirt was uncomfortable beneath his feet, reminding him of the red-brown plateaus too much. The white leaves passing through his hand instead of fully touching it was an odd sensation. Also familiar. Reminiscent of the Garden, really.

"Doktor, Professor, Inferno!" Vektor called to them, making them all snap out of their awe. "Please, hurry up! We don't want to get separated out here."

Frank and Abraham compliantly headed off, following Vektor's voice. Dante hesitated just long enough to put some distance between them before trailing along as well.

Vektor led the way, determined and wholly focused on the path that only he could see, apparently, as they walked through the undergrowth without a clear and open trail to follow. The rest of them were too busy looking around at the scenery and looking out for enemies to chat. Dante could hear the sound of rushing water in the distance as well as the chitters of the Pixie Birds in the canopy of the treetops above them. Their multiple tones fluctuated just right, making

them sound more like a whole flock instead of the two he could spot. He'd hand it to the Creators, their sound design was always their greatest asset.

The plant life looked lush and beautiful and Dante wished he had the time to sketch them and figure out what all their species were. It really was like they had been transported to another world.

Petel, right behind Vektor in their procession, came to a halt and held out an arm to stop the rest of them. This stopped Abraham, which stopped Frank, which made Dante jump back, the fires flaring up in his panic. He squeaked, "Wh-What? What is it?"

Petel didn't respond, didn't even look back. Above them, Paige's voice resonated. "There's — something? On the map, it's headed your way. It's signature, though. It doesn't look hostile?"

"Not hostile?" Vektor paused in thought. After a brief moment, he snapped his fingers and said, "It must be the Guardian."

Petel shot a glare at Vektor, but then the rustling was audible to all of them and a flash of white dashed through the undergrowth, drawing all of their attention. It emerged and revealed itself to be a mid-sized white wolf. The White Wolf. Dante gasped, as did Frank, while Petel straightened up out of his attack stance. Abraham still looked uneasy, but Vektor dropped to one knee in order to bow regally towards this other wolf.

"Noble Guardian of the White Forest, please allow us to continue. We have your familiar amongst our ranks, as required."

Frank and Abraham frowned down at Vektor, but Petel continued staring at the Guardian, mystified. The White Wolf was just as beautiful as ever and stepped forward to bow her head graciously at them in return. A sort of 'permission granted' acknowledgement. Then she dashed away, back into the undergrowth and out of sight.

Vektor stood and said, "Fantastic. We may proceed."

"Uhh, what just happened?" Frank asked, raising his hand.

"That was Shiranui, Guardian of the White Forest." Vektor readily explained, facing Frank and Abraham enthusiastically. "She is the gatekeeper of this level and the one who would bar us access had we not acquired her familiar."

"So then." Paige's voice came in overhead again, making Dante jump. "That signature was one of a Guardian. And you said each level has one?"

"Correct!" Vektor grinned, raising his voice just a bit to be better heard. "The Grey Tundra has the Resident, the Brown Hollows has the Librarian, and the Mainframe Kingdom has my family."

Dante relaxed, his fire deflating with him. Abraham glanced over to Petel, then said, "And her familiar. That has to be Petel, right?"

Frank nodded along in agreement. Admittedly, it would make the most sense. Though who the other familiar could be, Dante was not looking forward to finding out. Vektor said unsurely, "It's possible? I'll be honest, we won't be able to tell for certain until that specific coding in one of you triggers."

Frank's expression morphed to one of aggravation while Abraham's turned incredulous. And Dante decided to slip by them in order to stand closer to Petel. Frank swung his arms out as he exclaimed, "But it's so obvious that it's gotta be Petel. Didn't you see what just happened there?"

"You're able to see our coding, correct?" Abraham asked next. "Shouldn't it hold the answer?"

"I — Yes, but." Vektor huffed, growing defensive. "Yes, I can see your coding, but it's not that simple. You are all bundles of code with key words popping out at me, it's not like I can comprehend everything or even process all of it just because I can see it. I have my limitations, just like you, after all."

"What kinds of limitations? Do you need glasses or something?" Frank challenged.

"No, I think he just needs new eyes." Abraham said, crossing his arms over his chest. "Ones that see normally and not in code. Perhaps that would help."

"You—!"

Vektor stomped his foot against the ground, his armour clanking as he fumed. Dante looked to Petel curiously, who shrugged his shoulders in response. "That wolf. She wasn't an enemy." Petel said.

"I-I think. I think we all, um. Realised that, yeah." Dante said.

Petel grinned suddenly, his tail wagging. "She was pretty gregarious, in fact."

The absurdity made Dante laugh shortly. "Good, um. Good use of-of vocabulary there."

"Uh, guys—"

Paige's attempt to intervene was cut off by the appearance of a Bear, which came charging through the undergrowth at them. It knocked into Vektor's side, flinging him into Abraham and Frank. Petel leapt out of the way in time to avoid the thing, but Dante tripped over his own feet again, yelped, and fell to the ground on his butt. Abraham shoved Vektor over to

Frank and pulled his rifle off his back to aim after the Bear. "Some more warning would've been nice, Philips." Abraham complained.

"You were all a bit too busy arguing, what else did you want me to do?"

Her aggravation wasn't something any of them would argue against. The Bear faced them and roared loudly, the distortion of its cry really gargling its sound and making Dante's skin crawl. Vektor regained his footing and materialised his key staff, holding it out in preparation to attack the Bear. His visor hadn't been summoned yet, allowing them to see his perplexed expression. "Another Class III?" He asked. "Just one this time, but strange."

The Bear charged again, Abraham fired, and Dante shrieked. It took the shot in stride and veered suddenly to swipe at Dante with its menacing claws. He crawled away, but it was too fast and its claws scraped against his arm.

He screamed.

The fires, in response to his distress, rose around him, higher and higher until the heat and the flames were far more terrifying than the Bear.

Paige shouted something, but Dante couldn't really hear it because of the screaming. The Bear bashed against the wall of flames, trying to breach through and get at Dante. Its claws scraped at him and he couldn't stop screaming.

It would get to him eventually. It would reach his burnt and charcoal body and tear his head from his neck, his nose from his face. Then it would toss him back into the flames and reduce him to ash.

He clenched his eyes shut, covered his ears, and went on screaming.

"Dante, please, listen to me!" Paige cried, her voice frantic. "You can't outlast that Bear, it's doing more damage to you than you are to it!"

Frank looked helplessly to Vektor, who in turn looked to Abraham. As if Abraham, who'd already shot the dang thing, could do anything about it. He put away his rifle, just as frozen in panic as the other two.

And Petel stood there, alarmed by the desperation in Dante's screams.

He couldn't let this happen again. Dante was his friend. Dante was important to him. Important to the wolf.

Something in his mind clicked and he dropped onto all fours.

As Abraham tossed his throwing crosses at the Bear, Petel surged forward. One of them smacked into him, but he didn't even flinch. He dove onto the Bear's back and sank his fangs into its meaty shoulders.

It gave a roar and tried to throw him off, but he held fast. It swung at him, yet couldn't quite reach. Then it whirled around and slammed him against the trunk of a tree.

That dislodged him. But now its attention was on him and Dante would be safe.

Petel growled at it, baring the wolf's teeth and raising the wolf's hackles. The Bear snarled back, its fur ruffled and twitching in and out of code where he'd bitten it. Paige's voice came back over, confused and trying to remain calm. "Hey, uh. Guys? What's going on? Petel's stats were just boosted by a two-times multiplier."

Abraham caught his crosses and stared wide-eyed at the scene, along with Frank and Vektor. Dante's fire was dying down, as were his screams, which was a reassurance but not the end goal. The Bear took another swipe at Petel, which he nimbly ducked under, then he leapt forward and clamped his teeth into its chest. It gave a pained roar this time and scrabbled at him with its claws, trying to detach him once again. He bit down harder in response and kept growling.

Finally, Abraham said, "Uh. Well. Petel's just turned into a wolf."

"But." Paige paused, her confusion more clearly audible now. "Wasn't Petel a wolf already?"

"Like. A full-on wolf, though." Frank clarified.

Abraham was unable to explain any further, at a complete loss. Vektor took the opportunity and said, "It seems Wolf was indeed chosen to be Shiranui's familiar, as he's triggered the Berserk mode."

Petel was getting annoyed with this Bear's pathetic scrabbling and its refusal to just die already, so he released it and slid back on the dirt. It charged at him this time and he jumped out of the way, then dove for its neck and ripped with the intent to shred.

He wanted to see it fly apart. Blood, fur, flesh. Its coding flew out instead, like pillow fluff, and that had to be acceptable enough.

With each tear, the Bear's form became more and more unstable, flickering to a lower and lower resolution. Abraham winced at the sight. Frank fumbled a moment to get out his gun as Paige next asked, "Berserk? What's that?"

"You mean your tutorials didn't cover this?"

Vektor's expression became puzzled as he looked up to the sky. Frank rolled his eyes, slotting the purple magazine into his gun. "Yeah, sure is."

Petel succeeded in tearing the Bear's head off and it burst, leaving just the impression. Frank aimed at its afterimage and fired a bullet into the space. The bullet exploded into code and then the Bear rematerialised in the space, its fur a dark purple with green streaks and its claws bright red. Abraham jumped back and Petel growled at it, but it walked forward in order to stand closer to Frank.

"Huh. That was easier than I thought." Frank holstered his gun, then turned to face Vektor. "What's this Berserk thing now?"

Dante had stopped screaming, but the fire was still raised around him in his uncertainty. He panted as he watched Petel continue glaring at the discoloured Bear. Petel was, indeed, now a full-on wolf, with fur that looked like it might've been white at some point, and he was huge. Bigger than the White Wolf by at least two full heads.

Petel glanced over at Dante, checking on him again, and Dante flinched. The fire flared up, though settled quickly. Petel had saved them. Had saved Dante. He met Petel's eyes (and they were Petel's eyes, light blue and wild with adrenaline) and said, "Um. Th-Thank you."

Petel nodded in return. It was very reassuring and very much like Petel. Despite everything, Dante had never actually taken into consideration exactly how wolf-like Petel could be. It'd always been just a joke.

Now, however, Dante could finally say that Petel made a perfectly beautiful wolf.

Petel turned around to face Abraham, Vektor, Frank, and the discoloured Bear, then snarled at them. Which Dante really should've expected by this point, but hadn't even considered. Abraham and Frank held their hands up in surrender, Abraham saying, "Woah, there! We're not here to fight with you, Vitayev."

"Yeah, this Bear's on our side." Frank said. "I know I haven't had a chance to show it off until now, but this is basically the only thing I can do besides healing everyone."

Vektor made a pained expression and held up his key staff in self-defence, saying, "Don't bother. To Wolf, right now, this is a battle. He has no concept of friend or foe and is stuck in attack mode. That's what Berserk does."

Petel snapped his jaws in threat as he advanced on them. Paige said, "I suggest not picking a fight with him right now. His stats are raised and there could be more enemies waiting for you up ahead."

"We don't really have a choice here." Vektor raised a hand to flick over his face, summoning his visor, then squared his footing. "Our best bet, really, would be to—"

"To knock him out of the game." Abraham finished the thought for Vektor, his expression turning to defeat. Frank winced, the Bear mimicking Vektor's posture, while Abraham held up his crosses to brandish at Petel. "Sorry, chap. Was hoping it'd never come to this."

Petel leapt at them, choosing to focus on the Bear first and tearing into its neck as he did to the last one. The Bear gave a startled roar and its form shook, the purple shifting to a darker, redder tone. Vektor swatted at Petel with his key staff as Abraham tossed his weapons at him, though one of them sliced up the Bear's side. Frank yelped and went back to fussing with his gun. Paige's voice came back overhead as she asked, "Uh, your control's slipped down to 30%, Ernest? What's that — How do I even read this?"

"I ask that question every time I see your setup." Frank laughed humourlessly, ejecting the purple magazine and slamming the red one into his gun. "But really, I think the control is like its HP?"

Petel continued tearing at the Bear's neck and, just as Frank was taking aim, it gave a final roar and dissolved into code once more, this time not leaving an afterimage. Petel immediately dropped to the ground and leapt next at Vektor, his teeth clashing against the key staff.

Dante stood, the fire thrumming and pulsing in time with his panicked heartbeat. Vektor shoved Petel off and Abraham slashed at Petel with his crosses, but the wolf jumped away too quickly for them to catch. Still enraged, Petel switched targets to Abraham, clamping his jaws around Abraham's arm and chewing viciously. Abraham cried out, which got Frank to snap out of his state of shock and aim his gun at them. After a moment, he frowned and shook it in exasperation. "I can't do anything with this!"

"Stay back and provide support. We'll need your abilities for repairs once we're through here." Vektor ordered.

He swung his key staff and whacked Petel, but couldn't budge the wolf from his spot. With a grimace, he flung an arm out and a ball of glowing golden light materialised in his palm. It became a boulder of white stone, which the Prince then flung at Petel's back. It pelted the wolf and this time succeeded in knocking him off Abraham. Though it seemed they were too late, as Abraham's body fizzled and his form disappeared.

Frank shouted and Dante yelped, forgetting for a moment that Abraham would be fine, and Petel turned next on Frank.

"Petel's health is down to fifteen percent, you're nearly there!" Paige said, encouraging and desperate.

Just one last good hit would do it. Vektor quickly stepped in to block Petel off from Frank, wielding his key staff in an attempt to keep the wolf at a distance. "Doktor, heal me. We can do this."

Frank nodded and set about swapping his magazines again. Petel snarled, tensed and ready to pounce. Dante hesitated, the fire flaring up with his indecision.

No, no, he couldn't just attack Petel when Petel was the only reason he hadn't been mauled by this game. But if he just sat back and did nothing, Petel was going to eat them and then Dante would be in here, alone, with no way to get out.

The fires were supposed to be under his control, but they flickered and wavered in an unruly manner, almost taunting him.

Petel leapt forward, at Vektor, and Dante acted in an immediate decisive moment. He swept the fire around him into a ball with a swift wave of his arms, then shot it at the wolf. The fire knocked Petel out of the air and engulfed him, even as he yelped and rolled around to try and put it out. Dante kept the fire pressing the wolf down until Petel fizzled and was booted from the game.

Vektor and Frank glanced over to Dante as the fire ignited around him once more. It was jittery and erratic, just the same as ever. Frank recovered first, hopping up on his feet to dash over to Dante. "That was brilliant!" He said. "See? You're a natural at this, Vicario."

Frank beamed proudly, his naiveté really showing through. Dante bowed his head, giving a short, "Th-Thanks." He raised his head to look towards the sky and asked, "Um. Paige? H-How — How are they?"

Frank looked up in interest as well. Paige still sounded exasperated, but at least no longer distressed. "Fine, for the most part. Tired and Petel nearly attacked van Helsing as he was coming out, but fine nonetheless."

Dante and Frank both relaxed in relief. Vektor said, "Good to hear they're unharmed. Doktor, if you would please, heal us up so we can keep moving."

"Oh. Right."

Frank nodded and quickly shot Vektor in the arm, then shot at Dante. Even though he knew it wouldn't hurt, Dante still flinched back as the bullet went through him. Vektor smiled and tapped the side of his visor, dispelling it. "Thank you. Your ability seems to be more effective and quicker than mine. Isn't that right, Navigator?"

Vektor looked up to the sky as Paige said, "How would I know? I haven't seen how yours works."



Frank laughed as Vektor frowned, offended. Dante, a bit more confident now, gestured towards the direction they'd been heading and said, "Shouldn't we. Um. L-Let's just, uh."

"Keep moving, yes."

Vektor exhaled heavily, drooping forward in a good mimic of Frank or Paige's own exasperation, and led the way once more. Frank grinned at Dante before following quickly after the Prince. Leaving Dante to trail along behind, in charge of watching for anything that might attack them from the rear. If AIR would even spawn anything else, at least. Half the time, Dante was sure it was just broken.

As they walked along the rugged, unpredictable path, Paige murmured to herself, "Ernest's heal isn't a full one, judging from these numbers. Interesting."

A thought struck Dante and he asked before he could think about the lynching lions. "Can you heal yourself?"

Frank flipped around to face Dante, raising his arms behind his head and continuing to walk, but backwards. "Honestly, I dunno. If I had to guess, I'd say no just 'cause I don't trust it to be that nice, but we should test that sometime."

He smiled brightly at the prospect. Dante hesitated to smile back. The spectres couldn't reach him in here, but it was better to listen to the habits which saved his life than try to break them.

Vektor stopped walking as they approached somewhat of a clearing where a sad tree stood, its branches all drooping down to nearly cover its trunk with its green and white leaves. Frank bumped into Vektor, which made them both stumble, and Dante had to quickstep back to not knock into them both.

After regaining their footing, Vektor cleared his throat before officiously presenting the tree to them. "Here we are. The first checkpoint of the White Forest."

Frank examined it shortly, then said, "It looks kinda sad for a videogame checkpoint."

"Yeah, uh." Paige joined in, her voice echoing above them. "On the map here, it's labelled as inactive, so unless you've got some trick up your sleeve, I don't think you can even use it."

"That's a map?" Abraham's voice came over, too, though the suddenness and the difference of it being closer and of lesser quality made Dante flinch. "I agree with Ernest, your ability to understand any of this jumble is quite impressive."

"Thanks."

She said it genuinely, but there was something to her tone that made it sound like she was suspicious of his praise. Paige was also very perceptive, Dante had to remember that. Vektor grinned triumphantly and stepped forward, reaching his hand out towards the tree. "This is where my guidance is most useful. Watch."

His outstretched hand glowed with a golden light. The same golden light as earlier. And, Dante realised as he looked on, it was the same golden light that had been trying its best to shine through and now glowed freely from his eyes as well. It washed over the tree, illuminating it from the inside, and its branches creaked as they raised to reveal its trunk. It was bigger than any of the surrounding trees and hollow on the inside, a place of rest and safety. Once it was finished moving, the glow faded and Vektor withdrew his hand.

"Phew, that was a bit much. I must be out of practice." He shook out his hand briefly, then stepped forward and inside the hollow area of the tree's trunk. "Come along, let's finish up for the day."

Frank started forward, out of his awe, and Dante followed along after. As he neared the tree, his fire shrunk in around him for a smaller circle, which was oddly kind but also made him panic, which in turn made the fires flare up dangerously. He had to pause, to breathe for a minute in order to calm the fires down to an acceptable level. They only vaguely settled, pulsing along to his panicky heartbeat, but at least he could continue.

Inside the trunk of the tree, the space seemed larger than it had looked from the outside. The appearance of it was different as well, going from the white-tan of the tree meat to a white-orange with flickers of light darting up the sides and around the ceiling area, which was a black void that made it look like a star-streaked sky. It was very reminiscent of the inside of the scanners and Dante immediately shuddered at the thought.

Paige's voice resonated through to them, sounding closer than before but still echoing above them. "Yeah, it says it's active now and I can log you out from there. Ready to stop for the day?"

"That's probably for the best." Vektor dispelled his key staff and leaned against the wall. "As much as I'd like to keep going, we're down two players and I don't know if I've got enough magic left to unlock another checkpoint."

"Magic? I don't see—" Paige stopped herself, waited a second, then continued. "Okay, I'm getting you out of there. Hang tight a minute."

Dante frowned, but settled for watching his fire to make sure it wouldn't bite without warning as they waited. Frank slumped down to the floor by Vektor and also leaned against the wall, looking just as exhausted as the Prince. It was only a couple of minutes before the game tugged them down, down into the black and they fell to reality.

It was a much more reassuring sensation this time and he was soon dropped onto his feet inside the scanner, no longer surrounded by the fires.

The scanner opened and he stumbled out, a bit too hurried to be graceful. Frank similarly stumbled, though probably more out of tiredness than fear of any gathering shadows, and Vektor fell out of the centre scanner onto the floor. He caught himself this time, though it didn't help much as he still face planted into the floor.

Abraham went to help Frank while Paige swivelled in her chair to frown down at Vektor. "I'm amazed you haven't broken your nose from doing that." She said.

Vektor hoisted himself up on his elbows in order to ask, "Why would it break?"

Paige, Frank, and Abraham all stared down at the Prince, not quite believing just how robotic he really was. Petel stood behind Paige's chair resolutely, looking like he wasn't paying attention to their conversation. Too lost in his own shame. Which, honestly, Dante had never thought possible for the self-assured and confident wolf.

It was too familiar an expression. Like Dante was looking at a reflection of himself.

As Frank, Abraham, and Paige argued with Vektor about how yes, the nose technically didn't have a bone to break but that didn't mean it couldn't be broken, Dante crossed over to stand beside Petel. Before he could get close enough to reach, Petel flinched back and whimpered softly. Immediately, Dante withdrew as well and stuttered, "Ah. S-Sorry!"

"No." Petel forced the word out, growling and hitting his consonants much harder than usual. "It was. My mistake."

He huffed, aggravated by the lingering effects of being a literal wolf. After all, wolves were incapable of human speech. At least, natural wolves. There were always exceptions, always those which used human speech to lure in their unsuspecting prey.

But that wasn't Petel. That wasn't Petel at all.

"It's. It's alright." Dante said, careful to not get too close again. "W-We. Um, we attacked you, too, so."

"No." Petel insisted once more. He looked up into Dante's eyes this time. "You were. No fear."

Dante, a bit taken aback, shrugged. "You're a wolf."

As if that explained anything. He grimaced at his own statement. Petel, however, seemed to get the meaning of it and relaxed, smiling in appreciation. The argument that the others were

having had grown too loud, making Petel frown next. He stepped out from behind Paige's chair and barked, "Okay! We're done."

Abraham and Frank shut their mouths quickly, immediately cowed. Paige reluctantly sat back, aggravation clear in all her features. Vektor, on the other hand, looked to Petel in confusion and said, "Execute\_file\_THE-END.mov? I hardly think this is the time for that."

Again, they were struck by Vektor's ability to act like such an alien being. Frank cried out, "Why's it a 'dot-mov' file? There are so many better options!"

"Do you actually have a file like that?" Abraham asked. "Can you run files like a normal computer?"

"Guys. It's bedtime." Paige stood from the chair and pulled Vektor up to his feet. "We can discuss this more tomorrow, when we've all gotten some rest and had time to think about everything."

Petel nodded along and went to help carry Vektor. The Prince, despite being unable to struggle, raised his voice in disagreement. "Wait, wait! None of you have learned about the very important Berserk mode. Let me explain!"

"Tomorrow." Paige insisted, shoving her hand into his face as she passed him onto Petel. "I'm tired and you can barely stand. Leave it for tomorrow."

Vektor huffed, though didn't continue arguing. Probably due to the fact that he really couldn't have done much to protest, considering Petel was holding him upright and following Paige out of the tower. Dante went to follow them, but noticed Abraham and Frank looking at Dante with curious, unreadable expressions. Which was a bit unnerving, now that he had become aware of it.

Tentatively, he approached them to ask what was on their minds. The words caught in his throat, however, at the sound of a snuffling long nose behind him. Frank was undeterred by any such fears and said first, "You really weren't afraid of Petel. Were you?"

Slowly, Dante said, "It's. Still Petel."

"But he was an actual wolf there for a moment." Abraham pointed out. "How were you not scared?"

As much as they were perplexed with him, he was equally confused. Petel had introduced himself as a wolf. Petel had always been a wolf. His appearance, be it literal wolf or more human, didn't change anything. Dante couldn't just keep repeating himself and didn't know how else to explain it, so he settled for an easier, "The eyes. They were still Petel."

Again, Frank and Abraham shared a look. This time, Frank seemed happy about it while Abraham was still confused. Before Abraham had a chance to inquire further, Frank shoved him past Dante and towards the door. "Y'know, that makes perfect sense when you put it like that. G'night, Vicario! See ya tomorrow!" Frank said in parting.

Abraham sputtered. "Ernest, wait, I still—"

"Nah, you gotta get home, bruv." Frank insisted. "Stop makin' Perci worry 'bout you. And let's not even get on the subject of your pops."

It was amazing how Frank seemed to drop some of his more proper mannerisms as soon as he was alone with Abraham. His speech pattern grew more relaxed and even his accent nearly changed. As the two faded out of earshot, Dante found himself admiring how close their friendship really was.

Petel was closest with Sonya, but also held Paige, Levy, and Kalyuga in high regard. Did others think the same as Dante when they saw Petel with the members of his self-proclaimed pack? Did others think that Petel and Dante had grown close, too?

Dante shook the thought out of his head and left the tower, making sure to lock the door behind him.

When he returned to his room, he crawled right into bed. Designing some more wards would be nice, since Petel was still out, but nothing could really dissuade the spectres to stay back for long. Not while he continued giving them the benefit of existence.

The lights flicked off and he'd nearly drifted to sleep when Petel finally returned. The opening of the door startled him enough to sit up, but Petel stepped inside and flopped down onto his own bed as if he didn't notice. As if he didn't care this time. And while it was typical for Petel not to provide all that much conversation, as he usually got Dante going, then sat back to listen, this time was probably different. This time, it was probably best for Dante to ask about it.

"Um. Y-You."

He cringed at his own words and their volume. If he could just speak Italian, everything would roll off easier. There'd be no time to think about the imps dancing around with their pitchforks or the many-winged eyeballs, the rhythm would demand to be met and failing that would be a bigger betrayal than anything the spectres could hope to assault him with. Petel gave a muffled grunt in response, his face buried in his pillow, so Dante licked his lips and tried again.

"H-How. How are you, um. Feeling?"

Petel lifted his head, which was a good sign, and said, "Dangerous."

"O-Oh." Dante deflated. That was certainly relatable. "Do you. Uh. Wanna talk about it?"

Petel considered this a moment, staring up at the ceiling. Then he turned his piercing gaze on Dante and said, "Your ankles."

"Wh-What?"

Dante frowned. Petel sat up in order to sit cross-legged and said, "When I was wolf. In the game. I saw your feet."

"Uh. Okay?"

Petel scrunched up his nose in frustration. "Your ankles. They have scars on them."

Dante's eyes went wide immediately, and he asked, "You can s-see those?"

Petel nodded. As if it were that simple. Dante's hand went reflexively to his nose, where the most important scar was from his trip to Hell. There was no way. No one had ever commented on it before. But, if he didn't ask, he wouldn't be able to get the thought out of his mind and he'd draw a Chimera back to finish the job.

"Um. What — What else. Do you, uh. C-Can you, um, see?"

He pointed to the scar, unable to say it outright. Petel tilted his head to the side, over his shoulder, like a confused puppy. "You have a nose?"

"N-No, no—" Dante dropped his hands quickly, shoving both of them into his blanket. "Never mind, i-it's—"

"How'd you get 'em?"

Petel motioned to Dante's legs as best he could, considering Dante was sitting on them. The heat crawled up Dante's throat at the memory. "I — There was. A-A fire. A fire at the-the market." He shook his head quickly, the heat growing too much too fast. "Y-You — You changed the subject! That's — unfair!"

It burned up his neck and into his face, prickled behind his eyes and threatened to spill over. The event was too real, too recent in his mind despite it being years ago. Everything had gone wrong that day, from the trip to the bookstore to the dead-eyed fish puppet to the eventual fire leaking from his skin.

He'd wanted to die that day. The smoke had nearly granted his wish, but the fire refused.

"Hey. Dante." Petel's voice broke through those frantic thoughts roaring in his head. He looked up to see Petel staring at him, concern in those blue eyes. "You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

Dante took a few deep, shuddering breaths. It served only to stoke the flames inside; fire consumed oxygen. Better to stop breathing altogether. He clenched his eyes shut and did his best to hold back the hungry heat, stuttering, "I-I. You. And. S-Same, you same — uh, t-too."

His whole body trembled, but it was all in the past. It was just a memory and it couldn't hurt him anymore. Not really.

As long as he kept the flames inside, they wouldn't look too deeply into the incident.

Though unconvinced, Petel settled in to sleep for the night. Leaving Dante to huddle further into his blanket and ignore the wailing of the sky whales. They were normally peaceful, but grew agitated with the added heat in the air from the overwhelming fires burning inside him. They were far more suited for an icier climate.

But he had no time to think of them. He had nightmares to chase, shadows to appease.

It took a full day for Petel to recover enough to hold Dante's hand again. To laugh and joke with Sonya, Levy, and Kalyuga instead of shying away from them all. Seeing the wolf so downcast and different from the usual confidence he exuded reminded Dante that they were all dealing with their own haunts, no matter how toothless.

That uniting aspect meant there could be no other choice.

Though it was reckless and foolish, Dante accepted Petel's hand.

## Chapter 9: Howl of the Heart

"Am I allowed to explain it now, or do we still have to wait a bit longer?" Vektor asked, looking directly at Paige.

They all sat together for lunch, Vektor on one side of Petel and Dante on the other. Paige rolled her eyes at the Prince's impatience and said, "Yes, go ahead, we're ready."

Vektor's expression brightened and he sat up straight, preparing his lecture. "Berserk mode is a side-effect of sorts that comes from the boon of the Guardian. It boosts your stats, as Navigator mentioned, and enhances your unique build to tremendous proportions. Because Wolf here was chosen by Shiranui, his Berserk can activate as long as we're in the White Forest."

The table all nodded along collectively in understanding. Even Dante, who hadn't wanted to play in the first place, seemed invested. Paige raised a hand to her chin in thought and said, "So what you're saying is that only Petel's able to go Berserk right now."

"Precisely." Vektor sat back in his seat, satisfied. "As for who amongst you will be granted the Resident or the Librarian's boons, we'll just have to wait and see."

"Then there's—" Dante paused, a look of panic crossing his face as the attention turned to him, and he quickly backpedalled. "N-No, it's. Never mind, it w-wasn't."

He bowed his head, keeping whatever he'd been about to ask to himself. Petel really hated that Dante did that. If it weren't for the fact that any mention of his past made Dante nearly break down in tears, Petel would ask more forcefully what the hell had even happened to him.

Besides the literal Hell thing. That was kinda a given about the fireball by this point.

"Uh. Anyway." Frank started, keeping things moving past that awkward silence. "Is that really all the info we needed on this Berserk thing?"

"Yes, that about sums up the basics." Vektor confirmed. "It's really a wonder that your tutorials left out that detail. It's not like the system was updated to add it recently or anything, we're on version three-point-one-four. Such a peculiar oversight."

"Version three, you say?" Abraham smirked in intrigue. "So there were two whole other versions of this game besides the one we're experiencing right now."



Kalyuga leaned over the table a bit more, growing excited. "Do you know if there's any way to access that discarded data from the other versions? Seeing what elements were taken out might help us better understand who made it and why it's here."

Dante shrunk down in his seat, uncomfortably warm. No doubt growing upset over this continued discussion of the game. Petel went to speak up, but Vektor said, "Unless you know the passwords to grant you admin access, then I'm afraid that would be impossible."

Kalyuga sat back down, frowning in defeat. Paige looked to Vektor, her voice quiet in conspiracy. "How might the system react to attempting to extract that information through. Unsavoury means?"

"Please, do not." Vektor grimaced. "The system allows for three guesses before complete lockdown, which on its own is enough of a headache. And if it detects any attempts to break through the encryption, the whole system will delete itself and then where would I be?"

Both Paige and Kalyuga recoiled in disgust. Even Levy, seeing the ridiculousness of it all, asked an incredulous, "Really? It'll just do that?"

"That's a little extreme." Frank agreed.

Dante grimaced as well, which was how Petel knew it was ridiculous. Vektor shrugged, quite nonchalant in contrast to their reactions. "I assume the Creators wanted to keep their data untouched for a fairer experience."

Dante snorted through his nose. "Fair. Right."

Petel thought back on their encounters so far and could agree with that sentiment. Frank and Abraham, too, looked as fed-up as Dante. Paige rolled her eyes, but turned to address Frank in a sudden change of subject. "You sure you don't wanna join van Helsing and me in helping put the dance together? It gets you out of classes for the day."

Frank, grateful for the shift in topic, said, "I'm sure. Miss Cha said we're having a special test that day and I don't wanna miss it."

"You're such a nerd." Paige said with a fond shake of her head.

Abraham and Kalyuga laughed at her absurd statement. Sonya turned to Paige with interest and asked, "Do you know who else signed up to help?"

"I saw quite a few names I wasn't expecting." Paige replied. "Like Huesos and not Calci, can you believe it?"

"Lazybones signed himself up without getting dragged along by his brother?" Levy laughed. "Shoot, next you'll be sayin' that ol' Horse Glue and Jupiter volunteered, too!"

They launched into this new topic and Petel noted that Dante relaxed and lost a lot of that unnatural heat. Satisfied, Petel listened to Paige, Kalyuga, Levy, and Frank discuss their fellow classmates' willingness to work until the warning bell rang. As they headed off to their next classes, Dante stuck by Petel, even though they didn't share their sixth period.

Curious, Petel dumped his tray in the trash, then asked Dante, "Need something?"

Dante hesitated, of course. He dumped his own tray as a way to stall for time, then met Petel's eyes and asked, "Why. Do you think. Um, do you have a guess for why the game is here?"

He cringed as he waited for the response. But Petel didn't really have any outstanding theories as to why the thing even existed, much less as to why it was at their school in the first place. He settled for a simple, "To play."

Dante deflated. "Right."

He took off and Petel couldn't help feeling like he'd messed that up somehow. That bitter taste on his tongue, Petel headed towards his Biology lab. Miss Zhao taught the class and, if they were lucky, they could get her to go off on a tangent again about growing up with Mister Satou instead of focusing on the lesson of the day.

That was too normal and boring, however. The wolf itched to get back inside the game.

Petel flinched at the clawing of his own thoughts. The wolf was validated that day, given more power than it was meant to hold, and now it wanted to sink its teeth into some flesh for real. Petel wanted to play the game again as well, of course, but the wolf was ravenous at another chance for more power. More carnage. More teeth and claws and fur. Its lust was enough to make it drool, which Petel really didn't appreciate, and made him question if he should go back in at all.

He'd lost himself to fear once. He'd sworn to never let it happen again.

Thankfully, the wolf had no choice but to settle down and wait, the same as Petel. During Band, Petel sat as far away as he could from Yasha, who would no doubt be able to sense that the wolf was waiting for any opportunity to spring back out. Today was not an ideal dumpster trip day.

Miss Fitzgard praised them for their performance and kept both Yasha and Vladimir busy once she released the rest of them off to supper. Levy joked that Kalyuga had been right about the two of them not keeping time as well as the rest and Kalyuga couldn't stop laughing as she left through the campus' front gates.

"I think Miss Fitzgard's caught on to the fact that they're bullying you." Sonya said as they headed back to the dorms.

Levy frowned in thought at this possibility. Petel said, "It's about time."

"Petel—" Sonya huffed, puffing out his chest in that way he did when he got upset. "You really should talk with someone on the staff about this. They throw you in the dumpster."

"Yeah, that's real shitty of 'em to keep doing." Levy agreed.

They both stopped in front of Petel, looking up at him expectantly. Forced to pause mid-step, he glared down at them and said, "My problem. I'll handle it."

"But you really can't!" Sonya insisted. "If they catch you on your own, you can't stop them. And even — even if Levy, Kalyuga, and I are present, we're powerless to help because of Russell. If it weren't for Vicario, they'd have probably—"

"It's fine."

Petel shoved past Sonya, the wolf inside seething. He had to leave, had to get away before he did something regrettable. Sonya shouted after him, voice shrill in concern. "It's not fine! It's a real issue! Petel, just listen, please!"

Sonya groaned in frustration, but had no choice other than to let Petel go. If they gave chase, the wolf would outrun them. Despite having very light feet, Sonya could never catch the fleeing wolf.

Rationally, he knew Sonya was just concerned for him. The nervous birdie always was. But this wasn't something Petel needed help in. Yasha was just a bully with a lackey. If they continued aggravating the wolf, then Petel would let it tear their faces off. He'd claw off their chests and bite out their throats and they'd know then that he was as feral as they insistently believed.

But really, he couldn't let it come to that. Because, as Paige mentioned to Abraham, that was murder and generally frowned upon by society at large.

He entered his room (and, big shocker, Dante was there), put his violin case back in its spot by his bed, and flopped down face first into the sheets. They were a pleasant blue, because Grandpa Bassoon had refused to buy him red ones, and right now that was a good thing.

He took several deep breaths, then sat up to acknowledge Dante's presence. Dante, though hesitant to speak, made himself ask, "Is it. Time for supper already?"

Petel nodded once in confirmation. They continued sitting on their respective beds, neither one of them willing to make the first move. After about a minute of this stalemate, Dante looked uncomfortable enough to try speaking again.

"Um. Are you, uh. Not going?"

Petel shrugged grumpily. The wolf had stopped snarling, but he wasn't sure if it would bite that stubborn birdie. He'd done it before. It was best to stay away for the moment.

Realising that was the only answer he was going to get, Dante carefully stood off his bed and grabbed his room key. He seemed hesitant, then surprisingly squared his shoulders in determination and said, "Meet me a-at the tower. Okay?"

Curious, Petel looked up to meet his eyes. "Okay?"

Dante nodded, more to himself, then left their room. Petel waited a minute to see if he'd come back, if he'd wanted Petel to follow, but he didn't. Even more intrigued, Petel stood, got changed, and headed off straight to the tower.

Sonya was right about that, too. Somehow, Yasha was afraid of Dante. The last time Yasha grabbed Petel, they'd all seen how fast he ran when the fireball approached.

Though always afraid, Dante didn't show that fear in the face of the wolf. Though afraid, Dante stood up for Petel. It was fascinating and the wolf had the highest respect for Dante because of it.

But, of course, it was maddening as well.

If Dante hadn't intervened the first time, they might not have become friends like they did.

Which was why Petel allowed himself to go along with this, despite the fact that Sonya's words had stung.

He entered their tower and sat down with his back against one of the walls. The lights flicked on, as usual, illuminating the darkness of the nearly winter evening. He closed his eyes and listened to the hum of the computer as he waited, enjoying the moment of peace.

Dante owned a pretty recent model of phone, the only hint at who his parents were. Considering Dante's opinion on the game, this was less surprising than it should've been.

What was weird, however, was the fact that tech geniuses like Dante's parents wouldn't force their heir to learn even a little bit about computers. Almost like they weren't concerned with passing down the company to him at all. If Petel had learned anything about rich families from attending this school, it was that there was usually so much concern for business inheritance that it almost seemed comical.

So why not Dante?

The tower's doors opened, interrupting that train of thought. Dante near tip-toed in, focused wholly on balancing a tray of food in his hands without letting the doors swing shut and

knock it to the floor. Petel watched him struggle with this for a bit before the fireball finally accomplished it, then Petel clapped shortly as he came over to sit in front of the wolf.

"I, um. Well." He set the tray down between them, a bit breathless in that nervous way of his. "A-Are you, uh. Would you like. Uh. S-Supper?"

He gestured to the plates of food on the tray, presenting them unsurely. Looked like tonight's menu was shepherd's pie with fresh veggies on the side. Petel allowed himself a smug little smile as he asked, "We sharing?"

"Th-They wouldn't give me t-two portions. Sorry."

Dante deflated. Petel scooped up a bite and shrugged. "No problem. Thanks for bringing me food at all."

He ate the bite as Dante struggled with getting his next words out. "I-I thought. Well. You need to-to eat. So."

Petel swallowed and gave a short scoff through his nose. "So do you."

"I-I mean—!" Dante's head snapped up, a fiery challenge in his eyes. It was intense enough to take Petel aback a bit. "Y-You were. W-Were."

For a solid minute or so, neither one flinched away. Finally, Dante sat back and bowed his head once more, fidgeting with his hands.

"You looked upset. So. I thought. You might still want to eat. Even if. Not around the others."

Petel took another bite and chewed thoughtfully before saying, "Perceptive."

"And. Um." Dante cringed as he fidgeted more erratically. "I can. If you want to, um. O-Or I can. Leave, if you'd rather. Be alone?"

Petel considered it for a moment. Having time to let the wolf calm before going back into the game would be nice. And Dante was a part of the earlier issue. But, in the end, he'd prefer having company rather than listen to his own snarls echo around the empty tower. He shrugged as he ate another bite and said, "You can stay."

Dante relaxed in relief, all that anxiety drooping out of him. Petel continued to eat and Dante mostly poked at the food instead of eating it until, finally, Dante asked, "May I. Uh. Wh-Why?"

He gestured to Petel, as if that would help explain what exactly he meant. There was an obvious question, however, and indignation rose within Petel once more. "Sonya told me to report Yasha and Vladimir."

"Oh!" Dante perked up briefly before seeing the anger in Petel's posture, then wilted once more. "Oh. Is that. Not good?"

"It's my problem. I can handle it."

Petel huffed as the wolf growled at the back of his mind. First, those two had decided to continually antagonise the wolf. Then Sonya said he wasn't capable of handling the two blowhards? Implying that even Dante, of all of them!, was more capable than Petel? He wasn't a child anymore. Neither of them were and hadn't been in a long time. That was the whole reason Petel had taken on the wolf's fear to begin with.

If anyone needed protection, it was Sonya. The birdie just had such terrible luck.

Dante finally spoke up again, drawing Petel's attention back into the moment. "Well. If. If you say you can handle it, then. I'll trust you on that."

Petel blinked, surprised by such an answer. Dante was a loner type, too; of course it made sense once Petel gave it another thought.

"But." Dante went to continue, then hesitated. "If. Um. If you do decide that. Uh, th-that you need some help. Then. I. We. Um." He ducked his head further, hiding his eyes under his bangs. "J-Just howl for us. We'll come help."

Petel stared at Dante for a good minute. Then he grinned mischievously as he asked, "Howl?"

"Y-Yeah!" Dante brightened up with excitement, looking up to actually meet Petel's eyes unabashedly. "Wolves, um. They howl as a-a means of long distance communication. Normally to, um, to inform the rest of the pack where they are or if they're lost or. Or stuff like that."

He smiled, pleased with himself. It was probably the brightest Petel had ever seen the other guy. He had a really good smile. A bit awe-struck, Petel ended up just dumbly nodding along. "That's right."

Dante giggled softly, then his expression shifted to one of such gentle concern that it made Petel's breath hitch. "Having help. Can be nice. A-And even if. Everyone else is busy, or-or can't make it. I'll come help. If-If you want, at least."

He quickly turned away, as if realising how open he'd been just then. Petel found himself smiling and reached over to ruffle Dante's hair before he could think better of it. "Okay. Who are you and what have you done with the real Dante?"

Dante squeaked in surprise, then broke into breathless giggles. "Wh-What? Hey! I-I'm me! Sto Dante!"

"Are you sure? I feel like the real Dante would've told me it'd be too dangerous to accept his help."

"W-Well — you — per favore, Petel!" Dante shoved Petel's hand away and the two of them sat there laughing until they calmed down. Dante combed his fingers through his wavy locks, fixing the mess Petel had made and still smiling. "You're my friend. And. I'd prefer having a hand in your, um. Your well-being rather than. Th-Than causing. Ah."

He cringed and looked away, mumbling something under his breath. Just as he'd said, he was trying. Petel relaxed and went back to eating. After a few more bites, however, he had to ask the question that was burning in his mind. "What's that mean?"

Dante jolted and replied with a sloppy, "B-Beh? What?"

"That thing you said. 'Pear fah voray'."

Dante grimaced at Petel's pronunciation, which just made him grin. Dante exhaled that annoyance and explained, "It's, um. 'Per favore'. 'Please'. I-In Italian."

Petel nodded slowly, trying to log that one away for later. Another thought struck him and he said, "Пожалуйста."

"P-Pozhaluysta?" Dante parroted in confusion.

Petel chuckled. "You got it. That's 'please' in Russian."

Dante made a soft sound in realisation and sat there in thought. Petel recognised that this was probably the end of their conversation for the moment and returned to eating. After another minute, Dante joined Petel by nibbling at what was left.

By the time they'd finished, the tower doors opened and Paige, Frank, Abraham, and Vektor entered. Vektor was complaining fairly loudly to the other three, "I'm just saying, I don't understand why, if they're absent, we wouldn't go to get them." He paused to nod to Petel and Dante in greeting. "Hello there, Wolf, Inferno. Now—"

He nearly launched right back into it, but the realisation stunned him. Paige said, "Because they're right here." She stopped right by Dante and Petel and asked in a gentle concern, "You gonna be okay for tonight? Or do you wanna reschedule?"

Sonya had no doubt told them about their disagreement. And with the wolf chomping eagerly at this chance, it probably would be best to wait. Still, Petel stood and said, "Let's go."

Dante drooped, the only one not excited to continue. Vektor grinned and headed straight for the centre scanner. "Excellent decision, Wolf. We've got a ways to go before we reach the end of the Forest and it's only a matter of time before that Thief catches up to us."

Frank and Abraham went to a scanner each without question while Dante, sighing in defeat, trudged along after them. Petel went to the last free scanner, though he frowned at Vektor's word choice. Paige hopped into the computer seat and asked, "You think that Vektoria girl's playing the game, too?"

"It's where we both originated, we have no other choice." Vektor replied, his fists clenching as if on instinct. "Her entire goal is to halt my progress and reach the Mainframe before us. And I cannot allow her to do that."

Paige thought on it a moment before shrugging and tapping a last key, making all the scanners shut. "Whatever. Game logic, I guess. Anyway, get ready. You're going in."

Petel closed his eyes and let the light wash over him, immediately surrendering himself to the falling sensation.



## Chapter 10: We're Not Alone

When he landed and opened his eyes, the sight wasn't quite what he'd been expecting.

"Oh, this is new." Abraham said, landing beside Petel.

The inside of this tree glowed with circuitry, like some sort of tree-computer hybrid. Dante and Frank landed in the space and glanced around as well, while Vektor simply stared at them in confusion.

Abraham smiled suddenly. "This is the checkpoint we reached last time, correct?"

"Yup, you got it." Paige answered, her voice echoing from above. Petel liked the effect of it. It made her sound important. "Thank god I can load you guys directly into them. Hey, I'm going to take this tray back to the cafeteria real quick, so. Make lots of progress without me, I guess."

Vektor looked up into the roof of the tree almost in panic. "Navigator, we'll be flying blind without your assistance."

"You should be fine, there aren't any enemy readings at the moment. Besides, I want to get this done before the cafeteria closes so I don't have to break in and leave it sitting there all night or something."

She sounded resolute, meaning there was no point in arguing with her. Dante flinched, his fire dying down, and he said, "S-Sorry, Philips."

"It's okay, Dante."

Paige laughed lightly. That eased Dante's worries and the fire returned to its normal height. A fascinating thing to watch. Vektor, growing frustrated, tried again. "Navigator, please \_\_\_"

"You better get going while you've got the time."

Paige's voice faded out as she left. Vektor growled in frustration, but swept out his hand to materialise his key staff and headed into the level. Frank hopped along after the Prince, saying, "That's why she's the leader."

"I'm certainly not about to argue with her." Abraham laughed, following as well.

Petel looked over to Dante, who was hesitant to follow. On noticing Petel's gaze, he gestured for Petel to go first and said, "I-I don't want to hurt anyone."

That was fair. And Dante's powers seemed best suited for protecting their backs. Petel headed into the Forest after the others and Dante did indeed follow after. The wolf grinned, eager to play.

Vektor led them along, seeing a path despite all the foliage and undergrowth in the way. At one point, the rustling in the treetops above them made them all freeze, but it turned out to be a flock of iridescent birds with four eyes and round, chubby beaks. The beaks looked razor sharp, sure, but Vektor informed them that these beings were Pixie Birds and the Non-Hostiles of the level.

"How's that work?" Frank asked as he holstered his gun. Abraham, likewise, put away his rifle and Petel relaxed all the tension in his muscles. "Does every level have a non-hostile enemy along with the ones we gotta fight?"

"Correct." Vektor nodded, parting some of the white leaves in order to continue on. "Each level has four possible enemy spawns, which range in power from Class I to Class III, and this includes the Non-Hostiles. The Pixie Birds are the Forest's Non-Hostiles, Class Is are the Monkeys, Class IIs are the Tigers, and Bears are Class IIIs, which makes them the strongest."

Frank hummed in thought as Abraham frowned, no doubt over the fact that they'd only encountered the strongest enemies in the level so far. Petel next asked, "What about the Guardians? What do they count as?"

Vektor paused a brief moment, perplexed. "The Guardians are just that: Guardians." He answered. Then he continued forward, shaking his head. "They're not enemies at all. They are the gatekeeper of their respective level and that's it. No enemy would dare attack them and we shouldn't, either."

It didn't really answer much, but at the same time Petel wasn't sure what to ask exactly for more clarification. Abraham snapped his fingers, seeming to understand it better, and said, "They're the NPCs of their levels, then."

Vektor paused again, then frowned back at Abraham. "I beg your pardon?"

"Just as you and Vektoria are the important NPCs of your level, these Guardians are the important NPCs of their levels." Abraham said, giddy at having figured this out.

Petel and Frank smiled along, too. Dante, though, looked as confused as Vektor did about this explanation. Vektor turned to face Abraham completely, gesturing absently as he said, "I don't — What is that term? What does it mean?"

Abraham's grin dropped and Frank shouldered his way past Abraham, exclaiming in shock, "Woah! You mean you're an AI program fully aware of the game you're in, yet don't know the acronym for non-player character?"

"Non-player—?" Vektor huffed, suddenly offended, and faced forward to continue walking. "Preposterous. I'm not a 'non-player', I am a key player. Perhaps the most key player! Without my abilities, you could not even enter or progress through any of the levels. Such ingratitude!"

He continued grumbling as he stomped onwards. Frank and Abraham shared a short look, then each heaved out a breath in annoyance, Abraham raising a hand to cover his face as he shook his head and Frank letting his head loll backwards. They both followed after Vektor once they were finished. What other choice did they have, really? Petel, in agreement with them, glanced back towards Dante and said, "A real spoiled prince, huh?"

Dante grimaced, mashing his fingers together as the fire trembled around him in irritated spurts. "You have. No idea."

They followed this Prince for another good five minutes or so before coming across a larger, hollow and open tree, similar to the checkpoint they'd exited. Though, the branches drooped to block them from being able to enter this one. Vektor muttered in annoyance, "If I was only an 'NPC', as you say, would I be able then to activate this to further our progression? I think not."

Frank frowned, placing his fists on his hips. "That's really not what NPC implies."

"A 'non-player' wouldn't have such an active role in the progression of the game."

The Prince held out his free hand towards the tree, a ball of glowing golden light forming in the palm of his hand. The tree flashed golden briefly, reacting to the light, then lifted its branches up to allow them entry. Vektor, not waiting for any of them, walked straight into the tree and went to lean against one of its walls, crossing his arms over his chest. The perfect picture of a spoiled brat. Frank looked to Abraham, but Abraham could only shrug as he said, "Perhaps we should explain it a bit better?"

"You're. Um." Dante spoke up from behind them, making them all turn their focus on him. He hesitated longer under all of their gazes, but pressed on. "Th-They — He doesn't. Well, n-no one would appreciate it if. If you implied they're, um. That they're not r-real. Maybe."

His expression twisted in distaste. Which made sense, based on his words. Frank bowed his head, sheepish at the realisation, while Abraham seemed to take issue with Dante's point and said, "But he isn't real."

Frank aimed an annoyed look at Abraham and said, "He certainly thinks he is."

Abraham made a wry face, clearly wanting to argue, but refrained from doing so. Petel looked up to the canopy of trees above them and said, "Paige is taking a while."

"Yeah, really." Frank nodded along, grateful for a change in subject. He looked up to the sky as well, eyebrows knit up in concern. "You think she ran into some kind of trouble?"

"I hope not." Abraham joined in, wincing.

There was rustling in the nearby undergrowth that Petel's ears picked up, no doubt long before anyone else could hear it. It was headed towards them, and fast. Someone shouted, "The Guardian doesn't know where to go! Don't follow it, follow me!"

From this distance, Petel couldn't exactly tell whose voice it was, but it sounded remarkably familiar. Similar to Vektor's, actually. The rustling was then upon them and, now able to hear it too, Frank and Abraham went on the defensive while Dante squeaked in surprise, his fires flaring up. Could it be an enemy? Were any of the enemies designed with the capability of mimicking human speech? It didn't smell like an enemy. Though confused, Petel crouched and readied himself to pounce, to protect.

The source of the noise broke through the undergrowth and stumbled out into the small clearing around their checkpoint as a very familiar face.

"Dang, we lost her." Damon snapped his fingers on his now clawed hand, which was also burnt black and cracked in places. He quickly noticed Petel and them and grinned, revealing sharp but horribly crooked teeth. "Well, look who it is. The wolf pack!"

Abraham, Frank, and Dante were all just as taken aback by Damon's appearance as Petel, judging from their shocked silence. Damon didn't look great, having curved deer horns protruding from his head somewhat unevenly, the clawed hands and crooked teeth, a single undersized and sickly red wing protruding awkwardly from his back, a thin devil's tail with the pointed end, and red-brown fur covering his body from the neck down, ending at his hooved feet. At least he had a red button-up shirt and a black vest to cover his torso. It was so jarring and unflattering compared to his normal appearance that Petel was really unsure of what to say in this situation.

Damon's grin fell to an unamused frown. "What? Not even a 'hi' from the lot of ya? Not even a 'how'd you get in here'? Really?"

"Damon!" Niculaie broke through the undergrowth next, followed by Natasha, Aglaé, and Vektoria. "Don't run off like that, what if AIR had—?"

"Oh! Nicu, look!" Natasha interrupted, zipping over to his side and gesturing at Petel and them. "It's those guys. See? I told you there'd be some PvP action."

Frank seemed to brighten up at the others' appearances and shouted, "Hey, Zima! You look cool."

She grinned in thanks, her wings giving an extra few flaps as she hovered above the ground. Abraham and Dante remained frozen in shock and Petel couldn't really blame them on this one. Petel was, however, very interested in seeing how the game had changed their school mates.

Natasha had grey-purple bat wings and sharp buck teeth now, a large black bat clip in her hair, and wore a black bodysuit underneath a grey vest, grey skirt, and grey boots. Her outfit had a very similar colour scheme to Frank's.

Aglaé looked very gaunt, the brown vest he was wearing loose on him because of it and his bones and muscles visible beneath the short brown fur covering his body. He had clawed hands, clawed feet, a short and thin tail, gnarled horns extending from his head, and a blood red rose pinned on the front of his vest.

Niculaie had sharp buck teeth, too, and wore a long white cape with a jagged red wing pattern running around it and a thin tail-like red line extending down the back, a white vest beneath it, and white pants. He seemed to be barefoot, though there was no definition in his feet at all.

Then there was Vektoria, who looked the opposite of Vektor even here. She had a white scarf tied around her neck that looked like it could double as a hood, a white belt, white stockings and white gloves. After that, she wore a sleeveless black shirt, black pants that ended just after her knees, and black slipper-like shoes.

And she looked furious with all of them.

"Don't just stand there gawking!" She shouted at them. "They are the enemy. You should be defeating them!"

Aglaé grimaced in annoyance and, in his regular bored tone, said, "Pass."

"Yeah, give us some time to socialise, first." Natasha laughed as she floated closer to Frank, examining his outfit excitedly. "What are you, anyway, Ernest? Our forms are all pretty straightforward designs at first glance, but you chaps look kinda ambiguous."

Damon frowned, doing a quick headcount of them all, then asked, "Hey, where's your guy?"

"I can't believe this!"

Vektoria threw her arms up in exasperation. At the same time, Vektor ran out from the tree checkpoint and pulled Frank away from Natasha. The two whined, but Vektor looked too

furious to argue with about it. He glared over at Vektoria and furiously said, "What are you doing here? Trying to steal away my teammates yet again in another underhanded tactic befitting of your title, Thief?"

"Clueless Prince!" Vektoria spat back.

She waved a hand over her face and, in a glow of black aura, a silver mask appeared over her eyes, changing them from black to white. Dante, behind Petel, gasped. Vektoria didn't seem to notice. She materialised her own key staff, the exact same design as Vektor's but silver instead of gold, and held it by the three prongs to point the staff end at Vektor, as if it were a sword.

"Were my gang less useless, I wouldn't have to wrestle more control from you than necessary." She went on.

"Ooh, battle's brewing." Damon chuckled and elbowed Niculaie's side. "My bet's on our crazy-mad pauper here. What do you think, Nicu?"

Niculaie, knocked out of his shocked stupor, struggled to come up with a reply. It didn't look like he'd be able to get anything out, as he kept glancing over at Abraham, who was still stuck in his own surprised stupor. Petel frowned. Strange for their Huntsman to not leap at the chance to fight Niculaie or Damon, especially now that their appearances seemed to better fit what Abraham kept calling them. Vektor summoned his own key staff and his visor in response to Vektoria's aggression, growling out, "This ends now, you slanderous liar."

"Takes one to know one, spoiled brat."

The two charged and clashed against one another, then leapt back just to clash again. Natasha heaved out a breath and looked up to the sky, saying, "Jonathan, can't you do something to make her not right now?"

Frank perked up immediately. "Jonathan's with you guys?"

"Yeah!" Natasha grinned in reply. They waited, but the only sounds were Vektor and Vektoria's fighting. Still, Natasha groaned in frustration and landed on the ground, as if there had been a reply. "That sucks. Well, looks like it's up to us to make 'em stop. C'mon, Aglaé."

She grinned over at Aglaé, who had been impatiently waiting for this to be over. He raised an eyebrow at her and said, "No thanks. Ask the Wolf, he's probably got loads of energy to spend on a worthless battle like this."

Petel growled instinctively at such a show of disrespect. Natasha's grin fell to an unsure frown, though she got distracted by whatever Jonathan presumably said next. It was interesting that they couldn't hear him, considering they were able to hear one another just fine. Vektor and Vektoria threw each other sliding back, towards their respective teams, and Vektor paused to say

to them, "An excellent suggestion. Wolf, would you be so kind as to assist me in ejecting this Thief from the current session?"

"Two on one's not very chivalrous." Vektoria mocked, then looked back at her own team in anger. "Why aren't any of you helping me? You're supposed to be my gang!"

Niculaie and Natasha shifted in uncertainty while Aglaé rolled his eyes in a flagrant display of disinterest. Damon, also fairly annoyed, said, "Fight your own battles. We've got no business getting tangled up in your conflict."

"Liar!" Dante shouted, loud enough to make them all flinch.

Shocked out of that stupor, Abraham spoke up next, before Dante or anyone else could continue. "You. Both of you. And-And me. I'm."

Abraham pressed a hand to his chest, right on top of the ammo belt slung across there. Something twisted in his expression and, in a fit of anger, he ripped out a knife from the pocket there. Petel had forgotten he had it. Its blade was a deep red and the hilt a bright green, like a rose.

He was certain Abraham would go for Niculaie or Damon, as Niculaie flinched back and Damon stepped forward to defend his friend. However, Abraham plunged it into his own eye. Both Frank and Dante yelped while Niculaie cried out in distress. Before they could get close enough to stop him, Abraham stabbed himself twice more until his form fizzled and he was ejected from the game.

All of them, even Aglaé and Vektoria, stared in stunned silence at where Abraham had been just moments before. In the end, Petel grimaced and said, "That just happened, I guess."

"What the fuck!" Damon shouted, throwing his arms up in exasperation. "It's been three years and this is when he finally reacts? This is what makes him freak the Hell out?"

Damon turned to Niculaie for some kind of confirmation, but Niculaie looked distraught. His form shuddered and fizzled at the edges and Petel's senses told him danger. He shouted, "Damon, get back!"

Damon frowned over at him in confusion, still a bit too distressed to react quickly enough. It was too late. Niculaie's cape shifted from cloth into large, leathery bat wings, sticking to his body in an uncomfortably fleshy look, complete with the full tail. His feet became blood-stained claws and his eyes went wild, blank, and no longer recognizably Niculaie's. It was danger, danger, danger in Petel's mind, over and over, and he briefly wondered if Dante and them had thought this when he had gone Berserk.

Just as Niculaie knocked Damon aside and screeched, loud enough to make them all flinch back, Paige's voice came through overhead. "Hey, I'm back and I just saw van Helsing booking it outta here, what — oh, that's. A weird signature."

Dante choked out a soft sob. "He didn't. He didn't."

Petel shoved his way in front of Vektor as Niculaie flew at them, a misty golden dust falling from his wings with each movement. Natasha and Damon shouted, both completely panicked, while Aglaé and Frank floundered, unsure of what to do. Vektor, despite having been knocked aside, at least seemed blissfully unaware of the true danger. "Navigator, we seem to have run into our opposing players." He said, unnaturally level-headed. "Can you see Vampire's data?"

Niculaie screeched right into Petel's face, making him wince and pin his ears back. Then the vampire tried to hook the top claws of his wings into Petel, but Petel was just quick enough to kick him back. The gold dust smelled enticingly of home, where a nice hot meal waited, and made Petel a bit light-headed. Which probably meant it wasn't a good thing to breathe in. Paige said, "I can see some sort of hostile, that's for sure. It's stronger than the Bears, but it looks similar to when Petel went Berserk. Did you say opposing players?"

"It's Asheford, Vladimirescu, Zima, Desrosier, and Vektoria!" Frank shouted, his tone a mixture of joy and panic. Niculaie, having been shoved close enough towards the others, switched targets to them and attempted to bite into Damon while Aglaé and Natasha held him back. Petel went to jump in to help, but had to kneel as his head spun with dizziness. "Did you say van Helsing just ran out?"

Paige took a second to process what Frank had said, then answered, "Yeah, he was booking it when I got back. What happened? Did it have something to do with Vladimirescu?"

They lost their grip on Niculaie and Damon was knocked out by the gold dust, leaving him prone and open to Niculaie swooping down and viciously biting into his neck. Natasha and Aglaé had to back away, looking as dizzy as Petel felt. Vektoria screeched at them, not helping at all, and for a moment Petel was glad that they'd gotten the Prince over this Thief. He grimaced and flexed out his claws, mumbling, "Damn lover's spat."

His head cleared, allowing him to dive in and slam against Niculaie's side, knocking the Vampire off Damon's body. Not that it helped much, as Damon's form fizzled and disappeared. Frank moved back to stand with Dante while Vektor charged over to join the fight, pushing Niculaie back farther with his key staff. Natasha tossed out the bat charm from her hair and Aglaé threw the rose from his vest at their currently Berserk friend, bouncing back from their own dizziness.



Niculaie swung his wings out and shoved them all back with a gust of wind and golden dust. That wasn't ideal. Petel and Vektor dropped to their knees, having avoided most of it, but Natasha and Aglaé collapsed to the floor, completely paralysed. Niculaie jumped down by Natasha's body, ready to bite into her neck, but a fireball flew in and pelted his side, making him screech and retreat. Petel glanced over to see Dante, trembling but gritting his teeth, his arms out and ready to strike again.

"Sorry, s-sorry." Dante mumbled in an upset stream. "I'm so sorry, Nicu, I'm sorry."

He was doing his best. That was all they could ask for. Vektoria shouted up at the sky, "What do you mean he's only at fifteen percent left? How does that help us here? You're useless, Hyde!"

It very much seemed like she was too upset to do much else besides scream. And she'd called Vektor a brat. Vektor shook off the effects of the dust and stood, holding out his hand to materialise a white boulder. "Fifteen percent shouldn't be an issue." He said.

He chunked the boulder and pelted Niculaie directly in the chest. That seemed to be it, as Niculaie screeched and his form broke, ejecting him from the game.

Petel sat and heaved out a breath. Vektor and Frank went over to Natasha and Aglaé to help them stand back up. Again, Vektor's hands glowed with that golden light, only this time he focused it on Aglaé's body while Frank shot Natasha's arm with one of his bullets. The two were roused from their state and Natasha, the friendliest of them, said, "Thanks for the help there."

Petel gave a grunt of recognition. Vektor, much more gracefully, gave a regal bow in reply. "It was the natural, chivalrous thing to do in such a situation."

Aglaé rolled his eyes and walked away, back into the thick undergrowth from where they'd entered. Vektoria grabbed Natasha's arm and followed after Aglaé while shouting, "Don't expect us to go easy on you next time, clueless Prince!"

Natasha grinned and waved to them, a sentiment Frank returned, until they disappeared completely. The excitement now over, Petel was ready to sleep for the night. After a moment, Frank turned suddenly to address Vektor and asked, "Do you think there weren't any enemy spawns because there were too many players on the map at the same time?"

Vektor frowned, puzzled. "Why should that matter to AIR?"

"Get inside the checkpoint so I can log everyone out. Please and thank you." Paige broke in, nicely interrupting before they could really get going.

Petel hopped to his feet and did as Paige asked without a second's hesitation, flopping back down onto the floor once inside the tree. Vektor, Frank, and Dante followed along, also without argument. Vektor mumbled, "Yes, that's probably for the best right now. As long as

they're present, we might run into them again and that would be detrimental to making any progress."

He leaned against the wall and Frank sat next to him, waiting for the fall. Dante crouched down beside Petel, as close as he could get considering the fires, and asked, "A-Are you okay?"

"Tired." Petel grunted.

"Ah."

Dante bowed his head, trying to come up with something else to say. For someone who wanted to keep his distance so much that it manifested as a literal barrier of fire isolating him, he could really be desperate for interaction at times.

Petel understood that dilemma probably too well.

He had to apologise to Sonya before the end of the night.

Petel fell then through the floor and into the black. It only took a few seconds for it to right him and deposit him inside the scanner, back in reality. The doors opened and he stumbled out, all that exhaustion hitting him even harder than before.

Dante was there to catch him, quick enough to have seen Petel's wobbling and no longer impeded by the fires. Petel flashed a grateful smile at the fireball and leaned into him for support. Vektor fell onto the floor, face planting once more. Frank took out his phone and hurriedly tapped away on it as he said, "Do you think something went wrong with van Helsing somehow? Like, maybe the system executed part of his code incorrectly or something?"

The poor dear was speaking too fast in his concern. It made Petel want to give him a hug. Vektor lifted his head off the ground and said, "Professor's code looked to be functioning just fine, as far as I could see."

"Yes, well, you can't see everything." Paige countered, getting up from her chair to pull the Prince to his feet. "And it's possible, at least. Hopefully, everything's okay, but." She paused, then switched to concern as she asked, "What even happened?"

"I don't know." Frank ran both of his hands through his hair, pushing back his bangs until they sprang into place again. "One minute, he's fine and normal. Then we run into Vladimirescu and them and—"

He groaned and leaned back, dragging his hands back down and over his face. Petel grimaced and continued, "He stabbed himself to get out."

"That was a peculiar reaction, indeed." Vektor nodded along, as if he could understand or follow any of this. "Perhaps the coding in his eyes was aggravating him again, similar to when

we first met. Unfortunately, I wouldn't be able to see which directives are giving him issue unless I could see it clearer."

Paige turned her gaze towards the doors. After a second, her concern shifted to annoyance and she asked, "Why, though? Why would seeing Vladimirescu illicit that sort of reaction when he's always wanted to attack him?"

Petel shrugged. "Ask tomorrow. You took a while?"

"Hm?" Paige paused a second, then winced. "Right, sorry about that. Mister Thatcher caught me in the cafeteria, then Officer Riviera stopped me on my way back. Hopefully, they won't get me in any trouble for this."

She deflated, dragging Vektor with her. Petel's frown became concerned, though the wolf eagerly leapt up to volunteer its teeth in ripping those that dared threaten her to shreds. Dante, just as concerned, asked, "Don't we have a-a valid excuse, though?"

"You'd think so, but who knows?" Paige straightened herself and Vektor up, then headed for the doors. "Anyway, there's not much we can do besides wait until tomorrow to see what's up with van Helsing. For now, we all need our sleep."

Frank heaved out a breath. "I hope nothing too bad's happened." He hurried out after Paige, saying, "I'll let you know if he gets back to me before then."

"Sounds good, thanks."

She was on the third floor of the dorms, with Natasha. Not really near Sonya's room, but not too terribly out of her way, either. Petel jolted forward and out of Dante's grip, making the fireball squeak in surprise, in order to catch up to Paige. He offered out his arm, staring directly into her eyes as he said, "I'll take him."

Paige regarded him a moment before asking, "You sure that's a good idea?"

He nodded, resolute. She gave a dramatic roll of her head, then shoved Vektor onto him.

"Fine, have at it. C'mon, Dante, I'll walk with you."

Petel struggled to find a way to hold Vektor upright without toppling over himself. He was less tired now, but the Prince didn't even try to support his own weight. Dante hesitated a moment, then hurried after Paige. Frank hurried out as well, staring down at his phone all the while.

Petel watched them go long enough for them to just about make it past the main building, then started his own trek with the Prince. Vektor leaned heavily on him for support, but otherwise seemed the same as usual.

In a sudden shift of topic, Vektor asked, "Why do you think she hates me?"

Petel scoffed as a way to cover up his urge to laugh. "Because you over-explain and call us weird names."

"No, not Navigator." Vektor gave a heavy sigh, drooping in aggravation and nearly making Petel drop him. "Vektoria. I didn't really give it thought at first. It just seems natural for us to be at odds like this. But, really, there's no good reason for her to have hated me enough to do what she did to our home."

Petel paused to really take in his countenance. It seemed like the clueless Prince could show other emotions besides oblivious wonder and aggravation at being brushed off. They really could mistake him for a real human being at times. It'd be impressive if it weren't so frustrating every other time. In the end, Petel shrugged and continued walking. "Maybe you're a shitty ruler."

"Impossible." Vektor huffed, immediately offended. "The Mainframe Kingdom has seen its longest period of peace in its history under my grandfather's rule. Our people should be prospering and celebrating, not—" He stopped himself, too furious, then grumbled the rest. "Not running in fear or planning coups as a direct result of her deceitful actions."

They reached the dorm building and Petel had to pause as he figured out how to open the doors. "Why's opening your Kingdom so bad again?"

"That's not — ugh." Vektor tilted his head from one side to the other as he considered how best to explain it. "Our castle was built on top of the Mainframe in order to seal it away, as it houses the most dangerous enemies in all of the Rabbit Hole. My family has fought them back at great cost to us time and time again to protect the rest of the Kingdom." He nodded once, satisfied with that. "We must make it back to my Kingdom before her, no matter what, so that I may fix the seal and save my people."

His golden eyes practically shone in the night with his determination. Petel would hand it to the guy; he at least seemed to believe whole-heartedly in his cause. The wolf had to begrudgingly accept the Prince into their pack for now. Petel pulled him along inside and said, "Guess she just hates you, then."

Vektor grimaced, displeased by that answer. Petel walked straight to Sonya's room and knocked, despite Vektor reaching forward in a futile attempt to just open the door.

Sonya answered and, at first, bristled. Still upset, then. He noticed Vektor, though, and reluctantly moved aside to allow them in. Petel made sure to drop Vektor on his own bed first, then faced Sonya and said, "I'm sorry."

"If you really were, you'd agree to tell the faculty about those two jerks." Sonya countered.

Petel winced and his whole body tensed with indignation. After a second or two of silence (in which Vektor didn't jump in, surprisingly), Sonya deflated and moved closer to grab his hand.

"No, I'm sorry, too. I'm just — I'm worried about you, Petel. Last year, they were such assholes and I don't want you to have to deal with that all over again this year, too."

Petel clasped Sonya's hand tightly in return, offering up the best smile he could manage at the moment. Vektor sat upright and interjected, "If I may, what exactly is wrong with Wolf handling this on his own? He's quite capable of it."

"You're a part of the problem." Sonya snapped at the clueless Prince in aggravation. Then he looked back to Petel with that earlier concern and said, "Just think about it, okay?"

Petel grimaced, but pulled the birdie in for a hug. "No promises."

Sonya scoffed. "Stubborn wolf."

"Worry birdie."

He smacked Petel's arm playfully, but returned the hug as Petel chuckled. Vektor dropped back down on his bed and sighed. "The intricacies of relationships are truly the most baffling thing about all this."

"Maybe you should try it before dismissing it as incomprehensible." Petel said, rolling his eyes.

Sonya laughed, trying his best to hide it with a huff of breath. "That was two correctly used words. Very nice."

Petel separated himself from his friend, then left to head upstairs. He was really looking forward to passing out for a good, long sleep. As he was brushing his teeth, the warning bell for lights out rang. They'd played for longer than he'd thought. He made it back to his room before the lights went out and noted that Dante was sushi'd. No more conversation for the day, then. Petel flopped into his own bed and quickly passed out.

It made sense now as to why Niculaie and Damon had been there that Sunday, despite living off-campus. That didn't explain why Abraham had freaked out, but it was a start, at least.

## Chapter 11: It's All Wrong

After they'd all gotten breakfast, Frank announced, "He said everything's fine, so he's gotta be lying."

Sonya and Levy frowned over at Frank in pure confusion. Paige, meanwhile, said in alarm, "Hold it. You can't just assume he's lying immediately. Maybe everything is okay for him now."

"No way." Frank insisted. "After what happened, there's no way things could just be fine, like he's claiming. Van Helsing's a lot of things, but not — not that. That wasn't normal."

"Seconded." Petel agreed.

Levy leaned in eagerly and asked, "What even happened? What'd the Fourth do this time?"

"He ejected himself from the game and left before we had a chance to inquire as to why." Vektor helpfully explained for them. "His method was admittedly quite startling and I do agree that we should get to the root of it to make sure nothing in his code accidentally glitched or malfunctioned, but I otherwise see no reason to jump so vehemently to conclusions."

"Of course you don't." Sonya said, exasperated.

Vektor frowned at the birdie while Levy frowned in thought. Paige exhaled a slow, aggravated breath and relented. "Okay. You're welcome to ask about it, then. Anything else to report?"

"We've confirmed that Vektoria is encroaching on our lead." Vektor said before Frank had a chance to speak further.

Paige and Frank both frowned, though Paige's was more out of confusion and Frank's was out of apprehension. Levy leaned forward against the table, right back to interested as he said, "You're kidding. There are more people playing this game? At the same time? How's that even possible?"

"Two towers." Dante said softly, catching their attention. "Two setups."

Paige groaned. "It's so obvious that it's maddening I didn't realise it sooner."

"Hey, Prince." Petel started, shifting the subject. "How come I didn't go Berserk this time?"

Vektor thought a moment before replying, "Because we didn't see Shiranui before our battle? That's my best guess."

"Your best guess?" Frank leaned back in his seat in shock. "I thought you were supposed to know everything."

"Yes, well." Vektor huffed, aggravated and not one bit flattered. "For a player to enter Berserk mode, there has to be a catalyst. One would assume that, more often than not, the Guardian takes that role, hence the Berserk being one of the boons they grant to their familiars, but it could also vary depending on the player's build or the whims of the Guardian."

Petel made a wry expression and said, "Seems you left a lot out of your initial explanation."

"Look, it's a concept not even I understand all that well." Vektor flung out his hands and gestured furiously as he continued. "The core of the mechanic is simple, but the actual execution has too many variables and exceptions to fully explain. It could be triggered by the switch to battle mode only after seeing your designated Guardian. It could come about from hearing the Guardian singing the right song. I don't know which method belongs to which player, alright?"

Dante shuddered while Paige and Frank seemed curious about those specific examples. Petel would admit, it was quite the intriguing concept. Sonya wrinkled his nose in distaste and asked, "Who codes a game like this?"

"Someone paying attention to details." Levy grinned, the exact opposite of Sonya's reaction. "That's freakin' radical that they made it super individualised like that."

"Unless it's your job to explain it." Vektor sighed, leaning his elbows onto the table and resting his head in his hands. "What were the Creators even thinking, tasking me with all this?"

Petel frowned, fed-up. "You're a Prince."

Vektor glared at the wolf, but before he could make a retort, Dante stood and rushed out of the cafeteria, not even grabbing his tray this time. His motions hadn't seemed panicked, though they were intense all the same. It put a stop to the conversation, as whatever Vektor was going to say was forgotten as he frowned after Dante, aggravation clear in his expression.

For once, Petel could really agree with the Prince on something.

As soon as Phys-Ed was finished, Petel raced to get changed and get out as quickly as possible. He found both Abraham and Vektor sitting outside in the courtyard area, beneath their

usual tree, and dropped down to sit right beside Abraham, surprising the both of them. He asked a very straightforward, "What happened?"

Abraham was too taken aback to reply right away, giving ample time for Paige and the others to catch up and sit with them. After they'd all settled, Abraham asked, "What do you mean? I'm not sure I understand."

"Bullshit." Frank said without missing a beat. "You freaked us all out yesterday! What else could we be asking about after a performance like that, van Helsing?"

Abraham sat back, more confused and not taking this as seriously as Petel would have expected. "Yesterday? Hm." He stared down at his lap for a good minute as he thought it over, rubbing absently at the side of his neck, then he said carefully, "I'm still unsure of your meaning. Did something unexpected happen?"

Frank threw his hands up in exasperation and Petel would've normally agreed, but the contradiction caught in his mind. He hadn't shown signs of a headache this time, yet his memory was acting up just the same. Just as it had been back during October, after he came back from a hunting trip with his father and barely recognised any of them at first glance.

Whatever Frank had just said, though, Petel had missed it. Abraham recoiled with a surprised, "I — We — That happened?"

"Yeah! You just flipped." Frank leaned all the way back, flopping onto the ground with an upset groan. "Of all the times for your spotty memory to be acting up, it chooses now."

Kalyuga glanced to Paige, very confused and a little distressed. Paige, unable to offer much comfort, could only press a hand to her shoulder. Sonya also seemed perturbed by the whole conversation, similar to Dante, but Levy bounced up in excitement and interjected, "Vladimirescu was one of the other players, huh? That means Asheford and Desrosier were there, too, right?"

Vektor nodded. "Correct."

"They were there? In the game?" Abraham questioned, looking more and more baffled. Frank was indisposed, laying on the ground, so Petel nodded at Abraham in confirmation. He scrunched up his eyebrows and rubbed harder at his neck. "And I — I took myself out? Why can't I remember this?"

"That's what we're asking!" Paige exclaimed in exasperation.

"Might it be." Kalyuga paused, hesitant to continue only for a second, before pressing on. "It sounds like it was a largely traumatic experience. So, perhaps your brain has just blocked it out completely? What do you remember about yesterday? Is there anything at all?"



Abraham turned his gaze upwards this time. His hand reflexively clenched against the side of his neck and pulled at the skin. "I — We. We were discussing who all would be participating in the setup of the school event. That — Was that yesterday?"

"Yes, it was." Kalyuga encouraged brightly. "What next?"

"After that." Abraham faltered, really struggling to reach back for these memories. "I had. Theatre. With the Vampire, and. And we were."

His expression shifted to anger suddenly, as per usual when it involved Niculaie. Recognising this, Kalyuga quickly ushered him on. "Right, and then?"

"And then." Abraham exhaled a long breath, dropping his hand from his neck. "Nothing. The next thing I remember is waking up for school today."

They all deflated in disappointment, Levy yowling out, "You can't even remember supertime and all the fun we had then? C'mon, mate!"

"Perhaps some of your memory bank was corrupted." Vektor suggested.

"Or," Paige raised her voice, glaring at Vektor in annoyance. "More likely, you just experienced enough of a shock that you blocked it out or something."

"Yeah, that seems like what happened." Kalyuga perked back up, then smiled sadly. "If that's the case, the memories may never return to you completely, but that's at least one valid explanation."

"That doesn't make you sound like a computer program and not a human." Petel added with a pointed look towards Vektor. The Prince returned the look with an annoyed one of his own, then Petel turned back towards Abraham. "If it ever does come back to you and you wanna talk about it, just let us know."

Abraham, overcome with sorrow, said, "Truly, I'm sorry that I worried you and I wish I could explain myself, but I just don't remember."

"Don't beat yourself up about it too much." Frank sat up and patted Abraham's back, accepting this a bit too easily. "It's outta your control, therefore you really have no fault in this, yeah?"

Though unconvinced, Abraham nodded in agreement to placate Frank for the time being. They shared only a few more minutes of discussion, in which Frank steered them soundly over to what the Theatre classes would be performing for their end of term finals, before they had to split up. Frank charged ahead towards their Study Hall while Petel and Dante followed along.

Inside, Frank took a seat right beside Percival, who had just set his bag down on the table. Happy to see Frank, Percival gave an amicable greeting of, "Hey again."

Frank asked, "What happened with your brother last night?"

Taken completely off-guard, Percival froze up. Petel took the seat on Percival's other side and said, "Underhanded, but clever."

"Wh-What?" Percival gasped out, suddenly looking very small and afraid. Dante sat on Petel's other side, radiating guilt. "How do you—? H-He was just. Hang on." Percival took a second to structure himself better, then tried again. "You guys were playing the game last night, right?"

"Right." Frank confirmed.

Petel wasn't aware that they'd ever mentioned the game to Percival before. Frank hadn't blinked an eye at the question, though, so maybe the two had talked it over at some point. Percival let out a short, upset sigh, then said, "Last night, Abe came home furious."

"How's that any different than usual?" Frank asked.

"He was furious at father." Percival clarified. Both Frank and Petel straightened up in shock while even Dante gave a quiet gasp. Percival fidgeted uncomfortably, but continued. "They were shouting at each other a lot, something about the legacy of our family. I didn't hear a lot of it clearly. When I came down to see if I could stop them, they were both already gone."

"Wow." Frank breathed out, completely floored. "To think, he could get that angry with his dad."

A different detail caught Petel's attention and he asked, "Where'd they go?"

"Erm, I'm not completely sure." Percival winced, shrinking in on himself. "I'm not really allowed to talk about it, sorry."

"That's fine." Petel relented. "Thanks for letting us know."

"Yeah, thanks, Perci." Frank agreed, giving the boy a gentle nudge with his shoulder in an attempt to offer some comfort. "Hey, you're going to the school event, right? You should hang with us, it's gonna be wicked."

As Frank chatted with Percival about less serious things, Percival relaxed and stopped looking so distraught. He was remarkably similar to Abraham, just a bit neater, and Petel had thought them twins at first. Petel turned in his seat to face Dante and asked, "You got an opinion on any of this?"

Dante jumped in surprise, then squirmed under Petel's intense gaze. He radiated a discomforting heat; it seemed like he was, indeed, bothered. "I-I think."

He hesitated and glanced around quickly, as if afraid that someone might be listening in. He paused too long on a spot across the table, but faced Petel again before Petel had a chance to react.

"Um. It d-doesn't matter. Wh-What I think."

Petel snorted through his nose. "Sure it does."

"I'm just. Crazy." Dante disagreed, hiding his face so Petel wasn't able to see his expression. "Everything's. A conspiracy. No one w-would listen to a. A babbling artist like me."

Petel frowned, growing actually upset. He opened his mouth to further protest, but Dante stood and walked to the front of the room to talk with Mister Patillo. It caught Frank and Percival's attention, too, and they all watched Dante leave the room. The growl in Petel's throat dissipated and, instead, he was left with disappointment. "He's still pushing us away." Petel lamented.

"It's getting worse, too." Frank agreed, looking as crestfallen as Petel.

"Wonder what his experience was, growing up with his parents' company looming over him." Percival said, just as concerned as them.

"It can't have been that different from yours, right?" Frank asked, turning towards Percival.

"My father's not well." Percival said, an assuredness in his words that was in complete contrast to Abraham's own opinion. "Abe and I have fought with him about every choice we make that's not continuing our family's twisted legacy. Vicario's parents are actually doing good for the world and that has to be impossible to live up to."

Frank could only frown in reply. Petel thought back on how Dante seemed to want to avoid everything to do with his parents, be it conversation or technology as a whole, and couldn't help but suspect that they were missing something.

If Petel was anything, it was determined to figure out a good mystery when he came across one. But asking directly about it would, without question, only make Dante run again.

"Well, you're completely right about that." Paige said when Petel brought this up to her.

It was next Sunday and the two of them stood just far enough away from the others, waiting on Abraham to arrive so they could play the game. Sonya lectured Vektor on how

getting into fights with Vektoria in the real world wasn't smart while Dante listened to Levy and Frank discuss their gossip things. The air was cold enough to snow and the grey skies threatened something, but had yet to give.

Paige hesitated a moment, then lowered her tone to a conspiring one. "But. I have an idea that's less direct than just asking him about it."

Immediately intrigued, Petel asked, "What's the plan?"

"Sh-Sheesh, Petel, please." Paige went to shush him, glancing towards the others, then thought better and aborted the motion. "It's just. It's a little. You don't have to be so eager."

She seemed actually embarrassed about this. Petel's interest turned to confusion and he next asked, "Why? What's wrong?"

"Just." Paige made a wry face, then settled her hands confidently on her hips. "Never mind. Let me handle this. Dante!"

She called over towards the rest of their group and, predictably, Dante jumped in surprise. Levy smiled encouragingly at Dante and Frank laughed brightly, which helped reassure him enough to stand and walk away from them. It was a simple thing, but it made Petel smile nonetheless. No matter how hard Dante pushed them away, he'd clearly accepted them as friends. Dante came over and said, "Um. Did you, uh. Wh-What is it?"

Paige smiled in a gentle, apologetic manner and clasped her hands behind her back. "Sorry, but I've got some Calculus work I forgot about until just now. Mind helping me out some?"

Dante's whole posture brightened at that. "S-Sure. Yeah, I'd, um. Be happy to-to help."

Paige carefully reached over to place an arm around Dante's shoulders, guiding him towards the main building. "Thanks. It shouldn't take too long, I just got stuck on the final few problems."

"That's, uh. That's fine. Hopefully I can, um, I can help."

Petel watched them go for a moment, both impressed and even more confused than before. He glanced towards the others and asked, "Dante's in Algebra, right?"

Levy shrugged in reply. Frank said, "He likes math."

Petel wished to ask more about it, but had to hurry after Paige and Dante if he wanted to be a part of this. Those questions had to be filed away for later. As they headed inside the building, Paige rambled a bit as she explained herself. "Sorry, Miss Honda gives us some

assignments through the school computers, so we have to use the computer labs to finish them. Is that okay? Are you alright with that?"

She really did feel bad about this one. Dante hesitated only a second before steeling himself over and saying, "It's. Um. It's fine. Using the program can be, uh, e-easier."

Paige relaxed a bit and continued leading the way, sliding her hand down to hold onto Dante's instead of keeping it around his shoulders. His interest in math must've been stronger than his aversion to computers. Or, perhaps, he resigned himself to their plan.

At the computer lab, Paige chose one nearest to the door and sat behind it, quickly pulling up the school's site. She navigated to the appropriate page, then gestured to the last three questions down the line.

"Here we are, these ones. Any suggestions on where to start?" She asked.

They both turned to look at Dante, only to find him caught up in examining the computer on the desk behind theirs. His face was stony in deep concentration as he ran his hand over the modem, where the serial numbers were etched into it. He noticed them staring after a moment and pulled away from it quickly, switching his attention to Paige's screen and starting, "S-Sorry, sorry. Um, f-for starters..."

Paige leaned back in her seat, amused. "You're full of shit."

"Wh-What?"

Dante cringed. He couldn't just play dumb this time. Spurred on by this, Paige said, "You totally recognise these models. You know more about this stuff than you've let on, huh?"

"I-I. Um."

Dante fidgeted with his fingers, hesitating and growing hotter the longer he did so. Paige and Petel were patient. They could outwait him. Unless he ran. Seeming to realise this, Dante deflated and motioned half-heartedly for Paige to scoot over.

"Let me. I-I wanna see if-if it's this OS that has it. Um, pl-please."

Paige stood and offered Dante the seat. After hesitating another moment, his hands shaking, he sat and faced the computer. To Petel's surprise, Dante immediately pulled up the command prompt and began typing in some code stuff. He was faster at typing than even Paige, though not by much. Despite her earlier confidence, Paige stared in wide-eyed shock at their fireball friend. "No way. You really are." She breathed out, unable to finish her thought.

Dante shrugged, then hit the return key. The code processed in a second and then the screen changed to a somewhat comical scene of a pixelated bunny chasing after a beating heart

with two whole frames of animation, a chunky and simple, 'Congratulations!' over them. Dante sat back and crossed his arms over his chest, suddenly upset. "It's always this one." He mumbled.

"Woah, hang on, what?" Paige leaned in to really examine the screen, placing both her hands down on the desk and getting uncomfortably into Dante's space. "What did you do? What is this?"

"It's. Um." Dante scooted back, allowing Paige the room she needed. "M-My, um. My parents. They, uh, they liked to use th-this or — this as a test screen, a-and. And they just bury it in-in the code as a-an Easter egg. Of sorts."

Paige continued staring at the screen, seemingly not even hearing Dante. It was, admittedly, quite the surprise. Petel looked down at Dante and asked, "Why'd you lie to us?"

"I-I didn't!" Dante frowned up at him with a fiery anger. "I never said I don't know. I-I wasn't allowed to touch their work, s-so. I'm not allowed, so."

Petel met Dante's anger, cool and undeterred. Perhaps surprised, but not really intimidated. In the end, Dante backed down and glared instead at his lap.

"I don't want t-to talk about it. Sorry."

It was another sore spot then. Petel could accept that for the moment and returned his gaze to Paige and the computer. "Any other tricks you know that you could show us?" He asked.

"Can you jailbreak this? Or our phones?" Paige asked next.

Dante sat there, heated but quiet, for long enough that Paige grew apprehensive. Without raising his head, Dante admitted, "I know it."

Paige's frown of concern turned to one of confusion. "What?"

Petel, confused as well, followed up with, "Then show us?"

"I-I know the system. The-The game." Dante clarified, his fingers clenching tighter against his skirt as he let each word escape from his mouth. "It all. It looks f-familiar."

Immediately, Paige jumped up in excitement. "No way, really? Then why did you—" She stopped herself, switching tactics. "What does it look similar to? Is it from a competitor to your parents' company? What, what?"

Petel watched on, just as interested in the answers, but better able to keep his cool. Of course he was upset that Dante had lied to them about all of this, but it seemed to be wrapped up in something painful. As it always was with Dante. It wasn't like they could push too hard, either, because then their fireball would run. Dante seemed to debate with himself on what exactly to

say or where to start. After a longer than comfortable stretch of silence, he finally said, "My father is a Queen."

This time, Petel frowned in aggravation. Should've guessed that the only answers they could get from their paranoid friend would be cryptic nonsense. Paige deflated and asked, "What?"

Dante hesitated for too long once more, then pointed to the screen. Specifically, at the beating heart. "My father. He's. The Queen of-of broken hearts."

"But. This heart's not broken?" Paige said, still perplexed.

Dante remained quiet, adamantly pointing at the screen. Petel, coming to a sudden realisation, asked, "Does that make the rabbit your mum?"

Dante nodded, this time without hesitation, and withdrew his hand. That solved one mystery, at least. A mystery no one had been asking about, sure, but it was better than nothing. Paige opened her mouth, probably ready to ask about the relevancy of all this, but Dante next said, "They tried looking into th-the enhancers to try a-and dabble in, um. In virtual reality tech l-like this."

Switching gears, Paige asked, "What happened with it? Are they still working on anything?"

"It was too dangerous." Dante mumbled.

"So they scrapped it in the end."

Paige shook her head in disappointment. Dante remained withdrawn and Petel was struck by the sight for some reason. It wasn't like it was abnormal for Dante to be upset and closed in on himself, but something about it seemed off this time. Like the ghost of a bitter taste at the edges of something sweet.

Paige went on, snapping Petel out of the moment. "Do you think, maybe, someone found their work and completed it here, resulting in the game we're currently playing?"

They received no response. As expected. Paige sighed and crossed her arms over her chest.

"Well, at least that's one possible explanation. Perhaps it'll become more apparent as we get closer to the end."

"It's wrong." Dante said suddenly.

Once again, both Paige and Petel turned their gazes on Dante. He stared at the computer's screen with an upset sort of scrutiny. Growing aggravated, Paige asked, "What's wrong about it?"

"He chased her down." Dante emphasized, oddly caught up in his own thought process. "He was undone by the chasing of rabbits. That's how they fell. Not the-the other way around."

Paige frowned, perplexed. Petel watched the little animation on the screen a minute and couldn't be anything other than puzzled. "Your parents told you how they met?" He asked in the end.

Realisation dawned on Paige and she said, "That's not uncommon, Petel."

She shoved at his side and he wanted to ask how she'd know, being an orphan, but the wolf inside refused. That'd be too rude towards their leader. Besides, Dante nodded along shortly in agreement. Paige pulled out her phone to check it and grimaced.

"Anyway, looks like we're the ones holding up the show now." She slid it back into her coat pocket, then stepped over to the door. "Let's see if we can get some more answers from the game itself."

Petel perked up, heading over obediently. Dante hurried after, both frustrated and panicked. "B-But I — I just s-said — it's d-dangerous!"

"Maybe whoever set it up to work finished it." Paige said, shrugging. She took the lead and angled her gaze back at them to be better heard. "We've waited a few days each time things got intense and we're all still doing okay. The moment that becomes untrue, I promise you we'll stop."

Still upset but unwilling to argue it further, Dante gave a quiet, "Okay."

Honestly, that was probably the best they were going to get under these circumstances. Petel and them were too eager to explore this game, to figure out the mystery behind it. And as long as Vektor was there with them, urging them to continue, it was doubtful they'd ever abandon it altogether for anything short of someone dying. Even if it did turn out to be dangerous in some other way.

They arrived back outside and Petel was displeased to see that the sky hadn't opened up yet. They were definitely due for snow. Frank and Vektor were now joined by Abraham and the three sat under the roof of the outside cafeteria seating.

Frank greeted them with a cheery, "How'd the Calculus stuff go?"

Dante shrunk back, hiding behind Petel and clamming up again. Paige almost did the same, oddly sheepish as she said, "Actually. Dante told us something rather interesting about the game."

Frank and Abraham, predictably, drew closer with an immediate anticipation. Vektor frowned in distaste. "What could Inferno tell you about it that I can't?" He asked.



"Where it might've come from, to begin with." Paige said, frowning at Vektor's presumptuousness. "Apparently, his parents have tried to make tech like this before, but they scrapped it."

"B-Because it was dangerous!" Dante tried again in futility.

"Woah. So this might be the efforts of some renegade programmer? That's so cool."

Frank grinned at the thought. Abraham frowned in concern and said, "If it's really the product of something potentially dangerous, wouldn't it be best to stop playing around with it like we are?"

"We're tough. Including you, Huntsman." Petel said. Abraham's frown changed to annoyance, but he didn't raise any protest. Dante deflated as his hopes were completely dashed. "Besides, if we stopped now, what would we do about that one?"

Petel gestured over to Vektor, who said, "I'd very much like to return to my home."

Frank giggled mischievously. "He could pass for a human for at least a little while."

Petel looked down at the younger boy sceptically. Abraham smiled past his annoyance and said, "You make an excellent argument. Nothing doing except to see how much progress we can make today."

Frank cheered and took off towards the tower, leading their procession along neatly. Seeing him so energetic made Petel smile. His unapologetic enthusiasm certainly helped inspire them to keep going. The wolf admired it and had accepted Frank into the pack much quicker than most of the others. Even Levy and Kalyuga took a few months to earn the wolf's good graces, despite having Sonya's approval right away.

Petel glanced back at Dante, who was trailing along reluctantly behind them all. Dante and Frank were both first years and yet Dante often seemed the most aware out of all of them of how young they really were. He often took advantage of it, even, using it to avoid answering difficult personal questions the teachers would ask. More alarming was the fact that it was so easy to dismiss Dante once he wanted out of a conversation.

Dante noticed Petel's gaze and met it out of confusion, to which Petel gave a reassuring smile and faced forward just as they were entering the tower.

Those thoughts would have to wait for another day. For now, he was itching to get back into the wolf's skin.

## Chapter 12: For You, Confidence Isn't Worth It

Paige swiftly loaded them into their last checkpoint. Right where they'd run into Damon and the others. Petel leapt out, sniffing the air. No traces remained, of course, but he was still curious to see where exactly the others had come from and what their path might look like comparatively.

Vektor stepped out of the checkpoint behind Petel, materialising his staff. "Now that there are no longer any distractions, let's hurry on to the next checkpoint and finish this level before they can get too far ahead." He said.

"How many more until we reach the end of this place?" Frank asked, hopping out after Vektor.

Abraham and Dante quickly joined as Vektor paused to think. Petel wasn't keen on waiting, however. He gave a forceful exhale through his snout, then walked forward into the undergrowth, towards where he remembered seeing Damon come from. Behind him, Abraham squawked in an undignified manner and called, "What — Vitayev! Where are you going?"

"P-Petel!" Dante cried after him as well.

Dante used his first name and the footsteps of three out of four of their group rushing after him was all the permission Petel needed. They trusted his leadership just as they trusted Paige's. Petel had never been prouder of his pack.

The wolf's pack. Their pack? Petel wasn't sure which pronouns to use now.

Even as the others rushed to follow Petel, Vektor complained loudly after them. "Wolf, that's not the correct path! You'll get lost without my guidance, please come back."

He sounded almost exactly like Vektoria and Petel laughed at that. He did not stop, however. There were no discernible scents, but the sound of rushing water gave him some direction. Paige's voice, echoing above them, chimed in with a curt, "You can either let them go off on their own or you can go with them and not be separated, Vektor. It's your choice."

Vektor groaned in aggravation, but gave in and followed as well. "We're wasting valuable time here." He grumbled moodily.

Really, it was Vektor who acted the most childish out of all of them. As if he'd never been given the chance to properly mature and grow. He and Vektoria had been placed with Abraham as a third year, sure, but they were computer programs. They had no real age to begin with and it was an interesting design choice to let them act this childishly while making them older in appearance.

Then again, it was weird thinking about how someone had designed the two at all, considering how close to human they looked.

It didn't take long before they emerged into a clearing where a different checkpoint stood. The sound was clear and loud here and Petel tilted his head from side to side, trying to pinpoint its location exactly.

"Wow, Petel found our next checkpoint." Frank said, sounding impressed while teasing at Vektor a bit. "Guess we can find our own way around, huh?"

"This isn't the correct path." Vektor retorted, sounding huffy as per usual. "And this isn't our next checkpoint. The coding on it is incompatible with my powers."

"It's labelled as 'active'." Paige said, making them all look up towards the sky. Pinpointing the exact direction of this waterfall wasn't going to happen with that going on. "It must be where the others came from. That'd make sense, right?"

"Could we use it, too, since it's technically active?" Abraham asked.

Vektor started, "I wouldn't try—"

But Frank jumped forward, only to bounce off the lowered branches. A black barrier flashed for just a second at the moment of collision. Petel wrinkled his nose, disregarding the waterfall in order to crouch by Frank's side. "How'd that go for you?" He asked.

"Permission denied." Frank said, rubbing his head and pouting.

Vektor sighed, shaking his head at them. He stepped forward and held his free hand out towards it, that glowing golden light appearing in his palm again. Petel briefly wondered why Vektor was gold when Vektoria was black and white, as those weren't very opposite of one another, but gave up as Paige's explanation of 'game logic' played in his head. Vektoria was eerily colourless while Vektor had it, so it made at least the bare minimum of sense.

The tree's black barrier flashed again, this time sticking around for more than just a moment, and Vektor made a wry expression as he dispelled that golden light.

"Just as I thought." He grumbled to himself. "Can't even reverse the status of the thing."

Frank hopped to his feet, as did Petel. Abraham and Dante watched as the black barrier slowly faded. Petel's ears caught the sounds of that waterfall again and he headed towards it to his best approximation. The others quickly took note and followed after him, Dante crying out, "N-Now where are you going?"

"Wolf, please!" Vektor shouted as well, shifting his aggravation onto this new target. "There's nothing for us over here that will assist in our progress. Let's return to our own path and continue from there."

Petel snorted in amusement, not pausing for a moment. Paige's voice took on that knowing tone as she asked, "What're you after, Petel?"

She was just as amused at Vektor's frustration, it seemed. Petel grinned, willing to explain himself to her. "Can hear water. Wanna find it."

"Water?" Abraham and Frank asked together.

Dante's expression turned perplexed, matching his confused tone perfectly. "Can we r-really—? Do you really, um, th-think it's reachable?"

Petel shrugged and said, "Sounds close."

Frank frowned, suddenly looking torn. "Would the devs really put a water level this early?"

"Better to get it out of the way now, I say." Abraham laughed. "That way, the frustration won't be due to both mechanics and a higher difficulty."

Frank tilted his head back, needing to give the idea some thought. The water was loud enough by now that they all should've been able to hear it clearly. It was pretty deafening for Petel. Vektor, still huffy about the whole situation, grumbled as he trailed along behind them. "There are no water levels, there's the Forest, the Tundra, the Hollows, and my Kingdom. This is wasting time."

Frank grinned at the pouting Prince. "C'mon, let us explore a little. This is all so new and fascinating to us."

"You've, um. Never been here, either." Dante said, sounding just as adamant. "A-At least. I don't think."

"That doesn't matter in this equation. Right now, all this serves to do is to take us farther from our next checkpoint and lowers our chances of progressing during this session. Why are you all being so illogical right now?"

Petel smirked, oddly satisfied with his answer. "'Cause we're human."

Frank laughed brightly, then they entered an odd area where there was, indeed, a lake and a waterfall. Abraham, Petel, and Frank all walked right up to the water's edge, immediately more interested in it than wary. Like the rest of the forest, it looked very real. The detail on the surface as it churned and the spray of the waterfall mist was impeccable. Where the surface was calmer, the water itself seemed to be crystal clear, and it looked like the bottom was as white as the sky.

Petel crouched down to touch it. The sensation was definitely spot-on and it was a refreshingly cool temperature, but when he retracted his paw, it wasn't wet at all. There was also no reflection, just the nondescript shadow they all cast. He stood and looked to the others with a feral grin, asking, "Who's up for a swim?"

Abraham stepped up eagerly, throwing off his coat and hat and revealing the brown turtleneck beneath. "Do you think we'll be able to?" He asked.

"I wanna try, too." Frank pulled off his cloak as well, showing off the whole of the black bodysuit beneath it. His holster stayed on, however, despite all logical reason. "Let's see how well they've programmed the water physics."

"Those come off?" Petel asked.

Abraham and Frank laughed at Petel's surprise. Though just as interested as they were, Dante kept back hesitantly. Which made sense; the fire and all. Vektor frowned at them in utter exasperation, still too grumpy to do much else. "Swim? What do you mean? Why would you swim in it?"

"That area does look odd." Paige said, her voice echoing above them. "But that might just be the system's classification for water. You probably shouldn't just dive headlong into it, though. It could be like the water in Lyric's Crystal Breakers."

"Nah, Petel didn't drown immediately from sticking his hand into it." Frank laughed, preparing to jump. "Besides, this way's more fun."

Petel laughed along and, without waiting any longer, dove straight in with Abraham and Frank. The water reacted exactly as expected, splashing up from the impact of them breaking through the surface and submerging them completely as they sank from the force. However, the water ended abruptly and they fell out into a void of white, forced to watch the level fade away from below.

Abraham let out a startled yell and Frank shrieked, which got them some noise of surprise from Dante and Vektor above them. It was surprising they heard them at all. Everything was almost see-through from beneath, making it look as fabricated as it actually was and shattering the illusion of immersion it tried so hard to set up.

Even Paige's voice, shouting at them, seemed fainter as they fell. After a good minute, they reached more water at the bottom and that seemed to be the end of it. The impact made it seem like they exploded in the process of being logged out. If he wasn't in pieces, Petel would've screamed. The process put him in an odd in-between state, like an extended hitch in the log-out procedure, that suspended him in the void of black as the game scrambled to put him back together.

It took a lot longer than expected. Or, at least, it felt a lot longer than expected.

Eventually, the thing deposited Petel back on his feet, in reality, and the scanners opened to release him, Frank, and Abraham. They looked shaken, but otherwise fine.

Petel stumbled out, surprised at the lack of pain after that whole process. Paige whirled around in her chair, asking, "Are you guys alright? What happened? It looked like you just fell through the level."

"Did they m-make it out okay?" Dante asked frantically, his voice coming from the computer's speakers.

Frank slumped to the floor, digging the heels of his palms into his eyes as he groaned. "It was a complete ruse! Just the suggestion of water with nothing beneath it."

Paige leaned back in her chair in relief and said, "That's why it looked weird, then."

"It wasn't even an unintended clip or anything, the hit detection was clearly programmed." Abraham sighed, crossing his arms and leaning against the side of the scanner he'd come out of. "Curious it's there at all when it's too far off the normal path for us to run into naturally."

Petel grunted in agreement, then sat by Paige and her chair. Paige spared him a glance, then swivelled back around to face the computer. "That is weird. Well, you two are on your own now, so I suggest you get back to the checkpoint so I can log you out before anything else pops up."

"But we've made no progress at all!" Vektor protested.

The computer beeped softly and Paige grimaced. "If you wanna try to continue with just Dante, be my guest. But, just so you know, AIR spawned a Bear and it's headed your way."

"Of course." Vektor sighed out the words, then addressed Dante with a renewed determination. "What say you, Inferno? Will you cooperate with me on this?"

"But. But they. You can't. We're just." Dante half-screamed in frustration, an oddly noisy option for him to take when he normally kept as quiet as possible. Once finished, he snapped, "Fine! Let's try! Why not!"

"That's the spirit." Vektor said, triumphant and unaware of how fed-up Dante actually was. "As long as we play carefully, this single Bear shouldn't be an issue for us."

Dante groaned, unwilling to continue the conversation. The Prince's strange confidence in their abilities, despite none of them having played this game before, was highly unusual. Then again, Vektor saw them all as numbers rather than actual people, if Petel remembered correctly. They were also his only option for help in getting back home. Petel shrugged the rest off and said, "We should go swimming for real sometime."

"Ooh, yeah!" Frank hopped up, eager at the conversation starter. "It's too bad there's no pool here. And it'd have to be indoors right now, it's way too cold to just head to the beach."

"Quite unfortunate, the beach is so beautiful." Abraham waved his hand out theatrically, making Frank giggle at his dramatics. "And we only have an outside pool at home. Perhaps we can search up a nearby indoor pool?"

"I-I want to go swimming!" Dante shouted.

"Inferno, pay attention!" Vektor chastised immediately.

Paige frowned in thought as she continued watching the monitor. "Careful, you two. That Bear's down to half its health and neither of you can take another direct hit." An idea seemed to occur to her and she followed up with a cheerier, "Why don't we all go swimming as a treat once we reach the end of this level? That way, we have something to work towards besides just getting Vektor back home."

Frank pumped his fists into the air, cheering silently. Abraham grinned and said, "I like the sound of that."

Petel nodded in agreement, curious to see how good a swimmer Dante was. The fireball grew up on the beach, he'd said. And even if an outside pool was their only option, Petel could perfectly imagine Dante jumping into the waters as it snowed. Maybe his heat could melt the ice. Petel smiled at the thought, though it was equally worrying. If Dante actually did something like that, the wolf would drag him out before he could catch pneumonia or something.

The computer beeped faintly again, drawing their attention once more. Paige leaned back in surprise. "Well. That certainly takes care of that. Good job, Dante."

"Marvellous, that was marvellous, Inferno!" Vektor exclaimed. "Keep that up and we'll be there in no time."

"Keep moving." Dante replied curtly.

It was intriguing to hear their voices come from the computer's speakers even as they weren't addressing Paige directly. Petel asked, "Is everything we say relayed through?"

"I think so, yes." Paige nodded once, raising a hand to press to her temple. "It can certainly get cacophonous when all of you are talking at once, like when you, Frank, and Abraham were all separately going through your tutorials."

"Sorry about that."

Frank laughed lightly, resting his hands behind his head. Abraham, looking appropriately sheepish, said, "We couldn't hear each other then."

"Right, there's our most recent checkpoint." Vektor's voice, though mumbling, came through clearly from the computer. "From here, the path heads out in this direction."

"Let's go." Dante replied, more impatient than last time.

The computer beeped twice, like before, making Paige frown as she leaned forward to examine the new information closely. It was a hopelessly complicated stream of letters, numbers, and symbols that no one else besides her and Vektor could interpret, so Petel wasn't even about to try. After a second of scrutiny, Paige said, "AIR's spawned a couple of more enemies for you just ahead. A Tiger and a Class I this time, looks like."

"Only two and neither a Class III?" Vektor scoffed confidently. "How generous of AIR."

"H-How much health do we have left, exactly?" Dante asked, surprisingly serious.

Paige tapped a key a few times, then grimaced. "Vektor's got fifty percent left while you've got forty, Dante."

Dante hummed softly in response. "Better than I thought."

Paige's grimace turned puzzled at Dante's nonchalance. After a minute of waiting, the computer gave another two beeps and made Paige blink in surprise. "Okay. Good job, you took care of them." She said.

Petel utterly regretted his hasty decision to test out that water now. He so wanted to witness this focused Dante and work alongside such a determined fireball. Frank and Abraham shared a look, having a similar thought, and Abraham said, "You've become quite determined all of a sudden, Vicario."

"I w-want to swim, too." Dante said, as if it was obvious from that alone.

Petel understood perfectly and smiled. Frank giggled and said, "Better start looking up an indoor pool we can get to, van Helsing. They'll finish the level right here and now at this rate."

"As much as I would appreciate that, I'm afraid it would be impossible." Vektor said, strangely not infected by their jubilant mood. "I've only enough magic left to unlock the next checkpoint at best."



"Then just make a mad dash to the end." Frank suggested cheekily.

Abraham frowned, asking, "Would that count?"

"Checkpoint!" Dante announced.

Paige tapped a few keys and said, "Yup, there it is."

"The loss would be too great if we couldn't make it." Vektor argued. "We should accept this as the net gain that it is and regroup another day for our next session."

"I-I agree." Dante said. "Going through the-the rest of the level w-without everyone else would be too, uh. Too risky."

"Alright, get inside so I can log you out, then."

Paige rolled her eyes, tapping away at her keyboard. Frank bounced on the balls of his feet in unrestrained eagerness as he grinned up at Abraham. "You should stay for lunch, van Helsing. We can talk schoolwork and study together."

"Good idea." Abraham smiled in reply, placing his hands into his coat pockets. "Keeping our grades up is important. Was there a certain subject you were interested in?"

Frank paused to think it over, humming as he did so. The two certainly shared enough subjects, what with Frank taking a bunch of his advanced classes first. Petel chuckled at their ridiculousness. The scanners opened, allowing Vektor to tumble out onto the floor. Dante only stumbled as he cried out, "Maths!"

Paige burst into laughter, which Frank and Abraham joined in shortly after. Petel stood and offered Dante a hand, which he nervously accepted. Vektor pushed himself up into a sitting position and asked, "Why is the ground so cold? Was it like this before we went in?"

Frank and Abraham grinned at each other, sharing their amusement at such an odd question. Paige seemed to take it more seriously as she said, "Finally. I thought it'd hold out until nightfall." She tapped a few more keys, making the monitor shut off, then stood and clapped her hands together. "Time for lunch. Then we can do some actual studying. Sound good, team?"

"No objections here." Abraham agreed.

"I suggested it first." Frank playfully whined.

After making sure Dante was steady on his feet, Petel next helped Vektor. The hapless Prince really had to learn to catch himself at some point instead of flopping out like a dead fish every time. Then again, Petel wouldn't know if he could handle the transition either if he were in the same situation. To be created inside a game, then brought out into reality, it had to be a monumental adjustment.

Vektor didn't make this easy for himself, either, being so inhuman and unrelatable most of the time. No amount of learning could fix that.

Paige led the way out the door and, to Petel's joy, a light snow was drifting down, having already coated the ground an inviting white. Had Petel not been supporting the Prince in his arms, he would've flopped right down into it. Dante pushed forward, past all of them, in order to stand right out in it and gave a joyful little shout. "Snow!"

Paige smiled, her confusion keeping it from being too fond, and she asked, "Does it not snow where you lived?"

"Never!" Dante spun around, his arms out and his face towards the sky in pure delight. "This is — it's so — bella!"

Again, it was surprisingly cute. Again, Petel was struck by just how genuine Dante's enjoyment seemed to be when he finally displayed it. Frank laughed and jumped out to join Dante, matching that pure delight easily. Vektor looked to Abraham and asked, "Is snow a rare occurrence in your realm?"

"Did they not program snow and winter into your Kingdom?" Paige countered before Abraham had a chance to reply.

"No, my Kingdom has no snow. Ice is restricted to the Tundra." Vektor grimaced once he finished and pushed away from Petel to stand on his own. An unwise decision, as he slipped on the new terrain and nearly flopped back down to the ground. Abraham managed to catch him and the Prince huffed. "And this perfectly illustrates why that is."

Abraham let out a short, weary breath, saying, "What're you upset over? We made progress, you should be chuffed."

He stood Vektor up and the Prince trudged forward resolutely, tossing back a defiant, "There are too many particles moving about in the air, how does the processor handle this without lagging or crashing? It's making my head spin."

As he passed Frank and Dante, they stopped to watch him go. Dante's excitement faded to dismay. The same as every other time they discussed the game. Dante's eyes caught something in the distance and he tensed up. Panicked. Afraid. Not willing to chance it this time, Petel rushed over and gently pushed Dante forward, breaking him out of that fear. "C'mon, food." Petel encouraged softly.

"Yeah, we'll have plenty of time to play later." Frank agreed warily. He'd seen that change in Dante's expression, too. Still, he tried to keep the mood light by grinning back at Paige and Abraham. "I say a snowball fight's in order once we've studied all we can study."

Paige tossed back a confident, "As long as you don't mind getting your rumps kicked, that sounds fun to me."

"Quite the challenge to throw down there, Miss Philips." Abraham chuckled as they headed for the cafeteria. "Don't underestimate all of us so quickly, I distinctly remember never losing a single fight against any of my friends at these sorts of games."

"Must not have had very competitive friends if that's the case." Paige teased back.

"You can remember that, but not the time you stabbed yourself?" Frank asked incredulously.

They continued bantering as they entered the cafeteria and lined up to get their food. The mood seemed livelier today, many of the other students just as excited as them about the snowfall. Petel did a quick scan and was disappointed to find neither Sonya nor Levy amongst the crowd. As they sat down with their food, Petel looked straight across at Dante and said, "You did really well today."

Predictably, Dante was taken aback at receiving such praise. Frank sat beside Dante and jubilantly added, "Yeah, you really pulled through on your own. I knew you'd get the hang of things."

"That was, indeed, some fine work today." Vektor agreed, sitting on Dante's other side and sandwiching him in. "Worthy of your experience and very impressive."

Dante bowed his head, mumbling his thanks. While Petel hadn't exactly expected him to be pleased, the way he seemed almost ashamed to be receiving any praise was a bit off. Something to file away for later, along with all those other things Petel had sort of forgotten about by now. Paige moved the topic along to classes and studying and away from the day's exploits. As they discussed this, Sonya and Levy arrived to join them and Petel forgot all that once more.

They took a break to play in the snow before supper. It was still falling and Petel had no doubt it'd continue through the night. Abraham and Paige were, indeed, the most ruthless opponents in their snowball fight, defeating Petel with ease and going back and forth with each other in an all-out war. Frank and Sonya taught Dante and Vektor how to make some snow goons while Levy enjoyed flopping about and creating fallen angel pits.

Petel would call it a great day. He fell asleep near immediately, even before the lights out warning.

He wasn't sure why he awoke so suddenly in the middle of the night.

He couldn't see anything in the darkness. He did hear Dante gasping desperately, struggling to breathe, and bolted upright to check. There was nothing there, nothing Petel could

see, and he couldn't explain why he'd thought something might be there. Dante's distressed and weak noises were enough to convince his half-asleep brain otherwise.

He leapt out of bed and tumbled to the floor, landing with a loud thud, then climbed up into Dante's bed and found Dante from there.

The darkness seemed to lift as his eyes adjusted and Dante breathed in sharply, panting and staring up at the ceiling in a wide-eyed panic. It really must've been some nightmare for him to sound so out of breath. Like something had been choking him.

After a moment, Dante finally noticed Petel sitting there. He stared up at Petel, his eyes still wide with fear, and said nothing. Not a single word. He just continued breathing, getting air back in his lungs.

The silence was chilling. Petel couldn't explain why, but it was unsettling for Dante to refuse to even scream. And in the moment, it made Petel panic a little himself.

He snuggled his way into Dante's blanket, like an insistent dog, and held Dante close to his chest. For once, Dante didn't resist.

This time, Petel waited for Dante to fall asleep first. Only then was it safe enough to let his guard down and join.

## Chapter 13: Like Trusted Secrets

"What was that about?" Petel asked the moment they got up in the morning.

Of course he'd want to know. He'd woken up and then actually climbed into bed with Dante, refusing to let go until they fell asleep. Unsure of how to answer, how truthful Dante could be about it (especially considering that skirting so close to the truth was what had gotten him in trouble in the first place), Dante dumbly replied, "It-It was, um. Just a-a nightmare."

"Must've been some nightmare." Petel said. He followed up with a solid, "Wanna talk about it?"

Dante squirmed as the feeling of the sharp, thin hands wrapped around his neck came harshly back into focus. Just a nightmare. A bad dream. Something that hadn't actually happened at all. Petel had stared right at the shadow looming over Dante, choking him for going against the rules, and still hadn't seen it. They didn't want to be seen by anyone else. That'd ruin the fun. They'd go back to sticking their slithering hands down Dante's throat until he vomited again if they got much more recognition.

He wanted to scream.

But he couldn't do that.

It was too early and his body was still panicked from the memory. He'd probably need to wash the marks off his neck.

He kept his head down as he said, "It was just. The shadows. Again."

Petel hummed softly, accepting that, and the two of them continued getting ready for the day. There wasn't much Dante could say about it without sounding crazy or alarming his observant roommate, and maybe it was a good thing Petel believed him so readily.

The whole school was absolutely coated in snow, leading many to bundle up with coats, hats, and scarves on top of their uniforms. Even Petel took out a knit cap to wear, as red as his coat, which took Dante by surprise. The guy was cold enough to the touch, Dante hadn't thought he'd be able to feel it. It made him stand out amongst the sea of green, though, and Dante appreciated that small reprieve.

Honestly, Dante should've hated red more than green. Red brought up so many bad memories of fire and Hell. But green was guilty by association. Green was the one she always pressed onto him just to make him upset.

The imps and slithering slicers stayed out of range as the day passed and he allowed himself to relax a bit more. It was normal to have nightmares. Getting all of his schoolwork finished in time for winter finals and the school being abuzz with anticipation for the upcoming event helped him shove the matter completely out of his mind. Their group seemed more focused on the deadline for sign-ups to help decorate than the game anyway.

That Tuesday evening, as he and Petel were holed up in their room in full concentration on their books, Petel finally brought up the question that had no doubt been burning at the back of his mind. "Why'd you call your dad a queen?"

Roused from his thoughts on how best to show his work for this particular set of Algebra puzzles, Dante snapped his head up and blinked owlishly over at Petel. "Huh?"

Petel grimaced, looking for once very uncomfortable in the situation, and set his own work aside on his bed as he tried rephrasing the inquiry. "Back there at the computer. You said your dad's the queen of something."

"That's. What he calls himself." Dante shrugged, unsure of how else to explain it. "He said. He's always been a-a Queen."

Petel covered his mouth with a hand, digesting this. Dante racked his brain for something else he could say about his father, anticipating the inevitable follow-up questions. But what did he really know about Caro to begin with? Caro's friends and Lietta herself a few times called Caro a heartbreaker jokingly and Caro seemed proud of the nickname. He was much more friendly and personable, chatting up others so Lietta wouldn't need to be distracted. None of that reflected how the father Dante knew was cold and calculating, a much more chilling overseer than Lietta.

While Caro would smile at his wife and show her affection (when she'd let him), he hadn't got close enough to touch Dante ever since the fires returned with Dante from Hell.

"Is he. Um." Petel hesitated, then finally blurted out, "Is he gay?"

Immediately, Petel cringed, wanting to retract the question. Again, Dante was too startled and echoed his earlier confusion. "Huh?"

"I mean." Petel ran a hand through his hair, his face burning red in embarrassment. "Well. Queen is usually used for. When it's referring to a guy or-or someone who identifies as male, or — I mean — I guess—" Unable to get the proper words out, he huffed and settled for drawing

his legs up to his chest and burying his face into the tops of his knees. "You know. Forget I asked. It wasn't. It doesn't matter."

"He's married to my mother, though?" Dante offered up, completely at a loss.

"He could be Bi. I dunno." Petel let out a heavy, upset breath. "Just forget about it. It was really dumb. I'm sorry for asking."

It was odd to see the normally stoic and controlled guy in such a state. Dante couldn't resist the intrigue of it, willingly putting aside his maths so he could observe this better. "I don't really know what my father's sexual preferences were, I just know what my mother and him would call themselves." He said.

"We can drop the subject now, it's fine."

Petel looked up, his expression pleading. Still, curiosity compelled Dante to continue. "When I was in Sunday school. The pastors said that any and all sexual desire w-was a sin."

Petel wrinkled his nose and buried his face back into the tops of his knees. Undeterred, Dante went on.

"But. I know Roman Catholicism is especially behind the rest of the world in accepting these things. So. Uh." He paused, the thought leaving him. No doubt the work of a pesky wiggler who had taken the opportunity while he'd been too focused on observing Petel. A bit embarrassed himself, he raised his hands in a shrug. "I don't. Um. Is-Is 'Bi', uh. That's 'two', right? Like bicycle?"

Petel peeked up and said, "Yeah. Short for, y'know. Bisexual."

"Bisexual." Dante parroted the word, testing out how it felt in his mouth.

A little less uncomfortable now, Petel sat up straight. He stayed withdrawn and couldn't look directly at Dante, though. "Yup. That's what it stands for."

"Huh."

Dante sat back, mulling over this new information. For some reason, it didn't seem right to label his father as 'Bisexual', though he couldn't exactly pinpoint why that was. Caro loved Lietta very much. So much that Lietta saw it as more of a nuisance than anything else. Despite that, Dante suspected it to somehow be a lie. Clearly, it wasn't entirely, as Lietta would accept Caro's kisses, and that's how parents were supposed to work. Something about the whole concept seemed so obligatory, however.

They were partners, had created their own company with their own two sets of hands. Of course they had to go through the motions of showing affection for one another. Dante's

schoolmates had done the same motions when they'd foolishly play house. Yet those same parents refused to show Dante any of that obligatory affection.

He'd been marked for Hell, after all. A failure unworthy of such effort.

Perhaps that was why seeing his classmates' parents shower their children with that affection seemed so fake.

"There's, ah. Nothing wrong with it, you know." Petel spoke up, catching Dante's attention. Again, Petel seemed embarrassed, huddling more in on himself and keeping his expression hidden from Dante. "In being Bi, I mean."

The unfamiliar way in which Petel was reacting just served to puzzle Dante further. "Okay?" He said, his head tilting to the side.

"In fact." Petel paused to take a deep breath, then tried to push on as casually as possible. "That's, um. What I identify as. So."

"So. You're Bisexual?"

"I'm Bi."

Petel sat there, waiting for something. Perhaps a reaction or response from Dante. What kind was he looking for? It was very unclear how Dante should react to this information. As such, he settled for a simple, "Okay."

Finally, Petel turned his gaze back to Dante in exasperation. "That's it? 'Okay'?"

Dante shrugged, pleased that Petel didn't seem so nervous anymore. "It's, uh. Your preference? Sorry, I-I don't know what you w-want from me."

"You're Roman Catholic, though. Right?"

Petel rolled his eyes, annoyance getting the better of him. Again, Dante could only shrug in response. "I'm not qualified to-to dictate anyone's life. I'm not them, I'm me." He picked his work back up and let out a quiet sigh. "Besides, I'm, uh. Bound f-for Hell. Nothing's going to-to change that, so. Um, why be n-needlessly judgemental?"

He scribbled down the solution he'd thought of, then moved on to the next puzzle. Petel watched him for a moment before smiling out of relief and aggravation. "Those're some good words. Good vocabulary."

Dante smiled back a bit unsurely. "Um. Thanks."

"Thanks for not freaking out on me."



"Wh-Why would I?" Dante frowned in alarm, a burst of panic snapping in his chest. "Was, um. Was I supposed to? Has anyone else? Is that a good or-or a bad thing?"

"It's fine." Petel waved him off, chuckling fondly at his immediate reaction. "It's a good thing. I mean it, thanks."

Though not completely reassured, Dante sat back and said, "Um. You're welcome, then."

A chorus of snickers came from above him, signalling that the hanging crawlers had gathered overhead to drop onto his face and burrow into his eyeballs with their stingers. They could be so judgemental when their only purpose was to make him see upside-down for the rest of his life. Petel returned to his own schoolwork, too, so Dante simply kept his head down and didn't give them a chance to strike.

If Dante gave it a bit more thought, he didn't really understand the desire to find someone with the express purpose of marrying them. Perhaps he was still too young for that sort of thing. They were all still children.

It was, however, somewhat comforting to see that Petel was willing to show such vulnerability to Dante when the wolf was so stalwart and unflappable. Dante had certainly shown his own failings more than he'd liked, so it was a welcome balancing of sorts. Even if that sort of thought process just seemed to cement the fact that they were friends and nothing Dante could do would change this.

Such a stubborn wolf. It was safe to say by this point that Dante had grown fond of Petel, too.

At breakfast the next morning, Vektor adamantly declared, "We should continue the game today after everyone's classes are finished."

Paige scoffed at his words and Frank teased, "Someone's impatient."

"If I am, it is because I wish to make it back to my home before Vektoria does." Vektor said.

"He's only been here a couple of weeks and I already feel like we've heard that a hundred times over." Levy lamented.

He tipped his head back and sighed in a clearly over dramatic gesture, attempting to get a laugh. Petel gave a chuckle, but Sonya chastised him. "Be considerate. He's just as trapped here as the rest of us are."

Levy made some yowling reply, but Dante was thinking on his conversation with Petel from last night. There was nothing wrong in Petel being Bisexual (or Caro, if Caro was indeed also Bisexual), but something about it wasn't making sense. How did they know? How could

they tell? Had Petel dated anyone before? They were only kids! Petel was a year older, sure, but did that really make such a difference?

Dante went to interrupt the back and forth they were having about homesickness, but managed to only get out a brief and direct, "When?"

Paige, Frank, and Petel looked over at him, startled, while Vektor, Sonya, and Levy frowned at him in confusion. As if it was obvious, Vektor said, "Tonight, after classes. I thought I was very clear about this."

"N-No, no. Um." Dante ducked his head, trying to keep his breathing steady as the tendrils of the streamer gallows ghosted over his shoulders. "I-I meant. Sorry. Um, wh-when did you — uh, all of you, I-I guess — figure out your, um. Wh-Who you'd want to, uh. To date?"

He glanced back up at the table and, surprisingly, they all looked nervous or embarrassed by his question. Except Vektor, of course, who was just bewildered, and Petel, who had some context behind the sudden inquiry. Petel easily answered, "When I was twelve, I think. Came to terms with it and the wolf."

Dante gaped at him. "Twelve?"

Paige smiled brightly, eagerly switching gears to go along with them. "Well, I don't know if I was eight or ten when I figured it out exactly, but I do know all my crushes have been on girls since I was five."

"F-Five?!" Dante barely managed to sputter out.

"I was eleven when I figured mine out." Frank joined in, gesturing with his hands as he explained. "Most of the other kids in my class had crushes on each other and I asked William about it since he never did any of that, either. He said he was Asexual and explained it to me since I liked the word."

"And I've been comfortable calling myself Pansexual since I was thirteen." Levy chuckled, relaxing and nudging Sonya's side. "Looks like we're a right group'a queers, eh?"

Petel, Frank, and Paige laughed along, an odd solidarity to it. As if this somehow united them, despite their not identifying as the same thing as each other. Sonya, who'd remained embarrassed and blushing throughout, hunched up his shoulders and stared resolutely down at the table. Dante said in protest, "But. But we're kids! How do you know? How'd you figure it out so-so young?"

He was fifteen and never thought about another person in a romantic way, ever. In fact, he still didn't understand how anyone could look at another and decide to initiate any sort of relationship with them, on a whim! Friendship was one thing, but romance was such a gigantic leap.

Paige placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. He still flinched, more out of shock than genuine panic. "It's okay if you haven't figured it out for yourself yet. We all learn at our own pace." She said.

"Honestly, it's not an easy thing to figure out." Frank leaned against the table and propped his head up with one hand as he said, "Especially if you're Ace or Aro."

"And you're allowed to change your mind." Levy supplied, sounding the most sincere he'd ever been. "Don't feel like you gotta stick to one label just 'cause it was the first one you picked out or because someone else slapped it onto ya. I went from thinking I was totally Hetero, to Bi, to Pan!"

Though not entirely convinced, their reassurances did help. It was an odd aspect to his own identity that Dante had never even considered.

If he was being honest with himself, he identified more with his mother on this matter: displays of affection were utterly pointless and unneeded. Marriage was more a means to an end rather than the joining of two loving individuals. Romance was a waste of time when there was more important work to get done.

And that thought was more terrifying than any fear Dante could come up with.

Paige asked, "What brought this on, anyway?"

She glanced pointedly at Petel, making the wolf grin in a conspiring way. Levy grinned along, catching their implication, and leaned against Sonya in a far too friendly manner. "What say you, Birdie? Been awful quiet."

"I-I'm just. Concerned about eavesdroppers." Sonya huffed, pushing Levy off and unable to stop blushing. "They could. You know. Report us."

Levy laughed sharply at the absurdity. "For what? Being gay?"

"N-Not so loud!"

Sonya glared at Levy, who continued laughing. Petel's eyes lit up and he leaned across the table to say, "We're not in Russia anymore."

As if that explained anything. Sonya, quick as a hummingbird, fired back, "Our caretakers still live there. And, technically, so do we."

"May I ask something?" Vektor interjected, raising his hand to further bring attention to himself. Though reluctant to grant him the permission, Petel and Sonya both stepped down and turned towards the Prince. Once he had everyone's attention, Vektor said, "Thank you. What are all these terms you're throwing about? And dates? As in, the timestamps by which we measure

the passage of cycles? Are there multiple named stages in one's life? Are they personalised or merely different categories?"

They all gawked at him. It made a maddening amount of sense (as Dante also didn't understand half the terms being flung about), but to be that clueless? Was it really deemed unnecessary to even give them the information on romantic relationships? Frank murmured, "That's probably the most computer thing you could've said in this situation."

Petel wrinkled his nose in distaste. "You're a Prince. You've got parents."

Vektor wilted suddenly, a pained expression crossing his face. "No, I. Not for a long while now, I haven't." He snapped himself out of it and continued before any of them could ask. "But what does that have to do with anything you were discussing? Is this matter of dates and terms related to one's parentage?"

Levy rolled his eyes in amusement. "Sexuality, Prince. We're talking about sexuality here."

"Sexuality?" Vektor blinked, even more confused. "And what's that?"

The warning bells rang then, making Dante jump and grab onto Paige's arm. Paige heaved out a breath and stood, picking up her tray and pulling Dante along as she did so. "You've got Health first, right? Ask Mister Carriedo about it, I'm sure he'd love the chance to explain it to you."

Vektor brightened at the prospect of learning something new. Frank sank down on the table and whined. "Are you serious? Mister Carriedo'll never stop if we get him going. How could you do this to me?"

"Hey, I miss that enthusiasm. It beats Mister Williams' crankiness any day." Levy pointed out with a wink.

"And we'll all be late if we don't hurry."

Paige motioned for them to get up with a nod of her head. They all obliged and Dante made sure to grab his own tray. Kalyuga joined up with them in the corridors along the way and they took their seats before Mister Williams began the English lesson for the day.

The more Dante thought about it, the more uncomfortable he was with the thought of either Vektor or Vektoria getting involved in any sort of romantic relationship with a human. They were both just learning programs, capable of appearing alive enough to fool most humans into thinking they belonged when that couldn't be further from the truth. Were they capable of mimicking such sentiments? Did they truly feel anything? Or was it all just a trick of their coding?

Was Dante just like them in that sense?

He shoved that thought aside adamantly. He was human, alive, not just code and faulty programming. He had to be. He looked too much like his parents to be anything artificial. He remembered enough of his childhood before Hell to be a changeling or some equal creature taking the place of a poor human child.

He had to be real and alive. The alternative was much too terrifying.

But did that make Vektor and Vektoria any less alive when they were here, outside of the game?

The plague of questions hovered over him throughout classes. Even during PhysEd, Petel and them could hardly get a response out of him. He'd never questioned his whole existence before. Seemed rather silly and dangerous to do so. Now, with Vektor and Vektoria's presence here, in reality, it was hard not to wonder if he, too, was just a series of numbers and exceptions parading around as a human being.

Asking seemed like the only solution to this dilemma, but the possibility of it made the terror squeeze his throat shut and he had to stop it from getting out of control.

At first break, Abraham waved them over cheerily as they entered the cafeteria to get out of the cold. "Good morning." He greeted. "We're playing the game again tonight, correct?"

Vektor, uncharacteristically forceful, slammed his hands down on the table across from Abraham and said, "Yes, but first. Tell me something, Professor; what is your sexuality?"

Abraham, though bewildered and clearly taken aback, politely responded with a soft, "Pardon?"

"Sorry bruv, but just answer him." Frank sat down into one of the seats beside the spot Vektor stood at and groaned, rubbing his face with both hands. "He wouldn't stop until he'd mined the data from our whole class, it's best to just tell him and let him move on."

As the rest of them took a seat at the table, Abraham turned his gaze on Frank in incredulous amusement. "The whole class?" He asked.

"I'm more surprised he hasn't accosted the whole of the school yet." Sonya sighed, gnawing on a biscuit he'd grabbed from the available snacks.

Abraham turned his gaze back to Vektor and said, "I'm Homosexual."

"Fascinating." Vektor stood back, raising a hand to his chin. "There really is no discernible difference. Excuse me a moment, I'll return after I've confirmed something."

He swiftly walked off and out of the cafeteria. Once he was out of sight, Abraham turned to them and asked, "What set this off, exactly?"

"Dante asked us all when we'd figured out our sexualities."

Paige jabbed a thumb in Dante's direction. It didn't seem to be accusing, but Dante flinched all the same. Kalyuga sighed and leaned her elbows onto the table, a remarkably similar dramatic tone to it as Levy's earlier theatrics. "I'm a little offended he didn't ask me, too."

"Yeah hey wait!" Levy bolted up out of his seat and shouted across the cafeteria, towards the doors, "Get back here you pompous Prince and respect Duckie!"

Kalyuga burst into laughter, as did Petel and Frank, while Sonya and Paige smiled fondly. After getting no response, as Vektor was no doubt long gone by now, Levy plopped back down into his seat and crossed his arms huffily. As casually as she could, Paige asked Abraham, "How about you? When'd you realise?"

"I was very young. Just starting Primary school, I think." Abraham leaned back in his seat, rubbing at the side of his neck idly as he thought. "Pretty sure I even had a boyfriend? But I don't remember it too well, just the feeling."

"Wow, early bloomer outdoing us all." Frank laughed, cheering up quickly. "Too bad you can't remember, I'd've loved to meet the very first boyfriend of the great Huntsman."

"Frank." Paige chastised sharply. Frank winced, but continued grinning cheekily. She rolled her eyes, then continued. "You know, Dante, there's a term for someone who doesn't see romantic interest in anyone, too."

"You'll have to explain the rest of the terms, first." Petel spoke up, thankfully intervening. "We've been tossing 'em all about without checking to see if he understands any of it."

"Oh, right. Language barrier." Sonya frowned in a sympathetic understanding.

If anyone understood how terrible English could be, it was definitely the two other out-of-country transfers. Dante appreciated the concern, though being called out could lead to the field rats taking him back for more nonsensical tea parties with cake and drinks he wasn't allowed to eat.

He wondered what Niculaie and Damon's answers might be. Maybe he could ask after apologising for calling Damon out back in the game. And what would Dante's parents have to say about all this new vocabulary?

They probably wouldn't like it. They didn't approve of anything if it didn't blend well with their program.

Immediately, Dante wanted to learn all of these new things out of pure spite towards them. Whatever they didn't agree with the most, he wished to become and let them despair. And if that made him a terrible child, then that was ideal. He had countless punishments to tell him it was wrong, their disapproval ran through his whole being.

Through the entirety of break and most of Study Hall, Petel and the others explained all these new terms. It seemed like some sort of close secret they were willing to share with him, despite being confident in their admissions.

They really were his friends by this point and, yes, he liked this idea more and more.

He wasn't allowed this luxury. This was temporary until the shadows dragged him back to hell. They'd find out he was a betrayer and cast him out.

But they'd already caught him lying and hadn't rejected him yet. Perhaps it was best to enjoy this, to feel normal for a short while, until it all went up in flames.

During lunch, Kalyuga excitedly said, "The Theatre department's performing their play soon, right?"

"Ooh, right!" Paige chimed in, grinning knowingly at Abraham. "It's that musical about the Great War, right? What's it called again?"

Abraham instantly tensed up. As if he wanted to be angry but was too proud to go into a full-blown rage. As calmly as he could manage, he said, "Drones Uprising. Apparently, it's a favourite of Miss Dogwood's."

"Why the face, Huntsman?" Levy grinned, seeming to know the same thing as Paige. "Aren't you excited about your own production?"

Intrigued and unable to let it be, Dante asked, "Is, um. Something w-wrong with it?"

"No, no." Abraham quickly replied, running a hand over his face and down to his neck. "We're doing our first full run-through tomorrow, it should be fine."

"The performance is after the school's event, isn't it? Aren't you gonna invite us?" Frank joined in, as eager as Kalyuga.

"Yes!" Abraham perked up, losing that odd repressed anger at this new prospect. "You're all quite welcome to come see our performances. The first's this Friday evening, after classes and clubs, then we're doing two Sunday, one in the afternoon and one in the evening, for all the parents and family."

Dante gasped. "T-Two in one day?"

Abraham nodded, smiling fondly. "We'd be doing four total, but with the school event being Saturday, Miss Dogwood's giving us some leeway."

"That sounds like it's gonna be tough." Sonya said, thoughtful and thankfully as surprised as Dante.

"You should definitely try to make opening night, that's usually the most exciting performance for everyone." Abraham continued, growing eager.

"Which part are you playing? I could definitely see you playing the part of the general." Kalyuga said next.

"I can't believe you sing, that's wild." Levy joined in, genuinely impressed.

The conversation continued, but Dante was caught up in the relief that the snatching snipers wouldn't get him for being the odd one out. The rest of the cafeteria was bustling with other students now that the snow discouraged outside seating. It hardly gave the overhanging needles room to breathe.

He couldn't find Damon and his gang amongst the crowd at all. And for the entirety of the break, Vektor oddly didn't return to speak with them.



## Chapter 14: His Heart. His Heart.

They finally found the Prince after classes, trapped inside Mister Thatcher's janitorial closet. Paige helped get him out and seemed the most upset, asking, "How on Earth did you get yourself stuck in there, your Highness?"

"Did you catch some flak for asking the whole school about their sexualities?" Frank joined in, concerned.

"It was Vektoria. And no, the results are still inconclusive." Vektor huffed, brushing himself off as they headed for the tower. He took the lead and opened the doors for them as effortlessly as ever once they arrived. "Let's get going and make some progress today, please."

He walked straight into the centre scanner. Petel, Frank, and Abraham hurried inside, too eager to care about the slush they tracked in with them. Paige lagged behind, annoyed, and Dante trudged along last.

After landing within their last checkpoint, Petel stood and stretched out his neck. "Seems like you've got the hang of things, Paige." He said.

"I agree." Vektor said as he strode out into the Forest.

Paige's voice echoed above them, unsure and hesitant. "Thanks, it. It kinda just makes sense?"

It did seem strange that she just understood the system. About as strange as the fact that Dante had an inkling of how the whole thing might've come to be in the first place. Petel shrugged it off easily, following Vektor out. Abraham and Frank filed after him and Dante after them. Frank looked up towards the sky and said, "You're the only one who does, so we'd be kinda screwed if you didn't."

Paige laughed. "Very true."

"The rest of us, meanwhile, could still use some practice." Abraham lamented.

Petel grinned, his ears pricking up at the chance to mention this. "You keep shooting me."

"Well, if you stopped leaping in the way at the same time that Professor levels his rifle," Vektor interjected, "Then that wouldn't keep happening."

"Oh, sod off." Paige huffed, making them all look towards the sky. "There are three enemies heading towards you, by the way. One of each Class."

"How 'classy'." Frank grinned around at them. When no one reacted, he fell to a pout. "Aww, c'mon, that was funny. We should get some snappy quip rights, we're practically video game characters by this point and all."

Vektor flashed his visor on and flicked out his key staff with an annoyed, "Quips are not a part of your skill list, Doktor."

The three enemies came into sight then. From above them, Paige said, "I thought it was good, Frank."

Frank gave a triumphant guffaw, pumping his fist into the air. He had his gun at the ready, hanging back by Dante for the chance to grab an enemy. Petel crouched a moment, then pounced at the nearest enemy, which happened to be the Monkey, and swiped at it with his claws. Abraham fired at the Bear and offered up a thoughtful, "Maybe we should call out which enemy we're attacking?"

His shot struck the Bear directly in the head, making it roar in anger. Vektor lobbed a boulder at the Tiger, knocking it against the Bear, and smiled over at Abraham. "An excellent suggestion! I'll focus on the Class II while you lot take care of the Class I and Class III."

"But what if there are three Bears or two Tigers again?" Frank asked, frowning up at the sky as if Paige could supply an answer. Which, really, she was the leader, so her input was probably the best here. Petel focused on clamping his jaws around the Monkey's skull while Frank went on. "We're not all blessed with computer vision like our robot Prince over here."

"Um." Dante hesitated, his fires flickering in uncertainty. "We could. H-Have Paige, uh. Direct us?"

Petel's jaws snapped through the bony skull and he leapt back. "That'd work." He said.

"Maybe." Paige's voice sighed.

Frank shot at the space where the Monkey's data lingered, reforming it into being once more. It was no longer just bone white, its fur and spine-like tail tinted green and its eye lights in the sockets of its exposed skull flashing purple. Petel turned his attention on the Bear next, waiting for Abraham to shoot it again before pouncing to tear at its neck with his teeth. Vektor smacked the Tiger away with his staff and Frank's Monkey turned on it, too, keeping it at bay.

Paige said, "I wouldn't want to boss everyone around, though. And I know at least one of you wouldn't listen to me."

Frank laughed, looking at Dante to share the joke. Dante looked back at him in confusion. Petel sunk his claws into the Bear and freed his mouth, angling towards them and shouting, "Prince."

Dante's expression snapped to one of understanding instantly. Vektor glanced over and said, "Yes?"

The Tiger slashed at Vektor, taking advantage of his distraction to knock him back. He crashed into Dante, just narrowly missing Frank and making Dante yelp. The Bear ripped Petel off next and tossed him aside, his back hitting one of the tree trunks around them. Abraham took another shot, but the Bear crushed Frank's Monkey under its claws before they both dissolved into code. Just the Tiger left now.

"Inferno, get in there and stop damaging me." Vektor growled, shoving Dante forward and towards the Tiger in the same motion. Again, Dante yelped. "And that was an ill-advised attempt at a warning, Wolf, but I thank you for the sentiment."

Petel rolled his eyes, hopping to his feet. Abraham pulled back, stopping beside Vektor, and said, "Continued practice may be our only viable solution, then."

Dante mumbled something under his breath and pulled his fires up into his hands in order to shoot them at the Tiger in a large fireball. The Tiger roared, almost sounding pained, and its form flickered. Frank rushed forward, readying his gun once more as he declared, "Okay, this time, I'll use more control."

"Doktor, careful!"

Vektor tried to warn Frank, but Frank knocked into Abraham as Abraham shifted to join Petel. They both stumbled, Frank giving a startled cry, and Dante acted on instinct, going over to catch their young scientist. He didn't make it, as Frank slammed into the ground and his gun fired.

The shot struck right into Dante's chest.

Dante, once again, didn't scream.

In fact, pretty much everyone else screamed, starting forward and calling out, "Dante!"

"Uh, Frank?" Paige's voice joined in from above them, unsure and a little panicked. "Did you just hit Dante with one of your revival bullets? Because the system's having a fit about whether to declare him out or in."

"A fit for sure." Abraham breathed.

Dante's form seemed to splinter, twitching back and forth and revealing a wire frame beneath as it tried to both pull itself apart and keep itself together. His fires shifted from their usual red and yellow to a light purple and white while the rest of his colours couldn't decide if they should shift as well, bleeding in dark purples and sickly greens and then snapping back to his normal red. He looked up at them, moving agonisingly slow, his body sometimes glitching to appear as if it were painfully contorted, and Petel noticed that the fires seemed off-centre around him now.

"Shit, Dante!" Frank picked himself up and stared helplessly at the fireball, running his hands through his hair in aggravation. "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to hit you. Paige, is there something we can do to help him?"

Frank angled his gaze up to address Paige and Dante mouthed words helplessly. No sound came from him, however, other than the buzzing of his form twitching. His eyes caught Petel's for a moment and they were wide with fear. It didn't look like he was breathing, either.

More unsettling was the fact that his eyes were now the same dark green as Frank's and the whites a milky blue. As if he was dead.

Were it not for the better sensibilities of his more rational human side, Petel would have run to try and hold Dante together. It looked as if the fireball might fly apart for real this time.

"I'm not sure?" Paige's response snapped the wolf back to attention, back in the moment. "I'm not sure. The system can't decide if he's revived or not, so I'm not sure it'll even allow him to be ejected right now. I guess try getting him to the checkpoint to see if we can?"

"I can't believe your powers can affect us like this." Abraham helplessly mumbled.

"Checkpoint." Vektor's eyes lit up and he charged forward, past Dante, ready to continue leading them along the path. He dispelled his visor and key staff and stopped right at the edge of their visibility. "Hurry now, Navigator is correct. I know exactly what must be done in order to assist Inferno."

Petel glanced over at Abraham and Frank, then they all turned towards Dante. With how Dante looked, trying to move fast might be a problem. Dante stepped forward to follow Vektor, but had to stop as the fires refused to move with him. He reached out after the Prince and croaked out a garbled, mechanical noise that was incomprehensible as human speech. Abraham and Petel flinched, covering their ears. Frank stepped hesitantly towards Dante and started, "Hey, Vicario—"

As Frank moved, the fires shifted with him. He stopped immediately, startled, and Dante flinched back, giving a higher pitched mechanical cry. There was a moment of confused silence, then Frank brightened and hopped up in excitement.

"That's right, it's me. I'm controlling the fires right now 'cause of my abilities. This is so cool!"

The more excited he grew, the more the fires rose and burned. In the middle of it, Dante shrunk into himself (or, tried to, as his form glitched too much to really stay in one position) and silently panicked. Abraham and Petel went to caution Frank at the same time, but Frank noticed immediately and he fell to a frown, guilty.

"Sorry. My bad. Let me just."

He closed his eyes and concentrated. The fires, in response, lowered enough for Dante to step out. Petel hurried over and scooped Dante up into his arms, speeding off towards Vektor. Abraham gave a whoop and patted Frank on the back. "Fantastic! Let's get on with it and keep going."

"Yeah, good job, Frank." Paige joined in, encouraging but sounding a bit lost. "Doesn't look too far to the next checkpoint and no enemies yet."

Vektor nodded to Petel as the wolf pulled up beside him. "Our practice seems to be paying off already."

Petel shot a look at the Prince, but let it be. The guy didn't mean any malice by it and Petel was too busy trying to keep a hold on Dante to snap at him or anything else. Dante's frame at least kept the basic shape of his body, even as his colours and parts snapped around and clipped through Petel's arms. It did make him seem wider and he vibrated in Petel's grip, making chills run down Petel's spine.

Abraham and Frank followed swiftly along and they ran a thankfully short while to the next clearing. Keeping up with the Prince was easy, as he seemed to have the slowest movement speed out of all of them. Once in front of the next checkpoint, Petel placed Dante down and shook himself out to get rid of that tingling feeling.

Vektor unlocked the checkpoint with a flash of gold while Frank experimented with the fires carefully and Abraham watched on. Then Vektor grabbed at Dante's arm and missed it as it twitched just to the side.

"Come along, Inferno." He said, unbothered by this as he walked inside the checkpoint.

Dante made an odd noise, probably meant to be a squeak or something, and moved inside the tree with a bit of difficulty. Curious, Petel followed after them to watch. Abraham went as well, drawn over by concern, leaving Frank outside and unable to follow easily due to the fires. As soon as Vektor had Dante inside the checkpoint, he waved his hand over Dante and stood back, examining something only he could see. Paige's voice came over, saying, "So I can log Dante out, but it doesn't look like it would solve the issue."

"Why not?" Frank asked, his voice dampened from being outside the area.

"His data is still glitching and it'd probably remain that way the next time he's loaded in."

"Which is what I was designed for." Vektor grinned suddenly, pointing directly at where Dante's heart would be. "There. Now, hold still."

Before any of them could ask and while Dante seemed frozen in fear, Vektor's hand glowed gold and he dipped it into Dante's chest. Abraham gave a startled yell and Petel dove forward to tear Vektor off. Dante screamed, the heavily mechanical noise chilling and wrong, and since Abraham was too startled to hold him back, Petel successfully yanked the Prince away.

"Wolf!" He exclaimed, only mildly offended. "That was quite dangerous. Were it not for my proficiency, Inferno could have been further damaged."

Petel could only snarl in reply, the wolf at the forefront of his mind. He dug his claws into Vektor's armour and opened his jaws, ready to tear this self-proclaimed Prince's face off, but Paige's voice overhead stopped him. "He's right, Petel, calm down. Dante's stuff has gone back to normal."

Vektor held out his palm for them to see, revealing the purple bullet. With a last growl, Petel shoved him away and turned his attention back to Dante. Paige was right, Dante's colours were correct and he stood in one place, no longer twitching or contorting. He had his red eyes back, no longer dead-looking. The fires hadn't returned, however, and he was stock still from the shock.

"Gonna guess he'll want to return." Paige said. "Are you guys done for today, too?"

Vektor dove out, back into the rest of the Forest, and shouted, "We can't stop now when this is the penultimate checkpoint! We're so close!"

He handed the bullet back to Frank, who asked, "Penultimate?"

"Already?" Abraham joined in.

Petel glanced at Dante, who still hadn't moved, then followed Abraham out. Vektor nodded, a fiery determination in his eyes. "This is the fourth checkpoint and there are only five per level. Meaning—"

"There's only one left before we beat this place." Petel finished, grinning toothily.

"If you're gonna keep at it, better hurry." Paige broke in before Vektor could get upset about the interruption. "AIR's sending two more Tigers your way. I'll make sure Dante gets out okay."

Her last comment was probably aimed at Petel, but it helped Frank and Abraham relax as well. Vektor grinned, the glint of challenge in his eyes. He summoned his key staff and his visor once more and said, "After the experiences we've had, a duo of Class IIs shouldn't be any problem."

"And I've still got this fire."

Frank swept his hand around, demonstrating his point. The fires followed his command, intriguing all of them. Assured of their abilities, Petel crouched in preparation as his ears picked up on the advancing enemies. Vektor held out his free hand, creating a boulder just as the two Tigers popped into view.

Abraham tossed his crosses into the fray at the same time as Vektor lobbed the boulder, pelting the Tiger on the right. Their attacks worked in tandem perfectly this time, so Petel turned his attention to the Tiger on the left and slashed at its face to keep it from reaching Frank.

"Petel, get back!" Frank called out, raising his hand.

Petel hopped back obediently, watching how the lavender fires swept across the ground and surrounded their target. The Tiger roared, but the fires rose around it in an unrelenting cage.

Frank clenched his hands into fists and said, "This is brilliant. I can see why it's hard for Vicario, though, you really need to concentrate."

"When he chooses, Inferno can indeed put his power to great use." Vektor agreed.

The Prince forced the Tiger back with his staff while Abraham, beside him, helped by using his crosses like knives. Petel glanced over at Frank and gestured to the fire. "You got this?"

Frank nodded confidently and Petel launched himself forward to assist their Huntsman and Prince. The Tiger gave a final roar as Petel kicked it to the side, then it dissolved into code. In the middle of the fire, the other Tiger dissolved in much the same way. Paige whistled at them appreciatively and said, "Looks like you are getting the hang of things. Nice work."

"Thank you, Navigator." Vektor waved away his visor, then charged onwards with his staff out like a lance into the forest. "Quickly, before AIR strikes again."

"Right." Frank and Abraham chorused, running after the Prince.

Petel loped along as well, glancing upwards. It was mostly the canopy of branches and leaves of the trees above them, but the bright white of the sky managed to shine through enough to provide them with ample light. He called up, "Dante out there with you?"

"He's doing okay for now, Petel." Paige reassured the wolf, sounding just fed up enough that she was probably rolling her eyes. "Looks like you guys are — wait." She paused and they all did as well. "Okay, AIR's got three more Class Is headed your way."

Frank laughed heartily. "It's like it wants us to succeed."

"Don't get too confident." Abraham teased, pulling his crosses back out. "A good hunter never assumes victory even when facing an easy opponent."

Frank frowned unsurely, but now wasn't the time to question their upperclassman on the dodgy source of his hunting advice. Getting lectured on that weird Tome of Monsters book written by Abraham's family was not high on Petel's to-do list. Vektor nodded along sagely and anchored his stance, saying, "Wise words, Professor. We'd do well to keep them in mind."

Petel snorted, though didn't get a chance to reprimand the Prince as the three Monkeys swung into view. Frank caught one with the fires while Abraham and Petel struck the second, able to work together without harming one another this time. Left with the third, Vektor charged forward and slammed it against the trunk of one of the surrounding trees.

Under their assault, the Monkeys didn't last long. Each one was defeated and Vektor led the way forward once more, growing more and more excited as they went.

"Soon, we'll be in the Tundra." He said giddily.

"What's that one like?" Frank asked.

Vektor began, "The Grey Tundra is a level of giants and tricks."

The fires dissipated then, making the both of them grimace. Like anything else Frank brought back, it had probably lost the rest of its control. This experience, coupled with their previous folly, had better make them all appreciate Dante as an indispensable part of the team. Otherwise, the wolf would need to remind them all of the meaning of 'pack'.

Vektor continued, "It is home to the Resident, its Guardian. Since we have its familiar within our group, it should be just as accommodating as — ah, here!"

He skidded to a stop as they came into the next clearing, where the checkpoint stood. The last one of the level, Petel reminded himself. As Vektor unlocked it, Petel looked around at the Forest surrounding them. The white and brown of the trees, the green and white of all the undergrowth, and each enemy had become familiar sights. He was sad to see it go, even if seeing the new things in store for them was an exciting prospect.

The tree open and active now, Vektor stepped inside and called, "We made it, Navigator."



"I see that." Paige replied.

Petel, Frank, and Abraham entered as well and Frank immediately sunk to the floor, fanning himself with his hands as he said, "Phew, I'm all hot."

Abraham crouched beside him, concerned but hesitant to touch. "Was it the run or the fire?"

"The fire." Frank heaved out a breath, then looked up to meet Abraham's gaze. "It's like all the heat that was there's back in me now. Vicario, mate, I dunno how you do it."

They both turned their eyes towards the ceiling of the area, awaiting a response from their fireball of a friend. Petel glanced up as well, curious as to what Dante might say. It was, however, Paige's voice who responded. "You guys sure you wanna come out? The end of the level's not too far away."

"Unfortunately, it's necessary." Vektor said, quicker than any of them and shockingly level-headed. "My magic's been expended and if we ran into more trouble, I wouldn't be able to help beyond attacking with my lance."

Frank, Petel, and Abraham all turned towards Vektor in confusion. "That's a lance?" Abraham finally asked.

Vektor returned that confusion with a short, "I said staff, didn't I?"

There was a minute of nothing, in which all of them were too stunned and Vektor thought the issue settled. This, at least, explained away his improper use of the dang thing. Even if he still kinda used it backwards. Petel thought of the time they'd seen Vektoria and her weapon, how it had been the same shape, and wondered how she might refer to it in contrast.

Vektor went on, "I also don't have enough magic to unlock the exit or our entry to the Tundra."

"Okay, okay." Paige relented. "I'll log you guys out now, then."

Frank shrugged and said in a joking complaint, "Our wacky robot."

Abraham chuckled along, then they were gone as Petel fell into the black. He closed his eyes and surrendered himself to the sensation. After a short time, he was standing on his feet back in their reality. Still human, still unsure if he liked that.

He expected to see Dante there by Paige's side, shaken from what had happened in the game. He didn't expect Dante to greet them with a bright, "You, um. You all did g-great!"

From what had happened last time, he'd thought Dante would protest their playing again, but the fireball was doing his best to appear strong. Frank hopped out and grinned broadly,

saying, "Thanks." After a second, his expression fell to sheepishness. "Sorry about what happened."

"It's o-okay." Dante replied, trembling but keeping himself upbeat. "It wasn't, uh. It-It got fixed, so it's, um, okay."

Frank continued frowning, catching on to how much Dante was forcing it. Petel went over to wrap an arm around Dante's shoulders and said, "Told you not to do that."

Predictably, Dante squeaked in surprise. Vektor, who'd fallen out but caught himself this time, said, "Please, let us try not to let something like this happen again."

Petel shot a glare at the pompous Prince. Abraham crouched down by Vektor and ruffled his hair playfully. "Does nothing please you, your majesty?" He asked in friendly teasing.

"What? Please stop that."

Vektor waved Abraham off, collapsing in the process without his arms to support him anymore. Abraham, Frank, and Paige all giggled at the Prince's predicament and even Dante smiled a bit. Vektor sunk against the floor in defeat, looking like a forgotten sock tossed to the floor.

"I fear I may never understand why you all must patronise me so." He mumbled.

"We're not your loyal subjects, to start with." Paige said. She tapped a few keys on the computer and put it to sleep, then stood. "Anyway, let's get supper. I'm starving."

Petel could definitely agree to that. He pulled Dante along after Paige while Frank followed them, still giggling. Abraham hefted Vektor to his feet and more or less carried the Prince to the cafeteria. It was already pretty full with students wanting to enjoy the warmth of the meal and the heaters, but Petel was able to pick Sonya out of the crowd easily enough. The lonely raven sat at an empty table, jabbing at his food in disinterest. A quick scan of the area and Petel spotted Levy laughing with Ian and Nick, which explained that. As they got in line, Petel released Dante, confident that his roommate would talk about it once they'd returned to their room for the night.

As expected, they were in their beds and the lights had been out for a few minutes when Dante finally said, "He could've taken it."

Petel leaned himself up onto his elbows, eagerly asking, "Taken what?"

"This whole time. He reached right through. Like one of them." Dante exhaled a shuddering breath, his tone even and calm in stark contrast to the usual fear. "I was right. He is the same. I knew it, I knew it."

For the frantic repetition, he remained strangely deadpan. Petel sat up the rest of the way, an unease taking root at the back of his throat. "What are you talking about?"

"They've always been." Dante said cryptically, refusing to reply in a way that made sense. "They'll always remain."

Frustrated now, Petel growled out, "Tell me what you mean."

He could do nothing as long as Dante was only vague and ominous. He couldn't help if Dante remained obstinate about treating them like obstacles instead of like a pack. After a stretch of silence, Dante said, "Sorry. I don't want to have another nightmare."

That seemed to be the final piece that broke even the wolf's patience. Possessed only by its snarling, Petel grabbed their pillow and tossed it at Dante. They didn't think through the action, they just did. Dante yelped, knocked out of that weird state entirely.

"Wha — Petel? Why?" He cried, sitting up fully as well.

"If you're asking for help, then ask!" Petel near shouted. It was surprising they could speak at all, considering the wolf, but they couldn't think about that right now. "If not, then don't say that shit. Being ominous and evasive is — it's frustrating! You're upsetting me!"

Dante stared back at Petel, too shocked to react. Then, finally, he stuttered as he dug his fingers into Petel's pillow. "I-I didn't. I m-mean."

Petel grimaced. "You knew exactly what you were doing." They said quickly. The accusation made Dante flinch back; they weren't about to let Dante wriggle away from this one. "You're smarter than you let us believe. So stop pretending like you're not."

Dante withdrew into himself and the silence stretched once more. Maybe Petel could be gentler, but they were tired of this act. The constant aloofness Dante put up and being pushed away constantly had to stop. At last, Dante weakly admitted, "I'm, um. Going home for the break."

Petel frowned, taken aback enough to pause the anger. "What?"

"Th-They want me to, uh. Um." Dante tensed, drawing Petel's pillow closer to his chest. Whatever it was, it was making him upset and panicked as per usual. "Well. I won't, uh, b-be here. You'll have the-the room to y-yourself."

That anger returning, Petel growled, "Don't change the subject."

Dante let out a short and sad exhale, then looked up to meet the wolf head on. "You shouldn't think of me as a friend."

The boldness of it took them by surprise. Even when some of that fury was directed at him, Dante wasn't afraid. Petel ended up smiling in admiration of the sheer audacity of the act and said, "Too bad. You're pack."

"Pack?"

Dante deflated, losing all of that bravado in his confusion. Petel stood and walked over, holding a hand towards their roommate. A bit reluctantly, Dante relinquished the pillow and handed it back. Petel grinned and said, "Yeah. Night, mate."

"That's. Uh." Dante floundered for a way to respond as Petel flopped back onto their bed and settled in. "You're really. You can't. P-Petel!"

"Stop fighting. Let it happen."

Petel waved him off without even looking. Dante made a few frustrated noises and Petel would be lying if they said they didn't enjoy this. The two of them seemed perfectly matched in both the ability to get along and the ability to get on each other's nerves. And the wolf's insistent 'they' sounded so right. Like Petel wasn't a 'he' or a 'her', but a 'they' all along. Petel would have laughed about it had a pillow not pelted them in the side just then.

They sat up, grabbing Dante's pillow, and frowned at the fireball. "What—?"

They froze on seeing how upset Dante was, the question having been answered before they could ask it. Dante glared at them, remaining silent. Too upset to speak. The room was also far too hot. As if reacting to a residual memory, the wolf smelled smoke.

Carefully, hesitantly, Petel brought the thrown pillow over to their side, between themselves and the fireball, keeping it within view. An offering of sorts. "I upset you, too." Petel said.

Dante nodded.

They were too far for this sort of talk. The wolf refused to move closer, however, meaning they'd have to make do with just this for now. Petel searched for how to approach this. There was danger in the air. They weren't anything but straightforward. That would have to do. "Why can't you just tell us what's wrong?" They asked.

"You won't believe me."

Dante could barely reply as the room grew hotter. Still upset, still frustrated. Against their better instincts, Petel scooted closer to the edge of their bed and dangled their legs off the side. Testing the limits. "How do you know if you don't try?"

Dante slammed his hands down against his legs and shouted, "I have tried! I tried so many times! But even the smallest hint means I have to deal with the punishment. I hate it!"

His shoulders trembled and his voice sounded strained with emotion. It was really too hot. More so than should be natural. Petel stood and walked to Dante's bed, fighting the wolf with every step, until they were right in front of Dante. Tentatively, they climbed up and reached forward, intending to wrap Dante up in their embrace. Before they could, Dante yanked away, slamming back against the wall.

"No!" He huffed, the tears spilling down his face. They seemed to steam a bit as they rolled over his skin. "You don't understand. You're not listening!"

Petel huffed in return. "I hear you. You're dangerous."

Petel lowered their arms, however, aborting that motion for now. Dante buried his face into the tops of his drawn up knees and tangled his hands tightly into his hair. "Then why aren't you afraid?"

There was a thunk against the wall from the next room over. A return for all the noise, no doubt. Dante didn't even flinch and it was still too hot, but it wasn't getting any hotter now. Dante wasn't sobbing, either, despite the tears and being miserably closed off. Petel let out a soft breath in relief. Although the wolf wasn't settled, they had stopped protesting so strongly. They stood, grabbing Dante's pillow, and said, "Can't be afraid when you are the fear."

They placed the pillow down at the head of Dante's bed, then returned to their own. Dante didn't move.

"We can talk more about it tomorrow." Petel continued, settling back into their blankets. The heat would make it uncomfortable, but Petel carried enough ice within their veins to counteract it. "Get some sleep for now. Okay?"

Dante didn't respond.

After a few minutes, however, the heat lessened and Petel could hear Dante shifting, getting comfortable. That was as good an answer as any, so Petel pushed it from their mind and let themselves wander in search of sleep.

Hopefully, they would both be rational human beings instead of a wolf and a fire by morning. Petel barely understood why Dante was so hostile, why he could present this dangerous a presence and still be afraid, but that was why Petel liked talking to him.

Petel liked Dante.

And, clearly, Dante liked them enough in return. Otherwise, Dante would still be sushi-ing himself and refusing to talk at all.

Even if they had to painstakingly explain every detail, they'd get Dante to accept their friendship.

## Chapter 15: Open Invitation

The whole school thrummed with excitement Saturday morning. Even the dancing imps and the goblins seemed to join in, cackling as if they were gargling nails. Paige, Abraham, and the others who'd signed up to help with decorating the gymnasium got to skip the day's lessons. Which meant Dante had to sit on his own for English, to learn all these new terms without Paige there to gently explain everything.

Dante really, really hated English. If it weren't for the fact that the longest running monarchy still held enough power to make English the second most spoken language across the world, he'd happily stick with just Italian.

Despite their disagreement last night, Petel and Sonya helped him with the new worksheet during class. Mister Williams allowed them to do this, even though they had to turn around in their seats to do so. But for Algebra, Mister Williams went right back to being his grumpy self, chastising Roger and Vektoria for talking too much and Ian for getting the problem on the board wrong in the same breath. His aggravation riled up the constant trail of decaying leaves around him, the grubs inside buzzing threateningly as they sprouted wings. Dante tried not to focus too hard on that.

Things were much lonelier without Paige and Abraham. Frank tried to joke with Vektor, avoiding Dante, but succeeded only in confusing the Prince and making Kalyuga laugh.

While Dante ruined his chances with these new friends, he may as well burn those previous bridges as well with Damon and Niculaie. At least he'd get some closure for once.

Dante could be patient. He'd learned from the worst, after all.

Frank went immediately over to sit with Percival once they entered Study Hall. Dante wanted to find a spot by himself, but Petel grabbed his hand and pulled him over to a secluded table in the back. Petel took a seat across from Dante, also an odd choice, then stared directly at him with a determined, serious expression.

"What is it about us that you don't trust?" Petel asked.

Having not expected this, Dante simply answered, "I can't trust a-anyone."

"You do, though." Petel pointed out. "You try to push us away, but you also cling to us like we're the only friends you've got. What happened?"

Indignation rose up in Dante's throat like molten magma. He'd walked through Hell! He'd fallen so far down the Rabbit Hole that he wasn't sure if he was real anymore! Fire broiled beneath his skin, ran through his body like blood. What was so hard to understand about that?

Better question, why wasn't he allowed to explain it without suffering the consequences of his poorly laid out rules?

With a heated exhale, he said defiantly, "I'm not used to-to sharing my space. Normally. I get left a-alone."

He longed for the days of his childhood, when he'd play with Damon and Hell hadn't yet manifested in his backyard. Petel hummed softly in thought, then said, "Time to get used to it, then."

Things couldn't go back to that childish ignorance. He'd dug a grave using the scalpels and fire provided to him with every lie and it was just growing deeper. Petel stood and walked around the table in order to plop himself down in the seat right beside Dante, then leaned against Dante's side like an insistent animal. Again proving to be an unpredictable variable in all of this.

"You're weird, but I like spending time around you." Petel said.

Dante wilted a bit under his weight. "Weren't y-you, uh. Just upset w-with me?"

"You got upset, too. Why not kick me off right now?" Petel shrugged again, taking full advantage of Dante's complacency by draping himself entirely over Dante. "Fights don't make us instantly not friends. Flawed and dumb, sure. But still friends, long as we can work it out. Which is what I'm trying to do here."

The last of the heat fizzled out of Dante's chest, leaving him defeated and trapped under Petel's weight. "How would one. Um. Make an enemy o-of you, then?"

"Trying to go for it?" Petel snorted, amused. Still, he answered, "Betrayal."

"O-Oh."

Dante cringed. How did they not count finding out his lies? Uncomfortable, he gently pushed Petel off. Petel went willingly and said, "Sorry I upset you."

"It's. Y-You were right." Dante said, too defeated to fight it further. "I, uh, shouldn't have p-provoked you first. It's-It's fine."

Happy with this, Petel dug out his things and set about studying. Dante sat and stared at the table, his mind racing in panic. He heard the wings of a flying serpent slithering just above their heads and tried to ignore it. If he didn't think on them, they couldn't exist.

Whether or not Dante considered them friends didn't matter. Petel thought of them as such and, consequently, there'd be no convincing the wolf otherwise. Somehow, that prospect was more terrifying than the thought of the fires eventually swallowing him up in their rampage.

Dante could peel back his flesh to reveal the burning fires inside, but kept them contained. Had to look human to make others comfortable.

During lunch, Petel, Sonya, Kalyuga, and Levy were absent, but Paige and Abraham returned. Paige excitedly informed them, "We don't have to wear our uniforms for the dance. We can't exactly be completely casual, but this would be a good time to bust out that hideous mustard suit of yours, Vektor."

Vektor frowned and went to argue, "We've been over this, Navigator. The proper hexadecimal code is—"

"Whatever, computer boy." Paige waved her hand dismissively, cutting him off. She moved the conversation swiftly along by asking Frank and Dante, "Do you two have anything nice to wear? I may not have anything fancy, exactly, but I do have a few nice coats."

Abraham cut Vektor off from trying once again by saying, "I'd offer as well, except most of my clothes are tailor-made and I'm sure they'd be either too big or too small for either of you."

Frank grinned, an encouraging confidence to it as he said, "I'll be okay, thanks. William's a stuffy type, so a lot of his hand-me-downs were suit stuff."

Abraham and Paige shared a quiet chuckle while Frank laughed awkwardly loud at his own jest. Dante fidgeted with his fingers and hurriedly stuttered, "Y-Yeah, I. I'll also be, um, b-be okay. Th-Thanks."

The thought of wearing a stuffy suit jacket or a flammable gown made him grimace. Thank goodness his parents favoured business casual over something stricter. Vektor, settling down since he'd been so routinely shut out, smiled brightly at them as he said, "At a festival such as this in your realm, is it customary to wear finer clothing? It truly is a shame then that I can't wear my traditional robes."

"That suit'll do just fine." Paige said as she rolled her eyes.

Abraham nodded along in agreement. Taking it as a reassurance, Vektor said, "Good to know, thank you. Now, this celebration is in preparation for these final exams everyone's discussing, correct? Might I ask why such a thing is cause for festivities such as this? And before it even takes place, to add on?"

Frank smiled fondly at the Prince and said, "It's for our benefit. So we're not all super stressed the whole time."



"The reprieve is always much appreciated." Abraham agreed.

Vektor next asked, "Are exams meant to be stressful?"

"Didn't you say you attended some schooling before this?" Paige countered, incredulous.

"I'm sure I also stated that it was nothing like this." Vektor frowned, puzzled. "There's a distinct lack of combat training and trials to help expand your use of magic, first of all."

"Yeah, uh, that sort of thing isn't needed out here." Frank said.

The conversation continued like this until the sharp ringing of the end of lunch made Dante jump. As he headed back to class, he wondered if he should go at all by this point. No one wanted his presence as the ominous liar he was. Surely, they were all simply humouring Petel, the only one who simply refused to let Dante be.

Dante resigned himself to filing that anger away for later and rushed back to his room after classes ended. He had to search through his things a bit in order to find the one nice dress Lietta had gifted him, along with his favourite vest. The vest was a delicate lavender, the same colour as his shoes. Both gifts from his grandparents. It may have been a bit short on him by this point, but it was his favourite colour, so he'd wear it anyway.

Lietta favoured white for herself and grey for Dante, as the dress was a cloudy colour, but knew he hated green. That was probably the one extraneous fact his mother could remember about him. That was one thing she had over Caro.

He had to ignore how the air practically hummed with grinning ghouls and also how crowded the washroom was as he got ready. Then he pulled the dress on and buttoned up his vest. Perhaps the two items didn't match, but it hopefully didn't look too casual or messy. He took an extra minute to breathe, to prepare himself for the rest of the night, and headed out to the cafeteria.

Seeing the other students walking around in their nicer clothes, not their uniforms, was fascinating. There didn't seem to be a single repeated colour amongst them. Dante probably stood out the most, now, without a coat and his short sleeves exposing the skin on his arms. He hurried along inside the cafeteria, that nervousness prickling at the back of his neck.

"Dante!" Paige's bright voice reached him before he saw her. She seemed to pop out of nowhere and grabbed his hands in excitement. "You look so cute! Doesn't he look cute, Petel?"

Paige grinned over at Petel, who was apparently with Paige or popped in out of nowhere exactly like her. Petel nodded in agreement and Dante noticed that he had a normal looking suit and tie getup, no red coat or cream-coloured scarf at all. Petel's brows knit up in concern and he asked, "You're not gonna be too cold in that?"

"I-I'll be fine. Thanks." Dante insisted, heat burning at his face in his embarrassment and proving his point.

He wanted to fidget with his hands, but Paige had them currently. She looked nice in her yellow suit jacket and dress, though it was weird seeing her without the matching bowtie. She laughed at the both of them and said, "Dante's always too warm anyway, maybe this'll help. C'mon, let's get some food, then I can show you all the work we did to make the Gym look good."

She pulled Dante along to the line and Petel followed after them, smiling fondly. Once they'd stepped into place, Paige released Dante's hands and Dante asked Petel, "Um. A-Aren't you — uh. Are you gonna be, um. C-Cold?"

Petel briefly looked surprised before smiling again, this time in reassurance. "I'll be fine. Been colder."

"If you, um. Say so."

Dante deflated. Paige turned around, grinning cheekily, and said, "Dante, don't you think Petel looks refined in that suit?"

"Wh-What?"

Dante looked up in bemusement. Was he supposed to compliment anyone on how they looked? Paige had called him cute, sure, but how was he supposed to respond to that politely? Petel grimaced in complaint. "Refined? Really?"

"Well, that's what I think." Paige huffed. "Go on, Dante. Tell us what you think."

She seemed to be enjoying herself, at least. Dante floundered in panic, ending up with his initial impression as his only coherent thought. "Uh — w-well. Petel looks. Um, weird? Without the, uh, the coat and scarf."

Petel smirked in triumph. "See? He gets it."

Paige rolled her eyes at them. Dante, in even more of a panic, said, "B-But! Um, but. You, uh, you still. Um, I-look good! I mean."

He cringed at the obvious back-tracking. Petel chuckled softly and patted the top of his head, giving a short, "Thanks."

Paige watched them a moment, then faced forward and lamented quite dramatically, "I don't get the two of you."

Petel continued laughing and shoved his hands into his pockets. "You look good, too, Paige."

Dante nodded quickly. "Y-Yeah. You, um, look very nice."

Paige heaved out a tired breath, but smiled back at them gratefully. "Thanks. Glad we got this whole thing settled."

Petel laughed harder at her jest, making Dante unsure of whether or not to join. She seemed pleased either way, at least, and soon they had their food and sat with Vektor, Abraham, Frank, and Kalyuga. Frank greeted them cheerily, wearing a neat-looking black suit with pinstripes and a green dress shirt. Vektor was, indeed, wearing that mustard yellow suit. Strangely, though, it seemed to fit him well and wasn't as much of an eyesore as they thought it would be. At least, in Dante's opinion.

Petel quickly glanced towards the line of students getting their food, spotted Levy and Sonya amongst them (who both looked upset, Dante noted), then turned to Kalyuga and asked, "What happened?"

"Levy was trying to put salt on his mashed potatoes and got Vektor's attention." Kalyuga giggled, hiding her grin behind her hand. She at least still wore her hat with the feather in it and her yellow ascot, though her dark green suit coat and pencil skirt made her look very professional.

"He dumped the whole thing of it over the entire tray!" Abraham exclaimed, doing his best to fight back his laughter. His suit was a dark tweed brown and the jacket part was open, showing off his dark blue tie. "Then he poured mayonnaise all over his own tray at the mention of proper condiments!"

"Well, of course I did." Vektor huffed, still confused and clueless. "The change in code was fascinating. How could I resist?"

Petel wrinkled his nose in distaste while Paige levelled Vektor with an amused but aggravated, "You are a child."

Kalyuga said, "Anyway. Sonya gave his tray to Vektor and that's why they're both back in line."

"At least no one got upset 'cause it was funny." Frank said. He then turned to Dante and gave a somewhat awkward, "Hey, Vicario, you look pretty good. Lavender really suits you."

Taken aback, Dante could only reply with an equally awkward, "Thanks."

The lavender part was the most surprising to hear. He meant to return the compliment somehow, but the spectres were too quick to notice and grumbled behind him, a warning that they'd take his tongue if he dared open his mouth again. Frank addressed Petel and Paige next with a much more excited, "You guys look great, too. I can't wait to hear the band play! I'm gonna cheer my heart out for you guys so they have to give you all passing grades."

Petel smiled and Kalyuga laughed, both appreciative of Frank's enthusiasm. Vektor brightened and seemed to latch onto Frank's enthusiasm with his own, saying, "I'm looking forward to showing off my dancing abilities. Grandfather had me trained for a solid six cycles on my ballroom skills and it'll be nice to finally get to use them."

Frank and Abraham looked over at Vektor, intrigued at the prospect. Paige asked, "They programmed you with the ability to dance?"

"Of course. I am royalty." Vektor said. "It would be improper otherwise."

"He's got a point there." Abraham laughed, a sharp and jovial sound. "Vektor, I'll be your dance partner for the evening, if you'd like."

"You have ballroom training as well, Professor?" Vektor brightened, his eyes practically sparkling with his excitement. "I'm eager to see your technique. I gladly accept."

"Aww, no fair. Can't I get a chance to dance with him, too?" Frank whined in a joking, childish manner.

Paige frowned at them with the most fed-up expression that she had in her arsenal as she said, "Both of you are bloody incomprehensible."

Kalyuga gasped, then immediately burst into laughter. Frank and Abraham joined in and, after a moment, Paige did as well. Sonya and Levy rejoined them, then, and they continued joking together in their warm and familiar way.

Dante focused wholly on getting at least one bite of food without maggots or rotten bits and without the clay jams sticking their fingers into his mouth so they could snip out his tongue. He managed a couple of bites, which was quite the victory if he'd say so himself.

Petel had to leave early with Kalyuga, Sonya, and Levy for the band's setup. And though Dante was definitely more than a little nervous, their excitement had gotten to him more than he'd expected. The fires beat against his chest in an almost comforting manner. Paige rushed them all along the moment they were finished to the Gymnasium, grabbing Dante's hand specifically.

The inside of it looked nice, with streamers and balloons placed around to make it feel like a party, but not enough to be oppressive. Miss Fitzgard and Mister Adler helped the band kids get ready and Dante spotted several other teachers standing around to chaperone. Chiefly, Mister Carriedo, positioned by a table where there was a bowl of punch and a water cooler on top. The Headmistress was there as well, sitting in one of the chairs along the wall and smiling.

Paige guided Dante over to the arched sign above the entryway. "We put this up last, but it was a challenge. 'Cause it didn't want to stand up, so we finally just tied a bunch of balloons to it to get it standing." She explained rapidly.

Dante looked up and, exactly as she said, there were a multitude of balloons tied to the top of the banner to keep it afloat. He wanted to know how the teachers allowed this since it could be a hazard depending on how long the helium would stay in effect. Paige whisked him along to the next thing, however, which seemed to be the wall of chairs where the Headmistress was sitting.

"Setting up every single chair was a pain, but at least we didn't have to do tables with them this time. And it made it easier to put up the posters. Abraham and I made that one right there."

She pointed excitedly to a neon yellow poster with pink lettering on it that read, 'Cold outside, but warm inside us'. Dante frowned in bemusement. Was it a joke of some sort? Was he supposed to laugh at it? To know what it meant? He didn't get a chance to think more on it, as Paige then pulled him over to the table Mister Carriedo stood beside.

"They really weren't keen on us doing any sort of refreshments at first, but then I reminded everyone that staying hydrated is important. Especially when you're in a crowded, dancing fever. Isn't that right, Mister Carriedo?"

Paige turned her grin on the teacher, who laughed along with her enthusiasm. "Yes, staying hydrated is, indeed, important. You did very well with that lecture, Miss Philips."

"We all learn from the best here, sir." She winked over at Dante as Mister Carriedo puffed up in pride. Dante wasn't sure what she meant by that. "Lugging the water cooler in here was fun, even if they didn't let us make the punch. Mister Carriedo wanted to make it tomato juice, can you believe that?"

She aimed a quick unamused look towards Mister Carriedo. He shrugged with both hands in response. "Tomatoes are delicious."

"And you're allergic, sir." She shook her head, only playfully upset, then pulled Dante along to the next thing. "Mister Schmidt made it fruit punch in the end, which was the most inoffensive solution. But I get the feeling you would've preferred the tomato juice, huh?"

She grinned cheekily at Dante, really expecting a response this time. Dante shrugged as a good placeholder. Caro and Lietta claimed that straight tomato juice was too acidic and could interfere with their results. Still, Dante really liked Lietta's lasagne and appreciated that Mister Schmidt would often make spaghetti and meatballs when he was in charge of the day's meals.

Their next destination was the stage, where the band had finished setting up and now played their pieces. "The stage was actually deceptively easy to pull out." Paige said, stopping and finally letting go of Dante's hands. "It took every single one of us, though. So, what do you think?"

She was so bright and eager. So passionate about something that Dante just didn't understand. Hesitantly, he clapped and said, "It, uh. It looks good?"

"Just 'good'?" Paige laughed as Dante floundered, stumbling over his words in his hurry to correct himself and consequently unable to get anything out coherently. "C'mon, tell me about some of your other school's events. How's this one compare to any of those? Do they have different shindigs over in Italy?"

Dante stopped, caught off-guard by the oddly presumptuous question. He looked out over the performers up on the stage and picked out Sonya, Levy, Kalyuga, and Petel. All of them concentrated on playing as Miss Fitzgard conducted them. Most of the attending students danced along in a variety of ballroom styles. Amongst them, Dante spotted Vektor and Abraham waltzing and Niculaie with Damon in a similar routine. Finally, Dante looked back to Paige and said, "I'm not. Um. I-I don't know."

Paige frowned. "You don't know?"

"I never. Um. Went to, uh, to one o-of these."

There were dances and little festivals to keep them all complacent, sure. But Dante was never welcome there. The other kids knew that he was dangerous. They avoided him without prompting. Here, no one seemed to realise his danger. No one avoided him or treated him any differently. Except maybe Yasha. Charon and Fiamma would even try to provoke the fires within. Paige, incredulous, next asked, "Really? You never went to one? Not even once?"

Dante could easily supply her with a multitude of excuses about some spectres or other tormentors that she'd have to readily accept just to get Dante to shut up. The ghastly gremlins were drawn to feet, especially when dancing. Rickety roaches liked gathering in the corners of every party, waiting for the chance to crawl all over the food and get everyone sick. He could easily get Paige to dismiss him, like so many others.

But Paige was a friend. And the truth was a better excuse than any other reason in this scenario.

"My parents." Dante started, slow and hesitant. "They were, um. Always busy. So. I was, um. Also a-always busy."

After the fire manifested itself, they'd doubled down on their research. He'd even been cut off from Damon and Niculaie after that. A look of understanding crossed Paige's face, which then turned to determination. "Well then, we gotta hurry."

She grabbed Dante's hand once more and pulled them into the crowd of dancing students. His whole body tensed, petrified at the prospect of being entrenched in a sea of bodies. "Wh-What? Hurry?" He managed to gasp.

"We've got a lifetime of fun to make up for and only a few hours to do it."

Paige grinned suddenly, stopping only when she found a satisfactory spot for them, and, indeed, wasted no time. As she led him in a simple waltz, he hesitantly followed along. Her movements seemed smooth and practiced while his were stiffer, nervous.

As far back as he could remember, he'd never been encouraged to dance. Lietta hated whenever he made too much noise and Caro taught Dante a nice little breathing exercise in order to help him silence himself.

They'd never encouraged his art, either. Only tolerated the mess and continued tossing him crayons and paper, hoping it would shut him up long enough for them to finish their work.

But out here, they weren't around to micromanage his life. They couldn't constantly remind him of how much of a disappointment he'd turned out to be. He wasn't entirely free of their grasp. But, right now, they didn't matter. They weren't around. He could dance with Paige and enjoy the music without concerning himself with what they might say.

When the band's recital ended, Miss Fitzgard congratulated the performance and the crowd of students joined in with cheers of encouragement of their own. Dante got louder than he'd let himself be in a long while. He completely forgot about the snuffling pigs, the dancing imps, and the nipping pixies as he matched Paige's enthusiasm up until they switched over to Mister Adler's playlist and had to take a break for some water.

Paige went to convene with Natasha, Frank, Abraham, and Percival while Dante waited for Petel and the others to join them. He noticed Damon and Niculaie headed for the doors, however, and hurried after them without a second thought, too caught up in this infectious boldness.

## Chapter 16: Locked Out

Dante caught up to them just outside, the snowy air a complete change of atmosphere from the louder, stuffier inside of the Gym. Now he had to come up with something to actually say, some sort of explanation as to why he'd chased after them.

After struggling for a good few seconds, he settled for the dumb, automatic time waster. "What did. Um. Did you, uh. Enjoy the, the dance?"

It sounded so stupid coming from his mouth. This was why small talk was such a bad idea. Damon rolled his eyes, annoyed by the tone-deaf query. Niculaie looked pleased, however, and happily said, "It was good again. Abe volunteers every year and it's nice to see his efforts pay off."

After a moment, his own words sank in and he bowed his head in remorse. Immediately, Damon reassured the taller boy with a quiet, "Hey, don't do that to yourself. We came to have a good time and we did."

Niculaie laughed half-heartedly, brushing his bangs out of his face only for them to fall right back into his eyes. "Right. Sorry, I just."

He sighed softly and Damon reached up to pat his arm reassuringly. "Hell, it went smoother this time 'cause that Huntsman didn't even notice we were there."

Niculaie nodded along miserably, somehow still reassured. They were still so close that Dante was unsure of how to break through in order to participate. Damon seemed to notice this and pulled Niculaie along, turning his back on Dante.

"Let's get you home. Luca and Arsenie'll probably wanna hear about how much you danced with me."

"W-Wait!"

Dante flinched at his own shout. It got Damon and Niculaie to pause again, at least, but it also got the attention of several nearby teeth worms floating in the air. Dante couldn't think about that right now. He could deal with the consequences later.

He braced himself, then pressed on. "I wanted. T-To ask. If we could, um. If we could still be f-friends. Because. Uh."



There was too much to say and it all wound up getting stuck inside his throat.

He'd missed their banter. He'd missed being able to talk about Hell and have someone understand what he meant. He'd missed having companions who genuinely understood the true horror of everything they were subjected to in their childhoods.

Niculaie softened, a sort of guilt to his concern. Damon narrowed his eyes in the most wrathful glare Dante had seen on him in contrast. "We can't 'still' be friends." Damon snarled, advancing slowly and trapping Dante between his fears and the demon before him. "We were never friends. In fact, I'm pretty sure I've never seen you before in my entire life."

The heat flared up in protest, melting the snow around Dante and keeping the spectres at length. He thought back to when he'd first met Damon and his nanny, when he'd get babysat by the two older boys when he could barely understand English. They had tolerated his many questions and even played with him then. They had been gentle and even friendly, no matter how annoying Dante got. He looked up to meet Damon's red eyes in all of their fury and futilely tried, "But. Um."

"You really don't get it, do you, Fireball?" Damon laughed a low, unsettling laugh, then grinned cruelly down at him. Somehow, the grin was worse than the glare. "I have the power to cut you out of my existence here. So when I say we've never met before, everyone's going to believe me over a babbling artist like you. Because you're worthless out here and I'm the rightful star of the show."

Damon turned and walked away, not waiting for Dante to react. Dante called after him, "Has that — Have you always been b-bothered by that? It wasn't. I'm not—!"

Damon continued walking, refusing to listen. And Dante understood in that moment the true pettiness of the Demon King.

In all the times they'd been forced to compete, Damon never won. Not once.

Dante was afraid to fail and it drove him to always, always defeat the more confident, more capable boy. That vehement hatred seeped into Dante, too, and his hair turned to flames as the fires burst out in an inferno-worthy passion.

Niculaie jumped back, startled, as Dante shouted, "Fine. Fine! I won't — we're not — a-and never were! I thought — but, but no! You — You're a liar!"

Damon disappeared into the snow, not even noticing. Dante had never asked for this. They just decided it would be fun to pull his brain apart, to ruin every chance he had to make and keep friends like a normal child. He'd been to Hell and the suffering refused to stop.

The fires roared in his ears, pulsed from his hands, and he no longer cared to appear human.

He exhaled burning steam as his whole body trembled, volatile and close to engulfing his whole body. Niculaie hesitated, torn between going after Damon and offering up some worthless comfort to him. Of course, Niculaie was Damon's best friend. It was unsurprising when Niculaie mumbled a pitiful, "Sorry, Vicario."

Then he took off after Damon. Leaving Dante alone in his fire and surrounded by all these fears that didn't matter.

So this was how it was going to end.

Dante took a shaky breath, pressed his hands tightly over his ears, and closed his eyes. The fire refused to calm, even as he counted to three over and over.

Him, his mother, his father. Damon, Niculaie, and him. Shadows, Inferno, Hell.

It didn't help. He was alone, outside, and forgotten.

The dancing imps and teeth worms wouldn't dare get close, lest they be burned. The fire had yet to bite back at Dante as well, burning without restraint but still under his control.

He was too emotional, too filled with hate and anger. He was dangerous and no one believed him. Damon was right about that.

The fires could blaze and the spectres could win and still Dante would be worthless, worthless, worthless.

When he opened his eyes, the snow around him had melted, leaving the same sort of circle his fires gave him in the game. A shadow stood across from him, just outside of this space. It grinned its stapled grin at him and in his haze of upset anger, he screamed, "Go on! Take it!"

It didn't make a move.

Instead, a different, familiar voice shouted, "Dante!"

Then it was gone and the sound of footsteps crunching through the snow snapped him back to rationality.

Quickly, he breathed out all that anger and heat, dousing the flames. His hair fell back in place and, though apprehensive of what he might see, he turned around to face the ones approaching. It was Paige and Petel, of course, who stopped just short of the cleared circle around Dante, their expressions haunted. No shadows followed them or melted up from the dark around them, at least. Quietly, Paige said, "You were on fire."

Dante wiped the tears from his eyes and said bitterly, "I never asked for this."

Both Paige and Petel grew more concerned. That hadn't been the right response. Petel stepped forward and asked, "What happened?"

"A falling out. I think that's what you call it?" Dante gave it a moment of thought, recalling the Italian for it with crystal clarity. But Italian wasn't allowed anymore. So he shrugged it off. "Anyway. They wanted to make an enemy of me. I'm pretty sure, at least. Makes sense. I'm not one to be trifled with."

Paige, deeply perturbed, said, "You're not making any sense."

"And you were on fire." Petel added.

Dante sighed softly, hating what he had to do. If he didn't get them to disregard this, however, they could all be in danger. More so than they were already. "The fires. Came back w-with me. When, um, when I g-got shot."

He really didn't want to throw Frank to the wolf like this. It made more sense than repeating the same Hell explanation over and over. Petel perked up in understanding, accepting it easily enough. "They really made you angry, then."

Paige, meanwhile, stayed concerned. "I didn't notice anything wrong before. I'm sorry, I."

"Not your fault." Dante reassured her before she could continue. Despite having wiped them away, the lingering sensation of tears on his face made him rub at where they'd been. "I think. I'm done for tonight." He mumbled.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Paige persisted, worried in that way that made her such a great friend. "You were on fire. Aren't you hurt? Do we need to take you to the nurse?"

"If it's from the game, he should be fine." Petel said, fearlessly entering the vicinity around Dante and placing an arm around his shoulders. The snow fell into the area once again and Dante was less dangerous with the fire sequestered away, so he allowed it. "We'll have to dance next time."

If there was a next time. If the shadows didn't punish Dante properly for this. Only half-convinced, Paige relented and offered up an understanding, "Sorry some wanker ruined the evening for you. Want us to take you to your room?"

Dante nodded, too tired to reject their concern. That anger was more exhausting than he'd expected. Couldn't remain friends with his childhood, couldn't convince these others to stay away, and couldn't escape this Hell he'd endured.

Everything continued falling apart all around him.

The only decision left to him was to see this through to the end.

Petel directed Dante along towards the dorms, Paige right behind them. As they were passing the doors to the Gym, a group of other students rushed out into the night. The loud, sudden noise made Dante cringe against Petel and though his heart pounded in his ears, he recognised the others as Frank, Abraham, Sonya, Levy, and Kalyuga. They were familiar, not the shadows back to rip his heart from him. They weren't hostile. Just panicked.

Panicked?

Dante straightened up, concern overriding any fears he initially had. Paige seemed alert as well and asked immediately, "What's happened now?"

"It's Vektor." Frank said.

"I-I got this message from him." Sonya explained, holding up his phone for them to see. "Did any of you happen to see him leave or, or something?"

Petel and Paige leaned in to read the text. Dante, being the closest, didn't even have to move in order to read the simple, 'I've been locked inside somewhere and require some assistance at your earliest convenience, please and thank you' from Vektor's number. Petel rolled his head back in annoyance once finished. Paige, while sounding equally as annoyed, at least refrained from doing the same as she mumbled, "Again?"

Dante frowned at the sudden thought and asked, "Why message you specifically?"

"Who knows?" Levy shrugged, a wonderfully nonchalant gesture for the current situation. "All we could get from him is that he's somewhere on campus."

Abraham grimaced at the statement. Paige glanced to Dante unsurely, probably concerned about the fire and the exhaustion. Or something. But, as much as Dante hated to admit it, his curiosity had been piqued. How had Vektor, the Key, gotten locked away somewhere again? Why ask for help from Sonya, out of all of them?

Dante hated that part of himself, which had been exploited so many times. But, right now, they had a very inept computer program to find.

Since Dante hadn't left, Paige turned her gaze back to Sonya and asked, "Is that the only detail he gave you?"

"Getting information from him was like pulling teeth." Abraham said as Kalyuga, Frank, Levy, and Sonya all made varying displays of their aggravation. "No matter what we asked, all he would tell us was that he was still within the school."

"Of course." Paige rolled her eyes again, then headed off towards the main building. "Let's go find him."

"So you didn't see him leave." Sonya sighed, shoving his phone back into his pocket.

Frank and Levy echoed this disappointment with wordless groans. Everyone followed after Paige and Dante looked to Petel, questioning. Petel, in proper Petel fashion, smiled all friendly and said, "This guy, right?"

Dante appreciated the sentiment, saying, "Someone. Should've programmed him better."

They'd talk about it at some point. Petel chuckled and guided Dante after the rest of their group. Despite the bitter taste in Dante's mouth from even making such a joke, he did hope Vektor was alright. This probably had something to do with Vektoria, like last time.

The Thief was spiteful and cruel while the Prince was comparatively an ignorant buffoon. The unbalanced nature of it made Dante wonder if that was maybe the whole point.

Inside the main building, Paige had them split up to better search the halls. The building looked eerily quiet in the darkness and there were snickering slimes hiding in the shadows of every corner. Dante kept close to Petel, thankful that the wolf was willing to stay by him despite the fires.

As they checked through the window of every first floor classroom they passed, Petel asked, "Who made you so mad?"

There it was. Dante knew it'd come. He grimaced at the fresh anger and the fires flared up in protest. "Just. The Damon."

"Ah. Asshole." Petel agreed, an oddly indifferent reaction. "If he's not bothering Paige, he's making someone else upset."

"He's certainly. Always been very full of h-himself."

Dante nodded along tiredly. Even with the language barrier, it was clear that Damon thought himself superior. For a time, Dante had admired that confidence. Petel, trying to hide the full extent of his interest, said, "The only one willing to put up with him is Niculaie. Not even Aglaé or Natasha really care for his." Petel paused, trying to find the right word, then settled for making an over the top dramatic gesture. "—ness."

It was a surprisingly cute action from the fairly serious wolf and Dante laughed, though he tried to hide it by covering his mouth with both hands. Petel grinned along, then fell to a frown after Dante petered out.

"Are you gonna be okay?" He asked very seriously. "If the glitching carried over. Maybe we should ask Vektor to look you over again."

Dante drooped, stopping in his tracks. Petel had to pause as well and Dante said, "As long as I, uh. Keep everything in, in control. The fires s-stay inside."

He was too broken, anyway. He grasped at where his heart was and shuddered at the memory of Vektor's hand gliding through him. He'd let witnesses see for the second time in his life. There was no way he could survive after this.

Then again, if the game stopped right here, the data would be inconclusive. The only thing worse than Dante's failure was a botched experiment.

The two of them reached the end of the hall and Petel huffed. "No luck."

He pulled out his phone to send the message to the rest of their group. A little self-conscious of his own danger, Dante pulled out his own phone to see the conversation rather than stand so close to Petel.

Paige and Kalyuga, similarly, hadn't found anything on the second floor. Abraham and Levy had equally fruitless results from searching the cafeteria area. Dante was sure Frank and Sonya would report the same, meaning they'd have to try elsewhere, but Frank's message read, 'Top floor!'

'By the faculty offices!' Sonya followed up quickly.

Petel looked incredulously towards Dante, who very much shared that sentiment. What had the two programs been doing up there? Why go somewhere so off-limits? Petel rushed off towards the stairwell and Dante followed hastily after.

They met up with the rest of their group on the third floor and, sure enough, peeking through the window of the door to the records room, were a pair of bright golden eyes. They glowed in the darkness and made Dante hesitate, allowing the others to crowd around the door.

Paige knocked against the window pane, which made a noise of not glass, but a cheap plastic, surprisingly. Her annoyance was directed solely at Vektor as she said, "Fill us in. How'd you manage to get yourself into this one, ya git?"

"How else? I was trapped here by that conniving Thief."

Vektor groaned, his voice muffled but comprehensible. Levy shrugged, accepting the Prince's words easily. "Wellp. There ya have it. Hang tight, sir Prince. I'll go get Miss Fitzgard to help us out."

"Oh, good idea." Sonya said. "I'll go, too. She'll believe us if we can show her some proof."

Levy laughed brightly and the two rushed out before they could continue their conversation within earshot. Kalyuga and Petel both smiled fondly after them, Kalyuga saying quietly, "I'm so glad he's having fun again."

"I know what you mean." Petel said, his smile turning bitter.

Dante inched closer to them in order to appear as if he belonged to their group. Not too close, though; he held actual danger beneath his skin. Abraham pulled a wrap of leather from his pocket and said, "Before the teachers get here, I want to see if this'll work."

Paige eagerly stepped back to allow Abraham space. Frank gawked and asked, "You know how to pick a lock?"

"Professor!" Vektor, also shocked, took on a scandalised tone. "There's no need to jump straight to that."

"Sure there is." Paige giggled, slyly hiding her grin behind her hand. "I didn't bring my keys, so this might be the only viable solution."

Kalyuga laughed along. Even Petel chuckled, enjoying the joke. Dante frowned as his earlier thought came back and he blurted out, "Why aren't you able to just open it, Vektor?"

Petel, Frank, Abraham, and Paige all glanced over at Dante with varying levels of confusion, making him shrink back. Thankfully, Vektor's reply was immediate. "I've tried, Inferno, believe me. Vektoria's locks are quite difficult to undo, however. It's as if she deletes the very code that allows it to be unlocked in the first place."

Dante bowed his head in thought. Had Vektoria used her Lock, or did she use her Void? Was she that vindictive? Abraham gave an incredulous, "She deletes the code? Is that even possible?"

"Well, no way to find out besides trying, right?" Kalyuga said with a shrug.

"Right." Abraham nodded, regaining his earlier confidence. He crouched by the door and pulled a few pin-like tools from the wrap. "Of course, this would get me in trouble no matter the outcome, so I request you all vouch for me."

"That's the plan." Petel reassured him.

"Yeah, we need you on the team." Frank laughed. He moved closer to hover over Abraham excitedly. "Where'd you learn how to do this, anyway? Your dad wouldn't teach you something like this, would he?"

"No, I—" Abraham paused shortly, struck by a sudden thought. He shook himself out of it and continued fiddling with the lock. "I learned it from a friend. I think? I don't quite remember."

Both Petel and Frank's expressions soured in much the same way. They had really torn a chunk out of Abraham's mind. After only hearing good things about the Huntsman, seeing him unable to recall any of that was inexcusable.

All of them could directly blame Dante for their troubles and be absolutely correct in doing so.

Why were they so insistent on staying friends with someone like him?

After a solid minute of tinkering away at it, Abraham sat back and shrugged in defeat. "We did, indeed, try."

"It's a no-go?" Frank asked.

At Abraham's nod, he flung his head back in disappointment. Vektor sighed in defeat. "I thought as much." Abraham rolled his tools back up and pocketed them as Vektor continued. "I was hoping you might solve this where I couldn't, but it appears as if the missing code is causing too much of an issue."

Again, Dante was struck by an immediate thought and ended up blurting it out before he could think better of it. "Create a workaround, then."

Vektor aimed an annoyed frown at him through the door's window the best he could, considering the limitations, but Dante was too busy considering the possible pieces needed for such a thing. If Vektoria had deleted the code that allowed the door to be unlocked, they just needed to create a new unlocking method in order to get it to work again. Easier said than done, sure, but quite possible for someone like Vektor, who had that nice Creation on his side.

That brought up another few thoughts: Did Vektor's body have human things? Like blood and a skeleton? Working organs? He could eat, so he theoretically had a working digestive system. If he got hurt, would he pixelate like in the game? Dante thought of the white eyes, the stapled grins, and wondered briefly if Vektor would bleed black like them considering they'd been derived from one another.

He dismissed that line of thought with a shudder. Petel asked, "How could that work?"

"Yes, how?" Kalyuga joined in. "This is reality, things don't run off of coding out here."

Dante wilted under the scrutiny and mashed his knuckles together as he stuttered, "U-Um. Well. It's."



He wrinkled his nose in distaste. There was no good way to explain it without bringing up the fires. And who knew if Vektor's abilities even functioned out here? Dante just assumed as much, considering the way Vektor's eyes glowed inhumanly and Vektoria's ability to trap him.

In the end, Dante gave a tired, "Sorry. Just a-a thought."

Kalyuga frowned in sympathy and turned her attention back towards Paige, Abraham, and Frank, who were discussing how lock picking worked. Petel wrapped a comforting arm around Dante's shoulders, still willing to touch him, and he leaned into Petel's cooling presence.

Sonya and Levy returned then, towing along Mister Adler. Abraham and Paige stepped back, away from the door, as Frank gestured towards Vektor's visible face and helpfully said, "He's, uh. Quite trapped, as you can see."

"How'd you kids even manage this?" Mister Adler exhaled tiredly, rubbing a hand quickly through his short and unruly black hair. His eyes were black, too, like Sonya's and Jonathan's. He pulled a key from his coat pocket and inserted it into the door. "You shouldn't be playing up here in the first place, it's off-limits. You should be down at the dance, or—"

He trailed off as he struggled in turning the key or the knob at all. Dante watched with an unabashed curiosity. Vektoria really had broken the thing completely.

Mister Adler finally gave in, withdrawing his key to give it a look over and mumbling to himself. "I swear, this is the right one. What the heck?" He then composed himself a bit more seriously, saying, "This is ridiculous. You should be able to unlock it from your side, Mister Ketziah."

Paige winced and looked to Abraham, who shrugged. They'd all handily forgotten how locks worked for a moment there. Vektor scoffed and said, "Impossible. The mechanism for unlocking is out there, not here."

"No, it's in there, too." Mister Adler insisted, a bit aggravated at the Prince's wilful petulance. Even the teachers could get fed-up with him, it seemed. "There should be a turn switch of some sort on the handle. They have locks in Israel, I know for a fact you must have seen one before."

"Perhaps they do, but certainly no such thing exists in the Mainframe Kingdom." Vektor huffed.

He disappeared from view in order to look for the mechanism. Kalyuga glanced to Petel with a questioning look while Sonya slapped a hand to his face. Vektor really had nothing to stop him from talking about the game, no way of blending in with the rest of humanity. Dante could see a pattern here.

When Vektor popped back into view, he gave a succinct, "No such thing exists."

"What?" Mister Adler sputtered, gesturing uselessly towards the door. "That's — But that's — Are you mad? Are you in jest? Every lock operates like this, how can there not be anything there?" He grimaced and rubbed a hand over his face for a second, then went back to his more usual deadpan expression. "Alright, if you're so sure. I swear, if you're having a laugh. Hang on, kids, we're going to have to call in some reinforcements."

He pulled out his phone and walked away a few paces. Petel, Kalyuga, Levy, and Sonya all drifted closer together, watching him warily. Levy quietly asked, "Who d'ya think he's gonna bring?"

"It's gotta be Miss Fitzgard. Or Miss Kirkland." Kalyuga nodded resolutely, speaking just as softly as Levy.

Dante drifted closer to them, too, not wanting to be stranded out on his own where the tendrils of the shade weeds could reach him. Petel glanced curiously over at Sonya and asked, "Why didn't Miss Fitzgard come in the first place?"

"She's in charge of the event, so she had to stay and chaperone the others." Sonya said.

Petel frowned, but didn't ask about it further. Just behind them, Paige hissed at Vektor. "If they find out you're not telling the truth, you're going to get in serious trouble, you know."

"Why would I lie about this?" Vektor asked, not even bothering to lower his voice.

Frank heaved out a breath and leaned against the wall, mumbling, "Well. If it's this fun now, it'll be fun when they figure it out, too."

"They'll probably have to remove the lock entirely, if not the whole door." Abraham said, leaning against the wall beside Frank. A dark scowl took over his face as he continued. "Vektor wasn't kidding about the 'code' being deleted. The pins had no weight to them, no sticking points at all."

Frank and Paige both looked to Abraham in interest. Vektor hummed in thought. "Perhaps. Inferno, you might've been on to something with your earlier suggestion." He said. "A workaround would be tricky, but it might be the only option."

He disappeared from view once more. Dante asked incredulously, "T-Tricky?"

Kalyuga, just as flabbergasted, exclaimed, "That's basic coding!"

Vektor didn't respond. This whole situation was ridiculous. Mister Adler hung up the phone and walked back over, bringing them all to attention. "Alright, Miss Kirkland should be here soon with Officer Riviera. Then we can get the locks taken off so Mister Ketziyah can—"

"There we are!" Vektor exclaimed proudly, pushing the door open and stepping out to stand with them. "You were right, it wasn't tricky at all. I'll have to remember that for future reference."

All of them stared at Vektor and the open door in dumbfounded silence. Vektor smiled around at them obliviously, looking so accomplished. Dante held a hand to his head tiredly and said, "I-I think. I'm done for today."

Even in the silence, he kept her voice as quiet as possible. They hated noise. They hated his laughter more, but any noise had them agitated and ready to prod him. Petel pulled him closer and looked to Mister Adler, asking, "May we be excused from this?"

"Y-You. How did you?" Mister Adler, too preoccupied with staring at the now open door, slowly approached it to examine the knob. Just as Vektor had said, it didn't have the mechanism that it normally would to help unlock it from the other side. "What in—? I know this door had a. Wh-What the fuck?"

Their whole group (minus Vektor) seemed startled. Then Paige grinned and said eagerly, "Right? Sometimes, there's no eloquent way to put it, so you just gotta swear."

Mister Adler cringed and backtracked immediately. "I-I mean. Sorry, students, I didn't mean to. That wasn't very — I'm a little. Just."

He ended with a sigh, raising a hand to rub at his forehead. Paige, still grinning, hopped up on her feet as she triumphantly exclaimed, "Fuck!"

Kalyuga, Levy, and Frank broke into laughter while Abraham smiled in amusement and Mister Adler grimaced. Sonya's surprise turned to concern and Vektor still seemed clueless about what was happening. Petel gently guided Dante towards the exit to the hall, mumbling, "They probably won't mind."

As they left, they could hear Paige encouraging Mister Adler loudly as he attempted to salvage his professionalism to the amusement of the rest of their group. It soon faded as they walked farther into the hall and to the stairwell. The dark and growing silence was formidable, but Dante wasn't alone right now. Petel was there with him. And, besides, he was too tired to think on the spectres properly for anything to actually manifest.

They didn't encounter Miss Kirkland or Officer Riviera on their way. And once they made it outside, into the freezing night air, Petel said in lament, "I really wanted to dance with you."

Dante had to think about it much harder in his tired state. The whole dance seemed so long ago now. He offered up a soft, "Sorry."

"It's alright." Petel said. They paused a moment as Dante yawned and Petel asked, "So, you were friends with Damon before, too?"

It was such a casual, probing question that Dante didn't give it a second thought. He simply nodded along, not even considering any of the consequences as he babbled sleepily. "Yeah. At least, I always thought of them as friends. More than. I didn't know English very well or, or at all when we met, but. Seems like he always."

He yawned again and Petel waited for him to finish before asking, "How long have you known him?"

Petel had to remove his arm in order to open the dorm's doors for Dante. They were out of the nice chill and inside the stuffy warmth now. Dante said a quick, "Thanks." Then, he said, "Um, a long while? The Ashefords are, are my parents' lawyers, so. Damon had to come in a lot and we got stuck together for, for the most part."

It really had been a long time. They wanted to keep the Hell children together, probably. Why Damon had never bothered to learn Italian was a true mystery.

Dante smiled suddenly at a particular memory and said, "I used to. Um, call them 'Demo' and 'Nico' when I was, uh, younger."

They continued walking up to their room, separate now. Petel encouraged him with a short, "Really, now?"

"Yeah." Dante ended up giggling the more he thought about it. "Their names were, were hard. Nicu's is, is still hard."

They made it to their room, Dante laughing a bit deliriously and gratefully going straight for his bed. He wrapped himself up in his blanket, kicking off only his shoes and getting comfortable. Petel looked ready to argue with him for a moment, then backed down and busied himself with getting out of his suit. Dante closed his eyes and inhaled slowly.

"They always said, 'Be on your best behaviour'. But we. We w-were kids. Even Orpheus didn't listen to them all th-the time." He murmured into the fabric. As he breathed it in, he switched topics and said, "I hate this thing. But mother. Gave it to protect me."

After a moment of silence, Petel asked, "Why do you hate it?"

Dante's smile turned bitter, though Petel couldn't see. "She knows." Dante willingly explained. "This is my least favourite colour. She knows. But still, it's always green. Always grey. 'Wear inoffensive colours, Dante'. 'Don't be such an eyesore, Dante'. 'There's no salvaging you now, deerling'."

Dante let out an upset breath. They had to keep up appearances. Couldn't get away with shady practices if their child was a mess.

If Dante continued talking or if Petel replied in some way, it was lost to the moment as Dante faded out of consciousness and into slumber. Damon wanted to pretend like they'd never met? Fine, then. He'd just have to be prepared to deal with the unruly fires once they crossed paths again.

Though he didn't have control, Dante wasn't one to be trifled with.

## Chapter 17: Fires Don't Trust

"Let's have a gift exchange!" Frank suggested, out of the blue, during lunch Wednesday.

They'd made plans to play the game that evening, as a small break from their studying for end of term exams, and Frank had taken their silence as the perfect time to spring this on all of them. Vektor, ever the clueless Prince, asked, "What is that?"

"Y'know, a gift exchange." Frank grinned, as if that explained everything. When they all continued to stare blankly at him, he rolled his eyes and continued. "It's where people in a group get assigned another person in that group randomly and give them a nice thing. You all can't really not know what that is, it's not that weird a concept."

"Oh, so you mean that sort." Paige sat back in her seat and smiled along. "I'm for it, it sounds fun."

Her ease meant it was probably a good thing, so Petel agreed as well. Kalyuga, Sonya, and Levy all perked up at the idea while Dante and Vektor both leaned in a bit more, intrigued. Amused, Abraham clasped his hands together in a business-like gesture and asked, "What brought this on all of a sudden?"

"It's almost Winter Break. And that means Winter Holidays!" Frank exclaimed, throwing his hands up in the air with such a childish glee that it was infectious. "I just thought it'd be fun to have a bit of celebration amongst us mates before we head off, y'know?"

Petel glanced around at the rest of the table and was pleasantly surprised to see that everyone seemed to be in agreement about this. No need to persuade any of them with some barking. Vektor even smiled as he said, "As long as we continue making progress in the game, then I have no objections to this ritual of friendship."

"Get your schoolwork done, too, Vektor." Paige chided, though it was out of fondness now.

"Is it just going to be for those of us here at this table?" Sonya asked next, already deep in thought.

"Wh-When are we going to, um. To know who w-we're getting a gift for?" Dante joined in, worried despite still being eager and curious.

"Give me the rest of today and I'll get it worked out." Frank laughed at their instincts to plan so quickly, then paused to give it some quick consideration. "So, all of us makes nine, then we gotta include Perci and Jonathan."

Petel wrinkled their nose. "Jonathan?"

"Percival would definitely like that a lot." Abraham said with a gentle smile.

"Add Nat in there, too, she'll wanna get in on this." Paige said. She didn't object to Jonathan, despite the fact that Jonathan could be so surly when roped into a larger crowd and Paige knew this as well as Petel did. Well, they'd just have to trust in Paige's judgement here. She then asked, "How about your brother, Frank? Invite him along, too."

"William?" Frank jumped a bit, then frowned down at the empty tray of food on the table in front of him. "I mean. I'll extend the invitation, but. I-I don't think he'll want to go."

Dante and Vektor's expressions changed to curiosity. Vektor asked, "Is something wrong?"

Petel, Paige, Kalyuga, Sonya, and Levy all averted their gazes and Abraham's expression fell to one of remorse. Even if Jonathan or Frank hadn't said anything outright, it was readily apparent by the end of last year what had happened just from how many times William had to be sent home early. Taking it upon himself to explain if for Frank, Abraham said, "Like Percival and I, William doesn't take up room and board here."

Vektor frowned, wanting to argue, but strangely kept quiet. After another moment, he nodded and sat back. "Understood. A right shame, but let's hope he can attend as well."

"Y-Yeah."

Frank seemed floored at how pragmatic and agreeable the Prince was being. The whole of the table was, really. Petel leaned over to nudge Kalyuga's shoulder and smiled at her in a friendly, teasing manner. "You gonna be able to make it?"

"Hopefully, yes." Kalyuga grinned, clenching her fists in determination. "If I have to ask my sis to cover for me or even sneak out, then that's what has to be done."

Levy perked up in interest. "Your sis's comin' home for the holidays, eh?"

She nodded and the conversation quickly turned towards family and plans for the break. Petel would be spending it in the dorms again, so they allowed the words to wash over them and watched Frank hunker down with a notebook to scribble out the details for this gift exchange. He was so cutely excited that it made Petel smile. It'd be a much nicer way to end the term than what had happened last year.

Dante had said he was heading home for the break. Dante had lit up on fire and put it out without so much as a mark on him.

Petel still wasn't sure about it exactly, but Dante was a friend. Even if Dante could be considered dangerous, he wouldn't hurt them. It was the way he held himself, even becoming hesitant to stand too close to any of them after that incident. Right?

Yasha was right to fear Dante as a Fireball.

Somehow, the wolf wasn't satisfied by this answer and grumbled lowly at the back of Petel's mind for the rest of the day.

They had hoped to get some more information out of Dante about his parents, but the Fireball staunchly refused to discuss anything remotely close to that topic. Petel couldn't exactly begrudge him that, based on what little he'd said. If Petel's parents, or even Grandpa Bassoon, had been as delightfully controlling as Dante's parents sounded, Petel wouldn't want to say anything about them, either.

The school was still rife with chatter over the play and the dance, some praising the Huntsman and the Vampire's talents while others lamented the disappearance of Mister Adler from the final hour of the dance. After classes, Petel found Paige straight away and, once the rest of the team arrived, headed straight for the tower. The wolf was eager to play.

It didn't take long for them to land inside their last checkpoint. The fires burst to life around Dante, which was both comforting and disconcerting. Vektor led the way out, saying, "The end of the level shouldn't be too far from here. We should—"

The White Wolf leapt out from the undergrowth, right in Vektor's path, startling him into stumbling back and knocking against Abraham, who was right behind him. Dante let out a startled yelp and stumbled back as well. Above them, Paige's voice said, "Oh, is that the Guardian again? Interesting."

Shiranui sat and stared up at Vektor, inviting and asking for pets or to play. Unable to understand, Vektor slowly knelt in a show of reverence. Petel, their ears and tail perking up, loped forward and sat down in front of Shiranui, making the appropriate response to such a request. Shiranui mimicked the posture immediately, her tail wagging. Frank peeked out from behind Abraham and asked, "Is this a wolf thing? Do wolves actually do this?"

Petel grinned. Whether or not it was a wolf thing, they'd communicated. They dashed off into the undergrowth and Shiranui chased after them happily. Vektor shouted after them, "Wolf, not too far that way! We're almost finished here!"



Petel snorted through their nose at the Prince. They were here mostly to play and enjoy the adventure. Having another wolf, someone who understood the fangs and claws and fur within, was a rare treat in and of itself.

Above them, Paige's voice fired a smart, "Pretty sure you'll need my help more than him. He's with a Guardian."

Petel skidded to a halt, claws scraping against the white dirt and their ears pricking up. They couldn't hear anyone else's responses, but they could hear Paige loud and clear. Shiranui stopped beside them, tilting her head to the side in curiosity. Petel smiled and said, "You can't hear her. Can you?"

After some consideration, Shiranui shook her head. She could understand them. She seemed more like a child than a full wolf. Just like Petel.

Vektor did have a point, though. They needed to finish up here and move on to the next level. Petel would miss the strange White Forest, but they'd be glad to never see another damn Bear again.

Petel aimed an apologetic look down at Shiranui, then took off back towards the rest of the pack. Shiranui didn't follow this time. Able to enjoy Petel's brief company, it seemed. Finding the familiar sounds of the others didn't take too long, thankfully, and Petel emerged just behind Dante, who squeaked in surprise. Frank and Abraham waved in greeting, not even slightly spooked.

Vektor, his tone laced with irritation, said, "Welcome back, Wolf."

"Had a nice play with your fellow wolf?" Frank teased.

"Sure did." Petel laughed, a little breathless from the sprint. "Fight any enemies without me?"

"There are two headed your way, currently." Paige interjected, making them all tense up. "Just a Tiger and a Monkey. No Bears this time."

Vektor swung out his arm, summoning his visor and his key staff in one fluid motion and said, "No competition. We're making it today."

Petel grinned toothily in agreement and Dante shrunk back as the sounds of the enemies advancing on them became audible. Frank pulled out his pistol, checking which bullets were loaded in, and Abraham readied his rifle, pressing the butt of it against his shoulder. Then the two enemies appeared from the undergrowth, popping into existence in a slightly janky way.

The Monkey screamed as it saw them, its voice eerily human and distorted, and it swung at them from above. The Tiger, similarly, roared at them with the same sort of mechanical filter

over its cry as the Bears. The moment Petel leapt at them, their body changed into the full wolf and all that filled their mind was the desire to battle.

Abraham fired a shot and it ended up striking Petel's shoulder. They stopped to land and snarled back at him dangerously, a warning not to interfere. Vektor pushed forward and tossed out a glowing ball of golden light, which became a boulder that knocked the Monkey to the ground from its attempt to leap at them. It screamed louder, more terrifyingly human sounding than before. Taking advantage of the wolf's distraction, the Tiger swatted Petel away.

Dante cried, "Petel, watch out!"

Petel leapt with the momentum and wound back around to crunch down on the Tiger's exposed spine. The cracking of the bones only fuelled the wolf's battle lust. Frank whirled on Dante, shouting, "Is now really the time when he's gonna attack us, too?"

"W-Well. Petel — uh — um—" Dante fumbled.

"Focus on the other enemies first, Inferno." Vektor chided, readying another glowing ball in his hand. "We've proven we can handle Wolf's Berserk."

Abraham took another shot, this time at the trapped Monkey. It shattered its skull, which broke it into code and made it dissolve. Frank fumbled his pistol and was a moment too slow on the draw, as the lingering data disappeared before he could take the shot.

A stolen kill. Petel had wanted that.

They released the Tiger from their jaws in order to tackle the Huntsman. He yelped, taken completely off-guard. Dante squeaked and ran towards the two wrestling on the ground. "No, no, no!" He repeated over and over in a blind panic.

"Can we really, though?" Frank asked, sarcasm dripping from his tone.

"Guys, that Tiger's only got 20% left." Paige helpfully pointed out.

Dante focused the fire into his hands and pushed it in-between Petel and Abraham, separating them from each other. Abraham swore loudly at the burns and Petel retreated with a quiet whine. They looked straight up into Dante's eyes, hurt and questioning. The wolf fought to keep the fire safe. Everything the fangs and claws tore into was for him. Dante stared back, the fires melting around him in a ring once more.

Overhead, Paige said, "Okay, Dante, that just took Abraham down to 35% and Petel down to 60%. You gotta be careful with that, whatever you just did."

"I appreciate it, but what the fuck!" Abraham shouted, scrambling away enough to be out of the fire's range.

Dante winced, turning away from Petel's eyes. Denying communication. Denying himself.

Showing fear.

The scent drove the wolf wild, blacking out all remaining thoughts. They wanted to consume. To feast. To gulp down this fear and fire and never part from it again.

They sprinted forward too fast for Dante to react. Too quickly for Dante to even process what was happening until they slammed into him and knocked him against the ground. The wolf sank their teeth into his shoulder and tore with the intent to devour.

Immediately, Dante screamed.

"Dante!" Abraham shouted.

"Well. That's a problem." Vektor said, too casual for the situation.

The fires flared up too much for anyone else to get close. They rose up around Dante like a wall, trying to burn Petel off, but the wolf tore at Dante's shoulder and flesh and no, no, they couldn't allow this. Petel couldn't eat Dante. They'd said they wouldn't, even though they could. They very much could.

Dante struggled and screamed, pushing at Petel's body with what strength he could manage, but then the wolf clamped their jaws around Dante's neck and crushed Dante's throat.

Dante fell into the black, overwhelmed by fear.

"Guys — Listen, guys — I know Petel just took out Dante, but we have a bigger problem here." Paige was saying, trying to keep her voice raised over the pandemonium of Frank and Abraham's freaking out. "AIR's sending in more enemies and there's kinda too many of them?"

"Define 'too many'!" Abraham shouted back.

"Are you suggesting we won't be able to handle it?" Vektor asked, still way too calm for the situation.

"Let's just say there's more than should fit on the map and leave it at that." Paige said, losing her patience. "So unless you can quickly make it to the end — which I'm pretty sure you can't — get ready for some intense lag."

"We're gonna freakin' crash the game after all that?" Frank shouted in pure panic.

"Shit, what's gonna happen to us?" Abraham also shouted.

Dante finally recognised that he was laying on the floor, staring up at the far-off ceiling of the tower, half-deposited outside of the scanner. Paige was still at the computer, still trying to reason with Frank and Abraham. "Well, I can't just restart the system, now can I?"

"That is a negative, Navigator." Vektor said.

Dante sat up slowly, his whole body tensed to the point that it didn't feel like he was controlling it. Even breathing was a bit of a chore, being strained and something he had to manually remind himself to do. His mind buzzed, though it seemed utterly blank, and he had to stop himself from any efforts to stand for fear of it being too much for his shaking body.

Frank's voice, already distorted from the computer's speakers, broke up and distorted further suddenly. "Oh god — too late!"

"This... Take me, death." Abraham's voice dipped similarly in quality.

Paige clenched her jaw tightly, the frustration tensing her hands into fists, and she sorrowfully said, "I can't do anything to help. Sorry."

Dante was still alive. Was still alive. He could breathe. He was in one piece. There was no smoke, no brimstone, no Gargoyles or Chimera to speak of.

Paige took a moment to calm herself, then swivelled around in her chair to finally address the Fireball on the floor. "Dante?"

Her voice was hesitant and seemed to come from a separate reality. Dante couldn't even open his mouth to respond. His whole body didn't seem to be his own right now. All of this was just some nightmare his mind had dreamt up, throwing everything back in his face so hard it might tear his head off.

Petel had meant it as a joke. It wasn't meant to be taken seriously. Now, however, it was hard to deny the warning signs.

The other scanners opened, releasing the rest of them and allowing them reprieve. Vektor, of course, flopped out and onto the floor, barely unable to catch himself this time. Frank and Abraham's motions took a few seconds to get out of their jerky, halting state, and Frank exhaled a grateful, "It didn't crash. Thank goodness."

"Thank goodness, indeed." Abraham agreed, wiping his hand off on his suit jacket. "Now I feel bad for all the characters in games that experience lag like that."

"That was odd behaviour." Vektor said, pulling his head off the floor so that his words weren't too muffled to understand. "Why would AIR overload the system's enemy spawns like that?"

"Maybe to make sure everyone got booted? I don't know."

Paige shook her head in exasperation. Petel, oddly quiet, stumbled out of their scanner and kept their head down. When they finally looked up, their eyes locked with Dante's. And Dante slammed right back into his own body, bringing the fear flooding back until it overflowed from his eyes. He scrambled away, his back colliding with the scanner behind him, and he cried, "Y-You said you wouldn't eat me!"

Frank winced as the once hilarious joke now sounded too real, too visceral to be laughed off. Abraham, too, wilted and wrung his hands in concern over this new turn. Paige, unaffected by this atmosphere, doubled over and buried her face into her hands. "Really? This again?" She asked.

Petel, too, seemed hurt by Dante's outburst, shrinking back in shame. The fear pounded in Dante's ears and poured down his face. "You said — you said! Y-You wouldn't — you said!"

He was being too sensitive, too childish about this. There had always been the risk. Petel was a wild animal. The Berserk wasn't a rational thing. They didn't understand that Hell had left so many invisible scars on Dante's whole body. That he'd been torn apart and had his nose sewn back on as if it was the easiest solution to a problem they'd created.

Logically, Dante shouldn't have been upset by this. The reality, however, was that Dante couldn't stop his pathetic sobbing no matter how hard he tried.

Petel's expression twisted into one of aggravation and they snarled out a hostile, "You burnt me up twice now. I'm sorry I hurt you, too."

"I-I told you to stay away!" Dante clamped his hands over his ears and shrieked out the words. "You saw the, the fires. You know my danger. So why, why don't you stop getting so close to me?"

"Maybe because I like you." Petel fired back, too upset to be bothered by the tension they were setting up. "I'm dangerous, too. Doesn't stop me from making friends."

"I never asked for your friendship!"

"You didn't have to. That's how friendship works!"

Dante stood suddenly, sharply, pressing all his heat and pain onto Petel with enough force to actually make the wolf flinch. "I'm afraid of you!" He yelled. "Why can't you just accept that?"

Petel bared their teeth, ready to continue arguing, but Paige stood as well with an authoritative and stern, "Enough!" She frowned at Dante, then Petel, careful to keep Abraham,

Frank, and Vektor out of her range. Only when she was sure that she had their attention did she continue. "We're done here for the day. Everyone head out. You, too, Petel."

Petel bristled, still full of fight, then relented and grumpily left the tower. Though wobbly on standing, Vektor also headed off without any argument, mumbling a soft, "Thank you, Navigator."

Abraham placed a hand on Frank's shoulder and guided the miserable and defeated boy out as well. Dante exhaled a steaming, frustrated breath. He was an absolute failure. His parents were right about that. As he started off for the doors, wiping the tears from his face, Paige grabbed his arm and stopped him in his tracks.

"Not you." Paige said. "I need to talk to you about some things."

Dante deflated, resigned to this fate. He'd made all the wrong choices. No one to blame but himself. This may as well be happening. He sat back down on the floor and Paige sat right beside him, pulling him into a half hug.

They sat for a while like that in silence, away from the rest of the world. The question loomed over their heads. Paige was terrifying, too, but in a different way from Petel. There was a wildness in Petel's eyes, the defiance in the face of fear fueling their every move. Paige, in stark contrast, was mature enough to know truths only an adult could discern. Defiant in a similar, more rational manner.

Dante bit down on his tongue lightly before saying, "I shouldn't have lashed out like that. I'm sorry."

"Not what I wanted to talk about, but good to know you're aware of it." Paige looked directly at him, taking full advantage of that unsuppressable curiosity. Then she asked, piercingly direct, "How long have you had the fires? Truly?"

Dante cringed. Rich kid school for gifted youth, he reminded himself. The hand-picked players. He rolled the answer around in his throat for a minute, wondering how much he could actually reveal. It was all pretty unbelievable, considering everything. And no matter how perceptive Paige or Petel or anyone could be, Dante had a failsafe built in. A way out he knew how to trigger without the effort of even lying. "Since. Since I returned from Hell." He said.

"And when exactly was that?" Paige asked next.

"When I was seven."

Dante grimaced at the memory. Lietta had been talking up a big surprise for Dante's birthday. Caro had been out all day getting things ready for the celebration. Dante was just too impatient, too curious to wait for the surprise to come to him. He'd followed the trail down

behind their home, down and down into the mountains until his shadow cackled at his folly and the fires sprung to life around his feet.

He took a deep breath, starting slowly. Trying to keep his head this time instead of babbling as the artist. "I met Royalty. And Gargoyles. They scared me and when I tried to run. Um, a Chimera tore me to pieces. I-I thought I'd died, b-but. They brought me back a-and sewed me together. For a-a price."

Paige gave a short exhale through her nose, aggravated but choosing her question carefully. "And what was that price?"

Dante remembered the words so well. Even the gravelly voice of the Gargoyle as it spoke them. "Curiosity led me there. Creativity gave birth to misfortune. And fear created the fire. So I was cursed with the imagination to create nightmares. The curiosity to unravel my mind. And a fear so potent that it burns in me as an inferno until it reclaims my soul."

Saying it all aloud now was a grim, depressing reminder of the cursed life he'd been sentenced to. And that was even without mentioning how disappointed Caro and Lietta were with the whole ordeal. Paige withdrew her arm from around Dante's shoulders, deep in thought. "Hell isn't a real place, Dante." She said, still being careful with her tone and words. "Even if it was, it's impossible for any of that to have happened. You didn't die, after all."

Of course she couldn't believe him. It was like this by design. The only one capable of understanding had renounced their ties. Dante's hand clenched into fists reflexively at the thought, but that wasn't here. That wasn't now.

"But." Paige went on, placing her hand gently on his shoulder. "The trauma is very real to you. And you have. Fires. So, even if I don't believe that you literally walked into Hell, I do believe that something happened that you interpret as a hellish experience." She paused, then smiled wryly. "Maybe it even has something to do with this game."

She shook that ridiculous notion away and turned to face him completely.

"The important thing, however, is that we're your friends. And we're here for you. So maybe stop trying to push us all away and let us help you where we can."

She smiled in the end, trying to exemplify her point. Dante knew she was right. That letting go of the past, of those who clearly didn't care for him in favour of those who did was the better, healthier option within his choices. Even if Dante didn't understand why anyone would want to stay by his side. Even if he might end up hurting them later.

Taking a chance on friendship was, oddly, scarier than any shadow or imp threatening his life. More heart pounding than the knowledge that his head and heart would one day be harvested for the longevity of the Rabbit and her Queen.

Dante had to place his trust in these friends and hope to high Heaven that it wasn't the wrong decision.

They sat together for a while longer, in a comfortable silence. Then Paige stood and offered her hand out, another subtle question of trust. Dante took Petel's hand each time, so he'd do the same for Paige.

Maybe he was more stubborn about this than he had to be. They all wrongfully placed their trust in him, so he should really return that favour. Even with all the lies he had to keep up, it was nice to know someone was willing to support him. That was more than Lietta and Caro ever provided.

As they walked through the snow and towards the cafeteria for supper, the spectres parted for them. Just as they would for Petel. And, for once, Dante could appreciate this small comfort.



## Chapter 18: Communication Is Key

The next morning, Petel led with, "Sit outside with me. We can talk over breakfast."

They had just woken up. Dante really didn't want to go through this again so soon after his talk with Paige. But this wolf was too determined to be turned away. Dante sighed to himself and gave a quiet, "Okay."

He had to make an effort now. Petel and the rest deserved it after dealing with his messy, terrible companionship. And after their argument last night, Dante had a lot of apologising to catch up on.

The early light seemed to perfectly illuminate the fresh snow as they walked to the cafeteria together. It truly was beautiful. Dante had to fight the urge to flop into the piles every time he passed them. Mister Thatcher's best efforts to keep the walkways cleared seemed to be wasted as the snow continued drifting down and piling up to cover even the slightest disturbances.

It discouraged anyone from sitting outside well enough. Petel and Dante would have their privacy on this.

Inside the cafeteria, the warmth was both welcoming and stifling. Petel charged ahead, straight for the line to get their food. A wolf on a mission.

As far back as Dante could remember, he'd been alone. No one dared to get close to the fires outside of the other Hell children, who'd only been forced to put up with him anyway. He enjoyed the solitude, but he'd be lying if he said he didn't enjoy having Petel and them around. And while it baffled him as to why they all put in so much effort for someone as unsociable as him, he needed to stop disregarding all of their work.

He had to acknowledge and accept their feelings. His own feelings, too.

From across the cafeteria, Vektor caught sight of them and rushed over, nimbly dodging around the crowd in order to reach them. "Wolf, Inferno, I'm glad you've arrived." He greeted them, not even needing to pause and catch his breath. Dante flinched back, the golden grip around his heart coming back to mind violently, but Petel remained unflappable. Vektor was rather agitated as he continued. "We need to meet up with the others and discuss our plan for

getting through the last of the White Forest. We must keep ahead of the Thief as much as possible."

Dante frowned, his curiosity able to squelch that panic for a moment. How did Vektor know that? He went to ask, but the words caught in his throat. Not quite curious enough, then. Petel waved Vektor off, saying quite bluntly, "Later. I have to talk with Dante first."

"What could possibly be more important than this?" Vektor asked, incredulous.

Petel rolled their eyes at the clueless, unemotional computer program. Both of them were single-minded in a similar way, yet that bit of humanity made all the difference. "Friendship." Petel answered succinctly.

Dante expected the Prince to pitch another fit about this. There was a goal in sight, programming to follow. Anything that stood in the way of that would be trampled over mercilessly; Vektor had demonstrated this well enough already. However, he paused to actually think it over. "Friendship." He echoed to himself in a mumble.

He stood back, then walked away completely. Just like that. Petel chuckled and gestured after him. "See? Even that guy gets it."

Dante couldn't form a reply even if he tried. That couldn't be right. Vektor's programming couldn't possibly allow something like this to happen. Those values couldn't be prioritised over the end goal, that just didn't make any sense. Not once had he demonstrated the ability to switch around the importance of his goals. Sure, he seemed to have inherited Dante's curiosity and got distracted just by being fascinated with the world around him, but this? This was too far!

This had to be a glitch or faulty execution of something in his code. An unintended misinterpretation from that clever learning algorithm.

They'd want to know about this. Would Dante tell them?

As they collected their breakfast, which was poutine and eggs today, Dante decided to keep this development to himself. It wasn't like they ever responded to his letters, anyway. They could interpret the raw data for themselves. He owed them nothing.

He thought again of Vektor's fingers reaching inside him, brushing past his heart, and decided that if Vektor wanted to finish the level, then they'd have to help as much as they could. That maybe he'd leapt to a conclusion about this Prince before taking in who he actually turned out to be. Just as Dante had disregarded all of Petel and Paige's efforts to connect. The thought still made him shudder, but he couldn't just act like Vektor had hurt him when the opposite was, in fact, true.

Petel informed Sonya and the others of the plan while Dante headed outside to choose a table. The second floor (and the rest of the building, really) protected the tables from the snow

and the sunlight, but the chill ran right through the otherwise open area. Not that it was much of an issue for Dante, who needed every chance to cool off, anyway. He slid into a seat and collapsed onto the table, resting his head on his arms.

He was the problem and he knew it. Training himself out of all those ingrained habits would be like teaching risotto with a lasagne recipe. He lifted his head to watch the snow outside as the sun rose higher, hidden behind the clouds, and could no longer come up with an argument as to why that wouldn't be worth the effort.

"Alright, thanks for doing this." Petel said, announcing their arrival. They set their tray down and sat across from Dante. Instantly at attention, Dante straightened up and waited for Petel to continue. "First off, I'm sorry about last night."

"I'm, um. S-Sorry, too." Dante winced, lowering his gaze to his tray of untouched food. "I lashed out, uh, unfairly because I w-was scared. You didn't — um. Deserve th-that."

Petel watched him a moment, then smiled easily. "Apology accepted. Thanks."

Dante nodded in reply, then exhaled tiredly. "I'm, um. Also sorry for trying to, to push you away so much. I know it, uh, hurt you a-and wasn't a good decision on, on my part."

"Sure wasn't." Petel smirked, satisfied with the admission. They didn't keep up that teasing tone, however, as they next said, "I accept that apology as well. Friends?"

They offered their hand out, palm up on the table. Dante smiled wryly to himself at the gesture and accepted it, linking their fingers together. "Yeah. Friends."

Petel grinned, practically projecting the perked up ears and wagging tail. No one could argue that they were more wolf than human. Just as Dante was more fire than person.

Petel pulled their hand back in order to start eating, apparently satisfied with that for now. Dante scraped his hand through his hair, pushing it out of his face for a moment as he hesitantly asked, "Do you, uh. Just not f-feel fear?"

"Not since I became the wolf, no." Petel said, swallowing their bite. "You could face your fears, too. You have the power to do that."

Dante grimaced at the thought of the fires and shadows and screaming. His gaze slid towards the falling snow outside of the area as he said, "I accept your apology as well. Is, um. Is there anything else you w-wanted to talk about?"

Petel smiled brightly. "You have your fires here. Don't you? Those can protect you from your fears, right?"

"That's. As long as I don't lose, lose control."

Dante deflated, pushing at his food half-heartedly. Discussing it so openly was an odd experience. He expected the shadows to be there every time he shifted his gaze, standing at the corners of his vision and grinning their pained, menacing grins. Petel thought for a moment, allowing the silence to dampen the space around them. Then they broke it with a pointed, "Do you not like us?"

"Wh-What?"

Dante's head snapped up in a panic. Petel grinned broadly and said, "Because I like you."

"N-No, no, it's not that!" Dante said hurriedly, waving his hands out in a childish gesture. "I-I, uh." He shrunk in on himself, a creeping embarrassment coming over him at the admission. "I actually r-really like you all, too. A lot."

"Thought so."

Petel sat back, content. Before they could get too comfortable, Dante said, "That's why. I pushed you all away. I didn't — I don't want to, to hurt any of you."

Petel stared at him for a good minute, really pretending to take his words into consideration. Then they said, "Pushing us away is hurtful, too, you know."

"I-I know that now." Dante admitted grumpily.

Petel went on, as if it were funny. "Kinda negates the whole purpose of trying to protect us if you're just gonna hurt our feelings yourself."

Dante rolled his eyes, amused but annoyed. "Good, uh. Th-That was a-a good use of vocabulary."

"Accept our gregarious feelings." Petel gestured out broadly, really on a roll now that Dante had given in. "Don't worry so much about what might happen. We wouldn't be here with you if we didn't want to share in your hardships as well as your companionship."

Dante couldn't help himself from smiling at how over the top Petel was being. That was usually Frank or Abraham's job. He shook his head and said, "Clearly, you're not worried about getting burned."

"Denying yourself and all of us would be too egregious."

"Okay, I get it."

They broke into a quiet laughter and, as easy as that, everything seemed to be solved. All of that previous anger and frustration evaporated completely. Dante would even be so bold as to say he understood the wolf a little better now.

Everything about Dante was designed to reject friendship, even before he'd taken that fateful trip down into Hell. He'd burned the bridge of his childhood companions so recently that it seemed better to burn everything else, too. This, however, proved that doing so would be too foolhardy, even for him.

Maybe Vektor did have his priorities in order.

They joined up with Paige, Sonya, Levy, and Kalyuga in the halls as they headed to English. Kalyuga and Paige laughed together over some joke while Levy and Sonya argued back and forth about something to do with their Music class. Petel jumped in where they could and, together like this, they made for a loud bunch.

Just as the silence drowned out his worries, their noise also distracted Dante from the spectres. He appreciated that more than he realised.

Finals were coming up fast, so Dante elected to spend his break in the Study Hall room, working frantically on finishing the English assignment. He was pretty sure he had his other classes handled. English, as usual, simply presented the most difficulty.

Before long, Frank came in and plopped down into the seat beside him. "Hey." Frank greeted, a bit more cautious than his usual cheeriness could cover up. "Working on your stuff?"

Dante shrugged, too invested in memorising the spelling of 'effervescent'. Why did English have to be such an amalgamation of languages? At least the notorious Italian 'gli' hadn't made it in there. Frank continued looking at him expectantly, letting the pause stretch on to the point of being awkward. After at least a minute, Frank finally turned away and chuckled uneasily to himself.

"Okay, so. Still doesn't talk when it's just me, huh?" He sighed, drumming his fingers against the table. Before Dante had a chance to reply, he launched into his next topic. "Listen, I'm really, really sorry about that time with the glitching and the bullet. I get that you're upset with me, but. The team needs both of us, so."

Dante tilted his head to the side, taken aback by this sudden display of repentance. He went to correct Frank, but the other boy continued in too much of a rush.

"We don't have to hang out anymore if you don't want to see me. I can always hang with Perci. Or Jonathan, or. Or." He paused, clearly stumped. Then he shrugged in an odd display of false confidence. "Well, I have plenty of friends besides you lot, so. Don't be concerned for me, especially if. If you can't stand being around me anymore."

He shrunk into himself at the end, the bravado fading quickly. Able to finally break in, Dante said, "I'm not, uh. Upset with you, Ernest."

"It's alright if you are. I know you never wanted our friendship, we kinda forced it onto you." Frank countered, talking too fast in his shame. "I get it. I'd be upset with me, too, if I was completely ignored by my so-called friends at every turn. And had to listen to them enjoying something I hated. And had to live in misery as they refused to compromise on such a dangerous thing."

"I-I'm not upset. Really."

Frank continued staring off to the side and Dante was fairly certain that he was about to bolt out of there. Dante certainly had enough experience with that instinct. Not so much with keeping someone else from running, though. And now wasn't the time for hesitation.

"Um, uh. Frank." He raised his hand to place on Frank's shoulder, then stopped. He was fire and danger. He could cause real harm. "That really, uh. Wasn't your fault. It's okay!"

Frank spared him a glance, raising an eyebrow in disbelief at his aborted gesture. "Are you sure?"

Dante fully withdrew his hand, giving up on that, and settled for a simpler, "Of, of course."

"Why, then, aren't you upset with me?" Frank asked next.

He turned to fully face Dante this time, eager for an explanation. This would be easier if Petel was here. Going through how Dante had never really had friends before and how he'd been wrong to lash out like that wasn't exactly easy. He couldn't just shrug again or not say anything, either, otherwise Frank would think he was lying. Panic rising higher in his throat, he blurted out, "You're not, uh, a threat."

Frank drew back, frowning in disbelief. "Uh, hello? I was part of the forced friendship problem? Not to mention how it was my powers that made you glitch out."

"No, uh, I-I mean."

Dante wanted to scream. He really was just inept at this. If the goblins could come and rip out all his toenails to save him the embarrassment of stumbling over everything he said, he'd appreciate it for once.

"You're, um. Gregarious." He said in the end, resigning himself to this. Petel had used them earlier, so of course they were the only things that came to mind while he blanked out of panic. "I don't h-hate you, Frank. I don't hate a-any of you. I'd, um. Really like it if, if we could be better friends, actually."

Frank scrutinised him for only a second before sitting back in relief. "Okay. Cool. I'd like that a lot, too." He let out a whoosh of breath, further deflating in a perfect mirror of exactly how

Dante felt right now. "Half the time I'm convinced you all consider me a nuisance, so. I'm glad you at least don't."

"No way!" Dante reeled back, offended. "Everyone's always in such a-a better mood when you're around. I'm the one wh-who's a nuisance."

Frank scoffed and smiled wryly up at him. "Nuh-uh. You're the darling of the pack. Petel and Paige'd form their own protection squad for ya if they could."

"I, uh. Thought that was how they viewed you."

"But I'm always trying too hard and being insensitive for the laughs." Frank gestured out grandly, then bowed his head and slumped onto the table in self-consciousness. "You at least have some power behind you, able to scare off those jerks bullying Petel and burn through anything that comes at you in the game. I'm just a squishy healer, not even a good member of the team."

Dante went to continue arguing, but stopped as the realisation of what was happening hit him. "We're. Um. More alike than, than I thought." He said instead.

Frank shot an unimpressed look his way, though some glint of understanding shone through. "How so?"

"Extremely self-conscious of, of ourselves and how others view us." Dante smiled bitterly and Frank giggled along at the humourlessness of the situation. After a beat of silence between them, Dante cautiously asked, "How, um. How were the, the fires, anyway?"

"Really cool!" Frank brightened up, regaining that usual ecstatic energy he usually displayed. "I had no idea they'd be controlled by your emotions, of all things."

Dante laughed softly, wincing. "Y-Yeah, it, uh. It really e-explains a lot, huh?"

"I mean, it's better than me." Frank shrugged cheekily. "I can't even deal damage directly to anything."

"That's a-a really weird design choice."

"Isn't it? Makes me wonder if I come off like that in real life, too."

The bell rang, signalling the end of break and their discussion. Frank pulled out his schoolwork from his bag, then peeked over shyly at Dante.

"Um, Dante?"

"Yes?"

"I'm glad you wanna be friends. I think you're pretty fantastic."

Frank grinned broadly, facing Dante fully now. Dante smiled in return, a bit too genuinely. "Thanks. You, too." His smile fell and he added, "Sorry for making you th-think I didn't like you."

"Hey, it happens." Frank shrugged, easing back into his usual carefree attitude. "That's why communication's key."

Communication was the key.

Dante pondered this while Frank settled in with what looked like his Chemistry work. The reason why they were able to operate like this with one another was due to their willingness to discuss these matters openly with each other. Not one of them ever brushed the others off with a, 'It's too complicated for you to understand', or a, 'There's no time to properly explain the intricacies'.

Except for Dante. He was the only one prone to doing this. Just as his parents did to him. That had to stop, and now.

At least it revealed the reason why Vektor was able to prioritise them over his main goal; they all talked too much.

Petel and Percival arrived just as classes started and the four of them sat together in a comfortable silence, studying for their various classes. Petel helped Dante with the few terms he was missing and he got to look over Petel's Geometry for any errors. Frank and Percival asked them both for some pointers on their own English class assignment, which Dante was surprised he could actually help with.

They had become such a cohesive unit. How could Dante have ignored the obvious for so long?

At lunch, Jonathan, Percival, and Natasha joined them at their table. Frank pulled out a box from his bag and placed it before them proudly. "Everyone, draw a name!" He announced.

"We're doing it this way, huh?" Jonathan asked, smirking.

"Simple and elegant." Paige said with a smile.

As they took their turns drawing out slips of paper, Frank said, "The person you get's the one you'll give a gift to. We can have a little get-together the Friday before the end of term and have the exchange then. C'mon, Vektor, you take one, too. That sound good to everyone?"

"That'll be after all our exams, so I've got no problems with it."

Paige nodded, satisfied. Kalyuga, growing giddy, said, "I should be able to make it."



Though his confusion outweighed his annoyance, Vektor asked, "And when should we convene to finish the Forest?"

"Wow, you chaps made it to the end already?" Jonathan glanced around them, looking reluctant to directly address Vektor for some reason. "We're still a ways from it."

"Vektoria's been steamed about it for the past week." Natasha joined in, laughing.

Paige rolled her eyes somewhat fondly. "Not at all surprised to hear that."

Vektor frowned at Jonathan and said, "We already discussed this, didn't we? Why are you acting—?"

"Anyway." Jonathan cut him off hurriedly, raising his voice a bit above a natural volume. "Damon, Niculaie, and I are all bogged down with our own Third Year projects, so it's been a struggle to even have time to meet up."

"That's been an issue for me, as well." Abraham deflated, showing his tiredness for once. "We'll be lucky if we make time on the weekend to finish things."

Vektor fell to a pout, having been shut out completely. Paige said, "If everyone's doing well enough by this Saturday, we'll go then."

"Then, uh, swimming!" Dante quickly blurted out.

"Yeah, we can go Sunday." Fank sat up, fully energised at the prospect. Since everyone had taken a paper by now, he took the last one out of the box and then returned it to his bag. "It'll be a nice break before the crunch begins. We'll have to get off-campus passes, but it'll be well worth it. Does anyone know of any inside pools in the area?"

Percival sat up, slapping his hands down on the table in his excitement. "I know one."

"And I can help with the off-campus passes." Abraham said.

As the rest of the table grew more and more abuzz with the prospect of these plans, Dante took a moment to check who it was he'd have to get a gift for. On the paper, in Frank's enthusiastic scrawl, was Petel's name.

Well. That should have been ideal. They were roommates and all. They'd just had a talk to better understand one another.

Yet he had no idea what to get the self-proclaimed wolf.

"Who'd you get?" Natasha asked, looking over Dante's shoulder to see the paper.

Dante quickly held it to his chest to hide it. At the same time, Frank half-laughed and half-complained, "It's supposed to be a secret, Zima."

"Aww, that's no fun." Natasha booed jokingly. "As long as we don't tell the person we're giving the gift to, it should be fair game discussion-wise."

A general consensus of laughter rose amongst them, giving Dante a moment to restructure himself in his panic. The more he thought about this, the more he realised he had no idea what all Petel even liked outside of their schooling and game antics. Would a music album be too presumptuous? Was Petel tired of receiving things with wolves by this point? What could Dante even get when he wasn't allowed much extra spending money?

There wasn't enough time to figure this out. What was he supposed to do?

Frank looked over at Jonathan once the laughter died down and teased, "You've got a plan concocting in that brain of yours already, don'tcha?"

"Pretty much."

Jonathan smirked in reply. Sonya asked, "Will you be joining us for the swim?"

"Ooh, am I invited, too?" Natasha asked.

Kalyuga laughed at the other girl's eagerness while Paige smiled fondly at her roommate. Jonathan wrinkled his nose in distaste and said, "I'll pass on that, thanks."

"Not a swimmer? That's understandable." Abraham shrugged it off, which seemed to put Jonathan more at ease. The Huntsman then quickly fell into contemplation. "Let's see, with Zima and without Jonathan, that makes eleven of us."

"Do you really think they'll allow us eleven passes?" Kalyuga asked, growing concerned.

"It should actually just be eight." Levy reassured her, leaning around Sonya in order to pat her shoulder. "You and the Helsings live off-campus, so no need to get passes for y'all."

"Eight is still a bit much." Paige sighed, leaning her elbows onto the table and her head in her hands. "How are we gonna get all of us to a pool that's definitely not within walking distance?"

The group of them looked around at one another, waiting for one of them to speak up with the proposed solution. Dante was clueless on this one, having no experience in exploring anything other than the beach and the mountains around his home.

"We could take the sub?" Frank finally suggested.

"There is a station line near enough here." Abraham said, raising a hand to cover his mouth.

Jonathan stood and said in parting, "Have fun discussing your plans."

"You're leaving?" Frank asked, his tone teasing but genuine. "We just settled all the stuff for our gift exchange."

"Which means I don't need to be here anymore." Jonathan replied, exasperated but endeared. "Have to work on my project in the lab while I've got the chance, same as any of you and your exams."

He waved to them, then walked out of the cafeteria entirely. Natasha looked ready to shout giddily after him, but deflated as a realisation struck her. "I can't go with you guys, I made plans with Aglaé and Gaëlle for this weekend." She lamented.

Kalyuga frowned in sympathy. "Aww, that's too bad."

"But I'll definitely be there for this gift exchange." Natasha perked up instantly, also standing from the table. "See you later, Paige."

"You, too, Nat." Paige called in return, waving.

They settled back into discussing plans and Dante sat back, willing himself to not worry about it for the moment. There were plenty of other things to worry about that took precedence. Like exams, for one. Or the tonsil touchers that might sneak out of his throat to spill his teeth, for another. Plenty of other things.

It didn't stop him from thinking it over for the rest of the day. He thought he might ask Paige for some advice on what Petel might like, but they were busy all of Friday with schoolwork and there was never a good moment to bring up the subject.

It was hard to find a moment where Paige and Petel were separated from one another. Especially when Dante was more likely to be alone with Petel. Which didn't help at all.

By the time classes had finished Saturday, a nagging desperation had taken root at the back of Dante's mind. He was so nervous about the whole thing that he could only draw wolves in his sketchbook.

## Chapter 19: Closure, In More Ways Than One

"We have to make it to the end of the Forest today." Vektor said as they entered the scanners, as if they weren't well aware of all this by now. "Then, if we're lucky, we can get a head start on the Tundra before the break."

"Speak for yourself, mate." Frank groaned, his voice muffled as all the scanners closed. "You may be a computer program with perfect recall, but the rest of us have fallible memories."

"Some more than others." Paige mumbled to herself.

Dante closed his eyes, that built-up stress thrumming in his ears, and he welcomed the drop. As long as he fell into the black, the dripping shadows couldn't reach him. The game was its own thing with its own set of demons.

He landed inside the checkpoint, along with the others, and the fire ignited around him. Frank grinned over at him, more at ease than he'd been since the glitch incident. "Keep your head up. We got this." Frank said.

"As long as we work together and stop shooting each other, yes." Abraham laughed.

Petel charged out, eager as ever. "Practice makes perfect."

"Of what? Shooting each other or not shooting each other?" Paige teased in amusement.

"Please, we don't have the time for this."

Vektor strode forward to take the lead. Frank and Abraham went along with no hesitation, but Dante dragged his feet, keeping the fires as far from them as possible. Abraham looked around the clearing briefly, then asked, "Any idea how far the end actually is from here? Or if we're clear on enemies for the moment?"

"You're clear for right now." Paige said. She sounded a little distracted. "I can't tell you how far exactly the end is, but. You should be able to reach it."

The hesitation in her voice was one Dante recognised. He often used that same tone. Vektor powered forward, directing them into the undergrowth along the path and oblivious to this unease now hanging above them. "Thank you, Navigator. Keep us updated on the situation should things change."

"I'm certainly trying." She mumbled in response.

That got Petel and Frank's attention and they all shared a concerned look amongst each other. Vektor continued to charge ahead, not waiting for them, so they hurried after the Prince in lieu of addressing it. Dante glanced up towards the sky, wondering what it could be that Paige saw in her data. Another trap? The Guardian?

If it was an issue, she'd let them know. Dante pushed it out of his mind and focused on following Vektor and the others, keeping his distance as the fires thrummed with his unease.

The strangest thing he'd noticed throughout the whole of the Forest was that the scenery and the undergrowth hadn't changed. The white and green leaves, the brown and white trunks, the white dirt; all of it was just the same as it had been right at the start. The trees didn't grow any larger, the undergrowth never changed in species or anything. It all seemed very much like the same repeating assets placed into a map, like an actual game. Maybe a little lazier, considering how same-y it all looked. Dante's own sense of creativity screamed in protest at all of this.

Petel stopped suddenly, throwing out their arm. Startled, Frank and Dante jumped back and Abraham quickly drew his rifle, ready to battle. Vektor paused as well, noticing that the rest of them had come to a standstill. Before he could ask, Paige's voice came overhead, concerned. "Something's headed towards you. It looks like a group?"

Frank stood upright as he asked, "A group?"

"Vektoria." Gritting his teeth, Vektor summoned his visor and key staff. "Be prepared for battle."

Abraham's expression steeled over and he levelled his rifle out in front of them. "Way ahead of you." He said.

Dante gulped back an influx of heat, his fires shivering in agitation around him. He wasn't sure about confronting Damon so soon. The anger knotted up at the pit of his chest, ready to burst out, but what would they think if they saw him like that? Did he have it in him to fight the rest off should they retaliate?

The rustling and general conversation of the others came into earshot. The exact words couldn't be distinguished, but Dante was pretty sure the voices were Damon and Vektoria. Then, startlingly, Damon walked right out of the undergrowth in front of them and within view, in the middle of complaining, "—it's not quite like that. We're lucky AIR hasn't figured out yet. Ain't that—"

He caught sight of Abraham, Vektor, and Petel, prepared for battle, and froze. Aglaé ran into his back, knocking him out of it, and he shoved the others away and back out of sight.

"That's why, that's why, shit." He hissed at them, not doing a very good job of being quiet. "New plan, we need a new plan here, company's arrived."

"It can't be that bad." Vektoria loudly huffed and, after a squawk of protest from Damon, forced her way through the undergrowth and back into their field of vision. "Confirm, Hyde, what it is we're dealing with."

Her jaw dropped open in shock on seeing them. In an instant, Vektor charged forward to strike at her, but her reflexes were too quick. She jumped back nimbly, summoning her mask and weapon, then growled in frustration.

"Why didn't you say anything about this, Hyde?" She screeched up towards the sky. Vektor lunged again and she dodged once more, too upset to bother parrying his attacks for the moment. Whatever Jonathan's response was, it didn't seem to help as she went on screeching. "Don't give me that! You're our eyes on the matter, you should be more useful!"

Petel pulled their lips back in aggravation, baring their teeth. "Same problem, different rude child."

"Be nice to Jonathan!" Frank shouted.

"Oh, that's what those signatures mean." Paige said, catching their attention while Vektoria continued dodging Vektor's assault and shrieking at the sky. "I'd only seen them the once before, and they're not really the same as the other enemies, so I didn't recognise them right away."

"Sure seem like enemies to me." Abraham murmured dangerously.

"I also can't hear them, if they've said anything." She supplied.

Dante remembered that from the last time, too, so at least that was consistent. This whole game was filled with such odd design choices. Abraham stepped forward and shouted, "Face me, Vampire! Atone for your sins!"

Petel glanced back at Frank, who shrugged. The undergrowth ahead of them rustled violently until Niculaie was shoved into view. Niculaie, nervous and hesitant as usual, protested, "No, I can't! What if he — again?"

"Just give your speech, mate." Damon said, barely sticking his head out. "That should keep his code hostile enough."

He disappeared back into the bushes and Niculaie floundered, looking ready to bolt. Abraham would give chase if he did, though. And if Dante knew anything about dealing with being hunted, it was that the fear of being relentlessly pursued was greater than facing that fear.

Fleeing meant the problem would follow them forever, snapping at their heels and breathing on the back of their neck at every corner. Confronting it head on at least meant putting an end to the stress, even if they had to die with it.

Abraham took a step closer towards Niculaie, his rifle aimed right for the vampire's chest. Panicked, Niculaie jumped and his words tumbled out in a mess. "What for? Say you, Huntsman. 'Tis thee I-I beseech. Bestow!"

Interestingly, Abraham stepped down and lowered his rifle. "Say your piece, creature of the night." He said. "Let them be your final words."

Niculaie paused for a moment to breathe, then launched into his speech with such a dramatic flair that it seemed rehearsed. "My final words? Alack. Alay! What misfortune I feel, what grief. A creature of the night as peaceful as myself, hunted down by such a cruel fate. Nay, not fate. But at the hands of a truly wicked foe, the — uh."

He froze up, his dramatic and sweeping movements hitching with his momentum. He looked Abraham up and down, then turned away and continued floundering in spite of that.

"Um. The, ah, the cr—uh."

He flapped his cape a bit, clearly fighting himself on something. Again, Damon poked his head out from the foliage and he hissed hard enough that his forked tongue slipped out. "Say it, Nicu. Call him out for being the cruel monster he is."

"I-I can't do that." Niculaie shook his head, his cape bunching up oddly at his chest and shoulders. As if it were attempting to wipe the tears from his eyes. "It's not really. Y'know. I can't be th-that mean to Abe."

Damon smacked a claw over his face as Niculaie devolved further into mumbling. A softer heart than most of the rest of them. It was a wonder they didn't give Niculaie more of a healer's abilities, like Frank, instead of the Vampire build. The buck teeth were also ridiculous and Dante still hated the decision behind that. Abraham was convinced, it seemed, as he aimed his rifle again and roared, "If that is how you feel, then prove yourself by defeating me!"

He took the shot and Niculaie yelped, struck with enough force to fall back into the undergrowth. Damon fully emerged and slashed at Abraham with his claws, though he was too slow to catch the Huntsman. "If it's a fight you want, then let's go." Damon growled.

"We'll gladly engage." Aglaé said, darting out and aiming for Petel.

Petel rolled out of the way, leaving Aglaé to charge directly into Dante. Squeaking in surprise, Dante reacted on pure instinct, raising his hands and the fires around him as a wall. Aglaé hit the fire and, thankfully, retreated with a yelp of pain. Beside Dante, Frank loudly

protested towards the sky, "Sure, let's all fight 'cause that's so much fun. I love being able to participate in these things."

"You, too?" Natasha laughed, floating into view as well. "C'mon, then!"

She swooped over towards him and he gave a startled yell. Dante quickly concentrated his pillar over to stop Natasha, acting now as a wave shoving her against the ground. She shrieked under its pressure and fought hard to get out, bursting through the side after a minute and retreating.

"What the heck, that's no fair!" She huffed at them, flapping her wings and brushing off the residual embers.

"I underestimated him from last time, too." Aglaé agreed.

The fires returned to their place surrounding Dante and he said, "S-Sorry."

They weren't his true target. He couldn't break in easily without possibly burning Abraham again, however, as the two currently clashed claws to crosses. Frank hopped over and said, "Don't apologise, that was brilliant."

He bounced with an abundance of energy, probably wanting to pat Dante on the back or something similar but with no way to do so. A gleam of challenge entered his eyes and he turned to address Natasha and Aglaé.

"Hey, instead of trying to fight each other like fools, why not just have a race to the finish?"

Petel padded over to them, their ears perked up. "A race?"

"That does sound fun." Natasha agreed, back to her cheery self.

"Are you out of your minds?" Vektoria shouted, landing on Natasha's other side and making both her and Aglaé wince from her loudness. She swung the point of her key staff at Dante and them accusingly, indeed holding it more like a sword than a staff. "You want to have an inane little competition with the enemy when there are such high stakes on the line? They're not to be trusted, they're loyal to that useless excuse for a Prince!"

Aglaé rolled his eyes, immediately disengaged from the situation. Natasha thrust her fists and feet down defiantly. "They're our friends! Stop making this seem like work when it's supposed to be fun."

Vektoria went to reply, but Vektor charged in and distracted her into blocking his attack. He drove her away from them and out of the conversation, at least. Frank and Petel frowned after her, then Frank turned excitedly towards Dante and said, "C'mon, you gotta keep up."



"What?" Dante asked dumbly.

"Careful of your fires."

Petel winked at him, then took off into the Forest at full speed. Frank laughed and followed after as quickly as he could, though Petel was clearly faster. Dante yelled after them, too surprised to react coherently. Natasha and Aglaé, likewise, sped after the other two. "Now we're talking." Aglaé laughed to himself.

"Even with the head start, we'll beat you!" Natasha shouted gleefully.

Dante hurriedly looked to see if the others had noticed this. Vektor was too wrapped up in battling Vektoria while Abraham had a pretty single-minded focus on Damon and Niculaie. Jonathan and Paige could inform them, but Paige had asked them to refrain from splitting up like this.

Dante steeled himself over and swung out his hand towards the Demon King. The fires followed obediently, forming a clawed hand that swept Damon away in its grasp and slammed him to the ground. Damon cried out in pain, then shouted, "Stay out of this, Fireball!"

He even resorted to using Dante's nickname around the school. How quaint. He struggled under the fires, so Dante pressed down harder and got another yelp for his troubles. Niculaie gasped and cried, "You're hurting him, Vicario!"

"Good!" Dante shouted back.

Niculaie's concern was short-lived, as Abraham came in hot with his throwing crosses and forced Niculaie away and out of sight. Dante curled his hand into a fist tightly, crushing Damon in the grip of the fire.

"You know y-you can't win." Dante ground the words out, seething. "Always — I've always been. Too afraid to let you."

Damon shouted in pure frustration. But, without further effort, his body dissolved into code amongst the flames. Dante exhaled slowly, the fires returning to their place around him, and he took off after Frank and Petel. Above him, Paige said, "Dunno if that was really the best time for that, but you won't see me complaining. Petel, you're about to reach the end of the map. Abraham, Vektor, maybe you two should look into following the rest of your team."

Dante was too far away to hear anyone's responses. If they did respond. On his own, running frantically through most of the undergrowth, he was reminded of the times he'd play tag with his imaginary companions. Before he had to worry of the danger they posed to him.

He missed the sea and the mountainside of his home. Going back there for the break would sate that homesickness, but it also meant seeing Lietta and Caro again. As much as he hated this place, he'd miss his friends more than he'd miss his hometown. Of that, he was certain.

A dart of white and black sped past him, going at such a blinding speed it took Dante a moment to recognise them as Vektoria and not the Guardian. That explained her nimble dodging. And possibly Petel's, as Petel had run off with just as much speed. She left a trail of destruction in her haste, half-deleting some code and ripping through the rest.

Unable to catch up, Dante gasped out, "Vektoria. Vektoria! She's heading — Petel!"

"I'm getting to it." Paige huffed, then relayed, "Petel, Frank, you've hit the end, but look out. Vektoria's headed your way, and fast. Vektor, Abraham, and Dante won't get there before her, so maybe prepare for an attack."

She had to do so much for them. Without thinking more about it, Dante called up towards the sky, "Thanks!"

"You're just about there, too, Dante." Paige said, her tone softer and fonder now.

Dante smiled to himself, the fires thrumming in time with his heart. After a few more steps, he broke through the Forest and came into a wide clearing. Much wider than any of the clearings for the checkpoints, mainly because it stretched all along the horizon where the Forest just ended. The sky was visible, finally, and Dante noticed there was no sun or other noticeable source of light up there, just the blank expanse of white. The horizon line blurred into what looked like a still sea, which was clear enough that Dante could barely notice the difference between the two.

Standing at the edge of the cliff where the whole level seemed to just drop off were Petel and Frank. Petel stood protectively in front of Frank, growling as they kept back from Vektoria, Natasha, and Aglaé, who seemed to be fighting one another.

"Traitors!" Vektoria screeched, stabbing at Natasha with the tip of her silver key staff.

"Woah, hey!" Natasha hopped out of the way, the staff scraping against her side and making her wince. The crazed Thief kept after her and she settled for blocking instead of dodging as several more of Vektoria's jabs landed. "Quit it! We're not traitors, chill."

Aglaé pulled Natasha out from Vektoria's assault and blocked her stabs with his claws instead. Using more force and volume than normal, he said, "Stop attacking us!"

"Not until you explain yourselves!" Vektoria screeched, pausing to point accusingly at Petel and Frank with her free hand. "Tell me why you're content to sit and chat instead of destroying them so that victory can be ours!"

"We were about to fight. You interrupted that." Aglaé mumbled, rolling his eyes.

"Give it a rest, 'Toria." Natasha said, exasperated. "Even Jonathan's tired of your constant need for conflict."

After a moment of pause, she laughed while Vektoria screamed in frustration. Frank sighed and said, "Really makes you appreciate our robot Prince, doesn't it?"

"The lesser of two terrible programs." Petel agreed with a grimace.

Abraham and Vektor broke through the undergrowth next, making Dante squeak and hurry out into the clearing so as not to burn the two. Vektor, who had dispelled his key staff and visor in order to drag Abraham along, gestured for them to follow with his free hand and called, "The exit's this way. Quickly!"

Vektoria's attention snapped over to them and she sprinted at the Prince. Without thinking, Dante leapt in the Thief's path and raised the fires to wall her off. She didn't even change course, slamming directly into them and pushing so hard that he was knocked off his feet. That the flames didn't turn on him in retaliation was a terrifying thing to worry about later. She pushed and screamed all the way up until her form fizzled and she was ejected from the game.

Once it was quiet again, Dante flopped fully against the ground and allowed the fires to melt back around him. They flickered weakly, mirroring how winded he was now. Niculaie poked his head out from the Forest, meekly asking, "Is. Is it safe yet?"

Abraham struggled against Vektor's grip and the Prince had to put in an admirable amount of effort to keep them rooted to their spot. Aglaé dropped his head into his claws while Natasha chuckled uneasily. "Maybe not yet." She said.

"What happened to Damon?" Aglaé asked.

"That was. Vicario."

Niculaie nodded towards Dante. While Frank and Petel brightened at this information, proud that their Fireball friend had accomplished something, Aglaé and Natasha both let out defeated groans. That really said a lot more about their sessions than any words could convey.

"Seriously, how'd that Fireball end up with the second best powers here?" Aglaé complained.

Natasha frowned incredulously at him. "Who's got the first best?"

He shrugged moodily, mumbling something inaudibly. Natasha's eyes lit up. While she pestered him about this, Vektor spoke up and distracted Dante. "Thank you, Inferno. Let us continue. Wolf, would you please—?"

Petel walked over before Vektor finished, grabbing the scruff of Abraham's outfit in their jaws and yanking the Huntsman along. Abraham continued struggling, despite how futile it was, and shouted, "The battle hasn't been won yet! Let me put that filth to rest once and for all!"

Petel growled something unintelligible, as their mouth was full. Vektor shook his head and led the way along the outskirts of the Forest, away from where Natasha and Aglaé stood. Frank looked to Dante, concerned, and Dante watched Natasha tease a blushing Aglaé while also trying to coax Niculaie out of the undergrowth.

There was no more point in fighting them. An oddly rational and diplomatic decision to come from the Prince who couldn't help but rise to every challenge the Thief threw down.

Then again, Vektoria wasn't here right now. There was no other challenge left to meet, especially with victory right in front of them.

Dante stood, nodding towards Frank in reassurance. His body was drained, but the fires lit up just a bit brighter in response to his efforts. Frank smiled, then hurried after Vektor and the others. Dante followed, leaving Natasha and them on their own.

The Thief could hold a grudge. Dante was well aware of that. Vektor's existence seemed proof enough of this truth. The way Vektoria had deleted a hole through the Forest in her rampage came to mind and Dante shuddered.

They walked along the cliff just long enough for the others to pop out of sight. Dante drifted closer to the edge and, curiously, reached a hand out towards the emptiness. It hit an invisible barrier, like the one in the hub, though there was no visual indication and his fire clipped right through it.

Then Vektor stopped them at an innocuous point and said, "Here."

He crouched and placed both hands down against the ground, facing the drop off. The glow of gold extended from his hands and out towards the horizon, creating a bridge. It reached an invisible point that opened to reveal an area that looked like the inside of the checkpoints.

"There we are." Vektor stood, withdrawing his hands from the dirt and finalising the bridge's form. It looked like the same materials as the boulders he'd create, only as a path instead of as a weapon. He shook out his arms, his eyes still glowing brightly. "I'm not sure I'll have enough to unlock the Tundra, but at least we've made it to the end."

"That's, uh." Frank started, awed enough to need a moment to restructure his thoughts. "There's no way we'd have found that on our own."

"That is why it is imperative that I lead your way." Vektor smiled around at them in triumph, then walked forward onto the bridge. "Come now, let us proceed."

Without hesitation, Petel followed. Abraham, now calm and freed, went next. Frank mumbled a quiet, "That doesn't really answer anything."

Still, he walked after them, leaving Dante to trail behind. They filed into the back of the area and through the wall, which acted remarkably similar to the entrance of the whole Forest, and emerged back out into the void of black space that was the hub area. Only now, they stood between two of the spheres on a complete path, the broken one behind them. Abraham breathed out a soft, "We did it."

Frank's annoyance turned quickly to excitement. Petel grinned toothily and exclaimed, "We did it!"

They raised their voice from its usual growl in order to cheer heartily. Catching on to their enthusiasm, Abraham gave a loud whoop and Frank laughed along. Vektor stood back, observing them, and smiled an oddly soft and genuine smile. The expression was utterly foreign from anything Dante remembered or expected from the Prince and really helped him step back from all of his presumptions.

No matter what Dante could say about Vektor's origins, the Prince was a completely different entity. He deserved their support and the benefit of the doubt at the very least.

"Congrats, mates." Paige laughed, her echoing voice catching their attention and snapping Dante out of his thoughts. "Ready to get out and eat?"

Dante perked up. After exerting himself, he was actually pretty hungry. Petel looked to Vektor, interestingly enough, and said, "Maybe we can catch a quick sneak peek of the next level?"

Frank and Abraham turned towards Vektor to implore the Prince as well. Vektor blinked a few times, snapped out of his own moment, and hummed thoughtfully. "Let me see if I have enough magic for it."

Frank cheered and Abraham laughed as Vektor stepped forward along the path. He waved a hand towards the sphere in front of them, that gold glow returning. That was a good sign. The sphere flashed gold as well and a click resonated around the void, much like the first time they'd gained entry to the Forest. Paige said, "Good news, it worked."

Vektor dropped his hand and mumbled, "Just barely."

"Let's go!" Frank cheered, running straight into the sphere.

Petel and Abraham both shouted and hurried after Frank. Vektor gestured for Dante to go first, looking as winded as Dante was. Dante found himself asking, "You, uh. Gonna be o-okay?"

"Nothing a good cycle of rest won't recover." He replied simply.

That was probably the best Dante was going to get from the Prince at the moment. He braced himself, then walked through the white of the sphere and stepped into an area with a wide, open and grey sky. The path below him was surprisingly cold, being made up of grey, almost white ice. Outside of this path that stretched ahead of them into the visible distance, the expanse of grey sky, and the grey mist below the path obscuring what lay beneath (though it was probably nothingness, just the same as the Forest), it was surprisingly barren. That probably helped it load much faster than the Forest.

Vektor popped in behind him, making him jump, and the Prince said, "This is Grey Tundra, the second level along our path."

The area they'd entered from looked like a giant glacier, similar to the large tree they'd started at in the Forest. All originality and uniqueness had been expended on their game builds instead of on the levels they were traversing, then. Petel said, "And it doesn't snow here?"

"Goodness, no." Vektor shook his head, facing the entrance. "It'd be like what happened with the Class I overload. I'd offer up more of an explanation, but it would be pointless when we can't make any progress for the moment. Please, excuse my rudeness."

He phased right through the front of the glacier as he left the area. Petel's ears and tail drooped, but their group compliantly filed back out without argument. Once they were huddled together on the path in the void, Paige logged them out and they fell to reality once more.

Dante landed on his feet inside the scanner, grateful supper would be soon. He stepped out and was surprised at how wobbly he was. Vektor flopped out from the centre scanner face first onto the ground, also exhausted.

Frank hurried over to his side, helping him up to his knees despite the Prince's inability to support himself right now. "You gonna be okay to go to supper, bruv?"

"Why would I not be?"

Vektor looked at Frank in real confusion, not seeing the issue here. For once, Dante couldn't tell if it was Vektor's pride or inhumanity that caused this. Vektor's body was exhausted, but his mind was as alert as ever. Abraham crouched down by the two and offered them a hand, saying, "Perhaps because of your current inability to support yourself due to the differences in gravitational pulls, as you once said?"

Flustered now, Vektor muttered, "Thank you for your assistance."

"You remember that, of all things?" Frank laughed as Abraham helped Vektor to his feet.

The three of them continued chatting and laughing as they exited the tower together. Paige hopped off the computer chair and clapped Dante on the back, startling him. Her enthusiasm was so genuine and she was a friend, not a back troll. Dante had to get used to this.

Paige and Petel walked with Dante outside and soon they were all together in the cafeteria, enjoying the night's supper and one another's company. Sonya and Levy offered their congratulations at the successful venture and the mood was easily ecstatic. Paige chastised Abraham and Vektor for being distracted while Abraham lamented his inability to defeat the Vampire this time. Frank and Petel praised Dante for his part as well.

"You really have gotten better." Frank reassured him.

Petel agreed and Dante was so touched that he was sure his food tasted so much better, no rotten bits or maggots to worry about.

## Chapter 20: A Wolf On Fire

Getting the off-campus passes was easier than they had all expected. A combination of Abraham and Dante asking for them did the trick. Apparently, flexing their parental clout could come in handy on these occasions. And though Paige, Kalyuga, Frank, and Petel all tried to chip in for the sub fare, Abraham and Percival pretty insistently took care of it.

"The fare's not that much, even for all of us." Abraham reasoned as they chose their seats.

"It makes more sense for everyone to save their funds for the pool entry fee." Percival added.

Petel couldn't argue that. Their group nearly took up a whole section of seating on their own, even when fitting three to a row, but the trip wasn't long enough to settle in. Petel had just gotten comfortable in leaning against Sonya's side when their stop came up.

As they walked, Petel observed the city's surprisingly busy streets around them. Quite a few autos drove by on the clear roads, which were probably salted to keep the snow from building up too much, and there were a number of other people walking on their own adventures. Petel thought of introducing himself to one of these random passersby; 'Hello, I am the Wolf, using they and them pronouns now. How do you do?' Giddiness at this fact made Petel smile and they enjoyed the idea a minute longer.

Also, Vektor carried Frank on his shoulders the whole way and no one else seemed to want to ask about it.

Petel finally asked, "Enjoying the view from up there?"

Levy gave a joking, "Saving your legs for the fun?"

Frank grinned at them in response as Vektor said, "Doktor assisted me the other day. I'm simply returning the favour as requested."

Abraham's eyes lit up and Petel had the exact same reaction to that information. If they could have been asking for this sort of return the whole time, then Petel had a lot of catching up to do. Paige frowned at them, unimpressed, and Percival slapped a hand over his face as they got into who should be next. Surprisingly, even Sonya joined in the argument. It got Kalyuga laughing, which made Levy laugh as well, and Dante hung back in mild confusion at their antics.



They arrived at the pool before a consensus could be reached, so they agreed to settle things with a swimming competition.

"I'm usually the one to carry my friends, so it would be nice to see what that's like." Abraham said in excitement.

The statement struck Petel as a bit odd, but they let it be as they entered the building and went into the changing rooms. Dante's eagerness showed through once more, as he was the first to finish and he hurried out to dive straight into the pool. As fast as Petel was, they were certain they'd have no chance winning that race if they tried.

"He's real eager for being a literal fire." Frank said.

Petel smiled to himself, realising they had the answer to this. "He grew up by the sea."

Dante had trusted Petel with such precious information. All of the walls he put up constantly were just another way to let the fear rule him, yet he'd still allowed Petel through. Even if it was just a little at first or seemingly inconsequential to others, he was getting better about it and Petel couldn't be happier.

Petel wanted to get him a gift, too, even though Natasha was the one they'd pulled for the gift exchange. Would that be considered rude?

The pool was, surprisingly, not as crowded as Petel had been expecting. While the lifeguard on duty discouraged them from any roughhousing they might've gotten into, they still had fun racing one another and playing other games. Paige beat them soundly in pure power while Petel and Dante were matched in speed.

Percival continued doing laps even after they'd tallied their final results and Dante joined him, no longer racing and just having fun. Kalyuga and Frank enjoyed tossing around a beach ball, which quickly turned into a game of keep away once Levy joined, and Sonya ended up sitting out with Abraham as their Huntsman took a nap.

"You must've tired yourself out too quickly." Sonya said as they were all sitting out to take a break.

"No, it's weirder." Abraham said. He paused to yawn, then continued. "Large bodies of water just look so relaxing that I end up falling asleep if I hang around them too long."

Sonya quirked his head to the side, perplexed as to how that worked. Percival shrugged and said, "Doesn't matter if it's the beach or a fountain, he always conks out."

Petel chuckled and said, "Good thing the school doesn't have a lake, then, right?"

"Oh, there almost was one." Kalyuga raised her hand in a manner befitting a teacher, drawing their attention. "It was a topic of hot debate when they'd renamed it to Marina Royal years ago, but they ended up cancelling plans for even an on-campus pool. Something about avoiding lawsuits and not wanting to hire more guards, if I remember right."

"How do you know that?" Levy asked, impressed.

"My parents did a lot of research into the school even before I was accepted." Kalyuga glanced off to the side, towards the wall with its high windows, playing with the ends of her wet hair in embarrassment. "The only thing they couldn't find out was who exactly bought the place when it became a privately owned establishment, actually."

Petel frowned in bemusement. "It's owned by one person?"

"Or one entity." Sonya hummed at the thought. "I didn't know that, either."

They sat in silence for a minute, thinking it over. This handily explained the whole computer with a virtual reality game being allowed on campus at all. Maybe. Petel glanced over to the pool, where Dante was still swimming. Could this really have something to do with him? He hadn't really denied it. And he seemed to know more about it than he was able to reveal.

The memory of that night Petel had woken up to what sounded like Dante choking came to mind next and Petel pushed those suspicions aside for now. Trying to get him to open up about it in a crowded area would probably end in running or screaming, no matter how much better he'd gotten.

Paige, deciding similarly, stood and stretched her arms up. "Since we're all pretty much done here, let's head back and get lunch now." She said.

Frank stood quickly and exclaimed, "Ooh! Let's get hamburgs or something!"

Kalyuga, Percival, and Petel looked up in interest. Paige, however, shot that notion down as she said, "I mean, let's head back to the school and eat."

Frank whined playfully. "Aww, come on. We're already out. How can you not eat while you're out?"

"We'd have to carry our wet things along with us."

"Which we're doing anyway since we have to take the sub back."

Frank puffed up, proud of his argument skills. Paige sputtered, growing frustrated. "It's — It costs money to eat out, Frank."

"Oh, I can cover you if you need it." Abraham volunteered with a yawn.

"Or I can." Percival joined in. "It's no problem, really."

"No." Paige said, firm and polite. "The two of you already paid for our fares, I couldn't ask you to do more than that."

"Then." Dante spoke up, drawing attention to him. Petel hadn't noticed him leave the water to join them. "I could, uh. W-Would you accept my, um. My offer, Ph—uh. P-Paige?"

Petel softened completely staring at this timid, water-loving fireball. Paige's defences, too, seemed to melt, as she could hardly muster up another protest. "Are you sure?"

"It's the, um. The least I c-could do." Dante shrugged shyly.

"That settles it." Frank said, too giddy to sit still much longer. As he continued, he started off towards the exit, having to walk backwards in order to keep talking to them. "I know a great place that's close to here that I've been dying to invite you guys to for ages and now's the perfect time."

"At least get showered before you change." Paige called after him.

Vektor, who'd been sitting and listening to the conversation in rapt confusion, finally asked, "What does that mean? It costs money to eat?"

Petel and Kalyuga shared a quick look while Paige dropped her head back in exasperation. Did they really have time to explain the basics of economics to this computer program? Sonya, at least trying, said, "You saw us paying to get on the sub and to get inside here, right? It's the same for getting food while outside school."

"But why?" Vektor asked insistently.

Sonya hesitated, stumped. Again, probably due to the dilemma of wondering how much about economics they would have to explain before the Prince understood. It really only brought up more questions as to how Vektor's Kingdom operated. Dante tried next, saying, "Well. Transactions, uh, have to, to take place for the, um. For the exchanging of goods a-and services."

"Transactions." Vektor nodded once, perfectly understanding from that word alone. "This realm really is fascinating if it still utilises an archaic system like that."

"What, you just give stuff away for free in yours?" Levy questioned.

Vektor considered it a moment, then said, "I suppose that's one way to see it. Rather, everyone knows the task they've been assigned and performs it to keep our society's harmony."

Petel wrinkled their nose at the thought. Still, they were impressed by Dante's know-how and stood to clap a hand on the fireball's shoulder. "Good job on speaking his language." Petel said as Dante squeaked.

"At least someone can." Kalyuga said, staying positive.

Levy heaved out a tired breath in agreement, then hefted Abraham, who'd fallen back into a doze, up to his feet. "Anyway, let's get going before this chap goes comatose."

Abraham mumbled something, roused but incoherent, making the group laugh. Percival hung his head in embarrassment at his brother as they headed out. The winter cold wouldn't be good on their wet hair, but at least most of them had hats or hoods to stave off the chill. Besides Dante, of course, who hadn't even brought a coat.

"I-I'd just get too hot." Was Dante's answer when Petel asked.

Literal fire. Made sense. Petel was still unsure just how concerned they needed to be about that.

Frank led the way towards their next destination and Vektor carried a still groggy Abraham piggyback. Paige walked in-between Kalyuga and Levy, her hair tied back in a short ponytail, the only one of them who seemed bothered by the cold. Petel wanted to offer some help, but they had no heat to spare.

The restaurant in question turned out to be a quick hamburg joint going by the name 'Dip'n Shake'. Frank swore the name made sense once they considered the milkshake as the best condiments a good chip could ask for.

Sonya chuckled at this and said, "As long as it's a place where we can order our own food, it's practically a top marks place in my opinion."

"I hear ya there, Birdie." Levy agreed loudly.

The others gave a general chorus similar to that sentiment. Having so little choice in what they ate and what they wore did make today a refreshing break, just as a month of summer break was last year.

Frank ordered first, getting a hamburg and a shake. The milkshake was definitely the draw, but Petel was still surprised he hadn't ordered a fizz. Percival eagerly went next, following Frank's lead and also getting a shake. Levy hesitated as a thought occurred to him and he turned towards Kalyuga with a guilty, "Hey, uh, Duckie?"

Immediately, Petel realised what he was going to ask. Paige's reluctance seemed even more pronounced in their mind now. Before Kalyuga could react, however, Sonya stepped forward and awkwardly blurted out, "Let's order together, Levy."

Kalyuga and Petel watched in shocked delight as Levy ended up grinning broadly. "Thanks, Sonya." He said bashfully.

"That's what friends are for, right?"

Sonya shrugged it off easily, even shooting a wink at the cat. They moved ahead to order their things from the very patient cashier while Kalyuga stumbled back to stand beside Petel and breathlessly mumbled, "I could just cry right now."

"I love them more every single day." Petel agreed adamantly.

After they were finished, Kalyuga cleared her throat and went next. Petel would've followed up after her, but Dante pushed to the front eagerly and exclaimed, "Fizz!"

Paige moved to stand beside him and said, "Just a fizz isn't a meal, Dante."

"What type of fizz would you like?" The cashier asked.

Dante took a quick glance at their selection, drumming his fingers against the counter. Then, without looking up, he said, "Uh, o-orange. Please. A-And, um, th-the chicken bites, please."

Paige gave Dante a gentle pat on the shoulder, then proceeded to order for herself. He was so enthusiastic to get a fizz, of all things.

It was cute.

Dante was cute.

Again.

Petel was in trouble here.

Once they were all done ordering, they sat together at a table Frank claimed. Petel was the last to go, getting themselves a coffee.

"That's rather adult of you." Abraham said, interested.

"The shakes are the best part, though." Frank lamented.

Petel smirked at them, sliding into the seat beside Paige. Nonplussed, she asked, "Gonna drink it straight, too?"

"Nah."

Petel revealed the one cream they'd grabbed and set about mixing it into their drink. Levy and Frank laughed at the absurdity while Abraham and Kalyuga laughed in amusement. Percival mumbled something about the lack of sugar, which then made Paige laugh, too. Dante wrinkled his nose at it in distaste and asked, "Isn't it, um. Too b-bitter?"

Petel shrugged. "That's what the cream's for. Wanna try?"

They offered it out and Dante really considered it, that seemingly endless curiosity piqued.

Another cute thing about the fireball. Petel was really in trouble.

By the time their orders arrived, Dante finally gave in and took a sip. It had lost a lot of its heat by then, though Petel doubted anything could burn a literal fire. Dante stuck his tongue out at the taste and Petel had a good laugh about that.

Frank encouraged everyone to try dipping their chips into his shake at least once and they all agreed it was a good kind of interesting. Percival especially enjoyed it, mentioning that he'd been wanting to try it ever since Frank had first brought up the combination to him. Then Vektor attempted to dump the rest of Frank's shake on his hamburg and they barely avoided the mess of that.

They ended up returning to the school by late afternoon, after it was dark. Abraham, Percival, and Kalyuga had to hurry to their homes, leaving the rest of them to disperse until supper. Petel joined Frank, Paige, and Sonya in studying at the library. It left Dante to himself, which the fireball probably appreciated after such a busy day.

The next week passed in a blur of test preparations, assignments, and all extracurricular activities increasing their workload. Petel barely had time to sleep and eat between it all, it seemed so busy. Even Vektor, usually so adamant and antsy about wanting to continue the game, didn't bring up the prospect during their short breaks from all of their schoolwork.

The nicest thing about all this was that Yasha and Vladimir couldn't find the energy to bother Petel during the classes they shared.

The downside to all this was that Dante had gone back to his reclusive tendencies, sushing himself into his blankets for the nights and hardly talking to Petel at all.

If Petel stared too long, he'd offer up an unsure smile, at the very least. A small reassurance that let Petel know he wasn't trying to shut them out on purpose anymore.

The next Sunday, Petel headed to breakfast on their own, as Dante looked like he was getting some restful sleep and Petel would rather eat their own arm than disturb him. They found Paige and Frank in the less crowded cafeteria, Frank in the middle of complaining, "He's a rich kid. What kind of gift can I get that he'd even like?"

"You're worrying about it too much." Paige said, unbothered by his lamentations even as he leaned against her side. "He'll probably enjoy anything you get him because he's new to this."

The wolf's ears pricked up immediately as Petel slid into a seat across from them. "Talking gift ideas?" They asked.

Frank heaved out a breath and righted himself in his seat. "It's not Dante I'm talking about." He said.

Petel frowned in confusion. "I didn't think that?"

"Where is Dante, anyway?" Paige asked, neatly moving the subject along.

Frank, following Paige's lead, waited for Petel's reply. Petel settled into their seat and said, "Sleeping, when I left."

Paige gave a fond, "Aww, good."

"He deserves it." Frank agreed.

Vektor arrived then, sitting down beside Petel and immediately asking, "How are all of your test preparations coming along? Is everyone primed for the exams coming up or would a last study session benefit your efforts?"

"Wow, lookit you being all responsible in your human duties." Frank teased with a short laugh.

"Do you actually need help or are you just asking out of politeness?" Paige asked.

Vektor paused a second to think, then said, "I've logged away all the necessary information in my database, but going over that with all of you might reveal new interpretations that could prove useful considering the patterns and skewed perspectives of the way this information is presented in these tests."

Paige hung her head and groaned. "It's too early for this, you bloody computer."

"That's our computer." Frank laughed in delight.

Befuddled, Vektor asked, "Am I — Am I mistaken?"

Petel smiled at the small group in amusement. Vektor's logical way of rationalising things was very much the product of a computer program. Dante proved that he could help explain concepts to Vektor in a way the Prince could actually understand while Abraham, Sonya, and Frank were better at dealing with his robotic approach to things.

There was a familiarity, however, that seemed to go further back in Petel's memory. Much further back, to a time before their parents' death. To a time before the wolf.

They grimaced and shoved the thought out of their mind, unwilling to address it. They instead greeted Sonya and Levy as the two came over to join them.

It was well after breakfast by the time Petel saw Dante up and about. The fireball sat in the outside seating area of the cafeteria, scribbling away at some masterpiece.

"Waiting for lunch to be ready?" Petel asked, announcing their presence as they sat down beside their roommate.

Dante, of course, snapped his book shut and gave a startled yelp. After recognising it was just Petel, he deflated and nodded miserably. "I-I missed breakfast."

Petel whistled softly, impressed. "Slept that long, huh?" After Dante's next nod in affirmation, Petel asked, "Do you at least feel a bit more rested now?"

"Yeah, I-I think so." Dante said, straightening up with a hint of pride.

"Good."

Petel smiled at him, glad to see the improvement. After a minute of him fidgeting unsurely in his seat, Petel got the idea and waved before walking away. Dante watched the wolf go and, once they were far enough, went back to his sketchbook.

One day, Petel was going to see what secrets were in there. Then they'd know for certain that Dante considered them the closest of friends.

They liked Dante more than appropriately. They hadn't given the sentiment much concern, as the wolf tended to get possessive of those they favoured. Sonya, Levy, Kalyuga, and Paige all fell into this category, too, after all. And, given time, that possessive instinct would pass. Probably.

Their phone buzzed and they pulled it out to check. It was Abraham, asking if Levy was a gambling man. Not really one for messaging, Petel called the Huntsman and discussed whether or not Levy might like a deck of playing cards, as Abraham had gotten that mischievous cat for his gift exchange partner.

Petel smiled at the memory of Levy showing them card tricks during their finals last year, even after his sisters had accidentally ripped a bunch of them. Abraham recounted a similar event between himself and Percival, but couldn't recall any memories of other friends in his childhood. It really was worrying how the guy could barely remember his past. Almost as if he had to grow up and become an adult so quickly that he'd distanced himself from any dissonant actions and memories.

"You can talk to me anytime you'd like." Petel said.



"Thank you for the offer, Petel. I may take you up on that later." Abraham said with a bitter laugh.

So many of their pack was taking this seriously. They couldn't wait to see the results at the end of this coming week.

They called up their grandpa next and asked how things were going while they'd been gone. The old Bassoon appreciated it more than he let on and Petel was really going to miss him again during the Holidays.

Once exams hit, they all had no time to think about anything else. Petel, Sonya, Kalyuga, and Levy had to work especially hard, meeting after classes every single day for Band as well. Abraham seemed impossibly busier, as they only saw him during lunch. According to Percival, the Huntsman was even utilising his breaks to study and make sure his third year projects were finished.

Then it was finally Thursday and they were allowed to relax. Levy collapsed onto their chosen table for supper and exhaled a tired, "We made it."

"We sure did." Frank agreed, sinking back in a similar motion.

Dante and Vektor could only nod along, too exhausted to voice their own relief. Sonya held a hand to his head and murmured, "Now comes the stress of waiting to find out if we passed or not."

"You'll do fine, Ravenell." Paige waved off his concern, an attempt at comforting the poor stressed bird. "You and Kalyuga always get perfect marks."

Sonya frowned, uncertain. Petel leaned over to nudge his side and said, "Best to be positive."

"Positive thinking's good." Frank agreed, cheering up.

They shared a terse laugh amongst themselves, but their conversation petered off there. They were too tired to do much else besides eat their food and take solace in one another's company. None of them could even bring up their gift exchange tomorrow, too worn-out to be excited.

Petel was ecstatic, though. Their grandpa's package arrived just the other day, meaning their preparations were complete.

Since it was the last day of classes for the term, every teacher threw a little party for their students the next day. Sure, these were prefaced with the holiday assignments, but it was a nice and welcome gesture. Mister Williams even seemed happy for once.

Plans were finalised during lunch, everyone settling on holding their get-together in the commons of the dorms. Frank had offered up his own room while Kalyuga had suggested the library and Vektor the tower, the mad lad, but they were too many to fit comfortably in one of their rooms and the library and tower were too regulated and too cold, respectively. The commons, however, was cozy and had plenty of room for everyone.

Once evening rolled around and they all gathered into the dorm's commons with their gifts, Frank took charge and asked, "Alright, who wants to start?"

"I'll take the initiative." Abraham volunteered. He took his gift, a small box wrapped impeccably neat, and handed it to Levy. "Happy Holidays, chap."

Levy accepted it, excited but sheepish. "Thanks, wow. Um, should I open it right now or are we waiting?"

"Open it!" Kalyuga exclaimed.

"Yeah, I think we should open 'em as we go." Frank said.

Grinning now, Levy tore at the wrapping to reveal a deck of playing cards with cat pictures on them. Just as Abraham had said. Levy's eyes lit up instantly and he exclaimed, "Aw, this is awesome! Thanks, mate, I've been dying for another deck. Duckie, look! Look how cute they are."

Kalyuga laughed at his enthusiasm and Petel happily joined in. Abraham stood back, pleased at the reaction. After a moment, Levy slipped the deck of cards into his pocket and pulled out his own present, which was a bit bulky and clumsily wrapped.

"Guess I should go next." He said, then handed the gift over to Percival. "Happy Holidays, hope ya like it."

Percival accepted the gift with a soft, "Thank you." He opened it more carefully than Levy and revealed a box which displayed a variety of hot sauces inside. Petel would've questioned it had Percival not smiled brightly and exclaimed, "Brilliant! I've always wanted one of these, thank you so much!"

He opened the thing immediately and pulled one out to drink straight as Levy rubbed the back of his head in embarrassment. Paige stuck her tongue out and asked, "How can you stand to do that?"

"Perci loves hot sauces." Abraham answered for his brother, who was too busy chugging the whole bottle. There was an equal amount of laughter and shudders in response. "Father can't keep them in the house because he'll find them and drink them. He's a menace and now all of you know it as I have for the past fourteen years."

"M'fifteen, Abe." Percival said, finished drinking the whole dang bottle. He replaced it into the box, then took his own gift and handed it to Abraham. "And I got you."

"Ah, now isn't that just convenience at its finest." Abraham laughed, accepting the gift. It was as small as Abraham's had been and just as neatly wrapped. "Can I guess what it is or should I save you the embarrassment?"

"Just open it, Abe."

Percival rolled his eyes as Abraham continued laughing. The Huntsman slowly unwrapped it as he teased his brother. "This doesn't mean you're off the hook in getting me something for the Holidays, just so you know. I've already gotten five gifts for you and I plan on finding more."

"I'm sure your friends really enjoy watching you needle me and hold up the rest of this party." Percival retorted.

Petel certainly was, at least. Seeing these close brothers act like such good friends really made them wonder if they'd have done the same had they any siblings. Abraham finished unwrapping the thing, revealing it to be a dark blue tie with an intricate design sewn on in bright red. As he examined it, Abraham grew ecstatic. "It's the perfect colour and everything! Thank you, Perci, this is amazing."

"Glad you like it." Percival said, somewhat downcast.

Dante, interested by the design, asked, "H-How'd you, uh. Find one with this, um. This pattern?"

"Oh, Perci's excellently skilled in embroidery." Abraham said, quicker than Percival on the draw.

"Really?" Frank looked to Percival in awe. "That's so cool, I had no idea."

"Bet you also didn't know that Abe's a tie nut." Percival said, recovered from whatever had dampened his mood and now filled with mischief. "Goes absolutely mad for 'em. Especially any dark blue ones."

"You're right, I didn't know that either." Frank giggled.

Abraham went to argue with them in good humour and Petel had to admit, the design looked so professional that they wouldn't have thought about it being hand-made had Dante not asked. Petel was, however, distracted by Dante stepping forward and thrusting a gift into their arms. "It's, uh. I-I got — h-here." Dante stuttered out in a rush.

Just a little surprised, Petel accepted the gift and gave a calm, "Thanks."

They looked over the package, which was oddly thin and a bit wrinkled, as Dante stepped back and fidgeted nervously. Deciding to spare the fireball any teasing, they opened the gift (which was secured only by the ribbon tied loosely around it) to reveal several papers, all with wolves drawn on them, and a small canvas with a painting of a timber wolf in a snowy evergreen forest.

"Wow, those look really good." Sonya said, leaning around Petel's side in order to see them better.

"I-I didn't know what else to, uh, to get you, sorry." Dante hurriedly explained. "If, um, if you want, I-I could get you something else if, uh, if you don't like them."

Petel looked through each one carefully, completely taken aback now. They were, as Sonya had observed, really good. Each of the papers had a different species of wolf, almost like a study, and they all looked as fierce as the dangerous beast lurking inside of Petel. Sturdy and powerful, proud and solitary. The painting seemed like the final result and this wolf had such vibrant blue eyes that Petel immediately recognised himself in it. Finally, they professed, "I love it. Thank you."

The others cheered in triumph at their reaction. Levy and Abraham even patted Dante on the back, startling the guy. Petel knew Dante was a talented artist, but these still took them by surprise at how alive they looked. Almost like they could jump out of the paper and dash off into the winter night, on the scent of their unlucky prey.

Petel was hanging these up in their room, no question about it. They'd have to show Grandpa Bassoon, too, how wolves could be just as beautiful as they were deadly.

After another minute, Sonya and Paige convinced Petel to continue their gift exchange and they presented their gift to Natasha. The Russian candies delighted her, as expected, then she handed Kalyuga a flash drive in the shape of a duck. Kalyuga loved it, of course. She gifted Paige a hard drive, which Paige was ecstatic about, then Paige handed Sonya a collection of feathers and Sonya was giddy at the variety in them. He gave Frank a kit of magnetic connecting toys, which Frank expressed pure joy about, then Frank handed his gift to Vektor.

"It's a little something from all of us, in a sense." Frank said while Vektor puzzled over the small box. "To commemorate us becoming friends."

Paige frowned at Frank in bewilderment. "I don't remember helping with this."

"Wouldn't that be cheating if ya did?" Levy teased.

Vektor opened the box and pulled out a golden bracelet. An assortment of charms dangled around the chain and Petel noticed a wolf amongst them. Vektor looked over each one

carefully, then turned to Frank with an odd expression. "To commemorate. Our friendship." He echoed.

"Yeah." Frank went over to show each charm off, babbling in his nervousness. "Look, see, there's a little computer for Paige and a wolf for Petel. I got a red gem for Dante since they didn't have any fire things except candles and this one's—"

"Friends." Vektor interrupted. He seemed overwhelmed and held the bracelet to his chest absentmindedly. "We're all. Friends. All of us. Friends."

He stared fixedly down at nothing, doing his best to process this. Frank stood back and smiled, speaking gently so as not to further overwhelm the Prince. "That's right. You're our friend, Vektor."

Abraham, Levy, and Sonya gave their agreement confidently. Paige grumbled under her breath, "I wouldn't say friends is the right term exactly, but it's not completely wrong, either."

The information clicked in Vektor's mind and he grinned broadly, grabbing Frank up in a sudden hug as he exclaimed, "Thank you! All of you! My friends!" He gave a hearty laugh, then set Frank down and excitedly clasped the bracelet onto his right wrist. "A perfect fit! Fantastic! Jonathan!"

He turned swiftly on Jonathan, who jumped in surprise. As he offered out his gift and went on, Petel noticed there were tears streaming down his face.

"Here is a gift. For you, my friend!"

"A-Are you alright?" Jonathan asked in alarm.

"I'm more than well, though the closest term I can find to express this is overjoyed!" Vektor said, pushing the gift insistently into Jonathan's hands. "Go on, open it! Enjoy it! My friend Frank helped me in picking it out for you, our mutual friend!"

Petel smirked over at Paige and said quietly, "What have we wrought on ourselves?"

"Nice vocabulary there." Paige said automatically.

Jonathan accepted the gift, unsure of what else to do, while Frank and Abraham pulled the Prince away from him. "Okay, you need to calm down." Frank said.

"Really, are you alright?" Abraham asked.

Vektor laughed in response, a bit too loudly and a bit too mechanically. Dante went over as well, offering up a blunt, "Y-You're, um. Vektor, you're crying."

"Crying? Am I?" Vektor gingerly touched his fingers to his face, noticing the tears finally, and continued giggling in what was quickly becoming an off-putting manner. "So I am. Wonderful! I wasn't aware I was capable. Is this not a good thing? By all of your reactions, I'd assume not, but I'm overjoyed. Overjoyed!"

"Overloaded is more like it." Frank gently corrected.

Sonya, who'd joined them, took Vektor's arm tenderly and said, "Let's get you outside and away from all this stimulus, that'll probably help."

He directed Vektor outside, leaving the rest of them in an unsure silence. Petel easily refocused on the party, trusting Sonya. The others seemed to have the same thought and resumed as well, if a bit quieter in their concern. Jonathan unwrapped a beaker set and marvelled over it. Ever the science geek. Kalyuga and Levy gave short compliments and Percival, impressed, said, "That's just like Frank to be so thoughtful and help out."

"Aw, shucks."

Frank giggled and batted at Percival's arm, who giggled in return. Jonathan smiled suddenly, a fondness to it that was unexpectedly genuine. "It is." He cleared his throat, his expression returning to its cool indifference, and he set down the beakers in order to pick up his own gift. "Looks like I'm the last one."

He handed the gift to Dante, shocking the fireball. Dante accepted it with a quiet, "Thank you."

It was wrapped neatly, but the ribbon around it was tied so messily it looked like some sort of beast had done it. The wolf snarled in Petel's mind suddenly, making Petel's hackles rise as well. They couldn't just attack Jonathan so unprovoked, however, and settled for bouncing on the balls of their feet as they watched Dante open the gift.

It was a book. A sketchbook, specifically. Dante gasped and looked sharply up at Jonathan. "This is—!"

He couldn't finish his statement, too surprised. Jonathan chuckled, saying, "As soon as I got your name, I knew exactly what to get you. Glad you like it." He turned and gave a two-fingered wave of parting to them and next said, "I have to thank that Prince, if you'll excuse me."

His motions seemed different, more sweeping and grand somehow, but Petel couldn't really explain how or why they thought that. Dante called after him, "Thank you!"

Jonathan left without looking back. Frank plopped down on one of the seats, tinkering with his magnets. Abraham leaned against the arm of it and said, "All around, I'd say that was a right success."

"Agreed."

Frank puffed up in satisfaction while Kalyuga and Natasha cheered enthusiastically. Paige laughed at them as Sonya returned, then Levy pulled out his new deck of cards with a flourish to entertain them. Petel would have joined, but the wolf still snarled in their mind, too upset for play.

Jonathan wasn't pack. Petel was very protective of the pack. That was probably all it was.

Dante noticed the wolf's staring and went over to stand by them. "Is, uh. Everything okay?" He asked simply.

The wolf calmed instantly, content to have Dante by their side. Yeah, no, that was a good indication that this wasn't just a pack thing. Well then. Petel swallowed back that response and settled for an easier, "Yeah. Fine."

That was a quick and awkward way to discover they'd developed a crush on their roommate. And here they'd thought they might come to blows with him after all the times they'd clashed. Placated, Dante next stuttered out, "You, um. Uh, wh-what were those, uh. Candies? You got for, um. For Zima?"

The wolf's ears perked up. Perhaps they'd shared that jealousy for one another. Petel snorted through their nose at the thought (Dante? Jealous? As if.) and pulled the only one they'd saved out of their coat pocket. "Just some traditional treats. She's from Russia, too, so I thought she might like them."

"Oh." Dante smiled shyly as he accepted the offered candy. "They looked so, uh. Interesting. Um, th-thank you."

He ducked his head, toying with the wrapping guiltily. Petel really didn't understand why Dante seemed so ashamed of his own curiosity, but couldn't exactly ask about it right here. They said, "I figured you'd want to try one. I can always send for more from ol' Bassoon."

"Um. Th-Thank your, uh. Grandpa for me, too, th-then! Please." Dante said quickly, his eagerness showing through in spite of his best efforts.

He was so cute. Petel would be fighting an uphill battle if they tried denying this. They ruffled a hand through Dante's hair, chuckling. Their group chatted over their gifts and other things until the call for lights out. Vektor and Jonathan returned as they had to part ways and it looked like Vektor had successfully calmed down.

Last year, Petel had missed Kalyuga and Levy so much that they'd howled in their room for a whole day. With how much their pack had expanded, the same was bound to happen this year, too.

## Chapter 21: Confessions Not According to Plan

In the morning, Petel spent some time laying awake and thinking things over. They'd grown so close to the once distant Dante, it seemed impossible to think of their life without the fireball now. They'd wished for an adventure at the start of the year and one had fallen handily into their lap, complete with a guide and a clear end goal.

It all seemed so unbelievable. But it was very real.

And they had much more to do once this pack reunited.

Dante sat up suddenly and hesitantly said, "It's, um. Breakfast time."

Petel sat up as well, frowning over at their roommate in confusion. "Sure is."

Dante hesitated another minute before saying, "Would you. Um. Wait with me u-until my parents arrive?"

"Yeah, sure." Petel agreed, no further consideration needed.

Again, Dante hesitated. He looked as if he may retract the request, but Petel had already agreed. In the end, he just said, "Thanks."

That seemed to be the end of that, as Dante stood up to get ready for the day. The only scheduled school thing was the end of term assembly, which meant they'd have until afternoon before everyone who wasn't staying for the Holidays left. Petel was surprised to see how little Dante packed, leaving most of his school things in their places. As another point of intrigue, Dante took his bag with him as they headed out to breakfast.

The conversation as they ate was light with an underlying sorrow. Mostly it centred around Vektor's odd behaviour last night and what his plans were considering he didn't have a real world family to return to. He didn't even understand the Holidays being honoured, which led to that being explained next. Some of the students had left last night and without the few off-campus students, it left the cafeteria even emptier than usual.

"I'm happy to stay here with all of you." Vektor said once all the appropriate explanations were out of the way. "Your companionship, your friendship, is important to me. Almost as much as I wish to make it to my home, I hope we'll remain together."



The general response was one of mutual understanding. Even Paige couldn't disagree, accepting his words of friendship. Only Dante remained silent on the matter, completely focused on something unknowable.

As everyone filed out to the assembly, Dante headed for the main gates.

Petel hurried after him, asking, "Are you skipping?"

Dante simply replied, "My parents are almost here."

Petel drooped at the lost potential of spending more time with their roommate, but walked alongside Dante. As they stopped at the gates, greeting Officer Riviera at his post, Petel took note of several other students waiting around as well. It must not have been that weird for parents to pick them up early, then. Officer Riviera frowned at Petel and said, "I know you're not waiting on a pick-up."

Petel went to growl, but Dante spoke up. "Petel's, uh. K-Keeping me company."

"What'm I here for, then?" Officer Riviera sighed, but waved them off in exasperation. "Fine, I'll allow it. Once your folks get here, Vicario, Vitayev better hightail it back to the assembly."

Petel gave a lop-sided smile in understanding. "No problem."

They stepped closer and took Dante's hand in reassurance. Dante relaxed finally, after having been tense and bracing for something this whole time. The snow continued to fall in full force and wasn't about to stop anytime soon, drifting down peacefully around them. Petel would've loved to roll around in it and get the weird smell all over them, but they'd have to save it for later. Probably for when they and Paige were celebrating Sonya's birthday tomorrow.

"I've been thinking." Petel started, unprompted.

Dante glanced over at them and acknowledged them with a soft, "What about?"

"The wolf." Petel frowned, an odd panic building at the back of their mind. This wasn't natural. They didn't panic. "And. My relation to it, I guess."

Dante turned more towards Petel, intrigued and encouraging. "Have you, um. Come to a conclusion?"

Good word, Petel wanted to say. Instead, they said, "I like you."

Taken aback, Dante said, "I, uh. Like you, too? W-Was that in contention?"

Their face burning, Petel shook their head vehemently and stared at the snow-covered ground. "Just. Letting you know. Before you go."

Still confused, Dante happily let the matter drop at that. How could Petel explain this without sounding weird? Without running into this easy misunderstanding? Should they even say anything about it now? They'd been friends with Dante for a single term. Was it too soon to get this personal?

Petel liked Dante, that was the truth. The wolf wished to truly devour him and taste his charcoal again. Which, though honest, was frightening.

After receiving a page, Officer Riviera nodded to Dante. "This one's for you, Vicario." He confirmed. Then, a bit more cheerily, he added, "Have a nice break."

Dante's hand tightened around Petel's and it was amazing how much fear Petel could sense from that alone. The moment passed and Dante pulled his hand away. "Thanks for waiting with me." He said, smiling with the same fondness he'd had when they ate together in the tower. "See you in, um. See you n-next month."

Petel blurted out, "I've switched to they and them pronouns."

Dante was surprised only a few moments. Then he grinned brightly and said, "Okay. I'll remember, I promise."

He braced himself and headed out the gates as Officer Riviera held them open for him. So much for that attempt. Petel managed to get a good look through the bars at the woman picking Dante up; she had the same wavy golden hair as Dante, but wore a lab coat and frameless glasses that made her look like she was squinting a bit. Petel was amazed again at just how much she looked like Dante.

She took Dante's arm and guided the fireball down the path, then they were gone and out of sight in the blur of soft snow.

"That was rough to watch." Officer Riviera said, his friendly sympathy breaking Petel out of their thoughts. "Those Vicario sure are heartbreakers. Now go on, you're late as it is."

He shooed Petel with a wave of his hand. His wording caught Petel's attention, but the wolf whimpered so insistently that Petel could do nothing else but follow instruction. They wanted to howl already, to call for the pack to gather once more.

Petel hadn't exactly meant to say that, but smiled as they realised that Dante was the first they'd informed. Paige was next and, considering how easily Dante had accepted it, Petel had no doubts Paige would be the same.

They paused and glanced back towards the gates. The tower caught their eyes instead and a steady determination steeled over them as they continued on their way.

Their pack would figure this out together. What the game meant, Dante's fires, these rumblings of unrest in the wolf's chest. Petel loved their pack, had faith in them. Nothing could change that.